



WE ARE HERE NOW

Art & stories by child refugees in Surrey

Compiled by Greta Hedley & Heba Khalid



INTRODUCTION

The inspiration behind the Surrey Welcoming Communities' *Refugee Myth Busting* project, led by ISSofBC, was to inform and raise awareness among Surrey residents and professionals about the reality of refugees now living in Surrey. Part of the initial project was a series of training sessions for the education sector staff in Surrey. Refugee children told their story and together they produced a big tree composed of their art pieces and thoughts. The team that worked with the children decided to create this book as a legacy piece. The book is composed of a collection of art and stories by children who came to Canada as refugees from Burma, Burundi, Eritrea, Honduras, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Syria. The children used the language of the expressive arts including clay, painting, and storytelling to share their experiences and stories.

They explored the idea of home, displacement, belonging, and their feelings around integrating into Canadian society. The aim of the project was to let the children share with each other and with their Surrey community in order that their stories may be heard, and so that those of us involved in their lives have the opportunity to question some of the myths that exist, so that we may bear witness and listen.

The tree is a standing testament of their experiences: their removal from their homes, their families and homelands, and their journey to their new home in Canada. The artworks and stories are windows into the children's lives, into their losses, their longing, and their strength and resilience, and they are the bearers of their hopes and their dreams.



Tunga Mukiza, Grade 6, Burundi

In Africa trees can talk.



Paw Po Say, Age 13, Thailand

In my village the roads were made of dirt, the houses were low down but also rising up into the mountains.

We had warm monsoons. The houses were made from leaves and bamboo.

The men of the village built the homes, a school, hospital, and church. The women did the artwork on the cross.

We speak two languages. Karen and Burmese.

My parents were nurses in the hospital in our village.

Everything was close.



Manar Mohammed, Age 12, Iraq & Syria

I came from Iraq to Syria to Canada.

We wanted to come to Canada from Iraq, we thought we would only have to wait for a year but it took five years, so we moved to Syria as it wasn't safe in Iraq.



Soko Soko, Grade 6, Iraq



Peter Yousif, Grade 7, Iraq

Things in Iraq were good, we had a big house with a garden to play soccer in. My mother she loved to do the garden. We had many flowers. My big brother was really nice and really kind to me. We had a party at my house and all my cousins came. My brother went to buy the

bread and when he was out he was killed by a bomb. He didn't come home and we didn't know where he was. In the morning we went and we saw it. We found out. He was so nice to me. When we went to Syria it was different and I had to leave my friends and my family.



Ebyan Mohammed, Hassan, Age 12, Somalia

Once when I was alone with my young cousin, men broke in with guns, I was scared and hid under the bed. Men broke into our house to steal my dad's money, they put a knife in his thigh.

In my safe place I would have a helicopter to go shopping it is not safe with a car, men with guns will drag you out of your car.

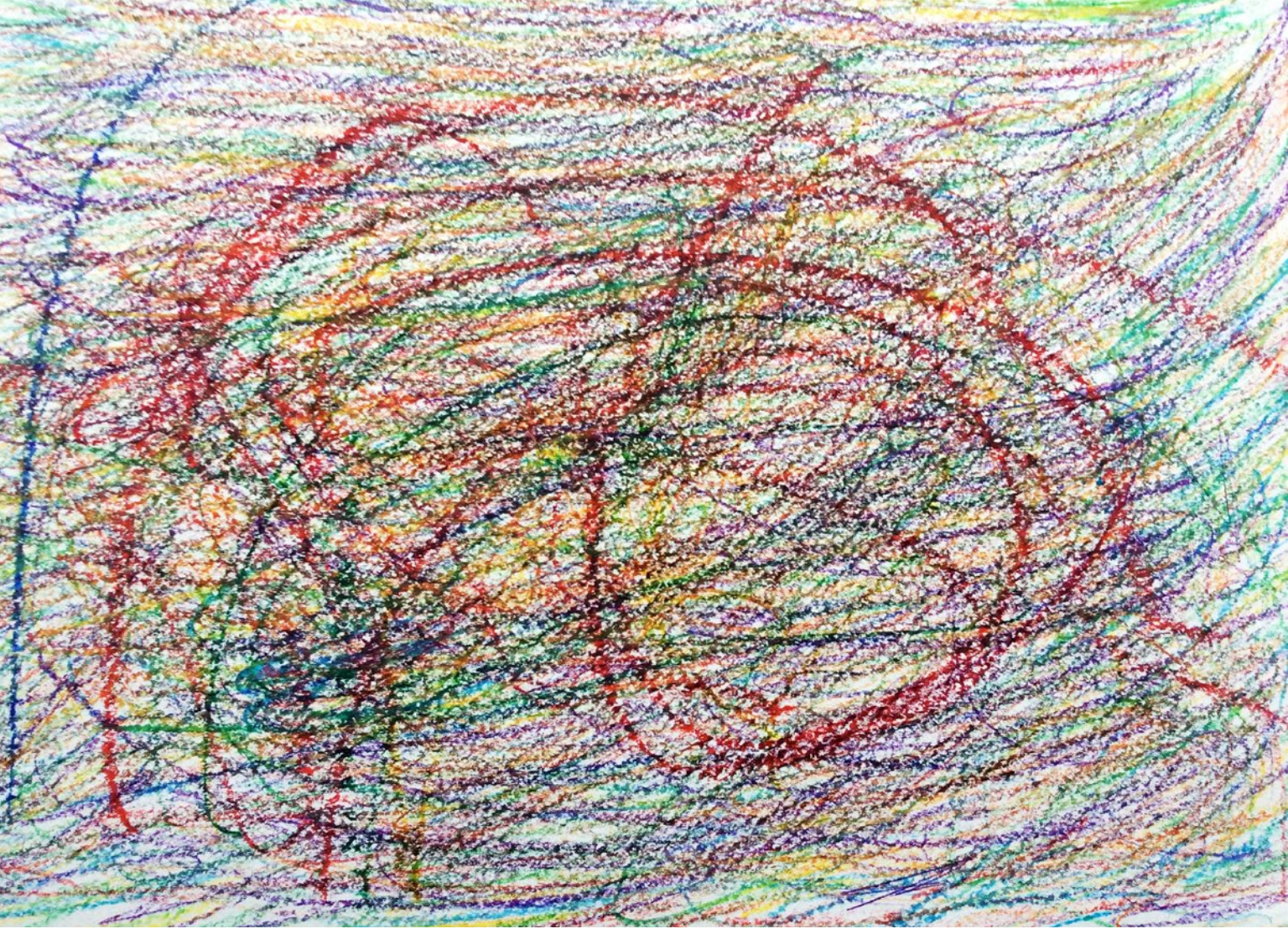


Soko Soko, Grade 6, Iraq

Things in Syria were so good for a while. But then everything changed and we were in trouble and everyone was scared. We had to keep moving to be safe and we had to find new homes to stay. We had no money and we had not enough food or water. I used to steal some bread from the shop for me and my brother. My father was killed in a war. Now I dream of my father. Now I am only with my mother and my sister.

flowers and a dog, chickens and a cat. It was our family house. All of our family lived there. I had so many friends, too many friends. We ate chicken, chips — special Iraqi chips — they were too good. We played soccer. I didn't want to leave Iraq, Syria was different too many fights and no friends. I want to go back to Iraq and see my family and play with my friends. I haven't seen them in four years and it is too hard.

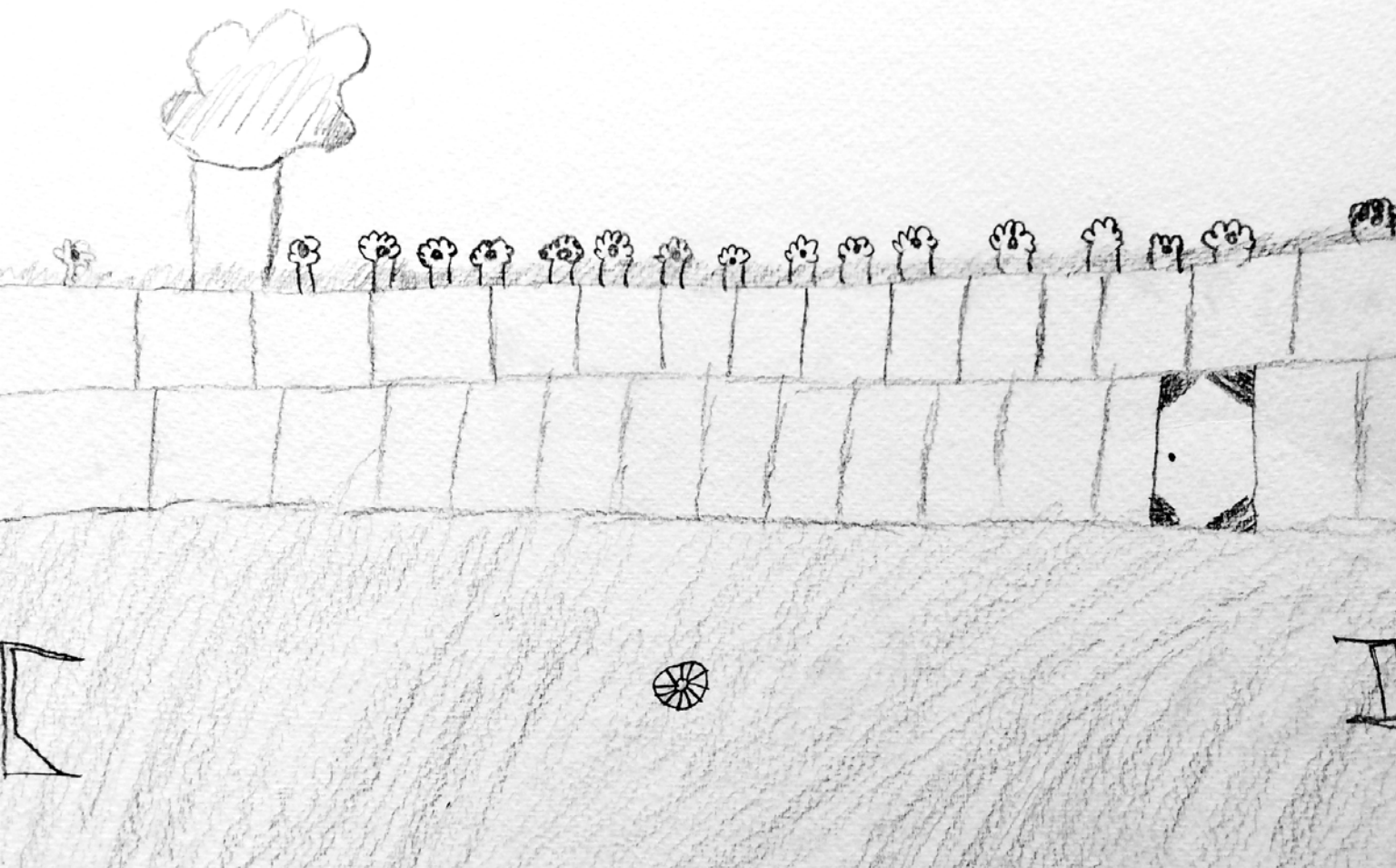
Iraq. We had a big house, with a big garden and



Thabit Babawi, Grade 6, Iraq

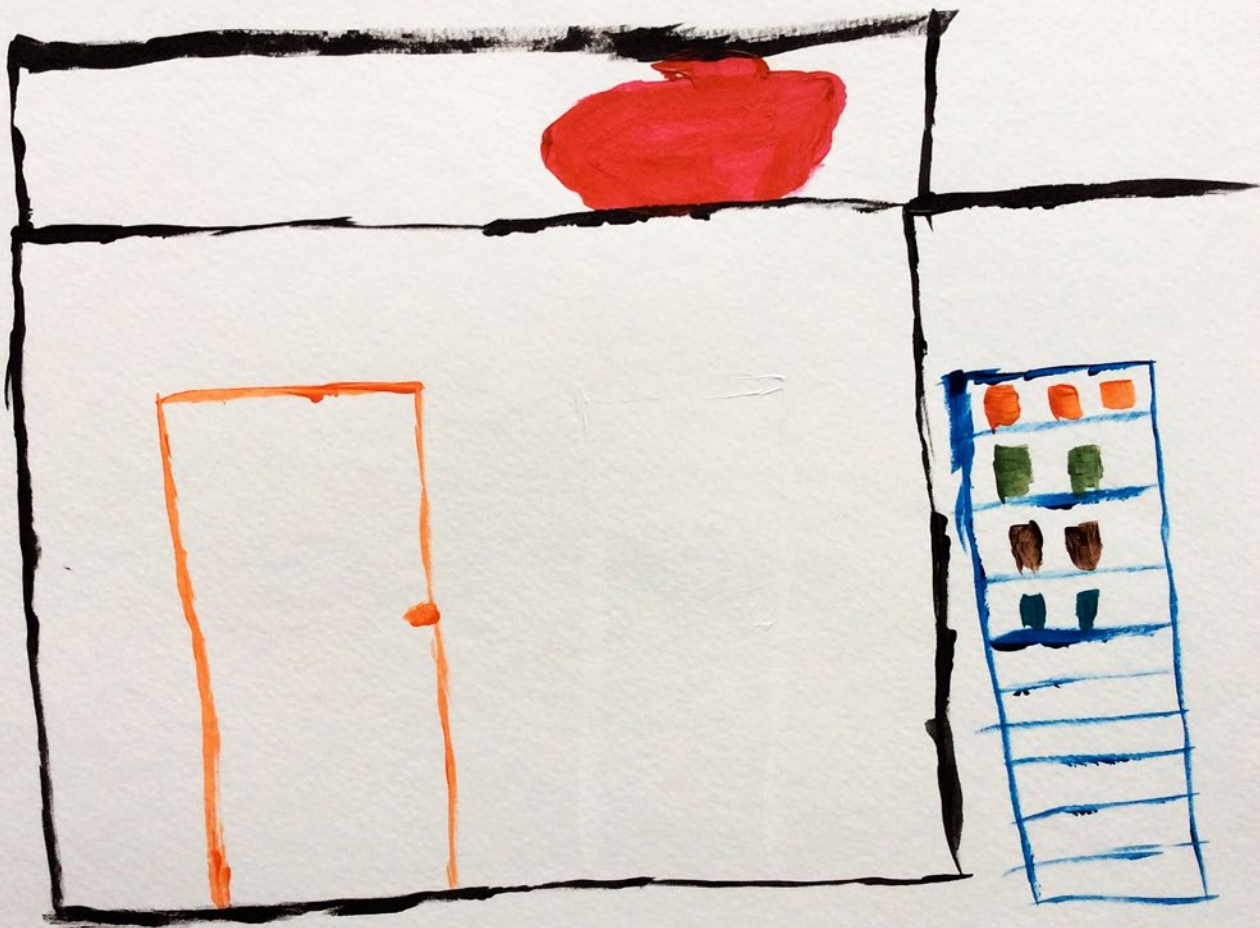
The yellow is for my sadness, I miss my family and friends. The blue is excited to have dreams. The red is angry but only sometimes I am angry. The green is running to my free place. The black is clouds and smoke. Clouds is rain. Smoke is war. Orange is learning everything new when you get here. I was sad when I knew I had to leave my friends. Everyone was leaving because things were too dangerous. We moved

three times in Syria. We left Iraq. People started to only care about money. Some of my friends went to Australia because the papers for Canada didn't work out. People just went wherever they could. We waited for the phone call and packed our things. I brought my teddy bears to remind me of my aunties in Iraq. And one reminds me of my dad, the purple. He bought it for me when I was four, and I remember that.



Salwan Alyais, Grade 7, Iraq

This is our backyard in Iraq. They make with lots of bricks in Iraq. We played with all of our friends. We never had to stop playing. It was hot, I liked it. I don't like cold. I have a big family and I feel like I will go home one day.



Manar Mohammed, Age 12, Iraq & Syria

I miss everything in Syria.

The houses are very different, the door to the house is really small but inside it's big and we go up onto the roof.

You go everywhere by bus, there is music and it's really cheap. There are no seatbelts and it's really fun.

We know everyone, all the kids play outside, it is safe there.

In Iraq they play outside but it is really dangerous.



Hanibal Reda, Grade 6, Eritrea

I can't see photographs of my friends and my family there. They don't have computers or cameras. Everyone is scared because there is more fighting there.



Paw Po Say, Age 13, Thailand

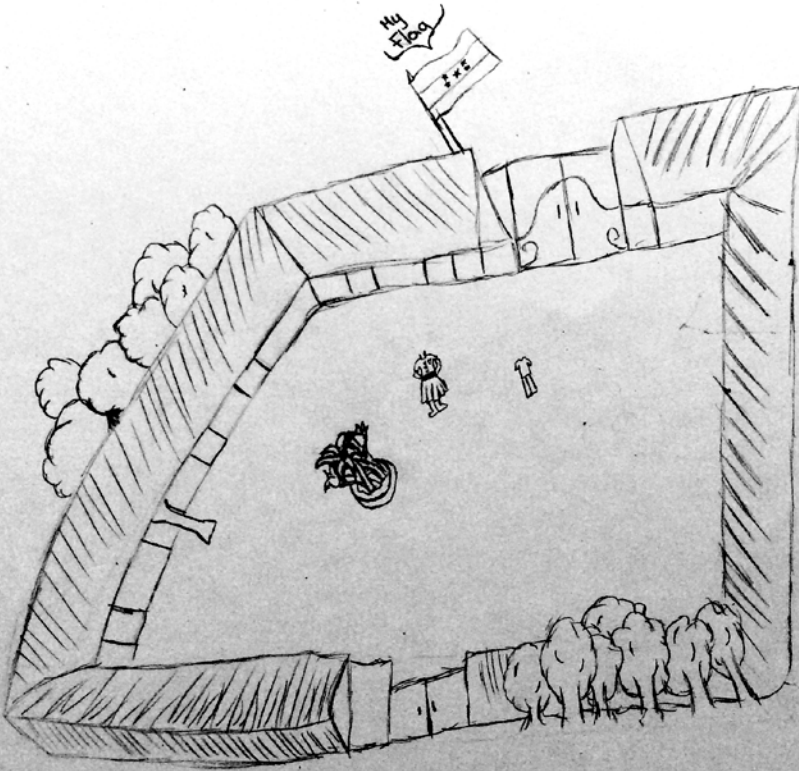
After school my friends and I would walk home through the woods, we would sit in the mango trees and eat the fruit and talk.



Paw Po Say. Age 13, Thailand



Men of our village built the homes, church, school, and hospital.



Heidy Valiente Ortiz, Grade 7, Honduras

It was always hot and I like that. I like to swim in the river. I came here I was five years old. I used to live with my family and we were six kids. My father stayed there. We left in the night when he didn't know. We walked. We had to walk for a long, long time. There was mud and we could have fun getting stuck in the mud. There were many people walking. I was in the circus. My family we lived in the circus that is why it was hard to wash our uniforms for school. Sometimes I loved to stay at my grandmother's house near the school and near the river. Sometimes my dad calls and we are all very excited. I want to go back but it's so dangerous. The most dangerous country in the world. Many of my family have been killed. If I go back I will bring my dad with me and I will never leave him there again.



Maung Oo, Grade 3, Burma

It has a shiny thing that you pray. Coconut trees and forests, tall houses made of wood, straw roofs. My dad made our whole house. He was still making the floor. We borrowed the materials. We played tag. My dad made me a parade instrument as well. I even get to sleep in a hammock in the house. We all came here in an airplane. When I painted this I was thinking about my older brother who died there. In Burma. All the water came and flooded the village. I didn't get to see his face. I think about him.

In Syria, I was at a big school, there was no playground, only dirt.

The teachers would hit you on your hand with a stick if you didn't do your homework.

I didn't go to school. I only went a couple of days because it wasn't good.

I had to go to a private school because the other schools were all closed down. I had to wear a uniform and buy food at the school. There were no playgrounds. We were not allowed to play, only walk around. I didn't like to walk around in circles. I like to play.



Paw Po Say, Age 13, Thailand

My mum told me we were going to leave, I thought we would be moving to another part of Thailand. I was told that it would be a better place to live.

We had one week.

I packed some traditional clothes and necklaces, but I had to leave many things behind.

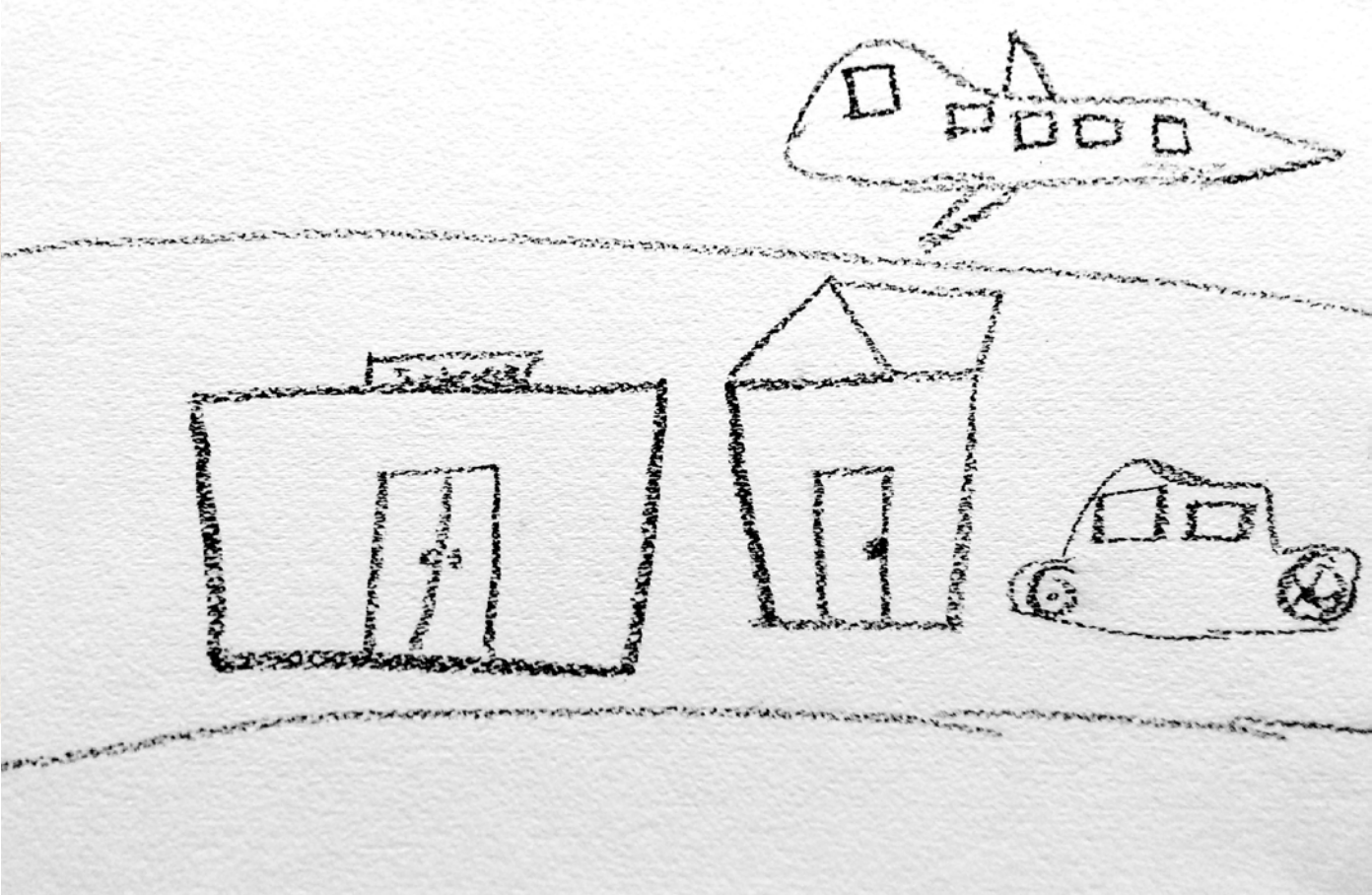
My friends were excited for me.

The night before we left, the neighbours came and we had a party to say goodbye.

We came in a truck to the city, where we stayed in a house, then a bus to a hotel, then another bus to the airport.

There were three families all packed in the truck, at the house we all slept in one room on mats. At the hotel I was scared of the elevator, I had never seen one, I thought I would be stuck.

My grandparents stayed behind, then joined us three years later. Some of my cousins are still there.



Manar Mohammed, Age 12, Iraq & Syria

I came home from school and my mum told me we were leaving, I didn't believe her.

I was happy and sad.

I had to leave all my friends.

I left the school early.

My friend's mum drove us to the airport.

My uncle met us at the airport in Canada.

My cousin told me we were leaving, she had seen my name on a list. I had to give all my clothes away including the dress I was to wear to my cousin's wedding. I packed a bag. It was a long bus journey, a zigzag road, my brother was sick many times, I remember the smell of lemons, it was horrible. They took us to a cold house, we were there for six days and then we went on another bus.

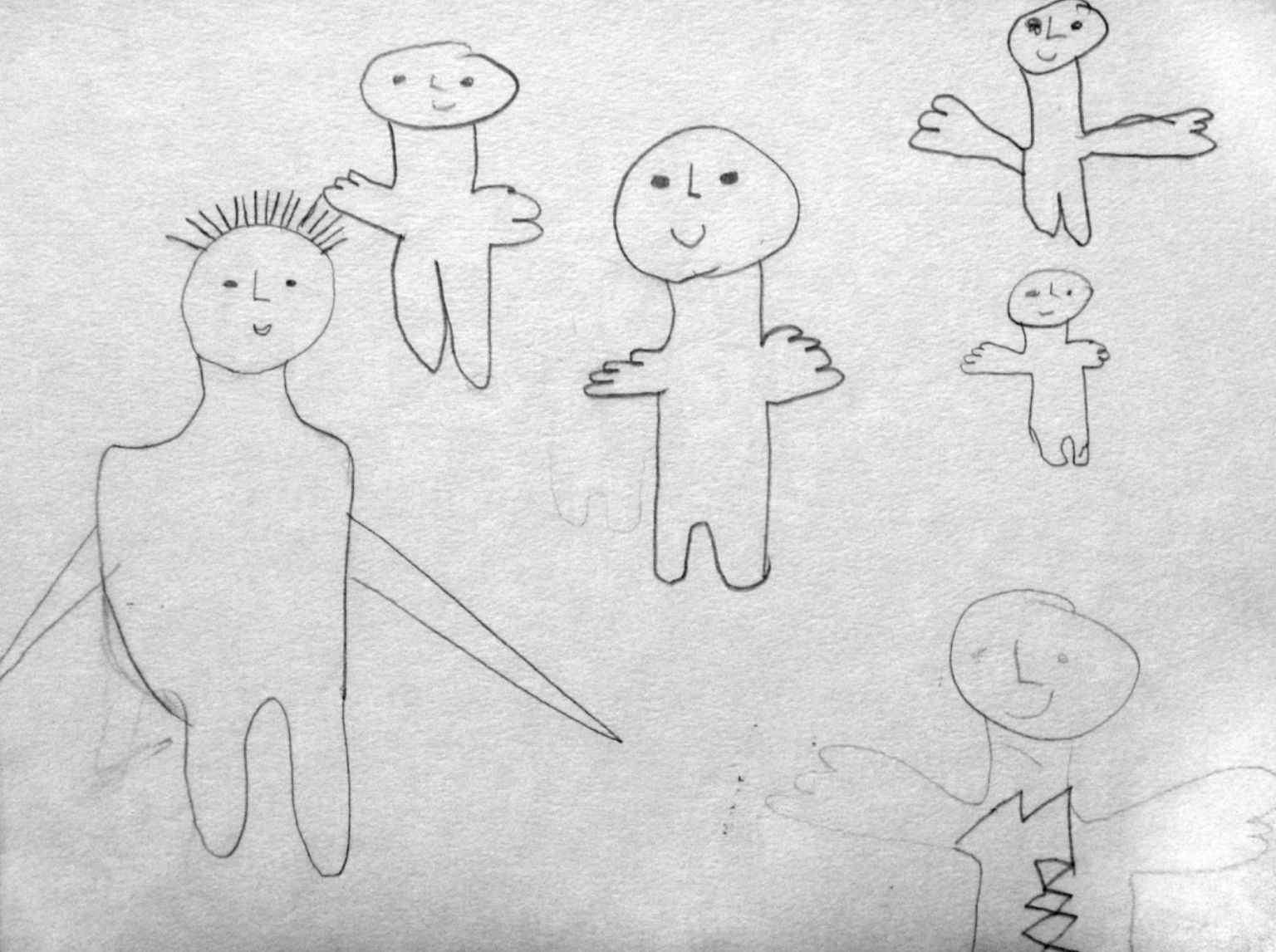
I didn't know I was going to come to Canada. When I came to Canada everything was different, more different than Syria. I had to learn a new language. I know English now but my parents they don't know English they are going to school they must learn or they cannot have a job. Here we have not a big garden and here we have different clothes and different food.



Tunga Mukiza, Grade 6, Burundi

Canada is good we are happy but we have trouble with money and my mother she must go to learn English or she cannot have a job. I will get a job when I become older.

I was in grade four when I came to Canada. I think here is easy, I think here people have many things and much money but I think people don't have family with so many people so they don't care if someone goes away or somebody dies. In my country we care more about people.



Soko Soko, Grade 6, Iraq

Canada is my first time going to school. I like it here because I play soccer with my friends. I miss Syria and all of my friends in Syria. I liked it when I saw them everyday. I didn't go back to Syria. I live here now but not everyone of my family is here. I have a big family; some of them they stayed in other places. I try to learn more English here in Canada. I try to have a good time in the school. I will become strong. I will stay here. When I am older I might go back to Syria to find my friends and my family.

On my first day, or the first time ever I saw Canada, my first thought was that it was really cold and the snow was really magical.



Paw Po Say, Age 13, Thailand

I thought that Canada would be smaller and all snow.

My first day of school in Canada I went to the office with my mum. A girl came and took me to class, I didn't understand anything. Then I met another girl from Syria and she translated for me. We became friends.



Khamis Kurdali, Grade 6, Sudan

My first school in Canada, I cried, I was so scared. I couldn't speak the language. I didn't know where my classroom was.

When I came to Canada everything was different. I felt lonely and I felt I had no friends. I couldn't speak English.



Khamis Kurdali, Grade 6, Sudan

My teachers know nothing about me.

CONCLUSION

Families who arrive in Canada as refugees have overcome great obstacles and adversity. They bring with them their varied experiences that include displacement, relocation, possibly living in refugee camps, and their journey to Canada. They also bring their strengths, abilities, and connection to their homelands and families. Understanding and knowing the stories and backgrounds of these families and the children helps them feel a sense of belonging and it helps them with integrating their worlds. It also allows us to enjoy and share the qualities and the gifts they bring.

Working with the group of refugee children in Surrey schools involved in this project has been a privilege and an honour. They allowed us to step into their drawings and stories and in doing so we have recognized their resilience and their capacity for understanding and overcoming hardships. We have witnessed the ways these hardships have deepened the children's sense of humanity and furthered their will to overcome and thrive in their new home. Through their art and stories they have offered us a way to understand and appreciate a little of what they have been through and what their experiences have meant to them. It helped them express their longing for family members left behind, for the land they felt so connected to, and their fond and loving memories of community, celebration of identity and connection that was lost. The stories from their pictures speak of their leaving, the journey away from the home they knew or the transition while waiting to hear about where they will be moved to, and of arriving in this foreign land. It gave us a glimpse of their hopes, dreams, longings and their strong desire to fit in.

The children have chosen to share this in book form with you, the reader. It is our hope that hearing these stories will extend the appreciation and understanding of these children, what they have endured, and the strength they have so that we can create an inclusive and welcoming environment. It is also our hope that it will encourage us to open even more possibilities for them to have a voice and to be seen in their classrooms and in their schools so that they can belong, settle, and feel at home in Canada.

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This book was compiled for the Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC) as part of the Surrey Welcoming Communities' *Refugee Myth Busting Campaign* (April 2013 – March 2014).

If you are interested in learning more about refugees in British Columbia, you can find several reports and publications on the ISSofBC website at www.issbc.org.