

Nyumbani Means Home

A Collection of Collaborative Poetry



**For the over 50 million refugees and
those still searching for home.**



Thank You Partners

There is no way we could have brought this book to publication by ourselves; it truly did “take a village” to create our vision. Each and every partner has been invaluable in the success of this project. First of all, a huge thank you to the Anser and Hillside administrators for their courage to make the connections, and for their trust in both the staffs and students. *The Agency for New Americans’* contribution was critical in helping us build understanding about our refugee community and in planning the first stages of the project. They also provided interpreters that helped us break the language barriers that initially existed. To the parents who drove students back and forth between schools and to the 125 amazing students in this project, thank you for caring enough to give of yourselves so generously.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	
First Thought	1
Circle of Drums.	2
All We Know.	5
Glass Walls.	8
Power.	10
Hungry Mornings.	13
My Child.	19
A Better Life.	21
Lifeline.	23
Infusion.	27
The Game of Hide and Seek.	29
Lost in Translation.	33
Shadows.	35
This is America.	37
A Pixel Protection	41
Everything.	43
Blue.	46
The Journey.	49
Finding Home.	51
This is My Friend.	55
Scars.	58
Will it Ever Be Enough.	60

The Good Side.	62
The Language of Laughter.	65
The Story was Marcello.	70
The Fun Group.	73
Waka is Home.	75
Foreign Words.	77
Fear.	80
When I Grow Up.	82
Always Home.	84
Without Words.	86
Colliding Worlds.	89
The Broken Words.	91
The American Survival Guide.	93
Kenya's Words.	95
Even After Everything.	96
The War.	98
A Closed Door.	100
9/32/14.	102
Reality.	105
Seven Years.	107
I Still Remember.	110
There is Hope.	112
Homes.	115
Words Aren't Needed.	117
Family	121
I Knew, He Knew.	123

Introduction

The Boise refugee population has grown exponentially in the past few years since the city's designation as a refugee hub. Our community has been given the rare opportunity to welcome people from countries around the world. It's an awesome responsibility to provide refuge and a place to call home to those who have been displaced by conflict, persecution or natural disasters.

Refugees in Boise are struggling in ways most of us cannot understand. Teen refugees are often caught between families and the larger culture they have become part of. Many U.S. teens do not understand the cultural ways of refugees and immigrants, which has led to our newest arrivals being misunderstood and left out. This collaboration between programs was about providing an opportunity for Boise teens and refugees to connect, share their stories, and build relationships. What the students created was a deep appreciation of diverse cultures and ideas.

This project stressed creating a win/win/win situation for Hillside Junior High Bridge Program students, Anser Junior High students and the Boise community. The refugees benefited from the project by being involved in language rich activities,

and it provided them an opportunity to tell their stories. Anser students benefited from the project by being involved in a culturally rich experience where they were able to explore cultural diversity in a safe and positive way. Our community will benefit because of the greater cultural understanding, compassion and tolerance that has been created. But clearly, the greatest benefit was the friendships that the students formed with each other.

It is our greatest hope that this book will open up dialogue and the possibility of new relationships.



First Thought

Mason

Focus your eyes on that one untold moment.

Be proud to share your history to those around you.

Find that dark time you fled your country from horror and war.

Fight the fear of the past.

Let the story overcome you.

Let the world know who you are.

Don't be shy

Be confident

Be brave

Tell us your story.



Circle of Drums

Amelia T. and Claude

I tell this story with the beat of my drum.
I do not know your words
And you do not know mine,
But through music
We understand each other perfectly.

Drumming is in my culture,
In my community,
In my blood.
It reminds me of my home,
Africa.

Bare feet against the dusty earth,
Hands slapping,
Dust swirling,
Colors flying,
Laughter.

Drumming in a circle
Represents unity,
Finding family,
Finding community.

Drumming is something you are born
knowing how to do.
The beat is in your ears,
The rhythm on your fingers.

Drumming is being with family,
Star-gazing on the roof top,
Eating mangoes,
Smiling together,
Creating memories.

Now the beat is silenced.
The only drums I hear
Are echoed in the beating of my heart.
But in reality
There is no dancing, no drumming.
Worry is written on every face.
Laughter is scarce.

Now I am here in America,
Learning new things,
Gaining new memories.
I go to a new school now,
Making new friends,
Sharing laughter.

It is hard to use the new words I am learning,
To form my mouth around the harsh sounds of English.
You laugh when I say the wrong things,
But it is good laughter.

I have left Africa behind,
But I know that someday I will go back.
But here, now,
I am home.
With my family,
With my friends.

Every time I close my eyes,
I hear the beat of the drum
Pounding in my heart,
I can always hear the rhythm,
Feel the papery leather of the drum beneath my
fingertips,
Pounding the earth,
Pounding my soul.

I tell this story with the beat of my drum.
I do not know your words
And you do not know mine,
But through music
We understand each other perfectly.

All We Know

Ella and Parfait

He says Burundi is all he ever knew
but the Congo is his home,
because it was his family's,
it belongs to him.

I wonder what that's like
to live someplace,
but know another belongs to you.
I wonder what it's like to love something
that is broken.

But in my heart I know,
the Congo is a reflection of his culture,
his family,
his story,
himself.

I'm not as complex.
I only know to belong where I am,
to straddle two worlds is a concept
foreign to me.

Parfait mingles wonder,
excitement,
and curiosity.
What stories will he tell?

Our first days were quiet.
No tales came rushing out.
Nothing was simple or fast.

Slowly, I catch a glimpse
of who he was
when the shyness was peeled away.
I see him reflected in his people,
a translator.
His confidence was surprising.

And as he spoke to the interpreter,
I realized,
his language was beautiful.
Beautiful.

Parfait's story tumbled out.
From the plastic tents they lived in,
to the desks overflowing with school children.
Secrets he'd kept to himself before now.

He's dealt with borders
and unimaginable challenges,
never allowing them
to become him.

I came to understand
Parfait is not a tragedy.
He is something much bigger,
more complex.

The moments that hurt
do not define him.
And what I thought was a broken story,
isn't really broken at all.

Glass Walls

Avalon and *Shueb*

He looks at me for help,
his eyes, soft and innocent.
He wants to tell me;
I can tell by the way he looks back at me,
fighting to find the right words.
English words, so that I can understand.
But he can't find the right words to stick together
to complete his story.

So I have to guess.
Were you scared?
Were you safe?
Were you happy?
Did bombs tear apart all you have known?
Do you have scars on your heart?

We point to the words and draw the pictures,
but do you really understand?
I listen to the way you whisper your language,
the exotic words that fall so perfectly out of your mouth,
trip and stumble out of mine.
I love to see you laugh when I pronounce your words wrong.
In that moment the glass wall separating our friendship
S HATTERS.

It gives me hope,
that we can break the borders.
We sit together and communicate,
maybe not using words
but pictures or maps.
We laugh at our mistakes.
We are both learning.



POWER

Grant Tinker and Marcelin Beaudin

All I knew was that Marcello was a refugee,
a black African from the Congo.
I knew to be sensitive because
bad things happened to him.
Those things made him quiet
and reserved.
That is what I knew,
but not what I saw.

What I saw
was unmitigated joy,
an aura of elation.
Happiness energized and influenced him.
His bright smile appeared unscathed,
gentle, pleasant and cheerful.
He is a light.
A shining example for everyone,
an imprint left in my soul.
I became absorbed.
Empowered by his influence,
I want to be like him.

But his smile and light are a shelter,
a place where all his bad memories hide,
protected and kept quiet.

His smile hides the past,
the hardships and trials,
concealed all of the war and violence
he has escaped.

He told us his story,
the story he hides with his light.
The death of his father at such a young age,
recalling the gunshots echoing in his ear.
I didn't comprehend at the time,
the smile, the kindness,
comes from his past.

His power is not in his survival,
but in the person he became,
a young man who is thriving
despite his struggles.

His smile doesn't hide anything,
it shows his strength,
living his life in the present,
moving forward unshackled by memories and scars.
He is a refugee,
here today because of his
Power.



Hungry Mornings

Kaelyn [] and Paw []

I miss my three-year-old dreams
When I could run in the streets
With my friends
And not have to worry
About the soldiers.

I miss my father
Who left for work
And never came back
“He go and find a new wife,”
My momma told me.

We wait in Myanmar
Until the men with guns come
Running down the hill
Their mouths open wide
Screaming a beautiful battle cry
And soon the air fills with the familiar scent
Of cooking

Except this is different
Because momma is scared of these men's cries
So she grabs my sister and me
And we run
Away from home
I turn as black clouds rest on my village.

My eyes droop
As my toes slide across the pointy stones
But my momma keeps walking
Through the thin trees
And large ferns
While my sister sways in her arms
A childish guilt speaks from my numb legs
Wishing I was the one being carried.

My mind wanders
I think of
Grandpa
Grandma
And of my friends
All the things I saw
Washed away by the flames
We take a break at a river

To drink the water
But my momma says no
As ash flows past my cupped hands.

I rest on my momma's hip
As she walks through the water
Her bare feet skim the mud
And prod the rocks
Until I sit on the tall grassy bank
Momma goes back for my sister
As I pull the water out of my
Long black hair.

Finally
We make it to Thailand
Where cold nights
And hungry mornings welcome us
My momma works hard
She comes back every night
Her feet dragging
Head lolling
Like she's on the edge of a dream
But hard work pays off
And I am soon standing in front of a

Red door
Whose paint is being eaten away by the dirt.
I start school
But the teacher is so mean
Every time I come home for lunch
I tell my momma about the
Teacher who hits me
That I don't want to go back
Hoping she feels my sorrow
But she insists
So I grab my books and run to school
Clenching my fists.

In my new life
In Thailand
I have a new father
He is gentle
And he makes my momma happy
And it is good to see her smile
For once.
But I knew we could never find a
Home
In Thailand.

Pain follows my family
Everywhere
And soon father is sick
We pray at night
Tears dripping into our laps
As he lays in a sky blue hospital bed
And closes his eyes
My poor sister
Who braved the fire
The men with guns
The ashen river
And all the times before Thailand
Soon follows in my new father's footsteps.

With no father
Our family is not protected
So we come here
To America
We fly in a huge plane
I grasp the armrest as we leave the ground
But momma looks out the window
the whole time.

Good-bye Thailand.

We say

Good bye

To father

To sissy

To grandma

To grandpa

And to our house

in Burma.



My Child

Daisy I. [unclear] and Justine I. [unclear]

Leave now my child.
Leave the tribal fights,
leave the fear of inequality and yells of brutality,
leave that suffocating camp.
Leave now my wonderful child.

Go my child.
Go start your journey,
go and see your land drift away,
as you fly higher and higher,
go find your own way in your new home,
you cannot get lost at home.
Go my beautiful child.

Be free my child.
Be free to
learn,
to speak,
to laugh,
and to embrace.

Be free to let one language flow in one ear
and another language out the other,
be free, but never forget where you are from
or you will forget where you are going.
Be free my loved child.

And one day,
come home my child.
Come home to the dirt floors of the refugee camp,
come home and eat from the banana and passion fruit
trees,
come home to those childhood friends displaced by
war.
Come home my new American child.

A Better Life

Regina Sadie [] and Paw []

“We go for a better life.
And when you learn English, life is better.”

Before we left, my father spoke slowly and gently in
my language,
explaining why we were leaving Thailand, my home.
Now, I speak slowly with my messy words
about those times of conflict and excitement.

Language is the door and education is the key,
but what if it's also the other way around?
How can I solve my problem
if the problem is also the solution?

In Thailand my parents starved for my schooling.
And they chose education
because it is our only chance.
Everything depends on education.

So here I am, caught in this mess of jumbled words,
waiting for a way out so I can find my way in.

These hopeless words are marbles in my mouth:
smooth on my tongue,
but impossible to swallow.

I came for a better life.
And when you learn English, life is better.
This language is brimming with possibility,
and I am making it mine.

My life is lost in translation between continents,
but with every new word my worlds are merging,
from Asia into America.

At school, more learning breaks through to my
hungry brain.
At school, people can hear my voice.
At school, they are understanding me
and I am understanding what English can do for me.

My father spoke slowly and gently in my old
language
when he told us we were coming here.
“We go for a better life.
And when you learn English, life is better.”
And now, life is better.

Lifeline

Sabine and Adil

His chocolate hands clutch each other
Like they are the lifelines
In this confusion of a room
That echoes with the babbling of too many tongues,
And too many tight smiles,
That only prove that the strangers across the table,
Are just as nervous as he is.

They stare at him,
Expectant, waiting.
But he simply stares into his lap,
Pretending he knows what he is doing,
Because that is easier than staring into the curious eyes
Of everyone else's expectations.

He can see the questions,
Stacked neatly on their papers.
One by one,
Their handwriting practiced and pretty,
Fluttering lightly in time with the quivering of their
Anxious fingers.
Their hands cramped around their papers
Like they are the lifelines

Without the words they will drown,
Because they have never
Truly
Been at a loss for words.

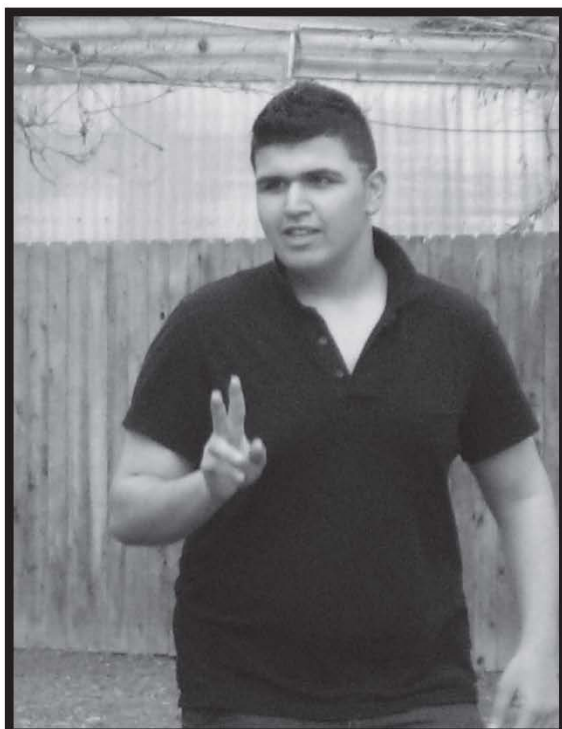
They speak.
He hears their words,
But he listens to the movement,
The waves of their voices,
Gently overlapping.
He knows he should concentrate,
Should at least try to understand,
But the far-off lull of his overwhelmed mind
Pulls him
Back.
His mind resides
With the wrinkled laugh of his grandmother,
His father, his uncle,
The warmth of his fragmented family,
Still
Back
There.
His mind is with Iraq,

The beautiful, scarred country that declared him
Untrustworthy
A traitor
A spy to
Iraq,
The country that didn't want him anymore.

His mind is with the memories
That shroud his thoughts.
His mind is chasing ghosts,
That flutter away,
Leaving him
Back
Here.
In the nervous room,
Caked with good intentions,
In the unfamiliar country
That he doesn't belong in.

Back in this cold, hard, replacement home,
With its packaged food,
Yellow hair,
Its puzzle of words,
The pieces scattered.

The strangers still smile at him.
They wait
For something to write down on their
Pure, white papers,
Not yet smudged with his past from
Back
There.



Infusion

Grayson J. J. and Justine Nyagah

One lingering memory remains,
a smooth carved spoon,
Mama's wooden ladle,
stained from many exotic foods and
odors from flavorful spices,
infused into the splintered utensil.
Tasteless fufu clings to the surface,
like me to Rwanda.

I fear that in America I will lose my true self,
that the culture of my people
will be drowned out by influences in the U.S.,
so I cling even tighter to
Mama's wooden ladle,
and think to myself,
What is this place
Boise, "ID"?

But I cannot look back,
I'm not headed that way.
I'm moving forward
stirring together two spices;
one familiar and one unknown,
one of my traditions, and one of modern life.

I can smell the mixed aromas,
and I wonder what will I make
of myself?

Although I have begun a new part of my life,
I will still hold tightly to my roots
with pride and confidence,
gleaming in my eyes,
showing that I will **not** discard my people
and my home in the dust.
Instead I will carry my past
into my future,
clutching Mama's wooden ladle.



The Game of Hide and Seek

Naomi and Doh

Hide and seek,
a game played by generations of children.
In Myanmar, everyone plays.
I was seven when I first learned the game,
Hide and lay low.
The Burmese government played too,
only they did not hide.
Come out they spoke,
the seekers, the killers,
their voices made up of lost generations of Myanmar.
You see, once you are found,
the game is over.

So we ran to Thailand,
to safety.
I went to school and I was happy,
I was safe.
But opportunity did
not find us,
and we ran again.

It all happened so fast.
Mother,
father,
sister,
brother
boarded a plane off to opportunity,
off to new life,
to find home in America.

This new land is happy.
The people welcome me,
but it is not my home.
They have new words,
strange words.
I do not understand,
I wonder if I ever will.
I like America but I miss my home,
I miss the language,
the taste of Karen words.
I like English,
but their letters lie discombobulated,
because they are not mine.

I try to hide, but the words always find me.
The words never stop looking.
I want to play, but not like this.



The words,
the running,
the game.
It is no longer fun; it never was.
This innocent game made up my youth,
defined my childhood.
Though I left the fighting,
the seekers still came in many forms,
so I continued to hide.
But it was then I realized that
I create my own games,
I choose when it ends,
I let go of all that is holding me back,
And I find freedom.

I understand now more than ever;
The voiceless boy will not be stopped,
for words will not define me.
So I do not stay silent.
I speak louder than I ever could with words,
through small, elegant actions,
a little grin, the soft humble look sewn into my eyes.
You may not know,
I don't always understand,
but I watch.

We communicate
with something larger than words.
We look beyond the delicate letters,
and we see each other,
past all struggles,
and in the definition
of who we really are,
we find home.

Lost in Translation

A Poem in Two Voices

Lili  and Shueb 

Question after question they
hand to me.

*Slow down, slow down,
he doesn't understand.*

Questions that I can't answer.

*Speak slowly,
pronounce your words,
simplify your sentences.*

I don't remember.
I can't remember.
I won't remember.

Give it time.

What if I get the answers
wrong?

*We've tried
everything.*

All I can do is sit,

Waiting to understand.

*He just sits and nods
like he's on repeat.*

*"Is Boise or
Somalia home
for you?"*

Home.
Shabby tents,
with unraveled edges,
The ghosts that are my life.

Somalia

*"How long did you live
there?"
We lean in,
we wait.*

I whisper cracked words back
to them.

The interpreter
listens.

"24 years."

*"Whoever said
lost in translation"*

Wasn't kidding.

*We try again.
"Will you ever go
back?"*

I want to tell them
sometimes I dream I'll go back,
but then I remember
there is nothing to go back to.

*Trying to understand
A refugee's world,*

Is hard.

But trying to be one

Is even harder.

Shadows

Omilia and Yousif

A shadow behind me,
An unfocused figure,
A blurry aura,
He stands in my wake,
my shadow named Iraq.

When I turn to glance at him,
He is pulled just beyond my reach.
Beyond the idea of reality.
He is no longer tangible,
reduced down to fragments of memories on the dirt,
a ringing bullet in the temple.

I am leaving,
hoping to stumble upon myself
when the new day comes.
Living off a borrowed sun,
the night seems brighter than the light of day.
I don't care where into the darkness I am taken,
because everything that matters is already left behind.
Behind me, and my shadow named Iraq.

Leaving is the easy part.

Making new history,
that's when you walk through a devouring flame.
I tumbled into that inferno,
my old life burned into ash,
becoming charcoal,
charred deep into my bones.

Now, I am here,
left sitting in front of incessantly searching eyes,
and scribbling pencils riddled with secrets,
secrets hidden in my new, muddy language.
My lack of words makes me seem incompetent,
but my weightless smile tells them otherwise.
Tells them that there is more to this boy,
to me,
than a child named refugee.

I can laugh,
I can play,
and I will understand.

But,
I wonder,
even as I sit here,
if they'll ever understand me.
Me, and my shadow named Iraq.

This is America

Nicole [] , Sandra [] , and Hasan []

He asked, "Why are you so kind to me?"

She asked, "How did you fit in so well?"

I said because this is not Asia.

This is America.

He is a refugee from Afghanistan,

She is an immigrant from China,

I am a U.S. citizen who grew up in Taiwan,

And we all ended up here.

He says that he had a hard life,

She says that she had a diverse environment,

But I say that we have the opportunity

To come, to stay,

And to start over again in America.

Where we are from is no longer important.

What we should see now is the road,

Waiting to be filled with our dreams.

We must grab onto the hopeless hope,

Even when we don't know where it will take us.

Will it lead us to a land of nothing?
Or will it direct us to the gate,
Where language starts speaking to us?

I appreciate how the language slips in my mind;
I enjoy how the intelligence plays with my brain.

If language speaks to us,
We welcome it,
We accept it,
And we embrace it.

Language flies in his mind
once he was opened to his new life;
Language slides in her mind,
confused by her new friends' words;
And language lies in my mind
When the time comes,
The time when I am needed.

Communication builds a bridge for him
Because English is similar to his mother language.
Language builds a wall for her
Because English didn't play with her voice.
Voice is necessary for me
Because English gives me the ability to help us all.

Education is like our mother.
Carefully nurturing and feeding us with knowledge.
It can be hard on us,
But that gives us the opportunity to learn more.
It can be easy on us,
But that takes away our chance to understand the world
better.
Education treated them differently.
He saw the beauty of learning,
But education didn't walk near him.
She didn't hear the voice of schooling,
But she felt the knowledge surrounding her.

We all have tasted school,
But we all experience different flavors.
Still,
We all feel the fire named "Desperation"
Peeking out from the cage of our hearts.

He said, "Teachers here are so nice to me."
She said, "School is so 'unstressful' here."
I said because this is not Asia.
This is America.

He heard the language,
But not the education.

She felt the knowledge,
But not the words.

I have earned my intelligence,
And I own my voice.
So I can find a way,
To heal our broken confidence.

Over there,
I am just a girl rarely noticed.
But here,
I am the powerful storyteller,
That can build the connection between all humans,
Because
This is not Asia,
This is America.



A Pixel Protection

Joe Tasso and Mohamad Chahine

He orchestrates his lips, trying to answer
He contemplates our scribbles,
wondering how they got there
He guilts his way to the glaring screen,
an apologetic flush with every swipe
His life, in a **pixel** depiction.

He stares at the glimmer, adjusting the brightness
He taps at the buttons, anticipating a response
He dismisses the questions,
wishing it would end
His life in a **pixel** depiction.

He sticks to the screen, holding on for dear life
He's glued to electricity, with control at his fingertips
He relives his life with google translate,
the same words in a different voice
His life in a **pixel** depiction.

The tablet is his safety,
a protection from the missing details
His face mimicked by frames-per-second,
the same body but a different person.
Pixels are what tells his story now,
his journey coated in
a different language.
His life in a **pixel** depiction.



Everything

McCall and Layth

The atmosphere was thick and tentative.
The normally laid-back greetings were stiffer than usual,
as though the words had suddenly matured
and were too old to be tossed around lightly,
without a care in the world.

My body tensed, inching my limbs closer to my side
as the questions began.

Hesitation,
nervous glances,
and subconscious fidgeting occupied us,
before someone dared to ask the first question.
Not an intense question,
but a soft one,
a safe one.

“Where are you from?”
Even though we already knew the answer.

Instantly, I was reminded of small children and water,
Cautiously dipping in one toe at a time,
careful not to make too big of a movement
and risk falling in.

Patient teachers coax them into the water,
the same way he was quietly urging us
to ask any question.
He was ready.

It was the rest of us who were nervous.
Too scared to say the wrong thing,
paranoid we weren't prepared.
Would he be offended?
Would he understand us?
What if we brought bad memories flooding back to him?
What if we shook our fragile friendship?
What if?
What if?

But he was bursting with what we were lacking,
confidence.
He had the answers.

I felt ashamed that
we had misunderstood his ability to trust us,
to trust himself.

His soft brown eyes silently encouraged me.
The words dropped slowly and softly from my lips.
What do you miss most?

I almost regretted the question
as the light in his eyes dulled,
and a sad smile crept across his lips.

I miss...

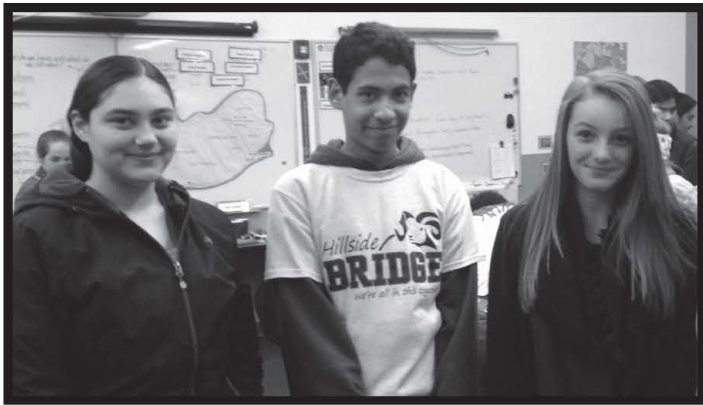
Everything.

Everything.

His wistful look is branded in my mind's eye.

He missed...

Everything.



Blue

Ruby and Daniah

“What is your favorite color?”

This is a game.

Correctly move the pieces,

Correctly arrange the right words

In the right order in your foreign mouth,

And you’ll get wide grins, baby talk, praise,

And the title of a refugee.

But you are not a refugee.

That word is broken, used, worn,

And reeks of pity.

You are an immigrant,

Forced by parents to abandon the place

You once called home.

Referred to as

“She”,

“That kid”,

“It”,

Because your name does not roll

Smoothly off the tongue,

Like your white sisters, Lucy or Paige.

But do not envy them; you are your people’s legacy,

And you are more than they know.

They stick you in their stereotypical box,
Telling you,
It is such a shame that you live in a land of terrorists,
Your women are married off young,
You cannot speak your mind.
But that is all they know of your people,
That is all they expect.

You itch to tell them the stories of your ancestors,
That they are human too,
But your words collide and mix
From the journey of your brain to your mouth,
And they watched you with expectant smiles,
Eyes wide with curiosity,
Trying to help, but not knowing how.

Your parents led you here,
With promises of going back.
Even after seeing your white hot fear,
Your quaking anger,
Your tears,
You were still led away
From the generation of your roots.

Here, it's a game.
People bounce you about,

Expect you to adapt,
To say your words right,
To know where the bathroom is
On the first day of school,
When you can't even remember
The teacher's English name.

You have been gone so long that you are afraid
That when you board that plane to go back
The turbulence of your flight will uproot you with the
truth,
That you are no longer sure which place is foreign,
And which place is home.

But you cannot tell any of them this.
Your mouth won't let you.
So instead, you shift your grin,
And remember your favorite color.

"Blue."

The Journey

Philip "P" and Abbas "A"

Abbas steps into the room,
sits down at our table,
slowly and cautiously relaxing into his seat.
We greet each other.
He pulls out his typed story
and starts to read.
His accent is strong
but it does not stop the words from rolling out.
I picture the glistening stars he describes,
And climb up onto his metal roof
observing the constellations
he shares with his family.
But he is not aware of my presence.

His story shifts to vibrant grassy meadows.
I smell the sweet aromas of falafel and fish,
and my black and white picture begins to leak colors,
that pulse as they flow down the page.
Abbas and his family are laughing and talking as they
eat.

Suddenly, the landscape blurs.
I try to focus on the laughter,

but it dissolves into chaos.
“Go home, find your parents.
Leave!”

Abbas runs to safety,
but his arrival brings the thundering sounds of bombs,
pummeling the earth.
On television he quietly witnesses Iraq’s war.
I look away because I cannot let him “see”
the reflection of his suffering.

Our blue and brown eyes meet
and I see in his limited smile
the green meadows.
In his quiet downcast eyes
I hear the thundering bombs.
In his clenched hands,
happiness and sadness are interwoven.
He has earned my respect
In a way that will never go away.
We are connected.

Finding Home

Sofi and Mustafa

In my old home,
my bare feet slapped the battered,
crusty,
coffee-stained earth of Iraq.
The soccer ball limped across the ground,
sagging,
deflated,
yet playful.
Our voices cracked above the stillness in the moist air,
teasing,
yelling,
tackling.

We were just kids, and didn't get mad at anybody.
Not when momma nervously glanced up
from the telephone,
worries ridden in her face.
Not when the angry men threatened us with
sharp frightening words,
"Give us the money,
or we'll kill you."

Not when
one gentle,
loving aunt
was caught in the middle of confused gunfire.

Suddenly, everything changed.
We were no longer hidden from the world's evils.
Our house was no longer home,
and it was time to go.
We lived in many places,
apartments,
houses,
buildings,
where luck did not follow us.

In Syria,
the first unfamiliar land,
Momma was unlucky.
Scorpions and spiders nipped at her feet
while we danced around the kitchen,
Ahmed,
Abdullah,
me,
and Ali,
(the only one still churning in momma's stomach)
waited for her mouth-watering shish-kabobs.

In Turkey,
during the dead of night,
a Playstation faintly murmured,
sending soft blue light
quietly bouncing from wall to wall.

Three disassembled streets away
bombs slammed into lives,
crumpling memories,
possessions,
and remains
into a chalky dust that settled into the still night.

That war devoured our lives,
slowly morphing us into refugees,
separating scraps of all we knew.
We ran away from the war and bad things,
but then the bad things came to us.
No matter how far we went,
how careful we were,
the ruins of our past followed.

In America,
our new home.

our past still follows us,
but it no longer controls us.
I am a refugee,
but I am safe.
I am a refugee,
but I am happy.
I am a refugee,
and I am home.



This is My New Friend

Jenneth *Josephine* *and Ishok*

This is my new friend Ishok
who came as a refugee from Nepal.
He is a hard surface
that cannot be cracked with a rock
but with a delicate touch of a pebble.
He has a cover to blend in
but beneath lay a mind,
a soul that is more knowing
than what the world sees.

This is my friend Ishok.
Green trees surrounded
his crowded refugee camps,
a wondrous site.
But inside,
bullets sliced through the thick hot air
surrounded by terror and fear.

This is my friend Ishok.
Every day was a fight for survival,
a flood over his body
that denied him a single breath.

Yet, he has good memories too
of chasing balls across soccer fields,
cheering for a winning team,
childhood games.

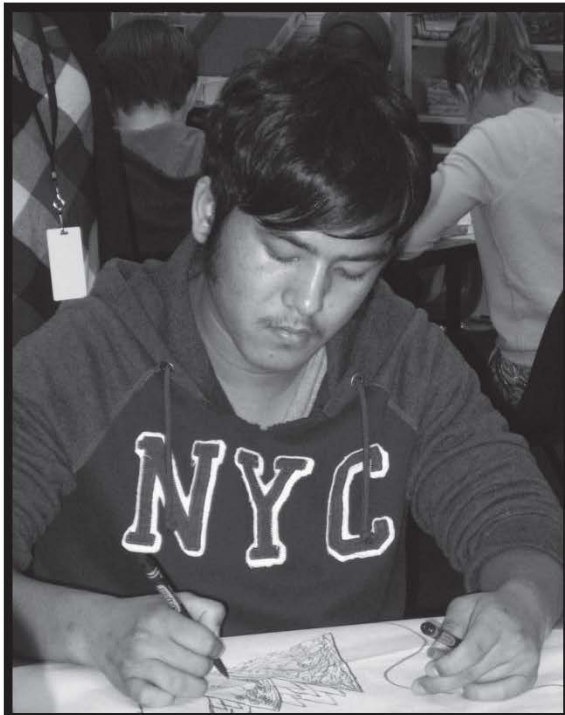
This is my friend Ishok,
who tells me of these things,
the things that are hidden,
tied back, not to be set free.
The things that can rip apart
Hearts,
Minds,
Souls.

This is my friend Ishok.
I cannot imagine
the pain of his childhood,
his innocence gone too quickly.
Those are the shoes
that our feet do not belong in.

This is my friend Ishok.
The boy who is looking
to fit in his new world
as his heart is cautiously revealed
in the abyss of American society.

This is my friend Ishok
who watched movies about America,
expecting to live in a big city,
with tall buildings and diversity.
Instead he is in
a small city,
surrounded by tall mountains
and white people.

This is my new friend Ishok.



Scars

Mason / and Shueb /

Scars
Some mental
others physical
but they all have everlasting impressions
on the way I think and act.

Scars
I shouldn't have to suffer
for someone else's war
but when men fight
the children deal with the consequences
children taken as soldiers
prisoners
hostages
and scarred with the atrocities of war.

Scars
Some are never ending
some are microscopic
but they all tell a story
a story of tragedy
a story of stupidity
a story of being in the wrong place
at the wrong time.

Scars
affect the way I see things
the way I see my home
the way other people see me
the way I see myself.

Scars
should not be a part of a childhood
childhood should not be spent trying to forget
all that has happened
but they can't
because
every time someone looks at them with pity
they are reminded.

Scars
Some mental
others physical
but they all have everlasting impressions
on us.



Will it Ever be Enough

Kate Smith and Sandra Smith

In China I am behind.

I work hard every night for tedious hours,

I work until my brain spits out formulas, phrases, facts.

It's not enough,

It's never enough,

Will it ever be enough?

Whispers of America seep in through half closed doors,

A constant buzz of thoughts and ideas,

A place where people are electric,

Witty and original,

Minds that aren't tied down by exhaustion.

But it's not enough,

It's never enough,

Will it ever be enough?

The bitter functionality of routine reminds me of my
harsh reality.

I am designated to a life of purpose,
not amusement.

But it's not enough,

It's never enough,

Will it ever be enough?

In a land unfamiliar to anything I have ever imagined,
The dusty sage brush kingdom of Boise, Idaho,
I am welcomed.
Here I am smart but trapped in culture,
My language has locked knowledge away.
Words jumble,
thoughts flip,
I get so confused.
But it's not enough,
It's never enough,
Will it ever be enough?

Counties, states, borders, language,
None of them define who I am.
I am defined by my capability for change,
I am defined by my ability to look at the world
differently.
Only I can define who I am.
It's enough,
It's always been enough.

The Good Side

Fiona and Hasan

I look at him.
His eyes are fixed on the table.
He seems far away
in a place I know nothing of.

When we talk,
his heart isn't there.
In his mind he is
somewhere.
Somewhere is all I know.

Iran and Afghanistan are his home,
but I wonder many things
about his past.
He doesn't
want to share.

When he speaks English,
his voice is quiet
and rumbles
with an added sound.

His story fills my head
with questions.
Who are the bad guys?
The ones who raided our house.
Do you want to see your dad?
Yes, A little.
Were you ever scared?
No.

With every question I ask
there comes a blunt reply.
How am I supposed to learn
if all he tells is the good side?

At the end of each day
I say goodbye.
I expect something,
though I don't know what.
Just some sign
that he feels understood.

I never did find
what I was searching for.
But maybe
he wants to say something,
just like I do,

but doesn't know how.
Shyness can swallow your
words easily.

Never darkness,
never pain.
He only wanted
to share the happiness.
His life changed,
and now he wants to let go of
all of the bad things,
push them into a corner of his mind.

The good side
was all he ever told.
Because he can't
throw away his memories.
He can't undo
things he wishes he could.
He has to go on.

That must be the way things
are supposed to be.
Maybe I am only meant
to know half.

The Language of Laughter

Mia and Lwee

I.

“I want to talk, but I don’t know English.”

See the world,
And see the lights,
The refugees,
Facing challenges in new countries,
We had never thought about before.

Language is the building block of our cultures,
Of communication,
Something we never really had to think about.
The right words dropped out of our mouths,
Onto paper,
Into listening ears,
No mistakes.

And now
The frustration circles inside all of our heads,
Around and around,
Howling
LET THE WORDS OUT!
LET THE WORDS OUT!
LET THE WORDS OUT!

Because the words are the key to unlock normality,
Something we haven't had since being
Stuck with the title "Refugee".
They sit in the palms of our hands,
But our fingers betray us
And we cannot grip them.
Not yet.

We want to share our stories,
Why we are here,
But we are unable.

Our thoughts are stuck
From our brains to our mouths,
And we have no English words.
I am a fragment of the 50 million other refugees,
A teenage boy transformed into a man
Through my journey,
Bouncing from country to country.

II.

See the paint brushes drag along the canvas,
Creating the picture of me here,
In America,
Happy and finally safe.

At a new school,
I sit with my group of stranger-friends,
And I can feel their anxiousness,
I can feel the awkward tension.

Dirt colored hair starts chewing with his thoughts,
And lets out a word.

“Welcome.”

I know “welcome.”

It was painted on the signs,
The signs people held up at the airport
When I first got here.

The other one begins,
Her sunset-painted lips slip-slapping together,
Her voice winding into the melody,
All of it wrapping around my head
The hum creeping into my nose, ears, mouth,
As random fireworks of understanding light up,
Quickly obscured with new words as they appear.
“Name... question... home... family...have...”
I nod.

Nodding is easy.
Just a bounce of the chin and everything is okay,
and their questions are gone.

Their eyes dart from one to another's.
There is no sound, noises having crept away just
moments ago,
And now I smell their nervousness,
Almost a metallic scent,
Mixed in with the spice of fear and excitement.

Dirt colored hair's voice rumbles out,
His eyes dig into mine,
Searching for buried stories,
I think.
What is it with Americans and stories?
They always want something.
They want my words.
The corner where the ceiling
Meets the walls is intriguing.
It's simplicity is beautiful.
It doesn't spit English at me
And then expect me to answer.

If I meet their interested gazes,
They might see a hint of confusion,
And I can't let them see that.
I have to be strong, like my father.
Sunset-painted lips starts laughing.
A big laugh,

One that leaks around the once-buzzing room.
Dirt hair joins in and I look at them,
I laugh a little too.

I feel relief's whispery fingers
Stroke my tense shoulders,
And at this moment,
I feel almost at ease.
We are communicating with no words,
Because laughter is universal.



The Story was Marcello

Sydney and Marcello

When we met,
he walked with confidence,
and his smile invited me in.
Drumming.
Drawing.
Laughing.
Talking.
He told us about the war,
the corruption,
the president,
but never about himself.
Devoid of emotion,
he mindlessly recited the history of Congo.

But he wrote,
what he had witnessed,
what he had felt.
The jagged words fit together,
like wrong pieces of a puzzle,
but the story was true.
The story was Marcello.

Sitting in refugee camps of dirt,

waiting for fate to be handed to him
the authorities continued to lie.
Living in houses made of red, dusty clay,
boys laughing as they played soccer,
going to bed with hunger aching in his stomach,
because the rice was not enough.
It was never enough.

The devastation of his story hit.
Marcello's smiling persona,
demolished by the wretched story that was his life.
The bullet that penetrated his father's head,
the despair of his country's constant conflict,
the powerful aching of hunger in his stomach.
He has suffered.
But I had never looked hard enough to see.

I had only seen his smile
and never recognized the pain behind it.
All of Marcello was there -
his hardships,
his joys,
his hunger,
his strength.
All in his smile.

The Fun Group

Lily (Lily) and Mohammed (Mohammed)

Timid glances fill the circle
as an uncomfortable silence creeps in.
I want to say something to make him laugh
or smile,
to break the ice,
the silence,
the barrier.
I open my mouth to recite the words I practiced
over and over in the bathroom mirror,
but my speed-demon mouth doesn't make an
appearance.

My mind draws a blank, and I become
impossibly shy.

"Where are you from?"
We hold our breath and prepare to be patient,
but the English words flow smoothly out of his mouth.
"I am from Iraq."
We nod in tune.
And my temporary shyness fades away
out of existence.

I speak like we are old friends.
We all do.
The whole group brightens up,
Lightens up,
and we all have to fight for air time.
I can laugh and smile and play without worrying
about my overly active personality,
because he has one too.

There's an excitement in the air,
the day is alive with pulsing energy.
People buzz around the classroom gather materials
for a masterpiece not yet made.
We stand in front of a map and all smile,
our hands perfectly plastered to our sides.

Finger on the camera button ready to snap the image,
Pauses...

"You're my fun group, right?
You're my playful group."
We smile and nod.
Diane grins and readies the camera,
"Then be fun."
We make poses without thinking,
click.

“Yeah, we’re using this one.”

Heads bang into others as we crowd around to look.

Our eyes dart to Mohammed, and await approval.

We thought he would be uncomfortable,

but he stares gently at the picture,

and smiles.

Just like that it happens,

we are friends.



Waka is Home

Mira and Claude

Lost *Waka*.

Family and friends,
My grandparents and cousins,
Those left behind
Forever in my memory,
Distant but never forgotten.
I carry them with me.

Lost *Waka*.

Uganda, the place I was born,
I can always call it my home,
Stamped with the mark of my existence,
No matter where life takes me.
I am intertwined with Africa.

Lost *Waka*.

Sentimental objects carried with me,
The picture of my friends and me laughing,
Before my life changed.
But I have had to grow up so fast,
To support what's left of my family.
My childhood vanishes.

Lost *Waka*.

Traditions.

The singing,

The feet pounding on the red dirt in rhythmic patterns,

The dance flowing through the generations,

Telling stories of our heroic ancestors.

Lost *Waka*.

Safety and belonging,

Uganda was a minefield of danger.

Everything I ever knew

Disappeared before me

And the pieces

No longer fit into my life.

Lost *Waka*.

Memories,

As I step forward

One unsure, unsteady foot in front of the other,

On the path to my future.

My old life plays back in my mind like a dream.

Then I Find Home,

A new home,

Creating new memories,

In new surroundings.

Found Home.
Acceptance,
New people accepting my wisdom,
Wanting to learn more,
To be educated about my old *Waka*.
So many different ways to share,
Different reasons for hope,
Different ideas of love,
Different ways to tell my story,
In my new *Waka*.



Foreign Words

Rebekah A. [unclear] and Sandra [unclear]

Language is her barrier,
crinkled and choppy,
slow and uncomfortable.
She tries my language
wishing, hoping,
we could understand
each other.

We ask questions struggling to be clear,
confusion stares back,
trying to recognize the English words.
Answers are short and rough,
she begs to be understood.

Why did you come here?
What is most important to you?
Why did you leave your country?
Education!

She fights for the right words,
we fight to understand.
She fights to form foreign syllables,
we fight to communicate in different ways.
Pictures, drawings, words,

her art helps us understand,
her gentle touch helps us see who she is.
A translator comes
for us, for her.
Their connection is hard not to see,
her first friend she can talk to.
She can relate,
Communicate,
without stopping,
without struggling to be understood.

Her language pours out like a song,
every note on key.
Smooth and soft,
she tell us her story, her life,
and who she is.
We struggled,
but we understand.



Fear

Nikolai and Mustafa

We are not safe in our home.
We are afraid.
In a hot, dry town surrounded by the deserts of Iraq
My family is threatened by evil men
Who killed my loving aunt.
We run away from our home in Iraq
Leaving our family, friends, and home behind.
We run away to Syria.

We were safe in Syria
Until the war arrived.
Fear courses through me
Helicopters fly above
Shooting at people in the dusty streets.
Bombs explode
Burning shards fall on our home.

We are not safe in our new home.
The evil war from Iraq
Has followed us here.
We have run away from the war and the bad things,
Away from the guns and the bombs,
But the bad things came to us.

We fly away
Across the world
Leaving behind the only land
That I have ever known.
To Turkey, then Germany.

From Germany to America.
In New York I want to stay
In the city of the movies but
We fly from New York to Chicago.

From Chicago to Boise,
Where we stop,
At last.
Our family is now safe
In our new home
Where we don't need to be afraid
Any longer.

When We Grow Up

A poem in two voices

Kellan *and Hussein*

When I grow stronger and smarter I will be

an engineer, creating machines
more intricate than the brain.

an architect,
constructing buildings
that are so tall they scrape the sky.

We will be remembered as innovators

an expert in our fields

a genius of our time

the greatest minds in history.

I will work hard

I will work hard

go to school,
focus on what is really important

do my homework,
put in the extra hours

**so that when the time comes for me to
choose my future**

I will be ready.

I will be prepared.

I will be sure
that I have chosen well.
that I have chosen wisely.
That I have chosen a path that is better
for my family
for me
for the world.
Because the things we learn in life
can change someone else's.



Always Home

Zoey and Paw

My home is a place where the moist thick air fills my lungs,
as the rain leaks through our wooden roof.

It is a place where the teachers leave burning red prints
on your skin with a bamboo stick
when you disobey the rules that keep you protected
from the outside world.

My home is a place where the men in green come take my
safety.

It is a place where my village goes down in dark flames,
and turns into my past.

I walk from the place that kept me warm with the laughter
of those around me.

I run from the place I called home,
the place where my memories and childhood is stored.

I leave the place where my friendship lays
with the abandoned volleyball.

I leave my responsibilities of the household,
of the pots and pans I would cook the family tradition in.

I come to a place where I sit in the dirt and watch
the hunger around me eat people alive.
I live in the dirty camp where children's stomachs
are just full enough
that they don't starve,
and the taste of Thailand swirls around me
until I give it the thing it so desires,
the feel of home.

I leave the camp where I was raised,
but never thought of as home.
I fly from the camps that healed my deep wounds,
and my thoughts
that tortured me.

I come to a place where I don't lose anyone,
where only good thoughts come to mind.
I live in America,
but it is not the home that kept me warm and happy.
It is the home that keeps me safe.

Without Words

Ezra and Parfait

The first time I met Parfait
we didn't talk,
but we saw ourselves in one another.
We knew each other.

I had trouble understanding him.
My Congolese friend spoke his best English.
But together,
we saw more than the words we spoke.
So we proceed in our silent adventure,
struggling to share our stories.
Where did you live in the Congo?
I lived in a refugee camp in Burundi.
My parents were from Congo.
His nature is rooted in Africa,
in his quietly revealed wisdom.

He is like all of us,
but possesses rare qualities.
Helpful and forgiving,
he wants to contribute,
with so much to give.
He is from the
dark continent of struggle

and remains hopeful in his new home.

I am from the

land of opportunity,

though I take it for granted.

He knows two countries,

two lives,

for better or worse.

I have only known one story,

one place,

for all my life.

But what really matters,

are our similarities,

in the present,

in the future,

our faith,

our friendship,

our willingness to learn from each other,

without words,

but in trust.

I know Parfait.

He is patient and strong,

shy at times,

but outgoing in his heart.

I know him
because of all we have to share
without the words,
soul to soul.

Most of all
I know we are friends
because of our similarities,
and because of the differences.

We know each other,
we inspire one another.
We see ourselves
without words.

Colliding Worlds

Elise Walker and Hussein Walker

My dad tells me the story of when the “bad people”
came.

They crawled into my house
To hit my mom and sister,
To try to kill my dad,
To steal our safety,
To damage my beautiful country,
To interrupt my childish dreams,
Replacing them with a looming nightmare.

Syria was supposed to be our new home,
Where we would find safety.
But then the “bad people” came.
The shooting, the screaming, the crying,
Had followed us like a relentless shadow,
Mimicking our every move,
No matter where we tried to hide,
It always found us.

Laid out in front of me was my new, new home,
My new safe home,
My new American home,

But I wanted so badly to turn back to my friends,
My cousins,
My aunts and my uncles.
I left them with the “bad people”.
I am safe, but they are not.

I only knew a little English
From my school teacher in Syria.
I could say, “Hi” and “How are you?”
But what happens when I am supposed to say goodbye?
What do I say then?
Or in between, when you ask me how I am?
I can understand you; I just can’t talk back.
A smile can only get you so far.

I am chained to my old country,
But am pulled to America.
Half my brain operates in Arabic,
The other half in English.
But I am forced to connect the two,
To unite,
To translate,
To balance my colliding worlds.

The Broken Words

Paige Turner and Daniah Turner

I try so hard to speak
that my hands flutter like
leaves on autumn trees.
The broken words
tangle into heaps of consonants and vowels
leaving my mouth twisted and useless.
Even the floor dares me to talk,
to understand,
to fit in.

The endless school hallways lead
me to a room
that is scarier than
the words that battle in my mouth.
Jill tells me that I'll be learning English here
and that there's nothing to be nervous about.
I'm not sure.
I'm never sure
anymore.

The broken words seldom make it past my teeth.
I want to curl up and disappear,
but Jill is patient.

She goes through each letter and sound
so I understand.
English is weird,
complex,
and I beg the words to be smooth on my tongue.
Jill reminds me to be patient,
that it will come with time and practice.

But,
I don't have time or patience!
I just want to understand,
to fit in,
to belong,
but without the words
I am locked
out.



The American Survival Guide

Zoe and Justine

Welcome to America,
where everything is “perfect.”
Welcome to your future,
it helps to fit in.

Welcome to a world of misconception,
where everyone assumes who you are behind your looks.
They conclude you wanted to leave
because all refugees are paper thin and uneducated,
so you must have been that way too.

They did not see who you were before -
joyful and lively.

They never stood on the same ground you did
watching you laugh with your friends,
or telling stories with your family.
They didn’t walk with you to school
at six a.m. everyday,
where you wrestled with a foreign language
that twisted in your mouth.

Yet, they say they understand your story,
“Poor girl,”

They say
“Poor sad girl,
desperate to leave her temporary camp,
and her tiny country,
in gargantuan Africa.”

Welcome to America,
where your past is a world away,
where junior high popularity
is determined by the color of your eye shadow
and the brand of shoes you wear.
The content of your character is over-looked.
Your past won't matter,
as long as you fit in.

They've given you a roof over your head,
and food in the kitchen.
In reality you have nothing,
but you are stronger than ever.

Welcome to America,
where you have sought refuge,
where you will remain unthreatened,
where you can be who you want to be
who shows us the courage of your convictions,
and the regal pride of an African woman.

Kenya's Words

Avery and *Mohamed*

I speak *Kenya's* words.

I speak of my friends, my home,
that I miss so much.

But that was then
and this is now.

I am happy here.

I tell my family "every day it gets easier,"
but not really.

I am the outlier,
in their world of utterly English words.

I speak *Kenya's* words.

But every day the new words come easier,
every hour,
every minute,

new words, new meanings, new thoughts.

But these English words are not mine.

I speak *Kenya's* words.

Even After Everything

Isabel *and Marcelin*

That night,
bad people came with shiny black guns
and shot my dad in the head,
then left,
off to slaughter someone else's father,
mother,
brother
or sister.

All of them gone,
For good.

It wasn't safe in the Congo,
it wasn't safe anywhere.
We had to keep running,
never really settling in.

I was six when we were declared "refugees"
in a camp called
Nakivale,
located in Uganda.

I spent eight years in the camp
where pain,
hunger,
sadness,
fear
was all I felt.
At least I had a place to live,
food to eat,
and water to drink.

But now I am safe.
Idaho has everything:
school,
college,
friends,
food,
ice cream,
french fries,
a future and,
HOPE.
I now know all things
are possible.

The War

Jacob [] and Paw []

The War,
Is not a joke and
The war in the movies
That is not real war.

The War,
Father leaves for another wife
Mom ever so sad and
Fear, fear for what comes next
Haunts your life.

The War,
Explosive rocks fall from the sky
Your home reduced to ash and
You must leave
Or you will be killed.

The War,
Flee, flee from Burma
Don't look back
You can never look back
You are not yourself
The old you is dead.

The War,
Walk away from home
Swim through the river and
Run to a safer place.

The War,
Wait years in the camps for a chance at a new life
To leave the place that no longer wants you
Where a new struggle has just begun.

The War,
The long hard
Ever so hard days
The constant worry of
Will I make it out alive?
The time comes after what seems like forever
To leave Thailand.

The War,
Is over
Peace at last
A new home is made in
America.

A Closed Door

Valerie and Yousif

I sing the snake-like song of my language,
bobbing in and out of syllables known
since the beginnings of my memories.
Through the open door you come, wide-eyed with wonder.
Seated, someone asks you your name
but you can't understand,
and I feel like I've taken a bite that I just can't swallow.

“Yousif.”

You finally say your name
and that insurmountable cliff just got a little more
accessible.

I love the way you sing your language,
but my mouth can't get a hold of it.

Showing you “welcome” is hard,
I try to create an understanding but feel misunderstood.
Then you show us your word for “welcome”,
and again it slips and slides on my tongue,
unable to quite grasp it.
Do you feel misunderstood?

Do you understand
what I'm saying?
That I'm trying to help you fit in?
Can you see that I'm doing my best to help?
Because you feel far away,
behind a wall.

The translator comes,
acting like a door,
letting you in.
Into communication,
communication to connection,
connection to understanding.

And we begin to
sing our snake-like songs,
together.



9/32/14

Savannah and Daniah

9/32/14

What is the meaning of life if I can't see it?
If it's something like a broken record playing a song
that I've hated all my life,
or moving places undeserving of your heart.

Family,
that's all I need.

cousins,
siblings,
mother,
father.

Can't we go back?
Instead of being in this place you're calling home.

9/32/14

Was the day I came,
not because of war,
not because of a forceful event,
but because my family sought for more opportunities,
new ways of making peace.

9/32/14

A forced place,
a time of sorrow.

No meaning dwells below those jumbled numbers,
but I ask again in a tone of confusion,
what does it mean?
What does it stand for?

9/32/14

Autocorrect is changing the answers to my life,
telling me what to do,
saying to me,
I can't speak like them,
but I can express like them.
Showing them what has happened to me,
what has changed my life?

9/32/14

Home,
where will I be going next?
Home,
where I will be shown to be like them.
To be the odd in a million evens
as I say something no one will understand.

9/32/14

is the time for a new beginning and ending,
a time to unravel the confusion
and to find a new
home.



Reality

Emmylou Harris and Sandra Harris

REALITY

Don't be frightened my child
This is a story called reality.
It isn't a fairytale about a beautiful princess,
Who lived happily ever after,
But it is a good one that holds

TRUTH.

You hope for the story of a young girl
who grows up as a fairy or a princess,
But this is not that story.
This is the real story of someone ripped from her home,

NO.

She was not taken or run out,
She made a choice.
The choice to stay and be treated unfairly
or to go and start

OVER.

Leaving behind more than we could imagine,
She took with her a voice.
That kept her bound to family and friends.
It is what she

KNEW.

She left behind family,
She left behind friends,
But brought more than you

THOUGHT.

She brought her kind quiet grace,
And her beautiful language.
But most importantly, her Chinese

CULTURE.

The culture she grew up with,
The Chinese society she knew so well,
Shared with billions of people,
and now with
ME.



Seven Years

Elias 37

A refugee camp is no place to call home.
The muddy streets are littered with trash,
and small white canvas tents
dot the eternal landscape.

Some of the worst of humanity
happens in this corner of the world.
Here hunger, disease,
murderers and thieves
run rampant through the crowded camps.

Worst of all this place is temporary,
Just a community to “survive” in
While they find you another country to
“thrive” in.

But seven years in a horror like this
is just as cruel and inhumane
as the conflict they are escaping.

This boy had his childhood here,
where he learned to speak,
where he learned to read,
and he made his friends.

But now what opportunity does he have?

He grew up in a world
where the only rules are
survival of the fittest.

He has waited seven years
to escape hunger, disease, and conflict.

His soul wanders like a river
that doesn't seem to go anywhere.

So while the sun begins to drop
beneath the horizon,
and the stars begin to find
a place in the sky...

He wonders if he will ever find
his place on earth.

I Still Remember

Edith and Justine

Think,
if we are lucky enough
we will leave
to find a new place,
a better,
happier place.
But for now I am stuck here
in an overcrowded camp with
people, people, people, people
on the borders of Rwanda,
even though
I'm not Rwandan
or a refugee,
I call the camp my home.

I still remember
the Baobab trees in the forest,
the chirping of the Gonolek birds overhead,
the soft moist feel of the moss
up the rough bark of the hollow tree.
I still remember
the food at the camp,
a half pound of beans,
a half pound of existence.

Life was rough but it was all I needed,
family,
friends,
my roots.

I still remember,
the day when we were told
we were leaving to the "*great country*",
to America.

The tall buildings, the busy streets,
the yellow and black cars
from the stories that I had heard.
I felt myself shake and cry with joy,
a feeling better than words.
Because everything is better there.

I still remember
the small crowded plane,
clutter, clutter, clutter
and leaving my life behind,
my friends,
my family,
my roots.

The houses below us
looked like tiny multicolored boxes,
from high up in the clouds.

It felt like forever before
we landed with a thump.
The plane rumbled and shook.
I know that feeling,
that exact sense of
being thrown and tossed around
from one place to another.

On the ground
we went through a tunnel only
to find ourselves wide-eyed and open-mouthed,
overwhelmed.
People, people, people
everywhere.

This was America,
this is my new home.
I feared I would get lost here,
but I realized this is how life is now,
and I cannot get lost
at home.

There Is Hope

Alexa T. and Parfait

No one chooses to be a refugee.

Every day I am reminded
my country,
my family,
my heart,
and my thoughts
were weighed down by war-stricken fear
of men with guns that surrounded my people.
They brought death to young and old
so my parents sought refuge in a camp in Burundi
and then in the United States,
to protect me from the horrible things that happened
in the Congo.

It was hard to come to America,
to become part of a new world,
a world I still do not fully understand.
The language does not sit comfortably on my tongue,
but it is a place without war.
Hope fills the walls of our new house,
where my family is safe and together.
But I miss my old friends
and the others I left behind.

We lived in weathered down shacks
of plastic sheeting.
The days were spent playing
with a homemade soccer ball,
and we never had enough food.
But now we have entered a joyful place,
a place where we can eat whenever
and whatever we want.
A place where we can feel safe and protected.

I am entwined in this world
and the sanctuary it provides.
At times dreams rise up and overwhelm me,
build in my chest and
threaten to slip off my tongue
out into the open air.

My life has not been easy
but not everything has been bad.
Coming here has been confusing,
but I am happy.
My father told me of the bad things
in the Congo.
Perhaps the bad things never truly leave us.

My life has been carved from my past
but my future is not set in stone,
because where there has been fear,
there is now **hope**.



Homes

Frances & Hussein

Ghosts of fear destroyed my beautiful home
Leaving me with only dreams of people I love,
My uncle's booming voice,
My little cousin's voice of bells.
Leaving me with only a memory of the Iraqi sun on
my face
And distant flavors of tradition.

I hold the pen my new teacher gave me but I fail
myself.
I can't write these words; they are not mine.
My hand won't shape them,
My mouth won't say them,
They fall out and land at my feet and
I trip on them and collapse before I am understood.

Voices that speak the language of jumbled sounds,
Tell me I am safer here.
They say that I can rebuild my home,
That I will be happy.
Who are they to say I'm happy in their tangled
tongue?

I want to stay here,
I wish I could go home.
Ghosts of fear destroyed my beautiful home
But not my memory
Of the Iraqi sun on my face,
Setting
As the sun in my new home
Rises.



Words Aren't Needed

Isabella and Doh

I sit down

I watch

I listen.

As everyone starts taking their seats,

The laughter dies down and the drums start to play.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

I glance over and a little curve in your mouth

Says you're having fun.

You're having fun.

I sit down

I watch

I listen.

You come again.

You sit and we ask,

We pry, but still

Nothing.

We eagerly await the history of your past

But we have to postpone the adventure,

For there is the invisible line
That blocks you from me,
English from Karen,
The wall that divides the words of truth.

I sit down
I watch
I listen.

You brought a picture?
I brought a picture,
Mementos filled with color,
Filled with joy.
You brought yours from home
Thousands of miles away,
A tiny square
That represents so much.
You brought a picture.

We hear no more,
The barrier defeats us once again.
The crushing truth has hit that
We may never hear your story.
It hurts.

We are here for you,
Waiting for the moment when you can talk,
When you will finally understand
You can stop running.
The waiting,
The silence.
The words do not spill from your mouth.
We are here for you.
Do you understand?

I sit down
I watch
I listen.

It was Thursday but we didn't meet until
A paper hits my desk and I see printed words,
Your words,
Your story,
Your journey.
My eyes glide over the words and I feel success.
We know your story,
Your past, your future.
We've split the wall that divides our worlds,
And beaten the monster that sews our mouths.

I hold onto the rails.
You do the same and
We cross the bridge to communication,
Because our stories can finally be heard.

The scathing actuality is the voiceless boy.
The remarkable beauty is that words aren't needed
To express the truth.
Communication isn't defined by letters on a page
Or the syllables you speak;
It's defined by the understanding.
It just takes time.
Time we had,
And barrier we broke.



Family

Tenje and Justine

We were born into this world,
our eyes open and
our skin brown.

Justine, a pretty girl with soft smile.
Tenje, a silly boy with wide grin.
A smile, that's all it took,
a grin and our hands met and shook.

We came together in one
simple social studies class,
met, talked, sang and danced.
Different kids, different losses, different faiths
but still able to face one another and laugh
together.

Yet I grew up,
swam in pools and
ate whenever hungry,
and she grew up,
swam through crowds
just to find something to eat.
Tennis shoes or bare feet,
our worlds stretched so far apart.

I left to become another's son;
she left to become another's citizen.
The pain of leaving those behind -
uncles, brothers, sisters, and parents
is shared from an adoptee to a refugee.
We connect.

Tenje and Justine,
a new sister,
a new brother.



I Knew, He Knew

Jalen and Mohammed

He flashes a quick smile across the table.
I knew that we were going to be friends.
He knew that we were going to be friends.
We speak gentle words to one another.
We both blush with shyness.

But something doesn't feel right.
The seen and unseen borders interfere.
He and I are very different -
culture,
gender,
language,
experiences.
But friendship has no limits.

His story intrigues me.
I intrigue him.
The words push against my lips,
urging me to ask questions.
But I fear that something I might say will offend him,
so I swallow my words.
I listen patiently as he tells me about his father.

“My dad told me to change my fear into courage.”
The phrase lingers in my mind.
He gives me courage that had been buried inside me.
I give a polite smile back to him.

We are individuals,
unlikely partners, placed together by luck.
Acceptance weaves our lives together.
Friendship knows no boundaries.
And the unexpected ones,
are the best.

