



2023

SPOTLIGHT

an anthology of work by Virginia adult education learners

SPOTLIGHT

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A note on language: The pieces appearing in **SPOTLIGHT** have been lightly edited by the editorial team with a focus on eliminating typos while preserving the evidence of adult learners’ developing writing skills and their authentic voices. The editorial team has also in many places made decisions about paragraph breaks and line spacing, as some formatting was not transmitted by the publication’s submission form.

Life in America

by Jin Park

Late in October 2014, it was cold, dark and raining, when I landed at Dulles International Airport with my family. Everything seemed to be new and unfamiliar, including buildings, people, foods, roads, cars, colors, houses, cultures, and even trees. But I felt the most different and hard thing was the new language. This was the beginning of my long English journey. I studied English for more than 10 years in Korea, but surprisingly, I couldn't understand one bit when people spoke to me. When people were talking, my mind was busy trying to figure out what they were talking about. Communicating is the most important thing in our life. Speaking a language is the first method used in humans' communication. Language is powerful. What doesn't change over time is the power of language. Language is connected to everything socially.

As you may know, there is a story about a boy. He was abandoned, and a married couple discovered him deep in the forest in France. They brought him to their place and taught him their language and culture, but he couldn't learn how to speak the language. This was the basis of language education and early child education. This means that learning a new language is not easy, especially for older people. I was not talkative, but if I couldn't let people know what I was talking about, I would be frustrated. The biggest problem for me was my communication style. Most Koreans speak very directly, but Americans speak smoothly and vaguely. I can read English well, but I had a difficult time understanding what they were talking about, and I felt ashamed. Since that time, I have been stressed out and under pressure. So, I studied English again from the basics, and I was more focused on speaking and comprehension. I focused on details and listened carefully. I didn't want to make a mistake again. Since I have arrived in the U.S, I've never stopped studying English. This is my life in the U.S and I will keep going until I die.

Untitled

by Gelareh Jamshidi

I've travelled many times into the broken cups of coffee,
And have drunk poems in the burned cafes.
I've played music on the collapsed bridges,
And have cried out in ruined places.

Whenever I took refuge
To the sun of far-off farms,
Horrifying scarecrows made me run away.
The sun yawned,
The cloud wailed,
And nothing remained in my eyes but burned wheat fields.

However,
Those eyes which dragged me
To the seaside café,
Showed me a tranquil island.
We arrived there and our hair got wet.
our eyes were shining,
and our pilgrimage had been accepted.

When we left paddles on the shore,
Seagulls have fallen in love with our shoulders,
The rain has rose to sky,
Orison has come down from sky.

I said to your eyes:
I've found my holy land,
And distances are strange superstitions.
I've told that I'll sew up the east and the west together,
And I'll make a short path from the middle of the world,
To the heat of your neck,
So that I hang myself around it
And become the necklace of your patience years.

Your eyes have laughed,
White ships departure whistling,
All alleys of the world joined together,
Continents got hands in hands,
And oceans became rivers.

Me,
A little seagull,
Who takes seeds of kiss
From the width of your shoulder
And spreads the wing of journey
On the height of your arms....

Untitled

by Atiqullah Bana

I am from the foods qably pala and tika kabab

I am from many good friends who help me during the hard days of my life, and this is my greatest success

I am from my father always telling me to be a servant of the people, and my mother always insisting that people should respect their teachers like their mother

The people in Afghanistan have very big hearts, because there are many problems around and in our country

We have constantly been invaded by neighboring countries

There has been no joy in the life of Afghan people for forty years

Today the doors of our schools are closed for girls who can now neither study nor work

We have been held hostage by terrorists

My English Teacher, Pocahontas

by Noriko Hattori

When I was six years old, my family and I visited my cousin who lived in Seattle, Washington. At the time, the Disney movie *Pocahontas*, was all the rage in the U.S. It told the love story between a Native American girl and an English settler. I brought a *Pocahontas* backpack and the soundtrack back home to Japan. Although the movie *Pocahontas* never caught on in Japan, I spent every night listening to the *Pocahontas* soundtrack. My father wrote out the English lyrics with Japanese pronunciations, and I learned all the English lyrics and sang along. My favorite song was "Colors of the Wind". While I did not understand the words, I loved singing along and asking no one in particular: "Can you sing with all the voices of the mountains? Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?"

Looking back now, I think that the experience of listening to songs and singing in English every day at that time greatly improved my vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. It was the *Pocahontas* soundtrack that made listening to and speaking English a natural part of my life. That music kept me interested and motivated to keep learning. I still remember the lyrics to "Colors of the Wind": "You think I'm an ignorant savage....You don't know....Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon? Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?"

More than 20 years later, I got married. And in early 2022, my husband was considering studying abroad in Virginia or Los Angeles. I loved the weather in Los Angeles, but my husband decided to go to the University of Virginia. In Japan, New York and Los Angeles are well known, but not many people know about Virginia. I also knew nothing about Virginia, so I did some research. Then, to my surprise, I found something on Google. *Pocahontas* was a real person and she had lived in Virginia. I never thought that over 20 years later I would be visiting *Pocahontas*' hometown.

The other day, my husband and I went to Jamestown, where *Pocahontas* lived. We saw the village where the Powhatans lived. *Pocahontas* was the daughter of a powerful Powhatan Chief. We also examined the ships which brought the English settlers. The actual history of the English settlement and the life of *Pocahontas* may not have been a happy story but that Disney film was my childhood. I felt it was an important story for me. And it was how I learned each English word. And it was also how I learned about cultures beyond the words. I am grateful for the opportunity to travel to the U.S. and for all my father's effort in sparking my interest in learning English. My trip to Seattle when I was 6 years old, singing the *Pocahontas* song every day, and now living in Virginia, were all connected like the wind that travels around the world.

Symphony in the Corridor

by Ya Li Fan

The Fairfield Hotel where I work is a warm family. Every morning we workers from different countries gather here to greet each other in English, Spanish and Chinese.

The two young, beautiful and energetic female bosses also greet us “Good morning” every day. When we are very busy at work, the two female bosses join us in cleaning the rooms, which makes us employees feel very warm.

The workers also bring their own country’s food and prepare to enjoy the happiness of lunch.

When the guests check out, we begin to clean the rooms, but we don’t forget to enjoy the music. Some workers wear headphones to listen to their favorite music, and some put their mobile phones on the work cart to listen.

I also like listening to music, and more I like singing. Sometimes I just let go of my voice and sing when I’m cleaning the hallway by myself, but my voice must not exceed the sound of the vacuum cleaner.

From time to time, Spanish, English and Chinese songs are played in the corridor. There is also the sound of various disinfectants and detergents used to clean the room spraying the stone floor and mirrors.

These sounds are intertwined. Accompanied by the sounds of the vacuum cleaner it is like a “Symphony”, which makes us forget our fatigue and enjoy the happiness brought by our work.

The Meaning of Home

by Havva Mohammad Zadeh

There is something about the smell of halwa that makes me think of home. My mother lives in Iran. She cooks a delicious sweet halwa which is made with flour oil, sugar rose water and saffron. The flour and sugar turn brown and smell very sweet. The halwa thickens and is soaked again in a saffron syrup. But it is more than the delicious smell in the air and the sweet taste in the mouth. It is made with love.

The taste of my mother's halwa is not only the taste of the sweet ingredients of halwa, but the taste of life the taste of love the taste of comfort the taste of a hug that brings peace. It is a feeling that not even a heavy storm can disturb.

When I think of my mother's halwa, my mouth is watering, and it is as if I can smell it and taste it under my teeth. I feel like I am home.

One day when I woke up, I smelled my mother's halwa in my kitchen. I was excited and thought for a moment that someone brought my mother's halwa home. I wondered if my daughter was heating it up for breakfast. I quickly rushed down the stairs and asked my daughter, "Are we having halwa for breakfast?" I was shocked.

She said, "No." But I did not believe her. She laughed at me and asked "Were you dreaming of grandma's halwa?" I still didn't believe her. I checked the stove and the microwave but I didn't find anything. I was really confused. That day, I missed my mother more than any other day.

True Beauty is Found Not in the Exception But in the Common Place

by Afaf

Do we need true beauty? If we find it, how will it affect our life? From my experiences I found beauty in everything I have done. For example: cooking, sitting with my family, reading, and even sometimes doing nothing.

The true beauty for me is found when sitting with my family especially during lunch time. It's the only time we are all together after my daughter comes back from school. It is not only a moment that we shared the delicious food I cooked with love. But also, we are discussing what happened during the day, especially with regards to my daughter's school. The conversations are in our language, Arabic; we enjoy doing that, so that our daughter doesn't forget it and practice more. Moreover, in our multipurpose meeting we discuss what is going on in our country and if anything, special news in the world. It lasts for one hour or more and it depends on how my husband slept after coming home from his night work. Also, we put our plan for the remaining hours of the day and how we can enjoy it; sometimes we are planning for the whole week too. That not only means knowing what happens for them as a detective, but also feeling I am sharing with them every minute they spend away from me.

I love to cook pastries and sweets especially when I am alone and have nothing to do. I relax and my mood totally changes as I empty all my energy. I hardly remember my tiredness when I see my family smiling and laughing like a baby. It really makes my day, and it's worth all the effort. That encourages me and gives me fuel to continue my journey in life. Reading my favorite books or reading with my daughter changes both of us towards the importance of what we are reading and how to love reading from hard copy not from online. Sometimes I feel happy while I'm doing nothing, only relaxing on the couch dreaming after a warm shower and hot chocolate beside me.

We can find true beauty everywhere if we want. If we are at peace with ourselves and feel beauty inside ourselves, the true beauty is found not in the exception but in the common place.

WHAT?

by Waleska Ortega

WHAT?

At first everything was so alien to me.

I looked at the street signs and thought... WHAT?

I listened to the people in the supermarket and thought... WHAT?

Everything around me had changed its name and I needed a translation. I love talking with the people and now I couldn't express myself.

I had to do something, that is why I decided to take English classes.

I have been in class for a few weeks, but now I feel like building the world again, but I am no longer alone. Now I am accompanied by a new community that shares my interests and my questions, especially the... WHAT?

I still walk in the street and sometimes I don't understand some things and I wonder... WHAT?

But now I have answers and I feel more comfortable with this world in English.



Untitled

by Milton Antonio Torres

When I came to the USA in 2002, I came with the intention of being able to help my parents. I am from a very poor place in El Salvador. Years later I finally built a house for my parents and was very happy with the achievement. I worked very hard to be able to help my family so I did not have time to focus on learning English. I knew that learning English would open better doors in life so I decided to learn English at LCNV (Literacy Council of Northern Virginia)*.

English Education Empowers. I worked as a roof installer (Roofer) for 19 years. With the English classes I have taken, I have a new position of Roof Inspector. Recently, I went to my tool bag and saw what I used before, a nail gun, hammer, level, and a machine to cut wood. I saw my bag today and now I have a laptop, an iPad, and a thermal camera.

I felt very blessed by God and to have the 3 most beautiful teachers. The teachers have patience, creativity, observation, dedication, discipline, wisdom, patience, and humility. Each of the 3 has something very nice. Ms. Maura has patience, Ms. Melissa is kind and Ms. Robin the diva, her smile that we saw her go through very difficult times and her smile never lost. I love them—all 3! (Thank you for all teachers).



* *The Literacy Council of Northern Virginia is now the English Empowerment Center.*

Untitled

by Masooma Jowhary

Before I started learning English, I had many problems in my language. I couldn't communicate with people when I went outside, and I liked to talk with my neighbors and to go shopping to buy groceries. It was hard for me to understand and solve my problems without learning English. I didn't have confidence, I felt shy to face someone because I couldn't speak. For this reason I stayed far away from people and was sad.

One day I made a decision and told myself to get up right now and move, because there is no tomorrow. The decisions of today make my tomorrow and tomorrow will make my future. Don't wait for another day, because life is too short and every second of time is worth more than a diamond. Finally I decided to search on Google. I found English language classes close to my house. I had a good feeling about that. I started in that direction and followed it. It took about 35 minutes to arrive at my destination. I went to the office and talked to the receptionist; she was very polite and kind. After that she gave me the information for the registration day and I came and registered myself.

Fortunately, I started classes, studied hard, did my homework, and tried to talk to my classmates. I had a good feeling, because my dream was coming true. I can communicate with people and I can solve my problems a little. My husband always supports me and gives me spirit to do my best in this way.

I am very grateful to God; He gives me the opportunity to live. I do struggle to improve myself, succeeding with education.

In addition I am thankful to all my excellent teachers; they patiently teach us, kindly listen to us and are very polite with us. I appreciate them and I pray they have a long life with their lovely families.

Because of our best teacher now I can write and speak English. Now I'm better than yesterday. Tomorrow I will be better than today, God willing.

English education gives me courage, confidence and the ability to speak better.

It's the beginning of my education; I will continue and complete my education as soon as I can. I have a plan to graduate from college. I have many hopes and wishes in my life. The biggest is to increase my knowledge and in the future to be a successful lawyer and serve successfully in society. I'm sure English language will help me to reach the peaks of success and be an English speaker.

My future is bright like a light (God willing).

In the end, I want to say thank you so much to the professors of the LCNV (Literacy Council of Northern Virginia*) community, who have made this golden education center of teaching English for us.



* *The Literacy Council of Northern Virginia is now the English Empowerment Center.*

Untitled

by Fatna Khamis

My name is Fatna Khamis. I am from Sudan. I came here on 8/26/2015. I came here by airplane. It took one day. The people who helped me in the United States are my family.

I came to America for many reasons. One of my reasons is for a better life and a job and then education. Now I have a job and I study English class at the Blue Ridge Literacy.

I knew that in the United States education is free K-12. I like that in the U.S there are more jobs, and I feel safe. I was surprised that the U.S is a big country with beautiful scenery. It was difficult to learn a new language but now I am doing better.

Stubborn Survivor

by Anitra Winn

Anitra is beautiful from the inside out. with the heart of a dreamer and the determination of a warrior, Life hasn't been easy for her, But she tied up her hair and smiled. Because she handled anything. There is a power in her that is strong enough to light up the darkest of days, so people need to know they're worthy, and this has allowed her to turn scars into beauty. Don't take Anitra for granted. She knows what she's worth and she isn't afraid to walk away if she's not been treated the way she deserves.

Blessed

by Anitra Winn

When you have siblings you'll share your deepest secrets, Having siblings should make you feel like you will never have to worry about anything, Well, Not in this case. Being the youngest of your siblings should be a great thing but it didn't turn out the way. Once my mother passed away that's when the time come when my siblings asked me to leave. I didn't have anywhere to live, Now I am asking myself, "What should I do? HELP ME!". Then the woman asked me my name. "Bonnie." She asked, "How old are you?" I told her, seventeen. "It's too late for you to be outside", she said. "Well, I don't have anywhere to live. "You don't have any family?" she asked. I told her I do, but they put me out. "I have a spare bedroom there are a few rules you will need to follow" "no problem" Bonnie said. The lady name Gladys comes in here and fixes you something to eat. The next day Gladys woke Bonnie up to take her to school, Bonnie said" Ms. Gladys I don't have any clothes. Ms.Gladys replies, "Let's make a day out of shopping so you get some clothes for school." Ten years later Ms.Gladys was about to lose her home, and then Bonnie paid it off. Bonnie said to Ms. Gladys, "IF it wasn't for you blessing me. I wouldn't be where I'm today to be able to bless you so I want to thank you."

My Goals 2023

by Tony Song

My family came to America in August 2021. Here I did not have friends and a job, facing different cultures, religions and politics. Most importantly, my English was bad, I did not understand what somebody said to me, even very simple things. Sometimes I was frustrated and awkward. So, I went to PVCC* and took a Nursing aide class, to help improve my English speaking and listening skills. After taking the class, I got an offer from UVA hospital, I became an anesthesia technician last October. This job is very important to me. On one hand, I can earn money to support my family life, on the other hand, it will give me more chances to improve my English level. I am getting familiar with my job right now, and my English is getting a little better. So, I have made some goals for this year.

The first goal is that the hospital will keep me employed in April. Why do I have this concern? The reason is my English is developing. I have only made a little progress in three months. Those co-workers who were hired later than me have been trained in other skills, for example, cell saver, offsite room, pediatric cardiac surgery, and so on. I think if I do not finish all the skills training in my probation, it is possible that I will be fired. So, I hope that the lead of day shift will train me in the next skill and I can have the chance to finish all the skills.

The second goal is that I always keep healthy. I have two conditions, one is that I have chronic low back pain, another is that I have pre-diabetes. So, I need to make a plan to keep me healthy, such as, exercise 3-4 days each week, eat not too much, do not eat junk food and so on.

I will try to take the TOEFL test at the end of this year, I hope I could pass by the third time. If I pass the test, I may take other classes and will get an associate degree or bachelor degree. There are reasons that I want the degree, the first is that I can communicate with other people fluently, totally understand what they said. I do not like the situation when someone said to me something, I do not understand. The second is that I have some chances that I can find a job that I am really interested in, my dream come true once again. The third is that I can earn more money, pay my daughter's tuition, rent, gas, food, etc, even I can travel to Hawaii and Venice.

* Piedmont Virginia Community College

All About Me

by Azra Shahbaz

Introduction

My name is Azra Sultana.

I have been married to a wonderful and lovely man.

I am a housewife, who is a multi tasking woman.

I am a Mother of two beautiful children.

I am a daughter of my beloved parents.

My Family

I have the best family in the world.

I have two lovely children and my husband.

I enjoy spending quality time with my family as much as possible.

I have a beloved Mother and 3 siblings, who are married too.

My hobbies and activities

I do **yoga** everyday, which keeps me energetic whole day and also I feel fresh and good to start the day with yoga.

I like to play **badminton**.

I watch **tv** everyday in my spare time, usually I like to watch movies and I prefer to watch it in **english language**, in this way I can improve my english language more fluently.

My Interest

I like to cook. I cook variety of dishes. Before I didn't know how to cook dishes properly, but now I could say I am a good cook and I have learnt cooking by watching youtube videos. My favourite dish is **Biryani**, which is a traditional dish also. It is a very delicious meal.

And I also like **painting**, I do painting whenever I feel like to do. I draw sceneries of nature and **calligraphy** writing too.

Family and Friends

I believe that **family and friends** are the true cause of happiness.

When you have **family** and **friends**, you have those who

Care for you. when you have a **family** and some really good

friends, you know that there will be always for you.

I Am Poem

by Giedre

Yesterday I was a diary.
Tomorrow I will become a paper airplane.
But today I carry around a pencil.
I am impatient and persistent.

I see the same views as the newest telescope.
I hear silence.
I am disobedient.
I am impatient and persistent.

I understand people don't know much about the universe.
I say, they always will stay curious.
I wonder how much I will know in ten years.
I am impatient and persistent.

My Name

by Raihanaa Ikhlassi

Read stories
Afraid of dogs
I am a mother
Happy
I like Apples
Nuts
And vegetables

Untitled

by Safeya Ahmadi

My name is Safeya Ahmadi. I am from Kabul, Afghanistan. I came to the U.S. in 2020. I came here by airplane. The trip took 2 days. My brother-in-law and sister-in-law helped me.

I came to America for many reasons. One reason is because I want freedom of religion and for a better life. The Taliban in Afghanistan does not allow girls to go to school. The Taliban won't let me study. In Afghanistan, I want to study and become a doctor in the future because I am very excited to become a doctor, but in America it is very expensive to go to college.

When I came to America for the first time, everything was completely different, it was a new country, a new language. What I like about the work here is that everyone is busy in their own life and does not care about anyone. The biggest difference is that there are three levels of government, federal, state, and local, and we have to pay taxes to all of them.

Untitled

by Sobeida Valle

Learning English helps me communicate with people who speak English, like my doctors and neighbors. If there is an emergency, I can ask for help in English. In addition, if a person approaches me and asks me for help in English, I can help them. Also, knowing English gives me more opportunities when looking for jobs that require English fluency. I can read books in English to my grandkids too! Finally, I was able to pass my citizenship interview because I knew how to speak, understand, and write English, so studying English helped me to become a United States citizen!



Enjoy the Slow Life in Charlottesville

by Janice Jung

I'm from Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Seoul is the largest and busiest city in Korea with a population of 10 million. You can do everything all day. Many restaurants are open 24/7.

If you just make a phone call, you can enjoy anything at home. You can get everything in just a few steps from your house. You can use WiFi to connect anywhere. There's a saying "The light never goes off in Seoul".

However, in Seoul people can't relax because it is crowded, loud, and there are many lights around them. I was too busy when I lived there, I didn't communicate much with people in person, and most of the communications were done virtually through mobile and digital systems.

When I first came to Charlottesville, it was just a quiet and small town to me. It was boring, inconvenient, and there was nothing to interest me. I couldn't find anything entertaining to do.

For example, when I first came here what I saw was only green nature. The restaurants and stores were closed early at night. I sometimes lost my internet connection. I had to wait for my mail for a long time. There were no elevators or any digital systems in my apartment. I needed to go quite a distance by car if I wanted to buy something.

However, this environment helped me spend more time at my house with my husband and my cat instead of hanging out with friends until late at night. I also had time to interact with neighbors and friends in person more often, and explore the beautiful nature of the Shenandoah National Park. I loved the sound of birds every morning and seeing squirrels on the trees.

The peaceful environment in Charlottesville also gave me an opportunity to look beyond myself. To be honest, in Korea I didn't say hello to my neighbors and enjoy activities in nature. I was watching my mobile phone and considering things only related to me. I didn't pay attention to my neighbors or the nature around me.

Looking back now, it was a dreary time. But now I have chats with my neighbors on the stairs. I grow my plants on my porch. My favorite time is meeting my neighbors when I take a walk with my cat. I'm able to think about my emotions and see beyond the present. I can have a face to face conversation with my husband about our life and future without looking at my phone. I feel very relaxed and it is worth it.

I'm learning about the slow but valuable life in Charlottesville. I believe this is the most precious time in my life. I hope I have convinced you that Charlottesville is a wonderful city.

The Meat of BÊÊÊÊÊÊÊÊ

by Cherif Dahissa

My name is Cherif, and I was born and raised in Porto-Novo, BENIN in West Africa. Living in the United States is a big dream for most of the people who live outside of the U.S. For us, who have French as a primary language, we are exposed to the language barrier that we did not realize existed until we meet the real problem of language.

It was November 18, 2018, and I landed at Richmond International Airport after successfully passing immigration formalities at CHICAGO Airport, giving answers to some questions to the immigration service to officially validate my entry into the American Territory. "It's been so far so good," until I arrived at my destination (RICHMOND AIRPORT), where I had my first challenge explaining myself in English, which was a stressful and embarrassing moment that I am ready to forget.

What was happening that day was that by 7pm, my family and I were at the baggage check area and in the scanner one of the officers detected in our baggage a package containing fried meats. He was curious to know what kind of meat it was, because some meats are prohibited on U.S territory, so below is our conversation:

Officer: Good afternoon, what is in this package?

Me: It is the Meat

Officer: Well, what kind of meat is it?

Before answering this question, I had already started to struggle with myself to find the NOUN of the animal I got the meat from. At the same time, we were in the line of at least 20 people. So, a few minutes later I had to answer, and my response was very ridiculous and was:

Me: It is the meat of "BÊÊÊÊÊÊÊÊ" (I couldn't think to say GOAT MEAT or LAMB MEAT)

Officer: Excuse me

Me: It is the meat of the animal who says << BÊÊÊÊÊÊÊÊ >>

The officer was literally confused and lost by what I was saying, but fortunately there was a Spanish-speaking person behind me who understood what I was trying to explain and came to tell the officer that I wanted to say "LAMB MEAT."

I was relieved that the lady came to help me, but it is a day that I will never forget because it was my first embarrassing and linguistic experience in the U.S. After that situation, I decided to go to school and my main goal is to learn English and improve my vocabulary and pronunciation.

Untitled

by Nataliia Belko

My name is Nataliia Belko. I am from Ukraine. I came here on 01/25/23. I came here by airplane with my son. His name is Yehor, he is 13 years old. Our trip took 3 days. First we go by bus from Ukraine to Poland. Then we had a flight from Poland to Geneva to Lisbon and then to Washington DC. In Washington DC my son and me to meet my sister's family. Her husband helped us move to the USA. We really appreciated him.

My family came here because of a war. Now I have a difficult time for my family. Now my family lives in Roanoke, Virginia. Now we are safe and many people help us. Here a lot of people are friendly and help us integrate into society. My son goes to Woodrow Wilson school, and I go to English class. I am trying to improve my English because I want to look for a good job and earn good money.

Before I came to USA, I know about many things like how people live here. I mean life level, political situation and other things. My biggest confusion here is that it is a long paper way but the biggest surprise to me is the nature of Virginia. I have here challenges, difficulties only with public transport. It's not good.

Now I feel thankful for everybody who helps my family.

Untitled

by Zarghuna Hamidi

My name is Zarghuna Hamidi, I am from Afghanistan. I came here in 2021. I came here by airplane.

The trip took 7 days. We started our trip from Kabul to Qatar. Then we flew to Washington. After that, we stayed in Wisconsin for 3 months. The CCC* helped me when I got to Roanoke. They helped with an apartment and with rent. We were able to buy beds and dishes and they helped get me into English class.

My family left Afghanistan because the Taliban came and the embassy where my husband worked closed. We had to leave for our safety. My son was only 10. Now he is 11 and in the 5th grade. He speaks excellent English.

Before I came to America I thought life would be different. I like that everyone in America can get a job, even women. Someday, I will be able to work and help my family. Life in America is better for my family than life in Afghanistan.

* Commonwealth Catholic Charities

Dreams Come True

by Alcida Duenas

I was born in El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America, I grew up in a rural area where there was no electricity or drinking water. Schools and health centers were two miles away, and there were no transportation services. I have one sister and four brothers. I was eleven years old when my parents got divorced; that was the moment my life changed.

As a result of that event, I stopped being a child and I assumed adult responsibilities. I enrolled my two youngest brothers in school, I attended parent teacher meetings, and helped my father with the administrative needs on his farm; I did all of this without forgetting that I was a student.

In order to attend the school, I walked four miles every day from first grade until I finished high school. I walked through extremely hot temperatures. I promised myself to continue studying in order to get a higher-level education, change my life and help my family. I looked up at airplanes all the time, and imagined myself traveling far away and beginning a new chapter in my life.

At an early age the community was important to me and for that reason since middle school I expanded my vocation to the Health Department, this was a two mile walk away from home. I was exploring a career. I didn't realize at the time that something inside me woke up; it sparked my desire to learn about health and be able to help my community.

The Health Department staff was friendly and they trained me on how to administer intramuscular injections. After passing all the training, I afforded the ability to help the patients to finish their treatment. This led me to becoming a health promoter in my community.

It became clear I wanted to become a nurse. After five years of studying at University of El Salvador, my first dream came true. In my first job as a nurse I was in charge at a Health Department. There were no doctors at the Health Department and my team was comprised of two RNs and one LPN. When I left that job, I worked as a Nurse Supervisor of a five floor hospital where I took on different roles.

I had many roles including administration, midwife, working as surgeon assistant and many other positions. I was continuing to help my community, who would wait for me on the weekends at my father's house.

I was satisfied with my profession but not with the salary. My salary was not enough compared to the high cost of living, so I got a second job with UNICEF. Working with UNICEF helped me to get a tourist visa and travel to United States of America. It is here in the USA where I started another chapter in my life. This transition was hard in the beginning when I was unable to communicate, it made me feel mute, but I still felt I made the best decision for myself and my family.

When I came to the USA I had two goals, the first one, was to learn a second language and be able to work in the healthcare field. The second one was to have a baby. I was at an age where I wanted to have a baby. I successfully got pregnant twice that resulted in miscarriage. Through the pain of these events, I could never get a satisfactory explanation as to why or

how this could happen from the physician.

I never figured out the reason for the pregnancy loss, because all the tests were normal. I advocated for myself and I requested a hormonal treatment for the first ten weeks of pregnancy and that treatment worked. Nobody checked my hormonal levels and finally I was able to have a healthy boy.

When I look back to many years ago, I remember that little girl who dreamed of a better life, more opportunities, being able to help her family, having a hunger for knowledge, and working with the community. That little girl still hopes and believes “dreams come true”, I know this because that little girl still living inside of me.

Untitled

by Asma Habibi

I am studying to learn English and to use the computer better. I have a lot to do to improve in both of those. I also have a job, go to the gym, and do shopping, cooking and cleaning for my family. I go to the library on the weekend and study my English book for two hours. Sometimes I am so tired that all I can do is sleep. Sometimes I feel like problems are so difficult, but I keep going!

I am most happy when I am with my family and doing my favorite activities.

I love that my birthday is May fifth. My family gives me figs and my mother bakes a strawberry cake for me and decorates it with my favorite colors, blue, black and red.

Sometimes my brother and I take his five children to Pen Park. We get out of the car at the park and walk around. We play football, volleyball, and visit fitness stations. We are all running around laughing, and having fun! Then we have a picnic that includes rice, chicken kabob, tea and coffee. My husband is the best and I love him so much and I love my daughter so so much and I can't wait to see her. I will hug her tightly, I will buy a family car and a house for our big family. I will cook them the best food and I will open my restaurant and name it Asoo Cooking. and my dad, mom, and siblings will come to France and my brothers will be married and I will fly back to Virginia and I will attend their wedding and I will have a park named Abaseen Jan.

The Influential Women In My Life

by Adebola Adelokun

Every piece of me has seemed to come from these inspirational women who have graced my life, whether in the past or present. They've made an imprint on my soul.

Coming from an extremely close family gave me a new meaning to the cliché, "it takes a village." We have CEOs in the family! My strongest qualities came from these people: faith in God, determination, independence, resilience, perseverance and hope in God.

Let me introduce you to my grandma's lineage. They were four sisters: Ola, Oni, Otunla and Olaoniye. These women were very successful in their chosen careers. Ola, my grandma, has always encouraged me to break the conventional modes of femininity and go after what I desire. She didn't just tell me; she showed me how and trained me. Oni was into the clothing merchant business. Otunla was a trader—she did well too. Olaoniye was an oil tycoon who wasn't intimidated by anyone. Their era was when women were meant to just be under their men.

My strength comes from my mother. Having overcome obstacles and making immeasurable sacrifices, she lives her dreams through her six daughters. She never accepts anything but the best from me and to do my best—not to disappoint her. She instills in me the strength to have my own dreams and to never be afraid of them. Despite the challenges of life, she remains unshakeable.

My siblings and cousins are my inspiration in the present, because with great education, they inspire me in so many ways. We have doctors, lawyers, a nurse practitioner, a scientist, and business owners. I am well aware of all their attributes, knowing that what they did and their genes give me hope that I will emerge, always knowing that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

TO LOVE SOMEONE YOU HAVE TO LOVE

yourself

By: Natalia Tovar

Sometimes you feel that you are not enough for someone because many people might be more beautiful than you or smarter than you. When you see beautiful things in other people but use those things to compare yourself; you are committing the worst mistake in your life.

learning to do something.

The second thing that can improve your self-esteem is learning to do something. You'll feel that you're good at something. It makes me feel good that I can sing and dance. What skills bring you pleasure? Are you good at making coffee? Are you smart? Do you exercise? Do you eat healthy and do skincare? All these things help your body, appearance and health. Your body will thank you.



Speaking of thank you, be thankful everyday for the good and bad things. When you do this, you'll see all the things in a good way. Say thanks for the morning coffee but also say thanks for the person who called you dumb. Don't let opinions of others influence your self-esteem.

Thanks life!



There's a lot of solutions about how to love yourself. Do things that make you feel good; for example, in my case, I feel pretty good when I do my make-up. I also feel great dancing and singing. When you do things that make you a better person, a person you enjoy being around with.



You can start building a healthy self-esteem today with small steps. Take care of yourself, learn to do something that brings you pleasure, and be thankful for all the experiences that are teaching you something.



My Life in the US

Moving Back and Forth Between Japan and the US

by Yoshimi Hiramatsu

Introduction

My husband and I have been moving back and forth between Japan and the US three times for 22 years because of his business. I would like to talk about how different life has been between two countries. I am glad for this opportunity to share a part of who I am.

First time : 2000~2005

I've never lived in a foreign country. My husband and I were moving overseas from Japan to Richmond, VA for his business. First, I had to get a driver's license. My driving skills weren't so bad but traffic laws are different. I learned the laws with the book and dictionary. I was so pleased to get my license passing the third exam. I can drive anywhere I'd like to go. When going grocery shopping, I knew my English skills were terribly bad. I couldn't understand what the cashiers said. I tried to learn it by myself. I am intrapersonal and logical. I looked up the words on the flyer of supermarkets before going shopping. I watched American movies or dramas with English captions. They helped not only my English progress but learning about customs or topics in the US. I stayed home alone. I didn't have friends here. I felt so lonely. After a while, my husband's coworkers, Lisa and Emmy, occasionally emailed me. I wanted to improve my listening and speaking skills because I had good relationships with them. I started to take Chesterfield Adult Learning ESL class. There were some memorable meetings with great people, who are still my friends.

Back to Japan: 2005~2009

My husband and I moved back to Japan in spring, 2005. We started our new life in Tokyo where we've never lived. My husband started to work at his new office. I began to work at the pharmacy. In 2007, one of the biggest and happiest things in my life happened. We had our own baby! My only child, Kanami was born! It's just five days before our 12th anniversary. Our life entirely changed. We're not a young father and mother so raising a kid needed more effort. The neighbors, my friends, teachers at my daughter's preschool, and her friends' mothers helped us. I appreciate their generosity.

Second time: 2009 ~ 2013

We arrived at the Richmond airport again in summer 2009. The things that I saw through the car window brought back memories. This was the first time my daughter was in a foreign country. She looked confused. She saw and heard what she'd never seen or heard but she soon adopted. I learned a lot from her. She encouraged me to focus on what I want to be and not to care what others think. My husband and I met many wonderful people through her at the preschool, her lessons, and the kindergarten. Regarding my English, it had been getting worse from living in Japan. I began to watch kids programs with my daughter, talked to her

teacher and her friend's mom. It's easy to lose it but it's hard to get it back. I had ESL classes. I knew my listening and writing skills were improved but my daughter's English was much more advanced than mine. She was to be my good English teacher. I wasn't feeling lonely. She was with me.

Back to Japan: 2013~2021

We moved back to Japan again. Our new life started again. Can you imagine how hard it is to move to another country? I feel scared. The hardest thing is to make new relationships with new people. This time we lived in Saitama; it is almost 10 miles north of Tokyo. Amazingly my daughter made friends on the first day of her elementary school. I started my part time job. I had relocated twice in 8 years since I wanted to work longer hours. I sometimes felt exhausted. There were too many things I had to do. I know every mother and wife have the same problems. Having a balance between my job, being a mother, and wife, and myself is the key to prevent a quarrel with my family. I regretted that I easily became angry after fighting. I encouraged myself and made efforts to change.

Third time: 2021~ ?

We were back again and again! Each one of us in my family made great decisions to come here. My daughter, Kanami, made the biggest decision. She was a freshman in high school in 2021. She doesn't have any friends in the US. She says "I go to school because I should do it." I'm so proud of her. I was uncomfortable having too much free time. I wanted to find something that I could do. My friend introduced me to some volunteer opportunities. I wanted to try them but I started working on my English skills. I knew they were lost again in Japan. Watching dramas, movies, reading short articles, and baking with English recipes have improved them. Reading and listening skills were getting better, I think, but speaking and writing still weren't. I appreciate that the distance learning ESL classes meet together every Thursday through Google Meet. I enjoy seeing my teacher and other students and knowing their unique thoughts, traditions, and so on. I am trying harder to learn. I continue to have the class. I wish I spoke English fluently.

Conclusion

My precious experiences are my own things. I am going to put my effort into who I am is better than who I was.

My Story with Moroccan TBOURIDA

by Tarik Mansouri

At the age of 15, my family and I were invited to my cousin's engagement celebration, which was the first time I attended an event outside of my city. When we arrived, we were welcomed warmly by my uncle and all his family, but I was attracted by a view, which was a group of men assembled in a tent holding guns in their arms. I asked my uncle about them and he told me that those men were horsemen who would put on a show to celebrate my cousin's engagement, I was so happy and excited since this was all new to me.



Every one of them had his own horse and the horses were healthy and good-looking. Really, it was a wonderful time when they started doing the show and running at a long pace while shooting their guns in the sky. The exciting news was that my uncle had his own team and every time they participated in a championship they won their game.

So it was a great time to know that and discover one of the best traditions of my country which is Fantasia or Moroccan Tbourida.

What is Tbourida?

According to Wikipedia, "Fantasia (Arabic: ايزاتنافلا) is a traditional exhibition of horsemanship in the Maghreb performed during cultural festivals and for Maghrebi wedding celebrations. It is present in Morocco, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Tunisia. It is attested in the ancient Numidian times during which it was practiced by the Numidian cavalry."

Untitled

by Suntorn Kunchorn

Hello everyone. My Mr. Sunny. I'm very happy to tell you about my visit to Thailand this time. Because I had the opportunity to go back and visit my home and relatives. Who hadn't seen each other for almost 3 years. Everyone was very happy and excited. They find time to relax in various places such as Phuket Islands, Phi Phi Island, Maya Bay. which is a very beautiful sea. And also find time to make merit and pay home to monks at many different temples very holy and beautiful. If there is a chance, I would like to invite everyone to travel together. we will take care of you. Thank you

Untitled

by Soma Rastgar

My name is Soma Rastgar. I am from Kapisa, Afghanistan. I came here in 2021 by airplane. We started our trip from Kabul to Qatar. We left Qatar for Washington D C and we spent one week at Fort Lee camp. After one week we came by car to Virginia. The people who helped me were my cousins and the CCC* Office. We were at my cousin's house for two weeks. Then CCC found a house for us and also some household items and we were very happy that finally a shelter was found for us. I come here because of a war, for a better life, freedom and family. I feel happy right now.

Before I came to America, I thought that life would be very difficult. My biggest surprise is that you have to inform the government about your every duty. What I really liked is that men and women are equal and both are independent.

* Commonwealth Catholic Charities

The Person Who Inspires Me

by Victoria Lopez Robles

Everyone has or has had a person that inspires them to take every decision in their life, a person for whom they feel admiration and respect. I am not an exception! My father was the person who had the most influence in my life, from when I was 5 years old until today, even though he passed away when I was 12 years old.

He was very dedicated to his family. My most precious memories are of my childhood when the whole family lived close to each other, and I could share with my uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents every day. My father always taught my siblings and me that the most important thing was family and always being there for them.

My father was the type of person who always had something to learn from whatever situation he faced in his life. I admired his ability to learn and develop new things throughout my life. For instance, he couldn't finish high school, so his job opportunities were very limited; however, he learned to build houses and hotels by taking different construction courses. For me, he was the best architect because he knew about math, physics, designs, construction materials, etc.

Every day I remember his advice and lessons and they encourage me to make the best decisions in my life. "Never stop learning," is one of his pieces of advice that I apply in my life. I try to learn new things every day and perfect what I learn because I know that one day I will be able to take advantage of it.



It's Never Too Late

by GarryTrent

"The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be,"
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Being grateful is something I'm very familiar with. I'm a recovering alcoholic, an addict, and well aware of how my life could've turned out. When I compare the person I am today to the person I was years ago, I can't help but reflect and feel gratitude. Through sobriety, I have earned my loving wife, a job that I enjoy, maintained my freedom, and learned how to appreciate every day I have on this earth. I'd be remiss not to acknowledge that I alone wouldn't have achieved these things.

Through his patience, tough love and generosity for sharing his personal experiences, I would never have been able to come to terms with my past and the trauma I endured as a child if it weren't for Herb Kay. I will always remember the words he spoke, that changed my life: "You are not alone."

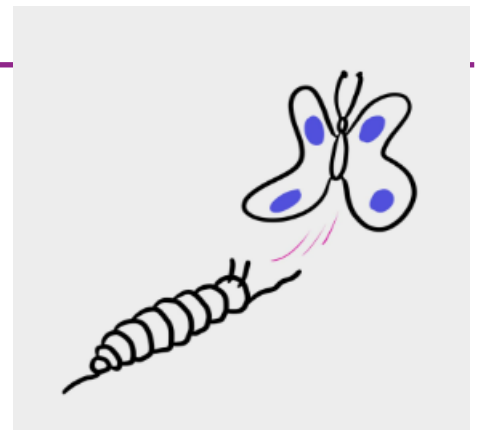
But, above all, without the help of God, to not only grant me the willingness to change, but also the strength to make the necessary changes, I would not be as blessed as I am. And, in paying it forward, it is my honor and privilege to help others as they have helped me.

GarryTrent has been in recovery for nearly 20 years and is happily married with a dog. He is a mentor and speaker for others in recovery and healing from past traumas.

Resilience

by Maria Galan

- R – Remember it's never too late to start.
- E – Enjoy the gifts of life.
- S – Say please and thank you.
- I – Immigrants: people looking for second chances.
- L – Love everything you do in this life.
- I – Influencer of positive things.
- E – Exercise your mind, body and heart.
- N – Never stop dreaming.
- C – Calm in difficult times.
- E – Everything will be fine.



My Life Story

by Sonia Habibzada

My childhood and adolescent

I was born in an Afghan and Muslim family. As Afghanistan past 3 decades war. So, My family immigrated during the war to Pakistan. I spent my childhood in Pakistan. I have three brothers and I don't have any sister. My father is an engineer and my mom is a teacher and they are the best parents in the world. They have always supported me. Even though my parents had a very difficult times during immigration because they lost their home, their work and they just start a new life from scratch but they always tried their best to pay their children's tuition fee in order to have a bright future.

I completed my elementary school in Pakistan. Always had a dream to become an engineer.

We moved back to Afghanistan because on that time Taliban was kicked out by the American forces.

During this situation girls had their rights so I started taking some English and computer classes beside my school.

I graduated from high school as topper.

My university and work period

I got selected in the Kabul University in my desired major which was ICT.

Unfortunately I was the only girl among 40 boys in my class. This is because some families forbid their girls to pursue education in engineering sectors.

When I was in 4th semesters I got an internship in a telecommunication corporation. I worked there for 3 months it was one of the best part of me life because I got my first salary from there.

I did my best during all the semesters. based on my grades I got selected in a scholarship to France. I have been in France for 2 months and I did research on smart containers in Lyon 2 university.

I got a chance to explore Europe, So, During my vacations I went to the Italy, Switzerland and Germany.

I found Paris the most beautiful city.

I came back to my home country and then I graduated from ICT Engineering successfully.

After my graduation I got a job as a NSS Engineer in a telecommunication corporation.

Fortunately I had many achievements during my work period as well.

I was selected as an ICT Girl by Afghanistan Ministry of Telecommunication.

I have had a training in Japan for 15 days.

I got promoted to supervisor position.

I got engaged with a very hardworking and kind man who was my coworker. My fiance got Fulbright scholarship and came to the US for completion of his master's degree.

My marriage life

After 2 years we got married. So, I opened a new chapter of my life, Everything were perfect in our life and we made our dream home. we were blessed with everything around us.

Three months later on 15th August. when I was working in the office my colleagues came to me and said leave the office as soon as possible because the Taliban are coming. so, I did. Everyone was shocked and the city was so crowded by people, All people seemed very disappointed and it was the worst day for the Afghan people. Barely I found transportation and came home.

I could not go to my office anymore. All Afghanistan was Occupied by the Taliban and they denied women for going to their works.

My husband and I left Afghanistan on 24th August and came to the United States.

We have been in a military camp which is called Fort Dix for almost 3 months.

Based on US government's decision we went to Oklahoma. Then my husband got a job and we moved to Virginia.

When I became a mom

Soorah, My baby girl, was born in 17th May 2022.

She is so sweet. I love her the most. She is the one who gave me a new life. She is six months old now.

Chihuahua – Smashing! Amazing!

by Liz NDoumi



People believe that the Apache Indians (pictured here) come from the USA, but the reality is different. For thousands of centuries, Chihuahua was the heart of the Apache Nation and the prairies and deserts were homeland to warriors who fought against Spanish domination for more than 200 years. Our principal Chihuahuenses roots, including mine, come from Apache. Actually, today, the Apache Nation sits on the border of 3 US states and 2 Mexican ones, mainly Chihuahua—no passport or visa, but a personal invitation, needed to enter!



In Chihuahua, we are a blend of 3 main different cultures which are divided by Indians regional native, which are the Tarahumaras/Raramuris, Criollos (mix of Spanish and Indians) and the Mennonites. The Tarahumaras/Raramuris came from the mountain regions, the Criollos live in the cities and the

Mennonites live in southeastern Chihuahua in a Mennonite camp in the countryside of Cuauhtemoc City. Every spring there are wonderful multicultural celebrations in the mountains.



The State of Chihuahua was an important part of the independence of Mexico from Spain in 1821, and almost 100 years later is recognized as the cradle of the Mexican Revolution in 1917.

Francisco "Pancho" Villa (former governor of Chihuahua, whose real name was Doroteo Arango) was one of the most important generals in the Mexican Revolution.

He is standing in the doorway of his house (above), which is now a museum near my childhood home.



There are many internationally famous artists, actors and singers who grew up in

Chihuahua, Mexico. David Alvaro Siqueiros, was a social realist painter; Anthony Quinn, was an actor who worked in numerous critically acclaimed films, both in Hollywood and abroad; Juan Gabriel El Divo de Juárez was known for his flamboyant style, which broke barriers within the Latin music industry; and, Alma Andrea Meza Carmona, who was crowned Miss Universe 2020 during the COVID pandemic.



In Chihuahua, we have amazing and delicious food dishes. The most traditional is carne asada (meat barbecue) with all the complements, like corn or flour tortilla, guacamole, corn, onion, chiles, etc. Other favorites are discada, pozole, tamales, can-



dies and beverages like tesguino (prehispanic corn beverages) and sotol (liquor). Also, This is where the burrito was born, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, during the Mexican American War in 1910!

In Chihuahua we have the only passenger train in all the country. Called Chihuahua-Pacifico (CH-P), it's the most spectacular and amazing train trip in the world! Every single day since 1961, it runs for about 12 hours from Chihuahua City to Los Mochis Sinaloa. The most impressive and interesting stops are the Copper Canyon and the Creel station, which are known worldwide.

¡¡Chihuahua EL ESTADO GRANDE!!

The Sky Is The Limit

Anonymous

Do you know how this continent was discovered?

I'm proud to say that Amerigo Vespucci was a great sailor from whose name the term "America" derived.

This is a short story about sailing, my personal experiences and limits which are on your mind.

"To travel on water by the action of wind." This is just the basic definition of sailing. Not enough to explain it. Let's try to change the point of view.

First of all, when you are facing the sea it becomes facing your own deepness. When sailing, you learn how to live together peacefully, share limited spaces, feel connected to nature and discover your limits.

Sailing is a particularly great experience to build your self-confidence and teaches us how to respect the differences between us. Because on board, you will not be alone. You will need crew members to share your feelings, the purpose of your trip and sometimes in unexpected circumstances you need to take responsibility for and become a leader.

As usual, we have many reasons to complain about the time that flies quickly. If you are ready to hear this, I will share a mysterious recipe to slow down the time. The solution is taking a place on board as a crew member. When you experience sailing on a boat, you will forget your cell phone which changes face to face communication and lifestyle. You will enjoy your moment.

Sailing is a great opportunity to learn some technical skills. Not only you learn wind directions and changings, navigation, weather forecasting but also surviving in nature too.

The benefits of sailing are endless. Let me tell you my own story, how I took my first step into sailing. I was just a kid, 6-7 years old. My uncle, who is a very talented marine, asked me to join him, when he was fishing in the beautiful Bosphorus, where the continents Europe and Asia are merged in Istanbul. I was always observing him to gain nautical skills. In a short time, I learned how to fish and what to do in difficult circumstances.

After a few years, when I was working as an employee in an ex-company, in 2012. I saw an ad which was about a sailing team which is sponsored by that company. I decided to apply to join as a crew member. Unfortunately, it wasn't easy. I took courses for six months. Many of the participants were eliminated after those courses. Finally, that big day came. I was accepted to the team.

I never think about the limits which prevent us to be successful. If you have so much passion, you can always handle it. At least you deserve it. I joined more than two hundred sailing races. Some of them were off-shore which were so tough and in difficult conditions. Not only I performed my best but I also had desperate moments.

As an example, I would like to share the most painful moment of my life, when sailing. One day, when I was in a sailing race, my phone was ringing persistently. It was my father on the phone. His voice was so sad. He told me to fly immediately to Bodrum which is a beautiful town on the west coast side of Turkey, on the first plane. After a few minutes, he told me that my mother passed away. My family without me were in a boat trip for a holiday. My mother had a heart attack when she was swimming. The main point is the sea that I belong to, took my mother from me. I always questioned mum's destiny but I never gave up. I respected nature's choice.

Sometimes we would like to leave everything behind. We would like to think about the way of life. When these kind of feelings come to you, please remember my story and tell yourself "I will get rid of all the limits on my mind and find the perfect cure in the ocean."

Untitled

by Frozan Haqtost

I am from my great family

I am from my mother's stories

I am from my hard-working father

I am from my sister's songs

I am from spending time with my friends and going to restaurants

I am from Afghani food: bulani, manto, and kebab

I am from studying hard

I am from my parents and husband

A Paradise in the Middle of the World

by Maria Altamiramo

Did you know that Ecuador has this name because it is geographically located on the equatorial line of the Earth? Without a doubt, Ecuador is a country that leaves a mark on the heart, and that is why today I want to share with you the reasons why I feel proud to be Ecuadorian. It is a wonderful country, full of culture, biodiversity, and friendly people.

Despite its small territory, it has four beautiful regions like the Coast, Andina, the Amazon region, and the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador has this advantage: in a single day and a few hours of driving ahead, you can see wonderful landscapes and go from a hot climate with beautiful beaches to forests, mountains, and active volcanoes. Yasuni Park is located in the Amazon region. It is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet,

home to species that are completely unique to the land. The Galapagos Islands are one of the most fascinating places on earth, with rare and unique wildlife.

To conclude, I want to tell you a curious fact about my beautiful country. We have the Middle of the World City, where there is a monument to its name, and it is one of the most visited places by tourists. It is one of the few places where you can step on both the northern and southern hemispheres at the same time. Ecuador, you'll likely be amazed at its natural biodiversity. Similarly, the country has diversity among its people and cultures. Here are two examples of our most important Ecuadorian traditions. I am proud to be Ecuadorian and to be able to share a bit of my beautiful country with the world.



Inti Raymi is a Kichwa word that translates into "Sun Festival", in Spanish. It's celebrated in the Andes to honor the Incan Sun God. Is a festival that is directly related to the end of the harvest season.



On New Year, called "el Año Viejo," families make New Year bonfires and "burn" the past year, el Año Viejo, which translates to the old year. This literally takes the



form of a scarecrow-like figure stuffed with hay and dressed to look like a man (or whatever character you want to portray). The Año Viejo represents the things we each will leave behind with the

past year. Around midnight, the Año Viejo is tossed into the bonfire.

During "El año viejo" we have another fascinating tradition which involves men dressing up as widows, blocking streets and asking for money of each passer-by. This is done because the belief is that it is the widow of the Old Year who is about to be burned.



Untitled

by Kayn Quincho

The dancing leaves in the air are familiar to the travelers
The travelers are familiar to the soil on the earth
Being aware of each and every step they take
They can feel the life breathing beneath their feet
Life being an acquaintance to the ones who took their last gasp of air
The ones who are familiar to the leaves laying on the ground

The fire is familiar to warm nights and filled stomachs
And the stars familiar to the storyteller
Who only tells stories at the dead of night.
The dawn is familiar to the sleepless one
Who's woken up by nightmares about the time
Where fire was familiar to despair;
Despair who burnt a palace and left only behind
Guilt that became familiar to the day-to-day living
Of the one who became acquaintances with the sun

The sound of the flute is familiar to a childhood
And a place where autumn is endless
To the time when astral beings align
Where the sun stays awake at night,
And the moon learns what is like to burn alive

The travelers are familiar to me
As lost memories from an inexistent past
Slipping away from my fingers
That are strangers to someone else's touch

My only want in life is to be famous
To used pens and filled sketchbooks
And to be remembered by none

Teenagers in a Foreign Country

by Mizuki Yokoi

One day, my mother said to me, "Are you interested in studying abroad?"

At the time, my best friend had moved far away, my grades were poor, and I was not enjoying school.

I didn't know what I wanted to do and my mental health was unstable. My mother suggested that I go to Fiji.

I was anxious about leaving my friends, family, and my love of dancing, and also spending time alone in a country where I did not understand the language.

I was nervous, but more than that, I was excited to be in a new place, so I made the decision to go.

So, I spent my entire high school years in Fiji as an international student.

Fiji is an island country in Melanesia, part of Oceania in the South Pacific Ocean.

Those who live in Fiji speak Fijian and Indian or British English. I lived with an Indian host family and went to a local junior high school. There were only 20 Japanese students in school.

As Fiji is a developing country, water and power outages were common, and I sometimes took cold showers and sometimes slept in total darkness. Japanese people are easily seen as having money, I have encountered theft many times, and once, I was even hit. Having grown up in a very privileged environment in Japan, Fiji was a completely different world for me. Some of you may have thought there was no way I could ever live in such a place, but I didn't really want to go back to Japan.

Why do you think that is?

Because I was very impressed by the people and nature there. Did you know that Fiji is a country that has many times ranked first in the World Happiness Survey? People living in Fiji are always smiling, positive and sociable. The night sky is full of stars, and the climate is very warm and comfortable all year round. Growing up in Japan's digital society, where I had to constantly be aware of my surroundings, Fiji freed my mind and set me free. I also created a dance club at my school, performed at festivals, and taught dance to students.

Going to Fiji was the biggest turning point in my life.

Fiji gave me a sense of independence, broadened my way of thinking and gave me confidence in myself.

Thank you

Mizuki

Refugee for Refugee

by Ali Ansari



My name is Ali Ansari. I was born in Afghanistan. I lived there until 2007, when our lives became very difficult and we had to move to Iran. My life was not easy as an Afghan living in Iran, so I had to move to Turkey two years later. Can you imagine being fifteen and coming as a refugee to a country where you don't know their language, culture, or where to live? Because of all the challenges and difficulties in my journey, this has become my mission to work with refugees in Richmond, Virginia and also overseas. I have been working with some non-profit organizations and churches in Greece and Albania to help people begin life in a new country. I translate for them, help with the driving test and encourage them to integrate into their new homeland.



I'm doing this work because I hope my experiences inspire them. Living in a new country is not easy, but it can also give you opportunities to find peace and rest. I am happy to live in Richmond, Virginia today and also want to thank those who are helping me understand the culture of this city and country, like Karen, my English teacher.



Sincerely, Ali Ansari

Thank You, Whatever Comes

by *Conrado Tostado*

When I was sixteen and I started meeting my poet friends every Friday afternoon at the newly opened Gandhi bookshop's café, in south Mexico City, I read the Six English Language Poets anthology by Isabel Freire.

Isabel selected and translated poems by Pound, Eliot, Cummings, Stevens, Williams and Auden.

The reading of that little book became, for me, a ritual in parks and gardens.

I unintentionally memorized "Erat Hora", a short poem by Pound. It starts with a quotation of a casual farewell phrase: "Thank you, whatever comes."

Though meaningful for Pound, the anecdote that follows may be indifferent: it's just one of those unique, magic gestures (smiles, words, glances) that people continuously exchange with each other, every time, everywhere. That is human nature.

However, when the poet says "No", this does not mean indifferent:

"Nay, whatever comes

One hour was sunlit and the most high gods

May not make boast of any better thing

Than to have watched that hour as it passed."

Six months ago, I landed in Richmond; it was late August. The first, deep, everlasting impression was the chirp of the cicadas...

... The glory of the summer trees; the humidity and warm weather; the gray jays, the crows, the ducks and geese, the (probably) eagles (or hawks or falcons) ...

A hare, two rabbits, a deer!

The rapid clouds.

And of course, all those little, enchanting houses, that seemed for us straight out of a fairy tale, with their delightful porches.

These generous, welcoming spaces, in between the private and the public life, made for conversation and contemplation, seemed to Jeannine and me a perfect image of what we were experiencing: the quintessence of this culture, new for us.

And then, the honest smiles (with a zest of shyness); the warm, greeting glances in the streets and small, cozy coffee bars; the casual chats...

I mean, the kindness of the neighbors, symbolized in their unofficial altar dedicated to *Mr. Rogers, the Neighborly*, anonymously made in an abandoned pay phone cabin, at the corner of a random street.

And the English course...! The dazzling heart of Karen; the discovery of Ali; the easy, unexpected, affectionate friendship with all my classmates (Karen calls it a family... and it is!).

The limitless gift of this new, luminous language...

The first words of the Pound poem used to arise again and again to my mind: "Thank you, whatever comes".

How to reciprocate all we are receiving? And to whom?

And finally, the Nickel Bridge... The James River...!

All of our Richmond's experiences seemed to flow into the James. Moreover, all of Richmond's times: past, present, future. All of America. All of our lives...

All times...



Which is to say, no-time... Only an instant.

However, there is no instant.

Just a flow that clearly manifests, there, as the turbulent waters of the James.

Yes:

"the most high gods

May not make boast of any better thing

Than to have watched that hour as it passed."

Untitled

by Bagher Alizadeh

I am thankful for my teacher

She helps me learn

I am thankful for work

We all need to buy things

I am thankful for family

I don't like to feel sad

I am thankful for sleep

It is important

I am thankful for good Afghan food

Because we always eat at home

I am thankful for the United States

My children learn here and get good medical care

I am thankful for my school because I learn so much

This Will Never Be A Final Goodbye

by Rodrigo Lemus Matus

Every time we say goodbye we inevitably feel an emptiness; an emptiness that we fill with a sort of illusion, an illusion to see each other again, to hug, to be together, we generate hope to share time again and enjoy it with those people who make us feel happy.

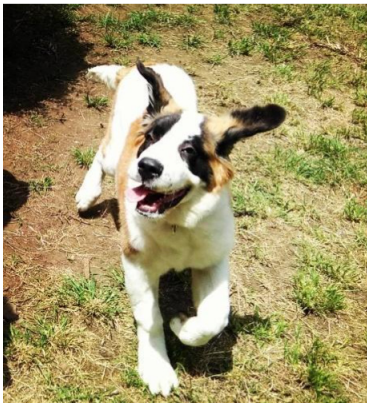
When we say goodbye to someone or someone says goodbye to us, that illusion becomes a reality because both parties understand perfectly well that what is happening is not a goodbye; that this farewell is just a "so long!", and then the hope becomes an appointment to which we have not yet set a date or time.

Just two months ago I arrived in Richmond VA from Mexico City, but before leaving I went through one of the hardest goodbyes of my life. There are many things that make this farewell different; for example, we don't speak the same language, she doesn't even speak, to be more accurate, she doesn't understand or speak sign language, she can't even write. Our communication is very limited, yet we have shared 7 years of adventures together, we have gone to the beach, we have gone for a walk every morning, we have been happy, and we have also been sad together during all this time.

When the date of my trip was approaching, I tried to look her in the eyes every day, trying to explain to her why I was leaving. I tried to transmit to her that hope and that complicity that we humans have when we say goodbye; however, she was only happy to be there with me at that moment, without caring about anything else.

Finally, the day came and I had to say goodbye to her – maybe forever. I say forever because she, my best friend, is a 110-pound 7-year-old St. Bernard, who, because of her breed and size has a life expectancy of 10 years maximum.

So, how do you explain to her that you don't know when you will be back? How do you call her to tell her that everything is going to be ok and that you are still taking care of her? How do you explain to her that you will never forget her and that you miss her? How do you explain to her that you never abandoned her and that you never will? But most of all, how do you thank her for coming into your life to make it more beautiful?



SPOTLIGHT

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