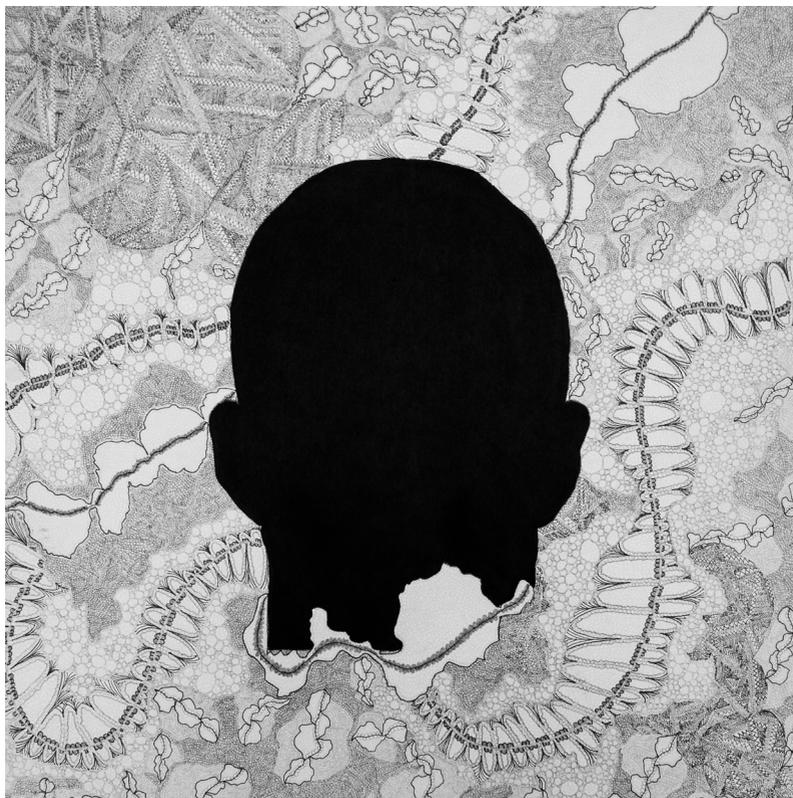


Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2014

Edited by Elise Dempster

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Secrets

He knew he would be the laughing stock of the entire camp if they caught him now...

Jules exhaled quietly, steadying his heartbeat as he lay under the bed at the back of the room, shielded from sight by the other bunk beds. The dormitory was sparsely furnished, military style, having enough space for eight kids and not much else. Already he'd been humiliated in the afternoon's cricket match: not the best athlete himself, his scratch team had lost by 52 runs, owing largely to his poor tactics as self-appointed captain and his dismissal for a duck. He would soon lose even his last few friends if something didn't change.

Year 7 at a new school was supposed to be hard for everyone, but for Jules it was turning into a sudden discovery that he was out of his depth. Bonding camp? He scoffed. More like boot camp. This evening, he would either change that forever or die trying.

The secret meeting had been scheduled for after dinner in the tall boy Peter's cabin. Jules wasn't sure about Peter, supposedly a doctor's son and now intent on founding a ridiculous secret society. He looked again at his watch: eight o'clock. The sunset over Union Hill at the cabin's rear was slowly fading into darkness. Someone switched on a light, but Jules, safely ensconced in his hiding place, remained motionless.

The boys trickled in. Jules listened to the muffled creaking of beds as they climbed into positions, whispering with anticipation. Edging himself into a position where he could watch proceedings unseen, he observed Peter standing motionless at the front of the room, a General inspecting his troops.

He was counting heads – six in all – everyone present and accounted for: Rogan, who played saxophone in the jazz band; James, who had been Peter's close friend since second grade; Max, who owned a surfboard and wetsuit and spoke of nothing else; Colin, who had proven himself the night before by supplying huge quantities of chocolate from his father's factory; and finally Bruce (short for Brutus); Jules's long-time best friend. Certainly it was an exclusive gathering – a Who's Who of high school novices, all of

them eager to stay. But it was the price of membership that made it truly special – and had prompted Jules's plan of hiding.

“Take one card each and a pencil,” Peter ordered the assembly. “I want the cards back in three minutes. Anyone who chickens out will be disbarred from future meetings. And do it in complete silence or I'll make you glad that my dad works at a hospital.”

Jules knew what they had to do. He watched as each boy fell to his initiation duty, scribbling with eager compliance. Peter wrote too, declaring his own contribution the best of all but refusing to hint at its contents.

With all cards submitted, Peter shuffled them and began to read. His troops listened intently, readying for battle. Each card held a secret betrayed.

“Annie Woolcott has a crush on Max. She wrote him a note.” The announcement of this treasured secret, claimed proudly by Colin as his handiwork, was met with appropriate hilarity and teasing – Annie Woolcott was universally loathed. Max swore and denied the charges, but the damage was done.

“My one!” declared Peter as he turned up his own card. “Mr Drake, the maths teacher, is an alcoholic. He goes to my dad's surgery.” He watched his soldiers' reaction with satisfaction. Jules wondered to himself what sort of doctor would tell their child such a secret about a patient. Clearly Peter was dangerous.

Before long, it was time for Bruce's card. Jules knew what he feared it would say, but still held out the hope that his long-time friend would not prove treacherous. A cloudy smokescreen masked the moon's soft glow as Peter drew his audience to attention and launched into Jules's secret with a theatrical flourish.

“Jules still wets the bed sometimes.” Immediate uproar ensued. This was potent news indeed – a weapon of true worth.

Bruce blushed deeply, basking in the others' enthusiastic affirmation of his guilty disclosure. Jules, from his concealed vantage point, clenched his fist involuntarily, then shifted in anger and hit his head on the base of the bed with a muffled thump. Luckily no one noticed.

How could his best friend betray him like that? How was a kid supposed to live that sort of thing down?

They were laughing uncontrollably now, joking mercilessly about the news, and providing lewd actions and sound effects. Even James, his friend since infants' school was shaking with mirth, revelling in the image. Jules scoffed to himself angrily, dumbfounded by the irony of a bonding exercise that drew its power from betraying the trust of other friendships.

He had seen enough. Slowly, he eased his way from under the bed, sliding backwards till he could no longer see his adversaries. Then he slipped out the back door of the dormitory, circled quickly around its opposite wall and arrived at the main door. After one last moment of hesitation, Jules turned the knob and entered brightly, projecting only a commanding nonchalance. Resisting the temptation to declare his hand, he nevertheless dared to meet Bruce's eyes briefly. His friend looked away quickly.

"Sorry I'm late, guys. I know I wasn't going to join, but I changed my mind. And I have the best secret ever." The sudden awkward silence was deeply amusing. Although in enemy territory, he finally had the upper hand. Jules pressed on with a disarming smile.

"Should I just say it, or shall I write it down?"

Peter took the bait instantly, handing Jules a blank card and pencil and instructing him to return them. Jules cleared his head of angry thoughts and scribbled his own secret before passing it to the front easily, leaning back into his seat with a feigned casualness as he surveyed the squad around him.

Peter stayed silent as he read its contents.

"What's the matter?" asked Max.

"I'll read it," said Peter. "The secret divulged by Bruce was a lie. I made it up because I knew he would use it."

It was the moment Jules had been longing for. No one knew how to react, least of all Peter. His battalion had been routed, its arsenal dismantled. Faces were frozen in shock, like expressions on dead soldiers. Bruce's obvious dismay only confirmed the veracity of the ambush. The room grew tense as each boy seemed to struggle to understand his own strange feelings. For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then all at once, the firing squad arrived. Everyone seemed to be shouting: hurling insults, accusing Jules of cheating, heaping their frightened indignation upon his 'illegitimate' secret.

"SHUT UP for a second!" came a voice. It was Max. The room fell silent in uneasy expectation.

"I made my secret up too," he disclosed simply.

And then, amid what almost passed for laughter, the truth began to rain down, like coordinated missiles shattering the infrastructure of a helpless city. Each boy, one after the other, confessed the same story: unwilling to compromise real friendships, they had scribbled only harmless lies, false rumours designed to save face. Only General Peter was left, staring at them all in disbelief – before he too revealed that his contribution was fabricated – because it had "seemed a pretty cool story".

Jules looked around the room. There they were: a happy band of faithful comrades, who had proven themselves to each other by betraying only their own false betrayals. Then Peter lifted high the pile of secret cards, slowly and deliberately tearing them to pieces above his head. With mock solemnity, he produced from his pocket a box of safety matches and issued his final order: each tiny fragment must be burned on a miniature campfire, to be built outside the dormitory. In this simple ritual, conducted with surprising maturity beneath a watchful moon, seven young boys were knit together in permanent alliance.

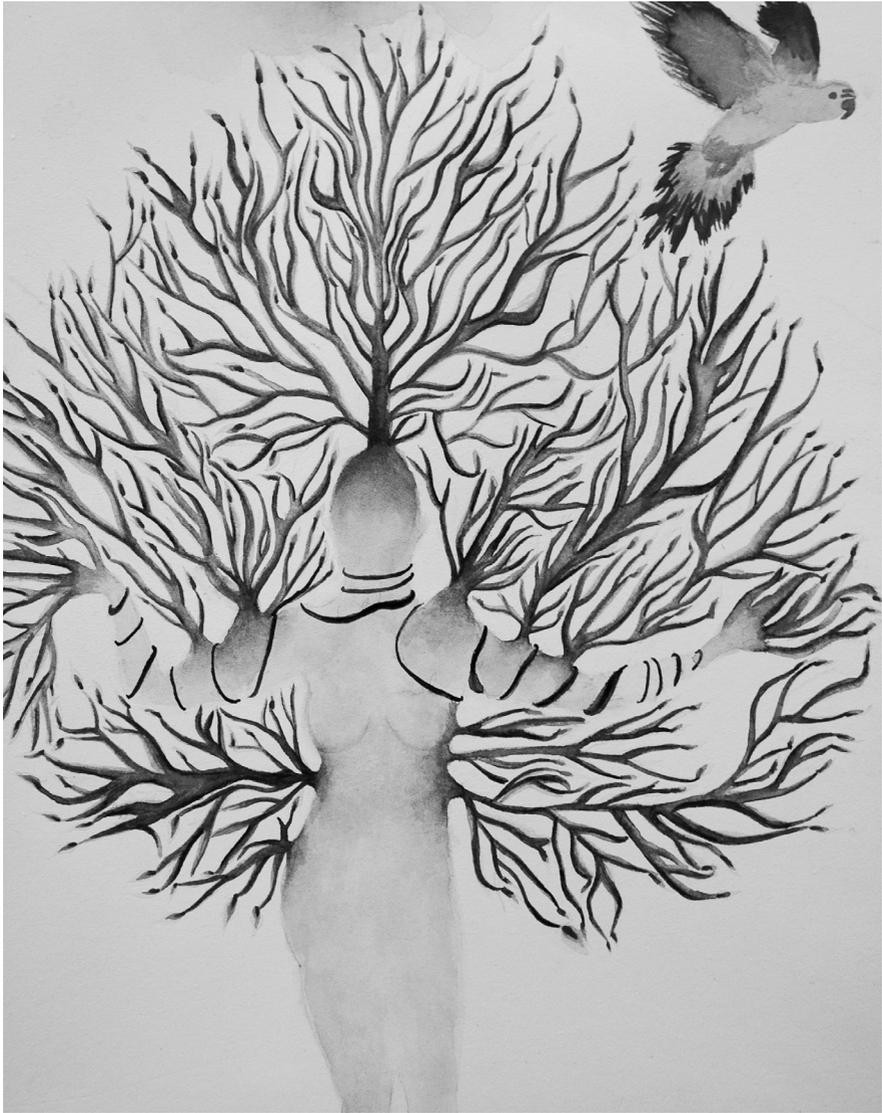
Tell Me

Tell me your wishes
Your secrets
Your dreams
For I am the keeper
Of all of these things
I was made to hold your thoughts dear
And keep them wrapped up
To keep your head clear

Tell me your sorrows
Your riddles
Your lies
For I am the keeper
Of all you despise
I was born to be your dream catcher
And hide all these things
From Death, the dispatcher

Tell me your passions
Your loves
Your delights
For I am the keeper
Of what brings you light
I was built to bring you your will
And keep you in spirit
To continue uphill

Tell me your start
Your middle
Your end
For I am the keeper
Of what you cannot tend
I was made to carry you on
And ensure that you live
When life no longer goes on



The Fairy's Wish

Once upon a time, there lived a fair princess who was renowned across all the lands for her exquisite beauty, kindness and intelligence. She was dainty as the fairies for which she was named, with hair of spun gold and eyes which glittered like the pure ocean when kissed by the rays of the setting sun on Midsummer's Eve. But one day, she was cursed; cursed by an unspeakable, untouchable evil, an evil which could not be seen, but only felt. Her curse was destined to be the end of her, and all the light was suddenly leached out of the princess' world, for the sweet voice with which she once sung had vanished, as had her golden hair. No longer beautiful, healthy and free, she felt as though she was rejected from society. She grew apart from them, unable to speak the thoughts on her mind, unable to venture into the village without feeling the eyes, staring at her from the shadows...

Faye sobbed, her tears blossoming as they fell onto the pages of the notebook on her lap. She tore the soiled page out of her notebook with a flourish of fury. *Cursed curse*, she thought, running her hand through her short hair. She'd had long hair once. But the chemotherapy caused it to fall out. Her mother said that her short hair made her look like an endearing pixie, but Faye rebuked her by saying that her name meant 'fairy', and all of the fairies in books had long, silky hair. Faye still remembered her pre-cancer days, when she could talk and laugh out loud and go to school, like every other girl. She wished more than anything in the world that she could be like that again. *But not all wishes come true...*

"Hayley, Faye! Dinner's ready!" The call from the kitchen shattered her daydream into one thousand shards of broken glass. She watched her thoughts settle on the ground around her like snow.

The moon had completed two full cycles; tonight it floated in the sky like a white balloon. The streets were deserted and no one noticed as Death crept stealthily into the little girl's bedroom.

A slab of heavy metal was pressing on her chest, forcing the air out of her lungs. Her throat was searing with unimaginably intense pain, hot lava bubbling up her trachea. The pain consumed her; she was drowning in darkness and fear. There was a lump in her throat. It was as if she had swallowed a basketball. She couldn't breathe. *Help*. The girl tried to scream, but she had no voice. No one would hear her. Desperately, she curled into

a ball, gasping for breath and thrust her hand out to her side. *Smash!* The glass of water on her bedside table now lay in pieces on the floor. The last thing Faye remembered were three figures running into her bedroom. They were cloaked in shadows. Then, the darkness swallowed her.

The rejected princess lived, isolated, at the top of a tall tower, with no doors and only one window, for many years. Still, she yearned to smell the fresh summer's air, but alas, her curse was too strong, she could not break free. Just as she was pondering over these thoughts again one afternoon, there was a blinding flash of light; it was as if a star had exploded in her room. The princess shielded her eyes. Suddenly, there, standing in front of her was a beautiful lady with auburn curls and eyes which were as deep as emeralds. She wore a kind expression, although it was not one of pity. She was clothed in a light blue gown, and when she spoke, her voice sounded like tinkling bells.

"What were you dreaming of?"

Faye woke up to the tinkling of real bells. Well, no, not bells. It was the familiar beeping of the machine which she was hooked up to. She was in a hospital... Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle slowly locked themselves into place as Faye remembered waking up... how many nights ago was it? She opened her eyes.

The next two hours passed in a whirlwind. There were scans, tests, visitors and more scans. Finally, Faye was allowed back into the ward. Her parents and sister were there, but their faces were red, streaked with tears. She mimed a writing action, and her mother reached into her bag to fetch the pen and paper which she always carried around with her, just in case Faye's speaking device stopped working. Her doctor came into the room.

"Faye," her mother said, her voice warbling, wavering as she handed over the pad of paper. She tried to stay composed, to assure Faye that there was nothing to worry about, but Faye could tell that there was.

Am I going to die? Faye scribbled on the paper.

Those five small words seemed to fill the entire room, with both screaming and silence simultaneously.

"Nobody lives forever," her mother replied. Her voice cracked. "I'm so sorry, my angel. You're very sick..." She shook her head, and buried her face in her hands. Taking a deep breath, she continued. "The doctors will perform their magic, they'll try very hard but you have to keep fighting, we're here

for you darling..." But Faye couldn't hear her anymore. She didn't want to be sick. Her sickness, her curse, had already stolen her voice, and her hair.

"Faye, there's a lady here to see you. She's just going to have a little talk to you okay? Remember there is always joy and strength to be found, even in the darkest of places. She is from an organisation who wants to help remind you of that." At that moment, a lady, wearing a blue hospital gown came into the ward. She had chocolate brown curls, and eyes which were greener than grass. *My Fairy Godmother*, Faye thought.

"Faye," she said. "My name is Ethel." To Faye, her voice sounded like tinkling bells.

Over the next two weeks, Faye came to trust Ethel. They seemed to move quickly past the barrier of language and soon Faye was genuinely looking forward to the days when Ethel would come in to talk to her. On one such day, Ethel asked Faye a question which changed her perception on her prognosis.

"If you had one wish, what would it be?"

Easy! Faye wrote. *That I magically wasn't sick and that my hair and voice would come back!* She looked up at Ethel, but could not place her expression. It was wistful, full of a subtle sadness, her eyes filled with the ghost of a smile.

"Someone once said, 'We do not need magic to transform our world. We carry all of the power we need inside ourselves already.'"

The princess gazed up at the lady. My Fairy Godmother, she thought. She will use her magic to rid me of this curse... These thoughts flitted and danced through her head like fireflies. It was as if the lady could hear her thoughts, for she said, "My child, I cannot rid you of this curse. Some curses cannot be broken, just as some wishes cannot be granted. There is evil, and sadness in this world, but there is also kindness, strength, beauty and truth, which live inside of you."

With that, the auburn-haired lady was gone, but so were the princess' thoughts of sorrow and fear. No longer afraid, the princess closed her eyes. She slept for one hundred years.

Sometimes

Sometimes I get scared
That I will grow up too easily,
Feel the inescapable stress of adulthood
Then slip away slowly at a ripe old age.
I will leave without a trace

In time I will be forgotten.
My name may be whispered
While sticky fingers touch my face
And I will be nothing but a dusty photo,
A paper thin memory.

Even if the world was my oyster
And I gallivanted around the globe
And protested for a better world!
It is everyone else's oyster too
And some places cannot remain untouched.

One day we will all fade,
And even our gravestones will crumble
And the world will slowly collapse
And all that will be left standing
Will be a dark bottomless void, filled with our untold secrets.



The Day The Whites Wore Black

She was sweating feelings. Her entire body was tense. Her breathing was uneven, she heaved in minims and exhaled in quavers.

“Sabine, are you okay?” Zach stared into Sabine’s green eyes, but they were cloudy and distant. “It’s like you’re not here.”

The moon was perched behind a thin mass of clouds and breathed rays onto the tombstones, as a soft wind whistled through the chilling air. Sabine regained consciousness and stumbled to a standing. Her mother and father turned from their eldest daughter’s grave, shrouded in flowers and melancholy, to meet eyes with their still living children. Zach’s blue eyes, which normally sparkled like rippling water, had dimmed. He stared at his crying sister, refusing the tears their turn down his face. His funeral suit was ironed and crisply creased, but he still looked crushed. Sabine wasn’t coping, she felt the blood coursing through her veins lose its colour, as her heartbeat became a slow and steady staccato.

Sabine tried to soothe herself against the thrashing anxiety and the hysterics. She concentrated hard, trying to remember what her sister had said, in that eloquent way she always did; “*The clouds will part, the sun will rise, you’re okay. Heave in a deep breath and heave it right back out. You’re fine. Promise.*” Rhea was the one person who’d given her a hand out of the bottomless pit of perpetual despair two years ago, when the black dog bit at her chest.

After the service, the family walked back to their car like wounded soldiers after losing the battle. There were no stars, only a white opal gleaming in the darkness of a thick foggy atmosphere. Rhea was an inconstant star her family had orbited and circled even as it was setting. The west was black now. The sun had died.

They knew what they had to do. They’d all agreed. Tonight they were going to clean out Rhea’s bedroom. They walked inside tentatively and Zach flicked on the switch. They felt a sort of goodness and closure, seeing everything that Rhea was – clothes strewn across the floor flung anywhere and everywhere, trinkets and debating medals balancing on the shelves, family photos in dusty frames.

But Sabine wavered. She flung the words into the air as her knees faltered. “It should’ve been me.” Slowly, the four words drifted down and struck her family. The words shot them like the gun that took their Rhea.

Sabine had felt the guilt from the moment she’d heard the news. “*Rhea’s dead.*” The words blared in her face and the lights around her had bled into each other. All she could see was a red that roared behind her eyes. It could’ve been her. A year ago it would’ve been her. Sabine had been so ready to just end. And just when she’d found the light again, death loosened his grasp on her and took another, the closest person to her. It was so typically tragic.

Among the fumbling stares of her family, that darted across the room between her parents and brother and fell onto their faces in shock, her weak body straggled onto her feet.

“I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.” She un-tacked a Polaroid of herself and Rhea that was stuck on Rhea’s bedside table and stifled a few deep breaths.

Everybody’s sighs cannoned and echoed each other’s. Zach was holding Rhea’s diary and had been skimming the pages.

“She didn’t want us to miss her.” Zach swallowed, hugging his knees, his back erect to the cold wall.

“Zach, she didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“I mean when she left home. That’s what she told me.”

“I don’t want your pity little brother.” Zach’s bright eyes looked up at his sister. Her titian hair fell gently down her shoulders. She smiled at him.

“I know I didn’t get into law, that’s fine, it obviously wasn’t fated for me.” Rhea liked to use words like fated. It was one of the things they all missed, the interjection of glorious and unnecessary vocabulary.

“And I know you’re a teenager and you’re doing your own thing, but I know you love me. And I don’t want you to miss me when I move out. Promise.” Zach had just nodded, smiled and wandered away. It was a perfect moment for a hug, and what would he give to hug her now.

As they ruffled through Rhea's possessions and folded all her clothes, the family uncovered some things they hadn't planned to.

A box of condoms under the bed startled George. Upon their discovery, in an instant, hundreds of thoughts about his daughter swirled before him in a vortex that he couldn't escape. He saw visions of her leaving the house in the evenings to go to some party or when she returned from "just a sleepover at Nancy's house." Everything suddenly came into question. He cleared his throat and chucked them into the garbage awkwardly, creasing his brow. He couldn't ask her about it now.

An angry diary entry about an argument Annika had had with Rhea filled her with tender upset. Sabine found her favourite shirt she'd thought she lost tucked away at the back of Rhea's drawer. She'd pressed Rhea with questions of its whereabouts, and Rhea had said that she didn't have a clue. Sabine had always believed her older sister. Zach took back \$50 from under her mattress she'd owed him since September. He felt a strange tinge of closure creeping inside, but it seemed like he was the only one.

It was like they'd all taken a step back from her body and looked at it from a different angle. She wasn't perfect. But, did they know her at all? They tried to purge their minds of the doubts that kept reviving themselves, for her sake, because they'd never really know.

The next morning, dewdrops made the plants shiver in the misty dawn and pink crested on the horizon before opening up into a clearing that drew away the fog of yesterday. They hung up their black formal wear to dry as the sun glazed the garden in its midday lustre. Mrs White donated most of Rhea's old clothes and Sabine placed all of the family photos in her room. Day by day they stripped down Rhea's room, recovered some lost memories and packed away the past. She was the greatest and the worst thing that had ever blessed their painfully painless lives, and it would take a long time, but they were going to realise that Rhea was always going to be there for them.

Whoever she was.

"Promise."

The Play Goes On

It all starts with a single phrase,
A word.
Down further you hear the syllable, the vowel, the sharp consonant,
The meaning.

It courses through you,
Charging through your mind –
A weightlessness as your kite floats without help
Motionless in the summer air

Suspended. But you are unable to unleash,
To leave the constraints behind and fly
Freely.
But the powerful play goes on

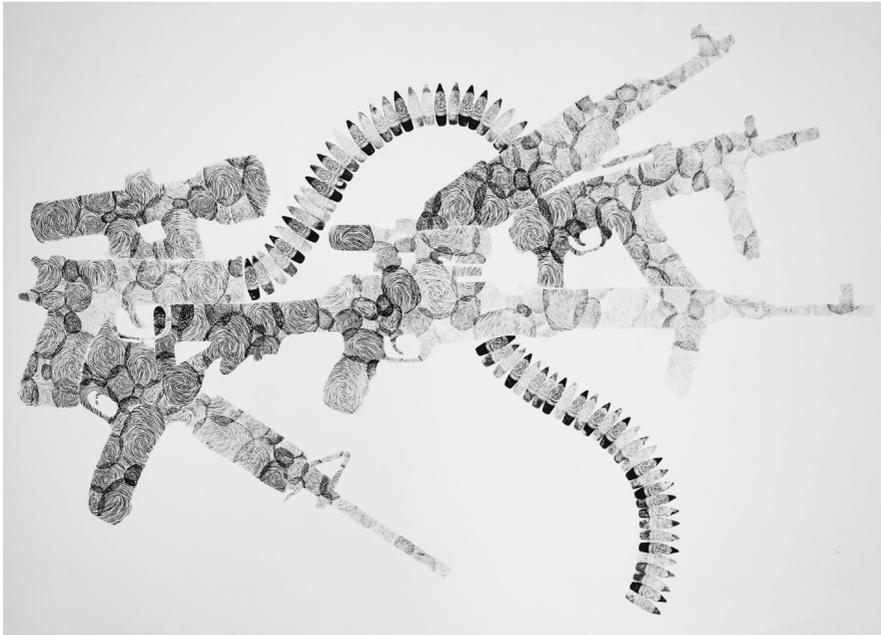
And it nudges at your insides and sparks great
Discomfort in your bones.
It wants freedom from your glassy bowels,
Slippery tongue, rusty teeth.

The play goes on,
The lyrical music pervading your mind,
Breaking down the steely barrier.
Escape, escape, escape.

And then it is free,
Leaving you behind,
A cold feeling as you search for it,
The dark drafty chamber of your heart left
Alone.

You watch your kite rise,
Rise up
Beyond the ground,
The clouds.

You grab at the string,
Try to pull it back down, back down to you
But it severs and is
Gone, gone, gone.



Zwei Brötchen: Two Bread Rolls

Cold fingers and patchy mittens.
A dirty ball and scuffed brown boots.
Shoot, score, win.
A victory lap, hands raised high.
But so much more mattered.

The heroes were watching.

Emil wove with the ball, dodging the half-hearted kicks from the other boys with a great amount of effort. His fiery energy seared the wandering snowflakes nearby, melting behind him in a wake of slush. Cowering buildings with walls more threadbare than his jacket shrank with trepidation, shaking, shivering, sobbing. Frozen saviours pegged into the ground were the undeclared boundaries of the game, the perimeter of childish rapture.

Emil wanted to impress. He needed to be noticed. He had everything but notice.

And a normal brother.

Emil swirled and kicked, worn shoes slick on the crude cobbles.

Goal after goal after goal after goal. But always missing the target.

Iridescent golden strands and concentrated empyrean eyes.

This time he would get the nod.

With knees bent and toes pointed, Emil was ready. He would be seen. He would be noticed. Finally he would—

“Emil, Mutti says that brushing your teeth once a day keeps the dentist away. What does that mean? Is the dentist scared of clean teeth?”

Leander shuffled into Emil's line of sight, knobby fingers fidgeting and clenching a jagged piece of cobble that he had discovered while investigating the path.

Thick coils of inky rage choked Emil's throat, slicing and throbbing. Again, again. Another chance messed up by a messed up brother. All he wanted was for his heroes to acknowledge him. He wanted to be part of the future, a future of joy and purity.

A future his brother should never be a part of.

Emil's eyes cut wounds to the bone, but Leander saw nothing, tilting his head quizzically, waiting for the answer to his question.

"Emil?" The name that was also a question slipped out and splashed on the ground in a puddle. Emil stomped through the spoiling word as he shouldered past Leander.

"Emil?" Leander scuttled after him, long legs easily matching the stride of their shorter companions. "Why are you walking so fast? Do dentists upset you? They upset me, their hands are too dirty, infections infections infections!" His hands still fiddled with the cobble, jostling not with nerves but with a habitual tick and a fevering passion.

"Leave me alone, Leander."

"Did you know that the most infections found in hospitals are caused by—"

"I said leave me alone." Emil turned and shoved Leander, a violent push of words and hands. Leander stumbled, confusion splayed across his face like a mask of thick paint. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Gangly limbs and vehement emotions left Leander with scraped knees, crouched in bewilderment as his younger brother marched off.

His feet already matching the rhythm of a soldier.

The parched warmth of Emil's home was bliss compared to the sodden winter outside. It was a loving hug enveloping him in thirsty arms, but all Emil wanted was to punch. And scream. And cry.

But that would make him just like Leander.

So instead, Emil did his chores.

He shoveled coal darker than his thoughts.

He scrubbed the dishes with hands colder than the biting air.

He fed chickens scrawnier than the human putrid wastes that staggered down in herds to be liberated by the liberators.

All done in a manner of fuming indignation and bitterness.

Emil physically ached with malice when Leander shyly lurched through the front door, fingers glowing red-hot as he clenched the handle of his broom. He glared as Leander tottered like an infant in the direction of Mutti's room, obviously going to complain like a child ten years younger than him. Emil bent his head back down; there was nothing he could do about it. But this knowledge did not prevent him from churning with spite.

His blistering animosity was not even evanesced by dinner time. For he knew that all dinner was these days was a bowl of pea soup. No bread, no meat, no smile.

But this day would surprise him

Because this day was special.

They had an extra ration card.

"Emil, Leander," Mutti tinkled, "Look what I have." With a deft slip of words and fingers Mutti unveiled a new item to their menu, a crisp piece of yellow paper, seemingly golden with the elation it brought.

"Zwei Brötchen," breathed Emil, reaching up to snatch it from her benevolent fingertips.

"Ah ah, you can only get it if you and your brother go together peacefully to the market." Mutti gave a pointed look to the both of them, her eyes her only sharp feature. "One for the both of you." The ration card twirled and fluttered as she tapped them tenderly on their noses.

"Yes Mutti," Leander chanted obediently, setting Emil into a state of disdainful eye rolling. Mutti, who noticed everything, placed the card in Leander's elongated palms.

"Now off you trot you two!"

The writhing chill carved their skin as they fought towards the market, a lamenting wind pushing them back in its painful misery. Frozen mud gnawed through their thin boots as they faltered past scurrying rats and people. The glimmer of the window front radiated impossibly bright through the murky air, a beacon of warmth and food. They trod forward, hunger and hope stronger than the furious elements of a winter's evening.

A simple alliance was formed as they shoved through the door, however short-lived.

"Look at all the food!" Leander exclaimed in ecstasy, eyes pirouetting with awe, hands swaying back and forth with incredulity. "Let's get our Brötchen Emil! Hot and toasty like Oma always used to make!"

"Give me the ticket, I will get it." Hand raised condescendingly and aged beyond its eleven years.

"No, Mutti gave it to me!" Leander stepped forward, slapping the ration card down in determination.

Another eye roll.

"Zwei Brötchen, bitte," Leander chimed, a glorious grin spreading across his stumbling features.

"Sorry, last one sold five minutes ago." Not even glancing up from his paper.

"Was?" Leander's face faltered.

"You heard me, no more left."

"But sir, there has to be, we have a ration card. See?" His finger jabbed erratically, poking the card with agitation.

"Come back tomorrow."

"But you can't, you can't, see we have a card. Can't you see it?" Jabbing escalating to a brutal stabbing.

"Kid, just leave me alone."

"But can't you see it? It's right here, right..." Leander halted as Emil placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on Lee, we'll come back another time,"

“But we’re here NOW!” Leander’s words shifted into a scream, pitching and echoing across the room and out the store in a fit of maniacal disorder.

“Lee, we have to go now,” Emil’s light touch evolving into a desperate tugging, trying to hold and pull his brother before he got in too deep.

But it was all over by then.

A damaged boy could only last so long.

Screaming and yanking and punching and crying. Bruises and fists and blood and bread. The angels outside heard, marching in with nightmares sewn onto their sleeves.

They saw Leander writhing on the floor. They dragged him out, howling and spitting.

“Where are you taking my brother?” Small fists hammered on broad backs.

“The race must be perfect, purge the impurity.”

“Please, no. He’s my brother.”

Emil was left alone that night.

And for all the nights after.

Cold fingers and patchy mittens.
A dirty ball and scuffed brown boots.
Shoot, score, win.
A victory lap, hands raised high.
But so much more mattered.

The *monsters* were watching.

Dinner Time

It was six o'clock in the morning and Mrs Eliza Caprizzia awoke with a rare sense of satisfaction. With her coffee mug in hand – Moccona with a drop of milk – she walked out of the kitchen, down the hallway, past David's room, past George who was still fast asleep and snoring on the couch, past the hanging cross with the little Jesus that stared down on her, down the stairs, around the corner and into the laundry that seemed to be a catastrophe as usual. Mrs Caprizzia stared at the endless piles of clothes; the work shirt that sported the remnants of bolognese sauce, the school uniform smudged not with the usual dirt and grass, but dried spaghetti sauce and her own aprons, battered and butchered by her frustration in cooking dinner the night before...

With fury – sharp, slicing fury – Mrs Caprizzia diced the tomatoes. Two cans diced tomatoes, the recipe read, but in an effort to pay tribute to George's Italian roots, Mrs Caprizzia decided to dice them herself. She had overheard the conversation between Maria and Nona Patrizia.

“Incapable!”

“What would her mother think?”

And as they swayed from one word to the next, moved their hands up and down, from left to right and shook their heads in disgrace, they thought Mrs Caprizzia hadn't heard. But the words lived on. No matter how hard she tried to lock them in a cupboard at the back of her mind, throw away the key, they always found a way to run through her thoughts like children playing catch. It was all too much, too overwhelming. She wasn't used to being on the outside looking in, the one being talked about, words insidiously mincing her desire to please them. It made her queasy inside, a sick churning in the pit of her stomach. But after all, George loved her. Of course he did...

Preparation time 25 minutes, serves 4.

Six years ago, they knocked three times before she answered.

“It will all be fine!” George had said, “Just be yourself.” Eliza thought it must be true. “How could they not like my darling Eliza Jones, a Caprizzia to be?” Despite George's certainty, Eliza could not seem to shake the

butterflies out of her stomach. There was something uneasy, something forced, a longing for acceptance as she stood on that front porch. Eliza wasn't Italian, no matter how hard she tried to be and she started to believe that her father was right.

"You're marrying that George bloke? That wog? Eliza, you ain't Italian! You don't even like spaghetti!" Eliza refused to believe him. She loved George. "This ought to be interesting, bloody interesting! You're kidding yourself, kid." But deep down, Eliza knew that it was true. Eliza Jones marrying an Italian. An Italian. It sure gave the neighbours a good laugh.

But as she stood on that front porch, the reality of her situation became clearer to her than ever. Her hair was pulled back at the hairline, tied in a neat bun. She seemed to have pulled it back tighter than usual and although tying her hair in a bun everyday had become a subconscious act, she could not help feeling that today, something had gone wrong. It was all too flat, too tight and tugged at the corners of her eyes. Instant facelift, she recalled seeing in a tattered magazine she read at the hairdresser's. Look younger, it read. George clasped her hand in his, a "don't worry" smile widening across his face. He sensed the tension in her shoulders, the build-up of anxiety, her light-headedness, and the dizzy spell that cast over her and embraced her in a suffocating hug. But with the turn of a key, a doorknob, an inward sway of the wooden door, the two were greeted in the usual Italian way.

"They're here! Loro sono qui! Loro sono qui!" The old woman's Italian echoed through the house and as she turned to face her, Eliza sensed an air of disappointment.

"What's for dinner, Ma?" George said as he kissed her on both cheeks.

"Bolognese," Nona Patrizia replied, staring at Eliza with pursed lips, uncertainty and general disbelief. Even her presence was wrong. They didn't want her there; let alone marrying their son.

"Mamma Mia! How could this happen to my son? We raised him in the right way. We christened him, we took him to Church. And now he's marrying a stranger, una straniera!"

And in their home, she was a stranger. Eliza couldn't cook like the Nonas and Zias that George had been brought up by. She couldn't pray like his brothers and his father. She didn't belong there and they made it clear that she didn't belong amongst them...

Cook onion, mince and celery in saucepan. The plastic bag ran red with blood as she emptied the meat into the saucepan. It splatted in a large pink heap, falling apart at the edges.

Add tomatoes, oregano, bring to boil, simmer. George would be home soon and what more could she please him with than his favourite meal. Mrs Caprizzia loved George, even when cooking bolognese like his mother, or going to church like his father, or raising David as she was expected to. Incapable. She wasn't. She wouldn't be.

Remove from heat. Leave to cool. But in her home, after all these years, she had finally succeeded. She picked up George's work shirt, her finger tracing the splatter of bolognese sauce, not Nona Patrizia's, not Maria's, but her own, Eliza Caprizzia's Italian Bolognese Sauce. With a widening grin, Mrs Caprizzia put the shirt in a bucket to soak. And she knew that the stain would be gone by tomorrow. And that she would have it ready for George by the day after. And he would put it on and go to work as usual. And when he came home, she would be waiting for him. And she would make the dinner again tomorrow.



Mrs Graham's Party

There was a plaque over the kitchen bench, staring Julia Graham down that read: 'Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, at the worst possible moment.' It was Murphy's Law, which seemed to hold true, if you believed in that sort of thing. The flowers certainly did, fresh this morning and already wilting. They'd look ghastly by the time Julia gave them to Mum. But it was dead hot, and Julia felt like wilting too.

It had been a long time planning the party, Mum's sixtieth. Mum didn't like parties and would probably be a little nonplussed – she didn't need reminding she was old – but the boys wanted it, wanted any excuse for a party. Yet it was luckless Julia hosting it, in her post-stamp sized apartment. John was on his second marriage with three kids under four who'd wreak havoc, their mother didn't like Teddy's girlfriend and Seb's wife was hosting a book club in which they largely ate cake, as far as Julia could work out. So it was Julia – unmarried and unencumbered – who would have to host it. She'd rather listen to the radio, and not worry about whether she'd put three eggs or four in the cake. Probably no one would notice, except Murphy and his law who noted it as the first of a long line of things that were sure to go wrong that night.

The doorbell rang and Julia paused a moment to sigh, world-wearily, before beginning the night's charade of goodwill. She picked up a rogue tea-towel on the way and wiped her hands on it as she opened the door, pretending she had been busy. As Julia opened the door, all she could see was the western sun, hitting her full in the face. But even the smudged silhouette looked sulky and supercilious, and Julia knew it must be Teddy. 'Smells delicious,' though they both knew her cooking was terrible. Julia grinned and knew it was going to be a long haul. She took Teddy's plump, healthy, crisp and wonderful salad and put it on the table next to her feeble offerings.

A trail of distant relatives and unknown friends began waltzing into her home like an invading army, though not nearly so well organised. By the time the sky outside had faded to a quiet lollipop pink, someone had found the

music, someone else the telly. Teddy was next to the table with a spinach triangle in one hand, and already reaching for the grapes with his other. He threw a grape into his mouth with the same arrogant ease he had when he was ten and first learnt to do it, before adjusting his tie and fiddling with his inheritance-worthy cufflinks. Julia flicked her hair from her face, noticing it was the same colour as it had been on that picnic when she was seven and Teddy had learnt to catch grapes in his mouth, and she remembered their great aunt's disapproval of the nice new hair cut she had recently given herself with the child safe scissors.

Teddy moved off with a look of earnest intent, the same look he used to read the newspaper, or to tell Julia how her cooking could be improved. Teddy walked back past Julia, carrying two full wine glasses and a look of triumph. She watched Teddy's tie, saw it flap before she realised he had tripped, and spilt the best red wine on the hired rug, and on their great aunt.

Oops.

A silence, which prolonged itself. To be broken only by their great aunt, worried about her dress and her great aunt brooch. There was a quiet rustle that grew to a roar, and everyone turned back to talk to another relative they didn't know. Julia looked at the hired rug. Teddy stood with the empty wine glasses in his hand. Julia thanked God she'd found the less fancy glasses in time, and that Teddy had the presence of mind to hold them out of the way as he fell.

Julia took the glasses from Teddy, who smiled at her, apologetically, and they found some wipes and spray for the rug. Julia noticed Teddy's smile, utterly embarrassed, but with a trace of his smugness. It was a smile that had always hung awkwardly, and generally meant he had spilt something hot or expensive. Julia remembered him smiling like that when she was four and he seven, and they'd slipped out between the gate and the fence (because walking out the front door was practical, but not sufficiently secretive), and walked down to the café to buy Mum a coffee. She remembered the smell of the café that day, spitting with the tang of coffee and bacon, and that's

what Julia smelt as she watched Teddy spill it across their mother and cry out, waking baby Seb again. Mum's wrath was as hot as the coffee. And when they were sent to sit on the stairs (sitting three apart), Julia was angry with Teddy, because it wasn't her fault. Teddy shuffled up the stairs, always looking down, keeping an eye out for Mum, until he was on Julia's stair. He plaited her hair, the way Julia liked it, and said how he liked that the house smelt of coffee now.

Back in her apartment, Julia and Teddy were crouched over the carpet, Julia's hair tumbling down in a curtain of frustration. Teddy tucked Julia's hair back, and said you could smell the wine better now it wasn't in the glass. Julia chuckled a little, and, briefly, looked on Teddy with the respectful eyes of a four year old. But the cleaning bill was yet to be paid. Julia thanked God Mum didn't like parties, and hadn't come to this one.

Julia

Julia lay on the coach, trying to stay afloat in her own sticky sweat, a result of her prolonged fever. Bacteria gathered in the flaky folds of her skin, building a small community of disease and pain. Every bone in her body ached from lying for too long. With difficulty she forced her muscles to contract, pulling herself up into a half crouching, half sitting position. Her maroon blanket slid off her ancient body, landing in a heap on the ground.

“Mother?” Her daughter’s raspy voice slithered through the house, travelling on the worn wooden floorboards and the lace that linked all the corners of the aging house.

Julia opened her mouth with the intention of replying, but her voice was stuck behind the wall of mucus barricading her throat.

“Mother!” The woman sounded more desperate. Her words danced in anxiety, tugging on Julia, begging her to reply. Finally, Julia’s answer pushed through the barricade and she answered with a wavering voice,

“Here, darling.”

A head of vivacious red curls, inherited from the hair salon, and stunning blue eyes appeared at the low doorframe.

“Oh mother! Look at the state you’re in!” Hurriedly, the younger woman carried her pleasantly plump body over to Julia. Now that they were within close distance, it was obvious that they were related. Both had been pretty in their prime, but time had erased their beauty, leaving only the same hooked noses and pale European skin.

“David, the kids and I are going out now. I’m sorry you can’t join us...” The daughter frowned at Julia while picking up the blanket. But when she placed it over her mother, her hands were gentle.

“We’ll be back in an hour. I’ll bring some water over before I go. You be good now, mother.”

Julia sighed impatiently while her daughter waddled away. She hated the silence of the house as she waited for the girl to come home. Sometimes she was out so late with David. And she couldn’t even see the kiddies these

days. Something about her getting infected. For goodness sake, she was already lying in a bed, drugged into a state of complacency. She doubted grubby little fingertips and dirt smudged faces would harm her. Yet Julia knew the hidden message behind her daughter's caring words: don't get sicker. Don't make the children sick; don't infect them with your insidious disease.

A little voice in her head shouted about the aching agony as Julia slowly lowered herself back on the bed. A small groan sneakily slipped past her lips. And then her back hit the cushiony bed and she was surrounded by the stench of slick bed sheets and unwashed nightclothes. She'd ask her daughter to open the window later, let in some of the breeze. Leveling out her breaths, she drifted into a state of semi-consciousness.

The sunlight washed through the window, shadows changing as the clouds drifted by, accompanying the sun on its stroll through the sky. Slowly the darkness elongated, swallowing the pale yellow glint on the edge of photo frames, obscuring the clock face with its short hand that pointed to a swirly six. Voices walked past the window and slips of conversation squeezed themselves into the house and up to Julia's ears... hurrying home... back before sundown... early back from work, we're having roast pork tonight... At last Julia could tolerate the weak light no longer. She would have to face the pain of sitting up again. Unimpressed she muttered, "That girl, late again... said she'd be back in a hour..."

Bones grinding and creaking, Julia stiffly rose and shuffled over to the light switch. She flicked the lever up, but the lights remained stubbornly black. Silly little thing. She flicked again, but still the room was covered in darkness. A lump settled in the pit of Julia's stomach which had nothing to do with the bile clumped in her throat. Nervously she tried the switch again, and again. Still no light as the horizon dragged down the setting sun, regurgitating inky blackness as a meager substitute for radiant sunlight.

Terror gripped Julia, shaking her back and forth, squeezing out strangled cries. Her body almost like a marionette, strings jerked Julia back towards

her bed. Pain from the illness was replaced with a suffocating fear. Where was her daughter? It must have been a fuse. But Julia knew her knees would not take her to the basement. The only thing to do would be to wait. Choking back cries and sobs, Julia raised her hands to her face. A small, sad attempt to block out the night around her.

Rocking forwards and then back again she waited. But the noise of a key in the lock never drifted to her ears, bringing a message of salvation.

Julia could taste the salty mixture of tears and mucus as it gushed past her lips. Slowly, bit by bit, she could feel herself unraveling. A slow trickle slid down past her thighs, marking the sheets with her fear. Mortified, Julia did nothing, nothing at all. Because she couldn't. What could she do? Where was her daughter?



Forsaken

The pavement rushes past beneath me. Head down, I examine its freckles of gum and cigarette butts closely, desperately hoping Brandon will be distracted.

“Did you hear me Erin?” He tugs on my hand, so that I have no excuse but to awaken from my pretence.

“Sorry?”

Brandon looks awkward now that I acknowledge him. He rethinks his approach.

“Oh, it’s just... well...” Faking a cough, he sputters, “What happened between you and your mum?”

I feel vertigo, nausea. I’ve tried to bury memories of my life with my mother deep beneath the façade I’m building for myself; now it feels like Brandon is cutting a shaft into my past, and pushing me down the hole.

Closest to the surface is my usual refrain: the pat biography that I shield myself with to deflect prying questions. Of how after my father died, I worked hard to become the artist I am today and all that crap. But I feel I owe more to Brandon. He makes me feel secure, and I know that if I push him away I would be a fool. So instead, I allow myself to slip into the darkness of my past, for our future’s sake.

It was a grey summer’s day when my Pa died. My Nonna told me in the only six syllables that directly addressed his death – “Erin, your Pa is dead.”

Nonna was my father’s mother. After she heard the news herself, I recall her slowly settling the faded Bakelite phone back into its cradle, and twisting its spiralling cord anxiously around her finger. Her gentle face, textured with a landscape of lines, crumpled into a burdened frown. The elements had thrown a fit on the night of my father’s death. A thunderstorm and lashing rain clawed at the windows while lightning had spasms above us. It seemed as though, just like us, the world was bawling at the unjustness of our loss. My mother came home even later than usual that night. I remember her

opening the door, and standing panting in the doorway, while the sky lit up in ecstatic flashes behind her. Her clothes and hair were drenched, and mascara dripped down her cheeks as she bent double and howled. Nonna, who had been trying to protect me from reality all day, dissolved in sorrow, drawing her hand across her mouth and clenching her fist as she gasped, as if suffocated by the pain. The only time I can recall my mother and my grandmother being on the same side was that evening, united by grief.

Unlike my mother and my grandmother, it didn't occur to me to wonder how life could ever rectify itself from this point. I was twelve, and death was still only a concept. Pa had simply slipped from existence into the ashes that rested on the mantelpiece. That bizarre summer was as interminable as the messages and flowers of sympathy we received. It appeared that everyone who had known my father was touched by his death. Touched enough to send yet another frozen meal, but not so touched as to visit us. We were left, isolated in our own misery, as if our loss was contagious.

After Pa died, my mother came home later and later with every night that passed. Our bins became heavy with glass bottles, my mother's mulberry lipstick around the rims. She had always walked a tightrope. Since I could remember, she had teetered between mania and despondency. When my Pa was around though, he held her hand and kept her stable, but in his absence she plunged into the tentacles of depression once again.

Nonna left soon after Pa passed away. She clearly did not see my mother and I as justifications for staying in that sordid downtown apartment. My mother did not keep her job for long, and when I returned to school after those holidays, she stopped going out at all, spending her days alone in her musty room with the curtains drawn. She no longer had the energy to drag herself from the sheets, let alone to be a mother. As I trudged home from school every evening, I dreaded the moment when I would open the door to the mute hallway and hear the repeated mutation of the clink of the keys in the bare corridor. To me, that was the sound of my mother's neglect.

In the afternoons I procrastinated my inevitable return home. I would paint with the school art teacher, Miss McCallum. She was a slight lady with a gentle smile and Scottish elocution. Engrossed in my work, this was

the only time that I could wash away my misery. Miss McCallum told me that I had potential, which was, to me, a ray of sunshine on a winter day. I was able to keep myself going through the onus of everyday, because of this belief that I had potential; that there was a future waiting for me. One of my paintings won first prize in a charity art show, and, stirred by my joy, my mother even promised to come to the gallery night. Honestly, this was more valuable to me than winning first prize.

My mother did not come though. While I stood forlornly at the door of the gallery, desperate to see her, I felt more and more alone as each person arrived. Later that night, as I tore up the stairs to our apartment, I could not decide if I was furious or heartbroken.

“Mama!” I shrieked, storming into her bedroom. From the sliver of window where the curtains failed to meet, a pathway of moonlight illuminated her room. She lay in bed in a cocktail dress, cradling a bottle while sucking her thumb and shivering. Her shabby doona lay on the floor, amongst discarded dresses and makeup.

“Mama!” I wailed, louder this time. “Where were you? You promised you would be there Mama, you promised!” By now, tears were pooling down my cheeks. “I hate you! I hate you so much!”

“Erin, I, I—” Her voice was croaky at first, but soon erupted in a sob. “You know I haven’t always been like this!”

I clenched my eyelids shut, only to find memories flickering through my mind like an old projector film. Of Mama guiding my hand as we skimmed a pebble across the water in one, two, three graceful bounds. Of the forts that we built from our doonas and pillows where she would whisper stories. Of her shrill of laughter as we had a flour fight in the kitchen. Of course she had not always been like this. But in that moment, I wanted to punish my mother, to hurt her just as she had hurt me. I bit my lip and scowled, “Yes you have. You’ve always been like this Mama.”

I succeeded. My mother was fragile. As she ran her fingers through her hair and wept, I could see that she had shattered.

A shudder pushes through me, and I feel the prickle of goose bumps rising from my skin. The epiphany stings bitterly. I had always thought that my mother had abandoned me, that she had given me up to her depression. Only now do I realise that I was the one who walked away from her.

Brandon delicately squeezes my shoulder, and I stagger out of my reverie.

“Erin?” Brandon chooses his words delicately. “Let’s just keep walking.”

The Empty Stage

These façades of originality
Mask true emotions
Yet the audience is judging
Watching carefully
Like a snake does its prey
Ready to pounce
And sink its fangs into your body
With metallic venom of remorse

We can all contribute a verse
Altering the plot
Yet the ending is always mundane
A lifeless reality
Every verse will alter the next
Shaping society like clay
Squeezing and moulding it
Until it is dry and brittle

The drumming and droning of heartbeats
Form one constant headache
A headache of madness
Sounds of crying voices fill the room
Each wanting to tell their story
Contribute a meaningless soliloquy
That they hope will alter your judgement
Your brutal, barbaric Judgement

And you will wear your costume
Attach strings to your body
As the narrator guides your frail ligaments
Across the empty stage
But let the play go on
But let the crowd applaud
And let the audience smile
As you stand there and bow to your predators

Hypothetical Authenticity

Rosa cleans. Her breasts jiggle to an unknown rhumba, bouncing joyfully with the dust. Flounces of lace nestle above her nipples as she bends over, cleaning the desk. All you really want to do is walk straight up to her and grab...

The sound of the phone broke Michael from his writing.

He dropped his pen and listened for the message.

No message.

He'd call the number later.

Without warning Rosa entered his office, yelling at him in shrill Spanish. Her voice pierced through the clatter of her vacuum cleaner, "dirty pig", "moron", "your poor mother". Michael lifted himself from the chair and stared directly at the blousy woman - more than a head shorter than himself - as she continued her usual rant. He forced himself not to laugh at the way *her hips swayed sexily to the right*.

Rosa had been the first of his characters to visit and she was determined to change him. The first time she had appeared Michael was sure he had finally lost it, reached the infamous point that some of the more 'eccentric authors' eventually reach – the point of creative confusion when creation becomes life and life, creation. He had written about her just the night before at 2:47am, created the *dimple in her cheek as through carved by angels*. And the next day, she had showed up at his apartment, knocking on the door with her very real hands, exactly as he had imagined her. For days he wouldn't let himself listen to Rosa, eat her cooking, or accept the blunt blows of cleaning utensils. He couldn't give in to the madness. Yet Rosa was so palpable, so real and the blows she administered to his head were so forceful they left his it ringing indelibly. After a week of ignoring her, he accepted defeat.

He wasn't surprised that Rosa had arrived. He had not left his apartment in over a month. He had everything he needed delivered to the door. Once, he encountered someone in the halls as he scuttled to receive the countless bills and occasional abusive letter from his publisher demanding a story,

but he merely slinked back into his pocket-sized apartment in the middle of Kings Cross with the bathtub in the same room as the oven and the neighbours who fought in Russian.

Keys, lock, open door, close door, lock. Silence.

He was so fast at the routine that he had stopped running into anyone at all. He was a weedy sort of man, verging on a mid-life crisis. He was unfit, smoked and never wore anything other than a deteriorating red velvet dressing gown over Target boxers. He didn't really receive any visits; even his mother had stopped phoning a few weeks before, finally tired of his answering machine. But it didn't matter to Michael, because Rosa would come every morning with some exotic dish to serve him for breakfast and leave at night just after she had fed him. The sex was wildly ferocious but tender, *her black hair streaming across the stained bed sheets as she moaned in ecstasy*. She was the perfect wife without any of the marital obligation. She would lecture him on his deep failings but he knew it was all in good spirit, merely a lover's spat. However, he could never listen beyond the first sentence, her voice drowned out by his own rhumba.

But one day, Rosa didn't come back. She had gone through the usual procedure of beating Michael over the head with the duster, yet by the time he was preparing himself for the final fight of the night, she had quietly retreated into the hallway. She had cooked his dinner and left silently. She had not returned the next morning, or the morning after. After five days, Michael resigned himself to the fact that she had given up and would not be returning.

It grew still in his apartment and Michael yearned for Rosa's sharp bludgeon to the temple and soft skin. But no matter how much he wished her to return, she did not. Finally, Michael grew tired of the agonising silence, so he wrote himself a James.

Seventeen. Brown eyes. Brown hair. Tall, skinny, no job, no school, or rather assumes that attendance isn't compulsory. Parents divorced. Plays video games daily if not hourly. Likes Michael...

And that night, James arrived. He burst through the door in a drunken mess and flopped onto the couch. He had liked James immensely, loved him even as if he were his own son. James was loud, even louder than Rosa. *He never washed his hair, letting the greasy juices fester and congeal. The rotten smell of teenage sweat swamped the senses.* James would grumble for hours on end at Michael about his parents' divorce when he was just nine and the teachers who had it in for him at school. It was the kind of conversation Michael wished he still had with his son. But, when he suggested to James that maybe he try to change his ways, forgive his parents, move on and find a good girl, James flicked his cigarette onto the wooden table and scoffed in his face, "Too clichéd for me, Pops." He left, stumbling out the door like a car with a flattened tire. He didn't come back either.

Without James or Rosa, the silence crept into the dark places of his rattled mind. He had no visitors – tangible or imaginary. He had no phone calls. And he had no letters. He longed for the jiggle of Rosa's bosom or the rotten smell of James' breath. He started to realise that maybe it wasn't them who had required alterations, but rather it was himself. He had wanted to create perfect characters when he himself was so much a failure with his disastrous first novel and his non-existent second. He never did try to change for them, listen to their advice. He never thought he needed to. They were his characters and they belonged to him. But in his silence, he started to question if he believed that anymore. Rather than being their creator, they had created him, opened him up and allowed him to experience love. But he was so content to remain disconnected, dismissing their comments, trying to fix them. That was why they left.

He tried desperately to write them back into his life, make them return to him and stay with him forever. But it never worked. Each night he would write up their arrival and each morning he would find himself once again alone. So instead of writing them, he tried a new character, one he had avoided since the moment Rosa arrived.

Michael, a lonely divorcee. Always late. Never cares what others think. All the people he loves have left him, but he is determined to change. Wash his clothes, brush his teeth, clean the apartment, call his mother... He would change everything. James will talk to him, laugh with him. Rosa will hit him, hold him, touch him. They would be together...

He dropped the pen, turned off the light and drifted into the pages, moving into the black and white, eternally.



TRANQUILIZING CHAIR

Torn, Tattered, Tainted

Born of a writer into a generational verse,
Told my stanza has to be new, better,
For pens before us have ruptured the manuscript
Destruction, hope, repair

The lines I write have been written before,
Welded together with other hands, eyes
But never before has my quill tip sung the sights they sing
New, fresh, old

What I feel around me is worn by the years
The surface that I feel is rough, calloused
For the hands, talons before me have caressed, ripped
Soft, smooth, blistered

What envelops my ears is repetitive, rhythmic,
The same lines have been twisted and spat out,
New words for the same phrases slowly crunch, splinter
Poetry, music, traffic

Our people desire so deeply to be their own,
And in this lose themselves, their eyes, ears
A quest to be heard, be awed not in awe
Belonging, appreciation, isolation

A surge to escape from imperfection, humanness
Leaves us empty, our gut greedily growling, howling
Clawing for the one thing that defies our beauty
Perfection, battle, loss

Born of a writer into a generational verse,
My stanza is written decaying but renewed,
Moulding, forming the pages of our tattered manuscript
Destruction, hope, repair



The Library

Daphne stood at the window, glaring. She was certain that if only she stared long enough the sparse array of street lights could hold out. The pounding, incessant gloom would shrivel. And maybe then Charlotte would play with her? The rain was howling and raving, ranting and crying out –

But inside, tucked away in a hidden alcove, her sister, Charlotte heard nothing of the tempest. Instead, curled in her corner, legs tucked underneath to warm her bare toes, she was clutching a book to her lap, her eyes never leaving the ink. For here, Charlotte had a Secret Garden of her own.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” Dickens said in sombre prose. The words curled about her ears like snakes hissing softly of their secrets. But she’d read this one already.

Charlotte softly shut the book.

The room around her was small and cosy, a warming study room teeming with books, row upon row so that she and Daphne had christened it ‘the library’ long ago, perhaps upon their first holiday to the old country house when they’d been but three or four years old. Now that the holiday was an annual event, Charlotte could – and would – find solace here every year.

Here, she could be with Anne, living in Avonlea, visiting Green Gables, going to the little school and getting up to mischief, discovering the wonders of the haunted forest and lover’s lane. Here, she could travel with Bilbo Baggins and the dwarves up the mountain, find Smaug, discover the ring.

“Read me,” a slim volume said abrasively. “Down the rabbit hole we go!”

“But you must read me,” said another, smoothly. “We’ll go to Treasure Island...”

Charlotte’s fingers walked the shelves, occasionally stopping to stroke their delicate spines. They – her friends – her blossoming receptacles of wisdom rustled as she did so, her fingers like the first drops of rain after a long drought. Whenever she came to a tale she hadn’t yet heard, or even a particularly old book, ancient and withered, she picked it up and flicked through it, the pages furtive and fluttering in delight as words crooned in her ears.

“It’s getting late, you know,” Charlotte whispered. “Mama will be calling me for bed soon.”

The tome in her hand snapped shut so suddenly she almost dropped it. *Little Women* – it had been so long since she’d read it. The Marches were calling, a ball was starting, she could hear the orchestra just as clearly as she could see the dancers twirling and Jo off in the corner...

“It’s late!” she muttered once more.

But she could surely wait until the end of this song. Mama wouldn’t mind, not when Alice was dreaming for her.

“You’re late, you’re late, for a very important date... but she’s no Queen of Hearts; surely she won’t mind.”

So while Shakespeare waxed poetic and Dickens talked his hat off and Alcott danced some more, dragons descended from the ceiling and Charlotte was Mary among the flowers and trees and she was up in the air on a swing...

Abruptly, thunder crackled, its shattering blasting through even the thick brick walls, and Charlotte glanced outside in surprise. She hadn’t realised it was raining.

But where was the music? Where was the dancing? Why had the rain suddenly become so loud?

Then the door opened.

“Mum says you have to go to bed.”

Daphne was in the doorway, eyes wary and assessing.

“But – I’ll just finish the chapter – I’ll be up in a minute...”

Daphne crossed her arms and frowned. “It’s already ten and Mum said you had to get ready for bed.”

“You do too!” Charlotte almost shouted – the response was automatic. But she sealed her lips and bowed her head and said not a word more as she traipsed out the door, trailing her feet behind her.

Which, of course, left Daphne, surrounded.

She knew they were laughing at her. Those puffed-up paper wasters always had: they lingered in corners, sneered under shelves, twittered to themselves. *How can Charlotte stand them...* she thought to herself.

“You stupid things,” she said aloud.

As one they seemed to snigger, the hard-backs providing support for the frail paperbacks, old and weary leaves crinkling at her.

Daphne rolled her eyes. She huffed back. But the giggled echoes of childhood laughter, ghosts of memory half forgotten, taunted her. And she couldn't hold out.

“Fine, yes,” she said. “Of course I remember.”

Daphne remembered that first year when they'd found this cramped room and thought it their own. She remembered those old tomes guffawing and how she'd thought to herself 'they're laughing with me, not at me, so it's all right.'

“I don't need you,” she tried to tell them firmly but still they loomed above her, staring her down, just daring her to enter their domain.

“Say something,” she whispered, but she felt the silence settle on her skin.

Daphne remembered that time, as it is wont to do, passed. She outgrew that five-pace room with no windows and a cracked light. She wanted to explore: into the woods beyond the fence, about the pond beside the tool shed - while Charlotte remained within with her books and her stories, her only adventures occurring over the rainbow and in magical kingdoms far, far away.

And now they closed in on her, these memories she'd thought trapped away, but brought to life once more by crinkled pages and words unsaid.

They never talked anymore.

“Out, out!” Daphne murmured to the wondrous cacophony glaring out at her. The books nudged each other, feeding their own egos, taunting her. They were bearing down on her, closing in – whispering to one another in the shadows –

Daphne could remember, from a few years ago, being in this very room. She was trying to drag Charlotte outside, but her sister was having none of it: she wanted to finish reading *Animal Farm*.

“It's so boring though!” Daphne had exclaimed, hoping perhaps to cajole her sister into a game of hide and seek. “You sit here all by yourself.”

“I’m not, though, am I?”

In a huff, Daphne had left soon after that, giving her sister the peace and quiet she so desired with her lonely books. If Charlotte didn’t want to spend time with her own sister, Daphne wouldn’t force her company.

Never seeing the startled eyes look up in hurt at the door’s slam, she instead sought solace and friendship in the woods, where she dreamt up a meeting of her own. And thus Robin Goodfellow came for tea.



Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

When John Baxter's day began, he never imagined that by the end of it he would be staring down the barrel of a gun. Okay, maybe that was a lie. During his time so far working as a secret agent for the illustrious MI6 he had definitely come across his fair share of near-death situations. However, unlike more weak-hearted souls, he'd never let that deter him from doing what he was best at.

Agent 008 was abruptly pulled out of his inner soliloquy by the sharp click of the gun's safety switch being turned off. Cold sweat trickled down his forehead and down the bridge of his long nose. But as much as he would like to brush it off, he couldn't – there were tight coils of rope winding around his hands and torso, binding him to the wooden chair that lay in the centre of the room. In his frenzied state, he was hyper-aware of the cruel metal of the vintage handgun pressed against his temple, ready to blow his brains out with a single pull of the trigger.

Baxter was getting more desperate by the second. For the first time in his long and successful career, it seemed like there was no way out of this situation. It was getting nearer to the end: he could hear the subtle creaking of his captor's finger slowly pulling the gun's trigger, could hear the soft laughs in the background as the famous 'Baxter, John Baxter', finally came to his demise. Accepting his tragic fate, John squeezed his eyes shut and prayed to the only god he knew, apologising for the many (and by many, I mean many) sins he had committed during his lifetime.

"Forgive me Lord," he prayed. "Tell them I'm sorry."

*His captor was about to shoot. He could feel the trigger being pulled in
3, 2, 1 –*

“LUCY, hurry up! You’re going to be late for school again!”

“Coming, mum!” she replied hastily. Lucy sighed. She wished her life could be more like John Baxter – the coolest, most awesome spy agent to ever live. Maybe then she wouldn’t have to do mundane things like going to school or doing chores. Maybe then the bullies at school would finally leave her alone. Characters in books never seemed to have to deal with people like Ashley and her Gang.

“Lucy!” her mother called once again, her shrill voice echoing up the staircase and into her room, startling her into action. Methodically – the evidence of having repeated the same routine every morning for years on end – Lucy shoved her folders haphazardly into her school bag before swinging it over her shoulder and gathering her beloved book in her arms. As she walked down the stairs and out to the driveway where her mum was waiting for her in the car, she lovingly traced the fading, blue letters of the book’s cover for the thousandth time since she had originally bought it on that clear summer’s day. *John Baxter and the Tower of Doom*, it read. She already knew what would happen at the end, but the suspense after reading his near death never failed to engage her each time.

She raised her visage to the sky. There was not a cloud in sight cluttering the endless expanse of blue spread above; a rare picture of quiet serenity above a busy world. Smiling, Lucy glanced down at the book in her hands one more time before placing it carefully into the back pocket of her backpack. She was decided. Today was the day she was going to stand up to the people at school. Even if they teased her, she wouldn’t back down – after all, what kind of spy (especially one like John Baxter) lets other people walk all over her? She didn’t know what it was that finally pushed her into doing something about her predicament when she had been taking the same old BS for years now. Perhaps it was the sky that filled her with a sense of

hope, or the memory resonating within her of that day so many years ago when she had first picked up the *Tower of Doom*; the sky the exact same shade of periwinkle blue as it was today.

BRIIIIIING BRIIING! The insistent ringing of the school bell drowned out the sounds of the classroom as the students clamoured for the haggard-looking teacher's attention. Lucy usually sat in the back of the class with her head down, invisible to an untrained eye, but today she sat right at the front. In fact the change was so abrupt that even Daydreaming Danny noticed, and his head was so far in the clouds most the time that Lucy almost wanted to ask him if he had seen any aeroplanes while he'd been up there.

BRIIIIIING BRIIING! Rang the bell once again. But on this particular day it wasn't just a school bell – it was a war-cry; signalling the start of the long and bloody battle between Agent Lucy Fields and Ashley and her Gang. Well, maybe they didn't know that. But she did. And this was a battle she wasn't going to lose.

Just as Lucy gathered up her school supplies and ventured into the hallway, she heard the incessant chatter of Ashley, Indigo, Tiana and Jess as they came out of their French class nearby. It wouldn't be long before they approached her like they usually did; all designer clothes, big hair and hideous pink eye shadow. She smirked, donning her imaginary spyglasses and top of the range night-vision goggles. Phase 1 of her plan was almost complete.

"Guys, look over there!" Ashley faux-whispered from behind her. "It's Lousy Lucy! Is there even *anything* she's good at?" Her followers laughed and trailed behind her like a gaggle of geese, all vying for her coveted attention.

"Eeew, I wonder what she's wearing!" one of them sneered. "What is that – it looks like she got it straight from her grandmother's closet... Quick, someone needs to dial the fashion police!"

Normally Lucy would be disheartened by their rude comments, but not this time. She thought back to the book lying at the bottom of her backpack. She was sick of being plain old Lousy Lucy – maybe it was time to be Agent Lucy Fields, the best spy the world had ever seen. She'd show them.

“You know I can hear you, right?” she said, spinning around to face Ashley and her Gang determinedly. The plot thickens. “It’s not very nice to call other people names.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it – go home and cry to your mummy? Boo hoo!”

“Don’t you insult my mum! I’m not gonna let you get away with this one. I’m sick of you treating me like something to be walked over. I’m not a carpet!”

Just as the scene was about to reach its climax, long fingers closed the book shut with a sharp snap. Dust from the pages of the novel clouded the small space of the library where she had sheltered whilst reading its contents. The only reason she had been attracted to it was because of its bright pink cover that was so obnoxious it was guaranteed to catch the eye of anyone within a two mile radius. After reading an excerpt, she could understand why no one had picked up this book in years now. Here was a real, literal example of why not to judge a book by its cover. The shallowness of the writing inside made her almost want to scream in frustration – who cares about the trivial matters of Year 5 girls!? There were bigger problems in the world that need to be addressed – for example poverty, gender equality, global warming...

She sighed. Maybe she’d actually follow her mother’s suggestion of reading a classic such as *Jane Eyre*, or *Pride and Prejudice* this time. At least then her English teacher would be pleased.

Gothic

The wind was howling. A gust of snow lashed at the man's haggard face as he searched for cover under the naked branches of decayed trees. His original path was covered by a carpet of white, abducting any remaining signs of life from the forest. Spindly fingers reached out towards him, pulling him backwards, towards the growing darkness of the storm and imprisonment he had escaped. He clutched the thick fur coat he had stolen closer to himself, knowing that without it he would not survive the night. Down below, fragments of tombstones were anchored in the tumultuous white sea, unmoving in the chaos. Overhead, gloomy clouds danced across the dead sky, the light receding as the barbaric darkness overwhelmed it.

Stumbling forward on thin gnarled legs, the man spotted a crude doorway—what might have been the skeleton of a grand structure. The suffocating cold spurred him forward towards the ruins. But before he could go any further, a woman stepped out from behind the doorway, wearing a lovely satin dress of a material as white as the snow which surrounded them. Her dress whipped around her, and she was doubled over, her slight frame threatening to collapse under the force of the gale. The man, moved by her poor countenance, staggered towards her as her frightened doe-eyes peered towards him, and her blue lips chattered with her small teeth.

"P-Please s-sir, may I wear-r your c-coat?" She whimpered as he reached her. Despite the icy blizzard which surrounded them, the man was touched by the helplessness of the young girl in front of him. He shrugged the thick fur coat from his hunched shoulders and wasting frame and draped it around the girl.

"T-Thank you sir," she whispered, "thank you!" In her delicate trembling hands she held out a folded piece of thick, rough paper. "Please, take it, it is for you," she said desperately.

India Anderson, Sophie Funston and Rachel Xu

The coarse paper rested in the man's thin, callused hand, hard from working through the bitter cold. He unfolded it hesitantly. But the pages were blank! The man looked up in surprise, yet the girl had moved from his vision. His heart thudded with apprehension as his head jerked around in search of the mysterious girl and his hide coat; his pants swirling like the wild winds. Yet all that surrounded him was the murderous white sea and the crumbling remains of the once proud building.

Sleeping Beauty Rises

Once upon a time, there lived a happy couple in a castle. Their names were Princess Aurora and Prince Phillip. Most people know the tale of Sleeping Beauty and her Prince and these people are that couple. After Prince Phillip heroically killed Maleficent in the form of a dragon, Princess Aurora fell in love with her saviour. They were married and the Princess and the Prince lived happily ever after.

That is, until one day the Princess was getting dressed for a ball. She asked the handsome Prince what she should say to the guests as he pulled on a suit and spent a lot of time creating an effortless look with his hair.

He replied, "What would you possibly need to say? Don't worry my love; I can talk for both of us. Oh, and don't forget to put on lots of makeup. We want you looking beautiful for this important event."

At that moment Princess Aurora had an epiphany. All I do is stand around and look pretty next to my husband. Surely I can do something better with my life.

She asked the Prince, "Shall I talk about the new security measures? I want to help."

"I do not need your help. It looks bad if you are the one talking about the management of my kingdom!"

The Princess was horrified at the rudeness and sexist behaviour of her husband. She walked down the corridor towards her room and stopped before a mirror.

"Mirror, mirror,
On the wall,
I need help to get the Prince to see,
What a poor husband he is to me."

The mirror shimmered and shook revealing a woman in an extravagant ball gown, with a wand in her hand. She told the Princess that this was not the first time Prince Phillip had been a bad husband. He was married to someone else when he declared his love for her and asked her to marry him. The Princess was horrified.

“That dirty old pig!” she exclaimed. “He thinks that he is so much better than me when he actually was using me to cheat on his wife! I cannot believe that he did not tell me this! I should have realised that a man as handsome as he could only be rotten on the inside. All the goodness that he possesses has been wasted on appearance!”

The Princess repeated this and more to the Prince when they next saw each other, and his lack of denial of any of her accusations made her even angrier. She asked for a divorce to get away from the lying man that she shared a life with. The Prince responded by saying that there was no such thing as a divorce for a royal couple and that he certainly was not going to permit it. Princess Aurora decided that she wanted to make the Prince pay for all that he had done wrong to her.

She waited until the dark of night, when the moon is at its fullest and the magic in the world is at its strongest, to take out her magic wand. She cast a spell on the sleeping Prince next to her. He slowly began to shrink, his skin turned green and welts formed over his body. His stomach became rounder and his fingers webbed together. The Princess closed her eyes and went back to sleep, trying to ignore the frog which was on the other side of the bed.

The Princess woke up to a horrible amphibian on her lips. She then started seeing the frog morph back into a human and was caught by surprise. She pushed the creature off her before it started growing taller and heavier and ran out of the room as fast as she could. The Princess realised that she would have to try again.

The next day, an opportunity arose. The Prince had completely forgotten about the frog incident and when he turned back into his human self, the Princess just told him that he must have had a bad dream. The couple went on a ride to a scenic area where the Prince could enjoy looking out over

the cliffs onto an expanse of ocean. The Princess brought along with her a poison apple so she could try to kill the Prince. She offered the apple after they had eaten their sandwiches and he took it, but then the peace of the area was disturbed by a group of birds flying overhead.

“A penny says that I can hit one of the birds,” Prince Phillip said as he flung the apple in his hand over the cliff and towards the flock. It hit a bird perfectly and the Prince cried out with joy as Princess Aurora rolled her eyes. She walked up to the cliff to pretend to admire her husband’s aim and held her hat into the wind, letting it fly to the edge of the drop as she stood next to the him.

“Oh no!” The Princess exclaimed. “My hat has fallen! Would you be so kind as to fetch it for me, my love?”

“Why of course,” the Prince said as he walked towards the edge of the cliff, oblivious of his Princess following closely behind him. He picked up the hat and turned around, only to be given a great shove down the one hundred metre drop, to his death.

Princess Aurora untied her horse from a tree and rode off to another kingdom. She made a career out of assassination and was highly respected and feared by many. The Princess realised that she did not need a Prince, or a man at all for that matter and lived happily ever after.

Wishes and Dreams

I am thinking of a fairy tale.
Where the step-mother is not a selfish witch.
Kind and caring instead of cruel and mean
Understanding and thoughtful rather than stupid and stuck-up
A fairy tale where only belonging and acceptance are wished.

I am thinking of a fairy tale.
Where the hero is not always the prince.
Giants and trolls save the victim from the vicious prince
And so called "Prince Charming" isn't so charming anymore.

I am thinking of a fairy tale.
Where no one's name is Cinderella,
Where no one has an evil step sister,
And no one has to be saved.

I am thinking of a fairy tale.
But this one is different.
With no evil wicked witch,
And no prince who saves them all.
A story of friends as close as sisters,
A story of truth and trust,
A story with a real happy ending.



The 12th Princess

Behind every story there is another story, a different version with a new meaning. I am sure you know the story of every princess. But don't they seem too coincidental, too illogical? There is one more story that has not been told, the story of the 12th princess.

Once upon a time, in a place not so far away lived an enchantress who gave birth to twelve beautiful daughters; Snow White, Aurora, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Ariel, Belle, Merida, Tiana, Jasmine, Winifred, Barbie and the youngest sister Regina. The sisters were gifted with magical powers, however the youngest was the most powerful. As time passed the sisters became prettier each day.

The sisters soon were after happy endings and each wanted a prince, who they believed would make their days happy. They devised a plan to put themselves in the position which they all dreamed to be in. The consequences of the plan worked out for all but one. As Regina was gifted with magic they asked her to be the evil witch in their fantasies, with the promise that they too would help her discover her happy ending.

Regina kept her part of the deal and she was the witch who cursed Aurora, the sea witch who took Ariel's voice and so on and on. As a result of over using her magic in such harmful ways her beauty slowly withered away. As each sister landed a happy ending their promise faded away in their minds, too caught up in their new lives. Regina waited for them to return and finally gave up. She went and searched for her sisters though, when they all saw her they were disgusted by her ugliness and set the castle guards against her.

Her sisters' reactions to seeing what she had become had festered within and over a period of many years her anger grew, filling her with hate, jealousy and vexation. She never forgot nor did she ever forgive. She spent a long time by herself in the deepest and darkest parts of the woods; all alone and not speaking to anyone. She even tried speaking to the birds but the sad reality is that it only works in fairytales.

One day while she was collecting berries, she heard a scream in the distance. She ran to see who the voice belonged to. It was a young prince who had been kicked off his horse and badly injured. She took him to her small house and cared for him there. As the prince was slowly healing he was at first frightened by the sight of Regina. Though over time, he soon became to enjoy her company.

Regina enjoyed the prince's company too. The prince often talked about how excited he would be to return home to his kingdom and to find his future wife. The thought irritated Regina as she had fallen in love with this prince. The notion of this depressed her as she believes she would never have her fair share of a happy ending. The prince recovered quickly and was soon off and away; he thanked her for the kindness and hospitality she had offered and hoped that they would someday meet again.

Once the prince had departed she became even more saddened and had never felt so isolated in her life. Hatred and misery overcame her and there was only one thing that she believed could cure her and that was revenge on her sisters. Revenge was such a strong word that contained such a harsh meaning but it was the only path she would go down.

She plotted and planned for her own happiness and her sisters' anxiety, oh how she loathed them. She desired that they felt her pain, her misery, most of all how it felt to be betrayed by the one they loved and to lose one that they held close to their hearts.

One night she had enough of scheming and daydreaming of her fantasy, and she set out into the dark woods, wearing a cloak of hatred, misery, envy and revenge. There were no stars in the sky that night, no one saw the shadow nor heard it come. As she cast her spell she threw all of her emotions into it; a large, black mist started to appear and with a touch it turned her sisters into their husbands' worst nightmares.

With this a small twitch occurred, her mouth moved and developed a grin, though for Regina it felt so strange to smile. Her spell did not give her the satisfaction that she was hoping for, instead she felt emptier. She looked

up and in front of her was the prince, looking at her with a great disgust. She didn't know what was worse, his look or the realisation that her spell had not eliminated her grief. He told her that he had planned to ask her to marry him but now he was reconsidering. reprehend

Words hurt, sisters can cause pain but nothing hurts more than to be reprehended by the person you love. Heartbroken, the prince had rejected Regina because of her actions. It made her realise that revenge did not matter, it did not make her happier, and all she had ever really wanted was just a happy ending. A small tear formed, slowly streamed down her cheek and dropped to the floor, thus reversing the spell. With that there was a powerful eruption and a light came from deep inside of her. It was the light of forgiveness, which shone through her and once again she became beautiful on the inside and out.

Regina lived happily with her prince and received her final wish to live happily ever after. Once again, the twelve sisters were united.

The End

Are You Really a Witch?

Is magic the cause of your corruption?
Is corruption the right word to use?
Your actions have caused much disruption,
People think you can only abuse.

Because you're a witch. The evil queen,
That's what people call you, is it not?
Was it from your mother that you got this gene?
Yes, your mother. Don't think we've forgot!

But people do not see the beauty there
They see only the beast they conjure
But there has never been a face so fair,
Nor a heart so damaged by love's torture.

But I see your true self in your selfless feats,
And your true heart, in your lonely heartbeats.



Bird Girl

Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who were happily married. The queen had always loved birds. She wanted to be able to fly like them and loved the symbol of their wings and the freedom they possessed. The king and queen had a child, whom they loved very much. The young girl was called AvePuella in honour of her mother.

But one day the queen became very ill and died. The king became very depressed but found happiness in two things; one – his daughter and two – birds. He was walking around his palace one day and a beautiful bird soaring above him in the grey sky caught his eye and suddenly the world was sunlit. The king watched the bird for hours, admiring its exquisiteness.

The bird reminded him of his wife and he decided that he must marry this bird. So he ventured deep into the woods to find a witch so that he could change the bird into a human for him to marry. After hours of frantically searching he came across a small cottage amongst overgrown trees. After three knocks on the thick wooden door, a stiff, plump and nasty looking witch stood silhouetted in the afternoon light.

“Come in,” she said creepily.

The king bargained with the witch for a potion. The witch, however, was cunning and told him the only thing she could do was make him into a bird rather than the bird into a human, and he supposedly would still have his happily ever after. But the witch wasn't satisfied with that; she said that she would only do this if she could have his daughter in return. The king was distraught and furious, but a decision had to be made. He chose to become a bird and give away his daughter because he assumed that without the bird-woman, his life would be miserable.

He drank the potion and ran back to his daughter. He explained to her what he had done and without a final goodbye or kiss, the potion worked its magic and he zapped into an elegant dove and flew out the window.

“Typical,” she thought. “Stepmothers and their unwanted presence.” AvePuella had to leave her beloved castle and any reminiscence of her mother. And for many long days and weeks and months and years she

worked for the witch, cleaning up her magnificent disasters and brewing nasty concoctions. She was miserable. Every day she begged the witch to let her go to find her father and the bird-lady, but every day the witch said no and cackled at the thought of her wickedness.

One day while AvePuella was scrubbing test tubes a catastrophic BANG came from the potion room.

“What have you done?!” the witch cried out. AvePuella suspected it was just the witch leaving one of her toads in the microwave again, so she gathered her dustpan and broom and followed her. As the witch entered the room, the door slammed shut.

“What’s this?” AvePuella said. Suddenly something hit the door with a *thump*. The witch began to scream and there was violent scratching against the door. Unsettling screeches echoed off the cold walls of the house. AvePuella was terrified and tried to open the door to stop the screaming but it wouldn’t budge. Just as she thought to take this opportunity to escape, the potion room fell silent. *Dead* silent. The door creaked open and revealed a twitching body on the floor. The witch!

Her eyes were gouged out and rolling around next to her head – now dripping with blood. Two bony birds fluttered out from behind a stack of books. AvePuella immediately knew what had happened. Holding out her hand, she let the oddly graceful bird rest on her arm.

“Thank you stepmama, thank you.” The bird cooed as AvePuella caressed her torn wings; like wet paper. She walked towards the towering shelf of potions and scanned her eyes over each label.

“Prince to frog... Poisoned apples...Sleep aids for beauties...Prince to beast...” She muttered to herself, “Ah-hah! *Human to bird*.” AvePuella loosened the cork on the bottle and took a swig. She squirmed at the taste. Suddenly the hair on her arms rose up and grew into elegant feathers. Her nose elongated into a stiff beak and she dwindled down to the size of the two other birds. They fluttered up to the windowsill and after one look back on the horrific scene, they took off into the sunset, ready to follow the sun around the globe.

The 'Magic' Mirror

Mirror mirror, in my hand,
Who is the fairest in the land?
The dainty maiden, pure and fair,
With sapphire eyes and golden hair?
Or the wicked queen, cloaked in red,
With a crown of tyranny upon her head?
Mirror mirror, what do you know?
The surface layer you only show.
You cannot see what's deep inside,
The feelings that one wants to hide.
You cannot see a heart of gold,
A heart of loathing, a heart that's cold.
Your smooth, shiny skin is just a knife,
Reflecting anger in times of strife.
Crack! Then if your surface breaks,
Distorted colours, out of shape.
What you show is not what's true,
You cannot see one through and through.



Princess Sophia's Extraordinary Tale

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess named Sophia, who lived in a stunning castle with a loving father, King Henry. Sophia was destined to marry the hideous Prince Cyril. He was so hideous he might as well have been a gargoyle. Sophia had only met Prince Cyril once, but still did not want to marry him because she was sure he was not her true love. Sophia desired a handsome prince with whom she could fall in love. Sophia loved romance and happy endings. I know, I know a typical old boring fairy tale. But this fairy tale is better than all the rest. Trust me.

One day a truly handsome prince named Edward came to the castle. He had luscious brown hair and a smile to die for. As soon as she saw Prince Edward she ran to her bedroom to pick out the perfect outfit. Still unsatisfied after twenty minutes, Sophia could see the prince leaving, so she sprinted down the steps and out the palace door. As she was running she fell over just as Prince Edward turned around. What a drama queen! He ran to her and his strong arms lifted her into the air as if she was as light as a feather. Sophia looked into his gorgeous blue eyes that sparkled like diamonds and true love hit her square in the face. I'm surprised she didn't cry. It hit her really hard. Sophia thought, "We are soul mates and are meant to be together."

The next day when Princess Sophia woke she went straight to her father's bedroom to tell him that she had finally found her one true love and that Prince Edward was the one that she was going to marry.

He immediately roared, "You are NOT allowed to marry Prince Edward. You MUST marry Prince Cyril, he is destined to be your husband."

Princess Sophia pleaded, "No, Father you can't do this to me. I don't want my fate to be planned out for me like an evening feast!" She stormed out of his room and ran to the sitting room, where she ate an entire box of chocolates I might add.

Sophia knew she had a life-changing decision to make, she could either stay with her father and marry the despised Prince Cyril or go to her one true love, the divine Prince Edward. Obviously, no contest. But there was just one problem; she did not know how to escape from the castle. It was surrounded by a moat, filled with seven savage crocodiles and there was only one gate that was heavily guarded. Sophia lay sobbing in her room, unable to think of a way to get out of the castle.

A little old woman entered her room and told Sophia that she could help get her out of the castle because she was a witch. The witch said, "If you drink this potion, when your feet touch the moat, the water will turn to ice. But, in exchange for this potion, you will give up your voice for five days and five nights. On the sunrise of the sixth day, if you and the prince are not married, then you shall lose your voice forever." Sophia failed to think of the consequences of her actions because her brain was filled with her own vanity. A very stupid girl in my opinion, I don't even think she was listening. As the icy potion ran down her throat she felt her voice leave her body. She nodded and as the witch left a horrible sneer came upon her face.

When night fell Sophia crept out of the castle and stood before the moat. She breathed in deeply as her feet touched the water. The place where her foot had touched turned to ice. Slowly, she walked across the moat and into the deep dark woods.

As daylight approached Princess Sophia found her beloved Prince Edward in a clearing of the woods. When their eyes met they ran and embraced. It was very romantic. For three days and nights Prince Edward and Princess Sophia built a magnificent little cottage in the woods and planned to spend every moment of every day together. On the fourth day Sophia performed an elaborate series of charades to show Edward how excited she was to get married and have children. After some confusion about the performance, Edward scoffed and announced he would never dream of having children.

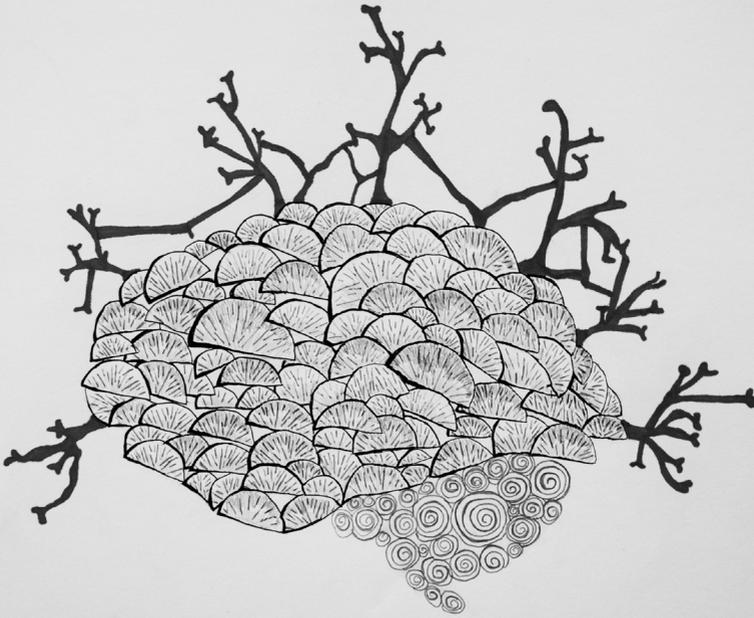
Sophia ran from the cottage and deep into the forest. As she dwelt on the fight, she began to wonder if she really loved Edward. How could she love someone who did not want a family? She wanted to love him but felt there

was nothing between them anymore. She started to wonder if she was wrong about true love. Are you beginning to feel sorry for Princess Sophia? I was.

Princess Sophia decided that she could not spend another minute with this excuse for a prince. However she knew if she didn't marry Prince Edward by the sixth day she would be mute forever. Sophia deeply regretted taking the potion without first considering the consequences. Finally, some smart thinking. Sophia quietly left the cottage the next morning and walked through the silent village into the castle. King Henry was delighted to see her.

Sophia woke early on the sixth day just before sunrise. As the sun rose Sophia could feel her voice leave her body forever. It was actually quite an intense and emotional moment. After this tragic experience Sophia's attitude toward romance changed forever. Sophia realised she didn't need love in her life to be happy. Amen sister. Sophia decided to be an independent woman and go back to school.

As the years passed by Sophia struggled living in a speechless world but coping with her condition helped her to become an extraordinary, intelligent and successful young woman. A change, I was proud. Once Sophia finished school she became a writer. The words that could never leave her lips were expressed through her amazing books. They were loved by everyone in the kingdom and she influenced the young people of the kingdom with her amazing stories. Sophia never married and spent her life alone. Even though she did not find her true love she lived happily ever after, in a world of words.



DISFUNCTION

Wind-Up Clock

I am growing up.
I can feel myself doing it –
The stretch of my arms, my bones re-knit
I can feel myself expanding.
My skin is demanding, it does not fit. Commanding
my walk, my talk, my blinking stare.

I see you there
upon the hill,
you've grown as well, your body will not still.
Remember when we used to play?
Outside our days were long but they were numbered by
the change that age has wrought upon our skin
demanding that we grow
(That summer day we promised to each other
among the windblown grass and flattened heather –
we would not move until the hill moved,
until the grass swayed,
but then your parents moved away).

I have a wind-up clock
that ticks only when I tell it to:
that is the clock we set on the mantelpiece of our lives,
and time only passed when we wished it flew.

But here is the surprise: we grew.
And we forgot that shade of blue the sky made
when the word 'future' was new.

People began to ask us questions like:

'What are you going to be when you grow up?'

And we discovered that's not what they mean –

They're really asking: 'How will you help me?'

Will you be my doctor, my accountant? Will my papers be in your
briefcase?'

And just in case you wondered

Contribution

Is less like a free market and more like a barter system;

I grow up and they ask

'How will you help me?'

Like happiness is secondary.

I am growing up.

I can feel myself doing it –

The flex of my fingers, my skin re-knit

I can feel my mind expanding.

And they are demanding; I do not fit. Commanding

my walk, my talk, my blinking stare.

I see you there

upon the hill,

you've grown as well

But then my clock stopped still.

Worlds Apart

When growing up my parents only ever gave me one rule, and one rule only; never cross the east creek. Every day I would go to the creek and sit on its bank, but I would always do as they asked me; I never once crossed the creek. Until the day I broke that rule. I crossed the creek. I crossed the creek while holding his hand.

My feet were beginning to go numb in the streaming water. My shoes lay discarded on the bank behind me, out of reach of water under an uplifted root of the oak. I looked down onto the water's surface and saw the sky above; a grey sky with endless grey clouds. But in front of that was my reflection. My hair had come out of my plaits and my eyes were wide with excitement and apprehension; each had a sheen of grey to them.

"Clara!" I looked up, but saw no one around me, only the grey trees that enclosed the banks of the creek. When I looked back down again at the water's surface I noticed how the grey water swirled around my ankles, unable to move me. Grey light danced on the surface of the creek, playing tricks on the eye. And suddenly he was there beside me. I could see his face, upside down and reflected in the water.

"Are you ready?" It was a simple question that has only two simple answers. I could have easily said no, turned away and never seen him again. My stomach knotted with apprehension and guilt. But when I looked up and saw him, all that fell away; I knew I was ready.

"Yes."

His pants were rolled up to his knees, and were a shade darker than the sky above. His shirt was untucked, clinging to his chest and shoulders where there was still water from his earlier bathe in the creek. The white of his shirt was a stark contrast to the black of his hair. Droplets of water fell from the ends of his hair, down his neck to underneath his shirt and over his eyes; his blue eyes that echoed the colours of the sky and the sea; the only sign of colour in this world. His hand was extended towards me, upturned waiting for me to reach out and come to him as he leaned across the creek

to reach me. It would be the first time that we would be on the same side of the creek. I looked at the bank behind one last time, remembering my childhood promise.

I reached out and placed my hand in his; the contact sent a shiver through my body. His hand was warm and embraced mine, entwining his fingers with my own. I clung on tightly, feeling his strength as he held me steady. I clambered across the creek, using my free hand to hold my grey dress out of the water and tighten my shawl about my shoulders. In two steps I was across, leaving my own world behind. I suddenly felt isolated, alone and guilty. I should not be there. I felt a pressure in my hand and realised that he still held it. He reached over and placed a free strand of my hair behind my ear, tracing his hand down my neck to my collarbone.

“Now, I will show you my world,” he breathed into my ear, causing me to shudder.

We left the creek behind, me following him through his woods to a place that I did not know. My feet were wet from the creek and I could feel the earth underneath; soft and warm from the midday sun. He led the way through the foliage and undergrowth. The trees seemed to me to be no different to those on my side of the creek; grey and tall. I did not understand why I had been banned from this world when it seemed to be no different from mine. He stopped suddenly, turning to look at me. His eyes were full of anticipation and hope, a look that I did not quite understand at the time. His look made me nervous, but that only made him smile.

“Close your eyes.” I looked at him, suddenly feeling wary and realising that the land around me was foreign and unknown. I didn’t close my eyes.

He walked around to behind me and slipped his hands around my waist. I could feel his body pressed against mine and could feel his warmth seeping through my dress, warming my back.

“Close your eyes. Trust me.” I felt his breath against my neck as he gave my waist a gentle squeeze. I felt my body relax as I gently leaned in closer to him. I closed my eyes. I felt his arms come free of my waist as he placed them on my shoulders. He moved his hands slowly down my arm to the edge of my sleeve. He lingered over the bare skin of my arms, slowly

tracing his hands down their outline to my hands, causing me to shudder with anticipation. I could feel his breath on my neck and collar bone, and the increased intensity and speed of my heart beat. He interlaced his fingers with my own, leading me forward, further into his world.

Suddenly I could hear birdsong, a sound that I had not heard in many years in my world. I did not know that birds were still capable of song. I could sense a memory emerging but it was too far away and I was too overwhelmed to notice. I felt, rather than saw, myself walking through a bush, and the ground changing from earth and dirt to grass.

“You can open your eyes.” At first I could not see anything at all save for the light from the sun. As I became accustomed to the light I began to see colours; the grass was green. The sky was a rich mixture of blues and greens and the clouds were not just white, but had hints of yellow, pink, green and blue in them. I could hear the birds singing and for the first time I noticed the presence of a breeze that swirled around my legs, playing with my now blue dress. I twirled around, inspecting the new colours of his world. My shawl, no longer needed, was sprawled on the ground. It, too, was suddenly full of colour; reds, oranges and yellows. What I saw amazed me. I had never before seen so much colour; the different shades and intensities. My senses were suddenly overwhelmed: I felt the happiest I had felt in a long time. The world was suddenly a place full of colour and life, a place to explore and a place to live. My heart felt light in my chest and I laughed with happiness. The discovery of such a place was beyond my comprehension. I was stunned that I had not noticed the dark and grey life that I had lived on the other side of the creek. I suddenly felt free.

I heard his laughter and stopped to look at him. His hair was darker, his shirt whiter and his skin tanned. His eyes were now a deep, rich blue; a blue that had no parallel in my world. I could feel the smile on my face and saw it reflected in his. He walked over to where I was and extended his hand once more.

“And you haven’t even seen the best part.” This time I did not hesitate when he took my hand. He led me up a small hill in the middle of the pasture. The grass tickled my ankles as I followed him to its peak. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

In the valley below us was a small cottage with a thatched roof and a single brick chimney. Smoke wound its way out of the chimney and the cream shutters were open. A small garden with lush red roses and vibrant vines was set at the back of the cottage and surrounded by a low, moss covered wall. But out the front, an older woman was reading a book, rocking slowly backwards and forwards in her chair with a purple rug over her knees.

I must have said something for the lady suddenly looked up from her book and looked straight at me. She let her book fall, forgotten, to the ground. She stood abruptly and started walking towards us, up the hill, discarding her rug. The woman began to run, her arms outstretched towards me and tears began to fall down her cheeks. She was smiling.

I took a step backwards into him. He caught me and whispered, "It's OK. Trust me." And so I stood there watching the woman climb the hill to us, while holding his hand. He must have shaken his head or given some minute movement because when she was nearly in arms reach she stopped, suddenly uncertain of what to do.

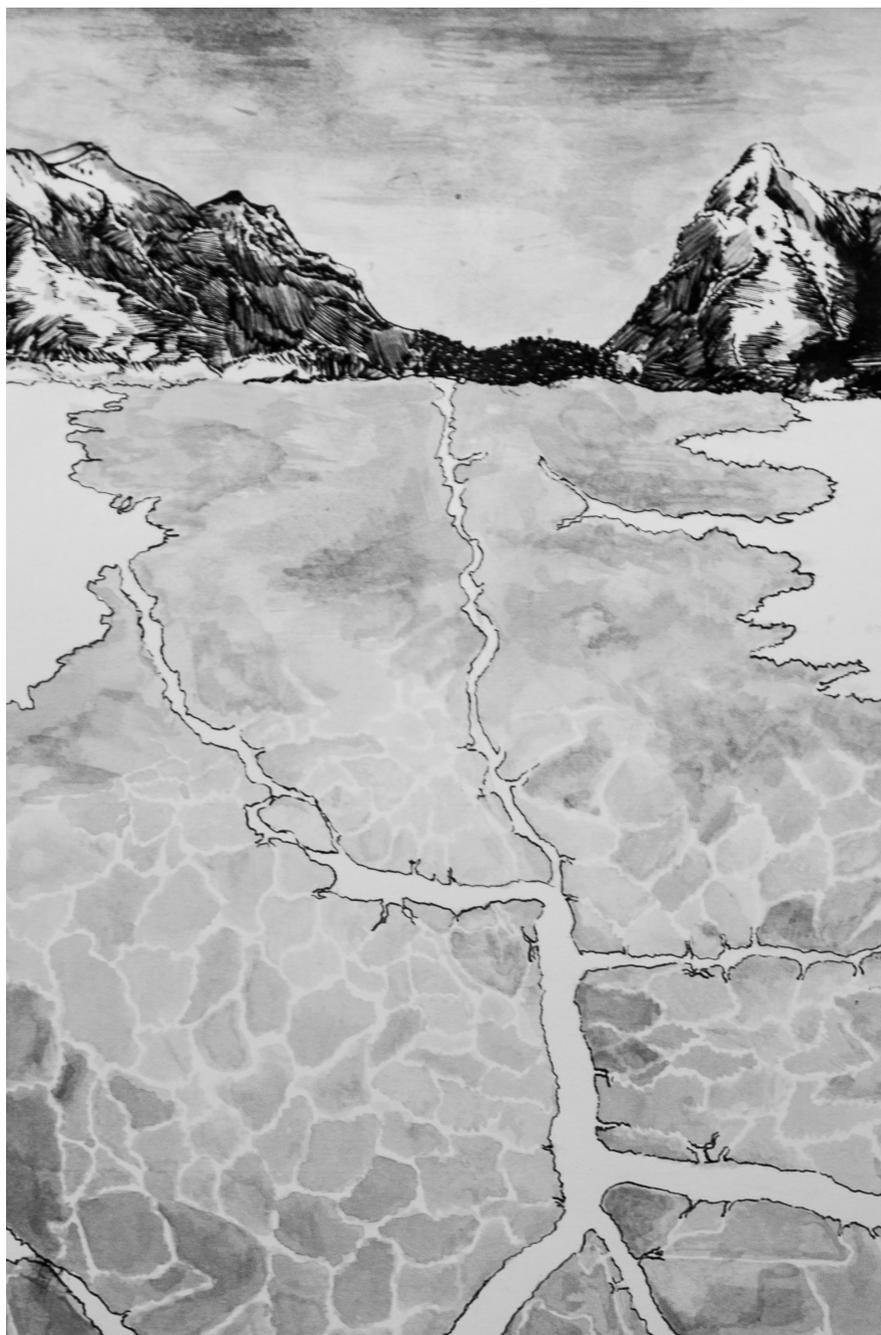
"Do you remember me? Charlotte? Do you remember?" Charlotte. I knew that name. Somewhere deep inside me I knew that name. I did not know this woman, and yet, in some way she was familiar.

"It's me. Your mother, Charlotte. I'm your mother and you've come home." She began to walk slowly towards me, her arms still outstretched. I felt him squeeze my hand once, hard, and then he let go. She wrapped her arms around me, smothering me in her embrace. I felt tears on my cheek and realised, with no small surprise, that they were my own.

"My daughter. You're home." I felt her hand gently stroking my hair. I looked over her shoulder and into his eyes; his deep, deep blue eyes.

Yes, I thought. I have come home.

A single, piercing scream emanates from across the river bank. A woman in grey clothes weeps, clutching a pair of white shoes to her chest that belong to the child she has lost. She rocks back and forth, her vision becoming blurry with unshed tears. Her grey dress is ripped and covered in mud. She sits in the creek, staring blindly at opposite bank. She feels the loss so keenly it is as though a part of her has died. The pain of her loss cannot be compared to any living emotion. Her child is gone.



The Crossing

An early morning mist had settled over the clearing as Ruth nestled against a log and waited for her friend. The dawning sun had only just peeked over the horizon, illuminating the sheaf of ice that covered Wenham Lake. Ruth huddled against the weathered tree, trying to keep the little heat she had from being snatched away by the wintery wisps of wind.

But the cold didn't bother Ruth; she knew it would only be a short time before her friend arrived. What did bother her was the escalating sense of paranoia that had plagued Salem in recent weeks. These witch trials – the murder of innocents who had supposedly succumbed to the ways of the devil – had made Ruth feel more than uncomfortable every time she ventured into the forest and made her way towards this very clearing. Every visit had made her heart beat a little faster; every passing hour saw her eyes to flit across her surroundings a little more often.

Ruth sensed movement and heard the soft crunch of twigs behind her. She spun to meet the gentle eyes of Peyak. Ruth understood the danger she had placed herself in when she and Peyak began their friendship, but she was willing to risk her chances, as was he. Peyak beckoned for Ruth to follow him to the edge of the frosted lake and she fell into step behind him. While neither spoke the other's language, Peyak understood Ruth better than anyone in her Puritan village. Peyak belonged to the Agawan Tribe, a group of American Natives who lived deep in the forests surrounding Salem. Those in the village deemed Peyak's people ignorant savages, which was ironic considering Peyak had taught Ruth everything she knew about life here in New England; from the ebbs and flows of the lake, to the subtle changes in the wind.

They had almost reached the waterline when Peyak came to a sudden halt. Ruth touched his hand, questioning what was wrong when he abruptly turned towards a thick fern a few yards away. His expression remained calm, but Ruth sensed a tremor of worry in his chiseled features. He took Ruth's arm and pulled her slowly towards the brush, when the figure of a young girl emerged from behind the shrubbery.

“Abigail!” exclaimed Ruth. Abigail Bishop was the daughter of the town’s preacher. “*Please*,” Ruth began, knowing nothing short of pleading would prevent Abigail from fleeing to tell her father. But even as she began, she knew it was a hopeless cause, given Abigail’s penchant for cruelty and her unwavering dedication to her father’s causes.

A wide-eyed Abigail stood and fled and Ruth spun to face Peyak, holding back the tears. He pointed towards the lake, asking if the fate of others who had walked the thin cover of ice would now be hers. She nodded and his eyes filled with fear. She signaled to Peyak that she had to go, that she might have a chance if she left the village now. But before she ran, she took his hand, one last time, and held it softly to her heart.

As Ruth stared across the glassy expanse that stretched out before her in a vast sheet of white, she wondered if she would meet her mother again in the afterlife. All she could do was hope that death would be quick and that the gates of heaven would welcome her.

She’d been captured of course – Abigail was quick and her father’s reaction quicker. And now as Ruth stood before the lake, being tried for the so-called ‘crime’ of collaborating with ‘the devil’, and the suspicion of being a ‘witch’, she prepared for the inevitability of death.

The Preacher pushed her forward. She took a step towards the lake. The villagers inhaled as one, like a horrid monster sucking every ounce of goodness from the thin and frosty air.

Ruth inched on. She reached the waterline where small fragments of frost had broken apart from the main bulk of water, like little glass knives ready to pierce into the feet of those foolish enough to trespass. She placed a single foot on the ice. She began to walk.

Ruth knew that ‘guilty’ or ‘innocent’, her death was inevitable. If she reached the other side without breaking the ice, she would be confirmed as a witch who must be hanged at the gallows, and if she slipped through the ice and fell into the water, a plunge that would corroborate her innocence, the weight of her dress would drag her to the lake’s dark and murky bottom.

She glanced up to survey her surroundings. The viscous fog that sat

upon the ice reminded her of the layer of froth that settled on a fresh vessel of milk. In the distance, she thought she could see something... something she couldn't quite make out. It appeared as a flickering light and it made her think of Peyak. Was he watching? Was he sending his love across the lake to her? It broke her heart to think of him – and yet he made her strong.

The memories of her days with Peyak filled her thoughts like gathering fireflies, the light of each and every one igniting the hope that there was life beyond this lake. She looked down at her feet, remembering what Peyak had told her about the frailty of the ice that thinned and thickened here and there. She remembered his showing her the different shades of blue – the glassy translucence of one spot, the milky thickness of another. Then she realised that she *could* survive if she had the courage to find the thinnest slick and plunge to her 'death' below it, for it seemed death was her only chance at life – if she could go under towards the opposite bank, and make her way to shore.

Ruth walked on, her frozen feet changing direction ever so slightly towards the darkened forest's edge. She heard the jeers of the villagers behind her. "*Witch!*" they cried. But she ignored them, focusing on the ice.

She walked straight, her feet slipping here and there. She took short, focused steps until she reached a patch of ice just like Peyak had shown her, a patch so translucent you could see the lapping water licking at its fragile surface below. Ruth stopped. She prayed that she would still see her mother one day, but not today – *not today* – as she took one strong step forward and plunged into the icy depths below.

A noiseless shriek escaped her lips. Icy tentacles seized at her arms, her legs, making it seem impossible to do anything but surrender to the agony that swallowed her whole. But the fireflies were still buzzing, willing her limbs to move. So Ruth started stroking, under the glass, finding pockets of air trapped between the water and the arcs of thin ice that covered it. She gasped – her breaths balloons of steam that soon dissipated into busy flurries of cold. She dove again, blindly seeking the frozen bank that might lead her to freedom. She sought faith in the fireflies but they too were now abandoning her, taking with them the glow of hope that had blazed so brightly what seemed like an eternity ago.

As Ruth's breath was about to run out, death finally claiming her weary, innocent soul, she felt a strong hand grasp hers and pull her forward and finally out of the bitter relentlessness of cold.

She collapsed to the ground, violent bouts of shivering coursing through her body as she drew desperately from the joy that was air.

"Ruth." She heard her name uttered in a voice she had never heard before, but recognised just the same.

"Peyak." Ruth struggled to her feet to meet the eyes of her friend once more. Peyak offered back a smile.

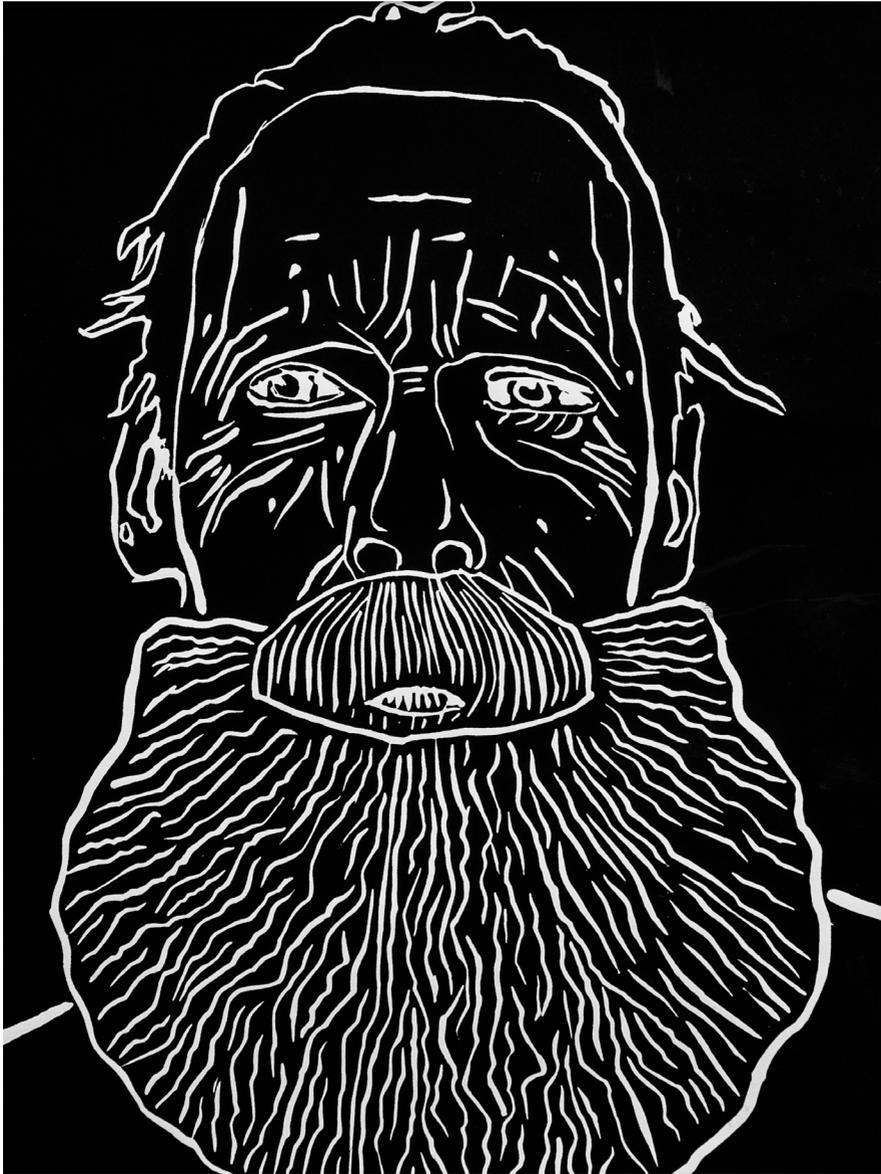
Then she gestured towards the forest with some urgency, knowing that they only had a small window of time before the villagers began searching the levee banks for evidence of her 'innocence' in death.

"Hurry," she stammered, and he nodded, taking her hand. And so they ran, past the aged oaks and furry moss that coated the ground beneath, they ran past the clearing where they had met so many times before, they ran and ran and ran to start a new life where they could live without fear, and finally be together at last.

True Love's First Kiss

True Love's First Kiss

How can it be true love when you've
never even met? Could it truly be poisonous,
unloving, fake, deathly? Are you sure it will fix
everything? Is it real or merely a dream in your long
slumber, a dream that never incarnates? Will it really
bring you a happily ever after? Or will it leave you
in that slumber, never for you to wake? Maybe
this true love's kiss is full of hatred and
venom. Maybe it was
never meant
to be.



Lights

It had been years since she had last seen so many skeletons in one place. But the blackened tree trunks seemed to stand stubbornly, proud of their survival amidst the chaos of the recent bushfire. Leila's father had always taught her that bushfires were not just about death and destruction. The bushfires that ravaged the neighbouring eucalyptus forests throughout her childhood at the farm left dream-like hazy days after the fires. But after fierce fires she had also seen buds that emerged on the branches, blanketing them thickly with life and regrowth. Just as a phoenix from coals, the trees found new life in their very destruction.

After many years Leila was finally returning home with her boyfriend Adrian, and she became conscious of the life force that seemed to pulse through the land. It was an odd notion – hearing life in a silence – like when you become acutely aware of the thudding of your own heart and are struck by the immediacy of your own existence. And now she could feel her heart thud faster as their car drove on to the familiar beaten track that led to her childhood home.

There was something bizarre in seeing Adrian wander around her old house. She winced at his footsteps, thumping the old wooden floors around the living room. Was this room always this small? Adrian's figure seemed to fill the whole space, and when he turned around she saw his face creased with – what was it? – almost distaste. Sure, some of the old drapes smelt slightly of mildew, but she thought her living room had character; framed pictures lined the walls and fireplace mantle, speaking of her past, echoing her memories. She peered at the photo of her mother hugging her five-year-old self. She always found it odd looking at a younger version of herself – it was as if she was remembering a younger sister she never had.

Even now as he reclined on the couch his hand clutched his phone and he didn't seem to acknowledge the brilliant hues of orange and blue that covered the canvas sky. Even she had almost forgotten the spectacular sunsets, as the horizon beckoned the sun, only realising now how the milky whites of the air-polluted city paled in comparison to the country. She almost

itched to grab that phone off him, to see what captured his attention when all she felt was the land calling out to her. She was about to ask whether he wanted to go for a walk when –

“Could you turn on the lights in here? It’s getting too dark,” he said suddenly. She moved to the light switch, flicking it several times when there was no response from the two globes in the room. At that Adrian had looked up, his gaze sweeping from Leila to the ceiling.

“So not even your electricity works here, eh?” Adrian sounded exasperated, and he turned on his phone light to shine on her face, its glaring brightness capturing her as if she were in the spotlight.

“You’re one to talk,” she retorted, “seeing as it takes you fifteen minutes to figure out how to screw in one light bulb.” Adrian turned the phone light around so it pointed back to him, illuminating the odd planes of his face from below. He had done the same thing with his torch back at their flat when their electricity grid supply stopped on their block, telling her ghost stories as they waited for their power to come back on. But she didn’t remember his cheeks looking so hollow, or how deeply his eyes sunk into his skull... shining a light from a different angle really changed how someone appeared.

“Calm down. I wasn’t trying to offend you, anyway.” Leila exhaled sharply; he was really quite oblivious to her sensitivity to his tone and facial expressions. She had heard that supercilious tone before, and how he liked to assume an air of elevated indifference – it was his way of ignoring her emotions.

“Just help me with the fire then,” she said, pulling the old blackened poker from its holder beside the fireplace. She started the fire, trying to ignore the fact that Adrian had not moved from his position and aligned the softly glowing embers so they formed a charcoal bed. She poked at the weak flames, trying to replicate the bonfire nights of her family...

“The trick is you have to blow on the paper with just the right amount of force,” her father said, bending over his neat arrangement of wood and paper. His breath was like some magical gust of wind, and as he stood back up she would see the flames swiftly consuming the paper before they licked at the logs. Somehow the subsequent billows of smoke would always

find their way over to her, engulfing her in clouds of dark grey smoke. It was different to the morning mist that sometimes settled over their land in the winter; this smoke was stinging, overwhelming, consuming. But sometimes her dad would joke around and say that the smoke could always be useful for communication if the phone or electricity failed to work.

Leila had always felt a reverence for the country, where everything had its place, everything fell into a natural cycle, everything fell from life to death, death to life... that unfaltering reassurance that life beyond yours would continue, the acceptance that you were insignificant compared to the vast world.

But how Adrian would scoff at her if he knew her thoughts! She recalled that excitement she had felt when she had first moved into his flat... or was it just nerves? Uncertainty? She felt a tightness in her chest as she looked at him sprawled out on the couch. What was she thinking, bringing him here? He didn't seem to understand her connection to her family house or land at all. He didn't belong here.

She rushed to the front door, desperate for some air so she could breathe again. She hadn't realised how quickly night had descended. As she stood there clutching the front porch rail, she turned her gaze heavenward. She watched the cosmos come to life, as if God had switched on the light of the heavens, and she felt an inexplicable calm as the stars began their slow dance across the skies. Her grip loosened, and she closed her eyes as Mother Earth's heartbeat soothed her. It was like pressing your head against a loved one's chest, hearing their steady breaths lull you into tranquillity.

"Hey, when my lease ends back home, you're going to find a new place with me, aren't you?" Adrian called out from the living room. She jumped, his voice jarring and harsh amongst the music of the cicadas.

It was a long while before Leila answered.



A Mock Of Life

His hair like suns and breath a comfort warm,
Just a technique, part of a part.
The way her heart just skipped a gentle storm
Cliché and old, ov-er wrought art.

Cannot we just enjoy how she feels when
The weight of his gaze press-es her cheeks pink?
Must we repeat same lines again
In vain to find some hidden chink?

It saddens me to see that human life,
Put down in words becomes a mock.
Yet worse that still more use their learning knife
To pick and prod, like fev'rish hawk.

And if you still nod: you were not quite swayed.
Was it a must, the thousand word essay?

Found In Translation

Clara's first memory of performed music was a mix of dark seats, rustling jackets and trickling notes; of bright voices, pungent perfume and the fizz of expensive champagne. Years later, she would recall a sad tinge to the memory, like a sepia haze over an old photograph.

She was six. It was Chopin's 2nd Piano Concerto. His name was Alexander Bolshov. She sat in the front row, legs dangling, in her new purple party dress and fidgeted with the lace hem while he played. He played sadly. The music was beautiful and the notes tinkling, but there was sadness between every note and steeped in every silence. The music spoke of longing and distance and melancholy, despite its intense atmosphere; it spoke of stillness and tears and sorrow.

The after-party was held backstage in one of the more modern studios. Her mother took her hand carefully and led her across the rows, expertly weaving through the crowds of people.

"Mama, why is he sad?" Clara asked, her other hand dangling by her side.

"Who, darling?"

"The piano man."

"What do you mean?"

Clara smoothed the front of her dress and said nothing.

The party was filled with glitter-clad women and dark-suited men. It made Clara blink. A woman with peroxide blonde hair kissed her on both cheeks. A man with a dazzling orange tie patted her on the head. A short dark lady beamed at her and stroked her hair ribbons. A short while later, Clara's head was spinning with a mix of lemon, lime and something that smelt strangely sour. Her father sent her to a dark corner and said it would help her dizziness settle.

The window bay was deep and when she stepped inside, the dark curtains swirled shut behind her. The moonlight was falling in a straight ray onto a single spot and she stepped into it, feeling the silver illumination fall onto her face. A voice emerged from behind her.

"Privet."

Clara turned around. There he was, seated in a corner of the window seat, watching her, half in shadow. “You’re the piano man!” she said and he smiled at her.

Alexander Bolshov had sea-blue eyes. His tie was the same colour as her dress and his suit was grey, unlike the sea of black jackets beyond the curtain. His smile was kind.

“What are you doing in here?” He tilted his head. She stepped forward, out of the light. “Is something wrong?” He frowned slightly. “Why are you—”

“Clara!” Her mother pulled back the curtains and took hold of Clara’s shoulder. “Are you bothering Mr. Bolshov?” Her mother turned to the pianist and they started to talk. Clara tried to discern the words passing between them, but the strange words jumbled in her head and turned into garbled sounds.

“Mr. Bolshov would like to know if you enjoyed the performance.”

Clara paused, then nodded. Alexander Bolshov’s smile grew. “Ask him why he’s sad.”

“Oh, Clara...”

“*Chto?*” Alexander Bolshov said.

“She...” Clara’s mother hesitated. “*Ona khochet znat’, pochemu ty grustish’.*”

Alexander Bolshov looked taken aback. “*Pochemu ona dumayet, chto mne grustno?*”

Clara’s mother sighed exasperatedly. “Mr. Bolshov wants to know why you think he is sad.”

Clara thought about this for a moment. “His music is sad. The music that he played. It felt sad.”

Clara’s mother clearly thought this was a waste of time. “*Ona govorit, chto vasha muzyka grustit.*”

Alexander Bolshov stared at her. Clara’s mother, interpreting this as annoyance, took his arm and led him out into the party, speaking to him all the while with those funny sounds. Clara stared after them as they disappeared into the sparkling crowd.

“Clara.”

Clara looked up. Her mother smiled at her. “Alexander Bolshov left a note for you at the hotel.” Clara reached for the envelope. It was crisp and cream-coloured and soft. The paper inside was covered with a strange succession of letters.

“Mama, I can’t read this.”

Her mother reached for the letter. Her eyes scanned over the words and she started to smile. “Shall I read it to you?”

Clara nodded.

Clara,

Your mother tells me you were named after Robert Schumann’s wife. Clara Schumann was beautiful and clever, just like you. And she had a wonderful talent for music and the arts. I will tell you something. What the music told you that night was correct. I was sad. You see, my family in Russia was extremely poor and I was sent away very early to learn music. I loved it. Music is a gift and it brings us many things. But I missed my family very much. I still do.

You made me very happy that night because someone understood my music. Not many people do, but you did, and I believe that Clara Schumann would have also.

We speak the same language, you and I.

Alexander Bolshov.

Pat, Darling

Pat Darling had a plumber's bum. He had a plumber's bum because he was a plumber. It was to be expected. He had a plumber's eyes, plumber's teeth, a plumber's finger to plumb his plumber's nose. He could throw a wrench to Joe, and Joe would catch it in his own plumber's hand, but Joe's palm was crinkled with the contours of Australian dreams; Pat knew Ireland like the back of his hand.

Pat drank his tea with his little finger outstretched, full of the pomposity of oiled hair and cufflinks. It was a buttonhole joint, the knuckle flicking through and out, so that his finger would never hold straight. Joe called him an Englishman, and Pat was put out. He threatened to drink Guinness on the job, and that was the end of that.

Pat drank his tea everyday in a little ritual of sorts. It was his only religion, so very un-Irish of him. His Catholic mother rarely talked to her Protestant aunt, but they would all drink tea. Pat drank tea whatever the weather. In Ireland he drank it while discussing the direction of rain from under the thin eaves of a shopfront, or facing straight into a head wind, watching his nephew fly, and crash, a kite. In Australia, Pat didn't drink tea for the warmth or the conversation, as Australians wouldn't stop talking anyway, except to decipher an Irish accent. Pat drank his tea even on that sticky, sickly day, with the sun hot on his back, the rain almost at his fingertips. Joe, with his keen sense of smell for piss-weak humour laughed with his unchecked, early morning laugh at the Irishman drinking English Breakfast tea. Pat choked on his tea with a snort that said the English Breakfast wasn't really English, the Irish really wasn't Irish.

Pat drank his tea, Joe his instant, and they stood with their feet in the gutter. They had to stand with their feet in the gutter some days, but the trick was to keep their minds out. At least until noon, when the Australia vs. Ireland cricket test would come on the radio from Perth. Then they could slip into watching (or listening) to the grass grow, and their minds would be on the field, perhaps close to the gutter past the boundary rope, but still on the field.

"The openers are out at the crease, ready for the first ball, and it swings back across him. Dot ball." Dry stuff, but announced boldly and in such a broad Australian voice, with such conviction and with the roar of a crowd

who will cheer for a dot ball as loudly as a six (for the best of test cricket is not in the scoring but in the waiting and the drinks break), it was positively exciting. So exciting Joe dropped his wrench and swore, loudly. Pat shushed him because they were in a posh street, but then realised it was so glittering with gold and everyone's houses were so large they lived only in the back of them. You could run naked down the street and nobody would see you; everyone was watching their gardens out the back window, ready to trim the hedge at the first sign of growth. Pat wasn't willing to try though.

"What a plumb! Plumb in front he was. That's gotta be out." It was the radio again, a cheer going up as the opener went out for a duck.

"This in't fitting. Gotta be the wrong part." It was Joe, who could never put parts together, even if it was the right one.

"And a fitting cheer for the bowler. What a plumb! Bit of a wrong move from the batter though." The announcer was still going.

"Flip it round. Wrong end." Pat was terse, struggling to fit his own pieces together.

"Ah, bastard." Pat didn't know whether Joe meant him or the pipe, or the Aussie batsman.

"Another dot."

"Just a dot of glue then and you should be right," said Pat.

"She'll be right, mate," Joe teased and Pat managed an Irish smile as dry as an Irish whisky.

"An excellent hit, stopped by the man out at silly point."

"Ah the silly bugger!" Joe again

"What a shot. The ball's barrelling down the ground, and yes, made it for four!"

"You can see the rain barrelling in across there. Here soon."

At Pat's words, Joe heaved around, swinging himself into the truck as sure as the ball swings across the pitch. Pat laughed, and Joe glared. You could hear a wrench fall. Joe's pipe end lay in its parts as the rain began to tumble. Australian thunder slapped, water ran down the street, carrying away the pipe pieces and the wrench, and the last of Joe's good humour.

Pat sighed and watched Joe grumble, perhaps about his wrench or the rain or the work or the bad instant coffee; maybe it was the world rolling across the back of his shoulders. Joe had a funny tendency to carry the

world on his shoulders – to listen to the women gruffing on the bus, or the boys playing games on their phone with elevator music turned up high, and Joe would wonder why he couldn't sit at home with a book with a gaggle of characters. Particularly when it was wet. And those characters were not Irishmen who espoused the benefits of tea. So Pat pelted off after the pieces and the wrench and Joe's good humour. He came back up the hill with a toothy Irish smile.

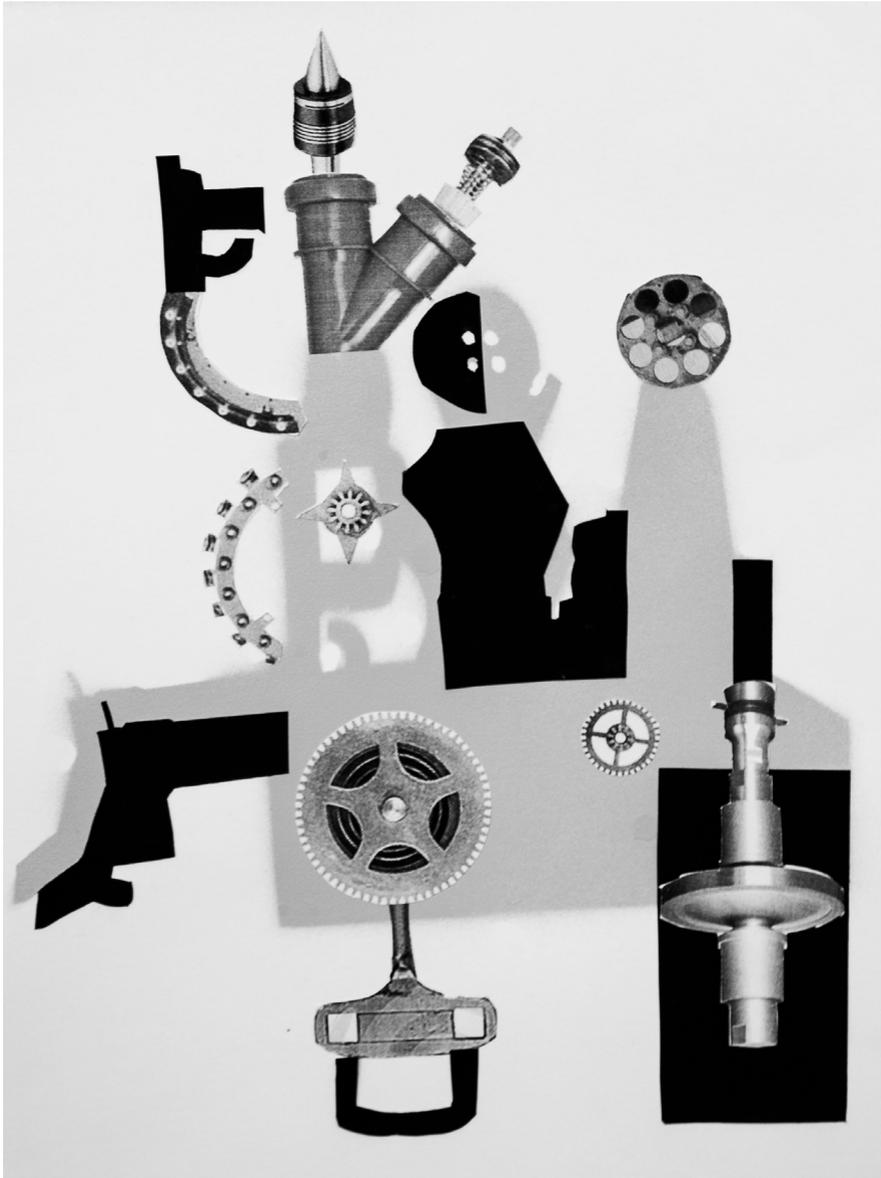
Joe was jumping. "He's made fifty, he's made fifty!" Pat handed him the pieces and the wrench, and a cheer. Pat didn't know why, but he was cheering too, cheering for the Aussie who was beating the Irish. It was probably lucky though, as the Irish would never win in cricket.

"Good on ya, Pat, darling." They both laughed.

Pat and Joe sat in the truck and watched the rain, with the radio turned up loud enough to hear over the pelting rain. Pat made himself another tea.

"Instant?" Joe asked. "It's Australian," he said with a smile.

Not for all the tea in China, or Ireland, or Australia.



The Brewer

Quack Quack Qua...

The 4:30am alarm was cut short by Dally's fist pounding the phone into silence. Dally rolled onto her back pondering if it was worth getting out of the toasty sheets only to be frozen when she left her apartment to join the world outside. Before her eyes could steal a few more minutes of darkness, her alarm sounded again, making her mumble about the stupidity of electronics.

Grabbing her phone from the charger she slipped her feet from under the blankets, testing the temperature of the room. Shivering she jumped out of bed, shoving her toes into her UGGs to try to retain heat. Quickly scurrying across her room she delved into the dark trying to find the light switch. Once found, she shuffled back over to her phone that had been discarded on the bed, swiped the screen to the side and lazily typed in her password. Her attempt was met with failure. Groaning in annoyance she purposely typed in the password in the hope that it would understand not to be so demanding in the morning.

As Dally pulled the old warped front door closed, the cold wrapped itself around her like a cocoon numbing her fingers and nose. Dally trudged to the car mumbling to herself but at the same time exhilarated by the darkness of the cobalt blue sky and the city lights that flickered, illuminating the city streets. She drove slowly through the city relishing the silence of the usually bustling city. In the chilly mornings that hovered over London the city resembled a sleeping giant, only to be woken when the symphony of engines, clacking of shoes and babble of humans sounded at eight o'clock. The asphalt was slightly tinged white with the frost and it crunched under Dally's boots as she made her way to the café at the end of Marylebone Road.

'The Brewer' attracted many businessmen and women who wanted a warm coffee for their frozen hands so they could sit at desks and stare at illuminated screens all day, although, at five am the old brick frame of the cafe was free of the crowd. Dally opened the glass doors just enough for her to slip through without letting in the frostbitten air and dusted her feet on the mat. Shuffling past the empty tables and upturned chairs, Dally made her way to the kitchen.

When 'The Brewer' was merely a part of Dally's imagination this run down warehouse was on the market. It took five months for her dream to be realised. The shop front retained the old bricks that had first drawn Dally to it. Inside lay a bar-styled bench made of thick wood, simple chairs and tables and many built in couches with comfortably worn pillows and vibrant throws scattered over them. The kitchen was a stylish combination of brass and wood with the details of the brass pipes polished to perfection.

When Dally cooked she could be lost for hours in her own world. Her mind would become as still and blank as a polished grey pebble that had been worn smooth and round by the sea. Hours could pass in masses of muffins and croissants. Dally loved when the air became warm; when the glass doors started to fog up; when the trays of warm pastries were too hot to touch and when the taste of cinnamon, white chocolate and apple muffins lingered in the air.

For Dally, cooking was not just creating a masterpiece. No. For Dally cooking allowed her to explore the freedom that comes with having no rules. She cooked because she enjoyed experimenting with different fresh foods. She cooked because it connected her with the past and gave her hope for the future. When Dally's Mum died she had inherited the family's ancient, much loved and much used rolling-pin. When her hands ran over the warm, aged cherry wood she could feel the presence of not only her Mum but all the women who had used it, and loved it, before her.

Ding Ding Ding

The first customer was a middle-aged man who looked like he had got out on the wrong side of the bed. Rubbing his hands together as he entered he dragged his eyes to the counter, shrugged off his coat and slumped onto one of the leather-cushioned stools. Dally padded around to the back of the counter, grabbed her notebook, ready to take the man's order. Smiling lightly at the man she asked him what he would like to have this morning.

"A hit of strong black," and almost as an after-thought, "please."

Dally dropped her smile and returned to the coffee machine mumbling to herself about people's lack of basic manners. Glancing back at the man's hunched form she saw the corner of some business documents and judging from his obvious late night antics he was probably a corporate advisor, and probably on the team that was working on the Parker/Martinez takeover. The takeover was bordering on the multibillion-pound mark and Dally could

understand his clipped tone and stressed face. Grabbing her newspaper and adding a warm biscuit to the saucer, she quickly walked back over to the man and passed him the newspaper, opening it at the business section with his requested coffee. As Dally turned away she heard a delighted yelp and couldn't help the smile that spread across her face.

During rush hour Dally sped between tables, people and coffee machine. Without thought she asked the same questions over and over again, finally realising what it would be like as a coffee machine that just had to repeat its job. When the last customer left she leaned against the bench, savouring the hum of the overworked coffee machine and the sound of the industrial washer churning in the background.

“Ehem.”

Dally jolted upright as if called to attention and whirled around to face the man that had so rudely interrupted out of her reverie. Staring at him she was surprised to see it was the first customer of the day.

“Not to be rude, but shouldn't you have left?” The man raised his eyebrow. Dally let out a sigh.

“I was just going to say thank you.” His features lifted from being serious to an almost smile. Chuckling at him, she gestured for him to continue.

“But how did you know that I was part of the takeover?”

“An educated guess,” she parried.

“Well if you ever want to make ‘educated guesses’ for a living...” The man left his suggestion hanging.

“I'll keep it in mind,” Dally conceded. The man flashed another smile, giving her a card before whirling around and walking towards the door.

Ding Ding Ding

Dally stared after him, hand on her hip. Anyone who looked through the fogged-up window would have stared as Dally let her laughter bubble over in waves. Standing up she smiled, shaking her head at her silliness for even considering the man's proposal. Humming to herself she turned around to the coffee machine, content with her life as it was.



The Czechoslovakian Playwright

La Maison d'Orange was due to open at half-past nine. It was a beautiful evening, mild, starry, and rather typical of a balmy autumn night under the Prague sky. Bedrich leaned against his shiny black cane; all around, men were shuffling with their caps pulled down and collars turned up – very, very down, and very, very up, so that collars covered mouths and caps covered eyes and all that remained were two little holes in the centre of the face that stared perennially at the ground, or – in the case of the curiously upturned nose – at some vague and distant light. For a moment Bedrich feared that he too might have to adopt this ridiculous style of dress. After all, he was a playwright and thus had more need to hide than anybody (except maybe a few persistent Uniates of the Greek Catholic Church). He inhaled. Czechoslovakia had changed so thoroughly, so quickly.

A faint wind ruffled under his hat and he put up his hand to keep it on. He decided that fearing the neo-Stalinists gave them more credit than they were due, and, content with this conclusion, mulled over the next few lines of his new play.

[VACLAV and GUSTAV find a COGWHEEL in the centre of the stage. The COGWHEEL is not overly big, but not too small, either. It's just the right size and sits nicely on VACLAV'S palm. Spotlight. The COGWHEEL is brilliantly golden and shining.]

VACLAV: [*Holding the COGWHEEL up to the light, then bringing it down to eye-level and staring at it in admiration.*] Why, her light is blinding! [*Holding it back up to the light, and squinting.*] Never in all my life have I seen beauty so pure and so plain!

COGWHEEL: [*Sparkling.*]

GUSTAV: [*Taking the COGWHEEL from VACLAV'S hands and examining*

it.] Isn't this weird? The nearest factory is all the way out there. [*Points to the EXIT, which is wide open.*] Do you think she's rolled here?

VACLAV: Rolled here? Well of course not. Cogwheels aren't made for rolling – especially not the pretty ones! [*Taking the COGWHEEL off GUSTAV and putting it on the ground.*] Watch. It'll topple over within three seconds. [*He gives the COGWHEEL a little nudge. It rolls unsteadily for the first three seconds but then gains momentum and rolls off the stage and across the theatre and out through the EXIT. VACLAV and GUSTAV watch, completely still.*]

Bedrich had always loved the theatre. A long time ago, when he was young and dapper and studying in Copenhagen, he remembered seeing a production of *Hamlet*. It felt so right to him, sitting in Denmark and watching as Fortinbras walked on with a charming smile, saying: "Take away these corpses. Now I shall be your king." Shakespeare made him feel special, the sole witness of a great drama that was enacted and concluded around him.

The language of theatre was secretive, he thought, but not really. The stage – a spiritual and "scenographic" tradition – sketched a complex theatrical grammar that allowed playwrights and theatre artists, in silent agreement with their audiences, to talk truthfully about their common woes. "Common woes," he said to himself, "that's the key." Amidst Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy and scientific atheism and, of course, the all-encompassing (and ever-shifting) Marxism-Leninism, suffering was the only constant. Suffering had to be embraced and exalted. Injustices, deficiencies, human frailties – all had to be sung and celebrated because everything could be put right if effort were sincere, concerted. This, they had to believe. But at the same time suffering had to be overlooked. It had to be regarded as a foreign concept, a sentiment that had never surfaced and will never surface and was discretely distilled into a single theatrical sequence, of slapstick, perhaps, or non sequitur. It was all very confusing. Life was lived because life had to be lived, and living life was enjoyable. Good fortune was not good fortune because it had to be earned and when you earned it, it would fall from the sky.

GUSTAV: [*Angrily.*] Now you've done it. I was just beginning to like her.

VAVCLAV: Oh Gustav. [*He holds his arms out, asking for an embrace.*

GUSTAV *takes a step back, angrily.*] I'm sorry, I really am. Surely you know I didn't want her roll away like that – surely! [GUSTAV is *still angry.* *He doesn't look too sure.*]

GUSTAV: You rolled her away.

VACLAV: [*Clearly hurt.*] But –

GUSTAV: You rolled her away.

VACLAV: Yes, but –

GUSTAV: You rolled –

VACLAV: [*Exasperated.*] Yes, but only to show you that she should be bad at rolling!

GUSTAV: [*Equally exasperated.*] Well she's clearly not!

VACLAV: But I couldn't have known, could I? [*The two are silent. They walk in circles on the stage, side-by-side, rather awkwardly. Suddenly, the COGWHEEL falls from the ceiling down to the ground, sparkling.*]

Had western theatrical discourse stuck to deconstructing *Hamlet*, Bedrich might think more highly of it. Instead it dug holes for itself, trapping Smiths and Martins in an elliptical orchestration and dreading the bald soprano and falling endlessly into a nihilistic, existential nonsense. Ionesco, Adamov, Genet – *please*. The world was not metaphysically or necessarily meaningless. Of course not. Bedrich shook his head and chuckled to himself. Had the French been more astute they might have realised that absurdity was a by-product of their own insensibility. Change your attitude, his teacher had often told him, and you will change the world.

Here in Czechoslovakia people had deep spiritual conviction. To Bedrich's knowledge there were some four million Catholics. As a number, really, four million isn't small, isn't big: it's just small enough for Stalin to hunt down and just big enough to make the hunt interesting, worthwhile. Bedrich found religion intoxicating, immutable, quite like love. You had to hang in there and not lose hope and eventually – *finally*, when you least expected it – you would be rewarded.

[The COGWHEEL sparkles on the ground.]

GUSTAV: [Looking up. Excitedly.] She must have come from the sky.

VACLAV: [Looking confused, then up.] The sky, you say? Why, she must have fallen from a belt pulley attached to some steel bar.

GUSTAV: [Putting up a hand as if to shield his eyes from the moon or some other source of light, then looking around.] Where would you find a steel bar around here?

VACLAV: [Incredulously.] Where? Gustav, this ceiling is made of steel bars! [Sweeping his arms up high and gesturing to the span of the ceiling.]

GUSTAV: [Staring at VACLAV rather blankly.] Well. . .

VACLAV: What? Can you not see the ceiling? [VACLAV looks up at the ceiling to check that it's still there.]

GUSTAV: Oh, I can see it alright. It's just. . . I just. . . I don't think it's something we're meant to see.

VACLAV: Oh Gustav. [Sighing. Shaking his head.] Can you see anyone here who can tell us what not to see? [He gestures to the otherwise empty stage.]

GUSTAV: [Pondering, deep in thought.] I mean – [Reaching into his pocket and taking out a piece of folded paper. He unfolds it, taking care to flatten out the creases with his palms. It's the script.] Here. [Pointing to the relevant line.] We're meant to be enjoying “a balmy autumn night under the Prague sky”.

VACLAV: [Taking out his copy of the script and reading it carefully.] Well, fair enough. We are indeed meant to be out in the open. [Pause. GUSTAV smiles smugly.] But Gustav, there's nothing in here that tells us to overlook the presence of the ceiling. [They stare at each other, stare down at their scripts, then up at the ceiling.]

A rather nondescript man stood himself beside Bedrich.

“Are you waiting for *La Maison* to open?” he asked.

Bedrich thought this was a rather silly question. Why else would someone stand on the steps of *La Maison*? Nevertheless, out of courtesy, he gave a nod and a smile.

“So you have some time to spare, then?” asked the man.

Again, out of courtesy, Bedrich gave a nod and a smile.

“A woman I had slept with had no access to pills,” the man said. “I was aware of that.” And after a slight pause he added, “She’s now having an abortion.”

Ah, thought Bedrich, a troubled man seeking out a confidant! Bedrich wanted to tell the man that Czechoslovakia suffered from periodic shortages of pills because its economic system is not based on supply-and-demand and that was is a good thing, because enterprises were product-driven and therefore selfless, giving blindly and without regard to how much was necessary or how much would be required, and that abortion was a progressive, scientific way of undoing the mistakes of man and woman. But somehow Bedrich felt that this explanation would not be appropriate, or consoling.

So instead he said, “Did you know? I’m a playwright. Bedrich Jaroslav Dobransky.”

The man pulled his cap back and looked Bedrich in the eye. He then looked Bedrich up and down as if to say ‘a playwright! Are you really?’

“What are you working on now?” he asked.

“*Vaclav and Gustav and their Golden Lover*,” Bedrich replied.

The man smiled and pretended to appreciate the title. He then asked, “Where can I go to see it?”

“See it?” said Bedrich, shaking his head. “I’m afraid you’ll never see it. It plays out in my mind, just for me.”

The man and Bedrich stared at each other, completely still. It was nearly half-past nine.

GUSTAV: [*Picking up the COGWHEEL that had fallen from the ceiling.*] Are you going to take her home?

VACLAV: Well, I would certainly lose her. I was thinking you’d be the better man for the job.

GUSTAV: Oh, you know me. [*He takes a step forward and tries to shove*

the COGWHEEL into VACLAV'S hands. VACLAV takes a step back.] Well, I would certainly lose her. [*They stare at each other.*]

VACLAV: Maybe you should just put her back on the ground – in some awfully conspicuous spot – for someone else to find. [*Pointing to the centre of the stage.*] There! [*He takes the COGWHEEL and places it on the floor, in the centre.*]

[*In the distance, outside the theatre, a man speaks of an affair he's had.*]

GUSTAV: Oh, Vaclav! It's half-past nine!

VACLAV: Hurry, our play finishes at half-past nine!

GUSTAV: Hurry, *La Maison d'Orange* opens at half-past nine!

[*Pause.*]

VACLAV: Let's go to *La Maison* for a drink. What do you say?

GUSTAV: Oh Vaclav – I say it's a marvellous idea.

the powerful play: a trptych of verses

#1

it's prickling heat and it's the
too-bright sunlight that jabs at our
eyes and it's the blisters on our feet that
are red with anger and it's you and
it's the truth that falls from your
lips like god's word and aligns perfectly with the universe

#2

your cologne is so strong that I can smell
it from the other side of the
road and when you breathe out it's just a mess of
feigned masculinity when I know all you really want to
do is curl into the foetal position and close your eyes until out of the
darkness emerges
stars that become galaxies

#3

"dying's for fools," they say
their eyes glistening
full of feigned wisdom
like a plastic diamond
caught in the brief light of narcissism
for it won't be long
until they, too, succumb to foolishness



Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank and congratulate the girls whose work appears in these pages. I am always impressed by the flair and passion for creative writing that students in the senior school possess and this year's *Ascham Ink* demonstrates yet again the rich rewards of that flourishing creativity.

There is a wide range of writing in these pages, from promising talent in the younger years through to entrants in the annual Ascham World Poetry Day competition and Year 11 and 12 Extension work. Similarly, the artwork here shows the variety of work and the talent across all years of senior school Art students.

I would very much like to thank my colleagues in the English Department for their untiring support and humour. It is only through their fostering of creative talent and their help in collecting entries that this publication is made possible. I would also like to sincerely thank Vanessa Chalmers and the Art Department, especially Vanessa Bellemore, for providing the images and also for developing their students' abilities and imaginations.

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And to all of the contributors and all of the writers in the senior school – keep writing! There is nothing so liberating nor significant as putting yourself and the world onto paper, whether for yourself or others. Revel in your creativity – it makes all the difference.

Elise Dempster

