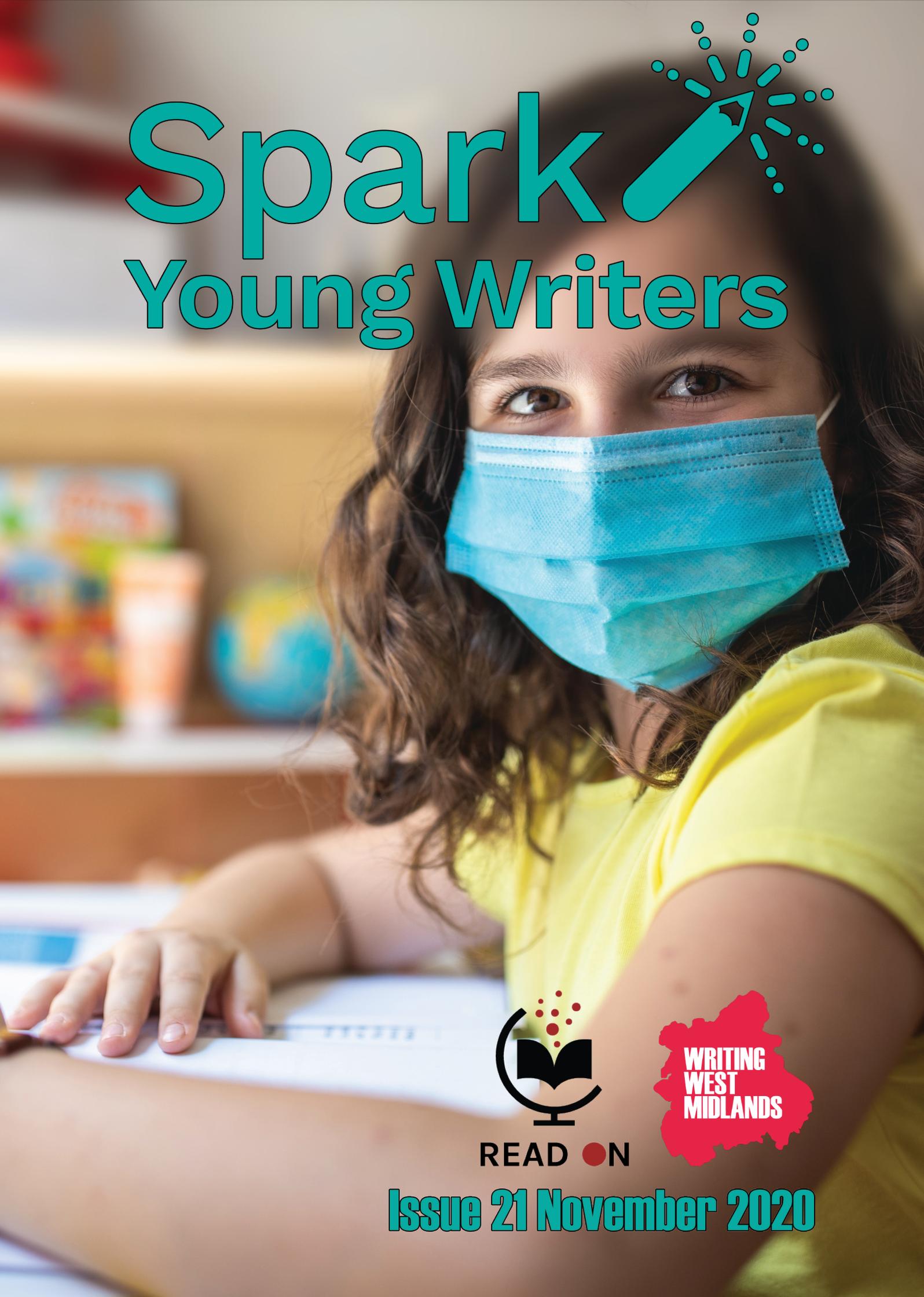


# Spark

## Young Writers



READ ● N



Issue 21 November 2020

You could say that this is the first issue of Spark Young Writers' where every poem, story or other piece was written during a lockdown — and the magazine was produced during another one. But I prefer to think of it as the first issue we've ever had a riddle in.

It was all written during the lockdown and just about the only request we made was that pieces be in some way about that. We felt safe asking that because we knew we were asking writers — and it's a rare writer who can help themselves going off into unexpected new and fresh areas.

So while we have articles that might start as being about the lockdown, they end in very different places. Coincidentally, we have a couple of stories in the form of diaries, but you may never see two such different tales.

In this time where we are suddenly all far more technology-savvy and technology-dependent than we could have imagined, we also have a tribute that is ostensibly to the typewriter. As you'll see, it's really about far more than that.

Which is why "The Typewriter", by Iona Mandal is my editor's pick for this unusual issue.

William Gallagher

Editor

Spark Young Writers Magazine is a publication of Writing West Midlands. We support creative writers and creative writing across the region. More information about us can be found on our website: [www.writingwestmidlands.org](http://www.writingwestmidlands.org).

This magazine features writing from children and young people aged 8 - 20 who live in the West Midlands of the UK. It is also available to read online at [www.writeonmagazine.org](http://www.writeonmagazine.org).

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Co-funded by the  
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Supported using public funding by  
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# The typewriter

Iona Mandal

My mother kept her typewriter in the back of her clothes wardrobe. She said it was because it reminded her of the many letters she had written to my father using it. My sister and I always longed to see it. We had asked her for years to spare us a quick glance. She never did. The same excuse left her lips like a broken record, "Memories will come flooding back." Neither of us sisters remembered who our father was. Not even his name. Only she did.

A day before my 7th birthday, we ventured inside her wardrobe, taking a step of faith into uncharted territory. We were careful not to make the door creak. Finding way through the various fabrics was certainly not easy. We found ourselves among her myriad woollen jumpers, tank tops, knee-length skirts, and distressed jeans mum had collected over the years from charity shops. I let my arms dance, as if in breaststroke; fibre from each piece of garment clinging onto my hands while I let it go. Mum's clothes always had a distant, musky smell to them, almost as if she had spilt a bottle of perfume over them years ago. Somehow, the scent had never waned away completely although years had elapsed.

At last, we reached a dead-end, the empty back wall. It was completely dark. We were both pressed against the cold, clean wood, hand in hand, after what seemed like such an arduous pilgrimage. My sister was already whimpering, after having read *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* a fortnight before. I squeezed her hand, assuring her there were no mysterious lands behind the wardrobe of a semi-detached house in South Birmingham in this world of 2020.

We felt around for the typewriter. I found it first, fingers landing on a smooth block with small circular keys on them. We both whispered in glee! I mustered the strength to lift the hefty device, standing opposite each other so that we could share its weight evenly. Swimming yet again through the haze of mum's cotton, synthetic and woollen fabrics, we finally reached the wardrobe's open door, the typewriter held tight in our hands. I stepped out first, then my sister, resting the typewriter gently on the tattered carpet below.

We gazed at the typewriter in all its glory. It had a gentle glimmer to it, although one could tell, it had lived through many moons. Suddenly, something caught my eye. Six of the letters on the keys were completely rubbed off, almost as if etched away by clammy fingers revisiting them too often. My eyes scanned over the keys. I had always been good in anagrams. I rearranged the alphabets, till they spelt a name.

My father's.

# Hoping?

Ansh Agrawal

The transition between primary and secondary school was a big one. The half-baked homework morphed into detailed essays, soft female teachers were replaced by enraged hairy males and worst of all were the countless people who strove to become perfect creatures of nature.

The constant pile of work fuelled my nervous disposition. GCSEs were coming soon. I chose my subjects and still regret picking music because I played the flute to grade 2 standard. They were abundantly irritating, especially with the masses of work which had no relevance to the brilliant career I had planned.

Along with GCSEs came the expectation to receive top grades and above all the extra pressures of the 21st century like social media; the kind adults simply seemed incapable of comprehending. Tension grew and even the 'not so bright' children claimed they would buckle up. More competition piled. Tests flooded in. One after the other they hit. Despite not being taught much of the exam content, we were told it was somehow always our fault and were given the overused title: disorganised.

One after another, topics which we had only been studying for days resulted in a test, surrounded by the silence of nervous classmates and the alarming gaze of what would have passed as a sumo wrestler. Despite my better instincts, I soldiered on. Others unfortunately embraced the idea of a detention and continued to neglect the responsibilities that came with age.

It was 2020, another year, or so I thought. It was the start of a new decade and another chance to make new year resolutions that we would forget about the next day. Obviously, mocks weren't that important. It was the real exams that counted. Mocks passed and most relaxed as before, some questioned teachers about oddly counted marks and worried that their questions had not been fully answered (the teachers really enjoyed watching us suffer).

I felt relieved consoling myself that only the real exams mattered. I had planned to study hard, burn precious midnight oil, knuckle down and absolutely focus on my exams. Days passed and the coronavirus pandemic was growing. It soon became apparent GCSE exams may be cancelled and if that were to happen... I found myself watching news for the first time. My dream to get a perfect slate had been wiped away. I wish I had been nicer to my teachers now that I think about it!

Oh, well - all I could do was to embrace the new lazy lifestyle to accommodate the government's (in)decision, make up for lost time and try to suck up as much as possible to my teachers online when Wi-Fi worked.

I didn't get much sleep before results' day hoping that my teachers had appreciated my newfound motivation to impress them and thinking about the best excuses just in case. What a shock - a decent number of passes, even a 5 in music! Not bad all considered. I wonder if the coronavirus pandemic would affect my A 'level exams too?

# The Corona

Sahil Agrawal

It was difficult to see past the spots of smog. Diseased murk cloaked her wrinkled skin. She sizzled slowly burning from within. Her raking dry cough created a constant background din amongst the malaise; pain greeted every increasingly shallow breath. She tasted the suffocating air which bristled like barbed wire wrapped down the back of her throat. Air turbulently whooshed past, sowing thorns deep into her being as she choked uncontrollably.

Life on the ground abounded oblivious. Berries and buds blossomed under the spring shine. Pink flamingos reclaimed what used to be theirs. She was carried higher and higher as she reminisced and rejoiced in her own creation, hitting the ground with a heavy thud as reality seared and singed her skin. She struggled on shore as she stumbled alone barefoot on shards not sure which way to go.

Clouds clotted, eclipsing the sun. Thunder crackled and lightning struck; disturbed, she flitted in turmoil between life and death. Wave after wave relentlessly smashed her defences. A deluge of rain drenched her. She shivered in the dark desperate for a glimmer of hope. Finally, the clouds began to lift; the haze cleared and a corona illuminated her path to the soft warm sand. The 'Splish, Splosh,' sounds of the waves gently caressed her feet as she inhaled deeply the fresh sea breeze.

Muscles relaxed as her eyes became less taut and scrunched up. Her soul transcended her frail bedridden body wafting like a feather nestled on a whisper of air. She observed a lone dandelion defiantly rejoiced on a sea of abandoned concrete. Sweet birdsong slept on the current above the desolate streets. She glided like a free gull over a shimmering sea enjoying the crisp breeze on her face. Oceans stirred deep. Fish dived into unknown depths jumping in joy. She soared amongst the clouds to see the highest white peaks afar after many moons.

Her body faded into nothingness. However, her mind forever at peace continued to explore for eternity.

# Stay at home

Sayandeep Das

I was used to it,  
used to the unrelenting nights  
and the blinding sun,  
making my eyes water.

I was used to it,  
the roars of 'get off my property'  
and the disgusted 'get a job!',  
whispered under bated breath,  
self-repulsion.

I was used to it,  
feeling the cold spit hurled onto my face,  
too ashamed to even meet their gaze,  
acceptance.

I was even used to the blunt, filthy needle  
and the tainted smoke slowing seeping  
into my lungs.  
I was used to the prison cells  
and sleeping hidden in hotel lobbies,  
societies greatest secret.

I was used to it,  
the humiliation,  
debasement, myself,  
for anything  
and shutting it out of my deranged mind  
the next day,  
barely human.

I was used to being the garbage can  
of people's woes and despairs  
and their half-eaten crusts.

But I was never used to this,  
handed home for a night,  
I was never used to ...  
living?  
I was never used to drinking from cups  
but only from the sweet sewers,  
salvation.

But I had gotten too used to this,  
I should have seen the unseen.

"Stay at home!" they'd said.

They had used me!  
the homeless one,  
to scare little children,  
scared of my sallow face,  
every shadowy crevice,  
holding a fresh horror.

What could I do?  
The homeless one?  
Society thinks I'm heartless  
and home is where  
the heart is.

"Stay at home!" they'd said  
But only to let the same ones  
who had stuffed me up then like an  
animal?  
And pushed a camera in my face,  
to throw me back into the grips of some  
mysterious virus,  
I couldn't even see?

What could I do?  
the homeless one?  
but wander the streets  
left out to wither away  
and let this infected society,  
spit on me once again.

# Autumn Riddle

Emily de Bono

I have a hard spiky shell, which is bendy and soft in the middle.

I am edible, but try to hide before the squirrels make me into a cake.

I'm smooth and brown and extra hard and strong. I come in pack of three.

Please spare me! Please spare me!

What am I?"

# Lockdown

Eliza Howe

School closed, and then it was real,  
Doing schoolwork, but finishing by lunch!  
Afternoons free for fun things.

FaceTiming my friend,  
Zoom quizzes with friends and family,  
Watching films, but not much TV.  
We're dancing with Oti,  
And Dad and I are trying Joe Wicks,  
But it's too tiring, so we don't do it again!

We played a game with friends on Zoom,  
And the game was delivered the next day!  
A mysterious parcel of Harry Potter Dobble.  
Who could've sent it?  
Turns out it was my Aunt, Uncle and cousin!

Going for walks,  
In all the same places,  
Finding the best route to my new school.  
Scooting with the girl next door,  
Having to social distance.

I tried to avoid wearing a mask  
For as long as was possibly possible.  
But then I saw a great film,  
And just had to get the book,  
So I wore one for the first time and hated it.

Schools return,  
Washing your hands five times a day!  
And cleaning the tables twice.  
Social distancing, temperature taking.

What a surprise, it's normal again!

Lockdown was boring,  
Lockdown was fun,  
Different for everyone,  
What was lockdown for you?

(the answer is a beechnut)

# Lockdown Commentary

## Abel Neto

Lockdown commenced as the schools, libraries and most non-essential shops closed. Along with it started my sense of anticipation, somewhat excitement and the vision of me lazing around.

Unfortunately, school was yet to open for six months, yet only about a week in did I start to realise it would not be all fun and games. I could not see my friends, school made us do compulsory homework online.

So I just sat on the sofa contemplating life until I got bored. By that time my thoughts had wandered and so had my eyes.

There I was, staring out of the window out on the deserted world that was once abundant with petrol fumes and people. It was a gorgeous spring afternoon - trees had already blossomed, flourishing out onto the street and gardens. Robins sat perched on the light bark of oak trees.

The sun in itself gleamed down upon this beautiful vista, as it was neither too hot or too cool.

I cocked my head sideways and wondered if maybe I should go outside. I reached for my football and headed out into the spring breeze.

# Dog diary

## Evie Brennan

September 21, 2020

Dear diary,

Today was an amazing day! It was full of adventure, fun and love! Probably a day that will go down in history! Me and my pet had the most splendid time, we even got to meet the queen and king of dogdom! Now, you might be wondering, "Hang on, who is writing this?" or, "Dogdom? I have never heard of that!" or even, "I wonder if sheep can really fly?!"

To answer all those questions of yours — except the one about sheep, I don't really know that one — all you need to do is keep reading.

Oh, you're still here? Good! And before you ask, no, I am not going to keep getting distra— ooh, look, a stick!

Alright. Alright. Jeez!

September 22, 2020

Dear diary,

Sorry I could not continue telling you my story yesterday, it was because I went for walkies with my person pooch! Oh, it was the most fabulous, incredible, mind-blowing walk ever!

I mean we did not just go around the block one time, no, no, no we went around the block THREE TIMES! That is like 30,000,000 miles! Anyway, enough about my spectacular walk! Back to the story!

Yesterday me and my "owner" (as you humans like to call it) went out on our daily walk, when, suddenly, we saw a flashing bolt of bright light shoot up, high into the air! It was extra-ordinary!

So, OF COURSE, we went to see what it was! Was it an alien? A signal? Or was it just the start of an adventure that would change our lives FOREVER???

To answer your burning questions, it was in fact a signal! But, not just any signal, it was a HELP signal! Me and my person pooch BOLTED to where this signal might be coming from!

We were ever so shocked to find the KING AND QUEEN OF DOGDOM. Yes, I know, it was utterly CRAZY! There they were! Magnificent canines! Probably the best dogs in the entire universe! Oh, and their people pooches were there too!

It turns out, they were calling a help signal because they were lost! Their horse had

gone out of control and galloped through the field, with their carriage attached to the back! They were stranded!

“Hello, kind citizen!” barked the queen, out of breath.

“Have you come to save us?” said the king, whimpering.

“Indeed I have, your majesty!” I quietly ruffed, trying to sound as formal as possible. Although, I did say it rather muffled because I was very — and I mean VERY — nervous! It seemed as if my person pooch was nervous too, because she was looking at Queen Elizabeth and her husband with her voice cracking just at the sight of them!

“Do you need any help?” my person pooch cooed kindly.  
“That would be very nice indeed, thank you!” said a delighted sounding queen and king.

My human soon contacted the “authorities” and they helped all of us by sending a police helicopter! But this was not just an old police helicopter, no, no, NO, this was indeed, a GOLDEN HELICOPTER!

It was amazing! Not just because we were in a one-of-a-kind, wonderful, golden helicopter, but because the “police-man” gave us a full-on, juicy STEAK! On a SILVER PLATER! It was love at first sight!

The queen and king of dogdom could not thank me or Sarah, my human, enough! They even knighted me and Sarah, so now, we are incredibly special! I was the first dog IN HISTORY to be knighted!

I have to go now, Sarah is calling me for walkies, but I hope you enjoyed my tail! (Ha, Ha...Get it?)

Sincerely,  
Charlie!

# Love

## Ruby Mckie

Love to me is memories,  
Dancing like idiots with my best friends, the Polaroids up on my wall of the people I love, sharing secrets at midnight, laughing over inside jokes, camping trips with childhood friends, shopping sprees, sleepovers and Halloween parties

Love to me is messy,  
Crying over someone who doesn't feel the same, breaking up friendships, letting go, saying goodbye when I want to stay, finding it hard to open up again.

Love to me is a bond,  
Finding someone who has the same passions, interests and music taste (of course), giving each other one look and then you know what they're thinking, leaning on each other with a listening ear and a hand to hold, sitting in a comfortable silence together.

Love to me is a journey,  
Learning to cherish myself first, showing gratitude for the small things, accepting myself. Finding a balance by setting boundaries with care, forgiving myself for the past, and living in the present.

Love to me is frightening,  
Revealing my vulnerability, shedding the layers of personality, exposing my flaws, being honest and learning as I go along, new and unpredictable

Love to me is essential,  
Face-times, Phone calls, Skypes, group chats, family walks all give me back that connection that I miss so much, this pandemic has shown me love differently: through computer screens and social media sites. But still it feels the same, because I'm still filled with that same warm feeling when I see their faces.

Through the phone I can still experience the same messy, frightening love, go on journeys, make new memories and share a bond. I know it's not the perfect situation, but a quote by Robert A. Heinlein once said, "Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own."

# The diary of a spaceman

Shrish Madhan

Friday, 13th September, 2061, 10pm

Dear Diary,

Wow, today was a very eventful day! It all started in the morning when our ship's commander noticed his comm-link was missing. (That's a device used to communicate with members of the crew.)

We were almost half way to Europa, where our new colony is going to be located. Our ship was huge, with 500 people on board so it was tough to know whether it had been lost or stolen. The commander relieved us from all of our duties and we were told to search the ship until the device was found.

I was super-excited because nothing interesting had happened in a while.

Without hesitating, I began my search. I was sure that if he had misplaced it, it would be in the command module or his quarters. But, when I entered his quarters, I was surprised. There were two people, a man and a woman standing around the desk and, the moment they saw me, they slipped past me and ran through the corridor.

I was suspicious, so I decided to follow them.

After about a minute, they stopped next to the cafeteria and, carefully staying out of sight, I looked at what they were doing. One of them had a velvet sack which seemed grimy but maybe that was just a trick of the light. The man pulled a small object from inside and I recognised it immediately. It was the comm-link!

But, before I could react, he pulled out another object which was almost an exact replica and left it on a vacant table. At this point, I confirmed my hypothesis that we had been breached. There were thieves on board!

I went forward to apprehend but suddenly, they took off down an alley behind the cafeteria and turned a corner. Chasing them as fast as I could, I came across a gas leak which concealed dusty footprints. I traced them along and found myself in the launch bay. The thieves were about to escape! I immediately entered and signalled for help.

I turned around and examined the miscreants closely. The woman was wearing an eyepatch and looked as if she had been in some accident. The man looked similar and it was almost like he was wearing his skin as a costume. The air pockets in his uniform seemed highly unnatural.

We were all in eye contact when my cabin-mate entered, holding a crowbar. He pounced on the man like a tiger taking down a deer back on Earth. The man was handcuffed and taken into custody.

Meanwhile, the woman had tried to run in the other direction but smashed into a mirror. We were lucky.

The mirror had confused her but her arm was bent in an awkward shape. Tendrils grew out of her shoulder like creepers and laced around her arm.

With flashes and a deep glow, it seemed like she was healing herself! We took the thieves to the commander.

There may be aliens living among us!

# Watching

## Lara Starkey

Her child's feet crunch  
And crack  
Against the gravel.  
Her first line of defence.  
Alerting her to intruders.  
Whilst she  
Protects  
And comforts  
Warm.

Her red brick exterior,  
Represents her family's heritage?  
Possibly Spanish?  
Italian?  
From warmer climates,  
Maybe?  
But now?  
She is the  
Warm.

It's just that silly man  
He says things like that.  
She knows him very well,  
He grew up here  
She saw him trip  
And grow.  
She kept him.  
Warm.

Now he has his own  
Children.  
They are hers too,  
She protects,  
Comforts,  
Just like their mother.  
And keeps them all,  
Warm.

She tugs the smile from her child's  
soul,  
Making it impossible to refuse.  
Her insides spill fun  
Spill joy  
And relaxation.  
She is home and  
Warm.

Her interiors,  
Comfort  
Beautiful  
Thoughtful.  
People cry inside her,  
Happy tears  
Sad tears.  
They laugh, they love,  
They grow, they go.  
She watches,  
And keeps them,  
Warm.

# Stars

## Sophie Nock

The stars in silence singing to the moon,  
Which winks and sparkles back at them,  
Receding from the sky.

Ethereal light in the midst of blue,  
A cold, dark night with hope shining through,  
As the bright stars glow.

Like lanterns in a dark, dark room;  
Or a silver glint in a pile of lead,  
They lead us to the truth.

We know that they're just balls of burning gas,  
Explained to us by science alone:  
But still, we dream.

# A monster is born

Aarav Desai

The dark shadows looming,  
Across the night façade of London,  
The thugs roar with unruly harmony,  
But as they release terror up into the smoky skies,  
As blood-shot wolves,  
Roam the deserted streets,  
A forsaken child roams.

He comes upon the pebbled cold streets,  
Glaring coldly from below,  
The walls whisper in the chilling air,  
They speculate the fate of the child,  
Forgotten in the fog of the city.  
And as he roams across looking for a way to beauty of the light,  
The thunderous spies of the night stalk him.

He approaches the swine of the dark,  
The timid fool scuttles to the alleyways,  
Where only fear can strike,  
The crowds of demons riot against the good,  
Peckish for revenge,  
Against their tangled past,  
The hunting begins.

The insect speeds across the witches and mutants,  
Looking for an escape from the reality of this nightmare,  
The claws of robbery take their grip,  
Upon his frail arms,  
And he with his feeble-minded brain,  
Begs for mercy to the faceless terror,  
His words of hope echo into the void.  
The beasts now feast upon their prey,  
Stripping the naïve child,  
Exposing him with the harshness of the cold-blooded kind,  
His weeps of innocence turn into bellows of hate,  
The years pass on to this kidnapped little child,  
The wickedness of the underworld groom him,  
A monster is born.

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