

Small World, Big Stories

REFLECTIONS OF OURSELVES

A Spoken Word Poetry Collection



The Spoken Word Poetry Project



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Our Story

In 2021, we decided to start a spoken word poetry project in a university English language program. Most of the students in the class had never before heard of spoken word, nor had they ever written a poem. After completing seven weekly online classes (11 hours), the students concluded the project by performing their spoken word poems in a final showcase, an online poetry SLAM—a competition where students were both performers and judges, assigning scores on a scale of 0-10 based on the content, performance, and feeling of each poem.

The Spoken Word Poetry Project

The 2-dimensional poems in this book do not capture the intensity and energy of that night; the feelings were palpable, the emotions raw, the vulnerability visceral!

As a memory of this experience, the spoken word poems from the project have been compiled into this collection—some poems with students' first names, and some poems without names for those who wished to remain anonymous but still desired to share.

This collection serves as a resource to demonstrate the potential of students to engage deeply and meaningfully with content that is personal and emotional. These poems and the discussion questions located at the back of this book also serve as a resource for other teachers and students to think critically and creatively about issues of identity and power, and topics of perception and prejudice.

The poems in this collection highlight diverse experiences of discrimination, racism, loss, love, (be)longing, acceptance, grief, fear, hope and desire. They shed light on the complex and dynamic realities, identities, lives and languages of these brave and daring English language learners, reminding us that we are not alone.

We dedicate this book to you, the students who taught us so much!

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[DE]INSTITUTIONALIZING ENGLISH*

By Jennifer Burton (PhD researcher)

*So, it begins for me with 1-2-3
And then A-B-C
As I embark on a new journey
Learning a language so foreign to me.*

*A language strange to my ear
Yet splattered on street corners
Turn on the TV,
And you will hear.*

*And so, the standardization commences
classroom rules,
grammar tenses.*

*Master these rules and you will see
Promises of open doors
A future full of possibility.*

*I forget to dot an 'i'
Or to cross a 't'
A demarcation of my skill
My inability*

*My English,
Still "broken" at this time
Unaware of its captivity
That it will soon pay for its crime.*

And so, I master the rules,

*And with the grammar I start
But I discover, that each communicative
encounter*

*Is more like a performance,
An art.*

*You see speaking is a two-way street
Language is about negotiation,
Crafting an identity
With each person I meet.*

*But test after test,
Standardization, you see
Gatekeepers of this language
No space for reconceptualizing my
identity.*

*Questioning the norm goes against the
grain.*

*The status quo
Well, that must remain.*

*Pack in a plethora of status and power
To diminish all silence and space
The English language,
Never free from my skin colour,
Nor my race.*

*For I am marked by the accent from
within me*

*This native-speaker model
From which we all must break free.*

*So many others have fallen prey to this
deceptive illusion
The English language system
Creating borders of acceptance
And exclusion.*

*The dominant class
A perpetuation of their ideology
But what's your "English" name?
Reproducing such hegemony.*

*May we be so fortunate to have scholars
Pave the way for speakers like me,
To shake up our understanding of
language
And create space for English variety.*

*In listening to our silent unspoken
words
They come to realize their own worst
fear,
The mistake is not solely in how I speak
But rests with you, in how you hear.*

REsigning

by Nicole (Instructor)

I quit.

It's what I did, but
not what I said.

Leaving, I told you that I loved this -
community, connections, the 'we'.

And, that *is* what I miss.

The collective potential of what could be.

When I left, I told you that things had
changed.

What changed, is changing, needed a change
was me.

Did you question that,
or wonder why?

Because we both know that mine
hasn't been the only goodbye.

I know the moment has passed,
but - at least for me - the memory lasts.

Our unfinished business;
Not loud words or slammed doors,
because that was never *my* style.

It was yours.

Of course, time and space
make this easier to do.
So, let me be clear now: I quit
because of you.

The Everyday

By Zhengze

Studying at ESL is still very fun,
especially before COVID-19,
I met a lot of friends there,
like me from China,
and other countries.

I used to go to school in Shanghai.

Although it is a super city,
there are very few people in our
school who communicate with
students from other countries like
this opportunity.

But now we do the online class.

The winter here is very boring
(Several shopping locations in
Regina actually look exactly the
same!)

Now I especially hope that the
cinema in Calgary will open soon. I
have a lot of movies I want to
watch.

NOTHING IMPORTANT

BY DENA

Dear German Embassy Employee,

I hope you are living a comfortable living situation as heaven!

YES! Living situation, because I hadn't.

AND YOUR children have a quality education and are safe! Because I hadn't.

Let me remind you..of me!!! This is Dena, the Syrian girl who has nothing BUT a scholarship acceptance, see..

NOTHING IMPORTANT!!

Do you remember the day you yelled at me like a lion and told me that I will be stuck here as a refugee forever?

Let me remind you..of me!!! This is Dena, the Syrian girl who has nothing BUT a scholarship acceptance, see..

NOTHING IMPORTANT!!

Do you remember the moment you informed me that I will never get a visa to continue my higher education because I am Syrian and a girl and people like me have to stay where they are just like a big prison?

Let me remind you..of me!!! This is Dena, the Syrian girl who has nothing BUT a scholarship acceptance, see..

NOTHING IMPORTANT!!

Do you remember when you silenced me and my tears when I told you that I am a hard worker and begged you to give me a chance to explain myself?

Let me remind you..of me!!! This is Dena, the Syrian girl who has nothing BUT a scholarship acceptance, see..

NOTHING IMPORTANT!!

Now I am emailing you from Canada, the safest place on earth.. Well it is better than your and my country. Canada..yes I GOT the visa and started my study at one of the best universities in the world. Thank you for motivating me that day!!

With all my heart I wish you a safe place to live!

Dena

Alone.

BY BO

China, China, beautiful China.
Ancient country across the ocean
I am from there.

In order to continue to advance
on the road of scientific research
and change the current state of life
I have to make a decision.

Stay or go or stay or go

Finally,
I left,
I left my mom,
I left my sister,
I left my home,

I choose you,

Canada, Canada.
I came to Canada.

I chose to continue reading,
learning, studying.

For life,
For family,
For future,
I came here to study.
I came here alone to study.

Crying alone,
Laughing alone,

Crying alone,
Laughing alone,

孤独 gu du,
寂寞 ji mo.

Eating alone,
Sleeping alone.

孤独 gu du,
寂寞 ji mo.

孤独 gu du,
寂寞 ji mo.

Eating alone,
Sleeping alone.

孤独 gu du,
寂寞 ji mo.

I wandered lonely as a bird.
I wandered lonely as a cloud.

But
I believe
I really believe

A short separation
Just for a better return.

Your Son

ELIE

To my lovely and lucky family
Your absent and ambitious son
Is very happy
Just like a fool child
He has nothing to hide
But he is good, great and glad
Yes glad, like his dad
He and you will be always in contact
And don't worry
It is a real fact
He misses his mom and dad
Your absent son
Is a little bit sad
And the hardest feelings has ever had
For his mom
In his dream
He always wants you to come
That's how it seems
Your absent son

Dear friend,

BY SHAH



Dear friend,

I hope you're doing well. I heard you're coming to Canada to study. Best wishes for you my friend. Today I'm gonna share one story in my life. Last year I went to Bangladesh and my transit was in China. The airport immigration official was so rude to me and he asked me some weird questions that were totally unnecessary. So I recommend you if you faced this kind of situation don't argue with them. Just be calm and talk properly. And keep your important papers that you have. So again best of luck for you and take care yourself.

Your friend,

SHAH

Sad Goodbye

i'll tell you about one of my friend who was so close to me.

Hope you will be keep patience till completing my story.

It will probably shock you.

But life is sometimes hard.

You can't do everything on your own.

So try to hear me out.

Maybe you will get emotional after hearing this.

Sorry for that.

I am friendly person.

For that reason i got a lot friends in my life.

But everyone wasn't my best friends

I had few only.

One of them was Karim.

I lost him 2 years ago.

He was jolly person.

In spite of being jolly he never mentioned about anything of his life.

His step dad tortured him a lot.

He asked help from his mom.

But didn't find a way.

For being so depressed he took his own life.

I would never forget this incident

FATHER

-By Rania-

I have experienced the loss of someone who
used to gleam like a star
But suddenly went so far

Leaving me in tears, and fears I know you hear
When I needed you the most you were
not here

I want others to know that it's so hard
To live apart from my guards.

You live in my heart, and I want others to know
that love does not die
But it stills make me wonder why I cry

Others who don't cherish their loved ones
See how I am weeping for my loved
one

I wish I have a time machine to turn the time
back
Even knowing that you still wouldn't
come back

Having loved ones is like a greatest bless
There is nothing more we could ask
more or less

The deceased memories are like a treasure
That no one else can measure

Father you are someone I miss with every
breath
You embraced eternal life even after
death

Father, I love you, and thank you that you
made me who I am
Something I would not have done
myself

New immigrants like me

BY SHOGOFA

New immigrants like me
Please dears listen to me
It gets better over time
The struggles and challenges
over time
The problems and missing
families
Will not be the same
Remember little progress is
better than no progress
Remember achieving many
things is not possible at once
Becoming a citizen, having kids
getting your license
It takes time to make it happen
but not at once
Some people will brag they
learned English fast



Others will brag they got their
licence fast
Some will brag about they got
their degrees fast
But, remember nothing happen
so fast

As a child cry for her mom
You will cry for your home
But remember it gets easier
over time
It gets easier over time

HOPE FROM HOPELESSNESS

I have a new understanding of the helpfulness of Canadians.

I think Canadians are the symbol of kind.

I really appreciate your help.

Because of your kindness.

My journey has become easier.

Without your help.

Hard to imagine what I will experience.

It is because of this kindness.

I think my heart become warmer in the winter nights.

A SECRET

76

Grandmother,
76 years old,
wanted to lose weight
decided to cancel breakfast and dinner. And bread and butter and
biscuit and beer

52

My mother does effortful exercises with energy every morning
wanted to get in better shape.

43

My uncle
invited me jogging every night,
burn calories, burn calories, burn calories.

Everyday I fight

Only one week,
I gave up and hated jogging.

22

At 22 years old,
my weight is 75kg
I don't know how many times I've failed to lose weight.

But I am not still control my appetite

21

21years old,
I've lost weight successfully! 62kg!
Balloon deflated, balloon deflated, balloon deflated

Actually,

I never tell anybody,
I took some diet pills.



FROM YOUR DAUGHTER, BY TUYEN

I am an immigrant. I am my mother's
daughter
"Hello", "Goodbye" was all I knew
English was a new thing?
Struggle learning
I will not stop

We both
Put everything behind
Sold everything we had
Come to Canada
I will **not** break down

Canadian
People are welcomed and supportive
Racist or discrimination
Who knows,
I will not cry

Me myself
Got 2 jobs,
A full time student at university
Police goals
I will not give up

At work
Day by day I have to face with people
Fake, stupid, or rude
All kind of jerk
I do not care

And Oh Hey one more
I work 60 hours a week
Working more than anyone else
Oh well I'm feeling small like a quail
But i know that I'm bigger than a quail

When i didn't have a license
I Walk to school
I Walk to work
When Cold or hot
Not a matters

Sometimes
I Question myself
Am i gonna make it?
Am i gonna make our life better?
I will not doubt myself

But hey, Since when
My mom's feelings is showing out
I got to know, but should I ask?
Who knows,
I will not promise

And yes
I started to love my mom more and
more
Like hard cord of music
Am i not a teenager anymore?
I don't even know

Maybe I am not that brave in real life
But on paper,

Dear mom,
I never say "I love you" right?
Because All I did was not right
I was an uncontrolled teenager
But you never express your anger

Dear mom,
You always cry in the dark

But you gave me a birthmark
Which showed you don't have to cry
in the dark
Because I am your daughter, so share
things with me

Dear mom,
I am not a teenager anymore
And you still think that I'm a kid
But please let me slid in a little bit
So I can understand you a little more

Dear mom,
I know it is hard
I know my dad left us when he knew
you have me
But how hard can it be?
For you to raise me without any
carefree!!!

I love you the most
And I fell like sometimes i overdose
But trust me even when i act like ice
Inside me I know what you sacrificed
My heart is hotter than ice

But hey mom,
I am an immigrant. I am YOUR
daughter
I Blame myself why the hell i act like
that
Just like a combat between being
nice and bad
But please do not be mad mom
Because at the end of all
My love for you is NOT small...

“ਮੇਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਚੱਲੋ”

KARAMBEER KAUR

I remember I was 15 years old.
My mother left us.
travelling to her maternal home.
She said goodbye
Tears in her eyes

My dad got a misunderstanding with
mom.
He said she went with someone else,
like another man.
He couldn't believe her.

That's why my mom left us quickly,
quietly.
“ਮੇਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਚੱਲੋ”
“COME WITH ME MY DAUGHTER”
she said.
I didn't go with her,
I don't have words
Silence
Silence
Silence

I stayed.

I know if I went with her, dad couldn't
go to take her back home.
Dad dad dad please stop my mother,
she didn't do anything wrong
My mind said
Totally speechless
Like I lost my tongue

Dad said “DON'T TALK WITH YOUR
MUM”.
I was quiet.

Mum left us,

Felt alone.

After 3 days
My nice neighbor secretly gave her
phone
I called to my mother
“MUMMA!” I said
she heard my voice
Heart filled with tears
Again speechless I am

6 months later
Union helped
Mum came back home

Dad couldn't apologize their mistake,
Mum adjusted
“IT'S OK,” she said.

Nobody sees her, Nobody knows her
How she felt, How she is alone
“She is brave as a lion” I felt.

Now fight remains continue,
To take respect and love.
Please,
Please,
Please.

Show respect, responsibility, love to
your wife.

She left everything for you.

THE ART OF ACCEPTING AND LOSING

By Parthik

Everything was normal and then suddenly
being divided by the pandemic,
Where everything seemed equal and
unique
Where everything seemed peaceful and
calm
Where there was only fun and fun
Everything was normal
Before leaving apart from your close ones
Before losing them in the pandemic war
Where every prayers and hopes went
worthless
Makes us stronger inside
With a power of accepting the lost
Makes us stronger inside
With a power of appreciating life like never
before

The art of losing and accepting isn't hard
to master
To be lost it's not the first disaster nor the
last
The art of forgiving and accepting isn't
hard to master
Life goes on for now and forever
Hope everything becomes normal
We can say we're the lucky one
We're still living! We're still breathing
We're still sleeping and waking up
We can say we're the lucky one
Some of them went to sleep and never
came back
With these new life and new learned arts
Let's all move on together.
Hope Humans will leave more peacefully
and together.

THAT refugee

BY KASSEM

Yesterday I was the one who had home
With my sisters, brothers and mom
Today I have no home, no sofa to sleep on
Refugee, yes I am that refugee
Who had no future, who was living without
power
More sadness, less happiness
More pessimistic, less optimistic
More fears, less dreams
After a long time, Each moment
of that time
It was like multiplied by ten
times
He started building from
scratch,
even though his life was like trash
He fought hard for his dreams, for his family,
for his lovely ones
even though every step was harsh

He entered university
worked hard
Studied
And then
graduated

"Yes, I am *that*
refugee"

A scholarship to Canada had
been offered
Canada where the dreams can
be achieved
He applied with no hopes that
he would be accepted
He didn't believe the email that
he received
He read it more than one time,
more than ten times

Yes
He got accepted
Yes, I was that refugee
Yes, I am glad, I was that refugee

PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

[De]Institutionalizing English by Jennifer Page 5

1. Do you think you need to correct your accent so others can understand you? Why/ why not?
2. Do you think it is important to learn English from a native speaker? Explain.
3. Do you think English and power are related? Explain.
4. Do you identify/ not identify with this poem?
5. The writer of this poem has not experienced these challenges herself. Do you think she has authority to speak about something she has never experienced?

REsigning by Nicole Page 6

1. Can you relate to this writer's experience? How? What happened?
2. Quitting doesn't eliminate workplace bullying or harassment. What are some other ways to address this issue?
3. Why do you think the writer chose this title for her poem?

The Everyday by Zhengze Page 7

1. How important is it to you to be able to speak with students from other countries? Explain.
2. Have you ever studied English online? In what ways does it differ from in-person learning?
3. What part(s) of your everyday life changed the most during the pandemic?

Nothing Important by Diana Page 8

1. What is the meaning of the title "Nothing Important"?
2. Did this poem motivate you or touch your heart?
3. Do you think that everybody can transfer their painful experiences into successful ones?

PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Alone by Bo Page 9

1. Do you feel lonely? When? Have you cried alone? Under what circumstances?
2. What is your advice to someone who's lonely?
3. Discuss a time when you've had to make a very difficult or life-changing decision.
4. Do you think that the efforts you put in now will pay off in the future?

Your Son by Elie Page 10

1. What was your first impression when you listened to this poem?
2. If you are in the same situation, what would you like to tell your parents in one sentence?
3. Do you think the writer's has overreacted? Why? Why not?
4. What does the writer mean by "absent son"?
5. If you were in the same situation, what would you say to your parents in one sentence?

Dear Friend by Shahrar Page 11

1. Why does the writer believe the questions were "weird"? What misunderstandings could be occurring?
2. Have you ever been in an uncomfortable situation at an airport or border crossing? Explain.
3. What suggestions would you share with a friend who was travelling internationally for the first time?
4. Have you ever experienced racism or discrimination? What happened?

Sad Goodbye Page 12

1. Have you ever lost someone close to you? How did you feel and how did you cope with the loss?
2. Do you think my reaction about my story in the poem is overreacted or not? And why?
3. If you are in the same situation, what would you like to tell your parents in one sentence?

PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Father by Rana Page 13

1. Who do you admire and why? How would you feel if this person was no longer in your life?
2. Have you experienced sorrow?
3. How can you get back on your feet after a challenging life experience?

New Immigrants Like Me by Shogofa Page 14

1. What problems did you face when coming to Canada?
2. Do you agree that “nothing happen[s] fast”?
3. How do you manage your time to achieve all your goals?
4. Has someone helped you in your journey?
5. Why do you think the writer repeated the last line of the poem?

Hope from Hopelessness Page 15

1. Do you think hopelessness is the beginning of hope?
2. When you need help, do you want others to take the initiative to help you?
3. How do you people usually express their gratitude?

A Secret Page 16

1. What does this poem say about the pressure to be thin?
2. Do you think there are different standards of beautiful for men and women? Explain.
3. Have you ever shared a secret with someone? Why/ why not?

PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

From Your Daughter by Tuyen Page 17

1. Discuss a time you and your parents have had a disagreement.
2. How has your relationship with your parents changed as you became a more independent adult?
3. What are the reasons why the writer cannot speak to her mom in the way she expresses herself in this poem?
4. What are the challenges the writer has experienced as an immigrant?

“ਮੇਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਚੱਲੋ” by Karambeer Kaur Page 18

1. What does “ਮੇਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਚੱਲੋ” mean? Why do you think the writer chose to use her home language in this part of her poem?
2. Why does the writer believe her mother was “as brave as a lion”? Do you agree?
3. What is the challenge the writer is experiencing?

4. The writer describes feeling “Totally speechless/ Like I lost my tongue”. Have you ever experienced this? What happened?
5. How can you motivate someone to be accountable for their mistakes?

The Art of Accepting and Losing by Parthik Page 19

1. Do you agree that “the art of losing and accepting isn’t hard to master”? Explain.
2. What have you had the most difficulty accepting during the pandemic?
3. Do you agree that “we are the lucky ones”?

THAT Refugee by Kassem Page 20

1. How do you feel after reading this poem?
2. What are some common misconceptions about refugees?
3. How do you define the word refugee? What does the writer mean by “THAT refugee”?
4. Have you ever had to start from scratch?