

# **New Jersey Literacy Association 2021 Writing Contest**



## **Grade 6 Honorees**

**Emma Escobar-Rivera**, Mount Pleasant Middle School, Livingston

**Marissa Holtzman**, Mount Pleasant Middle School, Livingston

**Shreya Joseph**, Mount Pleasant Middle School, Livingston

**Shona Kumar**, Mount Pleasant Middle School, Livingston

**Marie Szubiak**, Franklin Middle School, Somerset

## **The Blue Skies of Spain**

By: Emma Escobar-Rivera

*Grade 6 - Mount Pleasant Middle School; Livingston, NJ*

I cling to my mother's warm hand as we approach the school. My heartbeat accelerates, outpacing my small, black shoes tapping steadily on the sidewalk. In my head, there is a loud, rumbling thunderstorm beginning to form, but outside, the world is at peace. The leaves on the trees around us dance as the wind flows through them. Birds fly across the blue, cloudless expanse above.

I wonder whether it'll always be like this, or if the worrying will stop eventually. I remember seeing photos of the school I would be attending: The Lycée Molière. I had found it strange. Everything in French still sounded odd. Growing up, I would hear my parents speaking it when they didn't want my brother and me to understand what they were saying, and now I too was learning it. But what was even stranger was that we weren't in France, but in Spain.

We were originally going to go to a Spanish school, but then my parents found out about the French school near Madrid. They thought it would be the perfect opportunity for us to finally learn the language.

French was new and pretty but speaking and hearing Spanish made me feel at home, whether it was a mellifluous Andalusian accent or the harsher more familiar tones of the *madrileños* that reminded me of my mother.

A warm breeze ruffles my short hair, pulling me out of my trance. When I realize we are nearly there, I try to walk slower. The moment had come as I knew it would, but not so soon. As time stretched and stretched that summer, I felt reassured, but now it had suddenly snapped back like a violent spring: I was only moments away from arriving. There was so much awaiting me behind those intimidating metal gates, so much I didn't know.

My father had told me that it would be very different from my preschool, that in this school, barely anyone spoke English. That was good news. I spoke more Spanish than English anyway. But what about French? Part of me feared I wasn't ready.

These thoughts are interrupted when we stop at a large, white building, with the words LYCÉE MOLIERE on the facade. I take a deep breath and look up. There, perched on the first L, is a bird, chirping. My gaze follows it as it flies higher and higher into the neverending sky. And then, as I admire the blue skies of Spain, I know it'll be alright. I know I'll do just fine, and that this year will be one I remember for the rest of my life. And so, I let go of my mother's hand and enter.

Marissa Holtzman  
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## Rocky

In the past, I felt alone. No friends ready to leap into action and comfort me. But then, the best thing that ever could have happened, did happen. I felt a sense of relief and comfort. All of the pressure taken off of my chest. And you may not believe why. A dog.

Rocky was always there when I needed to talk to someone. His fluffy coat made it easy to lay on his back as I would a pillow. Although I now have caring friends, once in a while, I will sit with Rocky and talk about what has been going on.

I remember one time coming home after a really bad day, crying. Rocky came up to me and did not leave my side. I sat down on the bathroom floor with my head in my knees, and door was closed. I heard footsteps coming, and sure enough, it was Rocky. He used his nose to open the cracked door. He sniffed me. His tickly nose made me pick my head up. I smiled when I saw his tail wagging. I gave him a ginormous hug and put my head onto his shoulder. I told him, "I love you so much."

Our first walk together is something I will never forget. His poofy tail was blowing in the wind as we strolled down the streets full of fallen leaves, through our neighborhood. "Come on buddy," I kept saying. While panting, his adorable little tongue poked out of his mouth. I trotted a little so that he would get some energy out. His cute little run made me smile and laugh. When we got to the driveway, I took the leash off of him and ran to the garage. Sure enough, he followed. It was one of those "awww" moments.

The best part of having such an amazing ally in life is laying in bed after a long day, and looking back on how amazing somebody, a pet or person, has been to you. I will just be still under the blankets and think of all of the positive things. I love thinking back on previous happy days, and getting a huge smile on my face. And, I find that certain slow songs bring back many memories from the past.

Now, Rocky is 6 ½ years old and living his best life! He is part of my family which is my mother, father, sister, and me. I love him with all of my heart. Imagining life without him is too hard to do. I realize now that in life, it is important to take any support you can have, because you never know how much that person or animal will impact your life.

Shreya Joseph

# 2020

*March 13th, 2020. The start of the worst year of many peoples' lives.*

It all started in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. I heard in school that this was just a tiny little virus that would clear out quickly, but it didn't. It kept spreading in China, and after a few months, reached out to the whole world. When the virus first started spreading to the United States, my mom reassuringly told me that it would be okay, and that the virus would slow down and eventually stop. Well it didn't. It's been more than a year since the Covid-19 virus started spreading. Peoples' lives ended. Many couldn't go to work and make money to feed their families. Many got infected and died of this terrible virus. Kids around the world, like me, couldn't go to school and did virtual learning for the first time ever. "Virtual" was now a very familiar word for me.

The whole world was petrified, and everyone began following the strict precautions to avoid contracting this dangerous virus. Many were frightened to go outside. A lot of people's plans have changed. Some people wanted to go on long relaxing trips. But there is nothing relaxing about the situation we are in now. People are waiting for this virus to stop. To take in some fresh air, to see their families and friends, and most of all, to go back to life before this virus.

I have been impacted a lot just like many other people in this world from this virus. First came the good part - I didn't have to go to school and I was able to learn virtually, my brother and sister came home from college and we all spent time together as family, and I had lots of free time on my hands. Then came the bad part: all of my out of school activities were canceled, I lost touch with my friends, and I felt as though I could never go outside again without wearing a mask, gloves, and without hand sanitizer in my pocket. I felt like I was going crazy.

Me and my family wanted to go to India at the end of the school year this year. Because the virus became a little bit more calm, and we already booked the tickets, but then we heard on the news that the U.S might be banning flights from here to India. After I heard that news, I became so despondent. All I wanted to see my family in India and now, I don't know if I even can.

I thought the Covid- 19 virus calmed down because different companies started to make different types of the Covid - 19 virus vaccine and the covid cases slowly started to decrease. But then the covid cases began rising like crazy. Now there are new variants of the Covid - 19 virus in India, now that one variant is starting to spread all over the world. I don't know if this Covid - 19 virus will ever end, but we can only hope that it will.

# Biding My Time

By Shona Kumar

"Dad, are you coming?"

"Dad, Dad, where are you?! We're waiting for you. Dad, don't be late," my sister shrieked, ripples emanating from where she struck her fists on the bedcover.

This had become a nightly ritual for my sister and me, it had to happen: daily without fail! I can't recollect when or how it originated but this is now set in stone. Here's what happens: every night my Dad comes to say good night and tell us some story. We don't care if the story was silly, or weird but he has to tell a story each night.

Sometimes, my dad is tired, but he always ends up telling the story. We could hear his feet thumping, exhaustedly on the stairs.

"Girls, do you really want to hear a story today?" he sighed.

"Yeeess..." We chorused.

"Well then..."

On and on, the stories unfolded: full of excitement, comedy, or even drama. On and on they went until our dad bid us good night each day. Then suddenly one day everything changed.

This happened a week before Saturday. Since then, he has always been on the phone during our bedtime; constantly talking to various people or researching. My grandpa is infected with COVID in India. He was unable to take the vaccine because of his allergies. My dad and his brother are working desperately to manage his treatment from here. Morning in India is nighttime in the US, so he is always got busy during our bedtime.

For a few days, we tried to call him for a story, but he said with melancholy in his voice, "Not today girls...I am a bit busy..please just go to sleep."

After a couple of days, we even stopped calling and just silently went with our sleep routine.

This is the plight of many immigrant American families whose elderly parents are still in their homelands: old and helpless. With COVID spreading like fire and medical resources rapidly saturating, it's becoming a nightmare to get help.

We overheard our parents murmuring in anxiety and stress, and it seems there have been multiple passing aways in the extended family.

The word COVID meant nothing to me when our schools closed down last year. But then the cases started rising more worldwide and people were dying. It was still hard for me to connect with the people who confronted loss. But, now I can relate to the overwhelming sadness, grief, and chaos that Covid brings.

Tonight more than two weeks have passed. Just like so many days, today also my sister and I silently went to bed, still hopelessly missing our routine. Deeply praying and hopefully waiting, when our grandpa will get better.

I was about to doze off when I heard a knock on the door, "Hey girls, still up for a story!!" and saw my dad smiling at the door.

"Yes", we shrieked in unison and knew our Grandpa will be OK.

It was a hot, summer evening and I decided to go outside. I walked out of my house and into the garage. I grabbed my red bike, put on a helmet and rode my bike down the driveway and into the street. I rode my bike around the entire neighborhood. Riding back towards my house, I was getting tired and stopped in front of my mom's blue car. Under the car, I saw movement. I crouched down and saw it was a cat.

I saw the cat had something on his eye. It looked bad. His fur was gray and dirty. I went into the house and called my mother, who is a veterinarian, to come outside to look at the cat. She gently coaxed the cat from under the car. She looked at his eye and said "This is not good. It looks like he has a bad eye infection," We brought him into the house for the rest of the day to keep him safe. The cat was so friendly, I thought he might have been someone's pet but he did not have a collar on.

We called the animal shelter to see if anyone was missing a cat. No one was. I put posters up in my neighborhood with his picture. We kept him in the house for the night. We put him in our laundry room with a blanket, litter box and food and water bowl. In the morning, my mom brought him to her clinic to try to treat his eye. The eye was too damaged and she ended up extracting his eye. My mom could not keep the cat at her work so she brought him home. She said we can only keep him until he finds a home. We only have one mean cat at home so my plan was to convince her to keep him.

We kept the cat for two weeks. No one claimed him, so we tried to find him a home. Everyday I would come and pet him. We would play, talk and sleep together. It felt like he was meant to be with me. I would tell him stories and he would listen. He was able to move around and play even without his eye. When I slept, he slept. He became my best friend.

A week later, I was talking to a friend, Ohana, and she said her cat was very sick. She took him to my mom's clinic and was too sick and ended up dying. My friend was heartbroken. Her birthday was coming up too. It must have been terrible for something like that to happen days before your birthday.

My old plan was to keep the cat. Now I had a new plan. I already had a cat but my friend didn't and she loves cats. So for her birthday we surprised her with the cat, but I still get to see him. I guess the cat was meant to be with her.