

Victor D. O. Santos

WHAT

makes

us

illustrations by  
Anna Forlati

human

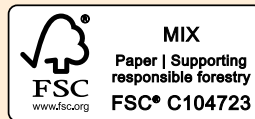
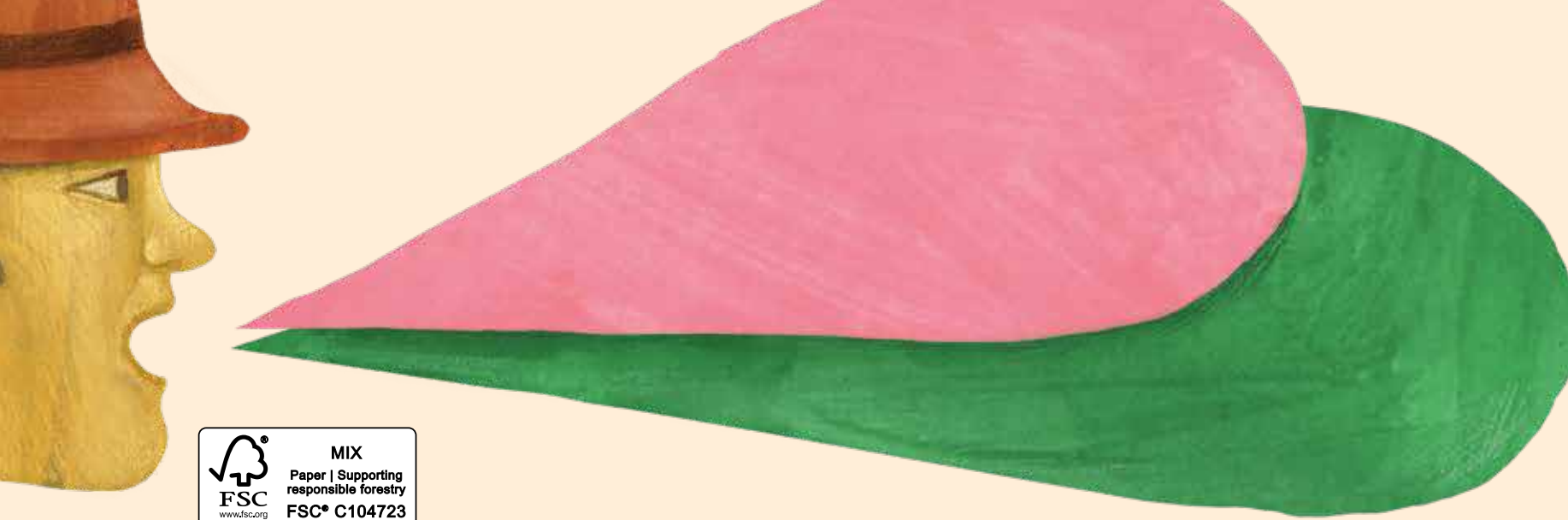


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Victor D. O. Santos

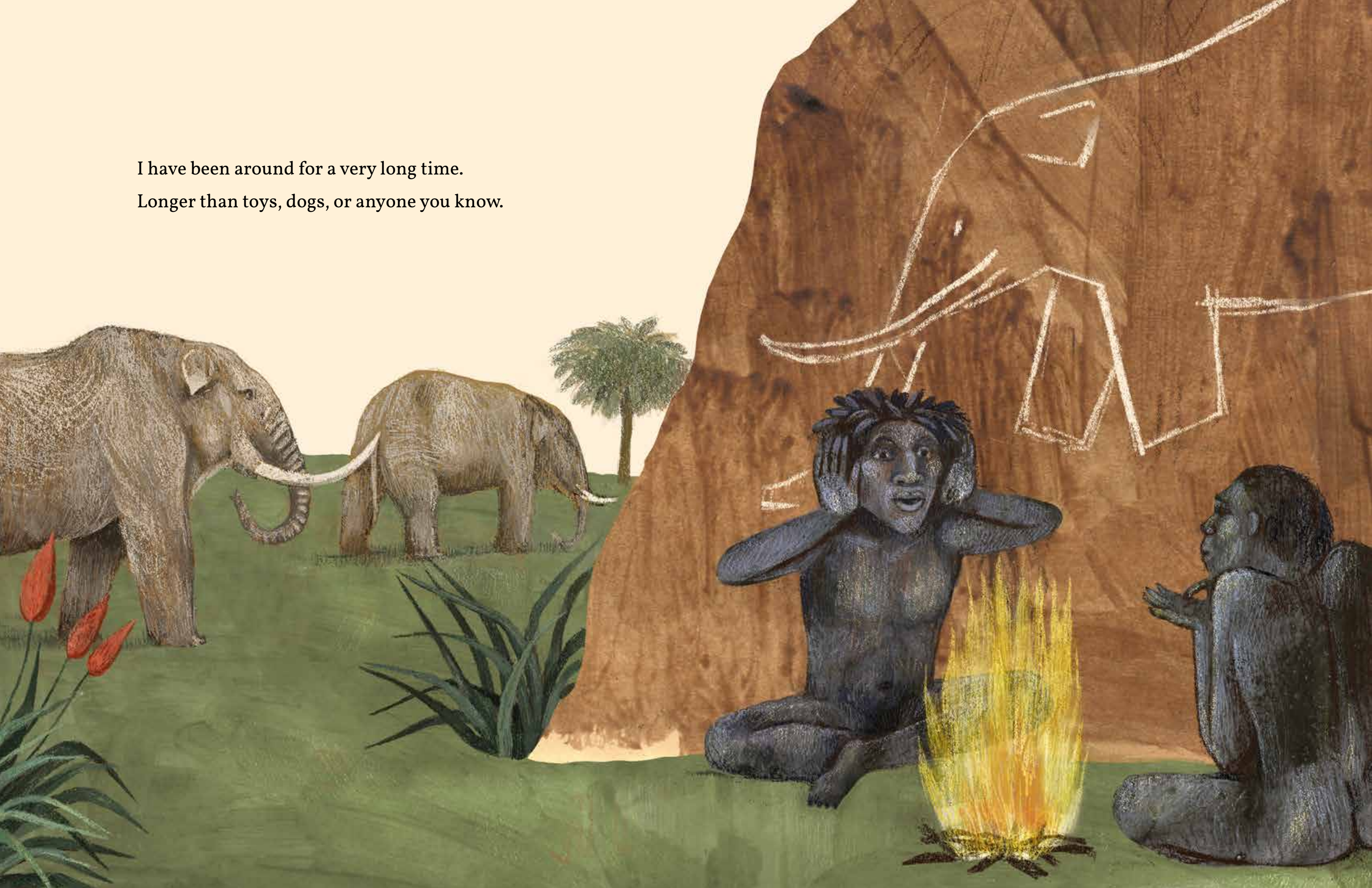
# WHAT makes us human

illustrations by  
Anna Forlati

Eerdmans Books for Young Readers

Grand Rapids, Michigan

I have been around for a very long time.  
Longer than toys, dogs, or anyone you know.



My roots go back many centuries.  
Some of them even longer.





I am everywhere. In every country, every city,  
every school, and every house.

I am sure you saw me today.  
Or heard me. Or felt me.



When you were a baby, you hardly knew me.

Over time, you have gotten to know me better and better.

But when you are old, you may start to forget me.



Some people have tried to avoid me.  
But they cannot get me out of their heads.





I can be as soft as a kitten or as harsh  
as the Alaskan winter.



I can show you love. But also hurt you.





In the beginning, I was one.

But now, you can find me in many different shapes and forms.

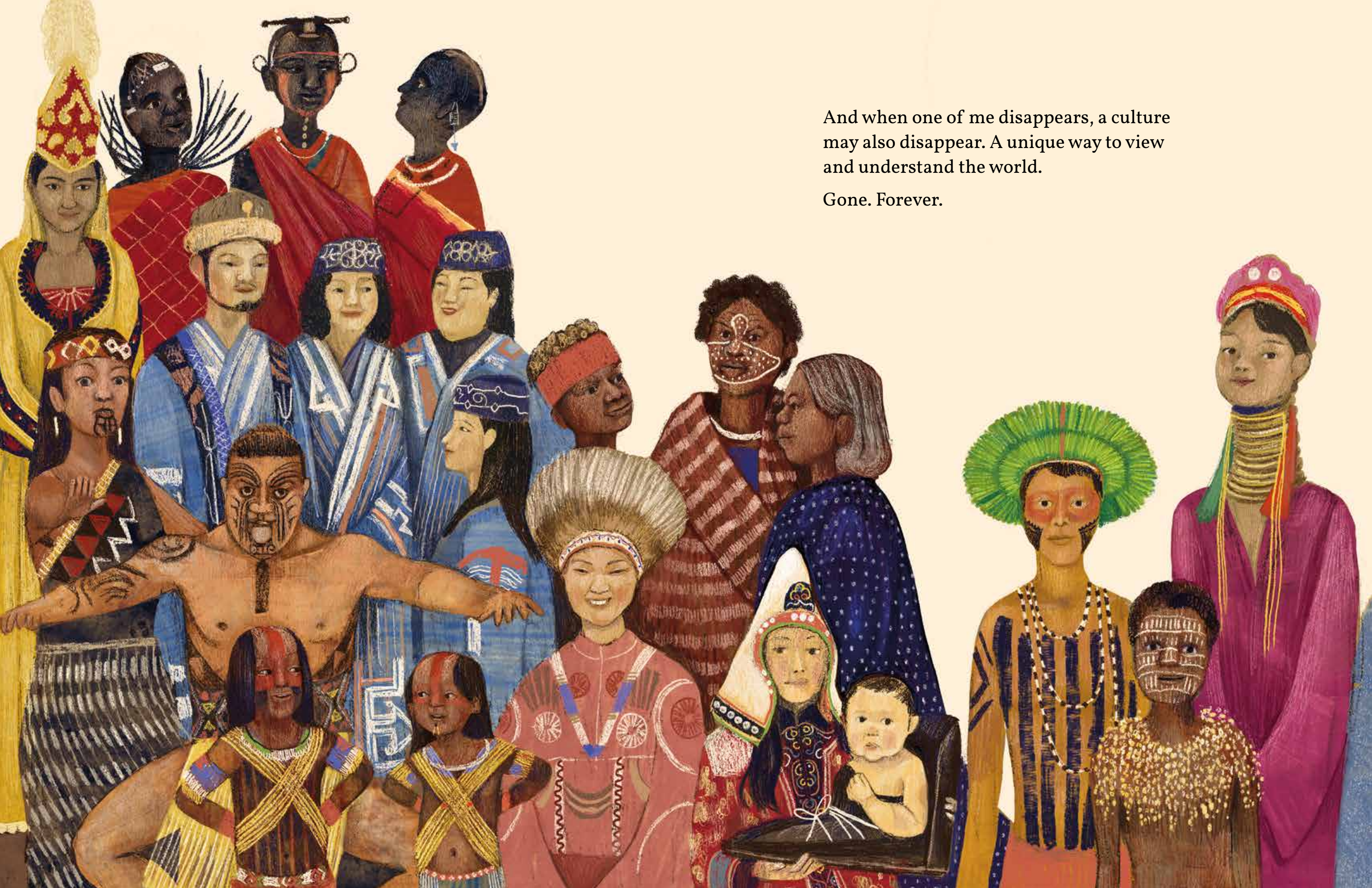
There are thousands of me in the world. Some are young and some very old.





Some are disappearing quickly.

By the time you grow up, too many could be gone.



And when one of me disappears, a culture  
may also disappear. A unique way to view  
and understand the world.

Gone. Forever.



Some people only have one of me. Others, two. Others, more.  
More of me means a more colorful and diverse world.  
A world with more doors you can open. And more people you  
can ask to help open those doors.

I am the greatest invention of all. Without me, most others would not exist, including the children's books you love so much.

I can connect you to the past,  
the present, and the future.





I make you human.





Catalanà

عربي

Ελληνικά

Magyar

Português

ᵒ/Maa

ភាសាខ្មែរ

עברית

ESPAÑOL

Ἑσῶνικά

アイヌ・イタク

اَللُّهُ

한국어

A'uwẽ

I AM LANGUAGE.

DEUTSCH

Esperanto

Gaeilge

ITALIANO

ភាសាថៃ

Українська

te Reo Māori

中文

Dine Bizaad

ᵒ/Maa

हिंदी

EUSKARA

Ελληνικά



## THE THEME OF THIS BOOK

Of the world's approximately 7,168 living languages (*Ethnologue*, 2023), it is estimated that at least half will become extinct by 2100. And when a language dies, a culture may also die with it.\*

With the loss of every language, humanity itself loses something precious. Something at the very core of what it means to be human. The cultural, geographical, botanical, and philosophical knowledge encoded in that language and cherished by its users could be lost forever.

Languages can be spoken, signed, and written. Being able to document a language through writing is one of the best ways to preserve its past and guarantee its future. Of the world's languages, only about 57% are estimated to be written. Without much-needed actions to ensure their protection, 85% of the world's writing systems, several of which you have encountered in this book, are on the verge of vanishing (*Endangered Alphabets Project*, 2023).

Every language is important. Every writing system is important. Every culture is important. The more languages, writing systems, and cultures our world has, the richer we all are as humans. This book is our humble contribution to the beautiful tapestry of our world's languages, writing systems, and cultures and our way to pay homage to the amazing peoples behind them.

\*Part of the author's royalties from sales of this book will be donated to organizations working to preserve and revitalize languages around the world.

— Victor D. O. Santos and Anna Forlati

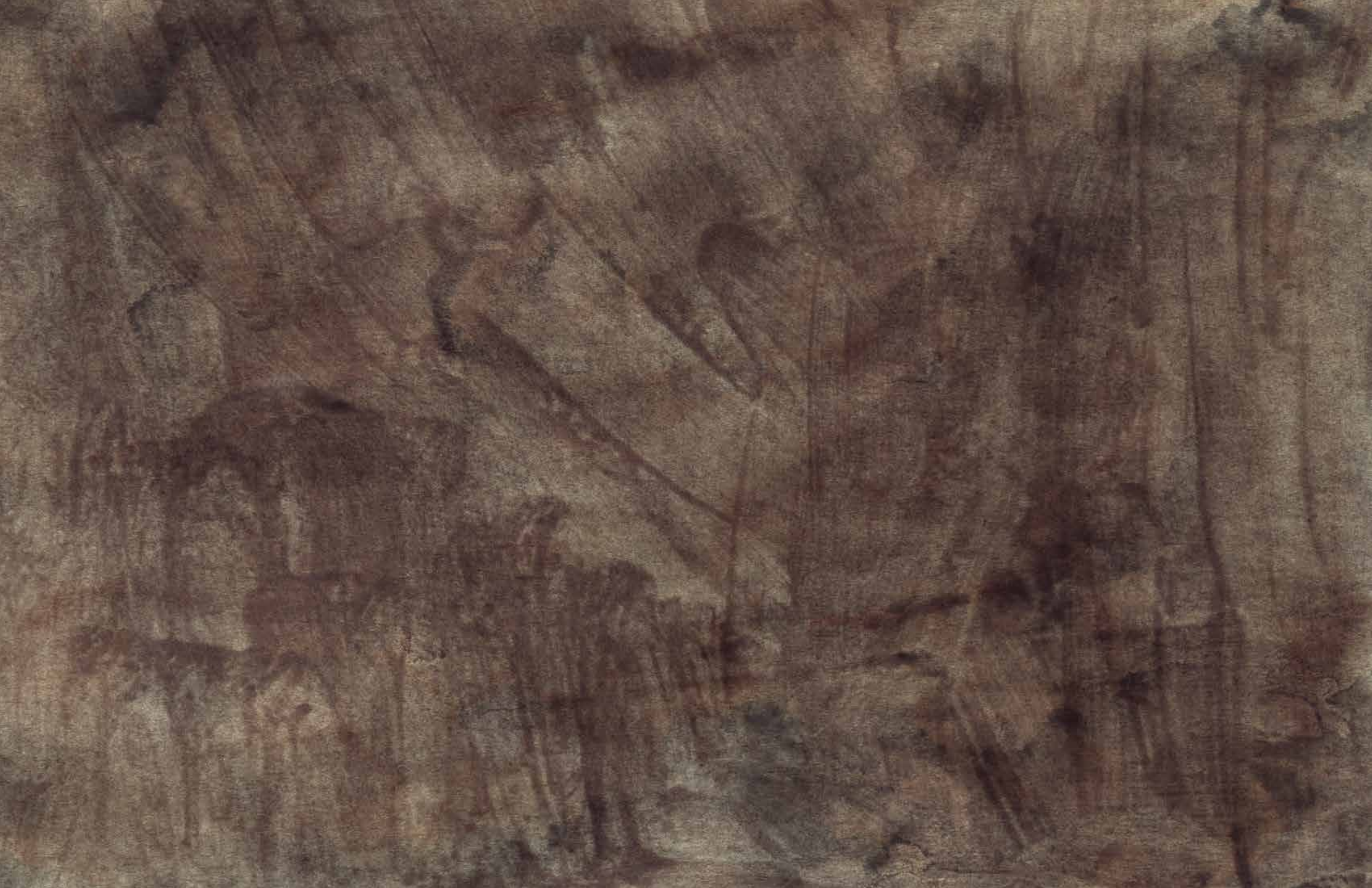
## A NOTE FROM UNESCO

Did you know that the word for *mother* in the Saptariya Tharu language is “मैया,” which is pronounced *maiya*? That *lind* means *bird* in Livo, and that in te reo Māori, *to play* is *ki te tākarō*? When we understand a language, we better understand the people behind it and their ways of life. To draw attention to the value of languages, the UN General Assembly has proclaimed 2022–2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The Decade focuses on preserving, revitalizing, and promoting Indigenous languages, many of which are at risk of disappearing. We all have a role to play in ensuring these languages are part of our future.

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**Victor D. O. Santos** is a professional linguist and children's author who has lived in five different countries and studied ten different languages. *My Dad, My Rock*, his English-language debut (Scribble), was a *Kirkus* Best Book of 2022. Originally from Brazil, Victor now lives in Des Moines, Iowa, where he and his Ukrainian wife are raising two multicultural, multilingual children. Follow Victor on Instagram @linguacious\_llc.

**Anna Forlati** is an artist and illustrator whose books include *Yoga for Kids* (Albert Whitman) and *My Dad, My Rock* (Scribble). *What Makes Us Human* was featured in dPICTUS's Unpublished Picture Book Showcase and was exhibited at the Bologna Children's Book Fair. Anna has studied Greek and Latin and is currently learning Arabic. She lives in Turin, Italy. Visit Anna's website at [annaforlati.com](http://annaforlati.com).



I have been around for a very long time—  
longer than anyone you know.

I am everywhere, in thousands of forms  
all over the world.

I can connect you to the past, present, and future.

Can you guess what I am?



“A thoughtfully guided quest.”

—Ellen Heck, author/illustrator of *A Is for Bee*  
(a *New York Times* Best Children’s Book of 2022)

“As you cross time and space and solve  
a riddle full of beautiful metaphors, an  
amazing answer awaits at the end to make  
us look at our existence in a new way.”

—JiHyun Kim, author/illustrator of *The Depth of  
the Lake and the Height of the Sky* (a *New York  
Public Library* Best Book for Kids of 2022)

“A beautifully illustrated book about our  
shared humanity.”

—Felicita Sala, illustrator of *Dark on Light*,  
*Be a Tree!*, *Arno and His Horse*, and *All  
from a Walnut*

“Opens a vast window to understanding  
the world and ourselves.”

—Hyo Eun Kim, author/illustrator of *I Am the  
Subway* (a *New York Times* Best Illustrated  
Children’s Book of 2021)

