

# More Than I Ever Expected

*11 Personal Essays by ACES Students*

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## *Alone Time*

by Rosanna Mendez

I was paralyzed. I could feel drops of sweat running down my forehead and the fast, loud pounding of my heart made me panic. I had dashed into the open elevator, shaking the snow from my North Face coat, my thoughts on the cozy apartment where a hot chocolate awaited me. Now my purse fell from my arms when I tried to open the door. I didn't even want to try to open it again. I couldn't face the fact that what I had feared had become the cruel reality. And second by second, my terror increased.

I was alone and trapped in the elevator.

I closed my eyes and spread my arms horizontally because I felt the walls were moving in on me. I opened my eyes and I looked at myself in the ancient little mirror in the right-hand corner of the elevator's ceiling. I could see my hair plastered to my head with sweat. And, ironically, it was snowing outside. I heard the sound of the "dinosaur" and I started to get mad. It was my stomach, already begging me to give it some dinner.

"Don't panic. Relax. You are going to get out of here soon," I told myself. I kept on looking at myself in the mirror, as I tried to calm down, getting hysterical, my hands sweating. I was breathing so fast that I thought I was going to run out of oxygen. I was worried about being stuck in the elevator for that whole night or maybe days. I was thinking that possibly no one would hear me if I called or that they wouldn't even bother to try to get me out. I started to remember my 8<sup>th</sup> grade Living Environment class, especially the moment when the teacher explained to us that the body can function for many days without food but not without water. What if I became dehydrated and had to drink my own urine? I heard someone say on a survival show that you could do this and stave off dehydration temporarily.

The prospect of being stuck in the elevator until who knows when was driving me hysterically crazy. I was thinking so many things that I completely forgot that I should scream as loud as I could or at least hit the emergency button, which I eventually did, a few times, but it didn't work. It only made a weird, eerie sound, like when you open a very old door. My mind raced all over the place and then I started to smell a delicious fried chicken; the appetizing scent was slowly working its way beyond my nose and into

my brain. I closed my eyes and my mouth immediately got dry. Now I was even more hungry, and worse than that, thirsty.

I started to look closely at my surroundings. My stomach spoke to me one more time and this time it was louder. I passed my hands across my belly as if I was telling a baby to calm down. I looked at the elevator again. The mirror in which I had seen my desperate face before was half broken, making a shape that looked like a map. I started to look more closely at every insignificant detail around me. The buttons were worn and not well attached, like a thousand little kids had been playing “punch the buttons.” The floor was so dirty that it was brown; not even bleach would return it to its original color. Some of the tiles were even coming apart, letting the metal underneath show. This elevator was the oldest elevator I had ever seen in my life and now I questioned why I ever had the horrible idea of getting into it. The thing was obviously falling apart and could stop working at any time.

Finally my mind woke up and I stopped accepting the situation as an unavoidable nightmare. I realized that this was real and that I had to do something to get out of that elevator or otherwise I could die. I took a deep breath as if I was getting ready to go under water and I started screaming as loud as I could without losing my composure. But the horror I was facing had taken control. I started to kick the walls, scream, jump, but nothing seemed to work. My throat was getting as dry as a piece of rope, I couldn't stop the tears. They weren't tears of sadness; they were tears of frustration, madness and desperation. No one heard my begging for help and I was sure that I had only a few hours left to live.

Sick and tired of kicking the elevator door, I resigned myself to the idea that no one was going to hear me. I picked up my purse from the floor and I started to look for my phone. I found it and tried to call my home phone number, but there was no reception. I sat on the floor and started to stare at the background picture on my cell phone, which was a picture of me and my mom hugging. I tried to imagine that I was sitting on the floor of my bathroom as I do when I want to be left alone, but I couldn't do it successfully because the bathroom of my house is always clean and doesn't smell bad. Faintly, I heard the barking of a dog going down the building stairs followed by human steps. I immediately stood up and started to scream as loudly as I could until the

person descending the stairs heard me and asked in a disinterested voice, “Why are you screaming?” I was so angry. I thought of telling him of what disease he would die from in the future, but instead I just answered in a calm voice, “Can you please open the door because I have been stuck here exactly one hour and it feels like days?”

The man punched a button and the elevator door opened normally, like nothing was wrong. He just put his hand on the handle and pulled it towards him. I was amazed by how easily he did this. “Thank you,” I said in a surly way, as if it was his fault that I had been stuck in the elevator. Then I ran up a floor to my apartment. The door was open and there was food on the table. My grandmother was serving fried chicken to my cousin. I walked through the living room, silently cursing my cousin for not hearing me when I screamed. They were just talking and laughing, looking at me as if nothing had happened. Furious, I didn’t say a word. I went into my room and dropped my purse on the floor. I took a shower, ate and then went to bed without telling anyone what had happened.

I don’t even know why I took the elevator that day because I hardly ever do. I’m very impatient and I hate waiting. I guess I took it because it was already there. I didn’t tell anybody what had happened because I knew my grandmother would go to the superintendent and make a big deal out of it. After all, I’ve learned recently that you can do anything you want if you have patience and I won’t be getting in that elevator again anyway!

## *Corazon de Maria*

by Estefania Lazo

My primary school back in Ecuador was located in the middle of the city. When I traveled there by bus from my grandmother's house, I was able to see the big, white building with a black roof from a great distance. There were two flags flying from each corner of the building. The flag at the right represented the nation of Ecuador. It was yellow, blue and red. The one at the left stood for the city of Biblian; it was yellow and blue with four white, bright stars in the middle. As soon as I got out of the bus, the enormous walls surrounding the school loomed in front of me. The name of the school, "Corazon de Maria," was displayed in the middle of the wall, in full, bold, black letters, and atop it sat a gigantic, vivid red heart, symbolizing love. Around this insignia were cheerful, colorful pictures of books, children, pencils, the alphabet, plants, flowers and a bright sun.

On my first day there, my grandmother said, "This is the school you will attend," and looking at the splendid angelic pictures, I was thrilled to go inside the school. I also thought that with a name like "Corazon de Maria," the nuns must be as kind as the heart of the Virgin Maria. But as I stepped through the grand doorway, I met Sister Maria, standing straight like a security guard with her immense eyes darting behind her glasses, inspecting every student. I recalled my grandmother saying, "Sister Maria is a friendly nun." Judging by her frowning, wrinkled face, her rod-straight back, her long ironed habit, her spotless shoes and the thick book in her hand, I doubted that she was.

Every morning at 8:00 a.m., Sister Maria rang the bell with her strong arm, very loudly, from the second floor. From above she was able to see the students in impeccable uniforms, rushing to line up in the tremendous yard at the center of the school. There, we prayed and sang emphatically as the fresh air from the early morning surrounded us and the sun shone over the horizon. As we sang, two of the best students in the school held flags with pride and honor. The teachers, and especially Sister Maria, were like shadows behind us, checking to see that we were participating and paying attention to the final announcements. Once we finished, we went to our respective classrooms in straight lines led by our teachers. I was always competing with

my friends, trying to be the first one in the line. I did not want to be the last one because Sister Maria usually stood in the back and scrutinized us with an intimidating expression. For everyone, it was crucial to wear a red tie and black polished shoes. We girls would wear black, ironed dresses that fell modestly below the knee, a milky blouse underneath, tall white socks and a white ribbon in our tightly pulled-back hair. Boys would wear black, ironed dress pants with a white shirt, and a vest on top. Their hair had to be cut short. Sister Maria made sure that every student wore an immaculate uniform and behaved respectfully.

If we did not listen to the rules we had failed to follow, Sister Maria usually sent us to clean and mop the chapel and made us stay after school to write the rules, neatly, in our journals, one hundred times. My friends at school speculated that Sister Maria was very mean to us because she had no family and did not like children. Over the years everyone made up stories about Sister Maria and there were a lot of theories, but we never knew the truth of her past. If a student did not listen or refused to obey, teachers often threatened us by saying, "Listen to me, or else I will call Sister Maria and you know her, right?" When students heard this, they went straight to their seats with their heads down, apologizing to the teacher for their inappropriate behavior.

Even though everyone avoided Sister Maria, we had deportment and religion classes with her once a week. As soon as Sister Maria stood at the classroom door, everyone shot up like soldiers, as if the captain or the president were entering. "Good Morning, Sister Maria," everyone would shout. "God bless you all," she would say, and then we would pray and sing for five minutes before the class began. She taught us principles, such as how to behave well at school and at home, eat properly at the table, respect others and read the word of God. She made us memorize prayers and songs so we could participate in the Mass every Thursday in the school's gigantic chapel.

Once we entered the chapel, the delightful aroma of the colorful fresh flowers, and the delicious fragrance of the white and red candles surrounded us, filling our hearts with peace and sympathy. Sister Maria usually sat in the front pew next to us. I thought she could feel the spirituality that I felt. Her countenance seemed serene and it seemed that harmony was within her. I could see that she had a great faith in God; she closed her eyes and prayed very deeply, holding a brown rosary made of wood in her

hand for a long time before the mass started. If students were not behaving well, she would take the student by the hand in a nice and delicate manner and lead him or her outside. Once she was out of the chapel, her mood changed and she spoke very harshly. I remembered one time when I went to the restroom I could hear her saying to a student, "Listen kid, we are in the house of God and no one should behave this way in this holy place, do you hear me? Do you want me to call your mother and describe this inadequate, disrespectful and uneducated behavior?" I was so petrified of her that I did what she said and never got into trouble.

As much as I had disliked Sister Maria as a young girl, as the time passed, my perspective on her changed. Whenever I passed her, I would lift my head to her serious face and say fearfully, "Good morning, Sister Maria!!" She would say "Good morning" with her brave, cool voice, looking me steadily in the eye. Gradually, as time moved on, I began to laugh privately to myself at her stern attitude. I came to think of her as my strict mother who nevertheless loved all the students in her silent way.

When it was time to leave the "Corazon de Maria" school, I walked into the large auditorium, filled with our families and friends, for the final ceremony. We had all shared many memorable moments during those seven years. Seeing my teachers and the nuns, especially Sister Maria, sitting in the front of the auditorium waiting to give out our diplomas made me want to cry. Suddenly, I realized how much I had learned there and how fond of everyone I was. I was going to miss everyone, especially Sister Maria, because, despite her severity, I had listened to everything she said. I was used to hearing her voice every morning. Leaving her and the school felt like leaving my second home.

I now know that everything Sister Maria did was designed to teach us important and valuable morals that we could keep for the rest of our lives. With a benevolent smile on my face, a bitter taste in my mouth and a broken heart, I received my diploma from Sister Maria. I wanted to give back the shiny brown-framed diploma with my name on the center. I wanted to start over again. I wanted to be a kindergarten student again, clinging to my grandmother's hand, afraid of Sister Maria. She might have a few thorns around her heart, but deep inside she was as lovely as Virgin Mary. I will carry her spirit with me always.



## *Not Just for Shopping*

by Anerci Marte

When I came to the United States and heard my sister had opened her own grocery store in Philadelphia called *Lopez Deli Grocery*, I expected it to be a familiar place, but I found it to be very strange. It was so plain that it felt almost dead to me. At my sister's grocery store, I could not hear *meringue* playing from around the corner or dance to a *bachata* while I waited in line. Her store made it clear to me that I was not at home anymore. Everything was so different that I had to force myself to adjust. Usually, in a grocery store in the Dominican Republic, the owners play really loud bachata and meringue to attract customers. In my sister's store, there is only a television on the wall, which you have to be in front of the counter to see. The store's only Dominican characteristic is that the television is always tuned to a baseball game.

The store has three sections: the kitchen, the counter, and the long hall where they shelve all the groceries. Inside, the first thing you see is the counter with the freezer in front. My sister's husband puts bags of sliced bread on top of the glass freezer case at night, so they will be fresh for the next day. On the right is the small kitchen where they prepare sandwiches; there is also a bigger refrigerator there containing hams and cheeses. That fridge also contains a big bottle of pickles in water that I used to hate to smell. I could never understand how someone would want to put those pickles on their sandwich. The four different aisles contain the typical groceries: chips, juices, sodas, cereal, Pampers, seasonings, canned food, rice, beans, cat food, and dog food. The only thing she doesn't carry is alcohol.

The absence of liquor in my sister's store was the most shocking cultural difference to me. In Dominican groceries, you can usually see bottles and bottles of it, especially Brugal, even from the outside of the store. This is the native rum, which is so strong that it makes your face look like you have just bitten down on a lemon rind. It goes down to your stomach like hot lava. In Dominican stores, the front refrigerator is always full of beer. Sometimes the music reminds customers of something that happened to them in the past or just makes them feel as if they have to celebrate and

have a drink. Because of the music and the beer, people start dancing. The loud songs make your heart beat in time, making dancing possible even for deaf people who can't hear the music but can feel the beat.

In the Dominican Republic, grocery stores also have more than one door. There is a big one in front that is always open to let the music out and invite everyone inside. In my experience, the stores in the U.S. have one small door and it is rarely open. I was also used to seeing chairs and tables, with names and phrases written all over them, in front of the Dominican stores. The names are sometimes the nicknames of customers or their real names, along with something characterizing the customer. Regular customers use these chairs and tables to play dominoes while drinking a beer, or just to relax a little while listening to some music and chatting with friends as they walk by. The front of a Dominican store is one of the most fun places to be. You can see people you have not seen in a long time, and also visit with grownups who will offer you something to drink, a beer maybe, so you could cool off.

In front of my sister's store there is nothing but sidewalk, and a long green pole with a red stop sign at the top. Nobody goes to her store just to say hi and spend a little time there. The people who come there just run in to get what they want and go back out again as if they had left some milk warming on the stove. This was hard for me to understand, especially when I first arrived in the United States. I am getting used to that difference now; however, I still believe that a grocery store should have more life to it. When I am not in my sister's store, I cannot even remember the color of it, yet I still can remember the hues and shades of all the stores around my house in the Dominican Republic. The structures are painted brightly, in red, green, yellow or dark blue. They are also plastered with the colorful logos of different brands, promoting food or beverages.

The only thing that I like about my sister's store is that there is a small room in the back that has two mattresses and a television, where I can watch something other than baseball. Sometimes I used to get bored back there and I would go to the front and have conversations with my sister. But it was difficult, because when customers came in, she had to take care of them. Our conversation would then take another path or we would just stop talking. My sister would handle the customers in the same way that they

handled us. She would say, “*Hi,*” name the price, and then say “*Thank you,*” with a smile. The differences between the bodegas in the United States and those in the Dominican Republic didn’t seem to bother my sister. My sister is half Puerto Rican, from her mother’s side, and half Dominican from my father’s side. Unlike me, she was born in the United States. So maybe this is why I am the only one amazed by these things.

Not having loud music, happy people, or colorful stores may sound like a small issue, but it affected me immensely. I used to love going to the store in the Dominican Republic. I knew that I was going to meet someone on my way there and would enjoy visiting the store even if it was just to see what was happening at the moment, or find out some bit of gossip that I could share with my mom. But here it’s different. The person at the counter doesn’t even greet you in a friendly way. I hate having to go to a store where there is no interaction with anyone. Store owners in the Dominican Republic usually ask the customer how their day is going and have a little interaction while taking care of you. In the United States, store owners don’t even look at you. They look at the prices on the groceries you buy and at the money that you give them. Being nice and interacting a little with customers would only make them come back to your store because they are going to feel welcome and appreciated. No matter how much I adjust to life in the United States, I will never understand why American grocery stores are so plain, so boring, and so unfriendly.

# *Sanctuary*

by Philippe Huang

Entering through the gates of infinite memories, I arrive at the park I've been coming to since the day I learned how to climb monkey bars. I remember I used to bang my elbows and knees on every other bar. During high school summers, every day of the week, I would come here from the break of day to the beginning of night to play basketball. Whenever I return to this stretch of Corona Park, my mind turns back to old times.

The park, green as a garden when seen from above, is a sanctuary for kids and adults of all ages: from toddlers, who have just entered the world of walking, to old people, who come to sit and reflect on their lives thus far. The park in Corona, Queens is like a home. The nice, gentle breezes in summer create a lively and calm environment. Even the many distractions, like the dribbling of a ball against the pavement, or hearing "Not it!" from the kids at the monkey bars, or the laughter all around you, can't distract you from taking in the overall beauty.

Half of the area is for kids, and the other half, which consists of a huge concrete field, is where older people socialize. The children's section is nearest to the front gates and consists of the monkey bars, two slides, a fireman's pole, a big fountain in the middle, and a full basketball court enclosed on the far right. Every part of this area, except for the basketball court and the fountain, is covered with a rubberized "mat" substance. The other side of the park features a double-sided handball court in the middle, with two stone checker tables (big enough to support the game, two sets of resting arms on either side of the board and, of course, beverages) on each side of the courts. Just past that lies a huge paved field, where people can play soccer or football, and four additional "half" basketball courts. From evening till nightfall, this part of the park, particularly the full basketball court, is where all the action takes place.

On those summer days in my high school life, I would run past the matted playground, straight onto the basketball courts. I would always begin my day on the full courts. The court is the size of an official basketball court; from the height of the hoop, to the length and width of the court. On a very nice day, the fences would be lined with

Asian, Hispanic and African American people. It was rare that one would see a white American. Mostly, I saw the familiar faces who came to watch and cheer on their friends who were playing on the court. I never heard a negative word spoken. Everyone always remained lost-in-the-moment, kids and adults alike, letting the wind carry their words to the ears of the concentrating players.

All of the basketball players in this park like to play their games differently. I tend to play a “5 on 5” game, which is five players on a team, sometimes even more. In this park, there is an unspoken law that everyone must follow if they want to play on the full courts: each team must have five members as a bare minimum. This shows how seriously we kids treat the full court. It had to be used to satisfy more than just a few people. It took about thirty minutes to play a 21-point game, where each shot is one point, except for those shots taken from the three point line, which count as two points. Every day, eager teenagers play at least one of these games. At the end of the battle, all the players shake hands, which are blackened from dribbling the ball. You can always see big smiles of satisfaction on their “camouflaged” faces, dirty from hands wiping away sweat.

I was often among these players, out of breath and dying from dehydration. One willing person from each group would eventually volunteer to go and buy some drinks at the corner store. While he or she ran the errand, the rest of us would either strip out of our T-shirts and hang them on the fence to dry or go wash our faces in the nearby fountain. I always enjoyed the feeling of the cold water hitting my face, after a hellish thirty minute game. Everything around you seems to move faster afterwards, as all of your senses are stimulated by the cold. You ignore the cries and laughter of the little kids lining up behind you, wanting to fill their water balloons. As I exited from the heavenly realm of being splashed by water, I would then get hit by the summer breeze. I always wanted to take in every cool sensation that nature had to offer my wet face. Walking back towards the courts, I could feel the water running down my nose and cheeks and hitting the ground as I kept a sharp look out for the person doing the beverage shopping.

When the beverage carrier arrived, we become football players, tackling the person with the bag of goodies. We each took our share, gulping down every drop of

liquid each bottle provided, ignoring all else for the few seconds you have until the bottle runs dry. For a moment, we forgot all of the pain in our bodies from running, all of the dirt on our faces, and the thick smell of sweat in the air. A small, but wonderful moment of laughter and praise for one another would follow, before we started the next game.

Every day I spent in this park was a day without regrets. This old, but glorious park has made an impact on many people in my generation. Now, it has become worn out and a newer, more improved park has taken its place in the same location, but for a different generation of people. No matter how much change eventually takes place, it will always be a park that stays in my memory as a sanctuary: the great “good” place.

## *The Halls of Glinka*

by Anna Marienko

The music college I attended while in Minsk was located five blocks away from my house, in front of a small, old-fashioned park with a long alley leading to it. The park was popular among the students, who spent their free time here studying, socializing or having a quick snack before classes. The alley was at its most marvelous state in late November, while brushed by the first snow. In the peace and tranquility of late autumn, it looked like a carefully crafted painting, every stroke of it perfect. At this time of the year, the park was a blend of stark contrasts: the white, snow-covered ground against the coal-black trunks of trees that were loosely decorated by the vivid red stains of the last leaves.

While located in such a beautiful area, the structure that housed Mikhail Glinka Music College itself was far from remarkable. Built in 1924, it was a glaring example of heavy Soviet architecture, impressing the eye of the passer-by only with its facade of pink stone that had faded in time from the rain. The rounded front of the building was interrupted by greenish oblong mosaic windows. The front glass doors had gray metallic frames and handles. At the bottom of the large entrance steps, there was a statue of the young Mikhail Glinka made of black marble. Facing the alley, with its back to the college, it gave off the impression that Glinka himself was welcoming every newcomer to the alluring world of music.

The college building had six floors, which were mostly occupied by classrooms and practice rooms. The first floor held the main classrooms-- the biggest ones-- all squeezed in close to each other, leaving space for only narrow corridors between them. In the evenings, with only sconces lighting them, the corridors appeared to be mysterious labyrinths filled with the muffled sounds of music coming from behind the closed doors. While waiting for the teacher, I would sometimes just stand there and listen to the cacophony of different melodies from various instruments playing together, interrupting each other to tell their own story. At such moments, hearing would become the most prominent sense and vision seemed completely useless; your eyes could barely distinguish the dark silhouette of another person walking down the corridor.

The classrooms themselves were simple and plain, some of them decorated by portraits of famous composers and pianists. All of the practice rooms were usually reserved by the piano students, who needed the pianos the most. At the busiest time of day, when it was extremely hard to get a practice room of your own, impatient students often joined together, taking turns at the piano. When all of the rooms were taken, a lot of the accordion and guitar students had no choice but to practice in the hallways, creating a unique atmosphere in the building, where various musical textures and fragments were always overlapping. It was often hard to discern which student was playing a certain tune and which instrument was prevailing.

The ground floor of the building was engulfed by the Concert Hall, mainly reserved for orchestra practice and instrumental concerts. The absence of windows and the dark, subdued colors of the walls and floors, with their Bordeaux velvet seats, gave the Concert Hall a gloomy, weighty vibe of seriousness and formality. This gloominess, however, quickly faded away once the concert started and the different instruments began to work and fire together, not interrupting but complementing each other to create a full-dimensional piece of music, engaging the public with a carefully prepared performance.

The second and the first floors of the building were partly joined in the north part of the building where the Grand Auditorium was located. The Grand Auditorium was given over to choir practices and piano performance exams for the younger students. The high ceilings and full-length windows of the room, extending to the ground, and the tall beige walls covered with various national ornaments, created an atmosphere of great esteem and enormity, making the grand piano, which was the only piece of furniture in the auditorium, appear small and insignificant. Always cold and motionless, as if frozen in time, the auditorium came to life only during choir practices and concerts, when its empty space was filled with rows of metal folding chairs. The white marble floors reverberated the mighty sounds of the piano, which accompanied the singers' voices. The auditorium was the place where I, shivering from the cold and fear, took my first piano performance exam ever. The feeling of being watched and heard by the whole auditorium audience made me tremble, and I was terrified of making a mistake, losing the right tempo or not being able to make my frozen fingers play the way I wanted



them to.

I started softly, playing one of those slow, cordial, melancholy Russian tunes composed in a minor key, gradually gaining more confidence as I strove to awaken the piano and make it sound exactly the way I wanted it to. I heard the rich mellow chords of the folklore tune fill the auditorium and echo off the walls, spreading through the rows of people. The piano was finally channeling my feelings and emotions out toward the audience, the tune flowing freely in all of its sad beauty. The sounds became more and more intense, until they reached their climax and then slowly faded away, ushering back the familiar silence of the auditorium. I remember feeling absolutely nothing as I finished performing and got up from the piano to the stormy applause of the public, my hands shaking, my mind drifting in a strange haze. That day I received the highest score among the students of my class, successfully finishing my first year at the music school, which for the following eight years of my life would become my second home.

Here the sounds of music never stopped, they were heard drifting down from everywhere, filling the building with life and energy. Music was the force that joined the students of the college, the force that gave the Mikhail Glinka institution value and meaning. United by a shared understanding, nobody here discussed the uselessness of trying to make a living out of mastering Chopin or spending time patiently examining the works of Tchaikovsky. Mastering their skills and striving to follow the examples of the great performers, these students came devotedly, day after day to the plain empty rooms, practiced in the dim corridors of the unremarkable, cold building, and tried their best to give the place meaning and light it up with their passion for life.

## *Beside the Rio Daule*

by Jean Idrovo

If I went back to Ecuador, visiting the Rio Daule would be at the top of my list. This river, which connects to the Rio Guayas and then ends up in the Pacific Ocean, is located in Salitre where my great-grandmother lives. The river is right in front of her house. For me Rio Daule is a magical place. In the morning the river shines and reflects the sky so beautifully. Looking down at it, it is as if you are flying in the sky. In my mind this river represents the life of my great grandmother. At first sight the river seems as peaceful as my great grandmother did when she was ill. However, as I discovered, if you take a closer look at both the Rio Duale and my great grandmother, you can find great life beneath the surface.

As you step out of my great grandmother's house, you might think the river was narrow, but the river appears wider as you get near it. The breeze enveloping your skin is a warm, comforting presence. On the other side of the river there is a hill with a small house on top with greenery around it. Trees with different types of fruit grow on neighboring farms. The river provides all of this life for us to enjoy. Walking along the bank, you come to the neighbor's wooden house, their little farm and the canoes next to the river. Sometimes there are small branches floating on the surface of the river. Here, it sounds as if nature were talking. You can hear the birds singing, the chickens clucking on the nearby farm, the water flowing, and the wind moving through the branches. Along the river there are different types of smells. In some areas, you can smell the freshness of the river mixed with mango. In others you can smell burning rice leaves from a factory close to the river, and even farther from my great-grandmother's house you can smell the fertilizer from the farms.

From a distance, it looks as if the river has no current but once you approach you can see the movement of the water going north. In the morning, when you go into the water it is as warm as if you were taking a nice hot bath. The bottom is as soft as cotton; you can feel the mud going through your toes, but the water is muddy and you can seldom see to the bottom. Sometimes you can feel the scales of the fish rubbing against you and you feel their slimy skins on your legs. The fish in the river rarely bite but when

they do, you can feel their small, pointy teeth trying to penetrate your skin. But they don't hurt as much as you would think, just a little pinch. I have been told that there are crocodiles and that they come out of the river at night. My older cousin once said that from my great grandmother's house, he saw them floating on the surface, their eyes reflecting the light of the moon. But I don't believe it is true.

For almost six years my great grandmother was paralyzed. I never understood how she became paralyzed. All I know is that one day she was moving fine without any problems and the next day she was completely immobile. She spent all of her time lying in bed. She looked so tranquil as if she had surrendered to death and had nothing more to live for. While she was paralyzed, her body was as calm and peaceful as the river. When I saw her from a distance, it seemed like there was no movement beneath the surface. As I got closer to her, however, I could tell she was trying to move. I could see her eyes moving, rolling around, and trying to see her surroundings. She would try to speak in soft, mumbling sounds. To listen to her I had to lean closer and as the smell of her perfume got stronger, it irritated my nose because it was so intense. Every time I visited my great grandmother, I would reach down to touch her soft hands; they felt like fleece in my hands. I could imagine her smiling back at me. I could see she still had more life in her than it seemed. My whole family took turns caring for her. I helped by feeding her, or at least I tried to; my aunt would always come in to help me. My mom's uncle, who lives with my great grandmother, took care of her mostly. He would feed her, clean her, and most importantly, talk to her, encouraging her to have faith that she could get better.

After a few years passed, my great grandmother was not paralyzed anymore. My mom said it was a miracle that she was able to move again. Now my great grandmother is able to walk around her house, cook for herself, and even walk along the river.

I wondered if all the times I imagined her responding to me, she really might have been trying to respond. One day, over the phone, she told my mother that she did remember me talking to her and she did try to respond but couldn't. Rio Daule will always remind me of my great grandmother. Like the river which appears still on the surface, my great grandmother's paralyzed body had much life beneath.

## *I Prefer a Small Home*

by Amy (Choi Lam) Yip

I was born in Hong Kong and lived there for the first eighteen years of my life. A lot of people say that everything is rushed in Hong Kong, and it's true. On the sidewalks, people walk very fast. However, the speed of the closing train doors is faster than the passengers boarding. New businesses open and close every day. If you travel away for a few months, you may not recognize your old neighborhood when you come back. This summer, I returned to Hong Kong after having been away in the United States for a year. It seemed that everything had changed; only my home remained the same, and that was a greater comfort than I could ever have imagined.

My family's home is located in Sheung Shui which is situated on the very north side of Hong Kong. Ninety-Five percent of the denizens of the island live in apartments. The remaining 5% are multi-millionaires and other successful businessmen, who live in grand residences. Our apartment building, called "Tin Mei House," is a public housing estate built by the Hong Kong government in 1990. Tin Mei House has thirty-five floors and is designed like the letter 'Y'. Therefore it is divided into three parts. Each wing has eight apartments or families on each floor. The whole building has three types of apartment: large, medium and small size. When I was still there, my father, mother, two sisters and I lived in a medium-sized apartment with one bedroom, one bathroom, one kitchen and a dining room. The area was only about 400 square feet.

After I landed in Hong Kong, I went home immediately. When I walked through our hallway on the thirteenth floor, approaching our apartment, I began to smell my mother's Chinese chicken soup. I had not had Chinese chicken soup since I had been in America. It is my favourite dish and my mother always makes a perfect batch. For some reason it smells like coconut, but she doesn't put coconut in it. Or maybe it's the delicious secret of the soup. As soon as I get a whiff of my mother's soup, I feel hungry right away.

When I opened the door, everything looked exactly as it did a year ago. The first thing I could see was the sofa. It was the same as before: the grey one. In my home, a sofa is not for sitting. It's always covered with uncountable items of clothing, freshly

folded from the dryer. We always find our clothes on the sofa, not in the wardrobe, when we are planning to go out. Smelling my mother's soup and seeing the fresh laundry piled up on the couch filled me with contentment. It felt good to be home.

Since no one would sit on the sofa, we all had our own other seats at home. As I entered the living room I found my father sitting on a black chair in front of the television because he likes to watch TV programs, especially the horse races. My parents were wearing exactly the same clothes: just like before. My mother only wears red T-shirts at home. My father only wears grey T-shirts. My mother was sitting on a red chair in front of the dining table, next to my father. When she has time to sit, it means that it is meal time. She always has a full schedule. At home, I always sit in front of the computer. When dinner time comes, we all move a little bit closer to the dining table. As I stood in the doorway, I saw this familiar arrangement too had been preserved. My father and mother were watching television, but I could see the joy in their faces. I could see them smile at me, even though they didn't say anything. We lived together for more than eighteen years. Sometimes I can understand them without any external form of communication passing between us. I could feel how happy they were in general about my return. Eventually, my mother went to the kitchen to reheat dinner for me.

While I waited, as I scanned the apartment for any changes, I came across my bookshelf. It was next to the computer. When I studied in Hong Kong, the bookshelf was my life. No one moved my books then, and as I saw the order of my textbooks and the types of the books on the bookshelf, I realized that it hadn't changed at all. On the first level were the main subjects: Chinese, Math and English textbooks. The second level was filled with my favourite subjects: Economics, Commerce and Computer Literacy. The third level held all of my notes. I was infinitely pleased that my parents hadn't thrown away my things. They maintain these arrangements because they believe and hope I will come back.

As I started to walk into the bedroom to put down my bags, I took another moment to look around. There were more than eighteen stuffed bears on my bed. I remembered my mother had once said that this bed was not for me, it was for Winnie the Pooh. Our bedroom is divided into two sections by a wardrobe. One side is my parents and the

other side is for my two sisters and me. I never felt our room was tight; in fact, it made us closer.

I was very glad that nothing had changed in our apartment. I began to understand that “home” never lets you feel strange. I am living in America with my grandparents now. We are living in a house that has three floors. It is bigger than our place in Hong Kong but I like the smaller one better. There is the warmth and comfort, but mostly I can feel love there. My return home was complete when we ate our Chinese chicken soup and I began to talk about my life in New York.

## *A Real Taste*

by Susana Vera

It was the end of my senior year in high school and graduation was approaching fast. I was getting excited about the big day. On a Friday afternoon, Natalie—my confidant for over five years—and I sat on one of the benches outside our high school cafeteria, discussing post-graduation plans. We decided we both ought to get a job for the summer before starting college the following year. Working would allow us to save money for college books and other expenses. Natalie and I lived near a very popular shopping area called Lincoln Road Mall, a busy road full of cafes and clothing stores, located in one of Miami's most visited sites, South Beach. Lincoln Road Mall was the perfect place to find employment, due to the vast number of jobs available. There were often big signs that read "HIRING" in the windows of businesses there. Natalie and I decided we would go job hunting after school.

We embarked on our journey to find a job on Lincoln Road Mall later this afternoon and our first target was a lovely, small, fashionable café on the corner at Washington Avenue, where Lincoln Road mall begins. The name of the café was "Taste Café," as clearly seen at the entrance in big bluish letters. Nicely decorated tables with colorful flowers and wooden napkin holders spread out onto the sidewalk. Each table was covered with a white, delicate cloth. Upon entering the café, the aroma of freshly ground coffee immediately struck us. The smell of fresh baked bread and muffins gave the place a sort of homey feeling. The woman smiling at the counter welcomed us, asking what we wanted to order. "Oh, no we are actually here to ask if you have any openings available. We want to apply," I replied briskly. The woman at the counter wore a blue apron and a hat with the name of the café on them. Her personality was bubbly and pleasant. She was a young girl, maybe in her twenties, with short black hair and light skin. She handed us two applications and warned us that there was only one position available. This was unfortunate, for Natalie and I had been looking forward to working together.

As I filled out my application, an African American, who I later identified as the owner, approached me to ask if I had had any previous experience handling a cash

register. Unlike Natalie, I had previously worked at several stores and was very familiar with the process. Thanks to that experience, I was hired on the spot. Natalie, who didn't seem to be bothered by it, congratulated me on getting the job. The manager immediately prepared a schedule, asking me to come in the following Monday. After we left the café, Natalie and I began jumping up and down in excitement. We couldn't believe how well our job hunting on Lincoln Road had turned out.

As it happened, I was asked to come in earlier than expected. On that first day, as I began to walk towards the counter to attend to a customer, I managed to quickly tie up the back of my apron. Nervous, yet excited to begin work, I looked up to find myself face to face with a tall, dark skinned man who seemed impatient for someone to take his order. Soon enough, I asked him what he wanted to have. "I just want coffee for God's sake. I've been waiting too long," he announced in an angry tone. "I'm so sorry, sir." I replied. "I really apologize. It has been a busy morning. What can I get for you?" As he exhaled, relieved that someone had finally come to help him, he asked me to make him a cappuccino. "Not too hot. I don't want my tongue to burn, and not too much hot milk, so it tastes like an actual cappuccino," he affirmed. As I prepared his cappuccino with the steamer, I paid very close attention to the specific instructions he had given me and made sure to give the cappuccino enough foam, so that it rose all the way to the top of the cup. Before I was finished, a line of four people waiting to be helped had formed next to the cash register.

I rapidly announced the cappuccino, leaving it on the spotless front counter, so that the man would come pick it up, and then rushed towards the cash register to attend to the next customer on line. At this point, there was so much noise in the café, it was bouncing off the walls. Some customers seemed to be waiting patiently, while others tapped their feet against the marble floor. Many people seemed to be in such a rush that if it was possible, they would fly over the counter to get what they had to order and leave.

It was 3:00 pm when a tall, robust woman with a stern look, who I was able to identify as the manager from the name tag she wore, put on her apron and touched my shoulder, signaling me to come with her. As I followed her to the office, located in the back of the café, I noticed how sore my feet were, and I began to wonder why the



manager had summoned me. For a split second I was worried, thinking maybe I had done something wrong. The office was a narrow room with a laptop and a whole bunch of folders piled up on a table next to it. "I apologize for having asked you to come in on such short notice," the manager announced, while grabbing the rolling chair next to the table. "We've been so busy, and I needed a hand as fast as possible."

"It's okay. I'm glad you did," I replied, giving her a brief smile.

"Now, I have been told you are willing to come in everyday from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, including Saturdays. Is that right?" She asked in a firmer tone.

"Yes Ma'am," I replied. "With the exception of Sunday."

As I stood waiting for the manager to hand me the schedule for the rest of the week, I glanced at a small, white-faced clock hanging on the wall, which said it was 3:30. I couldn't believe how fast time had flown by. "See you tomorrow, with your apron on, at seven on the dot," she announced, handing me the schedule she had neatly typed. "Yes Ma'am," I replied, as I exited the office. It had surely been a hectic first day of work, but I had enjoyed it. Besides the fact that my feet were sore, I had fallen in love with the job: the energy of the place, the people, the aroma of Colombian and Jamaican coffee, the smell of freshly baked goods. All of it created the perfect environment, one I wanted to be a part of, and it lasted until I had my college plans sorted out.

## *The Route*

by John Albal

As I slowly approached the 59<sup>th</sup> Street entrance, I felt anxious. I unclipped my cleats and stood upright, observing the vibrant colors ahead in the park. The multitudinous green leaves attached to the monstrous tree had my meticulous attention. I knew this morning's ride would be the most difficult challenge for me yet. One might think of Central Park as a place for relaxation. I think of it as a place for training. The tough hills, the never ending straight away—these are all challenges I have to face. As I pondered how I would accomplish my goal for the day, many thoughts ran through my mind, but I would not let them slow me down. It was a cool summer morning. I could hear the birds singing and the honking of car horns. I looked down at the time on my Garmin and it read 6:00 AM. I then punched the button of the device and the screen changed setting to “distance.” I boldly set it to 60 miles.

I clipped back onto my bike which meant it was time to begin pedaling. I changed to a higher gear to get the blood flowing in my legs. The unforgiving scent of horses flew into my nose as I hastily pedaled away. As I approached the red light, I unclipped again. I was breathing a bit more heavily. I watched a taxi fly by with a passenger in the rear. I thought to myself, “I would rather be in his shoes than in these cleats.” I attached myself back onto the bike and made my way onto the cyclists' path. I was instantly accompanied by a cyclist in a red jersey. I couldn't see his eyes through his blue shades, but the smile on his face was rather welcoming. At this moment I knew we were both at ease, but ready to attack whatever we had in front of us.

Up ahead, the steep hill waited for me. Determined, I dropped to a lower gear to challenge myself, cranked my pedals and quickly moved up the hill. I had now been cycling for twenty minutes, covering 10 miles, with a cadence of 75, cutting air with my aerodynamic form. I glanced up at the Natural History Museum. I always admire the exhibits inside as well as the classical façade. To my left was Cleopatra's Needle, a present to New York from Egypt. This piece of history weighs 180 tons, is 68 feet high, and is absolutely breathtaking. I continued to pedal, moving at a pace of 25 miles an hour, and came across the spiral-shaped Guggenheim Museum. This meant I was

adjacent to the Museum Mile on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, my favorite segment of the ride in Central Park.

I soon realized I was day dreaming as a triathlete flew by me. He must have been moving at a pace of 40 miles an hour. I am always discouraged by those guys. Changing to a middle gear, I tried to tag along. After five minutes my legs began to complain. I thought, "The beauty of competition is the whole concept behind it. There is always someone better than you." That is what motivates me while I am on my ride. There is always a bike that is ahead, and I am constantly fighting to catch it.

My Garmin now said 7:06 AM. I had been cycling for an hour, covering a little over thirty miles. My cadence was high, and my pace was about seventeen miles an hour. I was proud of myself, but the challenge had not yet been met. My thighs began expanding, taking in air after every motion I put them through. Blood was rushing through them and I had been sweating like I was in a sauna. I reached down to grab my drink from its holder, lifted it out and squeezed the cold bottle as the stimulating red liquid flew into my mouth.

I placed the bottle back onto its holster and stood up. Another hill was waiting for me, and I knew I needed momentum. I attacked the straightaway, aggressively turned into the bottom of the hill and attempted a climb up. This incline was by far the most heartless. Breathing extremely heavily, I began to think "What am I even doing?" I shifted into the highest gear, in an attempt to make it easier on myself. Doubts began to arise only halfway up the hill. I was a little over forty miles into my ride and worried if I could keep going, but I knew somehow I had to. There was no giving up. It was early in the morning and I was working while everyone else was resting. Repeating those words to myself, I felt a rush of energy. Mentally and physically, I was replenished. I climbed the hill and made my way down the other side.

At the bottom of the path, I decided to take a pit stop by the pond. Before I could sit, I had to buy myself another Gatorade. I detached both my legs from the pedals and approached the short dark skinned man behind his vending cart. I asked for a yellow Gatorade, to match the color of my jersey. I heard my stomach growling, indicating it was time to consume calories. So I also asked for a hot dog, then walked slowly over to the bench directly in front of the pond, and collapsed onto it.

Visibly drained, I released the clip from my helmet and rested it beside me. I lifted my yellow shades from my eyes, put them onto my head and ate my hot dog. As I took a gulp from my drink, I was content. It is during moments like these that I truly appreciate nature and everything in it. I listened to all the sounds being made by various creatures. The frog's guttural croaks, the birds' warbling, and the assortment of barking dogs all played a soothing melody. I looked up at a bird and wished I could identify what kind it was. I glanced at the pond and saw a baby goose struggling to stay behind its mother. I said to myself, "Life is truly a beautiful thing."

In my reflection later in the day, I came to realize that the Cleopatra's Needle I admire on my ride is central to why I cycle in the first place. This piece of statuary architecture was linked to worship and paying dividends to the Ancient Egyptian Sun god, Ra. One must have a great deal of motivation to build an object of such stature. My appreciation of the Needle goes beyond what one can see of it with the naked eye. I admire the history of the Needle. The degree of difficulty required in building this obelisk was immense, and as a cyclist I can relate. Getting on my bike is often a monumental task, but I still do it. I am confident that not every moment of building the needle was enjoyable, but it eventually amounted to a great gift.

When I decided it was time to finish my ride, I got up, put my shades back on, and placed my helmet onto my head. I searched for the distance setting on my Garmin. I had ten miles to go. I was impressed and undaunted. I got onto my bike and took off, delighted. It was time to finish what I had started.

## *Set Piece*

by Sogbe-Eden N'guessan

The year I took theater class, I was a junior in high school. I knew what theater was in general and what a person would have to do to be considered a master actor. After my very first class though, I came to discover that there is more to theater than just acting and learning to memorize your lines. Not only did I come to know what “stage right, center, and stage left” meant, but I also quickly realized that the class was going to require a lot more from me than I ever expected.

On that first day, as I entered the auditorium, I walked up one of two aisles leading to the stage. On either side of me were navy colored seats, most of them empty. I took a seat in the front row and admired the stage in front of me. Small staircases led up both sides of the stage, which was framed by black curtains, drawn open and tied into beautiful bows. The stage itself was black and shiny, as if it had been polished daily. Countless lights illuminated the stage. Most of them were white, but a few were pink or yellow or blue. I felt, for a moment, that the lights were being tested for a Broadway show, and I had to remind myself that this was Brown Deer High School, Wisconsin.

Some students looked very bored, as if they were only taking the class because they had no other choice. Others were very enthusiastic. They pointed at things and whispered to the person sitting next to them. They laughed amongst themselves and gave off a positive vibe as they admired the auditorium. A girl who looked familiar came to sit next to me. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she asked. I nodded vigorously in response. The students who showed no sign of enthusiasm whatsoever were on their cell phones, texting away. Those of us who were interested, however, continued to look around like they’d never seen an actual theater before.

Eventually the class had to start, and the teacher took over. Mr. Grindeland was the youngest looking teacher I have ever met. He appeared to be in his early twenties. He then told us he was twenty-three, as I had guessed. He was short and very handsome. He was dressed in a white and blue chemise shirt, blue jeans, and white sneakers. He had dirty blond hair that looked as yellow as a banana with the theater

lights projected on it. He had sea blue eyes and a tiny mouth. His face resembled that of a baby in some ways, except that he had facial hair. Everyone, even the students who looked drained, suddenly sat up and started to pay attention as he was speaking. His voice was vibrant and his words were well articulated. He didn't stutter one bit. He gave us each a syllabus and went through every detail on the page, so we wouldn't get confused. I liked him immediately because he was a new teacher who showed no sign of fright. His confidence revealed that he was straightforward and I appreciated that. He told us his expectations for the class, and that we would get along with him because we were all new to the class and it was his first time ever teaching a class. We had to be patient with him, he said, and I liked that too.

After he introduced the course, he ordered everyone to get up on stage for a warm up. He placed us in a big circle to play a game called "Hep." The game is played like this: one person claps to the person next to him or her, while saying "Hep." The next person has to keep the flow going until it reaches the same person it started out with. Mr. Grindeland said that he wanted us to show "energy" and that "if someone's energy drains, then the whole game will start to drain as well." He told us all of this in a very animated way. He told us that he wanted us to have "happy-looking" expressions and to develop positive emotions. Mr. Grindeland also assured us that we would have to do this at the beginning of every class. The purpose of the game was to get us conditioned to feeling comfortable with one another and to be unafraid to express our feelings. Another purpose of the game was to get us in the mood for class because the class was all about acting and committing to whatever scene it was we would be assigned to act out. Mostly, the game taught us that we, "the actors," would have to learn to depend on each other. If a person was "hepped" and the energy level was very low for that person, then the next person would have their energy drained as well. On our first try, we were kindergarteners on the playground having the time of our lives. We were hepping and clapping and laughing. We depended on each other to keep the energy strong and to prevent it from going dull. At that moment, I came to find that theater was full of enjoyment and should not be such a hard class to pass.

After warm ups, each of us had to go to a room near the stage to get chairs so we could sit and start introducing ourselves. The room was amazing. I thought it was

just going to be a room full of chairs, but I was wrong. Though the room was small, it held a lot of equipment for the theater. It had a rack of various costumes from previous plays. I noticed that the Dorothy dress from “The Wizard of Oz” was on the rack labeled “handmade.” Another corner of the room was full of make-up supplies, and in another corner, I saw the head of Oz, Peter Pan’s hat, a lamppost and other recognizable items. For a tiny room, it sure held a lot of things. After grabbing my chair, I looked around to find that I was the only one left in the room. That’s when it hit me. I came to the realization that theater isn’t just about acting. There’s the lighting, the make-up and, obviously, the sewing of costumes. I understood that even though acting was fun, there had to come a day when everything became serious and all of the participants (actors, costume designers, and make-up artists) had to hustle to get their job done in a short amount of time in order to impress the audience. I asked myself if I was sure that I wanted to do this. Perhaps this class required more commitment than I was ready for.

I scurried with my chair to complete the circle that the students and the teacher had formed on stage. When the teacher smiled, his blue eyes sparkled like glistening marbles. “Being an actor” he said, “is not just about getting your lines memorized. It’s all about commitment. Non-celebrity actors do not get paid good money. Anyone in the acting business knows that no one does it for the money. We do it for the love. It’s a really tough task to complete, but if I can make it, then any one of you can as well.” His declarations absolutely answered all of my questions. After this small lecture, I decided that I would also be committed to the choices I would make in that class. He didn’t do it for the money, but for the love of the craft. So I figured that love and commitment were what it took to be successful at whatever I wanted to accomplish. If I was going to enjoy theater class to the fullest, I first would have to learn to commit here in this arena.

I knew from that day that I was going to enjoy that class because the teacher did an excellent job explaining what it was we were getting ourselves into. I didn’t know what the other students wanted to do from then on, but I knew for sure that I was willing to do whatever it took to complete that course successfully. The teacher had mentioned that commitment was a big deal in the theater industry. Acting takes a lot of rehearsal, which I knew. Practice makes perfect and commitment makes success. And only on that first day of class did I come to the realization that I was indeed ready for such a

commitment. I was ready to put whatever I had into that class and end it with triumph. This ultimately happened for me. Not only was my commitment rewarded with an A in the class and the applause of an adoring audience after my performance as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, it also brought me to the realization that, with a little push, anything can be accomplished.



## *The Way to My Adey's House*

by Enezezer Tekie

The journey to my Adey's\* house really starts the night before I depart for the village. It begins with a feeling of anxiousness, of wanting to get there as soon as possible. I spend the whole night thinking about all the times I have been to visit my grandma. When I am on the bus the next day, going towards the village where my grandma lives, I start to feel the sense of peace my Adey's house gives me. I know I am getting close when I start to see the animals. There are cows everywhere; they have huge horns and most of them are different colors: white, black, and golden yellow. A shepherd hits them with his stick because they are being stubborn and playing around with their horns. I can see the dirt covered mountains and the small spread out trees. Just as I see all this, a fresh breeze of air rushes through the wide open window of the bus. It brings the warm scent of the clay and the cow dung. I can see all the corn fields and taef (Eritrean flour) growing on the farms. My Adey's house is visible on a mountain top far away: the brick walls, the shimmering roof top, and the blue door.

Once the bus stops by the station I know I have reached Diegsa, the village where my grandmother lives. The bus stops next to a tiny house that sells all sorts of snacks, cookies, donuts, cokes and so on. This tiny house is composed of red bricks and old wooden beams. Inside it smells a little burnt. The bus cannot go into the village any further because the roads are all dirt from the tiny house on, so I have to walk about a mile and a half to reach my grandma's. The ground is full of rocks for the first half of the walk. There are white rocks that look like pearls with a tiny hint of red on them. They look so clean, even though they are on top of the red dirt. When I see those white rocks, I remember playing among those rocks with my cousins; we used to bang two rocks together at night and they would make a spark.

The rest of the journey is up hill. When I first set out, I can see a church which is at the top of the steep mountain. A little further down the steep mountain lies the warm heart of my grandmother's house. It is on top of everything, high up the hill. The way it is

*\*Adey is a term of respect for a female elder in Eritrea*

built against the mountain really accentuates the height of the house. It looks like a fortress. When I was much younger I remember thinking that it was too far to walk and I would beg my brother to carry me. But now that I am older I enjoy the walk. I don't see many people around because it is the middle of the day. Everyone is either herding their cows, or they are away at school. The weather is perfect as usual: not too hot, not too cold, and very windy and sunny.

Donkeys are everywhere. There are a lot of cows as well, but the donkeys make me even more excited to get to my Adey's house because my uncle keeps a donkey there. As I walk along, thinking of my uncle's donkey and its beautiful brown hide, I realize how much I miss my grandpa. He died suddenly when I was too young to understand. I remember my grandpa putting me on top of the donkey when I was very little and how scared I was. That donkey had a white belly and white mouth. My uncle's donkey makes the loudest noises. I can hear it braying a mile off.

Further up the hill there are houses composed only of rocks (arranged in the same manner as the bricks used to build my Adey's house.) It always fascinates me that there is no cement or any sort of adhesive used to keep these rocks together. In these houses, right up the hill, there are some dogs that are really loud. They used to scare me a lot when I was much younger. I can also hear chickens clucking. The chickens remind me of how kind my grandma is and how much she loves me. When I was about three years old, I went to my grandmother's immediate neighbor and asked for eggs. My grandmother got upset then because she did not have any chickens and could not give me eggs herself. After I left that year she bought chickens of her own so that when I came back she had her own eggs to give me. Hearing those chickens clucking really makes me want to see my Adey, but I know there is still a mile left before I get to her house.

Past those houses with the dogs and chickens I start to see cows and corn fields and memories of farming with my grandmother fills my mind. I remember visiting a specific farm with her to do some work. The objective was to remove the corn roots because they needed to plant new grain in the field. It was the hardest thing I had ever done. The roots were like electric wires, all tangled up with one another in the ground.

By the time I took one root out my grandmother had already uprooted four. It astounds me how much my grandma works in her old age and how much she accomplishes.

As I approach the wooden doors I can't wait to see my grandmother. I start to run so I can see her frail beautiful face and hug her. When my Adey comes out to welcome me, I am bursting with happiness. I see that she has been working hard since all the clothes she is wearing are really dirty. She is a sign of peace and hope and love for me and when I hug her all her love rains down on me. I tell her how happy I am to see her and she calls me her wise grandson.

I am amazed at how clear my memory of my grandma is. I last walked this walk when I was thirteen and after that I came to America. I haven't seen my grandma for six years. I still feel the warmth of her love in my memory. I can easily become very nostalgic when I think about visiting her. Sometimes, I miss her very much and I have the same feeling I used to have on nights before I took the journey to her house. Whenever I think of her, memories of going to her house fill my head. They are as clear as daylight.