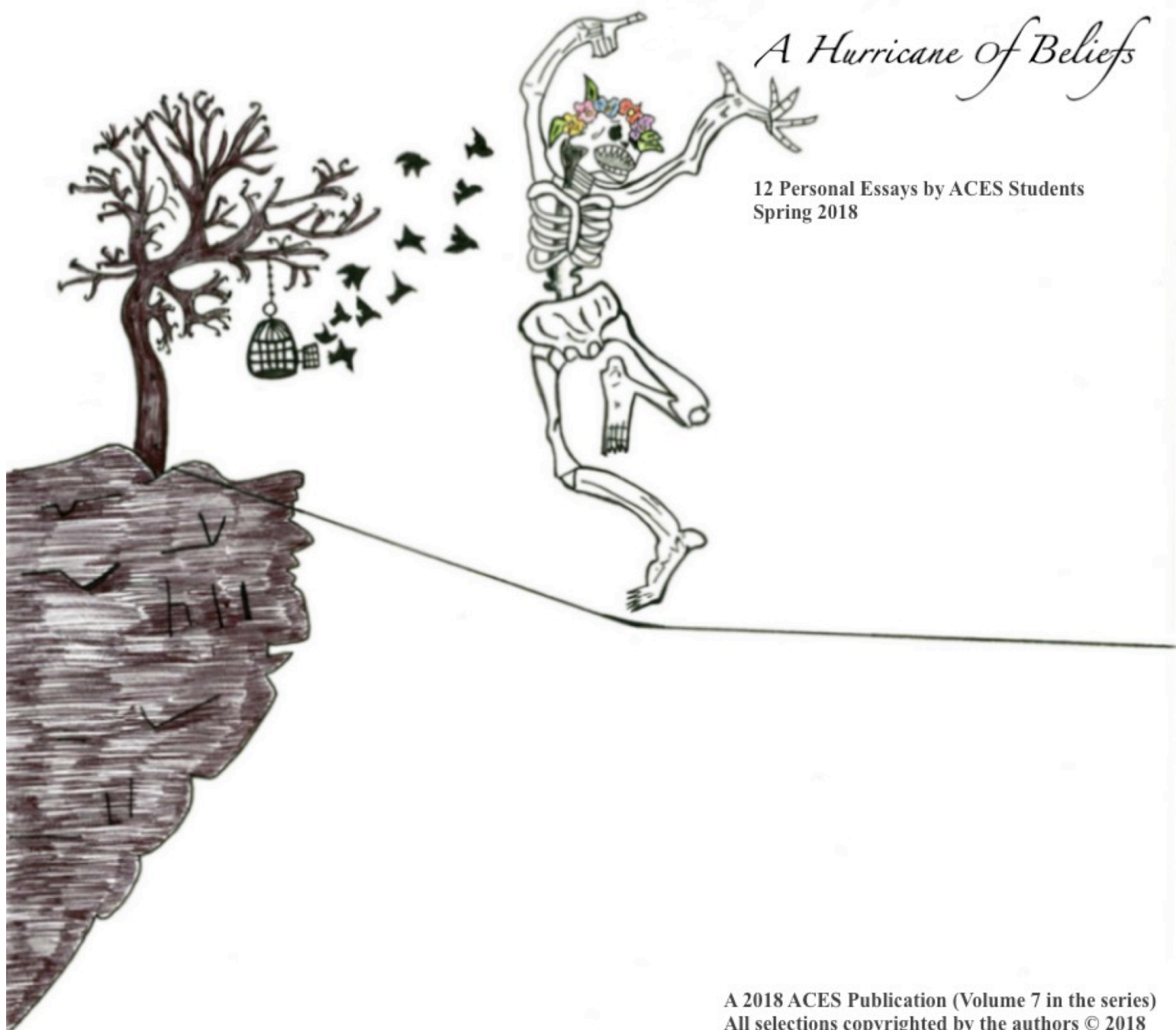




**A Hurricane of Beliefs**



# *A Hurricane of Beliefs*

12 Personal Essays by ACES Students  
Spring 2018

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## **Preface**

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*As I read each of your stories, I was surprised at how relatable I found many of your experiences; whether it was the rush of arriving in New York for the first time, or the bittersweet emotions of uncovering memories of someone from our past, or even the feeling of displacement that rose from a spiritual crisis. Perhaps the feelings of not belonging in our present and longing for our past is even more amplified for us, as we are all recent immigrants who have had so much more to leave behind. But reading through this year's ACES Reader, I realized that even if you all considered yourselves to be scattered islands, completely isolated in the open ocean, if you spoke loud enough and listened closely enough, you would realize how each and every of one you are surrounded by this great and giant cluster of other islands.*

*Your stories not only serve as evidence of your literary achievements, but also serve as a reminder that none of us are alone in grieving for our loved ones, or longing for our family, or even experiencing a personal crisis. So going forward, I hope you realize how important it is to tell your stories and articulate them to the best of your abilities. As the ACES program seeks to refine those abilities, this e-book reader serves as a testament to them.*

*Ronojoy Hem '19  
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April 2018*

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## A Hurricane of Beliefs by Alisson Martinez

*"I used to think I was the strangest person in the world but then I thought there are so many people in the world, there must be someone just like me who feels bizarre and flawed in the same way I do. I would imagine her, and imagine that she must be out there thinking of me, too. Well, I hope that if you are out there and read this and know that, yes, it's true I'm here, and I'm just as strange as you." –Frida Kahlo.*

I always considered myself an island. I always considered myself different than others. Too righteous for this time period. Too open-minded for this time period. Too closed minded for this time period. As many people have, I too tried to fit into society and follow the parameters established so that I would not be considered an "outsider." However, now I know that there are a lot of islands like me out there in the world. Islands who are not sure if they believe in God, or in Gods, or in no Gods at all. A specific moment or person in your life can completely change your perspective towards something. Watershed moments and epiphanies manifest themselves everyday in different ways. A course in college might determine what you really want to do in the future. A surgical procedure or patient, while you are a surgical intern or resident, might determine the type of surgeon you really want to be. An event or person in your life can

make you become a Christian or an atheist. It just takes one event in your life to turn it upside down.

Have you ever read *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*, *House Taken Over*, *The Son, The South*, or any story written in the tradition of magical realism? If you have, it will be easier for you to understand the following event. It all started after the hurricane. The hurricane was going to hit the Dominican Republic at night. We all went to my aunt's house because it was built with bricks and the hurricane was not going to hit it as hard as it was going to hit my house. We spent the day following the instructions prior to a hurricane. The usual to do list. A flashlight with enough batteries, drinking water, enough food, etc. Also, we secured our most valuable belongings and made sure that our personal documents (passports, birth certificates, and IDs) were secured and safe from the water and the wind. After following these instructions and eating, I went outside, I sat on my mother's lap, and listened to the anecdotes of my aunts, uncles, and mother, then I fell asleep and appeared magically in my bed. In the beginning, my dream was peaceful and filled with laughs. It was one of those dreams that you do not remember, but you know it was a good dream. Then, I felt like something weird was happening. I felt the presence of someone in front of me. I opened my eyes hoping I was not going to see anything and I could not believe what my eyes were seeing. A figure was standing in front of my bed. A tall and skinny man, with long straight brown hair, and a long brown beard. He was young and dressed in black clothes from head to toe. His eyes, I could never forget his eyes, they were as red as blood.

I do not think that a single soul in my family is an atheist. I grew up in a Christian family. We went to church every Tuesday and Friday. We prayed every night and every time one of our loved ones was in pain. However, for one reason or another, I felt guilty

because I felt that all my actions were sins. I tried and tried to be a good person, but I always felt like I was a bad Christian. I did not feel a connection with God. My feelings toward Christianity and God have always been complex.

That night, the man standing in front of my bed took my voice and my mobility. I could not move. I could not sleep. My experience of total impotence was indescribable. I wanted to scream, I wanted to move, I wanted to run, and I could not do any of that. He stood there for 10 minutes watching me struggle in paralysis, and then he took my breath. His facial expressions did not reveal anything. I could not tell if he was enjoying the situation or not, what I could see in his eyes was that he concentrated deeply on what he was doing. I could not believe that my sister was in such a deep sleep. I could not believe that all of that was happening and she was still sleeping. I could not believe that perhaps I was about to die and she was still sleeping. I was scared, angry, and sad all at the same time. Then, I woke up, abruptly, sweating, and breathing heavily. My sister was lying there, in the bed in the same position she had been in my dream and so was I. I wanted to cry, but instead I started reading the bible, that always calmed me down. Since that day, I prayed every day, I read the bible, and visited church. I did not have that nightmare again. In fact, I have never dreamed of anything ever again. You might think that this event was going to change my mind about religion, but it did not. No, I did not become a Christian and become all about God. And no, I did not become an atheist either.

After that event happened I started reading novels and stories, some were related to religion and some were not. Three novels: *San Martin Bueno Martir*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Alchemist*, and one short story, *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*, helped me discover and express my true, yet, complex feelings about religion. *San Martin Bueno Martir*

was written by Miguel de Unamuno. It taught me how religion can be used as a tool to control others. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was written by the great Colombian writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It made me see how even though some people might deny it, surrealism is always present in our life. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho taught me that if you have faith in God and perseverance you can succeed in whatever you want. *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* by Katherine Ann Porter taught me that even if you do the right thing in every aspect of your life in exchange for heaven, God himself can jilt you.

I'm still confused about my feelings towards God and religion but I am not embarrassed or feeling like an outsider because of them anymore. Now I know that nothing is small if my heart feels it. Now I know that I have the right to doubt. Now I know that there is no shame in being an island.





## **The Truth by Franklin Salazar**

I am looking at a picture of my great-grandmother, Maria, a senior lady with long wavy hair, tanned skin, thick eyebrows and dark brown eyes. On both of her ears, she wears pearl earrings, and the shape of her face is round. Her nose is flat and her lips are thin. The look in her eyes is serious and deep, her chin is narrow, her eyelashes are short and her shoulders are wide; in her neck she has wrinkles. She is wearing a baby blue dress; this is her favorite color and for her it means calmness. In this photo her posture is straight yet relaxed, it looks like she is looking at something or someone by the way her eyes are positioned. She is in a photography studio in Colombia, in the small city of Buenaventura, where she lives. A photographer took this photo of her, and she is at this place because she wants to get a good photo to give to her family members. I always look at this photo whenever I need some strength during a bad day. My great-grandmother has always been so strong, and through this photo, her spirit, her strength and values are transmitted to me.

I remember a time when my great-grandmother stood up with her patience and taught me a lesson. I was playing outside the house with some friends. It was a sunny afternoon, we were all playing soccer, one team “shirts” and one team “skins.” I was about to score when I heard my great-grandmother scream from the window, “Franklin Andres!!! Come inside right now! Your time outside is done!” No one in my family calls me Franklin. They all use my middle name, Andres, and when someone does, it is because I have done something wrong. I went inside the house and my great-grandmother asked me, “Why did I find this under your bed?” She had found my PlayStation One that my mother bought for me, but my great-grandma had punished me a few weeks back by taking it away. However, I had managed to find it and decided to hide it under my bed so I could play when she was not at home.

At first I did not give any answer. I was shocked. I never thought I would get caught, and now that she was there staring at me, I was thinking that she would punish me by not letting me go outside with my friends anymore or, even worse, by making me wake up every morning at 5 am to help her with the housework. But none of this happened. Once I managed to say something, the only thing that came to my mind was a lie. I told her that I had no idea why the PlayStation was there and that maybe my little cousin took it and had been playing with it. Obviously, she did not believe this because she said, “Do you think that I am going to believe that?”

“That's what I think happened,” I said. “I don't know why it was there.”

“What am I going to do with all of you?” she asked. “I am tired of you and Jackeline. You two are always fighting and you make it even worse because I punish you but you

continue doing the wrong thing! I take care of Jose and the housework, and you two bring more problems to me! *Ay dios mio!*"

It was true, she did take care of me, and Jackeline, my little cousin, and Jose, her 36-year-old son who had a parasite in his brain and had lost his sanity. I was expecting her to give me one of the harshest punishments that I had ever received but instead my great-grandmother sat me down and one more time asked, "Why was the PlayStation there? Just tell me the truth and I won't punish you or anything." She looked at me with that calm and relaxed look that her eyes always have regardless of how complicated the situation is that she is facing. It is the same look in the photo.

This time I could not deny the truth. "I found it and I took it to my room," I said. "I am sorry."

After I admitted the truth, she told me why it was so important for her to hear it. "I already knew that it was you who put that there, but I needed to hear it come out from your mouth. Do you know why?"

"No."

"You should always tell the truth to the people that you love," she explained. "It doesn't matter the situation, you should never lie to me. You are growing and if you do not learn to always say the truth now when you are young, then you will grow up to be a dishonest person, and while I live none of my children will grow up to be something like that."

"Okay," I said.

Nowadays, when I look back at that situation, I value her words more than I actually did when the situation occurred. As I have grown, I have found this is one of the most

important life lessons that she could ever give me. I cannot visit my great-grandmother very often, but sometimes I study that photograph, the deep strong look in her eyes, and remember her lessons.



## **I'm Part of an Island** **by Alisha Karminski**

**T**he poem “No Man is an Island” is written by John Donne, an English poet who believed that human beings do not thrive when isolated from others. This has always stood out to me because it’s true how we are all connected, how we need each other to feel fulfilled and feel like we are a part of something big. One half of my island was myself, the other half of my island was my best friend, Abe. She is no longer able to be with me on earth. God decided to take her home too early. Now, almost eleven years later, I’m looking back to my past and how it has left me as part of an island.

When I was six years old, I had my first and I thought my last best friend, Abe. Her full name was Abeba, meaning “flower.” We grew up in a place called Kara in Ethiopia, where everything is unpredictable. Abeba had black braided hair all the time. She had pure white eyes and you could see her innocence shining through her them. She was so skinny,

and her cheekbones were perfectly lined-up. Abe was the most beautiful little girl and she never wasted time staying inside, she was always out doing fun stuff. That's what I loved about our friendship. We were the same age and understood each other like we were twins. We saw wild animals walking around the forest and we created fire to push them away from our home. We didn't have much, but we were happy. We played in dirt all day. When we finally returned home, completely dirty, we'd get in trouble because we were told not to play outside while it rained, but we did it anyway. For my best friend Abe and I, nothing mattered as long as we were together. We believed nothing could end our days of happiness.

Life doesn't work that way. When I was four years old my mother passed away. The day she died I didn't understand what was going on because nobody told me of her death. We had the feeling that something terrible had happened, and Abe was right there next to the fence I was holding onto tightly, trying to make me laugh and not focus on the chaos around us.

Abe had a way of making every moment count; her only thought was about how she could make everyone happy. I remember one very happy day with her. There was a house a white man lived in down the road. We came up with the crazy idea of letting his bees out and stealing honey from his hive. The house where the white man lived was surrounded by a reddish fence that we could fit our little bodies through. We planned it all out and we knew what time the man would go to get the honey. We covered ourselves with extra clothes to protect ourselves from the bees. First, we pressed through the red fence, squishing our tiny bodies. Once inside, we were terrified, we didn't expect to see as many bees as we did. We thought the man never stayed at the place, but that day he did. That was

sheer luck because he was able to rescue us from what seemed like a million bees that kept attacking us. Naturally, he became our hero.

How can someone that is a part of me not be there the next day? We thought we were going to live and be with each other forever. As John Donne stated in his poem, “Everyman is a piece of the continent.” This applied to our friendship. We were as connected as continents; connected to each other like matching pieces in a puzzle. We were one—even finished each other's sentences and walked to preschool and to first grade together. We were inseparable, from day to dawn. Our parents knew if one of us said we were at one place they figured we were together. We thought if we had each other nothing could get to us. We were happy together.

My life went upside down once Abe got sick. AIDS was very common to our village, but she was the first child to die of it. The part of my heart that was part of hers felt her pain. Her desire to be a kid again, to be free of her body was mine, too. As time passed, the connection we had seemed to weaken and the distance between us grew wider. She was a big part of my world and my life. She was the only reason I wanted to wake up, so excited to play all day just with her. The puzzle was severed by sickness; our pieces couldn't be put together again. I remember she couldn't come outside to play, or she couldn't walk to the places she used to go. She couldn't finish a full sentence without breathing hard. Her small body just laid there and something took all her energy. She couldn't eat or stand up straight without someone assisting her. I could not watch her suffer any longer, so I made the decision to not see her. I remember her parents telling me how she would call me everyday and want to see me. I couldn't make it through the front door because every time I visited, her small body seemed full of bones and no life. The times I made it, we both cried and lay

there together. Not being able to do anything to help her made me feel hopeless and I told myself to always keep her in my heart. Finally, I decided never to see her anymore. I remember she reached out for me on my last visit like she knew it was our last time together, offering me her last bite of her food because she could not finish it, just like we used to finish each other's sentences. I didn't want to see her fall apart because I wanted to believe she still was with me. All I wanted was for her to play, talk and walk through life with me as she always had before.

Part of me felt like she left me alone in this big world to find new friends. I had to. This is the reason why "No Man is an Island" can apply to me. I wouldn't be able to have the friends I have now if I hadn't connected with others again and I wouldn't be able to have friends to support me through life. As human beings, we need other human connections for support to be able to live and exist. An island can exist because it was created to grow and adapt to its own self-environment. But, I need other people's past experiences and mistakes to learn from. We all are connected as one human race and we all need each other to grow.





## **I Preferred to Remember You** **by Santiago Marin Araque**

**I**t was the start of a beautiful Christmas. My mother and I decided to stay in Manizales, a pretty and small city in Colombia, with my great-aunt May. When we arrived at her apartment in the center of the city, the weather was perfect, making the city an ideal place to stay for Christmas. Her apartment, with a beautiful view, made it even more magical. As I was walking through the apartment, I found three amazing portraits. In the first one, my cousins were having fun at a family party. In the next one, my great-aunt was holding one of my cousins when he was just a baby. But certainly, the one that caught my whole attention was the last one: an old photo taken in the 1960s, which is one of the most precious possessions of my family. Looking at it, I felt like I had gone back in time—to a time when the photos were sepia, mixing yellow, black, brown and white. At that time, TV was black and white, the most trendy outfits were suits, dresses and elegant hats, and the chaotic times of war in my country were starting.

Meanwhile, a couple, husband and wife, posed for a photo that will live in the memory of their children as the memory of a happy family. This family was built on elegance and manners, principals that were and still are important and should be taught. The husband was a sophisticated and hard-working gentleman, and by his side was a beautiful and wise woman, his wife. About this couple, I can tell you that they were my great-grandparents, Fanny Yepes and Oliverio Araque, who looked stunning in front of the camera. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to meet my great-grandmother, but based on my grandmother's and her brothers' stories, she was wonderful: a kind and lovely mother, and a gorgeous woman. Sadly, she died at a young age. My great-grandfather Oliverio, however, was still alive. He was the oldest relative that I had met. In the photo he wore a gray suit, a dark blue tie, a white shirt, and glasses. He had stylish black hair and looked like a perfect gentleman.

Totally immersed in the photo, I started paying attention to every detail, for example, the smile of love on my great-grandmother's face. But even more surprisingly, despite his serious attitude, I could see love and happiness in Oliverio's eyes, too: the harmony of better times. In that exact moment, I realized the difference I saw in his eyes the last time I had seen him. Sadly, I still have that vivid memory in my mind.

It was a weirdly cold morning in Armenia. My grandmother had asked me to go with her to see Oliverio. At first, I didn't want to go, but my grandmother insisted. We arrived at my great-grandfather's house. Pretty anxious, my grandma knocked on the door. We waited a few minutes until my great-grandfather's second wife opened the door. I had never entered that house before, and actually that was one of the few times I saw that

“woman,” as my family called Oliverio’s second wife. Totally different from my great-grandmother, that “woman” had a hideous face mixed with a grouchy look.

“Come on in,” she said. “He is waiting for you.”

The house was full of creepy luxury and extravagance, absolutely different from my other relatives’ houses; the lack of taste and elegance was clearly visible. Furthermore, the lack of manners and sophistication in that “woman” caused me to wonder how Oliverio could have married her.

Finally, we entered a sloppily organized room, and from his bed Oliverio was looking at us, with a really sick expression. He waved his hand toward us, calling us to move closer. For a few minutes, an awkward silence filled the room, until my grandma started talking.

“How do you feel, father?” my grandma said.

“I guess, better than yesterday,” Oliverio said with an ill voice. “Are your sisters coming, as well?”

“Yes, Papito. They will be here soon,” my grandma said with a broken voice. Meanwhile, without saying a word, I was looking into Oliverio’s eyes, brown eyes surrounded by the marks of time reflecting to me his current mood. They showed me the pain of throat cancer—a fight that he was totally losing. Additionally, his eyes showed me sadness, not just due to the impotence of an inevitable death, but I could also feel confusion in his sight. As a result, I started thinking about the only other possible reason for his blue mood: his biggest mistake.

“Hi Santi, how are you?” Oliverio said to me. “Are you ok? Aren’t you going to say hi to me?”

“Of course,” I said. “Hi Papito.”

“Come closer, Santi,” he said. “I can’t believe how fast you’re growing, it seems like yesterday when your mom was a little girl running all around.”

Suddenly I knew it; it was “Story Time,” a family tradition. Older relatives narrated to you passages of their lives, ending with an implicit or explicit life lesson. In my opinion, such tradition was the pillar of my relationship with Oliverio. Oliverio’s stories showed me how much he cared about his family: from being totally overprotective with my mom during her childhood to teaching one of my cousins how to use a tie. Moreover, his lessons had a huge impact on who I am. As he told me, “Everything is possible, you just need to persevere and always do your best!” It is a lesson that I will never forget.

Oliverio was an honorable man most of his life. Unfortunately, nobody is perfect, and during one of his most successful times, he made the worst mistake of his life. Even though he had a beautiful family with a gorgeous wife, he fell into the claws of an opportunistic woman. Blinded by animal desire, the temptation betrayed his intelligence and gentlemanly attitude. Oliverio broke his precious family to follow the legs of an immoral woman. In fact, such event pushed him to an unavoidable divorce. The family Araque-Yepes split and one day, the only real love of Oliverio’s life died of unknown causes. After Fanny’s departure to heaven, Oliverio tried really hard to keep his family together. However, his kids didn’t trust him anymore; they knew about the presence of that “woman.” Marking the childhood of my grandma and her siblings, Oliverio damaged the love of his children, a love that could never be the same. Abandoning the love of his life for another woman, an opportunist who found in my great-grandfather the perfect budget for her and her sons, was Oliverio’s biggest mistake—the cause of his pain.

Despite his terrible mistake, Oliverio had an amazing and successful life. His intelligence and professionalism helped him to achieve a good style of life for him and his family. Retired from the Air Force where he had worked as a Control Tower Operator, he spent the rest of his life as a businessman. His business mind pushed him to get involved in the real estate business. But more than that, he had accomplished the amazing achievement of building a main house for his family, a house that with the passing of the years still stands and is in good shape.

Disgracefully, life labels each of us as a result of our actions and Oliverio wasn't an exception. Just a few days after I saw him, he died. A reality that Oliverio couldn't escape, many of my relatives remembered him as the huge shame of our family. On the other hand, I prefer to remember him as the hard working, smart, ambitious, and elegant gentleman that he was. His achievements and manners are big examples to follow in my life. The principles taught by him and my great-grandmother still are the cornerstones of our family; from generation to generation their legacy is still present. This is how I remember my great-grandfather, Oliverio Araque.



## **The Sun Shines Brighter After the Storm**

### **by Ydelsa Peralta**

**M**any people refer to the proverb “no man is an island and no man stands alone.” However, I have a different perspective. I believe that every man is an island of his own because of the different experiences and stages in life each individual goes through. If you don't overcome those events, it can make a person bitter and resentful. This occurred to me many years ago, when I participated in a poetry recital and forgot part of a stanza in front of my teachers, classmates and family. Probably what hurt me the most was, not the embarrassment I felt for myself, but the time it took for me to forget that moment and forgive myself. Afterwards, I became more empty and lonely, and I felt like an island.

The day that I began to feel like an island will always rest in my mind. It was on March 17, 2014, at 12:45 PM at The Newtown High School Poetry Contest. It was a bright Monday, the sun's rays were penetrating my skin and the beautiful flowers on the streets

were starting to flourish. I remember the lustrous, satin-beaded fabric of my red dress was glinting, complimenting my feminine shape. My hands quivered, distilling sweat; my heart wanted to pop out of my chest. The crowd applauded eagerly for every contestant—to think that I was among the fifteen students craving and lusting over the tangible gold-bathed trophy. In that same instant, Ms. Altomarino called my name: “The following student is Ydelsa Peralta; she will be reciting the poem ‘If You Forget Me,’ by Pablo Neruda.”

I was quite sure that I would leave a good impression on the three judges, since I worked really hard on memorizing the poem, but this was not meant to be. I stood up rapidly and turned my head slowly to make eye contact with each of the three judges seated along the podium. Anxiously, I cleared my throat and greeted the public, “Hello everyone! My name is Ydelsa Peralta and I am honored to be here.” Then, I nervously proceeded to recite the poem I knew so well. However, I found myself having trouble speaking, as if I had a lump in my throat. My hands were shaking and stone cold. Then, what I thought seemed impossible happened. I forgot the last stanza of the poem. The people from the crowd started cheering me on to continue. They were shouting and screaming my name. They were clapping to show some kind of sympathy towards me. However, I couldn't proceed. All I recall is running to the school bathroom, blaming myself for what had happened, and crying bitterly. That's the moment when I started to begin to feel desolation. I started becoming that island. My classmates took care to remind me that I did a great job, and I would smile and say “thank you” in response. But I never meant that “thank you.” That “thank you” was an excuse to trap all my feelings inside. I felt anger at myself because I had been practicing poetry since I was a child, and, yet, I failed at it.

After that incident I didn't want to speak to anybody about what happened. I was so hurt that I wanted to forget everything that had to do with poetry. But probably what hurt me the most, was my favorite book, an old book by the *Real Academia Española*. Every night before going to bed, I would read one poem from its glorious pages. My mother noticed the change. I was becoming more isolated and bitter. Beforehand, I was engaging in conversations, and I always volunteered in school activities. She started to notice that I was not staying late at my school's clubs, which was something I loved to do. I had less appetite for my favorite meals and I talked less to people. She started to worry about me and told me that she was my mother, but also my friend. But all I wanted was to be alone and this was affecting my relationships with friends, since I would ignore them when they tried to speak to me. I would smile pretending that everything was fine but on the inside my world was in pieces. What I did next was to hide everything from my mother and pretend to show her that I was feeling better, so I told her to enroll me in a guitar class. I found the teacher loud and unhelpful. Perhaps it was not the teacher's fault, it was mine. Even though I tried to fool my mother, her instincts were stronger. She knew I was not ok.

One night, before going to bed my mom brought me the book. I flashed back to my memories as a kid and began to cry uncontrollably. She hugged me like I was her little baby again. She told me that I needed to leave the past behind and live the present. After crying for almost ten minutes, I began to tell her everything that I felt inside. All I needed was a person who I could talk to. Because I blamed myself for this, I was not at peace with myself; therefore, I couldn't be at peace with others. I knew that if I wanted to be the same again, I needed to accept my past and proceed to the future. After that I made the decision to be



closer to my friends again and to engage in my favorite school activities once again. This helped me to be the same person I was before.

This experience has taught me so much and molded my perspective in life. When I was young, I used to think that I would be able to go through life, and in the end, life's problems and challenges would work themselves out. The moment that I failed in my poetry recital, I learned that there will be moments when I might be left alone with these challenges. I realized that people must often feel lonely as if nobody around them understands what they are going through. This is the moment when you feel like an island and this is exactly where I have been before.



## **My Special Doll**

**by Mariela Picon Zhagui**

I am looking at a picture of my grandmother, she is the oldest relative I know. She has medium length pitch black hair, chubby cheeks, and she is short. She is also wearing a black dress that has white spots all over; she is wearing black shoes that have a silver decoration. She is sitting on a single seat couch that has a green cover. Behind her there is a brown pillow. Near her there is a small, brown coffee table—on it a flower arrangement sits. The walls are a light and happy green with a combination of white and a sky blue. Behind her there is also a tall brown shelf. There are two ceramic dolls, which have been in my family for quite a while.

This picture was taken at her house in Ecuador. When this picture was taken by my mom, my grandmother was getting ready to go to a wedding. I received the picture from my mom. This picture was taken last summer during our trip to Ecuador, and not much has changed since this picture was taken. I was born and raised in Ecuador until the age of

ten—until then I grew up in that house. My mother also grew up in that house. This house has been through multiple changes, and it holds many of my childhood memories.

The ceramic dolls are meaningful artifacts in this photo that hold a special story. Those dolls were purchased by my mother and she always used them for decoration. I always wanted to play with them. Regardless of how many dolls I had myself, they were never as attractive as the dolls on the shelf. I always tried to get them from the shelf, but I was too short to reach. One day, I thought since both my mom and grandmother were out of the house I could play with them. I grabbed a chair and went to get the dolls. When I had them in my hands, they were slightly heavier than I was expecting. When I was about to get off the chair I lost my balance and I fell. I didn't get hurt, but one of the dolls broke. Her head came off, so I picked it up and put it back on the shelf. I was assuming that my mom and grandmother wouldn't notice, but that day when they came back from buying cleaning supplies, I heard a scream. While I was playing, they both called my name.

After I broke the doll, I was grounded for a whole month. They got really upset, not only because I broke it, but I also didn't tell them what happened. However, I didn't understand why they were so upset about me not telling them. Later, my mother came in and she talked to me. She told me that it was not that I broke the doll that they were mad, but rather that I hadn't told them. She said that this wasn't the first time that it had happened, and she needed me to stop, because one day something serious could happen and they wouldn't know because I wouldn't talk to them about it.

Eventually my mother had to leave Ecuador to come to the United States. I was left with my grandmother; she was the only person I had at that moment. Even though she was my only guidance, I didn't feel close to her; there was a distance that I tried to keep. I didn't

want to talk to her about my issues, because I knew she had problems in her own life. I did not want to be another burden for her.

One day, I was walking home from school and I saw this beautiful doll at a toy store. She had brown, curly hair, tan skin, and a blue dress. Immediately, I knew I had to have it. Regardless of all the dolls I had, this one was unique. It stood out from all the others. I didn't want to ask my grandmother to buy it for me because I knew her response would be no, since I had all these other dolls laying around. I decided to save up from my lunch money. When I finally had enough money to buy it, I felt complete.

I didn't tell my grandma that I bought it, I decided to keep it a secret. A week passed by and she still didn't know, until one day she was doing laundry and somehow she found it. She called me and asked where I got it from; for some reason I panicked and I couldn't tell her the truth. "I borrowed it from my friend," I said. She looked at me and told me to give it back. I was really upset because this was my one opportunity to open up to her, but I was so afraid of the consequences even though I didn't do anything wrong.

As I walked to my friend's house, I thought about what I was going to do. I thought that it would be okay if I asked my friend if I could leave it in her house, since I spent most of my time there anyway. When I got to her house, her mom was there but she wasn't. I couldn't take the doll back home because my grandmother would come with me to give it back, so I hid it behind a bush until I was able to see my friend.

Later that afternoon, I was helping my grandmother out. My uncle, who is four years older than I, came with his cousins and was holding the doll. They were about to cut her hair. In that moment I was furious. I ran outside and tried to take it away from them, but they wouldn't give it back. I began to scream. That's when my grandmother came out to

the patio and asked what was happening. I told her they took the doll. She had a confused and angry face and asked, "Didn't you go to give that doll back?" Before I was able to explain what happened, she assumed that I stole the doll from my friend. She took out a belt and began to hit me with it and she also hit my uncle with it. But it was mostly me, because in her eyes stealing was the worst thing you could do. As she was hitting me she was telling me how it was wrong to steal. When she finally stopped, she told me to get up and get the doll.

We went to my friend's house and she knocked on the door. I was still crying and could barely talk. Finally, her my friend's mom opened the door, saw me crying and immediately asked what was wrong. My grandmother took the doll away from me, and asked her if it was her daughter's doll. I was so afraid she might say yes. To me that doll was everything. She said that the doll didn't belong to her. My grandmother looked at me and asked who the doll belonged to. I was scared to tell her the truth. I was still crying. While we were walking back, she asked again. Finally, I told her the truth, but she didn't believe me.

The next day she went to pick me up from school and brought the doll. We went to the small shop from which I got the doll. She asked the owner if it was true that I bought it and the guy said yes. He also told her that I came in a couple days before asking about the price of the doll. My grandmother gave me back the doll and asked why I hadn't told her tell her the truth from the beginning. I told her that I was afraid that she might throw the doll out or become upset at me because I already had enough dolls. I told her how this doll was different to me and she told me it was fine to keep it, but that I couldn't continue to do these kinds of things, in which I think for myself and don't share with others. She told me

that right now it was something small, but you never know when things can get serious. She explained the importance of developing a relationship in which trust is involved.

Now when my mother and I travel to Ecuador, I always spend my time by my grandmother's side. While she cooks I tell her all the stories that I have. My arguments with friends, about school, etc. When I tell her all of these things she gets happy, because somehow it distracts her from her problems. She makes comments relating to my stories and connects back to them. But at the end of every talk she still mentions the importance of sharing my problems when they first start; that way if anything goes wrong, they can help me out before it escalates to a bigger problem. I now understand why my grandmother acted that way when she found the doll. She didn't mean any harm. Instead, her intentions were to teach me morals that would shape me into who I am today.



## **I Am a Beautiful Island** **by Drishti Kalia**

**W**hile I read, “No Man is an Island” by John Donne, I came across a sentence which read, “No man is an island, entire of itself.” I couldn’t agree more, until I experienced something which led me to a new direction. It made me believe that sometimes, people themselves can be entire islands. An island is not just isolated, but, independent and beautiful, because it doesn’t need any validation for its existence, from anyone.

On the radiant afternoon of August 19, 2017, I arrived in the country of my dreams, the magnificent United States of America. I could feel an adrenaline rush in my body as I landed at John F. Kennedy Airport. I was full of enthusiasm, super-excited to begin this new phase of my life. Carrying three huge bags (almost the size of small rhinoceroses), my heart felt exceptionally light as I rode towards my dorm from Queens to Brooklyn with one of my cousins. I remember telling him how eager I was to begin life in my dream city. I

saw the sun shining brighter than usual, as if it was smiling at me, wishing me luck. Deep blue bodies of water adjoined the land just like pieces of a puzzle, making everything seem complete. Out of the car's window, I saw the tallest of skyscrapers, so high, they reached illusory heights. I was completely mesmerised with the beauty of my dreamland.

At 6 p.m., I entered my dorm room. Before I could unpack and settle down, I realized it was time for the dinner party set up by the dorm coordinators for students and their families. I hastily got ready in my favorite dusky pink top and blue boyfriend jeans, and ran down from my room on tenth floor, to the shuttle bus outside, which further took us to the college campus.

As I entered Tuohy Hall, St. Joseph's College's main building, I reminisced about my journey. It all seemed so surreal. Finally, after two years of extensive hard work, I was going to live my dream! The happiness on my face was evident.

While everyone else was present in the dinner hall with his or her family, I sat alone. Before I could start feeling the pangs of loneliness, I met two girls, Lily and Juliana, who befriended me in an instant. Lily, a lovely, skinny, tall white girl with brown eyes and long brown hair, and Juliana, a pleasantly plump tomboy, Asian with black eyes and straight black hair, appeared so perfect to be friends with. They totally made me feel at ease, and I couldn't wait to create so many amazing memories with them. We kept on talking for the entire night, and decided to go to Manhattan the following day.

Excited, I woke up the next day at 7:30 in the morning, and we all left for Manhattan at 9:30. On the way, we had detailed discussions about our lives and what brought us here. We discussed our respective families and backgrounds. I began trusting them, and felt really comfortable confiding in them. Being in a new country I had to buy so



many things, I was confused about where to go. I wanted to buy groceries and stuff for my dorm room, so I casually asked them if there was a Walmart nearby.

“Wait, what? Who goes to Walmart these days?” They mocked me.

Also, I had questions regarding buying a new phone. I had come from India in such a haste, that I had no time to buy my electronics.

“Can you guys suggest a phone for me?”

“Uh, you could go for an iPhone SE or a 5s, or maybe 5. We wonder if they still sell them though.” They chuckled among themselves.

After being skeptical for awhile, I shooed the negative thoughts away and finally told them that my financial status was not very secure, and I had to overcome severe economic hardships to construct a path for actually coming to America and building on my opportunities and career.

Suddenly, I felt their behavior growing colder towards me. After I confided in them they gave me a nasty look; the kind of look that you give to someone when you pity them. I could sense our friendship drifting away from me. Next, they left me behind in one of the malls, didn't really talk to me on the way back in the subway and made plans to go to Times Square but canceled on me at the last minute, among other things. I was shattered, completely isolated. Just like Bouvet Island in the South Atlantic Ocean, the island farthest from any other landmass, I felt unwanted. My metaphorical distance with my “new friends” was equivalent to Bouvet's physical distance from its counterparts, or even greater. Hence, I realised that sometimes metaphorical distances can be larger than the physical ones. You could be living so close to someone, yet be largely distant, emotionally. Worse, spiritual distance could impact a person much more significantly than physical

distance. My heart sank with the thought that someone could abandon me just because of my financial status. This incident impacted me to such an extent that I stopped trusting people completely. I was reluctant to talk to anyone, and stayed alone most of the time.

I would do everything by myself, which in turn, made me more independent and self-reliant. I explored the city, took myself for treats at my favorite restaurants, and went to see the gorgeous Brooklyn Promenade all by myself, which gave me heaps of inner happiness. I started feeling good about myself again, and the fact that I was learning to survive in an alien land all by myself, restored me back to my high spirits. I knew I had learned something that I otherwise, under normal circumstances, wouldn't have. I realized the beauty and joy of being independent, of being, "an island, entire of myself," one that doesn't need material connections to sustain it, one that's complete in itself, and one that is instilled with peace and self-love.



## **I Am an Island Without Him**

**by Tanzina Akter**

**F**ourteen days after I was born my father went to Korea for his work. As I was growing up my mother was with me when I was going through difficult situations, but my father was not there to help. When we talked over the phone he used to give me advice about how to handle myself at school and home. Some family members were not happy after I born because I am a girl and they were hoping for a boy. When they said things like, “be home before 5 pm,” or “wear proper dress and cover your hair,” it made me feel bad. My father always advised that I believe in myself and have faith. He taught me to be respectful to all of my younger and elder relatives. But sometimes his absence broke me down emotionally because my father wasn’t physically there to support me. There were times when I felt like an island—alone, isolated—because my mother was busy with her responsibilities, and my father was on another side of the continent.

As I was growing up, I tried to pretend that I understood why he was far away from me. I wanted to be able to say that I took my first step with him holding my hand, like other children. My mother gave me all the love she could and everything I needed, but I always missed my father. I remember he used to call us almost every week. Even so, I did not talk with him sometimes because it hurt for the Island to hear his voice when it couldn't see his face. That was the worst feeling ever. The Island was getting more depressed as the sun went down each day.

When I was around six years old, I remember an incident that happened at my school when my uncle came to pick up my cousin and me. I used to call my uncle my father since I did not see my father and my uncle used to take care of me. One day my cousin and I got into a fight because we both wanted to sit with my uncle in the front seat of the car. I started crying, stating between sobs that I would sit with my father. My cousin argued: "He is not your father, he is my father." Tears rolled down my cheeks because that really hurt me and I could not hold my feelings. However, later my uncle said we both could sit together in the front seat but I was still not happy. As I grew up I realized that my cousin was right; he was not my father.

At that time I became close with my grandmother, trying to find a friend in her. Since that time I was closer to her than my parents. I started feeling comfortable with her and she was an understanding person who I could share everything with. She used to take care of me as my father would do. When I was in trouble she supported me just how a father should. She was the best grandma ever because she gave me so many memories to hold on to. The best moment was when she used to tell me bedtime stories every night so I

could fall asleep with a smile. Even she did not talk to my father for a couple of months because every year he said he would visit us but he could not.

When I was 10 years old, my father returned. Seeing him was my dream come true, but at the same time I was not that comfortable with him. I had not seen him in 10 years. Waiting for him at the airport with my uncle, I looked everywhere just to see his face for the first time. After an hour, he came out of the airport. I was so nervous because I could not believe the person in front of me was him. He gave me a tight hug and kissed me on the cheek but that was not enough. An Island was separated for 10 long years waiting for water to come back. When we reached home everyone was so happy, but I was trying to hide from him because I didn't know how to behave at that moment. After dinner, he took me outside to brush my teeth, and that night I slept between my parents. It was the moment I had waited for 10 years. We had a good father and daughter relationship as we spent more time together. He gave me so much love but still, it was not enough.

A few months after my grandma's death, my father decided to go back to Korea because my mother was getting ill and we needed money. So I got to spend only one year with him. Around five months later, my mother had a partial hysterectomy after she was diagnosed with tumors. Then, the day before my sister's wedding my mother suffered a heart attack. I remember distinctly when she entered the room and suddenly fainted on me. I cried loudly and my eldest sister came running into the room and tried to revive her. My grandfather and uncle took my mother to the hospital, which was about 30 minutes from our home, but her condition was very serious and they did not admit her. Mother was taken to a hospital in Dhaka, which was one hour away by car. Thank God, again my father came back to take care of us, and my mother recovered. However, this time everything was

different because he was busy with his job and again had no time for me. When he came home I was sleeping and in the morning he left early, so we did not get to see each other that much. The Island was alone again. No one was there but I did not give up being self-sufficient.

Later, my uncle applied for us to come to the United States. Then we got the visa and came here. Now my father works six days a week and has one day off from work. The day he gets off, he wakes me up and makes breakfast for me. I cannot ask for more than this. Finally, I am happy—the beauty of my island is back. Then I have to leave for school. After coming from school I get to see him for only a few hours and then I become the old Tanzina, like a little island.

One thing I want from my father now is just love and nothing else. I really love him so much and try to express that to him, but often I fail because I am grown now and people think I shouldn't be as playful or show affection to him as much. I always hide my feelings from him because now I have to behave like an adult. Now we have this time to make our relationship stronger and share our happiness. The Island tries to make no distance, or work, come between us.



## **Missing the Younger You** **by Tenzin Choedon**

**S**ince the day we are born, we continuously age, but sometimes we only start to realize it when we are in the elderly stage of our lives. When my grandma entered into this phase, she lost some part of her old self, her memory of time spent together with me. I have been missing all those moments frequently. Her old self was like a backbone for me, a backbone that helped me become the person who I am right now. I can walk with my head held up high, knowing that I am practicing all the great life principles she has taught me. The unfortunate situation of her memory loss blurs out all the wonderful moments I had with her. But I have found a temporary escape from such sorrowful feelings, that is to reminisce on all those cheerful memories by looking at her old pictures.

To begin, I look at an old picture of her when she had the power of memory. It makes me flashback to those marvelous times I had and makes those moments alive again. This picture of my grandmother was taken 14 years ago in India during the summer when she

was 67 years old. She's in Tibetan traditional attire called a *chupa* which she always loved to wear, even today. She is so dedicated to her traditions that all her life her *chupa* has been her second skin. I remember her wearing relaxed outfits only during bedtime. Her *chupa*'s top is made from cotton fabric and she loves to be in white during hot days. She's wearing our traditional apron, which is a sign of being a married woman. But soon after my grandpa's soul was taken away, she lost her interests in styling up; it's like one of her colored flowers had been plucked out from her body, leaving her to look less pretty. Like always, she's casually wearing her comfy shoes, which reminds me of those days when she looked out for me. The sound of her footsteps was like a thumping sound coming from a runner on a treadmill.

In the photo, she's sitting on the end of the mini bridge of the Namdroling monastery, a very well known place for tourists, where she often visited to offer her prayers to the sacred statue of Buddha and his disciples. I yearn for those days when she was physically active, even to sit in a squatting way and bend her knees, but sadly not anymore. She's carrying her prayer beads; her mantra and counting of beads are done simultaneously and in the picture her movements are still—all for the purpose of getting a good snapshot. Probably my mom took that picture as they often visited temples during pleasant weather. Her reading glasses look fine on her round-shaped face and with her natural soft yellow-brown complexion, the few lines of new wrinkles look very subtle. She appears to be young because of her puffy cheeks. Her deep brown eyes seem to be hiding under those glasses, obstructing us from reading her eyes. Her thin lips are frozen, yet ready to continue saying her mantras after the picture is taken. Her large and soft hands are still too, yet she is gathering her muscles to resume her counting of beads as one of her devotions to god. Her long and



beautiful black hair has been tied up in a bun as to show her neatness; but now with silver hair, it has become a thing of the past.

Moreover, I can plainly recollect that one specific time in my life where she brought me on track when I was going off a bit. It was in India during the fall of 2008 one Sunday evening at home in our living room where I was watching TV as usual. Two hours earlier that day, I had been out with my colony friends for a long time. I should have been preparing for my annual exams, which were a month away. However, I was just being careless about it and in school I had been skipping some classes. When I switched channels to look for something interesting to watch, right then my grandma came to me and said, “Tenzin dear, I have been observing you lately and I can see that you are not taking things seriously.” She approached as if she had caught me being a disobedient student at school. I’m sure she knew because everything spreads easily in our village, like how fires spread in forests. I was so embarrassed because it was true. I couldn’t utter a word except to nod my head while bending slightly, trying to avoid eye contact with her. She didn’t stop there, adding, “Being the only child to your parents and the biggest one in the second generation of our family, you have a big and sole responsibility to have a good education, a good temperament and finally a good heart. With these three you can achieve anything in this world and people will respect you and the young ones in our family will follow your steps.”

Among all her valuable advice this moved me tremendously; it made me teary. It felt like she had suddenly snapped me out of daydreaming further. Then I realized that it has always been one of her greatest desires to make all of us in the second generation be greatly invested in our education. Because of the lack of resources back then, she was not able to educate her children. But now in modern times with all these accessible resources,

encouraging us to study and making the best use of it has been her biggest goal. By then, I had forgotten about what to watch and only her words were ringing in my head. Right after that, I went to her and hugged her tightly and released her gently.

Then I answered, "I'm very sorry grandma, I keep forgetting how essential my role is for my generation of our family. I think it's because I'm young."

She nodded as if I was excused.

Then I continued and asked, "So just like now, in the future will you direct me on the right path when I'm walking on the wrong one?"

Immediately she responded, "Of course my dear, I will always be there for you. I am born to be your instructor." Somehow her words sounded very soothing and gave me security.

By dinnertime, I had abandoned the thought of watching TV that night. When she advised me with such strong emotions, it gave me some positive energy and made me enthusiastic to learn and accomplish something huge in my life. How effective her words were on me was proven when I was chosen to become Vice President and President for the 9th and 10th grade by our school teachers and students.

Presently, here in a foreign country, sometimes surviving alone is very hard when you are surrounded by different and new circumstances, and that is when you need someone you can rely on or have always been relying on. It reminds me of the protection and aid my grandma provided me and now she can no longer be my instructor, for she has changed. Or time has. That component of her has evaporated and intermixed with all the other particles into the vast air, making it hard to hold onto.

On the whole, as we age with time, we change and tend to lose some of our identity, which cannot be restored because it is out of our control. My grandma, who used to chase me around when I was caught misbehaving, she who helped shape me into a better person; now, she can no longer be that person anymore. Every now and then when I talk with her on the phone, the first thing she says after two minutes, “Who are you?” It’s so heartbreaking to hear this every time from her, and I have to remind her who I am and explain to her my whereabouts and everything for the next hour. These unavoidable changes in her life have made her weak enough to forget her positive selfhood. This loss has not only had an impact on her life, but even on those around her—especially me. For me, it is like missing a piece of my life, a piece without which, I am incomplete, just as a car that won’t function if it’s missing a part. My life continues to become gloomy as my grandma ages and now that she’s 81 and is starting to have dementia, I’m starting to miss her younger self and all the time she spent with me, being my guiding angel.



## **A Closed Window** **by Isabella Benitez**

**I** am an island. Something a little different than the British poet, John Donne, once said: “No man is an island.” Well, I guess he was wrong. I am this huge island. The problem here is that I don’t want to be an island anymore, but I am not sure if I am going to be able to get out of this misery.

Before I became an island, I thought that I needed everybody, but my reactions to people were completely different from what I thought they should be. “Myself” and “I” had always been fighting because one thought that I needed everybody, but the other thought: “Screw them, you can be happy without anyone.” As you can imagine, it is difficult to fight against yourself. The truth is that I liked to be surrounded by people; good vibes are what I lived for. I strongly believed that alone you couldn’t accomplish anything. *YOU NEED PEOPLE AND PEOPLE NEED YOU.* I reminded myself of that every day.

Precisely one year ago, I became an island. But this was not a one-day process. For me it was different. It was like when you go to the doctor and they start running tests on you and then they diagnose you. It was the same way, but the “sickness” in this case was isolation. You might wonder, how is she going to treat that? Well, that’s the problem. There is no medicine for that. The only help that you are going to get is inside you.

While I was growing up, in Cali, Colombia, where I lived until I was thirteen, I had some symptoms that told me something was wrong with me, but as usual, I ignored them. For example, I was open to my friends, but I was this piece of ice to my mom. She was interested in everything that had to do with me, however, I just didn’t like to tell her everything. Maybe it was because I didn’t live with her until I got to the United States, but the point was that sometimes she stressed me out! I can still remember the day she left me in Colombia. It was a Thursday. My mother lifted me up in her arms and spun me around in a flight of emotion. The strange thing is that I also remember a sensation of not feeling anything in that moment. Ugh, maybe I was a bad daughter, but what could I do? It did not improve as the years past. As I grew older, most of our conversations were like this:

**Mom:** *Hola miya*, how was your day?

**Me:** Good.

End of conversation!

I tried really hard to change that; but believe me, even if I tried harder, I would still have been isolated from her. I didn’t know why. She usually said that I just liked to mumble at her and that’s it. I found that funny because it was actually true. Every time that I did this I was becoming an island without noticing. I guess that it would have been nice to have read John Donne’s poem before it was too late.

Another symptom of isolation was that I didn't like to cry. Specifically, I didn't like to cry in front of my mom, and I didn't like to see my family members crying. Perhaps for me, crying was a sign of weakness, but I doubt it. I believe that that was another reason why I became an island. I was also very isolated from people. If we would have met before all of this was happening, you would have noticed that I liked to tell my problems to my closest friends, but even that changed. When I was in difficult moments, the only thing that was there for me was music. Tucked under the cover of a song, I could cry until I fell asleep, but from the perspective of my friends and family everything was normal with me. Sometimes this situation even bothered me, because everything was just monotonous.

The day finally came when I fully transformed into an island. In the first days of September, my Grandpa was taken to the hospital because unfortunately, he was getting sicker. It hurt me to hear that he was in the hospital because he was like a father to me. A father that I never had.

It was around 1PM when my mom called me saying: "Isa, your grandpa is leaving us." I couldn't think of anything else but my mom's voice. Of course, she was crying and I noticed it. Honestly, in that moment I didn't feel anything. Not pain, not fear, not hate. I just kept looking at the phone waiting for another call. At 1:20PM, my mom called again. She said: "He died."

Those words stuck in my mind for almost two minutes. I just kept thinking: *He died. He died. He died. He died.* Those words were swimming in my mind. I felt empty and isolated. I was in shock. I couldn't even cry. How was it possible that I couldn't even cry for the death of my grandfather? How was it possible that I couldn't even unburden the pain that I was feeling?

The problem was that I thought I was not feeling any pain, even though my family members thought I should be, not because I was a bad granddaughter, but because while time was passing by, that island of isolation was swallowing me up. The island had won. It was then when I realized that I had totally become an island.

I never thought that I could have been so cold about the death of my grandfather, or that I could have survived news like that. I wanted to cry, but a part of myself didn't let me. I don't think that it was me, but the island speaking for itself. At the funeral, I was there, but at the same time, I was not. I was locked up. My soul wasn't there. Not even a tear was seen on my face. My family was really mad because it was like I didn't even care. What they didn't know was that I was mad too, not with them, but with myself. I was mad because that day the island won, and Isabella lost. It was then, when I realized: the island didn't have any intentions to let me go, but it wanted to keep me forever.



## **The Unforgettable Memory** **by Xundong Zhou**

A few days ago, I was looking at a photo of my grandparents that was taken in my grandparents' house by my aunt in 2016. I got this photo from my dad's WeChat, a social media app that works as a combination of WhatsApp and Facebook. I think this is a great photo that can be used to describe these two elders. While this colorful modern photo may not be as meaningful on the surface as older looking photos, it does mean something to my family in the U.S.

Looking at my grandpa, he is reclining on a chair and smiling to the camera causing Crow's feet around his eyes. He is wearing a coat that goes from his shoulder to his knees because of the chilly season. When I zoom in closer, the thing that I am thinking is "time." His hair is white; his face is full of wrinkles, his arms are so thin, and the backs of his hands are full of veins that I can clearly see under the skin. Even though he is getting weaker over time, he is still farming fruits and vegetables daily, using shovels and hoes that are right



beside him in the photo. On the other side of him, my grandma is also sitting in a chair and smiling, but she looks way younger than my grandpa. She does not have so many wrinkles, nor white hairs. She looks as healthy as my grandpa. Although they are both healthy, still, how sad is it to see your closest one's appearance change over time? However, looking at the photo, I start to recall the memory of the place where I lived with them, and I am so surprised about the change that has happened over time. Even though I had already noticed the change, I still feel a little sad because I was not there to go through that huge change with them.

I used to live in the same village as my grandparents a few years ago. During that time, there were roughly 5,000 villagers in the village. The village is mostly elders because most of the younger people go outside of the village and find their jobs in the city. Moreover, in order to live comfortably, the elder seniors need to work to provide their basic needs, but most of time they just work for fun because the younger generation will periodically send money back to the village.

My grandpa owns about six or seven acres of farmable fields. However, things have changed over time. Since our village is very close to the beach, many companies decided to build resorts in the village. Hence, vacationers kept coming in, which caused a dramatic increase in the population, and also the economy of the village. However, the change in the environment has also provided the two elders with better medical access, food sources, and also other resources.

My emotions can change very quickly. Right now, I feel happy about one thing that has not changed, and I hope it will never change: health. My grandparents have always been healthy, from the past until now, and I can even say that they are healthier than most

teenagers. They sleep when the sun sets and wake up when the sun rises and they also have a consistent dining time. Nowadays, many people have bad sleeping and dining habits. Young people go to sleep late at midnight, wake up at noon, and eat their meals at a different time every day. That is why I think that my grandparents are healthier than most young people. Moreover, another thing that has not changed is the memory the photo brings up in me. The memory is not just about them; it includes me too. It is a memory from the past that was planted deep in the soil; it does not grow anymore, nor wither.

The memories of my time in China pump out of my brain when I look at this photo. It was the time when my dad was out in the United States, and my mom was at work. It was the time when my parents did not have time to take care of me. It was the time when I lived with my grandparents. It was the only time that I can remember as a seven-year-old.

“We are going to visit your grandparents,” the mother says to the little boy.

“Ok,” the little boy replies without any interest. Instead, he is staring at a computer screen. After a few minutes, I, the little boy, am preparing for the visit under my mother’s force. When I walk upstairs, I see my mom is packing my clothes.

“What are you doing now, mom?” I ask curiously.

She looks at me for a few seconds and says, “Go downstairs. We are going out now.”

“Ok,” I reply with curiosity, but on the road to my grandparents’ house, I totally forget about my curiosity because I have the “memory of a fish.” However, in the car, I have nothing to do. Slowly, my eyes are closing. My heart is slowing down. My brain is, fortunately, still working while I am sleeping. I do not know what is happening anymore, except the horrible dream that I always have. I dream about a capsizing ship, a falling airplane, and a stumbling fall from the roof of my house, but luckily I wake up before I

touch the ground. I am covered in sweat. When I open my eyes, I see the inside of my grandparents' house. I recognize it because of the photos on the wall.

The days with my grandparents have begun, but where is my mom? They say that my mom went to work, but she will come back next week with the toys that I like. I am feeling lonely at first, but soon I realize that my grandparents are still with me. Moreover, I always like to engage in rural life because of the shows on television, so I am getting excited about the rural experience with my grandparents.

A week later, my mom comes by and picks me up. We are going back to city. At that moment, hundreds of memories flash through my little brain. I think of the time that I woke up in the dark, the fresh fruits and vegetables that we ate, the time that I "helped" my grandpa on the field by stepping over the "dead" plants and seeds, and also the time that my grandma fed me really "well" with congee that contained a lot of sugar, and caused me to have a lot of cavities, but tasted very good. However, I am going back to the city anyway because school starts soon.

Now, even though I am in the U.S., we still chat on the phone often because it was the habit that we started ten years ago. They will listen to whatever I say; they have always been listeners. Every time when I finish talking, the only thing that they say to me is "remember to be careful on the road," "remember to stay warm," and "remember to keep up your grades." Right now, when I think of it, I feel guilty. I feel so bad that they have to listen to all the meaningless things that I say. From now on, I will start to listen to them rather than talk.



## Archaic Legacy by Hillari Kelly

**W**hile we are growing up, we have people other than our parents who directly or indirectly help us in the process of building good character. It's invaluable that we have people who are old enough and have the maturity to teach us about the potential that we have, from their perspective. In my case, I had a teacher who has been there for me since I was born, my great-grandma. She does not even have to tell me how much she loves me, her actions are able to demonstrate and elaborate on every feeling that she has for me. I have so many memories of her, sometimes they seem surreal as I express them, and other times they seem incomplete. However, I can connect one with the other and never get tired of saying every single time that she was there for me.

I'm used to leafing through photo albums every time I find one. When we decided to move, I found a picture inside the mess of packing. Now, let's pay attention to this picture. That's her, my great-grandmother, Maria Francisca Arias, aka Mamita. As we see in the picture, my great-grandma has an oval face with a dimple on her cheek. Maybe she had gotten a large amount of sun, so that makes her face look tanned, different from her body,

which is a little bit lighter with little spots. Her body consists of loose skin. Even though she is skinny, she does not have a very deep clavicle. She has always had slender but big and worn hands. She has thin eyelashes and her eyebrows are well-marked and thick. She has deep-set and luminous blue eyes. Also, she has a wide nose, which contrasts with her little mouth. She has fine black hair and it is always pinned up. She has a white dress on, which compliments the color of her nails and simple jewelry like her wedding ring and the cross on her chest. In this picture, she is carefully holding a baby in her hands. The baby is brown-skinned; it's a one or two-year-old girl. Finally, as you can already imagine, that baby is me.

She has me in her hands, and I'm not making a kerfuffle as most babies do when they feel uncomfortable. She seems comfortable in the picture and so do I. I could say that I feel that this picture represents our relationship. We get along with each other and we wanted to have a memory together. You may be asking yourself who took this picture. Well, I'm not really sure who took the picture because I wouldn't remember, but I guess that it was my mom because she was always in the house. Analyzing the background of the picture, I notice that it was taken on the terrace of the house. I know that it seems like an irrelevant picture, however, the feeling of closeness and familiarity that it gives to me is extraordinary. It makes me realize that she has not changed at all. It amazes me the simplicity that she possesses and how she always accepts me. Even though it is an old photo, she kept it. Behind that picture, I see her experiences and I'm reminiscing on our times together.

This picture also shows a house, the house where I grew up, which is now my grandma's and great-grandmother's house. The house is big enough that in the summer, my

father and his brothers come here to spend their vacation with their mother. When my whole family is there, which is my two uncles and my aunt with their three children, this house becomes not only a mess with all the gifts and things that we bring from New York, but also a fun place to be with their good memories and their long stories that sometimes they tell at night.

My aunt always starts with her “savage experiences,” about how she used to fight with almost everyone, even with her own brothers. Or she gives advice and tells me that I must have courage for every problem that I might have to face—you know, “family things.”

“You know I didn’t fear anyone,” said my aunt.

Mamita, who was also sitting down in the front yard said, “That’s true. I always had to be on top of you. I always had to be paying attention to the ones that she said she would beat because she always meant it.”

My dad was in the living room. Apparently, he heard the conversation and came over. “That wasn’t always true because she used to beat me and then run.”

My aunt looked at him laughing and said, “Raul, do you remember the time that I hit you with the iron and I almost burnt you?”

Mamita interrupted the story. “I had to be separating you from everyone, even had to be apologizing to a lot of parents because of the way that you hit their daughters and even destroyed their clothes.”

That moment was surprising to me because I also remember all the times that she was there for me when I was the one getting beat up. Every time my mom would get mad at me, everytime that she would try to hit me, my great-grandma would get in the middle and stop her. Most of my friends have funny and sad stories about how their parents, being

Dominicans, have tried to hit them, at least with a *chancleta*, when they were little. However, I do not have these experiences. My mom never had the chance to hit me, because Mamita would, as always, be there for me. Not only that, but when my mom yelled at me, at the moment that I wanted to cry, Mamita would get me in her hands and hug me. She was the guardian angel that any kid needed in their childhood. Fortunately, she was my guardian angel.

It would be impossible for me to describe every moment that my great-grandma was there for all her grandchildren. One night, when my family was telling stories under the stars, Mamita said, "I feel useless now that I'm sick. I cannot do anything for you guys. I spend the whole day in this chair."

My aunt looked at her with a big smile and said, "Don't worry, Mami. You already did a lot for us."

The situation was getting intense, so I decided to sit by Mamita's side and give my opinion. "Now it's our turn to make the dinner for you, to help you taking your baths and to basically help you like you did with us." At that moment, my great-grandma put her head down and I realized that her eyes were full of tears. She helped all her grandchildren in their childhood. She never needed or wanted help from anyone.

I may be getting emotional, but it inspires me the heart that she has and the fact she is hurt, not because she is sick, but because she cannot be there for us like she was back then. Sometimes people would think that those stories are lost down the memory hole, but no, Mamita stills carries not only our childhoods with her, but also the desire of always doing everything that she could for us.