

Skipping Stones

A Multicultural Literary Magazine

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Vol. 36, no. 2
Sept.-Dec. 2024



2024 Youth Awards • Best Books • Haiku & Tankas
Celebrate America Creative Writing Contest

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

The 2024 Skipping Stones Book Awards



We are pleased to honor the following 28 outstanding books—in three categories: Multicultural, Nature, and Teaching Resources—as our 2024 Award Winners. These picture books, chapter books, novels and nonfiction works promote an understanding of cultures, cultivate cooperation, and/or encourage a deeper awareness of nature, ecology, and diversity. They foster respect for multiple viewpoints and closer relationships within human societies. The honored titles offer various perspectives, help us understand our diverse cultures and their histories, and how we overcome challenging situations. Hearty congratulations to the creators of these excellent books!

To read the reviews, visit www.SkippingStones.org and click on the *Contests/Awards* button.



Multicultural and International Books:

Goodnight, Little Man by Daniel Bernstrom; illustr. Heidi Woodward Sheffield. Ages 4-8. *HarperCollins Publishers*.

On My Papa's Shoulders by Niki Daly. Ages 4-7. *Catalyst Press*.

Walking Together by Elder Albert D. Marshall and Louise Zimanyi; illustr. Emily Kewageshig. Ages 4-7. *Annick Press*.

Empty and Me: A Tale of Friendship and Loss (A bilingual English/Persian book) by Azam Mahdavi; illustr. Maryam Tahmasebi; Trans. Parisa Saranj. Ages 4-8. *Lee and Low*.

Tango Red Riding Hood by Rachel S. Hobbs; illustr. Carolina Vázquez. Ages 4-8. *Gnome Road Publishing*.

The Light She Feels Inside by Gwendolyn Wallace; illustr. Olivia Duchess. Ages 5-8. *Sourcebooks*.

José Feeds The World by David Unger; illustr. Marta Álvarez Miguéns. Ages 4-8. *Duopress/Sourcebooks*.

The Girl Who Figured It Out by Minda Dentler; illustr. Stephanie Dehennin. Ages 4-8. *Sourcebooks*.

The Girl Who Heard the Music by Marni Fogelson and Mahani Teave. Illustr. Marta Álvarez Miguéns. Ages 4-8. *Sourcebooks*.

It's Just Skin, Silly! by Dr. Nina Jablonski and Dr. Holly Y. McGee; illustr. Karen Vermeulen. Ages 5-9. *PowersSquared*.

Colorful Mondays: A Bookmobile Spreads Hope in Honduras by Nelson Rodríguez & Leonardo Augustíne Montes; illustr. Rosana Faría & Carla Tabora. Trans. Lawrence Schimel. Ages 5-9. *Eerdmans Books for Young Readers*.

Veó, Veó, I See You (Spanish/English) by Lulu Delacre. Ages 5-9. *Atheneum Books for Young Readers*.

Flap Your Hands: A Celebration of Stimming by Steve Asbell. Ages 5-10. *Lee and Low Books*.

Unstoppable Us: Why the World Isn't Fair, Vol. 2 by Yuval Noah Harari. Ages 10 & up. *Bright Matter Books*.

The Cedarville Shop and the Wheelbarrow Swap by Bridget Krone. Ages 10-14. *Catalyst Press*.

When A Brown Girl Flees, a novel by Aamna Qureshi. Ages 14-19. *Tu Books/Lee and Low Books*.

Nature and Ecology Books:

The Child and the Tree: A Tale for Better Times by Nohra Bernal; art: Rubén Rodríguez Ferreira. Ages 3-8. (**Alma Semilla**, in Spanish is also available). *Arreboles*.

Merry and Hark: A Christmas Story by April Genevieve Tucholke; illustr. Rebecca Santo. Ages 4-8. *Algonquin Young Readers*.

Fresh Juice by Robert Liu-Trujillo. Ages 4-8. *Lee and Low Books*.

A Warbler's Journey by Scott Weidensaul; illustr. Nancy Lane. Grades K-5. *The Gryphon Press*.

Screws Keep Things Secure: Simple Machines for Kids by Andi Diehn; illustr. Micah Rauch. Ages 5-8. *Nomad Press*.

Flipflop!: How A Boat Made from Flip-flops Is Helping to Save the Ocean by Linda R. Lodding and Dipesh Pabari; illustr. Michael M. Mwangi. Ages 5-8. *Beaming Books*.

When Nature Calls: The Unusual Bathroom Habits of the World's Creatures, by Maria Birmingham; illustr. Dave Whamond. Ages 6-10. *Red Deer Press*.

Bears, Bears, Bears by Wayne Lynch. Ages 10 and up. *Fitzhenry & Whiteside*.

Polar: Wildlife at the Ends of the Earth by L. E. Carmichael; illustr. Byron Eggenschwiler. Ages 7-11. *Kids Can Press*.

Superpod: Saving the Endangered Orcas of the Pacific Northwest by Nora Nickum. Ages 8-12. *Chicago Review Press*.

Teaching and Parenting Resources:

Rethinking Multicultural Education: Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice by Wayne Au, Editor. Suitable for K-12 educators. *Rethinking Schools*.

The Voice of My Heart: Unforgettable Memories in an Unforgettable Year. Edited by Merna Ann Hecht. For grades 8 and up, and multilingual learners' teachers. *Chin Music Press*.

Read book reviews on www.SkippingStones.org
in the **Annual Book Awards** subsection.

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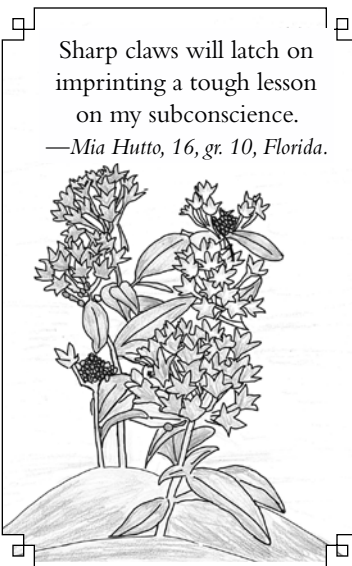
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—Carina Araujo, age 11, Maryland.

The 2024 Youth Honor Awards

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In the spirit of ecological sensitivity, we choose to print with soy ink on recycled and recyclable paper with a 30% post-consumer recycled content.



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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Winner of three National Association for Multicultural Education Awards, as well as EdPress Association of America, Writer Magazine, NewsStand

Resources, Eugene Ed. Assn., and Parent's Choice Awards.



From the Editor

We received so many worthy entries from so many of you that we have added four extra pages to this issue, and in place of an editorial, we've used the entry *Lost Before Translation* as the Guest Editorial on p. 8. Also, we'll publish many more **Noteworthy YHA Entries** on the website soon, and in Vol. 37, issue 1. —Editors

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."

Culture Embrace (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.

Celebrate America 2024 Creative Writing Contest



Honoring our immigrant past, shaping our immigrant future

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

First Place: Stories of Us

I sit
By the windowsill
Gazing outside.
Down, on the street, so many heads,
Each is unique.
Amidst the traffic and frantic honking,
I sense the presence of
Millions of others,
Just like me.
I contemplate
The journeys. Each of us—All of us have a story.
When mothers and fathers
Ventured far across the world,
Their sense of adventure leads
Them in search of a new life.
Then I think
About all the diverse people,
And a myriad of languages,
Some foreign to one, but familiar to another.
When I open my window,
I hear those languages harmonizing,
Merging together to form a chorus.
But not just any choir.
The symphony of every single person's story,
A song where every note counts.
I think about the stories
That Father would tell me.
About my father's mother and
His migratory voyage.
My father's trip to America,
With only 300 dollars in his suitcase,
And a brain.
I ponder about each and every one
Of the people in my neighborhood
And I wonder
Why Father would be willing
To relinquish everything
To speak in a foreign tongue.

I think about his pride
In having dual nationalities.
About being able to keep his
traditions close to heart,
And embracing a new part of himself.
American.
Then my thoughts drift to school.
All of the different students,
Each of us with our own stories.
The accounts of our ancestors,
And all that they sacrificed.
For us.
For each and every one of us,
To be here.
At this moment.
Right now.
To be present,
Someone had to work hard.
Someone had to shed tears of exhaustion,
Leaving behind familiar joy and wonder,
Leaving behind family and friends,
To create new memories and stories
In one country,
Forming one grand story.
But this story
Isn't just any story.
It is the story of us.
The U. S.
The story of the United States of America.

—Angela Du, grade 5, New York.

The 2025 Creative Writing Contest

The American Immigration Lawyers Association holds this annual contest to challenge fifth graders across the country to reflect on and write about one of two themes: “**Why I Am Glad America Is a Nation of Immigrants**” or “**What Does it Mean to be a Welcoming Nation?**”

Visit: www.celebrateamericawritingcontest.org

Second Place: Sugar and Milk

I wake up to the sounds of unfamiliar voices in different languages. I raise the blinds and look out the window. I see people wearing bright clothes and intricate patterns. They stand out against the dull brick apartment building, like fall leaves against a gray sky. My mom comes in and abruptly says, “Don’t bother with them. We were here first.” I sit silently on my bed pondering about what she said.

Weeks pass. Curious, I go over to their apartment building and find a girl watering a tomato plant. I shyly say, “Hi. I’m from the apartment across the street. My name is Sula.” She quietly responds, “My name is Aminah.” She reaches towards the tomato plant and offers a tomato. I smile and put it in my pocket. Aminah waves goodbye and runs inside.

I run back home to give the tomato to my mom. She says, “Thank you,” and takes a bite. “This is the best tomato I’ve ever had. Where did you get this?” I hesitated a bit, then I said, “From Aminah.” “Who is Aminah?” she asks. Anxiously I say, “The new kid from across the street.” Before my mom can say anything, I run upstairs.

Aminah and I start playing together over the summer. I think Mom is still unsure of Aminah and her family.

Tonight I wake up to loud sounds. I am scared. Mom comes running into my room and we run to the basement. The next morning, my mom says that there is a war going on and the safest place for us is right across the border in our neighboring country. We pack our clothes and hurry into a truck packed full of people. As we settle down, I see Aminah and her family in the corner. After a long and tough ride, we end up in a camp full of tents.

Mom and I are going from place to place in search of food and a job. A week later Mom finds a job at a small bakery owned by a family. The job doesn’t pay a lot, but enough to get food for both of us. Later that month, the family invites us for dinner at their house. It is a small house with two rooms and seven kids. I am eager to have a proper meal. My mom thanks them for sharing the food they have, especially when we come from a different country. Then the host shares a Parsi legend that she

had heard from her elders. She begins:

“In the seventh century, when Parsis emigrated to India, they were brought before local ruler, Rana, who presented them with a vessel ‘brimful’ of milk to signify that the surrounding lands could not possibly accommodate any more people. The Parsi head responded by slipping some sugar into the milk to signify how the strangers would enrich the local community and dissolve into life like sugar dissolves in the milk, sweetening the society but not unsettling it.”

Mom bursts into tears.

—Ananya Siddabathuni, grade 5, Minnesota.

Third Place: I See America

Through crashing waves and rocking ships,
I carry big wishes and high hopes for this new nation.
I see America, welcoming me with arms wide open,
Filling me with faith and showing me appreciation.

Leaving the green, white, and saffron flag waving in the breeze,
The concrete roof that once was over my head.
Still holding onto my traditions and beliefs,
While adapting to a different culture instead.

I am welcomed by classmates,
Welcomed by neighbors and teachers.
I soon feel connected with my community,
Regardless of my different nationality and different facial features.

When I get pushed down from inequity,
I get back up and stand strong.
I see America as a place of opportunity,
A place of liberty, and a place where nobody’s background
is wrong.

I will carry on our vows, generation to generation,
Longing for our customs to carry on, and never fade.
I hope that the new ages to come will learn that our heritage is
something to be proud of,
And realize the righteous impact on America that
we immigrants have made.

For I am an immigrant from over the seas,
Proud of my heritage and values, I hold near and dear.
I am holder of two nationalities, first generation to see America,
And I hope to spread the joy of our culture here.

—Caroline Keslinke, grade 5, Illinois.

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.

The 2024 Asian Celebration Haiku and Tanka Exhibit

1. Rain

The bright sky turns dark
Drip-drop drip-drop goes the rain
Earthworms all crawl out

2. Wind

Naughty boy it is
Playing hide and seek with me
Blew my hat away

—Suki Fang, age 8, Beijing, P. R. C.

1. A halo of light

Around the shimmering lake
Birds skim the surface

2. Birds chirp when I wake

Sunlight streams through the windows
Spring is here at last

3. Leaves rustle and sigh

Fragile wind strokes my light hair
Rain joins me softly

—Keira Lin, age 11, California.

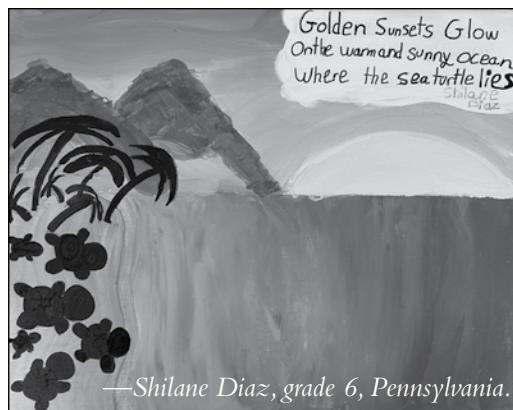
Mother Volcano

Peaceful when asleep
Inside is the lava lake
The earth starts to shake
Burst of anger rocks the sky
Smoke and magma plummets down

—Eason Lin, grade 5, Taiwan.

I am all alone
Looming in the dark night sky
Standing gracefully
Stars' gleaming eyes all on me
Only tree in the forest

—Fae Merritt, grade 5, Oregon.



—Shilane Diaz, grade 6, Pennsylvania.

The Seasons in Haiku

A single flower
is planted in a meadow
by the gentle wind.

The dusk sky cues
all the crickets to give us
a summertime concert.

The crisp, orange leaves
keep falling from the branches
to make room for snow.

The snow is now falling
and we are still waiting
for more.

—Madeline Male, grade 9, Kansas.

The evening sky glows
with orange swirls and pink puffs.

Dessert is now served.
—Madeline Male, homeschooler, KS.

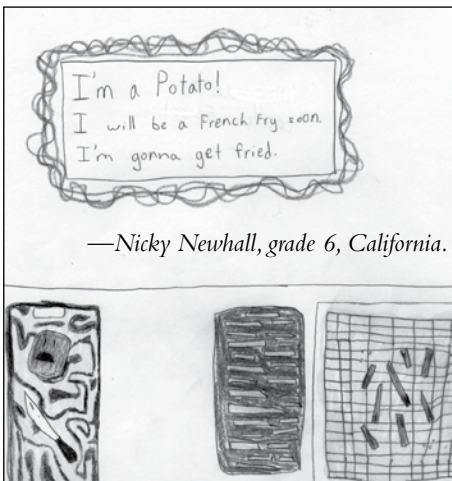
Sunrise

Early morning sky
Exquisite magical hues
Dazzling masterpiece

—Carrigan Crockett, grade 10, Texas.

Bloomed

All the bloomed flowers
Cleansing and refreshing me
Clearing all my thoughts
—Alefiina Ericheva, grade 10, New York.



—Nicky Newhall, grade 6, California.

Mountains, each unique,

Trees, fire, all burn burning brush,

Snowy, cold white trees,

Bright green trees, blooming flowers,

Magical mountains and me.

—Addisyn Miller, grade 4, California.

The sway of the trees

The nice feel of the green grass

Where has it all GONE?

—Lailee Shirani, grade 4, California.

Swoosh go autumn leaves

As they fall onto the path

And children rush through

—Chloe Adkins, age 10, California.

Moon

I stare at the light

of the snowy, silver moon

Feel the secure light.

—Ju Chan Kim, age 10, California.

The Boring Roadtrip

Long boring roadtrip

Shouting are we there yet mom?

Almost there child

—Alexa Barbosa, grade 6, California.

A Life So Beautiful

Look at the mesmerizing sky.

As the Sun glows over me, to think God

Made all this beautiful scenery.

—Megan Azizi, grade 6, California.

Just Stop Polluting

Nature has strong scents.

It has beautiful flowers.

Why do we pollute?

—Ezekiel Flores, grade 4, California.



Alice Pope, grade 5, Oregon.

1st Graders@Laurence Sch., Calif.

Winter

Winter, cold, snowy
Snowman and snowflakes
Get cozy in my bed
—Remy

Spring

green grass pink flowers
fruit is growing on the trees
warm and breezy days
—Eveleigh

Winter

drinking hot cocoa
the wolves are howling outside
arctic foxes play
—Scarlett

Spring

Roses, rain, and bees
Poppy, parks, garden, color green
Passover and windy
—James



Curiosity

Brings such wonder to the mind
Think about the world
—Sylvie Snay, age 10, Pennsylvania.

Sharp-tipped balled-up leaves,
Smooth and silky rosy pink,
Dianthus' spring delights.
—Nova Macknik-Conde, age 12, New York.

Squid and clam remains
their indignant life cycle
envied by the sand
—Lillian Liu, grade 10, New York.

Seasonal Swing

Shrouded by a glare
bitter gales rage across plains
as the earth slumbers
like unbearable burdens
weigh down the cushions of snow

Laughter echoes 'round
whimsy sprites chime as they soar
through old elder trees
running through lazy old creeks
old memories play along

Glaring lights conquer
outstretched to the untold ends
tramping with a strut
but when curtains tumble down
little stars devour the earth

Beyond smoking trains
once lie a thriving meadow
where creatures may dwell
and polished fruits mask the ground
in the soft lull they all know
—Evie Hwangbo, grade 7, Illinois.

Snowglobe

The picturesque town
lays nestled in the valley,
where it stays winter
as the seasons come and go,
and they battle the cold gales.

The bitter cold stings
and bites pieces of bare skin.
The wind howls and blows,
carrying thumb sized snowflakes
in its wintery clutches.

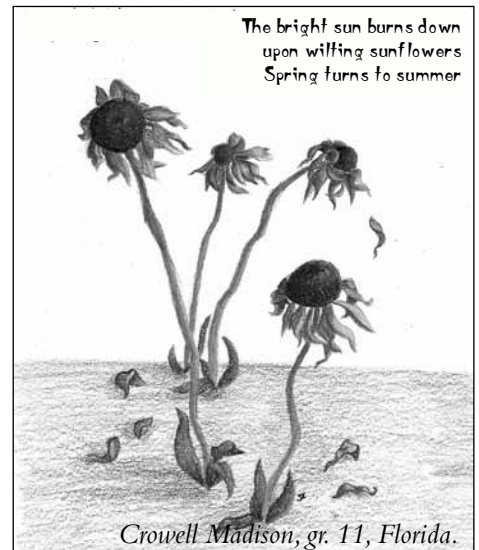
The cold squeezes them,
like clothes just a size too small.
They sway like a leaf
as they travel the slick paths
in the huge gusts of crisp air.

Sharp daggers of ice
protrude from their slanted roofs,
and frost covers trees,
and brick chimneys belch gray smoke.
Each breath creates a white puff.

Snow flies overhead
and shrieks arise when it falls.

Laughter echoes as
little children run and play,
their cheeks are rosy and red.
—Addy Steel, grade 7, Illinois.

Little worms crawling
Showing themselves to sunlight
Popping out of the dirt
—Allison Wheeler, grade 8, Florida.



colors fight over
possession of the night sky
envy is a game

imagery strikes me
reality is so far
from tonight's sunset

it came flooding back
vivid colors took over
consuming my mind
with silence that was screaming
then it was gone forever
—Clio Lefcourt-Taylor, gr. 5, New York.

Madeline Tu, grade 4, California

As the seasons pass
The new leaves flourish and bloom
The sweet smells of spring
Then the leaves crisp and float down
Fall will be covered in snow.

2024 Asian Celebration Haiku & Tanka Art

I followed the wind
the cool breeze took a hold of
me, I look around
I see the birds flying like
the wind in cold, breezy snow.
Lucia Torres, age 10, California.

The trees swag in
wind, creatures scurry
away from fire, why do
they suffer?



Lois Jordahl, age 10, California.

**Walking in the grass
My paws wet. I keep going
Living life so free.**

Elodie Hill-Jones, grade 5, Oregon.



A mysterious world
Black canvas with specks of lights
Peace embraces me

—Carina Araujo, age 11, Maryland.

The bushes are green.
The bushes are beautiful.
The bushes are gone.



Connor Smith, 10, California.

NYC, LA
Where is the green
tomorrow?
Where is it today?

Frida Stella Martinez, 10, California.

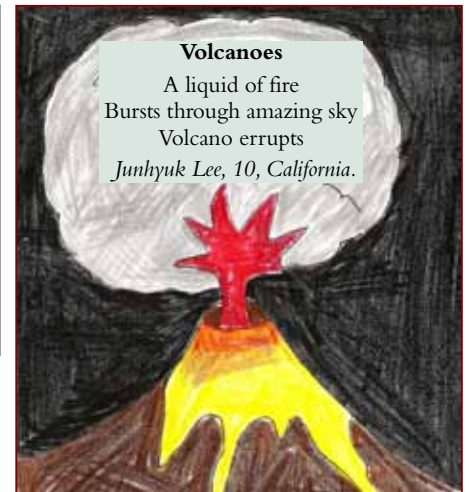


Mountains touch the sky,
Silent guardians of time,
Eternal embrace.

—Dahlia Neuman, grade 6, Connecticut.

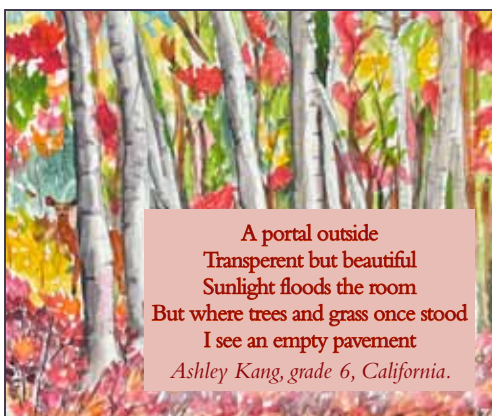
Volcanoes

A liquid of fire
Bursts through amazing sky
Volcano erupts
Junhyuk Lee, 10, California.



Stones are so heavy
Water is too, crash like waves
Splash! roar! So do you.
Malika Calvert, grade 4, California

A portal outside
Transparent but beautiful
Sunlight floods the room
But where trees and grass once stood
I see an empty pavement
Ashley Kang, grade 6, California.



Cloudless and clear blue
Into pink with rainbow ends
The sun says farewell
Beauty envelopes the world
The night lazily drifts on
Ashley Kang, 11, California.





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*)

2024 Skipping Stones Youth Honor Awards



- ★ ★ 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 Crain, age 13, Nevada & Jessie Li, grade 6, British Columbia, Canada.
- ★ ★ Ben Kwack, age 12 & Jaslene Kwack, age 14, Illinois. (See their entries on our website.)
- ★ ★ 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, grade 11, 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 the winners!

★ ONE O'CLOCK ★

"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.



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.



★ 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 (CO₂) 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."

Skipping Stones Stew

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.

★ Cultural Diversity ★

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.

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.

★ Poems by Jack Aronian, age 14, Connecticut ★

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 con-
tent and photography for County Parks. I have
a background working on farms; I love ani-
mals 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 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

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

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 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

The Woods... *continued*

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."

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.

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

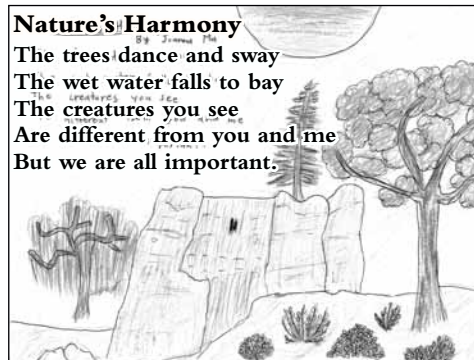
(Inspired by Night, by Elie Wiesel)

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.



Nature's Harmony

The trees dance and sway
The wet water falls to bay
The creatures you see
Are different from you and me
But we are all important.

—Joanna Ma, grade 4, California.

★ **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

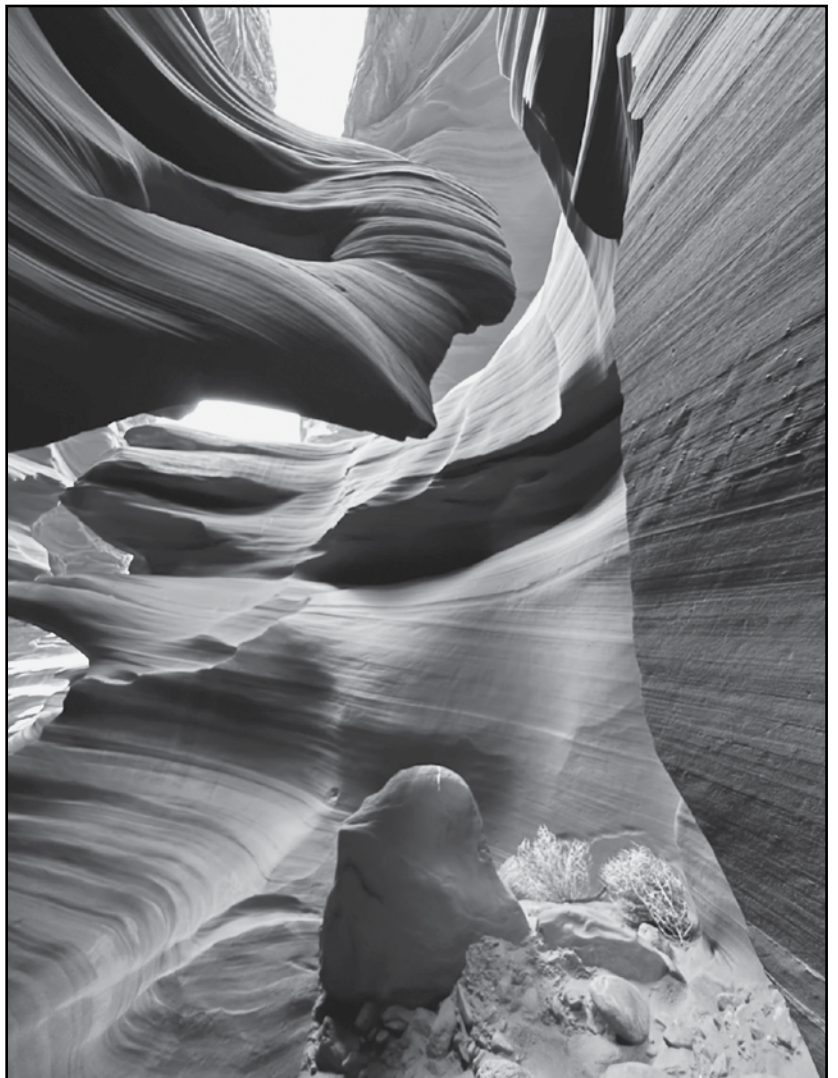
—Arianna Shaprow, age 13, Nevada.

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.

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."

★ **Art** (on page 30) 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.

Editor's Note: We received far too many Noteworthy Entries to include in this Awards Issue. Please look for many more amazing entries in our next issue and also on the website!

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.

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 beauti-
ful and wonderful."

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.

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.



Fruits of Labor by Emerson Chang, 15, Calif.

★ 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-

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.”

tary children facing various learning challenges. My essay (see our website) 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 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 (the first issue published in Sept. 2023).”

Noteworthy YHA Art Entries, pp. 29-30

Making a Change with Smaller Steps (page 29)

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 29)

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 29)

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 30)

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.

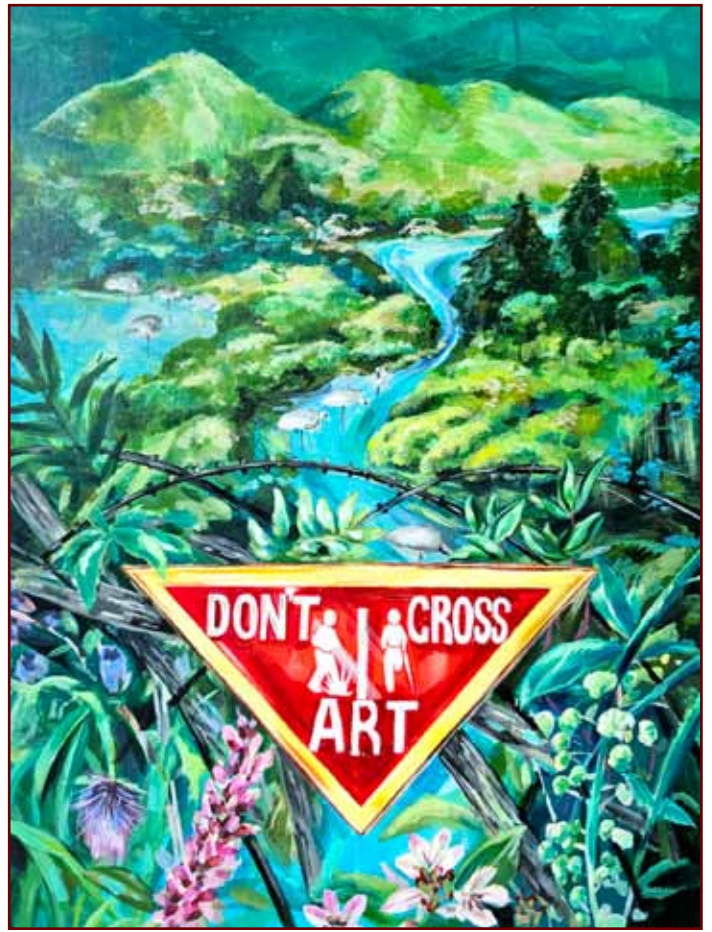
"Untitled" (page 30)

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.



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.



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

Youth Honor Award Art Entries



Nature of Canada by Jessie Li, gr. 6, British Columbia, Canada.



Wonderful Experiences in Nature by Jessie Li.



We Are Different by Jessie Li, grade 6, B.C., Canada.



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



“Untitled” by Promise Yi, age 16, South Korea.

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.

★ 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.)."

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.*

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



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.*

★ 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 On Wheels. I wasn't really listening—I couldn't be there—but there was one thing that caught my attention: “They

★ *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 back cover*), 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. (*see back cover*).

—Zeran Li, grade 10, New York.

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

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.

Fruits of Labor (*on p. 26*) 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.

The Discoveries (*artwork on p. 39, 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. (*see p. 39*).

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Nature Art by Pooja Verma, age 15, California

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*), 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. 38.



The Discoveries Irene Kim, age 14, Connecticut.



Stopping to Smell Flowers by Pooja Verma, CA

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Art by Zeran Li,
grade 10, New York.
Please see page 37.



(continued from p. 37) 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.