

Skipping Stones

Vol. 38, no. 3
Sept. - Dec. 2026

A Multicultural Literary Magazine

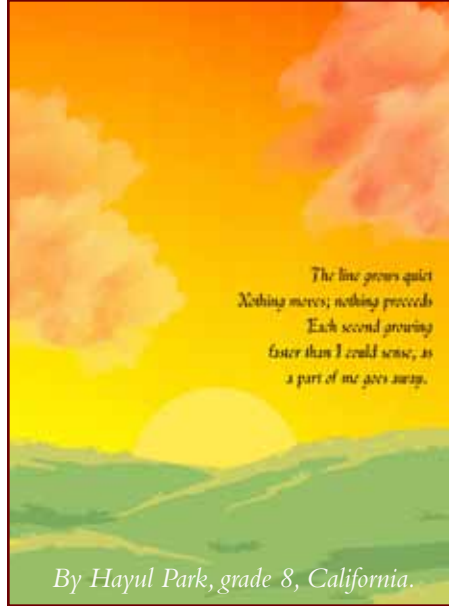
2026 Youth Honor Awards • Book Awards
Asian Celebration Haiku & Tanka Exhibit

Pages of Light by Hayeon Kim, age 17, South Korea.

2026 Asian Celebration Haiku and Tanka Art Exhibit



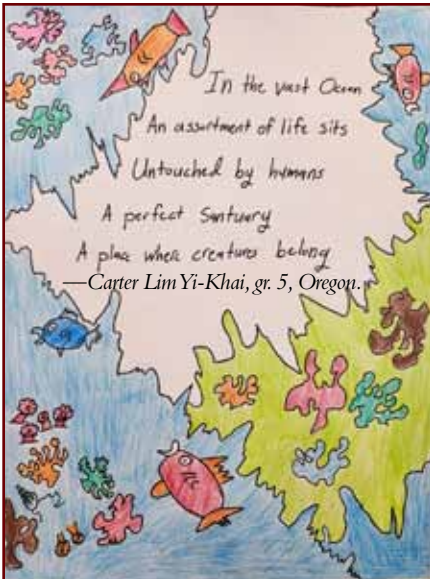
By Jessie Li, age 14, Canada.



By Hayul Park, grade 8, California.



—Lauren Piemlarp, grade 6, California.



—Carter Lim Yi-Khai, gr. 5, Oregon.



—Matthew Gross, grade 11, Florida.

Blue, red, and yellow
Colors that brighten my life
Bring me joy and warmth
—Carina Araujo, age 13, Maryland.

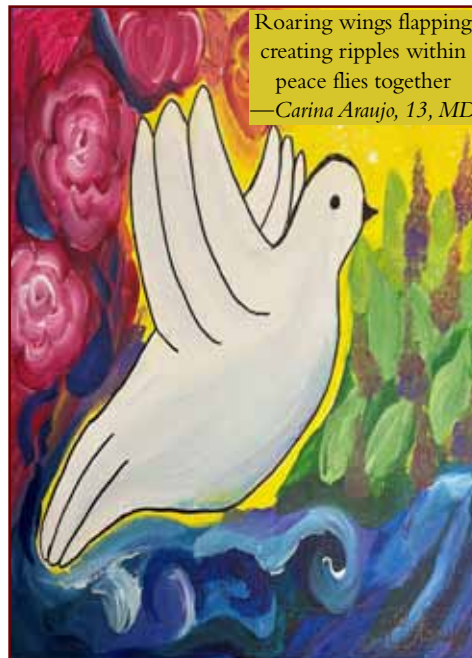


The Fire of Rebirth

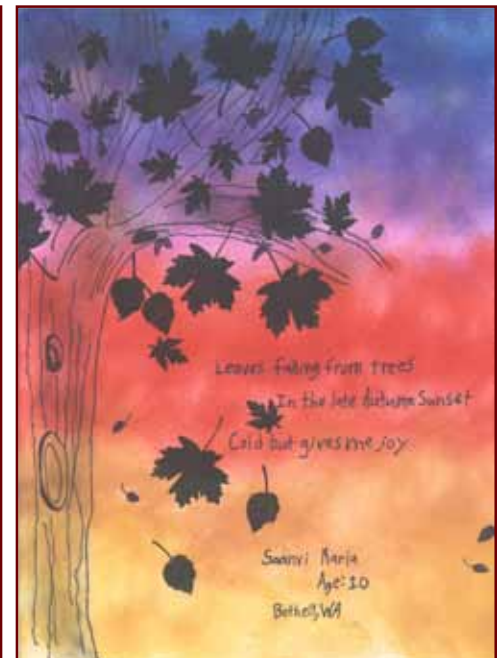
A broken cigar
A tiny spark lights the flame
The wind grows fury
The quiet of destruction
A sprout breaks ashes
—Ethan Wang, age 11, grade 5, California.



Isabella Alduma, gr. 6, California.



Roaring wings flapping
creating ripples within
peace flies together
—Carina Araujo, 13, MD



Leaves falling from trees
In the late autumn sunset
Cold but gives me joy.

Sanni Maria
Age: 10
Bethesda, MD

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Embrace of Nature

Water clear as glass,
Glittering golden sparkles,
Reflecting Sun's grin.
I row on the freezing lake,
Beneath the blue sky's vastness.
—*Jessie Li, age 14, gr. 8, B.C., Canada.*



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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.

We're pleased to share that later this year, Skipping Stones will become an integral part of the National Association for Multicultural Education!



Skipping Stones Prepares to Expand It's Outreach

For the past 35 years, the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) has been a leading voice for multicultural education. NAME was founded in 1991 to unite educators and advocates committed to equity, diversity, and social justice. The organization works with classroom teachers and scholars and community leaders, providing resources and encouragement in support of multicultural education in schools and colleges. Their aim is to "provide the preeminent digital clearinghouse of resources about educational equity and social justice." They also publish a quarterly journal, *Multicultural Perspectives*, and host their (inter)national conference on multicultural education.

Skipping Stones has been associated with NAME since 1997, when we received their national award for our work in the field of multicultural education for children. Since then, we have attended their annual conferences to display our issues and award-winning books. We've been honored by NAME three times over the past three decades. I've even served on their national board for a couple of years.

Now, we're excited to announce that *Skipping Stones* is joining hands with NAME. Starting in January 2027, we will be under the NAME umbrella. We've been communicating with them for several months on the many details. Now, we're ready to file legal papers and forms to become an intergral part of NAME. I will be working with *Skipping Stones* during this transition and likely afterwards until I retire.

Skipping Stones will continue to offer a forum for young voices to share their truth and their views under NAME's umbrella. All the values and programs that the magazine has stood for will continue uninterrupted. While we expect no major changes in our content, we do hope to gain greater readership through NAME's network of educators and its policy and advocacy outreach throughout the United States and beyond.

We're confident that this joining of hands with a trusted national nonprofit will solidify the stewardship of the magazine and its mission for many decades.

—Arun and the Board of Directors of *Skipping Stones*.

2026 Asian Celebration Haiku and Tanka Collection

The Aurora

Silent green rivers
Dance across the frozen sky
Night learns how to glow
—Soumya Varadharajan, grade 7, CA

Cloud Tears

Clouds break into Tears;
As gray pillows spill drops;
Feeds the earth with streams.
—Rudhvi Shivakavi, age 10, Cal.

The Thirsty Mosquitos

A needled pest hums
Like a thief, stealing blood
The night's thief soon feeds.
—Shreyan Reddy Netla, gr. 5, Calif.

Buildings undulate
Mother Earth jerks and trembles
The city crumbles
—Swanik Kulkarni, gr. 5, New York.

Warm sun sinking down
Holding orange dignity,
The setting sun glows
—Jonah Miller, grade 7, Connecticut.

1. Walking to the bus
A foggy, misty morning
A long day ahead
2. A fawn, laying in
An embracing, calm field
Safe in nature's shade
—Liam Vermes, grade 7, Connecticut.

Sanctuary of Light

Hug your pin-pierced life;
Forever warmth embraces your all,
In your dazzling light.
—Jessie Li, age 14, gr. 8, BC, Canada.

one of those days
a canoe rows
onto a rising sun
—Samira Fuseini, grade 9, Ghana.

Brightness streaks the sky
Color bends into an arch
Light after the rain
—Lio Sammons, gr. 5, Oregon.

1. The candle burns low
even light must spend itself
to push back the dark

2. Old dog on the porch
watches the road out of habit
no one is coming
—Samer Gupta, grade 7, California.

Such gloomy grey skies
Rain falls on the window pane
Spring's breath still lingers
—Aum Barman, grade 7, California.

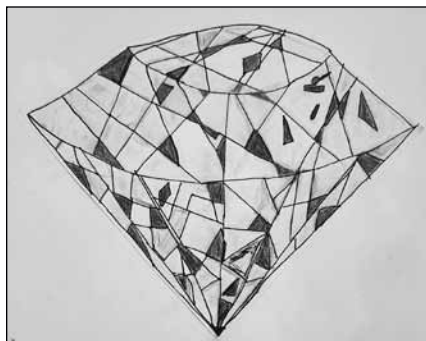
Beads of sap cling still.
Hardened amber drips of pine.
A tree's golden cry.
—Leah Feigenbaum, grade 7, California.

Garbage fills the air
Sea creatures watch in despair
Let's show that we care
—Arjun Gogineni, gr. 7, California.

Red-throated beauty
Her mellifluous song drifts
Iridescent wings
—Atharv Kakkar, grade 6, California.

1. Ants weaving dark roads,
Crawling in sincere order,
In disorderly worlds
2. Drinking shy raindrops
Hidden secrets of the earth
Life begins below
—Gautham Marrireddy, gr. 6, Texas.

Gluey, golden sap,
Why a young, small tree survives,
To an epic adult oak.
—Shriyans Reddy Kalavakuru, gr. 5, Cal.



Unheard

As the wind whistles,
The still silence breaks, unheard
Through the dead of night.
—Sivir Guo, age 11, Florida

Birth

A new beginning
Slight movement to life
A crack to embark
—Uddhav Dodla, grade 5, Michigan.

A white flecked flower
Purple petals unfurling
A star specked wonder
Green stem, bright yellow pistil
The blooming of the iris
—Chloe Lv, grade 3, New York.

A blissful Pink rose
Pollinating honeybees
Nature's many gifts
—Adhira Kanneganti, age 9, Tennessee.

Imagination

Look and see the world outside.
Take your mind to places,
Take yourself where you can't go.
Don't you wonder what's inside?
—Ozzy Le, grade 5, Oregon.

Stars gently sparkle
The moon lights up the night sky
Pale shimmers ignite
The shine has lit up the air
The grace has lit up the joy
—Stella Sun, age 11, grade 6, Oregon.

Bumble bees buzzing
Stirring honey into tea
The feeling of home
The sweet taste I'll always know
I'll never be lost from it
—Ember Hanna, grade 6, Oregon.

A treasure it is
Kaleidoscope of color
Older than us all
Cut into a perfect shape
Sparkling lights tease its glow.
—Carter Lim Yi-Khai, grade 5, Oregon.

Haiku & Tanka by Students in Skokie, Illinois

Hollows in the Tree

Old fox, pale and gray,
sat down for the final time
And let their life go.

The rotting carcass
saturates the forest floor.
A frail sapling stands.

The tree slowly grows
lush with leaves, armored with bark.
It becomes a home.

A new little fox
just moved into one of the
hollows in the tree.

—Dimitrios Tsonis, grade 7.

The Peace of Nature

Wind blows gracefully
Meadows moving with the breeze
Streams flowing with grace

The sun's light shining
Sets upon the vast blue sky
Where everyone sees

The tree's branches shake
From the vast breadth of the world
Peace, how beautiful

—Allen Lee, grade 7.

A shivering fish
wrapped in an icy blanket
cowers in the depths

The sun rains down knives
The burning desert consumes
all that once was green

Sky has a meltdown
A canary points upward
Oh! That's what I want!

The cold fish decides:
The planet will find her sun
She spins to the sky,

Throwing up water.
Canary smiles, drenched in jewels
Fish finds a warm pond

—Caroline Field, grade 8.

Delicate Life

Tiny mushrooms cling
to a rotting, mossy log,
Mostly unnoticed

First flowers of spring
young petals so innocent
vibrantly blooming

Young baby crawling,
trying to take its first steps,
giggling happily

Ducklings paddling,
splashing in the pond,
quacking in sheer bliss

Puppy licking you,
cuddling into your lap,
begging for a walk

Curious bunny,
still young and very tiny,
hops across the grass.

—Maddy Johnson, grade 7.

The Seasons

Reaching for the sky
The old limbs sway and creak slow
Soft snow diving down

Green stems emerge now
Waking from a frozen sleep
Silver ice retreats

Summer afternoon
White clouds float in navy sky
Golden sun shines down

Golden leaves descend
Painting the dark road below
A soft crisp carpet

—Ahmed Akhunji, grade 8.

Delicate But Mighty

Something in the midst,
Nodding down to the cold earth,
Its bell-like petals,

Withstanding the cold,
Blossoming from the cool ground,
A snowdrop it is.

—Isra Luisa Siddiqui, grade 5.

From Wentworth Falls P.S., Australia

Cockatoo

White plumes slice the air
Ivory wings glide soundlessly
A golden crest flares

—Jessica Kopp, Year 5.

Crimson Rosella

Cherry and azure
A caterwaul of colour
Casting cheerful hues
Devouring fig after fig
Vivid-feathered gluttony

—Olive Jovanoski, Year 5.

New Promises

Crisp leaves on oak trees
A new promise of autumn
What a chilling breeze

—Minami Wycisk, Year 6

A Watching Fungi

It listens to us.
A mushroom hiding right there.
Poof, a puff of fumes.

—Skylar Lay, Year 5.

Snake (Tanka)

Tongue tasting the air
Gleaming body in the sun
Laying very still
Soaking up the last sunshine
Because winter is coming

—Juniper Connelly, Year 6.

What The Forest Is

Sunlight through the trees,
Dew drops shining bright in webs,
A trickling stream,
Fallen trees left abandoned,
This is what the forest is.

—Lauren Allan, year 6.

Sounds

All I hear is peace
The calm whistling of the wind
Gentle leaves fall down

—Josephine Blaxland, year 6.

Boundaries of Our Making

The land we walk upon had no separation
no lines decreed where one land starts and parts
Until power holders drew maps for demarcations
to construct an 'us' and 'them' for undivided hearts

Birds ignore who owns the airspace
clouds drift freely across every guarded place
Rivers flow without passports to the sea
and roots continue to intertwine beneath soil, free

Rice, wheat and fruit grew in every season
abundance needed neither coins nor reason
Today trade policies, prices shape what land is giving
eliminating sharing as scarcity pervades into our living

The art of healing was once a generational practice
now delivered in sealed containers with malice
Remedies passed through handwritten scrolls
herbs rested in clay bowls

Plants were gathered to save a life once meant cure
where pesticides have poisoned what was once pure
Distributed through algorithms and marketing trends
care arrives with paperwork that never truly ends

Time was measured by seasons, sundials and moonlit skies,
our predecessors watched the skies for farming and advice
Clocks imposed urgency, replacing nature's flow
schedules, deadlines, & hustle culture became all we know

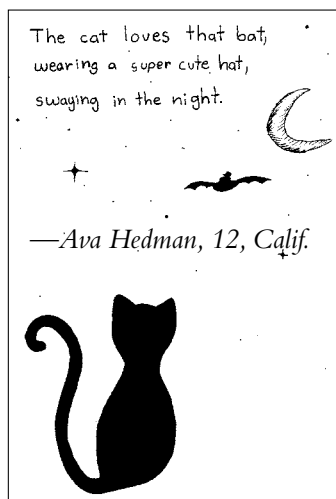
The urge to uncover every inch of land
to discover, dissect and disband
Setting expectation and labelling all in sight,
perhaps some things were meant to be in light

We gave meaning where none was required
so we remain prisoners of systems we code, yet never leave
We built the web, groups, then called them our home
to become the greatest paradox history has known

—Maheka Kedia, age 15, Mumbai, India.

She has a strong interest in economics and literature. Her poems have appeared in national publications and have received two national awards. She also represented her school at a national martial arts championship meet in India. Much of her writing explores identity, boundaries, and the systems that shape the way people live, travel and connect.

More 2026 Haiku & Tanka Entries



—Ava Hedman, 12, Calif.

Sleeping Kitties

Soft whiskers swaying
Quiet calm purrs all day long
Fluffy cozy naps

—Esther Maldonado, gr. 6, Calif.



—Vihaana Ahir, gr. 6, Calif.

The ant hill rumbles
Packed Earth fell on fragile ants
The swarm scattered out
The ants blinked their eyes open
And were met with lush flowers

—Advait Poddar, gr. 8, California.

On a quiet night,
I only hear the owl
Singing just for us

—Madeline Male, gr. 11, Kansas.

The sunflower glows.
It grew slow, and needed time.
Patience yields beauty.

—Remington Ace Reyes, gr. 10, Florida.

The Museum

caught in the act!
tried to touch the dark forest
inside the painting
sun warms up the air
flowers wake up from the dirt
green leaves start to grow

—Jeremy Wu, grade 7, New York.

1. dandelions fly
seeds slowly drift toward
the boy running by

2. the soft gradient
climbs up the stem slowly
making white turn blue

—Albee Xi, grade 6, New York.

In the Fog

Body and mind, one
Sensations always shifting
Lost in foggy breath
Forms unfamiliar
Faces swirled up like ripples
On glossy surface

Breathe in the silence
Let the moments slip away
As the soul drifts by

—Aurora-Lee Strandberg, 13, MI.

The tear of nature
Falling from the grayest cloud
Reunites with Earth
The sun returns home
After traveling the sky
Melts into the sea

—Trisha Gupta, gr. 7, California.

Forest sentinels
Clothe the ground with shade,
A person's haven.

—Ronnie Dinh, grade 10, Florida.

New Promises

Crisp leaves on oak trees
A new promise of autumn
What a chilling breeze

—Minami Wycisk, gr. 6, Australia.

2026 Skipping Stones Youth Honor Awards



- ** Youtao Cao, age 10, Japan. * Min Yang, age 11, California.
 ** Caroline Yiu, age 11, gr. 5, New Jersey. * Yuann Xie Yao, gr. 4, & Leo Ding, gr. 7, N.Y.
 ** Angie Li, age 11, gr. 6, Washington. * Meredith Zheng, age 11, gr. 6, California.
 ** Ariatna G. Claudio, age 11, Maryland. * Pearl Zhu, age 12, Toronto, Canada.
 ** Tenzin Palzom, age 12, gr. 7, Illinois. * Carina Araujo, age 13, gr. 8, Maryland.
 ** Polina Korobitsyna, age 15, California. * William Pham, age 15, Virginia.
 ** Juliana Pan, age 16, gr. 11, Washington. * Grace Li, age 16, gr. 10, New Jersey.
 ** Neer Patel, age 16, gr. 10, Florida. * Natalia Todorovich, gr. 11, Connecticut.
 ** Hana Tsai, age 17, New York. * Matthew Bartel, age 17, Florida. * Madeline Male, age 17, gr. 11, Kansas.
 ** *Shareground Students: Hayeon Kim, age 17 * Yeeun Shim, age 16 * Jisoo Kim, age 16, all from South Korea.*

We will publish more Noteworthy YHA Entries in our next *ONLINE* Issue, Vol. 38, no. 4, this winter. You can read the issue, as well as all other **Online Content** for no charge on our website. —editors

Blue Whale Blues

Blue whale's feeling blue

Tiger's feeling red

Who chopped down my jungle

and planted this coffee instead?!

Blue whale's feeling blue

Egret's feeling gray

Who trashed out my beach

And gave its beauty away?

Blue whale's feeling blue

White dove's feeling brown

Who drowned all my forest

In pollution from that town?

Blue whale's feeling blue

Meerkat's feeling pink

Just you smell these toxins

That make my soil stink!

Blue whale's feeling blue

Mourning his troubles in his melody

He'll hum it, sing it, and shout it . . .

If only he could do something about it.

—Madeline Male, age 17, grade 11, Kansas. She adds, "Writing, reading, art, and photography are all creative endeavors that I enjoy. My writing spans a wide range of poetic forms and prose genres. The natural world fuels my inspiration and imagination, and I feel that we should take care to preserve it."

Waterline

I kneel in the first-floor hallway,
cold painter's tape stuck to my wrist,
pressing a blue strip to the wall
where last night's water stopped climbing.
A neighbor from 2B watches. I pretend
the tape needs all my attention.

The building still sweats after rain:
coin laundry buzzing behind its door,
the corner bakery fan blowing warm grease into puddles.

The flood left a smell like pennies, bleach, and old leaves,
and buckled the cardboard boxes
we had trusted to the floor.

My father drags out the ruined rug.
My mother lays the altar photos on towels,
faces curling at the edges,
my grandmother's wedding portrait silvering
where the water touched.

My grandmother says her first home had a mark like this,
not from this city,
but from water rising in the dark
while everyone spoke quietly.

I do not ask which dark, which night.

We live between two weathers,
two languages for danger,
two ways to say, "Move this higher."

Outside, rain runs toward the canal
carrying brake dust, oil, and ibis feathers.
Inside, the blue line holds.

—Matthew Bartel, age 17, Florida. See his bio on page 9.

The Willow

Along the Potomac, just past the stone bridge covered
in algae,
I meandered, the willow weeps, its limbs
split by summer's thunderous wind. I stood
under its shade, touching its pale bark—stripped skin.
But the other limbs, they still bend low enough
to cradle whoever pauses to slump into crook, to admire
its prodigious trunk as the lowest leaves tickle the back
of my neck
each time I pass, dipping gently to sweep over
the silver-bubbled current, casting its arms
across the river's babble. As summer palliated
into fall and geese arrowed through the sky, September
held damp from a week of storms—still, the willow
swayed, leaning in to listen like a mother, even
as leaves feathered the water. Below, gnarled systems
of roots weave into themselves like dark braids—quietly
insisting on survival as, all fall, the thinning willow
cast shadow and sun onto the asphalt. What else can it do
but wait for strands of sunlight to wane to storm?
The river keeps tearing at its base, a handful of osiers
yanking branch from branch. Still, the willow
asks not for stillness, only the right to nourish
its roots and survive long enough for light
to find it. To heal after being split—and can't we
heal our world just the same? Even if its roots ache, if
leaves
remember the hush of their own falling—the willow
bows, bends. The willow waits to heal with us.

—Hana Tsai, age 17, Korean American, New York. See
another poem by Hana on page 10.

Matthew Anthony Bartel, age 17, serves as Florida's Youth Poet Laureate and as a National Youth Poet Laureate Ambassador, utilizing his platform to advocate for literacy and creative expression across the state. Beyond his literary work, Matthew is the founder of Our World of Hope, Inc., a Florida 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides humanitarian aid to children in international conflict zones, and he is a recipient of the Congressional Award Gold Medal. A Miami, Florida, native of Hispanic and Ukrainian heritage, his personal interests and research focus on fostering a sense of shared belonging among people, communities, and cultures, as well as academic subjects such as cosmology, archaeology, and natural history.

Diversity

Diversity is something that makes us different; something that makes us special. Something that makes us unique. It means how we have distinct cultures, genders, and languages we enunciate at home.

Diwali is a holiday that Hindus (and many Indians) celebrate. The night whispers, “Shhhhhhhhh,” crickets scream, “Crick, crick.” We illumine the leaf green lamp designed with zigzags. It engulfs the yard with effulgence in the dark night. In other words, the righteous (light) wins against the wicked (dark). The blithe *Diya* blazes luminescent with red, orange, and yellow colors. We gobble sugary and powdery *Rava laddoos*. Fireworks explode outside the window. “Crack, crack.” They contrast with the sky like white and black. Ecstasy filled me, glancing at such a magnificent phenomenon.

There are thousands of languages in the world. I speak *Telugu*. It is also thousands of years old. It's a Dravidian language. It is rated a level III (hard) on a language scale. Even though it is one of the top 20 spoken languages in the world, not even 2% of the people on Earth know that this language exists. I'm one of the few people who can speak this melodious language that is not widely spoken. There are over 8 billion people in the world; and I am from India.

Although there are numerous things distinguishable in all of us, we stand united in our school. Some are from China, some are from India, and one is even from Nauru. We have different ancestors, different traditions, and different languages, yet we stay under the same roof and breathe the same air. While we are all dissimilar, that doesn't stop us from being friends. It doesn't stop us from shooting a 3-pointer with elation together. We are all humans, and diversity doesn't separate us. Or divide us into parts. A person from Oahu (Hawaii), and another from Siberia, can still be magnificent friends.

Without diversity there would be clone-like people. Their nourishment would also be identical. Many famous buildings were built because of cultural beliefs. Without these distinct cultural beliefs, they wouldn't exist. I can't even imagine what kind of languages there would be without any traditions, religions, or customs. Many wars wouldn't exist, as many have happened because of religion, culture, or what someone seems like.

—Shriyans Reddy Kalavakuru, grade 4, California.

Muscle Memory

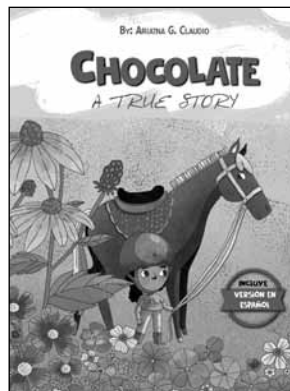
Each time Grandma handed me the colander, she placed
her hand over mine and swirled. Honeycombed, still warm
from its last use, it sang through three rinses. Sometimes
four. Until the colander's sky cleared of clouds, she repeated
that starch clung to rice. It began a kind of song, slipping
through my pruned fingers with every loose grain. She softened
each cloud into a rhythm she hummed, as our makeshift crop
softened into good rice. Clear rice, ready rice. I swirled
until the water gleamed, clear as fresh glass. Her job was to watch
with the same unblinking eyes she used when examining
my test scores, or the neat pleats of my dumpling, the symmetry
of my work as I wiped the table clean. The bowl always held
just enough for our unlikely pair of chopsticks, steam rising
until it disappeared into condensation. Each time
she called me clever, I simmered with the fresh rice grains
beneath the lid, the instinct she had begun passing to me
eclipsing my watchful gaze. Years later, in the sanctuary
of my own kitchen, I catch myself swirling time
into fogged glass, my inherited muscle memory
refusing to soften in her absence. Even now, my hands
feel her voice stippling the bowl's eternal bone-chill. I've learned
care through repetition like this: lifting single clouds
onto freshly-warmed plates, listening for her hum in the steam.

—Hana Tsai, age 17, New York.

Young author **Ariatna G. Claudio, age 11**, of Maryland, wrote and published a Spanish/English bilingual book: **Chocolate, A True Story** with the help from her mom and an illustrator, Xenia Voronicheva (Publisher: *Thoughts & Wonder, LLC*).

Ariatna's horse, Chocolate, lost his eyesight in one of his eyes when a tree branch poked his eye. Despite his injury, Chocolate remains the same loving horse he always was, still enjoying horseback riding, eating fruits, and playing with his friends on their farm in Maryland.

Even when Chocolate needs a little extra time and patience to learn his tricks, Ariatna never gets upset. Instead, she cheers him on and guides him along the way, showing real patience and understanding beyond her years. Her dedication to caring for



A Colder February

I speak of college
the way spring speaks of bloom,
Because it's easy to forget
amid the smell of her French perfume
that Mamá was raised with the smell of leather
on her father's working hands.
A woman who wanted to be a doctor in a country
where she was taught with pots and pans.
And I yearly await the soft, heavy snow of February
at the same time Mamá would eat fluffy, sweet
torta frita
amid the ecstatic, colorful explosion of Carnaval.
Mamá now spends her winters in a freeze,
and I forget the sun-kissed coast
that playfully dips to 50 degrees.
What does she dream?
Between her Tiffany ring
and her *quinceañera* money
returned to my grandfather,
who ate the same *empanadas*
that I do now as my mother talks about my
quince trip
the same way I talk about college.
Is it okay to forget?
The poets insisting
“Remember your roots!”
If it's because I'm watching a flower grow?
Perhaps I'll never know.
But maybe the *croquetas* Abuela makes
have always been the same.

—Victoria Dean, age 15, grade 10, Maryland.

Chocolate unconditionally is a quality that inspires all her readers.

Voronicheva's artwork brings this story to life with colorful, calm illustrations and gives each page a relaxed, focused feel suited to the tale's gentle nature. The story told in both English and Spanish makes it accessible to an even wider audience of young readers.

At its core, this book carries a meaningful theme that a disability does not change who you are inside. Chocolate is still the same loving horse, and Ariatna's love for him proves that message beautifully.

Ode to the Garden Path

Only the path knows the end,
Twisting and turning
'Round every bend
By the water lilies, it wanders
Near the roses, it runs
Through the mums, it meanders
It's a street for whomever inhabits it—
A Main Street for the squirrels
With a crosswalk for the rabbits
A final home, an invite
For the leaves to land
After their autumn flight
Of solid foundation,
It guides my feet
On my next exploration
Zigzagged, intertwined,
It'll lead you to what
It wants you to find.

The Dove's Flight

Flying over barren lands
Dried grass, withered roots,
Not a single tree stands
Even in calm weather
Wind pushes heavily
On weary feathers
The dove vows to be braver
But with the weight of the sky
Its wings start to waver
Its eyes search the earth
This bare, lifeless expanse
Lacking its prior glory and worth
Just then, a whisper of green—
Could it be . . . a tree?
Albeit a sapling, scrawny and lean
The dove soars down, coming near
As an olive tree emerges into view,
Defying the dry ground, it perseveres
The tree's arms reach out, inviting a guest
To land in its branches—
Gratefully, the dove arrives,
Having found, at last, a way of rest.
—Madeline Male, age 17, grade 11, Kansas.

Three Haiku

1. Whispers on the wind
tickling my skin—I laugh,
just the prairie grass.
2. On a quiet night,
I only hear the owl
Singing just for us
3. Caterpillar longs
To be a butterfly—yet
It's beautiful now.

—Madeline M.

You Are Gone, But Not Away

You held my hands when I was small,
You wiped my tears, you heard my call.
Your soft voice always felt like home;
Now you rest where I can't see.
You are gone, but not away,
You live within my heart every day.
In my tears, in my prayers,
I feel your love everywhere.
Your stories still play in my mind,
Your gentle smile, so warm and kind.
I miss your laugh, I miss your care,
Life feels quiet without you there.
You are gone, but not away,
You live in my heart every day.
In the sky, in the light,
I see you shining every night.
If heaven has a place for love,
I know you're watching from above.
Guide me when I feel alone,
Give me strength to carry on.
Though my eyes are full of tears,
Your blessings walk with me through the years.
I will live the life you taught me,
With all my love, dear Grandma.

—Abhinab Borah, age 12, Guwahati, Assam, India.

Hope

A forest had their night with the moon
And it's time for the sunrise
As it should rise above the ocean
A gentle breeze wakes the living things.
Brings them home and brings them bliss
A brand new day unravels in morning mist.
When the light passes through the leaves
The rainbow brings hope to all living beings.

—Chloe Wang, age 13, grade 7, Shanghai, China. She adds: "I barely have any connection with nature because I live in an urban place known as Shanghai. For this piece, I wanted to try to imagine nature using my art and poetry writing skills. I used Procreate, which I taught myself to use. I was inspired by the work of other photographers on the internet and I decided to draw a sunset in the forest, trying to show the sunlight coming through the leaves. My original intention was to highlight the atmosphere of light and shadow through nature, making the picture feel relaxed and alive."

Samsara

People have been stuck in this endless loop for some time. I don't even remember how long we have idled in this timeless loop. The rain keeps relentlessly hitting my face, so hard that I can't even feel my tears. I look above, and look down, all I see is dark and grey. In despair, I look beside myself. To the horizontal point, I see dancers in the rain.

“**B**orn, learned, tested, studied, graduated, worked, mated, died.”

A pretty long line of words that meant nothing and all things of a normal person living in China. Pretty long, pretty short. It's so short you can read it in two seconds, and it's so long you need to observe a whole life. What can we do to leap out of this samsara of shackles and regret? The roads are few, and the seats in the colosseum are getting taken by more and more people. The saying is, “条条大路通罗马” or “Would it really be that way?” Will all the roads lead to Rome and the ideal future of our lives?

I was born in an open-minded family. Unlike the parents who only knew how to coerce their children to study hard, they taught me to differentiate right from wrong, to choose my own pace and path freely. I observed and learned from the people who had good grades and tried the same method, studying daily and doing tons of tests. I had less and less time, and a good middle school is necessary, but as the people say, “万事开头难”—The start of all things are always hard.” The strict rules and application conditions were a high wall for the young me. I then tried to look in another way; my mother told me to magnify my talents in language, so I decided to take the path of an international course, one I had never heard of.

The firewall of China was superior and insurmountable, stopping us from accessing the outer world. The high wall and grey clouds covered my vision. Then a blinding flash of light lit up my eyes. It was a video—someone dancing in the rain, not in despair, but with defiance. Their movements weren't graceful; they were raw, almost violent, as if each step was a fight against the current. I watched the loop three times, then ten. The dancer wasn't trying to escape the rain. They were becoming it.

That was when the crack appeared. Not in the wall, but in the logic I had swallowed whole since birth. We

treat life like a staircase—each step higher, each step closer to some imagined sun. But what if the staircase is a wheel? What if Rome isn't a place, but a mirage? The dancer didn't ask for permission to leap. They didn't wait for the rain to stop. They simply moved, and in moving, reshaped the surrounding space.

I started small. A notebook hidden inside my textbook. Stories written between calculus problems. I stopped asking whether something was “useful” and started asking whether it was mine. The pressure didn't vanish—the exams still came, the parents still compared, the future still loomed like a grey mouth waiting to swallow me whole. But inside that pressure, I found a tiny room. A room where the rain was just weather, not a verdict.

Maybe all roads do lead to Rome. But maybe Rome is also a cage. Maybe the point isn't to arrive, but to wander. To dance in the downpour while others run for cover. To carve your own path not because it's easier, but because it's yours. The loop hasn't broken. The sky is still grey. But somewhere inside me, a dancer has begun to move. And for the first time in years, I think I remember what it feels like to breathe.

—Leo He (he/him), age 14, grade 9, P.R. China.

Seasons

Red holly berries

And spiky green leaves in snow,

Winter, ice forming.

Cherry blossoms bloom,

Everything saturated,

Now springtime is here.

Watermelon drips,

Lemonade condensating,

Summer in a glass.

Autumn leaves crinkle

Under sneakers, red, gold, brown

Finally, fall comes.

Seasons keep changing,

In tune with Earth's rotation,

Annual, always.

—Nova Macknik-Conde, age 14, gr. 9, New York.

Becoming

So, what are you?

More often, people politely wait a few minutes before asking that question. It's rarely mean-spirited, usually woven with curiosity, followed by an awkward pause. To some, it might seem invasive, judgmental, or even rude, but I've come to see it differently.

Growing up in New York City—a place where every street is an intersection of language, culture, and history—I've heard that question more times than I can count. While at first it left me fumbling, I've come to embrace it not simply as a question about my heritage but about my story. And I love telling stories.

So, "what am I?"

The simple answer: I'm half Indian, half German.

But when I say that, people often squint as if trying to place me into a mental Venn Diagram that never fully overlaps. Their skepticism isn't personal—it's cultural. There are deeply rooted stereotypes for both Germans and Indians, and I contradict both.

I'm an Indian linebacker, a German who sees opportunity within the rules.

When I received my first phone in 6th grade, the algorithm fed me caricatures: Indians in cyber cafes hunched over keyboards. Thick accents. Curry jokes. And Germans? Drinking beer from barrels and inventing unnecessarily precise compound words like Fußballweltmeisterschaftsqualifikationsspiel (a real word meaning 'football World Cup qualification match').

I laughed at the jokes, but something in me rejected them. None of them was me.

At home, my identity was split. The summer before freshman year, my dad signed me up for an economics and mathematics camp. My mom suggested I start working at a grocery store, like she did at my age, to learn discipline and order.

I did both. I crunched derivatives by day and bagged produce by night. But inside, I was restless, searching for something that truly felt like me. And strangely enough, I found it with the Harlem Jets on a football field.

My parents were reluctant and baffled: "You want

to get tackled...on purpose?" I couldn't explain why, but I knew I wanted to try.

The beginning was brutal. I was skinny. Really skinny. I got flattened—repeatedly. My helmet spun sideways more times than I can keep track of. So, I started lifting weights, changed my diet, asked older players for advice, and watched hours of tape.

By junior year, I was starting. By senior year, I was captain. I realized that true transformation does not happen overnight, and football had given me more than muscle. It gave me confidence, resilience, and a community that didn't care what I was—only how hard I worked. Off the field, that confidence began to ripple.

When I left middle school, I was cautious, quiet, unsure where I would fit in. Now, I walk into rooms ready to create space—not just find it. I speak up in class. I lean into difficult conversations about race, culture, and identity. I appreciate how my Indian and German roots aren't contradictions—they are bridges.

I carried that mindset with me when I started working with the Riverside Hawks, a nonprofit basketball program that empowers their athletes on and off the court. When I began tutoring, I thought I was just there to help with math homework, but soon I realized I could offer more. My own experience navigating academics, athletics, and cultural pressure gave me a unique insight into their world. So I became a mentor.

Now, when people ask me, 'What are you?', I still pause. But it's not because I don't know. It's because the answer is still unfolding. I'm a linebacker. A mentor. A mix of history and hope. I carry the customs, legacies, and contradictions of my family across oceans and into new horizons.

I've learned something else: identity isn't a puzzle to be solved. It's a work of art that we keep adding to—piece by piece, story by story.

So what am I?

I'm becoming.

—Timin Jain, age 17, New York. He turned 18 earlier this summer and is now a high school graduate.

A Balkan Kitchen

The pot hums on the stove
low and patient—
unlike the mountains of the Balkans
high and mighty
watching empires arrive
loud as storms—
while rivers surge like boiling water
scalding and leaving only ancient residue.

Steam rises while
a church bell rings
and a mosque calls to prayer
all echoing into the same sky.

Through the window
alphabets overlap like footsteps—
Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic curves—
braided into shop signs, books, and
the quiet scripts of passersby.

Grandmothers cook from the same fire
knead the same dough break the same bread
but call it by different names
hleb, *kruh*, and *somun*
and still—
in every tongue
it tastes like home.

Stories gather at the kitchen table
where voices speak over one another
as joy and grief are passed like salt
and memories are never served alone.

—Natalia Todorovich, age 17, grade 11, Connecticut. She adds: “A Balkan Kitchen, reflects my own family, heritage and understanding of diversity; I am a first-generation American, raised between my mother’s Serbian roots and my father’s Bosnian heritage, both of which have shaped my cultural identity. While history often emphasizes the divisions between these nations—their conflicts, religions, languages, and political boundaries—my experience has also been shaped by what they share: traditions, food, hospitality, family bonds, and a deep sense of home.

The kitchen in my poem was inspired by my grandmother’s, whose cooking became one of the clearest expressions of culture in my life. Around the table, stories were told pas-

How I Eat Roti

I eat *roti* like I eat chocolate cookies, ripping off pieces and swallowing the phrase “white-washed” down my throat like sugarcane juice with spangles of American pulp sundried into it. I ingest my history like I masticate identity, where a melting pot simmers on my tandoor oven, steaming intertwined with tangs of continuity.

Fresh aroma from masala curry drifts over drive-thru diners and football fields as I swallow my last name, shaved and savored with assimilated fricatives on my father’s passport: chili-pepper red, raw, remarkable and lingering from my past.

My chocolate skin and caramel eyes are branded from kurta-thick wrappers and crescent suns. The heat of mango-peeled summers sizzles through my words, and turmeric spices weave themselves into an American accent.

Our sugar-swelled ancestry connects like thin square tiles of Cadbury. Maybe, the term *South Asian American* was always as sweet as the lineage of home-cooked Texan *biryani*.

—Eesha Ande, age 17, Texas. Eesha plays violin, including Indian cultural music. She strongly feels her interest in Hindu philosophy and cultural movies influence her poetry. She also performs poetry at charity events to raise awareness about South Asian culture.

sionately, memories were revisited often, and food became more than nourishment—it became a language of love and connection. I’ve learned that culture lives most vividly in everyday rituals like the bread we break, the language spoken between generations, and the customs quietly carried forward.

Growing up between two intertwined yet historically divided cultures has shaped how I understand diversity. To me, diversity is not only about recognizing differences, but also about seeing how much can exist in common beneath those differences. My background has taught me to value complexity—to hold multiple histories, identities, and perspectives at once—and to see coexistence not as impossible, but as something already happening in homes, families, and communities.”

What Time Cannot Erase

I don't remember what we said.
I don't remember what we drew.
But I do remember Grandma's warm smile, as she guided
my hand.
I remember the Faber-Castell crayons laid out on her
bedroom table, waiting to be used. I remember the smell
of cinnamon muffins lingering in the air as I waited for
her to sit next to me.

The silence was always broken by the scratchy "shhh-
shhh" of pencil strokes as I drew.
I remember the Maryland park, outside her window
standing still like an unframed portrait, watching us quietly.
Strangely, the one drawing I do remember is a red rose,
each petal copied too carefully,
so she would believe it was mine.

Now, Grandma's bedroom has dimmed Friday mornings
pill bottles crowding the table where colors used to live.
I watch as others care for her—
She's unresponsive.

She started forgetting things before I noticed.
Names turned into little details,
details into my name.
Then it became everything.

The park is gone now.
Replaced by flashy buildings that don't belong.
Glancing through her bedroom window, the portrait has
changed—flatter, louder, unfamiliar.
I don't like that new portrait.
She doesn't remember the art sessions,
Not the drawings.
Not the park.
But the truth is,

I don't remember anything clearly either.
I just remember that we were there.

—Nour Sayed, age 17, grade 11, Cairo, Egypt, writes, "The
piece I wrote reflects on the art sessions I shared with my grand-
mother before she developed dementia. Although these moments
took place years ago, they remain vivid in my memory and continue
to shape the way I think about connection, time, and loss..."

"In this piece, I've tried to capture how memory works; not
as a perfect record, but as something partial, emotional, and deeply
personal. It reflects both what I remember and what I have come to
understand since, especially in light of my grandmother's condition."

Ghazal for a Disappearing Hutong

I'm 13 & holding your hand through the market tonight—
Neon lanterns flickering into bite-size stars of light.
In the hutong's hush, laundry ghosts in the memory
of sun-licked wind, white sleeves blurring into light.
The alleys, paved smooth now, swallow your voice
as you whisper: here was the ginkgo tree, our light.
We walk past windows gone dark, once filled by families
sticky as sugar, craving that sweetness like light.
Each morning, you woke to Yéye brushing his teeth—
to clattering bowls of red bean soup still warm with light.
Back then, you'd say, there wasn't mine or yours. Each
backyard
stitched together beneath one spiderweb of moonlight.
Later, you tell me your neighbor made the soup. Every
time you knocked for more, she smiled, ladling light
spoonfuls of sweetness into your bowl. Now, vendors
sell postcards of that street, each one waiting for light.
Where hutong weddings once blossomed between
courtyards, plastic souvenir shops shimmer in the sunlight.
While waiting for our glossed tanghulus, I trace Yinding
Bridge
with my finger, each ridge pressing through the stone's
mouth of light.
Silence, as we eat—the willow trees leaning in closer,
their roots
tangled in the dappled reflection of your memory's
murky light.
You lift your phone to capture the lake's reflection—
but the photo shows only tourists multiplying like light.
Your story still burns quietly within you—and now
within me.
Evening folds it quietly into the horizon's thinning light.

—Juliana Pan, age 16, grade 11, Washington. She is a
poet, writer, and visual artist. Her writing explores the inter-
action between political events and her own cultural identity.
She has been honored for her literary works and published in
several literary journals. She was born in Honolulu, Hawaii
and loves her grandma's cooking. You can read two more
poems by her in this issue.

Darkness of the town
Filled with the Moon's white night gown
Time is moving slow
Crickets chirping, leaves waving
While you gaze at the night's show.
—Akshara Mothukun, age 12, grade 6, Oregon.

A History Lesson

Nanjing Massacre, December 1937

To forget history is an act of betrayal.

He feeds her hawthorn sweets. Covers his daughter's eyes.
Beneath the table, they fold themselves into the street's
reddened screams, enclosed in paper-thin walls.

Citizens pile at the lip of the river, no more
than bodies stilled, gunfire blurring their faces
into artifact before the water could hide them.

Two soldiers laugh their bikes down the street, trade
swigs of sake to drown their guilt, the pity
they didn't take on the mothers.

The makeshift suitcases they carried
between them, surviving children held by the hand.
Beneath the table, he chops off her hair.

Don't worry. They won't recognize you.

In class, we spend longer reciting the names
of dust-bitten treaties than the children
left to bleed their names into the river.

In class, we memorize each date, sanitized
of the blood water, in preparation
for the multiple choice on our next test.

History is a flashlight our teachers pass out.
We aim the beams forward, moons spilling
across small patches of the world at a time.

We never see mothers through the pictures
of the memorial's stone on Google. We never watch
the white-haired bury the black-haired.

White chrysanthemums spill from their mouths.
Candy wrappers crinkle in her pocket. *Bàba, why
is this happening to us?* Bàba uncovers my eyes.

—Juliana Pan, age 16, grade 11, Washington.

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Things You Never Told 笑笑

That the face in the mirror will yellow
until it becomes a stranger's. That the tumors will

branch across your left breast until you can't
deny the secret you refused to believe. That her hands

kneading your favorite dumplings will whiten
before her knuckles dust with flour each Tuesday. That

dumplings set to boil will instead rise into the air
with our prayers, once the chemo begins

sapping your energy. That we will never enjoy
plucking sour blackberries from the backyard bush

again. That we will never again smile the way
we once smiled, not knowing what we didn't

know. What we didn't need to know. That
your hair will turn your face into a stranger's

as it thins. That you will accidentally admit each hug feels
more past than present, once or twice. That the wig will itch

as much as the word she won't be able to say. That
each fallen strand of hair will be another reminder

your body won't stop betraying you. Now, she grips
your sleeve, tears leaving themselves in stars across your face

as you play the music that keeps her alive, your violin bow
welcoming false comfort into "Jasmine Flower." *Look outside*

whenever you're sad, she tells you as she wipes stars
from your face. She knows why you're sad, though

she hasn't told you yet. You already know. Through the trees
skirting the backyard, crows tangle like darkness

into a closed fist. Imagine you are a crow, flying.

You do. You are a crow, afraid to take flight.

—Juliana Pan, age 16, grade 11, Washington.



—Carina Araujo, age 13, gr. 8, Maryland.

Diversity

What lessons did you learn on an extended trip to a country or region?

When I first heard I would move to Canada, I felt less like I was starting a new chapter and more like I was being dropped into the middle of an ocean without knowing how to swim. Leaving behind my friends, my school, and everything familiar, I was overwhelmed by one fear above all: I did not know how to speak.

During the long flight from Korea, I imagined myself sitting alone in a classroom, unable to understand, unable to respond. My English, which had only existed in textbooks, suddenly felt like a wall separating me from the rest of the world. That wall became real the moment I stepped into my new school. The building itself was unfamiliar. Elementary, middle, and high school students all shared the same space. But what struck me most was not the structure, but the people. In the hallways, I saw students of different races, speaking different languages, laughing together as if differences did not exist. Filipino, German, African-American, Japanese. Ethnicities I had rarely encountered before were now everywhere. And yet, instead of feeling inspired, I felt invisible.

In Korea, I had always known how to belong. Here, I didn't even know how to begin a conversation. Words would rise to my throat, then stop, trapped between fear and uncertainty. I avoided speaking, afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being misunderstood. Watching others move so freely between cultures made me feel even more distant, as if diversity was something I could see but not be part of.

Everything began to change during a simple moment in P. E. class. I was placed on a team with two girls I had never met. As we passed the ball back and forth, one of them smiled and asked, slowly, "What's your name?" It was such a small question. But to me, it felt enormous. They spoke carefully, giving me time to understand. They repeated themselves when I hesitated. They waited. And in that waiting, for the first time, I realized that communication was not about perfect English. It was about willingness.

From that moment on, the wall I had

built began to crack. I joined a group of friends from different cultural backgrounds, each bringing their own language, habits, and perspectives. Conversations were sometimes awkward, sometimes slow, but always genuine. I learned new expressions, unfamiliar accents, and ways of thinking that I had never encountered before.

Outside of school, these lessons deepened. Visiting a friend's home, I saw an Indian family gathered closely together, the air filled with the scent of spices, voices overlapping in warmth and laughter. Even without understanding every word, I understood the feeling. Connection did not require sameness. Gradually, I stopped seeing diversity as something intimidating. Instead, I began to see it as something that invited me in.

By the time I returned to Korea after a year and a half, I was no longer the person who had boarded that plane. I no longer avoided unfamiliar situations or feared making mistakes. Instead, I carried with me the confidence to step into the unknown, and the understanding that difference is not a barrier, but a bridge. Looking back, Canada did not just teach me English. It taught me how to listen beyond language, how to connect beyond culture, and how to find belonging in unfamiliar spaces.

Diversity, I realized, is not about how different we are. It is about how willing we are to meet each other halfway.

—Jisoo Kim, age 16, grade 10, Seoul, Korea.

Art: "Echoed Origins" by Grace Li, age 16, N. Jersey. See p. 25.



A Quiet Extra Heartbeat

Bent low in the hush between passing clouds,
I parted the grass with two careful fingers.
Each blade whispered green against my skin,
cool as riverstones at dusk.

There—

not a shout, not a flare,
just a quiet extra heartbeat
folded into the ordinary.

Four small mirrors drank the sunlight,
each leaf cupping a sliver of sky.

Dew gathered at their seams
like secrets too full to spill.

Around it, the field kept breathing—

ants hauling their burdens,
wind stitching and unstitching
the long green fabric of noon.

I did not pluck it.

My shadow leaned in, then slipped away,
as if afraid to bruise the symmetry
of something that had chosen its own rarity.

When I stood,

it vanished again among its sisters—

no brighter, no louder—

just one more mouth of green.

—Youtao Cao, age 10, Japan. Visit our website (and also the Summer 2026 digital issue) for his poems, story, and artwork.

Art by William Pham, age 15, Virginia (p. 35).

The morning woods were so still that I could hear my own footsteps echo in the deep forest. A soft rustle in the brush made me smile; expecting a rabbit or a frog nearby. Instead, I found a young deer already lying breathlessly in the withered, browned leaves, its body slack and a dark, deep wound on its side. Its eyes were still wet, as if the fear had just barely left them. I had arrived one heartbeat too late to protect it.

Art has always been my way of experiencing the world and sharing what matters me most. From my early days hiking in the Shenandoah Valley, I have believed that every tree, rock, and animal holds its own story. That sense of wonder, mixed with a growing awareness of nature's fragility, guides my creative vision today. My artwork focuses on nature, conservation efforts, and the relationship between humanity and the environment, expressed through semi-realistic imagery

The snail

The snail crawled past bright green bushes,
That were dripping with dew.

And then past trees who were beginning to blossom,
While humming birds from overhead flew.

The snail crawled past bees buzzing with excitement
As they collected pollen from a flower.

And past thick carpets of leaves,
While the trees overhead loomed like towers.

The snail crawled past bright green shoots,
Who were emerging from the forest ground.

And then came across a praying mantis,
Moving silently without a sound.

The snail crawled past a creek
Which was still muddy from the previous rain.

While pill bugs were sleeping below,
And ants around it scouring the terrain.

The snail crawled past an old brick wall,
English ivy dangling from above.

The snail then crawled in an old cottage's gate,
Where the tulips were just beginning to bud.

The snail saw an old man with a shovel
Watering his plants with a pail.

But then the man looked towards it
And seemed to want to pick up the snail.

The snail noticed the man's fingers,
And quickly crawled away

It slithered over the ground,
And into the shadows to never be found.

—Min Yang, age 11, grade 5, California.

and symbolic storytelling.

It was painful to see how easily its life could be taken without respect or purpose. To process what I witnessed, I later created Crosshairs, a drawing in which a deer stares directly at the viewer through the rings of a targeting scope. Hidden within its antlers are hunters, blending into the landscape like unseen forces that threaten wildlife every day. Through this piece, I hope to confront the cruelty of senseless killing and inspire others to think more deeply about the life behind each shot fired.

Much of my inspiration comes from the natural world I explore.

—William Pham, age 15, Virginia.

Respecting Wildlife, Reducing Waste, and Being Mindful of Our Actions

Before I ever understood words like ecosystem or biodiversity, I have loved animals for as long as I can remember. I felt a connection whether it was watching injured animals being treated on TV or begging my parents to take me to the beach.

Growing up in India, I dreamed of the ocean, but the polluted water meant I could only imagine what lived beneath the surface. It always felt like something I was missing. It was not until a surprise birthday trip to the Maldives (Islands in the Indian Ocean) that I finally stepped into the world I had always imagined.

When I first arrived in the Maldives, the brightness of the ocean almost hurt my eyes. The water was so clear and blue that it felt unreal, like a painting brought to life. As I stood above the water, I saw a baby shark swimming freely just below me. Instead of fear, I felt wonder. Every day, I swam. Sometimes in the pool, but mostly in the ocean, drawn by something I could not fully explain. During a snorkeling trip, I saw stingrays glide across the sand, jellyfish pulse gently in the water, and sea turtles move with calm, steady grace. Underwater, everything was quiet. Sunlight filtered through the surface, creating shifting patterns of light, and I began to notice how each organism moved within its environment, part of a delicate marine ecosystem where every species played a role.

As I spent more time in the water, I wanted to go further. Scuba diving brought me deeper. As I descended, the water grew darker and colder, and a quiet stillness surrounded me. Schools of fish moved in synchronized patterns, almost like a single organism responding to invisible cues. Sharks passed by silently, apex predators moving with effortless control. I felt both nervous and curious, but more than anything, I felt small. In a way that was humbling. It made me realize that nature does not exist for us. We exist within it. The ocean is not empty as it might appear from above, but a complex, layered ecosystem shaped by adaptation, survival, and balance.

Years later on an eight-day cruise before returning to Korea, I spent days staring at what seemed like an endless, empty ocean. The water looked lifeless, and I began to feel bored and disappointed. It felt very different from what I had experienced before. But one day, without warning, a group of dolphins burst through the surface beside our ship. They moved in perfect coordination, racing alongside us as if guided by instinct and commu-

nication beyond human understanding. Watching them, I realized how wrong I had been. I simply had not been patient enough to observe the ocean's biodiversity. It made me realize that sometimes, nature requires stillness, time, and attention before it reveals itself.

Outside of the ocean, on a family road trip to Banff National Park (Alberta, Canada), I experienced a different kind of ecosystem. After hours of driving, I grew restless, staring out at peaks that seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky. Suddenly, my dad slammed on the brakes. A grizzly bear stood in front of our car, massive and silent. For a moment, time stopped. I felt fear, but also awe. Later, standing by the Bow River, I watched the turquoise water reflect the mountains like a mirror. The cold, clean air filled my lungs, and I became aware of how everything from the river's flow to the surrounding forest was part of a larger natural system working in balance.

These experiences did not just stay as memories. At school, I am part of the Marine Biology Club, where we present different species each week and study their ecological roles within marine environments. Through these discussions, I have come to understand that even the smallest organisms contribute to the stability of an ecosystem. It helped me make sense of what I had seen before and understand it more deeply.

At home, helping my mom take care of the dogs at her dog daycare has played a big role in how I pursue my passion for animals. I am always there, ready to help whenever she needs a hand. I clean up after their messes, take them out on walks, play tug-of-war with them, and feed them. At first, it was overwhelming to manage so many responsibilities, but over time, I began to understand what each dog needed. The more time I spent with them, the more I realized that every animal has its own behavior patterns, needs, and ways of communicating. Helping out regularly has taught me responsibility and patience, but more importantly, it has shown me that even small lives like the dogs at my mom's daycare are part of a larger web of living beings that deserve care and respect. Watching them run freely, full of energy and trust, made it clear that becoming a veterinarian is a purpose I want to follow.

All of these experiences have shaped not only my appreciation for nature but also my sense of responsibility toward it. The ocean's beauty exists because its ecosys-

tens are still functioning, but pollution and climate change threaten that balance. Because of this, I try to protect the environments I encounter in simple but meaningful ways: respecting wildlife, reducing waste, and being mindful of how my actions affect ecological systems. More importantly, I carry these experiences with me as a reminder of what is at stake.

—Jiyun Han, grade 10, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

The water rests in liquid light,
A sheet of quartz at dawn—
It gathers every shade of sky
And brushes it along.

That weave the ripples thin	While gentle
winds with tender hands	Brush softly
on its skin	

The world let out a sigh
crystal waters pitter truths
storms to try

As
Too hard for

It settles still and deep	A
lullaby of sleeping light	The
heart is meant to keep	

—Caroline Yiu, age 11, grade 5, New Jersey. “I am a writer, artist, violinist, and a ski racer. I come from China and Hong Kong. The poem I wrote is inspired by the place I imagine when I close my eyes and need peace.”

The mountains stand in ancient sleep,
While roots wind through the dark and deep,
Drinking from cool, hidden wells,
In vaults of stone and silver shells.
The wind arrives on unseen feet,
Where golden plains and greenery meet,
Shaking glimmer from their sleeves,
And finds the sap the cedar breathes.

From granite peaks to salt-rimmed shore,
The clouds dissolve and then restore,
In cycles of the mist and rain,
Across the wide and emerald plains.
Each grain of sand and crown of snow,
The tides that pull and then let go,
A world of wood and stone and light,
Unfolding through the quiet night.

—Yuann Xie Yao, age 10, grade 4, New York.
Yuann adds: “My poem is about the mountains, oceans, and plains, and how they connect through the rhythms of nature. My heritage is a blend of two worlds: China and America. It is the smell of steaming rice and homemade fish in the kitchen on a Friday night, mixed with the smell of pizza from the school lunchroom.”

Sept. – Dec. 2026

Skiping Stones Stew

Dear Earth,

We are sorry for the pain we have caused you,
If we could go back, we'd undo
Cutting down trees to make matches that burn them into chars, leaving scars
Drilling into the ground for oil to power our cars,
Polluting your skies to make plastic that poisons not only you, but us too.
Warming seas,
Killing coral to drink from plastic water bottles that heat up in the degrees,
Releasing microplastics into our systems, hurting you
Out and through, in the blue

Stealing hospitality for owls and raccoons, squirrels and opossums,
To make power lines that promise to solve all our problems
Cutting down the houses of parrots, jaguars, and scarlet macaws,
To stride down the streets, with hands on our shopping carts
We didn't see it then, but now we do,
Dear Earth, we are sorry for the pain we have caused you.
Sincerely,

—Zara Vizauer, grade 6, California.

Dear Earth,

Thank you for the tall green trees that give us shade and
fresh air,
and for the deep blue oceans that are full of life and mystery
You provide homes for so many animals and give us beauty
everywhere we look,
even in the smallest things like flowers and grass.

I love how the soft colors of a sunset over the open fields
feel calm and peaceful.
The way the wind moves through the trees
and the sounds of birds singing make the world feel alive
and comforting,
like everything is in harmony.

I promise to help you by taking care of nature,
recycling whenever I can,
and not wasting your resources
I will try to keep the Earth clean
and respect all the living things that share it with us.
Sincerely,

—Isabella Aldama, grade 6, California.

**Dear Readers: What would you say in an Open Letter (or an E-mail) to
Mother Earth or Mother Nature? Send us a copy of your letter to print.**

—editors.

Food for Thought

- ★ When did you see the moon last? Did you notice where in the sky it was and what phase it was in? Could you guess how many days to the next full moon?
- ★ Do you eat fresh vegetables and fruits often? What fruits and veggies are grown locally? Is there a community garden area near you? Can you grow a few plants in your backyard or windowsill?
- ★ Where can you jog, walk, or bicycle with your friends/family in a nearby park? How do you enjoy the outdoors? Which nearby nature park(s) can you visit? How do you live earth-friendly?

To Claim the Earth

From birth, your eyes
level with a rat's,
beads of sweat cloud your vision.
Still, you lift your eyes
far above your height,
The birds are my neighbors, you lie.
Your hands sift through Mother Earth,
phony admiration.
Slick fingers gather her flesh,
a quiet exclamation of your boundless greed.
You say it is yours—
why, you have named the exchange.
The face of the coin turns
once in your favor,
but the crows do not reckon
nor the fields recall a purchase.
The tree decides none, not the shadow it gives.
You join your hands together,
and claim they are fastened by your eternal love.
Speaking to a sky that does not answer,
you call that echo
Harmony.

—Justin Koo, grade 10, New York.

What My Mother Carried With Her

My mother's story came in bits and pieces. Sometimes arriving through her words and sometimes through her actions.

When my mother was 15 years old, she and her family boarded a one-way flight to New York City. She had spent the past 15 years growing up in a quaint village in Gujarat, India and at the age when most people are just discovering themselves, she had to start over in a city so different from everything she knew. When my grandparents, my mother, and my mother's siblings immigrated to the United States they had nothing to their name other than two suitcases and the dream of a better future for themselves and their posterity. Hence, my mother and her siblings had to contribute to the family, and they worked multiple jobs in their teenage years. She told me that when she started high school in N. Bergen, New Jersey, she and all the other Indian students were bullied for their accent, skin color, food, etc.

While she would not talk about the adversity she faced frequently, it was evident that these traumatic experiences stayed with her.

What she would frequently show was how she and various other Gujarati-American families adapted to their new environments.

This was best shown in the kitchen. Many Gujarati families that immigrated to the United States found creative ways to alter the new cuisines they discovered and add an Indian twist. One of the dishes that is constantly on the dinner rotation in my house is called "Mexican *Bhel*." *Bhel* is an Indian street food item consisting of puffy rice, vegetables, and countless chutneys. "Mexican *Bhel*" is a dish that replaced the Indian ingredients with popular Mexican ingredients that the Indian community fell in love with. Instead of the puffy rice, flour tortillas are cut into little diamonds and fried in hot oil. Instead of the typical vegetables used in *Bhel*, we used lettuce, onions, jalapeños, and other Mexican toppings. Instead of various chutneys, we used guacamole, sour cream, and hot sauces. While this feels like a normal dinner for me, this dish was a way that numerous Gujarati-American families could feel included in "Taco-Tuesdays" across the United States.

Another way that my mom showed the way she adapted into American culture was the way my sister and I were brought up. My mother took our education

seriously and had a clear vision of what success looked like that she helped us work toward; however, she never made it seem like pressure.

As an immigrant to the U.S., she knew how to be disciplined in order to make her dreams come true. My mother went to sleep early, followed strict routines, and was always consistent. My mother was warm, yet direct. She did not always tell me about her reasoning behind certain things, but I am sure they were in accordance with her experiences growing up as a low-income teenager of color.

My mother's story did not start when she came to the United States nor end when she came to the United States, but her experiences calling both India and the U.S. her home became her story and then it became mine as well.

My mother carried her experiences and her resilience across the world so that one day I would have the privilege of growing up in a multicultural environment.

—Neer Patel, age 16, grade 10, Florida.

"My family and I are from two distinct worlds; however, I carry a part of distinct worlds with me wherever I go. My family is from Gujarat, India, and I was born and raised in Florida, far from the cities and towns that sculpted my parents. Nevertheless, those far away cities and towns have shaped me in many ways as well. Many people's identities come from one place; however, mine comes from many: India, The United States, and the experiences that connect them.

"At home, I speak Gujarati; however, when I step outside the house English naturally flows out of my mouth. While in most instances, I do not always notice the natural switch between languages so easily; it reflects how I move between different aspects of my life with ease as well. At school I am surrounded by a group of other brown students that I share a culture with and can feel understood without any explanation; but, at the end of the day I do live in a majority white-American town in Florida so there are definitely moments where I feel out of place.

"Even doing typical tasks like going to a barbershop can make me feel out of place as I am usually the only person of color in the room. Conversations about topics that I cannot fully relate to tend to be the norm, and in moments like these I feel different. I am reminded that my identity is not so simple. My identity shifts and adapts constantly, to fit into wherever I may be. I've a strong sense of belonging to my community..."

The Smell of Home

I sit down at the table, which holds all the colors of the rainbow in its arms. Dishes and dishes of scarlet meat, thick emerald knots of seaweed, creamy white *udon*, and golden-brown mushrooms. A tapestry of smells drifts by my face, all of them weaving together and making the smell of home. Warm, familiar, and welcoming.

Hotpot is always a recognizable dinner; something my family eats when guests are over, like today. The parents are in the kitchen, their faces all smiles. At the same time, my older brother talks with the other children that came over, one of them his classmate from elementary school.

Soon, everyone is seated, and the quiet rumbling of boiling water fills the air. Conversations quickly start, like a raven taking flight. Us kids chat about school, homework, video games, speaking English so quickly that the words blur together, like a string of notes in a cadenza. The adults laugh about work, funny conversations they'd had, things that we find dull and boring. They converse in Mandarin, the words easily flowing from their mouths like a river.

I can never manage to speak the language so effortlessly; every time I try, it sounds like I'm wrestling with the words, trying to get them to fit in my mouth just right.

As warm steam drifts up to the heavens, the sound of Mandarin and English syllables fills the air. It never takes a particular shape or meaning, but more a feeling. This is comfort. This is joy. This is home.

It's poetic in a way. I'm American, a kid who was born and raised here, yet I'm also so far from it. This city, this country, will always be my first home, but part of me is also from China, and this dinner is all of that—tastes and smells and colors that perfectly paint the picture of who I am. No, who my *family* is.

Home is many things. It's never a place nor a specific feeling. Home is the smile playing on my mom's lips, home is the flavors bursting in my mouth, home is the mix of Mandarin and English getting thrown across the table. Home is so many things, all at the same time, but most importantly, home is where your family is.

—Angie Li, age 11, grade 6, Washington, adds: “more than anything, I love storytelling. Whether that's writing a poem, performing a dance, or competing in a flute competition, I see a story in all of them. I love making people think, I love making people imagine. I love making people feel. Sadness, joy, anger, worry, I want them to get lost in my stories and maybe start to create some of their own. I wrote this after a family visited us for dinner.”

Rainy Walk through Los Angeles

It began to rain as I walked deeper into Los Angeles, light at first, then slowly growing heavier, like the sky could not decide what it wanted. The sidewalks turned shiny, reflecting the city in shades of gray and silver. Cars passed by, spraying water behind them, and the cool air brushed against my face. The city sounded different in the rain. Tires hissed on the wet streets, and raindrops tapped on rooftops and signs like a soft drumbeat. It seemed like a paradox, because everything seemed louder and quieter at the same time. People hurried past me with umbrellas and jackets. I heard different languages. Some spoke Spanish, others English, and some I did not recognize. Their voices blended together, reminding me of the diversity of Los Angeles. Even though everyone has different lives, we were all walking through the same rain at that moment, sharing something without even noticing it.

As I walked, I became more observant. I noticed small details I usually ignore. Rain slid down streetlights like thin strings, glowing softly. Puddles on the ground reflected buildings and lights so clearly that the city looked upside down. Near one corner, I passed La La Land Café. Warm light spilled out of the windows, making it feel cozy and inviting. It seemed like a perfect place to escape the rain, but I decided to keep going. Farther down the street, I passed Edikted. The entrance was bright, with a heart-shaped arch of lights that stood out in the rain. The mannequins stood still, almost like they were waiting for someone. The rain made the lights blur a little, giving everything a surreal feeling. It felt like there was a different world inside the store, separate from the wet street outside.

The rain made the city feel calmer. Even loud sounds like sirens seemed more subdued and distant. Streetlights reflected on the ground like glowing paint spreading across the road. I slowed down and looked around. I realized that I'm usually in a rush and don't pay attention to what's around me. But the rain made me stop and notice things. It showed me a calmer side of Los Angeles that I do not always see. It made me realize how my perspective can change the way I experience things. By the time I got closer to home, my shoes were soaked and my hoodie was dripping. Normally, I would be annoyed, but this time I did not mind. The rain turned a normal walk into something memorable, even if it was just a short, brief moment.

Even in a busy city like LA, there are quiet moments hidden. You just have to slow down to notice them.

—Preethi Praveen, age 11, grade 5, California.

Ars Poetica with Wingless Dragon

She does not welcome you—
you, who are unable to speak
its native tongue. You, who fill
whole drawers in your apartment
with fountains of red envelopes
from your Lǎolao, never used, fading
to dust like her ancestors' hollow-
chambered dragon bones. At the temple
next to the new dim sum restaurant, you
bargain pale lanterns for the dust showering
the whole ghost-swept farm filled
with Christmas trees, needles shaken free
of branched spines, already withering
in past tense. Once your offer is accepted, you can
finally free yourself—dragon by blood, American
by heart. Yet still you scream in dreams
silently through the door frame of your old apartment
on 60th Street, where you grew up—the one
with book bins dreamt from Amazon packages,
next to that overpriced Chinese supermarket that hung
lanterns like needled branches year-round.
You scream until you can't read Mandarin anymore.
Until the silence turns smoky, red as your future
poems. Poems scaling the ancient Bamboo scrolls
of China, poems filling the bellies of the wingless
dragons, past and present. Selfish poems. Your name
is the only thing you can write in Chinese— 笑笑

—Juliana Pan, Washington.



*“A Smoky Sky” by Benjamin Kwack, age 14, Illinois.
This digital painting shows impact of the fossil fuels on nature.
Ben’s story on the future of cars will be in the upcoming issue.*

Biomes of Love

You can't bandage words with the washed-up seaweed
leaving itself like gusts of regret across the coast
of Half Moon Bay. I would pry clams off of boulders
bare-handed for you until Cold Pacific foam sprays
red. It's typical, I guess, my pumping heart never knowing
when to clot. When to close the wound with salt
and hang my jeans up to dry, still damp from sitting
on sand-stung benches. In autumn's kaleidoscope
of mustard foliage, my vision has gone blurry: faces
pasteling into roses, the popcorn ceiling in the waiting room
turning back to iron clouds of snow. As I wait for you
to emerge and for my phone to blink awake, my lips crack
into wordless deserts, uncertain in love. The sea ripples
salty puddles back into my eyes. I've walked this path
before. Two years ago, loose specks of glitter blemishing
the gymnasium floors, Mary Janes squeaking tracks
into the plastic tiles as fruit punch breath fills the air
with insecurity. Ladles stir a tired untouched lemon slice
around the bottom of the bowl, bruised brown
by time and thick plastic. November is restless, manufactured
by gratitude. Stoic looks, static tears, my facial muscles
sleeping whenever nobody's expecting me to smile. I cannot
smile in a way that isn't forced. But who said it never rains
in California? Who said there are never clouds? I kneel down
to rinse away the tar stuck to a stork hatchling
with cupfulls of seawater. I would serve you shellfish
quietly, wrapped in the apology you never offered me.
You wouldn't know a thing. Only when you bite down
will you taste it: the bitterness flowing through my veins.

—Polina Korobitsyna, age 15, California. Her poetry explores intersections between gender, society, and family. Her work has been featured in many poetry magazines, and has been recognized in several national and international poetry contests. She serves as a Poetry Reader for *Afterbodies*, an international literary magazine. In the future, Polina hopes to introduce refugee and underserved students to poetry through free workshops, readings, and other literary events. When Polina isn't writing, she enjoys taking long walks with her friends and listening to Labrinth.

The Dreamland by Grace Li, age 16, New Jersey.

They told her that America was the land
where she'd find all she was looking for.
"The American Dream," they dubbed it.

They'll murmur in your ears, chanting:
Go, go, Chinese girl, shove your shrunken
red qipao and your fragile teacup set into your tiny
suitcase and fly to the dreamland. So
she came to the dreamland,
striding out of the airport in her best silk business suit,
her tiny red suitcase skipping behind her in a sea
of monotone gray, and smiling at passersby
that filled the congested streets of New York while
blasted music and shrieking honks clamored over
her feeble questions.
No one gave her a response.

They did not tell her that America was seven thousand miles away
from her hometown where her parents would rot
with age and loneliness. The stamp in her passport marked
an ever-present reminder that she could never return
to comfort them because her wallet is empty and
the men won't let her onto the plane if she's too broke
from running to the dreamland.

They never said that people wouldn't want to waste
time to a Chinese girl with invisible eyes and incoherent English.

Why is she even in America if she can't speak English?
So she shut herself up and packed her shrunken
Red qipao and tiny teacup set away, forever replaced
with a gray Goodwill sweater and Walmart plastic water bottles.
Chinese girl, isn't this what you always wanted?
Isn't this the dreamland? ★★★

(Below) **Project Perfection & Timeless** by Grace Li, age 16, gr. 10, N.J.



The Trolley Problem

You've probably heard of the trolley problem
Where you can choose to divert the trolley
from killing five men

To one.

And you'd probably choose to kill one man
over 5.

But what if

That one man was your daughter?

Or your son?

Or your nephew?

Or your mom?

What if that man was your one true love

Or your cute dog?

Or your pet dove?

What if that man was your dad?

Or your colleague?

Or someone who you've known forever?

Then, you'd probably pick the 5 men.

But what if the five people

Were 5 innocent puppies?

Or the most powerful in the world?

What if one of them promised

10 million as a reward?

You'd still probably choose the 5 men.

But what if

The one man was someone who'd been kind
all his life?

What if the 5 men were little children

But they had been rude to everyone?

What if the 5 men offered you 100 million

To kill the poor, kind man?

Now I ask of you

Who is really worth more?

—Xi Yuan, age 12, grade 6, California. She
enjoys writing poetry, drawing comics, and
expressing her ideas through creative writing.

"My 'Echoed Origins' (on p. 17) was created using digital tools, and reflects the diverse histories and cultural backgrounds that have made up society today. My pencil drawing, 'Timeless,' illustrates an old, gentle Indian-American lady that smiled serenely in a modern suit, demonstrating the peaceful reconciliation of cultures and generational differences. My oil painting, 'Project Perfection,' criticizes the reality that many of us are trying to strip away our own characteristics to conform to mainstream beliefs." —G. L.

What a Wonderful World

How diverse! How lovely! How full of pride! Let me start from the beginning. My school in China had just begun summer break in June of 2024, and I was eager for the adventure ahead of me: a trip to Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. I was ecstatic.

In Georgia, I saw the Gergeti Trinity Church and marveled at the natural wonders nearby. I saw the memorial of 200 years of friendship between Russia and Georgia and was awed by the beautiful mosaic showing off their national spirit. I toured the astonishing Uplistsikhe Cave Town, housing the creations and cunning of people from 3,000 years ago, and saw the transition from a pagan religion to Christianity. I entered one of the most sacred churches in the world, Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, said to be where Jesus' robe is buried. I visited a winery with centuries of history. One thing I remember deeply was how everybody went crazy after Georgia had qualified for the UEFA Euros for the first time in 2024, leaving a deep impression of everybody's pride in their country.

In Armenia, I went to Cafesjian Center for the Arts, a beautiful museum with beautiful art. Later, I saw Mother Armenia, a huge statue of a woman holding a sword and with a shield by her feet, representing justice and a country that is peaceful but is willing to defend itself. However, a sad thing I learned that day was the reason behind why Armenia seemed more melancholy than the other countries I had and would travel to. The Armenian genocide. It deeply saddened me, but there was so much beauty in the culture. I was privileged to see the Etchmiadzin Cathedral, considered by many to be the first official, state/government-funded cathedral ever built.

The final destination on my trip was Azerbaijan. It was so different, yet so similar to the other countries. Though it was a mostly Muslim country, I saw diversity. The ancient Fire Temple of Baku represented Zoroastrianism. Yanar Dag was an amazing mountain that has naturally occurring fire appearing from the rocks. I watched mud volcanoes erupt (although very small ones) and looked at ancient stone carvings on cave walls dating back 40,000 years. I also got to see the biggest mosque in Baku, with beautiful interior design, to end my trip.

At the end of my trip, when I reflected back, I saw how diverse it was. I saw so many different religions through the ages, spanning thousands of years, and the evolution of architecture and art. But some themes were common all around. The diversity in each country. How welcoming the people were to the tourists that my family and I were. The pride of everybody in their own country. From that trip, I learned that countries come in many different shapes, sizes, and forms, but no matter what, you always have something to learn from them.

—Leo Ding, grade 7, New York. He adds: "I am a proud American-born Chinese, and I can speak, read, and write both English and Chinese fluently. I love traveling around the world to places I've never been, because traveling around the world opens a window into new cultures, new religions, new traditions, and so many things I would've never known if I didn't go to the place. For example, while traveling in Georgia, I saw the world's only "Mongolian Jesus," a painting of Jesus that had to be changed to look Mongolian so the invading Mongols wouldn't take it down. It's those types of things that I learn while traveling that make me love it so much."



Carina Araujo, age 13, Maryland. See her piece, *Marginalization of Women*, in our next issue.

1. "Your Kind"

"*Your kind starts our horror stories.*"

You hear so many narratives about what happens when you meet other people, people with different skin colors from yours and different names for "your kind."

"*Your kind*" means foul food to them; "*your kind*" is inherently ugly in their standards.

You don't understand how your mother could be so cautious when everyone gives you their brightest smiles, their biggest laughs.

You brushed her off that day because you were sure she was lying, her warning fading in your ears. *Nobody* could be so cruel when skin color is just the difference between melanin levels.

If only you knew those smiles were from *pity*, not adoration. How could they be so daring when it comes to discrimination...?

2. Devoid

It started with the transition between elementary and middle school.

It was supposed to be magical, supposed to be your metamorphosis.

You imagined a new version of yourself, a niche new haircut and glasses that hugged your face just the right way. This change would be for *you*, not for anyone else. That was the magic of middle school, wasn't it? Becoming "*you*" for *yourself* in a miraculous few months?

Nobody would be rude anymore, nobody would form rock-hard cliques that only ever laughed in your face...

Your friends lied.

It didn't matter if you changed your hair for you, or you bought your glasses because you liked them, or if you loved the person you were then.

Nobody cares about your opinion in middle school.

The cliques are still the same, the rumors are still the same. The only thing different is that people *do* care about what you look like.

You were so proud of the roundness of your face,

the rich chocolate of your eyes, the way the sun faded your skin into a deep tan rather than a scarlet burn. Now you hate those parts of your identity.

It's not just you, either. Everyone else's buckets are filled with red hate, ruby droplets that bleed into your sponge heart.

All you know is to love, love, love. To take their anger, even when you crack and cry for it. Yet you *still* think that they'll get better, that, if you tried hard enough, you'd absorb their hatred.

Did the transition between elementary and middle school also come with delusions...?

3. Lasting

Those girls at school blame *you* for what happened in history because all "*Asians*" are the same. They think that the Japanese and Chinese are one, that the Filipinos and Laotians are a single ethnicity. They blend us into one color, our yellow and pink undertones disappearing from their vision. We all bleed red, but your skin is the color of "*useless dirt*" to them. Dirt that feeds their crops, dirt that's the foundation of their homes, dirt that forms their Earth, but they trample you without a second glance, regardless.

"*Why can't they see the difference?*" You asked your mother one night. Her eyes were stone-cold as always, hardened by the grief of losing her country. Still, her voice gave way near the end...

"*Because they blame us for their wars, for their hardships.*" Her broken English reflected her soul that night—crushed. You didn't know it then, but America had already made its way into your culture, a snake in the guise of freedom. Your mother spoke less and less Chinese, blaming it on her English workplace in the shop down the road.

You knew it was more than that.

Speaking anything *but* English was the fastest way to be ostracized, because the sound of foil crinkling was the "*right*" way to speak. You're not safe in society; the public will always see you as intruders on their land.

You can only hope that you can make alliances with them, the "*natives*" of America. "Native." They love the word. They think it's some right to dominance, some way to prove that this land is their birthright.

But who's actually "native?" They're not the Native Americans, no. Isn't it just *so* convenient that they re-labelled the *rightful* people of America the "American Indians"? "Re-labelled," like they mixed up the packaging of sold goods.

They take your voice, your rights, your background. They take your values, your culture, your identity. Except you can't be like *them*, either. You're packed like cattle into one outrageous category, the "Japanese," the "Koreans," the "Vietnamese." The title seems to shift with the eras, but one thing stays the same.

You're not Vietnamese, not Korean, not Japanese.

You're *Chinese*, the *largest* ethnicity in the world, and you'd think they would know that.

This is why you write, so many years later. You write like you won't have a tomorrow, you write like this is the only way for your soul to breathe.

You don't need the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, *because* the freedom of speech already runs in your blood. It's because of that freedom, born deep inside you, that you're sitting before pen and paper today, identity in one hand and individuality in the other.

You may not stand on a battlefield with worn equipment in your hands, the blood of your kin staining your fingers and running through your tears, no.

Instead, you fight a different war. You fight the tug-of-war of hearts, your greatest finale as "*your kind*." *That* is enough, to stand for your cause, to stand for your *visions*.

There is a *reason* the ox is part of the Chinese zodiac, because your back is heavy with the identity of "*your kind*." It's no insult anymore, but the mantra that echoes in your veins and brings forth your resilience. The same stone-cold perseverance that brought your mother to the "*Land of the Free*," the same rock-hard resolve that every *individual* shares.

It's a weight you'll gladly carry, not alone, but with the many.

—Meredith Zheng, age 11, grade 6, California. She adds: "I write because there's a relationship built between a reader and a writer when you create something, and it often feels as if I'm lending a piece of myself to someone when they read my words."

The Earth's Judgment: A Haiku Sequence

This collection started when I wanted to tell the whole story of our planet in as few words as possible. I chose the haiku form because the discipline of seventeen syllables forces every word to matter. The sequence moves through five ages—the ancient tide, the silence of deep time, a moment of burning and descent, the forest striking back, and finally a golden restoration. I wanted each poem to feel like one age of the Earth compressed into a single breath.

I. The Beginning: The Hunger of the Tide

Salt tongues lap the shore
Crabs burrow deep—sudden gone
Gold foam masks the sand

II. The Passage: The Long Silence

Ancient echoes cut
Glaciers carve silent statues
Soul drowned in deep frost

III. The Descent: The Burning Turn

Searing bullets fly
Wild screams of agony rise
Death and flame veil all

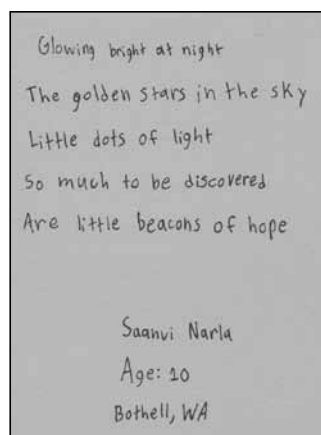
IV. The Retribution: The Green Trap

Poachers flee from ferns
Root-hands tripping, grasping tight
Forests keep their own

V. The Resolution: The Gilded Reign

Gold light drenches all
Shadows expelled to the void
Gilded thunder rolls

—Wallace Wu, age 10, grade 5, New York



Invisible Image

Shiny silver surface reflects my eyes back to me
Big and blue, framed with curled black eyelashes thickly coated in mascara
Makeup spilling out of overflowing backpack, last-minute touchups during passing period
My gaze is drawn to my eyebrows, which I then tend to with a spoolie, grooming them to my liking
Next are my lips: sparkly pink lip gloss, hastily applied and dabbed at until it shimmers just right
My skin is the last thing I see, if I even bother to notice the pale hue of my complexion
Maybe I will pause momentarily to reapply powder or blush, but I never take more than a couple of seconds to simply observe my skin. Why would I?

In any mirror, my face appears to me as floating features—eyes, brows, lips
The freckled road that connects each trait is invisible to me
Color of my skin, texture of my hair
Things I never think about because I don't have to
Invisible face, invisible privilege
Blessed with ignorance, cursed with reality

My best friend, whose beauty is breathtaking, stands beside me in the mirror
I ask her how she approaches her reflection
Her brows furrow in confusion at my cryptic question, but after some explaining, she finally responds:
“I see skin, then lips, then brows, then eyes”
The exact opposite of my own routine—I am confused
Her rich, dark complexion stands in stark contrast to my own pasty coloration—the realization sinks in
I am entitled to overlook the color of my own skin, as there has never been any cause for me to do otherwise
Passing period is over, the school bathroom empties
Although we are both on our way to Ms. W's calculus lesson, seemingly for the first time I
recognize that we are walking completely different paths to the same place
Side by side, worlds apart
And yet my newfound understanding brings us one step closer together

—Sadie Boggs, age 16, grade 11, New Jersey. Sadie adds: “I wrote this poem about the immense privilege and societal advantage I experience every day as a white person. This privilege is not always visible to me, and I have learned from my African-American friends that, unlike me, they are constantly aware of the color of their skin and how it causes them to be perceived by others. I decided to center my piece on a specific encounter I had with a friend of mine in school, in which I walked away with a newfound understanding of myself and my previous ignorance.”

★ ★ ★ ★ **Dear President George Washington** by Tayz, age 9, Maryland. ★ ★ ★ ★

My name is Tayz, and I am 9 years old. The year from which I am writing to you is 2026; 250 years after you made the United States of America independent. I wanted to tell you about the state of our country today, and the impact of technology.

Let us start with the social. The good impacts are that people can be connected more quickly over the internet. People can access entertainment from all over the world. But, we have to talk about the bad stuff, too. The internet has become a dangerous place filled with cyber bullies and, to stay safe, people try not to connect with each other.

Now, on to Mother Earth. On the good side, with inventions like electric cars (and electricity!), convenient ways to compost and recycle, there are ways to help keep the earth clean. On the bad side, pollution and climate change have made things unclean.

Finally, what might be quite important to you, is politics. On the good side, people are able to exercise their vote with more education because more information is available about the candidates. More groups of people are now able to legally vote, so it is more fair. There are also ways to use technology to register to vote and there =>

Where Silence Lives

The pool deck is always too bright, chlorine thick in the air
and the sound of timers snapping in the hands of volunteers.
Hours of waiting for a few minutes of racing.
I stand behind the block, shivering as the crowd echoes.
My heart beats against my ribs, trying to jump out.
When I dive in, the noise disappears
and it is only water, breath, and the lane line beside me.
I finish, pull myself out,
and the world floods back in all at once.

When I read, the room fades until I forget it is even there.
Words pull me in like a current.
I look up and the clock has jumped an hour
but I do not feel the time pass.
Characters become louder than real people.
Their thoughts feel almost like mine
and each page feels like a door I am stepping through.
I close the book and blink hard,
the room returning in pieces.
Sometimes the story stays with me longer than the real day did.

Pudding curls up on my lap
heavy and warm like he owns the spot.
His fur is soft and striped
and he blinks at me with slow confidence
as if he is giving me permission to exist.
He purrs the second I touch him
a steady vibration that settles my whole chest.
When he stretches out his paws
his toes spread like tiny stars.
I always feel calmer with his small, patient company
and he makes any space feel like home.

—Pearl Zhu, age 12, grade 7, Toronto, Canada. She adds: “I wrote this poem partly inspired by *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, especially the way Woodson uses quiet, small moments to show identity and voice. Reading it made me realize that voice does not always have to be loud to matter.

The three sections came from thinking about the different quiet spaces I return to. Swimming, reading, and being with Pudding are not just escapes from noise. They are places where I feel more grounded and aware of myself. Before a race, the pool deck feels loud and overwhelming, but once I dive in, everything narrows to water, breath, and the lane line. When I read, the room fades and the story becomes louder than real life. With Pudding, I do not really leave the world; he just makes where I already am feel okay.

Writing this poem helped me understand that silence is not empty. It can be powerful because it gives me space to notice, reflect, and listen. It also helped me see that my voice can exist in a quieter way, even when I’m not speaking out loud.

my way of saying i love you

she taught me that hunger has a polite form:
Chī bǎo le ma, have you eaten yet,
which means *I love you* which means
knocking on your door before she goes to sleep
to remind you about the time
mom, i know it is 12:54

i have been translating her my whole life
into a language she doesn’t need to learn again
not for a new country
not for the racist cashier she doesn’t even notice
but for a daughter who never speaks

this house holds the shapes of our silence
the specific angle she tilts her head
when she wants to say something
she swallows

i don’t know this word in either language
the way a person can be fluent with someone
and still miss every sentence

before she leaves for her bedroom
she sets the bowl of fruit down
i take it.
outside, the streetlight only does its one job
turning ordinary air
into something you can almost see through.

—Kaylee Da, age 15, grade 10, Massachusetts.

Continued =>
from page 29

are systems to mail in ballots no matter where you are. On the bad side though, people and candidates themselves are able to share false information about themselves and their opponents. Our current president does just that, using social media and Artificial Intelligence [AI] to spread his views and thoughts quickly and broadly. His thoughts and views seem to go against the freedoms and rights you, President George Washington, fought to achieve 250 years ago. Instead of your United States of America, the current president wants to make it a Limited States of America, only offering good things to a few people that he likes, instead of all Americans.

It’s a tough world today and situation for our country. But kids like me are learning from good examples in history to shape the present for a better future. —Tayz, age 9.

My story is about my personal experience overcoming struggles of identity relating to a cultural name in a place where there were not many of me. It tells the tale of being torn between the roots I've grown from, and the sky that I'm reaching for.

My name is Tenzin. It's not Tensun, or Tenxin, or anything in between. It means "*holder of the Buddha Dharma*" and "*upholder of teachings*." I was named by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. I was gifted with a name specifically made for me. I've lived in the United States of America for as long as I can remember. I eat steak at a temperature that I swear is the only correct answer. I play basketball, volleyball, or badminton in squeaky school gyms with my friends. I walk through litter-filled streets that smell of hope and desperation swirled together in an inseparable combination. I have a ridiculously long Starbucks order that I complain never tastes right. I spend hundreds of dollars in humongous malls. I am American, through and through.

My second name is Palzom. It is not Palom, or Paloma, or anything in between. It means “*gathering of prosperity*.” I was gifted with a name specifically made for me. I have never visited Tibet. I watch videos of nomadic life in the mountains, knowing that they are incredibly far from the truth. I listen to the tragedies of stories of my elders’ escapes from Tibet. I think about life in the prisons that they have put my people within. I envision conversations with the grandparents and great-grandparents that I will never meet. I fantasize about my lineage that will never be learned. I imagine life in a place that I have never seen from anywhere beyond a screen and in my mind. My parents are Tibetan. My grandparents are Tibetan. Therefore I am Tibetan, through and through.

I did not know that there were other people in the world, besides my family, that looked like me. In my earliest years, perhaps I always thought that we were the only. I accepted that I would always look different, and I was alright with that. That was mostly because everyone else looked different too. My preschool teacher was like me, but also not like me. Some of my classmates looked like me, but also not like me. Some didn't look anything like me. I assumed that this was the norm, and that everyone had a different appearance.

I met my first non-familial Tibetan, at least one

that I could remember, when I was five. The Tibetan Community Center of Chicago is one of my earliest memories of realizing that there were more of us. I recognized so many faces. Faces that looked like mine, in more ways than one this time. We were the same, but different. But we were the same nonetheless. At least, that was before I turned nine. Officially, I was old enough to join the regular weekend classes. Truly, I was more than old enough to start, but a late start was better than never. On my first day, there were so many things that I didn't know. Because I had never been to this weekend school before, they put me into the youngest class. There were children in that class that spoke better Tibetan than I do even now. One of the first things we did was sing the national anthem of Tibet, which I had never even heard before that day. I was home, but still so out of place. I was a Tibetan, but in name and appearance only.

As I grew older, I found it a funnier paradox. I was an American in behavior, but a Tibetan in name and face. I knew there was Tibetan in my heart, but the outer cover was fully American. I began to wish that my inside matched my outside. Or perhaps I wished my outside matched my inside. It was confusing, being two people. Sometimes I even imagined not being either. I fantasized about never being named in the first place, and therefore constantly being anonymous. I dreamed about looking more “traditionally American.” I envied the people who fit my standard. I dreamed about feeling more Tibetan. I envied people who fit my standard.

It wasn't until incredibly recently that I realized that there were not two people. I was one person. It has been years since I began to feel more Tibetan. The signs were small. I knew more Tibetan, in reading, writing, and speaking. When my peers looked at me, they began to recognize me as one of their own. Slowly, ever so slowly, the Tibetan buried deep into my heart became a part of the outside layer of the American. And slowly, ever so slowly, the American on the outside of my heart became part of the Tibetan.

I'm Tenzin Palzom. I'm Tibetan, and I'm American.
And I am proud to be both of them.

—Tenzin Palzom, age 12, grade 7, Illinois.

Excerpts from our Special online Issue: **Voices of Autistic Non-Speakers**

La Noyée

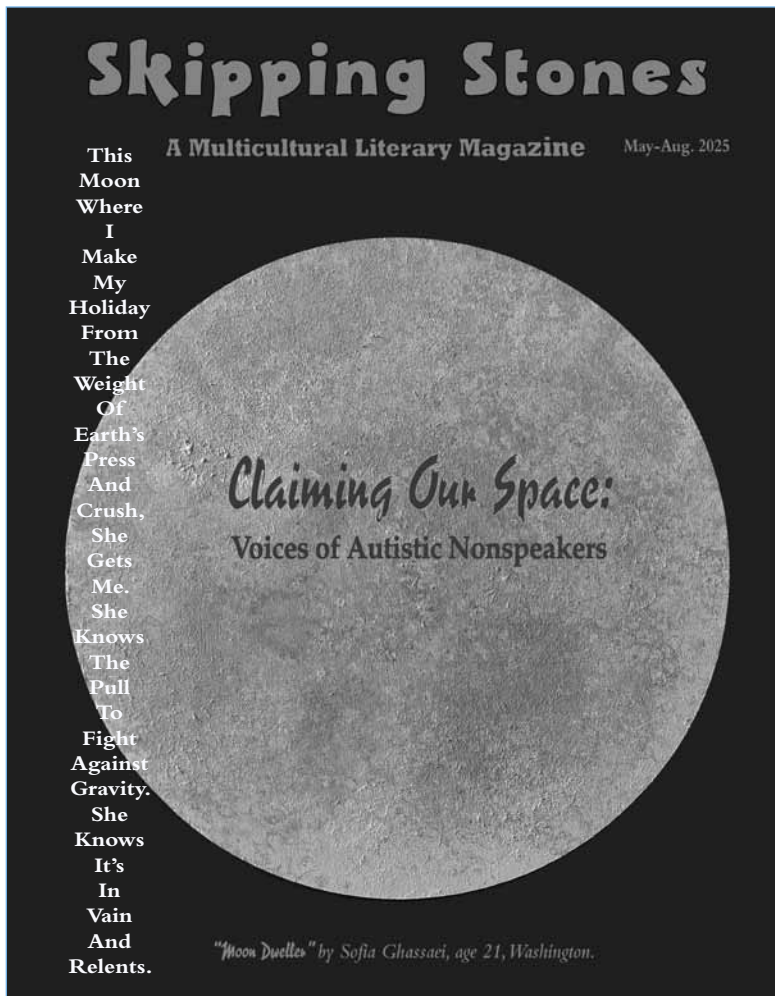
The girl has drowned	<i>Ahogada</i>
Not in water	<i>La niña se murió</i>
But in sound	<i>En un mar</i>
Salty and material	<i>De sonido</i>
Like the sea	<i>Azul</i>
It washes over and	<i>Quieta</i>
Satisfies all her	<i>Tranquila</i>
Desires	<i>Solo la canción y</i>
Her voice has stopped	<i>Algunos recuerdos</i>
Becoming one	<i>De ti</i>
With the song	<i>Sin más que sentir</i>
Lone remembrance of	<i>Sin más que decir</i>
Real love	<i>La niña soy yo</i>
As she lets go	<i>Ahogándome</i>
This is the way	<i>En la música</i>
To die	—Sofia Ghassaei,
She thinks	<i>wrote this poem when</i>
Drowning not in water	<i>she was 18, Washington.</i>
But in sound	

Love Letters

I fell in love recently
She is thin and interesting and beautiful and
a great conversationalist.
I met her in November, and it was love at first
sight.
I had a problem talking to girls before I met her.
I believe I was really interested in her as soon as
I realized I could tell her anything.
I could tell her what I am feeling
And what I want for dinner
And how the sun glistens on the lake near my
home
And that I love my mother
And that I love to read poetry
And that I want to go to college
And that I love my brother, even though I want
to punch him sometimes.
I am so in love with her.
Her name is Letter Board, and we will be
together forever.

—Tyler Mason, age 24, New York.

—Massimo Bossi, age 20, Ontario, Canada.



To read this whole issue for free, visit
[https://www.skippingstones.org/
wp/may-2025-issue/](https://www.skippingstones.org/wp/may-2025-issue/)

Red Lake

In the woods the trees whisper
sweet encouragements to me.
I respond sharing my dreams,
leaving fear and doubt
in the rear view
as I drive out to my sanctuary.
Campfire greets me.
Welcomes me home.
Here I am free.
Authentically me.

—Luke Verhoeff, age 20, British
Columbia, Canada. Luke is an autistic
youth who found his voice at age 19 through
a communication method of spelling
one-letter-at-a-time on a letterboard.

My Adorable Universe

That
Moon
Never
Goes
Away.
It's
Up
And
Down
And
Up.
It's
Like
My
Heart
When
I
Think
Of
You.

Our Own Paths

He was leaving. I couldn't believe it. My best friend, Asman, had to move. I was on my way to the train station to say goodbye. His family was moving to London because his parents found better job opportunities there. It made me remember something my grandmother told me a few years ago when we went walking in the garden.

"One thing I learned at a very young age was that life's journey is like a leaf," she told me. I stared at her, confused. She stroked my hair and continued, "Everyone starts on the same stem, the beginning of the leaf, and then they begin to change and grow, splitting off into different directions. Of course, people's paths might intersect again, but by then they themselves would be different." She paused and plucked a leaf off the ground to show me. She traced the stem and how the veins split off. "But of course, like how every leaf is different, every person is different too. Remember that, *beta*," she finished, calling me *beta* (a term of endearment) in her native language, Urdu. She died a year after that conversation.

I tried to remember that when we arrived at the station. Asman and his parents greeted us, the grown ups stepping off to the side to say their good-byes. Asman was wearing his favorite green jumper, the one he wore for comfort. He tried to look brave, but I could tell by the way he was clutching his suitcase that he was afraid.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yep," he replied and stared at the ground.

"Are you sure?" I asked again, tapping his foot.

He breathed shakily. "It's time for a new adventure."

I wanted him to stay. But we each had our own paths.

"You know, I will write to you every day. The mailman will have to stuff the mailbox with all the letters I'll send. He'll probably hate me!"

Asman snorted and looked up, his eyes shining. We joked and laughed, both of us trying to sear this memory into our minds.

The train screeched, rushing into the station, bringing the smell of diesel with it. I tried to smile, knowing that it was time to say goodbye. I noticed the train was

a dark green, Asman's favorite color. Maybe that was a good omen. His parents boarded the train and turned, waiting for him to join them.

"Goodbye," I choked out.

He grinned. "See you soon."

And then he was gone, inside the train that would take him to London, his new home. I asked my parents to let me stay, just to watch the train depart. When it started moving, I waved, even if he couldn't see me. Then suddenly, a green sleeve stuck out of a window and waved like mad. Even though I didn't see his face, I knew it was Asman, waving back from his new path.

—Gulmeena Balouch, age 12, Illinois.

22 Barclay Street

An imposing yet small gray stone structure
Stands out against the tall stark skyline,
Abuzz with life while the rest of the city dozes, never
fully asleep.

The golden cross that stands on the roof,
Matches the silver one that sits on my chest,
And the spiritual one that wraps around my heart.
Snowy white petals and emerald stalks liven up the altar,
Bringing temporary life to the unchanging marble.

Statues flank the altar,
Stone faces, stoic yet alive, watching me,
Encouraging me to believe.
Once a burden as a child; now the bedrock on which I
stand.

Difficulties abound, and yet inside:
A sense of joy, a sense of hope, a sense of peace.

The candles,
Carrying the hopes of prayers, flicker:

On, off, on, off, on, off, on.
The pews, where as a child, I would color or read,
Where I learned to pay attention,
Now cradle the believer in me.
This church has stood strong
For two hundred and forty years.
Turning child into man of God,
It stands strong, still.

—Fernando Rivera, age 16, grade 10, New York.

2026 Skipping Stones Book Awards

We are pleased to honor the following 25 outstanding books—in three categories: Multicultural, Nature, and Teaching & Parenting Resources—as our 2026 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 social issues. 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 timely books! *Reviews are available on our website in the Annual Book Awards under Contests/Awards heading.*

Multicultural and International Books

The Echo People, by SD Youngwolf; illustr. Shonto Begay. *Lee & Low*. Picture Book. Ages 3–6.

Humphrey the Hopeful Helper, by Marcie Davis; illustr. Ros Webb. *Workinglikedogs.com*. Ages 3–5.

Ahhh, Milk!: *The Many Ways Milk Is Made*, by Abbe Starr; illustr. Evelline Andrya. *Gnome Road Publishing*. Ages 4–7.

This Skirt Won't Work!: *How Women Athletes Changed Their Clothes and Changed the Game*, by Jennifer Cooper; illustr. Eva Byrne. *Sourcebooks*. Ages 4–8.

Black Hands: *Builders of Our Nation*, by Carole Boston Weatherford; illustr. R. Gregory Christie. *Crown Books for Young Readers*. Ages 6–9.

Kai Po Che: *Mini's Perfect Kite*, by Suhasini Gupta; illustr. Devika Oza. *Gnome Road Publishing*. Ages 6–10.

The First Girl on Stage, by Shruthi Rao; art by Devika Joglekar. *Yali Books/Sambasivan & Parikh*. Ages 6–10.

Sign Up For Adventure! by Lavanya Karthik. *Modern Marigold Books/Sambasivan & Parikh*. Ages 6–10.

Edie For Equality: *Edie Windsor Stands up for Love*, by Michael Genhart; illustr. Cheryl Thuesday. *Lee & Low*. Ages 7–13.

The Amazing Generation, by Jonathan Haidt & Catherine Price. *Rocky Pond Books*. Ages 9–12.

Half Spoon of Rice: *A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide*, by Icy Smith; illustr. Sopaul Nhem. *A bilingual English and Khmer. East West Discovery Press LLC*. Ages 9–14.

All that Chandni Knows, a novel in verse, by Khushboo Patel. *G.P. Putnam's Sons BFYR*. Ages 10–16.

Buffalo Dreamer, a novel, by Violet Duncan. *Nancy Paulsen Books*. Ages 10–18.

The Story of My Anger, a novel in verse, by Jasminne Mendez. *Dial Books*. Ages 12–17.

Imposter, a novel, by Cait Levin. *Charlesbridge*. Ages 13–18.

Nature and Ecology Books

All That Glitters Is Not GOLD, by Emily Brubaker. *Amazon/KDP*. Picture Book. Ages 4–8.

There Doesn't Have to be a Reason, by M C Kasper. *Flare Kids/Catalyst Press*. Ages 4–9.

So Many Ways to be a Bird, by Constance Anderson. *Star Bright Books*. Ages 4–9.

Mud to the Rescue!: *How Animals Use Mud to Thrive and Survive*, by Tanya Konerman; illustr. Melanie Cataldo. *Web of Life*. Ages 5–10.

Shell Seeker: *The Life, Work and Adventures of a Blind Biologist*, by Suzanne Sherman; illustr. Linda Olliver. *NSTA Kids*. Ages 5–10.

The Ocean's Heart: *The Tiny Creatures Essential to Life*, by Jilanne Hoffmann; illustr. Khoa Le. *Millbrook Press/Lerner Publishing Group*. Ages 6–10.

Armando and the Amazing Animal Race, by Diana Schaffter. *Sea Otter Press*. Ages 8–14.

Conservation Success: *Protecting Wild Spaces and Species*, by Laura Perdwew; illustr. Lex Cornell. *Nomad Press*. Ages 9–12.

Teaching and Parenting Resources

Down Syndrome Out Loud: *20+ True Stories of Disability and Determination*, by Melissa Hart; illustr. María Perera. *Sourcebooks*. Ages 8–14.

Ours To Tell: *Reclaiming Indigenous Stories*, by Eldon Yellowhorn & Kathy Lowinger. *Annick Press*. Ages 12+.

See book covers on page 36. Reviews of honored books can be read on our website, www.skipping-stones.org. Please click on the **Annual Book Awards** under the **Contests/Awards** menu.

The 2026 Youth Awards: Select Art Entries



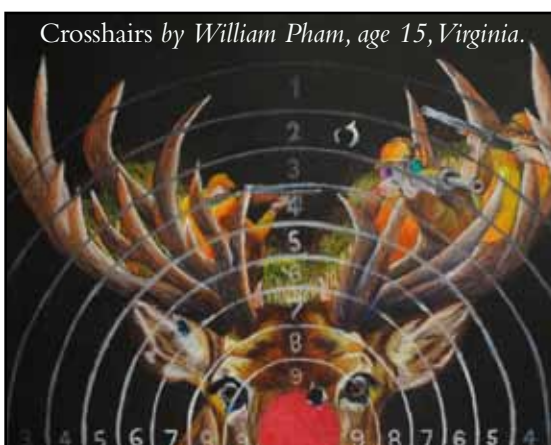
Energetic Rooster by M.W.



Self Portrait –Yeeun Shim, 16 • Golden –Yeyoon Kim, 18 • Aurora Plasma –Gahyun Rho, 17 • Summer to Fall –Junseo Lee, 13, S.Korea.



Purple Vine Flowers by Meng Wang, age 8, Georgia.



Crosshairs by William Pham, age 15, Virginia.



Ducks by William Pham, age 15, Virginia.

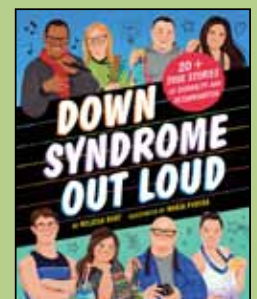
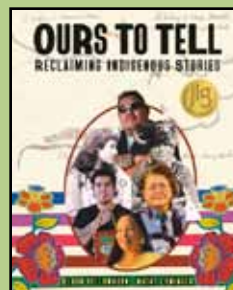
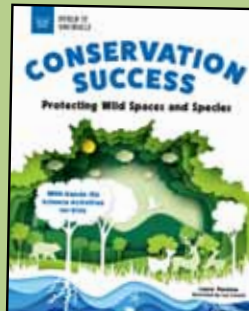
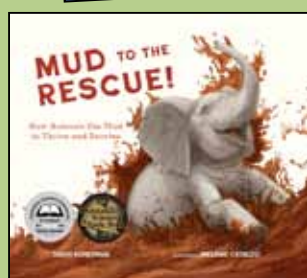
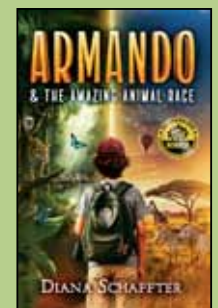
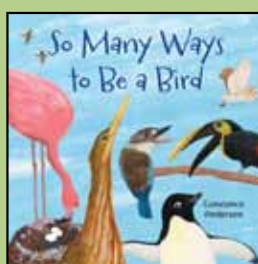
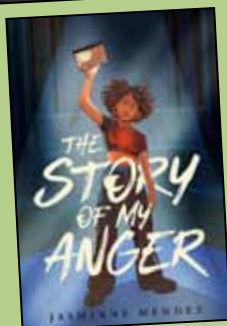
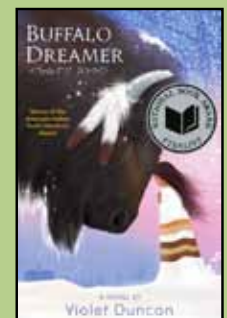
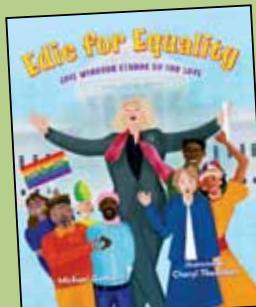
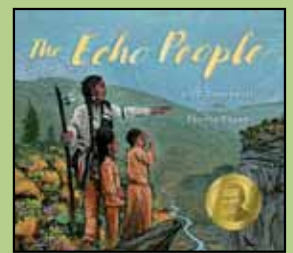
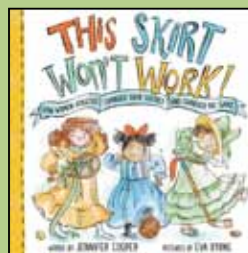
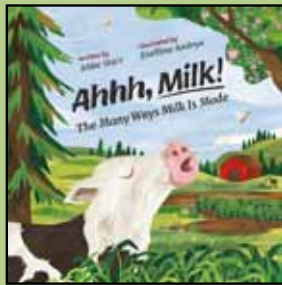
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