

# Skipping Stones

A Multicultural Literary Magazine

Sept. 2024

2024 Youth Honor Awards: A Special Feature

"Culture Embrace" by Amelia Chyu, age 15, grade 8, South Korea.

# 2024 Skipping Stones Youth Award Winners

★ ★ Aayuv Reddy, age 8, New Jersey & Keva Jain, age 10, New York.

★ ★ Eden You, age 11, New York & Anthony Wei, age 11, New York.

★ ★ Arianna Shaprow, age 13, Nevada & Jessie Li, grade 6, British Columbia, Canada.

★ ★ Ben Kwack, age 12 & Jaslene Kwack, age 14, Illinois.

★ ★ Amelia Chyu, age 15, South Korea & Autumn Maley, grade 9, New York.

★ ★ Jack Aronian, age 14, & Laurel Aronian, age 17, Connecticut.

★ ★ Zeran Li, age 16, New York & Steven Wang, age 17, New York.

★ ★ Mahilan Guha, age 17, Maryland & Aditi Nair, age 16, Virginia.

★ ★ Jonathan Junkins, age 17, Oregon & Emily Maremont, age 17, California.

★ ★ Pooja Verma, grade 11, California & Yifei Kevin Niu, age 17, Massachusetts.



Hearty congratulations to all our winners! While selecting these winners, we focused on the themes of our awards: promoting multicultural/international understanding and/or nature awareness/appreciation. Winners will receive an honor certificate, multicultural and nature books, and a one-year subscription to *Skipping Stones*. The awards issue has been mailed to the contributors and subscribers.

We received so many worthy entries that we have selected 20 students as joint winners. We added four extra pages to the printed issue to present the winning entries. We're pleased to share with you these thought-provoking selections, along with a number of noteworthy entries that were not included in the printed Awards issue due to lack of space. Please note that, we'll publish many **Noteworthy YHA Entries** (including some others that are not shared in this digital feature) in our next print issue, Vol. 37, issue 1.

This special feature is offered as our gift to all readers for it promotes global education and good will!

Happy Reading!

—Editors

## **Culture Embrace** *(Front Cover Artwork)*

“Culture Embrace” expresses the bond between generations, transcending age and cultural divides. In this artwork, an old lady and a young girl share a tender embrace, symbolizing the continuity of tradition and the passing down of wisdom and values. Through the universal language of love and compassion, this piece celebrates humanity found in cultural exchange.

—Amelia Chyu, grade 8, South Korea.

## **The 2025 Youth Awards**

The 2025 Youth Honor Award entries are invited by 5 May. Youth aged 7 to 17, can send up to five prose (non-fiction or fiction) pieces, poems and/or up to eight visual (photos or art) pieces for the award considerations along with a cover letter, entry fee, certificate of originality and parental permission. Please see details under *Contest and Awards* section on our website. Send to: [editor@skippingstones.org](mailto:editor@skippingstones.org)

# Skipping Stones

The 2024 Awards Special Feature

## The 2024 Youth Honor Awards

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## About *Skipping Stones*:

*Skipping Stones* is a nonprofit children's magazine that encourages cooperation, creativity, and celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity. We explore stewardship of the ecological and social webs that nurture us. We offer a forum for communication among children from different lands and backgrounds. *Skipping Stones* expands horizons in a playful, creative way. We invite you to send us your creative art and thought-provoking writing.

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## Solution, Not Substitution

A girl stands on the edge of a cement wall. Below her, water crashes down again and again, surging through a row of linear openings in the wall. They thrash like angry monsters, writhing and rolling furiously in a giant pool.

"It's a dam," she realizes. A *giant* dam in the middle of the *ocean*.

A voice startles her.

"Hey! You can't be up here!" yells a man, running toward her. Finally, he reaches the spot where she is standing, panting.

He sputters. "You need to leave. You can't be up here." She examines his uniform, noticing the badge that spells, "NDC."

"What does that mean?" she asks, pointing at it.

"NDC? National Dam Control!" he grumbles.

"Well, where do I go then? Is there a gas station near here or something? Anywhere with directions?"

The worker stares at her in shock. "G- Gas?! We haven't used gas in... ages! Everything is water-powered! It's the most sustainable use of energy! Hydrogen fusion reactors, energy storage from water molecules, hydroelectric power from the national dams. It's the new world!" he exclaims.

"If everything's so nice, then... What's that?" she points ahead. A few miles away, black smoke billows from an unknown source.

"Oh, that? That's the construction team working on another dam. It'll be finished in a few days!" says the worker, proudly.

"But that's smoke. It's bad for the environment," explains the girl.

"It doesn't matter! We're not using fossil fuels, are we? We're not burning up coal or harvesting nuclear energy!" says the worker, angrily. Then he leaves.

"But this is just as bad," says the girl quietly, walking forward and still looking at the clouds of smoke rising into the sky.

Suddenly, she is falling. Her confusion turns to fear. In just a moment, she feels her body enveloped in cool liquid, splashing around her until all is silent.

Looking around, she realizes that she is underwater. But strangely, her vision is perfectly clear. She can even breathe normally.

Shaken, she swims around, finally reaching something solid. A cement wall. She's on the inside of the dam.

All around her, mountains of debris and sand are piled, climbing up the walls. Behind her, twisted white and gray structures span the sea floor, covered in bristles. Coral. All dying, most already dead. She swims further down, all the way to the ground. She can't see a single fish in sight. Even the sand and ground are bare. She spots a hint of green on a spot a few yards away and swims toward it. To her surprise, it is a plant. The tiny plant waves in the water, almost as if it is trembling. Then, it is ripped out of the sand.

The girl watches in horror, then realizes that she too, has begun to move. The powerful currents of the water toss her side to side, jerking her limbs in multiple directions. A whirlwind of debris spins with her in the water, like a tornado. She can't see. She can't breathe. So she closes her eyes.

When she opens them, she realizes she is completely dry. Instead of swimming inside of a dam, she sits in a wooden desk, pencils and papers spread out on its surface. Ahead of her, a teacher calls her name. Students around her all giggle and whisper. Her cheeks burn red, embarrassed, but she can't think of anything except the feeling of cold water rushing against her skin.

She breathes to stay calm, now jolted out of her imagination and fully immersed in reality.

"Sorry, Ms. Caldwell. What was the question?" she asks.

Ms. Caldwell responds patiently.

"Kennedy has creatively proposed that instead of using harmful energy sources, we can rely on a water-powered society to reduce carbon emissions. Kennedy, could you explain your idea one more time?"

Kennedy stands up, reading off of a paper

"Okay, basically, we could have this giant dam in the middle of the ocean. A national dam. And it would power buildings with its energy. Vehicles could use water molecules and water energy to work. And when

## My Two Birthdays!

we need more energy, we can like, make more dams. If we commit to using entirely water-powered energy sources, then we can probably stop climate change,” explains Kennedy, smugly.

The girl pauses, recounting on everything she had just seen. She takes a deep breath, then replies.

“Well, building the dam in the ocean would require resources, and constructing the dam would be both harmful to the environment through carbon emissions and destruction in the sea. The movement within and outside the dam would change the path of water and currents, which could displace sediments and cause them to build up, destroying marine habitats. The species in these habitats like plants, animals, coral, and other marine organisms would die.” She finishes, amazed at her own explanation.

“Then how else would we solve climate change? We have to replace fossil fuels with some other energy!” argues Kennedy.

Everyone waits for the girl’s answer.

“Well,” she starts. “I think that substitution is not a solution. By completely replacing a source for another, we’re just transferring the problem to a different area. Instead of destroying forests, we’d be destroying the oceans, which is still just as bad. I don’t know the exact answer on how to stop hurting the environment, but we should focus on finding a lot of different solutions. We can create more sustainable alternatives for our current methods using many forms of renewable energy. This way, we can balance the resources we use and not grow over-reliant on a single lifestyle,” says the girl.

Silence.

“That... makes sense, actually,” says Kennedy.

“A great argument from both of you. Well done,” compliments Ms. Caldwell.

For the rest of school, the girl doesn’t daydream. Instead, she listens and thinks.

She thinks about the world, its people, and its problems.

She thinks about the future.

—Jaslene Kwack, age 14, Illinois.



Two halves of a world—two halves, each from a different time, each containing a different me.

On the left side, my *Doljanchi*, my first birthday. It is a Korean celebration for when a baby turns one year old. Traditional food, decorations, and items are spread out on a table. On the big rice cake, Korean letters spell out “축 돌,” meaning “Happy First Birthday.”

On the right side, my 14th birthday party. Held in the dining room of my house, it has balloons, wrapped presents, and a fresh cake finished with icing, berries, and a candle that spells “Birthday 14.”

I drew these two different scenes, one portraying the very beginning and the other showing where I am now, to explain how my culture has stood with me. Even though my perceptions of my identity have evolved throughout my life, my first birthday is something that I will always remember and cherish. No matter how many years pass, my *Doljanchi* represents the root of my Korean culture and heritage, which bloomed to create the person I am today.

—Jaslene Kwack, age 14, Illinois.

## The Protest Project

The bell rang and Ms. Erwell's tenth grade students all strode out, shoulders slightly dropped. Everyone had just received a new assignment about an event from the past that had some form of a significant impact on the world.

"I was just planning to drive to a waterpark in Wisconsin with my cousin, and I had promised them that I would be there! Carter, they'll be so mad at me when they find out!" Steven groaned with a trace of surprise still eminent.

I was also pretty shocked by the news. Ms. Erwell has never given out a long term project this entire school year in the time that I had known her for the past five months. But it was too late to stop it. Besides, I knew that if I started my homework early, then it would probably help a lot. I waved goodbye to Steven and walked into my study hall class.

Luckily, Ms. Erwell had already hinted that there would be some type of project, even if no one knew how long it was going to be. At least I already had a decent start on my topic, which was researching about avoiding war in the future by involving *anti-war* protests. I knew that this topic had so much information about it on Wikipedia and other websites, because I had already heard of it quite a few times.

I opened up a tab depicting an image of a small group of people holding a series of black armbands. The header was labeled, "What Happened During the Tinker v. Des Moines Debate?" Essentially, there had been a group of students who had decided to wear black armbands at school to protest against the war in Vietnam. The school board caught wind of the event and banned the armbands. The issue was then handled

by the Supreme Court after a long four years, and the students managed to win!

I felt a sense of relief that some people were still doing what they thought was right to do despite the risks that stood in their way.



Yet, even though some people had previously held protests to end all wars in the future, some of the matters still remained the same. I decided that it may have been because not enough people had supported their causes.

The solution appeared so simple! Why would anyone even want to fight each other anyway? There were so many

easier methods that included verbal battles handled in court. Most wars were started by extremely small problems except for some exceptions, like World War I where an archduke was killed by a gang of Serbians because they thought that he provided a threat to their country.

Thinking about how nobody was joining in on the anti-war matters made me feel like a hypocrite, because I realized that I was judging other people for not joining in on a protest, even though I wasn't doing anything about it either.

I guessed that it was why so many people were reluctant to be willing enough to fight for a cause that they supported.

My fingers sped across the keyboard at a slightly faster speed while my eyes flickered around until I felt the faint stinging sensation in the back of my eye sockets, indicating that I should relax for a second. *Why was I getting so obsessed with just a small homework essay?*

After a few more minutes, I glanced at the clock and saw that it was already 10 PM. Before I headed up

## ★ Cultural Diversity ★

the stairs to go to bed, I opened a new tab and searched up, “How to join a protest.”

★★★★★

I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock ringing. My head fell back onto the comfort zone of my pillows as soon as I tried to raise it.

Finally, my hand somehow managed to find itself on the pause button on the alarm.

The chaotic sound stopped and I fell back under the covers. Thirty minutes later, I stood up and trudged downstairs slowly. I yawned as I opened up my laptop and read the results from the night before.

One website said that anybody could start any type of protest as long as it was not violent. Or they could join another by doing whatever they think that they can do to change other people’s minds, like distributing fliers or joining giant, but peaceful riots which happen by getting peoples’ attention. However, people like police officers could still limit how much the protesters got to do, and shut down violent riots.

Another page caught my attention, which was a protest coming up in just a few days about preventing any more wars to come, in an area two towns over! When I told my mom about this and how I would be going, she surprisingly agreed and welcomed the idea.

On the day of the protest, my heart began to beat quickly and I felt a strange sensation wash over me. It wasn’t fear, but it was determination; determination to do what I knew was right.

—Benjamin Kwack, age 12, Illinois. He writes: “I was inspired to write this story after reading about a protest movement from the 1960s called *Tinker v. Des Moines*. Many people have taken risks in order to do what they thought was right. I hope that my story can help people spread awareness of the efforts taken by protesters.”

Diversity means connecting not just to the country you live in, but with the country your ancestors came from. It’s also about where your roots connect to. If you ask where my roots connect to, the answer is India. The main reason my roots connect me to India is that almost all of my family was born in Telangana, India. Even though I may have been born in America, I still consider myself an Indian at heart.

The greatest way India and America are diverse is by their religions. In India there are Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christianity, and Jainism. Even though there are many religions in India, over 80 percent of the people are Hindu. In America there are Christians, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Mormons, and others. Even though there are many religions, the main and most important religion in the U.S. is Christianity.

As Hindus, we believe in many gods. However, there are three main gods that we call the “Three Heads.” They are Vishnu, the god of management, Shiva, the god of destruction, and Brahma, the god of creation and the creator of the universe.

Another way India is different from America is by our holidays and traditions. One holiday we celebrate is Dussehra, the day Lord Rama (an incarnation of Vishnu) saved his wife from the evil demon, Ravan. Fifteen days later, we celebrate Diwali by eating sweets, and bursting fireworks! The purpose of Diwali is to honor Lord Rama for the day he came back to his kingdom after being exiled for 14 years. Another festival we celebrate is Ganesh Chaturthi. This is when Lord Shiva blessed his son with the power to remove challenges in our lives.

The clothing in India is another way my country is different from other countries. The traditional way for women to dress up is by wearing a saree. Sarees are best known for their elaborate colors, patterns, and designs. Men, however, dress up in kurtas, although we only wear them during festive events. We also put something called *tilak* on our foreheads, which is a red dot, while attending formal ceremonies, doing prayers, or on our birthdays.

One of the most obvious reasons India is different from America is the food. Some of the most popular dishes are varieties of rice, lentils, chicken, *dosa*, *biryani*, *gulab jamun*, *idli*, *kaju katli*, and *laddus*. The most popular dessert in India is *gulab jamun*, and it is made by combining milk solids, flour, and sugar. It is a delicious, spongy, and syrupy treat. However, the most famous dishes are *paneer* (cheese cubes), and *rotis* (unleavened flat bread).

These are just some of the ways India is different from the rest of the world. I may live in America, but I’m Indian by heart, and I’m proud enough to call myself both an Indian and American.

—Aayuv Reddy, age 8, grade 3, New Jersey.

International Day of Sign Languages is celebrated annually on September 23rd during International Week of the Deaf. This year I'm thinking about the sign languages that are being lost, forgotten, left behind.

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting in the kitchen while my grandmother was cooking matzo balls on the stove. She was telling me about how her family used to gather for dinner on Saturday evenings. Their apartment would flood with Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants speaking Yiddish. Sometimes, she would enter the kitchen while her grandmother and great-aunt were cooking buttery *lokshen*, meat-stuffed *kreplach*, and carrot *tsimmes* studded with raisins. Both had immigrated to the United States as young adults from a *shtetl* in what is now western Ukraine. Her grandmother, who was deaf, had never learned American Sign Language (ASL). They would make hand gestures to each other instead of speaking.

After hearing my grandmother's story, I was curious about how deaf Jews in *shtetls* communicated. Throughout my 17 years, I have learned scraps of Yiddish primarily from my grandmother ("Hold still, I need to get that *schmutz* off your skirt!"). Is there a Yiddish Sign Language (YSL)? This question began my search.

A Google search is what I started with, finding an entry for Yiddish Sign Language, but my excitement deflated as I read that experts in sign language are not aware of YSL.

Before WWII and the Holocaust, there might have been sign languages used by deaf Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, although there is no evidence to suggest that a unified YSL ever existed. In other words, as my grandmother would say, my research yielded *bupkis*.

The Holocaust had wiped out my ancestors' *shtetl*, among many others. The people living there had either fled before the war or were sent to concentration camps, where deaf people were especially at immediate risk, because they were considered unsuitable for labor. They were lost along with their unique ways of communicating. If I may never know about the languages my ancestors spoke, what other languages are on the trajectory to obscurity?

It turns out that there are a great number. One of the most critically endangered sign languages is Hawai'i Sign Language (HSL), which has less than 40 signers worldwide. HSL was recognized as a language by linguists at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in 2013.

In contrast to HSL, the spoken Hawaiian language,

while still critically endangered, has around 2,000 native speakers. It was recognized as one of the official languages of the state of Hawai'i in 1978. The Native Hawaiian community has led a movement that has resulted in an uptick of people learning the language. Now, anyone can log onto a computer and take lessons in Hawaiian on the popular language-learning platform Duolingo, along with other endangered languages like Yiddish, Navajo, and Welsh. Lessons in HSL are harder to find.

I believe that when the last speaker of a language dies, two languages die: the spoken form and its sign language equivalent(s). While there is a strong and necessary push to revitalize many endangered spoken languages, sign languages like HSL are being left behind. However, sign language is an integral part of cultural diversity and the inclusion of the Deaf community.

By revitalizing sign languages, we can also push back on oppression, genocide, and colonialism. We can even address the ableism that exists within our cultures. In Yiddish, for example, there are derogatory terms referring to deaf people. Learning how deaf Jews used to refer to themselves would aid in countering this history of discrimination.

Sign language revitalization has its challenges, the largest two being time and access to resources. I wish I had the time to sit down and learn an endangered sign language until I'm fluent in it. But with school and family responsibilities, I can't commit to such a task. Nor are there resources available. I'm still on the lookout for an online course in Hawai'i Sign Language, but all I have is a video teaching me how to sign, "My mother won't eat pork."

There are ways to revitalize sign languages without becoming fluent. I have already explored this with spoken language. Yiddish enriches my family's English conversations because there are words in Yiddish that cannot be fully captured in English. For instance, when my younger brother begged to go shopping at the mall for his bar mitzvah clothing, my grandmother exclaimed: "Going all the way downtown is a whole *megillah*!"

My dead-end search for Yiddish Sign Language has left me deeply motivated to help revitalize endangered sign languages before it's too late. Someday, I could be one of the people researching, cataloging, and developing educational sign language programs.

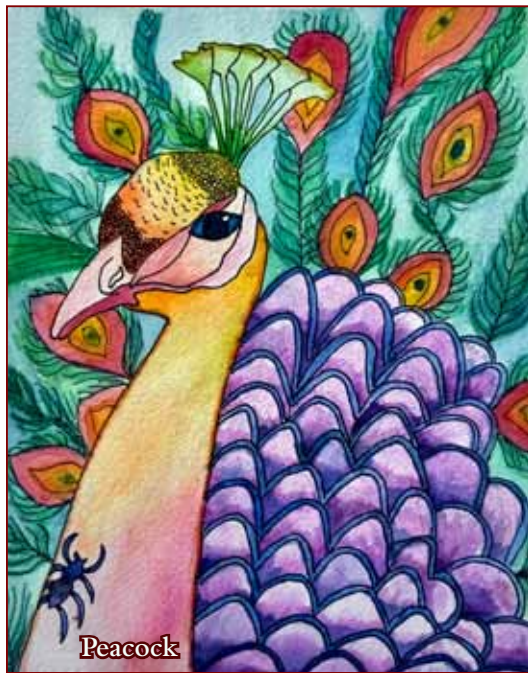
For now, though, I aspire to spread awareness and generate interest in endangered sign languages wherever I go.

—Emily Maremont, age 17, California.

★ Art and Photos by Autumn Maley, grade 9, New York ★



Up in the Tree



Peacock



Ready for a Camel Ride?



Flowers



Visiting a Souk in Morocco



Self Portrait



Statue of Liberty



Concept of Silvopasture

★ **In Search of the Real Me** *by Autumn Maley, grade 9, New York* ★

Slimy. Sticky. Ashamed. Those were the first words and feelings that came to mind when it happened. When saliva happened. When spit happened. It was the fall of 2021, and right before my eyes, my friend, who I had always seen as a good person, had just spit on my other friend and told her to, “go back to where she came from.” The locker room seemed to freeze in time. I stood motionless, realizing it could have been me on the receiving end of her hatred.

As young children, race and ethnicity don’t play a significant role in our minds. It is only as we grow and experience the real world that we are forced to face its truths. For some, the shade of their skin serves as a blessing, while for others, a curse. Either way, our appearances are not merely labels, but rather the fabric of our life opportunities and relationships. It intertwines with our culture, traditions and societal expectations. And I am no exception. I am half Chinese and half White, specifically Irish and German. As a child, I recall adults praising my uniqueness—a mix of people who, geographically, were never supposed to meet. The children at school, however, thought otherwise.

The first time I was forced to confront my race was first grade. I can still vividly picture my classmates and I, sitting with our legs crossed on the carpet in class. A boy in front of me turned around, seemingly harmless. He took both his fingers and stretched his eyes out with them. He continued to do this while pointing and laughing directly at me. A simple, yet shocking and degrading act that would keep me up for hours in nights to come. Later that day, I looked in the mirror and questioned myself. Was there something wrong with me? My eyes?

As school continued, I slowly noticed everyone around me seeing me more for what I looked like, rather than who I was on the inside. My classmates and friends began to comment on my race and ethnicity in perplexing ways. In seventh grade, before the Lunar New Year, our teacher gave a mini lesson on its traditions and meanings. At the end of the discussion, she asked if anyone celebrated Lunar New Year. I raised my hand proudly. A boy who sat in the back of the class shouted at me, asking why I raised my hand. I said I was Chinese, but he did not believe me at first. He even asked for pictures of my parents to see proof. On the other hand, others in the class added how obvious my

Chinese features were, that my light hair was the only feature showing otherwise. I realized that for the rest of my life, everyone would see me in different ways. This troubled me at first, because it meant I could never tell how people saw or thought of me. When I met new people, I would be engaged in a conversation with them, yet the constant thought would ring inside my head: “I wonder if they think I am white...or if they think I am Chinese. Can they tell I am both? What if they don’t like Chinese people and are only talking to me because they only see my white half?”

Now, in high school, I have grown used to the frequent joke, “I doubt Autumn can see it,” when something is pointed out. Or, “Don’t eat it,” when I pet someone’s puppy. To everyone else, simple and funny. And at times, even I will give a light chuckle so it is not awkward. But deep down, I just want to be seen for who I am. I never want to feel ashamed of half of myself, and at times like that, it is very hard not to. Coronavirus did not help the situation. When the pandemic first started, a great deal of people blamed China, and by extension, anyone who was Chinese or even looked Chinese. I felt offended by this but wasn’t sure if I was allowed to feel offended because I am only half. Yet at the same time I felt I wasn’t white enough to say I wasn’t offended by it. This troubled me once again. For a while, I could put it out of my mind because I was on Zoom every day for class, so I didn’t come face to face with taunting at school. But in the news, I saw how people of my race were being harmed in many ways, both physically and mentally, for being the supposed cause of this virus. It hurt me inside, for I knew I had nothing to do with the world-wide pandemic, yet others who looked like me were being punished for it.

I try to live by what my mother once told me: “It is impossible to be happy if you only love half of yourself.” This taught me that it does not matter if others see me as only white or only Asian, because only I can decide who I am, and I choose both. I celebrate not one, but two New Years. I have the privilege of experiencing different cultural traditions and values. I am the bridge between two cultures, embodying the harmony that arises when diversity is embraced. Should there be individuals who laugh at me for having “squinty” eyes, so be it. Because my eyes are wide enough to see the world in a greater lens than they ever will. (*Art on p. 12*)

*“An eye-opening experience with my grandfather that I still remember and look back to whenever I think about nature. In my piece, I describe my grandfather’s unique insights about the world and recount a harrowing story he told me that impacted me as a child and still echoes within me to this day.”*

On a Sunday afternoon in the middle of October, my grandfather and I sat on the back porch looking at the tall trees swaying in the light wind. The colorful mesh of the leaves was as bright as the sun, like a blazing fire. The vibrant ambiance felt like one of Bob Ross’ bucolic paintings coming to life. My grandfather slowly got up, walked towards a tree, and picked up one large orange leaf lying on the ground. He stood there for a few seconds—in silence, in solitude, in contemplation—but slowly, a shy grin arose as he walked back towards me.

“How beautiful, no?” he said in broken English.

“Yes, beautiful,” I nonchalantly replied. The leaf in his hand looked like every other leaf that day. It was bright orange mixed with a fading red and sprinkled with hues of yellow. To me, this leaf was simply the staple of fall colors. However, to my grandfather, there was something special he saw. Something unique. Something worthwhile.

My grandfather was always fascinated by nature and celebrated its acts of wonder every day. He believed that plants and animals had a world of their own, a world free from the shackles of ours, a world where peace was a suitable norm.

“These trees are from Bangladesh,” he said, “look this leaf... Not same tree. But similar. Bangladesh was more beautiful. Perfect. Until ‘47,” he continued as his voice got softer.

As an eight-year-old, I asked, “What is ‘47?”

He quickly turned his head, looked me in the eyes, switched dialects to our mother tongue of Bengali, and asked, “You don’t know?” My heart had stopped out of fear I had said something wrong or even offensive. However, once my grandfather finished happily bathing in my dread, he bellowed out a comforting chuckle that extricated my worries.

He continued, “Don’t worry, I’ll tell you.”

Awaiting an interesting and engaging story, little did I know, in the next 30 minutes my imagination

would take me to a place I had never seen before—a place far from perfect.

\*\*\*

August 15, 1947, was the day India achieved independence from Britain. However, with it came the separation of Hindus and Muslims, leading to a brutal migration. I was seven at the time, and our family had to migrate as well. But how could we? Our livelihoods, our roots, our future, all of it was in Bangladesh. The times were changing, though. We had no choice.

Over the past several days, riots had ravaged nearby villages like a pack of wolves hunting their way through a dense yet exposed forest. It shook us to our core. I still remember our last night. I ate two warm rotis, my favorite fish, and very spicy okra. I ate the food I loved in the place I loved with the people I loved. It felt like peace, something I longed for, cherished, and desired. It was an escape from all the chaos going around. It was my catharsis. As I went to sleep, I reflected on how grateful I was for the life I had, a life that gave me peace of mind.

“Wake up!” my brother said as he vigorously shook me awake.

“Why? What time is it?” I replied.

“One o’clock, we need to leave!”

He held my hand as we quickly left the house. My parents and sister carefully led the way through the ocean of darkness surrounding us. The smoke-filled atmosphere was suffocating, the unwavering silence was deafening, and the unmistakable circumstances were devastating. As we continued our desperate flee, my heart raced furiously, and my lungs and eyes burned incessantly. I soon lost focus and tripped, splashing my right hand in a small puddle. I looked back to check what I tripped on, and it was a corpse lying exposed on the cold, barren ground. I looked at my palm; it was enveloped in a layer of deep red blood. I immediately started to cry, but my brother wasted no time. He swiftly picked me up with his trembling hands, and we continued running towards the closest train station. During a brief moment, I saw the riots take place in front of my tear-filled eyes. People carried flaming sticks and even pitchforks—it was like a tragic nightmare, but it was real.

Amid the chaos, it felt like they wanted to kill me, a kid who was nothing more to them than a follower of a different religion—not a child, not a human, not a life. All the rage and all the violence deafened my senses. I wondered, what purpose did it all serve? Why did it never end?

Eventually, my family reached a local train station and luckily managed to sneak onto a train. Relief ensued afterward as we knew we would be safe. I stopped crying, but my mother began to cry as she let the past hour of our lives truly sink in. We were all in pain. Everyone on the train that day was in pain—everyone in the nation, as well. Who knew that even in the most peaceful of places, disaster could come knocking on the door? We soon reached a small town in West Bengal and found a new home for ourselves, a home we were all extremely grateful to have.

★ ★ ★

“This world is a mess, you know,” he continued, “but nature... nature isn’t a mess... it’s very, very beautiful,” he said with an infectious smile.

That day I realized that the world we lived in was far from perfect, but importantly, there was always a way to make it better. My grandfather and I sat there, reminiscing while appreciating the nature all around us.

“One o’clock,” my grandmother shouted.

“Let’s go,” my grandfather said.

It was his favorite part of the day... the part where he could eat the food he loved with the people he loved in a place he loved, something that would never get old.

—*Mahilan Guha, age 17, grade 11, Maryland.*

## ★ Silent Sufferers ★

Once upon a time, in the vast expanse of the ocean, beneath the shimmering surface, lay a world full of beauty. Fish and turtles glided peacefully while coral reefs teemed with life. But now, all that has vanished. All we can do now is struggle to survive. I, a sea turtle—one of the lucky ones—am still alive. But we have gone through many other heartbreaking times. We have watched our closest friends perish when they run into plastic bags during hunting. We have watched coral reefs slowly bleach and become lifeless, when many lose their homes. We have watched our once vibrant paradise turn into a battlefield; a battlefield where not only do we battle against food and shelter, but also battle against an invisible enemy that threatens to consume us all: *climate change*.

Climate change is making life extremely harsh for a turtle. But perhaps one of the most sorrowful consequences is the loss of our young. Due to warmer water temperatures, more females are hatching than males. Females are struggling to find mates to reproduce. Additionally, they also face a dangerous journey; females have to swim longer distances, meaning that the chance that they will be devoured by a predator is high. And even if they do find a mate, it is still very hard for them to dig nests in sand that is too soft or too hot. While we suffer silently, humanity is still busy making this demon even more powerful by burning fossil fuels and using plastic.

Plastic is what kills many of my friends. They tend to get trapped in plastic bags or gobble them down, and over one million of us are killed each year. I'm sure you want to help and you're looking for solutions right now. But you know what? I can give you some. You can help us by using metal containers and water bottles. Next time when you go shopping, you can also take a cloth or paper bag with you. If they ask you if you would like a plastic bag, say no. Additionally, you can buy in bulk to reduce plastic waste. Always try to avoid using plastic, and instead use renewable materials. Remember, plastic takes 500 years to biodegrade while renewable materials can only take a few months. Following these tips may seem like a small change to you, but if everybody does it, it can mean the world to me.

Ahhhhh... I've never been in a hot tub before. I feel like the water is so warm right now! But this might not be such a great thing; it means that global warming is getting even worse. Burning fossil fuels is the problem. Fossil fuels account for 75% of climate change. Fossil fuels release carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) into the atmosphere, which causes temperatures and sea levels to rise, and more natural disasters to occur.

But you can help us turtles bring back that world of beauty. How can you do that? You can drive an electric car instead of a gas car. You can bike, walk or take public transport whenever possible. Always try to use alternatives and avoid using coal, oil or gas. Remember, fossil fuels are a nonrenewable energy source, which means that they cannot be replenished and will damage the environment.

Did you know that 750 billion tons of ice is melting each year due to global warming? This means that every second you sit here, a whopping 24,000 tons of water—equivalent to 10 olympic swimming pools—is being added to the oceans! And if this continues to happen, you might see me crawling onto a building someday. Many coastline cities, such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco could be underwater by 2050! Sea levels have risen 8 to 9 inches since 1880. If humans choose to ignore the fact that this must be stopped, all species on earth will perish. You, and me, and everyone else.

But amidst this despair, there is still hope; hope that human beings, as species on this planet, can work together—as a global community—and defeat this corrupt demon that is preparing to swallow us all. Making a change is in our hands, for we can write a new chapter in the history of our planet. And it is a chapter that must be written before it is too late.

—Eden You, age 11, New York. Eden adds: “Writing is one of my favorite hobbies, and I won a Skipping Stones Youth Honor Award last year. I also enjoy sports including tennis, basketball, and swimming, and like to play the clarinet. I often go to China with my family. I enjoy traveling.”

## ★ Sages of Borneo ★

The Bornean orangutan swung around on the vines, using both its hands and feet to brachiate around the treetops. It was lanky, with the strength of five adult men. I watched in awe from the balcony of the small wooden lodge Mom and I were staying in during our trip to Malaysia in 2022. Eager to find an abundance of wildlife, I had been pretty disappointed when we reached our first stop, the bustling city of Kuala Lumpur, with no wildlife whatsoever.

But then, when we flew to the Island of Borneo in a dangerously small plane, I completely changed my mind. The second we landed, I could feel the damp, rainforest vibe. The calls and yelps of monkeys, chirps of birds, and snarls of predators reverberated around the jungle. I was dead set on seeing the orangutan, a species I had only seen in TV shows and in pictures. I wanted to run into the rainforest to look for them, but Mom stopped me before I did anything stupid.

The first thing we did was settle down in a small, dingy, wooden lodge in the middle of the rainforest. For some reason, the breakfast table was made of a canoe Sir David Attenborough once sat in. As I left the table for a day of adventuring, I saw it; the big orange ape—Pongo pygmaeus. This animal shares 97% of its DNA with me. It swung around gracefully, better than any monkey could. It was built for the trees. After a brief moment, without even time for pictures, the huge orange hairball swung out of sight.

Little did I know, what I would see the next day would excite me even more. We were going to an orangutan natural preserve. As soon as we walked through the wooden gates, I could hear the sounds of the many animals in the protected patch of rainforests. I could also hear the distinct calls of the male orangutans. Those calls are boosted to a range of 1.2 miles with their cheek and neck flaps, which only develop in males. We came just in time for lunch. Orangutans will eat almost 400 different types of fruit, favoring the stinky and spiky durian. In this park, the rangers gathered an abundance of fruit, including some lettuce and carrots, but mostly just bananas. It surprised me that the rangers wouldn't let the orangutans forage for their own food, just like in the wild. I guess that prepared me for seeing that the orangutans in the park were slightly fatter than the one I saw in the wild, because they

didn't have to find food for themselves and could eat as much as they wanted to. The wild orangutan, on the other hand, likely had a hard time eating its fill, resulting in it being very skinny.

The big debate is this: is it better to have the orangutans in the forest, or in the reserve? The orangutans in the reserve are carefree, laid-back, and they don't have to look for their own food. This is good and bad. I personally think that orangutans should know how to find their own food, not just have it handed to them. They won't know how to survive in the wild. The wild orangutan, however, was vigilant, constantly on the watch, and probably had chronic hunger. But it was also very happy and free. Even though the orangutans in the reserve looked pretty happy, with all the tire swings and monkey bars the zoo provided them with, they just weren't free.

To me, freedom and happiness are the most important aspects. The wild orangutans, though never getting their fill, won't starve to death either, will they? They are the masters of jungle herbology, knowing what is safe to eat and what isn't. But they aren't exactly safe enough. Deforesters are orangutans' worst nightmare. In the reserve, there's no such thing as deforesting. But in the wild, you never know when some random guy with a chainsaw and an excavator will come along.

Since there are faults to both sides, the best option for the future of the orangutans would be a mix of the protected and the wild. Instead of moving the orangutans into a reserve, we could just turn the entire rainforest into a protected reserve patrolled by rangers; one where orangutans are free to roam and gather their own food and won't have to worry about pesky guys with chainsaws and excavators; one that has orangutans free to roam and forage for their own food, whilst under the protection of an armada of rangers.

When we got home, the orangutans of Borneo hitched a ride in my brain. Now, three years later, I still remember the gentle giants covered with orange fur. The sages of Borneo will always remain, both in my head and in the real world.

—Anthony Wei, age 11, New York. *"I love animals, dinosaurs, and anything in nature. I also like to draw, write and experiment with things that often don't come out very well. But making mistakes is the first step to learning things."*

## Grass

short for some  
tall for others  
due to seasons  
changing its colors

smell the green  
know its feel  
perceive the texture  
laps your heel

billions of blades  
born every day  
double that amount  
mowed down anyway

kindergarteners  
or grades  
one through five  
constantly rip  
and tear them alive  
watch them fly  
through the sky  
still carrying clumps of their houses

way up high  
reproduced in plastic  
and rubber dirt  
cutter-mobiles  
constantly alert

all around  
none appreciate  
without them  
inevitable fate



Owl in Scope  
by Jack Aronian

## Where Do Poems Hide

I wake up and see  
Rain hitting my window  
Repelled by the trees

Wind blowing  
Leaves quivering  
Spiraling through the air  
As though caught by an invisible whirlpool

The constant rap  
Of thunder re-echoing  
In the breeze  
The white flash and  
Clap of lightning

The joy of splashing through  
Dense muddy puddles  
The clouds releasing  
All their stored anger and beauty

## To Wind

Thanks for migrating here for the spring—  
Turning from a frigid frosty gale  
Into a nice spring of moist, warm breeze...

How you whistle through my hair—  
Somehow cooling me down when I dash so fast...

You make the trees sway,  
Staying with me all the way...

A hurricane would *not* be nice;  
However a cool rainy wind  
Could be a delight...

Thank you Wind,  
From Unspecified Human

—Jack Aronian, age 14, Connecticut, writes: “I like to create video and film clips, and recently received an award for a horror short I wrote and produced. I also shoot content and photography for County Parks. I have a background working on farms; I love animals and being in nature. My writing focuses on small details of the outdoors, such as grass, that may be overlooked yet are essential in our ecosystem. I also reflect on the power of nature, such as wind, and how weather affects nature and humankind.”

## Season Haiku

### Spring

Friendly quacking duck,  
feathers spiral with mild air,  
feels vernal sun's glare.

### Fall

Turkey bound and dragged,  
muffled squawks echo from bag,  
poor bird is now gagged.

### Summer

Crash of ocean waves,  
thunderstorm with lightning flash,  
pond with frogs that splash.

### Winter

The sleepy snow haze,  
cold blanket muffling the ground,  
no plant breaking through.

## ★ The Woods ★

The first day of our everlasting autumn break, and my brother Jack and I were already bored. A few weeks previous, I had gone on a walk with our next-door neighbor into the woods, where he had shown me a large rock behind the house that we all called “Henry’s House.” I was eager to go back and show the mountainous rock to my ten-year-old brother. As I told him about it, we came up with a number of plans for what we could do once we found the big rock: make a movie, create an obstacle course, put on a play...

After grabbing a sweater each, we set out into the woods. At the time, it would’ve been a much easier idea to walk on the road until we actually reached Henry’s House, then to go behind it and search for the rock. But I was worried about trespassing on a property when the owner wasn’t home, so we decided it would be a better idea to take a back route behind our pond and through the forest. The only problem—we weren’t actually sure how to find the rock from the back way.

We walked down our driveway, then past our pond and into the woods. It was a beautiful fall day, crisp and probably fifty degrees. The ground was covered with pale, brown, crunchy leaves, and the sun streamed through the thin, brittle branches above us. Up top, the sky was yellow in the way that the sky can only be on a November’s day, and all around the scent of transforming greenery was fresh in the air. The warm weather had caused the ground to soften a bit, and for a few minutes, Jack and I forgot it was the start of winter. Actually, we didn’t even think about the fact that Jack was only wearing sweatpants and a sweater, and I was only in a sweatshirt and a pair of leggings.

As we headed along the way toward Henry’s House, we stumbled across the river behind one of my other neighbor’s houses. We had been to this point several times before, and I had the vague idea that if we followed this river, we could reach the large rock. So, Jack and I followed along the river, chatting happily about all the things that we as middle schoolers talked about: grades on the standardized test, the upcoming middle school musical, friends, teachers.

Before we knew it, we had reached a curve in the river... and realized that we had a problem. This was

where Henry’s House should be (or at least where I thought it should be), where the river curved right. Instead, there was a large, brick building undergoing construction. Workers shouted from yards away, driving around lawnmowers and booming construction vehicles. Jack and I stared at each other, bemused. The last time we had checked, Henry’s House was fully intact. We must have just gotten turned around.

“Should we just keep following the river?” Jack bounced from rock to rock, his blonde hair flipping around like a lion’s mane.

“Yeah, good idea, I don’t see a rock here. Maybe it’s further down.” We turned right to continue along the river and began to explore this part of the forest we’d never been in. Our parents didn’t know we had gone exploring, and I didn’t have my phone with me, but I didn’t think about all that. We just kept walking along the winding river.

At some point, we realized the sun was leaning westward, and it was getting late in the afternoon. Dusk would be falling soon. Yet we were already a long way from the construction site, and it would take us far too long to get back if we just turned around and went through the maze of the woods. Instead, we decided to cut up to the cliff on our right, and head back that way because we thought it would bring us back home again. We would call it quits for today and continue our journey tomorrow. The cliff was a gradual rise, layers of dirt and rock, coming to a flat peak that extended (or so we thought) back to our house. Although we could feel the onset of worry beginning to set in, Jack and I pretended everything was fine. We climbed up the hill, singing, joking, laughing, racing, seeing who could reach the top first.

“I am the king of the mountain!!!” we cried, tussling on each of the ledges. I had the continual goal of trying to catch up with Jack, who, being a bit more daring than I was, always stood a few ledges above me.

“I’ll catch you!!!” I said with a laugh when I got close to him again, trying to snatch one of his shoelaces. We continued working our way up the mountain, carefree as could be, slowly inching our way upward, maybe going left, or maybe going all over the place.

When we reached the top, we realized that instead

## **"I could see tears beginning to form in Jack's eyes."**

of traveling just the right amount to the right to fall even with our home, we had traveled too far and overshot it completely. At this point, we had to be at least a couple miles away from our house, and there was no trace of a way back.

"So... should we try and find a trail back?" I asked.

"Yeah," Jack said. We both were acting like nothing was wrong, at least not just yet.

"There are some trails over here," I said, gesturing to our left. In between the masses of trees, several horse trails wound away, all spiraling off in random directions. Then I dropped onto a log and sighed. "They're just going to go on for miles. Even if we follow one, it'll probably just take us to a state park or something."

In front of us, behind us, and to our left and right, were trees, countless dark trees, blocking out the light. I had always loved the forest, but right now, I prayed for a meadow.

"What about that tree?" Jack asked. A tall, many-branched cedar rose through the canopy. "I could try climbing it. I'm pretty good at climbing trees; I know I could reach the top."

I hesitated. "Those branches are way too spindly. They'd easily crack under our weight."

"I can do it, but not you! Being smaller than you has its advantages."

"N-no you can't," I said. "If you fell, we'd have no way of getting help." The weight of my responsibility suddenly crashed over me. My parents weren't here right now, which meant it was my duty to take care of my younger brother. I was responsible for his life at that very moment.

"Let's keep looking," I said, trying to keep my voice even. Right now, my brother was the only one keeping me from falling into panic, and I figured if that was the case, I was the only one keeping him from collapsing as well.

"There's a hill up there," Jack said, pointing to a little knoll on our right. "If we can't go on the tree, maybe we'll have a better view from that high ground."

"Good eye," I said, and followed him up the hill. It didn't make a difference. Even from atop the hill, all we

could see were more trees.

"If we have to sleep out here then maybe we can sleep on the big tree," Jack pointed to the cedar. When I didn't answer, he tried another idea. We knew that rather than giving in, we had to find a way out. "Are you sure that we can't get back to Henry's House?"

"It's far away now, we'll just get more lost," I said. We were surrounded by woods, all turned around, and daylight was beginning to fade. I had no clue what to do.

"Look, there's a gate!" Jack shouted.

Jack and I stampeded down the hill, trampling bushes in our rush to reach the gate. On the very top of the gate, a sign read: "Private Property. Violators Will Be Prosecuted."

"Arghh," I groaned and sank to my feet.

"Wait, I know where we are!!!" Jack said, jumping with excitement. "This is the back of the field with the apples!"

"Oh yeah!" Every fall, we picked apples on a property that belonged to one of our neighbors. Yet there was no way we could just trespass, and besides, I wasn't sure that this gate led in the direction we needed to go.

I peered through the gate at the field beyond. "We're not on the right side though. The apples are on the other side of the field, and that's the only way back... That apple orchard is huge and I don't know if we can find our way out of it in time. Even if we did break in, we'd never make it back home before nightfall."

I could see tears beginning to form in Jack's eyes. "Let's just go back to the top of the hill," I said, "and look around again. Maybe there's another entrance."

I shivered as the chilly breeze whipped me through my paper-thin sweater. If we didn't find a way back now, we'd probably be stuck out here all night. Who knew how cold it would get? I scolded myself for forgetting to check the weather this morning, and forgetting my phone, and not making a better plan. I was the older one and should have been more responsible.

At the top of the hill, everything looked the same as it did before, just a bit darker. Hopelessly, I turned to Jack. "Maybe we should just follow along the fence

## The Woods... *continued*

until—” Jack suddenly screamed, “Telephone lines!”

To our right was a telephone pole. A line of telephone poles, to be precise, stretching far into the distance. “YES!!” Jack screamed, bursting into tears.

“It’s the path back!” I cried as I recognized our old, familiar dog walking trail. Quickly as possible, we ran along the telephone poles, zigzagging through the woods and undergrowth. Within several minutes, we arrived directly back at the path that bordered the house with the apple tree, but this time on the right side.

Jack and I sprinted home, like caged animals set free, moving faster than we had in a year. We didn’t stop running until we reached our doorway and heaved ourselves through it, sobbing the whole time.

Even after we were home, I didn’t forget that Jack and I had kept each other’s spirits up. If it weren’t for his tenacious attitude, I doubt that I would’ve ever made it home that night. Jack is the kind of person to never give up, always striving to be the best, to reach the top. Even when we were racing up the hill to be “King of the Mountain,” he was trying to keep me motivated and going forward.

Safe in my bed, I thought, what if we were still out there now? Then I realized that even if I was stuck out there at this very moment, as long as Jack and I were together, keeping each other from falling into darkness, we would find our way out of the woods.

—Laurel Aronian, age 17, Connecticut, writes: “I love to write in all genres (poetry, prose, journalism). I have a passion for music, and I perform as a singer-songwriter and guitarist, as well as classical and choral music. When I’m not writing or making music, I’m playing competitive chess.”

## So Long, Schoolhouse *(a pantoum)*

Look at the empty shacks,  
The children once inhabited.  
Their broken pencils snapped  
Across skinny slab-like wooden desks.

The children once inhabited,  
The decaying wooden bunkers.  
Across skinny slab-like wooden desks  
They wrote love notes to each other.

The decaying wooden bunkers,  
In a dark October forest.  
They wrote love notes to each other  
Our generation never noticed.

In a dark October forest,  
They roam and search for scraps.  
Our generation never noticed;  
Never charted on any maps.

They roam and search for scraps,  
Their broken pencils snapped,  
Never charted on any maps,  
Look at the empty shacks.

—Laurel Aronian, age 17, Connecticut.

## Fiction

*(Inspired by Night, by Elie Wiesel)*

Is all His power  
Our belief in His power  
That gives us power?

Fiction is written  
When nonfiction is twisted  
To paint a picture.

If we don’t depend  
On fiction, our fear creeps in  
When we see the end.

—Laurel Aronian, age 17, Connecticut.

★ **Spirit of the Navajo** ★

Golden, dusty maroon colored sands  
Stretch until the land  
meets the desert night sky  
Endless, eternal

Diamond dust scattered  
across the pitch-black canvas  
Lighting up the land and our souls

At sunset  
Fiery red, yellow, and orange hues  
paint the sky  
Setting it on fire  
Relentless, sublime  
Until they fade  
into oblivion

The smell of sagebrush  
Just before the rain  
Floral and herbal notes ignite the senses  
Desert dandelions emit their nostalgic aroma

Coyotes howl in the distance  
Alerting us of their presence  
They are formidable  
A symbol of wisdom and strength

Night sky  
A pale yellow moon  
Its glowing presence  
shone onto the sand dunes  
A sliver of silver cuts across the sky

Asleep at night  
A Navajo blanket wraps around me  
Providing warmth  
Ambient air and warm winds  
Delight the senses with their dewy freshness

Desert's delicate breath  
A scent like no other  
The aroma of the night

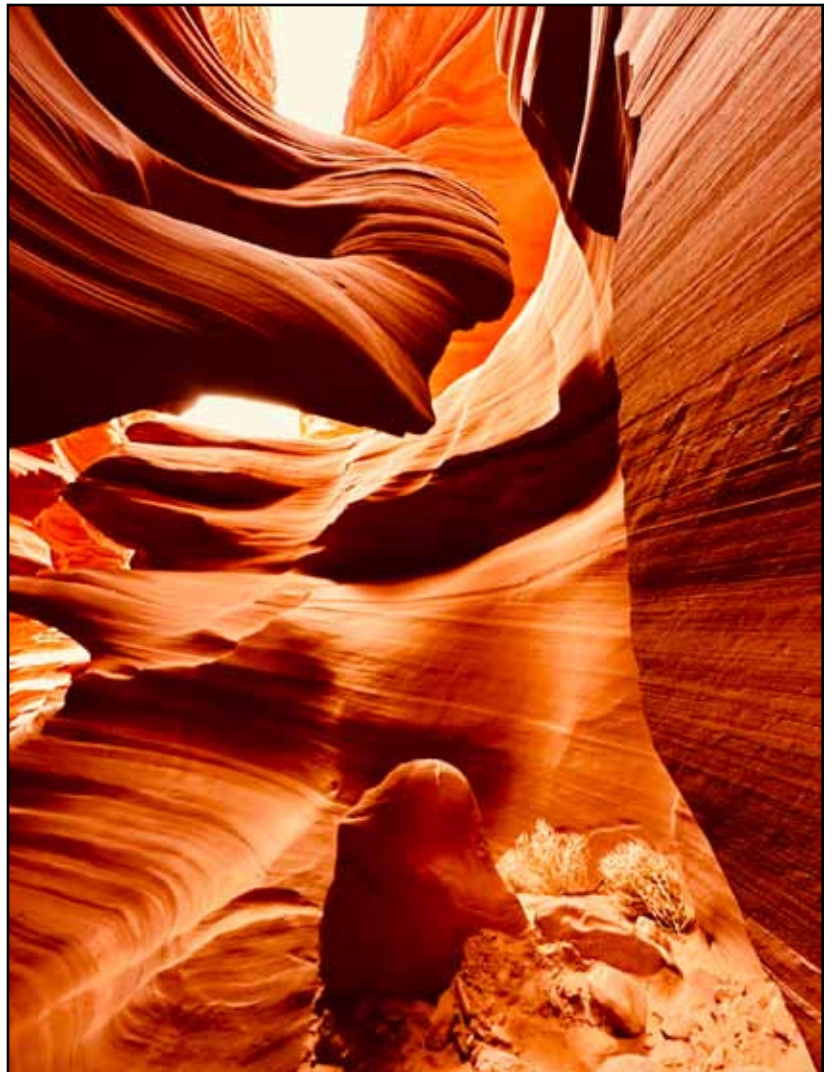
—Arianna Shaprow, age 13, Nevada.

*Arianna's poetry has been displayed in a number of museums, and her creative projects have been featured on several news networks in various urban centers. We've also published several poems by her.*

★ **Landscape Photography** by Arianna Shaprow, 13, Nevada ★



Horseshoe Bend, Navajo Nation, near Page, Arizona



Lower Antelope Canyon, Navajo Nation, near Page, Arizona

★ **Art by Jessie Li, grade 6, British Columbia, Canada** ★

“Art has been my passion since I can remember, and I've dedicated countless hours to improving my skills through various mediums including painting, drawing, and digital art. Despite my age, I've already had my solo art exhibition at 6 years old and became a columnist at 10 years old drawing poem illustrations for a Chinese youth magazine.

“As a teenager artist living in Canada, diversity means embracing and recognizing the differences. Because my parents are Chinese immigrants, I understand quite well how much effort they have to make to be fit in the society. In my artworks, I tried to showcase the beauty of diversity by depicting people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and ages with very strong color. I also seek inspiration from school and classmates to infuse my creations with originality and depth.

“As for a nature/ecology submission, I was trying to mix my own experiences in nature into this art piece. All the activities as skiing, rafting and hiking help me get a better sense of protecting our Mother Nature!

—Jessie Li, grade 6, British Columbia, Canada.



**Nature of Canada**



**We Are Different**



**Wonderful Experiences in Nature**

## ★ You Say ★

You say  
I can do anything, but  
my hand always falls short.

You say  
I am loved, but  
no eyes meet mine.

You say  
I will be more, but  
my dreams rise up only to fall back into ashes.

As I continue to lift myself,  
my fiery wings turn into stone.  
I feel the warmth of something more,  
but I just burn once again.

My words are stifled,  
my hands are tied and  
my brain shuts down as something new begins to surge.

My life is under the sway of hunger—  
blocking my thoughts and actions.  
“Oh no,” I hear them say.  
“Not again,” I hear them murmur.

A constant cycle,  
one they never signed up for,  
but a contract written in stone.

I am not the limited child they think I am.  
I am more. I am hope.  
Yet, I see myself falling, but  
like a phoenix,  
I rise from the ashes.

You say  
my choices have bounds, but  
I am anew. I know there is more to life,  
I just need the love and avenue.

—Aditi Nair, age 16, Virginia. She adds: “I wrote “You Say” from the perspective of someone with a disability. I placed myself in their shoes and reflected on their experience, signifying that everyone is important, must be valued and respected, and can do anything, no matter what.

I've always loved volunteering my time to help those in need. It gives me an immense sense of satisfaction. Through the many respite nights and summer camps at the Autism Society of Central Virginia (ASCV), I have developed a profound affection for spending time with teens and elemen-

## I Am Possible

After a full day spent in the hot sun, it was the end of another session of the Autism Society of Central Virginia (ASCV) summer camp. I paired with a little girl who was slightly high on the autism spectrum. She was captivated by the sounds around her and treasured affection. Although we did not speak much, our connection was strong. The next day, the little girl's mother thanked me for caring for her daughter. Following the conclusion of the summer camp, I noticed how kindness can make a difference in the lives of others.

Kindness is being friendly, generous, and considerate; however, the word means much more. I like to think of kindness like a fire. Once the spark starts, it consumes all. Rather than a destructive fire, the fire of kindness radiates the flames of positivity and selflessness. It is a word that emanates warmth and spreads to find new connections between similar and different individuals. In my two years as a dedicated volunteer for ASCV, my passion for supporting individuals across the autism spectrum deepened and flourished. Inspired by my experiences with neurodiverse youth, I founded a not-for-profit initiative, I'mPossible, dedicated to promoting STEAM education among children with learning challenges. This summer, as a program intern for ASCV, I will be extending the impact of I'mPossible for the first time through interactive STEAM workshops tailored to meet diverse student needs in collaboration with the organization's fantastic staff and team of volunteers.

I'mPossible's reach extends to neurodiverse youth, children with special needs, and students from Title I schools. The initiative aims to foster inclusivity and

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tary children facing various learning challenges. My essay is about my non-profit initiative, I'mPossible, inspired by my engagement with organizations such as ASCV that allow me to connect with neurodiverse youth. I'mPossible is dedicated to fostering inclusivity in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) education among children with learning challenges. I aim to share my passion through a fun and engaging approach where science seamlessly intertwines with art. Last summer, I created an online, global literary magazine, The Possible Society, weblink: <https://sites.google.com/view/the-possible-society/magazine>

equity in STEAM by enriching minds with hands-on activities and creative workshops.

I'mPossible's eight workshops highlight an essential topic in everyday life with an out-of-the-box approach. Built from kindness and empathy, the non-profit initiative relays the importance of using one's skills and expertise to help others succeed. To that end, neurodiverse youth face many challenges, especially in education and learning new skills. With the use of colors, pictures, easy-to-read slides, sensory-friendly spaces, and a step-by-step activity, the workshops meet the diverse needs of the participants, giving everyone access to STEAM, regardless of their age or background. The activities encourage creativity and innovation, allowing students to freely explore ideas and embrace failure as a part of the learning process. This experience will leave a lasting impact on the participants. Students will learn to appreciate their unique strengths, build a sense of community, and promote acceptance, boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem. For example, most youth with autism thrive in structured environments.

The workshops will provide clear explanations, step-by-step processes, and routines to reduce anxiety and encourage participation by giving a sense of predictability. By including visual aids in the presentations and breaking the projects into small and simpler steps, students can actively engage in creating unique artwork, slime making, building paper circuit cards, or even building a simple mini-paper microscope. This approach aids in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment where every participant will learn new skills, develop coping mechanisms through sensory stimulation, and develop social skills through collaboration and teamwork.

Kindness, empathy, leadership, and inclusivity are crucial to I'mPossible's goals and visions for the future. On that note, youth leadership and building an inclusive community are at the forefront of the project's execution. Youth leaders will strengthen the project by emphasizing diversity and creating an inclusive community where every student is valued, respected, and heard regardless of age or background. Currently, I'mPossible is establishing an inclusive youth leadership board so everyone can voice their opinions, advocate,

and help find solutions to problems while creating a more significant change in the community.

An internship experience with Stone Soup, a literary magazine, was my first indulgence in editing and formatting pieces in preparation for publication. The magazine internship honed my skills in crafting compelling content and gave me access to the backend process of magazine production. Last summer, drawing from the magazine internship experience, I expanded the impact of the I'mPossible initiative by creating a global literary magazine titled The Possible Society. By conducting creative writing workshops on virtual platforms such as schoolhouse.world by Khan Academy, I provided students from around the globe the opportunity to submit their literary pieces spanning from science to art, and the first issue of The Possible Society was published in Sept. 2023. In line with this vision, as a program intern for ASCV this summer, I plan to offer creative writing and art workshops and give teens and elementary-aged children with learning challenges a chance to publish their creative pieces on The Possible Society platform.

When I founded the I'mPossible project and The Possible Society, I felt like I was cruising through uncharted waters with endless possibilities. I often felt my ideas would sink since I had no training or knowledge to start my organization. Taking the initiative to start these projects, reflecting my love for STEAM and literature, has motivated me to help others share their voice, grow as lifelong learners, and continue exploring the endless possibilities in life.

—Aditi Nair, age 16, Virginia.

## ★ To Each Their Own ★

You've been climbing as long as you can remember, working your way up the rock wall. Your hands have chafed open, cracking and bleeding and healing over again, but you're getting more and more comfortable. Your arms are stronger; your stamina has improved. It's frustrating to have to keep moving forward, having to keep up with the daily quota, but you've been doing it. It just gets a little hard at times. The handholds shift sometimes, sometimes they break, sometimes you just have to crawl up a crevice in the stone.

You hear a voice from above you, and look over to see a friend, sitting on a ledge far above your head. "I finished my quota for the entire week today, so I'm giving myself some time to rest, y'know, build up my strength." Looking beyond him, you can see a rope trailing off into the distance. Noticing your gaze, your friend responds. "Oh, yeah, this? This is courtesy of my family. It's nice to not worry about slips here and there, and sometimes I don't even need to use my hands! Really makes climbing smoother." You've never had a rope. It'll take days to get to that ledge, and by the time you arrive, you might not even be able to take a break, for fear of falling behind. You keep climbing.

Further up, you come across a long vertical crack in the wall: no handholds in sight until after the gouge ends. It's been a while since your last rest, and your arms are tiring, but no matter how much you want to, the last thing you can do is put it off until later. You sigh, wedging yourself uncomfortably into the narrow cleft in the wall. It's hard going, as shimmying up a gap is much more strenuous than just going from handhold to handhold. After a day or so, you're about three fourths of the way there, and you're hurting. You're sore all over, and have only just now gotten to the widest part of the fissure. You're stretched as far as you can go, contorted in order to make progress.

You hear a scoff. "Kids these days. So lazy, always taking breaks. Never putting in the effort." Your limbs are trembling, your grip is loosening, your teeth gritting with exertion. With whatever mobility you have, you glance over. It's an older couple, in an elevator. An elevator! The older man frowns. "Hey you! Answer when you're addressed by your elders! I used to be in the army, and sure wasn't fighting for people like you." He throws a stone. It hits you in your side, causing your back to spasm, your torso to contort. You lose your grip,

shredding your fingertips in an effort to keep from losing too much ground in the backslide. You can't tune out the couple still ahead of you. "It was only a small stone! You didn't have to take it so personally!" "I know you've climbed these types of rifts before! Just do what you did then! Or if you were smarter like us, you would just get an elevator!" With a ding, the couple's elevator moves on. And you're back where you started.

You're hurting, bad. You feel your blood running down your arms, your fingers aching every time you bend them, your arms and legs tying themselves in knots with cramps. You don't know how much longer you can hold on. You hate yourself for being so weak, for not being able to climb as high, as fast, as well as the others.

"Hey! You doin' alright?" Through the sweat in your eyes and the hair in your face, you see a figure up above you, swinging their legs out the alcove. The voice pipes up again. "Ah. Yeah, those fissures suck. Have you tried wedging your back against the side and crooking your legs together in order to give your arms a break? It worked for me when I was in a similar spot, so it might work for you."

After a little more coaching and no small amount of struggle, you're at the top. Not of the mountain, mind you, but of the gap. You've met your quota, and can take a rest. Yeah, you're gasping like a fish and there's hardly a muscle that doesn't ache, but you made it. And wouldn't you know it, as you lie there, talking with your new buddy, suddenly climbing doesn't seem so miserable after all.

Not that it's easier, mind you. The fissures do and will continue to suck, but you know now how to approach them.

Your friend, with a smile, hands you a rope, trailing off into the sky, and with that, you're off climbing again.

—Jonathan Junkins, age 17, Oregon. He adds: "I am the youngest of five boys. We share a love of rock climbing, reading and dogs. My cultural background includes African American, Filipino, Italian and German. In our home we speak English as our primary language with some German. I have also studied French for 11 years. Things that are important to me include helping others through positivity, humor and optimism for the future. I believe that it's important that we advocate for justice and access to education for all. I wrote this vignette to help explain the difficult idea of privilege through allegory."

## ★ Not Either-Or ★

My friends have turned it into a game: how badly will the substitute teacher butcher my name? So far, “Qianqi” has been mangled into Kyankey, Chonky, and Jonjee, as the most egregious errors. The actual pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese is “chian-chi,” but I usually spare them from further embarrassment and tell them to call me Roger instead.

Roger is my middle name. It fits my background as someone born in Nashville, Tennessee, and spent his entire life in the United States. Qianqi fits my face, even though I spent years wishing it didn’t. My unpronounceable name seemed to flag me as a foreigner whenever people tripped over the consonants. To blend in, I knew the dates for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur rather than Chinese New Year or the Mid-Autumn Festival. I attended my friends’ b’nai mitzvah ceremonies, all while refusing to bring any home-cooked meals that might draw attention to my family background.

Finally, I went to talk with my parents about legally changing my name. The mispronunciations, misspellings, and stereotypes associated with having an Asian name had created a constant feeling of isolation as if I hadn’t lived in this country all my life. I felt that my own name was stripping away my American identity, leaving only the narrow perception of my Chinese ethnicity, a part of me I had grown to be ashamed of.

To my surprise, my parents were not upset; instead, they patiently spoke about their intention behind giving me a unique name like Qianqi. They had hoped it would shape my individuality and encourage me to carve out my own path in life. “You should be proud of being an American,” they told me. “We take you to weekend Chinese classes so that you can learn the language of your ancestors. We teach you Chinese history so that you can understand where you came from. We immerse you in Chinese traditions so that your life is enriched by another culture. We hope all these elements will set you apart, just like your name.”

At that moment, I began to see “Qianqi” in a new light. Rather than striving to fit in as one of the more than one million Rogers in the United States, wouldn’t it be more meaningful to stand out as Qianqi?

A sense of in-betweenness has burdened me for as long as I can remember. In the past, Chinese Americans

were disenfranchised by the Chinese Exclusion Act and further marginalized by the strict institutional and cultural norms. It is a vastly different America today, a true melting pot. But I can resonate with the Chinese American youth from long ago who considered themselves Americans, were Americans, only to be called “others” when they ventured outside home. Am I an “other” still, if only within my own mind? Caught in between this question, I found a realm of identity that feels both familiar and foreign, where the memory of a conversation with my best friend, Yusuf, resurfaces.

“Do I look too Muslim?” Yusuf asks, voice shaking.

My heart sinks. I know why he is asking the question: he’s been attacked, again. Since the Israel war began on October 7, Yusuf has been called a Hamas supporter and spat at. I also know how he is feeling: confused and afraid, just like how I felt after COVID-19 fueled anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. His question cuts straight to the core of my being, because I, too, used to tell my parents I hated my narrow eyes and pushed-in nose, features that make me look too Asian.

The Islamophobia ignited by the Israel-Hamas war is all-too-familiar to me in the wake of COVID-19, with the onslaught of anti-Asian hatred. My face has made me a target for racists and fearmongers. People who look like me were in the national news because they were harassed, beaten, killed. Asian Americans were portrayed as threats, even as we became the victims. It doesn’t matter that I was born in Nashville and lived my entire life in the United States. It doesn’t matter that I love American football and English literature. My eyes and my name mark me as an outsider.

Yusuf’s family is from Bangladesh. His appearance should be something he takes pride in. Instead, he wants to cover himself up so he can feel safe. So he can live a normal life.

The reality that Yusuf and I, in the 21st century, find ourselves wishing to dissociate from our background because we don’t want to live in fear isn’t tragic—it’s enraging. I am angry, really angry. It’s a primal rage that questions the very fabric of progress and challenges the facade of acceptance in our society. It’s a collective frustration, a cry for change in a world that clings to stereotypes and biases.

Do I cover my face and accept the label of “other?”

★ **To Appreciate And Accept: A Reverse Poem** ★

Do I remove Qianqi and pretend only to be Roger?

If that's the price for belonging in America, then it isn't the America I'm interested in belonging to. Writer and poet Audre Lorde writes, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." To heal a divided world, we need to acknowledge our individual and collective differences. Acceptance is always our choice to make, after all. And I hope we choose to see people as they are. Before judging the hijab, let's face the fear of the unknown that makes us uneasy. Before dismissing the accent, let's confront the subconscious biases that make us speak differently. Before silencing the voice, let's challenge the assumptions that make us ignorant.

For me, acceptance begins within. The people who hate us for how we look and where our families came from want us to turn away from our background. So instead of rejecting mine...

I choose to celebrate. I celebrate my parents' accents, my face, my unpronounceable name. Unconditionally and unapologetically. I'm Qianqi and Roger. I am not either-or, I am both.

—Yifei Kevin Niu, age 17, Massachusetts.

Kevin writes: "I founded a sports newspaper called *The GOAT*, and I captain the varsity tennis team. I am heavily involved with sports journalism and passionate about international relations.

"I am a first-generation US-born Chinese American. This submission is a personal story about how my struggles with identity have shaped who I am in the context of how others perceive me in American society. Even though identity struggles have been written about ad nauseam, I believe each story remains deeply personal and deserves to be heard. The idea that I needed to be as American as possible in order to be accepted used to make me ashamed of my ethnicity. Along with COVID and the Israel-Hamas war came an explosion of anti-Asian hatred, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. I realize in order for us to accept people of different backgrounds, we must first accept ourselves, unconditionally and unapologetically. Our collective effort to promote multicultural diversity and awareness is more important than ever."

Bound by chains,  
we desire not to be  
Who we aspire to become  
The world accepts  
Hate crimes  
We no longer value  
The true colors coming from a rainbow  
We let out a giggle and stare at  
The tearful smudged faces of others;  
We put a smile on  
Behind the veil of obscurity;  
Typing out words to destroy the emotions of others  
No more are we willing to be  
a voice of solidarity across all of humanity.  
We instead advocate for  
Resentment that will drag each other down  
We no longer have  
The acceptance that everyone needs in their community.  
We believe in  
The inequality trait in humans  
We will never understand  
The freedom to have differences in sexual orientation.  
Instead we support  
making fun of the disabled;  
We stand against those  
of different backgrounds  
Instead we go on the internet to support those  
Who engage in crimes motivated by prejudice.  
Nobody understands those  
Who sympathize with the victims.  
We solemnly stand with everyone,  
Who wish bad upon everyone else.  
It's unjustifiable to be with others  
Who want to make the world a better place.  
We were destined to walk with others  
Others who have no regard to life  
We question the good in us, in humanity  
Do we really believe there is hope in this harsh world?  
Why can't we wipe away the tears to see beautiful, perfect reflections?  
So  
Let's clear it up and look again

—Steven Wang, age 17, New York. He says his poem is a "call for action to advocate for everyone regardless of their background (race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, etc.)."

## ★ More Than Just A Delivery ★

Dad and I drove to the hospital. “Do you have a snack?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Book?”

“Yup.”

The hospital came into view. Soon it got larger and larger until the car stopped. We got out, and quickly walked up the steps to the doors we needed to enter. The food was piled on a table. I had expected a lot of food, but not an abundance! I picked up the cooler in front of me and ran down to our car. The cooler fit perfectly in the trunk. Next came the main course of food. That was what Dad was holding. I hurried to help him, and we carefully placed the food next to the cooler. I looked at the trunk. All the food just barely fit in! “Carmela Mosely, Nepute Road,” Dad repeated to himself. Now, it was time for deliveries.

My dad had a list of names for the people we were dropping off the food to. That list was where he read Carmela's name off of. All of the apartments or houses that the people lived in were close to the hospital, so it was easy to deliver the food. Just because it was easy didn't mean it was quick—we had over 12 people to deliver to, plus driving everywhere, and getting the deliveries to the people we needed to.

My dad brought me to every Meals On Wheels delivery. In every home I went into, I could always expect to see folding chairs and a table used for dining furniture. I also felt a bit... different. I think the seniors felt the same way about me, too. They were all so used to adults, and yet I wasn't one. Try to imagine this: you, a senior, just saw a child for the first time in a few years. You would be surprised, right? That was the same reaction they had to me. They weren't surprised in a bad way. They had a surprise that brought a smile to their face.

There was one lady named Charlotte, who might have been in her mid 80s. When I talked to her on the intercom, she didn't sound friendly, but in person, she was the sweetest person in the world. Every time I came to deliver food to her, I saw several photographs on her refrigerator. Once, I asked her about them. She pointed to two photographs. “That woman in the photo is my daughter, and the man in the photograph next to hers is my husband.”

“Where are they now?” I asked curiously.

“My husband is in Europe, trying to make money, and my daughter is also making a life in Europe. Don't go to Europe, it's a bad place. Stay here on Earth with everyone,” she responded. I was confused, and about to tell her that Europe was on Earth, when her caretaker mouthed to me, “Her husband and daughter are in Heaven.”

When we were going down the elevator, there was a woman next to us. It was a bit awkward just standing there, without a word being released from our mouths. Suddenly, she blurted, “Are you the Meals on Wheels people?” We told her that we were.

“I'm Carmela, I think I ordered Meals On Wheels.” Suddenly, instead of silence, the whole elevator was filled with laughs. One of the people we needed to get to was just standing right next to us, and we didn't even notice!

Carmela and Charlotte were friendly people. There were others who weren't very nice. All of the seniors who got Meals On Wheels left a bag at their doorstep. There was one old gentleman, probably over 75, who would come out of his apartment only in his underwear. He expected us to put his food in the bag, without even realizing that he was being unfriendly. My dad and I just waited patiently and smiled at him. I sometimes think that age is a funny thing, and that life is just a cycle. When you're a baby, you get sad or happy quickly, your emotions are fleeting, and you don't really remember much. When you're old it's the same, except your feelings and emotions remain all-consuming.

There were also people that were very sad, and maybe depressed. Every time I opened the door, I expected a light or sunny backdrop, but there were only shades of gray.

They were very kind though. You know the saying “You can't judge a book by its cover?” To me, the saying mainly referred to them. They may look mean on the outside, but they are some of the best people I've ever met. One of them, Sarah, even gave me a gift!

One time, I was really sick with a high fever, and sadly, I couldn't participate in Meals On Wheels. I looked up a word in the dictionary to describe how I felt, and I found one that I liked: *woebegone*. It means exhibiting great sadness. When my dad came home, he told me everything that had happened during Meals

More than Just a Delivery... *contd. from p. 36.*

On Wheels. I wasn't really listening—I couldn't be there—but there was one thing that caught my attention: "They were all wondering where you were, Keva!"

The month after that, my dad and I made all of our deliveries quicker than we've ever done before. "Is someone missing?" I asked my dad.

"Check the list. If we got all of our deliveries, we'll head home," Dad responded from the driver's seat.

I checked the list. I checked it again. And again... "Dad," I called, "Carmela's name isn't on the list."

I began to wonder: *What happened to her? Why isn't she on the list?* Soon I had a horrible thought. *What if I was the last person to speak to her?*

—Keva Jain, age 10, New York.

### The Discoveries *(art on p. 30, lower left)*

Art is a vision, a desire seeking to discover beauty. A vision is complete when we look at a place with intent. It is through this motivation that we truly care about a place.

For years, careless human activities have damaged nature. To represent this devastating state, the landscapes are expressed with rough lines of black ink. In contrast, the eye and the light represent an eye with the intent to discover beauty and to love nature. In such ways, I hope both *Blue Discovery* and *Green Discovery* will remind people that they too will find beauty in nature.

—Irene Kim, age 14, Connecticut.

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166 W. 12th Ave, Eugene, Oregon 97401 USA

## ★ The Art of Traditional Chinese Painting ★

Before I moved to America at the age of 11, I spent all of my childhood in China. Subsequently, a large part of my early artistic education centered around traditional Chinese ink painting. In this style of painting, there is a heavy emphasis put on technique in almost a philosophical manner.

The way in which water and ink mix and interact on the canvas is at the center of all compositions, which is why architecture and man-made elements tend to have straight, precise lines, while nature tends to be depicted with loose, flowing marks that fluctuate in width and saturation. However, even with these differences, architecture and artificial elements work in harmony with the natural environment surrounding it. When there's a Chinese pavilion or a traditional neighborhood, it is not an enemy to the trees or the mountains. Instead of hostility and the intruder-like image I feel like Western architecture often brings upon the natural environment, the two pieces work together in harmony to create a unified composition.

While the ratios of nature and architecture might vary, there doesn't need to be a 50-50 split for the two to elevate each other. In my opinion, this is a great reflection of the philosophies of Chinese culture when it comes to considering our role in the natural world. It is crucial to work together with the nature that surrounds us and to not let our advancements in technology and architectural feats be an antagonist to our terrain.

Even the idea of painting with ink and water inherently supports the idea of harmonizing the man-made and the natural. Ink is a man-made medium that is sourced from organic, raw materials, while water is perhaps the most magical natural resource, as it is essential to all life on Earth. As was aforementioned, the way the two materials mix and interact is at the heart of this style of painting. While this may not be so present in the modern day, heavily-industrialized China, it has affected me deeply, and captivated me for the five years that I spent learning about this style of art. While I have moved on to more Western forms of painting now, the three pieces (*on p. 31*), to me, are the moments where I felt like I captured this harmony the best in the time I've spent in this field of work. It is a reminder of my roots, and a way for me to find calm in the concrete jungle I now find myself living in. .

—Zeran Li, 16, grade 10, New York.

Pooja Verma is a sophomore in California and adores painting with acrylic paint and even watercolor, striving to tell personal stories about her cultural identity, interests, or current obsessions, which only art can truly convey. An aspiring ecological/evolutionary biological researcher, she loves illustrating the gorgeous ways in which life is able to harmonize in her paintings, looking to nature itself for inspiration. Often, she is inspired by plants from India, a country where she has never lived as a first generation Indian American, but finds beauty in. She speaks Hindi in a way much more choppy than her fluent ancestors, and is named after the Hindi word for prayer: “Puja.”

Aside from visual arts, Pooja is an award-winning classical flautist, spreading her creative expression by multiple means and dedicates her efforts to better her community. She leads ecological science initiatives like workshops for young girls, builds population-tracking birdboxes for local parks (*see an article on **Birdboxes**, a group she helped form, on [skippingstones.org](https://skippingstones.org)*), and performs in community service classical music performances. She dreams of creating city-wide murals encouraging environmental awareness in order to apply her visual art skills to her community, and strives to expand her existing efforts to achieve an even wider impact.

### **Touch-Me-Not**

When I visited India a while back, my grandmother showed me the elusive touch-me-not plant, known scientifically as *mimosa pudica*, which has the ability to curl its leaves into itself for self-defense.

Growing up, I’ve always avoided conflict the same way that a fragile touch-me-not does. I wasted my energy just like a touch-me-not does to withdraw itself from predators. My artistic journey captures the transformation of this mindset, symbolized by relentless ocean waves threatening to wash away the gentle touch-me-not. Simultaneously, my work reflects my fading connection to my Indian heritage, with waves of change symbolizing this cultural deterioration. Every time my parents and I engage in a “puja” (*prayer*), which I am named after, a small part of me feels foreign. My artistic process serves as a visual documentation of my journey, capturing the sublime nuances of growth, cultural identity, and the inevitably changing tides of life.

### **Stopping to Smell the Flowers**

Last summer, I was able to visit the most beautiful botanical garden and was lucky to stumble upon a little rabbit just enjoying the flowers. The rabbit even seemed to be smelling the flowers! I hold as one of my fundamental, unchangeable principles that life should be taken slowly, one step at a time, and here was this rabbit echoing my sentiments exactly. So, I portrayed this wonderful scene on a canvas not even bigger than my hand, truly pushing myself to new heights artistically. In my artistic journey, I strive continuously to portray these connections and beautiful moments I witness, fostering an appreciation for the natural world and more broadly, an appreciation of life itself.

### **Whale Fall**

When I learned about whale falls in biology class last year, an ecological phenomenon where a dead whale body is suspended to the sea floor and creates a self-sufficient ecosystem due to its nutrients, I felt compelled to express its beauty. For what is more representative of the cycle of life than a mere skeleton fostering so much growth that even new species can arise in its midst? I created a stylized watercolor and pastel snapshot of what I imagine a whale fall to look like in all its ethereal glory. Ornamented with whimsical creatures like octopi and worms, and painted in a vibrant and dream-like atmosphere, my piece truly represents the beauty that goes unseen in the deep sea. Beyond the ocean though, this piece speaks to the slim border and the fragility between life and death, each one paving the way for the other.

### **Templetree, Hibiscus & Madagascar Periwinkle**

These stylized and ethereal watercolor pieces are part of a set I made for my grandmother, inspired by the plants we saw together on walks near her apartment in Gujarat, India. It was in these special moments that amidst all the chaos, smoke, and trash, I was able to understand why my ancestors felt such a powerful connection to the land. It was the little moments, the people they met. The paintings currently hang in my grandparents’ living room.

**Kill It!** symbolizes the human impulse to act harshly against what they don’t understand; what is too insignificant for them to deem valid. This is shown whenever our species sees smaller life, like the common housefly. My work is a satiric parody of this relationship.



(clockwise, from top left) Touch-Me-Not • Templetree • Hibiscus • Whale Fall • Kill It! • Madagascar Periwinkle. Paintings by Pooja Verma, 15, California. See p. 29.



**The Discoveries** Irene Kim, age 14, Connecticut.



**Stopping to Smell Flowers** by Pooja Verma, CA



## *The Art of* **Traditional Chinese Painting**

*Art by Zeran Li, grade 10, New York.*

*Please also see page 28.*



*(More background and description of the artwork on p. 28)*

I included *(above)* the fourth piece in my submission, simply because I find the lack of color and the amount of varying brushstrokes in the composition to be a great example of the technique used in Chinese ink paintings, and how layered the composition can become with two simple mediums: water and ink.

—Zeran Li, age 16, grade 10, New York.

As I boarded the plane at JFK, my heart raced. I'd been dreaming of visiting South Korea since I was twelve and started watching K-dramas. And at eighteen, my dream was coming true.

Seoul was supposed to be rejuvenating: cars honking, rain drizzling, fresh air, and gentle breezes. In reality, it was not. I didn't understand a word of Korean, and people pointed and stared at me. I pulled out my phone to check if I looked like a clown; I didn't. My pin-straight blonde hair was neatly tucked into a high ponytail, eyeliner framing my warm hazel eyes, and no stains on my clothes. Why were they staring?

Three weeks later, five minutes late for my shift at the noodle restaurant, I hurried past my manager trying to go unnoticed. When a hand clasped my shoulder, I turned to the laughing face of Mr. Kim. He said something like, "Get better at sneaking in." As I was about to embarrass myself by responding, my friend Siti saved me by translating what he'd said, adding, "Try not to be late, he gets upset."

"He wasn't upset at all—"

A piercing voice cut me off. I looked to see Mr. Kim yelling at Siti for being only one minute later than I was! What happened? Wasn't he just laughing?

Siti immigrated from Malaysia to Korea at 12 years old. She was beautiful, like flowers in spring. I felt safe and trusted her. But Mr. Kim was always irritated with Siti. She could drop a fork when holding a whole stack of plates and he'd go off on her, saying she, "wasn't competent enough for anything." I always asked myself why he disrespected her, since she did more work than I did. It could have been because of her seniority and that he expected more, but I was starting to think it was because of where we were from.

When my shift finished, I overheard Mr. Kim say Siti's name while talking to the owner of the shop! The owner confronted Mr. Kim about not meeting the financial goal for the month, and instead of taking responsibility, Mr. Kim blamed "the *something* Malaysian" for not meeting working standards and driving customers away. I didn't understand what he said, but I could tell it wasn't good.

The next day, I heard shatters and voices echoing

from the dining room. I ran out and saw Siti kneeling on the floor next to a pile of plate fragments, wiping her bloody finger. Mr. Kim was already there, scolding her for being clumsy. Her expression was hard to read, as I couldn't tell if she hurt from her wound or hurt from the words.

Just as I was about to get a Band-Aid, I witnessed Mr. Kim spit on her. That's when I snapped. I inserted myself between Mr. Kim and Siti to demand that he walk away. If humans could let out steam like a kettle, Mr. Kim certainly would've. His neck veins pulsed and swelled, turning him an awful shade of purple. He turned to walk away, and just as he was about to enter his office, he spat out the same word I heard before. "The *something* Malaysian." Before I knew it, the whole restaurant was filled with gasps and looks of surprise. Not understanding what it meant, I ignored him as he slammed his door and turned my attention to Siti, telling her to wait as I grabbed the first aid kit. Pulling her out the back door, I sat her down on the steps. After a bit, I asked her, "What did Mr. Kim say back in the restaurant that made everyone gasp?"

She hesitated before telling me, "...He called me a worthless Malaysian."

I thought about this. "Why does Mr. Kim treat you differently than he treats me?"

"It's because Mr. Kim has always hated 'outsider Asians.' He thinks Korea and the US are the only two 'acceptable' countries. Since you are from the United States, he favors you. I am the only 'outsider,' so he hates me. It's unfair. I do most of his work, but he still calls me incompetent. And without good references, I can't find another job."

"I'm sorry that this is happening to you. The truth is, you're more competent than anyone here. Is there any way I can help you?"

Shaking her head slowly, she smiled at me. "Thank you for your support."

The next week Mr. Kim was everywhere, supervising us more intricately than ever. One day, he left the staff a note saying he would be out for a week. He also noted that he wanted me to take over. I barely had one month of experience! I decided to have Siti take over,

as it was the perfect opportunity to prove she was more than qualified.

Siti was reluctant, but I convinced her. That week, everyone, including the customers, was in a better mood, and the food even started tasting better! Her tiny tweaks to the management had gained many positive reviews. This attracted more customers and more income. Within just a week, Siti had already reached the financial goal for the month. Attracted by this sudden soar in profit, the owner came for a visit.

I was serving customers when I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see the owner. She smiled and asked, “Are you the person who has been filling in for Mr. Kim?”

Shaking my head, I pointed to Siti. “I’m not, but she is. Her name is Siti.”

Thanking me, she walked away.

At the end of the day, I stopped Siti to ask her about her interaction with the owner.

Smiling, she whispered in my ear, “I got a promotion.”

Looking at her, shocked, I cheered. “I’m so happy for you! What position are you now?”

“I’m the manager!”

“Wait, what about Mr. Kim?”

“Let’s just say, he won’t be returning.”

—Amy Wang, age 14, grade 8, New York.

### “Journey of Resilience”

This artwork, born from my connection to my hometown in South Korea, portrays two iconic symbols—the serene figure of Buddha and the elegant silhouette of a pagoda. Set atop tumultuous waves, the artwork shows the beauty of my home country and its journey through adversity.

The presence of Buddha symbolizes peace, wisdom, and spiritual enlightenment, attributes that have guided my community through challenging times. The pagoda, with its timeless architecture, represents resilience and strength, standing as a testament to the endurance of our cultural heritage.

—Tekkyu Lee, age 14, from South Korea, is studying in Massachusetts.

\*Please note that we published noteworthy entries (including poems) in the Awards issue. The pieces included in this digital feature could not put in the print issue for space reasons. We hope to print some of these entries in our next issue, Vol. 37, no. 1. —Editors.



## Birdboxers

*Birdboxers is a student-led group dedicated to the intersection of STEM fields and natural sciences, restoring and studying local ecology using technology with an avian emphasis. In our writing entry below, we chose to highlight our work on population-tracking bird boxes for Fremont parks, paving the way for environmental appreciation, awareness, and advocacy within our community.*

The existing decline in bird populations can be traced back to several human factors. For example, tree swallow populations face severe declines largely attributable to rampant deforestation. The removal of forests destroys their natural habitats, disrupting the ecological balance, and affecting the availability of nesting sites and the insects that birds feed on. This points to a bigger issue of environmental damage as birds are natural pest predators that help maintain a balance in insect populations. When bird populations decline, the variety of insects consumed, flowers pollinated, and seeds dispersed may also decrease. Protecting bird populations is crucial not only for maintaining biodiversity but also for preserving the natural processes that sustain our environment.

We, a group of seven high schoolers, founded Birdboxers with the ambition of serving our community and local wildlife. The target species we are helping are the western tree swallows and bluebirds. Through this environmental project, we aim to conserve their populations through innovation; namely, population tracking.

Raspberry Pi is a series of small computers that are the size of a credit card and can be plugged into a computer monitor or TV. Using this state-of-the-art technology, we engineered a system using an infrared LED and an infrared-detecting camera. Our goal is to be able to see birds through high-quality video footage, store this data, and use machine learning algorithms to discern things like bird behavior and if the box is occupied.

Swallow boxes already exist in local Fremont parks. However, they lack the innovative technology that our Birdboxers team works to produce. In order to track useful environmental data regarding bird population dynamics, or even behavior and nesting details, Fremont parks recruit volunteers to open up each swallow box one by one. Not only is this process outdated and time-consuming, but it is disturbing to the

birds themselves. Interfering with these habitats can upset birds especially in periods of egg incubation and chick development, introducing what seems like a threat from a predator. So, our technology, which will store data remotely in the form of photos and apply machine learning algorithms to learn about these fascinating species, helps to cultivate an understanding of the impacts of human activity on birds in a way that does not harm them. Given the threat of deforestation and climate change on tree swallow breeding and nesting habits, as well as the looming issues of climate change, pollution, and urbanization on existing migration cycles, the data we provide is incredibly valuable.

Our project has had the opportunity to attend some of the most significant events in our city, such as the Engineering Expo, which showcased more than 300 student engineering projects from various schools and attracted over 900 attendees to the Fremont Downtown Event Center. We also participated in Fremont's Earth Day, an even bigger annual event hosted by our city. These events have not only raised environmental awareness among citizens in our community but also helped us connect with people who can assist us in enhancing our city's pest management and population conservation. For instance, we have gained the support of notable city officials in sustainability, including Elisabeth Huffmaster, a Clean Water Educator at the Nature Learning Center under the City of Fremont; Department of Environmental Services, Nathan Ivy, a Service-Learning Waste Reduction Project Coordinator at Alameda County Office of Education, and Mayor Lily Mei, City of Fremont's mayor. This support has set our project on a hopeful trajectory for the future.

At our events where we presented our project to the general public, we were pleasantly surprised to hear so many concerned citizens ask about what they could do to help the decline of bird populations amidst urbanization, and even to alleviate human impacts on the natural world. We told them that they could create tremendous hope for the issue simply from their own homes, through ingenious projects like our own. Even if it's in their own backyard bird feeders, we work to foster genuine hope in our community.

The future of our group itself, Birdboxers, is =>

## The Presidency of the United States

There have been 45 presidents of the U.S. The current one, number 46, has a similarity to all but one of his predecessors. They are white, and all 46 are male. Asian Americans have been in the country since the 1800s, and have come nowhere close to the presidency. Could someone of Eastern Asian ethnicity ever become president of the country?

Loyalty is an act of faith in which you do not betray or desert your cause no matter the circumstances. I believe most of the issues faced by Asian Americans are to do with loyalty. When using a search engine to research the question, “Are Asian Americans loyal to the U.S.?” it distributes a plethora of discussion posts, disagreements, newspaper articles and more. For example, in a survey conducted by the Asian American Foundation of over five thousand U.S. citizens, 32 percent agree Asian Americans are more loyal to their perceived country of origin than to the U.S. I find this response disgusting and shocking. These questions and polls are not done on Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Norwegian Americans or African Americans; who whilst facing an uphill struggle in many areas, would not be questioned if they are serving another country. Where does the questioning of loyalty of this specific ethnic group come from?

As an Asian American, I have not felt any urging for ongoing loyalty toward any country other than the U.S. In fact, Asian Americans have contributed equally to others. So what causes this unique form of discrimination? I believe one of these reasons is fear. For decades, the U.S. has been the world’s global superpower, with no country since the fall of the Soviet Union coming close. Over the course of recent years

**Birdboxers contd...**=> also bright, as we have plans to start a large volunteering network and receive thousands of dollars in funding. Our project started off as what seemed like an idealistic and unrealistic goal, but the lengths it has reached in terms of environmental appreciation and advocacy now affect the lives of not only the birds we support, but the citizens of our community. Despite the recent destruction of climate change and habitat loss, we’re changing the world—one park at a time.

Contact Birdboxers at: [birdboxers11124@gmail.com](mailto:birdboxers11124@gmail.com)

though, China has grown and empowered their economy, as well as modernized their military to the extent where there is a possibility of them overtaking the U.S. in a decade. Politicians, media pundits, and some American people are fearful of losing their global hegemony. I believe this fear has spilled into affecting Asian Americans citizens. The buildup of tension between China and the U.S. has led to a buildup of tension against Chinese and other Eastern Asian ethnicities.

The coronavirus began November of 2019, and has only escalated this recurring issue. When the matter is brought up to classmates, all point directly to China as the one to blame. 1.4 billion people populate the country of China, fingers pointed to every single one. During the coronavirus, the amounts of Asian American hate crimes increased rapidly. People of various Eastern Asian ethnicities were affected by this as well. The differences between Asia and America’s culture itself is a leading cause, as we as humans tend to point fingers at those most different to us. For example, there is a mass of cuisine differences between Asians and Americans. Asian cuisine is based mostly on older type traditional recipes, including foods considered exotic to others. Americans are based highly on other ethnicities, although are home to modern dishes.

In addition to these previous points, whilst all nations have fostered racism, the U.S. has had government policies introduced specifically pushing these racist policies. When schools were divided into white and black, Asian Americans found themselves questioning where they belong. Asian Americans were not mentioned in the laws themselves, as if they were forgotten and the law makers didn’t know they existed. This sense of idea of being an “other” or not being a part of the nation itself I believe still carries on to modern society.

I do not believe an Asian American could ever become president. As much as we as a community continue to integrate ourselves with the nation, humans will always find a way to exclude parts of our people and treat them as outsiders. Asian Americans are constantly challenged on our trustworthiness, loyalty, and dedication to this country. Attempts to prove ourselves feel disregarded by the same continuous subgroup of people. I truly hope to be proven wrong in my lifetime.

— Abigail Lee, age 12, grade 7, Illinois.

## The Goddess of the Silkworm

White fluffy clouds floated in the azure sky, as the rays of the sun cast a golden glow across the Weiyang Palace gardens. A cool breeze blew through the rhododendron trees, causing the delicate flowers to flutter to the ground, dotting the land in violet.

Calling for some tea, the Chinese Empress Leizu breathed in the fresh spring air as she strolled over to the grove of mulberry trees at the edge of the Imperial Garden. She immediately wrinkled her nose in distaste. The mulberry tree leaves were filled with holes that were drying along the edges. Worms crawled all over the leaves, and there were a few tiny white objects among the fray of fat wriggling slugs. Looking closer, Leizu noticed how pale threads were coming off of the alabaster white ovals which appeared to be fuzzy cocoons.

“Tài zāo gāo le!” exclaimed Leizu in dismay, as she waved her fan frantically in front of her face.

Noticing her horror, a maid bringing tea scurried towards the empress.

“Your Majesty, please, sit down and have some wū lóng chá!” she exclaimed, curtsying before Leizu.

Just as Leizu was about to take a sip of the tea, she gasped. Floating in the liquid was one of the small egg-like objects from the mulberry tree above her. Leizu noticed how the tiny white oval was suddenly so soft, and a singular filament poked through the pale shape. A shiny ivory thread started to unravel in the water and the empress fished it out in awe.

“How long is this strand?” the empress wondered.

Shimmering like South China Sea pearls, the long delicate string reflected the morning sunlight.

“Take the end of this thread and walk to the opposite side of the gardens,” the empress commanded her maid in waiting, starting to unroll the glistening alabaster colored cocoon.

Holding the delicate thread, the young woman slowly backed farther and farther away, until the empress could just barely see her.

“This filament has to be at least a li,” gasped the empress as she took in the distance between herself and her servant.

Leizu then looked down at her hand and let out a shriek of disgust. A dead worm sat in her palm. Shaking it off, Leizu leaned down to pick up the shimmering thread that had fallen to the grass. The most beautiful lóng páo ever took form in her mind. Golden fabric shone brightly against a crimson background, taking the shape of a majestic dragon.

“Oh, what are such hideous trees doing in my garden?” an authoritative voice sounded from behind her.

Whirling around, the Empress Leizu saw her husband, the Yellow Emperor Huangdi pacing towards her. His woolen robes swished at his feet with every step he took.

Leizu rose from her bow and immediately threw out her hands.

“Please my Holy Lord!” she gasped. “Look! This fine filament came from those cocoons on the disgusting trees.”

She opened her palm to reveal the singular strand of thread.

“There are only a few cocoons on these trees now. But if we wait a few months, maybe there will be enough to make a beautiful lóng páo!” she exclaimed excitedly.

Stroking his beard, the Yellow Emperor nodded in agreement.

“As long as you make me a dragon robe, I can tolerate these monstrosities.”

One month later the bright summer sun shone down on the Imperial Garden mulberry tree grove. Now, the mulberry leaves were covered in cocoons. Leizu put her fan down on the garden bench and took a sip of the tea her maid brought over.

“Now how shall I turn these fluffy little cocoons into thread to weave a beautiful lóng páo?” the empress asked.

Leizu’s maid raised her bowed head and suggested, “My lady, do you remember the time when the cocoon fell into your tea? Maybe you could unravel the thread by placing all the cocoons in hot liquid.”

Leizu told her maids to prepare a bowl of boiling water and bring some cocoons from the mulberry trees

to her chambers. Soon, the empress was gently placing the little cocoons into the hot liquid. When the thin alabaster white strands had unraveled, she lay the filament on the table to dry.

The next morning, as Leizu was admiring the shimmering threads, a servant entered her chambers and bowed.

“My lady, the craftsman has made you a special loom,” the maid said as she beckoned for the wooden device to be brought into the room.

Enthusiastically, the empress sat down and started to spin the ivory colored strands. Soon Leizu had made the thread into fabric, and then turned to the servants in the room.

“Go fetch madder root and jinzi fruits from the gardens. We must make dyes.”

By the time the sun’s fading light was painting the sky a deep orange, Leizu had dyed the fabric red and yellow.

The next afternoon, the empress finished sewing the *lóng páo*. Lifting the robe into the air, Leizu noticed how the crimson and gold silk gleamed in the sunlight. She gently carried the dragon robe to her husband’s chambers.

The Yellow Emperor took one look at the garment Leizu had woven and gasped.

“Oh what a magnificent robe you have made for me!” he exclaimed in admiration as he examined the *lóng páo*. “We need a name for this new exquisite material.”

Leizu nodded in agreement.

“What about *sī chóu*?” she proposed.

Beaming at his wife, the Yellow Emperor declared, “That is a beautiful name for such a fine fabric! And you my dear, shall be called the Goddess of the Silkworm!”

Today, the practice of making silk that started with the Chinese Empress Leizu in the Western Han Dynasty is still popular and Leizu is still known as the Goddess of the Silkworm!

## Glossary:

Tài zāo gāo le!: So terrible!

Wū lóng chá: Oolong Tea

Li: Chinese measurement ( $\frac{1}{3}$  of a mile)

Lóng páo: Dragon Robe

Sī chóu: Silk

—Catherine Chen, age 12, grade 6, Hong Kong.  
“My cultural heritage is Chinese. Before Covid, my maternal grandmother sewed silk dresses for my sister, my mom and me. So I began to wonder, who in China first thought about making silk clothing? I did some research, and wrote this story which is actually historical fiction.

“My story’s main character, Leizu, is the ancient Chinese empress who invented silk. She lived in the Weiyang Palace, Xi’an during 2700 BCE which was the time of the Western Han Dynasty. My maternal grandmother is from a place called Xu Zhou in China which is about a nine-hour drive from Weiyang Palace. The story is based loosely on real events and I tried to make the details historically accurate. For example, I researched specific details such as how Leizu first discovered silk thread, how the ancient Chinese dyed fabric, how different members of the palace addressed each other, and even what type of plants bloom in the spring in Xi’an.

“I can speak, read and write in English and Mandarin. When I grow up, I would love to be in an orchestra and also be a part-time author.”

## Noteworthy Art Entries

### **Making a Change with Smaller Steps** (page 39)

Most people are notified about climate change and regard it as a serious issue especially in Korea, my hometown. Eco friendly Korean organizations strive and cooperate with each other to widely spread the issue of global warming to the public and provide capable and minor approaches to enhance the situation, as shown in my artwork, through planting trees, reusing materials, recycling, and riding bikes to prevent air pollution. I believe environmental degradation will be a further threat to our future generations. Thus, our society should focus on taking smaller steps to approach effective changes.

—Kelly Choi, age 15, sophomore, Seoul, South Korea.

### **Duality of the DMZ** (page 39)

Nestled between North and South Korea, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is divided by history but united in natural splendor. It is a symbol of division and hope, represented by the flourishing nature inside the four-kilometer-wide border. I witnessed the juxtaposition of nature's resilience against the backdrop of the divided nation as I explored the environment of the DMZ every month. In my artwork, I have sought to capture the profound contrasts. I was struck by the difference created by the blooming wildflowers that meet barbed wires restricting entry into potential minefields. Spring represents the duality of the DMZ as it depicts the paradox of lushness of life and stark reminders of separation. This dichotomy is visualized in my artwork where wildflowers burst forth while barbed wires protect nature, so-called "art." The cranes symbolize peace, finding peace amidst the tranquil river of the DMZ. I chose to depict the cranes in the spring which is the season of hope and renewal, even though cranes dwell in the DMZ during the winter. My artwork captures a place of both sorrow and optimism—a place where the beauty of nature's rebirth is juxtaposed against the somber history of division. I grew to understand the significance of nature as it represents human resilience and tried to capture the essence of this complex reality through my artwork—inviting viewers to contemplate the intertwining of nature and history that defines the Korean DMZ.

—Jieun Koo, grade 11, Seoul, South Korea.

### **Act Now, Breathe Tomorrow** (page 39)

**Act Now, Breathe Tomorrow** shows the need for combating global warming and consequences of interventions implemented far too late, leading to humanity's demise. Mother Earth, much like the womb, harnesses an environment with strict parameters to sustain life.

—Maru Han, grade 11, Jeju, South Korea.

### **All Together** (page 40)

As a student highly passionate to learn about female empowerment and societal engagement as well as general anthropology, I bring this interest into the realm of this creative production.

In the contemporary context, women have historically faced challenges in asserting their rights and achieving equal social standing. Despite these obstacles, their inherent patriotism and love for their local communities have always found ways to manifest themselves, shaping the emotional bedrock of our modern, developed societies.

My painting "All Together" seeks to capture this sentiment by depicting a scene rich in symbolism. Through the focal feature of embroidery, I have woven together different national flags, symbolizing unity, pride, and the shared aspirations of diverse cultures and peoples. The amalgamation of flags serves as a testament to the collective efforts of individuals, irrespective of gender, in contributing to the fabric of our societies.

I believe that my painting brings in the intricate activity of embroidery as a subject with a thought-provoking commentary on the enduring power of human connection and solidarity.

—Claire Kang, age 17, Seoul, South Korea.

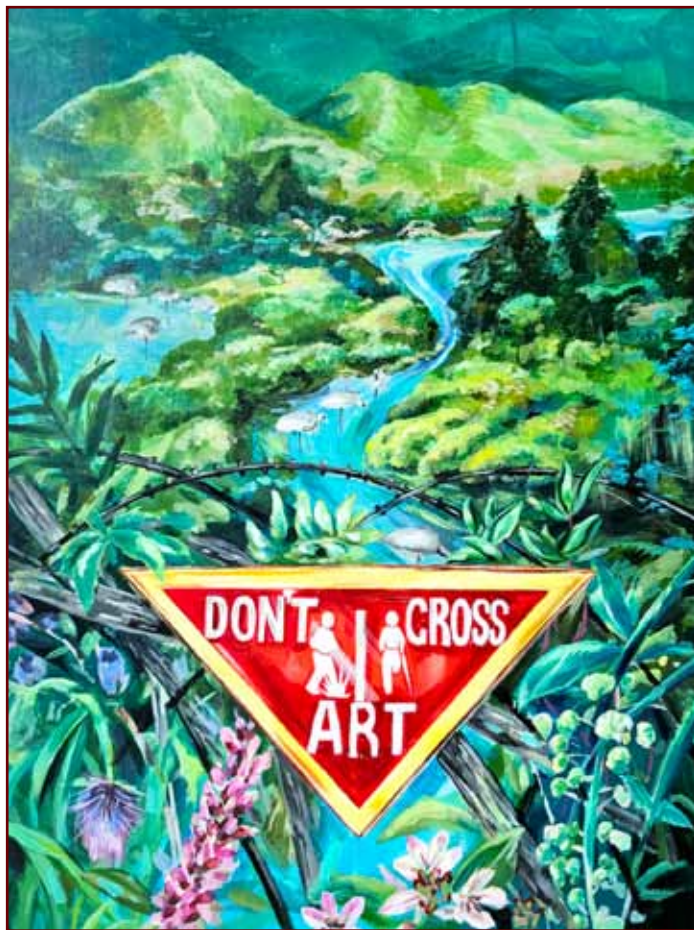
### **"Untitled"** (page 40)

The environment and people are the subject of this drawing. The woman's sad expression is covering the beauty of her face because it vanishes from the black background, which represents the world's future. The contrast between the red and black environment surrounding her symbolizes the harmful effects of human activity on the environment. I hope to increase the understanding that human activity is seriously harming the environment, and that we must act now, before it's too late, to lessen these effects.

—Promise Yi, age 16, South Korea.



By Kelly Choi, age 15, sophomore, South Korea.



By Jieun Koo, age 17, grade 11, South Korea.



**Lost Eden** by Tekkyu Lee, age 14, Massachusetts.



**Act Now, Breathe Tomorrow** by Maru Han, gr. 11, S. Korea.

## More Noteworthy Art Entries



**Chunha-chudong** by Danielle Choi, age 17, South Korea.

*This is a reflection of the dynamic harmony between the changing seasons in Korean culture. Inspired by the cyclical rhythm of nature, my artwork embodies the essence of the four seasons seamlessly intertwining.*



**All Together** by Claire Kang, age 17, Seoul, South Korea.

**Lost Eden** (see p. 39) delves into the concept of freedom and the human struggle to attain it. Through this piece, I wanted to show the profound impact of greed on our society, symbolized by the Garden of Eden. The Statue of Liberty within the artwork represents a human's quest for freedom.

—Tekkyu Lee, age 14, Massachusetts.



**“Untitled”** by PromiseYi, age 16, South Korea.



### Diversity in the Olympics

Diversity is a significant topic at the Olympics. Diversity includes many aspects, including gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability. The Olympics are a special event where diverse members of the population from all over the world come together to compete and participate.

My artwork shows diversity in the Olympics by depicting the representative Olympic sports of modern countries and athletes wearing modern uniforms in the style of ancient Greek murals. I wanted to express the images of people around the world winning and sharing their emotions without discrimination.

—Gunwoo Kim, age 16, S. Korea.



### Wishes by Jungwook Hong, age 13, South Korea.

My work blends Korean paper amulets, Buhjeoks, with Buddhism and Christianity, capturing their shared desires for wellbeing and using sacred Siddham and Latin texts.

*Please see page 42 for more.*



**Cross Country** by Justin Chun, age 16, grade 10, Seoul, South Korea.

## Wishes

Korea is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. Buddhism was the state religion of Korea during the Silla and Goryeo Dynasty from 527 AD until 1392 AD. East Asian Buddhists made use of Buhjeoks, paper amulets written by people who have “understood the ways of the world” in a tradition that was handed down from one generation to the next. There are mainly two types of Buhjeoks, which are Gilsangbuhjeoks and Byeoksabuhjeoks. The former is connected with calling for good luck; the latter is connected with repelling evil spirits. Buddhism came to Korea via Indian priests and they conveyed the religion in their own language, Siddham. Siddham became a sacred language and many Buhjeoks were written in Siddham, too.

After 1392 and the collapse of Goryeo, a new state arose. The Joseon Dynasty lasted until 1910 when the Japanese colonized Korea, and its state religion was Confucianism. Although there are not many people in modern Korea that consider Confucianism as their religion, Confucianism left its traces in many Korean rituals. For example, Charye is a ritual done twice in a year: once at the Lunar New Year and once at Korean Thanksgiving. Charye is done by writing ancestors’ names in Chinese calligraphy behind a folding screen, placing food, and bowing down as a way to remember our ancestors. Originally, people believed that their ancestors would come in a ghostly form to feast on the food that they prepared.

Another popular religion in Korea is Christianity. Korean Christianity has a very intriguing history; in 1784, Korean intellectuals went to China to learn the religion voluntarily as a scholarly subject, analyzing the Holy Bible. At first, Confucians oppressed the Christian religion, but later as Korea became a secular state, the two religions learned to exist together. In some Christian churches, believers are allowed to practice Charye as long as they do it as a form of tradition and not as a ritual. The Latin language has a great influence on Christianity as the language was used widely in the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church had the most influence. Many orthodox Christian believers use Latin in their prayers like it has been done for centuries.

This mix of various religions and the state of peace in diversity throughout history is one of the most important factors for understanding the religious demographics of Korea. Although sometimes dissent and conflicts occur, throughout 4,000 years of Korean history, there has been no notable conflict between religions—even though around three separate religions existed in each period.

I wanted to convey this variety of religions in my artwork. I thought about the similarities of the religions, and was able to see that all religions are essentially focused on the good luck and wellbeing of the believer. There are also usually special scriptures that emphasize the religious beliefs and represent wellbeing. I decided to pick two religions—Buddhism and Christianity—as they are currently the two most popular religions in Korea. Then, I picked two of their most famous components, Buhjeoks and The Lord’s Prayer, which both wish for the wellbeing of the believer. To emphasize the diversity, I also used each religion’s most representative language, Siddham and Latin.

This artwork connects back so much with my life. I was born into a Catholic family, but living in Korea made me familiar with the traditions of so many other religions. As a child I was forced to memorize Confucianism scriptures at school—as a part of Korean tradition that emphasized learning the words of famous Confucianism texts by heart. Although I was by no means a Confucianist scholar at age 8, reading these scriptures undoubtedly changed how I think and act. I had so much influence from Buddhism both directly and indirectly. So many of my friends are Buddhist, and looking at their animal-friendly lifestyle made me learn a lot. Perhaps we humans aren’t so great after all?

My large exposure to various religions and traditions was what I tried to convey in my artwork. I hope you can see the same thing in my artwork.

—Jungwook Hong, age 13, grade 7, South Korea.

## Poor, Poor Chicken

I am practically starving after getting home from high school track practice, and I am unabashedly stuffing rice and chicken in my mouth when my grandma just drops a bombshell: “Could you imagine killing the chicken? That’s what I did when I was a kid.” I whip my head around to the tiny, cheerful woman sitting next to me. My grandma continues telling her childhood stories, and my mom rolls her eyes. She tells my grandma, “We should take your grandkids to the Chinese countryside one day. They should experience some real hardship, unlike this richy rich American town.” She isn’t wrong; the other day, I saw a senior drive a Ferrari to school.

The two of them continue to regale the highs and lows of participating in the slaughter of the chicken designated for dinner back in 1970s China. I wince and maybe dry heave a little as my grandma tells me and my nine-year-old brother about the blood spewing everywhere, and other gory details that go something like, “The chicken always struggled but then the neck snapped and it died. Then we plucked out the feathers and roasted the poor thing for dinner but didn’t feel bad because it tasted good, and back in my day—”

Well, there goes my appetite. My mom sits there smugly, adding more fuel to the grotesque flaming garbage dump of a story. I catch my brother’s eye hoping he is equally disturbed, but he continues to stab at his rice with his chopsticks (perhaps reenacting my grandmother’s story impaling my hunger?). Huffing, I mutter “Why at the dinner table?” apparently interrupting my grandma’s speech about the hardships of daily life on a Chinese farm, etc. Suddenly, my dad chimes in with a helpful lesson about pain and struggle and real life. “You see,” he says, “when I came to America, I was a broke grad student. I worked so hard for everything I had...” I just shake my head, gobble a few more bites of rice, take one last swipe of that delicious soy sauce, and leave the table.

As I retreat upstairs into the safe space of my room, my grandmother’s story, although somewhat disturbing, makes me wonder how her definition of normal is so different from mine. At times I wonder if my American peers understand how the Chinese part of me affects my life. My parents and grandparents, both born and

raised in China, constantly emphasize the importance of grades, of developing a logical, problem-solving mind. In America, much of the culture revolves around socialization and sports. And I am expected to do it all. I aim for straight *As*, but I also need to play competitive soccer.

My grandma’s life in China did not have the same expectations. What she did on a daily basis at her rural home in China is so unlike my life in an American suburban town. Even with an ever-increasing Asian population in New Jersey, and bursts of culture showing up around our town, I know growing up here is nothing like the hypothetical life I might have had in China, especially 60 years ago. Would I rather have been in China, the land of academic weapons and chicken decapitation (or so my grandma narrates), or would I rather live in America, where I feel obligated to belong to two contrasting cultures? In our school hallways, I see the quiet Asian robotics kid, and the obnoxious American jock. Where do I fit in? Would I fit in if I was fully American in America? Would I fit in if I was fully Chinese raised in China? Would I be able to behead a chicken?

—Cheri Li, age 14, Chinese American, New Jersey. She says: “...At home, I speak both Mandarin and English. Growing up in a town where more than one third of the population is Asian (many Chinese) has taught me to appreciate my heritage. My upbringing has shown me that my Chinese culture is an integral part of my identity, which I am able to discuss in submissions like this one.

“In my free time, I enjoy writing, photography, music, and sometimes art. I can sing and play the piano, while other times I choose to read books. A large part of my childhood was spent reading or at the library, something I wish to continue to do in the future. Due to my Chinese culture and my love for reading and writing, I wrote a piece on my view of growing up as a part of two contrasting cultures.”

## The Consequence of Not Knowing the Full Story

*I'm submitting a short essay describing my experience when traveling to Cuba a few years ago. During this trip, I experienced the danger of a single-story, a term used by Chimamanda Adichie. A single-story is an overly simplistic and generalized perception of a person or a place. In her Ted-Talk, Adichie says that single-stories make "our recognition of our equal humanity difficult." My trip to Cuba allowed me to really understand the consequence, whether subtle or harsh, of a single-story.*

On a cold February night before my 6 a.m. flight to the island, I asked my friend's grandmother, Mrs. Perez, about her old life in Cuba. "How did you escape? Are people mostly uneducated? Is there enough to eat, and has communism ruined everything?" She smiled.

"Chiara, it's not so straightforward. Why don't you experience it yourself first? Then let's talk."

As a child of immigrants—my parents are Indian and German—our home has always been filled with global news events, so I thought I knew what to expect before our trip. However, consuming the U.S. media left me uninformed about Cuban life.

Upon arrival, anticipating thievery, I watched my luggage closely. Instead, a friendly stranger offered directions. That afternoon I couldn't decide what to sample as our local hosts served *ropa vieja*, *arroz y frijoles negros*, and *flan* while I peppered their son, Roberto, with questions. One by one, he added color and shape to my drab single story of Cuba. "Chiara, we have a 99% literacy rate, ranking 10th in college attendance with the US lagging behind. We also have free healthcare and a higher life expectancy."

I was puzzled. Was any part of my Cuba story true? After some probing, Roberto's mum glanced out the window, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Yes, there's access to education, but drivers serving tourists earn more than doctors saving lives," she nervously mumbled, afraid the government would hear. Free speech was still not legalized.

Later that evening, Roberto offered me baseball

clothes. I laughed. "But you only have boy clothes." He shrugged. "So?" Wearing a too-big t-shirt and "boys" pants, I grabbed my phone. "No *necesitas eso*," he suggested, and outside, I noticed the absence of phones. With no one sharing TikTok videos, I enjoyed playing with kids without tech distractions, noticing that boys and girls play together like equals. I wondered if the influence of social media on me, even with the liberal, capitalistic, feminist ideal, had somehow impressed the idea that girls should dress and behave a certain way. Recently, a boy in my Brooklyn school was surprised when I sported my class's highest number of pushups. I asked Roberto about it. "Chiara, 50% of Cuba's congress persons are women versus 20% in your country."

That night, I considered my perception of this island only a few hours ago. I had witnessed firsthand the danger of a single narrative. Internalizing Cuba as poor and oppressive, even if the single story of its government is true, oversimplifies the country and minimizes the many stories of education, health, and equality that are shaping it. It harmed not only Roberto but also myself because it interfered with my ability to relate to him. Experiencing Roberto's Cuba made my previous impression biased and one-dimensional. This experience taught me to be curious about stories beyond the single one.

"Mrs. Perez," I ask after returning home. "Why did you leave Cuba to come here?"

—Chiara Zimmermann, age 14, New York. She adds:

*"I have a reputation amongst my professors and fellow students as being focused, engaged, helpful, with sensitive observations and a pleasure to teach. I am also a competitive gymnast and train 17 hours weekly with additional travel and participation in competitions during the weekend."*

## Made in China

When people see me, they see the narrow eyes, the width of my face, my golden undertone, but they never see me. Either in their eyes or out loud, they ask the question, “Are you Chinese?”

They assume my nationality, and they assume right because pattern recognition teaches that most Asians—specifically, East Asians—are Chinese. While Asia is far from a monolith, Han Chinese people consist of the largest ethnic group in the world. But really, the assumption still hurts because who are they to peg my entire identity as a single statistic from Asia’s second most populous country?

Once they identify me and get comfortable defining me by my identity, they get friendly. And sometimes they think they’re comedians: “Look at that dog! Is that your dinner?”

Or the tried and true: “She’s blind—look how small her eyes are.”

Before others can laugh at me, I start to lean into the stereotypes: obviously I’m a straight-A student—not because I work hard—but because I’m Asian; obviously I’m good at math—I’m Asian; obviously I haven’t responded to their pity invitation—not because I don’t like them and I don’t particularly want to go—but I need my Asian tiger mom’s permission before I RSVP. Obviously, obviously, obviously. I make jokes at the expense of my own racial and ethnic identity before others can get to it. I enjoy the shock factor; in a way, it feels like I’m taking back the narrative. But instead I am complicit in my own mockery, doomed by the narrative I assume possession of.

Recently, I learned to let go and stop caring about the assumptions people make. It’s not my fault if they judge me; I don’t need to appease them. So what if my grades stutter A-A-A-A-A? I studied for them without my parents hounding me. So what if I have a talent with math? As my parents have taught me, “Take a compliment graciously and gratefully.” So what if I don’t want to go to their party? They never see past the eyes narrowed from suspicion, the face as wide and flat as China’s plains, with its undertone as gold as the wheat fields in the south of my motherland.

Why should I care about what they feel the need to assume?

—Katherine Liang, age 15, New Jersey.

## Three Drops of Water

I tiptoe with my tongue.  
We teeter and toddle through  
broken Chinese sentences  
riddled with gaps and  
cavities like an old set of  
teeth, rotting from the  
vacancy of my hesitation.

Angkong’s ancient eyes are  
burdened with epicanthic folds. They  
drown my incoherent mumbling with  
silence, cornering me in words I hardly  
understand about how  
this poem’s lettered limbs  
became a betrayal of who I am.

In my mother’s tongue, the word  
满 (mǎn) means that something is full, with  
three drops of water ( 氵 ) trickling from  
the side. It is the way the child tries to gather  
entire gardens of peonies and plum flowers into  
the hem of her little skirts. But in  
my mother’s tongue, all it takes is  
three drops of water to turn  
“full” into a word that does not exist, as if  
the contents run to the edge of a cliff (with  
the blood of farmers, scholars, and merchants  
that shed from my inkstone heart) and

drips  
drips  
drips  
into nothing.

*“My name is Brielle Rodriguez, an 11th grade student, and my name itself is a cultural artifact. Our family’s original surname is “Li” (李), but before I was born, my grandfather changed it to Rodriguez in consideration of the Spanish influence. My first name, Brielle, is a shortened version of Gabrielle, the archangel after whom I was named, showing the way colonization and cultural integration of the Catholic faith bled into my identity.*

*“I believe that culture gives the world its color. The activities a community engages in, and how they do it, is an opportunity to celebrate perspectives that change and collide over centuries. I speak “Hokkaglish” at home (Hokkien, Tagalog, and English), English at school, Frenchish English with my best friend (who is learning French with me), occasional Mandarin with my grandparents, and Filipino in an emergency where the only language the people I’m with can speak is Filipino (because Filipino grammar is a beast).”*

## Where I Am From

I am from fur and tangled manes  
From dogs barking and sweet applesauce on summer days  
I am from stars in the night sky as we lay on the fresh grass  
From footsteps crunching on gravel roads  
From laughing and singing silly camp songs  
And cabins deep in the woods  
I am from pine trees and bacon cooking in the morning  
From saddles and boots  
To interlaced friendship bracelets  
From books and pencils  
I am from nature  
And oceans  
From pets  
And friends  
To basketballs swishing through nets  
I am from family  
From birds nests  
Fell before I flew  
And all these things  
Are the feathers on my wings

—Sahale Patzer, grade 6, Washington. “I love to write stories and poems... I’m Chinese, Korean, Native American, and Finnish. To me, culture isn’t just where you’re from, it’s also about your hobbies and interests, traditions, and memories, what makes you you.”

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## Hidden in the Wetland

Hidden among the reeds:  
a duck feeds her chicks,  
an alligator blends in with the mud,  
and a heron, still  
as a statue, waits for fish to swim by . . .  
snap! The meal is swallowed  
in one gulp.

Such busy activity in this wetland,  
yet hidden enough to overlook.

Once the curtain  
of night has been pulled,  
frogs and insects croak and sing  
their own songs,  
while an owl flies over the moon  
reflection, and lands in a mangrove tree.

Such busy activity in this wetland,  
yet hidden enough to overlook.

What else here is hidden  
enough to overlook?  
What species still undiscovered?  
If this wetland is drained  
we’ll never know.

—Madeline Male, age 15, grade 9, Kansas.



## The Rock Pushed Me

Do you ever feel like you're climbing a mountain?  
That you're climbing up so high while the rocks are shaking and the gravity is pulling your feet so far down  
It's hard

It's hard to keep climbing that mountain with everyone when all you want to do is get to the top  
I'm sure everyone does too but not as bad as I do  
Sometimes I have to push and shove to get my way up the mountain, fighting  
for me alone when all those people surround me  
Everyone wants to get to the top so badly because of some imaginary pot of gold,  
Something that you just assume will make your life better

I'm always at the bottom struggling my way up  
It always feels as if everyone else is one step ahead of me and it just keeps going  
One step.... One step.... The mountain gets taller and I'm not moving  
Everyone's always had some sort of advantage to climb that mountain while I have nothing, nothing to keep me from  
being held back by the dust clouds  
No one will go back for me though because the pot of gold is waiting at the top overflowing with gold  
But I can't help to think what if there is no pot of gold  
X marks the spot is only a myth until someone reaches the top and realizes that  
the hole with the pot of gold is nothing but a hole

So why even try to climb up that mountain when the cuts and bruises sink into your hands making them numb again  
like you have done before  
Making me question if there was any one thing that people were fully sure  
I stay still here while the world turns and shifts around me  
Why do they get the advantages I wonder why they have these super powers that just get them at the top while I'm  
always a step behind not worthy enough to climb  
The rocks are slipping and I can't hold on  
The world is changing and I can't move on

—Mahi Kapoor, age 13, Virginia, adds: "I realize there are many challenges we may face.  
I love dancing, singing and writing poetry, it helps me put my feelings out to the world."

## Honed Vitality

Fluttering noises loop above me silently,  
imagining their flaps to be those of bird-wings  
as they fly freely through flamboyant flower patches.  
Springtime sunlight gazes down at grassy lawns like sunflowers  
and glazes off the vibrant veins of fluttering creatures,  
sparkling under the warm varied air in slow motion;  
plumped honeybees tumble over yellow puffs of pollen,  
welcoming the long summer's vain.

—Tiana Kuo, age 17, New Jersey. Tiana writes: "I have been recognized for my writings, winning the Topical Winner category in a national poetry contest. This year, I am in the process of publishing my memoir, "Abiding Adventures." My work delves into my cultural roots as a Taiwanese American and my deep appreciation for nature through the pandemic. My experiences have shaped my distinctive perspective, which I bring to my poetry.

"Through my explorations in writing and arts, I embraced my appreciation for nature, life wonders, and remarkable messages about Taiwan, containing my cultural roots. I feel deeply moved when I can share a piece of myself with others."

## Raindrops

*Plink*

*Plink*

*Plink*

I stare out the car window, watching the raindrops

*Drip*

*Drip*

*Drip*

Racing each other on the way.

Do they feel happy?

Do they enjoy

*Thrumming*

*Thrumming*

*Thrumming*

Down from their place in the heavens?

I lightly press my fingertips to the glass,

Wanting to throw open the car door,

Pleading to feel the glorious downpour on my skin,

For my hair to drip water down my back.

But the clouds clear, and I am left to sit  
With the weight of opportunity I hadn't the willpower

To seize

—Nova Macknik-Conde, grade 7, homeschooler, New York.

## El Cenzontle

El cenzontle anda y vuela.  
Con sus alas anda por los cielos; y se aleja a la estela.

Los plumajes del cenzontle  
caen como la lluvia y sus gotas  
Se aleja el cenzontle  
y se va a zonas más remotas.

Quiero ser cual cenzontle,  
perderme...  
Perderme en la vastedad de los árboles  
para así nunca mas volverme.  
Qué lindo sería ser cenzontle:  
quemarme en los soles,  
volar sin razones  
por todo el mundo,  
cantar en las mañanas canciones  
y en la noche quedar en silencio;  
mudo tal vez de amores,  
pasiones, emociones.

## The Cenzontle (Northern Mockingbird)

*The cenzontle walks and flies.  
With his wings he reaches the skies; and leaves in the wake.*

*The feathers of the mockingbird  
fall like the rain and its drops  
The mockingbird leaves  
and goes to more remote areas.*

*I want to be like a cenzontle,  
lose myself...  
Lose myself in the vastness of the trees  
So that I never come back again.  
How nice it would be to be a mockingbird:  
burn in the Sun,  
fly without reasons  
all over the world,  
sing songs in the morning  
and at night, be silent;  
perhaps, the silence of love,  
passion and emotions.*

—Alexander Rivera Preciado, 14, from Mexico, lives in Idaho.

## Mother Tree

The sounds of falling trees,  
Are now closer than ever,  
My children and friends,  
Crash and fall to the ground,  
The cries of pain and agony,  
But never of hate,  
The fungus bring back messages of goodbyes,  
As the remainder of us try to support each other,  
The Devil is now knocking at the door,  
But I do not fear it,  
Because I know that life is forever,

I know that somewhere out in the world,  
My seeds will grow and my children will flourish and bring life,  
Again making a forest and again producing a new generation  
So take my seeds all mighty rustling wind,  
And carry them across lands and seas, across rivers and valleys  
To a place where these seeds can plant their roots down hard and swell,  
And to the powerful buzzing saws wielded by apes,  
Cut me down and use my wood to make your goods,  
So that way I can finally find my everlasting peace.

—Derek Meng, age 12, California.



**Seoul City** by Hyun Min Lee, age 17, South Korea.

## Echoes of Existence

Do the skies weep,  
Their tears dancing with the breeze,  
Blessed for us, cursed for them,  
Misery veiled in beauty  
Does the earth remain unmoved,  
Confined yet expansive,  
Immutable it seems,  
Yet bound to the cycle of descent  
For can fire be restrained,  
Can its wrath be bound?  
No, it rages on,  
Drawn by its primal desires  
Nothing can be controlled  
Nothing can be encaged,  
This world has no phantom,  
It is driven by salvation  
We, but fragments of this entity,  
Should we not be the same?  
—Fatima Hussain, grade 9, Lahore, Pakistan.

## Killing Spree

The turmoil created,  
when we let the gas wander  
and seep through the cracks.  
When we turn on our engines,  
not electric,  
but fast.

How do you expect  
to save the world  
from its death?  
The demise quickly reaching  
flora and fauna  
will forever finish  
all lives without breaching.  
When we choose mean over green,  
we give up on our dreams  
of a world with pure gleam.  
Which is why  
we must act  
against this monster of greed.

For in the end,  
it will all fall  
to the ground  
with our being.

—Kasia Badger, age 17, Texas.

## the girl of the desert

somewhere in the land of the bedouins,  
away from the skyscrapers and traffic  
and wars and modernism and traditionalism,  
deserts lie calm, whispering their secrets  
into the december wind that blows across.  
dunes stand tall and proud like the arabs,  
a blended sea of gold and red and brown—  
a hush falls over it. winter wind blows again.  
clouds like a dark blanket over the sky—  
lonely girl stands, tall, proud, wide-eyed.  
a colored shayla ruffles up her curls—  
she holds it in place at her chest,  
scrunched up above her jalabiya—  
colored like cream, silvery rhinestones  
peppered along the neckline and sleeve  
she walks, her bare feet disturbing the smooth  
layers of mineral, grains making way for her  
as she leaves her mark on the sea of sand.  
the world holds its breath for her, refusing  
to spill its tears on the lonesome arab girl.

—Jude Al-Mufti, age 15, sophomore, New York.

### A Beautiful Bond?

What is a family? Is it a marigold ornament  
Where radiant flowers enrich each other's beauty  
Or is it only the thread inside, unwillingly joining one another?  
Or the Coastal redwoods in a forest, vying for the sky's embrace?  
Are they the constellation of stars, staying close, shining together  
To only be the shadows suddenly disappearing in the dark times?  
Are they caring and supportive? Or only the wild and scary nightmares  
Quickening the heartbeats with fear?  
Are they real? Trustworthy?  
Or just a snowman melting promises with it?  
How does it feel to be in a family?  
Suffocating  
For being tied by responsibilities  
Loved  
Like the cheering and clapping after a performance  
Who are they, truly?  
For I have heard,  
That family—  
Family is among the most beautiful bonds that exist.

—Amrita Dhuke, age 17, Pune, Maharashtra, India.

## STARS on EARTH

Stars, stars  
Light up the night.  
They shimmer and shine,  
Yellow and white.  
But they are too far to catch,  
No worries!  
We have stars on Earth to match.  
  
Like a soft and light feather,  
Spinning and twirling in every weather.  
Like a monarch butterfly,  
Sitting on a flower nearby.  
Like a bunch of big balloons,  
Flying above me in the afternoons.  
Like a midden of seashells,  
Ringing in my ears like bells.  
Like the keys of my piano,  
When I play do-re-mi with Ms. Nano.  
Like a charming ballerina,  
Dancing in her arena.  
Like a rainbow in a puddle,  
Those beautiful colors, I want to cuddle.  
Like me inside a big bubble,  
Giving me joy double.

These are my stars I can easily touch,  
They make me happy so very much!

—Aadya Agarwal, age 12, New Jersey.

## True Beauty

Is rose's perfume,  
And lily's bloom.  
Not atomic shrooms,  
Nor factory fumes.  
  
Not smokey air,  
Or turtle's despair.  
But bounding hares,  
And grazing mares.  
  
Flourished green,  
Die-for scene.  
Not teflon grease  
With no relief.

—Ethan Joeng, age 12, Illinois. He adds:  
“I like to express myself through nature and  
its vast range of variety. This lead me to write  
True Beauty, a poem that reminds us of  
what we truly see beautiful and wonderful.”



**Fruits of Labor** by Emerson Chang, 15, California.

## My Mother's Saree

My mother's hands are embellished with bangles,  
As she appears with her tightly draped saree.  
Her luscious, black hair beneath her dangles,  
As her eyes gaze into the light, starry.  
  
The seams of her saree trail behind her in succession.  
The fragrant aroma of jasmine flowers remained by her side.  
While her bejeweled bindi compliments her complexion,  
Her arms are filled to the core with henna designs.  
  
Yet every Monday through Friday, my mother does a role change,  
As she enters her workplace, determined to make an impact.  
An Indian woman in STEM, with chemicals her hands are stained.  
A dainty lab coat covers her person, remaining intact.  
  
Her scent resides with overpriced coffee, two milks one sugar.  
Her luxuriant, black hair curled up into a messy bun.  
An exhausted yet depleted expression hooks her,  
As she repeatedly murmurs to herself, “This is no fun.”  
  
She may tremble but never buckles under pressure,  
As her eyes gaze into the light, starry.  
Yet she still looks as radiant as ever,  
For she'll always be my mother in a saree.

—Sahasra Maradani, age 14, New Jersey. “My family is from Hyderabad, India, and both my parents are first generation immigrants. I speak the language Telugu within my household and aim to be deeply connected to my Indian roots, despite growing up in America. I recognize and appreciate the amount of sacrifice and risk my parents took, traveling across the world and restarting their lives in an unknown land. My submission was inspired by how I look up to my mother's work ethic and how assertive she is, despite the odds placed against her—an Indian woman in a primarily white, male office setting.

“I tried to capture how she remains in touch with her Indian heritage and how I hope to do the same, as well. Ultimately, I aspire to follow in my mother's footsteps and pursue a career in the STEM field. I hope that my poem inspires others in the same way that I am inspired by my mom.”

**Fruits of Labor** shows how the elements of nature that we are surrounded by contain a myriad of stories, as well as deep connections to us humans. Every apple that we consume bears a vast and varied history of its origin in the tree, followed by its departure from home as a human plucks it off that tree. A beautiful balance exists between humans and nature, exemplified in the green fluorescence of leaves, the delicate intricacy of individual grass blades, and the pureness of the clouds above. I encourage viewers to envision themselves as participants at the center of Mother Nature's embrace.

—E.C.

# My Identity

I grew up wanting to be white. I wished more than anything for straight hair, pale skin and freckles. My whole family is white, one half from south Georgia and the other from Colorado. I'm biologically related to my mother and was adopted by my dad when I was five. My mom and I met my dad and my now step-sisters when I was four. My biological father is from Namibia, a country in southern Africa, but he and my mother split before I was born.

Growing up in a white family means a complete detachment from Black culture, both American and Namibian. This disconnect from blackness permeates my everyday life. I don't know how to take care of my hair, keep it healthy or style it. I know next to nothing about the country my biological father was raised in. I don't speak the native language or eat any of the cultural foods. I've researched the customs and traditions of the people of Namibia, but I fear that I will never fully understand the culture. I can't walk into the village where my birth father grew up and feel at home. The reality is that I will never, and can never, be completely in touch with my roots.

Every single person of color living in America fights a hostile white world. Every step they take is combated by a larger system of oppression. I fear that I have assimilated into that system. Maybe being raised by middle class white people has stripped me of my native culture and made me part of theirs. Many times during my childhood—like community theater and summer camp—I was one of few, if not the only, Black or mixed person present. Camp was so overwhelmingly white that the only other Black person was also raised in a white family.

I have spent a concerning amount of my time explaining to white people's underhanded or overtly racist behavior back to them. It does not happen to me often, but when it does it truly opens my eyes to how clueless they can be.

One time, a white guy literally said the n-word to me in casual conversation. When I questioned him about it, he explained that he had been given an "N-word Pass" by his Black friend. Incidents like this are very rare for me, but they point out how normal it is for white people to be casually racist. The number of people that randomly touch my hair is astounding. In these instances, I am stand-

ing by myself or with a group of friends and someone that I don't even know comes up and starts to pet me. I don't really know what to do, so I just stand there feeling vaguely like an animal until they stop.

I hope that one day I can learn the language my birth father spoke. I hope that I can someday learn everything there is to know about my culture and customs. I realize that I sit in a place of enormous privilege, and that I have opportunities that I would not have in Namibia. My family supports me whenever I talk about wanting to reconnect with my culture, and I am very grateful for that. I hope that one day in the future, I can go to the country that my birth father was raised in and feel at home.

—*Tumelo Johnson, age 17, Georgia. He adds: "I wrote this essay to work through some complicated emotions I have regarding my identity."*

## A Prayer for My Multiverse Mother

My mother, a beautiful hero  
who saved me from hunger battlefield  
Her hands forged wok into invincible shield,  
unites the mighty power of fried rice and red tomato  
to fend off evil viruses

Mother is the water that nurtures tress  
and the fertile soil that nourishes seeds within earth's womb  
until the trunk towers and the leaves lush  
then I gaze at beautiful world with open eyes

Mother's heart is a blooming umbrella,  
warding off the drizzle of my tears,  
uncaring of her own drenching  
When sorrow pours heavily,  
whose heart else do I seek?

Mother is my first school,  
pulls me off from the darkness pool  
From her serenity, I recognized letters,  
learned words and counted numbers

O Merciful God,  
my mother is Your colorful gift,  
allow me to present her one simple gift,  
a humble prayer every day:  
"I love my mother, so love her too."

—*Zanjabila Khadija, age 9, Indonesia.*

## North and South Korea

At the border's edge where two worlds meet,  
A land divided, hearts incomplete,  
North and South, we stand as one,  
Yet severed by a line, by the morning sun.

A tale of unity, a dream untold,  
Innocence of youth and stories of old,  
We share a history, a common blood,  
Yet politics and strife, like a torrent flood.

Across this divide, our eyes do meet,  
Longing for connection, hearts' silent beat,  
A whispered wish for unity's embrace,  
In this barren no man's land, a sacred space.

Oh, how we yearn for bridges to be built,  
To mend the wounds that time has spilt,  
To break the chains of separation's might,  
And walk together into the dawn's first light.

For in this border's shadow, we remain,  
Two nations bound by both joy and pain,  
A yearning for the day when walls will fall,  
And unity will rise, embracing all.

In hearts, the flame of hope forever burns,  
A dream of unity, a fervent yearn,  
Though we cannot exchange, we share a soul,  
One day, as one, we'll reach a common goal.

Let unity's will, a beacon in the night,  
Guide us towards a future that is bright,  
For at this border, hope will never cease,  
A longing for a unified, lasting peace.

—*I An Ryu, age 16, is a rising senior, South Korea.*  
*See more of her poems in our next issue, Vol. 37, no. 1.*

### Our 36th Year Sale on Back Issues

To celebrate our 36th year, we are offering 10 back issues for just \$36 (or 36 back issues for \$100!), including postage within the U.S. (E-mail us for overseas postage charges). To order, e-mail: [info@skippingstones.org](mailto:info@skippingstones.org), or

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## Unthinking

All day, staring at the skyline, haunted by its red haze,  
All night, talking to myself, sure that I have lost my mind,  
Feeling a little unwell, but maybe it's a phase.  
Dead birds and weak children's hearts spell the end of mankind.

Oh well! So... the world is clearly heading for a breakdown.  
Chemical assault to the brain, forcing us to unthink;  
An incurable disease that spreads. Just look around!  
We should be searching for a solution, which makes me think...

Bezos, Musk, Branson... deplete Earth and inflict toxic scars.  
They believe they'll get away just in time for Summer,  
You and I, we live and die; but sure, they'll conquer Mars.  
Will their names echo across the centuries or mutter?  
Come! Sit! Let's stare at the ocean! Angry, unbounded,  
beautiful, limitless, and just like our minds, polluted.

—*Ares Bandebo-Cambra, gr. 6, Connecticut. "My poems aim to offer solace for those who feel powerless and isolated...Lately, the world seems to have gone mad. Billionaires are trying to conquer Mars, while the world drowns in problems. It feels like it is just a Summer vacation to them. I could not but write. Frustration regarding the environment and global health is the inspiration for this poem."*

### Write Yourself a Lantern

To write yourself a lantern  
It takes a little time  
It takes a little effort  
It takes a little climb

Words are our lanterns  
Nobody knows why  
To bring lightness in the darkness  
Illuminate the sky

On the dark cloudy night  
When the stars are out of sight  
See you looking out your window  
Trying to find the light

Searching deep inside  
Suddenly you find  
It's all you, child  
You're the lantern, you're the light

To sing yourself a lantern  
It takes an open mind  
It takes a little kindness  
It takes a little rhyme

Songs are our lanterns  
When darkness paints the sky  
To bring lightness in the darkness  
Illuminate our lives

—*Mara Bella Occhuzzo, age 9, Virginia.*