

Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal

Issue
Eleven

May 2020

Andrew Albritton • Ashley Qiu • Becca Wierwille • C. W. Spooner • Emily Hou •
Eric Bryan • Evelyn Hsu • Dedeeppya Duppi • Grace Ker • Jacqueline Jules • John Grey •
Lee Ho-cheung • Maya Mahony • Rain • Ray Zhang • Simon Nagel • Stephen Dudas •
Surina Venkat • Vincent Song



“We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.”

– J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

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BALLOONS Lit. Journal (BLJ) is an independent biannual online literary journal of poetry, fiction and art primarily for school-aged readers from upper elementary school years onwards. BLJ sees it an important mission to bring the art of literature, and the creation of it, to our younger generation. The journal is freely accessible to all electronically. BLJ welcomes submissions from people anywhere in the world and in all walks of life. We love something that is fresh, surprising, unforgettable, extraordinary, mind-blowing, humorous, bold, unique, layered, witty, educational, original...etc. In short, we want something exceptionally good. For the most updated information about the journal, please visit the website of BLJ:

www.balloons-lit-journal.com

Submissions are welcome year-round. Writers are advised to read and follow the guidelines stated on the above website. Enquiries and submissions should be sent to:

editorblj@yahoo.com

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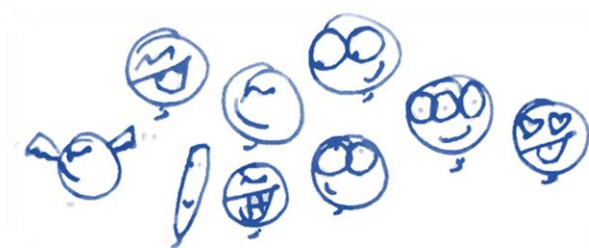
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* Adapted for Cover Art and Back Cover



Words from Founding Editor

What is the role of arts when the world is in crisis? When people are losing their loved ones and worrying about the shortage of food and other daily necessities, why do we still care about putting together another issue of a free literary magazine?

I am always clueless for many of my decisions. But this time, I'm proud of this ignorance and seeing this humble issue – Issue 11 of BALLOONS Lit. Journal born during the world-wide pandemic.

At first, I worried that nobody would have the mood to write and submit their work to journals. But I was stunned receiving so many pieces after I announced online that BLJ invited themed submissions on COVID-19, knowing that we had never had any themed sections in this journal. I guess that in times of trouble, people's desire for being together and getting connected increases. And we are finding ways to comfort one another, regardless of who we are and where we live. So, following the waves in the storm, we sail along, spreading words of love, passion, kindness, inspiration and humour to all those who have the chance to listen to our voices.

I begin this unique issue using a darker tone, with works related to ghosts, death and separation. Then, we come to lighter themes like magical beings, imagination and childhood. Once we arrive at the COVID-19 section, you will see the canvas brushed with our usual vibrant colours to unleash hope and joy – something we all need at this time. Works about connecting people, helping one another, having faith, family love, and looking forward to a new season are selected for this part. They all tell great stories and send powerful messages which I believe all of us should read and appreciate.

I thank Emily for her timely paintings which set a tone for this issue. I naturally adore all the entries here but my personal picks would be C. W.'s fiction which makes me rethink about the roads not taken; Andrew's verses of simplicity which lift me up and wipe my face with summer breeze; Evelyn's amazing talent which reminds me of the significance of every single helping hand to the needy; and Vincent's metaphorical words which direct me to look forward to the coming future with blossoms of smiling and healthy faces all over the world again.

This project may not be heavy enough to make a huge splash in the ocean of new literature. But with your involvement, through reading and writing, we have built up a positive and constructive community of arts. And our role in this troubled world is simple: we spread love, extend our helping hands and continue to grow this amazing group of people.

Dr Lee Ho-cheung

Founding Editor

BALLOONS Lit. Journal



Foreword for BLW Issue 11

Welcome to the eleventh issue of BALLOONS Lit. Journal; a unique offering at a very unique time for all of us. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched each and every one of us no matter who we are, whatever our jobs and wherever we may live. It has changed the way we live our daily lives, the way we travel, the way we learn and teach, and the way we connect to loved ones. As this issue goes to print it's fair to say that these sudden and dramatic changes will be with us all for quite some time to come.

There have been many dark days for communities around the world in the last few months and you will notice immediately that this issue chooses to adopt a darker theme graphically as a sincere gesture of respect and mourning for those dearly departed and for all the families suffering so much from this world-wide pandemic right now. The opening image of Emily Hou's dark sky and soaring aurora can be seen as a way of reflecting that mournful tone, perhaps. However, let's not forget that in Roman mythology and Latin poetry, Aurora was the goddess of the dawn, and in this issue, you will see dawn and the anticipation of a new start for all of us coming to life on every page through the words, feelings and experiences of our wonderful contributors. In the darkest moments there is always hope, and this issue demonstrates that by including a themed section of COVID-19 pieces that stand as deeply personal symbols of hope and positivity for all of us.

I was drawn to so many pieces in this issue, and I know you will be too. Ashley Qiu's poem "Screen to Screen" will resonate with all of us who have experienced the joys and frustrations of connecting with loved ones using technology, and how those online chats really are "a beautiful thing" in the absence of face-to-face meetings. Two lines from Surina Venkat's short story stand out, too: *There is nothing more amazing than humans in times of crisis*, and *There's always something good*. Take time to savour those beautiful lines for a moment and think about we can be even more amazing as partners, family members, friends, colleagues, and community members during this global crisis, and beyond. And there really *IS always something good*, but perhaps we need to learn to look for good things more, and to then truly express our gratitude for them once we've found them. I hope to carry this line with me far beyond the pandemic.

This issue allows us to appreciate through poems, stories and imagery the beauty that continues to exist in our world, in each other and in ourselves. Such creativity from our contributors allows for redemption and affords us precious glimpses of a better tomorrow. There *WILL* be a better tomorrow if we continue to be as amazing as we can be and if we look out for each other. Stay safe, stay well and stay in touch.

Dr Gary James Harfitt

Associate Professor

Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching)

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Photo above: Dr Ho-cheung Lee (left) and Dr Gary Harfitt (right) at the University of Hong Kong for the School-University Partnership Symposium, 14 Jan 2020

Stephen Dudas

Poet



Key

I found a key just yesterday,
but I'm scared of what it unlocks.
The door to another dimension
or the lid to a haunted box
or the desk drawer of a demon
or a cellar filled with gloom
or a closet full of skeletons
or a silent shed of doom.
Too many possibilities
and all sound pretty bad.
So I locked the key up in a safe
with another key I had.
And to be absolutely certain
that that's where it will stay,
I went outside and quickly
threw the second key away.

Stephen Dudas teaches at Miami University in Oxford, OH where he earned an MA in Creative Writing in 2013 and where he is currently a PhD candidate in literature. His writing has been published in *The Great Lakes Book Project*, *drupe fruits*, *Ohio's Best Emerging Poets* (Z Publishing House), and *Rain Taxi*. He is the author of a chapbook, *An August Nightmare* (Prolific Press, 2018). Dudas was a founding co-editor of *Threadcount Magazine*.




The Accursed

Zombie Zack wants his old life back.
He wants to be human again.
Vampire Vince was once a prince,
but has since lost all his friends.
Werewolf Will is a person still,
but not on a full-moon's night.
And Ghostly Gus, he envies us
and wants to be put right.

There's not much we can do for them,
poor former human beans.
Except for trying to make each day
feel just like Halloween.

*Author***Simon Nagel**

Langhosta



Simon Nagel, originally from Southern California, is now the in-house Creative Writer for Box Media in London. His short fiction has appeared in *The Glasgow Review of Books*, *Gold Man Review*, and *Ellipsis Zine* among others. “Langhosta” is his first short story for young readers.

The first thing you need to know to understand this story is that ghosts are indeed real. The second thing you need to know is that not all ghosts are wicked. Most don't care for haunting and just want to get on with their dealings as spirits but, for sad and unfortunate reasons, they cannot. Many ghosts are stuck between our world and the next one and can't move on because of unfinished business from when they were alive. Anyone and anything can be a ghost, so don't make the foolish mistake that animals can't have unfinished business of their own. If you see one, whatever you do, don't talk to it. Doing so makes you honor bound to help it onto the next world, which can be a difficult task. Keep in mind, ghosts don't get tired and they can be very demanding until you help them. The last thing you need to know for the purpose of this story is that in the Spanish language, the word "lobster" is spoken as "langosta."

Now that I've told you what you need to know, the story can begin.

* * *

Astor fidgeted in her seat throughout the entire dinner. It was her father's birthday and he had taken Astor and her mother out to a restaurant overlooking the sea. The walls were painted a deep shade of red and violin music played the whole time, making Astor's father feel like royalty.

A grand fish tank towered in the back of the restaurant, full of gigantic lobsters crawling over each other. They looked like they were playing an epic game of King of the Mountain or perhaps a game of lobster rugby. Astor imagined that somewhere beneath the pile was the unlucky lobster carrying the rugby ball, trying to wiggle itself free. Whatever the lobsters were playing, Astor liked watching them and decided she would ask her parents for a pet lobster for her next birthday.

Their waiter had a magnificent moustache

and spoke with a husky Spanish accent as he took their meal orders. "Langosta!" ordered Astor's father with glee. Astor had never heard of langosta before and thought nothing of it until the waiter returned to the table bearing a dish with a freshly boiled lobster. "Langosta!" he cried. Astor's heart sank. She poked at the vegetables on her plate and did everything she could to avoid watching her father gobble up the lobster she had daydreamed of keeping as a pet.

Astor had trouble sleeping that night. She tossed and turned, kicking her blankets to the floor and having an all-around unpleasant evening. Everything was how it should have been on her shelves and dresser, but she sensed there was an extra thing in her room. It was close — very close — but it wouldn't make itself known. It was a mystery Astor couldn't stand any longer, and for reasons she still isn't sure of to this day, she called out into the dark.

"Langosta! I know that it's you somehow. You're upsetting me to no end. Now go away! Scat!"

Astor wasn't sure why she knew the thing was Langosta, but it just felt right. Nothing she knew could explain the feeling. It was so powerful that she simply had to speak. While she was certain of her feelings, Astor was unaware she had made the grave error of speaking to a ghost.

She suddenly felt the thing coming closer, pushing right up to her face. She saw the great shell and two beady black eyes twitching her way. It was the ghost of the lobster her father had eaten only a few hours earlier that evening — Langhosta. It was enough of a fright to make Astor scream and shut herself in the bathroom at the end of the hallway. She dove into the bathtub and covered her eyes, but it didn't stop Langhosta from floating beside her like a piece of driftwood washed in by the tide. "Leave me alone!" Astor cried.

She remembered the steam that rose from Langhosta's plate. She cranked the bath's faucet full blast. Langhosta cowered and disappeared. The memory of boiling in a pot was still too fresh to withstand a bathroom full of steam. Astor's parents scrambled through the door soon after, demanding to know why Astor was taking a bath in her pajamas. Astor couldn't manage a single word.

"Sleepwalking," said Astor's father.

"Very odd sleepwalking," agreed her mother. They never spoke of it again.

The haunting, however, did not cease. The lobster spirit appeared in Astor's room several nights later, shivering at the threat of more steam but hovering all the same. Its fear confused Astor. Weren't ghosts supposed to be dreadful creatures that go bump in the night? Shouldn't it be trying to snip at her with its claws? Langhosta didn't seem like a very fearsome ghost. He seemed sad.

Astor wondered why she was stuck with the strange creature floating around her room. After all, her father was the one that ate him. Why was she the one being haunted? At that moment she had a strong feeling — much like the one she had when she first called out to Langhosta — that she must help him somehow.

"Would you like to go back to your tank and see your friends?" she asked. Astor grabbed her bicycle and made her way across town to the restaurant from a few nights before. Langhosta flew beside her like a ghostly windsock.

They snuck into the restaurant and crept towards the fish tank. Astor expected Langhosta to dive on top of the lobster pile and declare himself King of the Mountain, but all he did was hover near her shoulder.

"Would you like to play rugby?"

Soon they were down at the park. Every time Astor tossed a rugby ball to Langhosta, it passed right through him and crashed into the

bushes. Langhosta flared his claws, but there was never a chance he would catch anything. Astor frowned.

"I don't think I can help you" she said.

Langhosta lowered himself into the basket at the front of Astor's bicycle and nestled inside. She was about to ask where he wanted to go, but deep down she already knew.

* * *

The beach was clear when they arrived. Astor walked her bicycle all the way up to the water's edge and stopped. Her instinct trailed off. She didn't know what would happen next and it made her feel afraid.

Langhosta slowly rose from the basket and drifted towards the sea. He remained the same silvery outline of himself until the foam from a large wave swept him out of sight. Astor kept expecting him to rise, but he was gone.

It's not necessarily a frightening experience to be haunted. In Astor's case, she already missed her floating companion. She wondered again why he had haunted her, but then she remembered how awful she felt when she saw him steaming on a plate. Perhaps his ghost sensed those feelings and wanted to stay a while longer. Perhaps Langhosta's unfinished business was their friendship. The tide began to turn, and Astor rode home.



Author

C. W. Spooner

Chicken in the Ruff



Joey was getting cold feet. After all the hours of planning and putting things together, he was backing out.

"Geez, I don't know, Arlo. Maybe it's not the right time. Know what I mean? I mean maybe we should wait, see what happens. You know? Enroll at Junior College, see how it goes."

I was through arguing with him. If he didn't want to go, so be it. I was going, tomorrow morning at 3:00 a.m., sure of only one thing: I was heading east, to Sacramento, then Reno, then Salt

Lake or Denver and beyond. I was not going west to San Francisco. Frisco was the end of the line, not the beginning. You went to Frisco and then you went to the Golden Gate and jumped off. The end. No, I was going east, to places I'd never been. I mean, isn't that what Hemingway did? And Kerouac? Remember what Hemingway said, "In going where you need to go and doing what you need to do and seeing what you need to see, you dull and blunt the instrument you write with."

Sure you do, but if you stay in your hometown and



go nowhere and do nothing, what are you going to write about? No, it was time to leave, with or without Joey.

"Look, Joey, I'm going to be at Terry's Waffle Shop at three tomorrow morning. I'm gonna have breakfast — the best eggs, bacon and hash browns in town — and then I'm leaving. I'm blowin' this pop stand. I'm gonna see some of this world. If you want to come along, great. If not, no hard feelings, buddy. Maybe it's not the right time for you, but it's the *only* time for me."

Joey was quiet. I waited for him, letting him mull it over.

"Take care of yourself, Arlo. I love you, buddy."

"Love you too, Joey."

He hung up. I stared at the phone for a minute. Would I ever see Joey again? Friends like him don't come along very often. Maybe once in a lifetime.

I checked my backpack. I had all the essentials for life on the road, even a sleeping bag that rolled into a package the size of a football. Joey and I spent hours making checklists, going over what we'd need, but only the necessities. No extra weight. Whether you were hitching a ride with a trucker or hopping a freight train, you had to be able to toss in your pack and follow it quickly.

The letter I'd written to my mom sat on my desk. I resisted the urge to open it, read it through one more time, maybe add a note. No way around it, she'd be worried sick. But I had to do this. And the time had come. My room was in the back of the house, added on by my father a year or two before he died. A door opened onto a small patio. I'd used that door many a night, sneaking out of the house to hang out with my friends, then letting myself in just before sunrise. This time I wouldn't be coming back.

At 2:45, I looked around, hoisted my pack onto my shoulders and headed out the door,

closing and locking it as quietly as I could.

It was a short walk from home to Terry's, on the frontage road along the freeway. The café was open all night. It was June, the weather cool, a marine layer starting to move in, typical for the North Bay.

I walked up Magazine Street, heading toward the freeway, and started to think about breakfast. It may be the last good meal I'd have for a while. Terry's prided itself on something called Chicken in the Ruff. A sign painted on the building depicted an angry chicken with a bag full of beat-up golf clubs — you know, like he'd hit his ball into the rough. It dawned on me that after all these years, I had no idea what Chicken in the Ruff was. I should probably ask before leaving town.

I pushed the door open, walked in and looked for an open booth. And then I nearly dropped my pack. There was my brother Gary, sitting with a friend, smiling, laughing, his deep blue eyes, sparkling with humor. He didn't see me at first, locked in conversation. I stood staring in disbelief. He was wearing his Air Force khaki uniform, starched and pressed, his tie meticulously knotted with a perfect dimple slightly off-center. He looked toward me, smiled and waved me over. I walked to the booth, dropped my pack and slid onto the seat across from him.

"Arlo! Great to see you. How have you been, brother? God how I've missed you and Mom. It's great to be home."

I reached across the table and he grabbed my right hand in his. "Gary, what are you doing here? I mean, this is a shock...to see you...I didn't know you'd be here."

"Well, here I am, baby brother. And not a minute too soon either." He paused and glanced at my pack. "Hey, how about some breakfast? It's on me."

He waved to the lone waitress, a pretty girl with auburn hair, and in a minute my order was on

its way to the kitchen. The girl was back quickly with coffee for me and a refill for my brother. We were alone in the booth now, his friend gone somehow. In fact, we were the only customers in the café. I stared at him, not really sure what to say. God, he looked good, sharp and precise, his wavy blonde hair neatly trimmed, lean and well-built, six feet tall, maybe one seventy-five at the most. And he never seemed to age. How he pulled that off, I'll never know. I listened to him as he filled me in on the details of his journey.

"...so, I stopped here on the way home. Didn't want to barge in on you and Mom, wake everyone up. I figured the sun will be up soon enough, and then I'd come banging on your door. You still sleeping in the room at the back of the house? Still sneaking out to carouse with your buddies?"

He laughed and flashed his brilliant smile, white teeth gleaming in the fluorescent lights of the café. The waitress brought my breakfast and I dug in like it was my last meal. In the meantime, my brother carried the conversation, one story after the other, making me laugh with his adventures. I glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearing 4:00 a.m. I'd forgotten about Joey.

"Come on, Arlo. Let's head for home, give Mom a surprise to start the day." He called the waitress over, handed her some bills and left a generous tip. She gave him a smile that spoke volumes.

"You make it look so easy, Gary. I wish I had what you have."

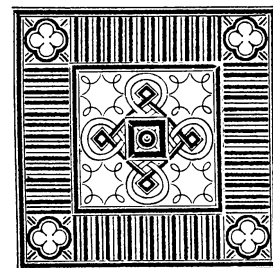
He smiled and punched me lightly on the shoulder as we left the booth and headed for the door.

The fog thickened as we walked along familiar streets. The closer we came to home, the dimmer my brother's image became, the fainter his voice, until I was alone.

I moved quietly along the side of the

house, through the back gate, and opened the door to my room. I don't know why I took the key with me. I should have left it with the note to my mother. I dropped my pack in the closet, undressed, and crawled into bed. My eyes were heavy. In spite of the coffee, I was asleep in no time.

I never told anyone about the night I left home, ready to hit the road and see the country, ready to *dull and blunt the instrument you write with*. No one wants to hear that kind of stuff. No one would believe it. Everyone knows my brother died years ago. I took the note to my mom and stuck it in my sock drawer. Maybe I'd need it, someday.



C. W. Spooner's short stories have appeared in *The Storyteller*, *Lost Coast Review*, *Spitball*, and an anthology from *Main Street Rag*. He has published two collections of short stories (*Children of Vallejo* and *Like a Flower in the Field*), two novellas ('68 and *Street Cred*), and a collection of essays, memoirs and poems

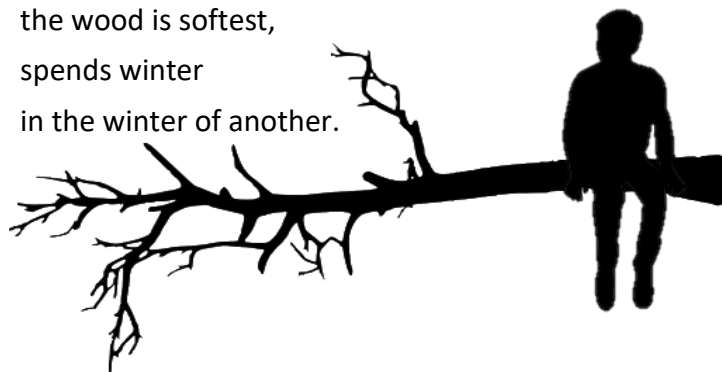
John Grey

Poet

These Dead Trees



Some dead trees fall across the path.
Either we scramble over, walk around,
or saw right through them.
Others tumble over the creek, ravine,
form bridges, ease the crossing.
The dead, in the restlessness of their waning,
are still up for one final gesture.
They slant against the living,
play at being trees still.
They topple in deep forest,
their final weathered leafless crash,
an unheard coda to the unexamined life.
Ants devour them slowly.
Snakes slither into the comfort
of their fractured hearts.
A groundhog burrows where
the wood is softest,
spends winter
in the winter of another.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *That*, *Dalhousie Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *Qwerty*, *Chronogram* and *failbetter*.

Becca Wierwille

Author

The Ice Cream Cart

A stylized illustration in a muted color palette. In the foreground, a person stands next to a vintage-style ice cream cart with large spoked wheels and a flat top. In the background, a person sits on a wooden bench, holding a large, dark umbrella over themselves.

Every afternoon around four o'clock, soon after school lets out, I hear the tinkling bell of the ice cream cart.

There are plenty of ice cream carts in Guatemala City, but this one is my favorite. The little old man who pushes the cart through our neighborhood is always smiling. He doesn't seem to have much reason to smile. He's hunched over and wrinkled. He doesn't have many customers. He is always alone. But his grin still stretches from one ear all the way to the other.

Whenever I hear the chiming of the bell, I run to the window and press my face up against the glass to see the man and his cart. This window run has been part of my daily routine for as long as I can remember. And though I feel rather childish now, a 13-year-old lovingly gazing at a cart

filled with frozen treats, I still can't help but ask Mama the same question each day.

"Mama, can I get ice cream?"

Keeping with our routine, Mama always gives me the same answer. "No, Sofia. Not today."

But in every story there comes a day when everything changes. My friend Esperanza is over so we can do homework together. Four o'clock comes, and we don't hear the bell. My stomach twists with worry for the old man with the ice cream cart. What if he is sick? What if something happened to him? Does he have a sister or child or wife to look after him, or would he be alone in his desperate struggles? I voice my fears to Esperanza, but she is not impressed.

"You're being silly, Sofia," Esperanza says. "You don't even know him."



"But he always comes at four. He's never this late," I say.

Esperanza laughs, but it's not funny. This isn't silly. The bells on the ice cream cart aren't just background noise in my life. They're daily noise, noise that is foundational to my routines, noise that I've come to depend on. When Esperanza has to go home early, I don't even mind.

Mama makes tamales for dinner — my favorite. I wouldn't normally leave the table during tamale night, but I'm mid-bite when I hear the most beautiful sound. The ice cream cart is here. The rickety wheels are tumbling across the potholes in our street. But the sun is already setting in the dusky sky. He is more than two hours later than normal.

"Mama, I have to go get ice cream today!" I rise from the table so abruptly that my chair crashes to the ground behind me.

Mama winces as if I threw the chair right in her face. "We're in the middle of supper, Sofia. Sit down."

"But it's important," I say. "I need to talk to him."

"Talk to who?"

"The man with the ice cream cart," I say. "I have to make sure everything's okay."

Mama sighs, shakes her head. She finds my sense of schedule rather strange and misplaced in a culture where time is secondary. "Okay, but you have to use your own money," she says. "And you still have to finish your tamale when you come back in."

"Of course," I say. Her request is not a problem. I would never miss out on a perfectly delicious tamale.

I run into my room to see if I have any spare change. A few coins hide in my pockets, others rest in my backpack, and a few are under my bed. I'm not sure if it's enough. But it's worth a try. Nerves bubble in my stomach. I've watched

this man for so long, but I've never bought his ice cream. Never asked his name. Never even talked to him.

I unlock the gate in front of our door and run into the street, just as the man is about to turn the corner. I catch up to him quickly. He always moves slowly, but he is moving slower than normal today. Again, I fear something is wrong.

"I'd like to buy some ice cream," I say, holding out my handful of change. "Is this enough for anything?"

The man nods, that familiar smile lighting up his face. My heart settles. I'm glad I've finally worked up the courage to buy something from him. "What would you like?" he asks. "I have chocolate, vanilla, or dulce de leche."

"Dulce de leche, please."

As he scoops ice cream into a tiny paper dish, I say, "I noticed you were later than normal today. Is everything okay?"

He hands me the ice cream. "My family lives far away from the city, and I don't get to talk to them much." For the first time, his smile fades. But it returns as quickly as it disappeared, and he is grinning again. "When they called today, we talked for a long time. I miss them."

"When's the last time you saw them?" I use the miniature plastic spoon to take a bite of the ice cream. Ice crystals sting my tongue from the burn of the freezing cart. Still, the sweet, caramel-like flavor is delectable.

The man scratches his head. "I suppose it was almost two years ago now. Yes, two years. We write letters. For now, that's the closest we have to being together."

I lick my spoon. "Why don't you visit them?"

He chuckles. "Bus tickets aren't getting any cheaper, and with all these big new grocery stores popping up in every neighborhood, my business isn't what it used to be." His words are sad, but his

voice is still bright and cheery. He nods at the darkening sky. "I'd best be on my way. Enjoy your ice cream."

I go back inside to finish my tamale, but I can't stop thinking about the little old man with the ice cream cart. What would it be like to go without seeing family for two years? How does he smile when he doesn't even have enough money to buy a bus ticket out of the city? Those tinkling bells aren't just a soundtrack to my daily routines; they're a soundtrack to the monotony and seclusion of his life.

I want to help him. More than anything.

For the rest of the week, I earn all the extra money I can. Our wealthy neighbor pays me to go to the market and fetch her some fresh vegetables. Mama agrees to give me my birthday money early for such a noble cause. A few coins on the sidewalk catch my eye. Esperanza even surprises me by throwing in a small contribution of her own. "You're a good Samaritan, Sofia," she says. I don't know what that means, but I thank her for the money.

Each day I hear the bell and watch him from the window. The next time I talk to him, I'll have the money in hand. Enough for a bus ticket, and enough for him to take off work for a week or so and still have enough to get by.

Then the afternoon comes. Mama says I have more than enough. It's time. I don't just wait for the sound of the bell; I watch. The minute I get home from school I sit in front of the window.

Four o'clock comes. The man doesn't.

Mama convinces me to leave the window to eat dinner, but I still listen for the bell's music. My skin itches with worry and anticipation. Maybe he got a chance to talk to his family on the phone again. Maybe he's just running late.

But he never comes.

Not that day. Not the next.

My routines feel broken. The world is still

and silent. My dream to make one man's life a little better is as freezer burnt as the dulce de leche ice cream.

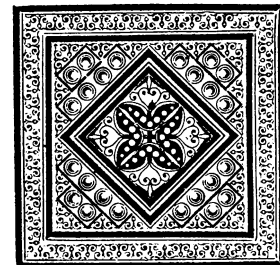
Mama is worried about me, but I'm too worried about the absence of the tinkling bell to even consider her worry.

And then, one month later, the music of the bell returns. It's now a surprise to me, rather than routine, and I run to the window.

But the little old man is not there.

The music is only in my head.

And the jar of money I collected for the man with the ice cream cart now collects dust on my windowsill.



Becca Wierwille is a kindergarten teacher and writer whose short stories have been published in *Guardian Angel Kids Online Magazine*, *Short Kid Stories*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, among others. She is a member of Word Weavers International and St. Davids Christian Writers' Association. Visit her at beccawierwille.com.

Whispers



Photographer

Lee Ho-cheung

Dr Lee Ho-cheung is the founding editor of *BALLOONS Lit. Journal*. His poetry, prose and artwork could be found in a range of journals. His photography was featured in *Rattle* and *Typehouse Literary Magazine* as cover art, and was also published in **82 Review*, *Adirondack Review* and *Front Porch Review*. This picture, “Whispers”, was taken at the mesmerising Bondi Beach in Sydney, August 2019.

Morning

The sky was stricken through with streaks of red. The colours were blinding, their hues almost indistinguishable to the naked human eye. But the eye currently watching it was not human. A black helmet covered the head, angular and sharp, a tri-forked slit covered the front resembling something from Star Wars. Its body was covered in armor, perfectly fitting sections. But what was most interesting were its hands. Dark shadows swirled around them, occasionally spreading upwards towards the shoulder, like two long lost friends trying desperately to meet.

It sat on a rooftop, high enough as to see the whole of London, but not enough to be over the clouds. The creature could if it wanted to, but it was content with sitting cross-legged on the top of a building, and looking out into the sunrise.

It raised its hand wreathed in a black chainmail glove, curling its fingers slightly and rotating its wrist as if it had never seen its hands clearly before. Energy coiled around it, twisting and turning like a snake, in a pattern similar to that of Earth's magnetic field.

A small seed had begun to sprout on the roof, out of the little cracks in the concrete, a bright green stem with two tiny leaves fluttering in the evening wind. Bending its helmet downward, it reached down a slender finger and caressed the slight shrub.

Gazing away into the distance, the creature suddenly stood up as if remembering something of more importance, and jumped off the building. Seconds from impact, its hands pulsed black and the shadows suddenly expanded to form a sphere around its metallic gloves, slowing his descent.

It landed to the ground with a gentle cushioned thump in an alleyway, deep in the heart of London. Its helmet seemed to withdraw into the rest of the glistening armor, revealing the face of a brown-haired boy with bright blue eyes. The rest of the helmet disappeared into him like wisps of smoke, as he hurried through the school gate, not wanting to miss his first class.

Rain

Author

Flight of Stairs

Have you ever wondered why
A flight of stairs
Is called a flight?

Well, some nights
When moonlight lies
In parallelograms of pearl

And curtains billow
With dreams of pillows
And nothing feels

Quite real
And everyone is fast asleep
And the owl turns away

And the rats and mice
Are counting sheep
And the shadows start to sway

And the faucets leak
And the floors all creak
Like ships in olden days

And the rugs are sunk in slumber
And the rafters dream they're lumber
Still drifting down the river

On a bright and windy day
When everyone is busy
Snoozing, unawares

And nobody is watching
This is when the stairs
Whisper to each other:

It's almost time, prepare!
And when all the clocks
That tick and tock

Strike the middle of the night
Those stairs, who've so long waited
Finally take flight.

Maya Mahony

Poet

Maya Mahony just graduated Stanford with a degree in English and creative writing. Her fiction and poetry have been published in *Terrain*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, *Leland Quarterly*, and *Collison Literary*. She loves spending time in nature, swing dancing, and playing guitar, and is currently writing a children's novel about a witch.

Kindergarten

When I sat next to you, you kept poking
my shoulder. Tongue stuck out.
Stickers on your face. (And this was hours
after art class, no one else had them on anymore.)

It was kinda pointless
for a little boy like you
to bully your friend like that.
I had to try to flick your hand off.

I didn't know what to do –
Whether to raise my hand, tell a teacher
tell you I wouldn't play with you
or ask if something was on my shoulder.

I did what I always do:
I just drew a butterfly on your finger
and a flower on another, as if that was
what any other girl would do.

and kept my face smiling.
It must have been a test, because
you didn't do it again, not with me,
not with other girls, not with other boys

You continuously came to me
I thought I had won, but
I still feel I messed up: I still don't get
what exactly you wanted me to draw.

Dedeepya Duppi

Poet

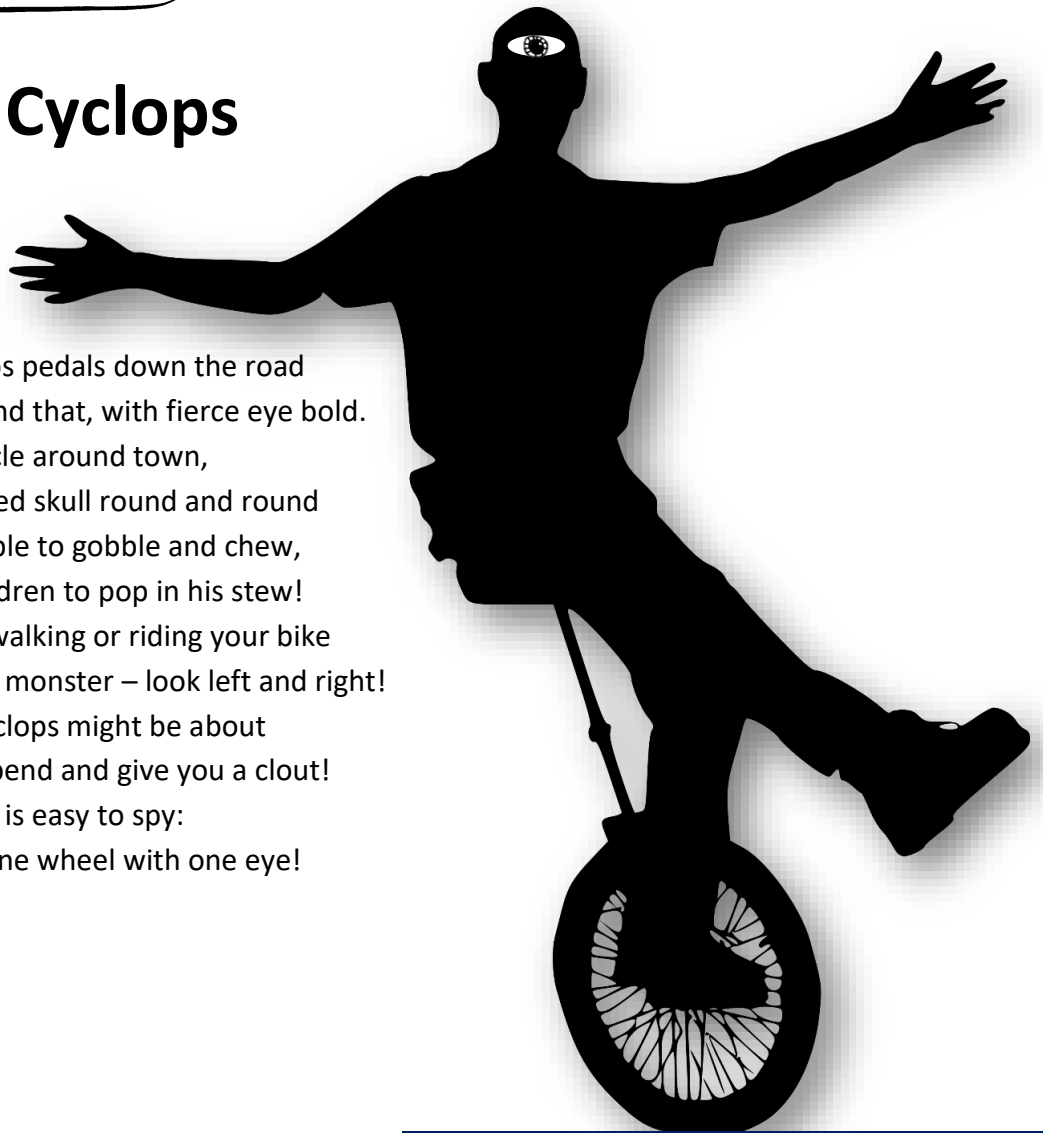


Eric Bryan



Cycling Cyclops

The Cycling Cyclops pedals down the road
Glaring this way and that, with fierce eye bold.
He rides his unicycle around town,
Turning his uni-eyed skull round and round
Searching for people to gobble and chew,
Chasing down children to pop in his stew!
While you're out walking or riding your bike
Watch out for this monster – look left and right!
For the Cycling Cyclops might be about
To roll round the bend and give you a clout!
At least this villain is easy to spy:
He is the one on one wheel with one eye!



Eric Bryan's work has been published in *The Caterpillar*, *Scoop Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and many others in North American, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

The Anti-Alphabet

A curious creature lives in Witch Wood
Beyond the cold stream where ruins once stood.
Deep in green shadow, away in the mist,
Hard by Gloom Hollow – there Druids, past, kissed.

This forest dweller has a strange hunger –
Indeed, its cravings will make you wonder!
The appetite of this unexplained beast
Is really not normal, to say the least!

The Anti-alphabet this brute is called;
It gobbles up language, words just get mauled!
Consonants, vowels, make its mouth water;
Calls, shouts and howls this savage will slaughter!

If you chance ever to walk in Witch Wood,
Beware of this fiend for which words are food.
Skulking in lime shades beside the footpath,
The monster will wait there for you to pass.

And should you while walking utter aloud
Sentences, phrases, from out of a cloud
The Anti-alphabet will then appear
To chew up your speech and hiss in your ear!

Adjectives, adverbs, are on its menu;
Proper names, places – and even when you
Say them in German or French or Spanish,
They will be devoured, chomped, wrenched and ravished!

If only this ogre could be convinced
To dine on sweet berries and pies of mince
Instead of eating vocabulary
With no fear of the constabulary!

The Anti-alphabet's spectacular
Yearning for the local vernacular –
Letters, nouns and verbs, all in its diet –
Means when in Witch Wood, DON'T TALK – BE QUIET!

Northern Lights



Emily Hou

Peaceful Sunset



Artist

Emily Hou is a 10th grader at Dougherty Valley High School in San Ramon, California. When she's not practising and competing on the golf course, she is partaking in her hobbies: writing, painting, and baking. Her dream is to someday become a cardiothoracic surgeon.

Swinging Out Soft



swinging out
 soft
 warm
 tire rubber under
 bare feet
 out over the green
 river
 letting go
 falling
 down to where the world hums
 at peace
 swimming to where
 bare feet
 walk on rock
 cool
 hard
 regrasping rope
 swinging out
 soft

Andrew Albritton

Poet



Pages

fluttering wings, fair
and delicate,
though with power

sufficient to bear
all who take them
gently in their hands

over blue horizons



Andrew Albritton teaches at Missouri State University. He has PhD in English from the University of Nottingham. His poems have appeared in *American Tanka*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Cargo Literary*, and other publications.



Themed Section

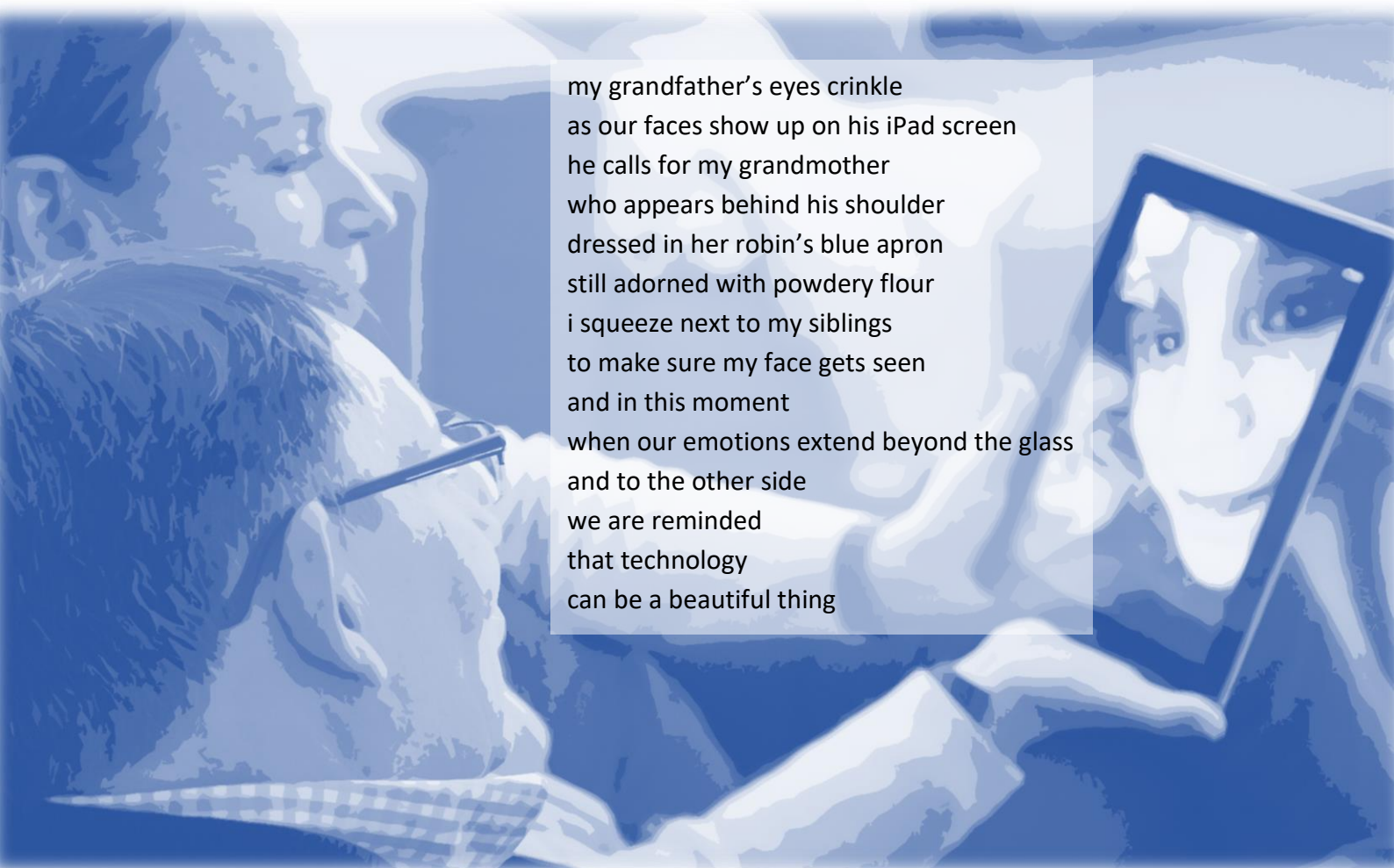
COVID-19

The following poems and short stories are inspired by the current worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. These pieces are written and submitted in an effort to spread comfort, love, unitedness and positivity which are much needed in this period of time.

Ashley Qiu

Poet

screen to screen



my grandfather's eyes crinkle
as our faces show up on his iPad screen
he calls for my grandmother
who appears behind his shoulder
dressed in her robin's blue apron
still adorned with powdery flour
i squeeze next to my siblings
to make sure my face gets seen
and in this moment
when our emotions extend beyond the glass
and to the other side
we are reminded
that technology
can be a beautiful thing

Ashley Qiu is currently a sophomore at Palo Alto High School. Through poetry, she aims to capture specific moments in time that are important to her and allow her to reminisce when times get rough. Besides writing, she loves to film and edit videos of her day-to-day life or of her travels around the world. During quarantine, she has been spending her time playing ping pong with her family at home, experimenting with crazy baking recipes, and finishing up a large oil painting project.



Something Good

Surina Venkat

Author

Surina Venkat is a 16-year-old sophomore at West Shore Jr/Sr High in West Melbourne, Florida, where she works on the yearbook and works with literary magazine staff.



When Neha first saw the word coronavirus in the news, she didn't pay much attention to it. The virus was in China. That was worlds away from her family's tiny apartment in Brooklyn, New York. But then, seemingly overnight, it was everywhere.

It dominated her news feed. *Thousands dead*, her screen informed her. *It's in the U.S. now*, TV anchors said. *Schools have closed*. *So many people are going to die*. Every time she saw or heard the word "coronavirus," which was happening more and more frequently, she would feel a spike of unease. And every time she remembered her mom was a doctor and on the front lines, she found it harder to breathe.

But it wasn't until she overheard her mother's phone call with her father that a knot of

dread and panic took up permanent residence in her chest, leaving her short of breath.

Her dad was a software engineer who travelled twice a year to India for work. He'd been on one of those trips when the coronavirus started dominating the newsfeed, but they hadn't been concerned. Now though...they had to be concerned. It was serious. People were *dying*.

"No, I don't want you traveling right now," Amma had said in Tamil. Neha pressed up against her room's door, trying to catch her mother's hushed voice. "No, not with this virus. You have respiratory issues. I don't want to risk it."

"Just stay in India," Amma continued in English. "I don't know how long, but you have to."

Great. Her dad was stuck in a country

notorious for its uncleanness while a pandemic took the world by storm. Every ugly feeling she'd felt in the past two weeks seemed to rear its head and slam against her ribcage. It didn't go away.

"At least you'll be with your parents,"

Amma pointed out. "I know. No one could've predicted this." When she got off the phone, Neha opened her room's door and stepped out into the kitchen. Amma quickly wiped away her tears.

"Hey," she said, with a smile. It was lopsided.

"Your dad is staying in India for a little bit. Until this all stops."

Neha couldn't speak so she nodded.

At that point, she began seeking out news obsessively. She set "coronavirus" as a Google Alert and asked her mother if she could get social media so she could keep up with her friends – but once she'd downloaded Twitter and Instagram, the first accounts she followed were the ones for news websites. Every half-hour, even if she was in an online class, she'd check to see if the virus was spreading in India. At night, she'd ask her mom for updates and Amma would tell her stories of infected family members and friends that made Neha's gut clench.

When her mom told her, tears in her eyes, that Auntie Iksha died from the virus, Neha had a full-on panic attack. When she didn't come out of her room for breakfast the next day, her mom sat down on the bed next to her.

"Stop this," she said. Her voice came off as harsh, making Neha flinch. Talking to each other wasn't really something they were good at. Neha always felt small around her. She missed her dad. "Focus on something good."

Neha stared. "There's *something good*?"

"There's always something good."

Millions of people were out of jobs, food shortages were happening across the country, people were dead and dying, and Neha was supposed to focus on *something good*?

Her mother squeezed her shoulder. "Listen, I know this is scary," she said softly. "But we could have it so much worse. I still have a job." A *dangerous job*, Neha thought. "And we have food. So many people don't."

That made the constant knot of panic in Neha's chest expand, crushing her lungs. She was having more and more trouble breathing lately. All the time.

Amma seemed to realize she'd said the wrong thing and sighed, hugging her daughter. "I know this is kind of scary," she said. "You're in middle school. Too young. But I think if you look, you'll see that all of us are going to get through this." She smiled. "I've been a doctor for years, Neha. There is nothing more amazing than humans in times of crisis."

Neha stared at her mother. Humans were amazing while they were *suffering*?

Neha only started to understand what her mother meant a couple days later. She and her mother put on masks her mother had ordered online – the masks had come two weeks late – and hurried to the convenience store on the corner. While running through the lobby of their apartment building, Neha's eyes caught on the message board hanging behind the front desk. The building's residents normally used it for important announcements, but now it was filled to the brim with writing.

Messages upon messages of hope and goodwill from the building's tenants were scrawled across it. *Stay safe and love to everyone*, nice old lady Ms. Betty had written and signed in her shaky handwriting. Mr. Shen offered to give food to anyone who needed it and underneath his message, the Nielsens, who had three kids and a baby on the way, had penned a heartfelt *yes please and thank you so much!! We're so grateful*. Someone – probably Wren, the third floor's local mischief-maker – had drawn a comic strip where

two people fought over a roll of toilet paper. *Don't forget to laugh!* The seven-year-old had written. Neha laughed before taking a picture and sending it to her dad.

At the convenience store, a person in the lane next to them had their credit card declined. The man looked so embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I lost my job last week..." His voice broke and Neha's eyes filled with tears.

"I've got you," the woman behind him suddenly spoke. She pulled out her own credit card, smiling, and waving off the weak protests of the man in front of her. "Make it up to me later, if you're so worried about it," she said, laughing as she typed her number into the man's phone. Neha blinked at the thoughtfulness of the gesture, stunned that had just happened. Next to her, her mom was smiling. She nudged her, and mouthed, "See?"

The next day, when trying to figure out if she wanted to watch TV or continue scrolling aimlessly through Instagram, Neha saw that her friend Alya had updated her story. She clicked on it and a familiar smile greeted her.

"Hey everyone! Hope you're all well!" Alya greeted. She pointed her camera towards the ground, where bolts of fabric littered the floor. "So you may have heard about the mask shortage. My father is a nurse at a doctor's office and they need face masks. He partnered with a local fabric shop to get cloth so we can make masks for them, because any protection – even hand-made items – are better than nothing!" She paused. "But we have a lot of fabric and my younger sister and I can't do everything, so if you want to help, please click the 'Yes' below!" Neha didn't have to think – she clicked the "Yes" button. A smile bright enough to match Alya's lit up her face when she saw 97% of people watching had clicked "Yes" too.

The next time she and her mom went on a grocery run was after a mere three days. They

were getting some food for the people at her office, her mom explained as they walked towards the elevator, fidgeting with their masks. Before they got in, Neha hesitated.

There was a couple down the hall that had a kid a few years older than her. He was always getting sick, so he might be immunocompromised. The news said being immunocompromised gave the virus a higher chance to kill you. Overcome by resolve, Neha turned around, surprising her mother. "Neha?" Her mom called after her as she knocked on Apartment 403.

Mrs. Cho opened the door a crack, peering out cautiously. "Neha? What's wrong?"

"Oh, uh-nothing!" Why had she thought this was a good idea? Now that Mrs. Cho was looking at her, she had no idea what to say. "Um... well, I just – my mom and I were going grocery shopping so I wondered if you needed anything? I know Kent is always sick so –"

Mrs. Cho's eyes widened and the relief that broke out across her face made Neha's stomach flip. "You would do that?" She said. "Oh, thank you so much, we were so worried about that. The online grocery thing has a three-day wait and we need food, but we're too scared to go out!" She slammed the door in Neha's face, making her jump. And then she opened the door again quickly. "Sorry! I'm just going to get money." She closed the door again, but much more gently, and came back with a handful of cash and a list of groceries for them. Kent stood at her shoulder, and gave her a shy smile.

As they left the convenience store that day, their groceries and the Cho's piled on the cart, Neha blinked as the realization came over her. *Oh*, she thought. *That's what Amma meant.*

For the first time in a while, the knot in her chest eased. Despite the mask on her face, she suddenly found it so much easier to breathe.

Talentless

Last week I was sitting at my sewing machine making a dress for my sister's now-canceled prom. It was a red satin two-piece that had a slit in the side of the skirt. Somehow, I messed up the hem and frowned at my uneven edge. I'd tried to sew shirts and pants, only to end up with lopsided, strange concoctions. I refused to give up, though. Sewing was my nemesis that I needed to defeat. As I sat there looking at my odd creation, I thought about how my sister wouldn't need a prom dress anymore anyway. Prom was canceled due to coronavirus. Still, I felt like a failure. I'd wanted to make a nice dress for my sister, and instead, I messed it up. If I couldn't sew, then what else couldn't I do?

There were many things in my life that I'd tried but failed at. I'd struggled with math. I'd stopped gymnastics because the teacher was so mean I would come home crying every day. I couldn't paint or draw. My pictures and paintings looked like those of a toddler. I couldn't bake. I once tried to bake my mother a birthday cake, but it burned on the sides and was raw in the middle. I won't even discuss dancing. Being only 14, I knew I had plenty of time to become a master at something, but why was it taking so long?

I looked out the window and pondered what I could do. Making a prom dress for my sister was one way I could be helpful to others, especially during the "Shelter in Place Order." I couldn't donate my time at a volunteer center because of the virus. So, I was stuck at home.

Outside my window, there was a squirrel sitting on the fence, staring at me as if to say, "I'm free and you're not." The weather was mild and sunny with a little breeze, perfect for my friends and me to go to Stanford Shopping Mall and window shop for makeup. I thought about all the people who were stuck inside their homes like me, waiting for the day that all of this ends. Then I thought about doctors, nurses, and hospital staff who were risking their lives each day and couldn't just stay home.

I thought about what hospital workers needed most right now. I knew that my nearby hospitals needed masks, and they were running out everywhere. A quick search of the internet told me that all I needed was 100 percent cotton fabric. I found some old t-shirts, and I printed out a pattern from the CDC website. It took me two hours to make ten. In the end, some of them were too small, big enough only for children, but six were good.

They were pink, yellow, and green, not the prettiest face masks. I packaged them and dropped them off in the donation bin at Kaiser. It felt good to do my part. They didn't need to be perfect and neither did I.

Evelyn Hsu

Author

Evelyn Hsu is currently an eighth-grader at Joaquin Miller Middle School in San Jose, California. She has enjoyed writing prose for over five years.



May the Force Be with You

"I'm one with the Force, and the Force is with me."

– *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*

With a kiss,
a desperate mother
slips a crystal pendant
over her child's head,
and invokes the protection
of mystical forces.

Running through gunfire
a blind man prays
to become one
with the power he extols.

Even in a galaxy far, far away
humans still seek a strength
outside themselves.

Call it Faith. Call it Hope.
Call it energy emanating
from Belief
we are all bound
to one another.

Without it, we crouch
in the hull of a battered ship.
Huddled creatures
careening through space
lacking the weapons
to battle the Dark Side.

Jacqueline Jules

Jacqueline Jules is the author of 45 books for young readers, including the *Zapato Power* series, *The Generous Fish*, and *Never Say a Mean Word Again*. Her first collection of poetry for young readers, *Tag Your Dreams: Poems of Play and Persistence*, was released April 1st. Visit www.jacquelinejules.com

Poet

Social Media Oyster



An oyster feeds by filtering. Trapping plankton, algae, and other tidbits for consumption. Unwanted silt does not go down its mouth. Instead, this clever creature expels what doesn't nourish.

Turning on my screens,
I should remember the oyster,
pumping gallons through its gills,
keeping only what is best to digest.



Sorbet



In mid-March 2020, the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak, my father and I pulled into a parking spot at Costco. The scene was a frenzy of people, cars, and carts. Cars were fighting over parking spots. Workers in neon vests each pushed long trains of shiny carts. Customers shuffled into lines, standing six feet apart. Coming from the yellow circle tables inside, the smell of fresh hot-dogs and pizza made my mouth water and stomach growl. I felt a shudder of excitement as I remembered that we would be getting our sorbet today. I liked to slurp sorbet on the patio with dad. My favorite flavor was strawberry lemonade. The tangy sweetness was like the taste of frozen candy. Drops usually slipped off my spoon and fell to the ground, where ants crowd around the melted drops. They pushed and shoved each other to

get to the sticky fruity juice. After a few minutes of struggling, a few ants always remained still, floating inside.

When we got into Costco, I saw that everyone was wearing face masks and gloves, just as we were. We saw a big white sign above the entrance that read: “Limit one bag of rice per customer.” I had heard rumors that people were so desperate for food that they brought all their family members to buy more bags of rice. At the entrance, fluffy blue blankets and sunglasses sat on top of boxes. The giant televisions looked down at me from their tall display stands. On screens, white foam slid over red rocks and luminescent orange sand. I reached out to stroke one of the blue blankets. My father quickly grabbed my hand and pulled it away from the blankets.

"Don't touch anything unless you have to."

I knew a lot about risks. The coronavirus had killed over 30,000 people around the world already, and the number of deaths and new cases was rising. My school had closed, and I was doing all of my classes online. For some reason, this didn't worry me. Instead, I worried about my dad. He'd been in remission for three years, and I was still nervous that the cancer in his lungs might come back. Our family had been very careful to make sure Dad stayed healthy. We had installed four air purifiers in the house. Dad stretched daily and went on hikes on weekends. We ate a lot of home-cooked meals packed with fresh vegetables. Part of me had learned to live a fulfilling life in the face of Dad's cancer, as if I needed to appreciate every moment with him. I appreciated when Dad drove me to places, when we played chess, when he made me corn stew. Despite all of our precautions, I realized that the cancer could come back at any time. It could even come back worse the next time. Sometimes I felt that it was like studying hard for a test and finding that I knew nothing that was on it.

"Hey Dad, why is everyone panicking so much? It's just a flu. People that get coronavirus still have a chance to live."

"In everything, there's a chance." He looked away and said, "Let's go check out the fresh vegetables. And we can't forget to pick up the sorbet. You can go get the sorbet first. I'll be at the cabbages."

I walked towards the sorbet section and saw that there was only one left. My walking turned into a frantic fastwalk. With a sigh of relief, I placed my hands on the box of sorbet just to realize another pair of hands were reaching for it.

"Hey, I had my hands on it first!" a boy around my age said.

"Can I please have it?" I should have been more insistent, but I didn't want to be videotaped

and put on the internet arguing over a sorbet.

"No!"

"Hey, six feet away!" I said.

"Yeah, get away from me." He scowled.

The tips of my fingers were starting to numb from my tight grasp. Reluctantly, I let go.

With my back slouched, I walked to the cabbages. I spotted Dad placing a cabbage into the cart. On the way out we looked for hand soap and tofu but couldn't find it anywhere. We passed piles of pink sweaters, juicy meat covered in air-tight plastic packaging, towers of croissants. Huge crates filled with watermelons. Hundreds of wine bottles lay next to each other. The shelves that used to hold the rice and the flour were nearly empty.

While waiting in line at the checkout and paying for the items, I glanced at the other shopping carts full of milk, eggs, rice, and flour — all staples that stores were quickly running out of. This thought filled my heart with uncertainty and sadness. But as I walked with Dad out to the parking lot, I noticed a couple of doves sitting on a telephone wire. In spite of all the things I did not have, I had Dad, and that was all that mattered.



Grace Ker is a 13-year-old who attends Miller Middle school in San Jose, California. She enjoys writing in her free time and is also a competitive fencer. "Sorbet" is her first publication.



Ray Zhang

Author

The Modern Plague



Two weeks ago, I was at school in classroom C-208. It was just before the bell rang and all the students were talking about coronavirus. When the class began, my history teacher, Mr. Darthy said, "You know, there is a much higher chance that someone my age or older will die from this

virus! You guys are pretty safe." I first thought about my mom since she was in her 50's. I pictured disturbing images like her lying on a hospital bed. I could hear her non-stop coughing. I knew it was something I could not protect her from. It felt as if I was dodging a missile, but the missile was

self-guiding. One way or the other, I knew she would die from this horrible evil virus. I also thought about the plague. We had just learned what the Black Plague had done to Europe. It had wiped out nearly half the population. I remember what the teacher had said about it: "If someone got the plague, there was no doubt that they would die."

At lunch, I got to my table which was right in the middle of the multipurpose room. I saw that most of my friends were already there. I sat down next to my friend, Paul. He was munching down a turkey sandwich.

"Yo Paul, sup mate? What're you thinking about that virus thing?" I asked. It was on everyone's mind, I figured. The World Health Organization had just declared coronavirus a pandemic, whatever that means.

He didn't hesitate. "I don't know, man. I'm not that worried; it seems like only people older than like 40 are getting it. Sounds like we are immune."

"Bro, think about it. What if your parents died? What're you gonna do about that?"

"Bruh, that's for, like, people in China. Besides our county seems fine."

"You blind? We just had like five new cases in our county. You don't read the news?"

"Whatever. You do you. I honestly don't care."

"Whatever, nerd."

I finished my lunch, which was rice and vegetable, and headed off to Mr. Schneider's science class. Mr. Schneider's classes were the BEST!!! He used a wheelchair and made jokes about how he used to try to do tricks in his wheelchair but always ended up falling down, until one day, he finally did it — he leaned back on two wheels without falling over. Besides, I loved science. It was my favorite subject. To address our fears, Mr. Schneider showed us a picture of the

virus on the projector. It looked like a red ball with little orange spikes growing out of it. "The spikes are its proteins," Mr. Schneider said. "The virus is both dead and alive, and it can change, which means it can get stronger." Then it hit me. Mr. Schneider looked like he was over 60 years old. I thought about it. What if he got the virus and NEVER came back? I cringed. What would science be like without him? How could the world ever be the same? I started to daydream. I could hear the whole world coughing. I could hear the sounds of all the ventilator machines humming. I could see the people in hazmat suits caring for the sick. The only thing that startled me was the word "test." There was a big test on Friday, and I had just missed out on everything Mr. Schneider said. He was talking about physical and chemical reactions. I didn't feel so well.

The next morning, I asked my mom if I could take the day off. I didn't feel like going to school. I felt as if the world was flat, and if I kept walking, I would fall right off into the infinite darkness.

I lied to my mom. "I feel super sick. Can I please take the day off?"

My mom grunted. "Fine, just make sure you finish your homework!"

That day, when my mom went to work, I opened my laptop and watched the charts of the coronavirus cases multiply and multiply around the world until I couldn't watch anymore. I figured that the coronavirus would keep spreading. I never knew something so small and mostly not living could cause so much havoc. Help me, God.

Tired of the frightening news, I took my dog Wesley out back for a walk around the yard. He followed me like he always does, and I noticed that all the neighboring houses seemed hunkered down. Cars were locked in garages instead of sitting in driveways. Blinds were closed. The birds weren't singing.

That evening, my mom came home and told me that my school would be closed for a month. I didn't know how to react to this. I imagined the halls of Costco being crowded. By then, I'd heard about people fighting over cushy packages of toilet paper. And people were running each other over just to get the last case of bottled water at Vons. I pondered, "How long will this outbreak last?"

Over the next few weeks, my dad worked from home, my brother came back from college, and my mom was home, too. The whole family was in the same spot finally. But it didn't feel right. It felt really great, but also really weird at the same time as if we were waiting for the National Guard to take over our neighborhood. We rarely spend this much together. It felt as if we were supposed to be somewhere different. The world felt so small.

One night, we sat around the table, eating dinner and talking about politics and who would be the next president in light of the current coronavirus crisis.

"I bet Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden will win the next election," I said.

"I don't know. Both will be fine with me," my brother replied.

"Don't talk with food in your mouth," my mom said.

My mother had made konjac with tofu and vegetables. The konjac gave the meal an ocean smell and a chewy texture. We usually got into arguments at the dinner table about Chinese news, but that night we didn't argue. I looked at the lights outside the window, and I couldn't tell if they were stars or radio towers on the hill. We ate in silence, glasses clinking and chopsticks snapping, and I was grateful we were all together.



Ray Zhang is a thirteen-year-old student who attends Windemere Ranch Middle School in California. He likes to write different stories about current problems in society. He also plays golf and hopes to be back on the course after this pandemic.



Vincent Song

Poet

The Last Cut

here, winter seeps in quick
across acres of hayfields and grasslands
in a few days the trees are dry

upstairs I could hear him mowing
taking the last cut before winter
hitherto rampant, the new grass

would now slumber till longer days
I thought of a moment with him
host of my foreign stay

when I came down he
led me to his machine, flipped
on the racket of mud and roots and fresh dew

and explained it was more about
brutality than the blade
that struggles to wipe the turf clean

but never really managed, however much you lawn
every year, after the rains of course
they would come back in all their glory



Vincent Song, a 14-year-old teenager studying overseas in the UK, loves anything number-related and word-related. He believes that combining those gives poetry, the most powerful of which preserves a static state of mind. He hopes that readers may find comfort and a return to the everyday in his work.





Balloons

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