Adventure Risk Challenge is a year-round program which takes underserved high school students through an intensive course that links wilderness to academics, and builds a foundation for a life-long relationship with the outdoors. Participants are mentored through a range of academic and outdoor activities, including backpacking, hiking, rock-climbing and wilderness experiences, while focusing on team-building, public speaking, and poetry and essay writing.

Here is a selection of poems from the 2014 ARC participants:

I am a Wildflower
By Carla M.

I am a wild flower
They call me a shooting star
I am a beautiful fragile plant
Eager to grow even though everybody
steps on me

To some I am a remarkable treasure
But, to others I am nothing
Depressed
Microscopic bombs of rain hitting
every inch of my body
Fighting to come out from the shadow
that hovers over me
Memorizing the lyrics to suicidal thoughts
Contemplating to
Slice until the beds completely red

I am a shooting star
Expected to be like my sisters
Strong and independent

Striving to have some of their
characteristics
Determined to provide the best for my
niece and nephews

Loving, always putting others
before themselves
Trustworthy protecting my secrets so I don’t
get hurt

I Am not them and never will be
I may sprout on the same patch of land
But I will hold myself back from growing
too close to them
So our roots won’t interlock
Sweet, funny and an outgoing girl with the
raised eyebrow
I am my own person

I am a shooting star
Ready to stand tall and let my colors gleam
Prepared for the miraculous journey
ahead of me
Where I will finally be happy
I am a shooting star
I am a mountain chickadee
Who was born in a forest
But exists in the sky
Who was tiny but travels diverse mountains

I immigrated to US when I was sixteen years old
I was scared and confused
But No one cares about what I feel
Parents just push you to the sky
No one cares who’s making jokes at you
because you don’t know how to fly

As People put the seed inside the soil
Though the seed will grow up to a tree
But
Rain will soak the seed
Lightning will burn the plant

I lost everything in my life
Language, friends, school, culture
Like a bird re-entering its egg
Helpless, weak, tired
Who doesn’t want to grow up again

I am a mountain chickadee
Who has become a little bird
Making friends with different birds
Trying to fly everyday
Being a part of the sky

Family tries to help me
People try to care about me
School tries to grow me up
Community tries to be closer
I am not alone to take on any challenge

I am a mountain chickadee
Hopefully to be a genuine bird
Being stronger and stronger
Like a horse runs in a race
Like a tree protects all birds from rain, snow……..

I am a mountain chickadee
Who has brief life
But working hard every single day
Singing the lovely song
Expending energy until the last second
I am a Quaking Aspen
I come from a poor but strong family
My parents taught me how to be the person
I am today. They are the best teachers
I could
Ever have. From the outside it looks
Like we are all individuals but beneath the
Surface we are all one.

They taught me that sometimes its better
To hide emotions. I have leaves that are
glossy green
On the upper surface and dull
green underneath.
Sometimes I get stuck with my own feelings,
I don’t know if I get gloomy or angry when
They give my sister more privileges than
They give to me.
I get stuck but at the same time I am
happy for her
Because I know she is a little Quaking Aspen
That is barely starting to grow up.

I prefer comfortable, familiar,
Moist soil, people that are going to be there
whenever I need
Someone to talk to, someone that
hugs me and
Tells me that they love me but especially
A shoulder to cry on.
I can also grow near
Desert springs.
I can learn to get out of my comfort zone
and talk to new people.
I may not be the best person you could
ever have met

But I am an Aspen
and they are remarkable and unique just as
they are.

Each day I am growing more and more,
As a person and student
Learning from my mistakes,
My bad choices and bad experiences.
I used to skip school
I think it was resentment because I would
Never have my parents’ permission to go out.
I lost all the trust of my parents and teachers
Like a tree without its leaves.
It has been hard to rebuild the relationships
We used to have but I am close to get there.

I stopped thinking
Just about myself and now every time I
Make a decision I think about myself and
Also my surroundings because we are all
Connected and it will have a big impact
In everyone else’s life. I want to be part
of the forest,
Before I was just lost
And did not know what to do
I chose the easier path but now
I would give up everything,
To gain the trust of all of those people

I’ve become a stronger tree
Because I am starting a new season in my life
I am stretching my roots and branches
More and more but this time I am
going through
The right path.
I am born a sequoia seed buried in the soil
As I wait for a wildfire to crack my shell
and let me be independent and free

I was born in the Congo.
Ready to emerge to the U.S,
leaving all my precious family members
and all my memories I shared with my siblings
and friends.

Shy and feeling trapped.
Looking like a loser who can’t stand a second
without giving eye contact to anybody
and couldn’t express myself
everywhere I walked I felt caged inside
like a person feeling stuck in jail and can’t
manage to escape.

I’ve been living stuck in the darkness
and empty place of being judged by others
how embarrassing
I was to them like a awkward and unworthy person
and all what came to their minds
was to only try to bring me down to their level
like a person who hates somebody
because they have nothing better to do.

Although they had the same problems
as I did by being bullied by others,
I accepted those negative judgments without
defending myself
and just moving on with my life
because all their negative thoughts about me
meant nothing to me.
And although they touched me,
they couldn’t hurt me or break me
and even if I fought back it wouldn’t be worth it
because it might start a cycle of hatred and pain
like a world without trust and confidence.
In the U.S,  
My parents, teachers, and family members were trying to make me fit in with others without realizing that I had my ways of doing what I know  
I should do to make them proud without them forcing me to do so.  
When my grades reports would come home they wouldn’t look at me but only judge my grade’s level if it was good or bad and if it was good they would congratulate me, giving me their gratitude and if it was bad reports they would express their anger towards me without thinking of all my effort.  
I felt like there is no trust similar to friends with benefits.  
We know each other very well but only from the benefits we will get from each and every one of us in the family.

When it’s time to keep up with schoolwork, my teachers would only help those she or he can see and seems to me that I was so invisible to them similar to a sequoia seed hidden on the leaves that would camouflage me without being noticed and cared about by anyone whose willing to bury me and give me water to grow.  
And when it came time for me to answer a question I would be nothing but a shame to the teacher, looking helpless like a sequoia seed struggling to sprout but the teacher expects me to be a full sequoia in a second.

And when it’s my free time my brother would come to me and tell me how distracted and troublesome I am to him and only trying to bring up a conflict. I understand the parts of him being my older sibling and playing his role.  
He was born a sequoia seed before me and a wildfire opened his shell and already set him free like the difference between a sequoia seed and a pinecone seed.  
He has his way of living and I have mine but seems to me he wants to change me into someone I don’t expect to be just in a snap of a finger, he expects me to be more like him; the perfect grade reports, the reward for being the student of the month, and a good sequoia tree everyone expects him to be.

I’ve learned to be myself and not accepting what others think and want of me.  
All the issues that were wrong were only me searching for the answers I knew all along and from that I lost my self in it.

And I learned that I’ve became wiser than ever, ready to give an advice to anyone in need of me, I understand now In the present I feel capable like a man who can do things, care, achieve, and accomplish more by facing obstacles and believing in himself.
I am a Black-Tailed Fawn

Born out of the happy warmth of May
Thrown into a world of cruel sound.
A world of stunning vibrancy.
A world that made me fold into myself.
High school.
I was still struggling to stand on unsure legs.

Where would I go, and how would I get there?
I was hesitant and clumsy
As I received the first crushing blow.
A blinding light that flashed before me,
Burning its image straight into my eyelids,
Through my brain,
And into my memory.

I don’t know how…
But in the light,
I lost myself.
The entire sense of who I was or
Wanted to be.

This light, a comet amongst stars,
Left as soon as it arrived
And an emptiness ensued.
It was all-consuming; devouring my thoughts,
Leaving me stunned and breathless.

Losing something so suddenly
Began my transformation.
My colors changed and then I wasn’t who I was
before.
I grew resilient.
I picked myself up off the ground, and though I
wobbled,
I was more determined; I refused to let myself
break.

Over time, I learned how not to stumble.
I latched onto the grace I observed and admired
in others.
More cautious than before
Jumping at the slightest sound I heard.
Skeptical of the world around me.

Because suddenly everything became a danger.
A peril. A predator.
Everything was questionable, different.
At any moment other pieces of myself might be
ripped away,
And I was still bleeding, still wounded,
Still healing.

But, at the very least, I am healing.
I am finding the grace I need to stand tall.
I am recovering the pieces of myself that I lost.

With every breath. Every hour.
I am one step closer.
Growing stronger.
Surviving.
Enduring.
Cold Waters
By Diego V.

I am a river
The Merced River
With smooth waters exploring wherever they go
Crashing and clashing against the rocks ahead
Too often I find something in my way that stops me
A mountain I must sail through to find my destination
But a river always finds its way through
It will channel across the smallest cracks
Rise up until its strong enough to pour over the sides of any mountain

All throughout life
I have had high expectations weighted on my shoulders
that drag me down like anchors
From the day I was born
my dad wanted me to be the best I could be
For him that was a hard worker, a great student,
to be someone in life,
but most importantly to follow my dreams
But my dreams could never satisfy his standards
He wanted a doctor, a lawyer, a professor

He never understood that the man he wanted me to be wasn’t the man I wanted to become
I wanted to find my own path, be my own man, someone I could look up to
But he only wanted to lead me in the direction he thought was right
To steer the river

At an early age I found a large dam ahead of me that held me from my potential
He was the rock that stopped me
The obstacle I would have to overcome to find myself and keep growing
And even though his intentions were for the best
I could not be who he wanted me to be
I had bigger plans than being a man made reservoir

His hopes were in me, his only son
I would be the one to carry the family name
The one who was supposed to make him proud
by being a hard working student
Yet I only brought disappointment to his eyes

He grew up in Mexico to a poor family that could barely sustain itself
His childhood consisted of working as a kid to help support his family
coming to America was a new start for him

He could give his children what he never had
A beginning full of possibilities
And a life full of opportunities

When I was born he wanted to guide me
Make me his ideal son
But you cannot lead a river
Rivers are meant to run freely
I knew where I wanted to go
I wanted to stretch for miles
Take in everything I could learn
and discover the world ahead of me
To carve my own course
To find who I am
A river
Strong, free, independent

To this day I can tell he hasn’t lost hope
in me
He knows I’ll make something out of myself
Maybe not the perfect student
and hard working son he wanted
but what I’ve always wanted
To be a musician and share my love
with others

Now I move with roaring waters
Quickly ascending mountain tops
Progressing toward a valley I have
waited for
I know there is a rough ride ahead
But I have no worries about the future
I am a Golden Eagle
Growing into a strong powerful bird
I was born in Mexico
As a small and fragile bird
My body and mind were not fully developed
I was not strong enough to fly to my distant father’s arms
My dad being away in the United States
Looking for food to bring back to our nest
And I, as a small and fragile bird, was just waiting for the day to become independent and fly across borders

I have a large supportive nest
Depending on my mom and grandma to show me the right paths in life
Like a Golden Eagle showing their young bird the right way
always being patient and compassionate
Both of them doing everything they could to have my brothers and I well-fed and dressed
They worked every Sunday to provide us with a higher quality of life
Making the ingredients for tortas and tostadas Which took them a day and a half
Worn out by all the food they needed to prepare

Exhaustion in their faces and body was visible but masked by their smiles
Always working hard to make sure I would be ready to depart into my hard but extraordinary journey in life

I am a golden eagle
Slowly unfolding my wings to take my first flight

Starting my long journey in life...fledged out of my nest
Scared that my wings wouldn’t be supportive to be able to fly
Scared to not be able to fly as well as others to not being able to adapt in the new environment
Scared to not being able to fit in with the new people
What if this unfamiliar environment was too hard to be able to adapt

Years passed and my dad said you’re ready to fly to the United States
I was overwhelmed with emotions
Happy, sad, nervous and scared
My heart, pumping up and down like a radiant happy child
Crying sad to leave my grandma behind who always stood by my side
My palms cold and sweaty of how nervous I was
How was I going to do it without my most comforting family member by my side?

I am a Golden Eagle
That flew to the United States
Crossing border’s to get to this new place
A place with more opportunities
But these opportunities didn’t come as an easy package
It came with a whole new environment and language
An environment with so many new rules that seem dumb at times
A whole new language that was hard to understand
The next few years were the hardest ones in my life
I used to cry at times and beg my mom to let me fly back

But she always said no and said that this was for the best
I didn’t understand…
I didn’t want to understand all I knew that I wanted to go back

I am a Golden Eagle
That wanted to give up
To give up the power that she had… but my family never gave me the chance to give up
My hardworking dad always encouraging me to be #1
All he wants its the best for me so I won’t end up like him
Working a full time job that doesn’t give him enough time to be with us

For him and my family I grew
I grew into this powerful and beautiful eagle who is never going to give up
Strong at hunting… hunting down the goals in my life
I am a Golden eagle.