

# Skipping Stones

Vol. 38, no. 1  
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A Multicultural Literary Magazine

Consejos de los abuelos:  
Advice from the Elders

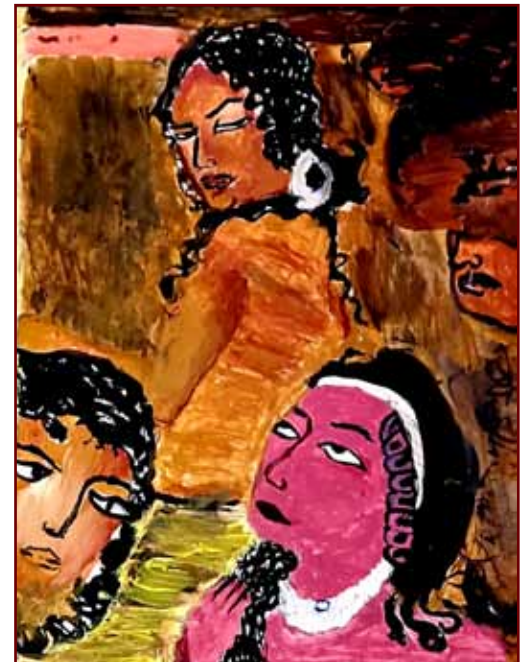
*Our Fragile World • Thinking of Wildlife  
Celebrating Diversity • Making a Difference*

Children in Umm Tuba, West Bank. Photo by Paul Dix.

**Art: Ahil Rahman, age 13, Kolkata, India.**



*(above) Serpent: Imagining a Serpent in the Garden of Eden • A Tribal Woman, India (top, right) • Cattle Grazing (middle, right)*



*(above): Turbulent Ganges • Reproduction of a Painting from the Ajanta Caves (middle), about 2000 years old • Reproduction of a Painting from the Ellora Caves in Central India (left), about 1400 years old. All Water Color Paintings.*

## *Making a Difference: Taking Action Is a Choice & that Choice is available to Us Every Day*

I have a history of taking action. I believe that action is the most honest form of belief. Conviction means little unless it alters how we behave, what we build, what we interrupt, and what we refuse to ignore. Awareness is only a beginning; agency begins when we decide to respond.

My understanding of action began somewhere ordinary: the kitchen. For my mom and me, baking together, mostly chocolate, was routine, almost background noise. But in 2020, I realized that familiarity could be a tool for change. I started selling over 600 hot chocolate bombs in my community, raising more than \$4,000 and reaching over 80 families. I didn't do it to seek recognition, but in response to what I saw around me: needs that could be met, even in small ways.

The project worked not because of novelty, but because it was accessible. Participation didn't require prior experience, complicated forms, or large commitments. Anyone could contribute in a meaningful way. It was easy to understand, easy to engage with, and immediately relevant to the people it aimed to serve. What mattered most was how the money was used afterward. Instead of deciding what organizations might need, I asked them. *Jackets instead of cash. Food instead of flyers.* Listening reshaped my understanding of service: meaningful help begins with attention, not assumption.

That lesson stayed with me. In 2023, I founded Chocolate4Charity, a nonprofit that channels my love of baking into meaningful impact. Through partnerships with local businesses, we've sold over 800 boxes, raising nearly \$10,000 for supporting causes I care deeply about: the Mark Schonwetter Holocaust Education Foundation, the Montclair Animal Shelter, Pediatric Cancer Research. We also donated 200 chocolate boxes to Comfort Zone Bereavement Camps. Over 80 students have joined me in volunteering, packaging, and delivering chocolates, discovering firsthand how small actions ripple outward. Each box doesn't just deliver chocolate; it gives people a chance to contribute, participate, and see the real impact of their efforts.

Chocolate is the vehicle, not the focus. Some causes reflect my family's history. Supporting Holocaust education honors my great-grandparents, Holocaust survivors, and my grandparents, immigrants, whose experiences shaped my understanding of responsibility. Other causes reflect friendship, grief, and compassion, such as supporting a peer battling cancer, helping children

navigate loss, and advocating for animal rights.

The most important measure of success is not the money raised but the number of people who participate. Many people want to help but hesitate because they do not know where to begin. Chocolate4Charity offers an accessible entry points. Through packaging chocolates, sharing a cause, or delivering donations. I have watched classmates who rarely speak up—over 80 in total—discover a sense of purpose simply by stepping into action. Real impact begins not with grand gestures but with invitations that inspire others to act.

In 2025, I was honored as a Top Upstander at an event organized by a library in Montclair, New Jersey, in collaboration with author Janice Cohn. The recognition was meaningful, but I do not see it as a title or an accolade. To me, being an Upstander is deliberate. It is the refusal to remain passive once you notice something that needs attention. It is the choice to respond, even when the right path is unclear or imperfect.

This understanding resonates with a message Dr. Janice Cohn often shares: "Light a tiny candle." Action is not about being seen; it's about aligning belief with our behavior. It is found in everyday decisions—listening, offering help, stepping forward when silence would be easier. That philosophy continues to guide my work with Chocolate4Charity and in other parts of my life.

Being an Upstander, like any meaningful action, is not a single moment. It's a practice, a habit, and a commitment to notice what others might overlook. In that sense, recognition matters less than the choices that lead to it. Action remains its own reward.

Action began in a kitchen for me, with melted chocolate and a question I could not ignore: How will I respond to what I see? That question has guided every choice I've made since that first chocolate, and to the moments when I have chosen to speak, listen, and act.

Meaningful change requires aligning belief with behavior, noticing what needs attention, and inviting others to work with you. Real impact is rarely sudden or dramatic. It is built from small, intentional acts that ripple outward, shaping communities, relationships, and lives in ways that are often invisible, yet enduring.

I truly believe taking action is a choice, and that choice is available to us every day. That's where responsibility begins, and that's where belief becomes real!

—Zoe Leitner, age 18, New Jersey.

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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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"An Evening Scene from Rural Bengal, Western India."

*Charcoal painting by Ahil Rahman, age 13, Kolkata, India. He adds: "I feel alone when I am with others, but when I go to the forests, I feel I'm with a lot of friends. I love the trees, the whisper of leaves, and the green darkness. I do not like the violence that's all around us, and I feel that there can be world peace only if there's an understanding between us all. I love to paint. I have been painting since I was 4 years old, and it's my passion, other than writing poetry. I love to do artworks which show less, but offer more for the imagination." (Please also see his art on p. 2.)*

## About the Cover

Nature lover and world traveler, Paul Dix, took this photo in Umm Tuba, West Bank, a Palestinian Arab neighborhood in East Jerusalem area of Sur Baher. It used to be a part of Jordan until the 1967 Six-Day War.

How innocent, beautiful, and loving the children are! Kids are inherently the same everywhere—sweet, pure, alive, and lovable. They all need love and happiness in life—no matter whether they're Arabic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Israeli, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, Palestinian, or what have you. We do know children respond positively to love and kindness; in fact, all living beings respond to love and kindness. Even fishes and plants! We wish for a world where love and kindness, compassion and friendships are abundantly present for everyone. If Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore of India were alive today, he'd have surely expressed, "Let our world be awakened to that dawn of freedom, love, kindness, compassion, and humanity." May we see this dawn on our leaders, too!

—Arun Toké, editor.

## Making Wontons

The cold water welcomed my fingertips as I dipped them into the bowl. I gently lathered the water onto the wrapper so I wouldn't rip it. The meat inside of the wrapper felt like a golf ball—smooth, spherical and heavy for its small size. I connected the two opposite corners of the wrapper and folded the *wonton*\* into an envelope.

I'm a third generation American and making wontons is something that connects me to my culture. My parents are pretty good at it, but I'm just starting, so sometimes I make small mistakes. We make them at random times. Sometimes I get home from soccer practice and the wontons are waiting for me, and other times, I get to make a couple of them, too.

Chinese cuisine is a lot different than many other cuisines in that you rarely ever get to eat the dish you ordered. Most of the time, you share all of the food with everyone at the table, even if you only ordered one item. When I share these meals with my parents, it helps me bond with them.

I set the wonton down on the platter where many of the wontons my parents had previously made were sitting. Journey (the music band) played in the background. My mom, who was preparing the vegetables for dinner, said something to my dad in Chinese which I didn't understand.

As my dad pulled the first batch of wontons out of the pot, the aroma filled the room, and my mouth watered.

I refocused on my task, but I was having trouble closing the wrappers tight. So I dropped the wonton onto the plate, sat back in my chair, and crossed my arms.

My dad got up from his chair and crouched down next to me. He then calmly walked me through how to find the right amount of meat and how to seal the wrappers well.

When I visit China, I'm the only person in my family who doesn't speak any Chinese.

Whenever we're shopping at street markets, vendors are shouting out items in Chinese, and at restaurants the menus are all written in Chinese. This makes me feel separated from my culture because I can't do the basic things that Chinese people can do. But when we're back home in California, making Chinese food is one of the only things that makes me feel Chinese.

"It's okay," my dad tells me. "Everyone makes mistakes."

My mom, still standing over the boiling pot of water, says, "Yeah, as a kid, I didn't understand how to make wontons right away. It takes time to learn new things."

A smile crept onto my face. When the wontons were finished boiling, I made a sauce containing soy sauce, sesame sauce and rice vinegar. I bit into the first wonton and the juice from the meat burst inside my mouth in a flavorful explosion.

Immersing in Chinese culture isn't just about speaking the language. Food and my parents are equally important things that connect me to it. In China, I may have felt awkward being around a lot of the people, but through participating in small cultural practices here in the U.S., I hope to fill the gap between Chinese culture and me.

*\*Wonton is a Chinese dumpling that is commonly found across many regional cuisines of China.*

*—Drew Choy, age 12, grade 6, California. Drew writes, "I'm Chinese-American, and I am the second generation of my family born in the U.S. I only speak English right now, but I used to be fluent in Chinese. The most important thing to me is my parents. They are the ones that support you and guide you through all aspects of your lifetime. My parents are my best friends and I wouldn't be who I am without them. In the future, my dream is to become a professional soccer player. I am a very athletic kid, and sports are something that always cheer me up."*

### Cook up Freedom, Strengthen Family

Do you know how to prepare a few simple dishes? Having some basic kitchen skills will surely help you in your life! It will save you money, and you'll enjoy better health! Fresh vegetables and fruits are great for good health. What fruits and veggies grow in your region? Is there a community garden near you? Can you have a backyard garden? Some plants (arugula, parsley, kale, etc.) can grow even during colder months.

Start by learning how to make fresh fruit or vegetable salads. Steaming greens and veggies, or boiling squash, potatoes, carrots, etc. is easy. Your parents will be glad to show you how to wash and chop veggies, and how to use a knife safely. Hang out in the kitchen with them, observe, and develop your skills. *Happy Cooking!*

—Editors.

## Meet the Author

We are delighted to bring back our **Meet the Author**, a well-liked feature in *Skipping Stones*. Through an online interview, young authors will share what inspires them. In this space, we'll learn about their individual processes, what they like to read and other topics that are important to them.

We see this column as a way for the international *Skipping Stones* community to know each other better and to learn from one another.

It is with great pleasure that we introduce Youtao Cao, a 9-year-old author from Japan, who recently turned 10. We asked him many questions about his background, his inspirations and writing process.

Youtao shares books that he has read (and reread!), as well as films, TV series and documentaries. He has a variety of interests and the creativity and enthusiasm to learn from many sources. We're sure you'll be inspired as you meet him!

Now, here is Youtao to speak for himself.

—Judith Volem, *Skipping Stones*.

I live in Tokyo, Japan—a city with a mix of quiet parks and lively streets, small toyshops and big malls. It's a good balance, and I enjoy exploring both sides. I'm in 4th grade at K. International School in Tokyo. I've been in its preschool program since I was one and a half years old, so I've grown up in an English-speaking environment even though my parents don't speak much English.

Over the years, many teachers have encouraged and guided me. School writing contests have also given me inspiration and space to create. Outside of school, my writing professor has been an important mentor, often reminding us to “show, not tell” and inspiring me to explore different styles and voices. Many people say I have a talent for writing, but I know there's always more to learn, so I keep working hard to improve.

I choose books based on curiosity. Sometimes I pick stories that challenge me morally, like *The Ox-Bow Incident*, and other times I want to understand historical movements and the people who shaped the world, like Dr. King in *Stride Toward Freedom*. I also take recommendations from teachers or discover something new just by browsing the library shelves. My mom often helps me choose books, but she also believes—and I agree—that reading different kinds

of books is the best way to learn. So I read across all genres: fiction and nonfiction, fairy tales and biographies, classics and science fiction, poetry and news articles.

Although I don't often reread books, I do reread comics—and sometimes, I revisit my favorite novels. Lately, I've been reading the Percy Jackson series so much that my copies are falling apart. I also like to bring a book with me whenever I go out, so I can read whenever there's a spare moment.

Since I was very young I've watched a wide range of original language films—starting with Disney classics and the Marvel series, then moving on to *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and the *Transformer* films, to name a few.

I get ideas from books, travel, art and even games. Sometimes I combine what I see with other influences. Recently, I blended a Roblox game event with the gilded doors of Florence to write a poem about beauty and hidden decay.

When I first started writing poems, my mom couldn't believe I could come up with them entirely on my own, so she always turned off the WiFi router—just to be sure. Now it's simply part of my writing routine.

I'd like to keep writing, whether as an author, journalist, or even a screenwriter. Whatever I do, I hope it involves creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and maybe a little weirdness.

If I could give advice to other young writers, I'd say: Don't wait to be perfect before you start. Don't let anyone stop you. The best stories come from being honest and curious. Write what you love, even if it doesn't seem “serious” or “literary” enough at first. Be chaotic! Be weird! Be funny! Your voice matters! Don't be afraid to rewrite, to take risks, and to share your work. Reading is part of developing writing skills. Every book you read teaches you something about how stories are told.

—Youtao Cao, age 10, Japan.

On the following pages, we share his five poems and one story.

You can also see a number of his art pieces and more poems on our website, [www.SkippingStones.org](http://www.SkippingStones.org)

## Signal in the Silence

Kenji Sato wasn't the kind of person anyone noticed. At twenty-eight, he worked in a small, gray office in Shinjuku, filing reports about printer orders. (*Shinjuku is a major commercial and governmental area of Tokyo. Shinjuku Station is the busiest railway station in the world.*)

He arrived on time, took his lunch alone, and left without saying much. It wasn't a bad life, just a quiet one. But everything changed the morning he found a cat the size of a car in the office break room.

It was sitting next to the vending machine, licking one enormous paw. Its fur was deep black with streaks of silver. One rust-colored eye turned toward him as he stepped inside.

"You're late," the cat said.

Kenji dropped his coffee. The cup bounced once and spilled across the tile.

"I—I don't understand," he said. "Are you real?"

"As real as that coffee you just wasted," said the cat, standing up. Its back brushed the ceiling. "You were supposed to be here three days ago."

Kenji stared. No one else was in the hallway. No one screamed. No alarms. Somehow, no one else saw it.

"I think you've made a mistake," Kenji said. "I'm just... I'm just an office worker."

The cat stretched its front legs and yawned. "That's why you're perfect. You've lived in this city long enough to feel its quiet ache. You notice things. Like when the streetlights hum too loud. Or when a person's eyes don't match. The city is sick, Kenji. And we need your help."

Kenji tried to step back, but the door closed behind him on its own.

"Tokyo is in danger," the cat said. "Not from bombs or earthquakes. From silence. A slow forgetting."

"What does that mean?"

The cat's tail wrapped around a stool. "People are losing their memories. Not just the big ones. Small ones. Names, faces, directions home. It's spreading. Last night, every single resident of a building in Kanda forgot how to unlock their front doors. They stood outside for hours, waiting for a memory that never came."

Kenji didn't know what to say. It sounded insane—

but part of him believed it. Somewhere deep inside, he felt it, too. A slowness in the city. Like it was falling asleep.

"What do I have to do?" he asked quietly.

The cat blinked. "There's a signal tower hidden in the old subway tunnels beneath the city. It's broadcasting static. Scrambling thoughts. It was built long ago by people who believed forgetting was peace. You must go down there and switch it off."

Kenji felt cold. "I've never done anything like that."

"You've lived through grief," said the cat. "That's enough."

A memory stirred—his father's funeral, the rain, the way his mother held onto his hand so tight it turned red. He hadn't thought about that day in years.

The cat moved the vending machine aside, revealing a trapdoor beneath. A faint blue light shone from the cracks.

"I'll be with you," the cat said. "But only you can pull the switch."

Kenji looked down at his shoes. Then, slowly, he stepped forward.

The blue light beneath the vending machine flickered like a heartbeat. As the trapdoor creaked open, the scent of old iron and rain-wet stone rose up to meet him. The cat, impossibly graceful for its size, leapt down first, vanishing into the shadows below with a whisper of fur against metal.

Kenji hesitated, then climbed down the rusted ladder, each rung colder than the last. The trapdoor closed above him, and the world of office reports and vending machine lunches disappeared.

The tunnels were vast and echoing, carved from ancient stone and threaded with long-dead power lines. Faded signs in kanji warned of danger, decay, and silence. As they walked, the cat spoke in low tones, its voice like velvet over gravel.

"The tower was built during the war. Not that war—older. A hidden war, fought between those who believed memory was a weapon, and those who believed it was a wound. The tower was their final answer."

"And it's still working?" Kenji asked.

The cat nodded. "Its signal is weak, but growing. People have forgotten how to notice the forgetting."

They walked deeper until the tunnels opened into a vast chamber. In the center stood the tower—jagged, black, pulsing with static. It was shaped like a needle, embedded in a web of glowing wires that stretched across the walls like veins.

As Kenji stepped forward, voices began to whisper at the edge of his hearing.

“Don’t leave me.”

“What’s her name again?”

“I used to live somewhere...”

“Why are you crying?”

He clutched his head. “It’s loud.”

“It’s memory,” said the cat. “All the ones people forgot, leaking out. Don’t let them in.”

Kenji stumbled toward the base of the tower. There was a panel—ancient, mechanical, humming with electricity. In its center was a switch. Large. Heavy. Waiting.

He reached for it.

But his hand froze.

The whispers changed. They weren’t strangers anymore.

“Kenji, wake up! It’s snowing!”

“You promised you’d visit this time.”

“Please, don’t go yet—stay five more minutes.”

His mother’s voice. His childhood friend. His father’s laugh, faint but clear.

Tears welled in Kenji’s eyes.

“If I switch it off... will I remember them again?”

The cat stepped beside him, one giant paw resting gently on the floor. “No. But it will hurt. Real memory always does.”

Kenji closed his eyes. The tower’s hum rose into a shriek.

And he pulled the switch.

The light flared white. The chamber shook. Somewhere above, a thousand doors clicked open. A woman in Kanda suddenly remembered her daughter’s birthday. A man on a train recalled the way his husband used to hum while shaving. A child pointed to a star and said the name of the grandmother she hadn’t spoken of in years.

The silence broke.

When Kenji woke up, he was back in the office break room, the smell of coffee sharp in the air. The vending machine blinked cheerfully. No sign of a cat. No trapdoor.

His shirt was damp with sweat. His hands ached.

On the table was a file folder. Inside were maps of the city, strange symbols, and a note in curling ink:

*There are more towers.*

*We’ll be in touch.*

—N.

Kenji looked out the window. Tokyo was the same, but different. Brighter. Sadder. More awake.

He smiled for the first time in years, picked up the file, and went back to his desk.

The city remembered.

And so did he.

—Youtao Cao, age 9, Chinese ancestry, Japan.

### **The Sea Keeps its Own Time**

The sea never hurries.  
It breathes in slow, patient rhythm—  
a pulse older than language,  
older than the gulls that cry  
over its restless shoulder.

Some mornings it shines like forgiveness,  
all silver and soft-spoken.  
Other days it roars,  
throwing salt and grief against the shore  
as if to remind the land  
how fragile it really is.

I stand at its edge,  
barefoot in the cold sand,  
and it tells me nothing—  
no secrets, no promises,  
just the steady truth of motion:  
come and go, come and go.

And maybe that’s enough—  
to know that even when I leave,  
the sea will still be breathing,  
keeping its own time,  
unbothered,  
endlessly alive.

—Youtao Cao, age 9, Japan.

## Poems by Youtao Cao, Age 9, Japan

### Joy, Unscripted

Joy doesn't always arrive  
with trumpets or fireworks—  
sometimes it tiptoes in  
soft as breath on a mirror.  
It's not always loud.  
Sometimes it's the silence  
after the rain,  
when the world smells like hope  
and everything feels newly forgiven.  
Joy lives  
in a cracked joke between friends,  
in a song you forgot you loved  
playing in a store you weren't supposed to enter.  
It's in the way your dog looks at you  
like you're the best poem ever written.  
It's that rush  
when the sun breaks through gray clouds  
and paints gold on your skin.  
It's finishing the last page  
of a book that understood you  
before you understood yourself.  
Joy doesn't wait  
for a perfect moment.  
It grows like weeds  
between sidewalk cracks—  
wild, stubborn, and free.  
So maybe joy isn't a destination.  
Maybe it's the way you walk the road—  
barefoot,  
arms wide,  
laughing at nothing,  
and everything.

*Poems by Youtao Cao, age 9, Japan. He adds: "I am a multilingual writer currently living in Tokyo, Japan. At home, I speak Chinese. I study in English at an international school, and I am also learning French and Japanese."*

*"I have a deep love for reading and writing in English. So far, I have read over 500 English books—more than 100,000 pages in total—and I especially enjoy stories and poems that explore memory, identity, nature, and emotion."*



"Our Family Dog" by Youtao Cao.

### Where the River Thinks

Poetry is the wind through pine,  
A hush before the storm,  
It carves the cliffs like patient time,  
That sets the silence warm.  
It's rain that knows the weight of stone,  
A leaf that writes the air,  
A spark the mountain keeps alone,  
But always longs to share.  
It blooms where language loses shape,  
Where roots outgrow the ground—  
Poetry is nature's secret tape,  
Wound tight, then gently unwound.

### Sunlit Shore

The waves come dancing, soft and slow,  
Their laughter chimes in tones of gold.  
The sand remembers every toe—  
A map of footsteps, warm and old.  
The breeze is sweet with salt and sun,  
It hums lullabies to seashells white.  
The tide brings gifts at break of dawn—  
A starfish, smooth as morning light.  
Oh, stretch your hands to catch the sky,  
Let summer paint you bright and free.  
The ocean sings—just listen nigh—  
It's singing songs of peace and glee.

### The Birch's Whisper

Silver light drips through the canopy,  
a thousand suns trembling on dewy grass.  
The river hums in fractured tongues,  
carving secrets into smooth obsidian.  
Wind unties the mountains' knots,  
scattering snow like forgotten letters.  
A fox pauses in the firelight,  
ears twitching to the earth's slow pulse.  
Dawn spills from a cracked acorn,  
growing roots where my shadow blurs.  
The world exhales—  
and I am caught in its breath.

# Wildlife through the Lens of Katsuyuki Shibata



*<= A Mountain Goat Kid gazes up with innocent and trusting eyes, Elkhorn Range, Northeastern Oregon.*

*=> An unexpected encounter with a Barred Owl in the ironically stunning dead forest illuminated in golden light, Elk Cove Trail, Mt. Hood Wilderness of the High Cascades of Oregon.*

*To see more photos by Katsu, please visit: [eastmeetswest.smugmug.com/](http://eastmeetswest.smugmug.com/)*



*Nanny and kid Mountain Goats meander through the rocky hillside, Elkhorn Range in Northeastern Oregon.*



*These two roamed around the rocky slope near Loowit Falls, Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Washington.*



*While Pikas like high-elevation talus, this one was in forest region*



*Hoary Marmots, Paradise region, Mt. Rainier NP, Wash.*

## Is Convenience Worth the Last Drop?

As we walk from the sea to earth, along paths carved by  
rapids long ago,  
It was Mother Nature's tears that nourished and raised—  
Our bodies, our cells, our kin who've begun,  
To shape the earth with a boundless run.  
And yet, we have forgotten our mother,  
Who raised us through countless years.  
Her lifeblood, pure and versatile,  
Now depleted, unwaveringly so.  
She gives us the sweetest fruits to savor,  
Irrigates our crops to yield golden wheat,  
And builds the grand towers that power our homes.  
Yet we poison her roots, her veins,  
Choking the motor, seizing the reins.  
Our pipes leak lacquered oil into her seas,  
From which we fish, then we eat.  
Steel succumbs, its strength turned frail by decay,  
Her hands unearth truths time cannot betray,  
Empires crumble, bound by nature's say.  
And so I call upon you—  
My peers, future generations, and past:  
Let us pause and remember: the taste of water,  
sweet and crisp.  
The refreshing rain that quenches earth's thirst.  
Without water, no harvest will grow,  
No forests, no flowing seas—no us.  
Let us act before time discreetly seeps away,  
With hands that halt the careless streams,  
And choices that honor the gift we've known—  
So the rhythm of life may endlessly flow,  
So that our cups will always be filled to the brim.

—Mikaela Gee, age 16, Chinese-Malaysian, New York.  
*Mikaela explores life's complexities through quiet reflection,  
capturing universal emotions in still moments—like gazing out  
a car window at the world rushing by. She's eager to share her  
voice and connect with readers.*



## Stuffed

Stuffed, stuffed, the house is stuffed  
With stuffed toys that need to be thrown out  
A waste of space  
I am told to get rid of them!  
But when I look around  
Memories abound  
First, the dozens of stuffed Pokemon  
Evoke memories of family trips to Japan  
I cradle an Eevee, a treasured prize won  
With bated breath at a claw machine in Tokyo  
I squeeze Lapras, the comforting pillow I hugged  
On the 18-hour flight to visit family  
I can almost hear my brother's high-pitched shrieks  
During our made-up game of Pokemon Dodgeball  
Can I let them go?  
Next, the stuffed shaved ice from Singapore  
Its name—*Ice Kachang*\* —reminds me  
Of Singlish and its foreign yet endearing sounds  
English, Mandarin, *Hokkien*\*\* , and Malay smashed  
Into one bizarre hodgepodge  
Intelligible only to insiders  
Like Singlish, I am a mash  
Of American and Asian  
Do others understand me?  
Then, a stuffed chocolate bar  
A souvenir from Hershey  
During my grandmother's first and last visit  
Before the chemotherapy failed  
The only stuffed toy she ever bought for me  
Mum says Grandma never bought her stuffed toys  
But that time, she got one for me  
Isn't it a souvenir of her?  
Stuffed, stuffed, my mind is stuffed  
Stuffed with memories I want to keep in  
Precious treasures  
That only I hold in my heart

\**Kachang*: nuts in Malay; *Hokkien*: Southern Chinese dialect  
—Claire Chen, age 11, New Jersey. She adds: "My parents  
were born in Singapore but I was born in America. My fam-  
ily visits Singapore or Japan nearly every year because we  
have family in those countries. I speak and write both English  
and Mandarin, but it takes a lot of time and effort to learn  
Mandarin in America... In Singapore, they speak "Singlish,"  
a mixture of several local languages—Mandarin, Hokkien,  
Malay, and English. Singlish can be quite confusing..."

## Elegy for the Fragile Universe

How will the world end?  
Will it end with alien settlers  
from another galaxy?  
Or will it be our own  
war-torn fault, the world's  
sparkling Hawaiian sunsets  
and buzzing Chinese streets  
melting and emptying  
any number of ways? Now  
that Earth has warmed  
like sand condensing  
into a fragile universe  
of glass, we are sturdy  
yet fragile. We scowl before  
we embrace. We pray  
between arguments while saving  
the world. Will we have to  
flee this green haven? Will we  
have to ribbon our faith  
into the carbon-filled air? Or  
shall we fit another  
planet more to our liking?  
Is any of this needed  
to save us? Will this stop us  
from existing, or can we stop  
ourselves? Whether the world dies  
or not, we must  
cherish what we have—  
whether the world succumbs  
to bots or we continue  
to laugh at movies  
and jokes with each day

—William Pan, grade 7, Washington. He writes: "I wrote (this poem) because I realized that we need to unite to stop climate change from ruining our world... I have written many poems and short memoirs that explore culture and family. I am drawn to poetry because I can play with language and build imaginative worlds that enable me to explore things I can't explore in the real world." William has recently joined us as one of our student interns."

## Our Sun, A Ghazal Poem

Everyone bows before a supreme force, our Sun.  
Everyone, to live, relies on our Sun.

A beacon of hope to travelers on Earth,  
When the moon is cast aside by our Sun.

It gives energy for greens to grow and thrive,  
No leaves, no air, without our Sun.

Some myths call it a god, burning bright;  
Others say even gods serve our Sun.

We now know it's not divine, just a flaming ball of gas.  
However, many still believe the myths that our Sun is a god.

Compared to some stars, it's barely a spark.  
Compared to others, colossal is our Sun.

Children say, "My parents are like the Sun."  
But even parents owe their life to the Sun.

We take for granted air, fire and breath,  
Each one a gift returned by our Sun.

Even scientists cannot grasp its full weight;  
Thousands of Earths would fit in our Sun.

One day Samir, all will vanish into the emptiness of space.  
But not today. We still burn with our Sun.

—Samir Sogani, age 12, California. He adds: "I am Indian American, I speak English and Spanish but I grew up listening to Hindi and Telugu at home. I have been very lucky to travel around the world with my family—from the ancient temples of Cambodia to the ruins of Machu Picchu. Everywhere I go, people are connected by the Sun, and I wrote this poem to reflect on the impact of humans on nature and how we take the Sun and Earth for granted. I hope the readers leave with the desire to take better care of our natural resources before it is too late."



"Lettuce Patch in a Garden" Photo by Arun Toké

## Ben and Chandra Save the City

One day, Ben and Chandra heard the trees talking. They said the city was in big trouble! Scareygon, the bad dragon, was back again.

“Look out!” Chandra shouted as Scareygon flew high in the sky.

“Oh no, not him!” Ben cried.

**KABOOM!** Scareygon laughed and blew black smoke everywhere. People coughed and ran inside.

“Ha ha ha!” Scareygon threw plastic bottles all over the place.

“This is bad!” Chandra said. “What do we do now?”

“I know!” said Ben. He took Chandra's hand, and they ran to the Science Centre. They needed help from the Spino-Dino Mega Tribe! They lived on the third floor in a super-secret lab. They raced up to Exhibit No. 10 and closed their eyes. **“KALA MAZOON GILI GILI BOON!”** they shouted while rubbing their hands.

Suddenly, Major Whitehorn, the Spinosaurus, and Captain Bluehorn, the Triceratops, came to life.

“Hello, kids!” said Captain Bluehorn.

“The city needs us!” Ben shouted.

Major Whitehorn and Captain Bluehorn flew into the sky. All the kids in the city came out with seeds and water cans. The dinos sprinkled magic potion everywhere.

The trees grew tall and strong, sucking up all the dirty air and plastic!

“You can't stop me!” Scareygon roared, but the trees didn't give up. Then it started to rain, and the sky cleared up.

“We did it!” cheered all the kids.

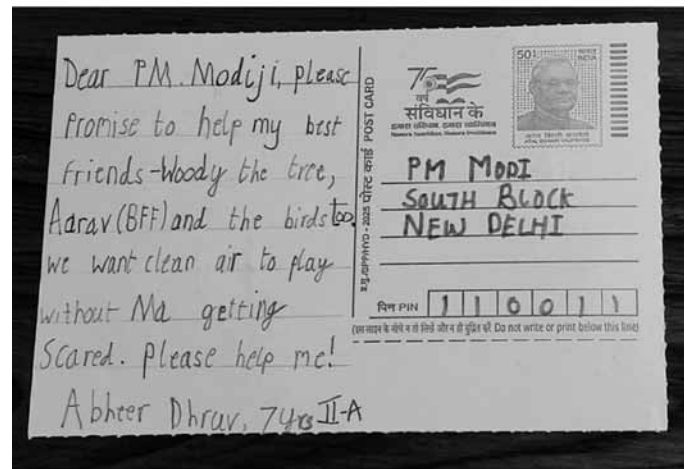
As the grown-ups came outside, the dinos began to disappear.

Ben and Chandra watched, as the dinos flew back to the Science Centre and turned into statues again.

Major Whitehorn smiled and said, “Always be kind to the planet. It's our only home.”

Ben and Chandra waved goodbye, feeling happy and proud to have helped their city!

—Abheer Dhruv Beniwal, age 7, New Delhi, India. He enjoys playing in the park, climbing trees, swimming, theatre, and yes, hugging trees too! Abheer sent this postcard to the Prime minister of India requesting action to curb the pollution.



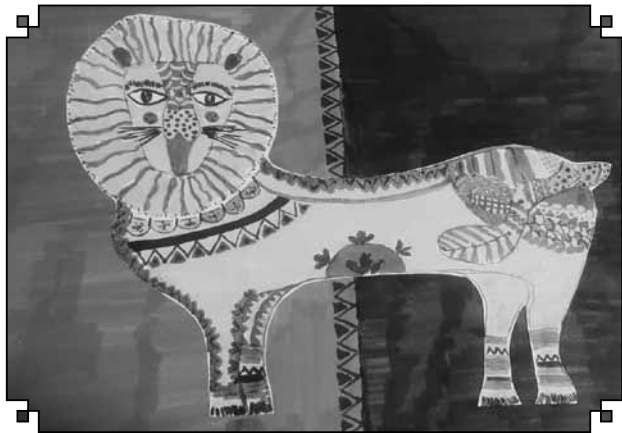
## Speaking Out Against Air Pollution

I went with my ma and pa to Jantar Mantar to protest about air pollution. I love India Gate, and right behind it is the National War Memorial, a place I visit often. It feels quiet and important.

That day, I wore a mask like my ma and pa. At first, I felt scared because there were big cameras and media people. They asked me why I was there. I told them I love my school, my city, my friends, and my teachers. My teachers tell us we should always stand up for the right things.

My ma and pa explained that we can all help make India better, and sometimes speaking up is one way to do that. That day, I realised children even seven year olds can speak too—not just grown-ups.

—Abheer Dhruv Beniwal, age 7, New Delhi, India. Warrior Moms is a voluntary, pan-India coalition of around 150 to 200 mothers and Abheer's mom, Namrata, is a member of this group. They took part in this citizen-led protest and spread the word via social media. These mothers balance caregiving roles with their professional jobs, united in their vision for clean air and a safer, healthier environment for children.



### Abheer Visits the Gir National Park

I went to Gir Forest with my parents. Before we went inside, I told them I wanted to see a langur. Not a lion—just a langur. When we entered the forest, the first animal I saw was a langur sitting quietly on a tree (*see below*). I felt very happy. It made me feel super special, like the forest knew I was coming. Langurs are fascinating. They eat leaves and fruits like Indian gooseberries, and they sit so calmly, like they are thinking.

There were many ghost trees. Did you know they change color with the seasons? First they are brownish-green, then pink, and sometimes they become completely white. They looked very magical to me.

We also saw Neelgai and sambar deer (*see p. 4*). They were very beautiful and gentle. We saw a jackal walking quietly on the path. We saw kingfishers near the water and green bee-eaters flying fast. We also saw an Indian scops owl resting silently in the trees. Did you know an owl can turn its head almost completely around? I thought that was amazing.

We saw three lionesses. People in other jeeps were excited, but the lions didn't care about us at all. One of them walked past our jeep like we were invisible.

Our guides were very kind and taught us many things. I fell in love with the forest. Gir is beautiful, and I hope it always stays safe and happy.

—Abheer Beniwal, age 7, New Delhi, India. He drew the Lion at school in traditional North Indian Madhubani style.



### Amelia Earheart Flies Away

One world one day, Amelia Earheart flew away.

Over the sea, over the seals,

Over the grass and over the fields.

Without another thought she crashed into a port,

She swam in the bay and climbed many trees.

As you can see, she was very pleased.

Other people on the Earth were very worried.

They thought that they lost their best pilot in just a quick flurry.

But Amelia had a great life as she had lots of food.

She had guavas and coconut and sometimes cantaloupes too!

She really missed flying, but this was the best life that she had.

Who would give up the tropics for the boring flying topic?

For centuries on Earth, people thought she was dead.

But she was alive and being well fed!

She discovered an island that no one had before.

It was a magical island, with magical fruits galore!

These fruits had special powers that made her live forever!

And nobody ever thought that she could live ever.

One day in 2028, someone sailed into her bay.

Hooray! Hooray! Amelia Earhart was found again!

Parades were marching down the streets, to celebrate her everywhere.

She elaborated about what life was like on the magic island,  
exaggerating every word.

But sometimes she was a little bored.

She was tired of news reporters asking questions  
and people asking about reflections.

Everywhere she went, she was always surrounded,  
even on her own secret island.

“I need to escape,” she thought and she was glad that she did.

She simply needed to shake a little palm tree.

She shot up into the sky, as the tree did have powers.

She flew across stars and into meteor showers.

Don't worry though, she still had magic inside her.

She found another planet where she could live peacefully.

And Amelia Earhart finally can live happily ever-afterly.

Poem by Viha Yenumula, age 10, grade 5, California. Viha loves to read and write, often adding a touch of magic to her stories. She also enjoys origami, roller skating, and going on hikes with her mom and dad. She speaks English and Telugu.

Langur in a Tree, Gir N. P. Photo by Abheer's mom, Namrata Yadav, India.

# Accepting and Celebrating the Differences of North Korean Defectors:

## *A Roadmap to Harmony in South Korea*

Standing in the crowded Seoul Station, I held a picket detailing the harsh realities of human rights violations in North Korea. We, members of the “Now Action Unity for Human Rights (NAUH)” team, had gathered at this busy intersection to raise awareness about the struggles of North Koreans, to highlight their often neglected status in South Korea. Despite our efforts, busy pedestrians hurried past, ignoring us completely. Then a non-Korean foreigner approached us, asking about our cause. His simple curiosity contrasted sharply with the indifference around us, and in that moment, I realized the importance of bridging cultural gaps. This moment reshaped my understanding of diversity, an aspect of the modern world that does not merely require coexistence, but meaningful engagement with our differences. Accepting and ultimately celebrating the cultural nuances between North Korean defectors and South Koreans will be critical to the peaceful coexistence and mutual flourishing of all on this peninsula.

Through my on-going work with North Korean refugees, I’ve learned that true diversity goes beyond just tolerance. Diversity requires us to actively celebrate our differences while recognizing our shared humanity. And though it may be a long road ahead, mutual understanding and acceptance will benefit both North and South Koreans alike, thawing our historically frosty socio-political relationship to bloom towards a more open-minded future.

North Korean defectors encounter significant challenges in adapting to South Korea due to differences in language and communication. A survey by the Korea Hana Foundation found that 17% of defectors had experienced various levels of discrimination, impacting their ability to find jobs and integrate into society. My eight years living in Dalian, China gave me firsthand insight into the challenges of navigating unfamiliar linguistic environments. As an international student, I experienced cultural and linguistic differences daily, which is why I believe in the importance and effectiveness of language programs like those offered by Hana Foundation and Woorion. Their work has augmented defectors’ ability to navigate daily interactions more

confidently. Beyond the work of these NGOs, the government and related organizations could employ comprehensive language education programs focused on vocabulary, expressions, and pronunciations. This is a direct way to address communication and language barriers, to bridge gaps in linguistic fluency at an institutional level. So in combination with the efforts of citizens on a day-to-day, personal level, this collective striving has the potential for great improvement between these North Koreans and South Korean people.

While North Korean newcomers may be able to adapt to South Korean society through these language immersion and training programs, the question of their acceptance by South Korean society remains another question. Recognizing the long-standing history between North and South Korea is the first step to address prejudice from South Koreans.

The peninsular split arose from a geopolitical decision, not as a result of differing national identities. Both cultures are still rooted in Confucianism and share multiple forms of cultural heritage including sports and holidays like Ssireum, Taekwondo, Chuseok, and Seollal. Recognizing these commonalities form the foundation for North and South Koreans to see each other as people with a shared culture and history. While language barriers can isolate refugees, shared activities such as sports and food can bring people together.

Case in point, my involvement with NAUH, Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), and the BlueStars Football Academy have helped me demonstrate the importance of cultural bridging between North and South Korean communities. With BlueStars, I helped organize a soccer tournament for North Korean refugee youth, combining my passion for the sport with my commitment to multicultural advocacy. The planning process proved to be more challenging than expected and taught me a number of valuable lessons in logistics and crisis management. For example, due to a sudden snowstorm, we weren’t able to host the Saeteomin Unity Soccer Tournament. Despite these minor setbacks, at the end of the day, I recognized that sports can be a powerful platform to foster meaningful conversations about cultural diversity and inclusion.

## Accepting and Celebrating the Differences... *contd.*

Organizing the BlueStars Soccer Competition reinforced my belief in the power of sports as a tool to break barriers and foster connections between the refugees and South Korean residents.

Similarly, through the LiNK Fall Festival I was able to introduce North Korean traditions to my school community. We sold North Korean traditional snacks such as Gaesung Jooak and attached handwritten messages to build empathy and understanding towards North Korean defectors. These experiences have shown me that true integration also requires creating opportunities for meaningful interactions. Through every event, campaign, and conversation, I have learned that cultural bridging is an active process where an open mindset and willingness to listen are essential.

When I think back on that day at Seoul Station or all those nights planning the BlueStars Soccer tournament, I can reach the simple conclusion that human connection is the first step towards fostering any type of multicultural understanding. Now that I have gotten a grasp of the fundamentals of soccer match organization, I want to broaden our programming to include monthly friendly games and cross-cultural interactions, giving young people from the North and South ongoing opportunities to look past preconceptions. I want to expand the range of North Korean cultural products that we introduce through LiNK. We can even set up a more collaborative effort between this club and local NGOs to create even stronger cross-cultural links. The potential for North Korean refugees to seamlessly integrate into South Korean society, enriching the culture and contributing to a unified future, is still possible and a vision worth striving for. I am dedicated to furthering this vision one discussion, one game, and one shared snack at a time.

—*Eunho Shin, age 17, student at Korea International School in Jeju. He says, "I am interested in cross-cultural exchanges, sports as a vehicle for social change, and human rights. I have made it my mission to learn about the contemporary world by examining the relations between the Korean peninsula and the greater human rights issues globally... I actively work with Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) as well as intern with Now Action and Unity for Human Rights to help foster understanding and unity among the North and South Korean people.*

## Advice to my Grandnieces and Ahijadas

### A Poem by Sandra Cisneros

1. Foremost, control your fertility.
2. Take lovers: discover the infinite.
3. Defend those unable to defend themselves.
4. Everyone is sacred, especially animals and other sentient beings.
5. Anger is fuel. Use non-violently for self-transformation.
6. Create from love on behalf of those you love with no expectations.
7. Humility before everything, generosity above this, love above all.
8. Disregard what Church and State deem a "good woman."
9. Be thankful for mistakes. If not, how will you find your *camino*?
10. Forgive, especially yourself.
11. Practice shamelessness daily.
12. Be mindful what you put inside your body.
13. No till-death-do-us-part commitments. You are becoming, even at 99.
14. Earn your own money. Keep under your own name.
15. Discover the universe, get an education.
16. Discover yourself. Travel. Read. Write poetry.
17. Aim towards auto-sufficiency in everything, especially joy.
18. Give thanks every morning, every night.
19. The Beatles were right; all you need is love.
20. Work on the above all your life.

Note: *ahijadas*: goddaughters; *camino*: way, road, path

© 2026 by Sandra Cisneros, an award-winning novelist, poet, short story writer, and artist. She's the author of *The House on Mango Street*, a novel that's often read in middle and high schools, and her most recent poetry collection is *Woman Without Shame*. Ms. Cisneros is regarded as a key figure in Chicano literature. She often uses Spanish into her English writing to better convey the meaning or improve the rhythm.

## Consejos de los abuelos - Advice from the Elders

La sabiduría nos llega cuando ya no nos sirve de nada. *Wisdom comes to us when it is no longer of any use to us.*

—Gabriel García Márquez, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, a novel published in 1985.

**A**ging is a constant gathering of life events and experiences that define who we are. It's a mix of successes and failures, joyously uplifting moments and intensely painful ones. Many are things that we are able to initiate and control to some extent, and others are purely random events that the universe unexpectedly presents to us. We either learn from them or we don't. But experience them, we must. We have no choice but to become elders in one sense of the word or another.

In most cultures, elders who have learned from their life experiences are revered for the wisdom that they have accrued in their lifetime. Their advice is heeded and respected. The photography project that I am working on in Oaxaca, *Consejos de los abuelos-Advice from the Elders*, is an attempt to share the wisdom that life has bestowed upon them with the youth of today. The people in this photo essay came to wisdom while it was still of use to them. Despite their age, they are still productive members of society and their minds are lucid. In these troubled times, we are in need of words of wisdom. I hope that their words may fall upon open ears and make a difference in some of our lives. —Richard Keis, Oaxaca, Mexico.



“Buenos días jóvenes, los saludo desde mi hermosa ciudad de Oaxaca, donde vivo feliz y contenta. Tengo 86 años y he vivido muchas etapas de mi vida. Les quiero compartir algunos consejos de vida.”

*Good day, young people, I greet you from my beautiful city of Oaxaca, where I live happy and content. I am 86 years old and have lived many stages of my life. I would like to share with you some advice that I have learned during my life.*

“Les aconsejo que retoman los valores tradicionales y traten de aplicarlos a su vida. No mentir, no robar, tener mucho amor a sus padres, sean obedientes, y humildes. No tomar mucho alcohol, no fumen, no consuman drogas, salgan a pasear con sus familias, con sus amigos, y sean amables con las personas mayores. Cuiden las plantas y animales.”

*I advise you to embrace our traditional values and try to apply them to your life. Do not lie, do not steal, have much love for your parents, be obedient, and humble. Do not drink much alcohol, do not smoke, do not use drugs; go for walks with your families, with your friends, and be kind to the elderly. Take care of the plants and animals.*

—Sra. Concepción Martínez, Cultivadora de plantas



“Respeten y cuiden lo que hay en la comunidad, valorando el sacrificio de sus padres, cumpliendo con las obligaciones como ciudadanos en bien de nuestra comunidad.”

*Respect and care for what is in the community, valuing the sacrifice of your parents, fulfilling your obligations as citizens for the good of our community.*

—*Maestra Eloisa Martínez, Capulálpam de Méndez.*

“Reconozcan una vida en base a los valores que sus padres y abuelos les inculcan desde pequeños, no haciendo a un lado su espiritualidad para una convivencia en justicia, respeto, y amor.”

Live a life based on the values that your parents and grandparents instill in you from a young age, not putting aside your spirituality for a coexistence in justice, respect, and love.

—*Adelina Maldonado López,  
Capulálpam de Méndez*





“Conserven los valores, costumbres, tradiciones y los recursos naturales para seguir disfrutando con las nuevas generaciones.”

*Preserve the values, customs, traditions and natural resources to continue enjoying them with the new generations.*

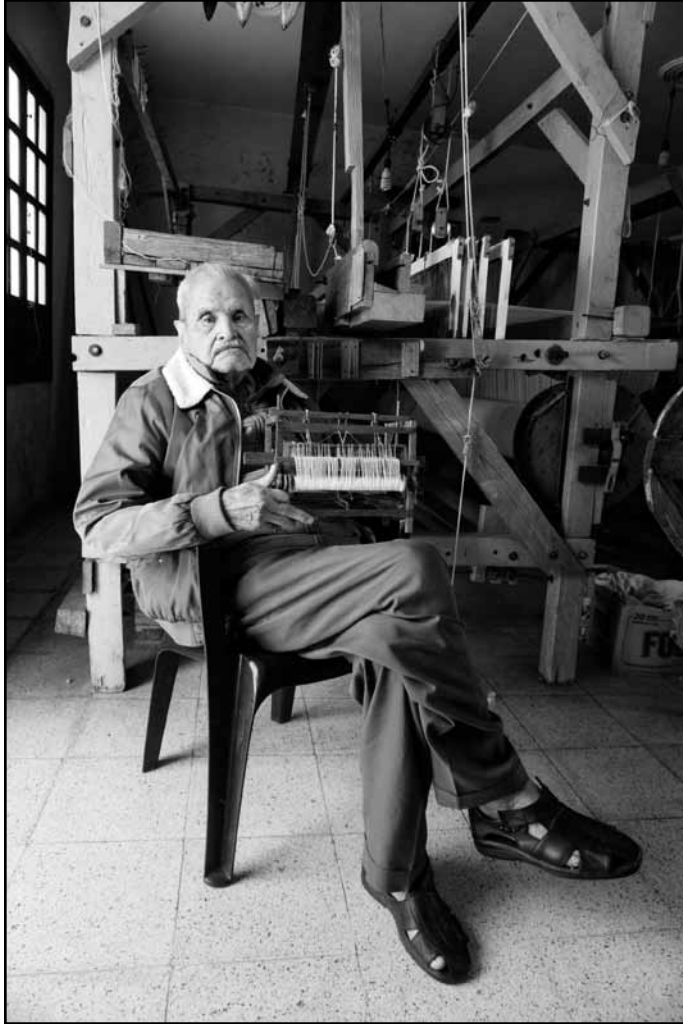
—Fidela López, Capulálpam de Méndez.



“No salgas de noche a robar a la gente de nuestra comunidad. Respeta a tus vecinos y sus pertenencias.”

*Don't go out at night to rob the people in our community. Respect your neighbors and their belongings.*

—Alvaro Y Inés, Juchitán de Zaragoza.



“No te olvides de las tradiciones, por ejemplo puedes aprender la mantelería del barrio de Xochimilico para que tengas un oficio y tengas algo que te entretenga y aleje de vicios.”

*Don't forget our traditions. For example, you can learn the weaving techniques of the Xochimilico neighborhood so that you have a trade and have something that entertains you and keep you away from vices.*

—José Leyva Garcia, Mantelero (Weaver).



“Que regresemos a nuestras raíces, a nuestros valores, y el cuidado que tenemos que tener con a la Madre Tierra. Tenemos que darla gracias por todo que ella ha nos dado, cuidar el agua, trabajar la tierra y comer la comida sana como antes.”

*May we return to our roots, to our values, and the care we have to take with Mother Earth. We have to thank her for all she has given us, take care of the water, work the land and eat healthy food as before.*

—Enriqueta Contreras Contreras, Partera y curandera (Midwife and healer)

*Photo essay by Richard Keis, ex-Peace Corps Volunteer and a retired E.S.L. teacher from Oregon. He has traveled widely in the Americas and Europe. In addition to English, his mother tongue, he also speaks Spanish and French fluently. He has served as Skipping Stones board member for about a decade, and his photoessays on Ecuador and Mexico have been published in our past issues. See more photos by Keis on <https://www.richardkeis.photography/>*

# The Little Princess and the Colorful Butterflies

No one remembered the name of the kingdom anymore, but it did exist, long ago!

Far, far away, nestled close to a forest, there was a tiny village, and it was the seat of this kingdom. There was a palace as well; but not like the ones in our big cities.

This palace was very different. Its walls were made of straw and clay, it had a thatched roof, and it stood gently beneath the sky, like a well-kept secret.

In this palace lived a little princess with her ancient grandmother.

One sunny morning in spring, when a sweet breeze was blowing, birds were chirping joyfully, and flowers bloomed in every corner of the yard, the little princess woke up.

She rubbed her eyes, looked out the window, and noticed something—their little walls didn't seem as colorful as the world outside.

The trees wore fresh green dresses. The flowers in the meadows sparkled with red, yellow, pink, and purple. Even the butterflies danced in colors—too bright and too many to name them here!

The princess longed to bring those colors into their home, their palace.

And she knew, like everyone else in the kingdom, that the true owners of all the colors were those beautiful butterflies.

So, the little princess wanted to catch one. But she was far too little.

No one else was home, so she turned to her granny. Now, her granny was like eighty or a hundred years old, or maybe even more. Nobody really knew how old she was. She was the oldest person in the whole kingdom. And, she was certainly far too old to run after those butterflies!

What could they do?

The old woman thought for a moment. Then she searched the hut carefully—every corner, every pouch,

every pot.

Finally, she found what she was searching for, a little fistful of sunflower seeds. She smiled.

Granny stepped outside into the wide, sleepy yard. With her slow, gentle feet, she planted the seeds in tidy rows and began to care for them. She watered them every day, with all the love in her heart.

Days passed. Little by little, green shoots appeared. Then leaves. Then came tall, strong stems.

And then one morning, a thousand sunflowers bloomed across the yard—each one like a small sun, shining with golden joy.

Granny didn't need to chase butterflies anymore.

The butterflies came to them—fluttering, dancing,

and painting the air with their beautiful colors.

And you know what?

They shared their colors generously. And from then, true beauty arose on the boundless canvas of nature—born from careful sharing.

And the little palace also sparkled with butterfly colors—reds, oranges, blues, and purples that no brush could ever copy.

Not just the tiny palace, but also the little princess herself sparkled with those attractive colors.

Her smile shone with every color of the butterflies.

And from that day on, little princess learned that true beauty grows many-fold when we share it with everyone, with profound care.

*By Diponkar Chanda is an emerging writer based in greater Toronto area of Canada. Originally from Bangladesh, he writes stories and poetry that bridge cultures, languages, and imagination. English is not his first language, and he brings the rhythm and depth of his native Bangla (also known as the Bengali) language into his storytelling.*

*Art: Makayla Liu, age 12, Vancouver, Canada. She adds: "I've loved drawing since I was a child, and in the future I hope to work in a field related to drawing or character design."*



## One Wrong Thing

Don't be quiet at school  
otherwise people won't like you;  
be kind  
but don't be too kind otherwise it'll come off as desperate;  
you have to keep up with your work  
but don't go too far ahead otherwise you are a "goody two shoes;"  
you have to be yourself  
but you also have to be what other people want you to be in order to fit in;  
"Aren't you the quiet kid in school?"  
you have to be nice to everyone  
even if they don't treat you right;  
"I have to be quiet because if I stand up for myself,  
I will get shut down;"  
you have to be loud and proud  
otherwise no one will hear you;  
"You are doing everything wrong!"  
you have to smile for the picture  
even if where you are smiling is purgatory;  
you have to keep your cards close to your chest  
but not too close otherwise people will think you are hiding something;  
you can't dress in black otherwise people will think you are emo  
but you can't dress too colorful either, otherwise people will look at you like a little kid;  
you have to follow the trends  
but you can't be too invested in them because it's not cool the next day;  
"I'm trying!"  
you have to stay and not cry  
because if you do, they will get pleasure;  
you have to be perfect.  
you just have to be.  
if you make one little mistake,  
you're a failure;  
one bad mark can damage your grade forever;  
one misstep can send you to the hospital with a cast on your leg;  
one wrong move and you lose the game;  
one new friend and you lose the whole friend group;  
one public embarrassment and no one can be seen with you;  
**one wrong thing, not the whole story**

—Alexa Dunsche, age 13, New York. She adds: "This poem came from the pressure I feel to be perfect, and how one wrong move can feel like it ruins everything. In the moment, I felt like each mistake I made erased everything else. Writing the poem helped me realize it doesn't have to be that way. One wrong thing can feel huge, but it doesn't define who you are."

## Noteworthy N.E.W.S.

★ **Walk for Peace:** A group of 18 Vietnamese Buddhist monks from Ft. Worth, Texas began their 2,300 mile peace walk on Oct. 26, 2025. After 108 days of walking 20 miles/day, they reached Washington, D.C. on Feb. 10th. A dog named Aloka, who was adopted during their 2022 Peacewalk in India, accompanied them as they spread a message of peace, unity, compassion and healing to millions of people.

★ **Rev. Jesse Jackson**, the renowned civil rights activist and two-time U.S. presidential candidate who pushed for a multiracial movement united around the common struggle for economic justice, died at the age of 84 on Feb. 16th. He served the oppressed, the voiceless, and the overlooked. Rev. Jackson worked alongside Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during his beginning days. **Long Live Jesse!**

★ At the House of Hope Vision School in Al Eizariya, West Bank, peace and justice education is woven into everyday school life, even under conditions of chronic stress and uncertainty for their students. They are rooted in Gandhi and Dr. King's teachings of **nonviolence** as a disciplined way of life, grounded in the dignity of every human being and the belief that transformation is possible, even under immense pressure.



“Mt. Sleeping Giant, Absaroka Range, Montana”  
Photo taken in June 2025 by Paul Dix.

## The Sleeping Giant

Blanketed by blue evergreens  
Sleeps an old man, great and towering  
His snores are rumbles of thunder  
Over angry grey skies out in the yonder  
His cold heart without a single beat  
His nose, a lonely snow-capped peak  
He lies on a bed of restless grey waves  
And pillows of sand, beneath a sun's cold rays  
His jagged stone eyelashes do not even flutter  
From his rocky lips, not even a mutter  
Raindrops slide like tears down his weatherworn face  
Circling his skyline peaks, eagles watch and eagles wait  
He has slept a thousand centuries  
Through raging gales and warm summers' breeze  
And even as the Earth shakes at its core  
He will be still, and sleep forevermore

—Michael Steel, age 14, Chinese-Canadian, high school student, British Columbia, Canada. His hobbies include creating arts, reading, writing, and playing Block Blast. He adds: “My poem was inspired by the stories my dad would tell me when we went to the beach. We could see big mountains across the bay, and he would tell me the mountains were giants who had fallen asleep for so long that trees had grown on them. I thought that was pretty radical so I wrote a poem about it.”

## “Knock, Knock: Without a Joke”

Knock knock is followed by a cheesy pun  
But it shouldn't be followed with a gun  
No questions of who's there  
Because that's a threat of a new protest  
Being held to the floor with papers in hand  
But it doesn't matter  
It only matters what they think of your skin!  
Is this the new norm of going door to door?  
A knock, implied with a threat  
A simple paper depending on if you live to regret  
In a matter of minutes  
You could never see your dad again  
Do you not realize, these people do so much?  
Silencing the biggest right people have  
No comments, no questions, just cold compliance!  
That's what they do when they think you've a lesson to learn.

—Serena.

## Boy in the Back

I was always the boy in the back  
Letting time slip through my fingers  
Watching the cluster and the chatter  
Watching and never doing  
A silent ghost, never real and never seen  
Floating in the cosmos behind my eyes  
Breathing in the synthetic suns  
And polyester skies  
Starry moons of the finest gleaming plastic  
Twenty years in the blink of an eye  
I saw the other side of the world  
From the back of our classroom  
The clay people danced before my eyes  
Only I could see them move  
Watching the constellations of LEDs  
Soar brightly over my head  
The things I never saw,  
But I always believed  
I was the boy in the back  
Living a thousand ceramic lives  
In a thousand spun-glass galaxies  
But I was never here at home

—Michael Steel, age 14, Chinese-Canadian, BC, Canada.

# Poems in Support of Our Somali *and* Somali American Community

*The largest Somali/Somali American community in the US is in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area. The good people of Minnesota are doing what they can to support the Somali American community there. Our subscriber and contributor, Merna H. from Washington state writes: "The least I can do is honor the amazing Somali poets whom I've had the privilege of working with over many years. I'm sending these poems in awe of their poetic depth and wisdom. I join you in full support of our Somali-American communities and all immigrants and refugees experiencing the harms imposed on them by the current administration... Thank you for taking time to read and savor these amazing poems and to share them with friends and family, if you so choose."*

## I Am

I am a girl  
who wears every color  
of Hijab—pink, black, maroon,  
whose eyes are dark,  
whose skin is the color of almonds.

I am a hardworking person,

I am a proud Muslim,

I am from Somalia,

I am full Somali,

I am someone who cares about your pain,  
emotion and culture.

I am a person who wishes  
to graduate from university,  
to study law and become a lawyer.

I am a hopeful person,

I am a person who wants to have a successful life,

I am a person who tries everything that's new to me,

I am a person who talks about great decisions.

I am person who believes in herself,

I am a person who thinks that the people of this earth  
should hold each other's hands to live in peace,  
and they should care about their Mother Earth.

—S., former High School Student from Somalia.

## A Nature Poem

Nature, I can hear your tears calling and yelling  
in the middle of the night, calling for help,  
but they cannot hear you,  
their minds focus on taking over  
countries and planning wars.  
They cut your trees with no hesitation,  
they no longer know the meaning  
of beauty.

—M., former High School Student from Somalia.

*This short poem addresses the predicament of our times,  
speaking truth with few words and deep insight.*

## Odkac

I remember the smells and sounds  
coming from my mother's kitchen,  
the food my mother prepared:  
*Sambusa*, chicken *biryani*, and *odkac*.

I eat and remember my mom  
sharing family stories  
as she mixed flour with salt  
and beef steak with *xawaash* and cardamom powder,  
she spoke of what my grandparents went through  
and how hard it was to live  
without food and shelter,  
losing families, relatives,  
in front of their own eyes.

As she sliced tomatoes, chopped onions,  
cut carrots, and minced garlic  
her eyes welled up from  
memory and onion,  
and she recalled  
how war was in front of them.

Cooking brings out  
the stories we need  
to learn from  
as if mixing spice  
with stories  
folds together our  
life and emotions,  
and sharing food together  
helps us to share life together.

My mother's kitchen is a safe space  
to talk about war and death,  
to talk about the meaning of sacrifice  
and not giving up  
over a full plate of *odkac*.

—H., former High School Student from Somalia. *She takes us into her love for her mother's Somali kitchen and writes of sharing stories and food across generations.*

## A Story, Somalia

My old home has the scent of good birth,  
boiled green beans, deep cornel oil,  
and hand me down poetry.  
Its brick, bright white-washed walls are widowed  
from their first paint,  
the walls uneven, cracking from gun shots and rocks.  
The thin roof tops always hummed songs of promise,  
the wind locked into a demonic rhythm with the leaves,  
the trees with the wind hugging them,  
loving them with a torturous love.

The round cemented pots  
kept the raindrops cool,  
spattering the foreheads of neighbors and dwellers softly.  
Loud children playing football, with sand under their socks,  
we had what we had and it wasn't a lot,  
but no one knew they were poor,  
we were all innocent of greed's hunger  
to judge, to oppress, to take.

Then Death came, multiplying like even numbers,  
splitting family members in seconds.

The death of my brother remains  
as the separation between my father and me.

Writing became the father I never had.

Growing up, war was a playground  
and my friends and I played in it,  
never did we learn to ride bicycles  
or play with dolls.

War was our playground.

Somalia used to combust with life  
like a long hibernating volcano,  
farmers, fishermen, even fighters had a place  
in our productivity.

The beautiful coast line,  
the elastic shore, the glorious mosques,  
I yearn for the warm scent of the Somalian rain.

Growing up, I feared the sea and closed doors,  
because whenever I dived into the pool of risk-taking  
it always seemed like I drowned.

Drowning in a sea with no open door,  
no escape, was my fear.

How I miss the magical night of Somalia, the sky  
collapsing willingly over its inhabitants,  
the burning sun of June, the guarding moon,  
the long naps at noon,

*continued =>*

## Somalia, an Ocean

Somalia is an ocean  
undisturbed it is beautiful,  
clear, blue, peaceful,  
disturbed and disrupted,  
it is dark, bloody, dangerous.

The ocean is calling us  
the tides are bringing peace  
but we can't hear  
because of the war  
we changed the water into blood  
and the beautiful waves that have always been there  
have gone to jail for a long time now.

The ocean is crying  
because we let her down  
we smashed her to the ground  
and denied her any chance for peace  
as if we don't need the ocean,  
but we long for her,  
to see the reflection of our beauty in her.

Somalia, it is time to open our eyes  
and see how the ocean looks today  
Somalia, it is time to free the ocean  
it is time for the ocean to rise  
like the flag that stands for peace.

Let the ocean tides bring us peace  
Somalia, it is time to welcome  
the ocean and open our hearts.

Let us come together  
be undisturbed in peace,  
let us come together,  
and let the water be clear once more,  
and we shall not let our blood touch the water again.

*—S., former high school student from Somalia.*

=> the freedom poets, the rampant wisdom,  
the magnetic tongue,  
those were joyous days.

Now, people rise to look for change,  
like a new moon's birth.

The art of storytelling is the world  
I wish for,  
I would wander off to it,  
until my story of Somalia is told.

*—Y., former high school student from Somalia.*

## At Least I Tried

I walked into my 5th grade classroom with my social studies poster rolled up like a scroll, careful not to ruin the pristine paper. At my desk, I unrolled the poster and took a look at it. It had some facts about John Cabot, an explorer, and a hastily made drawing of him at the center. “*Seems good! I could’ve done a better job, but still good enough to turn in, along with the English essay that goes with it.*” I thought.

A kid walked by and gawked, “Wait, *you* drew that?! I never knew you were that good at art!” I replied, “Oh, this? It’s not *that* good.” Then, the kids crowded around me like moths to a light from their little table groups: “How’d you draw it?”, “Since when were you an artist?”, “It’s so good I thought it was AI!”

I tried to deflect the questions, but more came. The teacher told the class to get back to work, or else they’d have to stay in for recess, but then he walked up to my desk, and said, “Wow, that’s a really good drawing! You should be proud of yourself!”

Later that day it was a rainy-day lunch, so I sat down on the food-stained carpet and from my Zip-Loc, I grabbed a handful of banana chips, a Kerala delicacy, that my dad had bought back after a trip to India. I took a bite and offered it to my friend.

“This tastes so good! What’s in it? It’s not like a normal potato chip,” she exclaimed.

“It’s a raw plantain fried in coconut oil,” I said with a grin.

“And what’s that little ball?”

“That’s Unniyappam. It’s got rice, jaggery, and roasted coconut bits inside. It makes me feel like I’m in Kerala, with my grandma!” I told my friend. Then, I went to watch YouTube on my Chromebook, sharing funny videos with my friends. One other kid, the class clown, snatched my computer and started blasting music. I sighed, and snatched it back, but the other kid took it back just as fast. We were fighting over the Chromebook like a tug-of-war match, until we heard someone shout, “Hey! Break it up, you two! The teacher said no roughhousing!” It was the outcast of the class, the one who’d always get angry when things didn’t go his way, the one people talked badly about behind his back.

I replied, “C’mon, this isn’t some kind of relationship!” The entire class erupted with laughter. I smirked. It felt like I had some power, some respect in my class. Then the laughter died down. I headed back to my seat with my Chromebook. I glanced over at the outcast, who was hunched over in the corner of the room, picking at his lunch.

Then for a while, everything seemed normal. There was still the overload of assignments, the competitive four-square games, but something was bugging me; like a looming deadline. Whenever I thought about that day at lunch, I wondered if I had gone a bit too far. After all, I embarrassed him in front of the entire class, when all he said was for me to stop messing around and actually follow the rules. The entire class was always teasing him, so humiliating him only added salt to the wound. Maybe, I thought, “*I shouldn’t have said that.*”

Later that month, a group of boys was huddled by the kickball court, whispering eagerly. Then, he went up to them. He mumbled something about joining their game, but I couldn’t hear it. One of the boys said, “*You* want to play kickball with us. You do realize that to play kickball, you have to kick the ball without falling on your face?” The entire group shook with laughter. A passing yard duty shouted, “Boys, you better include that poor kid, or I’m telling your teachers!”

My friend, who was walking with me, said, “He shouldn’t be in that game! That would automatically make his team lose. Honestly, they should just kick him out anyways.”

I fidgeted with my hands and hesitated. “Me personally, he doesn’t deserve it. I get that he’s...not the best at kickball, but maybe if they actually let him play, then he could improve.”

My friend replied, “You have a point. But I don’t think the boys would agree.” She nodded at him. Alone, he was slouched on the old bench, staring at the kickball game. “Guess he isn’t playing kickball for now.”

“He could play with someone else,” I said. “Maybe us?”

“C’mon, *him*?!” she said, giving me a little shake on my shoulders.

“Suit yourself,” I shot back. “I’m gonna play with him.”

## I Am the Son of Sprawling Green Forests

I went up to him with a ball, and said, “Um...do you wanna play with me, Jose?”

He looked at me as if I were some sort of alien. His eyes widened for a moment, but then he said, “No! Do you think I have no friends or what?!” He then stormed off to the playground and sulked. I started to pursue him, but I stopped, and went back to my friend, sighing.

“At least I tried!”

Two weeks later, I was sitting down in my usual spot by the field with my friends, munching on my favorite banana chips, and I saw him approaching me.

He fidgeted with his hands and mumbled, “Um—can I sit with you guys?” My friends looked at each other and sighed. One of them said, “Sorry, but we don’t have enough space,” and put her lunchbox on the one empty spot. “Okay...bye then,” he squeaked out.

I tried to call back to him, but something was blocking the words from coming out of my throat. I felt I was so mean to him, how could I make it up? I’ve tried to reach out to him, but it didn’t work.

But if I stop trying, I’ll never get a chance to make amends with him. *Fortune favors the bold*, I guess.

I picked up my banana chips bag and offer him. “Jose, you want some? It’s from my grandma back in India,” I shouted as I ran up to him. He stopped eating, and said, “Yeah, I’d want some.” I sat down next to him on the rusty bench, and he took a handful of the chips. “They’re really good,” he said, “We actually have these back home. They’re called *platanitos*. My *abuela* makes them perfect; they remind me of her.”

We didn’t say anything much, and when the bell rang, he gave me a small smile, and I saw him walk into the class alone.

I walked back to class feeling lighter.

At least I tried.

—Divya Rejeev, grade 6, California. She adds: “I am of South Asian ancestry, coming from an Indian family, but I was born and raised in California. I only know English, but I understand my native language, Malayalam, and I am learning Spanish as well. I aspire to be an architect in the future. The inspiration for my submission is a personal experience of mine, which I deeply regret, and how I grew as a person from it.”



I am the son of sprawling green forests,  
of the plains of China.

Son of the sweltering sun,  
son of thatched-roof villages,  
born from dirt-caked roads  
that twist through fertile plains,  
through wet rice paddies,  
curving around rocky mountains  
whose peaks vanish into fog.

This land is my home  
that stretches from the southern sea  
and rainy meadows  
to cold northern deserts  
and bitter tundra.

Years pass as I grow from a boy,  
frolicking in the forests of the south,  
to a man who carries a boulder on his shoulder,  
providing for his family,  
rooted to the land  
like a tree anchored by twisting roots.

Then rumors spread  
of a land out west—  
with fields bountiful with gold and promise,  
where anyone can be king.  
One day, I make the decision.  
I cross the shimmering sea  
to pursue an uncertain destiny,  
facing towards the rising sun,  
my back to the green meadows of my home,  
away from my ancestors,  
away from my family,  
away from the weight of certainty.

Ahead of me, only water.

—Alexander Chun, grade 9, California. He writes: “I wrote this as a tribute to grandfather to whom my family and I owe so much. He left China in hopes of a better life in America. He worked very hard so that his children (my dad, uncle, aunt), could grow up to become doctors or lawyers. I am grateful for his sacrifice, and also for babysitting me when I was younger. I’m still trying to figure out myself, since I am passionate about playing football, world history and creative writing.”

# Cultural Collage

## One Earth

We have a wonderful Earth  
And we should try to preserve it  
So more babies can be birthed  
And introduced to our Earth  
Our wonderful, wonderful, wonderful Earth  
We have a beautiful Earth  
With large, green grasslands and rainforests  
And elegant blue oceans  
With those always present sea-green waves  
And filled with living beings to support  
Our sweet, sweet Earth  
There is much knowledge  
Science, astronomy, mathematics  
And they are just a small part of the knowledge  
On our smart, smart Earth

Who knows what we can achieve?  
All we know is we can go above and beyond  
Who knows what more there is for us to discover?  
Who knows how far we can go?  
Let us keep on learning and understanding  
And discovering new ways  
To protect and preserve nature on  
Our sweet, wonderful, beautiful Earth  
Our dear, kind, gentle Earth  
Our amazing, sustaining, ever-providing Earth  
Our smart, dazzling, awesome Earth  
Our Earth!

—*Elodie K. Cotton, gr. 7, Connecticut. She's our intern.*

## Wish when...

Wish when...  
It's 11:11.  
You see the first star appear.  
You hear a bird singing in the rain.  
A butterfly lands on you.  
You see a camel-shaped cloud.  
You find a four-leaf clover (don't pick it).  
A firefly lands on your ring finger.  
You find a cricket in your house.  
You cut off the pointed end of a pie and save it for last.  
You drive across the state line into Tennessee and clap three times.  
Dear readers, when would you wish?

—*Hannah Kim, age 10, Alabama, loves noticing small wonders in everyday life and turning them into poems and stories.*

## Mother

Mother is the one who cares for me  
She keeps me safe, like a big tree.  
Her smile is soft, her heart is kind  
She always has me on her mind.  
  
She teaches me what is good and what's bad  
She is always with me when I'm sad.  
God says he can't be everywhere  
So he gave me a mom who always cares and shares  
Who helps me grow, layer by layer.

She is important because she loves me everyday  
She teaches me what's right in a simple way.  
Sure, She scolds me a little  
But she's always with me when I'm ill.

You are useless if your mom becomes sad because of you  
Mom is like a diamond, always cherish and know her value.

## Student life

Student life is not easy at all,  
Sometimes we rise, sometimes we fall.  
We smile outside and try to be strong,  
But inside we feel something is wrong.

We study hard day and night,  
Still grades decide if we are "right."  
We get tired but don't give up,  
We keep trying and keep growing up.

Some days we feel happy and bright,  
Some days we cry alone at night.  
Yet every day teaches us something new—  
How to be brave, and how to push through.

Student life has pain and fear,  
But also hope that keeps our heads above water.  
One day all our hard work will matter,  
And the world will see how far we can soar.

*Both poems by Mayank Yadav, age 12, Jharkand, India.*

### Inviting Your Best Creative Work!

We invite your creative writing (poems, plays, prose, stories, etc.), visual artwork (paintings, photo essays, etc.) for the 2026 Youth Awards. See details on website under

**Contests/Awards** tab. Enter by 5 May 2026 to:

editor@skippingstones.org, or mail to: **Skipping Stones**  
166 W. 12th Ave, Eugene, Oregon 97401 USA

## Terrarium

A terrarium destroyed  
 A world fell apart  
 The life of some shattered  
 with a broken heart  
 The owner can only watch  
 with little to give  
 As the remaining life  
 struggled to live  
 A creature, who once called this home  
 Now sets foot into a new world alone

Ants feed on carcasses  
 the remains of the dead  
 The survivors observe  
 their hearts filled with dread  
 The air seemed to be filled  
 with cries of dying  
 If you listen closely you can hear  
 the sounds of creatures crying  
 The terrarium held itself together for what seemed  
 like hundreds of years  
 But now what remains are sorrows and fears  
 Families are torn  
 Bonds are broken  
 What was a good balance no longer appears  
 But look past the remains of the dead  
 You will see a new path ahead  
 A new sprout here, a new creature there  
 Suddenly a better future seems ever so near  
 The new lives of many will honor the past  
 And nature itself will forever last

—Min Yang, age 10, grade 5, Chinese American, California. He writes: “I have a strong interest in Nature, especially in terrarium building. Recently, I had to release one of my terrariums, as the terrarium was overwatered. It gave me great sadness, but also made me think about the world in a new perspective. The plants and moss I threw out started growing again, and to this day I can still see the vibrant moss that I had once thought would be dead within a week. I wrote a poem to honor the spirit of the terrarium and to help others understand the wonders of nature. I believe that people should learn to appreciate nature more.”

## Skipping Stones Stew

### Our Back Issues on Sale!

To celebrate our 38th year, we are offering 10 back issues for just \$38 (or 38 back issues for \$100!), including postage within the U.S. To order, contact [info@skippingstones.org](mailto:info@skippingstones.org), or by snail mail: **Skipping Stones** 166 W. 12th Ave, Eugene, OR 97401

*Answer: I am a person!*

## Who Am I?

I may not have eyes to hide  
 or hair to care  
 or ears to face my fears  
 or a nose to smell a rose  
 or a mouth to shout  
 or arms to work a farm  
 or legs to walk  
 or hands to till the land  
 or feet to make my shoes tweet  
 Who am I?

—Tara Sadeghi, age 8, California.

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I certify that information furnished on this form is true and complete.

Sept. 24, 2025

—Arun N. Toké, Exec. Editor & Publisher



This is our last Printed issue. Going forward, *Skipping Stones* will publish our future issues only Online. You can read all our digital content *for free!* We will also publish content in between issues.

Please visit our website, [www.SkippingStones.org](http://www.SkippingStones.org) as often as you can to read all our recent and upcoming content—poetry, prose painting and photographs.

## Adventures in the World of Words

I am an aspiring writer. I love music, painting, sewing and other creative works, but one of my passions is writing.

At just fifteen years old, I've already immersed myself deeply in the world of storytelling, an interest that feels as intrinsic to me as breathing. So far, I have a collection of several short stories, each a foray into different narrative styles and thematic explorations, from speculative fiction to poignant coming-of-age tales. These aren't just idle doodles; they are carefully crafted pieces, some shared with trusted early readers, others residing in a personal archive, waiting for the right moment to emerge.

Beyond my own collection, last year I had the truly remarkable opportunity to contribute to the foreword of a professionally published novel titled, **Mars: First Woman on the Red Planet**. This wasn't merely a casual mention; I was actively involved in brainstorming ideas, conducting preliminary research, and offering a unique youth perspective that helped shape the introductory narrative. Working alongside the experienced author and editor provided invaluable insights into the publishing world and solidified my ambition to one day see my own full-length works on shelves.

My enjoyment of writing spans across a plethora of genres, a reflection to my evolving versatility and insatiable curiosity. I've dabbled in the intricate world-building of fantasy, the thrilling complexities of mystery, the thought-provoking concepts of science fiction (*love this genre!*), some in contemporary drama, and nature related topics. Each genre presents its own unique challenges and rewards, allowing me to stretch my creative muscles and explore different facets of human experience and imagination.

However, if I had to choose one genre that truly sets my imagination ablaze and captures my undivided devotion, it is, by all means, inspirational literature. It is unquestionably my true passion, the one I return to time and again, whether as a reader or a writer. To me, inspiring my readers isn't just about positive narrative or profound phrases; it is an entirely different world, a deep, mesmerizing landscape where we all can pave our own paths knowing there is no wrong turn when one

is trying to understand life and its true complexities.

In this unique realm, storytelling and reality come together in the most motivating and compelling ways. It is where a deliberate and powerful literary craft is designed to serve as a vital resource for the human spirit. In moments of doubt, failure, or exhaustion, it provides the necessary fortitude to persevere, reminding readers of their innate strength and capacity to endure hardship. To me, it aims to be a **source of light**—a beacon that cuts through the fog of confusion, fear, and uncertainty that often accompanies life's challenges.

This light serves to illuminate paths forward that may have been obscured by negativity, highlighting hope and possibility where none seemed to exist. It doesn't deny the presence of darkness but instead provides the perspective and clarity needed to see beyond it.

With that said, I know the ideas for these stories and crafts are everywhere, and so is creativity. We live in a world saturated with potential; you don't have to look far to find a spark, because most of the time it is right in front of you. Creativity isn't just for 'artists'; it's a heartbeat that exists in everyone. I see this daily in my own circle—friends who can solve complex problems with a stroke of ingenuity or transform a simple thought into something breathtaking.

But I also know that having a dream and executing it are two very different things. If I could offer one piece of advice to anyone, at any age, it would be this: do not let the difficulty of the process discourage you. It is perfectly normal to feel lost or to lack a clear road map for your future. Persistence is often more important than a perfect plan. Even when the way forward may seem challenging, keep your eyes on the horizon. Your dreams are valid, and the only way to ensure they never happen is to stop trying.

Do not ever give up. The clarity you seek will come with movement. Trust your vision and intuition; stay the course, and let your creativity lead the way.

—Giovana Gordon, age 15,  
South Carolina.



## Layers of Diverse Beauty “Beauty begins the moment you decide to be yourself.” —Coco Chanel

I am a teenage Indian-American singer, dancer and actress. I’ve performed in more than a dozen professional musical theater productions, including “Matilda” and “Beauty & the Beast” and have appeared in several nationwide advertising campaigns for well-known brands. As actors and models, we are provided with some of the best makeup artists in the area. However, the skincare products and makeup they use and what we see in the stores still aren’t truly reflective of or beneficial to my melanin-rich skin coloring.

The beauty industry reached an estimated \$570 billion in 2023, according to R. Kestenbaum in a 2024 issue of *Forbes* magazine. Yet, *Vogue* business indicates that “only 13 % of Black consumers in America say they can find beauty products at mainstream retailers that meet their needs.” With increased awareness about the challenges of finding melanin-rich skin color shades, many brands have focused their efforts on creating such options. However, there are major gaps that the majority of beauty brands fail to address: the needs of melanin-rich skin in makeup and skincare products, the difference in physiology from melanin-rich\* (or darker shade) skin and less melanated (lighter) skin, and why this topic has neither been researched nor implemented before.

According to Urban Skin Rx, melanin-rich skin has thicker layers than lighter skin tones, leading to differing factors when it comes to skincare. For example, darker skin can better protect itself against sun damage and wrinkles. However, individuals with such skin are more prone to hyperpigmentation, vitiligo, psoriasis, eczema, and reduced skin hydration. This demonstrates that there are great differences between the needs of melanin-rich versus less melanated skin, which further supports the conclusion that these challenges need to be paid more attention in the beauty industry.

Other sources like the scientific team of 4.5.6 Skin agree with the challenges stated by Urban Skin Rx and further state that Vitamin D is especially important for darker skin tones. They also note that for melanin-rich skin, water-based moisturizers and hyaluronic acid are incredibly useful since hydration is needed to penetrate its thicker skin layers. Urban Skin Rx’s article also goes hand in hand with what Rungnapa Kiatthitinan researched for a Koji White article, explaining the need for Vitamin C, niacinamide, kojic acid, and glycolic acid to keep post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation under control. There are many products and helpful solutions to help melanin-rich skin manage its challenges.

A widely-known beauty brand, Paula’s Choice, further explores this topic through an informational article focusing especially on the uneven skin tones of highly melanated skin and examines whether there is a need for different skincare for melanin-rich skin. The article explains how certain areas of dark-shaded individuals have higher concentrations of melanin than other places. One area Paula’s Choice identified as having higher concentrations of melanin is the under-eye area, which paved the way for recommendation of numerous treatments such as AHA and BHA exfoliants (*substances that remove dead skin cells*), chemical peels, and dermabrasions.

Finally, an article in *The Aedition* written by Elise Minton Tabin states further complexities melanated skin has that the beauty industry has not paid much attention to. It describes brown skin challenges and what it means physiologically. Tabin explains that darker skin often produces an excess of sebum, which has its advantages like mitigating signs of aging, but it also can lead to enlarged pores, pimples, and pore congestion which calls for a longer process of cell renewal. Tabin then refers brands that she researched as the “best skincare brands for melanated skin,” and explains her stance on each along with noting other factors like affordability and mindfulness to the environment. Some beauty brands seem to have somewhat addressed this underlying problem overtop the challenge of darker-skin individuals with finding their true shade. However, many of these brands are not well known and would not be easy to find if it weren’t for this one article. This shows that the issue still remains and further research must be done.

The beauty industry has yet to address all of the issues facing those with melanated skin and the needs it comes with, and there is no excuse given the revenue and popularity of the industry. Not only do these health issues of brown skin women need to be addressed for the daily beauty needs of the world’s diverse population, but should extend to everything else related to makeup and skincare. For example, actors and models should have the makeup and skincare they need to express an accurate portrayal of themselves without harsh treatments of the skin or long-term effect on it. There are many steps that can be taken: sharing this research with others who can help, spreading awareness of these needs, and acting now rather than endlessly waiting for existing beauty brands to do what is needed.

—Keya P. Vadivelu, age 17, grade 11, Ohio. \*Skin with higher levels of eumelanin, giving it olive to dark brown shade.

## BookShelf: *Multicultural and Nature Books*

**Black Girl, Black Girl: Celebrate the Power of You** by Ali Kamanda & Jorge Redmond, illustr. Amanda Quartey. *Sourcebooks.com*. Ages 4-8. Young readers are introduced to nine creative Black visionary women—activist, artist, attorney, astronaut, and athlete like Ava DuVernay, Miriam Makeba, Misty Copeland, Mae Jamison, Kamala Harris, and Wilma Rudolph. It's an inspiring book for girls who need female role models!

**Old to Joy** by Anita Crawford Clark. Gnome Road Publishing. Ages 4-8. Joy's Grandmama lives in an old house, with old trees and all kinds of old things. She even does her dishes the old-fashioned way! Joy thinks there's no fun in OLD things...but as the day passes, her grandma helps her discover how old ways can bring joy to her heart. Good story with great message.

**So Many Ways to Be a Bird** by Constance Anderson. *Star Bright Books*. Ages 5-9. This picture book combines engaging writing and insightful details to entice young readers discover the fascinating world of birds. Not all birds are alike; some fly, some can't. Some can fly, walk, and even swim and dive! Some of them migrate long distances. The book guides readers of all ages in their quest to understand the unique characteristics of many birds, and how they adapt to the changing environment and climate. It also has a spread on bird adaptation info!

**The Echo People** by SD Youngwolf, illustr. Shonto Begay. *Lee & Low*. Ages 7-11. One bright and early morning two Native children set out on a journey to meet their grandfather, an Indigenous chief. Grandfather leads them separately to a nearby river canyon area and encourages them to get to know and connect with the Echo People who live there. There they learn something about themselves and the world. This well-illustrated story will make a deep impression in readers' hearts. How we connect with the world creates our own realities and relationships. Our actions, words and thoughts all come back to us.

**Zoom in on Zombies** by Kari Lynn Winters and Catherine Rondina. *Fitzhenry & Whiteside*. Ages 9-14. Real-life Zombies are all over in our world; in bacteria, viruses, fungi, worms, bugs, fish, reptiles, and mammals. They survive even the most dangerous situations. This book details their survival tactics in natural habitats, explores their bizarre traits, and investigates how some animal zombies move about or use mind-control tactics. and suggests some cool hands-on science activities!

**History Smashers: Earth Day and the Environment** by Kate Messner; illustr. Justin Greenwood. *Random House Kids*. Ages 8-12. Myths, lies, climate issues, recycling scams? This volume focuses on environmental issues that you may have heard about. Did you think that Earth Day was the beginning of the environmental movement? Read the book to realize that countless people have been working to protect the environment, nature, and ecology for a long time before that. After reading this book, your understanding of the issues and the history of environmental protection will be much deeper. As it's a paperback, the black and white photographs are rather small and of mediocre quality. Yet the book serves a useful purpose with its informative and entertaining style of presentation.

**Make Your Mark, Make A Difference: A Kid's Guide to Standing up for People, Animals, and the Planet** by Joan Marie Galat. *Aladdin/Simon & Schuster*. Ages 9-19! With our ubiquitous digital devices and social media, we're now more aware of the many issues that impact our family, society and world. Getting involved in solving these problems can be very challenging! This book offers tools to get informed, and to become active and effective. It'll help you become an agent for change at school, community, and national level. It offers a basic understanding of the animal rights and human rights issues, and how you can tackle the problems. It's eleven chapters contain a wealth of information and examples of well-known activists in this easy to digest book.

**Living on the Veg: A kid's guide to life without meat**, by Clive Gifford and Jacqueline Meldrum. *Free Spirit*. Ages 8-13. Did you know that a vegetarian diet is good for our health, animal welfare, and ecological sustainability? If you have grown up meat-eating, taking the first steps to becoming a vegan could be daunting. This illustrated book could make that transition easier. While providing good answers to why to become a vegetarian, it also offers information on understanding food labels, good nutrition, and 12 recipes for easy to make veggie meals.

**The Amazing Generation: Your Guide to Fun and Freedom in a Screen-Filled World** by Jonathan Haidt and Catherine Price. *AmazingGeneration.com*. Ages 9-16. Want a life full of real friendship, freedom and fun? This book shows us how to use the *devices* as tools; and how not to allow them to use you. A perfect book for all teens; it shows them how to build their own life!

## **"A" Series of Journeys: The Story Behind the Board** by Kate Han, age 16, Canada

I've always struggled with the question, "Where are you from?" It's not that I don't know; the answer has never felt complete. I was born in Korea, spent much of my childhood in India, and now study in Canada. Each country left something inside me, not just as memories but as layers of identity. My artwork (see above), 'A' Series of Journeys, emerged from this sense of fragmented belonging. But without the backstory, I realized the artwork feels like a silent map—colorful but unexplained. This is the narrative behind that map.

### **From Korea to India: My First Migration**

I was five when my family moved from Seoul to Bangalore (*Bengaluru*). What I remember most from those early days was the constant feeling of being "new." New sounds, new smells, new alphabets. Even at that age, I knew I wasn't just visiting—I was being asked to live someone else's normal. In school, I was the only Korean girl. I didn't speak Kannada or Hindi, and I barely knew English. But children don't wait for fluency. I played tag with my hands, not my words. I watched others tie their shoes, share lunch, and greet teachers. I mimicked until it became second nature.

India gave me my first lesson in courage: that you can belong without blending in thoroughly. My neighbors wore saris and spoke a language I didn't understand, but they treated me like family. We celebrated Diwali together, and over time, the questions stopped being "Where are you from?" and started becoming "Are you coming to dinner?"

India didn't erase my Korean self. Instead, it added to it. I still spoke Korean at home, wrote *Hangul* in my diary, and celebrated *Chuseok* with food parcels from my grandmother. But the girl who lit sparklers on the rooftop during *Deepavali* wasn't pretending. She was expanding.

### **Canada: A New Kind of Destination**

Years later, I moved again—this time on my own, to a boarding school in Canada. If India was about cultural immersion, Canada was about cultural comparison. I had more words now, and more awareness. I could see how my classmates viewed "Asia" as a single block. I could also see how they saw me: someone exotic, sometimes confusing, occasionally admirable. Someone told me, "Wow, your English is excellent." It was meant as a compliment, but I felt the space

between us widen.

Boarding school life sharpened my understanding of identity—mine and everyone's. I met friends from Nigeria, Ukraine, Mexico, and Australia. Some had never left their home countries before.

Some, like me, had already moved across continents. We bonded over strange cafeteria food, homesickness, and midnight conversations about who we were becoming.

Canada taught me that identity is not a finished product. It's in constant motion. You carry your past, but you also build your future with every choice—what you say, how you listen, which memories you protect.

### **Why I Made the Board**

'A' Series of Journeys started as a personal project to visualize this idea of motion. I used pins and thread to create intersections, connections, and collisions. Each line on the board represented a person, a place, a story, or a version of myself. The foam base—soft yet firm—symbolized the adaptability I've had to develop. The photos marked moments in time that still speak to me. Together, they formed a chaotic and orderly piece, much like my life.

But something felt unfinished. It was only after receiving the Editor's message that I understood why. The board is a conversation starter, but it needs a voice. The images are full of meaning, but only when paired with a story. Without this reflection, the piece may be a decorative design, not a lived experience. That's why I'm writing this—to give the work its missing voice.

### **What I've Learned**

I've learned that home is not a location—it's a rhythm. It's in how you wake up, how you say goodbye, what you find strange, and what you start calling your own. In India, I learned to listen before speaking. In Canada, I learned to question people's meaning by saying "diversity." In Korea, roots can deepen even when far from the soil.

People are much more than the labels we use. The word "immigrant" doesn't tell whether someone is hopeful or scared. "International student" doesn't reveal how many languages people hear in their dreams. I've learned to ask better questions. Not "Where are you from?" but "What feels like home to you?"



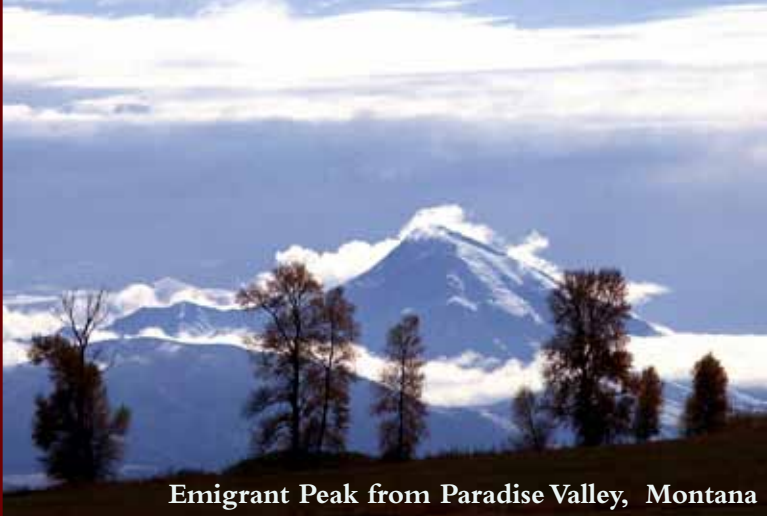
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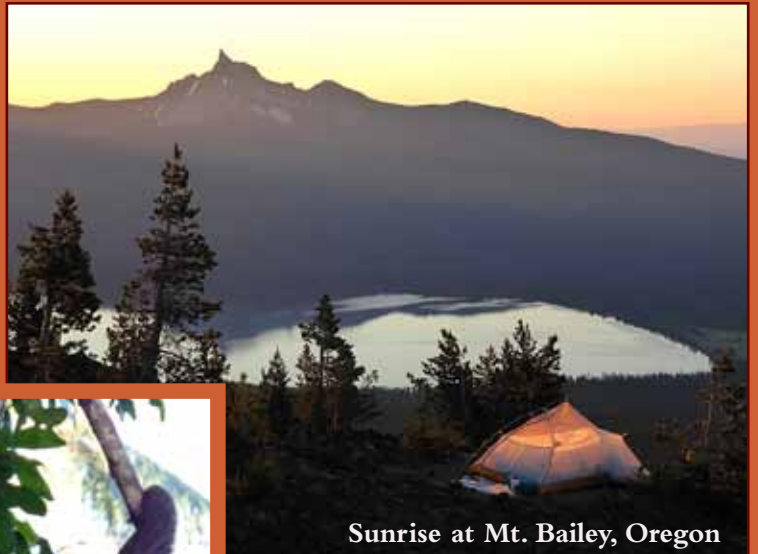
Emigrant Peak from Paradise Valley, Montana



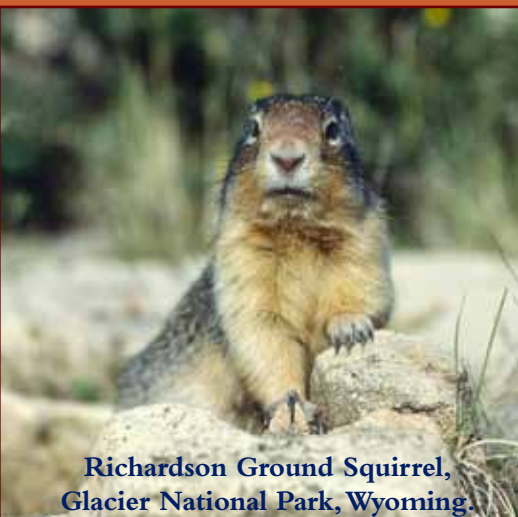
Ringed-Billed Gull, Washington



Collared Aracari, Los Guatuzos  
Wildlife Refuge, Nicaragua



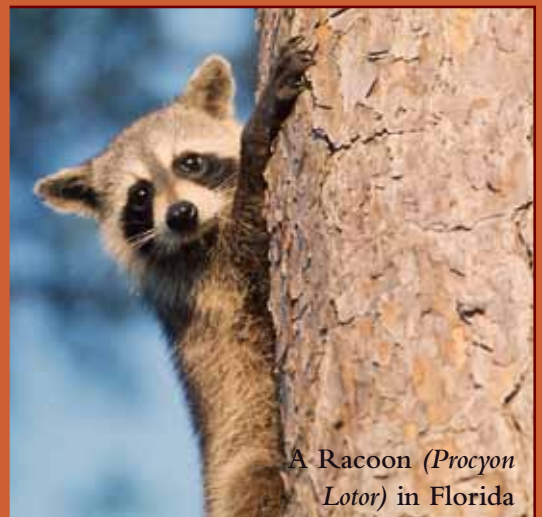
Sunrise at Mt. Bailey, Oregon



Richardson Ground Squirrel,  
Glacier National Park, Wyoming.



Two-Toed  
Sloth with  
Her Baby



A Raccoon (*Procyon  
Lotor*) in Florida