

Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2017

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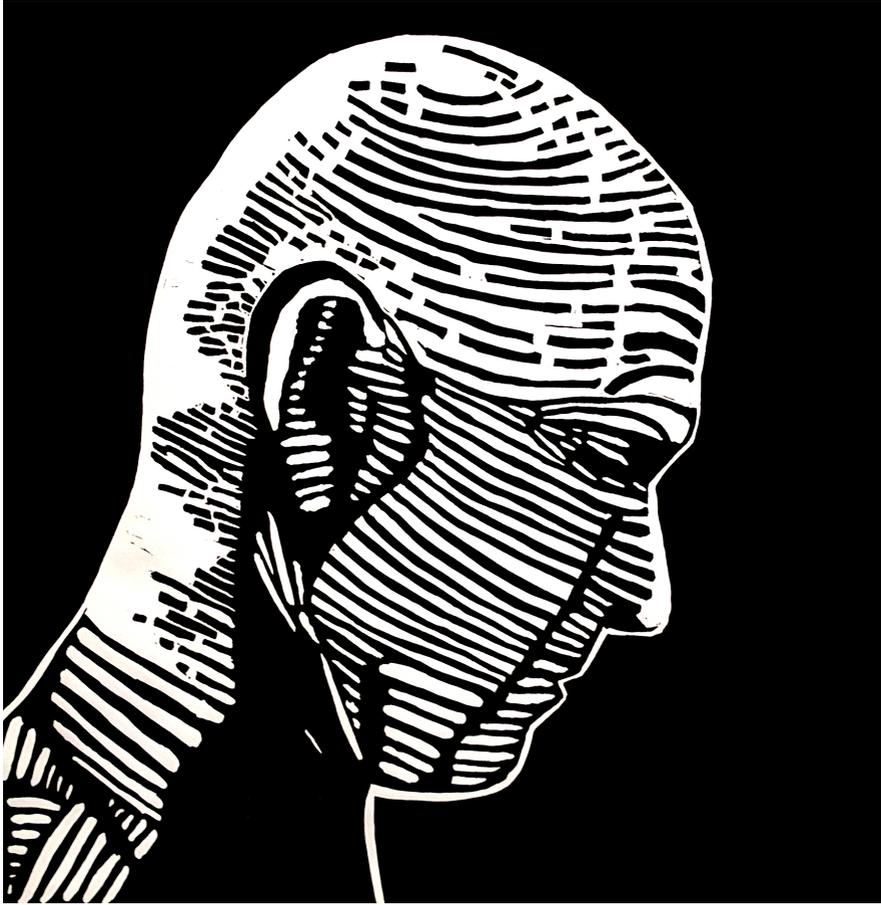
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Norm

Through two sets of sliding glass doors embossed with Royal North Shore Hospital insignia, you find your way through multiple obnoxious 'Get Well Soon' balloons to bunches of sympathy lilies. You think the 'It's a boy!' card will make Norm laugh, and take it to the pleasant salesgirl, but reaching for your wallet, your fingers meet only a mint, a golden Opal card and a five cent coin in your pocket.

The geriatric ward is on the first floor, painted in senile yellow and putrid greens, just across from the sympathy flowers. The familiar squeak of your shoes against the highly polished linoleum floor irritates you. As your nose begins to tingle with the smell of hospital grade disinfectant and stings with the chill, you pull your cardigan in a little tighter.

'It's not my first rodeo, dear. I'm alright,' your hand waves off a nurse.

'Oh, there you are, Mr Hume, I was just about to call you—Mr Hume, please don't—!' You push right past her—these young people think you need to be quarantined from the flu.

'Norm, you old bastard, this damn flu better be over by next week,' you laugh as you swing open the door.

It's Norm's bed. It's Norm's bed with a white sheet draped over a bulbous, long figure. The ashen faces of your nieces and nephews tell you that underneath the crumpled linen is your older brother Norm, and you fall.

With Janie and Phil, it was chronic ischaemic heart disease. Tom and Fred's tumours got the better of them. Tom's was from frying his face in the sun whilst playing beach cricket at Bronte in the brunt of summer way back when, and Fred's just popped out of nowhere, right into his bones. But Norm wasn't meant to die, Norm had the flu and we've all had the flu.

'Uncle Laurie, let me give you a hand.'

It's the polite one who studied something impressive or other at university. His hands grab onto the crook of your arm. Your shaking off goes unnoticed, and you're dragged into their midst, the sheet pulled back to expose your brother's wrinkly, dead face.

You still remember a chubby, crying thing, tussling against his blue blankets. The scar against his pinky came from being pushed out of the tire swing in the backyard—it was only half a yard down, you swore to mum.

What happens to the scar when he's put inside a wooden box and lowered into dirt? You rip off the sheet, the atrocity that hides him from reality, and reach for Norm's hands. His freckles and speckles have sunken into the valleys of wrinkles formed over decades.

Soph, the least irritating one, pulls on your cardigan.

'Stay with dad, as long as you like. We'll be right outside.' She looks right at you, eyes rimmed red and unabashed. She breathes with a grief that has control of her lungs.

'I'm so sorry for your loss, Uncle Laurie,' the other one imparts.

They leave and then you're on your knees again, pulled by gravity and anger and grief and shaking ankles. Your hands are growing cold in his. Tears are mingling with snot, marking the side of the blanket.

'What am I meant to do without you, Norm?'

You're going to die in one of these rooms, marked with hundreds or thousands of dead old buggers like Norm. Maybe Soph will come with sympathy lilies, and hold your dead hand until the coroner comes for your body. The other one will come to collect his part of your pension.

'You piece of shit, you've left me with your awful kids.'

Laughter and sobs have merged together, a barrage of indistinguishable emotion. Norm's wearing the same pants as you; they are rolled twice at the ankles. They are the brown that they manufacture old people's clothes from; when did you start shopping at old people stores? When did his skin prune permanently, like a white date? When did he—when did we get so old?

Your body is wracked with sobs, choking the ends of your words. You squeeze his hand tightly. You'll be damned if you go out crying over being old and everyone you love being dead, so you let go.

Eighty-four year old men don't go to hospital to recover. Their sagging beer-bellies and aching knees only remind them of better days, before the cocktail of drugs was shoved down dry throats every morning and bacon was classed as carcinogenic—hell, even before cigarettes were.

Norm's room looks as if he died in a field of wild lilies spritzed with hand sanitizer. The children are back, clutching at each other and shitty cups of joe from the cafeteria.

'You and me till the end, old man,' you whisper.

Soph's hand is outstretched to yours. You take it, and shakingly, you come to your feet.



Ninety Not Out

My grandpa Egon
Rushes to his favourite chair to watch the game.
He sits too close to the screen,
Screaming loudly at the players.
He looks up during the commercial break
And we know he loves us.
Then he wobbles into the kitchen,
And reaches for another beer
Like the Aussie he is.

My grandfather is a survivor
His home in ashes.
His family in ashes.
Stories he won't share sit still within him.
His library is lined with books from a time of pain and misery
Where he searches for an answer.
Once a Levi with full religious honours,
Thousands of years ago.
Now he wears a new name.

He sits in his favourite chair.
Ninety not out.
While there's cricket there's hope
That he will reach a century.

Scabber Kelly

November was the hottest month in Tennant Creek. Each day, as the sun dipped over the crest of its arc and an afternoon glow painted the town orange, hot winds swept in from the west, stirring up a hurricane of red dust that battered the town's streets, leaving residents waiting at their windows for the tempest to pass. This daily storm, however, was futile in comparison to the war that raged between the residents of Tennant Creek. Black, white; the divide had defined the area since its establishment as a gold-mining town in the '20s. The county jail was filled with dark faces, juxtaposed with the white-washed police force on the other side of the bars. At school, children blindly mirrored their parents, forming their friendships through race. One thing everybody in Tennant Creek was in agreement on, however, was to stay away from Scabber Kelly, the town's recluse, rumored to be responsible for the disappearance of three Creek boys five summers ago. An extensive police investigation had ensued and while little evidence was found and no-one charged, suspicion about Kelly still pervaded people's minds. Each Christmas the local primary school held a fundraiser for the boys' families, yet the town was always plagued with the sense of unknowing and the absence of Scabber Kelly.

A few kilometres away, on the southern skirts of town, a man sat on his porch in a rickety rocking chair. A blue heeler, the man's only love, lay by his feet, panting with her tongue out, seemingly smiling. The wall of ghost gums around the property cast a warm shade over the porch and the drone and occasional crackle of Outback news radio sung out from inside the shack. The man was grey with age and winced as he leaned back into his chair and shut his eyes. He stank of diesel and cigarettes, and sweat had pooled around his armpits and chest, staining his shearers' singlet. This man was repulsive. To anyone except his blue heeler, of course, who loved her master dearly. He forced a ragged cough from his sun-cracked lips and then, quietly, without anybody in the red, dusty world knowing, he drifted away. The man with the dog and the still heart was Scabber Kelly.

Constable Fogle shook his head as he glanced in the rearview mirror at the cloud of red dust being stirred by his police wagon. He was from Perth, the big smoke. He'd served just a few years on the City Police Force before being discharged in the wake of a botched high-profile investigation. He

was suffocated by student debt back then and finding a fortune in drug profits stashed in a storage unit was too much to resist. Against his better judgement, he'd taken half for himself and reported that he'd discovered a far smaller bounty. Needless to say, it didn't go unnoticed by his cerebrally superior peers. Fogle was not renowned for his intellect. The City Police Force had demoted him to regional service on account of his greed and inadequacy, and despite having been in The Creek for a little over six months, he still wasn't convinced of the so-called charms of the Outback. The way he saw it, the people here were just biding their time in a bloody sandpit. He hated scraping the grit out from beneath his fingernails each night. He hated the lukewarm beer at the Goldfield Pub. He hated his boss. But most of all, Fogle hated welfare checks.

This was the third of the day and, as usual, nothing even remotely exciting or out of the ordinary had happened. He was especially not looking forward to this one; explaining his unsolicited presence to the town kiddie-killer, Scabber Kelly, was bound to be an uncomfortable experience. Nevertheless, the job had to be done. Someone had called in about Kelly's dog wandering down the side of the main road—strange, as she was usually only seen at her master's heel.

Stepping out of his vehicle and approaching the house, Fogle espied Kelly sitting in his chair on the porch and felt an ice-cold anxiety rise up inside him. It was only when he reached the second stair that the copper took a double take. Not only at the sight of the decaying man, but at the rancid, evil smell of death. Covering his mouth and nose with the collar of his uniform, Fogle darted away—a rodent cowering before the cat.

Once backup had arrived and a small crowd had gathered around the fence of the property—news spread quickly in this small town—Fogle noticed the dog, lazing gently in the shade. Just as he began tiptoeing gently towards her, she was off, scampering through the ghost gums like a stray bullet. He ran after her, but he was no match for this wolf. Suddenly, she stopped. She was pawing at the ground, slowly, almost as if she was allowing her pursuer time to catch up. When he did, however, she didn't stop. She was digging now and just as Fogle reached out to grab a hold of her threadbare collar, something glinted from beneath the red dust that made his blood seize in his veins. It was the unmistakable, bleach-white roundedness of a skeleton. A child's bones.

Hours later, three birds from Darwin descended on the desert, filled with forensic experts from the big city. Constable Fogle's boss had already shaken his hand at least five times, congratulating him on his work. For the first time in Fogle's career, he'd done something right. The once-quiet desert plain was now dotted with tents and worker ants scurried busily between them. The news crews had arrived, snapping pictures and interviewing the crowd of locals around the fence, which had now tripled in size. Ever since the discovery of the bones it seemed as if Fogle, and everybody else for that matter, had forgotten about the blue heeler, who now lay watchfully on the fringe of the commotion. She panted; she knew.

Fully suited in white quarantine suits, four figures walked ominously towards the crime scene, now decorated with yellow police tape. The incessant chatter died down and black shoulders rubbed against white shoulders in solidarity. It no longer mattered, the Creek boys were finally coming home.

The white figures, like abominable snowmen, surrounded the bones and began dusting the dirt away from them with paintbrushes—artists of their craft. At once, they all crouched down, obscuring the view from the crowd who had all but ceased breathing. A harsh yell from the forensic huddle broke the tension, 'Which bastard dragged us all the way out here for this bullshit?'

He rose up, holding in his hand the unmistakable contour of a sheep's skull. Fogle felt his heart stop and looked down at the blue heeler who was now sitting at his feet. She looked back up at him, cocking her head, contemptuous. She knew.



Autopsy of Love

The entire radio play functions as a monologue. It is read by a teenage girl of seventeen years. The story is split into seven distinct chapters, whose titles are read out. Sounds come in and out as the piece is read, the speaker does not acknowledge them, it is as if they are emerging from her memory.

CHAPTER 5: The Elevator

Visiting that hospital made me ill, too, and so one day I just couldn't pretend anymore. If I even tried to talk candidly, though, I thought it would rip Sarah apart and I would never be able to put her back together again. So, I made a silent promise that this visit, number twenty-seven, would be the last.

On the way out of visit twenty-seven I stood in the elevator with Sarah's Mum and Sister.

SOUND: Elevator clunking open, people getting in

Because Sarah's family either didn't know or didn't want to know that she was gay, I'd never met them before. The elevator felt like a suspended possibility.

I imagined the lift clunking still. The mirrored walls extended outwards and a table emerged from the dirty carpeted floor—deep wood, with apple sauce, checkered napkins and a plate of pork and vegetables. I was sitting at dinner next to her mother, and I served her a thick pink slice of pork then asked about her work. I could hear her sister telling embarrassing childhood stories, and I could feel Sarah's foot pressing into mine under the table ...

SOUND: Elevator door opens

The doors screamed open and we all left without a word.

That afternoon I went swimming. I sat in the pool for hours. It reminded me of bath time as a child, that fear of getting out. How imperative it feels to stay submerged, even as the water grows cold around you. As I walked home yellow powder collected in a sagged corner of the sky and the night cold foamed around my flip flops and I imagined. What if her family hadn't been homophobic? What if I had asked better questions? Should I go back and visit once more, just once?

CHAPTER 6: The Dream

Sarah went home from hospital a week after I stopped visiting. The day she left, a mutual friend told me why she was sick. With a psychiatrist father who specialises in PTSD in child abuse victims, maybe I already knew what had happened.

As I slept that night I saw a pair of gold stud earrings, a grey plastic bag from Woollies, a cheap belt from Just Jeans, offensively mediocre tools for muting and mutilating. Then I saw Sarah lying on her porch at home, a belly ripped open and full of heavy dark, smooth stones, and she watched as the thin cold stream of country night drowned her.

I started awake from the dream and felt the stones growing in my own belly. I moved from my bed as if possessed and wandered outside, suddenly unafraid of the night.

I threw my phone into the glassy water at the edge of the park, set fire to the thoughts at the foot of my bed, took a blade and cut the thick umbilical chords attached to my mottled skin. When I returned from my walk I sat on the front step and patted my dog's belly, silvery pink like supermarket ham. We waited for hours, until the stones in my stomach had been pulverised.

CHAPTER 7: Still Running

So this morning, while I was running, the story I just told you flashed through my mind like it always does. I've dismembered and reassembled it so exactly that I can mark it on my path. By the time I reach the top of the big hill I'll be angry about the advice my Dad gave to me, and by the time I'm at the second lamp post in the park I can feel the pool water dripping down my back. Turns out that when I tried to cut connection with Sarah, to pulverise the stones, they only turned into a finer and more insidious substance. I'm still empty handed and running, smearing words into the ears of strangers, hoping your presence will clarify something; bring all this to the boil so that I can evaporate the excess and reveal the essence. But you've been no help. Perhaps love cannot be concealed, but it also cannot be assayed. Perhaps all there is to say is that it was.

Rosa Brook

'Have you ever considered naming the child? Sometimes a name can offer closure.' Doctor Meads is the first one to ever ask me this, and I am surprised I had not thought of it myself.

'I'm not sure I own that right anymore.' I say. 'It was stillborn, so ...' The thought fades to that empty nothingness I've grown accustomed to.

'Miss Delany, I'd like you to reconsider. Perhaps you are not quite as at fault as you think. Would you care to tell me a little more about what happened?'

Memories can resurface as vividly as you once felt them.

That summer was particularly hot. It simmered under our skin and scorched the arcs of our cheeks as we feuded the long drive from Kiwirrkurra to Rosa Brook in our old Datsun 180b. I'd always strangely romanticised the open road. The abrupt, almost comically instantaneous line from civilisation to the abrasive, infinite wild and the highway that intrudes on it. But eight and a half months of pregnancy had admittedly chipped away at my patience for such endeavours and I was beginning to loathe how we were roamers, caught in the hourglass of high school hunger and window gazing. I wanted security.

We were running low on petrol. It was a simple fact, and maybe it came down to the damn heat, or the lack of air conditioning in our crappy car, but William and I got into an argument. Days and days of gazing upon the vast, unchanging contours of Australia with the wind hot in my hair and the road fast beneath our feet had taught me one thing: it was a long way between towns. A long way between petrol stations. Will reluctantly gave in.

I waited in the car while he went to fill the tank. My eyes yearned and dreaded the journey ahead as it turned crisp in the sun, my feet on the dashboard and my hands on my belly as my child gave gentle kicks. Will was quick and before I knew it we were back on the road.

It was maybe two hours later that something felt wrong. I was shivering. The kicks that had been all but mellow nudges were wrenched and distorted, contorting and gnarled and I couldn't keep the screams from ripping out my lungs as we tore down the highway. It had come earlier than expected. Rosa Brook was too far away, the safer bet was to head back to Kiwirrkurra. So with an air of frantic excitement the Datsun performed a questionable and hasty U-turn and we were driving once more over frequented ground.

For five minutes.

Our speed was a frightful depletion, the car spluttering and wheezing, blistered by the road and eventually dragging its tired engine to a stop. My panic was quick and virulent.

'Shit. It's stuffed,' Will said. The words became lodged in my throat and, unable to hold them down, I was choking.

'Jesus Gabby, calm down.' He disappeared behind the bonnet, and five minutes later returned with a look of the weary, worrisome kind. Neither one of us could afford phones, not that we would have been in mobile range, and it was beginning to dawn on us that we were completely and utterly alone.

'Will, God, this hurts.' There were thoughts in my head like crosswords of letters and snippets but nothing I could quite piece together and everything was beginning to become scrambled and blurred.

'There's nothing I can do! God, I knew I shouldn't have taken you with me Gabby, I bloody knew it.'

He was angry, and had always had a particularly vulgar habit of projecting that onto me. I was young, with little protection, and to be entirely honest, very little independence. My reliance on him was a sickly tether he held with a false air of reluctance in his palm. I begged him to help. And it was a jackhammer to his ego that for once, I would have been better off without him.

He was hopeless. He stood, a circumspect prisoner in his stringent cell, as my screams rose and fell in dramatic crescendoes through that simmering summer day, the sole hope of a child dragging dissipated breath after breath from my lungs. But we couldn't save it. We were no doctors, or even grownups for that matter and we just couldn't save it.

It was only then, in its finality, that Will went to bury it. He walked far away, till his silhouette was a mere, dusty red ghost and if I thought hard enough, I could pretend he wasn't carrying something that was mine. Despite everything, it brought an ounce of comfort that it was buried in the free, open plains.

But it was only then that I hauled my barren body into the car and saw it. It was the gas metre and it was on empty. He hadn't filled it up.

I felt like such an idiot, I was so stupid to have trusted him. But who would doubt someone with such a trivial, mundane task as filling up the gas? In that moment I

didn't know who to be more angry at: myself or Will. The gunshot checklist rang through my heart, pulsing through its pain: I should have paid attention, I should have done the gas myself and I should have bloody read the signs from long before the child was even conceived. That time when he said we would stop by my mother's house on the road, only to drive right through her town. The time he left me stranded in a motel after we got into an argument. It was always his way, his plan, his damned dream and this was my baby and I was just so stupid not to see through him. For its sake. We should have been in some hospital in Rosa Brook. And that feeling, of sadness as infinite and ethereal as the universe, was insidious and I just couldn't understand that my baby was both beneath and above us, or in some otherworldly place and not here with me.

I wanted to weep. It would have felt like the right thing to do. But I was exhausted, and drained and just not properly filled up. I was silent for the loss of something so precious, as the summer sun sank to the ground behind me and the lingering black of night permeated the earth and seeped into my bones.

'Did you leave him after that?' Doctor Meads asks, reminding me of where I am.

'No.'

'Why was that?'

'I was just rather dependent on him at the time.' If she is as disgusted with me as I am, she doesn't show it. 'We left our families behind at a very young age. He was older and cooler, more confident and free and he knew who he was. I didn't know who I was. I just knew I wanted to be a mother. I think I forgot that I could be that without him.'

'But you're not with him anymore. What made you decide to leave?' A long pause.

'I fell pregnant again. And I'd like to name her Rosa.'



Complete

The man brought his tea up to his lips, sipping it lightly before placing it back on the well-polished side table. He held his newspaper open, turning the page every now and then in a swift and rather robotic movement. To any onlooker it would appear as though he was immersed in its contents, but if they were to look more closely, they would see that his eyes weren't actually reading the words, rather just gazing at them blankly. For it was true that he had no concern over the upcoming invalidity of Euro bank notes, nor the opening of the first hotel on Mars. By contrast, his mind was very much elsewhere. After a few more minutes of prolonged silence, he set his newspaper aside and made his resolution.

'Honey?'

'Mmm?' She flicked him a glance from the other side of the room.

'I was looking through the computer history yesterday, trying to find a website I had been reading for work, and I couldn't help but notice ... '

Suddenly very alert, she put her laptop down and folded her hands on her lap, leaning forward slightly. 'Oh James. Well it wasn't anything really. I'm not sure. I was just thinking ... '

'Yes honey, it got me thinking too.'

'Well?'

His brow crumpled and he looked at her solemnly.

'I think it's time. As long as you're sure you're ready, that is of course.'

She sprung from her chair, running across the room to sit on his lap. 'Oh James!' she exclaimed, kissing him gleefully.

He smiled back at her. 'We'll have to order soon, I've been told it's busy in January and often the orders get delayed.'

'Yes of course, the sooner the better I say! Why not do it today?'

Her husband paused. Realising her suddenness, she sat back and looked at him tenderly.

'Sorry, I mean, I don't want to rush you, this is something very special after all, for both of us.'

He looked at her lovingly, 'No, honey, I'm ready as long as you are. If it makes you happy to do it today, then why not? We've waited long enough.'

Her smile bled in with the light. She jumped off his lap to go and retrieve her iPad, before resettling close to him so they could both look on.

With a few quick flicks of the hand, she had the website hovering before them. It only took a few minutes before the account was made and the option for first delivery was selected.

Before them the hologram projected two large options: BOY or GIRL.

Her breath caught in her throat a little. 'I know we haven't spoken about this much, but I was kind of hoping our first might be a little girl?'

His expression gave away a little disappointment but he nodded his approval. 'Of course darling.'

The woman ignored his downtrodden tone and clicked GIRL, followed by NEXT. A range of skin colours appeared before them, spanning from dark brown to a fair white.

'I was thinking a warm caramel? It would match nicely with both our skins, and she would have less of a risk of sunburn.'

'Just what I was thinking,' he echoed back to her, smiling faintly.

'Blue eyes? They would really stand out against her skin. And nice long lashes too.'

'I was reading an article the other day and apparently green is on trend at the moment,' he remarked.

'Really? I saw Jeanette at the gym on Tuesday and she was telling me how green has just become so common now. She thinks blue will be the upcoming fashion, and I have to say I agree. Every second child walking around these days has green eyes.'

'Well I was just thinking, since I have green eyes, it might be a nice trait for us to share ... ' he faded off, knowing this battle was already lost.

'She can have your nose.' She clicked on a rather thick but small looking nose.

He sighed, loudly enough so she could hear, but not so loud that it warranted comment.

‘Long, thick hair of course. Brown with blonde streaks. Long legs, dainty hands. Medium sized feet, small ears and ... there we go.’ She pressed the CONFIRM button and a list of genetic traits appeared.

‘Smart, yes of course,’ she mumbled, selecting it quickly. ‘Oh, and sporty mmm. Yes, we definitely want her to be thin, no obesity gene in our child.’

She attempted to press the ‘thin’ trait, but a note came up, telling the buyer that only two could be chosen, unless they upgraded to a premium package.

‘Well darling I don’t think there’s really a question.’ She went to press the upgrade button, but her husband quickly grabbed her arm.

She turned to him, a shocked expression plastered on her perfectly rounded face.

‘Darling ... I’m not sure that it’s really in our price range.’ He motioned toward the 60 000 E* sign on the upgrade button.

‘Sweetheart, honey, this will affect her for the rest of her life! Imagine, our daughter walking around, the size of a house. How could you stand that? Looking at her and knowing you are responsible for her awful bulk, for her lack of friends. Speaking of friends, we haven’t even selected the ‘social’ gene. What if she ends up an outcast, on the streets, unable to find work or worse ... in gaol!’ She stared hard into his eyes. ‘Tell me the man I’m sitting here with is still the same man I fell in love with three years ago.’

His eyes drooped, ‘Well, I suppose, I mean maybe we could, if I get a promotion ... we could take out a loan.’

‘Now that’s better.’ Her face relaxed and her smile turned back to the screen.

With all the final selections having been made, she sat back and admired the child before her. The hologram projected a 3D model of the baby, and by clicking the TIMELINE option they could watch her grow old.

‘Isn’t she just gorgeous!’ the woman exclaimed, jittering about happily.

After a couple of minutes the CONFIRM ORDER button appeared, and with a peaceful sigh she pressed it. Her gaze drifted out the window to the garden beyond. An ad appeared for twins, two for the price of one and a half, but her husband reached across and pressed SKIP before she could see.

Three weeks passed, each day the woman growing more and more restless.

'They promised it would be a two week delivery period,' she stated to her husband one morning at the breakfast table.

'You know what I said about the new year period, always busy. Lots of people making new beginnings,' he murmured back over his newspaper.

'Why do you even buy those things anymore? They were outdated decades ago. What's wrong with a simple tabloid projection?' she scowled at the newspaper.

'Look honey, I know things with the baby are stressing you out, but there's no need to put that on me. You know I like the feel of the paper more than the new style devices. Plus I owe it to Steve, another month I'd say and he'll be out of business.'

She grumbled and turned back to her smart phone.

He looked up at her, 'Don't worry about it though, I've heard it's common to get moody just before the baby arrives, even a little sick. It's a big moment.'

'Hmm,' she said, 'you're probably right.'

It was just at that moment that the doorbell sounded, loud and clear.

'Lunch isn't due for another hour!'

She leapt from her chair and ran to the door, yanking it open to find a large, glassy white pod sitting on the doorstep.

'Honey, come quick!'

Without waiting she reached down and signed the screen at the top. The pod indicated that her signature had been confirmed and popped open, dry ice spilling out from the sides. Inside lay a tiny little being, curled and asleep. Her eyes widened and in a state of momentous awe she reached down to touch her new baby.

Immediately it sprang to life, crying and waving its little arms about. She was bending down to lift it up into her arms when suddenly she recoiled.

Her husband, who had just rounded the corner, looked at her with puzzlement.

'What is it dear? Is there something wrong?'

'One of its eyes is hazel!' she gasped, stepping slowly backwards.

'Oh,' he replied, a little underwhelmed. 'Well, it's unique.'

She stared at the baby with a form of horror, 'No. No. I won't stand for it. We're sending it back. I mean, how dare they? What an awful service. I knew we should have done it with Platinum Babies.'

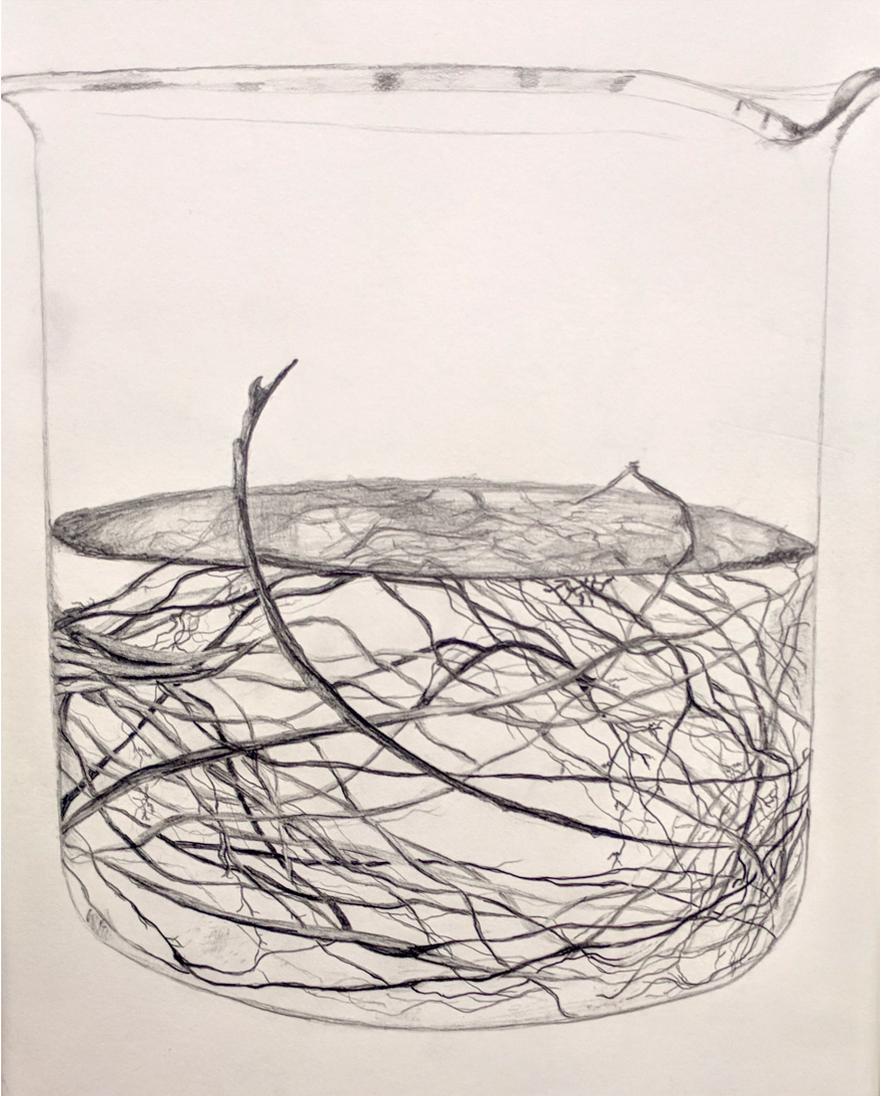
'But honey, it's a baby. It's alive. If we're not going to have it, then who else will take it? You know the rumours about the ones that get returned.'

'Be quiet. I don't care where it ends up.' She ran forward and shut the lid quickly without looking at it. 'I'm ordering a new one.' She stalked off back inside.

The husband stood there passively, listening to the distant helpless wails of the child from inside the pod. He couldn't help wondering... No no, he shook the thoughts from his head and turned to follow his wife back inside.

Two weeks later another baby arrived. The pod popped open, and the wife leaned hesitantly down to touch her. Once again the baby jumped to life, opening her eyelids to reveal two beautiful, blue gemstone eyes.

'Oh, isn't she adorable!' The wife picked her up and cuddled her softly. 'My little girl. Just perfect.'



To Build a Home

(Curtains Open)

You weren't always like this: pressed tightly to your chair, your eyes flickering across the screen. Your hands: restless. Tapping so rapidly that it would seem you are writing simply to fill the page. And then, deleting, only to have to start all over again.

Around you ... silence. The dripping of a tap in the ensuite. Stains on walls once covered up by childhood drawings and awards.

Downstairs you hear words thrown around like tennis balls. Your father always had a strong backhand. Your mum, however ... Well, she could serve but that was about it.

Back to the blank Word document in front of you. The heavy, blue light curls inside your eyelids. It seems at once a paradox, breathing calmly onto you, waiting for your eyes to flutter and fall asleep. Yet again, this light holds your eyes open like toothpicks. You imagine yourself as Alex DeLarge: heavy handed and heavy mouthed. Watching Nazi war crimes, or a glowing rectangle of white.

You want to fill the page with anything by this point. The emptiness mocks you.

So you type. Repressed deliberations, decayed from almost two decades, fill the page.

There is a woman, who sits on the train, her hands full of shopping bags, her clothes stained and frayed.

Here lie words that float between a world and a laptop screen.

Ella Wells
Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work

There is a woman whose wrinkles are full of dust and fingernails full of dirt.

A polyurethane sentence, or verb. You're full of this plastic, this sateen, this viscose language. At a distance, it looks slinky, voluptuous, lavish. When you come closer, you feel an urge to stick out your eager hand and feel it. Big mistake.

It has a sensitivity to it that you don't expect. Small strands become displaced and untangled, simply from the light pressure of an index finger.

Both you and your faux fabric seem to be coming apart at the seams. Yet, you can't help but continue writing.

There is a woman who looks at the sky and sees only moments when the sun passes behind a cloud, looks at the sea and sees only the most distant and quiet peaks of unbroken waves.

This woman takes the shape of many forms.

Sometimes I hope this woman is my mother. Other times, I fear this woman is me.

(Exeunt)

(Next scene: in the atrium, after Grace has wandered downstairs)

It smells like the sickly-sweet scent of a new personality, an odour that drifts up through the gaps in wooden floors and lingers above the lip.

This room is a Golgotha to your inner conscience. This house, in fact, with its high archways and winding wooden staircase reminds you of a time in which things were different.

The façade is painted in a warm grey, accented by the yellow light that pours through the windows and onto the front porch. It stands out from the surrounding Woollahra houses, but not because it doesn't have the same Victorian balcony and magnolia trees ... Perhaps it is merely because yours is the one house without a jacaranda outside, its bruised purple petals smearing across and staining the concrete. Or, perhaps it is the fact you and your parents are rarely seen leaving, particularly not together.

The house is larger inside than one would presume simply from looking at the façade. Abstract, gestural paintings of naked women are strewn across the feature wall, pairing awkwardly with the stunted family photos piled into the corner of the coffee table.

You look down at your body, and back up again at the paintings.

Who is more abstractly painted?

Your mousy brown hair. Your pale skin, nibbled by the sun each time you are forced to step outside. Hazel eyes and thin, receding lips.

The rest of the walls are stark and white, too tight to hold any more than a single slither of light that filters through the office in the next room where your father works, habitually sucking the life out of words for a living.

You have so much in common, although you don't realise it.

What remains in the house are all just *images*. You look at them, peering, peering, and then again, but closer this time. Is that me?

Stained Perceptions

and she goes forth out of hands
and she returns into hands
for solitude;
the emotion she doesn't dare to feel.

they label her and
splatter her name
with words
of little meaning.

they steal her soul and
brand her skin
with an image
that doesn't suit her.

they look out shuttered windows,
into stained glass
with no reflection.
theirs are the eyes that cannot see
a bruised soul
a broken heart
molded and misshapen
trapping the scars
within.

Fake

The barren road seemed dull in the grey haze, the rain beating mercilessly on the dirt path. One carriage pulled by a single horse carried a young boy. Both his eyes and cheeks were red from constant rubbing and wiping away of tears. The frost of winter bit his blood-stained fingers. His face was devoid of emotion, practically lifeless.

After an almost three-hour ride, the driver pulled to a stop outside a giant house, larger than the boy had ever seen in his life. It was only then that the boy's hollow eyes strayed from an imaginary line on the horizon. On either side of large oak doors stood two men, both in white and black, with swords strapped to their sides. They reminded the boy of the palace guards he had read about in fairy tales; yet they appeared rough and uninviting.

'Come on, boy ... we're here.' The driver offered a hand to help him down, keeping it extended until the boy jerked his attention away from the house long enough to accept it, and climb down.

'Can I help you gentlemen?' An old, stout woman stood in the doorway.

'This here's Soren, ma'am. I was told to bring 'im here.'

'Oh, oh! Of course, my dear!' She took Soren's arm, nodding a 'thanks' to the driver. 'That'll be all, sir. If you go around the corner to the servant's entrance, the cook'll be quite happy to give you some toast and a spot of jam.'

The woman closed the door, ushering Soren further in. The large foyer opened up considerably, giving way to two staircases that wound along opposite walls, forming an overlooking balcony at the top. His eyes drifted up, following the leaf-like pattern along the walls to reach the ceiling.

'This way, sir.' Sarah led him down a hallway, larger than Soren's whole house. A smile crept upon her face. Although comforting, it felt forced to Soren, who his whole life had been surrounded by miserably fake smiles.

'What do you want, Sarah?' Sarah seemed unfazed by the rudeness of the woman's voice from the other side of the door.

'Soren's here, ma'am.' The door opened abruptly revealing a small but defined figure.

'This is the boy?' she asked. 'Well that is all, Sarah.' The woman was less than kind to her humble slave, but Sarah was obviously used to the woman's torture. She scurried from the room obediently, leaving Soren alone with the mistress.

Stepping aside, she looked Soren up and down. Her gaze was hard and unkind as she was waiting for him to move inside. When he didn't, she arched an eyebrow.

'Well? Are you just going to stand there all day?'

Soren couldn't help but flinch slightly as her words cut across his wandering thoughts. Shifting his gaze away from her piercing stare, he entered the room cautiously.

'Now, boy, you are here simply because I loved my brother. I think it was an awful shame he died when he did.' She didn't sound the least bit sorrowful as she started to explain, 'However, I felt no love for his wife. He could've married someone much ... richer. She was nothing more than a baker's daughter. Though, you are, nevertheless, my nephew.' She adjusted her position, tilting her head ever so slightly to look at him.

Nodding his head a bit, Soren shifted, 'Y-yes, ma'am.'

'It is rude to look at your feet while someone is talking to you, boy.'

Soren nodded, attempting to lift his head. He kept his gaze from meeting hers; instead he focused on the wall behind her.

'Come now, boy. You shall meet your cousins and your uncle, once he returns from town.'

He felt out of place in this house, with these people. The one suit he wore, was the only he had; even then, it was too big for him and thoroughly worn. He was far more used to living a poorer life. He was accustomed to it, accustomed to going to work with his father in the morning, even if he couldn't do much to help. Later, he would come home to his mother working in the kitchen, or perhaps sewing something for a neighbor.

His mother ... he could picture her face vividly in his mind. She was always busy with one odd job or another. She would do anything that could help the family. She was always gentle, though never afraid to speak her mind.

Soren's thoughts turned then to his father. Once a man with a title, Lord, or something along those lines. Soren didn't know, but then again, the boy of only seven hardly worried about such things. His father had been disowned and shunned by his own family, but he knew that would happen after he married a common woman. He always seemed like he belonged more in a working environment anyway; he was never able to sit still.

'Sarah! Where are Jeffery and Rinna?' Soren looked up to see Madame Orrin casting a nasty glare at Sarah.

'I'll find them right away, ma'am.'

Shortly after, two children came running down the staircases. A quick look from Madame Orrin and they skidded to a stop, ducking their heads. With a slight nod, she lifted her chin again to survey them both.

'Soren, these are your cousins. This is Jeffery,' she nodded to the boy that had moved to her side. He was not much older than Soren, perhaps 10 or 11, but he was taller and bigger. With no hint of fat around his face, he had high cheekbones and a chin that came to a point, but not enough to be considered ugly. Broad shoulders and a relatively lean body, his size alone made him look almost 14.

Madame Orrin was speaking again. 'And this is Rinna.' She then motioned to the girl that had all but hidden herself behind her mother. Rinna was younger than Soren, though not by much, being the age of 6. Her features weren't as hard as Jeffery's; she had a shy, but honest smile. Offering a small curtsy, she blushed and tried to hide her small frame behind her mother again. She was an almost ethereal figure to look upon. Soren used the last bit of energy he had left to hope they would soon become friends.

Sarah stood off to the side, moving forward by Soren once the mistress and her children had left. 'This way, sir.'

Walking off towards the back of the house, Soren followed right behind. They walked through the kitchen, taking the back stairs to the second floor. The kitchen itself was just as ornate as the rest of the house, the counters cut from large slabs of granite.

'You'll be staying in the room at the end of the hall, if that's quite alright with you, sir.'

Soren bit his lip, mumbling a thank you to Sarah as she opened the door to his new room.

'Let me know if you need anything,' she offered gently, then closed the door behind herself.

The room was small and plain; it was hard to believe that it was connected to such an intricate house. It had a bed against one wall, a small table opposite which held a single book. It looked bare, and would probably remain as such, seeing as Soren had very little to add to the room himself.

He crawled straight into bed still dressed. For the first time since his parents' death, he cried himself to sleep.

The Meaning of Lila

*Who would clear the air
When it's full of loss;
Who would count love
Before the cost.*

Abel's swarthy, leathered fingers clasped the steering wheel, the green and brown mulch wedged tight underneath his nails.

A big red truck, carrying a load of maize and proudly adorned with Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* album cover, swerved in front of Abel's Toyota, its Give Way to Buses sign smirking delightfully. Despite the favouritism expounded by road rules towards larger vehicles, the coat of peacock blue that covered the morning sky lifted the corners of Abel's dry lips.

The sweltering heat engulfed his every breath, forcing his suffocating pores to bleed a salty moisture. In an attempt to escape the scolding air, Abel rolled down his window. The clamorous cacophony of cars, silver-tongued sellers and masenqo music that filled the main street of Addis Ababa quickly flooding Abel's senses. The aroma of grilled corn swept through his car, his stomach releasing a resonant grumble. Finally succumbing to his hunger, he picked up speed, already excited at the prospect of a distilled cup of coffee at the familiar Café Porto.

The scaffolds of skyscrapers looming like giant baobabs provided the necessary shade for the raucous street vendors. A monstrous glassy establishment reflected the nuances of the pedestrians. There were women in orthodox garbs, with reflective rays haloing their steps, and sprawling youths, whose tight, ripped jeans, paired with minuscule t-shirts showcased their dusky skin to the sun's grin—the contiguity of the two reinforcing the struggle of a world emerging from its cocoon of antiquity.

After completing the ceremonial task of parking and locking his car, Abel advanced through the cobblestones of Porto Street to Café Porto, his self-ordained little haven. Like his own version of the Sabbath, every Sunday, he made sure to visit the little café off the main strip.

At its entrance, Abel was met with cold wisps of air, which he drew upon in one huge breath as if he had just been resuscitated.

'Would you like your regular seat, sir?' the waitress enquired.

Etsegenet Herchmann Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work

Abel recognised her immediately. He knew she was going to be at Café Porto today, as she had been there every other previous Sunday. Mehret was a 17 year old, whose upturned nose and friendly smile only served to remind him of his Mehret, the child to which he no longer had a claim.

Abel knew there was no point in feeling angry about the past. He had made the decision, he had chosen to give her up. The year of 1999 was not a time to bring up a child in Ethiopia. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia was too important ... he had to support his country, his people. If he hadn't, they would have called him *asalif*, betrayer. It had been nearly impossible to keep himself alive, let alone a girl child. Bringing up a child in a time of civil war wouldn't have been right, it would have been irresponsible, reckless. He knew who he was meant to be, who he was. A soldier of the Ethiopian army. Not a single father.

Yet the dissatisfaction lingered like a dogged dull pain, the slow suffocation, penance for past choices.

'Sir?' the waitress enquired once again, succeeding in disrupting his momentary indulgence.

'Yes. Thank you ... and don't forget to bring my usual when you're ready, Mehret,' Abel replied. Perturbed with his momentary relapse into self-pity, he cautiously made his way to the corner of the room where he sat upon a straw carpet against a pillow threaded in gold. His eyes surveyed the room: the iconic image of Emperor Haile Selassie in his former glory, attired in his full military regalia, assuming almost equal position with the familiar depictions of the black Virgin Mary which Abel remembered from his childhood expedition to the Church of St Mary of Zion in Axum. Both, like old friends, comforting, welcoming. With his back resting on the wall, he observed the clients, wondering what led them to his little haven. Did they simply enjoy the coffee ceremony, or did they too find comfort in the escape of the shrouded coffee house?

On the other side of the room, laughing effortlessly, a little boy continued to dodge his mother's attempts at cleaning his mouth of what seemed to be remnants of the *tsebhi*, a chicken or beef stew, he had just consumed. Despite her irritable tone, it was clear to Abel that she adored him, worshiped him even, completely enamored by his euphoric laughter and the endless possibilities wrapped up in it.

His Mehret made no sound when she scrunched up her face—her way of laughing without doing so. Her eyes narrowed, her cheeks rose and her hand moved quickly to her mouth, covering it gently as she shook with joy. The world was an endless source of playful curiosity, its very purpose designed for her entertainment.

When Abel had returned from Badme, where he'd been training soldiers on the war front, Mehret was four years old. He found her older but new; her almond eyes wide, her mouth broad, the unmistakable indent in her chin and her head blanketed in rich, black curls. His little girl had run towards him, her chubby arms outstretched, and leaped into his arms. His fear of being forgotten quickly melted.

That morning, with the precision of a surgeon, she had carefully dismantled the tiny red toy car he had brought for her. For the next few months she did nothing but try to put it back together again.

As she grew older, her curiosity only became more ravenous. On her sixteenth birthday, Abel and Mehret went to Meskel Markets, where she found a gold watch on which she fixated for the rest of the day. Every time they walked by the watch-seller's stand, she would give the gold watch a lingering look, which of course Abel could not fail to notice.

That night Abel surprised her with it. He had bought it when she had been temporarily distracted by the traditional dancers, who had flittered in and out of the markets like butterflies fresh from their cocoons. Mehret looked at the watch with a half-knowing look, as if she had expected it. She knew her father well, confident of his relentless joy in making her happy ...

Abel paused for a moment, reflecting on his daydream, considering whether the watch was best suited for this recollection, may be a transistor radio would be better, just like the one he received when he was sixteen. Yes ... a transistor radio would perhaps be more meaningful. He was certain she loved music as much as he did. Of course she did ... or at least she used to.

He started again ...



Basket

‘When I was a boy, I made a long journey in a basket.’

Professor Wakefield sat back in his worn leather chair. He made his hands into a steeple, a rise that matched the arch of his thick, grey eyebrows.

‘Well that’s one I haven’t heard before, Mr Gahji.’

Seb attempted a smile. He had been nervous about this internship interview for days. When the Professor had asked; ‘Please tell me something about yourself that not many people know?’ the basket was the first thing that came to mind.

‘I’m sorry,’ replied Seb, knowing how ridiculous this had sounded. ‘I should have said in a basket carried by a hotair balloon.’

The Professor glanced at the antique clock in the corner of his sunny campus office and for a moment Seb thought he was going to show him the door.

‘Mr Gahji, you have made my morning!’ the Professor smiled. He reached for a hand-carved pipe that sat atop his desk and placed it in his mouth without lighting it. ‘Don’t leave me in suspense, Mr Gahji! Please, start from the beginning.’

Sebahive was not sure how long it had been since the orange sun had set on the vast savannah, but the moon was high and the brisk night breeze cooled the five-year-old’s shiny brow.

‘Are ready for our adventure Sebahive?’ whispered his mother.

‘Yaya Mawa,’ Sebahive’s heart was beating so loudly he was sure the man in the moon could hear it.

Seconds later, now ensconced in his tightly woven basket, Sebahive rose—high, so high it felt like he would catch a star. He crossed his tiny legs, he shifted on a knot that bit into his bony behind.

Sebahive closed his eyes. He remembered what his mother had told him—that he would not be able to embrace where he was going unless he honoured where he had been. He concentrated, and before long he could pick up the scent of cinnamon from the sweet rolling hills, the musky tang of clay the villagers used to bond their roofs and the fetid scent his mother said would stain their homeland for.

‘Sleep,’ said his mother.

The boy sunk a little lower. He felt the interlace making its own impression on his dust-covered skin. Like a memory. Like the waves of the Great Lakes. Sebahive looked down and ... was sure ... he could see the lake swell as a herd of hippo charged over its banks. He considered the mighty beasts from a new perspective; the curve of their backs, the turn of their ears, the blunt scoring of their thick broad snouts.

'Are you asleep, Sebahive?'

'Yaya.'

And before Sebahive knew it ... he was.

For the next week Sebahive sat in that basket, his eyes perched against a 'window' created by a small break in the weave. Through this opening the boy peeled back the truth of his homeland. He saw rivers as snakes and hills as tortoises and elephants as ants that scrambled across the savannah in rows. He took in the yellows of the deltas and the greens of the Congo-Nile Divide that cut a swathe through the landscape like an artist's sweeping brush.

Why had I not noticed these things before—how the colours change, the animals dance and how small man is in comparison?

He wanted to ask his mother: 'How is it that the long fire sticks that men carry act as wands that blind us?' But he did not, as he knew by now, his mother would be too tired to answer.

Seb looked up to see the Professor considering him, the old academic's eyes now glistening in the afternoon sun.

'Your name—Sebahive,' he gestured at Seb's application form. 'It is ...?'

'Rwandan, sir.'

'And your basket ride. It was from Rwanda to ...?'

'Zaire, sir.'

'You were refugees?'

'Fifteen years ago. In 1994.'

The Professor sighed. 'Terrible atrocities.'

Seb gave him the slightest of nods. 'I'm sorry Professor. I lied ... I ... There was no balloon. I was in a basket but I couldn't see out. The wicker was tight and the lid was always in place.'

The Professor tilted his head to the side. 'But you saw.'

Seb hesitated. 'Yes.'

The room fell silent until Professor Wakefield said: 'You did not lie, Mr Gahji. You said you made a long journey in a basket ... and you were lifted up. Perhaps not by a balloon, but by ... your mother?'

'She carried me on her head, Sir. She wanted me to hide in case the rebels had followed. She used her arms to carry what was left of our belongings.'

The Professor nodded, before setting his eyes back on Seb. 'Mr Gahji, I am an old man and believe me, if there's one thing I've learned it is that whether we are lifted by balloons or by the arms of another, whether we see new things with our eyes or in our imagination, as long as these things alleviate our fears, bring us hope ... there is no difference.'

Seb nodded as the Professor rose to his feet. 'It's late.'

Seb sighed. His interview was over.

'I want you here at 7am. We have a lot of work to do. You, your balloon and I.'

Seb swallowed. '7am? The balloon, I ...?'

'I'm getting old Mr Gahji. If anyone is going to need lifting during our journey of research, it is going to be me.'

Pawnography

Ed glanced around at his surroundings. A humming high street, gum spots and broken paving stones. Amidst the row of brown brick buildings stood a shopfront with bold yellow lettering and a black door frame. Its neon shop sign cast flickering beams of light onto the pavement.

Ed raised a hand and pressed it to the glass door, at first softly and then with a stronger grip, until he was no longer braving the cold of Hampstead High Street. He looked around the room. A musty room filled with things. An array of alien objects and books cluttered the sky-high shelves which covered every wall. To the left he saw musical instruments—guitars hanging from hooks, amplifiers with tangled cables and stacks of musical scores piled below. Directly ahead in a glass display cabinet were polished Rolexes, faintly sparkling diamonds and other decorative items laid out in ordered rows. Stuffed behind the register was a collection of clocks, all ticking at unusual intervals. The air was filled with a dampness, smelling faintly of mothballs and old cigarette smoke.

His fingers swept across bookshelves, ignoring the displays of scratched instruments and computer parts as he approached a glossy cabinet. Mounted inside was a first edition Harry Potter.

‘Name?’ The brusque voice took him by surprise.

‘Ed. Good morning, sir. I’m here for the ... the interview.’ Ed spoke with stiffened hesitancy.

‘It’s Smith.’ His words were clipped, straightforward.

Ed turned to face Smith, a middle-aged man wearing a faded coat. His wispy beard was a tangle of grey and white, his hands were bare and a pair of glasses hung on a chain around his neck. Smith jerked his head in the direction of the stool next to him, behind the counter. He repeated the motion until Ed understood the message and sat down.

‘Well Ed, welcome to Larkin Pawn.’

‘Thanks. I mean, thank you.’

Smith noted Ed’s shy demeanour from the emerging redness of his cheeks and the way he instinctively bit his lip. His apparent discomfort in his new surroundings

indicated that he hadn't seen the inside of a pawn shop before, let alone worked in one. Smith knew the types of people who would visit his pawn shop. The needy, the twisted, the youthful. The reclusive, the boisterous, the destitute. They would come seeking solace from London's winter. During the summer their children would drag them in, fixated on a contraption spotted through the window. With 2009 came new customers. In his 39 years working in the shop he hadn't seen such an influx of people since the recession of the 1980s. First it was the odd redundancy, or laid-off worker. Then came the bankers, accountants, real estate agents and construction workers.

Smith glanced at Ed, noting his slightly snubbed nose and shaking hands which rested in the pockets of his loosely fitting jumper. He was slim, naturally skinny, not a man who worked out. Cleanly shaven. Ed handed a folded sheet of paper to Smith, who tossed it aside and asked, 'So Ed—what's this, your fourth, fifth job application?'

'It's ... well, actually it's my eighth.' Ed followed up his statement, commenting, 'But I have had some experience in retail.'

Smith appeared disinterested, and Ed opened his mouth to apologise, however he was interrupted. 'A newbie. Well the business that you are coming into is different from the trade I grew up with. Times have changed, that's for sure.'

Smith sighed and Ed nodded his head, giving the man a poorly feigned impression of understanding.

Falteringly, Ed added, 'Sorry to ask, but does this mean, I've ... you know ... got the job?'

'Let me teach you the ropes and come Monday you can start working. I need a second pair of hands around this place.'

Ed was surprised at Smith's response. 'Thank you Smith. I won't disappoint.'

'You can start by ordering those shelves.'

Smith's aunt had left him the shop 30 ago, and he had taken great care of it ever since. By the age of 19 Smith was the proud owner of a consumer credit licence, and had begun to amass an assortment of pledges. At 28 he was the official

owner of the shop. As decades passed Smith began to see people like Russian dolls. On the surface they looked polished, unblemished. Peel back a layer, and their secrets started to emerge. Peel back another to claw away the crusted shell they hid behind. And another. That's where the grotesque, sticky black core of their being would reside—the truth. He understood just how easily people could resort to lies, exaggerated experiences and outright fabrications, all to hide the humiliation of the truth.

Cars

'They're like cars,' James interrupted. This was the last place he wanted to be; sitting in a counsellor's office at 3pm on a Monday. This was problematic solely due to the fact that at this time, James Peters was supposed to be at the library. He should have been returning books, as he had every Monday for the past three years. Three years ago, James had come to the realisation that having a weekly routine ensured consistency and accuracy. The weekly routine had been devised carefully and executed without fail for 1097 days. And so, this office was a highly irrational place to be, in the sense that it had no long-term benefits apparent to James and no clear place in his routine.

'Your thoughts, Mr. Peters, are like ... cars?' questioned Mrs. White, the counselor, assessing her patient with a perplexed expression. She sat directly opposite James in a cushiony red chair. A carpet, bathed in copious amount of dust, was sprawled across the floor. Mrs. White sat in front of her framed degree, her decidedly rebellious hair somewhat contained in a bun.

'Yes. They leave as quickly as they come, they're all different sizes, shapes, colours and brands and I can never keep track of all of them. A red four-wheel drive may suddenly shoot past but then there will be a white Golf and I focus on that. You see?'

'I'm afraid I don't, Mr. Peters.'

James dug his fingers into his palms, frustration taking control of his mannerisms. His conclusion was that the intellectual ability of Mrs. White was clearly nowhere near that of his and it was therefore impossible to communicate effectively. In order to explain the rate at which his thoughts travelled, he had to resort to a childish analogy in which he compared his thoughts to cars. James thought that this level of thinking was parallel to that of a seven year old. Despite this simplistic break down of his cognitive functions, Mrs. White failed to comprehend what he had spent exactly four minutes and twenty-three seconds trying to explain and James was forced to come to the conclusion that this simply wasn't going to work. Even so, he found the academically challenged psychologist an intriguing figure, and so decided to continue the appointment. He aimed to concentrate on her admittedly gentle voice and to ignore the tissue poking out of the sleeve of her cardigan—most unhygienic.

'Are you trying to tell me that your thoughts move quick?' asked Mrs. White.

'Technically thoughts cannot move quick, Mrs. White. Quick is an adjective and in this context, you are attempting to add further meaning to the word move, which is a verb. Thus, you must use an adverb. Now quick does exist in the English language as an adjective so I can see why this faux pas might have been made. The word I believe you are looking for is quickly, Mrs. White. Possible synonyms that could be used in this instance are rapidly, speedily, hastily, swiftly ...'

There was a long pause as his voice trailed off. James looked at his neatly laced shoes. He did not understand why silence had entered the room briefly. His grammatical explanation was precise, correct and detailed. Mrs. White cannot grasp simple grammatical concepts, he noted. He adjusted his spectacles and waited.

'I'm sorry. Do your thoughts move hastily Mr. Peters?' she rephrased.

'With great haste Mrs. White. I find it rather hard to apply myself to one before it is gone and another one stands in its place.'

Mrs. White cleared her throat, 'Mr. Peters, I don't know what to tell you. I understand that your thoughts move quickly but I don't understand how that is relevant to our session. I am a divorce counsellor Mr. Peters. Why did you come here?'

'Because I have been divorced,' James stated.

'Yes, but three years ago. Three years ago, Mr. Peters. Why are you here now?'

James dropped his gaze to the floor, his breath slowing and becoming heavier. His whole body closed in on itself, folding and melting into the chair. The room began to swirl around him, his feet no longer met the wooden floor and the cars stopped to watch. He steadied himself, leaning back into the chair and bit his lower lip. 'Her name was Millie. She was beautiful, funny, kind ... I loved her, Mrs. White, and she told me that she loved me too. She left me one morning. She told me it was because I never paid attention to her. She said she'd found someone else. She told me she loved me.' His eyes became glassy but remained fixed on the carpet. 'And then there was Chloe. She was an artist. She told me of her big dreams, but I didn't listen carefully enough and she left.'

‘I’m—I’m so sorry Mr. Peters. They sound ... like lovely women,’ said Mrs. White.

‘They were,’ James replied, ‘but I didn’t give them the attention they deserved. I knew how exceptional they were, but I just couldn’t think about it for too long. They would ask me questions and I would prepare an answer ... but then it would drive off before I could say it. That’s my problem. They’re like cars. And all I can do is watch them come and go and come and go ... and I can never hold on to them.’

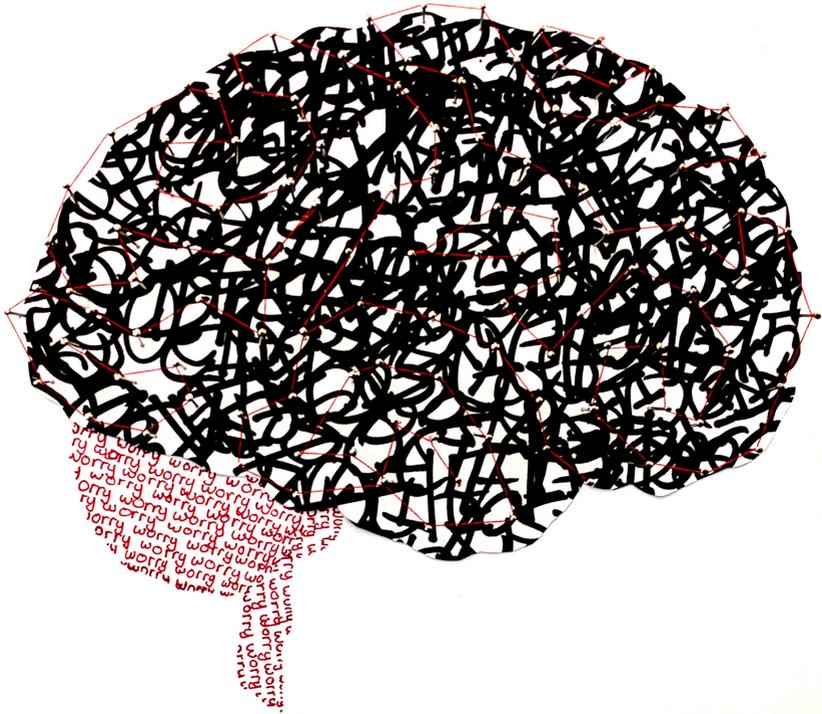
‘Mr. Peters, I—’

‘It’s not just thoughts or people, Mrs. White; it’s everything. Everything just moves too fast. How am I supposed to focus on things when all I get is a glimpse of them before they hurl themselves down the road? I can’t let it happen again Mrs. White,’ said James, shaking his head before hiding it in his hands. He drew from his pocket a creased photograph. He sat regarding it for a few moments, before passing it on to Mrs. White.

‘Who is this, Mr. Peters?’ she asked, studying the photograph.

‘Kate. Her name is Kate. And Kate will leave me because I can’t focus on her. She will drive away in her pale blue car. Its number plate is GHR-28I, the one that she always parks on a bearing of 3.4° from the front of the driveway. It has a coffee stain on the driver’s seat from when she hit the speed bump too fast. She always has tissues in the glove compartment, the kind that are infused with aloe vera. I remember little things like that you see, but when she speaks to me, it’s as if each word is whisked away before I can get a proper look at it. I can see it, right in front of me, it’s right there,’ said Mr. Peters, stretching his hand out as if he could touch the word, ‘but then it hits the accelerator and another word is there. They move so speedily, Mrs. White. People say I’m not listening to them, but I am. I’m trying so hard to listen, I just ... can’t.’

Once again silence crept into the room. It trudged across the carpet and nestled itself in Mrs. White’s chair. Silence sneered at James, mocking him from across the room and it laughed in his face. It grew bigger and bigger, filling up the empty spaces in the room and draining its colours. The silence loomed ominously above him. James’ shrinking shape frantically twisted towards Mrs. White, her red chair like a traffic light that might stop this nightmare ... but Mrs. White was no longer sitting in her chair. She was trying to talk to him but silence stole her words before James could hear them. And then, Mrs. White climbed into her silver car, and drove away.



Have Some Faith

Sunday, 11.30pm

'Still awake?' Jen wearily descends the stairs and comes to stand against the wooden doorframe of our living room. She hasn't yet noticed the flowers I put in the vase by the staircase. Jonquils, her favourite, weren't in the florist by the office so I drove out to a garden centre in God-knows-where to get them. She's jet-lagged, having flown from Afghanistan to New York, all in one day. I can't blame her for not noticing. Besides, she'll see them tomorrow.

'Half an hour until midnight, it's not too late.' I look at her face and she smiles warmly before coming to sit on the sofa beside me. Opening my arms in embrace, I pull Jen close to my body. We lean against each other in comfort, unmoving, until my eyes begin to water with fatigue. I open my mouth, moronically close it again. How is it that I'm nervous to speak to my wife of 15 years after her being gone for only two weeks?

'God, it was awful.' Jen's voice wavers, breaking the soft silence that blankets the room.

She turns towards the fire, quietly struggling to remain composed. I don't need to see her face to know the burden of the suffering and sadness that she's seen.

'You're back home now. You're safe.' The words stumble from my mouth. Consolation has never been my strong suit.

Jen continues, suddenly raising her voice. 'I know I'm safe. It's just ... just so many children are suffering, all of them either parentless ... or missing limbs, or ... or at the least, clothed in blood-stained rags.' After a long pause, she adds, 'I need to go back and do something more.'

'You've done so much. You've done so much more than anyone I know. But there's only so much you can do ... and you know you can't end a war.'

'I knew you'd say that. But Michael, how do you expect me to ignore what's going on in the world, especially after what I've seen?' Jen finally turns her body towards me, sighing. 'But if I can't help innocent lives, let me at least help you. For once, have some faith. Do something for yourself.'

Without thinking, I tell her, 'I married you. That's something I did for me.'

Her eyes soften for a moment, but the moment is short-lived. 'Michael, I've seen your office and it's just so ... so grey. We can do better than this.'

A waterfall of relief streams through my body. She said 'we', not 'you'.

Tuesday, 5.00am

'Stop 33. Two stops until the end of the line. Stop 33. Two stops until the end of the line.' A computerised voice monotonously recites the words through the train's rusted speakers and to my ears.

I watch as a man hastily scoops his sleeping daughter into his arms, her breaths fogging the window pane on which her head rests. From his movements, I can tell he's done this many times before. The doors of the train carriage slide open as the pair depart and before long, it is just me and two women left in the carriage, presumably shift workers returning home from the city.

Last night, at 6.47, I packed the few belongings that collected dust on my desk and left the office after 13 secure, stable, insipid years. When I returned home, I asked Jen if I had made the right choice, a part of me hoping she would reply with a definite 'no' and beg me to rectify the situation. As I predicted, she did not say what I had hoped.

The first indications of regret are beginning to settle on my shoulders, much alike the way that snow settles on the fields either side of the track. The snowfall today is heavy, much heavier than the weatherman predicted on Monday. What I cannot stand about the weather is just how unpredictable it is. No knowledge of cold fronts or downdrafts can prepare us for what is to come the next day.

Jen had told me to take a coat to stay dry this morning, but of course pride pushed me through our apartment door before I could even offer a brief goodbye. I planned to walk around the block, convince myself I had made the right choice. And now I've found myself on a train for over two hours, heading out of the city to the coast to do God-knows-what.

I shift my gaze to the left. On the other side of the train window is the ocean, its waves today rabid and relentless.

I have spent hours, days, quite possibly years memorising the first trip to the seaside with Jen, 17 years ago. It was a Thursday in spring, and we had waded into the water until we were unable to stand. Floating on our backs, we listened to the subdued roar of waves fighting for their place on the sand, and felt the sun allow its light to trickle from its fingers and warm our faces.

For a moment, time slowed, and I so vividly remember staring at Jen, barely able to mask my adoration as I watched her hair flow down her back like watercolour paint. The amalgamation of blues, greens, the occasional orange seeped into my periphery, but nothing was strong enough to pull my gaze away. Why she's chosen to stay with someone so ordinary all these years, I haven't yet figured out.

'Stop 35. End of train line. Stop 35. End of train line.' The newly-familiar voice removes me from my thought and signals the end of my train journey. I stand, my fingers instinctively moving to adjust my beanie in preparation for the cold outside. The hat used to be a colour, maroon, before it aged and became a mix of shades.

After the train ride, two bus trips, and a painful 20-minute walk from the bus stop, I find myself squinting through the snowfall to a stone church. A sign, submerged in snow, reads,

'Feed your faith and your fears will starve to death.' Jen told me to have some faith ... in myself or in God, I do not know. And so I find myself being led further up the path and into the candlelit room.

The many faces of the church crowd are bathed in the warm light of the candles positioned throughout the space. Amidst pews and holy crosses suspended from the walls are stained-glass windows depicting religious figures, whom I, of course, have never seen before. I can almost hear their mockery as I nervously take a seat in the pew closest to the exit.

If anyone I have ever known could see me here, they would most probably faint from shock, or at the least, rub their eyes to convince themselves it could certainly not be me.

Who would think that, in a moment of desperation, I would enter a church, let alone try to pray?

I look again to the mothers, fathers, children scattered throughout the room. Heads bowed and eyes closed in concentration, the murmuring of prayers rise from fast-moving mouths. Their whispers fly with hope, twirl in the candle fumes, and finally dissipate into the air and out through the door like smoke.

Closing my eyes, I ready my hands in prayer position and ... nothing. Nil. I am devoid of any new feeling. How can religion, a concept so ubiquitous, feel so foreign to me? Out of instinct, I turn to check if people are staring, as if they can sense the frustration that radiates off my body. Of course, nobody notices as I turn to leave the church, making my way back to the bus stop, and then to the train station.

I will catch the train alone, this time returning to the city. From then, I will figure out what to do next. I guess I'll need to have some faith.

Tanzen

Stefan turned on the small lamp suspended next to his workbench and carefully placed the beautiful satin pointe shoe down. The fabric glowed in the dim lighting of the small room. His eyes began to tear up as memories of the company flooded his mind. The ballets that he performed and the thrill of being on stage each night were over. No more. Change had begun with the stealth of subtle glances and whispers of fear, until the visit from Herr Director warned Stefan to leave the company before things got worse. Uniformed officers marched the streets and conditions became evermore threatening. As he left his home in the dead of night, he wondered if he would ever dance at the Stuttgarter again. Now living in Vienna, it was too dangerous to dance. He had been so grateful to Mr Schuster for taking him on and complimenting him more than once on his excellent shaping of pointe shoes.

Tears fell slowly as he sunk into his chair. He had not heard from his family and expected the worst for them. Camps were filling up with Jews being removed from their homes and businesses. But he had to be grateful for his home and job so he redirected himself to the warmth around him. Beethoven's Fourth Concerto crackled on the old gramophone in the corner, as the snow fell gently outside.

Yet his moments of peace were always short. He lived in constant fear that his master would discover his secret and send him away, leaving him desperate and helpless. Or even worse, that the SS would seek him out and take him to a camp like the untold thousands, including his beloved family. Every day he mourned for them but today the overwhelming feeling of grief was too much to tolerate.

Tired, he began to pack up his wooden blocks and horse hair wadding, carefully placing the pointe shoes on the rack. He could see the musicians from the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra trudging home after their performance, their instruments strapped to their backs, or hidden from the conditions inside their heavy overcoats.

He plodded to the back of the shop, sighing. Most people hated this room. It was where the company dancers would come to try on their shoes so the smell of mould and grime penetrated the rough floorboards. Stefan, on the contrary, was always comforted by the room. It was the place where he could dance again and feel the exhilaration of movement. He could once more relive the days before

the Nazis, and allow his imagination to choreograph new resolutions to *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*.

The doorbell rang.

Terror struck Stefan as he slowly reached for the door, the anticipation of what might be behind it always caused him hesitation. Not to worry. His master, Tavin Schuster had finally come back from shoe fitting for the company dancers.

'What are you moping about for?' Mr Schuster asked gruffly as he pushed his way into the shop. He mumbled, 'I left my keys here.'

'I take it you didn't have a good day?' Stefan asked, trying his best to change the subject.

'No I didn't,' Mr Schuster replied, flinging himself into the nearest chair. 'The Stuttgart Ballet is in town and one of the company dancers needs new shoes for tomorrow's performance. None of mine fit her. She is coming over right now to see if we can help her.'

'Don't worry, I'll make her shoes,' Stefan answered. 'You need your rest.' Mr Schuster agreed.

A few moments later, the doorbell rang and a tall, slim figure hurried inside.

'Thank goodness Tavin, I was worried I wouldn't have any shoes for tomorrow.'

'You're welcome,' Mr Schuster grunted from the corner as Stefan set up his station.

'What a beautiful shop!' She gazed around the shop in awe and smiled at the satin pointe shoes hanging on the wall.

As soon as the woman stepped forward into the light, Stefan knew exactly who she was. Anna Roche, the principal dancer of the Stuttgart Ballet Company. He had danced with her many times before he was expelled. She was the one who had pleaded with the director Guillaume Barre to keep him.

'Stefan? Is that you?' she gasped. 'It's been so long.'

He stood, terrified. 'I am so glad that you found a job after you were so wrongly removed from the company. We didn't know where you were.' She looked around the room, her voice light but her face pitying him.

'Yes,' he said, praying that she would not say anything more.

'It is so unfair. I can't believe what's happening now in Stuttgart, Berlin, all over Germany. We thought that it was bad in 1937, but now our friends Rosen, Cohen and Stein have gone. There are rumours of course but we can never be sure.'

Stefan's face was grave as he studied Mr Schuster, who had just become interested in the conversation. She felt his discomfort and, glancing at Mr Schuster, quickly changed the subject.

'Well, I need a narrow fit for tomorrow please. As you can see from this old pair the heel is too wide. You can see the wear on the ribbon.'

'Well I'll say goodnight,' said Mr Schuster as he trudged towards the stairs.

Stefan breathed a huge sigh of relief but now, more than ever, there was an overwhelming sense of sorrow. In that dimly lit room he felt deeply alone. All those wonderful artists had disappeared. How could it be?

Anna saw the grief in his eyes. There was nothing to be said. She put her arms around him and they danced.



Guilty and Framed

It was the fourth night in a row that William Conklin had not slept. Court transcripts were stacked up on the mahogany table beneath a faint circle of yellow light, with notes scribbled all over them and corners folded to mark the page. A plume of smoke slowly spiralled into the stale air, as he gently massaged his temples.

Julius. Ethel. Atomic secrets. Betrayal. Justice.

The words seemed to clump together like a big sticky ball of gum that stuck to the bottom of a shoe. He was almost certain there would be no clarity. This had long ceased to be about one person and their crime. What it was about exactly, he feared to spell out for himself.

Taking a gulp of his tonic and gin, he slouched back into the leather chair and watched the sky brighten in shades of grey—a mist seemed to stretch tight across the electrified sky.

He was to report on site at the United States District Court Southern District of New York at 10.30 when the nation would hold its breath and await the verdict for the Rosenberg Trial.

DEATH FOR A-SPIES

Rosenbergs Get Top Penalty In Atom Trial: One of the Greatest Peacetime Spy Dramas in the Nation's History Reaches its Climax as Julius Rosenberg and Morton Sobell, convicted of revealing atomic secrets to the Russians, enter the Federal Building in New York to hear their doom.

A fellow journalist offered Conklin a Chesterfield and gave him a light. Conklin was more nervous than he should have been, seeing that he was not personally involved with the Rosenbergs in any shape or form. His only job was to take notes and report objectively back at the CBS studio for the evening newsreel.

‘Got themselves into real trouble, didn’t they?’ The same guy who had offered him a cigarette cursed smugly through the gap in his front teeth. ‘They should just take the deal and confess whether they’re innocent or not. It’s ridiculous—the

justice system won't budge just because they repealed. It's Jack, by the way. Nice to meet you, sir.'

Conklin studied him curiously, the fedora hat amusingly out of place on the body of what was only a boy. Jack, too, had a cigarette jabbing out of his mouth, and a pad and pen in his hands ready for the action, but his bouncy gait and rash, simple-minded brain only proved him to be an imposter. He was merely a foot soldier of big broadcasting companies like NBC and ABC. This war, unlike any other war, was a battle of telling lies, and the better liar always won.

A swarm of cameramen clustered towards the sidewalk as an intelligent-looking man in glasses and a goatee stepped out of the car, followed by a small plump woman. Conklin had hoped to feel something more significant seeing them in real life, something spiteful about the way they walked or the way they spoke that could provide him with ammunition to justify what was most certainly going to be a death sentence on the page. Instead their very ordinariness had served to shatter all such self-woven illusions.

Shouts of protest clashed with overzealous so-called patriots from blocks away. From a portable televising device that Jack held, Conklin could distinguish in the pixelated image the parade of protestors who held 'Save the Rosenbergs' signs high above their heads, and another crowd that smashed beer bottles and slurred aggressive curses.

Jack muttered under his breath as he grew exhilarated with the headline he had come up with: *'Cold War—the Great Divide: Rosenbergs vs US Justice System.'*

After hours of testimony and cross-examinations the court-room fell into complete silence. The grand jury had just left the room and the session was adjourned.

Conklin sat quietly on a bench in the public gallery. His notepad had been filled with shorthand and, even as a man of intellectual acuity, he was struggling to conjure up the approach he should take with his article.

Only six hours ago Saypool, the prosecutor of the case, had with convincing rhetoric and skilful performance asserted that the Rosenbergs had 'committed

the most serious crime that can be committed against the people of this country' by delivering 'the weapons the Soviet Union could use to destroy us.' Meanwhile, watching the Rosenbergs poised up-straight in their defendant chairs, exchanging whispers in a contained manner that at once appeared calm and rational as if they existed in another universe protected from all the frenzy and hysteria, Conklin found it genuinely hard to reconcile the two worlds.

Ethel, Conklin had realised, was a character far from the stereotypical 1950s female. She displayed an aura of contempt for the whole proceeding that manifested in the brisk way she spoke. And Julius, in his introverted body language, bore a stubborn determination reserved for ideologists and intellectuals. Between their hushed breaths, the only reoccurring words Conklin managed to make out were 'Michael' and 'Robert', which after brief effort, he realised were the names of their sons.

Justice Kaufman had settled sombrelly onto his bench and the jury slowly shuffled into the jury box, all squirming as far away from the Rosenbergs as possible, as if the couple were radiation itself.

'I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb ... has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more innocent people may pay the price of your treason.'

The first sentences reverberated sonorously through the courtroom and Conklin knew with growing emptiness and disorientation that an irrevocable sickness had descended on the American populace, the more poisonous threat to the mind which was not nuclear radiation, but a paralysing fear that devoured all rationality and humanity.

Tapping his finger on the calculator, Conklin watched idly outside his apartment block where a crowd of drunken men with loose ties slung around their necks and shirt-sleeves rolled up damned the Rosenbergs into an eternity in hell for dining with the Russians. It seemed that the whole nation was inebriated. Walking up the stairs earlier, even the housewives in the neighbourhood were gossiping about the trials while they prepared dinner for their sleazy husbands.

It had been his third glass of whiskey, but Conklin intuited with extreme clarity that the Rosenbergs were in fact guilty of sending the Russians information. But he grew frantically sceptical as to whether 'sketches of a highly explosive lens mould' had in fact, as Judge Kaufman alleged, 'altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country' and afforded the Rosenbergs their deaths.

The radio in the study room sputtered in disjointed fragments. Conklin had formed a habit of listening to Russian broadcasting, banned on cable but still accessible on radio with a little bit of knowledge in radio wavelengths, which had been slowly phased out by the captivating televised devices. With meagre Russian he had procured during World War II, he managed to make out the phrase he had grown all too familiar with throughout the years: 'martyr sacrificed for the cause of communism'. At the same time on the flickering television screen in the living room, however, a young face was accusing the Rosenbergs of 'jeopardising the safety of American families and children'. Conklin was suddenly possessed by an uncontrollable urge to laugh out loud when he realised that the reporter was in fact Jack.

Later into the night, reading Ethel's last letter to her children, an almost irrational torrent of emotions crumpled Conklin as an unbearable burden weighed him down onto the floor and pinned him still as he sobbed.

'Dearest Sweethearts, my most precious children ...

Only this morning it looked like we might be together again after all. Now that this cannot be, I want so much for you to know all that I have come to know. Unfortunately, I may write only a few simple words; the rest your own lives must teach you, even as mine taught me.'

Here we go round the prickly pear

Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the prickly pear

At five o'clock in the morning

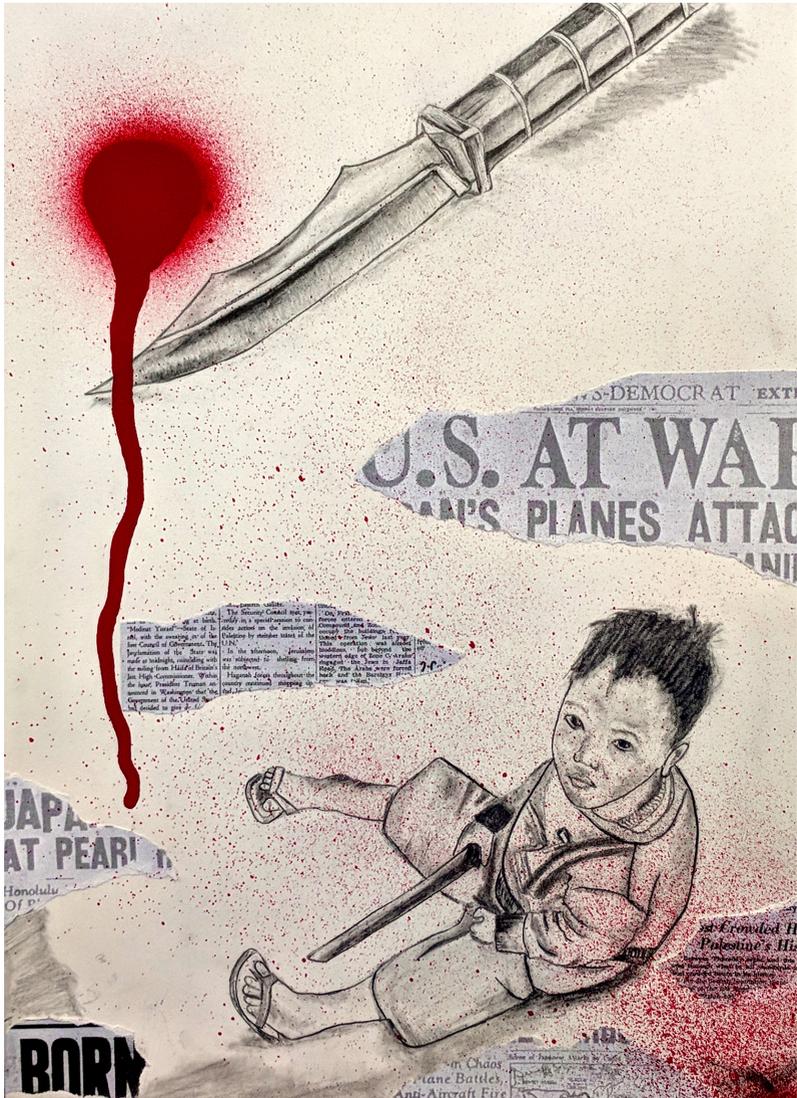
Conklin sank into a deep and numbing melancholy as a gloomy haze lit up the sky. A gentle rain had soiled the streets. Grimy newspaper scraps were blown into the air and clogged sewage pipes. All around the city, Conklin's article covered

the front page of papers. The glaring letters haunted him as he tried to restore his conscience: 'Traitors Executed'.

'No one wants to read about your political commentary, Conklin. The people are angry. They want a scapegoat. Hell, the country needs a scapegoat. Give them what they want...'

A mother pushing her stroller stopped at the newsstand to buy the paper. After a while, a sharp-looking man in a well-pressed suit stopped to buy one as well. Then the hairdresser. Then the plumber. And the college students ...

Lying unconscious on the floor, Conklin could clearly hear a woman's voice floating towards him from afar, singing the sweet melody of Sing Sing prison, when he thought he saw a jolt of electricity spark the humid air, and two corpses lie still on the electric chair.



The Ledge

An adult told me once that us lot have it lucky
She grew up on fear like we grew up on
fame and fashion and skinniness
Any day could have been the day the bomb
went off. Life was shorter, harder, sweeter.

I said, you lot had it lucky. With nothing left
to be afraid of we're terrified of ourselves.
Of our not-good-enough selves, of our always-
growing always-failing two-hands-on-the-ledge
feet-in-empty-air selves.

I smiled at twelve people on the streets today
and none smiled back. There's this boy and
I try not to meet his eyes because he might
think I'm encouraging him and when I push
him away later he'll call me a bitch for
leading him on.

You grew up before people had learned
how to make you hate yourself. Before
advertisers fully realised that selling stuff is so much
easier when we're so discontented with
all there is about our bodies and our minds.

I thought about deleting Facebook today,
but what if I miss out on something important?

I see myself falling prey to the herdmind
and I can't stop. One hand left on the ledge
and my feet flailing in the dark.

You grew up with the threat of an apocalypse, I said.
I grew up a part of one.



Sassy

Wednesday 7th, 6.00pm

My phone dances on my desk—an incoming message lighting up the screen.

Paul: 'Hey! How was your day?'

I open my phone, set a timer: 20 minutes. I'm not doing anything, and was just about to check my phone anyway; but I can't seem desperate. Boys don't like desperate girls.

Instead, they like cool girls. The stick-thin girl with the thigh-gap and perfectly flat stomach, but with huge double-Ds, and who can eat three McDonald's hamburgers within the space of 40 minutes. The girl who's happy not labelling the relationship that she's had with a boy for three months now, and who doesn't mind if she hasn't seen him all week because he needed 'time with the boys'; even though she's sure she saw a photo on Facebook of him with some other girl that she's never met before. Cool girl is hot, but 'chill'; does whatever he asks, and asks for nothing in return.

I have to be cool girl.

I spend the remaining 19 minutes and 17 seconds planning my reply, so it comes off effortless, casual, cool.

'Yeah good :) U?'

Paul and I text for hours, but not much is said. You can only fit in so much when you set timers every time you receive a message. In between messages, I plan tomorrow's outfit for school. You'd think with a uniform, there wouldn't be much variation. But you'd be wrong. Hair has to be tied in a way that says, 'I woke up like this,' without actually looking like you only just woke up. There is makeup to be applied to cover the many imperfections, without looking like a try-hard cake-face. The top button must be undone, and while there are school rules regarding the length of one's dress, they must be ignored, for fear of being seen as a teacher's pet, a goody-two-shoes. Who cares that it's winter, and that the couple extra centimetres of material could help in retaining some heat.

10.30pm.

I text Paul 'goodnight' after contemplating whether I should end it with an 'x' or not. I can't come off as clingy, needy—but is leaving it as just a word too cold? A couple moments later I receive a 'g-night :)'

Slumping under the sheets, I pass out quickly, tired from a day of doing my best at being 'cool girl'. I'll try again tomorrow.

Thursday 8th, 10.30am

At recess, I sit with my friends, my back being warmed by the sun, my legs stretched out nonchalantly, projecting complete comfort. My arms quickly grow tired from holding my body in this position, but I remain seated like this—it shows off my best angle to the crowd of boys sitting under the tree to our right, but without looking like I'm asking for it. Paul is there, and his laughter floats above the rest, filling my head, making me smile goofily. I giggle with my friends when they ask why I'm making such a weird face, dodging giving an answer.

Finally, I decide my arms can't take it anymore, and make an excuse to get up—I need some water. Walking over to the bubbler, I notice that Paul gets up too; but I don't look for long, that'd be creepy. And I'm cool.

After having a drink, I straighten myself up, wipe the water from the corners of my mouth.

Paul's behind me.

He says hi.

Crossing my arms so he doesn't see my hands shaking, I say hi back.

We talk.

After chatting for a while, he tells me there's this great new movie that's on at the cinema, asks me if I'd like to go see it with him.

I want to say yes immediately, tell him that sounds great. But cool girl would only reply, 'Maybe, I'll see if I'm free.'

But I realise I'm not cool girl. Cool girl is without her own interests and doesn't have the guts to stop guys from pushing her around. Cool girl doesn't care about

anything, not even herself; she doesn't have ambition, she can't decide anything on her own. She's not intelligent, she's not independent, she is not me.

Upon having this realisation, I come back to earth and realise Paul's been waiting for a reply for some time, and I have a strangely wide smile spread across my face. I'm just about to reply yes, when he says;

'You're smiling. So – does that mean a yes? Or am I going to have to wait another exactly 20 minutes before I get a reply?'



A Woman's Profession

Neurologist

Sunlight seeped through the window. It speckled the old kitchen with streaks of gold, the sedate coppery type only the warm late afternoon sun can cast. The limpid scene was interrupted by a cloud of flour, billowing out from the paper package Caroline Dunn had just ripped open. She set to work, measuring, pouring, kneading the dough. Flour clustering to the floor and bench, congregating on her arms and hair. Just as Caroline dusted the finishing touch of icing sugar on the crisp golden lattice of the pie, she felt a tug on her dress. She peered down to see a small hand clutching the floral material and two small serious eyes that were fixated on her own.

'Mummy?'

'Yes, Elizabeth, pet?' She continued to dust the pie.

'Do you ever get bored of cooking and cleaning and sewing?'

Caroline looked warily down at Elizabeth. 'N ... no, dear. When I married Daddy, we agreed that I would care for the house, and he would pay for it. Why?'

'They look so boring. I don't think I want to do that when I grow up. I want to be a neurologist. I read about them in Samuel's book. They look after brains!'

Caroline stooped down and looked uneasily into Elizabeth's bottle green eyes, wondering how to respond to her five-year-old daughter's foolish fantasies.

The front door groaned open as it did every day at 5pm, announcing the arrival of Caroline's husband. Usually she would be casually resting on the old horsehair couch, waiting to welcome him home. Today was different. She sucked in her breath at the thought of Elizabeth being caught openly wishing to be anything other than a wife and mother.

Caroline Dunn pecked her daughter on the top of her head. 'That would be your father, pet. Run along to your room, now.'

Detective

Bertha Ferguson stood, stiff as cardboard, reciting the exact words she had said the years before.

'Now class, last week's assignment was to think about what you would like to do for a job so you can earn money. We will go around the class and say what we picked, starting with ... Jeremy.'

'I want to be a fireman, miss.'

Bertha nodded. Of course. That made sense. 'Lucy?'

'I want to be a nurse.'

She nodded along to each response, her ears hearing but eyes unheeding. It did not really matter anyway. The answers, much like the question, were the same every year.

A hand darting up from the back of classroom caught her eye. 'Yes, Elizabeth?'

'I want to be a detective and solve crimes and stop criminals and save people.'

A snigger floated up from the middle row. The other 10-year-old girls muttered behind palms to each other, while sneering over their shoulders. The boys just snorted and guffawed.

'You can't be a detective.' One boy spoke up.

Bertha opened her mouth.

'Why not?!' Elizabeth shot back.

The boy simply shrugged. 'Because you're a girl!'

The classroom erupted into yelling, arguments shooting from one table to another.

'Class!' Bertha rapped her pointer on the blackboard. The shouting dropped into murmurs, and then silence.

She took a breath. 'Next week's assignment is due on Tuesday. You must describe the different tasks of the job you have chosen. Now, on to today's lesson.'

She tried not to notice the tears trickling steadily down Elizabeth's cheeks.

Waitress

Martha's granddaughter sat on the ancient couch opposite, one leg tucked behind the other, and fiddled with the revealing hemline of her skirt. Her brown curls drowned her uneasy expression. Martha settled back into the rocking chair. With an aching moan, it began to sway.

'Elizabeth poppet, you never told me what you were going to do next year.'

'Oh.' Elizabeth dragged her eyes from the cup of hot chocolate, the liquid just under the line of froth. 'I was thinking about having a job as a waitress.'

Martha nodded approvingly.

'That's a good sensible job. A woman who doesn't work, at least that much, has more time to raise a family.' That was the axiom that Martha wholeheartedly believed in. The saying she was taught as a child, to then teach to her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

'Are you alright dear?'

It probably was the light; that or the crumbling eyesight that came with old age, but Martha's granddaughter seemed to grimace.

'Yes, yes. I just... Don't you think you could have done more than just look after Grandpa and Mum?'

Martha scrunched her face, adding to the sea of wrinkles already washing over her nose and cheeks. 'I don't think so. After all, who would have cleaned the house, washed the clothes, cooked the dinners?' She scoffed, 'Not Grandpa, that's for sure.'

'I guess.'

'I'll just pop into the kitchen to get a cuppa.' Martha rose and shuffled out to put the kettle on. She thought about what Elizabeth had said. Do anything else apart from cleaning or cooking? Ridiculous. The thought was only thrust out of her mind at the piercing whistle of boiled water.

Elizabeth

I sit on my grandmother's rocking chair, soaking up the receding light of sunset. The orange amber glow dapples the wooden floor and grass, evoking memories of afternoons as a child. I feel a murmur of a breeze washing down my bare arms and through the hunched gum trees, tickling the sage green leaves. I inhale the familiar fresh scent of the bush, letting the heaviness of the moist air settle on my tongue. The only disturbance is an occasional squabble and screech of cockatoos. The whole world, apart from the birds, seems to reach a lull. The sway of creaking wood accompanies the click of knitting needles. I rest my hands on my lap and close my eyes, making the most of the small time I have to myself before my grandchildren arrive and I once again must cook, clean and wash. I think back to my childhood dreams. Would my five or ten-year-old self have believed decades

later I would be doing exactly what my mother and grandmother did before me? Even when I resisted?

I open the letter sitting on the stool next to me and can't help a smile from erupting. The envelope reveals a messy scrawl: Mrs Elizabeth Kingston.

Dear Grandma,

I need to ask you something. Today I asked Mummy if I could be an astronort (I'm not sure how to spell it) because it would be fun to fly in space. She said that I shouldn't because proper ladies care for their families. Is that true? What about proper gentlemen? Can't they care for families too? Please write back soon.

Love from,

Ava

Cinderella's Zombies

Dirt smeared across her face,
Cindy looked tired and weary.
She really needed to find a place
where she could take a break.

She trudged to the nearest cave,
And flopped right down to rest. Suddenly
to the nearest rock she gave
an almighty kick.

'Ugh! I hate this!' she cried.
She ran around the cave mouth.
'I can't believe the prince has died,
and left me in this HELLHOLE!'

Lying on the hard rocky floor,
Cindy went to nap.
But in the darkness, guess what she saw?
Two red eyes watching her.

Cindy leapt up and screamed, 'You pest!
'You filthy, rotten beast!'
She couldn't believe she had strayed into the nest
of a flesh-eating, diseased zombie.

She reached out, grabbed her gun,
aimed it straight at the creature.
But then she saw, one by one,
ten more zombies file out.

Counting her bullets. Only three left.
There was not much hope for Cindy.
She thought of the prince, who left her bereft,
and her anger reached the boil.

'Oi, you filthy creatures, you beasts,
you just try and get me.
For today you will not, shall not feast,
on me, you horrid monsters!'

Somehow, Cindy made it out—
How? We will never know.
Today, she wanders alone, about
the town, telling her story.

How she married the prince,
and how the zombies all existed.
How the prince died, and since
how strong she became.

'Women all around!' she cries.
'Gather round and hear!
None of you need men in your lives
when you've got some zombies near!'

The Plague

'Don't forget your phone,' Jude said.

'I won't!' Marie replied as she packed her handbag.

'What about your wallet?'

'I have everything! Have a good day at work,' Marie answered before walking out the door. Jude smiled, Marie had always been forgetful and rarely remembered everything when she left for work. Just as he expected, in under a minute he heard the opening of the door again.

'What did you forget?'

'The car keys! Love you!'

'Love you too,' he shouted as the door slammed shut. Jude collected his briefcase and folders before leaving as well.

One of the detriments of working at the laboratory was that it was very remote. One of the benefits was being able to afford a second car. The supervisors said it was isolated due to land availability, but Missi, one of Jude's co-workers, had a theory it was to stop the public from finding out about their project, as the research wasn't actually preventing food shortages. Everyone acted as though she was crazy. She did have a point though; they all knew it. There were some unusual rules preventing details of the project from leaking. However, Jude did what most people at the laboratory did: nothing. He didn't think it was worth questioning anything, given the size of his pay cheque.

As soon as Jude entered the workroom he went to his desk and started reviewing his old experiments on his computer. He had been stuck in a standstill for ages. His tests always constituted of one infected animal, and other non-infected animals. In all of his tests, the plague wasn't passing from the infected animal to the non-infected animals. He never usually reviewed his old experiments, but he had no other ideas. Luckily, he quickly found something intriguing. All of the animals had become infected, but they hadn't died soon enough. After that he'd changed to an extremely fatal method, but, what if the disease was too lethal? It was killing the infected animal before the plague could spread!

Jude slipped into his blinding yellow hazmat suit and opened the door to the experiments room. He shivered when he walked in, although it wasn't due to the cold. On every side, animals lay dead and sick in cages. He walked over to the experiment setup station and made a few adjustments to his usual method before returning to the workroom where he started typing up a report. He was flipping through the small booklet they had been provided that listed the specifications of the task when he noticed something peculiar. He quickly brought up a search engine and his hands flew over the keyboard. He found the information he desired and went to cross-reference it with the booklet. 'That can't be right,' he mumbled. He visited countless websites, but they all yielded the same response, one that placed many questions in his mind. He sat in his chair, pondering his choices for a moment before grabbing a scrap of paper and hastily scribbling a note in barely legible handwriting. He scrunched it up in his hand and made his way across the work room as if on his way to the file room. He slightly faltered at a desk, managing to discreetly place the paper down before continuing on to the file room.

Dusty files lined the bookshelves that ran through the middle of the file room, the brown carpet doubtlessly contained many undiscovered species of fungi and the aging walls were a ghastly shade of grey. So few people used the file room, so it was free from security cameras. It was the perfect place to meet Missi. She entered the room soon after him and walked over. 'You believe me?' she said.

'I think so. I found a problem in the booklet, about the reproduction rate ...'

'Yeah, I know. The plague is to be used on humans as a bioweapon ...' she said, as if it were a commonly known fact.

'What? It's for humans? I knew it wasn't for cane toads but ...' Jude faltered. He knew his superiors weren't always telling the truth, but this was worse than he could ever imagine.

'Yeah, it's bad. Now, as I was saying, if you trust me, I've got a meeting with a government official tomorrow. If you come it would make it more believable.'

'Uh, maybe, I might ...'

'You don't have to. Just let me know by tomorrow.'

'Oh, sure,' Jude said, taken aback by her up-front responses.

'I'll leave first. You wait for a bit after I go, to avoid suspicion.' She walked out of the file room, leaving it silent again as Jude pondered the implications of this new information.

When he returned to his desk, he looked at everyone differently. Did they know the truth? Or were they ignorant, choosing not to dig deeper for fear of what they'd find? Jude couldn't wait to get home as he had decided to ask Marie about it. He thought the decision would affect both of them, so they should make it together, but really, he was afraid of making the wrong choice. He was greeted by Marie at the door. She had a smile spread over her face.

'I have something to tell you,' Jude said.

'Me too!' Marie replied. 'At work today I got promoted!' Marie said. Jude was silent. 'Is there anything wrong? What did you want to say?' He found he was unable to ask her as it would ruin her happiness. He secretly knew that he wouldn't have been able to, he loved her too much.

'It's nothing. Good job darling!'

As soon as Jude arrived at work the next day he walked to Missi's desk. He had, despite his reluctance, decided to go with her. Missi's desk was usually covered in papers and notes, but today, it was completely bare, and Missi was nowhere to be seen. He immediately tried to contact her, but no response. Once everyone arrived a supervisor announced that Missi had retired. Jude was scared. If they could force Missi to leave, or worse, judging from her lack of contact, then what would they do if he met the government official? On top of that, he was due to hand in some results soon as he hadn't made any recent progress and he figured if he didn't, he would surely have to 'retire' as well. He didn't have any of the details of the meeting, so he could wait for a while before making a decision, assuming his experiment failed and he could hand in the failed results. However, his worst fears became reality when he arrived at his desk and found a scrap of paper. Written on it was an address, a name and a time in a nearly illegible scrawl. The time was merely an hour away. He suddenly remembered the experiment; if his findings were confirmed, the stakes would heighten as his supervisors would demand the test results. He ran to the experiments room and just as he feared, the animals lay dead in the cage. He took a deep breath, scribbled down the results of the test and walked back to his desk to make a choice.

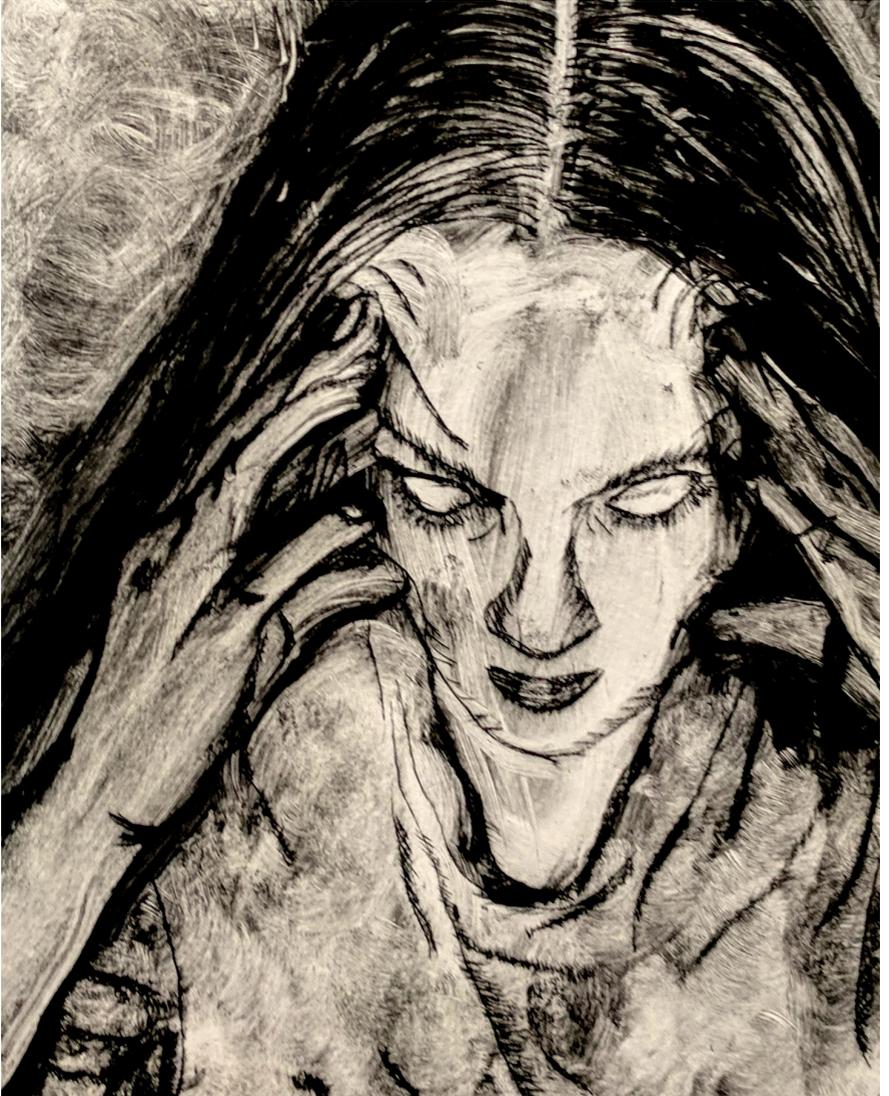
The sound of the lunch bell echoed through the workroom. Everyone was headed to lunch, but Jude was headed towards the exit. When he had nearly reached the exit, he turned instead into a small office. An old woman sat at a desk. She looked up as he entered.

‘Dr Trips, I have something to show you,’ he said.

‘What would that be?’

‘I’ve completed the assignment,’ he paused, taking a deep breath. ‘The plague has been finished.’

‘I look forward to reading your report, Jude,’ she said, giving a slight nod. Jude turned to the door and was about to leave when she spoke again. ‘We value your loyalty, Jude.’ Shivers shook Jude’s body, but he merely nodded and left the room.



The Perfect Pair

As I lay on the shredded newspaper, I awakened to the squealing children outside the class room. I braced myself for the next six hours of hell. Next thing I knew the bell went and the monstrous brats ran into the classroom.

'Oh my gosh I love this friendship bracelet, Courtney, purple's my favourite colour!' I heard Stacy yap.

It was chaos! Paper planes were flying in the air, Oscar's ball knocking them down. Nicky and Racheal were having a silly competition on whose hair was the longest. Edward and Oliver giggled behind my cage, about Edward's brother Jack's girlfriend. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine I was on a tropical island drinking carrot juice. However, I was interrupted by the constant chatter of the children around me.

Then Miss Malone came in and started booming at the children: 'SIT DOWN PATRICK YOU STUPID THING, MELONIE I HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE, THE BUNNY BITES, NOW SIT DOWN!'

The room fell silent, just the way I liked it. Everyone sat at their desk listening to Miss Malone criticise James's handwriting. I admired how well she shut the children up. I had tried a few strategies myself, for example I had bitten one of them once, young Abby, as Miss Malone mentioned before.

'Now, on with the class jobs?' Jenny suggested in a goody-two-shoes voice.

'Yes Jenny I'm aware ... I'M NOT AS DUMB AS YOU ARE REMEMBER!' Miss Malone growled.

I couldn't help but laugh, I just got Miss Malone's humour, it was a shame the monsters in the class didn't. If only Miss Malone was a bunny, I felt that we would be the best of friends.

'BUNNY DUTY,' Miss Malone said, raising her voice. This caught my attention as it determined if I either got fed, or let out of the cage to fend for myself.

'MELONIE.' My heart did a little jump. Melonie always gave me triple portions of what I was supposed to have. Which always led to World War Three. So, when I saw her skipping up to feed me I found a big comfy mound of newspaper next to the food bowl. I looked up to see the bowl overflowing with food and as she put it down I heard Miss Malone's voice summon that war.

'MELONIE, DID YOU FILL THE BOWL OVER HALF WAY?'

'Yes Miss Malone, but look at her, she is so skinny, you can almost see her ribs.'

'FIRST-OF-ALL MELONIE, DON'T BACK CHAT! SECOND-OF-ALL THOSE THINGS YOU CAN ALMOST SEE AREN'T RIBS, YOU IDIOTIC FOOL. THEY'RE FAT ROLLS! SHE NEEDS TO GO ON LIGHT AND EASY. AND LASTLY I'M THE TEACHER, I AM THE SMART ONE, YOU DO AS I SAY.'

Miss Malone and I just had so much in common, I mean what were the odds? We both needed to be on Light and Easy.

I looked over to Melonie expecting her to be crying and letting the teacher win the fight as most children do. However, the thing about Melonie is, she is stubborn, she stands up for what is right and doesn't get upset very easily, she just sees it as one big debate.

'I would just like to point out a few errors in the opposition's case,' Melonie chanted. 'First, the opposition states that I back chatted when in fact you asked me to answer. Secondly, you don't let me say anything and lastly you said you were the smart one, when in fact Miss Malone, I know I'm only in Year 2 but I am the smart one. Just because you are cruel to children, doesn't mean you have to be cruel to the class pet. And I'm not talking about Olivia Mihill who you make miserable, I'm talking about Trixie Twinkle Paws Hop a Lot Delight, OUR CLASS BUNNY!' Everyone in the room froze. Miss Malone pointed to the door of the classroom. Melonie stormed out, flicking her hair as she passed Olivia. I knew Melonie could stand up for herself but this was the next level. Quite entertaining, I thought. I looked out the window to see Melonie crying. If only I could be as talented as Miss Malone, she could make people cry by just looking at them.

When morning tea came, Melonie had to stay in and write lines. I could hear her sniffing as she wrote 'I will not fill the food bowl more than half way.'

'STOP SNIFFLING MELONIE, YOU ARE GETTING WHAT YOU DESERVE,' Miss Malone boomed.

'Why should I? Every human does it when they're sad. And I'm sad,' Melonie whined.

'Because, Melonie, it's hurting the rabbit's ears. You know that thing you care so much about? Of course you don't, you don't know anything,' Miss Malone sneered. She was always looking out for me. I just wished she would adopt me so I didn't have to stay a moment longer in this place. And hopefully when she adopted me she would change my name.

It was the end of the day and Melonie had very kindly left my cage door open. This was the perfect time. The perfect time to escape and live with Miss Malone. Without even thinking I hopped out of my cage and bounced down the hallway, through the car park and into Miss Malone's shiny blue car. I sat there, the leather seats cold against my paws and the strong smells of the crisps made me feel hungry. There I waited until Miss Malone hopped back into the car. I scrambled under a seat, trying to hide.

Once the car stopped Miss Malone got out, left her door open and went around to the boot. I leapt out through her door and ran into her garden. There was a patch of green lush grass at the front of the house. However, I kept hopping all the way up to the doorstep. There I waited for Miss Malone. When she came up to the door I saw she had shopping bags full of cabbage, carrots and other vegetables I was unfamiliar with. As she looked down and spied me she did something I never thought she would do. She laughed with happiness.

She reached into her shopping bag and pulled out a carrot. She let me nibble on it as she picked me up and took me inside. 'Oh you clever bunny,' she chuckled. 'If only my students could be half as smart as you.'

Life for a Leaf

Once upon a time in your backyard was a tree surrounded by grass. Now as you know plants are alive but probably in not the way you think. Although they may not be able to move freely, they can communicate.

‘Are you there Gerald?’ questioned Leith.

Now if you are wondering who Leith and Gerald are I will explain. Gerald is a strand of grass as young and lively as ever. Leith is a leaf who is growing old and wise as a leaf does in Autumn.

‘Yes,’ replied Gerald. ‘What made you wake me up when the sun is not yet up?’

‘I ... I am feeling my age.’

‘What does that mean?’

I would prefer not to say ... but ... um ... I think I am coming to the end of my life.’

‘What?’ shouted Gerald.

‘Just what I said,’ murmured Leith. ‘My life is ending and I have to face it.’

Now, most people might not overthink things when they see the ground is covered in brown leaves during Autumn. It has become normal to everyone but if your best friend was a leaf I think you would feel differently.

‘But why?’ Gerald asked.

‘Because I am a leaf. I come to life in Spring and leave in Autumn. It is just the way life for a leaf goes.’

‘Why?’ questioned Gerald in a sad tone. ‘Why does it have to be you? Are you still there?’

‘Yes,’ muttered Leith. ‘Although I wish I was not.’

‘Why? Why would you want to leave me earlier than you have to?’

‘Be—because.’

Now this is what it is like to lose a leaf: slow and painful. So next Autumn, have a thought for all those poor dead curled up leaves scattered on your path. Rather than stepping on them and hearing the piercing yet satisfying crunch, maybe avoid them and let them be.

The Kookaburras

Miles out of the nearest city, the old blue bus screeched to a stop. His formal grey pants unfolded as he slowly stood and made his way to the door. It creaked open, dust flying out of the hinges, and with a thump, he stepped outside. As the bus started to disappear, he took a deep, husky breath and straightened his maroon bowtie. A few minutes passed before he started down the worn path, the light shining through the trees casting shadows on the years of his face. Twigs cracked underfoot, and a gentle breeze blew along the treetops creating a highway for the shooting rainbow blurs of feathers. He travelled on, taking in all the details and comparing them to those that dwelled in his memories. Just as the sun hit the sky's apex, he came across a rusted shelter, aged just as he had since the years of love and attention.

'It's gorgeous, Freddy. We've got to have it. It's sweet but rugged ... just like you!'

Her voice floated through his mind as he approached the ruin, a scaly hand reaching out to feel the warmth of its sandpapery walls. All the days they spent there, he could almost feel the laughter shaking the fragile tin hull. All those times he had wanted to clear around it, so that people could clearly see it; tall trees hung overhead, showering tendrils of spiralling vines down on top of the shack, that then clung to the sides and produced small, dark blue berries that created the perfect camouflage.

'Don't go clearing anything! It's beautiful the way it is, with the vines and the berries. Make sure you don't eat them, though. Who knows what would happen?' She picked a berry off the plant and squeezed it between her thumb and index finger, releasing a pale green juice.

The wind whispered in his ear, a welcoming sensation, stimulating the hairs on his face. She was always sensible, but always hopeful, right until the end.

Caught up in nostalgic thoughts, he looked up and was greeted by a kookaburra, who laughed dryly and flew to a nearby branch. Curious, the man followed the bird, leaving the path to explore more of the ancient bushland. It was untouched, even since he had lived there. Large shrubs tumbled down the side of slight hills, the serene sound of magpie caws filled the air and the gurgle of a

small stream flowing over rocks and pebbles, perfectly rounded over the years, led the man down his way. He soon came to a pond filled with water-dwelling moss and gunk that would have smelt horrendous, had it not been for the water lilies. Everywhere. Poking through gaps in the water that the moss had not filled in time, encasing the edges of the pond like the rim around a glass lens. There, he stopped for a moment. He took a deep breath, allowing the sweet, hay-like scent of the beautiful flowers to fill his lungs and expel memories of the time he spent there.

She giggled, 'Stop splashing me! I swear, one more time—' cut off by an incoming shot. 'I told you, stop splashing! If you don't, I will be forced to unleash my awesome water-wielding powers down upon you!' She lunged at him, but was unable to catch him before he dodged, plunging herself into the grimy depths.

The lilies sparkled and shone, from where the man had subconsciously started flicking murky water onto them. A quiet sigh escaped his upturned mouth, picked up by the breeze and echoed across the pond. The tranquillity was comforting, however suddenly cut short by the renewal of kookaburra laughter. In a daze, he glanced around his surroundings trying to locate the mischievous shadow. As soon as he spotted the bird, it extended its wings and swooped down, dodging trees and tall shrubs, leading another path through the bush. Once he was ready, the man pinched the knees of his long pants and hauled himself up, stopping again just to catch his breath. He walked on, this time more aware of the hazy wind cocooning him like a soft blanket.

Pushing away the branches that hung over his path, the man pursued the restless kookaburra until he arrived at the great Moreton Bay Fig.

'There she is,' he huskily murmured. He stumbled to the base of the tree and put a hand to its wood, feeling for its heartbeat. He looked up, eyes lit with delight as he saw her, bouncing from branch to branch, pelting small fig fruits at him.

She called, 'I haven't seen you around here before. What's your name?'

'No matter my name ...' he responded, unable to avert his eyes from the beauty that stood before him. He had no idea how he'd found this place, he was only new to the area.

'Well then, Nameless, why don't you come on up? There's more than enough room for the two of us, but be careful!'

His back slid down the tree as he planted himself to the floor, and with big eyes, watched the timid boy and courageous girl jump around the old tree. The wind carried their feet, the sun's light gave them colour and his memory brought them to life. Their laughter rattled the eucalypts and shrubs up to hundreds of metres away, as the man sat locked, watching the life performed above him.

They sat in silence, legs entwined, listening to the sounds of the bush. He peered over at her face: mellow tan, freckly, small, deep pink lips, perfect eyebrows and striking eyes that reflected the wild blues and greens of the land. She caught him staring, and whispered 'What are you looking at?'

'You,' he responded.

'Me?'

'Yep.'

'Ok, if you like.' They continued to listen, only this time with less regard for the sounds of nature, and more for the racing beats of two young hearts.

As the sun's light turned from burning yellow to a swirl of deep orange and soft pink, the man's visions of youths started to change. The jumping from branches became flying, the passionate conversation became rasping laughter, until soon enough all that could be seen was the kookaburra, dancing with its mate. With slow breaths, as though he really had just relived his past, the man relaxed every muscle in his body. From the pounding of his brain to the very tips of his toes, he let go. Just as his head started to droop, he felt a strong gust of wind lift his chin. He glanced up, only to see his beauty, standing there in front of him. Her warmth radiated around him, giving him so much life that he burst up from the ground, right up into the air. He grabbed her by the hand and she pulled him along with her.

'Why, hello there,' he mumbled.

'Hello,' she cooed, her mischievous eyes poking out from under her lashes.

'Finally come to get me? I've been waiting for a while now.'

'I couldn't leave you here alone for too long, my darling, but I had to make sure this moment would be as perfect as possible.'

'Then what are we waiting for now?'

Together, they disappeared into the sky, watching the tree, the pond, the shack, the road, and the city, until everything disappeared into the dusk, leaving only the sound of laughing birds behind them.



Lost Kiss

It was so small.
a touch, a breath,
A moment captured in time.
The brush of skin in the cold wind.

The salt tinged the air as two
walked further down the rocky pier.
It was too long a wait, for this day.
Two humans, two hearts, one soul.

The passing years felt the waste of breath without the other.
They had balance with in both this life, and death.

The smile of her lips was the sweetest poison,
her lips wet with melon and berries.

She was a lover with hair of autumn leaves that fell as lovely as her tears.

He was a soul stretched tight across her stars.

From that first meeting there was
not a whisper nor a thought,
nor a kiss to be lost.

Excerpt from Somewhere Northeast of Here

Your dad moved the family out here in the middle of a thick, steaming summer, when you were 10 and bright-eyed and bubbling with anticipation. You spent the rest of the season with some of the neighbourhood kids. Harry, this tall stocky boy with a shaved head and a big gap-toothed smile, and Masha, sandy-haired and always scabby-kneed. The three of you played cricket in the street and dared each other to eat worms pulled from the creek and went swimming in Masha's backyard until the sun had carved angry red arcs across your backs.

It crept up on you one day, in the back of Miss Ross's Year 11 English class, when you were reading Auden. Then it came your turn to write a poem, and you wrote about dry creeks, naked dandelions and birds with clipped wings. At the time, you thought it was pretty good. Didn't overdo the rhyme, had some nice metaphors, all that. Reading it three months later, though, you realised two things:

- a) It was shit, and;
- b) It was about Masha.

One mid-September night, the sky flashed white and echoed with thunderclaps and you lay in the dark staring up at the shadows of the ceiling fan. And all you remember is wanting her there, to hold her close and quiet in all the softest spaces of your single bed.

Not long after you realised this, Masha moved down to the coast with this tall broad guy called Paul who came from out of town and cut down trees for a living. Her parents didn't like him, or his close-cropped hair, or the way he wore t-shirts that hung too long over his waistband. In the end, their cold, reserved resentment was what spurred her to hop in his black Toyota HiLux and drive down to his rented one-bedder in Lorne.

Portia Brajkovic
Excerpt from Ext. 2 Major Work

A month or so after school finished, you and Harry went to visit. You borrowed your Mum's car, woke up just before the sun and drove, racing the wind, down to Lorne. You stood on the long black road that wound its way alongside the cliffs and stared out across the beach at the distant, shadowy hills that held the water close. You both agreed it was beautiful, and, yes, Churchill was beautiful too, but not as much, and in a different way. You leant back on the hood of the car and soaked it in for a while.

Paul's place was small, the black pleather couch backed right up against the dining table, the bookshelf piled with crockery, DVDs, and old batteries. Back home, Masha's mum kept everything straight and ordered in pine furniture she shined with this Russian polish that smelt a lot like petrol and a little like lemons. There, everything had been white and airy and clear but here, Masha and Paul shared a shoebox of a room, the bed squished into the corner under the window, the mirror on the wardrobe covered in fingerprints. The balcony was small, and the view, for the most part, was shit, but if you stood on your toes and leant out a bit over the railing, you could see a brief triangle of ocean spread out between the trees.

Masha welcomed you warmly, as she always did—wrapped her arms around you when she hugged you, and kissed you lightly on the cheek. You wondered if she did this on purpose, if she knew what this closeness did to you, how it made your tongue go dry and seem too big in your mouth. She'd dyed her hair blue since you saw her last. A dusty blue, like old denim, that really should have looked stupid, and it would have on anyone else, but on Masha it didn't.

She stepped back and took in your face, the new shadow of stubble on your cheeks, your hair, longer now and curling around your ears. You'd shot up a few inches or so.

Masha nodded, smiling, 'You look good, Will. Different. Maybe it's the hair?'

You swallowed. Then she moved away and welcomed Harry.

Paul came out from the kitchen, and extended his hand to you.

'Welcome boys,' he smiled. 'I've heard a lot about you both.'

This guy was a perfect specimen. He had light honey-coloured skin and one of those stupid seashell necklaces, and his handshake was firm and practised. You took the Tooheys he offered, and forced out a thank you.

It didn't take you long to notice the hungry way Paul looked at her, or the way he slung his arm over her shoulders and pulled her into him. Masha looked up at him with wide eyes, with an open smile. You didn't know if she could see it, the way his eyes wandered over her skin. You wanted to tell her, and it felt wrong not to, but you reckoned it would have felt worse to intrude. So you kept everything hidden behind a steady smile.

That night, you hung around awkwardly in the kitchen as everyone ate Arrowroots and sipped coffee. Paul and Harry talked about the footy, but you had never really been a footy guy, so you just leant against the bench and listened and laughed when they did. Then Masha started washing the dishes, so you grabbed a damp tea towel from the bench and dried the plates she handed you, watching the steam circle slowly up from the sink.

The next day, you all sat by the local swimming pool, reclined on red plastic loungers, sunscreen smeared tacky over your chests. Masha and Paul lay back next to each other, his palm on her thigh, her face turned up towards the sun, eyes closed. Harry swam slow, steady laps in the pool. You tried to read, but of course

you couldn't, not with Masha sitting that close to you, near-bare and vulnerable, Paul's hand clamped down on her skin. It gave you a throbbing at the temples, seeing that, so you got in the pool and swam slow, steady laps with Harry, staring ahead of you at his wrinkled toes.

When you came up for air, you looked over at her and she was watching you, her mouth curved into a small smile, hand shading her eyes. You just stood there staring at her, her staring back, and then you forced yourself to look away. You watched a Band-Aid float by, and, nose wrinkled, pulled yourself out of the water. You shook your hands dry and bought yourself some hot chips from the kiosk.

You sat down and thought about how you wanted to offer them to her, and how you were going to, but then Paul turned around and kissed her hard and straight on the mouth, and she kissed him back.

So you ate them yourself, licking the chicken salt off your fingers.

Fee

I always wondered how everyone saw her in a way that was so different to how I did. It reminded me of what Fee always used to say: 'They can't see, they're blind except to black and grey.'

Fee always said things like that. It was how she saw the world and translated it into words. When the heavens opened and its tears drizzled down windows, others closed their doors to the dark sky and listlessly stared out the glass. Not her. She'd run through the streets like a lunatic, spinning and tripping in circles just to catch droplets on her tongue. Sam and Jo and all the kids from school laughed, but she didn't mind. What would life be without the simple pleasures, like rain, and dark chocolate? That was another thing she loved. Life was bitter, so chocolate should be too, she'd say. When Valentine's Day came around each year all the boys would give her roses. She'd smile and graciously accept them with the noble air of a queen. Then as soon as they were gone she'd toss them in the bin.

'Roses are a cliché. Too sickly sweet, plus they remind me of death. When my gran died we practically drowned in them—Mum had so many she palmed some off to our neighbours. They all thought she was mad, but accepted it as a symptom of grief.'

That was her explanation when I asked her why.

Maybe that was the reason why we became such good friends. We were unlike everyone else. Neither one of us was prepared to conform.

The main difference between us, however, was Fee was loud and I was not. Confidence dripped off her like honey. And she was beautiful. Unconventionally so. Two black beads that knew no depths for eyes; like a crow's. Pallid of face, a paleness so starkly contrasted against the redness of her cheeks, she bore a striking resemblance to a babushka doll.

But she did something to me. It was like she saw right through my grey façade; she parted clouds, she stirred thunder. And together, the two of us made a storm.

'So,' Fee announced as she collapsed into a beanbag, 'what's news in the land of Will?'

'Not much.'

I was doing what I always did on Sunday afternoons: visiting Fee. We'd been doing this every week since the start of Year 7, when our friendship had been cemented.

Fee's bedroom was a mess as always. It was filled with familiar clutter; scattered books strewn about the place, cut-up bits of paper from failed origami attempts, unlit candles simply lying around because she liked the 'mingling scents'.

I made myself at home, settling into Fee's old rocking chair by the window.

'Dad's on my back as usual, says he won't keep paying my school fees unless I lift my game. Dunno if he likes the fact I'm in the play, either. Too much of a distraction from work.'

'Ah, he'll get over it once he sees you can actually act. Took me a while to grasp the concept of Will actually being able to speak on a stage ... quiet mousey Will ...'

I chucked a pillow in her vague direction, missing her by a mile.

'So what's up with you since our last encounter approximately 48 hours ago?'

Fee tilted her head to the side as though lost deep in thought.

'Well, you know, just usual craziness. Sometimes I wish it'd all just stop for a bit, you know? Graduation keeps getting closer and closer, soon we'll be off at uni and our high school days will be a distant memory ...'

'Yeah I guess. Kind of psyched to leave it all behind though.'

'Aw Will. You know you'll miss it one day.'

'Yeah sure.'

There was a silence, brief and contemplative.

'So what do you want to do when it's all over?'

'What?'

'When we were in Year 7 you told me you wanted to be an astronaut. Is that still your dream?'

I scoffed. 'Course not.'

'Well, what do you want to be then?'

'I ... well it probably sounds stupid, because I'm not that smart and all ... but ... a lawyer'

'That's not stupid. And neither are you. You'd make a great lawyer.'

My eyes wandered to the window and looked out to the cloudless world beyond. 'What about you?'

'Me? I want to be a surgeon. It's always been my dream. Remember, I told you that way back when we were young idiots with no idea what we were doing with our lives. Some things never change.'

We laughed. It felt good to laugh. Just to forget everything else for a while. That was what I loved most about Fee, the way that we could lose any pretenses in each other's company. I loved the candour we shared.

'I think you would be a brilliant surgeon. The best.'

As she smiled, her eyes crinkled at the creases and her cheeks dipped slightly into dimples. She thought they were ugly. I thought it strange how a facial deformity could be beautiful. But I never told her. We listened to the way the trees whispered outside the window, and the birds chattered raucously within them. I moved my gaze to her and watched her in silence for a while. She kept staring at the outside world, entranced.

It was too dark to ride my bike home as I always did, so Fee's mum drove me back that night. She smiled at me from the driver's seat.

'Fee's lucky to have you as her friend.'

I stood outside my house for an extra moment before going inside. Night had fallen. It obscured the sky in its cloak of stars.

It was a Sunday, just like any other. Except it wasn't anymore. Not since the accident. Every Sunday for the past four months had been the same: dismal and empty, but it didn't stop me from coming.

Fee lay on her bed, her head propped up by several pillows, her face about 10 shades paler than usual. Her lips were fixed in a rigid line and not even a shadow of a smile passed over her. She glanced up to see me sitting in the chair beside her.

'What... why are you here?'

'Fee, it's me.'

She frowned. I thought I saw a fleeting moment of recognition cloud her eyes.

'I don't know who you are. Can you leave please? Open the window blinds on your way out, I want to see outside.'

The moment was gone, if it was even there.

'Just listen to me please. Don't make me leave just yet. Let me talk to you. I'm your friend.'

'I told you I don't know who you are! I don't know anything or anyone anymore! Just leave!'

'Fee.'

The energy had left her and now she was empty, deflated, like a balloon after all air and life has left it.

'I want to remember. But I can't.'

Slowly I moved towards the blinds. Drawing them, a wave of nostalgia crashed over me. All those days sitting by the window, side by side, watching the public pass by and the clouds overhead, floating everywhere that people go and beyond. Rain dribbled down on the other side of my reflection and I followed the trails with my fingertips. A constant throughout the turmoil of our school years, it had stayed with us when other things hadn't. It had become a symbol for us. A symbol of our friendship.

I felt her watching me, following my movements. She watched the rain as it trickled through me, drenched the floor and filled the room, building up higher and higher until she was floating in it. Her eyes met mine, and there was a spark of confidence I hadn't seen for a long time.

'You're Will.'

The words fell out softly but surely, like rain.

The Sound of Silence

The continuous beeping of the heart monitor, as it pulsed in time with her struggling heart, was no foreign sound to Dominique. It accompanied her every waking moment, drumming in her dreams and creating a constant tempo to her ever-changing boring life. She lay still on her raised bed, surrounded by machines, as drugs slowly drowned her contaminated insides, allowing her to breathe.

Cracking her eyes open to her dimly lit surroundings, she glanced around the room, seeing the white walls, chairs, and even photo frames. Everything was so pale and flawless, untouched by dirt. The white mocked her, proving that it was unstained and perfect, the exact opposite of her. She closed her eyes, wishing for a break from her haunting surroundings and white shadows.

Eyes closed, Dominique could hear the muffled bird calls from the trees outside, seeping into her dark room through the curtains. She could feel the small pain in her arm and hand, where the bridge from machine to her body was crossed by different potions. She could taste the remains of last night's pills and feel her breath enter her body and crawl back out, struggling to leave her polluted lungs. With her breath came the sickening smell of sanitiser, a smell that only came when something was infected, like her. All these senses bounced around in her head, as she individually focused on them, hearing and feeling the song of her life being played and wishing for silence.

A small knock on her door jolted her from her trance as a faceless nurse came into her cell, not waiting for a response to her knock. She carried Dominique's next dosage of poison that was to enter her body and try to battle the poison already there. A string of words escaped the faceless lady as she moved around the room like a robot, doing her chores without a thought or care for Dominique. The swish of Dominique's blinds brought an unwelcome sound into her room with a sharp light, which stung Dominique's eyes. Dominique squinted her eyes through the new unwanted light to see the bird, which had previously been singing to her, fly away. The woman came up next to Dominique and spoke to her in a high-pitched prickle of words, which blurred together to create a nagging ostinato in Dominique's right ear. The

nurse tilted her head, pressed a few buttons on one of Dominique's machines and then left, feeling satisfied with herself that she had done something useful.

Dominique slowly sat up in bed, her back cracking as she moved it for the first time in over 12 hours. She looked up at the monitor and saw that everything was wrong inside her, as usual. She started on her morning routine, a pattern of movements so familiar to Dominique it was almost like breathing. She swallowed her last tablet and swung her legs off the bed, joints stiff as her heart rate rhythm slowly increased on the monitor with her increase in movement. She found it hard to move, especially since there was nothing really worth moving for. Taking a big breath in, Dominique did the only thing that was worth doing, and that she was good at: causing trouble. Her mind worked in a systematic way, never letting anything show on her face, always doing it like the nurses did their chores. She enjoyed causing grief but never put too much energy into it, as she never put too much energy into anything.

She scanned the room, methodically weighing up her options of what would cause the most trouble. This was her way of getting back at the world, a world which took her independence and confidence from her with no second thought. She hadn't done anything wrong, she had never asked for her body to decay beneath her or for her family to abandon her with the label of freak. The horrible memories of her tainted past came flooding through her brain, sending waves of shivers through her body as well as a small stream of tears. She shook as the droplets fell from her face, feeling the cold trail they left in their wake. She saw her so-called friends' faces as they looked at her with disgust and her parents' faces as they looked at her with pity, the continuous question bouncing in their eyes of why they kept her. She could hear her heartbeat increase and her breathing become shallow, but nothing else. She couldn't feel the pain of betrayal or the anger of denial that had kept her up for hours on end when she was younger. These pictures flashed like a movie on fast-forward, carrying sound and light from the past, but not the feelings.

The only feeling she felt was annoyance at how she had lost all her motivation. She had used up all her anger, her hate for her life and her

situation. She had run the river dry in her eyes and had run out of synonyms of hate. But she hadn't run out of mischief. She laughed at the thought of her ever-lying back and just letting people drug and experiment on her. She was a human and although her passion had perished with her confidence, her spirit retaliated to the thought of her ever submitting to a reality of being a mute lab rat. At the empowering thought, Dominique stalked around the room, trying to find her next target to harm.

She moved to her inmate, the machine that was both poisoning her and keeping her alive. She leant down and slowly tapped the button to silence its grating tones and alarms. Flicking all her power points off, Dominique slowly rose from the ground and moved around the room. She walked into the bathroom, a plan blooming in her mind of how she could craft the most disruption to the nurses' boring lives.

The cold tiles numbed the soles of her bare feet, sending chills up her spine. She slowly reached for the tap, her movements refined and purposeful. Closing her eyes, Dominique listened out for the bird above the rush of water and heard its familiar tune. She sat still on the side of the bathtub and just listened to the song of a world that was made to kill her, yet kept her alive in her tiny machine-filled cell. She felt the cold blanket of water roll over her hands and feet, peeling open her eyes to see the bath overflowing. She smiled at the mess she was causing and at the relief she was achieving at seeing the white carpets and curtains darken with the kiss of water.

She slowly lowered herself into the tub, feeling the water hug her like a cold blanket. She took a deep breath in, her trachea closing in around the air, trying to capture it in her body. She felt her muscles gradually loosen and surrender to the cold, lowering her body further into the water, covering her mouth. She closed her eyes and just listened. The consistent ostinato of her machines was absent as they were all sleeping, her heartbeat was dimming and her bird was singing. The lack of new drugs entering her body was replaced with a more comforting sensation. The cool waves became one with her body, as she stopped feeling the pain, stopped listening to her faraway song and heard her heart's beating fade away. She slipped further into the water, losing her senses in the piercing yet soothing lap of water. Her drum faded out and her melody flew away, allowing her to finally hear the sound of silence.



Society of Keloid Girls

The sharp needle punctured the silky fabric repeatedly, pricking Miyoko's crooked fingers. She snatched her hand away before the droplets of blood could stain the pattern of white light and black rain.

'You've chosen a beautiful fabric!' said Mr Tanimoto. 'What's your inspiration for this garment?'

'It's a dress, the same style as the last one I made with my mother, before the bomb,' replied Miyoko.

Mr Tanimoto squeezed her shoulder gently, murmuring his condolences.

'Have you heard from the Atomic Bomb Commission?' questioned Miyoko hopefully.

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Mr Tanimoto said, 'They reminded me that they only carry out research, not treatment. But no matter, we will raise the money ourselves for your surgery.'

Miyoko knew that every piece of clothing the girls made was valuable beyond belief, but there were 10 of them who needed the money ... and only so many clothes they could make.

Miyoko looked past Mr Tanimoto at her friends working diligently in the background. Shigeko was hunched over a whirring sewing machine, rhythmically feeding it fabric. Little Shigeko, once kind and shy, was now perpetually fearful, surreptitiously trying to shield the mottled purple keloid that spread across her face. She shifted her gaze to Tomoko, who was struggling to cut swatches of fabric with her disfigured arm, her fingers bent into a permanent claw by the healed burns. They were the *hibakusha*: explosion affected people, unwanted by employers, rejected as potential wives. Miyoko pulled the stiff collar of her shirt tighter around her neck, feeling the coarse material chafe against her tender keloid. She did her best to hide the lattice work of scarred tissue, but everyone knew it was there.

Miyoko breathed in the crisp air as she surveyed the broken buildings cowering in the ashen shadows of the night. Their empty frames creaked and groaned like uncoiled hinges, silently pleading to be reconstructed. At dusk each evening, Mr Tanimoto and four other ministers would stand in front of these buildings, taking

turns to preach to a small crowd who had no other source of entertainment. They would say that it was no use blaming their government; that the hope of the Japanese people lay in repenting their sinful past and relying on God.

Miyoko didn't believe in God.

If he was real, how could he allow such suffering? Where was he now to help them all? No, Miyoko knew that she would have to take responsibility for herself. No God or government would come to help.

Miyoko stiffened with dread as she rounded a corner, preparing for the onslaught of torment. Three men lounged on the remnants of a staircase, encased in a thick fog of cigarette smoke. She quickened her pace and clutched her collar tightly around her neck, but it wasn't enough to keep the obscenities of loathing and scorn from pouring out of their mouths. It was the same every day: treated like a disease, repulsive. On the day, alongside her fellow schoolgirls, she had been helping to clear fire lanes. They were all out in the open when the bomb exploded. And now, in their time of need, they were ostracised, always to be viewed as *genbaku otome*: Atomic bomb maidens.

The next day, Miyoko was talking quietly to Tomoko when Mr Tanimoto burst into the tiny room waving a letter in his hand.

'Girls! We've had a breakthrough,' he exclaimed. 'I have been liaising with a journalist, Shizue Masugi, from Tokyo. She has written to the United States to help raise funds for your plastic surgery.'

Mr Tanimoto began to read the letter:

3-4-5 Umeda
Osaka City
March 12, 1955

Dear Mr Tanimoto,

Your concern for the *hibakusha* girls has moved me greatly. I have written to the embassy in Washington and they replied with this disappointing telegram:

'We are concerned with the Hiroshima Girls Project generating unfavourable publicity. Tanimoto may try to take advantage of this trip to raise funds for the Hiroshima Memorial Peace Centre, his pet project. He is looked upon here as something of a publicity seeker.'

This is a distressing reply, however, Norman Cousins, the editor of *Saturday Review*, has been aware of your efforts and has pledged to help you and the girls. He has found two doctors, William Hitzig and Arthur Barsky of Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, who are willing to supervise the medical operations.

This is a wonderful opportunity for the girls and preparations are underway for their arrival.

Yours sincerely,
Shizue Masugi

Miyoko was breathless with wonder. Finally! A means to end her suffering: to stop disgusted gazes, to actually interact with other people! She'd be able to get her keloids removed.

She was tugged out of her delirious state by a scoff. Turning to the source of the sound, she was dismayed to find Shigeko sneering.

'Why is this amusing?' questioned Miyoko.

'I'm not going to America for my surgery,' Shigeko said scornfully. 'The Americans were the ones who made us like this, deformed and grotesque. Why would I ever want to enter that country?'

Miyoko was utterly confused as to why Shigeko wouldn't want to remove her keloids. She had the opportunity to look normal once more and she wasn't going to take it!

'Please come with us,' Miyoko begged.

'I'm not going,' stated Shigeko firmly.

Mount Sinai Hospital with its brown brick walls and plate glass windows was an immense contrast to Hiroshima's blood-spattered shacks overflowing with injured people. Only two months ago she was at home, and now she was in New York City.

Doctors Hitzig and Barsky stood formidably in front of her, inspecting her keloid. They murmured between themselves, their words clipped, until finally they motioned for her to change into a paper thin gown.

That's it, no escape now.

Miyoko tried to still her trembling hands, pressing them into the rigid gurney. Endless white walls pushed closer and closer. She shouldn't be doing this. Complications, that was their excuse after Tomoko's death.

The mirror reflected Miyoko's fingers that poked and prodded her neck, circling, and circling,
and circling.

Porcelain skin, no scars or bumps, just smooth, tender skin.

What had she done? She had just erased the evidence of their destruction.

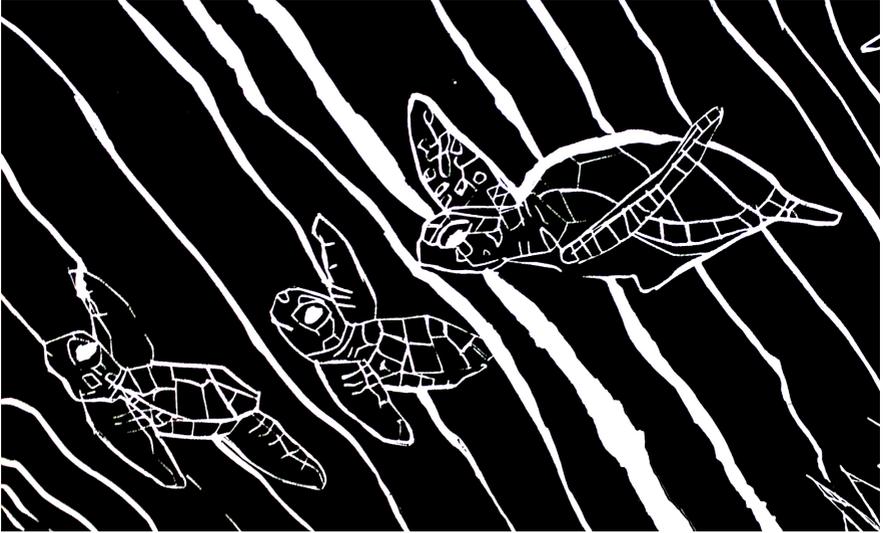
Yet she was ordinary once more. No one would gawk or sneer at her. A second chance. Maybe Shigeko's everlasting scorn was a price worth paying.

She should be grateful.

Snowflakes

From the first day I met you,
I knew you were a treasure
For friendship is a gift
And you always get the drift that,
True friends are never apart,
Maybe in distance
But never in heart,
We never part because
The best type of friendship is unexpected,
And every tall person needs a short friend,
And you know that
We've been partners in crime,
From the very start.
But just remember,
If we get caught,
You're deaf and I don't speak English.

Snowflakes are like best friends
they're ALL different
and they're ALL beautiful.



Three Siblings and a Ring

Beth Peterson's stomach flipped as the blaring noise of the church met her ears. The tears flew down her face as she turned to see her sister fluttering down the aisle. Nathalie Peterson felt nothing but joy at the celebration of life and hope in a wedding. Beth, however, felt the walls closing in on her, as she pushed the doubts knocking on the edge of her mind away. Her eyes swept from Nathalie to James, both preparing to make the biggest decision of their lives. Beth blinked the sensation in her eyes back as she tasted the bile burning the back of her throat. Her eyes dropped to Nat's hand, seeking the comforting presence of a memory; when she saw it, the sound of her heart cracking rang in her ears.

The ring. Emerald with a circle of diamonds surrounding it. The first present Beth ever gave Nat. The first one she bought herself. The emerald in the ring brought out Nat's green eyes, the diamonds perfectly contrasting her pale complexion. The very notion of taking it off never had occurred to Beth, yet now it was to make way for one of many rings that James gave her. She raised her tear-stained face to the altar, the hollowness in her chest more prominent than ever before. As the ceremony ended, she waited for some reaction, some tug on her heart to remind her that everything was okay, if Nat was happy. Yet none came. And Beth thought none ever would.

The car ride to Dunbar House passed in a different world to the one that Beth was in. She felt the heat beat against her skin as she watched the now-browning leaves fall from trees. Beth felt the well-practised words fall from her lips as people told her the lengths of their proudness, demonstrating their vanity in Beth's mind. She was fine with pretending. Had done it her whole life. The smile, the words, came second nature to her as she attempted half-heartedly to calm the raging storm overtaking her body. She stared at the distance, wondering how it would feel to never need to worry about how people saw you or your family, when the wave that she had been struggling to control crashed over her, leaving her body frozen as emotions hit her, one by one, bringing the truths that Beth had kept down to the forefront of her mind. The first tears woke her from her trance-like state, and she raced, the wind whipping her face, until she collapsed, a rough stone bench beneath her.

'Beth? Beth? What's wrong?' Ollie worried.

'Of course, you're here. You're always here. Until you leave me too,' Beth said bitterly, her hands writhing in anger across the bench she was sprawled on.

'Beth? Leave you? Is this about James because I assure you we checked him out. Only the best for my sisters,' he assured. She forced her head up, feeling her emotions get ready to pounce, like a lion in waiting.

'No, it's just ...' She paused, looking at him for a moment, trying to contain her words, before continuing. 'I just—well, you see—I—umm, everyone is leaving and now there is a pit in my stomach which is never going to be filled,' she spilled, the babbling only just beginning.

'Well—'

'And then there is the fact that she's leaving, I mean who does that?' Beth screamed, the sadness turning to anger, the force of it pulling her off her seat.

'Beth—'

'Why hasn't she even talked to me? Am I such a horrible sister that she can't wait to exploit the first opportunity to get away from me?' Beth blubbered, the last words nearly inaudible through her tears. The words were a truth so harsh, she couldn't meet his eyes for many minutes. When she finally felt herself running out of tears, she looked to see him. Sadness turned to surprise. Ollie was long gone, the dark horizon swallowing him. 'My own brother can't stand me,' Beth thought, the tears already pressing against her eyes for release.

'Honey?'

Beth's head snapped up in the direction of the voice. Before her stood Nathalie, with Ollie close behind. Before Beth's reason could stop her, she sprinted towards Nat and threw her arms around her neck.

'I-I-I'm s-s-orr-r-ry. I r-r-ruin-n-ned-d everything!' Beth sobbed. She felt Nat's arms surround her, breathing in the smell of honey and citrus in Nat's clothes.

'Honey, I would never leave. I'm right here. It's all fine,' Nat soothed, gently rubbing circles on her back. Beth felt another pair of arms engulf her, looking up to realise they were Ollie's. They stood like that for what seemed like forever, until they heard an unexpected voice.

'Beth?' James whispered, hesitantly. 'I'm sorry, I should have talked to you or—' Beth's arms interrupted him, as she wiggled out from her hug and pulled him into one.

'I was overreacting, it's fine,' she insisted with a sad smile as they separated. He smiled back, patting her shoulder lovingly, before turning to the reception, mumbling to Nat that speeches were soon. Nat inclined her head before turning to Beth.

'I should go, but I meant to give you this earlier. Sorry I didn't,' Nat said, while handing Beth an envelope that she had been holding behind her with one hand. Beth took it hesitantly, not opening it until Nat had turned to leave. Beth, suddenly very glad for Ollie's comforting presence, opened the envelope, her hands shaking. Inside, a beautiful emerald ring, with the words 'Keep it safe for me' written on the inside of the envelope. After some time of silence, she turned to look at Ollie.

'She is wonderful that sister of ours, isn't she?' Ollie marvelled, staring at the ring. Beth thought of the past months. The stress, the love, the anger, pent up emotions.

'She really is,' Beth whispered, with her first real smile in days.

Marathon

Every now and again, when a cloud stole its way across the sun's line of vision, the girl lost sight of the deep ocean floor. But she knew it was there. You may lose sense of your north, south, east or west, but there was always an above and a below. Few things in life were as certain. Even the things that were the same could morph into something different—like the form of a seaweed leaf that swayed in the current, or the shape of a jellyfish that slipped through your fingers like tiny, silent ...

'... *Ghosts! The ghosts are coming to get you!*' When they were young, her brother would swear that the unique cacophony of water-blurred sounds you could hear when undertaking a marathon swim were whispers from ancient sea ghosts. *They're trying to coax you under,*' he'd joke. But she knew Michael was only trying to scare her. If they were ghosts they weren't scheming but whistling notes that echoed like the air inside a seashell or a symphony composed by ...

... Poseidon was her brother's dog—a rangy mutt with a stunted, yellow tail. She could picture Poseidon as she lifted her head trying to get some sense of her position. She could picture Michael throwing his stick and Poseidon bolting out into the waves, finding the dead piece of wood and clutching it between his teeth like some newfound treasure. Sometimes Michael would run into the surf with the stick held high like Neptune's trident, and once he started swimming no one could catch him. He'd dive and disappear for what felt like an eternity, and she would hold her breath, waiting for him to ...

... surface. The surface was now a mellow, dusk-time pink. She stopped, looked about, spat the salt, circled her feet, breathed, searched, swallowed. She tried to focus on what her coach had told her about getting out in front. He used to say that every time she 'cut free' the water that ran over her skin was hers and hers alone—that no human had discovered those billions of water particles in that combination ever, and in moving through them, she'd claimed them before any man, woman, girl or ...

... *buoy* ... she'd missed the seventh buoy! She should have been more careful, paused to count each marker. Her father had this expression about wiser perspectives in hindsight. Was that what was happening now? Was she swimming in an ocean of hindsight? In hindsight perhaps she shouldn't have made the choices she'd made, but that pinch of time between 'then' and 'now',

it came and went so quickly, and in a split second you were forced to look at the world with new eyes, because that was before, and this was ...

... after Michael had drowned she'd moved to Alice Springs. Everyone was shocked. They'd warned her—that she'd miss the tangy smell of salt, the crusty feel of her hair after an early morning swim. They'd said she'd feel land-locked, imprisoned by a dry, red moat that stretched for kilometres, the only sign of water being rain that, after months of parching, shot downwards at its victims like angry shards of ...

... glass ... the water was as clear as glass, a moonlit crystalline blue. The girl looked down to see a dolphin slip beneath her, then out ... to see Michael ... stroking just ahead! So she pushed harder, felt the water slip from her eyes in salty tears of purpose, kicked a kick that scattered the lantern fish that carried her like fireflies forward, until she reached, one arm outstretched, to take her brother's ...

'... hand me a torch!' The man had her by the wrist. He pulled her up, from underneath the wreckage, where the breeze was cool and the air was tinged with urgency. She heard voices ... something about the boarding house collapsing ... about her being trapped underneath, for close to two whole ... 'How on earth did she manage to climb above all that? Her arms are cut to shreds, like she's physically clawed her way out. Miss, can you hear me? Quick, get her a glass of ...

'... water,' she said. The man thought she wanted a drink, but in truth she was answering his question. '... didn't climb out ... swam.' She wasn't delusional. She knew where she was and what had happened. She could still hear the blast that had come from the boarding house kitchen. She could still feel the strut across her middle—the one that had pinned her under the endless sea of debris where she was 'below' and life was 'above'. So she'd swum. Up. Out. Counting the buoys, trying not to lose sight of where she needed to ...

'... Go!' The man lifted her onto a stretcher—and she floated, mere feet above the ground, the endless sea of stars interrupted only by the gauzy silhouette of her rescuer. 'You look like Michael,' she said, but she doubted he heard her over the ambulance's siren. 'Lift her in boys. One, two ...'

... Three weeks later the girl was running along the shoreline. She held the stick high and called to the dog behind her: *'Are you ready?'* she laughed. Poseidon yelped in excitement. She stretched her arm and launched the stick as far out as she could manage, then she followed it and the dog into the water, diving without hesitation, head first into the waves.

The High, But Not the Mighty

Laughing and giggling, the other girls went down to the swimming pool. But of course, with their blonde hair and blue eyes, everyone was sure to love them. They walked towards our coach, already holding the skipping ropes for them. Not for me though. His black eyes glared into mine. I sighed. It was going to be another long session.

‘Hurry up,’ he barked to me, as the other girls collected their skipping ropes. I was too smart to snap back a clever retort. As always, I had to collect my skipping rope from the bag away from the coach. As I passed him, I could feel his dull eyes boring into the back of my head.

I joined the end of the line for skipping. Once the second hand reached 12, I would have to start jumping up and down, in time with my hands and the rope. There was a moment of silence, then the thudding of feet and the harsh whacking of skipping ropes. The hand reached 12. I groaned inwardly. I absolutely despised it. What was the point of bouncing up and down, staring into space and panting hard? The only result was the stench of sweat running down the neck and beads of it popping in different places on the slim and tanned bodies of the other girls. The hand was ticking ever so slowly. Coach was still glaring at me. I could tell because the feeling was in the air. The feeling of hatred and suspicion. In addition to the slapping of skipping ropes and thudding of feet, there was quiet giggling and chattering, and of course, I was left out. I felt like a pigeon in a flock of parrots. There was a whistle nearby, meaning that it was the end of the skipping session.

I stopped almost immediately and gathered my skipping rope in my hand. I folded it in half once then twice, followed by a simple knot in the middle. My feet reluctantly followed the girls who were putting their ropes in the bag. One step after another. Right, left, right, left, right. I shoved the rope back in the bag and headed for the lane I always swam in, and surprise surprise, it was the lane at the very end.

I picked up my Persian Red swimming cap. Putting my jetblack hair in a ponytail, I let out a long breath. I angled my head in a way that it would be easier shoving my cap over. On top of the cap, I put on my royal blue, Women’s

Vanquisher 2.0 mirrored Speedo goggles. I could almost hear the cool water calling out to me. Before I jumped into the pool, I scanned my eyes over the whiteboard which had the first two instructions.

Warm Up

I dived into the pool, with feet pointed and hands outstretched. The water relaxed me instantly. The ripples brushed against my pale skin. My tense muscles loosened. The first two instructions were pretty easy. 400 metres of freestyle, with fast kicking and tumbleturns. I hit the wall and arched my body in a ball and turned. I finished a lap. Seven more to go. The water hit my face and there was a sting, but I welcomed the pain. It was nothing really, compared to the snide remarks from Coach. I hit the wall once again for the eighth time. I lifted my head out from the water and took a breath from the crisp air.

Main Set

Coach, who was explaining the next set of instructions to one of the girls, paused and glowered at me.

‘Why aren’t you swimming Jennifer? Everyone else is swimming. All except for you,’ he snapped. ‘You stupid little Asian thing,’ he muttered under his breath.

I wasn’t thinking quickly enough to stop my retaliation.

‘Well, isn’t it obvious? I’m faster than anyone else here and I’ve finished,’ I hissed.

Shock covered his face.

‘Fine then. Whatever. Wait until everyone is finished so we can do the diving part of the session. Oh, my goodness. You are such a handful,’ he thundered while rolling his eyes at me.

Everyone came to the end of the pool where I was and got out. It was time to dive.

Diving was such an amazing part of swimming. It was like diving into a soft layer of cake. The surface of the water was the icing and the water itself was the actual unbelievably delicious bread.

I got onto the diving block and got ready. With a sharp blow of the whistle, I stretched my arms and legs. The first impact of the water woke me up. I was ready to do this. My strokes were even and acute. My legs kicked hard and although my feet were quite sore from hitting the surface repeatedly, I was determined to beat my personal best. The water slapped my face but my arms slashed it. One, two, one, two, one, two. Breathe in, out, in, out.

With all the anger and fury in me, I kicked, stroked, panted, and hit the wall. I was done. I knew I had beaten my personal best.

'32.74!' Coach yelled out to me. 'Go get changed. You beat your personal best. Get out of my sight. You ruin it.'

I smiled. He wasn't getting away with this utter disgust and stupidity. I could do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. It was for him to learn a lesson.

With all my strength, I pushed him. Not onto the concrete ground, but into the water. Gasps filled the air. Then silence. With that done, I stalked up the stairs and into the changerooms with a smirk on my face.

I was Jennifer Jeong and just about nobody was going to exasperate me, unless, of course, they wanted to end up in the pool.

If Shakespeare Was A Modern Celebrity Chef

Dear Reader,

My warmest welcome to all who wish to venture into my world of cuisine! This book contains many of my most famous recipes and written articles—including 'To Bake or Not to Bake' and 'Romeo and Julienne', many of which have been enjoyed by royalty!

As you may or may not know, I am Shakespeare. William Shakespeare. The man whose one-of-a-kind cooking style has entranced millions, from royal to poor to middle class, all around the world. You may have studied me in culinary class, or perhaps seen my face in cooking commercials. I do realise that language has changed in the last 400 years or so, and thus, I am glad to announce that this book has been translated most marvellously by many great culinary teachers and professors around the world! I have included them all in my acknowledgements.

A little about myself? Of course, of course. I live a mostly quiet life with my wife in Stratford-upon-Avon. I had to leave for a few years doing restaurant work. My children have grown up now ... I guess I'm quite the old soul. (People do say I look surprisingly young for my age. Must be all that organic meter and rhyme I use.) I also used to be just a server, before I started dealing with the small things like appetisers. The restaurant most famous for serving my dishes is the Globe Restaurant, in London.

Well, I better get on to showing you some of my recipes, shouldn't I? This first one is very general—a template almost—for one of my most well-known dishes. I do encourage you to attempt carrying it out, and serving to others. But it's all your choice what you want to do with this book for now.

Cheers,

William Shakespeare

A Classic Play

Ingredients:

- 500g iambic pentameter
- deep characters (numbers may vary)
- new settings
- 1 unique storyline
- a sauce base of comedy, tragedy or history
- a hint of new philosophy
- a dollop of love
- a rhyme, to cap the ends

Method:

1. Pour the iambic pentameter into a bowl along with a uniquely borrowed storyline. Mix well.
2. Fold in a hint of new philosophy to the mixture—slowly, while mixing. Continue until mixture resembles dough.
3. Dust the dough with rhyme, and flatten the metre to preference.
4. Spread a thick layer of sauce base of your choosing onto the dough. Sprinkle with deep characters and exotic settings.
5. Brush the play with a dollop or two of love before sending it to the thespians.
6. At the theatre, set the time to 17 minutes past sunset.
7. Collect your play from the oven and allow to cool. It will soon be ready to be served to a mass crowd by the acting waiters.





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 works. 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 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 powerful as putting yourself and the world onto paper, whether for yourself or others. Revel in your creativity—it makes all the difference.

Elise Dempster

