

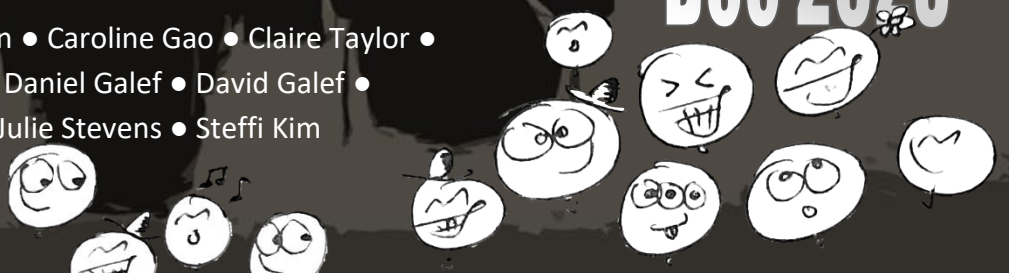
Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal

Issue
Fifteen

Dec 2023

Aamna Rehman • Bethany Veiman • Caroline Gao • Claire Taylor •
D. W. Davis • Daniel Barlekamp • Daniel Galef • David Galef •
Ho-cheung Lee • Joyce Lazarus • Julie Stevens • Steffi Kim



“...a writer is working when he is staring out of the window.”

–Burton Rascoe (1892-1957)

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BALLOONS Lit. Journal (BLJ) is an independent 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

Founding Editor & Designer

Ho-cheung LEE (Peter), EdD, FLCM

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Words from Founding Editor

It means the world to me to have this fifteenth issue produced amidst my increased “happy” workloads in my serving school.

“Happy” because I am promoted to the Assistant Principal position and I am trusted by the school board and other stakeholders; but the adjective is in quotation marks because I am not so sure if I am that brilliant for the administrative work that comes with this title. And *that* explains why this issue is a bit slimmer than before. Not that there weren’t sufficient submissions – the number the submissions (mainly from the U.S.) have been on the rise even without any effort of mine to advertise the magazine globally – time is indeed the main concern when putting together this issue. Since I basically do everything myself, the time needed to design one page told me that it would be unwise to keep the book the same length if I were to produce it electronically by the end of 2023, in order to keep my promise of producing at least one issue per year.

Despite the extremely tight schedule, I am over the moon to have these great pieces included (does it sound right that I automatically praise my own photography too?) in this humble issue. For poetry, the Galefs, father and son, give us wise, humorous and imaginative verses; Barlekamp’s verse on the beauty of Mother Nature will melt your heart; for a bit of funny twists, poems from Taylor and Stevens will bring you a smile when you finish reading their final lines; and for a touch of the Christmasy vibe, Rehman’s biblical work will give you lots of inspiration.

As for fiction, stories from Kim and Lazarus will stun you with their powerful plots on the power of nature; Gao’s story on the struggle between law and humanity will surely get you think as much as what the philosophical tale by Davis will get you; the issue cannot be complete without a tale showing the sweetness of family love, and for that, Veiman’s story gives us a perfect and hearty dessert.

There are unfortunately lots of editorial imperfections in this issue, but I am confident that the quality of its contents can make up for that. This magazine farewells 2023 and welcomes another amazing and bright year. BALLOONS Lit. Journal wishes everybody an amazingly great new year and healthy and prosperous journeys ahead regardless of what you plan to do.

Happy reading.

Dr Ho-cheung LEE

Founding Editor

BALLOONS Lit. Journal



2018



2023



2018



BLJ Promotion

2019



2021



BLJ being promoted (and complimentary copies given out) during different occasions of Dr Lee's professional sharing in Hong Kong



The Singular Solip (Entry in the Book of Nonsense Ani- mals)



The **Solip** has one curious feature:
An inside-outside sort of creature,
its left curves round to meet its right,
its top, its base — a silly sight!
It wraps itself just like a ball
of twine — its arms and legs and all:
Its eyes and ears all face inside,
its surface just a seamless hide.
The Solip's all the Solip sees;
its ears hear only Solip-knees.
Its nose is wedged against its fist.
It doesn't know that you exist!
But if it were to come unfurled,
its limbs peel off from where they're curled
until it bloomed just like a rose
and pulled its fist from out its nose
and took a tentative first sniff
and blinked, and looked about it — If
it saw, at last, the world around,
the furry grass upon the ground,
and clouds and mountains loom in view,
the blinding sun, the sky — and *you*,
the Solip wouldn't faint from shock
or petrify into a rock.
This wouldn't bother it a bit.
It still would think it's all just it.

Daniel Galef

Daniel Galef is a student and a teacher and a writer and a reader. His writing for children has appeared in *Spider*, *Caterpillar*, *Crow Toes*, *BALLOONS Lit. Journal*, *Orbit*, *Spaceports and Spidersilk*, and *Light*. His first book was published this year and is a collection of poetry for grown-ups titled *Imaginary Sonnets*.

Poet

Five Myths

The world was formed from three droplets of water.

My father's a dragon, my mother a phoenix.

I'm on a seven-year quest to slay the giant.

One by one, the mirrors crack from pain.

This poem will turn into a snake.

David Galef

Poet

David Galef has published over 200 poems in places ranging from *The Yale Review* and *The Gettysburg Review* to *Witness* and *Measure*, as well as two poetry books, *Flaws* and *Kanji Poems*, and two chapbooks, *Lists* and *Apocalypses*. He is a professor of English and the creative writing programme director at Montclair State University, as well as the editor of *Vestal Review*, the longest-running flash fiction magazine on the planet. www.davidgalef.com, @dgalef.



Aamna Rehman is currently a 17-year-old senior at a STEM school in Georgia. Although she was born in Pakistan, she grew up in Georgia and have spent the majority of her life here. She started to enjoy writing in middle school, leading her to join her school's magazine in her junior year of which she is now the Chief Editor. In her free time, she also enjoy reading, listening to music, and crocheting.

Jochebed and the Night Fish



There was a fish in the moon that swam in the skies,
Over the rocks and stars, 'round Venus and Neptune,
It would swim towards a girl who sang lullabies
To lull the child in her arms with a gentle croon,

The fish watched the girl lay the child into the night,
And give him a push, give him away to the stars,
It couldn't tell if it was the child or girl's cry
As he drifted through the black and broken sky far,

The fish swam through the horizon and it turned back,
To see the girl fade into a forever mist,
It followed the child through stars and between a crack
In the moon where it lived and gave the child a kiss,

I will watch over you, told the fish to the child,
And keep you safe as you swim through the River Nile.



Aamna Rehman

Steffi Kim

Author

The Scarlet Beast

The ground had been parched for many moons before the first inkling of a spark was conceived. Sweltering July heat, then the wrath of August had beamed down on the continent, while the cowardly clouds had scuttled away. One day they were there, their cool shadows taken for granted. The next day they were gone, no traces of purple on the horizon. Or maybe it was the wind to blame for blowing them all away.

It was in this season when the squirrels dared not venture out and the woodpeckers halted their drilling that the forest was subject to disaster. A stray beam of the sun's rays ignited a leaf, and nothing was ever the same.

The fire galloped through the forest, lancing a jagged path through the pines. In its wake,

black statues of trees stared up at the sky, landmarks of destruction. Owls lifted from their branches, flapping their beautiful wings, desperately outracing the cloud of smoke that rolled through the heavens. The clouds smoldered. The sun became little more than a watery orange disk in the sky. And soon, even the stars were shrouded in a smoky cloak.

The nearest town lay hundreds of miles away, across the surface of a once-glassy lake, now marred by stray timber bobbing on the surface. In the morning the townsfolk would peer out their scuffed windows and shut the blinds. The seldom-traveled streets became deserted as ash rained down on the houses, the cars, the electricity poles.



Mayor Johnson had called in the fire department from the town over, but purportedly all the firemen were needed there.

“The lumber factory will resume on our accelerated schedule,” he had pronounced. “We still need to meet the quotas by September. Our economy must remain active.”

So, the machinery was booted up and the town slogged along, and there was nothing you could do to stop the smoke-tinged air from lacing its way down your lungs and planting sparks of worry in your heart. But the lake plunged deep and wide, and — as one neighbor comforted the next — impenetrable mountains flanked it on either side.

“I ain’t going anywhere,” old man Jones had croaked, “The last time a fire came, it didn’t even touch the lake.” And if Jones wasn’t leaving, neither were the Isaacsons or Youngs or Codies or Lees.

The rain refused to fall. By the third day, the fire had consumed a major slice of the landscape and was peeking its orange flames through the margin of the trees, taunting the town from the other side of the lake. Per Mayor Johnson’s mandate, the lumber factory continued bustling away. Never mind the extra oil needed to prevent the ash from clogging the machines.

Down by the shores of the lake, a swarming crowd had gathered next to the factory. Any hour now the fire was bound to hit the damp shores and be driven away, the glorious water dissipating the beast. The splintered dock creaked in protest as throngs of people vied for the best seats. Who needed firework shows when you

could watch the shattering of flames? The possibility of imminent danger charged the air and the crowd buzzed excitedly. They were going to witness the miracle of the lake, the pride of their hometown. Far beneath them three green pipes spouted into the water, depositing the factory’s oil and byproducts into the murky depths below.

The onlookers’ anticipation was as palpable as the smoke clouds hovering in the town. This was it. The moment of triumph. Even Jones and the Mayor had deigned an appearance to the dock. Both men stood away from the crowd, arms crossed over their smartest suits. The kids clung to their mothers’ legs, while the fathers sawed away in the dry confines of the factory. The sun stared straight down from its zenith in the sky — if it could even be called a sky considering it resembled a flat gray canvas more than any blue dome.

Alas the inevitable tongues of fire breached through the remaining trees and licked the pebbles of the shore. The town held its breath and Mayor Johnson smirked, anticipating the whips of water that would lash out and tame the beast.

But no reprieve came.

Gaining speed, the fire burst from its wooden cage. Its fingers stretched across the lake, jumping from floating log to log. The oil-infused lake served as a catalyst, and the amplified flames rippled across the sky. For a minute the people stood transfixed by the wild red animal. Then, coming to their senses they ran out of the factory. The primordial fear of the flame, the innate instinct to survive, sank its claws into their hearts. They froze, aghast at the disaster they had manufactured. Then, wasting no time they fled into their cars, gunned the

engines, and attempted to speed away.

Mayor Johnson looked on, painstakingly nonchalant, as the fire surged a third, a half, three-quarters of the way across the lake. The infallible lake was burning. Beside him, the lumber factory lay silent for the first time in years. Behind him, the town stood deserted. The world was bathed in red light, dapples of orange flickering across the brush. The inferno could not be contained. It dove in all directions, expanding from the epicenter in a million different trajectories. It was a futile thing, to play with the flame. Even if one single spark was allowed to live, the whole forest could reignite.

The Mayor clenched his fists in silent indignation. He fumed. After all, he wasn't the one who had started the fire. The wretched sun, feeble clouds, and treacherous wind had betrayed him. The rain, and, come to think of it, even the glistening lake itself had conspired against him.

But none of that mattered.

Around Mayor Johnson, everything was blazing, burning, toasting into a blackened, brittle crisp. There would be no sunrise, no green sprouts next spring. Only the charred earth under a sagging brown sky.

The old Mayor was the only one to witness the flames devour the first of the houses.

There was no pride, and money could not buy him a thing.



Steffi Kim has been an avid reader from a young age. She lives in Seattle, Washington where she enjoys playing soccer in her free time as well as spending time with friends and family. Steffi is currently 15 years old, and a sophomore in high school.

Joyce B. Lazarus is a retired university French professor. She earned her Ph.D. in French from Harvard University and has published six books on French language, history, culture, Jewish history, and American history. She has also published several short memoirs and poems in magazines. This is her first work of fiction for children. She feels inspired by her three grandchildren to write for children. The main character, Simon, is named after her third grandchild, who is fourteen months old.

Joyce Lazarus

Living on the Edge



Simon hops from one stone to the next, playing with his younger brother, Andrew. It is a gray spring day in Newtok, Alaska, with rain clouds hanging low like herds of oxen in the sky. Simon always sees animal shapes in the clouds — sometimes geese, moose or even a whale. Today he sees oxen moving slowly across fields in the sky. As they leap off stones, Simon and Andrew land on mushy grassland that wobbles like Jell-O. Their shoes sink in and become coated with thick, dark mud. Even though Simon is only eleven, he understands that warm seas and more frequent storms are making his village sink and causing the river to swallow up large chunks of land. Mom and Dad explained to him that climate change was taking away their village, and that they would soon have to move to a safer location, about nine miles away.

Simon understands this, but Andrew, who is only seven, does not see why they must go away. He does not want to leave home and go to a strange new village far away, and he cries every time they talk about it. For as long as they both can remember, Mom and Dad talk about their “plans” — moving to a village called Mertarvik, on

a volcanic island that is on higher ground and safer from storms. They told the boys what it would look like: brand-new houses with electricity and clean running water, a gravel road connecting the houses, an airport, a post office, a clinic, and a modern school. The best thing for Simon is that they would have a new kitchen and bathroom with fresh running water and plumbing. Storms have destroyed the water tanks in Newtok, and many people have been getting sick from drinking dirty water. How many times a day does he have to go outside to collect rainwater in his cup so he can drink clean water or go out to dump waste in the marsh? Dad said they all need to move away from this land that is becoming contaminated.

“Newtok” means “rustling grass” in their native language, Yugtun. In the late fall, dry grasses rustle in the wind, making sounds like “swishhh” and “shhhhh,” as geese, ducks, and swans swim in nearby ponds. Simon’s family, living in a Yup’ik village in Alaska almost 500 miles west of Anchorage, can remember wide fields of dry land where they used to go berry picking and hunting for moose in the summer, and a bay where they would hunt for seals and go fishing for salmon in

the spring and fall. Simon loves fishing with his dad. In winter, there were snowy hills and bluffs where they enjoyed sledding. In mild weather, friends from school would come over to visit and they would play with slingshots and hunt for goose eggs buried in the grass. All the neighborhood families would come together for big celebrations at the end of each hunting season. There were plenty of delicious food, singing, dancing, and story-telling. They didn't mind the long winters because Simon and his friends would stay warm inside the large community center, making colorful masks for ceremonies, and learning how to make tools and kayaks to get ready for spring.

At one time, more than 350 people used to live in their village. Since climate change has been hitting them so hard, only a few dozen people remain. Puddles and swampy grass are everywhere, the village boardwalk is mostly washed away, and school is often closed because of storm damage. Their only airport might soon be flooded when the next big storm arrives. Most of Simon's friends have already moved to Mertarvik while others, like his own family, are still here. He worries about their community scattering or splitting apart — will he and his friends ever live together again in the same village? Can he visit those that have left without traveling a long distance by boat? Some of his favorite teachers have already moved to the new village and he misses them. What will happen to Newtok when the next big storm hits them? Simon has nightmares about not leaving in time, about huge waves sweeping over his house, washing it into the sea. One morning he wakes up in a sweat, shaking, after a scary dream about a wave that washed a-

way the entire village.

"I don't want to leave home," Andrew whines. "Why do we have to go?" His eyes begin to fill with tears as he buries his head in his mother's lap.

"The houses are all sinking here," Mom explains. "With melting permafrost, the land is wobbly, and the Ninglick River may one day wash away our home. We can't stay here much longer."

"There's no clean water here, and no waste treatment plant," says Dad. "We'll all get sick if we stay here."

"Andrew, we'll have a brand-new house in Mertarvik," says Simon. "You'll see, it will be good." He looks at the sky and sees clouds that look like playful seals — a good sign, Simon decides.

"The Elders in the village know that there is a time to stay and a time to move on. They have read all the signs and are very wise," Simon tells him.

Still, moving away from home is never easy. Dad said that Yup'ik people have been living in Alaska for thousands of years, long before settlers arrived from Europe. We have known our neighbors our entire lives. In fact, many are our cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. The Elders believe that our ancestors arrived here when there was still a land bridge connecting it to Russia, perhaps 10,000 years ago, before glaciers had melted! Simon looks at a map and sees that the Bering Strait separates Alaska from Russia. Just as he can see herds of oxen moving through clouds in the sky, he can use his imagination to picture his ancestors traveling over vast sheets of ice

with dog sleds.

The Elders sometimes talk about life in the old times, when Yup'ik families used to travel in the spring and fall between different fishing camps, leading a nomadic life. They prepared foods to last many months — smoked fish, meats, preserved fruits, and vegetables—and stayed in a village during the long, cold winters. When Alaska became a state in 1959, the government made Yup'ik people settle here in Newtok so that all children could attend free public school.

Simon's dad puts it this way: "The government gave us no choice about where to settle down. Winters have always been stormy here, with frequent floods. But with climate change, it's become worse every year! We see the land around our houses crumbling and falling into the river. Remember the basketball court that just disappeared one day? Fuel tanks and water tanks used to lean over. They finally collapsed. Everything is sinking. Some neighbors had to tear down their homes because they worried about them sinking into the muddy ground. Everyone is moving away to Mertarvik."

Simon writes a poem about the changes happening around him:

Staying here is not fun but it is home.

Now the land is sinking,
The water is rising, or both.
The river is taking our town.
We'll soon be moving on,
To an unfamiliar place.
Stay a little longer or leave now?

With their clothing boxed and piled into

boats, neighbors are saying goodbye one after another to friends, relatives, and to Newtok.

At school, children in Andrew's class talk about what worries them most:

"Big waves coming over us!"

"Losing my house in a flood!"

"Not seeing friends and teachers!"

"Watching the village disappear!"

"Not getting into the boat fast enough!"

Mrs. Dixon, Andrew's second-grade teacher, tries to calm their jittery nerves: "Our village gathered long ago to discuss how to face our climate crisis. We decided that the whole community would move to Mertarvik so that we could stay together and be safe. Every one of you will soon be leaving Newtok and moving into the new village."

That evening Simon is full of questions, thinking about his home:

"What will happen to Newtok after we've moved away? Will any houses remain?"

"The government will safely remove buildings and turn Newtok into a wildlife sanctuary," says Mom. "We don't want any more houses to fall into the river and contaminate the water. Fish, geese, seals, ducks, and swans will continue to swim around here. One day we'll come back to visit."

On a mild fall day between rainstorms, Simon and his family travel by boat to Mertarvik, to visit the house where his family will soon live. "It's the calm between storms," says his mom. "Each day seems to bring more rain and more flooding." Climb-

ing off the boat, Simon and Andrew see a white gravel road on firm, dry land rising over a hill. Simon starts to run. How good it feels to be able to run on a path and not have his shoes sink into mud! When he reaches the top of the hill, he sees all around him colorfully painted houses — red, blue, and green — about fifty or sixty of them. One of those houses, the blue one, will soon be theirs. Andrew follows him, running excitedly. Then the two brothers spot a large community center that has been turned into a temporary school while construction goes on. Opening the door wide, they step onto the gleaming white floor of a gym, noting the room’s high ceiling and three basketball hoops. Later they walk through four bright classrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Andrew’s heart skips a beat when his favorite teacher greets him with a hug. “Remember the story of Noah’s Ark?” says Mrs. Dixon. “How he rescued his family and all animals from the Great Flood? Well, Mertarvik is our Noah’s Ark for Yup’ik people in Alaska.”

Some months later, in the spring, Simon, Andrew, and their parents are sitting around their shiny kitchen table, eating smoked salmon in their new home. His parents have learned how to use their portable water tank, while waiting for plumbing to be completed for the whole village. An electrical system powers the streetlights for the entire village and warms every home. Simon peers through his windowpane and sees the glow of lights sparkling around the neighborhood, like yellow and white constellations of stars. For the first time in

many years, his family is drinking fresh water that they pour from a faucet, instead of collecting it outdoors from rainwater.

Simon and some other older students have written a play to perform in their new school. It is called “Water is Life”. The play has stories, songs, and dances, with everyone wearing traditional Yup’ik costumes. It is based on many conversations the children had with different residents of Newtok — Elders, parents, and kids — about the experience of living with eroding land, sudden storm surges, snow that comes earlier and melts sooner, confused seals, ducks, geese, and other birds. In short, the play is about living with all the strange environmental changes happening around them.

More than eighty people fill up the auditorium to watch the play. It isn’t just humans who have roles in this play. Talking salmon, moose, swans, and spirits of their ancestors have a lot to say as well. Andrew is dressed as a salmon who complains of a terrible storm, when river water rose so suddenly and with such ferocity that it knocked him onto a riverbank. He manages somehow to jump back into the water. Andrew’s friend Sarah, dressed as a swan, dances while waving white and yellow fans. The swan is confused by the weather and doesn’t know when and where to lay her eggs so she drops them on swampy grass too early in spring.

Their ancestor’s spirit has the final words, singing in a soothing voice: “We were here, we are here, we will be here.”

Flame



Ho-cheung Lee

Yachts



Photographer



Chat



Silence



Lavenda



Boo!



Dr Ho-cheung Lee 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 also published in **82 Review*, *Adirondack Review* and *Front Porch Review*. This series of photographs were taken during his local and international trips before the pandemic hit us all.



Author

Caroline Gao

The Edge



874523 used to have a name. Her brother repeated it like a mantra whenever he wanted her attention. Her mother insisted that it meant prosperity although she came back empty-handed from scavenging most of the time. It didn't matter anymore. Her parents had promised that they would bring back life to the ocean — that was their job after all — yet the oceans were still dark and gloomy, and her parents were both dead.

There was only half a sun again. It mirrored itself, distorted by the sea. Orange, purple, and blue smudged across the surface. Somewhere, some time ago, the horizon might have been beautiful. Past the edge of the horizon maybe. 874523's head throbbed from standing under the

sun all day. The static of her radio hissed and popped, and the voice of her boss sheared through the dull silence.

"Inmate 874523, are you done securing your bundle? You're heading to the cay tomorrow. Get back quickly. Over."

The radio stuttered, coalescing into the rhythmic sloshing of the waves. A large cluster of garbage wrapped in netted fabric floated around in the gray behind her. The chance of seeing a fish swim by was almost zero here above what used to be called Miami. A large mass of garbage floated by, silently drifting as if it had no idea where it was going.

874523 reached for the yellow button by

the wheel of the boat, before letting her hand drop back down. She really hated the Warden, but she had to answer. If she lost this job, she would be sent to Fiji, a prison camp known for its giant lake of toxic waste.

She sighed, pressing and holding the yellow button. "Copy that. Will be back in one hour and seven minutes. Over."

874523 walked to the back of the boat, past prisoner 984352 who sat snoring in the corner, his cap lowered over his face. She tapped twice on the black tablet attached to the boat's bulwark. *1.326 tons*. The Warden would be pleased.

Waves lapped over hundreds of cans, plastic bags, plastic bottles, tires, and styrofoam netted together. Among the trash, 874523's eyes found a baby manatee: a calf trapped in the net. A sea cow paddled around the trash cube, occasionally nudging the garbage with its nose. She only knew these magnificent creatures from her parents' giant leather book of animals that she had read over and over again in her childhood. A gray fin poked out beside an old pair of tennis shoes and some PVC piping, and a muffled squeak emitted from the mass. 874523 watched the creature curiously. She had not seen an animal of the sea since the war started. In a second, its head was forced to dip back down into water again.

It was drowning.

She felt her stomach churn. The red button enclosed in a transparent case was only used when a person got trapped in the dragnet.

"Inmate, have you determined the weight of your load?"

The muffled shriek of the manatee made her pause. It had taken her all day to

collect this trash. If she pressed the button to let it all go, it would take another day to retrieve it. A prisoner who had mistakenly pressed the button died a couple weeks later in Fiji. The prison cared only about the 25 thousand dollars that the government would pay for each ton of trash. If a prisoner died, there was always someone else to do their work.

The palms of her hands began to sweat. Her trembling fingers entered the password, and the lock clicked open. What more could anyone do to her now? She had lost almost everything by breaking laws to keep her brother alive. He was somewhere in the north still fragile and scarred from the war, waiting for her to finally leave prison. But he was old enough to find a job at the lithium mines now. Everything would be just fine.

"Inmate, are you there?"

874523 slammed her palm on the red button before she could change her mind. Eleven long, hard years of work, all gone to waste. The black netting popped off the hooks. The orderly cube of trash dispersed into miscellaneous items bobbing up and down and drifting away with the current. The calf joined its waiting mother, and the two gray figures swam toward the horizon. It seemed as if they were swimming toward the edge of the world.



Caroline Gao is 12 years old. She loves writing fiction and poetry. She was a winner of Stone Soup's Weekly Flash Contest and a finalist of the Young Inklings Book Contest. When she's not immersed in the world of literature and writing, she plays golf and has recently won the U.S. Kids World Championship.



Daniel Barlekamp is the author of poems and stories for young readers and adults. His children's poetry has appeared in *Ember*, while his middle-grade fiction is forthcoming in *The Haunted States of America* (Godwin/Macmillan 2024) and has appeared in *Crow Toes Quarterly*. He lives with his wife and their baby boy, Noah, in Massachusetts, where he works in immigration law by day and attends law school by night.

Lick the Wind (for Noah Reid)

Let's take a walk
outside where there
is so much to behold.

You'll lick the wind
so sweet just like
a pint of Rocky Road.

You'll learn the names
of all the trees
like Musclewood and Birch,

and sing a song
of friendship to
the Starlings in their perch.

You'll flutter with
the Monarchs and
the graceful Mourning Cloaks,

then swoop to kiss
the Bluebells where
they dance among the Oaks.

Then when we look
with wonder on
the sunset's golden hue,

you'll know that you're
a part of Earth
and Earth's a part of you.

Daniel Barlekamp

Claire Taylor has been a writer since childhood. Her first poem, published at the age of ten in *Highlights Magazine*, was about what it might feel like to be a leaf. She is the author of a children's literature collection, *Little Thoughts*, and is the founding editor of *Little Thoughts Press*, a print magazine of writing and artwork for and by children. Claire's debut picture book, *Benjamin's Sad Day*, is forthcoming from Golden Fleece Press. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland with her family and pets in an old stone house where birds love to roost. You can find her at clairemtaylor.com

The Worst Camp in the World?

In my bunk I found a skunk
it stunk up the whole room

The mess hall is a mess of moss
where slimy fungi bloom

In the commodes you'll find fat toads
who croak their nightly song

I send a desperate letter home
"Help, Mom! This camp's all wrong!"

The swimming hole is but a puddle
the soccer field's a hill

The mac and cheese tastes like shoe leather
The lemonade like swill

I can't sleep thanks to the creep
of mice across the floor

Outside an owl hoots way too loud
and all my bunkmates snore

This is the worst camp in the world
so you'll be surprised to hear

I've made so many fantastic friends
that I'm coming back next year!



Poet

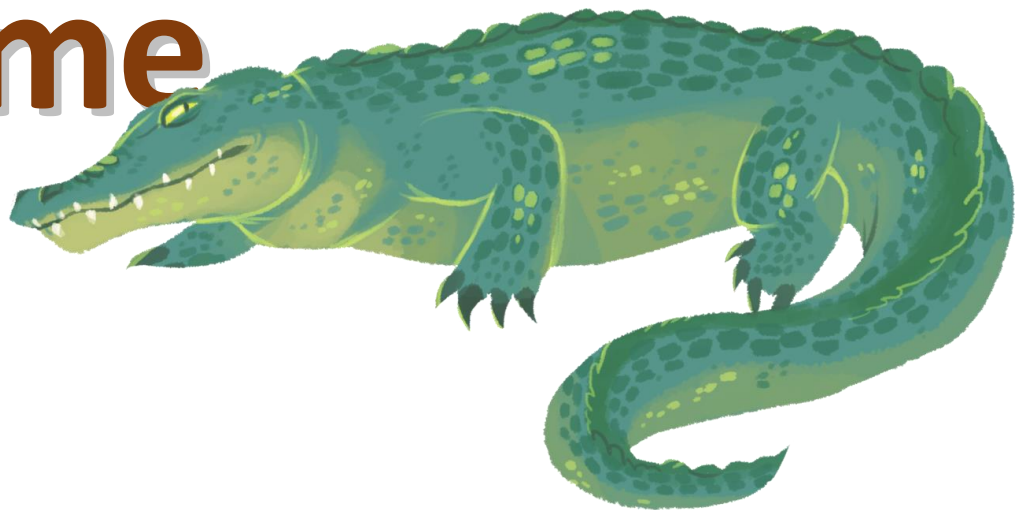
Claire Taylor



Author

D.W. Davis

What the Alligator under My Bed Told me



H

He said, "Don't scream."

But I did anyways.

"I said don't do that."

"Sorry."

He sounded like an alligator. Raspy, leathery voice full of dark mirth. I could picture his teeth flashing as he spoke, jagged rows of sharp knives slicing through the air. His eyes, deep and ancient, looking straight into my soul. Judging without judgment because he already knew what he would see.

Of course, I couldn't be sure. I'd never

spoken to an alligator before. But I had a gut feeling I was right.

As if to reassure me, he said, "I am an alligator."

I swallowed. Sometimes, it's better to be wrong.

"I probably won't hurt you," he said.

Probably?

"How old are you, David?"

Only my parents called me that. My friends, teachers, even my grandparents had always called me "Davey." They said I had "the

look.”

“Nine.”

“Three times three. Five plus four.
Eleven minus two. Fifty-four divided by six.”

I waited. The room grew silent, the dark closing in on me. I could feel my heart beating, my pulse in my ears. I wanted to move — run for the door, dive out the window like Arnold Schwarzenegger, scratch my nose even — but I was frozen to my bed, staring up at the ceiling full of glow-in-the-dark constellation stickers that weren’t, for some reason, glowing.

I let out a breath. No response from under the bed. I said into the darkness, “Okay.”

“It’s important to know these things, David. They are a part of who you are.”

I wasn’t sure of that. I said, “Are you real?”

“Are you?”

I pinched myself. Twice. I said, “I’m not dreaming.”

“That is very reassuring. I am glad I am not a figment of your imagination. That would have been very disappointing.”

I wanted to cry but I didn’t. It wasn’t a crying situation. What would that get me? Neither of my parents had reacted to my scream. They were probably asleep. I wondered what time it was. I had school the next day, a science quiz too. And I would have to climb the rope in P.E. I wasn’t good at climbing rope. I preferred playing dodgeball. That way, at least I stood a chance of, well, dodging the ball.

“You know my name,” I said.

“I am under your bed. It would be discourteous of me not to know your name.”

Why did that have to make sense?

“Do *you* have a name?” I asked.

“Alligators don’t have names,
David.”

“Oh.”

I stared up at Orion. Always my favorite constellation. He reminded me of Hercules, whom I’d read about the year before. Strong, noble, unstoppable. A hero, someone everyone could look up to. I wondered how Hercules would handle finding an alligator under his bed. A talking alligator, at that. He would probably take it in stride. He would probably reach down and pull the alligator out by its tail and whip it around the room like a lasso. I could almost smile at the image. I didn’t because there was actually an alligator under my bed and I wasn’t Hercules.

“I am here for a reason, David,” the alligator said. “Alligators don’t normally lurk underneath children’s beds, you know. This is not normal behavior. You have not had an alligator under your bed before.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You have not. I would smell them. We do not normally do this. We only do it when we have a story to impart. This is not comfortable. I barely fit under here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“They call this an *occupational hazard*. You will learn about that when you are older. It’s nothing to feel sorry about. And I think you truly are. What is in this box down here, by the way?”

I closed my eyes and pictured the space beneath my bed. First, I pushed the image of an alligator out of the way. That was hard to do.

“My dinosaurs. Dad says I shouldn’t play with them anymore. I’m getting too old.”



"I am older than you, David. I remember dinosaurs. I would not play with one myself, but I see no harm in it now that they are extinct. It's a big box. I keep bumping into it. My apologies."

"It's okay."

"I have a story for you, David. But I need you to listen very closely to it. Do you understand the concept of a parable?"

"No."

"A fable?"

"Like the one with the fox and the grapes?"

The alligator sighed. "A weak example, but yes I suppose. Like the one with the fox and the grapes. It is a story with a moral. A lesson. A story with a purpose beyond the story itself. You must read into the details of the story, David. You must read beneath my words, into the truth beneath. Do you understand?"

"Maybe?"

The room was still. My mattress had never felt so heavy, which was weird because I was on top of it and not the other way around, but somehow I felt it pressing upon me. Maybe an alligator under your bed will do that.

"There was once a boy with an alligator under his bed. Are you with me so far, David?"

"Yes. Uh, sir."

"Please. So there was this boy with an alligator under his bed. And this boy was very surprised to find an alligator under his bed, because alligators do not normally do that, as I have previously established. And this boy, David, he was scared. He was very scared to find an alligator under his bed. But when the alligator started talking, David, this boy, he started listening. And he

listened to the alligator. And he realized that this talking alligator, David, this talking alligator knew a thing or two. And this alligator, well, he told this boy, David, that he should listen to it. That he should listen to what it had to say. And do you know what this boy did, David?"

"No."

"Yes, you do. The boy listened, David. The boy, David, listened. He listened to the alligator. Because he knew the alligator was old and wise and would not have been under his bed if there was not a reason for it. This boy was very astute. So he paid attention, David. And he did not disregard the words of the talking alligator underneath his bed."

The shadows across the ceiling had not moved. I'd really, really hoped they would. But you can't will something like that into happening. Just like you can't will a talking alligator into not happening. These things we learn the only way we can, which is also the way we would least like to learn them. I was a little too young to learn *that*, but it also felt about the right time.

Silence descended upon the room. Normal silence, except for everything that wasn't normal. I thought of when my dad had put the stars on my ceiling, and he'd said it was like having a skylight. But actual stars glowed constantly, and I probably could have found shapes in the patterns of the bubbled plaster anyways.

"Do you understand, David?"

Such a rich, gravelly voice. Like tires on a dirt road. But reptilian.

"I think so," I said.

"It's a good parable, David. You should think about it."

"Okay."

There was a huff. “You have to urinate. Is that from fear or the water you drank before going to bed?”

I did. I said, “I think the water but I’m not sure I’m sorry.”

The alligator said, “You don’t need to be sorry. I’ve done my part here.”

“Okay.”

“Two letters and you insist on saying them. There are twenty-four other letters in your language that you can use.”

“Okay.”

The alligator sighed. It was a deep, resonant sound. “Fine, David. As long as you heard me. As long as you listened to the parable. Otherwise my purpose here is, pardon my Francois, effing pointless. I apologize for cussing. I just hate to think this was all for nothing.”

“I get it,” I said, staring at the ceiling. “I’m okay.”

“You got the point of my story?”

“Yes.” I paused. “Well. No. But that’s the point, right?”

“You’re nine years old, David, and you’re talking to an alligator. Yes, that is the point.”

A car drove by. Headlights slashed through the blinds, illuminating the ceiling fan and wall briefly, like a blessing.

“Close your eyes, David,” the alligator said. “Think about the story. The parable.”

I closed my eyes and pictured everything else. You know. Literally every single thing but a talking alligator under my bed. It wasn’t hard. The hard part of was realizing the opposite.

“I have to go,” the alligator told me. “Now that my work is done and I am not going to eat you. I thought about it at first

but decided not to.”

“Thank you?”

“Just remember to think about what I said. And close your eyes. I want them closed. They are better closed for this.”

I squinched my eyes shut. Tight. “They’re closed.”

I heard a slithering sound. A heavy noise. Lots of friction. The door to my bedroom, poorly oiled, creaked open. Then the door to the main bathroom, even more poorly oiled, squeaked open. I hoped my parents would wake up. They didn’t. I heard a muffled cuss, a word I won’t repeat even though I clearly understood it. Then, “the plumbing, my god, these Philistines,” which I still don’t understand. Then the toilet flushed, and my bedroom descended into silence as the water and whatever else flowed down the pipes, and I lay awake awaiting for what came next, even after I realized it wasn’t coming. This was a fable. I was either going to learn something or nothing at all. I waited for whichever came first.

D.W. Davis is a native of rural Illinois. His work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him at [Facebook.com/DanielDavis05](https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavis05), or [@dan_davis86](https://twitter.com/dan_davis86) on Twitter.

Bethany Veiman

A Thought So Loud



I've always been good at listening to what people don't say. I'm not talking about telepathy or any hocus-pocus junk like that. I'm talking about feeling another person's thoughts whispering around inside them like a breeze in a greenhouse when the door is opened. Mom calls me *intuitive*, meaning I can read a lot from what a person doesn't say. And there's no person I am better at intuiting than Grandpa. He is what Mom calls "a man of few words." But that's just because he is a

man of Thought and derring-do rather than hot air. I understand this because Grandpa and I are the same.

My story — that is, *our* story, begins on my first day of break last summer. Grandpa and I sat across from each other at the breakfast table, crunching on Cheerios and listening to some oldies rock 'n' roll music from Grandpa's past. We shared the old farmhouse, Mom, Grandpa, and me, and jamming out to oldies after Mom left for the day had kinda become

Grandpa and my thing.

"It's going to be a melon summer, folks!" the announcer boomed through the radio, sitting on the table between us. "That means hot, hot, hot with weekend showers!"

"What's a melon summer?" I asked around my spoon.

"Oh," Grandpa's deep voice rumbled through his chest, earthy like mud and deep as distant thunder, "it's just his way of saying it'll be hot with generous rainfall. Good conditions for watermelon growers."

"Watermelons, huh," I murmured, chewing my cereal into a mush to lubricate the cogs in my waking brain. "Grandpa, we could grow watermelons this summer," I said. "Your old tractor still works, right? And the field hasn't been used in forever. It's not doing any good, just growing weeds."

"Yeah, I expect you're right, June Bug," he said, getting up to lumber to the farmhouse window, angling his eyes out at the unused field.

I could *hear* Grandpa's Thoughts as he eyed it. There are thoughts, and then there are Thoughts-with-a-capital-T. A Thought-with-a-capital-T isn't a quiet-hands-folded-to-themselves-thought like their well-behaved lowercase cousins. No. A Thought has a sound. If you're paying attention, you can feel it changing the room. Some Thoughts are light like feathers, some heavy like a can of nails. Some zip and crackle, others whirr and fizz. I felt Grandpa's Thought growing big and loud inside him. It filled up the farmhouse and made the cat's tail twitch, and the dog began chewing her paws.

About a week passed, Grandpa's Thought burst from him early one morning with a WHAMOO! I looked out the window, and Grandpa was firing up the old tractor to plow the old field! I charged from the porch, hearing the screen door snap behind me on rusty springs as I ran down the hill.

I followed the plow, piling rocks to the side, pulling the white, carrot-y thistle roots. The

new till squished between my toes. It smelled of earthworms and new beginnings.

Our melon summer had begun.

But the job was more extensive than Grandpa and I could handle on our own, so I called the relatives. The following Saturday, the relatives rolled up in their minivans and Ford pickup trucks with shovels in the beds. The uncles and aunts dug mounds in the dirt while the cousins and I helped Grandpa drop black seeds into the soil and cover them up again.

As luck would have it, the weather people were wrong about the weekly rain forecast (no surprise there). For days, I squinted at the sky, watching for clouds. Nothing. The brown soil looked dry and cracked as pie crust. Grandpa eyed the field, and the sky so much the cat's tail started twitching again, and the dog returned to sucking her paws.

Now Grandpa's Thought sounded like wheels turning: quiet, methodical, a soft *click, click, clicking*.

Then, without a word to me, he walked outside and started messing around in the pond with long hoses and things. I waded in, too. I was too involved at this point to be a shirker. Besides, we were already planning the Big Summer's End Surprise, and if the watermelons died now, it would ruin everything. Grandpa and I sank a water pump into the pond, rigged up a whole watering system in the field, and connected the two with the hose.

By midsummer, leafy vines fanned from the mounds, green balls clinging to them. The weatherman was right about one thing, the days stayed hot, hot, hot! But one day, I woke up and felt a change in the air. Rubbing my eyes, I wandered into the kitchen. I found Grandpa sitting at the table crunching on his bran cereal, the radio on as before. He looked up, and his face split into a wide grin, and I could hear his Thought without him speaking it out loud: *it's time, June Bug*.

Things happened fast after that. I designed a flier on Mom's laptop and had it print-



ed at Office Depot. We drove around in Grandpa's pickup, pinning the ads to coffee shop bulletins. I made the phone calls since Grandpa isn't a "phone person." Together we made a big wooden sign and pounded it into the ground near the road. On a swampy day in August, cars started piling into the driveway.

Strangers, neighbors, and kids from school with their parents all came. The Big Surprise was ready. "Grandpa and June's Watermelon Patch," the sign read. The tiny seeds we had planted months before were now enormous watermelons of every variety imaginable.

Our neighbor, Mr. Tim, gave people hay wagon rides with his pair of Percheron horses. Several food trucks parked outside the field selling lemonade, ice cream, and hot dogs. There was a watermelon eating contest, a watermelon roll contest, and a seed spitting game. The watermelon tasted so sweet that its pink flesh gleamed with white sugar when cut. Grandpa came to find me.

"Wanna ride with me, June Bug?"

As the wagon creaked and bumped around the field's perimeter, I had a Thought. A Thought so big I wondered if Grandpa could hear it too. It sounded like the dog chewing its paws, the rasp of a tractor engine, and crickets fiddling away near the pond. But mostly, it sounded like *this moment*: of families laughing as they searched for the perfect watermelon to bring home. It sounded like the wind shushing the leaves in the woods, of the lazy, humid sounds of summer in the country. I leaned against Grandpa, and he put his arm around me. He smelled of fresh air and contentment.

And I knew he was thinking the same thing.



Bethany Veiman writes whimsical stories for children and for those who, like her, will always be children at heart. She grew up on a hobby farm similar to the one depicted in this story. However, unlike June and Grandpa, she never had much success growing watermelons.

The Z Team

I want to be on the losing team
smash the ball wide and have someone
catch it in row X.

I want to be the last player chosen
for a team that brags they're the best
and then wear the wrong kit.

I want to drop every skimming ball
feel the anger as you ignite
then miss my bus home.

I want to be the agonising player
be the one who lets you down
forgets to bring the half-time snacks.

I want to miss, drop, botch, skid
pant, fumble, squirm and trip
but above all, above all else,
I want to take part.



Julie Stevens

Poet

Julie Stevens writes poems for both adults and children. She covers many themes, but often engages with the problems of disability. Her children's poems have been published in *Paper Lanterns*, *Parakeet Magazine*, *Buzgaga*, *The Toy*, *Tyger Tyger*, *The Dirigible Balloon* and many more. She has three published adult pamphlets: *Step into the Dark* (2023) and *Balancing Act* (2021) both with The Hedgehog Poetry Press and *Quicksand* (Dreich, 2020). www.jumpingjulespoetry.com





Balloons

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