



'A Letter from the New World'

By Kayla Bosire, Senior Winner aged 16 from Nairobi, Kenya

It was a beautiful day to die.

While the rest of me withered away into nothingness, a field of forget-me-nots blossomed before my aching feet, mocking my suffering. Their rich hues matched the periwinkle sky that clothed the heavens above. A quiet peace filled the lands. A peace that stretched beyond the seven seas - a peace so strong that neither disease nor pestilence could stand against its power.

And I, the very same one who had torn the world apart those thirty years ago stood weakened, unable to do anything but accept the fate laid bare before me. And who am I, you ask? Who I am is no secret to any man. They called me by many names, the humans, but you will identify me best if I introduce myself as COVID-19. I was once powerful, I was once feared. Now I am nothing. Nothing because mankind decided to fight back. And when united, they are much greater than I.

Kingdoms, states, and provinces, people of every nation and tongue came together - united by the very thing that had driven them apart. And there was no lion and lamb - none greater than the other - for all were in harmony. It mattered not the color of your skin, nor the gender you identified by. It mattered not your religious beliefs, nor your name or your father's name, for there were no barriers differentiating one man from another.

No longer was the long shadow of inequity cast across the world's poor. The beggar's hands turned into praying, rejoicing hands. Equity hummed in the air, promising more fruitfulness in the years to come. And the Commonwealth nations, together with the rest of the world held hands, holding on to that beautiful moment, on that beautiful day. And I knelt among the forget-me-nots, watching as the world slowly pieced itself back together.

Watching as the sun shone down on my sins, and the oceans washed them away. Watching as the very last of my power was taken away from me, stolen by the advances the men and women armed with syringes and white gloves made. Watching as more people recovered from my deadly sting. Watching, because all I could do was watch and wait.

So in my sunset hours, I took a final stroll across the New World. My travels began in the south, walking through the coconut plantations of the Pacific. From the vibrant tech cities of Guam to the tranquil white palm beaches of French Polynesia, a pulse of joy filled the air as the islands came together, forming the Pacific Union. Despite their remoteness, a flourishing trade and

logistics network connected their fertile agricultural islands to the rest of the New World. Together they were invincible. Together they were able to face any challenge hurtling their way. Together, they made a difference that stretched beyond their sandy borders.

Across the Indian ocean, my voyage continued as my feet landed on the 'Mother Continent.' Africa, they called her. 'Mama Africa' had nearly been bled dry, her jewels robbed of her hundreds of years earlier. But now she is healing. Once scorned, she has risen to power. The world came together to help 'Mama Africa.' They extended their right hand, and she took it, and together they rebuilt a broken land. Within the African community, tribes merged together, no longer separated by language, religion, or ancestry. No longer divided - ever one community. One people. And that unity pushed them forward, as more cities sprouted from villages, and people came together to help fuel the change. From the motherland to the rest of the world, strength and peace rang out, and the faint singing of these words could be heard: "Umoja ni nguvu; utengano ni udhaifu." (Unity is strength; division is weakness).

Further north, past the vast Sahara and the sandy Sahel, my journey continued. I landed in the largest of the seven great continents, Asia, where cities full of life and laughter, teemed with people. With an ever-growing population, air pollution was a constant issue. To mitigate the situation, cities had gone green, planting more trees and greenery, limiting carbon emissions, and using technology to help promote the purification of air. There was something rich in the silence found within its cool forests which, thanks to the people, had been conserved to this day. Inhaling, I could smell everything - hear everything - in those forests. The people had fought for a greener home, thus sparking a revolution that spread to the rest of the world.

Revolutions like this, however, weren't uncommon. War had an iron grip in the Middle East. For far too long had the people of Syria and Afghanistan been torn apart, resources wasted on ammunition and weaponry. The world demanded peace, and peace it received - with some difficulty and some time, but peace nonetheless. Nations, once shells of themselves, were slowly recovering. Blood was no longer shed. Peace was blooming, peace was blossoming, and it would bear fruit as long as the people worked together. As long as they continued to see past the mistakes of their ancestors. A wise man once said: "the only way out of the labyrinth of suffering is to forgive."

Forgiveness didn't come easy. It had taken thirty years to rid the world of the chaos I had caused, and the confusion and uncertainty even the most powerful of nations had felt during that period. That uncertainty had forced the world to put aside their differences and come together to fight an invisible foe. People were falling dead like flies from the skies, and a fear greater than any fear I had witnessed swept from continent to continent. There was uproar and chaos and anger. So much anger and so much pain. Pain that was channeled into power. Power that was channeled into healing. True power. The kind that came from within - the kind that made people fight for something greater than themselves. That kind of power had been absent since the dawn of time. And to think that I, the one that divides, was the one that merged them together - was the very thing that forced different worlds into one.

No it was not perfect; the New World did have its flaws, but for the first time in hundreds of years, a significant change had come. And as the world changed, things changed for me too. I was dying - my power was ebbing away, unable to keep up with the changing times. My life on this earth was quickly running out as I proceeded with my exploration of the New World. So much had changed in the Americas. From the samba filled streets of Sao Paulo, to the quiet desert ranches in the North, there was a strange calm. In the North, advancements in space exploration allowed for greater access to the rest of the universe. And in Europe, as I sat and observed the land of the midnight sun, I saw that they too had various developments regarding education, security and social needs, which granted children more access to learning systems, and provided a secure environment for all citizens.

Togetherness was an unspoken rule in the New World. All were working in harmony to keep the world in order. Those who cried out for justice, were heard. No one turned a blind eye to their neighbours suffering, nor did pleas for justice fall on deaf ears. For the first time in a long time, mankind understood that you did not have to be the same to have a common goal.

The Commonwealth, among other associations, had one goal: peace and security. And when they tossed their differences aside and joined hands - when they looked past one's beliefs or the color of their skin - they achieved it. Together. They advanced and progressed together. And when that finally occurred, groundbreaking discoveries were made in science and medicine, better solutions to Old World problems such as global warming and climate change were unearthed, when the freedom of speech prevailed.

And just as my travels came to an end, I stood at the top of the world and looked around. This world, tainted as it is, continued to redeem itself day by day, hour by hour, as the people learned to forgive. My voyage concludes in the quietude of the evening, as I return and lay down in the sea of forget me nots. And in the serendipity of silence, my breath is stolen from me as the painted sun sets.

It was a beautiful day to die.



Prithavi Mata

By Aditi Nair, Senior Runner-up aged 15 from New Delhi, India

She was a regular visitor. I could be busy planting the *bajra*¹ or sweeping the mud floor, when she would suddenly arrive. She never directly announced her presence; it wasn't required. Somehow, I was always able to sense her standing in front of the house. I would then open the door and let her in.

She was tall and regal, as she entered the house barefooted, smiling graciously. Her skin was dark, wonderfully dark. Tiny dandelions were braided into her long, flowing hair (the flowers differed each time she visited). She loved adorning herself; pine cone earrings hung from her ears and a necklace of woven grass sat on her chest.

She would then seat herself on the wood stump, the folds of her green gown draped gently over her legs.

Her dress had always elicited my curiosity, and I had once asked her what it was made of. I had expected lace, velvet, cashmere; rich names I could savour in my mouth. Her eyes had twinkled briefly, then she had said straight faced: it's moss. I had obviously thought it a joke, but when I ran my hands over it, I had felt the only too familiar wetness of warm moss. My hand had been tinged green for a month after that.

We would then talk, and she would bring me news. I was 14 years old, still a *ladki*², living a secluded life in the outskirts of a nameless village. My parents had died very young and I hadn't ever met them. For me, she was the only link to the outside world.

She was called *Prithavi Mata* (Mother Earth), for she was the Earth Goddess, as was commonly believed in our culture. She suddenly appeared one day at my doorstep, and I could not refuse her. I do not know why she continued her visits, perhaps she grew fond of me since her first arrival. I have reason enough to believe so, for she let me call her *Maa* (mother), which I relished.

After our conversation, she would depart, with promises of returning soon. I would eagerly await her arrival. Waiting for her then, I am not ashamed to admit that I would feel lonely sometimes. I was quite young, after all. Still, I dearly loved my solitary life. I did not have any

¹ A millet grown in India

² A young girl

worldly desires — I grew my own grain and got sufficient water from the lake nearby. It was tough labour, but I was content.

The year I turned 16 however, everything changed. That year, a disease spread over the world, and claimed countless lives.

Death rejoiced, as did my mother.

I was astonished when I opened the door and saw her — she was radiant! How youthful she looked, how much brighter! Her gown was luxurious, her eyes shone triumphantly. She hugged me instantly, and I caught a quick whiff of the fragrance of jasmine in her hair, before she pulled apart.

What happened *Maa*, I asked.

It's the illness that's done it, she replied. It's forced everyone to remain in their homes, so my children are thriving! My creatures can return to the land they once inhabited, feast on what they wish, rather than the drivel they were given when they were caged. My saplings shall grow mightily; no longer will their roots choke on the toxins the humans feed them. Your mother is flourishing, dear girl!

Saying so, she grabbed my hands and spun me around. Her sudden playfulness, so different from her usual self, surprised me and I was amazed at her childlike joy. We spun till our heads rang, then stopped. She continued her sweet, giddy laughter, while I tried to get answers out of her about the mystery illness.

It's mostly lethal, she said. People recover, but get pains everywhere. It is afflicting thousands all over the world, except in this tiny nook of yours.

She wasn't particularly sympathetic towards the humans' woes; she was instead focused on describing the visions of the clear water and the blue sky, both untainted after a long time. The humans couldn't open their concrete buildings and pollute me with smoke and impurities, when all of them were dropping dead, she explained.

She left soon after, leaving me with unanswered questions and a few concerns. However, harvest season was arriving, and the daily wars I waged against the pests on my field took over my mind once again. Therefore, the matter lay forgotten.

The next time I swung open the door, I gasped again. In front of me, stood an old, haggard woman — *Maa*! Her face was gaunt, lined with wrinkles, and it seemed she had aged terribly. She was silver haired and stooped. No longer did her eyes glisten or her gown sparkle. She stepped inside and could barely walk to the chair. I handed her an entire *matka* of water, and watched as she gulped it down thirstily.

What happened *Maa*, I managed to croak out.

It's them, the humans, she replied. Her voice was grating and raspy, and I winced to hear it.

They've defeated the illness and they've dirtied me once again, she continued.

I was about to reply, but decided against it when I saw her face harden. Her voice took on a crueler tone, and eyes gleaming with anger, she said: these wretched humans never learn.

I was shocked. I had never seen her like this, and the way she gritted her teeth as she spoke frightened me.

She must've noticed because her rage disappeared and she seemed apologetic. I'm sorry my daughter, she spoke softly, I did not mean that.

So she embraced me, and I did too, and I realised after that she was sobbing over my shoulder. I realised then that she was not wicked, just broken.

So, amidst her cries, I took care of her as a mother. I carried her frail form to the lake and gently bathed her, hoping to wash the bitterness away into the water. While she mourned the damage done to her, I clothed and fed her with my own two hands. When she thrashed around in her nightmares, screaming for her children, I whispered sweet lullabies into her ears.

I mothered her. Delicately, tenderly.

After about a week or so, she had recovered sufficiently and left. I did not stop her, knowing that I couldn't.

That was the last I ever saw of her, for she never returned.

That is, until now. After 40 years, she has returned once again.

In these 40 years, I have aged greatly; my knees ache and I cannot stoop down to pull off the weeds growing around my *bajra*.

I can sense her in front of the door right now, although I haven't opened it yet. She knows I know, yet she doesn't knock or call me. She quietly waits for me, as I waited for her all these years.

I walk to the door and swing it open.

There she stands in front of me. She looks how she used to, before that cursed disease ravaged the entire world. Everything is still the same, except for her eyes. Her eyes are tinged with a soft wistfulness, a remembrance of lost days.

It's been 10 years since the illness ended, she says.

I do not say anything.

The illness became worse after I left, she continues. I could sense my health was deteriorating quickly, and I was afraid.

Afraid of what, I want to ask. But I don't.

Afraid of dying, she answers as if she has heard me. I was scared I would wither away, scared that my children would die, dirtied and poisoned. So, mad with rage, I murdered the culprits. I wrought destruction, with the last of my powers. Sometimes I willed the land to swallow them up whole, and sometimes I let the oceans and seas flood their homes.

She looks calm, serene but I know her. I can sense her terrible guilt, shaking her from within, right down to her core. Her core where flowers bloom and birds sing.
So I tell her I forgive her. For nourishing herself with the blood of my kind.
The flowers bloom brighter and the birds sing louder. Her eyes clear, as the remorse drips off of her slowly.

Thank you, she says.

And now, I ask.

Now I will return and create a newer, kinder, gentler humanity, she says.

What about me, I ask.

Her eyes meet mine and we both know what must be done.

She moves forward, and for an instant I know horrible, horrible fear. It grips the back of my throat and almost chokes me.

But then I feel her warm embrace, her strong arms around me. The fear leaves, as quick as it came.

Maa, I whisper in her ear.

I can smell the jasmine in her hair.

I can hear the flutter of bird wings somewhere.

Then, I am gone.



ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2021

OKWARE OUR PANDEMIC EPIC

By Ethan Charles Mufuma, age 13 from Mukono, Uganda

Welcome to my village

Known but much

The village of *Okware*

Okware our pandemic hero

Okware our pandemic mirror

Whose story's sweetness

Deserves every Commonwealth ear

Ear to the ground, I shall narrate it all

My village *Asila*

Ignorant we were about the pandemic

Carelessly we lived with no panic

Too strong we thought we were

With bodies resistant to illnesses

Illnesses including pandemics

To us,

It was a disease of the Whites

Okware smelt a rat

And without seeking extra support

Okware launched campaigns and campaigns

First,

Connected a community radio

Loud enough with clear audio

Morning, midday and evening

Okware cautioned the residents

In my native language, *Okware* met everyone

Bridged the gap between myths and facts

Spoke deep and wide about the pandemic

Every community member shifted the mind

In no time, we started to mind

Minding the Standards

Minding the Operations

Minding the pandemic Procedures

On his flat tyre bicycle

Okware fetched water

Dug from his pockets and bought soap

Supplied it to the elderly community

Reached them hut to hut

Cautioned them to stay home

Enlightened them on the killer pandemic

But never stopped preaching hope

Okware, misinterpreted by the police

Arrested and accused of politics

That he was carrying out campaigns

But even in prison

Okware kept to the reason

Alerted the other inmates about the pandemic

Urged them to create a distance

Prison, turned a pandemic school

Okware, released after community demand

Never shifted his stand

Continued with pandemic lectures

Continued with that generous heart

Shared every little bite

His garden turned a community donor

His farm remained a living hope by all

All, including the haters of oneness

How he discovered herbals

Only heaven can tell

All we saw him do

Was distributing leaves

Calling people to steam

Steaming became steaming

Solely, *Okware* remained the community hope

All he went through, none can tell

How he learnt tailoring
Heaven is the witness
All we saw were masks
Masks in colours and sizes
Labelled 'save life first'
Thousands of masks he made
Preached instructions on how to use
And the pandemic avoided *Asila*

His haters turned lovers
His doubters became believers
Men in political power joined *Okware*
Together we made an army
And kicked the pandemic beyond repair
Secured our hope, raised growth
Worked in solidarity, in unison
And the community sang '*Okware, Okware Okware*'

Thought it was done but wait
The pandemic tricked and teased our intelligence
When it claimed the life of *Okware's* son
Oh! Oh!
Our fear grew fresh
How could this happen to *Okware!*
Who was safe then?
The community looked hopeless

Great people find opportunities even in a crisis
In such a dark hour in *Okware's* family
Okware stood strong, courageous and focused
To the entire community he spoke
'My son is sacrifice, a lesson or else a chance
To teach the entire *Asila* and the world beyond
That the pandemic is merciless to every soul'
Not just death but a lesson above doubts

Ears turned more open to *Okware's* community radio
Eyes became brighter and looked longer
Every mind became cautious and vigilant
And *Okware* remained the mastermind
Okware's son rested in peace
But *Okware* never rested at peace
For he thought the community needed more
If the pandemic was to be arrested

Where could our hope come
Who could sacrifice beyond life
None can count how many could the pandemic shallow
Okware remains our pandemic hero
In his name poems be recited
In his image sculptures be curved
In his memory books be written
In his vision communities be driven

Asila continues to rise above the sky

Asila remains hopeful and matches on

The pandemic sits below the shadow

Our growth is never at a threat

Our lives passed the test

Praise be to that togetherness

No difficult beats a joined effort

No season, no pandemic, no situation



Autobiography of Corona

by Raisa Gulati, Junior Runner-up, aged 14 from Amritsar, India

Year 2019, the skies are darker, there are no stars to be seen twinkling in the noisy night, the roads are full of cars filling the air with anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, crimes are rising and diseases are spreading fast. It is a heaven for me so here I come to hijack the living cells of a human.



I, whom the humans called 'CORONAVIRUS', lived happily in the horseshoe bats in Wuhan in Southern China till I took a global flight and decided to thrive in the human species.

My strength lies in my power to spread quickly and mutate. An added bonus is the lack of respiratory etiquette amongst people. I quickly



made my way through the droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose of an infected person.



My mission to devastate humans was going to fail had the humans heeded the early warning given by Dr. Li Wenliang but thanks to the lack of freedom of speech

he was summoned and admonished and I 'SURVIVED'.

I got my big break in Italy, U.S.A and U.K. where I was 'OMNIPRESENT'. As of June 2021, I was the reason for 3.96 million confirmed deaths making me the proud owner of creating the deadliest pandemic in history.



11th March, 2020, I was declared a pandemic and the world got together to eradicate me. Countries locked down their cities, industries were shut down and the movement

of people was restricted to prevent me from gaining momentum.

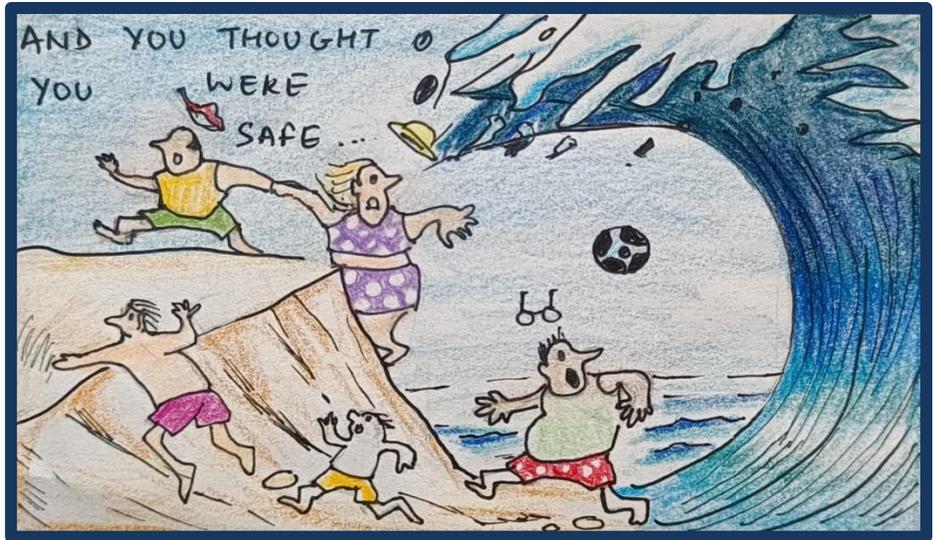
March 16, 2020,
the humans
thought that they
had found a
magic wand when
they conducted
their first phase 1
trial of COVID-
19 vaccine on Jennifer Haller in a record time.



I realized that it was
time for me to
mutate. I attacked
with a new strength
in the second wave
erasing many
families from the
face of Earth,

causing economic and social disruption.

Coming like a Tsunami, I spread through different regions of the World in subsequent waves making full use of negligent behavior of people, creating anarchy wherever I went.



But nothing could kill the spirit of these “HOMOSAPIENS”.

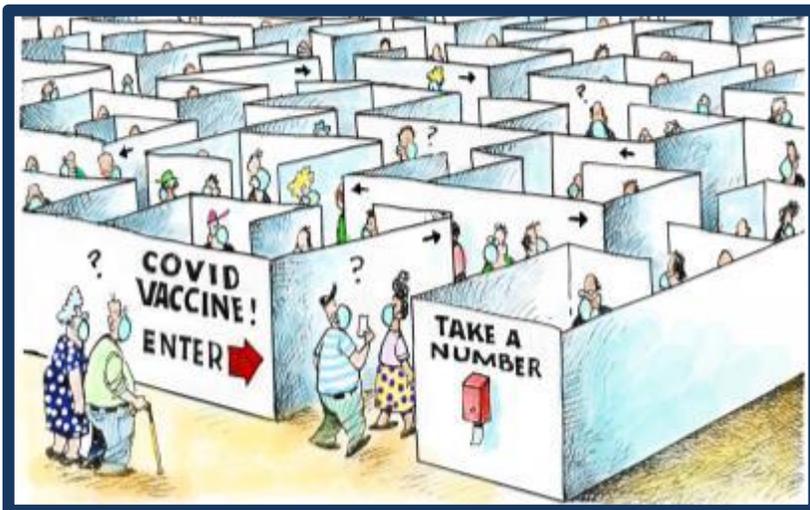
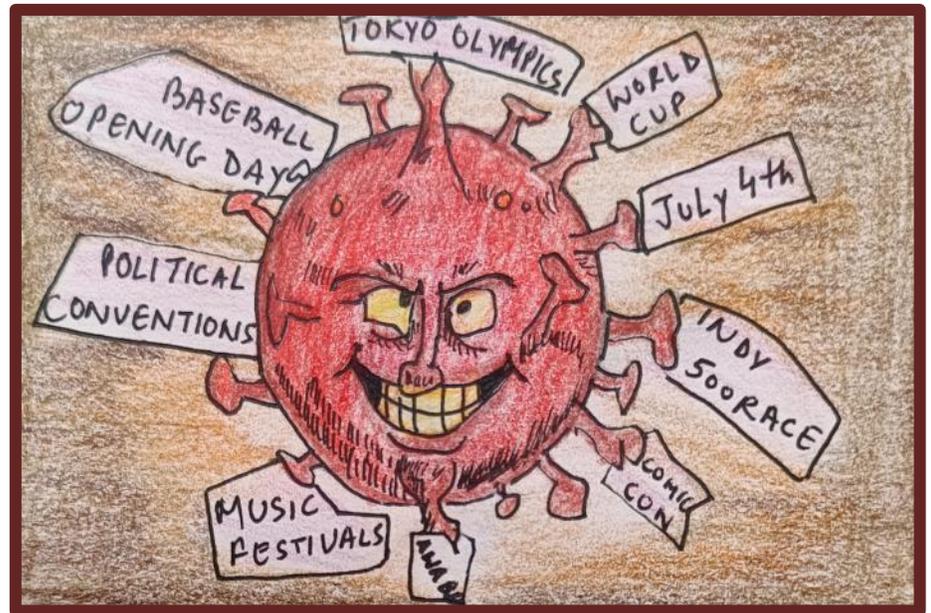
They portrayed unsurpassed examples of humanity and suddenly became empathetic towards

one another. They started using social media to interact, attended webinars, marketed products online and did work from home to erase me.

They cancelled all the events where I had planned to eradicate them. The Tokyo Olympics, World Cup, Music concerts, July 4th

fireworks...everything was halted. The

airlines stopped flying and cruise line industry was hit hard and in India the trains were converted to mobile hospitals.



Mass vaccination became the new ‘mantra’ to prevent me from spreading. The rich nations donated vaccines, medical supplies, food and all sorts of financial

aid to stabilize the poor nations. The ritual of washing hands, sanitizing things before use became a compulsory habit.

I gradually became weak. I lost my power; they started choking me with their hygienic practice. I may not have won the war against them but I gave them a good taste of their doing. 'THEY', who had once covered the Earth with plastic, were now themselves covered in plastic to be safe from me.



Year 2050, my mission still remains unaccomplished because of the united efforts of the people. The Earth is greener, the sky is blue, there are beautiful stars to be seen twinkling in the dark night, there is more

cleanliness but that doesn't mean I'll go....I'll be there waiting patiently for my CHANCE, till then you can read about me in the "Natural History Museum" in London.