

**Author:** Kareem Heslop  
**College:** Graduate Studies



*"I am Kareem Heslop, and I hail from Jamaica. Merging art and science in creative ways is an enjoyable hobby of mine."*

Essay Prompt: "Mutton, a reporter for the school's newspaper interviews a survivor of COVID-19. She learns the crippling truth about a forgotten world"

### **A Century After COVID-19**

"So, how does it feel?" Mutton, a young, student reporter grinned as she nervously pointed a Walcarte-grade voice recorder in the direction of Cayenne Curry. The now 126 year old survivor of the COVID-19 pandemic sighed, and proceeded to adjust himself in his chair until he sank into a cozy recline.

"You mean, how does it feel to be the world's oldest grad student?" Cayenne responded.

Mutton smiled sheepishly, as Cayenne's humor only served to elevate her anxiety in meeting such an astronomical figure. Cayenne's wit had not left him, but his stony face and gravelly voice forged by father time kept you alert. He is the last remaining survivor of the 2020 global meltdown; a relic. He has remained silent about the events of the pandemic for more than a century; courtesy of a gag order imposed by the One World government. Ten virus-free individuals under the age of thirty were selected from each continent to bunker underground, after it was found that more than 95% of the population contracted an aggressive strain of the COVID-19 virus, a much deadlier, COVID strain. The global economy crashed, and chaos broke out as the virus ripped apart the human race. Underground, the One World government was formed; no longer would there be separate countries and citizenships. Cayenne and the others were forbidden to speak of the past; to make way for the future.

After fifty years of living in isolation, they rose to the surface to find a planet rich with vegetation and wildlife, but no humans. Oceans and lakes were free of pollution, species that were on the brink of extinction were now fully recovered, and the climate was cooler and fresher than it had been in centuries. Humankind had a chance to start over, and so they began to rebuild.

“You have been silent for so long! Tell us what it was like during COV-”

“COVID -19 was a terrible time, absolutely terrible!” interrupted Cayenne. He proceeded to detail the events of a time long forgotten. The world had not progressed in the linear way that economists and scientists had predicted more than a century ago. Instead, time stagnated.

Global superpowers were busy jostling for supremacy when the virus blindsided the world. First, it swept over China like the Black Death. With a taste for the most mature among us, it moved quickly through Asia. The Europeans were slow to react; their aging population was struck hard and fast. Within a matter of months, the East was in turmoil.

Word had it that the virus jumped species, likely from bats into humans. We never discovered the truth about the genesis of this creepy shadow that you could feel even in the darkest of nights. Some say it was engineered intentionally, a bioterrorist act designed to crumble empires. Others thought it was simply our due punishment for the wickedness, and bigotry that consumed the world.

The virus’s approach to the United States was eerie, but certain. The leaders were divided on the appropriate action to protect Americans. In the face of what was termed “the invisible enemy,” there was no clever retort. The first wave of infections had us gasping for air. Schools, airports, places of worship, restaurants and department stores shut down, and thousands lost their jobs. Countries closed their borders, and many were left stranded, never knowing when they might see their loved ones again. Life as we knew it came to a screeching halt.

“It was a tough time, ‘self quarantine... practice social distancing,’ they said. ‘Wear masks everywhere!’ It was strange, people hoarded the weirdest things...You could not get a roll of toilet paper to wipe your... Hahaha!” Cayenne’s delirious laughter sent shudders up Mutton’s spine as she tried to muster a smile. “We flattened the curve at first, if only we had been more patient, we might have had a chance.”

Before COVID, the elders would say that the television was rotting our brains, and the smart phone destroying our ability to socialize at public gatherings. There is strength in numbers, but with the onslaught of COVID, separation would have been key. It is the great irony of our time, that in the era of the internet and the smart phone, we could not heed the warnings and be socially distant.

“I remember my friends saying, ‘lets party, this virus will pass soon...’ then it happened...

The whole world watched the US with bated breaths as he cried ‘I can’t breathe!’

“What’s the US? Was it a town?”

“No little miss, it was once the leading country for opportunity; a melting pot of cultures chasing what was ‘the American dream.’

“Wow, I have never heard of this ‘US,’ it sounds amazing,” Mutton responded with intrigue.

“As I was saying, the world gazed upon the US in shock. Despite humanity itself being threatened, we still made time to treat others as separate and unequal. As the living fighting against the non-living, we also fought against ourselves, distracted by race, we sabotaged humanity.” Cayenne sobbed quietly as Mutton searched hastily for a serviette in her purse. Race was not a charged word for her. In the new school system, it was explained simply as a phenotype driven by genetics and background; it did not dictate status in the world.

Cayenne explained that he was talking about the brutal killing of a man by the blue bloods of his society. This man was suffocated to death for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Under the knee of a descendant of former colonizers, he pleaded for his life! He was not a porcelain saint, his skin was bronze and his hair like wool, but most importantly, his life mattered.

So gruesome was the murder that it sent shockwaves through the civilized world. For once, we all had to face the demons of inequality. Our perfect society was only humane for a privileged few. Others were gentrified, vilified and hunted. His killing marked a turning point in the middle of the pandemic. Riots broke out and businesses burned, as frustrations about racial injustice intensified. Tired and angry at a broken system, they took matters into their own hands. No longer would any blue-blooded angel draw chalk lines around entire neighbor “hoods,” with a hand in the pocket and a knee in the neck of the accused. People marched for weeks, families mourned for months, and cities burned. All the while, the virus marched on like a well-trained assassin; silently and efficiently, eradicating us.

While the issue of racial injustice stood ready for inspection on the global stage, the masses seemed to support a reform. Statues of oppressors that loomed over grand cities were torn down, social media erupted in a volcano of tweets and memes that called for equality. It seemed a real change was on the horizon. However, the problem with trends is that they die, and people move on.

As governments ignored the warnings of record rates of infection, the economy opened up and the virus walked into boardrooms, hospitals, airports, daycares, hospices, and schools. People were so happy to get back to earning a living that they ignored the Grim Reaper’s scythe tugging at their masks as they struggled to breathe. Soon we thought the mask “too uncomfortable,” and as we threw out the N-95s, COVID took the I-95, full throttle, it t-boned us hard. The curve that we worked so hard to flatten was now nine months pregnant and society was crowning. Yes, stillborn.

“We tried all sorts of things.” Cayenne sat up in his chair and leaned forward as if to share a secret. “We tried contact-free delivery of food and meds so that people didn’t have to leave home.” Rocking back sharply in his seat, and throwing his arms up, “but then the drivers got sick and spread it to the customers. Then we tried using drones, but then anarchists and xenophobes

kept shooting the drones down out of paranoia that packages of viruses were being flown in from abroad by these things. Not everyone wanted life to get back to normal miss, miss...”

“Mutton... Surely, you must think we learned our lesson? Peace, love and unity reigns supreme in our world, its all I know.”

“Yes, we are a resilient species.” Cayenne looked searchingly over Muttons shoulder before focusing on a screen in the cafeteria. An advert big letters read, ‘INTERNET REBUILD ALMOST COMPLETE!’

“We thought we would have flying cars by now, robot maids, and advanced medicine. Instead, nature brought our faces to the sweltering asphalt and held us all there for a hot minute! We were forced to reflect on our wrongs, and realize human life is frail. We sobered to the reality that life suffered under our rule. Without us, the planet flourished. Be grateful that love is now a four credit course in your classrooms, and equality is natural and not a protest anymore...”

“Sorry, my battery is about to di...”

**Author:** Jessa Mae Sabate  
**College:** Pharmacy



*"Hello! My name is Jessa Mae and I'm from the Philippines but I'm currently living with my grandmother. I will be a 2nd year student of the College of Pharmacy. I love the healthcare field because it helps me connect and be of service to people but writing helps me get to know myself better."*

Essay Prompt: "Cohvy Diana is just like the other high school students but of the year 2100. She will discover a lot of things from the year 2020 through a strange object she found in her room. What will she discover? How will she react to her discovery? How will this affect her and her family?"

### **The Photograph**

"What is this? Who are these people? Why aren't they wearing the suits we are wearing now? That's odd and impractical."

Cohvy Diana asked as she picked up a bizarre thing she found from the corner of her all- white bedroom. Cohvy Diana Anson is a straight A high school student of the year 2120. It was the first time she's seeing such a strange thing. It looks so archaic and torn but whoever kept that must have a talent in preserving things. She stared at it for hours, flipping it side to back then to the front while looking for a hologram button. She has no idea how that thing works.

After hours of thinking which feels like decades, she then suddenly got a marvelous idea! She scanned that thing with her mobile Nokia Morph Cell Phone which she was wearing as a bracelet. A Nokia Morph Cell Phone is especially high-tech that it can transform into any gadget she needs and it is very handy. Cohvy found out it was called a photograph. She surprisingly discovered some profoundly microscopic scribbles at the back which she missed earlier and once again scanned the scribbles with her Nokia Morph phone. It translated into " COVID 19 Pandemic Year 2020." Her eyes almost popped out of her eye sockets out of surprise. That thing called photograph is 100 years old!

She looked at the photo again. The people in the photograph looks so happy seeing from their eyes. They look like they were waving at the photographer from their balconies. All of them are wearing some clothing to cover bottom half of their face. The face covering looks like their head gear, only way, way less bulky. To top that, they were not wearing any heavy full-gear suits like

theirs. "That would be so convenient," she uttered.

Cohvy pulled her self back to reality after being immersed in her curiosity and daydreaming. She was studying her lessons online before she got distracted. Despite that, she was still able to go back to her studying. However, after some minutes of studying, her effort of staying focused were proven futile. She can't keep the photograph out of her mind. She hastily finished all her assignments then dashed through the portal to their living area connected to the kitchen. She sprinted to the living area where her parents are to ask about the photograph.

"Ma, Pa, look what I found!" Cohvy exclaimed excitedly.

Her Papa, Quarantino still with a sandwich on his mouth turned his head towards Cohvy's direction baffled by the sudden break of silence in the living area. He was in the middle of eating and savoring his sandwich when her daughter, Cohvy was rushing to them. Her Mama, Coronalisa on the other hand, was not looking because she was busy cooking their dinner. Yes, you read that right, dinner. Quarantino is still eating his sandwich even when they are about to eat dinner. "What is it, Cohvy? What's the excitement about?" Quarantino asked still munching on his merienda.

"I found this strange thing called photograph! And the people in this thing are not wearing the suits we are wearing now! Their place also looks so dangerous because there are no automated shields like our dome house. Their place is so open to microbes and invaders. How is that even possible?"

"That photograph might be from the previous owner of this house who now flew to the other planets and got a space home. They are old couple who are both history researchers. They must have dropped it from a special preserving container which slows the aging of things from years before. Anyhow, just throw it. You might get infection from it because it has been out of the container," Coronalisa explained while pressing some hologram buttons to set their dinner table. Plates just seem to automatically appear out of nowhere.

Cohvy's excitement went spiraling downhill when her mama told her to throw the photograph. She pretended to throw the photograph in a floating bin which sucks garbage when a hologram button is pressed. She could not afford to throw it. She hid the photograph inside her pocket by tapping it over her suit near her thigh. Good thing Coronalisa did not notice. The family went ahead and ate their dinner peacefully 6 feet apart as how they have always been doing it. Take note, Quarantino just ate his "merienda". Oh well.

After that extremely satisfying dinner, she immediately headed back to her room to look for answers to her million questions. She browsed through the airbook for answers. It took her hours to learn all about 2020. Good thing she has finished all her school requirements this time.

As she was finishing up her personal research, she glanced at her window which looks more like a projected screen on a wall. She saw for the first time the dead earth. The environment is so

toxic, and no more living thing survives in the outside unless the organism is covered by bulky gear suits which are specialized to protect them for toxicity and any infections. Everything is lifeless, and dark and still. This is the very reason why people has occupied other planets and built some space homes. She was stunned that the earth 100 years ago has flowing, rich rivers, swaying trees, green grass, flying birds, chirping crickets, croaking frogs, beautiful sunlight and more.

Cohvy realized everything was so different back then. Houses are made of bricks or woods but now, they are made of special synthetic glass materials to withstand the harsh environment. Dome houses are like snow globes. Their doors are called portals because they look like portals that just appears when you need them. Everything is hologram and automated. Oxygen are generated from the synthetic trees inside the dome house. Gear suits are part of their bodies and are forbidden to remove them because of high risk infection. No more teachers are needed to teach students because technology does it for them from the convenience of their homes. Neighbors do not really know well each other. Reproductions are done in laboratories through in vitro fertilization.

The information that really caught her attention from this personal research is from the events that happened months before the Covid 19 pandemic of 2020. People kiss and hug their loved ones and she thinks this is particularly impossible. She even needs to look for the definition of the terms kiss and hug. She is in awe to find out that siblings hug each other, couples hold hands while dancing salsa, parents carry their children in their bare hands, mothers breastfeed their babies, dogs sleep with people, and children play outside of the house. All of these are non-existent in their time. After the 2020 pandemic, people are not allowed to do any physical interactions. Mankind has become cautious, afraid and abusive to nature to the point that they created technology to protect them from the effects of the damage they themselves did to the earth. They neglected the environment until nothing is left and useful. Different strains of viruses and bacteria have mutated because of the destruction of the environment caused by the mankind's astonishing indifference to the place they're living in.

After reading all these, Cohvy swiftly rushed to the living area where her parents are, floating comfortably in their sofa far from each other, eating chips while watching their favorite Hologram Show. She was observing them from a distant. Both of them looks so content. She noticed that people like them born on that year has in their innate nature to be physically distant from each other.

“Are my parents really happy? Do they actually love each other? Or me? How did we manage to live a life without the emotional connection? Without the physical touch of love?”

The photographs she found from her research, of people with smiling faces and people hugging and kissing their loved ones flashed back in her memory. Tears came running down her cheeks without her consent. She slowly walked toward her parents while wiping her disobedient tears. She hugged her Papa and Mama from behind. Both were surprised but did not stop her from doing what she was doing even with the presence of their bulky suits. Even though both of her parents do not know what it was called, they both liked it.

“What do you call that, Cohvy? Can we get another one?” Quarantino and Coronalisa requested at the same time.

Cohvy scurried in front of them without explaining what it was. They now group-hugged so tight they do not want to let go. After then, Cohvy squeezed in between Quarantino and Coronalisa. All of them did not mind the close proximity while watching and enjoying their Hologram TV show. They felt so connected with each other. For once, they are not scared. The things taken for granted by people before are now the things they will always treasure.

**Author:** Anonymous

*Essay Prompt: "An international graduate student deals with his PhD research work, his family in the US, and his father's illness back home all amid the rising of a global pandemic."*

### **COVID-19: A Personal Journal**

#### March 7th, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 435

I stood in the JFK airport security check in disbelief. Something big was going on. Something wrong was going on. I had an idea of what it could be, but I could not know for sure. My anxiety grew as I stood there, checking my watch every few minutes, calculating how long it would take me to get through security, get my luggage, and run to my next flight's gate. I noticed that I have not moved an inch for the last thirty minutes. I glanced impatiently at the unmanned security check gate. I still had an hour and a half before my next flight. I could still make it, or at least that is what I thought at the time. All I could think about was that I am going to see my wife and daughter this afternoon. They will be picking me up at the Charleston International Airport, and we are going to try a new fancy pizza place for dinner. Of course, all my naïve dreams were later crushed that day when I missed my flight and had to be rerouted to Boston before making it to Charleston by midnight. That meant that no one is picking me up, I will not see my daughter today, and more importantly, no pizza. I later learned that Gov. Cuomo has declared a state of emergency in New York City earlier that day after the coronavirus cases in the state has reached 21. That was the reason behind the chaos at the airport.

#### February 7th, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 12

The last week has been one of the most stressful in my life. My father, back in Egypt, seems to be losing a long fight against cancer. He collapsed a week ago and had to be admitted into the ICU. The doctors are not very optimistic about him regaining his conscious. I am torn, having just gotten back from Egypt in the end of December, between leaving my wife and daughter in the US and going to see him, or staying here to take care of them. Realizing that I will never be able to forgive myself if I did nothing, I began the steps to travel back to Egypt for a week. By the time I managed to get everything in place to visit him on February 26th, he had already gained back his conscious and was released from the hospital. When I finally saw him, he was very weak, unable to support his wasting body to even sit in his bed on his own. His spirit was broken. He thought he would never be able to walk on his own again. This was coming from a man whose will to live has kept him going strong almost eight years after being diagnosed with cancer. I had arranged for him to start physical therapy sessions. As a pharmacist, and an aspiring scientist, I told him many stories about people who made it out of far worse medical conditions to lift his spirit. And of course, most of my stories were made up.

#### March 3rd, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 124

I only had four days left in my stay in Egypt and a lot of things to take care of before leaving. My father was getting better. On another note, COVID-19 cases were rapidly increasing in Italy. Countries were starting to suspend travel to or from certain areas. I remember looking at earlier return ticket prices as I panicked, considering the possibility of being stranded away from my wife

and daughter.

March 13th, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 2184 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in Egypt: 93

It has been less than a week since I got back from Egypt. President Trump declared COVID-19 outbreak in the United States a national emergency. Within one week after that, the state of South Carolina had declared a state of emergency and closed public schools and restaurants. For my wife and I, that meant that at least one of us will have to stay home to take care of our daughter. We ended up splitting the days, to be able to keep our experiments going. We were not fully efficient, but we still managed to get something done by the end of every week.

April 1st, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 221068 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in Egypt: 779

I learned something about myself over the last few months: I am afraid of slowing down. For me, the only way to survive is to keep moving, to always be doing something. In the last few weeks, I have not been doing as much as I wanted to. I struggled to come to terms with achieving less than I initially planned for 2020.

While the numbers of COVID-19 cases were rapidly increasing in the US, the government in Egypt was facing scrutiny from the public there. People were not trusting the official numbers. My doctor friends are saying they have been seeing a large increase in the number of admitted patients with symptoms resembling COVID-19's, but there were no enough tests.

My father's health was getting better. He was able to walk and even go outside on his own. His eating was better, and he was regaining weight. However, I worried about him every day. The fact that he is immunocompromised in a country where the medical institution was oversaturated is scary.

May 1st, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 1134616 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in Egypt: 5895

I open my eyes and she is there. Her smile widens and her big eyes sparkle as she yells in her cute little voice "Wake up!". She immediately starts asking me to sing her one of the thousand children songs and lullabies I have memorized over the last month. She then uses her own made up language to describe what games she would like us to play today. Our bond is stronger than ever. She is turning into my new 20-month old best friend.

My days were now split between taking care of my experiments and taking care of my daughter. Like many others, I found striking similarities between what was happening and the post-apocalyptic works of fiction. Things like excessively and repeatedly washing my hand reminded me of Zombieland's rule number 2: Double Tap. And like many others, I found solace in spending more time with my family. I learned to enjoy taking things slow, or again, as rule number 32 states: Enjoy The Little Things.

June 1st, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 1874440 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in Egypt: 26384

The numbers of daily cases and daily deaths due to COVID-19 have been going down for a while. Businesses have been gradually opening up for the last couple of weeks. As I dropped my daughter off at the day care, I contemplated how new discussions quickly became mainstream. Whether to wear a mask and how to handle COVID-19 mitigation without hurting the economy were subjects for daily debates. I learned that people have the ability to turn everything into an ideological fight. I learned a lot about people's bias, not just to certain political agendas, but even in science. I noticed most people in my network would only promote science articles that supported their views on COVID-19 prevalence, transmission, and treatment. At the same time, other debates like how to support local communities were also taking over. COVID-19 was simultaneously bringing out the best and the worst in people.

June 13th, 2020 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in the US: 2142224 – confirmed COVID-19 cases in Egypt: 42980

Unfortunately, the number of COVID-19 cases has been rising, at least in SC, for the last week or two. The possibility of a second wave is increasing, and more businesses are taking the initiative to close again to prevent the further spread of the virus.

In Egypt, things have gone crazy in the last couple of weeks. The official number of daily cases is increasing day by day, even with the limited testing capabilities. It is enough to scroll through a random Egyptian's Facebook timeline at any given day to realize that most people have someone they know that died of COVID-19. Furthermore, people cannot find hospital beds, and quarantine facilities are oversaturated.

It seems like, even for an optimist like me, things are headed into a bad direction. I think to myself: "I am more stressed about my family back home more than I have ever been. I am more stressed about my family in the US more than I have ever been." Then I find comfort in remembering all the good that has come out of this: people supporting local businesses and communities, learning to care more about mental health and less about overachieving, my father's improving health against all odds, and my daughter's laughs and newly-learned dances that I got to see first-hand because of the lockdown.

**Author:** Ralph Tanios  
**College:** Graduate Studies



*“My name is Ralph and I moved from Lebanon 5 years ago to embark on my MD PhD journey at MUSC. Writing has been a medium for me to express myself and to inspire others to always be their unapologetic selves and to think outside the box.”*

Essay Prompt: As she approaches the end of high school, Natali Zumab of the class of 2120, has to decide which of her parents' careers she wants to pursue. Upon emerging from isolation to shadow her population genomicist father, Natali learns of the 2020 events that changed the world forever. She learns that evil lurks in human nature, but patience, unity, and sacrifice allow mankind to withstand the test of time.

### **Mosaicism**

It was my last week of virtual classes which meant no more CRISPR booster shots for at least a year! It also meant I had less than 7 days to decide which of my parents' careers to take over. I headed to the family nourishment table to learn more about my future, something I probably should have done before.

“Remind me again what a Population Genomicist does, dad.”. As soon as I uttered those words my mom's jaw dropped wide open. She breathed angrily, fogging up the plexiglass between us and fading from view till she was just a silhouette.

For 6570 consecutive days, I pressed the heat button and watched my nourishment cube go up in flames till it was black and crisp and ready for consumption; “Sterile” as mom would say. At this point it was impossible for me to show any enthusiasm for what I was about to ingest. How could she blame me for not wanting to be a Nutrition Strategist like her?

“It's easier for me to show you, Natali”, said Dad. “Come to work with me tomorrow”.

Work? As in outside? I jumped at the thought of finally leaving my quarters for the first time since... well... ever!

The next day I put on a pink Hazchem suit and followed dad to a metal section of the wall that suddenly bifurcated. The wall split apart to reveal an empty room with 3 buttons: “Zumab”, “Ximab”, “Umab”.

My dad waved his badge across the panel and the light shifted from Zumab to Ximab. “What’s the difference?” I said jokingly, “and why not Umab?”

- Umab is restricted access. It is accessed only in emergencies. All in due time.

The walls closed again and when they opened back up, a room full of plexiglass cubicles came into view. Each room had one body connected to wires and to computers and strapped to a bed. These bodies had similar shapes as me, but their skin was... monochromatic.

I watched my dad take one needle and draw liquid from the arms of 12 different bodies.

“What’s that for?”, I asked.

“This is how I make the CRISPR shots you’ve been getting.”

-You never really told me what those are for.

-Ever since the CORO Nation began in 2020 we’ve developed these shots to help your body maintain control over the virus.

-Virus? 2020? Like a 100 years ago?

My dad took one look at my puzzled face and I could see the gleam in his eyes that he only gets when a teaching opportunity presents itself.

“It all started in a place called Wuhan”, he began. One person contracted a virus that spread so quickly that within months hundreds of thousands of people became infected. There was no cure for the virus at the time, and it killed thousands. The only way to defend ourselves was to isolate ourselves from others and wait it out. This worked for the first few months and infection rates began to drop, allowing us time to tend to those who had the virus and to help them recover. However, people’s boredom and selfishness got the better of them. Not everyone had the patience to be locked up at home and told what to do.”

-So then what happened?

-A group of people demanded for their rights to roam freely with no rules, no isolation, and no protection. They were strongly convinced that the virus was a hoax. This created the great divide where people split into two N.T. or Neo-Territorial factions. There were those who sought personal gain and GENeralized freedom, a term they loosely defined to mean the ability to do what they wanted, when they wanted, and without having to listen to authoritative figures. They called themselves the N.T. Gen and they believed that science was a myth and a form of

governmental control. So they ran amuck, infecting each other carelessly, until the virus began to mutate and take on new forms. We had to study and anticipate all these mutations in order to contain the virus. This is why we developed these CRISPR shots to attack any mutation the virus acquires to resist containment.

-That's wild! How can the N.T. Gen be so reckless?

-Unfortunately in earlier times not everyone had equal access to resources like we do nowadays. Not everyone was educated to think objectively. Not everyone empathized. Many people were given advantages since birth. Some had more resources, more rights, and more opportunities; and instead of helping those that didn't share their privilege, they used their advantages to trump others. Their advantages made them feel special, like they were better than everyone else, and they could not denounce that. They refused to have someone tell them to settle for less so that others could benefit. They turned a blind eye to the injustices of the world around them. So long as they were not struggling, they didn't have to worry about the struggles and suffering of others. "Out of sight out of mind" they would say.

-That's completely unfair!

-It gets worse. Can you imagine a world that forbids you from looking the way you do, loving those you love, or celebrating your true self? Imagine a world dominated by greed, where one refuses to relinquish an ounce of privilege even if the lives of millions hang in the balance. People were targeted just because of the way they looked. They were deprived, ignored, and even massacred; and many lost their lives to revolt to try and make things fair for all. They had to revolt just so that others around them could live. Many of those with advantages did not do anything about it, but when this virus came, they finally got a sense of what it's like to have their lives controlled by external factors. This virus targets people indiscriminately, and when they were advised to isolate themselves for their own safety and the safety of others, they felt "oppressed". They felt like their freedom was challenged and was being stripped away from them. They revolted by ignoring the warnings.

-What about those who didn't agree with the N.T. Gen?

-That would be us. We set up walls in different parts of the world to isolate ourselves from the N.T. Gen. We built formidable towers dedicated to studying this virus and how to overcome it.

-Are we the Umabs?

-No. The Umabs are the humans who have practiced proper isolation since the outbreak began. They have never been infected with the virus and we keep them together in one sector to prevent cross-contamination.

-So who are these people in the cubicles?

-Those would be the Ximabs. They are chimeric N.T. Gen who have succumbed to the idea that this virus is not a hoax as they had originally thought and that only science can save them and their families from extinction. They have acquired multiple mutations from their time roaming the world freely, getting infected and re-infected, but they have volunteered themselves so we could study and counteract these mutations.

-Why do they look different?

-Ah you mean why are they monochromatic? Believe it or not, everyone used to be monochromatic a century ago. When we set out to find a cure we took samples from many people whose bodies naturally fought and survived the virus. We noticed patterns in the survivors belonging to certain chroma. Each pattern offered an evolutionary advantage. Once we combined patterns from different chroma we were able to fight the virus from multiple angles, allowing it little room to fight back. You see, the secret to survival is uniting all the bodies originating from different chroma and different backgrounds. Had the N.T. Gen realized that uniting our differences can help us overcome any obstacle thrown at us, we could have been able to stop the virus from spreading. We believed in science and the betterment of society through collective sacrifice. We set out to unite these different bodies and we called ourselves the N.T. Bodies.

-But my skin! It has tan and black and white and many other shades. Why?

-Because you, Natali, are a Zumab. You are humanized. We have been giving you CRISPR shots in order to target the viral components in you and allow your human side to permanently take over. Introducing the CRISPR virus so early in your development, since you were just an egg and a sperm, can have unprecedented effects beyond our control. Because this virus originated from different groups of people, it had different evolutionarily advantageous effects in different parts of your body. You are an amalgam of previous generations. You are all of mankind compacted into one body and one mind. You are a mosaic, the definition of true beauty. Each mosaic pattern is unique, but no pattern is deemed better than another. There is no discernible category by which to judge! You Zumabs are all equal. You are all the products of nature and its randomness. You are all limitless!

**Author:** Amanda Daulagala  
**College:** Graduate Studies



*“Hello, I’m Amanda. I am from Sri Lanka. After completing my undergraduate degree at SUNY Oswego, I enrolled in the Ph.D. program at MUSC. Writing has been a long-forgotten habit of mine, which reemerged with the opportunity of the essay competition.”*

Essay Prompt: A high school student, who questions the health and safety regulations in the year 2120, learns about the corona pandemic that transformed human civilization through the touching family-story of his friend.

### **Hospital Food**

Jared looked at the clock. It’s another five minutes before his classes end for the week. History teacher assigned an essay on the evolution of use of technology in the education field. The best essay will enter to a competition with regional high schools and will earn points for college applications. Jared logged out of the classroom. His head hurt from being in virtual reality for three hours. He craved something cold; it’s a nice evening to enjoy an ice cream in the park and an evening stroll. On his way to the park Jared’s watch beeped every time he was less than a meter from other pedestrians on the road; he could hear their watches beeping as well. He smiled awkwardly then realized his face was covered by the mask from nose down. He nodded and walked away trying to keep “the one-meter distance”. Unfortunately, the park was already filled with maximum human capacity per health guidelines. Jared was slightly irritated, he really wanted to stay outside, it’s a Friday afternoon after all. He decided to take the bus to the park in the nearby neighborhood.

At the bus stop, Jared opened his digital health records for the last month from his watch to be scanned by the ticket meter, if there were any suspicious circumstances he will not be allowed in the bus. Other than occasional headaches from being in the virtual classroom, he was fairly healthy. The ticket read that he is to be seated at the fourth cube in the seventh row, Jared smiled to himself because it was a window seat and he could enjoy the bus ride. He cleaned his hands with soap dispenser at the ticket counter before entering into the bus. Watching trees passed by, Jared wondered... “what if the park hadn’t been full? Why is the society obsessed with social distancing and health rules?” He remembered the discussion in history lesson earlier; apparently, a pandemic hundred years ago in 2020 was to be blamed. As he walked to the exit, Jared could

hear the cube door closing and sanitizers spraying from the bus ceiling to sterilize the cube for the next passenger. "What exactly are we so scared of?", Jared rolled his eyes and with one raised eyebrow thought himself "pandemic?!"

Jared thanked his luck because with his arrival the park reached its intended number of people. He couldn't imagine going elsewhere again. He scanned his health records at the gate and cleaned his hands in a haste before entering the park. The park gate didn't open. Confused, Jared looked at the notification appeared on the smart screen beside the gate. It seemed in his hurry to enjoy the evening, he hadn't washed his hands for ten seconds; another health rule. He growled under his breath and washed his hands again, fifteen seconds this time.

Inside the park Jared booked a space under a tree. While waiting for the ice cream he ordered online, he thought to call his friend, Damian, whom he usually meets three times a week for the science lab, the drama club and swimming lessons. Beside the in-person meetings, Jared and Damian always sat next to each other in virtual classes and occasionally visited each other's places. If the setting sun didn't shine through, Damian's hologram could have been misunderstood for a real person. "Which park is this? Definitely not the one near your house" Damian said looking around with both a surprised and a confused expression. "No, couldn't get into the park I usually go" Jared replied. Damian leaned back and closed his eyes as if to feel the evening breeze on his face. The duo sat in silent for a few minutes. Jared could hear a doorbell at Damian's house. "I ordered ice cream, yours must have just arrived. Mine is here too. Be right back" Jared said standing up to walk to the park gate. Damian nodded and disappeared.

"Didn't you say your grandmother used to talk about that pandemic we learned earlier" Jared asked sitting comfortably on the grass, back in his designated space, with an ice cream on one hand. "Yeah, her mother had told stories to her" Damian replied levitating in the air; he probably sat on a tall sofa. "My great grandmother was a graduate student at MUSC at the time" Damian continued. "What kind of stories had she told to your grandma? I know that pandemic is the reason why we are so obsessed with cleaning everything". Damian laughed at his friend's lazy attitude towards sanitation. Although, social distancing, hand washing, wearing masks in public spaces and other "safe health practices" were customary in 2120, they weren't normal hundred years ago. It was clear that other than repeating what was engraved in his behavior since childhood, Jared truly didn't understand the necessity for such extreme routines. "Do you know what will happen if you don't adhere to public health rules?" Damian asked in a judging voice. "Other than getting fined and getting a disciplinary action from the school, no" Jared replied, and he couldn't care less. Looking at Damian's frustrated expressions Jared realized he had to explain further, "maybe you get sick and have to eat hospital food". Damian was still silent. Jared went on "I mean...a pandemic seems so un...real, it's impossible...". Damian sighed "that was exactly the issue with people a long time ago...they didn't realize the gravity of the problem". It was Jared's turn to be silent and listen.

"When the pandemic had started in China, people at the time hadn't realize how important it was to act swiftly. They didn't know how quickly it could spread. There were many other political and economic struggles countries were dealing with, so authorities disregarded repeated

warning from health officials. Then it became a global pandemic of a scale the world wasn't ready for. There are many studies that show just the simple act of sanitizing your hands frequently and wearing a mask could have significantly lower the deaths and the alarming infectious rates. Although it was hundred years ago the world was at its most advanced technological phase. But like you said, for a civilization equipped with such technology, a global pandemic caused by a virus didn't seem "real." Damian stopped to have the last bite of his ice cream. "And it gets worse. After months of local area shutdowns across the globe, people slowly started to overlook the public health rules. As the death rates decreased people thought the virus was slowly dying too. But it was just getting ready for a second round. And it hit harder and stronger. You see, it had evolved, and the new mutations were much deadlier than the original and infected the domestic pets as well. So, people had to euthanize them. Although, there had been clinical trials for vaccines, the research couldn't keep up with the virus's mutation rate as it started to jump between species. Originally the officials had thought the pandemic would end in a maximum of two years. But it wasn't until another five years things became barely normal" Damian stopped to catch his breath.

Wow! He surely knows a lot about this...what was the virus called again? Jared could notice a personal connection in Damian's tone to the grisly picture he described that meant something a lot more than just a passion of a book nerd. "You seem so personally affected by this whole thing" Jared commented after a long silence. "It wasn't just a health issue... The pandemic shook the entire civilization. People lost their jobs, and they didn't have means to survive. Economy crashed, food and other bare-minimum supplies became unbearably expensive. Lower and middle-income families couldn't afford to fulfil their daily needs, let alone afford proper health care. Although the governments around the world tried, it was already a lost battle. Families were given limited amount of food bags and other necessities weekly. But it wasn't enough. Eventually, people started looting the shops, robbed hospitals for medications and other hygienic products."

"Society just descended into chaos. My great grandparents were immigrants from developing nations who migrated with high hopes of better lives. It seemed life wasn't fair to them in their new world either. They couldn't pay last respects to their dead parents because international travel was banned. My great grandfather was a resident in the hospital and passed away from contracting the virus. Things really wasn't great when my grandma was growing up either. It took more than three decades after the pandemic for the world to recover and find a new "normal". Corona (that's name of the virus Jared forgot, Corona!) really taught how precious life is and how much you depend on each other to protect it" Damian looked at the night sky and wondered how different life would be if there ever weren't a pandemic. Jared was slowly understanding why he had to take all those public health classes which he thought was a waste of time.

"So, you see, rules are there to help us progress as a society. It may be just a simple act of washing your hands, but other members of the society trust you to uphold your responsibility. Aaaaannd with that I'm going to finish my preach for the day!" Damian laughed. Jared laughed back, wondering how it would feel to actually sit next his friend all day like in the old school system. "I should head back. I'll see you in science lab" Jared waved at Damian's vanishing hologram.

While waiting for the bus, Jared remembered an old photo of from his grandmother's diary. The picture was taken at a park and there were so many people gathered to watch a firework show on the Independence Day. It seemed so surreal; one would never see a gathering of that many people now. Somehow the people in the picture seemed really happy tightly packed in that space. Then Jared remembered what his great grandmother had wrote on the back of the picture. "Life after the pandemic feels like hospital food. You cannot enjoy a plate filled with different cuisine that excites you sensory nervous with a range of flavors, vibrant colors and lively aroma. You just enjoy the same bland flavor with a monotonous color but with an aroma that brings back memories". Maybe, in future Jared will understand what she meant.

**Author:** Caren Doueir

**College:** Graduate Studies

"Hello! I'm Caren from Lebanon. I'm an MD/PhD student in my second year of graduate school at MUSC, and I enjoy writing during my free time"

About the essay: Caren reflects on her experience away from home during the pandemic. She tries to understand her thoughts and emotions and, in the process, fosters an appreciation for "the other", in its different forms.

### **The Other**

During the pandemic, I have opened a word document and closed it, still unnamed, several times. I opened my phone's Notes app and pressed back a few seconds later. I tried holding a pen and writing the racing thoughts down, but I couldn't make them stop long enough for me to put the first word down. I had time to think during the pandemic. I thought about myself, my family, my country, the world, people I knew, and those I never met. Sometimes I had too many thoughts and feelings that I thought it was time to write them down. Now, I finally am...and I realize that they can be summed up in one concept: "The Other"

It started with me reading about New York City, a place I could call home. I saw pictures of the calm streets, empty subway carts, clear bike lanes, and I shuddered. That, for NYC, was chaos. I thought about my friends who lived there, even the ones I hadn't been in touch with for a while. I thought about the children living in apartments as big as my room, elderly dying alone in hospitals, and healthcare workers stripped away from their families. I thought about other people in another city with compassion I had never felt before.

I felt sad, hopeless, and confused. I wondered what I would have done if I were living at another stage of life. I wondered what I would have done if I had still lived in NYC and if I was already in my clinical years. Would I have been brave enough to plead hospitals to accept my help? Or would I have preferred online rotations while studying for Step 2 with ample time on my side? I questioned my other self, one that only existed in a world of what-ifs.

And then, it kept going. I read about Europe and citizens dying without funerals. I pictured my family members for a second and hid the thoughts away. I had always worried about them living in a volatile country and always shoved those fears to the back. Now those past fears had new ones joining them, until they climbed their way to the top of the pile. I worried about every sentence I said to my family, wondering when would be the last. They had started their quarantine a month before mine. My parents were still grocery shopping. My sister worried about them and I about her.

I kept going to lab, wondering when I would be quarantined in solidarity with my family. I felt I needed to keep doing research. It was what everyone here was doing after all. But I also felt that I betrayed my family. I was living a normal life while they weren't. I felt guilty.

The day then came when quarantine started and I got to get a glimpse of what my family was going through. I got to live with them, away from them. But that wasn't as comforting as I thought it would be. My roommates were getting ready to leave and stay with their parents. I stressed about buying groceries and medications while they were gone since I was the only one without a car, and I couldn't ask any of my friends in Charleston in fear of compromising their quarantine. My roommates drove me where I needed to go to stock up on food and medicine. Then, my roommates left, and I was alone with mixed thoughts and emotions. I saw all my friends on Instagram joining their families, going back home, and enjoying quality time with their loved ones. That was time I was never going to get. I was the different one, the other one, enjoying quiet me time instead of family time. I wished I could go home. I was jealous. I was saddened by distances. I was mad at how planes were built, putting part of the blame on their engineering. Couldn't they have safer air to breathe in there so I could go back home instead of stay in a house I'm not sure I call home yet, for weeks and weeks ahead?! I got homesick even though I called home for hours a day. The phone calls helped as I felt like I was gaining that quality time. But the guilt crept in again. I was guilty for not doing work and talking to my family instead. I felt guilty for wasting their time. I felt guilty for wasting my time. I felt confused about what defined wasted time. I suddenly missed my mom's hugs even though I hadn't gotten any of them for months before the quarantine. I missed my grandma's food even though it had been a while since she cooked. I wondered if I would ever be able to go back. But, I somehow left space for other feelings, besides guilt and fear. I felt grateful. I was grateful for my family's health and mine. I was grateful for having people to miss and work to worry about. I was grateful I cared enough to be moved by the stories of people I never met and grateful I had the ability to think about nonexistent scenarios.

Most of all, I appreciated my country and the bravery of its people. Not only were they going through a pandemic, but also through an economic crisis. If only a pandemic had brought me down, I wondered how they were still standing with more than just that one problem. I taught myself how to cook my family's dishes and bake my grandma's desserts. I caught up with friends from home and checked on extended relatives. I listened to music from my country. I knew I would never understand what they were going through, but I wanted to try. It wasn't fair otherwise.

A third problem then suddenly hit my country, a bug infestation. I wondered if I even deserved to be buying the food I had, walking in a bug-free outdoors, and watching Netflix when I knew my family was silently struggling.

I then realized that humans don't live alone. There are so many other creatures sharing the world with them. There were viruses and insects slowly trying to take over. There were trees and birds serving as the only interactions for some people. There were pets keeping others company, and there were people. There were lots of people. There were lots of people in lots of different places. There were lots of people, in lots of different places, all sharing that one world with those several other inhabitants.

A surprising thing then happened. Hornet bugs infested the US. I thought it was a great coincidence that a similar problem was happening here and there. Then, as protests kept going in my country, they emerged here as people fight for black lives. It was no coincidence, I thought.

This pandemic has shown me that the world is truly one place. There were lots of people, in lots of different places, all sharing that one world with those several other inhabitants. Not only did humans share the world in common, but they also shared experiences. They shared very different experiences that somehow formed connections and agreed to create a challenge for everyone everywhere. Perhaps, I thought, the world was showing us humans that we are weak unless we realize how differently similar we are. It is true that during the pandemic, I felt closer to people, even strangers. However, with my new realizations, I was angry at my fellow humans. I was angry that it took a pandemic, economic and social collapses, and environmental crises to show us the importance of collective efforts. We needed a collective effort of staying home, of speaking up against injustice, of preserving the nature that housed our other non-human neighbors. I mention that as if those disasters were successful at making us one. They weren't. We are still divided politically, economically, racially, and socially, not just in my country and not just in the US, but everywhere. We are so divided that we cannot fight a virus, nurture the environment, or protect each other.

I then thought if I was going to fix the world we broke and show others how connected we all are, I needed to understand who I was as a unique individual. I focused on things I liked. I made new decisions in an effort to nurture my other silent self as well. I understood the value of understanding myself, and that is a realization I will carry with me in the future. While I tried using the quarantine to develop individually, I also realized that living as individuals is not completely possible. We need each other to grow, to be mentally well, and to fight disease and injustice. I was grateful that I didn't have interruptions from roommates or family during class. I was grateful that I had perfect wifi as no one else was using it. But I also realized that my roommates were a component of my sanity and my family and friends were impossible to live without. I now value myself as an individual, but more importantly, I value myself as an individual who belongs to a vast world of opportunity, conflict, sadness, peacefulness, and controversy...one world of humans living amongst plants, insects, viruses, the sky, the sea, and everything in between.

Today, I am glad I didn't close this document unnamed. I have realized that we live amongst beautiful contradictions. We live with the other. We live with other people, animals, viruses, and insects. We live with thoughts of another self. We live with feelings of guilt and other feelings of gratefulness. We live because of that. We live because of our friends, families, and strangers. We live because of the trees, chirping birds, and loving pets. We live despite killer viruses and economic and social turmoil. We live with everything and everyone connected in one loving chaotic world.