

THE MOODY NEW YORKER



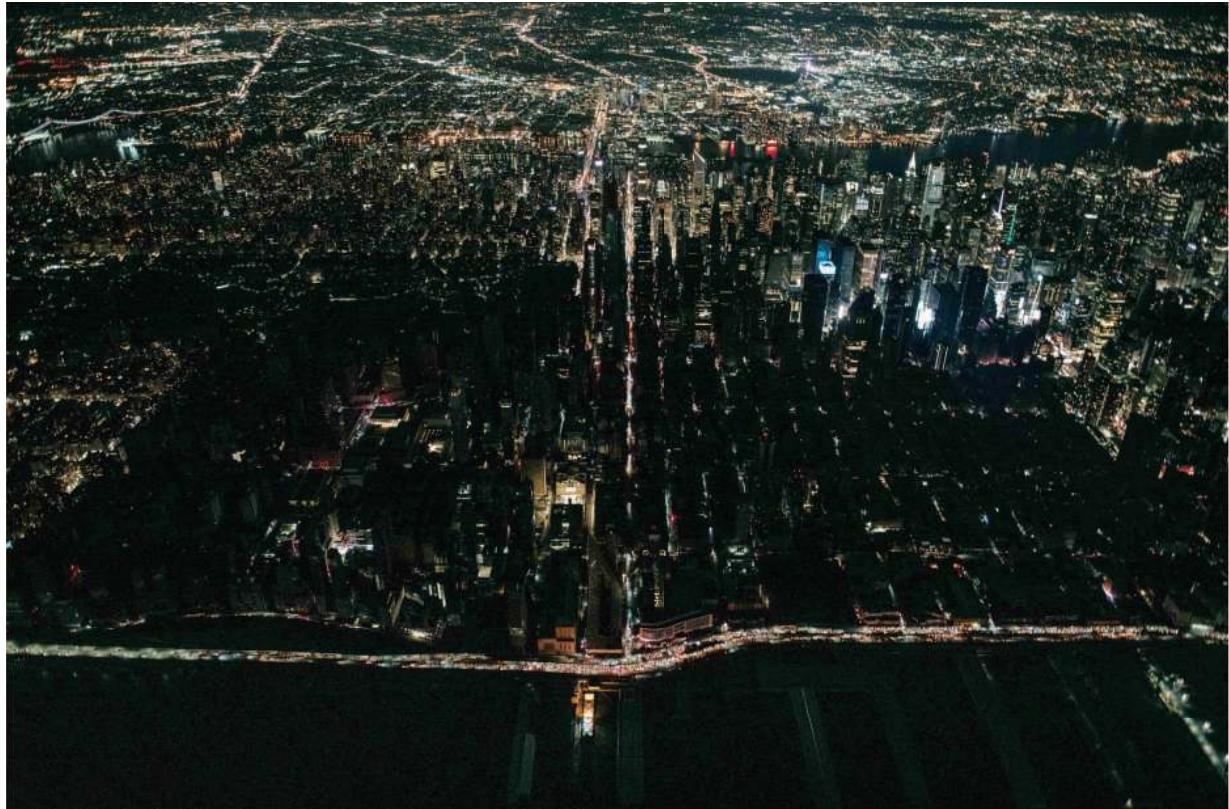
THE MOODY NEW YORKER

STORIES AND ESSAYS FROM
PEN WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS
SUMMER WORKSHOP 2019

Annemarie Alms
Aliya Bermudez
Esther Dai
Zoe Priscilla Davis
Frida Espinosa
Marie Lucie Gauthe
Tess Martinez
Alexandria Brooks
Kelsey Zhen



Photo by Aliya Bermudez



Blackout in New York City 2019
Photo courtesy of Scott Heins/Getty Images

Blackout: A Short Story

by Zoe Priscilla Davis

Inspired by true events

The evening in Canarsie was a time of congregation. Men who wore their bald spots like crowns and their beer bellies like robes held barbecues, their backyards becoming their kingdom. Young children waited for their mothers to come home so they could escape the confines of their cracked Brooklyn homes and run to the park down the street, the modern attraction now their sanctuary. Despite the beauty of the small neighborhood in Brooklyn, I wanted to escape. As a matter of fact, I always wanted to be outside of my father's house and around the city's changes. Most of my life has been spent inside these four walls. They never change, and they've seen too much. I would much rather be surrounded by the lights and the harsh sounds of Times Square than inside of my tight, hot, weed-smelling bedroom.

The smell didn't come from me, but from the boys numbing themselves just outside of my backyard, making the smell travel from their spliffs to my bedroom window.

The city is what I found myself dreaming about as I sat in front of my fan on an absurdly hot Sunday in July. There isn't much you can do in that heat except dream of colder times, or in my case the button that powers the AC. My father's fear of his electrical bill had the rest of the family suffering as they sat in their rooms, drenched in sweat. I stared at the fan and saw it go. And saw it slow down. And saw it slow down some more. And saw it stop. Then my lights went out. And the cable box.

"Margo!" I screamed my sister's name out loud, and thanks to the thin walls in our house she was able to hear me.

"I know." She replied in the motherly tone she developed from taking care of me all these years. When our parents weren't home, she was next in line. These same thin walls allowed me to hear my brother Isaac's footsteps as he trotted to his door. He came out speaking.

"Is it the whole block?" he said, frustration evident in his voice. I watched as my sister fiddled with the power source in our parents' hallway.

"I...don't know," she replied, her voice distant, her focus on nothing but the power source. Isaac spoke up.

"Don't just mess with the buttons, you can hurt yourself."

"It's fine, Dad taught me how to do it."

"Margo-"

"Cool it, Isaac okay? You don't know what you're doing either." Her tone was harsh. I turned my head in Isaac's direction. He stood without a word leaving his lips, and his soft brown eyes fixed on Margo's hands as she pushed every button. Sometimes I worry about him. He doesn't talk much, sometimes he says nothing at all. His eyes always seem to speak for him, filled with colors. Dreams he wants to accomplish, words he wanted to say but never did. I believe it is situations like these in which my brother gains confidence. After a few seconds, he got up and walked down to his room.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be working." Margo broke the silence, with her voice just above a whisper. She closed the box and turned around. A smile decorated her face. "I guess the only thing to do is sit outside."

"Not really. There are many other things we can do." She rolled her eyes at my comment and went upstairs.

Once we got on the porch, I realized how long it had been since I sat there. The whole block was outside. The men who threw barbecues now held flashlights instead of spatulas. The children

didn't want to go to the park. The darkness became their cover as they raced down Canarsie's wide streets on their bikes. There were not many women outside, only teenage girls and their boyfriends, the darkness hiding them as well. My sister and I were the only ones in our family who decided to come outside.

I took a good look at her. She sat with her legs stretched out onto the steps below her. Her long black hair fell down to her back. She had a brown complexion that appeared golden in the sunlight. Her right arm was pressed against the stair above her while her other arm fell carelessly against the front of her. People always told us we look alike, but both of us would always respectfully disagree. After sharing a comfortable silence, she spoke.

"When do you think Isaac will join us?" Even though we were outside, she kept her voice low.

"I don't think he will. He likes his room a lot."

Our younger brother never fit in with any of the other kids. They would always pick on him for reasons that were unclear to our entire family.

"I should apologize to him. I didn't mean to snap like that."

"Ah. I'm sure he's fine." I waved my hand dismissively. Isaac had thick skin. He would be alright.

Margo snapped her head in my direction, her stance no longer calm.

"But don't you think that's the problem, Aubrey? We never check on him. Even when he was getting bullied, we just let him sit in his room." Her eyes had fire in them.

"Mar. It's not like he said anything to us," I whispered. She shook her head in disbelief.

"That responsibility isn't only on him. We should check on him more."

"Well, go check up on him then." She stayed there for a few moments.

"Why doesn't he come to us?" she whispered. I never answered her question. I think we both knew that Isaac knew we would never understand.

The sun began to set after some time. Margo and I were in the same position as we had been earlier. Everyone began to question whether the power would ever come back as they sat with their bodies cramping. The children were resting and their mothers were now outside. The park and the street became dangerous. For the first time, I didn't want the city. I enjoyed sitting out on my front porch with sweat cascading down my face. I enjoyed the darkness and admired how it brought everyone together. Everyone sat in a comfortable silence, except for the teenagers down the street. There was no noise made near us until--

"Um...hey guys. Margo, Aubrey...." I recognized the voice but couldn't make out the face. "It's Jada." I froze. I haven't seen her in years despite the fact that she lived right down the street.

"Hey Jada." Margo croaked.

"Hi." My voice was barely audible, but she heard me and through the darkness I saw her smile.

"I was getting tired in my house, so I figured I'd check up on some people. You're first on my list." Her voice was much deeper than when I last saw her. I couldn't help but remember the last time we spoke.

Her voice was tender. Sweeter, as she was much younger back then. It was the last day of summer vacation, and the next day we would be in high school.

"I don't think I'll make any friends," I had said to her. She had a small smile playing on her lips, and she held a vanilla ice cream cone. Basic, but it was her favorite. The contents dripped from the cone and onto her shorts, but she didn't seem to care.

"You're nice. People will like you." She spoke loudly, her voice ringing in my ear. I held it

as I responded.

“You like me. That doesn’t mean everyone else will.” She huffed and raised her eyebrows.

“Aubrey. I speak for me and our friends when I say you are one of the coolest people I know. Besides--” She took a pause to lick her ice cream, “...what does it matter? You have us!”

“It matters because I spend five days out of the week at school.” I felt myself getting frustrated. She didn’t answer right away. She just continued to eat her ice cream as if it were her last meal. Neither of us spoke until she was finished.

“Aub. You’ll make friends, okay?” She finally addressed the ice cream on her shorts, groaning at the stains.

“Yeah? And how are you so sure?” I laughed. I found her confidence astounding.

“I just am. If anything, as I said before, you have us! This friendship is too good to throw away.” She took a bite from the bottom of the cone. “We’ll always have each other.”

I nodded in agreement. We were both mistaken. Margo remained silent as Jada continued to speak.

“How are things?”

“Good. How are things with you? How’s your mom?” Margo asked. Jada’s nose twitched.

“She’s sleeping.”

“In this heat?” I finally spoke. “Seems too hot to sleep.”

“Ah well, her drinking has her out like a light most of the time.” She laughed. Margo and I looked at each other. Her mother didn’t drink three years ago.

“Oh...well what about your dad?” Margo asked. I gaped at her inquisitiveness.

“Travelling.”

“Cool, cool. When is he coming back? I haven’t seen him in a while.” Even in the darkness, I could see the sadness in Jada’s eyes.

“I don’t...I don’t think he is,” she whispered. My mouth fell open. I didn’t think these things could happen to girls like Jada. Ones with good grades, straight hair, and porcelain smiles. Margo didn’t say anything. She just jumped up and gave her a hug, and Jada returned it.

“Thank you for that gesture,” she laughed. She backed up a step, and let out a short breath. “Well. I think I should go to Marlon’s house. Haven’t seen him in awhile.”

My eyes drifted to his house; the one on the very end of the block. He sat on his porch by himself. I couldn’t see where he was looking, but he looked empty. Like something that was once there when we were younger died inside of him. I shifted my gaze back to Jada, who was also looking at him.

“I hear he’s been going through it. But you!” She turned around to look at me.

“What about me?” I squeaked.

“You still dream of the city?” She lifted an eyebrow, her mouth now in a straight line.

“Yeah. I’m sure the lights are on over there.”

“Well, you’ve got your family here. Appreciate that family...” Her leg began to shake. “While they’re still here.”

I cursed my inability to speak. How could I? The last time I saw her, her life was completely different. And so were we. She didn’t speak. Neither did Margo. We just sat in a comfortable silence. I couldn’t help but think of Isaac, how lonely he must’ve been all this time. Before any of us could get a word out, there was a sound. Then the street lights turned on. And then the lights in all the houses. The block erupted with loud cries. The children were awake, the men were alert, and then women escaped to their rooms. The teenagers laughed and ran to their houses, as they had been out on the streets. We were no longer protected by the darkness. We could no longer hide.

For the first time since middle school, I looked at Jada. She had grown a few inches taller, but besides that she looked the same. Her eyes were still dark, her hair still brown. She was still beautiful.

She smiled at us, a silent goodbye. I watched as she walked down the street, over to Marlon. He greeted her and from our porch I heard her voice.

“It’s been so long!” she said. He nodded his head and tucked his hands in his pockets. I didn’t see the rest, because five minutes after the power came on I returned to my bedroom. But for the first time in a long time, I didn’t dream of the city. Instead, I thought of Jada. Her sad eyes were etched into my memory.

Just then I heard a knock on my door.

“Come in.” I said quietly. It was Isaac who entered. He was quiet, waiting for me to speak, as he always does. Looking at him now, I felt terrible. I had been trapped in my head for so long. I wasn’t there for him. I wasn’t there for anyone. “Are you okay?” I whispered.

“Mhm,” he mumbled. “I woke up to the lights. Where are Ma and Dad?”

“Still out.” He stayed still. “Are you sure you’re okay?” He looked at me. His eyes spoke levels, but so did his words.

“Yeah. I’ll be okay.”



Photo by EGiamatti

Hello Gorgeous

by Aliya Bermudez

Strolling through Times Square feels like such an ordinary act when you've lived in New York City your whole life. You can't understand why tourists take photos of every building until you look up. You see those bright lights that still mesmerize you just as much as they did when you were a kid. You see all of the billboards with the latest shows and soda commercials. You close your eyes and can almost taste the scent of the savory tacos, empanadas, hot dogs, and Halal food. Your ears absorb the music that surrounds you. It's not necessary for you to open your eyes to know that a drummer and electric guitarist are battling each other on opposite sides of the street, each trying to attract more attention than the other.

The city around you feels so diverse, with a new face at every corner. It seems impossible that you'd ever see the same person twice. Your enjoyment of the culture of the city is interrupted when your eyes are forced open after a strong hand touches your waist and "hello gorgeous" is muttered to you as a 6'1" figure slides by. You look around to see if anyone noticed, but as soon as you look up, you're greeted with cat calls, whistles, and guys nodding and high-fiving each other in approval. You look around yet again for a witness, this time with a face of desperation, only to find that no one else has seen. Correction: everyone on the street has seen, but they all have chosen silence. This is their normal. This is our normal. You turn to look behind you and notice something your eyes had skipped right by. Your eyes take in this man sitting on the ground with a sign that reads "Please help, God bless." He shakes a Coca-Cola cup, some coins rattling inside it, as people walk by. They seem not to notice him as they rush off to their next destination. You successfully find a way to fall into the crowd and flow in their direction before breaking into your own path and going down the stairs to the train station.

"If you see something, say something," is printed in large yellow block letters on the station wall. Does anyone ever actually listen to that? Does anyone ever actually see it? You look around once more and notice the people around you are oblivious to what goes on around them. This is what it's like being in the city that never sleeps. This is what it's like being in the city that never speaks.

Nearly every person you see is looking down at an electronic device. Men and women, all dressed for a casual Friday at work, collectively sigh, grunt, suck their teeth when they hear the MTA announcement over the loudspeaker. The first announcement made was, "All Manhattan-bound A trains are no longer running between Euclid Avenue and Howard Street due to an incident which police are investigating. A person has been struck by a train. Thank you for your patience." In a few short moments you hear the next announcement: "A person has committed suicide at one of the stops ahead so all Manhattan-bound A trains will remain stationary until further notice."

"Ugh you won't believe this," you hear a fellow passenger complain. "Some idiot threw himself in the train tracks so the trains won't run for a while. This is ridiculous and so selfish. Now I'm going to be late to the office." You look in the direction of the voice and you see a slim man who has dark hair slicked back with gel. He's holding a briefcase and his button-up shirt looks a little too tight for him. You wonder how he could think of such a thing. How could he say something so horrible and cruel?

As soon as you hear that you decide to forget all of your responsibilities for a day and go to the place that always feels like home: Coney Island. That is where everyone goes for carefree enjoyment. All around you there's a constant sense of community that refuses to be ignored. It's where the performers of the side show aren't referred to as "freaks" but as artists. It's a place that makes you feel connected to the past, way before handheld technology, back when neighbors knew each other. Coney Island is the place where there's something for everyone. Coney Island is the place where there's an abundance of humanity.



Photo by Aliya Bermudez

Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl

*I'm so hungry
Hunger makes me
A modern girl
Took my money
And bought a donut
The hole's the size of
This entire world*
— Modern Girl, Sleater-Kinney

The eating clinic's bed sheets were a harsh, beaming white—the same shade that could be sewn for a wedding dress or painted on the walls of a schizophrenic's ward.

The morning light played harshly on them, drifting ghostlike across the length of my little room. Below, the wooden planks became hazy with the brightness.

Do they feel uncomfortable too? Their blindness.

My hip bones stabbing the mattress, eventually becoming a searing, numbing kind of pain.

“Moria? Moria! You lazy shit—Wake up!” Emma repeated.

Her voice always managed to sound on edge, even before 9 a.m. Perhaps even more so *now* because it was in contrast to everything else.

The alarm blinked a crimson 8:27, and the books, cozily shoved together on a high-end shelf, looked dull—all of them morphing into a single gray blur.

I groaned.

“Emma, can you please shut up? I'd *love* to get up, because I oh so love the beautiful morning-time, but unfortunately, I'm obliged to sleep—”

She hit me with a pillow. Lightly, but then swung back again, following a more violent aesthetic.

“Your sarcasm isn't needed so early. It could also make some sense—who the fuck are you obliging by sleeping in?”

“Myself.”

“Oh, wake the fuck up Moria! You know the rules. And you know that, above everything, you can't break 'em. I mean, who do you think you are?”

She managed to say *the word* twice in a matter of 10 seconds, so she wasn't in any mood for contradiction. But then again, she's never in the mood.

So, obeying, I stood erect, made my bed, and continued with my morning routine. We love our habits, after all, even if they leave us sweating, grasping—they make us better.

* * *

There are four oddly placed Christmas wreaths in the lobby, each complemented by a Menorah. It's as if they were either playfully hiding or ashamed to show themselves to each other. Four wreaths equate the lacking tree, and supply a sense of holiday spirit into the small, ridicu-

lously crammed room. It's so cluttered with paper, folders, and furniture, that the wreaths can't help being concealed. The Menorahs are placed at random intervals on any available ground, and ultimately justify Emma deeming it the "holiday shithole."
Year round, it's the "shithole."

We're sitting like canned sardines. Sinking into the soft waiting-chairs, our butts and arms slightly grazing one another's, and our suitcases crushing our legs as we rest our hands on them.
Frost and snow build on the window behind us, weaving a fragile canvas, when the silence is broken by Mrs. Reed.

"I've brought you some cocoa! You must be freezing. There's some cookies too, if you like. Please try to eat something. I made them, of course, they're gingerbread. I guess I'll put this tray ... well, it's quite stable on your suitcases, if you don't mind. Yes! Well, I must see to Lucille now. She's ... *emotional*. Happy holidays, loves!"

There are a number of nurses who basically live in the clinic, of which Mrs. Reed is the ideal. Her compassionate brown eyes are always fleeting, never settling on one thing. They're always looking for any other opportunity for charity.

She's one of those people who can carry out an entire conversation by themselves, likely stuck in her own simple world of helping others, but not ignorant of harsh reality, and so being content with herself.

She was a young widow, I think, and then somehow found her way here.
She's nice, which is simple enough to imagine about an old woman.

These random thoughts and figures work their way into the cocoa.
It's light, almost purplish brown, and the white puffs of tiny marshmallows emerge to one side.

310 calories.

There are four amber cookies, decorated with vibrant frosting: two bright dots making red eyes, a green grin.

120 calories, just about, if I had two.

These possibilities exist on another plane. Considering them was completely ridiculous, to ever carry them out was impossible.

They drift farther, and farther still, from my grasp. Merging with the horizon—swallowed by it. I can *only* imagine this alternate reality, where I would've breathed in the mug, taken a sip, and then meticulously, carefully, slurped one of the marshmallows.

It would be hot against my tongue, initially like licking charcoal dyed pavement in the middle of August, but which I would quickly swallow, and wait until it's fiery state would settle.

I'd force myself to sip slowly, savoring every sweet drop, and pausing to note its contrast to my empty mouth.

Emma ravingously gulps down her cocoa. She's done by the time I stop staring, and her sky-blue eyes instantly turn to me.

To my untouched cocoa.
To the cookies.

Then they swing back with dilated pupils— somewhere between a lioness on the hunt and a deer caught in headlights— at the same time driven and completely mortified.

She doesn't bother to wipe the milk- beard on her reddened lips, her pale chin, and doesn't need to ask questions. Within two minutes, the tray is cleared, and silence presides.

It's a tragic contrast to the animalistic chewing, which only deepens in an expanse of shame, getting worse when Emma says "Thanks" as a kind of afterthought.

"No problem."

Taking her sleeve, she rubs her face clean, grunting at intervals, and stares off into nothingness. Silence returns as if reality were a calm lake— omnipresent, then suddenly disturbed by a lark (Mrs. Reed), or a wading bear (Emma), but coming to a stillness again, as if nothing had or ever could happen.

Reality seems blotched with these weird outbreaks.

My dad signing me off and bringing me to the car was not one of them. He had a quiet way of agreeing with the silence.

Before leaving, I look back at Emma, managing a cheerful "Merry Christmas!"

"See you next year!" she replies.

Her eyes are drained with the effort, falling to the floor. A dark, reflective seal falls over her; a shadow, of sorts, and I don't look back.

She was waiting to purge, but because the bathrooms were monitored, had to wait to be picked up and brought home. Or to a gas station, more like— after eating, you need to purge within the hour. Otherwise, it doesn't count.

Still, I envy her. I can never manage purging— strong stomach, I guess.

But, still, I've tried, and I'm left there. Kneeling down.

Breathing in the smells of myself, gagging gagging gagging gagging, and *still*, nothing comes out.

* * *

The car's drenched in silence, shielded by its hum.

My dad glances at me when a minuscule smile manages to break across his face. But his eyes quickly turn back to the road, and his smile wills itself to indifference.



Photo by Annemarie Alms

The bastard can't see the life of me.
He could never understand. And
he'll make me big
like him. Repulsive.
Disgusting.
Bulging over his
hot cocoa.



Photo by Marie Lucie Gauthé

Is it worth it?

by Marie Lucie Gauthé

I am dreaming that I'm back at my grandparents' house in Togo. In the dream, it's morning, the screaming chicken my alarm clock. The birds are tweeting. The waves are humming a very relaxing song. I'm back in the time when every day was like going to the beach. Just sitting there in front of my grandparents' house on a mat, with the wind blowing and the sands dancing around my feet, under the coconut tree my grandparents planted. The blue sky the same shade of blue as the sea. The sun, like a turned banana, seems to smile.

This dream reminds me of how peaceful my life in Togo sometimes seemed.

My grandparents' house is next to a lake and the ocean, which are separated by a strip of land. Every year it seems as if the ocean is swallowing that piece of land bit by bit. The fishermen of the town, called Aného, say that one day the ocean will swallow both the land and the lake. That thought scares me, because it also means that one day it will swallow my grandparents' house. Though it's obvious, my family hardly mentioned it. It was too awful a possibility to talk about.

My mother saw other dangers, too. Despite all the money she spent on my education, she worried that it wouldn't be enough to help me in the future. For work, she wasn't making as much money as she'd like to because "business is slow," she said.

My mother, like so many people in Africa, thought a magical land called America could solve all these problems, just like they say on TV. She left with my stepdad and stepsister, whom I had only seen in pictures without ever being able to keep their images in my head. I don't remember much about my mother when she was in Aného. She was always at work. So I was raised by my grandparents. I don't know who my father is. I only know his last name. He is just like a puzzle piece in my life that I haven't found yet.

Now, in America, my mom is my alarm in the morning. I wake up from my dream of Togo to my mom screaming "LUCIE". I lied. She wasn't screaming: I'm just not a deep sleeper. As I get up, it feels as if someone just stabbed me in the neck. With my head pounding, I struggle to keep my eyes open. The sun is piercing through the curtains and like always the fan is roaring. I live in Brownsville, in the biggest building on my block, the only building on my block. It's the same routine every morning: I brush my teeth, eat, go on my phone, then in the afternoon go to the park. When I step out of my apartment, the heat smacks me in the face as I walk to the elevator. Ding! I go in and press lobby. Ding! I go out and head for the doors. When I go outside, there's barely anyone outside since it's suffocatingly hot. Like always, it smells like weed. Old men sitting in front of their homes, with red eyes, talking to one another while listening to music.

As I cross the street onto the next block, I see an all-white car with blue writing on it spelling NYPD. It's parked in front of one of the shops, with two police officers in it. I remember how I saw on the news yesterday that a black male suspected of breaking into a car was tackled to the ground and shot by police not just once, but twice.

Here's something that didn't exist in Togo. Because of my skin color, I think to myself, these

police can come out of this shop, point their guns, and shoot me.

The cops are just one example. Because of my curly hair, I have to work ten times harder just to get the same opportunities as a person with straight hair. Because of where I live, I am not as important as someone that lives in a fancy neighborhood. Because of my features and my background, my life isn't of any meaning to society. And, yes, because I'm black, walking past police officers is a struggle. As if a big weight has been added to it, my heart dropped.

In America, all this is something I had to grow up with.

So is it worthwhile to live in the US despite racism? Of course it's not, but if you want something you have to take risks and abandon so much to get it. I chose to abandon my safety and freedom for my education and also to be with my mother. As for my country, I can always go back and visit. Because if I didn't come to the US, I would not have been able to make a living in Togo and support my family, given the little education I was receiving. I wouldn't have as many opportunities as I have here.



Photo by Marie Lucie Gauthier

Hurt People Hurt People

by Alexandria Brooks

Where clarity begins

After what happened to my mom, she wanted nothing but the opposite for her children. On top of this she wanted us to be in the know, now. Some thought it was too much too early. But a young mind is to be shaped. "Know why someone wants to be your friend." Her wise words and positive encouragement geared me and my sister in the right direction. A lot of hurdles were avoided just because somewhere in my subconscious my mother's words stood firm. Her parents abused her, the whole nine; and she was shaped by that too. She told us a lot. About how either way the wind sways, she'd get a beating; so she would go and have fun instead of listen. Even, that she was the example not to follow. Subtly revealing her troubles. She's an example of resilience. She's still a brilliant soul with a scarred heart. Feeling broken yet she never let herself fall apart.

The Bronx: Beginning Banding, Demanding

We were months into it. The state of your parents' relationship has a direct effect on the child, as much as they may try to hide it. As much as they want to deny it. Relations are interlaced; spending more time with a new person means bringing in their habits. My parents still love each other; but they point the finger in their hearts. Yet to surrender to the truth of humans not being photoshop perfect. This new guy, the now-known narcissist (otherwise known as narc) my mom was seeing seemed fine at first. As he was reflecting her brilliant image. Pulling the wool over her eyes for the show. Wrapped up in violent love, she was playing her part. I was busy in school so it wasn't often that I was around to hear or know.

My older sister got the thick of it, storing more than she would dare revealing. "I don't even know why she's upstairs with yo ugly ass anyways!" She echoed through the hallway her disdain for the situation. Missing chunks of senior year and had an anxiety attack about our mom dealing with this narcissist. Nothing *seems* to matter to the entangled. Though the abused hear you initially, their abuser has nothing but a winding, dangerously hypnotic story. Gaslighting, fighting, arguments and lies that were to disguise. Kept my mom there, and kept her trying to salvage the unsalvageable; a narcissist cannot hear your truth as long as they are living a lie. He was deep in his mind.

The narcissist would greet every woman outside with a smile, a helping hand and still trying to be their man. With any perceived danger to my mom being his alone, he'd flash aggression like a casual smile. He intruded with his act of sweetness but after he won her love. Every day he'd bust in, screaming his rhyme and reason and not realities. Fearing abandonment deep down, everything, even separation, is a threat.

After my mom would spend days up there, upon her leaving he would pin cheating on her forehead. That's their toxic way of coping with their own trauma and fear. With the loving soul my mom has, she ended up seeing the reasons for the narcissist's ways. His momma and baby mommas treat him like how he treats my mom. Hurt people hurt people and without healing the cycle never ends.

The toll of a narcissist is visible after a few months. She wouldn't enter our home the same. A clean apartment with a dirty cup in the sink, her fuse had never ever been so short or volatile. She boiled like a teapot and you could hear her shout. When she was mad, it was his pain extended by just dealing with him. He antagonized her but didn't want her to leave. As it

rattled my brain, I could only think what to do? How could this be solved, if ever? It took the spark of life out of me, I felt hopeless. But I couldn't give up.

My grandparents never listened to my mom, so my mom does the opposite. She'd believe us before a teacher. With my grandparents being religious my mom saw the corruption that lies under the Sunday Sermons. So she didn't force us into church and Yogi Bear was an exciting choice. With me doing lots of self-help/spiritual research, I'd shamelessly send related videos to my family members. I first started my research when my mom and I were 'bumping heads.' I realized that this is not really her. He was hurting her and creating a reflection of his monstrous behavior. I began to send videos about narcissists to my mom. After that she did her own research on it. It felt like forever and I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. After everything a fight on Christmas, police calls, busted doors, stalking, splitting and a jail visit. She was ready to go.

The videos helped to put the conversation on the table. And soon she'd tell me about what's happening. My sister was crushed and done with it, her hospital visit meant nothing and my mom's promise to stop seeing him was empty at the time. I had a sort of epiphany during this time. Abusive childhoods correlate with abusive romantic relationships in the future, because that's what their child self received as "love." So the ball can't be dropped or it'll keep rolling that way. During the episodes where the violent 'love' was brought to our door, I've gotten loud and emotional. And it wasn't helping. So I learned to be softer with my words to slowly help unwind out of the nonstop drama. My mother let down the boundaries she had, avoiding men of this nature for 20 years.

Surrender to Render

As the crazy play continued, my mom was ready to get to the beginning of the end. Narcissists go insane when their victim becomes aware and ready to go. Only through knowledge can one resist their addictive confrontations. A narc can't accept the truth and so they live a lie. They don't seek counsel, they brew in their stew of trauma. If no one else knows or cares passionately the victim would live life as their toy. Pushing buttons and getting the reaction they want, toying with them until the end of time.

Where would we be if my mom couldn't face the truth herself? How many people do you know are suffering a fate that they *can* change? We are not as powerless as the narcissists of our lives would like to *trick* us into believing. Narcissists are wounded and weak, which they throw anger over their own eyes to send lies to the outside.

They feed on the resilient, empathetic hearts of mothers everywhere. Narcissists only thrive when they can corner their victim mentally. Spinning the victim's mind into a web of lies to be used by the Narc. My mom is human, and was real and vulnerable with us. Sometimes the only counsel you need is your children. Kids get the short end of the stick in every situation like this. Often the short end of the stick is nothing but the truth of the relationship's trickling effect. My mom is so strong through her trauma as she accepts reality; and that is the beginning to healing and a better lifestyle.



Photo by Alexandria Brooks



Illustration by Tess Martinez

ROLLER COASTER

by Tess Martinez

Anxiety is like a rollercoaster. It starts slow and steady, so easy to manage because I've pushed it to the back of my brain. I occupy myself so that I don't think, but once my interest in hobbies begins to dwindle, the ride starts up, and I begin to worry. Thinking is never good. I get strapped into the rollercoaster before I've had a chance to protest, and I begin climbing that steep hill. Things begin to get worse -- I start to fidget and space out, I talk too much (and when I do, I stammer). I begin imagining whatever I'm dreading over and over, trying to calm myself down, but it always has the opposite effect. I'm not even at the top of the ride yet. The ascension takes forever, but when I'm at the top, things reach a climax. I'll be irrationally cold, or hot, and any sensation is too much. My clothes are too tight, the people around me are too close. I'll get angry, or sad, or both, for no reason, but once I go through every emotion known to man, I begin to descend. It's worse than oversensitivity, because it becomes desensitivity. The end is, quite literally, a crash. I don't care what happens to me or anybody else. I don't care about anything. I've reached a breaking point. The worst part is, if I actually make it to the bottom, it lasts for days, sometimes even weeks. I won't reach out to friends or family. It becomes harder to get out of bed. I cared so much that I can't care at all. This rollercoaster has ruined my life and torn up all of my commitments.

All except one.

Pride only comes once a year, and every year I go. New York City is packed, as it usually is, but love is raining from the air in the form of confetti. It's oversensitivity in the best way, so many people and so much love that it's overwhelming. The colors are blindingly bright, and every corner is spilling with sunlight. Even when people scream in my ear, I laugh and elevate my voice to scream with them. Together, we remember people we love, the ones we haven't met and never will. They made it possible for me to stand here with my flag. I give my thanks by stepping off the rollercoaster and rejoicing. At any other time in the year, meeting eyes with someone in the city is awkward and annoying. It makes me touch my face self-consciously. It makes me adjust my hair and check my reflection. During pride, though, when someone makes eye contact with me, I smile. They'll probably compliment my outfit, hand me a beaded necklace, maybe even pull me into a hug or a dance. Groups of friends giggle and gather together, singing along to music that shakes the ground.

Someone grabs my arm, and I turn, already smiling. My smile grows when my eyes land on the people behind me. "Hey! You guys made it!"

"Of course! I haven't seen you in a while though," one of my friends says, people jostling around us. I try not to let my smile waver.

"Yeah, I know. I just--" I cut myself off, swallowing hard and staring at the ground. I don't know what to say. Even my excuses are tired and worn out.

"I'll try harder to reach out."

This seems to sate satisfy my friends, who just cheer and wave their mini flags, whistling and calling at people who march by. They look so happy, and so put together. Their outfits are carefully picked out and they cling to each other. I remember my hair, which is in twists, but was lazily thrown into a ponytail. I've broken out recently, and I had no time for makeup. To top it all off, I'm here all alone. They've got it all figured out, but as always, I'm still confused. Suddenly, I feel the need to go home. It's overwhelming, enveloping, and it clings to my lungs like a vice and squeezes. I wheeze out a goodbye and push through the crowd. The cheering masses are suddenly too much. They don't notice as I walk by, or they convince themselves they don't see me. Whichever it is, I'm grateful.

I don't get too worked up about having to leave. My therapist says that my "mental health is very important," so I have to "prioritize" it over some things. Pride is also winding down to a close, so I'd probably leave at this time anyway. People are packing themselves onto trains, maneuvering so we fit like puzzle pieces. It's loud, it's crowded, and it's moving fast. But above all: it's hot. The train car I chose doesn't have AC. I'm too far in to try to squeeze my way out, though. So, I stand there and suffer.

The man next to me is sweating buckets, it drips down his forehead and stains his shirt to a darker shade of green. The little girl in front of me has taken off her shoes. The woman to the left of me has sparkly headphones. I watch everyone around me carefully. Most of them all have something from the parade draped on their bodies. One woman is wearing a bright rainbow dress with her hair dyed rainbow, and the sight almost makes me crack a smile.

People begin to trickle out of the train car, and soon, I get a seat. I have to squeeze my legs tight, but it's a corner seat, so I refuse to give it up. My dad's texted me twice, both saying 'Alfonsa, where are you?' I don't have any service, so I just put in my earphones (without playing any music) and watch the people around me. The crowd starts to change as we go further uptown. The people's clothes are more tattered, and old. Women cling to their knockoff designer purses. Boisterous families get on. Kids with missing teeth showcase their smile to their siblings, girls shake their head so that the beads on their braids clink together. It's a world I'm familiar with, but one I'm not allowed to join. I'm stuck in the middle, between the ghetto and the clean streets, as I always have been.

I watch sadly as people from the parade begin to put on their masks. They don't need physical costumes, the fact that they're changing themselves is enough. They peel rainbow stickers off their cheeks, patches of hair missing. The woman in the rainbow dress pulls on a coat. Men take off their beaded necklaces, one by one. They shake their hair to get rid of any leftover glitter. I understand them; unfortunately, I am one of them. I am proud of who I am, but somehow, shame washes over me when people stare at my colors for too long. As if I'm something to be marveled at. It always flares up my anxiety. I'm scared someone will see me and be filled with enough hatred to kill.

So, I pull on my hoodie and zip it up 'till it pinches my neck. I rub at the paint on my face until the skin there is raw, and even with my dark complexion, you can see a hint of red. I stomp the glitter off my worn-out sneakers. I remove every trace of my pride. People around me silently do the same.

Even though New York City is way more progressive than a lot of other places, I face a lot of homophobia. Of course, it just sits me right back down on that roller coaster, one I'd struggled so hard to get off of. The train suddenly is quiet, the thundering of the wheels on the tracks is background noise. A woman chatters loudly on her phone. A man spits on the floor and eyes the rainbow-haired lady with disgust. My phone buzzes in my pocket, but this time it's a text from my sister. 'You better get home, Alfie. Dad's worried and mom's here to pick us up for her weekly visit.' I ignore her, too. For a couple of moments, I allow my family to wonder where I am. I feel a tad guilty, but I let them get on the rollercoaster, if only for a moment. I let my head drift backwards and my eyes fall closed. I still feel the glow of pride. I remember one sticker I hadn't peeled off my cheek, and I decide to let it remain.

If I'm going to be forced to ride this rollercoaster, it's the least I can do to try not to crash.



Photo by Frida Espinosa

THIS IS AMERICA

by Frida Espinosa

I grew up hearing of New York and the wonderful places you would see. How bright the city was and how beautiful it was especially at night. My father Miguel thought it was so great that he moved there and left everything behind. He left in 2011 wanting to follow his dream of becoming a painter. I was seven when he went away. The only trace of him at home became letters he sent with a New York City address written on them. I was devastated, although Miguel said he wished he could have brought me. He would tell me stories of his life there, the opportunities the city offered and the excitement you could find. He once tried this food called a hot dog, with an American bun and nothing spicy like salsa, that cost only 38 pesos — just like street food in Mexico! He said he hoped to bring me to America someday, when he had money and the time was right.

I had always imagined how my life would be in New York before I moved there. For a while, I liked the idea of it but didn't want to leave my home behind: Mexico's homeless street dogs, the street food carts of tortas and the open space. Most important was my grandma Amparo. She would cook *pollo, frijoles* and make the best *conchas* for me. When I was younger she would take me to the parks and tuck me in at night. In 2014, my grandma became sick from leukemia, and it got critical over time, until it was fatal. We would visit the doctor rarely. Some medications were costly and out of our budget. There were years of doctors visits. We helped my grandma until she was on her deathbed. I wailed and wailed.

"Why must you do this lord?" I cried. She slowly passed that day. My mother told me, "We have to let her go *hija*," with deep grief in her eyes. That was a day I will never forget for the rest of my life.

We stayed a month after my grandma died and I remembered the day my mother sat me down and told me that we would have to cross the border for a better life. My hands shook and I was nervously sweating, but after lots of thinking I realized nothing was holding me back, so I did whatever it was I had to for a better life with my parents. The journey was painful, dangerous and hot. We only wore jeans and a t-shirt, carrying jugs of water. There was nothing but the beaming sun and miles of dirt, miles and miles without water. After a couple of nights in the desert we tried booking a local flight in Arizona but were not understood by the people behind the desk. We could only speak Spanish and we didn't have passports. Instead, we took multiple crowded buses to New York.

I often think about how I came to where I am now when I smell cilantro or see my mom, who worked as a cook in Mexico, wear her chef's hat. When I eat *pollo* and *frijoles* I will always think of my grandma and how much she meant to me. The cilantro brings me back to when I would visit my mom at work after school, watching her slice and dice cilantro and onions. That was before she was a maid and when she didn't have to clean toilets for a living. Instead, she did what she loved doing the most. Even if it paid little, being a chef gave her dignity. My father had dreams of becoming an artist, but they have washed off after being in New York for so long. He was turned down by many people, told his art was not good enough. He gave up. In Mexico, we lived in purple cement building with a huge backyard, and my father had dreams. In the Bronx, our home was a cramped, one-bedroom apartment, and I was teased for being different.

I live in a country where my president supports racist policies against immigrants. He has only made me more afraid than I already was. I can't watch the news without bursting into tears and my nightmares about being held captive in I.C.E. for months feel more real. Any time or any day I.C.E can take me and my family away. But I have to go to school and my parents can't stay

home because they have bills to pay. My parents weren't safe and had no lawyers when they were caught. People in plain clothes came to my father's construction site and asked where he was from, what country he was born in. He refused to answer and they handcuffed him and took him away for not answering. They even knocked on people's doors and at the door of the apartment my mom was cleaning that day. Again they hid in plain clothes. She had to open the door, since the wealthy white people who owned the place paid her to do so. The officers asked if she worked there and what her legal status was. My mother and father asked to make calls and for lawyers but were denied and treated like criminals. The raid happened across the city. Everyone in our neighborhood left their homes and started to yell, cry for justice.

I found out that they were taken away from a family friend who told me she didn't know exactly where they were. I couldn't believe that this day had come. I had dreaded it and prayed for it to never happen. But my greatest fear came alive and I was being separated from my only family. I couldn't tell them how much I loved them or even say goodbye without being taken away, too. I may never know where they are or if they were deported. It won't be too long, I sometimes think, until I'll be trapped in one of those cages. The only thing I have is my family friend who lives in a bedroom so small you can almost hit your head on the ceiling, with no wiggle room. Nothing will ever be the same again; I won't see my parents' faces, and they won't watch me succeed in life if I ever do.

On some days I question if this life I'm living was worth everything I've been through. If being traumatized was worth being able to go to college and having a well-paid career in America. I'm going insane to a point of losing my mind figuring this out. But when I'm sane, I believe the pain will be worth my future.



Photo by Esther Dai

Train

by Esther Dai

When the train stopped at 90 Street on Elmhurst Avenue, a man sat directly across from me. He looked to be in his early twenties, still young. Later, I remembered the blue Mets shirt he was wearing, but at the time I didn't pay much attention to him, just giving him a fleeting glance.

I wasn't sure what happened, or how it began, but suddenly I noticed that the man in the Mets shirt was in a fistfight. At first, I thought it was a joke, just two friends roughhousing around a bit, but the blows grew more violent. The people around them got up and moved to the side, shaking their heads, while others recorded the fight. I tried to ignore them at first, but when the two men fell onto the floor, just barely missing my feet, I decided to get up. At that instant, a man wearing a baggy, gray sweater hopped onto the train car and pulled out a gun from his side pocket. It was a handgun, silver and sleek. He pointed it in the direction of the men, the direction I was standing in.

I could see the barrel of the cold gun and suddenly, the world around me shrunk to no more than the nickel-sized opening. I froze. If he had pulled the trigger in that second, I could have lost my leg.

But I just couldn't move. It wasn't until I heard the muffled screams of other passengers through the music that was playing through my headphones that I started to move toward the door. It wasn't until the woman that had been sitting next to me frantically pushed past me that I finally snapped out of my daze. I ran out of the car doors and tripped onto the next car.

Before I got on though, I turned back to look. The three men were grappling and rolling around on the train floor, throwing punches at each other. I saw people still recording on the platform. They seemed to not know that the man carried a gun. But I knew. I turned to the people who were shoving each other aside with the enthusiasm of shoppers on Black Friday, all trying to gain a view of the brawl. I opened my mouth to tell them to step back onto the train, when a gunshot was fired. Then I heard another. And another. Perhaps there were even more, but I couldn't hear anything over everyone's screams. I saw everyone crouching down, so I followed and ducked my head.

I don't know how long it was until I heard police sirens and the train conductor telling everyone to stay in the train, that he'll shut the doors. He never did.

There were so many people screaming, and the lady next to me kept on screaming, "Shut the doors, please! Close the doors! We're going to die." A teenage girl sitting near the door was crying, calling someone who seemed to be her mother. Maybe, I thought, I should do the same. I started to reach for my phone, when police officers came in to evacuate us.

It wasn't long until we were rushed out of the train and told to take the train back to the 82nd Street stop in order to catch the express train instead.

When I walked out of the train, I saw the blood. It was a puddle dripping into smaller puddles, spanning across the platform. I don't think I can ever forget the redness of it, the way people were simply stepping over it, barely giving it a second glance. A man had just died there, I thought, but no one seemed to realize that. I turned away and walked toward the other staircase.

On my way back home on the R train, my hands couldn't stop shaking. I wondered if anyone on the car train knew what had just happened. I wondered about many things, but there was one question that I couldn't stop thinking about. Why was I unable to move? I had read the articles after the Sandy Hook shooting, after the Parkland shooting. Common sense told me to run as soon as I sensed danger. I should have at least moved right out of the way when I saw the gun.

It was a week after that I finally registered what this all meant. I could never ride the train again.

That proved to be difficult, though. Instead of getting home in forty minutes with just one transfer on the train, I spent an hour and a half, not including delays, to transfer on three different buses just to get home. For a high schooler with limited rides on the metrocard and unlimited

amounts of homework, it was torture.

It took me a few months to realize that using the subway again was inevitable. There was no way I could spend the rest of my life fearing something that happened hardly ever. I started riding the train again.

It wasn't easy. I refused to sit down for weeks, choosing to always stand close to the doors. I didn't wear my headphones, scared that I would miss the shouts of fighting men. I know my fear will probably never go away, but at least it's a start.



Photo by Esther Dai

What I Hate About New York City

by Kelsey Zhen

I don't know why every tourist feels the need to visit this city when they're coming to America. Lights are always shining and you'll never know what you'll find. The whitewater rapids of New Yorkers rush through you on the streets and you'll become lost, distressed, and overwhelmed by buzzes of adrenaline. Below the streets are no exception. Endless surges of heat overpower your senses, making cool air a distant reality you remember from your past life above ground. You'll hear music, too, but you won't know if you're hallucinating from the heat or if it's real. Yet, there he is. An electric guitarist with rhythms that have the same indie vibe as the blue bandana soaking up the sweat on his forehead. The man can't even go to the bathroom without having to unplug his entire station and bolt there. Trains are packed with bags in backs and words are heard from far and wide. You can hear Spanish whiz past you, then Korean, French, and maybe even a Scottish accent somewhere. For once, I would like to hear what they're saying on the loudspeaker. On the streets, you can't get anywhere without meeting the smell of cheese pizzas, neon lights saying OPEN from the diner across the street, and the scent of sweet butter trailing in the air towards the doors of the small bakery. The bulbous lights from the theater blink at everyone who crosses their territory. You can't help but stare at their hypnotic rhythm - on, off, on, off - as if the magic of theatre itself isn't enough to mesmerize you. And then there are the taxis. With their golden coats of paint, they pollute the sea of silver, white, and gray with radiant hues... yet, there's something magical about it.

It gives New York a sunlight in the rain. In the subway, the guitarist has the power to turn the rapids of New York into a streaming river even when he's barely getting recognized. In the trains, unique languages turn up in ads and ring in the air. In the streets, you have thousands of places to try without having to get in a car. A world where you can travel by ferry, sky tram, and subways with thousands of overlapping lines on the map. Where one train can take you to a zoo in the Bronx, red brick buildings in Queens, and Coney Island in Brooklyn.

Coney Island's where all the crazy people of New York finally have a place to let themselves loose. It's where a man bought a 150 foot ferris wheel as a ring for his wife years ago. It's where crazy ideas like standing up while eating "hotdogs" and launching carts onto tracks were born into the world. Where now, you'll find a man that watches YouTube videos to blend in his 3D printed inventions with the 99 year-old ferris wheel. A man who takes delight in the smallest details of life and creases his forehead only when money starts to be calculated to the cent. It's rare for someone like DJ (Deno Vourderis Jr.) to be found in today's green paper society. But he is where he is now, because his father was in the same spot years ago (without YouTube), with *his* father before him—buying a ferris wheel to show his love for his wife.

The other day, my friend and I were walking down 5th Avenue and I asked her if she would ever move to Manhattan. She immediately said "No, there's no culture here." I don't know if I had known my whole life or if the city has grown on me, but I couldn't *disagree* more. Here, where the lights are always shining and you'll never know what you'll find.



Photo by Annemarie Alms



Photo by Zoe Priscilla Davis



Photo by Kelsey Zhen

Teaching Staff:

Jill Eisenstadt, Amy Finnerty, Elizabeth Giamatti, Alex Traub, James Traub

And very special thanks to:

Colleen Davis, Production Manager, The New Victory Theater

Elizabeth DeVeau Tan at The Strand Bookstore

Jennifer Egan, President, PEN America

Ivan Lescia, Maître d', Sardi's

Raad Rahman, journalist and human rights activist;

Adam Rinn, sword swallower and Director of The Sideshow

The staff at Rocco Pasticceria

John Sexton, President Emeritus, NYU

Dennis Vourderis, Head of Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park

Rebecca Werner, Director of Membership, PEN America

Liena Zagare, Founder and Editor, The Bklyner

Dick Zigun, Director, Coney Island USA



WE LOVE YOU, ROCCO'S PASTICCERIA!!!





Photo by Esther Dai