

# Andúril

2025/2026

*A collection of senior  
student creative writing*



COVER IMAGE

*A Living Network*

*By Anya Disney*

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the first issue of *The Anduril* since COVID. In 2025 I had the pleasure of running a creative writing elective and, with that small but dedicated group of students, decided on a concept and philosophy for this revival of the St Hilda's creative writing magazine. I would like to extend my hearty thanks to Amarni Krahe, Audrey Mann, Lela Dharmananda, Minna Harley and Stella Hauser for their energy and enthusiasm in helping to bring these voices together.

This magazine holds poetry and prose from students of all years. Many pieces were created in 2025 English and Literature classes; several earned recognition in local and national writing competitions. Much of the work is dark, complex, and emotionally brave—an honest reflection of adolescence as a time of intense change, vulnerability, and the search for something solid. German poet Ranier Maria Rilke urges, 'Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.' The pieces within this volume embody the spirit of that insistence, proving that when life feels unsteady, writing can be a way through. The page offers a place to shape experience—to decide what belongs in the frame, what is named, what is transformed. That process can be cathartic: a small, meaningful reclamation of agency when you feel you have none.

My hope is that this issue of *The Anduril* helps to build (and rebuild) a strong creative writing community at St Hilda's. Thank you for reading.

Dr Marie O'Rourke



## LOOKING IN, LOOKING OUT

*Where She Sees Me From*  
Jasmine Nichols (Year 10)

## Homecoming

Alicia Chen, Year 12

*Cabin crew, prepare for take-off.*

She releases a long, slow breath. There it is—that all-too-familiar swooping sensation in her stomach. It's a feeling she has long been acquainted with.

She always buys a seat by the window. It's become a force of habit. She likes to watch the world shrink before her, likes observing how rooftops and highways blur into spidery lines like veins. And once she rises above the clouds, she watches the sky.

The first time she saw what the sky looked like from the window of a plane, it had been the brightest blue—so bright it almost burned her eyes. She had clutched her mum's hand and pressed her face to the glass, little six-year-old legs kicking restlessly.

Today, the sky is dusky blue. Streaks of cotton float by as it darkens, and far below, homes light up in unison. It's a tentative blue, a blue that is unsure whether it's ready to welcome the night.

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Just as the seatbelt sign switches off, the baby across the aisle starts crying. He hides his face in his mother's neck, as if blocking out the rest of the world. She did that too once, on the staircase of her grandparents' house, on a night many years ago.

It was her favourite spot to sit, offering her a view of the kitchen, filled with the whistling of pots and the sizzling of oil; the dining table with at least five different choices of food on it at any given moment; and the living room, where the TV was always drowned out by the chatter of relatives, neighbours, and old friends. This was the place where the raucous laughter was never too loud, where the precise smell of woodsmoke and seafood at dinner always lingered, and where the glow of red lanterns shone like beacons, guiding the lost back home.

That night, she sat on the staircase with shiny streaks down her face. She held a pair of scissors in one hand. In the other was the return ticket she had stolen from her mum's bag. She knew, with a bone-deep certainty, that she had said more

goodbyes in her ten years of living than she needed to say in a lifetime. She was sick of leaving and returning and finding that home had reshaped itself without her. The lines on her grandparents' faces deeper, their eyes more tired. The hands of her little cousins, no longer so little.

Her mum found her later, surrounded by jagged paper shards. Without a word, she gathered her daughter in her arms. They sat there, two hearts bracing for impact.

Leaning her head against the window, she remembers how she sat on the plane the day after and saw a grey sky through blurry eyes.

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She wakes to the smell of chicken and gravy and the sound of the man in the seat beside her peeling the aluminium foil off his meal. Bright green peas, lumpy mashed potato, and a pale piece of grilled fish.

It brings her back to a long-ago New Year's Eve dinner table, laden with dishes arranged like Tetris. A two-foot-long fish sat centre stage, glistening with glaze. Crabs were displayed alongside plump prawns. Sweet and sour pork ribs squeezed next to stir-fried bamboo shoots. And a huge vat of soup, complete with fish balls and pork dumplings.

She sat sandwiched between her grandma and her second aunt, elbows tucked into her ribs, her chopsticks feeling foreign in her hand. It took her three tries to pick up a pork rib. She watched as everyone executed the carefully choreographed dance that she had known all her life. Arms reaching across the table but never hitting any head or elbow, chopsticks like cranes distributing food around the table.

This was how she knew love—as plates of sliced fruit, carefully washed and peeled. Instead of words, they placed the best bites of meat and the plumpest prawns on her plate. She smiled woodenly and bowed her head at every offering added to the growing mountain of food before her.

Her throat felt stuck, no longer able to voice the words of her mother tongue with ease. The laughter around her now seemed too loud. Too stifling. Her grandpa picked off a piece of steamed fish and reached over to place it on her overflowing plate. She pushed her hand out, gesturing that it was too much, that she had enough. Her hand accidentally knocked the chopsticks too hard. The piece of fish fell onto the floor.

No one else at the table saw. She watched her grandpa bend down and sweep it up with a tissue. Her eyes burned. She couldn't meet anyone's eyes for the rest of dinner.

She was fifteen when her heart broke for the first time.

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Halfway through the flight, she checks her phone for the last message her grandma sent her—a gif of a dancing birthday cake.

Entire years have passed in which she only sees her family through a pixelated screen, the connection always cutting out, the call always freezing in the middle of a sentence. The calls are all the same anyway. The same words are repeated over and over, a scripted conversation so comically stilted that even the long stretches of silence are more bearable.

And the hardest thing is that she has become used to it. Used to the sickly, bitter taste in her mouth when she receives messages on New Year's, wishing her health and happiness. Used to the staticky silence that rings in her ears when she picks up the FaceTime call from her grandparents, their faces too close to the screen. Used to the tightness in her chest on nights in strange-smelling hotel rooms, lying on her back, promising herself to call them more, to visit them soon.

But she never kept her promise. She couldn't bring herself to return, to try to fit herself back into the puzzle. Not when it had changed so much without her. A different car in the neighbour's driveway, the absence of a dog's bark from across the street, scores of unfamiliar faces at family gatherings.

And she changed too. Reshaped her edges to fit in somewhere else. She dyed her hair lighter and switched her accent. She chased a life that kept her further and further away, crossing oceans, time zones, and years. She no longer smelled woodsmoke and felt a little hollow. Like a dandelion seed, she flew away and grew where she landed. New earth, new roots, new dreams.

Almost a lifetime ago, she took her seat on a plane that was about to take her away from a place she would not be back to for many years. She had briefly glanced out the window, seeing her own reflection against the black night.

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Hers was an adolescence spent in embarrassment of her differences, erasing the parts that stuck out of place. This was followed by an adulthood spent in guilt for

being embarrassed—for allowing this embarrassment to take her away from the only real home she had known.

It would've been a lifetime spent running away from facing herself and what she had left behind, were it not for the years of time and distance. It wasn't a single moment that did it. Or even a series of moments. It was the gradual acceptance of life that came with growing up.

She knows she can never get the time back, will probably never quite fit like she was meant to. And she now knows so much of her pain is self-inflicted. She could keep lugging the weight of it around the world. Or she could forgive herself. And then, she could buy a plane ticket.

On a day long ago, when the sky was a periwinkle blue, she had stood with her grandma at the terminal. Her grandma's face was lined with more wrinkles than she remembered. Her eyes were a little more tired, but just as warm as they always had been. She leaned in as her grandma whispered, 'Don't forget to come home. No matter how old I am, I'll make all your favourite food for you to eat.'

She has to let the guilt go. Her baggage is always far too overweight anyway.

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*The seatbelt sign has been switched on. We will be reaching our destination shortly.*

Now, she sits back in her seat, bound for the one place every flight in her childhood had landed in. But as childhood passed, the sky observed from the window seat did not lead back home.

Home. In her mother tongue, the character for home has eleven strokes. If she squinted, it looked like a roof with a family under it. No strokes can be left out, or else it no longer means home.

For the first time in a decade, she watches the sky as the plane descends. Watches it lighten from midnight to a sweet light blue, just as the first rays of gold peek over the horizon.

How beautiful it is that, come daybreak, even the darkest of nights will turn light once more.

*Grandma, I'm home. Sorry it took so long.*

## ***Memento Mori***

Grace Powell, Year 12

*Memento mori* –

Remember you will die.

*Memento vivere* –

Remember to live.

Each breath a gift,  
Each moment borrowed,  
Each pulse a miracle.

I will feel everything fully –  
the highest and the lowest,  
the thunder and the snowfall,  
the flare and the eclipse.

I want to unhinge my jaw  
and let my scream fracture the silence,  
shatter the air until tears fall from the sky,  
split my shadow from my feet  
and send it sprinting into traffic.

To run until my ankles  
shard into the concrete  
until my ribs fracture and  
the busy air pours in like wildfire.

I want to tear the book's pages and swallow them,  
(as if obedience tastes better when you choke it down).  
I want to carve open the clocks  
(and bleed out the hours I forgot to feel).  
To dance barefoot on broken expectations  
(just to feel something real beneath me).  
To push myself against the sky until it shatters,  
jump from the lip of a thunderstorm.  
Not to fall – but to be felt.

But the louder I scream the more  
I realise  
what I want  
is silence  
that listens.

I want to peel back my skin—  
like damp wallpaper in a forgotten home  
and let someone see the insecurities.  
I want to cry—  
let the shame leak from my eyes,  
without flinching at how it makes me look,  
or hiding my face like a flame ashamed of its smoke,  
or laughing it off like a broken dish.

I do not want to be asked to explain the tide—  
only accepted by someone willing to build a dam.

I want to tell you the secret I've been carrying, like glass  
in my throat, knowing each piece will scrape me raw inside.  
I want to whisper it into your cupped hands and see you hold it  
without disgust, turn it gently between your fingers,  
like something worth keeping.

I want to love.

To sew our trembling hands together with a silk thread so  
I can always feel your rough skin.  
To fold myself into the hollows of your silence  
as smoke slides under a cracked window.

I want to rip my heart from my ribs and force the quivering organ to you,  
carve your name into the marrow of my bones  
so that every heartbeat echoes with your shape.

I want to love like the ocean loves the shore,  
relentless,  
unforgiving,  
endless.

I want to say, 'This hurts,'  
and for it not to be left to echo.  
I want to say, 'I am afraid,'  
and see the scars I hide soften beneath your steady gaze.  
I want to say, 'I am still here,'  
and feel everything because  
one day, I won't be.

*Memento mori* –

Remember you will die.

*Memento vivere* –

Remember to live.

But I prefer –

Live to remember.

## The Red Balloon

Abigael Pond, Year 12

### The First Goodbye

She was six, holding grief in the  
shape of a heart—  
red, helium-filled,  
its ribbon cutting lines into her palm.

They said, 'She's gone now,'  
as if gone could mean something  
to a child still losing her teeth,  
still learning to spell her own name.

In the garden, leaves, little ghosts  
whirled and danced. Then fell.  
The sky was grey and aching,  
too much for a small girl to carry.

She held the string, held her breath.  
The balloon pulled, wanted to leave.  
Was she supposed to let it go?  
Or would it take her with it if she did?

'Mama,' she said, 'is this goodbye?'  
The balloon rose with the wind's  
reply.  
She let it go. She let her fly.  
And watched it vanish in the sky.

### Tugging at the Edges

Grief didn't leave—  
it just learned to hide.  
It curled up beside birthdays and  
school dances,  
tugged at the corners of smiles.

I learned to smile, to grow, to bend,  
but always looked for signs above.

And somewhere deep, I vowed  
to never forget her kind of love.

I stopped chasing balloons—  
until one found me again.

### A Star Waving Back

That night, beneath a navy sky  
stitched with stars,  
I returned to the garden one last  
time.

I untied the ribbon from my wrist—  
not with sorrow,  
but with stillness.

This time, it wasn't grief.  
It wasn't fear.  
It was thank you.

I let it rise—a red dot against  
the vast forgiving dark,  
carrying everything I never said  
and everything I still carry.

It blinked once,  
like a star waving back.  
And I smiled.

Hope, like love, may drift and  
climb, but never leaves.

And for the first time,  
letting go  
felt like being held.

## White Dresses

Poppy Aristei, Year 12

The hospital room smells like bleach, wilting flowers sitting on the windowsill doing little to mask the scent. Machines whir at her side, a continuous mechanical lullaby that never wavers. The lights buzz faintly above us, casting a too-white glow over everything. I sit in the chair beside her bed, our hands tangled together like ivy, stubborn and clinging. Her hair is thinner now sitting just below her shoulders.

I watch as her chest rises and falls with shallow breaths. She looks tired, deep purple marks stain her under-eyes, but still beautiful, always so beautiful.

'Tell me again,' she whispers gently, about our wedding.'

I tighten my grip on her hand as I begin our daily routine, leaning down next to her so only she can hear me, my voice barely above a breath. 'Two white dresses. Mine would be satin, simple but elegant. Yours would be covered in lace, and a train as long as the aisle of course.'

'Of course,' she laughs, I see that twinkle in her eyes that reminds me how to breathe properly. 'And the flowers?' she asks.

'Sunflowers for you, daisies for me. I could braid them into your hair ... if you wanted that,' I reply.

'I would love that,' she smiles. 'And we'd dance barefoot in the grass.'

For a moment I can really see it, no one watching but the sky as we spin in endless circles until our feet hurt, laughing until our lungs give out. What I wouldn't give to have that, to have all of it because when it comes to her, I am so selfish. I want everything, because I know soon, I will have nothing.

But still I smile as though it doesn't hurt, as though I can't feel my heart breaking a little more every day. We both know it could never happen, and not just because she is stuck in this hospital room, losing more colour every day. It could never happen because of the way people look when they pass us on the street, because our hands can only ever brush in public, never hold. Because of the whispers, the hiding.

It could never happen as long as the nurses here call me her 'friend', and her sister sends cards without signing my name. There are a million reasons people

believe our love is a sin. A sickness. People say times have changed, that love like ours is finally seen. But laws change faster than hearts do. There are places—and families—that stay frozen in time, their love conditional, their silence sharp as glass.

'I still remember the first I held your hand,' she murmurs, a tired smile tugging at her lips. 'You flinched like I'd burned you.'

'I was scared,' I whisper. 'Not of you. Of being seen.'

'You never liked hiding,' she says. 'Even then.'

I laugh softly. 'Neither did you.'

I thought of the letter she wrote that nearly ended us. High school was finally over, and I felt an uneasy sense of obligation settling in my stomach. I knew I was supposed to stay, find a nice boy to marry and forget all about those past few months. But my dear Alice, she was ready to run away and start our lives together. Her blissful naivety astounded me. How could she happily throw our entire lives away and leave, because of— What even was it? A summer fling?

I was so angry. Angry that she could she ask me to choose between happiness and safety. She made it seem so easy. So simple. I suppose I was jealous, too. Jealous that she could be so sure and that I was holding her back, still caught in fear. But above all, I loved her. Of course I loved her, with every fibre of my being. It took over my whole body and left me gasping for air, suffocating and overflowing. I knew it would be her, for the rest of my life. She was inside me, right down to the marrow of my bones, and she would never leave.

But still, I couldn't do it. I didn't know if I would ever be able to say it out loud. To face losing my family, my friends. To watch the people who helped me grow leave me behind without so much as a second thought. It was easier for Alice. Her family had left her behind a long time ago. She had nothing to lose anymore. Except me.

*September 19, 1968*

*My dearest, Jules*

*I have been living in Eden with you all summer, it has been the best of my life, and you are the reason for that.*

*It's like you understand my mind in a way that no one else can, I didn't know I was capable of ever loving someone as much as I do you. But that is why this is so hard. Sometimes it feels as though I got rid of my self-worth to be with you and I don't want to be like that. I thought that having your love could be enough, that I could be a secret for however long you needed. But I am slowly suffocating behind this mask of a girl who isn't me.*

*If I am going to choose this life for myself, I want to live it freely, fully and without reservation. I am ready to accept the hatred because with it comes so much more love than I could have ever imagined. I can't keep looking over my shoulder and dropping your hand in public. I know who I am, and I am proud of that. I wish I could tell you who you are, but I can't, that is your choice.*

*We both know that I can't go on like this, and it seems that you can't live any other way.*

*If I stay with you, I betray myself, my identity. If I leave, my soul will break in half. You know I don't make this decision lightly but if you cannot be with me, love me wholly, and accept the consequences, we can't be together anymore.*

*I'm sorry, I wish it could be any other way.*

*Yours always,*

*Alice*

Reading that letter felt like ripping surgical wire from under my skin, every word a tug that tore through everything I'd stitched so carefully between us. I never imagined she could leave me behind, that there was a world where she moved on, to a life without me in it. But I knew I was putting her in an impossible position as much as she was to me. It wasn't fair to either of us, being forced to choose. Because of all the things that people could hate in this world, they pick love.

'Okay then,' I remember whispering to no one, my voice still trembling with fear. In that moment, it really was a simple decision. Now, sitting here, looking into her eyes, they still hold that same golden spark as twenty years ago, when I first saw her and knew that everything would be okay. Because her love was the only love I ever really needed.

'I love you,' she whispers. And I know it's the last time. Her eyes flutter shut and her hand falls slack.

And in the silence, I can still see us twirling in endless circles, barefoot in the grass. Her hands tangled in my hair, my arm around her waist, underneath a sky that never looks away.

It feels so real. And maybe it is, somewhere else, far from here.

Maybe one day.

## Still, I Reach

Olivia Murray, Year 12

My back ached. They say I am  
strong because of what I can carry  
but no one asks  
how many hands I had to grow  
just to hold it all.

I wanted less,  
but even that was too much.

Still, I reach.  
For someone who might stay,  
for a version of myself whose  
presence makes me proud,  
a purpose worth waking for.

Still, I reach.  
For success wrapped in silence,  
for growth without guilt,  
understanding those around me—  
without sacrificing myself in the  
process.

They said *stay grounded*,  
So, I buried my feet,  
clung desperately to what I knew.  
Bound myself to traditions,  
familiarity, routine.  
To the rhythm I once trusted.  
But it all shifted,  
changing and swirling beneath me.

*Stay grounded* they said.  
But the ground betrayed me,  
Splitting, like a scar reopened.  
My limbs longed for  
stability, connection, strength—

something solid to wrap around.  
Something I couldn't grasp.  
Instead, confusion came.  
Then guilt. Guilt  
for not doing enough,  
for feeling too much,  
for being tired all the time.

*Achieve more.*

*Push harder.*

But who said this?  
No voice but my own,  
no pressure but my own.  
I built the weight,  
sewed heaviness into my skin  
and carried it, in silence.  
Held a mirror that  
reflected only mistakes.

The outside? Different.  
I laugh. I perform.  
My structure looks strong,  
sturdy, resilient. Clad in  
heavy metal, I'm bulletproof,  
blocking everything out,  
sealing everything in.  
Contained. Controlled.

Metallic, on my tongue  
a bitterness I can't swallow or speak.  
One hand clinging to anything solid,  
whatever won't move,  
isn't caught in my storm.  
The other, scraping the ground  
grasping for any shred of  
stillness, an anchor.

Occasionally, it snags a piece of  
humanity—  
a glance from someone who really  
sees me.  
Brief respite, momentarily motionless  
until the connection is ripped again,  
plug yanked from wall,  
attachment severed.

I look around and observe.  
They seem fine, everyone else,  
steady. But then I see  
their limbs, too, are  
reaching, tired, tangled.  
I see their smiles stretch too tight,  
a performance of peace.  
Their arms extend just like mine, all

grasping in different directions,  
silent in our suffering.

And—still—I reach.  
Not for more.  
But for balance.  
For stillness.  
For quiet that doesn't shame me,  
For space without apology.  
One arm flung outward,  
in case someone finally reaches  
back.

## Winter Solstice Waltz

Alya Ahmed Khalif, Year 12

Blood-red brooding in her cheeks, resembling the red pen used to mark the paper that causes her hands to tremble at its reception.

Thin, crisp unforgiving white pages. Lines overflowing with frantic ink escaping from the structural integrity demanded by the defined crosses that stain the test. Mistakes known to her but self-fulfilling as nothing escapes the frantic burn conducted by time. Time, a desperate scarcity, evaporating into the wind's taunting Viennese waltz. Vulgar winds sweep her face, replacing ember cheeks to mirror the colour that fills unanswered questions.

*One, two, three. One, two, three. Simply follow the steps.*

Certainty comes with the continuous tide that flows surely to the stream. She had once dreamt of gracefully gliding across the maple floor in suede-soled flared heels; enjoyed as she plunged into the lustrous harmonic opera that fluttered from her mother's peachy smile.

A seedling.

Twirling bedazzled dresses, that photographed nicely, a caption listing each progressive achievement; forced into immaculate posture, one that wouldn't permit her to notice the eudialyte buried under the creamy ballroom floor.

Now the daughter's head hung eerily low—almost detached, decapitated—walking towards dread. The vacant grey of the concrete seemed to bleach its colour in reverse. Barred from slowing or pondering meandering thoughts, untempered by ice shards aimed milliseconds from her spine.

The ability to sleep cascaded away from her, the surrounding abyss amused by her whimpers. Tears on white bedsheets, begging for home.

But she *was* home... And she was no longer alone.

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Blood-red brooding from the mother she wished desperately to evade, as only those stern and direct hands could induce colour to return to her face. Thin, crisp unforgiving strikes forced the red to ferment into a vengeful mulberry-

violet: marks of deserved imperfection. Mistakes can only be learnt by experiencing them physically. Only pain can persist in the feeble human memory.

Memory—she searched for apathy, for the glacial cognitive dissonance necessary to commit to completing her pre-decided life plan.

Spontaneous riptides debilitating remnants of mental fortitude, replacing the giggling pig-tailed princess who learnt ballroom dancing by stepping on her mother's feet with someone whose arctic façade silenced Andrea Bocelli's opera in van Gogh's Tuscan sunflower fields.

One, two, three. Just. Follow. The steps.

'Pick the pen up.'

Concentrating on every miniscule movement. Calculating perfection.

'Write! Put on flared heels. Back step. Side. Close. Forward.'

Sweat barrelled down her face in the place of dried tears that severed hope—there wasn't time. Hands shivering as if the unbearable load of a ballpoint made her Atlas, condemned to bear the burden of the sky: a mere myth.

'Never play against the clock.'

Missing a beat crumbles the veneer of elegance. An inescapable, numbing voice in her head. 'Shoulders down. Arms rounded. Chest concrete and lifted.' But when she looked to the source of the voice, with cumbersome grey eyes ensnared by a ring of ice, eyes that once glistened echoing the spark atop the calm simmering morning wave, she forcefully cooled the lava brewing within her.

Forceful lines marked a face, expelling dimples that had cuddled her mother's smiles. Hands peeling from scrubbing laundry, and overspilling soup. Sleepless, selfless. For her daughter. A foundational guilt burnt brighter, permitting the daughter's eradication of conflicting emotions.

Eyes succumbed to lacklustre surroundings, glared at the paper scarred with disgraceful red ink. Light retreated, called back by autocratic eyes, obscuring voluminous satin strands from passage—sprouts with dictated darkness.

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It's called rattan.

A versatile pliable palm that can be constructed into elusive wicker tapestries. Kept in the storage room outside the kitchen, she always knew when *it* was coming. The sound of her mother making that left turn and opening the high pitch door with decaying hinges ingrained an instinctual spasm of the muscles on her back.

Oil to the flame. The end of the rattan frayed into thousands of splinters, exponential damage incited from each hit: a grimacing greeting she had memorised (stop!) Thin strains of the palm plunged into her skin like the hair she saw flee her mother's head in handfuls.

She needed to be prepared to dance alone quickly.

Perfect test papers pave the planned future: secure, the scholarship. Waltz!

Flaunting the fire opal gown screaming *her* desire to be sought after.

An abrupt eruption barrelled from the descending rattan, cascading into the fibres that formed the tissues of her back. Silenced screams brewed like lava, as blood dripped from her mouth, from the lip she bit down on; like a despairing grip clinging onto a balcony balustrade seconds before the sweat and exhaustion is obsolete, fate is confirmed.

Each cut culminated into the ring of fire, ruby magma that escaped to the crust oozed from each sliver. Slashing over burning cuts, reaping pain deeper underneath her skin.

One! Two, three. Each strike, a lesson.

Desperate to accelerate learning, even through unforgettable pain. A mother's loving duty. It was just the two of them surrounded by ensnaring darkness. Obsidian which had dipped her bare, in fire, for entertainment.

One, two, three.

Burns inundate her with a sizzling orchestral agony, from Capitoline Hill to Tartarus, ripping her skin off cell by cell. Begging answered by intrigued eyes detached from empathy. With each blaze she swore her daughter would never be defenceless in the world. By the melodic radiance of love she would build her daughter walls, even if she had to force them into existence.

\*\*\*

The solace of the gelid linoleum table, which was grasped onto, searching for the comfort of its frigid plunge to combat the sweltering exothermic back blistering. Whimpers! No, louder than the sound of the overdue screws, emulating the patient lingering of lava: meticulously, until the volcano is full. Lava moves slowly and patiently, devouring victims piece by piece, leaving remnants of residual diamond handy work; ignoring fried flowers. Rattan was simply firewood to fuel her daughter's defences. For love! Dare anyone critique a mother protecting her daughter? Morality! Devouring weakness.

With each step of her plan, her daughter executed the prospects of her being incinerated by the world disappeared. Her daughter wincing and writhing as the solidified lava was replaced with magma in abundance. The mother raised her arm higher, practiced weapon in hand, blinded by the view of past pain and the self-loathing of knowing she could not protect her daughter for much longer. Mining! For rubies—permanently mapping her daughters back, cultivating exponential cuts.

Observe her daughter's tremor. A calculated gaze.

\*\*\*

Red Devil infused into the shrivelled raisin of a vein following the persistent pain in her chest, a cautious IV drip fixated in her arm. PPE, fearing 'saviour' poison. Liquid hanging from a cross: an arctic shiver. Terminal lucidity! Like the curls and coils of exhaled acrid smoke; seductive and intoxicating as her Waltz. The pungent scent sizzling her throat to a desert, replaced with the staining smell of antiseptic. 'Till death. Do us part?

Her daughter, dancing, to fix the cracks in her mother's hospital notes. Walking on the burning stove paved out for her. Skin burns, blood boils as she persists, counting, 'One! Two! Three!'

And yet, there was: a time, after her mother's anger.

Alone. A Viennese Waltz can change direction spontaneously as the white—white like her mother's skin—swirls that fill the river's rocky rapids. Stage 4. Test paper 4.

The timer begins.

Every line must be filled. Precision. The Red Devil has consumed even her mother's excretion. Confined by nausea, entrapped by the metallic taste on her tongue. Harrowing! Torment! Refusing palliative care, constricted to morphine's insanity. Icy hands. Racing through lines, unbeknownst to the uneven stutters of

her mother's heart monitor – pause, answer the question: correct, next – a long beep like a stygian iron scythe's screeching along the floor. Drowning in the aroma of drugging emissions; sleepless circulating smoke. Three seconds left.

Two. Pause. Unravelling silence. One.

Time's up.

A machine's resounding *last* cry...

Nothing.

A phone call.

It wasn't painless.

The mother was never the type to go in her sleep.

\*\*\*

Blood-red brooding thoughts poisoned to oblivion as one daunting reality settled.

Frantically yearning for something to quell the internal pains. The walls! But the basement walls glared: merciless. But who was she to complain? For the walls were but a speck of sand in comparison to the great ocean of anger that had been *eternally* evaporated.

Burning bruises yells for mercy answered. Perhaps it was what they wanted.

In ashes of childhood, the solemn room peered over the orphaned daughter, draped in snow-shade sheets that sought a lucid detachment called a slumber. Unlikely. The Viennese Waltz spins so quickly—rapids, agonising the blue into foaming white bedsheets.

One... Two...

Undisturbed by burnt leaves, a perennial cycle that never parts. An inevitable raging dolent abyss buried with funeral flowers. No dance or academic achievement would return her mother to her; nothing would relieve her of the scars carved on her back.

In the lament of a Winter Solstice Waltz, she cried and called out for her mother.

## Fallen Ballerina

Tessa Hewitt, Year 10

Tonight, she moves languidly,  
*a pas seul*  
lighting the nothingness  
*plié* to  
*relevé* to  
*en pointe* to  
*arabesque*.

Her leg quivers— She holds ... (1)  
Stars gaze ... (2)  
Moon cry ... (3)  
Meteor pause ... (4)  
And her leg lowers.

But she wants more *adagio*  
dissolves—  
Flood sky, explode.  
Arms merge legs merge toes  
and passion soar.

She Flamencos  
clapping her hands (1,2,1,2)  
splitting in two (1,2,1,2)  
her feet, faster than light (1,2,1,2)  
in two corners of the sky (1,2,1,2)  
green to yellow to red (1,2,1,2)  
on the verge of frenzy (1,2,1—)

Freeze.  
Look at each other  
a breath— *chassé* to centre stage;

*Pas de deux,*

She pirouettes

toe-breakingly tall,  
spinning,  
twirling,  
wrapped in a green haze.

Fading—  
as a single clap echoes.

She falls  
leaving nothing  
but silence  
and a longing gaze.

## **The Birthday Party**

Minna Harley, Year 9

*This piece was longlisted in the Junior Secondary Category of the 2025 City of Subiaco Young Writers' Award.*

Birthdays are a time of joy and happiness for most children. Laughter, presents and most importantly, parties. Hester's mother had forced her to have a birthday party that year. She was reluctant to agree, however there wasn't much she could do about it. Her mother's word was final.

'Your tenth birthday is special,' Mother had told her. 'You'll be double digits.'

'But Mum,' Hester replied, 'I don't want a birthday party. They're too noisy.'

'Nonsense.' Mother spoke with a hint of sternness in her voice but masked it in a calm manner that was easy to see through. There was no point arguing with her. All Hester could do was wait and let Mother's plans sort themselves out.

Mother had insisted on a simple party at their house, with activities like pinata, egg and spoon race and pass the parcel. Then there was the issue of who to invite. Mother asked her about school friends, but Hester replied she didn't have any. There was no point in trying to lie—everyone in her class saw her as an outsider—but Hester didn't mind too much. She didn't enjoy the company of other people and much preferred to keep to herself. Mother made the decision to invite everyone from her class, which caused Hester's heart to turn to stone. She doubted that anyone from her class wanted to come.

Hester dreaded going to school the day the invitations were sent out. She watched with heavy eyes as each member of her class read their invites to her birthday party. She kept her head down, not daring to look up and catch sight of all their gazes burning on her. The whispers around her were impossible to block out, and she was almost sure they were talking about her party.

When the day Hester had been dreading for a week came around, Mother had wasted no time getting things ready. She had outdone herself with decorations, and the kitchen table was lined with fairy bread, cupcakes, party pies and mini sausage rolls. Balloons were scattered around the house and Hester forced herself to put on the biggest smile she could manage whenever Mother looked her way.

'It looks amazing,' she croaked through gritted teeth, trying her best to sound genuine.

'You're going to have the greatest time,' Mother smiled softly, clearly more excited for the party than Hester was.

The atmosphere became awkward when the guests began arriving. There were around twenty children in Hester's class, and soon the entire living room was filled with all of them running around, barely acknowledging her existence. She hadn't expected the guests to bring presents, however almost every guest arrived with a beautifully wrapped parcel in their hands. The boys helped themselves to the food on the table and the girls were grouped together talking, avoiding Hester but glancing over to where she stood awkwardly on her own.

'I don't even know why we're invited,' Hester heard one of them whisper. She recognised the voice, a girl named Lizzy, but didn't dare to glance up from where she pretended to search for something in a pile of party decorations. 'I don't even like her. I'm just here for the food and stuff.'

'Why would she invite us anyway? She's never talked to us,' another one said, but her voice was lowered so Hester couldn't tell who it was. Then the girls dropped their voices to whispers, so overhearing their conversation would be impossible, although Hester couldn't help but notice that when she stood up and looked their way they all stopped talking and smiled at her.

The buzzing of the chatter of students around her made Hester feel dizzy. She never liked being in crowded rooms, but the safety of her own house now felt unfamiliar. For her, school, the place she felt unsafe, was now seeping into her personal life. It was horrible. Today was meant to be Hester's special day, but it felt worse than an ordinary one.

Nothing was going according to Hester's birthday party's plan. Mother's birthday plan. Some of the boys threw the eggs that were meant for the egg and spoon race onto the floor. This worried Hester, but when she brought it up with Mother, she only brushed it aside and smiled. 'It's fine, as long as they're having fun.'

But were they really having fun?

Hester's eyes flicked to the clock on the kitchen wall every five seconds, but time seemed to slow down. The party stretched on forever, despite the fact that it had barely begun. The rainbow llama pinata was tied to a tree in the backyard, its flaky, colourful paper fur standing out amongst the green of the trees and grass it

surrounded. It hung awkwardly from the tree, too bright, too fake. It didn't belong there, just like Hester.

'Who's ready for pinata?' Mother called out from behind her, which made Hester jump. She must have caught her staring.

A few kids raced over, grabbing the bat eagerly and standing underneath the rainbow llama. The girls and boys who were bunched in groups rolled their eyes and slumped out to the backyard. Hester trailed behind, picking at the skin around her fingernails. Once everyone had gathered around the pinata, Mother snatched the bat from the boy's hands, which surprised him.

'Hester, why don't you go first?' Mother said while her eyes scanned the crowd before eventually locking on her daughter's. Slowly, Hester stepped forward to the front of the crowd, her classmates stepping out of the way for her to walk to where Mother stood. She quickly wiped the sweat off her hands on her dress and tried to stop them shaking as she received the bat. She could barely get a firm grasp on it, let alone hit a pinata. But she had to try, for Mother's sake. Then again, what would all her classmates think if she couldn't hit the pinata properly? She'd be seen as weak. It was her birthday party. She was meant to be happy. Why did she feel so afraid?

Hester closed her eyes and hit the pinata as hard as she could. She managed to puncture it slightly, but she quickly turned around and handed the bat to the first person she saw. She dragged herself to the back of the crowd, her head down looking at the grass of the backyard, not wanting to glance up. She stared at the grass, hoping that it would open up and swallow her whole.

Once the pinata burst open and the lollies spilled out onto the lawn, Hester turned and ran back towards the house. All of the kids were distracted, trying to push their way to collect lollies, and Hester only hoped Mother was distracted too and wouldn't see her running. She managed to make it to the bathroom, and closed the door quickly behind her, feeling the tension release as she locked the door. She was hidden now. Safe.

However, the party wasn't over yet. She only had a few minutes to get herself together before Mother called for her. She forced herself to step out of the bathroom and smiled until the muscles in her face hurt.

'Are you enjoying the party?' Mother asked.

'Yes,' Hester croaked, a little too loudly, through a smile that was a little too wide.

'I think it's time for cake!' Mother announced, drawing everyone to the decorated kitchen table. She prompted Hester to sit at the head. The rest of the children gathered around, still keeping their distance from where she sat. Hester looked down at the table. She could feel all twenty sets of eyes staring at her.

Suddenly, the lights were switched off. The room went quiet. The only sound Hester could hear was the sound of Mother's heels stomping towards the table. A soft gleam of light came closer and closer to where she was sitting, until the birthday cake was set down in front of her.

Hester had never seen a cake more beautiful. Yellow buttercream icing was spread neatly across cake and swirls of pink and blue decorated the sides. Little edible flowers were placed along its edges. The words *Happy Birthday, Hester!* were carefully iced on the top, surrounded by ten glowing candles. Mother had outdone herself.

As she set down the cake, she opened her mouth to sing. 'Happy birthday to you...'

Oh no. The worst part of the party. The rest of the class joined in the song. 'Happy birthday to you....' Hester's head was forced up. Twenty pairs of glowing eyes, visible in the darkness were fixed on her. Shaking hands clutched her dress tightly, trying to calm them down. Some kids in the back rolled their eyes and mumbled the lyrics, while Mother sang loudly as she smiled. Hester was panicking.

'Happy birthday dear Hes-ter...' As all twenty of them sung her name, she flinched ever so slightly. Her head was spinning. Her eyes were watering. She ducked down slightly to hide her reddening face. It felt so strange. People she didn't even like were singing at her. They were singing her name. They sounded like they were forced into wishing her a happy birthday, and Hester was forced into having one. Everyone was still staring at her. They could see her panicking. This only made her panic intensify. 'Happy birthday to you! That's it. The song was over.

Until her Mother called out, 'Hip hip, hooray!' Hester tried focusing on her breathing. It was what she did when she was scared. Mother had taught her that. But it was impossible to focus on anything other than the panic, and that everyone knew she was panicking.

'Hip hip—'

'Hooray!'

'Hip hip—'

'Hooray!'

It was over. Everyone went silent. Mother urged her to blow out her candles, but she couldn't force a single breath out. All the air inside her had been sucked out, and she felt like nothing more than a deflated balloon. Her head was still spinning, and she could barely focus on anything, but she couldn't give up now. Not when she'd come so far. Not when she'd survived the entire party.

With each soft blow that escaped from Hester's mouth, the soft glow from a candle was replaced with smoke until the room was dark once again, leaving her a moment to let out a small, silent tear before Mother switched the lights back on. Now, the only present Hester wanted was to be alone.

## **My uncle's journey: USA to Palestine to provide medical aid for airstrike victims.**

Haya Billal, Year 10

### **The Arrival**

PAMA and promise guide him  
to immersion in hostile lands.

Greeted by men.  
Men who wore grins of blades.  
Weapons worn less cutting.  
Curled lips at folly martyrdom while  
jests of hidden condescension  
steer to the border.

Catching a final echo of  
'hopeless heroes' before  
descending into broken lands.

Any new uncertainty quickly blown  
by winds of dust and breathing  
wraiths.

He walks through the markets  
stitched into residential ruin.  
Grey—consuming.  
Amid lingering hurt  
simple routine plays out remarkably.  
Forged countertops of fallen bricks  
and concrete slates, once  
rooftops, support  
mangoes from village boys  
burning gold in mines of dust.  
Play pretends of normal business,  
a refuge that holds sanity.

Oh, how they bare  
the weight of normalcy.  
Ordinarily extraordinary.

### **What Falls: Gaza**

An overcast gloom  
or temporary silence.  
Held breath at the tongue;

breath out and trigger  
fire falling from the sky.  
The ground gives way.

Endless dust obstructs  
her eyes, haunted by what can't  
be seen but is known.

Hair that belongs to  
her head, stressed by grey matter,  
her youth long gone since

lost pleas and voice.  
Eternally in a void.

## Always

Maia Leung, Year 8

Sometimes, I feel as if the world is spinning and time continues, yet I just stand there and watch. Sometimes, I feel as though my life is all fake and everything is just a dream.

Sometimes.

No. Always.

Black lines the edge of my sight, slowly closing in on the bright blue forget-me-not flower clutched tightly in my hands. And then I fall, the abyss of darkness swallowing me. I cram my eyes shut in fear, dread pulsing throughout me. Hands shake uncontrollably, as if afraid something will lurch out at me in the last possible second.

Gone is the sprawling meadow of peaceful flowers, gone is the reassuring warmth of the sun's rays on me. Gone. All of it. The sky-blue flower is still clasped in my hand, wilting slightly from my death-grip. Emotions flood my mind, slowly submerging me. This time, as darkness approaches, I let the current of sorrow pull me along, watching the memories in anguish.

There is always anguish now. Always.

\*\*\*

I sit on a park bench. A kaleidoscope of grey surrounds me. Dust and debris claw at my skin from all angles. I'm careful to avoid the pile of ruins nearby, and the cemetery, but especially the kids. They are huddled on the floor, the oldest one holding them as they cry, blood and grime splattered on their hands.

'Mama!' the youngest cries. An officer with his gun raised smiles, a wicked smile worthy of Hitler himself. Maybe he is Hitler? No. Hitler is dead, the war is over, and we are safe.

Yet some people will always be unsafe. Always.

'Mama!' the child screams again. He pulls away from his sibling's embrace and runs at the officer with all his might. 'You took my Mama!'

'Sasha, no!' His sister tries to save him, but it's too late.

Time begins to slow. The soldier tosses him into the truck. The truck with big bars and a cold floor. Like the one they took me in. I look away trying not to remember.

I always remember. Always.

\*\*\*

Heavy thuds echo on our boarded-up door. Suddenly, I'm six years old again, hiding behind my mama's legs, shaking with terror, a forget-me-not clasped tightly in my hands. German monsters barge in, grabbing me roughly by the arm. I frown. These aren't the monsters I know; these are proper men who look like princes.

Mama reaches out towards me, but it is no use, they hold her to the wall and place a gun against her head. A single tear rolls down her cheeks; face contorted in agony, she cries, 'Anna!'

'Mama! Help!' They are monsters. Monsters disguised as princes. My anger rages. I kick and bite and scream and howl and try. Try to get to my mama. Try to be safe.

Try. Always.

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But sometimes trying is not enough.

Once again, I fall, my consciousness gnawing at the back of my mind, slowly being pulled back together like lost pieces of a puzzle. I find myself back at the meadow, where I have been for the past couple of weeks, a forget-me-not clasped tightly in hand, lost in unknown thought.

*My name is Anna Alspach. My parents are dead. I was a dying orphan when Mami and Vater raised me. I am a proper German girl with German parents. A German girl...*

*My name is Anna Alspa ...* These words go over in my head, again and again, engraved throughout me.

And now that is all a lie. More memories come back to me in black and white pictures. A freezing truck with crying kids. Nuns with strict faces and canes. Nuns

that make us say, 'I am not a Polish girl; I am a good German girl. A proper German girl ... ' I remember the crying kids at night and the silence.

There was always silence. Always.

Then flowers, and peace and Mami and Vater. But despite all of that, something was missing. And now I realize what it was. My past.

Anger boils up inside me. *Germans are monsters*, I think with hatred. *They took me. They took my past and my history, my Mama and Papa and everything that I owned.*

*Germans are monsters*, I repeat, but then I stop. Not all of them are monsters. Some are nice like Mami and Vater. *War is a monster*. I try again. *War is a greedy monster. It takes children from their Mamas and hurts people in irreparable ways. It takes and takes until there is nothing left.*

I didn't want this to happen. No one did. I didn't want to forget. Yet sometimes it is easier to forget your past and remake a new one. But never forget yourself.

My name is Anna Alspach. And this is my story.

Always.

## The Avenue of Souls

Jasmine Boyle, Year 11

As I wander down the quiet road  
lined side by side with steadfast  
trees,  
One flowering gum catches my eye,  
its sweeping canopy sways in the  
breeze.

Beneath the sheltered shrine I spy  
three small plaques, knee to knee.  
Still clear despite passing time  
a leafy whispering comes to me.

It began one summer long ago,  
before Ferdinand's decease,  
before her weary branches held  
the weight of memories.

A mother sat beneath her boughs  
face upturned towards the light,  
her precious boys all playing near,  
wide eyes joyous, shining bright.

The sun's harsh rays were softened  
as they played in welcoming shade,  
for many peaceful hours  
while dancing shadows swayed.

More vibrant had the blossoms  
been,  
sparkling rubies in an emerald ocean,  
exulting the joy of being alive.  
Swirling scent of eucalypt, soothing,  
a familiar potion.

But time marched on, a lonely tread  
As seasons came and went.  
And one by one the brothers left,  
caught in a struggle none could  
prevent.

Still the mother visited  
to pass her lonely hours.  
Silver streams tracked paths down  
her cheeks  
knitting socks and scarves 'neath  
faded flowers.

Far from home and fearful,  
nine thousand miles away,  
a soldier wept for his mother and  
brothers  
but all he could do was pray.

A woody scent, a puff of breath,  
Carried away the umbra of death.

Closing his eyes it brought back to  
him  
a warm sun, a brother's laugh, his  
mother's smile.

Like an angel, it folded him in warmth  
and hope.

He closed his eyes and dreamed a  
while.

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Splintered wood, splintered bones,  
shattered souls,  
wretched moans, desperate prayers,  
shrapnel blasts—  
haunted ghosts march in lines with  
empty eyes  
knowing any breath could be their  
last.

The gum bore their pain,  
blossoms died  
as twilight's shroud engulfed the sky.

Shrapnel, bullet, bayonet, nail,  
blood dripping down the wood,  
staining the ground a crimson red  
as if in Flanders fields one stood.

Seeing the wound, she made not a  
sound,  
but in her depths, she knew,  
like Mary when she saw the blood  
and her heart was rent in two.

A searing ache that tears the soul,  
a sorrow that swallows the light,  
cemented when the letter came  
making day seem black as night.

Shadows lengthened, days grew  
cold  
until crisp smell of camphor broke  
darkness's hold.

The sun rose over the canopy  
a weak yet gentle light,  
bringing back treasured moments,  
back when the world was right.

Surrounded by sweeping branches  
she thought she almost heard  
a whisper of childlike laughter,  
her desolate heart finally stirred.

As the number of dead piled up,  
the number of trees, it grew,  
as family and friends remembered  
their loved ones, and all they'd been  
through.

Gallipoli, Warlen Court, London,  
their souls, like birds, return to the  
boughs,  
reuniting with fallen comrades  
along the avenue, heaven bound.

So, if ever you find yourself walking,  
down the avenue of souls,  
you might just feel a whisper,  
from a spirit ne'er to grow old

## Chocolate Brownie

Lily Offer, Year 9

We should all get to eat chocolate, even the smallest animals. Brownie hasn't. Yet. As he lies on the metal table, barely breathing, looking at me like he does when he's hungry, or lonely, I think he should try a little.

Brownie's *way* older than me, by six years, so maybe he got to try some before I was born, but I, I have never given him any. I don't want to make him sick, but it turns out dogs can get sick from other things when they're ten. Mum says Brownie's going to a better place, a place where he can run without a leash, and play in the mud, and sniff all mailboxes he likes. I don't know if there'll be chocolate where's he's going, so I need to give him some now. Just so he gets to try it.

Mum says me and Brownie are a force field because we're always together. There isn't a day I haven't had him by my side. It's Louie *and* Brownie, we don't work without each other. Brownie has thick dark fur; my hair is the same but lighter. We are actually similar in lots of ways: we both have the same blue eyes, we're both always hungry, and we both adore walks down to the river.

I love our walks – it's what I'll miss the most – that's why I don't understand why Brownie has to go. I know he is sick and it's affecting his heart, but Brownie loves me and my family more than ever, so his heart must be okay. I think it might be something about his legs because he doesn't walk a lot anymore. He used to run and jump and play with me all the time but now he just likes to cuddle on the couch. It doesn't mean he loves me any less because he only wants to cuddle with me. His legs are sore and need a break, that's all.

I also need breaks from sport. But when I need a rest, Brownie is always there for me. I can't understand the words when he barks but I know exactly what he's saying to me – that it's okay to feel sad and things will get better. When I talk, I know he understands by the glint in his big blue eyes, the eyes that look like the river. Even if we speak different languages, we couldn't love each other any more than we do.

Brownie's a German Shepard so he always walked us instead of us walking him. We live just a five-minute walk from the river, so it became our daily tradition. At the river Brownie runs all over the beach, jumps into the water, and doggy-

paddles around looking for fish. The best thing is playing with him. We race up and down the sand, and he always beats me but that doesn't matter. I throw his favourite ball into the water so he has to run in and get it. It's a normal yellow one, very old, but for some reason Brownie likes it more than all his others. It must be the strange way it smells.

Recently he stopped running and jumping and paddling on our walks. He just sat, looking out over the water. I wondered what he was thinking about. Then a few weeks later, he got diagnosed, so instead of walking we would drive so that he still got to go. Even if he couldn't do the things he was able to before, he could still be able to be where he wanted to be.

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We take him to the river in the morning like normal, like nothing is going to change. We stay a really long time because Mum says it is his last visit. I think he knows. He spends a while standing with his paws in the water, looking out over the blueness, at the birds and boats. I can tell he's sad. I realise that Brownie will miss me too. I hope there's a river where he's going next. Maybe he'll think of me and all the good times we had. I won't go to the river anymore. I've never been without him.

I make Mum go past the shops on the way to the vet. I buy a double fudge chocolate brownie, one of the ones that are in a special plastic container that they keep on display. Then we drive, with Brownie asleep on my lap.

The drive to the vet is long, but the wait once we get there is even longer. I don't like it. The chairs are cold and hard. It smells like hand sanitizer. And the walls are very stiff, like the room is holding its breath. I'm holding my breath too – Mum's is shaky, and it's making me nervous. The table is very high. Brownie's nose is tucked under my chin and I can feel his breath on my neck. It smells like dog food but I don't mind, it's Brownies. There is a large overhead light that is glaring at us all, me, Mum, Brownie and the two vets who are very nice.

When we first came, Brownie was given a needle. Mum said would make him very sleepy. It's worked, and now he's very still, his chest rising and falling slowly. My bed is far more comfortable than the cold silver table, and I think that we should've brought along Brownie's blanket.

Mum squeezes my hand tighter. 'Louie, do you want to step out for this next bit?' I can't say words, so I just shake my head. If Brownie's leaving soon, I want to have every little moment we can have. I realise I haven't given him the chocolate yet,

so turning around, I stretch for Mum's bag and start searching through all the weird little things she hordes, until I find the plastic container, slightly reshaped.

'He might not want it,' Mum says. She looks tired and I need to remember this is a hard day for her too.

'I'll try anyway.' I'm certain Brownie will want it. I take off the lid and break a small piece to place in front of his nose. He gives it a sniff, then carefully takes it. I can't tell if he's unsure or just too tired to eat it quickly. I think he likes it, because his tongue starts searching for more. I give him more pieces, which he eats faster.

'He loves it!' says one of the vets with a warm smile, then it drops and her voice becomes serious. 'Are we ready for the next part?' she asks softly. Mum just nods her head.

I allow the tears to fall as I rub his head. I don't have to say anything because Brownie knows I'm telling him goodbye. The second vet grabs a larger needle than the first and flicks the top twice. I'm getting confused, I thought they were going to take him away.

'Louie, Brownie's going to close his eyes now, it would help him if you closed your eyes too,' Mum whispers softly while her hand pats my head. I lean down and rest my forehead on his, feeling his breath, and close my eyes.

Suddenly we're at the river again, he's running, jumping, swimming and I'm laughing and running with him. The sun is out and the breeze is warm – it smells faintly like dog food. We're together again. I'm back at the place where I feel my best, with the only person who could make me feel that way. He'd always look back when running up and down the beach, to make sure I was following him. His tail would wag so hard it would shake his entire body. He would bark at the water if it splashed me. In those moments time moved so slowly, so slowly that I thought it would never come to an end. All those little things – the splashes, the sand on his paws, how he would shake water all over me – will end up being the things I miss the most. All I can do now is savour the memories, the image I can clearly see, of the sand, the sun, the sky, the warm breeze, and Brownie, right where he needs to be.

A cloud comes over us, and the breeze stops. Brownie disappears. And I'm standing still, on an empty beach, with nobody but myself.

## careful creature

Lela Dharmananda, Year 9

what a careful creature,  
crawling down your features,  
dripping in silk,  
but made of teeth.

it started at nine.  
with **Chin**,  
the not-quite-grandma  
but close enough to count.  
the nursing home  
reeked of bleach and endings.  
they smiled when they saw me  
like grief was a guest to impress.  
I can't go back there.  
not even on school trips.  
not even in dreams.

Indian funerals are big.  
not like movie big.  
like 'every relative you've never met  
wailing on your behalf' big.  
like pressure so loud it turns into  
white noise.  
like 'don't cry too much,  
but cry enough to prove you cared.'

and I did.  
but mostly  
I hid.  
under chairs,  
inside my own skin.

then **Grandpa**.

year five.

Canberra.  
my mum cracked down the middle  
and I didn't know how to hold her  
pieces.

I wore black like I understood death.  
but I was eleven.  
I just knew it meant silence at dinner  
and tissues in the car.

then **Grandma**.  
I waited for her to die.  
every. single. morning.  
ear pressed to the floorboards,  
waiting for a call that would steal  
something.

when it came,  
I didn't cry.  
until the funeral.  
until the microphone.  
until I was standing there  
with a perfect speech and a broken  
throat.

I shook like I was underwater.  
and maybe I was,  
because how else do you explain  
drowning  
when everyone else is breathing just  
fine?

then **Archyma**.

thirteen.  
I thought maybe I'd be spared.

you know, like, three is enough.  
but death doesn't do punch cards.

the ceremonies again.  
so many white flowers I started to  
hate the colour.  
hands clasped too tight,  
prayers in languages I never learned  
because no one expected me to  
need them  
this soon.

people say,  
'you're so strong.'  
like it's a compliment.  
like I don't have to be.

but I'm not strong.  
I'm just used to it.  
I'm the girl who waits for bad news  
like it's a text that hasn't been  
delivered yet.

I don't trust good mornings.  
I don't trust silence.  
I don't trust joy  
unless it's wearing a black veil.

I stopped crying.  
not because I'm okay,  
but because I ran out of tears.

## **All I Want for Christmas is my Six Front Teeth**

Ariane McGlew

September 17th, 2017. It started as a normal Year One school day for a normal Year One girl, six years old, barely even knowing I existed. That day, all my friends were sick: Lola had the flu, Evie was getting over a cold. And Serena? Serena just didn't feel like coming. Like any little kid at that age, I just went along with it and the morning passed in a blur, doing the then gruelling task of our three times tables or, as I liked to call it, 'The mucky stuff no one likes.'

Finally the clock hit 12:10 and it was lunchtime. I sat alone on the boat statue, finishing my chicken parmi and chips, wondering how to spend my lunch without my friends, waiting for a teacher to check that I had eaten so I would be allowed to go and play. Mud kitchen? Nah, Mum had plaited my hair all nice—I couldn't get it dirty. Oval? Eww, no, boys played in the sand pit down there. Playground? Yeah, playground. It was decided.

I remember wandering over there, stopping at every drink fountain to cool down on what was a weirdly warm spring day. I remember I was very careful about which spot I picked, because people said Rory was sick on one of the bubblers and Henry spat on another. Eventually I made it to the playground, full of that familiar smell of warm plastic, the sound of the big kids arguing over who did what better, and other kids in my year screaming and playing tag, occasionally grazing their knees. Watching over it all, like it was her very own kingdom, was Mrs. Jones, a pretty lady who gave the best hugs and had a room full of games on Thursdays. Poor Mrs Jones had no clue what was about to happen to the little girl (me) approaching the monkey bars.

I didn't usually play on the monkey bars, but with my lack of friends that day, I had nothing better to do. I selected the green ones: six bars, low to the ground, covered in chipping green paint. Everyone said they were the safest, and I thought so too. Back and forth I went—once, twice, three times—skipping bars between. When that got boring, the grand idea to jump halfway was one it seemed I couldn't ignore. I prepared; knees bent, lined up, little hands outstretched, it was a clear path. Pushing off, I reached for the third bar, but when I tried to grab it, it wasn't there. I had gone too far. Far enough to miss the third bar but not far enough to reach the fourth. Time slowed down, the sound of kids faded out, the smell of plastic vanished as...

Bang! My face hit the metal platform at the bottom of the bars. The only thing I smelt now was the copper of blood; the slight burn my hands had felt from swinging on the bars now completely drowned by what my mouth felt. My lips felt loose, I could barely breathe between my screams and there was so much blood that I just kept swallowing. A cacophony of screams erupted around me, everyone horrified by what they saw. One particularly brave kid, Lux, picked up one of the teeth that had been ripped out of my head before he realised what it was, dropped it and screamed too.

What followed was chaos. Mrs. Jones rushed me to the nurse, every teacher and kid we passed alarmed by what they saw: me, a tiny little Year One, screaming, blood running down my neck from my mouth. The lady at the front desk looked as shocked as I felt but I barely noticed. All I felt was my lip in the wrong place, my gums bumpy and smooth, and flesh hanging down from the roof of my mouth. Dazed, I hardly even registered when Mum came rushing in.

Next, a blurry ride to the hospital. My head felt like it had been hit with a brick, yet at the same time, I was half asleep. Mum floored it, breaking multiple traffic rules just to get me to Princess Margaret Children's Hospital. I was going there because I was a princess too, she said. It was hard to sort out in my head what had really happened to me: one moment I was playing on the monkey bars, the next, it hurt. Dad met us in the car park, and I think it was the look on his face that really scared me. He looked afraid; and Dad was never afraid.

Somehow, they managed to distract me from the pain and panic with a My Little Pony colouring page, while the doctor and plastic surgeon spoke to my parents in a room that smelt like the laundry cabinet I wasn't allowed to go near at home. After that, was the feel of a hospital gown followed by the smell of blueberry anaesthesia, counting down from ten. I don't think I even made it to seven. It was the weirdest sleep ever: no dreams, but I remember the darkness. Waking up was like trying to swim in full denim clothing, everything too heavy to move. When I finally did wake, I was home. My face was numb, my vision a bit blurry, and Mum was sitting on my bed.

That day, I had snapped two teeth clear out of my head through my lip and three more teeth were embedded back into my gums. They also had to take a sixth tooth out so it would grow back evenly. I could barely speak. The first few times I tried, my tongue didn't work, and after that I had a strong lisp.

It was a long recovery. I went to speech therapy at the doctor's with Deidre to learn how to say 's' again, but it didn't work until my teeth started coming back six months later. I had to have all my food cut up into tiny squares before I could eat it, even pizza! Mum and my sister's friends said I looked cute, like a baby with my smooth gums, but that got old and annoying very quickly. My class from school sent 'Get Well Soon' cards and gifts, which was cool, and the doctors discovered that, miraculously, my teeth were actually so neatly lined up for when they did grow, that I probably wouldn't need braces after all! (Spoiler: I ended up being the only member of my family who never needed braces.)

And that year at Christmas I sang, over and over, 'All I want for Christmas is my SIX front teeth.'

## What Justice Forgot

Grace Popplewell, Year 12

Beneath a silver disc, a hanging  
wound  
fluorescence flickers, the strobe of  
the dead.  
Blood-bitten banners hang above  
my head,  
barren stands that once enslaved,  
a room heavy with ghosts that go un  
graved.

The parquet floor, scars and echoes.  
Abandoned lockers breath in rhythm  
(exhale trauma)  
memory is too much (exhale trauma).  
They stretch like mouths in silent  
screams,  
they do not close, bulging at the  
seams.  
I close my eyes, I see them; I open my  
eyes, I see them:  
her hands, still black with lead,  
a cap atop his head,  
he hums the pledge through  
shattered bone—  
the anthem of the dead.

The echoes hum, the rifles preach,  
the courts alter just out of reach.  
Where bodies once played now  
ghosts convene,  
strewn between bleachers, a sight  
unseen.

An altar of wood and ash, beneath  
the scoreboard's broken flash.  
Where numbers once danced, now

silence tallies the cost.  
A gathering of relics:  
his cap  
her sketchbook  
a civics text swollen with guilt,  
the pages curl and rot, a scripture of  
what justice forgot.  
Candles flicker low and thin,  
the smoke curls into names I hold  
within.

'Abaddon,' I whisper,  
'Azreal,' I say,  
these are the names I crave,  
saints of their silence and guards of  
their grave.  
The syllables dry on my tongue,  
like rust in the barrel of his gun.  
A metal beam overhead shifts,  
groaning with weight unseen (but not  
unforgotten).  
My spine answers, vertebra by  
vertebra,  
our nation's law, failing to care for  
long—  
they taught us fear instead of song.

I kneel: not from grace, but ruin.  
Faith?  
Nothing but a shell my grief's been  
chewing.  
Her begging mouthed so soft, so  
slow,  
his tears casting a pool of chalk dust,  
their cries echo through the stain  
of textbooks preaching our pain.

Their limbs enwrap mine, cold and  
hollow.  
They want me to lead;  
I want to follow.  
Behind each lesson a teacher  
(who should be titled a hypocritical  
preacher)  
forcing false 'rights', false 'freedom',  
'The Second Amendment',  
classes far from filled with  
contentment.  
Each sermon stained in freedom's  
name,  
wilts beneath our nation's crimson  
shame.

Classroom clocks reverse,  
hands clawing at minutes we failed  
to protect.  
The exist sign glows red regret.  
I see the serpent—  
coiled metal, brown,  
left in my locker—a suggestion.

I hold it. It hums. It purrs.  
It fits just right...  
Held like a precious relic  
my only prayer: to end the ache,  
to no longer be haunted while  
wide awake.

A knock—soft, then light.  
Not from above, not from below,  
a knock from behind.

A woman enters.  
Her voice fractures me, low and  
clean—

'Don't leave behind an unavenged  
scene.'

The gun a relic, spent and hollow.

Their spectres fuel a candle's narrow  
flame,  
a beacon stitched from a survivor's  
guilt and a victim's name.

Tall. Proud. Unforgotten.

The hall remains,  
liminal and lingering,  
but I walk it.

Behind me the silhouettes shrink,  
not erased,  
but eased.

## The Spaces Between

Stella Hauser, Year 9

She walks the halls alone these days  
where laughter used to live.  
Three shadows trail her silent steps  
with more than she can give.

One was sunlight, hair like flame,  
a cannonball in spring.  
They dared the lake one summer's eve—  
she sank before the ring.

The second wore her hoodie low,  
cracked jokes to calm the fear.  
She texted, 'There's a shooter here,'  
then screams replaced the cheer.

The last one smiled too softly,  
words always just out of reach.  
She tried to stay, but the weight she bore  
outmatched all they could teach.

Now every corner holds a name,  
each breeze a ghostly thread.  
She traces memories like maps  
to all the things unsaid.

The world keeps turning, cruel and bright,  
and she keeps breathing still,  
though every breath is part of them  
and every silence kills.

So, when she laughs, it's half a prayer,  
and when she cries, it's steel.  
She loved them hard, and lost them all—  
and still, she learns to feel.

## **The Last Bedtime Story**

Anika Nguyen, Year 11

Once on a bed under his favourite Harry Potter blanket, he had a dream. And it was about a kingdom, and he was the shining knight. He would wake up, tell his mummy and she'd smile and say, 'I love your imagination honey.' Then he'd stay with her all day because that's all he had in their small apartment on the East Coast.

This was the year he'd start primary school. His mummy would sing songs from the radio with him every day and tell him that she loved him. His radiant joy felt like the first rays of a timid sun ray after a winter storm, and he chased the warmth of the sunlight. And every night as his mummy tucked him into bed, he'd ask for a story from her, because that helped him have dreams. He'd ask for her to stay until he fell asleep because he loved the feeling of being loved.

Once on a bed under a navy-blue blanket with white stripes, he had a dream. And it was a nightmare of him not being good enough for his actual dreams. Because that's all the world would ever tell him. He'd wake up and he wouldn't tell his mum because he felt misunderstood.

This was the year he was doing his best. He had friends, a girlfriend, and was a well-known athlete at his school. This year hit him with a surgery and he was off school for weeks. And in the first week, people would check up on him. He felt loved.

He'd eventually go back to school wrapped in a bandage and crutches and try to ignore the pain. But every day he felt pain and every day he felt lost. It crushed him with the overwhelming force of a tidal wave and, he drowned in its embrace. And when he came home, he'd skip his mum's snack and go to his room. Because food didn't feel as good as the little white tablets did. Because food only hurt him more and talking to his mum only used more energy and nothing else made him feel happy.

This was the year a rumour went around that he was caught going through a couple of his friends' parents' bathrooms. And of course, the kids at school called him a disgusting addict and were embarrassed to be seen with him. This was the year his girlfriend left him, and he watched her kiss his best friend. His

surgery had now healed but the pain it caused in his heart didn't. And at night he'd take a blue tablet to help him forget about that fun life and those amazing people that had slipped away from him. And he'd place a bet on whether or not he'd wake up the next day, all because he hated the feeling of not being loved.

Once on a brown couch under a thin throw blanket, he tried to dream but he couldn't fall asleep. When the sun came up, he got up and thanked his friend for the roof and headed into the city in search of a job. The city was live; its congested highways and glowing streets pulsing with one massive heartbeat. An oasis of light and opportunity. He'd call his mother, and she'd pick up with a weary voice. As he reasoned, each lie that tumbled out of his mouth, each falsehood that slipped past his lips, ripped another shred of guilt through his sinful body.

This was the year he got kicked out of his home for almost overdosing in front of his brothers. The same year his little brother graduated from high school, and he bought a thrift-store suit and watched from the corner. He felt happy for his brother but couldn't cry as he watched his parents gleam with pride and joy as their last hope for a good kid walked the stage. And he regretted going along because now he felt hopeless about his own dreams he had since being a little kid, and it consumed him like a wildfire. The end of yet another day of being alone and failing hurt him even more than the last. And he'd tuck himself under blankets and wonder when anyone would come to help him out his hole. Because he hated the feeling of being absolutely alone even more than the feeling being unloved.

Once on a sidewalk on the corner of 4th and Spruce St. under a heavy snow jacket covered with holes and stains, he finally had a dream. He dreamed of his childhood and his mother's snacks. How he loved school, and his talents in football. His great friends and the only girl he would ever really love. He saw the person he was and the person he still yearned to be. But then he'd wake up.

This was the year he couldn't find people to stay with anymore. It was the year his mother changed her phone number and address, and he quit looking for a job and spent all his time looking for a stronger high. He woke up to the noises of the city. The bustling footsteps and congested highways made him angrier; everything made him angry now. Occasionally he'd look up at the by-passers and

reach out for change, food, a conversation—something, anything, to make him feel human again. But everyone walked over him, looked away, like he was trash that no one wanted to take responsibility for and pick up.

The sadness felt like a thousand needles pricking his skin, and it grew like an expanding balloon across his chest. That's how the world had made him feel ever since the day his peers found out he was struggling with a pill addiction. So, he'd stay in the same spot, high and numb, wondering how many more days his body could last. It didn't matter to him because he hated the feeling of being trash.

Once on a bed of concrete, when he saw the sky a dripping tap, slowly drain its vibrant colours into a vacuum of nothingness, he had his final dream. This was the evening he used every pill he had, as tears streamed down his face. On a crumpled piece of brown paper, he wrote his name, because that was all he had left anymore. He wrote that this was the year he'd given up, about how he hated the pills but they were the only thing that was always there for him. As he faded away into his final dream the tension ebbed away, and relief greeted him with its warm embrace.

He gazed up at the sky and called to his mummy, asking for one more bedtime story. Because that made him feel loved.

## A Love Letter from The Moon

Alessia Radici, Year 12

He was the sun, burning and bright.  
Not gentle, not sunshine,  
but merciless rays demanding to be  
    seen.  
Rays that would singe. In flame.  
Destroy eyes  
before you dared avert your gaze.

She could never look away.  
She was the moon, reflecting his light,  
sometimes eclipsing,  
sometimes unseen,  
but always there,  
Rotating in and out, like the  
    inevitable—  
an unstoppable cycle that saw  
the sun for what, for who he was—  
and simply, stayed.

She would always stay for him.  
To her, the sun was everything.  
Strong and confident in ways she  
    couldn't be,  
an unstoppable force of nature  
you couldn't challenge without  
    burning alive.  
A crucial and horrible necessity.

And it was glorious.

So brilliant that she couldn't stop  
staring, even if it hurt.  
She endured all of it.  
The searing pain.  
The spots that blackened her vision —  
To her, they were just reminders

of who he was, what he meant, what  
    he could be.  
To her, they were tattoos from a god.  
And she wore them with pride.  
If this was the price of admiring one  
so profound, so glorious—  
then let her burn to ashes.

But some only wanted to fear.  
neglected his brilliance.  
Coloured skies, sunsets, sunrises  
ignored to warn of rays that burn  
irises, should you stare too long.

And it hurt.

Because even something ruthless  
as the sun could nurture, too.  
Could be kind.  
And as the people shied away  
under the shade of trees,  
they seemed to forget that,  
without the sun,  
they would be nothing.  
They simply chose to let the cavity  
built for love, beneath their rib cages,  
turn into a breeding ground of hatred  
    instead.

Hatred in the form of raised fists and  
curses, promises to never look up at  
him again.

And the sun stubbornly shone  
brighter; harsher.

Because you cannot contest

a God and expect to win.  
Because the sun wanted to be seen  
and the moon's eyes weren't enough.  
Her love alone would never be  
enough.

Still, she chose to adore him,  
just as she did.  
Her purpose in life.  
to stay in his orbit,  
to catch his light,  
dull it with her presence  
before reflecting it down onto  
those who cared to look up at her.

Mediator between the sun and  
the world itself. That was her job; her  
one reason for existence.

She would do anything for that  
big, brilliant ball of liquid  
gold and wonder itself.  
She would orbit him, love him  
so strongly that tides would change.  
She would gaze at her god,  
she, his most loyal worshipper.  
Watch with bated breath until  
the end of days, until  
he too went out in one  
brutally beautiful bravado  
of light and passion.

Because he was the sun.  
He demanded to be seen.  
And she was the moon.  
Who was she to deny him  
the recognition he deserved?

## Symphony of the Deep

Vivian Chen, Year 9

*Crash!*

Beneath cyan waves  
Lies a world of wonder,  
The ancient haven of miracles opens its arms in its chilly embrace  
As a new universe of treasures and riches emerges.

Beneath squid-ink waves  
Lies a whole new city, teeming with life and energy.  
From crustaceans to fish to turtles to whales frolicking  
Among the torturous trenches and trails and sky-scraping corals.

Beneath ravenous waves  
Lies a school of iridescent fish.  
Dancing and twirling among jellyfish and tuna there lay a vibrant reef,  
Beams of golden sunlight pierced through the surface of the water,  
Illuminating the minuscule sardines for the idle gropers on the sea floor.

Beneath lucid waves  
Algae gently sway to the current's ballet.  
The song of the ocean resonates, where  
Every creature takes part in this intricate eternity

## Remembering Her Remembering

Elly Lima, Year 10

Beneath the plane tree, the sidewalk ran straight and cracked. Children had drawn hopscotch grids; gum glimmered faintly like forgotten sweetness. A single leaf clung to a twig, brown and paper-thin. As I sat on the park bench, someone behind me called, 'Careful, it's slippery!'

I wasn't sure who they meant. I was watching the leaf.

It trembled, undecided, a quiet rehearsal of falling. The air beneath it seemed to wait, patient, expectant. My reflection wavered faintly in the wet pavement, though it could've been anyone. The suitcase beside me leaned against the bench leg, damp in the corners.

I hadn't decided if I'd stand. My feet itched to follow, to lift and drift the way that leaf did, uncaring of the world below.

A truck idled at the curb. From its window, a radio leaked 'The Sound of Silence'. Mum used to hum it on Sunday mornings while she washed dishes. She said, 'It's not sad, it's just honest.' I could never bear this kind of honesty.

The leaf shifted. The branch let go.

It fell, not in surrender, but in certainty. A brown whisper against the wind, twisting, spinning, falling without pause. My eyes followed it down, through its fragile tumble. For a moment I thought I saw her in it: light on porcelain, a hand pausing above the sink, a voice that didn't finish the sentence. Maybe she never said goodbye. Maybe I imagined she did.

Maybe I only imagine the leaf means something. Maybe I need it to.

The leaf lived a whole life without my touch, unaware I watch. Maybe that's how it would be with Mum, her days unfolding like quiet laundry on the line, soft with waiting. She'd hum; the light would still fall across the counter, patient as ever.

The urge to turn back gathered in me like rainwater, but some truths drown before they're spoken. Truth pressed at the edges of my leaving, the unspoken word between us swelling, waiting, never said—a suitcase at my feet, a doorway left open.

The rain thickened; the song broke apart. Hello, darkness, my old friend. The leaf sank, folding into the gutter's shallow current, softening until the water carried it on. I watched until I couldn't tell if it was still there. Somewhere, she might still be humming it. Or maybe I would be, remembering her remembering. The difference blurred.

I couldn't tell if I'd left yet. The world would keep moving either way, light crossing tiles, the hum of water, the silence that filled whatever words wouldn't hold. And somewhere, my Mum would live her life fully, unmarked by the honesty I could not bear, the kind she once said was not sad, just honest.

## The Void

Gabby Wu, Year 8

Imploding with darkness, I drift  
through the void, clinging to whispers  
of the star-speckled light.

The galactic universe waltzes,  
gleefully spinning through echoes of  
present and past.

Alone in our solar system, planets  
linger, mumbling stories of sorrow  
and gloom. Silently screaming  
in the void for so long, they remain in  
darkness as they hum a soft song.

Slaves to the night, stars dance  
through the sky, light years away, yet  
burning so bright.  
Silently flickering, we see them shine,  
secrets echo and fade out of sight.

Mystery lingering, the loud silence  
invades, surrounded, the universe  
cries, whispering secrets to the  
galaxy outside, asking for rescue  
from the darkness unknown.

## Search for Paradise

Lisa Zhou, Year 7

I hide in my closet, curled in a ball,  
hand over mouth, waiting just like  
Mum told me to, before Dad  
burst through the door.

I'm silent, careful not to make any  
noise. I hear their distant screaming,  
Dad's shouting, sharp like blades,  
shattering my taped glass heart.  
The closet walls close in,  
the screams get louder. I do not cry.

Instead, I think of the day we will  
finally escape, travelling to places  
we never knew existed.  
Beaches every day, watching the sky  
painted rich, vibrant reds, and blues,  
waves, whispering of freedom.  
My mother, ever so carefree, laughing  
with the seagulls who soar above.  
I pray that day comes, and then we  
can leave this all behind.

But reality is cruel, and my mother's  
ear-piercing scream brings me back  
to the closet I crouch in. Every fibre in  
me screams to leave, get out.  
Wincing at each creak, I push the  
closet door open, gasping.  
Fury twists my father's face as he  
raises his bottle ready to strike,  
my mother helpless.  
But I cannot just watch.  
Lunging forward I seize her hand,  
and we run, for paradise,  
**never** looking back.

## Love, Silence and the Space Between

Hannah Abdulrahim, Year 11

I was born in Jakarta, Indonesia but have spent most of my life in Perth, Australia, where I still live now. Growing up, I always believed I had a pretty clear understanding of my family. I knew my mum, Lisa, loved me endlessly, and back then, I even felt like I knew my dad – let's call him 'Henry' – too.

In the early years, he was around more. I remembered his presence – not super strong, but enough to feel like he was part of the picture, even though we lived in separate households. But as I got older, I noticed things started to shift. The connection faded. He became more distant, emotionally and physically. And eventually, I referred to him as my mom's partner.

Then I turned 16, and everything changed. This is what happened.

A few days after my birthday, I went to get my driver's license. I was excited and brought all my documents with me: birth certificate, passport, and everything else they might need. While flipping through my passport, something caught my attention. It listed my mum as my only parent and legal guardian.

That didn't shock me. It had always been just the two of us. But seeing it written like that made me stop. I felt this weird curiosity I hadn't felt before. I never asked too many questions about 'Henry'. I knew not to – my mum avoided the topic completely. Whenever I was curious, I usually went to my auntie.

That night, I sent her a text. Instead of texting me back, she called. Her voice was soft. She said, 'It's not my place to say.' That was it. Nothing else. I didn't push it, but I also didn't sleep that night. I knew what that meant. I was starting to realise the man I thought had just 'disappeared' might not have existed at all. Not in my life, at least.

One morning, a few days later, my mum came into my room early and sat at the edge of my bed. She looked nervous. She said, 'I'm so sorry.' And then she told me the truth.

Sixteen years ago, the day after I was born – May 26, 2009 – my mum had gone to a hospital in West Jakarta, where she was told she wouldn't be able to have children. While she was still processing that, a woman from the adoption 'office' approached her. A baby had just been born the day before, but her mother had a terrible accident and passed away. There was no father or other family listed. That baby was me.

They brought her to see me. She picked me up from my crib and I stopped crying. That moment stuck with her. She said she just knew I was meant to be her daughter. She didn't hesitate. She adopted me that day.

*My auntie, Ima, holding me for the first time before adoption process at the hospital*



'Henry' wasn't there.

So, it *was* just her and me from the start.

I didn't know what to say to this and just sat there, stunned. I had already accepted that I might not be 'Henry's' biological child, but I had no idea I wasn't biologically related to either of my parents. And what hurt even

more was knowing that if I hadn't brought it up, no one planned on telling me. They wanted to 'protect' me, but all it did was leave me feeling like I didn't know who I was.

Of course, I knew my mum and my family loved me. That hadn't changed. They reminded me every day, and I never questioned how much they cared. But love didn't erase the confusion or the grief. For my mum, nothing had changed – I was still her daughter. But for me, everything changed. I suddenly had no idea where I came from. I had no information about my biological family, and to make it harder, the hospital where I was adopted no longer existed. There were no records. No leads. No way to trace anything.

I ended up taking two weeks off school – I just couldn't act like things were normal. During that time, I saw my therapist every other day, trying to figure out how to process everything.

Then, during my school break, I decided to visit the orphanage founded by a close friend of my mother, Tante Ria. This orphanage was special to me because it was where we celebrated my birthday every year when we were living in Jakarta, long before I knew I was adopted. I never questioned it, as it seemed like a lovely family tradition.

The orphanage is about thirty minutes outside Jakarta in what used to be a slum. Years ago, during the 1998 economic crisis, Tante Ria, along with four other women, was a part of the Catholic Women Association – Chapter Jakarta, which kept finding babies left in alleys and doorways. She believed, 'If we have good intentions to save the babies, God will provide and pave the way as well.' They felt they had to do something, and so, Abhimata was born in a small rented room.

In time, the community pooled money, and the home grew, from one room into a building. Today, Tante Ria still runs the administrative side of the orphanage and visits as often as possible, but daily care is managed by hired caregivers, including nurses for the many infants who still arrive.

The home takes children from newborns up to ninth grade. For older children, staff work to place them in boarding schools so they can continue their education. The house is filled with meals, school routines, chores, and the small dramas of children living closely together. Older kids help feed and dress the younger ones. Nurses teach caregivers how to soothe fevers and clean bottles. The house celebrates birthdays and school milestones. It feels like a family.

When parents visit, they sit in a common room with staff nearby. The founder keeps a list of donors in a plain notebook. It's not fancy. But it works because people show up when asked.

I was curious to know how the children arrived and was told there are several paths. Sometimes parents walk in and say the placement is temporary, promising



to return once they can afford to raise the child. Staff always encourage families to stay together if there's any chance it can work. When that doesn't work and placement happens, contact information is collected, and visits are scheduled. If three months pass without a visit, the orphanage closes the file and moves forward with long-term care.

Watching the children, I noticed there were more girls than boys, especially among those nearing tenth grade. I wondered if it was a coincidence or pointed to deeper patterns I didn't yet understand. I wanted to

find out if this is common – and why.

The visit left me with a bigger question, though: Why are there so many orphanages in Indonesia?

I used to compare Indonesia to Australia and think in terms of civilized and not civilized. That frame collapsed as I sat in the orphanage office and listened. The difference is not morality; it's budgets, systems, and how countries organize care. In Australia, social services and foster care networks fill the gaps – unwanted babies are to be dropped off at hospitals. Formal orphanages are rare.

In Indonesia, money is a part of it – poverty stretches families until they break. Access to services matters too: prenatal care, childcare, social support. Sometimes it's family dynamics – a husband refuses a child, and a mother is left with love but no resources. Culture and religion also shape decisions around abortion and parenting. Though abortion is legal in limited circumstances, it's not always accessible, affordable, or socially acceptable. And so, a baby ends up at a gate. And then people step in where the system cannot. Homes like Abhimata start because a few people refuse to look away.

I left the orphanage feeling both heavy and clear. What started as a birthday tradition and personal history became a responsibility. I knew if I told my story I wanted it to be useful – to the children, the caregivers, and the families who live these realities every day. I didn't end up in an orphanage and have a loving family, but I still had a lot of processing to do.

As a child, I was taught to 'cover my mouth' when I sneezed to protect those around me. But no one ever taught me what to do when the 'sickness' came from someone else; no one taught me how to protect myself. That's the dynamic within my life now, especially with 'Henry'. I wish someone had taught me earlier that love isn't supposed to leave you in pieces, and that you're allowed to step away when you need to, even from the people you once ran to.

For now, I'm working on creating my new normal, and spreading awareness about orphanages and unwanted children to those around me to whom these concepts are very foreign.

## Lessons on Loitering

Ava McLeod, Year 9

Lessons on Loitering:

On rare mornings  
I sit to watch clocks turning  
Tired eyes and weary sighs  
Every minute wasted  
Route to colourless.  
Ideal offence for class  
Not really fair to slight despair  
Grand path ahead.

Lazy life loitering:  
Occurring, it continues  
Innocent I plea,  
Trapped inside a churning hour.  
Every thought counts on me,  
Rushed listening  
Instructions Limiting  
Now I'm back  
grounded for class.

Lessons on Loitering

## Suburbia

Dara Qin, Year 10

Muted, bleak colours,  
Bursting in a symphony of greys  
and browns.  
Forgotten, age-old cars, remnants of  
a long-gone era,  
Discarded upon unkempt,  
overgrown lawns,  
Basking in the silence, undisturbed.

Sunlight spills onto the burning  
asphalt beneath my feet. I turn—  
Not a soul in sight, only the endless  
sprawl of housing,  
stretching on like the horizon.

In the distance, the smell of  
eucalyptus wafts alongside the  
lingering remnants of a sausage  
sizzle.

A gentle, warm breeze blows past,  
embracing me, whispering  
amongst the swaying leaves,  
as if telling a secret—  
ghostly in its departure.

This is home.  
Where memories are made, and  
where echoes remain.  
This is suburbia—  
Where we belong, although  
sometimes it feels as if we're only  
waiting.

## Room to Grow

Miette Edgerton-Warburton, Year 10

The shoes were too big. There was at least an inch of lonely space left gaping in front of my toes. The store woman looked at my mother with confusion from where she pressed her thumb against the unsupported leather.

'Mum, don't you think they're too big?'

'You'll grow into them,' she replied.

The shop lady shook her head. Mum just nodded and paid for the shoes, leading me out of the store with her arm slung over my shoulders and a toothy grin.

\*\*\*

The sweat from my palms was pooling on the floor, I was sure of it, and everyone could see it. My shirt was untucked and heart thrummed rapidly, barely contained inside my chest. Where was she?

All at once I felt the pounding slow to match the music as I saw her. The hazy shine of flashing lights reflecting off her hair, her eyes locked with mine. I smiled at my shoes. Mum said she would come.

\*\*\*

Mum sat across from me; eyes lined with salty tears. We sat on the verandah of my childhood home, the sound of the moving van idling in the background. She sighed, and I leant in so she could kiss my cheek.

I heard her let out a breathy laugh. 'I knew this would happen, eventually. You couldn't be mine forever,' she said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Love you, Mum. I'll be home for Christmas,' I said, then pulled out of her grasp and turned to follow the van down the drive.

'Wait, Honey! Don't forget your shoes,' she said. 'You left them in your room.'

\*\*\*

I held the briefcase tight to my chest to avoid the crowd that ebbed around me, stumbling and scuffing my shoes against the rough street. 'Damn, I'd just polished those.' Mum always told me that they look at your shoes. Deep breath. 'It's okay.'

The building loomed above me, imposing, against a cornflower-blue sky. Large glass doors revolved to emit men and women in sharp-edge suits. I walked forwards, sending a quick word of thanks to Mum for telling me to dress up, not down. I found strength in the sound of my familiar shoes tapping against the cold marble floor.

\*\*\*

The familiar bell chimed as I swung the door inward, eyes fixed on my phone. More lockdowns starting Monday. I sighed. I hated working from home. The lady at the counter smiled at me, letting me know she would be with me in a few minutes. I let my eyes wander to the windows of the cafe, my gaze landing on a tumble of brown hair and hazel eyes framed by long pale lashes. I turned back to give my order, mind preoccupied.

Admiring the swirls of pale foam on the top of my cup, I grasped the handle to leave. The tip of my shoe caught against bottom of the door frame. I stumbled forwards, my hands letting go of the coffee, spilling all over my shoes as I collided with something.

The girl blinked down at my shoes, laughed and said, 'I know a good dry cleaner.'

\*\*\*

The plane feels stale, like they didn't bother to check if there was enough oxygen left before all the people got on. Stark blue medical masks glare at me from every angle. The food is awful. I couldn't care less; I just wanted to get home.

We ended up landing late, almost two in the morning. Mum was still awake. She enveloped me in her arms and my brain registered how weak her embrace was. I drew back and peered at her face. It had been two years since I'd seen her. The once fine lines peppering her face had grown deeper, spreading out from the corners of her eyes and above her brows.

'I've missed you, honey,' she said.

Later, I heard coughing in the kitchen while she made dinner. But when my girlfriend called, I looked down at my shoes and told her, 'Mum's fine.'

\*\*\*

She looked beautiful. There were no words to describe her as she floated toward me, veil and dress trailing over the grassy floor behind her. I barely even

registered the words that were being said and when she leaned in to kiss me, all I could do was look at her.

Then, when I finally tore my gaze away, I spotted Mum, crying, and smiling at my shoes.

\*\*\*

His face was so small, no larger than my palm. Small, pudgy hands wrapped around my finger, and I was filled with so much contentment that it hurt to breathe. My wife was curled in the hospital bed, gazing at us. I could tell she knew exactly how I felt. I kicked off my shoes and climbed up next to her; the little body cradled between us.

Mum sat in the corner, cradled in a wheelchair. She was asleep, but not for long. The little mouth opened, and a shrill wail filled the room.

I glanced at my shoes, discarded in the corner.

\*\*\*

I hadn't eaten for days, and greasy hair hung over my face as I sat on the verandah of what was once my home. Of course, it didn't mean anything now she wasn't here. The empty chair shouted at me from across the table, asking where she'd gone. I had no answer.

My body was parched of all liquid, so much salt had crusted on my cheeks that I found it hard to blink. My son came out to tug on my pants. How could he know what had happened? How could anyone know?

'Mumma says that you should come inside, because its cold,' he said to me.

'I know, mate. Tell her I'll be in in a minute.'

I watched the light retreat over my shoes and across the lawn.

\*\*\*

He was nervous, I knew he was nervous because he'd learnt from me.

'Dad, what will they ask me?'

This made me smile. 'Nothing you don't already know. Just be yourself.' I looked down as I stumbled over an uneven bit of cobblestone, my gaze stopping on my worn leather shoes.

Then I remembered something. 'Let me look at those shoes of yours,' I said. 'They always check if your shoes are polished.'

\*\*\*

Time had been kind to her. She had almost as many wrinkles now as I did, but hers accentuated her history of laughter. The young couple walked over to us, their eyes alight with excitement. 'Do you remember that feeling, love?' she asked.

'Like it was yesterday, honey.'

They palmed the keys and waved goodbye as we reached the taxi. My heart hurt, and I knew it was not just the pang of selling. I braced myself against the side of the car, and my wife rubbed soothing circles down my back.

I slipped my leather-clad feet under the front seat of the taxi, smiling at the driver. The pressure eased and life went on.

\*\*\*

I rarely wear those shoes anymore. I find they no longer fit me, with my body shrinking and shriveling the way it has. Still, I always have them near me, resting beside my bed, for they remind me of times that are now forever engraved into my memory as clear and vivid as a film.

It's just me now, in this old house that I began my life in. My boy is out there growing, and my wife has passed. I know I will see her soon, but not yet. There is something I have to do first. Knowing I have walked in those shoes down every road to reach the place I am in now, I know I cannot in good conscience, let the path become a dead end. So I will pass them on to the next walker that needs to find themselves and never leave home at the same time.

When morning comes, I heave myself out of bed, my feet bare, and slip into my mother's old room. Tucked behind the wardrobe door I find the very same box that my fresh shoes came to me all those years ago, just as I knew I would.

I shamble to the kitchen to retrieve paper and pen, even as my heart starts to twinge and burn. Back in my room, I place my shoes back in their box and scrawl a note, laying it on top of them before closing the cardboard lid. Slipping back into bed, I clutch the box to my flaming chest, smiling. A tear escapes my eye, even knowing that he will understand what I have written.

*You'll grow into them.*

## Sky, Sea, Storm, Sun

Isabelle Annear, Year 11

Soft pastels replace midnight's blue silk,  
where the strength of sea meets the peace of sky.  
Depths of darkness broken by a known light  
moving in, by an unknown power,  
drawing a cloak of relief over her world,  
keeping us safe every day, every hour.

As a pure truth in our world of lies  
she will go unnoticed, overseen, despite her allure,  
each and every time.  
Reaching far and wide, softening the land,  
she reveals warmth and beauty.  
Green of leaves, blue of tide and gold of sand—  
specks of her dance upon an endless flow of blue.  
Yet no one sees the shimmer and sparkle,  
ignorant creatures look right past, as they often tend to do.  
They won't take back what they bring, or protect her purity,  
staining, cutting, making permanent scars,  
drunk on a sense of knowing best. A false maturity.

So, an anger grows within her. Unmistakable now.  
She radiates heat upon them, still they don't understand,  
arguing the what, the who, the how.  
Looking up to the heavens they fail to see,  
blinded by self-made complexities,  
her policy, 'I'll look after you, if you look after me.'  
The gold will scorch on, the green become a crumple,  
sending her message, without a reply.  
She can take it no longer and clouds begin to grumble,  
her breath bellows from the west, building up,  
as a layer, a melancholy hue settles over all.

She'll let it all out, her strongest tempest, as she mourns with  
a longing to be heard, and her heaviest tears fall.  
The glassy blue, reduced to a shattering of pieces,

endless churning, churning, churning,  
prey to the wind's power, waves scaffold toward the sky.  
Her anger, a fuel stronger than the force of any man,  
a showcase of her rage, her force, her power.  
Wailings of the young combine in a choir of minor key,  
hiding away from the unpredictability of her anger,  
playground engulfed in a foreign darkness, its  
brightness, nostalgic warmth, nowhere to be found.  
It's a relentless war.  
The dunes, a tumbling landslide while waves swallow the coast,  
a shoreline stained with debris it was never meant to meet,  
a thunderous crash of a falling wave, the persistence of her gale.

But, in time, it dwindles, slows,  
fatigue subdues her bawling to a softening sprinkle,  
the scene recedes into solemn rest...  
Threatening waves become a horizon's slight crinkle.  
Her dearest light of gold peers from under a mask of cloud,  
paints the sky with a cascade of pastel pinks, oranges, blues.

Only now do they pay attention to her marvels out loud,  
as a steady weight pulls her under. Down she will sink,  
a cyclical life, trapped like a chain and link.  
Darkness settles as she goes,  
a gentle motion of soothing crashes,  
back and forth,  
all that is left.  
They've all gone now, left  
her sacred home. She is finally alone.  
This peace exists only when they are gone,  
when she's free from the countless troubles they bring.  
Yet always forgiving, she exists for them—  
who is she to judge, to condemn?

So, soft pastels replace midnight's blue silk,  
where the strength of the sea meets the peace of sky  
and depths of darkness are broken by a known light.

## Just for Me

Sahana Vijayasekaran, Year 8

Laughter echoes in the air,  
Whistling wind in my ears,  
Wrinkled hands push me, the rickety swing creaking in a grumbled protest.  
Gray highlights of age, wisps of wisdom accompanied by a dimpled cheeky grin.  
Rusty chains cool against my palms, roses whirling and twirling in the breeze.

Have I found what freedom feels like?  
Does it feel like laughter?  
Soaring high like a kite?  
Or like there is nothing else in the world when my stomach  
swoops, as if to take flight—  
Absolutely weightless, unbothered, by issues down on the ground.

At a comforting abode, a beautiful blend of taste,  
savoury, spicy, saving delectable sugary delights for last.  
I rush into her soft arms, she sweeps me up, experience pooling in her eyes,  
Stories rushing back like a tidal wave, with sweet strawberries to heed her word.

Years like grains of sand, memories like flitting guppies, darting away into the  
shadows—  
Slipping through my fingers,  
I catch them with an outstretched hand,  
Cherished, forever, they will be.  
In the nook of my mind, an escape from the world,  
Just for me.

## Camp

Monte Palin, Year 7

'Please don't make me go!' cried Aaron as he ate his breakfast.

'Don't worry, it will be fun, and a great experience,' his mum told him as she started to pack his bag.

Aaron was a small 10-year-old boy with brown hair, lots of freckles and rather short for his age. Today was the day that the Year Fives went to camp but Aaron didn't want to go. The only time he'd spent away from his parents were the hours when he was at school.

Once all Aaron's bags were packed, he got into the car, off to school to then catch the bus to Camp Nature. When they finally arrived at school and his mum opened the door he refused to move.

'You're embarrassing yourself,' she said, pulling him towards the door. And she was right. He was embarrassed.

He walked over to join his class but before they got on the bus his teacher, Miss Giddy, had something to say. 'I know that this is a super exciting day, but I need to make sure before we leave that everyone has everything they need.'

After all bags were checked they got on the bus. Everyone's parents were smiling and waving goodbye, but Aaron's mum was standing away from the group. She had a proud but nervous look on her face as she mouthed to him, 'You've got this.' Aaron took a deep breath and tried to comfortable for the long journey ahead.

'Oof!' cried the kids as the bus lurched and they smacked into the seat in front of them. The teachers rushed outside to see what had happened, expecting to see something or someone lying dead on the road, but there wasn't anything. Just a broken-down bus with twenty kids in it. Calls were made to every mechanic imaginable, but they were either closed or had no staff available to help.

It was getting late by the time Miss Giddy made her next announcement. 'Kids, I'm afraid we are going to have to sleep in the bus tonight.'

The other kids screamed for joy. 'This is going to be so much fun!' they all cried. All of them except Aaron. This was his worst nightmare.

The good kids who were actually trying to get to sleep moved to the front of the bus; at the back, a group of kids feasted on the lollies they had brought along. And in the middle, was Aaron. He couldn't even think of sleeping or eating. All he could think about were the worst possible things that could happen, like, 'What if a criminal comes in the night and drives us somewhere nobody could ever find us?' Or, 'What if we run out of food and all starve to death before anyone arrives to rescue us?' Everything that went through his head was horrid but extremely unlikely. But after an hour of solid panic Aaron was exhausted and he couldn't help but fall asleep.

He woke up to the sound of stressing adults and the sight of people running. 'Uh oh, what's happened now?' he thought. As he stood up, his stomach was full of butterflies and he felt dizzy. He approached Miss Giddy and asked what all the commotion was about.

'Have you seen Roxy?' she asked. He could tell she was stressed, as if she had got zero sleep.

'No, I haven't seen her, Miss. Why?' When she didn't reply he knew this meant a bad, bad thing. Roxy was missing. 'There is a kidnapper!' he thought. 'There is a kidnapper and they are on the loose and are probably going to try kidnap me too!'

He ran back to the bus, thoughts racing, to get out his Apple Watch and call Mum. 'It'll be fun, you said. It'll be a new experience, you said. Well, guess what Mum and Dad you were wrong!' Fumbling, he tried to dial the number, then noticed he had no reception. He started to hyperventilate. The watch fell out of his hands and within seconds he collapsed onto the floor. He had fainted.

Aaron awoke to see his mum, dad and Miss Giddy surrounding him. And standing next to them was Roxy. Turns out she just decided to go on a morning walk but forgot to tell anyone. Nobody said a word. His parents just helped him up and walked him to their car.

The trip home was silent until his dad said, 'Maybe next year.'

That day a mechanic came and fixed the bus, but Aaron was no longer able to join them. He just sat in his room, wondering why he always reacted to things in the worst way possible. After a while his parents came in and they had a chat about why this happened to him, how to prevent it from happening and what to do if it happened again. After that chat, Aaron suddenly felt like he was missing out, and he was desperate to go back to camp but it was too late. The others would be coming back to school tomorrow.

The next day Aaron felt even worse with everyone around him talking about it. Whatever conversation he got into he couldn't get out. He knew he never wanted to miss out or feel this left out again.

He still felt that way a year later as he called out, 'All packed' to his parents. It was now Year Six and he was heading off to camp, feeling like he had never been this ready for anything in his entire life.

And as he jumped onto the bus that morning his mum and dad realised that they could finally be the parents that smiled and waved their kid goodbye, knowing that they would be just fine.

## The Golden Guardian

Clara Wood, Year 8

Cars drowsily trundle down the street,  
as lazy bird choruses rise with the morning and engine smoke smothers crisp, fresh sunlight with grumbling groans and weary whines that resonate within their owners. Wheels crunch on gravel, side mirrors glint spitefully, shining in a way I need not right now. I do not mind. My time will come.

Inside, people glare at the road as if it has personally offended them, and cars scream at others when they don't move fast enough. Such a brutal, harsh ritual of society, I marvel silently to myself, ponder why mornings aren't as peaceful as they could be.

Dogs holler at every passing animal. Playfully? I puzzle, peering over them lazily as they sniff at every fluttering insect, greet every flower. Intentions are difficult to interpret when your soul is as distant and rooted in place as mine. I stand tall despite my puzzlement, Watching over them dutifully with tender care.

More weather-battered cars pass, bearing paint scrapes and duct tape battle scars, and tiny daisy humans, swaying palm tree humans,

cactus flower humans,  
dark chocolate frown humans,  
mango grin humans,  
marshmallow smile humans –  
Humans so vibrant and vivid and hurrying along that I almost forget the cracked glass and vastness inside the crevices of their souls,  
as I wait patiently for enlightenment.

At last, my time has come.  
Sunlight slumbers and tiny sparks come out to aid me in my routine of silent compassion.  
I raise my head high with a weak, flickering flash,  
not young as I once was.

Still, I endure, proudly, as caffeinated people drag their sleep-deprived bodies down the quaint paths below. As confusing and mesmerising as humanity is, I can't help but admire their tenacity, their strength.

And I do my part to help guide them towards my light –  
I *am* a lamppost, after all.  
Perhaps not needed, but wanted, appreciated, noticed.  
Most of the time.  
A silent steady offer of lingering support.

## Through The Eyes of a Horse

Sophie Walker, Year 11

The eternal hum of humanity,  
the continuous bustling of life,  
a materialistic world  
infiltrated by the poison of strife.

People coming, people going,  
bus brakes screeching at a frantic  
pedestrian.  
People whistling, people cursing,  
yet none is heard by the tranquil  
equestrian.

Sun rising steadily over land,  
its warm touch offers the gift of a new  
day.  
They wander untroubled, peacefully,  
untouched by the fast-moving  
world's disarray.

Mane and soul, wild, an everchanging  
sea,  
untamed by the fear of tomorrow.  
Eyes bold and unflinching, a fiery  
spirit,  
they give freedom, man's to  
borrow.

The human heart fears what it can't  
control,  
fears the very things that set it free.  
A self-destructive trait, doomed for  
downfall,  
but their beauty never ever scared  
me.

A seat behind these ears offers a  
world  
untouched by chaos or fears.  
To ride a horse is to fly without wings,  
to listen without your ears.

The deafening beat of galloping  
hooves,  
the pounding thump of my longing  
heart,  
a rhythm of trust and of confidence:  
it's the beat of nature's finest art.

Adrenaline trickles through my veins,  
a thrill where I belong,  
as her powerful hooves pound the  
beat,  
and my heart sings the song.

Out here, on this horse's back  
I find true solidarity.  
An untrodden path of faith,  
a comforting clarity.

The natural world glitters,  
eucalyptus waltz in the breeze.  
Vast and endless blue skies,  
a world enveloped with admirable  
ease.

The horse is nature's way  
to let you keep in mind  
important, moral things—  
don't leave yourself behind.

The gaze of a horse offers loyalty,  
it offers perfect imperfection.  
As continuous as the Milky Way,  
a blissful and refreshing connection.

The gift of life is often forgotten,  
it's an unconscious sacrifice,  
this robot cycle of work and sleep,  
oblivious to paradise.

To ride is to leave your woes behind,  
to enjoy what nature has gifted,  
to let the horse take you to a place,  
fantasies never knew existed.

I have unknowingly given my heart  
away,  
to a mare of passion and of gusto,  
of life, wonder and enthusiasm,  
who shows me to lead, not to follow.

So, stop and look at the bright  
world  
when you wake each day.  
Feel gratitude for the small things,  
that are sent your way.

To do this is to recognise  
without jealousy or remorse,  
the gift of life we were granted,  
to look through the eyes of a horse.

## Man and Deer

Ella Byfield, Year 9

### *Man*

The hammering of my boots was a rhythmic thudding, pounding the mess of leaves and dirt beneath me. It was steady and unwavering, not straying away from the beat even once. It gave me something to focus on. The constant thud drowned out the erratic calls of the forest and saved me from getting distracted.

I swerved through the trees, navigating the maze of plants with practiced ease. It was the path that my father taught me, and the path his father taught him. I clutched my rifle tightly in my gloved hand as I approached the clearing. I knew the deer would be there, a clear shot, an easy trophy to take home and hang up in my living room. The bushes gave me the perfect cover, and the nearby stream washed away any noises I made.

I didn't stop for anything. I shoved protruding branches out of my way as I marched closer and closer, kicking down the saplings that dared to stand between me and my prize. Ducking behind a bush, I raised my rifle with a precise flick. The feeling of the smooth wood against my cheek brought a familiarity that made my heart hammer as I squinted, trying to observe the deer through the tangle of leaves that divided us.

I only saw them for a split-second before a blur of brown, galloping beasts darted into the shelter of the towering trees across the stream. They must have heard me. Hot, red rage shoved my thoughts away, and my hands moved quicker than my head could aim. My rifle sent a deafening boom echoing through the forest in the direction the deer bolted in.

I scanned the area with nothing but low expectations and anger flaring in my stomach. My eyes darted left and right across the clearing, until I saw it. A diminutive heap of red-stained fur, lying limply, sprawled across a pile of grass and leaves. The pathetic thing couldn't even try to get up. It just looked over at the forest trees with wide, tentative eyes.

I slammed my rifle into the ground, ripping off my hat and throwing it down too. No buck to show off, no antlers to take home and hang triumphantly in the living room as a silent brag to visitors. I stomped back, my steady rhythm replaced with a messy rage burning my insides.

## *Deer*

The forest would always remember me, by the way my hooves felt against the ground, and the way my breath joined the air of the trees, flowers and bushes. It cast a light on my fur, a dappled golden glow filtering through bunches of green leaves hung high in trees that reached far above my head and could see more than I could dream of.

I trailed behind my family, hooves lightly pattering against the grass and leaves like the rain when it falls. The grass swayed in a gentle dance and my fur followed along, rippling in the wind. The glittering of the river caught my attention as small stars danced along the surface, and I watched as the water rolled smoothly to make way for rocks and branches. A flickering image of myself glanced back at me, quivering at the edges and dotted with twinkling spots of light. The brown of the fur on my head was the same hue as the bark of the trees, except it seemed softer and more delicate, and less obstinate and sharp.

The second I saw the flick of another deer's ear and the snap of their head towards the bushes, a feeling like the winter lightning storms swirled inside me. All of others darted, weaving their way through the trees until they were engulfed by the entanglement of thick forest. I took off after them, but almost as soon as I started to run, I was shoved to the ground, overwhelmed by an excruciating burning that throbbed from my upper leg.

The trees above me twirled as I tried to force myself up, but something kept pushing me down, pressing me into the earth. Hot red poured out of my leg, drowning the fallen leaves that I lay upon. The forest stayed calm, still swaying and murmuring sentences into my ears that I couldn't understand.

Night came quickly. A starless black overcame the daylight. The hues of orange and pink that usually painted the sky in streaks were replaced with visions of the trees spinning above, before blurring and fading to darkness. I desperately tried to hold on to the last glimmer of sun, but it deteriorated into eternal pitch black before I could whisper the forest goodbye.

My blood would forever stain the forest floor but not his hands, for even when he forgot, the forest would remember.

## My Home

Gillian Lowe, Year 8

I breathe in cool quiet morning air,  
filled with a beautiful fragrance of fresh flowers sweet as honey,  
calming, earthy aroma of damp rotting wood.

Tall marri trees—rough bark, hard gumnuts, bright pink feathery flowers—  
reach for the never-ending blanket of bright blue above,  
sun shining through lush brown branches, glowing like a campfire,  
on my warm fulfilled face.

Smiling delicate ferns brush my legs,  
covering rich moist soil on the soft forest floor,  
and dancing vibrant flowers bloom with colour.

Little honeyeaters joyfully play in the tall banksia tree with  
Long, spiky, silvery-green leaves,  
drinking sweet nectar of soft orange flowers,  
kangaroos gaily hop through thick shrubs, magpies sing high in a tree.

Nearby, a contented stream delicately trickles  
its cool clear water as fresh as mint,  
in the bushes, the insects' hum is the forest's heartbeat.

My scenic walk continues, trees silently  
whispering to me in the light refreshing breeze.  
I admire long curvy veins in a colourful green leaf,  
joy filling my heart, I think to myself:  
this is my happy place; this is my home.

## Little Red Florets

Vivien Leu, Year 11

Out of all things that I stumble upon,  
the little red florets in my yard.  
They sit and smile in the glistening sun.

Some stay open, some stay closed,  
some slowly ruffle outside their comfort zone.  
Tips turn from bright pink, to dark red, to maroon,  
and for once I realise their ever-changing presence.

When the glisten is at its prime,  
the dark green leaves begin to evolve!  
From bold green to a mellow yellow,  
I finally see what they're trying to tell.

Their smile coexists with her glistening eyes,  
her bright red shirt, the golden cannon.  
I realise that those ruffles of bright pink  
hint at the happiness, the youthfulness of my dreams.

Until the glisten fades,  
the bright pink ruffles no more,  
now maroon, now fading.  
Diminishing, the glint in her eyes,  
the scoreboard doesn't match her dreams.

Behind those red florets the glisten sets slowly,  
behind the dark leaves, behind the white fence.  
Yet I spy some hope left, I see her potential, in those  
little red florets that ignite my dreams.

Should my hope for her reflect the beauty in my yard?  
They are the only thing that reveals her talent;  
The bright red embodies, enhances.  
It is time, as red bulbs turn crimson,  
the golden glisten preparing her, preparing me.

For it is the night that God's eyes  
will be watching from above.

The crimson reflects her red cheeks too.  
The florets' spark tells me if they bloom,  
she will bloom too.

It seems like it's been day and night,  
although the end is just the beginning.  
God's word praises the goal,  
the one she worked hard for,  
because of those little red florets in the yard.

Clearer than the sky, not a cloud to be spotted,  
not a single flaw I see in her. Emerald green leaves  
seem to serve no purpose, yet add much,  
rich green to yellowing grass bringing back  
the pitch, that day, in the UK.  
Bringing me back, to her.

Little red florets that grasped my eye,  
helped me see a golden cannon and bright red badge;  
helped me hear the chanting of her name, Arsenal's game.  
Helped inspire me, to shine like her,  
like those little red florets, in my yard.

## Ashes of Control

Freya Ganesan, Year 11

I liked things neat. My notebooks were lined with ruler-straight margins; my pencils sharpened to precise points. Even my dreams followed a timetable. Mum says I was born organised. But really, I just feared the mess of things—the unplanned, the unknown.

That morning began like any other: sunlight arranged itself neatly through the blinds, birds recited their usual chorus, and I ticked off the first box on my list—*make* *bed.* Outside, summer simmered lazily, the kind of heat that made air thick and slow. But underneath it, something restless stirred and a faint scent of smoke, like a secret, whispered softly.

By noon, the horizon had begun to bruise. A dark orange wound spread across the sky. The news reporter's voice trembled through the radio: 'Residents east of Cinder Ridge, prepare to evacuate.'

Cinder Ridge. Our ridge. Mum's hands shook as she packed photos, passports, the cat carrier. I tried to take charge, thinking lists, priorities, order. 'Grab only essentials,' I said, scribbling *Clothes. Water. Chargers.* But smoke was already leaking in, curling through the doorway like something alive, erasing my neat handwriting with its grey fingers. We stepped outside into a world that had lost its edges. The air pulsed with heat; the sun was a smudged coin behind the haze. 'Stay calm,' I repeated, as if the words would hold the flames back. I could hear that my voice was thin, brittle.

The road was clogged, horns blaring, people shouting, dogs barking from the backs of utes. The order I clung to had begun to fracture. 'This isn't on the plan,' I muttered, as I plucked at the rubber band on my wrist, trying to keep calm. My psychologist had said this was the best way to manage my symptoms and prevent outbursts. We crawled forward for what felt like hours, then a gust, sudden and furious, swept across the hills. The fire leapt like a predator uncaged and flames clawed at treetops, turning birds into streaks of ash.

Mum gripped the wheel, knuckles bone-white. 'We can't get through,' she said, her voice cracking. Behind us, the road glowed red. Ahead, a wall of fire swayed, whispering its hungry lullaby. Something inside me splintered. I'd always believed

control was safety, that if I planned hard enough, nothing bad could happen. But here, in the inferno's breath, all my plans dissolved. 'Out!' Mum shouted. 'We have to run!'

We stumbled into the bush, sucking in air that tasted like rust. Smoke wrapped around us, thick and cloying, each breath a negotiation. I clung to the list in my pocket, but it was useless now, the ink just bled into my sweat. Nearby, a tree cracked nearby, falling with a roar like thunder. Mum pulled me down, shielding me, and her heartbeat thundered against my ear, wild and uneven.

We crawled toward a clearing where the grass had already burned to ash. The heat softened; the world stilled. Embers drifted through the air, tiny, restless stars refusing to die. And in that strange silence, something loosened inside me. Control had always been my armour, but it was also my cage. By the time the helicopters arrived, hours later, their blades chopping through the smoke, I no longer cared about the soot on my clothes or the scratches on my arms. I was breathing. That was enough.

Days passed before we were allowed back. We returned to find our home was gone, all that remained, a skeleton of black beams and melted glass. I expected panic to hit. But it didn't. Instead, a quiet certainty settled over me. I picked up a lump of charcoal from the ground, and noticed how it stained my fingers, dark and imperfect. I drew a shaky line on the back of an old envelope, a line that was not straight, not measured, just *real*.

I found Mum sitting among the ruins, smiling faintly through tears. 'What now?' I asked.

'We'll rebuild,' she said simply. For once, that word, 'rebuild', didn't frighten me. I realised that sometimes; to gain control, you have to lose it first. As dusk folded over the valley, I looked at the horizon, scarred but beautiful. The smoke had lifted, revealing a sky so clean it hurt to look at.

The world had burned and begun again. And maybe, so had I.

## All the Beautiful Things

Elly Lima, Year 10

Maybe it's the narcissist in me-  
to want and want more,  
even though my legs work fine,  
and my heart beats as I cry.

To want and want more,  
This body will never be enough for  
me.  
And my heart beats as I cry,  
the ache a constant, though I'm still  
free.

This body will never be enough for  
me,  
its joints falter, and its muscles bend.  
The ache a constant, though I'm still  
free-  
but in the dark, I find light again.

Its joints falter and its muscles bend,  
but the scent of rain is upon the  
ground,  
but in the dark, I find light again-  
the laughter of friends a comforting  
sound.

But the scent of rain is upon the  
ground,  
there is the touch of hands that hold  
me tight,  
the laughter of friends, a comforting  
sound-  
the moon about in its quiet soft light.

There is the touch of hands that hold  
me tight,  
the taste of summer on my tongue,  
the moon about in its quiet soft light-  
the beauty of songs yet to be sung.

The taste of summer on my tongue,  
the sight of flowers in full bloom,  
the beauty of songs yet to be sung-  
the moments that lift me from illness'  
gloom.

The sight of flowers in full bloom,  
the light that spills from morning  
skies,  
the moments that lift me from illness'  
gloom,  
with all the beautiful things.

The light that spills from morning  
skies,  
This body will never be enough for  
me.  
With all the beautiful things,  
it must be the narcissist in me.

## You and Me

Charlotte Wee, Year 12

You and Me. Smiling  
in the morning, a symphony of hues.  
With a voice so gentle and quiet,  
making music so sincere, honey-sweet.  
A kaleidoscope leaving hushed  
whispers on my walls, waves of colour.

You're strong, like the glass of a  
marble, and I'm a mess from the melted  
butter you smeared on our walls. You  
blow a kind wind, so I can still hear your  
laugh, and paint golden rings that float  
like a tattoo kiss.  
I squint, see an incandescent glow,  
shy, it waits, swaying in the crowd.

Pink ribbons appear as you blush,  
embarrassment, hidden with a veil  
of white foam. I see you relax, take a  
breath, shining, radiant, daylight.  
Awake now, a hopeful blue stain,  
like a soft cobalt blanket. Rare as  
forgiveness, sacred as acceptance.  
You're decorated with strokes  
of white, smudges of hope that play  
with me, but dance with everyone else.

Behind, untamed passion that blinded  
me, left me silent, lost, burnt. Swept  
away in grey. Delicate shadows that  
flicker in time, bruises of strength,  
frowns you taught me will pass.  
Clusters of secrets, because you cry.

My hair will catch in the wind,

and I'll know you're taking a breath,  
and sometimes I'll hear you scream.  
And I will feel your tears come pouring  
down, and when they stop, feel relief.  
I look up and I don't feel so alone. You  
carry it with you too. It's your power.

You should be tired now, but you're  
painted with bristling, velvet darkness,  
a rich cloak, awake on sleepless nights.  
A haze of blurred lines, a fury of  
mischances. Stars, like jewels, dancing.  
Glowing beads strung so perfectly  
together, dangling diamond earrings,  
fighting for attention, tying me in knots  
I surely can't untangle. I thought I would  
be locked there forever.

In the centre, the ghost of the sun,  
a pearl on display. Gentle. Comforting.  
Smooth, like satin's touch. Its glow  
stares with smiling eyes, gently holding  
my heart, my hand. We dance in  
moonlight, too young, in the park.

And time can heal, because my heart  
is now covered in welcomed stitches,  
and my thread no longer unravels.  
Sometimes, I will feel a soft tug,  
and think I still miss you.  
But it tightens quickly. And I'm grateful.

You and Me were made to happen,  
but just not made to last.

## Landslide

Ruby Lykke, Year 12

It was 3:36 on a slightly windy Friday afternoon when I finally managed to escape the office, off the back of a meeting meant to finish more than two hours prior. I spoke for a total of approximately minutes on the same contract we'd been analysing for months and sat, for the rest of the meeting, trying not to fall asleep. Three straight weeks of conferences and phone calls and contracts had driven me insane, and I was looking forward to the trip home for Miranda's engagement.

The streets were the kind of busy usually expected for the end of the week, humming with cars and briefcases trying to get home and start the weekend as soon as possible. I bent down slightly, lifting the edge of my trousers from the pavement as it began to rain, only to see they were already soaked. 'Great,' I muttered, 'just great.'

The rain still hadn't let up by the time I made it home. Heavier now, it tapped on the window as I packed my bags, suddenly grateful for the excuse to leave the city, even if just for a few days.

In an hour I was gazing out the window as the pilot announced our descent into Redstone. The intercom crackled above me while I made the final few edits to my manuscript. I shut my laptop and placed the tray table back to its closed position, somehow not feeling as satisfied as I thought I would have. Perhaps it was the thought that, albeit finished, the draft would most likely never go anywhere, never do anything successful. Eighteen months of my life, and for what? To sit among the other files in my laptop like a download I never meant to save? I tried to push the thought out of my mind.

A forty-minute taxi ride later, I stepped out of the car and onto the lawn of my childhood home. The 'Congratulations!' banner hanging off the porch swayed slightly in the breeze as I carried my bag up the driveway, music and the smell of something delicious wafting from inside the house. In the distance, the snow-covered mountains stood strong and timeless, my own silent welcome banner to the place I knew so well. Looking up at them, a sense of quiet relief settled over me, and I smiled. It was good to be home.

The old jarrah door swung wide open as I knocked, and I was quickly enveloped in the arms of my little sister. 'Carrie!' she squealed, 'Ugh, I'm so glad you're here. I missed you! Aunty Vicky's gotten into the sherry, and Mum is being way too loud for eight o'clock.'

'I missed you, too,' I replied, laughing. 'Sounds like everything's going pretty normal then?'

'Oh yes, definitely normal,' she chuckled, rolling her eyes as she held the door open and I stepped inside. 'Take your stuff upstairs,' she said, moving towards the kitchen. 'I'll pour you a drink for when you come back. White wine, okay?'

'White's perfect.' She nodded and turned back to face the kitchen. 'Hey, Miranda!' I yelled from the stairs. She swiveled around. I grinned, holding up my left hand and wiggling my fingers at her. 'Congratulations, by the way. Steve's a lucky guy.'

She laughed. 'Well, thank you very much. Now hurry up and join me down here. I can't fend off the whole family by myself.'

Soon I was being paraded around the room by my mother, making small talk with members of the extended family that I hadn't seen in God knows how long. But thankfully, I wasn't the only one being questioned tonight. Steve had been cornered by Aunt Vicky near the charcuterie and seemed to be sweating slightly. He caught my eye from across the room, mouthing, 'Help me,' silently as she reached to fill up her glass. I laughed and shrugged at him. 'You're family now,' I mouthed back.

I turned back to a conversation in which my mother was bragging about the success of a case I took earlier in the year, to a man whose name I couldn't quite remember. 'Yes, yes... It was quite the payoff, wasn't it, darling?' She laughed haughtily. 'So successful. She'll be paying for our retirement before we know it!'

Though well-meaning, something about her comment made me feel particularly off, but I faked a smile and gave my best attempt at a laugh. There was no point in making a scene. She didn't know how unhappy I'd been all these years. She didn't know about all the panic attacks, the weeks on end when I couldn't sleep a wink, because every time I drifted off, I'd have this horrible feeling that I'd forgotten something crucial, like I'd left something important behind that I couldn't quite recall. I swallowed, feeling my heart race at the memory, and I took a sip from my glass, the drink somehow more bitter now than it had seemed just minutes ago.

Steve had managed to escape Aunt Vicky and seemed to be starting a speech near the fireplace. Miranda gazed up at him from his left, the smile on her wine-flushed face filled with excitement as Steve cleared his throat dramatically and raised his glass. She looked happier than I had ever seen her. And I realised that despite all the successes of my past few years, I'd never felt like that. Sure, there

were moments when I felt proud of the effort I put in, the weeks on end of hard work. But I never felt happy with myself when I was done.

Suddenly overwhelmed, the edges of the room seemed to blur around me, and I became all-too aware of my fingers around the cold stem of my glass. I drew in a breath and let it out slowly, attempting to calm myself, but it wasn't enough. Making my exit quietly, I passed through the kitchen for a glass of water and retreated to my room, the sound of applause signaling the finished speech echoing behind me as I closed the door.

Later that evening, I was still sitting in that same position on the floor of my room when I heard a soft knock. 'It's only me,' Miranda whispered. 'I thought you might need some ice cream.' She smiled and held up the tub and two spoons.

'Thanks,' I replied softly, grabbing a spoon as she sat down. 'Sorry I kinda disappeared on you earlier.'

'No, no, it's alright,' she replied, her mouth half-full of ice cream already as she dipped the spoon back into the tub. 'You okay? You seemed a little off tonight.'

I sighed and sat up a little straighter against the pillows. 'Yeah, I'm okay. Well, actually, I'm not sure.'

She shuffled closer and put her hand on my shoulder.

'It's just, lately, I've been feeling so behind on everything, like everyone's doing amazing things with their life and I'm just—'

'But, Carrie, you do so much.'

'I know. But that's the weird thing. I've achieved a lot. I'm in a job where I'm making more than I ever imagined, living in a fancy new apartment I just bought with my own money, but I just feel like something is missing, you know? And it's ridiculous. I've worked so hard to get here. I know I should be happy, but—' Struggling to put my feelings into the right words, I stood and began to pace, spoon in hand.

'I just feel like I'm doing all the wrong things with my life. I went to law school in the first place because it was the closest thing to a writer I could be and still make money. And at the start, I enjoyed it, I really did. But now, God, I'm fifteen years into this thing and all I talk about are mergers and contracts and money. Bloody money! I've just finished a manuscript for God's sake, and I can't even bring myself to send it, because ... because... what if it doesn't work?'

I sat down and let my head fall into my hands. 'I just keep asking myself what's the point, you know? Like, everyone keeps saying how I'm doing so well, so successful.' I paused. 'Shouldn't that be enough?'

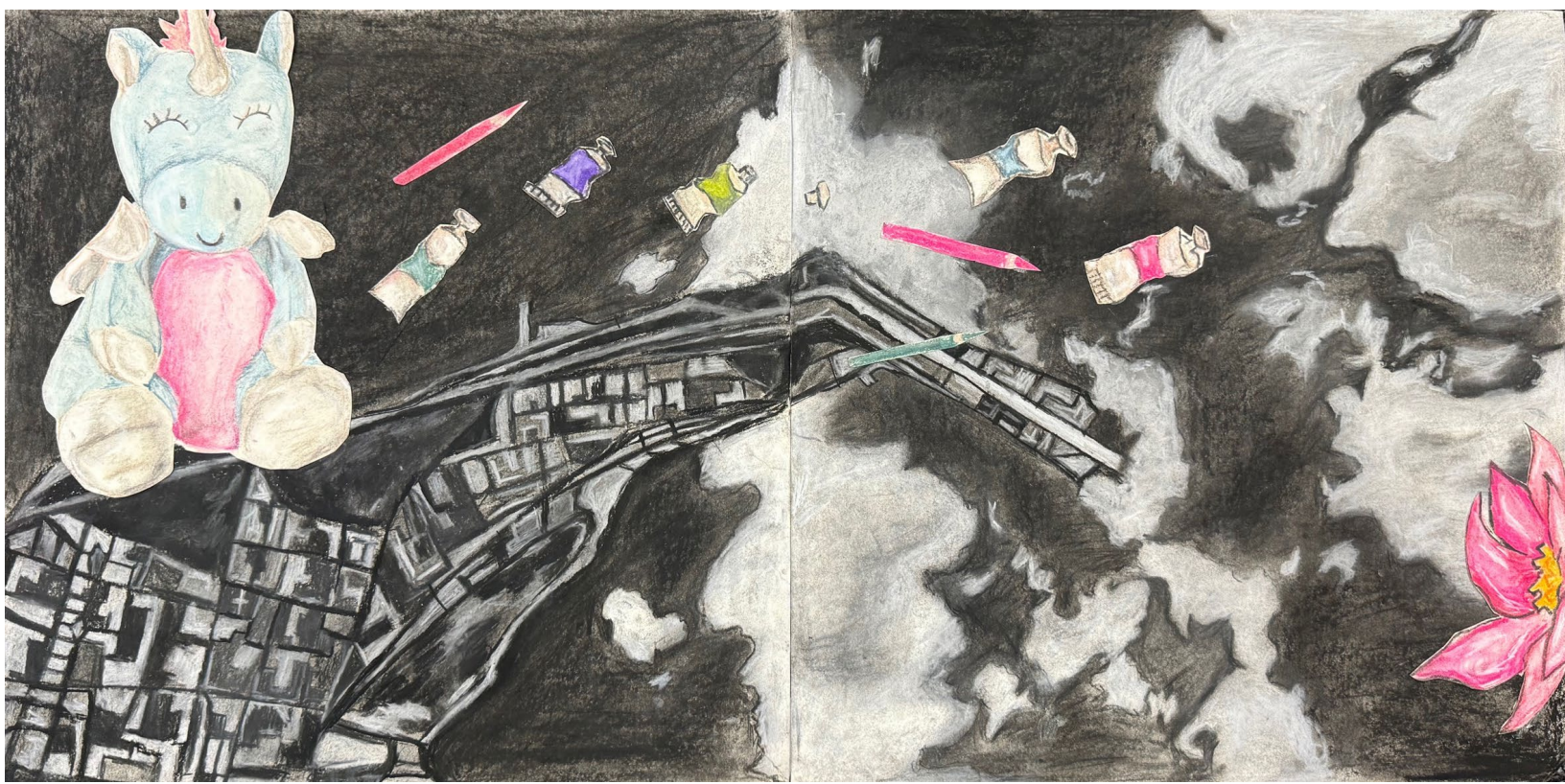
Crossing her legs, Miranda took my hand in hers. 'Well,' she said, 'the way I think about it, is it really success if you're miserable all the time?' She took another spoonful of ice cream. 'At the end of the day, you need to ask yourself what it is you'll regret more, that you didn't make as much money as you could have? Or that you didn't give yourself a chance to do what you actually love? I mean, what is it you're so scared of, anyway? You never know if it'll work out until you take the chance to do it. And even if it doesn't go perfectly, so what? You've never done this before. It's not going to be perfect the first time around. It's not meant to be. But if you never even send it, how will you know?'

On the plane ride home fifteen hours later, Miranda's words still echoed in my head. What was I so afraid of? Was it failure? Or was it simply the fear of chasing something uncertain, after years of doing what was expected?

Looking down at my completed manuscript, I realised she had a point. There was no way of knowing whether it would work out. Unless I gave it a try.

# OTHER WORLDS— SPECULATIVE, SINISTER OR STRANGE

*A Childhood Dream*  
Clara Radici (Year 10)



## Not Enough to Explain

Annabelle Kelliher, Year 12

There was a moment, just before it all changed, when everything seemed ordinary. The kettle screamed on the stovetop like it did every morning—the same wheeze and shriek. The red numbers of the digital clock blinked slowly: seven... forty-two. The blinds fluttered as the wind gently nudged them, and the news droned faintly from the television in the living room—something about a road closure, something about a heatwave.

Mum hummed tunelessly in the kitchen. The same song. The one without a name. Lucy sat at the breakfast table, crunching on her cereal as usual, the milk a little too warm—maybe off. Her brother, Jamie, scrolled mindlessly on his phone in the chair across from her. Same expression. Same silence. Same day. It was always the same.

It arrived the way fog does: silent, sudden, and all around. Not loud like a thunderclap, not soft like a whisper. More like a flicker, just enough to unsettle, not enough to explain. A feeling, faint and cold, brushing the back of her neck like a breath in an empty room.

Something was ... off. Something more than the milk.

It started with the wallpaper. She had stared at it every day for seventeen years, a forest shade of green vines curling up the walls of their kitchen. But that morning, maybe it was the light or maybe it wasn't, it looked wrong. The pattern repeated too exactly. Every vine twisted in the same direction; every leaf tilted at the same angle. Like someone had copied and pasted the same stretch, over and over. Lucy blinked. Rubbed her eyes.

The kettle stopped screaming. The silence that followed felt manufactured, like someone had pressed mute on a scene. 'Mum...' she started, her voice uncertain.

'Yes, darling,' Mum replied, not looking up from her cutting board.

'What's that song you always hum?'

Her mother paused, knife hovering above half-chopped carrots. 'I... I don't know,' she said slowly. 'I've just always hummed it.'

'Yeah, I know, but where did you first hear it?' Lucy asked.

She smiled gently. 'I suppose I've just always known it.' She turned back to her chopping.

Lucy glanced at her brother. 'Do you remember what we did last weekend, Jamie?'

He didn't even look up. 'Same as always.'

'What's that?' she asked.

He blinked, still not meeting her gaze. 'You're being weird.'

Routine slipped: just a little, just enough. Her cereal tasted like cardboard—not stale, just empty. She got up to open the window. It wouldn't open, even though she'd opened it yesterday. She looked at the clock on the microwave, blinking slowly: seven... forty-three. Yet she knew she'd been sitting there for at least twenty minutes. She tried to scroll on her phone. All the apps were blank. No texts. No browser. No past. No existence. No explanation.

'What day is it?' she asked, slightly alarmed.

'Thursday, of course,' her mum replied.

'What date?' Lucy demanded.

Another pause. 'Does it matter?'

Yes. Yes, it did matter. Lucy got up so fast her chair scraped against the tiles. She ran to the front door and threw it open to see— Nothing. Thick white fog had swallowed everything: the driveway, the street, the sky. The post box seemed to be floating in the fog like a relic, untouched by time. The ordinary, she realised, was not ordinary at all. She was stuck in a loop. A lullaby. A script.

She turned back to her mother, still standing in the kitchen; still chopping; still smiling. 'Why didn't I notice before?' Lucy asked, her voice quivering.

Her mother looked at her then. Her eyes weren't unkind, but they weren't quite real either. 'You weren't meant to.'

## The Fault

Eva Smith, Year 12

I step out into the street, my footsteps hollow and mechanical, signaling my reluctant entry into the great clockwork I have been taught to call home. Under the sallow light of the moon, The Great Wall stands stark and ominous, slicing the night in two, outlining the strictly designated boundaries we are forbidden to cross. Beyond the wall? No one knows. The Omnifathers ensure it stays that way.

Duty commences at six sharp. I lower my head, catching the harsh, familiar gleam of the green light embedded in my tracker, a constant reminder of the life I am tethered to. Without slowing, I begin my silent ascent toward the duty centre, escorted on either side by bright lamps that hem the streets. My pulse quickens. Each step blurs into the next as I weave cautiously between the regiments of marchers. I am careful to keep my movements measured, invisible. 5:58 p.m. flashes on my tracker. I am going to be late.

Every action, every word, every misstep is recorded by the Omnifathers. No moment is truly our own. The familiar whir of their passage cuts through the stagnant evening air. I flinch instinctively as one glides by, dragging behind it a woman, limbs thrashing, her voice raw with terror. I recognise the sound of her pleas—she is a fellow coworker from the ‘Generate Our Future’ factory. I do not make eye contact. No one does. The woman’s cries are quickly smothered by the silence that follows her removal: a silence too thick, too rehearsed. Her absence presses down heavier than her presence ever did. The evening sky, grey and deceitful, looks down at me. 5:59 p.m. I won’t make it in time.

I focus on my tracker to distract from the agonising burn in my lungs. Then, without warning, darkness. The world turns off. The Omnifathers freeze mid-glide, heads drooping like broken marionettes. The lamps gutter into darkness. The sense of surveillance dissolves into a silence so profound it is almost deafening. For a moment, I think my mind is playing tricks on me, that this is some final test. I glance down; my tracker is blank.

Cautiously, I lift my head. Across the street, doors creak open. Faces peer out, tentative and pale in the moonlight. We stand in suspended disbelief, the void speaking a thousand words. Somehow, the main power system must have collapsed. Is this our chance? Hope ignites, sudden and terrifying. For the first time in memory, people pour into the streets, not into the orderly lines we are

forced to inhabit, but into chaos, into life. Mothers clutch children close to their chests; fathers drag hastily packed bags. The air smells sharp, electric with possibility as The Great Wall is clawed with bare hands and broken hope. It is finally time.

Yet I stay where I am, frozen. This can't be true. It must be a fault in the system. A fault they will patch; a fault they will punish. I glance again at The Wall, now buried beneath a mass of scrambling bodies. They will not get out. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. Already, I can hear the faint crackle of life returning to the Omnifathers. I know the city will wake, and when it does, it will be even angrier than before.

I lower my head and step back into the shadows, the green light of my tracker flickering back to life. The faces in the street hesitate, but only for a moment before screams begin to rise. But they are screams not of rebellion; they are screams of realisation. This was never an opportunity. It was a malfunction. A trap.

I knew it. Hope was a malfunction. Obedience is survival.

I continue my walk.

## The Australian Dream

Jasmine Ingram, Year 11

The home pregnancy test showed two distinct green lines. ‘Hanna, we’ve got to call the clinic straight away. If we don’t, you know what they’ll do to us.’

‘Charlie,’ I pleaded, ‘I just can’t. It’s our child. There must be another way.’

‘You know we can’t afford it,’ he replied.

We strapped on facemasks and cycled down to what used to be Leighton Beach—it was now a toxic and polluted wasteland. This was where we always went when we needed time alone to think. High humidity and record smog levels combined to keep the temperature hovering around forty-four degrees Celsius so, slick with sweat, we sat on the sand, holding slippery hands, faces flushed from the oppressive heat. Charlie rifled through his backpack and pulled out a frozen banana he’d rationed. Since the decommissioning of the cattle and dairy industries, bananas had become literal gold—a highly sought-after substitute for contraband ice-cream. He offered it to me, and we sat silently, both of us filled with the dread of what was to come.

Squinting into the sun, I could just make out Rottnest Island. A magical nirvana floating on smoky grey clouds, my fondest memories were all tangled up with Rotto. Suspended somewhere in the sleepy, golden years before starting high school, I recalled holidays spent with cousins, when days seemed long and full of sunshine. We would pedal our bikes to Little Parakeet Bay for the best snorkelling, fascinated with swirls of rainbow-coloured fish and coppery dugites sunning themselves on rocks. One day we hunted for crayfish but came home with a dog-shark we’d found dead on the beach. I remember how proud I felt when Dad cooked it on the barbeque, delicious with lemon and salt, wedged between slices of white bread spread thick with butter. Other times we free-roamed, drifting between tennis, mini-golf or long bike-rides to watch the seal colony on the other side of the island. We never grew tired of arguing how to spend our ‘bakery’ money. Personally, I always voted for the yellow slabs of vanilla slice.

‘Do you ever miss it?’ Charlie asked, hesitantly.

‘I wouldn’t set foot on The Island now. Even if they paid me.’

When the 'Green Australia' policy was first introduced in 2031, I was only twenty-two years old and couldn't imagine anything more selfish than having a child. But now, here I was, desperate to find a way. When The Australia First Party took control, I would lie awake in the darkness struggling with a sense of doom, terrified the world might implode if I dared to fall asleep. First, they deported all non-white Australians who couldn't prove their Anglo-Saxon lineage, labelling them a threat to our sovereignty as a nation. Then, they drove everyone into factions and forced us into districts, creating a hierarchy where only those who could prove the longest generational ties to Australia gained entry to the superior realms. Rottnest Island was at the pinnacle of this social stratification, and those who were more recently settled in the country were relegated to the lower echelons on the mainland.

On The Island, the elite gained access to birthing services, whilst the rest of us drank water rumoured to be laced with sterilisation drugs. They told us this would be a temporary sacrifice to ensure our survival as a nation. They sold the idea of reigniting The Australian Dream—but it turned out that the dream was not just a lie, but a nightmare for most of us.

I turned to Charlie. 'What about Tasmania? I've heard rumours about a group of doctors who are taking on patients who can't afford the treatment—'

He cut me off, snapping, 'We have no way of getting there, Hanna. We don't even know if that's rumour is true or just wishful thinking.' He was unwilling to entertain the idea. 'It's way too risky for you to stay pregnant. They'll find us; they'll take you away.'

The 'Green Australia' policy, limiting population growth to babies born with the ability to photosynthesise, was what had changed everything. Once that was introduced, highly regulated fertility clinics offering new and expensive genome editing technology began to spring up across Australia. This allowed doctors to insert plant DNA into the human genome, effectively incorporating the fundamental life process, photosynthesis. The ability for humans to use sunlight to convert carbon dioxide and water into chemical energy and oxygen, promised to feed the country.

However, to be eligible to apply, you needed a certain amount of money in your bank account. Which meant, effectively, that only a select few could access the service; only a few were legally permitted to have a child. What had been promised as a service accessible to all was in fact a form of genocide against the working class and those of mixed origins. If you were not enrolled in the

programme and fell pregnant, it was considered treason. You would be arrested on sight and forced into serving as a human volunteer for scientific experimentation.

As we sat together, looking out toward the tainted horizon, a crumpled piece of paper blew onto my lap. I stared blankly at the page, slowly realising what it was— an old political pamphlet, its slogan summing up all the promises made by the party, the reasons why the masses had been inspired to vote them in.

Australia must remain hopeful!

We must allow ourselves to dream!

Our children deserve clean water, clean air—

**VOTE AUSTRALIA FIRST FOR A FUTURE THAT SHINES  
GREEN!**

## The Brain Dead

Helena Zheng, Year 9

It laughs at my feeble attempt for freedom. The gate, it's a skyscraper, casting shadows that span hundreds of meters, trapping anyone who dares to approach under its watchful eye. Made of metal that doesn't dent, rust, or flake, it's the kind of surface only the rich can afford. The gate keeps out people like me, the poor children who long for freedom. I press my forehead against its cold metal and let the chill bleed into my skin; let it remind me that the world outside doesn't care.

Somewhere beyond this gate is Ad Space. People say it's just a social construct, but I've seen the glow at night; their screens running overtime, flickering every time a new brain-dead enters the log system. It exists. It's there. It taunts me every day, dangling freedom just out of reach. 'Do they see me?' I wonder. Maybe they're sipping liquid gold somewhere, watching through the cameras, laughing at me. Maybe one of them whispers to the other, 'Watch the poor thing. She thinks she owns her thoughts!'

The first time I heard an ad in my head, I thought it was a god. '*Brighten your day with Sunkiss Light soft drink! Now available in rare tree flavour!*' I laughed at the absurdity of this unknown voice appearing randomly throughout the week. I laughed so hard I thought I'd suddenly have abs. Back then, I thought it was a prank, a one-off thing. But it didn't stop. It never stops.

The ads now slip between any cracks in my thoughts, like water, weaselling through whatever is left of my autonomy. '*Feeling tired? Try EnergyEz, your daily dose of energy! Now available in capsule form!*'

*'Guardian Gates now on sale. Buy your protection, peace of mind and safety today! Limited stocks available!'* I press my palms against my ears, but the voice doesn't come from outside. It's not external. It's inside, and it will always find me no matter where I run.

*'Lonely? Try FriendLoop! Buy new friends in just three easy payments!'* I scream, 'SHUT UP!' and my voice slices through the ads like glass. I don't know where my thoughts end, and the slogans begin anymore.

Metal against bone; bone against metal: I stopped feeling the pain an hour ago. Or was it two? Time stretches here, useless, a concept sold to the rich for their

amusement. Streaks of light bleed into the previously dark sky. I glance at my arms, now littered with shades of green and purple. I only hear the hollow ring of metal as I strike my fist again. Beneath that ringing, I imagine a heartbeat, one that belonged to a little girl (mini me) long ago.

My parents told me it would never be worth selling your brain for money. The temporary monetary gain couldn't even cover half of the living expenses in 2050. Despite their values, to keep my sanity and my future hopeful, they turned to Ad Space. I never knew they had begun selling their memories to Ad Space until it was too late.

It started small—a dream, the lyrics to a favourite song, the taste of an apple. Little things you don't realise make you human until they vanish. But inflation climbed, electricity disappeared, food disappeared. So, they sold more. And more. Until one day, they forgot who I was. Their eyes dulled. Movements slowed. They became free real estate for Ad Space.

The brain-dead, that's who they are now, piled in alleyways, eyes half-open, breathing but not living. Some say their souls replay old ads on a loop. I like to think—I need to hope—that they're somewhere better. Somewhere with peace and freedom. It makes passing them in the streets slightly easier.

*'Ad Space: Bringing the Future of Tomorrow!'* The brain-dead don't hear this. That's how I know I'm not one of them. Not yet. I blink, and for a moment, catch my reflection in the metal surface. My face looks wrong; my skin is too pale, and my lips move half a second late.

There's one memory I keep replaying. My mother is sitting by the window, her eyes open but empty. Her mouth is moving like she's chewing air, but no words come out. I remember thinking she looked peaceful. I think I understand her now. I slide down the gate, my back pressing against cold metal. The city stretches behind me—silent, flickering, hollow. The lights don't blink anymore; they just stay frozen on the same ad. *BELONG! BELIEVE! SELL!*

Someone told me once that the rich still have real sunsets. (Were sunsets green? Blue? Maybe fiery oranges and reds?) That their skies aren't filtered. (A sky without static!) That they can think their own thoughts. (Imagine that. Ideas that belonged only to you.) I close my eyes and try to imagine it, silence without

slogans. But the voice interrupts again—'*Why dream when you can experience?*'—and the picture dissolves.

I don't know what I'd even do if they opened the gate. March inside? Demand my mind back? There's nothing left to give. I just want it to stop.

I look down again. My veins are glowing brighter now, thick cables twisting under the skin, humming with colour. They look fake, like a toddler drew them on with a Sharpie. For a second, I wonder if they are fake. Maybe that's the connection. Maybe that's how the ads are getting in. I press a hand to my wrist. It feels warm, too warm. If I can just disconnect them, then, I'll be free.

## Before I Forgot

Clementine Castleden, Year 10

I open my eyes, blinded by the sickly artificial light they insist we wake to. Everything shadowless and bright: it feels too open to be private. I hitch myself up on my elbows and stare at the relentlessly white surroundings, eager to spot even a flick of colour. Nothing. Unsurprised, I sit up straight. The bunk above me is quiet and has been ever since Eril passed her exit exam. I remember how excited she was. For years before that exam, she dreamt constantly about being outside the walls. I guess it's what keeps us going in here—the hope of new life.

I understand where she was coming from. Being raised on stories of a great city and colourful lifestyle, reminders that we were lucky to be chosen for training so we could help protect the 'great city of New Asberg.' Our regulators had permanently engraved this in our minds. I think once the city had been called something different, long before the Fifth World War. Something like York? But that doesn't matter now. Whatever it was, it's all long gone.

Once, I was excited by the thought of getting out. But not so much, now. I don't like change; in a weird sort of way, I like my life now. Well, 'like' might be an overstatement. I deal with it. I know what's happening, what time it's happening—all the time. It provides comfort, in the most distant way possible. Now, thinking about what might be beyond the walls makes me uneasy.

When the bell goes, I startle, realising I'm completely disorganised for the day ahead. My door suddenly unlocks and slides open, exposing me to the melancholy flow of students heading to their first class. I jump up and run to a hidden spot in the corner of the room to slip on my uniform, a tasteless grey cotton jumpsuit that's three sizes too small. You only get issued a new uniform every five years, so there's no point dwelling on how uncomfortable it is.

It's Saturday. Which means military training first. I slide into the crowd and let it carry me there. Military class is uneventful, as usual, and though the end of the lesson seems to come too slowly, it does eventually arrive. The regulator dismisses us after we perform the school anthem: this is mandatory at the end of every lesson. The last student caught not singing was lashed raw. So, everyone sings. Full stop.

Walking out of the training centre, I head to my next class, deliberately taking my time. Math is next; I hate math. As I turn down a corridor to my left, I notice a small

huddle of boys a few metres up. I don't think much of it at first and assume they're probably doing the same thing as me. But something about the way they're talking, hushed and looking around periodically, piques my interest. There's no one around to hear them, so what could they be afraid of?

Although deep in my gut I know I *don't* want to know, curiosity takes over and I slow my walk to a shuffle, veering in closer as I pass them. Once I am within earshot, I can hear their whispers getting more intense. My heart is beating fast, but I don't know why. What's there to be scared of? As I get closer, I make out a few of the hushed words.

'I'm telling you, he saw his life before the school!' insists the boy closest to me.

'He was diseased!' hisses the one on the left.

'Creed is right,' whispers Alfie seriously. 'Ted did see his life outside of the walls.'

I know him, Alfie, and he's not like this. He sits at my assigned lunch table, and from what I can tell, he's upbeat and sweet almost all the time. I drag my focus back to the group but suddenly hear nothing. Then, looking down, I see my feet frozen in place. My heart's not beating fast anymore—it's come to a complete halt. Holding my breath, I turn slowly toward the group that is now directly beside me. I see Creed, Alfie, and the other boy eyeing me cautiously, like I am holding a bomb set to randomly detonate.

Alfie comes forward. 'Jess? Jess, listen to me. Listen! Ted saw nothing, Ted is not diseased, we know nothi—'

I hear the heavy thump of the regulator's combat boots approaching, turn back to the boys, and see them all retreating, fast, down the corridor. The combat boots are getting closer, louder. A knot forms in my mind as I decide whether to run or plead innocent. Too late. I feel a pinch somewhere on my arm and feel myself slipping in and out of consciousness as I collapse to the floor. I catch a glimpse of the regulator's pristine white boots as my mind goes dark.

I dream of a family, one I don't recognize but somehow feel I should. 'I'm there,' I think. 'I'm viewing from my own eyes.' I am lying down on a lumpy mattress. Rickety bars rise around me on all four sides but are cut short after half a metre or so and topped with foam tubes, like babyproofing. Suddenly a woman's face appears above me, smiling. She's beautiful and has an eerie familiarity, warm features and olive skin. She lifts me out of my soft cage and places me on my

feet. But somehow, everything's wrong. My eyes barely reach the height of the table in the room's centre, and I'm closer to the woman's feet than her head. There's a sharp knock on the door, and it flies open without warning. I don't see who it is before my consciousness begins to slip once again. I hear the woman let out a heart-rending scream. Then I don't see or hear anything more.

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I wake to the familiar bars on the underside of Eri's bed above me. It somewhat surprises me— I half expected to be in the nursing bay. I guess it wasn't very serious. I get ready for the day, and it rushes by. It's only when I get to lunch that I begin to remember what happened before I passed out. I don't see Alfie, and suddenly yesterday's strange events hit me like a bullet.

It's weird, I swear I remember simply passing out in math class. Yet somehow, I know I didn't. I definitely didn't. I remember bits and pieces: walking by Alfie and his friends, hearing something important. Something about Ted, another student, seeing his past life, as in his life before school. But that can't be right. That's impossible. Everyone here was raised in the lower school and brought here at a certain age. At least that's what we've been told. Noone remembers anything before upper school.

That boy must have been diseased. Although, what *is* 'diseased'? I've never really thought about it before. When a student goes missing out of the blue, the regulators tell us they've been taken somewhere to be cured; that they had a disease that was contagious and deadly. But why are we just expected to believe that? What if 'diseased' is not what they've told us it is? What if—

I quickly dismiss the idea. I'm sure the regulators wouldn't lie. Why would they? Walking to my lunch table I turn to Rachel, my good friend. 'Where's Alfie? He should be here by now.'

Rachel gives me a quizzical look. 'Alfie? Who's Alfie?'

## **Beyond the Known**

Laraine Zhang, Year 9

*This piece was Longlisted in the High School Category of the 2025 Dymocks  
'Beyond Words' Creative Writing Competition*

### **Historic Homes of the Greater UK**

Issue 24, June 2019

Ashbrooke Hall - An Art Historian's Dream

By Natasha Ellis

This delightful historical manor tucked away in the hills of Oxford is a must-see for any historian, art connoisseur, or anyone with an interest in unusual tourist destinations. Ashbrooke houses an enormous collection of portraits by some of the most renowned Regency masters, all of which are of the same subject, Earl Henri of Oxford, who may just be the most documented man of his age.

At the centre of this collection sits a painting of a young woman, origin unknown. This haunting gallery houses one of the only portraits painted by Franco Coppola, as well as many other rare pieces.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit, and the audio guide is masterfully done, painting an almost Austen-esque romance.

(\$37 for a guided tour)

### **Ledger of the Miller & Sons Pawnshop**

Date sold: 13<sup>th</sup> July 1816

Item: Portrait of a Young Woman in Pink (*artist unknown*)

Price: 3 pounds

Seller: Bridget Miller

Buyer: Charles Hastings

Notes: In truth, I am awfully glad to be rid of that damned painting. It is unsettling, and her eyes seemed to follow me around. I might have sold it a little low. I'm sure some fool would've bought it for far more, for it is very beautiful, but the sooner it was gone the better.

## **Journal of Henri, Earl of Oxford 10/07/1816**

10th July, 1816

It is good to be in my childhood home after all this time. My Grand Tour days are behind me, and I do rather think the good people of Oxford University would prefer to avoid my face. The whole place is rather empty, and what furniture there is seems to be terribly outdated.

I have sent my man Charles out without a budget and instructed him not to return until he brings me something truly special. I wish to begin a collection of beautiful things, to make my home a haven for the arts. To surround myself with the extraordinary. The most wonderful pieces, and the finest of minds: they shall all gather at Ashbrooke Hall.

## **A letter to Miss Elizabeth Cross**

September 25th, 1816

My dearest, beautiful Elizabeth,

Sometimes I get worried that the master of the house is quite mad. Us servants rarely see him anymore, and he wishes his meals delivered to the ballroom, which is to be transformed into a gallery. It's nice-looking, but it's just not what's done in a respectable household!

Besides, it's not much of a gallery with just one painting in it. It's just the one Hastings brought in, and nobody except him has seen it. When we enter the room, it is always covered in cloth, and as far as any of us are concerned, it must be too hideous to sell.

He is always cooped up inside, muttering away to himself. I'm certain he's a great man, but everyone gossips about him so. As far as I know, he employs me, and that's all that matters. I shall ask to visit around Christmas, and I hope we shan't be apart for much longer.

With much affection,

Your loving Catherine

## **A note to Franco Coppola, from his assistant Edward Bell**

February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1817

A man dropped by the studio the other day. Asked for a portrait, and I told him you didn't do portraits unless you felt particularly inspired. He's an ordinary looking fellow, but he's Earl of Oxford. You know the type. He was very insistent, and he doesn't plan on giving up any time soon. Apparently wants to be told 'No' by the master himself. He'll be back Thursday, so we'll see what you're thinking then.

Edward

## **An excerpt from the introduction of Doctor Anthony Carlyle's *Guide to the Mind*.**

I have decided to dedicate my time to writing this book, since it is quite evident that a study of the mind and its madneses is required. This conclusion was reached due to a patient I had in my youth, the Earl of Oxford, who was quite the character. The poor fellow spent all his time talking to a painting of a beautiful woman. He was, I believe, genuinely in love with it. Truly unfortunate.

## **Excerpt from the transcript of *Remarkable Pieces of the Regency Era* with Luci Green (2010)**

*Young Lady in Pink*, 1795, artist unknown

Now, this breathtaking painting is truly a mystery. With the distinctive light work of Coppola, yet those vibrant colours from Collins, the subject is painted in the romantic light of a Jane Austen heroine. All I can say is, Kiera Knightley better watch out!

## **Journal of Henri, Earl of Oxford**

It is all of no use she speaks to me not she stays forever young as i age how long can i go on like this i care no longer for being a gentleman she is everything i know none of my paintings speak only death will part us for she will stay young forever how can i make this last

### Newspaper clipping from *The Oxford Gazette*, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1818

WANTED: Doctor or mortician with experience in embalming, preservation and anti-aging. Generous remuneration. For more details, write to Ashbrooke Hall.

### Diary of Dr Anne Vandertramp

August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1818

Is there any solution to my dilemma? There's no damn use in being a doctor if you have no patients!

If only the Earl of Oxford wanted something more realistic. I can't make ~~these~~ false promises of immortality. However, he is a desperate man offering a very generous amount of money for a single attempt.

Surely, it's worth me trying.

### An excerpt from the conclusion of Doctor Anthony Carlyle's *Guide to Immortality*

And that's the end of it. Immortality is utterly impossible. Unless one has a supply of healthy, live organs, it is impossible for a human to live past eighty.

### Excerpt from the transcript of *Georgia Solves it!*

Ep. 29, 14/04/25 "Frankenstein meets Jane Austen, with an echo of Dorian Gray—The case of Dr Anne Vandertramp"

How far would you go to spend forever with your lover?

For most people, this answer seems simple enough. But for Henri, Earl of Oxford, he meant *forever*. The cost? Seven lives, twenty-four self-portraits and his sanity. And the reason for all of this? A painting.

## A Ticket to Nowhere

Lela Dharmananda, Year 9

There is magic to trains at night, the kind that hums in your bones and makes you feel suspended between worlds. London to Belgium, overnight. The platforms are wet, smelling faintly of rain and cement, and the people move in lines, purposeful and dim. But the minute you step into a carriage you are no longer a part of it—you are a secret; you are a radiant light wrapped in silk. I loved it.

The station clock ticked lazily above me as I dragged my bag across the platform, scarf tucked under my chin, fingers sticky with chocolate from the corner shop. I had fifteen minutes until departure, and I spent them staring at my reflection in the polished metal rails: I looked small, delicate, a ghost of the person I was growing into. And I liked it that way.

Stepping into the carriage, the world shifted, surrounding me with warm air, the scent of hot chocolate and polished old leather, spongy beige carpet and soft golden lamps. I could feel the hum of the rails immediately under my feet, vibrating up through the soles of my shoes, like a gentle lullaby. Foldaway beds were tucked into hidden nooks, blankets folded with care, velvet curtains drawn at every window. The attendants moved with quiet purpose, trays balanced, keys jangling. This was not at school, or home, or the half-life in between. This was elsewhere. This was mine.

My compartment was narrow but perfect: two leather seats facing each other, a foldaway bed waiting inside the wall, a massive window draped by curtains heavy enough to drown out anything beyond. I dropped my bag and curled into the seat, tugging a blanket over my lap. For the first time all day, I exhaled.

That was when the knock came. It was sharp, too sharp, and I froze. Passengers didn't knock; passengers passed each other like ghosts. The door slid slowly open and he stepped in, a man, thirty, maybe older, his suit too clean, his eyes too bright. He smiled, but not the kind of smile you could trust. 'You're in my seat,' he said, voice low and even.

I laughed, because obviously he was wrong. The attendant had given me this key, this room. But he didn't move, didn't even blink. The smile didn't budge.

Something cold crawled down my spine. 'Wrong cabin,' I said sharply. 'Check again.' But instead of backing out, he just shut the door behind him. And here's

the part I won't ever forget: the hum of the train got louder, like it was holding its breath.

What happened next was fast, stupid, a blur of instinct. His hand brushed the inside of his coat, reaching for something. I didn't wait to find out. My hand shot for the nearest object, my heavy metal water bottle, still warm with tea. I swung it. Hard. It hit his neck with a sound that made my stomach twist. And he dropped, just like that, cracking his head against the corner of the seat on the way down. And then he wasn't moving at all.

For a moment I just stared, waiting for his eyes to flick open, for him to tell me I was crazy, to laugh, to say I overreacted. But the silence stayed. My stomach lurched as I knelt beside him and shook his shoulder twice. Nothing. The air felt thick, pressing on my skin. This definitely wasn't supposed to happen. My phone was in my hand before I could think. *How long until rigor mortis starts?* Forty-five minutes to a few hours Google said. That was all the time I had before he turned stiff as wood. I grabbed him by the hands, breath tearing at my throat: he was much heavier than he looked. I tried to arrange him in the corner of the leather seat; blanket tucked under his chin, but the angle was all wrong. It looked awful.

Back on my phone. *How to make a dead body look alive.* No signal. My reflection stared back from the screen, wide-eyed and desperate. Blood smeared the carpet where his head had hit. I scrubbed at it with my scarf, but it just spread, darker. I was startled by a knock on the door. 'Tickets, please,' a voice called, polite, practiced.

I cracked the door open just enough and forced a smile. 'Already showed mine.'

The attendant's gaze slid past me, quick, sharp, as if seeking a glimpse of something. 'Sometimes we check twice,' she said. My throat constricted. But after a pause, she nodded and moved on. I collapsed back inside, pulse thrumming against my ears. I couldn't deal with this: every sound in the corridor seemed to be coming for me.

I was rehearsing excuses in my head when the door opened again, this time without a knock. In slipped a man, quiet as smoke. Not the attendant, someone else. 'You look like someone who doesn't know what to do next,' he said, his voice steady, conspiratorial. I couldn't move; I certainly couldn't speak. He glanced at the body, at him, then back at me. No shock, no judgement, just a strange, measured calm. He smoothed a cushion, tucked the blanket tighter, arranged things the way I had tried and failed. Every movement was casual yet

practiced. 'When they come back,' he said softly, 'look tired. People believe tired.'

I swallowed hard. 'Why are you helping me?'

He gave me a look that seemed to chill and comfort all at once. 'Because I've done this before.' He slipped into the corridor without a word, leaving me alone with the hum of the rails.

And when I eventually dared to look back, he was gone.

## Chained Explorers

Caitlin Chesson, Year 8

*This piece was Highly Commended in the Youth Category of the 2025 Peter Cowan Short Story Competition,*

The night sky glittered, deep and dark above the ocean. The Angel of the Deep looked up, through the rippling water to watch the stars. There used to be far more, the Angel mused. They stretched across the heavens, and the sea would mirror them back. The water would rise to touch the sky and fall to embrace the earth in an eternal dance of warring forces.

One star caught the Angel's attention. A golden glimmer, slowly growing, it became a figure clad in a puffy white jumpsuit, wires going to its pale helmet, which had a single golden sheet of glass in the front, reflecting the Angel of the Deep's own helmet. If they had a face, it wasn't visible. They moved with a grace that wasn't quite human, wasn't quite mechanical. An in-between, like so many things in life.

'Hello,' the Spirit of Exploration said. They were floating just above the water, away from the rising and falling of the waves. They never touched the waves, though it was only a hairsbreadth away. It wasn't their place to intrude.

'You're back.'

'Had to visit my favourite being.' If they had a face, the Spirit of Exploration would probably be smirking. The other didn't respond. After a while, they glanced towards the Angel of the Deep, taking in their appearance. 'Are we the last ones left, then?'

'Yeah.' They let that sit in the air between them for a while. There used to be more like them. The Angel had vague memories of a long, hooked beak and black-glass eyes. A bloodstained coffin-shield. However, they were gone now. Faded.

They could both feel it in their souls. A gentle tugging.

'Do—' the Spirit hesitated. They never hesitated. 'Are you going to go too?' The Angel of the Deep looked up at them in surprise. Sometimes they forgot how young the Spirit was.

The Angel knew how they looked. Barnacles covered the old rubber tubing of their arms and legs, and their feet were physically glued to the floor, sand and

dirt claiming them once more. They let out a mirthless laugh, gesturing to the tube on their helmet. It once led upwards, to the surface world, but was now crushed under a rusted anchor, waist high and covered in debris. It was too heavy to move, and besides, why would they? The diving suit was creaky and stiff, and it was so much more comforting to stay standing on the sea floor, watching the world go by through a gilded glass plate. 'I don't think I'll be up and about anytime soon.'

The Angel of the Deep had already come to terms with this, long ago. They were destined to leave like the changing of the tide, drawn back into the ground with the inevitable falling of the waves. They were fading, being forgotten, and soon the Spirit would be the only one left, drifting the skies in a bright space suit, like a white dwarf star, before eventually dying too.

The Spirit of Exploration looked towards the inky black sky. They knew all this too. The heavens were reflected in their gold visage, and, for a moment, the Spirit wasn't young and curious, but old. Tired. 'So, this is goodbye, then?'

The Angel of the Deep hummed noncommittally. It sounded like whale song, low and crooning. It sounded like the gentle burbling of bubbles, the hiss of relief of a glacier caving into the sea and the low rumble of the ocean floor. Slowly, the sound seeped away. Two explorers drifted in the all-encompassing silence.

## A Game of Hearts

Audrey Mann, Year 9

Few people know what happens when a card game ends, the box being put away with a thud upon a shelf, in a drawer, or laying forgotten on the floor. Sometimes, it's a tale of peace and happiness. This is not one of those stories.

I didn't want to kill him, you see. He drove me to it with his endless affairs, constant drinking, and continuous talking. It was too easy, to be honest. He had grown complacent within his role, having had no one oppose or try to kill him from the time we got married.

A simple slip of the hand over his goblet at dinner was all it took. It was almost satisfying, in a way, to see the way his golden eyes bulged, pale skin turning purple as he struggled to breathe, her name, 'Regina,' like a prayer falling from his lips.

He knew, of course, that I was the one who did it. There was a small pang of guilt as I felt arms wrap around me from behind, but I turned easily from the dying king, my gaze softening when I saw him there. Jack. My Jack. Cast in the low light, he looked even more striking when he looked at me like that, with the gaze that I wanted only on me.

That gaze flicked to my dead husband as Jack moved away from me, his arms slipping from around my waist like leaves falling in autumn. I mourned the loss of the warmth, for a second as he crouched down beside the body, checking for a pulse before shaking his head. 'Too bad dear old Rex here choked on his dinner. Such an unfortunate accident.' His eyes lazily crawled up to mine, eyes with dark depths I would happily fall into, drown in, get lost in over and over again, an abyss and ending of my choosing. I kept looking, searching for any signs of hesitance at what had happened.

A devilish, sinful smile curved his lips as he stood up and stalked back towards me. His hand traced the curve of my cheek bone, gently, in a way that belied the strength, the wickedness beneath. His lips brushed lightly over mine, a featherlight kiss that left me wanting, needing, craving more. I knew it was proper to wait three months before I married again. I did not want to wait; but to keep suspicion at bay, I needed to go into full mourning. My gaze landed on the far wall, where a faded painting of mine and Rex's wedding hung, a dusty reminder of that day, so many years ago. I was surprised to see that we looked genuinely

happy, like our marriage would last into the next life, and maybe the life after that. It turned out that was never meant to be.

We took no notice of the small girl in the shadows, pigtails slightly askew, who was watching not just the body on the floor but the two people standing over the dead king, embracing as if they had known each other for years. No one would believe her anyway if she told them. She slipped into the shadows, the black diamonds on the hem of her dress winking in the low torch light.

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Roses adorned the room's walls—white, pale pink and red in small bouquets, shaped into small hearts—a subtle tribute to the late Rex, King of Hearts, as well as Jack of Hearts, soon to be King Consort. It was a state affair, and everyone was there. Everyone from the Aces to the numbers and even some of the other royalty were stationed up front.

Jack waited up the front, resplendent in a white tuxedo with red hearts embroidered along its cuffs and pocket. I clutched a bouquet of red and white roses in my hands, the train of my wedding dress moving behind me, so long you couldn't see the end of it, its intricate white lace masking small intertwining spades and hearts which glimmered softly in the candlelight. My view was slightly obscured by a white veil, which was held in place by an intricate tiara of diamonds and sapphires and emeralds catching the light.

The ceremony passed in a blissful blur, and I barely realised what was happening until we'd finished our vows and the priest pronounced us husband and wife. Suddenly, Jack pulled me into his arms, dipping me down for a lingering kiss. The crowds of people in attendance cheered and covered us with rose petals as we walked hand in hand back down the aisle, our love no longer a secret.

The coronation followed the day after, my Jack being crowned King Consort for all to see, and now to rule by my side, until the end of our reign. We would live out the rest of our lives by each other's sides, content and happy.

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It broke my heart to put that knife in her chest. Wish I could say I regretted it too, or that it actually broke my heart. But it didn't. She didn't have anyone to blame but herself. All her incessant talking, and whining, and jealousy was just so annoying. I swear, I only had to talk to one woman in court and all of a sudden it

was, 'Off with her head!' Besides, I had already gotten what I wanted—the crown, power.

Honestly, she shouldn't have killed Rex that night. Hell, she shouldn't have come to the tavern after finding out about his 'affairs.' It was too easy. Making her fall in love with me was just too easy. She should've been more careful, especially for someone of her prestige and station. I couldn't believe she was so easy to manipulate. Anyway, it's too late to talk about what she 'should' have done now.

Maybe I do regret some of it. It was hard to see the betrayal in her eyes, her blood staining the bed red. Maybe I shouldn't have chosen stabbing—too messy, too hard to clean out of fabric. But at least it was easy to pin the blame for that on someone else. She was useful, until she wasn't.

I saw that girl, hiding in the doorway, just like that night when the first king died. The little diamonds on her dress were a dead giveaway. But I wasn't too bothered as my eyes returned to the body laid out on the bed, silk and blood mixing. No one would believe that girl anyway.

## The Great Secret

Celeste Kong, Year 7

*A mother's love is eternal.* I used to whisper those words to myself whenever I missed her, when nights grew long and coalesced into a breeding ground for nightmares and hollo-eyed monsters, spectres stitched from regrets and the things I'd tried to forget. They were always there, listening. And eternity seemed like a cruel word when all I could remember were fragile fragments, like shards of glass. Memories caught the morning sunshine in fleeting, delicate ways, scattering light through the mist of fading recollections. And they were sharp, cutting scars upon scars.

That night I dreamt of a woman. The face was obscure, but I could see her gentle silhouette. Wavy brown curls framed her face; gilded gold cuffs decorated her wrists and arms; a drop of amber shimmered on her throat. Her white gown billowed in the wind as she stood in a pine forest where tall trees loomed, fallen leaves creating a slick, glossy carpet of faded orange and gold. Suddenly, she lurched forward, falling to her knees and claspng at her throat. Tendrils of green smoke poured out of her mouth as her eyes became glassy and white.

When she moved towards me, I recoiled in horror, but for some reason I couldn't connect with the screaming logic to flee. When her eyes met mine, instead of anger and hunger I saw a pained expression, a grimace of regret and sorrow set across the deep and circling lines of her face, a tortured mouth hanging open for a wail that would never sound. I wanted to help. But what could I do? I tried moving towards her, but my legs dragged behind me as if I was running in water.

Gasping, choking on this green smoke as her eyes bulged, she spoke in a raspy voice:

*Step forth, young seeker, mark the night,  
The hour has come, the world alight.  
When guardian's visage doth appear,  
Know then the secret draweth near.  
Speak that which none expect to hear,  
And hold thus close what thou holds dear.*

She then fell heavily to the ground, her hair strewn across withered leaves. The smoke ceased and her eyes returned to that familiar warm brown, shining in the

moonlight. She breathed out so softly, I had to strain my ears to listen. 'Ophelia, find the Great Secret. Find you. Find Secret. Take the map, leave at dawn.'

Shivers ran down my spine and arms, a coldly electrifying yet familiar caress. The phrases tangled in my thoughts, looping over and over again until they began to lose meaning. *Find the Great Secret. Find you. Find Secret.* What did that mean? Why did this woman look and sound just like my mama but speak in riddles? 'Wait! What does that mean?' I tried to say, but my voice came out like wind through glass. Silence.

The dream disintegrated as I slowly woke to reality, fragments of what I had seen slipping like sand through trembling fingers. My body ached as if I was the one who had been thrown, and I found myself questioning everything. Why did this dream feel eerily like a premonition?

I tumbled out of bed bleary-eyed, and a small, yellowed, tightly bound roll of paper tied with twine fell to the floor. As if picking up a secret from the past, I moved towards my dresser and cautiously unwrapped the piece of crinkled paper, fingers unnerved and shaking. Before my eyes were intricate lines drawn with ink painstakingly etched into the parchment. Tiny trees clustered together like miniature forests, the map's even, precise lines showing the hard work of the ancient cartographer. In calligraphy at the top the map were the words Ashwick Vale. Shock ran through my body, and I dropped the map to the floor. 'Ashwick. Ashwick Vale. That's where I live. That's the forest. The forest outside the orphanage. Right now,' I muttered to myself like a madman.

I noticed that a polished gold coin had rolled out from the parchment. On one side, there was an old pine tree pressed into the face. I flipped it, and the face of a woman stared at me, smiling warmly.

*Find the Great Secret. Find you. Find Secret. Use the map and leave at dusk.*

The words whispered restlessly around me, swirling in my mind like a tornado. I felt, deep down, that somehow, I was on the right track. Could this secret stop the pain? Throughout the years I had smothered any flicker of hope that I might one day see Mama again. The woman in my dreams had felt just like her, though I hadn't seen Mama in eleven years. Was she telling me, now that I was an adult, that I alone could find the secret to her resurrection? Nothing was certain in my confused mind.

As a child I watched Mama draw many maps. Her hands were always splattered with ink. 'Practice makes progress, dove,' she used to mutter repeatedly. She would draw maps of our home, the vale, sometimes mapping the whole of Ashwick. I watched, intrigued, as she flicked her special signature at the bottom corner of every one of her maps. I scanned this map for any sign that this could be Mama's and in the bottom corner, her signature trembled at the edges. Time itself had worn those strokes thin, but I'd have known them anywhere. They didn't seem to be any letters of the alphabet I knew, yet looked absolutely familiar, like something I'd seen in dreams but couldn't picture clearly. This was Mama's map.

Time flies fast when your mind is occupied. I spent most of the day discreetly packing for my journey. Determined to take only the essentials, I just rolled up the map, tucked my coin into the pocket of my petticoat and stuffed some provisions into the sack. I prised up a loose floorboard my most prized possessions were hidden underneath. There was a small chest, and something shrouded in a cloth. Carefully unwrapping it I revealed a dagger.

I remembered, as a child, Mama talking about it fondly. She said, 'This is a special object, Lia. Your Pawpaw gave it to me and when you grow to be a great princess warrior and go on adventures you will need this. Pawpaw called it Aegis. You can use it to protect yourself, but never to harm others.' Mama told me that Aegis usually referred to the name of a god's shield, but she said that if both a shield and a dagger were used for protection against evil, there was no reason not to call it the same thing.

Aegis was beautiful. The dagger glowed faintly as if it was forged from tiny stars. Along its blade, the word 'pétra'—Greek for 'stone'—shimmered in gold. The dagger's hilt was made from leather and fur. Delicate strands of gold were threaded through the handle. Comforted knowing that I now had Aegis with me, I set off at dusk.

Gravel crunched underfoot, pine trees towered over me, their leafless branches like gnarled talons. I constantly turned my head, anxious that somebody might be following. Moonlight dimly lit the pathway, air thick with the scent of damp earth and decay. Darkness pooled between tree trunks, hiding the beasts that I knew lurked within. The occasional hoot or the snap of the branches makes my heart jump. The forest was alive and watching.

After traipsing for what seemed like an eternity, my eyes were sagging and my legs ached. I had followed the map as best I could in the pitch dark, yet I had an

uncomfortable sense that I had taken a wrong turn somewhere. There were now barely any trees around me and definitely no 'silent guardian', whatever that meant. There was simply no one and nothing nearby. Giving into exhaustion, I placed my backpack on the trunk of a tree whose foliage gave me just enough coverage from predators. A nap felt imminent.

I was startled from my slumber by a flash of bright light piercing my heavy eyelids and, I was sure, the sweet scent of vanilla all around me. It smelt just like her. 'Mama, is that you?' I hastily gathered my belongings and started in the direction of the light. Shimmering in front of my weary eyes was an image of the woman from my dreams. Her body was translucent, like a ghost. She paced around a fountain, as if waiting for someone important, someone expected. Suddenly the apparition looked back and caught me by surprise, her gaze piercing right through me. Then, she vanished.

That marble fountain had not been there when I arrived but now it stood, a crown jewel, carved from polished marble that glowed softly beneath the warm sun. Its tiers were encircled by two graceful stone serpents, their scales polished smooth by centuries of enchanted water flowing over them. Their eyes seemed to follow me, watching every step I took, and water arced from their open mouths in glittering streams, each droplet catching the light like tiny stars. The fountain's pool shimmered with an otherworldly brilliance, like crushed sprinkled diamonds. Ancient, intricate designs of a woman and a small girl were etched into its base.

As I crept toward the fountain's basin full of curiosity, I noticed dozens of shiny polished coins scattered across the bottom—shiny polished coins just like the one I possessed. I bent down, about to scoop up one of the coins, and shrieked when black leathery things curled around my ankles. I shrieked again, registering they were in fact snakes slithering up my legs, tightening their grip. Their forked tongues lashed at me, their black, oil-like eyes stared, hungrily, pearly white fangs dipping venom.

Terrified, I scrambled backwards, heart bursting out of my chest. Beads of sweat pricked my forehead as I paled, the blood in my veins turning ice-cold as my body stiffened with shock. Whipping out Aegis, I slashed blindly, trying in vain to rid myself of the snakes. The reptiles expertly wove and dodged the blade, constricting my movement even more. I racked my brain for any more lifesaving hints the prophecy might have given me.

*Step forth young seeker, heed the night  
The hour is here, the world alight.  
Once the guardian makes himself clear,  
Now you know the secret is near.  
Exclaim the unexpected, to hold something dear.*

I screamed in frustration and helplessness, the prophecy's words replaying in my head. It seemed this would be the end. My end.

As I swung Aegis one more time, I glanced at the word etched into the blade's shiny metal. 'Stone,' I thought. 'But that makes no sense. Why would something made of metal have that engraved on it?' A moment later realisation hit: the first letters of the prophecy's lines spelled STONE.

'Stone!' I yelled, ecstatic that I had figured it out. The snakes froze upon hearing the word and their glossy eyes ceased swivelling around. One serpent let out a final, rasping hiss as its gleaming scales began to dull, their shimmer fading into lifeless grey. Cracks spidered across its body, spreading from those glassy eyes down its coiled length like growing frost. Its stone skin then crumbled into dust, dust then scattered by the wind.

Exhaling, I slipped my fingers into my pocket and fished out the coin, hoping its familiar weight might steady me. It didn't. All I felt was foolishness. Foolishness and anger. How could I have thought I was ready for this? For *any* of this? With a sharp breath, I drew my arm back and hurled the coin into the fountain. It was supposed to splash, giving proof that I'd let it go. But nothing happened, no plop, no ripple. Just silence.

I frowned and stepped closer, the water's surface unnervingly still and reflecting my face like glass. Leaning over the edge, I tried to spot my coin glinting beneath the water but before I could, a strange dizziness washed over me. The air seemed to hum, light bending and flickering around the fountain. My breath caught, the world tilted, and then everything went dark.

The vision came to me like a rainbow on a spray of water—elusive, yet very real. The same woman appeared before me, though now her features were sharper, no longer obscured by a blur. Her complexion was tanned, her lips soft and rose-pink. Rich brown hair was swept into an elegant coil atop her head, threaded with strands of pearls and delicate gold filigree. Her gown cascaded in layers of lace and ruffles, every fold shimmering faintly as if stitched with strands of gold. Glossed heels peeked from beneath the hem, and her wrists bore ornate cuffs

which matched the dress. Her fingers were bejewelled with diamonds, catching the light, creating a constellation. But best of all was her gentle and luminous smile, the kind that made you feel seen, loved and impossibly safe.

I knew I wasn't dreaming now. I could feel tears streaming down my face, my hands shaking uncontrollably as sobs racked my chest. I couldn't bear it any longer and rushed forward, not even caring to lift my dress as I ran. 'Mama!' I wept, her embrace wrapping me in a kind of warmth I've hadn't felt in years.

'Ophelia, my dove. Sit, please,' Mama said gently as she waved her hand over a patch of grass, creating two chairs and a table with food.

After my body had stopped shaking, I stammered, 'Mama, are y— Are you back for good?' afraid to know the answer.

'My dove, I believe you know the answer. The dead aren't meant to be alive,' she answered, the faintest smile playing across her lips.

I hated the way she was acting. I hated that she seemed so at peace with being gone. Forever. How could she not want to be with me? How could she forget her dreams? Our dreams?

Placing her warm hands on mine, she spoke slowly. 'Lia, do you remember our fantasies? We imagined once that we'd move into a little cottage in this very forest. It would be made of polished wood and covered with honeysuckle. Bees would come and give us the sweetest honey and our goat—What did we call her? Bessie? Yes, Bessie, our magical goat—would give us any beverage we could dream of. There would be a fireplace inside and every day we'd read and draw and dance and do whatever our hearts desired.' She paused and looked into my eyes. 'But it's time to stop dreaming, Lia. Stop letting me hold you back. It's time to follow those dreams instead of thinking about them.'

Nodding, I thought I understood, but something still didn't make sense. 'Of course, Mama. But, what's the secret? You said, "Find the Great Secret. Find you. Find Secret." I've found myself; I now know who I am, and I've defeated the Serpent Guardians. What's the secret?'

Mama laughed and her voice echoed throughout the woods, sparkling in the air around her. 'Dove, do you know my name?' she chuckled.

My face burned. How could I not know? I had never thought of her *real* name. She had always been Mama to me, nothing else.

Her smile trembled like a candle in the wind. 'Secret, dear. My name is Secret. And though the world may change, and time may slip through our fingers, my love for you will never fade. *That* is no secret.'

## At the Top of the Tower

Beatrice Wilson, Year 9

I heard the clock strike midnight when I finally reached my room after the night's festivities. I said goodnight to my father and headed upstairs. The manor's corridors felt oddly empty and cold and I shivered as the storm outside reached a crescendo. Beginning to feel uneasy, I lit a candle from the sideboard and continued my climb before, turning a corner, I saw Lord Harley casually leaning against my door frame, blocking the way in. 'Good evening, Lord Harley, do you need my assistance with anything?' I asked carefully to keep my tone polite and calm, which did not at all reflect my feelings.

He said nothing for a few seconds, just stood there, framed by the doorway, eyes roaming mine, gaze fixed and steady, like he was considering something. I saw a flicker of something in his eyes; I recognized it as something that often flashed in mine. Fear. As if he made up his mind, he replied in a furtive whisper, 'I have to tell you something of great importance.'

I stared at him blankly; he never had anything important to say. 'Of course.'

'Not here!' he hissed.

I looked around, confused. 'But there's no one else here,' I said. He stared at me with desperate eyes; he had never looked at me that way before. Fear rose to their surface and was reflected clear as day in his deep hazel eyes. This made me scared as well, and I became his mirror image. Frightened, I began to look over my shoulder, peering around. I got the ominous feeling that we were being watched, which was crazy. We were alone. Weren't we? 'Well, where do you want to tell me?' I whispered.

'Meet me at the top of north tower at half past twelve. It's ten past now. Don't tell anyone where you're going, and don't let anyone see you.'

I nodded and watched him walk away. Trying not to think about what he could possibly want to tell me, I changed into my night gown and soon, with candle in hand, I was tiptoeing toward the north tower. Peering around corners, I snuffed the candle at every noise, only relighting once silence had returned. Still, I saw no one.

After ascending the tower stairs, I pushed open the door at the top. Cold wind and rain lashed at my face and forced my hair to whip about, making it nearly impossible to see. I forged on, and as I came closer to the tower's edge, I became aware of what seemed to be a struggle up ahead. I approached cautiously and Lord Harley locked his gaze with mine. A flash of lightning lit the scene, and a scream was torn from his throat as the figure he was wrestling with shoved him, hard. I watched, frozen as he overbalanced, then fell over the edge. The thump of his body hitting the ground below made me retch and I clutched at the wall, trying to regain my balance and regulate my breathing. I was in the company of a murderer. I had to get out.

I stumbled back to the door I had come through. 'What if the murderer saw me? What if he follows me? What if Lord Harley is still alive?' I tried to gather my thoughts as I raced downstairs and ran through the corridors of the manor until I reached the kitchens, where the servants were still cleaning up. I wove between them, ignoring their puzzled faces as they took in my wet, crazed hair, shaky hands, and terrified breathing. Shoving the outer kitchen door open I gasped as, for a second time, I was hit with the force of the storm.

I hurried through the grounds and around to where the north tower overlooked the hedge maze. Racing feverishly down its gravel paths, I cursed every time I reached a dead end. And it was so very dark. 'Very dark,' my mind screamed, because I left my candle on the roof! They do know I was there.' I thought back to my desperate escape. I was sure I had heard the North Tower door slam shut for a second time, that muffled footsteps had followed me down the carpeted corridors; the murderer would now be coming for me.

I suddenly felt very exposed, angry at myself for crashing carelessly through the maze. How could I have been so stupid? I had to find my way out or at least hide somewhere. I also hadn't forgotten that somewhere in this maze might be Lord Harley, and if by some miracle he had survived the fall, he would need my help. I was trying to decide my best move when an unwelcome sound made me spin around: gravel was crunching beneath a foot, less than a metre away. I inhaled sharply, desperate to figure out which direction that sound was coming from. *Crunch crunch crunch.* My heart began beating louder, ruining all perspective of sound and space. Were they close? Were they getting louder? I had no clue. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.* It was the murderer, I knew it was. No one else would be out at this time of night.

Scrabbling, desperate to find a way out, I pushed at the hedge behind me and found a small gap. It had probably been made by one of the dogs, and I thought I might be able to fit through it and crouching down, I began to pick my way through the greenery. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.* Those footsteps were definitely getting louder. I scrambled my way through and landed with an un-ladylike thump on the ground on the other side. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.* They were right there; I could sense it: I had left that dead end not a moment too soon. Peering through the leaves I saw a shadowy figure that spun on the spot, looking. Looking for me. Their eyes came to rest on the hole in the hedge. The hole I had just scrambled through. The hole that was the only way out.

They cursed, then smiled: a very odd combination. The voice was deep—a man’s—and slightly gravelly. They were tall. And well dressed. They had been at my father’s party that evening, then. By the time I realized what he was doing, it was too late for me to hide. He bent down, eye level with the hole and peered through. Cold cobalt eyes latched onto mine and I lurched back from the hedge. He tried to push through the hole in the hedge but failed. I heard him curse again as he stood up and began to run the other way. *Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.* As the pace of his footsteps increased, I began to panic. I had no idea what part of the maze I was in, so I just tried to run in the direction I thought led away from him.

Blinded by fear and panic, I took paths at random and tried many times to force myself through the ‘walls’. As I rounded a fork in the maze, I saw that, further ahead, the hedge had been crushed in on itself, so I sped up, desperate to see if it was Lord Harley. Heart pounding, and feet burning I skidded to a sudden halt as I spotted an arm—Lord Harley’s arm. Luckily, it seemed he had fallen onto the hedge, which cushioned his fall. I pressed my fingers against his wrist to check for a pulse, and a very faint, throbbing greeted them. He was alive. Just. The sound of footsteps filled my ears again as I looked around desperately; there was no way I could carry Lord Harley by myself. I scrambled haphazardly into the hedge beside him, hoping against hope that the man wouldn’t look too closely. Twigs scratched my face and tangled painfully in my hair as I burst through to the other side. I was out.

I got to my feet and pressed myself against the wall. Finally, I knew where I was. Directly above me was North Tower, looming in all its crooked glory. The end of the maze was just a few hundred metres to my left, which meant it would only be another few seconds before I was joined by the man with blue eyes. Sure enough, the sound of pounding feet rushed past exactly where I was standing,

but on the other side of the hedge. My breath caught in my throat, my heart felt like it was bursting out of my chest. I had a split second to decide whether to run or hide.

I sprang away from that spot against the wall, my route mapped out in my head, across the grounds and through the kitchen door. I urged my legs to move faster, pounding against the muddy grass as the sopping hem of my nightdress stuck to my legs. I hitched it up and clutched fistfuls of fabric as I ran before wrenching open the kitchen door, hurling myself inside and slamming the door shut, fumbling to lock every latch. When I'd calmed and caught my breath I peered cautiously through the door's curtained window. The garden appeared deserted. The odd movement in the trees instantly drew my attention, but nothing, no one, ever emerged.

The horror of the evening's events flooded back to me in a crushing heap. The fight, the push, the thump; the crunching footsteps. I grabbed the nearest maid who looked terrified as she noticed the twigs in my hair, my crazed eyes, and the scratches covering every inch of my skin. 'Please help!' I pleaded, my eyes locking into hers. She clutched my arms, keeping me upright.

'Ma'am you're going to have to calm down. Let's go upstairs to see your father.' I clutched onto her for dear life. She clicked her fingers and two other servants ran over and helped support me up the stairs.

After a sleepless night my father came into my room, just as the sun was rising. He had gone out last night with a group of men to the place I had found Lord Harley. They had carried him back to the manor and he was now asleep in one of the guest rooms downstairs. The doctor's arrival had been delayed due to the storm. 'He's just woken up,' my father said. 'He's asking for you.'

I let out a sharp exhalation. 'I... I... I don't think I want to see him.'

'You need to. We need to find out what he knows and who did this to him.'

My palms were clammy as I pushed open the heavy door, and whispered into the dark room, Lord Harley?'

A raspy whisper responded from deep within. 'Evangeline?'

I inched closer to the bed, seating myself in a chair. A hand reached out from the folds of the sheets and clutched my arm. I stiffened, incredibly uncomfortable. 'The faster I find out what happened, the faster I can leave,' I assured myself.

Turning to face him, I started gently. 'I know this must be hard for you, Lord Harley, but could you tell me what might have happened last night? Or,' I gabbled, 'can you at least tell me what you had wanted to tell me in the tower?'

'I was going to tell you that... I was going to tell you that.... I was going to tell you that...'

His grasp went limp, his hand dropping with a soft thud onto the bed.

A low soft chuckle filled the dark silent room, echoed inside my brain. 'Lord Harley?' I gasped as I looked up from my lap and found cold cobalt eyes boring into mine.

## Shaping the Stars

Adya Paul, Year 7

Camille placed her aching body on the grass, indulging in its every tingle while stretching herself onto the sleek sward, a remembrance of her beloved grandma. She was passed now, but long scenic walks with her would always be the most precious memories within Camille's mind.

These were her last moments of serenity before being crowned Queen of Belgium. The twilight sky glimmered into her ebony eyes, ethereal stars danced across the outskirts of the cosmos, as she lay, feeling the essence of the soil and grass beneath her body. The satin tone of trees streaming in the breeze, the luscious aroma of delicate meadow flowers, and the moon mirroring onto the pasture—filled her with pleasure and peace. She could almost imagine the placid sound of angels, arrived just to bless Camille themselves. She whispered to no one, 'There's such rare clarity in silence, stripping away of all excess. No distractions, no demands. Just the world as it is: unfiltered and whole.' Laying back, her hair stretched across the herbage as, in the distance, a hue of exquisite colours emerged. It was a picture-perfect scene that could surely only live in a vision.

When gloomy clouds began to swarm around her, Camille closed her eyes and tears began brimming down her pale face. She felt a sense of relief as the world around her seemed to pause, as if time had stopped. Preparations for tomorrow's Coronation had been all time stamps, discipline and harsh workouts. Her real source of delight was always here, within the meadows, distant from her grand estate; here, she examined the unknown, the endless labyrinth of life, struggle, and strength. She took comfort from the coherent design sculpted into the empyrean—the stars were a perpetual formation never to be ravaged. Camille curled up, owls perching among the trees, their hypnotic gaze watching her drift to sleep, surrounded by the world around her.

As dusk turned to dawn, the sun replaced the moon once was. Camille rose, moving away from the meadow as a sapphire butterfly floated across her line of sight. Landing onto a delicate marigold, her grandma's favourite flower, the butterfly lightly rested on the petals that started to droop down. As the wind blew across the hills, transporting the butterfly away from Camille and the flower, she thought, 'They can search for me, dress me in silk, place a crown upon my head. But I am already a queen, crowned by wildflowers.' Camille remembered that one day, she would shape the stars too.

## The Silence After the Storm

Charlotte Di Latte, Year 10

The rain lashed against the windows as Detective Sarah Adamson stepped out of the car, coat clinging to her in the downpour. The motel's neon sign buzzed and flickered like a dying firefly, throwing distorted shadows across the peeling paint of its weather-beaten walls. The word *VACANCY* sputtered momentarily in red before cutting out entirely, leaving her in near darkness. Pulling her collar tighter, she made her way towards Room 6, each step sinking into the soaked carpet with a dull squelch, every footfall heavy with the weight of the night ahead.

Inside, the air was stale and thick with the tang of damp carpet and old cigarette smoke. James Rowe, a wealthy businessman whose name had once carried weight in the city, now lay crumpled on the worn bed. His suit was rumpled, his face pale and still, looking as lifeless as a marionette with its strings cut. The room's single window was locked from the inside, and the door showed no sign of forced entry. Sarah's eyes were drawn to the floor where a shattered watch lay near the body, its hands frozen at ten minutes to twelve. Its face glittered faintly in the dim light, like an eye winking back at her.

'Odd,' Sarah murmured as she crouched. A watch could stop in a fall, but something about it tugged at her instincts, insistent, wanting to be noticed.

Mr Harris, the motel owner, hovered awkwardly by the door, fingers twisting, voice trembling as he whispered, 'Detective, I swear I didn't see anyone. Nobody came in or out. This place is quiet. Too quiet, most nights. Then this happens.'

Sarah studied him carefully. His eyes held confusion, not guilt, but she wasn't ready to rule him out just yet. 'We'll see,' she said, jotting in her notebook. Someone had killed James Rowe, and she was determined to find them. When she stepped out into the hallway again, her boots melted into the damp carpet. She noted that large, muddy footprints trailed from the door of Room 6, though the storm had blurred their edges, washing away certainty like ink running in the rain. Sarah muttered under her breath with a sigh, 'Another answer that isn't an answer at all. Great.'

Later, she sat across from Mr Harris in the dim reception area, a flickering desk lamp casting restless shadows across his face. She leaned forward slowly and asked, 'Was Mr Rowe wearing a watch when he arrived tonight?'

Mr Harris shook his head immediately. 'No, ma'am. I'd have noticed. He signed the ledger at my counter, right up here. He wasn't wearing a watch.'

Sarah froze, her pen slipping against the page. 'So, it's not his watch,' she whispered to herself. Her chest tightened as the thought sank in. 'If it doesn't belong to him, then it belongs to someone else. Someone who was in that room.'

The broken watch no longer felt like a discarded object, it was the one thread that could tie her to the killer. 'Every answer I find just opens another question,' she stewed, in frustration. 'Whose watch is it? Why leave it behind? Was it carelessness? Or— Or a warning?' Her mind turned to James' past. He had been a powerful businessman, a man whose money and influence reached far beyond this forgotten town. Power like that was bound to create enemies. Sarah tapped her pen against the notebook, brows furrowed as she wondered whether James had made enemies powerful enough to send hitmen after him.

Sarah asked to see the security footage of the motel, but Mr Harris's face fell. 'I tried earlier,' he admitted. 'Looks like the cameras were down. Power surge must've fried them last night.'

Sarah's jaw tightened. 'Too convenient,' she muttered. 'Far too convenient.' Again, the trail bent back into mystery, every clue leading to another uncertainty, as if the truth was always one step ahead, taunting her.

Later that night, Sarah returned to Room 6. The broken lamp sparked faintly as she clicked it on, the bulb sputtering before giving in to darkness. The storm rumbled overhead, a drumbeat rattling the windowpane. The air smelled of wet carpet and coppery silence. Then, the buzzing neon light outside died completely, sinking the room into pure black. Her pulse quickened.

From the hallway came the sound of slow, deliberate footsteps. Each one grew louder, heavier, as if whoever it was wanted to her to hear them coming. Sarah gripped her notebook tighter, forcing her breath to steady as the air seemed to thicken, pressing against her chest. 'They're here,' she whispered to herself shakily. 'Whoever silenced James Rowe has come for me now.' A shadow stretched across the thin line of light beneath the door, and she knew it wasn't Mr Harris.

The clock ticked to 11:47pm. The handle rattled once. It stopped. Every answer led to another question, and she was running out of time.

## Dead Men Don't Talk

Tiffany Lynass, Year 11

I sat in the corner booth of the near deserted diner, fingers tracing the rim of my coffee cup. The flickering neon sign outside casting a warm, dim light over the worn red leather seats and faded wallpaper. The diner felt like it was separate from time and space, the setting perfectly quiet, isolated. I liked it that way. Across the table Claire leaned back in her seat, watching me with that curious look she has. Tonight, there was something different in her gaze. Something that made me feel like she was trying to see past the calm facade I'd carefully constructed to deter her. But I wasn't worried. Not really. Claire had always been easy to read. I had the upper hand.

'So,' I began, keeping my voice casual, 'you haven't seen him?' I asked, consciously playing the concerned friend.

Claire picked up her cup, took a sip, and shook her head. 'Nope. Not since that night. What's going on, Maggie?'

I smiled, stirring my coffee. 'It's just odd, don't you think? He hasn't been home, his car's still in the driveway, but his wallet's gone.'

Claire set her cup down, leaning forward slightly. 'Maggie, you're really starting to worry me. Why are you so fixated on this?'

I shrugged, keeping my tone light. 'I can't help it. You know how he is, always disappearing. But this time feels different,' I said egging her on.

She tilted her head, eyes narrowing as she studied me. 'You're acting strange. Is there something you're not telling me?'

I met her gaze without hesitation, a smile playing on my lips. 'Nothing you need worry about. I'm just making sure everything's in order. I am a cop, after all.'

Her eyes searched mine for a moment longer. I could see the gears turning in her head, but I wasn't concerned. I had been much too careful for her to be able to piece anything together.

'Do you think—' Claire hesitated, lowering her voice. 'Do you think something might've happened to him?'

I laughed softly, shaking my head. 'You've been watching too many crime shows, Claire. He's probably somewhere, blowing off steam. He'll turn up eventually.' As I said it, satisfaction curled in my chest. Claire was right. Something had happened to him. And I was the one who'd made sure of it. The adrenaline of someone being so close, yet so far from understanding, was flooding my veins and filled me with confidence. But confidence is what gets you caught. 'Focus, Maggie,' I told myself. 'Remember, fear keeps you alive.'

Claire was still nodding slowly, but I could tell she wasn't completely convinced. 'Maybe. But if there's anything you're hiding—anything at all—you know you can trust me.'

I scoffed and leaned back in my seat, relaxed, confident. 'I've got nothing to hide, Claire.'

She held my gaze, searching for any cracks in my calm exterior. But I remained steady.

'Alright,' she finally said, her voice softening. 'But I'm here if you do need to talk, okay?'

'Thanks,' I replied, amusement in my tone. 'I appreciate that.'

We finished our coffee in silence, the tension between us growing thicker with each passing second. I could feel Claire's eyes on me; I didn't mind. Let. Her. Look. There was nothing for her to see, nothing I hadn't already covered up.

When the cheque came, I grabbed it before she could, tossing a few bills onto the table. 'I've got this,' I said, standing up smoothly. 'You can get the next.'

Claire hesitated, then nodded, slipping out of the booth and following me to the door. 'Take care, Mags,' she said as we stepped into the cool night. 'Don't be a stranger.'

'I won't,' I promised, flashing her a smile. 'See you around.' She gave me one last look, something unreadable in her eyes, before turning and walking down the street. I watched, my heart steady, until she disappeared around the corner. Only then did I let out a breath, satisfaction settling deeper into my bones. Claire might've been suspicious, but she didn't have anything on me. I'd made sure of that.

I walked to my car, the night air crisp and refreshing. The street was quiet, almost too quiet, but I welcomed the solitude. This was my victory, my moment. I had done what needed to be done, and no one would ever find out. As I slipped into the driver's seat, I couldn't help but glance in the rearview mirror, half-expecting to see Claire watching me. But the street behind me was empty, just like the one ahead.

The sense of control clung to me like a second skin. I had played the game. No one would find out what I'd done. Not Claire, not anyone. I knew one thing for certain; secrets had a way of coming out unless someone is holding a shovel ready to cover them back up. And I was holding the shovel. I checked my glovebox and felt the cool barrel of my Glock 41.

There's something calming about touching a gun. The power floods you like a tidal wave. You are God, that fragile balance between life and death plays on your trigger finger. I moved the gun and my badge to the side and found the envelope, pulled it out and opened it. Inside was my insurance policy, in case Claire got too close. Photos don't sound like much but, I knew Claire would never want these out. I put the envelope back.

The hardest part was over. From here on it'd be child's play, smooth sailing. Dead men don't tell your secrets, right?

## Greywater's Secret

Devyn Edmiston, Year 10

The body was discovered at dawn. The first pale light pushed through the fog as the waves crashed against the shore, and there he was, Seb Ausbrock, lying lifeless beneath Greywater Lighthouse. The tower rose above like a crooked finger pointing to the sky, though Seb's eyes, open and blank, would never see it again. His chest had a single stab wound, deep and clean. Not the clumsy anger of a bar fight, but the work of someone who knew exactly how to kill.

I knelt beside him, boots sinking into the wet sand. Seb was thirty-eight, a journalist who had been digging into the secrets of this town, peeling back its layers to show the rot beneath. His curiosity had cost him his life. Seagulls cried overhead as if watching, judging. In his stiff hand he held a clue – a silver watch, cracked, stopped at 3:17 a.m. Blood flecked its edges like rust. But the watch wasn't his. Whose? I bagged it carefully. I had a feeling this wasn't the last question I'd need to answer today.

Greywater was a town where secrets didn't whisper – they pressed against you like thick fog. At the pub, the regulars froze when I walked in. My shadow stretched across the floorboards. Eventually, a fisherman spoke. 'Seb was sniffin' too close to Mayor Scott,' he said, voice shaky. 'The mayor's money ain't clean. Smuggling at the docks. Seb had papers to prove it.'

I headed straight to Seb's office. It had been ransacked: drawers open, papers scattered like dead leaves. Whoever had done this wanted to erase him, not just steal from him.

But they missed something. In the burned trash bin, a piece of paper, a note with the words '... if you don't stop digging, the lighthouse won't be the only thing that falls.' Threats. Warnings. A clear motive.

The fog rolled in thicker that night, covering the streets like the town wanted Seb's secrets buried with him. But I knew the watch was the key. Turning it in my hands I saw its back bore traces of an ornately engraved J. My stomach tightened. Mayor Scott was Mayor *Jackson* Scott.

The next morning, I was at his office, early. The room smelled of polish and smoke. I put the watch on his desk. He looked at it, then quickly away. 'Where did you find this?' he asked, voice gruff.

'In Seb Ausbrock's dead hand. Stopped at 3:17.'

He paled. 'Detective Lonnie, Seb wasn't wrong. He was onto something, someone, bigger than me. I tried to stop him. He grabbed the watch. But I didn't kill him.' His words trembled. I could see he was scared. 'Go and visit the old inn on the cliffs. You'll find out what I mean.'

It didn't take long to get there, but it didn't look promising. The abandoned inn clung to the cliff face like a broken skeleton. I entered to find rain dripping through holes in the roof; mould choking the walls. Then I spotted it. In the fireplace, blackened and brittle, lay the half-burned note: 'If you don't stop digging, the lighthouse won't be the only thing that falls. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.' So, Seb had been threatened, repeatedly; cornered, but he had kept digging. Why? That stubbornness had cost him his life.

By dusk, the lighthouse was a ghost in the fog. Its stones groaned in the wind as I climbed the worn steps. Mayor Jackson Scott waited, coat tight around him, eyes darting like a trapped animal. 'You think I did it,' he called. 'But I didn't. Someone else was there – someone worse. They'll—' A gunshot suddenly sliced through the mist. The mayor jerked, red spreading across his chest. He fell on the steps, lighthouse looming behind him like a tombstone. Through the fog, a shadow scurried away, silent and quick.

Now two men had been silenced: Seb, who chased the truth, and Jackson Scott, who tried to stop it. The files were gone. The smuggling ring remained hidden. The killer was still out there. And I stood at the lighthouse's edge, waves crashing against the rocks, the burned note heavy in my pocket.

Seb Ausbrock had been right: Greywater's secrets ran deeper than anyone admitted. And now it was my case. My burden. Because in this town, secrets didn't stay buried. They rose like the tide, dragging you under.

## The Final Card

Lola Lotsu, Year 10

Every answer led to another question, and I was running out of time. The clock on the wall mocked me with its relentless ticking, each second scraping against my nerves like a blade against bone. Sixty minutes. That was all I had, if the dispatcher's trembling voice had been right. Sixty minutes, to catch a killer who was always one step ahead, always waiting for me to fail.

The apartment reeked of copper and blood-soaked carpet, the air so thick I could taste the iron on my tongue. My shoes squelched with every cautious step, each sound intruding on the suffocating silence. The body lay in the kitchen, limbs unnaturally twisted, eyes bulging in a mask of terror that had outlived the victim. Blood haloed the head, seeping into the marble tile, already drying to a sticky black.

I forced my gaze past the face—pity was a luxury I'd burned out of myself long ago. What mattered were the details. Always the details. And there it was. A single playing card rested on the corpse's chest, edges crisp, the ink dark as fresh blood. The Jack of Hearts. My stomach clenched: the last two victims had been marked the same way. This card wasn't just a signature; it was an invitation. A taunt. A countdown.

The "Jack" wasn't just killing for pleasure anymore. Now, he was playing, toying with me.

I scanned the room, every nerve wired tight, searching for anything that broke the pattern. Near the window, barely visible against the grime and rain, I found it—a footprint. It was smudged but clear enough: size eleven, heel worn thin. Finally, a trace of reality in a crime built on theatre.

Hope flickered. For the first time, he had slipped up. The egregious trail carried me out of the apartment, down the fire escape into a back-alley slick with rain and echoing with a cacophony of distant sirens. The city stretched before me like a labyrinth of shadows and secrets. The prints weakened the further I followed, but the urgency in my veins drove me faster until the path ended at the docks, in front of a derelict warehouse.

The building looked abandoned, its walls eaten by rust, its windows blind with boarded planks. But the door told a different story. A chain, heavy and new, locked it shut, the silver of the padlock gleaming unnaturally in the dark. Someone had been here—and recently. I forced my breathing to steady. How the hell was I meant to break through this? My hands were calm, but my heart hammered as though the clock itself had taken root inside my chest. My eyes swept the shadows until they landed on a rusted crowbar propped against the wall. Perfect. I snatched it up, the cold metal biting into my palm, and forced it against the lock. The door groaned open, swallowing me into blackness.

Inside, the air was stale with oil and decay. My flashlight beam sliced through shadows, catching on broken crates, warped metal, and discarded tarps. Every creak of the rotting floor reverberated like a warning bell. Somewhere in this darkness, the Jack was waiting. A narrow corridor drew me deeper and at its end, a reinforced door. It was far too solid for an empty warehouse; it was the kind of door you put between yourself and a secret.

Time was dripping away, I could feel it in my bones, so subtlety died in favour of urgency. I kicked once. Twice. The wood cracked on the third, splintering into submission. The room beyond glowed with the weak swing of a single bulb. And there he was. The Jack.

He turned as I entered, surprise flashing across his sharp features before dissolving into a crooked smile. A pistol dangled loosely from his hand, casual, almost theatrical.

'You're quicker than I thought,' he drawled, voice mocking, calm, as if the outcome was already decided. I didn't answer; words wouldn't stop him. He lunged and instinct pulled me forward, colliding with him in a violent tangle. The gun skittered across the concrete as we grappled, every second a war. His fist crushed into my ribs; white pain flared hot, but I pushed through, scrambling, clawing, until cold steel slid into my palm. I raised the weapon, heart racing, and pulled the trigger. *Click*. The empty chamber snapped like a death sentence.

The Jack's laughter rang out, jagged and merciless, as he rose, brushing dust from his coat, wearing the smile of a man who had orchestrated every move on the board. 'Did you really think I'd leave a loaded gun lying around?' he sneered, sliding another pistol from his jacket, this one heavier, polished. Real. Its barrel levelled with my face. 'You've been clever, detective,' he said softly, almost admiringly. 'But clever doesn't beat death, or time for that matter.'

The ticking filled my ears again, louder than the bulb's buzz, louder than my own pulse. He lowered the gun slightly, eyes gleaming with something colder than hatred—understanding. 'You know, I think I'll give you the chance to ask me one question.'

The words caught me off guard, but I forced my voice to steady. 'Why the signature Jack of Hearts?'

'Because, detective,' he murmured, voice curling like smoke, 'the heart is the easiest to break. And the Jack? The Jack is never the king, never quite enough. Just like you detective, always chasing but never winning.' For a moment, silence reigned as the ticking stopped, the world held its breath. And all I could see was the black tunnel of his gun. It was the ending he had written long before I arrived.

## A Horrible Way to Die

Olive May, Year 10

*O. O. O.*

His fingers hovered over the call button for a split second, his breath deep and unsteady. In the suffocating silence, a lonely owl's hollow hoot tore through the air like a scream. Darkness engulfed Sam from all directions, as if the night itself was pressing its hands over his eyes. Droplets of icy water clung to his hair and skin, tracing cold paths down his back, soaking into the fabric which now clung to his body. The lake stretched before him like a sheet of black glass, reflecting the moon in shattered shards.

'Triple Zero, what's your emergency?'

He forced breath into his lungs, voice breaking as the only words he could manage tumbled out. 'I found a body.'

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'Now, just tell me what you saw.'

Sam couldn't meet Detective Quinn's gaze as the words he'd been dreading slipped through her lips so easily. Before he'd even began gathering the strength to respond, she scribbled down a word or two onto her blue notepad. The scratch of her pen sent his thoughts into a spiral. Had he already done something wrong? He knew how easily meaning could be twisted, how gestures, posture, even the rhythm of his breathing could be read like a confession. Psychology had taught him that much.

Suddenly, every movement felt like evidence, and he forced his hands to lie still on the table, his voice to come out slower, steadier, as if control alone might save him. 'I was swimming at Ravenwood Lake and—' His voice trailed off as his mind wandered back to the image he had seen earlier. An image he'd expected to only ever witness in his nightmares. He shivered.

'It's okay, take your time,' Detective Quinn reassured.

'I dove off the jetty,' he started, 'and when I surfaced, it was just... Just floating there.' The tears that Sam had been holding back for far too long came rushing out of him. He buried his face in the fluffy rug the constable had offered when he

first arrived. The interview room's lights burned his stinging eyes, but no matter how tightly he pulled the blanket around himself, he could never block them out.

The door suddenly flung open, and a young officer entered the room. 'Detective Quinn, Sheriff needs you. They've identified him.'

She froze for the briefest second, then stood, setting her notepad down with care. 'Just wait here, Samuel. I'll be back in a moment.'

The door clicked shut, and suddenly the room felt larger. Sam's grip on the blanket tightened and he shut his eyes, desperately trying to regain control of the situation. He hated feeling so small and helpless, but a thin thread of relief wound through him. She hadn't asked why he was swimming so late at night—a detail he knew wouldn't survive the weight of her questions.

A moment later, Quinn slipped back into her chair, her expression unreadable. 'Samuel, I need to attend the autopsy now. And since you're a minor, I can't hold you for much longer. I'm going to have to let you go.'

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'Detective Quinn.'

'Yes, Sheriff?'

'You didn't mention the cause of death to that suspect, did you?'

Quinn firmly shook her head.

'Interesting. As he was leaving, he said to me, "Cyanide is a horrible way to die".'

## A Keystroke in Time

Kavindri Abeysuriya, Year 10

His fist banged against the desk, the sound of his oversized watch colliding with the hard surface sending shivers down the spines of unread books. His head was pounding as he helplessly grasped his face, pulse quickening before he collapsed onto the cold metal. Red was the last thing he saw before ... *Crash!* Detective Joseph James shot upright, eyes darting around the empty office complex, taking in spindly shadows creeping up the walls. Head throbbing as the mechanical buzzing of his computer drilled into his skull, he reached a slender arm toward the ground, picking up the books that had fallen from his desk.

Now wasn't the time for sleep, he told himself, now that the city was more awake than ever before. His mind re-traced the web he'd been weaving, one which led him back to the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, a date just shy of five weeks prior. 27<sup>th</sup> of May was the day government officials were alerted about the cyber-attacks. *Tick.* Foreign powers and rising military tensions. *Tock.* The Federal election was set for the following week. His fingers raced across the keyboard, then abruptly stopped as he sighed loudly, tore his hands through platinum curtains which framed his angular face and returned to a slouch. He stared at the screen of his computer.

There was however one thing which he hadn't woven into his web; it sat motionlessly in the pit of his stomach. His mind ticked over to a twelve-year-old boy, his eyes full of life as he bragged about Federal Bank's weak security. A childlike sense of wonder and nostalgia framed those memories before darker ones piled upon them. His eyes fluttered shut and his head drooped despite his caffeine overdose.

He had been only twelve years old, curled up in the corner of a large bedroom decorated with spaceships and cars. 'Why wasn't Tyson adopted with me?' were the first words he had thrown at her; words charged with fiery resentment and the pain of a broken heart. His adoptive mother's wish for him to warm to her never came true. From the moment the two boys were separated, Joseph had never felt complete again.

The young detective frantically reached for his half empty glass of water; it did little to wash down the lump growing in his throat. What made him doubt his sanity, however, was the clue as blindingly obvious as a blood stain in the middle of a white t-shirt. The link between Tyson and the case was an IP address which

pin-pointed an exact location on the map. Its incandescent red burned into Joseph's retinas and clouded his thoughts. A mastermind criminal would *never* leave such a stupidly obvious trace, it must have been calculating and deliberate. Drumming his fingers against the desk, fragmented thoughts flew through his mind. *The smartest person I know ... a prodigy ... forever twelve years old ...* Suddenly his fingers tensed and froze, eyes widened, and the buzzing sound stopped. *Foreign powers attempting to sway the election—that's a puzzle piece that fits!* It was what the news could broadcast to the whole country. He pushed thoughts of Tyson away; another variable would bring his web crashing down. He was lying to himself.

Through the darkness, a face emerged from the pixels of his screen. Grey stormy eyes identical to his own stared back at him, making his heart race. A twitter post from two years ago was Tyson's last trace on the internet. Was the man even alive? Joseph brushed the thought away before it could fester. A dreadful feeling was clawing at his insides, a serpent trying to slither out through the cracks of his facade.

Those thoughts he'd buried in the back of his mind were ravaging through his meticulous web like a bulldozer clearing a forest; his last shards of hope were turning to dust. His fist banged against the desk, the sound of his oversized watch colliding with the hard surface sending shivers down the spines of unread books.

## Karma

Ayra Ryroth, Year 11

The faint glow of the moon pulsed through raging clouds, softly illuminating the area around her. Rain pelted down like bullets and jagged forks of lightning split the sky. The air was thick and heavy, charged with electric energy. It sent shivers down her spine and raised her hackles.

Swivelling around, sopping dark locks lashed her face. Huge, chocolate eyes were tainted by the fine streams of red that ran through them as dilated pupils darted frantically, searching for an escape from the paranoia overwhelming her mind. Suddenly a crack of thunder ripped through the night sky, a violent shudder so intense that it momentarily paused the pounding rain. Taking shelter under an oak tree, Lila's hand rested against the large trunk, chest heaving with each laboured breath. 'He's not here,' she thought. 'He can't be here. Your mind is distorting reality. He doesn't know where you are. He doesn't, does he?'

The faint snap of a breaking twig came from behind her. She startled and tuned into the sound of the leaves rustling, branches swaying like skeletal fingers reaching out. It was all too much. It sounded far too real. This was the reason she had run in the first place— away from home, away from her life. No one had believed her. Not even the police. She hated the way they had looked at her, full of pity. But she knew. Lila knew that it was revenge or karma for that incident so many years ago. He was still out there. All the signs pointed to it. So, she ran.

When the rain had subsided, she saw it as her break, and she took off. Took off once again, like she always did, pelting at top speed back to safe spot. Barely taking notice of the figure that lurked in her peripheral vision, Lila didn't stop until her shelter came into view. The little tent was lying there in a shambles, poles nowhere in sight, its shredded cover tangled in the branches of a nearby tree. The carefully cut cord that once anchored it to the ground was scattered everywhere and her belongings swirled among the brown and grey puddles that surrounded her. As lightning illuminated the sky, she spied an odd clearing, free from leaves and other debris, a little distance away. There, carefully scrawled into the mud was a message. I SEE U.

As another flash of lightning rippled through the atmosphere, Lila noticed that etched next to the message were boot prints. Panic surged through her, heartbeat echoing like a death knell. Those boots weren't hers. The contrast

between her dainty, sandal prints and the large, boot prints was stark. 'He's found me!' her mind screamed as she raced through different possibilities, but each one lead back to the same conclusion. It was him, her stalker. She bolted from her hiding spot; feet slipping on the muddy ground she ran deeper into the forest. She couldn't afford to stop, not now. The rain drummed relentlessly against the leaves; her soaked shoes squelched with every step. She could barely see a few feet ahead of her, the darkness so thick and oppressive. Every breath was a struggle, her lungs burning as she pushed herself to keep moving.

But she swore she could hear him, the sound of his footsteps, deliberate and unhurried, echoing through the trees. He knew she was exhausted, that she had nowhere to go. He was toying with her, savouring the hunt. Lila's legs ached, her strength fading with each passing second. She stumbled over a root, crashing to the ground with a cry of pain. Her knee throbbed where it had struck a rock, and her palms were scraped and bloody. The taste of copper filled her mouth as she bit down on her lip to keep from screaming.

Still, she forced herself to her feet, body screaming in protest. She couldn't give up, not when he was so close. But her vision was blurring, her mind foggy with exhaustion and fear. The world around her spun, and she could no longer tell if she was making any progress at all or running in circles. Another flash of lightning tore through the sky, and she saw him again, closer this time, his figure moving with an unnerving grace through the trees. His face was still hidden in the shadows, but she could feel his eyes on her, piercing through the darkness, locking onto her like a predator.

She stopped, breathless, heart pounding in her ears. The figure emerged from the shadows; face unmistakable, the lifeless eyes that had haunted her nightmares for years. Time seemed to stop as realization washed over her, a tidal wave of terror and disbelief. Her blood ran cold as she recognized him—but this time, it was no dream. The man she thought she'd buried with her own hands now stood before her.

## Out of Time

Stella Hauser, Year 9

Lizzy had always heard the voices. They started as murmurs—distant whispers brushing against her ears like wind sneaking through cracked walls. At first, she dismissed them as a byproduct of exhaustion, stray thoughts tangled in the quiet hum of her mind. But they grew louder. More insistent. More real.

It always began the same way. 'Lizzy.' Soft. Gentle. Almost soothing. 'Lizzy, come here.' She sat on the edge of her unmade bed, fingers digging into threadbare sheets. The dim glow of her bedside lamp barely touched the corners of the room, where shadows thickened unnaturally, stretching toward her like unseen hands. Her gaze fixed on the peeling wallpaper, as if looking anywhere else would give the voices power.

The medication was supposed to silence the noise, keep the whispers buried beneath a chemically induced quiet. 'We're waiting.'

Her breath hitched. A shudder ran through her as she pressed her palms hard against her ears, trying to drown them out. 'You're not real. You're not real.'

A laugh—hollow, wrong—slithered through the room like something alive. The air turned brittle, the temperature dropping so sharply that goosebumps erupted along her arms. Slowly, stiff with dread, Lizzy turned toward the mirror above her dresser. At first, her reflection looked normal, just her, sitting there, wide-eyed and trembling. But then the details shifted. Her mirrored self-smiled, but the expression was too wide, too sharp, as if something else was pulling at the edges of her lips. Her eyes—normally light, normally hers—had darkened into endless, yawning voids. That other Lizzy tilted her head. 'You're running out of time.'

A strangled gasp tore from Lizzy's throat. The bed groaned as she lurched backward, her pulse a frantic drumbeat in her ears. The voices swelled, rising into a discordant symphony. The walls trembled, as though the house itself was exhaling, as though it, too, was listening. 'Come find us,' the voices called.

'No,' she choked out. 'Go away.'

The reflection twitched. Its skin soured to a sickly grey, fingers elongating into something not quite human. A slow, gurgling chuckle spilled from its throat, thick

and wet. The light flickered violently and then darkness gathered: not just the absence of light, but something real, something sentient, that coiled and slithered, pooling like ink, pulsing like breath. Something was coming through. 'Lizzy,' the voices called again, closer this time. Right behind her.

She spun, expecting someone, but there was nothing there. Then she saw the mirror. Its glass no longer reflected her room, instead, rippling like disturbed water, a shifting void on the other side. A pale hand, its skeletal fingers tipped with ragged nails, pressed against the surface from within. Then another. Twisted faces emerged in the fractured reflection, their eyes too wide, smiles too sharp. Teeth gleaming, jagged and eager, they wailed, 'Let us in.'

Lizzy clapped a shaking hand over her mouth, trapping the scream that clawed at her throat. Her legs felt sluggish and heavy with terror. She lunged for the door, fingers scrabbling for the knob and yanked. It didn't budge. Locked. The whispers escalated, pleading, laughing, mocking. A thousand voices overlapping, seeping into her skull.

Then— Silence.

Dread thickened in her chest. Slowly, hesitantly, she turned back toward the mirror. Her reflection was just her again. Tears blurred her vision. A shuddering breath escaped her lips. Maybe... maybe she was imagining it. But then the image shifted and the other Lizzy stepped forward, pressing a single, pale finger to the glass. The mirror shattered.

Glass exploded outward, slicing her arms, her cheeks. Lizzy staggered back, breath ragged as darkness spilled from the shards like thick tar, spreading, moving, stretching.

And then, from within the abyss, they came. Hands, flickering between shadow and flesh, clawed their way through. Grinning mouths stretched impossibly wide, teeth bared in twisted hunger. Their laughter was wrong, warped and fractured, as if it didn't belong to just one being but many, all speaking through the same lips. 'You belong with us now.'

Lizzy stumbled, her body no longer her own. Her limbs turned to lead, sinking, pulling as the walls pulsed, like lungs drawing in a slow, deep breath. The whispers slithered into her skull, carrying secrets she had never spoken aloud.

'One more time.' The darkness surged, then there was nothing—no sound, no light, just an aching, endless void.

But then, warmth. A gentle hum, rhythmic and familiar. When Lizzy opened her eyes, she was no longer in her room but stood in a vast, spectral chamber, where the walls shimmered like liquid glass. Time felt distorted, stretched and unravelled. The walls were lined with faded photographs. Lizzy moved closer, her breath shallow and saw that the images were of her. Smiling. Laughing. Captured in places she'd never been, with people she'd never met. Yet it was her own face that stared back at her. The voices no longer taunted. Now they wept and a sorrowful longing wrapped around Lizzie like a phantom embrace.

A new voice joined the chorus, smooth like velvet, amused. 'You've been here before.' The words seeped into her veins, cold and absolute as a sick realisation hit: this wasn't the first time. At the far end of the chamber stood a mirror. Unlike the shattered one in her bedroom, this surface pulsed, swirling with silver and shadow and within it, her reflection waited. It smiled, but the expression did not seem to belong to her. Drawn forward, Lizzy pressed trembling fingers to the glass which gave way beneath her touch, rippling like a puddle.

A warmth crawled up her arm, seeping into her skin. The mirror had swallowed her whole. Inside, her reflection—no, not her—grinned, wild-eyed and bloodstained. It stepped forward as she was pulled back. And then, she was on the other side. Lizzy's body stood in the real world, still and silent before slowly, its lips curled into a jagged smile. From within the glass, the real Lizzy pounded against the surface, screaming soundlessly.

But Lizzy—no, not Lizzy anymore—only tilted her head. 'Shhh.' The lights flickered. The whispers faded. The real Lizzy was never seen again.

## Hunger

Kiarra Fernando, Year 9

Nostalgia was a thing that had always tainted my perception of life; rose-coloured glasses preserving the world of the past, a place where life was a haven and no problems arose. *Enough. No more. Focus on the present. Do your job. You're not a puny child anymore.*

'Macrinus, you look stunned,' said a cold echo that snapped and bounced across the chapel, pulling me out of my trance. After days of prying open the gate, we were finally in.

'See a ghost or something, Maccie?' The nickname wiped other thoughts from my mind, annoyance and embarrassment replacing the euphoria of what could've stayed, the final push into reality. Today was my first grave-robbing gig with the professionals, the ones that truly made a solid buck out of the business. This was the group I needed to stick with if I wanted Olly to actually have a shot at reminiscing about his childhood, like I did, instead of dying before it ended.

'See a ghost or something, Maccie?' The voice was no longer tinged with a masculine tone but replaced now with the familiar rhythmic lull of another. It was just the nerves. Just the nerves, right? Why else would her voice be ringing in my ears, bouncing off these mosaic walls covered with depictions of sacrifice. 'Honey, I told you not to stray from the excavation party,' the voice of my deceased mother continued, berating me.

Suddenly, the memory of that day came back in flashes to my present mind; the memory of that day I had discovered this ghastly place of past religion. My stubby finger had followed her scolding then, pointing my mother to the ruins of Calgurius Chapel. The days that followed were painful for my brother Olly and I: she never returned from that mission with her team to search the Calgurius chapel and learn about the Swissari Cult, an isolated community that once lived there.

I had heard what the people of our small town whispered. The members of the Swissari cult hadn't been seen in centuries; presumably died of starvation in the chapel where they once resided. That chapel now lay barren next to an abandoned archaeological dig site. I'd heard their theories: that ghost, ghouls and monsters had stolen away the lives of my mother's team that day. Olly always told me to never dream; never hope she'd appear alive. Although her death was a

definite, the cause was another question mark, and I could not dispel it until I'd explored the chapel myself.

I knew it was selfish of me to use others for my benefit. Selfish to repeat the mistakes of my mother, changing the course of others' lives to answer one's own questions. The dreaded question had lingered over my family's heads for years, and when it lingered in mine it was laced in guilt. What if I had never sparked the interest in her curious mind? (The mind which I inherited.) What if Mum was still alive? *Enough. No more. Focus on the present. Do your job.* That's what Olly would say to keep me focused, keep my mind off those daydreams in which I was struck with the regret of what I had done. But now, Olly couldn't say anything. He was stuck in a hospital bed, in a coma.

'Before we continue any further lads, I wanted to raise a hand to our new recruit, Macrinus Craig, for leading us here and consequentially loading up our pockets with cash!' The hall filled with cheers, screaming my name and the sides of my mouth even contorted into a smile. But I think if you took a photo of my expression right then even the average person could look into my eyes and see the guilt. What had I led these already poor men to? I couldn't face them, my legs pushing me to the other side of the humongous chapel, plastered with glacial shards of tinted glass, my uncoordinated and metal braced hands clanking on plaster carved pillars. A chill fell over my shoulders, a voice called, 'I only need you.' Then the world collapsed.

Where was I? Who was I? *I am Macrinus Craig, the Calgurius chapel is where I am.* Who was I with? *My fellow grave robbers of my hometown.* Where were they? *The underneath of the dome of the right wing of the chapel.* *Though now, heaven would be a more accurate answer.* How could I live with my guilt?

For days I had wandered that God-forsaken chapel, covered in cough-inducing dust from the collapsed dome which had once been carried by four plaster pillars. Pillars that I knew were already crumbling from years of wear and weak construction, even on that day I led the men into the chapel with promises of reward. That angry whisper, the chill that followed haunted my every step; my head was too filled with questions to properly function. The only definite was the instinct to survive and escape the now claustrophobic landscape of the half-crushed building. For days I tried to find the gate through which my team and I had entered; for days that voice trailed behind me. I heard its exhaustion, its

heavy breathing and croaks of pain. It repeated its chant, in and out, every hour of every day: 'I only need you. I only need you. I only need—'.

'WHY?' I screamed into the chaos. Immediate realisation of my stupidity made me idle in the shock of what I had now done. I had betrayed my location. The steps behind me finally caught up.

'Why? To answer my question.' The whisper finally had a face, a body: one of paper-white skin and bloodshot eyes, draped in robes, bones jutting out of every limb. 'How nice will it be when my hunger is met?'

## Tick Tock

Maya Smallbone, Year 12

### **7:00 *Tick tock.***

My alarm went off like a gun, shooting its relentless noises at me. I sat up stiffly. I had been awake for an hour already, lying on my back, staring at the ceiling. There was no movement allowed before 7:00. I tossed the grey covers aside and got up.

### **7:01 *Tick tock.***

I approached the wardrobe, less than a metre away. When it sensed me, the doors slid open and two spindly metallic arms slithered from its cavernous black depths, presenting me with today's grey clothes—the same clothes I'd worn the day before and the day before that. I took them from the hands, which vanished back into the cupboard, and threw my night clothes into the drawer that opened at the bottom, ready to be cleaned.

### **7:04 *Tick tock.***

I stood in front of my locked door and reached out for the white pills in the small clear cylinder in the slot by the handle. I tipped them into my hands and placed the cylinder back into the slot. The pills stared up at me like a pair of pupil-less eyes. I swallowed them.

### **7:05 *Tick tock.***

I stood at the top of the stairs, my brother next to me, and our parents appearing just behind us from their two rooms. This was the only time of day I ever saw my parents. We exchanged pleasantries.

'Hello, Father,' we said in unison. 'Hello, Mother. Hello, Brother. Hello, Sister.' We descended the stairs in pairs—the perfect family unit.

### **7:06 *Tick tock.***

I placed my white bowl under the dispenser and watched as a grey lump dropped into it. It sank into the shape of the bowl unwillingly and gazed at me accusingly as I began to eat. I forced my spoon into it and up to my mouth, the bitter taste coating my tongue completely. My family sat and ate in silence.

**7:10 Tick tock.**

Father disappeared into his study. Mother vanished into the laundry. I sat down in front of the television, Brother beside me, and opened my notebook. Automatically, the screen brightened, blinding us in its haste. Colours popped out of its black oblivion, and a voice began to sing about addition.

Every day was the same, the same every day. Repeating. Repeating. On and on and on and on and on. For the last seventeen years. Pill. Greet. Eat. Learn. Sleep. Pill. Greet. Eat. Learn. Sleep. Pill. Greet. Eat. Learn. Sleep. The clock ticking like a hammer in my head. An endless daily mantra.

Until that day. That day when everything collapsed. That day when the world stopped. That day when society died in front of me. The Day. I sat down in front of the television, Brother beside me, and opened my notebook. Automatically, the screen brightened, blinding us in its haste. Colours popped out of its black oblivion, and a voice began to sing about addition. *BANG!* It was a peculiar noise. I squinted at the screen. There had never been a bang before. I didn't know the television could bang like that. *BANG!* It happened again.

And then there was a voice—a screaming voice. But it wasn't happy like the usual screaming voices, celebrating The Suburbs and laughing about our successes in The Distant War. This screaming voice sounded different. I couldn't quite place it. I'd never heard a voice like it before. 'Look. Look around you. Look at the screen and the pills and the slop you call food and the ticking. It's all wrong. It's all a trap.' It didn't sound like it was coming from the television.

I pulled my eyes away from the screen at 7:12—something I had never done before. There was a man staring into our window, into me, hands pressed against the glass. He shouldn't have been able to do that. Every house was equipped with one-way mirror windows; no one could see in. And yet he was looking straight at me like he knew I was there, right there in that spot. 'You're trapped like a rat in a cage, and you'll die like a rat. Escape! Escape before it's—' The man stopped abruptly. A red flower bloomed on his forehead, and he collapsed, sagging against the glass. I watched him as he slid away, my eyes still locked on where he'd been.

I knew my brother would be looking at the television again, but I couldn't help the niggling feeling of something, growing, inside me. I didn't like this feeling. It felt

like worms wriggling under my skin, like someone punching me in the stomach, and like screeching sounds that made my ears ring. A group of men in white coats appeared, and I looked back at the screen hurriedly. No one looked at the Street Walkers. Not even through the windows. They would always know.

I was awake before my alarm again. I hadn't slept well. But now I knew. I was confident. I was going to escape the hands of the clock. I was not going to swallow my pills.

And that was possibly the biggest mistake of my life.

## Lost Rhythm

Alicia Odgers, Year 12

**21/09/1979**

At first, it began with a few harmless toe taps. Then came a plethora of thumps, glides, and pops, with amplified energy that infected the room. The dance floor was painted in vibrant flashes from the shimmering disco ball hung in the centre like a magical planet.

Sequins caught the light with every spin and twist, reflecting colours like fireworks exploding on the dancers. The air was thick with a heady smell of hairspray, sweat, vinyl, and passion. Not only could you hear the bass, you felt it, like a pulse that came from within. Nothing but pure soul and emotion, where they celebrated life, freedom, fashion, and the feverish night.

**Present day 21/09/2089**

Amber's wide eyes gleamed with wonder as she wished she might someday relive these old photographs, in a world of colour, laughter, and music rather than her sterile and grey reality. Music and dancing had been erased from existence since the early 2000s, deemed controversial and a source of conflict between people. For a moment, she got lost in a daydream, gently swaying to an invisible beat, trying to imagine how music would sound.

But the sound of a faint, monotone voice at the door jolted her back to reality. *COMMENCING WELFARE CHECK. T-MINUS TWO MINUTES.*

Amber slammed the photo album shut and shoved it under a dusty couch, causing a few photos to spill out onto the floor. With her breath caught in her throat, she fled up the basement stairs. Amber just made it to the front door in time, lining up with her parents and two brothers a moment before the door opened. The Overseers emerged from the light behind the door, synchronized like clockwork. *COMMENCING WELFARE CHECK.*

Their monochrome armour gleamed like cold metal as the visors over their eyes began to scan the home with glowing lasers. They swept the room with

mechanical efficiency, searching for anything that might be out of order or go against the society's values. The welfare check was never truly for well-being, but an intrusive inspection which acted as a reminder that no one was free from the watchful eyes of Stillspire.

They passed neatly over the kitchen shelves and the tidy living room, making it to the end of the home. But Amber's heart dropped as she heard a thud against the first step. Her breath quickened with every step she heard descending to the basement where the forbidden memories lay. Only then did she realise that she had forgotten to shut the door.

## **The Lie They Watch**

Maddie Bogust, Year 12

They told us it was tradition. One Race. A test of strength. A measure of endurance to become a glorified Prime Soldier. But it was a performance. A lie. The lie they watch.

Yet I too took my place at the starting line, pride pumping through my veins like electric lightning bolts. There was not a flicker of doubt, only the quiet certainty that I was exactly where I was meant to be. It all felt strangely ordinary, like stepping into something I'd done countless times before. For the past six years, I had been dismantled and rebuilt. Each command I followed stripped me clean of weakness, beating it out, until only hardwired obedience remained. It was all leading to this very moment.

We were told what waited at the end: promotion to Prime Soldier. This was the highest honour, a future beyond the ordinary for those who had completed the Race. These people were heroes. No one knew what the role of a Prime Soldier truly was. We didn't need to. They never came back.

Twenty contenders stood in formation around me, all of us real-life replicas of one another: navy uniforms, shaved heads, silent and still. Clones. Each of us was perfectly crafted, an immaculate product of Energia's design. I felt the steady pulse of the Link beneath my wrist—loyal, precise, and a constant reminder that I was connected.

The countdown began. 'Three...' The voice, smooth and mechanical, pierced through the silence. 'Two...' I hunched over, ready to begin, my nostrils filling with the scent of pine as I dug my feet into the cool earth beneath me. 'One...' The Link vibrated once. Permission.

I sprinted, a machine unleashing its full force, making sure not to get caught up within a pack: Energia sacrificed those who followed; rewarded those who led. In front of me, a sharp hum cut through the air, followed by shrieks and lifeless bodies collapsing to the ground. Five in total—the false starters—were eliminated before their second breath and erased forever. That was precisely how it should have been. Cheaters.

As I surged forward, something glitched beyond the trees—a flash, a movement, a crowd, like rows of people were watching. But it was just a trick of light reflection. My training told me to ignore it. I settled into a rhythm, legs moving with programmed power, each stride hammering into the ground greater than the last. I held my ordinary position near the front, not reckless enough to lead but far ahead of the stragglers.

I repeated the mantra the Energia trainers had drilled into us with every inhaled breath: ‘Run without question. Finish without failure.’

Then I saw it, just ahead. A line of trees shifted unnaturally, parting like they had been shoved to the side by invisible hands. My pulse quickened, not with fear but anticipation. The First Task was the Pinnacle, and I had prepared for it; it was nothing unexpected. The forest unveiled a single colossal tree, its trunk and branches spiralling into the clouds. I didn’t hesitate—my hands gripped the slick bark, splinters biting deep into my skin like fangs as I hauled myself upwards.

But above, a sharp mechanical crack echoed. Someone had slipped and fell, fast, out of control. Before I could adjust, their shoulder slammed past mine, my right hand tore free, leaving me hanging by one arm. I couldn’t let this phase me: pain was irrelevant. I shifted my weight, found a foothold in the bark, and hoisted my right arm back into place. The branches thinned as I climbed higher, and the air turned crisp. Soon, the canopy of luscious trees vanished beneath layers of carpet clouds. I didn’t stop. I didn’t look down. I was nearly there. I saw it glimmering through the mist—the golden platform—polished and unnatural against the rough bark. Finally, my fingers gripped its cold metal surface. Relief. The Link vibrated on my wrist as I pulled myself up. A voice followed: ‘Task one complete. Proceed.’

The platform shifted beneath me, opening a path forward, just as it was supposed to. The forest dissolved, replaced by endless sand stretching ahead. It was The Final Task. The Dunes. Heat pressed against me, heavy and suffocating; the sand moved, eager to consume anyone who rushed. This wasn’t just a desert. The Dunes demanded control. This was what my training had prepared me for. Ahead, uneven dunes rose and fell like cascading waves, each collapsing at the edges. Between them, pockets of quicksand waited for racers to make mistakes, and many were made.

I began, each stride angled for distance, not speed. Hitting the first dune, I pushed off just before it disintegrated beneath me. The dunes narrowed, and the gaps widened with every dune I crossed. Suddenly, the golden platform reappeared—one last leap. I launched from the last dune as it crumbled, my body slamming onto the shiny surface, a faint sound rising, like an eruption of people cheering far in the distance. It filled the air for a moment but then disappeared, as if it had been turned off. It couldn't be real. It must have just been the wind. I stood there, breathing heavily, as the Link pulsed on my wrist. 'Task two is complete,' the voice announced.

My heart pounded with a sense of victory. The platform began to rise, and soon enough, a blinding light flooded my eyes. This was about to be heaven. I felt the weight of everything I had trained for lifting from my shoulders. This was the moment before it all changed, when everything seemed ordinary. I was at peace; I had worked so hard and rightly earned the honour to become a Prime Soldier. This was how it was supposed to end.

But I began to hear those strange sounds once again. I thought it was just the whispers of the wind, but the roaring grew louder as I continued to rise. And then I saw it: the roar wasn't the wind at all; it was a crowd, thousands of them packed into rows just like I had seen at the start of the Race. Then, the voice I had heard a thousand times before began to speak: 'Congratulations. You have finished Level One. You are now one step closer to being a Prime Soldier. Welcome to the Arena Series.' The crowd howled once more. I stared in disbelief. What did it mean? Was this not the end? Was I not a Prime Soldier yet? Why was I surrounded by all these people?

'Now the real fun begins. There are just ninety-nine more levels to complete in the Arena. So, keep fighting. Keep entertaining. Keep finishing with honour. This is not the end; you have so much more to prove as our newest competitor. Then you will become a Prime Soldier.'

My stomach almost dropped out of me. I was paralysed. They told us it was only one race, and that was the end. But I wasn't finished; I was just at the start of a continuous competition. And it was all just a game for their entertainment. No glory. No honour. A lie.



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*The title, The Anduril, also known as The Flame of the West, is taken from J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy, The Lord of the Rings. The Anduril was Aragorn's ancestral sword which symbolised strength, courage and freedom.*

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