

Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2015

Edited by Thea Todhunter

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Introduction

This year's edition of *Ascham Ink*, capably edited by Ms Thea Todhunter, showcases some of the best creative and critical writing of 2015. The anthology of short stories, poems and essays is illustrated with images of selected artworks from the Senior School Art Show. Thanks must go to all contributors, especially Ms Todhunter and Mr Chris Summers from the Art Department.

English is a vitally important subject because it empowers students by giving them the necessary tools to develop their own voice in the world. By reflecting on the way composers use language to shape meaning, students are inspired to think deeply, to take creative risks and express their unique vision to others. When students are enjoying what they are doing, they are more likely to learn and grow. For this reason, the English Department is always reflecting on past programs and inventing new activities to engage the girls.

A particular focus in 2015 has been on creative writing, with activities embedded within Assignments across Stages 4, 5 and 6. Some of the work you will read in this anthology has come out of this Assignment work and some from the various activities devised by the English Department that sit outside the usual timetable, including the annual Ascham Writers' Festival in Term 2. The Festival involved all girls in Years 7 and 8 who participated in a range of creative writing workshops facilitated by English teachers and two guest authors, Ms Kate Forsyth and Ms Claire Zorn. The workshops focused on building characters and settings, playing with genre and activating the five senses.

In Year 9, students alternated between the critical and creative, examining a variety of short stories and putting into practice strategies used by some of the greatest writers in history.

It is an honour to introduce the 2015 edition of *Ascham Ink*. I hope you enjoy reading it and that you feel as proud of the girls as I do.

Mrs Amy Dal Pozzo
Head of English

Ours

Some love is like the raging flames
struggling to reach the sky.
Licking and devouring all in its path
but dying out in the blink of an eye.
Ours is the embers that burn through the night
the heat warming, bubbling tip to toe.
Time may whiten and wrinkle our edges
but everlasting is the resonant glow.
I will love you as long as the stars doth shine
and the sea laps and fades on the shore.
As evergreen as the hue of ancient pines
our love is all that, but more.



The Fading Light

Standing above the fire, the red glow hitting his face, James tossed her letter into the flames, watching them lick the pages and blacken the edges. He choked on the words he never said, swallowing back months of endless nights and empty beer bottles. Her words no longer any use to him. Eighteen pages of eighteen months turned to ashes drifting through the chilling winter breeze off into the fading light. The colours he looked up at, dull and two dimensional, no longer filled with the wonder of opportunity and promise that they once did. As his gaze returned to the fire he was hypnotised by the dancing flames, James' mind waltzing to thoughts of her. As he closed his eyes, the warm glow stroked his cheek as she once did, the breeze running through his hair like her fingers and whispers from the trees echoed in his ears like the sweet nothings she used to whisper to him. His brain too exhausted to fight his memory, let her face swim in his mind's eye, images of rainy days, mix tapes and coffee stains reducing his sanity even more.

They are sitting on the lumpy brown couch in an almost empty living room surrounded by worn books and CDs. Her hands holding onto the holes in his sweater and a look in her eye, looking at him the way everyone wants to be looked at. Studying every line, every freckle on each other's faces and discussing all realms of time and space as the golden morning light floods in through the dirty windows. Still in pyjamas, the TV is left off and dreams of travel, of houses and little feet escaped their lips. The two are intoxicated by the nature of love and crippled by its effects. These two romantics are bound together by their expectation of the unrealistic, bound by what they have studied in books, let drip off their tongues in poems and let fill their lungs in songs. Refusing to drag themselves to their English Lit class the two talk for hours, ruffling sheets, clinging to pillows and consuming more hot beverages than recommended for human intake. A moment of frozen time, a bubble, untouchable by the danger of the outside world. The golden light catches James' eye and blurs his vision, he closes his eyes.

The sight that greeted him was a dead fire, the remains of an unrecognisable letter and a silent world. A battlefield. Nothing more than a bloody scene of lost love. The golden light was no longer there and the fulfilled feeling that once swelled in his body had been replaced by the sting you get after putting antiseptic on a wound. James shifted his weight from foot to foot and stumbled, knocking the fire pit and letting the cold evening air bury its way down his shirt. Holding his coat James grit his teeth, threw the empty bottle onto the fire, took one last look and walked away. The darkness crept in, increasing the narrowness of his vision.

Her name, her face, her eyes, in everything he saw. She was in every woman he lay eyes on. The face he used to look for in the crowd now the only face he could see. Betrayed by his subconscious, James was bombarded with anxiety and began to grieve memories, the powerful force of nostalgia consuming him. Unable to run from his mind he ran from the fire. James attempted to run from his logic and towards someone else's bed, towards the bottom of a bottle, towards the flames. He refused to confront the itching of what many have been in that letter. As he ran towards the falling night the cold evening chill stung his eyes.

James opened his eyes to their living room on a crisp yet boiling Christmas morning. Wrapping paper hid the floor and laughing disguised all signs of trouble. White cotton shorts and singlet pyjamas clothed everyone in the room as they crammed into their tiny apartment. The friends that couldn't drive home the night before waking on the couch and starting the day eating and drinking early. CDs were ignored as the jokes continued between friends and the two romantics embraced on the lumpy brown couch. Light from the cloudless sky poured through the dirty windows and balcony, the warm sun hitting James' face. Tightening his grip, James inhaled, taking in everything around him, finally, closing his eyes.

Torn away from his intrusion of memory by a puddle James opened his blood shot eyes, greeted by darkness once again. It was an endless cycle. Running from the dark to be welcomed by an illusion of light, unable to escape his addictions. She was one of them.

The Bookstore

The wind blew harshly against my skin, sending icy chills through my spine. Its cold hands gripped my throat, my scarf struggling to keep my neck warm. As I pushed my way through the narrow, cobblestone streets I began to look for somewhere to take refuge from the bleak, wintry weather.

The thought of my mother's birthday popped into my head as I passed under a small bridge. This sudden relief from the wind enabled me to look up and just around the corner I saw the small second-hand bookstore I had been looking for. Ever since I was little my mother had read to me from the book *Little Women*. It was her favourite book and she had collected different versions of it ever since I was little, each with their own unique cover. She had a whole shelf allocated to them, each book with its own little story. There was the one that had been given to her by her grandmother, the one that she had found in an old bookstore which had a beautiful inscription on the inside and, my personal favourite, the one that had a beautifully decorated cover picturing three girls and their dresses, each with intricate patterns and designs on them.

The door to the bookshop creaked open and the bell above tinkled in the wind. The comforting warmth of the shop was accompanied by the musty smell of the old books. Outside the rain began to beat against the window as the wind whistled its way through the whole town. Unwinding my scarf, which clung to my neck, I made my way through the shop to a small corner hidden from view. As I sat down amongst the books I was reminded of the countless nights my mother had spent reading to me. I too had enjoyed the nights when *Little Women* was the book she would read to me, as back then I had felt a strong connection to the story and in some way it had an everlasting effect on me I suppose. I guess that was the reason why she so often read it to us. The invaluable moral lessons the book bore were ones that were extremely important to my mother. I guess it's a part of what made my siblings and I the type of people we are today.

I ran my fingers along the stiff spines of the books as I thought about their past, and wondered what had brought them to this little bookshop. My eye was caught by one of the spines, which happened to be Little Women. I slowly pulled the book from its slot, revealing the golden writing and the silver detailing on the book. It was perfect. I pried open the book and began reading. Memories of my childhood flashed through my mind.

A sudden burst of thunder made me jolt as I look at my watch. The time had slipped by whilst I had been reading. I stretch out my legs, stiff from the cold, and slowly make my way to the counter, not wanting to leave the warmth for the unforgiving storm outside. The book was exactly what I had been looking for and I knew my mother would love it. As I pushed open the door the bell above tinkled a goodbye as a sudden gush of sharp, cold wind came through the door. Once again shivers were sent through my body, radiating out as they removed the warmth from within me. Struggling against the wind I made my way back home. My legs stumbling over the cobblestones as the rain began to pelt down. I hurried back through the tunnel, again provided with a short relief from the wind.

Shortly I arrived back at the door to my apartment, my fingers not wanting to hold the keys. I pushed through the door and once again was hidden from the storm. I allowed myself to dry off before I sat down in front of the fire and began to read the book from start to finish.



It

A cold mist coated the windows. Scenes of country and swaying trees played like a film outside the train. The carriage had a scent of perfume, probably from the grand lady sitting opposite us, rugged up in her warm fur coat. I continued to make patterns with my breath on the window, distracting me from reality.

“Heike, wir sind angekommen” mother said, rattling my arm. The train had finally arrived in Frankfurt. The sound of scraping metal filled my ears as the train pulled to a halt and the smell of coal engulfed me as the carriage door opened. Several Nazi officers boarded the train, their heads as stiff and uniform as a machine, cast about the train. As they came towards my mother and me, I stared into the reflection of their polished black boots.

“Why are you coming to Frankfurt?” the shortest and plumpest man asked, looking harshly into my mother’s eyes.

“My daughter and I are coming to stay with my mother while my husband fights for Germany in Russia” mother said, trying to use a gentle and non-provoking voice.

“You have a very ugly daughter,” he said under his breath and he turned away and walked down the remainder of the train compartment.

“All clear”, he shouted marching off the train and then pacing down the platform. Mother stroked my shoulders and pulled me in close to her chest.

“You’re beautiful to me,” she said as we got off the train.

Frankfurt seemed like a haven compared to the chaos and danger in Berlin. Mother couldn’t afford to hire a car to get to grandmother’s so we ended up walking the distance. I had asked mother if grandmother knew we were coming, but she just said that it would all be fine. We walked for what felt like a whole day. The soles of my feet were aching and my straw hat was knotted around my face. The harsh wind was blowing full force, scattering the autumn leaves around us. I watched mother pulling her trunk behind her. Her blue eyes full of pain as she kept trudging through the ice-cold gust of wind. She hadn’t eaten that much in the last week. The rations had gotten smaller and smaller and mother often ended

up giving half of her rations to me. She used to be a proud and strong woman, but I could see that this war was making her frailer, crushing the hope inside of her, breaking her bones.

The cold grey sky began to recede, leaving behind the night as black as ravens. Suddenly mother made a quick turn and started to walk down a street of dilapidated houses. I quickly followed her and ran to the door, which she was standing at. She curled her fingers over my frozen hand and knocked three times on the dark wooden door. There were footsteps behind the door and the rustling of keys. A frail old woman appeared from inside the cramped little town house.

“Don’t you bring that thing inside this house. It is made by the devil itself!” said grandmother in a coarse voice. Her piercing eyes cut deep into the darkness surrounding us.

“You mean the trunks?” I asked with confusion. At that very moment there were loud footsteps marching down the street. Mother pushed me inside and grandmother quickly locked the door behind us. For a long moment grandmother didn’t speak, she turned towards my mother and sighed.

“Heike, go upstairs. Your bedroom should be the second on the left”, said mother, still staring at grandmother. It was an effort to lift my heavy feet up each stair but eventually I made it to my small dark room. There was no fireplace or even a light, just an endless abyss of numbing blackness.

I couldn’t sleep well. The radio had been playing all night in the room next to mine. It continued to discuss what was happening in terms of the war. That was all anyone could talk about. I had asked mother a couple of times what would happen if we lost the war, she had just replied by saying that no matter what happened we would always be together. I heard whispers coming from downstairs. Were grandmother and mother still awake? I edged my way out of my room so I could hear what they were saying.

“What happens if they find her, in my house?” asked grandmother.

“They won’t,” said mother reassuringly.

“Heike is a girl, no matter if she is different to the rest. They won’t find her here in your house mother.”

“I hope not. Hitler would kill us all for hiding her. Three were taken last week to Auschwitz to be tested on.”

“Quiet mother! I don’t want to disturb Heike. It’s been a long day.”

I could hear footsteps making their way upstairs. I quickly stumbled into bed and pulled the sheets over my cold weak body.

The next morning I decided to go to mother’s room. I knocked hesitantly on the deteriorating door.

“Heike?” I heard my mother question from behind the closed door.

“Guten morgen mutti,” I said as softly as possible. I put my hand over the brass knob and creaked open the door. Mother was lying curled up on her bed. She was pale as a white shirt and looked almost sickly.

“What did you mean last night mother? Why am I different?” I asked, scared to know the answer.

“It is good to be different my child,” said mother in her reassuring voice.

“You are a hermaphrodite Heike, a creature of the devil,” said grandmother in her stern voice, appearing next to me.

“What’s a hermaphrodite?” I asked. I could see my mother’s eyes looking pleadingly towards my grandmother.

“You are neither a boy nor a girl. You are an ‘it’. Hitler carries out experiments on people like you and then he kills you. You are different and Hitler is afraid of different,” said grandmother in a cautious tone of voice.

“Whatever you do, you must not tell anyone else,” said mother reaching out for my hand. I was afraid. Why did Hitler want to experiment on me or even kill me? I have done nothing wrong. Downstairs there was the sound of polished boots kicking against the door. I looked towards mother and then towards grandmother.

“Get changed and cover yourself up completely,” whispered grandmother. She hobbled down the worn stairs in her nightgown.

“Guten morgen,” she said opening the door. I quickly put a scratchy woolen jumper and a skirt on and followed her downstairs. The smell of porridge wafted around the room. I hadn’t taken notice last night but so much had changed about grandmother’s house. A small and dull metal table inside the kitchen had replaced the beautiful mahogany one. The

plates stacked in the sink were broken and cracked and there was dust collecting in the corners of the wall. What had happened to what used to be a small, neat and elegant house? My attention was drawn back to the door where two Nazi officers were standing in their tight uniforms. Their corn-coloured hair slicked back and shiny as a mirror.

“Who is this?” said one of the men looking down at me.

“This is my granddaughter, Heike,” said grandmother, her hands shaking with fear.

“With any new people arriving, a thorough check must be completed,” said the other man looking sternly down at grandmother and me. They marched inside, throwing books off shelves and plates out of the sink. The men were bulls, raging about and destroying everything in their path. Tears were seeping out of grandmother’s eyes. She couldn’t move, she watched as her life was thrown across the floor. I could hear mother walking down the stairs, weak as a twig. She too watched in horror as the men completed their search. One of the men looked towards me again. His eyes scanned over me as though checking whether I was stale bread.

“You,” he said staring straight at me. “You are a very ugly looking little girl,” he began to walk towards me. “You are hiding something little girl. I can tell.”

“Heike!” said mother, pretending to scold me. I could see she was afraid. She ran over to the kitchen and slid past one of the Nazi officers and looked along the bench top.

“Where is the cake that we made for the sick lady next door? Did you eat it?” Her voice quivered and beads of sweat dripped down her forehead.

The officers looked around suspiciously. Suddenly, one of the officers chuckled.

“Everything is good here,” he said. And with that, the two officers departed, leaving their mess and chaos behind. My heart was pounding in my throat. Mother rushed over to me and held me in an embrace, smoothing my hair with her fingers. They were afraid of me. I was afraid of myself, all because I was different. It was as though mother could understand what I was thinking. She began to whisper in my ear.

“You are beautiful to me.”



Blank Pages

When did our story end?
When I see you now
I see a blank page.
Empty.

Pages once filled
with words
in a book that never ended.
We said.
We thought.
Some say it's hardest
to end a story.
It's true.

One day your novel
will have a different author.
And the one I write,
well...
it won't be written with you.
About us.

Can stories write
themselves?
Because I
don't know how to write
them myself.
By myself.

So I sit here
with my pen in my hand
the tip on the
first line.
Waiting...



A Glass Slipper

“A glass slipper...”

A glass slipper is much like a human heart,
fragile and delicate, to be kept safe from breaking.

A glass slipper is much like a human mind,
it allows more of what's on the inside to be seen.

And a glass slipper is much like a human,
it's just one half, two are needed to complete the pair.

Ceiling

The boy remembered the best day of his life like his star plots, meticulously. Every moment was a bright, HD blur of laughter and tears and congratulations, and in the girl's case, many occasions of eye rolling. The girl didn't understand his fascination with stars and the sky and the unknown parts of the world. He had been obsessed with stars for as long as he could remember.

He remembered that day too, the worst day of his life. He had arrived home one day and found an empty house. The couch had been wrapped tightly in bubble wrap, and his childish paintings were crammed into a cardboard box, along with everything else that once hung in the living room. The boy's mother had told him that his father's job had suddenly forced them to move across the state. She reassured him things would be okay, and that he'd find new friends.

"We're constants in a world of variables," the boy's mother had always told him, "Everything changes but we stay the same. Just like the stars. The stars are always there. They move around but they never, ever change. They never, ever disappear." She had told him that when he slowly lost contact with his old friends, and when his favorite sweater faded to grey in the wash.

On the best day of his life, his parents had bought him a star plot. It had been his seventh birthday, and no one could believe it. Star plots were expensive and often reserved for professional astronomers, and when the boy had ripped up his wrapping in a desperate attempt to reveal his present as fast as possible, he had gasped. The girl couldn't remember the entire day, but to her, that moment was as clear as the morning sky. The boy stopped breathing for a moment, and the beating of his heart seemed to stop too. And then it came back, gushing and pounding like the sea. The whole room was filled with his choked breaths and stuttering heartbeat, and then his granite grey eyes filled with tears.

They spilled down his marble face and collected on his jawline. He didn't bother to wipe them away. The boy looked at the star plot, then at

his parents, then back to the star plot. He ran to them, and they scooped him up in their arms.

"Mommy! Daddy! Thank you so, so, so much! Thank you!"

"Fictor," the boy's mother murmured, kissing his forehead.

The best day of his life ended there.

"A-19, F-624, K-35."

The boy with the watery grey eyes squinted at the seemingly endless stretch of intense indigo.

"Okay, Issy. Hi. Hello. If my plots from yesterday are correct, in nineteen seconds you'll witness the world's two-thousandth shooting star on J-93. Happy birthday, my loud friend of nine years, I hope all your wishes come true."

The girl with the large, solid green eyes squinted at the seemingly endless stretch of intense indigo. She sighed into the mouthpiece.

"Thank you. I'm waiting. Fictor?"

The boy and the girl sat in silence, ten kilometers apart, accompanied by the soft hush of each other's belated breathing. They both waited for the moment that never came.

"Fictor? Did I miss it?"

"I didn't see it either. I didn't even blink, I swear."

It was two minutes past midnight.

"I'm sorry. I must have calculated wrong. But I swear, Issy, I swear. I've been graphing and plotting for months and it was supposed to pass J-93 tonight I swear it did."

The boy took a deep breath and adjusted his telescoping, zooming it closer to square J-93.

"Fictor? Are you there? It's okay. I'm just glad I'm talking to you."

"Shhh. There's something weird on J-93."

There was a patch on the border of the plot, slightly darker than the rest of the sky, less indigo and more black, less solid and more...pixelated.

The boy turned the furthest focus ring. Sixteen black pixels, sure and

thick, plastered smack-bang in the middle of the sky, in a formation more or less that of a square.

The boy's head pounded. The stars never change. They never, ever disappear. They couldn't have. His mother had assured him. Everything had changed but the stars never had. They couldn't change. He felt as if his anchor had been uprooted. The boy was drifting out to sea.

"I have to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I hope you have a good birthday."

"Already? Fictor, I don't want you to go," the girl whined, her shallow breathing filling up the silence, but it was too late. The boy had hung up. The line went dead.

The boy's mother stormed out onto the balcony, expecting no one but finding her disheveled son. The boy's skin was sallow and his eyes were ringed with purply shadows. Upon her arrival, he rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair.

"Fictor? Have you-"

"Yeah, mom. All night."

"And-"

"Yeah, mom. I'm alright, and I'll fix myself some breakfast in a second or two."

The boy's mother rolled her eyes and forced a smile. She hesitated, embraced her son, then turned and strutted off, leaving behind a waft of honey, expensive perfume and the click-clacking of high heels.

The boy squinted into the sky, now a pearly baby blue, dolloped sparingly with fluffy mashed potato clouds. The clouds were lined with pink, and although star plots were expensive and usually reserved for night-time observation, if he set it up like usual, and zoomed up onto square J-93, he could just barely make out the stark black outline of pixels, sitting nonchalantly as if it had always been there.

Wait, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Another black pixel had formed on the outer edge of the black square. The boy checked the lens to make

sure it wasn't just a lens malfunction.

And then everything went black.

"Guess who!" The boy's eyes were covered with a pair of warm, clammy hands, belonging to one with a high, bubbly voice, far too happy for a sleep-deprived boy.

"Issy, stop."

The girl sat down beside him and rested her head onto his shoulder. He smelt like wood and musk and cold coffee and sweat.

"Fictor, you stink, and you look like hell. How much did you sleep last night? Guess what? I'm seventeen, now. It's so weird, I swear I was ten yesterday. I was going to tell you I was seven years older than you, and then I was like, hey, that's not right. And then I realized you're seventeen, too. Do you remember when we were little? I knew exactly how many years and months and days old I was. Anyway, this morning I woke up and mom got me one of those phones that everyone has, you know, the ones that prevent radiation or something from getting into your head! I've been wanting one forever!"

The boy kissed her cheek. She smelt like oranges and flowers and clean bed sheets and ink and salt and fresh lipstick, and her cheek was powdery on his lips.

"Issy, you shouldn't wear so much makeup. It comes off on me, and plus, you look fine without. Look, J-93. Even in broad daylight it's black. It's like a computer screen or something."

The girl leaned over the boy and peered into the viewfinder.

"So? Maybe it's just a broken lens."

"It's not."

"Whatever. Your mom's worried about you, and I'm worried about you, and I walked almost three hours to see you this morning so how about you get off your star plots and we go for a walk?"

The boy rubbed his eyes and groaned quietly.

"Look, I'm very touched that you walked all the way here and I know it's your birthday and everything, and I appreciate it very much. But

this is just me being a jerk, not you, okay? You've done nothing wrong. It's my fault. I just really need to work on this. Stay for dinner. You can accompany me here now, but be very quiet, okay? My head hurts."

"Maybe you should have slept. Maybe you shouldn't do any more. Hey, I saw this ad the other day about how the darkness is bad for your eyes and if you want to stay awake after 7pm you should get the OptiNight Glasses so the darkness won't hurt your eyes as much."

"God, Issy, I feel like you're the kind of person ads were made for. They're only saying that so you'll buy them. My eyes are fine, and I've been staying awake after 7 for years."

The girl rolled her eyes. "It's a precaution! You could get cancer from it or something in maybe forty years and then you'll think back and go, man, I wish I listened to Issy."

The boy stayed silent, fiddling with the telescope. The girl sat watching for a moment, then stood up and headed inside.

"I'll be in your room if you need me. I'll try not to burn it down or something."

The boy prodded his mashed potato, pushing it slowly around the plate, painted a pearly baby blue. His eyes flickered from his food to the girl sitting opposite him, to the sky outside. The girl hadn't noticed—she was too busy forking peas and roast beef into her mouth, and chatting to the boy's parents about school and the weather and the future and television.

The boy's father was nodding animatedly, and the boy's mother was worriedly stealing the occasional glance at her son.

"Fictor, aren't you hungry?"

The boy shrugged. The girl smiled and nudged his foot from under the table. "Fictor has been studying his star plots all day, haven't you?"

The boy shrugged again. The boy's father swallowed his potatoes and nodded, desperate to keep the awkward air away, the thick air threatening to suffocate everyone in the room.

"Yeah? Any news from the heavens today?" The boy shrugged again,

opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. He sipped at his water, cleared his throat, and then tried to form a sentence. "I...Yeah. It's weird, you know, there's this little black patch in the sky and it's been there since last night and it's getting bigger and nothing can pass there I think not even the clouds or the stars and everything just disappears in it and comes back out again and it's not blue it's almost like someone's painted over the sky or a part of it has just cracked and fallen off or something". Once he started, he couldn't stop. The girl glanced around the room nervously. It was there, waiting to strike. The awkwardness hung like a storm cloud above the dinner table. The boy bit his lip thoughtfully.

"I mean, ah, never mind. I'm full. I'm going to go to bed."

"Sit down, son. You've barely eaten, and it's Issy's birthday for God's sake. She walked all the way here to see you, and all you can seem to talk about are these darn stars. Stars! My son is obsessed with stars! While other boys his age are running around playing basketball and going to concerts and chasing after girls, my son is watching stars! My God, these darn, darn stars. For God's sake, Fictor, take a seat and let's talk about school, or the weather, or the future, or television." The boy's father was red in the face and the girl was sinking down into her chair, pale like the marble bench top.

"It's okay, sir. I'd better be going home anyway. It's getting late." The girl stood up abruptly and shrugged on her coat, kissing the boy's cheek and hugging his mother and waggling her fingers at his father.

"Thanks for having me tonight. I had a really great day. The dinner was great. Bye!" And just like that, she was gone.

The room was silent. The boy stood up. "I'm going to bed."

The family was positioned spaciouly along the couch. Each member stared forward blankly at the blaring static color of the television set. Outside, the sky was growing dark, but the darkest patch of all remained the pixelated black clump. The boy hadn't dared to mention it to his classmates lest they laughed at him, or mocked him like his father. One lunchtime, crowded around the corner table at the furthest edge of the

Cafeteria, the boy's closest friend had spoken up.

"Guys, is it just me or is there a black patch in the sky?" The boy's heart had thudded in his chest, the erratic pounding threatening to spill out of his mouth, and he had swallowed it.

"D'you need glasses, Thomas?" another boy had shouted across the table, laughing, and a few others had joined in. Another boy had peered into the sky.

"No, yeah, guys, look. There's a black patch, right over there. See?"

They had all turned to the boy. One of them had cocked his chin.

"Hey, Star Boy, Fictor. What's with the black patch?"

The boy had swallowed. Coughed.

"I, uh. Yeah, actually it's been there for a few weeks, now. It's been growing bigger. It's like pixels, y'know, when a pixel in your computer screen dies and there's a little black dot where it used to be. It's blacked out."

The boy's closest friend had sipped at his juice thoughtfully. "Yeah, looks like it. Weird, man. A patch that big doesn't really get noticed, cause y'know, no one looks at the sky and all. But once you notice it, it's there. Betcha they're gonna put it on the news tonight."

The family stared forward blankly at the blaring static color of the television set. There was talk of budgets, of starving children, of bushfires. And then the newsreader bit his lip and looked straight into the camera. "Now we have a, um, revolutionary message from the President himself. Mr. President?"

The family was now alive, craning their necks forward lest they miss the revolutionary message. The president's face flashed across the screen. His eyes were cold and his mouth pointed downward.

"Good evening, America. Good evening, to all the other citizens from all the other regions watching this. I regret to inform you of an issue that has recently been concerning our parliament, and a large number of the general public too. I reassure you that you have nothing to worry about. Now, a fair few of you may have noticed the hole in the sky..."

The president's voice became a buzz in the boy's head. "See? See? I told you! There's a dark patch in the sky!" His father's eyes flickered briefly from the screen to his son. "Shh, boy. The president's speaking." The boy rolled his eyes.

"...The sky you see outside your windows at this very moment is not really the sky you think you know, but I assure you it is not so far from it either. Many years ago, we hired the most prestigious engineers and scientists of various regions of the world, and worked together closely in secret and at night to construct a screen, similar to that of a computer, over our planet. Essentially we have constructed an electronic ceiling above our atmosphere, programmed with the highest technology to produce mist and rain and snow when required. But recently, our screens are experiencing technical difficulties, which our engineers are trying to analyze, right this moment. I am here to announce that for the next few days, weeks, months—the screens will be completely shut down and the only lights in the sky will be the emergency lights. But bear in mind this is by no means the deception of the government system to trick our world—this is but a small security measure to prevent any unwanted invasions of our planet. Please do not be afraid—this is for your own good. Thank you, good night."

The screen went black. Outside, the entire sky fell to darkness. It reminded the boy of the time the girl had covered his eyes—predicted, but still a shock. The sky started to glow an eerie neon green, faint like the green glow of the emergency exit lights at school.

The girl sighed into the mouthpiece.

"Fictor? I'm sorry I doubted you. It's so scary. Do you think it's scary? But I mean I guess it's for our own good, if the president said it himself. We're safe, Fictor."

"But Issy, don't you see? We're not safe. That's just what the president says and he's just as human as you and I.

He can lie just as easily as you and I. There's nothing safe about

restriction. That's just restricting the movement and flow of the world. Issy, can't you understand this? We're in a cage! This...this ceiling! Don't you see? It's not to keep them out, it's to keep us in."

Love is the Mineral

My family is a rock,
strong and tough,
and bound together by
nature's force.

Love is the mineral that comprises what we are.
We are unique, and rich in texture,
each mineral in our rock is different,
special...
vital...
irreplaceable.

We embrace we surround,
and we are all there for one another,
....ALWAYS...unconditionally...forever.
Our strength is in our cohesion.

House

Bedroom

The window splinters when he shuts out the night. Amelia watches as he struggles with the blinds, pulling too hard at their strings. She knows that he is pulling in the wrong direction, that his attempts are too aggressive. She says nothing, the same as the previous night. Eventually he will get it and the blind will release and fall with a zipping noise. She surveys her husband from her bed. "Callum came home with a busted lip last night," she hands her words out carefully.

"I had a look, it was fine. Hardly any blood." He continues to tug in jerks at the blind. She sees only his back.

"Jarod, he's our son, I'm worried about him. I think he's getting into the wrong crowd."

He swats her words.

"You're acting ridiculous, this stuff is harmless."

Amelia turns her body the other way and the sheets rustle. "I'm... I'm just..."

"Trust me, honey. Boys don't sit around chatting about their feelings at lunch time. This is just boys being boys, it's a bit of fun. I was the same at that age." He keeps tugging.

"I know you were." She whispers the words, only the room is too quiet. She cannot see him, but she hears the blind being released and heavy footsteps towards the doorway of the bedroom.

"Look I dunno what you're getting at, but put it this way, If he's not acting like some of the pooftas he's at school with then I can't say I'm too upset."

More splinters and a closed door.

Attic

"I miss you, too, George."

Callum hangs up the phone and sits in darkness on his bed. He lets

George's voice lingers in the black and twists like smoke around his head. Only it is violently interrupted by the sound of shuddering school lockers and running feet and taunts and blood on pavement and hideous laughter. He presses the bruise above his eyebrow. It is too hot in this room. Why are there no goddamn windows? He flings his phone at the wall, and it smacks the bricks hard but doesn't break. All of a sudden his door opens and his father comes in. Callum shoots up from his bed.

"Alright, only me," his father chuckles and leans against the door-frame, his head almost grazing the ceiling. "On the phone were you? Who with?"

"Sarah Perks," he releases the name instantaneously. His father grins, oblivious to the paling of Callum's knuckles as he grips his wooden bedstead.

"Mum's worried about you, but I told her to knock it off. I was the same as you at sixteen; chasing girls, bit rowdy," There is something dull perpetually settled at the back of his eyes, but he still wears that repulsive grin. He grasps Callum's chin and lifts his head to his own. He smears his finger over the cut on his eyebrow, opening up the wound.

"The other guy better be looking worse." He winks at his son and leaves.

George rings again from across the room. Callum walks to the bathroom and takes his dad's razor. He shaves his head, leaving only short stubble.

Kitchen

Keys rattle in the front door and Amelia jumps from her seat. She waits by the pot of soup on the stove, idly stirring peas and bits of sausage around its tarnished silver edge. She is ready to smile and ask how his day was. The question is posed at her lips. But he is on the phone when he enters the house, speaking in gruff tones. Work has been rough. Amelia watches as the door closes and a sliver of lingering sunlight squeezes from the kitchen. She returns to her soup and those drowned, swirling peas. When Jarod hangs up the phone he spreads himself onto the couch and turns on the TV. "I forgot you don't like peas, I'm sorry." Her words fling themselves from the bubbling soup. Her husband's eyes are on the screen, and he swallows and his chest seems to move and maybe he grunts but he does

little else. “How was your day?” she asks.

An “It was fine,” is tossed from one side of the kitchen to the other.

Amelia winces and collects herself. “I bought all of Callum’s school books for next term today. Thought I’d stay organised. I know he hasn’t finished term one yet, but you know how stressed I normally am come first day back.” She laughs, but each expulsion of breath runs into walls, so she stops doing that. “And I found a place near us where you can buy those socks that you like. You know the ones you normally only get in the US?”

“Are there peas in my dinner?” His gaze is still directed towards the screen.

“Yes.”

He mumbles something, but his words are inaudible to Amelia, who is swirling in soup steam.

“I can’t hear you.”

“You know I don’t like peas, why the hell would you put them in my dinner?”

He grazes Callum, who sits in a chair in the corner of the kitchen, as he walks upstairs.

Basement

They are both sitting on the leather couch. Each time one of them moves its folds rub together in what seems like a cacophonous groan. They look uncomfortable, at least to his mother, who pokes her head around the laundry door every once in a while. Callum does not usually have friends over, and hardly ever girls. They have been sitting there for a while, both wide-eyed and staring ahead of them. Dim light hangs heavily over the room. Callum reaches over, places a hand on her lap, moves it up her leg. She shifts and the couch groans, and his hand falls from her. He returns his hand to her thigh, and presses into flesh.

“I have to get a drink,” she begins to stand up. Callum swallows, the bruise above his eyebrow is pulsating. He grasps her hand and pulls her towards him but she turns away.

“I know what the boys at school say about you”, she says quietly. Someone is shaking, or both.

Laundry

Amelia hears her son’s voice before she sees him push the girl back onto the couch, “Come on, don’t be a bitch.” She can almost hear as something inside of herself snaps. She drops the iron and it cracks the wooden floor. She charges into the basement, towards her son, and takes hold of both his shoulders, shaking him hysterically.

“HOW DARE YOU!”

Her voice fractures, her head flushes and throbs. She screams uncontrollably, and words are little but a nonsensical and manic stream. And suddenly Callum stands and pushes his mother to the floor and the room explodes. She curls into a hideous heap and lies sobbing amongst fire and debris. The girl has scampered off. Through a film of hot tears and ruins she sees Jarod standing at the top of the staircase, looking down at her, his face contorted into an expression of deep disgust.

“This is your fault,” she attempts to throw the words at him, but she is too weak and they fall short, losing momentum before they reach his feet.

“She’s crazy, she’s absolutely insane!” He is talking to Callum, yet his face remains scrunched in loathing.

“Come on Cal, we’re leaving.” But she knows that they cannot leave, they are all suffocating.

There is no air in this house.

The Game We Play

She is youth,
consigned to a patriarchal being.
He tells her, 'aren't you pretty? Aren't you sweet?
I will compel you a fine wife!'

She is learning,
polluted values in tainted context.
They tell her, 'fix your face. Starve your mind.
This is the game we play.'
She is oppressed,
perceptive theories hushed like children.
Her husband tells her, 'subdue. I brand you subordinate.
Retire to your lesser means.'

Now she is dying,
imprisoned in white nothing.
So she tells them, 'I muted. I allowed for your dominance.
I know now that I am dying,
I never really lived.'

In the Name of Science

The ketamine is already taking effect, his movements slowing, becoming drowsy. The mouse begins to go still in my hands, no longer fidgeting or trying to wriggle out of my grasp. I cover his body with my other hand ensuring that during his final moments he will be warm and comfortable; it's the least I can do. He's gone completely still, the only sign of life is the rapid movement of his chest.

"You ready?" I look up at her. She's smiling and excited, it's my first time perforating a mouse. I should be excited; I've been given the chance to further my responsibilities in the lab. No one has this opportunity at my age. Then why do I feel like my stomach is rolling over? Why do I feel so nervous? I force a smile and place the mouse in the tray.

I lay him on his back, extending his front legs perpendicular to his torso against the tray, sticking them down with tape over the wrists. I pull his legs down, making the body taut, and stick them one on top of the other with tape. His head flops to the left, and I stand, transfixed as his whole body pulses with each intake of breath. It almost seems peaceful; his eyes are closed and his mouth slightly open, displaying his incisors.

This mouse was bred for a purpose, and one purpose only. It was created to sacrifice itself for us; to further our enlightenment in the ways of our world and to allow us to explore the mysteries of ourselves.

She piles a handful of paper towels at the bottom of the tray and hands me the forceps and the scissors. it's time.

I lift the sternum up and cut beneath the ribcage. The initial incision is harder than I thought; the skin being tough and protected by hairs. I then insert the scissors further and cut the abdomen open, careful not to puncture any vital organs; we need him to be alive or the blood will clot in the brain.

I lift the sternum up, exposing the beating heart, lungs and other organs. The tiny heart beats frantically, trying to fight the ketamine. I attach a pair of forceps to the upended sternum, holding the structure in place. She passes me the syringe and cannula. I insert the cannula into

the left atrium of the still beating heart. While holding that in place with one hand to ensure that it doesn't come loose, I cut the right pulmonary artery. I stand there, engrossed by the scene that is before me: the small knoblet of red muscle pulsates, beating the blood out of his body.

I press the barrel down on the plunger against the bench top. The clear fix slowly enters the heart of the mouse, and is pushed through every artery, every vein in every organ. The mouse's breaths become quicker and shallower. I thought she said that this would be a quick and painless death.

The crimson blood of the mouse leaves its body through the cut in the pulmonary artery, flowing over its exposed internal organs and pooling in the cavity that has formed beneath the organs. It finally spills over, bursting over its fur-covered skin, trailing its way down the sloping tray to the pile of paper towels at the bottom. The cream coloured towels begin to turn red, soaking up the exsanguinating blood.

I keep pressure on the barrel of the syringe, my arms growing tired from the effort of emptying 100ml of fixative through a cannula. The mouse takes its final, shuddering breath, opening its mouth and gasping for air. Its heart stops beating.

Finally, the once red liquid turns clear, there is no more blood in the mouse. His organs start to turn white; its heart, lungs, intestines take on this ghostly quality. I increase the pressure on the syringe; it's nearly empty. The clear liquid starts to flow out of its ears and begins to bubble at the nose. The size of the deposit forming at the entrance of the nasal cavity slowly grows, until it finally spills down the face of the mouse, flowing down to the bottom of the tray where it is soaked up by the paper towels.

With every second that passes I try to convince myself that it is better to use a mouse in research, one that has been specifically bred for research, than to use humans. We use mice as the specimen upon which we base our research in the hope that answers will be found.

As the fix slowly runs out I look into the mouse's face, finally at peace, meeting its predetermined end.

He died for us.

The criminal was then thrown on his back, his arms outstretched along the patibulum. The wrists nailed to the wood, holding them in place. The feet were then nailed through the arc of the foot to the cross, with the knees slightly flexed and rotated laterally, the left foot being pressed against the right foot. The body of the criminal is crucified. By custom, a Roman guard pierces the body with a sword or spear through the heart of the victim.

Crimson blood of the criminal flows down the torso from the wound, oozing down his legs. Below the suspended body, blood pools.

He died for our sins.

White Walls

They tell you that it's all in your head and you want to believe them. Their lectures go on for hours but their messages never really sink in. You sit there. A soulless void. Surrounded by their worried eyes and fake smiles. You know they are trying to be strong and in the warm light of the familiar living room you want to be strong too. But you know as soon as you go to bed and the lights are out, that familiar warmth of recovery is destroyed and they are coming for you. You try to push these thoughts aside but they are permanently stained in your head, just like the voices. The evening is growing old and weary and you know its time for you to go. You say goodbye, not see you tomorrow as you are unsure if you'll even be there tomorrow.

Walking down the dark hallway, you get scared. It is so dark now, but in that darkness you find that sense of relief. That sense of relief like finally getting home after a long day, that peaceful relief that nothing can get you. Nothing can take away from relief that you feel right now, alone in the pure darkness. But then it hits you. Like a bullet to your head. All alone, no one can protect you from them. The wound spreads over your body until the agonising pain is all that you're left with. The pain that no one can save you from who are coming for you. From who want to take you away. Take you away from all you know. They know that you're not normal and you know they are going to take you somewhere. You don't know when but you know they are coming. You feel them grabbing at your heels as you float further and further into the darkness. The grip on your heel tightens as you begin to feel suffocated. They're here. Surrounding you. Grabbing at your feet, your arms, your hair. Pulling you deeper. Deeper into the darkness. They won't be able to find you.

The darkness begins to consume you, all of your body until you are nothing. Nothing but the lonely darkness that you were dragged into. You lose hope. You can't get back, their vicious attacks on your body never cease. You want to yell. You want to scream. Why can't they leave you? You give up on all hope, nothing can stop them dragging you further.

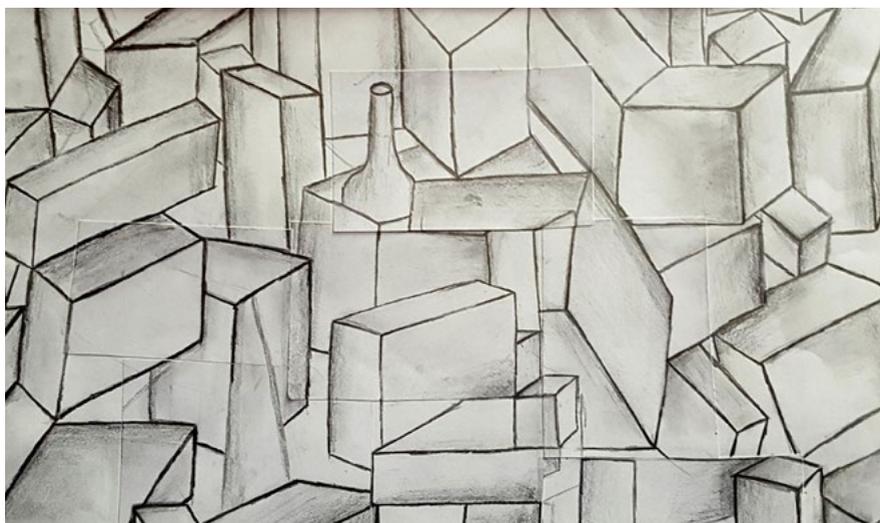
Further into the dark. You give one last struggle. You know that you cannot fight them. They have destroyed you. Taken everything that you know. Taken what had once made you happy. Ruined it. All that is left is a tainted remain. They have ruined you. They follow you, like a loyal dog. Never leaving your side. Following you. Watching your every movement. That rabid dog. Watching you from the darkness that now holds you close. Suddenly the hands are gone. No longer pinching your skin. No longer piercing your soul.

You slowly begin to feel again. First your fingertips. Like a warmth spreading over your body. You shoot up. Your damp forehead stained your pillow. You move to turn your bedside light on. No one is there. The mountain of blankets surrounding you provides protection. They can't get you here. You give one last glance around the room. Nothing is there. You try to reassure yourself. But you can't. You just want them to leave you. Let you have one night of sleep. Let you be free of their stare. You turn off the light. You know they are coming for you.

You lay there. Waiting for them to come. You know they are here. You can feel their eyes on your skin. You know they are moving closer. You can't see them. You can't hear them. But you know they are there. They grab your hand. They pull your hair. You try to kick them off but you can't hit them. You try to scream but they are covering your mouth. They are yelling. Yelling at you. Their sharp nails dig into your skin. Drawing blood. The excruciating pain of their arrival burns your body. Their fiery touch holds you firmly. You are unable to escape. You scream. You scream again and again, until suddenly it all stops. All the pain. All of the voices. Gone.

The silence is deafening. That painful silence scares you. You don't know what to do. Without their ever-watching eyes burning your skin you feel even more alone than you have before. That loneliness. All alone in the dark. That peaceful loneliness. No worries. Nothing to care about. Just floating in that open darkness. Not caring about where you end up.

You're suddenly awake. The tired eyes of your parents worry you. Just another nightmare. Just another night. No escape from their tight hold.



Run for Freedom

I pity the people who believe they are perfect. I pity them because no matter how beautiful, intelligent or talented they are, they always end up falling, at some point. That used to be me, and there is nothing I regret more.

I looked at the landscape around me. The bright, burning sun was settling on the horizon, painting the sky pink, blue and yellow. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was familiar about this foreign place. I tried to make sense of it, but my mind felt foggy, regretful. Behind me, a few convicts looked exhausted from the mind-boggling journey we had embarked on. My father, the captain of our ship, Arthur Phillip, strode towards me.

“Well Chiara, how are you feeling?” His voice boomed through the stillness of the air.

“I am fine father. Apart from the fact that I was torn from my homeland, I am fine.” I felt resentment towards my father, because he had brought me to this vast wasteland. His face turned purple and he puffed his cheeks.

“I will not have this ridiculous behaviour! You are lucky enough to have come on this ship! What did I ever do to you for you to dislike me in such a way?”

I sighed and turned away to look at the scene before me. While we were on the ship, I found out a piece of information that I wish I didn't know about. I turned to face my father again and exhaled deeply.

“Father, while we were coming here, I heard you talking to someone about me.”

His face turned pale.

“What did you hear?” He looked very nervous. I thought about how I would answer.

“Well, I am pretty certain that you were saying that the reason I am here is because I have been misbehaving at home.” I gulped loudly. “You also said that you thought it was a disgrace to have a burglar as a

daughter.” I choked down my tears. My father sighed loudly and talked slowly.

“I spoke the truth, but I never meant to hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

My eyes narrowed as I scanned his face for lies.

“A word cannot fix a cruel action.”

Although my voice was cracking and my heart was about to explode, I held my ground and waited for his response.

“Let’s just drop this conversation for now, we will talk later. In the meantime, why don’t you come and watch Sir Thomas Austin release 24 rabbits for hunting? I will get my gun and go with the men myself. You can watch!” His voice was too rushed, but I pretended not to notice. Without a word, I followed him.

Sir Austin was standing proudly, holding a cage of rabbits in his arms. His arrogant expression was almost as prestigious as my father’s. I hated them all for hating me, but I watched anyway, as he unlatched the cage and released the 24 rabbits that were scrunched together. I felt sorry for them, felt their pain, but life, as I learnt on the boat, is filled with pain. The small brown creatures were skinny from the lack of food and as soon as they were let down on the ground they sprinted towards the nearest patch of grass. I watched them for a while and after they were finished eating, they ran away from all the humans.

Sir Austin grinned maliciously.

“In half an hour we will hunt them down with our guns.” His voice boomed in the thin air.

I walked away towards the ships and rolled my eyes at the stupidity of the men.

Half an hour later, all the men who were going hunting with my father were lined up and holding their guns. They looked pleased with themselves, as proud as lions. As Sir Austin shouted at the men, they started walking in the direction the rabbits had gone. It wouldn’t hurt anyone if I ran, would it? But of course, my father had clearly stated earlier that day that I didn’t matter. I quietly followed after the men, without them noticing me. As I reached a field of red dust and flowers I had never

seen before, I heard the men yelling at each other to try harder to shoot the rabbits. I peered behind a shrub and watched as the men aimed at the poor creatures. Some fell to the ground in a scarlet heap, and others sprinted as fast as their little legs could carry them. It was my time. I had to decide. Would I go back to the ship and live my life, as my father wanted it to be? Or would I run away from everything I knew to write a new page in my life? Whatever I chose, I knew I would change. As I sighed a deep breath, I followed the rabbits. The crisp, silver moon hung in the night sky. It was my lamp in the dark and I knew it would guide me on my way. The men were already far behind me. I could finally relieve myself of all the regret and resentment I had been feeling. I sprinted, faster than I had ever run before, and as the rabbits ran for their freedom, I ran for mine.



Hope

My eyes darted around, jumping from face to face while the vessel swayed from side to side. The atmosphere loomed between each person as they mumbled to one another. I wondered to myself if Mum, Anh and I were going to survive and if we would see another light of day ever again. The Communist-swarmed land shrunk behind us into nothingness, leaving the boat alone in the middle of uncharted seas...

The salty air pricked my face as the whispering wind ran through my thick, black hair. Suddenly the putrid smell invaded the peaceful scene. I scrunched my nose and allowed my hazel brown eyes to look away from the terrible sight. The retching child was the prominent sound apart from the vessel gliding through the foaming waves.

“Tram? We had no choice. You should know that by now.”

“Yes, I know,” I replied in an exasperated voice. Mum's frail face stared at me, loss filling her eyes and sorrow taking over her body like a flood dominating a city. When she was happy, her hair was as dark as the night sky and as shiny as the stars, but ever since Dad's death, her youth never returned.

I looked away, tears filling my eyes. Splash. They cascaded down my supple cheeks like marbles tumbling upon a hill. ‘Why?’ I thought. ‘Why did it have to come to this? Leaving Vietnam was the last thing I hoped to do. Did we have to leave in the first place?’ My delicate eyelids drooped over my vision, abandoning the rest of my surroundings under the night sky.

Sitting and adjusting my position, I tried not to arouse everyone around me, which was hard considering we were all clumped together. My cramped legs constantly gave way as I edged towards the side of the boat. The scintillating sea was a mirror floating before me as it reflected and complemented the beauty of the stars. The ghostly moon sneered down at our boat, smirking at us ominously. I felt alone. My mind pondered while I stared at the sky above. ‘What was going to be left of me and my family?’ We lost so much already. Dad dying in the Vietnam

War, us losing our home.

All of a sudden, hunger strikes me mercilessly, making yellow liquid gush out of my mouth. The disgusting bitter taste stung my mouth. Some went in the wrong direction and pain shot up my fragile nose. My sharp ears heard people stirring behind me. Clutching my stomach, and looking down in shame, my brother sat in a heap beside me, sighing as he did.

Anh rubbed my back as I drooped and sagged like a helpless doll. Everyone was getting restless now. People began to fight and yell. Some said they could see food but, of course, their deceiving eyes cruelly rose them out of the miserable pit of darkness and dropped them back in. The never-ending blueness ate away at the one and only thing that we all clung on to. Hope.

Suddenly a shout of excitement rung in my ears. 'Yes! They've come! We're all saved!' Cheering aroused the rest of my senses. My head instantly turned towards what everyone else was joyfully looking at. A blotch of blackness was heading towards our miniscule boat. I didn't know why everyone was so excited. The massive boat had an ominous feeling to it. I didn't know what to say or think...I just stared and stared and stared and...

Reality hit me again as I came back to my senses. The pirates sneered at me like ravenous dogs. They beat my body until I had bruises, stripping me and mum from our dignity. What else did they want? The woman's scream was a knife scratching a blackboard. It rung in the room in front of us. We were doomed. These merciless animals would do anything for wealth. Ruthless and shameful people they were and still are.

The door swung open, preparing to lure the next person into the room of misery and helplessness. A dishevelled woman stumbled out of the room and collapsed in the doorway. Her body was exposed and her face was sad and humiliated. Now it was our turn. To suffer what she suffered. To meet our worst nightmare. But no. One of the pirates exclaimed something in a foreign language. Our bruises and cuts stung fiercely as we were dragged and thrown back onto our feeble boat. I looked around

at all the skeletal faces. The relieved expressions of men as they looked at their wives and daughters with love and sadness. Ashamed that they were helpless in this situation. All the women's faces were drained of energy and nothing was going to bring their hopes back now.

The waves slapped against the side of our vessel, trying to stay together, trying to make it before something else morbid happened. It creaked with exhaustion and sighed in the wind. Unfortunately the worst was yet to come, as the clouds formed over our heads in a heap and we all dreaded the worst. Until our hope ran out.

Treading Water

The obnoxious beeping and arrhythmic amplitude of noise created by the hospital machines in ill combination with the sickening anguish was enough to place the young couple on the verge of insanity. Together, they crumpled under the pressing weight of guilt, visibly seeping through their clothing. They stroked the cold forehead of the tiny body, laying lifeless amongst the cables, barely keeping their small string of hope alive.

The sun was still high over the small backyard as the paramedics arrived, sprinting their way towards the scene. With each firm beat on the chest of the young girl, the sun's heat intensified and the small puppy became increasingly crazed.

The painful ringing of an alarm echoed through the room and down the corridor as the couple panicked, frantically searching for aid. They found no relief in the sight of two doctors and a close cluster of nurses sprinting towards their door. Their shadows ran through the artificially bright room before they moved in and circled the bed.

The stinging sensation of freezing water consumed her as she struggled in the uncomfortable depth. Whirlpools formed above her waving hands and after a brief moment of weak struggle, calm soaked through her body as her hair floated, gracefully mimicking the ripples on the surface. The desperate bark of a dog rung through the quiet atmosphere before the faint sound of ambulance sirens grew closer.

The red line at the bottom of the small screen ran flat, contrasting the anxiety and tension growing amongst the busy mass of clinicians in the claustrophobic cubicle. Within a slow and separated breath, the couple witnessed the team preparing the cords attached to the chest of the girl.

“Do not touch patient. Analysing heart rhythm. Please wait.”

The last two syllables wrung in the mind of the desperate, exhausted mother.

“Please wait.” These were the same two words she had heard, repeated constantly as she sat on hold, her mind focused on the call. Knowing the potential length of the phone call, she questioned herself as

Stephanie Hogan
Year 11
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to why she didn't end the call earlier and the different situation she could possibly find herself in now, if she had done just that.

"Charging defibrillator. Move away from the patient. Clear."

How could she?

"Shock will be delivered in, three."

She slipped through the pool gate before it clicked. The woman was preoccupied with the difficult phone call as she walked back inside to escape the heat. Her father had fallen asleep on the couch by the window which looked down onto the backyard and pool area.

"Two"

The young puppy slipped its paws under the gate in a failed attempt to wedge itself between the solid metal bars.

"One"

Her foot slipped on the smooth tile, wet from the infant floaties drying in the sun by the chair. It was as if she had disappeared with only the faintest splash unheard at that particular moment in time.

"Shock delivered. It is now safe to touch the patient."

She ran to her daughter's side but was restrained by two of the nurses, her husband bent over in the chair, head in hands as he ran his fingers through his hair and over his face. She cried out in agony as the situation played over twice more. The small girl's chest arched violently with each shock, mirroring the pain inside her mother's own chest. The doctors commenced CPR for the third time as the line stayed flat on the screen. The couple watched on, their grey faces, drained yet etched with fatigue and anguish.

The fear of the couple sharpened as the doctors slowed their movements before they stopped completely and stood frozen with their heads bowed. The man and woman stood behind them, like two small animals caught in the headlights of a speeding truck, unwilling to accept the inevitable, impossible devastation. The woman felt an indescribable chill wash over her, drenching her in a veil of numbness as the man fell upon his knees at the side of the hospital bed, gripping the metal bars either side. Nothing could be heard or felt but the piercing pain of silence

and now endless emptiness.

As she stepped up to the podium her heart began to race a little faster than usual as her fingers shook softly, sending ripples through the sheet of paper she was gripping. This was the largest group yet. She nervously lifted her head and gazed into the sea of eyes as she began to speak.

Her vision focused on a woman who was watching with sympathetic eyes as she held onto her daughter's hand. The young girl was intriguing and fascinating to the speaker, perhaps due to the resemblance between her own daughter and this polite young child. Her voice broke slightly with her concluding lines, "never be complacent, and hold your children close and dear for they can vanish in an instant. Thank you."

The thunder of applause startled her as the whole audience stood and dominated the auditorium with noise. She broke into a wide smile and waited before the MC thanked her and she made her way out into the foyer. She met her husband in the hall and they stood silently for a moment, remembering the abyss of grief that they had fought against. They discovered an unknown strength that existed within them together. Without it they would still be engulfed in the devastating weight of guilt.

Sound of Sirens

BOOM.

A siren cries, the nefarious kind.

Fight.

Too late.

She's ruptured veins on the street
her infatuation with blood, so avid
she bathes in it.

A sweet melody lures your last ephemeral breath
your love flayed
your hate masked
your soul glued into fine ash...

The sirens howled. A pack.

Water is an enemy.

Surprise.

A pile of sticks

a little fire to comfort your limbs?

Your feet light with the smell of death

it ascends your leg.

You are lost.

Lost in a flame of light.

Another word torn from a sentence.

Cycle

It was all just a game. You pick a weak, fragile, insecure girl. You take her on a romantic date to the movies, then to a glitzy dinner at the Ivy. You listen to her rabbiting on about her siblings, her summer trips to the Cape, her deepest, darkest fears. Then, you get what you want. Suddenly, she starts to become needy, the dark cloud of deceit hanging over her head. At this point you realize it's time to drop her. Another one gone, another one to add to the collection of used toys.

Sex is not love. Sex is merely a human instinctual urge that makes my life a little easier. I'm a seventeen-year-old boy, blessed with a perfectly staggered jawline, eyes a stormy blue. I'm the quarterback of the varsity football team, I'm flunking maths, but hey, who gives? People respect me. People fear me.

My Dad comes home late most nights, foolishly drunk. He tells us he's stayed back at work, but we know where he's really been.

To me, these girls, they're my distraction, my guilty pleasure to say the least.

Two years later

The shrill ring of my digital alarm clock startles me. Lifting open my eyelids, they feel as though I have twenty kilo weights on them. The pounding in my temple feels like something of a Kenyan drumbeat. A wave of nausea comes over me as I run to the bathroom. On the grimy yellow tiles I skim my crusted fingernails over the cracks in the frosted window. Empty Corona bottles lay strewn across the floor.

The baby starts to cry, his desperate wailing rings through the apartment. That thought of getting up to comfort him, I dreaded. Standing by his crib, beside the recently emptied wardrobe, a leather boot is all that remains. I study its patterned detail, the rusted zipper, once shiny, now dull and worn.

Alexandra Culhane
Year 11

I gaze down at my child, food stains all over his unwashed coverall, his dark little oval eyes staring into mine with a sense of admiration and curiosity, contrasting with his tear stained cheeks. As I cradle him in my arms, the wailing softens to a sobbing, then to a peaceful slumber. Taking a seat on the worn couch, tears streaming down my face, I hold my child's tiny head in my hands, praying he won't turn out the way I did.

Love's Elements

FLAMES

Flames lick up her sides
engulfing her in blistering passion.
Infatuation seizes her spirited form
igniting a scorching furnace within her.
A roaring fire, sparked from an ember of lust.
Transformed into a blazing inferno.

LIGHT

Beams radiate through her figure incessantly
pulsating through her delicate frame.
Mesmerising, blinding.
Illuminated by obtuse faithfulness,
and premature promises.

WATER

Reservoirs of water cascade around her
flowing for eternity
carrying enamoured hearts and broken tears.
Soaring to the sky as it flies off cliffs,
a sense of tranquillity
shattered by gravity.

ICE

Frost creeps up her sides
formed by bitterness and animosity.
Her love lies dormant beneath layers of anguish.
All emotions encased in resentment.
Smouldering ruins of a fire,
extinguished by frigid fury.



New Wind

A new wind came.
A new wind came and
it was time to move on.

Our Autumn leaves began to fall
away forever drifting apart ...

The next wind came.
The next wind came alone.
An empty silence only scattering
our leaves further into isolation.

Later rain arrived, pounding and
crushing the only part left
of my own leaves.
But it passed.

Yet now another rush of wind
has come, sudden and unexpected ...

A warm wind.
A warm wind came and
I moved on.

Another Nightmare?

As her muffled cries subsided, I curled tightly into a ball and pulled the thin doona over my head, trying to once again forget the thuds and shrieks that rattled the whole house.

I awoke abruptly, shivering in a tangle of sheets, yet dripping with sweat and my face a mess of tears. This routine had become all too familiar, yet never became any easier to live through. I had never understood why my mum didn't fight back or try to escape. Late one night I silently crept out my window and ran down the street to the nearest phone box where I called the police. After their visit the situation only escalated and his drunken rages intensified. Now I understood.

The nurse on duty entered.

“Another nightmare?”

I remained silent and still, thinking ‘not a nightmare but a flashback to my nightmare’. The door closed, leaving me to lie awake in darkness for another four hours until morning came. I had learnt from experience that it was futile to attempt to sleep again on nights like these. Instead I would occupy my mind by studying the room. I was the only permanent resident at the Calabasas psychiatric ward of the ESF Memorial Hospital and having lived there for the past two years, I knew every inch of every room like the back of my hand. The dull whitewashed walls, grey-carpeted floor, my single bed tucked into the corner, a small desk pushed against the wall and the visitor's chair by the door. Of course, there was no window because psychiatric patients and windows are a lethal combination.

4 June 2015—Patient Notes

Medical Record Number: 948326

Name: Sophia Phoebe Young

D.O.B: 18/05/1996

Physical Appearance:

- Dull, long blond hair
- Pale skin
- Awkward body language—Patient S.P Young presented with symptoms:
 - Confusion
 - Anger
 - Inability to comprehend
 - Rocking
 - Inability to speak
 - History of traumatic experiences
 - Anxiety
 - Avoid eye contact

Diagnosis: Traumatic Mutism and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Treatment: Rest, sedatives, exercise, regular counselling, observation.

Having been diagnosed with mutism and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the age of 19, the psychiatrists made the decision that I was 'unfit' to live in society and therefore kept me within the confines of the hospital. But, like my past, this hospital held many dark secrets.

Two years later:

8 August 2017 – Patient Notes

Medical Record Number: 948326

Name: Sophia Phoebe Young

D.O.B: 18/05/1996

Patient's current condition:

- Difficult psychiatric patient—mute.
- Uncooperative—refuses to provide written answers to questions.
- Nursing staff report despite these difficulties she is unusually willing to participate in hospital activities and interact with other

patients.

- Nursing staff report she is hyper alert to her surroundings.
- Nursing staff report she sometimes talks in her sleep.

Psychiatrist's Notes:

- The sleep talking confirms that the patient has the ability to speak.
- The patient's eagerness to interact is unique and very unusual considering her mutism.
- The patient has a notebook/diary.

Psychiatrist's Conclusion:

I suspect that patient S.P Young is in fact very bright and is taking everything around her in. I believe that the patient has Selective Mutism and is educated and has the physical ability to speak and provide written answers. It is unusual and disconcerting that I have made no progress with the patient, especially over such a long period of time. Need to detain indefinitely. No progress.

The psychiatrist had become suspicious of the legitimacy of this patient's diagnosis. Nursing staff had unofficially reported that she only had one constant visitor; a man in a well cut business suit who claimed to be the patient's brother but only ever visited during office hours. They also appeared to have a very formal relationship and did not interact like family. The nature of this visitor was very confusing and suspicious considering that this category of patients are typically only visited by family. If he was not her brother, what were they hiding?

At exactly 9am sharp, Dr. Morgan, my psychiatrist, entered my room and took his seat in the visitor chair. Dr. Morgan was a sinister looking man with harsh, wiry features and a somewhat aggressive manner. He was cocky and wore his glasses right on the tip of his nose. After one hour of Dr. Morgan asking an array of random questions whilst I simply sat there looking blank and staying mute, giving nothing away, the wretched man finally left. As he was leaving I watched him survey the room for any clues that might answer the puzzle that was me. I noticed

that his eyes lingered on my notebook sitting on the table in the corner of the room and sure enough when I returned to my room that afternoon, the notebook was gone. He had taken the bait and my work could continue.

My diary contained weekly entries describing everything that had occurred in my life from the age of twelve and expressed every thought and emotion that I had left unsaid. It contained recounts of the abuse at home as well as information about my nightmares, everything to prove that Dr. Morgan's original diagnosis was correct. This diary was exactly what Dr. Morgan needed to alleviate and erase any suspicions regarding me as a psychiatric patient. This hospital held many dark secrets.

The nurse starting work at 7am triggered the alarm. She ran down the hallway in a state of complete and utter panic, screaming "Missing patient from the psychiatric ward, room 18!" By that time it was too late. The story had broken and was on every news bulletin and the headline of every newspaper, nationally. The dark secrets of ESF Memorial Hospital had been exposed. Two years of Selective Mutism; an undercover operation more difficult than we had ever previously undertaken or imagined. Incredible secrecy and teamwork but for a worthwhile cause. Our work was done.

3 October 2017—*New York Times*

'Patient S.P.Y Exposes ESF Memorial Hospital and Dr. Morgan'

Sophia Phoebe Young (S.P.Y) has been undercover as a psychiatric patient in ESF Memorial Hospital for over two years and has worked hard to gather shocking information and evidence of the drugging and abuse of psychiatric patients. This evidence, which includes photos, video clips, medical records and voice recordings, undoubtedly reveals the ongoing abuse and exploitation of defenseless patients suffering mental illnesses and disabilities. S.P.Y worked in conjunction with The American Government Health Department and was in regular contact with them over the course of her undercover operation...

Coming Home to Benny

I hate gravel. Driving down gravel roads makes the car lurch and shudder as I grip nervously onto the steering wheel. In the damp weather with the mist settling in the valley, the ground becomes soft, almost enough for the bottom of my trousers to be covered in a concrete looking substance that makes my newly polished shoes a waste. For every occasion that I drive back home, there always appears a small stain on my trousers and a few freshly made dents on the side of the car from the bits of loose rock hitting the polished red aluminium and leaving a chalky white scratch. The panel-beater looks at me like a madman when I come in and ask him to polish a dent with a width of about two centimetres. After Benny's wedding there was a mark on the number plate that cost more than a month's salary. Dad's funeral preceded a flat tyre and the back windscreen smashed from the rain which had caused the gravel to turn into a pool and subsequently rocks to ricochet off the glass.

This time I can already see a small scratch on the front bonnet from manoeuvring a little too close to an old tree down by the river that Benny and I used to play around. Benny now takes his kids there every off-weekend, I imagine he sits there watching them trying to catch fish with their bare hands while he lies behind his faded, putrid smelling cap rested just below his eyes to block out the sun. Of course Audrey is there, asking him if he's keeping an eye on the kids, or something I can only imagine an overprotective mother saying. Mum tells me that Benny is doing well with the kids and that Audrey's a good addition to our family, not that I'll ever be able to witness it firsthand.

The skies ahead are turning a mixture of orange and grey, a storm just sitting to the right above the setting sun, making the sky smoulder up like an extinguishing fire. I press my foot down on the accelerator with Mum in the back of my head reminding me that she's expecting me in by 6.30pm. My hands slide up and down the cool leather of the steering wheel as the car grumbles over the gravel road. I roll the window down, drops of mist forming on the inside of the leather door. Country air blows against my

face, the fresh smell of cut hay and damp bark in the misty evening air. Mum's probably already put the heater on by now, the blue red hue of the sky tempting the street lights to flicker outside her kitchen window. Benny will be outside collecting wood for the fire, leaning on his crutch with the same arm cradling the damp sticks. It won't take long until he'll grumble to himself, drop the sticks and limp back inside, telling Audrey that the heater sounds like a better idea.

Up ahead I reach an intersection, one overgrown with daisies and forget-me-nots. On one side is a fence post that stands weakly, leaning towards the road like a windblown tree. The car slowly burns out and I glance down to my hand that has wrenched the keys out of the ignition. The sun has almost slipped behind the hills but instead of pushing the keys back in the ignition I grab onto the cold door handle and step out of the car. Slushy gravel roads greet my clean black trousers, my shoes sinking into the chalk coloured mud. Up ahead Benny's playing in the sunlight. I'm just behind him, struggling to catch up, pulling my jeans up over my childish legs and carrying on. Benny spins around the fence post gleefully, oblivious to the bits of wood and muck that are now sticking out of his already calloused hands. As I reach him, I grab onto his arm and pull him back, so his little bare feet slip on the mud. I see black for a second. It all happens very slowly, his fragile head toppling backwards, his mangled legs twisting and colliding against each other. It isn't even a big thud, it sounds as if a bit of gravel has hit the side of the red polished aluminium. His head slides slowly down the fence post, blood seeping gently from the black of his blond-topped skull.

Some things I'm glad Benny doesn't remember. I'm glad he doesn't remember the fact that I broke a wine glass against a wall at his wedding, or Mum turning purple with rage and disappointment after he came back from the hospital, his vague disposition watching this unknown woman slam pots down on the counter. In some ways, he's known Audrey and the kids for all his life that he can remember. But, sitting on the shiny red aluminium bonnet, gripping my hands around my coat as the wind seeps through my shirt, I wish I wasn't the only one to remember the fence post at the intersection.

When I Go Back Home

“I had a dream last night. It was a good dream. I was back home with Por Por and Li Ling.”

I watch as my friend David sighs, looking out to the hills that become golden as the sun rises over the new settlement. He smiles but the smile does not reach his eyes.

“I’ve had those dreams too. It makes me want to turn my life around, go back to China. For a while, the feeling’s so real, yes?” I shift my gaze from David to the upturned soil and river debris, suddenly filled with heartache. “Then I hear the filthy sound of the Europeans. Reality strikes and I realise I can’t go back.” Images of my beautiful daughter flash through my mind. She runs home from school along our pebbled path, smiling and laughing. All my memories from home are so simple, so happy.

David’s face suddenly becomes bright, illuminated like the lanterns in our New Year festivals.

“That’s the thing...I used to think that we could not return so soon but after my dream something was different. I realised I must return to China and have just arranged to return on the next passenger boat back!”

For a moment, the idea seems so real. Then I think of my parents. They would be ashamed. David starts to talk again.

“We must go to where we belong, our homeland. Don’t you miss your village and a proper lifestyle? It’s so dirty here. Not everyone works as hard as we do.”

Should I agree and return?

“I cannot go back. We have been in Australia for only three months. I send letters home to my daughter. Even though it is costly, it helps the homesickness. Think of all the gold that is yet to be found.” David cannot leave me.

“Hai, did you change your name to an English one for no reason? Did we travel two painful months for nothing?” I sigh again and wipe my

hands along my wide bamboo hat, determined to find some gold and show David we are here to find our fortune.

When David and I were called to 'Xin Jin Shan', the new gold mountains, I imagined beautiful landscapes and peaceful work. The goldfields are nothing like my dreams. Every night I worry that somebody will steal from my tent or that there will be no rice to eat in the morning. My dreams are like bright candles in a dark room, except that these candles have run out of wax, wavering to gloominess as reality hits. I did not worry so much in China. I had no work either. And that is why I have come to Australia.

The smell of stale ale engulfs my body as soon as we reach the mine tunnel. David turns towards me.

"Xing, remind me to keep the passageway open, we have to be able to get back up to the surface."

I nod, wiping my callused hands along the middle of my frayed blue pants. Inside my pocket is a small square of parchment I have been saving for a letter and my new steel nib pen.

Four hours, five small blocks of quartz and one ravenous stomach later, I wearily flop down onto a hollowed log. I will wait for David to return from his mining tunnel so we can eat lunch together. Blowing my candle apprehensively, I watch the spark diminish until the walls are cast in shadow. Images of my wife flicker in my head. Her laughter radiating around the room, waving as I walk to the boat, her usual happiness replaced with a melancholic disposition. Saying goodbye...

Bang! I look up from my feet to see my coworkers running from the smallest mine tunnel.

"That's the last for today. Altogether, sixteen pieces of quartz with gold."

David's voice is more animated than usual. All his workers cheer and clap too. I put on a small smile. I should enjoy the last days with David before he leaves to go back home.

I gently push myself off the log and join the celebration crew. We walk briskly to get to the exit tunnel, stomachs rumbling, when I remember

something terrible. Oh no. Oh no. Did David keep the passageway open? Wait, did I remind David to keep it open? Oh no. I guess I will just wait and see if everything is ok. If not, we could be in this desolate mine shaft for a while.

As we reach the main exit to get back to the surface, my coworkers' celebratory expressions fade almost instantly. It is like a sunny day, suddenly struck with thunder, and all because of me. I watch as David tramps over to the bottom of the long vertical tunnel, our only entrance and exit. He looks up and I see the satisfaction in his eyes fade. The tunnel is blocked and we are trapped inside it.

"It is going to be a long time until somebody comes to open up the mine. Get comfortable." David announces miserably.

I stalk over to another sunken log, dismal like our feelings, and take out my square of parchment.

Dear family,

Life here is tough but I will stay strong until I can make you proud.

Love, Xing.

Skiing on Mount Everest

Soaring down the ivory slopes,
quicker than a bullet exiting its chamber.
Being blinded by the bright, reflective snow.
Snow in my hair, sun on my cheeks and happiness in my
heart.
Snowflakes melt on my tongue and nose.
The screeching of the skis scraping on ice patches,
the rush of going at the speed of an arrow,
the trees dancing in the nearby wind,
the wafting smell of closeby restaurants engulfs me.
“It is as exhilarating as being shot at without result.”
Clean, clear, and blissful.
Skiing

Coco Frohlich
Year 11
Amy Molineaux Prize Winner

Pink For the Girl and Blue For the Boy

In the not so distant past, the burning question asked at every birth was 'Is it a girl or a boy?' but today things have changed...

It's Christmas Eve, and the world is wrapped in a perfect veil of white. The fire crackles softly from the living room, the fir-tree is adorned with tinsel, baubles and bells. The ham is marinating in orange and clove, and the Labrador is suffering the indignity of a Rudolf costume. The windows are slick with splintery frost, and the light-up nativity scene on the roof glistens with all the mirth and jocularly of a rosy-cheeked cherub. In the kitchen, a warm glass of milk and a stick of shortbread are waiting for that special guest...

Little Bob and darling Jane are each in their bedrooms, but tonight of all nights, they must not sleep! Ears straining, they lie perfectly still in the darkness, waiting for the shuffle of footsteps, the clink of bells, the soft crunch of shortbread. But alas, only silence! Their eyelids begin to droop as they are slowly overcome, and softly, sleepily, they are dragged into slumber.

They awake to a brilliant white, which funnels through the window with such alacrity that they shoot out of bed and glare slack-jawed at the street outside, buoyed by those falling flakes of white and all the fun they promise. In a horrible moment of mutual realisation, Jane and Bob exchange fretted glances—they slept through Santa! They tumble down the stairs and skid just short of the tree, which imposes with all the stoic majesty of a medieval King. And under the tree, one pretty in pink and the other dashing in blue, are two rectangular presents, each studded with a huge, luscious bow. With breathless excitement, they pull apart the delicate wrapping to reveal the spoils of a year 'being good'—a baby doll for Janie and a fire truck for Bob.

It doesn't take much effort to distinguish between 'boy toys' and 'girl toys' in the modern age. Little girls like Barbie and Bratz, little boys like football, dart guns and Lego. Girls want to play Mummies and Daddies, but boys want to play Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians. A play kitchen for the girl, and Meccano for the boy. A dolly for Jane, and a truck for Bob.

Jo B. Paoletti, an historian at the University of Maryland and author of *Pink and Blue: Telling the Girls from the Boys in America*, believes that much of what distinguishes the masculine from the feminine is taught in childhood. She believes that the concept of 'girly things' and 'boyish things' is an institutionalised value, projected onto us from birth and cemented by the constructs of clothing, appearance and even toys.

Paoletti's research shows that an understanding of our gender emerges at around three or four years, when we've already been subjected to the binary codes of boy/girl behaviour—boys like to play outside, girls play inside. Children at this age are also conscious of their clothing and physical appearance, which is associated with a particular gender from birth—blue shorts for boys, pink dresses for girls. The rules about 'gendered' clothing for children are actually not age-old, but began around World War I. Before the 20th Century, all children were dressed in white dresses which, as Paoletti says, "Was once a matter of practicality—you dress your baby in white dresses and diapers; white cotton can be bleached." Pink and blue emerged as colours for children about halfway through the 19th Century, but weren't assigned to a particular gender until after World War I. Even then, the codes were reversed, according to an article from the Earnshaw's Infant's Department from June, 1918 which said, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl."

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought more gender neutral clothing for children, and then in the 1980s, with the emergence of prenatal testing, parents suddenly decided to shop specifically for their

newborn boy or girl, which began the marketing of specific, gendered toys and clothing. As Paoletti says, “The more you individualize clothing, the more you can sell.” The rise of consumerism in young children has aided this process, with slick advertising that targets and exploits the rudimentary impressions of gender that we begin to form as children. Babies have no concept of gender, and studies have even shown that baby boys love to play with dolls, so it’s very possible that the definitive codes of boy toy/girl toy are just as constructed as the codes of boy clothing/girl clothing.

When it comes to the old argument of ‘nature vs. nurture’, it’s easy to be dismissive of the impact that simple things like clothing and play things can have on young children. But Paoletti, like many other sexual identity researchers, believes that our childhood years are deeply formative, especially when it comes to learning acceptable behaviour and social norms. The way we define ourselves is shaped by the way we are defined and the expectations, gender-based or otherwise, of who we should be. Codes only exist so long as we enforce them, so why not a fire truck for Jane and a dolly for Bob?



Business as Usual

Alexander Holmberg, a short, plump man whose wire-framed glasses perched upon his ruddy nose, gingerly stepped into the restaurant. The day had just started to turn to dusk and the Argentinean air was hot and humid.

The small bistro was comprised of eight four-seated tables, and cracked pillars in lieu of walls to allow for the air and atmosphere of Buenos Aires to seep in while the patrons enjoyed their meals. The fans placed throughout generated a soft oscillating hum.

Alexander spotted Adrian Wooldridge, a business associate with whom he had been discussing effective money laundering techniques for the better part of three months. Adrian was dressed in casual attire: loafers, blue jeans, and a sweater. He sat across from Wooldridge, who had two plates of food already on the table.

"I hope you don't mind that I ordered for us, my friend," he said, smiling a toothy grin. Holmberg took his seat and set his hat on the table next to his plate.

"Not at all, in fact, I'm glad you've done so, as we have important matters to discuss." Alexander flapped his napkin and tucked it into his collar.

Adrian chuckled, "Indeed we do, Alexander. Indeed we do. But, first, let's enjoy this meal, shall we?"

Holmberg nodded and they dug in, enjoying the meal of steak, vegetables, roast potatoes, and red wine. They discussed where they came from, their favorite childhood memories and their wives, things that had been said before but made for sustainable, if trivial, conversation. When they finished, they set their napkins on their plates and leaned back in their chairs.

"My, my, that was divine," Alexander breathed, dabbing away the beads of sweat forming on his brow with his pocket-handkerchief, "and what a choice of venue," he remarked as he looked around.

Adrian chortled and nodded, saying, "Yes, yes, it is quite quaint, isn't

Willa Swift
Year 9

Margaret Lundie Honour Board Prize Winner

it? I find a sparsely populated area is best to discuss matters of, shall we say, sub-legality.” Alexander nodded, gesturing with his right hand for Adrian to continue. “Well,” he started, removing a stack of papers and an ink pen from his briefcase which had been set against the table, “it appears that these records you’ve given me have some oversights. Is it alright if I go over them with you?” Holmberg cocked his head, and nodded.

For the next half-hour they went over minor discrepancies in Alexander’s paperwork: aliases, fake dates, everything that needed to be falsified correctly in order for his money to be sufficiently laundered. “It appears that everything is as it should be, Alexander, thank you for meeting me,” Adrian concluded, collecting the papers against the table and sliding them to Holmberg.

“Although, I must confess; matters of finance were not my only motivation for doing business with you these past months.”

“Oh?” Alexander asked, slightly confused.

“Yes. I have something I must show you, and then our business can be concluded,” Adrian said, smiling again.

“Definitively.” Alexander nodded and Adrian reached into his briefcase, pulling out a long, silver dagger, sheathed in a remarkably ornate scabbard.

“Do you recognize this?” Adrian asked. Alexander took the knife in his hands, running his eyes over it until he reached the top. The handle of the knife was adorned with a decoration he had hoped to never see again. Sitting atop the knife of nearly pure silver was the symbol of the Wehrmacht, a proud eagle with its wings outstretched presiding over a Swastika. His blood turned to ice, his breathing stopped, and he slowly met Adrian’s gaze.

“W-where did y-you get this?” he asked, his voice trembling.

Wooldridge smiled at him, but it was a different kind of smile than the one Alexander had seen before. Adrian Wooldridge’s face was painted with a cold expression, behind that a complex cocktail of emotions; most notably, a seething, unrelenting hatred.

“Where I acquired this isn’t important. What is, however, is the man who owned it before me.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Adrian” he rasped, staring helplessly into Wooldrige’s unflinching eyes. Adrian threw back his head and laughed a jarring mockery that made Holmberg flinch.

“Spare me, Wilhelm. We both know you aren’t Alexander Holmberg, Swedish banker and family man. Wilhelm Geiger”, he said, reciting from memory, “an SS private, second class, if memory serves. Personally favored by Buchenwald Commandant Josef Schuler. He went missing after Buchenwald’s liberation, and has not been found or tried as of yet. Some say he’s hiding out in Geneva, although that seems a bit too ironic. I hear he’s closer to Argentina”, Adrian hinted, staring frankly into Wilhelm’s eyes. “I retrieved this knife from the personal quarters of Commandant Schuler.”

“How could you possibly have...?” Alexander’s voice trailed off as Adrian rolled up his sleeve, revealing the numbers 765-38 tattooed on his arm.

“What do you want?” Wilhelm said, his voice only a coarse whisper.

“What I want, Herr Geiger, is the location of Schuler.”

“What makes you think I know?”

“He was never caught, Wilhelm. That means he’s still out there, and you’re going to tell me where.”

“I don’t have that information, and even if I did, why would I give it to you?” Geiger spat, slamming both of his hands on the table.

“That steak,” Adrian said, gesturing to the empty plate, “was treated with a lethal amount of Dimethylmercury, a very slow-acting, very deadly poison. I have the treatment, which I will give to you, if you tell me where Schuler is.” Wilhelm looked down, his vision blurring as his breath hastened.

“I swear,” he began, his desperation giving way to his German accent.

“I know nothing! I haven’t seen Josef since we parted ways in Kiev!”

He frantically searched Adrian’s eyes for mercy or understanding, but

Willa Swift
Year 9

Margaret Lundie Honour Board Prize Winner

found only steely stoicism.

“Please,” he whispered, “I don’t want to die.”

Adrian Wooldridge, prisoner number 765-38, looked at Wilhelm Geiger, and smiled.

“GIVE ME THE ANTIDOTE!” Wilhelm screamed, his chair clattering to the floor as he stood. He slid his pistol, a standard issue Walther P38, out of its side-holster and leveled it between the eyes of the man who had poisoned him.

In his fit of rage and distress, Wilhelm had failed to notice the quiet man dining behind them. Had he noticed him, he would’ve thought it odd that he ordered only water, which he hadn’t touched, and the only other thing on this man’s table was a steak knife. The man rose silently, the knife clutched in his hands.

“Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Gieger.” Adrian sighed, sitting back in his chair.

The first blow pierced the nape of Wilhelm’s neck, severing the atlas vertebrae. Warm, red blood immediately began to spurt, spraying his assailant. He reached blindly behind him, loosely gripping and slapping the face of the man who had a knife buried in his neck. Blood bubbled from his mouth, his eyes rolled up in his head and his body went limp. The young man released the corpse and it slid to the floor with a wet thud.

“What do we do now, sir?” The young man asked, wiping his hands on his pant legs.

“Now,” Adrian exhaled, rubbing his temples as he slid the dagger back into its case, “We find the next one.”

Jameson's Day Trip

A fine spring morning to be so far from the office. The train was soon to pull into the station, and Arthur Jameson was the first off, the same thought chuffing through his mind. A fine spring morning to be so far from the office. Jameson smiled to himself as he strode through the station. He didn't notice the bent railings, rubbish, or suspicious scents; Jameson was far too busy relishing the solitude, a welcome change from the packed Tube. He felt giddy in a way he hadn't since he first left the little town for an office in London. He remembered how he had been thrilled at the thought of working for the nation's greatest banking firm in England's biggest city. Jameson snorted. That was long before he had learnt to relish the luxury of a quiet station and the sight of an endless sea of green. Jameson paused, then murmured, "Speaking of green, a stop at the park might be a fine thing to do!" He listened to the sound of his own voice echoing in the building, without any concern as to who would hear. Jameson couldn't remember the last time he had said something so pointless at all, or done something so inefficient as sitting in a park.

Jameson, after finding a bench that was situated under an oak, surveyed the roughly rectangular park in which he found himself. It was dominated by a hill, which he was directly opposite, rising up in the right-hand section of the park. A uniform row of black metal stakes surrounded the perimeter, and at each corner was another entrance. Concrete paths wound from these gates, and led around the grounds. The grass, which was kept in order by the groundskeepers, was a vibrant green, and the trees that formed linings to some of the more utilised paths proudly displayed their viridian leaves. Jameson sat in contentment, taking in his pristine surroundings, when he suddenly noticed a pungent smell wafting over from his left. It was some time before he was able to correctly identify the smell as fertiliser. Unimpressed, he stood up and began to walk up the hill. Jameson quickly felt fatigued, and before he had reached halfway he found himself having to stop for breath.

Jameson then realised that he was thirsty. He strained to remember

whether there was a kiosk nearby, and looking around saw none.

“That’s the thing about the country, nothing but greenery as far as the eye can see.” He huffed. Jameson looked up the hill, and tried to calculate how long it might take him to reach the top. His chest began to tighten. He began to feel that the park, with its oblivious plants and cheerful blue sky, was smothering him. He looked to the fence, about fifty metres to his right. He felt trapped. He stood, afraid to take any action. Finally, it occurred to him that there was a gate at the lower right hand corner, from which he could leave the park without having to climb the rest of the hill. He resolved to buy himself some lunch, and hurried down.

“A fine spring morning, bah!”

After about half an hour, Jameson arrived in a small café. He waited at the door for one of the waiters to approach him. Then he remembered this was the sort of place where you would seat yourself. The thought of having to choose his own table distressed him, but he eventually settled at one in the corner. He looked over the menu. Tea, coffee, and a number of cakes and sandwiches. Jameson paused. Is that what I want? A place with only one type of coffee? Oh, I’m already sitting down, perhaps a pot of tea would be just the thing for me. I’ve had so much coffee in the city anyway. Jameson looked about for a member of staff. Seeing none, he rose from his seat and headed to the counter. A squat waitress was counting change when he approached.

“Excuse me?”

“Can I help you?”

“I’d like a pot of English Breakfast, please.” He sounded louder than he’d intended; his crisp consonants, his rounded London vowels reverberated harshly off the garish yellow walls. Flushed, he continued,

“To the table over”

“I know where you are, sir. £6 please.”

She called him sir. He looked at her again. The waitress wouldn’t meet his eye as he handed over the money, staring demurely at the table. Jameson loved being called sir by the secretaries in the office, but here it felt unsettling. He sat down feeling decidedly awkward about

the whole ordeal. Jameson couldn't understand why. He had grown up here. He remembered how he had attended parties in the park, running up and down the hill like it was nothing, and never being afraid of the vast expanse of green. What's more, he had taken it all for granted, been desperate to leave for the city, especially during his teenage years. And now he had returned to make the final decision on his retirement to the little village, to his home. But the smog and crowds of London were a part of him as much as his silk shirts and his high-end glasses. He looked like a Londoner, not a bumpkin. He couldn't stay here—Oh! There's the tea. Jameson jerked out of his train of thought, and proceeded to pour himself a cup. It looked like mud, not at all like the hot drink he was familiar with. Jameson got up. He couldn't do it.

The station stifled him with its silence. He shuddered, a sense of deep unease soaked him. He hurried over to the platform, handed the ticket seller a crisp £20 note and told him to keep the change. Jameson bounced on the balls of his feet, the train bound for London couldn't come soon enough.

From the Cliff

An old man stood on his verandah in a house near the cliffs. The cliffs that sat, as obstinate and enormous beasts, guarding the coastline, jutting their jagged jaws into the water. He watched as the ocean heaved itself tirelessly against the walls of rock and ruptured with apocalyptic intensity. There was not a still moment, there had never been one. Not a moment when the feet of the cliffs were not hugged by a foam that sprayed up in magnificent white sculptures. There was great violence and also something wonderfully rhythmic contained in the scene. For forty years the old man had stood and watched from his verandah. He had not heard another voice in his home besides his own for a long time. So he liked the music at the cliff's edge.

Not many people came to this small part of the coastline, which was why the old man noticed the tall, slim figure standing at the edge of the precipice. It was so thin its human form was almost indistinct. The old man could see it wasn't wearing shoes. He waited for a moment on his verandah, and then followed the wind to the edge of the cliff.

The figure swayed at the point where the grass ended and the last foot of rock began. His arms moved back and forth like pendulums, as if disconnected from the rest of his body. As the old man moved closer he saw something small and dark a few metres behind where the figure stood. A coat, neatly folded, and a flaking leather wallet rested in the grass. The old man walked slowly towards the cliff's edge. The wind was high, so any sound was snatched quickly into the ocean. The figure had stopped swaying and was now only leaning forward, as if trying desperately to listen to the whisper of the horizon. Its head turned briefly as the old man came to a rest beside him, and then back to face the ocean. He was young, but deep contours ridged his face. For someone so young he had a lifetime written into his skin. The young man's eyes, sharp and frantically searching the scene before him, were the only indicator of his youth.

The older man spoke. "Is there something I could do to help you?" He offered the words slowly. They were quiet, but he was careful not to let them catch the wind and fly away. The young man continued his search of the waves.

"It's quite beautiful isn't it?" The young man's breath heaved. Each one seemed strenuous. He leaned further towards the ocean.

"I come here every day. Sometimes you can see whales." He handed over a smile with the greatest care.

"What's your name, young man?"

For a while there was only wind and two figures standing too close to the precipice. But then there was another voice; one that sagged, each sound rolling carelessly into the next.

"Felix. My name is Felix." He sounded unsure.

"Felix." The old man paused.

"I think this world holds a whole lot for a Felix. It's awfully cold here in the wind, why don't we get you somewhere a little more sheltered and you can tell me a bit about yourself?"

Felix began to tremble, as if only just remembering the chill. He took a step back from the cliff edge and looked up towards the old man's face, still crinkled into a gentle smile.

"My name's Bert." He held a hand out to Felix. "What would you think about a cup of tea?"

The old man shuffled over to the sink and filled the kettle with water. He hummed as it boiled. Felix sat in the corner of a cream sofa. There was no sound, no indent made into the soft cushion. It was as if a vapour had settled on the chair.

"Do you take sugar in your tea?"

Felix blinked. He wore the heavy pull of insomnia under his eyes. Bert continued, "My mother used to never let us put sugar in our tea, so we used to always have to sneak a teaspoon from the bag when she wasn't looking."

The creases had returned to his eyes and they held a playful glimmer.

“She said it ruined the herbs. And now that I’m old and so very wise, I must say I agree with my mother.” He set a cup of tea next to Felix and a bowl of biscuits on the table.

Bert lowered himself into an arm-chair, his arms wobbling on the descent. The skin on his hands was heavily creased and draped limply over his bones. There were indents in some areas, protrusions in others, and the entire surface was mottled with shades of brown and purple. He folded them across his lap and blinked slowly at Felix, whose eyes had been restlessly searching the room since he came in.

“So young man,” he carried his voice carefully and placed it in the hands of the broken figure before him.

“Tell me, why were you standing so close to the cliff edge on this day?” Felix opened his mouth but said nothing. His gaze had for a moment ceased its tireless pursuit and found that of the old man. It dropped again and continued to ricochet off the walls of the room. For a few moments silence rested on the breaths of both the men.

“I have a wonderful garden,” the old man began. His words were not rushed; they left his mouth as a slow thought floats through the mind. As his voice reached Felix, the young man’s form started to focus around the edges, in places where at the cliffs had been blurred. His body seemed to press more of a weight onto the sofa.

“When my wife died I began to take a lot of long walks, and I found I had a previously undiscovered love for flora.” His eyes glistened again, and there was something cheeky and boyish in his smile. “I had never done much gardening before, but I bought some seeds and buried them in a patch of dirt out the back of the house and my, it seemed I turned my head away for only a single moment and suddenly I had a glorious bush of tiny red flowers. Truly remarkable!” The young man had picked up his mug and was taking small sips of tea. Bert pretended not to notice, but his eyes creased a little more as he continued.

“So I kept it up and now I have quite the collection. I didn’t know a lot about plants, and really I still don’t. I don’t fuss too much over what’s what—some seeds grow and some don’t, but I like that too. It’s just the

way of it.” He paused for a moment as he stroked the folds of his neck. Felix was leaning forward, letting Bert’s voice warm his skin. The old man seemed to be searching for the right words. “It’s like poetry.”

There was a silence as Bert took a sip of his tea, the surface of the liquid quivering slightly as he drew the cup towards himself with gnarled fingers. He placed the cup back on the table and looked ready to begin again, when the young man who sat before him spoke.

“Loneliness.”

The word seemed to escape from his lips almost involuntarily. Bert tilted his head towards the young man. Felix spoke again.

“You asked why I...” His eyes had stopped their attempts at escape. They drifted towards the floor with the languid gait of the breeze outside. “It’s because there’s no-one.”

The old man paused, listening to Felix’s words linger long after they had been spoken.

“Isn’t it strange, how lonely so many of us feel in this world. There are so many of us! All so separate...” There was another pause as the words hung in the room.

“Only it doesn’t always have to be that way,” he smiled at Felix, his eyes creased. “Would you like to see the garden?”

At first it was small. A smile so large it fractured the face. But then it grew into a laugh. Felix began to laugh, because it was wonderful and unexpected. Before him lay not neat rows of tulips but an explosive tangle of leaf and bush and flower. Lavender that had grown woody and wild all knotted together with vines of wisteria; lovely blooms of roses struggling through a web of vivid hydrangeas; then optimistic attempts at herb planting that sat at the foot of huge drooping gloriously warped symbiosis. The old man chuckled, “It’s a work in progress.”

As Felix stood he could feel his own body, solid on the ground solid beneath him. He could feel the wind run into his skin, the brush of the garden on his arms. He was still laughing. He was breathing too. For the first time the young man took a breath and felt not the vicious sting of water but air fill his lungs.



The Usuals

He starts walking. He keeps walking. He does not stop walking. He walks every day since it happened. He hesitates past the office building that once held so much hope and acceptance yet now looms above him, casting a shadow and blocking out the sunlight behind. The hum of the opening and closing glass doors that used to provide so much comfort morphs into an echo that drowns his nightmares.

A beep brings my attention to my phone as I habitually type in my password and open the unread message.

“Hey Mate, management is on my ass about clearing your desk space. It’s been nearly three months. I think you better come and pick up your gear soon.

–Alex, HR.”

My hand instinctively squeezes the phone tighter as my shoulders tense and my thumb firmly reaches for the delete button. The “Hey Mate” stabs the deepest. The nonchalant address from the man who robbed me of my job and now calls me a friend. That office had seen so much of my life yet this kid was able to separate me from it at the company’s first provocation?

My finger presses down on the button beneath and the screen turns black in my hand, catching my own reflection. It was not the same person I saw a few months ago. I could barely recognize the man I once knew and respected.

His briefcase trembles in his shaky hand as he fumbles through the pockets of his charcoal suit jacket; subconsciously making his way towards the coffee cart he has been to so many times before. With a habitual nod of the head the barista knows to make his usual order.

He draws the cup close to his thin lips, its rich ambrosial fragrance engulfing him, and takes in the hot, black liquid, its stimulating warmth

causing cool beads of sweat to form on his wrinkled brow. Reality replaces the momentary distraction causing his focus to turn to the bottom of the cup where small grains of coffee remain. The cup crushes beneath his frustrated hand and his grip loosens before falling to the cracked pavement below. An inaudible grunt leaves his heavy body as he pulls his tired eyes away from the recyclable object now left on the street without purpose.

A gust of wind sweeps past causing snatches of cold air to coil around his legs as the man stops walking to find a seat at his front door. He stares at the Christmas gift from his wife on his wrist and blankly watches the seconds pass as he waits. He should not be home this early. At six o'clock his legs straighten and his knuckles tap on the door in front of him. The handle turns and his wife emerges.

"Hi Honey", she says nonchalantly as the man makes his way inside.

"How was work?"

"Not bad." he replies through a forced smile as he removes his jacket.

"The usual."



Rosie's Dilemma

Once upon a time there was a young girl from Sydney. This girl was 16 years old, beautiful and fresh as a flower, so it was no surprise that her name was Rosie. Her hair was long and brown like chocolate, and her eyes as blue as Sydney harbour on a sunny Summer day. Rosie was not, however, just pretty. She was a very hard worker. She did very well in school, not because she was the smartest, but because she tried the hardest. If she got something wrong, she would keep working until she got it right, and she was never afraid to ask questions. In fact, she spent all day asking questions.

There was only one place in the world where Rosie didn't ask questions. That was at home. Rosie never spoke when she was around her father. She could still remember a time when their house was filled with happiness, laughter and constant conversation. But that time was long passed. Ever since Rosie's mother died, her father came home later and later each night, and always smelling of beer. He did not want to talk then, and certainly not answer Rosie's questions. All he ever wanted to do was sleep, and wait for the pub to reopen.

When Rosie was younger, her father used to read to her. He'd read books for hours and hours, and Rosie would sit on her mother's lap at his feet and listen. Rosie loved her father's books. He was such a good writer; funny and creative. His stories would always be filled with magic and hope, and sometimes he would write about a beautiful girl with chocolate hair and harbour-blue eyes, and all her magical adventures. He would make Rosie feel like a princess. But her father hadn't written a word since Rosie's mother died.

One day Rosie decided she'd had enough. She was sick of the silence, and the smell, and having to cook and clean and look after someone who acted like she wasn't there. So she called her Aunt Claire.

"Claire, please help me. My Dad is not taking care of me. I need somewhere to stay."

Rosie loved Aunt Claire's huge sandstone house, and all the animals in

her big green garden. When Rosie got there, she talked a lot, and never had to cook or clean. She was able to do all her school work in peace but she missed her father, and she worried about how he'd be getting on without her.

Meanwhile, little did Rosie know that her father was missing her too. One night, a week after Rosie had left, when Rosie's father was trying to sleep in his study, looking at the paper and pens that had laid there unused for years, he heard a knock at the door. He answered thinking it was Rosie coming home, but as soon as he opened the door he realised it wasn't Rosie but a boy he didn't recognise. The boy, named Jack, had short black hair like a raven with beautiful grey eyes. He was kind, sweet, sensitive as well as compassionate but he also had a thing for Rosie because he'd seen her in class at school.

"Who are you, and what are you doing at my house?" inquired Rosie's father.

"Oh my gosh I didn't realise you were Rosie's father, you have no idea how much I love your books."

Rosie's father was shocked. "Why are you here? I've never seen you before. Please go away."

"Please," said the boy, "I just came to see Rosie."

"Well she's not here," her father said, "And I think she might be gone forever."

He started to close the door, but the beautiful grey-eyed boy blocked it with his hand.

"Wait," he said, "she's the one, isn't she? The princess in all your books. Maybe if you write another one, she'll come back to you."

Rosie's father was surprised. He didn't know there was anyone in the world who still remembered his books. Being reminded of them, he suddenly thought about Rosie's face when she was young, and used to look up at him so lovingly while he read to her. He started to cry, and the sensitive young boy took his hand.

"Please sir, please write more."

On the doorstep that night, Rosie's father promised Jack, himself, and

the absent Rosie that he would do just that. He would write more. He would bring the magic back.

A few months later, Rosie saw a book in the store with a familiar face on the cover. She couldn't believe her eyes. She ran straight back to her old house, which looked much cleaner than she expected, although, of course, not as clean as when she left it, and she saw her father, looking better than he had in years. Her father laughed through his tears.

“I hoped you might come back.”

Rosie smiled too.

“I was always going to, Dad. I never really left.”

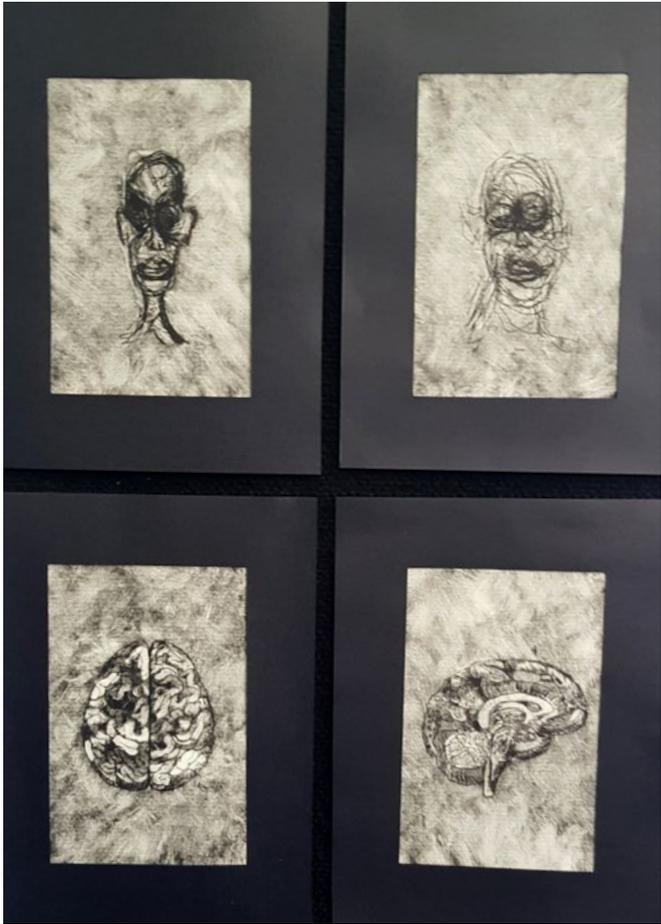
Woman

She stands alone, hunched over with guilt
She must consign herself over to a life of oppression
She knows nothing of equality or freedom
She lives a subsidiary life of repression

She endures her husband's patriarchal ways
She is ruled by his dominant position
She must uphold the values thrust upon her
She must never show any form of ambition

She is misunderstood outside the context of her culture
She is seen as nothing more than a supplementary figure
She lives a subordinate existence
She knows her physical and emotional needs no one will consider

She knows with each day that passes
She must hold her feelings close to her bosom
She continues on regardless
She is woman



Before Dawn

They sat in non-specific clumps sprawled out across the lawn, contrasting the blackened sky. Light dribbled, warm yellow, from randomly placed outdoor lamps, highlighting people's outlines as they revelled. Each one of them represented something different: temptation, recklessness, joy. Together, they celebrated the indestructible certainty of youth and days to come. Drinking, smoking and chatting away into the night. I stood up slowly and made my way away from the buzz. Lighting my last cigarette, I watched.

Which one am I? I think, dragging haphazardly on the light. Music thuds in the background and people clump together, throbbing in time with the baseline. I remain indifferent.

Not temptation, I'm too disinterested... Not recklessness, I'm too centred... Not joy, I'm too meditative... The cigarette burns on and smoke collects in my lungs, engulfing my senses. Someone in the throbbing crowd beckons me; hand poised artistically above everyone else, body stationary against the pulsing mass. I hold up the cigarette as if it's an excuse, and they don't pursue my company. No matter how well I chase the feeling, I know in the back of my mind we are all detached from each other. People here don't actually care about me, and I have always been intrinsically impartial to them. These are my friends, not because we share the same values, but because we go to the same parties. Hell, sometimes I don't even know what my values are...

The cigarette runs out around the same time as my interest, leaving a smoulder tipped filter burning its way toward my fingertips. I look around me, habitually reaching into my pocket for another. Once again, I'm left empty. I feel my phone buzz away in my pocket, distracting me from the vacant spaces consuming my thoughts.

"What?" I pick up, projecting my exasperation.

"Come over."

"I don't have a lift."

"I'll come pick you up."

“ ... ”

“Where are you?”

“... Don't worry about it; I'm not far away. I can walk.” Hanging up abruptly, I walk toward the gate. I leave without saying goodbye. Nobody notices. I walk for what feels like an hour, crossing town to get to his house. The streetlamps wash faded yellow light into the ink black night and illuminate patches of houses and lawns here and there, like loosely held clothing slipping away to reveal the skin beneath. Tiny pinpricks of light dabble through the black-cloaked sky. Stars, planets, and galaxies: far off places that have only ever been touched by the expansion of our ignorance. The lamps emphasise the decrepit abandonment of lawns at night time. The poorly kept gardens and sloppily mowed lawns make it obvious I'm not the only person who doesn't care. I wish I could walk like this forever, free from the stupid expectations and obligations. Across mountains and deserts and coastlines, finding interesting places and real genuine people. Finding myself. Really, truly finding myself.

Im thinking about leaving when I arrive at his house. He's sitting on the empty road, bathed in a pool of dank streetlight. In one hand lies a decrepit paperback, folding back on itself. His other hand lays curled on his cheekbone, mouth chewing away at his thumbnail. His eyes eat away at the book, consuming every syllable it has to offer.

“Got a cigarette?” My greeting.

“Yeah give me one second.” His response.

We sit together in silence. He reads, and I breathe in the addictive delirium of smoke.

“Why didn't you come tonight?” I say, exhaling slowly. The silent aura decapitates, carried away in shrouded plumes of nicotine. He dog ears his page and puts the book down, angling his face towards me. There's something majestic about his movements. The habitual calmness he exudes stops the relentless white noise buzzing in my head, eating away at my thoughts.

“I wanted to finish my book ... I just wanted to be alone for a bit.”

“Then why did you call me?” I breathe in more smoke.

He looks at me with hunger.

“Because you didn’t want to be there either.”

We sit in silence for a bit longer, cigarettes nearing the end of their destructive lives.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I say, punctuating the rhetoric by butting out the ashen remainders of the light. He reaches for his keys and I grab his arm, stilling it. Slowly, I guide him upwards and start walking.

“I don’t get you.” He says, not soliciting the need for a response.

My gut wrenches. I know he doesn’t mean it maliciously but the words bite. I can’t think of any worse label that ‘misunderstood’ or ‘tortured.’ I don’t have problems. I don’t seek attention. I am not that girl.

I don’t get me either.

We reach the coastline sometime before dawn. I collapse on the sand and let it compress beneath me, feeling tiny sediments tumble through my sticky hair, over my clothes and skin like lukewarm snow. I turn onto my side and look at him. He sits perched calmly on the sand dune, watching the black sky dilute itself into lighter blues and purples.

“What do you want to know about me then?” I ask.

Maybe if he asks the right questions, I’ll figure out my own answers.

“Everything.” He says, without glancing down.

“Everything?”

Hell, is there even anything?

He looks down and catches my eyes with intensity. I feel like I’m missing something.

“Everything.” He says.

So I begin. I talked about my childhood: the sun-bleached memory of golden hair tinged with salt spray infused winds, my parents’ rocky but flirtatious relationship, my brother’s obsession with basketball and my love for a small blue bike my dad had bought me. And then my very sudden hate for that same bike after my father’s even more sudden departure. This superseded my love for books, and surfing, and making my brother’s life hell. As I grew older, I developed a sudden

depraved sense of desperation to get my mother's approval, partially for reassurance but mainly to see her express any emotion other than relentless, all-consuming despair. And then high school, and the sudden irrelevance of anything I cared about. THIS IS COOL, THIS IS NOT. THIS IS NORMAL, THIS IS NOT. And then my love for cigarettes and my hate for people. And my inability to forgive my father when I bumped into him outside school, even though I saw remorse consume him so entirely it had dribbled pathetically from the corneas of his eyes. He could not wash away the past, or my hatred for how pathetic my mother remained. But now, sitting in the salty mist of sea spray overwhelmed by fatigue, all I seemed to feel was an overwhelming lack of anything other than cigarette smoke and vacancy.

It was so easy to pinpoint all these memories and all the emotions they left behind, but so hard to figure out whom I was because of them. When I finish talking, the sun has risen and two or three stragglers are at various locations along the shoreline.

"Do you think we're more introspective than most people our age?" He asked. I've never heard him second-guess himself before.

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not."

Silence contrasts the rapidly changing skyline, broken half-heartedly by the splurging lap of waves long broken hitting the sand.

"It doesn't matter who you are, by the way." He says slowly. Methodically.

"What do you mean?"

"You said you can't figure out who you are."

"Yeah."

"Well maybe that's not what you should focus on. Maybe you should just figure out who you want to be, what you like, and try and achieve that."

"But what if that's not who I want to be in five years? What if I wake up one day and think 'this isn't who I want to be'?"

He pauses.

“That’s the beauty in it. You will never stop changing. Everything about you: who you are, who you were, who you want to be... it’s fluid. The second your interests change, you change with them.”

I stand up and brush sand off my skin, then start pulling off my jeans.

“What are you doing?”

“Come on let’s go for a swim.” I say. He complies.

The water washes over me wave by wave and unlike the ocean, I feel calm. I am not temptation, I am not recklessness, I am not joy. I am myself. Together, we swim out past the crashing white foam, towards the rising sun. Behind us, the darkness slowly subsides.



Dry and Crumbling

Dry and crumbling, the stench of rot had begun to creep up the walls of the motel room, flaking away at the faded pink wallpaper to reveal the now brown paint beneath. It had slunk up from where it had taken root years before, below the ground, back when the smell was weak enough to be concealed by the smell of perfume or cigarettes. Worn down after years of use, the wooden floorboards had begun to creak menacingly once stepped on, the planks bending beneath the weight imposed upon them. But the down of decay was common inside the cramped room; the lone window rattled, the wardrobe groaned, even the bed let out high-pitched whines when used. Its loud and piercing rhythm masked the sound birthed within its folds, so it was the only noise that bled beneath the mould-stained door.

Rising from beneath the discoloured sheet thrown across the mattress, a dyed blonde woman padded across the protesting floor towards her bag, slung haphazardly across the single chair perched against the corner, barely supporting itself with one snapped leg. With trembling hands and cracked nails, she reached in for a cigarette, burning the tips of her fingers as she set it alight.

“Are we done here?” Asked the man sprawled out against the stained sheets, his hairy arms folded across his bare chest.

“You tell me,” she answered softly, and he smirked, pleased.

“Alright, the job’s yours. Come in on Monday at eight o’clock and we’ll figure out what to do with you.”

She should smile, she knew. She should thank him, perhaps, or laugh, or nod. But if she opened her mouth, she would scream.

He dressed painfully slowly, his eyes hot on her bare shoulders as he yanked his clothes over his body, each movement making the floorboards squeak louder beneath his square feet. The ring was the last to go on; he shoved it over his finger with effort, the golden band too small for his swollen knuckles. Clothed in nothing but the lingerie she had bought that morning with a collection of carefully counted coins, she watched

everything but him.

Before he left, he kissed her, his hands wandering over her tensed body. One of her hands curled involuntarily into a fist around the forgotten cigarette; the other caressed the back of his neck.

“I’ll see you at the office, sweetheart,” he leered with a wink as he left, the wall shaking as he ripped the door open.

“Can’t wait,” she offered in reply, but he had already strode out of sight, his heavy footsteps thundering down the brittle stairway to the reception. She couldn’t find the energy to close the door behind him.

She let the cigarette fall to the floor, unsmoked, and sat herself down on the cold wooden floor, drawing her goose-bump covered knees up to her chin. From the very depths of her tattered bag, she drew out a cracked compact, examining the mosaic of her face in the mirror. She was a collection of smears and streaks, of bloodshot eyes and brittle hair, of cracked lips and mottled skin.

“Lucky,” she whispered to herself through the lump in her throat. “Lucky he even wanted me to begin with. Lucky I had this advantage over the others. Lucky I’m a woman, and young, and blonde and thin. Lucky, lucky, lucky.”

Willa Swift

Year 9

Margaret Lundie Honour Board Prize Winner

Coming Home

When you decide
to crawl back into
the spaces of yourself
you have abandoned – your
spine, the back of
your hands, your
coal-covered voice
– dust off the cobwebs,
trace your fingers over
yourself as if you are
an ancient map full of secrets
waiting to be discovered.
There are dips and grooves here
you have forgotten about.
There is rust,
neglect.
There is graffiti
along your walls.
a spray painted list of people
searching for abandoned buildings
but found you instead.
Open doors,
open windows,
apologise to the skin for
all the times you have
left without a word.
This is coming home



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Finally, to all of the contributors this year, always continue to write and "fill your paper with the breathings of your heart" (William Wordsworth).

Thea Todhunter
English Teacher