

# Writing Stories Voices of the Valley



## A Collection

Volume II

Edited by Emily DuBord Hill and Erin Lord Kunz

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## *Introduction*

We are thrilled to be able to say that this is Volume II of *Writing Stories: Voices of the Valley*. Because of the outpouring of support from the community, we are able to offer the collection for a second year in a row, this year's theme focusing on New Americans, refugees, and international residents in the Red River Valley Region.

Eastern North Dakota and the surrounding region is a dynamic and burgeoning area for international residents, though we often don't think of North Dakota in these terms. As the years go by, however, we are seeing this area become a welcoming site of resettlement for refugees as well as an attractive home base for people from all over, partially because of our booming economic development but also because of the safe and friendly atmosphere. In this collection, we will see writers and interviewees speak to both of these facets of North Dakotan life; we will also see the exciting cultural exchange that is happening, providing learning opportunities on a constant basis.

We believe that reading the stories of local residents from all walks of life helps to generate empathy and understanding. By focusing on the human element of narrative, recognizing what we all have in common, and attempting to understand our differences, we can make the Valley region a home to all. Likewise, the proceeds for this collection go directly to the Grand Forks Global Friends Coalition, an organization that helps New Americans successfully resettle in the area. Thank you for contributing to this community non-profit writing project and promoting diversity and understanding in our region. We are proud to present this year's *Writing Stories: Voices of the Valley*.

Yours,

Emily and Erin

# I. Bloodline

by Erika Gallaway

Sometimes when I think back, I can still remember every detail so vividly so that I am standing in the operating room all over again. It is brightly lit with sunlight from the windows and the bright lights over the operating table and all around the room. The air carries with it a sterile scent from the antiseptic. I breathe it in, feeling the electricity of adrenaline in my veins. My heart beats, almost in time to the monitor nearby. I watch the green line dancing up and down in sharp, zigzag motions across the black screen. Voices can be heard as well, the controlled tones reserved for conducting operating procedure. My hands are clammy under the latex gloves and I can feel that beneath my crisp scrubs I have goosebumps. There's energy in the room so magnetic that I feel myself physically drawn to it. At the center of it all is my father, his face calm behind the surgical mask. I can't help but feel conflicted. His job was the center of our problems, the reason we rarely saw him. It was the very field I had sworn I would never go in to. Yet here I stood, glued to floor, absorbed in everything that was going on. There was someone on that table, someone that lay still but was perfectly alive and completely reliant on the doctors to fix them. It was incredible... and frustrating.

Legend tells of an Indian Chief by the name of Mara, who lead the rebellion against the conquistadors. When he met his death on the battlefield, his men shouted "Mara kayo!", "Mara fell". Later on, a village was constructed and named after chief Mara. It came to be known as Maracaibo. That was back in the 1500s, long before industry swept across the land and corporate CEOs took on the roles formerly held by the conquistadors. Maracaibo is the second largest city in Venezuela, after Caracas. With a population of 2 million, it has become a sort of cultural hub nestled into the western shores between the Gulf of Venezuela and Lake Maracaibo. Being a seaside metropolis, people of all ethnicities and backgrounds come and go each day like the ships from the sea. My family is no different. My father's parents hailed from Lebanon and Egypt while my mother's family is composed of Ecuadorian and Venezuelan descendants from Spain.

My childhood was spent running around in dusty sneakers, playing in the street or the nearby grassy lots. Our school was crowded with kids of many different ages, and our teachers moved from class to class while we stayed impatiently in our desks, waiting for the lunchtime break when we could get back outside to freedom. Some would say life was simpler then; others would have complained about there only being

5 TV channels. I fell somewhere in between. Life in Venezuela was the only thing I knew, and with the economy in disrepair, I knew mostly of living with the bare minimum. Like most, my childhood memories reflect the hard work of my parents. Both of them spent most of their time working, but my father was gone the most, as he had multiple jobs. My father was a physician who worked out of several places at once to support us. My mother operated a food stand in the city, which my father often manned between shifts. There was even a span of time where he took on the role of coroner. All in all, I saw little of the man. I blamed it on his career and vowed at a young age to never follow in his footsteps. I would be in control of my career, not the other way around.

It was in the late 80s that my father was rejected for a teaching profession at the local university. Faced with a lack of jobs and a family to support, he made the decision to move us all to the States, where he was offered a research position on the east coast. Our new house was in Burlington, Massachusetts. It was my first taste of American culture and I did my best to take it in. I can still recite the exact address as I had to do every morning for my parents. It was their belief that in the case someone found some kid wandering around, looking confused and speaking only Spanish, they could at least go by the address I babbled repeatedly and take me home. Kids are like sponges in that way. If you set them in front of a TV, they are able to soak up the language, the nuances. I had watched enough Sesame Street to last a lifetime. It was in Massachusetts that I saw snow for the first time in my life. To this day I remember it vividly and although a bit of the magic has been lost over the following winters, my first memories are still incredible. My parents wanted me to be able to enjoy the things I could while in America. It wasn't always easy with money as tight as it was, but the snow was free and it was everywhere— big fat sparkling flakes that floated down from the sky and landed on my mittens. In those moments, the rest of the world kind of faded away, all of my stress going along with it. I lived in a place where water could freeze and fall from the sky. It was something that was impossible in Maracaibo but perfectly attainable in Burlington. Perhaps other things could be as well.

We had only been in the states for a couple of years, but my father was offered a job in the field of breast cancer research, one that eventually led to his becoming the top practitioner in the field in South America. The people in my town looked up to my father in a way that I can only hope to achieve one day. As the town general practitioner, he had treated almost everyone at one point or another and often for the price of a humble meal or no price at all. The economy has not improved much in Venezuela, and to this day my father performs surgeries for little to nothing, making just enough to get by. I can't help but look up to the man. It was an inevitable path that I

followed in his footsteps. You could say it was in my very blood. I was 15 when I sat in on one of my father's surgeries. I was in his charge at the time and thus, ended up at the hospital for most of the day. It was in the operating room, surrounded by the glare of medical lamps on silver tools and the smell of antiseptic that I realized I had found my calling in spite of my own declaration against it.

The second time we moved back to the States, I was just finishing middle school which is arguably the worst time for anyone to have to move ever. Middle school is hard enough when you're battling puberty and social pressure in your own town. In a completely different country the pain and embarrassment of being the new kid is exponentially worse. On top of regular English classes, I had to take French for a language course, because being fluent in Spanish while having to tackle English isn't enough for the system apparently. Phy Ed class was a bit rocky, as it was set up in a much less practical manner than back home. In Venezuela, we play sports to stay active. There's an objective, which tends to distract one from the fact that they're chasing after a ball for 45 minutes or so. The American system seemed to think that sports required a level of skill too specific for everyone to take part in, so Phy Ed class focused on the more irrelevant basics like rope climbing and dodgeball. American's fascination with dodgeball still eludes me. Personally, I wasn't a big fan of the welts.

Lockers were another setback, especially since I seemed to be shoved inside them more often than my backpack was. It wasn't necessarily the fact that I was out of shape or nerdy. I like to believe my broken English and quiet demeanor left too much mystery for the average American bully to handle. Overall, school became even less enjoyable as I got older. The feelings of frustration and isolation were unbearable. My nationality and language made me stick out from the crowd. I stood at the social outskirts, now estranged from my old friends after being gone for two years. My teachers became my new companions and their support helped me get through the hardest parts of school.

I was able to make it past those couple really tough years, getting my grades up and working continually on my language skills. I was accepted into medical school outside of the United States and spent the next seven years there, teaching English and working as a firefighter while I was in school. After receiving my degree, I moved to Orlando to get the proper licensing conversion. Then I took up three jobs in Los Angeles for a couple of years in order to pay off the expenses and build my resume. International graduates have to prove themselves if they plan to operate in the United States, and that proof usually requires that you have your work published. Thus, one of the jobs I took on was an unpaid research position. After I had completed my work in

LA, I was offered a third year resident co-chief position in Chicago and stayed there for the next three years.

My time in America hasn't always been positive. I dealt with bullying, prejudice, and red tape as I tried to make a place for myself. To deal with these things, I've had to resort to many of the practices adopted by other immigrants, such as covering up my accent. The immigration process has been a long and arduous one, and my wife is still struggling with her status and securing the ability to work here. Until then, she has had to put her own medical practice aside while we both live here but it's a sacrifice we've had to make in order to stay together. She is the only close family I have near me, as my sister is in Manhattan and my father is still working in Venezuela. Growing up in Maracaibo, my very large extended family got together twice a month for a "grill weekend" filled with food and family time but I haven't seen hardly any of them since I settled here. The fast pace of American life has that effect.

Even as a resident since 2007, I am legally limited in regard to traveling and I face other restrictions as well, though not as many as my wife. I can only hope that she will be granted more freedom soon so she can continue to be the independent, hard-working woman I fell in love with. Until then, we both reside happily in Crookston, Minnesota where I work at the local hospital. I keep busy with other things as well, including volunteering as an ambulance medical director and teaching monthly medical forums that are open to the public. I also became a member of the board of directors at the Mental Health Center. All of these things are my way of trying to give back like my father has. I became more like him than my younger self would have dared, but over time the medical profession became my calling and his self-sacrifice became the motivation behind all of it. Looking back on all of my memories, that fateful day in surgery, moving to the U.S., climbing the rope in gym class, finally seeing snow – it all added up to where I am today and I am, admittedly, in a pretty good place.

Like many immigrants, my parents worked tirelessly to support my siblings and myself. Their love and the support of others has given me opportunities I could never have had in Maracaibo. Despite my longing for a different life than my father's, I have come to realize that in a way, I got what my younger self had wanted. I may have become a doctor like him, but I have also taken my own path, filled with hard work and barriers to overcome.

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Erika was born in Grand Forks and returned to attend UND. She is currently finishing her sophomore year and plans on getting a double major.

## II. Norwegian Roots

by Emily DuBord Hill

As I walk through the glass doors of the campus coffeehouse on a blustery day in February, I immediately step into my past. There seated at a table with her business school textbooks and her half eaten steel cut oats was a young woman I had not seen in a few years. Still golden haired with beautiful almond shaped eyes, she waves and smiles at me.

After quite a few years of not seeing each other except for bumping into each other at campus events, conversation between us still flows naturally. There is something invigorating about connecting with a person you haven't seen in ages but especially a person with whom you share travel experiences. For some reason, it feels like you are meeting up with a friend who you have only met in a dream.

Lena Matsen was one of my favorites. As a teacher, I know I'm not supposed to have those particular prized pupils, but it happens to every teacher. Just ask one. But it just so happened that I had to travel half way across the world in order to meet her as well as many other young college students who would ignite my passion for students and teaching in ways I never thought imaginable. Lena shared my love of learning and challenging yourself intellectually to be even better. Also, with her and a few other students, we were able to take a field trip to Brussels on an extended weekend that semester. We marveled at the Atomium, played in Mini-Europe, listened to all sorts of music from around the world in the Musical Instrument Museum, and most importantly devoured Belgian waffles together. Travelling, truly a classroom of life, bonds you permanently with the people you have the privilege of discovering new worlds with.



I officially met Lena in a town called Moss, on the southern coast of Norway. I was to spend a semester teaching literature and writing courses to first year Norwegian college students who had hopes to ultimately complete their education in the United States. The school was called the American College of Norway and had a small class of around 75 students that semester. The University of North Dakota has an exchange

program with this school and when my graduate department offered me the opportunity to travel and teach, I signed the papers the day it was offered to me. I was a 24-year-old woman who needed a change and needed to see the world beyond the borders of North Dakota. I was a young woman who needed to grow.



A girl from Kolbotn, Norway was feeling the same way in 2010. Lena dreamed of exploring a world beyond Norway. She watched her older brother go off to school in Bergen and then cross the sea to London to make his home. Her brother had a keen eye for business and insurance over in London and gradually opened his own company over in Norway. Lena desired this business path as well but decided after a year of going to university in Norway that she needed to get away in order to thrive. She heard of American College of Norway from a friend who was attending there and was enjoying it. When Lena learned that after taking your generals at this school you then completed your education in America, she knew she had to give this school a try.

Through taking classes with professors from UND and exchanging cultural traditions with the few UND students who were attending ACN that year, Lena knew going to the United States to finish her schooling was the right path for her. While working with ACN's college advisement councilor, Lena spread her net wide in the United States. She researched business schools and was attracted to a couple of schools in North Carolina as well as looked into University of North Dakota as an option. At the time, UND was really her fall back plan if the schools in North Carolina did not work out. But it turned out all of the universities she applied to accepted her and thus decision time commenced.

"Did she really want to go somewhere that was colder than Norway or a place that had more Norwegians living there than Norway did?" These were both questions she asked herself while looking at her college options, however North Dakota did win over the others. Primarily, the decision was made because of college tuition cost issues. Schools in North Carolina were much more expensive than UND since there were not specific exchange programs with Norway at those schools. Lena thought to herself, "Well, why not? I can just spend a year or two in North Dakota, save up some money and then transfer into another school." With this practical logic, Lena enrolled in

University of North Dakota and travelled to a place called Grand Forks, North Dakota in the fall of 2011.

She noticed the transformation of cultures with each flight she boarded. In Norwegian culture, the tradition is to gradually become more open and welcoming as you get to know someone new. There has to be an element of trust developed between new acquaintances. But before that happens, small talk between strangers scarcely exists. The flight from Oslo to Amsterdam was comfortable and quieting since most of the passengers were Scandinavian. When Lena boarded the plane from Amsterdam to take her to Minneapolis, she noticed that complete strangers would say hello or briefly nod. But nothing prepared her for the puddle-jumper plane that took her from Minneapolis to Grand Forks. She quickly learned that North Dakotans not only made polite small talk; they wanted to know you. "Where are you from?" "What do you do?" And most importantly, "How's the weather back home?"

When she arrived on campus and began classes, she realized she liked it too much here to leave. She found UND to be very inviting to International students in the sense of making her feel comfortable and connecting her to resources. It was important for her not to cling only to other International students but to branch outside of this circle and meet all kinds of students. Of course, she would always keep her dear friends Cecilie and Kine whom she met at American College of Norway, but it was time to meet North Dakotans and beyond. Lena stepped outside of her comfort zone and met a plethora of students through her residence hall, apartment buildings, courses and organizations. There was just something about the people in this area. She had never met so many strangers who were interested in getting to know her not only as an International student but also as a person. When people find out she is from Norway, the most common reaction is still "I'm Norwegian too!"

Since living here, she has observed that North Dakotans have amazing amounts of pride for their heritage. More than any Norwegian national she knows. She finds it an endearing trait that most people in this area know the exact percentages of their nationalities and practice many Scandinavian customs that aren't necessarily practiced consistently or at all back in Norway. Sure, Norwegians are patriotic on May 17<sup>th</sup> on Norway's Independence Day, but other than that many live out their lives with very little thought about the origins of their ancestors. Because of her time in the Red River Valley, she has in some ways connected to her Norwegian roots even more so than at home. She is proud to say she now knows how to make lefse from scratch – an art she can take home to Kolbotn since no one from Norway actually makes homemade lefse.

Stepping onto UND's campus was a big step not only for Lena but her family as a whole. She is the first person in her family to study abroad. Her mother, who is a special education teacher back in Kolbotn, thinks her daughter is a little too far away from home but admires the independence she has gained from her experience living in Grand Forks. Lena herself admits she has transformed into a more open and independent woman since living here. When she goes home to visit at Christmastime, she is continually struck at how much she has changed. She strikes up conversations on trains with fellow Norwegians and tourists. In public, she finds herself holding doors open for strangers and saying thank you to cashiers. She is more self-reliant and walks a little taller.

Although time back home in Kolbotn is savored, she does find herself aching for things that are her new traditions from living in the Red River Valley. On Christmas Day in Norway, she now craves stuffing to go with her mother's roasted turkey. She misses the freedom to have a meal out on the town. Americans take eating out in restaurants for granted. Norwegians eat at home more often than not since food costs are incredibly inflated. When you come from a place where the version of a hearty hamburger is going through the McDonald's drive-thru and paying \$15, it is understandable why most meals are at home. But since living in Grand Forks, Lena frequents Toasted Frog and JL Beers and appreciates the beauty of a juicy American hamburger.

Thanksgiving is another tradition she wishes she could bring home to Norway. There is nothing equivalent to a day completely devoted to giving thanks in her country. Lena loves this idea and admires the true meaning of this American holiday. Each fall since coming to Grand Forks, she has spent the weekend with friends and their families. However, she finds some irony in this American holiday. She does not understand the logic behind all the greed and materialism that comes with the day after – Black Friday. To be spending an intimate celebration with family and friends the day before, giving thanks for your blessings, just to be thrown out the next day with the Christmas rush. But that is really her only grievance about this tradition, except for the fact that pumpkin pie disturbingly tastes like Norwegian brown cheese.

But despite all of her new interests and traditions she gained in North Dakota, nothing can replace Norway for Lena. Although the plains can be beautiful, she yearns to see the mountains, bountiful trees, and the deep fjords of her country. With every passing year, she misses Eastertime in Norway. Easter is not solely a religious holiday in Norway. It is more of a family holiday and celebration of spring. The Easter holiday is not just an extended weekend, but also a whole week or more for businesses to close

to allow families to celebrate together. There are always more than a few large family dinners that feature lamb as the main dish. Homes are decorated with chickens and children hunt for eggs outside.

She is not homesick but has a new appreciation for home. Lena is ready to go home.

After she receives her Masters degree in Business, she will ultimately go where there is employment – hopefully at a bank. Of course, she wouldn't mind if her career took her back to Norway. It is to her advantage that she completed her education in the United States since Norwegian businesses like to see professionals with diverse educational experiences. She will forever be grateful for going to school in Grand Forks for this reason. Her North Dakotan education will always make her stand out from the crowd when trying to make gains in her career.

Although she may leave the Red River Valley in a year or two in order to continue on to the next stage in her life, Lena knows that Grand Forks will be her new vacation spot. She can see the humor in this, however this is the home of her second family – her friends and faculty members who have made this a home for her. Lena is honored to say she has North Dakotan roots and they run deep within her heart and memory.



Emily, Co-creator of Voices of the Valley, was born and raised in the Red River Valley. She is currently an Instructor in the UND Honors Program and recently accepted into UND Educational Foundations and Research Doctoral Program. In her spare time, she sings alto in the Grand Forks Chorales, reads voraciously, and has intellectual conversations with her Maltese/Poodle, Mr. Gatsby.

### III. Dark Feathers in Winter

by Laurel Perez

#### Part I: Clan of the Hearty People

Refugees fleeing from war torn countries used to be placed in large U.S. cities and forgotten. New Americans with little and sometimes no English, given housing, a stipend, and left to find their way in a new country. I wasn't around when people first began to immigrate to the U.S., but then everyone was new, forging new lives often with very little. Imagine this new scenario, imagine having left a full life behind, being handed the pieces of a new one, and then having to make it work in 2015. Those large cities like L.A. can swallow a body whole, and if no one knows your name, if you have no family left, or your family isn't listed, can't speak English, you may stay John or Jane Doe, or never be found.

Visualize for a moment the Midwest as it is today; imagine the hearty people that survived those extreme temperatures. If you've never lived in the Midwest, you probably don't know how kind, how family-oriented those from the area are, how they fold you into their homes like one of their own. They'll feed you hot dish, and tell you all about how to layer for the wind and snow, they'll invite you to lefse feeds where you'll watch elderly Germans and Norwegians roll the dough so thin, you'll be sure that it will tear. They'll dig you out of the snow your first winter, when you don't own a shovel and your tires are spinning. They'll tell you not to slam on your breaks in the winter, how to remain calm when your car slides. They'll give you an emergency car kit, complete with flares, blankets, a shovel, and rope. Tell you to keep an extra coat in your trunk, as well as water and snacks, and to stay in your car if you get caught in a storm. They'll take you to get gas when you let the tank go below a quarter, and it freezes.

Midwesterners are community people; they have volunteered every man woman and child in times of flood, each person given a task along the assembly line of filling sandbags, and placing them along the Red River to save the homes of strangers. If you have never seen a community come together to save a town, raise funds for a family in need, then you have never seen how amazing it is to be a part of these Midwestern people.

There is just something about the Midwest, something about these small communities that keeps them ticking. The kind people there, the helping, willing people, who survive all kinds of Mother Nature's storms, these people know that they

have to stick together, just like immigrants from long ago discovered in order to thrive. This is why we send those fleeing for their lives to these small communities, you cannot be lost and forgotten in a place so ready to greet you, and teach you their ways.

## Part II: Relocation as a Metaphor for Salt

Imagine any number of reasons why  
a family might leave home  
country -  
Perhaps it is no longer safe  
maybe they want to  
be educated in the US  
to take new needed skills home  
to serve their people  
their village  
their tribe.

It's freezing when they arrive  
with no coat  
unsuitable shoes

Don't worry  
in North Dakota  
we've got people ready  
to bundle you up.

People so ready to learn from you  
to share in your culture  
to share our own.

Your first winter will be rough  
your first semester in an ESL program  
will feel more difficult than it should  
maybe your elderly parents are learning English  
in the basement of a local church  
but you have no car.  
You will be provided with a ride.

If one is willing to try

one can make a home here.

### Part III: Conversation Partner

When I was an undergrad, taking way too many credits, trying to get my degree already so I could teach, I took a multicultural education class at UND. In this class we were assigned conversation partners, people from other countries here to learn English, and apply to UND for a degree they could use back home. I still remember our entire class going to the International center, though this was years ago. I still remember seeing my partner for the first time as he walked past me. I knew he would be paired with me, because his eyes were dark, rimmed black. Honestly, I knew my luck, he looked scary, and I just knew I would be paired with this man from Saudi Arabia. No one ever tells you that even if you grow up in a big city on the West coast, that if you spend enough time in North Dakota, that you will become so used to the white out of people, that you will in fact come to see other cultures as seemingly scary, even if it's just the thickness of their furrowed brows, the way you cannot see into the dark irises staring back at you.

Perhaps this is a learned fear of the Other from post 9/11, perhaps you've never looked at another person and been a little unsure. I'm unwilling to label it, but know that I decided to be open to this experience, and that it didn't take long for me to realize my partner was just as unsure of me as I was of him. I learned a lot of things over a semester of conversations with this man, who had just as many questions about my culture, and my role as a woman in America, as I had for him and eventually his wife about their culture, and their lives in Saudi Arabia. My partner practiced his English, and I practiced my ability to find alternative words to describe my life when the meaning was otherwise lost.

My favorite part about our time together was sharing a few meals with my partner and his wife in their home. His poor wife spoke next to no English, and was incredibly confused when I requested that she make traditional Saudi foods without meat, so that I would be able to share in the meal with them. Vegetarians are really not a thing in Saudi Arabia, and trying to explain that I choose not to eat meat was so much more complex to explain than any other time I have had this conversation in the past. It also made me inherently aware of my own freedom to choose such things, and of how I must look to people who eat what is available. The food was wonderful; I have never eaten anything like it before. The spices were so unique, pungent spices that clung to my clothes, and I swear I could smell on my skin for days. We ate on the floor

in their dining room, trash bags lined the carpet, and I sat legs pressed together as if side saddle on the floor as his wife did. My legs fell asleep, and it honestly hurt to spend a few hours on the floor like that. My partner, who sat with his legs crossed, seemed unperturbed. We ate with our hands; they showed me how to use the bread, much like Naan or a pita to pick up white rice and what looked like a stew that included potatoes and other root vegetables, traditionally served with beef.

I learned a lot about the role of women, at least as far as this one couple could teach me about their culture, and I hope I was able to convey as much from my own, white, barely middle class American perspective. Before I had ever joined them for a meal my partner and I had discussed the attire of women in Saudi Arabia, and he had shared that his wife wore full covering, including a hijab that in fact covered her eyes, spare for little holes through latticework fabric. The only skin shown is her hands when she is in public, and I'll be honest, the thought of sharing a meal with a woman that I could not even make eye contact with made me nervous, made me feel uncomfortable, and I worried that I wouldn't be able to connect with her at all. I asked why this garb was important to my partner, and he shared that if another man were to look upon his wife, he would feel beyond violent, and would feel called to fight or even kill this imagined other man. He then asked me if my at the time boyfriend, or my father had any say in my attire. I assured him that even when my father was alive, he never said much on the subject, and my now husband has never complained about what I wear, nor felt violent towards others who look at me.

When I first met my partner's wife at their home, I was surprised to meet a dark eyed woman, belly full with their first child, scantily clad in a silk, dark green negligee, which at one point in the evening she lifted to wipe her face, her swelling belly and pubic hair protruding. I found that because I am a woman, she was allowed to dress as she pleased in her own home. Had I been a man, she would not have joined us when we ate, and she would have been fully covered, unless I were her father, brother, or uncle; male family members may see her hair, face, and hands, but not the rest of her body. Given this news, I was still surprised to see her in her negligee. Through some very broken translation, I was able to ask her how she felt about needing to be fully covered when in public. She shared that it made her feel safe and special that her husband would be so jealous if another man saw her. For her it was a supreme compliment; inside, the independent woman inside of me was screaming. I do not judge other cultures for their choices; instead I imagined what would feel like a complete lack of freedom for me in my world. I imagined not being seen as I am now, a woman who loves to wear color, and changing my hair all the time, a woman who has always had

the freedom to do and wear as I please. I think this was an important thing for me to learn, something years later I still reflect on.

This very kind woman also had lots of questions for me, though she wasn't always sure how to ask them. When I described a trip I once took with a group of my peers to Turkey, they were both aghast that I had not been accompanied by my husband or father. They were speechless that I lived with my then boyfriend out of wedlock, couldn't even understand why we felt this was okay. I learned that their marriage had been arranged, and they seemed a little confused how I felt such freedom to choose who I dated and married. It was not a forced pairing, both my partner and his wife were asked by their fathers if they agreed to marry the other. Though I had to fight back my surprise when I learned that my partner had not even seen his wife's face until their wedding night. In my mind, he married a pair of lovely hands, since they had never even spoken until their vows. I know what you're thinking now; I thought it, too. What oppression! How terrible! But, the fact of the matter is, these two are happy, and it is their culture, so I respect it.

Something funny happens when you live in North Dakota, even if you are not a native (like myself). Somewhere between becoming a part of the community and surviving college in my case, I became a part of a wonderfully accepting people. I will always be indebted to UND for this and many experiences which allowed me to meet new people, many of whom had very different cultures from my own. As a person who has grown up feeling largely like I didn't really have a culture, one of many in a large city on the west coast, I feel like I gained what I cannot even name. I am proud to have been a part of a community that I know, even from far away, is welcoming people from all over.

Laurel grew up in Oregon where she lived in Portland. She later moved to North Dakota to earn a Bachelor's and Master's in English and secondary education. She is a poet, instructor, and master crafter and likes to spend her time knitting, reading, writing, and generally crafting. Today, Laurel lives and teaches college composition in Illinois with her husband and creamsicle cat; she is currently a doctoral student in Creative Writing - Poetry at Illinois State University.

## IV. Community around Nisa

by Chrystal Nelson

Seagulls cry into the salty breeze. Whip-poor-wills sing to each other in the rolling hills and trails on the Appalachian Mountains. Spanish moss hides the bark of the trees bringing to mind a mourning widow hiding behind a veil of black lace. A gentle kiss of sunlight awakens the rows and rows of sunflowers, while a wind ripples through the wheat. Water churns and froths pick up dirt as it races to the ocean. Young, steep peaks stretch for the stars creating vivid images of strength and foreboding desires. Forests of green trees hug sandy dunes while vines of purple gems twist, turn, and intertwine throughout the valleys. America's beauty lay in her differences.

A siren's call, a beacon, a light, an adventure, a cry to bring "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Words of power echo through time and ring with truth. Millions travel to the new chosen land. New Americans flood a new country with hopes, dreams, and change.

The self-made man. This persistent ideal waves above America in a golden banner meant to entice and encourage. In reality, the self-made man idea has failed as many as it has created. America pulls so many to her shores for a better life. Truthfully the American dream of a better life and the self-made man died with the rise of globalization. Many now enter America, not to seek a better life in terms of monetary gain or power, but to become a part of the world. The global world shares strong economic ties and moral obligations. Those countries which consider themselves to be a



part of the global world share one goal of ending poverty, ending starvation, balancing money with active living, etc. America's youth allows her to adapt quickly to new ideas, and the rise of globalization, in essence, becomes America's strongest feature. Nisa Rajput represents this new wave of Americans seeking redemption through a new life of global togetherness.

Harare, Zimbabwe, located in Africa, does not exist in the realm of everyday

thought for those in North Dakota. For Nisa, Zimbabwe constantly runs through her thoughts. North Dakota remains as foreign to her as Zimbabwe remains to the North Dakotans in the Red River Valley. Questions plague her daily: Did she make the right choices? Will America be the place where she can achieve her dreams? Answers always appear to be out of sync with such questions.

Nisa entered co-ed private school, called nursery, at the age of three. At the age of six she went to junior school, and at the age of thirteen she entered Form 1, the American equivalency of junior high school. Harare's schools belong to the government or the private sector, relatable to the American public education system. Upon entering Form 1, Nisa faced the Zimsec exams. The exams were required in her school and once she completed them, Nisa received her stream number. The stream number may be viewed as an American high school would view grade levels. Zimsec exams include math, English, general knowledge, and Shona, the national language of Zimbabwe. With fierce competition to be placed in the better streams, Nisa chose to participate actively in sports: hockey, tennis, and swimming. This, and her Zimsec scores, gave her a competitive edge. Such an edge allowed Nisa to dream of a future anywhere.

Colonized by the British, Zimbabwe's principle language remains English. In 1890 Cecil John Rhodes entered into a deal with King Lobengula over mining rights. Rhodes brought in many settlers, overthrew King Lobengula, and renamed the area Rhodesia. Marked by apartheid policies and the resettlement of large amounts Africans, Rhodesia witnessed many battles for freedom. Early 1980 brought news of freedom. Zimbabwe emerged from the ruins of Rhodesia. European colonization ended decades prior to Zimbabwe's freedom, but the Europeans clung to land as a view of power. Many of the reforms the British brought to Zimbabwe continue today, as does the English language. Its importance to Zimbabwe stems from the need for Zimbabwe to compete in the global market.

The economic situation in Zimbabwe teeters back and forth between a solid system backed by loans, mainly from China, and corrupt governmental officials taking funds. Limited freedoms within Zimbabwe hinder market growth. Developing a national identity remains the primary focus of Zimbabwe; without an identity it cannot join the global world.

Born into a life of privilege, Nisa knew of the hardships Zimbabwe faced but they did not touch her life. Nisa enjoyed living in a house, having a pool, servants to assist with cleaning, etc. Money flowed through her father's business to her family. Even knowing the problems of Zimbabwe, she did not strongly feel the effects of being

raised in a Third World country. Americans hear the term, Third World or Developing Country, and instantly think poverty, destitution, pain, and suffering. The two ideas are not synonymous with one another. Nisa grew up surrounded with every luxury. Until her graduation became more prominent, Nisa never considered the economic crises of Zimbabwe affecting her future goals.

As graduation approached, Nisa faced what most students faced. Anxiety. A decision needed to be made concerning her future. Rather than stay in Zimbabwe, Nisa's family urged her to leave the unstable country to find another. The instability of Zimbabwe's economic situation, based upon continued corruption, forced her to recognize the need to enter the global world through another country. Country after country filtered through her mind: Australia, South Africa, Cypress, Great Britain, etc. Choices most American students would never consider. Added to the pressure of finding a country to fulfill her needs, Nisa needed to choose a career path immediately.

International students may rarely switch majors, especially not the statistical allotted five times American students switch. American students, feeling secure with America's global position, flit back and forth between majors like birds racing for the newest, fattest worm. Any idea of a concrete choice immediately makes American students responsible for their own future, but if they continue to switch majors, they can remain blissfully ignorant of adult life. Well, as long as their parents do not force them to choose. Nisa, however, did not receive any choice. As such she considered her athletic career and her academics. The two prominent fields she followed included Hotel Management and Sales and Marketing. Hotel Management lost its appeal rapidly; it seems everyone these days wishes to manage a hotel. With a firm choice in Sales and Marketing, Nisa began the process to enter the global world.

The call of America's new promise lured Nisa further from the other countries. America's bold claim of the self-made man and living a better life never crossed Nisa's mind. America's stability and continued presence as a world leader appealed to Nisa. She would be able to enter the business world one small step at a time and eventually would earn her place in the global community America claimed a place in. Upon making the decision to enter an American college, Nisa enrolled in a scholarship agency. The scholarship agency placed students of Zimbabwe in colleges of different countries. Lindenwood, Missouri, claimed to have a decent athletics program, as did Minot, North Dakota. Gradually though Nisa dropped the athletics from her wish list. Mayville, North Dakota popped up. With limited time, Nisa made her decision.

Entering another country to visit can be a hassle. Delays in plane layovers, lost baggage, customs, passports, crying babies, jet lag, bad airport food, and the final relief of arriving at the destination, only to be told the hotel fell over. Applying to go to college in America from the small country of Zimbabwe, no small amount of patience would be tested. Nisa applied for her F1 Student Visa. The ambassadors informed her they could not guarantee she would receive the visa. The American Embassy interviewed her for potential threats. Nisa passed. Mayville State University accepted her. Nisa purchased her tickets to leave for school. Every day she traveled to the embassy and waited in the lobby to hear her name for the F1 Student Visa. The first day, no such luck. She fretted over not receiving the visa. Nisa had not been turned down for much. Would she have to rethink her future, her choice in country, her entire system of beliefs in America? The following day, an hour before the embassy opened, Nisa arrived to wait for her name. At 9:30 a.m. Nisa heard her name. At 11:00 a.m. the next day, Nisa left for orientation at Mayville State University.

Heroes in stories gladly charge off in search of adventure. No worries over packing or planning cross the heroes' minds. Food, well there will be villages along the way to provide food. Shelter, camping under the stars remains man's best way to communicate with nature. Transportation, luckily man possess legs to be able walk. Rarely do heroes consider illness, death, or failure. In the end the hero wins the lady's hand in marriage, thus securing many villages and many treasures. Reality does not work in the same manner. As humans, we rarely know when we have entered into an adventure. A few, a small few, realize their adventures have begun and all their choices thereafter will affect the future. Nisa appeared to be one of those lucky ones. For the adventure of her life started with a plane ride to a new country.

Seven hours spent toddling around Reagan Airport in Washington D.C., Nisa refused to leave for fear of missing her connecting flight. In January 2012 Nisa landed in Fargo, North Dakota. James Morowski, the enrollment officer, picked Nisa up at the airport. Nisa stepped outside the airport and celebrated her excitement with a small squeal; she also grabbed a coffee because the cold proved to be too much for her to handle. The doubts began to press in as she traveled further and further away from the airport. The flat, sparse land of North Dakota spread before her in miles. Mayville proved to be outside the city of Fargo, further than she had imagined. The further they drove away from civilization, Nisa began to panic. Her initial thoughts focused on weird kidnapping scenarios, where she starred as the kidnapped. Isolated from family and surrounded by the harshness that makes up a North Dakota winter, Nisa cringed. Resolutely and gracefully Nisa forced herself to perk up and push aside the doubts.

Really, who in North Dakota would want to kidnap her? Her adventure began and another person joined the rush to be a part of globalization.

The Earth spins at a constant rate and time continues. And Nisa, well Nisa's personality is not one to waste time. Nisa dived right into the life at Mayville State. Beautiful and happy, Nisa attracted friends everywhere. Happiness is contagious. As a foreigner to America, most North Dakotans initially viewed her with distrust. Her happiness never wavered; as such, Nisa never heard an unkind word. The entirety of her stay in North Dakota has been one of open questions and warm welcomes. Even without the rudeness so many Americans hold a reputation for, Nisa noticed quirks of the Americans she lived near.

North Dakotans, for those who do not know, pride themselves on remaining stoic during the worst of a crisis, while simultaneously assisting those around them. Gossip never happens in North Dakota, in truth the citizens just express concern over certain lifestyle choices in order to help those who need it, which proves to be a deluded version of gossip. Churches and bars equally fill every town. North Dakotans work hard, play hard, and support each other through it all. This need to be a part of everyone's business and know every detail about each other often overwhelms newcomers.

Being a part of the community never bothered Nisa. She loved the people who gathered together to help each other, and they loved her in return. Even with the sense of community, Nisa noticed how North Dakotans tended to be individualistic. Certain rules had to be followed. One may comment on the neighbor's choice of paint color, or how the snow plows never seem to run, or any other number of eccentricities, but one can never outright call a person a bad name. Stark truth has never been accepted. Once these rules have been conquered, North Dakotans open arms to strangers and fully accept them into the community.

Three years of pushing herself, Nisa graduated in December 2014. Being accepted into the community of a small, North Dakotan town, Nisa felt she could conquer any job. She applied for her OPT, temporary work visa, and a job in nearby Fargo. North Dakota crept into her soul and latched on. She developed a fondness for the people who would fight on her behalf in order to assist her with achieving her dreams. Nisa now works at Spectrum Aeromed in Fargo, North Dakota. This first step for citizenship allows her to work in her field. With a job in America, on her way to becoming an American citizen, Nisa's adventure of becoming a citizen of the world continues.

America offered Nisa a chance to achieve her dream. People immigrate to America, not for a better life, but to become a part of the world bigger than their own. The adaptability of a new country spills over into opportunities for her people. America's youth, once a hindrance, now allows her to spring forward into the new era. People flock to America to achieve their dreams. America's strength lay in her differences and her people.

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## V. Green Garlands

by Erin Lord Kunz

“Dahn-you-bought,” I say, as Khina hands me a freshly made cup of Nepali tea. She’s been trying to teach me a little Nepali here and there, while I help her with her English.

“Dhanyabadt,” Khina corrects.

“Dhan-you-bought.” I grip the warm cup and bring the sweet, rich, comforting tea to my lips, grinning knowingly about my ignorance.

Khina laughs, and we return to teaching her English, typically a more successful venture. Today we are reading a movie review from *The New Yorker*. I wasn’t aware of how many levels of irony are embedded in every single *New Yorker* article until I had to explain to Khina that nothing means what you think it means. Khina sails through the literal reading, but it’s more difficult to make sense of the casual, passive aggressive jabs at directors, actors, the state of the film industry, etc. Next time I’ll choose something more sincere for our homework.

As we read, translate, and converse, Khina’s son Swarnim interrupts periodically, as two year-olds are apt to do. I feel like a useless bystander as they communicate in Nepali, and I try not to look irritated, because I’m not – I’m just unhelpful. On the occasions Khina responds to Swarnim (in Nepali) and gets his bucket of toys, I can then be helpful. Building Lego towers as high as possible until they drop does not require a shared language – just a little imagination and laughter. This time, I am definitely at a loss for their discussion, because no food, no toys, no freshly uploaded computer game appear. These are Swarnim’s typical requests. Finally, exasperated, Khina gets up, goes to the cupboard and proceeds to fill a bowl with shallow water and add a few ice cubes that bob along the top. Swarnim’s eyes light up as he takes the bowl and merrily, but carefully, trots off into the next room with his ice cube water. I’m not sure I would have been able to understand that request even if the toddler were speaking English.

Khina was born in Bhutan in 1984 and was forced to flee to Nepal at the age of five. She didn’t know why she had to move; her parents told her that it was because of religion – a conflict between Hindus and Buddhists – and they had to become refugees. She lived in the refugee camp with her family for nearly 17 years before she received the opportunity to come to the United States. She arrived in the U.S. in April of 2009, entering the country through Miami, Florida. After a brief seven-month stay in

Sacramento, Grand Forks became her permanent residence, because of the safety and stability it provides. In 2014, Khina officially became an American citizen after educating herself in English, American history, and the like. Her husband Suddendra will become an American citizen in three years, courtesy of his marriage to a smart and motivated woman. In the meantime, Khina, Suddendra, and Swarnim enjoy their life in Grand Forks, North Dakota, Khina raising their son and Suddendra working at the local potato processing plant. Khina has three brothers and five sisters, two of whom live in the United States. Her parents still live in Nepal, and she misses them dearly.

“What is the major religion in Nepal?” I ask Suddendra and Khina, just one of my many questions during our tutoring visits.

“About 80% Hindu, I’d say,” replies Khina, after some thought. “We will go to any church though. We’re all just human beings.”

When I ask about her parents’ thoughts on religion, she admits that “they are stricter about their faith because they don’t have education.” Khina and Suddendra, on the other hand, are at once open to diverse religions but mainly indifferent to all, which is not so unlike many young, American families.

I ask more questions about their experiences as refugees, the government of Bhutan and Nepal, and dozens of other things. During a particularly complicated conversation about the paperwork that got them to America, Suddendra reminds me that all of this information can be found on Wikipedia. I pause for a moment and consider if the situation were reversed, and someone speaking a language that was not my first were asking me to explain the political intricacies of America, as well as where I came from, along with where my parents and grandparents came from, and so on.

I laugh and admit to Suddendra, “I am sort of Irish, a little German and Polish, and maybe some Bohemian, too. But I would never be able to answer these questions if you were directing them at me.” They seemed relieved that I was no longer asking them to narrate the geo-political story of their ancestors, and I instead enjoyed my food. Khina cooks me Nepali food nearly every time I visit, which makes me think I am getting a way better end of the deal compared to the light English tutoring I offer Khina. Over Christmas, I brought Khina a Tupperware container of some of my ultimate comfort food – knoepla soup – and she commented on both its tastiness and its creaminess. It now stands as our zest barometer when we generally discuss food. In our conversations, food is either creamy and doughy like North Dakotan food or spicy and

flavorful like Nepali food. During one particularly hot, eye-watering lunch, Khina remarked, "Very spicy for you, very not like the soup." Indeed.

Though we're not so far apart in age, Khina seems much wiser than me. At times, I feel like a child alongside this woman who's seen and experienced so much. I was born in western North Dakota, and though I fled Mandan, I didn't go very far. When my husband and I miss our parents we drive three and a half hours and see them, and not without complaining about the trek. How can I lend out my heart, to understand her experience as a refugee when my life is so different?

"What was it like when you first landed in America?" I ask, assuming that there would be a mournful story to describe leaving one's home and traveling to an unknown place.

"When I landed I was happy and excited...and I thought I was an American," laughed Khina.

"What were some of your initial impressions?"

"I see that everyone was busy...no one is...like...sitting without work. Everyone is busy here. When I was back to our country some of the peoples are sitting like idle, without work, they are talkative, without work. When I came here people are busy. Relaxing, passing the time without work."

I finally think we're onto something here, hearing Khina talk about her struggle moving to a new culture that values work above all. I ask if she prefers the lifestyle back home.

"No," she answers. "I like the work."

"Hmmm. Do you like being in North Dakota?"

"Ya, I like, I love...it's just a little bit cold, but I still love. The people in North Dakota are really nice and really helpful. I went to California, I had been there for seven months...and we came back here...it was so dangerous, and we like it here."

"What don't you like about North Dakota?" I ask abruptly, not totally understanding where Khina is coming from.

"The snow."

“The winter is long,” I commiserate.

“I love the long winter, but it’s hard on my back, otherwise everything fine,” Khina says. Once again, I feel like a child, trying to justify my own complaints and receiving no validation; her pleasant kindness scatters my cynicism. I act as if I am a tortured soul living in North Dakota, imprisoned in the land of freezing gloom, but Khina only quietly comments about how the negative 30 temps make it hard to walk since she had back surgery. Misery receives no company with Khina – only perspective.

During one of our tutoring sessions, I taught Khina to write haikus. I explained the 5/7/5 syllable structure, and then wrote one as an example:

North Dakota is  
my home. I was born here, and  
I love and hate it.

I counted out the syllables on my hands as I read it out loud: “North.Da.ko.ta.is.my home.I.was.born.here.and.I.love.and.hate.it.”

Khina put the pen to paper, and within a few minutes, her haiku was complete:

Swarnim is my son.  
I was born in Bhutan and  
I love my country.

Khina strikes a formidable, impressive balance between appreciating her new home and retaining the customs of Nepali and Bhutanese culture. I would imagine that it is difficult to be anything other than white in North Dakota, and by “white” I don’t just mean skin color. I mean bland. I mean a place where eating at Pizza Hut and watching *American Idol* constitutes an extra special night. I mean not being different, not pushing the boundaries. Creamy and doughy, not spicy and flavorful.

However, Khina is resourceful and finds enough ingredients at our small international market to keep making her favorite Nepali foods. She explores the town and always has people around her. She moves between English and Nepali fluidly. She tells me how she continues celebrating Nepali festivals while also learning about American holidays. She celebrates the Teej festival, when women wear red dresses, yellow/green garlands, and pray for their husbands to have a long life. The women fast for one night and stay

awake, finally celebrating by gathering all the local women together, dancing, singing, and eating a great variety of foods.

Over Christmas, I introduced Khina to a bit of American folk culture by sharing some of my baked gingerbread men. I decorated them and then wrote out The Gingerbread Man poem, realizing immediately how strange the tale is:

“Run, run, as fast as you can; you can’t catch me; I’m the Gingerbread Man.” The suddenly anthropomorphized cookie, who saves himself from the oven, immediately gets eaten by a fox while the grim sensations are described, and we act as if this is a delightful children’s story to be recounted while celebrating Christ’s birth. Hmm.

After transcribing the poem on cute red Christmas paper, I thought about how I might explain it, and realizing that I couldn’t, I got a warm, fuzzy feeling. I like our customs with weird origins and sketchy, if not nonexistent, meanings. When we try to pinpoint meanings or – worse – act as if every custom has an important place in an overarching linear history, we overthink our desires and lose out on some of the fun. Too often, we try to force information – and whole cultures – that we don’t understand into our own frameworks of meaning, and we predictably fail to understand. We only need to humbly jump into the whirlwind that is culture, with its eccentricities and idiosyncrasies and complications and differences, and take the bits we love and love the bits we take. I never explained the meaning of The Gingerbread Man to Khina. I also never asked Khina to explain the meaning of the red dresses and yellow/green garland to me.

One day, I ask Khina if she wants to stay in North Dakota and raise Swarnim here. She replies, “Ya, I love here. I don’t think to go anywhere further.”

Even if she does love work, Khina still seems to retain her non-Western ability to be satisfied and not constantly busy herself with obsessing over change, and movement, and a misleading idea of progress.

Wondering if she still thought of herself in terms of her past, as a Bhutanese person forced into a refugee camp in Nepal, I ask, “Do you think of yourself as a refugee?”

“Right now, no, I’m not, I don’t think...when I get to the United States I was not a refugee...now I am a United States citizen.”

We're no more than the sum of our present moments. And right now, I'm a young woman who gets to drink homemade Nepali tea week to week, wondering what Swarnim is going to do with that cold bowl of ice cube water.



Erin Lord Kunz is Co-creator of Voices of the Valley, an Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Administrator at Mayville State University, and a doctoral student in the Educational Foundations and Research Program at UND. She predictably likes reading and writing, as well as dogs, running, travel, and Netflix.

## VI. Priyanka, from the City of Joy

by Brittney Christy

Priyanka and I are both graduate students at UND. For the past four semesters, we've been working toward a shared goal of finishing our English M.A.s this May. A now rapidly-approaching graduation means that we're about to be shoved out of the nest, and we're both hoping that our wings have matured enough to catch some wind. I'm struggling with the uncertainty of my future, feeling ready but not quite ready to take the leap. Just in case, I'm keeping my mom's cozy attic in mind. Moving back in with my mom isn't ideal, but it's a comforting safety net.

For Priyanka, our impending graduation comes with some additional challenges. Priyanka hails from West Bengal, India, and she's here on a student visa. If she's unable to secure work in her field within three months of graduation, then her visa will expire. That means she'll have no choice but to return home—a more than 7,000 mile trip with little chance of returning to the U.S. When she tells me this, I feel the sober reality of her situation, but she doesn't let on that she's worried or afraid. As my mother likes to say, failure is not an option for some people. It's only an option if you entertain it as one, and it's clear that Priyanka does not.

Let me back up a bit. I met Priyanka on the first day of graduate assistant orientation. We were two faces among nine in a freshly-formed cohort of smart and eager English enthusiasts. She sat across the room from me, demure, unimposing, and quiet. I first noticed her incredibly long hair that fell with a slight curl at her waist. One humid North Dakota summer will drive you to butcher a beautiful mane like that, and one look at Priyanka will make you regret it. Then I noticed her eyes, light brown with flecks of gold, matching the gold ring she wears on her right hand and the gold nail polish that often adorns her delicate finger nails. Her eyes are kind but conscientious, giving the distinct impression that not much gets past her. When introductions start, I'm delighted to hear her name for the first time. Priyanka is not a common name in the United States, but it's one of my favorites. I first heard it working at a dental office in Portland, and loved it enough to commit no small amount of time trying to convince my partner that we should reserve the name for one of our future children.

I get nervous when I meet new people, and I often end up saying something awkward. For that reason, I resisted my initial impulse to approach Priyanka and gush about how beautiful her name is, likely not withholding the details about my secret desire to name my future children after her, and fawn over her impossibly long hair

and probably touch it without permission (I'm not great at first impressions). For whatever reason, be it my perception of her shyness or my own nervous nature, Priyanka and I didn't connect on a personal level that first day or during the semesters that followed. Our small cohort provided us with a sense of unity and intimacy, and our shared experiences as teaching assistants fostered a sense of like-mindedness, an understanding that we're going through the same things, even if we don't talk about it. We're comfortable together, smiling when we visit, but there's a perceptible distance between us, a reminder that we're not quite friends. Perhaps I was waiting for an opportunity that didn't present itself; perhaps she was too. After a while, we seemed to accept the routine of being familiar strangers, tied but not connected.

The opportunity to interview her, to write a piece of her story, was the push I needed to make a connection. I've always found journalism a convenient sublimation for my socially-awkward curiosity. It's a nice wall to hide behind. Shielded by the role of reporter, interviewer, and temporary ethnographer, I'm granted *carte blanche* to ask anything that piques my curiosity. Though I felt anxious that she might not want to be interviewed, I'm incredibly grateful that she agreed. Had I not finally seized an opportunity get to know Priyanka, I'd have never known that the seemingly shy lady that I so often passed in the hall, was one of the strongest women I've ever met.

Priyanka's home town is the bustling metropolis of Kolkata (renamed from Calcutta in 2001 as a move away from British colonial history). It's a city that houses, with its suburbs included, more than 14 million people. (As a point of reference, the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro is about 3 million people). It's known as the city of joy, and Priyanka tells me that it's a fun and bustling place, filled with historical monuments, land marks, and jolly people. Though Grand Forks couldn't be more demographically different from Kolkata, Priyanka tells me that the people are similar in their friendly nature.

Part of what makes Kolkata so joyful are the many festivals and celebrations that occur throughout the year. Priyanka's favorite festival, Durga Puja, occurs in the fall and is the celebration of the mother goddess – a goddess, I might mention, who has ten arms and rides a lion. Pretty awesome. The celebration lasts for days, and people often dress up, eat lots of food, and celebrate to the fullest. With a controlled whimsy, she says, "I miss those pleasant times."

I try to imagine her home, and I scramble for touchstones – snippets from travel shows depicting expansive markets with huge bags of spices and vats of delicious street food for sale; large cities that I've seen like Los Angeles or Minneapolis, which still don't even come close in size – and I can't quite grasp it. It's a place as far away and as

foreign to me as Grand Forks once was to her. Through her eyes, Kolkata is a beautiful place to call home, and I can't imagine why she'd leave it. I finally have the chance to ask what brought her to North Dakota, of all places.

This is where her mysteries begin to unfold. A degree from the United States is considered very prestigious, and UND offered her a teaching position and funding for her education. Priyanka has clear career goals in mind, and obtaining a degree and teaching experience in the United States is an essential first step toward meeting those goals. Priyanka's family was not able to fund her education abroad, so securing a teaching assistantship was the only way she could come here to study.

"I had to fund myself," she tells me modestly, as if supporting herself through her education, thousands of miles from home, without the luxury of a financial or emotional safety net, was merely a thing that people do. But I've met very few people willing to make such commitments. For her, it's just a part of her life. She firmly believes that "if you want to get something in life, you have to sacrifice something." It's a mantra of sorts that's gotten her through the difficult times: when she was worried about culture shock and stereotypes, when she felt uncertain about being able to express her feelings or worried about how people would receive her. It helped her combat the homesickness—the longing one feels when it's a holiday for nobody else but you, and the frustration of not being able to buy the groceries necessary to make dishes that taste like home. She mentions these things in passing because, for her, they're necessary sacrifices for a larger goal.

I know that feeling of homesickness, how hard it can be to feel alone in a foreign place. I want to know more about the difficult times, but something about her demeanor, about the way she tells her story, stops me from asking. Her tendency to linger on the positive, to see the best in things, to skip over the difficulties, is all part of her method. Her unwavering optimism keeps her focused on her priorities. At this moment, she's made a commitment to her education and she refuses to let anything stop her from meeting that goal.

This aspect of her personality, her tenacity to succeed, is what drove her to get on a plane bound for the United States, even though she'd never traveled alone and never left the borders of her own country. Sitting on that plane, ascending toward a new adventure as her home disappeared beneath the clouds, she told herself, "you're a brave person, you can do it." She's positive, even when nobody's looking. I can't imagine the kind of strength it takes to make that kind of life change, to have the courage to leap into the unknown. When I asked her how she did it, how she got on

that plane, leaving everything familiar behind, she modestly replied, “maybe God was there with me.”

Priyanka surprised me with her openness, her willingness to share. She made me feel comfortable being open too. We exchanged stories and experiences; she laughed when I told her about my failed attempt at making paneer. We agreed that a road trip to Fargo would be in order, since that’s the closest place to get good Indian food. In her good-natured way, she expressed vexation at our bitterly cold winters, and I’m shocked to report that it never gets below 10 degrees Celsius in Kolkata (that’s 50 degrees Fahrenheit, by the way). Her sense of humor flares when she jokes that nobody would live here if it weren’t for UND. But UND brought her here, and she’s glad.

The more I learned about Priyanka, the more I regretted not getting to know her sooner. I waited for an excuse to make a personal connection when I could have just made one, just because I wanted to. Now, I see the end of our shared time in this department approaching, and it makes me sad. But taking a page from Priyanka’s book, I tell myself that it’s never too late to invite a friend into your life. It’s never too late to enjoy the happiness that a kindred soul can bring. Priyanka’s name is Sanskrit in origin, and it means “something that is lovable or something that makes you happy.” Cheerful Priyanka, who hails from the city of joy, has been aptly named. Her positivity is inspiring, her happiness contagious. She’s already taken big leaps in her life, and she doesn’t seem worried about the uncertainty of the future. I’m still unsure about my future, but I’m not worried about Priyanka. She’s met her life challenges thus far with courage and grace. Not even North Dakota’s bitterest temperatures can deter her, and that’s really something. She’s got a fur-hooded parka and she’s taking it all in stride.

Brittney is a graduate student at the University of North Dakota. She will be completing the English Master's program in May and starting the doctoral program in the fall. Brittney focuses her academic energies primarily on composition and rhetoric studies, but she is also a creative writer.

## VII. A Dream in America, Not an American Dream

by Grant Mitchell

In Jhapa, Nepal, a refugee camp exists. Forgotten and out of the mind of the western world lies tens of thousands of individuals with hopes and dreams. There, kids run around after school. In the sun, they play in the dirt and grass. The kids are not playing with expensive action figures or new electronic toys. With stained shirts and calloused feet, they kick around an improvised football made of plastic bags frayed at the edge. In this refugee camp, homes are made of bamboo walls covered by a plastic roof. Hardened mud braces the floor rather than wood or cement. There is not linoleum or carpet. Instead, the bamboo households are missing rooms; a standard open-concept. On the walls, there are no pictures of family vacations to the Caribbean, posters of movies stars, or mirrors with intricate wooden frames. The bamboo huts lack tables and chairs. There are no couches. Instead, when the wind brings the winter chill, the newspaper becomes insulation and is packed tightly against the cracks in the bamboo. When a light breeze blows through the glassless window, flies travel in, finding lodging for the night. These bamboo huts are described by what they don't have, but what they do have are families.

During the evening, a select few faces slip back into these huts from their jobs outside of the refugee camp. Silently, the few that can, break the rule against outside employment. If their employers knew they were from the refugee camp they would not have been hired. Kids play until called home to eat their second and last meal. The meal cooked for dinner is rice, the same meal cooked for every dinner. There wasn't a variety of fruits or vegetables. There weren't supplements or vitamins. The rice, salt, and sugar provided at the refugee camp are portioned out to each family. The allotment is inadequate to provide the necessary nutrition.

Students race the sunset to complete their homework. One student in particular, with a pencil in his hand, hurries as the sun begins to touch the horizon. There was not laptops to type on. The only light this boy could have after dark was that of a kerosene lamp. Fully lit, the kerosene lamp is not sufficient light to do homework in. If the lamps were able to provide enough light, there still wouldn't be enough oil to keep them burning. There isn't electricity here. The rule governing the light at night is simply, oil or no oil.

After dark, kerosene lamps can be seen flickering in only a select few scattered huts. As the congested commotion begins to settle down for the night, the boy lies down on a hard cot, also made of bamboo. A long day awards him sleep, not soft,

plush, and adjustable mattresses. He pulls to his chin a black wool blanket. The blanket is not decorated with cartoon characters or pictures of planes and trains. Here, the ambient noise roams freely through the cracks in the bamboo. People can be heard talking just outside the walls of the hut. He can hear the breathing of every family member with effort. Cockroaches scurry across the floor into the corner. They, too, dream of a nutritious meal. As the boy lays in bed, America is a dream away, but community resides in his bamboo hut.

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After years of waiting, the boy and his family had been selected to be relocated from the refugee camp to America. They flew for nearly twenty hours. Arriving in America through the gateway of New York, his passport states “Bhutanese American” though he was born in the Nepalese refugee camp, never having set foot in the neighboring country, Bhutan. Everything he sees in America is for the first time in his life. As he exited the plane with his family and went through the custom checks, he was finger printed by a blonde light-skinned lady, another new experience. She appeared frustrated, speaking English, a foreign language to the boy. The reason she was angry could have been for stepping on the wrong side of a black dividing ribbon or it could have been for the boy not paying attention. Whatever unfamiliar rule was broken, it’s hard for him to understand. He can see screens all around him flashing pictures and words in rapid confusion. The boy is welcomed to America, met by paperwork and waiting lines. His greeting consisted of a barrage of rules and regulations.

After navigating through customs, the boy and his family were taken to a hotel. On the way to the hotel, he sees tall boxes rising to the sky, lit with a thousand lights bottom to top. Everything in New York moves so fast. Cars are zipping to the left and right. He never saw roads so busy and traffic so speedy. He never saw doors that opened before reaching them with no one on the other side to open them. There was no handle or knob. There was no latch on the door, instead the door was self-opening. Others walked in and out of them without taking note of the engineering. Those born in America may never know what it is like to see automatic doors for the first time.

At the hotel, the boy and his family were given cards instead of keys to open the room door, another perplexing American mystery. The food served to them filled the evening air with a stench. An unappetizing aroma of grease and oil found its way to the nostrils uninvited. It was fried rice and breaded tilapia fish. Dinner was accompanied by an oily whole piece chicken and Pepsi. The boy wondered how the people of this country could eat food like this.

That evening, no one touched the large black screen in the hotel room because the family felt the television was not theirs to touch. The television remote was an unsolvable puzzle. Undoubtedly, the mother will clean the room in the morning. She will put the soft white blankets back how they were found. She will pick up the garbage and fold the towels, setting them orderly on the bathroom counter top. When they leave, they will be sure to make the room as clean as when they arrived.

As the boy laid down that night on the hotel bed, he pulled to his chin a starchy hotel blanket. As he closed his eyes, lights flickered hazily through the blinds. The muffled sound of cars and horns could faintly be heard in the distance. The breathing of every family member can be heard. America could be only a dream, but community resides in this hotel room.

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The boy, now in his twenties, lives in a Grand Forks apartment with his family. In the evening, the family comes home, one by one. Some come from school and some from work. Friends come to visit for a short while. It doesn't take long before feet quickly multiply on the cracked linoleum and lightly stained carpet. The apartment soon fills with energy and commotion.

Unlike the bamboo hut, this apartment has windows that stand between them and the cold. Insulation and drywall block the wind outside from reaching the family. The inside walls retain memories of their Hindu culture through paintings and pictures. There are pictures of friends and family with arms around each other's shoulders. Red ribbons hang from the ceiling starting in the corners of the room and colliding in the center. Lights, run by electricity, allow the guests to stay into the evening. In the corner of the living room, a television sits on top of a glass stand; it remains off. A decorative Navajo style carpet with black zigzags around the grey edge is set on the floor. The rug is not from Nepal, but rather one bought at a local store. Shoes align the wall near the door. The shelves contain cups, plates, and pans. The kitchen counter top has a small pile of envelopes and bills. Gold-trimmed dishware and little trinkets can be seen in a glass cabinet. There's a decorated blade mounted on the wall and drum made of wood and goat skin.

As the mother cooks, the smell of Nepalese tea and spice fill the air. She grabs eggs from the refrigerator to add to the noodles. She serves flattened rice mixed with banana smoothie to the family who are scattered in different rooms. When dinner is over, slowly the living room empties. Friends put on their shoes and say goodbye. The family returns the dishes to the sink. Everyone has somewhere to be tomorrow. There's homework that needs to be completed and a classroom seat to be sat in. There are boxes to be retrieved and clothes that need to be folded.

The boy, now a man, lives in America, a land of opportunity and freedom but also responsibility and duty. He has a shop to open and a business to run. With respect and love for the country of America, he will fill out the paperwork that needs signing and taxes that need filing. He has car insurance and cell phone bills. As he pursues an education in pharmacy tech, he has homework to complete.

When it is time for bed and he closes his eyes, he goes to bed on a mattress with pillows. He will appreciate the heat. He will appreciate the bed in a room with carpet. He will appreciate the silence and lack of cockroaches. In America he dreams, but community resides in his apartment.

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Twenty years from now, he is a father. This is the house he will have in the future. The house is small and brown. This house will have a two car garage and a backyard spacious enough to play yard games. His family will live with him and his parents too.

They will have barbeques on the porch with a grill. Homemade chicken and the smell of Nepalese food will fill the air. Friends and family will play badminton on the green acre. People will be found in different rooms talking and laughing while others will be outside in the backyard. Kids will jump in the swimming pool on a hot summer afternoon. They'll make cannon balls and splash their aunt lying in the sun.

Later, when the sun begins to touch the horizon, everyone will begin to leave. The badminton net will be put away and the porch will be cleaned. Colorful beach balls are pulled out of the pool as toy trucks and cars are picked up from the yard. Inside, the food is being packaged and stored in the fridge for another day. The garbage is collected from the porch and tables, then brought out to the street in the front to be collected in the morning.

As the family commotion settles, the family will get ready for bed. Several generations will be sleeping under one roof. After brushing their teeth in the bathroom, the children will pull up their colorful blankets and be tucked in by their father. When he lays on his mattress, he will remember the days that wind blew in through the cracks of the bamboo walls. He will remember the sound of cockroaches scurrying across the floor. He will remember the stories his father told him of a time before he was born, when his parents had a 41 acre farm with chickens and goats. This was the farm they used to own, before the government of Bhutan pushed his people back into Nepal and they would be left with nothing before coming to America. These stories remind him of

how unimportant houses, cars, and pools are. These stories will remind him of how quickly these things can be lost.

Until then, maybe he will be a police officer who works to protect citizens. Maybe he will have remained a pharmacy tech. Maybe he will stay a small business owner. Maybe he will have a house with room for a swimming pool. Wherever he is in twenty years, he will uphold the U.S. constitution. He will pay taxes and insurance. He will encourage his children and his grandchildren to pursue an education. He will sleep, and when he dreams, community will be found there.

Grant is a Master's of Occupational Therapy Student at the University of North Dakota as well as a Resident Manager for the University of North Dakota Apartments. When not studying or working, he has been sighted still playing with Legos in recent years. He also enjoys reading, writing, and the married life.