

Presented by Advocates for Dignity & Hume City Council

ADVOCATES
FOR DIGNITY



REFUGEE WEEK 2026

STORY WRITING COMPETITION

“A Million Stories: Journey to Hope”

Reflecting on the journeys refugees have taken—from displacement and uncertainty, to belonging and contribution.





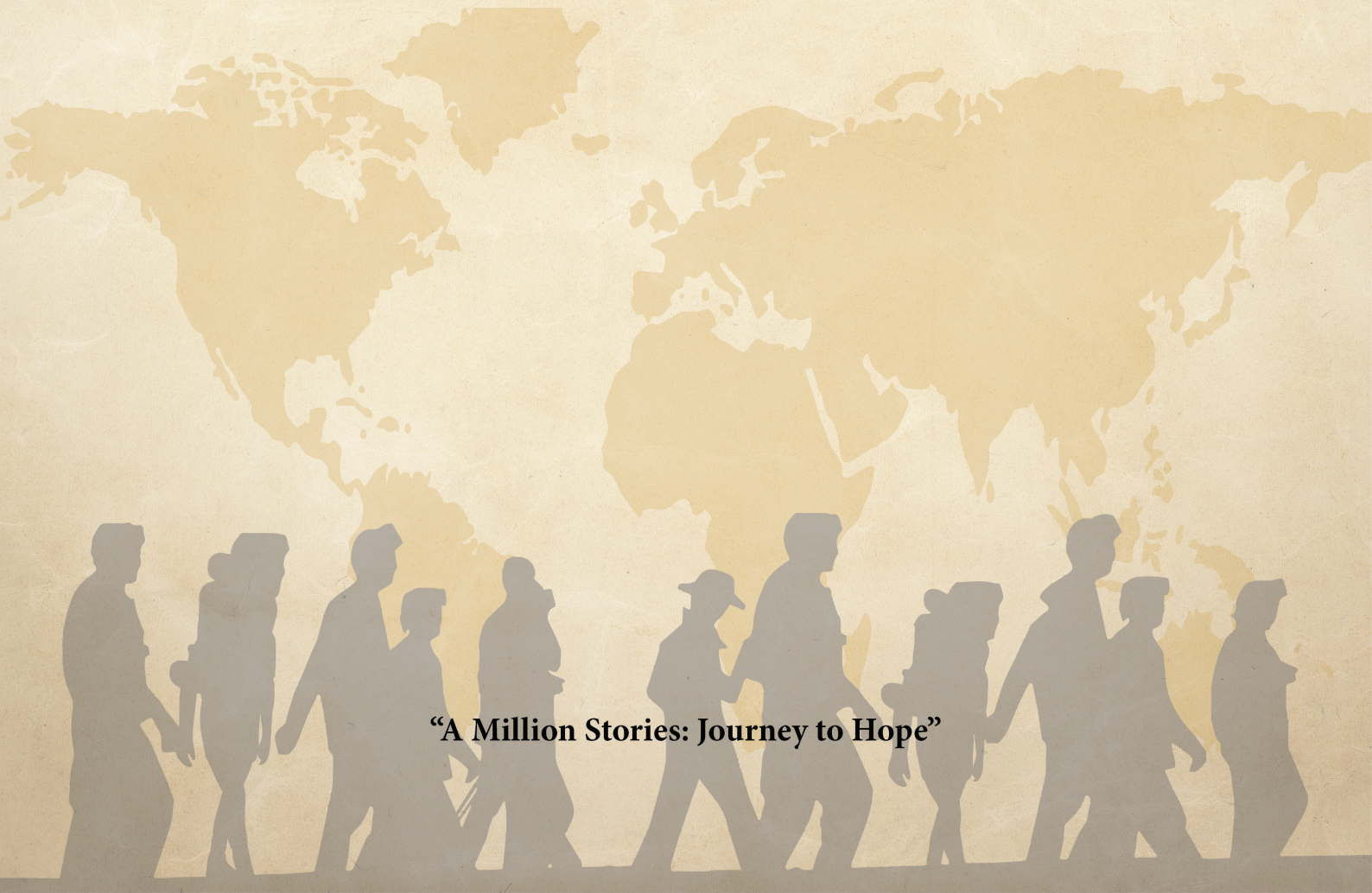
Advocates For Dignity

OUR MISSION

To Advocate For Human Rights In Australia And The World, By Engaging Communities And Organisations , Law And Policy Makers.

OUR VISION

A World In Which Every person Is Treated With Dignity, Respect, And Equity



“A Million Stories: Journey to Hope”

**Welcome to
"A Million Stories: Journey to Hope"**

This booklet is a celebration of voice, resilience, and community. Within these pages, you will find a moving collection of creative writing pieces submitted entirely by our community members for the Refugee Week 2026 Story Writing Competition.

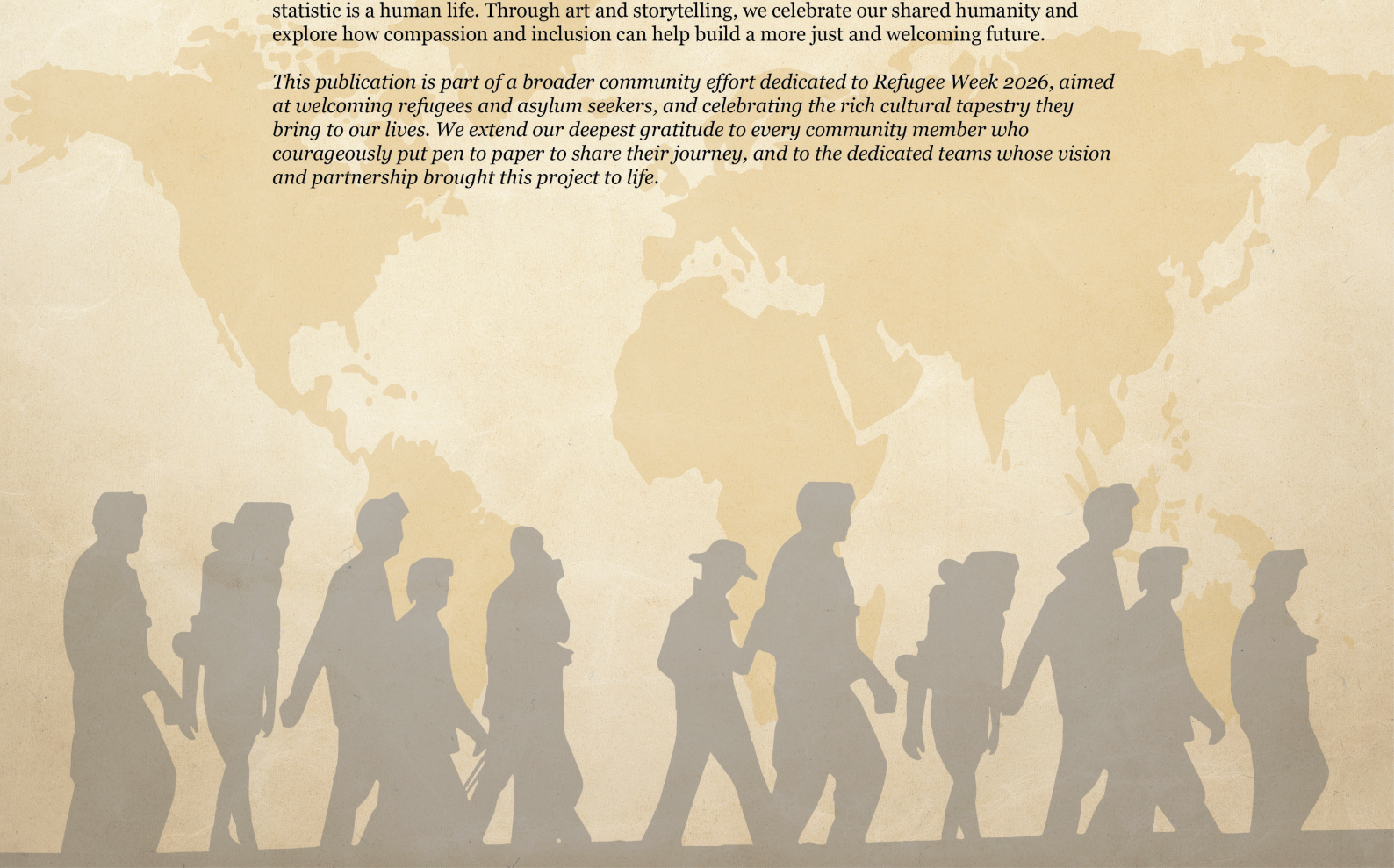
Co-presented by Advocates for Dignity and Hume City Council, this initiative invited local writers from two distinct categories—Secondary School and Adult—to share their unique, personal interpretations of this year's theme: "A Million Stories: Journey to Hope."

About the Theme

This year's theme honours a defining chapter in Australia's history. Since 1947, Australia has provided safety and a new beginning to one million people through permanent humanitarian visas. Each journey represents a story of courage, resilience, loss, and hope — stories that continue to shape families, communities, and the nation.

As we commemorate the 40th Refugee Week, this theme invites reflection on the refugee journey from displacement to belonging and contribution. It reminds us that behind every statistic is a human life. Through art and storytelling, we celebrate our shared humanity and explore how compassion and inclusion can help build a more just and welcoming future.

This publication is part of a broader community effort dedicated to Refugee Week 2026, aimed at welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, and celebrating the rich cultural tapestry they bring to our lives. We extend our deepest gratitude to every community member who courageously put pen to paper to share their journey, and to the dedicated teams whose vision and partnership brought this project to life.



SECONDARY CATEGORY SHORT STORIES

“A Million Stories: Journey to Hope”

Sarah Jafari

Under a New Sky

My name is Sarah, and when I first came to Australia, everything felt different. The sky seemed bigger, the streets were quieter, and people spoke a language I could not fully understand. I remember looking out of the car window and thinking that nothing looked like the place I once called home.

Leaving my country was not easy. I had to say goodbye to my friends, my school, and everything that felt familiar. I tried to be strong, but inside, I felt scared and unsure about what was waiting for me.

On my first day at school, I was very nervous. My hands were cold, and my heart was beating fast. Everyone was talking and laughing, but I stayed quiet. Their words sounded too fast, and I could only understand a little. I was afraid of making mistakes, so I just smiled, even when I felt lonely.

The classroom felt strange. The teacher was kind, but I couldn't understand everything. I looked around and saw other students answering easily, and it made me feel different. I wondered if I would ever be able to speak like them.

During lunch breaks, it was even harder. Students stood in groups, laughing and talking. I didn't know how to join them, so I often sat alone, watching and feeling invisible.

One day, while I was sitting alone, a girl came and sat next to me. She didn't say much. She just smiled and shared her food with me.

At first, I didn't know how to react. But her smile made me feel safe. That small moment meant so much to me. For the first time, I felt like I wasn't completely alone.

After that day, things slowly began to change. She sat with me more often, and little by little, we started talking. Sometimes we used simple words, sometimes gestures, and sometimes we

just laughed. She was patient, and that helped me feel more confident.

I started to learn new words and understand more. Every day, I tried a little harder. I listened carefully in class and practiced speaking whenever I could. I was not perfect, but I was trying my best.

There were still difficult days. Sometimes I felt frustrated when I couldn't express myself. Sometimes I missed my old life. But I reminded myself that change takes time.

My teachers also helped me. They encouraged me to speak, even if I made mistakes. Slowly, I became more confident. I started to join conversations and make more friends.

At first, Australia did not feel like home. But little by little, with small acts of kindness and courage, it started to feel warmer and more familiar.

I noticed the beauty around me—the parks, the sunsets, and the quiet streets. I started to create new memories, and those memories made me smile.

Now, when I look at the same sky, I remember how lost I once felt. But I also remember that I didn't give up.

The sky is still the same,
but I am not the same person anymore.

I am stronger.
I am braver.
And maybe
this place is finally becoming my home.

Shanini Kulasinghe

Where the Sun Sets

I didn't bring much with me. Not because I forgot. Because I thought I wouldn't survive long enough to need it. The bag still felt heavy, though.

Tears burned my eyes as I looked out into a vast ocean of runaways, refugees, and innocent people failed by every system meant to protect them. I look up into the ashy-grey sky as the dark clouds swallow the sun.

The tattered and threadbare pieces of fabric that clothed me were thin; my limbs underneath them even thinner. I had it worse than others. Hunger felt like something was eating at me from the inside. I had food in a leather pouch, but I gave it to a ragged child who was crying from the pain. I couldn't watch a child weep.

3 4 5 days since I last ate. 3 4 5 days since I was at home. 3 4 5 fingers curled into a fist as I watched the cruel world tear at itself.

Everything familiar vanished in smoke.

I thought back to a week ago. When I was with Mama. When I was safe. "Follow the sun. I'll meet you where it sets," said Mama. I believed her. I wanted to believe her. "Don't stop," she added. "Not for me." She clasped my hand in hers and turned my wrist so my palm faced upward. Mama had placed an old locket in it. She pressed the button on the side as it lay in my palm.

It opened with a click to reveal a parchment-like photo of a baby being cradled by its mother, with the father holding the baby's tiny hands. It's me, I thought. I was beautiful. I was happy. I looked down at my once soft but now rough and calloused hands, warping back to reality, where I stood in the middle of nowhere. It was raining now. The raindrops hid the tears dripping from my eyes. They hid my past.

My wet hair drooped in front of my face as I stood still in this new, unfamiliar land. A path of tar was paved before me. I began to see cars like metal creatures roaring as they sped along the road. They splashed water from puddles onto me, leaving me drenched. Miserable.

I know I left my home to escape Death, but after losing just about every piece of my soul until there's nothing left, I stopped caring whether he found me. I knew I wasn't coming back from this.

I lifted my chin and looked forward. A glint of warm light bounced off my eyes. The sun was setting. Hope stabbed through me, sharp and sudden. "Mama?" The words escaped my mouth in a whisper before I could bring myself to know I'm not dreaming. A word echoed around my head. A word I had not heard in days. A word that helped me believe that I'm still here. Alive, not just surviving.

My name.

"Solace," said a voice. I was sure it was Mama. But it couldn't be. I ignored the odds. The world around me disappeared. All I had to do was run to where the sun sets. Then maybe Mama would be there. We could be happy. She promised.

I refused to look back. I shut my eyes and started to run across the road toward the sun.

Car tires screeched to a halt.

Horns blared.

People shouted.

I am deaf to it all. My feet reached the lush grass again, and I opened my eyes. To my dismay, the sun flickered, just for a heartbeat, slipping behind a thick gray cloud. The light I'd been chasing in desperation had vanished into the atmosphere.

My feet faltered. My chest caved in. The world rushed back all at once. I fell to my knees, sobbing. Why why why did it have to be me? I clutched my hand over my chest as my breath hitched and I choked.

The rain continued to shower down on me, sending shards of cold down my spine.

I knelt there. I embraced the world. It's cruelty.

Suddenly, the rain seemed to stop shattering on my body, but it still hit the ground around me. I looked up. A little girl held an umbrella over me. She had a blanket in her other arm, which she wrapped around me and said, "Come inside! It's cold."

I smiled wearily at her, knowing that my faith in humanity is restored and that maybe I'm not as alone as I thought.

Anniya Khalid

The Flames of Hope

My eyes slowly fluttered open as I blew out the tiny flickering flames. Thirteen candles! Thirteen years of my life, never to be seen again. Balloons came raining down and happy voices sang, but more than all the gifts and cake, I was most excited about one thing. Something I didn't know would stay close to my heart for the rest of my life.

"Grandma?", I quietly said her name while tiptoeing into her room. It had been a busy day and I hadn't been able to talk to her by myself among all the people. Grandma's room was still and dim, in contrast to the party's chaos happening outside. There she was resting peacefully in her favourite armchair, with her eyes closed. Soft eyelids opened as Grandma heard my voice and her face broke into a broad, and beautiful smile. Today was the day Grandma would tell me. The excitement rushed within me.

"Ayesha, did you remember?" She sounded surprised as she asked me, with a happy smile but slightly dim eyes.

"Of course, Grandma! this question has lingered for so long, and I want to know!"

There was a tense silence.

"Grandma," I whispered "What really made you leave Afghanistan?"

"I didn't leave because I wanted to, I left because I had to."

The words hung in the air, heavy and still.

After a brief pause grandma asked me to sit beside her. I knew it was finally the time! I passed grandma a cup of traditional Afghani tea before I sat down.

"There was war, I was torn away from my home, my family, and eventually even my heart. Do you know Ayesha? That was the last

day I saw my mother, your Great Grandmother. I did not eat anything for days."

I gasped. I didn't know that Grandma had been through so much pain. She put her tender hands on my cheeks, as tears welled up in my eyes.

"Me and your grandfather were forced to leave. We had to go to a place where our children could grow up without having to fear. We came here to seek safety and refuge, and we came for you Ayesha and I am glad that we did my dear. This country provided us with so much love and care."

I crumpled into Grandma's arms. I hugged her so tightly, as if trying to say thank you for all the sacrifices she had made. Her story wasn't just one of loss, it was of courage, love and choosing hope even when times ahead looked dark.

After Grandma told me that story, whenever I felt scared, or alone, I thought of Grandma and tried to be strong just like her.

Joanna Antony

Journey to Hope

The room was always dark when we prayed in Afghanistan. It wasn't the type of peaceful darkness in the nightfall. It was the kind of darkness we needed to hide, the kind that we needed to be safe. Mama would pull the curtains tightly across the walls so no light could give us away. Outside, the streets carried on as normal, but inside we lived in silence.

"Arya, Azad! Come quickly!" Baba whispered. He was waving his hand at us from the kitchen telling us to hurry. Baba knelt on the worn rug and lifted up the loose floorboard, pulling out the Bible wrapped in cloth. His hand moved gently as if he was holding something alive, something precious. "Listen," said Baba as he slowly opened the Bible. "Deuteronomy 31:6, Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

Although his voice was quiet, it filled the whole room. Mama came and sat next to us. We could see the fear in her eyes. Her eyes moved towards the window at every noise heard. Fear lived alongside us, it breathed in the silence. "Why do we have to hide Baba?" Azad asked quietly. "Because," Baba replied, "sometimes people don't understand, and sometimes people fear what they don't understand." I looked over at the Bible. It didn't look dangerous. But somehow it was.

By morning everything returned to "normal". Or at least it looked that way. The Bible was covered and stored away, and Mama moved through the house quietly, but attentively. That night something felt wrong, like we were waiting for something. Mama kept glancing toward the window. Even Baba was quieter than usual. Then somewhere in the distance a car door slammed loudly. Mama's face changed. "Don't speak," she whispered. We could hear footsteps coming closer. We all froze. Our heartbeats were so loud I was sure

they could be heard through the walls. Then came the knock, that soon turned into pounding. Voices came from outside. Baba walked toward us and whispered, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid" "Baba how, in a time like this?" I asked. He replied, "Especially in a time like this, it'll be alright." But this time I didn't know whether to believe him.

The door burst open. Boots filled the room. Voices echoed over one another. Azad started crying. I held him tightly, even as my own hands shook. Baba stepped forward and said, "It was me." I tried to reach for him but he was gone and we never saw him again. After that night we knew we were not safe. Mama said we had to leave. We took what we could, and Mama held the Bible close to her chest. There was no time to say goodbye. So we left Afghanistan. Quietly. In secret. Like we had lived for the past years.

The journey felt endless. Dark roads, cold nights that felt colder than they should have. Azad stopped asking questions after a while. But sometimes he would whisper, "Is Baba coming back." We never answered. But I always remembered his words as if I was hearing them on a broken record. Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid. The Lord your God goes with you.

When we arrived in Australia, everything felt different. People spoke freely, dressed freely, they laughed and lived without fear. It felt unfamiliar, as if we had stepped into a new life, a whole new world. The first time we entered a church I was so fascinated that I stopped at the door. Light poured through the stained windows. We could hear the loud voices filling the room. Azad asked in shock, "Why are they so loud." I swallowed. "Because they can be." I had never stepped inside a church before, I've only ever heard Mama and Baba describing them, but I could have never imagined it would be this beautiful. Mama took my hand. "It is okay now," she said softly. Although it didn't

feel right straight away. It slowly started to.
And sometimes I wished Baba had been able to
see this.

Even though we lost Baba on our road to
freedom, we did not lose what he gave us.
Faith. Hope. New life.

Because now when we pray, we don't need to
hide.

Haneef Elham

A Million Stories: Journey to Hope

Flight to Freedom

Your eyes open from a deep slumber, only to hear the continuous sound of bombs and artillery reigning from above. Your mind alerts your body but you are used to this - this ugly reality where physical packages of devastation don't stop dropping on your home, on your country. You and your family's lives are at stake, they always are. Everything you have ever worked for, dreamed for, hoped for, it could all come crashing down the next second. You flee Afghanistan - what you called home your entire life. You flee it not because you want to, but because you have to. You hope for a life away from war - a life of peace and tranquility.

This is the depressing reality of a refugee. You are stripped of your rights and have to choose between fleeing your home or dying in vain. Your life is constantly in danger, but you hope to make it to another country with hopes as high as the moon. You leave so many things behind, some loved ones, friends, memories and property, but this is the cost of survival. Before boarding the evacuation planes, you take a good look at the mountains around the airport, thinking why such a calamity had to descend upon your home.

Touching down in Australia is a rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts. You're both happy that you survived, but feel lost and alone in this new setting. You are given no choice but to start from scratch and rebuild your life and it's not like the world gives you any time to contemplate all this information as you settle in. Your neighbours notice you moving into their street, they say something, but you can't understand anyway. You feel lost as if you were a lion stranded in the middle of an ocean, but you have to push forward and get used to this life, even if it means stepping outside your comfort zone.

You eat comfortably, sleep comfortably and

live comfortably, but how can you stay calm and satisfied without reassurance of the safety of some of your loved ones? You think about them day and night, you think about your own experiences and what you and your family went through, hoping their journey will be easier. You remember violent moments in your life, you remember times when the world felt so unfair that you wondered what happened to international laws. This is the next phase of your survival, trauma...

Day and night, you think about your family, their safety and situation, but participation in community events, talking and visiting friends and everyday challenges help your mind stay clear and calm. Your family is the biggest help you have, and yet, you left some behind.

Little by little, you settle in peacefully, but only after facing the difficulties. You learn English, make friends and relationships. You are a local and you know which supermarket has the ripest fruit. You feel happy here, but something inevitable is missing in your heart. You came to Australia, but you left your heart, soul and belonging in Afghanistan. You feel empty inside, but satisfied on the outside. You appear confident, but you know something inside you thinks back to the happy times you had at home - before the war, before chaos, before the cycle of destruction and creation.

You are happy here in your new life in Australia, but you left your heart in Afghanistan...

Marieel Yoash

My Refugee Writing and my life as A refugee.

I was born in Iraq in 2014; a war was happening at the time between the USA and Iraq. I was very young and had to go to Turkey to survive and Iraq was ruined at the time; I couldn't still live there it was uninhabitable! Turkey was well until they joined in-- my family left. I went to Australia where I live now. One day I want to go back to Iraq and see where I originated from. Refugeeing is very hard to do because it takes YEARS to learn what culture the countries you go to teach and what the language is. For Australia its simple. Australia is very luckily multi-cultural, but my mum took almost 5 years to get her citizenship. The refugeeing took a long time but it made me have a lifetime opportunity. I escaped from Iraq at 7 months old and came to Turkey, I was 3 years old when I came to Australia.

I loved my little so time in Iraq, but my time was limited. I loved Turkey because me and my family went too many parties, and I once left my parents and went to the doors of the party and my parents tried finding me.

We got to Australia. We lived 2.5 Years in Turkey! And Australia is a very nice country. My Time in All Three Country's-- Fun Fact: Iraq was the country I lived the least time in only living 7 months! but Turkey made it to second place on time at 2 and a half years, but Australia takes the cake for the most time because I lived 9 years by now almost Australian which is pretty crazy in my opinion! It's a very well-run country and I love it here. I don't think of changing anytime soon unless if my parents tell me to, I guess I might go to whatever country they say maybe back to Turkey maybe even to a place, I haven't seen before like Spain or Russia.

Why did I look for escape is a question. I still get asked a lot! But For real WHY! Because Iraq is a country known for war with its pretty notorious run of wars, And I say that because I was born in a war at a young age--small and

vulnerable! I didn't have a long time as you could think in Iraq I lived only 7 months, And Turkey was only 2.5 Years. I believe Australia was the best option for me and my family for the time being. I love this country but I think it could improve on some aspects but I think it was the best choice, my family loves this country, I love the thought of refugeeing and how many other people that are not just me their refugee story. I personally have a deep love for mobility, I love travel and all types of travel: plane, car, motorcycle, bike, scooter, ice skates and more. I even use mobility in games a lot.

I love to travel, I really love it, but when I hear about traveling because of war, I get sad--because I know people love where they originate from, I know how people feel while traveling to a foreign country they don't know. I was young and vulnerable while traveling. I felt sad, I loved Iraq and I really do wish to go back there one day, I would do ANYTHING for just a millisecond of time back in Iraq. I also love Turkey but I really do wish to go back to Iraq one day. The process of escaping takes years for multiple reasons, and I have the reason of war and not poverty. I previously questioned about where I was born in Iraq and Turkey and I don't really remember it, because it was long ago in 2014-2017—I don't remember Iraq and Turkey from my memory, I love all refugee stories and how people do it. I do feel sad but also happy for all who got the chance to escape like me and my family.

Caylee Galinato

The Hope To Belong

"Oh, I'm listening to rap" a friend of mine said.

"I love that music!" Everyone else simultaneously agreed.

I sat there intently, listening to what the majority liked.

One of them looked at me.

"What about you Caylee?" She asked

I stuttered, stumbling over my words.

"Oh yeah, I like rap too." I replied hesitantly.

"Oh well I like pop music" someone said mockingly as everyone laughed.

I laughed too, not a real laugh, but a laugh that covered up my actual fear.

You see, I don't listen to rap and I love pop music. But I feared saying it. I feared being pointed out. I feared being separate from the crowd.

People say you should voice your opinion. But what if our opinions cause us pain, not pride. What if our opinions don't give us sweet smiles from others, but strange glares in the hallways.

A boy quietly sat in front of me on the bus, he wore a Minecraft style bag and headphones, and my friend was quick to point it out.

"Ooh look at that Minecraft kid." My friend sneered quietly.

I laughed.

I laughed in order to make it seem like I'm agreeing with her but in reality I laugh at the pathetic part of me that is too scared to voice my actual opinion in fear of disagreeing. I love Minecraft and, in another world, I would have been just like him. But I fear that standing on a

hill of any opinion that is not like the majority will lead me to getting shot down. I want to fit in, I so badly do and I know so many of us want to. So, we act like this.

People ask us for our opinion and tell us that it's okay if it's different. But that's a lie. It's not 'okay' to them. It's not fine with most people. But they keep telling us we should have different opinions so why do they shame us for them? It's an invitation to make us feel better, but really, when we open the invite, it tells us what we should really think.

Still, we convince ourselves into thinking we are all different, but maybe we've subconsciously become each other. We look at the shapes of our leaves, thinking we are all unique and not like the rest, but in reality, we are all the exact same pine tree in a forest.

But you see, I often observe this fast-moving world, and I know all these lies we display are for one thing.

To fit in.

But bit by bit, we begin to replace each part of us with something new, just to look good. But at what point of replacing body parts with metal are we all just the same robot?

Inside, we all want to show our differences. Those things that give us colour, make our personalities and let us shine. But the cons of being our true selves are too heavy to bear.

Yet, it feels as if there is a piece of our true selves patiently waiting inside. It sits there quietly, wanting to be unraveled.

Maybe belonging is not being like the rest but rather being welcomed by the rest. I believe we should not accept who we 'should' be but instead be accepted for who we want to be. That's what truly belonging is.

No matter the colour of our skin, the sound of our voice, or the age of our souls, we must pick

up the pieces of our true selves and glue them back together. Belonging is not fitting into one group but actually being valued despite our differences.

So, I guess we should all have that hope to belong.

Samaira Bhatia

Home has never just looked like a place to me. It has always felt like something, thick in the air, impossible to ignore.

The first thing that greets you is the smell. Haldi blooming golden in hot oil, cumin crackling, garam masala swirling upward in spirals. It seeps into everything: the curtains, the old wooden table, even my hair, clinging to me long after I leave the kitchen.

That afternoon, the scent was stronger than usual. Nani stood by the stove, her silver hair neatly parted as a pot of sabzi simmered beside her.

When my teacher assigned A Million Stories: Journey to Hope, I shrugged it off. “But that’s just about refugees,” I said, dropping my bag onto the floor. “You came on a plane, that’s all.” Nani didn’t answer. She wiped her hands and walked slowly to the cupboard. When she turned back, she was holding something small.

I had seen it a hundred times before, tucked away. The metal was a dull, worn gray, crisscrossed with fine scratches. The edges had jagged dents and the lid no longer sat straight. “यह,” Nani said softly, “सरिफ़ डबिबा नहीं है।” (This is not just a tiffin.) She rested her hand over mine. “इसमें मेरी पूरी ज़िंदगी बसी है... जो मैं पीछे छोड़ आई, और जो मैंने यहाँ बनायी।” (My whole life lives in this... what I left behind, and what I built here.)

She lifted the lid.

“When I was young,” she began, “I wanted to be a doctor.” In our village, people waited hours to see a doctor. The nearest clinic was far, and even if they made it, most couldn’t afford treatment. “I saw people bleeding, sick, crying for help... there were no qualified doctors. Sometimes they died waiting.” “I used to sit outside thinking, one day I will change this.” Her fingers brushed the inside of the tiffin.

“But we were poor,” she said. “बहुत गरीब,” she

added. (Very poor.) “Sometimes I would lie awake listening to my parents whisper about money, wondering if we would survive another month.” Her voice dropped. “मैंने अपने माता-पिता को कई बार भूखे सोते देखा है... कहते हुए, ‘मुझे भूख नहीं है,’ जबकी उनकी आँखें सच बता रही थीं।” (I have seen my parents sleep hungry many times... saying ‘I’m not hungry,’ even when their eyes told the truth.)

“And outside,” she said softly, “it was not safe. There was fighting. Sometimes gunfire in the distance. You learn as a child when to stay quiet.” “कुछ सुबहों में, परिवार बस गायब हो चुके होते थे।” (Some mornings, families were simply gone.)

“लेकिन मेरे पास एक ऐसा सपना था, जो मेरा साथ छोड़ने को तैयार ही नहीं था।” (But I had a dream that refused to leave me.) “Back home, I studied wherever I could. I helped at home during the day, and at night, I worked.

When I finally came here, I barely knew English. Only simple words. Hi. Thank you. Sorry.

“I worked three jobs just to afford tutoring, housing, and my education.”

“जब मैंने जाने का फैसला किया... मैंने सब कुछ पीछे छोड़ दिया।” (When I decided to leave... I left everything behind.)

“मेरे पास सरिफ़ एक छोटा बैग था... और एक सपना।” (I only had a small backpack... and a dream.)

“When I came here,” she said, “everyone was ahead of me. I understood the words... but not the world.”

“लोग हँसते थे मैं चुप रहती थी।” (People laughed, I stayed quiet.) “But I kept going,” she said. “I listened, learned, and studied harder than ever.”

She tapped the tiffin. “I brought this with me every day. Whatever I could make. But...”

“इसमें सरिफ खाना नहीं था... घर था, हम्मित थी, यादें थीं।” (It didn’t just carry food... it carried home, strength, memories.) “I became what I dreamed of,” she said. “And it was worth it. Every sacrifice.” She looked at me, pride glimmering in her eyes.

The next week, I stood in front of my class. The tiffin rested in my hands, heavier than it ever felt. “I’ve seen this my whole life,” I said. “But I never really... saw it. Every scratch, every dent—it holds something. Ambition. Zeal. Desire.”

“My grandmother always tells me.” I pause to take a deep breath. “कभी अपनी ज़िंदगी को हल्के में मत लेना... क्योंकि कहीं ना कहीं कोई है जो उसी ज़िंदगी का सपना देख रहा है जो तुम जी रहे हो।” (Never take your life for granted... because somewhere, someone is dreaming of the life you are living.)

The room was silent.

A million stories never arrive empty. And one of those stories had been sitting in my kitchen all along.

Anushka Sharma

A Million Heartbeats

One million.

It is a number that is difficult for the human mind to truly grasp. If you were to stand in a stadium and watch a million people walk past, it would take days for the procession to end. Since 1947, Australia has granted one million permanent humanitarian visas. One million people who fled the familiar to embrace the unknown. One million people who carried the weight of their past in suitcases and the seeds of their future in their hearts.

Today I stand in my community as a student, as a neighbour, and as a member of this vibrant Hume City community. I also stand before you with a confession: I am not a refugee. I have never had to look at my home and realise it was no longer safe. I have never had to say goodbye to everything I knew, wondering if “goodbye” actually meant “forever.”

But while I do not share that history, I am a witness to its legacy. I live in a community that is a living, breathing library of these million stories. And if there is one thing I have learned by listening, it is that behind every statistic is a human life — a life that refuses to be defined only by its trauma but chooses instead to be defined by its hope.

The theme of this year’s Refugee Week is **A Million Stories: Journey to Hope**. It invites us to look back at the seventy-seven years since that first humanitarian arrival in 1947. But more importantly, it invites us to look at the person sitting next to us.

In Hume, we see these stories every day. We see them in the entrepreneur opening a new business on Broadmeadows’ streets, bringing the flavours of a distant homeland to our doorstep. We see them in the parents waiting at the school gate, their eyes filled with the fierce determination that their children will have the opportunities they were denied. We

see them in the artists, the poets, and the musicians who use their craft to bridge the gap between “us” and “them” until there is only “we.”

The journey from displacement to belonging is not a straight line. It is a path paved with the jagged rocks of loss and the steep hills of language barriers and cultural shifts. It is a journey of immense courage. It takes courage to lose everything and still believe in “something.” It takes resilience to be uprooted and still find the strength to bloom in new soil.

When we talk about “hope,” we often treat it as a passive thing, a wish made on a star. But for a refugee, hope is a defiant act. It is a choice made every single morning to keep going, to contribute, and to belong. This “Journey to Hope” isn’t just about the physical travel across borders; it is the emotional journey of reclaiming one’s dignity.

As we mark this Refugee Week, we must ask ourselves: what is our role in these stories? If there are a million stories of seeking safety, there must also be a million stories of welcome.

Art plays a vital role in this. It is the universal language that needs no translator. When a young person in our community paints a mural of their journey or writes a poem about the smell of rain in a country they can no longer visit, they hand us a key. They invite us to step inside their experience. They remind us that while our origins may be different, our heartbeats, our fears, our loves, and our aspirations are exactly the same.

To the one million who have come before, and to those who are arriving today: thank you. Thank you for making Australia more than just a map, but a mosaic. Thank you for teaching us that “home” is not just a place you are born, but a place you help build.

I may not be a refugee, but my life is infinitely richer because I live among those who are. My

understanding of courage has been shaped by your stories. My understanding of hope has been deepened by your smiles.

Let us move forward not just by counting the million, but by making sure every single one of those stories is heard, valued, and celebrated. Let us ensure that Hume City continues to be a sanctuary where the journey to hope finally reaches its destination: a place of true, unwavering belonging.

Because in the end, we are not just a nation of statistics. We are a nation of stories. And the most beautiful chapters are the ones we write together.

Rahimeen Khan

A Million Stories: Journey to Hope

The life I once had was no more. My dreams of becoming an author felt like they had disappeared. There was no safety, no sense of belonging—only confusion and fear.

Just yesterday, everything felt perfect. I was playing with my friends, laughing and learning new things at school. At home, I helped my family set the table for dinner we had cooked together. My heart still feels warm when I think about that day. There were so many things I wanted to do, so many people I wanted to meet, and so much more to learn.

“One day,” I say to my mother, while writing stories in my notebook, “I will write a book. It will be about adventure, girls who change the world, birds flying over mountains.” She would smile and tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Inshallah,” she would whisper. “One day.”

But everything changed in a second.

“Fire.”

That one word took everything away.

I didn’t understand why we had to leave. Why did I have to say goodbye to my friends? Why did my perfect life suddenly feel like it was slipping away? My parents rushed around the house, frantically packing clothes and important things.

“We have to go,” my mother said softly.

“Why?” I asked. “Why are we leaving?”

She paused for a moment and then said, “because it’s not safe anymore. But we will be okay.”

Safe from what? I wondered as I slowly packed my things into a small bag.

“Where are we going?” I asked again.

“To Australia,” she replied.

Australia.

The word felt strange and far away. It lingered in my mind for a moment. Just hearing it made everything feel uncertain and distant, as if it belonged to another world entirely.

I looked down at my bag, not knowing how to respond. I was scared, confused, and heartbroken. I picked up my favourite teddy and a small pot my friends had given me. I didn’t want to leave anything behind, but I couldn’t take everything with me.

We left before sunrise.

It didn’t feel right leaving the place I had called home for twelve years. The streets were quiet, and the wind carried an unfamiliar whistle. Everything felt different, like the world had suddenly changed.

The journey was long. Some days we travelled. Some days we waited. I didn’t always know where we were going or what would happen next. I missed my home, my friends, and my school. At night, I held my teddy close and tried to be brave.

“Mum,” I whispered one night, “will things ever be the same again?”

She gently held my hand. “Maybe not the same,” she said softly, “but they will get better.”

I wanted to believe her.

After many days and nights, we finally arrived in a new place.

Australia.

Everything felt new—the air, the sounds, the people. I didn’t understand the language, and I felt small in this big, unfamiliar world.

On my first day of school, I stood quietly at the classroom door, my teddy in my bag. My heart was beating fast as if it could pop out of my chest.

My story was not over.
It was just beginning.

Then a girl walked up to me with a warm smile.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Emma.”

I hesitated, then said softly, “I’m Amina.”

She pointed to a seat beside her. “You can sit with me.”

It was a small moment, but it meant everything.

Days passed, and slowly, things began to change. I started learning new words. I began to understand my teacher. I even started to smile again.

One day, my teacher asked if anyone wanted to share something with the class.

I felt nervous, but I raised my hand.

“I like writing stories,” I said quietly.

I told them about my home, my journey, and my dreams. When I finished, the room was silent for a moment.

Then everyone clapped.

I looked at Emma, and she smiled.

For the first time in a long time, I felt something I thought I had lost.

Hope.

That night, I sat by the window and looked up at the sky. The stars looked just like the ones back home. Maybe some things never change.

I held my teddy close and smiled.

Because even though my journey was difficult, I knew one thing for sure—

Haajar Muzaffar

Olive Girl

The Story of Hope and Growth

It's been three months since we arrived in Australia.

"New hope, new future," my dad had said. I didn't see it that way.

Home was filled with laughter and friendship, until the bombs arrived. Here, it feels empty and cold. The air is stiff.

I miss home.

Today, I found an olive seed in my coat pocket. I thought of the olive orchards back home and slowly brought the seed to my heart, glancing outside. I had an idea!

"Dad, look," I said. "I planted an olive tree."

He smiled but didn't pay much attention. If he did, it would probably remind him of home as well. My dad hasn't been talking much lately. He has been busy with work, taking multiple jobs at different places.

Feels lonely.

Why am I struggling to breathe?

I miss home and dad.

War is still haunting me. The doctors said that toxic fumes had settled in my lungs like a silent enemy, slowly taking my life one cell at a time.

It's been a year since my olive girl has been fighting with cancer.

And today she asked me to continue her diary before falling into coma.

The doctors said there's no treatment and that they tried everything they could. Time passed, the clock ticking. My olive girl and her tree slowly escaping me.

She dreamed to have an olive tree garden. Dreams can come true, so I set to work on it!

My olive girl's dream united us all. Chloe called the neighbours and we all planted many olive seedlings, everyone wishing for her recovery. Even if she's nearly gone from this world, her spirit remains with us and the community.

As we all work together in our new olive garden, the tiny seedling at home shot a new leaf! Is it possible?

Can my olive girl recover too? The doctors had nearly lost hope but I haven't.

Today she opened her eyes! My happiness can't fit this world! I show her the photo of her olive tree and her dream olive garden. Her face lit up.

The doctors were surprised. "A real miracle," they said.

I stand with the whole community looking at the thriving olive garden.

Finally, I can breathe.

"This is home," I tell my dad. "New hope, new future."

ADULT CATEGORY SHORT STORIES

“A Million Stories: Journey to Hope”



Afreen Sayyada

You, me, we all saw them leave, not with belongings, but with pieces of their life in their hands.

It wasn't a choice.

It was fear that pushed them out of their own home. A place that once felt safe became somewhere they could no longer stay.

The mother kept looking back, as if her eyes could hold onto what was slipping away.

The father walked ahead in silence, carrying more than anyone could see.

The children said nothing. They understood too much.

I have met those children. Some carried wounds that had healed, but their scars still spoke.

I sat with them, painted their little faces, braided their hair, placed tiny gems, and drew henna on their hands.

They smiled, but carefully.

As if kindness felt unfamiliar. As if they were still learning that not every hand brings harm.

Maybe, in those quiet moments, they thought of home. Of their mother's touch, of festivals and laughter, of hands once filled with henna by someone they loved.

That thought breaks something inside me.

But I made sure, before they left, they smiled freely, even if just for a moment.

The journey they carried was heavy. Full of loss, of people they may never see again, of a home that lives only in memory now.

And then they arrived in Australia.

There was no celebration, just relief.

Slowly, they began again. The children smiled a little more. The parents finally breathed.

They are happy now, not because they forgot, but because they are safe.

As an orphan myself, I understand that kind of loss, losing a parent, losing a home, learning how to begin again in a world that feels unfamiliar.

Learning to trust again. To believe that somewhere, there is still kindness.

you, me and we all saw them leave...

And I see them now, still carrying their past, but also carrying hope.

And maybe that is how we heal the world, one act of kindness at a time, making it a little better for someone who has already lost so much.

Hani Pito

My Mother's Tale

Strong knocking on our wooden door ...

It's three o'clock in the morning when the sounds started to be louder outside our rural house positioned on the top of the hill. I heard my uncle screaming begging us to get out quickly

"Hurry up! They are coming!"

My father had his gun and quickly joined the men of the old village. My mother picked up small items and wrapped my baby sister in a thick cloth. She grabbed my hand tight and pulled me out of our warm mud house which was next to our old cherished church.

I heard my father's voice calling me:

"Son! Take care of your mother and sister, you are the head of the family now!!!"

I did not understand what he was referring to, nor did I know that these would be his prophetic last words!!

People gathered on the bank of the river and terror and fear reigned over the place.

They boarded the only ship in groups of women, children, elders and youth. The men had no option but to stay and defend their land, their honour and their history.

The sound of bullets rose and flames ravaged the village houses. My eyes were nailed to our church's bell that strangers heartlessly threw and smashed onto the ground, its ringing still resonating in my ears.

On the opposite bank, the caravan overflowing with countless displaced loved ones continued to flee and seek safety.

We walked and walked for a long time. Everyone was tired, but the fear of being chased by the crows-the heartless predatory

strangers- prompted the convoy to continue.

I took turns with my mother carrying my little sister until we reached the cave, where the sad caravan decided to spend the first night away from our friendly village.

Some kindled the fire, everyone cooperated and shared a little food and from the severity of the felt fatigue, most of the people fell asleep, while some young men remained vigilant guarding the cave.

I tried to sleep and approached my mother, yearning a hug and instantly felt the warmth of her heart before her hands.

Soon the images of my dad, mingled with the sounds of bullets flashed before me.

I woke up to my little sister's screaming and crying bitterly, which in turn heightened the bitterness of the situation. Both my mother and I tried repeatedly to distract her but it was to no avail, as it seemed that the cold, hunger and fatigue had exhausted her just as it did everyone else!

My sister calmed down a little after drinking some milk, so once again I tried to sleep and this time pictures of my childhood continuously flashed before me onto the walls of the cave - I remembered my childhood, my friends, my room, my house, my school and finally the big beloved tree on the riverbank used countless as a child's river launcher!

Our guards quietly entered the cave and asked everyone to be still and silent because a group of Crows are hovering over the place and we do not want them to discover us.

Unfortunately, my baby sister woke up and started crying and screaming as if something had pinched or stung her.

All my mother's attempts to silence her were unsuccessful, and voices rose in the cave pleading with my mother to silence the child!

Suddenly the baby girl fell silent, relief and
deadly silence reigned in the cave.

After hours of waiting with anticipation, the
guards of the cave were certain that the danger
had passed.

At that moment my mother fired a cry of pain
that filled the place with an ominous sadness
that echoed continuously within the cold cave.

Her gut wrenching gasp mixed with her tears
of blood foreshadowing the horror yet to come.

I approached my mother, asking and
wondering:

“Mom, why are you crying?”

The women of the village also approached,
chatting and repeating the doom fuelled
question-

“Why are you crying?”

With burning tears, my mother pointed to the
dead baby girl on the cloth-

revealing-

“Uh ah I couldn't silence my baby
daughter ... I had no choice- God forgive me- I
strangled her to not reveal our location!!!”

Deadly silence filled the cave!

Dedicated to the spirit of the heroic martyr -
my father ...

And to the spirit of the little angel- my sister ...

Sarah Jafari

Under a New Sky

My name is Sarah, and when I first came to Australia, everything felt different.

The sky seemed bigger, the streets were quieter, and people spoke a language I could not fully understand.

On my first day at school, I felt very nervous.

Everyone was talking and laughing, but I stayed quiet.

I was scared to say something wrong, so I just smiled, even when I felt lonely inside.

One day during lunch, I was sitting alone.

Then a girl came and sat next to me. She didn't say much.

She just smiled and shared her food with me.

That small moment meant a lot to me.

Slowly, things began to change.

I started to learn new words and understand more.

I was still not perfect, but I was trying my best.

At first, Australia did not feel like home.

But little by little, with small acts of kindness and a bit of courage, it started to feel warmer and more familiar.

Now, when I look at the same sky, I remember how lost I once felt.

But I also remember how I didn't give up.

The sky is still the same,

But I am not the same person anymore.

• I am stronger.

• I am braver.

• And maybe...

This place is finally becoming my home.

Iva Malupa

Again and Again, we begin

There are a million stories in a war,
but no one ever tells them all.
They tell you about the battles—
the destruction of enemy targets,
the sky raining down with missiles and metal,
the flags rising and falling like breaths
from weary lungs.
But they don't tell you about the quiet.
This is one of those stories.
I was a child,
In what used to be called Yugoslavia.
Before it became something people only spoke
about in past tense.
Before it broke into pieces - with people that
no longer knew how to care about each other.
Back then, it was just home.
We had a good life.
We were not poor – quite the opposite. My
family had assets, meaningful jobs, holiday
homes.
Summers were spent drenched in the salty
Adriatic sea, the smooth pebbles against my
feet.
Winters were sharp and alive - spent skiing the
alps, bundled up in layers, building snowmen,
and breathing clouds into the air, falling,
laughing, getting back up again.
Life was full of family.

Full of the kind of days you don't realise that
are precious, until they are gone.

My parents were building something – a life, a
future. A legacy to pass on.

Brick by brick.

And I never questioned it. Because when you
are a child, you believe the world you are given
is the one that will stay.

I never thought that we would leave.

Why would we? Everything we loved was
there.

It began before the war had a name.

Before the maps were redrawn by politicians
with questionable agendas,

before the radios spat out words like conflict
and casualties

We lived in a town that didn't expect to be
remembered.

We were ordinary.

At first,

It didn't look like war.

It looked like less.

Less food.

Less electricity.

Less fuel.

Less certainty.

Shops with empty shelves.

Longer lines.

Shorter tempers.

Currency lost all value.

Secure jobs disappeared overnight. Businesses shuttered their windows.

My parents became resourceful in ways I didn't understand then – but I do now.

They stretched everything.

Meals became smaller. Then uncertain. Then just enough for my sister and I, and not for them.

They found ways to make something out of almost nothing.

It is strange what the human psyche can survive on – just how little you can have and still keep going.

Later, came the sirens.

They cut through the air with sharpness, electricity, instantly changing the mood of the day into panic and dread.

The first explosion was far away.

The second was not.

We learned quickly. How to run and how to hide in basements.

One day, our house was invaded with men with guns.

They were not soldiers, not politicians, but men yet with another conflicting agenda, men with eyes that had forgotten to see people, or civilians, just enemy targets.

I remember the sound of my own breathing – too loud, too fast.

A gun was pointed at us.

And in that moment, the world shrank to a space between a finger and a trigger.

Time stood still.

I didn't cry. That's what I remember the most.

I just kept still.

We survived.

But something inside me didn't.

After that,

The world was never the same.

Loud noises became ominous warnings.

Sleep became unpredictable.

My breathing came fast and hard, at certain triggers.

This is the part they don't tell you - that war doesn't end when you leave the warzone.

It follows you - in your thoughts, in your body.

In the way your heart races when it shouldn't.

I remember the night we left.

My parents talking in low voices – the kind they thought we couldn't hear. But children always hear.

There was no good option.

Only choices that felt impossible.

Choices where every path costs something you love.

My parents chose to leave.

Not because they wanted to – but because they had to.

They packed only what they could carry.

A legacy built carefully over years and generations, lost forever.

We walked.

Not toward somewhere - but away from
everything.

There were others on the road. Thousands,
maybe.

Each one carrying their own story— wrapped
in blankets, stitched into bags,

hidden behind eyes that could no longer cry.

A thousand stories,

moving in the same direction.

Away.

Days turned into weeks.

The road stretched endlessly.

We reached the border at dusk.

It wasn't a line on the ground— just a different
kind of nothing.

People whispered the word safe like they were
afraid it might disappear, like it could be
jinxed.

But safety, I learned,

is not the same as peace.

The camp was crowded.

Rows of tents stretched endlessly,

like a sea of temporary lives.

We were given numbers.

Rations.

A place to sleep that wasn't the ground.

And for the first time in weeks,

we stopped.

But stopping was harder than moving.

Because when you stop,

you think.

And when you think,

You remember.

My home. My town. My family.

The legacy left behind.

I met a woman there.

She sat outside her tent every day,

writing in a small notebook.

"What are you writing?" I asked.

"Stories," she said.

"Why?"

She smiled—

"Because if I don't," she said,

"they disappear."

I thought about that for a long time.

About my town,

now reduced to memory and bullet riddled
ruins and craters.

Later, I began to write, too.

A story of starting over.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But also, a story of something else.

Hope.

Because hope is not the absence of fear.

It is the decision to keep going anyway.

Hope isn't something you find at the end of the journey.

It isn't waiting for you, like a destination.

Hope is what carries you there.

Wars don't end for the people who survive them.

They just change shape.

There are still a million stories in this war.

Some will never be told. Some will be lost.
Some will be forgotten.

But some—

some will survive.

This is one of them.

Nour J A Ismail

A Journey from pain to Hope

Two years ago, I arrived in Melbourne carrying more than just luggage—I carried loss, fear, and a fragile hope for a new beginning.

On April 7, 2024, at 9 p.m., I stepped onto Australian soil with my two brothers, one of their wives and her six-month-old baby, my husband, and my one-and-a-half-year-old child.

The journey had taken 24 exhausting hours, with stops in Turkey and Singapore. At times, I truly believed I might not survive it—that my story might end somewhere between departures and arrivals.

But I arrived.

I arrived after leaving behind a homeland destroyed by war. A home that had once held memories, now reduced to dust. I left behind most of my family, my friends, and the career I had built with years of dedication.

I left everything—and arrived with almost nothing.

War had reshaped our lives in just six months. After losing everything we owned, the decision to leave was no longer a choice, but a necessity.

Still, it was the hardest decision I had ever made. I did not want to leave my family, my country, or my identity. But as the danger grew each day, especially for my child, fear became stronger than attachment.

One of my brothers said something I will never forget:

“We are all drowning. If we all stay, we will all be lost. Someone must survive to help the others.”

That was the moment my journey to hope truly began.

I came to Australia believing I would rebuild my life—continue my career as a doctor, support my family back home, and create a safe future for my child.

But hope is not a straight path.

When I arrived in Melbourne, I found myself navigating a different kind of struggle.

The weight of war did not disappear—it followed me. The fear for my family remained constant. The longing for home lived quietly inside me.

And around me was a new world: a new language, unfamiliar systems, and a culture I was still learning to understand.

I often felt like I was drowning in an ocean again—only this time, it was invisible.

Back home, my husband had been a company manager. In Australia, he had to start over—requalify, gain local experience, and rebuild his career from the ground up.

Meanwhile, we needed income.

He took a job in a meat processing factory, working long hours in freezing conditions.

As for me, I had been a specialist in internal medicine.

I began the long process of having my qualifications recognised. I studied for exams, enrolled in courses, and tried to understand a completely new system.

With the support of generous individuals and organisations who helped cover the cost of my exams, I carried not only my own ambition, but also the responsibility of their belief in me.

At the same time, I was a mother to a child who was struggling.

My son had delayed speech. He cried

constantly, day and night, frightened even by simple sounds like a phone ringing. He suffered from stomach issues and frequent vomiting.

He needed comfort, attention, and a sense of safety in a world that had already overwhelmed him.

I was torn between two urgent responsibilities—my career and my child.

Six months after arriving, I sat my first exam.

I passed on the first attempt.

It should have been a moment of celebration.

But instead, I felt the cost of that success. My child's condition had worsened, and I realised I needed to pause.

I shifted my focus completely to him.

I arranged medical tests, sought support from community organisations, and searched for playgroups and childcare centres to help him integrate and feel safe again.

Without a car, and with my husband working long hours, even simple tasks became daily challenges.

But slowly, through play, patience, and love, I began helping him rebuild his sense of security.

At the same time, I returned to studying for my English exam.

This period was one of the hardest.

My health began to decline. I suffered constant stomach pain and could barely eat.

Despite this, I sat the exam—but I failed the listening section.

I tried again, after weeks of preparation, but life intervened once more.

My husband underwent emergency surgery.

We moved to a new home.

I sat the exam again—and failed the same section.

I felt defeated.

For a moment, I questioned everything—my ability, my path, my future.

Then, just as I prepared for another attempt, the exam system was about to change. All available bookings across Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, and Adelaide were full.

It felt like another door closing.

But hope sometimes appears quietly.

A friend advised me to keep checking daily for cancellations.

I did.

After a week, a spot opened.

I booked it immediately.

Two weeks later, I sat the exam again.

This time, I passed.

It was not a loud victory. It was quiet, heavy, and full of everything I had endured.

But it was real.

After that, I began applying for hospital jobs—but faced rejection after rejection.

The system was difficult, especially for internationally trained doctors.

Many advised me to move to rural areas, where opportunities were more accessible.

But I hesitated.

We had just begun to stabilise in Melbourne. My husband had found his footing. My child was slowly healing.

The thought of moving again felt like reliving displacement all over again.

Still, life continued.

I began working casually with community organisations.

It was not the career I had trained for, but it gave me something just as important—a sense of purpose, connection, and belonging.

And slowly, things began to change.

Today, two years later, my husband is an operations manager in a non-profit organisation.

My son—who once feared the sound of airplanes—now loves watching them.

We often sit together, eating ice cream, looking up at the sky as planes land.

He is now in kindergarten.

He has friends.

He laughs, plays, and speaks both Arabic and English.

As for me, I work with two community organisations, supporting others while continuing to pursue my medical career.

I have started applying for positions in rural hospitals, ready now to take that next step.

The challenges have not ended.

But something has changed.

There is hope.

My story is only one among a million.

A story shaped by loss, but carried forward by resilience.

A journey that began with fear, but continues with purpose.

To Australia—and to Melbourne—thank you for giving us safety, a home, and the chance to begin again.

This is not the end of the story.

It is only the beginning of hope.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who helped me—those I met face to face, those who supported me over the phone or online, and even those who helped me without ever seeing or hearing me.

Heartfelt thanks for your trust. Thank you, Australia—its land and its people.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely

Nour J A Ismail

Somaya Alhendi

A Future Still Possible

Homes do not disappear when walls collapse.

They disappear slowly — when laughter leaves the rooms, when fear sleeps beside your children, when every sound at the door feels like danger, when the place that once protected you begins to ask you to survive it.

Before the war that followed 7 October 2023 in Gaza, my life was beautifully ordinary.

I loved my home with the devotion some people reserve for grand dreams.

I cared for every corner of it.

I decorated it for Eid, prepared food with joy, welcomed my family, my aunts, and my friends.

My house was always open, warm, alive.

I believed happiness was simple: a full table, familiar voices, children running through the hallway, and people who arrived without invitation because love never needed one.

Now, I sometimes watch strangers laugh loudly and wonder where joy still comes from.

My own face almost forgot how to smile.

I loved my country deeply.

I did not know that distance from home could become an illness with no cure.

At first, leaving was only an idea people mentioned in whispers, like something impossible.

We spoke of travel the way people speak of storms they think will pass.

But war does not pass politely.

It enters everything.

When the bombing intensified after the Gaza

war began, death became part of daily routine.

My children lost friends.

They lost teachers.

They lost the right to feel safe.

The sound of explosions still lives inside me.

Even now, certain noises can return me to those moments.

After a long and painful wait, approval finally came for travel.

But only for me.

My husband and children were not included.

How can a mother accept safety alone?

I refused.

I waited.

I hoped the decision would change.

But death was moving faster than paperwork.

Finally, I called the embassy and said I would take my children and try.

That morning, my eldest son cried.

He said, Mother, you once told me that God creates miracles. Take me with you.

Just try.

He came with me to the crossing with no passport, no papers, nothing except faith.

At first, an officer said maybe.

We waited for hours.

Then another officer arrived and said no.

He must return.

I begged in a way only mothers understand.

After calls, delays, and desperate waiting,
permission came: my son could travel with me.

My husband had to remain behind.

That day I learned that survival can carry the
shape of grief.

When I arrived in Australia, I could hardly
believe I was alive.

Running water.

Electricity that stays.

Food without fear.

A night without explosions.

Safety is invisible only to those who have
always had it.

But Australia gave me more than safety.

It gave me dignity, opportunity, and the
chance to begin again.

Over time, I grew to love this country deeply.

I am also profoundly grateful to my eldest
brother, whose support and sacrifice opened
the path for me to come here.

So I worked.

I learned.

I began again from zero.

I created a simple food menu with affordable
prices and shared it in one community group.

I expected silence.

Instead, my phone filled with messages and
orders from Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane.

Later, an organisation invited me to run
cooking workshops.

I accepted immediately.

Some nights I returned home after midnight.

Some mornings I left before sunrise.

I waited for buses in freezing wind, heavy rain,
and burning heat while carrying bags,
sometimes with my young son beside me.

Still, I continued.

Because women like me do not stop when they
are tired.

We stop only when we are finished.

After many setbacks, I earned my driver's
licence and bought my first car.

To me, it was freedom with four wheels.

This journey taught me something important:

Refugees are not defined by their
displacement, but by their talents, dreams, and
contributions to the society that welcomes
them.

We came to Australia carrying our heritage,
identity, and experiences to share them.

We do not arrive empty-handed.

Today, when I look at myself, I do not only see
a woman who survived war.

I see a woman who walked through fire and
did not burn.

My homeland still lives in me — in my
language, in my cooking, in the way I love, and
in the tears that still arrive without warning.

But now another love lives beside it.

Gratitude for Australia, the country that
received me not as ruins, but as a future still
possible.

Some women, when war destroys their houses,
become houses themselves — places of shelter,
warmth, and hope for others.

I am one of them.

Maryam Khosho

When Gilgamesh Chose Stability Over Immortality

It is a rainy day.

It resembles the day I left my country on the first of April.

On that day, spring is beautiful, yet rain can pour down at any given moment, as if saying:

"I, too, am like life—full of lies; I claim to be beautiful, and that hopes will be fulfilled, causing people to multiply and give birth. Then, I surprise them with war, sectarian strife, or by depriving them of intellectual freedom, turning them into frightened idols... Heh, isn't this what life is like in your country?"

That is what I said to myself.

Yet, I love the month of April very much.

The first of April is the Akitu festival.

This Babylonian feast traces its origins back to a Sumerian festival called Zagmuk, celebrated to mark Tammuz's return from the underworld.

However, in the Babylonian-Chaldean civilization, it was celebrated to mark the victory of the god Marduk over the goddess Tiamat, thus becoming a Babylonian feast.

It used to pass through Assyria, and the Assyrians would join the Babylonians in the celebration.

Thus, it became a feast for everyone—a feast that unites rather than divides.

On that day, as I was packing my bag, my memories came rushing back.

I decided not to take much with me.

Instead, I packed things that would remind me

of the traits I must inherit from my homeland:

****The Sun Necklace:**** To remind me of the god Shamash, the symbol of justice and truth.

****The Chamomile Bracelet:**** This authentic Mesopotamian symbol, which they called the "gift of the earth," was a symbol of Ishtar's beauty, a remedy for illnesses, a sign of spring, an ornament, and a motif decorating the walls.

****A Blue Shawl:**** To remind me of the beautiful Ishtar Gate, and how the Babylonians cared for architecture and beauty, making their country an emblem of development, elegance, and pride. (Alexander the Great once said of it: "He who has not seen Babylon, has not seen beauty.")

****A Small Statue of the Winged Bull (Lamassu):**** To inspire strength within me.

****A Pen Engraved with the Name 'Nabu':**** The god of writing and wisdom, to remind me to write and search for wisdom.

****A Perfume:**** To remind me that the very first perfume maker was a Sumerian woman named Tapputi.

I placed a few necessary clothes in the bag and zipped it shut.

Just as I closed that bag, I decided to close the chapters of my pain —pain caused by a homeland that deprived me of expressing my thoughts and practicing peace and unity, away from an alien sectarianism imposed on us, and forced wars that prevented us from seeing white doves gracing our skies.

That wasn't the whole story.

This country stripped us of our human rights.

We became complacent with the bare minimum because we never knew what full rights truly looked like.

I resolved to shut out these sorrows by migrating to a land that respects the human being and respects their thought—a land that teaches us that we are equals, and that truth must triumph, provided we cooperate with it.

Now, I am here, in a country that is my home and my refuge: Australia, which embraced me with a tenderness akin to a mother's.

I am the one who lost her mother and her tenderness in 2014.

My mother, a young woman who was only forty-three at the time, died because the hospitals in northern Iraq were wretched.

They could not save a woman in her forties suffering from a stroke.

They transferred her to another hospital, and during the transfer, she passed away.

They view human beings as mere numbers; she was not the daughter of an official or a minister for them to care about saving her, or to provide the necessary care and space.

In Australia, I tried for years to adapt, to settle down, and to build a new life alongside my family, who had also suffered deeply in our homeland.

My father, a cultured man and a writer, feared ISIS would reach us.

He decided we had to migrate immediately before they reached our village.

This was on top of the salaries that were paid only once every three months—and the calamity was that they would only give us half.

The economic situation in the north back then was dire.

Oh, those memories, and that fear of the unknown!

In fact, even the known was terrifying.

It constantly told us: there is no religious,

national, or intellectual freedom.

And to be a girl?

Oh, the agony.

For every disaster that struck, you would be the one blamed, even if you were the victim.

But after these years of adapting to Australia, I now belong to it deeply.

I am achieving my goals, knowing where to go, and claiming my rights.

I worked, I studied, and I graduated.

Finding a job in my specialization was difficult, so I worked in other fields.

I practiced writing, did sports, built friendships, and published a book...

Australia's doors were wide open for me.

I love my country, but I love specific snapshots of it, not the country as a whole.

I love its history, where writing was invented and discoveries were made.

I love the educated, intellectual class that does not subscribe to terrorist and sectarian ideologies.

I love its writers, the generosity and kindness of its people, its antiquities, its heritage, and the years when it was safe and blessed.

As for the wars, the conflict, and the law of the jungle—I cannot stand them.

I wish to erase them from my memory.

I am a peaceful person; my religion is humanity and love alone, and that is precisely what is not practiced over there.

I look at my watch; it is 2:00 PM.

In an hour, I have a cultural gathering with Arabic-speaking youth.

I smiled as I remembered that I was the one who founded this group.

I sought out and brought together young people interested in cultural, philosophical, and social discussions, as well as reading, for speakers of Arabic and Syriac.

I founded a cultural forum for debate and reading so we wouldn't feel estranged and isolated in a world where interest in intellect and reading has dwindled.

We meet in the park or in a café and share our thoughts with absolute confidence, without fear of an informant's report or a threat to our lives.

I got ready and went.

Our discussion revolved around happiness and meaning, navigating between nihilistic, existential, and absurd philosophies, and how to make our lives more bearable.

Someone asked me:

"Do you think there is absolute happiness in Australia?"

My answer was that absolute happiness is an illusion you won't find anywhere.

Australia is not that utopian paradise concocted by a fertile imagination to escape the absurdity of life, because philosophy is ultimately the philosophy of your own outlook on life.

The reason for life's existence or the purpose of being are existential thoughts, feelings, and questions.

However, Australia offers you numerous reasons to endure life and keep going; it grants you strength, backing, and support.

Your question reminds me of the response given to Gilgamesh when Siduri said to him:

"Where are you racing to, Gilgamesh? The life

you seek, you will never find. Let your belly be full day and night, Be glad and rejoice by day and by evening. Feast, dance, and play, Keep your clothes clean and bright. Cherish the little one holding your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace, For this is the lot of mankind. When the gods created humans, They allotted death to mankind, and retained immortality for themselves."

The session ended.

I arrived home and was scrolling through Facebook when a post appeared before me about a poor girl who died due to domestic violence in Iraq.

It reminded me of a story I wrote a few years ago on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Australia.

I began to read the story I had written back then:

Gazing into my mirror—which never hid my truth from me, never lied, and never gave me illusionary wings—I found myself weak, like a thin thread caught between two rocks, or between two worlds: between my imagination and my reality.

I closed my eyes, eyes that lacked the foresight of life and experience in the outside world—a world so different from the broken home that shattered the wings of a seventeen-year-old girl.

I closed my eyes and danced an improvised dance, like a bird performing a dance of escape, like ballet, or perhaps an expressive painting drawn through body language.

I spin around myself... imagining a healthy body that was never slapped by its only hope, and never rejected by its only fireplace during the bitter days of winter.

I imagine a great love filling me, as if I found it every time a desire to be sheltered dwelt within me, or anything that made me feel like a gentle being who deserves gentleness.

I complete my dance, synchronizing with a peaceful Beethoven melody, as serene as the life I long for.

I smile and remember December and a generous Santa Claus with his gifts.

In secret, I wish for amnesia and an escape from my own book—an escape from one novel to another, but this time, I will be the one to choose it.

I keep smiling; my world right now is at its most beautiful.

That is, until my bedroom door is pounded on brutally and without permission, violating my imaginary world and my only space to flee from the savage coercion that surrounds me every day.

I begin to look at my body, whose true color I have started to forget.

The redness and bruising have left no spot untouched to remind me of the color of my skin when I was born.

I can no longer hear Beethoven's notes; my memory drags me back to the tones of shouting, weeping, and the whipping of slaps for every single day I have lived on this earth.

The expressive dance of escape grinds to a halt.

The shackles of prison forcibly encircle me, preventing me from fleeing to adopt another story that contradicts my own, to erase it from reality and from my memory.

The door of death opens, drawing closer to return me to the tragedy of this broken house that never ceases to shatter.

It approaches, a burning spark of fire leaping from his eyes before the cutting words leave his lips...

But, for the first time, when I looked at the mirror behind him, I saw myself—but not the self I used to see.

I saw a strength greater than the strength of a young girl.

I saw two powerful wings, larger than my dreams and larger than the brutality of this man standing before me...

and with all the strength and audacity I possessed, I said:

"Enough..."

No, I screamed and said:

"Enough!"

Armed with the power of that "Enough," I threatened to report him.

Despite his mockery, I did it.

I called...

I called, and I triumphed over this monster, because I am in a country that does not accept monsters.

Instead, it hunts them down to rescue frightened, young angels like me...

But today!

This young girl has conquered fear, wrapping herself in the mantle of a persona that protects her from the beasts of the earth.

Nigma Mehdi

A million Stories: Journey to Hope

Hope. A word that carries different meaning depending on the circumstance and who you ask. For some, it's the textbook definition: 'a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen' but for a few others it's a belief, which they hang onto like it's their last lifeline. The way I see it, that is from a mother's perspective, it is to being able to find a home away from home, finding a family in strangers and by making the unknown land more known.

For most refugee moms, motherhood doesn't only revolve around the usual worries of caring for their children, it circles around paving a way for their kids to survive. Its about surviving a war instead of snuggling in bed with their babies. Its about dreading the worst while basking in the sound of giggles. Its about knowing what the present situation looks like but choosing to staying oblivious to the reality.

While Planes roar overhead, people scream and borders collapse before they are ever drawn on a map. but mothers stand there with their babies in their arms and no good choices left, only the chance to survive are forced to take decisions no woman should ever have to. Love does not always look like staying, sometimes love looks like releasing and letting go with shaking hands and a prayer that doesn't even have words yet, of the past you knew, the uncertainty of the present and the unknown future.

Being a refugee in a country you know nothing about, is not a journey but a rupture. It is a mother ripping a piece of herself loose and throwing in towards safety hoping it lands somewhere kinder than where she once stood. When people talking about borders, they never talk about the part about mothers who choose grief now so their children can have a future later. They never talk about the way war turns motherhood into a series of unbearable calculations, who get to love, who gets to go and who gets to be left behind with the waiting.

Mothers expand themselves across distances, across fear and across time. She trusts strangers with her babies because the alternative is usually death and many people fail to see that. They see a woman different from how they look. They see a woman who carries herself in her cultural or religious clothing in her worn out shoes but what they don't see is the reason she is as is because of the distance travelled.

Growing up I would see the tv filled with the images of boats capsizing, women holding their children with all the strength left within and I would always wonder, what could have possibly driven them to take on such a gruesome path. What circumstances were they leaving behind and what future were they envisioning. My mum would always take this opportunity to remind us to be grateful.

'The only difference between you and them, is God's mercy on your soul' Her words still always linger in the back of my mind. What did I do that gave me the privilege to be born on the 'right' side of the border. Or was it everything I didn't do? If it is purely luck, then how did we get so lucky that we won the geographical lottery? Who gets to decide all these things? I may never know the answers to these but what I have always known is the urge to help those who can't help themselves especially members of the marginalized communities. Amidst all that footage, there was a picture of a toddler in a red shirt that is imprinted in every part of my brain. It exists pre-motherhood for me but that image is near to impossible to look at and once you do, you can never forget it. On a deeper level, the reason it is so hard to get over is every parent's deepest fear becoming reality. Despite doing everything to protect your child, the world still somehow fails them. Within this heartbreak, the true meaning of hope persists. It is not just optimism; it is an invisible force that pushes to keep going. The 'hope' to see their child taking their first steps on a foreign land. The Hope to hear them speak in a language they themselves aren't fluent in. The hope to see them making

their new friends, taking unknown paths, starting new careers, getting married to the love of their lives and making a life for themselves and their future children.

Their love is quiet and intense but their hope unwavering. The determination to carry her kids through it all. No mother wants to stand in line while pieces of bread are handed out, relying on the mercy of strangers, not knowing if one day they'll have enough. No mother wants to see her beautiful memories turn into hurtful memoirs of her past. No mother wants to answer the hard questions her kids ask: When will they get to go home? When will they get to play with our friends again? Or Why does the world feel so unfair?

There is both unimaginable grief and extraordinary hope in the journey. It is deeply rooted in the belief that somehow tomorrow will be a better day. The pain of today will somehow feel less with every fleeting moment. Every act of love given in the future by the kids of these women is shaped by the saying 'I will break my own heart if it means yours keeps beating.' This is what being a refugee mother looks like, and more importantly what motherhood looks like when the only world she has ever known, is on fire. The kind of love no border can contain. Behind every refugee child that one day succeeds is a mother who refused to give up, refused to let her circumstances take the better of them, refused to let the injustices of the world silence her voice and refused to let the pain in her heart take away the only thing she could hold onto: Hope.

Maryam Rezakhani

When Darkness Taught Me How to See Again
For years, I lived inside a silence that no one else could hear. It wasn't the silence of peace, but the silence of a heart that had forgotten how to beat with hope. Days passed like shadows sliding across a wall, and I moved with them present, but hollow, breathing, but not alive. Hope had once burned warm light inside me, but slowly, quietly, it dimmed until it became nothing more than a memory I didn't dare touch. I had learned to live without expecting anything from life.

So when the chance to migrate came, I didn't feel excitement or fear. I simply nodded. I thought I was carrying my darkness with me, like a suitcase I could never put down. I didn't know that sometimes, you must walk into a new darkness to discover a new kind of light.

The moment I arrived in the new country I felt as if someone had placed me in a world where all the colors were unfamiliar. The language rushed past me like a river I couldn't step into. The streets twisted like a maze built for someone else. People moved with purpose, while I moved like a ghost trying not to be seen. I wasn't blind because my eyes failed me I was blind because my heart didn't know how to see anymore. In those early days, I searched desperately for anything that resembled the life I had left behind. A familiar smell. A familiar word. A familiar face. A familiar rhythm in the air.

But every time I found something that looked like my past, I realized it no longer felt like home. It was like touching a photograph the shape was there, but the warmth was gone. That realization hurt. But it also whispered a truth I wasn't ready to hear: I could not rebuild my old life, I had to build a new one.

The challenges came one after another, like waves testing the strength of a fragile shore. The first time I got lost on the bus I felt same panic I used to feel when I was lost inside myself. The first time someone didn't understand my words, I shrank inside, as if my voice had betrayed me. The first night I cried

from loneliness, I wondered if I had carried my emptiness across oceans.

But slowly, quietly something inside me began to shift. Every mistake taught me something. Every fear pushed me forward. Every moment of confusion carved out a new space inside me. I began to understand that my fears were not walls meant to stop me they were doors meant to be opened.

The fear of speaking helped me learn the language. The fear of getting lost helped me learn the city. The fear of being alone helped me learn myself. The fear of change helped me grow. The changes that once terrified me began to feel strangely beautiful like storms that leave the air cleaner after they pass.

One morning sunlight slipped through the window of my new home and painted a soft golden line across the wall. I stood there, watching it, feeling something warm stir inside me something I thought had died long ago. It wasn't joy. It wasn't excitement. It was something quieter deeper like the first breath after a long night underwater. It was hope fragile trembling, but real In that moment, I realized I was no longer blind.

Not because everything had become easy, not because I had stopped being afraid, but because I had learned to see with new eyes. Eyes that understood that change can be terrifying and still breathtaking. Eyes that knew that getting lost is sometimes the only way to be found. Eyes that recognized that hope doesn't always return like a sunrise sometimes it returns like whisper.

Migration didn't save me. I saved myself. By walking through the darkness, by facing the fears that once controlled me, by allowing myself to break down. And now, in this new land, with all its challenges and all its light, I finally understand:

Sometimes you must lose your sight to learn how to truly see. And I in this place far from where I began have found my eyes again.

Zohreh Rezakhani

A Million stories: Journey to Hope

Every refugee has a unique story of courage and struggle. Some left their homes in fear, others in hope of survival. The journey is never easy, full of pain and uncertainty.

But inside every heart, there is a small light of hope. That hope pushes them forward toward safety and peace. Although our dream is the same. A dream of a better life, dignity, and belonging.

A Million Stories Journey to Hope



A Million Stories Journey to Hope



“A Million Stories: Journey to Hope”

In celebration of Refugee Week 2026, Hume City Council and Advocates for Dignity invited community members to share their unique interpretations of the theme,
"A Million Stories: Journey to Hope."

This collection brings together the powerful, diverse, and moving creative writing pieces submitted by our community. Through poetry, prose, and personal reflections, these pages capture the profound emotional arc of the refugee experience—honoring the difficult paths of displacement and uncertainty, while beautifully celebrating the ultimate triumph of finding belonging, community, and a place to contribute.

Presented by Advocates for Dignity & Hume City Council

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