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FIRST PLACE Grades 8-9

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A Letter to my Great-Grandchild in 2123

You will be reading this letter in the distant future, and I hope your world is full of grace and beauty. I wish I could say the same about the world we live in now when many of us still take so much from the land and treat it like a commodity. Some days, I fear that this will not change. As I think these thoughts, I ask myself what should I do to replenish the earth in return. I remember the people before me like Aldo Leopold and Robin Wall Kimmerer who used the world around them as their teacher. So, I too learn from the bison, the deer, and the bees.

When I study the bison that roam the Great Plains, I watch how they contribute to the life cycle of the grasses: big bluestem, switchgrass, and Indiangrass. The bison give them their yearly haircut and aerate the soil, contributing to the evolution and biodiversity of these species. They don't even think about how they are helping the grasses survive, they are just eating. I can't speak for the bison and the grasses, but what I observe is the way that they have an unspoken gratitude toward each other. As I watch their silent understanding of each other, I long to have that natural connection with the earth, giving back by helping the topsoil stay healthy and strong for plants and animals.

I am a student of the deer too. That quiet prancer up mountains and through meadows, bouncing so quietly that the trees barely see them. As they lay down to rest, the plants beneath them surrender to their weight, but after the deer wake, the plants float up after a night of being delicately folded underneath the deer's body. When I think of this, I feel suddenly raw and embarrassed, noticing my heavy human tracks over the plants, and how my body thoughtlessly pressed them so flat that they are stuck and unable to move. But after watching the deer, I am learning to move through the world with more grace, with a light-footed approach, with a gentler touch.

I learn from the diligence of the bees. They work in a community effort, never backing down, always on a mission. As I watch them come and go from the lavender to the sunflower, I admire how they hover and wait for each other, making sure no one is left behind. As I grow up in 2023, our culture praises those who do things on their own and look like they do not need help. But some of us believe that it's possible to unite and restore the land, as a community. Like the bees. I am young now, so my role in this movement is to be a student of the land: to listen, learn, and do my best to love the earth and show others that the earth is our teacher. I will always be a student, but when I grow older, I intend to be a botanist who is still humbled by the adaptability and perseverance of native plants. I will work with others, like the bees, so you, my great-grandchild, will have a more stable ecosystem and leaders who have compassion for all species. I hope my generation will be good ancestors to you.