



SCRIPSI



SCRIPSI
RUYTON
LITERARY PUBLICATION

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COVER IMAGE

Original garments photographed and adjusted for production.
Original garments (right to left) by Year 12 students
Liliana Testen, Helena Moschoyiannis and Jonte Makrigiannakis
Submitted as part of their folioVCE Product Design and Technology

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EDITORIAL

MS DANIELLE COOPER

LEARNING LEADER

ENGLISH

In the novel *I for Isobel* by Australian author, Amy Witting, the protagonist spends much of her childhood and adolescence denying and suppressing her talent for words and writing. It is not until the closing pages that she no longer denies the 'word factory' and finally acknowledges that she has 'met someone' – herself. In declaring 'I am a writer', Isobel feels liberated. Studied in VCE English classes this year, this novel delivers a strong message to budding writers. Likewise, Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, studied at Year 8, endorses the joy that comes from writing through his protagonist, Liesel, who recognises that 'words had brought her to life.'

The collection of writing in this year's *Scripsi* once again showcases the many Ruyton students with a talent for language and writing. Through experimenting with a range of forms and styles, students have been able to explore, reflect, create and contemplate their world through powerful and precise images and descriptions. Many pieces in this 2016 edition of *Scripsi* evolved from English and Literature classes, or in response to the annual Isobelle Carmody Short Story Competition. The Literature Club is to be thanked for devising this year's topics: The Coat, Clandestine and Remember, which produced deeply stirring, thought-provoking narratives. Ruyton was privileged to have the 2016 Vogel's Literary Award winner, Katherine Brabon, as the judge of the Carmody stories. Katherine commended the students on their creativity and originality, while encouraging them to pursue their passion for reading and writing. The annual Orator of the Year competition also produced speeches which moved, persuaded and shocked, as students experimented with persuasive language and techniques. I hope that you enjoy reading the winning speeches at each year level as much as the School enjoyed listening to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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COVER UP

CATHERINE ANDRONIS
ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD
FOR CREATIVE WRITING
WINNER

Alex was by far the most popular girl at her school. She had it all; beauty, brains and the ability to dance and not look like an awkward chicken. All the girls treated her like a God and all the boys were deeply in love with her. You'd think that she would be happy, but she was anything but.

Alex lived a life that wasn't hers. She was a fake and lost hours of sleep afraid someone would find her out. Alex wasn't who anyone thought she was.

7

Her mother had bought her a dull rose coloured winter coat a few months ago that she loved at the time. Her mother had spent a handsome sum of money on the coat to ensure that Alex would wear it all winter. At the time Alex knew she would wear that coat until it was splotted with stains and falling apart, but as she grew, Alex came to hate everything about the coat. It hugged her figure so that you could clearly see her hips and curves. It made Alex feel like a girl, which she no longer wanted to be. Though she hated the coat, she kept wearing it as she loved her mother and would never want to disappoint her. This was why she was scared to tell her mother she was actually a boy. Her mother would never accept her, so Alex kept quiet and continued to live a lie.

It was her last few weeks of high school and Alex felt like she was drowning in the sea of lies she'd created for herself. She had grown into this personality that wasn't hers. Alex wanted so desperately to be a boy, but she had become this incredibly popular, beautiful girl. Would she be treated the same once she became a boy? Surely not. Her friends would think of her as a freak. If Alex were to become a boy she'd miss the comfortable life she had built for herself. But, the Alex her friends knew her as was simply a character she had created. Alex was the girl with the supposedly beautiful life harbouring a deep, dark secret.

Alex became increasingly unhappy each time she put on the abhorrent pink, winter coat. For it meant another day pretending to be who she wasn't. It was only a matter of time before she broke, before she snapped in two and let out her secret. And that she did.

It was on April sixth that Alex finally broke. She was home by herself. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror repulsed her, so much so that she started smashing bottles of floral scented perfume;

only women liked those scents and Alex was no woman. Alex was a boy who needed to finally accept it.

She ran into her room and grabbed the pink coat that caused her so much angst and tore it up in tiny pieces until it lay an ugly pink pile of her floor. Alex grabbed her favourite pair of navy jeans and baggy white top and threw them on. She grabbed a pair of scissors and began cutting her long hair haphazardly. With each lock of hair that fell on the bathroom tiles around her, Alex felt more and more free. It was as if the coat, her hair and the floral scented perfume held as a tether to the artificial life she wished to leave behind.

Alex stared back at his reflection and for the first time he was actually happy with the face and body that stared back at him. Alex was sick of pretending. He was sick of changing himself for the sake of others. No longer would he be known as the beautiful girl who had it so perfect. Alex would be known as the freaky boy, because that's what he was.

He didn't care how many people would be repulsed by the way he was or by how many disgusted looks he got. Alex was who he had always been, but this time publicly, because he didn't care what others thought of him anymore.

By the time Alex graduated he was an outcast with a disgruntled mother and family but never felt more free. With nothing hanging on his shoulders, Alex felt like the person he had always wanted to be. He was finally happy even if he was called a freak and he was ignored completely, it didn't bother him anymore. Alex was finally Alex.



SOCIETY
SHAPED MASKS

JORDAN COOK
ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD
FOR CREATIVE WRITING
HIGHLY COMMENDED

Everyone has a secret behind their perfect, society made mask. However when really everyone is the same, liking the same clothes, sharing the same food and nobody dares to be different. We were all taught that different is bad and when the mask is exposed, you are nothing, except for that one secret.

The death, the devastation and families torn apart that war brought, but society had to rebuild itself.

No one had hope.

Willow's feet were pounding against the gravel and her breathing was ragged, she hit the realisation that she was being followed but she thought that the pursuer had ceased following her.

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath, nobody was like her, she was different, not orientated by society.

Willow was more like an outcast, being glared at by her parents all because she was different. She wanted to stand out rather than fit in. She will never fall down, she will always stand up for what she believed in. Willow was shy and secretive to a degree, she has never taken her mask off and she has never revealed her secret. Although, that's about to change.

I awoke with a fright before relaxing back into bed, today I felt different, creative almost. I decided on wearing my most treasured, bright turquoise scarf today. I arrived at school and pushed through the school gates and spotted my principal briskly strutting over to me, 'oh no' I mumble. "Miss Nixen, that... scarf is deemed too bright for our school rules, follow me." He said, choosing his words carefully. He always acts like he knows more.

I follow him up the long, winding staircase to his, dark and musty office.

"Wait here, I have some other matters to attend to." he walks out and shuts the door firmly behind him. I look around and spot a drawer with some important looking papers hanging out. I sneak over to take a closer look and I find a dusty looking book entitled, *The Companionship of Music*. I glance up, frowning in frustration. What is music? I take a quick look and decide I'll look at it later, I stuff it into my bag. Mr Welsh re-enters the room and promptly announces "I will let you off with a warning Miss Nixen, take the scarf off." He then signals for me to go and I leave hurrying down the staircase, ripping the scarf off my neck as I leave.

During classes, I cannot stop thinking about what music might mean, at the end of the day I rush home and plop down on my bed



and begin reading hastily.

Music is a wonderful thing. In this book you will learn what are instruments and the basics.

What is music? I pondered that question over and over until I decide to keep reading.

Flute – This is a silver, brass, or gold instrument it is to be blown across the opening to produce a sound. Intrigued my eyes flickered over the diagram of a flute, I paused, thinking what if I were to make one? What if I were to create this... Music?

I run outside with my legs bursting with energy. I collect wood from the nearest pile and run back into my bedroom. I sit carefully onto my blankets and start using a knife to carve a block of wood into a simple, wooden flute. I blow hard, expecting a noise but all I hear is a squeak, I refer back to the book to find that I didn't have the correct 'mouth shape', so I fix it and I start to hear a wonderful note.

I press the holes excitedly, listening to the different sounds, I then precede to try and play the piece in the book, although the sound was quite hideous. I had created this music!

During my day of classes, I cannot stop thinking about my discoveries – how long has society and the government kept this secret from us? How much information remains from our old life? How much is being kept a secret?

A plan forms in my head while I'm day dreaming in class. A plan that involves me breaking into the government's office and playing my wooden flute for everyone to hear, for everyone to be inspired about the secrets that they have kept from us about our old life. We could build a better society. One that is not so secretive.

I silently creep down the alley ways in my black clothing, my heart is racing for if this doesn't work then I could go to jail, or worse I could be executed. But I try to steer away from my thoughts as I creep up the hallways and into the reception area. It's almost the crack of dawn, people should be waking up soon.

I wonder about the security as I creep up the stairs and down the narrow, dark hallway. I look at all the nameplates on the doors and search for one labeled Prime Minister.

"Ahah" I whisper as I have found it. I push open the door, hesitant to make as noise, and walk over to the desk, people should be waking up now. I talk into the microphone " Hello everyone, I am Willow Nixen and I have unlocked the secret of society, music." I start to play. This is a start of a new hope.

7



HUMMINGBIRDS

SOPHIA DOUFAS

As they slowly nibble on nectar in extensive fields
of flowers,

Their delicate wings like petals in the wind,

Small, petite, exquisite, vibrant, innocent,

Landing perched onto majestic tree trunks,



7

Birds singing to each other,
Light pouring through the gaps in the branches,
Making patterned shadows on the dried up leaves
on the ground,
The tree itself; majestic, rooted, thick,
yet somehow, it's gentle, warm, closed too,
bark peeling off its almond trunk,
and now and then, a leaf ends its time on its twig,
slowly, lightly, falling, drifting away,
and joining the dried up leaves on the soil,
The wind dances with the tree,
rustling it back and forth,
on the old Moreton Bay Fig tree



THE MORETON
BAY FIG TREE

SOPHIA DOUFAS

7

ON MY OWN

SASCHA GILLAM

Two-thousand, one-hundred and sixty-three hours since she had last spoken. If only Dad was there to help. I remember hoping, that soon, Mum would join him in the sky. It would've been better than what she was going through here.

The crash was fatal. Dad died and Mum barely survived.

I was left to pick up the pieces.

My thoughts were interrupted by a deep, male voice.

"If you want to speak to her, she can hear you. She just can't respond."

I turned to face the doctor that had been taking care of her.

"Thank you," I whimpered.

He pulled up a chair and sat down next to me.

"Sometimes in these situations, it's best to get back to your normal routine," he suggested.

"I don't have a routine. I graduated university two days before the crash. I'm unemployed and I live... *lived* with my parents." My voice was barely a whisper.

After a minute of silence, he stood up and quietly left the room.

I thought about talking to her. There was something about talking to a lifeless body that didn't seem right. But I tried it anyway.

"They said that you can hear me. I don't know if that's true or not but I'm talking to you, nonetheless. Doctor Johnson has been taking good care of you. He says you probably won't remember much when...if you wake up. I remember what you told me about your life, so maybe I can help you with that."

I paused and took in a deep, shaky breath.

"You told me about how your Dad would take you to the park every Sunday until you were ten. Your Mum would meet you at the school gates and you'd ride your bike next to her as she walked the dog, all the way home."

I would've stopped talking, but the slow, repetitive beep from the machine next to her bed reminded me that she was listening.

"You told me about the first time you met Dad. You were on a skiing trip and you came flying down the hill and bowled him over. You later found out he lived in your town. You always told me about how his icy, blue eyes sparkled whenever he got excited. You also told me about how I have his eyes."

I sighed as I looked down at the tear stains on my dirty, grey sweatpants.

7

"I remember when I was little and Dad would have to travel a lot for work. You'd make sure he called everyday to talk to me. I always loved to help you cook dinner. I remember my first day of school. All the other kids were crying and clutching to their parents but I gave you a hug and happily skipped into the classroom."

A small chuckle slipped from my lips.

"You called me, two days before the crash, saying you were coming to visit me. I was going to surprise you and give you the news that I'd graduated from uni but I guess that didn't work out."

I wiped more tears away from my cheeks. My head tilted up as the machine by her bed began to beep louder and faster. I was ready to call for a Doctor when the beeping slowed again.

"I remember."

Her voice was hoarse and barely audible. I gasped and jumped up from my seat.

"Mum?"

"I remember the crash," she spoke again, her voice cracking.

A lump formed in my throat. "What do you remember?"

"It was a grey, rainy day. I was with your father. A car swerved suddenly, losing control. The last thing I remember..."

"She's awake! Doctor Johnson!" A nurse called, cutting her off.

Doctor Johnson hurried inside, followed hastily by two more nurses.

"Serena. Nice to see you're finally up," Doctor Johnson stated with a warm smile.

She didn't respond. She didn't even move.

"Mum?"

Silence.

"Mum?" I repeated, my voice breaking, the lump in my throat growing.

Her eyes flickered and her fingers twitched. She motioned for me to step closer. I leaned my head next to hers and she smiled, a weak and small smile.

"I love you Skylar. Don't ever forget that. You're going to do great things, I know it. Make your father and I proud. We'll be watching you," she whispered into my ear. My own tears fell onto her cheeks.

"I love you Mum."

Our eyes met for a moment of silence. All the memories we shared were replayed in our minds.



ON MY OWN

Her eyelids fell and a small breath escaped from her mouth. I leaned back again.

The loud beeps slowed down until it was one final, lengthy beep. Then quiet.

I looked around the room. It was empty. They had left us alone. She had left me alone.

I slumped back into the chair I was so very familiar with. I was surprised with the lack of tears streaming down my face.

I dialled my best friend. She picked up in seconds.

"Tyla?" I choked.

"I'm coming to pick you up. Stay strong, Sky," she soothed, instantly knowing what had happened.

"Thank you," I whispered.

I placed my phone down and walked to the window.

It was a grey, rainy day.

I was on my own.

7



20.7.2116

INK

Dear Vanessa,

CHLOE HUANG

It's so lonely up here without you. My house and my area is a replica of New York, and it looks the same. They say that everything on earth is still there, but I don't know. Are you still there? The smell of you on your woollen coat has faded, but I can still imagine it, as I lie with you and mum on the couch lazily watching TV. I miss it so much, your smile lighting up the room, your laugh ringing in my ears as I laugh with you too. They say I'll be able to send letters to you now, but only once a year. It seems too much distance between us, considering that the forecast is that our home will be turned into a wasteland in a few years.

There are no wild animals here, but I've been trying to get a permit to adopt a dog just like Ollie. How's life on earth? Can you still see the wild roses lining the walls of the museum? I wish I could come and see, but I'm stuck here until eternity passes.

Waiting,
Felicity

7

Felicity put down her pen, a torrent of memories swarming into her mind like a flood. It felt like she was trapped, stuck here forever. *Why didn't I feel like this on earth?* She thought, I couldn't leave then, and *I can't leave now.* Ticking off the 358th day on her calendar, she sighed, her breath a silvery white in the cold air. Sucked into her memories, tears ran down her face, reminiscing the past.

22.7.2117

Dear Felicity,

I can still see where you are at the top of our house. Mum has stopped watching TV, saying it reminds her of you too much. The government says there might still be a chance that we can save ourselves, emphasising that we must never lose hope. I already have, accepting my incoming death like a weight on my shoulders. Not on everything, though, as there's still you, my guardian angel, my only hope. The

INK forecast says that we'll live for another three years before there's too much carbon dioxide in the air and the atmosphere collapses. I'm not sure I believe that. I don't want to, but maybe secretly, I do.

Hope,
Vanessa

Vanessa drew a lone, white daisy in a field of grey, reminiscing those days of innocence only a few years ago. The Program had made the world a chaotic mess, anyone willing to do anything for the safety of their family. A crisis had torn the world apart, returning it to the almost animalistic world of the 1900s. It had suddenly become save yourself, and if not, protect your family. Felicity and a thousand others were chosen for the rescue mission, while Vanessa had not been. While everyone else celebrated, their family spent the last days of their union doing everything that we could ever do together. Memories are important. They always were.

7

26.8.2118

Dear Vanessa,

This letter might be the last you read. The government told us today that they were going to nuke the world before you suffocate. They say the risk of us losing our gravitational attraction to the earth will be too high if the atmosphere imploding pushes us off course. Even if you'll never see me old and wrinkly, I want your last thought to be of me, those times when we were little, still innocent, clinging to each other for hope and strength. Remember me like I am, the irritable older sister, never leaving your side. Pour those memories in your mind like concrete, and never, *never* forget.

A Ghost,
Felicity

Dear Felicity,

Remember that old movie we used to watch when we were little? Iron Man? It was so funny to us to think how people then could only imagine things like that. Now everything that was just a fragment of their imagination could be real. Just eight years ago, I thought everything was perfect. Only in my mind's eye did I see the death and chaos that the world could be. Now my imagination is a reality. I can't escape it, but what I can do is make believe, just like I was in a movie. I can pretend, that the world is safe, perfect even. But in the end, it's just a big mirage that I've whipped up for myself. The oasis that I see in the distance will never get bigger, just like the dreams I dream in my sleep will never be real. All I'm doing is searching for something that I can't reach. Maybe I'll stay in this mirage. Maybe it'll make the pain of insanity disappear. Maybe this past world of ours will remain in my mind until everything returns to nothing. You'll live for longer than I will, but remember, the memories of us will last for eternity, even if I'm a world away.

7

Forever and Always,
Vanessa

Felicity watched the beautiful blueness of her old home morph into a ball of fire. Tears dripped down her face, staining the dark blue ink of Vanessa's last words. Helpless, Felicity stood in front of the glass, suffering in silence. She felt the warm grasp of Vanessa's hug, welcoming her home. *It's a mirage. An illusion so real you want it to be true. A trick of the mind.* Nothing more, nothing less.



FADE

CHLOE HUANG

Fading summer, fading light
Days passing, never as bright
Can you sense the coming night
Bringing in the world of twilight

Fading purple, fading red
Navy coming as it spread
Watching the sun as it left
Spinning warmth in a thread

Fading winter, fading white
Colour coming back to life
Fluttered wings into flight
Vibrant flowers now in sight

7

Fading beauty, fading life
Crumpled petals, crumpled strife
The grass saying goodbye
Seeds in dirt, another life

Coming summer, coming light
Hope growing, becoming bright
Can you sense the fading night
Making the world bright
Every day filled with delight



I can see it in the distance,
It's too far away to touch,
My legs tremble,
Muscles twitch,
One step and then the next,
It's getting closer with every breath.
A tiger lurks behind me,
It's breath on my neck.
My heart is a beating drum,
With the crowd as the symphony.
One step and then the next,
It's getting even closer yet.
The wind brushes my hair,
The grass licks my ankles,
Dirt climbs my back,
Rain splatters like paint across my face.
One step and then the next,
Faster and faster I need to get.
I surge ahead,
Breaking free from the pack,
Victory washes over me,
Success is sweet.
One step and the final one,
Finish line, triumph, it's all mine..



GOLD

ELIZA KLOTZ



There was a knock on the door and a little boy ran and opened it. All of a sudden the child leapt into the man's arms and gave him the biggest hug. He started to cry...

His phone rang and he slipped his hand inside his leather pocket. He answered the phone and said "John's speaking". A few minutes later he placed the phone back inside his jacket pocket and looked up at his concerned wife Anne and two children who were gazing up at him. All he could say was sorry. His work partner Simon had called and said that some urgent work had to be attended to involving their old colleague George. His eyes and expression on his face told them a lot more information though. He stood up and left the house with a disgusted look on his face, and thought "why today?? What could be more urgent than some well earned time with my family?"

7

A man slowly emerged from the side of a dark, dingy alley way. He looked around cautiously to see if he was being watched or followed. He had wrapped his big, long, hairy arm wrapped around the side of his waist; he was clearly hiding something in his jacket as there was a big bulge pushing from the inside out. Little did he know that in fact there was someone watching him. There was John who had just driven in the car park across the road. John was a spy who worked undercover for ASIS (Australian Secret Intelligence services.) He carefully opened the car roof and slid quietly through it so he made no noise opening the car door. He casually crossed the road and started to follow the unusual and suspicious man. John could feel his heart racing; he sometimes found his job spine-chilling and hair-raising when he thought about arresting a potential mass murderer. He also loved the thrill of living by multiple names and going undercover.

John was darting from doorway to doorway peering out from behind corners. He felt himself reach down beside his cold, skinny waist and wrap his hand tightly around his 740 pistol. As John was about to turn the corner where the man had stopped to catch his breath, he released his hand from the gun as he heard a familiar voice. It was close, as though he could reach out and touch it. He narrowed his eyes and squinted around the corner to see George. He looked up and down at the dark and ragged man that used to be full of life and now looked as if he had seen death. John examined his old colleague and noticed that he had confidential files from ASIS headquarters inside his jacket. John wanted to ask him why he

had confidential files but before he had the chance, George called out, “Yes I quit! Yes I did go and work for the enemy!” They both grabbed their guns and started shooting ferociously at one another. John thought to himself about how he had to leave his family and go undercover. He never thought that it may have been the last time he saw them today. He thought of his children’s faces peering up at him sadly and him telling them not to worry. He would be home soon. As he thought this to himself he realised that he couldn’t give up; he had to make it home. He pulled himself up off the concrete and started to fight for his life. Finally, after ten minutes (which felt more like hours) George fell onto the ground pleading for his life. John was not the man to kill someone just because they may have done so to him, so John called the police and fled.

John sprinted as fast as he could back to his car. He placed his bloody arms across the steering wheel and rested his sweaty head on his arms. He made some phone calls, the first to his family telling them he would be home soon, and another to Simon, who was his recent work partner to explain what had taken place.

When John arrived home he was in two different states of mind. He couldn’t completely focus on one thing and when he did he took a lifetime to do so. His wife Anne picked up on this and sat him down to talk once the children had gone to bed. They spoke all night with many tears shed. He told her that his family was not safe around him and that they had to move to the country. The next morning when his children woke they expected to find their father in the living room; instead they found their mother in tears on the couch. The mother explained to them that they would not see their father for many years to come; he had left them for safety reasons but would return some day.

There was a knock on the door and a little boy ran and opened it. All of a sudden the child leapt into the man’s arms and gave him the biggest hug. He started to cry...



BE CAREFUL

The air was a misty blanket, wind rustling through the leaves
But something there was missing

ANNA TIMM

One small thing was missing
Only empty silence remained where Rosie should have been.

She arrived on the stroke of midnight, her fiery eyes ablaze
Her silver shoes shining brightly in the moonlight's rays
Her footsteps echoed loudly as she walked the cobbled path
She waited on the wooden bench

Every night the wooden bench
Every night she waited for Winter, silent in the dark.

Rosie waited every night, from midnight until dawn
Every day losing hope, her smile growing wan
Although she tried to maintain hope, she couldn't help but fear
The nights got longer, darker, colder

Rosie's heart; darker, colder
From the day she'd last seen Winter, it had been a year.

Winter returned on midnight's stroke, his icy blue eyes bright
He waited on the wooden bench until the sky was light
Winter watched for Rosie, silence hanging in the air
He waited on the wooden bench

Every night the wooden bench

Every night he waited for her, but she wasn't there.



Put your hand up if you have thought about death.
Dying.
The end of the world.

CARPE DIEM

ANNA TIMM

ORATOR OF THE YEAR

WINNER

I've thought about all of these things many, many times. It's called an 'existential crisis': a moment in which you stop, and question whether life has any meaning or purpose, seeing as we're all going to die in the end. This usually ends in me crying alone at three am while stress-eating, but that's a different story.

Because this speech is supposed to be uplifting, I'm going to talk to you all about living for today. The famous Latin proverb, 'carpe diem', translates roughly to "seize the day, for tomorrow you will die." Aside from the death part, it's pretty motivational. 'Live for today, for tomorrow never comes.' Another famous proverb. With imminent death looming upon us, it's important to focus on the now.

So, straight up, I've already lied to you. I said this was going to be an 'uplifting' and 'motivational' speech. Yeah... no. So sit down, fasten your seatbelts, grab some popcorn, ladies and gentlemen, because today I'm going to talk you through all the ways the world might end.

Right, so I was going to go through the whole sun-exploding-earth-ending-fire-death scenario, but by now everyone's heard that. It just doesn't... scare me enough. Has anyone here heard of the 'ice' theory? To save you all from the boring science formulas and equations and logic and stuff, it pretty much works like this: water doesn't freeze without 'impurities' or imperfections. This means water can get a lot colder than zero degrees without freezing, *if* the water is completely purified and perfect. How does this relate to the universe? We have reason to believe that our universe works similarly. Many think that our entire universe is like purified water; completely free of flaws. But as soon as a tiny flaw, imperfection, impurity is introduced...

Done. Frozen. End. Goodbye. Next chapter.

So if science stuff isn't the end of us, it'll almost certainly be us. Humanity. Global warming. Greenhouse gases. Holes in the ozone. Tragedy after tragedy. Bad political leaders... Donald, we're onto you, mate. Not to be all 'yay-flowers-trees'-ish, but we're not living



CARPE DIEM

sustainably, and unless we turn this world right around, right now, we're doomed.

Chances are, one of these days there won't be a tomorrow. We just can not guarantee that we'll have one. But my entire speech has pretty much just been one long lead up to this: live for today. Live for now. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying you should go rob a bank and move to Vegas. But enjoy yourself, and enjoy your time on this planet. Earth is effectively a ticking time bomb, bound to explode at some point. So, I urge you, *live your life*. Because one day, you'll have to say goodbye, and let me tell you, you'll have a darn good story to tell in the afterlife.

Thank you, and enjoy today!



7

Walking down a dimly lit hall
My steps light as feathers
Tip toe, tip toe.

THE PIANO

RENITA YANG

Approaching a large figure in the distance
Its edges are ragged with age
I do not care.

Caressing its exterior lovingly, softly
It looks at me and smiles.
I smile.

Lifting the worn black cover
Monochrome keys staring at me
Daring me.

Sitting down on the stool that squeaks
I raise my hand and play
A note.

The familiar sound of a C sharp fills my mind
The instrument is a semitone sharp
No surprise.

A note turns into a musical piece
I close my eyes and let the music spread through my
veins
It consumes me.

It's interesting how charcoal black and ivory white keys
Can be heard in all of the different colours of the
rainbow
Listen.

7



CLANDESTINE

RENITA YANG

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Her memory has been unusually excellent from the day she was born. She remembers the first time she opened her eyes, seeing bright lights, adults crowding around, cooing at the beautiful baby before them. And perfect she was, with her big blue eyes, soft tufts of jet black hair growing on her small head and flawless porcelain skin. This was obviously not left to chance. Nothing about her had been left to chance. Everything had been carefully chosen, from her IQ of 234 to her mysterious name. Clandestine, because she was a secret.

However, there are no secrets that time does not reveal. This one took ten years. Her parents wept, begged to be released, promised that they wouldn't be involved in the production of any more designer children, but the remaining officials shook their heads no and sentenced them to death. New Earth couldn't afford to accommodate people like them bringing superficial lives into the world, especially in a time when everyone else was trying to return the globe into its pure state again, free of anything artificial.

They let the offspring survive, though. Perhaps that was their biggest downfall. Because when you allow something to survive, it doesn't just survive. It thrives. In 2130, a debate began, an argument concerning the ethics of designer children, a debate which turned into conflict, conflict which turned into war. A war that the people three decades ago, in 2099, had already predicted would occur.

They knew that designer children would be manufactured after the medical crisis that would wipe out almost all of Earth's 11.2 billion people worth of population. It was inevitable, something that would definitely happen, because humans would be forced to find some way to sustain life on Earth without endangering the lives of those who survived the crisis. They also knew that human nature would precipitate some people to continue producing designer children after the law declared manufacturing of these children illegal, which would unavoidably result in a war.

What they didn't forget was that designer children were the future of survival on New Earth. So with the limited but advanced technology they had, they designed an outside world christened with the name Extramural to protect the children during the war. It would be located underground and be readily equipped with all of the resources required for human survival. They mapped it all out, on an old and tattered piece of papyrus, made to stand out against

7

the futuristic landscape.

Clandestine looks at this map, thirty years later. She is sixteen now, her eyes wiser, her hair longer. She is told that she is one of the only designer children left in the world; most of them were killed at the beginning of the war. What she does not see is why they were killed. Children like her were the key to the rebuilding of human life after the crisis, and she thinks it's funny how no one appreciates the existence of something until they need it.

She spends days studying this map, trying to figure out what the red cross slashed across it is. Her time is limited, though, because in a few days, the government is coming to scan the orphanage for designer children. They can't keep her there any more.

She takes a small boy of eleven with her. His name is Arrowplx. They navigate through forgotten forests, ruined buildings, and somehow end up in a motel owned by an old lady. The lady is skeptical at first, but allows them to stay in one of her rooms until the authorities roaming outside leave the area.

They watch the news from small television in the motel room, losing count of the passing days, until the old lady tells them sadly that they are due to leave. Their safety is compromised out there in the war torn city, but if they stay, they aren't guaranteed protection either.

As they leave the motel, Clandestine notices a man nearby chopping wood. *Who chops wood nowadays?* she murmurs to herself.

And already, without doing anything, he is already on her list of suspicious people. She is about to tell Arrowplx not to approach him, not to say a word, but it is too late.

The man's reflexes are quicker than her expectations and he spins around. His eyes flash in recognition and he edges closer towards them.

She closes her eyes. There are more people moving in on them. She can feel it. The hairs on the back of her neck are standing up. There are goosebumps starting to form on her arms. Her legs are shaking, almost like they are prompting her to run.

Her fight or flight instinct is kicking in, and she's fighting to keep still. *Think*, she urges herself, *think*.

But she can't think because in approximately five seconds, a squad of armed soldiers are going to close in on them. She needs



CLANDESTINE

to escape, in 5, 4, 3, 2...

“Run!” she screams to Arrow, as loud as she can.

They break into a fast sprint just as the soldiers jump into the clearing. Suddenly, the red cross on the map starts beeping.

“Extramural 50 metres away,” a robotic voice sounds.

They run, not stopping, not looking back, and into a black hole that sucks them up and into a world of light.

It is the Extramural.

She looks around.



7

THE NOSTALGIA
OF RAIN FOR
LEROY WILSON

BELLA EAMES

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

RUNNER-UP

He taps his fingers nervously on the kitchen bench. He sits upright, shaking, his fingers make nervous beats on the laminate surface. He stares out the window, dotted with rain. The last time he had seen rain was the 13th of April, 1995. Twelve years ago. He could not forget that day. He was haunted by this day. He is black. Some might say that small fact doesn't matter, but that fact is something that has changed his life forever. He saw the rain again...

The day was grim. He stepped out of the car. His face was covered by his jumper. The flashing lights of the cameras were blinding. He was dragged through the crowd. Rain dropped onto his face. His face was drawn and gaunt. He was in a state of stupor. Helpless, he was dragged into the court room about to face reality.

One-hundred or so eyes were on him. They glared. They did not know his back story. He was framed. His murky eyes looked into those of the white Judge, they were unforgiving. But more importantly they were prejudiced. The judge spoke, definitively, "Order in the court." The audience was silenced, and the judge looked as though he could already determine the future of this helpless black man, "Mr. Leroy Wilson, how do you plead? Guilty or innocent?"

Leroy rose to answer. "Innocent, your honour." He was in his best suit. The one he wore at his wedding. Leroy was not a rich man, he lived with his wife and was raising three children as best he could. He knew his wife would be somewhere in the jury but he could not bear to look at her. He could not breathe. The sounds of the jury talking to the judge were a blur. Until he heard the word, guilty. His chest tightened, his fingers rattled nervously on the table top...

He was fighting it now. He was scratching himself. Etchings of blood were written on his legs. Sweat dripped off his forehead as he boxed away at the walls of the house. He was breathing uncontrollably. Hyperventilating. All he could see was white...

The photographers were lined up outside the court. The flashes were a blinding white. Questions were thrown like punches at him. He couldn't answer them. Not a single word left his lips. Not a noise. Drops of sadness filled the air. Leroy's own drops of sadness trickled down his cheeks. Microphones were shoved at his face. One question, though provoked him:

"Does it bother you that out of you and the other suspect, a white man living with mental health problems, you were arrested?" He desperately wanted to answer, but he walked away. He knew the truth but was sad to accept it. The truth of a black man's place in this world. He went to sit down on the bench, as expected it was wet. He stared blankly at the puddles on the ground.

Exactly 3 hours and 17 minutes later, he was called back into the court. The judge rattled the gavel on the table. There was silence. Until the judge spoke.



“Mr. Leroy Wilson charged with the murder of Ms. J. Chisholm will be sentenced to a minimum of 12 years in jail.” The words cut him like a knife...

The blade cut his arm. Blood dripped from it. He went pale. The blade dropped out of his hands and dropped on the tiled, kitchen floor. The silence was broken. “Please, your honour I cannot go to jail.” But Leroy didn’t know that he wasn’t in the court. It was 12 years later. “I said please don’t send me to jail. I have kids. I have a wife.” He wailed as he relived this dark memory.

He was taken into the cells. The dimly lit, grey cells. The lights flickered on and off and a cold draught blew through the chambers. Silence was now a sound; Leroy couldn’t stand to hear it. He was thrown into a small cell, where a white man sat hunched in the corner. Leroy was on the floor crying he banged his fist-shaped hands onto the concrete floor, crying. All that could be heard was the sound of his agony. The agony of leaving those he loved behind. The agony of being black. Droplets fell from his stormy eyes onto the cold, hard ground.

“So you deserve it! You, black murderer.” The man seemed as though he would never speak, not until now. He stood up from his place standing above Leroy. Leroy cowered under the dark shadow of the white man. He looked straight into the thunderous eyes of the white man. “You killed that young lady. Now it’s time to pay.” That word. Pay. The man was certainly reimbursed, but only 12 years later...

Leroy lay on the cold ground. Much like the cold ground of the cells he found himself in on the 13th of April, 1995. Leroy could no longer bare to live with his memory. To anyone he was a nobody. A black nobody. Now he could rest in peace without his vivid, dark nostalgia of rain haunting him. For the memory of rain to Leroy no longer exists.



The smell of rain was in the air when he stepped outside of his apartment that morning. The sky was a sheet of grey, and silence had consumed the town. A raindrop fell. Droplets of rain began to fall faster and harder, and soon, it was pouring. As he pulled the collar of his coat above his head, ready to sprint home, he saw the girl. She was sitting on a park bench all alone, and spreading her arms out, as if she was embracing the rain for a warm hug. It was only when he walked closer that he realised her face was flowered with bruises, and her eyes were flowing with rain-mixed tears. She looked miserable. Desperate. She nervously bit her fingernails as her body shook furiously. The man knew she needed help. So he took her in.

"Have you seen my parents?"

The man took the girl's hand in his as they walked into the empty petrol station at night. He put a loaf of bread and a chocolate bar on the counter. As he scanned the room to see if he would need anything to live off for the rest of the week, he was alarmed by a sudden thump near the automatic sliding doors. He slowly turned around and gave a sigh of relief. It was just her. Hopping and skipping in and out of the sliding doors. The two lonely beings took their bread and sweets, and walked down the cracked concrete pathway to his house. Her new home.

"You're not my daddy. I want to go home."

A thundering slap was heard, as the girl collapsed on the floor.

She sobbed quietly, in fear of being heard.

The man, feeling sorry, gave her a gesture of warmth.

A hug.

The girl smiled as the cool air hit her face. The world began spinning around her, with the sky and ground all mixed into a blur. She could see a whole spectrum of colours. Blue, green, white, black, red, purple. This world was her rainbow, filled with colours of every hue. He spun her around one more time and then placed her gently on the soft, wet grass. Her life was perfect with him.

"Where are you going?"

She breathed heavily as she tried to run away.

"Stop right there!"

She turned back, not realising the consequences of her hesitation.

He pushed her to the ground.

"You're mine... you'll always be mine."

The leaves were scattered around the lonely street, and the trees



were dull and bare. He paced up and down the road, occasionally mumbling to himself while fidgeting nervously. His once kind face had turned ashen grey, and wrinkles of worry were plastered on his forehead. He heard children laughing and playing in the distance, caught up in a world of their own. They were so selfish in the man's eyes, so ignorant. The man's anxious expression slowly morphed into anger, hidden with a blank face. As he tensed his muscles and clenched his fists, he slowly entered back inside.

"We're going to the hospital."

She was already unconscious.

"You're fine now. Let's go home."

"Don't do that again okay? You're safe with me."

Nod.

"Come on now. What do you want for dinner?"

He was oblivious as he cooked up the usual microwave dinner. He warmed up his hands at the stove, and washed the dishes from three days ago. The girl slipped into the kitchen, without any presence whatsoever. She clasped her hands around the knife, and walked, head down, back to her bedroom. Counting her breaths, she started sniffing quietly. Fear engulfed her, and with every breath she became more and more afraid. The only thing that calmed her down was the words that she repeated in her head.

I hate him.

As the man called her out for dinner, she hid the knife behind her back, and shuffled to the dinner table. He brought out the hot, steaming, cheap pasta dish, and as he bent down to place the plate down, she did it. Her small fingers grasped the knife desperately, and she plunged it down in his neck.

Guilt. An emotion that is not seen, but felt. An invisible burden that stays with you, until someone finally lifts it off. A monster that may hide but will always be there until finally extinguished. He felt his shoulders relax, and he knew, that she had finally killed the monster inside.

He saw her for the last time. Her raven black hair lay perfectly on her narrow shoulders. Her brown eyes were welling up with tears. He suddenly remembered their first encounter. Her misery and despair were disappearing, and she looked... free. The man smiled one last time as he mouthed his last words.

Thank you.



She saw him for the last time. His ruffled brown hair began to turn maroon, and his hazel eyes started fading into nothing. The collar of his tan coat was drenched in blood. She suddenly remembered their first encounter. The same tan coat, first soaked in rain, now soaked in blood. She lightly touched the worn out coat, reminiscing for a few seconds.

I'm sorry...

Shallow breaths slowly quietened. Gasping came to a halt. His heart that beat furiously to the last minute had finally stopped. He was gone.

All that was left of him was a corpse and a warm coat.



THE COAT

MADÉLINE TRUONG
ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD
FOR CREATIVE WRITING
WINNER

I looked at him. Kill in cold blood, I thought. Just another one. He lay draped over the icy, unforgiving concrete. His limbs fell around him and his soul broke apart, shattering on the hard footpath. The yellow star branded into him shone far too brightly against his wilting ashen-grey skin. It seemed like every breath would cause cracks to spring up his body like a porcelain doll. His lungs fought to drag in and hold each laborious breath, before it spilled out again.

I invited the trigger closer into the involuntary jerk of my index finger. He didn't even realise his life was about to be snuffed out. Instead, he just heaved his head up off the pavement and looked at me. Piercing me with those strangely luminous hazel eyes – forcing me to look behind the bruised and beaten skin that clothed him. And then, I remembered...

8

It was a soggy, melancholic day in Ichenhausen – Nazi Germany 1935; the kind that seemed to sag at the edges and to be splashed with a watery grey paint. But despite the depressing weather, my seven-and-three-months-year-old self couldn't have been any happier. This was due to the plain fact that I was with my best friend, Youssef.

I had everything except the eyes. My mother was considered Aryan, so naturally, my hair resembled a smashed cheesecake with a lavish topping of fresh straw. But my eyes, they were Gypsy eyes – a dangerously deep brown.

It was on one of these regularly miserable days in which we were undergoing our favourite activity: collecting buttons. Both of us were unashamedly proud of our collection, as pitiful as it was.

That day, Youssef was animatedly recounting anything and everything – as only seven year olds can. Like me, he had nearly everything. He had sharp cheekbones and freckles that always had the appearance of being hastily sprinkled on top at the last minute. His hair was a muddy blonde but with strange streaks of brown lining his scalp underneath the curls. His eyes were deceptive too – a nutty green, that could be referred to as hazel depending on if you were a glass half full or a glass half empty sort of person.

I nodded fervently in agreement. It was then, that it tugged gently on the sleeve of my curiosity.

'Look, Youssef,'

Dozing in the gutter was an unfamiliar button. As scratched and bruised as it was, we could both identify the colour of blood topped

with a white circle, and in the centre a black spider sprawled over the dented tin. I picked it up, transfixed. Oddly, Youssef recoiled.

'It won't bite,' I teased.

'Just leave it there,' he said quietly, 'I don't like it.'

'But its so cool! Go on – have a look.'

Youssef gingerly reached out a chalky finger and touched it, but his face remained pinched with apprehension. Irritably, I fumbled with the rusty pin and fastened it crookedly to my shirt.

'If you don't want it, then I'll have it and I think I'll keep it there.' I pointed defiantly to the fabric on my chest.

'I think I'll go home now,' he coughed up quietly.

Why didn't he appreciate what I had found?

As I trudged home, it seemed like the pin gave me a new light. I had always been shunned as soon as people looked into my dangerously coloured eyes. But the pin seemed to change that... people held the door open, they moved aside for me as I walked along the footpath.

That was only the beginning. From then on I became obsessed. I persuaded my mother to let me join the Hitler Youth. Greed and power conquered my naïve mind, its cancerous tentacles squirming into every part of my mind. Willing to sacrifice everything to wear that coat – the one that matched my pin.

I charged my way through military school and before I knew it, my arm had slipped into that hot, savage sleeve of glory. I was now someone the new world recognised and respected. I forgot myself in that stiff iron-pressed coat.

I learnt quickly to kill in cold blood; believing it best for the world to purify the German race. I climbed the mountain of ranks step by step and would not rest until I reached the summit. I learnt to see the smears of dirt on the fabric of the world. I learnt to fix things with a gun and a trigger.

I gripped my status so hard, the blood drained from my knuckles until they were ghostly white. And stupidly – I never let go. Not even during the gassing or shootings or even when I saw my mother die or my best friend fall. I didn't bother to reach out and catch them for the fear of letting go of what I idiotically valued so much, revealing the pungent stench of a Jew.



THE COAT

Pleadingly, he looked at me once more. Those hazel green eyes. And I yearned to spare him. But how could I? If I saved him, I would be dragged downwards instead. You see, the world does not take kindly to a Nazi betrayal to save what most see as the dirty smears on an unsoiled piece of fabric. Throughout my whole life, I never knew that once I put that coat on, I could never take it off.

BANG



8

It's been 5 years since Gran was diagnosed. Dementia is slowly eating her alive. Her grey curls cover her chocolate brown eyes. Gran's skinny figure is slumped down on the couch, her hand moving with hesitation up to her chapped red lips as she takes a sip of her tea.

I placed the sunset pink tulips into the tall, skinny glass vase mum gave her. It is carved with vines that are swirling around it. Her memory was getting worse. I remember her doctor mentioning it could get as bad as her not remembering how to talk, eat, drink or breathe.

The thought of Gran not being around for much longer scares me and I try to escape the thought from my busy 16 year old mind, but sometimes I fail to do so.

"Hey Gran. How're you doing?"

"Hi Charlie, I'm doing great. Could yo—" She kept talking but I stopped listening.

First of all, my name isn't Charlie and with this response, she is not doing great. She's getting worse.

Gran took another sip of tea and looked at me, expecting me to do something. She must have asked me to clean her room like the last time I visited which was probably last month.

"Um, Gran, I'm not Charlie, I'm Kaylee. Your grand-daughter."

I can feel my face tense with worry because I can see her expression turn from her regular happy self, to a confused and uncomfortable look as her brown eyes wonder around the vintage wallpapered walls and furniture and her worry lines appearing on her forehead.

"Oh, sorry dearie. My mind has been playing up on me these last few years. So, how is school?" Gran took another sip of tea.

"Fine." I said.

I'm getting a little bit impatient, but I stay for as long as I can. Silence kills the normal chatter of our monthly visits. I look down at my blue and white spotted watch, which reads 3:20.

"Um, Gran. I better get going."

She looks into my pale ocean blue eyes, as if she can see right through me, but still waves her wrinkly hand, her long fingernails painted a strawberry red and replies,

"Okay dearie. See you next time."

Gran then smiles her crusty crooked smile back at me as I step outside. The air smells as fresh as a daisy. As I walk down the street,



I see Gran's mustard yellow cottage at the corner of Grand Street. The sunny April sky shines in my eyes, blinding me as I walk down the hill. I almost feel as if Gran does, completely oblivious to anyone and everything around me. I try to think of ways to help her, guide her through her dementia.

Every time I visit Gran, her condition is worsening and it's tearing me apart. I bring her the same sunset tulips and replace the old ones with the new in the decorated vine vase. As well as the flowers, I bring Gran my baby blue photo album and we go through each of the photos together. I try to give myself hope that maybe she'll remember some things, but I'm starting to question it. I can see her eyes assessing them but the perplexed appearance of her paper thin face tells me otherwise.



Every time, it's the same expression. Every time, it's the same blank face. Every time, my fear is growing stronger. I know that Gran will soon be gone and live in a better place. Her vine on the vase will swirl its way to the end. But even if she doesn't remember anything or anyone, I still bring her the sunset tulips and place them in the vine vase.

The flowers will always be our one-way connection to the memories that once existed in both of our minds. But now, only remain with me.



THIS MATTERS

MAYA WILMSHURST

ORATOR OF THE YEAR

WINNER

When I was in Year 6, my teachers brought something to my attention. Until then the only time I had heard about people with disabilities was in a negative light. When I saw them on the street, I would turn my head until they had passed, frightened of their appearance and oblivious to what was going on inside their heads.

That day, my teachers asked us to get into small groups. One person from each group was taken away and shown a pattern, made of tiny coloured blocks. Using only small nods we had to aid our other group members in guessing it. They would sequence the blocks in an attempt to understand what was going on and we would grow increasingly frustrated as they missed what seemed obvious to us. Tiny coloured blocks are a tiny problem. The real problems are so much bigger.

Today I'm going to talk to you about something that should matter to all of you and something that definitely matters to around 20% of Australia's population; the 1 in 5 people with a disability. Every disability is different; some affect movement, some speech, sight and hearing and others the ability to learn. There are so many more. One thing all of these have in common is the effect they have on the lives of so many people; more than just the 1 in 5 people who suffer from them, but also the lives of all those around them; families, friends and in some cases carers.

That day in Year 6, my class was looking at a severe form of cerebral palsy, in which the person has little control over their movements and often can't talk. Inside their heads, there may be a fully functioning brain but their lack of control over their body makes it extremely difficult for them to express their thoughts and emotions. Often the dedication of those around them is the only way they will ever be heard.

This is the story we don't see when we look at someone with a disability, we don't see the hundreds of pages folded up behind the cover, lined with rows and rows of words. In fact when we look at any stranger, all we see is the cover. All we see is their appearance, not their experiences, aspirations, family, friends and all those who believe in them. We don't see who they are. This is even truer for people with disabilities. If all we see is the wheelchair they are seated in, then the only emotions they'll perceive are pity and fear by those around them.

So, why does this matter to me? When I was four, my great-aunt died of motor neurone disease. For the last two years of her life, she



had little control over many of her muscles and had to be in a wheelchair. She also had difficulty speaking. What would you think looking at someone like her? Would you see a capable woman locked up in a dysfunctional body or would you not see...would she be another person to turn your head away from on the streets. Would you immediately assume that her mind wasn't working properly and that she wasn't like you because she couldn't produce normal thoughts and ideas. Because in actual fact she could. She had a perfectly functioning mind; it was only the outside that was being affected by this disease. But you couldn't see that.

How would you feel if you were like her – bound to a wheelchair or had any other form of disability? You would constantly be judged on your appearance and not seen for anything but your disability. Imagine that. Now think about those who face this problem every single day. Judging anyone on their appearance can harm their self-esteem as well as the esteem of their family and friends.

It's basic respect not to judge anyone on their appearance, we're told this all the time. We're told not to judge anyone on their gender or skincolour, so why should we judge them on their wheelchair or way of movement? Why should it be any different for people with disabilities? Yes, they may look slightly different to you and I, but they're still the same in so many ways. They have the same people behind them and the same childhood memories and ambitions. They deserve the same respect too.

Doing that exercise in class didn't give me an understanding of the condition of every disabled person and what they are going through – in fact only a tiny percentage of people have this severe of cerebral palsy – but instead it showed me how little I understood about the lives and conditions of people with disabilities. It showed me that if all I could judge them off was their appearance then I couldn't judge at all.

So, next time you see someone in a wheelchair, don't initially assume anything about them. Think about the stories you can't see, hidden behind the cover... and think again. What do you know about this person... and is it enough to judge them on? If all you have to judge them off are the coloured blocks that you can see then don't judge at all, because there are always more coloured blocks stacked up behind them. In various patterns and shapes. Always there. And just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they don't matter. Because they matter. This matters.



11:58PM

tick... tick... tick...

The rhythmic beats resonate from the relic suspended above the metal doors, consistency to the point of comfort. Yet how tedious it must be for Time's thin red hand; playing a ceaseless game of chase that's never won. She's a strange creature. Unseen and neglected by most, her presence for those here is conflicting; heavy and confining yet uncertain and greatly welcomed at the same time. Rows of interconnected plastic chairs line the ivory walls plastered with posters and pamphlets warning of just about every illness from A to Z. Uncomfortable and rigid, they're fully occupied by the dejected and broken. There's preserved stillness in the room, only occasionally disrupted by the wails of a small baby or a recent widower. White peonies arranged on low glass tables fail to disguise the stale smell of bleach and antiseptic that is wafted at every movement. Night has taken up residence in the sky, brushing aside the constellations to make room for the vast circular lantern.

tick... tick... tick...

I remember the last time we were here; I was introduced to you for the first time. Shrieking as you left the comfort of my womb, your head burrowed into my bosom seeking warmth as I cradled your fragile form. You really were a tiny little thing; seven weeks premature. I still remember you clasping my finger in your tiny fist, looking up at me with those big chestnut eyes. I made you a promise that day: I would be by your side forever and always. I guess 'forever' isn't as long as I had thought. Or maybe when you were a child, still a stranger to the world, everything felt like forever; single moments would stretch out to the furthest horizons – never-ending. I now know better.

11:59PM

tick... tick... tick...

There was a time when I held resentment against you. I was young

FRESH-FALLEN
SNOW

HAYLEY DO



FRESH-FALLEN
SNOW

and angry at the world – afraid you'd become another responsibility I would just let down – that is what happened. You had come home with tears streaming down the contours of your face, blotching the mascara I had watched you meticulously apply just two hours prior. You collapsed into the ocean of pastel-coloured sheets, wrapping yourself in a fetal position. You were just sixteen and he'd broken your heart. The fury and undeniable desire to break anyone who dared to hurt you ripped through me but your faint whimpers pulled at something deeper. So I came over, bundling you up in my arms, stroking your raven hair like I had done every night since the nightmares refused to go away. Silence accompanied us for hours and together we watched the dawning sun's first light flood into the bowl of the midnight sky; violet, blue and orange, and I made a decision. You were fresh-fallen snow, a purity the ground would only tarnish, so I bottled you up in jars and locked you away.

9

tick... tick... tick...

I pushed you away by sheltering you too much. Deprived you of experiencing life in fear you'd get hurt – not wanting you to repeat my mistakes – did I suffocate you? So you went out on your own searching, got into it with the wrong people – like mother like daughter I guess. You lost your way; pierced yourself with metal and marked yourself in ink. You tried and experimented with foreign substances. I found the empty vials, the discarded needles, the white power that so closely resembled snow.

tick... tick... t-t-tic-

Time's hand jerks and stutters; twitching in a violent manner back and forth. Then it goes still, hovering in the space between the '11' and '12'.

The two metal doors swing open as a man donning cerulean scrubs trudges out. Dishevelled with dark smudges beneath his eyes, fatigue weighs down his heavy steps. Somewhat hesitantly, he lifts his eyes from the suspicious scarlet stains that blemish the otherwise bleached-cleaned floors and scans the room of hunched shoulders; he settles upon mine. He makes no attempt to mask his

expression. I see the pity, dejection and grief scoring his face.

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head. “No. No”

Eyes wide and raising my hands to fend off the truth, I stumble off the chair, bouncing into the wall, searching for a way out. I double over; clutching my midsection, sinking to the ground. I feel a wetness coat my cheeks.

No. No. No.

I rake my fingers through my untamed hair as my chest splits open to the horror of reality that sets in. The pain is like nothing I've ever experienced. Different to the localised ache of a surface wound, this is throbbing; numbing; all-consuming, slicing my insides and ripping me apart. Everything slows and muffles: my pounding heart, my ragged breathing, yet the bustle of machinery and workers continues on somewhere in the background as if they don't quite exist in the same world as mine.

I can see the glass jars shattering, raining down in glinting shards – my snow is falling.

12:00AM

tick ... tick... tick...



WHAT DO YOU
MEAN, HERMIONE
GRANGER'S NOT
REAL?

JACQUELINE DU

I'd call myself a self-proclaimed bookworm. I love to read books, and I've watched my fair share of TV shows and movies. In other words, I've 'met' a lot of different characters. Now, when I asked multiple people what they thought reality was, they frowned at the philosophical question. They thought for a while. They often began saying something, only to stop and reconsider. However, when I asked them whether characters in a movie or book were real, the answer was often an immediate, resounding 'no'.

There's a fine line between imagination and reality. Or are they one and the same? Most agree that the world appears differently to every individual. You see it through eyes that have experienced, that have been taught the ways of their upbringing, from different perspectives. So if the way you see the world is based on what your mind shows you, then one could claim that reality is simply a figment of your imagination. On the other hand however, imagination could be considered a part of reality as well. Thought is real, isn't it? Generally, the definition of reality is accepted as all the things that are tangible, detectable by the five human senses. However, can you see, touch, taste, hear or smell the number 5? Not exactly, yet last I checked in maths class, that was a pretty real number. Imagination is a fickle thing, even when it comes to imagining scenarios or concepts. So it must be even more capricious when one's imagination creates a complete character, must it not?

Many people had an imaginary friend growing up. Whether it be an imaginary twin to accompany a young mischievous boy when he's pulling pranks, or a young girl pretending she has a pet unicorn. It could even be a matter of giving character to a Barbie doll and playing tea parties with her. I know I used to pretend I had my own fairy godmother who would make my wishes come true. The logical thing to do now I'm older is roll my eyes and say "I know she wasn't real", but she seemed very real to me at the time. I may have been skipping along, none the wiser, but that's not to say she didn't exist at all. Because she certainly did, in my mind. And what I thought was real translated to my very real actions – in the 'real world'.

Speaking of characters that were not living breathing human beings but still affected the world in a very real way, I come to a contentious subject – gods. Now, I won't breach the topic of God Himself, as the church sees him, but rather the gods that entire



civilisations believed in. We'll use the most well-known Greek gods as our example, though this goes for Norse, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Aztec, Mayan and just about any cultural gods out there.

The Ancient Greeks believed wholeheartedly in their gods to the extent that they day-to-day lifestyle revolved around their beliefs – they'd sacrifice their oxen and food to the gods, they'd hold ceremonies, superstitions and traditions in their honour. It used to be that if someone reached the central hearth of a Greek village, that village was honour-bound to protect that person, as the goddess of the hearth, Hestia, decreed. So if, for argument's sake, we say that the Greek gods were not real because they didn't have physical bodies or because they didn't really 'happen', does that mean the beliefs of the Ancient Greeks were not real either? Does that mean their lives weren't real at all? How can something 'not real' be the basis of our real world?

Speaking of falseness laying the foundation for reality, *The Truman Show* directed by Peter Weir explores this concept quite thoroughly. I found it interesting to hear my classmates' responses to the question posed by our teacher: 'Was Truman's world real?' Most first reacted quickly by disagreeing, though a few seconds later would amend it by saying "Well... it was real to him because it's all he's ever known." Which got me thinking, does that mean reality is simply knowing something? Getting used to something? Are we confusing reality for normalcy?

In Truman's mind, his world is his reality. However, in the minds of the viewers it isn't, it's 'just a TV show'. How about the Christof? Is it his reality? It's something he is heavily invested in; it's always on his mind and it must be real to him. What of the actors? They may not see Truman as their real husband/friend/son/neighbour. But their characters are still real to them, because that's their job. Their real-life job.

With the definition of reality and imagination blurred as so, I'd like to propose the notion that book and movie characters are, in fact, real. Many an author have jokingly observed that their characters seem so real to them, they often forget that they're not people. Last year at the 2015 Reading Matters Convention, author Jaclyn Moriarty shared with the audience the time she went to the supermarket and subconsciously bought pretzels for the character in the book she was writing at the time, saying "I got to the counter



WHAT DO
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REAL?

and kept looking around for Celia, thinking she should be around. Then I realised she wasn't going to turn up. I treat the characters in my books like my own children sometimes – I can walk around the supermarket knowing exactly what they'd like and dislike." In fact, more often than not, quotes from books or movies are attributed to the character who says them, instead of the author who wrote them.

My favourite fictional character of all time is Hermione Granger of the *Harry Potter* series, written by J.K. Rowling. It's ironic that though I've read so many lesser known books, I still seem to find something incredibly unique in a character that's so widespread and popular. She means a lot to me – I identify with her, I laugh and cry with her. I may even go so far as to say I look up to her, a character that is so strong-willed and capable. However I know, from hearing other people who love Hermione too, that my Hermione is not the same as theirs. Even from interviews with Rowling herself, I know that the character she created in her mind isn't the same as the character I interpreted. They are similar, but not the same. It reminds me of the very first point I brought up: that no two people see the world exactly the same. It's the same in principle. So why are we so quick to draw the line between the two, saying that one is real while the other is not? Maybe reality's not so clear-cut after all.

9



Pale sunlight filtered through the little girl's bedroom window at the break of dawn, gently rousing her from her sleep. Blearily she opened her eyes, watching as the fuzzy outlines of the Winnie the Pooh stickers on her wall came into focus. Blinking the last shrouds of sleep from her dream-filled mind, she regained her bearings.

"IT'S SATURDAY!" she screeched with delight. Bouncing off her bed, she ran next door into her parents' room, shaking her mum and dad awake.

"Mummy! Daddy, it's Saturday! We have to go to the market!"

"Mhm, why don't you go and get changed, I'll be up in a second..." came her mother's mumbled reply. Satisfied that her parents would take her to the market soon, she gleefully returned to her own room and began rummaging through her closet for something nice to wear.

Ten minutes later, nose pressed against the cool glass of the car window, the girl gazed at the hot air balloons drifting lazily through periwinkle sky like the colourful bubbles of a lava lamp. The cityscape whizzed by, skyscrapers and tall trees jutting proudly into the sky – palace guards lining the streets as she approached her domain. At last, the family's large white Prado pulled into the carpark of her beloved Queen Victoria Market.

Since as long as she could remember, the little girl had been coming to the market every Saturday morning, accompanying her mother on her weekly grocery shopping. Sometimes it would just be the two of them; the little girl loved helping her mum pick the ripest strawberries and the sweetest nectarines. She pranced around the place as if she were the princess, exploring her wonderful kingdom.

Today however, they were accompanied by her father. These were the best trips of all, because while her mum went grocery shopping, her dad would take her on a hunt to find the most bizarre store she could. 'Daddy days' were also the best because they would inevitably result in him buying her a jam doughnut – the specialty of Queen Vic Market.

The little girl bounded out of her car seat, dragging her father along with her towards the stalls. The open market air was a cacophony of sounds; storekeepers hawking their goods, customers bargaining heatedly, clashing of scales and the occasional indignant squawk of a chicken. The young girl dutifully trailed after her dad,



staying close by so as not to get lost in the throngs of market-goers.

The girl dawdled along, scrutinising the items along the aisles like a queen would inspect her subjects. Her father let his daughter take her time – they were in no hurry. She seemed particularly taken with the potted cacti, though quickly learnt not to touch them, having accidentally pricked her finger. Yelping, she gingerly fingered the petals of a cactus flower instead. To her delight, the fuchsia petal was velvety and smooth, caressing her fingertip like a fairy’s kiss. Having just read the Rainbow Magic book series at home, she decidedly announced that the stout bristly plants adorned with tiny unfurling blooms were rather like hobgoblins playing dress-up.

Moseying past a rack of fluttering silk scarves patterned with a myriad of colours, the little girl suddenly caught a waft of aromatic cinnamon on the slight breeze. She perked up considerably at the scent of what she’d been waiting for all morning, and her father smiled wryly at his eager daughter and her pleading eyes.

“Can I have three doughnuts today Daddy?” she wheedled, knowing it was unlikely.

“One.”

“Two?”

“Two then,” he acquiesced.

Skipping gaily towards the jam-doughnut van the girl hopped on the end of the queue, two gold coins clinking in her pocket. It was a long queue as always, but before too long she was eagerly reaching up on tiptoes to pluck the white paper bag from the outstretched hand of chef, like she had done so very many times before. The girl took a huge bite, spurting molten strawberry jam all over the sweet dough. A bit of jam dribbled down her chin and she hastily licked it up, unwilling to waste so much as a drop. The tangy, sugary goodness made her tastebuds sing. Her dad chuckled at the icing sugar and cinnamon moustache she now sported, coating her upper lip with a dusting of glitter. She didn’t mind though – she was thoroughly satisfied with this market trip.

The young girl would have many more delightful trips to the market in the weeks and months to come. What she didn’t yet know however, was that the following year she’d be joined by a new baby sister. With the baby around, the family found themselves going to the market fewer and fewer times. From weekly trips to



fortnightly, monthly...and then only once in a blue moon. This happened over a period of years, during which the girl started school. She started karate and piano. She was so busy starting a whole new life that she hardly realised the gradual change from her old. But then one lunchtime, she was in the cafeteria of her new school when she found them selling jam doughnuts. A slow smile lit up her face.

It seemed the queen had returned home to her kingdom.



QUEEN OF
THE MARKET

9

BOUNDLESS
PLAINS TO SHARE

ELLORA KELLY
ORATOR OF THE YEAR
WINNER

Who dreams of winning lotto? That \$21 million jackpot all yours. Well, Surprise... You have already won. The greatest lottery is your place of birth. It guarantees you legal protection from discrimination, education and access to clean water and shelter. More than two thirds of the worlds population cannot guarantee these basic human rights.

Nauru, is the size of Melbourne airport with a tent community of 1200 asylum seekers on it. Lost, alone, unemployed and many in poor health. They have fled discrimination and horrific violence. Since September 2012, Australia has been incarcerating ALL asylum seekers including children. Physically and emotionally vulnerable they live in tents where temperatures can reach 45-50 degrees celsius.

So, let me get this straight, fellow human beings are coming to us, begging for help but we turn our hearts away and lock them up.. People on Nauru have constantly stated that they are 'always scared, all the time, always checking the door to see if it is locked.' People are promised medical treatment, but there are no prescriptions filled, getting a pair of glasses can take 9 months.

Can you imagine getting sick in a foreign country where you did not speak the language and you were told you could not have a doctor?

What is worse is Australia is legally required to provide asylum. Australia is defying articles 1-9, 12-14, 16, 20-25 and, 28-30 of the UN Declaration for Human Rights. We breach 37 of the 43 articles of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. We are guilty of more than 1000 individual cases of abuse on Nauru. We should be ashamed. Australia was one of the first signatories of the UN Declaration and now we mistreat those in need. Even basic privacy is violated as women have been watched in the shower by male guards.

In 2012 asylum seekers spent an average of 72 days on Nauru, now it is 441! There are people who have been there for more than 3 years waiting... waiting. If we were the ones seeking asylum I hope we would receive compassion and kindness. We give these people nothing. Just think, what if we had not won the "born in Australia lotto". What if you were fleeing Syria right now?

During WWII, many English children went into the country with signs around their necks stating their name, address and



“please look after this child.” These children were returned to their parents at the end of the war. Almost all had been fed and cared for, sometimes by strangers, for up to 4 years. Society, generally, cared for children. Four weeks ago there were 128 children without their parents living in Nauru.

A recent UN investigation condemned Australia for gross abuse of children and human rights violations. This is OUR country committing those crimes! To use Atticus’ words: ‘There is one way in which all men are created equal – there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, is a court.’ If Australia will not uphold the laws of equality then we cannot trust our legal system.

One argument for detention is that asylum seekers are a security risk. Here are the facts: In 2010, ASIO labelled 1 person as a security risk of 7181. One! We are breaking the law AND reducing our multicultural richness due to a false perception of risk!

Another argument is that processing refugees onshore is too expensive. Offshore processing on Nauru costs \$350,000 per person per year! More than 4 times the cost of the old, integration into society system. Many asylum seekers are families whose entire life savings have been paid to people smugglers to save the lives of their children! I am sure your parents would do the same.

So... what can you do to help right now?

1. Take part in the Run4Refugees, an event that is part the Melbourne Marathon on the 16th of October. It funds 30 support programmes for asylum seekers.
2. The Youth Action Project targets youth to change Australia’s negative approach to refugees and asylum seekers.
3. The #RightTrack campaign promotes fair refugee and asylum seeker support in the courts.
4. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International cast shame on us worldwide to shine light on Australia’s failure to provide refuge.

A small change of circumstance and we could be the ones seeking refuge. We need to treat others as we would wish them to treat us.

We are Australians, as our our national anthem says: we have a land of “boundless plains to share” ...and yet for “those who come across the sea” all we have is barbed wire and fear.



WEDNESDAY

ANGELA LIN

The bright orange glow of the sun painted the sky's blue canvas a mellow pink and indigo, which reflected upon the calming dark hue of the ocean waves. Stunning sights like this had always spoken to Anthea. It wasn't that they had a voice, rather that they sent her messages of tranquility and soothed her heart; blessing her with a stunning array of colours. Scenes like these gave her goosebumps and took her breath away. No matter how many times she'd seen them, the beauty of nature returned to surprise her again and again.

Sight had always been an irreplaceable aspect of Anthea's life. Ever since she could remember, her mother would take her to the beach to watch sunsets, or take her hiking in the mountains to see the view from above. She would tell her bedtime stories of knights who rode into the golden heavens of dawn, or recount tales of fairies who played in pastel-coloured rainbows. Her words would paint breathtaking pictures before Anthea's eyes. Coupled with dewy forests and flowing rivers, sight was a treasure Anthea valued above all else.



I

Everything went wrong on a Wednesday, like it always did. Anthea didn't know what was wrong with Wednesdays – maybe they were too far into the week but not close enough to the weekend – but something always inevitably happened on a Wednesday. Anthea had received her first failing mark on a Wednesday and had broken her arm on a Wednesday; her parents had even divorced on a Wednesday. This Wednesday, she'd overslept and missed the sunrise. She was forced to take the shortcut to school rather than the relaxing, picturesque path she so loved. She sat through the school day, doodling flowers in the corner of her notebook and dreaming about how the waves would look from below the sunlit ocean surface.

After school had ended, Anthea treated herself to the prettier route home. The day had gotten better. The sun was now shining and fluffy white clouds were few and far between, spread out across the bluest sky since winter had come. She took her time walking through the park, the last scenic stop before foggy grey fumes and noisy intersections returned.

The pedestrian light turned green and beeped its signal. Anthea reluctantly left the garden behind. The same light began blinking

red when something slammed into her and the colours around her flashed that very colour before fading to black.

WEDNESDAY

II

She should've seen it coming. The quiet sobbing of her mother had been a clear giveaway. Perhaps she'd been too groggy to realise. When the words escaped the doctor's mouth, however, Anthea snapped to attention. "Your occipital lobes that contain your visual cortex were damaged quite badly when your head hit the road," the doctor told her. She sounded regretful, but Anthea couldn't tell without seeing her face. "I'm sorry, but you'll be permanently blind."

The diagnosis shook her to the core.

Blind. The word echoed through her head. She was shocked, speechless, but her mind was racing. To Anthea, blindness was hollowness. Everything she valued had been centred around her ability to see and now all of it had been sucked into a void; stripping her of her identity. Who was she without sight? What was the point? Her throat closed up and hot tears spilled from her unseeing eyes. It seemed their only purpose now was for crying.



III

The first few mornings had been the worst. She'd woken up and had opened her eyes to enjoy the view of the sun painting her walls gold, momentarily forgetting. Instead, she'd been greeted with an empty nothingness and the crushing realisation that she would never see that view again; that she would never see again. In lieu of the beautiful world of colour she had known and loved, she was faced with a world of darkness. She was now too far below the sunlit ocean surface to even get a glimpse of the waves, surrounded by murky water that suffocated her. It took her breath away, but not in the way that she loved.

You'll be permanently blind.

Anthea lay awake at night, waiting for the water to pull her under. It never did.

When her rehabilitation period had ended, Anthea was discharged. Her mother told her that nothing had changed. She was still Anthea. She still lived in the same house with the same bedroom. Maybe she was right – her house never changed; but her home had. She had even begun to forget the colour of the sky.

She tried to be strong, she really did. Anthea held back the tears until her mother guided her to the sea by their house. The sand was as soft as ever beneath her feet and the scent of the ocean beckoned her. That was when the floodgates broke. Anthea's mother sat her down and hushed her. After a while, she painted for her like old times. "The sun is setting right now. You can only see half of it peeking over the ocean."

"What colour is the ocean?"

"The same colour as a blue primula."

"And the sky?"

"It's orange, yellow, purple, pink and blue. It's beautiful, but not quite as beautiful as you."

"And today is...?"

"Wednesday."

Anthea smiled as she remembered. Stunning sights like this had always spoken to her. Now they had a voice.



I remember it. I remember it all. I was staring out the car window watching raindrops against the glass race each other down the frame gaining speed by collecting little drops on the way. What once was delicate pitter patters soon evolved into a thunderous drum roll of heavy droplets on the roof of the car as my mum drove me to basketball.

“Harper,” my mother badgered. “Where is your jumper? You’re going to be freezing!”

The smooth leather seats are so frosty they seem to bite my bare skin making my teeth chatter and goosebumps rise.

“What about your drink bottle or your phone? How are you going to call me to pick you up?”

“It’ll be fine”.

“No it won’t.” She drew a deep sigh. “Did you even finish your homework or put your computer on charge? Harper, you need to be less forgetful.”

This was our usual routine, I forget something, my mum notices and then proceeds to list everything I’ve ever forgotten in my entire life.

They say that in moments of terror time switches to slow motion. But this crash came in an instant. The car suddenly appeared meters away in what seemed to be magic, my stomach flipped and an irresistible force catapulted us both forwards. In the final milliseconds my jaw dropped to let out a scream, before the cacophony of screeching tyres and shattering glass hit like a tidal wave.

Breathe. Just remember to breathe. It’s been a week since the accident. I need to concentrate on right now, right here. I glance up to the ticking clock and rows of hunched over students scribbling on their papers then back down to my own science test. I re-read and re-read the first question hoping if I stare it down long enough it might just answer itself. Suddenly a squeaking white board marker alerts my attention and I look up to find my teacher crossing off minutes. Something about the image sparks a match in my brain immediately taking me back to all of the science lessons. To my surprise and shock all the answers begin to flow from my pencil. My hand swiftly moves across the page as I see flashes from every single class, exercise and note. I remember my teacher’s chirpy voice explaining frequency, the smell of chemicals in the lab... Once I



finish writing, I find I still have 10 minutes to spare.

At lunch, I try to describe this strange flash of memory to my friends as we walked to the oval.

"...And once I answered that question, everything else just came flooding back to me!"

"I told you, you were going to ace it!" My friend, Sophie exclaimed. "Hey, so what are you going to wear to my party this weekend?"

I close my eyes and I'm suddenly blasted back in time to primary school, grade 3, sitting on top of the monkey bars, where Sophie asked me this exact question eight years ago.

Sophie's 7th birthday was a blistering hot day and we were all melting like the delectable ice creams in our hands. We all danced on the sweet, freshly cut grass in her backyard to the catchy, repetitive songs from High School Musical for hours. Sophie suddenly bored had an idea, "Guys! I know what we should do! Let's all get on the bikes!"

It seemed like such a good idea at the time. We had the wind in our hair, everyone laughed in their high pitched voices with the vast road ahead of us... Until it wasn't a good idea anymore. Sophie fell off her bike and fractured her arm in two places, the humerus and the ulna. I rode her back on the handlebars of my bike to her house where we were found we were just in time for cake. A shadowy figure is holding the birthday cake in the doorway, but it's too vague, too blurry and too obscure to make out who it is. How strange it is that I can remember everything else, but not the simplest detail of someone who was there?

An hour and a million thoughts later, I've become so overwhelmed and tired. All this memory recall makes my head spin, black spots form in my vision and my stomach heaves... Now, every face, object and place triggers a memory in my head and I can't make it stop. Eventually my will gives in and my dad finds me curled up on the matron's bed ready to be collected.

Thump, thump, thump my head throbbed. It was quickly becoming too much to bear. I could feel every memory dancing, swirling and jumping around in my head. I pull the warm, cozy covers over me as I climb into bed. But my mind won't let me sleep. There's one final thing for me to look back on, the furthest memory of them all. The year is 2001 and I'm only 7 pounds big. Before my eyes open, I can hear joyous laughter and chatter from nearby. Light



splashes in through the windows onto the white hospital bed. My vision is blurred but I can see a woman holding me gently in her warm arms. Her hair is tousled and she has heavy eyes but she still manages to look beautiful. Despite her fatigue, she's overjoyed to see her daughter open her eyes for the first time. This was the first time I saw my mother. At last, I realise what I've been trying to forget has been what I needed to remember all along. The throbbing comes to an end and finally my mind clears. I remember it. I remember it all.

REMEMBER IT ALL



WALK IN
MY SHOES

SIENNA
WILLIAMS-STARKIE
ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD
FOR CREATIVE WRITING
HIGHLY COMMENDED

The amber sun melted into the horizon, as its remains seeped into the flocculent clouds. Soft lavender and rose danced across the sky, mixing in with the aura of tangerine that enwreathed the dying sun. The last flashes of the gleaming golden rays of sunshine swiftly climbed to the top of the buildings. A faint cool breeze brushed past me, whispering as it ran. It ruffled my hair and I wrapped my coat tight around me. My pace quickened and the sound of my feet against the grimy footpath ricocheted off the sleeping downtown buildings. The old lingering smell of cigarette smoke crept into my lungs and consumed me, causing me to wheeze. My breath was a pale puff.

I was a block away from home when I heard it. At first I thought it was just a creature of the night, stalking some innocent pray to devour, yet... my mind wandered. I stopped and let my ears adjust to the mysterious racket in the distance. The faint sounds seemed to be emanating from the street to my left. My curiosity got the better of me, I crept towards the intriguing sound. A street light flickered above, making the path ahead seem intimidating. My heartbeat quickened as sinister silhouettes of trees eerily swayed in the bitter breeze. As I got closer, an array of voices emerged from the hubbub, frantically jumping and dashing in the wind.

“Get off me!”

“Give it back!”

“You pig!”

As I advanced further still, I could clearly hear the frenzied sharp sound of high heels pounding on the road, just around the corner. Both the screams and my pulse hammered violently in my ears. I stopped walking and braced myself momentarily for what was just beyond the bend. I knew whatever I was about to face I could be the hero; I would be the hero. I would do the right thing and would have to do the right thing. I clenched my fists and strode on.

I was horrified. Before me stood a lanky man wearing an enormous tawny trench coat, he was looming over a petite lady. Despite the dim shafts of light flickering from the shabby street light, I could clearly make out the towering male figure seizing a salmon-pink purse from the lady's small fragile fingers. All while aiming threatening abuse towards the innocent young woman. My stomach churned and my fists clenched so tight I felt my fingernails



furiously piercing into my skin. My enraged pulse was throbbing in my ears. It was wrong.

I can't remember when I first started to charge towards him. My surroundings became a blur, all I could see was the loathsome creature in front of me. The moment my fist sunk into him, I felt free, more alive. The sharp metallic stench of blood oozed from his despicable body. He deserved to scream, he deserved to howl. He was the monster who needed to be punished. The coward wouldn't even fight back. He was pathetic. I withdrew when I was convinced his punishment was adequate.

"Are you okay miss?" I asked the frangible figure standing behind me.

Her beauty was still prominent, despite her tussled hair and crooked teeth. The pale peach and indigo on her dress swirled into intricate flowers around her hips. Her skin glowed with sweat under the soft light floating down from the streetlamp above. At the end of her elegant fingers were delicate blue droplets of colour. I could still smell her scent of faint lemongrass and lavender under the pungent odour of sweat. On her feet were flat, black boots.

"No, people shouldn't be allowed to do that. It's wrong" She responded, her petite nose sneering down at the criminal behind me. I glanced down at the grubby crumpled purse laying by my feet. Its beauty had been crushed, its now torn sides eating away its beauty. The soot of the city streets had stained its innocent pinks and purples. It could never be the same.

I picked up the fragile purse and handed it to the unfortunate lady. She scowled at the purse, as if it was equal to the rat that had been trying to take it off her. She snatched it out of my hands. She glared at the shameful man at her feet. I felt a warm glow inside, despite the sun having long ago hidden itself below the horizon. I had done the right thing. Using all her might, she ripped the purse in half.

My eyebrows furrowed. Was that not what she was frantically grabbing only moments ago? Had I missed something? Why would she destroy something she wanted so badly? My eyes widened. She had wanted to destroy it. My blood went cold. It was then, that I turned and truly saw the man behind me.

He was in the heap I left him, crumpled and diminished. What was left of his protective coat flew open, exposing his secret: a shiny



WALK IN
MY SHOES

lilac dress. He stared up at me and I could just make out his makeup stained face, coated in tears. On his feet were shiny fuchsia high heels. I outstretched my blood stained hand. He discarded it and reached for the debris of the purse.

“No, people shouldn’t be allowed to do that. It’s wrong” resounded inside my head, as he hobbled into the night.



9

BOYS AREN'T
MEANT TO CRY

JENNIFER WU

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

HIGHLY COMMENDED

He sits alone at the window, ears tuned to the steady rhythm of the clock ticking on the kitchen wall. His hands tighten around the ring in his hand, fingers clutching at the metal; grounding him. Blue eyes dart back to the clock on the wall – the hands move at a dizzying pace as his eyes follow the movements. He shakes his head, runs a hand through his hair, and grits his teeth as he struggles to hold back tears. *After all, boys aren't meant to cry.*

He glares down into the bottom of his cup, studying the image of his distorted reflection, and he thinks back to a time when he had really looked that young; when his eyes still held that spark, and his cheeks had held that rosy glow. And then he remembers his twelfth birthday – he remembers the celebrations and the constant buzz of conversation, the heady feeling of exhilaration, and then, he remembers the day after. His father had taken him shopping for a birthday gift after the party, his excitement still present as his blue eyes darted around to each store's window display, before they settled on the lacquered varnish of a new bicycle – the bright pink paint still shining on the frame as the polished metal of the bell sitting on the handlebars winked at him.

He had walked into the store, smiled brightly at the cashier, and pointed at the shiny new bicycle sitting in the store's display. His father took one look at the bicycle and the expression of confusion on his face morphed into one of anger. He shook his head quickly, his eyes hardening as he turned his son away roughly, before calling the shop assistant gruffly – “Can we get one of those blue bicycles on that rack over there?” The shop assistant nodded cheerfully, making small talk with her customer. The boy glanced at the blue frame of the bicycle. It looked so dull and bland in comparison to the striking magenta colour that covered the bicycle resting at the window. The boy's father smiled coldly and adjusted his tie; “Yes, the blue one over there should be perfect for my *son*.” The boy looked on with wide eyes as his father pulled him outside by the ear, forcing him down by his shoulder to sit on a nearby bench. “Listen here, boy; no man, and certainly no *son* of mine will be participating in these feminine activities you've taken such a liking to, do you understand?” He could only nod his head weakly, his mouth dry, as he forced back the words he could feel scratching their way up his throat and the hot tears that clawed at his eyelids, threatening to spill out. *After all, boys aren't meant to cry.*



He is brought out of his reverie as the clock on the wall chimes loudly, signalling that an hour has passed. Once again, blue eyes dart down to his lap, the ring now resting gently on his fabric-covered thigh. With trembling hands, he picks it up, resting it gingerly down on the table, and remembers when he first met *her*.

He was seventeen, she was a year younger; all soft skin and doe eyes and messy hair. He thinks back to lazy mornings with her—clean, white sheets over their bodies as they lay together, legs entwined and arms slung over their eyes. And then he remembers the way she sat up abruptly one morning, the sheets pooling around her waist. He remembers the flush of pink blossoming on her cheeks and the constellations of freckles adorning her shoulders. And he thinks of the way she smiled at him, the edges of her eyes crinkling as the rising sun shone from behind her, creating a glowing golden halo as it highlighted the loose strands of hair that framed her beaming face. He thinks back to the days he spent with her; her palm in his, their fingers fitting together like puzzle pieces and the sound of her laughter still ringing in his ears, like liquid gold, soft and mellow.

And then, he remembers the way everything fell apart. She had approached him one afternoon under the cherry tree outside his house, tucking a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear as her russet eyes darted around nervously, refusing to meet his gaze. *What had he done wrong?* He focused his stare on her face, frowning at the lines between her brows. His hands itched to reach over and smooth out the wrinkles that sullied the smooth canvas of her face, but he forced himself to remain still. She cleared her throat as her words came out shaky. “I—I think we need to break up.” She choked the words out.

The boy felt the air leave his lungs as his eyes widened. “W—Why?” He could see her gripping the hem of her shirt until her knuckles turned white. “I just feel like you’re too feminine, y’know? Like it sometimes feels like I’m dating a girl... It just makes me uncomfortable.”

“But what about the ring?” They both looked down at the metal on the girl’s hand—the once gleaming silver now appeared dull and lacklustre. He could only just make out the word engraved on the ring—‘Forever’. He met her tearful gaze once again. “What about the ring? What about forever?” He asked. She squeezed her eyes



shut, tore off the ring, and placed it in his hand. "Sometimes forever doesn't work." The metal was cold in his palm.

He is broken out of his trance once again as he feels hot tears sliding down his cheeks. Gritting his teeth, he wipes fiercely at his face, leaving the skin raw and red as he squeezes his eyes shut. *After all, boys aren't meant to cry.*



BOYS AREN'T
MEANT TO CRY

9

BOAT PEOPLE

GEORGIA BAYLEY

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

HIGHLY COMMENDED

A line of millions desperate to flee sweeps across the land. Thousands of malnourished children weep in their mothers' tired arms. Old men lie restlessly on the harsh, uneven floor in need of days of sleep. Every thirty steps, a fierce looking man stands guard armed with guns and batons, scanning the crowd like a hawk, eager for someone to do something punishable. A stubborn brick wall topped with vicious amounts of unforgiving barbed wire stretches across the shoreline beside us for hundreds of kilometres. Glancing down at my beloved Firas is the only happiness I can experience in this treacherous place. My son is my life. A day apart is a day of despair; a second without him feels like a year. Some day, we will escape this devastating land together and live an incredible life. The line to the boat may slow our journey but a feeling in my gut tells me we can make it to Australia.

I O

We've been here for months, Firas and I. Terrible things have happened in the line around us every day; so terrible that I must shield my son's eyes even though his ears can hear the stories. I know not to step out of line so we patiently wait for a spot together on the boat. Firas now lies restless beside me, he whimpers loudly and pleads for water but I cannot help him. Fresh water isn't common in our line to freedom. Leaving for water would mean leaving the line and starting all over again. My little boy continues to weep and he's getting louder. People are beginning to stare and guards are closing in on him as if he's fresh meat. The nearest guard reaches over and strikes him on the back, cruelly silencing my poor Firas for just a second before he bursts out with a piercing shriek. I try to stop him but he's uncontrollable.

Night is falling and I fear that Firas will continue to cry. He lies nestled in my protective grasp and finally drifts off, still sobbing into my skin. Soon afterwards I find myself falling into a hazy state. I let myself slump to the ground and dream of better days. Just a few hours later the morning light touches my eyelids and tears me from my deep sleep. I roll over on to the rutted floor and hear the gravel crunch beneath me. When I finally become aware of the life around me, my heart stops. I stare down into my empty arms. My empty, childless arms. A series of deafening screeches escape my mouth. Firas is never gone in the mornings; I know something is wrong. Perfectly shaped tears struggle down my weathered skin as panic rises like a tsunami inside me.

I turn to the man in front of me, abruptly shaking him from his lifeless sleep. Gazing towards his semi-conscious eyes I notice his unusually withered face. His eyes sit imperfectly perched on his skinny cheek bones like golf balls; a small scar kisses the tear duct of his left eye and hundreds of tiny folds in his skin show signs of age. He returns to the world around him, trilling his lips and peering at me with confusion. He sees my wet, saddened eyes and immediately realises why I seek his aid. He raises a long, bony finger just above his hip; pointing towards the front of the line. I follow his line of sight. He's not pointing at the line, he's pointing at the boat.

I spring to my feet, carelessly startling numerous people around me. I run, jump and dodge. The guards are beginning to chase me and one fires near my feet but I resist their attempts to stop me. Sweat beads combine with the tears streaming down my face, creating a stinging sensation on my dry skin. The start of the line is within my sight, only a few more guards to pass before I can slip through the gates and board the boat. Ten metres, five metres, one metre. I stop and raise my eyes only to see the boat beginning to drift away from the shoreline. Firas' perfect, moon shaped face rests on the ledge of the ship. I struggle to contain myself as I notice a gash on the side of his head from which a stream of blood trickles. His eyes are filled with tears and his hands struggle to prop his fragile head above the ledge. They've beaten him.

I slump to my knees in agony; it feels as though someone is slowly ripping my heart from my chest. People whisper around me, questioning my situation yet I cannot find the words to respond. One young girl steps out of the line, reaches out and simply strokes my dry, broken skin. I sob into my sleeve, inhaling the remaining scent of my son's gorgeously delicate hair. Finally, I pull myself together and I am helped to my feet. Again, I gaze across the water only to see the boat pushing aggressively against the waves far, far away; getting closer to Australia and further from me.

A lanky, old guard approaches me. I fear he will beat me but he only wants to negotiate.

"You want a spot on that boat?" He curiously questions, "what will you do for it?"

"Anything, I swear!" My voice is raising but I cannot get the words out fast enough. "Take everything I own. It isn't much but take it all."

IO

The hostile guard gains a demanding tone; “I don’t want your belongings...” he pauses, pondering his next move. “I want your service!” I meet his eyes, fearful of what this service might be. He picks up on my curiosity. “You say you’re desperate for your son. Are you desperate enough that you’ll work for it?”

I remember seeing poor Firas on the boat; his innocent eyes filled with tears, his head gushing. I will do anything to see him again. “If you have somewhere for me to work and be with Firas, get me a place on the boat please.”

“Aha! We have a deal.” He announces ecstatically. “You’ll take the next boat out and begin work once you reach land.” He extends his hand, gesturing for a shake. It all seems too good to be true but a spot on the boat is all I wanted and now I have it. So I take his hand and give it a firm shake before he gently herds me towards the newly arrived boat, bobbing at the shoreline just metres away from me.

It has been hours since I willingly bade the Syrian border goodbye, so many hours that the gate to darkness that hangs in the sky is beginning to hide itself as night falls. Looking out across the ocean at the fiery sun, I remember the time Firas and I went to Eilat beach to watch the sunset. It reminds me of the sweet scent of happiness; the indescribable scent that I cannot come close to smelling without my son by my side. I see shy clouds, barely visible in the dusk-filled air and remember the rain that destroyed our house last year. The rain that brought my son and I together as we huddled in the corner of our tiny kitchen. Night is finally here and the stars gracefully remove their dark cloaks, reminding me of the nights in our line to freedom that we spent gazing into space together. I inhale the smooth ocean air and remember the first time Firas caught a fish. A long lost tear of happiness breaks free, followed by an unbroken stream; I will find my son again.

But just as I reach a feeling of complete satisfaction, I overhear a fellow traveller discussing post-arrival plans. I wish I misheard him. I feel as though I might die. The world around me slows. Dizziness fills my head as the tears of joy turn to tears of terror. I pause, struggling to string words into a sentence... “This boat isn’t heading for Australia?”



IO

She was so tired. She'd just sit down now, for a moment – only a moment, no harm could come of that. After all, she'd sorted everything out, hadn't she? The rooms were clean, beds made; she'd washed the dirty laundry in the tub, scrubbing out the stains with a bar of soap and hanging them out to dry. She'd even chopped the carrots and parsnips for tea. Of course, she could just cook it all now and keep it warm for when Charlotte came...

But she was so tired. Slowly, carefully, she lowered herself onto the chair on the porch. She always had to sit down slowly now because her knees were all weak and sore, and a shot of pain raced up her back after any sudden movements.

But the chair was nice – not a pretty chair, but stable, comfortable, and that's all that mattered. She sighed, lifting her head up to the sky, feeling the soft hands of sunlight gently caressing her face. She could hear the birds, some sweetly singing, others bickering like old women. Then suddenly – could it be? A little bird fluttered down and landed on the porch; for a moment it looked up at her, curiously, then it turned and flew off. It was grey with a ring of yellow around its neck. It was exactly like the one she and Lizzie would see when...

Lizzie. Anne remembered when they were little girls – “Annie and Lizzie” – such close sisters. How, at the end of the day, after school, after helping their mother around the house, after supper, they would sit in bed and tell stories and giggle. They'd had to share the bed, and share the room with their brother. *He* got to sleep on the side with the window, the window through which you could see all the stars in the night sky. Anne remembered how, once their brother had fallen asleep, she and Lizzie would creep over to the window and watch the stars. And some nights – no, most nights – they would even fall asleep there, and wake up to the chirping of a little grey bird with a ring of yellow around its neck. It always gave them a funny look before flying off...

Goodness, she was just a child back then. She'd had to grow up, sooner or later. She remembered how, at thirteen, she left school and worked as a washerwoman, supporting her family – her ageing parents – until she turned twenty. When she was twenty she met James.

Anne sighed. She didn't even know she was to marry him until he came up to her and said he'd arranged it with her father. Then the wedding – “oh, look at you all dressed up dear” – and the

IO

children – “no boys, well we can’t have everything, can we dear?” The endless cycle of wiping the tables, mopping the floors, fluffing up pillows, scrubbing dirt out of shirts, watering down stew so there was enough food on the table... sometimes it seemed too much to bear.

Her hands – once the soft hands that used to love curling around a pencil during class, the soft hands that picked up a dirty shirt for the first time and plunged it into a tub of murky water – were no longer smooth and untouched. Anne looked down at her hands, resting on her lap, dry and wrinkled and scarred. She could feel a tear forming in the corner of her eye, and she would have let it dribble down her cheek had she not heard a burst of laughter in the distance.

Celia! she thought, and managed to blink away the tears before the little girl came into view. Celia was wearing a little pink frock, daisies curling around her locks of hair. When she saw Anne sitting there, her face lit up and her blue eyes sparkled.

“Granny!” she cried and raced up to the porch. Behind Celia, Anne could see Charlotte, her daughter, walking up. Though Charlotte certainly lacked Celia’s bright energy, she wasn’t quite tired either.

Celia gently lifted Anne’s hands and sat on Anne’s lap, wrapping her grandmothers’ arms around her.

“Granny,” she said, eyes sparkling, “Mother and I have had the most marvellous day! We went to the park and had ice cream, and then she bought me this book – look, I wanted to show you!”

Anne could feel the soft wind go through her. She could hear Celia’s voice, reading in the slow, hesitant way that children read, index finger under each individual word. It was getting late – the birds were flying away for the night, and she could see the evening’s first, sparkling star.



IO

Tony Abbott kisses nun in Sydney, K Rudd dog posts shaving 'selfie', Likely Australian senator brushes off kangaroo poo fight video, Clive Palmer has a cold and may miss first day of parliament, Whitebread salami sandwich thrown at Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Prime Minister Julia Gillard hit by another sandwich during Lyneham High School visit. Welcome to Australian Politics, Believe it or not, these were actual headlines appearing in our media over the past 10 years. Whilst this may all be a little fun and games, the wide variety of events occurring this past month made me realise just how messed up the world's politics are. In the United States we have an orange coloured man who is living proof that money can't buy you good hair running against Hillary Clinton, Turkey is in disarray after a failed coup in attempts to throw out the government, Great Britain's divided after the highly controversial 'Brexit' and over here we've had 5 Prime Ministers in 7 years. This has been a highly unusual year to say the least.

Politicians have never been painted in a good light but why is that slight bit of distrust now resulting in such instability worldwide? I would love to give you a simple easy, peasy answer, but I'm afraid it's not quite that simple. Many people claim this downfall was long coming, but why now exactly? The latest version of the IPSOS MORI trust poll which measures how much people trust different professions produced politicians at the very bottom of their list, with only 19% of people believing there is such things as honest politicians. This is an unfathomable drop of 58% over the past 42 years. Earlier this week the WAB ethics index rated politicians the worst rating of all occupations. I have researched the background of our current Prime Minister Mr Turnbull, our local member Josh Frydenberg and our first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. They all seem like perfectly good people that we should be able to trust, so why don't we?

The economic crisis in 2007–2008 plummeted the amounts of trust in national governments to record lows and it hasn't much recovered since. Our new modern era and scientific revelations have made us begin to question our surroundings, and the governments are in clear shooting range. Us as a society are now beginning to see the many errors in the ways of politicians. We are beginning to question the government and their decisions, and feeling no fear in speaking out if we feel misled. We are looking for

POLITICS

JESSICA CLARKE

ORATOR OF THE YEAR

WINNER

IO

someone to blame for all these terrible issues we have globally, and the governments seem to be the perfect people to pin it all on.

Although, it does go without saying that we have some foundation to build our mistrust and displeasure with these politicians on. Like politicians in past generations, today's politicians believe if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth. They convince you they're sincere and compassionate by kissing babies and appearing at charity events. Some would say they act a bit phoney from time to time. As well as this, some politicians have become human puppets. Every politician need money to campaign. It's the source of the money that creates puppet-masters and puppets. I don't have anything against puppets as such, I think "Sesame Street" is great but when it comes to representing me in parliament, I'll pass on them.

The effects of such unsteady governments worldwide is completely, and utterly, never-ending. Protests in all different forms have begun arising with many countries proving their discontent with their respective governments. Great Britain's referendum for leaving the EU ended in a highly controversial 'yes' vote, and as if the tension wasn't already enough over there with a 48% 'no' and 52% 'yes' vote, many voters are said to have placed a 'yes' vote in a kinda 'STUFF YOU GOVERNMENT' way and to show their displeasure with the current government but they didn't actually vote with the intention of leaving the EU. Over in Turkey, we have the most overt form of protest against the government happening, an attempted coup having occurred only about one week ago. It's clear that many countries are showing disapproval of their own governments but in every form of protest we have witnessed, it seems the non-revolting solution turns out much better.

Yes, we may be consumed in finding out the latest goss about Tay Swift and Kimmy K's beef or finding all the rare Pokemons around Melbourne, but it's time that we pay attention to the root of all our problems. After all, we can't just build a wall and hope that it will fix everything, and having Kanye for 2020 president isn't quite the solution either. So what's the solution I hear you ask? Look, I really have no idea, I'm not a politician you see. But what I do know, is that we have to begin to tune into this. The outcomes of when you stop trusting them are much worse than those when you do. We have stop worrying about the efficiency of our politicians and

IO

constantly putting them down when we have much bigger issues that we need to put our effort into. It's time that we take the leap of faith, that we trust those which we vote into parliament and that us as a nation, no, as a world population, put our trust into the governments and politicians across the globe.



POLITICS

IO

TO QUIT OR NOT TO QUIT

The word “quitter” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a person who gives up easily or does not have the courage or determination to finish a task”.

ELLA CROSBY

Last year, I quit a sport I had taken up because it wasn't right for me. The strange thing was, every time I told anyone I had given it up, I felt like I had to make excuses. I would talk about my desire to focus on school or an excess of other commitments; it wasn't enough for me to tell the truth and say, “I had a go, and it didn't make me happy, so I didn't keep doing it”.

After this experience, I started to wonder about this vendetta our society has against quitting. Why do we think of ceasing to do something as an inherently negative thing?

Some psychologists have suggested that our fear of quitting dates back to the very origins of the human race; prehistorically, quitting was a truly terrible survival tactic. The cavemen who decided that hunting wasn't for them and that they would really rather paint didn't tend to have a very long lifespan. Hence, humanity evolved from exceptionally stubborn caveman, and the same mentality of “try, try again” that applied to hunting 40,000 years ago is still being applied to pretty much every aspect of our lives today, though it remains a fallible ideology. Just as some *homo habilis* might have been better off switching from mammoths to rabbits if circumstances called for it, so too might us modern-day humans be better switching to more achievable goals, even if that means ceasing the pursuit of something else.

Here's the thing: not everything you will ever begin is something you are destined to finish or succeed at. Perseverance is key, but it is not everything. Quitting something doesn't automatically mean you're scared of commitment, lazy or a coward. In fact, deciding to quit something is often exponentially harder, wiser and braver than pursuing it. Besides, giving yourself the freedom to quit means you'll enjoy the things you do keep doing more because you know you're doing them because you want to.

I am by no means encouraging you to quit every activity you have ever had a moment's doubt about pursuing; what I am doing is encouraging you to consider *why* you are still doing all the things you do. There comes a point when you need to ask yourself whether you are persisting for the right reasons: Are you doing it because you want to, or because you don't want to disappoint someone else?

IO

Is it making you happy, or are you just too scared to quit?

Tenacity is a very valuable quality, and I am not trying to encourage its underestimation. Personally, there are many things in my life I have considered giving up, and am exceedingly glad that I didn't. Often, my extra work and patience resulted in success shortly after I had considered quitting. In these cases, I know my persistence paid off.

However, I also know that quitting other things has made me a better, happier and more balanced person. It's all about consideration, not blind perseverance nor blind abandonment.

For there is a distinct difference between quitting things that matter and quitting things that don't. Unfortunately, having spent most of lives being bombarded by anti-quitting sentiments like "quitters never win, and winners never quit" it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the different between lazy quitting and considered changes in life direction.

In order to combat this, I suggest the creation of a new word, one without all the negative connotations "quitter" evokes. A word that simply means "a person who is wise and brave enough to cease doing something because they know it isn't essential, it doesn't make them happy and isn't right for them".



IO

NO END

LAURA FLOOD

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

HIGHLY COMMENDED

In most tales, there is a clear story. A beginning, a middle and an end. The villain is clear and set in stone, and there can be no justification made for their actions. The boy gets the girl, and they all live happily ever after. In most stories, the villain and the victim both agree on what actually happened.

But that's not how this story goes.

"For he found her in the field, and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her."

DEUTERONOMY 22:25

IO
An hour after it happened, she remembers taking a shower. Later they told her that was stupid, she didn't really care though. She just wanted to feel clean, but the water doesn't help, you know that right? Maybe it washes away his touch, but it doesn't do much about the shame. It might work to make her look clean, but I don't think she'll be able to feel clean ever again. All the water really does, is create a secret, between her and him.

An hour after it happened, he remembers laughing with friends. Laughing at some joke, like it actually mattered. He remembers going back to the party, and having another drink. He didn't feel guilty though, he didn't know he'd done anything wrong. In fact, he wasn't thinking about what had happened at all, he had a science test coming up and he was worried.

A day after it happened, she goes to the police station, embarrassed and ashamed. They tell her that she was asking for it, that she shouldn't have drunk so much, that she shouldn't have worn such a short dress. They ask for a follow up statement anyway. She doesn't go back.

A day after it happened, he wakes up with a raging headache and nausea from his hangover.

He wasn't the only one that threw up that day.

He remembers it differently, of course he does, we're rarely the villain in the stories we tell ourselves. He remembers a pretty girl, with a short dress and a painted mouth, the Juliet to his Romeo. I suppose he also remembered it as a game, and that that time, he won. In this story that he tells himself, he is not the villain. He remembers making love in an alleyway, and feeling quiet elation. He doesn't boast about it though, he isn't that kind of person. And

isn't that funny? It's true though, he wouldn't hurt a fly. And yet he hurt her. He doesn't like people who pick on those who are weaker, yet he chose her, didn't he.

His lack of intent doesn't change anything for her though. She's the one that's got to live with it.

In the story she tells herself, she is the survivor. Not the victim, not the abused, but the one who got up and went on. She is her own saviour, she is the one who had to get herself out of the alleyway, and she is the one who had to wash away his touch. Some days, she actually lets herself believe it. Other days, she mourns; her innocence, her youth, her childhood, all stolen by a boy who was too bloody plastered to ask if she wanted him. Her mother sees her tears, and asks if she's worried about school. Her father sees her shaking, and asks if she's eaten anything. The eighteen year old male cashier sees her flinch, and keeps his silence. He wonders if she's alright. She's not, but maybe someday she will be.

When she starts throwing up the next month, she doesn't talk about it. Doesn't want to think about the possibility of such a thing. But it sneaks inside her mind, tormenting her. The feeling that even though she showered, she didn't quite wash him all out. She feels lost, and sick, and tired. So tired. She thought she got away. She thought it was over.

She imagines that she can feel it sometimes. Moving in her. She knows it can't be true, she's only seven weeks pregnant, but logic doesn't seem to help in the face of ungodly fear. Ungodly. What a joke. To be frightened of having a child, rather than the fear of losing it. A cruel irony.

She can't tell her parents. They're devout catholics, and they would insist on her keeping it. She doesn't, in the end. Even though it goes against everything she has been taught, she can't keep it. She justifies her actions – the child wouldn't have parents, it would always struggle to understand the nature of its conception, it just wouldn't be fair. But that isn't the truth. The truth is that she can't bear the product of her defilement growing within her, shackled to her forever. He already took her innocence, he won't take her future.

In this story, there are too many villains. The police who called her stupid, the boy for not listening, the people who turned a blind eye. They can be so cruel, these little beings of mine.

In this story, there's shame, and tears, and ignorance. There's no

IO

NO END middle, and there's no end. The boy hurt the girl, and yet how can we condemn him guilty of his vile act, when he himself had no knowledge of committing it? The girl won't live happily ever after, and he won't even understand what happened.

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.”

COLOSSIANS 3:5-6



IO

Dear Grace,

I must start by not introducing myself. After all, you are not a stranger to me. However odd this may be, please disregard who is speaking to you and lose yourself in these words. You are so good at that.

I am typing this letter on a typewriter. It's old and rickety and bangs whenever I touch it. My hands are stained with ink, and my brain is drowning in drafts – you have no idea how many times my fingers have formed the words to say to you. The room is smoky, the floors are creaky, and my feet won't stop tapping the floor. Anyway, I digress. What do you say to a girl who has an infinity of words wriggling around in her brain? No matter how right my writing is, you will still edit. So I will attempt to tell you what you need to know, as I am old and I am sad, so please accept this for what it is. You are so good at that.

You were fifteen. Your birthday began so spectacularly that you cried, silver smiles making tracks down your cheeks. Light and colour caressed your face, music pierced your ears, studding them with irreversible marks. You embraced. You danced. And your reality was so deliciously perfect that you didn't want to dream, for fear that your brain would create a world worse than what you wanted. Than what you had. So what came next? What could top this? I know you, and I know that after the party you sat cross legged with a moth-bitten teddy bear clutched to your chest, and grinned at the ceiling. I know you would have blown out the candles that litter your shelves, and scribbled glowing thank-yous on scraps of paper. I know you would've awoken the next morning to a sea of wrapping paper and a little nostalgia sitting at the bottom of your bed. This is my first piece of advice. Enjoy yourself, and enjoy your memories – but don't dwell too much on the past. You are so good at that.

You were sixteen. Your feet blanketed in socks, your ears wrapped in a beanie. Your footsteps so quiet that you couldn't even hear them. His shirt hung off your back, MGMT's tour shirt, a little too long. Your knees, skinny and bruised, gleamed golden in the moonlight. And next to you, there He stood, shorts hanging low on his hips, exposing a strip of tanned skin encompassed in veins. Blue and red. Too soon, his long limbs crawled out your window, and

DEAR

AMY HALE

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

WINNER & SCHOOL

WINNER

IO

DEAR scaled the fence. He fell, and your parents found out.

Do you remember running up to him, and cupping his face, bringing your nose to his? Remember, how he couldn't feel his broken leg, because you were there, and you numbed the pain, if only for a little while?

He was the first, and you met him at the beach. He tasted like salt, and his hair was dreadlocked with anticipation. So you fell in nervous love, both of you so desperately wanting each other, even just for the novelty of the name tag, Grace and Christopher, Christopher and Grace. You used to read his English books to him, and he used to check your Maths answers. You loved him more than he loved himself. Until he found someone else to read to him, another girl with butterscotch hair and freckles on her nose. The night you found out, you tried your mother's red wine. It stained your lips maroon, and bled through his shirt, that you couldn't take off for fear of it truly being over. Your cheeks were salty, your eyes raw. You loved, you lost, you left yourself behind. And here lies my second piece of advice. Love like you did when you were sixteen. And don't be afraid. You are so good at that.

You were seventeen. A girl next to you clutched a porcelain toilet bowl in her red hands, whilst you stared at the ceiling, fingers absentmindedly sweeping her hair back. Poison shot out of her mouth and into the water, creating a magnificent splash. You let the strands fall. One by one they fell, almost dancing through the air, long black threads sewing themselves onto the bowl.

And you left. That was the start.

A selfish seed surreptitiously sewed itself, burying deep into your core. First it was leaving a friend retching over a bowl, and then as it progressed, your seed grew into a plant. Leaves fell out of your ears, swirled under your eyes, and branches poked holes in your mouth.

When you saw the same girl with the red hands arranging a pillow on a street corner, you walked past. A little too fast, even though your wallet felt heavy with change and your heart rattled in your chest. After all, you were always taught not to speak to the homeless.

Be kind, Grace. All you can be is kind. Please don't be greedy. You are so good at that.

Now you are eighteen. Grace, my love. I know you better than

IO

you know yourself right now. I am old, and I am sad, and I am full of regret. Top to toe, I swear. Even though it's probably inevitable, I want to protect you from the same fate. Maybe someday, if a clever scientist figures out how to get this to you, you will read these words the same way I wrote them. With a throat blocked full of tears, and a mantra of "please don't cry" echoing in your head. I keep thinking, what if things were different? What if you actually listened to these lessons?

I want you to throw the wrapping paper out. You don't need it anymore. And I can guarantee it will sit festering under your bed until you do. I know mine did.

I want you to burn the MGMT t-shirt, but not your memories. Mine sits, gathering dust, a constant reminder of Christopher's bittersweet love.

I want you to part with your spare change, and scatter it around the city. There are those who need it more than you.

I have our old address burned into my mind, and although our hair has gone grey with age, our mind has not altered.

You see, I am you and you are me... Or at least you will be.

Yours,
Grace.



DEAR

IO

SONDER

JESSICA HEPWORTH

You delicately swirl the teaspoon through your coffee, watching as the frothing forms intricate twirls of creamy whiteness and shades of chestnut brown. When you are content with your creation, you rest the teaspoon on the saucer, and slowly draw the cup to your lips. As you swallow you feel the warmth spreading throughout your body, beginning in your chest before radiating through to your fingers and toes. You place the cup back on its saucer.

The small coffee shop is only slightly busy this morning. The soft whisperings of conversations from occupied tables congregate to create a light buzz that fills the room.

You look out the large window to your left and watch as passers-by hurry about in the frost outside, no doubt engulfed in their busy schedules and petty desires; never stopping to watch the world around them. Each nameless face appears in your view for only a moment, before passing out of sight, a moving artwork framed by the window's edges.

A woman comes into view. She is young, dark-haired and beautiful, but what strikes you most about her is her elegance. She wears a draping, deep brown fur coat which she wraps around her. She must be wealthy, no doubt a glamorous model or movie star, or the wife of some successful businessman. She steals a quick glance behind her before disappearing out of view. But now your mind is emblazoned with her image. You take out your notebook and your favourite pen, and begin to write:

Sabrina. An elegant name for an elegant woman. With poise and class she walks through the streets of New York. When she speaks she does so with purpose, in a smooth, deep voice which puts everyone under her spell.

Her life is a privileged one.

That night, like every other night, Sabrina is escorted home by her chaperone. After another day modelling some of the world's finest clothing, she wears her grandmother's coat. She knows it is a hideous thing, but her Vera Wang is in for dry cleaning and she had already worn all her others more than the acceptable amount of times this season. It may as well be the least valuable thing she owns. The drive is short and in no time she is travelling up and in a shining silver elevator. She opens the door to her penthouse suite. Sabrina takes off her coat and throws it carelessly across the tabletop. It really is much too worn and outdated for someone like herself.



Each day that you sit in your coffee shop, each time your pen touches paper, you discover more about Sabrina. The more you learn about her lavish life, the more you envy her. She has everything you ever wished for; a beautiful home, the perfect job, the nicest clothes. She is happy. You wish you were that happy.

You are running late. Well, if it is possible to be late for your morning coffee. You rush along the busy city streets anyway, becoming one with the sea of commuters. Today you are meeting with a publisher. You are excited, but nervous too. It's not easy to get by in this world, and you hope that today things will change. As you turn the final corner of your journey a sudden collision throws you off balance and you find yourself falling backwards, landing with a thud on the concrete. You hear a soft moan. It seems as though it was a young woman with whom you collided. You slowly rise to your feet, gathering a few stray pens which managed to escape from your satchel.

"Here you are," says the woman, handing you your favourite pen.

Her voice is mellifluous, much softer and kinder than you had imagined.

"I'm very sorry about this, it's all my fault, really," she explains.

Now that you see her face, you notice her eyes are not just blue, but decorated with tiny specks of gold as well.

"I'm just in an awful rush you see, and I really can't be late again," she looks worriedly at her watch.

She wears a draping, deep brown fur coat, although it's not as shiny and clean as you had envisaged.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" she asks.

You feel as though the answer should be yes, but can only shake your head.

"Well, I must be off then, running late as usual!" she exclaims, "Have a nice day."

It is a strange feeling. You can't help but feel as though you have stepped into the very world of your own creation. You are an intruder in your own story, in *Sabrina's* story. You watch, mesmerised, as she moves past you, and your eyes continue to follow her as she walks hurriedly down the crowded street. You can't look away. In a moment of complete whim, you follow her. Darting through the human traffic is no easy task, but something within you drives you

IO

SONDER

forward. You catch a glimpse of fur disappear inside a small café just ahead. You break into a slow jog and in no time a soft chime announces your entrance into the café.

It is not as nice as your coffee shop, but at least it is warm inside. You wonder why someone like Sabrina would come to a place like this.

You decide to take a seat by the window. Your eyes scan the room, searching at every table for her. You can't seem to see her anywhere. Perhaps it was your imagination after all, to think you had actually encountered her...

"Oh, hello again."

Your head jerks up at the sound of her voice, and yes, it is her again. You look into her eyes. You must say something, but words escape you. What is there to say?

"Can I take your order?" she prompts.

Your eyes drift from her face to the light blue waitress uniform she wears, then to the small name tag clipped to her collar. *Claire*.

"You really don't say much, do you?" Claire says with a smile, "I'll pop back in a few minutes then, when you've made up your mind."

Sabrina no, *Claire*, hurries off to take another order as you sit in disbelief.



That night, like every other night, Claire walks all the way home. Her grandmother's coat the only thing separating her pale skin from the bitter cold air. It may as well be the most valuable thing she owns. The walk is long, and she pulls the coat tighter around her, wishing she had boots, or a scarf, or gloves. She is puffing by the time she reaches her building, wheezing from the frost that constricts her lungs. She climbs the rickety stairs which lead to her small apartment. She opens the door to her home. Inside is a bed, a table, a single chair and a small basin above which the yellowed wallpaper is beginning to peel. Claire takes off her coat and carefully drapes it across the tabletop. It is much too extravagant for someone like herself, but then, it protects her from the cold, and keeps others from knowing the truth.

Her life is an ordinary one.



IO

Present

The apartment was... dingy to say the least. Not what I expected at all. Stepping off the white tiled path, I stepped onto the scruffy, snuff-coloured carpet. The cacophony of car tyres, making out with the harsh bitumen underneath them as they rushed past, was drowned out by the thick, lead-plated doors swinging closed behind me.

In the centre of the room, a single, sombre-blue lampshade was perched upon a mahogany table (that had seen better days) adjacent to a flimsy tape recorder. The light illuminated the elegant, yet dark, figure sitting before me. Her arms, which were resting on the table, were folded squarely near her willowy body as if they were guarding a close-kept secret. Bringing the lit, acrid paper to my lips, I puffed a cloud of smoke. Desperately, my rose coloured lips then assaulted the edges of the tobacco cigarette enjoying how it burnt an eager path from the back of my throat down my esophagus, bringing me closer to death, to freedom by the minute. As the stranger's mouth stopped bunching like a drawstring sack, she reached over and turned the pathetic excuse of a tape recorder on.

"I've been expecting you."

I fought back the urge to laugh as she bemusedly delivered her Italian Mafia line that sounded like it came straight out of *'The Godfather'*. An uninvited smile begged to be released, knocking sinfully against my lips. It would be wrong. I can't trust her. I can't trust anyone. Above all, I can't trust *him*. I took another puff.

"Is the tape recorder really necessary?" I questioned her stubbornly as I flopped down in the chair in front of her own, eyeing the way the tape in the prehistoric piece of junk spun around. "I should have listened to *him*." Damn, I shouldn't have said that.

"Who's *he*?"

"No one you need to know," I defiantly whispered, as my hazel eyes pierced hers. "Are you here to interrogate me or help me?"

"How about you tell me why a sixteen-year-old girl like you would need a criminal psychoanalyst?"

Huh, that was unexpected. But then again who am I to crush her fantasy. She doesn't know. She's oblivious.

"Look, I'm messed up okay, I don't know." Yeah, and the extent of my 'messed-up-ness' freakin' scares me.

"Tell me then. Enlighten me."

Oh, she doesn't even know the start of it.

HIM

NAVYA KATARIA

IO

HIM *Before*

It started with tiles. Black tiles and white tiles. The tiles that every footpath in a metre radius was made up of. Ever since I was a scrawny five-year-old, I would play a game with myself. The black tiles were mud and the white tiles were heavenly clouds. Stepping on the black tiles meant ruining my sparkly, rainbow-edition shoes. The black tiles were for the scum. The white tiles were perfectly clean. Carefully, I'd balance on my tiptoes and jump, zigzag and contort my little feet over the black tiles, avoiding them at all costs. The game was harmless. Just a little fun. Until *he* appeared.

He was charming, at first, and charismatic, oh yes. I'd spend nights vocalising my youthful dreams to him. Heck, I trusted him enough to include him in my tile game.

Then nights turned into years and he became so much more than a mere presence in my life — he proved to be a horrendous monster.

Two years ago, this one particular September morning was picturesque. Disney-movie-worthy if you asked me. The yellow wisps of the sun kissed the sky, turning it to blush a peachy-orange colour. Grandma, whose skin resembled an old avocado, was perched on a rickety, termite-bitten chair, a pipe in her hand and a weary look in her eyes.

“You’re so much like your mother.” Sighing, she shifted in her chair, crossing her bruised legs over one another, her eyes overcome with a glassy sheen.

Mother had died when I was young due to an overdose on I.C.E and Dad had abandoned us years before because of her addiction. Since then, Grandma had been the only family in my life and even she was close to receiving death’s kiss. Grandma opened her frail mouth once more, commanding me to get the groceries for this week.

I meandered down the path that lead to the local ‘IGA’ store, looking down at my feet as I hopscotched my way over the black tiles, carefully placing my feet on the white ones. As I was about to place my right foot down, a foreign foot suddenly took its place. Glancing up, I was greeted with the sight of a pudgy-faced boy. Freckles adorned his face and his blue eyes were squinting down at me. I told the boy to move. He didn’t budge. I couldn’t sidestep to the right or the left as I was surrounded by black tiles and I had

IO

sworn off ever placing my pure feet on the cold black. How dare he ruin my game! I swear my face must have turned red at that moment as I could feel the heat flaming through my cheeks, radiating from me.

HIM

That's when *he* reappeared on the black tile to my right. *He* told me to pick up the rock on the side street and to bash the boy's head as the pathetic boy had defied me. I did just that.

And then I ran. The groceries that grandma needed long forgotten.

The boy died.

I later found out he lived in my street.

He went to my school.

He was my age.

He did not deserve death.

I keep thinking back to that day. It wasn't my fault. *He* made me do it. *He's* the monster.

Grandma was right — I am just like my mother. Drugs became my best friend. They would rid me of my guilt, my fear, but they couldn't get rid of the most important thing. They couldn't get rid of *him* and *he* kept coming back. The tile game that had started as some simple childish fun had metamorphosed into a dark, clandestine secret that only evoked images of *him*.

I O

Three. Three more innocent people later died. Only one died because of me.

Death one was Grandma. She figured out that Marge-from-Bingo's nephew, the pudgy-faced boy, was murdered by me. As she had connections with the local town police Chief in Command, Bruce, she was able to bribe him to keep my story hidden. A shameful skeleton in the closet. Her heart was already in a frail condition and my betrayal led to her death just fifteen days after the event. Deaths two and three happened after others overdosed on some drugs that I had edged them to try. Deaths two and three were *his* fault. *He* told me to sell them heroin. *He* told me to force them to guzzle down vodka while taking it. *He* told me.

Present

I told her everything.

She turned the tape recorder off. She played back everything I said as I awkwardly shifted in my seat and, if that wasn't torturous

HIM enough, she started to document everything.

“You know I can help you right?” she stated blankly, as if the answer was blindingly obvious. The thin tip of the cigarette, forgotten in my hands, corroded before my very eyes. Each fiery ember burning up as it drifted to the concrete ground.

“I know.” I was lying.

From the top right drawer of the table, where the fingertips of my left hand lazily drew circles in the rich wood, she procured a yellow file. She placed it in front of me, opening the front page. Immediately, I was greeted with an image of my face and she placed her personal notes neatly on top of it. The file was mustard yellow. I hate mustard yellow.

She leant forward in her chair. Her elegant frame dramatically hunched like an awkward giraffe neck.

“Look, I think you have...” the elision produced from her words were bluntly drowned out, blurring into oblivion as *he* appeared behind her. *His* face contorting into a deadly scowl and *his* shadow overpowering the dim light of the room. *He’s* here.

He picked up the blue lampshade to the side of her and... CRUNCH! The sickening sound of her skull breaking filled every corner of the room.

“NO!” I tried to scream but my voice was lost at the back of my throat. *He* looked at me and disappeared into the thin air. Glancing down at my hands I saw that my cigarette had been replaced with the blue lampshade. I was standing behind her dead body.

I glanced at the psychoanalyst’s notes on the table. Scrawled messily in the centre of the page were a few words.

MENTAL ILLNESS: SCHIZOPHRENIA

I was *him*. *He* was me.



IO

The twisted silver metal can clanks along the cobblestones. The alleyway is dark and coated in grime.

“Run!” A little boy dives on top of the can, curling into a ball. You run towards the end of the alley, shrieking with laughter, chased by red headed boys in overalls, caps caught in the wind, to lie lonesome and abandoned on filthy cobblestones. A boy pretends to grab his rifle, hauling it onto his shoulder, clicking his tongue in imitation. Another tugs your arm, pulling you away, your knight in shining armor.

“You’re my hero!” you say. “You saved me!”

A mock battle, a minuscule comparison. Overalls instead of uniforms, dirt patches rather than scarlet blood. A warped comprehension of honor, not horror. A game.

Then, your painted, pretend world shatters: a make-believe bubble of valiant heroes and courageous soldiers, come and gone. The sun is setting, grapefruit orange fading into soothing hues of purple and blue. It is time for supper, time for family, time for reality. A piece of thin yellow paper drifts in the wind, and you pause for a moment, watching it float delicately to the ground, and, for the millionth time, you thank the Lord that your Daddy didn’t have to go to war. That he doesn’t have to suffer the same hellish fate that grown ups try to hide you from. Pretense and wool are thick, but your green eyes see clearly.

“Be proud of Daddy,” they tell you. “Your Daddy is special, he’s very important. Be *proud!*” And you are, because you are an obedient little girl who always brushes her hair and ties her shoes, boasting at school about your Daddy, your important Daddy with the mysterious, secret job.

You wave goodbye to the red-headed rascals as you reach your small, white two story house, with its midnight shutters and periwinkle door. You spy your Daddy’s smart black boots, bigger than twice yours, and you break into a skip, ready to leap into his loving arms. You fling open the door, run through the main room, down the hall, into the kitchen. Straight to your father. Up, up, up, into his arms, not caring about the dirt patches you are inevitably leaving on his pristine grey suit.

“Hello, little one!” He smiles, swinging you around.

You ignore the worried expression he wears as you enter the room. You ignore the nervous wringing of hands, the low tone of

IO

voice he uses when he is trying not to be overheard. You ignore the mask of ill-concealed worry on your mother's face as you watch her out of the corner of your eye, the harsh set of her lips and crossed arms. Because right now, everything is perfect. The man on television doesn't say so. But here, safe in your Daddy's arms, it is.



Today, when you skip down the cobblestone streets, something is different. The usually lazy, amicable murmur is frantic and incessant. Grown ups stand in tight-knit circles, faces pale and taut. People stare at each other for moments too long, a million words conveyed in a single glance. Newspaper sellers line the street and, not for the first time, you are desperate to read. The letters jump out at you. You see letters that forms words you don't recognize, long, complicated words that scream at you in bold fonts. You recognize the final word and that is enough. Four letters. Bomb. You think of your little games in the alleyway, of the broken metal can and you shiver. You reach down to thumb through the pages of the newspaper and your blood runs cold. Words are meaningless now. The pictures before you speak for the volumes you could not read.

You see the twisted, burning red. The white of dead skin hanging in sheets off bodies. Eyes fallen out of sockets. Limbs contorted, or worse, gone entirely. Shoulders melting into arms. And

bodies. Piles and piles of them, lying lifeless in the streets, mere shadows of the people they used to be. Elderly, children and impossibly tiny infants.

You don't want to play anymore. You walk home, your feet trudging slowly down the cobblestones. You think of the families, of lives ended mid-sentence. Of children walking to school, oblivious and innocent. You cannot comprehend this atrocity, this catastrophe that you cannot yet understand the justification for, that no one bothers to tell you why. All you know is an endless number: lost mothers and fathers and children, lying dead in the streets. Some, obliterated entirely, a shadow the last trace of their existence.

Most of all, you think of the telegrams. You imagine a thousand yellow pieces of paper, floating in the wind. A story cut short, a tale of lost time, a bustling city of life turned hell. You wonder how a single piece of paper can convey such heartbreak, such tragedy and emotion, and you mourn for the lost souls. Tonight, they sleep with the angels.



IO

You open the periwinkle door slowly, your heart heavy, your mind confused. You tug on your blond plaits, head cocked to the side as you hear the sound of clinking glasses and raised voices. You walk into the kitchen and pause in your tracks. Your mother spies you and swoops in, her eyes bright, cheeks rosy. She caresses your cheeks, lifting your face to hers, taking no notice of your disconcerted expression.

“Look, darling!” She points to a newspaper lying open on the wooden dining table. “Your daddy did this! The big new bomb he made dropped on the bad guys!”

You freeze, the back of your eyes seared with terrifying images of human skeletons. Of course you know there are bad guys but all you can think of are the people, dead, dead, *dead*, and you wonder what they did to deserve such a hellish fate. You look up at your father, for once home by midday, your body trembling, your trenchant gaze burning. He does not look at you, but instead chuckles loudly, a joking reply to a statement made by one of the many men standing around the table.

Your mother walks behind you now, lowers her head to your height, mouth level with your ear.

“Be *proud*,” she murmurs, and the pride she feels is evident in the unsuppressed jubilation of her tone. But for you, it does nothing. *Be proud?* You want to say. *Of what? A killer?* But you don’t. You are *obedient*, and right now your family is happy, so of course, so must you be. A translucent ghost of a smile passes over your face, and you nod.



The twisted metal can is thrown across the dirty cobblestones, but today you do not run. You simply stare, your mind awash with the horrors of a bigger world. One of the redheaded twins grabs you by the arm and drags you away, away from the so-called danger. Your chest feels tight, your head pounding. *Be proud be proud be proud* is screaming in your head and you press your hands to your forehead, squinting your eyes shut. When you open them, the boy is staring at you expectantly.

“You’re my hero,” you’re supposed to say, “my knight in shining armor.” But today, you don’t. You stare at him in shock – *Be proud be proud be proud* – No.

A moment’s hesitation and you have already been forgotten: the

IO

WORSE GAMES
TO PLAY

silver can is flung through the air once more, but this time nobody turns to you.

You try to say that you are going home, but the word feels odd on your tongue, no longer familiar, but foreign, wrong. You scramble backwards until your back meets cold stone. A sudden desire to escape engulfs you, but there's nowhere to go. You sit and watch, frozen, because, after all, there are worse games to play.



IO

Out there, the city was getting ready to eat itself alive. I stroked his feathered coat, brilliantly coloured in mahoganies, purples and yellows. I glanced at the city below, ignited by the warm, comforting flow of fire in the streets. Sensing apprehension, he looked in my direction. His deep, blue eyes shone like sapphires. His head tilted back into my hand as I stroked him, expressing his affection. I lifted myself onto the broadest part of his back, gently straddling his muscular figure. "This isn't safe for you" I told him. With his wingbeats and steps synchronised, he used our elevation to his advantage and dropped off the perch.

First, there was panic. There's always panic. The buildings came closer, streets became wider and the madness that unfurled below became clearer. The realisation dawned on me that I was going to die a horrible, painful death. And then, he spread his wings. I screamed, almost certain that no one could hear me. Looking below, there were fires. There were clouds. There was a war. Way below, they started firing. The cracks burst through the streets, I could hear them all the way up in the air. I clasped onto his plumage in fear, as he abruptly plunged downwards, as if we had reached a place devoid of air. He let out a piercing screech and flung his head backwards as the iron arrow pierced his body. The sky started to tumble. Or was I the one tumbling? I was the one tumbling. I tried to get up, but putting pressure on my arm was a bad idea. My wrist had likely broken in the fall. I eagerly looked up at the sky as he barely escaped, susceptible to the iron. I remembered the city getting closer and closer, and hitting something. Then, my body realised I was in pain. Lots of pain. The impact had probably been somewhere around my stomach. I coughed up blood.

"The flying lady of Destronne," the Urchin Lord said. That was his name, he had taken great pains to inform me. "And what brings her highness to our humble street? What brought you swooping down with your majestic grace, to care for the poor and the mistreated?" He held a worn wooden ruler in his hand, and he raised my chin with its tip. Urchin Lord raised on hand, and the surrounding crowd fell silent again. He brought out a large iron stake, and handed it over to one of the Urchin children. The boy grinned from ear to ear as he accepted the stake in both hands, and held it reverentially. "I know about the phoenix Ada," the Urchin Lord taunted. Fear became a weight on my ribs and a dull ache in my eyes, an unwillingness for my mouth to lift past neutral. I used

IGNIS

ELINA ROUPAS

IO

to come to this spot each morning, right along these streets. I'd pass the clock tower and wait for the Phoenix to appear at dawn, singing a song so enchanting. It was here I learnt all about him; a symbol of renewal and resurrection. With the gift of immortality, a Phoenix would end its own life, blazing himself in his embers. Its only weakness, a weapon of iron make. For a moment, the world was a blur of dull colours, I had lost myself in nostalgia. Then, everything came into focus.

I wish it hadn't, for I found myself once more in emotional agony. Shackles were bound around his flanks and throat, chaining him to the hands of the Urchin children. The iron bonds raked against him, emitting the smell of burning flesh as the sound of pained howling filled my head. I threw myself into his wings, and he flinched as the Urchin children secured the shackles. His chest rose up to brush mine, before sinking down following the deflation of his lungs. His breaths were shuddered, catching in his throat as they breezed in and out of his body. His ribs stood out, curving down from his chest, unyielding even as his feathers stretched over them curved around them with his every intake of breath. I splayed my hand resting a finger on his forehead, skating up and down the sleek hardness of his bones. He rested his beautiful head against my heart, and a thick, pearly tear fell desolate from his eye. "Bring me the iron stake!" A deep ache settled into my chest, tugging at my heartstrings as I plucked a single feather from his chest. My body rested against his one last time. Soft, certain and comforting.

The earth blurred below me as I felt a surge of adrenaline. His cries muffled in the distance getting further and further with each ragged breath and stride I took. I stopped to watch from afar, and with a sing clap of his wings, he turned to ash. Immolation. His ash ignited in a magnificent golden fire, which became violently agitated spreading amongst the town. From the pyre, sprang a new phoenix. Which after embalming its father's ashes, flew towards the sun. I looked at my hand; the skin darkening and clasped the feather. A hush fell upon the clearing, dimming the traditions overflowing beyond the city. A single beat thrummed off into the unwavering, resolute silence. Placing the feather against my heart, it reminded me of hope. He showed me beyond the present defeat, beyond the moment of being cast down, and beyond the negativity of this city.



IO

White walls, white ceilings, white floors... everything as white as the soft, pale clouds on a clear morning. That's all that I ever saw, day in and day out... white. Even the doctors and nurses now wore white coats not like the ones who had spoken to me on the first day. Those doctors had vibrant vermilion coats and had told me that this place was for rehabilitation.

When I asked why I was here they simply said, "What's past is done, it's the future that matters." and there had been no more questions about it. I don't actually know why I'm here, I just can't seem to remember. All I know is my name, Sophie Rose Williams.

Ever since day one, I've felt lost and lonely. That was until I met Connor. My very first memory of him was when everyone was out playing in the grounds. I was scrambling up a massive oak tree with gnarled branches that reached out like arms. As I climbed higher and higher, the branches became thinner and weaker until one of them snapped beneath me. I plummeted about three metres to the ground. As I braced myself for the pain and agony that I knew would follow, two strong arms wrapped around my back and caught me.

After being set back on my feet, I whipped around to find out what had broke my fall. A tall boy who was about my age with curly, chestnut hair and deep blue eyes stood in front of me, shoulders slumped and nervously fiddling with his hands, "You fall like a leaf in winter, elegant and graceful" From then on we couldn't be separated.

Life had been simple until today. Usually we would follow a routine, moving along to our next activity like a train of ants along a footpath. Today, I woke up at seven o'clock, then I found Connor and we lined up in the hall to have the same bland breakfast that we get everyday, slopped into a our bowls. We proceeded to individual therapy, moving down the line towards the doctor's office as though it was a check-out at the supermarket. By the time my tedious session with Dr. Taylor was over, it was already lunch break. Connor and I were climbing our oak tree when from out of the blue he said, "I'm tired of this, I'm leaving this dreary place"

It startled me and I stared into his eyes to make sure he wasn't joking. "I can't take it anymore. Are you coming with me or not?" he looked hopeful.

"No, I have to find out why I'm here first and besides you don't

IMPRINT ON
YOUR SOUL

LILY TARRY-SMITH

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know what the world is like outside of here” I was thoroughly confused and couldn’t believe that he would ever question being here but as I was thinking this, he jumped down from the tree and hastily made his way to the perimeter. He was my best friend and I couldn’t just let him go out there on his own. It was now or never so I sprinted after Connor, “Hey, wait up! I’m coming with you!” I called to him.

“Hurry up then, slow coach” he smirked.

The situation escalated quickly and I was running so fast I could barely focus on what was in front of me, let alone the doctors who were now chasing us like a pack of wolves after they had seen us jump the prickly iron fence that surrounded the complex. They were gaining on us and I heard Connor shriek, “Run, Sophie, run!”

I heard that voice before. I collapsed on the ground, sinking into the damp forest floor. I looked up into the pale blue sky, the sun twinkling in the distance. The trees began swaying and their colours started to swirl, loop and collide in front of me sending sparks of blue, gold and purple into every corner of a room packed with people. Music was pounding through the walls and my head hurt and everyone was asking me questions,

“Sophie! What’s wrong?” “Are you okay?”. But then the kind, concerned faces became distorted and eyes bore down into me. The ground was shaking and I was spinning and spinning, like a tornado, down into the depths of the Earth, but it was when I hit the core that I heard the sirens. I was pulled back into reality, the whole room froze.

The silence extended further and further and nobody moved. The piercing “wee-wah” of sirens were getting louder when suddenly a shrill cry broke through the silence, “RUN!”. Everybody screamed and ran for the doors. Some tumbled out of the open windows but I didn’t move. It was like I was stuck to the ground. Men in blue and white uniforms flung themselves into the room and one yelled, “Nobody move!” He didn’t need to, I was the only person in the room and I couldn’t move a muscle even if I tried. The panic started to set in. One by one my muscles jolted and I fell limp to the ground with a thud like a sack of potatoes, hitting my head on the corner of a crystal clear, glass table.

“Sophie! Sophie get up!” Connor’s voice pulled me back into reality and my eyes locked with his deep blue twinkling ones.

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“Connor, I remember...” “What?” he questioned with his brows furrowed, looking down at me with concern. I breathed deeply, inhaling the sharp aroma of eucalyptus. Then sighed heavily and fluttered my eyes closed, “I remember you. You were there”



IMPRINT ON
YOUR SOUL

IO

THE FLIGHT OF
A PORCELAIN
PUPPET

Laura Tinney

Isabelle Carmody Award

For Creative Writing

Highly Commended

It started when the sun fell. Its brightness silenced our city and brought death with it. They did not intend to spare any life, and with its wrath it left shadows of darkness to remind us of its visit. There were walking ghosts, wailing children, skin falling off of people's bodies, pain seemed to ring eerily through the air and there was an overwhelming smell of ashes that infected every sense in the body. It seemed to be raining darkness, dust and dirt, the sun had fallen and night was following suit. Mum quickly hurried us all down to the water in an attempt to ease the burns that had formed on our skin. We were both so young. I was four years old and you were barely two, we would normally be so ignorant to our surroundings, living in our own little world, but children have an adept ability to understand fear and it was palpable in those moments. It was later realised that this new dawn was not the sun, it was an atomic weapon intended to destroy. A man in a suit halfway across the world dictated its release and with only a few words he threw our lives off balance and everything changed irrevocably.

The war ended, we were on the losing side. History's bias swings to those who succeed, they write the story. The world was buzzing with freedom and hope, whilst we suffered from the actions it took to reach it, our sacrifice disregarded.

No war has an innocent side. By the end, all hands surrender, covered in blood, no one is spared from the destruction. However after every fire, life can still be found.

One of mankind's best qualities is resilience and it took every ounce we had to regain order after treaties were signed and apologies were made. The only option was to move forward, and that's exactly what we did. You and I grew up under microscopes, studied in an attempt to understand the effects of radiation on those involved in the attacks. Though their inspections seemed distant, it felt constantly like we had strings attached to us, binds that were made all those years ago. We were treated as fragile and were constantly monitored. Slowly it felt like we became these weird concoctions of glass and strings and experiments, like little porcelain puppets. Control was never an epithet we got to call ours.

Although haunted by the past most people were able to continue leading their lives, and we did, until you hit 11 and bruises of different sizes and shapes started covering your lightly tanned skin, and yet they appeared without pain or cause.

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I remember we took you down to the nearest hospital. We had seen symptoms such as these in our community – they were never a good sign. It was winter, and the trees had been transformed from vibrant demonstrations of life, to bony creatures peering over the sidewalk.

You got a thrill from the busy streets, you said it made you feel alive. You were playing around, running in between people and ducking back to meet me. Your long charcoal hair was obediently following your ephemeral silhouette, and every few seconds it seemed, you turned and beckoned me to hurry up and join in. Your feet seemed to lift off of the ground. You reminded me of a bird, fleeting and beautiful, soaring across the grey pavement, effortless and free, a perfect contrast to the seas of people bound by jobs and duty. The sky seemed to echo the pavement and vice versa, each with an imitation of the kind of grey found within a storm's brooding cloud right before rain. But you played with all the endearing curiosity of a child, caught in a moment, rarely looking back and scarcely anticipating the future.

IO

A doctor's diagnosis can always be deduced from their eyebrows. Our doctor had knitted his together, lines of stress sat upon his forehead and his lips were pulled into a tight line almost trying to conceal his verdict. You had acute malignant lymph gland leukaemia, and had to be hospitalised with only one year left to live. After you were admitted as a patient to the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital we came to visit you for the first time. It felt strange to see your sanguine face trapped in such an institution, stuck in bed. I kept envisaging the freedom with which you had flown before we'd ever come to the doctor, and it felt like circumstance had clipped your wings. You smiled for us. Through all of your pain, you smiled, with barely a scintilla of fear, to help us feel better.

After two days you were moved to a different room where you gained a roommate, we brought you your favourite cherry blossoms as a room welcoming gift and you smiled as though it had teleported you somewhere else. It was your roommate who told you about the cranes. She claimed there was a legend in which whoever can fold one thousand origami cranes will be granted a wish. It was also this roommate who taught you how to make them. Your wish was obvious, to regain the life that was being taken from you.

THE FLIGHT OF
A PORCELAIN
PUPPET

It seemed lovely the time you spent creating them, putting blessings of your soul out into the world, as you were slowly being torn from it. It also gave you something to do. You found pleasure in finding myriads of paper you could use to create the paper cranes – lolly wrappers, sheet music, magazines. You reached your goal of 1,000 cranes and made a wish. But nothing changed. Even when your hope and innocence was shattered you continued to try. Time is a terrible guest, he leaves as briefly as he arrives. You were completely anaemic and our parents determinedly insisted you were to eat. You ordered tea on rice, the kind mum used to make at home when we had bad days. Whilst your body seemed to have slowly weakened, your eyes remained a vibrant hazel a defiance to the death that was forced into your body all those years ago when the sun fell. Your final words “its tasty” still ring in my head, your memories soars within my heart and your cranes resonate all around the world.

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It feels bizarre writing about you even though you're long gone. You'll never read the words I've strung together, a series of echoing syllables which you evoked in my head. It feels strange talking about you in past tense. You'll never feel the pain, answer the questions, learn my thoughts, understand what I wish I could say to you. To the carefree smile I could've sworn you gave me just yesterday. To the spot where I thought you were lying just a minute ago, but now all that remains is a gust of wind that's filled with dust to remind me how long you were actually gone for. That's the thing about leaving, a space remains. On that lamentable day that made our lives swerve over 80,000 people left this world with only space to remain and we were transformed into an empty country, yet even then that wasn't the end to our losses. You'll never know how many times I have spoken out to remind the world of what you died for, to attempt to revive that day of terror so others can understand what it is you and I went through, and the ineffable courage that you bore it all with, and most importantly why it can never happen again.

I want you to know I remember you. I remember your pain, your smiles, your love, your hopes, your wishes, your cranes and beyond.

I remember you in your entirety,

I miss you my dearest sister,

I miss you Sadako Sasaki



The sky was bright and blinding when I stepped out of the JFK airport. I felt numb as people pushed past me and an endless stream of cars flowed by. My grandfather was waiting for me dressed in a dark grey fleece and sandals that reminded me of my mother's daggy fashion sense. He did not look like the man I'd seen in my mother's photos. A man flushed with youth, strong and tall with hair like flames.

He held out his hand. It was bony and rough, freckled skin sagging, thick blue veins bulging out of the backs of his hands. I shook it. Despite his frail appearance, his grip was strong and unshakeable. I couldn't remember how to talk.

To my eyes, accustomed to years of drought and murky brown waters, it seemed more like an ocean than a river. I could not see the other side. Blocking my view were countless pink-grey granite islands engulfed in trees. The water seemed to stretch out forever, following the curve of the earth to the horizon.

My mother thought that the change in scenery would do me good. I thought I was past being helped. I didn't voice that particular opinion.

"How far away is the cottage?" I yelled, struggling to make my voice audible over the churning of the engine and the rush of the wind. My eyes stung.

"Not too far," he yelled back. He stood, hunched over the steering wheel in his old age, his face twisted into a smile. I was clueless when it came to boats, but I knew we were going fast. We were quickly overtaking all the other boats around us. My hands tightened around the railing as the boat jerked and jolted over the waves, its tip rising and falling, sending drops of crystal clear water spraying everywhere. We were going so fast I could barely register the shape of the islands passing us by. My head swam, not like when I was back at home, lying facedown on my bed and feeling so miserable I couldn't feel anything at all, but like I was at last alive to feel my heart threatening to break free from my chest. A blue and white speedboat veered around the corner, red and blue lights flashing.

The policeman flagged us down. A worm of fear tunnelled itself into my heart. Grandfather slowed the boat to a stop.

"Anchor your boat!" the policeman called out as he steered his boat beside us.



“Carver,” he said, “if I catch you speeding one more time I’m going to have to take your boat.”

Grandfather stared impassively at the police officer. “I was barely going fast at all!” He sounded insulted, almost petulant.

The police officer sighed. I got the feeling that this was not the first time Grandfather had been in trouble.

Now I could see why I hadn’t seen this man since I was a baby.

We’d been on a boat, my family and I and my mother’s friends. It was dark, so dark that the night settled upon us like a blanket with only the faint shine of the stars a universe away to guide us in our blindness. So dark that we didn’t see grandfather coming, speeding towards us on his boat. In that moment we were his prey, his targets, faceless, unseeable objects on the floor of the world, far, far below him.

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It probably didn’t happen that way. I’m only reconstructing the stories my parents told me, filling the gaps they left with an image of a man who resembles my Grandfather.

I remember: two weeks before my Mother sentenced me to a month with relatives I’d never met in some far off corner of the United States, I was standing at the farthest tip of a cove. I had jumped from rock to rock until I was thigh deep in cold water and had no more rocks to jump to. Before me the shallow shelf gave way to the dark blue depths. Skin sheathed in goose-bumps, I was shivering. The expanse of the sea stretched out before me, vast and imposing, and I felt impossibly small. I wanted to yell: *Is this it?* But the numbness in my stomach had spread all over my body like a lake freezing over, my words blocked by an impenetrable wall of ice.

Now here: Saint Lawrence where the water was perfectly wild. The wind swept the water up and down into mountains peaked by white foam and dark valleys that swelled and swallowed. The canoe’s seat dug into my back and my nose was pink and sore from sunburn, yet I still felt cold.

Chip was one of my younger cousins, with a warm smile, broad shoulders and bright orange hair. In truth, I did not know how exactly I was related to him, he could have been my brother and I would have still looked at him as if he was a stranger. Chip had insisted in taking me out canoeing. I had hesitantly agreed, not wanting to stay another day being introduced to the seemingly

endless stream of distant relatives. How they all managed to end up on the same island in the middle of nowhere at exactly the same time, I did not know.

I jumped up onto the dry wood of the dock and pulled the canoe in, wrapping the yellow rope around and over the cleat.

“What do we do with the paddles?” I asked.

“Just leave them on the dock,” Chip shrugged.

I stepped into my flip flops, wrapped a towel around my waist and started up the dock, past the boat shed, towards the rusted ladder up to dry land.

“Stop!”

I froze. Chip tensed. Grandfather stormed out of the boat shed, shoulders squared and face tight.

“What are you doing!” he barked, picking up the paddles, brandishing them like a weapon.

“What do you think you are doing?!”

I turned away from the ladder.

“Listen here,” he said, voice quick and sharp like gunfire. “Listen here. You have to look after your equipment.” Each word was punctuated by a violent hand gesture. “Your equipment could be the difference between life and death.”

There was something hungry in his watery blue eyes. I couldn't speak.

“Put things away when you use them damn it. How long have you lived here, Chip? How long?”

Chip opened his mouth. Then closed it.

“Get out of my sight!”

We hurried back up onto the grass. The ground stabilised beneath me. When I looked back he was staring sightlessly into the water, cradling the paddles against his chest like a new born baby.



Here's what my Mother told me: hundreds and hundreds of years ago my forefather stepped onto a ship and sailed towards a unknown world. That man, whose name my mother abandoned upon marrying, married and had children, and those children had children. And so on and so forth, the family tree twisted downwards, thick, gnarled and branching, anchoring itself into the land.

On Sunday morning everyone went down to an old wooden Protestant church overlooking the water, surrounded by oak trees



with rough, knotted bark and broad green leaves. But I had not been raised a Protestant, nor in any sort of religion for that matter, and I did not feel any sudden inclination to become one.

I did not get up until late morning, when my desire to lie still and do nothing was overcome by the grumbling of my stomach.

Grandfather was standing by the sink, rinsing a sponge. The pile of dirty dishes that I'd seen when I'd gotten up in the middle of the night to get a drink was gone. Not a crumb was on the floor. I stood next to him and poured myself a glass of water. The glass was cool against my fingers.

"Aren't you going to church?"

"Why would I do that?" He frowned as he wiped down the bench top. "God's never saved me."

The white marble twinkled in the soft morning sunlight.

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know anything. "I thought it was the thing to do around here."

Grandfather snorted.

The foil wrapper of my medication crinkled and I popped two pills into my mouth and swallowed them. Grandfather gave me quick sidelong glance. He didn't say anything.

"I'm going to the airfield," he said, "Want to go for a spin?"

I stared at him.

"You can still fly?" My words were stiff in my mouth.

His smile stretched to his eyes.

"Like they can stop me."

I looked out the window of the plane; Lake Ontario was below us, deep, dark and ancient. Blue above us, blue below us. There was a careful energy in Grandfather's movements as he fiddled with the controls. The plane was an antique Cessna A-37 Dragonfly; Grandfather's pride and joy. The great engine of the beast hummed and throbbed beneath me. Something rattled near my ear and the thick straps of my seat belt dug into my chest.

I wanted to ask him about the war. I knew nothing about the Vietnam war. History wasn't something that I'd ever enjoyed, nor paid attention to in school. He'd killed people. I knew that. He'd killed people without ever seeing their faces, without ever knowing how they lived, where they died. He'd spent more time waiting on the edge of his seat, everything perfectly in order and ready to go, the taste of blood on his lips, his heart thumping in anticipation of

II

the next chance to measure himself against his own demise.

I looked at him. He looked like an eagle, circling above the earth, searching for his next meal.

The plane banked, and my vision was filled with perfect blueness. I screamed. Grandfather was laughing, great hearty laughs that shook his entire being. He whooped, and soared upwards, higher and higher, and then dove abruptly downwards. Something inside of me thawed, and I screamed again, not with fear, but exhilaration. Again we soared up, towards the sun. My stomach tied itself into knots. Would we crash? Would the steel wings keeping us afloat fail? Would the next moment be our last? The countless dials filling up the dashboard spun out of control. Grandfather nudged the joysticks. We were falling.

In the split second we were hanging upside down, suspended in the middle of the sky by a giant metal bird. I looked down upon the world, all of it, all at once. I could see where Lake Erie emptied its guts into Lake Ontario, and close by, the faint lights and metallic spires of Toronto. And if I looked west I'd see where the family tree had taken root, fed by the waters of the Saint Lawrence, its broad canopy sheltering the growth of future generations. And further, out of sight but not out of reach, the airborne battlefield of Vietnam. Reflected in my grandfather's eyes was the impenetrable canopy of the jungles beneath a black sky filled with faintly flickering lights of mechanical dragonflies. To the soldiers below it must have looked like the very stars were falling. And fall they did, plucked from the sky, the burnt out shells of fallen angels.

Here's a man who was never meant to die old and wingless. He wasn't made to sit patiently, watching his body decay before him. He should have died in the heat of battle, gone out with bang, with his heart in his throat and his blood flooding through his veins, eyes focused on an imperceptible point far beneath him.

I looked at my Grandfather, really looked at the whole of him and then looked at my hands. They were clenched tightly around the edge of my seat. I let go.

Something within me unthawed, like it was finally the end of a long winter, and burst free. The white, hot center of my own mortality burnt through my veins and I could finally breathe long enough for the world at the periphery of my vision to come back into focus, perfectly sharp and deathly beautiful.



A STAR TO KEEP

RACHELLE
PAPANTUONO

'Twinkle twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high...' Mother chimed. Every morning I hear this same tune with its insistent, unrelenting rhythm and a silent plea to be remembered. Perhaps mother wants to imprint the song on me, so that I can teach my children as she has done for me. But I dismiss such thoughts; work must be done. I remove the blanket from above me and put on sandals. I scamper to the kitchen to make breakfast for my father, one of the few household duties I still complete. I no longer spend hours upon hours of wringing piles of clothes and scrubbing floors clean. He does not know. And I pray to Allah he will never find out.

The eggs, tomatoes and bell-peppers shriek at each other in the frying pan whilst father enters wearing his knee-length shirt and loose trousers. Mother is out the back soaking garments with her withered yet skilful hands. It is given knowledge that the women should do the housework and the men earn the money. I do not object, because why would anyone listen to an uneducated girl? I hand over father's breakfast and prepare to leave. It is only after father leaves that I am able to go. I head to my room to change and fold dry clothes to lessen the workload for mother. The door opens and then swiftly closes. I am free to go.

The burqa shields my body. However, it is not only to cover myself from men, it hides what I may be carrying underneath. I tread along the coarse road whilst my neighbour strides alongside me. The heat is blistering and stifling, the sun burns as if it is trying to hinder my travels. I am banned to walk the streets without a male accompanying me, all women are restricted. A traditional mud-brick house appears into sight, with its non-existent roof and cream colouring. My heart races, I feel a mix of excitement or fear; I am not sure. It was mother's idea. The whisperings only between women had reached her, and she had grasped the opportunity. It's prohibited to venture to school in my area. Mother says even if there were schools the extremists would burn them down. I reach the front step, knock twice and enter. The interior is as bare as the façade but I do not care. More than ten other girls are scattered on the floor, with books sprawled around them. Pens and papers litter the ground. As I watch, eager, feverous eyes look back at me. I grab my supplies from underneath my burqa and add them to the enticing collection below. Our teacher Fazela was once a proper

I I

teacher, but now must educate secretly away from the suspicious eyes outside.

I see numbers scrawled across papers and ink mingles with the creamy coloured paper. Fazela is adept and does her best to empower us by teaching biology, chemistry, English and cooking. 'Girls, grab those able minds and let's put them to good use' she announces as she sits on the floor next to us. 'We know how to solve for one unknown, now let's try solving for two. They call these problems quadratic equations. Relating a problem with real life and linking the two together are key in this process. We'll attempt question 2 together...' and we get lost into the problem in a world where we cannot be lost.

'Arezu, what does this question mean?' A young girl asks me, eyes wide but lacking the innocence that should be present.

'Pretend you have buckets of washing. If you had one bucket and then another bucket, how many buckets would you have in total?' I propose.

'Why of course two,' she responds, skin gathering at her forehead.

'So what if you needed to wash 4 clothes in each bucket. How many would need to be washed?' I ask the girl.

'Eight,' she quickly replies.

'Good! So think in terms of the number of buckets and the number of clothes in each bucket to help you multiply,' I suggest. She nods slowly whilst her eyes narrow and her head returns back to the problem. Fazela beams at me across the room.

A knock echoes through the house and our words are suspended in the air. Our pens ache to be used again, our fingers twitch. Fazela is the first to move, motioning with her hands that we must go to the farthest room – her husband's bedroom. A light flickers. Hastily, we detach ourselves off the floor as Fazela nears the door. All it takes is one misplaced sound before shots will fire. We tiptoe to the bedroom and wait. If it's the Taliban, Fazela will sneeze. From day one she had made this clear because she knows teaching girls will mean death. Muffled and indistinguishable words travel down the hallway. I scan the bedroom, for any means of cover. There is only a bed and an overstuffed wardrobe which would never fit us all. We surrender to the ground to kneel and pray to Allah that they won't find us.

The padding of feet becomes louder as they near us. They're



coming inside—they don't need permission. A sneeze comes, however not from Fazela, from the man. His talking is disrupted by an uncontrollable chuckle. A yelp tears through our unyielding prayers which could only come from one person, Fazela. Sounds ricochet off the walls: wails of defeat, scraping and pulling across the floor and whimpers of pain. We close our eyes and wait, waiting as another celestial thing is ripped straight from our beating hearts.

I never saw her again. My neighbour arrives and takes me home. He is aware of the teaching but will not spread a word as he is one of the few men who feel reduced because of the Taliban. Once I arrive, I assemble ingredients to cook for tonight's meal before father returns. My mother wearily smiles at me as I pretend to have been in this house all along. As any other day, I do, because I must, if not for me then for my mother. Like the other mothers, she must do double the work so that we may go unnoticed, so that we may learn. So I hide under my burqa and hope father does not see any glint of uncertainty; not today, and not tomorrow.

II

I watch the transition from day to night as often as possible. The clouds look as if they are cardboard pieces carefully thrown into a fire. The edges are tinged with smouldering light and embers root themselves deeper into the cloud. The darkness lurks around the corners of the burning light and abruptly claims the sky. Stars glimmer with the hope of what we can achieve. It seems we are never scared of the darkness itself, but of the possible things that may manifest due to its presence. They're not afraid of the knowledge, they're afraid of what we may become when we have it. They shudder at the choices, the possibilities. Let there be more stars as we teach ourselves, so that when we look at the night sky we do not see darkness, we see light. So that we are no longer scared of it being dark, as we are no longer scared of the unknown. I name my star Arezu. Let it be a beacon and guide for our children. Let me shine brightly and pass on my teaching as Fazela has shown me. Let me twinkle like a star. I peel off my burqa and it falls to the ground. I will not be scared.



Dust billowed off the box as I pulled the resisting top flaps open. I reached in, running my fingers through the array of materials before grasping a soft pink sweater adorned with blue hearts. I brought it to my nose, inhaling its aroma. Dust gathered in my passages and I coughed violently, attempting to expel it.

It did not smell like her anymore.

I heard Corey's car door slam and I cringed, bracing myself for the verbal assault I was sure to face. My bedroom door slammed deafeningly against the wall.

'Grace! How could you!'

'I—'

'No, I don't want to hear your pathetic excuses! I really, really liked him and you chased him away. What kind of sister even does that?' Elaine crossed her arms, her steely gaze resting on me as her heeled boot tapped incessantly on the floor.

'He was a jerk!' I crossed my own arms, mirroring my sister's stance. Legs apart. Chin raised.

'But I love him.'

'No you don't.'

'You don't even know what love is.' Elaine seethed.

'I love you, don't I?'

I glanced reproachfully from the box of chocolates to the stark white door. The strong scent of antiseptic assaulted my nose. The screeching of stretchers and hushed conversations echoed around me. I let out a shaky breath.

'Grace I can hear your heavy breathing through the door. Stop dawdling and get in here.'

I let out a soft laugh before carefully pushing the door open.

'I didn't want to scare you with how gruesome I look,' I murmured, forcefully stretching my thin lips into a smile. By the dulling of her emerald eyes I could tell it was too wide to seem natural.

'Well it's too late for that. I can see that horrid looking pimple on your chin, are you sure it's not alive?'

I gasped, sending Elaine an icy look before throwing the box of chocolates at her. I regretted it immediately. Elaine winced as the box hit her stomach.

MISCELLANY

ROSHICA

PONNAMPALAM

ISOBELLE CARMODY AWARD

FOR CREATIVE WRITING

WINNER



'Oh God, I'm so sorry!' I rushed over to the white bed, bending over my sister's frail frame as I frantically ran my hands over her stomach, 'are you okay? Do you need me to get a doct—'

'I'm fine, stop it,' Elaine weakly pushed my hands away.

'No really, if you're in pain you need to tell me. I—'

'Stop! Stop tiptoeing around me like I'm some sort of freak' I froze as Elaine squeezed her eyes shut, deep ridges forming along her pasty forehead. The dark bags around her eyes deepened as she opened her eyes and gazed wistfully out the window, 'can we just pretend I'm not sick... just for today.'



A loud groan reverberated around the living room as I lay, unmoving on the carpeted floor. I rested my hands on my protruding belly as I felt another bout of queasiness consume me.

'Elaine,' I wheezed out, hearing a muffled grunt in response, 'I think I'm going to puke.'



A few moments of silence passed as I felt the numerous types of junk food protest against each other in my stomach. Elaine was curled up in a foetal position, her arm extended out with a half-eaten stick of liquorice sitting in her open palm. She reluctantly lifted her head to look at me.

'Please don't do it on mum's Persian rug.'



Mum and dad gave Elaine a reassuring look before closing her bedroom door softly. I could tell something was wrong. For one, mum and dad were almost never civil to each other, let alone comforting. I held my breath, trying to make eye-contact with my sister who was blatantly avoiding my gaze.

'What is it?' My words cut through the silence. Elaine shifted. *A breath in, a breath out.* A car door slammed. *A breath in, a breath out.* I scratched my neck. *A breath in—*

'I'm sick, Grace.'

A breath out.

'Sick as in with the flu? I'm sure you can get better if you go to the doctor or take some medicine—'

'No, really sick,' Elaine looked away, her jaw clenching momentarily, 'I've been going to the doctor for months. I'm not getting any better.'

II

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because you're only twelve.'

A breath in—

'I can help you. I'll give you whatever you need. I'll be your keeper, like in that movie. I can save you, Elaine. I can save you.'

And then I saw my big sister, the person I had looked up to for my entire life, completely unravel before my eyes. Elaine let out a strangled sob, her hand flying to her mouth as she attempted to hold herself together. Her frail body trembled with the force of her muffled, broken cries. I could hear the blood rushing through my ears as I knelt next to her and gathered what little was left of her into my arms and rocked her back and forth.

She cried harder, her body shuddering as air refused to enter her lungs. Our tears fell together in a shower of grief as I clutched her closer to me, trying to hold on to the one thing that was destined to leave me.

'You can't save me,' she whimpered, 'it's too late.'

A breath out.



'Grace! Get off me!'

A sweaty hand settled on my face as I was shoved off my sister's bed, landing on the floor with a dull thud. Elaine looked down at me with a murderous expression.

'It's like one-hundred degrees. You can't sleep in my bed tonight, it's too hot.'

'But I can't sleep on my own,' I whined 'you're the one who made me watch that stupid horror movie.'

'Not my fault you're a wuss,' I glared at Elaine's smug face before getting up and trudging slowly towards the door. Chills crept up my spine as I stared out into the eerily dark corridor. The fear of what was out there started to clutch at my throat: monsters, murderers, creepy one-eyed dolls who carried out their vengeance at night.

A disgruntled sigh echoed behind me.

'Ugh Grace, fine,' I spun around, sending my sister a grateful look. She rolled her eyes, edging closer to the end of the bed and patting the empty space beside her.

'And then they all lived happily ever after. The end.' I shut the book with a resounding thump and looked to my sister who was gazing back at me with her lips slightly upturned at the sides.

'You just made up that ending, didn't you?'

I sheepishly looked down, picking at the faded blue blanket thrown lazily over the bed, 'maybe.'

Elaine's soft laughter was cut off by a violent fit of coughs that wracked her body. I leaned over, rubbing her back and pushing the hair from her wig away from her face. Her skin was almost transparent under the harsh hospital lights and her lips were dry and cracked. It was clear to see that cancer had taken my sister hostage.

'You should go home and have a shower, you stink,' Elaine wheezed out.

I had given up arguing with her. I nodded, reluctantly getting off the bed and moving towards the door.

'Hey, Grace,'

I turned around, 'yeah?'

'Please drive safely.'

'I will.'

That was the last time I ever spoke to my sister.



We lay on the trampoline, side by side, gazing up at the misty clouds drifting by.

'I wish we could live forever,' I muttered.

'Me too,' whispered Elaine, 'me too.'



That is how I remember Elaine. Not in an ordered way, or with the good separated from the bad. I remember her just as she was; a jumble of colours and emotions and words. That is how I remember my sister.



II

I was in the zone. Level 3, addition, 23 seconds on the clock. It was another intense game of mathletics – firing through the questions, smashing Craig T, age 6, Craigieburn Primary School. As I was whipping through the answers, I got to 9+10, and it got me thinking. Would my tireless, carefully, scheduled Mathletics study sessions, earn me a pass in my Methods exam.

The assumption that the use of technology is fundamental for excellence in academia is a lie. Despite being the primary leader in the world for technology in schools, Australia does not compare with our global counterparts in terms of results. Furthermore, our reliance on gadgets hinder our ability to comprehend information and have staggering long term implications on our ability to learn. Not to mention, the destructive impact it is having on social skills and communication.

We must move away from the idea that frequent use of technology is a necessary element in education. OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) a forum made up of a collection of the world's most developed countries, released a report stating that based on tests undertaken in 70 of these different countries, those that had heavily invested into technology, in the areas of reading, mathematics and science have seen “no noticeable improvement” in performance.

Australia is a country, that thanks to the Rudd, Gillard, Rudd, governments, has invested a whopping 2.4 billion dollars, ensuring that as many children as possible have a laptop in their school bag. For every 1000 computers, there are 900 Australian students. We have been programmed to believe that our computers are the be all and end all of our educational lives. Ironically, despite an abundance of these technological gadgets in our schools, Australia is ranked well behind Singapore, who with very moderate levels of technological use in education still beat us in terms of digital skills.

Let's have a look at one of the highest-achieving countries in the world. You guessed it, Finland. Where there are 1000 Finnish computers to 5000 Finnish students, even with this ratio they academically put us to shame. The truth is, that they don't even need to be in the Mathletics hall of fame, to outperform us.

The distraction that technology provides can have a negative impact on one's learning capacity. From the moment we log into our computers, we're taking in and sifting through an incredible

TECHNOLOGY
IS DOING MORE
HARM THAN
GOOD IN OUR
SCHOOLS

MEREDITH RULE
SUZANNE NORTHEY PUBLIC
SPEAKING AWARD
WINNER



amount of information.

Now, yes, we are the first generation to be exposed to this overwhelming access to information made available by computers. But, it is damaging our capacity to learn. Due to this overload, we seem to have lost our capacity to retain our focus on one particular task. In fact, a study conducted by psychologist Dr Larry Rosen, observed that students, when told to study something important, lost focus after a solid three minutes. After all, contrary to previous belief, studying is nowadays defined by watching tv, social networking and eating with an open textbook nearby.

Dr David Meyer, psychology professor, University of Michigan, urges that “under most conditions the brain simply cannot do two complex tasks at the same time.” The prefrontal cortex of our brain, responsible for higher order thinking and complex cognitive processes, is placed under enormous pressure when one is both studying and distracted by technology. Technology is impairing some of our most basic human functions. By providing our students with a distractive outlet, a computer, we are diminishing their ability to retain and recall information, when it comes to being tested.

Us, Australian students are said to be spending around seven and a half hours, the length of an entire school day, everyday of the week on devices. It is no wonder that, the Finnish cohort, with only around a quarter of them using computers more than once a week, are out-performing us.

Whilst our technology enables us to reach others at the touch of a button, it is threatening our interactions and emotional responses. Eating us from the inside, causing anxiety, stress, and uncontrollable sweating.

24% percent of teenagers admit that they are suffering from a fatal condition known as FOMO. Fear of missing out. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, the list goes on. We are too preoccupied with our screens, obsessively comparing ourselves to other people’s lives and achievements, an overwhelming percentage of us feel bad when posted selfies don’t get enough likes. Is this what have become? Why are we letting these networks dictate how we feel? Furthermore, why are we letting the screens dominate our lives? Recess, lunchtimes from the beginning. Prep to 6, it was Club Penguin, Year 7 it was Slenderman, Year 8, Icy Towers, Year 9, 2048, Year 10, Tetris, Year 11, Slithero.

What will it be in Year 12, our last year, possibly the very last



times we will see each other. Scientists are worried that we will never be able to develop the same social skills, because of these distractions. We all sit in groups, failing to look each other in the eye, devoting our attention to our screens in hand. A facial expression can say so much. We are being dehumanised by this excess of technology: we are on the path to losing how to read mood, body language, feelings, how to be patient, knowing when to force or express something. Technology is jeopardizing some of the most important foundations of our humanity.

Our devices are causing more harm than good in our schools. Despite previous belief, technology has no correlation with academic success in primary and secondary education. It does, however negatively impact the way in which we learn and comprehend information. It succeeds in dehumanizing us, distracting us, creating a social divide between us.



TECHNOLOGY
IS DOING MORE
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II

MINOR MAJOR

STELLA SKOULLOS

The song was due this coming Monday. I had two days to compose a song about strength and vitality. I had no idea what to do. “Working hard is a mindset”, my father would always profess as he sent me to do my schoolwork. I thought of that now as I gazed, blankly, at an empty document on my computer. It was a phrase my grandfather would always tell my dad in his thick, migrant Italian accent. I lifted my face from the blank document and drifted towards the kitchen. *Thump*, I heard as I tripped over my clothes on the floor. *Ting*, I heard as I threw ice cubes into my glass. My forefathers have been known for their strong work ethic, but personally, procrastination was my greatest talent.

If you asked me why I was doing this music composition course, I would tell you that I grew incredibly bored after my three gap years travelling the world, and I decided to return to Melbourne in an attempt to ground myself once again. I enjoyed going into the city for class, but I detested the work that they assigned us; I just didn’t find it relevant to me. I sat back down at my desk after hours of Netflix and nothingness. “Who in the world am I going to write about?” I pondered over and over again as my eyes surveyed the room. My flat was grotesquely decorated in unwashed clothes, glasses, crumpled up paper and the odd instrument. I had speakers scattered across all the walls and there was always music, endless playlists of blues artists, jazz artists, everything.

Several moments later, I decided on my grandfather, Luciano. An image of strength, his proverbs guided me throughout my childhood. Now, I only follow a lonely few. He was born during the Great Depression in Florence, Italy. The World War had left Italy broke and weak. At just eleven, his father was sent off to the Second World War and his mother, after his father left, died giving birth to his third little brother. Nono doesn’t like to talk about his childhood much, but when he does he mentions his mother and his fond memories of her, while wearing a soft smile. I picked up my guitar and began to experiment with the chord structure. I began with mostly major chords, but something was telling me I needed to use minor chords instead.

The remainder of that day was spent in deep concentration; I hadn’t concentrated like that in years. It felt good. I heard the rustle and occasional beeping of cars outside my flat. Winter was ending slowly but surely, and the leaves of the trees were being revived by

I I

the promise of the approaching spring. I finished the song, exhaled a mighty breath, and rushed to put my jacket on. I was going to visit my grandfather to show him what I had created.

It always struck me how everything seemed larger in scale in the city. As I stopped my black Jeep at the corner of Collins Street and William Street, I glanced up at the mighty skyscrapers with tenderness in my heart. The city has always made me feel as if anything was possible, and I admired their colossal figures around me as the generations before me had surely done, with hopeful eyes. Everyone in the city had something to do, somewhere to go, someone to be. Women and men in suits bustled about purposefully and you could hear the bells of trams, the zooming of cars and faint conversations, lost in all the noise. The green light appeared in front of me and I pushed my accelerator pedal down.

Another red light stopped me at the Warrigal Road exit off the Monash freeway. This time there were no skyscrapers, just a wide road, and some houses and trees. I had arrived in suburbia, the place that many migrant workers had return to after a long day's work, to rest and to reap the rewards of their hard work. I glanced around at the figures beside me in their cars. To my left, an elderly man sat in the driver's seat wearing a grey cloth cap with a younger female passenger. I imagined the conversations they could be having. I imagined their names and that they were father and daughter. I imagined the girl's doubt in her father's ability to drive her safely. I imagined that when she would try to instruct him, he would quickly remind her that he had been driving longer than she had been breathing. The light turned green again and I drove on, barely ten minutes away from showing my grandfather my composition. He would be pleased with me. Surely.

As I drove into his driveway, a wave of hesitation swept through my mind. Is my song sad enough? Does it truly capture the struggle that my grandfather endured? One last play of the song erased any doubt and I stepped out into the cold air towards his front door.

Nono built this house himself. Well, that's what dad always told me. It was a weathered yet sturdy house of timber and red brick, encircled by a white picket fence. I knocked on the front door and was soon welcomed by the same thing, a weathered yet sturdy old man, with a smile of white and gold. "Donatello! Come stai?" My friends called me Don but my grandfather insisted on referring to



me as my full name.

“Bene, Nono, bene”, I responded in my futile Australian attempt at an Italian accent.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming. I would have prepared some lunch for you”, he said in his thick Italian accent as we walked into the kitchen.

“No, I’m not hungry. I ate before I came”. This was a lie, but I recognised that a full stomach is of utmost importance to the native southern European. He would feed me anyway, and brought me one of his famous cappuccino. Surely enough, as I sat down on the kitchen bench he brought out a plate of cold pasta that Nona had made the night before and placed it in front of me.

“Nono, I really can’t I’m not hun—”

“Nonsense, nonsense, eat, my boy”, he said as he squeezed my cheek with hands as tough as sandpaper. I was 22 years of age and he still squeezed my cheek.

II

During the sixties, Australian authorities swept through Europe, enlisting anyone who wanted to come to Australia by offering to pay for their ship ticket and for their accommodation when they arrived in Australia. A young Luciano was attracted by the promise of this new great nation, and left his home country with nothing but the clothes on his back and his family. He is a hard worker, they all were, all the immigrants all their lives knew nothing but persistence; those who did not work hard simply did not survive. This incredible work ethic remained with him all of his life, and it was his hard work and vitality that has allowed me and the rest of his descendants to live comfortable lives where we don’t have to wonder whether or not there’s going to be food on the table tonight.

“I have something to show you”, I said as he sat down. “I wrote a song about you and your life”.

“My life?” he looked at me, perplexed. I nodded as I reached into my backpack and grabbed my speaker. Perhaps he didn’t see his life as anything worth writing about. For some unknown reason, I felt nervous and uneasy. I pressed play. The song ended and Nono let out a warm smile. He looked at me admirably and said “Donatello, it is wonderful. Good job, good job...” I sighed in relief. Like the ice in my glass, the smile on his face dissolved. “It’s just...” I inhaled nervously yet again. “Why is it so sad if it’s about my life? My life has been happy, maybe sometimes hard, but no sad, this too sad”. I

frowned at his poor English and the statement that came with it, but I contained my confusion and continued to drink my Italian coffee. With the television blaring in the background and my Nono engrossed in a deplorable Italian soap opera, I left his house. I got back into my Jeep and began the journey back to my flat.

‘These skyscrapers would have been half the height that they are now when Nono arrived here’, I thought as I drove back through the city. I set my eyes upon one skyscraper in particular and thought about the difference between the view from the second floor of that building as oppose from the view from the twentieth floor. Perspective changes everything. The twentieth floor and the second floor are facing the same busy street, but the shimmering sun looks brighter and the earth looks smaller from up higher. The immense glow of the sun almost blinded me as I pulled into my driveway.

I rushed upstairs and played it again, to listen out for what I had done wrong. The melancholy minor piano chords paired with the sombre strings elicited feelings of sorrow and hardship, after all that was the heart and soul of the song. If Nono didn’t like the song, perhaps it could have been the melancholic ambience that pervaded the composition that discouraged him. The song was due in two days, and I knew I couldn’t hand in a song that Nono disliked. I kept the strings score the same, but altered the central chords from minor to major. I rose and looked outside my window. I again pondered how different the view from my window was in comparison to my view from the ground floor. On the ground floor the dark trees canopied over my head, but from my window, I could see above the trees and I could see the city in the distance.

Perspective changes everything.



THE WEIGHT
OF THE COAT,
THE WEIGHT
OF THE HEART

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FOR CREATIVE WRITING
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II

“Are you leaving yet?”

Despite her wording, Ma meant no hostility. She wanted me to deny it. She wanted me to stay.

“Yeah. I leave at dawn.” In the pitch-blackness of the shabby little two-room house made up of timber and red mud bricks, a bright lotus blossomed. Ma had lit a candle. The scent overpowering the smell of rice from last night’s dinner and rotting cabbages stored in the cupboard.

I open the white and yellow daisy-patterned curtains that cover the only window in the house, it is still dark outside. There are no stars. The peach trees are scraping their branches against the house as they cower from the fierce wind. What meagre fruit they produced would surely fall off and be squished.

I find my uniform, made of a far smoother material than Ma and I could afford, placing the cap with the bright red star proudly onto my head. The khaki jacket was still missing my name and blood type.

“Ma, where’s the thread and needle?”

“I’ll get it.” Her voice rasps. She never wanted me to grow up, or enter the war. Oldest Brother had died in the war, right after his marriage. Oldest Sister and Second Sister had died in childbirth. I was the only one left. And when the first crack of light appears in the sky, I’ll have to leave.

Ma doesn’t know I’m going to the front line. She doesn’t know I’ll truly be fighting, with the risk of losing my life every second, with my heart beating faster than I can count.

“Here.” The small container of our needles and threads is shoved into my hand. I pick out the red thread, easy it tentatively through the needle, pricking my finger in the process.

I lick and suck on my bleeding finger, hoping Ma didn’t see the blood. It’s too late though, there are tears shining in her dark eyes.

“I’m fine, Ma.”

“What do you need the thread for? Let me do it.”

My hands don’t budge.

She reaches forward and takes the needle gingerly with her steady hands, then pries my fingers off the coat.

“Ma, I’m a grown man. I can do this.”

“Let me.”

She sits down at the small table that couldn’t fit more than four people. “What do I sew on here?”

I find our accounts book, the only book with the only paper in the house, and write my name and the English letter 'A'.

Ma doesn't read or write, but she can copy anything. She's good at sewing and stitching; she can do flowers for embroidery. Her eyesight hasn't faded enough yet for her work to suffer.

Everyday, our lives rotated around food and work. A happy man was a man well fed. Ma worked at home, I worked in under the blazing sun in the fields.

And then the revolution began and formerly *rich, stupid, greedy* aristocracy were being sent to work in the fields, and *pure, strong, good-hearted* country folk like myself were engaging in the war.

Ma had finished the second character of my name. She always said my name was the best name out of us four kids in the family. Mine meant I was loyal, that I obeyed my filial duty.

Not anymore.

"Fourth," Ma called me by my nickname, as the fourth child. "Where are you going?" The name meant so much more than what it sounded like. It wasn't just a number.

"I'll be in the city, Ma."

"That's not true, is it?" Her voice was soft, thick with emotion, but not condescending in anyway. She sounded old, she sounded like a mother.

"No." I rasp out.

"Are you going to the front line?"

"No." I deny it, but only confirmed it with my lightning fast response. Ma had beat lies out of me from a very young age. Good men don't lie. The lie tasted foreign and acidic on my tongue.

"When I was helping your Pa get ready for the front line, I sewed the same funny triangle on his coat."

"Ma, I..." What would I say? I couldn't tell another lie. But I couldn't hurt Ma any more.

"Don't apologise. You do what is good for the people; you do what Chairman Mao wants you to do. You make me proud."

"I will make you proud, Ma."

Her lips move, barely, not enough for clear sounds to escape, but I had a feeling she said: "You already have."

Something blossomed in my heart, just as light blossomed at the edge of the sky.

I hugged Ma, in the dim light and warm orange glow of the candle. We didn't say anything; we didn't need to, because a child is



THE WEIGHT
OF THE COAT,
THE WEIGHT
OF THE HEART

always taken from a mother's womb, making the bond between a mother and child the strongest in the world.

I grab my bag, the coat tucked under my arm, and walk out the door, past the rows of tiny houses, with roosters and hens frolicking along the dirt and stone of the narrow road, the sound of early morning sweeping reaching my ears.

I reach the village gate. And I step out into the ocean of vast unknown.

Wang, a childhood friend of mine, greets me grimly. Together, we climb onto the waiting truck, which soon bumpily speeds away.

We got to watch the sunrise through white bark and branches of the trees, the light shining upon the fields of rice and corn. It did nothing to lift our heavy hearts. And I notice, as the truck shudders over another bump, something in both the pockets of my coat.

In the coat pockets, there was the last of the rice wrapped up in a red handkerchief, and a precious peach for longevity that she had intended on having herself, for the sake of her health, that was now in my clutches.

I cried, grasping the coat, sitting on the truck with thirty or more sons with equally loving mothers they left behind, awaiting the sounds of drums and gunfire.



II

Thirty seven and basking in the sun, Susan M. maintained a steady rhythm dragging her bow across the violin strings, rosin dust rose around her to form a cloud, then dispersed into the open air. By now the process was completely methodical, churning through each scale; four crotchets turned into eight quavers turned into sixteen semiquavers. She didn't need music, she had full faith her fingers would land in their correct spot, each note perfectly in tune. Her bow hand worked in perfect unison. Up, down, up, down, the music filling her reverie.

Above her the magpies shrieked, their sound blending with her own. From her perch on the decking she could see the world around her. She preferred to practise outside, with no walls, no acoustics, nothing to restrict her sound, it was given free rein (unlike in the city where there was always someone banging on an adjoining wall to silence her). As she continued to play, she fell deeper into her stupor. But, inevitably, as soon as the last notes finished ringing out, the constricting in her chest returned. The pulling of guilt. So, she played on, continuing to extricate the notes from her instrument out into the open air, for no one to hear, as had been the usual for the past six months.

I 2

✦

She packed her violin away neatly in its case, the consequential quiet starkly apparent, and roamed listlessly, searching for her pot of green tea and the latest crossword puzzle. In her idleness she was left to her own thoughts. *Reckless driving*, that's what they called it. Six months ago she would not have given a single thought to her driving. Too busy pouring over some Shostakovich score for the orchestra to play. But all it took was one uncertain bend in the road for the collision to happen. For a life to be lost. Susan M, who had once been Melbourne's leading symphonic conductor, now resigned herself to nature where there was no one around, no one around to hurt.

She sat on at the dining table on the back deck looking over her expansive property, occupying only one of the the ten dining chairs set there. Occasionally her trance would be interrupted by the insistent rubbing of a head against her legs. Lenny, the cat, had adapted quite well to his new surroundings (he always seemed to have some decapitated rodent between his teeth). Susan M. envied him.

Yet out here she didn't have to be who she was. She could be in a

different century playing alongside some of the finest musicians of the baroque era. Maybe she could be sitting next to Mozart as he scratched out the final notes of a symphony. But reality always found a way of returning and slowly the serenity became menacing.



Thanks to her position roughly three hours away from the nearest city, in Mansfield, life around her thrived: she was embraced by fecundity. Her property stretched all the way past the dam (where she would find the dirt trail to lead her into town). In her shroud of nature she felt secure. The gum trees along her drive formed a protective wall, the rural murmurings of nature crooning her like a lullaby.

The property required little upkeep, however that could also be due to the fact that Susan M. was hardly the farming kind. She had attempted to maintain a vegetable patch, but without proper treatment and care her tomatoes had withered away and her strawberries were carried off by birds (as though her lack of a green thumb hadn't already been proven by the succulent she had let die in her apartment). Instead she decided to appreciate nature for what it could do, well, naturally, without her meddling. She did not find herself particularly enamoured by her surroundings. The long grass had been baking in the sun for so long it had started to look like brittle straw. Gnarled tree branches that resembled grotesque skeletons jutted out along the landscape. However she did find she felt a certain affinity towards the Paterson's Curse, a herb native to Europe brought over in the 1850's. She knew that it was an 'alien weed,' yet could not suppress the joy the vibrant purple flowers brought her. Spanning across the hills the purple haze resembled a rolling ocean. She had received numerous complaints from surrounding properties, yet the serene calm she felt exuding from it surmounted any complaints she could receive. The Paterson's Curse reassured her, made her feel like less of a curse herself. Her purple sea.



On this late winter morning Susan M's playing was interrupted by the sound of the van making its way up her drive. Irritated that her playing was cut short, yet still eager to receive the order she had placed, she made her way over to the front of the house. The gravel grated underfoot. Her skin had hardened from the cold (the winter

I 2

air had quite a bite to it, something Susan M. wasn't accustomed to yet). After months of non-stop playing her bow had slowly started to disintegrate and each day she only continued to shred the horse hair away. For some reason she had expected her special priority package to be delivered by someone whose waist was increasing at the same rate his hairline was receding, not the younger man who stood before her. 'Susan Mulherin?' he smiled as he handed the clipboard over for her to sign. As she scribbled she was pleased there was no hint of recognition about her name. After she handed the clipboard back and received her package, the transaction complete, she watched as he continued to stare into the distance.

'Those Viper's Bugloss can be a real pain. You ought to get someone out here to have a look at them.'

'The what, sorry?' She had never heard that name before.

'The weeds, the purple ones. Can cause a real mess with the livestock.' He strode forward to where some of the Paterson's Curse reached. 'Sorry to be intrusive, I'm part of a wildlife conservation group.' He moved back and introduced himself as Adam Johnson. Susan M. didn't quite know what to make of Adam Johnson, she had not expected any postman to be so fascinated with weeds or anything other than mail, yet she was quite content with any human interaction at all. After what felt like ten minutes discussing the nature of these particular weeds Susan M. could not hold out unpacking her new bow any longer.

'I was wondering what that was,' Adam Johnson remarked.

'So you're a musician, what's a musician doing in a place like this.'

'I'm a conductor actually,' she replied, looking up from the bow, the new extension of her limb.

'Not much to conduct out here.'

To her relief the silence was permeated with the sound of an insect buzzing past (Susan M. was thoroughly used to the sound and sight of creepy crawlies by then). Adam Johnson took a number of tentative steps backwards.

'Are you scared of bees?' She asked.

'Not scared. And that's no bee. That there is a European wasp. They can be quite dangerous. This one is on its own but there could be more somewhere. I'll give you our card in case you need any help.' He handed over a business card, *Wildlife Conservation*, and lightly grazed her hand with his in the process. The first human contact in quite some while.

I 2

Before leaving Adam Johnson reminded her to get someone in to look at the *Viper's Bugloss*, and then drove off outside the protective confines of the gum tress. Susan M. was left with a feel of uneasiness. Lenny skirted through her legs as she made her way over to the back deck to return to her playing.

Halfway through a movement of Beethoven the unnatural sound of hissing clashed with her playing. She turned to see Lenny on the low hanging roof that protruded out from the back of the house, swatting at nothing (he always seemed to find imaginary enemies to lacerate). 'Get down you stupid thing,' She hissed back. He seemed to ignore her as he continued to face his non-existent foe.

Wondering what could get him down she found herself picking up her old bow and swinging it at him. Once, twice, three times. When he seemed to have retreated back she moved one of the many empty dining chairs in order to get a better angle. With one last thrust she was sure her bow would have been enough to scare the cat away, until it connected with something much more solid.

They swarmed her like a plague, knocking her off the chair and to the decking. The thrum of their wings and bright yellow stripes blurred around her. She felt the welts and then the constricting started. Not the same constricting as that of the guilt, this time her throat was tightening inside her. All she had was Lenny's eyes staring back.

'I'm sorry,' she wanted to shout. 'I don't know what to do. I'm not from around here.'

Over her sea of purple, just like her music, her voice rang out, unheard.



I 2

I go down to the creek to make sure the nest underneath the foliage is shielded from the rain, and I get close enough to see the new family's porch glutted with pots and pans to watch the leakage even though this is the lightest spell we've had in weeks. Dad says they'll go easy as the sun does if the weather keeps like this. *Kill the ones you can't save*, he says, but I tell him the ducklings belong to their mothers. I collect the feathers from amongst the moss and bark chips like I'm removing the lining of a womb.

Sometimes I think about how the feathers on their breasts remind me of pins in my mum's pin cushion and how they must hurt. Dad says he'll buy me the boat I want if I bring him enough down feathers to stuff the mattress or the boots or whatever he's making. At moments his heart is as bitter and waterlogged as the days, my dad tells me I look just like my mum. He warms my cold hands in his and I stare at my colder feet. When surroundings start to dismember, it seems moods tend to do the same. I don't have my mum's face. I have my own.

Dad reckons the family from the city are *bloody whackers* for chopping down the cedar trees and replacing the space with a stable. *That fence is bloody atrocious*, he said, kicking the paling with his dirty boots. I straightened it as he turned away to light a cigarette.

After they settled in, I couldn't find no more nests near the yard. I crawled along the prints of webbed feet and felt as small as the ducks would, with their waddle that would empty a pot of water on their backs just from spills along the way, and tail ends fettered by coagulating frost. You've got to gather the first lot of feathers during the incubation period, then go back for the rest when the young have vacated the nest. It's no good if the ducklings are still there. They'll peer at you with beady eyes wondering why you're staving the only warmth they know. If damp feathers are left too long though, they will mildew. Other times I drip my special medicine in the beaks of the newborn, by night as they are quelled by sleep. Death swallows them whole. Their stiff feathers and small bones aren't threats to its infinite throat.

The dew from last night sealed everything in a fragile layer of ice. The black soil cracked under my feet, as if I was standing at the place where dawn caressed dusk and it broke. A storm is a storm is the rise and fall of the creek's heaving chest, but it scared the newcomers with the prospect of flooding. They want to drain it,

I 2

probably with a tube like the medic does to the dying. But the creek fosters life and the animals need to drink their fill. I look at the trees, naked and speechless in the wind and I imagine the house submerged in the creek head first, like a duck diving underwater. Its frozen surface looks like a mirror.



When the ducklings return to a cold nest, sometimes their wings get caught in the icy glow, dead and bright as the reflections of stars floating on water. It's common, during wet spells. Moonlight on their bellies and mortality at their backs, they turn from ashes to aspens. It's like the seasons get trapped in their bones until they thaw and it will be winter for a long time coming. I can crawl close enough to smell the dying fragrance of their bodies, my claws soaked and bits of plume sticking to them like I had stolen the wings of an angel. My hands can disappear while I am still staring at them and I can't wring the blood from them even though they're full. The storm has the sound of glass or an orchestra or the time my mum left the tap running. The bare trees shiver in the wind, slouching out of spite away from the nesting. Maybe they're shying from the honesty of decay that has taken its place.

I clean the rime off the plumage with my sleeves. It smells musty and cloying like wet moss. Mum left behind a pillow stuffed with feathers and I press the memory like a soft bruise with my eyes full, cheeks smeared and my mouth melting into leaking breaths. I think about my dad saying how *we don't cherish summer without knowing the cold*, and outside I can hear blunt wings loud in the evening quiet.



I'm in the shade searching for a nest and I see an older girl standing by the creek. I hadn't seen her around, so she must be from the new family that just moved across from here.

Hey there, she says, *What brings you here so early?* Nothing much I tell her, collecting feathers. She raises a brow and tries to follow my line of sight. I gesture for her to be quiet as not to startle the birds.

Down sweaters are the duck's guts this season, and she starts going on about ethics and the anatomy of flight and other things I don't care to know. I've always wondered how duck's guts look, and I picture their offals denuding every hidden colour but shudder at the thought.

She lights up with her hand blocking the wind. I tell her it kills

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and that birds fly off and use them to burn down homes, but she ignores it and keeps complaining about the *bloody creek* being too close to her home, like she thought the place where lands meets water was the edge of the world.

She mutters, *it's been a good spell hasn't it*, as she twists the cigarette butt in the mud. I ask her how to break it and she just looks at me and says, *you're a bit wet behind the ears even for your age*. I feel the backs of my ears and a droplet catches onto my finger. It must be the weather.

We should head back inside, the weather forecast's not looking good, she says concerned, but I don't trust the weatherman.



By the time I get home the feathers have become loose inside my palms like when my mum's hair was all falling out. A while ago the trees were undulating and whispering in the tempest, and even though you can't hear them now, their melodies never cease.

This time I prepare a more concentrated syrup. A child's dose would do it for anyone, needless to say for a duckling. That way the coats are fresh and will pull off easier. I also mix some in the butane of dad's lighter.

The walls felt paper thin. Not so secretly, I'm afraid of the thunder outside.



It's been a week since the wind sounded sharp enough that it could cut through trunks to release the sentient ghosts of their sap. I sit by the creek, just watching the birds and the fish floating above it like they had fallen from the sky. There must have been something in the water and I waited for so long I began to think it would turn the shade of blood. I picked up a carcass and it had released so much cortisol its wings fell off and left a two finger wound when I tried to move it. Its feathers stood like velvet stroked the wrong way and so stiff it was no good.

I strolled around till I found another duck by a worn out nest. It was weak and probably sick. I gripped it firm on the mantle and tightened my fingers at the base of a quill. I hesitated in the embryo of a moment and then plucked, at first one at a time and then in clusters.

The creek reflected all that remains of the sky, the sky just getting bigger and bigger.

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✧
The girl is by the creek again, staring into it with her arms folded.

Need a light? I strike the flint wheel the way I see dad do it and I can smell the fluid sweetening and the flame licking its lips.

✧
You've got to see this, my dad said early in the morning, my eyes brimming with rheum. By the creek a group of people were gathered watching a body get hauled out from the congealing mass of bloody water.

Isn't that the sheila that just moved in, one of the ambulance blokes said disapprovingly.

On the stretcher I saw her eyes were reflective like the duck's when I pulled out its feathers and her dress was tangled in nettles. The gauze on her forehead unfurled shyly like a bird's wing from the pain that was starting to precipitate, and I figured she knew just as well what it was like to bleed. The smoke from the collision behind her looked like a halo.

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✧
Dad got me the boat. Baby blue, but it was lacklustre and had dents in places. I guess it's just something borrowed, something blue that could suffice as more or less the same as any other. Still I couldn't help but feel it is just a hollow husk. I rowed along the creek where nothing ever floats and I couldn't tell whether it was night or day, the winter masked it and there were no mother ducks parading the young to their resting place. The light might swallow the shadows, or the shadows could swallow the rest of the light.

It just depends who has the larger mouth.



SURRENDER AND
DISHONOUR
AND DISCIPLINE
AND GLORY

CLAIRE SMART

I woke to the gentle *plink plink* of rain hitting the window sill. I was dreaming about a railway line, and was roused by the discordant clanging of hammers on metal. Like a distant fog, the railway blurred into this oddly familiar reality that grew on me as if the dream had never existed. The cold kitchen tiles stung my bare feet as I set the kettle to boil, goose pimples growing underneath my pyjamas – I wasn't accustomed to the British winter after years of Southern China's mild climate. *If you ask me why I came to Sussex*, I would say that Sussex is charming in the way that any new place is; curiously enigmatic and left to the imagination's interpretation before its true history and intransigence is revealed.

I peered into Dan's room – he had fallen asleep midway through writing a story. His forehead rested on the edge of his typewriter, his arms crossed over the desk like a Tibetan monk in prayer. The floorboards were barely visible beneath clothes, bedsheets, shoes, empty cigarette packs, magazines. Papers and books lay open over the floor – Hemingway's 'A Farewell To Arms' and a collection of James Joyce novels. The dark, tangled mop of Dan's head stirred, his unwashed hair falling towards his shadowy face as he lifted his head off the desk. Late sleepless nights had enhanced the dark circles under his eyes, casting a shadow of unconsciousness across his blank expression.

'Good morning,' my voice cracked the cold air, still rough from sleep.

'You should have knocked before coming in,' he spoke emotionlessly, as if in a trance.

'I shouldn't have to. *You must be exhausted.*'

'I have to go to work. Isn't that what you want?' He hated knowing it was his job that gave me pride and happiness.

He was right – it was what I had wanted, when he was younger. Despite scarring his weak knuckles, my brass ruler had disciplined Dan to work hard, proceed to London University, study to become an anaesthetist. Funny how it was he who had gradually lost sensory perception since starting his degree. Back then he had wanted to write. Not research papers or medical transcripts, but stories. As a child he wrote about werewolves and zombies and vampires, not about the real world. But they were childish ways, and it was my duty to discipline him into growing up to cope with the adult world. I had repeated every syllable, every consonant of the Chinese

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proverb until it was inexpugnable from his mind. *One cannot become useful without being educated.*

Dan showered, dressed and left for work. Desperate to get out of the house, I slipped into my scuffed, sheepskin slippers and embraced the chill of the slowly emerging morning. The sky was as smooth and transparent as glass, empty almost. Morning dew latched onto my slippers with every step, my eyes undeviating from them until I neared a cliff facing Beachy Head. A lone figure stood watching the overlooking seascape, wearing an oversized trench coat that smelled of gasoline and sea salt. He didn't stir as I stopped next to him. He seemed hypnotised, unconscious even, as he watched the monotonous rotation of the lighthouse beacon down at the bay. At each turn, there was a fleeting moment at which the harsh ray of light faced away from us, engulfed by the morning fog. And every time, that ephemeral calmness vanished as the rotation continued, like a heartbeat breaking silence. I, too, must have fallen into a sort of trance; the continual dripping of a tap and indistinguishable choking noises startled me, and I woke to reality. The tramp was gone. I turned back home, heavy with an aura of lonesomeness.

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I knew that feeling all too well. Dan had tried to run away once, when he was just seventeen. I had let him go, knowing that before long he would return, drawn back not by my company, but his dependence on my financial stability. *To tell you the truth*, I was almost relieved at his relinquishing; he had abdicated respect and honour and pride long ago, when he wrote his first story, unleashing the Pandora's box that was his untamed imagination and desire. His mother, not as dissociated as I, fidgeted and began to cry. *I looked at her serious, beautifully lined face*, her bright moistened eyes, and already I felt myself betraying them.

'He is your son,' her voice quivered through her silent tears, 'What's more important is not that we have a perfect, disciplined student, but a son.'

'There is no discipline here. He is impudent and stubborn and thinks he can do anything he wants. That is not how life works.' I was agitated, angry even, at his childish stories and his childish mind.

She stood from the worn, threadbare sitting chair, sighed, and trudged to bed, rubbing her eyes from weariness and from sorrow. *Here is what I believe* – children owe their name to their parents, and

have an obligation to make a name for them. *These honours and this glory shall He send, whose honour and whose glory you defend.* Each hour he was gone, the louder my thoughts became. I must have fallen asleep.

The scream of a young man in the distance penetrated the atmosphere. No doubt a prisoner working too slowly would return with harsh red lines on his back, sharp cuts as straight as my brass ruler. Or, if he was less fortunate, he'd return to the railway with the flesh on his back missing, *like it had been scooped out by a spoon.* I was one of the luckier ones – or so I had thought – still tied by ropes in a single-file line of British, Americans and other Chinese troops. They made us walk up past the railway and up a steep, muddy path between two ochre mountain sides, which were decorated with decaying skeletons covered in a layer of translucent skin that stretched over thin, brittle bones. The soil was sour and wet under our bare feet, the rain like acid seeping into our thoughts through the top of our heads with every thick, heavy drop. Among the roped line of prisoners, and Japanese officers, there was a raucousness of disturbance and destruction as we walked single file up the mountain, yet an eerie silence was imminent in the humid air.

But the place to which we were taken was much worse than that railway, unimaginably worse. To them, torture was an unavoidable necessity – for the sake of their country. To us, death couldn't possibly come slower. *When poisoned, one might as well swallow the plate.* I can't tell the story in full detail, partly because I'm not the writer my son is, but also because those memories only surface in nightmares. But *this is what I know:* they believed the Yamato race was superior to any other. Richer, more powerful, more disciplined. They did what they did out of fierce loyalty to their country, disciplined themselves by physical punishment and unbearably strict regimes. Surrender was the ultimate dishonour. They refused to believe the Chinese and Americans and British were human, because of our weakness to surrender. Perhaps they were right – from then on I had always refused to surrender.

My face was cold against the kitchen tiles. I must have collapsed, or fallen asleep. Dan was crouched beside me, his warm hand on my shoulder.

'Ba, what's wrong? What happened?'

'We won.'

'What?' his voice had risen with increasing concern, as he lifted

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SURRENDER AND
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my back off the floor.

'We won the war.'

He must have known of my traumatic dreams, particularly after his mother's death, but did nothing to anaesthetise them. We sat there in chilling silence on the hard floor. It wasn't quiet though; I could feel the warmth of his body next to me, the pulse from his hand on my shoulder. After a while, he spoke.

'I got a promotion, to work in Takashitu Kure Hospital.' He looked at me, his dark brown eyes full of regret and remorse. Maybe that's just what I wanted to see. 'I won't go. I'm not going to work with the Japanese. I know you'd resent that.'

'Go. Take the job.' The words were barely audible, my throat tightening with hostility at his betrayal.

It didn't take much convincing. He took the job.

Dan left the next Wednesday night. Had I known how long it would be before I saw him again, I wouldn't have said that what he did was unforgivable, that he was no son to me. I felt numb, sick in the humidity of the room that had an atmosphere not unlike a prison camp on an ochre mountain at the end of a railway line. *Full of wanting*. I returned to the lighthouse. The old, trench coat man was there. I gave him a slight nod, though he didn't notice, leaving me the night sky all to myself. I was drowned beneath the tenebrous and unfathomably deep expanse that was the sky above. Rain came like thick, heavy blood, beating down like the footsteps of a thousand soldiers. *He who is drowned is not troubled by the rain*. The lighthouse beacon continued to turn, though its beam was dimmer, muffled by the ongoing storm. Meanwhile, the faintly glowing moon remained simple and stagnant, unwavering among the maelstrom of rain and fear and surrender. How quickly a storm can come, shattering the equanimity of a clear sky that had remained intact, day after day. That was all it took; after years of submissiveness and reservation, I was drowned in hatred and guilt. Surrender is the ultimate dishonour. Years after, that was attenuated by a different, poignant sort of pride. I had not surrendered. I had, and from then on always would, stay loyal to my boy.

But at that moment, I was consumed.

The war was over and the prisoners were released, at a single gunshot.



If you're sick of hearing about guns, I'll let you in on a little secret. I am, too. I'm sick of hearing about guns and gun-related violence. I'm not going to mention the latest incident, because it doesn't matter. I'm going to make this as generic as possible, so it can apply anytime there's another shooting.

Which there no doubt will be, because Americans seem completely unwilling to do anything but shrug their shoulders and say "Well, there's nothing we can do about it!" Except in every other country, they have done something about it, clearly, because the United States is the only developed nation where this happens with this level of frequency.

And, of course, every pro-gun person has the same arguments, the exact same similes, metaphors and analogies. Tucker Carlson, Fox News correspondent who has also worked for CNN, trotted this old gem out in October 4th, 2015: "When you have a drunk driving accident, you don't ban cars, you try to prevent drunk people from driving them."

And yet, whenever someone brings up the issue of gun regulation and control, not banning guns, people still scream about their rights.

Let's use the famous drunk driving analogy. You're right, you don't ban cars. But think about how much it takes to legally drive a car. You have to get a license. In order to do so, you have to prove to someone not just that you're old enough to drive, but that you're capable. Depending on where you live, this can be a pretty long process. You have to get your learner's permit, then you have to drive with someone in the passenger seat for a length of time. Then, finally, you have to demonstrate to the government that you can drive by passing a test. This process takes months, in some cases years, before you can operate a motor vehicle for yourself. During this time, you certainly can't purchase a car, I mean, you could, but you can't drive it on your own.

All of these are regulations, some sort of attempt to create safer drivers. The old system wasn't nearly as well-regulated, and it shows in the number of automobile-related deaths per capita there were years ago. And, funny enough, no American screams 'My freedom is being taken away!' when a new legislation is introduced involving driving.

Why? Because, the right to drive isn't in the American Constitution. The right to own guns is. Except, most people who

GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

HANNAH
WINSPEAR-SCHILLINGS
ALLAN PATTERSON PUBLIC
SPEAKING AWARD
WINNER

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quote that have no idea what they're talking about.

Ask someone to quote the Second Amendment word for word, and they'll probably say something like "We the people have the right to keep and bear arms!" which is not what it says.

What it actually says: "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." A *well-regulated militia*. This part is constantly ignored.

Even ignoring the idea that it was meant to be for members of a regulated militia only, that it really means Johnny down the street can own a gun. "Well-regulated". It's not.

Oh, there are background checks in some states, and in some American states you have to wait three days to get your assault rifle. But you don't need to do half the things you need to do to get a driver's license in order to own a gun. In many places in the States, you don't need a license. There's no such thing as gun insurance. And you don't need to prove to someone that you're capable of handling a gun in a safe manner.

But again, forcing people to do that? All sorts of excuses not to, the biggest of which: "My freedoms!".

Tucker Carlson, in a response to co-host Clayton Morris mentioning Australia's low gun violence and strict rules on owning guns, said "They have no freedom! You can go to prison for expressing unpopular views and people do. And in Western Europe by the way. And in Canada. No one ever says that." He says places like Australia, Canada, and Europe have no freedom, because we have stricter regulations or outright ban the ownership of certain types of guns, or all guns.

Japan, too. Let's toss them in, because they're a great example. Japan has 126 million people crammed into one one-hundredth of the space of the United States. In 2008, they had *eleven* firearm related deaths. Eleven!

But it's a free country. They hold free elections, where you can vote without being killed for choosing the wrong party, there's a free market economy, you can pursue whatever career choice you wish to make. And guns are banned there.

In Australia, in 2014, there were 207 firearm-related incidents, compared to 51,776 (fifty-one thousand seven hundred and seventy six) in the United States in the same year.

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In 2015 in the United States, there were 13,338 (thirteen thousand three hundred and thirty eight) firearm-related deaths, not including suicides or accidentals – they were pre-meditated murders.

Everyone says, “Well if you ban guns or make them harder to get, criminals will be the only ones who have them!” This is, however, hypothetical. It’s based on fear, that the only thing preventing criminals from tearing into people’s homes is the chance that they might be standing in the doorway with an assault rifle, ready to protect their family. It can’t be based on any real world statistics because, as we’ve been shown, Australia and Japan have low gun murder rates.

A lot of Americans always mention, “Look what happened in Germany in the 30s and 40s, as well as the Soviet Union, and in Cambodia, where they banned citizens from having guns! You know what happened? Genocide happened!”

But then when you point out how gun control works in other countries, they’re very quick to point out, “Yeah, but we’re not the same as them!” So, you’re not like other countries, but you are like Nazi Germany?

They think the worst will happen, but the worst is already here, in the form of every person in the country having such easy access to guns, that that’s how they decide to solve their perceived problems.

Regardless of which side of the argument you land on, you have to agree that something has to be done. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it has anything to do with guns, even though that’s almost always the weapon of choice in the US, you do realise *something* has to be done.

So let them try *something*. Even if it means getting a gun is as difficult as being allowed to drive a car. It doesn’t work? Well, then the Americans get to say ‘I told you so’ while they enjoy the “well-regulated” part of the constitutional right to bear arms. It’ll give them something to do during the waiting period.



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It was a cold, rainy morning when he arrived. I was dreaming about the war, and the dull whine of falling bombs in the desert. When I woke up, he was standing outside my bedroom door, haunted and unsmiling. His clothes were shining wet and looked as though they'd been pulled from a cupboard. Backlit by the ghostly light of the hall, he looked spectral, ephemeral, a waking dream that might vanish at any moment.

For a moment, dream and reality threatened to coincide. A war-torn desert replaced a peaceful room, fatigues replaced pyjamas; sand replaced worn floorboards. Like a figure in fog, the real world gradually asserted itself; rain hammering a cold glass pane, a dark room swathed in papers, and the gaunt figure of my old friend in the doorway, shining with light and water, unbelievably, impossibly *here*.

"*Hakim?*"

"Hello," he said in Arabic. A wry, uncertain smile unfurled slowly across his face, as though he'd forgotten how to do it properly. "I'm back."

I stared at him, and waited for emotion to register. Shock, relief, rage, anything. But the reality of his presence did nothing but slowly seep through, leaving the dull, numb ache of disorientation. He had been gone, but now...

"It's raining quite a bit," he said.

"You... you're here. I thought you had gone." It felt strange to be speaking Arabic again, but then, everything in this moment – this dark, rainy, bewildering moment – felt strange.

A shadow passed over his face. "I was. But I'm back now."

Cold and unfeeling, I rolled out of bed and hit the floor, stretching my toes along the grainy floorboards. The drag of his breath halted for a moment, quizzical. Feeling my way through the dark, I shuffled across the room, racked back the blinds, and cracked open the window, breathing in deeply the cold, damp sea air. Everything smelt of brine and rain.

I turned and, subconsciously, perhaps, a memory from our time in the desert, went to hold him. His entire stance changed the minute I got within reaching distance. His eyes went wide, nostrils flaring, jaw clamping shut so tightly it had to hurt, head tossing like a wild horse's. "Don't," he bit out, once the involuntary tremors ceased. His gaze crept haltingly to mine. "Please, don't."

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Stung, I pulled my hands back. “You... must be tired.” The words sounded ludicrous in this setting, but I needed some sort of normalcy, anything. The shocked, numb part of my mind took this mental breadcrumb and set off down its track, resolutely planning the essentials. *Tea. Warm clothes. Food. A hot bath.*

“Come on,” he said, and stooped to pick up an Adidas duffel, and what looked like a rolled-up sleeping bag. “I’m starving.”

“Very nice,” he said, as I led him through the interior of my cramped houseboat. “Love the portholes. Very retro.” There was something in the tone of his voice that added a painful bitterness to his words, some indefinable darkness that look the words and twisted them. Not directed at me, I could tell, but whatever it was had him wound as tight and tense as a bowstring.

“Ah, the old Kalashnikov,” he smiled briefly as his eyes alighted upon my baby hung on the wall over the wood-burner. “Still your favourite, eh?”

His words transported me, and suddenly, I was back in the desert again, fingers slippery around the stock, straining to see through the shimmering heat haze and falling bombs. I realised I was rubbing my ears.

Hakim caught sight of the kitchen, gave a gusty sigh of relief, and started towards it. “Excellent. I need coffee.”

I lingered uncertainly as he padded through the kitchen, still seeming ghostly and insubstantial. The interior of my houseboat was a mess of tangled clothes, books, bottles, and papers, drawings and diagrams in clean, stark lines like coloured sunbursts. On my psychologist’s recommendation – art therapy was a surprisingly common staple of war vets.

The kitchen bench was gritted and stained, blackened in some places where the smell of cooking meat had triggered my episodes. Had I known he was coming, I would have cleaned up. I arranged the scattered pill bottles and other medication in neat lines by the window, swept the wrappers off the counter into the bin, stacked the magazines in a pile, and looked up to find Hakim looking bemusedly at me.

I took a breath. Better now than later. “I thought you were dead.” Out in the open, the words sounded aggressive, confrontational.

His gaze darkened. “I might as well have been. But I’m back now.”

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I narrowed my eyes. "Where were you?"

He flinched, abruptly, violently, as though he'd been shot. "Please, don't ask me that," he whispered. "I can't... I can't talk about it now. Please."

Uneasy, I held his gaze for a long moment, chewing my lip, mentally going over the eight months he'd been away. Questions gathered and fizzed on my tongue, like bubbles in a soda can. Waiting for answers, I knew, which would not be forthcoming.

"Please," Hakim forced a smile, his eyes distant. His gaze went over the top of my head, unseeing. *Thousand-mile stare*. "Don't worry about me. You just keep doing what you do."



It was meant to be a preventative raid, part of an ongoing series of campaigns to keep the rebels massing in the north from capturing the city again, a preventative measure.

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We parachuted in about half a kilometre outside the city, plummeting through the densely packed leaves, before furling our parachutes and setting off at a steady jog towards the outskirts of the city. I followed my unit carefully, keeping quiet and to the shadows, and Hakim fell in beside me. My partner was young, dark, and dove-eyed, with corkscrewed hair, and a cigarette seemingly permanently glued between his lips, moving unsteadily through the undergrowth. Nervous.

Muffled grunts and curses exploded out of the town square ahead and the almost non-existent light glinted off the muzzle of a hand gun. As we neared the fighting, the smoke, melee of bodies, chatter of machine guns, and sharp report of pistols made it difficult to tell how many were ours, and how many were the enemy. Soon, the streets were swarming with people, too many people, or so it seemed.

First things first. The bullet flew true to the streetlamp, shattering it and raining glass on the attackers below as the bulb flashed and failed. Use the bench as a springboard to leap over their

blind shots, sinking a knife into a shoulder and ripping it free. The scream this time was higher pitched, wild with shock.

Pure killing moves. Forget any notions of fair play or honour, save for helping the person next to you, and fighting the urge to leave the boy behind, because he was too slow. He could take out of the bigger ones, while I could get the fast, little ones when they got

past the snipers. There's something about the heat and chaos of battle that forges bonds.

We fought as dusk and bodies fell, and won as night came over the city.



I told my girlfriend of Hakim's arrival the next day. She didn't say anything for a long moment, head still inclined. Framed by ash-blond hair, with skin silvered in the moonlight and lips still gently parted, she looked beautiful.

She rocked back on her heels, hair falling over her face, and looked at me, her hair like platinum and her skin like wax paper. Terrifying beautiful.

"I thought he was dead," her voice was as cold as midnight frost. Hakim doesn't know about us, I'd explained before, but that had nothing nothing to lessen the tension.

"So did I, but now he's back."

She hunched forward, hugging her knees to her chest, and shuddered. The look on her face was strange, shut down. She knew I'd been a soldier, she knew exactly what Hakim and I had done, out there in the starless, godless desert.

I'd mentioned the war to her several times – she knew the nature of what Hakim and I had been through, what we'd seen, what we'd done as murderers, soldiers, harbingers of retribution out in the desert lands.

She stared at me, her face desolate, particulate. Then, she resolutely reached across to the bedside table and pulled on her sunglasses. Hiding was a habit of hers.

"Just don't introduce him to me," she said. Her voice was still cold.



It was two hours after the raid, and Hakim and I were stationed outside the ruined, crumbling shell of a building, a white van idling on the corner with its headlamps on, while unspeakable things went on inside. The screaming from inside sounded unnaturally loud in the cold night air.

"I've been thinking about Tennessee Williams," Hakim said conversationally, as a hoarse scream sounded from behind us.

His tone was so at odds with the violence, it made me laugh. Trust Hakim to uphold his university studies, even out here. "Oh, really? And what does he have to say for himself?"

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“I have the guts to die, but do you have the guts to live?” he quoted, long, dark hair falling into his eyes. His face was impassive, tiger-striped in the light from the lamps. A gunshot cracked against the stillness of the night, and I jumped. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, lately, what with the war and all. Because, you know...” he let the sentence drop, and barked a laugh.

I punched his shoulder affectionately. “Don’t you go and die on me, now. We’ve got a war to get through.”

So flippant back then! Had I known what I know now about the mental cost of war, I would probably have been more tactful.

But it was an interesting thought, nonetheless, disquieting and almost ironic, here in a war-zone at the end of the world.



I found Hakim curled up on my living room floor the next morning, arms over his head and eyes closed, and, in fits and starts, received his story.

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He couldn’t even remember what he’d been doing, he told me. Reading, watching TV, whatever, when suddenly he’s on the floor, eyes rammed closed and writhing, fingernails embedding crescents in his skull as he struggled to hold onto himself through those sounds.

The thump of a windblown book hitting the floor, I realised later, can sound uncannily like a gunshot.

His heart was racing, almost palpating in his chest, oxygen was just out of reach, every hair and nerve in his body attuned to the slightest sound, the slightest current of air, the slightest vibration, and he was shaking, trembling, shivering.

He told me where he’d been the past eight months.

He told me about the failed raid, how they’d stormed them, found him, and dragged him blindfolded to a bunker underground, where they held him and bound him and tortured him in the dark. I thought about all I’d heard of torture – how many troops had raided places like that in the past to discover gruesome anomalies; prisoners of war bled dry, humans kept under solitary confinement and tortured for days on end to test the authenticity of papers written by madmen; shackles and syringes and knives.

I held my partner as his seizures subsided, and thought again of Tennessee Williams. I thought of all I knew of bravery, and wondered what it felt like, truly having the courage to live.

I held him as the sun rose.



Of all the types of ghosts that exist, apparitions were the hardest find. These were the ones that were said to be living around our property in Marysville. So barefoot, I tread through the untamed tangle of trees. The forest debris dug into my soles but I was looking for the faded figure of my favourite ghost, Peter.

The swamp was only a few hundred metres away from our house, but you had to make your way through the dense bushland to find it. I traced my way along the cracked earth to find the thick, muddy pool of water. I often imagined all kinds of life inhabiting the murky liquid, like yabbies and fish, obscured from the open land above. They must be frightened of what lies beyond the dark safety of their hidden world.

As I made my way back that day, a thorn pierced my heel. I wailed but there was no one apart from the cockatoos to hear me. In enduring silence, I journeyed back to the house I'd grown up in, having limped the whole way. Dad picked me up and efficiently put me on the table, pulled out the wedged thorn, dabbed alcohol on the wound and bandaged me up. The scent of scotch lingered in the air as I looked down at my mummified foot. It had been a while since I'd seen liquor go anywhere other than his mouth.

At night, he was a beastly figure, audaciously sprawled across the couch. Mum tucked me in to bed and gently smiled at me in an attempt to hide the resentment and sourness behind her face. She often told me ghost stories of the apparitions that lived in the trees around us. They were lost spirits, looking for a way out of the tangle of bush and back into life. She told me of characters like Margaret, the scullery maid; George, the successful property owner; and of course, Peter, the young boy who stole his Mistress's jewels and ran off into the bush where they were never seen again. Mum told me not to, but at night I'd leave my bedroom window open, in the hopes the apparitions would come visit me as I slept. I'd wake up in the mornings with small, round, itchy welts on my body, fairly confident it was the apparitions who did it.



My cousins came to visit sometimes in the summer, dumped by their mother for days at a time. As they munched and rumbled, I couldn't help feeling away, as if I wasn't fully there.

"Can we go to that swamp-thing?"

"Yeah we want to go. Please."

I 2

Please was obviously something he didn't say very often. Mum looked exasperatedly between the chubby, red faces of the difficult children and me.

She breathed in slowly. "Off you go then. Helen will take you."

I led the way through the bush and the two boys stomped behind me. The weight of their feet sounded like sacs of potatoes dropping against the ground. When we arrived at the hidden sanctuary, the eldest instantly pushed his brother into the swamp, disturbing the quiet and muddying them both in the process. Aunty Norene came to pick them up and was not impressed with their state. As she yelled, mum sighed and defeatedly accepted all blame.

That night, mum didn't tell me any ghost stories. Instead, I heard the dull thunder of harsh words at the other side of the house. When I woke up in the morning, my arms and legs felt itchy and uncomfortable, dotted with red. I was mad at the apparitions for making me feel this way.

I stayed at the swamp all day, fantasising about a life beyond the bush. I imagined salty waves lapping against my feet, washing away the mud from the swamp. I'd float in the surface of the cold, ocean water, feeling connected to the countries beyond. But I'd never learnt to swim and I was too old now. All sorts of dangers lurk in unknown waters for a girl who can't swim.

A tiny, black bug buzzed around my head, pestering me. I watched as the insect landed on my arm, pierced my flesh with its nozzle and began to suck. In one fell swoop, I slapped the bug dead underneath me. All that was left was a smear of a red, crushed body, and later an itchy, round bump.

Dad arrived home late and I could feel the unhappiness between the two. Doors were slammed with a little more force and eyes never met. I could almost touch the tense, unsaid words that hung in the air. Hiding in my room, I watched as the blood, red sun crept below the horizon, slowly swallowing us into blackness. I could hear angry murmurs for a brief moment before I tried to block it out.

As the dusky night approached, moths began banging on my window trying to enter the light. Trapped in the dark bush and looking for something better. I thought of the fading figures of apparitions lurking in the labyrinth of dense vegetation. I hid a torch under my pillow and put my jacket in the corner in preparation.

I 2

Mum tucked me into bed, eyes red and cheeks salty. I kept myself awake for a while in the cosy warmth by scratching my irritated bites and planning the night ahead of me. When the lights were gone and all was still, I put on my jacket and shoes then grabbed my torch to escape. I managed to reach the front door before I noticed mum resigned in the kitchen, almost melted into the surroundings behind her. An untouched glass water created a rim against the table.

“Where are you going?”

“No where.”

“Just tell me where you’re going Helen.” She didn’t seem angry at all, more mildly curious.

“I just wanted to find Peter’s jewellery to give back to him.”

For a moment, she processed this, maybe thinking of a suitable punishment or scolding words. If you’re going somewhere in life, you might as well not go there alone, is what mum always used to say. It was what she used again then.

We made our way silently into the middle of the tangle, leaves and sticks gently crunching under our feet. I held my torch ahead and mum held hers up, looking for the apparitions above. The bush looked different in the obscured dark, the trees seemed larger, enveloping us into a shadowy hug. It was cold and I was tired now, ready to return to the comfort of my blanketed enclosure. But mum tore on through the debris, calling out for something in the dark and digging up holes with her hand-sized spade. After a while a strange rustle followed by a large bang lulled us into silence. We finally surrendered: back to the house only a few hours before dawn.

I woke up after that night in a surreal daze, unsure whether we met Peter or not.



Months went by and dad started to grey and weaken. He had developed liver disease, inhibiting his drinking escapades and rendering him unable to work. Instead, he flopped about like a wet fish, sullenly moaning and grumbling around the house.

Mum got a job working as a secretary at a local law office. She couldn’t pick me up from school in our shabby blue station wagon anymore, which meant I had to sit on a swarming school bus to make my way home. Yet when mum was around the house she was floating, positively lively. So I didn’t mind.

It was as though in dad’s pain and restriction, something was gained in my mum.

I 2

I came home after school one day and noticed a glittering yellow-gold object in my vision. A single earring that was hung with deep red rubies and bright green emeralds was laid out on the table. The ornate piece of jewellery looked as delicate and beautiful as a butterfly's wing. I noticed dirt wedged between the joins of stone and metal, muddying the shine.

Mum had found something of Peter's after all.



It was a warm Easter that year. I woke up early with the bright sun gently nudging me awake. I ran outside traversing through the great wall of mountain ash and picking up brightly-coloured eggs along the way. Sucking on a chocolate egg, I pushed through the ferns and shrubbery to my usual place at the exposed, swampy land. I crouched down as I saw her, sitting with her back to me by the edge of the quiet puddle of mud. Her hair flowed down around her shoulders yet she usually always had it up. I watched my mum as she leant forward and held her hand out into the water.

With the stroke of her arm, she created miniature waves that continued to ripple even after she stopped.



I 2

