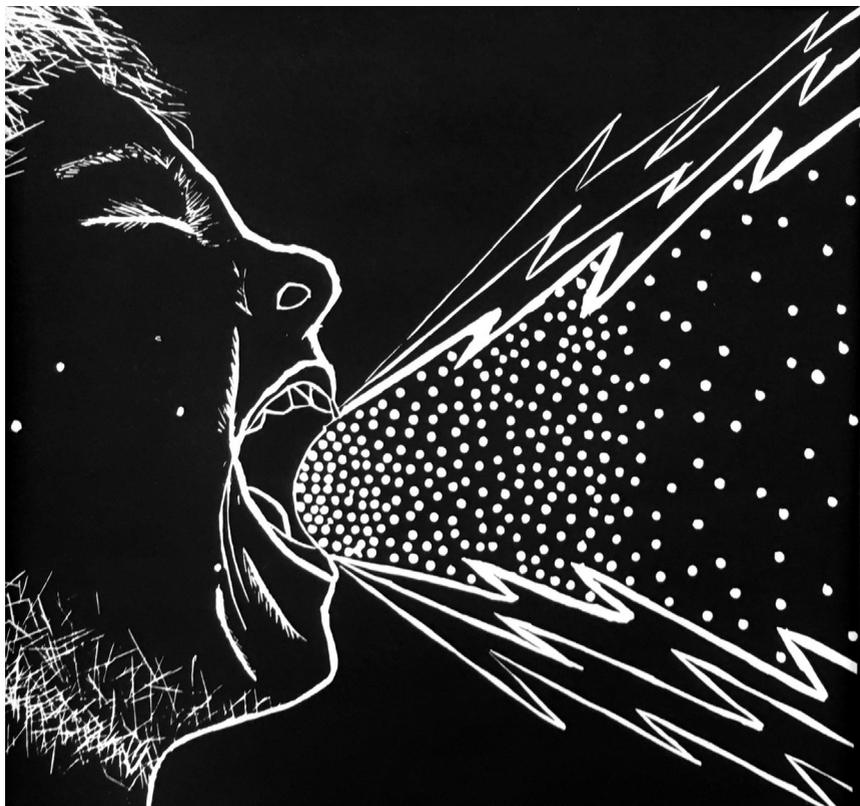


# Ascham Ink



**Ascham School 2016**

*Edited by Elise Dempster*

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# (Untitled 1)

I call womanhood an uphill battle. I mean  
the transition, the slick-slide from girl to  
this. Almost-woman, never quite adult,  
this stag inside my heart trying to escape;  
his antlers always catching on the walls  
of my ventricles. Blood dripping into the wounds  
and out at the same time. Cross-contamination,  
girl to woman to girl to woman; teeth in the dark,  
heavy hoofs on the underside of my ribcage.

I watch myself holding onto that girl-ness;  
scrappy limbs and wide eyes and so little care.  
So much feeling. I string it along, wring it out,  
squeeze every drop like the dying desert man  
and the last of his water. I paint the stag red  
and make him frightening. File his teeth into  
fangs. I say to him, here is the part where  
we learn how to fight. Here is the part  
where we don't fall to pieces. Here is the part  
where we accept the blood and drink of it.  
Here is the part where we forgive each other and  
co-exist, girl inside woman, both of us afraid.

I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to  
fight without him. I say, let's not frighten each other  
anymore. Let's turn the fear out on everybody else.  
The stag drops his head and his sharp teeth part.

*'There's no fear but what you make,'* he tells me in the dark.

*'All I am is what you can't let go.'*

# Paint

There was a claustrophobic smell of paint. And when I whispered the walls spoke back to me. And then the infrequent ratter and tatter of rain on the timber roof. Then light, soft and warm, a deep yellow. The glow of a lone lamp, arched like a thoughtful man at a train stop.

And then the thoughts seeped in again. I picked myself up from the floor, scratching my face where the carpet had kissed me. Alone again. The quiet of twilight. Where had I been?

My skin was dry and red. Yes, the fire. Its coals now burnt to chargrilled hearts shifting with the energy of fading heat. Where had I ... asleep. I had fallen asleep, reading Hemingway. *The Old Man and the Sea*. It reminded me of fish and chips, my sum appreciation of the ocean. I had never been, but I loved to read about it. It seemed almost a sense I'd yet to experience. The way humans describe the roar of the tide; I wondered what it must feel like to swim in a body of water that is alive and moving.

The smell of paint again. The ivory walls waded in the purple glow of the sky through my window. My skin was painted too. In the fading light I could see the rivers of dents in my skin, microscopic depressions that traced the skin on my wrists smothered by off-white wall paint. A draught hissed through the trees and seeped through the open window. The dying coals hissed back. I shut the window and then the deafening silence I had woken to. Asleep. I was asleep. Why had I been?

The shadows became clearer as my eyes adjusted to the drippy violet light. Boxes, stacked on each other, some open and others still sealed. Slowly collecting dust. In my new home that seemed wildly vacant yet lived in and worn out I had accumulated only the most necessary possessions. First, my book, to take me someplace other than the company of myself, secondly, my lamp, to offer light in only the darkest of places, and finally the fire, chewing at the eucalypt wood, breathing heat and life into this still cabin.

I rummaged through the boxes. They were chaotic from the rush I'd been in to load my boot and flee. I began to wonder if I had left it behind. But then, among my scarves and lingerie, I found it cradled and protected. My favourite teacup.

The stove was hesitant to light, and I considered making billy tea over the fire. But the suffocating waft of gas arose and slowly the blue flame licked at the kettle. The water whistled in protest and I poured the bubbly water into my cup. It had a large chip in it; occupying so much of the side to the left of the handle it would have been deemed useless by anyone else. I could only drink half a cup of tea at a time for the crack was so wide. But I wouldn't take any other cup but that one. It had been hers. And the faint memory of lilies painted on its rim still clung to the fine ceramic.

The sky was dark now. The stars were slowly forming at the surface of the deep blue. I tried to make them out but the reflection of the lamp in the window gleamed persistently. My home creaked and moaned, contracting in the cool night air. The milky bubbles swirled in the storm of my teacup. I tilted the water away from the crack, sipping it intermittently and feeling the rush of sweet brown sugar and the creamy milk I'd stashed in my car for the trip. That's the only thing I took from the kitchen. That, and the brown sugar. My fingers cradled its fleeting heat.

What would I eat? There was nothing here but boxes. I hadn't thought this through. I wasn't even sure where the closest town was. The only place I knew was the IGA back in Berry, but that was too close to him. He might be out, he might see me. For now, all I had was the Earl Grey that steamed in its broken vessel.

I remembered how Mum used to hold it, with her elegant fingers laced gently around its body. Its ethereal frame. Delicate in such a way that it seemed out of this world. Her nails would be a painted mushroom brown, she loved that colour. I used to watch her through the slit in her bedroom door, recoating them in the dewy morning light. Everything she impressed became soft and lovely. Her fingers were emaciated but light at the touch, leaving behind a whisper of fingerprints.

Everything about my mum was ethereal.

Now the chipped cup was just the debris of a fall, an accident, a splinter of a memory of her I hadn't realised was so important to me. And I felt I was

gripping it too tight, and any second it would burst and the tea would spill and the china would demolish to dust and cry out along the timber wood floors.

So I put it down. And the tea went cold.

The bedroom was a substantial size with gaping windows and a crooked cupboard cut into the corner of the wall. I imagined a hot breeze shifting among white curtains, thrusting it upwards and casting silhouettes of spirits dancing in wedding gowns. A large bed between the windows, haphazardly made in the morning with papers from the night before strewn all over. The floor a messy collage of cups of water, my bra thrown over the nightstand and tattered record cases leaning against the wall, slipping in micro movements as fast as dust falls to flat on the floor. The distant, airy sound of an orchestra tuning rolling around my record player, momentarily kissing the needle of the tone arm and fleeing it again. Meeting and fleeing, meeting and fleeing. While I watched the orchestra hummed a drone of Camille Saint-Saens.

But there was no music. And there was no bed. And there were no dancing brides. The room was still like the hills sitting by my windowsill. I flicked the switch by the doorframe and yellow flooded the room. Shadows played in the desolate mountain ranges outside, standing still at a distance close enough I knew it was a human figure staring directly at me, but far enough that I knew they were figments of my imagination, shadows of nothing, on an estate of nothing but me.

I had always thought that by escaping his wrath it would silence the voices in my head. But then they grew more fearful and demanding of my attention. I thought if I slept alone I wouldn't crave the feeling of his arms cradling me, as he lay so close in our bed but far enough that I felt oceans between us. I thought this would make things simpler.

Now he was gone, for good. Or rather, I was gone. Now I had left him without a word of goodbye, gathering only what I needed and packing the boxes I had packed and unpacked for so many weeks leading up to it. Now I could sleep in an ocean drowning only me. One lonely corpse, bagged and stripped of identity, chained to a rock. Inevitably, a *shared* fall to the seabed

was too crowded. Just one was less demanding of the world beneath our world to gurgles us up for good.

Yet the touch of his hands on my hips, the comforting pulse of his warm blood on my blue skin, it lingered on me. It lingered like the cloudy wrench of smoke from a bonfire in my midnight black hair. I desired his tender touch, though I hadn't felt it in years. As I picked at the wallpaper I hadn't yet painted over in the grimy, empty kitchen I recalled those moments recently when I had felt his touch again. But it had been cruel. It had left black and blue footsteps on my spine. His touch had tasted like beer and cheap vodka. It had smelled like every other night.

I was imprinted, barcoded with miserable blood clots gathering at my skin. Meeting apprehensively with scabs of scratches and burns and cuts he had left as well.

In the distorted reflection of the milky tea that was spotted with leaves and cold bubbles, I saw a bony head in the ripples of liquid, with short dark hair. I saw a figure that I had always detested for it was never as thoughtful and placid as my mother had been. I saw a figure ripped to the raw flesh by pain and neglect and isolation.

But in the swirling misery of the cold, cloudy puddle I observed a skeleton sculpted with layers of paint. Thick with the weight of hundreds of paint layers that had all been wrong and corrected with another layer. Layers that momentarily felt beautiful and honest, but within an instant of doubt were caked by another distortion of my identity. I watched her dwindle into the cracked teacup and with her went all the yellow light. And the walls whispered their goodbyes.

# The Split

FADE IN:

## 1. INT. BLACK ROOM

The screen begins black.

CLOSE UP – A small light bulb hanging from the ceiling is switched on and begins to flicker.

Silence except the ticking of a clock. Heavy breaths. Against those are swift and staccato pants in time with obscured, cut shots.

CLOSE UP – a man's two feet, firmly planted on the ground.

CLOSE UP – two big, blue eyes pressing shut. The light flickers on the closed eyelids, coming in and out of shadow.

A slight muffled whimpering comes into earshot with the echoing sound of banging.

The banging crescendos and becomes faster and faster then fades out like the echo of cymbals. The clock stops ticking.

CLOSE UP – the hands of the clock, stuck and twitching.

The screen cuts to black.

## 2. INT. FELICITY'S LIVING ROOM – DAY

An out of focus painting of a woman hanging on a blank white wall fades into focus. Daniel (28) is an artist; young, handsome and naively romantic. He begins reflecting on his relationship with the woman, Felicity, as the painting comes into focus.

**Genevieve Couvret**  
**Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work**

DANIEL (V.O.)

When I was twelve years old I had to build a clock for school. The day before it was due, I dropped it.

It was the best and most beautiful thing I had ever made, the hardest I'd ever worked on something.

So my dad got out his tool box and taught me how to use a screwdriver, a spanner, a hammer, everything.

That was when I fell in love with fixing things.

Daniel walks around Felicity's living room staring at the painting hanging on the wall. The scruffiness of his stubble and clothing contrasts with the softness of his face. Sunlight streams in through the open window next to the kitchen bench, perpendicular to the living area. Daniel reaches down to the coffee table in front of the couch for a Rubik's Cube and tosses it in his hands. He seats himself at Felicity's dining table, playing with his sweaty palms, waiting for her. He begins to try to solve the Rubik's Cube.

Felicity (26) is in the bathroom down the hall, staring in the mirror. Felicity is Daniel's ex-girlfriend; mature and pretty but always looking tired. She appears, at first, as the average and ultimate girl next door. She smiles and embraces him as they haven't seen each other in a little while.

FELICITY

Looks like you need a little help there.

DANIEL

I'm so bad at these.

FELICITY

Let me have a go.

Felicity takes the Rubik's Cube and begins matching the sides as Daniel watches and feels a slight smile forming.

DANIEL

How have you been?

FELICITY

Good. Better, I think.

DANIEL

I'm glad. Is it just us today?

FELICITY

Well you never know who might show up.

CLOSE UP on Daniel and Felicity's fingers lingering as Daniel takes the cube out of her hands.

FELICITY

You're never going to be able to solve it.

Let me have a go!

DANIEL

Give me a minute!

Daniel fumbles with the Cube a bit more but then places it down on the table in exasperation.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I give up. There's too many sides.

FELICITY

I told you so.

DANIEL

It's confusing!

FELICITY

I know. Don't worry about it.

DANIEL

You know what, no. By the time I leave  
today I'll finish this.

FELICITY

How long were you planning to stay?

DANIEL

However long it takes.

Daniel pensively stares at Felicity, who doesn't notice as she gets up and begins to make tea for the two of them. It is incredibly homely, and to Daniel, surprisingly normal. Slowly, he drifts back into his memory.

DISSOLVE TO:

3. INT. ART STUDIO - EVENING

TEXT: Last year

Daniel is painting. A radio plays in the background. In the centre of the room sits his muse, Felicity, posing for a portrait. Daniel smiles as he moves his brush across the canvas. CLOSE UP shots of the brush don't reveal what the painting is and follow Daniel's brushstrokes. He takes a step back to admire his work.

DANIEL

Done.

FELICITY

How is it?

DANIEL

Come and see for yourself.

Felicity leaves her seat in the centre of the room and goes to look at Daniel's artwork. A shot from behind Daniel reveals that the painting is of a dog. Felicity gasps and bursts into laughter when she sees it.

FELICITY

Is that supposed to be me?

DANIEL

Of course not.

FELICITY

Then why did you have me posing for three hours?

DANIEL

I don't know. I wanted to spend time with you  
... and you looked pretty up there.

FELICITY

Oh, come on.

DANIEL

Are you mad I wasted your time?

FELICITY

Nah, it wasn't a waste of time. But you could've  
just asked to spend time with me.

DANIEL

Would you have said yes?

FELICITY

I certainly wouldn't have minded.

Felicity begins to smile and then moves back into the posing space, closer to the radio. She turns up the volume and sways in the centre of the empty room. The wooden floor and lamplight is warm. Daniel steps out from behind his canvas and its shadow in the corner of the room and enters the open space, walking towards her.

DANIEL

Hey, how about I paint you next time? For real?

FELICITY

Nah, the dog's cuter.

DANIEL

True. But I like you anyway.

Daniel grabs Felicity by the waist and begins to dance around to the beat of the song. Felicity giggles. Daniel takes her hand and spins her around. They stand, pressing close to each other and smile.

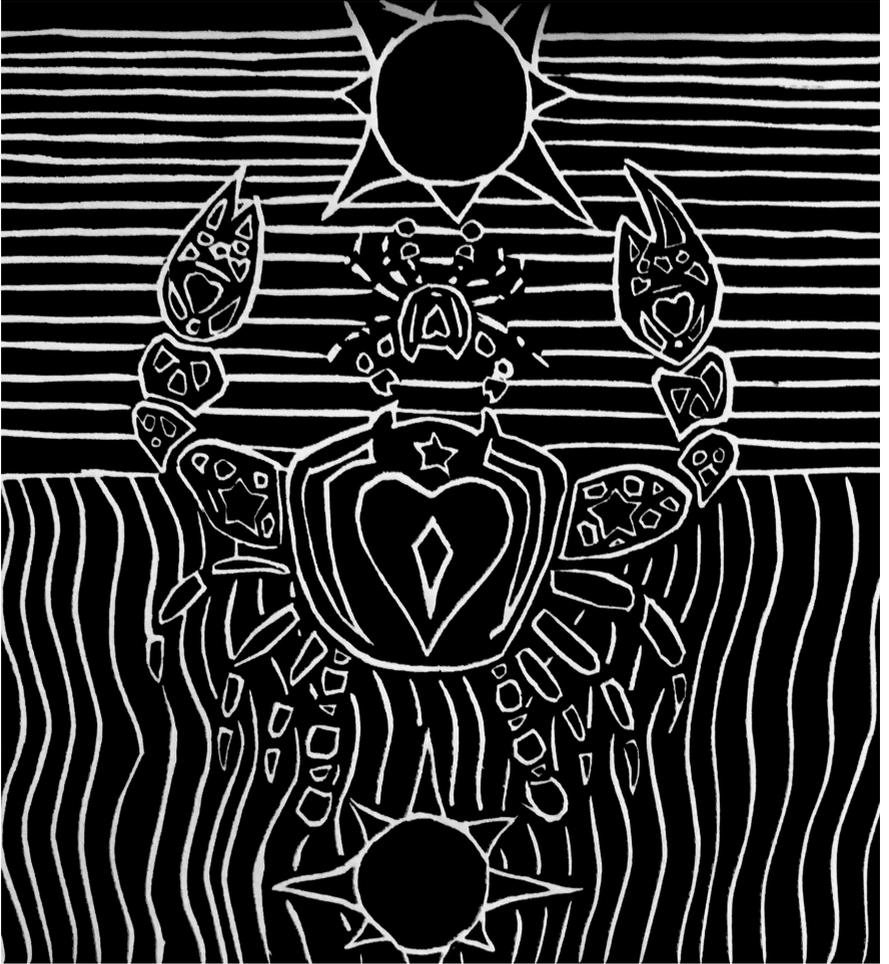
# Adjoining Hearts

If I look  
at the crystal moon, at the red branch  
attached to your beating heart,  
I feel an instant connection.  
A connection so strong,  
that it carries me  
over to you in a flash.

The flash.  
The image of your blissful beauty blinding me,  
for life.  
Your elegance, electricity,  
so vibrant and warm.

My love for you is like a blooming flower,  
growing more and more each day.  
Each day that I'm blessed with your presence,  
I blossom some more, collecting new colours,  
growing deeper roots.  
The roots to our love.

My roots grow by your soil, so sweet  
that bees may mistake it for honey.  
Without my honey, my scent would be dampened,  
I would be lost,  
floating away in the crystal ocean,  
without my rock.



# Beyond Measure

The clinic was silent, but for the rhythmical tick of the clock on the wall, the passing of time seeming slower and slower as the hands continued to spin. Lena gently stroked her firm, round belly. She still could not believe that a life was growing inside of her. A beautiful healthy baby, she hoped. Today all would be revealed. Lena's deep brown eyes flickered across the room as she grew impatient, shifting their focus to the window in an attempt to ignore the creeping anxiety fluttering in her chest. A smile crept across her face, her sharp eyes softening as they gazed at the branches heavy with blossom caressing the window.

Spring used to be Lena's favourite season. As a child she loved how the trees would burst into bloom, and the sparrows and robins would return to fill her world with melodious tunes; but most of all she loved spring as with it came the promise of many carefree mornings spent with her mother. Each day at sunrise they would leap out of bed and run outside into the open garden to play. Dainty dandelions peered through blades of soft green grass that blanketed the garden lined with rows of mulberry trees. Together they would bask in the rays of the mellow, kindly sun, gazing upon the clouds wheeling across the pale blue sky above. Discovering shapes of goblins, greyhounds and grannies in those clouds was her mother's peculiar gift. Lena would rest her ear against her mother's rotund belly, balancing a newspaper upon its surface, convulsing helplessly with laughter as it wiggled every now and then. Her mother's melting nut-brown eyes were always upon her. Her calming voice resonated throughout her day, marking each dawn of the rising sun and closing nightfall with a lullaby.

"Miss Andrews?" called the nurse, interrupting her reverie, summoning her to the ultrasound room. A wave of panic swept through her body as she entered the dimly lit room.

Her mother too must have been nervous. She still remembered the day that she left for the hospital, her hair swept up into a scraggly bun, her deep penetrating eyes ringed with sleepless nights. Little Lena was sky gazing alone in the garden, trying to decide whether gliding above her was a cow or a sheep.

“Come here darling, give me a hug before I go!”

“Do you have to leave now? Who will help me finish my rocket ship?!” demanded Lena, scowling down at her glossy red gumboots.

“I won’t be gone for long ... only for a few days. When I come back I’ll be bringing home our little peanut with me!”

“Don’t give Mum a hard time, okay?” Lena sternly ordered, wagging her finger at the sphere towering above her head.

“You’re a brave little monkey,” said her mother, holding Lena in an embrace that was to be her last.

“How much do you love me?” asked Lena, cheekily awaiting the familiar response.

“Beyond measure!” shouted her mother before closing the car door.

As she followed the car out of the driveway Lena was already awaiting her mother’s return, but what should have been days turned into weeks. The sun no longer seemed so bright, the grass seemed no longer a vibrant green and Lena began to lose hope.

Instead of her mother returned a baby boy, tightly swaddled in a blanket, with curious, beady, brown eyes. Lena marvelled at how his smooth bright face transformed into that of an ugly, wrinkled, old man each time he cried, his mouth opening up like an impatient bird waiting for its next worm.

Just as a new pair of shoes loses its shine, her brother soon ceased to be an object of interest, bearing more resemblance to her abandoned pair of gumboots, soiled and scuffed.

Where on earth was her mother? This question constantly circled in her mind bursting with anger, boredom and frustration. Lying alone in the garden was no longer amusing. The clouds were just clouds, the muddy, treaded grass was no longer inviting and she winced each time the shrill cry of a bird dared penetrate her ears. Silence became a well-known friend.

She seldom saw her father during the day. By nightfall he would return, swaying and murmuring like an old hollow tree, the lips of his expressionless

face trembling as he emptied the last drops of the amber liquid onto his tongue. Lena's presence only upset him, his body cowering at the mere mention of her mother's name.

Long after her bedtime, she heard him talking on the phone, awoken by the mention of her mother's name, a name she had nearly forgotten.

"We will bring her home in a few days," he murmured.

That week proved to be full of surprises with her father arriving at the school gate in place of her grandmother, dressed in a pristine black suit and his best overcoat.

"Today must be the day!" she thought, her entire body rippling with excitement.

Leaping out of the car door she entered the busy living room. To her utter delight it was filled with all her favourite family members who drowned her with affection: Aunt Molly who knitted her bright pink socks every Christmas, Uncle Norman with his talking parrot and all her cousins. She couldn't wait for her mother to arrive. How she would love the party! The room was filled with her favourite flowers and food and even the sun had come to welcome her home.

Running up to her bedroom she ordered her grandmother to follow and dress her in her best clothes, quickly returning downstairs after donning her mother's favourite summer dress, a great contrast to the mass of black below. She was ready to impress, even wearing her least favourite pair of itchy stockings, pulling them up as she plucked her mother's favourite flowers from the garden bed.

She returned to a room consumed with silence, so quiet the drop of a pin could be heard with great clarity, the tension only broken by a stifled sob from her dear Aunt Molly.

"She is here."

Lena cautiously edged herself closer to the huddled crowd, squirming her way to the front. Her fiery eyes, burning with curiosity, began to settle, soon glazed with a film of tears as the flowers hit the floor.

Her small chubby hands tightly gripped around the smooth black box lined with delicate frills. There her mother lay, her arms gently folded across her motionless chest. Lena wrapped her fingers around her mother's stiff cold hands.

"You are freezing!" she gasped, gently wrapping her bare arms her with her favourite yellow blanket.

A faint smile lingered on her mother's pale face, aglow with contentment. Never had she looked so peaceful. She was beautiful.

"Do you want to know the child's gender, Miss Andrews?"

Tears rolled down her face as the cold ultrasound probe swept purposefully across her belly.

"Tears of joy! Oh bless!" exclaimed the red, rotund nurse from the depths of the room, while Lena's thoughts remained 25 years in the past.

"Why was I the last to know? I was so young. She was so young. She was carefree. She was my everything. What if I die too, leaving my child alone in the world? A life without a mother's love is a life I don't want them to live."

"Sorry Miss Andrews, did you want to know the gender?"

Lena nodded absentmindedly, still lost in thought.

"It's a beautiful healthy girl! Congratulations."

Lena didn't feel like celebrating just yet. A staggered breath escaped her mouth as she dried her eyes.

"Get yourself together," she thought. "You have made it this far. There are no complications. The baby is healthy and that's all that matters right now."

Lena's mother was her rock and now it was her turn to also be strong. That was what her daughter needed. Limitless strength and love beyond measure.

# Canon-fodder

*So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man,  
and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its  
place with flesh.*

*And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he  
made into a woman and brought her to the man.*

*Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and  
flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of  
Man this one was taken."*

Her entrance is quiet, echoing the  
Soft sounds of the sea as she arrives on the shore  
Born of foam, of roses, of myrtle — of Caelus ...

"Carried o'er the sea a long time,  
And white foam arose from the immortal flesh;  
With it a girl grew"

As an afterthought of sorts; a mere consequence of castration  
As failed masculinity gives way to potent femininity  
Through preserving her modesty just so  
"Take this shawl, dear,  
And do cover your breasts with your hands,  
Yes, just like that," whispers Botticelli,

With greying fingers ghosting across her wet body  
Tracing every curve, each strand of hair  
Each piece becoming the sum of a celestial whole  
As she enters the canon as the Object.

**Isabella Keith**  
**Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work**

Alas, Sapphic stanzas have already summoned Her  
Begged Her back to the earth's black bosom,  
And She returns to the darkness.  
And so they must whisper, for the night has arisen  
And soon Her skin will sink back,  
Back into the sea-foam  
And their tongues must not speak a word of it, for they mustn't be seen  
here  
So they sing their songs of love in darkness  
Amongst the clattering clamour of the great dark sea and the far too  
many of those like them who have perished in the sparkling nonsense  
of moonlight.  
But they sit on roses, with thorns tickling at their feet,  
With the stems caught between their toes and so they bruise them like  
knees  
And the water heats up — Jupiter has a temperament —  
And no longer does it melt beneath the surface and simmer and sliver  
across Her skin  
But instead it scratches and screams and claws at her flesh — takes  
her breast  
In its hand;  
Dares Sapphic desires to disappear,  
Causes thorns to grow from the red-scathed skin  
That twist and scare you from behind...  
Only to sink back into the sea-foam, back to Olympia,  
And so She disappears  
And the poetess awaits her Muse once more, crying:  
    "Sweet mother, I cannot weave —  
    slender Venus has overcome me  
    with longing for a girl."

As Venus spins, spins backwards, deeper into the sea.

And so Petrarch descends, summons *his* Muse:  
Bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh, woman  
Designed for him.

La aura, Laura, too holy to paint,  
Unreachable — The ardent lover croons  
Of gold, of gaze, of comfort, of despair,  
His goddess, his contempt for those who dare  
Speak of whom he daren't even whisper  
Bar lusty vagueness, bright eyes, potent stare.  
Desire flutters, mutters, stumbles, simpers,  
*Simmers* in unchecked metaphors and weeps:

“I find no peace, and yet I make no war:  
and fear, and hope: and burn, and I am ice.”

And perhaps Shakespeare will thaw the frost,  
Will court his women well  
Draw a feather from his sword;  
Bleed into the quill.

He'll claim Orsino's grave surfeit,  
Such that his appetite  
For love “may sicken and so die” and that  
Hamlet's forty thousand hearts beat  
With all their quantity of love...

And over Shakespeare presides Elizabeth  
— *Videō et taceo* —  
He writes to her — *for* her —  
For *her* stage, *her* England,

The one that bears *her* hand in marriage ...  
But she has no lover — She is The Virgin Queen:  
She strikes the Canon with a match  
Which burns with sharp flames that rival her hair  
And leave her face ashy, eyes stony,  
Glaring in the light as the choir murmurs

Gloriana,  
Gloriana,  
Gloriana:  
That greatest Glorious Queen of Faerie lond ...  
Gloriana,  
Gloriana,  
Gloriana:

“So summon the witch — Summon the bitch,  
Bring her to her knees,” they cry.  
Prick the skin and find the mark  
Make her swim — Then watch her sink, watch her  
Speak of spells, spells — Watch her learn to spell,  
Twisting the words at her fingertips into long strands  
Of poetry — Words that simmer, simmer,  
Rattle and hum  
Bubble ... Double, double toil and trouble as she sinks  
Beneath the surface.

Duchess, Duchess, Lady o'Mine,  
Dare I speak against will of thine?  
Dare I summon candle-light;  
Dare I make thou stay?

Flicker the shine across the wall  
Let wax weep the cradle of its fawn  
Amongst ceramic skin and bone of fine  
Please do sit, O Lady o'Mine.

We must stage an intervention,  
Dare'st I say  
With heavy heart and solemn eye  
You have...  
A womb that wanders.

It is Freud, you see,  
He speaks of displaced uterus,  
Of the free-floating subconscious,  
The "mind within the mind".

And so we must treat you,  
Must psycho-analyse,  
It's very new, you see, my dear,  
He knows what I must provide.

Let us go to bed my dear,  
Speak of something else,  
Hysteria mustn't cause us trouble —  
Intercourse is known to help.

And with a "Pop!", a "Boom!" — A Pollock-like explosion,  
Out of the Modern treachery, the greyish weary eyes  
From the fog emerges —  
The women from the wives.  
Husbands turn the gas marks up  
And in goes the head as the meter ticks on.

For this is the empty hum  
Of the virgin-prostitute  
The perverse-angel  
The two-faced sinister and saintly woman  
    Of the woman from whom came the beginning of sin, and through  
    her we all die...  
For how can one live as an oxymoron?  
And amongst these binaries lies the ... Lies the ...

No! We are not of rib, tongue, wandering wombs, penis envy or  
afterthought!  
Not taken from man, not a consequence of castration —  
Not sliced from Caelus, nor birthed of sea-foam and pretty pink shells,  
We are instead standing on the shoulders of our mothers,  
Birthed by our mothers, taught to speak by our mothers,  
And it is only in mythology that woman comes from man  
And only in yellowed pages that our voices are silenced  
But the world is a big white sheet and our toes poke tentatively out of  
the bottom ...  
And it is now that —

That interruption is no more  
and Lady Lazarus will rise!



# Everything

Everything carried me to you,

As Gravity,  
if nothing else  
pulls us together,  
neither of us grounded

Time does not touch us,  
love does not abide night or day,  
nor summer and winter,  
it is evergreen.

And the love I give you  
is not a rose,  
but a daisy,  
young and dainty

And yes, I know,  
it sways in the breeze  
But the wind poses no threat,  
its roots run too deep

And each time you question this,  
our love,  
each time you pick at the petals,  
'She loves me'  
'She loves me not'

You will be left  
with only a smile

# Jasmine

“Well Lou and I best be off, I should get her some lunch before she starts whining again.” Josephine’s voice drifted through the small terrace house into the kitchen where Olivia hurriedly searched through her medicine cabinet. Josephine walked in dragging a disgruntled Lou after her. Despite her unsavoury expression, Olivia looked down at her niece with the utmost affection.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay a little longer? I could easily cook something up for her!” Olivia turned towards her sister.

“No, I wouldn’t want to impose like that.” Josephine noticed Olivia’s unsuccessful rummaging. “Are you all out?”

“Yeah, just about I reckon.”

“Here,” Josephine reached into her handbag, pulling out a tattered packet of Nurofen.

“Keep it, but we’ve got to go. Come on Louie.” Olivia chugged down two white tablets as her sister pranced out, daughter in tow.

Trying not to think of the stabbing pain in her abdomen, Olivia leaned on the kitchen bench waiting for the Nurofen to kick in. Her gaze landed upon the potted Jasmine on the windowsill. Its delicate pale petals fell victim to the harsh afternoon sun, which left them looking wilted just enough that Olivia felt it necessary to move them out of the danger zone. The Jasmine had been a wedding gift from James, a perfect choice Olivia had always thought, he knew her favourite scent had always been Jasmine. While she was bent over looking for the small watering can, Olivia felt another sharp jab in her stomach, lower than before, as she sought to quench the hungry plant. She hoped James would be home from the doctor’s office soon, she was beginning to think that he might have to pick up something stronger than Nurofen this time.

Holding the Jasmine gingerly in her arms Olivia rocked the plant back and forth and walked towards the cabinet across the room. She placed it next to the photo of her niece. She felt it brightened up the room, made it somehow warmer, more alive. Her last plant had died in the summer heat

and she was determined not to let that happen again, but the plant seemed to already be wilting before her eyes. What would James think if he came back to find the Jasmine dead? He would be disappointed again. Olivia sprung into action, the first task she'd had in weeks. As she potted around looking for plant food and compost, she was relieved at the distraction, which took her mind off the pain

Olivia watered the plant, humming a soft lullaby to herself as she heard the front door open. The Frankenstein Jasmine stood there a little worse for wear ... James hugged Olivia.

"How was it?"

"It was fine, the GP's receptionist just gave me the results in an envelope."

"Oh it was that simple? Here I'll take a look now." James went to the dining room, putting his bag down. Olivia lifted the opening flap of the envelope. She didn't have high hopes, she knew she had always had an iron deficiency but she really didn't want to start taking those horrid supplements again.

Olivia read the test results, James shuffled around in the next room. A sharp throbbing exploded in her abdomen, only this time Nurofen wouldn't fix it. She re-read the letter. Then read it again. Regardless of the amount of times she went over those results her eyes still fixed themselves on that one word burned on the page. She dropped the letter in the sink. The potted Jasmine stood on the counter, its petals had wrinkled and its stem withered. She hurled the plant into the sink and watched the fragments shatter. James entered at the sound of commotion. He looked at the plant's remains scattered in the sink; his heart sank.

"We're not having any more Jasmine, are we?" His wife's face was pale and anguished.

"No darling," James' voice was calm. "There'll be no more Jasmine."

# Gild the Lily

AUSTER,  
James Harvey.

Late of Sydney, originally London. Taken from us before his time, 3rd March 2015, aged 50 years.

Remembering you is easy, my love because I think of you every single day. The hardest part is missing you, because my heartache will never go away.

A service will be held at Saint Ambrose Chapel, Mosman, Friday 6th March, at 10 a.m.

One

*The last thing you said, among the many last things, to someone you loved and would never see again, is not what you wish you had said. You regret it every day.*

He didn't do it because he wanted to die. He did it to escape the pain.

She didn't want to wake up. She was having a much better time asleep. It was almost like a reverse nightmare: when you wake up from a nightmare you're relieved; she woke up into one. After two days of suffocating sobbing, groaning and trying to breathe, her body was weak and exhausted and her eyes were near swollen shut. Eventually the wailing gave way to breathing again.

*In. And out.*

*In. And out.*

She was tired of crying, of feeling. She longed to be numb.

But numbness never came. She felt everything.

She looked at the backs of her hands, struck by how unfamiliar they appeared. Fingers stretched, the blue veins raised just beneath the surface, looking, thinking, feeling the pressure of flexing tension and recalling moments flowing into composite time. Missing him in her body and feeling abysmally alone. Everything eternal around her was disintegrating. With him, she knew who she was. Without him ...

... you're elevated outside the world. Finally senseless. Motionless. The mood passes, then the noise and rush and blur are back and you slide into your life again feeling the painful weight in your chest. Time does not exist in reassuring sequence; passing, flowing, happening – the world happens, it has to – with names and dates and distinctions.

*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit—Psalm 38:18*

Two

Everything is partly something else. The overlapping of reality and what is drawn from your wildest dreams leaves you floating in a sea of uncertainty. The fusion of truth and falsehood has entangled your mind in its chaos. Jumbled and confused. Or sometimes you become someone else, someone in a story or a film perhaps, speaking dialogue of your own devising. Time seems to pass. The world happens, unravelling into moments. Because this is how you live a life even if you don't know it. There is an extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind. Lights flash, shadows change and one thing becomes another; for nothing is ever one

thing. You forget the time. It is just a question of sooner or later before you remember, because you always remember once you are here.

Close your eyes and feel it.

'Time is the fire in which we burn'.

She watched the flame burst blue from the burner, melting the oat granules into an unappetising slush. Grace stood there remembering something. She remembered the Vienna almonds. The rich, burnt aroma lingered with each handful she took and poured over her steaming oats. Each almond slowly sinking into dense yellowish swirls. She asked him what he wanted for breakfast using sweet talk, but soon felt foolish and stopped. He sat down and got up. The juice. He forgot the juice. He shook the carton longer than he needed to because he wasn't concentrating before he poured it into his 'juice glass', watching the orangey foam gather at the surface. James' dark olive skin was lit up by the morning rays and his deep blue eyes traced the delicate words of the *Sunday Telegraph* that was launched over the gate early this morning. He had been looking at it all this time but had absorbed none of the words on the page. He ate breakfast, or didn't, leaving most of it.

James turned the television off. She turned it on; he turned it off.

She realised what it was that he'd said that she hadn't heard five seconds ago. Something insignificant. She got up to get something, half stumbling out of her chair in a gesture of self-ridicule because – she didn't know why. He looked up from the paper and laughed in the empty way she didn't like. She forgot to get something. She stared at the box of tea bags but realised that wasn't it. She stood until it came to her (it almost always did).

Grace turned on the television.

The morning news played as background music. At first it was in a foreign language – perhaps Japanese. She took a spoonful of her oats and forgot to taste it. When she tuned in again it was reported that there was a mysterious terrorist attack where a bomb exploded in Amsterdam and she didn't catch if the three suspects had been captured or not. She watched and drifted. She was here and there. Everything she heard numbed her into

vacant contemplation. She remembered that she forgot to put the honey on her oats. The jar was left open on the bench. She stared at the points where her knuckles shone white, bloodless from the pressure of her grip.

James hugged her from behind like he always used to. She remembered to smile. She felt herself crawling towards him and put her hand on his shoulder, nearly moving it into his hair and down his back, but didn't.

She put her hands on his shoulders and her eyes rose to meet his. The first time their eyes met like this, he told her they were the most beautiful warm chocolatey eyes he had ever seen, but now he told her that the dark circles around them meant that she should get more sleep. Grace was always tired now, even of him.

What does it mean when people look into each other's eyes? When was the first time a conscious being looked deeply into the eyes of another? Was it the first transcendent moment? The gaze that we desperately search for together.

He turned the television off. Dead silence. Often she would have something to say, but it would only occur to her after he'd left. She would either call him back in, or she wouldn't; he would reply, or he wouldn't. He had said he was going to go for a surf. But with his bad hip, she almost asked him if it was wise. But then she didn't. Of course he knew it wasn't. But maybe not. Something was missing when they talked. He didn't care, or he didn't seem to. It was a disjointed rhythm. It was hard for her to find the tempo.

She watched him through the window. He said he was going for a surf, but it was raining. He said he would be back for lunch. Was he really going surfing? Of course he was, but maybe not. His figure became smaller and smaller as he walked further and further away. She didn't think it would be the last time.

Yesterday she told him she didn't know what she wanted anymore. He felt her slipping through his fingers. He was losing her. She told him that they weren't working and that she was tired of fighting. She told him that she was

leaving. It was only a threat. He picked up his dinner bowl and flung it onto the floor, tomato soup exploding onto the hard wood. She begged him to stop. The dog barked, interrupting itself from lapping the red, congealed liquid. He slapped her. Without hesitation, like he meant it. He didn't really. But he still slapped her.

Time stopped. Everything stopped. She kept saying sorry, but what for? She tried to look at him with glassy eyes. Those eyes. Pierced with pain and guilt but she didn't believe it. She believed none of it. She believed that he loved her once. Had loved her but now her heart stood still, silent. She blinked as soft tears fell down her cheeks. James had never imagined that his throbbing palm could cause so much damage to a woman's delicate face. Especially not Grace's. Her breath steadied in a matter of fifteen minutes and the tears ran dry. He looked at her with those eyes, like she could disappear and he wouldn't notice. What she would do to take away this fear of being loved, her allegiance to the pain.

# Melinoe

It wasn't that bad. Over the road it was lush and manicured, quite well fed you might say. A bit crowded though, not that you could help that when people bought little portions of it. You wouldn't expect them to leave half their land disused, particularly when it was only 120 cubic feet. Not that they really could use less space than that. People only get so small these days. And then there were the little stones, not neat and uniform like some of the ones he'd seen, they were in assorted shapes and sizes, some growing lichen, others crumbling at the corners. It wasn't like it was their fault, but he'd rather a better view.

He turned away from the balcony and shifted his eyes back to his dog-eared paper. It must be Sunday today. Where was she? The bloody woman had gone to get milk half an hour ago and he was still waiting for some in his coffee. He thought of how he used to pile spoons of sugar in, then drink it black. But those days were long gone, he preferred it with just milk now, Melinoe had convinced him of that.

Age was a terrible hairdresser, changing Melinoe's hair from a splendid and voluminous coffee-coloured mane, to a withered, scratchy bunch of paper strands, like they'd just come out of the shredder. Not that he loved her any less. The deep lines which marked the sharp, papery planes of her alabaster face reminded him of better times, memories, which he was admittedly losing. Melinoe was always reminding him though. She was the one who'd kept her wits, though her decline in health had reduced her to this origami woman, folded into herself, hiding the rips and scribbles, which made her who she was, simultaneously the source of the tears, an impressive composition, yet unfathomably fragile. Without Melinoe he'd be lost; hell, she'd only been gone 15 minutes and he was questioning himself. He noticed dark blotches forming on his paper, the ink bleeding. He'd better go inside, hopefully she wouldn't get caught out in the rain.

He heard a brief knocking. Hobbled past his mahogany Chesterfield sofa (which looked exceedingly out of place in the new apartment) he got to the door just as the mail slipped beneath the door. For God's sake this was a

nursing home, didn't they know no one's back worked properly anymore? He'd wait for her to get back, she was better with that kind of thing. He limped to his Chesterfield, collapsed onto it and let out a surprisingly loud groan of relief, before falling asleep instantly. He'd entirely forgotten about the coffee he couldn't drink, the soggy paper outside, the mail he probably wouldn't understand but couldn't reach anyway.

A sturdy-looking nurse rapped on the flimsy door from outside and strode in. He jerked up with a sharp intake of breath, escaping the clutches of fatigue. He could see the layer of pudg around her waist was actually a child on its way.

"Sir, it's time for your bath, if you could just—"

"Not yet. Melinoe's getting milk over the road," he sputtered. He was like a decrepit car, the peeling paint and cracked dash betraying his ability only to idle, she thought.

"Sir, Melinoe pa—"

"I'll wait for her."

She smiled warmly, but in a practised way, despondency seeping through her eyes. He wasn't anything without Melinoe.

"Of course sir. I'm only a few steps away." She closed the door behind her.

"So's Melinoe."

He wasn't wrong.

He heard a key push into the meagre lock of the door. Melinoe usually kept the keys, though they had a skeleton key down at reception. As the door opened, he saw her delicate face, restored to the beauty of her youth, her cheeky grin and that endearingly bashful mannerism. They'd built a life together, a family, a house, even though she'd really done all the hard work. He had only brought the the money in, but she was actually an excellent tradesman and mechanic. Now so much of that had gone, but he still had Melinoe, of course. He'd be lost without her.

# Love Burns

In me nothing is extinguished or forgotten  
A fervent flame burning in my soul  
Burning with passion  
Burning with love  
Fuelled by you.

It blazes through me  
Through every touch, every word  
My fiery flame flickering  
And licking at yours,  
Fuelled by you.

But that one Winter night  
When another prodded your flame,  
Burning with your love  
Burning with your passion  
My heart burnt to a crisp and blackened  
Fuelled by you.

In me nothing is extinguished or forgotten  
Except for a hellish heart  
Its weight crushing a once fervent flame  
Into embers that will be no more,  
No longer sparked,  
No longer fuelled by you.



# A Visit From the Good

Despite the debilitating cold, Eamon had always loved the morning. He liked the way the different colours melted through the sky like milk in his morning tea. But now, it was another reminder of what he had lost. She was gone and he was alone. Now he preferred to do nothing, because then he could remember more.

“Don’t you touch my brekkie you little rascal!” He often talked to the creature, though he found it painful when the response did not contain half as much excitement as it would to *her*. Lord, the barking used to drive him up the wall. After she died, though, the dog was the closest thing to her that he could still hold in his two hands.

Eventually, the days started to slow down. They didn’t walk so fast anymore, a result of sheer exhaustion. They lazily dragged Eamon behind. As the long hours melted away, Eamon considered himself. He considered, and thought, and questioned, and felt. Soon, he dissolved every harboured thought, except for one. Was it worth it anymore? Life was beautiful, but perhaps his time was up. Maybe, his time on Earth was just for her. Eamon cooked the idea, and while he was letting the idea stew, he sat. Not once getting up, for fear something would change his mind. He thought, if he saw the sun, maybe rain again. If he heard birds, or looked at the river, he would want to stay. So he sat, and waited until he decided to join her. She wasn’t going to be alone anymore, for he would go to her.

Following this decision, Eamon had something to do before he said goodbye. Every day for the next week he brought the creature outside and wouldn’t let him come back in until he had food in his mouth. He couldn’t leave him behind. She loved him too much. Killing himself would be killing the dog too.

The perfect night came. The moon was large and loud. It was screaming at him, “COME OUT, COME OUT! LIKE YOU USED TO WITH MARY!”

Eamon went to the moon. Once he was outside he sat, gently, and stared. His heart was hurting. His mind was hurting. He knew he was ready.

“My dear, I am coming to you. I shall see you in Heaven.” He whispered this repeatedly, so she would hear him. Cautiously, so as not to wake the creature, he pushed himself up onto his feet. A pistol that craved his touch smirked at him. His fingers embraced the cool metal trigger guard. He brought the trigger to his face and just as he was ready to tighten a few muscles in his fingers, a man’s mellow whistling crept into his ears. It felt as though a thousand bugs were crawling up his spine, and suddenly, he had been struck by Medusa. Unable to move a muscle. He studied the whistling, an airy yet pretty sound. Finally, as he was remotely eased, he dared himself to see his company. His head spun to meet the source as quickly as a spin top.

“Good Lord in Heaven.” The words ran out of his mouth as his jaw dropped. A large man, a light emanating from his core, stood before him. His eyes were as dead as his body, yet they were home to a wonderful cobalt blue. Eamon noticed a frayed rope hugging the man’s neck like a child to its mother. Eamon was unable to concentrate on just one thing; the man was a collage of horror. His attention was loyal, however, once the man started to speak:

“Just *wait* until the other side.

Wait *for* the other side.

You mustn’t worry.

He doesn’t like it when you hurry.

She’s waiting for you.

So you must wait for her, too.”

Eamon felt a tightening in his chest, followed by water in his eyes.

“I feel as though I should be more terrified,” he said, with a voice influenced by terrible concern, “but I am simply curious.”

“I understand. I do see.

But you must listen to me.

It is a sin. You are committing a sin.

You will go to Hell if you end your life before Him.

You will never see your love.”

Not once did the spirit move. He was as still as Eamon’s heart. Eamon noticed his fixation on the man’s eyes. They provided comfortable room for thought. Suddenly, Eamon was disturbed by an epiphany that had securely settled itself in the back of his mind. He was shocked at his own cowardice. Death had been a brilliant thing, something, he believed, that would connect him to Mary once again. His thoughts grew into those of debilitating terror as he registered the presence of the spirit consciously. Though, the worst the spirit could do was end his life. And wasn’t that what he wished for? Just as Eamon remembered how to communicate in order to receive the answers to the questions screaming in his head, the spirit sat down. He joined his hands and tucked them into his lap delicately, and lay back, as lightly as sifted flour, letting the Earth swallow him whole.

Eamon was left alone once again. No longer still, but closely accompanied by violent shaking all over. Peculiar how alive his body seemed, after being so closely threatened by the prospect of death. Despite the cold thoughts in the harshly cold Irish air, Eamon stayed put. Never moving, not even to hydrate himself, all through the night. Inevitably, the withered man creaked his bones in the direction of the house. He poured himself into bed and put the lid (made from blankets) on, to secure the contents of the container.

As the evenings went, so did Eamon’s final strands of sanity. On the rare mornings when he *forced* himself out of bed, he burnt time over his fire of suicidal activities. He had committed, mentally, to a subtle and sleepy ending. He craved no dramatics nor heroism, simply eternal sleep. On an especially cold evening, he was preparing some kindling. He had an arsonist’s idea to light the lovely place to the ground. To rid the world of any trace of him and his beloved so they could live together in a *new* way. Growing accustomed to strange glimmers and lights, credit to the hired policemen of the Lord, Eamon neglected a pull from his right side. Despite all efforts, his eye was *too* interested in something of an unusual nature,

outside. Allowing his curiosity to motivate him, he gently lifted himself up and slid to the door. Once it was cracked open, he let his scorching eyes meet the world again. Simultaneously, he registered the striking face of the *familiar* stranger.

“Well I warned you.” Those were the words sputtered out by the ominous creature invading Eamon’s space.

“I, I—” His mind had been booted out, courtesy of paralyzing fear. He merely watched as the stranger’s spider-like fingers reached for a blunt, rusty, knife.

“Now, I suppose I’m sorry, but it’s for the best. I promise.” With these words, he held his throat, feeling the intensity of emotion running through his victim; no doubt he would short-circuit. “You will never be with Mary, unless you fall victim to something other than yourself. You would have been *your own* cruel ending.” The words were painted on the walls of his thoughts. He felt defeated, and chose to allow his fate to be carried out.

# A Letter to Nancy

R.A.A.F. Base Townsville  
7th July 1942

My dearest darling Nancy,

I write to you, with a heavy heart, longing for the day we can be in each other's arms again. The relentless rain and oppressive humidity only adds to the stifling atmosphere of the overcrowded camp. It's hard to live with the guilt of the lost men I have sent into battle to never return, their planes shot down by the Japanese. Every time I send my pilots on their next mission I am wracked with guilt and fear of them not returning, while I, as Squadron Leader, have remained safely in my office on the Air Force Base in Townsville.

However, I have nightmares of the one mission I went on when we were one pilot short. I am unable to disclose the details of this mission except to say I witnessed both planes either side of me being shot down, killing all four men. Among them my much-loved young pilot Charlie who I had taken under my wing and who I wrote to you about, the fine young man I had trained. He was dear to me as he reminded me of myself at the age when we first met so I treated him much like a son. He knew all about you and longed to spend time in the country with us after the war. So I have taken his death very hard and feel responsible for sending him on that mission. It was after his death that I lost my faith.

I am comforted that you are safe for now and being looked after by your parents on the farm and well fed from the wheat crops, sheep, vegetable gardens, fruit trees and not to mention the butter from farm milk. From what I hear from my fellow officers, their families in the city are living off limited rations. Being on the farm will give our child the best start. I miss your cooking and fresh food as in contrast here the rations we live on consist of spam, bully beef and tinned fruit and vegetables. The dry biscuits we have with our tea are nothing compared to your baking.

My love, I must now share the two great fears that haunt my thoughts and fevered hallucinations. There is a chance that we may never see the day where we can be together again, either from my deteriorating health or your fate at the hands of the Japanese invaders.

I seem to be getting no better, weaker every day as the dengue fever grips my body like a brown snake. I'm dehydrated from constant sweating and the pain screaming from my joints and withered muscles is becoming unbearable. Although I am six foot five, I am now down to nine stone. The constant fevers have ravaged my body and rendered me weak and listless. The severe headaches are like my head is being hit with a hammer and the pain behind my eyes is so sharp, as if steel nails are being driven right through them. I can no longer keep any food down and am surviving on sugared black tea and cigarettes. I am not afraid of my own death but only the thought of never holding you in my arms again.

However, my greatest fear is for your safety and the future of our child. The Japanese seem to be winning the war. They are all over the skies and we are losing more and more men and planes each mission. I hear the Japanese submarines made it into Sydney Harbour and the government is looking at conceding the Eastern coast. I think it is a good idea to listen to the BBC reporting on the European war and the war with the Japanese. I hear stories of unimaginable pain and suffering inflicted by the Japanese on war prisoners and captured nurses. My fear for you and our child keeps me awake at night and turns my dreams into nightmares. I do not mean to worry you unnecessarily but, my darling, the Japanese are coming. So I must make something very clear. When that day comes, you must take both your lives before falling into their hands. These are very harsh words that cause immeasurable pain to me at the thought of you being forced to do this. However, you must believe me, it is a better fate than the torture, cruelty and slow death you would otherwise face.

At this point, all we have is our belief and faith in God. The nurses sit by my bed and read the Bible. I know I have written letters to you previously about how I lost all my belief in a God who could allow for so much death, loss and suffering. I am sorry those letters broke your heart as I know how strong your belief is. So please be assured that my faith has returned stronger than ever as I watch the nurses take care of the sick and wounded like angels and as I think of you.

All my love  
William xxx

*air mail*

PAR AVION  
AERPOST  
O.E. 78.



Mr & Mrs. S Gordon

6 Her St

Summit 2720

Australia



# The Apocalypse

One second later. The apocalypse.

Tendrils of air escaped my lips  
As I trudged, trampling blankets of rubble.  
Streaks of pepper twirled within the tomato sky  
Chopping buildings into pieces with an earsplitting blade.

Finding the child nestling snugly in his warm bed and mid-snore,  
I soothed his soul with my icy palms, gently releasing it heavenward.  
Life's comforter clearly snatched from over his sleeping feet.

Heaven Street was burning,  
Flames staining the pouring rain.  
The snow on the ground clad in an encrusted black coat  
As each snowflake struggled to coat the world white again.

Photos littered.  
Framed indelible photos, of the Führer,  
Strewn amidst the debris.  
I scrunched his visage countless times.  
Glass shattering, satisfying revenge each time.

A beautiful, tear-stomped girl shook the dead.  
Dear Liesel gained one thing beloved,  
Lost everything else.

The book.  
Words lost forevermore to her Papa.

Snowflakes burned her arms.  
Fingers seeping blood.  
Loneliness the inescapable ghost  
Ever waiting for you, whichever sanctuary you seek.  
Alone except for a broken accordion case and her precious book,  
She stepped on my heart. Liesel drew my torrent of tears.

When tears blurred her vision and streams ran down her face,  
I watched as the book thief was dragged away.  
Accordian. Remembered.  
Crunched, crumpled book  
Trampled, then tossed into a garbage truck abyss.

I salvaged *The Book Thief*.  
Lucky for Liesel that I was there;  
But 1943 was my ubiquitous year.  
I was just about everywhere.

Only the bullet-free remained.  
There was only me.



# Liesel's Obituary

The sky was the brightest blue. The suburban Sydney sky had parted all the clouds and was divine with light, as if outlining the pathway to heaven. Together, we watched the flamboyant sunset transition the sky from turquoise sea to midnight sapphire.

## **Today was the last day I saw the book thief**

### *Alive*

In all honesty it is with the greatest regret to inform you that only yesterday afternoon I picked up the book thief and carried her soul away. I thought you would like to know her soul was sitting up like her Papa's. I can tell you her final visions included her closest family but also, bright as a summer sky, were the memories of Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her brother and the boy with hair the colour of lemons. She greeted me like an old friend. It had been a long time since I shadowed her journey in Molching, but she recognised me. She liked air, she never tired of breathing it, but deep down I think she knew it was time to go.

Before taking her on towards her next destination we talked like blabbering teenage girls. I had so much to ask the book thief. I watched her face marvel as I pulled out that dusty black book, and as I looked her eyes contained a mixture of shock and disbelief as we were reminiscing of old times. We looked at the aged book and we were further intertwined over her other adventures. After what seemed like centuries we reached the end of Anzac Avenue and we departed as I sent her away.

### **Excerpt from *The Sydney Morning Herald***

**Liesel Meminger passed away yesterday at the age of 87. She migrated to Australia in the late 1950s with her husband. She was renowned for her love of books, her pea soup, her kindness and compassion. She will be dreadfully missed by her three children, grandchildren and other family. A service will be held next Friday on the 13th at 10:00am at La Perouse ...**

To me this obituary did not fully capture the life and achievements and story of the book thief, so instead I decided I would publish my own to outline what the incredible story of Liesel meant to me. In my obituary I aimed to capture the spirit and character of Liesel. I always believed that Liesel existed before, but she only started living when she met her Papa, the silvery-eyed Hans Hubermann, who drastically changed her life.

***Death's Weekly* – Human deaths pg. 44**

**Feature article – ‘The Life of Liesel: Defining Moments’**

- 1. Stealing *The Grave Digger's Handbook*: First book stolen and a moment that represented her brother's death, something that would haunt her mind for the continuum of her life.**
- 2. The Bedwetting Incident: The beginning of her journey to develop a love for words. I could smell the friendship between Hans and Liesel begin there.**
- 3. More book stealing from the Mayor's library: it is these acts that allowed Liesel to understand the power of words.**
- 4. Concealing a Jew in Nazi Germany: Liesel found a lifelong friend in Max. Many years later when she heard and felt the guilt of the horrors of Hitler's government, this acted as a way of providing her some comfort and helped to ease her conscience.**
- 5. The Boy with Hair the Colour of Lemons: Her first true friend, how could anyone forget Jesse Owens and the book thief?**
- 6. Bombing on Himmel Street: An event that forever altered her life. She lost everything but I believe this is important as it acts as a reminder to her to be fortunate for what she had and that war kills innocence. And innocents.**
- 7. Marriage and Children**
- 8. Australia: but that is another story altogether**

In all truthfulness, humans like Liesel Meminger make this tireless and eternal job worth it. I have seen so much hate and endless destruction and have witnessed humans at their worst but also at their best. There comes a moment when humanity knocks on my door and completely surprises me as I see people act with such beauty and I watch like an enchanted child discovering the taste of chocolate. Characters as intriguing as Liesel, who hold so much courage and goodness, restore my faith in humans. They have an unexplainable attractiveness. Maybe it was her love of words that was her fascination, or her untapped wisdom and recognition of words to have power, or her unfortunate circumstances. But there was no doubt that the book thief was, is and always will be an inspiring person. I never had the opportunity but I always wanted to ask her how the human race could be so magnificent and so disagreeable, and use words so fantastic and so damaging. Liesel was a force of hope like the break of day.

**Last Fact**

**Liesel Meminger finally found Himmel Street.**

# The Hero in the Shadows

Word after word is ripped from its page.  
Forbidden books are burnt by German rage.  
The man on the podium looks on at the destruction,  
A huge, sweltering crowd follows his every instruction.  
All the while, as Aryan sweat pours from the skin,  
A girl stands nearby, and a match is struck within.

The crowd unfazed by the blazing heat, unaware of the fact  
That their own freedom of thought is now no longer intact  
Knowledge is power, and as the embers glow,  
A nation burns itself into ignorance and woe.  
In the shadows, the girl turns away as her liberty burns,  
The heat rolls over her back and inside she yearns,

As book after book is wasted in the flames,  
Finally something has been found to blame  
A man whispers, "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,"  
And just like that the façade of power begins to rust.  
Unease grows and people begin to wander home,  
Quietly thankful for their pure German genomes.

The girl waits in the dark and looks to the skies,  
Something at the edge of the flames catches her eye.  
Down near the edge a fragment of freedom rests,  
Singed and smoking but in tact, it is quietly possessed.  
The girl puts it under her jacket, and it heats her heart,  
And she clutches so tight she worries it may fall apart.

As she walks home the book burns into her chest  
Scarring in the thievery, separating her from the rest.  
But yet she is still wiser than they could ever know,  
With her pilfering comes thirst, which starts to grow.  
A small act of rebellion in an oppressive world,  
And just like that the girl's destiny is unfurled.

# Phantom Ballet

“Goodnight, Charlie.”

“But we didn’t finish the chapter,” Charlie retorted, wiggling back out from the tight covers of her small bed.

“But we finished three others. Come on, back under you go,” her dad said, tucking her back under the duvet and giving her a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Please please please—”

“Goodnight, Charlie,” he responded, walking to the door and reaching for the light switch. “Sleep well.”

“Can you leave the light on?” she asked. “Please, I just feel like it on,” she said more calmly, giving her father her best puppy dog eyes.

“Charlie, you just turned eight! You won’t get to sleep if we leave the light on.” Her dad laughed softly, once again pulling her into the bed.

“And you have Monte, too,” he said, handing the soft, green dinosaur to the girl, earning a small giggle.

“Goodnight, Charlie.” He smiled, flicking the light switch.

“Goodnight,” she responded, yawning.

Charlie watched from the corner of her eye as the door closed and her room became blacker and blacker.

She rolled over, holding Monte tight to her side, scrunching her eyes and saying over and over, “Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep.”

But she knew the monsters were coming. She could feel them creeping from under her bed, from the pockets of her raincoat in her closet, and from the corner of her eye, the monsters were coming for her.

Charlie dived under her pillow, searching frantically for her torch. Grasping the handle and sitting bolt upright, flashing it around her room. Picking up the ladybug umbrella from her bedside table and brandishing it like a sword, she delicately slipped off her bed. Armed with her umbrella in one hand, a torch in the other and with Monte under her arm, she slowly approached her cupboard, avoiding the creaky spots of floor as best as she could, swishing her umbrella like a sword every few steps. Quickly opening the cupboard, Charlie shined the torch into the pockets of her raincoat.

“No monsters there,” Charlie sighed, and continued investigating the rest of her room.

However, when it came to checking under the bed, not even her sword or light could make Charlie feel safe. Grabbing Monte and still clutching the umbrella, Charlie plummeted back under her duvet. Using her umbrella as a stick, she created a small teepee with her duvet; umbrella, torch and Monte in hand. Here she was safe from the monsters in her room.

A strange tune wafted in from the edge of her bed and brought her attention back to outside of her teepee. Creeping to the edge of her duvet, Charlie peered out from underneath, switching on her torch. Her curiosity about the strange music matched her apprehension of it. She peeked out of the covers to the strange land that had become her bedroom. Shadows of skeletons danced along the walls as if part of a phantom ballet. Neon bugs buzzed on miniature storm clouds and slimy caterpillars crept along the bedroom floor. The room was the same, but alive, a city of strange creatures and glowing lights.

Charlie watched, eyelids never closing in case she missed a moment of it. She couldn't decide whether to be scared or excited by what lay before her; maybe she liked the thrill of it. She stepped out from her duvet, leaving Monte on the bed behind her. The dizzying music of the phantom ballet swept Charlie into the arms of a shadow skeleton, whisked her around the walls of her room, effortlessly changing from a ballet to a hypnotic waltz. Round and around they went, the room slipping into a spin of colours each time they turned a corner.

But the colours began to fade and the lights started to dim as the skeleton gripped her tighter than before, pulling her back to another more sinister round of the dance.

But Charlie began to tug, becoming alarmed by the bones, pulling her arm out of the skeleton's pirouette and sprinting towards her bed. As she ran, the neon bugs and glowing creatures began to fall from around her, losing their colour and glow, creating a sea of grey slush, preventing her

from making it to her bed. The grey sea was rising by the minute; Charlie felt her chest becoming tighter and tighter as she waded and paddled through the crawling sea to her bed, the covers glowing from the torch being left on underneath.

Finally reaching the bed, Charlie climbed aboard the now rising mattress as it floated upon the grey sea, bobbing up and down with the growing waves. Tying the bottom corners of her duvet to the front corners of her mattress, and pulling Monte under her arm, Charlie opened the umbrella just as a huge wave lifted the mattress almost to the ceiling. Charlie tugged on the duvet, directing the mattress to the open window as the wave came crashing down, pushing the mattress out of the room and into the air, far from the monsters behind them.

Floating above the chimneys and roofs underneath them, Charlie, Monte, the mattress, duvet and umbrella stared at the stars above, swimming over the city below.



# Festering Fear

Hands soft, she wrapped her palms around the metal rung. She had expected it to feel familiar, welcoming, but instead she was met with an icy shock. Without her callouses the bar felt hostile, reluctant to support her for the 27 steps she needed to climb. It was only 10 metres before she was safe again, feet planted firmly on her platform before she flew. Flying didn't used to be troublesome. She had learnt before she could talk – how to spread her arms wide, listening to the wind whistle past before tucking tight to spin through the air.

She pictured it, slowly unfurling her fingers to spread her wings wide. “Wie ein Adler,” her Oma had whispered, “Like an eagle.” Together they were unstoppable, ‘The world’s most elegant aerialists,’ the papers had called them, ‘Truly two birds in flight.’ Eyes closed, everything slowed, only the bass of the drum in time to her heartbeat, egging her on, faster and faster with each passing second until the world burst into noise. One hand wrapped securely around the bar, her other teased the crowd, waving to boast her immortality.

The eagle who flew with one wing.

With ease she wound her feet around the ropes, looking down one last time to charm the crowds below. This was it, the finale. *La fin du spectacle*. Hands over her eyes she counted, waiting for the call to release. The concluding hurrah.

On hearing the call she flew, confident, towards the sound of the catcher. The audience were silent in apprehension, a single breath, one creature, expectant. She focused, confident for the catch, daring one last wave before turning.

Then the bar was gone.

Suddenly, sweat.

Slipping.

Sinking.

Screaming.

Confused, she reached into the darkness, heart beating loud in her ears as she fell further from the sky. The creature was coming, its smile crooked as it climbed further towards her. The cries softened around her, she wasn't flying anymore. Her wings had failed her.

Eyes wide, she stared at her hands wound tightly around the bottom rung. White from the pressure, she gradually uncurled her fingers, allowing the blood to revive them. Her cowardly, incompetent hands stared helplessly up at her. If they couldn't catch her then, what hope did she have of trusting them to catch her now? They were pale and smooth from the months unable to train. The months she spent alone, too troubled to come anywhere near the company of her beloved trapeze.

She turned and faced the empty stadium, empty of shrieking children or distracting stage lights. It simply sat, expectant, the creature ready to rise and pounce at unsuspecting prey.

The trapeze was her first friend. Her first real companion in a world full of concerned grownups and serious conversations. It had been her rock, a reassuring escape in times when the adult world came tumbling down in an attempt to snatch her world away from her. Only her Oma, the owner of the trapeze, could coax her to leave her friend for an hour or two, before quickly returning to disappear into the scaffolding. Nothing could ever stop her.

And she wasn't going to let it stop her now.

She turned, determined this time to defeat the monster that gargled in her gut. One hand wrapped precariously around the ladder, she tested her newfound confidence, slowly raising her toes from the floor. Instantly, the monster stirred, lifting its head in surprise from its slumber. Overwhelmed by dizziness, she felt her palms begin to sweat. Again it would win, this time ensuring to lock the door behind. Just one foot further and she would have no escape. There were no cushioned crash mats like they showed on the television, only solid wood, waiting to sabotage any last hopes of unsuspecting fliers. Just one foot off the ground.

She waited. Nothing.

The monster had lulled, not yet ready to squander her efforts. Relief flew through her body, her toes tingling in increased hope. Another hand, another foot. Nothing. This time faster. Hand, foot. Outrun the monster, don't let it catch you. Hand, foot, hand, foot, hand, foot. She could feel her body begin to gain strength, begin to gain confidence as she climbed further and further into the heights of the sky away from her troubles. At the top of her beanstalk would be her prize; her trapeze, overjoyed to have its long lost friend return from war.

Another hand, another foot.

And there it was. The platform, almost as she remembered. Only half a metre wide, it no longer seemed the safe, secure haven she had memorialised. It was covered in dust, and without railings, there was no longer anything separating her from the floor.

She was in limbo, stuck halfway between the earth and the sky, heaven or hell. Tears began to trickle down her cheeks. There was no way out this time. The monster would come, arms wide to take her away. But she would fall first. Reliving her nightmares while watching her Oma fade away on the platform.

She stepped onto the platform, prepared to surrender to the darkness once and for all. There would be no rematch this time. This was it. *La fin du spectacle.*

Her trapeze no longer flew without her. It simply sat, observing the chaos of the world below while gathering a thick layer of dust. Her loyal friend, her companion for every adventure. It called to her, begging for one final escape. One last flight to beat the beast.

And then there she was. Her Oma on one side, her friend on the other. Her grey eyes set straight ahead, she whispered, "Jump. Jump god dammit."

No.

Fly

# Trapped

I'm trapped in a room.  
Its grand wooden door is locked.  
I could burn it down,  
I have fire,  
But I don't.  
I even hold a key  
To unlock it,  
But I don't.

The room is safe and warm,  
Nothing can hurt me.  
Outside is foreign.  
I've heard from some,  
That it is vast and mesmerising,  
Filled with love and attachment.  
But some beg to differ ...  
It is a world of revulsion.  
Rejection.  
You step out and instantly,  
Your heart crumbles,  
Trampled by the beings that roam the unknown.

My choices are limited.  
I'm running out of time.  
I only have mere seconds  
Before the key in my hand dissipates  
And the fireplace burns out,  
Along with my chance.

# Beauty

She was slipping on her high heels as her mother's shrill voice cut through the cosy home, amplified in the small space. Reluctantly she paused, hand on the door. She could just leave, her mum couldn't stop her once she'd gone. But the shouting match that she knew awaited her afterwards if she did that, forced her around.

"Where are you going, dinner's soon!" her mother cried, words a jumbled mix of English and Chinese or what she had affectionately coined Chinglish. Her mother emerged from the kitchen, spatula in one hand and bowl in the other, face visibly drooping as she saw her daughter's attire.

"I'm going to a friend's house, I told you, *remember?*" Truthfully she had only told Dad. But he was much more easy-going with these things and probably would not have even minded the other half of the sentence she had omitted: Yes she was going to Alyssa's house but then she was going to the new club which had opened down the street from her friend.

"Dressed like that?" Her mother raised her eyebrow and she spluttered, caught under her lie.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Her long dyed hair was a curtain between them, hiding her burning cheeks as she fiddled with the lock, trying to escape. Behind her, her mother was a statue, silent and unmoving and she caved from the unwavering pressure to defend her lie.

"What? All my friends will be wearing the same thing. And I'll be home before twelve."

"Come here," her mother finally sighed. "Before you go, I need to tell you something. Come, come."

She eyed her mother. She had expected her to be angrier. Slowly she turned back as a compromise.

"Fine."

"Well come sit down." They sank into the soft padding of the dining room chairs.

“When I was young, my mum used to tell this story to me, so listen to it carefully ...”

“Seriously? You’re trying to tell me a fairytale?” She lurched as if to rise but her mother’s voice flowed on, unperturbed by her interruption.

“This story begins with an empress who never smiled, even though it was said a smile of hers would move the entire world. Empress Bao Si was extremely beautiful and the emperor loved her because she had borne him a son. So the emperor no longer cared for the kingdom but focused on Bao Si alone. But nothing he did could make the cold empress smile.”

“Wait, this story? You’ve told me this like a thousand times. I get it, don’t look pretty, don’t lie, stuff like that. Whatever.”

“Finish listening or I won’t let you go,” her mother snapped, her daughter’s petulance finally breaking her patient façade. Drawing in a long breath, her mother continued.

“To impress the empress, the emperor lit the fires on the signal towers, pretending that there was a war. All his generals came running, dressed ready for battle. Bao Si, when she saw them running frantically about, burst out laughing. The emperor was delighted. To see Bao Si laugh again, he played the game repeatedly. This proved to be the kingdom’s downfall. For when the kingdom actually came under attack from Western barbarians and the signal fires were lit, none of the generals came. And so the capital and palace were captured, the royalty slain and the Zhou Dynasty – that had lasted for eight centuries – came to an end.”

She rolled her eyes at her mother’s dramatic ending, but a question lingered in her mind.

“But what about Bao Si, what happened to her?”

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The blood dripped down my thighs, staining the embroidered phoenix that was intricately stitched onto my changpao, maroon. Under the dancing light of the fire, the gold threads glimmered and glistened, breathing life into the phoenix. I gasped, trying to draw out the oxygen from the smoky air.

*Please don't hear me.*

Every sound reverberated and each noise drew them closer. I took in a shaky breath, hand pressed tightly on my stomach, and tried to calm my mind.

Tonight I would die an empress. Not a servant.

Suddenly, a bright slash of silver cut through the hazy room and I screamed, thrashing and dodging. The wood next to me splintered and a man, with a hollow laugh, pulled his dao, his sword, out of the rubble. I tried to crawl, but the long skirts tripped me and the smoke was everywhere, thick and viscous. He seized the elaborate plaits piled on my head. As my brain slowed down, unable to sustain so much movement in the smoky air, I cast my mind back to a few months ago.

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I watched the empress lift her hand lazily, her little finger high in the air as she tasted the delicacies the new wave of soldiers had brought back. Her tongue curled around the pink and white flesh of the prawn, her nose crinkling slightly at the taste. I had heard from my sister that the prawns had smelled slightly sour when she was preparing them. I gulped slightly. Surely the empress could not tell that something was wrong.

The empress closed her eyes slowly, deliberately, and spat the half chewed prawn into a silk handkerchief before beckoning for it to be taken away. A bead of sweat trickled down from my nose before resting on my lip. My tunic felt like it was suffocating me in the intense summer heat. Of course, the empress had several ladies fanning her with vibrant feathers that trembled with each methodical swish.

“You.”

I stepped forward into a deep bow, as the word reverberated in my head, not daring to lift my head.

“Yes, my empress?”

She smiled slightly, her painted lips twisting into a smirk as she observed my crooked back and messy bun.

“What’s your name?”

“Li Qing Qing.” A small flicker of annoyance fluttered through my mind. I licked my already moist lips. She had not bothered to remember my name, even though I had served her for eight years. Yet her name was constantly on my mind, engraved into my brain.

Empress Bao Si, the favourite wife of Emperor You of Zhou.

“Qing Qing.” Sharp, quick words. “Your sister, was it? She works in the kitchens.” She turned her heavy onyx eyes to the soldiers who were standing guard beside the doorframe.

“Don’t you think it was negligent of her sister not to inform our lovely little Qing Qing that the prawn is spoilt?” She compressed her lips into a thin white line. “Shall we send her a little reminder to be more conscientious next time?”

I shifted slightly in my seat so I was facing the heavy-set bodies of the two men. My hands and feet felt icy in the sticky, humid air, yet my face was burning. I shook my head. Begged them. The smallest jerk. We had known each other for years.

The man on the left spread his face into a wide smile, like a toad pleased it had managed to catch a fly. He swept his changpao into a bow before he spoke.

“Yes, empress. It was negligent. How many lashes shall it be today? Ten, twen—”

“Are you trying to put words into my mouth?” Her voice climbed in pitch, shaking off any hint of playfulness. My heart started pumping again, faintly but steadily. My sister and I were no longer the centre of her attention, no longer her playthings – or so I hoped. I fixed my eyes on her face and the wrinkles forming between her eyebrows, those faint lines that stayed even as she relaxed her face, as if they were slowly being traced into her skin. She could have avoided those wrinkles if she stopped shouting at people, stopped abusing her power.

Another hot flush crept under my skin, prickling like a small horde of ants as I thought of all the things she had to sacrifice. All the hardships she had to face to become queen. All the non-existent things. She was born, her eyes sparkled ... and the emperor, who was attracted to shiny things like a fish, took one look at those dazzling eyes and made her his queen.

I dug my muddy nails into my palm, hidden beneath the layers of my changpao.

Outside, a distant drum thudded, followed by a chirp of protest from a sparrow whose peace had been disturbed by the procession that stamped towards our palace, located to the east of the main palace.

Emperor You of Zhou was coming.

All heads turned towards the only window in the room, mesmerised by the approaching sounds.

“Quick, help me up!” The empress hissed as she struggled to rise before falling back down with a small thump, weighed down by her clothes.

I smothered my smirk with a pretend cough as two other girls lent her their hands. Serves her right.

She turned back before she had reached the door, staring into my murky brown eyes.

“My lovely men.” She smiled, eyes still glued on me, pausing intentionally to allow the dread in my stomach to intensify. “You were right. Twenty lashes seems like a fitting punishment.” She looked back towards the door. “But you can leave the sister alone.”

My lips parted in astonishment as the men shoved me towards the door, leers painted onto their face. Why had she left Jing alone? But it didn't matter, because she could have left both of us alone. She could have, but she didn't.



# Great Foreigners

## Chapter One

*We are one, but we are many  
And from all the lands on earth we come  
We share a dream and sing with one voice:  
I am, you are, we are Australian*

—‘*I am Australian*’, Bruce Woodley, Dobe Newtown, 1987

We cruised above the world, lost between the translation of the plastic bright lights above our heads. The seatbelt light ignited as her hand gripped onto the cold harsh steel side, the plane responding back with a constant murmur. I watched her move in her seat desperately searching out the window, only to be greeted by the piercing dark blue sea once more. She became restless, focusing now on the inside of the plane.

She observed the men and women surrounding us. A child crying loudly as the mother, embarrassed by the sound, walked up and down the aisle. The constant line of people waiting for the bathroom and the flashes of the screens in front of us broadcasting the latest films.

*No smoking, wear your seatbelts, ask your flight assistant for more information, read the details inside the seat pocket.*

The rays danced around the plane, teasing us with quick visions of what we were to expect. Her patience was running thin as she rested her head upon the window and nodded a little tune with her forehead. Her melody reminded me of the sound of fruit dropping onto the moist sand, a gentle thud.

As I closed my eyes, I envisioned home. Home with white beaches, and the familiar sound of water lapping onto the side of the fishing boats. Home, where I imagined the spice and fresh fish slowly cooked in broth and the taste of the salt in the air.

I was lucky, this was part of my childhood. My mother valued education, she valued my future as a woman in a tight black skirt and white shirt, the same as the ones she had seen come to our village. The rest of the mothers attended the meeting, hearing the locals translate it in our dialect. The mothers laughed saying the more arrogant, the larger the hand gestures.

Yet, my mother saw this as a chance for me, I think she felt proud of an arrogantly educated daughter dressed solely in monochromatic colours.

So straight after the meeting, as the other mothers pushed themselves out of the wooden hut, my mother pushed us towards the black and white angels, dragging the translator along the way. She offered them a traditional meal, a traditional evening and a traditional young girl who just wanted a different future, and by the time this was translated, it was decided that I was to be that traditional girl in modern Bangkok, studying and learning.

My hand was nudged as she gestured towards the window. The splash of the deep blue, rusty red and dark green covered the land, with specks of silver shining boldly in the sun. Her head followed the dark black pathways and the endless possibilities that laid at the end of each street. As she reluctantly pulled her eyes away from the window, only to be met by mine, she smiled.

“Why are you staring at me, when you can be staring at this!” I smiled too, this time it was not nervous, but genuine.

The overpowering voice had returned, she turned to me grabbing my hand. She kept one eye on me and the window, as if the land below us was as fragile as the past.

*Please fasten your seatbelts for landing. Thank you.*

She was excited, but I guess she could be. She was young, innocent and had only grown up in the world of anger, not like me, when the world was peaceful and tender. I peered past her bushy brown hair, noting the small houses all completed with perfectly aqua blue pools. As we got closer to the runway, the more nervous I felt, yet ready to face reality.

I was used to facing new worlds. As my mother and father fought about

my future, I was swept away to modern Bangkok. The traffic, the unfamiliar faces and new demands. As I grew more accustomed to this new way of life, I began to enjoy it more. I loved the fun that the nightlife offered and the sense of a modern day adventure. As I graduated high school and began university, I searched only to find a job at the local bar.

However, this modern day fairytale all changed one evening, whilst I was at work.

“Khun Mae,” the harsh voice whispered in simple English.

“Yes, it is. May I ask who’s speaking?” I answered wearily. I hadn’t heard this voice before.

I heard the phone drop, the yelling of someone’s name and the picking up of the phone again.

The familiar ranting of Pak Tai rushed over the phone.

“Why you working in a bar? Imagine if your uncle knew. Khun Mae, come home, your mother is sick, very sick. You need to come to your family or have you forgotten?”

I paused. “What was that aunty? Could you please repeat?” I watched as university students piled into the bar, two from my class who looked confusingly at me, before I surprised myself with how easily I had adopted my long lost accent.

“Your mother is very sick, come home now please.” The short sentence as well as the excited feeling of hearing Pak Tai had gone. I finally understood the point of the phone call.

“I will try to be home by Wednesday.”

“Try, no you need to be home now. Khun Mae, live to your name and be honourable to your mother.” I heard the phone slam and the familiar silence came creeping back as quickly as the Pak Tai went.

In all my years in Bangkok, I hadn’t received one phone call, not even for my graduation or my acceptance into university. I hadn’t been home since the last Songkran Festival when my mother took me aside.

“Khun Mae, you are different, you are much different now. Go and study more. Study harder.”

Her Pak Tai accent was gentle. It wrapped my soul in comfort and hope. But she was always like this, always holding my hand. I guess now it was hard when there was such a divide between us.

That morning I left, I walked through the village to the bus stop with my small suitcase. I noted the amused looks upon the women’s faces as they whispered and continued their daily routines. My mother eventually came to the bus stop and pulled me around the side, out of eye’s view. She kissed me hard upon the cheek, leaving behind salty love.

I finished my bar shift and the next morning organised leave with the university. I packed my things and found myself on a train heading out of the city, and then a bus that now had windows that opened and air conditioning. By the time I had stepped off the bus, it was already Thursday.

The next couple of days were a blur. There was a lot of disappointment. As my mother moved onto a new world filled with our ancestors, I discovered my little village again.

# Untitled

Nothing.

This world surrounds me; I am buried by the thoughts and dreams  
of a generation

Waves pull us in all directions

I don't know where to venture.

But sitting here alone, immersed in thought

I realise how close I am,

To waves of energy that fly vibrant colours

The space of creative notions.

Floating. Flying. Drifting through the breeze

I gravitate afoot,

I'm grounded by the spectrum of life

A sense of thought and wisdom.

Something.

# Out on the Huahai Highway

The limousine was parked in the prohibited zone, the driver unperturbed by the pageantry of the patrolling police car. In the pulsing metropolis of Shanghai, money and status propagated protection. Kun Tang glanced at his watch. He hoped she wouldn't be late. He'd driven many times for Ms Lee before, and she was notoriously unpunctual. He had not wanted to take the job. His wife was at the hospital, but he knew if he refused this assignment, it would be a long time before he would be offered another. Life for a driver in Shanghai was all about waiting for the next call, and he and his wife Feng had just been managing to make ends meet. With the money he earned from driving in the evenings and his day time job at the warehouse, they had been able to pay the rent and their daughter's school fees. But, like an earthquake's early warning tremors, the doctor's diagnosis last week threatened their fragile stability.

Up in her office Lee Zhou shut down her computer and picked up her Louis Vuitton overnight bag. She had been putting off this trip for weeks but it'd been impossible to ignore the message in the last phone call.

"We can not finalize the sale of the house unless you're here, it's part of the condition of your parents' will."

No matter how much she had tried to persuade her father's lawyers, they were determined to follow the old provincial ways. She doubted if they even had internet. Everything had come by mail and if she had recognised in those old-fashioned typewritten letters a rebuke for her absence at her father's funeral, she had chosen not to see it.

Out on the footpath, the heels of her stilettos unconsciously tapped to the rhythm of Shanghai's heartbeat; the cacophonous screech and continuous beeping of horns, the pulsating sound of capitalist progress. Impatiently, she waited for the car to pull in. The driver got out and opened her door.

"Evening Ms Lee."

With barely an acknowledgement except for the customary nod of her sleek shiny chignon, she slid into the leathered silence of the limousine. Kun glanced in the mirror and bit his lip. Was it his job to tell his client to put on their seatbelt?

Out on the Huahai Highway, the Friday traffic leaving the city had already peaked. It was raining and the customary Shanghai smog smeared the way. He sighed; the trip was going to be long and slow. He doubted he could make it back home in time. Sometimes he wondered what Shanghai looked like from above. Roads and highways and crossovers, arteries and veins of a robotic city in a soupy atmosphere.

In the back seat, Lee tapped away at her computer. If only the lawyers had waited. She had only one more week to complete the deal she was working on and was determined that the head office in Beijing would take notice. This business with her father's lawyers was nothing but a nuisance. It had been five years since she'd seen her father. Once her mother died, she hadn't seen much point in returning home. Ignoring the censures of her father's neighbours who had expected him to move in with her after he had fallen and broken his leg, she had salved her conscience by paying for the upmarket nursing home she had found for him in Jinang. Weeks would slip by before she had found time to visit him. Only the regular nursing home debits from her account reminded her of his existence. And here out of blue, the lawyers had called for her attendance.

"According to your father's instructions, we cannot proceed with the sale of the family property without your presence."

All at once, the car slewed to a skid. Lee was thrown forward. In the front, Kun struggled to return the car to the bitumen, just managing to stop before he hit the car in front of him. He jumped out to attend his passenger. Lee, by this time, was lying back against the headrest, her eyes closed, her face pale. He noticed the beads of sweat pearling on her forehead, and thought for a moment how the tight rolls of her hair which had loosened and fallen in youthful strands around her temples softened her usual forbidding appearance.

"Ms Lee, I'm awfully sorry about that. But I don't think we're going anywhere soon, it'll take the police some time before they can move the truck that's broken down up ahead. Are you alright?"

She nodded.

He had to ring his wife, let her know that there was no way he would be back in time. In the backseat, Lee listened to her driver's agitated murmur.

"Yes I know, they've prepared for tonight, but there is nothing I can do. Of course she is going to come and live with us. We'll manage, we'll find a way somehow ... We're not going to abandon her ... No, no stranger is going to look after your mother ... Of course I'm sure ... How could we hold our head up in the village? Look, just tell her I'll be home as soon as I can ... Tell the hospital we'll make the arrangements as soon as we can."

Listening to the man's voice, Lee wondered at his dignity. She supposed it was the first time she had actually heard him speak. He was not speaking the rough dialect of the uneducated. And she was startled at the eloquence in his voice. She heard his compassion, and was overawed at the surety he gave his wife. But most of all, she was surprised to hear the familiar tongue of her childhood town.

Astonished, she leaned forward to look at the chauffeur. It was the first time she had really looked at him.

"Are you alright Ms Lee?"

"I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Are you from Jinang?"

He smiled. The corner of his eyes creased into the folds of someone used to grinning and laughing. Unexpectedly she smiled back. She liked the feeling.

"Yes, my mother-in-law is still there but we think we will have to bring her to the city. My wife wishes that we could return."

Maybe this was a chance for her to start again. Perhaps she could be able to help him out. Her father's house needed a family to live in it.

Outside, the rain had stopped. And the new moon had just begun to rise. The traffic control had moved the broken down truck. Looking out the window, Lee could now see the cleared way ahead.

# The Power of Time

The fluorescent algae bobbed on the meniscus of a marshy rock pool. The rhythmic waves danced in unison on the seven-mile beach ahead, whilst the cobblestone scattered shore line reflected the peaking rays of early morning British summertime. Professor David Shilling felt most at ease during this time of the day, he often sat on the chipping beach-wood balcony of his Isle of Wight home. A Sainsbury's withered notebook in hand, a smartphone in the other, David anxiously flitted through his recent emails, hoping to have received a reply from Jules, his 30-year-old daughter. To his dismay, another 'follow-up' email from the Isle of Wight Literary Association appeared in his inbox instead.

*'Dear Professor Shilling,*

*Anne Murray here, just confirming you have received the topic which we would like you to write your article on – 'The Art of Travel – Why should we venture from our beautiful Island home in order to broaden our horizons?'*

*Once more, we very much appreciate your participation in our Association, it means so much to the community we have here, and the lives it will make such a difference to, you are such an inspiration to aspiring young writers of our time.*

*FYI – the Promotion & Release Dinner will be taking place on the 18th July – will send more info in regards to that over the next few days.*

*Kind Regards,*

*Anne Murray*

*Dean of Co-Ordinations & Community Service*

*Isle of Wight Literary Association'*

David, after reading Anne's email, hastily switched off his phone. He gazed around his tranquil home. The sunlight shone through the sun roof and reflected off the terracotta tiles and glass cabinets filled with 'British Children's Author of the Year' awards. Scratching the dried aftershave off his shirt collar, thoughts began to infiltrate his mind.

It had been six years since he had been diagnosed with agoraphobia. He hadn't left the Isle of Wight for 14 years – since he lost his Emily. The thought of having to explore Europe in an attempt to write his article made death appear a more suitable option. He knew his children tired of it, they used to come visit him but slowly the visits shifted from once a month, to one every six, if he was lucky.

“Shrrrrinnngg” sounded the doorbell. Apprehensive to answer, David's palms began to sweat.

A shrill voice sounded from behind the pale blue painted mahogany door: “Pa! It's Charlotte and Daddy!” A wave of relief came over David; his granddaughter had come to visit he assumed, or most likely it was his son James, asking for yet another favour.

Opening the door, he could see James had headphones in and was on a conference call. Charlotte, in her usual attire, bright pink Converse, black leggings and a jumper that read ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’, flung her arms around David, startling him slightly.

Muting his call, James whispered, “Hi Dad, good to see you – listen, it's my week to watch Lottie, and I have back to back meetings in Canary Wharf all week, can you please watch her for a few days?”

“I... uhh, um,” David muttered back.

“Come on Dad, it'll be good for you, a young face 'round this old lonely place. You haven't seen her in months anyhow!” James retorted.

David nodded and dragged Charlotte's pink Kipling suitcase into his neatly kept living room. Before he could say goodbye, James had disappeared down the lane in his black car with tinted windows.

Charlotte sat down courteously on one of the stained leather armchairs in her grandfather's living room. “Pa! All my friends at school are talking about the article you're writing for the magazine! Can I help? Oh please?”

“Oh Lottie, perhaps not, why don't you go get yourself settled and we can... um... go for a little walk around the block?” David said hesitantly, silently dreading the idea of even putting on his shoes.

As the next few days passed, David's headaches and anxiety attacks were replaced by mornings filled with story reading, afternoons of splashing amongst the rock pools and evenings of barbequed dinners, prepared by Charlotte and her Pa together. It was not until Charlotte was sound asleep in her annexe bed, that once belonged to her aunt, that David attempted to tackle 'The Art of Travel'. The grappling fear he faced of entering into a world of death, loss and danger, was always heightened by thoughts of his darling Emily; the smell of the scorched rubber, the glass fragments of the windscreen scattered across the eroded road. His psychologist told him to try to force himself to face his fear, to immerse himself, but this he felt he simply could not do.

It was not until 6am the following morning, that David realised he had spent the entirety of the night staring blankly at the unfinished document on his computer screen. The pixelated text stared back at him, 'Whilst the Isle of Wight, our darling home, is magnificent in every sense of the word – we must travel with our human instinctual urges.'

"Morning Pa," young Charlotte appeared at the back of her grandfather's office chair, her blonde locks delicately framing her fair complexion. "I found something this morning, I think you should see it."

Charlotte's gentle hands handed David a dusty book, and a rusted compass rose, and as he looked closer, he noticed the faded front cover, an old photograph of Billie Holiday, Emily's favourite singer. "What's this Lott?"

"It was Nana's, Pa. I'm sorry for snooping, but I couldn't help myself from rummaging through all your treasures up there. Grandma was an explorer, did you know?"

A wave of emotion poured over David, tears welling in his eyes, "Yes my dear, yes I did."

It was then that David realised, while flipping through pages and pages of Emily's travels before she had met him, how silly he was to spend his life without her shut away.

As adventures in Greece, the Baltics, and the Galapagos Islands flashed before his eyes, he finally came to the last page; Iceland.

David's liver-spotted hand covered his mouth, and he stared glassily at the photograph of himself and Emily by the Blue Lagoon hot springs.

That trip was his first and only ever holiday. It had led to Emily's exploring days coming to an end, giving way to the mundane tragedy of marriage. Perhaps someone could finish her exploring for her ...

David finally realised what he had to do.

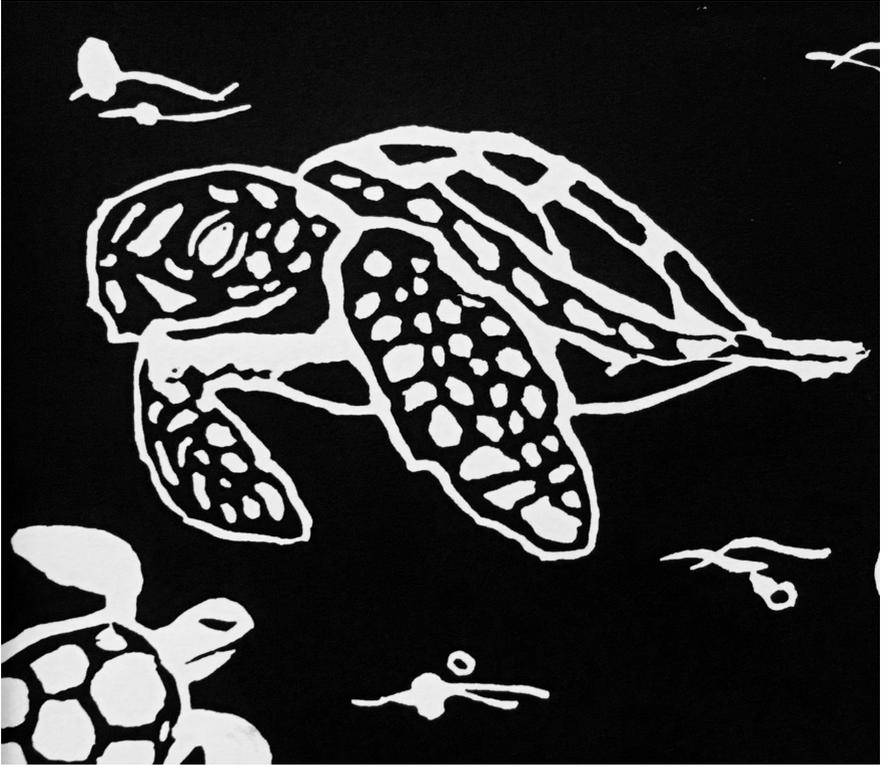
"Lottie?" he muttered.

"Yes Pa?"

"When is your Father picking you up?" he queried.

"He sent me a message this morning asking if I could stay here another week!"

"Pack your bags, we're going to Iceland tomorrow morning, I have an article to write!" David beamed. The first genuine smile Charlotte had seen in months.



# Time

Life is a tapestry of hours  
forever mellowing in tone,  
Life is a song of words  
the lyrics that line a page.

Each verse a memory,  
Each bridge a twist in the path,  
And each rhyme a sense of achievement.

Life is like the tune of a song,  
the one we listened to together,  
Life is like the instrumental backup,  
the important times hidden beneath words.

A sudden crash, a sparked moment,  
A beat that keeps us sane,  
The time we shared our song together,  
The time we shared our life.

# A Flash to the Past

The door of the apartment swung closed behind her and Jess flung her heavy bag onto the floor. Her socks scratched along the carpet as she skipped to the living room. I watched her collapse comfortably into her favourite chair.

“Hi Grandma,” she said bursting with excitement. I gave a shy smile in reply and gripped my mug of tea, careful not to drop it, my hands were much shakier these days. The wind whistled in the golden maple leaves outside the sunroom windows and birds held meetings along the branches of the trees.

A sudden thunder of clapping and cheering, and exhilarating commentary sprung from the television.

“Australia’s final bowl, what will it be?” the commentator left us on a cliff hanger. “And it hits the wicket! Wow, what a bowl for Australia, that will be remembered for years and years in cricket history.”

“Grandma?” Jess asked curiously. “You went to the very first cricket Bodyline game, right?” I shifted my eyes across the room, Jess’s eyes still glued to the television.

“We’re learning about it in history, I was wondering if you could help?” Jess finished watching and tore her eyes from the television to meet mine.

The TV remained quiet but the cheering didn’t. I remember the smell of the freshly cut grass on the oval. I feel my beating heart in my chest. I remember my father sitting next to me.

Images flowed through my head like water in a creek. I was walking to school one morning. I passed the newspaper stall, an old man stood selling the paper; his face desperate for attention, his eyes pleading for money, his hands callused and grey. The paper titled, *JAMES SCULLIN & THE DEPRESSION*. I continued walking; the taste of dripping on bread lingered in my mouth from breakfast that morning. Dad couldn’t afford Vegemite or cereal like the other families. Especially not after he lost his job at the Tivoli Theatre on Castlereagh Street, which closed down for the talkies a few years back. Dad hadn’t had a job since especially with the Depression in Australia.

Most kids at school had parents who had kept their jobs. The Martin family were the richest at my school. Every Sunday they went to the talkies, tickets at least sixpence each. That's 24 pence! That's more than my dad earned a week. I wished I could go to the talkies every Sunday. Dad wanted me to drop out of school when I was 14, so I could start working or at least stay home to cook and clean. We could never afford university either. There wasn't much hope for a girl in a public school to even sit the exam for university, let alone pass.

I always asked my dad why I couldn't go to the talkies. His answer was always the same, we were too poor to go to the talkies and had to save up for more important things. But luckily he took me to the pie cart in Woolloomooloo every once and a while.

One Sunday dad had gone out to buy some food, which would just be the usual dripping and bread and possibly some milk depending on the price. I sat in my room, an invisible cloud of grey made it impossible to breathe. Anger and envy slapped my cheek with a crack; why couldn't I go to the talkies? I begged my dad every day, every minute, every hour to let me go but we just never seemed to have the money. I paced around the room muttering under my breath, "This isn't fair ... why does this always happen to me?" when something caught the corner of my eye. The reflection of a silver jar that sat under the bed. It was dad's savings jar. My stomach dropped to my feet. Maybe a shilling or two couldn't hurt, I thought. I couldn't, if dad found out ... I could never even think of doing such a thing. My mind continued to procrastinate as the jar perched quietly under the bed. After a while the jar was so tempting I couldn't help myself. I reached under the dusty bed and grabbed the jar. I felt the icy cold metal coins in the tips of my sweating fingers.

I walked in the front door after seeing the talkies with a waft of dripping sliding up my nose. I wiped the sweat off my palms and took a deep inhale of the stale air around me. My dad sat at our small, chipped, wooden table. He held sixpence in his hands and explained that he was sorry he didn't let me

go to the talkies and that the sixpence would be for me. I remember the fire burning up my throat. A weight dragging at my feet, my face burning. What would I say, he wouldn't understand if I turned down the money. I remember the face when I told him it was only sixpence that I took. His fingers rubbed his face in frustration, his eyes wet in sadness. I think he may have hid his savings jar after that, and I wasn't allowed bread for a week, only dripping on its own; it was disgusting.

I remember another morning, Dad made me some Vegemite on toast before he went to work at the theatre. The Tivoli Theatre was going great. The talkies had shut down there so the government said that it could be reopened back to a live production theatre. The best part was I couldn't even remember what dripping on bread tasted like. That weekend Dad and I went to watch the first Bodyline cricket match against England to join thousands of Australians all celebrating the end of the Depression.

"Grandma, hello, Grandma?" Jess sung, her hand swaying in front of my eyes. The powerful shock struck my body as I revived it from my deep thoughts. Back in reality I examined my pruned figures, I touched my grey hair, and smelt the stale, old smell of my skin.

"The Bodyline series," I sighed, "where do I start?"

# A Second Chance

The blinding sunlight snuck into my room through the miniscule rips that decorated the piece of cloth draped over my window. It was what I used for a curtain. I had recently attempted, unsuccessfully, to stitch the gaping holes back together. However, the curtain wasn't to keep the sunlight out, it was to protect me from the prying eyes of the creeps that wandered around the neighbourhood at night. The clock that sat on my nightstand stared back at me, taunting me. It was 7:27, the bistro opened at 8:00. I could make it in 20 minutes, if I tried. I contemplated skipping, but I couldn't risk losing my job. I needed it, not only to feed myself and my mum but also to pay the majority of the rent. I tiptoed out of the house, not wanting to wake Mum. I hoped that maybe, just this once, she was really asleep and not just passed out on the couch. As usual, it was false hope. She was lying, unconscious, on the small couch that filled our tiny living room.

The door strained against its hinges as I slammed it behind me, secretly hoping that it would wake her up. She had been getting worse, it didn't used to be all the time. Before, there were times, not many, when she would come home sober. Not anymore. Now she yells all the time and the only time I ever see her is when she is out cold, lying on the sofa. School had finished a couple of months ago, my few friends had taken their chances and got out of town. They all knew that in this town, you are destined to fail. I wanted to go with them, I needed to. I didn't have the cash though, I never would.

The overcast sky dampened my solemn mood and I dragged my feet along the loose gravel that was scatted randomly along the path. The clock read 8:02 when I walked through the doors of the bistro. I was late. It wouldn't have mattered; no one was here yet anyway. However, my boss thought otherwise. He was a vulture, he lived off slight imperfections that impinged on his everyday life. Unfortunately, I was one of those imperfections. His eyes focused on me and he nearly tripped over himself as he marched towards me.

"Xanthe ... I believe you are late. You will need to make up for this lost time this afternoon." He walked away seeming very pleased with himself, as if two minutes would change my life.

It was a slow day; in other words, it was a normal day. The same, regular customers ordering their same, regular meals. My boss walked out at exactly 6:00, threw the keys at me and ordered me to lock up at 6:02. The seconds ticked over at a painstakingly slow pace. The infuriating noise of the clock made me incapable of concentrating on anything else. So I was completely oblivious to the old man that walked through the front door. He must have noticed my transfixed look, as he walked over to me and tapped me on the shoulder. He chuckled to himself and walked over to one of the lonely vacant tables that sat near the open window. My legs began to slowly move towards the table and I pulled out a pen and pad of paper. I wanted to tell him to leave, that the shop was closed. But those few words refused to leave my lips and instead I asked him for his order with my well-rehearsed fake smile.

“You don’t have keep that ridiculous smile plastered on your face you know.” He spoke to me with force yet kept a peaceful and tranquil tone. Even though he hadn’t yet taken his eyes off the newspaper he was reading I could tell he noticed my confusion but continued anyway pretending to be completely oblivious.

“I used to come here all the time. I thought it would be appropriate today, to come here.” He didn’t elaborate and acted as though we had known each other our whole lives, though we had only just met. I decided to sit down with him as I could tell he had a lot to share, and in that moment I decided I could listen forever. Listen to his stories instead of live mine.

The doors of the bistro were finally locked long after the sun went down. It was around 10:00. I had spent hours talking to the old man who I now knew to call George. His life story had mesmerised me, it was inspirational and emotional. When it was my turn to share I was embarrassed to tell my story. It wasn’t worth telling. He had been through the hardship of war and the death of not only his wife but also his daughter. He was alone in life. He told me how I reminded him of his daughter, willful and full of potential. When he spoke about his daughter and wife, his voice was always filled emotion and pride. This was a complete contrast to the way I spoke about

my mum, the drunk, and my dad, the runaway. The darkness threatened to engulf me on my way home and every sound or rustle of leaves caused a shiver to shake my body. Once I had made it to my street I sprinted back to my broken house, filled with broken things.

Over the next few weeks my job became my refuge, my sanctuary. It wasn't really my job that I relied on though; it was the old man that had become a regular. He came in every afternoon at 2:00, ordered the same coffee and sat in the same worn out chair that faced the grimy window decorated with people's sticky, oily fingerprints. He told me all his stories and I eagerly took everything in, desperately trying to remember all the little, seemingly insignificant details. George had become a prominent feature in my life and was the closest thing I had to a grandfather, to actual family.

The rain drenched the ground and a small river had begun to form on the side of the road. I highly doubted anyone would be at the bistro today considering no one would leave their house with the destructive weather that had suddenly hit the town. I went anyway, I was willing to brave the storm if it meant I could talk to George. However, he never showed. I knew something was off, but I continued to tell myself that he had simply made the smart choice to stay indoors. I walked home and through the door just as the phone began to ring its annoying, repetitive tune. I almost didn't pick it up, but I just wanted the continuous tune to end. An unknown voice was on the other end.

"Is this Xanthe?" The voice spoke to me with an official tone.

"Yes, this is, what is this about?" My voice cracked.

"I am George's executor and I regret to inform you that he passed late last night. Heart attack, no one got to him in time." It was so formal, so disgustingly formal. I fell against the wall and tears fell freely down my cheeks.

"I am going to need you to come into the office sometime this week Xanthe, is that possible?" There wasn't a single bit of emotion in her voice and it made me sick.

“Why do I need to come into the office? I am no relative.” I choked on my words and breathing became the hardest thing I had ever had to do.

“That’s the thing Xanthe, George has left everything to you. All his savings, properties, possessions, everything.” Despite everything a glimmer of hope appeared through the darkness. I was getting out of this town.

# Charlotte and Elaine

*At this point, the stage is silent, the applause died over fifteen minutes ago. Another successful concert from the Westhill College Girl's School. The final choir has left the stage, and is now mulling through a studio of medium size and outside. A group of seven is congregated outside the door.*

*"Who was that sitting near Eric Richards?" A blonde twitches.*

*"That was Fiona, they're going out." A brunette pokes at some rubbish.*

*"I thought she was with Tom?"*

*"Think she is," the tallest girl squeals.*

*"Can't wait for that to explode!" The group quivers in unison.*

*"Did you see that boy near the front, Elaine?"*

*"Yeah, what about him?"*

*"Molly, have you—" A flash indicates photography of some variety.*

*"Alice what was ..."*

*And so forth. The group, though certainly not by design, had moved slightly so that they were framed by the door and formed a windbreaker for the studio's remaining inhabitants. Those inhabitants include two stagehands eyeing off over a broom and a dustpan, a student spectating the standoff, and a teacher entirely finished with the daily façade.*

*Outside this environment, in the lobby of the theatre, a gaggle of parents stands going through the clumsy process of identifying to whom each child belongs.*

... So really, I suppose Mister Anders is more likely to win the broom, given he has established a precedent for using the dustpan as a tool of persuasion and intimidation until he wins the broom. Mister Wuri would save everyone a lot of bother if he relinquished his claim as soon as possible. Either he knows something to prevent Anders from being belligerent and has simply refused to disclose it, or he is a slow learner. Whatever the reason, he hasn't given up his guns yet ... I confess this is starting to frustrate me. And what is our good Miss Young doing, celebrating the mediocrity of the night? No, no that looks more like she's leaving through the stage. The swing of the

**Matilda Moffitt**  
**Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work**

coat and fatigued slump of the shoulders as she bends to pick up her bag do suggest leaving. Thinking of leaving, perhaps that ought to be *my* next move. I do seem to be the only person left, apart from Anders, Wuri and the highly contentious broom. Yes, and besides, my parents have probably had quite enough of looking for me. On we go then. Or, on we would go were it not for this rabble blocking the doorway. They're showing no signs of moving. Not a-one sir. Well, I suppose we evolved shoulders for a reason. I tap on one politely.

"Excuse me ... "

"Did ..."

"Oof."

"She's so ... "

"Sorry." And that's freedom. On to the lobby. Maybe it would've been easier to leave through the theatre, but then of course I would be making things easy for myself, and that's simply not how we do things ... One wonders if the crowd has dissipated at all, I'd like to think it has. Makes things more straightforward for the parents. Ah, this is still a debacle then. Curse my size! Or, curse everyone else as mutants! Either way, my view is blocked ... Well there it is then, into the Styx I—

"Hey, hey, uh, Charlotte." One of the girls from the crowd at the door is now standing in front of me.

" ... Hi. Can I help you at all?"

"You dropped this ... *Arkham Tales*." So I did. Or did you steal it? Probably not, this one is obscure enough that I don't think someone like you would bother. I suppose a thanking is in order then.

"Thanks very much."

"I'm Elaine. I like Lovecraft too." Well now, that's a hypothesis rejected, then. Or she read the name under the title ... actually there doesn't seem to be an author listed—

“You dropped it as you were passing our group, I think.” What you call a passage I call a slog, Elaine, but it’s not something to hold against you.

“Thanks for returning it.”

“No problem, hey, uh, how’d you like it?”

“How’d I like what?”

“The book. How’d you like it? Or how are you liking it, if you haven’t finished yet?” I’ll be honest, this wasn’t a question I was expecting today. Least of all from someone like you, Elaine. And I’m sure my parents will be getting impatient, but then again, they so rarely have any reason to take issue with my behaviour that I may reasonably expect leniency. But then I’d be imposing, wouldn’t I—

“I interrupted you, I’m sorry ... I liked it, when I read it, and I’d love to compare thoughts with someone.” There it is, that’s the kicker, what you want! Would that be so bad, though, comparing thoughts? And really, this won’t associate me with her group, if she only wants to talk about books. Alone – well, together but alone together. I suppose I’m game.

“I haven’t finished it yet, but so far I’ve enjoyed it well enough. Thank you again for returning it, Elaine.” Now please, I really am worried about keeping my parents waiting, so if I might be allowed to leave—

“Give me your number! No, actually, I’ll give you my number. Call me, please.

Anytime, Charlotte.” Right, right, thank you. This is a lovely piece of paper, and I can read the number written there easily enough. A good thing too, as it seems Elaine is being claimed by a parent before our very eyes. Ah, and that looks like my own owners, over by the wall. Here they come. Hallo parents! How are you tonight, then?

Did you enjoy yourselves? I’m glad to hear it. Oh, and is that a program I see in your bag, mother dear? Shall I, with subtlety, steal it? Indeed I shall. Now ... actually while I’m holding this I might write Elaine’s number again, so that I have two copies.

Not on the first page; I'd hate for this to be found and misinterpreted by anyone.

Perhaps between ... no. No, this won't work in the proceedings at all. Instead, let's insert this into the credits. Under the altos, right down where it might almost be a misprinted page number.

*In the early hours of the morning, a slight teenager, apparently unable to commit to hibernation, sits with her recently returned book, ostensibly reading it, but the flicking of her eyes and her failure to turn a page in over a half hour betrays that her mind is occupied by something a good deal more alien than a sci-fi novel. Elsewhere, another stockier girl sleeps, totally unaware of the painstaking analysis her character and intentions was, from within the womb of a bedroom, undergoing.*



# 1918

As Alice walked into her home paddock, she looked back and admired the view of rolling green hills spotted with thousands of sheep as far as the eye could see. A mixture of pink and yellow clouds blanketed the sky as the sun disappeared behind the hills. This utopian world was the only place she had ever known and with an image like this in front of her, it was hard to imagine that a war was raging on the other side of the world. The evening breeze blew her long strawberry blonde hair off her freckled and blue-eyed face. Her tall, athletic build was an asset on the farm, as she often did the same work as her brothers, which was definitely her preference to being indoors attending to domestic duties.

She entered the gate and rehung the broken sign that read 'Miaton Park', the name her grandfather had given their property. Pushing open the fly-screened door of her humble white timber home, she saw her mother sitting at the kitchen table. Her eyes were red from tears and her hands trembled as she held the all too familiar letter that so many other families in Goulburn had received. Standing next to her mother were her brothers, Will and Jack, both tall lanky figures.

Alice knew immediately what this meant and her usual calm strong demeanour gave way to floods of tears as she ran up the stairs to her room.

When Alice was able to pull herself together, she made her way back downstairs where she learnt that her brothers would be registering with the army in two days and shipping out in a week. Her immediate reaction was to run over to her best friend Grace's place next door, whose family had been living there for generations too. Grace had been through the same situation with her brother, who enlisted a year ago even though he was under the enrolment age. Tommy had always been an adventurous kid who was keen to see the world, having grown up in the sheltered environment of a sheep station. Grace, unlike her brother, was more of a polite, gentle, softly spoken girl who had just finished her training as a nurse and was working at Goulburn Hospital. She was attractive, with a pale complexion that was brightened by large hazel eyes and curly brown locks that hung just above her shoulders. As children, Alice and Grace were inseparable, despite Grace being two years older. After a lot of tears and hours of discussions, much to everyone's surprise, the girls too decided to head off to England, to join the war effort.

A week later they were on a train to Sydney and when the group arrived at the port, they were thrown into the chaos of soldiers and nurses saying goodbye to their families.

“Sorry girls, no civilians past this point, you need to say your goodbyes to the boys now,” said a short stubbly man in an officer’s uniform.

“Excuse me?” Alice said in an indignant tone. “We are going to work as nurses at the front, just like all the other women here.”

“Really? You girls look too young, you will just get in the way. The war is no place for girls like you.” Indignantly, they ignored him and marched on board the boat. Five weeks aboard the ship seemed to drag, but their spirits were revived when they got to London, and they were caught up the energy of the city.

The girls went straight to the recruitment centre for volunteers and due to the high demand but low supply of nurses, Grace got a job straight away. However, due to her lack of experience, Alice was turned down. Undeterred by this, Alice walked over to a large notice board in the corner of the room. She spotted a sign that read ‘VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR AMBULANCE DRIVERS’.

This was perfect! A role traditionally held by men but one she felt she was capable of doing. She stormed right back over to the recruitment officer and both she and Grace exited with smiles from ear to ear.

She quickly enrolled in a first aid and mechanics course, then both girls were ready to leave for France, where Tommy, Will and Jack were already fighting. The girls’ plan was to stay in one of the bigger base hospitals but the night before they were to leave, they received shocking news.

“Grace Cartwright? There is a telegram for you waiting downstairs.” As Grace quickly followed the officer, she hoped and prayed that it was from her mother and that there was good news on the other side of the line.

All of a sudden her stomach was in knots as she opened the paper.

“Tommy’s plane was shot down a week ago and he is still MIA. Fellow pilots saw his parachute open but ground forces have been unable to get to him.” She read the words over and over again, sick with disbelief.

That night, the girls changed their plans and decided to move from field hospital to field hospital, searching for Tommy.

It was a bleak cold night in France when the girls arrived. Goulburn was cold and wet but this was something entirely different. The first field hospital they stayed at was full of Americans where Alice's status became legendary. They thought of her as unstoppable and were impressed by her bravery and love for her second-hand timber truck. They fondly referred to her as the AA, standing for Alice's Ambulance, reminiscent of the AAA they knew from home. Despite gaining a reputation, the girls left empty handed with drowned spirits, as nobody knew anything about Tommy. The girls kept on the move, transporting wounded soldiers to each hospital. Their third hospital stop was full of Australians; a few of the men knew Tommy but didn't have any news. Feeling at home amongst Australians, they decided to stay for a while. The fighting in that region was very fierce so they were always busy and there was something special about looking after boys from home.

Late one afternoon, returning from her rounds, Alice was alarmed to see smoke on the horizon. Despite having heard bombs dropping all day, she never dreamed a hospital would be a target. Of the 20 tents, most were gone, some were on fire and only a few were left standing. Alice felt a stabbing pain in her heart as she raced around the desolate camp. Under a damaged tent, she recognised the pale skin of her best friend's hand. She raced over, pulling the debris off Grace, but it was too late. She fell to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. She was oblivious to the frenzy of activity around her, totally consumed by her grief.

The next thing she knew were soldiers pulling her away from Grace's body and loading her into a truck. She finally came to her senses and told the surrounding soldiers that she would not leave without Grace. They assured her that she would be in a truck behind them and that they could travel home together.

Alice spent a few weeks in London, organising the return of Grace's body. During this time a ceasefire and the end of the war was announced, none of which gave her any comfort.

As Alice walked onto the boat, she heard a familiar voice call her name.

"ALICE!"

She turned around. It was Tommy. Her heart sank as she saw his huge cheesy grin running towards her.

"WHERE'S GRACE?"

# A Burning Dream

Tabitha dreamt a strange dream; surrounded by darkness she lit a match and watched the flame grow. Dancing demons struck their eerie shadows upon her sleeping mind, haunting images of her father and brother. A sudden violent fall sent her brother sprawling onto the floor; glass shattered everywhere, like a thousand glimmering daggers. Tabitha held herself removed, even as trees erupted through the floor, a shock that had her wake with a jolt and then ...

“Help!” Tabitha screeched, violently causing her brother to fall off the bed. “Oh, Maury, I am so sorry. Did I break your glasses? Are you okay?”

“Y’ know,” Maurice mumbled, trying to hide his surprise, “If ya didn’t stay up readin’ al’night, actin’ like a owl, then maybe this wouldn’a happened.” Tabitha caught a glimpse of his unsteady hands, old man’s hands.

“*The Great Gatty?*”

“*The Great Gatsby,*” Tabitha snapped, snatching her book back.

Tabitha lived in a word of books, they cocooned her, transported her, but most of all they drew her into wild adventures, far more exciting than her own little life. To say nothing much happened in their little sawmill town in rural Melbourne would be the biggest understatement of the year. ‘Warburton’, the most boring town in the whole of Australia. It may be a beautiful place, lush with trees and wildlife, but Tabitha didn’t think that it even deserved to be placed on the map.

Ever since she had read about Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood when she was five, she had realised that trees only led to bad things. The gruesome twisted trunks were what led all the innocent characters to their terrible fates, until they were heroically saved of course. It was hard, working in a sawmill, to stay away from trees, but she avoided the forest every day and worked in the pleasant side of the mill, working with wood planks. Planks had never killed anyone, after all.

“C’mon sis, I don’t care ‘bout them story characters. I’m just about starved still, I could eat a horse!” Maury interrupted her thoughts. “Dad says, if ya don’t wake up then he’s gonna eat ya breakfast.”

Groaning, Tabitha pulled herself out of bed. Standing beside Maurice she was reminded of his towering frame. Tabitha would gawk at the dozens of hen-squabbling girls at her school, chattering giddily about his cheeky grin, and freckles “scattered across the bridge of his nose like the Milky Way.” It drove Tabitha mad listening to them. They weren’t talking about the Maurice she knew.

“Tell Dad I’ll be ready in five.”

Hurrying now, she flung off her nightgown, and changed into Maury’s old, white shirt. It hung down – far too big for her – to her knees. On the way she picked up the large, clumpy boots she had found in her mother’s cupboard. Here she was a hand-me-down history of her family, her brother’s little sister, her dead mother’s daughter. Grabbing a scarf on the way out she tied it around her head in a firm knot. Wisps of her chocolate hair escaped, a mind of their own, as she scrambled downstairs.

“Why if it isn’t my favourite daughter!” Broad-shouldered and grime-covered, her father stepped forward. Tabitha stared at his new haircut, another do-it-yourself job; it looked like an abandoned rat’s nest. Life in the Depression had meant there were lots of do-it-yourself jobs around the house, stairs you couldn’t stand on, windows fixed with board and a roof that let in so much rain, you would think you were outside.

“What would you like for breakfast this morning, m’lady? Oats, or oats?” Her Dad chuckled. Tabitha was already shovelling breakfast into her mouth, there was no point trying to enjoy it, food was food now and everything tasted bland.

“I promised Will I would help him put away the planks in the yard,” she said, slurping down the last of the milk.

“Is that why you’re in your cocktail dress and string of pearls?” Dad chuckled.

“Be back by noon!” he yelled, into the echo of the slamming door.

Tabitha strolled down to the sawmill, a walk she knew well, happy to be away from the house and her father’s obsessive political talk. Tabitha’s father

was angry, Prime Minister Menzies had shut down the steelworks in their old town of Port Kembla. After her mother died he had no job and no choice but to move them to Warburton. Most mornings Tabitha's father would be on Robert Menzies' case like a dog at a bone. They had been so happy there, Tabitha had left the only home she had ever known, all her friends but mostly Tabitha had left behind the memory of her mother.

Still vexed she eventually arrived at the sawmill and came upon a man guarding the mill; spies were everywhere now, people stole wood like it was Christmas ham.

"Aren't you a little young to work in here?" he asked.

"I'm nine sir, I think I am perfectly capable of moving wood planks," Tabitha answered meekly.

Inside, huge bear-like men moved giant planks at the end of the mill. Tabitha picked up the newly cut wood bricks and spent the rest of the day quietly humming her favourite song, Ella Fitzgerald's 'A Tisket a Tasket.' The day passed swiftly as she daydreamed about finally having enough for a 27 cent ticket to the cool retreat of the town's new air-conditioned cinema.

At the day's end her arms ached as she slowly closed the door to the bedroom. Maury and Dad had fallen asleep while listening to the radio. She thought they looked as peaceful as babes, as she kissed them goodnight. Once in bed she prayed a good night to her mother's picture while fumbling for her trusty reading torch and nodded off into a deep sleep.

Another nightmare started Tabitha awake, her nose adjusted to the burning smell of timber. Smoke was crawling under her door, and everything she saw was grey and hazy. Tabitha started frantically choking, scrounging for air. She could see a flame licking at her door as she lunged under it, grabbing for her mother's picture. The heat was indescribable as she watched the last piece of memory of her mother instantly curl up and turn to ash. *Trees only lead to bad things*, she thought.

"Tab! Please! Please, please, please, Tabby!"

It was Maury.

“Tab!” He had tears in his eyes. “Quickly!”

She was lank in his arms now, Maury somehow managed to scramble them both out of the window.

Tabitha watched as her home turned into a fiery hell, safely beside Maury and her father, her eyes now crisp with tears. It was then that Tabitha turned her head to the rubble road that snaked through the town. She noticed other girls, just like her, standing at the same gruesome image as she was. Their own houses in flames, their own parents scrabbling to secure things treasured.

“Ain’t this a dark and black day?” Maury whispered.

It was the blackest Friday Tabitha would ever remember.

# The Awaited Return

The wind was howling like a swirling storm was on the brink of collapsing, thunder clapped in the distance, looking onto the isolated land. A once vibrant house, full of sibling rivalry, Christmas dinners and cluttered mess loomed in the centre; dark, wrecked and barely hanging onto the last of its life. But there she was, Louisa coming up the driveway that hadn't borne the pressure of a human walking upon its surface since the year it was abandoned. She kept on looking back, goosebumps embellishing her pale skin, her blonde shoulder-length hair blowing wistfully across her plain face. For some reason, the sight in front of her compelled her to move forward. A sense of haunted *deja vu* crept up her spine as Louisa remembered the countless times she had walked on this foreign driveway. Upon the entrance of the looming house, she stood shaken as the past she had since buried resurfaced into reality. What was in the house?

Louisa was rightfully fearful of the ruins of a place she once called home. She could see the splinters sticking out of the timber, the paint on the porch scraped off and the lightbulb on the roof cracked and shattered into innocent shards of glass. Deep down she knew she couldn't go in alone. There was something eerie about the place, as if she wasn't the first one to come back to this house. But by thinking this, she called upon her senses; the feeling of not being alone heightened with the scorching feel of a gaze directed upon her. But where was it from? Circling the porch – not daring to enter the house, Louisa looked for any movement; she peered in the busted windows, trying to make out anything beyond the dust and blackened house but she only came across a cat perched on a table inside. The cat with matted black hair snarled, fangs glowing white with the green embers of its eyes staring straight to the soul of Louisa. She ran ... legs tripping over themselves; burning with the exhaustion of the fuel which was adrenaline.

This abrupt escape led her next door to her neighbour, an older boy who she used to walk to school with; a figure of her past that she could vaguely remember. Thomas was his name, the soft name complying with the timid personality of a boy once so scared of his shadow. It didn't get any different as he grew up, he was suspicious of Louisa's house when the neighbours

suggested that there was someone living there, an unknown spirit of some sort. But it was only gossip, a haunted tale told to children to stop them from intruding. Louisa stayed at Thomas' for the night, convincing him to revisit the house the following day where he was a safety measure in case of apparent threats. But later that night her intentions hindered, a whisper-soft sound of metal scraping along the earth next door captured her full attention. But it could've been anything, right? It could've been the cat, the wind brushing something over or maybe it was her imagination; where paranoia really did enrapture the mind of a person.

Early morning rose, the air still crisp, the silence of the night still resounding but this particular morning was different. The eerie loud silence was piercing, the streets blanketed with fog, the clouds rolling like kids drearily walking to school. Not even the birds were chirping, hushed by the isolation of the houses in the early morning. Treading across the thin driveway to Louisa's house, the pair walked up the winding path to the daunting door. Stepping inside caused an influx of memories to resurface, the familiar sound of footsteps at the front door and someone yelling out their presence echoed through Louisa's mind. She shook her head, continuing onwards into the ruined remains of her living room and into the mouldy dank kitchen. They decided to survey the house, circling the property until they were sure no one was there, but as they continued on, Louisa noticed something strange. Scattered around the house were tools; pliers, wrenches, rope and shovels. As far as she knew, her family never had those tools and if they did, they would've been stored away, meticulously hidden away by her mother ... But the two suspicious people continued on, now wary of the hidden threat of a stranger in the house.

The moment of extreme horror came moments after their realisation. Louisa was walking alongside the edge of her house, hands stroking the walls that held so many memories when she came across something so gruesome that she let out a choked gasp. Thomas was on her heels, his anxiety growing as the seconds ticked by. Unburied and still fresh, was the dismembered limb of a human, half of the calf sticking out of the dirt as if the

layer of dirt once covering it had eroded to reveal the awful truth beneath. The shrieks of Louisa could've been heard from miles away, and if it wasn't for Thomas shaking her hard enough to clear her mind she would've been laying face-first in the growing pile of limbs. The more they looked, the more remains were uncovered; hastily buried and barely brushed by a layer of dirt. The encounter had their faces stricken with fear, their complexion like a ghost's, paler than the clouds that dusted the sky. Turning, they began to run but a movement in the corner of their eye caught their attention. Louisa turned, coming face-to-face with a person whose face was crazed, body trembling with crusty blood and dirt caked on his hands. The only sign that he was human was his voice, a haunting cackle that was barely louder than a breath. But what Louisa and Thomas were fixated on was the hammer he had in his hand; it was larger than his forearm and had clearly been used on the limbs lying on the ground.

The two took off, running through the house in the direction they came from but before they were able to fly out the door, the man blocked off the exit. His hammer was replaced with a shovel now, a feeling of dread descended upon Louisa and Thomas. He lifted the shovel and yelled, a broken curse that echoed in the room as he took a swing at the two. It struck them in the head, the thigh, the torso, the arms; it was as if the shovel was a disease, slowly but surely destroying each part of their bodies until they lay there unmoving, consciousness leaving their body. The man had a vendetta; Louisa's father had accidentally killed his son in an accident just before the house burnt down. He wanted to destroy everyone in Louisa's family but she was the only one who slipped out of the grip of death. So he waited ... and waited ... for her return; the sickening need for revenge encompassing his mind, driving him to insanity and the thirst to kill. But now it was done! He needed to clean this mess first and foremost and so he began. First he burned Louisa in the secluded pit of dirt he had prepared over the years, and second he buried Thomas with the rest of the other bodies that he had accumulated. Third and lastly, after his mind settled into a calm, he grabbed a pair of scissors and stabbed himself in the heart. He stabbed three times before he gargled on his own blood, his last breath a lungful of red, but what was more eerie was the smile on his face as he did so.



# Gothic

Her naked feet collided with the ice cold floor, creating a faint creak throughout the house. Her body froze, aware of whose ears also heard the creak.

*The house looks so different during the day*, she thought to herself, admiring the intricate stylings. Sadly, the house hadn't been maintained. It was drowning in moss and the colour on the walls clung to it for dear life. All that was left was an empty blue, one that once was vivid and alive, and now sat stoically on the walls, waiting for oblivion.

She made her way up another painfully cold stair, making another weak creak. She felt an acute sense of self-awareness as she reached her gentle hand out to meet her old friend, sunlight, which was peeping through the window. She did not remember the last time she felt sunlight. The warmth not only warmed her pale fingers, but her whole body. It travelled up her arms, to every inch of her. However, she couldn't help the feeling that she was being watched. She felt eyes on her, particularly when she closed her own. Her hand soon became her arm, and her arm soon became her face, and her whole body was drinking in the glorious brightness of the sun.

The eyes that she felt only became stronger. The longer she spent in the sun, they came closer and closer and now she felt as though someone was standing behind her, as though itching to tell her. Her eyes shot open and her neck jerked to the side and her body followed. No one. The staircase was almost painfully empty. She continued up the stairs with apprehension, placing her delicate hand on the wooden railing, only to feel another meet hers. Her hand jerked to her chest and the urgency became stronger. For what? She didn't know. All she knew was that she was definitely not alone in this melancholic house. She powered her way up the stairs, unafraid of the event of noise, holding her hand to her chest, as though to protect it from further violation.

The hand she felt, felt large, and rough, as though belonging to a labourer. There was something sad about its presence though, like it was asking her for help. The doors began slamming furiously, like they became angrier

at her. The sun was replaced by violent darkness and an awareness that she was now alone within the foreboding hall. The silence burned through her, as did her instincts. And a shrill cry echoed throughout the house. A desperate, blood curdling cry that shot through her like bullets. She began to run. Furiously, she ran through the house, tormented by the endless darkness. She felt the same hand wrap around her ankle and then her heart dropped through the earth.

# The Session

It's 1pm. Lunch hour. I'm in the city crammed into the crevice of a queue. Fluorescent lights blaze my eyes into a haze of unconsciousness. The greasy aroma of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Big Macs fill the air. The bustle of the vendors echoes – Money – Money – Money, throughout the mall. The crowd moves like a famished beast with multiple heads, twisting and turning, every cranny, every nook. People circle me like vultures, round and round, round and round. Scavenging the food court, trampling on the carcasses of the dead and wounded looking for their next meal. Vultures fend for themselves, they see their next meal, their next conquest, their next fight. Vultures don't look out for others, they are a selfish race full of ego and self-righteousness. And that's the problem for a girl like me, a girl who brings a bag of insecurities and anxiety bundled up with her every step.

Today I'm feeling okay about everything, I've been doing well, I feel like I've come far these past few months. 'Well?' I think. Here I go again, doubting myself, my accomplishments. Snap out of it!

Precipitously, I feel someone push the back of my neck... an accident I suppose. I turn around, a sheepish guy looks at me. "Sorry," he says. This is exactly what I need, a test. I remember what I've been practising, keeping calm, keeping perspective. It's not the end of the world. One, exhale through the mouth, then inhale through the nose to a mental count of four. Hold the breath for a count of seven. Exhale through the mouth, to a count of eight. Now inhale and repeat.

I feel like the 4-7-8 method is working until a feeling all too familiar creeps up on me again. Slowly, but surely, I feel every wall closing in towards me; I can't see straight, my vision becomes spotty. I feel as if I'm looking through a kaleidoscope. But, it doesn't feature the usual tessellating shapes or vivacious colours. Instead a jumble of my insecurities and fears come through – Am I worth something? – I'm such an embarrassment – Why am I such a failure? I need to pull myself out of this state, it's all in my head, I have to keep remembering that. It's not real, it's in my head. I try the technique again. I feel my breath shallowing, I'm not getting enough oxygen... my anxiety has taken the reins.

A tidal wave of tingly sensations washes over my body, stinging my gut. My reason, my thoughts are all disfigured. At a time when I know I need to be rational, I am completely irrational. At this point all I have to do is keep a sane face for the public, they don't want to see me breakdown for the third time in the past year. The corners of my lips fight hard not to fall to the floor. A smile masks my internal terror. I know I need to get out of here, compose myself. I look down at my nails frayed from the edges, my hands red and clammy. I need to escape; get out and run, because if I don't, I think I may die. I prepare to take off. One, two, three go.

I push through the crowd, elbows out, head down, back hunched. Where am I going? I don't know, just somewhere that's not here. I look around for the green glow of the exit sign. No matter where I turn I can't see it. It is hiding from me. I turn around and see a sign for the ladies bathroom, it's the next best thing. I follow the path. It feels like an interminable people maze to the bathroom. A queue awaits me, this is just my luck. A sharp, agonising pain pricks the back of my throat, it is only a matter of time until I come undone. The firecracker is about to burst; I feel the countdown in my head begin for blast off. It's not that kind of exciting apprehension that you feel for the clock to strike 12 on New Year's Eve. It's the feeling of terror that comes when you have a bomb strapped to your body in the centre of a hot police pursuit. While you want to run for your life, you can't. You're trapped, suffocating in your own body; you want someone to hear you, nothing comes out.

I fall to the ground, all I feel is an intense pain all over me, squeezing me into this little ball. My salty tears dampen my shirt. Everything and everyone is looking at me ... I'm in a mental freefall. Everything is tumbling out of control. My words fragmented, my body bound by ropes; I want to be told that everything will be OK, but no one says anything. They just look on. I'm sinking into a pit of darkness, everything begins to fizzle and ...

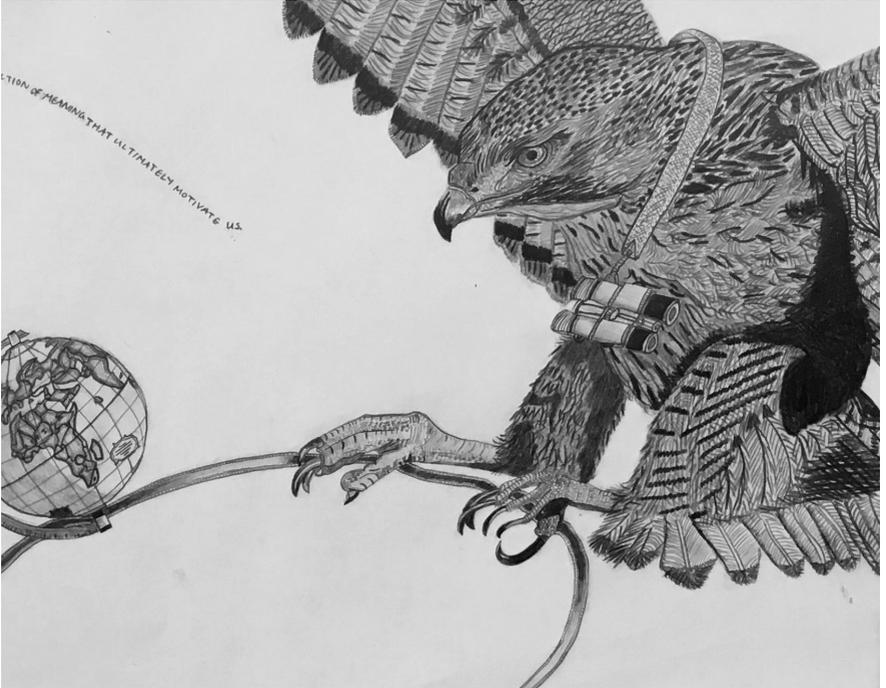
"And that's time for our session, 2pm Wednesday? Next week. Great, see you then and remember 4-7-8."

# All Hours Have a Purpose

I have known hours built like skyscrapers,  
level upon level,  
minute upon minute.  
The contents of which remain dull,  
the people mindlessly perched upon chairs  
in perfectly laid rows.  
Back to back,  
second to second.

I have known hours like calm beaches,  
the waves calmly lapping the shore,  
waves filled with content.  
Beaches with gentle breeze,  
brushing the trees,  
carrying the eagle high and low.  
The serenity that never lingers,  
for these hours never last long enough.

I have known hours like violent storms,  
each lightning strike another rod of fear.  
Each thunder crack another minute passed,  
counting the minutes like seconds between the two.  
The storm that lasts an eternity,  
and leaves with the same speed it came,  
and what remains is rejuvenated land,  
for all hours have a purpose.



# The Weight of Silence

We sit here, silent, neither of us daring to move.

The diner is empty. Just you and I. Me and you. The two of us.

It's the middle of summer and yet my whole body is cold, numb to the core. The sun's golden rays have melted away, leaving the moon hanging loosely in the sky, its luminance shy and hesitant. The white artificial lights above us flicker ever so slightly, casting us in a sickly glow.

We're only separated by a table, a slab of wood, yet your mind seems a million light-years away. I tap my foot to a silent rhythm, desperately trying to ignore the crippling awkwardness between us.

You stare down at your lap, fiddling with your hands.

You're too unsure to look up at me, too consumed with shame. Shame that you were never there. Shame that you let me down too many times to count. That the person sitting before you is a complete stranger.

It's your turn to move. I'm waiting for you to start the conversation, to man up, to finally be the adult.

You don't look up.

Your eyes are glued to the ground, as if the chequered tiles interest you more than your own daughter. Maybe they remind you that I have you cornered, that there is no escaping this. Checkmate.

I fiddle with my napkin, tearing it up into little pieces. Each piece a fractured memory. Each a moment in which you were absent. Each another disappointment. I sigh with an audible breath. You look up, as if you're about to speak.

Nothing.

I keep tearing, scolding myself for the faint glimmer of hope I just felt.

There's no napkin left to tear, each memory has been contorted out of shape, destroyed.

I start thrumming my fingers on the table.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

Over and over again.

You subconsciously reach out to stop me. I freeze at your touch.

You look up, confused, just realising what you did. A wave of understanding wakes you from your daze; an epiphany. You finally realise that this is more serious than you thought.

My urge to scream at you is unbearable.

Do you understand now? Do you realise I'm holding our two battered hearts in my cold, unsteady hands?

One sudden move and they both go falling.

Words swim around my head, dancing on the edge of my tongue. They don't come out, they wilt like flowers before they can bloom. Chapped lips opening just to close, my mouth turns dry as I shut my eyes, trying not to think about what I know is going to follow.

My body is numb. I'm moments from breaking. You can see it too; I can tell. The fear is in your eyes. I see you glance at the space between my quivering, trembling hands, but you cannot see the two hearts I'm clasping.

The silence crescendos, loud and deafening.

You speak with your eyes. No words needed. I nod, you stand and turn to leave, I grab your wrist.

"Just five more minutes."

My words hang in the air, echoing for an eternity. You sit.

Silence.

My cheek is wet. I ignore it. I wipe my nose with the back of my sleeve. You hate it when I do that.

"What are we doing?" The words tumble out of your mouth, beyond retrieval.

I shrug. "Does it matter?"

No response. There never is with you.

It hits me then, how useless this is. And all of a sudden I'm watching from outside, peering in through the windows, my hot breath fogging up the glass. I see myself, stealing glances up at your face, staring through blinding tears.

Pathetic.

How many more years would I wait? How much longer would I struggle for air as I drown in your lies and broken promises? When would I stop thinking that you would start to care? That you would suddenly wake up from this, this drunken stupor and you would cradle me in your arms and make up for it. Make up for all the years that you weren't there.

I shut my eyes, and I'm five again, dancing to *The Nutcracker* in a frilly pink dress during the Christmas concert; all chubby faced and crooked smiles. I didn't really understand disappointment then. I felt it though, I knew something was missing. I looked out in to the audience; you weren't there, nor was Mum. She was outside yelling down the phone, cursing under her breath as she pulled her cardigan tighter around her body.

Then I'm seven, lining up backstage at Speech Night. I walk out, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, trying not to fall. I look out on the audience, eager-faced parents beaming with pride. I see Mum, she's recording with our camcorder, a grin stretching from ear to ear. Where are you? Still at the office, hunched in your chair caught up in work, the computer seeping your features in blue light. Shouldn't have bothered asking.

When I was fifteen you remarried. You waited for me outside the school gate, tapping your leg over and over in nervousness. We walked along the boulevard, eating ice cream until we were sick and talking until our throats were raw. You fooled me. You made me think you had changed. That you actually cared. And then you told me about her, the new woman in your life. You became animated, genuinely excited. I'd never seen you like that, ever.

And even now, at twenty-six, I still feel like that little kid, dancing on a stage, trying not to fall over clumsy feet.

I'm biting my cheek, chewing on my gums in anticipation. All I can taste is metal, sharp and overwhelming.

This is the endgame.

I'm looking straight at you now, staring daggers. My anger and rage sharpening each blade before it strikes, each blow executed with calculated precision.

You don't even flinch.

But you never have. Every insult, every profanity I've ever hurled at you has been met with a profound silence. A silence which leaves me questioning who I'm even battling. A silence exactly like the one smothering me right now. Because you've never fought back, not even once.

You've never fought for me. For us. For anything.

It's stupid to think that you would start now. And sitting at this chessboard, you'd rather not play, you don't want to make your move. Your hand moves with hesitance, your eyes with reluctance.

You already know how this is going to end.

You shift awkwardly in your seat, trying to find comfort in this moment of defeat.

I'm trying desperately to balance the two pulsing hearts in my hands, they're slick with blood, slippery to touch. I'm struggling. Can't you see?

Finally, you open your mouth, seconds away from uttering weak promises and feeble excuses.

But you're too late; I've already made up my mind. And as I look down at the two hearts in my hands, swollen with pain and lost time, I see my ring gleaming on my finger, a reminder of why I'm even here. And yes it's small and dainty, but it promises commitment, a future, a love unconditionally perfect. It promises what you never could.

My hands are still quivering, though. Because in this moment, it's just you and I. Me and you. The two of us.

You reach out your arm to steady mine but your touch is foreign. I flinch.

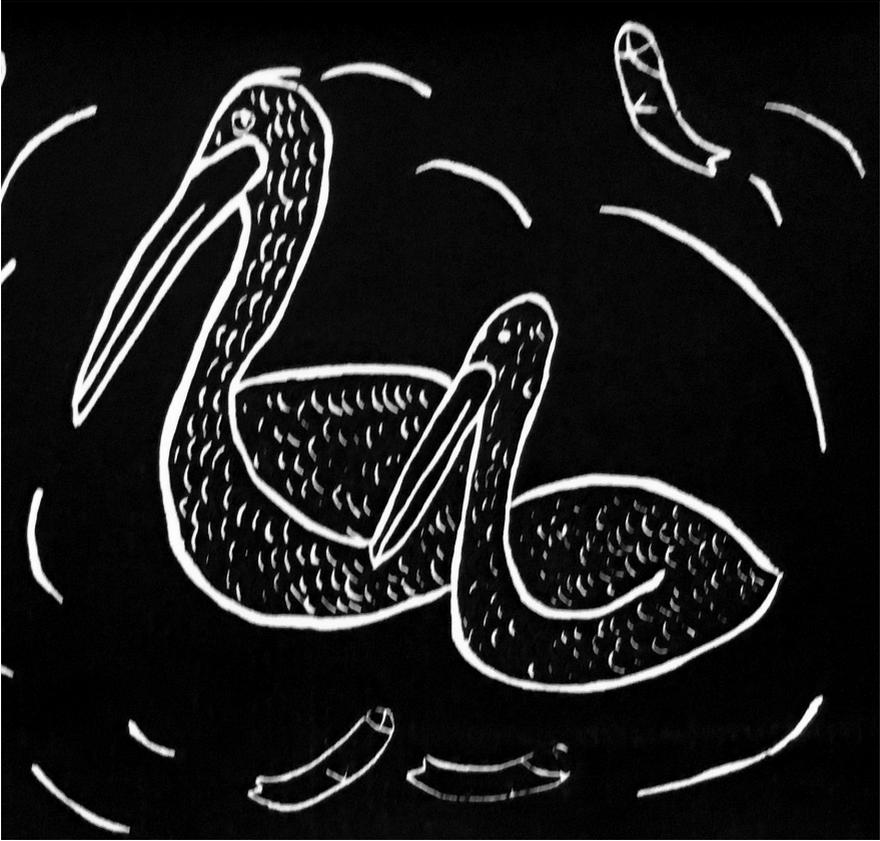
They slip from my hands.

Time stops as we watch them fall, bruised and bloodied.

They hit the floor, beating once more, unsynchronised, before they stiffen, cold and lifeless.

I can't let you fail me again; I cannot give you another opportunity to hurt me.

Game over.



# Acknowledgements

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

There is a wide range of writing in these pages, from promising talent in the younger years through to polished Year 11 and 12 Extension work. Similarly, the artwork here shows the variety of work and the talent across all years of Senior School Art students.

I would very much like to thank my colleagues in the English Department for their untiring support and good humour. It is only through their nourishing of creative talent and their help in collecting entries that this publication is made possible. I would also like to sincerely thank Jeff Morabito and the Art Department for developing their students' abilities and imaginations and sharing the results.

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

Elise Dempster

