

Skipping Stones

Vol. 38, no. 2

July-August 2026

A Multicultural Literary Magazine

2026 Book Awards • Celebrate America: A Nation of Immigrants

Anyone Else Concerned about Global Climate Change?

Three Sisters, Oregon Cascades. Photo taken on a flight over Central Oregon on March 17, 2026 by Arun N. Toké.

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For Your Summer Enjoyment...

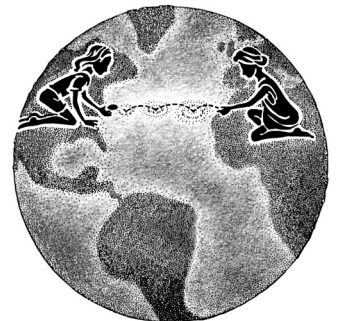
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“Missing my Dog at the Airport”
Art: Nova Kim, age 8, Alabama.



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. 

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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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Dear President George Washington

April 8, 2026

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

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

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

Finally, what might be quite important to you, is politics. On the good side, people are able to exercise their vote with more education because more information is available about the candidates. More groups of people are now able to legally vote, so it is more fair. There are also ways to use technology to register to vote and there are systems to mail in ballots no matter where you are. On the bad side though, people and candidates themselves are able to share false information about themselves and their opponents. Our current president does just that, using social media and Artificial Intelligence [AI] to spread his views and thoughts quickly and broadly. His thoughts and views seem to go against the freedoms and rights you, President George Washington, fought to achieve 250 years ago. Instead of your United States of America, the current president wants to make it a Limited States of America, only offering good things to a few people that he likes, instead of all Americans.

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

Sincerely,

Tayz, age 9, Maryland.

To the Parents Who Hope to Be Friends with Their Children: An Open Letter

On my sixteenth birthday this year, after winning the Business Pioneer Case Challenge (BPC) pioneer 100 bronze award, I was overjoyed to get home and start unpacking the birthday presents my friends and family had prepared. There was a dachshund doll, my favorite CD, a Polaroid camera, and the K-pop group's merchandise I had been longing to buy... Although these gifts from my friends were not expensive, they were special to me. At the end, I spotted the packaging box of a Mac, and I could tell from your faces that you were anticipating me to be surprised.

I subconsciously looked at my desk, where laid my old computer—my trusty companion for nearly two years. Its shell was covered with stickers I had carefully chosen, including snowmen, apples, trees, and the stars that you always questioned. It was still in good condition, and it witnessed my highlight moment winning the BPC award.

I hid my disappointment and smiled, saying, “Thanks, but the one I'm using now is still working fine.” You laughed and replied, “Let the old one retire.” I wondered if you would realize that what I was anticipating was never a new computer.

Like in many Asian families, the relationship between you and me seems to be distant and implicit. You try hard but fail to become close friends with me. Instead, this distance may grow over time due to a lack of understanding.

On the first Friday of the new semester, after a week of boarding school, I was looking forward to going home to share my updates with my mom. After dinner, I happily showed her the diary I'd been composing for a long time. However, I saw her frowning and shaking her head slightly. Her eyes were locked on the sentence, “At the best age, one should view the world with the best kindness, and I want everyone in this world to be carefree, happy, and without disputes.” She left a deep sigh and told me that I was too idealistic in facing the cruel reality of society. At that moment, her words brought me down.

As children, we can sense your intentions. You can learn to be good listeners by putting yourselves in our shoes and communicating with us as equals. Being good to us doesn't mean giving us what you want. It

will be great if you could spend time getting to know our inner world instead of giving a negative comment right away. I'd love to share with you my favorite K-pop group's music videos and songs when we have nothing to do in the car. I look forward to sharing what I've seen and heard, as well as the thoughts I'm developing about this society and the world. Children's hearts are like a magical world. We look forward to your key to open the door to our inner world.

Sincerely,

An Asian child longing for her parents' understanding

—Wenxi Yan (grade 10, age 16, Shanghai, PRC) is drawn to psychology. Healthy family relationship plays a pivotal role in children's mental health, well-being, and personal development. As a Gen-Z girl who grew up in an Asian family, she can tell the deep love her parents have for her. However, there's a generation gap and some misunderstandings between Wenxi and her parents. She hopes to become close friends with her parents. In this letter, she addresses her strong will from an adolescent's perspective to promote healthy family relationships and mutual respect between parents and their children.

Cultural Context: The Legend of Shurale

The story (on p. 5) is a reimagining of a popular folktale from the Tatar people, who live in the heart of Russia. The Shurale is a mythical forest spirit—a hairy, mischievous creature with long, ticklish fingers. In our folklore, he isn't just a monster; he is a master of the “deadly tickle.”

Translating this story was a challenge because the hero's victory depends on a pun. In the original Tatar version, the man calls himself *Byltyr* or “Last Year.” When the Shurale screams for help, the other spirits think the event happened a year ago.

I chose the name “Prior” for this English version to keep the rhythmic, almost musical trickery of the original. Prior works as both a mysterious name and a word for “before.” This creates a logical trap: the forest spirits cannot catch “Prior” because he is already in the past. I wanted the dialogue to sound fast and confusing, just like the woods itself.

I translated this story to show the world the unique “magic of wit” found in Eurasian folklore.

—Sabrina Rejepbaeva, age 14, Russia. See next page.

The Woodman and the Shurale, a Tatar Folktale

Once upon a time, there was a woodman in a village. One day, he was walking in the forest, chopping wood and singing. Suddenly, a Shurale appeared from the darkness. The Shurale had black fur, his long tail was wriggling, and his long fingers and long shaggy ears were twitching. The Shurale saw the woodman and started to laugh:

“I know who I will play with now, with whom I will laugh! How can I call you, human?”

The woodman realized things were grim. He needed to come up with something clever, real fast. He said, “You can call me, ‘Prior.’”

“Let’s go, Prior, let’s play, let’s tickle!” said the Shurale. “Let’s see who will win!”

All the Shurales are masters of tickling! How can you escape this?

“I’ve no time to play; I’ve a lot of work to do,” said the woodman.

“Are you joking?” the Shurale growled. “Don’t you want to play with me? Well, I’ll spin you around the forest so that you will never get out!”

“Fine,” said the woodman. “I’ll play with you, but first, help me split this log.” He swung his axe and drove it into a log. The log cracked. “Now you can help!” the woodman shouted. “Faster! Put your fingers into the crack so that it doesn’t close; I’ll hit it again!”

The not-so-smart Shurale put his long fingers into the crack, and the woodman quickly pulled out the axe which made the Shurale’s fingers pinch tightly. He jerked. The woodman grabbed his axe and ran away, but unfortunately, it wasn’t the end.

The Shurale screamed loudly throughout the forest, and some other Shurales came running to help him.

“What happened? Why are you screaming?” asked a tall, elderly Shurale with a long, mossy beard.

“Prior pinched my fingers!”

“When did it happen?” asked a tiny, curious Shurale, tilting his head.

“It happened just now! Prior pinched them!”

“What do you mean?” scoffed a clever, squinty-eyed Shurale, crossing his arms. “You’re talking about ‘now’ and ‘prior’ at the same time!”

“Yeah, yeah!” shouted the Shurale, still twitching

his fingers. “Prior, Prior! Catch him! Punish him!”

“How can we catch up with what is prior?” said the confused Shurale. “How can we punish the past?”

“Prior pinched them, but you are screaming now. Why weren’t you screaming prior to this?” asked a spooky Shurale whose yellow eyes glowed in the dark.

“Will you ever find the one who pinched you? It happened so long prior to now!” said the young Shurale, nervously tugging at his own short tail.

The not-so-clever Shurale couldn’t explain anything that made sense to them, and all the other Shurales fled back into the safety of their hidden underground lair. He hoisted the log on his back and still walks around the forest, screaming:

“Fingers! Prior pinched! Fingers! Prior pinched!”

—*Sabrina Rejepbaeva, age 14, Russia. Sabrina speaks Turkmen, Russian, and English. She adds: “...sharing these Eurasian stories is vital for multicultural understanding.”*

Life Cycle

Once, a while ago

I saw two snakes slithering down below
They were headed towards three eggs, sitting in a nest
The male ate one, and the female ate the rest

The male began to leave
And the female began to follow
When the poor birds came back
They wore faces full of sorrow

Once, not a long while ago
I saw two adult snakes trailing three baby snakes
slithering down below
They were headed towards six eggs, sitting in a nest
The male and female each ate one, and encouraged
their babies to eat the rest
The snakes left, with the babies following in gladness
When the poor birds came back
The only thing that could be said
Was that they nearly drowned in their sadness

Once, a long while ago
I might’ve felt bad for those birds fretting, to and fro
But now I realize that no lives were ended
Only wore different appearances than intended

—*Xi Yuan Cheng, age 12, California.*

Love

What is love?
No proper explanation
No casual thing
The meaning behind it
Impossible to explain

Maybe love is a moment;
A walk on the beach.
A shared milkshake.
A cold fall day
With a warm embrace.

Maybe love is a person,
not a thought.
Like your heart is tangled up with them;
Forever caught

I think it's you
You're what love is about
Oh, this feeling with you
I can't describe it out loud

Your eyes bring me solace
Your hands bring me life
Your presence makes me want you
with all my might

Maybe that's what love is:
a person who lights you up.
What makes you feel alive
With one person's touch

I think I found it;
A love for me.
The sight of her
Makes it hard to breathe.

—Aurora-Lee Strandberg, age 13, Michigan.

The Art of Writing an Open Letter

While you can always write to someone you know, you can also write to someone who does not know you at all.

In an open letter on p. 4, Wenxi addresses her perspective that promotes healthy family relationships and mutual respect between parents and children. Consider writing an open letter to someone on a theme close to your heart and send it for publication. Please see p. 3 for another topic idea.

Monster: Speaking Out Against Air Pollution

I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of green through the window of my bedroom.
Green? As in foliage.
I know there is a tree right below my window, though it does not quite reach up to it.
But the tree is moderately tall, having grown from strength to strength.
It does offer a direct view to some of the floors situated lower down in the building.
In fact, this one isn't the only tree, there is an abundance of foliage inside the compound where my dwelling stands.
Hence, all the windows look out onto not just trees, but also bushes and potted plants lined up in neat rows. Some of which bear fruits and sprout flowers, too.
There are also groves of them, enclosed inside tree grates occupying the divider right across the road.
But with so much supposed greenery and oxygen all around, why do my eyes still crave the calming effect of green and my breath feels so heavy?
As I take a closer look at the leaves, there's a lingering sadness that tugs at my heart as I see the accumulating layers of dust threatening to hijack the greenness from the leaves, leaving them high and dry, devoid of their lushness.
How eagerly I wish I could run my fingers on them, feel their texture, and take delight in their vibrant colour.
But the very thought of my palms getting blackened in the fine, powdery, soot makes me cringe to death.
Every object within my area of vision is now caked in dust, as if that's a prerogative—a protective film to keep the object safe inside.
But here is the irony.
What looks like a cover is actually the monster that is slowly eating away at the very lifeline of my city and strangling it to its very core.

—Srinjaya Lahiri, Kolkata, India. Located in Eastern part of the country, Kolkata is one of the five largest and historical cities of India. You may have seen glimpses of this bustling city in many well-known Indian movies.

A Ghost's Whisper

The wind across the Alaskan tundra didn't just blow; it bit. It carried the scent of ice, the oncoming snow, and the faint, heartbreaking ghost of a boy who shouldn't have been out there. Kodiak, a Malamute-shepherd mix with fur the color of a winter storm, stood on a ridge of frost-hardened lichen. His paws were numb, the pads cracked by the unrelenting permafrost, but he didn't sit. To sit was to let the cold win.

To sit was to admit that the scent was gone.

The scent—*Leo*—was a mixture of the familiar soap, dried sweat, and the greasy salt of the potato chips he always shared under the covers at night. It was a dim thread, a silver needle in a haystack of white and grey. Behind Kodiak, the lights of the search party shimmered like dying stars. Their snowmobiles roared, a mechanical growling that Kodiak hated. They were too loud, too heavy, and they didn't understand the language of the wind. They had been out here for three days. The "Golden Hours" of survival were long gone, replaced by the grim, quiet desperation of a recovery mission. Kodiak knew this because of the way Leo's father, Tom, smelled: like sour adrenaline and the sharp, stinging salt of tears that froze before they could fall.

"Kodi! Back! Get back here, boy!" Tom's voice cracked across the distance. It was the voice of a man who was losing his world.

Kodiak didn't look back.

He couldn't. If he looked back, he might see the defeat in the man's eyes, and that would be the end. Instead, he turned his nose to the north, where the tundra rolled into the jagged shadows of the Brooks Range. There, tucked inside a fold of the earth where the wind whistled a low, mournful C-sharp, was a speck of something that didn't belong. A scent of nylon. A scent of plastic. A scent of *fear*. Kodiak lunged forward, his muscles screaming against the cold, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. He was running toward the only thing that mattered. Leo was fourteen, a boy made of sharp angles and restless energy. He was too old to believe in monsters and too young to believe in his own mortality. He had gone out to photograph the Aurora Borealis, chasing a "solar storm" he'd read about on a weather forum. "I'll be back by dinner, Dad," he'd said, grabbing his camera bag. "Kodi, stay. It's too cold

for old bones."

Kodiak had watched him go from the porch, his tail giving a single, skeptical thump against the wood. Kodiak wasn't that *old*—seven was prime for a Malamute—but Leo had a way of treating him like a fragile antique.

But Leo hadn't come back by dinner. He hadn't come back by dawn. Now, on the fourth day, the search party was preparing to scale back. The bush pilots said the visibility was dropping. The state troopers said the temperature had hit thirty below. They were talking about "the inevitable."

Kodiak didn't believe in the inevitable. He believed in the way Leo's hand felt behind his ears. He crested a hummock of frozen peat, his breath coming in ragged plumes. The snow here was thinner, scoured away by the wind to reveal the ironhard ground. And there, wedged between two jagged rocks like a broken wing, was the backpack. It was a bright, neon-yellow North Face bag. It looked violent against the muted grays of the tundra. Kodiak reached it in three desperate bounds. He didn't bark. Barking was for the searchers. He sniffed the fabric. Leo had been here. The scent was fresh—well, fresher than the trail at the trailhead. But there was blood. A copper tang that made Kodiak's hackles rise. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to tell a story of a fall, a scrape, or worse.

Kodiak nudged the bag. It was heavy. Inside, he could hear the clink of the camera lenses. Leo would never leave his camera. Not unless he couldn't carry it anymore.

Kodiak let out a low, vibrating whine. He looked back toward the search lights, now miles away. He could wait for them. He could sit by the bag and howl until they found him. They would find the bag, they would find the blood, and they would call off the search for a living boy and start the search for a body.

Kodiak looked at the bag, then looked toward the mountains.

A new scent was drifting off the peaks. It wasn't Leo.

It was something musk-heavy and predatory. A wolf...? No. Bigger. A grizzly that hadn't quite settled

A Ghost's Whisper, *continued*

into hibernation, or perhaps a polar bear drifted too far south. Kodiak grabbed the strap of the yellow backpack in his teeth. It was awkward and heavy, the plastic buckle digging into his jowls, but he began to pull. He wasn't pulling it toward the searchers. He was following the faint, dragging trail that led away from the bag, toward a narrow ravine. The ravine was a crack in the world, hidden by a shelf of wind-blown snow. To the human eye, it looked like a solid drift. To Kodiak's nose, it was a chimney. Subtle warmth—just a fraction of a degree warmer than the air—was rising from it. And the scent of Leo was stronger here. It was concentrated, trapped by the ice walls. Kodiak dropped the bag at the lip of the ravine. He barked then—a sharp, commanding yelp. He waited for a reply. A shout, a groan, anything.

Silence.

He slid down the embankment, his claws scratching uselessly against the ice until he landed in a soft drift at the bottom. The ravine was narrow, barely wide enough for a person to walk through. The sky above was a sliver of violet. He moved deeper. The scent was changing. The same soap smell and sweat were still there, but they were being drowned out by something chemical. Something like... ozone? At the end of the ravine sat a small cave, more of a hollowed-out pocket in the permafrost.

And there, curled into a ball, was Leo.

He was wearing his heavy parka, but the hood was pushed back. His hair was frosted white. His skin was a terrifying shade of translucent grey. He wasn't moving. Kodiak let out a frantic whimper and rushed forward, licking Leo's face with a tongue that felt like warm sandpaper. Leo didn't wake. But he was breathing. The breaths were shallow, rattling puffs of white frost. Kodiak began to do what his ancestors had done for thousands of years. He didn't just stand there; he pressed his entire body against the boy. He tucked his head under Leo's chin and let the heat of his own heart transfer through the layers of down and wool. He became a living furnace.

Minutes passed. Or hours. In the tundra, time didn't flow; it froze.

Kodiak felt a twitch. Leo's hand, stiff as a dead branch, moved. It fumbled blindly, his fingers sinking

into Kodiak's thick neck fur.

"Kodi..?"

The voice was a ghost. A mere vibration.

Leo didn't open his eyes. "Kodi... you found... the bag?" Kodiak licked his ear. "Good boy," Leo whispered. "Inside... the pocket... the little one... the pills..." Kodiak knew "pills." Tom took them for his heart. Leo took them when his chest got tight and he couldn't breathe. Asthma... but the bag was at the top of the ravine. Kodiak stood up. Leo groaned at the loss of warm sensation, his body curling tighter.

"Don't go..." Leo wheezed. "Stay... please..."

Kodiak looked at the boy. He looked at the steep embankment he had slid down. He couldn't drag Leo up that. And Leo couldn't climb. The dog scrambled back toward the shelf of ice. He dug his claws into the frozen grounds, his muscles bulging, his breathing coming in harsh, sobbing gasps. He fell back twice, sliding down the slick wall. On the third try, he found a root—a stubborn, stunted willow branch and hauled himself up.

He reached the yellow bag.

He tore at the small pocket with his teeth. The zipper was frozen. He bit down harder, the metal tasting of salt and rust, and pulled. The zipper gave way with a screech. Inside was a blue plastic inhaler and a small orange bottle. Kodiak grabbed the bottle in his mouth. He looked back down the ravine.

In the distance, the roar of the snowmobiles was getting louder. They were close. Maybe half a mile. But they were moving in the wrong direction. They were heading toward the ridge, away from the hidden ravine. Kodiak had a choice. He could run to the snowmobiles and lead them back. But Leo's breathing was a wet, failing sound. He didn't have minutes. He had seconds.

Kodiak leapt back into the ravine.

He dropped the bottle next to Leo's hand.

"Leo! Leo, wake up!" Kodiak barked, a loud, sharp "woof" that echoed off the ice walls.

The boy's eyes fluttered open.

They were bloodshot and unfocused. He saw the orange bottle. With a trembling hand, he reached for it. He couldn't unscrew the cap. His fingers were white

A Ghost's Whisper, *continued*

with frostbite, useless as wooden pegs. Kodiak watched, his heart hammering. He stepped forward and took the bottle between his back molars. He crunched. The plastic shattered. A few white pills spilled onto Leo's chest.

Leo managed to get one into his mouth. He swallowed dry, his throat working convulsively. For a long time, nothing happened. Kodiak lay back down, covering Leo's torso with his heavy body. Then, Leo's breathing changed. It deepened. The rattle subsided. A small puff of color returned to his cheeks—not a healthy red, but something better than the grey of the grave. "Thanks, buddy," Leo murmured. He reached out and gripped Kodiak's fur. "They're coming, right? You brought them?"

Kodiak looked up.

The sky was turning a deep, bruised indigo. The search lights were gone. The sound of the snowmobiles had faded. The wind had shifted, and the searchers had moved to the southern flats, guided by some false signal or a wrong intuition. They were alone. Kodiak knew he had to bark. He had to howl. He had to make enough noise to wake the dead. He stood at the mouth of the cave and let out a long, mournful cry. It was a sound of pure silver, rising up through the ravine and out into the vast, empty tundra.

He howled until his throat was raw. He howled until the stars began to poke through the veil of the atmosphere.

And then, he heard it.

Not a snowmobile. Not a human voice.

It was a low, strange *thrumming*.

The air in the ravine began to vibrate. The snow didn't just blow; it began to swirl in a perfect circle, as if caught in an eerie vortex. Kodiak's hackles went up. He growled, a deep, primal warning. This wasn't the search party. This wasn't Tom. A light—brighter than any flashlight, whiter than the snow—descended from the sky. It wasn't the Aurora. It was solid. It was cold. Leo scrambled to sit up, his eyes wide with fear and wonder. "Kodi... what is that?"

The light filled the ravine, turning the blue ice into shimmering diamonds. Kodiak stood in front of Leo, his teeth bared. He was ready to fight the sun itself if it

meant protecting his boy.

A figure stepped out of the light.

It wasn't a man. It wasn't a beast. It was tall, thin, and moved with a grace that didn't belong in a world governed by gravity. It shimmered like a reflection in a disturbed pool of water. Yet, it looked so familiar... Kodiak lunged. He didn't hit flesh. He hit something that felt like a wall of static electricity. He was thrown back, his fur singed, his senses reeling. "Kodi! No!" Leo screamed. The figure didn't touch Leo. It reached out a long, translucent hand and pointed toward the yellow backpack sitting at the top of the ravine. Then, it pointed at Kodiak. A voice didn't speak, but a thought bloomed in Kodiak's head. It wasn't in English; it was in the language of deep intuition and forgotten instincts.

The figure moved toward Leo. Leo didn't shrink back.

He looked mesmerized.

"You... you're the one," Leo whispered. "The light I was looking for."

The figure placed a hand on Leo's forehead. The frostbite—the white, dead skin on Leo's fingers—began to recede. The grey tint vanished. The boy's eyes cleared, glowing with a strange, reflected light. Then, the figure turned to Kodiak. It knelt. Its face was a smooth, featureless mask of light, but Kodiak felt a profound sense of recognition. The light intensified. It became a roar of heat and sound. Kodiak closed his eyes, leaning into lucid sleep, feeling the ache in his joints vanish, feeling the hunger in his belly disappear.

A few hours later Tom was the first one to reach the ravine.

The search party had seen the light—a pillar of white fire that had pierced the clouds for exactly ten seconds. They had ignored their GPS units, ignored the fading fuel gauges, and raced toward it.

"Leo!" he screamed, sliding down the embankment.

He found his son sitting at the mouth of a small cave. Leo was perfectly warm. His parka was zipped up. He looked as if he had just stepped out for a breath of fresh air.

"Dad," Leo said, his voice steady. He looked dazed,

A Ghost's Whisper, *continued*

his eyes fixed on the sky.

"Oh, thank God. Thank God." Tom pulled him into a crushing hug, sobbing into his son's shoulder.

The other searchers gathered around, flashlights darting everywhere.

"I'm okay, Dad. I'm okay," Leo said. He looked around the ravine. "Where's Kodi?"

Tom stiffened. He looked at the ground. There were no paw prints in the snow. "Leo... son," he whispered, his voice trembling. "What are you talking about?"

"Kodi," Leo said, his voice rising in panic. "Kodiak! He found me. He brought me my inhaler. He crunched the bottle for me. He kept me warm all night."

The searchers exchanged uneasy glances.

"Leo," the State Trooper said softly, kneeling down. "Leo, Kodiak didn't come with us on this search."

"No, he followed me! He was right here! He fought that... that thing." Leo pointed to the center of the ravine.

Tom gripped Leo's hands. "Leo, look at me. Kodiak died three years ago. Don't you remember? He died in his sleep on the porch. We buried him under the willow tree."

Leo froze. The memories hit him like a physical blow. The willow tree. The small wooden cross. The year he was eleven and the world felt empty because his best friend was gone.

"No," Leo whispered. "No, he was here. He... he smelled like soap and potato chips."

"The cold does things to the mind, kid," the Trooper said, though his own voice was shaky. He was looking at something on the ground.

He reached down and picked up an orange plastic bottle. It was crushed, as if by a powerful set of jaws. "Where did you get this, Leo?" the Trooper asked. "Your father said you forgot your inhaler and your meds at home. We found them on the kitchen counter when we started the search."

Leo stared at the bottle. "Kodi... he went to my bag. He brought it to me."

"Your bag?" Tom asked. "We found your bag, Leo. It was three miles away. It was buried under a foot of fresh snow. It's been there since the first night."

Leo looked up at the lip of the ravine.

Sitting there, perfectly visible in the moonlight, was the neon-yellow backpack. It wasn't buried. It was sitting on a clean patch of rock. And next to it, pressed into the frost-hardened lichen, was a single, massive paw print. As the searchers hauled Leo up the embankment, they were hurried, spooked by the strange silence of the ravine and the impossible presence of the bag. As they loaded Leo into the heated sled of the lead snowmobile, Tom paused. He looked back at the ravine. He saw the paw print. He saw the backpack. But he also saw something else. He walked over to the backpack. He picked it up. It felt heavy—too heavy.

"Leo said Kodiak brought this to him?" Tom muttered to himself.

He opened the main compartment of the bag.

Inside, there were no familiar things packed by Leo the morning he left.

Instead, the bag was filled with a strangely designed camera and lenses he'd never seen before in his entire life. A bottle of pills dated 2044. He also saw the photograph of his son at an older age and the same dog, Kodi, sitting by his feet, well and alive.

Tom gasped, dropping the bag. The things spilled out of the bag and onto the tundra. Among them was a rusted metal dog tag, the name *Kodiak* still legible under the grime.

Tom backed away, his heart hammering. "What is this..?"

But then he tried to remember. He had watched the burial. He had dug the hole under the willow tree himself. He had seen the dog's body. He looked at the photograph again that lay on the frozen ground next to his feet. There, Leo looked in his early thirties, and the dog sat by his feet as if he never died.

And then he saw the date on the back of the dog tag:

Kodiak. Property of Leo Miller. 2044.

Confused, Tom looked at his watch.

A Ghost's Whisper, continued

The year was 2024. From the sky, a low, rhythmic thrumming began again. The stars seemed to shift, re-aligning into a pattern that wasn't on any map. In the distance, a silver-grey dog stood on a ridge. He wasn't made of fur and bone anymore; he was made of starlight and memory. He gave a single, silent wag of his tail, watched the snowmobiles disappear into the white, and then stepped into the light, following his boy into a time that hadn't happened yet, but always would.

The tundra remained. Vast, cold, and keeping its secrets. The wind blew again, erasing the single paw print, leaving nothing but the sound of a boy's name, whispered by a ghost who refused to let go.

—Giovana Gordon, age 17, South Carolina.



My Name Is...

My name is Marek and I am in fifth grade.
My name is Marek and I am Czech,
With Czech grandparents and a Czech class grade,
With Czech relatives who I know by name.

My name is Marek and I am Nepali.
I love the *momos* our family friends make,
The curries, the meats, the vegetables with rice.

My name is Marek and I am Indian,
The *poojas*, the colors, the *dosas* are great.
My name is Marek and I am American,
I like high fives and ten-lane freeways.

My name is Marek and when you look at me,
You might not see much of the cultures that are mixed.
But when I start talking, what's hidden comes out.
Then you can see who really is 'me.'

So when I watch other people, I like to think:
'Who really are these people all the way in?'
What cultures, interests, and ideas do they keep within?
I like to find out, to ask them and see,
And that way they can also learn about me.

—Marek Desai, age 11, grade 5, California.

A Garden of Peace

If peace were a garden, I'd grow it with care
With sunflowers smiling and love in the air.
No thorns of anger, no weeds of hate
Just rows of kindness, open gate.

I'd water it daily with laughter and song
Where children of every place belong.
No fences, no borders, no shouting aloud
Just clouds floating soft in a sky unbowed.

Butterflies dancing from leaf to leaf
Whispers of hope in the smallest belief.
A garden of peace isn't hard to grow
It just needs hearts that want it so.

Would you help me plant a seed?
Let's make this garden what the world needs.

—Parth Singla, age 9, India.

Ivory as Long as He's Here

He's treading through the valley.
In awe as he captures sight of the white roses.
The faded blood petals brushed his emotions.
For he convinced me to continue sprouting an
abundance
Of ivory roses in the meadow.

So I attempted to maintain the valley.
Just for the sake of fulfilling his promising dreamscape.
"White roses are my favorite."
And that only motivates me.

Where are the red rows?
Ivory seemed to replace them.
The flowers filled with vitriol.
Transforming into his hope.

And if I fail,
The cycle repeats.
But as long as he's here.
They stay ivory.

—Geslyanies Reyes, age 16, Massachusetts. Writing poetry and songs is her way of expressing her emotions and deepest thoughts. Geslyanies' hobbies include reading, biking, drawing and soccer.

Nostalgia

Poems by Daniel Jung, age 16, New York

This poem is about missing my childhood; it captures the happiness of knowing that the memories of my childhood will always remain.

Never-ending summers stretched so long,
Every shade of green impossibly bold.
Vivid colors painted the world in layers,
Even the nights hummed with soft firefly light.
Remember the scent of fresh-mowed grass,
Flowing lines in the lawn that Dad spent hours proudly working on.
Open DVD cases with a satisfying snap,
Rewinding favorite movies over and over.
Gentle hums of the TV's glow
Once a world where everything felt slower.
Trees to climb with branches that held treasure, monsters, and stories.
Tiny feet scampered all over the bark, seeing how high we could go.
Every laugh, each fall, every scraped knee,
Nostalgia whispers: "You were alive here."

Floating on swings that defied the pull of the earth,
Our screams of joy carrying through the air.
Running across lawns, sidewalks, playground equipment,
Each step sadly taking us towards the future.
Vacant lots slowly became the norm,
Every tree missing the joyous kids' company.
Rusty bikes leaned against fences, forgotten.
Yesterday became last week, last month, last year.
Open hearts never realizing how quickly it all ended
Unaware of how fleeting it all would be.
Nights of homework, jobs, and other worries ensued, yet we still have
Glimpses of a past, too vivid to let go; the memories we'll never lose.

First Time Too

When I was younger,
I thought my parents were too hard on me.
Always pushing. Always asking for more.
A better grade. Less free time. More extracurriculars.

It felt like nothing was ever enough.
I'd watch my friends laugh off mistakes,
While I fretted over the lecture I'd get when I got home.
Every time I fell short, I'd wonder:
Why can't they just let me be?

But the older I get, the clearer it becomes.
This life I'm living is the one they dreamed of.
Each opportunity one they never had.
They didn't grow up with choices.

(Please see col. 2 for more.)

My first time to DisneyWorld
Was their first time, too.
Dreams were luxuries, a luxury that they
earned for me.
So when they push me
It is because they see in me
The version of themselves that never got
the chance.
And after the fights, when the words still
hang in the air, I remember.
This is their first time living too. Their first
time being parents.
Their love doesn't always sound gentle.
Sometimes it sounds like
"You can do better," or
"Don't waste this chance."
But underneath it, I hear what they really
mean: "I believe in you."
"I love you."

Gone in an Instant

It is easy to forget
the way the morning light spills gold across
the floor,
how the air smells after rain,
how laughter feels when it's real and unex-
pected.
How lucky we are to experience this.
We forget that nothing is promised—
not the next sunrise,
not the voice we expect to answer,
not the body that carries us,
step after step,
without complaint.
Only when it is gone
do we hear the silence.
Only when it slips away
do we feel the weight of absence.
But there is still time, always time, to notice
To enjoy the quiet miracles surrounding us.
To look closer, to say thank you.
To hold it all, gently, as if it could vanish—
because it can.

—Daniel Jung, 16, New York.

Brainstorm of the Brilliant

A playful fable rooted in South Asian folklore and highlights a timeless theme: how intelligence, wit, and a clever mind can peacefully solve problems that brute strength cannot.

The elephant was not always the giant creature we know today. Once upon a time, he was quite small! Although he possessed a long trunk and a short tail, his most striking feature was his enormous eyes. Because of these large eyes, he could spot far more food than the other animals. As a result, he ate a little more than the rest, though he never overindulged.

One beautiful day, the elephant left his den and wandered far into the unknown. Suddenly, he stumbled upon a lush forest of *Amalaki* (Indian Gooseberry or *Amla*). He had never seen such a beautiful fruit hanging in heavy bunches from the flexible branches of a tree before and he had no chance to know that it was actually a mythical fruit of ancient India, which had a sweet and sour taste. This *amalaki*, which has Ayurvedic properties, is not only a taste enhancer, but is also known to everyone as an appetite and energy booster.

Curiosity got the better of him. He plucked a fruit and popped it into his mouth.

“Oh dear!” he gasped. It tasted incredibly bitter at first.

Just as he grew annoyed and prepared to spit it out, a strange transformation happened on his tongue. The bitterness vanished, replaced by a delightful sweetness.

“How magical!” the elephant cheered.

He continued to chew with absolute bliss. The more he chewed, the more wonderful flavors he discovered. Overjoyed and utterly enchanted, the elephant decided to make his home right there in the *Amalaki* forest. After feasting on the fruit all day long, he returned to his shelter with a deep, satisfied belch.

But the elephant did not know a secret about the *Amalaki* fruit: eating it drives up your appetite and makes you ravenously hungry.

Having gorged on the fruit all day, the elephant awoke the next morning feeling utterly famished! He began to devour everything in sight. He didn't just stop at the fruits and roots of the forest; he began tearing down the leaves, bark, and branches of entire trees. He loved everything he tasted. Yet, the moment he finished eating, his stomach would rumble again.

Because of this endless feasting, the elephant's body grew at an alarming rate, ballooning until he was as massive as a mountain.

With his size came selfishness. Gradually, the elephant began stealing food from the other forest animals. Whenever anyone dared to protest, he would bully them. He began throwing his weight around for any reason—or no reason at all. Before long, the elephant became a terrifying menace to everyone.

Seeing no other choice, the animals gathered their courage and went to see their king.

The king of the forest was the lion. Truth be told, the lion was also deeply troubled by the elephant's unruly behavior. However, he felt powerless to stop him. He knew that with a body that massive, the elephant could easily overthrow him and claim the throne for himself.

But a king cannot show fear to his subjects. So, the lion quickly dismissed the animals, grandly promising them a solution.

That night, the lion secretly summoned his wisest minister: the fox.

Although the fox was small, his brain was sharp. After listening to the problem, the fox smiled. “Your Majesty, you cannot stop the elephant with brute strength. We must conquer him with intellect. Leave this matter to me.”

Reassured by the clever fox, the lion went to sleep.

A few days later, while the elephant was busy tearing down a grove of banana trees near a lake, the fox crept up to him. He bowed politely and said, “Greetings, sir! I trust you are well?”

The elephant glanced down at the fox, stuffed a whole banana sapling into his mouth, and smiled. “Mmm. Yes, I am doing splendidly these days!”

The fox peered closely at the elephant's face, his expression turning grave. “Dear me. Your eyes do not look splendid at all,” he said doubtfully.

“Why? What is wrong with my eyes?” the elephant asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“They look terribly diseased! Both eyes are dangerously swollen. Are you not in agonizing pain?” The

Villains Aren't Born, They're Made

fox's voice overflowed with deep concern.

"No, there is no pain at all!" the elephant replied, blinking.

"Ah, I see," the fox murmured wisely. He paused, shaking his head." Then the pain will strike in a few days. My own nephew had the exact same affliction! At first, there was no pain. But when the ache finally started, it was unbearable!"

"And then? What happened?" the elephant asked, his heart beginning to race.

"Then, I rushed him to the doctor! But alas, by then it was too late."

"What do you mean too late?!"

"Alas, sir... his eyes could not be saved!"

Terrified, the elephant's voice trembled. "Do you truly see the same symptoms in my eyes?"

"Sir, should I speak with fear, or with total honesty?" the fox asked smoothly.

"Tell me honestly, I beg you!"

"I am afraid the very same signs are vivid in your eyes," the fox sighed.

Panic gripped the elephant." What must I do? Tell me, what should I do?"

"Well, sir, it's best we consult the physician immediately!"

The doctor of the forest was the monkey, who had already been briefed on the plan.

The moment the elephant arrived and anxiously presented his eyes for examination, the clever monkey went to work. With swift, nimble fingers, he removed the elephant's two giant eyes and replaced them with a pair of tiny ones.

With his new, small eyes, the elephant's field of vision shrunk dramatically. He could no longer spot endless mountains of food all at once. Consequently, his eating naturally slowed down to a perfectly normal amount. As his belly shrunk, his aggressive attitude vanished too.

The newly transformed elephant was no longer a bully to anyone—and that is why, to this very day, the mighty elephant has such small eyes.

—Diponkar Chanda is an emerging writer based in greater Toronto, Canada. Originally from Bangladesh, he writes stories and poetry that bridge cultures, languages, and imagination.

I stared into his ice cold eyes
And chipped away at the ice
Until I broke through
I swam through his feelings

At first, all that was there
Was hatred and anger
Eventually, the layer of anger finally gave through
I saw more feelings and memories
Revealing sadness, pain, and tears
I saw the kids who pushed him around at school

Soon, the sadness parted
Around a beam of joy
I watched and felt his happiness
As his sister played with him
And stood up to his bullies
I saw her making food for him
And ate little herself
But she grew weak and tired

And the world didn't have time for her
Guilt and remorse filled the hole in his heart
I now knew his story
I hugged him
Like the way his sister used to
As a therapist, I had seen my share

Of teenagers in juvie
This one looked like barely a teen
And his eyes were already black with hatred
Villains aren't born
They are made

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

Questions to the Readers:

After reading this poem, what thoughts come to your mind? Do you see any similarities in what you've just read and local news stories or real life situations in your community? How do you like to respond to the author's take on this topic? Feel free to write to us via email:

editor@skippingstones.org

—Editors

I'm called a Queen Conch

I'm a queen conch (pronounced konk) and I live in the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. My home is on Coco Cay in The Bahama Islands. Scientists call us gastropods which means *stomach-foot*. We are sea snails and have a strong muscular foot on our underside which helps us hop and crawl along the sandy bottom to find food and get around. We also have two eyes on the tip of tubes that look around and can sense danger. Have you ever seen a submarine periscope? That's what our eye tubes look like. The insides of our shells are very colorful like the beautiful fish that you see in the reefs, seas and oceans.

I can retreat into my shell when I feel afraid. I'm very shy so if someone picks me up or a big fish swims by, I can pull my soft body back into my shell. Then I shut the trap door! It's called an operculum. Did you know that I build this castle I live in all by myself!

When I was born as a small larva, I had a special layer of tissue called a mantle. That's the part of my body that forms my shell. After about three weeks I settle to the ocean bottom in shallow sea-grasses. Now I begin my life as a real sea snail! Along the way I absorb calcium carbonate from the ocean with my mantle. It takes 4-5 years for my shell to grow to become an adult.

I can live as long as 20 to 40 years of age. My color is a golden tan on the outside with deep pink and orange areas on the inside.

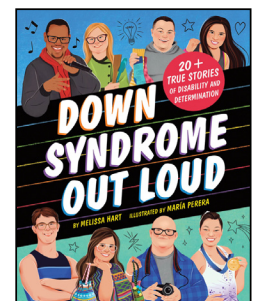
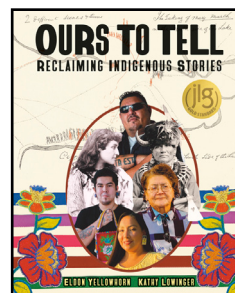
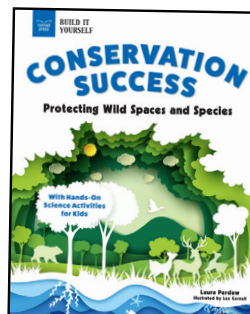
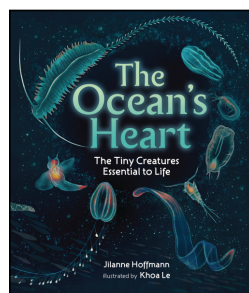
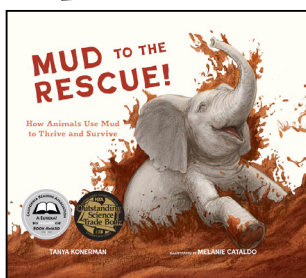
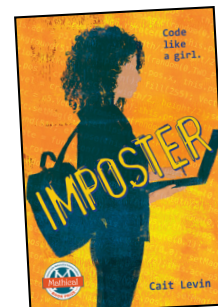
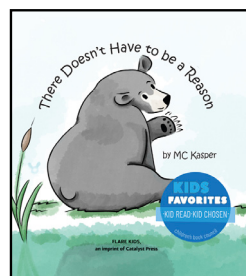
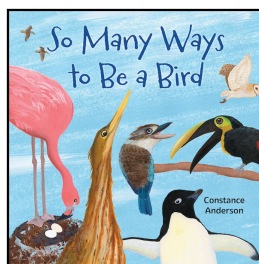
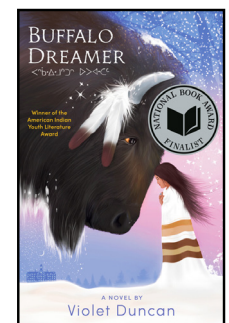
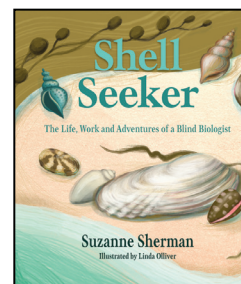
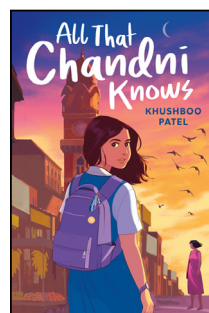
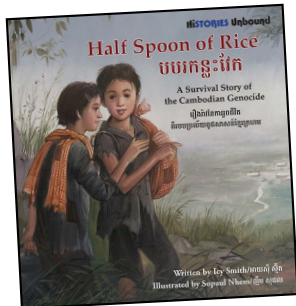
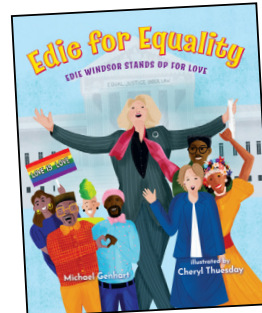
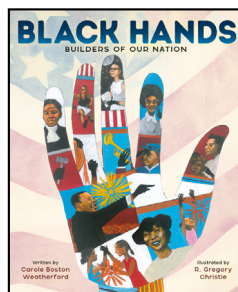
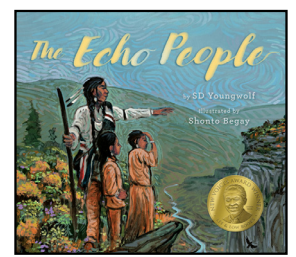
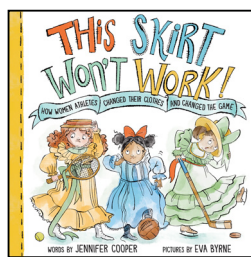
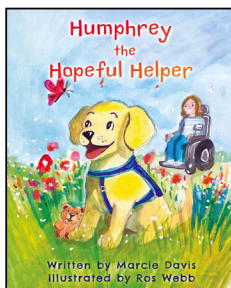
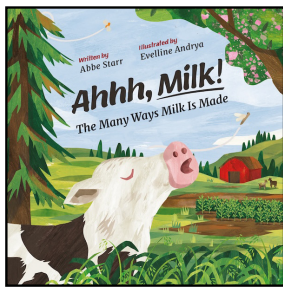


If you see me or my relatives while you are snorkeling, please remember we are alive and still living in our conch shells. A few weeks ago two girls found me and my cousin. They lifted us out of the water to take pictures. We were happy when they put us back in the water close to where they found us. We are part of a living ecosystem that depends on us. We try to keep the sea grasses and reef habitats healthy by eating algae on the sea grass blades and in the sandy areas. When we are gone, fish, octopus and shrimp can hide in our shells. Sometimes hermit crabs move in and make our shells their new home. We hope all the sea creatures who visit or move in will be as happy as we once were in our conch castles! We believe in Recycling!

—Regina Montana, children's author, New York. **Queen Conch** (art, top) by Maria Amparo, age 12, Regina's granddaughter. Regina explains: "Last summer my family visited Coco Cay in the Bahamas. After a short snorkeling trip with her mother, Maryellen Annese, my granddaughter and her cousin found two live queen conch sea snails. After I had taken a few photos the girls walked back to the sea area where they found the sea snails and returned them to the water. My article is written in first person narrative from the perspective of the queen conch. The girls learned how important these snails are to the native habitat of the area. The two photos show Maria Amparo and her cousin, Maddie (age 8) holding the conch shells."

2026 Skipping Stones Book Awards

We are pleased to honor the following 25 outstanding books—in three categories: Multicultural, Nature, and Teaching & Parenting Resources—as our 2026 Award Winners. These picture books, chapter books, novels and nonfiction works promote an understanding of cultures, cultivate cooperation, and/or encourage a deeper awareness of nature, ecology, and social issues. They foster respect for multiple viewpoints and closer relationships within human societies. The honored titles offer various perspectives, help us understand our diverse cultures and their histories, and how we overcome challenging situations. Hearty congratulations to the creators of these timely books! *Reviews will be posted on the website in the Annual Book Awards under Contests/Awards by July 2.*



Multicultural and International Books

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nature and Ecology Books

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teaching and Parenting Resources

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

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

Reviews of these honored titles can be downloaded from our website, www.skippingstones.org. Please click on the **Annual Book Awards** under the **Contests/Awards** menu.

Why Every Child Deserves a Bookshelf

“Percy Jackson and the Olympians” is one of my favorite book series. I still remember the feeling of holding that thick book in my hand, thinking about what a great story it was.

Bookshelves aren't just furniture; they are actually something that makes you feel empathy and builds your identity. Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson shows all of us readers that sometimes, your weaknesses can be your greatest power. Examples from the book include ADHD, which can improve your battle reflexes, and Dyslexia, which allows you to read ancient Greek.

This book series made me stop and think that maybe being ADHD and dyslexic isn't *bad*. Obviously, I wouldn't want it, but maybe it wasn't as bad as others say it is. Percy Jackson really opened my eyes a little.

“Wonder” by R.J. Palacio is another book that touches me deeply. It teaches us about kindness and why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Together, these novels show me that books are a world of infinite possibilities. They help us understand our values.

Another book I could really connect to was “The Giving Tree” by Shel Silverstein. It is a book about a boy and how his relationship changes with the tree as he grows up. Through the fact that the tree always sacrifices itself willingly, I learnt that there are always people who help and sacrifice, but you shouldn't be greedy and keep taking, or you would regret it in the end.

However, while I can read the many books in my own personal library, many kids in India (and a number of other countries) don't even get the chance to read a book and enjoy it. Even though our country has a skyrocketing population, very few kids have the luxury of non-academic, joyful reading. This doesn't give them a chance to meet characters like Auggie, Percy, and The Giving Tree.

In India alone, over 287 million people are illiterate, which limits their ability to engage with books. Also, only about 10% of books bought in India are for leisure. As I think about these statistics, I realize that reading good books shouldn't be a privilege, but a birth right. We, who have the privilege to read, should be aware that there are millions of youth who want to read, but can't.

If a story changed your life, imagine the people whose lives are on hold because they haven't found their story yet. To be sure, a child not able to read isn't just their own problem; it's a problem shared by the whole society. We may be losing out on a great scientist, innovator, or leader.

Let's have book drives (donating books to NGOs or community centers), or set up Little Free Libraries in neighborhoods. Let's use the “one-on-one mindset” (donating a book every time we get a new one). I will use the blogs I write on social media and author interactions to spread awareness of these issues.

A bookshelf isn't just a place where you store books; it's a sign of the joy and love of reading. Let's make sure that all readers, young and old, are able to read the many good books written, irrespective of their financial abilities.

—Aaryaman Kinra, age 12, India. He writes: “I am 12 years old and a student at Neev Academy. When I am not diving into a new book, I can be found playing tennis, cricket or practicing the guitar.”

Cover: Three Sisters, Oregon Cascades, photo: Arun N. Toké.

Snow is water, but it's just *temporarily* frozen water resource for life on planet. Water is life, and all of life depends on the availability of fresh water regularly. Fresh water is a *limited resource*. Climate change makes it even less predictable now. This year the snow pack in Oregon was definitely on the low side as seen in this bird's eye view photographed from an airplane, on a flight over the Three Sisters mountains in Central Oregon in mid March.

Global temperatures are definitely on the rise over the last few decades. “Continued fossil fuel emissions are directly responsible for the disruption people are experiencing this week in their homes, schools, and workplaces... The speed of [climate] change is startling... Every few years, we are seeing heat records shattered in Europe. This year, it has been in consecutive months. In the UK, we are used to ‘snow days’ shutting down schools, but this generation is now growing up with ‘heat days’ as well.” says, *Theodore Kepping, researcher & coauthor of the World Weather Attribution Study on Extreme Weather.*

Even When It Shakes

By Rouchu (Ariel) Wu, Age 11, Alberta, Canada

I was six when I first arrived in Canada.

I pressed my forehead against the airplane window as snow fell like fragile silk. Soft and beautiful, yet cold, sharper than anything I'd ever felt. I felt small and untheathered, like a single snowflake drifting in a world that didn't know me, a world that didn't care if I belonged.

I thought of Chengdu, China. The streets I used to run through, the sizzle of street food, the spicy scent of Sichuan peppercorns curling through the night air, lanterns glowing softly in the dark.

My first day of school was terrifying. Twenty curious eyes turned toward me. I whispered, "Hello." My throat tightened. My hands were cold.

During recess, I watched children run, jump, and laugh while I clutched my lunch—my beloved spicy noodles—and stayed frozen on the sidelines. I smiled when people looked at me, but it was a mask.

Then one day, someone sat beside me. She pointed at my noodles and said, slowly, "That smells really good." I didn't understand every word, but I understood kindness.

Her name was Chloe.

That moment was small, but it stayed with me. After that, I began trying to learn English, but I did it alone.

I whispered words on my walk home, repeated sentences in front of the mirror until my tongue ached. I stumbled, mispronounced, faltered. Sometimes kids laughed. Once, someone copied (mimicked?) the way I spoke, stretching out my words in a strange voice.

My face burned. I smiled anyway.

Once, when I stumbled over my words, she leaned closer and said quietly, "You're doing better than you think." I didn't answer. But I remembered.

I smiled through the pain. I swallowed the frustration and the shame. I hid my feelings so no one would see the broken pieces of me.

Books became my escape. I started with picture books, then small novels, and eventually books far beyond what anyone my age was supposed to understand. Words became wings. Words became armor. Words became a place where I could breathe without judgment.

Slowly, I began helping others with English. The girl who once whispered "hello" became someone people came to for answers.

Even after I moved to another city, some people didn't really leave.

Years later, I wrote my name on the board to be an MC. When they called my name, my heart stopped. Me? Chosen? After all the fear, all the doubt, all the years of hiding behind a smile... I'd made it.

I practiced tirelessly. Every echo of my voice was a preparation, every heartbeat a reminder that I could do this.

On the stage, hundreds of eyes watched me. And then I spoke. "Good morning, everyone." Clear. Steady. Unwavering.

In that moment, the girl who had been afraid, the girl who hid her pain, the girl who felt invisible...began to fade. In her place stood someone new. Brave. Seen. Alive.

I wasn't ashamed anymore. I ate my spicy noodles without hiding them. I wore my Chinese clothes proudly. I played the guzheng without hesitation.

"I'm from Chengdu," I said. "I'm Chinese."

My culture wasn't something to shrink away from, it was my pride, my anchor, my voice.

Being new didn't mean erasing home. It meant carrying both Chengdu and Calgary within me. Step by step, word by whispered word, smile by hard-earned smile. And it meant remembering the people who helped me along the way.

Chloe showed me what kindness looked like. And slowly, without even realizing it, I began to do the same.

When someone new sits quietly at the edge of the playground, I notice. When someone struggles to find the right words, I wait. When someone feels invisible, I try to be the person who sees them. Not because I have to, but because someone once did that for me.

This is my story. Not perfect, not easy, but mine.

Somewhere along the way, the cold began to fade, and the light grew warm.

If you've ever smiled through pain, hidden your feelings, felt small or invisible, you are not alone.

You can rise. You can speak. You can belong. Even when your voice is quiet. Even when it trembles. Even when it's uncertain, it's still yours, and it always was.

Author's Note: Chloe isn't one person, but many. The quiet kindness that meets us between languages and helps us find our voice.

The Windmill That Spoke to the Sky

A Nine-Year-Old's Curious Journey into the World of Windmills, Clean Energy, and Big Dreams

Something I really enjoy is building things and learning how they work. A few weeks ago, I made a small windmill at home using cardboard, paper, a motor, and a straw. It was part of a DIY project I did for fun, but while doing it, I got super curious—what are real windmills like? How do they help us? Are they just toys, or do they do something important? That's when I started reading and exploring everything I could about windmills, and now I want to share it all with you.

A windmill is a machine that uses the wind to spin blades. This spinning action can be used to do work like grinding grain, pumping water, or even generating electricity. In modern times, windmills that create electricity are called wind turbines, but the idea behind them is the same—using the natural power of the wind to help people. I think that's pretty amazing. Wind is free, it's everywhere, and it doesn't pollute the air like cars and factories do.

The first windmills were made more than a thousand years ago. They were used in Persia (which is now called Iran), and they looked very different from the wind turbines we see today. Those early windmills had vertical sails and were mostly used to grind grains into flour. Later, in the Netherlands, people built big wooden windmills with huge blades that turned in the wind. These were used to pump water and keep the land dry. Some of those Dutch windmills are still standing today, and they look like something from a fairy tale.

I was curious how they actually work. I found out that when the wind blows, it pushes the blades of the windmill, making them spin. These blades are attached to a shaft, kind of like a rod. When the blades spin, the shaft spins too. In old windmills, this spinning would turn gears that crushed wheat or pumped water. In new wind turbines, the shaft is connected to a generator, which creates electricity. So, the wind isn't just blowing for fun—it's doing something useful!

After learning all this, I felt like building a windmill wasn't just fun—it was powerful. When I put my little windmill near the window, and the breeze made the blades spin, I imagined it talking to the wind and saying, "Thank you for the energy." I know that sounds funny, but it felt magical. My windmill didn't power any

lights yet, but it did make me feel like an inventor.

One of the best things about windmills is that they are good for the Earth. They don't make smoke or dirty gases like cars or factories. They don't use fuel that can run out. Wind is a renewable energy—which means it never ends. That's why scientists and engineers are building more and more windmills all over the world to help stop climate change. Windmills help keep our air clean and reduce global warming. That's a big deal.

I found out that in India, places like Gujarat and Tamil Nadu have huge wind farms—these are places where many wind turbines are lined up in rows. Other countries (like USA, China, and Germany) also use a lot of wind energy. Some wind turbines are even built in the sea! These are called offshore wind farms, and they float and spin in the ocean wind. That's so cool, right?

There are also amazing facts about windmills that I never knew. For example, the biggest wind turbine in the world has blades longer than a football field! And one wind turbine can make enough electricity to power hundreds of homes. In Africa, some kids even made windmills from scrap to power lights in their villages. That made me think—if they can do that, maybe I can build something that helps people too.

Even though I'm a kid, I believe we can do our part. We can learn about clean energy. We can use less electricity and waste less water. We can build small windmills at home or school. We can talk to our friends about why wind energy is important. And maybe someday, some of us will grow up to become scientists or engineers who build even better wind turbines.

So now, when I see a windmill or a picture of a wind turbine, I don't just think of spinning blades. I think of teamwork between nature and humans. I think of a world where we don't pollute the air, and we live in harmony with the sky, the wind, and the land. I imagine windmills waving at the clouds, saying, "Let's save the planet together."

That's why I called this story, "The Windmill That Spoke to the Sky." Because in my imagination, that's exactly what it does.

—Parth Singla, age 9, Haryana, India.

OpEd: The Dying Art of Journalism

Journalism is dying. Not slowly, nor quietly. It is being dismembered, defunded, robotized, and shot at, while most people are too busy scrolling social media to stop and notice. Take a moment to think about the last time you physically held a newspaper in your hands and took the time to genuinely read about what the articles had to say. If you answer that it has been quite some time since, you are not alone.

It's no secret that the internet has become ingrained in our daily rituals. Today's companies have comfortably profited by turning dull chores into a convenience, bending modern technology to our busy schedules. You can order groceries without leaving your couch, consult a doctor without being seen in person, and even receive live updates about current events unfolding, with a delay measured in minutes rather than days.

While all of these newfound benefits seem remarkable, there's an aspect to this same reality that is especially troubling under the surface to modern journalism. That same technology that we all rely on has harmed the people who once made it their professional purpose to factually inform the public on current events.

When the internet emerged in the 1990s, the newspaper and advertising industry was valued at nearly \$40 billion, with editors and writers focused on timely print news delivery. However, as digital advertising became dominated by companies like Facebook and Google, the print news industry struggled to transition online, leading to a rapid decline in serious journalism.

Since then, employment in the U.S. newspaper industry has fallen 80%. The industry that once offered 450,000 jobs at its peak now employed roughly 79,000 people annually as of 2024 data. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that employment for journalists will continue to decline throughout the decade.

Journalism has long been an unreliable financial pathway, with journalists often undercompensated for their essential contributions. As thousands of newspaper jobs vanish in the U.S., the field has become less attractive, reflected in the average salary of \$60,000, which many view as unfair. This decline has detrimental effects, leading to writer burnout, shrinking newsrooms, and a shift in focus from authenticity to efficiency and from nuance to uniformity in news coverage.

Despite the challenges that the internet has brought, it has promised a solution to its own disruption. With the help of digital outlets, anyone with a laptop and wifi connection can type away and become an author. Excellent journalists have been produced with the help of the internet, offering millions of articles and genres of content for individuals to engage with at the click of a button. The information is everywhere, and it can be accessed anywhere. However, journalism is beginning to lack quality.

The increased accessibility and embedded AI in today's technology has introduced a new set of obstacles for the pressured news industry. AI can proofread, structure, and create articles at speeds no human can match, forcing real journalists to compete for jobs that companies can replace with Artificial Intelligence.

Utilizing these resources at the expense of qualified humans is financially beneficial for many news companies struggling to compete in a slowing market. Sports results, weather updates, and traffic reports have already been partially automated by some major companies to save time and money, perpetuating a cycle that kills authentic journalism in the long run.

The rise of fake news and the increasing use of AI are harming public trust in journalism. A recent poll shows that the percentage of Americans who trusted mass media "a great deal" dropped from 72% in the 1970s to only 34% in 2023. Many people are unhappy with AI's role in technology, as it lacks empathy, misunderstands the value of statistics, and shortens attention spans. These issues threaten the core values of journalism.

Abroad, the profession of journalism is losing something more considerably irreplaceable. Journalists working in active war zones have always operated in dangerous conditions, many of whom consider these risks to be the norm of the job. A catastrophic new trend is emerging through the 21st century, where there is an apparent deliberateness for journalists to be targeted and killed around the world.

The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 2024 was the deadliest year for journalists in the history of their three-decade research: over 124 journalists and media workers were killed in action that year, =>



Kayaking and Camping on the Owyhee River, Southeastern Oregon. Photo: Arun N. Toké, editor.

with two-thirds of them Palestinians who were killed by Israeli forces. The number of journalist deaths in 2024 exceeded the “record high” of 113 that were killed in 2007 during the Iraq war.

Since the Israeli War in Gaza began in October 2023, more than 260 journalists, as of April 2026, have been killed as a result of their reporting on the atrocities being committed in the Gaza Strip. In the history of journalism, this conflict is reportedly the deadliest for press members. Those who are passionate about discovering present-day realities are being inhumanely punished for their journalistic positions.

The profession as a whole, however, is facing considerably more challenges than ever before. The cumulating pressure of the internet, AI automation, declines in available job positions, and deliberate violence towards journalists is straining an already burdened industry. We as a whole, both as a nation and species, will begin to feel the pain that newsrooms have been facing for decades.

The next time you read a news article, whether it be on printed paper or on the timeline of your

Instagram feed, consider the following: was it written by a human? Is it properly reported, verified, and accurate? Is it relevant to the ongoing events today? Will this institution be standing in a decade from now?

This age of unfathomable technological advancement has made news available in quantities that have never before been available at the immediate hands of the consumer. In previous generations, individuals had to wait upwards of a few days to receive newspapers about events from the following days, but today, that reality is different: we are collectively watching the art of journalism die. Before you briefly skim the morning headlines, consider a world without journalists, because that’s where we’re headed.

—Megan Blattler, age 18, our student intern, Oregon.

I chose to write an opinion piece that addresses the decline of journalism in modern society. This topic is especially important to me because I spent a lot of my own personal time creating my high schools’ magazine, as well as interning here at Skipping Stones. The removal of credible news reporting has become a genuine problem, especially within the last six years, and our nation will be the one to feel those consequences.

Nature Poetry

Small Green Thoughts

It comes quietly—
not in a burst,
but in the way the air softens
and the light lingers a little longer
on windows and skin.

The mornings loosen their grip on cold,
and the afternoons stretch, unhurried,
as if time itself has decided
to breathe more deeply.

Something beneath the soil
decides to begin again,
without asking,
without needing permission.

Roots stir in the dark,
finding their way
through memory and silence.

Branches, still unsure of themselves,
hold small green thoughts
at their fingertips,
testing the air,
as if wondering
whether the world is ready.

A bird tries out a fragile song,
not yet certain of its own voice,
and somewhere,
water remembers how to move.

And all at once,
though nothing shouts it,
though no single moment can be named,
the world feels possible—
as if everything has agreed, quietly,
to try again.

—Youtao Cao, age 10, Japan.

Next Issue: Sept.-Dec. 2026
2026 Youth Honor Award Winners
Asian Celebration Haiku & Tanka Contest

A Crucial Link in the Ocean Chain

In this poem, I focus on the vaquita, a rare porpoise that represents the ocean's fragility. I was inspired by the "sacred thread" of nature—the idea that every small creature is a vital link in a much larger chain.

Deep in the ocean, quiet and small,
The vaquita swims beyond our call.
Hidden in the waters of the sea,
A rare marine animal, wild and free.

Like many creatures beneath the waves,
It depends on habitats and bays.
The sea provides food, shelter and space,
Supporting life in every place.

Marine animals play an important part,
Each one a piece of nature's art.
From whales and turtles to fish and rays,
They help keep balance in countless ways.

A single life is a sacred thread,
Where every species must be led.
We must protect every fin and soul,
To keep the ocean's spirit whole.

The vaquita reminds us why we care,
That ocean life is precious and rare.
By protecting the seas where these animals live,
We preserve the future they have to give.

Though small in size, its story is clear:
Every species matters, far or near.
Every effort to protect the sea
Helps marine life thrive for generations to be.

— Yuann Xie Yao, age 10, New York.

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More Than A Medal: *The Life Lessons of Olympic Slalom Paddler Evy Leibfarth*

I am a 16-year-old canoe slalom athlete. I train and compete in a traditionally male dominated sport based on precision, discipline, hard work, and focus. Oftentimes, I find it difficult to still feel empowered in my femininity when competing. Luckily, I have a role-model who uses her feminine individuality to bring her confidence when competing. For two-time Olympian Evy Leibfarth, slalom has also been a place to learn lessons about pressure, perseverance, and staying true to herself. She is a 22-year old athlete and competing on the world stage has taught her far more than just how to navigate turbulent water. Her journey offers insight into what it takes to compete at the Olympic level while challenging expectations about what an olympian should look like, especially for young women who want to succeed without sacrificing their femininity.

Leibfarth represented the U.S. at the Tokyo and Paris Olympics. “At my first Olympics, I didn’t have a lot of experience racing at that level. I was so scared of messing up and disappointing people. My mindset was focused on fear,” she says. In between Olympics, Evy grew not just as an athlete, but as a human being. “For my second Olympics, I went in with a much more positive mindset. I told myself how exciting it was to experience all that pressure. How cool it is that I get to feel this energy around me and that so many people believe in me.” Evy earned a bronze at her second Olympics. Between the two games, Evy worked with a sports psychologist to reframe pressure as something positive rather than something threatening. “I thought: it doesn’t matter how I do as long as I give it my all and I’m paddling like me. Learning to deal with pressure is one of the hardest things paddlers have to do. Goals are great, but expectations are hard.” Evy’s internal growth has played out on the international stage. We all can use her example as we navigate our daily struggles; even though our challenges might not be at the Olympics scale.

Evy said, “When I was 15, it was my first season competing as a senior. I medaled at some international events, which felt amazing, but it also created really high expectations.” The pressure forced Evy to reevaluate why she competed. “When it comes down to it, I’m not paddling to win, I’m paddling because I love it. The struggles and hardships you go through in slalom are just as important as the results.” The few minutes before a slalom run are emotionally intense, and Evy has devel-

oped her own ritual to enter the start gate with confidence. “Ten seconds before my run, I take a deep breath and smile—my dad always tells me to do that.” Positive self-talk also fills Evy with assurance and confidence. “I talk to myself out loud in the start gate: *‘I want to win this, and I can.’ ‘How lucky am I to be here?’*” I’ve learned to take a deep breath and smile, not just before a slalom race, but before I do any difficult task, and it really helps.

For Evy, success in sport ultimately comes back to perspective. While she has always set ambitious goals, she hopes the legacy she leaves in the slalom community is about more than results. “I want people to remember that although I took sports very seriously, I always had fun,” she said. “Having fun is the most important thing.” That mindset must be an important lesson she has learnt.

Evy shows all young girls that women in sport can be athletic, happy, and feminine all at once. “You don’t have to change yourself to be a professional athlete,” she says. Evy has always embraced femininity even in a traditionally male-dominated environment. She remembers being told she didn’t take the sport seriously because of how she presented herself. “Growing up, people told me I wouldn’t succeed because I wore makeup and dresses to sessions,” says Evy. Her experience resonates deeply with me. I am a girl who loves the color pink, and always needs a cute outfit to feel confident for whatever I do. Entering a race is scary, but looking down at my pink boat, bedazzled helmet, and pink lifejacket is a source of joy and reassurance that I can do hard things while looking fabulous. Evy’s influence expands beyond athletes like me and into the wider world of sport and beauty. Last Olympics, Evy was part of Sephora’s campaign focused on connecting beauty and sport. By doing so, she helped challenge the outdated idea that femininity and athleticism cannot coexist. While some say that you can’t express your personal sense of style while also being competitive, Evy challenges that narrative.

Her response is simple: “You can go win a race with glitter on your face and still be strong.” While I don’t know if I’ll ever put my lip liner and favorite shade of pink glitter on my face before descending a 50-ft. waterfall like Evy, I’d love to add a little pink and sparkle to my outfit before my biggest races. In my own way, I am channeling my inner Evy!

—Georgia Lindemann, age 16, Florida.

Zainab's Lamp

Zainab was twelve when her father's cart broke for the last time.

After that, their small village had no money for oil, and at night, her one-room house was dark.

But Zainab had a borrowed slate, a piece of chalk, and a strong wish to learn. Every evening, she sat under the only streetlamp in the village. The light was weak, moths surrounded it, and people rushed past. She didn't mind. She copied words from an old newspaper and made questions for herself from them. One day, it was the meaning of "resilience." The next day, it was, "How do bridges hold weight?"

It was slow.

Some nights, the wind blew out the lamp, and she would wait until it was lit again, her fingers cold on the slate. Her mother worried. "Who will marry a girl with ink-stained hands?" she would ask. Zainab would smile and say, "Lighting the lamp is in my hands. Allah will provide the light."

Months turned into a year.

Other girls began to join her. First one, then three. They brought their own scraps of paper. They called the spot "Zainab's circle." When the village teacher saw them, he gave Zainab his old books on Saturdays. Zainab taught what she learned to the others that same night.

Two years passed like this.

Zainab's questions grew harder. She wrote essays by the lamp and mailed them to a free correspondence program she had found. She failed the first test. She studied more. She failed again. On the third try, she passed.

The last winter was the hardest.

Her father fell ill. Zainab tutored younger children during the day for a few rupees and studied at night. When the scholarship letter finally came, it was not a surprise. It was the result of every cold night, every failed test, and every word she had taught another girl.

She left for the city university, but she did not go alone. Three girls from her circle went with her on a grant the teacher had helped them apply for.

Years later, people in the village stopped calling the streetlamp by its old name.

They called it "Zainab's Lamp" now. Because she had proved that one small, steady light could teach a whole village how to see.

—Farkhanda khatoon, Karachi, Pakistan. She explains: "This story is inspired by the girls in our villages who study by moonlight and still believe in light."

Spiritual Currents

"This poem is about what my adopted father and second mother taught me in seeking out my inner self, in the Native American way. I do enjoy it very much and will learn more about my culture. I wrote this poem because I feel that there will always be a spirit guiding us wherever we go. Even in death, there's a spirit that guides us."

Within each breath, a quiet turning,
Threads of fire, endless yearning.
Circles unseen, both rise and fall,
Whispers, bind the vast to the small.

Through the earth, soft and wide,
Spirits dance where truth abide.

Were streams never seen,
Flowing light, we are forever

They rise so quietly, to meet the light,
And the seeds of dreams are joy by the mark.
On the surface, of all things that heat,
Our paths, where our two feet step.

Let time stretch, let seasons spin and grow,
There's love, where hope is the seeds of sorrow.
Walking onward hand in hand through light and night,
Our souls hold tight to what we know was right.

—Makayla Warner, age 14, grade 9, Oklahoma.



My Travels to Kumrat Valley and Thandyani in Pakistan

Kumrat Valley: A Winter Wonderland

On a cool Friday afternoon last year, on January 31st, we set out on our journey. My family and I departed our Taxila home early afternoon, eager to spend a winter weekend in the snow-covered splendor that is Kumrat Valley. For a large portion of the drive, the magnificent Indus River accompanied us as the route wound through tunnels and hills. We took in the surrounding landscape—towering mountains shrouded in early winter mist—as music played softly in the car, blending with the hum of the engine and the occasional conversation.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, we paused to offer prayers and grabbed some snacks. The drive took nearly nine hours, and somewhere along the way, I drifted into a light sleep. When I awoke in District Dir, the windows were completely fogged. “What’s on the glass?” I asked my mother. “That’s fog,” she smiled. “It’s freezing outside.” By late night, weary from the journey, we checked into Hotel Green Hills. Wrapped in warm blankets, we fell asleep almost instantly. When we got up around 7 a.m. next morning, we were greeted by a breathtaking view of a snow-covered mountain directly in front of our hotel. We had a quick breakfast before traveling the 14 kilometers to the Kumrat Waterfall. After two kilometers of driving and four kms of walking in the clear air, we rented a jeep for the final eight kms. Snow became deeper under us as we ascended, and soon the jeep started to skid on the slick road. We waited as another car had stalled up ahead. Only the distant sound of water and the crunch of snow broke the unreal solitude.

We eventually arrived at the waterfall. As we hiked the last distance, our feet dug ten inches into the snow. We absorbed in the sight of icy cascades and glistening streams, laughed, and took many pictures despite the cold seeping through our boots. We then strolled down to the riverbank, where the crystal-clear water reflected the sky. It was humble and serene. By 4 p.m. in the afternoon, when we returned to the hotel, we were hungry and exhausted. Although it was late, the lunch was amazing. After that, I had a nap, and the remainder of the day went by peacefully, filled with family stories, munchies, and sound sleep.

Our last day, February 2nd, we got up early and left by 9:00 a.m. With snow-covered mountains, rivers meandering through valleys, and the excitement of winter's hold palpable everywhere, the trip home was equally enchanted. The water spraying on the windscreen momentarily froze. The temperature was far lower than zero degrees Celcius. We stopped a few times, once for oranges from a roadside seller, once by a river, and again next to a flour mill that was powered by water. We got home around 7:00 p.m., capping a journey that will be with me for years to come.

Abbottabad, Thandyani

Thandyani: Where the Hills Whisper Peace

We left for Thandyani, a tranquil hill station close to Abbottabad, on a crisp April morning. While we were driving, the crisp, cool air gently brushed our faces. With each bend, the scenery changed, revealing valleys that went on forever, rolling hills, and pine trees. We arrived in Thandyani by the afternoon after making a lunch stop on route. We reached a stunning vista after a brief ascent. The land below appeared so far away and so motionless, while the sky above us seemed to go on forever. The only noises were the distant echo of songbirds and the wind rustling through pine needles. It was a peaceful time spent in nature. We made a stop at the well-known Illyasi Mosque on the way back, which is renowned for both its delectable fritters and its spiritual beauty. Flavourful, crunchy, and hot, they were the ideal way to round off a lovely day.

Thoughts

These travels served as a reminder of the beauty of nature, the love of family, and the unspoken delight of exploring new places—all of which are found in simplicity. Every moment, from the soft slopes of Thandyani to the snow-covered paths of Kumrat, served as a reminder to slow down and appreciate the surroundings.

—Sitara Nauman, is an English medium student in 8th grade in Pakistan. The Kumrat Valley in the Upper Dir district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province is known for its stunning natural beauty and Abbottabad at an elevation of 4,120 ft. is a hill resort located in the foothills of the Hindu Kush and Karakoram ranges. Photos from her travels on facing page.

The Voice from Spring

In the early morning of spring, cherry blossoms and apricot blossoms were everywhere on the streets. Iris's mother bought two apricot blossoms for decorating. Well, she was lucky because Spring is her favorite season. She would visit her grandparents and receive lucky money.

She went downstairs for her morning glass of water and bread. Sky, her dog, sniffed the fresh air. Mom looked at the list of things to do today.

"First, we will go to our grandparents' house, then shop for clothes. The biggest event is that we will see the lion dance!"

"Hooray!" Iris cheered. Watching the lion dance is one of her favorite things to do in Spring.

Dad took the bags into the car. "Ready!" he commanded.

Sky jumped on Iris's lap. They drove to their grandparents' house. The way was full of golden fields and shops. Swallows flew high in the sky. There was lots of traffic, and the road was busy with people. It meant *Tết* had come.

At the house, Grandmother ran out and hugged Iris. "Welcome!" she said in a weak voice and handed Iris her lucky money.

They sat on the chairs chatting. On the table was lots of food and candy. She couldn't help herself.

"I always waited for you to visit me," her grandmother said. "And now, I can see my grandchildren happy."

After an hour, it was time to say goodbye. She loved her grandmother. It had been a long time since she had seen her.

Sky barked loudly.

"Don't worry, Sky." Iris petted her dog. "We're going to Whimsical Wardrobe to buy new clothes."

Iris liked shopping. Cubby is her favorite kids' clothing store.

Dad drove to the mall. While he looked for a place to park, Mom, Sky, and Iris walked into the entrance.

"Cubby is on the third floor, Mom," she said.

They walked inside the store. There were dresses,

shirts, jeans, shorts, and *ao dai* (the Vietnamese traditional long tunic dress), Mom chose an *ao dai* and some shirts and jeans. She picked a headband for Sky.

At the counter, Iris looked at some shelves and saw some small lion heads for dancing. She had always wanted one.

Mom took Iris and Sky out of the store.

Now, Iris could hardly wait! It was time for Dad to take her to see the lion dance. She liked the moves and fancy costumes.

Dad drove to the gate where the lion dance was starting. There were people selling caramel candy, sausages, hot dogs, popcorn, and much more. Dad bought Iris a bucket of popcorn and some caramel candy.

The lights on the stage went on. Three lions walked out: one red and two yellow. It was so cool. They jumped super high, the drums were loud, and so were the cymbals.

After the show, fireworks lit the sky. It was beautiful.

Dad told Iris it was time to go home. She was sad to say goodbye to the lions, goodbye to the fireworks, and goodbye to the stage.

Back at home, Iris found a box on the couch. "What's that, Mom?" She asked.

"It's a surprise. You told me last spring that you really wanted one, so I bought it." Mom walked up the stairs. "You can open it!"

Iris walked to the box. She found a letter stuck to a red bow. The letter said: *To Iris.*

"Some random toy?" She thought.

She opened the box and found... A LION HEAD!

Iris was so shocked. She had wanted it forever. Now she could hang around all day and play with it.

Her holiday was over, but she could still hear spring calling her name.

—Li Li, age 9, Vietnam. *Tết festival marks the first day of the Lunar New Year—the most important celebration in Vietnamese culture, and it marks the beginning of spring in Vietnam. It is also an occasion for family reunions in many Asian cultures, including Vietnamese. In 2027, Tết celebrations will be held on February 6th and 7th.*

Celebrate America 2026 Creative Writing Contest



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

First Prize Winner:

A Classroom Full of the World

My backpack felt bigger than me that day,
Filled with pencils, hope, and words to say.
The morning sun was warm and bright,
As I walked to school in the golden light.

My parents walked beside me, calm and proud,
Through streets that buzzed with voices loud.
My mom fixed my ribbon and smiled with care,
My dad gently brushed a strand of my hair.

I was born here, under America's sky,
Where dreams feel big, and hopes fly high.
But my parents came from India, far away,
Searching for an opportunity in a distant place.

They came so that one small girl could grow
In a place where endless chances flow.
A land where effort lights the way,
And tomorrow shines brighter than today.

Inside the hallways buzzing with cheer,
So many different kids were here.
Different faces, cultures, names,
Different foods and different games.

A girl from Mexico waved and said hi,
A boy from China smiled and walked by.
A friend from Denmark bounced a ball,
And a girl from Idaho waved in the hall.

At lunchtime, I opened my box to eat,
Warm *rotis* and curry smelling sweet.
For a moment, I wondered if they would stare,
At the spices floating through the air.

But a girl leaned over with a friendly hum,
"That smells amazing—can I try some?"
Soon we were sharing bites and laughs,
Trading stories across the class.

I told them of India, my parents knew,
Of monsoon rains and skies so blue.
Of cricket games and summer heat,
Of busy streets and markets' sweet.

They told me of baseball, pumpkins, and snow,
Of autumn leaves that brightly glow.
Of sledding hills and winter cheer,
And summer camps that come each year.

The teacher smiled and wrote on the board,
"Welcome, Class," in letters adored.
She said, "In this room we learn and grow,
And every story matters, you know."

I looked around at the many bright faces,
Different languages, cultures, and places.
And suddenly something felt so clear—
This is what makes this country so dear.

America felt like a giant tree,
With branches for you and branches for me.
Each leaf a story, each root a land,
Yet growing together, hand in hand.

It's a place where cultures meet and blend,
Where strangers smile and become your friend.
Where children of immigrants stand tall and free,
Learning together like one big family.

So on my first day in fifth-grade class,
I watched the busy moments pass.
Fear turned to laughter, quiet but clear—
And suddenly I was happy here.

I thought of my parents standing near,
Of the long road that brought them here.
Across the oceans, across the years,
Through hard work, courage, and hidden tears.

My backpack still felt big that day,
But my heart felt bigger in every way.
Because in this classroom, bright and free,
America had made a place for me.

By Aneri Kakrania, grade 5, California.

Aneri was honored during the American Immigration Council's 2026 Immigration Impact Awards on June 19th in San Diego, California.

A long, long time ago		Or if you see ICE you can give a yelp
There was water		Or if you don't have the time
Then, there were trees	<i>Pomosh</i>	You could donate a few dollars
Then		A quarter, a dime
There were animals		But whatever you do
And bugs and bees		No matter how big or small,
Then there were humans	<i>Bangzhu</i>	You'll make someone happy
Living together		And that helps us all
Making friends		Think
Playing forever		Think about yourself
But their population became more		Your ancestors immigrated
And they got angry		A long, long time ago
And started a war	<i>Help</i>	So if you think, "Why help them?"
People became unwelcome		I just want you to know
They wanted to leave their countries		That your family went through hardships
To resettle in a different one		That long, long time ago
Where there was peace		This might convince you
But their culture began to come undone	<i>Hilfe mich</i>	Maybe it won't
Then the governments said		But if you can help there's no reason you don't
"You're not welcome here"		Because no matter where they come from
"We have enough people"		No matter where they are running from
"We want you to disappear"		Immigrants are human
Through days of travel	<i>Ayuda</i>	We are human
They could not rest		So no matter the color of their skin
Walking and walking		Or their accent
Doing their best to not be afraid		Whether its thick or thin
Of the guns		Kindness
Or the blood		Kindness helps us all
They might shed in a raid	<i>Pomosh</i>	In good times, in bad times
This		Whether we are rising
This still happens		Or about to fall
This		We need to work together
This is why		Whether we're with family, friends
This is why we need to be welcoming	<i>Bangzhu</i>	Or people we will not be with forever
Welcoming and helping those in need		Be welcoming
Why help the governments?		Whether you're welcoming immigrants with signs
Why help them when they're doing something wrong?		Or welcoming a family to their new home
This		You will be helping
This is why we need to help		So however you can
You can help with housing		Just do your best to help.

continued on col. 2.

—Beatrice Gordon, grade 5, North Carolina.

Third Place Winner:

What It Means To Be a Welcoming Nation

A welcoming nation opens its door
To people searching for hope and more.
It offers kindness, a helping hand,
And a safe place in a brand-new land.
It listens to stories from near and far,
And treats each person like a shining star.
Different languages, foods, and names,
But inside, we share the same **Dreams**.
A welcoming nation stands tall and strong,
It chooses love and right over wrong.
When we open our hearts and let others belong,
The world shines brighter—together we are strong.
It is a place where children can play,
Where laughter is heard throughout the day.
Where new friends are greeted with a **Smile**,
And kindness spreads across every mile.
A welcoming nation shares its light,
Helping others through the darkest night.
It teaches respect, fairness, and care,
And shows that everyone has a place **There**.
It is more than a country or land,
It is reaching out a gentle hand.
It means believing in hope and dreams,
Even when nothing is as quiet as it seems.
A welcoming nation celebrates each **Voice**,
Each story, culture, and choice.
When people feel safe and truly free,
Our nation grows stronger for all to see.
In a welcoming nation, every voice is **Heard**
No one is left behind or blurred.
From mountains high to river wide,
People are valued, nothing to hide.
It is a place where dreams take flight,
Where hope can bloom in the darkest night.
Where hands join across land and sea,
Together we build our **Community**.
So when we welcome others in our nation,
We build a world full of imagination.
We stand together, hand in hand,
A brighter future across the land.

—Haram Naseer Ahmed, grade 5, California.

The Quietest..Roar!

In a tropical, hushed rainforest, stood a hill. The trees swayed in the cool breeze and the birds chirped on top of the trees. All the animals enjoyed their cheerful lives, all except one, a particularly reluctant one. A slack, amicable sloth. He was so sluggish that nobody wanted to communicate to him. All he would do was climb tree branches leisurely and find a new spot on a tree to sleep. He would occasionally nibble on some leaves if he was hungry. All until he heard about an animal. The nimble, stalwart jaguar! Alongside his daffodil fur with ebony spots, he was feared but praised for his mighty, ear-piercing roar. He was the leader of the prowl (a group of jaguars). He was all the sloth wanted—strength, speed, confidence and size. Just then, the sloth wanted to go to his territory and learn how to roar. He finally located a toucan and asked him if he knew where the jaguar was.

“Hello, Mr Toucan, do you know where the frightful jaguar is?” questioned the sloth. “Are you sure you want to go to him?” asked the toucan. “I’m a hundred percent sure!” replied the sloth. “Okay, but you have to be heedful of your surroundings,” cautioned the toucan. Trembling with fear, he scaled the steep hill for every time he ascended, fear filled him even more until... ROARRR! The jaguar had seen him! After countless climbs, he finally reached the summit, where the jaguar was sprawling on a moss-covered, eroded and monumental rock. “Ahem, excuse me, King Jaguar!” exclaimed the sloth. “Um, MEEK, King Jaguar, could you wake up?” complained the sloth. YAWN! CRACK! GROAN! GRUNT! Silence filled the earthy air. His ears flattened against his head. It surely gave a terrifying scare. Consequently, he fled. He darted to the nearest bush and concealed behind it. The jaguar whimpered, “Don’t injure me with those razor-sharp claw...” “Calm down, I’m not going to hurt you,” interjected the sloth. “What do you want from me?” responded the jaguar. “I want to learn how to roar!” cried the sloth. “Sure, just take a few deep breaths, relax your throat and then push out air in heavy puffs and you can roar!” asserted the jaguar. His first and second try was a failure but in his third try, he roared! ROAR! However, it was quiet. After that, they were inseparable, indissoluble and best friends forever. From that day, they both learned that true strength isn’t about being the fastest or loudest. It’s about knowing yourself, moving at your own pace, and having the courage to embrace what makes you unique.

—Harris Idris, age 10, Doha, Qatar.

Taking Care of North Dakota

Moving to Harvey, North Dakota felt different. I was so used to the bustling streets of Orlando and the nearly constant sound of cars, that in North Dakota everything seemed peaceful and quiet by contrast. Rolling hills for miles around, and only the sound of your car on the highway. Now, having lived here for almost seven years, I can say that the peaceful and pristine image of North Dakota was nothing but a facade.

The majority of the middle and high school boys here always talk about their big, gas-guzzling trucks, diesel combines, and other farm equipment. They also talk about semis (tractor-trailers) and whether Peterbilt or Volvo is better. My preference for smaller and more fuel-efficient vehicles amuses them.

During recess, a big, loud pickup might rumble by, belching black exhaust, and one of my friends will say, "How's that smoke treatin' ya?" It annoys me because, well, they're just trying to provoke me. Plus, most of the people in my community are totally fine with high fuel emissions and polluting the environment, and they dismiss the fact that these things are contributing to climate change as untrue and silly. I'm pretty good at putting on a neutral mask, but really, when they make comments like this, I'm fuming inside.

One time, my friend Bentley and I were going on a bike ride, so I told him to meet me at my dad's house. When I met him in our driveway, the garage door was open. Bentley saw my dad's Mazda CX-90 and said, "That's a nice looking car!"

"Thanks," I said.

"Is it an EV?"

"Um..."

"Hybrid?"

"Yeah, it's a hybrid."

Bentley rolled his eyes. "Bruh."

"What?"

"I like it and don't like it at the same time."

I instantly knew why. Any car that used any amount of electricity to move was definitely not his type.

"Come on, Bentley," I said.

"What? It's a freaking hybrid. No one likes those."

I clenched my fists. I absolutely hate when someone makes a blanket statement or speaks in absolutes when they're expressing an opinion that might not be as popular outside of Harvey. "Maybe not anyone here, but I've seen countless hybrids and even fully electric cars in places other than NORTH DAKOTA!!!"

In the U.S., the deaths of around 200,000 people each year are linked to poor air quality. If people don't put in an effort to reduce their carbon footprint, our health and our climate will suffer. Many people in North Dakota think that their gas-guzzling vehicles are better and that EVs are just piles of junk metal with batteries in them that pollute the environment. What they don't see is that humanity as a whole has to work together to change our transportation system and energy production system; they think that the idea of one's personal choices helping fight climate change is futile. They are, in part, correct, but not for the reasons they think they are.

The greatest damage being done is not by individuals, but by huge fossil fuel companies, one of them being an oil company based right here in North Dakota. Marathon, the world's 22nd-largest oil producer (based on 2022 data), is the seventh-largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions in the oil and gas industry. This means that they are emitting way more greenhouse gases than they should be. Owing to Marathon's carelessness, Fort Berthold Reservation, right here in North Dakota, has seen several crude oil spills due to broken pipelines that pollute the air and water, and flaming does not completely eliminate the harmful gas emissions produced by the oil.[1] North Dakotans are perfectly capable of showing empathy to their community, so they should not be okay with this.

In fifth grade, Bentley was my best friend. We'd hang out together, go to the pool together, but most importantly, he played a huge role in helping me through my parents' divorce. He is one of the few kids in my class whose biological parents were separated. He empathized with me and gave me a few tips on what to do in certain situations, like when my parents were fighting, but most of the time, he was just there for me.

Following the pandemic, it was my first year of in-person school since second grade, and I didn't have any friends. My parents were almost always arguing, and of course, I couldn't talk to my brother—he was just four! One morning, my dad had shouted at me for forgetting to wash my face, which really hurt my feelings. I knew I'd have to bottle it all up before I got to school because I didn't want to attract too much attention.

When I got to school, I took a deep breath and went inside to see a large curtain in the corner of the commons area where the seventh-grade boys liked to hang out before class started. I went behind the curtain and there was Bentley; I sat down, put my head in my knees, and started to cry.

“Yusuf, are you okay, bro?” Bentley asked.

“I'm fine.” I said, tears rolling down my face.

“Did your dad say something?”

“Bentley, it's fine!” I said.

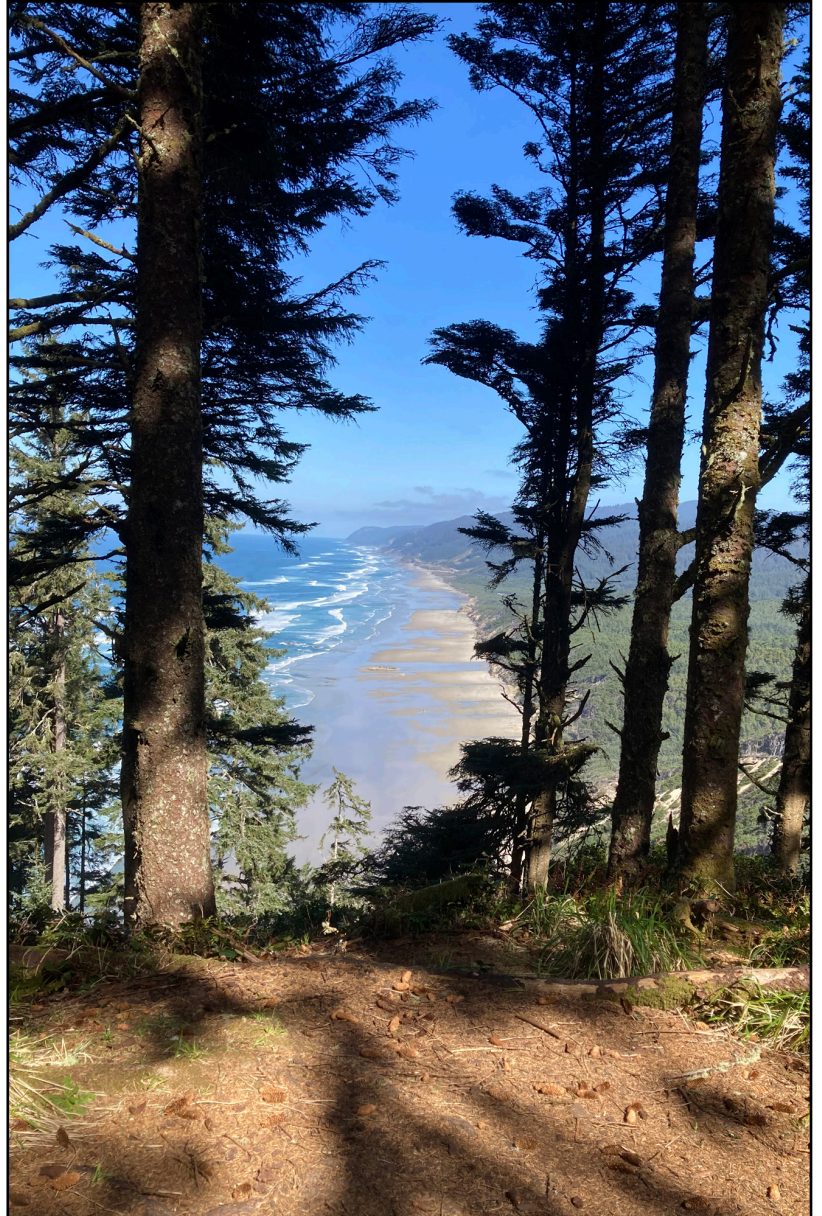
“I'm texting your mom,” he said as he opened his messages app.

I perked up, wiped my face with my sleeve and swiped at his phone, knocking it out of his hand. I put my head in between my knees again and my breath quickened.

He embraced my curled body in a hug, my heartbeat slowed, and the tears on my face began to dry.

We are humans, and we should always help our fellow humans in their time of need. If people here in North Dakota—good people like Bentley—took pride in a cleaner environment and the strength to take on a huge company like Marathon Oil, not only would people on the Fort Berthold Reservation be safer, but we could be proud that North Dakota is a state that takes care of its own.

—Yusuf Dean, age 13, North Dakota. He adds: “I live in the U.S. with my brother and my Sri Lankan immigrant parents. I don't speak Sinhalese, but I speak a bit of Spanish as my second language. I value curiosity, especially in children, because it is, in my opinion, the driving force behind learning and ultimately being



Hobbits Beach, Seen from a View Point on a Hike along the Pacific Coast of Oregon

Photo: Arun N. Toké, Oregon.

successful in life. When I moved to North Dakota from Florida seven years ago, I found that while it was very different from the city life I was used to, there were some similarities. My essay is a reflection on one of the sources of tension I've encountered in my North Dakota community.”

2026 Minoru Yasui Student Art Contest for Middle and High School Students

The theme for Minoru Yasui Student Art Contest (www.minoruyasuilegacy.org) for grades 5–12 was **Upholding the Rule of Law**. What does seeking justice for all look like? We're living in unprecedented times today, where the Constitution is being challenged, rule of law is being upended, and companies, universities, immigrants and other marginalized people are being demonized. If Minoru Yasui were alive today, what hopeful actions would he take for democracy, civil rights, and social justice? The 2026 winners were announced earlier this spring (visit the website details).

Senior Division, First Place: “Leading By Example” by Katharine Abbott, grade 11, Washington.

Katharine writes: “In a time when the rule of law is being ignored by those who promised to uphold it, it is more important than ever to speak out for justice and equality. However, in our divided country it often feels as though the pursuit of justice has been radicalized and even made out to be the problem in our society, rather than the step to a solution that it is.

This could not be farther from the truth, as Minoru Yasui demonstrated in his own battle for justice, when he fought the discriminatory laws that targeted his fellow Japanese Americans. Yasui understood that obstacles would need to be overcome to achieve immediate change, while making sure his community and others knew that their voices too could be heard with perseverance.

In my piece, *Leading By Example* (p. 35), I used a collage of traditional Japanese prints to honor Minoru Yasui's heritage, and ballpoint pen to depict what I believe is the only way to counter destructive narratives and uphold the rule of law: speaking out louder than ever to inspire our future leaders to use their voices to uphold the rule of law. I wanted to illustrate the act of speaking out, with the children in the collage learning and participating in a march for justice, following the path that Yasui and others have forged for them.

We live in a time when fear of retaliation has silenced many voices. It is crucial that we take action now to demonstrate again the power of protest.”

Senior Division, Second Place Winner: Ami Moon, grade 12, Washington.

Ami writes: “The constitution and the rule of law were established on the basis of equality. The heart of this nation is built on the notion that everyone, regardless of their background, should be heard. However, our current administration has defiled the meaning of justice and left an unrecognizable and fleeting image of what our nation should be. When the rules of law are a suggestion and the Constitution a loose guidebook, it

seems justified to break families apart and kidnap children from their schools because of the shade of their skin. Like the fading Lady Justice in my painting, hope seems tenuous in these unpredictable times. Yet, in the blues and blacks of the oil paints, vitality emerges from the lady's chest. It's legacies like Minoru Yasui's who evoke action in ordinary people and keep her alive.

Change relies on discomfort. My art displays the dismemberment of Lady Justice; her flesh is exposed, showing the consequences of ignoring the rules of law in an unfiltered form. Hope is not maintained through comfort but through action, fiery passions, and anger for change, like the vibrant oranges and reds that fill the lady's bloodstream and keep her together. Minoru Yasui was just an ordinary man, yet when he stood in that courtroom, he became a lifeline for thousands of marginalized individuals. He wanted to share the message that anyone can act, so I chose a young Hispanic girl to represent the passion and power that drives change. The heart of justice doesn't have to be wealthy, physically strong, or well-connected, it can be you.

The most dangerous action in times like these is inaction. Protests, boycotts, and noise are what keep equality alive. We should be loud, colorful, and wide-reaching: “We are here, and we will not give up.”

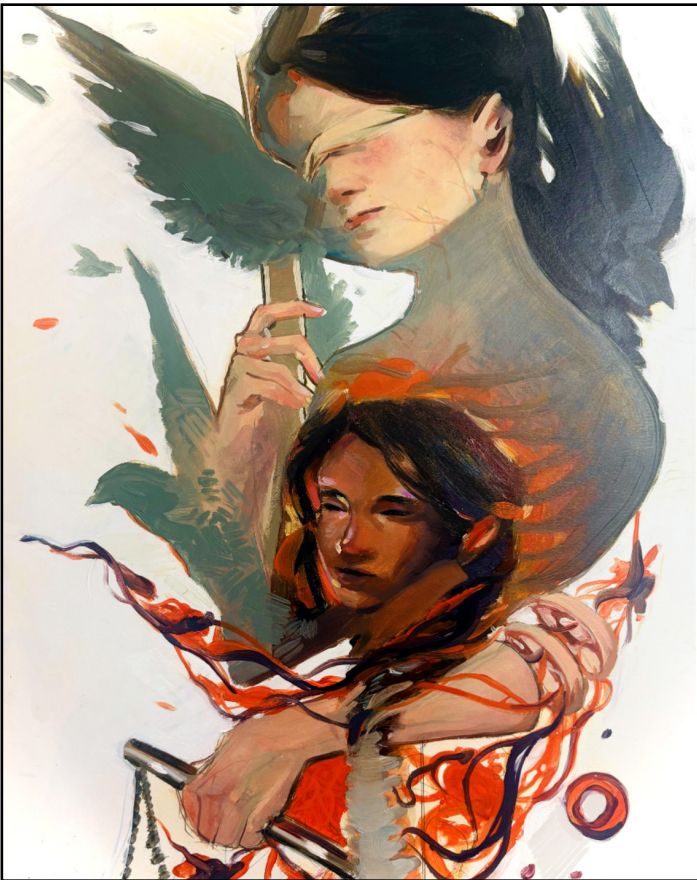
Junior Division, First Place Winner: Ava Makiya, grade 8, Maryland.

Ava adds: “My art piece reflects this belief. Lady Justice shows structure and balance within my artwork, representing the rule of law, creating fairness and stability, as well as the paper cranes representing peace and hope, colors of strength and resilience. The lanterns, symbols of guidance and community. Blank spaces for failed and silencing voices, light breaking through spaces representing accountability and hope. Through this piece, I show that the rule of law is not automatic—it must be defended, just as Yasui did...I am half Okinawan. Learning about Minoru Yasui connects my family's history to a larger national story of injustice and resilience. His story feel intimate and real, not a distant history...”

Upholding the Rule of Law: What Does Seeking Justice for All Look Like?



Senior Division, First Place: "Leading By Example" by Katharine Abbott, gr. 11, Washington.



Senior Division, Second Place: Ami Moon, gr. 12, Washington.



Junior Division, First Place: Ava Makiya, gr. 8, Maryland.

Real Meaning of Education

Last year, during an event at my school, our teacher asked us a question: “What is education?” I thought I knew the answer. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I did not. That question stayed with me for days.

When I started thinking of education, the first things that came to my mind were probably the same things most of us think of—school, examinations, and report cards. But somehow, I felt that could not be all.

Then I remembered a conversation with my family about one of the oldest teachings in the world, that every person must discover what they are and what their life truly means. And when I asked how, the answer was: education. Education is one of the most powerful tools we have.

So, I tried to connect the dots. School, exams, and report cards are definitely important parts of learning—but they are not complete meaning of education. Real education is much more than collecting information or earning good grades. I think of it in three steps:

The first step is gaining knowledge. We learn facts, ideas, and skills from books, teachers, parents, and our experiences. We study science, mathematics, languages, history, music, and art. This knowledge helps us understand the world and prepares us for future opportunities. But knowing things is only the beginning.

The second step is applying knowledge in real life. Mathematics, for example, is not only about solving equations—it teaches us logical thinking and problem-solving. Learning about the environment becomes meaningful when we reduce waste, conserve resources, and care for nature. At this stage, education helps us shape our character. We develop discipline, responsibility, critical thinking, and empathy. We begin to understand that what matters is not only what we know, but also what we do with what we know. We stop just following instructions and start asking meaningful questions of our own.

The third and deepest part is wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge in the right way—with humility. It guides us to make thoughtful decisions, treat others with kindness, and act responsibly. This is where we get to know the true version of ourselves and its importance in life.

When I was very young, my mother taught me “*Vidya Dadati Vinayam*,” an ancient Sanskrit saying that means: “True knowledge gives humility.” For a long time, I did not fully understand it. But now, I think I do. The more we truly learn, the humbler we become, because we realize there is much more still to discover. Wisdom and humility always go hand in hand.

A simple example can help us see the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Imagine two students who both score excellent marks in science. One uses that knowledge to get ahead personally, which is a good and worthy goal. The other goes a step further, using the same knowledge to help classmates learn and to work on projects that benefit the community.

Both students are doing well. But the second student has moved beyond knowledge into wisdom. Education reaches its highest purpose when learning is used to make a positive difference, not just for oneself, but for the world around us.

Nowadays, information is available everywhere. We can find facts within seconds through books and technology. So, the true value of education is no longer measured by how much information we can collect, but by how we think, act, and contribute to the world.

Education should inspire curiosity, encourage meaningful questions, and help us understand who we are and also the world around us.

In the end, education is a journey from gathering knowledge to acquiring wisdom, and from learning new skills to unlearning old patterns. When education shapes both our mind and our character, it becomes much greater than marks on a report card or career. It becomes a way to know ourselves, and to use what we have learned for the betterment of community.

—Yug Goyal, age 8, Pune, India. He wrote this piece under the guidance of his parents, especially his mom.

Questions to Ponder:

What is the purpose of our spending so many years in school and studying various subjects? Why should we study history? Or math and science? What is cultural literacy? What’s the difference between Education for Life and Education for Earning a Living? What do you think “Know Thyself” means?

Precious Planet Earth: Our Only Home



A Rainbow at Sunset, Montana, the Big Sky State

Planet Earth, our only home has been around for about 4.6 billion years. Since its beginning, there have always been constant changes on the planet. Early in Earth's history, most changes were geological or astronomical, but over time, life and the biosphere have become significant drivers of change on our planet.

With the beginnings of the industrial revolution, the human embrace of a collective growth mindset, and the subsequent emergence of multinational corporations and large-scale international trade, we have become the primary driver of changes to our global home.

With an exponentially-increasing human population, now approaching 8.4 billions in 2026, the extraction, production, and consumption of fossil fuels, minerals, plastics, and other chemicals have skyrocketed. Our carbon footprint is continuing to rise and carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases are accumulating in our atmosphere and changing local and global climates. The impacts of pollution on the air, water, and land is observable globally and our collective actions (as well as inaction) are altering ecosystems

and the biosphere. The human-caused climate change is occurring and its impacts are already being felt in vulnerable coastal areas, along ecological boundaries, and in our cities. Major consequences of climate change will be felt around the globe in a matter of decades.

Unfortunately, the majority of our governments, corporations, and businesses, either ignore the understanding gained through scientific knowledge and computer modeling, pretend to be ignorant of its consequences, or push off action to future generations. They keep on doing business as usual—growth, growth, growth. Wanting more profits and more control over the market, they go for more production, more consumption, and as a result, greater impact on the Earth's natural systems. The current U.S. leaders side with corporations over future generations of people, favoring ecologically-suicidal fossil fuels—oil, fracked gas, and coal—over renewable energy like wind mills and photovoltaic (solar) power.

Everything is interconnected in nature: weather systems, ocean currents, and the cycles of important chemicals (water, nutrients, metals, etc.) are all mediated over long time periods by the Earth's geology and



Air Pollution Emitted by a Small Steel Factory

make our Earth a unified system capable of nurturing diverse fauna and flora over hundreds of millions of years. But humanity, with our amazing ability to invent and create technological know-how and build huge systems to serve our ever-growing population, has reached a state where we're able to alter the very environment that has enabled our growth. The planetary system has ways to balance the short term ecological changes that we have made in the last 200 years, but they operate over timescales (millions of years) that are inaccessible to us. As a result, we cannot rely on natural cycles to solve the serious problems we have created. We must be proactive to protect society and the natural cycles and systems as we know them. Else, life on this planet would become hard to sustain in many regions. It would need to be supported by artificial means because of life-threatening storms, huge temperature fluctuations, and large-scale habitat destruction.

In this photo essay, we offer a glimpse of our precious planetary home. But having experienced vari-



Aconcagua, Argentina (22,858 ft.), tallest peak in the Americas

ous parts of this beautiful home of ours in real life, we know the limitations of this virtual medium. This visual-only medium is unable to fully convey the multi-sensory, magnificent nature of the Planet Earth! We want all of us to experience it in real life, because we know that when we've experienced it, we'd love it! And when we love nature, we'd do all we can to preserve its beauty, its wholesomeness.



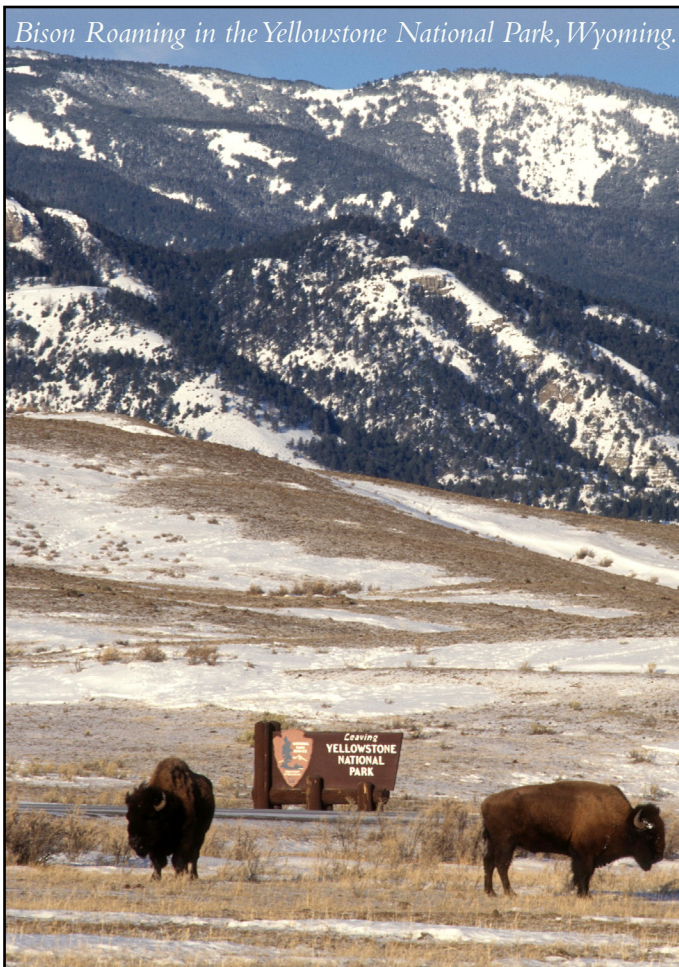
Cans and bottles waiting to be recycled in Montana.



The Jirishanka Peak (20,000 ft.) in the Andes Mts., Peru.



An Intense Lightning Storm in the Big Sky State, Montana



Bison Roaming in the Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.



Nature is Priceless! A Demonstrator Raises Nature Awareness at the Oregon Coast

Let us all do our best to be *good* Earthlings—Water Protectors, Land Protectors, Wildlife Defenders, and Good Earth Protectors!

By Arun Narayan Toké. Photos by Paul Dix, Oregon.



Volcan de Fuego, an active volcano in Guatemala, CA.



A Lioness Pride in Masai Mara Ntl. Reserve, Kenya, Africa



Giraffes in Masai Mara National Game Reserve, Kenya.



A Windmill Farm in the Columbia River Gorge, Oregon, has 450 MW generating capacity.



Amboseli National Park, Kenya, Africa



Northern Lights in the Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska