

# No Easy Trip

*12 Personal Essays by ACES Students*

SPRING 2014

A 2014 ACES eBook Publication (Volume 3 in the series)  
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*The ACES e-book launch is a very special event for the ACES community for two reasons. Firstly, it is a way for us to honor our fellow students for their creativity and hard work and acknowledge their writing accomplishments. More importantly, however, it is an opportunity for us to share their work publicly so that not only our small community, but you and the rest of the campus can also enjoy and acknowledge their talent and creativity. As Managing Editor of the ACES Website, I know that the ACES students have a lot to offer as writers. Their unique points of view, shaped by their multicultural background and diverse experiences, are one of the greatest strengths of their writing and at the core of its originality and appeal.*

*This year's collection takes us from a chilly winter holiday gift exchange in Albania to an out of control roommate in Paris to a brother denied chocolate croissants in Prague to a tiny red box with a white ribbon in Lebanon to a military-themed bar in China and many other thrilling locales. As evident from this year's selections, the ACES students come to St. Joseph's with a variety of incredibly unique experiences behind them and a lot of stories to tell. And here they are, very pleased and excited to share these stories with you.*

*Thank you,*

*Anna Marienko and the ACES Blog Staff  
St. Joseph's College, Brooklyn  
April 2014*

## Table of Contents

<i>Fifty Shades of Family</i>	Klara Kurti .....	4
<i>1092 Girl</i>	Samantha Cedeno ....	9
<i>1949</i>	Wentian Pang .....	14
<i>Girl On Ice</i>	Yangzom Lhamo .....	19
<i>Golden</i>	Nada Kassir .....	25
<i>The Vitus Touch</i>	Asllan Jaupi .....	29
<i>Mooncake</i>	Dingyi Liu .....	35
<i>From the Corners of Tashkent</i>	Inna Kim .....	39
<i>Life With Women and Music</i>	Argenis Ovalles .....	43
<i>No Easy Trip</i>	Petr Vlasov .....	48
<i>Bushwick, Once Removed</i>	Celina Sarita .....	52
<i>The Road to Hunsur</i>	Tsewang Bhuti .....	56

## *Fifty Shades of Family*

by Klara Kurti

Living in America, my family has often had better opportunities than my family in Albania. My parents hold good jobs, my sister and I have a better education, and we live comfortably. Although we work very hard for everything we have, our family back home in Ostren always assumes we're rich and live a perfect life. The hardest part about talking to them is that they constantly remind us about their struggles and how easy we have it here in the U.S. It's always a "guilt trip" about how unhappy they are and how our problems are never as difficult as theirs. As irrational as their complaints can often be, throughout the years, I've learned to look past them.

Last year, my father thought it would be a great idea for my sister and me to spend our winter break in Albania. He also told us that he and my mother had to work and would not be able to join us on vacation. Although we begged and pleaded not to go, he booked the tickets the very next day. "Who wants to spend their winter break at Uncle Shabani's house?" he would holler enthusiastically every night when he came home from work. He knew I dreaded staying at his brother's house, mostly because the temperature there was always zero degrees during the winter. After a few days, I believed that my father was inflicting a joke on us. As the day of departure approached, I realized my father has never been a good liar. I have to admit, I was excited to see all of my cousins. It had been years since I'd last seen them at one of the family weddings. I imagined most of

them had grown up and forgotten us. I wanted to surprise them, so I told my mother not to mention anything to anyone besides my uncle. However, as always, things escalated quickly. Over the course of the next couple of days my cousins started emailing me. I expected them to be as ecstatic as I was about my visit, but all they mentioned in the majority of their emails were the gifts they wanted us to bring them. Some asked for iPhones, others asked for expensive clothing, and to top it all off, my closest cousin desired a diamond necklace. Where in the world was I going to get all of the money for this from? They expected me to be Santa Claus, but we're Muslim and don't even celebrate Christmas! There were thirteen of them and only two of us! At that very moment, I just wanted to cancel my flight. All I thought about was the fact that I was being used by my own family.

December 15th approached very quickly. We arrived at Tirana International Airport at approximately 3 pm. It was colder than usual that winter afternoon. The paralyzing air made it almost unbearable to move. We quickly rushed through airport security and got our luggage. As we walked out of the main entrance the first thing I saw was Uncle Shabani and his two sons, Julian and Bardhi. We ran to them, and suddenly I felt as if I had been at home with them all along. The car ride back to Ostren took approximately four and a half hours; the roads were slippery and I was afraid we would drive off a cliff. When we finally arrived, I realized all of my uncles, aunts and cousins were there, including Uncle Behari, who lives all the way in Greece. We greeted everyone and then proceeded to sit by the stove to tell them about our trip. Everyone was

so kind and welcoming. "I can't believe I thought they only wanted us for the gifts," I thought to myself, feeling more foolish than ever. That night we all ate together and watched old family movies. It was one of the few times where I remembered all of my family being together; the only people missing were my parents. It was cozy by the fire, but we could hear the loud wind brushing up the window, singing a song of its own. Things seemed too good to be true... *which they were.*

The next morning, I was rudely awakened by a loud noise. It couldn't have been later than 6 am. I quickly rushed to the other room and spotted my cousins going through my luggage. Clothes were being thrown all over the place and I even spotted a broken iPhone on the floor. "That one is yours, Freddy!" shouted my cousin, Ola. I couldn't believe this was the same Ola that had just started college. I stood there in silence, waiting for them to notice me standing there in my Hello Kitty pajamas. "I didn't ask for *this*...." whined Lorka. To top it all off, nine year old Milena shouted, "Are these Odeta's *old* clothes!" I had heard enough; I decided to step in and stop them from causing any more damage. When I asked them what they were doing, they simply said they wanted to find all the presents. I wasn't upset that they had opened the gifts; I was upset that they were so greedy that they had to do it behind my back. Most importantly, I didn't expect to get such negative feedback from all of them. They didn't even apologize for the mess or for going through my personal belongings.

After two minutes of awkward silence, everyone left the living room. One by one they followed each other and walked past me as if I wasn't there. I stood

quietly in my pjs, with my clothes all over the place, and Odeta of course was still asleep. After a few seconds of contemplation, I followed them. Although I was upset, I understood that they were just excited to see their gifts from America. When I walked into the living room the first thing I asked was if they liked their gifts. "Thanks," said Ola and Freddy in a casual tone. You could tell they were siblings by the way they spoke at the same time. The now snarky Milena responded: "I bet those were all of your hand me downs!" The rest proceeded to watch *Big Brother*. No matter where you are in the world, almost everyone watches American reality shows. I gave them a fake smile and went back to sleep until late afternoon. When I woke up, I realized everyone had gone snowboarding on a nearby hill, and Odeta and I were the only ones home. At that moment, I let out a series of sobs and called my *mother's* brother to pick us up as soon as possible. Due to a snowstorm, it turned out, we were trapped in Ostren for another week. For the next few days, Odeta and I stood together, for the most part. Our cousins remained very distant and we still didn't feel as if they wanted us around. They didn't try to talk to us and we didn't try to talk to them. The only time they spoke to me was when Manjola and Lorka asked if they could have some of my own clothes since I had "more of them at home." After feeling guilty for having so many clothes, I gave some of my jeans and shirts away. It's hard to say no to the ones you love.

Later, that summer, as a last attempt to try to please everyone, my father arranged a vacation for all of us to stay at a famous beach resort in southern Albania. Since most of my uncles were unemployed that summer (because they

have seasonal jobs), my father paid for everything. Throughout the vacation, however, all we heard were complaints about how things could have been better. Many casual "thank you's" were thrown around, but I never heard one that was sincere. I've learned throughout the years, including that summer, that not everyone will be grateful for the things you do for them. But, as Mother Teresa has said "Be kind anyway;" many will be envious but, "continue to succeed anyway." The best thing to do is live your life the way you want to, because not everyone was brought up well. By the way, I wish I was as rich as my cousins think I am!



## 1092 Girl

By Samantha Cedeno

Three winters ago, when I went away to a boarding school called Fiap Jean Monett, in Paris, everything was different to me. It was a place of new traditions where people were used to being very social and warm, greeting everyone, even though they didn't know each other. The school was full of new people who lived more independently than I was used to. I even had to adjust to the time change from Ecuador. I thought that I would find it difficult to adapt to this "French" system but no, that was not exactly the problem. *That* turned out to be Adriana, my Columbian roommate.

I didn't think it would be an issue that Adriana came from Colombia; the Ecuadorian and Colombian cultures are not hugely distinct, so maybe adjusting to *her* way of living would be easier. Well...I was wrong. The first day I entered the dorm, Adriana was waiting for me, sitting on the bed, facing the door, next to the TV bureau. She was about four and a half feet tall, with long brown hair and hazel eyes. She seemed to be very popular and friendly so I had wanted to be her friend. As soon as I entered, I smiled at her. She greeted me with a sweet "Hi." That first impression made me think we could be good roommates and maybe then best friends and have a good time sneaking around Paris, like in the movies.

So, I just left my luggage on the floor and started organizing my things on my side of the room, which was next to the window that opened onto the street. We had an awesome 10<sup>th</sup> floor view. It was the perfect room. We could see the

white streets and the shiny fruit market in front of the building. Our room had a smell somewhere between coffee and honey, and if you were able to take a very deep breath, the aroma would penetrate your brain and make you forget about any problem. The sun made my side of the room the best. It was always aiming its light right at my bed, and every morning it fought through my curtain to warm my forehead and wake me up. It was splendid. The only problem was the girl sleeping in the other bed.

Every day we had to wake at 8 a.m. for classes. I never missed a class, but for Adriana, playing the role of the “absent girl” seemed to be a favorite thing to do. Sometimes I made noise slamming the door or stamping my feet to wake her up, but it was impossible: she was as immobile as a frozen corpse. The first days I never actually saw her, as she was never in the room. I even forgot about her and started making other friends. It was not until the second week that I decided to start a conversation with her. One day I waited for her to arrive to the room. I started doing my homework, then I cleaned the room, went to buy supplies, Skyped with my parents, and soon it was eleven in the evening and Adriana had not yet arrived. When she opened the door around midnight, I rapidly hid my book under the sheets and took my laptop and opened it, as I thought it would seem more normal to be online.

When I looked up to say “Hey,” I saw her wearing my skirt and orange and yellow-striped sweater. I was really confused at first and didn’t want to believe that they were my clothes, so I said, “Hi. Are those my clothes?” Right after, though, I knew I had messed up our chance at being friends. *Why did I do that?*

I thought. *Samantha, anyone could own that skirt. It was on sale at H&M. But what about the sweater? No, no, no— it has to be hers. She would have asked to borrow it.* All the while, Adriana hadn't answered me. So, I said to myself: *Just face it, you screwed it up. She will never want to be your friend.* And just as I was about to keep digging myself into a hole of shame and embarrassment, Adriana moved her head up and saw me. She gently smiled and turned around. I felt dumb. I closed my laptop, opened the sheets and buried myself in them.

The next day I woke up at 8 a.m. as usual. I saw Adriana's bed and avoided remembering the previous night's scene by just grabbing my boots and coat and making sure I got to my classes. I was about to enter the classroom when a very slow, pale old woman walked towards me and asked if I was staying in Room 1092. I nodded. She asked me to accompany her to the director's office. I thought that maybe they were calling all of the students staying in the dorms because I saw other students I knew going in the same direction. When I arrived, the lady told me to sit down in a chair. I decided not to do so. It didn't take long for the principal to open the door and hand his assistant four sealed envelopes. She came over and told me that I had to read the letter and sign it. I did not really understand what was happening, but I started to get scared because it seemed to be really serious. The assistant told me that it was a warning because I was about to be expelled. I didn't know French very well, so I avoided speaking. Instead, I freaked out and started crying in the office. Inside I thought, *What did I do wrong? I haven't even had a chance to sneak out yet!* I was so scared and worried about what the lady had said that not only was I

unable to open the envelope, I couldn't ask for the reasons. I just felt like bawling like a little baby.

When I calmed down, I decided not to open the envelope until I saw Adriana so we could read it together. That day I was supposed to take a trip around Paris, and I had been dreaming about that excursion since I'd arrived. However, I was so worried about the sealed envelope, I preferred to go to my room and tell Adriana everything.

I skipped my English class and ran back to the room. I took the elevator and as soon as I arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, extremely loud electronic music was playing. It was coming from 1092. *My room!* I started knocking and calling Adriana. She suddenly opened the door and was wearing my clothes AGAIN! My black boots and my earrings. My room was a mess: full of people I didn't know, most of them seniors. There were plastic cups all over the floor. I started crying in front of everyone and screaming at Adriana in Spanish: "¿Qué te pasa? ¿Por qué no me avisas que vas a hacer esto? ¡Eres lo peor!" I knew she could understand me, but even in this situation she would not talk to me. I didn't have to read what was in the envelope to understand that the warning had come because of her. She was totally different from what I had expected. People started to leave and Adriana just stared at me.

When I think about that morning now, I feel mortified. But in the moment, seeing the plundered room and the people sitting on my bed, I didn't care what anyone thought: not even the cool, handsome senior boys. I eventually calmed down and started reading the letter. It was just a warning. Still, I knew I had not

overreacted: this could get worse. I did everything not to let that situation ruin my time in Paris. I changed rooms and roommates, even though Adriana did apologize. At the time, I thought I had acted childish, but now that I think about it, maybe it was the best performance of my life.

## 1949

by Wentian Pang

It was the year that modern China was founded. It is also the name of my favorite bar in my hometown back in China. Near the city limits of Kunming, you can find DianChi, the biggest and most famous lake in YunNan Province. My first visit to “1949” was in the summer of 2008, when I was back from Sacramento, visiting Kunming for my summer vacation. My best friend, Yang, picked me up from the airport at nine in the evening and started driving toward DianChi.

After we had been on the road for thirty-minutes, we parked next to the dam, which covers the southwest side of the lake. Yang told me, “*There* is the bar - “1949.” The neon light outside the cabin was very prominent; I could see it from a quarter mile away. The crimson light shines out across the lake, turning orange as it mixes with the white streetlights that line the dam. I thought to myself: “That is one unusual color.” The cabin itself looks like burning charcoal, and you can feel its warmth in the cold air. This perfect sight would make anyone fall into a peaceful dream. The bar sits obvious and alone— one of the few buildings on the shore, and the only one with its lights on.

Yang gave me a brief introduction to the place as we were walking toward it. He told me that the owner’s father had been a regimental commander in the Chinese Civil War, from 1945-1949. The father had lost one of his legs (I don’t remember which one) and his right arm to bomb shrapnel during the battle of

NanJing in 1949. The son was so proud of his father's sacrifice to his country that he named the bar after the year to honor him. This patriotic story reminded me of one of my 6th grade teachers, Miss Deng. She was a thirty-five year old communist who was so passionate about politics that I am sure she is still single. This can happen in a place like China. Miss Deng always recounted for us something Napoleon supposedly once said: "China is a sleeping lion. When she wakes, she will shake the world."

As I sauntered closer, I saw that the cabin was made of a red-tinged wood. There was a plank hanging on the door with "1949" carved on it. Both plank and cabin appeared to be old and damaged, but this made it all more "historical" than the other cabins on the lake. There was a bench on the grass by the front door and a middle-aged couple was sitting there. They did not speak, but seemed like they were enjoying themselves. I could hear the music when I was fifteen feet from the door. It was "Civil War" by Guns-N-Roses. Axl Rose's husky voice filled every inch of the bar as I stepped in. The song had gotten my attention. I was very curious.

The lights were brighter inside and it was warmer. There were nine red wooden tables set up in an orderly fashion, with about six chairs around each table. One group of people was playing darts in a far corner of the room and another was playing pool near the bar. Most of the customers seemed to be around thirty years old. They were all dressed casually, in blue jeans, T-shirts, comfortable dresses or knitwear. There were many black and white historical photos hanging on the wall; most of them were of The People's Liberation Army

(which was the Chinese Army's name during the last century). Portraits of Mao Zedong and Stalin were also displayed proudly. The theme color of "1949" is red, if you haven't guessed it already: red lights, tables, chairs, doors, even the cups are red. One thing that I felt was unique and very interesting was the dartboard, which held a photo of Emperor Hirohito in its center; Hirohito, the leader of Japan during World War II, was one of its main war criminals. In the picture, he wore a black and white uniform with a red sedge hat. His image was covered with more holes than any other part of the dartboard. It was easy to tell that everyone "liked" his forehead and eyes.

We drank several bottles of beer and spoke about what had happened over the past six months. I realized that none of the songs playing in the bar were Chinese. Some were Russian, others were English, and then there were some languages that I could not recognize. I found it strange that everything in this bar had some connection to Communism, except for the music they played. There was an oil lamp on every table, each one covered with a glass shade. Maybe it was just my own illusion, but the lamp's orange flame warmed me further. I rose, looking for the washroom, and saw that a huge Chinese Flag covered half of the ceiling. The wind from the window blew the flag and it made a whooshing sound. I found the washroom after making a few turns, but then it took me five seconds to distinguish which room was the Men's. A Tibetan antelope, which has a bigger body and much more hair than your typical antelope, was carved on the door of the Men's Room, and a cute everyday sheep was carved on the Women's Room door. There was a banner hanging in



the Men's that featured two Mao Zedong quotations: "*Political Power grows out of the Barrel of a Gun,*" and "*All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers.*"

As I stumbled back to the table, I saw an old musket on the bar. This weapon was not a work of art. It was rusty, with a series of numbers near the breech. The bartender told me it had once been used by the owner's father in battle. It was ancient history now, just like the regimental commander. I went back to my chair and talked to Yang for hours. He told me that every waiter and bartender there had all once served in the military. It was hard for them to find a job after they had retired from service. Our nation is not always good to veterans, who often have no powerful family and are poor. We left the bar around 1:00 a.m., and the dartboard and pool table still hosted small crowds of cackling regulars. On the way back to my apartment, I kept thinking about the Napoleon quotation Miss Deng had told us. Actually, that is just a part of the saying. I learned the original version during world history class in Sacramento: "China is a sleeping lion; when she wakes, she will shake the world. For God's sake, just let her sleep forever."

After our first visit, Yang and I would regularly go to "1949" and sit for hours. Later, I began to take friends there and most of them like it a lot. We played darts and pool with strangers and made many new friends. Most of these fellow forty-niners were in their thirties, while I was not even yet an adult when I first went there. Sometimes I would sit on the wood bench and look at the shadow of the cabin. There is a small willow planted there. I found it during the summer of 2009. The willow has grown higher and higher since then. Its

branches had stretched to reach the lake when I went back this past July.

## *Girl On Ice*

by Yangzom Lhamo

The flight to Washington State from New York City took approximately six hours. The interior of the plane was filled with dull brown seats above a grey carpet. My mind was bubbling with thoughts and questions. I wondered why I was flying so far from home just to climb mountains and glaciers. I had done a great deal of hiking in Tibet, so why was I so excited to go to the Pacific Northwest to do the same thing? Naturally, it was not the landscape that had me worried; I had only been in the United States for a year, and my English was barely a quarter as good as it is now. Also, I would be meeting people I had never encountered in my life, though I had seen their names on the *Girls on Ice* website.

Girls on Ice is a ten day summer program for girls across the nation interested in nature and science. The program allows high school students to explore nature in real life, rather than just reading about it in textbooks. It takes place in Seattle, Washington each year; however, they offer only ten spots. I applied because I was interested in climbing mountains and glaciers, but I never thought about who my peers and instructors would be.

When I got off the plane, I felt the person I knew myself to be dissolving. I feared meeting the strangers who awaited me. The friendliness, the smile, and the courage had suddenly vanished from me, and my face started to burn when I saw the hand-held banner at the gate that read, *GIRLS ON ICE*. To add to my

discomfort, I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, as it had been above ninety degrees when I'd left New York. Now it was raining and chilly in Seattle. My body was also turning numb from the cold. It was then that I realized I had made the wrong decision to apply to the program, and I immediately regretted it.

When I wandered over, I realized that most of the girls had arrived and already become friends. I said, "Hi, my name is Yangzom," and they responded by telling me their names, but because of my accent, everyone seemed reluctant to talk to me. They carried on conversations without me. I had no choice but to stay by myself and wait, while the other girls chatted and shared stories of their travels and how it was their "first time leaving home." Most of the girls were American; if not, they were American-born, with immigrant parents. Therefore, conversation was never a burden for them. I, on the other hand, was afraid to speak a word or even look at them. Finally, the last girl showed up, and we were taken in a car to the foot of Mount Baker, which we would be climbing for the next eight days.

On the way, other girls were talking and asking each other questions about where they were from and how they were accepted to the program. I remained in the background, a little mouse doing the best I could to avoid the confident cats. The journey by car took almost three hours and all I did was pretend to sleep. Halfway through the ride, we met one of the instructors, Ms. Erin, a short, blonde American woman. She gave me an insincere hug and patted me on the back. Instead of getting comfort from her, I became even more nervous to meet the other instructors. When we finally arrived at our destination,

we saw a lonely house in a village, at the end of a muddy path. Along the side there were dark little bushes. We learned that the structure belonged to a former “Girls on Ice” participant. After we unloaded our bags, we circled around the campfire and introduced ourselves. That was the first time in my life I had spoken to twenty-five Americans, a group that included the volunteers, three instructors, and the Girls on Ice themselves. I was trembling and my heart beat twice a second. I wanted to run and dive into the bushes.

After the introductions, someone gave me a piece of bread that had dark-blue dots on it, and said, “This is delicious.” I don’t know what was wrong with my tongue, but the snack tasted sour-sweet and I almost vomited after my first bite. Still, I forced myself to swallow. It turned out to be a blueberry pancake. Then I went off for hot water, hoping to make a cup of tea, but instead they had only a sickly sweet brown tea. This turned out to be my first cup of hot chocolate. I did not like any of the food they had; all of the tastes were very unfamiliar. The dinner was just as much of a let-down as the so-called blueberry pancake. I was given a plate of uncooked vegetables that they called “salad,” and more hot chocolate to keep my body warm. At home, I would always eat rice, meat, and vegetables for dinner, and have bread in the morning. Without rice or bread, it was no meal for me. Even worse, I was worried that the next nine days of my life would be spent starving alongside these people, with only mountains before me.

Finally, it was time to sleep. I had been longing for it the entire day, not because I was tired, but because I wanted to be alone. I slept in a tent with a girl from Alaska. Our tent was quiet while the other tents were full of chitchat.

Eventually, the girls fell asleep and the sounds of birds singing, mosquitoes crying for blood, and grasshoppers twitching in the bushes accompanied me until I dozed off. But I barely slept that night. Even though I had only been there a day, it felt longer than a year.

My few hours of sleep ended abruptly around six in the morning. Everyone was gathering in the storeroom where the instructors were distributing hiking equipment. All of the girls had already gotten theirs, so I got the heaviest grey sleeping bag, which had holes in it, and boots that were too small for my feet. My backpack was as tall as I was, and twice as heavy as everyone else's.

After breakfast, we started the hike. The mountain became steeper as we walked up, and the reflection of the sunlight on the snow prevented me from opening my eyes properly. During lunch, the girls sat in a circle and talked again. I attempted to join them, but no one noticed my presence. As a result, I retreated to a corner to sit by myself.

After a few days, we were finally approaching the summit of Mount Baker. We broke camp at around 6,000 feet, but since the mountain is 10,780 feet high, we left most of our gear behind so we could make the summit. It was sunny, and for almost the entire day, we walked on the glacier. As we climbed, we saw clumps of snow falling from other steep mountains as the sun beat down. We also crossed some small crevasses, each of which held a mixture of ice and dirt.

It was around midday when we had our next lunch and discussion. Each of us was given a topic that we had to discuss. My topic was "the most humiliating time in my life." I barely knew the meaning of the word at the time,

and I wasn't sure if the definition in my mind was correct or not. Also, I was shy and had no idea what to talk about. However, this was my chance to join the group and connect with the other Girls on Ice. The pressure of the moment and the fear of saying the wrong thing took over. Nothing came to mind. I couldn't say anything. Suddenly, a girl from California named Flora said, "Why are you pretending you know nothing? Just speak up and don't waste our time." I was shocked. It was like she had stabbed a knife into my heart. As a result, I did not have the courage to speak again. I would be wasting their time if I spoke at all.

I spent ten days of my life with these strangers, unable to express myself because of the language barrier and anxious about making mistakes. When I returned home from the trip, I looked up the word "humiliation," even before I'd unpacked my bags. Google defined it as: "To make (someone) feel ashamed and foolish by injuring their dignity and self-respect, esp. publicly." I found that the definition I had had in my mind on Mount Baker was nearly the same, and I should have answered the question. The scolding I'd received on Mount Baker kept swirling through my head. Later on, I came to realize that what Flora had said to me was indeed true, though it had injured my pride and heart. In today's society, a person has to have self-confidence and courage. Interacting with people and participating in discussion are the keys to success in life. Therefore, some of my peers who felt reluctant to be with me on Mount Baker became inspirational to me in retrospect. What Flora said back then helped me learn something about myself. If I were a little more social, outspoken, and not so shy, then the ten days on Mount Baker would have been happier for me, and I would

have learned much more by overcoming my mental obstacles. Sometimes certain conversations might hurt you in the moment, but you eventually realize that they are necessary for growth.



## *Golden*

by Nada Kassir

I still remember my 15th birthday, when my mother gave me a lustrous, golden ring as a gift. I recall the day vividly. It was Sunday morning, August 30, 2009, and I was sitting on my bedroom balcony drinking coffee. My mom came and told me to dress up, because she was planning to take me to a gold shop in Beirut. It was a wonderful day, but boiling hot, as if the sun were about to drop on our car as we set out. On the highway, dozens of cars crowded the road while we waited for the light to change.

As we reached the gold store, my excitement transported me to another land. As a child, I used to play with my mom's jewelry. I would wear her bracelets, rings and earrings and stand in front of the mirror and act like a model in an ad, dripping with jewelry. A golden snake coiled around my hand, a tiny sparkly necklace hugged my long neck, small colorful stones cascaded down my chest. My mother's long earrings brushed my shoulders and got tangled in my hair. Her anklet clanged and rattled with my footfalls as I realized I should probably keep the noise down.

I almost forgot I was sitting in the car. I opened the window and the dry air slapped my face. My eyes throbbed and I felt like I was sitting near an oven. Everywhere I looked, the people of Beirut were melting like pieces of chocolate. I was in the car, waiting for the light to turn green. Tik tak, tik tak, tik tak, the time passed slowly. The light changed at last and the cars sped away, revving their

engines like Ferraris, turning the highway into a stadium race. I imagined speeding past our competitors, reaching the gold shop just in time.

I had never been in a gold store before. My exhilaration was palpable. I got out of the car and started walking slowly toward the shop. A gleaming display of metal kidnapped my eyes. I could not hold still. My mom took too long parking the car, so I ran and stood near the window, face against the glass, wanting to try on everything. I spotted a ring with white stones in the center that seemed to turn slowly in a starburst of light. When its shining rays passed through the glass and struck my eyes, I felt as if someone had thrown a hot rock into my brown irises. I FINALLY walked into the shop, which was voluminous. The sunny light of jewelry filled the store. Golden accessories were organized in the showcases like pleated rows of flowers, each folded over the next. Soon my mom was standing near the necklaces, holding her Burberry bag and looking intently with her brilliant eyes. She chose a necklace and clasped it on before the mirror. She changed pieces three times before choosing the one she wanted. The necklace that she selected was long and hugged her heart just below her hijab.

By the cash register, the merchant stood with his pen behind his ear, the phone held between head and shoulders, while he scowled into his papers. I approached slowly and gently and asked him to show me the ring from the window. He retrieved it and passed it to me; I held it with a trembling hand. My fingers felt along the tiny micro pavé gems. I remember it was the first golden ring I had ever placed on my finger. It was very tiny and lustrous, with sparkling,

small, starlight stones. When I slipped my finger into the ring, I felt the smoothness of the gold and the flames of light surrounding my fingers stuck there. My hand burned, but it was not the result of any real fire. I called to my mother loudly to come look. My mom held my hand softly with a shining smile, impressed. She kissed me on my chubby little cheek. "Congrats, love," she said. I took the ring off my finger and asked the merchant for the price. It was \$130, but because it was my birthday gift, the merchant gave us 20% off. Then he packaged it for me in a little red box with a white ribbon on top. It looked like a red velvet cake. My heart thumped as I accepted the gift box.

Four years have passed now and I am no longer little Nada, no longer fifteen. However, as I grew up, I developed an addiction to jewelry and golden accessories, which has magnified. When I moved with my family three years ago to New York, I left most of my jewelry in Lebanon because I thought I would come back in few months to reclaim it. Some of this jewelry has been lost, and some I allowed my little cousin Zeinab to have, since it didn't fit my fingers anymore. However, it was so hard for me to give up on that particular golden ring. Even though it would not have fit anymore, I still consider it to be the most cherished of my jewels because it represents a part of my heart. In Lebanon, I kept it with my clamorous earrings, resting in the drawer in its small red square box still banded with white ribbon. On the desk, teddy bears surround the storage space like body guards protecting it from any damage. My bedroom door stays locked tightly to keep out any air that could pass through and allow dust to dull the redness of the box. In addition to my own security systems is the

quiet wall that I imagine still monitors the house for any strange eyes that might fall in love with the lustrous stones. But all of this is gone now. And I am less adorned, if not more vulnerable, in a new world.

Yet, I have my memories. And they are golden.

And the new world is not too bad either.

## *The Vitus Touch*

by Asllan Jaupi

“Wake up guys. It’s time to get ready.” My father’s irritatingly loud voice shook the hotel room and pierced my eardrums. The alarm clock had gone off a minute before my father started to call us, but unsurprisingly, his droning voice was what woke me. As for my brother, he slept through both alarms, as usual. We both knew that the plan for that day in Prague was to visit the St. Vitus Cathedral. However, for me, the thought was so exciting that my sleepiness evaporated. I sprung from my warm, cozy bed and threw my covers to the carpet before running straight to the bathroom to wash up and get ready for the tour. However, as I looked into the mirror, the sight of my reflection frightened me. My eyes were bright red and my hair was all over the place as if I had pulled an all-nighter at school. In fact, the look was more “Night of the Living Dead” than Southern European tourist. Perhaps the worst thing about getting ready on winter mornings was waiting for the freezing sink water to get warmer. When I was in a hurry and looking like a zombie, those seconds ticked on like an eternity. Thankfully, after quickly brushing my teeth, washing my face, and combing out my messy hair, everything began to fall back into place.

When I got out of the bathroom, I could smell the warm croissants my parents had ordered us for breakfast. Oh, how I love those half-moon delicacies, with their irresistible caramel hue and cloud-like texture. When I approached the breakfast table, I could see steam rising out of the delicate rounds of dough as

my dad slowly cut one in half. The scene reminded me of a French commercial I had seen a while back, one of those rare advertisements that actually prompt you to go out and buy the product immediately. I sat down at the table and eagerly devoured all the chocolate-filled pastries as if I was famished. Fortunately, my parents did not like chocolate, which meant more for me. Thankfully, my brother, who was my only competition when it came to food, was still asleep. Usually the aroma of food would wake him right up, but not this time. After many attempts, my mom finally managed to rouse him, but unfortunately for him, there weren't any chocolate-filled croissants left. He had to eat the cherry jam-filled ones, which were also pretty delicious but nowhere near as good as the chocolate croissants. He sat at the table, disgruntled. "Where are the chocolate ones?" he asked my father. "Early bird gets the worm," I said as he gave me an ugly look, jam hanging from his upper lip.

After everyone had finished eating, we left the hotel and headed for the Cathedral, which was only a short distance from where we were staying. An icy cold wind blew into my warm and well-fed face as we exited the main entrance. It left me with the frostbitten sensation of hundreds of tiny bee stings on my cheeks. My eyes started to water, which made me regret not bringing my scarf. Along the way I took note of the fact that the citizens of Prague were passionate about fashion. I was surprised to see that they had such great taste and style, but then again it was Europe after all. Long, formal winter coats were apparently the dress code for most women, but many wore different colored versions of this classic look. Some ladies wore cherry red, some purple, some brown, some

even pink. I saw an overweight woman don a yellow coat, which, unfortunately for her, reminded me of a school bus (I assume it was not the look she was going for). Full-length coats were also common among the men but either in deep black or dark grey. As for the headwear, fuzzy fur hats and patterned scarves were the norm. Most of the women were outfitted in sleek black leather boots. The men, on the other hand, were not as fond of hairy headgear, but did seem to like scarves quite a bit. As for footwear, almost every fellow wore shiny black dress shoes. I was never one for looking at people's clothing, but these were no ordinary people. They were models in the street. Unlike the people of New York, everyone seemed to be enjoying their morning stroll in their winter finery. Some people were walking their dogs, some drinking their warm coffee, some talking on their cell phones, and some were even jogging. "Who goes for a walk at seven thirty in the morning in twenty degree weather?" I asked my brother. "Crazy people," he said in a cranky voice. I was not sure if he was angry at my parents for waking him up early, or the fact that he did not get his chocolate croissants. Either way, I was not about to ask.

When we finally arrived, I was astonished at what stood in front of us. Religious architecture never ceases to amaze me, but this cathedral was like something I had never seen before. The yellow brick exterior and the extraordinary roof that covered it were breathtaking. It looked like a humongous yellow cake with chocolate on top. The only thing missing was the candles. I had seen many fascinating sites during my few days in Prague, but this one surpassed every one of them. Even my sleepy brother seemed interested.

Above the entrance was a massive black and gold clock which was actually functioning, unlike the clock towers back home in Albania.

As we entered, the first thing that caught my eye was the dazzling gold chandelier in the front of the church. It was adorned in light blue and green gemstones. Circling the fixture were lit candles, which made each individual stone sparkle. The chandelier looked as if it had fallen out of an illustration from a medieval text. I thought that it must have been at least five hundred years old. Higher up, the gray ceiling was so expansive that it resembled an alien spaceship. I poked my dad and asked him “Do you think aliens built this?” He chuckled and said, “You and your scientific movies.” At that point, I decided to break away from my family and explore on my own. Fortunately, there were not many other visitors around because it was still early in the morning, so I began my journey without hesitation. Getting lost was not one of my worries; getting to see the whole thing before we had to leave was.

As I continued to walk deeper into the cathedral, I encountered breathtakingly picturesque scenery on the walls. There were countless numbers of religious paintings and many incredible, life-like murals depicting different events and figures in Christianity. Other than Jesus and Mary, I could not recognize many people in the paintings, which was odd because I had seen many documentaries about religious icons. Overhead, the jewel tones of the enchanting stained glass windows appeared to me like beautiful rainbows in the sky, glowing with every color imaginable when the sunlight shone through them. Blue, green, orange, red, purple and yellow were the dominant colors.



The further I ventured into the church, the more acquainted I became with the artistic objects. They seemed to reveal themselves to me around every curve and alcove. Sculptures and tombs of saints became part of the already marvelous inventory. One of the sculptures, a human figure with perfectly carved features, was holding a candle that looked so realistic I almost stopped and asked him for directions. Further in were tombs, which I had never seen in a church before, arranged creatively out of cold grey and gold metal. Life sized sculptures of soldiers lined my path, carrying golden caskets covered in intricate geometric patterns. Surrounding them were miniature baby angels, which were also made of grey metal. I started to wonder why the artists had not used marble instead. It would have looked better in my opinion.

As I continued walking, I looked down and noticed that even the floor was a masterpiece, with its gleaming kaleidoscopic swirls of marble, mostly red, orange and black. When I looked more closely I saw that there were also a small number of green, white, and blue tiles interspersed between the richer tones. As I kept staring down, I almost bumped right into one of the thick marble pillars that supported the cathedral. Looking up I realized that the pillars changed colors when the sunlight hit them, because of the stained glass windows. When the grey and black of the pillars mingled with the many different shades from the stained glass, they projected some of the most hallucinating scenes— patterns I had not seen, even in my dreams. As I walked past them, the sunlight danced across the stone and faded away, moving on to grace the next pillar in my path.

After I'd explored a while, people started to crowd the place, so I went to look for my family. It took me a few minutes to find them due to the size of the structure, but finally I spotted them by the altars. They all seemed speechless at what they had seen. "Are we ready to leave?" my father asked us. "No," my brother replied. "Can we stay a bit longer?" I never expected to hear *that* from my brother in a place like this. His ideal vacation was to spend time at the beach or the arcade. He was never interested in these sorts of things. I felt threatened and happy at the same time. So we decided to go for a quick tour of the cathedral again before heading back to the hotel. But this time, as a family.

## *Mooncake*

by Dingyi Liu

My mom had just bought a luxurious tin box for me. I didn't know what was inside, but I knew it must be something awesome. The whole box dazzled and sparkled like gold against my eyes. I put the gorgeous airtight box on the table. I could see large Chinese characters on the cover in red — “合家欢乐” (Happy Family!) I tried to open it slowly because I didn't want to scratch it, but the lid seemed to want to stay closed. My mom used a small fruit knife to try and open it and I wanted to stop her for fear of ruining it. A few minutes later, though, it finally opened and I felt like Christopher Columbus discovering America. I stepped forward, excited to see what was inside. Four tan-colored, fat, circular mooncakes sat perfectly in the box. “Mom, what are these?” I asked, studying one mooncake closely. There was a beautiful flower pattern on the cake. Then I picked one up and tasted it: ginger, onions, mustard, meat, eggs. I listed aloud all the things I could taste. “Yes, this is the new style,” my mom said happily, like she was winning a prize. The mooncakes I had tasted in China were a thick mix of low-gluten flour, sugar and oil surrounding the cooked yolk. What my mom had brought home was a wonderfully different specimen.

Since my family moved to America three years ago, we hadn't celebrated a lot of holidays and I'd had no chance to encounter a mooncake. I'd almost forgotten about the Chinese holiday of Mid-Autumn Day. We live in Brooklyn now. When Mid-Autumn Day on lunar August 15<sup>th</sup> (September 11<sup>th</sup> on the Gregorian calendar) came this year, my “Chinese” neighborhood did not hold any

public celebration. No one came out, because we were not from the same hometown and celebrated Mid-Autumn Day in different ways. It was a very quiet day, a disappointment. In the sky, though, the moon was the biggest and roundest of the year, and at home, my mom cooked a lot of food for us. She enjoyed it and I could feel her excitement. Her every movement was like a dance. She sang songs while she cooked, but the full reason for her joy eluded me.

My hometown in China was a small place: one poor road between two rows of houses, with rice paddies surrounding all of it. I think only two hundred people live there, so we knew each other well. When Mid-Autumn Day came, every family would be busy cooking food for the dinner feast. After eating, each family would share the best dishes with the other families, and then we would go to a small playground where there were no houses around. We would sit on the ground and eat more, while we appreciated the moon. After that came my favorite part: our parents would tell cooking tales and stories about their children on one side of the playground, while we kids were free to play.

I remember my first time eating mooncake with my friends. I was ten years old on that Mid-Autumn day. After I finished my dinner, my friends brought me the treat that was as big as my palm and as round as the moon. We sat in front of my house while we ate. The night fell, and the moon slowly and secretly climbed out from the mountain and rose into the sky. "Look, that is so beautiful!" one of my friends yelled out, unable to control himself. The moon was like a luminous pearl, lighting up the night. "My mom said don't point at the moon. If

you do so, it will cut your ears,” another friend said, panicking. I thought: *What? How can the moon cut my ears?* But I nodded along. We began a long debate about whether the moon really can slice off your ears. A half hour later, we finally arrived at a solution: go back home and ask our moms.

The wind in the mid-August night was a bit chilly. I sneezed and tightened my coat, but the wind could not blow away our excitement for the brilliant moon. The moonlight was bright like sunlight, and even at night, we could see everything as clear as if it were day. The stars seemed shy. They didn't come out, or maybe the moon was too bright for them. I could see the green rolling hills, like a camel's back, one by one. The river quietly and slowly flowed at the mountain's feet. The moonlight surfed the waves of the river, one after another, creating a new galaxy. The open land surrounded the river, and the grass danced in the wind. The two mango trees in front of my house, determined not to be outdone, swung their branches, and the leaves rustled like cheerleaders. I could feel the crickets' excitement. *They must be hiding somewhere*, I thought, *holding a party*. “Chirp, chirp, chirp.” A very busy day for them, too. I took a deep breath and the wet air, with its faint scent of soil, traveled through my nose and reached my brain. I couldn't stop inhaling; it made me calm. I felt it was the freshest air in this world. We were watching the moon and forgot about the time, until our parents shouted at us to come home. We did not want to leave and go home to sleep, because the sky was so bright, and we still each had a half of a mooncake in our hands. “Can we stay a bit longer?” we asked our mothers, just as we did every year, but the answer always came back the same: “No! Come

home, right now!” We reluctantly said goodbye and went home. When I arrived, my mom ate my remaining half of the mooncake. When she said, “Happy Mid-Autumn Day,” I felt as happy as if I’d received a new toy, and I smiled the best smile I could for her. The night regained its luster.

Now, looking back, I can understand why my mom is so joyful on Mid-Autumn Day. I think it is because she understands that time passes quickly, and she treasures every moment that we all have together. The evening of Mid-Autumn Day in my third year in America was the first time we had celebrated it outside of China. On that day, as I stood on the threshold holding a mooncake, my mom was as excited as ever. The mooncake seemed to become smaller in my palm, but I soon realized that it wasn’t the dessert becoming smaller, it was me growing up. I looked to the sky. The moon, bright as the sun, still shone as a flawless diamond, even in this vast American city. A breeze moved through my hair. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes and felt I was back... sitting in front of my house in China... with my friends. Eating mooncakes, of course.

## *From the Corners of Tashkent*

by Inna Kim

I grew up in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, which regained its independence from Russia in 1991. I was born in the capital, a very beautiful and historic city called Tashkent. Although Tashkent is a relatively small city, there is something special on every corner. For example, there are many ancient monuments in the city that symbolize the bravery and courage of our ancestors. I remember when I was a little girl, my grandmother and parents took me to one such monument. The place was very spiritual and imposing. There were writings engraved on the walls, and torches that lit up every corner and all along the walls. The flames sparkled and they reflected in our eyes. I remember looking carefully at every torch, slowly inhaling their slight, burning smell. It was a nice, cool evening outside; neither too cold nor too hot, just warm enough that I could wear a t-shirt. However, at the same time, my bare arms felt the slight breeze of a gentle, summer wind. On one of the walls, there were huge metal books with different names carved into them. My grandmother told me that those names were the names of the soldiers who died in the Second World War, and then my parents helped me find my great grandfather's name. I remember feeling horrified at the thought that my great grandfather had to fight in Russia's battles, but afterwards I realized that he was a true hero, which made me feel very proud.

Growing up in Uzbekistan, I was always surrounded by a very friendly and loving community. A part of what made the atmosphere of my childhood so peaceful and memorable was the neighborhood where we lived. The people in our neighborhood were very kind and helpful, and we all knew each other. The children played in the backyards together, and the parents sat on the benches and watched. The houses in which we lived weren't very large but they were all very close to one another. The houses in Tashkent were all one-story buildings. Almost every house had its own backyard with apple and cherry trees growing in it, and rose and strawberry bushes blooming. There were also many different shops and restaurants in our neighborhood. I remember there was one bakery that I used to go to all of the time because they baked the best Uzbek bread in the entire world. Uzbek bread takes only about ten to fifteen minutes to bake. Sometimes the bread was not ready by the time I arrived to the bakery, so I would wait patiently, and watch the dough bubble in the heat and the bread get all crispy in the oven. I remember that at home I liked to spread butter on a hot slice of bread and watch it melt into the grains. My parents used to send me to that bakery all the time to buy fresh, homemade bread in the mornings. I remember I would walk to the bakery almost every single day with a satchel in my hand and a smile on my face.

There was also a very fancy restaurant only two doors down from our house. I remember that there were always a lot of people there and that loud music played constantly. Surprisingly though, the noisy and crowded nights never bothered us, but rather filled our backyard with the light echo of traditional



Uzbek music. One day, we decided to pay a visit to this supposedly special restaurant that everyone had been raving about. After all, it would have been a shame if we had never gone, living only two steps away from it. So we all dressed up in our finest clothes and headed out to dinner there. I remember my dad wore a black suit with a tie, my mom wore a dark skirt with a satin blouse and I had a cotton, summer dress on. We sat at a table for four, ordered traditional Uzbek salads and main dishes, such as a rice and beef dish called *plov*, and enjoyed the sounds of the Central Asian music. I remember lying in bed that night, thinking what a great night I'd had with my family.

One hot, humid, mid-July morning, I was walking down the street to pick up some fresh bread from the bakery. Although it was very early in the morning, the sun was already shining brightly and it seemed like there was no escape from its blazing, almost fire-like rays. The sweat was dripping down my cheeks and I was running out of breath as I tried to hurry to the bakery to shelter myself. However, no matter how quickly I walked, it seemed as if I hadn't moved at all. The bakery seemed to be an infinite distance from me. In despair, I stopped for a moment to take a breath and wipe the perspiration from my face. I looked across the street and that's when I saw a row of six or seven palm trees, which were very unusual for the hot, humid climate of Uzbekistan. The trees were tall and their huge, green fronds overlapped each other, creating a pool of a cool shade in the middle of our desert-like street. I quickly crossed the thoroughfare and stood right under these hanging green "umbrellas," inhaling the tropical scent

of palm and thanking nature for such miracles. Funnily enough, I learned later that it was not nature that had provided the palm trees, but a local restaurant!

Looking back now at all the memories I have of my hometown, I realize how much I really miss it. The delicious food, the loud music, the laughter of the children playing in the backyards. It all reminds me of home and brings on a nostalgia for childhood. Uzbekistan is not huge, compared to Russia and the United States, so the sense of community is much stronger there than in many other places in the world. I built life-lasting friendships, created unforgettable memories and spent fourteen wonderful years in Uzbekistan. No matter how far away I am from my hometown, and no matter how much the Uzbek government might be criticized in the world press (even when it is justified), a part of me will always yearn for Tashkent and I will always belong there. I hope my country will find its way on the difficult path to democracy and equality for all.

## *Life with Women and Music*

by Argenis Ovalles

***"Does what I'm wearing seem to shock you? Well, that's okay because what I'm thinking about you is not okay. Got it on my mind to change my ways, but I don't think I can be anything other than me."***

**– *"Light Me Up"* by The Pretty Reckless.**

I was born in Manhattan, but at the age of five, Mami and Papi sent me to live in a conservative, chauvinist, Roman Catholic household (with a small Southern Italian influence) in the Dominican Republic. There, the matriarch rules the house, despite the strictly male-dominated culture. I found myself living with my grandmother, Florida, my aunts, Daisy and Mayra, and my sister, Eileen. My uncle Eddie and I were outnumbered. If I wanted to watch programs, I'd do it when my Señoras were asleep, otherwise I would lose the war in TV land. They would watch *novelas* or soap-operas, as they are called in the United States. While watching these shows, I would have to endure the females in my family gossiping about the actresses' clothes, or social lives, or whether one or another got pregnant or had a new hairstyle or any other nonsense. But worse than all this, they enforced machismo notions upon me by making me watch sports with Uncle Eddie, which would probably be preferable to your typical Dominican teenager. For me, it was not.

At first I thought the women in my family would be more modern, but it really wasn't that way. They certainly wanted me to be the stereotypical 20<sup>th</sup> century Macho of Latino America. They ruled the tube, but wouldn't let me do chores, unless it was convenient for them. When they forced me to play sports, I

wished I was dead. One time I was bullied by kids of the community in Santo Domingo de Guzmán for "not speaking normally." I have a stutter. One would think that such cruelty would be an acceptable reason for not wanting to play with those horrible kids.

But one night, as twilight was kicking in, and I could barely see the faded green walls and rusty golden door of my friend's house, my aunts were not taking excuses, especially my Aunt Mayra. "What kind of Dominican does not play *pelota*? You got to be a normal Dominican, as well as a normal speaker— and the man of the house!" she demanded, ignoring the fact I was also an American. "I am not playing!" I retorted, though my knees were buckling in fear. I sat on the front steps of my friend's house, waiting for the worst. I was afraid, imagining how Mayra might make the light of life vanish from the windows of my soul. I could see fire in her eyes, as if Armageddon was about to descend, all because of my resistance to playing sports.

Eventually my friend's mother calmed Mayra down. She was about to hit me with her Italian leather belt. Fear lingered on the walk back to our place. Everything was quiet, but quiet like you experience in a horror movie just before the murderer strikes. I remember it so vividly: Aunt Mayra was wearing a pink top and jeans, while I was wearing my overalls and a Scooby doo shirt with New Balance sneakers. She kept her eyes fixed on me. We communicate through our eyes, so I knew she was trying to say, "I'll beat the hell out of you." To keep myself distracted, I looked at the gloomy clouds. They were gorgeous, tufted in

the shape of horses galloping towards the horizon and fading as they touched the dim blaze of the sun.

Of course, my refusal to play pelota wasn't my only "failure." I didn't have much of a social life, either. I didn't go out to too many parties; the kids wouldn't invite me. My only appearances were at "Horas Santa" celebrations, in which people spent at least an hour worshipping and praising Jesus Christ, which would eventually conclude in dancing. "Why aren't you dancing *Bachata*?" my aunts would nag, again forcing chauvinist expectations onto me. Bachata is an Afro-Latino genre of music and dance that originated with the African descendants in the Dominican Republic in the early parts of the 20th century. It is not the best music genre in the world. Sure, it makes the blood run through your veins, and yes, it makes your feet dance. It even puts you into a beautiful, bittersweet, loving mood. I realize I am contradicting myself here. The thing is that I *like* Bachata; I just don't *love* it. And I don't want to be expected to love it. When I told my aunts, Daisy and Mayra, that Bachata wasn't my favorite, they again dismissed me with their cutting "we disown you as our nephew" glare. But to me, dancing Bachata gives the impression that a guy is either a womanizer or a drunk. Take, for example, these Tedororo Reyes' lyrics: "I pay homage to all the drunks. Those who drink by little pints, liters or gallons. Foolish is he who doesn't drink so that he can say he's good to his woman." Lyrics like these are among the first that any Dominican kid hears.

My aunties weren't the only ones to antagonize me. My tastes even clashed with my sister's. Eileen liked to watch MTV on our only television and

we generally did not enjoy the same programs. But one day, as we sat on the blue and beige sofa, eating white rice with red beans and beef, with salad on the side, I made an important discovery. The scene started out typically enough: she knew I wasn't happy and I was wearing my usual "I want to watch something else" face. You know, the raised eyebrows and the deep frown. But suddenly, I heard something majestic— an electric guitar and drums pierced and thundered out of the speakers. My eyes lifted. The lyrics were hard to understand since I had forgotten almost all of my English, but it was still a pleasure to my senses. I thought my eyes were going to pop out. The video showed a gig played in a dark and foggy room with cheerleaders cheering for musicians, while the teens from the crowd behind them were being destructive and wild. "Load up on guns and bring your friends. It's fun to lose and to pretend. She's over-bored and self-assured. Oh no, I know a dirty word," the lines went. It was the first set of lyrics I remember hearing as a child. Even though it may not seem appropriate for Kurt Cobain to be the inspiration for a twelve year old, I thank God I heard "Smells like Teen Spirit" that day. I felt connected to something, connected to music, for the first time in my life. I knew in that moment that this song was meant for me. Besides, there had to be other people besides me who loved Nirvana. I wasn't alone in the world. There was still hope for me.

Years later, I moved back to New York. I was still living with women, since now Padre was nowhere to be seen. I was still scared that other people might think of me as "the other." A few people in the Dominican American community who didn't follow the expectations of males started to accept me as a sort of

social deviant. It only took three more years for them to accept me as a Dominican who just doesn't play sports and is more likely to listen to Nirvana or Led Zeppelin than Bachata. My mom and sister got used to it, too. They accepted it. And I learned a valuable lesson: just because you are raised with an idea, it does not mean it is the correct idea. Not every man is the same. There is nothing wrong with being different from your culture, or in my case, adoptive culture. I don't think I would raise a boy to follow the social patriarchal system, but rather to follow what he believes in. As for me, I know what I believe in. It is good to be different.

## *No Easy Trip*

by Petr Vlasov

My father refuses to fly, so the only way for us to get to Bulgaria is to drive there. Usually we start our journey in the early morning, around five thirty, so we have more time to see the road before sunset. It is neither safe nor convenient for us to drive at night. Our route always takes us through Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. We spend a lot of time driving in Belorussia and Ukraine, but spend only a couple of hours in Moldavia and Romania. The roads are dilapidated much of the time and we somehow take different roads every year, not because we want to try something new, but because we always take the wrong route. There are few signs to guide us.

Last year we got lost, even though we had a GPS navigator. We were not able to find a route we needed. At one point, we were on gravel roads in some really small village in Ukraine and got stuck there. We did not know what to do because the people there did not speak Russian or English, so we could not ask how to correct our course. Moreover, my father had just gotten a fancy new Audi, so we did not feel safe. We feared that the people around might attack us for our car. My father is very irascible, and because I was supposed to look at the map and at the GPS, he felt that it was my fault we'd gotten lost. He became very unhappy and we even had a small fight. He was saying that it was my job to keep us on the right track. But it was not my fault; it was the bad roads and the lack of signs. Still, my father told me that if I was responsible for something, then



it was my fault if something went wrong. Of course I knew that he had a point, but I was still angry. It did not matter how hard I'd tried, we would have ended up in the same place. Eventually, I tried to concentrate on the road as much as it is possible, so we would not get lost again, and it worked, because we found our way out of the village and were finally able to continue to Bulgaria.

While we were driving on the highway in Ukraine, it was time to fill up the gas tank for the first time on the trip, so we stopped at a gas station to do so. However, we could not insert the nozzle into the tank. We looked so silly, we did not know what to say or do. We sat in the car and tried to figure it out, and then we had another fight. This time we were just arguing with each other for no reason. It is just the way we usually solve problems and, to tell the truth, it works. After five minutes, my father told me, "Just call the dealer and ask what is wrong." So I did. I was really surprised when a guy from the support office told me that he had no idea what the problem was. Moreover, he said he did not know what we could do about it. My father and I started arguing again about what we should do. The situation was critical. We were in the middle of nowhere and did not have much gas left, so we were trying to do *something*. After some time, we stopped complaining and decided to move to the next station to try to refill there, but we did not succeed there either. We sat in the car again, thinking the trip was over. We did not even have enough energy left to fight with each other and we lost hope.

So now we were relaxed. My father started telling me about some really interesting moments in his life, like when he and his friends started a rebellion in

the army because there were no regulations and the commanders could do anything they wanted to do. For example, the officers used soldiers to build their villages and to cook for them. Later on, my father had to escape from the army. Our conversation was very open, and I was glad that we had it; usually we do not have a lot of time to talk. After twenty minutes or so, feeling more inspired, we decided to move to another gas station. Finally, at the next place, the nozzle went into the tank! I could not understand why it worked only then, but my father explained that he thought that the car had a special fuel valve and that not every nozzle fit it. When we had a full tank of gas, I memorized the size of the nozzle that works with my father's Audi and we never had that problem again.

The next disaster, however, happened at the ferry station for crossing the Dnieper River in Romania. The problem was that you have to pay a fee in Romanian *lei* and there is no currency exchange point and we did not have any lei because we had no use for it. Moreover, they do not accept credit cards. It seemed like it would make a lot of sense if there was at least one exchange point on this international route. I was furious about it, but my father remained sensible. I tried to convince the Romanian staff to take U.S. dollars, but they flatly refused. Then they told me to drive one hundred kilometers back to the city and find an exchange point there. I had a huge argument with them, shouting and calling them unpleasant names, while my father sat there in the car listening to music. After ten minutes of yelling, I gave up and realized that there was no way to deal with those people. It was clear that they just wanted us to pay more money, but we continued to refuse, not because we did not have enough money,

but because they were rude. I sat back down in the car and my father and I discussed what we should do. We soon realized that there were more cars coming through the station and we could ask someone to exchange the money for us. I was running from one car to another, trying to find someone who had extra lei to exchange until I found a British guy who agreed to exchange ten dollars to lei. My father and I felt so good, because we had won that “bribe competition,” and I felt especially vindicated when I finally paid the fee. We got on the ferry and were able to forge on.

There were no more difficult situations on *that* road, and the rest of the trip was actually manageable. Looking back, that journey was helpful in developing a better relationship with my father. After going through those tough situations together, we started to understand each other more clearly, and became closer overall. In particular, I learned from my father’s story that you have to fight for what you believe is right.

## *Bushwick, Once Removed*

by Celina Sarita

I moved to the Bushwick section of Brooklyn from the Dominican Republic when I was eleven years old. It was a hot afternoon when I walked out of the airport. The first thing I noticed was the thickness of the air. I remember seeing cars of all kinds on the streets, mostly vans, pickup trucks and SUVs, and I wondered throughout the ride where the motorcycles were. We had moved to a neighborhood where all of the apartment buildings looked exactly the same: three story buildings with ground floor apartments where the landlords lived. The only noticeable external difference was the color of each house: some were white, some black, some blue, and mine was yellow. Inside, on the second floor, a narrow hallway led to the two doors of our apartment. The one that led to our parents' room was closer to the building's entrance. The door we could use to enter the apartment was at the far end of the hallway where the stairs drifted up to the next floor. This door opened to another hallway inside our apartment and this was the door that everyone coming or going had to use. The entryway to our apartment always had an unfamiliar and unwelcoming scent to it. It fell somewhere between old wood and the dirty rug on the stairs that was never cleaned. At other times, the smell of the Ecuadorian food our downstairs landlords were always barbequing in the backyard wafted through the hallway.

Inside our apartment was a kitchen where I knew I could always find two boxes of cereal: Corn Pops and Froot Loops (which today I detest because the taste brings back memories of when I first got here.) Our living room was not

very eye-catching. It had a crystal table, which held an ugly vase that had dirty plastic flowers in it. My siblings and I later broke the vase while playing around. My mother still owns the table to remind everyone how grateful we should be to my father's niece for giving it to us. She keeps it in a closet where it won't get broken. The room also had a huge Sony TV that my mother later sent to my grandmother in the DR because we weren't using it.

Next to the living room were the two bedrooms, one of which I shared with my sister. We had a queen-size bed that we both slept in. On top of the adjacent dresser was the only toy my sister had from the DR: a stuffed Scooby Doo wearing a green American football uniform, with a football under its paw. We never made any changes to our room during these months. We kept it exactly how our cousin had left it for us. When we moved out, we took the bed and the Scooby Doo and threw away the dresser. The room was left empty. We don't know who originally painted the place but the same yellow paint remained on the walls when we moved. We spent most of our time there in our parents' room because it had a window that looked out onto the street. We were not allowed to open the hallway door in my parents' room because they'd say, "You never enter a house through the bedroom; you'll bring a lot of dirt inside and, plus, if you're bringing guests over, you can't have them traipsing through there." We spent most of that summer, stuck in that room, watching other kids play outside. We couldn't join them because of the language barrier, just as we couldn't venture out into the hallway.

I recall the time my cousin, whose name I don't remember, took us outside. She said, "Have you ever seen a squirrel? Let's go out and find one." I was really happy to leave the apartment. When we got out to the sidewalk, we were quickly disappointed, not because the squirrels were unfriendly, but because the other children were cruel. Many times my siblings and I would go to the park in sandals and then take them off and leave them hidden in a corner so we could play freely. And every time we took them off, some other kids would steal them and we'd have to walk home barefoot. Today I realize that they did this to us because they could clearly see that we did not belong there. The other boys and girls would take off their shoes and they were never stolen. Ours were snatched because the children knew we couldn't speak enough English to defend ourselves. We would then hide from our mother because if she saw we were barefoot she would yell at us, or at least that's what we thought. She now says that she knew our shoes had been stolen but didn't say anything because she didn't want to make things worse. Later on, our cousins, who lived a few blocks away and spoke English, would come over and stay the whole day. With their help, we were able to communicate with the children from the block and we could finally all play together. It was then that Bushwick became magical to me and doors and hallways no longer mattered.

After a year in that apartment we moved to a house on the corner of that same block and about six months later, we moved to East New York, where I still live today. The new neighborhood is more diverse: there are African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and some Whites. The only problem with this new place is

that it is very dangerous during the summer. Everyone has to stay indoors because of the gang activity going on in the street. The police are always around, but as soon as they turn their backs, a shooting occurs and someone is killed. Every time I think of Bushwick, I remember the two summers I spent there and how I'd see South American Latinos wearing shorts, cooking outdoors, sweating, and then going to the beach, and this reminds me of my country. I will never consider East New York my home, even though I have lived there for about five years. I long for the day I can move to a place that reminds me of where I come from. My mother says, though, that when we move, we will move to a place where there are fewer Dominicans because in her eyes they are just "a bunch of gossipers," but I don't see it that way. Even though we went through a hard adjustment period, for as long as I live, Bushwick will remind me of home and bring me back to the enchanting and the bitter memories of childhood.

## *The Streets of Hunsur*

By Tsewang Bhuti

During the summer of 2012, I went back to India from New York to visit friends and relatives. I was very excited to travel there after having been gone for five years. I was eager to see what everyone was doing and wanted to travel to places I'd never visited when I still lived there. I wanted things to be laid back, and wanted to enjoy India with a tourist's eyes. However, I did not expect that viewing India through a new lens would lead to a startling realization about gender discrimination and the double standards that women and girls face each day there as they go about their daily routine.

It was meant to be rainy season during my stay, but it didn't rain at all, which ruined the crops. When the temperatures rise this way, a typical American woman might wear shorts or a mini-dress, but in India, such practices are less common. While I knew that most women did not wear shorts, I did not expect for it to be an outright problem for someone to do so.

In the Tibetan settlement called Rabgyaling, near Mysore, India, there is a collection of about fourteen villages. When I lived there and during my visit, I stayed in "A" village, also known as Doundupling. One day, my sister, my sister-in-law, my sister's friend and I were leaving to go to the city of Mysore to see a movie. Although Mysore is urban, it is not as large as other major cities in India. In order to get there, we would have to take two different buses. I remember that when I left my uncle's house that morning and he saw me in shorts, he asked me



if I would be going out like that and told me to change. I insisted that it would be fine and that nothing would happen. After all, I was not wearing anything too revealing; they were just regular, blue cotton shorts. His concern made me feel vaguely nervous, but not afraid, since my cousin was also wearing shorts and she would be going with me. After all, in our village, shorts were not common, but were still acceptable, especially in the extreme heat.

We left early in the morning because it would take a long time to reach the theater. When we arrived in Mysore, a few people glared at me and my exposed legs, but I still felt relaxed. Besides, boys and men like looking at girls everywhere, I told myself. Even in New York, when I walk down the street, I get stared at, because it is so common. I told myself to ignore the attention. However, the problem escalated on our return to the village after the movie. Since we had to take two different buses, a transfer was necessary at a town called Hunsur, which is smaller than Mysore. The people there aren't used to modern clothes, like shorts or dresses above the knee, though young girls there do wear jeans or pants when not dressed in traditional clothing.

After getting off at the bus station, I felt the eyes of many men upon me. I do not remember their faces, but I do remember the expressions they wore of shock and disdain. At first I thought it was because I was wearing my scarf around my shoulders like a shawl to combat the air conditioning on the buses, but I quickly realized that the scarf wasn't garnering the attention. I remember most clearly two men walking in front of me, turning around, pointing at me, and then saying something in Kannada that I couldn't understand. This gesture is

used by many people in India when they are scolding or speaking ill of someone. Their body language, tone of voice, and entire energy expressed contempt, and in a moment, I became flushed with terror. My mind raced and I imagined myself being beaten by the men and boys in the crowd. I hid myself among my sister, my sister-in-law, my cousin and my sister's friend, asking them to encircle me as tightly as possible.

My sister-in-law behaved differently from the rest of us because she is a bold woman; she doesn't like to keep quiet while injustices are occurring. She, along with my sister, told me not to worry because they were there with me and the men could not do anything to me. However, the situation soon became worse. Some "boys," who might have been in their early or mid-twenties, stood on an apartment balcony above and began to yell down at me. I did not see them at first, but after the commotion grew louder, I looked up and saw hordes of them. I wanted to get out of there, and fast. But my mind went blank and all I could think about was how they were going to beat me for wearing shorts that bared my legs. I was so afraid. I wished that I could change into pants, or get into a taxi so that we could go to our village. We knew a driver in Hunsur who often drove us, so my sister called him. He was already busy, so she called his father who was also a driver, and he came to pick us up.

I remember standing outside the pharmacy, counting down the seconds, as my relatives and friend hid me. I did not have to wait long, and I was so glad when the driver showed up. As we piled into the car, a wave of relief washed over me. However, my peace soon turned to a subtle resentment when my

sister, sister-in-law and sister's friend were able to exit the vehicle to eat amazing street food, while I was left to cower in the car. They did bring me back my favorite, masala dosa, which I ate in the safety of the back seat, not wanting to risk anymore male attention.

I will never forget that time. Sometimes I regret not listening to my uncle who warned me not to wear shorts. At other times, I wonder why I was the only one to be bullied since my sister was dressed the same way. It's not that I would ever wish the experience on her; I just don't fully understand why my clothing caused such a stir. And I don't want to be so negative as to say that all men in that town or in India are judgmental. Hunsur had been one of my favorite places because I visited it often while living with my uncle. But I know that in larger cities like Bangalore or Delhi, it is more common for girls to wear shorts. Of course, this does not mean they face less harassment. In fact, some girls are not as fortunate as I was to escape. I recall watching a BBC documentary called "India: A Dangerous Place to Be a Woman," in which a girl of fifteen was returning home from a friend's birthday party when men jumped out at her, grabbed at her hair and tore at her clothes, demanding to know where she was going and what she was wearing. The incident was recorded on video and was posted online. In India, if a girl is raped, she faces public condemnation and no one will marry her. As a result, a woman's family will not complain, because they fear losing respect.

Even though much of that vacation was memorable for the wonderful places I got to see and the kind people that I met, I will never forget the

unfortunate incident that happened in Hunsur. The event made me more aware of what women in India have to contend with, and it caused me to feel strongly that women and girls should be able to dress as they please without risking harassment or worse. Standards of modesty are culturally specific, but no one should have to suffer shame or physical violence because they decided to wear a respectable pair of shorts on a hot day.

*THE END*