

The Pandemic Project

Volume 5



SUNY Erie
Fall 2022

The Pandemic Project evolved in Spring 2020 when the annual Spring Arts Festival was cancelled due to COVID-19. Knowing that our students would not be able to recite their work live on the stage, we wanted to provide a space to commemorate their creative efforts. It was our hope to share their voices and talent by recording their challenges and the ways in which they came to terms with the pandemic. Special thanks to retired Humanities Professor Michelle Michael-Lippens for suggesting we find a virtual venue for this project.

Volume 5 encompasses work submitted during the Fall of 2022 from Pandemic Literature, composition, and creative writing students, along with John Dunne's Cardinal O'Hara students. It marks what we hope is the final issue of *The Pandemic Project*. The pieces move us away from the early days of masks and isolation and into themes of fostering self-care and seeking refuge in nature. For example, a ballerina discovers comfort in her mother's advice, "find the calm inside that little body./Get to the other side." Another student writes, "I. Made. It./ I have another chance./I'm still here."

We have enjoyed curating this collection which will be permanently housed in the SUNY Open Access Repository (SOAR) thanks to SUNY Erie Librarian Matthew Best. Our students truly inspire us both online and in the classroom, and we will always explore new ways for them to express their talents on stage and on the page.

Edited by

Professor Jennifer Campbell

Associate Professor Lisa Wiley Moslow

These pages are dedicated to

Matthew Best and Jewel De la Rosa

SUNY Erie North Campus reference librarians

for their unwavering support of our English department students
as embedded librarians in our courses and as valuable sources
of information and inquiry.

Thank you for graciously allowing us to host events
such as the Banned Books reading and others in the library.

Matthew ensured the longevity of this project
by adding the first four volumes to the SUNY SOAR database.

Thank you for going above and beyond the call of duty!

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Anxiety Doesn't Wear You

—an email from my mother, June 4, 2021

Adrien Malof

I wish I could carry your anxiety.
Don't let this consume your thoughts,
it's not fair to yourself.
Don't let it suck away all enjoyment,
you must find your own path to this freedom.
Hardest thing we all go through.
Finding our composure in times of stress
find the calm inside that little body.
Get to the other side
It is never easy when we really want something.

Letchworth

—after William Carlos Williams
Kali Havernick

Sunrise on the dam
Bright oranges and yellows

Water flows through—
Birds begin to sing—

A treelined trail to the bottom—
Dew-soaked grass

Camera rests at your chest,
Waiting for its turn, but

You don't give it a chance
Letting yourself connect

I Have a Dream Too!

CeCe Irizarry

I have a dream that one day this nation will strive to create peace everlasting.

I have a dream that one day all wars will soon be ending.

I have a dream that one day we will help our neighboring nations to adopt the same thinking.

I have a dream that the people of our world will never know the fear of war.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the children of our world will never know the pain of loss.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the fathers of our world will never know a day without their children.

This is my hope and faith. With this faith, we will be able to create never-ending world peace.

This will be the day when the concept of war will be foreign.

Lashtacular
Amber Pawlak

In the walls of my salon, I can be as creative as I want and be well compensated for it.

Clients come for a service, therapy session or even a nap.

Crystal chandeliers and bright lights allow us to perform effectively.

Vibes calming enough to take a nap. My salon is my favorite place to be.

I build friendships over the years.

Sometimes I sit and I'm all ears. Candles burn to flavor your nose.

I have a passion to give people confidence even at their lowest times.

In return they give me the confidence to continue my journey.

Black Girl

—inspired by Jamaica Kincaid
Jataya Munn

Wear your hair in braids to express that you're not ashamed of your culture, but be careful or you may be deemed "ghetto" by the people who don't understand your culture. Wear your hair straight to get a break from the high maintenance of your curls, but be careful or else you will be told that you are trying to be "white". Don't forget to tame your curly 'fro, or else you may look "unprofessional". "Is that your real hair?" is a question you will often be asked as a black girl. So in return you ask them the same question, but for some reason you get looked at as if you committed a crime. You don't understand that question; why would it matter if that is your real hair or not? Is it because they want you to fit into the stereotype that black women can't have long hair? Would they ask you that question if your skin looked like theirs? Why are they reaching to touch your hair? Are they crazy? You are not an animal, so they shouldn't try to pet you like one. Your hair is not their hair, so you wonder why they reach to touch it. "How do you get your hair curly?" You respond with "I use water, what do you do to get your hair so straight?" You get the response "My hair is naturally straight"; you think to yourself "what a coincidence, my hair is naturally curly." Why are we asking questions that we know the answers to? Is the grass green? Well duh.

"I just got a new spray tan, I'm almost as dark as you." They say that while laughing, but you look at them with a straight face as you try to figure out what is so funny. You wonder if you should remind them that their melanin is fake and will fade in a week or so. Yours is real, it shines in the sun and is everlasting. Your natural melanin is embraced, while they use their artificial melanin to cover up their naturally pale skin that hides underneath it. They're not as dark as you, but it's funny that they tried. You stop to think you found the joke, is it that their spray tan made them orange? Well orange is the new black, so you've heard. Why aren't they laughing? Did you offend them by commenting on their skin? They commented on yours first, but you have to laugh or else you'll be called "too sensitive" as a black girl; and they were "just joking", but you were "just joking" too, don't be so sensitive!

You raise your hand to answer a question and you immediately wonder whether or not you sound too "white". You have been told that you were trying to be white based off how you spoke. Would it make them feel better if you smacked your teeth, and incorporated the N word in all of your sentences? Maybe if you didn't announce your words and talked in a sassy tone they'd feel better, because that is what is expected from you as a black girl. When you get an important phone call, as a black girl you must code switch; or else you will be labeled as "ignorant" and "unworthy". When applying for a job and the application asks for your race, as a black girl, you contemplate whether or not you should answer. Sometimes you will be told "You're not like the rest", is it because they

think all black girls are the same? Why don't they go on and tell you what "the rest" are like? "Lighten up, it was a compliment"; as a black girl you must not show your anger or else you will give into their stereotype that all black women are angry. As a black girl you will have to bite your tongue and move along.

As a black girl, you'll wonder why is it your job to educate them on your blackness? You'll want to tell them to try picking up a book, and to do their own research. You'll wonder if the white women who wear box braids and other African braid styles decided to educate themselves on your blackness, as they wear the braids that you were once ridiculed for wearing; as they wear the braids that your ancestors wore to store rice because they weren't fed by their slave masters; the same braids that your ancestors used to map their way off of the plantations that their people enslaved your ancestors on. As a black girl you can't say anything because "It's just hair". As a black girl you will be asked by your white peers "Can I have the N word pass?" They'll laugh while asking, you'll stare still trying to figure out what is so funny. Is it because they usually say the word anyways, but to get your validation they think that it would cancel out the fact that they are racist? That was a funny joke, yet you can't seem to force a laugh or even a smile. Now it is trendy to be black, but only for those who are not. As a black girl you will wonder if this essay made them upset so that in response you can say "Lighten up, don't be so sensitive"; just as they would do to you.

Withholding

—after *The Lovers* by Rene Magritte
Adrien Malof

Drapings of white shielding the truth,
unable to reveal our true identity.
Scared you may hate what you see
behind the curtain.

The day I open up is a day I may regret.
You are holding back as well,
two people staring at each other
behind the curtain. Only seeing gray.

These curtains are not strong enough
to hold our passion back.
Now pieces of cloth between our lips,
as we kiss.
Imprints turning into scars from the thread
with each kiss we take.
Marking our fear is stronger than our passion.
Wrapped in fabric with no way out.
Powerless to open up to whom I love.

Florida

—after William Carlos Williams
Sam Calcaterra

The creek behind the house
long and narrow

Put together between stones—
The smell of salt water and grass—

Sunshine of the early morning—
The fish are jumping

A fishing pole, un-lined
laid on the grass, next to

a spool of line— And the
worms ready to be used.

Class Coverage

—Source material: work email
Hannah Kwasniewski

We are really struggling
with classroom coverage today.

Please come to the Main Office
and sign up for incidental
pay if you are interested.

The Reading teachers
have been doing a lot of this “subbing”
and while less than ideal, very appreciated.

It’s going to be a team effort today.
Respectfully.

Bluefields Beach, Jamaica

Shaneil Currie

A family trip planned once a month,
where everyone would busy themselves
to get everything ready.

The food would be cooked, put in the trunk,
bags would be packed,
and all that was left to do
was for us to load up the car.

The journey was a long drive,
once we arrived it was worth it.
Stretching our limbs to relieve the aches
from being so close in one position.

Crystal blue water glistening under the rays,
white sand crunching under my feet
and the laughter and voices of different family members and friends
let me know it was going to be a fun day.

We brought fried chicken, curried chicken and rice with peas,
played games, and a few minutes later changed our clothes,
washed off the sand, and were on our way back
to rest after a great day at the beach.

Blizzard Duplex

—inspired by Jericho Brown and Lucille Clifton

Lisa Wiley Moslow, SUNY Erie Associate Professor of English

i am running into a new year
i dreamt my neighbors drowned in a wave of snow

i open the door to a wave of snow
i'll huff and i'll puff and i'll blow your house in

mr. wolf huffs and puffs *i'll blow your house in*
cars abandoned electricity flickers

abandoned cars, electricity flickers
trapped neighbors dig one another out

trapped neighbors shovel one another out
Christmas morning sun pierces icy windows

peaceful morning sun pierces icy windows
on the North Park marquee *Get Well Soon, Joe*

Thank you Sha'ktra & Trent Get Well Soon, Joe
we are running into a new year

I Have a Dream Too!

Shaneil Currie

I have a dream that one day this nation will accept each race whether Black, Hispanic, or Asian.

I have a dream that one day police officers will ask questions and use proper defense mechanisms instead of shooting.

I have a dream that one day government assistance will help everybody in need without asking about the amount of money they are working.

I have a dream that there will be shelters and food for the homeless so they can be off the streets.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the nation will take care of the veterans that were fighting for this nation, providing them with money, food and shelter.

I have a dream today.

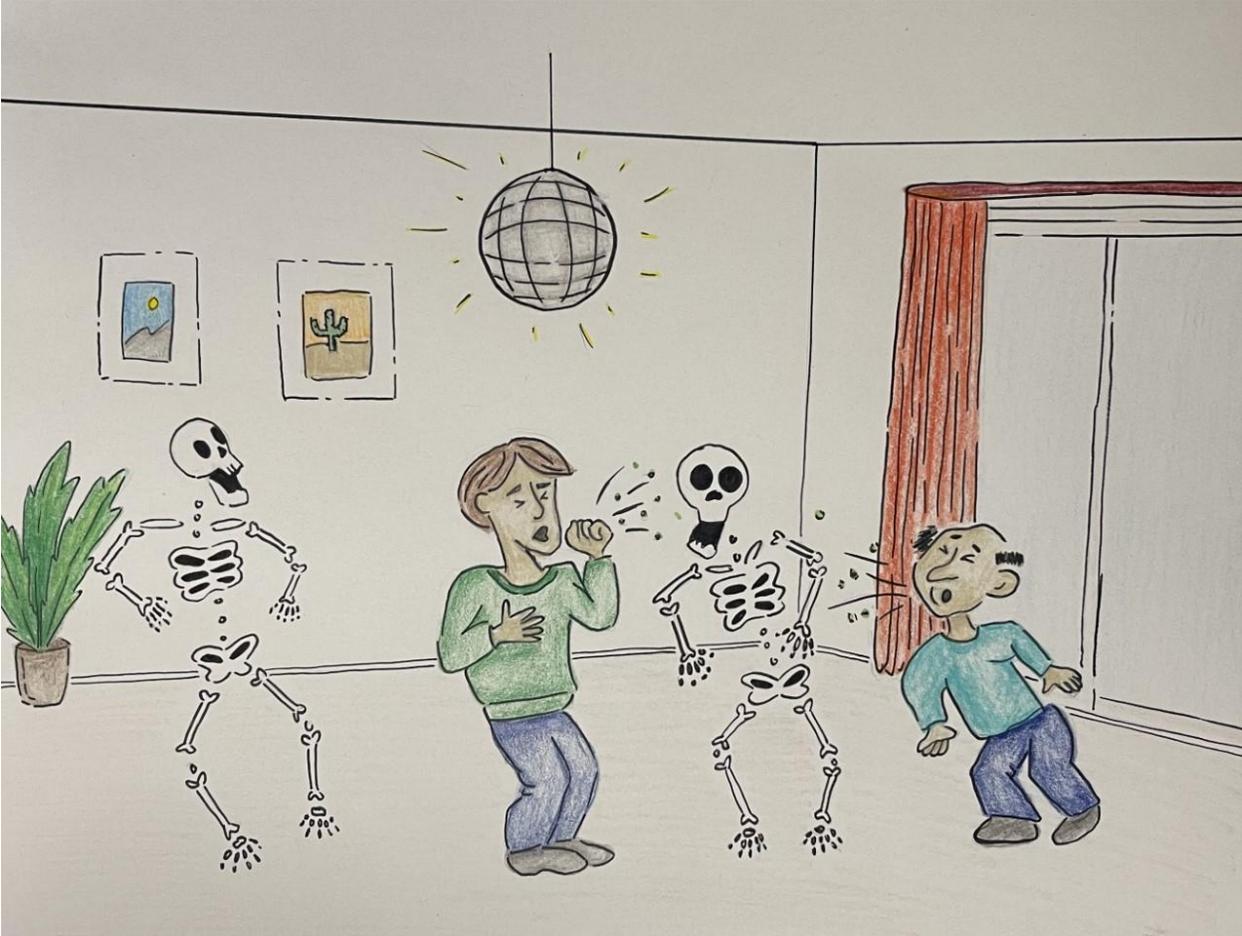
I have a dream that one day education will be free for all, so students won't be working to pay back student loans and focus on their future.

This is my hope and faith. With this faith we will be able to make this nation successful and caring to all its people.

This will be the day when all races will come together, the less fortunate will be cared for, and America will finally be a nation of opportunity.

Corona Parties

Daniel Ventura



Boredom

Michael Zelaski

I sit all day watching time waste away.
I busy myself with new gameplay,
But the game's joy will just delay
The boredom I feel all day.

Sit, Tick, and Sick

Michael Zelaski

Sit Sit Sit

All day long

Tick Tick Tick

Time Passes Along

Sick Sick Sick

World Stopped Yearlong

So I sit

Watching time tick

Still got Sick

The World

Michael Zelaski

The world slowed and sick
Staying at home all year round
Sickness will still spread

A White Sunrise

Nico Scirri

It was the end of night, and all had been well
So, I thought, as I stared upon the veil
The trees were green, with a luminous saturation
And I find found myself wrought with discreet fascination

The stars above; the sky's tapestry

Flitting through the sky like a swarm of fish through sea.

I stood upon the grass, hand over my eyes
For in the distance, I beheld a white sunrise

Hidden behind a wall of snow,
I could see the barest hints of a glow
Rolling over the trees like a log down a hill
A snowstorm rose with the might to kill.
Now as I stand beneath a green covered tree
I think to myself, "Blimey! This is the worst place to be!"

The Great Indoors

Niko Annunziata

"It's been years, or has it? I've lost track. My body only barely continues on...water is scarce, food even scarce-er...I might just die. If the illness takes me...use me as sustenance. Don't actually...that might make you sick, too." She begins to fake cry a little; a dramatic spiel from a dramatically bored girl.

"We have plenty of water. Even if we were running out, we could go get some, 'long as we're careful," interrupts the other taller, and much more reasonable, girl.

A great groan erupts from the drama queen. "Okay, Riley. We'll have plenty of water. Too bad I'm still DYING OF BOREDOM."

Riley rolls her eyes in her usual fashion. "Chelsea, didn't you bring over literally every movie you own?" she sternly asks.

"Yes, I did!" The poor girl finally seems to have some sort of spark in her eye. Like a leprechaun after his pot of gold, she launches up off the scraggly couch to the upstairs guest bedroom to retrieve her giant burlap sack of movies. There's all sorts of discs waiting to be scanned by a DVD player. A sweet, sweet DVD player. The TV in the house isn't the greatest, but she doesn't care. As long as she can maybe watch *Dumb and Dumber*, Riley's least favorite movie, she'll survive the eye-strain squinting to focus on a decade old LED TV could give her. She giggles to herself before bringing down the big collection cinema archivists would be envious of. If only she had a better way to store it all. Chelsea's utter joy almost made her louder than the couch she slammed herself onto. "Heeere they are!" she gleamingly shouts in a songlike fashion.

Riley opens the bag indifferently, almost as if she's been scarred by Jim Carrey one too many times, but clings onto the prospect of being able to watch *Die Hard*. The pair begin to look through each and every film, getting the experience of working at the now-closed second hand stores.

"Wooohoo!" Chelsea interjects. She gleefully pulls out a copy of *Superbad*, shaking it a bit to make sure her friend knows that this is her choice.

Riley scoffs. "Oh, hell no. You only like that movie because you think Michael Cera is the hottest guy on earth, for whatever reason."

"Hey!" Chelsea defensively replies. "Superbad is one of the greatest comedies ever made. The leads complement each other flawlessly, and every joke lands! She pauses a bit before muttering an additional, more honest comment. "...even if Michael Cera is a dreamboat."

Riley smirks, and continues to rummage through the seemingly endless pile of culture. "Here we go." She finds *Die Hard*. She's been waiting to watch this again ever since she was stuck indoors. Chelsea places her hand on her chin, seemingly contemplating this particular pick. "It's not Christmas, buuuut... yeah, okay!" Riley smiles; a rare sight. With the movie chosen, the pair split the work of a typical movie night. Snacks and Blankets go to Riley, while Chelsea will handle the movie and the remote.

Finally, the girls have food, and are ready to get comfy. All that's left is to put the movie in. Chelsea opens the jewel case. The disc is almost like an invaluable jewel to her. The shimmer, the shine, the lack of fingerprints. It's all perfect. She trusts this old DVD player with her life. Carefully, she slides it in, making sure not to touch the bottom layer; a

technique that she's mastered after countless unreadable movies at her hands. It's secure. Another success. Chelsea hops back on the couch all proud of herself. Riley is wondering why it took over a minute to put a DVD into the player, but it doesn't matter. She's just happy she gets to watch her favorite movie with her best friend.

"Alright. Power on!" Chelsea commands the remote. The anticipation kills her, but nothing happens. "Power...on." She gives it another click. Then, another ten. "Power on, power on, power on, power on!" she panics.

Riley gets up and sighs. "Probably something with the cable." Keeping it level-headed, she checks behind the television. The AV cables are all in order- red, yellow, and white. Regardless, she unplugs and replugs all three. "Anything?" she asks her couch command. Chelsea still is met with white text blaring into her eyes that read "NO SIGNAL", a phrase that haunts the nerdy girl.

"Do you happen to be weird enough to bring backup cables?" Riley jokingly asks her terrified friend.

Chelsea lights up. "You know me so well!" Even for the most odd occurrences, Chelsea makes sure she is packed well. She goes back to the sack and reaches all the way to the bottom. She knows exactly what she needs to feel for. "Gotcha!" she shouts. With a smug look on her face, she hands Riley the cables. Being more athletically minded, Riley is not as technologically adept as her friend. Luckily, she does know how to jam cables into outlets. They try again. This time, with more confidence.

With more hope than ever, Chelsea waits for the text to go away and instead show her something more entertaining. Unfortunately, that never comes. The duo are officially out of ideas. Riley is merely disappointed, but Chelsea is borderline depressed. She sulks on the couch, hiding her head in the Nirvana T-shirt that is far too big for her, but she still insisted she wanted to borrow from Riley.

In an attempt to comfort her friend, Riley offers to do something else. However, Chelsea snaps back. "Like what? We're stuck inside! We can't go back to my place, my mom is essential..."

Riley comes up with a plan. "You got keys. Can't you just swoop in there and grab your DVD player?"

The nerd she is, Chelsea corrects her friend. "Uh, *Blu-ray* player. And no, I can't. Your TV is MEGA old and doesn't even have HDMI." She creeps back into her oversized shirt.

Taking a deep breath, Riley once again tries to cheer up the disheartened girl. "Well, Chels, you've always had that weird imagination of yours. I'm sure you'll come up with something."

A figurative lightbulb seemed to light up over Chelsea's head right as the real one lighting the living room flickers. "I got it!" Before words of affirmation could even leave Riley's mouth, Chelsea swiftly cuts off the praise. "We write a children's book!"

Riley seems to be open to anything, except this idea absolutely leaves her flabbergasted. "I-what?"

Chelsea justifies her idea. "Think about it! It's super easy! All we gotta do is come up with some dumb idea, and by the time this whole thing is over, we can buy a new DVD player with all our moolah! And we won't be bored!"

Riley tries to inform the overly excited young author about how long it takes to

actually publish a book, but Chelsea already has the crayons out. At this point, Riley knows she cannot be stopped, and goes with the flow. The brainstorming process begins.

“Okay, okay. What do kids like?” Chelsea asks.

“I don’t know.” Riley responds. “What did you like as a kid?”

Chelsea racks her brain a bit before replying, “soap dispensers.” Riley did not think she could get anymore confused, however, she was foolish to believe that was the case while around her best friend.

Chelsea sees the astonished look on Riley’s face and explains. “When I was like, I dunno, five or so, I didn’t know soap was in the dispenser. See, I thought there were like, tiny magical elves who create the soap.” She then goes on to imitate these fictitious creatures. “Oh-ho-ho! Hello, traveler! We are the elves of good hygiene! And we make cookies! Out of soap!”

Being reasonable as she can be in this situation, Riley gives some feedback.

“Actually... we can use that. It can tell kids to wash their hands in a time where that’s really important. Though, we might wanna get rid of the ‘cookies out of soap’ part.”

The main concept of the story put in place, the two began to work on their story. They craft a mystical world full of elves who promote cleanliness. It has enough cutesiness for kids to enjoy while also containing ample thematic complexity for adults to find.

Once it is finally complete and stapled, Chelsea wipes sweat off her forehead.

“Whew! That was a good thirty minutes. Now what?” Riley looks out the window to a house across the street. It’s a resplendent lavender, which is not exactly common for the houses in the neighborhood. Through what seemed to be the kitchen window, she could see a woman washing dishes with the stressed complexion only someone with kids had. She recognized it from her own mother, who raised quite a rambunctious child. Riley turns back to her friend. “Chels, do you have a mask?”

Over at the gaudy, almost fake-looking house, a knock can be heard at the door. The woman peeks through the doorknob, then opens the door. She finds two masked highschoolers standing six feet away, one short and the other extremely tall. The short one is holding a stack of papers stapled together with crude crayon illustrations.

“H-Hello Ma’am!” says Chelsea, visibly sweating. The woman laughs and greets her back. She then looks up at Riley.

“Hello, Riley. How’s your mom?”

“Good, Rita,” says Riley. The two make a bit of small talk, while Chelsea seems shocked at the sudden name drops.

Riley then gets down to business. “Listen, I know how your kid can be. So, my friend and I made a little booklet about the pandemic.” Chelsea then hands Rita the book, then backs away as fast as she can.

“The Tree of Cleanliness?” The front cover loosely depicts a tree with elves inhabiting it. The elves are keeping their distance from each other and washing their hands. The mother seems bewildered.

“U-uh, yeah, see I kinda thought there were elves in the soap dispensers when I was younger,” Chelsea explains.

For the first time since this whole sickness spread, Rita smiles. “Well, thank you girls. I’m sure he’ll love this.” She then waves goodbye and shuts the door.

The two take off their masks and talk about what just happened. “Woow, look at you being all nice!” Chelsea says in a slightly mocking tone.

“Yeah, well, I figured she’d be struggling,” Riley replies. “I thought visiting her, even if it’s for a couple seconds, would cheer her up a bit. Tough times, if you haven’t noticed.”

Back at the house, Rita calls for her son. He’s only eight years old and dressed in his pajamas. The look in his eyes tells anyone he just wants to go play with his friends again. “These nice girls from across the street made you this.” She hands him the booklet. His eyes light up like Christmas has just come. He’s smiling again. He runs back upstairs presumably to go read it.

Back at Riley’s house, the two are still quite bored. They only managed to distract themselves for a little over half an hour. Much to their dismay, the DVD player did not repair itself in that time. Suddenly, the doorbell rings. The duo play rock, paper, scissors to determine who answers it. Chelsea wins, which doesn’t affect Riley that much considering it’s her house, and she would have likely just answered the door anyway. After masking up, Riley opens the door to find no one. Rather, she finds a piece of paper in the ground and brings it inside. She walks back to the couch to see what it is with Chelsea. The pair flip the paper over to find a note. The handwriting seems to be that of an eight-year old:

Dear Ryelee and Chelsea,

Thank you so much for the book! It was really cool! I thought the elves were funny, and I liked the drawings. Now I’m washing my hands like I should so I don’t get sick! Mom is really happy too! I Can’t wait to go outside again!

Ryan

Both girls go “Awwww!” in unison. Chelsea then makes a speech.

“Ya know, Rye. I think you taught me something today. Even in a worldwide pandemic, we gotta do our best to stay connected with people and not isolate ourselves. Otherwise, we’d miss moments like these. We gotta stick together as much as we can, even if it’s hard to physically see each other. Also, imagination is kinda cool.”

Riley smiles, only the third time today.

“Aw, wait!” Chelsea adds.

“What? What is it?” Riley asks in shock.

“We should have totally asked her for a DVD player!”

But Soon and for the Rest of Your Life

Thomas Snider

You're a young boy
There's plenty of time
Have fun, Enjoy

I'm only 17
Plenty of time
I'm only 26
Plenty of time
I'm only 30
Plenty of time

I'm 35
What happened
I was just here

The saboteur was here all along
Laughing, crying, lying
I've seen him every day

The help finds the mess
The dogs nip at our heels
Overhead our rescue circles

We've waited so long for you
We could never find you
We'll never leave you

The dogs no longer lead
They wait patiently

I'm only 43
There is plenty of time

Stay Here With Me

Olivia Francis

In the dark abyss, I feel your presence.
Even after death, you always look to protect me in my residence.
I still hear your voice when you play slots on the laptop screen,
As I helped you, sitting on your bed, when I was fifteen.

The aroma of the bitter coffee and smoke fill the air,
While you begin to fall into a slumber in your brown, reclined chair.
My heart sinks a little more when I think about you,
Wishing I had more time to tell you everything that is anew.

You carried many burdens, choosing to hide your pain with a smile,
While death was approaching your door from a mile.
Losing you was one of the hardest things to endure.
Even with knowing your flaws, I still loved you more and more.

When the world endured COVID, I thought it wouldn't affect me much.
But, then I lost you, and with the world, I lost touch.
All I want for you is to come back and see
That I need you still and that you should stay here with me.

It's only 8am

Cole Graziano

I would tend to stay away from my computer and phone for a few weeks
as the tape holding up your picture disintegrates.
Your mouth opened as the fire burned within you.
And you spoke of many things which I would like to forget.
You used to call me a rose as I called you a tulip,
I would think upon these nicknames as purity.
But as I think deeper into your previous warning signs,
I realize that I was never your flower, more so your pollen.
You took all of me, leaving me with nothing and moving onto the next.
Although I found myself in the corner crying,
you were with someone else as I hugged my knees and thought about what went wrong.
I realized it was never me.
So I'll lay here in this bed I call home
surrounded by the objects keeping me alive without sensation
And when I try to stand up after my distant hibernation
I'll begin to realize the truth.
You could never love anyone more than you loved yourself,
so you were trying to make me,
you.

They Haven't Done the Leaving

David Genco

The Beginning

You find comfort in being home in the house you grew up, in the place where birthday parties were thrown all the way from the single digits through the teens and on through most of the twenties but it's been long enough to be less of a homecoming and more of an extended visit after working time zones away crossing the continent, now you're plotting the next move, you relish it but after tasting freedom complacency isn't on the menu so you work with your dad back in his business lifting climbing screwing fixing building and you allow yourself to enjoy returning to your roots, and you joke and poke as he makes small mistakes and trips through the cluttered garage because it's always safe punching up and who's higher up than superman? but soon you find that kryponite's real and it's lurking hiding, also plotting, biding its time because soon you find him sitting in the other room and there's a look, one you've never seen, well you have seen it but never on him, you ask yourself why he's making a face like that there's no reason, and he looks up at you the man who hates doctor's offices and he tells you I think you need to call an ambulance and then there's an epiphany, the morning and the mistakes unlike him and the whole feeling of being off clicks and fits and it makes perfect sense because the morning was off, he was off, the world is off because this doesn't happen, superman doesn't need ambulances and then you're riding in the back, him on the stretcher and you can track landmarks that pass out the back window, check them against the route you know they'll take but they're driving so slow where's the urgency they don't give tickets to ambulances, he needs to get to the hospital and if you had only known this is how it would go you would have put him in your Equinox and driven superman yourself.

The Middle

Your plotting and your scheming and your freedom are vague thoughts from another time another world, were they even yours because you can barely fathom a time so carefree with such levity where you could contemplate such things and you've heard it before but now you learn through experience man plans and god laughs, you wake up to your alarm not an audible one set on a phone but an internal one that goes off when a certain level of anxiety is achieved a certain anxiety that builds even in your sleep so you get up from the three hours you managed and open the first pill organizer your sister has set up and drop them into a small paper cup, the kind made for kids to rinse their mouth out with, they even have cartoon fish on them, and you walk into the living room and it pulls at you to wake him up but there's a schedule that requires demands adherence because the sacred precious capsules in the cartoon fish cup they won't keep him alive forever but they'll make that day not today so you adhere to the schedule, even though it means disturbing his rest, you put them down on the

end table and lean over him place your hand behind his knees and bend them over the edge then one on his shoulder, the other on his hip and you two are again a team like the building and the fixing but this time you're not really sure what the goal is it's just simply living so you move as one and sit him up and today he can manage balancing on his own while you hand him the fish, he fights swallowing the one that tastes gross but he takes it the second try because you tell him it's a must and he isn't in the position for contesting anymore there's no fight in him, not for small matters like this, and thankfully he returns back to the position and the state in which you found him and you're happy he can salvage a little more rest before really having to address the day because it's still dark enough out where today's battle doesn't have to start yet, it can wait, and today it does wait and you thank the day for this small favor and you both get to rest, having done your duty, just a little bit longer and later on when stomachs and the sun demand you finally do start the day you hear the talking heads on tv talk about some impending doom, a new plague, don't they know the world is already shut down all they have to do is take one look at the house that once hosted the parties, joyous things, it's not that anymore but if they saw what was going on now they'd know the end isn't coming it's been here and he's listening, too, but the logic the reasoning the comprehension it's not what it used to be and he doesn't understand can't grasp the magnitude of what they're saying, no, life can't just go on and it doesn't matter that it's only in China but you and your sister and your mom, you take notes on all the precautions and days weeks later you put them into action no seeing anyone outside the pod not that you had time for friends as it was, sustaining a life doesn't afford much down time, you wash the groceries but not just the produce, you lysol the box the pita chips come in and the microwave dinners that he agrees to eat because you and the doctors say he can't take the sacred capsules on an empty stomach but in the end he barely touches because the pills you need the food for them but loss of appetite is the main side effect so how much can you really fault him?

The End

The panels of wood are too flimsy, they're cute but flimsy, so you devise a way to buttress the privacy fences your mom picked out, give them a frame so you can actually attach them to the chainlink and maybe the neighbors will start to mind their own business and in the grand scheme of things, of course, it doesn't matter but you make it matter because something physical and real has to matter, something that you can control, something that gives you the excuse to feel effectual because the main objective, the only one that matters, you've failed at, not totally yet, because your mom and sister are downtown as you play around with power tools in your backyard, but it was decided the day he took that second ambulance ride the day that was the last straw when the cons of going back to the hospital, the local ground zero of the great plague the talking heads spoke of months before, when the cons no longer outweighed the pros of staying home safe in quarantine, when the words that mumbled out of his mouth no longer made sense and the nights you thought were sleepless

before, for the last three days, they've been wrung out like a dish towel, and now you actually could recount seeing each consecutive red number on the digital clock pass and you haven't bothered preparing your own food because you know you'll end up being the beneficiary of the meals you make for him, the prior hunger you realize it wasn't much but it was still something so you're forced to confront the fact that you failed but really this is just the acknowledgment the judgment was decided and passed down long before this second hospital stay, the one where the doctors tell you over the phone because you can't be there with him because of the great plague they tell you they had to intubate him to keep the oxygen to his brain, the stay where they ask you after weeks of being put on speaker phone and hoping for increased brain activity at the sound of your voice told to you by blinking lines on a screen, after all that those you were counting on as your substitutes in the fight where you were forced to act as tribute already for another, they betray their role and tell you that a room has opened up on another floor and maybe it's time to consider the options left for you and your sister and your mom and words like palliative from an organization called Hospice are said to you, these words are just the acknowledgement of the failure but truth be told the endeavor was always meant to be a failure the opponent too formidable the burden too much, the fight was always an illusion just you trying your best like holding water in cupped hands, something you knew deep down but pretended not to, so that room on that floor that's where your mom and sister are but you're not, not today, so add that to the failures and you expect to screw the makeshift frame to the privacy by yourself but you hear a noise that you know is the clink of the backyard gate opening and you see them come towards you but it's the middle of the day and they wouldn't leave him there alone because they've been stronger, they've been at the bedside despite the plague and despite the horrible wheezing sound his too infrequent belabored breaths now make, no they wouldn't leave him and there are no words said but you figure out that no, they haven't done the leaving, he's finally left us.

COVID-4

Devin Knose

“So, you get out tomorrow?”

“Yeah, dude. I’m gonna miss this, brotha. I’m gonna miss everything.”

As the cargo plane doors opened, David could see all of his loved ones waiting for him to be home finally. After three deployments and many gunfights, he was finally honorably discharged from the military. However, the year was now 2052. The world has changed more than ever since he first went into the service in 2032. David was a thirty-eight-year-old man now, not an eighteen-year-old kid. He has seen all of the evil in the world, but nothing could prepare him for this next chapter of his life.

A couple of weeks later, David and his family were watching the news on their television. The reporter mentioned a word that nobody has heard in quite some time. David could see expressions of disbelief on his parent's faces.

The news anchor said the following: “A new, more deadly variant of COVID-19 has been found in a select few states in the country. We are not sure what this means at this time, but if you have any symptoms of a flu-like virus, please go to your local doctor immediately.”

“What a load of bullshit! There's no new strand of COVID. That ended thirty years ago. A virus can't just pick up where it left off. Turn this shit off,” David's dad said.

“Honey, calm down. I'm sure it's nothing. Just change the channel,” David's mom replied.

Almost immediately after David's mom said that, David walked up to the television and punched it so hard, the television screen snapped and started smoking.

“Not dealing with this political bullshit. I dealt with it for twenty years in the Marines. It's ending there.” David took out the Copenhagen from his bottom lip and threw it at the television.

David's parents looked at him in fear. It was at that moment that they realized that the eighteen-year-old that they sent to boot camp was gone. Unfortunately, this was the only way that David knew how to control his feelings.

A couple of months later, there hadn't been much of an update with the new strand of COVID, but David's conditions had worsened. Therapy didn't help because nobody understood what he saw while deployed, and even if they could wrap their head around it, they would never really know what that does to a person. The VA rescheduled him multiple times, and he won't talk to his family. He sits in his chair all day staring at the wall. The silence was almost deafening in the house. David's parents were scared of talking to him over the fear of him lashing out at them. But then, the radio sounded an emergency broadcast.

“This is an emergency. Please if you have any flu-like symptoms, please report immediately to your closest hospital. The COVID-19 strand, now being referred to as COVID-4, is taking over and infecting the respiratory system, killing people within a couple of weeks. There is no cure for it once it goes too long without proper treatment. Please get to the closest hospital or doctor's office as soon as possible if you have any symptoms.”

David's parents looked at each other in fear. They started to panic, calling family all over to make sure that they were okay. Then David lashed out.

“THIS IS BULLSHIT! I GOT OUT OF WAR JUST TO FIGHT ANOTHER FUCKING FAKE WAR! YOU GUYS REALLY DON’T BELIEVE THIS FAKE NEWS, DO YOU?” David started punching the walls and throwing everything that he could get his hands on.

“Dave, calm down. Please. You’re scaring me,” David’s mom said in a soft yet stern tone.

As they locked eyes, David could see the fear in his mother’s and father’s eyes. He realized that they were not scared of the new strand. At this moment, they were scared of him. He then snapped out of it.

“I- I’m sorry. Let’s just make sure that everyone is safe,” he said.

They all looked at each other and nodded in understanding. After many phone calls, they knew that all of their family was safe and unharmed. The country, however, had gone into a state of panic. Businesses were being shut down, people were boarding their houses up with wooden planks, stores were being robbed of food and water, and people were dying in the streets because everyone was driving crazy. David and his family had no other option than to sit and wait this out.

David went into town every week or so to scavenge for food and water. Most of the time he came back with just enough to get by another week. Sometimes they had to make one meal last a few days.

Eight years later, the country was in horrible shape. It looked like a nuke went off. Nobody was in the streets, abandoned cars were blocking every intersection, and there was little to no sight of wildlife. The world was empty. David and his family were eating their dinner for that night when David noticed that his father’s eye looked cloudy.

“Dad? What’s up with your eye?” he asked.

“Nothin bud, probably just the old age,” his dad replied and laughed.

David shook it off and headed out to scavenge for more food. The streets were so quiet that David could hear his footsteps echoing down the road. He stopped and dropped to his knees.

“How long? How long can I keep this up?” he said to himself.

He got back up and proceeded to scavenge. After David gathered the supplies, he started to head back home. When he turned onto his street, he could see his mother sobbing on the front porch. He sprinted over to his mother. When he got there, he automatically knew that it was nothing good.

“Mom, mom I’m here,” he said while hugging her. “What happened? Are you okay?”

His mother looked up with tears running down her face and a look of pure horror.

“I tried, honey. I really tried to keep him around as long as possible.”

Everything clicked in David’s head. He ran inside to see his father laying on the couch. Not breathing, just laying peacefully. As he stared at his father in disbelief, he dropped to his knees again.

“He got infected, and it traveled throughout his whole body. His cloudy eye was an effect of COVID-4. He held on for as long as possible, but didn’t want you to be here for when he passed,” David’s mother said to him while holding his shoulder.

David and his mother cried together for what felt like days. They buried David’s father in the backyard and gave him a proper funeral. Now it was David and his mother against whatever was coming their way.

The Left Side of My Brain

Cole Graziano

Your eyes locked as you looked at me in pity.
You have done the unthinkable
I have done the unimaginable
Goodbye
A word which fluttered along my thoughts as you beat me down
until I couldn't make a noise.
Your name was painted red as I looked in the mirror as to who I've become.
It was a warning sign as well as a checkpoint
I thought for a moment as I realized the game saved here.
And even if I died, or went down the wrong path,
I would have this point to look back on.
I don't know where I came from,
who I am,
or what my purpose is.
But as long as I'm able to remember
Right here
In this moment
Crowded by the darkness of night
With an abundance of stars
And your hand pressed to my heart
Until our last breath consumes our fate
I think I'll be okay.

When Did Science Become Political?

Aubrey Farelli

The vaccine turned into a jab
It was all made in a lab
If you got it, they'd ridicule
Damn it it's pitiful

Masks are worth it you see
But some people don't agree
Should we force those to comply
No that is wrong, and I cannot lie

My body, my choice
Everybody should have a voice
But the virus continues to spread
And over a million are now dead

Habit

Jennifer Campbell, SUNY Erie Professor of English

And the day will come
(said the one who was not
a preacher) when we
will once again choose
the adjacent seat
to a waiting room stranger
coat elbows brushing
with the sound
rustling magazine pages
used to make

We won't count
two blank seats
equals six feet
and consider ourselves
safe from the distance
won't see proximity
as tempting evil

We will note
the worry lines
that have settled
into place
and consider
what gumball joke
we might share
to earn smile lines instead

Untitled

Kenya Tyson

If I could go back in time, I would love me more.

If I could go back in time, I would laugh louder.

If I could go back in time, I would take that risk.

If I could go back in time, I would truly live.

But instead, I'm here.

Living with the aftermath.

Wondering, "What if"?

Looking back with longing.

Looking back with want and desire.

Looking... back... and seeing...

Realizing...

I. Made. It...

I have another chance.

I'm still here.

Flowing... growing... living...

Props To My Therapist

Aubrey Farelli

Covid has really taken its toll
I feel it deep deep in my soul
My therapist suggested that I meditate
I guess that suggestion did resonate

Covid made me dissociate
So, my therapist suggested I exfoliate
She said self-care will cure it all
You got to catch yourself when you fall

I took all her suggestions
Because I do trust her intentions
I am glad to have met her
Because ever since our sessions, I feel better

Teatime With My Demons

—Inspired by the painting *Tiger, Shark, And Me Sit Down For Tea*
Daniella Fanara

The dishes on the table and the mugs tediously set
The tea kettle awaits the dirt on my hands
The chair creaks beneath me from the weight on my shoulders
But I am not alone, at least not yet.

Beside me is my companion that visits me at night
Causing me to wallow in bed and search for the light
The other is my enemy that ruins all my days
And sends me spiraling in orbit back to my old ways

Now tell me what you would do
In a situation as absurd as this
When you just want a moment of peace
And your thoughts invite the other two

Pearly white teeth, orange, and black stripes
Curated by thoughts of the scariest types
When the dark commences, and the fear begins to roll in
I look at my reflection in the glass and there is when it begins

Paranoia and thoughts of the worst
Overthinking situations that have yet to happen
The walls are closing in and it is getting hard to breathe
In times like these it feels I am cursed

“Stop this” I cry as I sip on my tea
The tears in my eyes make it especially hard to see
I turn my head slightly to meet both their eyes
And suddenly the sun seems quick to arise

I do not get scared of the dark and to face both my demons
For now, we sit down and have tea every night
I sit there exposed and as vulnerable as ever
My anxiety no longer has power