



CANADA IN MY EYES

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Stories Written by Aisha, Dequana, Triza & Aliya

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This booklet came together as part of Growing Up Across Borders (GRABS), an ERC-funded research project currently active in five countries. At its core, the project explores how young people who have experienced forced migration navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Migration and growing up are at the heart of the stories gathered here.

Grounded in creative research methodologies, GRABS held five storytelling workshops at the Global Migration Institute (GMI) in Toronto, where the authors of this booklet came together to share their experiences. These pages are the result of that journey. We are grateful to each author for their openness and trust. We thank S4 Collective for their partnership, and GMI for kindly offering the space that made this work possible.

This research was conducted in Toronto, situated on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Toronto remains home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples from across Turtle Island. This territory is governed by The Dish with One Spoon Wampum treaty.

HOW I FEEL GROWING UP ACROSS THE BORDER

Canada!!!!

A country full of opportunities

Opportunities that are way beyond your expectations and definitely out of your reach

You become an object rather than a subject as you become more desperate for opportunities

Canada !!!

The country where excitement for opportunities quickly turned into resentment

Resentment that stems from Uncertainty

Uncertainty of constantly longing for opportunities that are out of your reach, whilst I watch the rules and laws constantly change before my eyes

Uncertainty that becomes a systemic barrier

I watch myself slowly become an object rather than a subject

I watch myself slowly race toward either a win or a loss

Canada !!!

A country that makes teenagers and youth migrants grow way older than they are

The growth that is not from age but from exhaustion, struggles, hurdles, and responsibilities that we are unprepared for

Hurdles and responsibilities that alienate you from your childhood

Exhaustion and struggles that alienate you from your youth

A country that takes away the core childhood experiences of children and youth migrants

A country where your dreams seem impossible to reach

Canada

Oh, I wish my alienation from my Youth

Oh, I wish my mental and psychological exhaustion
wasn't the price of my migration.

This is how I feel, growing up across borders.

Author's note

This story was written to convey a realistic, less delusional side of the Canadian story. This story was written not to denote the countless acts of kindness that migrants experience from their communities or in Canada, but also to acknowledge the other side of the story. This story is published to highlight the importance of preparing mentally for the hurdles and struggles of adapting, assimilating, and belonging in a new space, as the experiences that affect us mentally and psychologically play a significant role in the outcome of our migration, both when our dreams perhaps feel out of reach and when they eventually become possible within our reach. They say, "There is a price for everything," and undoubtedly, the price of migration is not just monetary but requires non-monetary costs.

Aliya

WHAT IT TOOK, WHAT IT GAVE

Canada in my Eyes. It took away from me as much as it gave me. But some days, I like to believe it gave me more than it took.

It took away the familiarity I had always known, the people, the places, my family and friends, and even the strangers who somehow made me feel at home. It took away the version of life that might have felt uncertain but (and) familiar.

But in return, it gave me safety. It gave me freedom. It gave me people and experiences that slowly helped me believe that life could still be kind to me.

People often call it the land of opportunities, but I learned that opportunities also come with sacrifice (or at least a cost). The smiles came with tears. Moving came with loneliness. And comfort sometimes came with fear that I might be forgotten where I came from. Trying to adapt to new norms often made me feel guilty, as though growing into this new life meant slowly letting go of my roots, my culture, or pieces of myself.

But somewhere in between the loneliness and the growth, I began to change. I learned gratitude. I learned to appreciate the little things; small acts of kindness, moments of peace, and the feeling of being safe enough to dream again. Like the old puzzle from my childhood with its crooked edges, I realized I did not have to fit in perfectly to belong. Somehow despite my imperfections, this was still a place where I could grow. This was exactly where I was meant to be.
Maybe.

Sometimes I wonder why Canada treated me so gently. Sometimes I wonder why it was so kind to me. Maybe from the moment I stepped onto its soil, it could see right through me; the unfairness life had handed me, the stories I had never spoken loud and the ones I still carry quietly in this fragile chest of mine.

And maybe that is what Canada through my eyes truly is: not perfect, not painless, but a place where broken things are still given the chance to grow.

Author's note

Through this piece, I wanted to show the mixed feelings that come with moving to a new country and how immigration can completely change a person in both painful and beautiful way. I mostly thought about the loneliness, depression, and sense of loss I experienced after leaving behind the people, places, and familiarity I once called home. But I was on my shift when I started writing, reflecting and observing the people around me like the kind customers at work, the smiles, the greetings, and the small moments of warmth. I realized that Canada had also given me comfort, safety, growth, and opportunities. I wanted to show that migration is not one-sided. The pain and the beauty, the loss and the growth, the grief and the opportunity all exist together, and one cannot truly be acknowledged without the other.

Aisha

STORY ON MIGRATION

She seems not to care, but does she truly not care? As a quiet girl, she always shut herself away. She talks about being the youngest and experiencing life early, a life that wasn't meant for a youth. She grew up early.

Feeling like you're not supposed to be in love, even the one thing you look forward to the most hurts you. And that's love. Have you ever given your all and never stayed happy or received the same treatment? Have you ever felt you gave so much to people but no one was there for you? Have you ever felt the pain inside you that doesn't want you to be happy?

Oh Canada, oh Canada. She is living in a place that doesn't even want her, but she is still standing here on Indigenous soil, wondering why a country she never imagined being here could hate her for just being a minor with no say.

"Oh Canada, oh Canada, when will you accept me for me in a world where I don't feel love?

Oh Canada, oh Canada, you have broken my heart, stolen my soul, and weakened my heart.

Oh Canada, oh Canada, I'm now a Canadian citizen. I'm no longer an immigrant without status.

But my heart is still broken"

She lacks so much love that she doesn't even know good love from bad love.

Even growing up without that foundation and going through life without status. She was learning everything the hard way. No guide, no example, just pain teaching her what love isn't instead of showing her what it is. Even her brother and sister's love wasn't good love. Every love she ever had was toxic and hurtful. It felt like a cycle she couldn't break. No matter how much she gave or how real she was, she kept receiving the same kind of love that hurt. At the same time, she was dealing with systems that made her feel invisible, like she had to fight just to exist, just to be seen, just to be worthy of opportunities.

So she started giving more, loving harder and being there for people in ways she wished someone was there for her. Because maybe if she gave enough, she would finally receive it back. Maybe someone would finally choose her the right way. Even with everything, she still loves so strongly. And that's the part she is still trying to understand: how after everything, after all the hurt, all the disappointment, all the times she felt alone in this country or even in her own life, her heart still chooses love. Maybe that's not a bad thing. Maybe that's the one thing that kept her going.

She seems not to care, but does she truly not care? As a quiet girl, she always shut herself away. She talks about being the youngest and experiencing life early. A life that wasn't meant for a youth. She grew up early. But that's okay cause now she a grown girl. A grown girl with ambition.

A canadian citizen. Honours Student.

"Oh Canada oh Canada
You have made me found
You have improved my life
You have given me trauma but with trauma comes healing
Oh Canada oh Canada
You have broken me but you did heal me"

Notes from the author:

For me, it was never just the Canadian system that broke me but the people who surround me. It came from relationships; and everything I've been through, especially my immigration journey in Canada. Trying to figure out where I belong while feeling like I don't fully belong anywhere. Living in survival mode for so long, always watching, always careful, always feeling like things could fall apart at any moment. This changes you, it makes love feel confusing because you don't even feel secure within your own life, so how can love ever feel secure?

Dequana is author of "Heart strings: Navigating Love , Loss and Self- Worth" a poetic journey that combines the essence of a book and a journal. She has also funded Youth Healing & Empowerment.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BLUEPRINT AND BREATHWORK

Everyone comes to Canada hoping for great opportunities and success
I won't lie... I did too and in some ways I got it.

I also went through many sets of heartbreaks in order to get where I am.
When I say heartbreak I don't mean just romantically, I mean losing
friends, opportunities because of my skin colour and how I don't look
like my name, second guessing every decision I make because I'm not
sure I'm worth it.

When I was younger I had a dream or something, well maybe a plan, or
a small blueprint laid out for my life after high school.

15- Graduate .

18-Get my dream job .

20- Get married .

22-Have children .

25 and older : Happily ever after.

Well I did graduate, I got a job. Is it a dream ? Sometimes.

I think after that I just started learning how to:

Look for 5 things I can see

Find 4 things I can feel/touch

Listen for 3 things I can hear

Inhale for 2 things I can smell

Search for 1 thing I can taste

Right now I can barely figure out what I want for breakfast or if I'm
gonna have breakfast.

Hint : it's probably something quick and easy .

To be honest, there's no pressure but there's a lot of expectations and when you can't meet them in this "Land of Opportunities" everything feels like it's going down the drain.

I'm not here to discourage anyone but follow your heart and if it's too broken and you don't know what pieces to follow, it's okay to just breathe .

Triza

PART 2

The stories that follow were written during our storytelling workshops. They were prompted by the conversations, questions, and brainstorms we all had. These stories are the fruit of free writing: sometimes words that arrived in the moment, sometimes words that were taken back home and then shared with the group.

GROUNDING INHALE-EXHALE

Breathe in. Breathe Out.

Inhale. Exhale.

What do I see?

She looks darker than usual. Cheeks no longer as plump.

Crusty lines running down her face.

Hands wrapped tightly around her knees as she rocks back and forth like leaves on a windy autumn evening.

This is all she sees through her pool filled sunken eyes.

Inhale. Exhale.

What do I hear?

The world is quiet.

Silence.

This light deprived room is so quiet, but not quiet enough to silence the voices in her head.

Her heart thumps loudly in her chest, ringing in her ears.

She listens to the whooshing sound of air moving in and out as she struggles to inhale and exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

What do I taste?

Bitterness.

The kind that creeps up her throat and settles heavily in her stomach.

Her body tells her what her mind refuses to tell her out loud.

Inhale. Exhale.

What do I smell?

The stiffness in the room

For some reason it feels hard to breathe

It's suffocating to be here and even more suffocating to be in her own body

Inhale. Exhale.

What do I feel?

The muscle in her stomach slowly tightening.

She thought to herself the least she could do was wail as loudly as she could.

But even that felt impossible

Like a rope strapped tightly around her neck

Nothing came out.

And in that moment she realised that even the right to wail had been snatched away from her.

So what more was left?

Electric signals rushed through her body, making their way to her head until she felt like ripping it off her shoulder.

It hurts to breathe.

It hurts to exist.

Goosebump spread across her skin as she sat alone in fetal position

Was this how cold her life had become?

The night felt longer than usual.

Peck. Peck. Peck.

She woke up to a pigeon at the window, its shadow cast against the floor as the sun stretched through the curtains.

Inhale. Exhale.

She stared her reflection in the mirror. As ragged as she looked, a small, peaceful smile formed on her face.

She had survived another day.

Author's Note

This piece was inspired by a poem about anxiety written by a Lebanese author which I read during one of our group sessions. What stood out to me was how she used only sounds and noises to express anxiety. I found it creative and powerful, but it also made me wonder what it would look like if those sounds were given words, if the reader could fully step into the body and mind of someone experiencing anxiety, panic, emotional numbness, and exhaustion. That became the inspiration behind “Grounding: Inhale, Exhale.”

While writing this piece, I also realized how much I have grown emotionally. In the past, I think I would have focused only on the sadness and pain that come with anxiety. But this time, the first thing that came to my mind was not the suffering itself, but the act of surviving it. The words “breathe in, breathe out” came to me

immediately (grounding techniques, reminders to stay present, reminders that the feeling will pass). Through this piece, I wanted to remind readers that healing is not always dramatic. Sometimes survival itself is enough. Sometimes making it to the next day is more than enough. I wanted anyone who reads this and relates to it to know that although anxiety can feel isolating and overwhelming, it does get better, and if they survived it once before, they can survive it again.

Aisha

THE DAY I DIED

The day I died

It wasn't loud, there was no sirens, no last words. No one really noticed.

It was quiet like the moment after you finish crying and just... stop

The day I died, I got up, checked my phone and still replied- "I am fine".

I looked fine but it was the last time I was gonna breathe without thinking about my skin color or background.

December.19.2019, my life changed.

No Introductions.

No warm welcome

Toronto, the city of opportunities, fake smiles, odd racial stereotypes whether it is called or uncalled for.

My freedom sort of died- so it's the day I died. The constant stares, the unspoken words but all in all, it's the day I died.

Is there rebirth? soon? maybe? never?

I don't know- just re-learning... with caution

Triza

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED?

If my sad experiences could be shown in a two minute trailer would you still look again at me the same?

Would you be sad that it happened?

Would you be happy that I grew past it?

If everyone could read your thoughts

Would you be nicer? stronger? bolder? funnier? more quiet? happier? sadder? or just an open book full of curiosity?

Have you ever thought that your life was a prank and you are waiting for the producer to say "CUT"?

If you could be everything and anything you want, you'll be more happy? or sad? or peaceful?

If peace was for sale, would you be rich enough to buy it?

Then again, I am simply just wondering...

Triza

I LIKE TELLING STORIES

I like telling stories because it is a valuable form of advocacy.
Advocacy for who?
For those whose voices have been silenced.
Silenced in an institution that proclaims equal rights.
Rights that are exclusive to those who have inherent hierarchy.
Hierarchy in an institution that promises equity and justice.
Justice they say, as though it is inclusive.
Inclusive as though it is granted to everyone.
Everyone deserves to be heard.
Heard in a way that brings about change.
Change in a way that guarantees Equity and Justice

Aliya

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