

THE EAST HARLEM SCHOOL presents:



BRIGHTER DAYS

**THE 2022
POETRY
SLAM**

Art by Amy M., Grade 7



BRIGHTER DAYS

THE 2022
POETRY
SLAM

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LETTER FROM IVAN

In such ravaged times, who can tend you, wrap you in kindness,
who believe that next year spring grass will grow thick and tall?
杜甫 **Tu Fu**, Starveling Horse Chant, c.755

The challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind—of your self. This means feeling free to know what you know and to feel what you feel without becoming overwhelmed, enraged, ashamed, or collapsed.

Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score*

Who can tend you? Wrap you in kindness? Maybe our warrior poets tonight? Questions for ravaged, darkened times. Lingering clouds of loud and quiet despair, particularly for adolescents, but also for adults, began to build before the pandemic set in. Suicide rates for people ages 10 to 24, stable from 2000 to 2007, rose nearly 60 percent by 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. No more days, bright or dark. Could we have taught them to be more tender toward themselves - or might we have worked toward a society and schools that wrap everyone in kindness?

Meanwhile, in our little corner of Spanish Harlem, we have never waited or hoped for brighter days. Instead, we have always made our own weather at the 309. The ill winds and uncertainties of our modern lives are why we take refuge here on 103rd Street - in stillness and movement practices, plant-based meals, free play and friendships, the liberal arts, and a school building filled with light. Always inclined toward serenity and healing.

And it is also so strongly through the reading, writing, and performance of poetry - that our students learn *to know what you know and to feel what you feel without becoming overwhelmed, enraged, ashamed, or collapsed*. Our students learn to tend *themselves* and wrap *themselves* in kindness. And they turn this self-awareness and self-mastery and self-care into compassion for all other beings - and into this luminous high art they share with you at our Poetry Slam.

From San Juan to Sinaloa, from Hong Kong to Huancayo, our families bear a healing light that lies at the heart of our common humanity. Courtney Knowlton and her team make sure that our warrior poets pass on that flame to you - in this incandescent poetry and performance.

And your support, in dark and in brighter days, makes all this joy and serenity possible.

You, like this poetic present moment, *tend us and wrap us in kindness*.

So grateful! -Ivan



SPECIAL THANKS



TINA FEY

for hosting the New York Poetry Slam for the third time and for years of friendship and support to our school.



Archer Roose

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for their generous donation to the New York Poetry Slam.
We are proud to partner with this woman-founded and led small business.



**Greenwich
Country
Day School**

GREENWICH COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL

for hosting the Greenwich Poetry Slam and for their incredible hospitality as we hold our first Slam north of the city.



COST PER STUDENT

\$15K

Cost per student for the
2021-2022 school year

\$22K

Cost per student for the 2021-
2022 school year, including
mandatory after-school and
mandatory Summer Semester

VS.

\$28K

New York City public
school cost per student for
the 2021-2022 school year

\$640

All East Harlem School families
pay tuition, which is based
on their annual income. The
average annual tuition for the
2021-2022 school year is \$640

ABOUT EHS

The East Harlem School is an **independent** middle school (grades 4-8) for low-income students - it is **not** a charter school.

EHS was founded in 1993 by Ivan Hageman, who remains the Head of School, and his brother. Ivan grew up on 103rd Street and went to Collegiate School and Harvard. He returned home to Spanish Harlem to open what is truly a community school. Leveraging the inherent strengths of El Barrio, we help students open to the larger world.

- 92% of EHS students qualify for free or reduced lunch.
- The School annually raises its budget each year almost completely through the generosity of private donors.
- Our school is open from 8AM-5PM, for eleven months of the year.
- Students receive an elegant liberal arts education with a maximum class size of 18 students.
- Students are not accepted based on test scores, but instead on the strength of their character and the commitment of their family to our educational mission.
- The School explicitly cultivates the body, spirit, and mind of every student.
- All students receive fine arts and drama instruction. EHS provides daily meditation, organic and plant-based meals, comprehensive sports and conditioning, and regular exposure to the beauty and challenges of the natural world.
- EHS students attend top boarding, day, Catholic, and public high schools. 90% of EHS students matriculate to college and 100% our graduates grow to become stronger, kinder, and wiser citizens.



THE EHS TEAM

Faculty & Staff

Donald Albert
Cara Bendich
Jonah Chasin
Taylor Cole
Kellie Diodato
Katherine Duncan
Alexis Fudge
Samantha Gonzalez
Ivan Hageman
Jay Hayes
Julia Holzman
Christine Kell
Courtney Knowlton
Samantha Lauten
Jeena Lee-Walker
Maroua Mesbah
Rosa Perez
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David Rawitz
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Tyler Starks
Olivia Tueros
Anna Warren

Additional Team Members

Evelyn Adorno
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Aleona Nyamgavaa-Sencion
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FLOWERS

The art featured in this year's Poetry Slam was created by our 7th graders in their Visual Art class, taught by Alexis Fudge. Students used black acrylic paint to create contour drawings of flowers using one continuous line. The goal was not to lift their brushes from the paper and not to erase or start over. After making numerous line drawings, students picked one or two and filled them in with watercolors. This observational exercise – drawing what you see, not what you think or know – is a core part of our art curriculum. We appreciate the lesson in learning to see and learning to move forward despite mistakes. We feel these flowers and the work put into them truly embody our theme of Brighter Days.





MEET OUR ALUMNI

Throughout the film you will meet several alumni whose stories of deep meaning, dynamic virtue, and transcendent joy began here at The East Harlem School. We hope that we have helped them discover a life that brings them and their communities joy. Among the alumni featured in the film are:

BLAIR CLARKE

EHS '03, Miss Porter's School '07, Clark University '11,
British School of Fashion '17
Co-founder, More Than Agency • London, United Kingdom

BARRY CLARKE

EHS '04, The Taft School '08, Bowdoin College '12
Senior Director, Authentic Brands Group • Los Angeles, California

DUANE BURRESS, JR

EHS '06, Professional Performing Arts School '10
Comedian and Actor • New York, New York

PASCAL LOUIS

EHS '06, Beacon High School '10, Cornell University '14
Business Development, Enfusion • New York, New York

KELLY RAMOS

EHS '08, The Darrow School '12, West Texas A&M University '16
Program Analyst, NASA Goddard Space
Flight Center • Greenbelt, Maryland

MELISSA PATINO

EHS '12, St. Jean Baptiste High School '16, Mercy College '20
Masters of Social Work Candidate,
Stonybrook University • New York, New York

IBUKUN OGUNWOMOJU

EHS '13, Westover School '17, Franklin & Marshall College '21
8th Grade Science Teacher • Bronx, New York

FERNANDO FLORES

EHS '19, The Loomis Chaffee School '23
Varsity Soccer and Lacrosse Player,
Admissions Tour Guide • Windsor, Connecticut



Clockwise from top left: Pascal and Ivan at his 2006 EHS Graduation; Duane performs at the 2005 Poetry Slam; Ibukun, bottom left, visits DC with classmates in 2013; Melissa receives her EHS diploma in 2012 from Ivan and Ms. Ross; Barry and Blair Clarke attend 2012 EHS Graduation



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POETRY



THE WORLD TO ME

ALYSON, GRADE 7

For nineteen years, Papá lived in Puebla.
On the farms near his home,
They grew apples and avocados,
Corn and cucamelons.

And then he made his way to America,
Where he got a job at a supermarket.
For twenty years, he has stocked the shelves of the
Third Avenue Garden on the Upper East Side.
Twenty years.
He is a very organized person.
He likes everything in place.
Thanks to him, our home is always as tidy
As a grocery store in the morning.

In the stock room,
There is a giant fan that whirs so loudly all day long.
Four years ago, the noise began to damage his hearing.
He had surgery to stop the constant ringing in his ears.

So much of the produce that he puts in place
Wears a sticker that says
Grown in Mexico.
These apples, these avocados,
They crossed the border like he did.
And now they have to fit in,
Get in line,
Just like he does.

My papá means the world to me.
The world. El mundo.
I get my positivity from him.
We both smile with our eyes, with our whole mouths
and teeth.
We both can walk into any boring party,
And make it bright.

When I used to visit him at the supermarket,
I couldn't believe all the friends he had.
He brings order to the shelves,
But joy to the aisles.

When something exciting comes into the store,
He brings it home for our family to taste.
Dragon fruit and passion fruit,
White strawberries and spicy mango lollipops.
Marzipan - and beans that were a dark denim blue.
But I don't care what is in his bag.
I just care that he is home.
That he is healthy,
And that our family can have dinner together.

Alyson is happy to be a part of the Poetry Slam again this year. She remarks that being a part of the Slam feels "like fireworks." She wrote her poem as a birthday gift to her father, who is from Puebla, Mexico. In her free time, Alyson enjoys tap dancing and spending time with her friends and family, including older brother Jason, EHS '14.



STILL, LIFE

AUTUMN, GRADE 8

I want to draw a portrait of my grandmother.
Maria Pagan.
I want to sit her down,
This woman never sits.
She is on her feet constantly, helping others.
I want to stare at her stunning face
And see the depths of her soul.
This woman has lived.

I'll start with the rectangular outline of her face
And then go to her eyes.
Her hazel eyes that fell in love with a trumpet player
when she was just twenty.
Her eyes that see the good in everyone,
Even when she's looking at people
Who have a lot of bad in them.
I'll draw the droopy skin that now hoods
Her once giant eyes.
She isn't wide-eyed anymore - she has seen it all.
And yet, she always finds beauty.

Then for her nose.
Straight and pointy.
More Spanish than Puerto Rican.
It grew up smelling coffee and harina de maiz.
Now she sniffs out danger,
Keeps everyone safe,
And knows exactly when her rice is ready.

Now her mouth,
Shaped like a heart,
That has shared so much with me.
What it was like to grow up on a farm.
Her story of moving to New York,
And leaving her newborn behind in her mother's care
The mouth that has tasted so many guavas,
And tells me I have to try one some day.

On to her ears.
Abuela's ears are
All about the earrings.
She loves pearls.
She loves when her earrings and her necklace match.
She bought me a set.
It's not really my style, but I wear it to make her happy.
Her ears that learned English from Sesame Street,
Her ears that listen to me,

That let me speak,
That don't interrupt or judge,
That listen in a way that tells me everything will be okay.

And her hair.
I spend a lot of time drawing her hair.
Giving it texture and body.
Just as she spent a lot of time fixing it up.
Always a new style, always blonde,
Often with a pearl hairpin.

Last, her skin.
Thickened from time -
And from life.
The sunspots that emerged in her teenage years,
From all the days spent in the island sun as a girl.
I will have to give special attention
To the lines around her mouth,
Across her forehead,
At the corners of her eyes.
These lines come from being an immigrant,
Alone in America.
From the trumpet player being a man who drank too much.
From surviving the cold,
Which is not her in DNA.
Lines from living as a Boricua woman.
It's not easy.
I wonder what will cause my lines.

While I draw her, I know she will talk.
She has so many stories.
So much advice.
I want to capture it all in her portrait.
I will ask her to tell me about dancing,
Because that lights her up.
She feels free when she dances to Spanish music,
In La Marquettea under the train tracks on 112th Street.
I can relate to that feeling,
That way of turning feelings and memories into
Something beautiful.

Autumn was born and raised in East Harlem, but she loves listening to her grandmother's stories about growing up in Morovis, Puerto Rico. A talented artist, Autumn likes writing poetry because she enjoys the challenge of painting pictures with words rather than pen and paper. In her spare time, Autumn is teaching herself how to play the guitar, bass, and ukulele.



MS. MCKINLEY'S CLASS

BLESSENCE, GRADE 5

In my house, there are two couches:
One for me, and one for them.
I sit on one with my coffee mug close by
(Don't worry it's only water.)
They sit on the other: all four of them in a row
(It's the only time they sit still.)

Ms. McKinley's class is in session!
My siblings are my students,
And they help me play pretend teacher.
"What's 5+2?" I ask with purpose.
The littlest one, only two, just wiggles.
The three and four year olds look to their fingers
But play pat-a-cake instead.
The six year old proudly shouts "Seven!"
And I give her a sticker
From the art kit I got for Christmas.

"Time for science, class. Let's look outside!
What do you see?" I ask,
And then I rest my chin on my fist.
They all raise their hands:
"Cars!" "Trees!" "The sun!"
I tell them the sun is actually a star.
They didn't know that before.

I learned that from my science teacher,
And when I'm in front of my class,
I try to be smart like him.

I try to be kind
Like my humanities teacher.
And sometimes funny
Like my math teacher.

I listen to my students
and laugh at their jokes.
I try to make sure they understand
and help them when they don't.

I try to be like all of my teachers
And think of all the things I didn't know
Until they taught me so.

I take a sip of my pretend coffee
And tell the kids it's time for lunch.
They line up one by one,
And it's off to the kitchen
Where we make peanut butter
And jelly sandwiches.
I help them get the bread,
And when their hands get messy
I tell them it's ok
And just to try their best.

When I grow up,
I want to be a teacher,
but maybe I already am.

Blessence's older siblings and several of her cousins attended The East Harlem School before her. She was so excited to join them here that she asked her mother if she could skip a grade so she could get here faster! In her words, "EHS is not like other schools. We're different in the best ways possible." She is inspired by her teachers and most especially by her mom. When she's not playing pretend school with her siblings, Blessence likes to play basketball and other sports.



COFFEE FOR ABUELO

CHARLIE, GRADE 6

On the weekends, I am the first one up.
I wait for my little sister to stir so I can start her breakfast.
I feel peaceful when I cook.
Breakfast is my specialty – for now.
One day, I'll know how to make everything.
Today, my sister orders an omelet. It is my favorite thing to make.
Fry the bacon, crack the eggs, scramble.
Oil the pan, pour the eggs – and watch for fluffy edges.
Add the bacon, one slice of cheese.
Fold it, flip it.
One for my sister, one for me.
In our pajamas, we plan our day.
The cheese flows out, the bacon is crisp, the eggs soft and comforting. I am proud.
My grandparents sleep. They are tired from caring for us all week.
I clean the kitchen, I make them coffee.
When they emerge, Abuelo limping,
Abuela with one eye still shut,
I am full of love, and I pour them café con leche.

My mom left when I was 5
And my sister was 2.
For the last six years, Abuela and Abuelo have done everything for us.
Abuelo taught me to ride a bike – it wasn't easy –
We had to call other family in for backup.
They've taught me to breathe when I am angry.
They help me fall asleep when I am restless.
They wake me for school.
And they feed me.
And I feel the love in the food –
Abuela's food is magic.
All day at school, I wonder what she will make for dinner.
Sopa de ABC when I'm sick,
Flan for a celebration.
I watch her, I try to learn.



Charlie, front, with his grandparents and two younger sisters.

My name is Charlie – my dream is to be a famous chef.
And have a famous restaurant.
I will feed anyone –
No matter who you are or how much you can pay.
I imagine my restaurant being so successful that
I will be able to care for my family.
I want to make a signature dish inspired by each of the 50 states.
And when the waiters bring it to your table, they will sing you that song –
Alaska, Alabama, Arizona....
A celebration of this country – and all that is possible here.
I imagine people coming from all over to eat my food.
I will tell them about how I got my start –
Weekend mornings in East Harlem,
Omelets for my sister, waffles sometimes, coffee for Abuelo
and Abuela.

Charlie's family is from Puebla, Mexico. At EHS, Charlie enjoys coding class and sports, but at home, he is always in the kitchen. He plans to be a famous chef one day. Charlie says that cooking makes him feel fulfilled and that he likes using his skills in the kitchen to show people how much he cares.



BABY NURSE'S BABY

CHRIS, GRADE 8

My mom knows how to take care of babies.

How to swaddle them tightly in a
cozy cocoon to help them fall asleep slowly,
How to warm the milk to just the right temperature—
Not too hot, not too cold—
To pour it into the bottle, not missing a drop.
How to change them,
Letting them squirm and wiggle around a little
Before she gently
Lifts their arms and legs
To bundle them up.
Give them a bath,
To keep them fresh and clean,
Change their diaper,
And burp them after they eat.

And so she has taught many mothers
How to care for their own babies.
And she cared for me, too, of course.

But now that I'm older
I try to care for her.
I try to meet her needs.
I know how to give her some peace and quiet
How to keep the house tidy:
To make the bed,
To sweep the floor
To clean up after the dog
To care for myself as much as I can,
Because she is the baby nurse – and I'm a teenager.

When you're the baby nurse's baby,
You sometimes want to cling to that role.
I let her make the bed for longer than
I probably should have.
I might have even accepted a



Chris and his mom, Roberta, in 2015

Lullaby into my teenage years.
But being home in the pandemic,
While she went to work,
—babies didn't stop being born and
moms didn't stop needing her support—
I learned to care for our home.
A weird silver lining,
But a good one for our family.
I still let my mom mother me,
But I'm trying not to let her baby me anymore.
And just to let the love come full circle.

Chris is the youngest in a family of East Harlem School alumni. He wrote his poem about his mother, who hails from Puebla, Mexico and works as a baby nurse in New York City. Chris hopes that his poem honors all mothers in the world because in his words, "it must be a hard job to love someone that much." His favorite class is science, and on the weekends, Chris likes to play soccer with his friends.



WITH ALL THIS UNCERTAINTY DEAN, GRADE 8

In 2020, when the world seemed to be holding its breath,
I, too, was holding mine.

Life went on, the good, and the bad -
Grass still grew,
Teenagers got taller,
Jobs got harder,
And some moms got cancer.

My mom was diagnosed right before the pandemic hit.
Isolated in our home, I felt helpless,
Watching her weaken from chemo.
I held my breath
Out of fear, a paralysis.
I felt like I was just in the way.
I was so focused on how I could not help her.
I felt like a little boy trying to survive in an adult world.

Trying to lessen her stress,
I moved in with my dad.
There, I would get home and leave my backpack
unopened.
Math sheets, books I was supposed to read, study guides I
should have looked at,
All untended to, like the toys I'd outgrown.
I was frozen with fear.
Stuck in a small box,
No way out.
Most of my mental time was spent worrying
That mom wouldn't make it.

It's not my mom's job to tell me to do my homework.
It's not my dad's job either.
But I didn't realize that until this all.
I was so used to her reminders.
Without them I didn't touch that backpack.
Night after night, it sat by the door,
A heavy weight I carried back and forth to school.

I know I was angry.
That my mom was suffering.



Dean and his mom at the EHS Thanksgiving Potluck in 2021

That our house was full of wigs and nausea medicine.
That I wasn't even living in my house anymore.

And I know a time will come again
When I'll feel frustrated,
That the world is not in my control.
And when fear settles back in, I'll have to remember
That backpack lying by the door, and that
Freezing in place is no way forward.

In the end, my mom's strength gave me strength
To shoulder the straps onto my back
And lift my responsibilities as
Her endless positivity lifted me up.
She showed me that it is possible
For us to live joyfully - through and
With all this uncertainty.

*Dean's family is from
England and Montserrat.
His favorite class is art
because he finds it easiest
to express himself in the art
studio. Outside of EHS, Dean
enjoys playing basketball
and spending time with his
family. Dean hopes that his
poem reminds the audience
that strength exists inside
all of us.*



SAINT CATHERINE IN THE FROST

KARDENE, GRADE 8

Two roads diverged in an island nation,
My parents staring down them both.
The comfort of Jamaica – the opportunity of America.
They could stay and be with family – lots of family – in the
warm weather,
those famous, delicious patties.
Or they could go – into the unknown, into the cold,
Where so much felt possible.

Leaving me with Grandma, they chose New York.
And like Frost says, way leads on to way,
I doubted if they should ever come back.

For eight years, I lived in Jamaica with my grandma.
It was simple. Just the two of us.
My parents, immigrants in the Bronx,
worked and went to school and
got a life ready for me.

Two roads diverged again – but at nine,
I didn't get to choose my path.
Despite my protests, my parents moved me to New York with
them.
Today, I am sorry not to get to travel both.
Because while I am happy here,
my heart also longs for the country I left.
Had I grown up in Saint Catherine, Jamaica,
Where I could see mountains from my window,
Who would I now be?

In sixth grade, the roads diverged again and
For the first time, I had a choice.
My local school in the Bronx or The East Harlem School.
I chose the long commute for the opportunity I saw.
Maybe bravery runs in my blood after all.
This was the path less traveled.
It has been a good path.
Turbulent to start, but I am healthier and happier,
Thanks to my teachers and friends.
And I don't think any other school has a principal who greets
the Jamaican girl,

Once a track runner,
With the Usain Bolt gesture each morning to make sure she
smiles.

This year, I will graduate.
Roads will diverge.
Again.
And again. And again.
What a blessing to get to choose my path.
Way leads on to way.
Each door I choose means
I don't choose another one.
I'm learning to accept that.
Each path has secrets to be explored.

Like Frost,
I shall be telling this with a sigh,
Somewhere ages and ages and hence:
Two roads diverged
in an island nation,
and in the Bronx
and in East Harlem,
and in so many other places that I don't even know yet.
And I was strong
And I walked into the unknown.
And that has made all the difference.

Kardene was born in Kingston, Jamaica and lived with her grandmother in St. Catherine until she was nine years old. She moved to New York in 2017. In her poem, Kardene reflects on her life through the lens of Robert Frost and imagines the different paths she could have taken. She trusts that she chose the right one! Here at EHS, Kardene loves science class and in her free time, she is usually reading.



YO MAS, YO MENOS

KARIM, GRADE 7

Summer 2020 was such a long summer.
So hot inside together all day.
The weather app would say 80 degrees, and
In an apartment with five people and with no air movement,
It must have been 100.
My sisters and I begged to go outside,
But my parents said we should stay at home.
I think I went outside five times the whole summer.
One, two, three, four, five.

I'd been looking forward to the start of school.
The chance to get out of the sweltering home.
But when presented with the choice
Of whether to send us in or keep us remote,
My parents chose remote.
So sweaty and sad, I felt that August.
Deep devastation,
That my parents said it wasn't safe.
The stuffed subway scared them too much.

So again, when the weather cooled and fall came,
And it felt like time for back to school,
I had to stay at home.
I told them I understood their decision.
I know their goal was to keep us safe.
They love us deeply:
At night with my mom, she says,
Te quiero, I say Yo Mas, and then she says Yo Menos.
A joke between us.
We actually love each other the same.
Mucho.

Anyway.
They wouldn't let me go back to school.
I was mad and sad, but I didn't say anything.
I watched the Zoom background of my peers change
From their white apartment walls,
To the inside the school, where I wished to be.
From my window I watched people walking free.

I imagined their joy and tried to hold it inside of me.

I searched Covid case counts on my computer.
The dark red of New York.
The line on the graph climbing up and up and up.
I knew I wasn't going anywhere.
Fall turned to winter.
I was still at home.

In the spring,
My research gave me some hope.
The line on the graph seemed to be dropping.
The red of New York faded to orange.
In March, my parents said not yet, maybe, soon.
My heart broke for my sister, whose 8th grade year was
slipping away.

On April 19, a miracle happened.
They said we could return.
I didn't even have to do the whole speech I had practiced.
The second they said yes,
We ran to Walgreens to stock up
On masks and gloves and shampoo and detergent.
The rule was, as soon as we came home
we would wash our hair and our clothes.
It didn't bother us,
We would do anything to go to school:

I love my dog more than most things of this world,
But if they would've told me I had to give her away to go
back to school,
I think I would've.
I was desperate.

My first day back, wasn't as great as I expected.
I felt afraid I was going to fall on the train
Because I didn't want to hold the bar,
Even in my plastic gloves.
At sports it hailed.
We all got wet and had to back to the gym.
I felt strange talking to my friends at first.
I had missed so much.
Their memories and jokes didn't include me.
But they were kind.
And I was happy to finally meet my teachers in person,

And just be somewhere other than my bedroom.

Sometimes, when I look back on last year,
I feel bad for my old self.
She went through a lot at a very young age.
Yes, she gave me new gratitude.
I already had a lot of gratitude, but
I wish she hadn't had to go through all that to get more
I wish she hadn't missed so much school.
But I do think I learned that I stronger than I knew I was.
And one day when I'm at medical school,
In classes around the clock, feeling exhausted and stressed,
I will know that there is nothing I cannot do.

Karim's family is from Huacho, Chaucayan, and Huancayo, Peru. The youngest of three sisters (Katherine, EHS '21 and Kristine, EHS '19), Karim spent much of the pandemic at home, sheltering in place. Writing about her experience helped her come to terms with her desire to be out of quarantine and her parents' concern for her safety while also making her appreciate the things she missed. Karim is so happy to be back at school in person.



A ROSE IN SPANISH HARLEM

KELSI, GRADE 8

My ballet teacher used to tell us
To tighten our cores
And point our feet.
To hold our arms and legs straight and strong,
Angling our bodies into lines
Like Manhattan's steel skyscrapers
Outside our windows.

In a sunny studio on 86th Street
She would tell us
To keep our backs flat
As we bowed towards the barre
To move in unison.
Up to relevé, balancing in our pointe shoes,
We would plié, chassé, jeté as one—
Each of us a rose in a cream bouquet,
No petals out of place.

My ballet teacher taught me lessons
That made me stronger,
My lines straighter,
My chin higher,
My movements more in sync with the piano's melodies:
Plié, chassé, jeté.
To follow my body,
And others, too.

I was a pretty flower in a bouquet.
Except for the days when I felt out of place
Among the white tights
And the pink tutus of 86th Street.
The only ballerina in caramel pointe shoes,
Always arriving a few minutes late
From my school in Spanish Harlem, long
After the other girls had stretched and warmed up.
They were already in their places, planted in rows.

But my ballet teacher told me
It's not just about mimicking the movements
Of the girl next to you in the mirror.
Or trying to jump and spin like everyone else.
"That's not dancing," she'd say.
Follow the music,
Move with purpose.

I don't want to be a perfect white petal,
Curved delicately like all of the others
I don't want to wear the same white tights
And pink tutus
As everyone else on stage.

I want to follow the music
And move with purpose,
A red rose in Spanish Harlem
Blooming by itself,
In a garden of its own.

Kelsi's family is from Morelos, Mexico. After being in the Poetry Slam in sixth grade, Kelsi learned to speak up and is grateful that she can continue to express herself through poetry. Her poem this year demonstrates how she has learned to move with purpose and how dance has taught her patience and confidence. In her free time, Kelsi likes to ride her bike in Central Park and spend time with her three brothers, including Gilberto, EHS '18 and Ferdinand, EHS '23.



TWIN LIFE

LIANA, GRADE 6

One thing my brother has that I don't have,
Is that he doesn't worry what other people think about him.
He does the silliest weirdest dances.
He looks like some combination of a camel and monkey,
And he laughs so hard
And I laugh with him.
Sometimes we tease each other.
In a nice way.
I told him he was a sloth,
So he said I was a turtle.
I guess we're both a little slow and lazy,
But only sometimes.

I am two minutes older,
But already he is way taller.
In all situations, we are compared.
What we got on every test,
Who behaved at the family dinner,
Who sings better – Me!
Who runs faster – Me!
Who's the better cook – Me!
Who cleaned up our mess – Me!
Who has a better memory – fine, him!
And I guess I better admit,
That he is funnier than I am, too.

Twin life is
Totally terrific and totally terrible
At the same time.
It is crazy and chaotic.
My brother says he will always protect me,
I say I'm fine, I don't need your help,
But I like knowing he cares so much for me.
And guess what?
I will protect him, too.
Even though he's taller.
My dad says even if we are five planets apart,
We are united.
It's true.
And like it or not,
We twins need each other.



Liana and Anthony on Randall's Island in 2017

Liana's mother is from Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic and her father's family is from Italy. She and her twin brother, Anthony, are the youngest in their large family and her poem honors their special bond. Liana likes playing with her dogs, Maui and Penny, and has begun reading more poetry in her spare time. This is her first year at EHS and she loves how nice and heartwarming everyone is here.



RAISED BY INSPIRED BY "RAISED BY WOMEN" BY KELLY NORMAN ELLIS MARIAM, GRADE 7

I was raised by
A too much sugar in the bottom of her teacup
Glued to her computer screen
Taking up too much of her side of the bed
Kind of sister
A dancing around the living room
Candy-loving
"If you don't stop, I'm calling Mom!"
Kind of sister

I was raised by a
Yelling on the phone too loud
In French and Mandingo
Kind of mother
A rice cooking
Praying before dawn
Then rushing me out the door
To get me to school on time
Kind of mother

I was raised by
A mama's boy
Business-minded,
Wanting to start his own company in Africa
Kind of brother
A magically appearing in the kitchen
Just as Mom's famous jollof rice is ready
Kind of brother

And I was also raised up.

Raised up to new heights by
A law school studying
Never give up on your dreams
Going to be a Supreme Court Justice one day
Kind of sister

Raised up
By a comforting shoulder to cry on



Mariam, bottom right, celebrates her oldest sister's college graduation.

A "You can count on me"
Bringing me sugary pastries when I'm lonely
Kind of brother

Raised up
By a strong
Determined,
Powerful
Kind of woman
By the first in her family to come to America from Guinea
A sleeping on the living room floor
With eight other people
Kind of mother
Moving from Brooklyn to the Bronx
From the Bronx to Manhattan
Trying to find a home
In a new city
In a new country
To start a new life
Kind of mother

All so she could raise me up
As high as I could possibly go.

Originally from Guinea, Mariam's family is full of strong women, particularly her older sisters Aminata, EHS '19 and Aissatou, EHS '13. Mariam wanted to write a poem about her unique family and, in doing so, thank them for all they have taught her. In her spare time, Mariam enjoys reading. Her favorite book is Harry Potter.



PHOTO NEGATIVE

MICHELLE, GRADE 8

Small camera, big change
Photography is everywhere,
More today than ever before.
Photography has power.
All of us who take pictures have power.

How about instead of the perfect posed portraits of friends,
We show the moments before,
We show the moments after.
Instead, let's show the moment
when the group who all had their arms
Around each other smiling,
Separates, everyone in their own direction,
Some feeling sad and left out,
Some angry about something that had just happened,
Someone dreading going home.
Everyone's going through something.
It's normal.
The camera can show it –
In one photo, you can make others feel they are not alone.
No one's life is perfect.

How about instead of photographing women with their
Makeup done, hair done, clothes all matched,
Fresh nails,
We show reality.
Let's photograph bedhead.
Wrinkles and pimples.
It's normal.
It's human.
It's beautiful – because it's real.
Because it's who we are.

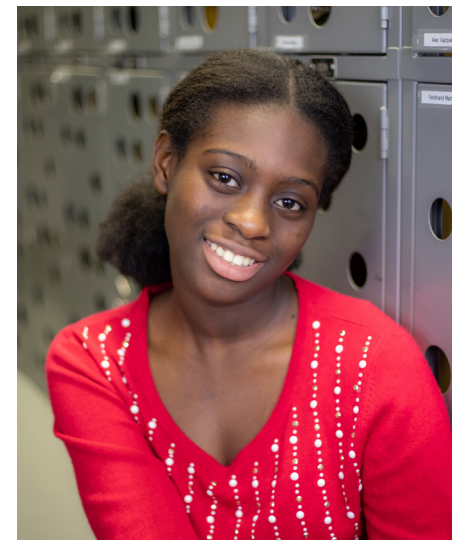
How about instead of photographing
The happiest family you've ever seen,
You shoot the moment when the parents are arguing and
The kid is listening.
You shoot a parent yelling at their child,
A kid refusing to eat,

Siblings fighting,
Laundry unfolded, toy cars all over the floor.
How about showing a single mom raising her kids,
An aunt or an uncle acting as parents.
It's normal.
We shouldn't be ashamed.
Life is messy, the camera can show it.

Everywhere I look,
I hear about struggles with mental health.
Teens especially, but
I know it's everyone.
I think photography is part of the problem –
It tells us we should be a certain way.
I challenge us to show what is real.
Everyone has a camera. Use it for truth.
We will lift each other up,
Sharing what is natural and normal,
Sharing the beauty in the mess,
That is being alive.

Small camera, big change.
Let's go.

Michelle was born and raised in the Bronx. Her parents are both from Ghana, and she is grateful to have been influenced by both Ghanaian and American culture. Michelle hopes to be a photographer so that she can show reality, not just the picture perfect images we see on social media. She also enjoys figure skating and playing basketball.



A FEW KEYS

RYGEL, GRADE 8

Two roads diverged in an island nation,
I found a piece to learn:
Für Elise, by Ludwig van Beethoven.
Like the melody I heard whenever I opened
My mom's old music box.

Who was Elise? I imagine she was someone beautiful.
And maybe dangerous, too.
Her song sounds bittersweet to me—
Happy and angry at the same time.

I was twelve years into my life
And eleven months into quarantine
When my mom bought us a piano.
We rearranged our living room to make it fit.

When we finished, she told us: Go be your own teacher.
Anything to keep us occupied.
I practiced how to position my hands just right:
Arched like two rainbows above the black and white keys.

How to count the beats, keeping tempo and time.
On the bench I started piecing together patterns,
Stitching together melodies.
When I slipped and got a note wrong,
I began again.

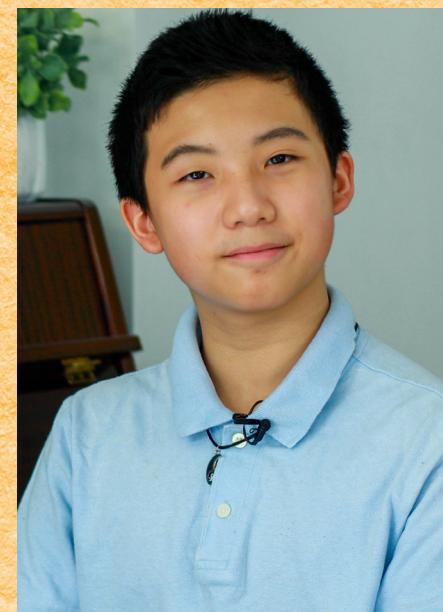
So much magic made with the touch of a few keys—
Music transports me to a beach at night,
The moon reflecting off the water, or to a theater stage
bathed in light,
Filled with ballerinas in white fairy costumes.

Or to a music box sitting on a shelf in the corner.



Rygel plays the piano in his living room.

Rygel lives in Queens with his two brothers and his older sister, Ryanna, EHS '21, with whom he was featured in last year's Poetry Slam. His mother is from Myanmar, and his father is from Hong Kong. An accomplished pianist already, now Rygel is learning to play the violin right here at EHS. Next year, he'll join Ryanna at Brooklyn Technical High School.



FERNANDO ON FACETIME

STEPHANIE, GRADE 8

Fernando is my brother.
He was given the opportunity to go
To boarding school, far from our home.
People say he is a lucky boy
Who was able to leave a poor neighborhood.
People say he is a smart boy
Who was so fortunate to get away.
People see a brown boy walking on an old, alabaster
campus,
And say he should be grateful to be there.

When people think of East Harlem,
They might only see the headlines:
A young girl, not much older than Fernando,
Murdered at Burger King on 116th Street.
People see crowded subways that reek in the summer heat,
Homeless people sleeping on dirty streets.
No wonder they think Fernando is lucky to leave.

But when I think of East Harlem,
I think of my family:
We go to the La Nostra Pizzeria on 110th
Where the pies are warm after a chilly soccer game
In the crisp autumn air at Jefferson Park.
We celebrate Cinco de Mayo in the spring
At the street fair lined with blooming branches
And spicy aromas that spill out of the vendors' stalls.
We say mass for mis abuelos on their birthdays,
And burn candles that sparkle in the comfort of a quiet
church.
I miss my brother then.

We spend every Christmas Eve with my godparents,
Praying over baby Jesus before tamales and tacos for dinner.
When they decided it was time to move back to Mexico,
My brother and I were sad.
But I was able to hug them tight to say goodbye,
While Fernando was only on FaceTime.



Stephanie and Fernando at the EHS Thanksgiving Potluck in 2021

So, sure, my brother is lucky.
He goes to a great school where he earned his spot,
Where he works hard and gets good grades.
People are right to say how charmed his life must be now.
But I see the sacrifices that he made,
The opportunities he seized, the late nights he studied.
And I see what he left behind, what he misses in our city.

Will I also have to leave my home to achieve my goals?
Will FaceTime be enough?
Will my parents be okay when Fernando and I are both
gone?
If you really love someone, do you have to let them go?

Stephanie has been at EHS since the 4th grade. She is a very competitive soccer player and looks forward to traveling to London with her team this summer! Stephanie was inspired to write her poem about her brother, Fernando, EHS '19, after going through the high school application process herself this year. Next year, she will join Fernando at Loomis Chaffee in Connecticut.



LINES OF ACTION

WARREN, GRADE 5

In art class, we learned about Keith Haring.
You know the one:
The artist who painted people,
Hugged by black lines
So it looks like they're vibrating.
His simple lines have meaning,
Like the lines I'm writing here.
His murals have a message:
They want to change the world,
And so do I!

If I were in a Keith Haring mural,
Lines would sprout out of me like springs.
In the morning, they'd dance with excitement
And energize me with joy.
Jumping like kangaroos,
Singing as soundwaves,
The lines would curve around me like snakes.
By lunch, they might hunch
With a little bit of sleepiness.
But at frolic, they would wiggle like worms,
Chasing me in constant locomotion.
By the end of the day,
The lines would be like the hands of a clock
Going tick tick, tick tick,
Time to go home.

My Keith Haring lines of action
Would follow me everywhere I go.
Sometimes they'd be squiggly,
Sometimes they'd be straight.
Sometimes they would stretch to the top of my classroom
ceiling!
I could lend a line or two to a friend who needed a hand:
Scribble a curly line here to make them smile
Or pin a straight line there to help them study.

Maybe it'll be murals, music, or medicine,
But I'll change the world one day, too.
I'll help people be good and learn from their mistakes.
And when they feel down or troubled,
I'll remind them to imagine a little line, like a lightbulb,
Popping out to pull them up to start again.



Warren poses at the Keith Haring mural on 126th Street near his home.

Warren was born and raised not too far from a famous Keith Haring mural in East Harlem. Warren knew immediately that he wanted to write about Haring because he loves the way he uses art to teach lessons and change the world. Warren hopes to do the same in his poetry. Warren's favorite class is math and on the weekends, he likes playing board games and cooking with his family.



DON'T FORGET TO DREAM

ZANAI, GRADE 8

Have you thought about your dreams lately?
I have!

I dream of winning an Olympic gold medal
At my weekly swimming lessons,
Where the water glistens back at me, telling me to dive in
Without hesitation,
Without fear.
I come up to the surface, take a deep breath in
And imagine the roar of the crowd in my ears
A great burst of energy coursing through me,
Knowing I can win.

I dream about launching my own fashion line
As I lift the needle of my sewing machine
In my grandmother's living room
I imagine working in a light-filled studio,
Draping models in vibrant fabrics
A million ideas for designs rushing into my head at once
Thinking, I can be a successful designer.

I dream about becoming a surgeon
Late at night, when I see my mom squinting at her laptop
with tired eyes,
Her medical books piled high on her lap,
I know she hasn't forgotten about her dreams,
And they make me think of mine:
Gray hospital doors opening in a swift movement,
Me walking down a hallway in scrubs,
A stethoscope around my neck,
Knowing I can help people
The way my mom does.

Have you forgotten about your dreams lately?
We all get tired, or distracted, or sad
Especially today, with the world shutting down.
When I forget to dream,
I look at my mother
Who came to America from Nicaragua
Strong, fearless, determined
Through the bad hair days, the sad times, the hungry times,

Or my grandmother
Who had to move from Puerto Rico to New York City
All because of a hurricane
They are women who let their dreams lift them up
And carry them here
To this country where anything is possible.

Have you thought about your dreams lately?
I have!

I'll visit Taiwan,
Taste all the flavors of boba tea.
I'll perform on Broadway
(I'm in a choir, after all.)
I'll go to Italy
See ancient ruins
Eat authentic pasta.
Don't believe me?
That's okay, you'll see.
I dream BIG
And I will live BIG.
That's what my mother
And my grandmother taught me to do,
And family is everything to me.

Dreams give birth to more dreams
I'm living proof of that.

Zanai's family is from San Juan, Puerto Rico and Nagarote, Nicaragua. In her free time she loves to sing and dance, but most of all, Zanai likes to spend time with her family. She enjoys poetry because she is able to express her thoughts and feelings through words. A Poetry Slam veteran, Zanai's poem reminds us all to look ahead and never give up.



POETRY PROMPTS

Ask your parent or caregiver to tell the story of your birth or the day they met you. Ask for all the details they remember. Ask them to also share the story of your name, if they know it. Then write what you learned in your own words.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are light gray and evenly spaced, typical of notebook paper. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

Spend 15 minutes sitting quietly by a window in your home. No screen, no music, no company. Watch, listen, smell. What do you see, what do you notice? If you'd like, start with "Sometimes there is too much sky...." or "Sometimes there is not enough sky..."

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are light gray and evenly spaced, typical of notebook paper. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

I used to be _____

but now I'm _____

OR

I used to think _____

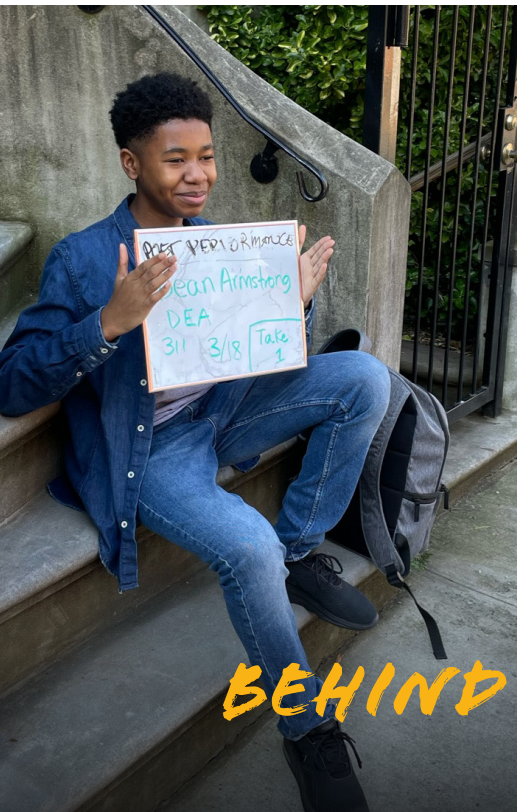
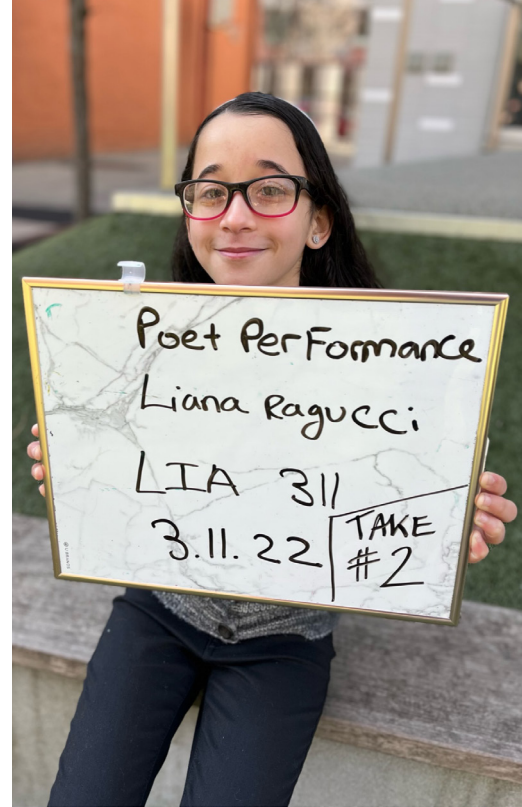
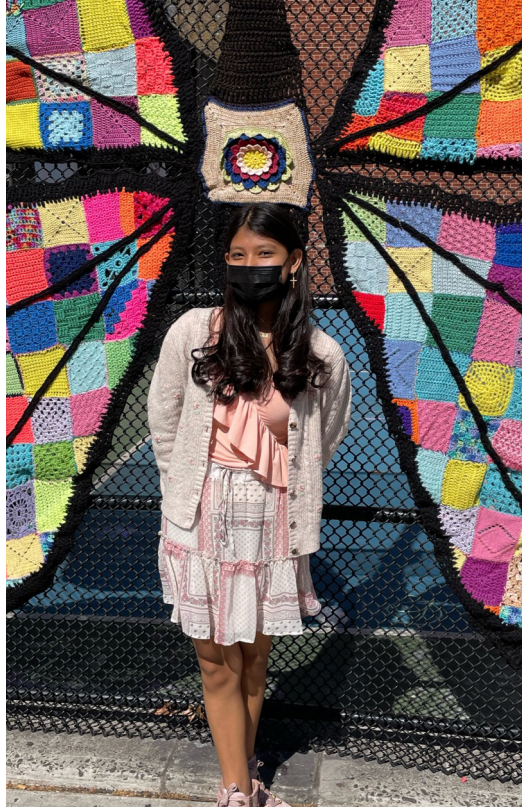
but now I know _____

Write the thank you note, apology letter, or love letter that you have always meant to write.

Handwriting practice lines for page 54, consisting of 20 horizontal lines.

Make a list of ten important people in your life and one object you would associate with each of them. Pick one and turn it into a poem or paragraph.

Handwriting practice lines for page 55, consisting of 20 horizontal lines.



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