

# Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal



Issue  
Nine

Apr 2019

Alex Schwed • Ashreya Mohan • Ciarán Parkes • Carrie L. Clickard • Cash Myron  
Toklas • Eric Crowder • Erica Montgomery • Helen He • Lee Ho-cheung •  
Lynn Kang • Michael Dai • Oscar Au • SONG Yiding •  
Susan Gundlach • You Young Kim • Zeppy Cheng



**“Poetry is slightly mysterious, and you wonder what is your relationship to it.”**

**– *Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)***

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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)**

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\* Cover Art

\*\* Back Cover Art



## Words from Founding Editor

Too many ups and downs putting Issue 9 together. The process of making it was an adventure itself.

I am very glad – This issue received the highest number of submissions and many of these potential contributors were schoolchildren. That is exactly why BLJ was initiated in the first place: we are to encourage reading and writing among young people and nurture a curious and creative heart of literature in them.

I am very upset – I am upset to have to disappoint people. Naturally, to keep the style and quality of the journal, we had to be very selective, just as any other quality literary journals out there. And that means we rejected many submissions and broke many hearts. But that is part of the game. You keep reading and writing and submitting your work to journals and you will one day find a door open.

I am very very glad – Since we are so selective, and probably since we are getting clearer what BLJ wants, the intakes this time are extremely well-crafted (except my own pieces at the end, which I feel shy to compare to all the other hugely beautiful pieces here). I fall in love with each entry as usual: we have poetry on social issues, childhood, family love, and interaction with nature; for prose, we have three animal-themed pieces and two on surviving during hard times; for artwork, He's simplicity with striking colour sense stuns me; Montgomery's amazing captures move me; and Kim's ingenious painting techniques dazzle me. I am drowned by all these literary and artistic talents in this small issue. And I feel so fortunate to be able to publish them in this issue.

Finally, I am too upset to put into words – One of my very best literary friends and mentors, Prof Sam McCready, who contributed to BLJ Issue 5 and was a great supporter of this project, left us in February at the age of 82. He had given so much valuable advice and encouragement to my work and he inspired me so much over the years in my creativity and teaching journey. Sam's passing is a great loss to the world of speech and drama, arts and performing arts, to say the least. To BLJ and myself, we have lost a great friend and a great teacher. Sam, you are always in my heart for my literary and artistic endeavours.

BLJ Issue 9 is a truly special issue. It gives me pain but at the same time, I feel that it connects with me more than the other issues did. This is an odd feeling.

I hope this humble journal will fascinate you as well.

**Lee Ho-cheung, Ed.D.**  
Founding Editor, BLJ



# Foreword

We are meant to fly. And that is what this uplifting magazine allows us to do. The contributors here together present a world of balloons. Each page breezes us along. Open it anywhere and see how no matter how short our city night light, each of us is like a firefly. Or maybe modest as a mouse sharing an amusement park ride. Childhood is that attitude, one of innocence all the world needs.

This work speaks up for the children in all of us. Yes, as I pull takeaways from each of the contributors, I find this – us as children. So read on, and let the faraway stars dim, but not the purity of a smile.

Life is imperfect, no matter the utopia we may wish. We all long to be safe. Let the hours fly by, but not the sacredness of time. Time travels. And stays. See how life is simple as an everyday coat and hanger in a perfect place.

A balloon can be like an elephant in the room, but such big childlike dreams are not made to stay in a cage. Surely, lack of gravity in outer space might take away all our balloons, gone like bubbles of a bath, like dinosaurs, leaving us in the aftermath here upon the real world, flat, to lift our human race. But we learn from these talented contributors that we are survivors and are made to lovingly carry such weight.

So, let the wind shiver. Let go to the field of gold. Allow the leaves their way of disarray. Bring it all close with a loving hug. No matter how far we go, or how seemingly old, we are here together to dream. The sky awaits. Rise. Join the color. See yourself in this buoyant magazine.

## Joe Bisicchia

Honorable Mention recipient  
*Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry*  
 Marlton, New Jersey, USA

Poet

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# Ciarán Parkes

## A Shiver of Wind...

A shiver of wind  
over an empty  
snow-covered field, or maybe  
hundreds of snow-  
coloured Arctic rabbits,  
perfectly camouflaged,  
moving slightly.



## Autumn

Sunday  
papers  
full  
of  
environmental  
issues  
gathered  
in  
piles  
around  
my  
feet  
like  
leaves

**Alex Schwed** is traditionally an elementary school teacher. In 2016 he obtained a master's in neuroscience and education, specifically targeting how play influences creativity. He is an avid lover of the outdoors, words, and firmly believes that each moment deserves to be cherished as if it is the first, much like his 14-year-old dachshund goes nuts over the same slop she's eaten her entire life.

## Ten per day keeps the blues away

1 for mom  
1 for dad  
1 for Auntie Linda  
Even though she's mad.  
1 for my bestie,  
Another for my neighbor.  
Tally one more for the stranger,  
Who did me a welcome favor.  
1 for teacher,  
And mom deserves another,  
I even saved a big one,  
For my grumpy older brother.  
And that last one,  
That special one,  
That makes a person happy,  
That last hug,  
That special hug,  
I'll let someone give to me.



# Alex Schwed

*Poet*

**Carrie L. Clickard** is an award-winning picture book author and poet with *Flashlight Press*, *Holiday House*, *Bloomsbury* and *Simon & Schuster*. Her work has appeared in publications around the world including *Spider*, *Cricket*, *Ladybug*, *Highlights*, *High Five*, *Light*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Myriad Lands*, *Spellbound*, and *Enchanted Conversations*.

## Dino-soaring...

Past stellar seas and cosmic shores  
you'll find Earth's missing dinosaurs.  
They flew here when our world went cold  
in spaceships built of stone and gold.



They liked the planet's inky lakes,  
its flying frogs and singing snakes.  
The crystal trees of pink and blue  
were tasty – good for napping too.

They found the lighter gravity  
meant dinos could move gracefully.  
They floated, sweeping through the skies.  
A perfect dino paradise!



A dozen dozen years went past  
'til dinos thought of Earth at last.  
By then their ships had turned to rust.  
The fuel containers full of dust.

No way back home to jungles deep  
to oceans blue or mountains steep.  
With lifted head and lowered girth  
they sang their sorrow for the Earth.

So if, one day, you sail the stars  
and find their planet, far from ours,  
land gently on the inky foam  
and bring our dinosaurs back home.



# Carrie L. Clickard

Poet



# Survivor

*Author* **Michael Dai**



**M**My church hosts this annual Thanksgiving party with speed-eating pumpkin pie contests, and they let us kids play video games and ride on scooters outside. They also have this tub filled with fish. To catch the fish, we use plastic spoons and then put the fish in a cup. One year I caught about ten, whisked them home, and plopped them in a tank. After five months, all of them died except for Survivor. He was a guppy, about two inches long with bulging eyes, and he always seemed to have a strand of dookie hanging from his butt.

Survivor had an orange body with gold shimmering fins and scales. His tail was like an orange fan. I fed him pellets of who-knows-what, and he was content. Grandpa said that Survivor would live for only “about two-to-five years.” I wondered what I would do without Survivor’s goofy little eyes staring at me when I came home from school each day. Grandpa helped me clean the tank that held a castle the size of a coffee mug and plastic seagrass, where Survivor could hide and peek at me through swaying green. Whenever

I changed his water, I had to put him on a plate, and he would wiggle out. He was mischievous like that. I worried that one day he would escape. "Survivor is much like you," Grandpa said. "He doesn't listen." I found this funny because fish are just fish — they don't have bad behavior.

Grandpa used to take my sister and me to eat at this fish place, and he would order tuna or salmon, and I would always say, "No! Don't eat Survivor!" My grandpa had a booming laugh. He was nice like that. We would talk about random things like his favorite Chinese dramas or the weather. I wanted to know about his life, so I asked him, "Grandpa, what was your house like when you were a kid? What clothes did you wear? Did you ever have a pet fish?" He answered all my questions as if he didn't care about anything else but me.

One day, Grandpa was standing in the bathroom and he just collapsed. When I visited him in the hospital, he said, "I'm fine. Quit fussing." So I told him about the fidget spinner craze at school and my new cell phone and the kid who rides his skateboard all over school even though it's not allowed.

As I sat in the hospital room with Grandpa, I thought of all the things he had done for my sister and me. I remembered the times he brought home those huge chocolate bars full of almonds and nougat. My sister and I loved those candy bars, forgetting our manners and grabbing them out of his hands and stuffing our chubby faces until we felt sick. He liked to make us Chinese fried bread and soy milk. Once, I strode into the kitchen and went straight to where Grandpa was making the fried bread. I literally stuck my face onto my plate and munched it all up only stopping to drink some soy milk. Another time, when my parents went out to a birthday party, he let us stay up late watching *The Mist*. He sat in the chair next to us, munching on popcorn and looking unfazed at all

the blood and gore. He smiled when the monsters came out as if he were expecting them, while we screamed our heads off. That night, as my sister and I went to sleep, I was afraid that the mist would suddenly spill into our house and the creatures would take us into the foggy depths, never to be seen again.

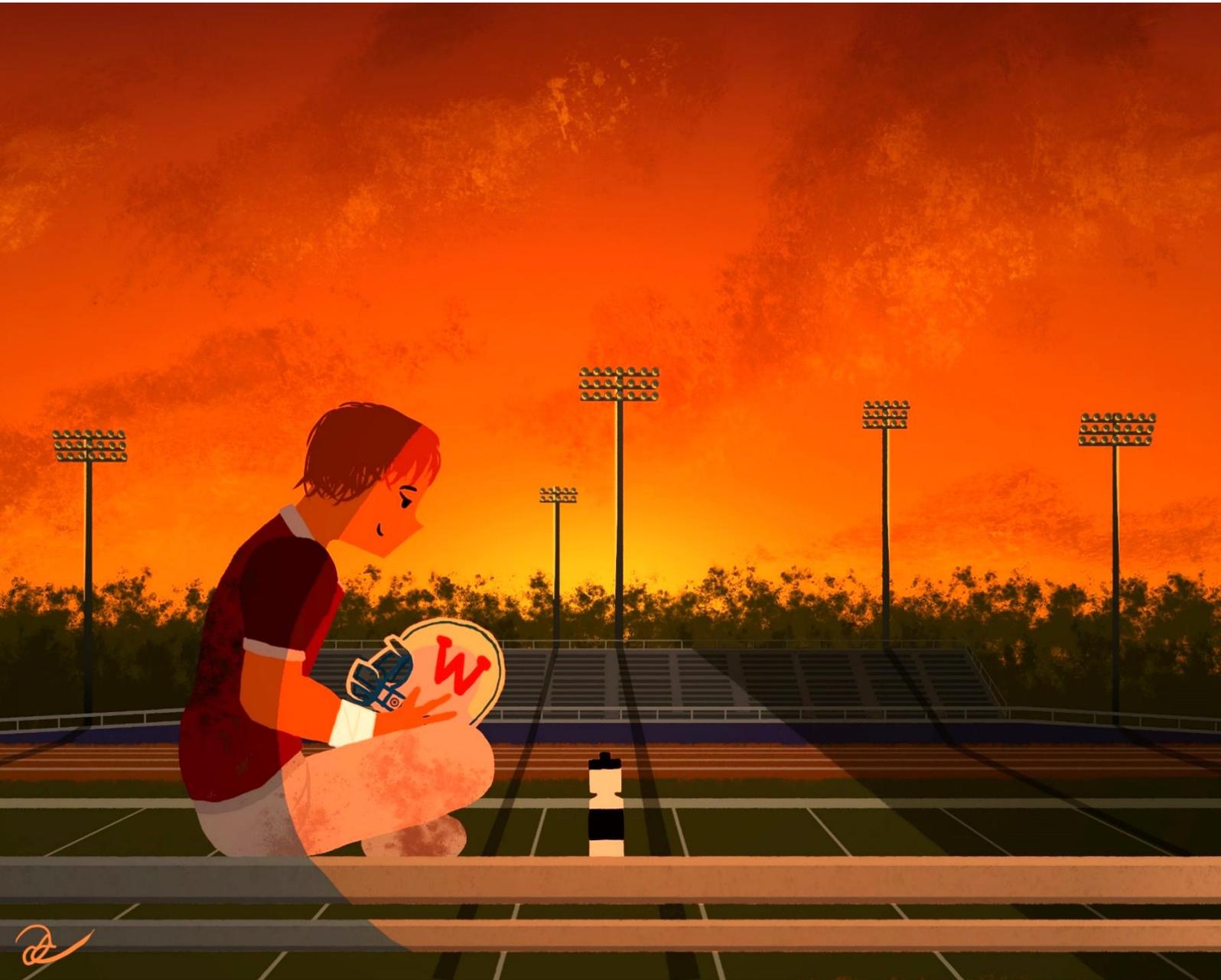
A year after Grandpa died, I came home and saw Survivor floating in the tank, upside down. It was a Friday, and it felt like something good would be happening. Boy was I wrong. I took him out into my backyard and buried him under the grapefruit tree because he would always stare at it through the window with his big guppy eyes. I was glad that Survivor had been a part of my life and that he was there for me for as long as he was. I sat there and cried under the tree for ten minutes. I told him, "I'll miss your guppy eyes and mischievous behavior. I wish I could bring you back, but my mom says that every living thing eventually moves on and that it's something everyone needs to get used to."

I don't know why I cried so much. Survivor was just a fish, after all.



**Michael Dai** is 12 years old. He attends Sutter Middle School in California. He hopes to be an author one day, but his parents want him to be a doctor.

# Practice Break



Helen He

*Artist*

## Robotics Shop Blues



**Helen He** is a young doodlebug who enjoys capturing everyday moments and memories with digital art. When she's not painting in Photoshop, she can be found designing spreads for the high school newspaper, coding Android apps, or tinkering around in the robotics workshop.



## Bubble Bath Magic

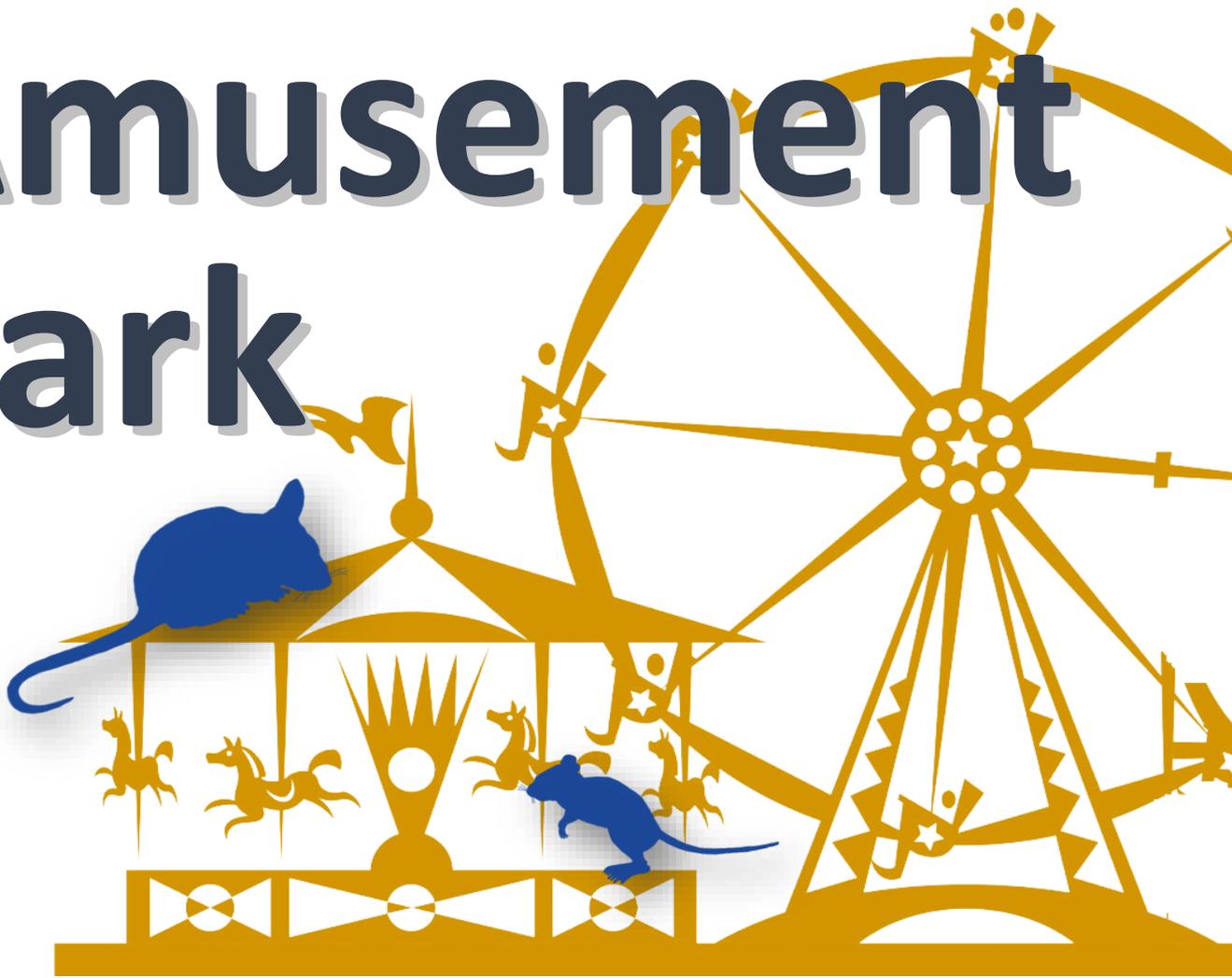
# City Night Lights



# Zeppy Cheng

*Author*

## The Mouse and the Amusement Park



I am a researcher. I research mice. Especially their brains. They make a good model for how humans work, act, and react to stimulus. Mice are actually very smart. They can navigate mazes, press certain buttons in order, and even recognize faces.

Let me tell you a story of a mouse that I found in my lab one day. We were experimenting with special “smart pills” that were supposed to help kids stay focused in class.

We never expected the pills to actually make the takers smarter. But they did. Much smarter.

His name was Kenny. He was a mouse who we gave a dose of the magical pill in order to test it to see if it had any bad effects. Instead of just showing more intelligence, he began to speak. Out loud. In a small, high-pitched voice that reminded me of Alvin from Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Kenny would speak as long as he was on his medication. He knew how to make proper conversation, could answer questions about his life, and was able to hold his own in a debate about the relative merits of McDonald’s and Burger King. He was a big fan of the New Orleans’ Saints, as he had watched one of our lab assistants as he viewed a game on his phone.

Kenny wanted something. Every day he would ask me for it. I knew he was not going to live long — and so did he. Mice do not have very long lives. He did not have much time to learn, play, and have fun like a normal kid. After all, he was just a kid. He didn’t know much.

One day he came to me and told me exactly what he wanted. He wanted to go to an amusement park. Ride a roller coaster, go twisting down a drop, feel the wind in his

whiskers and his fur. I did not know if they would allow a mouse to go to a theme park, but I knew that I would try. Kenny was an amazing mouse. He deserved to have something amazing happen to him.

The day I took him to the theme park was a holiday. It was crowded, and there were a lot of people who were walking about, standing in line, waiting for other people. I saw a lot of strollers.

I had Kenny in a mouse cage that was clearly visible by my side. In retrospect, I knew I should have hidden him. But I couldn’t know. I couldn’t know that they wouldn’t allow a mouse into a theme park, no matter what, even if he could speak English like a cultured British person. Oh, I forgot to tell you. Kenny had a British accent, which he probably got from the exchange student who was working at the lab and supervising Kenny’s development. That man, Charles, loved talking to his animals. I guess that was where Kenny learned his English.

Kenny was distraught after learning that he couldn’t get into the theme park. We stood at the entrance for some time, watching people walk in and out, and nothing except the rules of the people who owned the park could stop us. But their rules were absolute.

We had to follow those rules.

I walked with Kenny back to my old beat-up Ford and placed his cage in the passenger seat. Kenny looked up at me through the bars.

“Don’t you think we were being too obvious back there?” he said, in his cultured, British accent. “Maybe next time we should ditch the cage.”

I nodded. I had learned that my own

hubris and the fact that I worked with mice all the time made me unable to understand how other people saw Kenny. They probably thought I was a ventriloquist.

Kenny's eyes were full of emotion. He looked human. It was helped by his perfect voice, but everything about him was very human. His expression. His posture. The light in his pupils that danced and looked deeper than any actual human I had ever seen.

There was also the fact that I only had a dozen more of the smart pills left. I couldn't keep him on the pills for as long as I wanted because we only had the grant money to purchase a small amount. The drug would need to be able to approved by the FDA before any more could be produced.

That was the sad part. Kenny wouldn't even be able to speak for the rest of his short life. I needed to take him to the amusement park before that happened.

I went home, Kenny in his cage by my side, and thought for a long time about how I would get Kenny into the park.

I had an idea. I had a breast pocket that, with a pocket protector, might be able to hide Kenny's small frame inside of it. It was genius. I knew that pocket protectors would someday serve me well. Everyone teased me for wearing them, but I wasn't so keen to have an ink pen spill all over my nice white lab coat. I was in a field where nerds were king.

Kenny spent the day I was at work before the weekend spinning around on his exercise wheel. When I got home, he greeted me with a nice "Hello." I gave him a dose of his smart pills. In the morning, I placed him in my breast pocket and took him to

the amusement park again. There was no one to stop me this time. We got through. And, I only had to pay for one ticket.

I knew I was doing something wrong, but at the same time, I wanted to grant Kenny's wish. I wanted him to experience some of the fun that humans were capable of experiencing.

We rode the biggest roller coaster, the one that dominated the skyline, and Kenny loved it. He couldn't believe how fun it was, dropping through the sky, almost flying.

When we got back to the lab, Kenny thanked me, smiling in his mouse-like manner. I spent a couple more days with him, trying to figure out all he knew, but in the end, we ran out of medicine and he turned back into a normal mouse. I was the only friend he ever had. He lived a good life in a cage in my house until he died, and for the entire time I thought he watched me, his eyes entreating me like those of a human's.



**Zeppy Cheng** is an author of more than ten books: *War on the Rolling Plains*; *Dungeons and Diamonds*; *Armed, Cute, and Dangerous*; *Power Trip*; *Mac*; and more.

## Like Fireflies

shattered drop of silver from high  
mourns the leaves wilted beneath a  
rimy moon  
as time murders the last red flickers  
on the bleak earth

bird's shrill screech under a  
grim canvas  
smothering the  
quietness of the woods  
jarring the lost

as frost rises along  
the gelid chill of the  
withered silhouettes  
belonging to the once rich  
cherry blossoms

none ever  
witnessed such  
barren lands as  
vacant as the night  
in the woods

yet like stars  
they burn bright in  
the ink of the heavens  
and march on in  
the long sleep of the  
northern sun

venturing on  
under the torch of  
their own spark

and when shadows come  
they cry and fly and die  
to cast fire to the  
parched soil  
and dance nimbly in the skies

how feeble the light  
how deep the night

like fireflies

# — SONG Yiding *Poet*

**SONG Yiding** is a 13-year-old school kid living in Hong Kong. He enjoys writing, studying physics, and thinking about philosophical questions which drives him crazy. He also likes learning different languages like Latin and French. He holds dear to himself that 'to live, is the best way to die'. He aims at living his life to its highest summit possible.



let go



Erica Montgomery —



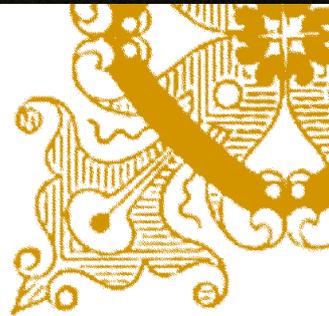
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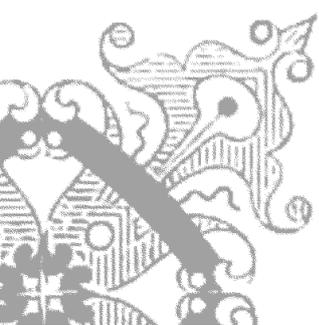
*Photographer*





**January**





# have faith





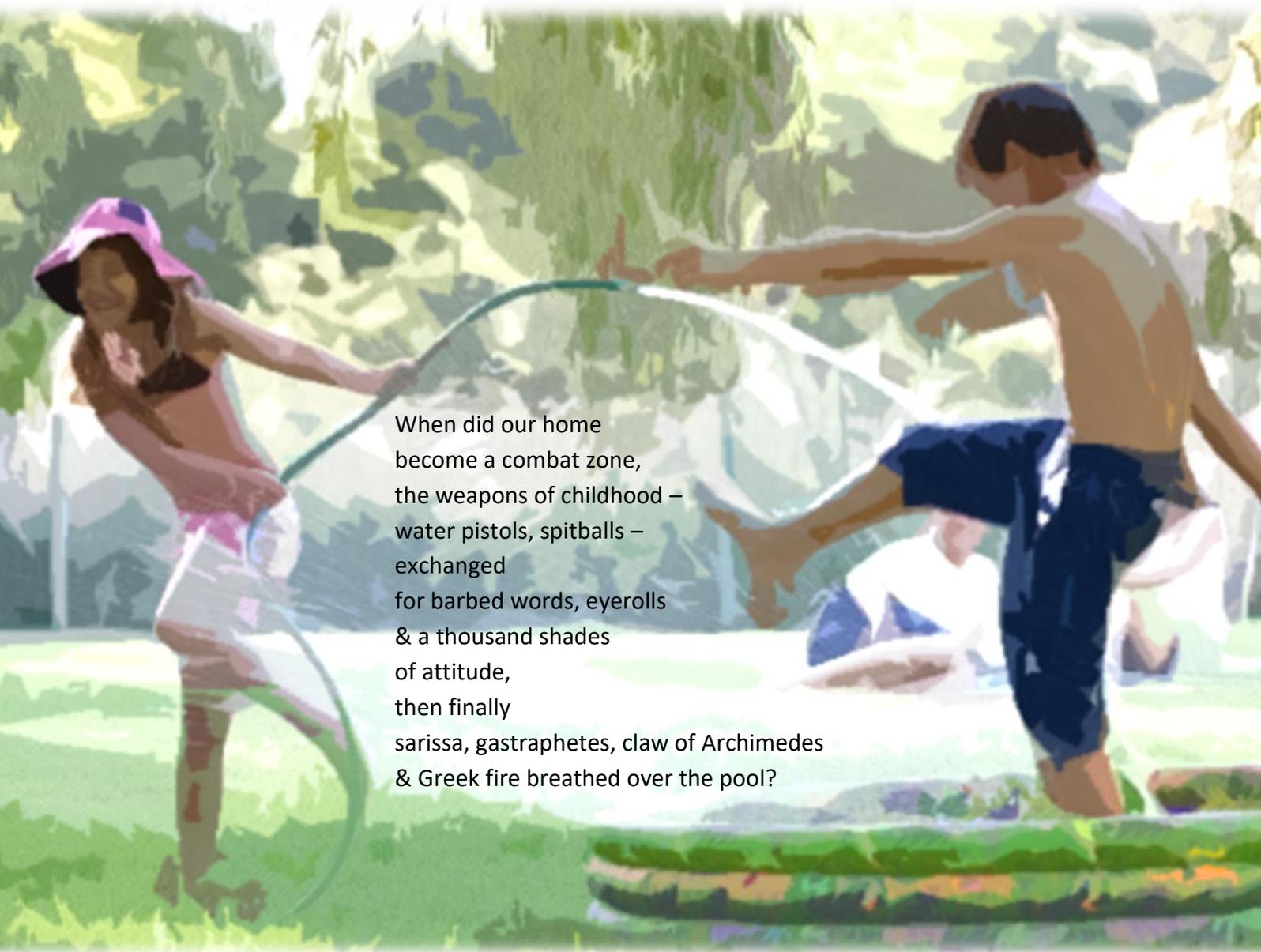
field of gold



**Erica Montgomery** is a mother of three, wife to an amazing and talented man, a portrait and family photographer based in Los Angeles, and a documenter of life. Her passion is creating visual memories of ordinary moments. She finds nothing more beautiful than real life. Nothing more inspiring than capturing a real moment with genuine emotion. She strives to make images that invoke feelings and memories of a life well lived. So what if it isn't perfect? So what if things are unorganized and messy? That is what life really looks like. And family. And love.



## Weapons of War



When did our home  
become a combat zone,  
the weapons of childhood –  
water pistols, spitballs –  
exchanged  
for barbed words, eyerolls  
& a thousand shades  
of attitude,  
then finally  
sarissa, gastraphetes, claw of Archimedes  
& Greek fire breathed over the pool?

# Cash Myron Toklas <sup>Poet</sup>

**Cash Myron Toklas** is the pseudonym for an author, poet, and playwright who wishes to remain anonymous. He is new to literary publication, although three of his poems appeared recently in *The Piltdown Review*. His current project is a reboot of Hesiod's *Theogony* from the perspective of Saturn/Kronos. In general, his work explores the lessons that ancient myth can offer for modern people.

# Garbage Children

We are the garbage children  
The ones you throw away

The ones nobody thinks about  
The ones so easy to betray

We're the children gone unnoticed  
We're the children you can't bear

Somber souls slopped in sorrow  
And not one of you seems to care

We live our lives voiceless  
In the shadows between the cracks

We're decay bound to infertile soul  
Where footprints leave no tracks

We are the children better off not here  
We are children that don't exist

Our dreams remain undeveloped  
Forgotten with the flick of a wrist

We are the garbage children  
The ones you throw away

No one speaks up for us  
But hopefully they will...some day

## Eric Crowder

**Eric Crowder** is a Behaviour Support Coach for Onslow County Schools, in North Carolina. He generally writes silly poems that he often shares with his own three kids.

*Poet*



# Survival of the Fittest

*humanity had been stripped to its core*

---

Author **Ashreya Mohan**

The lights went out all too soon, all too fast.

We never saw it coming. It was a monster, so large and full of nothingness that our minds could not even come close to understanding it. It started not too long ago, and we watched as distant stars started to dim, like the way a candle flickers at the end of its life. But this was not just the simple life cycle of a star, this was something consuming it whole.

So we watched, and we assumed, but never really knowing what was going on. Maybe

that was the worst part, that we would never really understand the way the cosmos worked, in what wondrous ways it had weaved itself this world so full of beautiful uncertainty.

I stayed indoors most of the time, peering into the void outside, of the fact that any day might be the last haunting me. It was hard, accepting the fact that we were wrong about everything. The world will not end in fiery heat death, a frigid ice age, in war and blood-shed or treacherous plague. It will end with our worst

fear – the unknown. The very thing that makes our skin crawl.

And then the nearer stars began to die out, and that was when the panic really started to grow. Full-fledged panic, rumors filling news sites and social media. This impending apocalypse had come much too soon. We were supposed to live longer, do better things, but what had we done, really? People searched for their answers in the liquid nothingness of the sky, but it held no such thing.

Time became sacred.

The stars we had so lovingly named, the ones that formed constellations that we had conjured up in our minds, started to dim, and the nights only got darker. There were people that rejoiced, people that worried, people that profited off the panic but in the end, the only raw human emotion hidden underneath all those layers of society was terror.

And from there was where it rose, a powerful human resistance that united every single person. The same humans that had fought each other at every point in history banded together because of that primitive emotion, the fear of the end. We had written stories about this, made movies, and told jokes but now that it was here, humanity had been stripped to its core.

The darkness had reached the sun, and day-light lost the brilliance it used to have. But humanity did not. Shelters were built. Warmth from the earth had been harnessed. Oxygen was collected. We built ourselves a post-apocalyptic shelter, a civilization that still thrived somehow in the absence of the sun.

I sit in the little tent we built for ourselves, amidst hundreds of others exactly the same. The only world we know now is a dome, built of the broken re-mains of our shattered hope. Outside this little haven, the world is nothing but pure darkness and freezing cold, like stepping off the

edge of the world. It is not much, this strange apocalyptic shelter. Life will never be the same again, but maybe just the fact that it exists, and we are still alive, is all that matters. We hadn't let it consume us, like it had to everything else.

I used to think a lot of things were beautiful. The mountains that rose to heights of wispy clouds. The first snows of winter, the unchangeable warmth a summer day brings. But perhaps the most beautiful thing is humanity itself, the way we have built ourselves up from mere apes to intelligent beings. The way we find beauty in everything in the world, and find solace in the stories we conjure. There is something so pure in a human smile filled with true joy that I'll never understand.

We refused to die.



**Ashreya Mohan** is a high school student in Ontario, Canada. She has won writing awards including the *TSA Essay Competition* and other local competitions. Apart from writing, she enjoys drawing and photography. From a very young age, she's always shown a creative side and she hopes that her passion in writing will take her places.



# Utopia



*Author*

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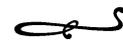
**Oscar Au**

Spears of purplish orange showered upon the barren landscape, the sky pigmented a bloody red. As the last pinkish rays of aura faded away, God's night star, the moon cast down weak splinters of light. Under the night sky adorned by drops of ethereal crystals, the haunting corpses glittered blood-red like rubies. Iridescent, but horrific.

Drunk with fatigue, I collapsed onto the ground. Around me, my fellow companions scattered, some mourning over their sprained ankles or broken limbs, others simply staring amidst in a daze. The trench smelled of a nauseating odour – a mixture of gunpowder, and decaying flesh. Before joining the army, I had always pictured the glory and honour a soldier was entitled to. I had childishly believed that we could win the war easily, and pictured myself returning to my home country, showered by accolades and distinctions. It seemed decades ago, when I was still an ordinary kid, about to graduate from a prestigious medical school. That afternoon after I attended my graduation, the city was deluged with propaganda. Thousands of black-and-white posters engulfed the city walls, interspersed among the winding alleyways, cloaking the city of London in unyielding stacks of paper... There was a call for duty ringing in our ears, the duty to serve our motherland. My friends and I instantly ventured to enlist.

Half a year ago, I was deported here in France, to fight in the Battle of Somme. The battle dragged on infinitely, ultimately resulting in a stalemate. Millions of lives were sacrificed, but nothing was accomplished. I clutched onto the golden chain hung around my neck – It was in the shape of a dove, the symbol of faith and hope.

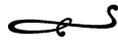
There was a severe dent in the middle. The chain had protected me from a shot a couple of months before. The bullet had simply ricocheted off this pint-sized alloy. It was a reminder of the existence of miracles. At this point of the night, the northern wind howled and slapped against my cheeks like frosty blades. Shrouding myself in a bundle of rags, I eventually drifted off into another series of obnoxious nightmares...



I woke up to a blinding flash of white. The first snow had made its way through overnight, and now, as I peeked into the hole through the cement wall, I saw the ground blanketed in a coat of white, temporarily disguising the corpses and bomb shells, the atrocities of us human beings. Under the winter glare, the No Man's Land was barren, snow shimmering like little moons, with withering patches of grass and thorns protruding in places. The morning routine was monotonous. Jonathan and I had to patrol the boundary and report any sightings of German war-craft or artillery. As we scanned the horizons, the morning sun, glaring from the azure canopy, dipped the earth in a dazzling nectar-gold, which would have been mesmerizing if it were not for the situation. I crouched on the rocks and took a bite of the stale leftovers from yesterday. Every night, we were distributed loaves of bread and a scarce bottle of water, to temporarily quench the agonizing hunger and thirst. It was far from enough, especially when we constantly exhausted ourselves on the battlefield.

When we returned, the admiral had placed his orders. We were to fight across the No Man's Land at noon to the enemy's

trenches. Time stalked by. Minutes felt like hours, hours felt like years. My fellow comrades were exchanging anxious glances, fiddling with their weapon belts. We witnessed the sun gradually ascend, until it was directly above our foreheads, signalling noon. The harsh blare of the admiral's voice vibrated in the air, 'Boys, get up, get up. It's time. Today, we fight for our King, for our country. Today, we defeat our enemies and bring the trophy home. God bless us.' As if on cue, we chanted in unison, 'England till we die!', banging our fists against the heavy armour.



The snow crunched beneath my boots as we advanced through the trenches into the battlefield. A while ago, clouds had started rolling in and draping the sky, an ominous feeling clinging onto their very fringes. I could feel my heart slamming against the fragile dove chained around my neck, which weighed upon my chest like a shard of ice. Hope. Even in the darkest of times, I thought, hope never ceased to exist. It was like a pulse in the eternal mind, always there when you sought for it...

'Bang!' a blinding flare radiated into the sky, debris showering all over us like hail. I braced my arms over my head. In formation, we charged out of the trenches into the bare exposed No Man's Land. As I struggled to open my eyes, the icons of the iron cross swarmed my vision, imprinted on flags wavering in the howling wind. Not long, the battlefield was laid out with corpses, the menacing roar of cannon balls and grenades reverberating in my eardrums. 'Whirr...' A high-pitched wail made the ground shake and tremble. I glanced up, just

in time to witness a bomb parachute down from an aircraft and sink right through the air. 'Boom!' I plunged to the ground, and felt a sharp pain arise from my ear. Around me, soldiers crumpled down, and the ground glimmered a pool of bright red. I saw the universe behind my eyelids, stars swirling in disorder. My face was searing, though smeared with ashen snow.

'Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!' a petrified cry echoed in the air. Hearing this, I fumbled for my mask. I could apprehend tormented cries ringing behind me. The flood of lethal gas was approaching at an alarming rate. Hands trembling, I fitted the straps around my hollow cheeks just in time. The first wisps of gas wafted past me, stinging my skin like thousands of bees, as I limped away, my pulse throbbing in my skull.

'Oliver!' a gasp sounded from beside. I glanced towards the direction, only to see Jonathan clambering over the rocks. A sense of relief and camaraderie rushed into my mind. But as I looked closer, something was wrong. His mask wasn't strapped around his mouth. The green smoke enveloped his body, and in the thick mist, I could recognize Jonathan's body twitching in agony. Large tumours obscene as cancer popped out of his blood-drained skin. A bloodcurdling shriek exploded from his lungs. Just as I was about to dive towards him, a violent pull refrained me from doing so. In my despair, I saw the admiral pull the trigger on his rifle, and the bullet sank into Jonathan's chest – the only act of mercy in this ruthless massacre. Tears streamed down my cheekbones, but I knew it wasn't over. The battle was still not over. Jonathan's death was only a fragment of the many casualties. Under the sun, which

peeped out of the apocalyptic, the dove hung around my neck glinted like topaz. Have faith and hope, I silently reminded myself.

We barely had time to catch our breaths, when the second wave of bombing was initiated. Soldiers collapsed one by one, some faces I recognized, others I did not. Bombs and gunshots resonated in our ears once again, like panicked shrieks of young children. I dragged my legs forwards, ankles feeling like they were about to shatter. Another bomb rocked the ground and sent me flying a few meters away from where I was standing. In the split of the second, a gleam at the left corner of my eye grasped my attention. My chain. My four-leaf clover. It had fallen off my chest and was now nestled in a patch of grass, twinkling like a midnight star. Without a second thought, I crawled to retrieve the dove-shaped chain. It was cold to the touch, the intricacies of carved wings, and of course, the bullet dent detailing its surface. Preciously cupping it in my sweaty palms, I heaved a huge sigh of relief.

When I was just about to reposition the chain on my neck, then a spherical object ruptured right beside me. Before I could react, green mist evolved from its casing, swirling into the air like a devil being summoned from hell. My mind turned blank as I gawked disbelievingly at the ascending smoke. I was too stunned to move, to reach for the mask clumsily hanging from my belt. My muscles had solidified to stone, rigid and frozen. The carpet of mist wavered in the air, gradually encasing my body. The gas felt like fire, drowning me in its very depths. Blood was vomited out of my froth-corrupted lungs. My skin flared as if acid was slow-

ly disintegrating my cells. Was hope, after all, just a mirage in the desert in times of war? Was it just a non-existent pillar we people ludicrously clung on to?

I grasped onto the dove chain. Even till then, I was still foolishly hoping, hoping that faith would lead me to Eden, to eternal utopia.



**Oscar Au** is a secondary school student studying in St Paul's Co-educational College, Hong Kong. When he isn't having his head buried in schoolwork, he enjoys to read and write. He desperately wishes to trot across the globe (and Mars) with just a pen and a book.

## Safe

On sidewalks, painted  
with ice, my dog and I walk  
through winter.

On both sides, frozen grass  
covers the ground, on and on  
from one yard to the next.

Gray shapeless clots of ice  
threaten two- and four-leggeds  
traveling on foot.

We make our way  
shakily slipping along  
learning to be patient,

each corner a signpost,  
signaling a bit of progress,  
marking a small victory.

Finally back home,  
we bring our cold memories  
inside, into the warm.

Poet



**Susan Gundlach's** poems have appeared in such journals as *After Hours* and *\*82 Review*, in the "poetry tutorials" *The Crafty Poet II* and *The Practicing Poet*, and in the walkway of the Evanston Public Library. Sue also co-edited the poetry anthology, *In Plein Air*. Her poems for children can be seen in *Cricket* magazine and *BALLOONS Lit. Journal*. Sue serves as visiting artist at local grade schools and has helped mount a traveling exhibit of her poems illustrated by the digital photography of fifth graders. Her poetry for "grown-ups," paired with artwork by a visual artist colleague, has been featured in exhibits at the Evanston Cultural Center and the Evanston Public Library. Sue lives in Evanston, Illinois, with her family, human and canine.

## Time Travel

Two leftover deer  
galloping, floating out of the fog,  
appearing from another time,  
gliding down the street and up into yards,  
stopping to nibble on sculptured shrubs  
that were never meant to be there  
in the long-ago wildness,

creatures straight from a medieval tapestry,  
standing by, still, staring at my dog and me,  
we who are strangers in this misty scene.



# Susan Gundlach



# Shree and the Elephant

*Author* Lynn Kang



**A**s I was sitting in the healing room, I closed my eyes for a couple of minutes. A weird daydream cordoned off my mind. I heard the clattering of chains and what sounded like paper being rubbed together. A puppy was barking in the distance. Or perhaps it was the sound of children laughing. Whatever it was, it was not helping my anxiety.

I opened my eyes and noticed that the walls of the room were saffron-colored. I am pretty sure it was my mind playing tricks on me again. I was used to it by now. One of the three

walls began to open, and a giant Elephant stepped through. I was now staring, in a total state of shock, at this mysterious animal.

The elephant was not white, brown or grey but rather a shiny saffron color, from trunk to tail. Its original brown color was visible through the cracks of its skin; one couldn't miss it. There were shackles on its feet, golden fetters, complimented with very thick golden chains. Its teeth were gold plated as well. The end of its trunk had been dipped in something red.

“Hey buddy, where did you come from, are you here to see the doctor too?” I asked this mysterious creature. The big animal was as amazed as I was. It was twisting its head back and forth like a dog taking a deep interest.

An hour went by gazing at the big creature. Out of nowhere, an icy hand touched the side of my neck. Shree was finally here. I am sure by this time I had begun drooling. She held the back of my head with her right palm and wiped something off my chin, as a mother would do after feeding her child.

I shifted my focus from the elephant to Shree. She was looking so beautiful that day, like an angel with her loosely tied ponytail. Her hair was tied back with a yellow band. She was wearing a silky robe; her brown eyes peered down at me. Interestingly enough, her gown was saffron-colored too. She had a long golden mala hanging around her neck, which was swinging back and forth.

She asked me if I wanted a glass of water. I nodded, and she walked away from me. I heard a sweet sound; it was like someone clinking two small cymbals together. I looked down and noticed that she was wearing two very beautiful Indian anklets. I smiled a little after seeing them. I don't know why they made me so happy.

I looked back to see what my elephant friend was up to. It was also walking away from me, its head still tilting side to side. The shackles around its ankles made a sweet noise. I was trying my best to recollect where I heard that sound before. I looked at the elephant again. Her trunk wasn't red anymore. Instead, it was filled with water.

I looked down at the floor. There was a blizzard of various thoughts racing through my head. As I tried to fight off the noise, the sound began getting louder. I looked up; she was here. She had brought me water in a tall glass.

I took the glass from her hands and right after taking the first sip I started weeping. Till this day I don't know why I cried, she hugged me, and I buried my head into her chest. Shree wiped tears from my cheeks and walked out of the room without saying anything.



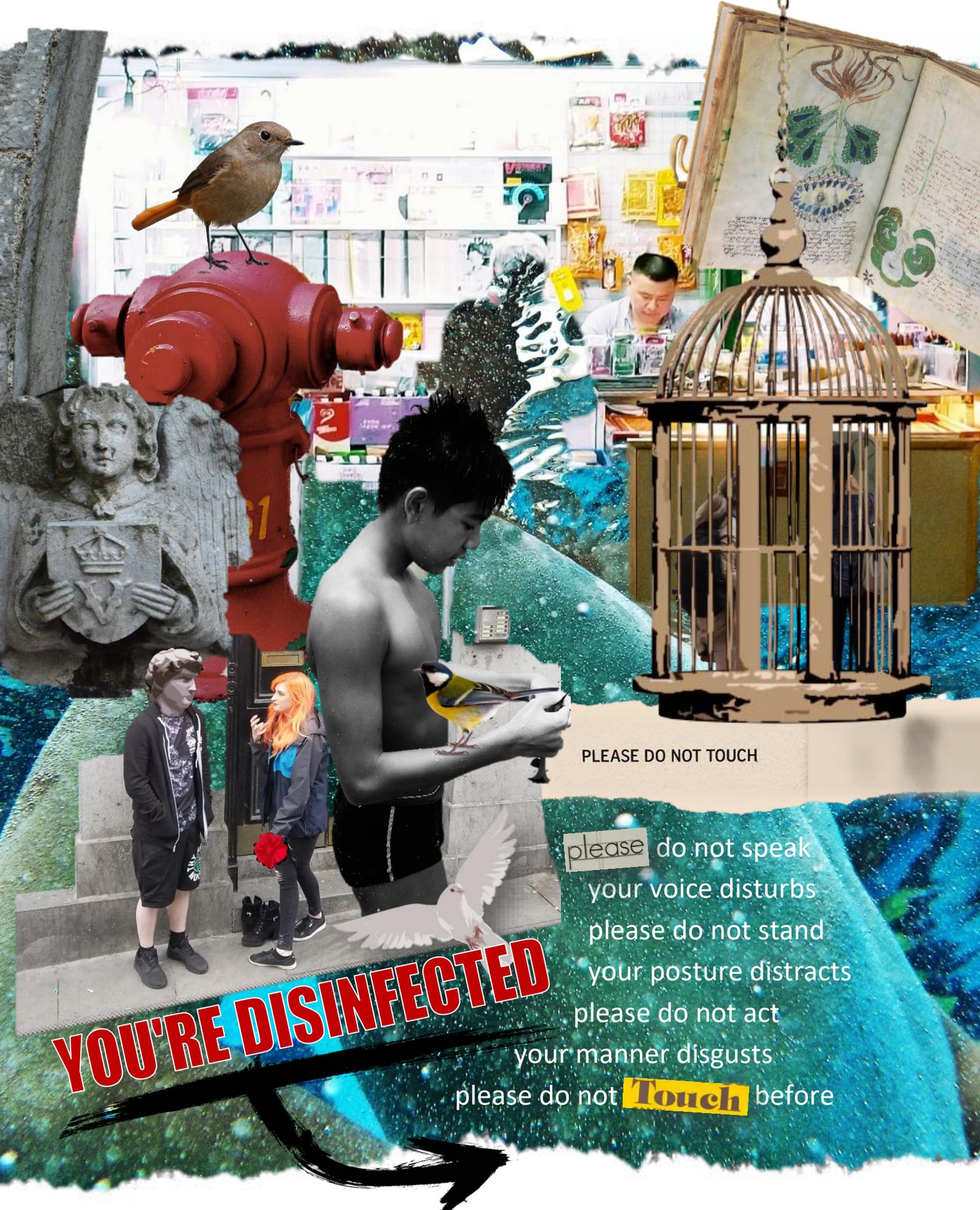
**Lynn Kang** is a rising senior attending an international school in Seoul, South Korea. Most of her writing comes from the dark humor that keeps her daily life afloat. Her other interests are playing the flute in her marching band and watching old black-and-white films.



## Artist You Young Kim

**You Young Kim** is a sixteen-year old junior at Seoul International School in Seoul, Korea. She spends her free time making art, visiting different exhibits, and exploring all corners of the city. Kim plans to continue exploring her interests in art and writing to seek and develop unique ways of expressing herself. Several of her works have won recognitions in the *Scholastic Art & Writing Awards*, and her most recent work was published in the *Daphne Review*. Kim is also the visual art winner of the *Claremont Review's 2018 Annual Writing & Art Contest*.





PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH

please do not speak  
your voice disturbs  
please do not stand  
your posture distracts  
please do not act  
your manner disgusts  
please do not **Touch** before

**YOU'RE DISINFECTED**

Lee Ho-cheung



## You Don't Belong Here

You tried so hard  
 to chirp and perch  
 on a stick. You clad  
 yourself in feathers  
 so that you made the  
 same noise as you  
 flapped your arms.  
 You hopped like them  
 and ate from the  
 same cup to make  
 yourself believe  
 you blended in.  
 To your dismay,  
 no matter how hard  
 you tried, you didn't  
 belong.  
 You undressed and  
 unmasked.  
 Unnoticed,  
 you left  
 the cage.

Artist &  
 Poet

**Dr Lee Ho-cheung** is the founding editor of *BALLOONS Lit. Journal*. His poetry, prose and artwork could be found in a range of journals, print and online. His poetry was shortlisted in *Oxford Brookes University's International Poetry Competition* (2016), for *erbacce-prize for poetry* (2017) and twice for *The Proverse Poetry Prize* (2017 & 2018).





# Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal



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