

Celebrate America 2025 Creative Writing Contest



We are pleased to present the national winners of the American Immigration Council's Creative Writing Contest for fifth graders. **Skipping Stones** is one of the cosponsors of this annual contest. Please visit: www.celebrateamericawritingcontest.org for details.

First Place Winner: America Poem by Luu Ly Shulman, grade 5, New York.

The city sleeps, but I am wide awake, thoughts bursting through my head.
Stories swirl, whirl, twirl,
Because my mother just kissed me goodnight,
And when I look up at her face in awe
I realize that everyone has a story.
You may not be able to tell by their language or by the way they present themselves,
That Everyone. Has. A. Story.
One may be similar to my mother's story,
A Vietnamese refugee who escaped Vietnam with only
Her family recipes,
And her immediate family of 5.
You can't tell by my mom's scars or her faint smile,
That her father fought in the war,
Or that her mother one day kissed her goodnight,
Only to spend the next day in a hospital room with cancer.
You. Can't. Tell.
As I reflect on all of this,
I can almost smell the faint Chanel Number 5 perfume
Lingering around the room.
I smell the perfume my mother wears everyday
As her mother did.
I smell my grandmother
and see a faint image of the stories my mom always told me about her
They start to appear in my head.
I think about my grandmother's quick escape from Vietnam
Fleeing in the middle of the night Grabbing her bottle of Chanel number 5
The bottle that ông ngoại (my grandfather) had given her when he was training as a
pilot in the America.
Perhaps that small Chanel bottle was a symbol of hope,
That one day, her life would be normal
She wouldn't have to run from bombs, she would attend parties.
You. Can't. Tell.
As my eyes get heavy and my eyelashes land softly,
I think of a compelling question,

First Place Winner: America Poem... *continued*

A phrase my humanities teacher taught me.
A wonder.
“What happened after they got to America?”
That was a question that I have repeatedly asked my mom.
Every time getting a new answer.
Some of these answers are how they settled down in Louisiana in a small town.
Being the only Vietnamese family,
Their neighbors would throw glass into the garden,
Just so they couldn’t step on it without bleeding out.
You. Can’t. Tell.
Thankfully My Grandmother had a superpower.
Bringing. People. Together.
She did this by working at a grocery store and getting ingredients
To make her family spring rolls and give them to her neighbors
With her famous motto, “Roll Forward, Always Forward”
And POOF the neighbors gave her family peace.
And she inspired.
She did this by becoming one of the first Vietnamese American teachers in Louisiana,
A mentor, and a second mother to her students.
She connected people over the years,
And at her funeral, over 3,000 people came.
If my grandmother, along with millions of other immigrants,
Had never come to America,
Then who would share
Their recipes?
Their stories?
Their hope?
My grandmother has passed down all this to her family,
Like yours,
Which is continuing to grow.
Kind of like America, growing every day with new faces and stories.
If we allow it.

Luu Ly is an energetic, thoughtful, and well-rounded 11-year-old. Born and raised in New York City, she’s a proud New Yorker with a foodie’s heart—always eager to explore new cuisines and share her culinary adventures with family and friends. One of her favorite pastimes is traveling with her close-knit family, discovering new places and gaining fresh perspectives along the way.

A dedicated student at the Chapin School, Luu Ly genuinely enjoys learning. She was especially inspired by her favorite teacher, Ms. Sherman, who nurtured her curiosity about people, cultures, and the wider world. Known for her creativity and thoughtfulness, Luu Ly brings heart to everything she does, such as crafting homemade birthday and holiday cards.



Second Place Winner: **Flavors and Rhythms**

Every Friday night, as I step out of the dance studio it is my time to choose where my family goes for dinner. I look all around trying to make a choice, which is never easy. Will it be the Argentine Market? The French *Boulangerie*? The new Brazilian Steakhouse? The small sushi counter? The Lebanese restaurant that reminds me of my grandma's home cooking? The Vietnamese *Pho* place, with its scrumptious smell? The Mexican *Taqueria*? The Jewish deli or the Peruvian *Ceviche*? As you can see this small shopping center in South Miami is a representation of my country. A country that is made so special and unique, thanks to all the distinct cultures brought by immigration.

You see, I am a foodie ballerina. Not only do I love to eat, I also love to dance, and ballet is my life! Because of immigration I am able to explore many styles and rhythms from all over the world. All of my ballet teachers have immigrated from Cuba, Poland, and Russia to the United States of America. They are the reason I am both a dancer and the person I am today. I am responsible, disciplined, and I set very high expectations for myself, so I can be the best I can be in all my crafts. They are also the reason why my dancing style is unique. I get to blend Cuban and Vaganova, with the American *Balenchine*. I dance a Polish Polka or an Italian Tarantella. When I'm not dancing ballet, I get to dance Latin Ballroom, hip-hop, Flamenco and jazz, each with its unique cultural tones.

My family is also a representation of this mix of flavors and rhythms. My *abuela*, with her Lebanese roots, will choose *Kibbeh* and Tabbouleh and loves Flamenco music that reminds her of her times living in Spain. My mom, raised in Colombia, will go for an *arepa* while listening to Shakira, and my dad, who is American with English and German roots, will go for a more simple, medium rare fillet. If it wouldn't have been for immigration, my family would not be the mix of flavors and rhythms that it is today. I would have not ever been born.

America is a nation of immigrants that have brought everything I love to my home, from flavors, to rhythms, to cultures, and ideas. This fusion has made me who I am today. It has inspired my creativity and imagination and given me different points of views. As I continue to leave my dance studio every Friday night, after dancing to the different rhythms, I will get to choose from the many unique flavors I can eat for dinner with my family.

By Alana Atkinson, grade 5, Florida.

The American Immigration Council will honor the Grand Prize Winner, Luu Ly of California, at the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado on June 20th evening during their annual awards banquet.

Third Place Winner: **Why I'm Glad America Is a Nation of Immigrants**

Maman (*mother*) and I were living in Khuzestan, with no idea that America was a nation of immigrants. A hardworking, innovative, nation.

“Hila!” She called. “They’re coming.”

That day, Iraq bombed the most sacred parts of Iran, including Khuzestan. We had to leave Iran. My father had left years before, and we were leaving now.

Goodbye. I thought. I was on a crowded ship, watching as Iran’s shores slowly got smaller, until they melted into the horizon. I imagined my brother Ali on the battlefield, fighting for Iran. But now, I was going to California.

Maman pulled me into an embrace, making me remember she was there, and whispered the words she always repeated. “Your name is Hila. Hila means “hope” and we will always have hope.”

I was afraid of America, but when we arrived, a green statue of a lady greeted us. What I will always remember is the torch she held, for it reminded me of hope, never lost.

When we arrived in San Diego, California, I was scared. I hadn’t seen Baba (*father*) in years. But when we pulled up at his house, I smiled. When I spotted a bigger tree, I felt like a tsunami of hope had just hit me. It was a pomegranate tree, with bright red fruits dangling from its branches. Pomegranates were a symbol of Iran. I gathered my bravery and stepped towards the door. I knocked, and it opened so quickly, I didn’t even think. I just jumped into Baba’s arms. Grinning widely, I looked up at my father. Deep, black eyes gazed at me. “I missed you,” he whispered.

The next morning, I decided to do some exploring. Sitting in a beach chair on the front lawn of the house next to ours, there was a girl about my age dressed in a bathing suit. She wore heart shaped sunglasses, and she was reading a thick book. Sitting on a tray next to her was a glass of pink lemonade. I decided to walk over. When she saw me, she waved and smiled, and I waved back.

“Hi!” she exclaimed. “Aren’t you the girl from Iran?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I came yesterday.”

She smiled. “I’m Sarah!” Sarah patted the grass beside her. We talked a while about my journey, and how Iran was bombed. How San Diego was always somewhat warm, and how Sarah’s older brother was SO annoying. Then, she did something I didn’t think she would do. Sarah threw her arms around me, and exclaimed, “I am so glad immigrants come here. Hila, you make America great!”

Those are the same words she says to me now, as we receive the news that the war is over. I cry with joy when I see her smiling and hugging me tight. I am an Immigrant from Iran, but I am American, and I am what makes America great. Maman pulls me into a warm embrace and whispers,

“Your name is Hila. Hila means hope, and we have never given up hope.”

By Sarina Razaghi, grade 5, California.