

# Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal

Issue  
Twelve

Dec 2020

Bill DeMain • Chris Low • Elaine Choi • Felix Quiñonez •  
J. S. Kierland • JaeMin Song • John Grey • Katie Waters •  
Kris Spencer • Kyra Li • Logan Henry • Michelene Esposito •  
Michelle Liao • Nicholas Froumis • S. B. Fields



**“If you have the words, there’s always a chance that  
you’ll find the way.”**

**– *Seamus Heaney***

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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](http://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](mailto:editorblj@yahoo.com)**

*Founding Editor & Designer*

**Ho-cheung LEE (Peter), Ed.D.**

*BLJ Advisory Board*

**Ricci FONG, Ph.D., Gary HARFITT, Ph.D., Lancy TAM, Simon THAM**

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# C N T E N T S

Words from Founding Editor 6

Foreword for BLJ Issue 12 7

## Poetry

John Grey	<i>Life of a Paleontologist</i>	8
Kris Spencer	<i>Imagine</i>	9
S. B. Fields	<i>I Don't Sing in the Shower</i>	12
Nicholas Froumis	<i>I Found a Genie in My Thermos</i>	16
Michelle Liao	<i>Perhaps This Time</i>	18
Bill DeMain	<i>What's in a pink flamingo?</i>	30
	<i>Who does a giraffe's hair?</i>	31

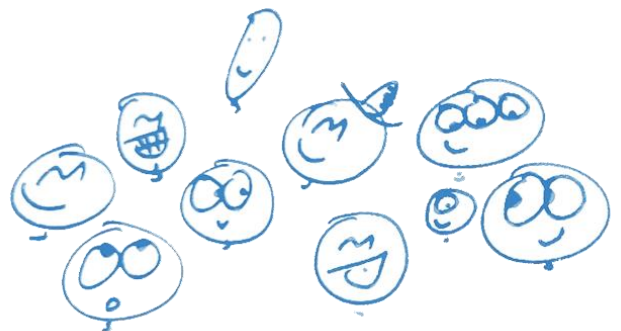
## Fiction

Kyra Li	<i>Subjugation of Silence</i>	13
Michelene Esposito	<i>A Protective Fuzz</i>	20
Chris Low	<i>Local Buzz</i>	24
J. S. Kierland	<i>Deep Water</i>	27
Logan Henry	<i>A Monster's Howl</i>	34
Katie Waters	<i>Bottled Up</i>	39

## Artwork/Photography

Felix Quiñonez	<i>Neil's Coffee Shop</i>	10
	<i>(No Summer) Summer</i>	11
Elaine Choi	<i>Forecast</i>	19
Bill DeMain	<i>What's in a pink flamingo?</i>	30
	<i>Who does a giraffe's hair?</i>	31
JaeMin Song	<i>The Final Stage of Ocean*</i>	32
	<i>Shattered Minds</i>	33

\* Cover & Back-cover Art





## Words from Founding Editor

Writing this passage feels like writing an end-of-the-year reflective essay because this issue happens to come out at the end of the year. And with all that happened, or didn't happen in 2020, it is really hard not to write it like a year-end wrap-up.

Online teaching, online meeting, online marking, filming, editing, effect adding (however amateurishly)...all these time-consuming activities have become our new essential skill set as a language teacher. The digital world surely brings us closer with images and sounds in times of isolation, and words are becoming all the more powerful maintaining and strengthening our distant connections. Despite the difficulties, I feel blessed to be able to contribute to the new world of bond-building by keeping this literary project thriving and vibrant, at least for readers with a youthful heart.

This issue doesn't have a theme, unlike our last issue where a COVID-19 section became a very memorable and striking part of the magazine. However, I strongly feel that the works here coincidentally go with the year-end atmosphere – they all give us something significant – these are Christmas presents for us to unwrap.

I am deeply touched by the impact of these gifts. We received the importance of treasuring family love from Li, Esposito and Kierland; the caution we need or shouldn't need for decision-making from Froumis and Liao respectively; the yearning for a better tomorrow from Choi, Song and Quiñonez; the spirited song that comes out so naturally from Fields; the "hard work pays off" from Low; the hauntingly rhetorical question from Spencer; the creative ideas to portray simple matters from Grey and Demain; the power of acceptance from Henry; and, the power of self-belief from Waters. I am so very contented with these 15 entries, no, 16, including Principal Tam's heart-warming words on the right!

This issue is certainly one of the very few wonderful things I earned in the year 2020. I wish that you would treasure it as well, being a part of your fond memory of a very very special period we have lived through together. And for 2021, quoting from Sarah Ban Breathnach, "Take a leap of faith and begin this wondrous new year by believing."

Best wishes to you, my friends.

**Dr LEE Ho-cheung (Peter)**

Founding Editor

BALLOONS Lit. Journal






## Foreword for BLJ Issue 12

Only till Peter, the founder of BALLOONS Lit. Journal asked me to write the foreword for this issue that I realized that it is Issue 12 already! BLJ has evolved to be a literary magazine paraded with poetry, fiction and lots of artwork and photography! Hats off to Peter!

No one would disagree that 2020 has been an extraordinary year. The collection in this issue is a good demonstration of the “unexpected”! How can you not frown when you see “I found a Genie in my Thermos”? How can you not ask yourself the same question when you read “Imagine” – would you like to start things up again or just stay quiet? I wonder whether Kris, the Headmaster had experienced the pandemic when he wrote this poem. He surely wanted to go back to the good old days of face-to-face instruction.

When I saw the painting “(No summer) Summer”, seeing the couple sitting in the living room with bathing suits, I nearly wanted to paint another one – (No Celebration) X’mas Celebration! Who would have thought that X’mas parties could go online? That is extraordinary!

Having said that, there are scenes in the fiction section which are so familiar! The confrontation between the parents and the young adult is so vividly depicted by Kyra Li in “Subjugation of Silence”. Who has not been asked by mum to take the phone away? At that moment, I stepped into the real world, going back to the “ordinary” again!

I hope the world can soon go back to the “old” normal, from the present upside down to upright stand! Is it the message behind the cover and the back-cover art? The year 2020 has come to an end. Get some *Cheer-up Syrup* from Katie Waters and hang in there!

What’s in the 12<sup>th</sup> issue of BLJ? Immense treasure for you to explore! Let’s go!

Ms TAM Suk-yin Lancy  
Principal  
Law Ting Pong Secondary School

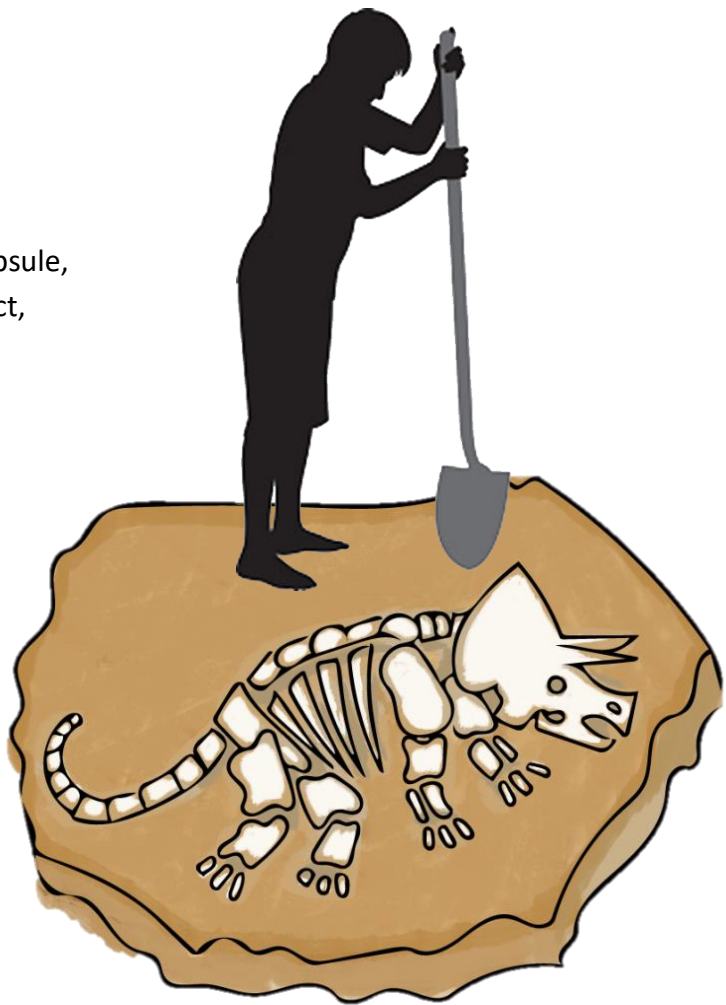


# John Grey

## Life of a Paleontologist

shovel in hand,  
looking for bones  
old collisions,  
ancient tides,  
tracks in a time capsule,  
be it petrified insect,  
leaf or bone

my future,  
as always,  
is what happened  
long ago



**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Sin Fronteras*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Qwerty* with work upcoming in *West Trade Review*, *Willard and Maple* and *Connecticut River Review*.


# Kris Spencer

## Imagine

Imagine you were the last person on Earth  
And all the lost plants and animals were back, and evolving  
The planet happily revolving  
With certainty and worth

And then some God or other  
Offers you the chance to bring back the humans  
All the eight billions  
Your sister and your brother

Would you do it?  
Start things up again  
All the joy and all the pain  
Or just stay quiet



**Kris Spencer** is the Headmaster of a School in London. He has had published seven books, working mostly with Oxford University Press. He is a regular contributor to magazines, including *The Times Educational Supplement*.

## Neil's Coffee Shop



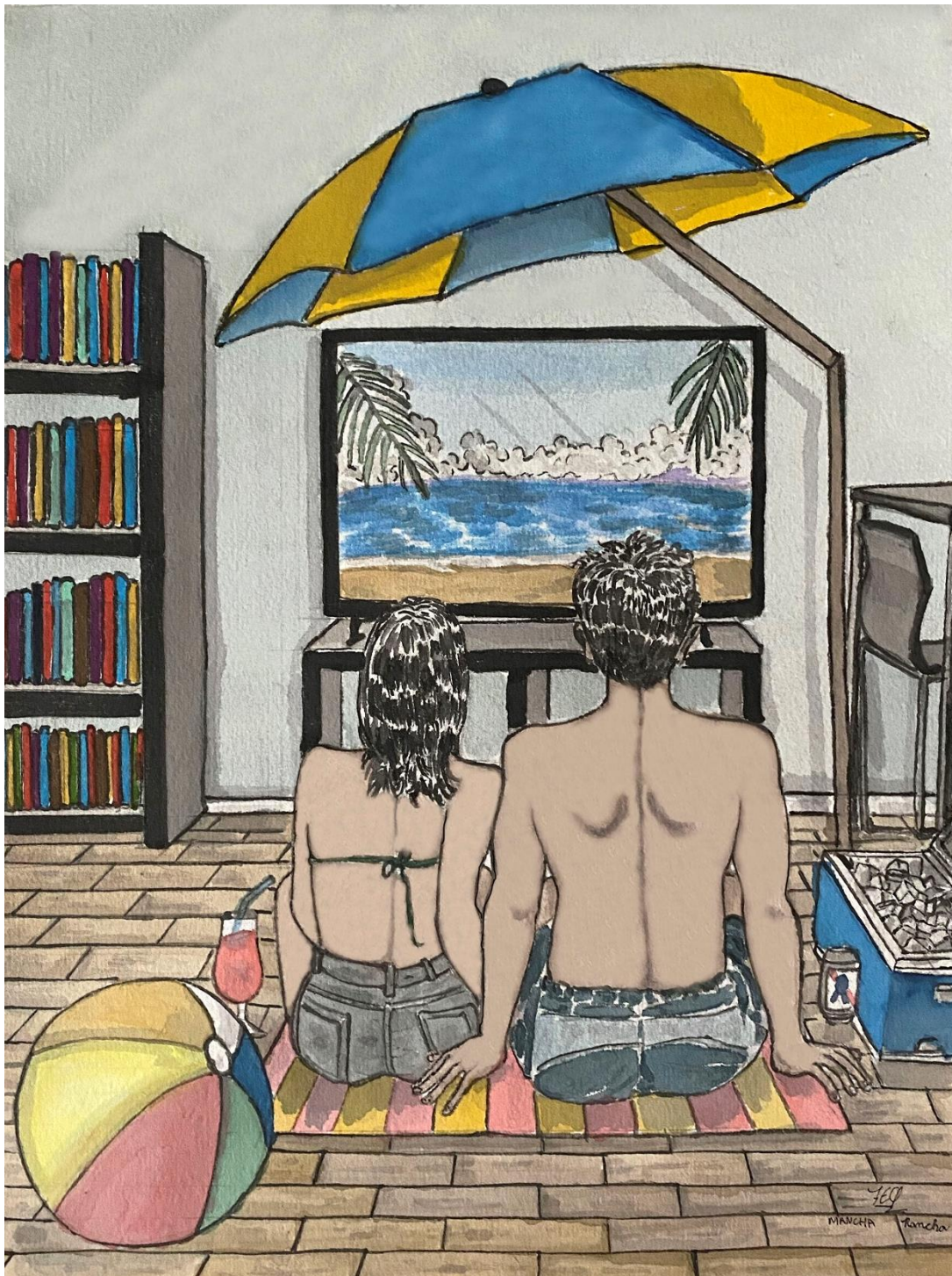
Watercolor paint on watercolor paper, 9 x 12 inches

# Felix Quiñonez

*Artist*



# (No Summer) Summer



Watercolor paint on watercolor paper, 9 x 12 inches

**Felix Quiñonez** was born in Paraguay and raised on Long Island. He studied journalism and art in Hunter College, and illustration at the School of Visual Arts. His self-published comic books and graphic novels have been sold in stores in NYC and online. His writing has been published in the *Hunts Point Express*, *My Culture Magazine*, *USA Today*, and various online publications. Since 2016, he has been the co-editor and contributor to a comic book Anthology called "Emanata". When not reading or making comics, he enjoys watching movies and listening to music. He loves Indie Rock and Hip Hop (especially of the 90s variety). He lives in Brooklyn with his cat and his cat's rat.

**S. B. Fields** is a freelance copywriter and proofreader in New York City. You can find his work in the *Anthology of Poetry by Young Americans* as well as recycle bins across Brooklyn. Fields attended grade school in a humble suburb in Connecticut where he majored in Pokémon and being late to Social Studies class.

Poet

# S. B. Fields

## I Don't Sing in the Shower

I perform.

I take center tub  
beneath the splashing spotlight.

Our opening number is a little song  
that's been in my head  
since I heard it playing in the waiting room.  
But we make haste to fan favorites:  
the second verse in that Queen song,  
and the opening riff of some ballad.

Subtle steps and taps  
performed daily, carefully, to perfection.  
One slip could harm the show, you know.

My brother groans through the tiles.  
They can take a lot away from me.  
But they're never taking this.

Oh,  
this water is cold now  
and that's my cue.

My bar of soap reduced to tears.  
And the shampoo drips for more  
from the balcony above.

But I slip backstage.  
And dig for my lucky comb,  
neglecting the ovation  
and the weeping curtain call.



# Kyra Li

Author

# Subjugation of Silence

“M

“My god,” my brother, Jeremy, said. “It’s a wonder Mom didn’t kill you.” He stood at the doorway to my room. The look on his face was pale and wide-eyed.

“I can’t believe I’m still alive.” I was waiting for my mother to storm up to my room with a Voldemort look on her face and *avada kedavra* me.

“I heard you from my room. What happened?”

“She was threatening to take away my

phone for the hundredth time.”

“Yeah, but calling her a drunk is just... stupid.”

He was probably right, but I had gotten tired of the constant threats. I didn’t mind the practice, but the nagging drove me mad: *If you don’t practice, you can’t advance. Besides, how will you be able to get into regionals? You’re wasting my money on violin lessons if you’re not going to try! I’m gonna take away your phone for a week so you can think about your life!*





Once per month for the past year, my mother had taken my phone away for several days at a time. Without my phone, I missed out on social media posts from my friends, and not having my phone when I went out was just embarrassing.

"Too bad," I said to my brother.

"You should apologize. Mom doesn't even drink more than a can of beer once in a while. If you don't, she'll totally disown you."

"I didn't mean it. I was just mad. Don't you ever say things you don't mean?"

It had been fifteen minutes since I'd accused my mother of being a drunk. Fifteen long minutes since I left her in the kitchen washing the dishes. Twenty since she said, "If you don't practice violin in the next five seconds, I'm gonna take your phone." And yet, I could still hear her down in the kitchen, the water in the sink running and the dishes clattering, my phone still in my hand, my violin still in its case.

My brother left the doorway, and his bedroom door closed. Somewhere upstairs, a shower squeaked on, and a Chinese soap opera blared from the TV in the guest room, where my grandparents were staying.

Then, I heard my mother answer the phone. I could tell she was talking to Gloria, her friend from college, by the way she laughed at Gloria's jokes. Gloria was always funny. She could make shocking political jokes that made everyone laugh. They began to gossip about a mutual friend, whose son got into Harvard for lacrosse but he'd bombed the SAT and couldn't write an essay to pass fifth grade.

Meanwhile, I lay in bed waiting for my mom to finish her conversation and come and take my phone away. Or maybe

she would kill me. Out the window, I saw only blackness. A car drove by, passing light through the shadow of trees, which, at night when I'm trying to sleep, always looks like a monster crawling across my wall.

A couple of years ago, my mom helped me paint my wall in pink, white, and "sandstorm" stripes. I'd wanted a trophy shelf, so she ordered me one and helped me nail it into the wall. In my closet, there were racks, where she'd helped me organize my clothes and keep them off the ground. I thought about the times I'd asked for her opinion about my clothes and she'd say, "You look amazing!" especially when she knew I didn't feel all that amazing. In the corner was my desk, a hand-me-down from her childhood — a white intricately carved piece of furniture and chair with a velvet cushion. When she'd given it to me, she told me, "This is the desk I've used and kept since when I was about your age."

From my room, I could hear my mother hang up the phone and the garage door opening. The slamming of the mud room door made me jump, and then I heard the soft voices of my mother and father. They were speaking the way they always do when they discuss my brother and me — in quiet cahoots.

Next, the spicy, earthy smell of kimchi rice rose from downstairs along with the mint chocolate scent of my favorite cookies baking in the oven. Pretty soon, my mother yelled, "Jeremy, come down to eat." I heard the water pouring downstairs, and then, I realized that she was not going to call me down for dinner. This was the first time that my mother hadn't forced me to come down to eat with the family since the time I had food poisoning in fourth grade.

At that moment, my stomach felt empty and uncomfortable, so I rummaged around my backpack until I found the granola bar from last week's violin recital. I poured the crumbs from the smashed granola bar into my mouth. They tasted stale, but sweet and nutty. Continuing my search for food in my desk drawer, I found Watermelon Icebreakers and an old lemon-lime lollipop. As I sucked on my lollipop, I looked over at my violin that lay in its case under my desk.

Some days I hated my violin. I hated its shape. I hated that it was nothing more than a stuck-up fiddle. I hated the mark it left on my neck that I worried would never go away. I hated how it controlled my life and limited my free time, restricting me from making plans with my friends and made me feel guilty for skipping a day of practice. I hated the sound of its voice sometimes, loud and repetitive.

Other times, I felt that it was fun to be able to play an instrument, and I knew that practicing was better than wasting my time on my phone. But why couldn't I have kept playing the recorder? It was easy. Less than four octaves. Why were my parents making me play the horrible violin when I could've merrily stuck with the tried and true?

Still, it was always in the back of my mind that my parents were decent people only trying to help me survive as an adult. They had immigrated from China and attended college in New York. They worked hard to get their educations and make a comfortable life in America, an attitude that had trickled down to my older brother. He was the captain of the water polo team, editor for the school newspaper, member of the

Independent Research Team, and the recipient of multiple national writing awards. He always played his piano when he was supposed to. I respected his determination to work hard, his self-control, and his high standards.

As these thoughts ran through my head, I stared at my violin. Maybe it was the lack of dinner that was making me delirious, but my violin suddenly looked like a person with a long neck and thin waist, whose bow resembled a kitchen utensil. It looked a little like a woman holding a spatula.

If it could speak, it would have said, "I want you to be happy. I want you to appreciate music."

I walked over to my violin, opened my music book, and started playing "Spring" by Vivaldi. I felt the winter of the day melt into evening.

**Kyra Li** is a rising sophomore at The Pingry School. She enjoys dancing, playing tennis, playing the violin, as well as doing calligraphy. She wrote this piece one weekend after she had an argument with her mum about practicing the violin.

# Nicholas Froumis

## I Found a Genie in My Thermos

Mom must have sealed up my Thermos too tight,  
when she packed the leftover chicken soup.  
I twisted and struggled with all my might  
to budge that ever-stubborn plastic loop.

And to my amazement what did I see  
when the lid finally spun from its place?  
A tiny genie staring up at me,  
Covered with soup, silk, and elegant lace.

I ran to the field, my Thermos in tow,  
giving my classmates no chance to give chase.  
Behind the big tree, where no one would know,  
I could take my time to look at his face.

"You know how this works, don't you my master?  
Three wishes shall be at your disposal."  
"I have always wanted to be faster."  
"And I shall honor your first proposal."

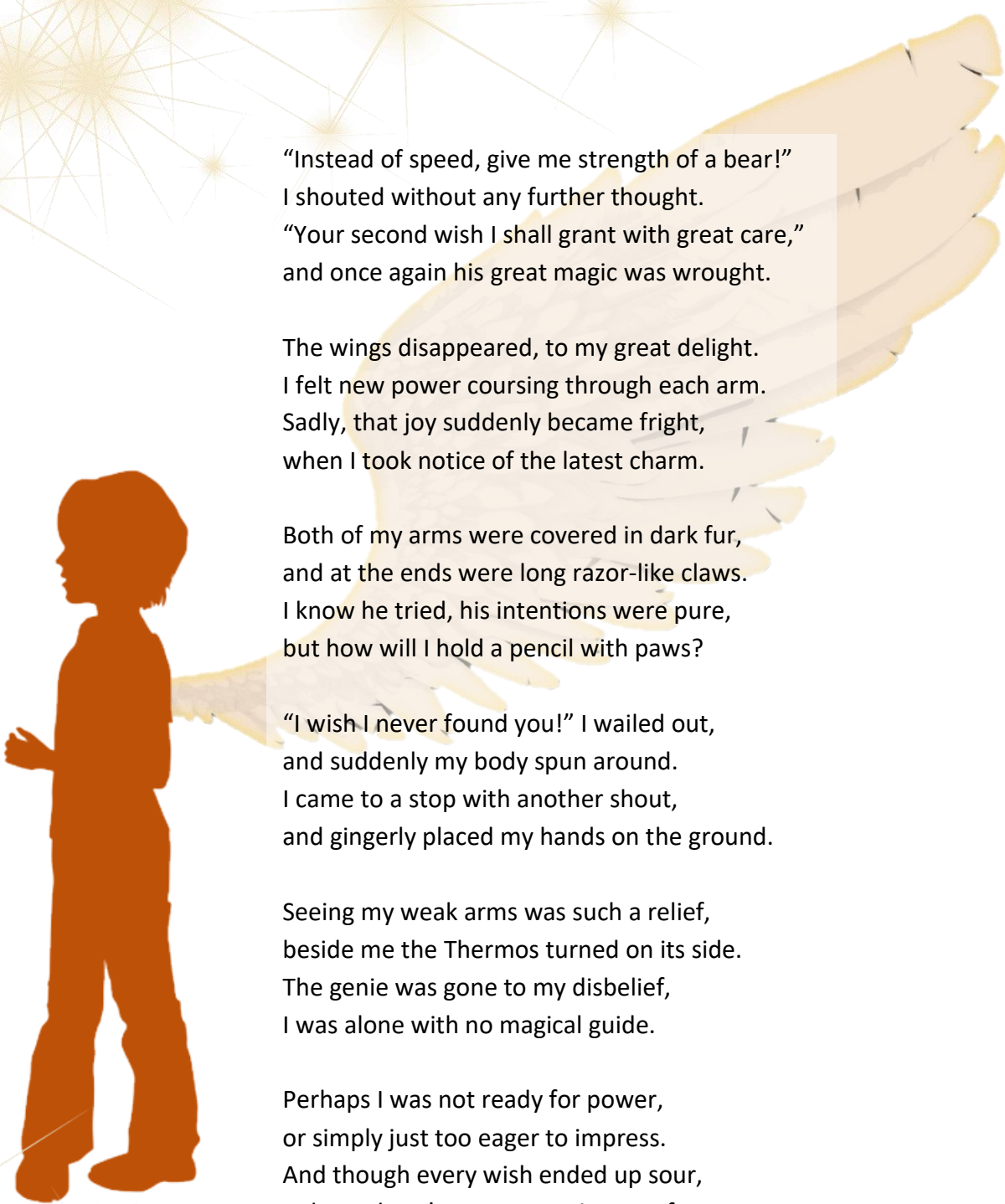
Then two great wings emerged from my back,  
tearing my shirt like construction paper.  
I flew at great speed around the dirt track,  
so fast that no one noticed my caper.

It was bliss at first, then to my chagrin,  
I noticed the sheer size of the wings.  
Being new is tough enough to fit in,  
without the kids asking, "What ARE those things?"





**Nicholas Froumis** practises optometry in the Bay Area. His writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Gravel*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Penwood Review*, *WestWard Quarterly*, and *Ground Fresh Thursday*. He lives in San Jose, CA with his wife, novelist Stacy Froumis, and their daughter.



"Instead of speed, give me strength of a bear!"  
I shouted without any further thought.  
"Your second wish I shall grant with great care,"  
and once again his great magic was wrought.

The wings disappeared, to my great delight.  
I felt new power coursing through each arm.  
Sadly, that joy suddenly became fright,  
when I took notice of the latest charm.

Both of my arms were covered in dark fur,  
and at the ends were long razor-like claws.  
I know he tried, his intentions were pure,  
but how will I hold a pencil with paws?

"I wish I never found you!" I wailed out,  
and suddenly my body spun around.  
I came to a stop with another shout,  
and gingerly placed my hands on the ground.

Seeing my weak arms was such a relief,  
beside me the Thermos turned on its side.  
The genie was gone to my disbelief,  
I was alone with no magical guide.

Perhaps I was not ready for power,  
or simply just too eager to impress.  
And though every wish ended up sour,  
at least there's ten more minutes of recess.

**Michelle Liao** is a student at Marshall High School in Marshall, MI and the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center in Battle Creek, MI. When Michelle isn't writing, she enjoys reading YA books, spending time with her friends, and attempting to play piano pieces correctly. She currently lives in Michigan with her parents and an adorable little sister.

## Perhaps This Time

I remember this place.  
Insistent wind tugs at my hair  
and forms new shapes in the sand.

All around me are squealing children  
frolicking in the sand,  
digging, searching, for little treasures.

Down at the very bottom  
of this sand-covered mountain  
lies a shimmering lake,  
waves gently cupping the shore.

It seems so close,  
and yet the wind never carries  
the scent of the lake all the way up here.

The slope is steep-  
a formidable enemy, for sure.  
But is that really what's stopping me?

Or is it the fear that I'll never return?  
Give in to temptation and find  
that the struggle up  
is just a little harder than I expected?

But perhaps this time,  
I'll find the courage to climb down,  
wade into the smooth water.

Perhaps this time,  
I'll step into that postcard view.

Perhaps this time, I'll turn around  
and see a hill slanting up  
instead of down.

Perhaps this time. Perhaps *next* time.  
And so I stand,  
knowing that this opportunity  
might not ever come again.  
And yet I still turn away.



Poet

Michelle Liao





## Forecast



Acrylic on paper, digital media, 16 x 22 inches

# Elaine Choi

## Artist

**Elaine Choi** is a junior based in Seoul. Elaine finds great interest in contemporary social and environmental issues, and her artwork often reflects her thoughts and ideas regarding them. Through art, she also expresses her identity, which she believes is a work in progress. She hopes to be able to constantly create artwork that communicates, inspires, and summons actions.



# Micheline Esposito —

## A Protective Fuzz



**M**

My father brought home pizza twice last week. Ever since my mother got sick, he's been acting weird. It's not like he's grouchy or anything. He's just quiet.

Sometimes now I look at him when he doesn't know it, and you know what he looks like? Scared. I guess there's no reason for anyone to look scared when my mom's around. My Mom's like Wonder Woman. Before she got sick, she wouldn't sit down unless she was making a shopping list or taking the ends off string beans. There were times I wondered if she ever slept. And then it turns out sometimes she didn't. That's part of it — part of the manic depression. I remember one time I fell out of my bed at like 3 o'clock in the

morning and she heard me. Another time Eddie got a nosebleed in the middle of the night and she *knew* it. How do you know that kind of thing?

I sure don't know those sorts of things.

My little brother, Eddie is this uber smart kid. He's in about three of those gifted classes and my parents cart him around the county, so his robotics team can compete — and because of Eddie, they almost always win. Also, he's in chorus. He's got a concert tonight and, of course, he has a solo. That's the type of kid he is.

The solo is only about four lines. I wish it were longer just because he keeps singing those same four lines over and over and it's driving me crazy.



Eddie's only ten. I'm not sure how much he understands. He's old enough to understand when we tell him Mom is sick and, sometimes, the sickness makes her hide somewhere we can't find her. I try to tell him how I remember, back when he was a baby, how we eventually found her and the doctors fixed her medicine and how it's been years since the sickness came back. But, as smart as he is, he just stares at me like I'm talking another language and walks away. The past few days he's asked me the same question 20 different ways.

"Are you lying to me," he'll ask.

"I'm not lying to you, Eddie. She's coming home soon," I'll answer.

"That's what Daddy tells me."

My mom owns this hair salon and she's been cutting hair since we were babies. I worked there this past summer, just doing shampoos and sweeping up. Anyway, today Eddie comes home from school and tells me he needs his hair cut for the concert tonight and I need to cut it for him. Give me a break! I don't know anything about cutting hair.

He just rolls his eyes at me when I tell him 'no' and pulls his bald eagle report out of his backpack for me to sign – and, of course, he got an "A". Seeing that report somehow makes my chest get tight. I remember that report from the day my Mom left and it's weird how she could be there and be her usual self and then we come home from school and she's gone. How could I not have noticed anything different? Didn't something have to be different? I think hard, but I can't remember anything. That was the morning I was eating cereal and she was sitting there sketching on a piece of paper.

Eddie walked into the kitchen, his hair standing up on end. "Well, where is it?" he asked her.

He took the sketch of a bald eagle from her, then flung it on the table.

"It's supposed to be a *bald* eagle," he said, "Why'd you draw fuzz on the top of its head?"

"It *is* bald. It's just a little fuzz. I don't see the problem with a little fuzz," Mom said.

"Bald does not mean a little fuzz."

"Eddie, give me a break. I happen to know you have never seen a real bald eagle in your life. I'm the one in the hair business. I think I know a little more about baldness than you."

"It's true," I told him, "All the bald guys who come into Mom's salon have this fuzz on the top of their baldy heads. We have to shave it off."

That got him and he sat down to eat his cereal, chewing and considering that.

"What's it for?" he finally asked.

"Protection," she told him.

"A protective fuzz," I added.

"Oh, yeah? Then why do you shave it off?"

"I don't need this, early in the morning," she told him, "Finish your cereal. You're going to miss the bus."

Eddie got up in a huff and left the rest of his cereal and the report cover. I picked it up. My Mom's a pretty good drawer.

"Don't pay attention to him. This is good. I remember when you used to do report covers for me."

"And you'd say 'A giraffe? It looks like a cow.' And I'd tell you 'It's a baby giraffe. Its neck has to grow.'"

We were laughing. I gave her a hug goodbye. And then I went to school.

That afternoon I came home from school and my father was home early from work.

"What are you doing home?" I asked.

"Did you get a call from your mother?"

"No. Why?" I said, but even then, I somehow knew. That was a month ago. Thirty-three days, to be exact. My father has taken a bunch of time off work to be with us more and pick Eddie up from aftercare, but tonight he has a work meeting he couldn't miss. That is why I skipped my leadership meeting at school to come home and microwave this T.V. dinner for Eddie. That is why I'm the one on pointe for this concert thing.

"Eddie! Dinner's ready," I call up the stairs.

Eddie comes trudging down the stairs and plops down in the kitchen chair and immediately starts making these gagging noises.

"What is *this*?" he asks.

"Salisbury steak T.V. dinner."

"Gross! It stinks! When's mom coming home?"

I'm trying to figure out which of the hundred buttons to push to get the dishwasher to start, 'cause let me tell you, that is what 'stink' smells like!

"Joyce, when is Mom coming home?"

"Soon," I say for the hundredth time, but I'm not really paying attention. I open and close the dishwasher and try pressing the "start" button again. Nothing. I open and slam it this time. Nothing!

"When's soon, Joyce?"

"I don't know, Eddie!" I yell. "How am I supposed to know! What is wrong with this dishwasher!"

"Well, you keep saying soon, so I just figured you had an actual definition," he mumbles all snarky.

"Oh shut up, Eddie!"

I was so angry. Really! How was I supposed to know when she would come home? I actually hate her right now. I hate that she left. I hate that she gets sick. I hate that she leaves me here to deal with this. Who buys a dishwasher with so many buttons? How is it I have to answer these questions? And why can't anyone find her? How hard can it be to find an actual real-life *woman*, for God's sake?

Eddie grabs his fork and his T.V. dinner and stomps upstairs. I hear his door slam.

It's right about then I start to feel like a jerk. I head up after him.

"Hey Eddie," I call through his door. No answer. I open the door and he's sitting on his bed, his face all red, trying not to cry, shoving hunks of Salisbury steak into his mouth. I walk over and plop down next to him. "Hey Eddie, listen," but he won't even look at me. He's going to choke to death. "Hey, cut them smaller."

"I'm not going to the concert tonight," he says.

"What? You have to go. You have a solo."

"Mark Kramer can sing it. He cried when he didn't get it anyway."

"Oh, no way, Eddie! You have to do it. I'm coming to your concert, just to hear that solo."

"But you hate my solo. You always tell me to shut up when I sing it."

"I'm just giving you a hard time," I tell him.

"Here," he says, handing me the T.V. dinner and getting up, "And I'm not going."

He can be one of those really stubborn gifted kids when he wants to be, let me tell you.

"What are you going to do? Just duck out of everything? Just sit at home?"

He swings around.

"Yeah! Maybe I'll do that! Maybe I'll wait here until Mom gets home. She'll be home *soon*, right Joyce!"

"You don't know when that is, Eddie. Soon could be another month."

"Soon is *not* a month, Joyce. Any moron knows a month is *long* – not soon!"

And now he *is* crying. And that's when I get up and hug him. And I keep hugging him, even though I'm crying now too, until I feel him calm down, feel him stop shaking.

Then he says, "You know something, Joyce?"

"What, buddy?"

"I don't know when soon is."

"Neither do I."

"It's a stupid word. It doesn't have anything to do with Mom."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're so stupid, Joyce. She could never come home soon enough."

You think I could have thought of something to say to that. I mean here's this 10-year-old boy, his damp hot face looking up at me. You'd think I could have said something a little intelligent, but all I say is, "You're right. It's a stupid word."

Eddie nods at me, like someone is finally making some sense. And don't ask me why, but I start thinking about this time

when I was seven and crashed my bike into the big rose bush on our street. I was wedged in there, screaming like a lunatic, and Mom came running out of the house and rescued me. Then she got on the phone and reamed this lady at the city hall out about cutting that thing down. You can always count on my mom to scream at some lady on the phone for you. She's always right there for those types of things. Most mothers would just stick a Band-Aid on your knee and send you back out.

Thinking about it gave me this excellent feeling suddenly, so I tell Eddie the story. Eddie laughs and calls me a klutz, but he gets in his concert clothes and we start walking to school.

The more I think about that day, the surer I am that a mother who will do that – protect her klutzy kid from a bush – is a mother that's for sure coming home. I don't know how to explain it really. What I do know is that *soon* is a stupid word to use with mothers. If you want the truth, soon is never soon enough for mothers. Eddie is right. Let me tell you, you can't pull anything over on those gifted kids. Don't even try.

**Micheline Esposito** writes Children's, Young Adult, and New Adult Fiction. Her first novel, *Night Diving*, received a *Foreword Magazine* Silver Award. Her second novel, *Mermaid*, was released in 2007. Both novels were published by Bella Books. Her third novel, *Catch Me*, was released in 2014 by New Libri Press. She has published short stories in *Fine Lines*, *Young Miss* and *Teen* magazines. Micheline lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.



# Chris Low

## Local Buzz



“And that’s my hive tool! For lifting out the frames.” Angie pointed at something that looked like a crowbar lying next to the honey jars. She couldn’t tell if the little boy across the table was fascinated or terrified.

“The frames are where the bees live,” Angie continued, “And where they make the honey. Cool, right?”

“I’m hot,” the boy said as he tugged on his mom’s arm. “Can we go now?”

Angie leaned over the table and pushed the hive tool aside. “Did you know that on a hot day like today, the bees keep the hive cool by fanning it with their wings?” The little boy took a step back, and Angie realized she was probably

coming on too strong. Most people didn’t expect a ten-year-old girl working at a roadside honey stand to know so much about her product’s origins. But Angie had been totally fascinated ever since she started beekeeping as a way to help her family’s struggling farm.

“You know...maybe we’ll come back another day,” The woman said.

“But I was just about to show you a honeycomb!” Angie reached under the table and pulled out something that looked like a rectangular picture frame. “Bees instinctively build each cell with six sides. A hexagon is the optimal shape for honey storage.”

The woman barely even nodded as she

she shuffled her son back towards the car. Angie watched them drive away and scratched her head. Bees were such amazing problem-solvers, but apparently none of it had rubbed off on Angie. She couldn't even figure out how to make a sale.

"How's my queen bee doing in here?"

Angie turned at the sound of her dad's voice. He'd been keeping an eye on things while he worked in the yard.

"The hive already has a queen, dad. There can only be one."

"Okay, okay. Well, how's business? Those folks buy some honey?" He nodded toward the car as it disappeared on the horizon.

"Scared 'em away," Angie said. "I guess the hive tool is a little weird-looking."

"Well, I still think beekeeping was a great idea."

Angie crossed her arms. "What do you mean was a *great* idea?"

The smile drifted from her dad's face. "Summer's almost over, Angie, and I'm not sure we can afford to winter your hives again this year."

Angie had been dreading this conversation. Her dad was always talking about how beekeeping was an investment, and sooner or later they'd be needing a return. "But the bees have been working so hard!" she tried, "And they've just discovered the new sunflowers down by the pond!"

"I know, Angie, but —"

"And did you know that they dance? That's how they tell the other bees where to find the new food!"

Her dad shook his head. "I'm just as amazed as you are, but we need some kind of income, and these bees just aren't —"

Angie's dad was cut short by the sound of a car crunching over the gravel in front of the honey stand. A man in a suit jacket stepped out and nodded as he walked up to the table.

"Local honey, eh?"

Angie smiled and put her hands on her hips. "Yes sir! Harvested it myself!" She couldn't believe the timing. Served her dad right for doubting her.

"I'm Dr. Haber. I work down at the university." He offered his hand to Angie, then to her dad. "I've heard about you," Dr. Haber said to Angie. "You might just be the youngest beekeeper in the whole state! It's created quite the buzz, if you'll excuse the pun."

Angie blushed and folded her arms.

"And you keep the hives nearby?"

Dr. Haber asked.

"Just up the hill," Angie said, "But all the honey is right here. How much would you like?"

"Actually, I'm not here for the honey."

Angie's smile faded. So much for good timing.

Dr. Haber lifted a jar from the table. The pale-yellow honey illuminated in his hand as he held it up to the sun. "Good color," Dr. Haber said. "Must be some sunflowers nearby."

"Yes!" Angie said, "And they just found the new ones I planted!"

"Really?" Dr. Haber put down the jar. "Did you know that when bees find new food, they communicate it through a series of —"

"Dances!" Angie shouted.

"Hold on now - you some kind of a bee scientist?" Angie's dad asked.



"I suppose you could say that," Dr. Haber said. "I'm an entomologist."

"He studies bugs!" Angie said to her dad. "Remember – I was telling you that's what I want to do!"

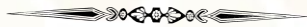
"And that's why I'm here," Dr. Haber said. "I'm doing a new study on insect communication and would love to observe your bees." Dr. Haber looked between Angie and her dad, then quickly added, "I wouldn't disturb the hive. And of course, I'd pay you for being part of the study."

"Well how about that?" Angie's dad put an arm around her and said, "Your bees might just give this farm a shot in the arm, after all!"

Angie was beaming. She looked out to the stack of bee boxes resting like a chest of drawers at the top of the hill behind her house. A faint haze of movement surrounded them as the worker bees returned from their afternoon of foraging. Maybe Angie wouldn't have to say goodbye, after all. A sense of relief swept over her, and she spun around, clapping her hands.

"Are you a dancer, as well?" Dr. Haber asked.

"Maybe I am," Angie said. "I do learn from the best!"



**Chris Low** is a children's writer and elementary school teacher outside of Philadelphia, PA. He draws inspiration from the organized chaos of his special education classroom and the perpetually surprising wit of his own students. In addition to his middle grade book projects, Chris has published several award-winning short stories with *Highlights for children* and *Spider Magazine*. Chris is married with two young boys and a dog who will eat literally anything.



*Author*

# J. S. Kierland

## Deep Water



**H**e waited until his grandfather took the oars before sliding the skiff into the water and jumping into it for a perfect start. The old man nodded his approval and began to row through the glassy water toward the dark island edging the shadows on the other side. They headed for the dead tree where the light wouldn't hit for hours. He reached for the paddle, dipped it into the dark water at the stern, and angled the boat toward the black

mound where the fallen tree barely broke the surface.

He held the rod while the old man tied his special bait of worms and silver fish just above the hook. Then standing straight up in the boat, the old man lobbed his line just below the sunken tree and let it run out in a faint buzz until the fish broke the surface.

"You got him, Grandpa!" he yelled before



it turned.

The old man stiffened at the sudden weight, pulled at the line, and the large bass flopped into the boat. Billy took the pole, while his grandfather lifted the flapping fish off the bottom and carefully angled the hook out of its mouth. Billy took the fish in his arms, curled it in against his chest, then leaned over the edge to let him slide back into the water.

"If you have to catch them then you're not fishing," the old man would say, and they'd watch the quivering fish disappear back down into its secret world.

Drifting out into the deeper part of the lake, the old man tied a heavier weight on the line to work the bottom. That's when Billy took a long gulp of the canteen's metal tasting water and settled back to watch the early light rise out of the silence.

No matter how many times he thought about the old man he always remembered the one fish that hit so hard. It cut in close and the old man had to let out a lot of line. Then it turned to fight and his grandfather leaned forward to shorten his grip. Billy lunged into the bow, stumbling over the bait bucket, and grabbed the back of the old man's jacket to keep him from tripping over the oars. His grandfather's legs tightened like posts as he bent to keep the sagging line from disappearing under the boat. The fish came up thrashing and Billy caught the large wriggling bass in mid-air with its greens and blues sparkling in the shimmering morning light that jumped off the lake.

"He's a beauty, Grandpa," Billy said, squeezing the fish against his chest.

"He's caught deep though," the old man muttered, opening the bass's mouth,

trying to unhook him. "Can't reach it. We'll have to take him in."

"My hand's smaller," Billy said. "I'll get it."

The old man held the fish's mouth open and Billy reached down into it, and the bony ridges in the fish's throat scraped along the back of his hand. He pushed further down into the yawning mouth, feeling the taut line where the bait wriggled just above his grandfather's special knot. The fish's cold, sticky insides chilled the tips of his fingers but the hook stayed just beyond them. If he jerked the line it would pull the fish apart, so he let go and eased his hand out of its gaping mouth. The old man stared down at the fish and opened his jack knife.

"Let me try again, Grandpa."

"He took it too deep, Billy. Can't put him back like that. Wouldn't be fair."

"I know," the kid said and the old man cut the line. "Does this mean he'll die?"

"We all have to die, son," he said, and began packing his old metal box with its hooks, lines, and weights.

"We going back so soon?"

His grandfather began rowing towards the dock even before the sun had reached halfway across the lake. The bass flopped at his feet as they slid over the water, cutting through the long shadows that ran the lake like dark fingers. Billy sprinkled fresh water over the flopping fish until they finally bumped to a stop at the dock.

The old man cleaned the big bass and they stopped off in town and gave it to the one-eyed cook at the diner. The cook invited them to eat with him but the old man declined, and they got back into the car and headed home.

"I'll be going away for a while," the old man said. "You can take the poles. Go fishing whenever you want."

"Where you going?"

"Oh, not far. I just won't be able to fish for a while." He started to say something else but stopped. They sat quiet, listening to the drone of the old Chevy. It'd be their last time out together. After that came the church, the cemetery, and the long ride back in the limousine.

A few days later his father handed him the old man's fishing poles. He slid his legacy into a dark corner of the closet and waited for a time that never seemed to come. The years passed until he could barely see the fishing pole's worn handles behind the hanging clothes that had gotten longer with each passing year. Whenever he did notice the poles, he'd sense the big open-mouthed bass on his hand again and think about his grandfather drifting on a lake somewhere, fishing in the deep water.



**J S. Kierland** is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, and did postgrad at Hunter College where he won the New York City playwright's award and was admitted into Sigma Tau Delta. He was also given a full scholarship and Fellowships to the Yale Drama School and after receiving his MFA became playwright-in-residence at Lincoln Center, Brandeis University, and the Lab Theatre. In Hollywood, two of his stories were produced into films. He was also resident playwright at the LAAT, where he founded the successful LA Playwright's Group. He has published a novella, edited two books of one-act plays, and there are over 125 of his short stories in literary anthologies, reviews and magazines around the U.S., including, *Fiction International*, *Colere*, *Trajectory*, *International Short Story*, *Bryant Review*, *De La Mancha*, *Front Range*, *Muse & Stone*, *Mount Hope*, *Emry's*, *theravensperch.com*, and many other leading Literary Reviews. "15 of the BEST SHORT STORIES" was published in 2014 by Underground Voices, and his novella *HARD TO LEARN* was published as an e-book by the same publisher. He has also edited two "Best Plays of the Los Angeles Actor's Theatre" and is just completing a novel.

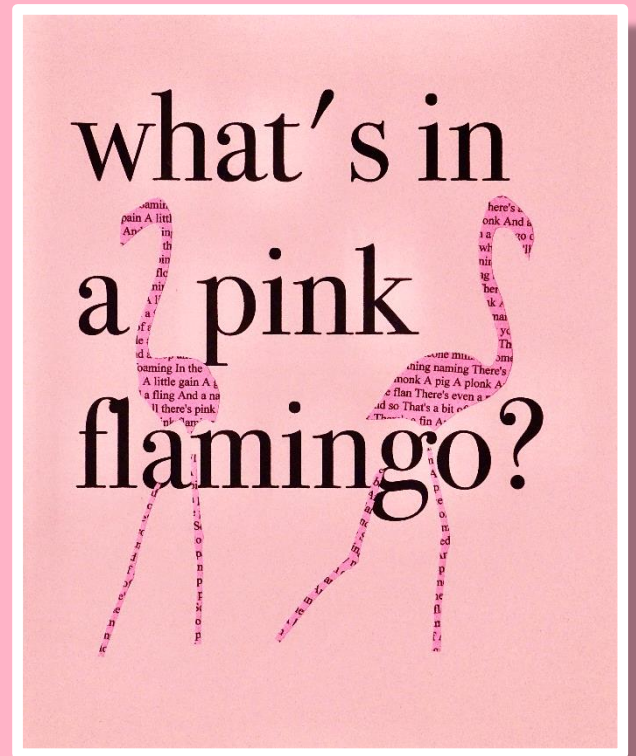




## What's in a pink flamingo?

There's a pin  
and some ink  
There's a fin  
And a mink  
There's a mop  
and a pail  
And a flop  
and a fail  
Someone pining  
Someone faking  
Someone mining  
Someone flaking  
Something foaming  
In the loaming  
Something flaming  
Something naming  
There's a go  
and a no  
A little pain  
A little gain

A girl named Flo  
A boy named Mo  
A monk  
A pig  
A plonk  
And a fig  
A king  
A map  
And a fling  
And a nap  
A loaf  
A pan  
An oaf  
And some flan  
There's even a mango on a napkin  
But most of all there's pink  
Lots of pink  
Flaming pink, and so  
That's a bit of what you'll find if  
You look inside a pink flamingo



# Bill DeMain



## Who does a giraffe's hair?

The stylist for a giraffe  
Is an Oxpecker bird, don't laugh  
He'll sit on his head all day  
Just combing and brushing away  
He'll smooth down those flipped up licks  
While eating his dandruff and ticks  
And all that he wants from Big G  
Is a kind of a substitute tree  
A perch with a view and good height  
A safe place to crash for the night

## Poet & Artist

**Bill DeMain** is a music journalist and musician from Nashville, TN. He has written articles for *MOJO*, *Classic Rock*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Mental Floss*, and songs for artists such as Teddy Thompson, Kim Richey, Marshall Crenshaw and Curtis Stigers. When he is not writing, he likes to watch birds. And when he is not watching birds, he likes to write poems about birds and make cut-out art.





## The Final Stage of Ocean

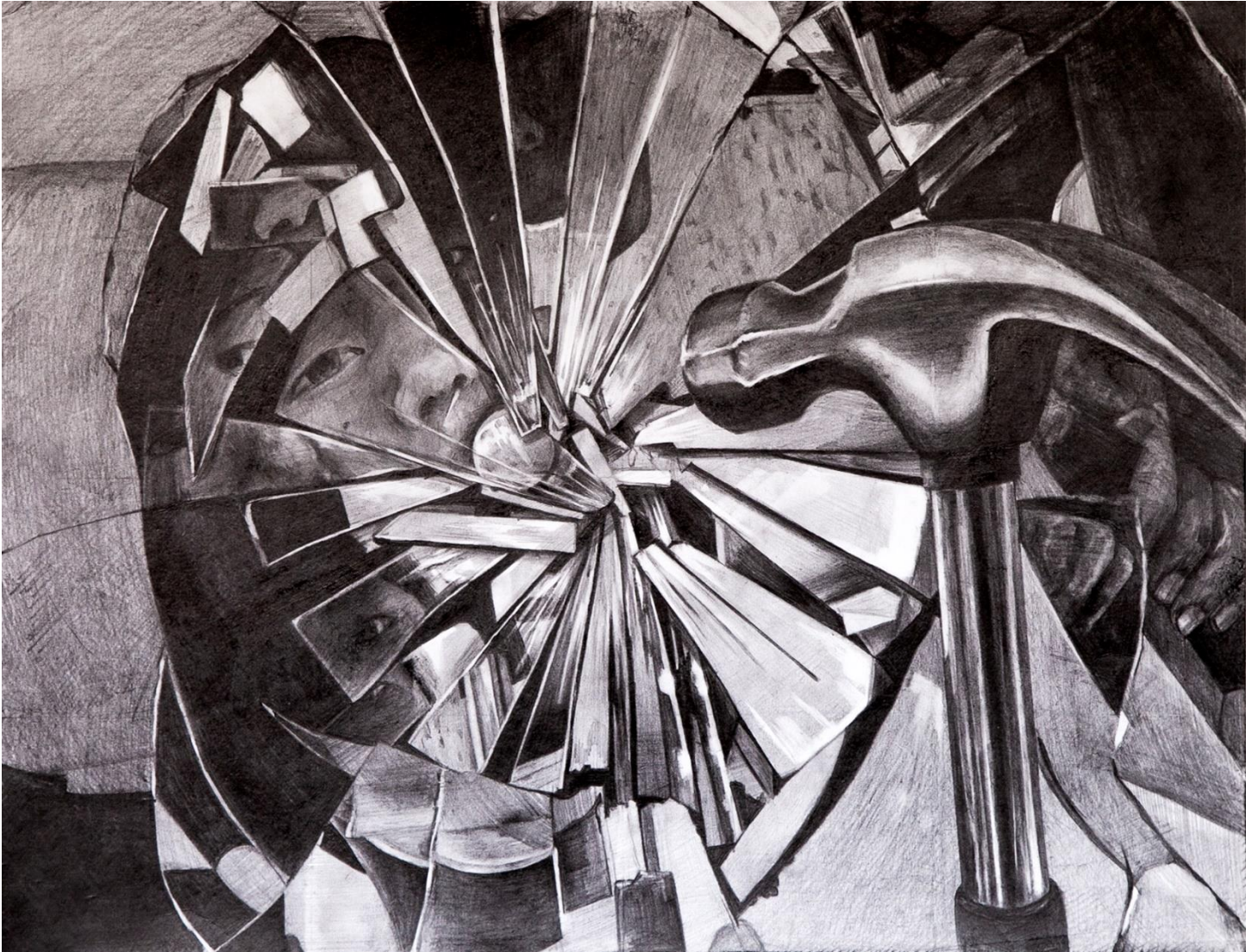


Acrylics on canvas, 53 x 72 cm

# JaeMin Song



## Shattered Minds



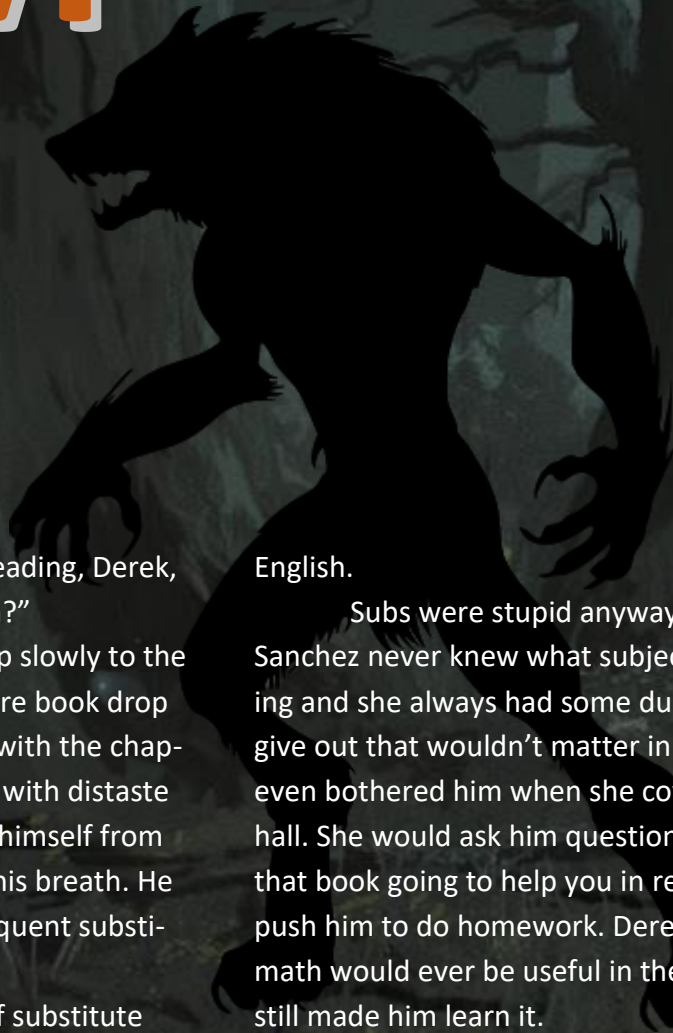
Pencil on paper, 50 x 38 cm

### Artist

**JaeMin Song** is an eighteen-year-old student attending an International School in Seoul, South Korea. He enjoys bringing together issues from real life and his imagination into his artwork. Besides art, he enjoys playing soccer or hanging out with his friends.



# Logan Henry — A Monster's Howl



“I appreciate your enthusiasm for reading, Derek, but would you care to pay attention?”

Derek Alvarez slid his eyes up slowly to the substitute teacher and let his vampire book drop with a thump. He was almost done with the chapter, too. Ms. Sanchez eyed his book with distaste before turning away. He restrained himself from whispering something nasty under his breath. He hated Ms. Sanchez. She was the frequent substitute teacher at his middle school.

There were only a handful of substitute teachers in his small town. They crossed subjects and Ms. Sanchez, who frequently popped up in Math and History (subjects he found brain-numbingly boring) had to come into his favorite —

English.

Subs were stupid anyway, he thought. Ms. Sanchez never knew what subject she was teaching and she always had some dumb assignment to give out that wouldn't matter in the future. She even bothered him when she covered for study hall. She would ask him questions like, “How is that book going to help you in real life?” and then push him to do homework. Derek didn't think math would ever be useful in the future, but they still made him learn it.

He barely held in a sigh as he slumped down at his desk and pulled his notebook towards him, scribbling in it furiously. He missed Mr. Lycaon and talking about stuff that was actually

cool, like mythology.

"When do you think Mr. Lycaon will be back?" Derek whispered to his friend Devon when Ms. Sanchez was turned away. She had been distracted for a while. She had Zoe helping her with the smartboard.

"I dunno, dude. I heard from Tyler, who heard from...I dunno, someone else, that he has some pus oozing disease. Got it from some gnarly gash on his leg. Gonna be out for a while." Devon grinned at the thought. Derek knew Devon didn't like English. He'd rather be in Science, or better yet, away from school all together.

"You guys are so stupid," Grace hissed behind them. "He has the flu."

"Whatever," Devon muttered. He caught Derek's gaze and rolled his eyes, but his face did look a little disappointed and his neck flushed red.

Derek reached over to clap him on the shoulder, and then turned around to glare at Grace.

No matter how many times a substitute came into class, they could never get the smartboard to work. Derek eyed his book and slid it toward him slowly. It looked like this was going to take a while.

Dinners were quiet lately. Camila, his older sister, took the extra plate into the kitchen before their dad could notice. She had gotten better at that recently. Cooking was when his dad was happiest and also the time that Camila could sneak in and put the extra plate back. When his mom was alive, she would play the blues while they cooked. She would sing and taste test, sometimes even got Derek or Camila up to dance, while their dad watched the pots. He still listened

to the blues, but there was no more singing along.

Eventually the music shut off and their Dad called them into the kitchen to help. After they sat down and prayed, the quiet settled in around them.

"I liked that song," Camila finally spoke up. She fidgeted with the crucifix that hung around her neck. "The Louis Armstrong one. It was pretty."

Their dad smiled. "Yeah, your mom did too." There was a pause, where both Camila and Derek held their breath. "How was school?" They let go.

There were a few noncommittal noises, until Camila spoke up. After she talked about her day, she kicked Derek under the table.

"Hey —!" Derek erupted, before closing his mouth with a snap. "Mr. Lycaon is sick," Derek grumbled. "Had to do some dumb worksheet in class today."

"Must be that flu going 'round," his dad mused. "You guys have to get your shots."

Derek and Camila both groaned. Derek saw his dad crack a smile and he couldn't help himself either.

Mr. Lycaon was back...but — Derek made a face — he wasn't sure he should be. His English teacher was a man in his forties, or maybe fifties, Derek didn't really know or care. He was mostly bald, thin and tall, often leading him to hunch his shoulders in his baggy button-ups.

But he looked worse. He was thinner, if possible. His shoulders were more hunched than usual and his skin had an unusual yellow sheen. His flint colored eyes



even seemed to glow. In the two months that Derek had known him, he had never seen Mr. Lycaon like this. There was a gash on his forearm that was scabbed over and red. Derek eyed it with curiosity and a little bit of disgust. It almost looked like a bite mark. Derek reflexively touched the crucifix hidden under his shirt. His eyes swept the room to make sure no one was looking before he quickly crossed himself.

"I told you!" Devon whisper-yelled in his ear.

"There's no pus," Derek said wryly, giving his friend a joking smirk.

"Well, obviously he isn't gonna show up to class with pus oozing out of his arm," Grace spoke up before Devon could.

Devon gave her a look and then turned to Derek. "What she said."

Derek felt kind of bad for being excited that Mr. Lycaon was back, because he looked pretty rough. When he started his class, he couldn't stop twitching. Not often, but every once in a while, he would pause and his head would flick. And his fingers couldn't stop curling in on themselves as he talked. Clenching and unclenching.

Derek scooted his chair back. Whatever he had, Derek wasn't catching.

When class ended, Derek tossed out, "I'm happy you're back." It was the first time Mr. Lycaon smiled all class and uh, Derek wasn't in a hurry to see that again. He never realized how big his teeth were before...and shiny.

"Does he seem okay to you?" Derek asked Devon, thinking back once more to the bite mark on his arm.

Devon grimaced. "Nah, that pus disease messed him up."

Derek pursed his lips in thought, fiddling with the vampire book in his hand...Nah, he decided. That was crazy.

"You guys are so stupid," Grace said, walking past them. She looked at them over her shoulder. "But...something isn't right."

Sundays were for dinners at Abuela's, but they weren't always consistent. His dad couldn't make it this week because he was too behind on work. Abuela was his mom's mom. Sometimes he thought it was just too hard for his dad.

Camila never missed a dinner. She was close to Abuela. Derek loved his abuela too, but he couldn't help but shiver as he peered out the window. The days were getting shorter, darker, and colder. Too cold for Derek.

"Are you coming?" Camila asked as she pulled on her red gloves.

"Uh..."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever." She flipped her dark hair out from under her collar and pulled her red hat on. "I'll tell her you said you hate her."

"Oh, come on!" Derek protested. He burrowed deeper into his hoodie. "It's cold."

"Yeah, yeah," she called out as she walked out the front door.

Just as Derek settled in to read his book, he spotted the galletasucas on the counter. His eyes slowly slid to the door, then back to the cookies, then to his book. Abuela couldn't drive anymore and they always brought her galletasucas to her on Sunday, because she couldn't get to the store.

He looked at the door once more. Camila did this on purpose! Well, she

thought better of him because he wasn't going to go out now just to bring her cookies. He'd never get out of there.

He refocused on his book, but the cookies stayed in his peripheral. Sitting there, judging him. Stupid Camila! He let his book drop with a thump. He grabbed the cookies and yelled to his dad, "Going to Abuela's!"

Stupid, sneaky Camila.

He shoved the cookies into the pouch of his hoodie and hopped onto his bike. He knew Camila would take the bike path. Maybe he could catch up to her before she made it to Abuela's.

God. It was freezing. And dark, except for the peek of the round moon behind the dark clouds. The bike path was barely visible and it was slick with wet leaves. His hands ached from gripping the handle bars, trying to control the wheels of his bike.

He didn't crash until he heard a piercing scream. He lost control and fell to the ground, his left side slipping in the mud. He lay there dazed, until he heard the scream again.

That was definitely a girl's voice. His heart pounded against his chest. Camila! He pushed his bike off him and fumbled to get back on, pedalling furiously toward where he thought he heard the voice. Again, his bike crashed into the ground, but this time to avoid his sister.

She was pressed up against a tree, cowering, but trying not to cower. He could barely make out the look on her face, but he knew she was ready to go down swinging.

"Mierda," he muttered. He could make out the outline of the...thing. It was tall and thin, hunched over at the shoulders,

with claws and...sharp teeth sticking crookedly out of a snout. And fur. "Mierda," he said again.

The thing towered over Camila, but almost looked like it was restraining itself. It snapped around at the sound of Derek's voice and bared its teeth at him and snarled. Camila took the opportunity to run, circling the tree and coming to stand beside Derek.

Just before the monster lunged, Derek spotted the ripped button-up hanging off its hunched shoulders. That almost looked like the ones Mr. Lycaon would wear.

Camila pushed Derek and she went the other way. The thing snapped at air and the brother and sister looked at each other and started running. Derek's mind started spinning, jumping from one thought to the next, and then back, and then sideways. God. He was nuts.

Camila tripped on something and went down, but he had too much momentum and went flying past her. He skidded to a halt and doubled back, but not before Mr — whatever, got to her. It hovered over Camila, spittle dripping from its maw.

"Mierda," Derek whispered again. He grasped at the silver crucifix around his neck, the twin to his sister's. Here goes nothing, he thought as he yanked it off his neck. He swung towards his teacher and stabbed the silver crucifix downward, against the monster's back.

It...uh...didn't do much. But it pierced its skin and the monster howled. Actually howled. It cowered and Derek saw the fur melt away, the teeth disappear, and his shivering, hunch-backed teacher lay against the ground. His clothes were in tatters and his face was pressed against the mud. Derek

helped him roll over. Mr. Lycaon snapped at him with his teeth, but stopped mid-movement, as if realizing.

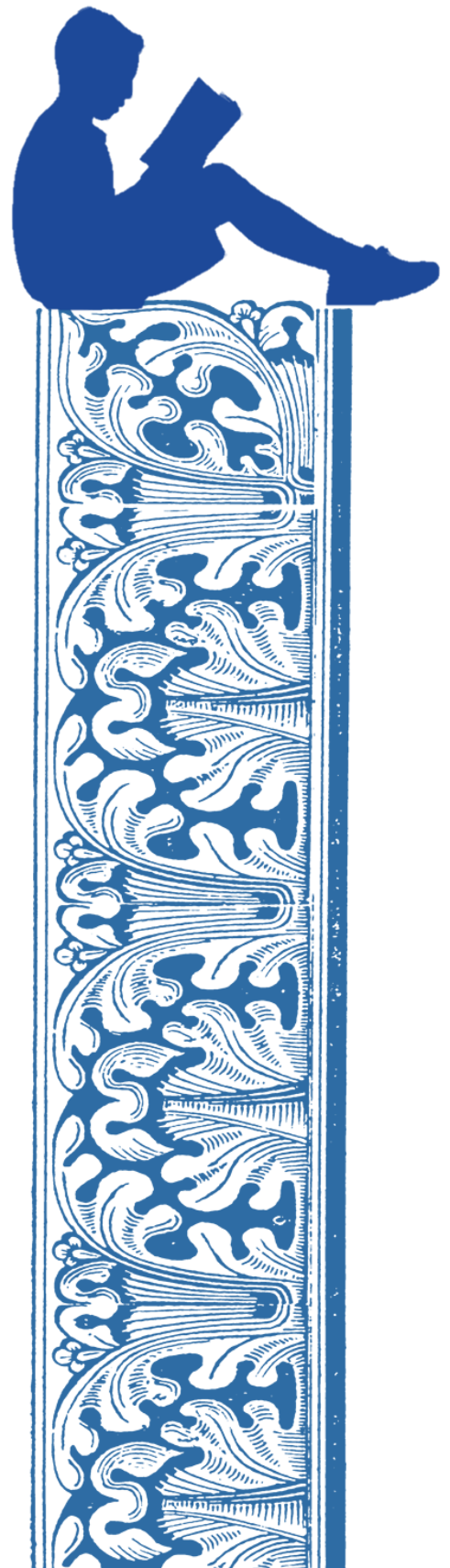
Camila acted quickly, calling the police to say they found a sick man in the woods. They sat against a tree together, watching the 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher shiver and try to form words.

Mr. Lycaon was taken away in an ambulance and the two kids walked away from Abuela's house, towards home. Derek steered his bike while walking, as Camila called to explain they wouldn't be able to make it.

When they got home, neither of them was able to say a word. Camila took the crushed cookies from Derek and placed them back on the counter. Derek sat on the couch and studied the wood grain in the coffee table. His lips twitched into an involuntary smirk when he caught sight of his book. He slowly pulled the forgotten book towards him and cracked it open to finish his chapter.



**Logan Henry** is a writer and graduate student at Chatham University, where she is currently seeking his MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has been featured in *The Ascent*. She lives in Upstate New York and spends entirely too much time hoping to make vampire novels a thing again.





Author

# Katie Waters

## Bottled Up



Livia had almost given up hope by the time the bottle arrived.

Nothing had lifted her heart. At times, she thought it had stopped completely. Today was a Friday, but the world still looked off-colour. It hadn't helped to see Danielle walking arm-in-arm with Melissa on the way to Art.

Three weeks ago, there had been a school trip to Stonehenge. Danielle, who was supposed to be Livia's best friend, had partnered with Melissa. Livia had texted her that evening. Danielle never replied, and, from that day on, it seemed that Melissa was her new best friend.

Livia slammed her front door, trying to shut them out of her mind.

Then she saw it – a small, brown paper package, lying on the door mat. It was addressed to her.

Livia grabbed the package and tore into it.

She had ordered the potion weeks ago, in the middle of the night. Unable to sleep, as she tried to hear her faint heartbeat, she'd searched the internet for a remedy. She knew she was bound to find one; you could find almost anything on the internet.

Sure enough, Livia eventually came across a website called "Bottle It Up" and selected the ideal potion. It was expensive, but she had no other choice.

Now, here it was, in her hands – a little black bottle with a heart-shaped lid.

Livia took the package up to her room. If her mum came home and saw the bottle, she would want to know what it was. Livia couldn't exactly say, "Oh, it's a magic potion that I bought over the internet to turn me into a stronger person." She knew how her mum would react to that.

Mariana, Livia's grandma, had had cupboards full of potions and magical objects.

"Don't take after your grandma," Livia's mum had told her from a young age. "It isn't a healthy obsession, all of this witchy stuff."

For years, Livia hadn't been interested in "witchy stuff". That was before her heart began to wither.

This potion came with a little sheet, folded several times. Livia opened it out, scanned the tiny print for the English instructions then read them carefully.

### ***Cheer-up Syrup***

*To restore strength to weakened hearts.*

*Please read these instructions carefully before use.*

**DOSAGE:** *For oral use.*

*Adults and children aged 12 years and older:*

1. *Mix 4 teaspoons of Cheer-up Syrup with 12 teaspoons of water.*
2. *Leave mixture in a cool, dark place for at least 72 hours.*
3. *Face west when ready to take the mixture.*
4. *For maximum effect, play passionate music in the background.*

*Children under 12 years:*

*Not recommended.*

*Do not exceed the stated dose.*

*Warning: May cause drowsiness and/or blue ears.*

Livia's hair was dark and thick enough to cover her ears, so she wasn't too worried about them turning blue. However, she felt her weak heart sink a little when she saw the words "*for at least 72 hours*". That was three days. She wouldn't be able to take the potion until Monday afternoon – and only if she prepared it as soon as possible.

Livia ran to the kitchen.

Once they were both in the jar, the water began to dilute the black potion to a pale grey colour. Livia found one of her paintbrushes discarded on the window sill and used it to stir the mixture. It reminded her of watercolour painting. If her parents walked in now, maybe they'd think she was just doing some ordinary artwork.

*Leave mixture in a cool, dark place.* It was dark under her bed but not cool enough – as it was winter, Livia was reluctant to turn her radiator off in her room. She hated getting cold hands; it made it impossible to draw.

The coldest place in the house was here, in the kitchen. Livia opened the cupboard again and pushed the sealed jar containing the mixture to the back. There.

Now all she had to do was wait.

When Livia awoke on Monday morning, her heart felt weaker than ever.

At school, she spotted Danielle and Melissa in the dining hall. Melissa was show-

ing Danielle something on her phone, but Danielle kept glancing up, as though she was looking for someone. Livia hurried out to the courtyard and sat on a bench. As she picked at her cheese sandwich, she wondered if Danielle had been looking for her.

No, Livia told herself, of course not. It was Danielle who had ended their friendship. Livia had told her how Melissa used to treat her – the kinds of things Melissa had said to her. Danielle had chosen Melissa anyway.

During Art, Livia's mind was on two things – her barely beating heart and the potion in the kitchen cupboard. She covertly downloaded a "passionate music" playlist onto her phone.

By the end of the lesson, she had only drawn half a cat's head. Mr Simmons, who was patrolling the classroom, sucked his teeth when he saw the vague pencil marks in Livia's sketchbook.

"You're better than this, Livia," he said quietly. "You know you are."

Livia swallowed and nodded.

*I will be better*, she wanted to correct him.

Mr Simmons sighed and walked away. Livia wished she could tell him about her weakened heart. Then, maybe, he'd have a little more sympathy.

As soon as she was outside the gates, Livia ran – she didn't care if anyone thought she was odd; the solution to her problems was waiting at home.

Once home, she opened the kitchen cupboard and peered inside. Over the weekend, she had wondered if the potion would change – she imagined the jar being full to the brim with some kind of purplish liquid, like the potions in cartoons.

Instead, Livia found the jar empty.

With shaking hands, she took it out and inspected it. It was *clean*, as though the potion had never been in there. Livia put the jar on the floor and peered at the others. She was sure she'd put the jar in that spot, but maybe she was remembering wrong. She rummaged around, knocking over a couple of the lighter plastic jars – they fell out and bounced on the kitchen tiles.

Livia stood up quickly – too quickly for her heart, which throbbed, trying to beat harder – and backed away from the cupboard. She searched the entire kitchen – every shelf, every cupboard, every nook, every cranny.

She didn't find it. The potion was gone.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Livia lifted her fork and let the spaghetti fall from its grip.

"What's wrong, Liv?" her mum said. "You've hardly touched your dinner."

"I'm just tired."

"You do look a bit pale," her mum said. "You're not coming down with something?"

Livia had the urge to open up about her heart, which was beating fainter by the minute, but she shook her head.

"I felt alright when I got home," she said. "I was even going to paint. But I forgot where we keep the jars – you know, for the water?"

Her mum blinked at her. "Well, they're in that cupboard, aren't they?" She shifted around and pointed. "Next to the oven. I cleaned that one out this weekend. It was about time. I thought you hadn't used



those jars for a while – one had some old water in it.”

Livia’s stomach flipped. She dropped her fork. It clattered against her plate.

“Did you wash it?” she said.

“Sorry?”

“The jar. Did you wash it?”

“Yes, I washed it,” her mum said.

“Don’t worry. That’s obviously what I’m here for. It isn’t as if anyone else might be kind enough to –

“Hey, where are you going?”

Livia had stood up.

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

In her room, Livia dropped to the floor and wriggled under her bed. There was no time to cry, and, besides, she didn’t think her heart could take it. She had to find the bottle with the rest of the potion, mix some of it with water again and wait another three days. This time, of course, she would definitely keep it well-hidden from her mum.

Livia pulled out a green shoe box. Had she put the bottle in here? She couldn’t remember. She knew she’d put it somewhere safe, but she had many “safe” places.

These shoeboxes had kept things safe since Livia was a little kid. In this one, she found special postage stamps, “lucky” crayons, ribbons cut from her old ballet shoes, a yellow-haired troll and a crocheted ladybird. Livia snatched all of these sentimental items and discarded them on the floor around her. She just wanted the potion. She *needed* the potion.

As she opened box after box, Livia’s head thumped. Why had she kept all of these ridiculous knick-knacks? What good would they do?

Stifling a sob, Livia tipped out the

last box. Beach shells, train tickets and homemade bookmarks scattered across the floor.

Then, she saw it. Mariana’s mirror.

The memory flowed steadily through Livia’s mind. It was her sixth birthday. Mariana had found her in the kitchen, playing with the fairy from top of her birthday cake.

“You like fairies?” Mariana said.

Livia nodded.

“What do you like about them?”

“...they’re magical.”

Mariana smiled. “Well, I’m glad you like magic. That means you’ll like my present.”

From behind her back, Mariana produced the small, silver, spoon-shaped mirror. Livia took it and looked at the reflection of her chocolate-smeared mouth.

“It isn’t for looking at your *face*,” Mariana said. “You’re beautiful, and you always will be, but you mustn’t get vain... No, no, no – this mirror is for looking at your *heart*.”

Mariana took Livia’s hand and gently lowered the mirror to the level of her chest. She tilted it slightly upwards, so that Livia could see the reflection – through her t-shirt was a dark shape with gold glitter inside, and it pumped every second.

“Do you know what that is?” Mariana said.

“It’s my heart.”

“That’s right. But do you know what that gold dust is?”

“No.”

“That’s your strength. Look at how much you have already.”

Livia had been an artist from a very young age. There were, she estimated, about two glitter pots’ worth of gold dust

floating inside her heart.

"Remember that amount," Mariana said. "That's how much strength you've got. Use this mirror to keep an eye on it. You don't want to lose any of that stuff."

When Mariana died a few days later, Livia had been too full of grief to think much about magic. She had put the mirror at the bottom of the shoebox, to keep it safe, and there it became something to remember her grandma by. She had forgotten about its magical properties.

Now Livia lifted the mirror in front of her chest. The reflection was unclear at first, as though the surface was rippling. Then the image settled, and Livia saw her heart. She saw the gold dust. Two glitter pots. Exactly the same amount as before.

Livia placed the mirror down and gazed ahead of her, picturing Mariana and her crooked smile.

"You see?" she heard Mariana say. "It's still there. All that strength."

That evening, Livia did the washing up. Her mum came into the kitchen as she was drying that last plate.

"Goodness," she said. "What's going on here?"

"I just thought I should help out a little."

"Well, it's about time." But her mum was smiling, and she gave Livia a hug.

There was something about being in her mum's arms, and smelling her musky perfume, that made Livia want to cry. She pulled away and pretended that she needed to sneeze. Her mum, however, could always see through her daughter's pretence. That was, in itself, a kind of magic.

"Hey," she said. "What's wrong, honey?"

Livia shook her head. She wanted to tell her mum about Danielle and Melissa, but she knew it would hurt. She wasn't sure if she was strong enough.

Then she remembered. Of course, she was.



**Katie Waters** is a writer from England. She recently graduated from the University of Winchester with a first-class degree in Creative Writing and English Literature. She is committed to writing for young people. Her short story "First Light" was placed third in a competition judged by Michael Morpurgo, who immensely inspired her to write for children. She helped to create a website for students, which provides advice about online bullying and harassment. Last year, she wrote a monologue for a young actor, who performed it at Theatre Royal Winchester.





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