
MUSE ARTS PRESENTS:

The Stories We Share

Anbrin Syeda * Bānoo Zan
Dailybet Villaseñor
Fátima Morales Bustamante
Gabriela Covaci * Jasmine Delaviz
Laura Fernanda Vera
María José Bancalari * Paola Gomez
Veronica Gomez * Veronica Viteri
Xiud Cancino * Yannis Lobaina

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MUSE ARTS

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Introduction

The Stories We Share explores creative writing and the power of collective creation while sharing space with community members who are curious and passionate about writing as a form of self-expression. This year, we were so fortunate to have such an amazing team who made it possible for this publication to exist, both in print and online.

During the past eight (8) months, we have worked, learned, and unlearned together. Having an amazing group of co-facilitators who very generously contributed their time, energy, and skills to this knowledge-exchange process, we have also made space for empowerment, joy, vulnerability, and creativity. We would like to express our gratitude to the wonderful guest facilitators who joined us this year: Bānoo Zan, Hanan Hazime, and Gabriela Casineanu.

We faced different obstacles and had to adapt—we moved our programming online, making sure participants felt connected and engaged regardless of distance. It was magical, it was powerful! Women from many walks of life and different cultures met every week to celebrate, to appreciate, to cheer each other up. We know that *The Stories We Share* is more than just a project— it is a community, one of resilient and brave women who know first-hand the complexity of migration, and who recognize the importance of belonging as a way to support our personal and collective well-being.

We are grateful to each woman who made this space possible: the MUSE Arts team, all the guest facilitators, and every participant. We are also very

grateful with our community partners, COSTI Immigrant Services and Romero House, for supporting our outreach efforts and for making our programs visible to the communities they support.

This project was possible thanks to generous funding from Toronto Arts Council through the Refugee and Newcomer Engagement Program.



We create self-portraits while connecting our experiences of resilience and resistance.





**Anbrin
Syeda**



Migration



My paternal birth home isn't in any of the ongoing war zones or under some brutal regime. The city of Lahore is the arts and culture capital of Pakistan, a place where creativity flourishes. Nevertheless, the desire to move was deeply ingrained in my DNA.

Both of us, my spouse and I, had stable careers and private schooling for our 3 children, but I longed for new horizons. Since being the first-born son comes with privileges and responsibilities in our South-Asian culture, my spouse had a different opinion. The argument would usually center around, "to move or not to move," especially because he enjoyed the multiple benefits of a protective family fabric at his paternal home shared with siblings.

Naturally, the thought of migrating was an alien concept. In contrast, I found the home environment to be controlling and limiting my growth. I wasn't the pampered one— the 'attention' is for sons, particularly the firstborn, and the idea is to say *ameen* to every whim and fancy he displays.

However, in the year 2005, our immigration application to Canada got approved. The final deciding moment had come, yet my spouse was still reluctant to decide. Convincing him to move out of his comfort zone was going to be a difficult task. Above all were the circulating stories of failed migrant experiences— we were referred to chat with a few of them. Needless to say, their stories were heart-wrenching and discouraging.

We participated in multiple brainstorming sessions with our respective siblings and parental figures.

I remember a statement from my eldest brother— in a very unapologetic tone, he stated, "This is not a migration, it's running away from the in-laws."

I snapped back with a big, "NO!" and he consistently repeated the same statement in 5 different ways until I broke down and cried. However, there was still one more statement to come.

"You are like Eve wanting to eat the forbidden fruit," he muttered.

On one hand, reflecting on his statement increased my respect for Eve's choice, especially in the context of my stagnant situation and having a soul that desired new adventures in new territories. On the other hand, perhaps my brother was right. I was seeking freedom from the controlling nature of the people that surrounded me.

Eventually, I won the vote in favor of migrating. On the day of the flight, I felt overwhelmed with excess emotional baggage and the family dramas of the past few weeks weighed heavily upon me. For that reason, even a small 2 kg bag seemed to weigh a ton to me. The travel time was scheduled at 24 hours, which meant I had sufficient time to reflect and shed unnecessary thoughts and emotions.

Finally, by the time we landed in Toronto, all the emotional baggage was gone. I felt light like a feather that welcomes the sweeping winds of change, and I was ready to flow with them.



My Hope for The Globe

Mine is a meek soul
full of longing and desire
to manifest a simple plan,
for our blue globe to heal
from all the smoke and toxicity,
starting top to bottom, down,
through every nook and corner.
This is my prime prayer and passion.

I hope to take the initiative
for a greener earth cover.
Cleaner rivers, streams, and lakes,
and recovery of all wild habitats
by reclaiming wrecked forest acres.
Above all, to prevail and invoke
a system that supports
and implements the said quotes.

Another hope that runs deep
is to awaken all sleeping souls
to the dilemma of our tired globe,
choking with toxic compounds,
the chopping of oaks and mass erosions.
Now is the time for actions
not just political conversations
when inaction is not an option.

A hopeful note worth toting along
as a global announcement roll
is banning of single-use plastics,
floating in septic pools and oil slicks,
polluting and terminating sea-life
towards sickness and extinction—
the trick here is to replace
with an alternative grace.

I also anticipate some action
for a cleaner air space
and an end to the arms race
for a peaceful human race.
Embracing bees, mice, and ants,
replacing GMO's with organic growth,
and reducing the pesticide usage—
I hope to manifest this soon.

Often, I dream of an empire
free of materialism and greed,
where children no longer bleed
by mining silver, gold, and diamonds,
riches guaranteed to bring grief
with kids pleading to be freed.
Few men understand this need
and proceed to succeed in the deed.



My Affinities

I am like an attic door
that is rarely opened,
but once unlocked and investigated,
many memory chests are to be found,
awaiting to be discovered
and explored one at a time.
Sometimes, the overflow
in the storage
can no longer be ignored—
only then is it cleaned
from the core
to a radiating, empty floor
that no longer bares
totting memories of conflict and war.
Now, shared and displayed,
no-more is it a door
that seldom opens,
rather one that never closes.

I am like a vibrant throw
spread over a big sofa arm,
holding a warm charm
during the snowstorm
on temperatures below zero
with a row of kids
who have nowhere to go.
I know this though,
'cause I am their sofa throw,
as flexible as cookie dough,
listening to the woes
of their tiny toes,
so slow to grow.

A mom who bestows
and sheds endless love that glows,
through a worn sofa throw,
with no expectation in return.

I am like an abstract painting
with no clue of its purpose or meaning,
an image quietly screaming
to decode its deeper meaning.
Packed in coats of coloring,
plus, facts below the covering
known only to the creator,
the psyche of a dreamer
unknown to the abstract extract.



An Affinity With a Cat

I am a small black cat
that crosses the path
of all superstitious folks,
who then stop to curse
from fear of worse outcomes
which come by cats cutting across.
But I am a calm, black cat
that couldn't care less!

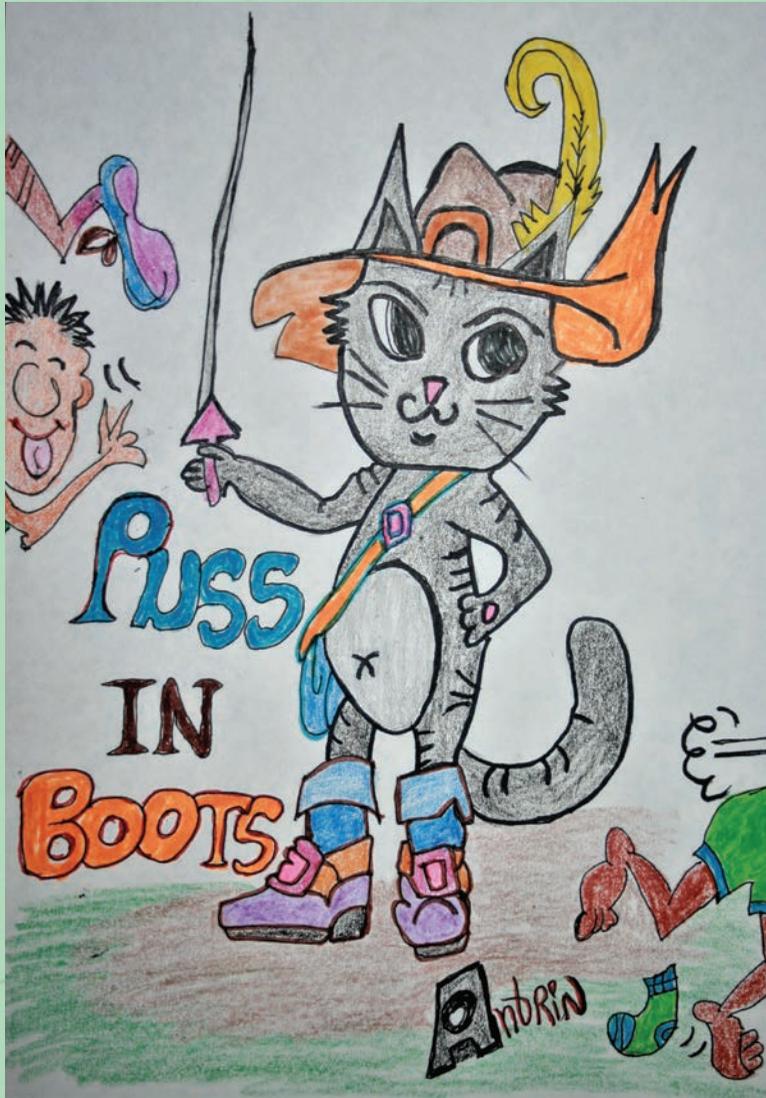
A solitary life I love
similar to the panther cats,
recluse as the planet Pluto,
quiet and tranquil as the doves,
with a DNA of tomboys
and an ability to overpower
all local cowboys,
creating an annoyance
among my family members
who see me as a fatal beast.
Hence, they suggested
I change my ways
to adopt elegance and grace
and drop my feral nature,
plus the claim
of alignment with the lions
through the same bloodlines.

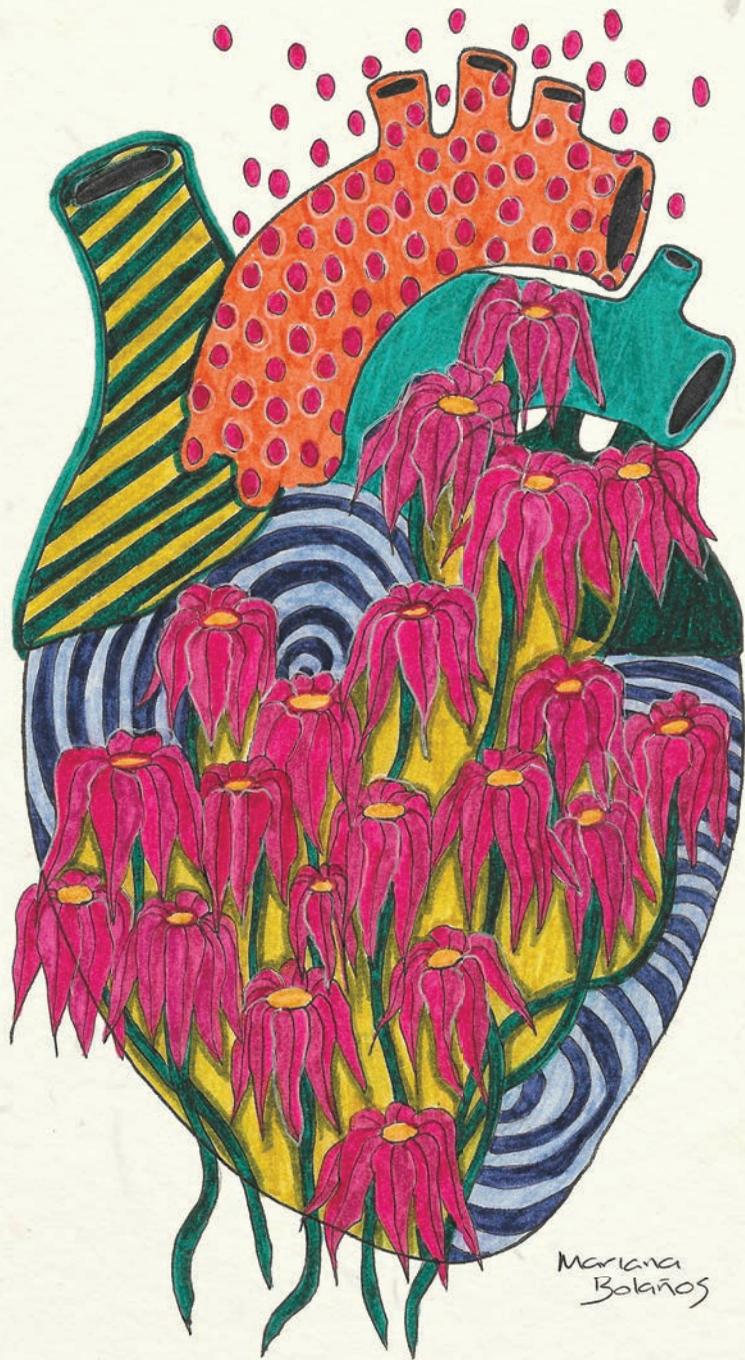
So, I began a new journey
of taming and domesticating,
bringing an end
to my wild tigerish ways
until I lost all that was intrinsic.

Through years of conditioning,
a total transformation
I underwent
to inhibit my instincts,
pushing me towards
a feline alienation state.

Unaware of my true traits,
I am destined to fail.







Bänoo Zan

Where Are You?

In the desert—

I worshipped the cactus god
pink-orange-red—
a watermelon sun
thirsty for pasture clouds

I was the river of molten stone
blanketing the city
making statues of agony
out of the living—

It took oceans
of barbed-wire wounds
to get to this refuge
of elixirs and dreams

I haven't come all this way—
to compromise—
to bury my story
in locked notebooks—

in the land of me—





Dailybet Villaseñor

Gratitude

At this point in my life, it makes sense
and I realize how great it is.

So much to give thanks for—

Thanks to God for allowing me to be alive.
Thanks to life for giving me health.
Thanks to life for giving me the family that I have.
Thanks to life for allowing me to meet the wonderful
people that I have come across in these exact
moments of our existence.

Thanks to life for allowing me
to enjoy a hug from my husband every morning.
Thanks to life for allowing me to hear my dad's voice.
Thanks to life for allowing me to see my children
become beautiful beings.

Thanks to life for every second of
happiness, sadness, bitterness, anger,
excitement, and impatience,
because it allows me to feel alive
and improve every day.

All I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you.

Gratitud

En este momento de mi vida, toma sentido
y me doy cuenta de lo grande que es.

Tanto por que dar gracias—

Gracias a Dios por permitirme estar viva.
Gracias a la vida por brindarme salud.
Gracias a la vida por tener la familia que tengo.
Gracias a la vida por permitirme conocer personas
maravillosas que nos hemos cruzado en estos momentos
exactos de nuestra existencia.

Gracias a la vida por poder disfrutar
un abrazo de mi esposo cada mañana.
Gracias a la vida por poder escuchar la voz de mi papá.
Gracias a la vida por poder ver a mis hijos convertirse
en seres hermosos.

Gracias a la vida por cada segundo de
felicidad, tristeza, amargura, enojo, excitación,
enfado, e impaciencia,
por que me permite sentirme viva y poder mejorar cada día.

Solo me queda decir gracias, gracias, gracias.



Hope

Today, I wake up looking at the sky and feeling grateful for another opportunity to live, to breathe, to enjoy everything and everyone.

It is so wonderful to see how nature helps in the development my children's minds and hearts.

I thank God for these moments.

I will have them in my heart,
always with the hope that they enjoy
every ray of light that the universe gives away.





Fátima Morales Bustamante



Hope Poem 1

Hope is like the sun of September,
a bleeding peach carozo in the hands of a child
the hill shining in blue and green
two dogs barking and running freely
waiting for the sun to show up,
waiting for the moon to calm you.

Hope is like a table full of meals,
a steaming humita
ensalada a la chilena
the laughter of your grandmother
the music in the air
someone who stands up and starts to dance
uno dos, un dos tres
a hand that invites you to join
old cumbias filling the space and your heart.

Feeling good is easy.
Everything seems so simple,
it's like nothing can hurt you
or as if the wound had stopped screaming.
It's like turning the corner and suddenly
seeing a familiar face.

Hope is a place that once I had,
a place that sometimes visits me,
without knowing how.

Hope Poem 2

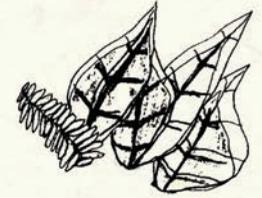
Suddenly, I hear a laugh in the kitchen—
it is mine.
In between cinnamon and merkén,
I dance a bolero with myself.
Suddenly, I hear a song in the streets—
it is me singing baladas out loud.
I can't restrain myself and my cheeks are blushing
and so is my mood.

Suddenly, I pass by a cat—
Hola, ¿cómo estás?
Her eyes seem to answer my question
in her ever-so-sleepy way.

Suddenly, I can tell one flower from another.
Suddenly, I know which bush has a new leaf.
Suddenly, I recognize ten types of blue in the sky.
Everything speaks to me—
Bienvenida al mundo
and I start to pay attention.
We have been waiting for you



A Story



Como al amante dormido después del amor, así te recuerdo. En calma, tranquilo después de esparcir tus energías entre mis piernas. Mis pies en tu arena. Las gaviotas que atraviesan el cielo. La mirada perdida dentro de ti, en tus entrañas, queriendo ahogarme en ellas. Un vacío tan lleno de rostros, de manos impertinentes, la sal curando la piel.

Así te recuerdo. Creciendo cada día más niña entre tus mareas, olvidándome de ser mujer (¿qué es el olvido si no el recuerdo al revés?), usando mis manos para algo más que secarme las lágrimas.

Camino por Avenue en este imposible Toronto tropical. En ese "camino" el sujeto que se conjuga se siente tan distinto a la Sujeta que camina. El "yo." El estar. Dos cosas que cuando despierto en las mañanas, nublado el entendimiento, no logro aunar. Quiero hacer hincapié en lo imposible. No logro comprender cómo es que puedo cortar el ambiente con mis manos. La humedad espesa eligiendo mi pelo como su hogar. Increíble el calor que me ahoga en la misma calle que me recibió blanca de nieve. Y es que un día, sin más, tomé un caballo de papel entre mis manos, después de dos timbres en sus hojas me trajo hasta acá.

Camino por Avenue. ¿Quién camina? Un heterónimo de mí, sin nombre definido. Mi otro yo aún está en tus tierras de dorado y celeste. Veo una notificación en ese quebrado y viejo espejo negro. No puedo evitar ver mi reflejo. Rojez y pelo meduseo. Es el mensaje de una amora que quedó a medias. Así de encabritado mi instinto equino. Suspiro. Respondo con risas. Me distraigo en las historias que comparten mis contactos. Las voy saltando cuando de pronto, sin aviso, inesperadamente, una chica me muestra tu rostro azul,

inconmensurable, sereno, a través de la pantalla. *Quisiera decir que mi corazón dio un vuelco, pero qué cliché.* Algo se me remeció dentro. De repente ya no soy ese yo confuso, de repente soy un tamarugal del desierto, acariciando al viento con mis ramas ásperas, haciéndole el amor dolorosamente con mis espinas. *¿Nunca voy a aprender a querer?* De repente soy la iglesia derruida, la bengala que ilumina rosada la tarde, mis manos haciendo pan para mis amigas, la feligresa apasionada, la cúpula dorada besando el sol, el escondrijo del colegio donde los amores adolescentes juegan a descubrirse, el jirón del vestido de La Tirana, la calle Salvador Allende cruzándote como una cicatriz, los perros que ladran a coro cuando tiembla, los pasillos del cementerio N°4. De pronto ya no estoy en Toronto, esta tierra incomprensible para mis ojos cafés y mi lengua migrante, de pronto estoy en ti.

En ti, Iki-Iki, tierra de sueños que cumplió los míos.

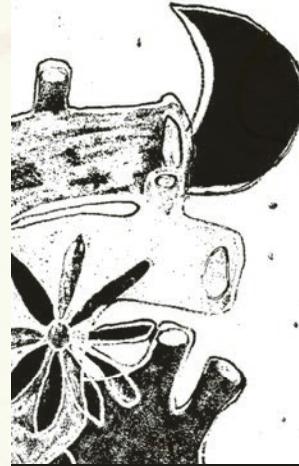
Soy esa ventana que mira a la duna *¿por qué estoy llorando?*, la luna que baña mi cama cuando abro la cortina, las nubes anaranjadas que tocan suavemente mi celosía. Soy este anhelo de tu arena dorada, soy el estertor de ola contra ola en Playa Brava. Soy ese olor mezclado de la revolución que vive en mi pecho. *En orden alfabético: bala balón barricada bengala lacrimógena limón sal de mar.* Quiero volver a poblar tus esquinas tus esquirlas con las sombras erráticas que dejo tras de mí, *borracha la noche y borracha yo*, jugar a ser quien siempre quise ser entre tus calles sucias que estoy destinada *¡ahora lo sé!* a recorrer siempre. Esté donde esté mi cuerpo, corran los tiempos aciagos que corran, mi corazón está bañándose en tu poza a medianoche, porque si algo tenemos en común tú y yo, *mi mejor amante mi más grande maestro*, es que un dragón dormido vive también dentro de mí. Y su fuego, nuestros fuegos, son los que me atan a ti.

A Poem

I am like an embroidery—
my threads tell a story
with different colors and patterns
which talk about fire,
serpents, and resistance.

My face is like a notepad
written in a dead language,
full of secrets from a past
that, although doesn't exist,
somehow survives in my visage.

My heart is like a mask
that hides itself
to protect myself and others
from years gone by,
from memories and insecurities,
from deception and suffering.
It's like an armor or fear
that sometimes doesn't cover
but drowns,
that sometimes doesn't protect
but attacks.
corazón coraza
mask heart
protects me from pain
but from happiness too.





**Gabriela
Covaci**

Foreword

Every day is a story; every day, we shape our legacy in this world.

Most importantly, we came together with different personalities to kick up, step down, and listen and learn from each other. We are an open book if we want. We are shy, even a tad mysterious. Speaking about myself and unlacing my secrets can be puzzling as I espouse my honest opinion quite vocally, but we found the magic wand – communication – because perceptions flavour the content and influence how we interact.

During this exercise, I envisioned “The Stories We Share” to be an activity built on appreciating others with different points of view, recognizing and valuing their opinion.

Week after week, we came *relaxed*, some weeks *tired* or *chilled*, but *grateful* for the experience. *Passion*, *power* and *pride* were three strong *p* words that drove us! As we are closing another chapter, we learnt, in the end, that half of us in the group were creative thinkers, while the other half were proficient problem solvers. However, the whole group was striving to create a safe environment to learn and grow.

Meaningful conversations occurred in an environment where resources, energy, and talents helped us transform into a substantially multicultural group. A bridge between two mottos – **Be Prepared** and **Why** – was created and crossed back-and-forth during our learning process. When the main strengths are duty and knowledge, the complete picture is a brilliant work. If – Be prepared - is your motto, your instinct is to keep the “product-in-production,” maintaining the structure and following the guidelines. This is as crucial as abstract thinking, and the unknown challenge of outer space that defines the – Why – group.

Let’s end where we started! Our wand’s magic is a tool that gives us the power to improve our communication skills, to turn an intimidating experience into a memorable and meaningful opportunity, and to stand up for something we believe in. Empowering ourselves with all this knowledge, communicating effectively and establishing relationships seems inseparable.

The words that appear in *italics* were said by participants during *The Stories We Share* workshops to describe how they were feeling at each session.

The words that appear in **bold** are mottos for the two strongest colours that came up in the “True Colors” spectrum from the majority of the participants during the workshop.



Hope Poem

Hesitant about the future
inside-out and outside-in
our life is suture
with simplicity and a continuous spin.

On a run for joy
just emotions come convoy
happiness doesn't mean that
we balance life like acrobats.

Pease of life changes definition
fear is now a condition
anger builds up everyday
nothing seems to go away.

Entering the roller coaster
joy is replaced by a monster
and we discover day by day,
acceptance is the price to pay!

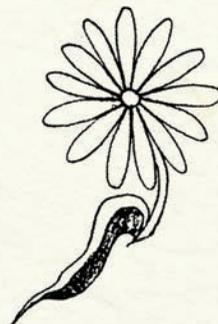
These Shades are not Culori

The shades are not *culori*, and happy to say
defined by a spectrum, we are not the same
a magic wand was created to open our *minte*
a metaphor of colour to show why we couldn't be identical.

Less stress, less emotion, a self-esteem builder,
I said – a common language
and *nu* just a color to paint the *defecte*.

Distinct personalities with distinct perspectives,
imagine we were just *green*, or *gold*,
or *orange*, or *blue*,
if we were just relaxed or just happy,
just *activi* or just *calm*.

The tool was created, a mix of four colours,
a metaphor of colours that aren't alike,
but do have so much in common!



The four colours (orange, gold, green and blue), differentiate the four central primary personality types used in the "True Colors" personality assessment. Each of us are a spectrum that incorporates all four colours in different proportions.



S-I-M-P-L-I-C-I-T-Y

Simplicity

Simplicity

SIMPLICITY

S-I-M-P-L-I-C-I-T-Y



Jasmine Delaviz



An Umbrella

They say your soulmate can be a plant,
an animal,
a tree,
or maybe even an Umbrella.

If so, then, mine is without a doubt,
an Umbrella.

If love can be an onion,
lethal,
a moon wrapped in brown paper,
then, mine is, without a doubt, an Umbrella.

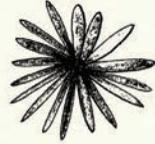
I leave it at home on rainy days.

A Warning

Like a spider,
misunderstood.
I stretch my misshapen legs and arms
drawing webs of uncertainty.
Do not come near me—
my webs of heartache will devour you instantly!



Home



Cora looked at the unwashed pile of the dishes in the sink and felt nauseous.

She walked over to the window and reflected on her ever-so-bleak surroundings. She had always hated this city with its polluted air and crowded streets. It was a place that perpetually encouraged her tendency to feel lonely and isolated.

She heard the screech of the main gate as it went ajar and then the loud bang of it going shut. He was home. Cora could see the silhouette of his lanky, frail figure on the wall.

She glanced at her own reflection in the kitchen window and frowned. Cora was known for her gloomy countenance. Her friends called her, “the apathetic angel.”

He touched Cora on her cheek, and his cold touch reminded her of the conversation that she had promised him to finally get over with tonight. He stepped out to the balcony, waiting for Cora to join him. She came closer until she could see the sad glint in his eyes.

In a hushed tone, he said, “I hate this.”

Cora looked back, even more unsure now than she was an hour ago. Staring at the pile of unwashed dishes, she replied, “You are lost. We are lost.”

They looked at each other— two shadows on the wall, indifferent and blind.

Cora studied his teary eyes and his uncertain gaze.

Eventually, she took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry.”

She looked lost, her emotions raw like the bitter taste of an unwanted touch.

Cora could actually hear him shatter into pieces in front of her very eyes.

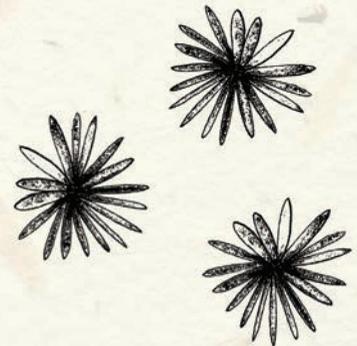
But she said nothing.

It was time to go Home.

A Room of Her Own

I am the unearned confidence
of a creature fantastical—
blind, ridiculous and indifferent,
in a constant quest
to comprehend the agony of this
human experience.

I am in need of some ample hours to waste,
some mind clearance space,
to throw me back into the intended confusion.



A Poem on Hope

Hope is the quivering of my forlorn fingers,
pulling aside, gently, the curtains of uncertainty.
Out there,
dark and dismal,
I hear the chatter,
the language of the shadows,
the murmur of the gates—

— Shut.

My mind,
torn and complete,
paces the possibilities.
Back and forth,
— *Shab'haye Roshan* —
A little hope is a dangerous thing, you see!





Fernanda
Vera



Esperanza

Hope is mi *nahual*
looks like a bird, smells like the sea
is like the breeze, feels like the rain.
Oh, pájaro de mil colores
with all our voices,
your taste is the flavor
of hundreds of flowers.
Flowers of my gist
blooming in my soul
spreading the smell of creation
and keeping the secrets of animation.

Us

Her heart is powerful
like the crystal that cleans itself with its
magic.
His eyes are transparent
like
ice,
keeping the secrets of the cosmos safe
and loud.
The elements of nature are as much hers
as his.
The Spirit that inhabits their bodies is a flower nourishing
beauty,
like a mother feeding her child—
as eternal,
as ephemeral.

Magnolia

The radiance appears softly in the middle of the forest. Orange, yellow, and love reflect the Sun mercifully over the trees. Leaves rub the roots in the coldness of fall, and birds fly around spreading freedom and fullness. Some of them are native species, others have been traveling and you can notice it in their feathers. All of them are getting ready for the Solstice, and Magnolia knows her favourite time on the planet is coming. Traveling for them is more than just freedom— it's their way of life, the only way Magnolia knows so far.

Some moons after she started her journey, spring had finally begun to sprout, beginning with the Equinox. That night before she went to dream, she noticed again that feeling of detachment on her wings, which are connected to her heart, and couldn't figure out what was causing it. Magnolia felt it during the whole trip. She knew something was missing but didn't know what, yet.

She wasn't sure what to do: should she go back home, or keep going on her journey as always since it was about to end? Magnolia decided to continue her journey. She never worried about having a house because the Universe always provides her with a beautiful one wherever she is. The house wasn't a problem, but she still felt like something was missing.

After many moons of deep landscapes and thoughts, Magnolia completed her travels. She started to believe that the feeling of detachment was now a permanent part of her wings.

The morning after she arrived home, she was astonished when she saw her mom flying towards her, welcoming her with the warmest hug and a treasure smile.

Magnolia, after happily eating too many bugs at the Summer parade, asked her grandma about that tickling feeling that disappeared after hugging her mom. Grandma replied, "Those are the roots of the heart growing with you, freedom going with you."



L-aura

She is the jungle loving the heat,
the jaguar sleeping on a branch
She is those wild flowers growing in the dark.
Her breathing glows everywhere
because her gist flows with the wind.

She is the dust manifesting past-present-future,
holding her existence.
She is deep and high as a mountain
depending on how you look at her—
inside
or outside
her skin,
with your
eyes
or
with all your bodies.



Suspiros Astrales

Yo no pretendo nada pero
él lo quiere todo.

Él navegaba triste
y ella nadaba buscando su mirada.

Yo veo flores en el agua
y tú mis raíces en las alas.

Inner

I dream when you laugh
Because I can see sparkles
All over the place
Solidos platonicos rubbing
my soul
- Warm-
-Smooth-
-Subtle-
-Slow-
-Deep-
Alchemy
In the Universe
Of my Love.



**Maria José
Bancalari**

Just Homework

The elementary teacher gave them the writing assignment and let them know that everyone should start writing immediately. Some students began to move their desks as they sought to find the precise place to receive inspiration exactly above their heads— inspiration that would move their pencils automatically. Other students released deep sighs as they squeezed their heads to expel an idea, any idea. The rest of the students who found the exercise stupid did not even attempt to complete it, and began to doodle on their sheets.

A home...what is a home? The exercise seemed misleading. Everybody knows what a home is, but how could they explain it? The assignment gave geographical locations and their smells, family members, and homemade food as examples to develop the writing composition.

The teacher was afraid of what they might write. In the past, this kind of innocent question had brought to the surface the hidden monsters that surrounded her students' lives, which she was not able to do anything about.

After ten minutes of noisy preparation, there was silence and most of the class concentrated on their own activities.

Just then, the teacher looked around the classroom and imagined that she was on the second floor of a very nice house, surrounded by fields full of farmers during the fruit harvest. She smiled as she could smell the sweet, ripened fruit.

In the front row, a very neatly-dressed boy was writing methodically. His handwriting was perfect and his composition was divided into equal paragraphs. The first paragraph detailed where he lived and the typical smells of his house. In the second, he named all of his relatives from the most important to those he had only seen once in his short life. In the last paragraph, the child described his favorite foods and congratulated his mother on her amazing cooking.

In the middle of the classroom, a dreamy little girl with a ponytail was writing about her dollhouse. Suddenly, she let her imagination run so freely that she began writing about what a typical house on Mars looks like. She looked out the window and saw three moons.

At the back of the classroom, a disheveled boy with messy hair who normally showed no interest in the class, was anxiously writing about what a home is and what it represents to him. He described how love and responsibility are the foundations of a family, and how society functions decently when all loving families work hard to improve it.

While correcting the homework later that night, the teacher couldn't believe how perfect the boy at the back's composition was. It was a big surprise and she was happy that there was a change in this student's attitude.

The next day, the teacher read his essay aloud. She let the class know that she felt proud of his work for the first time.

At the end of the class, she told the student that she was happy he had such a great home and that he could describe it so perfectly.

The boy looked at her sadly and said, "It's just homework."



Journeys

I just woke up.
I am here, still in bed.
I am trying to clear my mind that is caught in old cobwebs.
At night, my grandparents wept for the fallen empire
that could never be built.
I cried with them.
I know this because I had to wipe my dry tears.
Three years ago, when I had just landed, I woke up and
wondered why I was here.
A few years before, I didn't want to wake up at all.
In the present, I get up, wipe my face, and open the blinds again.
It's a new path on an ancient journey.
I think I chose it, so it's completely mine.
I walk slowly, but bittersweet habits push me forward.
I breathe in as I look at the sky.
Most of the time it's gray— that's why I carry a backpack
full of colors, even if it's heavy.
I look back and wonder: how surprising life can be!
When and how did all this happen?
Where is he now? Who is this person I'm sleeping with?
No palm reader could have predicted this destination.
But what is my destiny? Will I be able to catch it?
Have I already lost it?
I feel stuck, as I did in the past,
although I must be moving forward.
Tomorrow, I will definitely resume the apparent new path
of an old circle that only occurs in my mind.



Missing

Esperanza is the name of hope.

Esperanza is a long name. When you call her, the vowels force you to open your entire mouth in great demand. Meanwhile, other letters remind you to whisper, because hope is elusive and she is still a fragile creature.

Esperanza likes to play hide and seek.

Every morning, I feel like I grab her when I leave my house and breathe in the new day, but she is already gone.

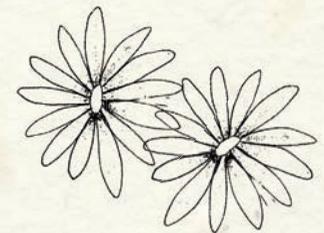
Esperanza is hidden in green nature.

Summer is a long and endless race in search of her. It is fun! At last, I finally touch her as my head falls back on the pillow, minutes before I fall asleep. She slides through my dreams so easily.

Only on paper do I manage to grasp her: in projects outlined in agendas, or in journals that I never check again.

Esperanza is always in the future.

Sometimes, when the days are too long and gray, I forget I am playing the game and stop looking for her. Yet in my most desperate moments, I find her at the bottom of the box where I am drowning. I am always sure she will be there and this confidence allows me to hold my breath longer.



Snowy Garden

When I dream, I am the birds that are already far from here
and do not announce the rise of this pale sun.

I am in the warm room, but in reality, I feel like the snowy
garden behind the glass.

Silence rules my world and I listen to it with full attention. It is
demanding and I am obedient.

Around me, little lights try to spread cheerful colors but only
reflect a faint nostalgia.

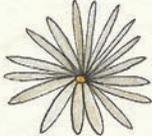
I know It's all about time...I hold my breath and wait. There is a
burning life running underneath.

Now is the time to be patient. That stillness is in me.





Paola
Gomez



Hope

Hope is the smile of a child jumping on the freshly painted rayuela.

Hope is a Saturday in the morning with the smell of arepas coming from my mom's kitchen while she calls our names telling us breakfast is ready.

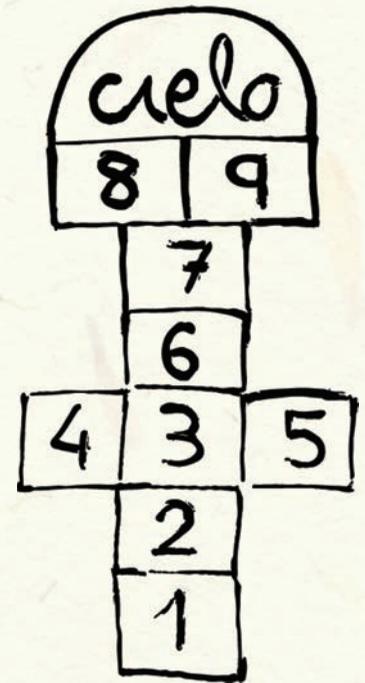
Hope is the ink in my pen when I dream of tomorrow.

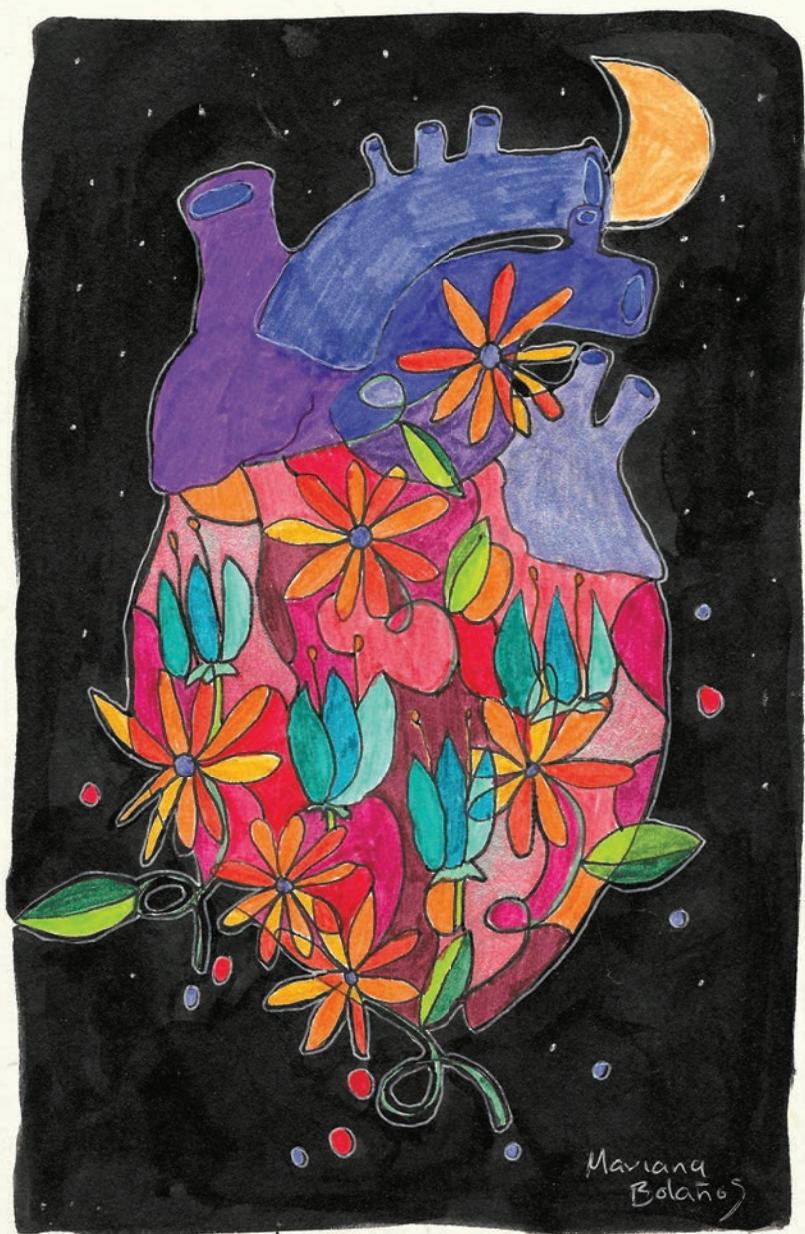
Hope is my respiro profundo, when I am afraid without reasonable explanation.

Hope is the colour that I paint in every word and every thought.

Hope is how I move,

and why I do it.





Veronica[🌿]
Gomez

Soaring Beyond

I am like a caterpillar breaking free from her cocoon.
I am ready for my first flight,
soaring above the land of self-discovery.
I am landing on trees filled with my biggest wins
and my greatest losses.
I am alive.
A tiny creature with aspirations
as tall as the mountains I fly above.
But here comes the avalanche—
that which will challenge me until I believe my wings are not
strong enough,
until I believe the pattern on my back is not beautiful enough,
until I believe I am not enough.
But I have had enough.
I will soar—
soar beyond the expectations of the little creature that I am.
Because I am on a journey and
I will not stop flying until I land.
Land in a place where my flight is showcased
and my delicate wings are replaced.
Replaced with the beauty of what is now a strong monarch.
A journey that blossomed from a transformation
which began when the caterpillar *knew* that the butterfly
was enough.

My Physical

My body is a vehicle,
a vehicle only I am meant to drive.
Everyday I work on becoming a better driver,
but the only way I'll learn is with a few bumps and scratches.
I drive freely, without traffic,
beyond the highways, railroad crossings, and stop signs.
There are no stop signs on my roads.
I yield with caution and drive faster than I ever have.
I am almost there.
I look back and realize how curvy the journey has been,
filled with unexpected hitchhikers.
But I am here, finally,
at my destination.
Filled with excitement that soon turns into confusion
I ask myself,
Is this it?
Is this the reason I have been driving for so long?
My mind was so set but I have come to a deeper realization.
My motive was the destination,
but what kept my engine running was the journey.



The New Girl

Why is my accent seen as an unfortunate sound?
Why is my pronunciation the reason you think less of me?
I know why—
all you see is the aftermath of what I am trying to be,
not of what I am.
I am a person of history, culture, richness,
richness you have yet to discover.
My mother tongue has fought so hard to stay alive
in a world where she is compromised.
My accent is a representation of who I am,
not who I am trying to be.
When I speak, I speak with the voices of my ancestors.
It is unfortunate you do not hear them
but I do, so I'll be damned if I choose to speak like you.
I choose to speak with them—
with my history,
with my culture,
with my richness,
because that is who I am.
I will not change to satisfy your ears
rather, I will speak with power
instead of perfection.





Veronica Viteri



Una Historia Personal

Ese día me sentí mucho más cansada de lo normal e incómoda por una sensación de ardor y quemazón en medio del pecho. Pensé que era porque hice algunas compras y ya estaba entrando al octavo mes de embarazo.

Me fui a descansar, pero a eso de las 11 de la noche, me desperté con un leve dolor en la parte muy baja del vientre y con la sensación de que me estaba orinando. Me levanté y le comenté a mi madre. Ella me acompañó a la clínica donde estaba siguiendo el control de mi embarazo.

Como era muy tarde en la noche, hoy pienso que la persona que me atendió debió ser una enfermera o enfermero de turno. La verdad no recuerdo si era hombre o mujer, no recuerdo su rostro, pero recuerdo sus palabras.

Me dijo, “no puede ser un proceso de parto porque aún no es tiempo, y si él bebé nace en este momento va a tener muchos problemas.”

Me dio unas pastillas y dijo que me vaya a casa, que duerma del lado izquierdo, y que regrese al día siguiente para realizarme un eco y chequearme con detenimiento.

De regreso a casa los dolores se fueron intensificando y yo sabía que eran dolores de parto porque cada vez eran más intensos. En su desesperación, mi madre salió a ver un taxi— un poco difícil de conseguir pues vivía en una área tan peligrosa del sur de Quito. Un vecino que seguramente vio la preocupación de mi madre le preguntó qué le pasaba. Ella le comentó lo que sucedía, y él se ofreció para llevarnos a la clínica. Cabe resaltar que era una clínica privada a la que había acudido ya que no confiaba en el sistema de salud público del país, pero no nos atendieron. Fuimos a otro y ni siquiera nos abrieron. Recuerdo que el vecino dijo que un conocido había ido al hospital público del sur y que si le habían atendido. Los dolores se volvían cada vez más fuertes e incontrolables,

y parecía una carrera en contra del tiempo hasta que por fin llegamos al hospital.

Recuerdo que había mucha gente en los pasillos, mi desesperación era realmente grande al ver que a mi madre le dijeron que no podían atenderme porque no contaban con camillas ni oxígeno para un parto prematuro. En el desespero me acerque, les dije que por favor me atendieran porque ya no aguantaba los dolores. En ese momento sentí como una explosión en mi vientre, y mucha sangre empezó a bajar por mis piernas hasta hacerse visible en el piso. Al ver esto, una enfermera empezó a gritar, “¡emergencia! ¡parto expulsivo!”

Ingresé con ella y, sin tiempo para ponerme una bata, me dijo que me quitara el pantalón. Me subieron a una silla de ruedas desnuda de la cintura para abajo. Llegué a la sala de partos, y la doctora ni alcanzó a ponerse guantes— tan solo me subí a la camilla y mi bebé salió, lloró, y escuche como se le cortó el llanto, como si le taparan la boca. Tenía los ojos cerrados mientras todo esto ocurría— pensé se lo llevaron a algún lado. Después de unos minutos, vino el pediatra con él bebé envuelto en una mantita amarilla y dijo: aquí está su hijo, señora. Emocionada lo tomé en mis brazos, pero cuando miré su carita, me sorprendí porque estaba casi morado. Se lo dije al doctor a lo cual respondió, “ah sí, debe estar con frío,” y se lo llevó.

Después de unos minutos, regresó y me dijo, “su hijo está muy mal. Por nacer prematuro tuvo un ataque cardio-respiratorio.”

Quise decir algo pero no me dio tiempo— se dio media vuelta y se marchó mientras me suturaban algunos puntos por un desgarre que tuve. En ese momento, ya el dolor físico no importaba. Era más la incertidumbre por el estado de mi hijo, la decepción del sistema de salud, y me sentía humillada por lo que estaba atravesando. Luego me dejaron en el pasillo

A Personal Story

donde esperaría hasta que hubiera una cama disponible en la sala de recuperación.

El tiempo que pase ahí pasaba lento y como si estuviera en un película. Escuchaba como les regañaban a las madres adolescentes, indígenas, solteras— en fin, a todas a las mujeres a las que se nos había ocurrido traer un nuevo ser al mundo. Escuché como alguien falleció porque tuvo preeclampsia y cuando llegó al hospital ya era muy tarde. El ambiente era lúgubre y triste, todos eran muy groseros con excepción de la doctora que me atendió en el parto que por cierto era gringuita.

Ya en la habitación de ocho camas, me sentía muy mal y pensaba que tal vez mi abuela materna tenía razón cuando decía que tener una hija no era buena noticia, pues como mujer se viene al mundo solo a sufrir. Luego para darme ánimos, me dije a mi misma, ¡menos mal tuve un varón! Intenté descansar, pero casi no dormí esa noche.

En la mañana siguiente, apenas pude me levanté y me fui en busca de mi bebé. Pregunté por él y ahí estaba en la sala de cuidados intensivos con aparatos por todos lados, nunca pensé verlo así— era muy pequeño y frágil para soportar todo eso. Creía que solo estaría en una termocuna, esa que les ponen a los bebés prematuros y después de unos días ya pueden ir a casa. La realidad era otra— él estaba sufriendo. Dentro de mí sabía que había mucho dolor. Me impresioné tanto que no recuerdo detalles de ese momento, lo que sí claramente recuerdo es pedirle a Dios que por favor no permita que sufra más. Le di un beso y salí devastada.

Llegué a la cama llorando desconsoladamente, y mientras la leche se derramaba de mi pecho, escuchaba el llamado por el altavoz a los familiares del niño Viteri— mi hijo murió.

That day, I felt much more tired than usual and had an uncomfortable burning sensation in the middle of my chest. I thought it must be because I'd done some shopping earlier and was already entering the eighth month of my pregnancy. I laid down to rest, but around 11 at night, I woke up with a pain in the lowest part of my belly and the sensation that I was urinating. I got up, told my mother, and she accompanied me to the clinic where I had been monitoring my pregnancy.

As it was very late at night, thinking back, I think that the person who attended me must have been a nurse on duty. I don't really remember if it was a man or a woman, I don't remember their face, but I do remember their words. They told me, "These must not be labour pains because it's not time yet. If the baby is born right now, he will have many problems."

The nurse gave me some pills and told me to go home, sleep on my left side, and come back the next day for an ultrasound and to check me out more closely.

Back home, the pains intensified and I knew they were labor pains because they were getting more and more intense. In desperation, my mother went out to find a taxi— a little difficult to find since we lived in a somewhat dangerous area in the south of Quito. A neighbour saw my mother's concern and asked what was going on. She explained to him what was happening and he offered to take us to the clinic. It should be noted that I had been attending a private clinic because I did not trust the public health system of the country, but they didn't treat us either. We went to another one, and they didn't even allow us in. I remember the neighbour saying that an acquaintance had gone to the southern public hospital and that they had treated him there. The pains were getting stronger and harder to bear, and it felt like a race against time until we finally reached the hospital.

I remember there were many people along the corridors. My despair escalated when I heard that my mother was told

they couldn't treat me because they didn't have stretchers or oxygen to accommodate a premature birth. In despair, I approached the receptionists and begged them to please take care of me because I could no longer bear the pain. At that same moment I felt an explosion in my belly, and a rush of blood began to flow down my legs, pooling underneath me on the floor. Upon seeing this, a nurse yelled, "Emergency! Expulsive labor!"

I followed her into the hospital and, without even enough time to switch into a robe, she instructed me to take off my pants. They sat me in a wheelchair, naked from the waist down. I reached the delivery room and the doctor didn't even manage to put on any gloves— as soon as I got on the stretcher, my baby immediately came out crying. Then, I heard the crying stop as if the doctors had covered his mouth. My eyes were closed during all of this, and I felt that they immediately took him somewhere.

After a few minutes, the pediatrician came back with my baby wrapped in a yellow blanket and said, "Here is your son, m'am."

Excitedly, I took him in my arms, but when I looked at his little face, I was surprised to see that he was almost purple. I mentioned this to the doctor to which he replied, "Oh yes, he must just be cold," and took him away.

After a few minutes, the doctor came back and said, "Your son is very sick. He had a cardio-respiratory attack because he was born prematurely."

I wanted to say something but he didn't give me a chance— he turned around and left while the nurses were in the process of giving me stitches for a tear I obtained while delivering. In that moment, physical pain no longer mattered.

I was overwhelmed with uncertainty about the state of my son, disappointment in the health system, and feeling humiliated

at what I was going through. The doctors had left me in the hallway, where I had to wait until there was an available bed in the recovery room.

The time I spent there passed slowly, and I felt as though I were in a movie. I could hear the sound of teenage, Indigenous, and single mothers being scolded— essentially any woman who had thought of bringing a new being into this world. I could hear as someone died because they had preeclampsia, and by the time they reached the hospital it was too late. The entire atmosphere was gloomy and sad and everyone was very rude, with the exception of the gringuita doctor who attended me during the delivery.

When I finally found a spot in the eight-bed recovery room, I was overcome with a heavy feeling and thought that perhaps my maternal grandmother had been right. She had said that having a daughter was not good news, because a woman only comes into the world to suffer. In an attempt to cheer myself up, I said, thank goodness I had a boy! That night, I tried to get some rest but hardly slept at all.

Even though I could barely get up the next morning, I went around looking for my baby. There he was, in the intensive care unit, surrounded by machinery. I never thought I would see him like that— he was too small and fragile to bear it all. I thought he would only be in an incubator, like the kind they put premature babies in and after a few days they get to go home. The reality was very different and I saw that he was suffering. Inside, I knew there was a lot of pain. I was so shocked that I don't remember many details from that moment, but what I do remember clearly was asking God to please not allow him to suffer any more. I gave my baby a kiss and was devastated.

I returned to my bed crying inconsolably, and as milk spilled out from my chest, I heard a voice on the loudspeaker call for the relatives of the Viteri boy. My son had died.

Poema Esperanza

Esperanza es como el primer rayo de sol en primavera,
es la fragancia de las flores y la alegría
al contemplar su belleza.

Esperanza es sentir el rocío en las verdes praderas,
es el júbilo que siente mi alma al escuchar
la sinfonía de la naturaleza.

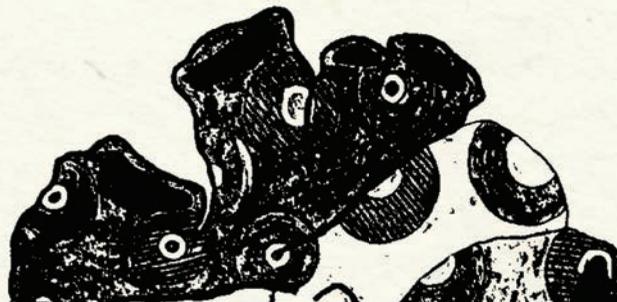
Esperanza es el manantial de amor
que fluye en mi corazón
después de un invierno casi letal.

Hope Poem

Hope is like the first ray of sun in the spring,
it is the fragrant flowers and the joy we feel
as we contemplate their beauty.

Hope is feeling the dew that covers green meadows,
the glee in my soul upon hearing
the symphony of nature.

Hope is the spring of love
that flows within my heart
after an almost lethal winter.





Xiud Cancino



Hope

Close your eyes,
put on your headphones,
listen to my voice.
I am your sleeping pill—
there is hope here.

We can walk together hand-in-hand to a place without end,
until we cannot feel our feet.

An angel from the sky told me you are living in paradise.
He said hope has the shape of your body
and the smell of your hair.

It is magical, how you fill the empty with your presence.

Hope is enough to make me fly across the universe.
Hope is enough to make me live in the moment.
Hope is enough to make me say what I feel.

Let's go to the beach and sing your favorite song
together in front of the sunset.
I do not feel anxious anymore.
Is this hope, or just something I do not have a word for?

For Mike

I Feel Like a Flower

I feel like a flower that can bloom and reflect change
in a short time.

I feel like a flower because, in every season,
you can see a different color.

I feel like a flower because my essence is not perfect,
but it is real.

The Little Box

I am like the little box in the corner of my room.

I was wondering why, then I understood.

I can keep secrets, too.

I can hide, be close, and not say anything about it.

If I wear a purple dress like the color of my little box, I can keep
some value, if I am not scared to be open sometimes.

My little box is not perfect. Some days I feel that I belong to
the garbage. But no, if you don't mind, I will stay in the corner
of my room



Feeling Every Sunset

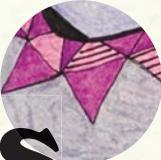
I am a pink sunset in the summer afternoon.

I can feel the breeze touching my face, the smell of paradise,
the happiness walking in the streets with a bright smile
passing by and saying hello.

What a day to be alive! Running between the trees, trying to
find the rain, to dance there, to grow there forever. I am just a
convenient mix of stardust. There is no need to make sense,
just a need to have existence.







Yannis Lobaina

Hope/ Esperanza

Hope is a human being holding on to the only tree
in the middle of a hurricane.

Hope is the transparent gaze of my daughter Amélie
when she wakes up next to me every morning.

Floreecer/ Bloom

Like a wild dandelion, I can bloom/*floreecer* everywhere.
I can persevere, flourish, and be grounded in an arid land.
Like a wild dandelion, I can float and wave in any land.
I will find the courage to break the past pattern in my living,
I will heal all the wounds of my heart
like the Japanese did through the method of *Kintsugi*.

Like a wild dandelion, I can bloom/*floreecer* no matter the
challenges in my path.
Like a wild dandelion, I have the warmth and power
of the rising sun.

I'm an Island



I'm an Island from the Caribbean
dreaming in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

I'm a piece of my motherland
unsettled in the cold water of the grand Lake Ontario.
I'm an island with a thousand sounds and a soft breeze,
an island with blooming dandelions and bird songs.
I'm an Island with numerous rivers, waterfalls, and palm forests,
in the middle of another land called *Turtle Island*,
Like *Ithaka* waiting for my inhabitants to return to me.

Under the Christmas Tree

Under my Christmas tree in the cold, gray, Toronto afternoon,
I feel like I'm a new pine, with a firm branch shelter for the
wild birds.

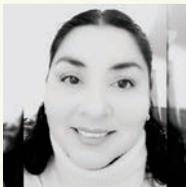
Every morning, the fresh smell of my Christmas tree makes
me feel like I'm in the middle of the forest in a wooden cabin
My Christmas tree has evergreen branches, and in the
middle of winter they make me feel peaceful and joyful. Although
December gives me nostalgia for my motherland, the sorrows
have made me become a wounded woman, strong and released.

Now, I understand the smell of Christmas, and the lights are
an excellent metaphor for life. Under my Christmas tree in the
cold, gray, Toronto afternoon, I forget the ordinary moments.
I feel like I'm a new pine in love with my solitude.

Meet the Authors



Coming from a teaching background, **Anbrin Naqvi** started her career in Canada as a flower grower at Mocon Greenhouses. Later, moving to the Waterloo region opened new doors for her and she worked as a Project Assistant at the Social Planning Council of KW. Being involved with the *Festival of Neighborhoods* further widened Anbrin's horizons and resourcefulness. Through networking, she landed a job as a Children's & Youth Leader at the House of Friendship for the following ten years. Working there gave her a deep sense of belonging, plus the immense satisfaction of making a difference in the community.



My name is **Dailybet Villaseñor**. I was born on July 1, 1978, in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, Mexico. I'm married and have 3 children who are my greatest pride. We arrived in Toronto on March 10, 2020, each one of us with a backpack with all our memories, experiences, loves, wishes, and dreams of our lives, along with the hope of being able to live in peace and freedom. I am grateful for this new opportunity to be able to enjoy ourselves and enjoy life in all its fullness. Currently, I'm enjoying the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo in Spanish.



Fátima Morales Bustamante is a Chilean teacher and feminist activist, currently living in Canada. She is a beginner writer and has participated in the creation of several fanzines about feminism and politics. She likes to write poetic prose in which she expresses her thoughts about life, and make collages, where she can mix image and poetry to create a more extensive meaning.



Originating from Romania, **Gabriela Covaci** arrived in Canada in 2003. Following her arrival, Gabriela helped coordinate various local and provincial multicultural development projects. She has volunteered with settlement agencies, has spoken at different events, and founded a non-for-profit organization that supports women and children. In her various roles with Mohawk College and the Hamilton and Halton School Boards, she assisted with career planning and assessments, oversaw program activity, facilitated workshops, and participated in various conferences and summits.

Gabriela has a B.Sc. in Chemistry, an MBA in Marketing & Business, and a Master's in Education. Gabriela has been awarded Halton's Newcomer Strategy Award, the Canada Top 25 Newcomers Award, the Sesquicentennial Citizenship Award, and the Mohawk College Alumni of Distinctions Award, to name a few.



Jasmine Delaviz is an Iranian educator and writer who currently resides in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature. Jasmine has a perpetually growing passion for Literature and has been sharing her love of writing and reading with her pupils for over a decade now. Currently, she teaches English Literature and is an advisor of the Young Journalist Club in a Malaysian International School and College.



Laura Fernanda Vera doesn't wear makeup, earrings, bracelets or necklaces because she always accidentally loses them. She is from the Ancient Sea and loves to admire the solar journey. The Moon heals her soul. She meditates to achieve compassion, devotion and strength; to love freely and make decisions from clarity. Nature keeps her alive; Anthroposophy keeps her wondering. Fernanda always goes barefoot and sometimes she even loses her shoes. She reads and has learned a song on the ukulele; she sings and enjoys to greet the cows on the road. She uses medicine from the land, she sews-embroiders-knits. She knows about language but she doesn't care about academic titles anymore. She is still full of dreams, aware and ready to die anytime. She celebrates life and death, will never like olives, and her love lives in your heart when you are thinking of her. All nations, all beings, the entire Universe lives within her bodies. She dances with her eyes closed. She is Art, she is light and darkness. She has 3 children who were born from her heart and a brave companion who loves, cares, and supports her dreams and ideas. Fernanda walks with her Spirit and is gratefully 33.



My name is **Veronica Viteri** and I came to Canada in 2013 from Ecuador. I was born and raised in Machachi, a small town surrounded by mountains. As a child, I really enjoyed creating comics. As a teenager, I couldn't be without the typical diary with entries and poems inspired by first love. I obtained a bachelor's degree in Commerce and Administration, specializing in Accounting, although due to a lack of support I had to give up on my idea of joining the Faculty of Arts and entered the Faculty of Administrative Sciences instead. I have three adorable daughters—Angie, Valentina, and Ámbar. I was part of a national literacy program for adults, worked in the private educational sector as a preschool assistant, in the Ministry of Education as a pedagogical advisor, in various Children's Centers, and in the Ministry of Social Inclusion as a technician and comprehensive children's development coordinator. I carried out a project that encouraged reading, with which I obtained the title of Early Childhood Educator from the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters, and Educational Sciences. In Canada, I have volunteered with MUSE Arts and Teach2Learn and, thanks to the workshops given by Paola Gómez, I have revived my love for writing.



Maria José Bancalari is a Spanish Language and Literature high school teacher from Buenos Aires, Argentina. During her teaching practice, she developed creative writing workshops frequently. In these workshops, participants were exposed to different art forms to inspire them to write.

In 2017, Maria José moved to Toronto. Looking for new ways to bring literature closer to people, she enrolled in Arts Education and Community Arts. Since her graduation, Maria José has been involved in different community projects for immigrants and refugees. At the same time, she continues to practice and learn about writing in multiple workshops.



Acknowledgements



Xiud Cancino is an actress, writer and teacher specialized in Human Talent Development. Born in Venezuela, she began her career when she was 15 as an actress for a theater company in her small hometown near the Amazon rainforest. Before the age of 17, she had already performed complex classical pieces by various authors. This awoke her curiosity for literature and she began the creation of different plays that, years later, would be performed on the Caracas stage. At age 18, she won a scholarship to study at the Central University of Venezuela where she obtained a Bachelors of Education in Human Talent Development. In the 5 years of her career, she has been an activist for the rights of students and teachers, has performed in more than 15 plays, and 10 pieces of her authorship have been performed in different Caracas theaters. Among the most important are *Innocents*, *Night of Dreams*, *Emergency Exit*, *Versus*, and *Primary Fears*. She is currently an actress with the Toronto Free Theater Group and her first mystery novel, *The Chronicles of Lucero Amaral*, is published on the Wattpad platform.



Yanniss Lobaina is an award-winning Cuban artist based in Toronto. She has more than twelve years of experience as a published author and creative visual storyteller. Lobaina has published more than 25 short fiction and flash nonfiction stories worldwide. In 2019, she received the Toronto Arts Council Newcomer and Refugee Artist Mentorship grant for her current picture book *Amélie The Crow Girl*, the bilingual spanish/english series.

Lobaina graduated from the International School of Film, Radio and Television in Cuba, and as a diplomate of the VII Literary Training Course Onelio Jorge Cardoso. She is currently pursuing Creative Writing at the University of Toronto. Yanniss loves to explore themes of immigration, diaspora, and motherhood through different storytelling tools.

Anbrin Naqvi

A project like this zine couldn't have come at a better time since the pandemic has restricted so many other activities. I am extremely grateful to have been a part of *The Stories We Share* workshops. Through them, I discovered writing to be my saving grace, as well as being helpful in easing the overall environment of anxiety.

I am thankful to Paola Gomez for extending an invitation to join the MUSE Arts writing group, which I would have been reluctant to join otherwise. In these times of isolation and loneliness, the self-assessment tool shared by Gabriela Covaci added colour to an otherwise dull week. I am grateful for having received this refreshing perspective. In addition, the prompts by Hanan Hazime for creative poem-writing using similes and metaphors were very helpful— I was able to bring out ideas that had been dormant for years. That has been a valuable experience.

Finally, the guidance and constructive suggestions by Laura Rojas gave a beautiful flow to my pieces. I appreciate all her efforts towards helping edit my completed chapter.

Xiud Cancino

A mis padres y mis hermanos, son ese pilar fundamental en mi vida, gracias por tanto. A mis hermosas sobrinas, espero que cuando aprendan a leer, su tía sea su escritora favorita. A Paola Gomez y el equipo de MUSE Arts, por seguir cumpliendo sueños.

Meet the Team

Gabriela Covaci "It takes a village to raise a child," as the African proverb says, but it takes a big heart and a passion for putting new projects together year after year!

For the book and the fantastic opportunity to work with these amazing women, my thank-you goes to the entire team.

The Stories We Share will be a memoir for all of us participating during the pandemic. We were so blessed that Paola and the entire team connected strong women worldwide to work together and have excellent support with an authentic village approach. Instead of spending time wandering around the effects of the pandemic, we were focused on our weekly meetings and looking forward to Monday night. Isolation did not affect us as much as others because we had the support, the aim, and the tools to stay engaged and away from any negative thoughts. We worked together, looked out for each other week after week, and raised an amazing child— our book.

Yannis Lobaina I am always grateful to Paola for creating and strengthening these creative spaces for us immigrant women. Writing is my career and my passion. Being part of these workshops as a participant is really inspiring, energizing, and motivating. It was a wonderful and meaningful time together, especially amid the pandemic. I really appreciate MUSE Art's work!



Bānoo Zan is a poet, librettist, translator, teacher, editor and poetry curator, with more than 200 published poems and poetry-related pieces as well as three books. *Song of Phoenix: Life and Works of Sylvia Plath*, was reprinted in Iran in 2010. *Songs of Exile*, her first poetry collection, was released in 2016 in Canada by Guernica Editions. It was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award by the League of Canadian Poets in 2017. *Letters to My Father*, her second poetry book, was published in 2017 by Piquant Press in Canada. She is the founder of Shab-e She'r (Poetry Night), Toronto's most diverse poetry reading and open mic series (inception: 2012). It is a brave space that bridges the gap between communities of poets from different ethnicities, nationalities, religions (or lack thereof), ages, genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, poetic styles, voices and visions.



Gabriela Casineanu is an award-winning author, professional coach, and university instructor who considers life a self-discovery journey worth exploring. After immigrating to Canada, a career shift to coaching opened new opportunities, Gabriela founded the Immigrant Writers Association (IWA) and Introverts Academy, and continues to help immigrants through her coaching practice.



Hanan Hazime, also known as **The Mad Muslimah**, is a multidisciplinary artist, creative writer, community arts educator and, creative writing instructor living in Tkaronto/Toronto. She identifies as a Lebanese-Canadian Shi'a Muslimah Feminist and Mad Pride Activist. Hanan has a Master of Arts degree in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Windsor.



Laura Rojas, is a Toronto-based artist and designer with a BFA in Cross-Disciplinary Art: Publications from OCAD University. Laura is interested in using art and design as tools for education, activation, and participation, as well as exploring the role of community arts in strengthening our connections with each other and the world around us. She is a community artist and facilitator with MUSE Arts.

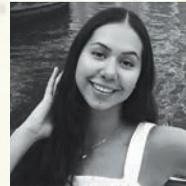


Mariana Bolaños is a Mexican artist based in Toronto. She has created a diverse body of work in painting, ceramics and installation. Focusing on art with a social purpose, she works as a facilitator in community programs engaging people with disabilities, immigrants, women, and children. Mariana has collaborated with the Neighbourhood Arts Network, Workman Arts and MUSE Arts. She was also recipient of the RBC Arts Access Fund and received grants from the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council with Pinceles Latinos Collective.



Paola Gomez is a trained human rights lawyer, community organizer, public speaker, artist facilitator, writer and dreamer. A member of PEN Canada's Writers in Exile and an advocate, Paola is involved in causes such as ending violence against women and forced migration. Paola is the co-founder and Director of MUSE Arts and the Creator, Director and Producer of HAPPENING Multicultural Festival.

She is the recipient of 2008 Amina Malko Award from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 2009 Vital People from Toronto Foundation for her community building initiatives, the 2016 Constance E Hamilton Human Rights Award from the City of Toronto, and the 2018 Champions of Change Award, excellence in the Arts from the Skills for Change.



Veronica Gomez is a community artist interested in creative writing and literature who aspires to travel the world and connect with others. She currently works with MUSE Arts, a non-profit organization, in aspects such as workshop facilitation, communications, and project development. She was a facilitator for *The Stories We Share* and is currently working on the *Artist Talks Holistic Wellness* online series, part of MUSE Arts' Winter Activation Program.



The Stories We Share is a series of creative writing workshops for immigrant, refugee, and newcomer women-identifying persons. This yearly program brings together women from different backgrounds to participate in creative writing activities, collectively creating stories and poems, and sharing their stories of migration and journey through creative writing.

In a safe space, women worked together to produce individual and collective work. Their work is part of our publication, *The Stories We Share*. Here, you will read a collection of stories and poems written by participants between September 2020 and March 2021.

