

# Editors' Pick

for **Non-Striking Writers**

## Telling Room



While much of the writing world was on strike last year, the writers at the Telling Room were taking time out to help young people find their muses, making the rest of us feel like money-grubbing erudites. "We believe the power of stories can literally change the lives of young people and change the fabric of the community at large," says their pleasantly non-corpspeak mission statement.

And change the community they have. The Telling Room's collection of 15 immigrant and refugee teenagers' coming-to-America stories, *I Remember Warm Rain*, was the number two best-seller at Longfellow Books last year, just after the final *Harry Potter* book. (And excerpts from that project, published in the *Portland Phoenix*, took second place for racial and ethnic coverage in the New England Press Association's 2007 Better Newspaper Contest.)

Founded in 2004 by three local writers, the Telling Room has presented famous authors in a Living Writers Series, arranged in-school workshops, opened a location on Commercial Street for drop-in tutoring, and begun an annual Maine Writers On Maine forum for high school students and teachers.

Standing firm behind their belief that writing should be fun, the Telling Room encourages young people to tell their stories with games and field trips designed to awaken the writers within each of the kids lucky enough to participate. Since all of the Telling Room's programs are free, students of all backgrounds are able to take advantage of the opportunity to create with guidance from a group of writers who inspire with their passion and creativity.

*Telling Room* | 225 Commercial St. Portland | 207.774.6064 | [tellingroom.org](http://tellingroom.org)

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"I just can't imagine like running for your life, not knowing if the people you love are dead or alive ... Your story was very eye-opening to the troubles that our world goes through."

Lexi Pelletier, in an e-mail to Aruna Kenyi after reading his story

Aruna Kenyi, from Sudan and a student at SMCC, and Ali Mohamed, from Somalia and a junior at Portland High School, visit Yarmouth High School Friday to participate in World Culture Day.

Photos by John Patriquin/Staff Photographer

# Refugees' stories rivet students



Yarmouth High freshmen Laura Klepinger, Sierra Ryan and Emily Mitchell listen to Ali Mohamed and Aruna Kenyi Friday. "When we're thinking we're having a really bad day, compared to them, we're having a really good day," Ryan said.

Tales by teens who fled war-torn nations strike a chord with Yarmouth youth.

By TESS NACELEWICZ  
Staff Writer

**YARMOUTH** — They live just about 12 miles up the road, but Yarmouth High School freshmen have learned that there is a world of difference between their lives and the lives of immigrant and refugee teenagers in Portland.

Earlier this year, the Yarmouth students read some "coming-to-America" stories written by the Portland teenagers, and were struck by how their experiences contrasted.

On Friday, during a day celebrating world culture at the high school, the Yarmouth students got to meet two of the young authors and hear them speak about the horrific experiences that drove them from their home countries.

"When we're thinking we're having a really bad day, compared to them, we're having a really good day," said Sierra Ryan, 14, after listening to Aruna Kenyi and Ali



"I Remember Warm Rain" is a book of stories written by immigrant students participating in a Portland writing project.

Mohamed read their stories and answer questions about their lives.

Kenyi, 18, read a part of "The Photograph," the story he wrote about how Arab militiamen swept into his peaceful village in southern Sudan when he was 5, burning the houses and killing nearly everyone. He and

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEFFIGGES Dana RR

# REFUGEES

Continued from Page B1

his older brothers escaped and lived in refugee camps for years until they came to the United States.

They arrived in Portland four years ago. Only after that did they get a photo showing that their parents are still alive, although their father is in a wheelchair because soldiers shot him in the legs.

Kenyi, a student at Southern Maine Community College, said they have spoken by phone but the family has yet to be reunited.

Mohamed, 17, also was 5 when men with guns surrounded his village in Somalia, shot and killed his father and 3-year-old brother, badly wounded his mother and took all of their money and valuables.

Mohamed, too, lived in a refugee camp. He came to Portland just last year.

"It is peaceful here," wrote Mohamed, a student at Portland High School, "except sometimes in my dreams."

Kenyi and Mohamed's stories are among 15 in an anthology called "I Remember Warm Rain."

All of the stories were written by immigrant and refugee students who participated in the Story House Project conducted by The Telling Room in Portland, a nonprofit writing center for children and teenagers.

Writing mentors worked with the students to help them craft their stories, and The Telling Room published the anthology of their work this year.

Yarmouth High School teacher Josie Tierney-Fife had her freshmen in this upscale suburb of Portland read the stories.

"It has been really wonderful for my students to have that kind of exposure and to hear those voices and about those experiences that, otherwise, here in Yarmouth, they wouldn't be able to," she said.

The students were so moved by the stories that they e-mailed the authors, Tierney-Fife said.

"Dear Aruna Kenyi," began Lexi Pelletier, 15, in an e-mail, "I just can't imagine like running for your life, not knowing if

the people you love are dead or alive ... Your story was very eye-opening to the troubles that our world goes through. I am just awed. I've read stories similar to this kind of thing, but then reading it firsthand from your point of view. Wow."

The e-mail correspondence led to the visit to the school on Friday.

Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, executive director of The Telling Room, said the goal of the organization is to get young people to write, share their stories with the community and make connections. The authors in the anthology have given talks and readings at other schools where teachers have had their students read the anthology, and plan to do so again.

At Yarmouth High, Katie Hodgkin, 14, was impressed to meet the writers. "To actually hear them talking and telling their stories was more, like, powerful," she said.

After the readings, the Yarmouth students peppered Kenyi and Mohamed with questions such as what the two young men think of Maine.

"The only thing I hate about here is the snow," Kenyi said.

The students also questioned Mohamed about killing hyenas.

He had read a part of his story "Hyenas," about how he was known for his ability to kill them, even as a small child. His story ends: "But I'm done killing hyenas. At least I hope so. I'm almost as tall as my father now, and I've nothing left to prove."

The two young men spoke with the same eloquence and composure with which they wrote. But when they were questioned afterwards, they said it can be hard for them to retell their experiences.

"I cry inside, not outside," Mohamed said.

They said they do readings to meet their young American readers, and hopefully to help them.

"If they have never been to Africa, they can learn about Africa," Mohamed said. "And they can learn how we came here and how different it is to live here and to live there."

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# 'I am from...'

## Scarborough students tell their stories

By Leslie Bridgers  
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Feeding off the stories of 15 teenagers who emigrated to Portland, 15 Scarborough students started telling the stories of where they are from.

On Nov. 28, the group of middle- and high-school students gathered at the Scarborough Public Library for a young writer's workshop, led by Gibson Fay-Leblanc and Patty Hagge of The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing program in Portland dedicated to young writers and storytellers between the ages of 8 and 18.

Before sitting down to write, the students walked through the Story House Project exhibit, a visual representation of the stories of young immigrants told in a compilation called "I Remember Warm Rain," which was put together by The Telling Room.

Though the immigrants' stories were ones of their war-torn homelands and their assimilation into American culture, Fay-Leblanc and Hagge told the Scarborough students that their own thoughts and memories were just as important.

"Those people have very powerful stories," Hagge said. But, according to Fay-Leblanc, when the immigrant students first sat down to write, they didn't think they did.

"We all have them," he said. "It's just about finding the right ones to tell."

Building off the exhibit, the students were asked to write a poem about where they were from and, Fay-Leblanc said, that doesn't just mean Scarborough, but "all the things that make you who you are."

The students described land-



Young writers put pen to paper during a recent workshop at Scarborough Public Library led by instructors from The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing program in Portland for young writers and storytellers.

Staff photo by Leslie Bridgers

**Misha Linnehan**  
age 11

I am from Linnehan and Murphy,  
Finkelhor and Samuels.  
I am from synagogues and chapels  
both, rabbi and priest.  
I am from marsh stretched to crack,  
and Suburbia pressure.  
I am from the monopolies of  
American freedom.  
I am from a worthless pigsty of  
propaganda, and a mansion of  
words and letters.  
I am from relations of the age of fear  
and lies.  
I am from grease and salt, and  
dashes of soda and flavor.  
I am from the cafés and stores of  
smalltown suburbs, from malls and  
markets.  
I am from baseball and football, and  
Brady and Ortiz.  
I am from tightly sketched roads and  
vividly written highways.  
I am from history and future, from  
this world and others.  
I am from a nation of allegory, but

"Misha" see page 9

**Emily Tolman**  
age 13

I am from the sandy beaches,  
Their shores lined with green paint  
I am from the grey lines that follow  
my pencil everywhere,  
I am from the lakes and the songs of  
the loons,  
I am from the beam of light erupting  
from a lighthouse,  
I am from the crazy contraption that  
works in my head,  
I am from the stories untold,  
The amber flames that lick hungrily at  
the timber,  
From the role of film capturing movies,  
To the blue oceans its companion  
black islands,  
I am from my pencil which is hard at  
work right,  
From the long walks to Angel Falls,  
I am from Brandon, Cameron, Abby,  
To Maggie, Anna, Ellie, Zach and Jill,  
And Nani, Papa, Kathy, Greg, Gema,  
Gempa,  
I am from the from the mountains of  
chocolate I wish to own,

"Emily" see page 9

**Andrea Tolman**  
age 13

I'm from Scarborough Maine,  
I'm from Nani, John, and  
the little girl Emi  
From aroma of the harsh grass  
From the solitary cry of a loon in  
Rangeley.  
I am from the the strange  
mummichugs that one would  
believe as fantasy.  
I am from the vast expanse of  
ordinary,  
And the white chalk of the baseball  
diamond underneath Scarborough  
High.  
I am from the breakfast casserole,  
From the "quick hide it under the  
table!"  
I am from the ecstatic and  
unpredictable,  
From random bliss  
From random depression  
From random nervousness  
I am from the writing in the middle  
of the night when my parents think  
I'm asleep.

"Andrea" see page 9

**Mariah Volk**  
age 13

I am from Amy and Derek, Nana,  
Papa, Mimi, Grampie  
I am from Maine: the rocky coastline  
to the "skyscrapers" of Portland.  
From vacations in Florida, Red  
Sox games, Lee and back to  
Scarborough.  
From singing and acting, going to  
church, and family dinners.  
I am from softball: the hot dirt field  
with no shade.  
I am from waterskiing and tubing,  
ice skating and sledding, from the  
s'mores to the cocoa.  
From Broadway plays, Thanksgiving  
with the family, and four-wheeler  
rides getting lost!  
I am from "Try your best," "Never  
give up," and "Good work."  
From comedy and "rock and roll."  
From Volk Packaging and Pa Ben and  
boxes.  
I'm from robins and huskies.  
Marlee, Winnie and Boomer, Carly,  
Little Jerry, Stella and more  
From love and happiness.  
I am from ME.

"Stories" see page 9

10/31/07

## Adventures with PhenomenMom...

# A story for writers and cat lovers

Most of the activities I suggest are immediately shot down by the little critic. So you can understand my utter shock when I announced Winter was attending "Wharf Kitties," a writing workshop — and she was ecstatic. Thrilled, even! I'm not sure if it was the kitties part, as she is a cat whisperer, or the writing part, as she is an avid writer — she even refuses phone calls while working on her "book." Either way, I found an activity that needed no coaxing and I was on top of the momming world.

Winter hurried home from school giving us just enough time to walk down to Commercial Street. The Telling Room's new space is adorable — exposed brick walls, view of the harbor, steel bulletin boards, writing areas, shadow boxes with profiles of noteworthy people.

The kids filed in and sat around the table, ready to write a quick story using the starter sentences given. They were instructed not to worry about spelling or whether the story was true, and to use only their young imaginations.

They enthusiastically wrote and read their little stories, discussed last week's kitty finds and prepared to head to the wharf in search of kitties and inspiration. Before leaving home base, the Cat-O-Meter was brought out, which allowed the kids to reveal their motivation for being there — love of kitties, love of writing, parent's made them attend, or somewhere in between. Winter was smack in the middle of loving kitties and writing — just as I suspected.

On the way to the wharf, we discussed kitty respect, which meant we were to move slowly and quietly, because the kitties are skittish, and we shouldn't stare because it is taken as a threat. The kids were given goals to name the kitties they found, think about the setting using their five senses, put themselves in the place of the kitty and write their thoughts in the little notebooks they were given. Imagination reigned and they were not to

allow anyone else's ideas to infringe on theirs.

Stepping quietly, we searched through the mostly silent wharf behind Sapporo. The distant buzz of electric tools, kid whispers and seagull cries were the soundtrack to our adventure. We all crept around until a black kitty lounging inside a lobster trap, one sunbathing in front a purple shed and another lying on top of a stack of lobster traps were discovered. Winter informed me that the cat on top was a Scottish fold, which I thought was something she made up — like her Spanish-Canadian math system — until I Googled it later and found out she knows her breeds. Whoa!

After tip-toeing and note-taking, the kids discussed what their stories would be as we walked back to The Telling Room. Winter formulated a thriller where kitties were chased and captured by animal control and other kitty-catchers. She began writing as soon as we returned. All the kids were scribbling the beginnings of their wharf kitty adventures.

I was in awe. I'd never seen children so excited about writing. I might've squeezed out a little tear of joy. Here, pride in writing and confidence in storytelling is cultivated. The Telling Room fosters free thought within programs that develop good writing skills — pre-writing to get the juices flowing, reminders to use all senses for inspiration, note-taking and writing while experience is fresh. (The public school systems might learn a thing or two from the Telling Room!) I couldn't be more excited about this organization and it's benefit to children in the community.

"Wharf Kitties" is a five-week workshop for ages 8-11 at The Telling Room, located at 225 Commercial St. in Portland. The last class is held Nov. 7 from 3-4 pm. For a schedule of other programs, go to [www.tellingroom.org](http://www.tellingroom.org).



Amy and her 9 year-old daughter, Winter, explore activities that are fun for both mom and kid.



JOSE LEIVA/SUN JOURNAL

## Storytelling from the heart

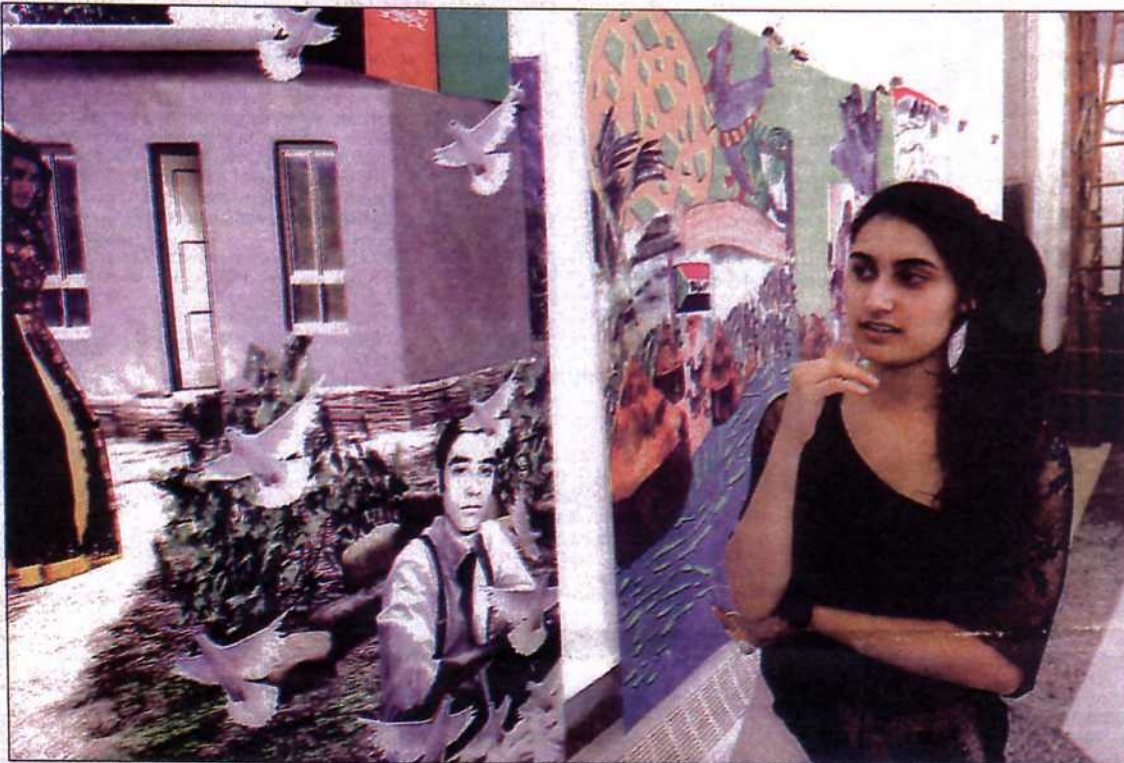
"When I got hurt playing soccer yesterday, I didn't worry because I knew that if I needed to I could go to the doctor without having to bribe the police. I wanted people in Portland to know how bad the police are in Kenya. And I wanted them to know that the police here are helping the people. ..." Thus reads one of more than a dozen coming-to-America stories in the "Story House" project on exhibit at the Lewiston Public Library through October. Fifteen Portland-area students originally from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Sudan worked with professional writers to preserve in text their tales of struggle and hope of getting to the United States, and the challenges they faced upon their arrival. The teens then collaborated with Maine College of Art students to design and build sculptural "story houses" for their personal stories. Viewing the exhibit, from left, are Bengi Saban, Kiim Elmoge and Rahima Deqow.

KUWAITI HASSAN examines his contribution to the Story House Project. Hassan's and others' work will be exhibited at Space this week.

# Stories to tell



Jack Milton/Staff Photographer



Jack Milton/Staff Photographer

Aqlia Sharafyar of Deering High School wrote about her father, who loved doves, for the Story House Project. He was killed and her sister wounded by a bomb in her native Afghanistan. "I want to share my story with people," she said.

Teenagers from immigrant families are sharing their experiences through words and art in the Story House Project. The work will be on display this week at Space.

**H**assan Jeylani did not see himself as a writer, and he never really thought he had much of a story to tell. But the 16-year-old had trouble reconciling his childhood in Somalia and Kenya with how his life was playing out in his adopted home of Portland.

There were the good schools his father wanted him to go to but also the everyday indulgences American culture offers, like top-shelf basketball sneakers and video games. More and more he noticed his prayer schedule was becoming erratic.



**JUSTIN ELLIS**  
NXT: THE NEXT GENERATION

His debate was quiet and internal. He never thought someone would ask him to put it all to paper. Jeylani is one of 15 local young people from immigrant families who have written about their lives as part of the Story House Project, created by the non-profit writing workshop, the Telling Room. Their stories, from places like Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Afghanistan, are almost unreal, especially



Jack Milton/Staff Photographer

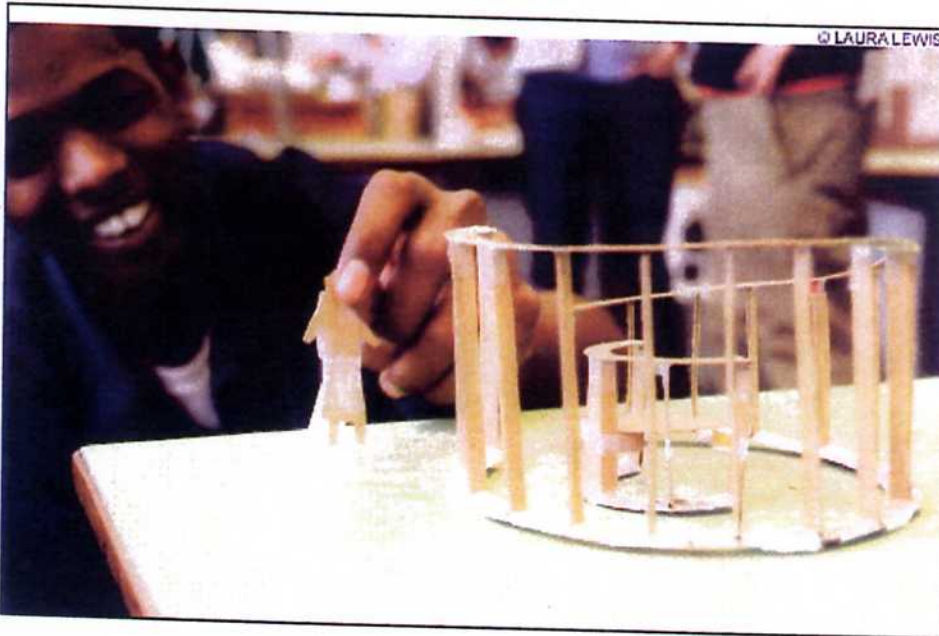
Desiree Duell, a senior at Maine College of Art, works with Waynflete student Hassan Jeylani, whose story contrasts his life in Portland with his childhood in

## 'I'm done killing hyenas'

Excerpts from Portland teens' stories of migration to America

By: PORTLAND PHOENIX STAFF

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These are excerpts from the stories of Portland high school students who have come here from other countries — including Somalia, Iran, and Iraq — and have worked with members of the Telling Room, a group of prominent local writers (including fiction writer Lewis Robinson; screenwriter Lance Cromwell; Telling Room founders Sara Corbett, Susan Conley, and Mike Paterniti; and poet Gibson Fay-LeBlanc), to record their experiences in their birthplaces, here, and the stops in between.

They illuminate the world inhabited by so many people who have found new homes in Portland — and across Maine — often seeking better living conditions, and freedom from fear of attack, but arriving to find new fears, and old ones, still arising.

The fifteen students' writings, photographs of them by local photographers Laura Lewis and Sean Harris, sculpture-like "story houses" the teens built with the help of Maine College of Art students, and audio and video recordings of the students telling their stories will all be on display at SPACE Gallery, at 538 Congress Street in Portland, starting Tuesday, May 8, with a 6:30 pm reception. The exhibit will be open only a short time — through May 11, from noon to 6 pm.

Admission is by donation (\$5 is suggested). An anthology of the stories, published by Portland-based Warren Machine Company, will be available for \$5.

### HYENAS

By Ali Mohamed

My grandmother always told me that I should be afraid of the lions, but not to be afraid of the hyenas. My grandmother lived in our village and helped my mother cook. She died before my father died, but I remember the stories that she told me. She said that you should never run away from a hyena because they will kill you, but if you don't run away, they will not kill you. My brothers and sisters were afraid of hyenas, but not me. They had seen a hyena eat something down by the river once, and it scared them.

At night, we put our goats inside the fence that went around the house. One morning, a hyena jumped the fence, grabbed a goat by its neck, and jumped back out of the fence. My father said to me, "Wake up! Go get that hyena who stole our goat!" So I ran after him. I hid behind a tree and when the hyena went by, I hit his kidneys with a club and he fell down. My grandmother had told me not to bother hitting them in the head. You can hit them all day in the head and nothing will happen, but if you hit them in the kidneys they will die, she said. My father ran over to me with a knife, and he gave the knife to me. He was afraid of the hyena. Then my father said, "Kill him!" I stabbed the knife into the hyena's stomach. That was the first time I killed a hyena. It was before my father died, and he died when I was five years old. . . .

My father was a kind man and he was very tall, he was maybe ten or eleven feet tall! Well, I don't know how tall he was, I never asked him, "How tall are you, father?" But when we walked together, while going to the ocean or to town, and he held my hand I looked way up into the sky to see him. My mother says I am getting tall like my father. . . .

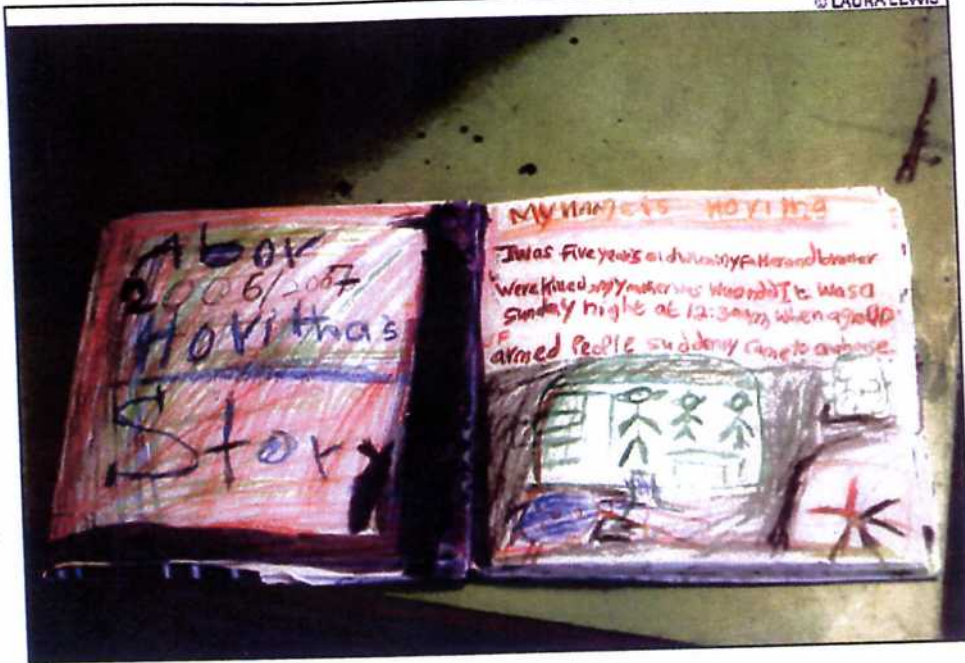
Nothing had ever happened in my village. It was a very quiet village. I don't think that anyone had ever been killed there before. It was a Sunday night. I remember everything about that night. It was in the summer of 1992. It was 12:30 am. We were all awake. There were men with big guns who surrounded our house. They looked like they were in the army. My mother said that we were the minority tribe, and they were fighting against us and that is why they were there. Or maybe they had seen my father coming from his store in the town and thought that my father had a lot of money.

One of them had a chopped off arm, there was no hand below his elbow. He seemed to be the commander and he was the worst of them. He told everyone to come out of the house and to lie down on the ground. He said, "Where is the father of this house?" My little three-year-old-brother told them that my father was in the outhouse. Then the commander without a hand, without saying anything, shot him. Just like that, without thinking, he just shot him and he died. The soldiers went to the outhouse and kicked down the door. The outhouse was up on the rocks and there was no way he could have escaped from it. The commander with the chopped off arm told my father to come out, and when he did, the commander then told him to get on the ground. Nobody was moving. A few minutes later, the commander said to one of the soldiers, "Why are you looking at that man, kill him!" Then they shot my father. He died. My mother screamed, "Why did you kill him?" The soldiers asked the commander if they should shoot her. The commander didn't care about anything and he said, "Look at her!" and then he shot her. The shot hit her leg. She was alive, but badly injured. . . .

One time, my friends at the refugee camp and I were talking, and they said they didn't believe that I had killed a hyena. They were afraid of the hyenas. I told them to ask my mother if I had killed a hyena in my village. Then one morning, early, they took me over to the slaughter house where there were always hyenas lurking around. I told them to give me a club. I started running towards some hyenas, there were three or four together and then I dove on to the ground and grabbed the legs of one the hyenas, then I hit him in the kidneys, like my grandmother had told me to. That's how I killed that hyena. Then I took a rope and I tied his legs together. My friends said, "This is amazing that you can kill hyenas like that!" Then they said, "Every Friday we will come here and you will kill a hyena." But I said, "No."

I was fourteen when I killed that hyena and I lived in the refugee camp in Kenya. Now I am seventeen and I live on Merrill Street in Portland, Maine. It is peaceful here, except sometimes in my dreams. Coming to America has meant going back, again and again in my mind, to these stories I am telling. My mother wants me to forget, but I cannot. I would like someday to go back to Kenya, perhaps go to the university there. And I would like to ask my girlfriend there to marry me.

But I'm done killing hyenas. At least I hope so. I'm almost as tall as my father now, and I've nothing left to prove.



## THE PHOTOGRAPH

By Aruna Kenyi

I will tell you now about the night everything changed. It was the hour just after dinner when families go to visit each other. Everybody gets up and wanders from place to place, saying their hellos. My tribe, the Bari — we're very friendly people. I was with three of my brothers, playing. I would have been five years old. Meanwhile, my parents had gone to our garden, to pick corn.

That's when the Arab militia attacked. Everything was peaceful, and then I heard a noise like an earthquake. I saw the plane coming, and they started bombing our village. Then they came in trucks. The soldiers were yelling at us to leave our homes, and they started killing people and burning everything.

Of course, everyone ran in a different direction to save his or her life. Some mothers and fathers even forgot their kids. That's how I was separated from my parents. My brother led us into a cane field and we hid there for the night. We could see the fires and hear the screaming. There were many mosquitoes and the grass was sharp and wet on my face.

In the morning there was nothing left. No houses, nothing. My oldest brother, who was 20 at the time, said, "It's no use. Our parents are probably dead, and we don't want to die here, too," so we got up from the field and started walking. "I'd rather die ahead," he said.

I just wanted my parents, that's all I remember. From that point on my life has been one of never getting to say goodbye.

## PONCE DE LEON WALK

By Kahiye Hassan

It was common for my father and me to take a walk around Portland in those first weeks. We were like Ponce de Leon trying to find the legendary "Fountain of Youth." Our journey started on the October morning we headed out Danforth Street towards the Old Port. I had never seen so many dead leaves lying on the ground. The bright yellows, reds and oranges were like the sun lying on top of the earth. This was very weird to me because the life hadn't been sucked out of the leaves. When I snapped the edge off the stem of a yellow and red leaf, white fluid oozed out. The trees didn't look lifeless either. Their roots were healthy beneath the ground. The grass couldn't be any greener. The ground was moist because it had rained a couple weeks earlier. Not like in Kenya. When it rained there, it rained — for hours, sometimes days. Here the rain was about a five-minute thing, and there wasn't any sign of drought. . . .

One night, it just got really cold. My feet and my fingers for the first time were frozen. I went to bed seeing the stars, but the next morning, when I woke up, it looked like someone had covered everything up in a lustrous blanket, or had a

pillow fight. It was still cold. After eating jelly for breakfast, my father and I took our dirty clothes to the laundry. As we walked on this white pearl frosting, it felt like a sponge that didn't keep its shape. The sun reflected on the blanket, making sparks. After we washed our clothes, we headed down State Street toward Danforth Street, and this white fragile puffy cotton came tumbling down softly from the sky. I wondered if it was raining, but I couldn't hear it, and I couldn't feel it. It just appeared. The atmosphere was getting warmer. I took my gloves off to reach for it, but it melted on my hand. I stuck my tongue out. It didn't taste how I expected — it was just like water. My dad reached down, picked some up and threw it at me. He sprayed my face and put some more inside my jacket. I jumped up because it was cold — it felt like glitter was under my jacket. I tried to spray him, but it didn't reach. This was how I first learned to make a snowball, pressing it together with my gloves. I tossed the snowball at him, hitting him in the back of his neck.

