



# Stories of Arrival

## A Poetry Project with Immigrant and Refugee High School Students

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**W**ORKING IN COLLABORATION with an ELL teacher at one of the most culturally and language diverse high schools in the country—Foster High School in Tukwila, Washington—has given me the gift of falling in love with the wild side of poetry. I use the word “wild” not only because of the way I have seen poetry leap over language barriers and cultural differences, but because I have come to recognize and embrace the untamed aspects of the poems my students write—the ways in which they side-step the rules and boundaries of grammar, syntax, punctuation, and sentence structure.

I have been privileged to witness how poems can slip into the hearts, memories and imaginations of young people from widely diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Poetry has allowed these students to tell their stories with language that is fresh and full of surprises. Yet the poems they write also speak to the profound experiences that are part of leaving a home,

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family members, a country, and a way of life, often because of difficult, even unbearable, circumstances.

To honor and support these young poets, and to share their stories with the larger community, in 2009 we began a project at Foster High School called Stories of Arrival: Youth Voices. In this project our students, immigrants and refugees in the English Language Learner program, read poetry from around the world and write their own poems about their life experiences. They then share this work with the larger community by recording their poems for broadcast on a local public radio station, and publishing an anthology of their work, celebrating its release at a public reading. Proceeds from the sale of this anthology are donated to the Refugee Women's Alliance, a local organization that serves the students and their community.

The young people participating in this project have journeyed to Washington State from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bosnia, Brazil, Burma, Burundi, Congo, Eritrea, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Iraq, Kenya, Laos, Mexico, Nepal, Palau, Romania, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, Thailand, Tonga, Togo, Turkey, other parts of the U.S., and Vietnam. All are learning English. All have left behind members of their family on their journey here. Many of them will be the first in their families to graduate from high school.

## Getting Started: Writing is Made of Voices

I begin the project with a short statement of intent. “Writing is made of voices,” I tell the students, “like threads weaving a cloth or like the patterns we draw to connect the stars, we must remember that our voices connect us to the human family.” Then I show and tell the students what will occur during the project. Because I want to build in a strong sense of the universality of poetry and the strength inherent in finding our voices to tell our stories, I start by sharing as many bi-lingual poems as I can find to represent the languages spoken in our classroom (see end note). Most important to me is that I launch the project by communicating my confidence in the students’ abilities to find their way through the complexities of using a new language to write about their lives. I want to instill in them Salvadorian poet Roque Dalton’s sentiment that “poetry, like bread, is for everyone.”

I am certain the success of this project is, in part, that it provides space for telling stories about real life experiences. It is difficult, particularly for students from radically different cultures and experiences, to find a place within their school environment to express what lives deeply inside of them. I have discovered that when English language learners are given the opportunity to tell their life stories, their new language takes on rich layers of meaning. Carrie Stradley, the ELL teacher with whom I collaborate, notes that when these students write poems, the process fosters an engagement in their new language that is quite different from the “utilitarian English” they use to navigate school. “. . . These poems are memories they have left buried or ‘un-translated,’ that are not a part of their newly-shaping identities as teenagers in the United States,” she says. “They [bring] us the worlds that they left behind.”

Because poetry has the capacity to hold paradox and ambivalence; it can give voice to what grieves us, wounds us, troubles us, and at the same time give us courage and hope. I find that English language learners are constantly surprised by the process of translat-

ing their feelings and memories into a new language. The poems they create please and excite them with their truthful expression, their imagery and their potent effects on others. This too is what I mean by the “wild side” of poetry.

One of the first poems we read together is Luis Alberto Ambroggio’s poem, “Learning English.” (translated from the Spanish by Lori M. Carlson).

### Life

to understand me  
you have to know Spanish  
feel it in the blood of your soul.

If I speak another language  
for feelings that will always stay the same  
I don’t know  
if I’ll continue being  
the same person.

I invite three students to come up to the front of the class, one who speaks Spanish and two others who speak different languages. The Spanish speaker reads the poem in both English and Spanish; then we listen to two other readers recite the poem, translating the English into their own languages. This type of exercise is one of the many ways we celebrate our polyglot community.

### “My Life Is Like...”

In the next several sessions we begin to talk about what our lives are like. We discuss the idea of contrast—the ways that most of us experience conflicting emotions, often holding two competing emotions at once. Talking with the students about the tug of opposites allows me to use exaggerated physical gestures, which helps them to understand context and meaning. We pantomime our way through a number of paired emotional opposites and then the students begin to practice writing comparisons that begin “my life is like.”

I guide them to find images, sounds, and objects that will allow them to explore their own emotions. We read a poem by Lan Nguyen, from Vietnam, called

“My Life Story” (from Naomi Shihab Nye’s *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poetry from Around the World*). The poem begins:

What shall I tell them about my life?  
 a life of changes  
 a life of losing  
 remembering  
 eighteen years ago  
 a little child was born  
 surrounded by the love of a family . . .  
 surrounded by mountains and rivers  
 so free and beautiful

But life was not easy  
 the dearest father passed away  
 and left a big scar in the child’s head

She grew up with something missing in her  
 she had seen the people born and dying  
     born from the war  
 dying from guns and bombs . . .

Without telling them explicitly, I sense that the students begin to understand that poetry is a condensed language that will allow them to express their emotions and tell about their experiences in a unique shorthand. This would be much more difficult for them if they were asked to write in prose or five paragraph essay form.

I also read this poem because nearly half of the students in the project have experienced the consequences of war. Many of them have been born in and/or lived for years in refugee camps; their families having been displaced by war and violent conflict.

When thinking about what her life was like in the Baghdad of her childhood before the war began, Monia Haman, a student from Iraq wrote a “My Life is Like” poem,

#### **MY LIFE (excerpt)**

My life is like a diary book  
 like a big piece of paper  
 you can write anything on it

you can draw many things too.

My life is like pencil colors,  
 there are hot colors,  
 there are cold colors,  
 there are light colors, the bright morning  
 there are dark colors, the beautiful nights

I remember when I was young, Baghdad at night  
 was like a big golden box  
 full of colorful jewels  
 like a mother trying to protect her children  
 each moment  
 But, now she is old, exhausted  
 vulnerable, dismayed,  
 grieving for losing thousands  
 of her strong children.

In a reflection she wrote toward the end of the project Monia offered that, “Writing poems gives me hope to let the entire world know something about the true Iraqi traditions and true history of my country.”

Bior Duot, a student from Sudan, created a stunning “My Life is Like” piece, in which he expresses his grief over his grandmother’s violent death.

#### **MY LIFE (excerpt)**

My life is like a wounded soldier in a  
     battlefield crying  
 out for help, but no help arrives; looking for a  
     place to hide  
 but no place for hiding. I am just a fallen  
     victim who falls  
 and gets up even though a terrible war  
     surrounds me.

My heart cries, but I do not show my  
     emotion,  
 for a warrior like me, my courage,  
 my strength, tell me I have to encourage  
 the orphans and widows of my country,  
 to hold their heads up for better days.  
 My lovely country where hatred and jealousy  
 create a state of war

that made me a refugee  
and left me with nothing  
but bad memories.

My life has changed from walking long  
distances  
of the same bleak color.  
Now my life is like another journey filled with  
multi-colors—black, white  
and colors that my grandmother would not  
recognize  
even if she had not been hit with that bullet.  
“Rest in peace.” I miss her. I wish she was  
here  
in my life now to see me grow.

## Translating Memories

Another way I help students translate their memories into English and gain confidence in doing so is through visualization exercises. I give each student a piece of paper with a large circle on it. The words “MY STORY” are written in the middle of the otherwise empty circle. I ask the students to draw three important picture memories and I remind them that specific details and images will help their reader and audience see, feel, and understand their poetry. *River of Words: Young Poets and Artists on the Nature of Things*, edited by Pamela Michael, and Linda Christensen’s book *Teaching for Joy and Justice* have been especially helpful resources for finding student poems to use as examples of image rich poetry written by young people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In the poem “Tiger Eyes,” for instance, from Christensen’s book, high school poet Chetan Patel gives a strong picture of a young man who looks into a mirror and sees his own history reflected back to him. The poem begins, “I look into a mirror/and watch the history inside of me/flood out.”

The encouragement to write from visual memory prompts the opening of a floodgate of poems. Some are harrowing, telling of narrow escapes, loss of loved ones, the experience of seeing rape and destruction in a loved village; others provide images of distinct and

loved places, though all speak to a longing for home. Helber Moo, a Karen from Burma, wrote of her difficult memories:

Memories of the land where my ancestors  
have lived for centuries  
But the Burmese army entered our village  
Confiscated our properties  
Killed our cattle, pigs and chickens  
Set our homes on fire  
Forced labor on our village men and raped  
our village women  
And the persecution goes on and on like a  
circle . . .  
In my heart I miss you my homeland  
Everyday I hear my lonely heart it says, “One  
day I’ll go back to you my homeland . . .”

Khalida Lomanova, who is Turkish from Russia, wrote,

I remember my house, big and beautiful  
my garden full of colorful flowers, like a rain  
bow in the sky  
I remember the smell of fresh earth. My  
chickens, I miss them  
I miss holding my beautiful and puffy little  
chickens . . .  
I feel that I left some part of my life  
that I have to keep it with me/in my heart.

## In the Recording Studio

When we reach the point in the project when it is time for the students to record their work, they express concerns about recording their poetry for the radio. They tell me they are too shy and cannot imagine reading their poems in English. On our field trip days to Jack Straw Productions in Seattle, where we will record, the students are jittery. Yet, by the day’s end, they love this experience.

During the recording sessions, six students at a time watch through soundproof glass as each one takes a turn with a voice coach in the recording chamber. They are at once intimidated and thrilled with the



high-tech equipment and the studio-sized ear phones and microphones. The engineers invite the students to work the sound board with them during recording. The students are also given an opportunity to listen to and digitally edit their own poem. By the end of the recording sessions, the students talk of working with Jack Straw as one of the highlights of the entire project. They express pride and delight in the confidence they have gained and suddenly begin to think of themselves as celebrities. They are eager to tell everyone they know to tune in when their poems are broadcast on KBCS radio throughout an entire month on a program called “Voices of Diversity.” Watching these young people from around the world—some in traditional dress, others in typical American high school garb—everyone present in the studios experiences a shared sense of the power of voice and the courage that issues from the poems.

### Tapping into the Strength of Their Voices

Stories and poems help us keep memories alive, allowing us to create and sustain an on-going connection to what and whom we have loved and lost. Over the past two years of this project I have observed that when ELL students write about their memories encoded in the language they are learning, they begin to feel more connected to their own experience, which softens the strangeness and strain of writing, reading, and speaking in a new language. When students write poetry about their personal experiences with war, conflicts, loss, and many other difficult situations, their excitement grows as they tap into the strength of their voices. Their skills in language acquisition increase dramatically because their writing is connected directly to their memories and experiences.

Sharing their work with each other also helps these young people understand and appreciate the

experiences of their fellow students. Huong Vo, a student from Vietnam wrote:

“I like to enjoy the poetry that our class has made. We can share our cultures and feelings with each other. I like to understand more about the life that our friends in the class have suffered before coming to the U.S. . . . When I write poems, anything that begins appearing deep in my heart helps bring my childhood memories back to life.”

The students’ poems often speak to feelings of dislocation, disconnection and exile. It seems to me the companion to these feelings is a sense of longing—a homesickness and often a sense of the impossibility of going home. I want creative writing and poetry to serve as a resource that supports these students as they negotiate their longing for home while learning to adjust to a new country. I know that the students agree that in the ongoing political and educational debates related to immigration, something often forgotten is their individual stories that bear witness to their deep humanity. Poetry brings honor to their memories and creates a place in the community where their voices and stories are welcomed.

In the last line of one of his poems, Krishna Dhital, a student from Nepal, wrote that “voice touches everyone’s heart,” a line that, to me, defines this poetry project.

I remember guitar, you bring your  
voice, let’s sing it, blood in your heart  
is red like mine, tears in your eyes are  
the same as mine, song is loud  
voice touches everyone’s heart.



One purple wart hog marries the trailer.

## Notes

For classroom exercises that students can lead in their own language I have found the 1st International Collection of Tongue Twisters website useful, especially in preparing ELL students to present out loud:

[www.uebersetzung.at/twister/es.htm](http://www.uebersetzung.at/twister/es.htm)

A book that has been especially helpful for this project because of its global approach, integration of art and poetry and bi-lingual translations is *Side by Side: New Poems Inspired by Art from Around the World*, edited by Jan Greenberg, (2008), NY: Abrams Books for Young Readers. Other books with poetry written by ELL and immigrant students or with a sampling of translations from diverse global poets that have proved useful are:

Arnold, Marilyn, Ballif-Sapnivil, Bonnie and Tracy, Kristen, editors, (2002). *A Chorus for Peace: A Global Anthology of Poetry by Women*. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

Carlson, Lori Marie editor. (1996). *Barrio Streets Carnival Dreams: Three Generations of Latino Artistry*. NY: Henry Holt and Company.

\_\_\_\_\_, edited by. (1994). *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States*. NY: Henry Holt and Company.

\_\_\_\_\_, edited by. (2005). *Red Hot Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Being Young and Latino in The United States*. NY: Henry Holt and Company.

\_\_\_\_\_, edited by. (2008). *Voices in First Person: Reflections on Latino Identity*. NY: Atheneum

Christensen,, Linda. (2009). *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-imagining the*

*Language Arts Classroom*. Portland, OR: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.

Garza, Carmen Lomas. (1996). *In My Family / En Mi Familia*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press

Goldman, Paula, editor. (2006). *Imagining Ourselves: Global Voices from A New Generation of Women*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

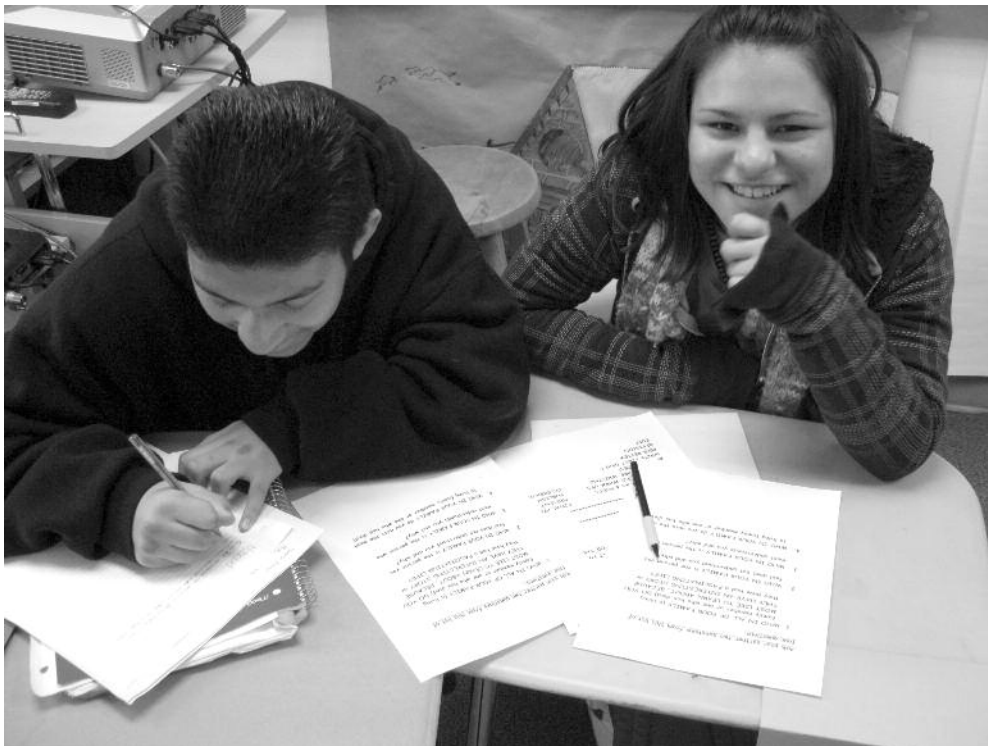
Hadaway, Nancy and McKenna, Marian, editors. (2007). *Breaking Boundaries with Global Literature*. Newark, DE: International Reading Assoc. Chapters 4-6, "Coming to America: The U.S. Immigrant Experience;" "Language Diversity in the United States and Issues of Linguistic Identity;" "Resilient Children in Times of War;" and Chapter 8, "Using Poetry to Explore Social Justice and Global Understanding."

Michael, Pamela, editor. (2008). *River of Words: Young Poets and Artists on the Nature of Things*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, ed., (1992). *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World*. NY: Aladdin/Simon & Schuster.

\_\_\_\_\_, selected by. (1998). *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Rhomer, Harriet, (1999). *Honoring Our Ancestors: Stories and Pictures by Fourteen Artists*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. A first rate picture book by fourteen gifted artists honoring the ancestors who most influenced their lives, includes artists who are African, African American, Chinese, Filipino, Jewish, Lebanese, Mexican, Mexican-American, Native American, and Puerto Rican.



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