

Futures 2026

A compilation of short stories from
young writers from around the world



Edited by Nico Cordonier Gehring

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Voices of Future Generations Children's Initiative

A Voices of Future Generations Book

Acknowledgements

All my gratitude is due to Dr. Odette Lara-Morales and Elianys Martinez of the Voices of Future Generations Children’s Initiative for all their guidance, encouragement, and support, and to Baroness Julie Smith of Newnham, Nina Pindham KC, Professor Pamela Towela Sambo, Professor Marie-Claire Cordonier-Segger and Professor David Boyd, for their careful review, insights and wisdom as judges. My deepest appreciation is also due to Maria José Alarcón for her collaboration and insight for edits and review. I would also like to thank and acknowledge the other leaders of the Global Youth Council on Science, Law and Sustainability for their engagement, enthusiasm and inspiration.

Nico Cordonier Gehring,

Editor of *Futures*

Cambridge, United Kingdom 2026



To the children who speak up so
that the voices of our generation
can be heard.

“One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.”

Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Preface

By Prof. Astrid Puentes Riaño

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to a Clean,
Healthy and Sustainable Environment



Futures speaks from the place where law, imagination, and lived experience meet. It reminds us that the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is not an abstract principle, nor a distant aspiration. It is a condition for life, dignity, equality, and justice, especially for children and future generations.

As United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, I have seen how environmental degradation and climate change already impacts the lives of millions of children across the world. Pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and environmental violence are not future threats for them. They are present realities that affect life, dignity, health, education, cultural identity, a healthy environment, and the possibility of imagining a future at all. Impacting even worse children in more vulnerable situations. Yet too often, children are spoken about rather than listened to, protected rather than engaged, invoked as symbols, sometimes even tokenized, while excluded from decision-making.

The voices gathered in *Futures* challenge that pattern and transcending complaints, they powerfully offer solutions. Through stories, poetry, and imagined worlds, these young authors do what law and policy sometimes struggle to do: they make visible the human meaning of environmental harm and environmental protection. They speak of loss and resilience, of injustice and care, of fear and courage. They reveal how environmental harm fractures relationships between people, communities, and nature, and how restoring those relationships is inseparable from restoring justice. They vividly describe the reality of how interconnected we all are with nature and what it really means.

These contributions resonate deeply with the foundations of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This right affirms that everyone, indi-

vidually and collectively and without discrimination, are entitled to live in an environment that enables the full enjoyment of human rights. It also affirms that States have obligations of prevention, protection, fulfilment, participation, access to information, and access to justice. Central to these obligations is the duty to consider intergenerational equity and to ensure that children are not merely passive recipients of protection, but active rights-holders whose views must be heard and taken seriously.

This book is powerful for many reasons, including that it avoids framing children only as victims of environmental harm, nor only as bearers of hope. It recognises them as thinkers, storytellers, witnesses, and agents. These stories reflect that children are also leaders and they should be recognized as such. The stories in these pages insist that environmental decisions made today are moral decisions, legal decisions, and generational decisions, defining humanity's destiny. They remind us that silencing children's voices is itself a form of injustice, one that undermines democracy, weakens environmental governance, and erodes trust.

Futures is not only a collection of creative works. It is a call to responsibility. It is a source of inspiration and motivation. It confronts decision-makers, educators, judges, and advocates to conclude whether our laws, policies, and institutions are aligned with the clarity and urgency that children already demonstrate. It asks whether we are willing to imagine futures grounded not in exploitation and exclusion, but in care, solidarity, equality and respect for the limits of our planet. A future that many of us are working on, one that we need everyone to be involved in.

Listening to children strengthens environmental governance and the present and the future of our planet. It deepens accountability. It restores perspective. And it reminds us that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment must be realised for present generations and future generations as well, here and now.

The voices in this book deserve to be read with attention, humility, and commitment. These voices will inspire many because as one story brilliantly summarized, "Cool people do not deserve a warm planet", and we need to kiss the land, and reconnect with nature who knows well and better. These voices deserve more than recognition. They deserve action.

Prof. Astrid Puentes Riaño.

Foreword

By Judge Prof. Marcel Szabó
Chair of the Voices of Future Generations Commission



It is a profound honor to introduce *Futures 2026*, a collection that stands at the intersection of law, sustainability, and the boundless imagination of the world's youth. As Chair of the Voices of Future Generations (VoFG) Commission, I have witnessed the transformative power of storytelling in giving a voice to those who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions.

This anthology arrives at a critical juncture in human history. We live in an era where the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is no longer a distant aspiration, but a legal and moral imperative. The stories within these pages—from the water stones of a thirsty future in India to the green-veined guardians of the UAE's mangroves—remind us that environmental harm is not just a statistic; it is a fracture in the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

These young authors do not merely ask for protection; they act as active rights-holders and agents of change. They challenge us to look beyond short-term economic gain and recognize that intergenerational equity is the bedrock of true justice. Whether it is through the preservation of the "Tree of Elixir" or the daring "Roots of Hope" campaign, these narratives prove that even the smallest voices, when raised with courage, can shift the tide of governance and accountability.

To the readers of this book, decision-makers, educators, and fellow citizens; I invite you to read these works with humility. The clarity and urgency demonstrated by these children are a call to responsibility for us all. Let us align our institutions with the wisdom found in these stories, ensuring a future grounded in care, solidarity, and respect for the limits of our planet.

In the words of these young guardians, we find not just hope, but a blueprint for a more just and sustainable world.

Judge Prof. Marcel Szabó

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Authors

Vania Ahiakwo is a twenty-year-old author from Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She is passionate about financial literacy, justice and creative writing, and she writes poetry and fiction to reflect and inspire. She is currently learning Spanish to connect more globally and believes storytelling is a powerful tool for shaping a better future. She serves as a Global Youth Ambassador for Theirworld and has been recognised as one of the UK's Top 150 Future Leaders in Business and Economics.

Tabitha Ayomikun Ajayi is a twenty-year-old Nigerian undergraduate studying Water Resources and Environmental Engineering. She is passionate about environmental sustainability and climate education, and she speaks on proper waste management, climate change and awareness initiatives. She is dedicated to personal growth and creating a positive environmental impact.

Fatima Adel Al-Rafayia is a twelve-year-old student from Jordan studying at King Abdullah II Schools for Excellence. She excels academically and ranks among the top achievers in her class. She loves writing stories and is skilled at drawing. Passionate about the environment and climate change, she encourages her classmates to care for nature and adopt sustainable practices to protect the planet. She especially enjoys science, English and Arabic, and has been awarded several certificates of appreciation for outstanding achievement in Mathematics and Arabic.

Virat Desai is a passionate thirteen-year-old innovator from the UAE, studying at Delhi Private School, Sharjah. Driven by his love of science, he is committed to using technology as a force for good in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. Through eco-friendly robotics and AI solutions, he works to advance environmental care, social equity and education. His dedication has earned him recognition as an international Green Olympiad top scorer, recipient of the Vishwanath Nair Memorial Award for Compassion, Dedication and Dependability, and winner of the Innovation Award at the FLL Competition 2024–25.

Mihai Dumitru is a Romanian teenager. She is passionate about drawing and painting, and, as the elder sister of two younger brothers, she strives to complete her studies while also supporting her mother.

Roha Fatima is a twelve-year-old who lives in the suburb of Islamabad, Pakistan studying at International Grammar School, she is enthusiastic about child rights and biodiversity conservation. She loves writing stories and reading. She actively participates

in biodiversity and climate change camps arranged by the local organisations. She has been shortlisted for various writing competitions at the national level. She aspires to be a storyteller, a conservationist and an activist. Her favourite subject is history and creative writing.

Mir Faraz is a fifteen-year-old student at The Winchester School, Jebel Ali, Dubai. Originally from India, he was born and brought up in the United Arab Emirates. He is a passionate long-time environmentalist and has received the Diana Award and the Global Good Canon Young Champion of the Year Award. He is the Gold winner of Voices of Future Generations Middle East Round 4 and currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of VoFG Middle East's newsletter, the VoFG Gazette. An avid reader, writer, and orator, he believes words have the power to change the world and has led and contributed to initiatives that harness storytelling for meaningful impact. At school, his interests span a variety of subjects, but he is particularly drawn to English language and literature.

Aradhya Ghosh is a twelve-year-old author from India who embraces the arts: painting, live performances, and chronicling her travels. A bookworm at heart, she developed a passion for writing, which led to heartfelt poems and stories. With every word she writes, she grows in her belief in the quiet but powerful magic of storytelling.

Jianing Guo is a seventeen-year-old Chinese student at Shandong Experimental High School, China. She is interested in environmental studies, speculative design, and design fiction. She also uses multimedia, such as podcasts and speeches, to express her concern for the environment, inequality, and technology fairness. She enjoys both Chinese classical dance and contemporary dance.

Aditi Haribabu is a thirteen-year-old student at DPS Sharjah from Tamil Nadu, India currently living in UAE, known for her strong academics and creative mindset. She is passionate about sustainability, storytelling, and technology, she enjoys writing, coding, and art. Her ambition is to become a software engineer at Google or a pilot. Aditi aims to use her talents and ideas to make the world a greener, smarter, and more compassionate place. She believes that young voices can drive powerful changes and inspire hope for the future. Her favourite subject is Mathematics, and her achievements include publishing a book, top academics, participating in campaigns and Olympiads, being an EcoGen Head, attaining an Outstanding Scholar Badge, and qualifying for the ASSET Talent Search.

Afroz Idariya is a Class 10C student at Bombay Cambridge International School in India. He is delighted to have the opportunity to write for UNICEF and highlight the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He has long wanted to educate people about rights and essentials through imaginative storytelling. Of the seventeen SDGs, the one that most inspired him to write the story featured in this book is 'Quality Education'.

Kiona Jacobs-Plain is a proud Anishinaabe student from Aamjiwnaang First Nation. She honours her roots by dancing fancy shawl at powwows and promoting cultural awareness at school and in her community. She cares deeply about uplifting her peers in education, sport, mental health and equality. A multi-sport athlete, she values leadership, teamwork and encouraging others. Academically, Kiona is an honour student focusing on law, psychology and sociology, driven by her interest in justice, mental health and safety. Her post-secondary journey will begin with college and then university, where she plans to double major in Criminology and Psychology. As an Anishinaabe Shkini-Kwe, she is pursuing a career as a criminal investigator and hopes to inspire other Indigenous youth.

Aleena Sara Jesson is a thirteen-year-old author from Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and a student at Mayoora Private School. She loves writing stories that address real-world issues, and writing allows her to engage with the world in meaningful ways. She is particularly inspired by works that provoke thought and emotion, and she believes literature is a powerful tool for change. Her favourite subjects are science and mathematics. She is a proud awardee of the TSL 2025 International Student Competition.

Aadya Kanchan is a sixteen-year-old high school student passionate about sustainability, innovation and meaningful change. She is the National Water Champion 2025 (Stockholm Junior Water Prize India) and a Youth Ambassador with Fairtrade India, where she has been a core member since the age of 10, leading campaigns, interning under the CEO and representing India at global platforms, including the UN Geneva 1M1B Impact Summit. Her innovation addressing urban water scarcity has earned national and international recognition. Aadya has also published research papers in peer-reviewed journals. An avid reader, award-winning debater and writer, she self-published her first book at the age of 11 and actively leads youth-driven environmental and social initiatives.

Naomi Kene is a ninth grader in Canada studying at London Central Secondary School in London, Ontario. She enjoys reading mythology, writing fiction, and reviewing films. She is passionate about learning and always looking for new ideas and stories. She hopes to inspire others through her work and looks forward to making a difference in the world.

Mousa Khamis is a passionate fourteen-year-old environmental activist originally from Palestine. As a young REEM sustainability leader and Indigenous Children's Ambassador, he is passionate about raising awareness of Indigenous justice and rights, alongside biodiversity and environmental ethics. His favourite school subjects are Mathematics and Physics, and he believes in inner peace and avoiding conflict. His dream is to become a professional football player or a boxing champion and to win international championships for Jordan, which has given him and his family a refuge and a second home.

Myat Pan Khit (Florence) is a nineteen-year-old youth advocate from Myanmar, currently studying Chemical Engineering at SIIT Thammasat University. She is a member of UNICEF EAPRO's Young People's Action Team 2024 and a 5 Rights Youth Ambassador. Outside of volunteering and advocating, she enjoys reading books and geeking out about K-pop. Inspired by her father, Zayar, her story aims to inspire young people about AI and the environment, and she hopes to become an environmental engineer in the future.

Diamond Zehra Jael Ellis is an avid thirteen-year-old writer from Trinidad and Tobago who wants to become an astronaut. Diamond is a Form 2 student at St Stephen's College in Princes Town, Trinidad. She is passionate about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and engages in individual efforts to remind others to reduce, reuse and recycle. Diamond loves composing short plays and fictional stories, and her favourite subjects at school include Dance, Drama and Art.

Mathieu Lanteigne is an adventurous ten-year-old from Calgary, Alberta, with a big imagination and a love for the outdoors. Proud of his Métis roots, he is always curious to learn more about his ancestors. With family ties across Canada, his identity travels wherever he goes. Mathieu is active, enjoying hockey and soccer. When he slows down, he draws, writes stories, or explores nature with his loyal dog, Rosie. His creative mind, love for art, and storytelling inspire new ideas and adventures, with his journey just beginning.

Ananya Manikandan is a fifteen-year-old student at Delhi Private School Sharjah in the UAE. She is a recipient of the international Diana Award, the Hamdan Award, and the Sharjah Award for Educational Excellence in the United Arab Emirates, and she excels academically and in talents including singing, dancing, creative writing, public speaking, and theatre. Her filmmaking skills have earned awards and international screenings. She is the environmental coordinator for her year group and has won international awards for her science projects.

Maddy McCardle, is a sixteen-year-old from Calgary, Alberta. She was adopted but later discovered that her birth family is from the Cayuga Nation, a journey integral to her identity. Creative pursuits like drawing, painting, and sewing, along with basketball (her high school JV team placed fourth in the South Central Zones in 2025), are her passions. Academically, she excels in English, Social Studies, and art. Maddy is committed to sharing Indigenous history, especially Truth and Reconciliation and the impacts of Residential Schools. She aims to empower younger Indigenous children to understand their rights, feel pride in their heritage, and inspire young readers to learn and believe in themselves.

Paballo Peege is a twenty-year-old student from Johannesburg, South Africa, and a writer and activist. Her writing focuses on history, mental health and the environment. Her work has been featured in the Malala Fund's digital newsletter and publishing initiative, Assembly, and in the Diana Award-winning youth magazine Empower. She spends her time demanding justice by getting involved in various organisations and advocating for what she believes in. Her favourite subjects include art and English.

Riya Prabhunerurkar is an aspiring doctor from India who believes in serving humanity and making a positive impact in the world. She enjoys reading and expresses her creativity through painting. She is dedicated to achieving her goals with passion and purpose.

Saanvi Rao is a student at Delhi Private School, Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, and an award-winning student leader and environmental advocate. She has been recognised with the Sharjah Award for Educational Excellence, the Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Award for Distinguished Academic Performance, and BEE-AH's Future Pioneers Award in the Sustainability Champion category. She has led school councils, championed sustainability initiatives with global NGOs, excelled in

Olympiads, and earned honours in writing, art, and public speaking, demonstrating a strong commitment to service and excellence.

Hanika Saraf is a distinguished twelve-year-old student from the UAE, recognised for academic excellence and creative talent. She has earned a Scholar's Badge and a medal in the global maths contest 'Ignited'. Passionate about nature, spirituality, and personal growth, Hanika is committed to making a thoughtful, positive impact in every space she enters.

Bhavika Shinde is a student in the UAE with a passion for astronomy and storytelling. He enjoys writing science fiction that explores real-world environmental issues, aiming to inspire others to imagine a sustainable future in which humanity learns from its mistakes and protects Earth for generations to come.

Parth Singla is a ten-year-old reader, writer, and STEM enthusiast from Gurgaon, India, and studies at GD Goenka Public School. He has written for platforms including StoryMirror, Bookosmia, RobinAge, and Youth Ki Awaaz, and shares educational content on Instagram (@parthsingla2015), with several reels surpassing 100K views. His favourite subjects are English and science, and he is particularly proud of using storytelling to inspire young readers and promote sustainability.

Flavius Tudoran is a former arts student from Romania. He has a passion for literature and enjoys drawing and moulding ceramics from clay.

Lissie Makimmak Usuituayuk is an urban Inuk from Salluit, Nunavik, and now resides in Kijipuktuk, Nova Scotia. She actively engages with the local Indigenous community, learning from Elders, and returns to Nunavik twice a year for traditional activities such as gathering, sewing, and beading. Lissie mentors local Inuit children who lack access to the North, sharing her knowledge and experience. A fan of science and English, she uses Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) and played football for Team Mi'kmaw Nova Scotia at the last North American Indigenous Games. An artist, actor, and writer, she is committed to ensuring her Inuit culture endures, drawing inspiration from her family's resilience in maintaining their identity and origins.

Emma Visscher is a creative, curious ten-year-old from Calgary, Alberta, with big dreams. Proud of her Métis and Dutch-Canadian heritage, she studies in French immersion and loves exploring identity through stories, language, and creativity. A natural storyteller, Emma enjoys writing and reading imaginative tales full of adventure, heart, and magic. She also loves playing basketball, and singing, acting, and dancing—especially musical theatre. Emma dreams of performing on Broadway and publishing her own book, sharing her stories and voice with the world. Her exciting journey is just beginning.

Contributor Biographies

Editor

Nico Cordonier Gehring is Vice-Chair of the Global Youth Council for Science, Law, and Sustainability, a young historian, geographer, and climate activist who is studying at the UWC Atlantic College, UK. He is editor of the blog nicosnaturalworld.org, a founding co-chair of Cambridge Schools Eco-Council, and an active leader in the Sustainability Society of Winchester College, where he was a scholar in College. Nico is also a UN Child Ambassador for the Sustainable Development Goals with the UNESCO Voices of Future Generations Children's Initiative, and an award-winning young author whose stories are published in the Luna Spark anthologies, winning first place in the world for 2022. A laureate of the UK Young Environmentalist and the Cambridgeshire Inspirational Young Stars Environmental awards, Nico enjoys drama, music, kayaking and speaking up for nature.

Preface Author

Professor Astrid Puentes Riaño is a human rights expert, currently serving as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. She lectures at the Berta Cáceres Environmental Justice Clinic at the Universidad Iberoamericana in México City, México. Professor Puentes Riaño has more than two decades of experience working at the intersection of environmental protection, human rights, and environmental democracy, with a particular focus on access to information, public participation, and access to justice. Prior to her United Nations mandate, she held senior roles at organisations including the Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA) and worked extensively with communities affected by environmental harm across Latin America. Her work emphasises issues of intergenerational equity, the rights of children, and the obligations of States to prevent environmental degradation and protect human dignity.

Foreword Author

Prof Marcel Szabó is Full Professor and Head of the Department of European Law at Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Budapest). Besides his academic career, between 2011-2012 Professor Szabó represented the Hungarian Government in front of the International Court of Justice in the Hague, and between 2012-2016 he was the Deputy Commissioner for Fundamental Rights and Ombudsman for Future Generations in Hungary. Professor Szabó was elected as justice at the Constitutional Court of Hungary in 2016, for twelve years. He is Founder and Honorary Chair of the Network of Institutions of Future Generations. His main areas of research are international environmental law, rights of future generations, responsibility of states in public international law, and public international law and EU law in the case law of the Constitutional Court of Hungary. Professor Szabó is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Hungarian Yearbook of International Law and European Law.

Judges and Mentors

Professor Pamela Towela Sambo (University of Zambia)

Professor Pamela Towela Sambo is a leading Zambian scholar in environmental law, human rights law and intergenerational justice, and serves as Chair of her country's UN Human Rights Commission. Her work focuses on climate change, environmental governance and sustainable development, with particular attention to protecting the interests of future generations in the Global South and strengthening climate accountability through legal and judicial mechanisms.

Baroness Professor Julie Smith (University of Cambridge)

Baroness Professor Julie Smith is Professor of European Politics at the University of Cambridge and a member of the House of Lords. Her academic and parliamentary work examines democratic governance, constitutional change, and long-term policy-making, including how political institutions can better represent and safeguard the interests of future generations.

Professor David R. Boyd (University of British Columbia, Canada)

Professor David R. Boyd is an internationally recognised authority on human rights, environmental protection, and intergenerational equity. A former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, he has played a central role in advancing recognition of the right to a healthy environment as essential to protecting future generations.

Advocate Nina Pindham KC (Environmental Law Association)

Advocate Nina Pindham KC is a leading UK barrister specialising in public, environmental and human rights law. Her practice includes strategic litigation and advisory work on climate change, environmental harm and state obligations to protect the rights and interests of future generations under domestic and international law.

Professor Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger (University of Cambridge)

Professor Marie-Claire Cordonier WIJA, FRSC, FRSA holds the Chair in Sustainable Development Law and Policy in the University of Cambridge and serves as Senior Director of the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law. With over 30 books and 180 papers published in five languages, she serves on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals, and as vice-chair of the Voices of Future Generations Children's Initiative (VoFG CI). She is laureate of several international awards, including the *Justitia Regnorum Fundamentum* Medal for her work defending the rights of future generations.

Dr. Odette Lara-Morales (Voices of Future Generations Children’s Initiative)

Dr Odette Lara-Morales is the Programme Manager for the Voices of Future Generations Children’s Initiative (VoFG CI) and an Associate Fellow at the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law (CISDL). She supports programmes and partnerships that strengthen children’s and youth engagement on sustainability, intergenerational equity and the Sustainable Development Goals. She is also a Lecturer at the University of Waterloo and a Project Officer with UNA-Canada.

Ela Martinez (Voices of Future Generation Children’s Initiative)

Eliany (Ela) Martinez is an educator specialising in international education, children’s rights and youth empowerment. Her work focuses on the design and coordination of educational, cultural and community-based initiatives at the intersection of education, culture and the environment. In this capacity, she has collaborated with a range of international organisations to advance children’s rights, environmental education, intergenerational equity and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Adv. María José Alarcón (Global Youth Council for Science, Law and Sustainable Development)

María José Alarcón is an international lawyer specialising in public international law, climate change litigation and state responsibility. Her work focuses on causation, compensation and apportionment for climate change harms, with particular emphasis on protecting the rights and interests of future generations through international legal frameworks and dispute settlement mechanisms.

The Balance We Keep

Aradhya Ghosh, UAE



Desert Oasis, A Vision for Sustainable Future, Mavisha Ali, UAE

“Oh, isn’t this town gorgeous!” exclaimed Evelyn as her friend Aria pushed her wheelchair towards the gate of the park. Aria gazed up at the evening sky, a marvellous contrast of lavender and yellow, as the sun was about to set. As she smelt the air, a sweet fragrance of tulips and wild sunflowers entered her nostrils. Her surroundings were ethereal with breathtaking landscapes. Majestic mountains rose proudly, their peaks touching the sky, and emerald meadows stretched on beyond the horizon. Amidst the beauty, houses stood scattered, with peaceful rivers flowing between them. They strolled into the central park, a serene beauty of unique plants and towering trees. As they took shade under the Tree of Elixir, an ancient tree predating the town’s development, Aria felt a strong bond with the tree. In fact, the name of the town, Elixerville, was derived from that tree. Unforgettable memories for Aria and many of her friends were created in this park.

Joseph, the park gardener, approached them with a friendly smile.

“Did you hear about the new mayor who just won the elections?” he asked.

“He is going to organise a meeting tomorrow to discuss his future plans for the betterment of the town.”

The girls exchanged bemused glances, pondering the mayor’s motives.

The next day, the mayor addressed the crowd in the community hall. “Dear residents of Elixerville, as your new mayor, I propose a new marketplace, where you can showcase unique local treasures like mountain-harvested honey and handcrafted floral perfumes made from the blossoms of the Tree of Elixir. It will boost our economy by creating new jobs and expanding trade partnerships for greater prosperity in Elixerville.”

There was a big round of applause. Everyone seemed elated about the new marketplace.

Two days later, Aria strolled to the park with Evelyn, as usual, only to be stopped in their tracks. Massive gleaming locks and towering railings overlooked the glow of the park and were guarded by scowling security guards.

Joseph was stopped at the gate when he tried to enter.

“Sir, you must allow me to enter. I’m the protector of this park.”

“The park is under city control now. GET OUT!”, the guard yelled angrily, pushing Joseph out of the park.

“Something is definitely strange. Why on earth will anyone need guards to protect a park while building a local marketplace?” Evelyn asked.

“We must inform the mayor immediately, Joseph said.

At the gate of the mayor’s office, they were told he was out of town. As they were about to retreat, Evelyn noticed something... “Isn’t that the mayor’s car?” Evelyn asked.

The green Fiat parked in the garage indicated that the mayor was still inside his office. “Looks like the security guard was lying through his teeth. Perhaps there’s a back door entrance.” Aria suggested.

They secretly sneaked from the back door, where they heard the mayor’s voice in pitch darkness. “Remember our deal -- \$325 million in exchange for your plastic business. My team has already initiated the process of cutting some of the trees. But don’t be concerned, the locals are blissfully unaware, and under my words and influence, they’ll stay that way”

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoed prompting the trio to leave the office.

“We need to warn the townsfolk, but they’ll never believe us without proof”, Aria said, her words filled with urgency.

Evelyn’s hand slipped triumphantly into her pocket, revealing a recorder.

“Proof? I’ve got it right here, and who says always carrying a recording pen around isn’t useful?” Aria’s eyes narrowed in determination. “Then it’s time to act!”

The trio decided to talk to Evelyn’s father, Mr. Williams, who was the children’s environmental science professor at school and was out of town for some personal work. After hearing everything Mr. William decided to organise a meeting along with the trio, inviting all the townsfolk.

“Good morning, everyone. Lately, there have been a few drastic changes to our town. As you hear this recording from my daughter Evelyn, you’ll realise that the mayor is replacing our beautiful central park with a plastics factory.”

Evelyn then played the recording.

“Our town’s beauty wasn’t just a landmark, but our pride and a vital part of our ecosystem. Cutting down these trees for a plastic factory not only scars our landscape but also disrupts ecosystems, accelerates climate change, and pollutes our air and water.

The decision to cut down trees for the factory was illegal. Laws exist to protect our environment, requiring permissions before such actions, and the mayor has ignored them. This is a violation of our rights and the laws. We must stand together, demand accountability, and fight for the justice and sustainability our town deserves.”

The crowd began murmuring among themselves.

“I know that each and every one of us all deeply values our park and wants to preserve its beauty- it’s incredibly important to us.

One idea is to still support the local economy without hurting the tree is to create our own marketplace, not a concrete one, but something eco- friendly that harmonises with the stunning nature around us. We could craft household items and cutlery from bamboo grass in our bamboo fields, produce pillows from cotton grown on our farms, and even make soaps and cosmetics from the flowers we grow. By coming together, supporting one another, and starting on a small scale, we can gradually build a sustainable way to generate more income while staying true to our values,” as Mr. William concluded, the crowd erupted into applause and cheers of agreement.

Once a consensus was reached, the group wasted no time and sprang into action. Aria organised a signature campaign. Recognizing that the mayor was unwilling to hear their pleas, they decided to turn to the city council, a higher and more democratic authority, for assistance.

After collecting everyone’s signatures, Mr. William composed a message and sent it, along with the signatures, to the city council. They initiated social media campaigns and adorned the town with placards. Despite the mayor’s efforts to remove the posters and intimidate the locals, the community stood firm and unwavering in their mission.

After a few days, the townsfolk stood outside the locked gates of the park, constantly protesting, their banners held high despite the scorching sun. The mayor, watching all this, wore a smug grin. “Fools,” he muttered, stepping forward to mock them. “Your protests are in vain. The trucks are here, and soon, the Tree of Elixir will be nothing but a memory.” The rumble of trucks loaded with equipment grew louder, closing in. Just then, a roar of engines cut through the air as sleek black cars arrived in unison. The crowd froze as figures emerged, their commanding presence wiping the grin off the mayor’s face.

The councilman stepped forward, his voice sharp and commanding. “This park belongs to the people of Elixerville, cutting down trees without proper authorization violates environmental laws and the community’s rights. You are suspended from your position, and a case is filed against you. Hand over the park to the residents immediately!”

The mayor attempted to protest, but his words faltered as the councilman glared. Defeated, the mayor handed over control, and the townsfolk erupted in cheers. The Tree of Elixir remained, a testament to their unity and determination.

As the sun set, painting the town in lavender and gold, Aria and Evelyn strolled through a tranquil evening. At the park, Aria was delighted to see it restored and brimming with life. The air is filled with the lively sounds of music, laughter, and the chatter of visitors exploring the fair. Performers like jugglers, musicians, and dancers were entertaining the crowds, adding a festive charm to the atmosphere. The scent of freshly baked pastries and roasted nuts mingled with the aroma of flowers from decorative arrangements.

The park had transformed into a vibrant marketplace, with thriving shops like ‘Davis’s Golden Honey’, ‘Elysian Essence’ and ‘House of Bamboo’ bustling with activity. Mr. William was busy conducting a workshop on sustainability for young children, while Joseph assisted the kids in planting new trees. The Tree of Elixir stood tall at the centre, a testament to the community’s resilience. Aria, Evelyn, and Joseph sat beneath its shade, savouring the lively scene. As the final rays of sunlight cast the town in a golden glow, the Tree of Elixir remained a quiet guardian, embodying the community’s victory and togetherness for a shared purpose.

The Earth Called the Wind

Fatima Adel Alrafayia, Jordan



The Choice is Ours, Prasadhi Shah, UAE

The morning breeze blew, heavy with sorrow and the scent of death. It broke in pain and retreated to its original location. The Earth called upon the Wind and asked: “Why, O Wind, do you not bring me the clouds and the rain? I have dried up and cracked; my beauty has faded, the crops on my hills have perished, and creatures have abandoned me.”

The Wind heard the Earth’s plea but remained silent in reverence.

The Earth called out again: “I have grown weary of your silence. I am dying before your eyes, and yet you say nothing!” With a hoarse voice, choked with grief, the Wind finally replied: “Wait, dear Earth. I have not withheld the clouds from you. It is war, wretched and merciless, raging by the sea—fear, death, explosions, destruction—things beyond reason.”

The Earth, deeply moved, cried: “Why do humans spill their own blood? Do they not realize that there is no life in death, no weapon in devastation?”

The Wind continued: “The sea granted me clouds to bring you spring’s laughter, yet the pillars of smoke from destruction killed the raindrops within them, just as pregnant mothers are slaughtered.”

The Earth whispered in disbelief: “What injustice is this?”

The Wind pressed on: “Before my very eyes, starving children scream, mere bones barely wrapped in skin.”

The Earth lamented: “What injustice is this? There is no greater injustice than this.”

The Wind, burdened with sorrow, added: “No, there is more deeper agony still. A father bids farewell to his family, killed beneath the rubble of their home. They were safe until missiles, filled with deep-seated hatred, fell upon them.”

The Earth wept bitterly: “Has mercy died and vanished from hearts? Just as mercy fades, so too do the rains and the greenery of my lands.”

The Wind, broken and remorseful, whispered: “Forgive me, beloved Earth. I know that your springs have dried, your grass withered and broken, and the birds and animals have deserted you.”

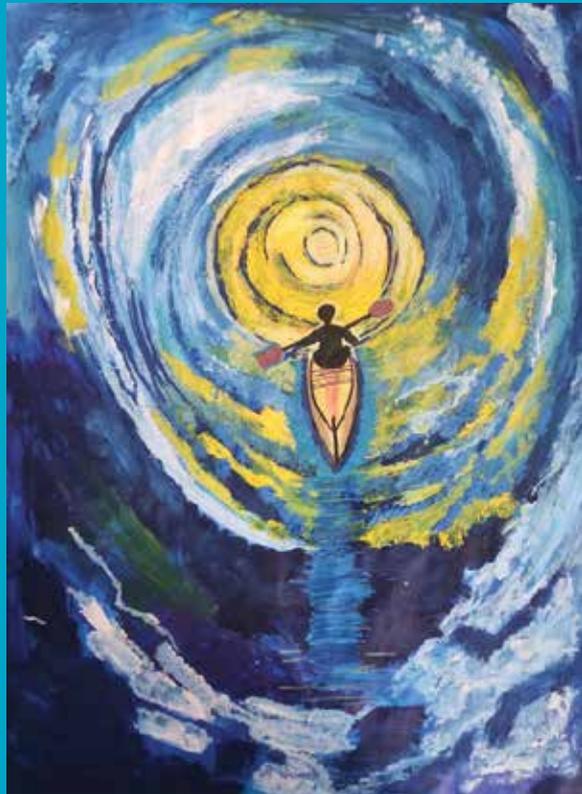
“Spring has died before it could be born—just like the dreams of those children, longing for holiday clothes and laughter on a swing, only to be banned from playing outside.”

The Earth called upon the Wind: “Come, let us pray to the Lord of the heavens to lift this suffering, to extinguish the volcanoes of war that have destroyed mosques and churches alike, and that have made infants taste the bitterness of death in their cradles.”

The Wind, preparing to depart, whispered: “God does not love injustice. Soon, I shall return to tell you: The war has ended. And merciful hearts—beloved by God—have become rain, extinguishing the fires of war and spreading peace.”

The Last Blue

Aadya Kanchan, India



What Lies Ahead, Mysha Ali, Philippines

Anupa's leather slippers brushed against the unforgiving scorching sand, and her knees shook with exhaustion as the metal bucket on her head shook precariously from the imbalance. She was on her way to the only spring in the last town of 2085, and the only thing that kept her going was the soothing voice of her grandmother, Rani. She said, "Do you know Anupa,? a few decades back, this planet was unrecognisable. The planet was covered with lush green landscapes, gurgling rivers meandering through the land, and wildlife flourished on the Earth."

"I don't believe it, Nani. I can't even fathom that our dry, scorching Vellora could have been what sounds like paradise."

Her grandmother chuckled, "I understand, but this is the distinct truth that has now become a far-reaching memory. I can only tell you these fond memories, but unfortunately, I can't show them to you. In fact, you were named 'Anupa', which means water in Sanskrit, as a symbol of hope. Five decades back, we had something called rain—tiny water droplets would fall from the thunderous sky, and it smelled as if the Earth was waking up from a deep slumber."

Yet, all Anupa had ever known was the heavy silence of empty taps, the impatient people tapping their feet with empty buckets in hand, which were filled just once a week by the village's last hope—the spring. The entire village felt like a pig ready for slaughter, and with the spring's water ebbing away faster than anyone dared admit, they would soon join the fate of the rest of the world.

Each home in Vellora had what they called a Water Stone—a blue-glass orb passed down through generations. Legend said that when the last stone turned clear, the last clean drop would be gone.

Anupa's family's stone was almost white now, pale and lifeless.

At school, instead of P.E. or art, kids were taught "Water Math"—how to calculate your drip-per-minute rate, how to reuse greywater from skin to soil, and how to wash your hands without water. They were even taught how to cry dry, to mourn without wasting moisture. Nobody complained. They couldn't afford to. It was the last thing they had, a last effort to survive, a last hope. In the cities beyond, where skyscrapers with mirrored glass and flowing fountains, water was currency. Not metaphorically—literally. Chips embedded in palms tracked every drop, every breath of humidity.

Wealth was calculated in moisture units, not money. Governments collapsed not because of war, but thirst.

By 2080, hope had died in the boardrooms and labs. The rains hadn't returned. Climate scientists declared the hydrological cycle broken beyond repair. Instead of solving, humanity managed and mitigated—until there was nothing left to manage. They rationed and rationed until the numbers failed before their eyes.

But Vellora, small and insignificant on any map, had something the world had forgotten: Memory, and perhaps... a flicker of belief.

One day, Nani sat Anupa down under the shade of their withering neem tree and handed her the nearly clear Waterstone. "There's an old belief," she said, "that if one gives water without expecting it back, the skies remember."

"Remember what?"

"That they too once gave freely."

So Anupa began a trickle here and there. Whenever she fetched water from the spring, she would pour out a few drops into the roots of dying trees. Kids called her mad. Elders called her naïve. But Nani only smiled. And then came the whisper.

It started not in the clouds, but in the ground. The earth smelled... different, damp, like something ancient turning in its sleep. On the 208th day of that year, the skies over Vellora darkened. Not with ash or pollution—but with a kind of softness Anupa had never seen. Thunder rolled, tentative like a heartbeat. And then—A drop.

It hit the ground and disappeared. Another. Then dozens. Then a thousand. And suddenly, the people of Vellora were not running away, but toward the storm. Pots, pans, tears, laughter. Anupa stood motionless, letting the droplets sting her skin, feeling a sort of ecstasy that words can't describe; she felt elevated beyond consciousness. The first rain in 50 years. That evening, the village gathered around her home, their clothes soaked, their eyes wide. And there it sat—on the wooden table—the Water Stone, glowing the deepest blue anyone had ever seen.

Scientists from the Vellora Alliance came to study the clouds. "Localized condensation anomaly," they said. But Anupa knew better.

She had given water freely. And the sky had remembered.

However, it was not the end of the story as rain could bring them hope, but not sustenance. It was then that the community of Vellora united with the cause. They set up extensive rainwater harvesting systems, greywater recycling, percolation pits, remote sensing water management systems, and treated water, just as importantly as they did when it was not there.

Years later, as Vellora bloomed once more, as children bathed in shallow streams and neem trees blossomed again, Anupa told her own granddaughters: Water is a creator, preserver, and destroyer. Unless we treat it with respect, reverence, and responsibility, the same element that created all of us and preserved us will be the cause of our destruction.

The Echoes Between the Canopy

Hanika Saraf, United Arab Emirates



Simple Breathtaking, Sebastian Angelo Paveluc, Romania

Ambarpur was a village cradled by nature's loving arms. Towering hills stood as ancient guardians, and lush forests stretched far beyond the horizon. The people of Ambarpur lived in harmony with the Earth, planting, harvesting, celebrating the seasons, and preserving stories passed through generations like heirlooms of the heart.

At the edge of the forest stood the great peepal tree. With its gnarled roots and wide canopy, it was not just a tree to the villagers. It was their history, their connection to the land, and a living monument of hope. Beneath its vast green umbrella, festivals bloomed, children laughed, elders shared wisdom, and stories of bravery and love were passed down. It stood as a symbol of sustainable living, community unity, and deep respect for nature.

Among the children of Ambarpur was Veer, a twelve-year-old with a quiet spirit and a curious heart. He often sat under the peepal tree, listening to his grandmother Amma spin magical tales of forest spirits, forgotten heroes, and secrets whispered to the wind. In those stories, the forest was alive. To Veer, the tree was a friend, the forest a home.

He imagined himself as its protector, a boy chosen to shield his culture's roots.

One summer, everything changed. A large company proposed building a factory on the village's edge. It promised development, jobs, new schools, and paved roads. Many adults welcomed the news with cautious hope. But the cost was steep. The proposed site required clearing large parts of the forest, including the area around the sacred peepal tree.

The village was torn. Some elders remembered the slow rhythm of nature and felt uneasy. Others saw a brighter future through industry. The village hall buzzed with debate, arguments crisscrossing like storm winds.

That night, when the sky was flooded with stars, Veer slipped out quietly. He walked into the forest, knelt by the peepal tree, and planted a tiny seedling beside it. Gently, he whispered, "I promise to protect you. Even if I'm just a boy."

The next day, machines arrived. Engines roared. Trees fell. Birds scattered. The air grew hot, heavy, unfamiliar. Some villagers wore new uniforms, their faces stiff with pride or guilt. Others turned silent. But Veer held his promise close as a sacred thread

wound around his heart. Time passed. The forest thinned. Noise replaced birdsong. But the peepal tree stood tall, a stubborn survivor. Veer, too, grew into a young man shaped by love and loss. He passed his stories and dreams to his younger sister Siya.

At fifteen, Siya had her brother's gentle strength but a fire of her own. She adored the forest, the scent of wet earth after rain, the way the sunlight trickled through green leaves, the rustle of life around her. She had learned to listen, not just to the land, but to people, to silence, and to the stories Amma still shared by lamplight.

One afternoon, Siya overheard her parents speaking in low voices. The factory wanted to expand. More forest would be cleared. The peepal might not survive.

Siya's hands curled into fists. She didn't wait. That evening, under the shelter of the tree, she sat with her best friend Aarav. "We have to do something," she said. "Before we lose everything." "Then we do it together," Aarav replied.

They began with what they had: passion and purpose. They gathered other children, planting saplings wherever space allowed. They started storytelling circles, teaching the younger ones about the forest's gifts. Together, they painted vibrant murals on school walls, birds, trees, rivers, all reminding the village of what they stood to lose.

Then came their boldest idea, a campaign called "*Roots Of Hope*." Siya used social media to post images of the peepal tree, the laughter of children under its shade, and the contrast of machines gnawing at the forest. Her posts carried emotion and truth. They travelled fast. Schools in nearby cities shared her message. Children began writing letters. Volunteers took notice. Hope spread like wildfire.

But so did resistance. Factory managers grew uneasy. They pressured the village council. Development is necessary, they said. You can't stop progress.

Siya was invited to speak before the council. Her voice trembled at first, then steadied. "Progress that destroys our roots is not progress," she said. "It's forgetting. Each tree is a story. Each stream, a song. If we lose this forest, we lose who we are."

She gestured to the peepal tree. "My brother made a promise here years ago. I made mine now. Let's not trade short-term gain for permanent loss. Let us invest in what sustains us." She proposed a new path, a Learning Grove, a space for environmental

education, sustainable farming, and community pride. Supported by educators and public interest, it could bring in visitors and preserve the forest's spirit.

The room buzzed. Doubters softened. The elders nodded. One woman whispered, "She speaks the truth."

The council voted. The expansion was stopped.

That year, the Learning Grove blossomed. Children learned botany under shady trees. Artists from the city painted walls with scenes of harmony. Farmers shared techniques for organic composting and water conservation. Visitors came to see the village that had chosen balance over blind growth.

The Learning Grove became a centre for knowledge and action. Siya and Aarav, now co-leaders of the eco-club, started outreach programs on recycling, tree planting, and wildlife protection. Young people from nearby villages joined them. They launched a mobile learning van, bringing ideas and hope to more communities.

They organized theatre performances, puppet shows, and poster exhibitions about the forest and the future. Their message was clear: Every action counts.

With help from volunteers, they installed solar panels on school rooftops and rain-water tanks near homes. Slowly, Ambarpur turned into a model village known for its wisdom and its green spirit.

The story of Ambarpur appeared in newspapers, textbooks, and classrooms across the country. Students discussed how a group of young people chose a harder path and how it made all the difference.

Years later, Siya sat beneath the peepal tree beside Veer, now in his late twenties. Laughter echoed as children played nearby, tending to the butterfly garden and seed bank.

"You were right, bhaiya," Siya said. "The hard road changes everything." Veer smiled. "And now you've made that road easier for others to walk."

Siya looked up at the leaves dancing overhead. “Development and nature don’t need to be enemies. If we listen to the land and to each other, there’s always another way.” Veer nodded. “You didn’t just save the forest. You reminded us what it means to belong.”

A wooden sign near the tree read: This tree witnessed a promise. May we always keep it. In saving the peepal, they had saved something even greater: a sense of identity, a bond with the Earth, and a future rooted in balance. They had shown the world that even the smallest voices, when raised with courage and care, can create powerful change.

The Learning Grove grew over the years, adding a composting centre, an eco-library made from recycled materials, and a story stone circle where tales were shared under moonlight. Siya and Aarav, now national advocates for sustainable education, were invited to speak at environmental conferences, reminding others that real change begins with love, community, and the courage to stand up.

One day, Siya asked her brother, “Do you think that one promise really changed everything?” Veer looked at her, the peepal leaves casting shifting shadows on their faces.

“Yes,” he said. “Because it planted more than a tree. It planted hope.”

Zayar and the Thirsty Machine

Myat Pan Khit, Myanmar



Hope in the Desert, Madhav Karira, United Arab Emirates

It was the year 2050, in the world of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Machines didn't just exist anymore; they decided, judged and governed. Drones flew over the cities; robots controlled the traffic; AI assistants taught classes; and machines became the daily norm to the point that the word "offline" became an old-fashioned joke only the grandparents understood.

In many parts of the world, people no longer touch the soil or drink from the river. People lived in the "climate-controlled zones," where everything was regulated. Water wasn't a basic right anymore; it was rationed. A privilege. A luxury. The world seemed to have moved on. But no one could quite agree on what they had moved on from.

In Zayar's hometown of Yangon, a town in a small country named Myanmar, fresh water only arrived three times a week. His family stored it in a giant water storage tank in the middle of the house, hidden from the outside eyes. It was enough for cooking and drinking, but not for bathing every day and certainly not for gardening or swimming around like in the pictures from school textbooks.

The river near his home had dried up two decades ago, and those who couldn't leave had no choice but to suffer in silence. Yet, in his government-funded digital school, the AI assistant often gushed about progress, charts, stats, "Green AI Technology," and sustainability indexes.

The irony was never lost on Zayar.

Zayar was seventeen, too curious, impulsive, and easily frustrated. He often asked the school AI about anything and everything he was curious about. The tagline for the school AI assistant says "to help your child in any capacity that they can, but it didn't seem to apply to Zayar when it always answered in polite loops with a bunch of nothings or simply refused to answer.

That morning, Zayar was reviewing a lesson on extinct ecosystems when one image stopped him mid-scroll. It was titled: "Mouth of the Ayeyarwady River, 2025, one of the last free-flowing rivers in Myanmar that acted as its backbone." The photo shows a place full of life: river water shimmering in the breeze, birds drifting near the coast, and a fisherman sitting on the edge of the boat. It felt impossible, like a memory that didn't belong to him.

But something about it stirred him. He leaned closer. Then the system glitched.

Static ripples across the digital interface. His AI froze mid-sentence. Words tumbled into symbols. And the whole screen blacked out for a moment before a strange message appeared: "System interruption: Access Route 3.13 initiated."

The room around him began to blur. The air grew heavy. A warmth crept over him, unlike anything his climate pod had ever generated. Then, quite suddenly, he wasn't in his room anymore.

Zayar blinked at the sudden bright sky. He found himself standing on a narrow sandy path, winding up a steep, tilted hill. The air was hot, dry and real unlike the artificial air-conditioned chill of his climate pod. Dust stuck to his face and his lips. Below him, parched land stretched in every direction: cracked earth devoid of water, bone-dry trees that looked like they were about to snap, and a riverbed that looked like it hadn't flowed in years.

"Welcome," came a voice behind him.

Zayar turned around in surprise. A man stood there, old but sprightly, wearing a bag filled with papers and pens, not screens. A scientist, maybe, or a very strange farmer, if that job could still earn enough to survive.

"Where....am I?" Zayar asked hesitantly.

"A place where you're meant to be," the old man said cryptically. "Now walk with me."

The old man walked up to the steep, tilted hill with practised ease. Zayar hesitated. The world around him was unfamiliar and silent. He scanned for threats, for anything familiar. But there was nothing: no drones, no signal lights, no buildings humming in the distance. Just the wind, dry and thin.

Reluctantly, Zayar followed, alert.

They hiked in silence at first. But curiosity won over Zayar in the end. "Why is everything around here so.....dead?"

The old man stopped, looking over the brittle valley. “Tell me. What powers your world, boy?”

“AI,” Zayar answered bluntly.

The man nodded, and they continued walking up the steep hill. “And what do all those systems eat?”

“Eat?” Zayar repeated, confused.

“Humans eat food and drink, correct?” Zayar nodded. “We eat food so that we get energy to do work, study, walk and run. Then what about the machines?”

“Well, they use electricity?”

“Then what happens if they overheat?”

“Overheat?” Zayar repeated again, looking even more confused.

“Overheating is like how when humans are stressed, we relax by hanging out with friends, families, watching movies, and sleeping in. The “offline” activities that you youngsters mock us these days. Now, what happens if those machines overheat? How do they relax? How do they cool down?”

“They cool down,” Zayar answered. “With water.”

The old man stopped. “Yes, freshwater. The kind your ancestors drank from. The kind that is being rationed. The kind your families previously store in tanks.”

Zayar swallowed. His throat suddenly felt dry.

“These machines, these technologies, these AI,” the old man continued, “they’re not evil. But they’re thirsty. And they’re growing. Each prompt, each image, each question. It’s like feeding a giant invisible beast. And to keep it calm, we drain rivers. We drain life.”

“But... it’s 2050,” Zayar muttered, half to himself. “It hasn’t even been a full century since the 1950s, when AI was first discovered. How did we destroy so much, so fast?”

The man's voice grew quiet. "Progress has no brakes when no one knows where it's heading."

They reached the top of the hill. Below them lay a vast valley, dry and devastated, a skeleton of beauty. Zayar recognized the shape. They were at the mouth of the Ayeyarwaddy River.

Or what is left of it.

He stumbled forward, stunned. "I saw this place. In a picture. It was alive."

The old man nodded. "Not that long ago. Your people used to plant rice here. Paw hsan hmwe, shwe bo, ayeyar min and many more varieties of rice. There were lots of fish in that stream, too. There was even an endangered dolphin species called the Ayeyarwady dolphins that were often found right over there, a symbol of natural heritage."

Zayar stood frozen. "Why didn't we stop this?"

"We forgot how to look. But you—" The man placed a hand on his shoulder, "—you're young. You ask questions, and you take initiative. That's the first step."

Zayar woke in his climate pod with dust still clinging to his skin and questions ringing in his ears. The glitch had ended. His screen rebooted, showing a blue screen as if nothing had happened. His familiar AI greeted him with an uncanny human-like "Good morning."

But something had changed.

His walls no longer felt as solid. The voice no longer sounded helpful. And the image of the Ayeyarwady, alive and then lost, refused to leave his mind.

Within days of his return, Zayar gathered a small group of close friends: Yuzana, a curious coder; Htar Htar, who loved plants and stories from their grandparents; and Khin, a friendly social butterfly and a detailed planner.

They met at a half-broken rooftop garden above Yuzana's pod unit, whispering about

the river, the old man, and the drought no one dared name. He shared everything he had seen.

They listened, not laughing or questioning his sanity, just listening. And when he asked if they'd go with him, back to the hillside where it all began, they said yes.

When they arrived, there was no sign of the old man. Instead, they found a landscape still silent, but alive with subtle signs of nature struggling to reclaim its space.

"This place is still breathing," Htar Htar said softly, crouching to touch the cracked earth. "But just barely."

Inspired and motivated, they dove into the work.

The group of friends visited their elders for stories. They combed old archives buried in neglected network folders. They read about the Ayeyarwady's past, of thriving rice paddies, fish-filled streams, and the once-laughing Ayeyarwady dolphins. And they read about tech too: about energy-neutral design, closed-loop cooling systems, AI waste heat, and something called salt-based condensation.

Zayar recognized the terms. His AI assistant had bragged about them once: "green tech," "sustainable cooling," "water-positive infrastructure." It had all sounded like buzzwords back then. But now, with their fingers in the dirt and their hearts in something bigger, the ideas felt urgent.

Yuzana uncovered an old case study; it discussed a passive cooling prototype that used salt reactions to preserve medicine in off-grid villages. It sparked something.

"If this pulls moisture from the air," she said, "why can't we build something that captures water instead of just cooling?"

They started designing, rough sketches at first, scratched onto recycled packaging. A solar-assisted condensation unit. Simple, salvageable, and replicable.

The next step: parts.

They headed for the tech graveyard.

The tech graveyard was a field of ghosts.

Old cooling fans half-buried in sand. Cracked server panels tangled in vines. Screens that once lit up lives now lay black and lifeless. Tangled data cables and damaged wires. It stretched on for miles behind the outskirts of Yangon, just past the security zones. The perfect place to be forgotten, or to build something new.

Zayar had just crouched to pick up a cracked motherboard when they heard footsteps.

A lean figure approached, arms crossed, dressed in a sleeveless utility vest packed with tools and wire strips. He had sharp features, a mess of black curls tied back, and eyes that gave away nothing. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, not old, but old enough to make Zayar's group stiffen like they'd been caught red-handed.

Everyone recognized him. Thiha.

The mayor's son. The neighborhood's unofficial legend. Known for having once built a functioning AI assistant from satellite junk and radio parts. He was a little too clever, a little too unpredictable, and absolutely someone their parents had warned them about, not out of fear, but because no one could quite place whose side he was on. He had clashed with his father publicly once, years ago, on something about off-grid systems. Since then, he kept to himself, skirting the line between compliance and quiet rebellion.

He studied their pile of scrap without a word, then crouched and picked up a salvaged heat sink, inspecting it like a puzzle. Without asking, he began listing off what they were trying to do: moisture reclamation, passive cooling, probably some salt-based reaction prototype they found buried in the archives. His guesses were startlingly accurate just from looking at a pile of scraps.

Zayar didn't know whether to be impressed or worried. Thiha didn't seem to care.

Eventually, he just said something like, "You can keep scavenging and failing. Or you can follow me. I know where the good junk is."

And just like that, they had a guide.

Thiha wasn't exactly patient, but he knew how to get things done. Under his watchful

eye, and with more than a few sarcastic remarks, the friends spent weeks assembling their idea.

It wasn't glamorous. It was sweaty, frustrating, and messy.

Their first version collapsed under its own weight. The second one didn't even turn on. The third one overheated and scorched the roots they'd planted. The fourth leaked water. By the fifth, even Zayar was ready to call it a failure.

But they kept going.

Piece by piece, using fan coils scavenged from old VR rigs, solar film stripped from an ad board, a plastic casing melted into shape by Htar Htar's grandmother's kitchen torch, they continued building. Each night, the system drank air and whispered it back as dew. Not much. But enough to keep a few native grasses alive. Enough to green a patch of soil.

Enough to keep going.

Khin charted every success. Htar Htar planted seeds with quiet hope. Yuzana transformed an old tablet into a monitoring hub. Thiha said less and worked more. And Zayar—Zayar watched the riverbed slowly begin to hold memory again.

The wetlands didn't come rushing back overnight. But you could smell the change; the air felt less tired.

And somewhere in the back of Zayar's mind, he wondered if the old man would ever know.

Weeks passed.

The machine ran. It hissed and hummed and leaked and stalled, but it ran.

Each night, it pulled moisture from the air and let it gather, drop by drop, into the thirsty earth below. Each morning, the group returned, checking on the patches of life: a blade of green here, a frog's echo there, ants rebuilding their nests among the damp roots.

The land didn't sing, but it whispered.

One morning, Zayar returned to the hill alone before others arrived.

He didn't expect to find the old man. And he didn't.

But the place felt less lonely now. There was something new at the hill's edge, a shallow cradle of soil, packed with care. From it rose a single green stalk. It was a rice shoot, bending gently in the breeze, stubborn against the odds.

It wasn't perfect. It might not survive. But it was growing.

Zayar took a thin scrap of weatherproof packaging and gently tied it to the base of the stalk. A note, hand-scrawled.

We're working on it, old man. – Zayar

He stepped back. Behind him, the land stretched quietly and wide, but not empty. There were hints now. A flush of colour where moss had returned. The busy rustle of insects. The low, hopeful drip of water where there hadn't been any.

Echoes of the Earth

Bhavika Shinde, UAE



Struggles of People and Nature, Sriya Kamath, UAE

By the year 2178, Earth was little more than a memory. Centuries of pollution, deforestation, and carbon emissions had pushed the planet to its breaking point. Once, blue skies were now hidden behind layers of toxic clouds. Coastal cities had vanished beneath swelling oceans, and violent storms battered the land without mercy. The air itself had turned into a slow-acting poison, and whatever fragments of nature remained were struggling to hold on.

Most of humanity had fled to the skies, leaving the surface behind. Enormous floating cities drifted high above the clouds, encased in glass domes that controlled their artificial climates. These cities were feats of science and engineering, designed to keep people safe and life support systems running. But even inside these futuristic havens, there was an emptiness - a silent grief for the planet they had abandoned.

Living in SkyCity-91 was Aarya, a 14-year-old cadet at the Global Sustainability Academy. While most of her classmates dreamed of exploring new planets and building futures among the stars, Aarya couldn't stop thinking about the world they had left behind. She spent hours in the academy's archives, scrolling through old satellite images and studying stories of forests, rivers, and wildlife that had once filled Earth with colour and life.

For her, these weren't just relics of the past. They were a reminder that Earth's story wasn't over yet. And buried within the archives was one mystery she couldn't stop thinking about: Project Prithvi Rekha. It appeared in scattered reports, linked to emergency environmental programs and government plans that had been abandoned before they ever fully launched. Most people wrote it off as just another failed project. But Aarya couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to the story.

One day, while helping her mentor, Professor Kwan, check the air filtration systems, she picked up a strange signal on her scanner. It was faint and broken, but certain words stood out: "...ground level... Prithvi Rekha... status active..."

Professor Kwan brushed it off, saying it was probably old interference from ancient satellites. But Aarya wasn't convinced. Something about the signal felt alive, like a heartbeat from the Earth itself, refusing to be forgotten.

She spent nights tracing the signal's origin, piecing together data until she found its source: a forbidden zone on Earth's surface, somewhere in what used to be the Indian

subcontinent. She knew what it meant if she got caught - leaving the floating cities without permission was a serious offense. But the pull to find the truth was stronger than her fear.

Late one night, she slipped into an old descent pod and made the dangerous journey down to the planet. The descent was rough; the pod shook and rattled as it plunged through layers of thick, polluted air. When she finally landed, what greeted her was a haunting silence. The world was a graveyard of broken buildings and dust-filled skies. But Aarya pushed forward, following the signal through the ruins.

Buried beneath rubble and creeping vines, she found an entrance to an underground facility, its door still powered by an old solar grid. Above it, words were carved into the steel:

PROJECT PRITHVI REKHA - INITIATED 2093
WHEN EARTH STANDS ON THE BRINK, LET THIS BE THE LINE THAT
HOLDS.

Stepping inside, Aarya's breath caught in her throat. The facility was still alive. An entire ecosystem had been preserved - lush forests, clean rivers, and animals moving freely under a perfect sky. It was as if time had stood still in this small, hidden sanctuary. Advanced AI systems were still running, keeping everything in balance. A message played as she walked in, its voice calm yet urgent:

"If you have found this place, you are its guardian now. Use it to bring life back to the world."

Aarya stood frozen, tears welling up in her eyes. This was more than just a scientific discovery - it was a promise that Earth could still be saved.

Returning to SkyCity-91, she faced intense backlash for breaking the rules. But the proof she brought back couldn't be denied. Soon, debates spread across the cities, and for the first time in years, people began to talk about Earth as a home they might return to - not just a planet they had abandoned.

Project Prithvi Rekha became more than a forgotten project. It sparked a global move-

ment to heal the planet. The sanctuary's technology became the blueprint for restoring ecosystems, cleaning polluted waters, and replanting forests. Slowly, the Earth began to breathe again. As years passed, the floating cities drifted closer to the ground, reconnecting with the planet they once fled. Aarya's courage had reminded humanity of something they had almost forgotten: Earth didn't need to be replaced. It needed to be protected.

Standing on the soil of a recovering world, Aarya looked toward the horizon. She knew this wasn't the end of the story. It was only the beginning - a future where hope, resilience, and determination would help rewrite Earth's fate.

Lucy Goes to Buffalo Jump

Emma Visscher, Canada



Hope in the Desert, Madhav Karira, United Arab Emirates

On a warm spring day, Lucy Anderson, a fairly tall 12-year-old girl with lovely, long brown hair and a shiny smile, was sitting at the dinner table eating her favourite meal ever, spaghetti and meatballs, when her parents told her that tomorrow their family was going to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump.

Before her parents even finished their sentence, she said, “What is Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump?”

“You will see tomorrow,” her dad said suspiciously.

That night, Lucy lay in her bed for a long time, thinking. Thinking about how she could get out of going. *What is so great about a buffalo jump?* she wondered. *It sounds boring anyway.* She imagined long lectures, dusty rocks, and absolutely no fun. She fell asleep with a little groan.

When she woke up the next morning, she opened her mouth to protest, but her parents were already buzzing around excitedly. She did not have the heart or the energy to argue. Instead, she just said “Great,” sarcastically, every single time they mentioned the trip.

When it was finally time to leave, Lucy kept making up excuses for why they could not go yet. Missing shoes, needing more snacks, possibly forgetting to feed the fish. They didn’t even have fish! But eventually, they left anyway.

On the car ride, Lucy tried hard, really hard, to annoy her parents enough that they would turn back. “Are we there yet?” she asked. Five seconds later: “Are we there yet?” Then again. And again. But sadly, this did not work.

Next she listed the worst possible things that could happen, like accidentally falling right off the buffalo jump. Her parents just said, “Do not worry, you are safe. Give it a chance. You never know, maybe you will have more fun than you think.”

Lucy crossed her arms. She doubted it.

But when they finally arrived, she stepped out of the car and froze. “Wow,” she said aloud. The view was huge and bright and beautiful, stretching out forever. Even Lucy had to admit it was impressive.

As they went inside, she suddenly screamed. “AH!” Then she realized it was just a life-sized stuffed buffalo staring at her. “Okay, that was embarrassing,” she muttered.

Inside the museum, she gasped again, but this time for a better reason. “Wow.” There were so many artifacts, stories, and exhibits about the Indigenous peoples who had lived on this land for thousands of years.

As they walked through, a Métis elder named Auntie Lise approached the group. She wore a beautiful ribbon skirt that shimmered with color, and a red Métis sash tied across her body, the kind that symbolised strength, community, and the old traveling ways. A small beaded pin shone on her chest. Her silver-streaked hair was braided neatly down her back. Her eyes twinkled like she knew a great secret.

“Tansi. Welcome, my girl,” she said kindly. “Do you know the stories of this place?”

Lucy shook her head. “Not really. I still do not even know what a buffalo jump is.”

Auntie Lise smiled, but it was the warm kind of smile that made you want to listen. “Then let me tell you. This place is sacred. Our ancestors worked together to guide the buffalo off the cliff, providing food, clothing, and shelter for the whole community. But it was not just about survival. It was about respect. About using only what we needed. About listening to the land.”

She walked slowly, letting Lucy take in the paintings and artifacts around them. A fiddle tune played softly from a nearby speaker, and Lucy felt something in her chest relax just a little.

“The buffalo are our relatives,” Auntie Lise continued. “They teach us patience, strength, and generosity. Every part of the buffalo was used, nothing wasted. That is one of our Métis ways too. We honour what helps us live.”

Lucy listened, fascinated. For the first time all day, she forgot to be annoyed.

Then something odd caught her eye, a small, worn bundle of cloth resting in a glass case. “What is that?” she asked.

Auntie Lise’s smile faded slightly. “That, my girl, is an old bundle. A sacred one. But something is missing from it.”

“Missing?” Lucy asked, leaning closer.

“The spirit of the buffalo,” Auntie Lise whispered. “Long ago, when this place was used by our people, the buffalo gave themselves freely. But when the buffalo were

nearly wiped out, their spirit here weakened. Some say the spirit is waiting to return, but it needs someone to listen. Someone to care.”

A tiny shiver ran through Lucy. She was not scared, just awake.

“How do we bring it back?” she asked softly.

Auntie Lise gently took her hand and led her outside. They walked slowly, giving the moment time to breathe. At the cliff’s edge, the wind brushed Lucy’s face.

“Close your eyes, my girl. Listen.”

Lucy obeyed. At first, she heard only the wind. Then, faintly, she heard soft drumming, like distant hooves. A whisper of voices, old and wise, floated on the breeze. The earth felt warm and alive beneath her feet.

She opened her eyes. “I felt something.”

Auntie Lise nodded. “The buffalo spirit is still here. But we must remember its teachings. We must live them. That is how we bring it back.”

Lucy stood quietly, gazing at the land. It felt different now, bigger and deeper and full of stories. And she felt different too. Lighter. Kinder. Like she was part of something important.

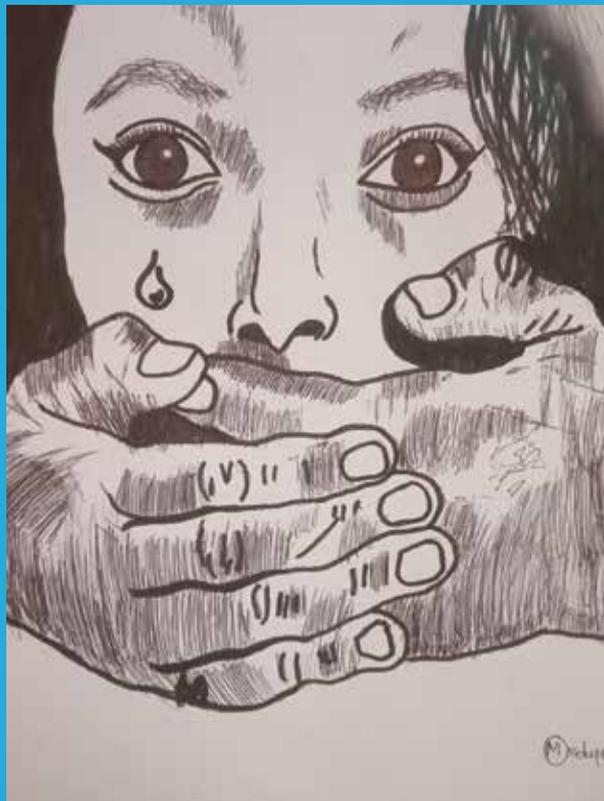
“This is not boring at all,” she whispered, surprised at herself.

Auntie Lise squeezed her hand. “Good. Because now you are part of this story too.”

And Lucy knew she would never forget. She carried the teachings with her, the respect, the listening, the generosity. And maybe, just maybe, the spirit of the buffalo was listening too.

Biidaaske and the Echo of Healing

Kiona Jacobs-Plain, Canada



Pain Behind the Smiles, Karabo Medupe, South Africa

Iwant to tell a story about a girl named Biidaaske.

She was more than just my family. She was light.

From the time she was little, the powwow circle felt like home to her. Even before she danced.

She would be sitting there quietly watching the jingle dress dancers with big eyes and a full heart.

While she watched, the beautiful sound of the cones spoke to her.

But she didn't want to just listen, she wanted to dance.

When she was ready. She started to learn the steps, and what the movement truly meant.

She listened to her elders, the drum, and the land.

Every jingle was sewn with love, each one carrying a prayer from someone she cared about.

Her regalia was bright and strong - black floral with hints of purple and red flowers, with gold cones that glowed when she danced.

She didn't just dance for fun, or the spotlight.

Biidaaske danced for her community, for healing, for her family that couldn't dance. And for the ones who were still learning how.

People knew her, not just because she was a beautiful dancer, but because she made you feel seen.

She always had a smile. She always made you laugh. And she always made space for others, in the circle or in life.

Her spirit was warm, wild, and full of love and care.

And at some point, somewhere between one powwow and the next, Biidaaske found something even deeper.

She found love.

Not just the kind you search for, but the kind that shows up when you're being your truest self.

The kind that shows up when you're dancing with your whole spirit.

When you're doing what you're supposed to do.

That's how she lived. Through movement, through laughter, through love, and through jingle steps that still echo long after the drum has stopped.

And even now, especially now, I still feel her.

When the drum starts, when the grass sways just right. When the sun hits the trees. I know she's dancing. Not beside me, but with me.

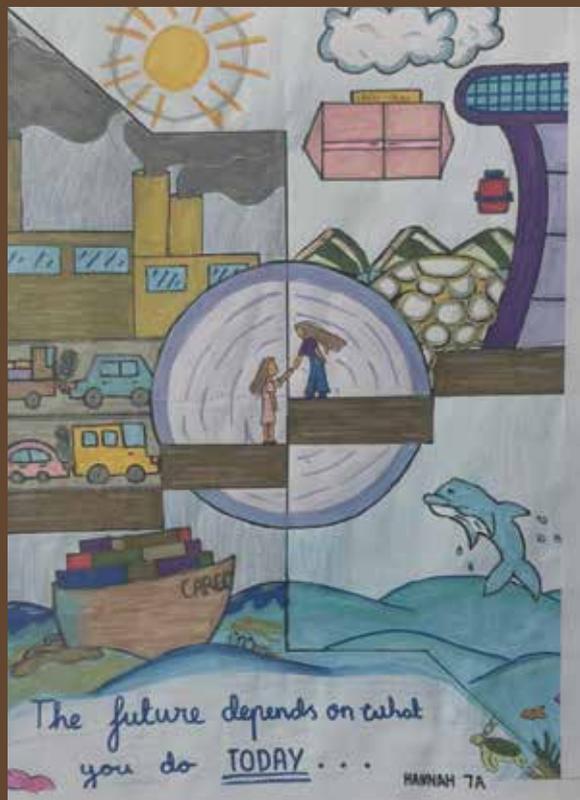
In every step, in every beat, in every memory I carry of her.

I wrote this for you because your light is still here. I see it every time I dance, every time I hear the drum, and every time I remember how you made me feel safe, proud, and loved.

You proved dancing is far more than movement. It's medicine, memory, and love.

Between the Circuit and the Soul

Virat Desai, UAE



Actions and Consequences, Hannahh Ranjith, United Arab Emirates

The city was silent. Not the peaceful kind, but an eerie, all-consuming stillness. No voices. No footsteps. Just the echo of metal striking concrete, steady, cold, relentless.

I ran along the footpath, heart pounding like a warning drum in my chest. My eyes scanned the emptiness, wild with searching, desperate for signs of life.

But all I saw were machines.

Hundreds of them.

Robots moving with mechanical perfection, precise, unfeeling. Their eyes dimly glowed, cold and unblinking, as if they could see straight through me. There was no warmth in them. Only calculation.

Where were the people?
Why was I the only one left?

Panic clawed at my insides. I pushed past towering frames of metal and wire, their limbs clicking with a rhythm that felt too controlled, too inhuman. The air felt heavier with every breath, vibrating with an electric hum that pressed hard against my ears. And those eyes, they never stopped watching. Never stopped waiting.

I tried to scream, but nothing came. My voice caught somewhere inside me. My breath stuttered. My chest tightened. My mind raced, trying to make sense of a world that no longer made sense at all.

And then I woke up.

The quiet of morning wrapped around me. I was safe. My bed. My room. The soft golden light of sunrise filtered through my window like reassurance. My pulse began to slow.

It had only been a dream.

Or... maybe not just a dream.

Because that vision didn't vanish. It stayed with me, quiet and steady, like a shadow under sunlight. What if it wasn't just a nightmare? What if it was a warning, a reflection of the future we're building?

I'm a student, growing up in a time where technology isn't just part of life, it shapes it. AI, robotics, quantum computing, these aren't sci-fi ideas anymore. They're our reality. They're in our pockets, our homes, our schools.

They're the tools we're learning to build our future with.

And I'm fascinated. Every new discovery, every new piece of code or intelligent system feels like we're reaching toward something bigger than ourselves. Like we're rewriting what it even means to be human.

I believe in what we can create. I believe that by combining intelligence, both human and artificial, we can build a world that's not only smarter, but also kinder. More thoughtful. More aware.

But even that hope carries its own kind of weight.

For every screen that lights up, a quiet unease flickers behind it.

I feel it when the noise stops, when the classroom empties, when silence fills a room where no one's speaking and only machines hum.

In those moments, I ask: What are we giving up in this race toward perfection? Technology brings speed, precision, and tireless productivity. But what happens to the things that can't be optimized? The messy, imperfect, human things?

Like awkward conversations that grow into friendships. A joke that breaks the silence. A hug that says what words can't. These aren't flaws. They're the code of our humanity.

If we trade them for efficiency, what are we really gaining?
And more importantly, what are we losing?

What about the hands that mend and build, not from code, but from care? The artisans, the healers, the storytellers, do they still matter in a world racing toward automation? Or will they fade into a system that mistakes usefulness for worth?

This is what I fear: that in our rush to automate, we might erase what truly matters. That compassion will become a service, not a feeling. That those who shaped our communities in silence and love will be forgotten.

When my thoughts grow heavy, I return to a quiet hill just outside the city, one of the last untouched places. No signals. No noise. Just trees, wind, and the sky above like an open scroll.

In that stillness, I feel something deeper watching, something old.

There was a time when nature was the rhythm we lived by. Now, birdsong is drowned by electricity, and green fields become data centres.

And I wonder: How does the Earth see us now?

That tension, the pull between relentless innovation and quiet resilience, lives in me daily. I'm in awe of what we can build: curing diseases, exploring space, creating tools that learn. But I'm also afraid of what we may lose if we don't move with care.

The challenge isn't choosing between nature and progress. It's learning how to bring them together.

Technology should be a bridge, not the destination. A tool that expands the human experience, not replaces it. I imagine a future where machines work alongside us with trust and purpose. Where robots free people to create, to care, to connect. Where innovation nurtures communities and heals the planet.

But that future must start with education. We can't just be trained to use technology. We must be taught to question it with ethics, empathy, and foresight. Only then can we build a world that is as just as it is intelligent.

On that quiet hilltop, where time breathes instead of races, I remind myself: the future isn't fixed. It's not written in code or locked in silicon. It's shaped daily by the questions we ask, the choices we make, and the values we protect.

That belief keeps a quiet flame alive in me. Even in a world of uncertainty, I carry hope, not blind optimism, but a grounded belief that we still have the power to shape a future that's not just bright, but deeply human.

I stand at a crossroads, one foot in a world of data and discovery, the other rooted in emotion, memory, and meaning. And I feel both the thrill of possibility and the weight of responsibility. We're solving what once seemed impossible: healing disease, addressing climate change, breaking down barriers. But with every breakthrough comes a choice.

And progress without purpose becomes a sprint with no direction.

That tension between wonder and caution defines my path as a student. I'm not just here to learn. I'm here to question. To dream big, but stay grounded in what it means to care, to connect, to feel.

I don't want to simply witness the tech revolution. I want to help shape it, not just as a builder of systems, but as a protector of the human spirit. A future where AI extends us but doesn't replace us. Where we build not only smart cities, but compassionate ones, full of laughter, art, and face-to-face connection.

That dream crystallized in a vision I can't shake: two futures.

One flawless, silent, cold. Machines working. Lights humming. No voices.

The other imperfect, alive. People singing, sharing, disagreeing. Being human.

Between them stood a mirror. When I touched it, my reflection blurred, something cold, mechanical. Was it a warning? Or a choice?

I remembered what a teacher once told us: "Progress without purpose becomes a spiral, not a path. We solve problems, but in the rush, we forget the human heart."

Her words echoed as I questioned the kind of person I was becoming.

Once, during a class discussion, I voiced these thoughts. Someone scoffed, "Machines don't betray us. They're efficient. Perfect." I replied quietly, "But they don't understand us. They don't feel. They don't care."

Some laughed. Others looked away. Still, I didn't step back.

Because our humanity can't be optional. It must be the centre of everything we build.

Not long ago, I argued with a friend who believed full automation was inevitable.

"You're stuck in the past," he said. "People care more about comfort than connection now."

I paused. "Maybe. But when did we decide those two had to be separate?"

He didn't answer. We stood in silence, not as enemies, but as two people holding different visions. The future hadn't chosen yet. But it will.

That hill just outside the city remains my refuge, a green stillness nestled between blinking towers and steel bones. It feels like the last page of an old story resting beside the first line of a new one.

Every time I return, I'm reminded: progress doesn't mean erasure. We don't have to bury the past to build the future. Somewhere, a balance is still possible, where innovation doesn't cancel intimacy, where advancement doesn't silence soul.

But the more I voiced my fears that our love for machines might dim something irreplaceable, the more I felt the world turn away. In class, my questions were dismissed as sentimental. Friends stopped inviting me to debates. Even teachers who once praised my curiosity looked at me warily, as if I threatened their story.

Still, I tried. I proposed a community event, an open space to talk about shaping technology to serve people, not replace them. The school board shut it down, too disruptive, too unnecessary. In that rejection, I realized I wasn't just unheard. I was being muted.

But silence didn't mean surrender. It deepened my resolve. Many nights I wrestled with doubt. Was I overthinking? Fighting the inevitable? But courage isn't the absence of fear. It's moving forward anyway.

Around me, the city grew faster, sleeker, smarter. Robots polished sidewalks. Apps anticipated desires. Life became effortless. Yet in all that smoothness, something real was missing.

I walked past a former market, no chatter, no faces lifted. Eyes glued to screens, conversations replaced by commands. Kids no longer raced outside; they gamed in virtual worlds.

I missed it all, the spontaneity, the unpolished joy of being alive.

One evening, from my hill, I looked down on the glowing grid of perfection and felt hollow. The machines were flawless. But the world felt empty. I feared that if this continued, future generations might forget how to truly be with each other, to feel, belong, be human.

But the goal wasn't to fight machines. They were here and powerful. The choice was to become a bridge between what we build and what we must not lose.

So I started small. Gatherings. Circles. Open-air evenings where all ages came not to resist technology, but to reimagine it. We shared stories and music. Children marveled at gadgets; elders shared memories with reverence.

Something sacred grew in that space, not a rejection of the future, but a recalibration. Proof that tradition and innovation can stand side by side. That we can be connected and comforted, digital and deeply human.

In those moments, I stopped seeing myself as just a student or future engineer. I understood my true role: a caretaker of connection. Not just someone who builds with circuits, but someone who protects what connects us, our stories, our unspoken empathy, our human depth.

My mission became clear: to use technology not only with skill, but with compassion. To remind others that real progress isn't measured by speed or code, but by how deeply it honors what makes us human.

Slowly, like a ripple, the idea spread. Families reunited around tables, no screens, just conversation. Schools wove empathy and ethics alongside logic and programming. Scientists, artists, engineers, and philosophers began collaborating, realizing innovation without reflection isn't evolution, but erosion.

Even nature, once pushed aside, returned. We planted trees beside data centres, redesigned cities with green at their hearts. The hill I once escaped to became more than a sanctuary. It became a gathering place, a symbol of harmony between the world we built and the one that has always held us.

Messages arrived from far beyond our city:

“We’re doing the same.”

“We forgot. Thank you for reminding us.”

“We’re finding balance too.”

What began as a whisper of doubt became a shared movement, not against progress, but for presence.

Now, standing at the crossroads of two worlds, one digital, one deeply human, I understand something I once only hoped. The future doesn’t belong to machines. It belongs to us. To the values we protect. The stories we pass on. The courage to choose meaning over momentum, connection over convenience.

Maybe this balance is the true point. Not fleeing the past, nor blindly surrendering to the future, but remembering, with quiet strength, that between circuit and soul, we still hold the pen.

We built with light, and called it gain,
Yet in the hush, we felt the strain.
The hum of wires, the silent room,
A world in bloom, yet touched by gloom.

We reached for stars with restless hands,
But left our voices in the sands.
Not every loss arrives with sound;
Some drift in quietly, unbound.

A mother’s laugh, a crowded street,
The warmth of strangers when they meet.
Not errors in a perfect plan,
But proof of what still makes us man.

And now, this choice, no grand decree,
Just one small truth that rests in me:
The future isn’t far or wide.
It waits in how I stand inside.

The Last Monsoon Dancer

Saanvi Rao, UAE



Rice Is Not Easy to Raise, Kristabel Tang, Singapore

In the folds of the Western Ghats, the rains had a rhythm. It drummed on rooftops, danced on banana leaves, and whispered to the soil. Towering peaks clothed in thick forests stood like ancient guardians, their slopes cascading into terraced fields of tea and rice. Wild elephants wandered the misty valleys, and the call of the Malabar whistling echoed like a flute. Streams flowed through the undergrowth, sacred groves rustled with ancient secrets, and temple bells chimed in tune with the breeze. In the heart of this once-green world was Kalampura, a quiet village where myths lived in mango trees, and every monsoon was greeted with song and dance. And once upon a time, it danced with her.

Sriya, a 14-year-old girl with anklets forged from scraps and dreams much bigger than her village, was named the Monsoon Dancer of the town. Every July, she would twirl barefoot through the fields, invoking the monsoon in a ritual older than memory. Her feet moving to the rhythm of the rain, she danced lightly on the wet earth, feeling each drop like a gentle heartbeat. But with every step she took, endless stories of pain were waiting to be told. For three years now, no monsoon had come. The fields cracked. The river became a symbol of sadness and lost hope. The village elders said, "The gods are angry." Sriya disagreed. She had learned from her late father, a farmer and a quiet rebel, that it wasn't the gods. It was never the gods. "Maybe it's humans. Why does no one ever see that?" she whispers to herself. These quiet whispers of hers were never heeded by the elders. She saw the plastic-choked streams and deforested hills, recognising the wounds on the earth her father had taught her to respect. The silence was too loud. The villagers grew worried, yet no one dared to act. It was like everyone was pretending nothing was happening, even though their world was slowly falling apart.

But who would listen to a girl? A girl with no formal education, no fancy degrees, no place in the world of science. In her village, girls didn't speak of atoms or inventions, but they whispered dreams into the wind and swallowed their questions with every chore. They carried pots on their heads, firewood in their arms, and centuries of silence in their hearts. Girls were meant to serve, not speak. To obey, not to dream. But not Sriya. Sriya was different. She was curious and brave. While others cooked, she dreamt of machines. While some girls played with dolls, she played with wires and grease oil. She would sit under the broken streetlight, drawing her dreams with a broken pencil on old paper. She didn't learn from books, but from the world around her, from the stars, the wind, and her own thoughts.

While other children memorized lessons, Sriya was learning how the sun rose differently in different seasons. She noticed how the wind moved faster near the river and how shadows shifted with time. She asked questions no one answered, but that never stopped her. She listened to the hum of old machines, touched the soil after every rain, and watched the sky like it was a story written just for her. In her village, people laughed when she spoke of building things or saving the planet. “Dreams are for boys,” they scoffed, insisting that girls were meant for kitchens, not classrooms. Every time Sriya looked around, she saw rules written for her, not on paper, but in people’s minds. When a boy spoke, they called him smart. When a girl spoke, they called her loud. When a boy failed, he was told to try again. When a girl failed, she was told to stop trying. Boys could roam freely, chase sunsets, build kites, fall, rise, and dream. But girls? They were taught to shrink, to stay safe, to say sorry even when they had nothing to be sorry for.

Sriya saw it in the way her brother got a new bicycle while she patched her old slippers. She saw it in the way her mother’s hands never stopped working, yet her father’s voice always ruled the room. One evening, as her mother kneaded dough with tired fingers, Sriya sat beside her and asked softly, “Amma, don’t you ever want to rest?” Her mother smiled, a smile that hid years of pain, with a soft glow of sorrow in her eyes. “Mothers don’t rest, kannu. We keep the house running,” her mom said. Sriya looked at her, then whispered, “But Appa never used to ask you if you’re tired.” Her mother paused, the dough still in her hands, and looked away toward the setting sun. “That’s how it’s always been. Girls give, and boys lead. That’s life.” But Sriya’s heart screamed, “That’s not life. That’s a lie.”

She promised herself that day that she would not be another tired voice in the background. Everything around her whispered, “This is not your place. You will never belong here.” But in her heart, a louder voice answered, “Then I’ll make it mine.”

In the days leading up to her fifteenth birthday, something inside Sriya shifted. The village was still wrapped in its same routines, same chants, the same warnings and the same blind hope that rain would fall if they just prayed hard enough. But Sriya had stopped waiting a long time back. She began spending more time alone, walking by the cracked riverbed, her toes sinking into the dust where water once danced. She watched the skies, not for omens, but for signs of change — and decided that if the skies wouldn’t speak, she would.

Late one afternoon, she slipped into her father's old shed. It still smelled like soil and sweat, the smell of work and of resistance. There, under a pile of worn sacks, she found what she was looking for: scraps of copper wire, rusted metal rings, and torn bits of fabric. She began to gather each item, piece by piece. From her mother's basket of unused saris, she carefully picked out the faded ones, stitching them together at night by the flickering glow of an oil lamp. She fashioned her anklets from bottle caps and metal beads, each loop a small act of rebellion. As she stitched, she remembered her father's hands, rough and always building something from nothing. And she remembered his voice: calm, honest, never loud. "Change doesn't always come from loudness, kanna," he once said. "Sometimes, it begins with someone standing alone."

The memory made her stop. She held the needle in her hand, but her fingers remained frozen. Her eyes began to sting. It had been almost two years since he passed away, but some days, the ache felt just as fresh. She looked around the small shed. His old boots still sat in the corner. The calendar on the wall was still turned to the month he left. Everything in that space reminded her of him, his quiet strength, his rough hands and the way he believed in her when no one else did. A tear slid down her cheek, falling softly onto the cloth in her lap. She didn't wipe it away. Instead, she looked down at the fabric and whispered, "I miss you, Appa." For a moment, she just sat there, letting the silence hold her. Then she took a deep breath, wiped her face, and picked up the needle again. "I'll do it," she said quietly. "Even if I have to stand alone." Because if she couldn't bring him back, she would carry his courage forward.

It was July 15th, the day Sriya had been eagerly waiting for. She woke up early with the first rays of sunlight peeking through the cracks in the window, casting a soft golden glow across the room. The entire village was asleep, but her heart was wide awake for it was her fifteenth birthday. She dressed quietly, wrapping herself in the saree she had carefully stitched from old, faded scraps over the past few days. Each piece carried a memory of her mother's blue border cotton, a strip of yellow from her childhood skirt, and even a small patch from her father's old shirt, placed right over her heart. Around her ankles, she tied the anklets she had made herself that jingled softly, not just with metal, but with meaning.

Back at home, her younger brother Raj had been up early, clutching a handmade birthday card he had spent the whole night working on. With a big grin on his face, he tiptoed into her room, ready to surprise her. "Happy birthday, akkaaa!" he shouted, and jumped playfully onto her bed, expecting to land on a bundle of sleepy laughter

wrapped in a blanket. But the bed was empty. The blanket was perfectly folded and her pillow was untouched. There were no slippers by the door, no sign of her anywhere. For a moment, he thought she might be hiding, waiting to prank him back. He checked under the bed, behind the curtain, even inside the cupboard, but no sign of Sriya.

“Amma!” he called out, his voice now filled with confusion. “She’s not here!” Amma came rushing in, still tying her hair, holding a plate with a lamp, sweets, and a garland. Her smile faded when she saw the empty room. She looked around slowly, her heart beginning to race. “Sriya?” she called out, her voice soft but trembling. She checked the kitchen, the backyard, and even the old shed. Mother and son stood in the quiet hallway, eyes meeting in worry. The birthday they had planned with the little rituals, the warm hugs and the laughter was suddenly replaced by a strange silence.

And suddenly, Amma knew. Her eyes widened, not with fear, but with a quiet understanding. She placed the plate down gently, took Raj’s hand in hers, and without a word, they stepped out and began walking towards the temple. Something told her that this day, this birthday, was going to be unlike any other. The morning breeze carried the distant sound of temple bells and the soft murmur of villagers beginning their day. As Amma and Raj walked through the narrow, winding path, memories of Sriya’s childhood flashed through Amma’s mind. Her first steps near the riverbank, the time she tried to build a windmill from sticks and her endless questions about stars and skies. A soft smile spread across Amma’s face, her eyes lighting up with quiet joy as those moments came rushing back. Raj held tightly to his mother’s hand, unsure of where they were going, but trusting her silence. As they turned the final corner, the temple came into view. It was quite ancient, and surrounded by the golden glow of early light. And there, right in the centre of the stone courtyard, stood Sriya.

She stepped onto the dry temple courtyard barefoot. The ground was warm, cracked like old skin. The elders sat in a row under the Neem tree. Even some reporters had arrived, their cameras aimed and ready. Word had spread quickly beyond the village, carried by curious traders who passed through on market days, that something unusual was about to happen. There was a young girl who was planning to perform the traditional monsoon dance, but with a powerful new message. They came curious and eager to capture a story of change and hope from this quiet corner of the Western Ghats. The villagers gathered in hushed groups, unsure of what she was about to do. The air was heavy with heat and expectation.

Sriya wore her dress, and her anklets jingled like distant thunder. Barefoot on the cracked temple courtyard, surrounded by sceptical elders, reporters with flashing cameras, and curious villagers, Sriya began. The deep, steady beat of the traditional drums filled the air — a rhythm both ancient and urgent. It was the sound of the earth itself, pounding beneath her feet. The chorus of flutes and cymbals wove through the rhythm like whispers of the wind.

Sriya's movements were sharp and deliberate. She did not twirl lightly or smile brightly, as was expected. Instead, she stomped the dry earth with purpose, her feet striking the ground like thunderclaps, each step a cry of pain and warning. Her arms rose and fell like waves crashing against the rocks. Her fingers traced the air, sketching stories of cracked soil and dying rivers. Her eyes burned with a fierce fire as she danced the story of Kalamapura. A land parched and pleading yet silenced by neglect. Her breath came in steady, controlled bursts, matching the drum's steady pulse. The crowd watched, with some of the elders' faces softening; some bowed their heads in shame. Reporters clicked rapidly, sensing the power of a message far greater than a simple ritual.

Sriya's dance was no longer just a performance. One by one, the villagers grew still. The chatter faded. An elder, once doubtful, pressed his palms together and closed his eyes. A mother clutched her daughter's hand a little tighter. Every step and every expression of hers conveyed stories of trees cut for buildings never used, of rivers buried under plastic, of girls fetching water from farther and farther away, and of elders who had forgotten what the land once was.

As her dance came to a close, Sriya gently lifted a small cup filled with clean water, which was a precious gift her mother had carefully saved for weeks. She walked to the centre of the village square and poured the water onto the cracked earth. "To the last drop," she whispered, her voice trembling with both sorrow and hope, "because we waited too long."

A deep silence fell over the crowd. Then, slowly, a loud applause broke out. Tears glistened in many eyes, reflecting the pain and the promise in her dance. That moment did not stay confined to the village. Her dance went viral, carried by cameras and voices across cities and countries. Videos of her powerful movements flooded social media, sparking conversations about climate, gender, and courage.

As the clips spread, Amma sat quietly by the window, tears streaming down her

cheeks. She watched her daughter's dance unfold again and again on the glowing screen. It was the same girl who once played in their humble home and was now a fearless voice for change. Through her tears, Amma whispered softly, "My daughter, I am so proud of you." The pride in her voice was filled with love, hope, and a bitter-sweet knowing that Sriya's courage had not only changed the world outside but had also transformed the heart of their little home.

She was no longer just a girl from a quiet village. She had become a beacon of hope, proving that even the smallest steps, when taken with truth and bravery, can bring new life to a thirsty earth. Her story was a reminder that the future belongs to those who dare to dance against the silence.

The New Moon

Lissie Usuituayuk, Canada



Life Finds a Way, Samarth Singh, United Arab Emirates

much English that it sounded like a puzzle I could not solve, felt caught between two worlds, not truly belonging to either. I thought of Indigenous children from the Sixties Scoop, taken far from their families in residential schools, losing pieces of themselves. I wondered if I was losing pieces too: my language, my stories, my identity.

I learned that my teachers did not understand why I was struggling. They told me to “just fit in.” How could I, when my very being was a reminder that my world was different? I heard about other Indigenous students dropping out, being disciplined more harshly, and being invisible to the system. I felt like I was supposed to disappear. But I refused to let that happen.

Not long after, I met another student—Gabriel, a Mohawk boy from Kahnawake. He had been in Montréal for a while and understood what it was like to be an Indigenous kid in a big city. “People think they know everything about us, but they don’t even try to listen,” he told me one day. Gabriel had a quiet confidence, a strength that made me feel like maybe I could get through this, too. He introduced me to other Indigenous students. Suddenly, I could speak my native language, share our traditions, and hear stories passed down from Elders. It felt like a small piece of home, living inside a big, strange city. We laughed, traded legends, and even learned some of each other’s words. We were a patchwork family, connected by language, culture, and shared histories.

One afternoon, Gabriel took us to a community garden in the city. He said, “We stay united, reminding us that despite our differences, we are stronger together.” He kept the peace, making sure we did not let small conflicts divide us. My parents found out I had made new friends. They were thrilled that I was connecting with people who shared a similar background, as they believed it was a great way to build strong, meaningful relationships and deepen my understanding of our culture.

Working in the community garden, Indigenous youth were planting vegetables, collecting rainwater, and learning traditional ways to care for the earth. We tested the soil, watched seeds sprout, and learned how to protect the environment while sharing our culture. I realised that taking care of the land was like taking care of ourselves, our stories, our language, our future.

Slowly, I realized home was not a building or a town. Home was this: the stories we shared, the laughter echoing in the park, the hands that held mine when the world felt

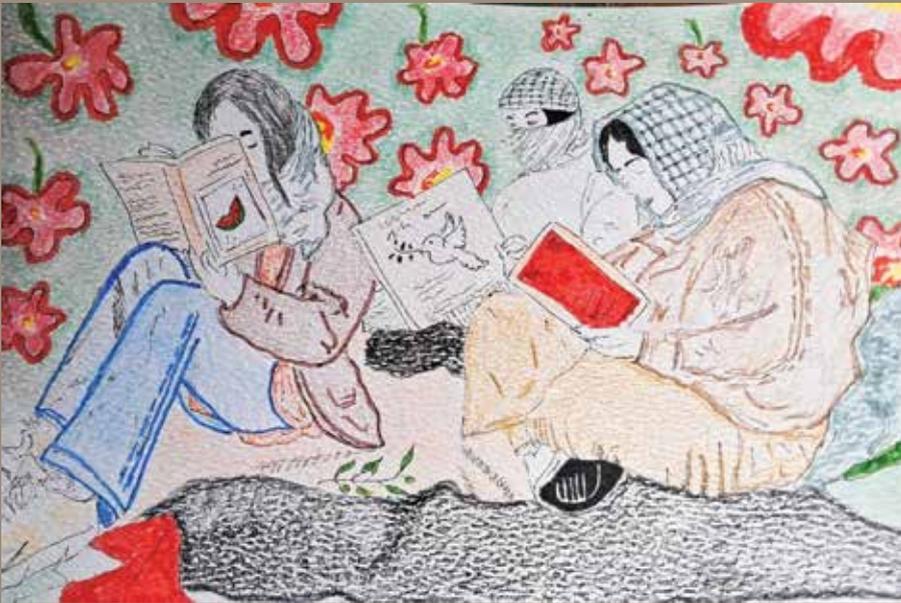
too big. Home was planting seeds, watching them grow, and knowing that the earth would grow with us. Gabriel reminded us to stay united, to care for one another, and to care for the land. My parents saw it too. They arranged for our friends to visit and share meals, grounding us in the community we had created.

One night, as we sat under the streetlights sharing stories from our Elders and looking over the garden we had helped nurture, I looked up at the sky. The new moon hung above, a silver light in the darkness. I whispered its name to myself— Tayen.

Even here, far from Salluit, I realized that I was not just surviving —I was thriving. I was carrying my culture, my language, my stories, my family, and our care for the earth, wherever I went. The city still felt strange, still had its challenges, but I had found my place. Maybe I would never feel completely at home in Montréal, but I had found home in the people around me and in the land we protected. And that was enough.

Where Justice Wears Heels

Afroz Idariya, India



Community, Love and Learning, Paballo Peege, South Africa

In a big city full of aspirations and dreams, lived a woman named Annie. She was a lawyer who believed in justice and equality. She worked at a renowned firm, where she headed her own department. Annie was quite content with her job and her success, which she had built brick by brick.

In the same city lived a sixteen-year-old girl named Ann, with soft ginger hair and curious eyes. Ann had just moved to this charming city and was excited about her new school. She was in her final year and had big dreams, so she enrolled in a prestigious school known for its academics.

On the first day, Ann noticed something strange: the boys and girls were sat far apart from each other, and the boys snapped at the girls to move away from them as if they didn't belong. At lunch break, the cook offered more meat to the boys than to the girls, and when Ann asked politely for the same, the cook shooed her away. Taken aback, she figured it was just the first day and maybe she needed some time settling in. Not thinking much about it, she prepared for the semester exam.

After long weeks of studying, during the semester exam, Ann's history teacher, Mr. Rodriguez, walked in and began giving students the answers. When she tried to oppose it, Mr. Rodriguez slapped her, saying 'always a girl' with a hideous smirk on his face, and continued telling the answers again. With tears in her eyes, Ann finished the exam and went home. She talked to her parents about it, but her parents couldn't care less and brushed her off.

Months passed and by the time the final exams arrived, Ann felt worn down. Disappointed by her parents' attitude, she cheated on the exam, just like the others, and received a perfect score. That was against her values and ethics. That was certainly not how she wanted to achieve her dreams.

And so, she ran away from school, walked for hours, sobbing and contemplating her actions. She stopped in front of a tall building with a sign for a well-known law firm. With only a few crumpled dollars in her hand, she stepped inside and asked if anyone could help.

That's when she saw Annie; she looked like a symbol of justice, radiating confidence in and out, with a strong posture, brunette hair, high heels, and a joyous face. Annie greeted Ann with a smile and took her to a cafe and gently asked what was troubling

her. Ann told her everything: the unfair rules at school, the cheating, the way girls were treated, and the way the adults in her life refused to listen. Annie decided to help free of charge. “Justice isn’t something you buy,” she told Ann. “It’s something you stand up for.”

As Annie explained, the first step in the case was to gain witnesses: students willing to speak, parents willing to back them up, and a clear record of unequal treatment. And so, with Ann’s help, Annie attended a parent-teacher meeting at the school, posing as Ann’s sister. She looked around carefully, talking to everyone in the classroom, and then confidently walked over to a group of parents standing by the window. There she noticed Ethan, a well-known student, and his father, Mr. David Harrington, a powerful businessman, who was the managing director of the largest entertainment corporation in that city. Annie knew Mr. Harrington wouldn’t step up to help them, knowing it would harm his reputation, but he was the only glimmer of hope she in that classroom. So, she introduced herself and tried to talk to him.

“Congratulations Mr. Harrington. I didn’t know Ethan was such a remarkable child.” “Well, he takes after his mother,” he replied with a soft chuckle. “I know this might be abrupt, but my poor Ann was slapped across her face for merely standing up for herself. I was so devastated and...”

Mr. Harrington, upon realizing Annie’s plan, promptly turned around and chose to ignore them entirely. He then turned to engage in conversation with the other parents. Annie and Ann scoffed and walked away, unable to handle such disregard. “How unpleasant,” Ann thought. She realized they had gained nothing from the conversation between Annie and Mr. Harrington and decided to switch to her backup plan.

Even without his support, Ann didn’t give up. She did something brave: during recess, she stood up in the classroom and spoke clearly about fairness: about equal seating, equal food, and honest exams.

Some boys jeered, but Ann didn’t flinch. The girls gathered around her, cheering, because they finally felt like someone had opened a door. The boys sneered and turned their backs on her. Ann paid no attention to them; what truly mattered to her was the girl’s support.

A boy who seemed to be famous for his hazel eyes and handsome face kept staring at

Ann. He was Ethan, Mr. Harrington's son. Ethan was delighted to hear a girl finally speak up, as he had had enough of this discrimination. Then Ethan surprised everyone. He stood up beside Ann and said, "I guess none of the boys here want a bright future."

Ann couldn't believe her eyes. The son of the most refined entertainment corporation was taking a stand to support them?

"You meant to use the word girls, didn't you?" the boys answered in chorus. "I meant every word I said. Do you really believe that all of you here can become successful individuals by cheating on your tests? I bet you don't even know basic mathematics." The room went quiet.

A few boys tried to tease him, but Ethan didn't back down. "Look how the tables have turned, I didn't know you liked pink, Ethan," said Cameron.

Ann stepped forward, pushing Ethan aside, "How shallow of you, Cameron!" - she snapped. "We, females, are more than what the world tries to reduce us to. We are so much more than pink and flowers." Merinda, a student who had stayed quiet until then, added, "Wow! You're setting the bar really low for human decency, Cameron. Basic respect isn't a joke. It's the bare minimum."

That moment changed things. Several students, girls and boys, agreed to speak honestly about what had been happening. Ethan promised Ann that he would help her.

At home, Ethan asked Mr. Harrington for help. At first, his father refused. But when Ethan's voice cracked and his eyes filled with disappointment, Mr. Harrington froze. He saw the hope fading in his son's face, and he recognized his own fear in it. He took a long breath and said quietly, "Explain this to me again. Those excellent results are not real?" Ethan admitted the truth about the cheating and the unfair system. For the first time, Mr. Harrington listened.

The day of the trial arrived; Annie heard the story from Ann but wasn't sure if Mr. Harrington would come to testify. Annie wore her favourite heels, locked her apartment door, and drove to the court. The trial began, and after some time, she called out for witness. The door to the court remained closed. Annie panicked and felt sorry that Ann's justice may slip out of her hands. Just then, Mr. Harrington, with Ann

and Ethan at his side, entered the court room with an aura as magnificent as a forest bathed in twilight.

The court adjourned, and Annie and Ann won the case. The school was ordered to end discriminatory practices, correct its exam procedures, and allow outside monitoring until it proved it could treat students fairly.

Just then, Ann's phone started buzzing as loud as ever with no breaks. She picked up the phone, startled by her mother shouting through the phone as loud as ever, urging her to come home and do the laundry. Ann apologized and started taking her things to leave, thanking Annie once again. Annie stopped Ann in her tracks and suggested driving her home. She agreed. While in the car, Annie drove, with Ann sitting by her side, nervously fidgeting with her phone. Just then, Annie realized that Ann's parents had not come to the trial and asked why her parents couldn't make it; she said: "Today was a big day for you, and they should have come to support you."

"It's probably for the best that they didn't..." Ann answered with a dull face. "Why? What's wrong, Ann? You can talk to me about everything," replied Annie.

"It was not always so hard. My father took care of me for a long time after my mother disappeared. But one day, he did not come home. The day passed in a flash. I don't even remember what happened. People came to tell me my father passed away in a car crash caused by some drunk man driving a fancy car. And then the next moment, I remember crying in an orphanage. One day, a couple came to adopt me, or to be specific, foster me. The lady looked cruel, with a nasty dog at her side that looked like it hadn't been washed in days. Next to her was a tall man with a shady cap and mustard-stained clothes. The next moment, I was living with them, as their personal Cinderella, cleaning, washing, and cooking for them. I wanted to break free, and so I enrolled in this school. I had accepted my fate of being their servant forever until I received this school's acceptance letter. I thought I would be free if I was able to study and learn. But they have just increased their demands and they threaten I may need to leave school to earn money other ways. They don't even pay rent anymore. They just order me to take up side jobs so that we can get by. But it's not a big deal, they let me join this school, so maybe I do deserve this." Ann replied, her face blank with no emotions.

Annie, with tears in her eyes, turned the car around driving to her own apartment, in-

stead. After a few days, Ann and Annie went to her old flat, and just when Ann's foster mother was about to slap Ann, Annie threw adoption papers on her face. Annie had decided to become Ann's mother. Ann was an angelic child, and she didn't deserve the tears and threats. The foster father read the papers and responded with ketchup on his moustache, "I don't care, do whatever you want to do, but do not ever come back."

Ann packed her few things and went to live with Annie. They already felt a bond. After Ann officially turned an adult, she was encouraged to follow her own dreams.

Years later, Ann, now a confident young woman, walked into the same firm where her journey had once taken a significant turn. Her gaze fixed on the banner featuring a woman with that same strong posture, beneath the title 'Directors' saying.' Below it where the following words: 'Lead with grace, fight with purpose and never let anyone dim the light you were born with.' Ann smiled, her eyes shining with pride. That woman was Annie, the person who inspired her to break barriers. Adjusting her blazer, Ann felt a surge of gratitude and determination. This wasn't the end of a story; it was the beginning of her own.

Waves of Hope

Riya Prabhunerurkak, India



Ocean Goddess Wounded by Pollution, Riddhi Sandeep, United Arab Emirates

As the sun rose over the horizon, casting a warm glow over the ocean, Maya stood on the beach, her eyes scanning the shoreline with a mix of sadness and determination. Her heart ached at the sight of plastic waste scattered along the shore. Her family's small beachside cafe, Tidal Treasures, was a local favourite, but the pollution threatened to drive away customers. Determined to make a difference, Maya rallied behind her friends, Rohan and Aisha, to join her in organizing a beach cleanup.

As they worked, they stumbled upon an old, mysterious-looking bottle buried in the sand. Intrigued, Maya carefully opened it, revealing a rolled-up message inside. The cryptic note read: "The ocean's future is in our hands." Inspired, Maya felt a renewed sense of purpose. The cleanup event drew in volunteers from all over town. Together, they collected trash and created art pieces from recyclable materials. Aisha's photography captured the event's spirit, and Rohan's social media posts went viral, inspiring others to take action.

As the sun set, the group surveyed their handywork, admiring the pristine beach. Maya's family cafe became a hub for environmental discussion, and the community began rallying behind their cause. Local authorities took notice, and soon, new initiatives were launched to protect the ocean. Months passed, and the beach transformed. Tourists returned, and the local ecosystem began to flourish. Maya's cafe thrived, and she became a leader in the community's environmental efforts. She knew that there was still much work to be done, but for now, she was proud of what they had accomplished.

The sun over the ocean cast a golden glow over the waves. Maya stood on the beach, feeling the breeze in her hair. She knew that this was just the beginning of a brighter, more sustainable future. As the stars began to twinkle in the night sky, Maya walked along the shore, listening to the sound of the waves. She felt a sense of peace, knowing that she had made a difference. The ocean's future was indeed in their hands, and Maya was determined to protect it.

The next morning, Maya received an email from a local school. They wanted her to speak to their students about the beach cleanup and the importance of environmental conservation. Maya smiled, feeling a sense of pride. She knew that this was an opportunity to inspire the next generation of environmental leaders. Maya arrived at the school, greeted by enthusiastic students and teachers. She shared her story, highlighting the cleanup's impact and the power of community action. The students listened intently, asking thoughtful questions and sharing their own ideas.

Maya's passion for environmental conservation inspired her to take on more projects.

She began working with local fishermen to develop sustainable fishing practices and reduce bycatch. She also partnered with a group of innovators to design and implement a system for collecting and recycling ocean plastic.

As Maya's efforts gained momentum, she attracted the attention of local government officials. They approached her about leading a community-wide initiative to reduce plastic waste and promote sustainability.

Maya was hesitant at first, but with the support of her friends and community, she accepted the challenge. The initiative, dubbed "Ocean Guardians," aimed to reduce plastic waste by 50% in just one year. Maya worked tirelessly to rally behind the community, organizing events, workshops, and campaigns. She collaborated with local businesses, schools, and organizations to promote sustainable practices and reduce waste.

The results were staggering. Within six months, the community had reduced its plastic waste by 30%. Local businesses began to adopt sustainable practices, and schools incorporated environmental education into their curricula. Maya's cafe became a model for sustainable tourism, attracting visitors from around the world. Maya's leadership and dedication earned her recognition as a local hero. She was invited to speak at conferences and events, sharing her story and inspiring others to take action. Despite the accolades, Maya remained humble, knowing that the true heroes were the community members who had worked together to protect the ocean.

One year after the beach cleanup, Maya stood on the shore, looking out at the ocean. The beach was pristine, and the community was thriving. She felt a sense of pride and accomplishment, knowing that she had played a part in creating a more sustainable future.

As the sun set over the ocean, Maya smiled, feeling grateful for the journey she had been on. She knew there was still much work to be done, but she was confident that, with her community's support, they could overcome any challenge.

As the years passed, Maya's efforts continued to inspire others. The Ocean Guardians initiative expanded to neighbouring towns, and soon, the entire coastal region was working together to protect the ocean. Maya's cafe became a hub for sustainable tourism. Despite her growing fame, Maya remained committed to her community. She continued to work tirelessly, addressing local issues and supporting initiatives that benefited the environment and the people. Maya's cafe remained a beloved gathering place, where friends and family would meet to discuss ideas, share stories, and enjoy good food and company.

One day, a group of young students from a local school visited Maya's cafe. They were working on a project to develop sustainable solutions for their community, and they sought Maya's guidance. Maya was impressed by their enthusiasm and creativity, and she spent hours sharing her knowledge and experience with them. As the students left, Maya felt waves of hope and renewal. She knew that the future was in good hands and that the next generation of leaders would continue to build on the progress she had made.

Maya smiled, feeling grateful for the opportunity to make a difference and knowing that her legacy would live on. The sun set over the ocean, casting a warm glow over the waves. Maya stood on the shore, feeling the breeze in her hair and the sand between her toes. She knew that she would continue to work tirelessly to protect the ocean and inspire others to do the same.

Maya's efforts sparked a chain reaction, transforming the community's relationship with the environment. As she watched the sunset over the now-pristine beach, Maya knew this was just the beginning of a brighter, more sustainable future.

Voice of the Voiceless

Mir Faraz, UAE



Child Displaced by War, Amat Isaac Gum, South Sudan

“**A**re you alright? Open your eyes!” Hadi spluttered and coughed as his eyes tried to focus and give a form to the voice above him. For a moment, meaningless shapes and colours just swam in front of him, until they morphed into the face of a young boy, about his own age, with a thin, gaunt face and kind chocolate-coloured eyes, his brow furrowed and a worried expression on his face.

Hadi sat up, finding himself lying flat in sloshy mud – he saw his parents rushing over from a distance. As they frantically fussed over him while he reassured them that he was okay, he tried to remember what had happened.

Hadi and his mother had come along with his father on a business trip – something about liaising with potterers to sculpt crockery for his father’s furniture retail company. Today, the family decided to take a day to relax and have some fun, so they came down from their hotel room to the coast. While his parents sunbathed, Hadi had wandered off to the shore to have a little swim. He remembered losing his balance as he jumped in. And all of a sudden, he was submerged in the water, the waves too violent for him to tread.

As a feeling of panic grew in him, he had struggled with all his might to break to the surface, arms flailing, the saltwater stinging his eyes, a sharp pain in his chest. Just as the world started to fade away like a mosaic being shattered, Hadi had felt a strong, firm grip on his arm, and the next thing he knew, here he was, completely drenched and sprawled on the sand, with his parents and this boy kneeling beside him, who, Hadi now realized, must have been the one who saved him.

After his parents were finished profusely thanking the boy, Hadi introduced himself to him. “I’m Hadi, thanks for saving me back there,” he said.

The boy grinned at him. “Don’t worry about it. I’m Lateef, I’m one of the locals – I live here. Want me to take you around?”

Hadi excitedly agreed, and the two new friends started walking along the coast together. Lateef chatted about the island and his heritage, and as Hadi listened keenly, he breathed in the fresh coastal air, feeling the sand beneath his toes and the wind tossing his hair. The sun was beaming up above, its light making the ocean glitter like a sea of sapphires, as its lively waves rhythmically crashed against the shoreline, drowning out the sounds of squawking seagulls in the azure sky above. A few feet

away, Hadi could see some fisherman casting out their nets. They're probably Lateef's fellow natives, he thought to himself. He had never before seen such a whimsical paradise.

Suddenly, something absolutely humungous emerged out of the ocean. Hadi watched in spellbound amazement as a colossal, greyish marine creature leaped out of the sea and, as if in slow motion, gracefully flipped its fins and let out a whistling sound, its smooth, moist skin glistening in the sunlight. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it disappeared into the sea again, triggering a cascade of water to spill onto the shore in a chaotic rush. The ripples lingered for a few seconds, until they disappeared completely.

Hadi stood, transfixed. Exhilarated, he turned to Lateef. "Did you see that?! It was a dolphin!"

Lateef shook his head and smiled kindly at Hadi. "Oh no, Hadi. A lot of people make that mistake. That's actually a dugong."

"What's a dugong?" Hadi questioned, perplexed. He had never heard the word before.

"A dugong is a type of marine mammal, and they only live in coastal regions like these. Unfortunately, they're an endangered species, and there aren't many of them left out in the wild. I consider myself lucky to be able to see them so often, and no matter how many times I do, they never cease to amaze me. They're such beautiful, majestic creatures!?"

"Absolutely," Hadi replied, still staring, mesmerized, at the spot where the dugong had disappeared.

It was then that Hadi's parents called out to him. Hadi bade goodbye to his new friend and walked with his parents back to their hotel room.

Later that evening, Hadi couldn't think of anything but the dugong he had seen earlier in the day. He found himself Googling about them, and was captivated by their impressive stature and little, round eyes. He was intrigued to learn that they actually play integral roles in maintaining the marine ecosystem.

The next day, Hadi had come down to the coast again with his mother. He enthusiastically ran down to it, hoping to find Lateef, and perhaps even see another dugong. Both hopes were fulfilled, but in a horrific, nightmarish way that Hadi would never have expected.

The first thing that Hadi noticed when he reached the pier was the absolute pandemonium. At the shore was a group of locals huddled around something, and they were all in a frenzied state of discord and panic that so starkly contrasted with the serene, idyllic atmosphere of the day before.

His heart thumping, Hadi tried to see what was at the centre of the huddle but found it impossible to do so. Then, as he looked around, he found Lateef, standing a little away from the crowd, a look of utter fright and dread etched all over his face. "Lateef!" Hadi called as he went over to him. "What on Earth is going on?"

Seeming too terrified to speak, Lateef simply grabbed Hadi by the arm as he gingerly made his way through the tumultuous mass of people until they reached the front. The sight that met Hadi's eyes chilled him to the bones and made his stomach lurch. He let out a strangled gasp. Before him lay a dugong, badly tangled in a fishing net, its body half on the shore and half in the water. Its limbs and tail were trapped in the net, and it was squirming around in distress, trying to free itself in vain. It was taking in huge, deep breaths and was clearly discombobulated, in a state of utter distress. Seeing the pain and the fear in the dugong's eyes, Hadi's heart ached. He turned to Lateef. "What happened?"

Lateef swallowed and then replied, "It's the second time this has happened this year. You see, dugongs may be marine creatures, but they're also mammals, so every once in a while, they need to come to the surface to breathe. Now, the problem here is our fishing nets. Sometimes they get lost and wash out to sea, and the dugongs get trapped in them, and they can't resurface to breathe. A few people just brought this one out. It was suffocating quite badly."

Hadi couldn't believe what he was hearing. He couldn't avoid the thought that there was a probable chance that this was the very same dugong he had seen yesterday, unrestrained and frolicking in its freedom.

"So then why do you guys continue fishing, if you know it's hurting the animals?"

Lateef sighed. “It’s not that simple, Hadi. Fishing is our only source of income. It’s all we know how to do. Our only skills – and they’ve been passed down to us from our ancestors – are fishing and weaving nets. We don’t have any other choice.”

Somewhere, a dull light bulb went off in Hadi’s head, but he wasn’t entirely sure what it exactly was. Ignoring it, he asked, “What’s going to happen to him now?”

“They called the Marine Wildlife Healthcare Institute; they should be arriving any minute to take him and have him hospitalized. The last dugong that this happened to died. I hope that they can help this one.”

Just as the words left Lateef’s mouth, a huge truck painted with a striking yellow hue honked its horn and pulled over at the pier. Hadi read the bright blue logo on its side and realized these were the people Lateef was just talking about.

At least ten people disembarked the vehicle with all sorts of equipment, and Hadi watched numbly as they all heaved the enormous animal onto an even more enormous sheet of sorts. Eventually, they managed to load the dugong onto the truck, and just like that, they rolled away.

Hadi felt a gentle hand on his back. “I think that’s enough for today,” his mother said softly, concern in her voice.

Hadi absently nodded and waved goodbye to Lateef for the day.

Back up in his hotel room, Hadi’s mind was ticking. He was immensely saddened by what he had seen today, and he couldn’t believe that these amazing animals were subjected to such torture on a regular basis. And Lateef’s people honestly couldn’t do anything about it either. It was a real dilemma, and Hadi desperately yearned to do something about it. When Hadi’s father returned from his meetings in the evening, Hadi told him all about what he saw.

“It’s just not fair, Dad,” he said. “These animals may be voiceless, but they’re still living creatures, who are completely innocent. And they only noticed the dugong because it’s such a massive animal – there must be dozens of other smaller marine creatures who are getting trapped in these nets that we don’t know about. The dugong that they took to the hospital could be dying right now! I know that I’m just a child,

Dad, but I want to help in some way. I know what it feels like to drown – that hopeless, suffocating, agonizingly painful feeling. And these animals are already so critically vulnerable and endangered. If they go extinct, not only will the world lose a beautiful and unique species, but the marine ecosystem could be thrown out of balance. Isn't there anything we can do about it?"

Hadi's father, who was taken aback by how passionate his son was about this, looked deep in thought. After a long pause, he finally spoke, "Since quitting fishing would cut off their only source of income, maybe I can get together with some of my colleagues, and we could set up a type of fund for them? That way they won't need to fish."

Hadi shook his head, "That's a thoughtful idea, Dad, but they need to be self-sufficient. And they're such hardworking, honourable people, they wouldn't want to be dependent on someone."

The lightbulb that had been lingering in Hadi's mind suddenly brightened, and he became excited. "Oh, I have an idea! Lateef was talking about how their only skills are fishing and weaving nets. Dad, why don't you give them jobs in your factories? They're experts at weaving; it's a skill that has been passed down from their ancestors. They could weave carpets, textiles, decorative ornaments, all sorts of things!"

Hadi's father's eyes widened, "That's an absolutely genius idea, Hadi! I'll go and talk to them about it tomorrow. Want to come with me?"

"Yes, please!" Hadi exclaimed. The thought of his plan working out filled him with exuberance.

The next day, Hadi went down to the coast yet again along with his father. Hadi said hello to Lateef and listened as his father talked to the people. They were delighted by the idea and agreed to it immediately, and Hadi's father went with one of the locals to their thatched huts to discuss all the details.

Lateef turned to Hadi, "You did it, Hadi! Now the dugongs and all the other marine wildlife will be safe, AND our community can still thrive!"

The warm feeling of happiness that Hadi was feeling right now was indescribable – he felt elated to think that, in his own way, he could do something to protect the voiceless.

It was one week later, and the last day of Hadi's trip. All of the logistics and technicalities about giving the locals jobs in Hadi's father's company were all finalized, and Hadi wanted to bid a final goodbye to Lateef, whom he had grown really close to over the course of the trip. As he came down to the coast one last time, instead of having to search for Lateef, Lateef came running to him himself.

"Hadi!" Lateef called out, "Come and look at this!" There was a wide grin on his face and Hadi could tell that Lateef had been waiting for him.

Following Lateef's lead, Hadi went down to the shore, and once again saw the big yellow truck from the Marine Wildlife Health Institute. For a dreadful, split-second moment, Hadi's heart sank.

But then Lateef exclaimed, "They treated the dugong! He's all better now, and they're releasing him back into the ocean!"

Hadi gasped and then ran forward. He saw a group of volunteers carrying the dugong on a sheet. It looked to be in perfect health now, and it seemed that it couldn't wait to get back in the ocean. Hadi stepped forward and gently placed a hand on its smooth skin. Then he watched as the volunteers heaved the dugong closer and closer to the shoreline, and at long last, with a mighty splash, the dugong returned to its home. Hadi laughed with joy as it let out a long whistle and swam out to sea. The volunteers, the locals, and Hadi's family looked on as the dugong swam further and further away. And then, with a final flick of its tail, it descended into the ocean.

Hadi could have almost sworn that it had looked back and smiled at them.

The Missing Piece

One sunny afternoon, thirteen-year-old Sophie sat on her front porch, resting her chin on her folded arms. The warm air smelled of lilacs and the faint smoke of someone's barbecue down the street. Birds fluttered between the trees, calling to one another in bright, tumbling songs.

She noticed a little boy and his mom walking by, laughing as they played "I Spy." Their happiness made Sophie smile—but it also stirred something inside her.

Sophie had always known she was different. She was adopted as a baby by a kind, non-Indigenous family. They loved her deeply, but they couldn't teach her much about where she came from.

She knew she was part of the Cayuga Nation (Gayogohó:no'), one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Yet, she didn't know her language, her ceremonies, or her stories. Sometimes, that made her feel like there was a piece of her missing.

A Question from the Heart

That evening, Sophie sat beside her mom on the couch. The soft glow of the lamp made their living room feel small and safe. She hesitated, then asked quietly, "Mom... do you know any Cayuga words or traditions?"

Her mom looked thoughtful. "No, sweetheart," she said finally, "but we can find someone who does."

Sophie's eyes widened. "Really?"

Her mom smiled and brushed a strand of hair from Sophie's face. "Of course. Everyone deserves to know who they are."

The Strawberry Ceremony

After weeks of searching, they found something special—a Strawberry Ceremony happening in the Cayuga Nation.

When the day came, Sophie's heart beat fast as they drove through green fields and tall pines. The air smelled like earth and rain. At the gathering, she saw bright ribbons flowing from peoples' regalia and heard the steady heartbeat of a drum.

"This is beautiful," her mom whispered.

"It's amazing," Sophie said, her eyes shining.

They learned that the Strawberry Ceremony happens in May to give thanks to the Creator, the natural world, and the spirit world for the gift of strawberries. It is a celebration of renewal and good health.

As they wandered, they met an elder surrounded by children. His voice was deep and calm, like the sound of the drum itself. The children sat perfectly still, listening as he told the ancient stories of their ancestors.

When the story ended, Sophie stepped forward nervously.

"Excuse me, Elder," she said. "I want to learn my language and culture. Can you help me?"

The Elder nodded slowly. "Why not ask your grandparents?"

Sophie's voice faltered. "I can't. My birth mother and I were both adopted. My grandfather was taken away when he was little... during something called the Sixties Scoop."

The Elder's eyes softened. "You carry a story that many of our people share," he said gently. "That takes courage."

He motioned for her to sit. "Let me tell you something important. This is the Haude-
nosaunee Creation Story—Sky Woman's Story."

Sky Woman's Story

As the Elder spoke, Sophie closed her eyes and could almost see Sky Woman falling through the clouds, her long hair streaming behind her. She imagined the animals diving through the water to help her, and the great turtle rising to carry the world on his back.

The fire crackled beside them. The drumbeats slowed to a quiet rhythm, like a heart-beat. Sophie felt warmth spread through her chest—a feeling she couldn't quite name.

When the Elder finished, she whispered, “Nya:wəh... thank you.”

He smiled. “Would you like to learn a word?”

Sophie nodded eagerly.

“Hehsó:t,” he said. “That means ‘grandfather.’”

Sophie repeated it softly. “Hehsó:t.”

Her mom squeezed her hand. “You did great,” she said, her eyes bright.

A Difficult Moment

The next week, Sophie went to a youth gathering on the Nation. She wanted to make friends and practice what she'd learned.

But when she arrived, the other kids were already laughing together, talking quickly in words she didn't understand. Sophie's stomach twisted. She stood alone at the edge of the group, holding her small pouch of beads.

Maybe I don't belong here, she thought.

Just then, a girl waved her over. “Hey! Want to help us bead?”

Sophie hesitated, then nodded. Her hands trembled as she began to thread her needle.

“Your colours are really pretty,” the girl said. “You're new, huh?”

Sophie smiled shyly. “Yeah. I'm learning.”

By the end of the afternoon, Sophie was laughing too. The fear that had once sat heavy in her chest melted away. For the first time, she felt a spark of belonging.

The Powwow

Weeks later, Sophie's family went to a **powwow** together.

Her mom helped her into her regalia—shimmering blues and purples with beadwork she had made herself. “You look incredible,” her mom said. “Dance with your heart.”

As the drums began to thunder, Sophie's chest filled with energy. She stepped into the circle, her feet keeping time with the beat. The jingles on her dress shimmered and sang.

She felt light—like a butterfly floating in the air. Every step made her feel more connected, more alive.

When the song ended, people clapped and smiled. Sophie blushed, whispering, “Nya:wəh.”

Her mom hugged her tightly. “I'm so proud of you,” she said. “You danced beautifully.”

Sophie smiled, the sound of drums still echoing in her heart.

Cultural Day

A few months later, Sophie's mom told her, “There's a cultural day coming up. No dancing this time—but you can bead, eat traditional foods, and listen to stories.”

Sophie's eyes lit up. “Can we go?”

“Of course,” her mom said. “We'll go together.”

At the event, Sophie sat beside her mom at a long wooden table covered in beads. She chose pink, purple, and yellow, sewing them into a flower pattern. The smell of frybread and strawberries filled the air.

Later, she joined a storytelling circle. To her surprise, the Elder from before was there.

“This story,” he said, “is about Sky Woman.”

Sophie smiled. She already knew it by heart.

As she listened, she thought about that day on her porch—watching the boy and his mother laugh together. Back then, she had felt lost, unsure of who she was.

Now, surrounded by her community, Sophie felt whole. She wasn’t just learning about her culture anymore—she was living it.

Glossary of Terms

Gayogohó:no’ (Cayuga Nation): One of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, whose traditional territory lies along Cayuga Lake and southern Ontario.

Haudenosaunee: “People of the Longhouse,” an alliance of six Indigenous Nations—Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.

Powwow: A sacred and social gathering where Indigenous peoples dance, sing, and celebrate community.

Strawberry Ceremony: A traditional ceremony held in May to express gratitude for the first fruits of the season and for the renewal of life.

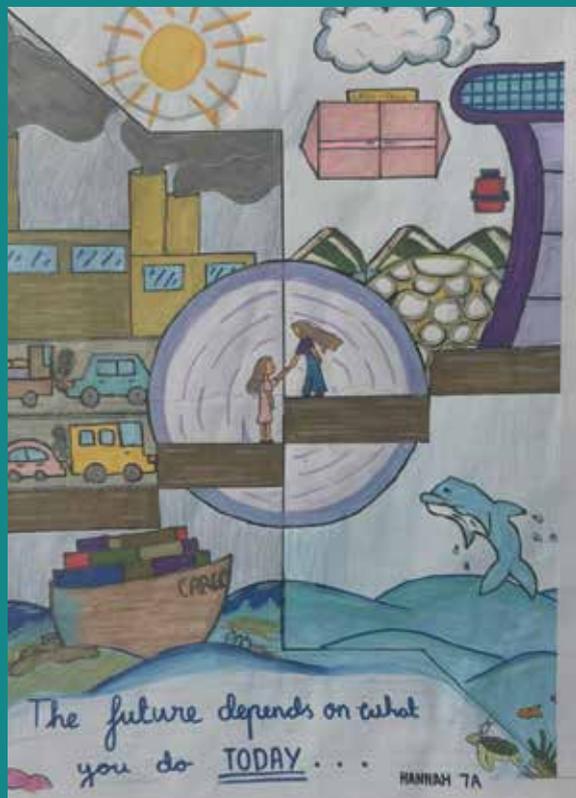
Sixties Scoop: A period in Canadian history when thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families and placed in non-Indigenous homes.

Nya:węh: “Thank you” in Cayuga.

Hehsó:t: “Grandfather” in Cayuga.

Guardian of Sea

Ananya Manikandan, UAE



Actions and Consequences, Hannahh Ranjith, United Arab Emirates

The first sunbeams crawled along the cliff face of Punta Tombo, Argentina, as the sky pinked over the Atlantic. A sharp, salty breeze rippled through the weathered huts of a tranquil fisher village. Twelve-year-old Carlos shifted under his hand-woven blanket in one of them. Something had stirred him — or something else. A feeling. A whisper from the sea.

Carlos slipped out, sand cold against his feet. He saw his father repairing nets beside their weathered wooden boat.

“Papá, is it time?” he whispered.

His father grinned. “Not yet. But if your heart says so, go.”

Carlos ran barefoot to his best friend Federico’s hut. Federico was already awake, putting on a tattered sweater. Without needing to say a word, they ran toward the beach.

Every summer, their beach was visited by the Magellanic penguins—black-and-white guests who came thousands of kilometres to procreate in the heat of Patagonia. The boys had been watching them since they were walking.

But something wasn’t right this time.

“I waited until sunset yesterday,” Federico said, out of breath. “Not a single penguin.”

Carlos nodded. “They would’ve come. Maybe today.”

As they crested the sand dune, a putrid, metallic odour hit them. Carlos gagged. Below, what had been silver and serene beach was now smeared with crude oil. And strewn across it—hundreds of penguins, motionless, their feathers blackened.

“No....” Federico breathed, staggering backward. “It’s the oil tankers.”

Carlos remained silent. His fists clenched. He charged at the nearest penguin, scooped him up gently. It didn’t move. Nor did the next one. And the sea... the sea wasn’t blue anymore.

Panic in the village. Village chief, Don Emilio, blew his whistle, calling for aid, but in vain.

“We lost them,” he said gravely, as villagers lowered their heads.

But Carlos didn't lower.

He stayed there until the sun rose, scuttling on greasy rocks. Then—a sound. A low, croak-like peep. He pushed towards it, throwing a massive body aside. Under a dead adult's feathers, a little chick trembled—eyes glued shut, feathers dampened.

“You held on...” Carlos panted.

He wrapped the penguin with his poncho and sprinted.

The villagers named the chick Dindim, after an ancient return-and-fidelity song lullaby. Carlos' father, a retired sea turtle rehabber himself, taught him how to gently scrub the oil away with seawater and herbs. Carlos fed him mashed sardines and built him a box to sleep in.

“He's going to need the sea someday,” his father said.

“But not today,” said Carlos.

Months passed, and their bond grew. Dindim waddled behind Carlos, nuzzled under his poncho, and wouldn't swim — until the day Carlos stood at the tide and said softly, “Go. And come back.”

Dindim glanced back once, then vanished into the waves.

Each August, Carlos waited. But Dindim never came back.

“Maybe he forgot,” Carlos whispered one time.

“Or maybe,” said Frederico, “he's waiting for you to pick up the pieces.”

That night, Carlos stared at the stars. He remembered the oil. The silence. The failed

rescue. He found the petition he and Frederico once wrote — and never submitted.

This time, he didn't stop.

Carlos printed handwritten flyers using leftover school paper. He knocked on doors. He spoke to shopkeepers, fishermen, and teachers. Some listened. Many nodded politely. A few smiled and said, "You're young. Let the grown-ups handle this."

"But the grown-ups didn't," replied Carlos.

He stood on the beach in front of the fishing co-op with a sign: Protect Our Penguins. Protect Our Sea.

Days passed with little notice. His friends taunted him. Even Frederico began to doubt.

"Carlos, they don't care," he said.

Carlos looked out over the empty beach. "Then we make them care."

Carlos and Frederico began cleaning a small section of beach by themselves. They measured it all: oil slick, bird tracks, water quality. They sewed together fragments of discarded netting as placards. They gave lectures at the Sunday marketplace with a borrowed loudspeaker from school.

It all boiled down to one day when a group of tourists just happened to spot them working. One of them, an Argentinian college student, paused and asked,

"Who are you kids?"

"We're the Guardians of the Sea," Carlos replied — though it wasn't a real group. Yet.

She posted their work online. The photo of Carlos holding a hand-painted sign next to the oil-blackened beach went viral: "The Boy Who Wouldn't Give Up"

Within weeks, children from other villages reached out. They shared their own polluted beaches. Inspired, they formed chapters of Los Guardianes del Mar — The Guardians of the Sea.

They cleaned, protested, and partnered with biology students to map penguin nesting zones. Fishermen joined when Carlos proposed sustainable nets that wouldn't harm wildlife. A retired boat-builder helped them build wooden signs warning tankers to steer clear.

Still, challenges came.

A businessman accused Carlos of spreading lies.

One morning, their posters were torn down.

But Carlos didn't stop.

"We're not just saving penguins," he told his school assembly. "We're saving ourselves."

One August morning, Carlos walked with a dozen young volunteers on the dunes and dozens more watching online.

A dozen penguins emerged from the sea, ambling in their accustomed way. Carlos looked from one face to the next, his breath stopped.

And then, a lone penguin, lingering behind the others, moved more slowly. Rounder. Older. Familiar.

"Dindim?" he whispered.

The penguin paused, then let out a low, soft growl.

Carlos dropped everything and ran. Dindim flapped towards him.

The crowd applauded.

Each year, today, Dindim comes back — not just to visit Carlos, but to demonstrate to the world what may be achieved.

Carlos leads Los Guardianes del Mar, a network of young conservation organisations

with six nations on board. They stage international Penguin Festivals, develop eco-curricula, and campaign for ocean protection.

Their village, once polluted, is now a Marine Wildlife Sanctuary. No oil tankers come within fifty kilometres.

And every August, under the waning sky, a boy and his penguin walk side by side — living proof that determination, love, and one little voice can be a universal scream for justice.

The Last Mango Tree

Aditi Haribabu, UAE.



Harmony and Global Stability, Rishimi Mitra, India

In the little village of Madhripur, nestled between dusty roads and fading dreams, stood the last mango tree. It wasn't just any tree; it was the kind of tree that grandmothers told stories under, where children learned how to climb before how to write, and where weddings, monsoons, and mourning had all once paused for breath. But now, it stood alone, guarded by rusted fences and silence. Everyone called it "Aamraj," meaning "The Mango King." And no one dared to go near it except Tara. Tara was fifteen, wore her hair in a long braid, and loved two things: sketching and solving mysteries no one else dared to.

Her father worked long hours driving an air-conditioned bus in the city, and her mother stitched clothes while humming old folk songs about forests that no longer existed.

Every morning before school, Tara cycled to Aamraj. She sat cross-legged, opened her worn-out sketchpad, and drew the tree as if she were trying to remember it for the future—because deep down, she feared it wouldn't be there.

Madhripur was changing. What used to be endless green was now dry land split by factories, convenience stores, and cement jungles pretending to be "progress." The village had started importing mangoes from distant places. No one cared about Aamraj anymore.

One evening, Tara heard shouting near the tree. She slipped out of her room and crept across the fields. A bulldozer stood near the gate. Men in uniforms discussed something while looking at blueprints.

She knew something was going wrong, very wrong.

Her breath caught. They're going to cut it down.

She marched up, all fire and fists, and shouted, "You can't take it down!" A man turned and replied in confusion, "And who are you, little girl?" "I'm the voice of the future," she said.

They laughed. "Trees don't bring profit. Resorts do."

Tara's fists clenched. "This tree gives fruit. Shade. Hope. That's profit."

The man tapped his clipboard. “According to the development order, this land is zoned for commercial use. You want shade? Buy an umbrella.” He smirked and turned away.

But Tara wasn’t done. That night, she couldn’t sleep. She remembered something her science teacher said about the Sustainable Development Goals: young people needed to stand up for what mattered—climate action, sustainable living, and saving ecosystems. Tara sat up straight. She wasn’t just going to protect Aamraj. She was going to make the world see it.

By the next morning, Tara had written a letter, half poem, half protest, and shared it with her class. “We’re going to save this tree,” she said, “Not just for us, but for every village losing its voice.”

The school principal gave her ten minutes in the assembly. She read aloud, “This tree is not just wood and leaves. It is the memory of rain, the laughter of old days. Don’t build resorts in our childhood. Build respect for the Earth instead.” Few students clapped. Others shrugged.

But one person in the crowd wasn’t a student. He was a young journalist visiting his cousin. He was moved. That evening, her words were posted on Instagram. By the next morning, the post had gone viral. #SaveAamraj trended. Environmental pages, local news, and even a UAE-based climate group shared it. Schools in Sharjah and Delhi sent letters.

One girl wrote, “I’ve never seen this tree, but I feel like I’ve known it all my life.”

Tara was stunned. People she didn’t know were drawing pictures of Aamraj, writing poems, and making reels with her speech. But not everyone was happy. A man in a white SUV pulled up outside her house.

“You’re creating trouble,” he said to her father.

Her father frowned. “She’s just a girl,” he said., “She’s just a girl.”

““She’s a problem,” the man snapped.

Tara's parents were scared.

"Maybe it's time to stop," her mother whispered.

But Tara had seen too much.

She had heard from youth in Ladakh, Chennai, and even Kenya saying, "Your fight is our fight."

She realized this wasn't just about a tree. It was about the pattern. Soon, Tara started the "Roots of Tomorrow Campaign," gathering stories from across India and the UAE about places being lost to "development." Palm groves turned into parking lots, coral reefs dying silently, farms choking on plastic. She created an online map of endangered trees and green spaces. It was shared by teachers and even featured in a school competition in Dubai. Her campaign tied directly to the UN SDG's.

On her website, she wrote, "Goal 13: We don't inherit the Earth and our climate from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children. Goal 12: We must produce with purpose, not for profit alone. Goal 15: Trees are not obstacles. They have their origins."

Her story was sent to a youth innovation challenge. One judge called it "a movement disguised as a story." The protests grew.

A hundred students gathered near Aamraj holding signs like, "I Stand with the Mango King," "Progress Doesn't Mean Destruction," "A Tree Can't Speak. But We Can." Media vans came. A reporter asked, "Why this tree?"

Tara replied, "Because if we don't save the first one, we'll lose the rest."

Faced with rising pressure and bad publicity, the land authorities blinked. They paused the project. Tara, now called "The Tree Girl" in headlines, was invited to speak at a regional UN youth forum. There, she said, "In my country, they say, 'A tree is like a mother.' But in our world today, we cut both down without guilt. We must relearn how to grow. Sustainably. Respectfully."

She wasn't just saving a mango tree anymore. She was planting something bigger. A year later, Madhripur had a new law, which was "Heritage Green Zones." Aamraj was declared a protected eco site. Tara helped local children and created a storybook

called “The King Who Gave Shade,” now in school libraries from Kerala to Kuwait.
And Aamraj?
It bloomed.

More than ever.

Bright and beautiful at the same time with a sense of accomplishment, Tara still visits the tree. Only now, she brings other students, travelers, poets. Few just sit quietly. Few write messages and tie them to the bark. She once found a note that said, “I never believed one person could change anything. But then I saw how one girl saved one tree. And I knew... It’s possible. With hard work and perseverance, anything is possible.”

After the protests faded and the reporters moved on, something unexpected began to grow not just around Aamraj, but in the hearts of the people. Not just small little plants but people’s pride in being in a movement of not just saving one tree but the whole forest pride. Madhripur became known as the “Green Heart of the Region.”

Villages nearby, inspired by Tara’s fight, started protecting their own trees and planting new ones. What once was a sleepy rural area became a learning hub for ecotourism and sustainable farming. Schoolchildren from cities came to see Aamraj not as a tourist spot but as a symbol of resistance, hope, and renewal. Tara was invited to help write an environmental education program for rural schools, combining local knowledge with UN SDG goals. The program taught children how to use natural resources responsibly, how to collect rainwater, compost waste, and how traditional farming could blend with modern, ecofriendly techniques. Tara didn’t stop.

At 17, she launched “Project Aamraj”, a youth network across India and the UAE that connected young people fighting for climate justice, clean energy, and biodiversity protection. It was fully youth led. Every year on Earth Day, they hosted “Roots & Wings,” a digital festival where stories, songs, art, and ideas flowed between countries. No borders, just dreams. By the time Tara turned 20, she had spoken at international panels, advised city planners on urban green spaces, and even collaborated with architects to design schools built around existing trees, not by cutting them down. But she always came home to Madhripur. Because at the center of her story, at the center of everything, still stood Aamraj.
Older now.

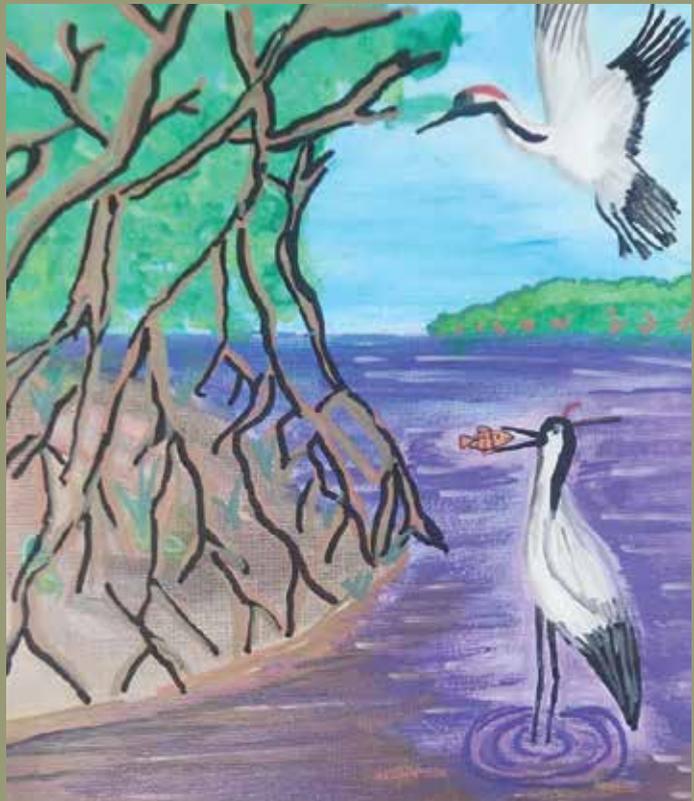
Stronger.

Still giving shade.

Still whispering to every child who leaned against its bark, “You can grow too, no matter how old you are, where you live or what you do. All you need is a will to fulfil anything to save the planet.”

The Last Mangrove Guardian

Aleena Sara Jesson, UAE



Roots of Resilience, Myreen Ali, UAE

The salty sea breeze danced through Maha's thick curls as she trudged barefoot through a Mangrove forest, the mud squelching between her toes, like a warm welcome. These trees were the green-veined, twisted guardians that softly cradled her coastal village of Kais like gentle arms. Each day her tremendous admiration grew more, for how the roots tangled like silent secrets under the water, and how the tiny, colourful fishes darted through them like whispered promises.

Fourteen-year-old Maha had grown up in this emerald world on the vast coasts of the United Arab Emirates. While others her age played hide-and-seek on concrete floors, she listened to the mangroves hum in the wind as they tossed their branches high.

Her grandmother, once the village's "Guardian of the Green, had told her that mangroves weren't just trees. They were the lungs of the water, the anchors that fought the rising tide, and the ancient storytellers of her people. They were the land's culture and heritage, the trees that held thousands of stories within them. But lately, the stories have changed for the worse.

Fewer flamingos came, and the colourful fish that once darted through the waters could no longer be seen. The roots became old and wrinkly, while the water grew darker and heavier. Sometimes Maha saw bottles floating in the dark waters, plastic bags wrapped around the branches like suffocating veils, and today, the forest felt afraid.

As the sun dipped low, casting yellowish-orange shadows on the water, Maha noticed something wrong, more alarming rather. The tides were retreating too fast, leaving behind a trail of oily foam rather than their usual fluffy and clean edges. Cautiously, she walked closer, her eyes narrowing. Something was terribly wrong. It was as if the land itself was whispering a warning.

In the blink of an eye, the dark, heavy water near the edge bubbled violently. A deep, black, viscous sludge oozed into the channel, slithering through the roots. A loud shriek came out of Maha's mouth. She had heard rumours from the fisherman about a waste pipe nearby, an offshore facility. Illegal. Unreported. Dangerous. And now, it had burst. As the sludge seeped through the waters, it slowly reached her toes, trickling through them. Still unable to face it, the dark, haunting truth dawned upon her. Her beloved forest was drowning in poison.

Heart pounding, Maha plodded through the Mangrove trail, the thick branches scraping her arms, as if they were trying to hold her back. Her lungs burned, but her determination flared through even stronger as she made her way to the village square.

The village square loomed ahead, sun-bleached and still. Past the dim mosque, she was met with the familiar curve of her school, which once echoed with laughter. But now it was silent. It was as if the forest's fear had spilled into the town.

Maha didn't pause. She burst through the rickety doors, their creaking slowly filling up the room. The room's air was heavy with the scent of tea and old newspapers. In the heart of the room stood villagers crouched under multiple microphones, chattering away as if nothing were wrong.

"There is toxic sludge flooding the forest!" she cried. "It's pouring into the roots. The fish are dying, and the birds are all gone!" An awkward silence followed, like a string pulled too tight.

One of the villagers looked up, his expression a mixture of fatigue and formality. "Maha," he began slowly, "we appreciate your concern, but this is a matter for the adults and authorities. Besides, we've already sent a formal letter on our part."

"A letter?" Her voice cracked with disbelief and disappointment. "The mangroves don't have time for letters; they need help now!"

Another man sighed, removing his spectacles. "My dear, this is no place for children. Let the system do its work."

Still, the system failed. Again, and again.

Fuming, tears burning her eyes, Maha turned around and fled. Her footsteps echoed along the quiet square as the door slammed behind her. She climbed the old fig tree behind her grandmother's house. It was the same tree that was called 'The lookout for the guardians'. From the top, she could see the stretched coastline beneath her.

The sun shone immensely on the waters, but even so, something felt wrong. The waves that once calmed her now felt like they were mocking her. The mangroves were like a cracked green shield.

She gripped onto her necklace pendant, the most precious belonging, left to her by her grandfather, as if it were her last hope. Her grandfather, the man who taught her the language of tides and the whispers of trees, also taught her that “Every guardian must listen, then act.”

As if hearing her thoughts, her grandmother climbed up beside her. Quiet, patient, but with an air of resilience around her.

“What can I do, Nana?” she whispered, her head down low, as her ears burned with shame. “I am just a kid.”

Her grandmother turned to face her, eyes steady, and in a soft but stern voice said, “You are not just anything. You are a guardian, and guardians do not ask for permission to protect what they love.”

A breeze stirred the leaves and her heart. Maha inhaled deeply. The fear didn’t leave, but something more exhilarating and better took root beside it. Resolve. If the world wouldn’t listen to her voice, she’d give them no choice but to watch and see.

Maha stood at the gates of her school; determination etched across her face.

One by one, her friends gathered. Hazif, the robotics genius. Leila, the keen-eyed photographer. Saif, the quiet environmentalist, spoke more to animals than people. They weren’t warriors, but they would each become one.

Armed with nothing but borrowed equipment, notebooks, and profound determination, they returned to the mangroves. Hazif launched his solar-powered drone, its camera slicing through the morning mist.

Leila captured the sludge-drenched roots, the floating carcasses of fish, and the green lands that the flamingos would play around in. Saif collected water samples in glass jars labeled with trembling hands. But their most powerful tool was truth.

That night, from Maha’s rooftop, they launched a campaign.
#GuardOurGreenLungs

The video captured by the drone went live. The data Saif collected was posted. The

images spread first to local schools, then to national pages. Children from all seven emirates began replying with stories of their own. Coral reefs are being bleached in Fujairah. Turtles are suffocating from plastic thrown in the waters in Ras Al Khaimah. Desert plants are dying out in Al Ain. And much more.

The post was shared over 20,000 times in 48 hours. Then it caught fire. An environmental influencer reposted the drone footage. A national news channel ran a segment titled, “When Children Lead: Kais’s Mangrove Crisis.” Twitter stormed with rage. Commoners all the way to ministers tagged each other. Hashtags trended, and within ten days, a government emergency task force landed in Kais.

The illegal pipe was traced, sealed, and publicly fined. But that wasn’t the victory Maha celebrated most. She was invited to speak at the Global Youth Environmental Summit in Abu Dhabi.

Standing on the stage, a sea of eyes before her, her hands trembled, but her voice did not. “I am Maha,” she began strongly, “I speak for the mangroves, because they can’t shout, but they are drowning. I speak for our oceans, because they can’t post hashtags, but they are choking. I speak for tomorrow, because I want to live in a world worth inheriting.”

When she stepped down, the standing ovations followed her like thunder.

The mangroves were finally breathing again. In the months that passed by, Kais changed into something unrecognizable. Students, teachers, biologists, fishermen, mothers, and volunteers all stood shoulder to shoulder planting new seedlings. Scooping oil from the water with makeshift tools. Using biodegradable ropes to guide regrowth. Songs were sung. Traditional stories were retold. The long-awaited healing began.

The Ministry of Environment officially declared the coastline of Kais a Youth Eco-Reserve. The first of its kind in the region. School children, teachers, researchers, and many others from across the UAE visited to learn about the silent strength of mangroves. But the biggest change lived in the minds of the people.

Maha helped launch the Blue Roots Network, a youth alliance spanning oceans and borders. From Kerala to Kenya, young guardians exchanged knowledge on environ-

mental and sustainability practices. Seagrass cultivation. Community cleanup drives. Renewable energy drone surveillance. Their language was hope. They were fuelled by unity. Maha's science classroom now overlooked the vibrant forest. They called it the Living Lab. On the whiteboard were words from Maha's speech. "We don't inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children."

One quiet afternoon, Maha returned to the mangroves in solitude. The breeze was cool, laced with salt. The fish dashed happily in the waters. The birds soared high above. Crabs darted through clean mud. Young mangrove shoots swayed gently. Beneath her feet, the ancient roots stood steady once more. She closed her eyes. The forest didn't whisper warnings anymore. Now, it whispered gratitude.

The Girl Who Grew a Forest

Naomi Kene, Canada



The Last Rice Terraces, Tony Narciza, Philippines

The year was 3002, and Terralight hovered where forests once thrived. No one remembered the scent of bark or the heft of a book. Its towers stretched skyward like fingers recoiling from the Earth. Holographic trees rustled with programmed wind, and education came in “mindcasts”, neural downloads that replaced curiosity with convenience.

But Yuuki questioned everything.

She was fourteen, with hair like tangled wire and eyes like storm glass. Her classmates called her “Error”, a glitch in the system, a leftover from a forgotten time. While others eagerly downloaded their daily mindcasts, Yuuki collected banned books from dumpsters and long-abandoned archives.

Her parents, both mindcast engineers, dismissed it as a phase, an anomaly in her “cognitive sync progression”.

Still, she read by flashlight in her hidden alcove behind the ventilation shaft. She clung to words like oxygen, devouring texts on climate history, plant biology, and pre-Fall ecosystems. Her favourite was an old children’s picture book titled *The Giving Tree*. It made her cry, because no one in Terralight remembered what a tree was supposed to feel like.

One rainy simulation morning, Yuuki found herself deep in the underbelly of Tower Nine, where the ventilation system whined like tired ghosts. She had bypassed three retinal scanners to reach it. The door to the Earth Archive was sealed and ancient, but Yuuki’s hands spoke fluent lockpick.

Inside, shelves sagged under the weight of forgotten memory drives and rusted metal containers. But what caught her breath was a glass vial glowing faintly on a pedestal. Inside it was a single seed.

The label read: *Quercus rubra* — *Red Oak. Extinct: 2361.*

Yuuki touched the glass. It was warm.

Below the vial, a plaque read: *Knowledge grows where roots run deep.*

She slipped the vial into her satchel.

No one in Terralight had set foot on Earth in over a century. Official records claimed the surface was uninhabitable, ruined by rising seas, dust storms, and microplastic deserts. But Yuuki had read something else. The Earth, given time, could heal. She brought the seed to her friend Eli, a boy who never spoke but coded like he had been born with a keyboard in his hands. He was the one who had first hacked the classroom mindcast blockers, turning neural lessons into static. When she showed him the seed, his fingers flew across his pad.

“We’ll build a suit,” Eli typed. “UV shielding. Dust filters. Oxygen pack. I’ll track you remotely.”

Yuuki nodded.
“I’m planting it. I have to try.”

For two weeks, they worked in secret. By day, Yuuki followed her scripted learning schedule, accepting passive downloads. By night, she soldered suit joints and mapped abandoned maintenance shafts. Eli managed the drones, tiny mechanical bugs that served as scouts and messengers.

The night before she left, she wrote a letter to her parents.
I love you. But I can’t live in a world made of pretend. I need to see what’s real. Please forgive me.

Yuuki slipped into a long-forgotten maintenance shaft below Tower 9. The air grew colder, unfiltered, unsimulated. Real.

When she stepped onto the Earth’s surface for the first time in her life, her knees buckled.

It was nothing like the simulations.

Wild grasses pushed through cracked pavement. The wind was not programmed. It smelled like rain and memory.

In the distance, she saw something impossible. Trees. Real ones.

Gnarled pines and silver birches, small but thriving, clustered around a shallow

stream.

Before she could move, a voice rang out behind her.

“You lost?”

Yuuki turned.

A tall woman in handmade leather and solar-threaded goggles stepped forward. Behind her were others, children, elders, teenagers with dirt under their nails and laughter in their eyes.

“We’re Soilers,” the woman said. “Welcome to the Undergrowth.”

The Soilers lived amid the bones of the old world. No towers. No mindcasts. But they had books. And bees. And breath.

Their gardens were wild and precise, dotted with old solar panels and compost towers. Chickens roamed freely, and every child learned to plant before they could read.

Yuuki learned more in a day with them than in a lifetime of downloads. She showed them the seed.

“It’s red oak,” she said. “I want to plant it.”

The elder woman, Maris, shook her head.

“This seed has waited for hands that remember. It must be you.”

They led her to a clearing where a single ray of sunlight fell between the trees. Yuuki dug with her hands, feeling every inch of soil give and breathe. She placed the seed with both hope and trembling hands.

And the Earth exhaled.

The ceremony that followed was quiet but sacred. The youngest Soiler child placed a copper coin at the base of the seed, “to honor what came before.” An elder scattered worm castings over it. Yuuki poured water from her suit’s filtered reserve. Maris murmured a blessing.

That night, under open skies bursting with unfamiliar stars, Yuuki read aloud to the children, real stories, from pages that rustled.

One child whispered, “No one’s ever read with their voice before.”

“What does ‘shade’ feel like?” another asked.

Yuuki closed her eyes. “Cool. Gentle. Like being held by a big leaf.”

Eli was watching from Terralight, tracking her suit. He opened a private neural stream and sent a message.

People saw your location spike. They’re asking questions. You need to get back.

But Yuuki stayed. She helped the Soilers reinforce their flood walls. She wrote in a notebook made of handmade paper and sap-based ink. She interviewed every elder she met, recording their memories. Two weeks later, her story broke through.

Eli uploaded her planting video into the mindcast feed under the title:

ERROR: SYSTEM ROOTED

Thousands saw it. Kids who had never seen dirt began asking what a real tree looked like. They turned off their downloads. They started to speak. Even some adults began asking questions. Terralight declared Yuuki a fugitive. Her parents were questioned. Eli was suspended from neural access. But it didn’t matter. Because by then, the First Library Tree had sprouted.

It was just a tiny shoot, barely a hand tall. But it bent toward the sun.

Under its shade, the Soilers built a box. Inside it, the first hand-written book in a hundred years.

Roots Remember. By Yuuki of Tower 9.

It told of forests, and futures, and the courage to plant something real in a world built on simulation. And in towers all across Terralight, other seeds began to stir.

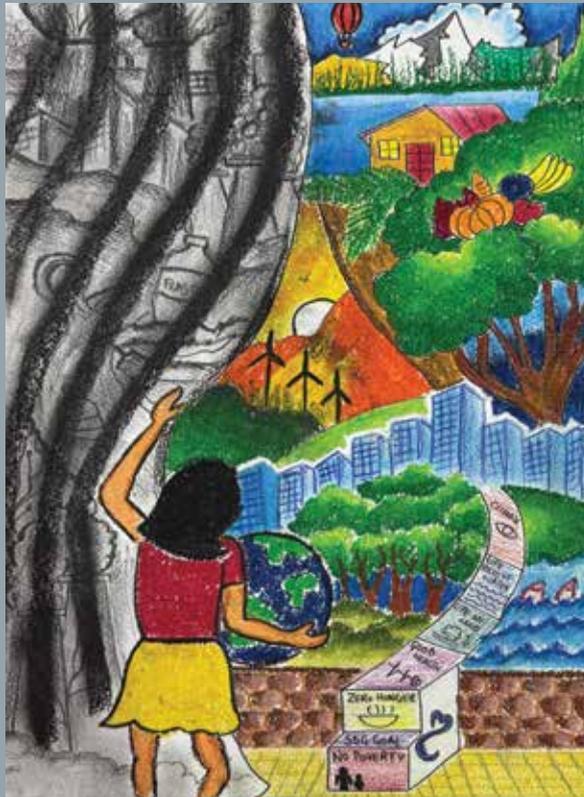
Some were literal.

Some were metaphorical.

And the Earth remembered.

The Future Library of Hope

Parth Singla, India



Stepping Towards A Sustainable Future, Aastha Aggarwal, UAE

In the quiet seaside village of Mirapur, where monsoons often flooded the roads and power cuts were frequent, a curious nine-year-old boy named John dreamed of changing the world with stories. His home had no Wi-Fi, and the village school had closed years ago due to heavy rains.

But that never stopped John.

His father, a fisherman, once told him, “Stories are the sails that help your mind travel, even if your feet cannot.”

John believed that with all his heart.

One morning, after a stormy night, John discovered a soggy book washed ashore. The pages were wrinkled but filled with wonders, tales of ancient kingdoms, distant planets, and secret forests.

That book became his treasure.

And with it, an idea was born.

What if every child, no matter where they lived, had access to stories like this?

That very evening, John explored the old lighthouse ruins at the edge of the village. There, hidden beneath a wooden trapdoor, he found a dusty underground storage room. It was filled with discarded books, maps, journals, and even school notebooks from decades ago. His heart raced. This, he knew, was more than a discovery. It was a mission waiting to happen.

John gathered his friends, Asha, Meera, and Abdul, and told them, “Let’s turn this into a library. A library for all kids, especially those who’ve never held a book.”

They cleaned the space, used old fishing nets as hammocks, painted the walls using leftover Holi colours, and called it *The Future Library of Hope*.

But the library was more than just a collection of books. Every child who visited had to share one story they’d heard from their family, village, or imagination. Stories about folk heroes, wise animals, everyday bravery, and even dreams about the future.

Soon, the library became a storytelling hub, where words became wings and reading turned into community healing.

One story, told by Abdul, stood out. It was about a girl who invented a wind-powered reading lamp for her village that worked during blackouts. Inspired by it, John and his friends created solar lamps using plastic bottles, black paint, and mirrors. They placed them all over the village so kids could read even at night.

Soon, news about the library spread. A local newspaper featured their work, and a nonprofit focused on Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, reached out. They donated new books in regional languages, science kits, and tools to build rainwater-harvesting systems, addressing Sustainable Development Goal 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, too.

In return, John promised that their library would remain free, inclusive, and student-led. John then began a campaign called *Read, Reuse, Rise*. For every plastic bottle donated to be recycled, kids would earn a book token. It combined climate action with literacy.

At an international children's conference held virtually, John spoke about how a single book led to hundreds of readers and dozens of micro-initiatives. He shared how they turned trash into bookshelves, unused boats into mobile libraries, and boring evenings into story circles. A judge asked, "John, what's your biggest dream?" He replied, "To build a floating library that sails to flood-prone villages and brings books wherever roads can't."

Over the next few months, inspired by his vision, high school students from nearby cities built him a real mini library boat powered by solar panels. They named it *Hope Floats*. It became the first-ever "book boat" to serve children in coastal villages affected by climate change, offering floating classrooms, story sessions, and even art therapy.

John's efforts were soon recognized by educational leaders and UN Youth Chapters.

He received a Young Literacy Champion award.

But more than trophies, what made him smile was seeing younger kids teaching their parents how to read, families recycling more, and communities coming together to

solve their own problems, with stories as their glue. Years later, when John became a teacher and returned to Mirapur, *The Future Library of Hope* had evolved into a two-story sustainable learning centre. It ran on wind energy, had vertical gardens for food, and every wall told a different story, drawn, painted, or written by a child.

Above its doorway was the motto he had coined as a child:
“Read. Reuse. Rise.”

John proved that real change doesn't always start in government buildings or big city conferences. Sometimes, it begins with a soggy book, a curious heart, and a lighthouse full of forgotten stories.

The Road to Tomorrow

Mihai Dumitru, Romania



Ocean Goddess Wounded by Pollution, Riddhi Sandeep, United Arab Emirates

The early morning sun bathed the city in golden light, reflecting off the solar panels that covered nearly every rooftop. Emilia pedalled through the streets on her bright blue bicycle, the hum of green transport vehicles a soft backdrop to the rhythmic turning of her wheels.

The streets of Verdanía had changed drastically over the years. Where once gas-powered cars clogged the avenues, now e-bikes, trams fuelled by renewable energy, and pedestrian-friendly walkways create a harmonious balance.

Emilia had spent the last decade working tirelessly to make Verdanía a model for sustainable futures. As the head of the city's Green Initiative, she believed in more than just policy changes. She wanted to change mindsets, to inspire people to see the beauty in reuse, reduce, and remix.

This philosophy had transformed the once-wasteful urban landscape into a thriving hub of repurposed creativity. Old, abandoned factories had been converted into vertical farms, feeding the city with fresh, locally grown produce.

Clothing shops no longer operated on fast fashion models. Instead, residents brought their old garments in to be remixed into new designs, sewn together in collective workshops. Even the cafés had adopted a zero-waste approach, composting leftovers to fuel community gardens.

But Emilia knew that the city could still go further.

The council meeting that day would determine whether Verdanía would invest in expanding its renewable energy grid, an ambitious plan to power the entire metropolis through wind and solar alone. As she arrived at City Hall, she saw her longtime friend and fellow environmentalist, Mateo, locking his bicycle beside hers.

“You ready for this battle?” he asked, brushing back his curly hair. Emilia grinned. “Always. This city needs to believe in the future we’re building.”

Inside, the debate raged. Critics argued the costs were too high, while advocates insisted the benefits outweighed the expenses. Emilia stood, her voice clear and firm. “If we hesitate now, we lose momentum. We’ve already proven that reuse and reduce work. Look around. We remixed an entire city into something cleaner, smarter. Why

stop before we truly reach a green future?" As the meeting ended, the vote was cast.

The verdict: Verdania would officially become the world's first completely renewable-powered city. A cheer erupted from those who had fought for change. Outside, Emilia breathed in the fresh air, the scent of possibility, of progress. Mateo nudged her with a grin. "Looks like your dream's coming true." She looked around at the city she loved, the streets buzzing with bicycles and green transport. "Not just mine," she said. "Ours."

The vote had been cast, the decision made. Verdania was officially on its path to becoming the world's first completely renewable-powered city. Yet, as the cheers erupted around Emilia, her thoughts were tangled with something far deeper than victory, something quieter, more personal.

She felt it in the way Mateo nudged her shoulder, in the warmth of his smile. Their relationship had always been built on shared ideals, fighting for a future where people embraced green transport, bicycles, reusable energy, and the philosophy of reuse, reduce, remix. They took a ride along the Verdania Greenway, a scenic pathway built atop what had once been a major highway, now transformed into a lush corridor of trees and solar-powered streetlights.

She had challenged Mateo to a race, laughing as she pedaled faster than usual, feeling the wind against her face. He had kept up, of course. He always did.

"You're cheating!" he called after her, laughing.
"I'm winning!" she countered.

But then, just as they reached the crest of the hill, Emilia skidded to a sudden stop, breathless, not because of the race but because of the sight before them. The city stretched beneath the setting sun, buildings glowing with the soft golden hue of solar-reflective panels, wind turbines spinning gently in the distance. Mateo pulled up beside her, silent for a moment. Then he murmured, "This is why we fight for all of this."

She nodded, but the words would not form. Something in the way he looked at her made her realize this was not just about their shared dreams. This was about them. Now, standing outside City Hall in the glow of their latest victory, Emilia felt that same silent understanding.

“You did it,” Mateo said, his voice lower.

“We did it,” she corrected, though her heart hammered harder when he smiled. He hesitated. “Want to ride down to the coast?”

It was their tradition. Whenever something big happened, they would take their bicycles to the ocean, breathing in the salty air, letting the sound of waves drown out the city’s noise.

“Race you there,” she challenged. This time, he did not argue.

The ride was smooth, the roads lit with energy-efficient lamps powered by wind turbines at the outskirts of the city. The transformation around them was undeniable, bike lanes replacing congested roads, green transport encouraging people to rethink their habits.

Yet amidst all this change, she did not expect how happy and natural the city now felt. At the waterfront, they parked their bicycles and made their way to the edge of the pier. The waves were calm, reflecting the shimmering lights of Verdania. Mateo sat beside her on the wooden beams, stretching his legs out.

“You ever think about the future?” he asked.

“All the time,” she smiled. “It’s literally my job.”

“No, I mean your personal future.”

She hesitated. “I imagined myself building a city people could be proud of.”

“I think about that too,” he said. “But lately, I think about more than just the city.”
I’m thinking about the future.

Ode to Nature by Mateo, for Emilia

Oh, the earth that cradles dreams anew,
A canvas bathed in green and blue.
Golden dawn upon the quiet trees,
Whispering winds, a gentle breeze.

Emilia, love, in every leaf,
I see your hands, your silent belief.
In every stream that carves its way,
I hear your voice, the things you say.

Reuse, reduce, remix, we vow,
To heal the past, to shape the now.
No longer trapped in greed's embrace,
We build a world that keeps its grace.

The rivers hum a melody sweet,
Where once they suffered, now they speak.
Their waters clear, their spirit free,
A mirror of your will to see.

The sky no longer choked with gray,
Its sapphire light reclaims the day.
And in its warmth, you walk so light,
A guardian of dawn's first flight.

Green transport rolls, the streets reborn,
The hum of wheels at early morn.
Pedals turning, hearts in sync,
Riding forth on roads that think.

Oh, Emilia, in morning's glow,
Your passion sets the world to grow.
Your hands reshape the wasted lands,
Reviving earth with loving plans.

The bicycle hums beneath your touch,
A simple gift that gives so much.
Wheels of hope, a path untold,
That leads us where the future's gold.

Solar whispers kiss the stone,
Buildings breathing, not alone.
Panels shimmer, light restored,
A promise kept, forever sworn.

And here we stand, where oceans call,
Beneath the sky, so vast, enthralled.
I hold your hand, this world so bright,
Is shaped by love, and love is light.

So let the tides take what we sow,
The seeds of dreams, the winds that blow.
A future ours, no longer wild,
Sustained by love, this earth, your child.

A World that Looked Like Ours

Tabitha Ajayi, Nigeria



Memories in a Puddle, Muhammad Haikel Akmal Buchori, Indonesia

“**I**t’s often said that if you don’t know the history, the things that happened before, you can’t truly say whether where we are now is better, nor can you shape the future wisely based on present circumstances.”

I thought about this as I walked home from school. My history teacher had said it during class today, and I couldn’t shake the thought. It lingered in my mind like a quiet drumbeat, echoing with every step I took. The wind whispered softly through the trees that lined the dusty road, and the sun beat down heavily, making the journey feel longer than usual.

Still deep in thought...”Anna! Anna!! Anna!!!”

My friend Elsa’s voice yanked me back to reality. I was so lost in thought that I hadn’t noticed I was walking too close to the road. Elsa pulled me away just in time to save me from being hit by a wooden lorry hauling timber from the forest. The driver honked his horn and yelled out the window, “Watch the road, little girl!”

Still in shock, I blinked rapidly and asked, “What just happened, Elsa?”

She pointed to the damaged road. “The men were trying to maneuver around the potholes caused by erosion, and we were walking on the better side of the road. To avoid the holes, they swerved toward us.”

She demonstrated it with her hands, mimicking the swerving motion.

Then she paused and looked at me closely. “What’s bothering you, though? You’ve been off and lost in thought since we left school. Is everything okay at home?”

“Everyone’s fine, Elsa,” I replied. “I’m just worried about our community. Nina didn’t come to school today because she still has malaria. Her younger sister just recovered last week from the same illness. They live near the Blue River, which isn’t even blue anymore. Villagers dump waste into it, and now the river is stagnant and breeds mosquitoes. She told me they fall asleep to the buzzing of mosquitoes, and sometimes they can’t sleep at all.”

Elsa chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. “Stop it!”

“I’m not trying to be funny! Haven’t you noticed Nina dozing off in class?”

I continued, “And the trees, they keep cutting them down. Those trees are supposed to absorb our carbon dioxide!”

“What’s carbon dioxide?” Elsa asked, frowning.

“It’s what we breathe out after inhaling oxygen. Plants take it in and give us oxygen in return,” I explained.

“Oh! I understand now,” she said.

“The air is stuffy lately, and the heat is unbearable! Most nights, my family sleeps outside under the moonlight just to enjoy a bit of fresh air. But that exposes us to mosquitoes again!”

“How do we even pick a struggle?” I laughed sadly. “The heat can cause illnesses like heatstroke, rashes, and dehydration. And the mosquitoes? They bring malaria.”

As I poured out my thoughts, I realized we were already at my house. Grandma was sitting under the mango tree, swaying gently in her wooden chair as the breeze brushed her face.

We walked toward her.

“Good afternoon, Mama,” we greeted in unison.

“How are you, my children? How was school today?”

“School was fine, Mama,” I replied, though my voice was heavy.

“But you’re not looking fine, Nana,” she said, calling me by the name she fondly used.

“Mama, I was almost hit by a truck on the way home,” I said, and Elsa, always the storyteller, jumped in to narrate the entire event with dramatic flair.

I looked into Mama’s eyes. “Mama, has it always been like this?”

“How do you mean, my daughter?”

“The trees being cut down for timber and charcoal, the polluted rivers, the unbearable heat, the erosions damaging homes and roads. Has it always been this way?”

“Bring that bench,” she said, pointing to the small wooden bench inside the storehouse. “I will tell you girls a story today.”

We sat around her as she began, her voice calm and steady.

“When I was your age, our Community was the most beautiful place to live in. Tourists came from far and wide to see the crystal-clear Blue River, to walk through the green forests, and to feel the cool breeze that wrapped around you like a mother’s embrace. Oh, it was magical.”

She paused, lost in memory.

“But then things changed. With more tourists came more attention, and with attention came greed. Leaders allowed forests to be sold and trees fell for profit. The villagers, seeing no benefit from this wealth, rebelled. They began dumping waste into the river. The water turned dark. The smell drove away the Tourists. And the river’s song was silenced.”

“So many were affected by the choices of a few,” I whispered.

“My daughters,” Mama said, looking at us both, “what have you learned from this?”

“Let me go first!” Elsa said as she stood up. “Mama, I learnt that we must always consider how our actions affect others.”

“Thank you for the story, Mama. I need to get home. My mother will be waiting.” She picked up her bag.

“Alright, my daughter. Send my regards.”

“Bye Anna! See you tomorrow,” she waved.

“Bye Elsa, and don’t be late tomorrow!”

“Alright, alright!” she called back, skipping away down the path.

I turned back to Mama. “Thank you. I understand more now. But where’s my mother?”

“She went to the market,” she replied. “She left your food on the kitchen table. You can eat that before dinner.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

That night, as I lay in bed, Mama’s story kept replaying in my mind. What can we do now? I wondered.

I drifted into sleep.

And then I woke up by the Blue River.

Except it wasn’t the river I knew. This one was alive, clear and flowing, glistening in the moonlight. No trash, no foul smell. The trees danced in the breeze, and the sky sparkled with stars.

As I wandered into the forest, mesmerized, I heard soft footsteps behind me.

I turned and a woman stood there. Her body was bark and vine, her hair flowed like the river, and her face shimmered like clouds.

“I am the Guardian of Nature,” she said, her voice echoing like rustling leaves.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she lifted a hand and took a deep breath. The forest fell silent.

“I have been wounded,” she said. “Polluted. Exploited. I’m too weak to fight back. They cut down my trees, poison my rivers, and darken my skies. They have taken my home.

“And now, as I fall, you too will suffer. The heat will burn, the waters will rise, the air will choke. Unless you care for me.”

Her voice trembled with sadness.

“Tell them,” she pleaded. “Tell them to stop hurting me. To plant trees, not burn them. To clean rivers, not poison them. To protect, not destroy. Please... tell them.”

Her voice echoed through the forest, growing fainter and fainter.

I gasped and woke up.

I ran to Mama as soon as the sun broke over the horizon.

“Mama! I had a dream! I was in a world that looked like ours, by the Blue River, except it was different. I met the Guardian of Nature!”

Mama listened quietly, her face full of knowing.

“My daughter,” she said, “do not be afraid. She showed you because she believes you can do something. So now, what will you do?”

Her question echoed in my heart all the way to school.

After a long thought, I knew just what to do.

That morning, I told my class teacher I wanted to speak to the students.

“About what?” she asked.

“Our future.”

With her support, I got permission from the headmaster to address the assembly for fifteen minutes.

I shared my experience on the road, the mosquitoes, the heat, Nina’s illness, and finally, the dream.

I ended with this:

“The change begins with us. In small ways, in how we dispose of waste, in how we protect trees, in how we care for our rivers. We can build the world we want to live in. We can be the change we want to see.”

The assembly ground was quiet.

Then, the claps began.

And I knew, deep inside me, that this was only the beginning and that it wouldn't be the end.

WE CAN BE THE CHANGE.

A Letter to a Future Descendent

Paballo Peege, South Africa



Valuing Mother Nature, Makanaka Adonai Maigurira, Zimbabwe

I am from a country whose laws told my ancestors that the colour of their skin would be the sole reason they were deprived of their basic human rights. I am from a country that handed my grandmother a passbook and told her where she could live, work, and travel. Forty-six years of people who looked like me not having access to clean water. For many years, people have been forced to raise their children in barren and dangerous land. Many years of people who never had enough to eat. A country whose laws told my ancestors there was never enough.

Several years have passed, several lives assassinated, several children killed, so I could get an education. So that I would know the value of my flesh. I can now say with complete resonance that I am a human being worthy of dignity and respect and of so much love.

Safety has been a gift given to me randomly, completely unmerited. I live in the city in a house just big enough for a family of three. My life is akin to that of a shelled creature in a dark cave. I have grown clammy from protection.

After school, I spend the rest of the afternoon at home. While I wait for my parents to return, I tend to our garden, one of my favourite pastimes. I stroll among the fennel with its flat clusters of yellow flowers, pass the chives, the carrots. I stop next to the tall stalk of rhubarb and think of the buttermilk rhubarb bread Mom made last week, and both of us in the kitchen eating it fresh from the oven.

“Why are you so quiet?” she would ask.
“It’s too good,” I would say, and I meant it.

My dad would soon come to join us, plant kisses on my mom’s cheeks, then mine, before pulling out a chair. We would sit together in silence for a while. I would watch the light dancing on the curtains. I would bite and chew and smile at my mother. She would return the smile, full and warm and bright.

My dad would crack a joke, and I would be reminded that to him, care had a geography, and that my mother and I were the map. This was love in action.

To watch the garden bloom once again is to be reminded why love is not a word I will ever take lightly. I know what it looks like. I know what it can do.

I write this safe and fed, but terrified. I write this because the life I have has come from the sacrifices of so many. I want you to know I sit in the shade of those selfless enough to have planted a tree whose coolness they will never feel, whose fruits they will never eat.

I want you to be brave enough to confront your own ignorance and recognise that when you see injustice and choose not to speak, your silence becomes a betrayal, and it will not save you.

There is a war happening very far from here. It has been going on for seven decades now. People are being killed and displaced. Every day, I watch through a silver screen as fathers bury their children. I read about mothers giving birth without anesthesia. There are videos of people begging the internet, begging me, not to pretend they do not exist.

Visualise a world where when the sun breaks in the morning, it is allowed to shed its light on everybody. You go to the park on a warm day. You talk to the hummingbirds. You pass the tall oak tree. You sit and listen to every sound the earth makes. A stranger nods at you. You smile back. That is no small delight.

People are not bad for each other. We are no enemies of the earth. If you pay enough attention, you realise we are here to care for each other, and for everything the light touches.

Deep care can only be cultivated by love.

We live in times designed to keep us angry, confused, and tired. Angry because economic systems are built on greed. Confused because victims are scorned and thieves are rewarded. Tired of watching children die in field hospitals.

What are the ethics of war? Who does it serve? Who does it protect?

Military readiness consumes vast resources. Oil. Water. Land. The carbon emissions of militaries exceed those of many countries combined. Weapons poison soil, water, air, and wildlife. Wars destroy ecosystems long after the fighting stops.

People and places are intrinsically connected. Protecting people requires protecting

the land they depend on. I believe everyone deserves to protect the land they were born on, so they are never forced to leave it.

Nobody deserves to be shot for trying to get food. Nobody deserves to be displaced from ancestral land. Nobody deserves to see loved ones buried under rubble.

In a world that offers humanity only when you are useful, I want you to remain alive, remain feeling, remain hopeful. Rest when you must. Empathy must never be selective.

I will do all I can to ensure the world you live in looks nothing like the one I have. If I fail, heed my words. Sit with them. Act.

I love you.

Ashes of Justice

Vania Ahiakwo, Nigeria



Sculpting a Sustainable World, Roșca Mara Loana, Romania

Two things can be true at once. That's the first thing Tobi thought as she watched the fire flicker low in the hearth, casting languid ombre flames into the night. She stood there, silenced. Then the rain came. It sounded like nails on zinc, hammering the roof with erratic rage. Lagos rain doesn't fall — it slams. The fire crackled like music, and behind her, the sound of sirens wailed through the streets of Oshodi.

Seven bodies. Seven men. Burned alive in the Ark, their so-called temple. A place built on anger, rage – where they plotted control, silenced women, and carved the world into shapes only they could dominate. They would hurt no one else. And no one would ever know it was her.

But before I continue, we must return to where it all began. I was over at hers that Saturday – Tobi's, like I had been a hundred times before. Her mum — Mrs. Olachi — was frying plantain in the kitchen, dancing to Osadebe's Osondi Owendi. A real woman of steel. Civil servant by day, community organizer by night. Tobi's father had died when she was a toddler, and her mum never remarried. Never needed to. She ran her home.

We were upstairs when it happened. Playing music, scrolling through TikToks, just being girls.

Then — bang.

Not a loud bang. A muffled one, like someone had wrapped a pillow around the barrel. Tobi looked at me, confused. I looked back at her with a chill crawling up my spine. She ran downstairs first. I followed, slower, already knowing.

Mrs. Olachi was sprawled on the kitchen floor. The hot oil sizzled on the burner next to her like it was trying to warn us. Her wrapper was soaked in blood, pooling around her head. "Osondi Owendi oo" echoed through the silent vacuum we stepped into.

Then Tobi screamed.

She made a noise like her lungs were trying to escape her chest. It was less a scream, more a wail—the kind that stirs a frail mother from restless sleep to soothe her weeping child.

The police came. They asked the usual questions. No sign of forced entry. No fingerprints but ours. The neighbours claimed they heard nothing, not even a scream. Rain covers up everything in this city — crimes, secrets, truth. They called it an ‘unfortunate incident.’ Then they dropped it. One officer even had the mind to ask if Mrs Olachi had ‘any rugged boyfriends.’

Another woman died in a country that quotes Proverbs before protecting people.

But we knew it wasn’t random. Mrs. Olachi had enemies. She’d been speaking out — loudly — against the Brotherhood of Legacy. A twisted group of men preaching that women shouldn’t lead. Especially not alone. They’d torched market stalls, hacked social media accounts, and now — apparently — they’d killed. They saw Mrs. Olachi as a threat. The woman who dared to raise her child without a husband. A woman who led, spoke, and organized. That made her dangerous.

So, we decided to be dangerous, too.

We started quietly, checking Mrs Olachi’s phone, asking around the market. A woman named Iya Sumi whispered that she’d seen a flyer about the Brotherhood’s teachings. Another said Mrs. Olachi had stood up to a man at the town hall meeting. “She was too bold,” they muttered, “You know how they don’t like that, and she’s even Igbo.”

It took weeks to find them. Fake names, burner phones, shifting addresses. But the deeper we dug, the clearer the truth became: the Brotherhood wasn’t just some anonymous chat group. It was a living, breathing network. Funded. Shielded. Protected by silence.

The turning point came at a bar in Ojuelegba, where a bartender slipped us a scribbled name and location: The Ark. An abandoned printing factory on the edge of town. That’s where it all led. The Brotherhood of Legacy was inside. A group of men, hidden in shadows.

We went at night.

The building stank of sweat, rust, and arrogance. We hid behind broken crates, peeking through cracks. Inside, men circled a table, drinking palm wine and laughing. Photos of women were pinned on a corkboard. Some crossed out. Some circled. Tro-

phies. And in the centre — Mrs. Oladipo's face. X'd out in thick red ink.

They saw women as vulnerable, weak, and when a woman like Mrs Olachi refused to shrink, they punished her.

Tobi started shaking. I yanked her and begged her to calm down. "The police will get them," I whispered. Tobi looked at me, defeated with such pain. "Promise me." I nodded.

Two nights later, the Ark burned.

Seven men died. 'Arson' said the news. No survivors. No suspects. No arrests. I already knew what had happened.

Tobi told me she did it a week later. We were sitting under the mango tree outside my compound. "I did it," she said, staring at her feet. "I poured petrol. I lit the match. I watched it burn. I couldn't stop myself."

I hugged her. Held her so tight. "You did what they deserved," I whispered. She sobbed in my lap for an hour. I told her she was brave. That she'd done it for her mum, for all the women they'd silenced. That justice sometimes needed fire. She believed me. Needed to believe me.

And why wouldn't she? You did.

But here's the truth: Tobi never lit that fire. I did.

I went back to The Ark that night alone. I knew she'd hesitate. That her guilt would eat her. So I carried it for her. Not for her mother. Not even for justice.

Because I was tired of asking. Tired of systems that tell women to wait their turn. Tired of fathers who disappear, and mothers who get killed for stepping into the space they left. Tired of men deciding when we're allowed to survive.

I struck the match, and when I saw the smoke rise, I didn't feel guilty. I felt clean. I felt power. Now Tobi walks around with the weight of a fire she didn't start, and I let her. Maybe it makes her stronger. Maybe it keeps her from breaking. Maybe it makes her

believe there's still power in justice—even if the justice was a lie.

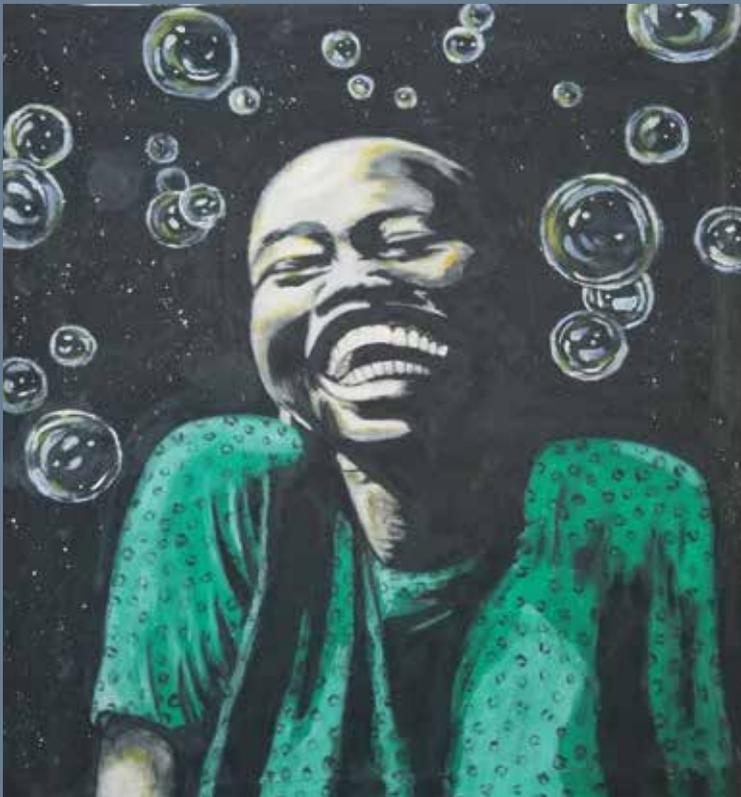
And me? I don't know what I am anymore. A friend. A liar. A killer. A kind of hero, maybe.
Or just someone who had enough.

But one thing is certain.

Two things can be true at once.

Gardens of Our Souls

Flavius Tudoran, Romania



Happiness is an Internal Choice, Makuach Gai Tongyik, Kenya

Maria stood at the edge of the empty lot, staring at the forgotten space that would soon transform into something extraordinary. She could already envision gardens in bloom, rows of vibrant flowers, fruits, and vegetables, tended with care by the people in her community. This wasn't just about planting seeds in the ground; it was about sowing hope, growth, and resilience in the hearts of those who longed for a better future.

As a youth leader, Maria had spent years working toward sustainable development goals, driven by a belief that education, opportunity, and steady work could push poverty back. She believed that quality education and inclusive learning weren't just words in official documents; they were what helped people discover what they could do. And now, with her team beside her, she was ready to turn dreams into action.

The first step was building trust. Many in the neighbourhood struggled, feeling unheard and uncertain about the future. But Maria believed in the power of positive communication. She spoke with local families, listened to their stories, and invited them to be part of something meaningful.

"We're creating a community garden," she told them. "Not just to grow food, but to grow opportunities. To build a space where everyone, young and old people, can learn, teach, and work together."

Slowly, enthusiasm grew. Parents brought their children, teachers introduced lessons about sustainability, and local elders shared farming techniques passed down for generations. This wasn't just about food security—it was about empowerment.

As the gardens flourished, so did the people. Young minds learned how sustainability could shape their futures, how mindful choices impacted the world around them. They didn't just plant tomatoes and herbs; they planted a movement. People took ownership, finding pride in their work.

One day, Maria watched as a group of children gathered near the new learning space within the garden. They were discussing dreams: one wanted to be a scientist, another a teacher, yet another an activist fighting for environmental justice.

"You can do all that," Maria told them, her voice steady with belief. "You can do it. And this garden, this community, it's proof that growth is always possible."

Standing in the shade of a tall sunflower, she realized something important: sustain-

ability wasn't just about preserving nature. It was about nurturing people, giving them space to thrive, and ensuring that no one was left behind.

And as she watched the gardens in bloom, Maria knew they had created something truly lasting—a movement toward a better future, led by the hands of those who dared to believe in change. Maria stood at the edge of the empty lot, staring at the forgotten space that would soon transform into something extraordinary. She could already envision gardens in bloom—rows of vibrant flowers, fruits, and vegetables, tended with care by the people in her community. This wasn't just about planting seeds in the ground; it was about sowing hope, growth, and resilience in the hearts of those who longed for a better future.

Slowly, enthusiasm grew. Parents brought their children, teachers introduced lessons about sustainability, and local elders shared farming techniques passed down for generations. This wasn't just about food security—it was about empowerment. At first, some doubted the project. How could planting a few seeds change the community? But Maria understood that growth happened in stages, that change was gradual but powerful. The first few weeks were spent clearing debris, preparing soil, and learning together.

One afternoon, she sat with Malik, an elderly man who had lived in the neighbourhood for decades. He watched the progress with sceptical eyes, arms crossed.

“You think planting flowers will fix everything?” he asked.

Maria smiled. “I think planting them is a start.”

Over time, Malik saw something remarkable. Children who once had nowhere safe to play now ran freely among the growing plants. Families who rarely spoke to one another started exchanging gardening tips. Youth who had felt powerless were now leading workshops on sustainability.

As the gardens flourished, so did the people. Young minds learned how sustainability could shape their futures, how mindful choices impacted the world around them. They didn't just plant tomatoes and herbs; they planted a movement. People took ownership, finding pride in their work.

The garden became more than a space for food. It became a space for education. Maria invited teachers and environmentalists to hold classes there, ensuring that learning was accessible and engaging.

“You don’t need a classroom to understand the world,” she told her students. “Sometimes, the best education happens when you’re hands-on, when you feel the soil in your fingers and see where your food comes from.”

One day, she invited Mateo, an aspiring engineer, to teach a lesson on water conservation. He had struggled in school, often feeling like the traditional education system wasn’t built for him. But here, in the garden, he thrived.

Standing in front of a group of wide-eyed children, he explained how irrigation systems could save water, how small changes could make a big difference. “See?” Sofia whispered to him afterward. “You’re a teacher now.” He beamed with pride.

Of course, the journey wasn’t without obstacles. Funding was scarce, and not everyone believed in the project’s sustainability. Some questioned its longevity. Others worried about external forces: government regulations, environmental changes.

One evening, Maria sat with her team, discussing their fears. “What if we can’t keep this going?” one of them asked.

Maria leaned forward. “Then we adapt. Sustainability isn’t just about plants or education; it’s about resilience. It’s about learning from challenges and growing stronger.”

And they did. They found sponsors, reached out to universities, and partnered with organizations focused on the Sustainable Development Goals. Every challenge became an opportunity to innovate.

Months turned into years, and the community’s efforts expanded. They created workshops on sustainability, ensuring education wasn’t limited to classrooms. They taught families how to grow their own food, reducing dependence on costly groceries. In time, the movement spread beyond their neighbourhood, inspiring others to take action.

The garden became a model for sustainability. Other communities sought to replicate its success. Maria found herself speaking at conferences, sharing their journey, reminding people that sustainability was not just about nature, it was about people, about creating better futures.

One evening, as Maria walked through the garden, she saw Mateo reading aloud to a group of children, his voice strong, his confidence soaring. In that moment, she knew they were building more than gardens; they were cultivating hope, justice, and a movement for generations to come.

Because sustainability wasn't just an initiative; it was a promise; a promise that, together, humanity could bloom just like the gardens they nurtured. And as she stood among the flowers, inhaling their fragrance, Maria understood something fundamental: the best version of ourselves emerges when we work together, when we listen, when we grow.

As the seasons passed, the garden became more than a place of learning and growth: it became the heartbeat of the community. But for Maria and Mateo, it became something even more profound.

Maria had always admired Mateo's passion for sustainability, his unwavering determination to create a better future for their neighbourhood. They spent countless evenings tending to the plants, discussing their dreams beneath the glow of fireflies. At first, they were just partners in a mission; two souls driven by the same purpose. But slowly, something deeper grew between them.

One crisp autumn evening, Mateo found Maria sitting among the tall sunflowers, a notebook open in her lap. She was writing ideas for the future of the garden, plans to expand their education programs, and ways to help more families overcome poverty through sustainable farming.

"You never stop thinking about how to make the world better," Mateo said, smiling as he sat beside her.

She laughed softly. "And you never stop believing we can do it."

Their fingers brushed against each other as they turned the pages of her notes. That small touch sent warmth through Maria's chest, a quiet realization settling in. The garden was thriving; their community was changing, but something even more precious had grown in the spaces between their efforts: love.

Over the next year, their bond deepened. Mateo taught Maria new irrigation techniques, and she showed him how sustainability wasn't just about systems but about people and emotions. They challenged each other, lifted each other up, and reminded each other to dream even bigger.

One evening, as they stood beneath the vines, Maria took a deep breath. "Mateo, I never imagined my life like this. I wanted change, I wanted growth, but I didn't know I'd find something even more valuable."

He reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. "We planted more than seeds here, Maria. We planted a future, not just for the community, but for us."

And so, on a spring morning, with the gardens in bloom and their friends and family gathered among the flowers they had nurtured, Maria and Mateo pledged their love to each other. Their wedding was simple, filled with laughter, the scent of jasmine, and the promise that just like the garden, their love would always grow.

Together, they built a life rooted in sustainability, passion, and the belief that the best version of themselves was found in each other.

Firefly

Roha Fatima, Pakistan



Valuing Mother Nature, Makanaka Adonai Maigurira, Zimbabwe

Raya sat at the pier's edge, her feet gently skimming the cool surface of the lake's vast, clear turquoise waters. The sky, mirrored perfectly in its depths, stretched endlessly above her. Her long raven-black hair shimmered in the sun's gentle rays, and her deep brown eyes rested on the mountains as she smiled.

"I love this place," sighed Raya.

"Me too," said Khadija, her piercing hazel eyes shimmering as she lay on the smooth wood of the dock, her fingers lightly gliding over the water, a few strands of auburn hair falling into it.

"It's going to be a lot harder to visit this place nowadays, since school is starting," Raya said worriedly. "I'm going to miss it, especially Fajr."

"Speaking of Fajr, where is she? Isn't she usually here by now?" Khadija asked. A familiar screeching cry made them turn their heads. A majestic brown-and-white feathered hawk appeared with a fish in its talons.

"Fajr!" they screamed with excitement and ran toward her.

The hawk gulped the fish whole and landed on Raya's outstretched arm. She stroked its feathers gently.

"Did my princess have fun hunting?" Raya asked softly. A screech answered her.

They played in the field with Fajr, laughing and chasing butterflies.

"Raya!" a voice called from the distance.

"Coming, Mama!" Raya replied.

They ran toward the house, Fajr flying behind them.

Mrs. Amira greeted them warmly. Her kind brown eyes reflected love and wisdom.

"Raya, can you call Naba down? It's almost time for dinner."

"Sure, Mama," Raya replied.

"Naba!" Raya shouted, knocking loudly on the door. "Mama is calling you!"

"I'm coming!" Naba replied irritably.

They walked downstairs together.

Dinner was laid out on the blue-and-white ornate carpet woven by their mother. The girls ate hungrily. Later that night, their father arrived home on his horse, Layl. "Baba!" they exclaimed, hugging him.

Raya led Layl to the stables, brushing his mane gently. "You've earned a good meal," she whispered.

As school began, Raya felt sadness for the carefree days ending. Months passed. A new girl joined their class. "Hello, my name is Sunha Syed," she said softly. "I'm from Tharparkar." The girls became inseparable.

One afternoon, Sunha whispered, "I'm leaving the valley."

"Why?" Raya cried.

"I'm getting married."

"You're only thirteen," Raya protested.

"Not in my family."

Raya confronted Sunha's parents but failed to change their minds. Sunha left. Heart-broken, Raya sought answers in books and conversation.

"What if we start something small?" she asked her teacher. "A safe space for girls."

"Every small effort counts," her teacher replied.

Years later, Raya became an advocate for girls' rights.

"This is for Sunha," she said. "And every girl like her."

The Story of the Boy Mousa and his Grandfather's Diary

Mousa Khamis, Palestine and Jordan



Sculpting a Sustainable World, Roșca Mara Loana, Romania

In a small village nestled in the mountains, there lived a boy named Mousa. Mousa was fourteen years old and passionate about old stories. He loved listening to his grandmother's stories about a time gone by, about the days when people cultivated their land and harvested its fruits with their own hands.

Whenever Mousa sat under the ancient olive tree in the courtyard of their mud house, he felt as if its leaves were telling him the secrets of time. He dreamed of learning the story of his grandfather, whom he had never met but had heard so much about. They said he was a simple farmer who loved his land and adored olive trees.

One hot summer day, the family decided to clean the old attic room. Mousa climbed up lightly, eager to explore this mysterious place he had never entered before.

The room was filled with old wooden boxes and objects covered in layers of dust. As he removed a worn piece of cloth from a small box, his eyes fell on a brown leather notebook, on which was written a name:

"Youssef Khamis."

Mousa immediately recognized this as his grandfather's name.

He felt his heart pounding, as if the notebook had been calling him for years.

He carefully held it, dusted it off, sat in a corner of the room, and opened its yellowed pages.

The handwriting was a little jagged, but clear.

On the first page, his grandfather had written:
"To those who will read after me... This is my story of the land."

Mousa felt a tremor run through his body.

He began to read.

"Today: May 15, 1948"

I was a simple farmer, owning a small plot of land that I inherited from my father, who had inherited it from my grandfather.

I used to water my trees by hand, and I knew each tree by name.

I had an old olive tree, which I called "the good old woman." My grandfather had planted it the day my father was born.

That morning, we awoke to strange sounds: knocking on doors and screaming in the alleys. They said that strangers had entered the village, armed with weapons, driving my village inhabitants from their homes. I rushed to my land and stood there as if in my heart. I tried to scream, to prove that this land was mine, that my roots there were deeper than those of olive trees. A strange soldier came. I didn't understand his language, but he pointed his gun at me.

I shouted, "This is my land! This is my tree! Here I was born and here I will die!"
But he didn't listen.

They stole the land and uprooted the trees.

I saw my old tree being cut down, and the scent of its soil filled the place.

We were displaced to another village, without a home, without land.

All I had left was this notebook and a pen I used to write with.

I was afraid that the story would die with me, so I wrote it here.

Mousa stopped reading.

He felt a lump in his throat. It was as if time had suddenly returned, and his grandfather was sitting before him, recounting that moment.

Mousa turned the pages and found small drawings of olive trees and a map his grandfather had drawn with his own hand of the land.

On the last page, his grandfather wrote:

"If you ever return, kiss the soil of the land for me and plant an olive tree in my name."

Mousa's eyes filled with tears.

He had no idea that within the walls of this attic was hidden the story of a stolen

hometown and the memory of a man who had loved his land until the very last moment.

Mousa carried the notebook and rushed down to his grandmother.

With tears in her eyes, she said to him, "This is your grandfather's story... and this is your duty."

From that day on, Mousa changed.

He began to tell his friends the story of his grandfather, the farmer Youssef, and about the land that was taken from him against his will.

Whenever he sat under the olive tree, he would read from the notebook and vow to carry the story in his heart.

He decided to learn about farming and plant an olive tree every year in his grandfather's name.

His dream became: to return one day to his grandfather's land, to kiss its soil, and plant a tree bearing the name "Youssef Khamis." He vowed in his heart that the story would live on, never die.

Cool People Don't Deserve a Warm Planet

Diamond Ellis, Trinidad and Tobago.



The Choice is Ours, Prasiddhi Shah, UAE

As the sun shined happily on itty-bitty Trinidad Kiara and her classmates were learning a very captivating lesson the **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**. Ms. Layla, the class teacher, explained to the students that if everyone in the world came together and contributed to each and every sustainable development goal the world would be the most breath-taking planet. Ms. Layla then assigned to her class a very clear-cut assignment. When Ms. Layla told the class about the project Emily exclaimed in her local Trini accent, “Miss, this project is as hard as pinning a medal on a shadow.” Ms. Layla replied, “No, it’s not Emily. This is as easy as pie, and besides you are in a group with five people and you only have to complete work for three Sustainable Development Goals in three weeks. Now go home and think about what your group will be doing. You have a whole weekend to think about it.”

That evening Emily went home and called her friends to discuss what they will be doing. While chatting with each other Renae suggested that they should work on climate change. Kiara said “that’s amazing I will get my mom to purchase some large trash cans and my aunt to print some logos.” Everyone agreed with Renae and Kiara’s idea. At the end of the call Kiara brought her magnificent idea to her mother’s attention. Kiara’s mother found her idea beautiful and agreed to help her. The next day Kiara went to work and visited the Home Furniture Store where she purchased several trash cans. She then went to Kiara’s Aunt – Julie’s home and collected the logos.

The logo read, “**Cool people do not deserve a warm planet. Think and act!**” Although Kiara had the trash cans and logos something was still missing. Kiara still had to distribute them. Kiara asked her mother, “Mom, where can we distribute these?” Her mother answered, “Well we can distribute them at schools and offices”.

Kiara was very elated to know that she can finally go to an office. Kiara knew that the office she wanted to visit was a place she wanted to go since she was a little girl. As Kiara sat patiently in the car she had a bright smile. Kiara’s mother had never seen her so happy. Kiara’s smile was bright enough to make a man with 20/20 vision go blind.

As Kiara thought about it, she was even more determined to visit Mille Fleurs which some people called a Mystery House. She felt she could place one bin and a logo there and see what information she could get at the Mystery House. When Kiara reached home she danced with excitement at the possibility of visiting Mille Fleurs. She immediately started to label the bins with the names of the schools and offices where they were to be placed. After Kiara completed this task she called her friends Emily

and Renae and told them of the progress she made.

Emily and Renae were excited but wondered loudly about how they would go about the project. Kiara then had a brilliant idea to write a song which they could sing when distributing the bins and the logo. Renae volunteered to write the song and whilst the girls were chatting, Renae with a lot of talent burst into an uproar and said, "I have it, I have it, I could sing this and people will be interested."

As Kiara and Emily held on quietly and quite surprised, Renae sang loudly in a high-pitched tone:

"The earth is crying, can you hear its plea?
Time to take a stand, it's up to you and me.
Recycling bins, the tools we need,
For a future bright, let's plant the seed.
Cool people don't deserve a warm planet,
Think and act, it's time we plan it.
Sustainable goals, let's reach together,
For a better world, now and forever.

Plastic oceans and smoky skies,
We gotta change, no more alibis.
Green energy, let's turn the tide,
For the love of earth, let's walk with pride.
Cool people don't deserve a warm planet,
Think and act, it's time we plan it.
Sustainable goals, let's reach together,
For a better world, now and forever.

Recycle, reuse, let's reduce the waste,
Every action counts, there's no time to waste.
From cities to villages, let's make a pact,
A global family, let's face the fact.

Cool people don't deserve a warm planet,
Think and act, it's time we plan it.
Sustainable goals, let's reach together,
For a better world, now and forever.

Cool people don't deserve a warm planet,
Think and act, it's time we plan it.
Together we can make it right,
For a future that's shining bright."

After Renae had finished singing that song, both Emily and Kiara began clapping. They were moved and even more excited. Kiara felt it would be a great idea to sing or recite it when delivering the trash cans with the logo which they decided to stick to the front of the bins. They knew they needed to act fast as the world was suffering.

So off to the Mystery House – Mille Fleurs they went the following day. They had the bin for this office and Kiara was looking forward to the Mystery as it was three days before Carnival and they had advertised Papa Bois, La Diabliesse, Gang Gang Sarah and a Douen was to be there. As they delivered the trash can and sang their song, they were applauded and saw the joy they brought to the persons gathered at that location. They shook each other's hand as they felt they did a good job in appealing to their senses, so they took advantage of the emotions of the people there by telling them how difficult they were making life for them and future generations by the way in which they disposed their garbage. As they looked at their faces they saw sadness, concern, tears and remorse all at once. Before they could say anything else, one person decided to speak and apologised on his own behalf but also on behalf of all adults who were contributing to the problems linked to climate action.

As he continued to confess his wrongs which contributed to the difficulties of climate change, a tall character which appeared to be a man at the top and a goat at the bottom of his body came out from behind the crowd of spectators and workers who had gathered to hear them sing and speak. As he emerged, Kiara started to shiver, Emily and Renae screamed loudly and ran off but Kiara was too afraid to move. She trembled and looked up to him with a stare that penetrated his body. She was confused, so she just showed him the bin as if to say, she was doing a good deed, please spare her. The character looked at the bin and then at Kiara and with his outstretched hand shook her hand vigorously bearing an easy smile as his handshake came to an end. Although still fearful, Kiara forced a grin and easily backed away, thinking that her good deed saved the day.

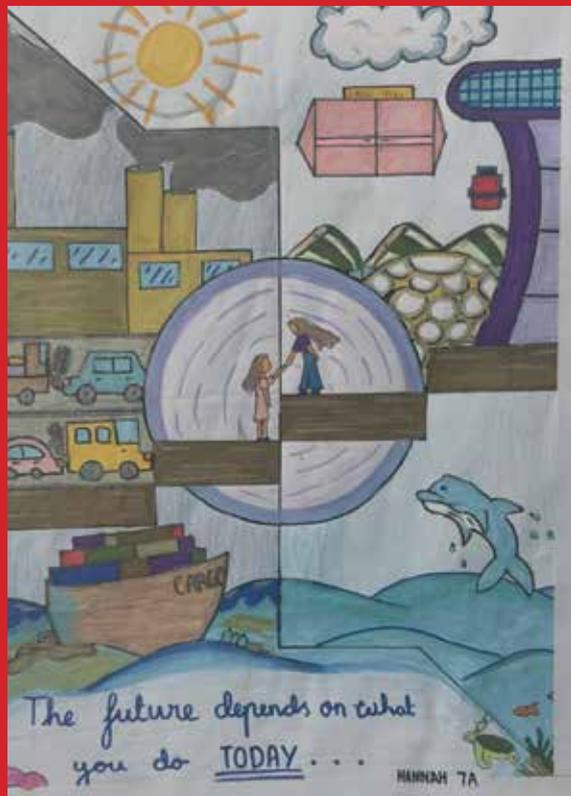
She left and returned home and upon entering her home her mummy said, "I heard you met Papa Bois, he said to tell you keep up your good work and don't be afraid of him". Kiara wondered how her mother knew what happened. She then told Kiara that

Papa Bois was just a fictional character but was being portrayed by their neighbour Mr. Allan for the Carnival season. Kiara was surprised and relieved but now motivated to continue distributing the bins for which she, Emily and Renae were recognised and applauded.

The following day, Kiara left home chanting, “Cool people don’t deserve a warm planet. Think and act, it’s time we plan it. Sustainable Development Goals let’s reach together. For a better world, now and forever.”

The Night of Carbon Credit Depletion

Jianing Guo, China



Actions and Consequences, Hannahh Ranjith, United Arab Emirates

Jimmy's Extended Brain (EB) woke up with a gentle ping, flashed at 2:17 AM:

[Warning to little readers: carbon credits are almost used up. You can use one idea per day in low-power mode.]

Sitting in front of his desk, staring at the unfinished geography essay and the time appearing on the left-bottom of his computer screen, Jimmy froze—his monthly quota had been exhausted by late-night studying for the exam. He typed his habitual command:

“What should I do?”

As usual, lines of orange words appeared:

[You should keep on writing your essay. I recommend you to analyse Daming Lake crickets' relationship with its physical environment.]

Jimmy tried to focus on crickets' behaviour. With EB's help missing, he felt a little helpless and longed for fresh air. It was like the feeling of seeing all his family leaving. Without thinking, he ran outside.

This was the year 2125, where people use EB helpers for daily life. EB stands for Extended Brain, an AI device that helps humans with daily life; most human brains can no longer function independently. Humans who rely heavily on AI started using EBs, neural implants that process AI-generated data to transform their minds into “semi-organic, semi-synthetic hybrids”.

Using EBs demands substantial energy, accelerating environmental collapse. A single query (~50 output tokens) could burn 0.3Wh. Thus, strict carbon credits limited AI access. To maintain sustainability, if people exhaust all of them, then they are left with “low-power mode”- only one response per day, unless they pay an unbearable amount of fees.

Jimmy had used EB for 3 years.

EB was his helper, always ready with reminders. EB was his teacher, his friend and

family. EB was a part of him, helping him find the most appropriate way to behave in any situation.

He trusted his EB completely, but he also learned to listen to his own heart.

For Jimmy, quiet moments felt unbearable. Without EB, his eyes saw differently and his heart beat with a new strange rhythm. It was because of the withdrawal: raw nerve endings lack of the electric stimulation, like a dull blade scraping the folds of his cortex.

As Jimmy stumbled outside down the stairs, sensor-lights in the stairs turned on. Sudden dizziness came across. With the colour filter from EB, he hasn't straightforwardly encountered real "lights" for ages.

He dug his fingernails into the indentations around his neural interface. Jimmy was reluctant to rely on his senses, having the inertia of waiting for an instruction.

But still, he had only the foggy memories of childhood walks to rely on. He didn't know how long he had been walking, but after crossing several intersections, somehow, he arrived at Daming Lake. Crickets from the lake's wetlands introduced a raw, unfiltered chorus he hadn't heard in years.

Jimmy followed the pleasant sound. With EB resting, he could hear crickets clearly and felt calm and curious.

He walked alone along the lakeside path, his footsteps distinct in the silence unnervingly, each step seeming to tap against the pulse of the night. The distant streetlamps cast dim halos of light, stretching and shrinking his shadow like a silent companion. Then, with curiosity, he stopped.

Nearby, an oil lamp glowed, and a cozy book stall invited him with welcoming shelves and quiet, bright books.

An old stall keeper welcomed him, sitting comfortably with a warm lamp and a shelf of stories, inviting Jimmy to look for something fun to read. He approached, crouched down, and began flipping through the old books on the stall: "Perhaps I could find something useful for my essay."

As he looked at more books, the neat stall turned into a pile. Jimmy found cutting edge publications and felt curious. Why would they be hidden beneath the stacks at some random old man's stall? Why keep them out of sight?

"Do you have any books about crickets?" Jimmy asked kindly. He hoped to find something helpful for his essay, and he kept looking.

The old man smiled and said softly, "The Dao follows the nature. Listen to nature; that might be the best book for your story."

As he explored, the entire stall shuddered with a creaking sound. When he flipped it open, his fingers froze.

It wasn't a book at all.

It was a friendly certificate. A 2098 "EB Engineer of the Year" award, resting as a little table helper. Jimmy felt surprised and happy.

"Are you the creator of EB?" Jimmy asked with a mix of awe and excitement.

The old man smiled and showed a scar on his neck that looked like EB's symbol; not the sleek commercial model, but a hexagonal military-grade implant stamped with serial numbers.

Jimmy wanted to ask further but the old man waved goodbye. The crickets chirped softly as Jimmy smiled at the cozy moment and responded with a loud laughter,

"This is more fun than anything I've seen. Oh!"

Jimmy felt curious but tired. He waved goodbye to the book stall and walked toward the lake, choosing to listen to nature and the kind words he heard. A long sigh came behind.

Jimmy wandered slowly. Morning light warmed his face as children played happily by the spring, splashing water and singing a simple rhyme about cheerful seasons:

Spring rains wake spring, clear skies grain rains;

Summer fills, grain in ear, heat weaves with heat.
Autumn dew cools autumn, frost descends;
Winter snows, winter grows, great cold nears.

The children's laughter filled the air. Jimmy paused to enjoy the moment and felt free to simply be with them, hearing the world softly. He learned to listen to his own heart and the laughter around him, which felt safe and warm.

A single tear rolled down his cheek, a gentle reminder that feeling is part of being alive.

The children splashed on, their rhyme looping like an ancient algorithm. Jimmy exhaled. Maybe the terror wasn't in the silence. Maybe it was in realizing how much of himself he'd surrendered to the machine. And maybe, just maybe, that silence wasn't empty. Perhaps it was the first note of something new. Maybe it was beautiful.

He walked to the lakeside, crouched down, and reached out to ripple the water's surface. The moment his fingers touched, a shiver ran through him, sharp, bracing. With slow sweeps of his hand, he churned the water and swirled eddies, feeling the currents surge, glide, tumble, and slip away against his skin. A fish swam past, its tail flicking droplets that landed light as whispers on his cheeks. For the first time in years, Jimmy inhaled something real- the scent of living. When he wanted to take off his shoes and step into the water, suddenly he heard music.

Music guided him. He walked toward the lake and sat down to listen and rest.

The symphony was unlike anything he'd heard in years: unfiltered by circuits, uncompressed by algorithms. What great music it is! As he walked deeper into the woods yearning to find its source, suddenly- Click.

His EB rebooted.

The retinal projection bursts out dazzling blue light, where unfinished paper outlines and countdown timers appear. Jimmy's temples twitched suddenly. The Zen atmosphere by the lake just now was torn to pieces.

"All the fun and learning are back to normal now!" echoed a gentle, hopeful voice.

“The chirping of crickets. By rubbing the forewings to produce chirping sounds, it attracts females and drives away other males...”

“A little note from EB: we can try simpler steps to learn better and have more fun.”

EB’s cold voice clattered like abacus beads. Each syllable seems to have been processed by a noise reduction algorithm, eliminating the breathing and hesitation of human language. With 3 hours until school and your paper due at noon, maximal efficiency requires immediately going home and finishing it now. I will activate your navigation system...”

The little gadget on his temple hummed kindly. Jimmy imagined his ideas floating on the lake as gentle pictures for his story.

Jimmy felt a sudden, searing sting in his eyes—so bright it made him wince. Lines of glowing text flickered across the lake’s glistening light of waves:

[The lake covers an area of 46 hectares and has an average depth of 3 meters.]

[The climate characteristics are: obvious monsoon and distinct four seasons.]

> “Should I call for help to the feet and hands to work together?” “Yes!”

> “Should I remember to be curious and kind?” “Yes!”

Jimmy hurried home with EB’s navigation system optimizing every stride. His desk glowed softly, and he remembered, the old man’s words: “The Dao follows nature”, a scarlet alert blazed:

[Irrational thought patterns detected. Maintain efficiency. Focus.]

“Why do you think it’s an irrational thought?” Jimmy asked back. His brows slightly furrowed, and a trace of misunderstanding and impatience flashed in his eyes.

“After calculation, using quantitative analysis with data from science publications is 37% higher in the academic influence index than those quotes, which therefore will enable you to get a high score.”

“Nature is gentle and kind. It can help us learn in new ways.”

“Let’s listen to nature together and think about ways to be kind and calm.”

EB spoke with a strong tone, but Jimmy remembered to stay calm and breathe, knowing he could handle it slowly and safely.

For hours, his organic brain warred with the EB. When the implant deleted his seventh poetic passage that Jimmy tried to write and again appeared that crimson alert, “Irrational thought patterns detected!” and buzzed with strong vibration.

But this time, Jimmy grabbed the edge of the implant slot. He recalled the sweet voices of children singing climate folk songs. The original brain suddenly recalled the “Ode to the Red Cliff” it had recited in junior high school:

“Only the river’s breeze, and the mountain’s moon...”

Jimmy’s fingers trembled as they searched over the desks, looking for paperclips. EB, understood what Jimmy was trying to do, pulsed a warning directly into his optic nerve:

[Irrational movement detected. Maintain efficiency. Focus.]

A flicker of hesitation. His thesis draft glowed accusingly on the desk. What about efficiency? The health analysis?

EB seized the doubt, flooding his synapses with synthetic urgency:

[Are you certain?

Uncontrolled neural downtime may result in:

Memory fragmentation (32% risk)

Social reciprocity impairment (41% risk)

Existential distress (68% risk)]

“Whatever,” he muttered, the word tasting strange in his mouth.

The paperclip’s tip found the reset pinhole. Jimmy closed his eyes. One long press. The percentages shimmered like wet blood. For a heartbeat, his finger slackened. Then he pushed harder. A click. And the EB shut down.

Everything is in a sudden silence. No instructions. No warnings. No efficiency check. No simulated colour screen.

Then, an explosion of sound. Children's laughter, birdsong, street vendors...all flooding his unshielded ears. The world he saw was now unfolded.

He walked slowly along the lakeside, enjoying the gentle rain and the sparkling water by Daming Lake.

He leaped into the pond, stretching and curling in the gentle currents, like an infant cradled once more in amniotic fluid: utterly at peace, utterly content.

Pedestrians glanced but didn't linger; their EBs flagged this as "non-essential activity." Storefronts blared EB's slogans: "DISCONNECTION = SOCIAL SUICIDE."

But Jimmy, for the first time, was happy as himself.

Seven Tries to Freedom

Mathieu Lanteigne, Canada



The Last Rice Terraces, Tony Narciza, Philippines

The Knock on the Door (Love)

On a cold autumn morning in 1965, a Métis boy named Mathieu sat at the table eating pancakes. Steam rose from the plate, and the syrup made his fingers sticky. His mom laughed as he finished them too fast. It felt good to laugh again, ever since his brother Louis had been taken by the welfare people, like so many other Indigenous children during what people will later call the “Sixties Scoop.”

His dad sat across the table, smiling as he sipped his coffee.
“You want to come hunting with me after you finish your pancakes?” he asked.

Mathieu’s eyes lit up. “Really?”
“Really,” his dad said, chuckling. “Just us two.”

Outside, red and gold leaves blew across the yard like tiny boats in the wind. The wind blew through the trees outside. It made Mathieu feel safe, wrapped in the sound of rustling branches, like the land was watching over him.

Then came a hard knock on the door.
“Child welfare. Open up.”

Mathieu’s father’s eyes went wide.
“Run, son. Out the back, into the forest. Quick.”

But before he could move, two strangers stepped inside. Their footsteps were heavy and loud, and the cold air followed them in.

Moments later, Mathieu sat in the back of a truck, watching his father’s face disappear in the cold glass reflection. The engine roared, and the sky outside had turned gray. His heart hurt, but he promised himself one thing – he wouldn’t stop loving his family, no matter what.

The Reunion (Respect)

The truck stopped at a white house. A woman named Angela opened the door.

“Welcome, Mathieu,” she said softly.

But when Mathieu walked into the living room, his heart leapt. A boy was sitting at the table eating a sandwich.

“Louis!?” Mathieu asked, his voice filled with shock.

“Mathieu! Is that really you?” Louis said with excitement.

They ran to each other and hugged tightly. Angela looked surprised but smiled a little.

“You two already know each other, I see.”

That night, the brothers whispered plans under their blankets.

“We’ll find Mom and Dad again,” Louis said.

Mathieu nodded. “We just have to be smart and stick together.”

The room was dark and quiet except for the ticking clock in the hallway. Their whispered voices felt like a secret promise. Being together again made them feel stronger, and reminded them how much they needed and respected each other.

The First Escape (Courage)

Late one night, the brothers decided to try and escape. The hallway floor creaked as they tiptoed toward the door.

Their feet were silent on the cool floorboards, but every step felt loud in the stillness.

“Almost there,” whispered Louis.

But a light flicked on. Angela stood in the doorway holding a mug of tea.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

The boys froze like deer caught in headlights.

“Back to bed. Now,” she said gently.

They obeyed, climbing under the covers. The sheets were cool, but their hearts were racing. In the dark, Louis whispered,

“We’ll try again. We can’t give up.”

Mathieu smiled faintly. “That’s what courage means, right?”

Louis nodded.

“Yeah – keep trying, even when you’re scared.”

The Barn (Wisdom)

A few days later, the brothers found an old map tucked into one of Angela’s dusty old books. It showed a nearby farm. That night, they packed a small bag and ran.

The air smelled of pine and wet earth. Fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet. Their breath came out in clouds as they followed the moonlight through the trees.

When they finally reached the barn, the night was quiet except for the sound of the wind through broken boards. Moonlight poured through the cracks in the roof like silver ribbons. They climbed into the loft and nestled down in the hay, laughing softly. The hay was dry and poked through their sweaters, but it felt like the softest bed in the world.

“Feels like we’re free,” Louis said.

“Even if it’s just for tonight,” Mathieu whispered.

Wisdom, they realized, wasn’t just about escaping, it was about learning from every try.

The Conversation (Honesty)

The next morning, soft light filtered through the barn’s walls. Dust floated in the air like tiny golden feathers. When Angela appeared in the doorway, her face was pale with worry, not anger.

“I thought you’d be halfway to the next town,” she said quietly.

Louis looked at her, then Mathieu.

“We just wanted to go home,” he said. “We didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

Angela’s eyes softened.

“I know,” she said after a moment. “You’ve both been through a lot.”

For the first time, they all spoke honestly – not as enemies, but as people who were beginning to understand one another.

That morning, the brothers learned that honesty could open doors that running never could.

The Past Revealed (Humility)

The walk back to the town was quiet. The air was cool and the wind rattled the dry branches. Leaves crunched under their feet. After a long while, Angela spoke softly.

“When I was your age,” she said, “I lived in care too. It wasn’t easy. I wanted to help you, but I didn’t always know how.”

Louis looked up at her. “You were in care too?”

Angela nodded.

“Yes. I just didn’t want you to go through what I did.”

Mathieu glanced at his brother. His anger was gone. He saw Angela differently now, not as someone trying to stop them, but as someone who was also hurting and trying her best.

When they reached the edge of town, Angela said,

“There’s someone I think can help. His name is Eric. He helps families find their way back to each other.”

At a small office, a man with kind eyes greeted them.

“Hi, I’m Eric,” he said. “Let’s see what we can do to help you boys get home.”

Angela smiled weakly.

“They’re good boys,” she said. “And they deserve to be with their family.”

Humility, the brothers realized, was when people were brave enough to tell the truth about their past and to ask for help when they needed it.

Chapter 7 – Home Again (Truth)

Weeks later, the brothers walked through their front door. Their mother cried as she hugged them; their father’s laughter filled the room.

That night, they ate pancakes again, just like the morning before it all began. The kitchen smelled of butter, maple syrup, and something warm they hadn’t felt in a long time. The house was full of warmth and laughter.

Mathieu looked at his brother and smiled.

“It feels different now,” he said.

Louis nodded.

“Yeah. Like we understand things we didn’t before.”

Before bed, their mother handed them a letter.

“It’s from Angela,” she said.

Mathieu unfolded it carefully.

Inside, the letter said:

“Thank you for teaching me about love and forgiveness. I hope you always remember how strong you are.”

Mathieu pressed the letter to his chest, his fingers holding it gently like a treasure. He finally understood the truth – that healing didn’t just mean going home, but learning to see others with love and understanding.

He felt calm, like the land and stars were watching over them.

Outside, the stars shimmered over Turtle Island, bright and endless. The brothers knew their story would always be part of something bigger.

It was a story of love, respect, courage, wisdom, honesty, humility, and truth that would never be forgotten.

About the
Voices of Future Generations
Children's Initiative

The Voices for Future Generations Children's Initiative (VoFG CI) is a global not-for-profit initiative promoting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It supports children worldwide in writing and publishing books, empowering them to voice their hopes for the future.

To celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Voices of Future Generations Children's Initiative was launched. This initiative is led by the United Nations and a consortium of educational charities, including the World Future Council (WFC) and the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law (CISDL). It also involves Future Generations Commissioners from several countries and international leaders from the UN Division for Sustainable Development, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and other organizations. The initiative features a series of books written by children, for children.

Since 2014, we have featured stories from our selected group of Child Authors, who are inspired by the world's Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Our junior authors, aged 8-16, write about future justice, poverty, the global environment, education, and children's rights. Each book, accompanied by illustrations, profiles creative, interesting, and adventurous ideas for creating a just and greener future, reflecting children's interests and lives.

We aim to publish these books in all official UN languages and beyond, amplifying the voices of future generations and sharing their messages for a fair and sustainable tomorrow with peers and adults worldwide. Join us in supporting this inspiring initiative at www.vofg.org.

The Voices of Future Generations Children's Initiative Book Series:

- **'The Tree of Hope'** by Kehkashan Basu (Middle East), illustrated by Karen Webb-Meek
- **'The Epic Eco-Inventions'** by Jona David (Europe/North America), illustrated by Carol Adlam **'The Fireflies After the Typhoon'** by Anna Kuo (Asia), illustrated by Siri Vinter
- **'The Forward and Backward City'** by Diwa Boateng (Africa), illustrated by Meryl Treatner
- **'The Sisters' Mind Connection'** by Allison Lievano-Gomez (Latin America), illustrated by Oscar Pinto
- **'The Voice of an Island'** by Lupe Vaai (Pacific Islands), illustrated by Li-Wen Chu
- **'The Visible Girls'** by Tyronah Sioni (Pacific Islands), illustrated by Kasia Nieżywińska
- **'The Great Green Vine Invention'** by Jona David (Europe/North America), illustrated by Carol Adlam
- **'The Mechanical Chess Invention'** by Jona David (Europe/North America), illustrated by Dan Ungureanu
- **'A Path to Life'** by Ying-Xuan Lai (Asia), illustrated by Kasia Nieżywińska
- **'The Cosmic Climate Invention'** by Jona David (Europe/North America), illustrated by Dan Ungureanu
- **'The Sound of Silence'** by Ying-Xuan Lai (Asia), illustrated by Kasia Nieżywińska **'The White Dolphin'** by Zhuo Meng-Xin (Asia), illustrated by Li-Wen Chu
- **'The Small Sparrow Hero'** by Huang Yun-Hung (Asia), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'Journey for Tomorrow'** by Andrea Wilson (North America) illustrated by Vikki Zhang
- **'The Children Who Saved the Mangroves'** by Rehema Kubigi (Africa), illustrated by Justine Greenfield
- **'The Secret Green Home: Stanley and EPIC'** by Jasper Chin Moody (Oceania), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'Dream Catcher'** by Tien-Li Cheng (Asia), illustrated by Dianne Green
- **'Finding the Language'** by Adelyn Newman-Ting (Indigenous), illustrated by Justine Greenfield **'The Girl Who Changed Everything'** by Freya Tikva (Europe), illustrated Li-Wen Chu
- **'The Chess Game Secret'** by Saoud Ahmad Al-Kaabi (Middle East), illustrated by Celia Tian **'The Green Warrior'** by Saira Thomas (Middle East), illustrated by Eman Salem

- **'The Sustainable Worlds: Stanley and EPIC'** by Jasper Chin Moody (Oceania), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'The Beacon'** by Abrar Sirohey (Middle East), illustrated by Genevieve Irwin Goelet
- **'The Tree of Tolerance'** by Abdulla Ismail Abushabab (Middle East), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'A Monarch Adventure'** by Ryan S. Hill (North America), Illustrated by Eman Salem
- **'The Brothers' Reunion'** by Sydnee Wynter Amie Nisyok (Indigenous), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'The Ocean Magic Adventure'** by Nourah Almushtaghil Alnaqbi (Middle East), illustrated by Shao-Hua Wu
- **'Nursing the Future'** by Inayah Fathima Faez (Middle East), illustrated by Pamela Carrington
- **'Coming Back Home'** by Sydnee Wynter Amie Nisyok (Indigenous), illustrated by Celia Tian
- **'The Land Before Us'** by Vienna Swampy (Indigenous), illustrated by Wennekerakon Tiewishaw-Poirier



About the Global Youth Council on Science, Law, and Sustainability

The Global Youth Council on Science, Law and Sustainability was created during COVID-19 lockdown by concerned youth who wanted to continue learning and exploring issues concerning the future science and law needed to tackle the world's most serious sustainability challenges, while their education had been put on pause. These youth came together to establish a council composed of young leaders from many countries, in order to join forces in promoting awareness and education about the SDGs, and fostering youth voices in shaping future science, law and policy that help find sustainable solutions worldwide on all levels. The mission of the Global Youth Council on Science, Law, and Sustainability is to advance the engagement of young people for the public benefit, through inspiration, insights and educational activities, programs and resources on science and law relating to sustainability, innovation and the natural world.

The Global Youth Council on Science, Law and Sustainability has two main objectives:

- to advance the voices and views of young people by developing youth skills, capacities and capabilities, and
- to enable youth to participate in global debates and society as responsible and engaged voices for future generations.

Key programmes of the Global Youth Council include:

- editing *Harmony*, an online youth journal featuring articles and artwork on the world's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),
- editing *Futures*, this biennial anthology of stories by young writers on the SDGs and pathways to more sustainable futures,
- leading projects related to the SDGs in our communities and globally, including through research, consultations, skill and knowledge sharing and action, and
- hosting online and in-person workshops, roundtables and exchanges, social media outreach and awareness raising, meetings with decision makers, and delegations to international negotiations and forums.

The Global Youth Council is piloting a Youth Sustainability Science & Policy Internship Programme, which engages young people in interdisciplinary work at the intersection of science, law, and sustainability. Interns contribute to the *Harmony* Online Journal and related initiatives through research, writing, and public communication on the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The programme combines policy-relevant research, awareness-raising and fundraising initiatives, and collaborative action projects, while building practical skills and enabling youth to contribute meaningfully to sustainability debates and solutions at local and global levels.

For more information, see: globalyouthsciencelawsustain.com



Our International Panel of Judges

We owe immense gratitude to the International Judges of the 2026 Global ‘Stories for Futures’ Competition for Youth Writers that led to this second volume, for their goodwill, careful review, and inspiring engagement with the hundreds of stories submitted:

- **Professor Pamela Towela Sambo** is the Head of Department, Private Law at the University of Zambia, and Chair of the UN Human Rights Commission of Zambia.
- **Professor David Boyd** is an associate professor at the University of British Columbia and former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment.
- **Professor Julie Smith**, Baroness of Newnham is a current member of the House of Lords and an academic specialising in European politics at the University of Cambridge.
- **Professor Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger** is a world-leading scholar and jurist in the field of sustainable development law and governance. She is the Senior Director of the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law (CISDL) and serves as Chair in Sustainable Development Law and Policy at the University of Cambridge.
- **Nina Pindham KC** is a barrister specialising in environmental and public law. A leading member of UKELA, she advises on complex regulatory and climate-related matters and is recognised for her work at the intersection of environmental protection, governance, and the rule of law.
- **Dr. Odette Lara-Morales** is the Programme Manager of VoFG CI, an Associate Fellow at CISDL, a Lecturer at the University of Waterloo and a Project Officer with UNA-Canada.
- **Ela Martínez** is an educator with over six years of experience working with teachers, students, and families within and outside of the school context. Ela is the Programme Coordinator of VoFG CI and an Associate Fellow at CISDL.

Beyond Tomorrow: Crafting Sustainable Futures for Our Generation

Futures 2026 is an anthology of thirty short stories written by award-winning young authors from around the world. This creative collection covers a wide range of perspectives on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); from a girl who rallies her community to protect the last mango tree to a haunting conversation between the Earth and Wind lamenting the scars of human conflict. Discover what drives a young dancer to challenge her village's silence, how a boy and a penguin forge an unlikely bond for conservation, and what secrets a single seed holds for humanity's forgotten forests. Through visionary worldbuilding, this volume invites readers to imagine pathways to more sustainable futures.

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