

FLIGHT

OF

HOPES



In the beginning of the school year, a group of 4/5 teachers and parents met and wondered how a study of America's Great Migration might fit within our year-long theme of Crossing Borders. With the help of our art teacher Meghan Calhoun, we pursued a study of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* and imagined how it might help animate a student telling of a local refugee's story.

Our class benefited by the important work done by Dennis Wilson, the education and advocacy coordinator at IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services). Like the Statue of Liberty herself, the staff at IRIS welcomes the poor, the tired, the struggling to breathe free and helps them to resettle their lives here in Connecticut. The Tuesday before Thanksgiving 2017, Dennis welcomed a group of Cold Spring students, parents, and teachers to his workplace. We were dropping off the winter clothing that our school community generously donated to refugees. Dennis was generous with his time and took our group on a tour of the IRIS offices. At the end of our informational visit, we told Dennis that we were interested in hearing the stories of local refugees. We asked him if he might know of anyone who would enjoy telling us theirs. His smile suggested he knew just the right woman.

On a wintry January day, Cold Spring's fourth and fifth graders met Gladys Mwilelo and heard her story. A refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo who recently immigrated to the United States after spending thirteen years in Burundi, she told her tale to students and answered their questions with warmth, humor, and great detail. Though her life has been filled with challenges great and small, Gladys affirmed over and over again the power of hope and hard work to make the best of situations.

Students were challenged to tell Gladys's refugee story in a form inspired by Lawrence's painted panels and captions. Meghan taught the children more about Lawrence's creative process, his use of

color, simple geometric shapes, and abstraction. Lawrence painted all sixty paintings in the series at once, proceeding color by color, so both 4/5 classes worked with Meghan to create their own palette to help make the work uniform. In Lawrence's paintings he focused on subjects, themes, and relationships including movement and rhythm, cause and effect, and struggles and triumphs. Similarly, students worked to depict subjects, themes, and relationships including perseverance, hope, and family.

Although no actual national borders were crossed during the decades-long exodus of black citizens from the South to northern and western cities in the United States, Isabel Wilkerson, author of the award-winning book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, noted, "The Great Migration had (much) in common with the vast movements of refugees from famine, war, and genocide in other parts of the world, where oppressed people, whether fleeing twenty-first century Darfur or nineteenth-century Ireland, go great distances, journey across rivers, deserts, and oceans or as far as it takes to reach safety with the hope that life will be better wherever they land."

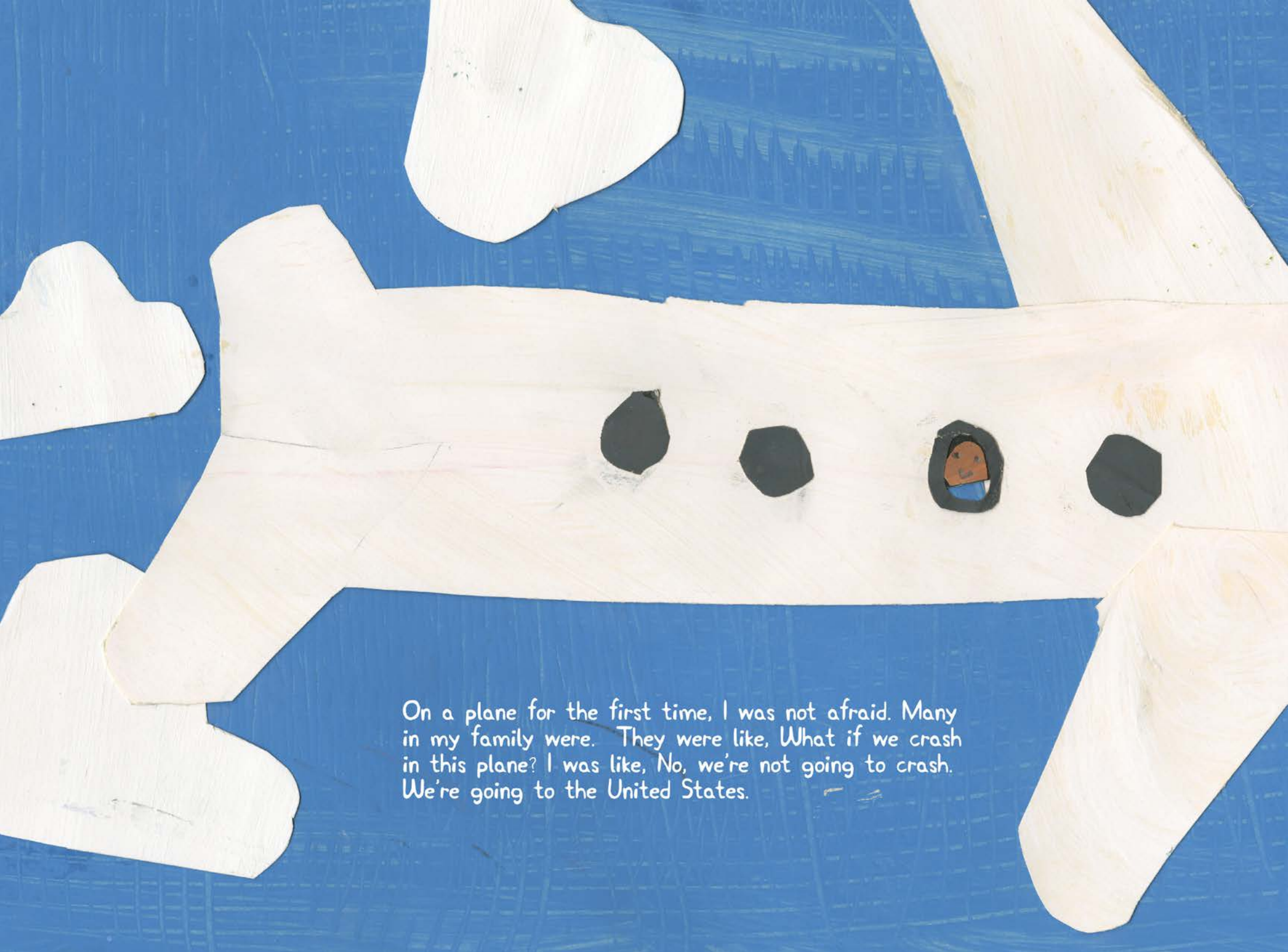
Our class wishes that Gladys's life continues to get better and better while in the United States and that her dream to pilot a plane comes true. We know our lives are better having heard her story, and we hope yours is too after taking flight with this book.

- Abby, Alma, Cecilia, Charlotte, Finn, Giada, Hayes, Jasmine, Jonah, Joshua, Kaelen, Keshav, Kiran, Kofi, Lev, Liam, Madison, Malini, Martina, Neela, William and Wyatt



I used to see planes high in the sky when I was in Burundi, and I was like, Whoa, what is that?

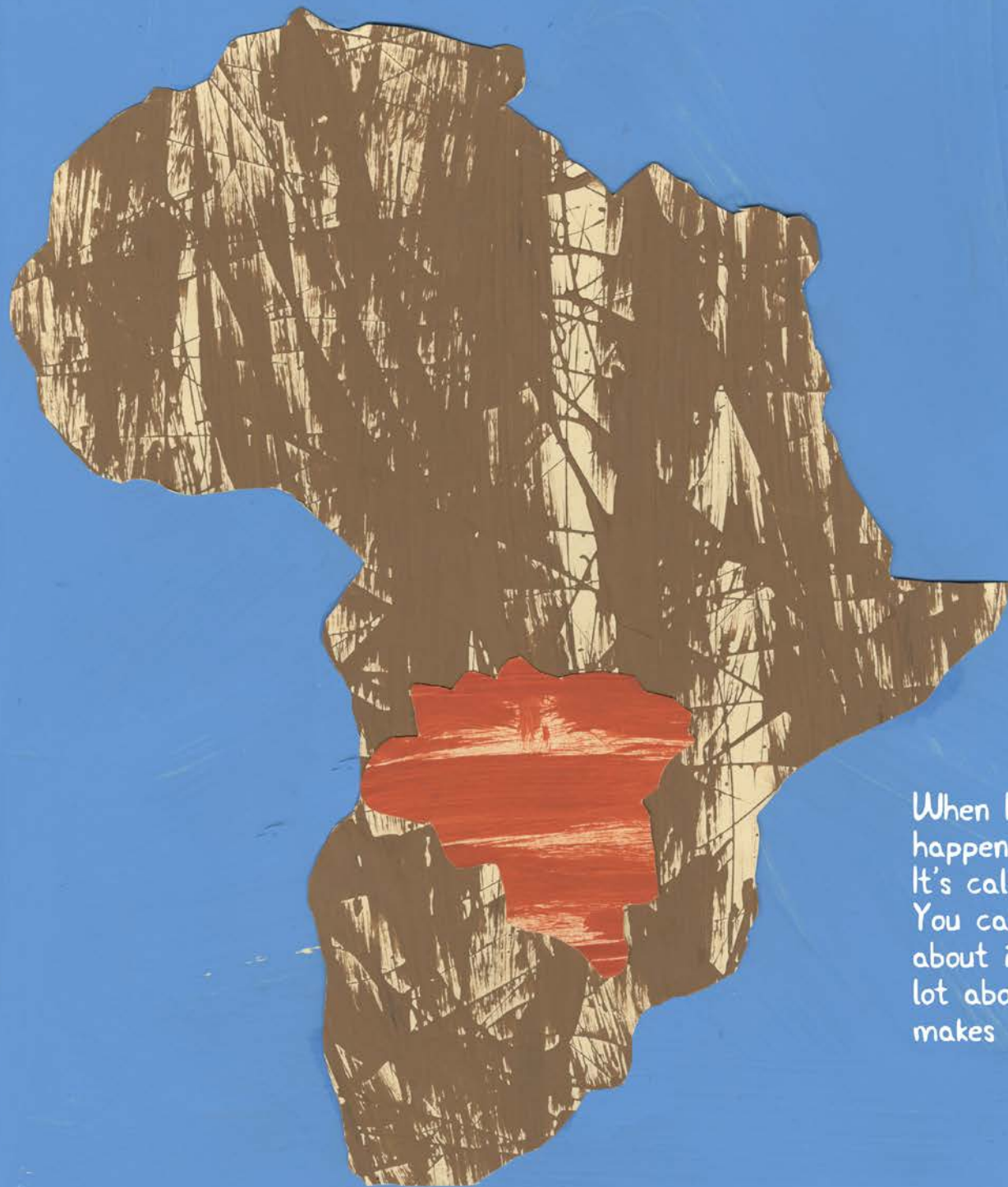




On a plane for the first time, I was not afraid. Many in my family were. They were like, What if we crash in this plane? I was like, No, we're not going to crash. We're going to the United States.

So my name is Gladys, and this is my
refugee story. I have been in the United
States for four years now. I was not born
here. I was born in this country called
Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's
in central Africa.





When I was this tiny baby something happened in Congo. There was a war. It's called the Congo War in 1993. You can look it up. I don't know a lot about it, and I don't want to know a lot about it. Thinking about it never makes me feel good.

Let me paint you an image: when war is taking place,
everybody is running. Some people run to each other.
Some people just run away. It's chaos.





When you are in danger, it's your job to find someplace safe for your family to go. At first my mom disagreed with her friends. Her friends told her that we have to move, but my mother said no. She said, I have several kids. How am I going to run?



My mom decided to stay at home. She locked the house. We were supposed to be quiet, but I cried.

Maybe I cried so loud that my dad heard me. He had been away taking care of others that had been hurt in the war. Now he came home to help his family.





My dad said, We have to go to Burundi.

We got there by taking a boat across Lake Tanganyika. It is the deepest lake in Africa. We had to leave everything that we had - our house, our friends, our family.



I grew up thinking Burundi was my country. Even now, I consider myself Burundian. But others knew I was different by my look and the way I spoke the language.



They used to discriminate against me. Instead of calling me by my own name, Gladys, they would call me by my own country name. They used to call me Congo. They hated me. They didn't like me because I was someone else different from a different place. That was one thing that has affected me throughout my life. Because I was just a kid who wanted to try to fit in with the group. But the group did not take me as who I was.



I was ten years old. One memory that I have is I would see kids wearing uniforms - blue and white uniforms - and going to school. That used to make me cry a lot. I was like, Why am I sitting here and not going to school, but kids who were the same age as me are going?



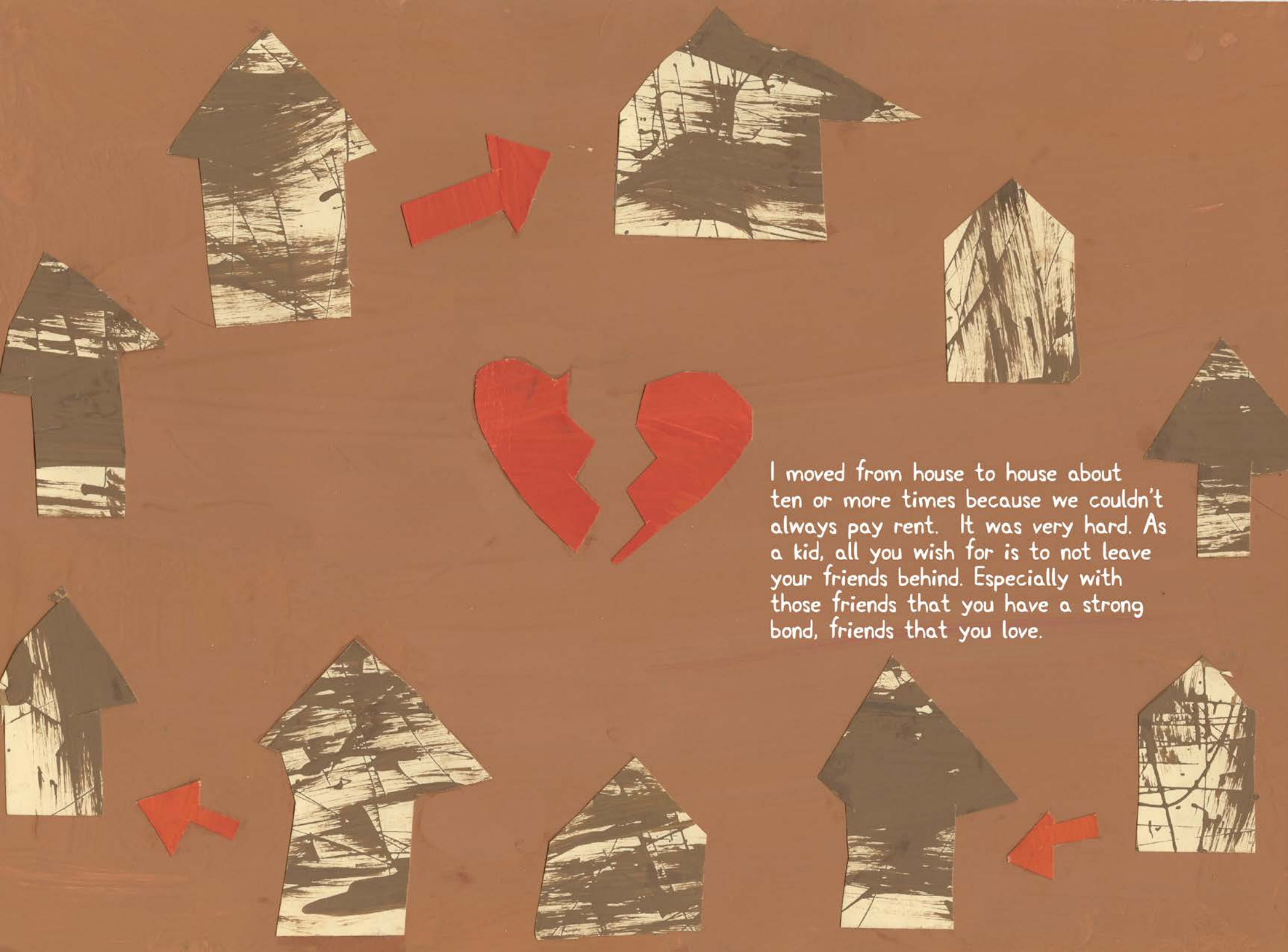


I had to do something to earn money when I didn't go to school. So I sold some dessert on the street. I made the chapatis myself. You make the dough with flour, eggs, and water.

I was just a kid.

As an immigrant into a country that is not yours, the people there don't trust you. They will tell you, We are from here. You immigrant people do not know what you are doing. So I had to try to stay away from trouble.



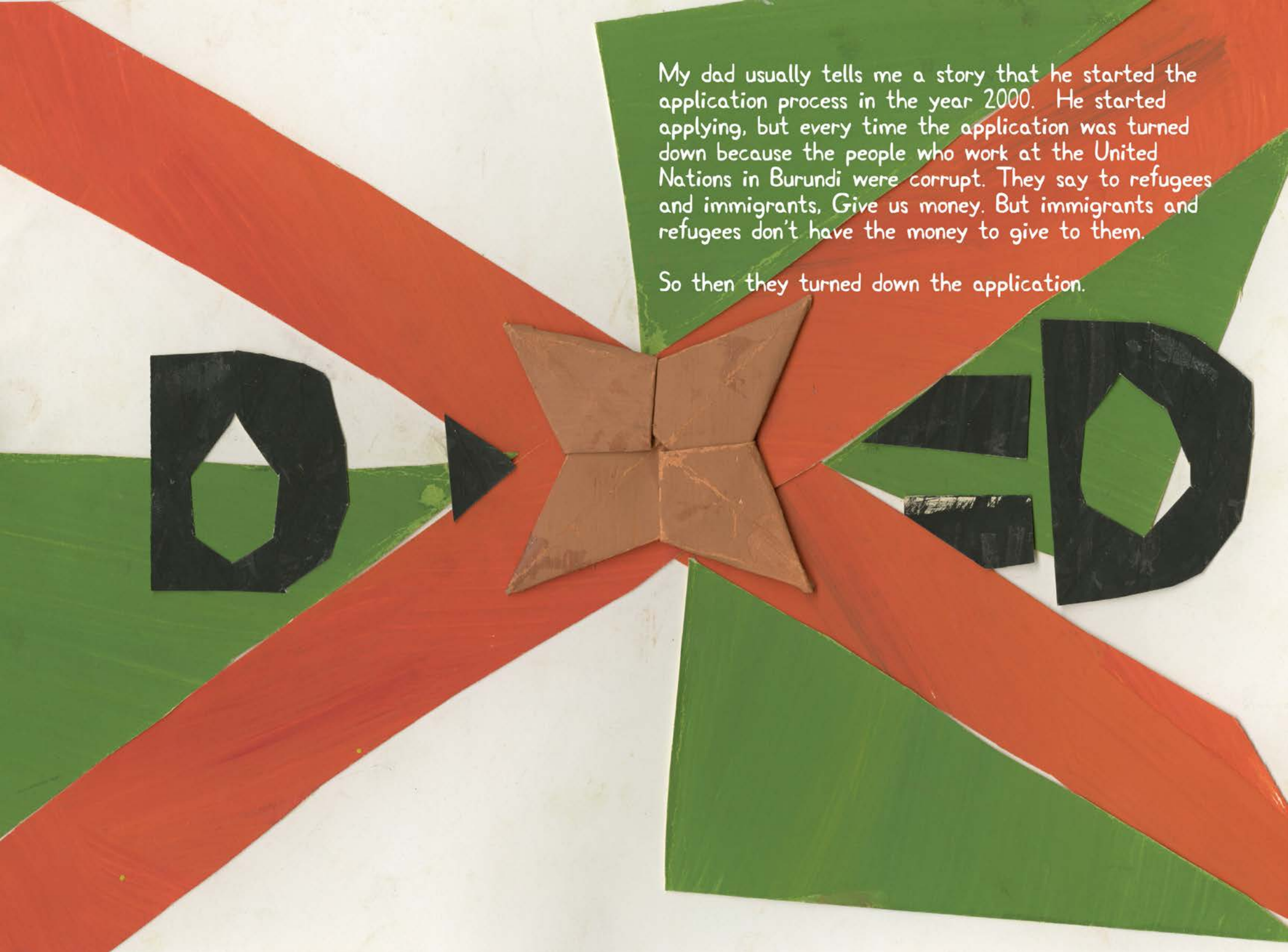


I moved from house to house about ten or more times because we couldn't always pay rent. It was very hard. As a kid, all you wish for is to not leave your friends behind. Especially with those friends that you have a strong bond, friends that you love.

My dad tried to apply to go somewhere else beside Burundi. There is this organization called the U.N. - the United Nations - who help people who have left their homes because of conflict, war, persecution. So they helped me and my family.

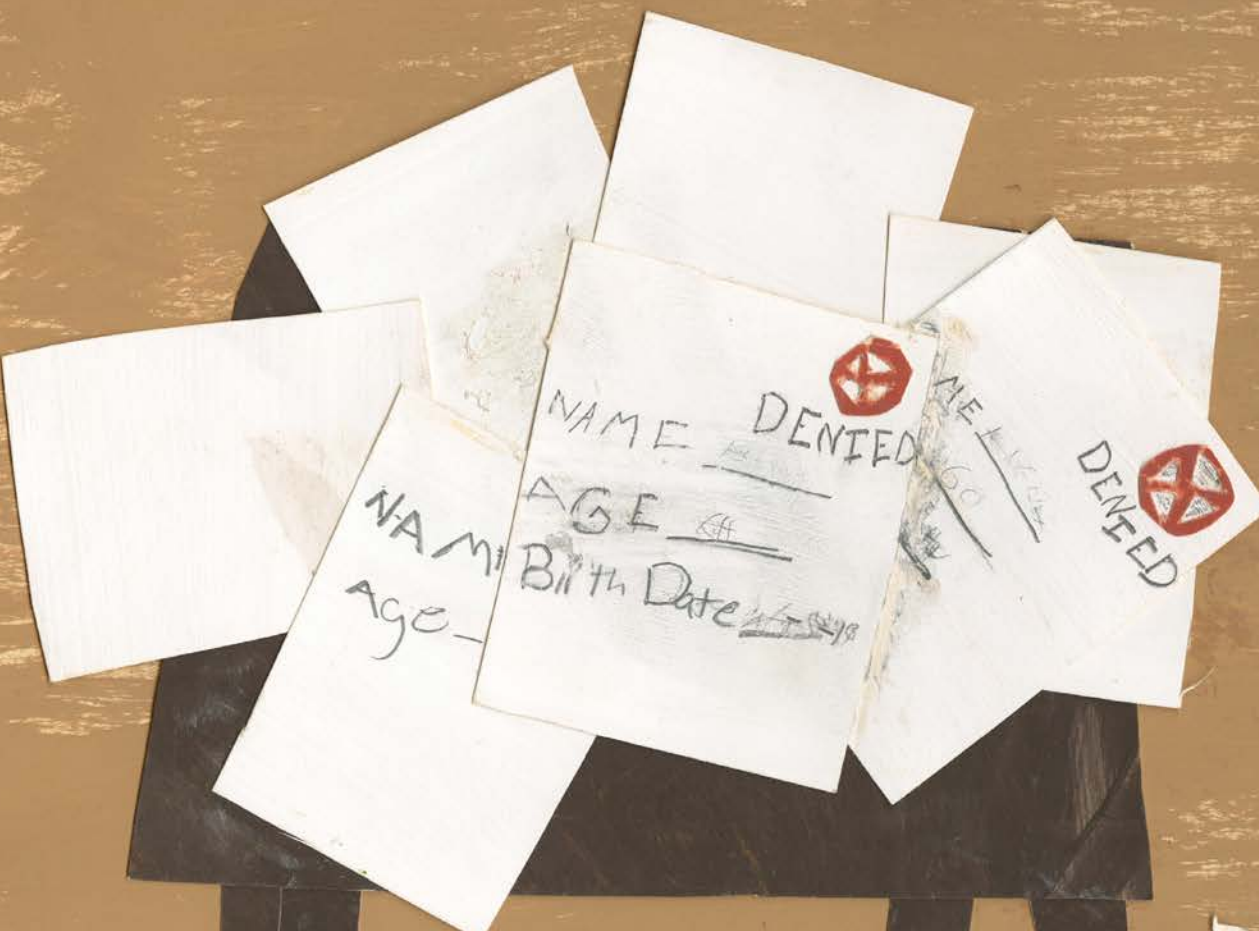


UN



My dad usually tells me a story that he started the application process in the year 2000. He started applying, but every time the application was turned down because the people who work at the United Nations in Burundi were corrupt. They say to refugees and immigrants, Give us money. But immigrants and refugees don't have the money to give to them.

So then they turned down the application.



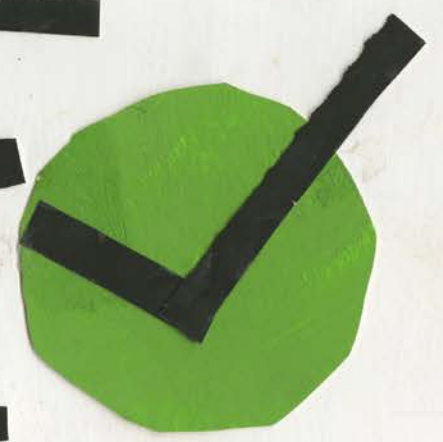
But my dad didn't give up. He would apply, reapply, and reapply, and they would deny him down. He knew that there was a hope. He kept trying because he wanted us to have a good education. He had heard that in a country like the United States, education is there for anyone.



The day we saw U.N. officials at our door, we knew nothing about what was going to happen. They come to visit you to see if what you wrote is true. They will look around the house. Look at the kitchen to see if there are meals. Look to see if there are clothes. That you really don't have anything.



[REDACTED]



Finally, the application in 2013 was accepted. It was a big accomplishment. My dad said it was the most important thing that he had ever done. They told my family you are going to go to the United States.

[REDACTED]



I was happy about that because when I was a little kid I watched a lot of TV of life in the United States. .

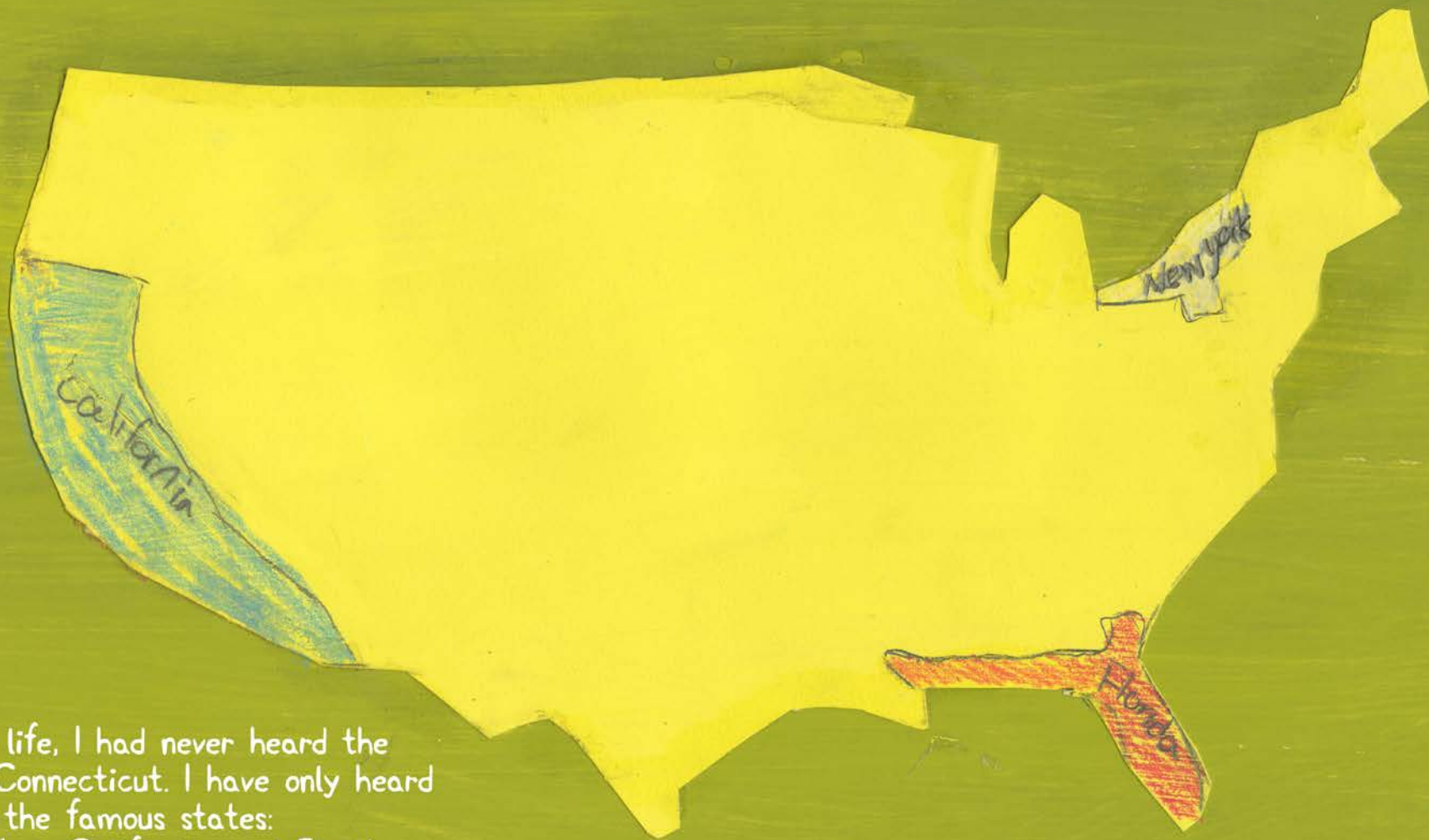
There is a show where neighbors help people build their houses. It gave me the sense that that's how the United States is. This is a community where people are volunteering to help others. That's the home I've always dreamed of. That's a place I've always wished to be.



I was thirteen years old. I had nine siblings on the plane with me. I was the only kid in my family who didn't get sick. I didn't even sleep.

We came over with other United Nations clients.
Some we already knew; some we didn't. Some of
them went to Idaho. Some went to Arizona.
Texas. And I think Vermont.






In my life, I had never heard the word Connecticut. I have only heard about the famous states: New York, California, and Florida.

There were so many people in J.F.K. airport.
So many people. I felt like this tiny little
thing in the middle of nowhere.






One of my big reactions
when I first moved here
was, Wow, there are so
many cars. I was shocked.
Why are there all these
cars? Who uses all these
cars?

It was May. I was freezing.
Really freezing. I was like Oh,
my God. I'm about to tell you
take me home right now.



A collage of various green trees and a white house on a blue background. The trees are made of different shades of green paper and have various shapes, some with jagged edges. The house is a simple white shape with two dark windows. The background is a solid blue color. The text is written in white on the right side of the collage.

Even though I come from a country with jungles, I never had the experience of seeing huge trees until I came to the United States. While we were driving, the majority of the houses and buildings were blocked by trees. I shouted to my family, Where are we going? Are we going into a jungle?

When the car stopped, we
were in a big empty lot. I got
out of the car and saw six
ladies headed our way.



It was so strange. They were so excited to see my dad. I was like, How do you guys know my dad? They're giving him a hug. Who are these people?

They turned out to be IRIS (Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services) people. IRIS welcomed us as a huge family, all at the same time. They told us it rarely works out that way, but it did for us, and I usually call that a blessing.



I was exhausted. I didn't sleep on the plane, and I didn't sleep in the car ride from New York. So now I wanted to go home. I was asking myself - Can I get home? Where is home? What is home?

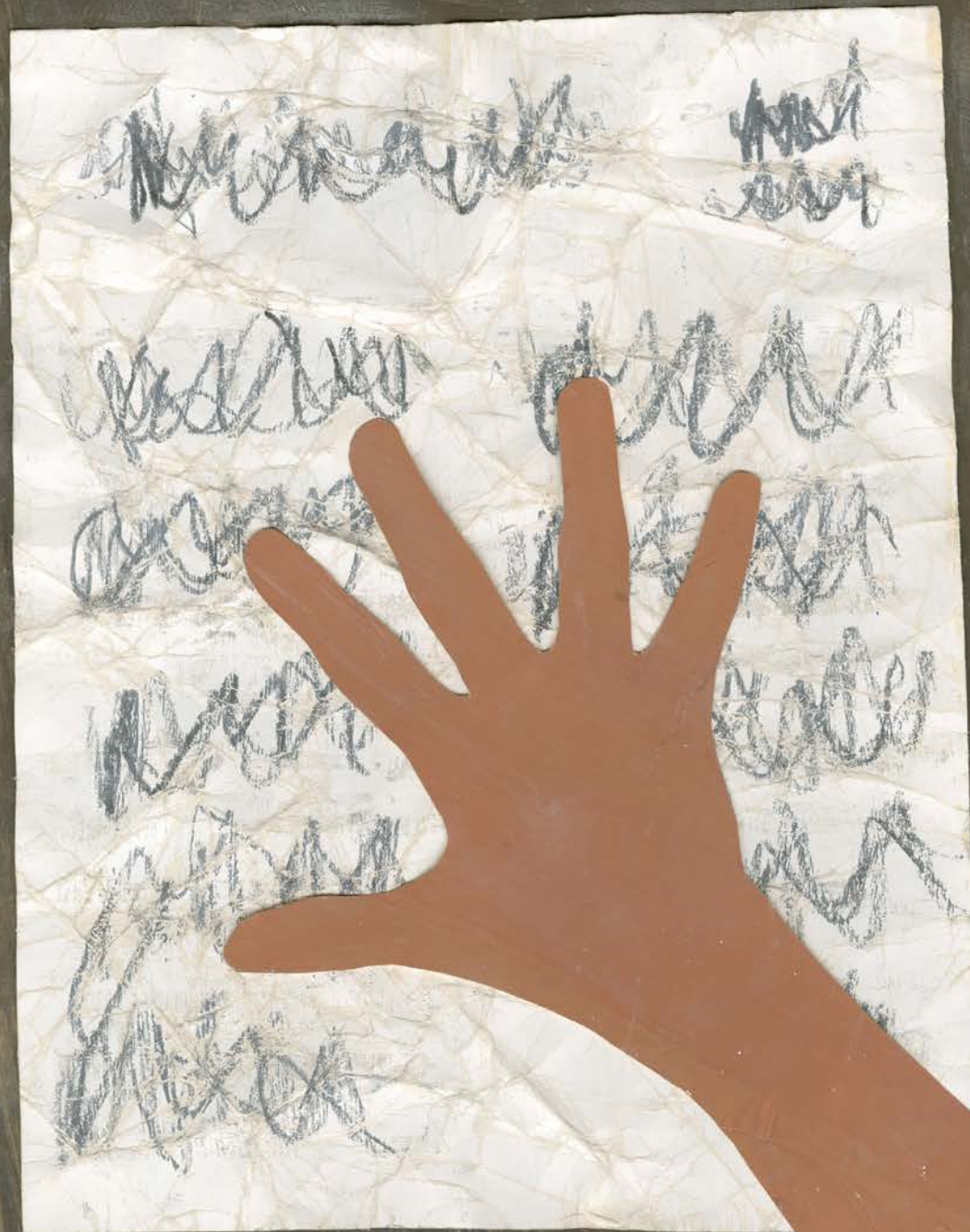


My memory of the next morning was that I woke up at 4AM, and I thought it would be dark. But everything was light. My dad said, You guys have to go back to bed. I was like, No, it is light out.

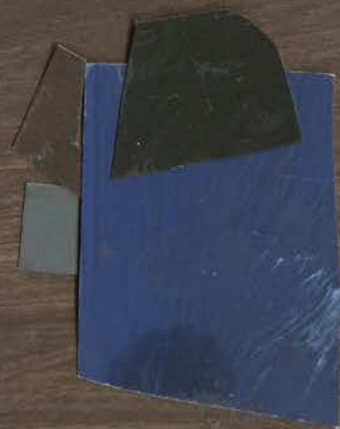
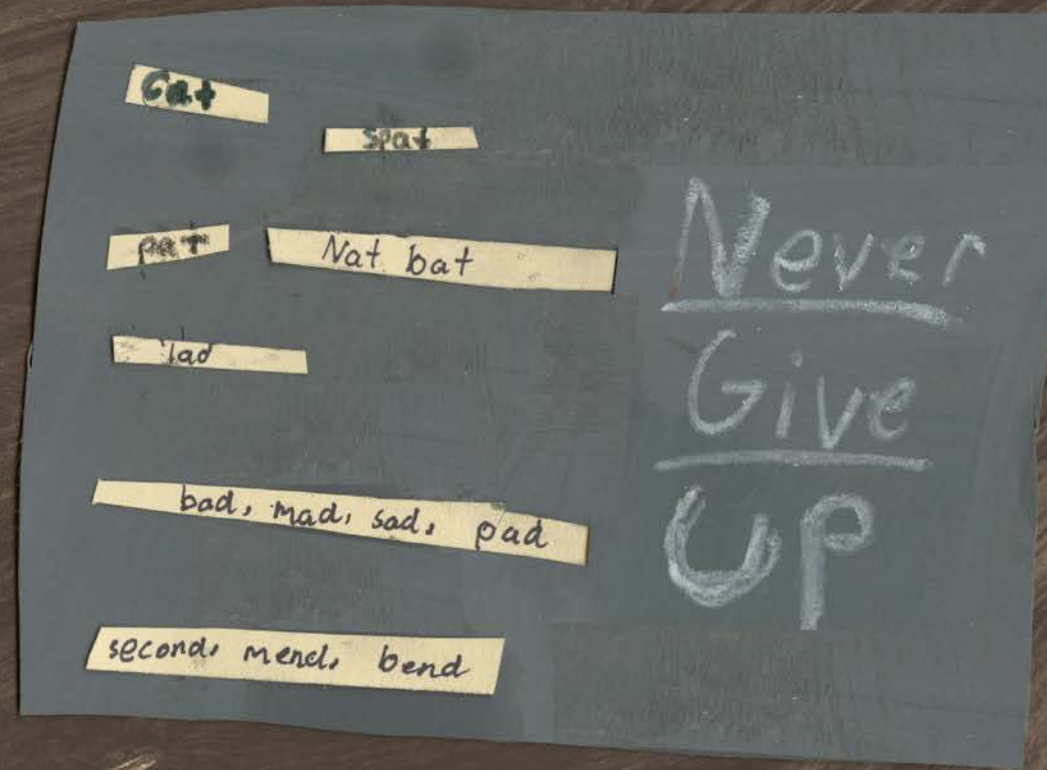
And then I went back to bed.

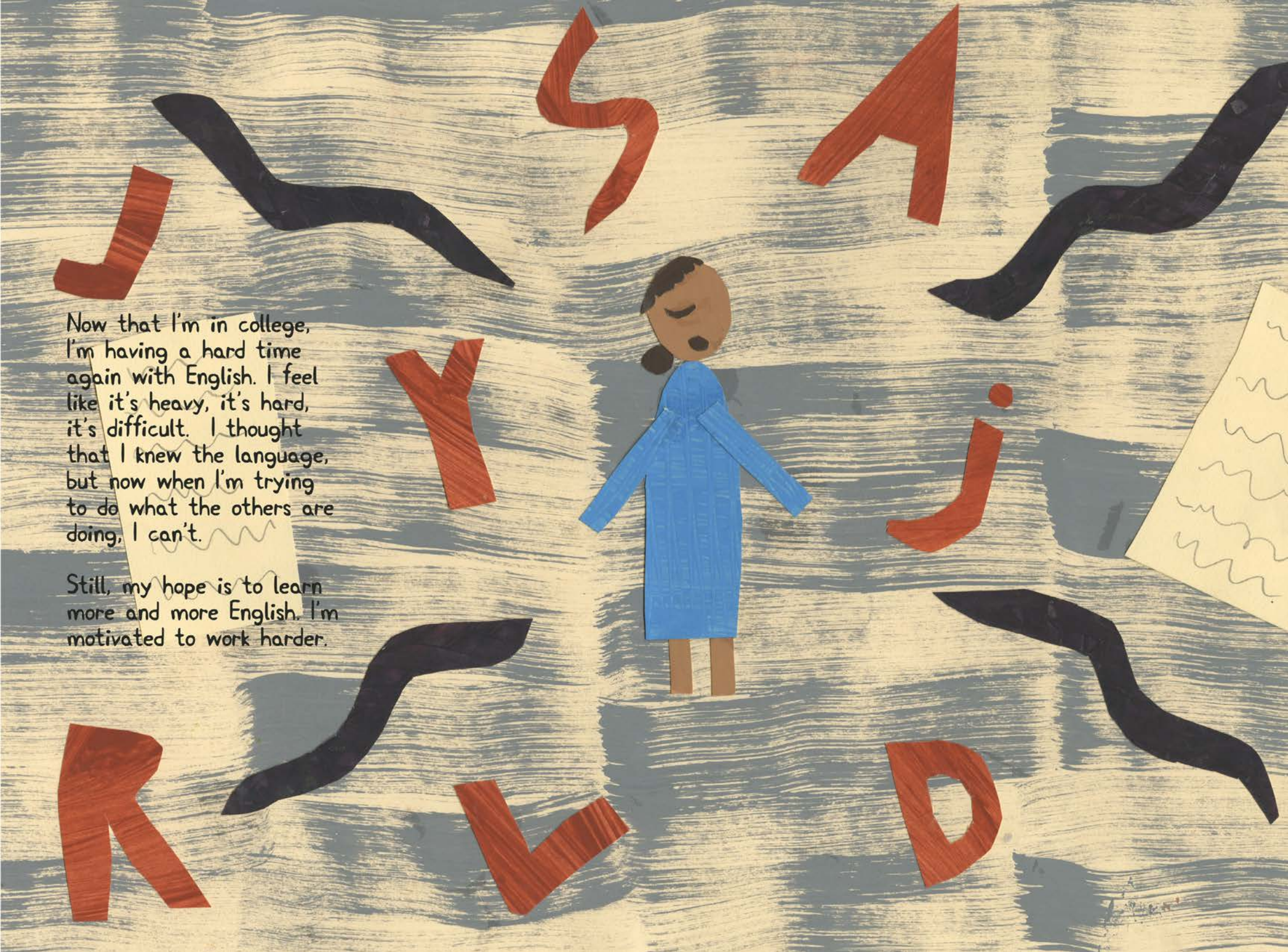


I'm a Freshman at Central Connecticut State University. My hope is to be able to graduate, but I'm having a hard time financially. Financial Aid paperwork is a pain; it gives me a headache. There is usually so many papers I need to do, and I'm like this is not something I'm used to doing. I know I have to do it. It's my job. It's my obligation to do.



I have gotten help from some others in this country. My mother gave birth to me, but I say another woman also gave birth to me by first teaching me English. Her name is Nicole Pernal. Ms. Pernal is the only woman who never gave up on me. She made me feel that it was okay not to know.



A central figure of a person with dark skin and hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved dress, stands in the middle. The background is a mix of light yellow and blue brushstrokes. Scattered around are various letters and shapes: a red 'L', a black wavy line, a red 'S', a red 'A', a black wavy line, a red 'Y', a red 'j', a black wavy line, a red 'R', a black wavy line, a red 'V', and a red 'D'. On the right, there is a yellow paper with wavy lines. The overall style is abstract and expressive.

Now that I'm in college,
I'm having a hard time
again with English. I feel
like it's heavy, it's hard,
it's difficult. I thought
that I knew the language,
but now when I'm trying
to do what the others are
doing, I can't.

Still, my hope is to learn
more and more English. I'm
motivated to work harder.

I knew the word for snow even before I came to Connecticut. In Burundi we called it in French neige. My dad usually said Snow is American sand. But it's not true. Sand is sand, and snow is snow.

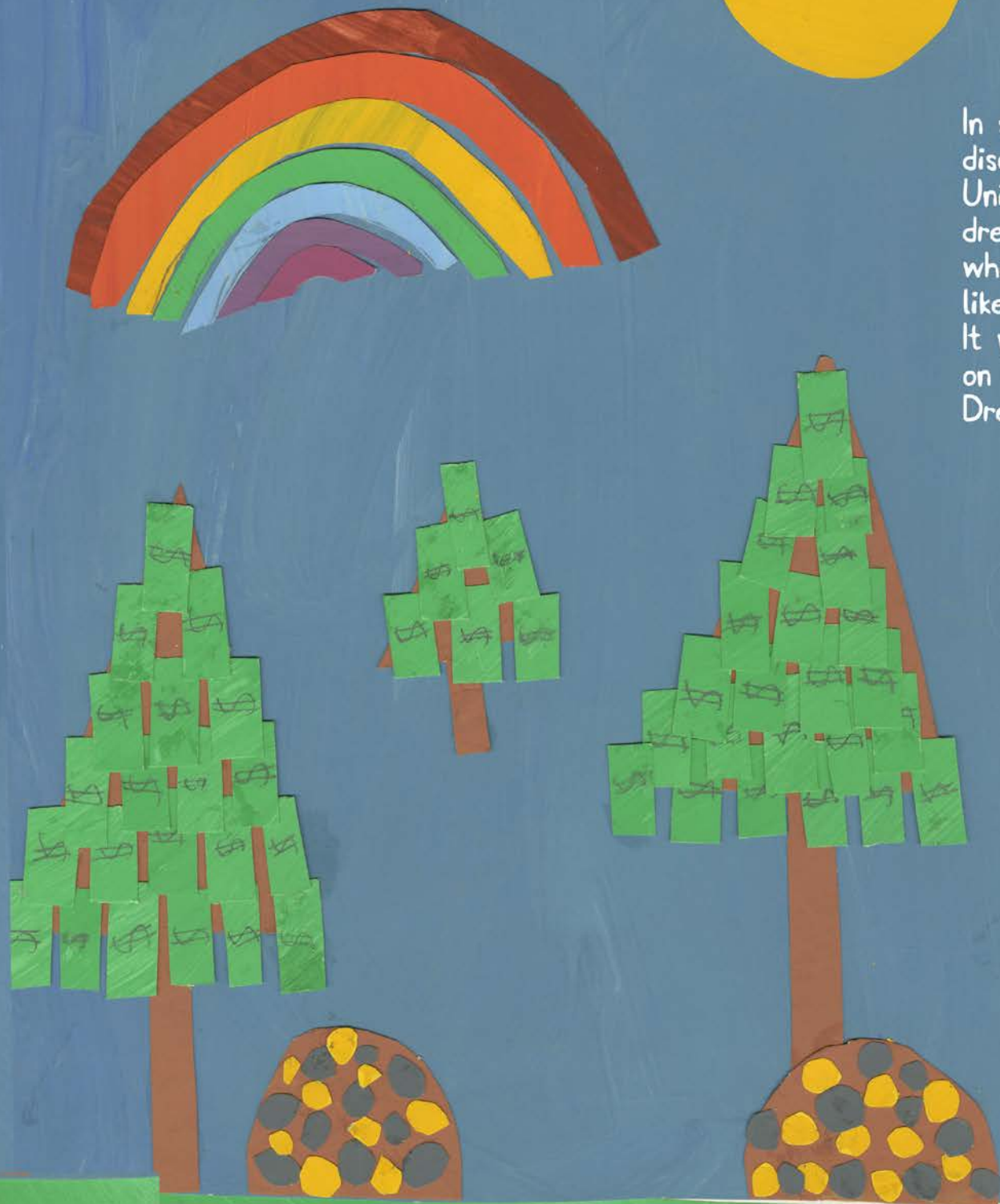


My favorite American food is hamburgers.
But no cheese. I don't like cheese.

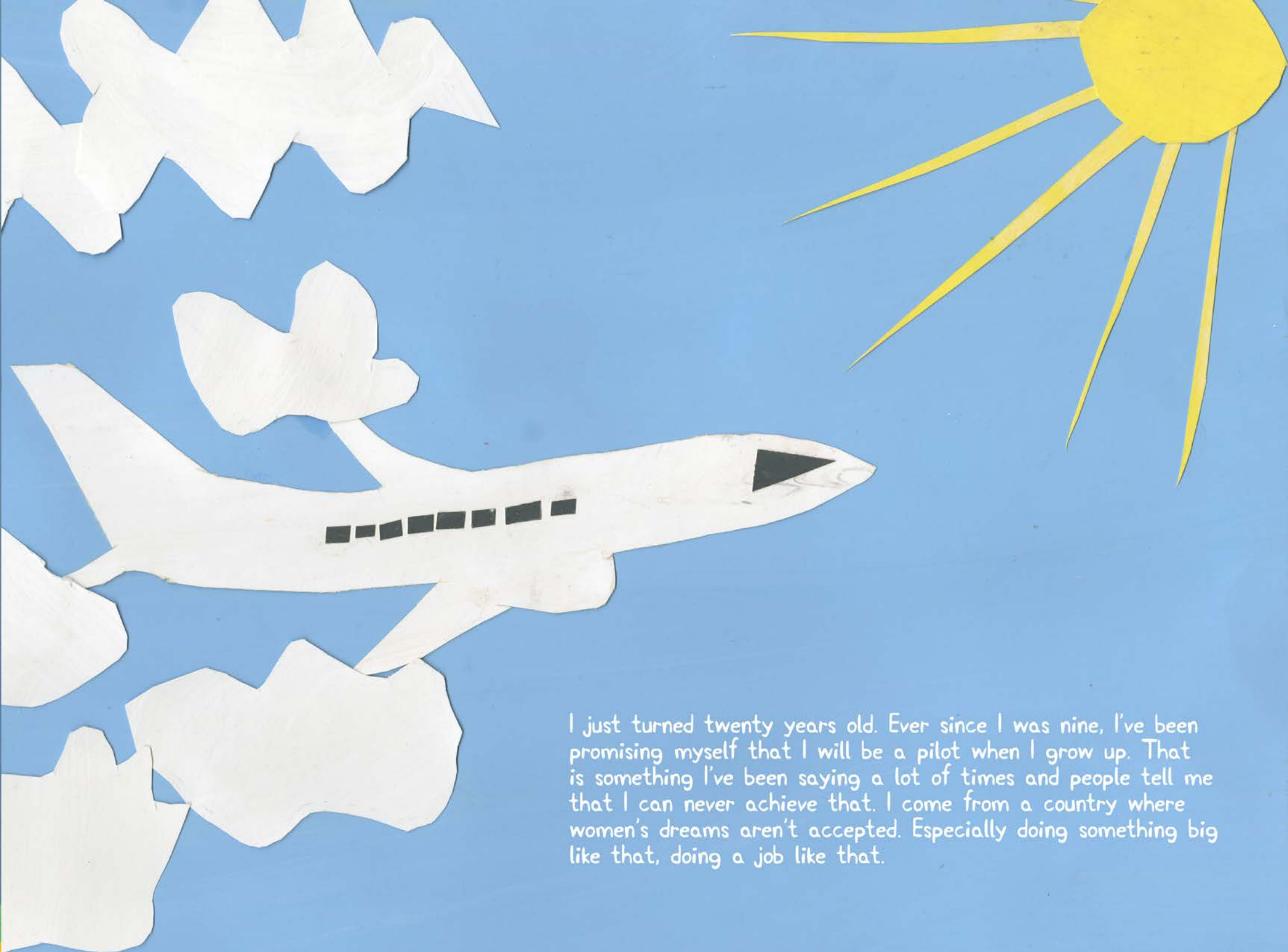





Being in Burundi those years made my family really close. We cooked together. We ate dinner together. One memory I do cherish is being able to share a dinner around a table with my family. But right now in America we don't do that anymore because it is a busy life.



In some ways, I was really disappointed when I got to the United States. I had really huge dreams thinking that maybe my whole family could live in a house like that. That's not how it was. It wasn't the way I watched it on TV. The whole American Dream broke my heart.



I just turned twenty years old. Ever since I was nine, I've been promising myself that I will be a pilot when I grow up. That is something I've been saying a lot of times and people tell me that I can never achieve that. I come from a country where women's dreams aren't accepted. Especially doing something big like that, doing a job like that.



There is always hope, no matter how hard things are. I want to inspire other kids who came here through IRIS and struggle. I know I've struggled, but I'm strong. I overcame a lot of new stuff. I want to help give other refugees the hope to move on. I feel like it's my job to tell them what I went through and show them I'm still working hard, I'm still standing.

And one day in the future, I'll be flying.