

Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2018

Contents

<i>Cover artwork – Kate Ledger, Year 10</i>	
<i>Artwork – Nina Lane, Year 10</i>	4
We Don't Need Feminism Anymore – Rachel Herron, Year 11	5
The Zoo – Zoe Freedman, Year 9.....	7
Lucky Ling – Wendy Xin, Year 9.....	11
Sombre Fragrance – Shoshana Auerbach, Year 8	16
Waardah – Georgia Austin, Year 12.....	17
<i>Artwork – Anna Kaljo, Year 10</i>	20
Depravity – Neisha Heath, Year 10	21
Day In, Day Out – Trista Catelan, Year 7.....	24
The Sapling – Tiarne Lo, Year 12	28
Salted Cod – Saachi Brajkovic, Year 11.....	31
The Lonely Bird – Sophie Lotz, Year 9	38
<i>Artwork – Alexandra McLaughlin, Year 10</i>	43
The Slavery of Lincoln – Emily Chepurin, Year 10.....	44
After Liesel's Death – Miriam Arnold, Year 10.....	48
Seven Mile Beach – Alyssa Chong, Year 7	51
<i>Artwork – Francesca Aron, Year 10</i>	53
I Will Never Forget – Samara Talintyre, Year 9.....	54
The Mango Tree – Armaity Pavri, Year 12.....	58
Toujours – Phoebe Santow, Year 10	62
The Red Flood – Claudia Saywell, Year 12	66
Heat. Sweat, Blood. Death. – Jana Tomasevic, Year 11.....	69
<i>Artwork – Sasha Barakate, Year 10</i>	72
Walls – Olivia McDonald, Year 12	73
<i>Artwork – Milla Jarvis, Year 10</i>	78
<i>Artwork – Georgina Sundich, Year 11</i>	79

Foreword

This year's edition of *Ascham Ink* celebrates the creative output of students from Years 7 through to 12.

The writing – whether narrative, discursive piece or poem – proves that the students of Ascham School can pen bold, thoughtful and unexpected pieces that address a diversity of ideas and concerns with aplomb. Australia's live sheep trade, teenage mental health, the toxicity of certain social scenes, women's rights, arranged marriages, Gothicism, *The Book Thief*, the glory of NSW's beaches and the majesty of flowers are just some of the topics that are explored here. Accompanying the literary pieces are substantial works from Ascham School's Art students.

I do hope you discover something here that enthrals and moves you.

Mr Lorne Johnson
Editor and English Teacher, Ascham School



Nina Lane, Year 10

We Don't Need Feminism Anymore

Yes, that's right, you heard it here first, folks: we don't need feminism anymore! Nope. All problems to do with gender equality are now solved. We've cured the horrific diseases we call Sexism, Misogyny and Inequality. Feminism has been deemed no longer necessary by the white, straight, teenage private school boy from Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, who sits across the table from me, in a café, in Bondi Beach, sipping away on his \$7 Frappuccino.

A monumental time in history. I feel honoured! So incredibly honoured to be a part of such a milestone in this contemporary world! Women's problems have, all of a sudden, just gone! Disappeared! Just like that! I can *finally* walk home by myself late at night and not worry about that weird Creepy Man who would constantly stalk the dim, shadowy maze of streets and lanes that I used to dread walking through. A girl at a college party somewhere in America all of a sudden has no fear of the Star Football Players who once would be able to take advantage of her and get away with it. Now, because of the rapid elimination of rape culture, men treat women with the highest regard and utmost respect. Girls all over the world now have the best education available to them. Young girls in developing countries are learning to read and write instead of being married off to that Creepy Man five to six times their age.

The wage gap? No more!

The glass ceiling? Shattered!

What was she wearing? Doesn't matter!

Want kids? Great!

Don't want kids? Even better!

Women of all shapes, sizes and colours are being celebrated on magazines covers and runways. Wave goodbye to all your insecurities and unrealistic beauty standards that society once laid upon you because we don't need feminism anymore! All of this is thanks to the heroic Frappuccino-sipping boy who has

suddenly decided that all these problems, which women all over the world, face every single day, are no longer affecting us. Thanks, mate!

I just sit there aghast, shocked, stunned and speechless. My mouth falls to the floor as soon as the vile sentence spews from his lips. It was like he had been practicing The Announcement for months. His ignorance and complete lack of understanding of life, in general, scalded me like the blistering coffee I held in my hands. The conversation was going so well. He came off as considerate, courteous, humorous...until he revealed his true colours. It was going great, but after he finished his Frappuccino, he witnessed the same old Creepy Man sitting on a bench beside us whistle at me and drool. But Frappuccino Face must be right! He seems so sure. No, I reckon we don't need feminism anymore.

The Zoo

Sometimes, I sit naked in the tree at the back of my house, in the rain. It makes me feel serene.

This party is not serene – this party is not really a party, it is an excuse to drink. It's Friday night drinks, it has migrated from the office to Tony's house. I had to force my feet, to grind myself down the brown-clump carpet stretch of corridor to get here, as if the floor was ceramic and each ridge in my sneaker grips was the prong of a fork, scraping. My ears are still ringing. I told Tony I would come at 12:02, over instant coffee, and since then the porridge I had this morning has formed itself into some kind of nebulous fist in my intestines. Or a lump of clay, or tar. Perhaps all three. So we stand here, about ten of us or so, in Tony's modern lounge room which looks like a box and is beige. I stand in a corner and finger the artificial potted palm, concentrating on its texture, and watch, and listen to the room fill, and to the wine glasses fill. This room is expansive but it feels small. It's layered with tastes – beer and dust, cork coasters, TV meals, half-eaten Fantail, chest with sweat, cigarettes. On top of it all, bodies – pushed, squeezed, propped up in heels and belts, dishevelled. Carol must have brought her kid – in the centre of the lounge room, little Holly is sprawled on the couch, bug-eyed.

'Who brought the bubbly? Ohlovelydon'tmindifdo'

Chink, gulp. Carol has been enveloped in the teeming mass around the kitchen counter, scooped up gracefully by the jaws of this party, swallowed. She will be churned in its stomach, along with everyone else – homogenised. Someone belches. The TV noise has started to trickle through the clinking and chinking, idle-slurping conversation – though the layers. I can hear Holly is watching David Attenborough.

'A male blue bird of paradise is advertising for a mate. He'll need to do more than flutter his wings to impress this female.'

The birds here, too, jockey for best position. They strut, they pose. Each has added something flamboyant to his coat – a pocket scarf or pin. One stands at the false fireplace, leaned, one foot crossed in front of the other, and pretends to be aloof. This is a commendable effort, such a position can be difficult to maintain. Another pours drinks with flicks of his wrist.

‘A fine wine – good vintage, Burgundy. Full-bodied, stunning depth of flavour...’

‘This bird prefers to sing than to dance.’

The receptionist and her tittering women pass their eyes across the spectacle with mild interest – they are amused at the males. These are their finest garbs, and this is their finest prancing.

‘A jaguar is hunting – he stalks from a distance. He’ll take his prey by surprise.’

Kristin, though, seems to welcome this advance. She stands with her hip jutting, arches and blinks, turns around again. She gives what might have been a tinkle through the sheen of her syrupy lip gloss. To me, it sounds like a gurgle. He’s transfixed. She wiggles. He’s salivating.

‘In a community of monkeys which depend upon one another for survival, grooming is...’

A particularly loud burst of laughter from the kitchen interrupts my snippet. Kristin has retreated to the bathroom. Some of the other women are there too. Ritual preening. A two-way exchange. You get a free freshen-up, I get a sense of superiority and a ‘you owe me one’. And there’s an order – a hierarchy – see I can groom you if you’re an established inferior, but I can’t groom anyone I’m inferior to – we can’t risk ‘one-upping’ the leader. I’m offered lippy. Kristen has some on her teeth – I can see in her smile, which parts her lips like they’re an elastic band which has long since lost its stretch.

'The vultures descend on...'

'Nibbles! Nibbles, anyone?'

Tony sets a fusion Nigiri platter on the middle bench to appreciative hums. There is a mad scramble for food – to cram, to stuff. Co-workers with chips in their nostrils, viscous wine; nectar dribbles from lips, stains chins. There are more arched backs and digging elbows here than there are cheddar puffs. Dolmades, cheese, laboured breathing; a woman in front of me has her face to the ceiling, hand above her mouth, pushing an orange-pink conglomerate mass down her throat. It looks like mucus. Grunting. Someone is retching. I think I will retch.

A hand on my shoulder – Mel, the girl who answers the office telephone.

'Hellooooo. Back from cloud cuckoo land!'

Cloud Cuckoo Land. How fitting. I let her guide me to the small group of people still at the bench and plop a piece of sushi into each of my hands.

'Mummy, look!' Oh, mummy, what's it *doing*? Mummy, come look at what it's *eating*.'

Her voice sounds like it has been extruded from a pepper grinder – around and around, pitch up and pitch down – whiny. Fascinated, horrified, fascinated, horrified.

'Mummy!'

We shake the crumbs from our chests and process into the lounge room – we are adults.

'This praying mantis must mate before the killing winter arrives – it is his last chance. He latches onto her shapely thorax and cautiously inserts sperm into her abdomen. Mating can last for hours, but not this time. She devours his head. If anything, his dying spasms increase the amount of sperm delivered.'

'Oh how revolting.'

Now it is we who are bug-eyed, swallowing, bobbing our heads, patting at breast pockets for handkerchiefs to dab our necks. This is intense viewing. I stand at the coffee table and leaf through Tony's magazines. Some girl wearing very little is being chained, and I imagine Tony leering at it, just as he leers at barbaric mantis sex on screen. Just as we all do, mesmerised. I let the cover fall.

'Holly honey, why don't you go into the kitchen. Tony will make you a hot chocky.'

Somebody paws at the remote. I feel bile in my throat. I feel like I'm drowning in cod liver oil, in molasses, I feel like I've swallowed an onion, I feel nauseated. Nauseous. I slink away, suck in the air outside the house like it's a tonic. Perhaps, I can sit in the tree tonight.

Lucky Ling

The night had fallen quickly. All over the city, the street lights shimmered in the drizzling rain, the spectrum of oranges and whites swaying and oscillating like the koi in an imperial pond. In the narrow side streets leading away from Xin Tian Di, drops of rain ricocheted off faded commercial canopies and onto the mandarin peels and cigarette butts littering the road. The tip-tap tip-tap of rain steadily beating against battered walls was almost lethargic as the ebb and flow of habitually overworking businessmen, shielded under the fluttering canvas awnings, funnelled into dingy restaurants that promised shelter and reprieve from the tension of Shanghai's business skyscrapers.

Ling pushed her way through the stream of the late night workers. She breathed heavily. The tempo of her high heels quickened like a wound up metronome. Her tote bag swung uncontrollably as she hurried towards Lucky Cat restaurant. She was late. How Ling loathed working the late shifts at the restaurant, but it was the only job that allowed her time in the mornings to complete her group projects, to save money of her own, and to satisfy her parents' expectations to gain work experience. After all, a child's first duty was to satisfy their parents' wishes.

Ling, you're lucky that your generation have so many job opportunities. You must gain experience now if you want to earn big money later.

Ling sped the last few metres. Her slight pant made softly swirling clouds in the gradually warming winter air as she briefly paused at the back doorway. Her dread overflowed her as she took a deep breath and trudged inside like a criminal into the courtroom. Inside, pools of boiling oil in frying woks sputtered and hissed angrily as stacks of bamboo steamers smothered the air with its humidity. Her breath no longer made cloudy patterns. Her heart constricted with nervousness as the head chef stopped his furious chopping and frowned disapprovingly down at Ling. His eyes were condemning as he glared at Ling.

'Put on your apron,' he commanded, before turning back to his meat knives and sliced shallots.

'Yes, of course, sorry,' Ling murmured, averting her eyes before escaping from the angry heat in the kitchen to the relative safety of the waitresses' counter.

Her body drooped at how narrowly she escaped her head chef's wrath. It was just her on the shift today, she noted. Ling dropped her bag on the bleached white surface of the table and looked in disdain down at the waitressing apron – a metallic print of a lucky cat emblazoned on concrete grey. She loathed its lifeless colours, the ever-smiling cat, but she couldn't disobey the head chef. In her mind, Ling was balancing the benefits and drawbacks of wearing the apron when the words of her mother intruded in her unruly mind...

Ling, you're lucky they are tolerant of your irresponsibility. You must show your respect and gratitude by always obeying your elders.

Having finally dredged up the willpower to don the apron, Ling was engulfed by the rough material's sour vinegar odour.

She saw that just three of the tables were filled. The usual circles of families were gone, replaced by lonely late night stragglers in rumpled business suits. The normally boisterous rumble and murmur of conversation was now subdued like background music. The near silence seemed strangely peaceful for Shanghai, the city that sleeps less than New York. Seeing no customers in immediate need, she opened up her bag and took out a stack of pristine white papers and brightly coloured textbooks and placed them strategically around the objects on the counter: a pile of menus, a laptop and pin pad paying machine, and a happy welcome cat that obediently waved its arm to and fro, day after day. Sometimes Ling wished she could be the lucky cat, forever happy and willing when doing his menial job. Scanning the room again, then double checking that the head chef was preoccupied, Ling began to study for her upcoming finals.

Ling, you're lucky the tutoring let you get into such a prestigious school. You must study hard, score well in tests and reports, and graduate at the top of your class.

Ling kept studying, barely distracted by the soft clicking of utensils and the slurps of customers drinking liberally from their coffee and tea cups. The welcome cat's arm swinging tirelessly counted down the seconds to the end of her shift. She was so absorbed by her work that she was startled when the welcome cat tonelessly spoke a welcome, a welcome that was scarcely heard at night. Ling automatically stood to greet the newcomer.

Ling, you're lucky you come from such a respectable family. You must always maintain a polite reputation and never lose face for us.

A short girl with a sharp cheekbones and eyes shielded by designer sunglasses shouldered open the door and sauntered into the restaurant. The wind outside made her floral blouse flutter before she turned back and shut the door with a resolute thud. She turned back around to the waitresses' counter. Her full glossed lips pulled upwards in a wide grin that positively radiated joy.

'Ling! I haven't seen you in ages!'

'Hi, Mai.'

She had electric blue streaks in her black hair.

'Oh you shy thing. Knowing you, you're still trying to be perfect for your parents.' She looked pointedly at my pile of study materials across the counter, 'Loosen up, little sis. Their rules don't make sense.'

She had a Gucci handbag. 'I thought you'd be less...'

'Less what?' She caught my stares, 'Less...successful?'

Ling's mind spun from the sudden appearance of her sister, at how much she has changed. 'I don't...'

She suddenly sobered. 'Mother says you must obey your elders. But here you are studying when you should be looking out for your guests.'

Ling looked guiltily at the dirty plates scattered on all tables. Then at a sleeping guest whose phone was ringing.

'Why? Because mother tells you to study too.' She paused for a few seconds. 'There's a reason why I chose to be kicked out of the family rather than follow their dumb rules.'

The disbelief had slowly grown and morphed into catatonic shock. Ling's mouth slacked. Her mind was numb. After all these years, she had thought her parents' words were law. But seeing Mai so happy tonight stilled all her previous thoughts and overtook her mind with dangerous ideas. Thoughts of independence. Of freedom. Of controlling her own destiny. Her eyes blanked as her mind worked furiously.

Mai took off her sunglasses as she saw her sister scrunching up her features in confusion. She smiled again, this time with pure winning affection.

'Take the rest of the night off. You think over things. I'll cover for you.'

She took off my apron. She closed my study materials and put them back in my bag. She turned off the power point that spoke the welcome speech. The lucky cat stopped waving. Then, Ling snapped her eyes and grabbed Mai in a fierce hug, as if her entire mind has rebooted with a revelation.

She burst out of the restaurant... a nightingale from its cage, a lion from its chains. Outside the rain never faltered, but Ling ignored it. The rain is the first sign of the coming spring, when animals were roused from their winter sleep and when fresh leaves grew from withered trees. A stray cat hissed at her before running away. Midnight in Shanghai – Ling rejoiced for her new found freedom. But she paused at the familiar sight of a black Audi parked on the road outside, its window rolled down.

‘You’re sopping wet, Ling. Hurry up and get in here,’ her mother’s voice called from inside the car.

She opened the car door and stepped in. She closed the door behind her. Inside a cup of hot soy milk awaited her.

‘Ling, we’re lucky to have you. We must always stay together, no matter what.’

Sombre Fragrance

Step into the train
as irises kiss you
a fragrant goodbye.

The poinsettias
that lure you
to Valence.

And you told me
your secret recipe
that sultry afternoon.

Sharp tones,
warm tones,
vanilla, musk, myrrh.

A base tone of violets,
with a heart-tone
of Mystery.

A top-tone of roses
the scent
of our story.

Let the fragrance ignite.

Waardah

Hannah was awake. She drew back the white curtains to reveal the sky, painted in streaks of rose pink by the rising sun on the early mid-April morning. Vapour trails crisscrossed the sky, leaving a patchwork of fragmented memories in her mind. She lay in bed for longer than usual, thinking, and drifting in and out of sleep. The past two weeks had moved slowly, and Hannah had struggled through each night. Her once brightly coloured dreams now felt grey like the gnarled, steely branches of the trees outside, exposed and vulnerable to the icy air that had arrived early this year. It was Easter, Good Friday, a sombre day for the family. A knock at the door and her sister's voice interrupted Hannah's contemplation.

'Hannah,' Zara whispered. 'It's Easter! Let's bake something. We always bake on Good Friday, remember?'

The anguish of the last fortnight intensified as Hannah realised this would be the first Easter she baked without a guiding hand. She looked at her little sister and smiled. Zara glowed with energy that was a remedy for Hannah's solemn mood. In the kitchen, a rose-scented candle was burning on the counter amidst a sea of cards and fading photographs in old frames. Their mother was already up, gathering the dead floral arrangements that had accumulated. In past weeks, the house had become an endless field of wilted flowers. It wasn't unusual per se. The kitchen table was always adorned with flowers – they lived next door to a florist – but this was excessive. She plucked a single rose from its bouquet and placed it in a small vase, positioning it in a beam of morning light by an open window. Her petals had begun to fall off, but she still emanated an elegant beauty.

'Good morning, Mummy!' Zara exclaimed. 'Hannah and I are going to do some Easter baking.'

Their mother sighed and smiled gently.

'What a lovely idea. I'm sure Teta would love that. How about you bake basbousa? It's in the recipe book she left for you, Hannah.'

Basbousa was Hannah's favourite dessert, and nobody made it quite like Teta did. Ever since she was a little girl, Hannah would live for the idyllic moments they spent together as she sat upon the counter in Teta's kitchen, watching in awe as her grandmother combined the ingredients to conjure up the magical treat; dipping her finger into the sticky syrup to sneak a taste, listening as Teta told stories of her childhood in Sudan. Hannah had always been mesmerised by the grainy sensation of semolina on her tongue.

'Are you *sure* it's not sand, Teta?'

Even as her health declined, Teta managed to bake basbousa every time Hannah visited. Darting in and out of the pantry, Hannah searched for the ingredients. She didn't need the recipe book; visions of Teta baking were instinctively ingrained into her memory. Zara perched upon the counter, watching Hannah measure, pour, stir. Hannah instructed her sister to place an almond in each diamond sector of the dough before placing the dessert in the oven, as Teta had done. Aromas of lemon and coconut percolated through the house as the cream-coloured dough baked.

Removing the tray from the oven, Hannah smelled the comfort awaiting her in each bite of heaven. She drizzled sweet syrup over it. The sisters' eyes met in eagerness while they each nibbled a diamond of basbousa, still deliciously warm. Hannah savoured the taste of her childhood – suddenly her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. The normally neutralised zest of the lemon in the syrup was overbearing. Each bite lacked the floral, velvety essence Hannah remembered. The delicate texture was perfect, the crust echoed the sands of the Sahara Desert that gave the basbousa its exotic appeal. But the dessert missed the soothing flavour Hannah had cherished since her very first taste all those years ago.

'It's not right!' Hannah snapped, feeling beads of salt water stinging the corners of her eyes.

She paced up and down the kitchen, trying to trace her mistake. Where had she gone wrong?

*

A voice stirred in her head, *Listen carefully, Hannah, every ingredient in basbousa is essential. You must not forget anything I teach you when you come to make it on your own one day.*

'Why would I ever bake it without you, Teta?'

*

The day's momentum slowed and like a wilting rose she slouched into the sofa. Closing her eyes, Hannah replayed the hours spent with her grandmother, following her instructions step by step. First, semolina. Second, coconut. Third, lemon. Fourth...

A cool breeze from the open window woke Hannah from her daydream, carrying with it the scent of the lone rose standing in the breeze.

'That's it!' thought Hannah.

Rushing into the pantry, Hannah began her quest for the essential ingredient. She frantically searched every crevice, when finally, her fingers brushed against a tiny object hidden behind the bottles of olive oil and vinegar. It was a tarnished and discoloured bottle no bigger than her index finger, with a pink lid and faded Arabic writing. Only a few droplets remained, but it was all she needed. She carefully drizzled the last drops over the basbousa, inhaling the familiar scent she yearned for. She closed her eyes gently, holding onto the transcendent moment. She sensed the presence of her grandmother, Rose.

As she slowly opened her eyes, Teta's soft voice echoed in her mind, and Hannah remembered. 'What makes basbousa so enchanting is the rosewater,' she recalled, as the last rose petal floated and fell to the floor.



Anna Kaljo, Year 10

Depravity

On the 31st of May 1854, a young, and relatively fair maiden, having recently experienced the untimely death of her sister, which resulted in constant mourning and hence hopeless ill attention from her father, was, on this day, wandering through the roads of an evidently abandoned street. The name of this maiden was Annabelle Hawson, and the street on which she was walking, having been observed from a nearby sign, was labelled Depravity. Her thoughts first focused on the peculiarity of a street having such a title, and soon after, she began to think of what circumstances had occurred which had led to its name. However, before she could ponder, her eye was caught by a certain house. Its ancient air caused it to stand out dramatically among the other clean, modern houses; the house seemed, to Annabelle, to be in a state of derangement.

A feeling of excruciating superstition. Annabelle inspected the abode further. As she crept closer to the dilapidated house, a cavernous terror flooded her body and despite the humid weather, a cold air passed through her lungs. Although she knew her suspicions was ludicrous, she was not able to fight a deep trepidation from brewing within her. Despite such feelings, she was inclined to continue into the house, knowing that she had plenty of time until her father would notice her disappearance.

The walkway leading up to the house was cracked and bent, enabling persistent weeds and dandelions to climb, pleading for sunlight. Sparse remains of paint hinted at the house's former prosperity, and, under Annabelle's cautious push, the door begrudgingly creaked open, allowing a musty odour to fill the air. It was quite hot now.

Delicately removing her jacket and gloves, she began to explore the environment she was surrounded by. She clutched her dress firmly. A bead of sweat dripped off her nose onto her quivering lips. The lonely silence that reigned, was only disrupted by the whistling wind, piercing through small slits in the stone. As she passed through the open rooms of the first floor, her eyes glanced fearfully on the

door positioned at the top of a steep staircase, and she almost thought that she heard murmuring sounds within.

Each step creaked more than the last, and the light grew less as the windows became small and sparse. Eager to explore the room then retreat, she pushed forward the door apprehensively. The room was unlike any other in the house. It looked as if it could still be in use; flooded with dolls and dresses, there was no doubt it belonged to a young girl, possibly of an age similar to her unfortunate sister. The gloomy light, reflecting through the cracked windows, instead of dispelling her fear, assisted it, for, by its uncertain rays, she fancied she saw shapes flit past the curtains and glide into the obscurity of the room. She felt a warm breath on her shoulder.

'What's that?'

A shriek, laughter.

Annabelle, after flinging herself around and dismissing her wild imagination, noticed a ripped piece of paper placed, almost deliberately, within a crack in the wall. A sense of foreboding at first restricted her from inspecting the paper. Nonetheless, a few moments later, Annabelle found herself with a picture grasped tightly in her bare hands. She observed the picture to be of a girl; she was smiling, but her eyes were lifeless. The girl bore a remarkable resemblance to her mother. She shuddered. Her mother.

Annabelle had not thought of her mother since her sister had passed away. She remembered little, excluding few cheerful memories from childhood. Even the current location of her was completely unknown. The oddity of this circumstance, however, was that she was unaware of why she had no memories concerning her mother.

She pondered the possibility of the room having once been occupied by her. Again, her thoughts were disrupted by the same voice, 'please'. This time the voice was breathy and pleading, though unemotional.

'Is anyone h-here?'

Annabelle's trembling voice was answered with nothing but a silence so dreadful that she would rather someone had replied. She was afraid more of nothing than of something. It was irrational, nevertheless, unavoidable.

'There's no one, Annabelle. Stop fretting so much. Father always tells you not to fret...'

Whilst Annabelle said this, she began to remember.

The dagger which had been wedged abruptly between coarse fingers and the wicked smile which had slithered across her skin. Her small sister who had been playing innocently unaware of the horror which would soon befall her.

Annabelle, almost fainting with terror, was reminded of that day, and, more importantly of why she had pushed it so forcefully from her memory.

The cavernous eyes which had dwelled deep in her mother's head could now not be shaken from Annabelle's distressed state. She was transfixed by the blood seeping into the purest white fabric on her sister's breast, and, abstaining from looking down she felt a thick liquid on her own breast. A tear fell onto her cheek and then was immediately greeted by a flood of others. Falling back, almost senseless, onto a small rocking chair, her countenance, from a state of distress, transformed into impassiveness.

Forevermore, she would rock back and forth, thinking only of her mother's hand plunging deep into her sister's heart. The eternal curse of mourning. She rocked back and forth.

Day In, Day Out

Portia's perspective

Sweat fills the warm, sticky air of the bus depot, as the last of the overworked and overtired drivers clock off, the corners of their lips pointing down and the wrinkles upon their bushy brows even more dominant than their protruding guts. Swiping each and every one of their cards as they walk by is a disgusting job. I almost wish I was wearing gloves. My hands are becoming sticky from the moisture encased around each Opal card. The stale smell of the rotting sandwich in the lunch tub of one of the drivers makes me almost want to be sick. With each inhale, a warm sensation comes driving up my throat, threatening to burst out. I cannot be sick. I cannot be sick.

'Next,' I call impatiently, becoming increasingly irritated as these sloths end their tiring day. I know they don't have it easy. Lots of abuse from agitated businessmen needing to get to their meeting on time; or the school kids with their pathetic excuse for a free bus ride. Blah blah blah. It doesn't take away from their hideous nature.

Done. Finally done. I look at the doors and am about to bolt out.

'Portia,' that high-pitched whining voice cannot be missed.

'Mm, yes?' I reply less than enthusiastically. I know what this means, and the answer has to be no. No, I'm not going to cover the graveyard shift for you, Grace. Yes, I do actually have a life, Grace. In fact, it's my fifteen year wedding anniversary, and we had planned on spending the evening together at home.

'Any chance you can cover me tonight? This cough keeps getting worse, and the kids need to be picked up from school. It's double pay anyway, dar!!' she says with a look on her face that couldn't scream 'I'm lying to you Portia' any louder than it already is.

‘Say no, say no, say no,’ I say in my head. Why always me? Portia, the pathetic forty-six-year-old bus manager, can’t say no to Grace, the thirty-something-year-old with a young loving family waiting for her at home. My palms start to sweat as I feel my grip getting tighter. Becoming increasingly agitated, I see Grace looking quizzically at me as I still haven’t responded. My lips pursed at the sight of her and the thought of Zac’s cold tuna bake sitting cold on the kitchen table.

‘I’ll take that as a yes, then?’ Grace said as she grabbed her bag to leave.

The passiveness rises within me. I no longer want to stay in this hell hole for longer than another second. Not that I have anything waiting for me at home, but that’s not the point.

‘Sure thing, Grace. Would love to.’

Grace’s perspective

The smell of the station lingers under her nose, so far from the smell of the divine perfumes with their tantalising, musky scents that were sprayed by the colleagues around her in the firm. What a fall from grace, she thought to herself in defeat and lugging her change of clothes in her old Country Road sports bag, stained from leaking lunches and sweaty gym towels.

‘This is literally the last place I pictured myself six months ago.’

Looking around the busy CBD street I see men and women in beautifully tailored suits, with their leather suitcases and earphones, continuing their crucial conversations from meetings of the day. I am completely invisible to these people.

I hurry through the bustling crowds of peak hour, past the lines of Ubers and taxis being filled, quicker than stores on Black Friday. It doesn't bother me, it doesn't bother me, it doesn't bother me. The warming thought of going back home fills me. I close my eyes as I wait for the bus to take me home to the only bit of normality that is left: Peter.

I met Peter on his first day at Catelan's, a New York law firm that was becoming increasingly successful and reputable amongst law associations. It was left to me to give him the tour around the pretentious and miserable office. Yep, I can do this. The only thing is I struggle not speaking my mind.

He was wearing a brand new ill-fitting suit that made him seem all the more human, in comparison to the other partners. He smelt like bath soap, the imperial leather bath soap that is left in your grandparents' spare bathroom for decades. He looked easy, simple and relatable. A rare find in a place like this.

I watched him climb the ropes and watched him become an overnight sensation at the office. When we first spoke, I helped on a case, and we stayed up all night. Usually, this would bother me, I'd ask for overtime, even a day off. There was something different about him. He was the reason I showed up each day. Even when the tensions in the office were rising, my head remained high so that I had no idea of the turmoil occurring around me until the day it hit me in the face.

I remember it so clearly, every single word that was said. It was 9:30, about an hour and a half after I entered the office. I had one cup too many of my morning coffee and was jittery and sweaty. I could hardly look straight or focus as I was called into the meeting. I had been so stupid not to realise what was coming. I was blinded by this happy feeling of love, which had walked into my life so suddenly, I wasn't ready. I was let go. Just like that. Disposable. Gone. Not needed.

Which is what lead me to be here. Working as a systems manager at the Bondi Junction bus depot. Organising timetables, resolving disputes, dealing with strikes and attempting to keep a bunch of unhappy individuals that bit happier.

Shortly after losing my job at Catelan's corporates, Peter proposed. He lifted me from such lows and showed me that he was there when I needed him. This man could love me through anything. And since then, we built our little family.

I press the buzzer two stops before my house. The walk after the day helps me calm down before I get home. It's natural, and I run through the events in my head. What happened, as well as where I want to go. How much longer will I be doing this for? How many more jobs can I be unsuccessful for? How much longer will Peter stay with me? Is he that committed to me, even with these moods, this job, my lack of motivation?

Knowing he will be there with the kids when I open the door. Like he has been for the past 5 years. It warms my entire body, and I instantly relax. Calm, breathing, excited to be home. Walking faster up to the front door, across the path we built as a family, laying each brick yourself to save money. The lights are off, which is strange. I open the door. I drop my bag to the floor in confusion as my house is silent.

The house is quiet, different to what I'm greeted with each afternoon. There are no giggles, screams or laughter. They're gone, everyone's gone. I run upstairs and open the wardrobe. His clothes are gone. Everything is now gone.

The Sapling

The ebony sky enveloped him and, through his coat, a crisp wind nipped like a terrified wasp. His commitment to religiously paint at dawn saw him revive what she had forgotten. As his wife's carer, the ardour of his morning masterpiece was worth the sacrifice of sleep. Each brushstroke of the revived flora renewed optimism into her faded leafy-green eyes, rekindling hopefulness he had not seen for quite some time.

*

The line of pills that slithered down her parched throat was only a temporary ease to the insidious beast festering within her. Every morning, he habitually drew back the curtains and escorted his wife to her daily reprieve, the window. There, the sublimity of the garden reminded her of living. On a good day, she was transported to new worlds: the magnificent Balinese gardens they visited on their honeymoon. In her mind, the windows stimulated eternal gardens with aromas of jasmine, citrus and bright tropical blooms consuming her with liminal pleasure.

Today, however, autumn leaves crusted like filo pastry and shuddered in the callous breeze, fluttering onto the concrete below. She adored the tenacious vine, reaching for the sun in hope of renewal after each season. With the change in temperature, the aching returned more rancorously. More painkillers.

He gave up on trying to take her outside. She did not want to see herself struggle past the door like some haggard old woman, when she was in the prime of her youth.

'Have you noticed the vine?'

He wondered what vine she was referring to.

She sensed the foliage in the enclosure was shedding its radiance like a tormenting reminder of fate.

'That vine,' she pointed feebly, 'its leaves are almost gone.'

'Yes dear,' he reassured her. It was only when he repositioned her head on the deflated pillow and covered her quivering body with a blanket, he noticed. Bereft of life, the relics of the drab grey bark peeled away from the trunk and a pile of scorched leaves shivered in the corner of the courtyard.

His plan was to confront the intruder that penetrated through her bones: the venom in her body turning her into a lifeless carcass. She pulled her sleeve down to conceal the offensive graffiti of cannula scars. Shaky hands travelled through her thinning hair, the last remnants of her femininity that shed like leaves. He had to do something.

The next morning, he carefully freed himself from his wife's embrace. With his plan in tow, he silently exited the room to retrieve the equipment prepared the night before. Hair whipped his face as he mounted the ladder. He began to paint, restoring the vines' vitality with each brushstroke. Inhaling the icy air, the hefty restrictions upon him, as her carer dissipated. The artistry of life, like the sapling on a vine, was now a potent elixir.

Elated, he returned for his wife's morning ritual. She smiled gregariously.

'Look! They're bright, healthy... breathing!'

Majestic sapphires of colour had begun to sprout on the vine. She attributed the rebirth to the change in weather and an earlier dawn shower. He had not witnessed her in this state for months; a refreshing baptism of hope budded.

With a hot itching sensation at the base of his throat he coughed in futility. His chest erupted as he twisted his face and sneezed.

'You're wheezing,' her voice rung.

'It's the weather.'

She moved into the kitchen and switched on the kettle.

'Camomile?'

He noted the role reversal as she retrieved two porcelain mugs and aligned them on the wooden bench. Hot fever rose into his temples.

In the proceeding days, her strength progressively rejuvenated, as his declined, the infection spreading like locusts scratching at his insides. She no longer needed his assistance to the chair; the sinister influenza nailed him to the bed like a coffin. Dread drilled his chest with worry. He was aware that the paint would fade if he could no longer be the faithful pilgrim to his dawn ritual. The vine's revival was in jeopardy.

Rattling cough.

Wheeze,

 breathe... pain.

 Chest ...

 collapse.

*

Inside the room alone, she was terrified by a sudden downpour that relentlessly whipped the windows. As life was no longer shared, it was now her duty to draw back the curtains. She hoped to find relief from what lay beyond the window, but the vine was now a guilty reminder of her revival. Any comfort had drowned in the savage storm that violently shredded the foliage, like prey in the jaws of a lion. She leaned into the glass. Blistered paint peeled from the wall like shedding skin, exposing the naked brickwork. Then she realised...his sacrifice. Oh, why did the leaves fall at all?

Salted Cod

Sitting there, in the front seat of your boyfriend's Audi 80, you dread going inside. The house is small and badly kept, red bricks stacked one story high, somewhere in the middle of nowhere in Strathfield.

Darcy's halfway up the patio stairs when he realises you still haven't moved. You aren't frozen in fear. No, it isn't quite fear, more an overwhelming dread, a foresight into the battle that is to unfold, that fastened you tighter than any seatbelt. In your peripheral, you see him turn and notice you sitting there.

'Liz!' he calls.

He shakes his head, muttering under his breath as he makes his way to your side of the car. You shut your eyes, sighing deeply, listening to your heart hammer in your chest. His footsteps approach, but before he can open the door you snatch your purse from the back seat and get out. You smooth down your hair and check your lipstick in the rearview mirror. The sun lashes at your back, and you look up, marveling at the boundless clear blue. Arms crossed, Darcy stands in front of you, one eye squinting against the glare bouncing off the car. His face is twisted with concern.

You roll your eyes, walking to move past him, but he grabs your arm gently.

'I know how cruel she can be, but please.' You try to pull your arm free but he only softens his voice. 'Please,' he places a hand on top of yours, 'just play nice.'

You want to send your eyes heavenwards again, but his furrowed brow softens yours.

You nod.

*

There are people on this earth who – thanks to a perfectly gaping chasm in their chest or perhaps underdeveloped synapses – are entirely devoid of human emotion. This woman is one of them.

She stands at the head of the dining table, aggressively skinning potatoes. It's dark inside, the only light trickling in from between the folds of the sharply drawn curtains. Every so often she wipes her hands on her apron and tightens her chequered headscarf, tucking away escaped grey tendrils. She's ignored you for the past twenty minutes, talking only to Darcy. They converse in rapid Croatian; it flies over your head. You attempt conversation, 'How are you, Kata?'

'I've been better,' she replies, she gives a tight smile but it doesn't reach her eyes.

With that remark, she brushes past you, carrying an outlandishly large bowl of peeled potatoes towards the kitchen counter.

'I'll be back, just need to check something,' he kisses you on the forehead, as if in good luck.

He disappears down a corridor, and you hover uncomfortably at the table. You flick through the newspaper sitting there, to occupy your trembling hands. You try to distract yourself, trying to read the headings but they blur, talk about Hawke and Keating and spills; it does little to calm you.

Smothering your nerves with false confidence, you walk towards the kitchen island, taking a seat on a stool across from her. The metal is cool against your skin. An episode of *Seinfeld* comes on the TV across from the kitchen; stock laughter fills the silence. The woman huffs, reaching for the remote and switching it off.

You attempt conversation, 'Can I help? I can chop the potatoes.'

A simple request and her eyes dig into yours. The jury is out; moments pass as they deliberate. 'I think I can handle it,' she talks slowly, patronisingly.

Darcy rejoins you and can sense your annoyance, it reverberates off you in waves. His aunt turns to the stovetop, removing a large piece of cod from a bowl of water.

'Are you making bacalar, Kata?'

'Da,' she slips into Croatian, the way she does when she's annoyed.

'Liz made bacalhau. How did I forget?' Dashing outside, he rushes to the car boot, carefully carrying inside a plate from the cooler stashed there.

Kata only stares blankly at him as he re-enters. He places the plate on the counter, tin foil crinkling as he unveils it.

'Što je to?' *What is this?*

She gestures to the plate, her voice blunt and unfeeling.

Your tongue is suddenly too large for your mouth. 'It's our version of bacalar, the Portuguese version.' You're about to continue, but a rapid stream of Croatian cuts you off.

'She comes to my house with bacalar, with bacalar?' She raises her voice as she continued, 'You didn't think anything of it? No? Nothing? Am I not the one who cooks?'

Darcy stammers, simultaneously stunned and confused by her anger.

'Well,' he begins slowly, 'it's only food and she wanted to cook for you. Is there something wrong with that?'

She doesn't reply, instead she turns back to the cod, beginning to bash it with a mallet, the sound reverberating through the whole house. Neither of you moves, nobody says a word.

Minutes continue like this. You turn to Darcy, eyes wide and arms crossed, 'You ask me to play nice, but have you ever thought about telling her the same?'

The rhythm of the mallet drowns out your hushed arguing, 'You know it's not that simple, she's the only family Georgie and I have left.'

'Maybe, none is better than her.' At this, he looks at her, head cocked to the side: disappointed.

You swivel on your chair, your chin cupped in your hands, elbows leaning on the cold island bench. Darcy runs his fingers through his curls, the way he does when he's nervous. His aunt sulks, muttering incoherently under her breath as she picks bones out. The clock above the fridge, a tacky, coloured outline of the former Yugoslavia, ticks away in the background, a metronome to the silence.

The old woman plates the fish in a hurry.

*

Lunch drags on for twenty-eight and a half minutes, the smell of fish is overwhelming. Efforts at polite conversation are interrupted by bitter remarks. Only eight words are exchanged between you and his aunt.

'Bacalhau?' you offer to Kata.

'Ne, ja sam više nego u redu.' *No, I'm more than fine.*

Darcy slices the tension with a proposal, 'Briscola?'

From the top drawer of the kitchen, Darcy produces a deck of cards, worn and yellow. Well-loved.

'Bisca!' you pipe up, 'I used to play this game with my father.'

Aunt and nephew battle it out – aunt wins. Perhaps he let her.

Just as the game ends, Darcy's Nokia buzzes from the kitchen island. Duty calls and he ducks outside, pacing as he talks business, leaving the two women together.

'How about a game,' the old woman offers.

The woman deals, eyes slightly narrowed in concentration. You hold your cards close to your chest as you feel your opponent psychoanalysing you, lips pursed, brow furrowed. The game begins, a slow dance of deception and deceit. You chew the inside of your cheek as the game grows more intense. You're tying. The hunger flashes in the woman's grey eyes.

It dawns on you that perhaps you should let her win. Maybe. You don't, you throw down a trump card.

'Bisca!' you exclaim, victorious.

'Briscola,' she corrects under her breath, clenching her stack of cards in her hands, bending them out of shape. She stands, sending her chair scraping backwards. She carries her plate to the kitchen, cutlery clashing, metal scraping against ceramic.

The flyscreen bangs closed as Darcy walks inside. Seeing his aunt angrily scrubbing dishes, he looks at you, eyes wide with concern. They beg, 'What have you done?'

He approaches his aunt cautiously, slinking behind her like a shadow.

'Greenhorn,' the old woman mutters under her breath.

'Greenhorn,' he whispers to himself, turning the word around in his mouth. It tastes sour. Stupid and backwards it meant: a stupid, backwards Portuguese.

He pipes up, 'Greenhorn, huh?'

She turns to face him, plates clashing in the sink. With detached interest, she registers his look of disgust, rolling her eyes.

He glares at her, 'Why?'

'Why what?' she responds in curt Croatian, but he asks again, persisting in English. 'Because she's...' she trails off. Her English is strained, but her accent is thick and masks her panic.

'Because what? Because she's not Croatian? Is that it? It's 1991.'

You stand in the doorway, arms folded. Listening.

'I've introduced you to so many women in our community. Perfectly suitable, not one fault. And yet you insist, on this, this, Portugee,' she hisses.

The word leaves her lips just as you re-enter the room, your footsteps echo hollowly on the wooden floors. You snatch your purse from the stool before grabbing Darcy's keys and phone from the island bench. You walk to the door calmly, holding it open and Darcy begins to follow you.

He reaches the door, hesitating slightly. He straddles the doorway between freedom and here.

'You coming?' Your voice is low and your words are steady, tainted slightly with fatigue.

Darcy stares blankly at his aunt, who hasn't moved. She stands with her jaw tight, digging crescent moons into her palms. Darcy shakes his head in disappointment. You're standing just beyond the doorframe, patient and calm, hand outstretched. He follows you out, dissolving into the light outside.

The Lonely Bird

It was seven minutes after midnight and Fredrick, or Freddy as his friends called him, shot from his bed. He woke to the sensation of slobber being painted onto his forehead. Charlie.

'Come here boy, I'm alright,' he said, fighting to keep his heavy eyes open. This happened most nights. Freddy and Charlie would listen to the radio until morning, cold and miserable. Freddy caught his reflection in the dated radio, mesmerised by the aged thirty-year-old man staring back at him. He forgot for a moment that this was his reality.

His eyes were cold and brown, their drooping lids falling onto his pasty skin. The droning sound of Charlie barking at something in the distance awoke him from this trance. Freddy dragged his crippled body to his chair and stared at the cold and mouldy timber beneath his feet, following the indentations carved into the hard-wooden planks.

*

'Mum, Dad! Come and look at Charlie's new trick. Roll over, buddy, come on! Look, look, Dad!' exclaimed Henry, as he bounced around the living room with Charlie. Charlie's paws dug into the new timber floors as he followed, eager to show off their new tricks.

'Good boy, Charlie. Come over here, Freddy,' said Alice, Freddy's mother, with a smile. Fredrick and Alice embraced, they knew they didn't have much, only a small house, and Henry and Charlie, but it was enough. They stood for some time, grateful for their family amongst the loneliness and anarchy that pounded on their doorstep.

*

'See ya, boy, I'm going into town. I'll be back soon.'

Freddy slid on his battered shoes, placing his cold hands on the withered doorknob. Walking in to the crisp air, Freddy turned his gaze back at the house

and a depressed face stared back. The wooden planks lining the walls were slowly decaying, rotten from the water that sunk deep into the cracks formed through years of abandonment.

The interior was clad with cheap brown furniture and sickly white wallpaper that reached down for the floor as it peeled off the walls. Outside, the sun seemed to shoot right over the house, leaving Freddy in darkness. The street had emptied over the years... Europeans fleeing to the city looking for jobs as the money flew from their pockets. Freddy and Charlie remained, excluded from the happiness that circled the streets. A pile of letters and parcels had accumulated on the doorstep, reminding Freddy that it had been a while since he crossed the threshold.

*

'Fredrick, could you grab the mail? You know how much I hate it just lying out there in the rain,' Alice said, as she wiped the food from Henry's cheek.

Upon leaving, Fredrick wrapped his hand around the pile of letters and noticed a silver tin that had been knocked over and the white feathers that had flooded out onto the cold concrete beneath. Fredrick let out an agitated groan and snatched the tin angrily as he looked up to see an empty street. Cowards, huh. Can't even show their faces. Fredrick slammed the door behind him as he walked towards his family in the kitchen.

'Another one,' said Frederick hopelessly as he poured the icy feathers onto the kitchen bench, and dropped the letters to the floor.

'Daddy, why do people keep sending us feathers?' questioned Henry from the wooden stool, as he chewed loudly on his toast. As the crunching grew louder, the feathers seemed to smirk at the crumbling house around them, forcing Alice to snap.

'Go to your room, Henry!' she bellowed.

'And get ready for school, or you'll be late. The neighbours said you can borrow their bike to get to school.'

Henry scrambled from his chair, tears dripping from his eyes. He had never heard his mother yell before.

'I have to go. This is the third time this week. Ever since I lost my job, the town's been cracking down on me. Maybe if I go, we can get that money the government is offering. I hear it's six shillings a day. You can look after Henry while I'm gone and, when I get back we can buy a car and finally get Henry the education he deserves.'

'Frederick, didn't you hear? The Wilsons' son died last week. They sent them a telegram through the mail. What will I do if you don't come back? I can't do this on my own. The money is worthless if we're not all here together.'

'I'll be back, I promise. That reckless kid couldn't tell the difference between a gun and his left foot,' urged Freddy, almost as if he was trying to convince himself.

*

Freddy set foot into the warm rays, heading towards the train station. The closest grocery shops were in the city and the train was the cheapest way to travel. People shot past him in all directions, hurrying for different reasons. Freddy slowed down as he watched a small family, a mum and two children. The mum was yelling at the two children, who were pulling each other's clothes as they rolled on the dirty footpath. They don't even realise how lucky they are. He clenched his fists. Up ahead, sat a well-kept wooden building fitted with a tiled roof, acting as a bowl for the pools of water waiting for the sun to save them. More people began to arrive for the two o'clock train.

The air became congested and Freddy struggled to breathe. He dropped onto the dirty floor and held his shirt to his mouth fighting for a single breath.

*

'Freddy, wake up! Troops, go for cover. Get inside!' yelled sergeant O'Regan.

'Here, take this. Tom gave it to me before he went to the front line,' said his mate, Oscar, as he passed a fraction of bread to Freddy. The ground above shook as they crouched in a dark hole. The shriek of the bird became louder as the air clogged up with dirt. Each hit sent the dust tumbling down onto the heads of those cowering in fear.

'Do you know why they have those birds?' asked Oscar.

'Why? So, we can throw them at the Germans when they come flooding in?' joked Freddy, as he blocked his ears from the screams outside.

'Nah. When they stop singing we all gotta get out of here. Cause when they stop singing there's no more air left to breathe,' Oscar replied, as he quivered in the darkness.

*

'Come on. Get up. Alright you're gonna miss it,' said a young child cynically as he kicked Freddy's feet. 'And if you're gonna lie there, at least bring your feet in. Me and Mum are trying to walk here.'

Freddy stood up, his head weighing him towards the ground. Everything seemed amplified. The sounds, the voices. His vision blurred as he leant on the brick wall beside him. As the train rolled in, the screeching sound against the tracks pushed Freddy to the ground.

*

'You were too good. It should have been me. Me, me, me. It should have been me. Why? Why? Why? Oscar! You were too young, too young. Oh, it should have been me,' screamed Freddy.

Freddy lay on his knees clasping the man's bloody hands until the nurses dragged the stretcher away. Freddy lay shivering, the screams around him became quieter as his eyes slowly shut.

*

'It should have been me. It should have been me. He was too young,' sobbed Freddy as he curled his body into a ball beside the tracks. The train station had cleared out and was only left with the few rail workers brave enough to stand near the distressed man rolling on the floor.

Freddy opened his eyes to a young man grabbing his hand to help him up. Freddy forgot about the groceries and rushed home.

*

'Alice! Henry! Where are you? I'm back. Hello...,' exclaimed Freddy.

'You weren't at the train station, so I thought I'd meet you here. Hello...'

'Hey buddy. Oh, I've missed you, Charlie. Where are the others, boy?' questioned Freddy, as he clung to Charlie. Even Charlie seemed to know what had happened. As Charlie stopped panting, a hood of silence smothered him as a wave of loneliness pounded through the walls.

'H-hello,' Freddy let go of Charlie and searched the house in desperation. He was left with a lifeless building and a telegram from the government pinned to the front door.

'They're gone.'

*

Freddy fell through the door and immediately stumbled to the kitchen floor. His heart pounded. His chest began to heat up as his throat tightened. Bolts of pain shot through his body. Slowly his heart began to slow down, and the world around him stopped moving. His eyes lay open, staring at a wall, a photo frame. A photo of Alice, Fredrick, Henry and Charlie. All together. One last time. Freddy's heart stopped beating. His blood stopped moving. The birds had stopped singing.



Alexandra McLaughlin, Year 10

The Slavery of Lincoln

Cracked, tarmac roads wound through the dense forest of skeletal trees and overwhelming silence. The sun never shone on the land, so the birds and the foxes had fled years ago. At the end of the tangled track lay a barren structure, the only thing to suggest human civilisation for miles. The windows were damaged forming countless cracks that form an imitation of a spider's web, weaving in and out of each other. The vague outline of the trees could barely be made out through the thick mist that strangled the forest. Vines formed a twisted maze upon the side of the house, grasping at the crumbling roof. Everything that touched the house seemed lifeless, including the man inside it.

*

The starless sky was casket-black and brooding. The cold north wind mewed through both the valley and the souls of the men. The commander raised the proud banner aloft in defiance. It represented their dreams, their lives and their salvation. If it were taken, it would mean they were dead. 'Fire!' Their feet stomped off the frozen ground like the rumbling of thunder. A tempest of wicked, barbed fire arrows soared into the sombre sky, it was butchery. They were all gone. Except one.

5th May – 1865, Civil War, Iowa. Robert.

*

The tarnished house was Robert's grave. He had lain there in isolation day after day for forty-eight years, decaying to the sound of his own voice and the smell of rotten food. Robert was one of the few survivors of the Southern States, and after their loss something had changed within him. His will to live steadily declined, and he would spend his days gazing out the window into the forest, forgetting to eat or to sleep. Consequently, his great-nephew Abraham visited the house once a month bringing candles and food, as the old man would have nothing to do with the newfangled idea of electric lighting.

As the sun sank into the deep horizon, Abraham approached the mouth of the house. He pushed the door open; the hinges whimpered reluctantly. He hadn't

journeyed to the house in over two years, as last time he had brought extra supplies in order to save money from the frequent and expensive transport. Yet, Abraham felt a certain stillness that had not been there before. The ghastly silence made his body flinch as he paced down through the hallway. It was utterly untouched; cob webs, mossy walls and dust coated the house. The moss crawled up the portraits that hung crookedly, covering all but the eyes of the painted humans that appeared to be following Abraham's body as he left the hall.

Abraham continued into the shadows, and darkness echoed and folded inside itself until any form of light was absorbed completely. He cringed at the stained curtains that were swaying softly in an uneven rhythm, causing the hairs on his body to rise. It must be the wind, he thought, but when he made his way closer to the window he felt no breeze strike his skin. Dismissing an indistinct sense of fear, he maintained his pace and continued towards the old man's room. The few candles that sat on the window sills only emitted a little light, so Abraham followed the faint sound of the man swaying on his rocking chair.

As he approached the room the groaning of the chair became increasingly penetrating, generating an eerie shriek that echoed throughout the halls. Abraham squinted at the corner of the room, where the old man was rocking. He seemed to be staring out the window that had sills roughly painted black. The old man's head was twitching with angst, as he repeatedly muttered underneath his breath, 'In Dixie Land I'll take my stand, to live and die in Dixie.'

'Robert,' Abraham murmured, 'I'm here.'

The old man's head jolted one last time, then twisted erratically to face Abraham. A nebulous blur glazed Robert's eyes; they seemed entirely lifeless, the eyes of a lost soul. Abraham noticed that the old man was dressed in an unexpected way; his dressing gown was revealing his exposed chest that uncovered a chain of dim, gold luminescence. Robert had told him about the chain countless

times before. The story went that he had retrieved it from a dead soldier on the battlefield years ago, and had never dared to take it off his aged neck. Abraham stood in awe as he saw it for the first time in all its glory.

Robert's fingers raised up and down, as the veins though his arms tightened and he gradually stood up from his rocking chair. His whole body jolted and his breathing became heavy. Abraham looked about him in bewilderment when he said, 'Robert, Robert, are you ok?' Robert's eyes raised to meet Abraham, looking straight through him while he approached Abraham with pace.

Robert began to obsessively shriek, 'Hear the northern thunders mutter! Northern flags in south wind flutter. Send them back your fierce defiance! Stamp upon the cursed alliance!'

Robert extended his rough hands towards his great-nephew's neck, and anchored his grip as Abraham began to scrabble to get a hold of any leverage he could to pry Robert's large but feeble hands from his throat. Abraham's hands met the golden chain, and he too began to strangle the old man with the chain, in order to save himself. Abraham could barely breathe, nevertheless the old man was weak and it was not long before his lungs collapsed and he fell to the ground in exhaustion. He was dead.

Abraham's hands could not unclench from the golden chain, and involuntarily he violently tugged it off the dead man's neck and placed it around his own. As he did so, electricity sent a shock through his body. His mind burned with nothingness: all control fled from his body while his thoughts shrieked, telling him to do one thing. With a key that was tied to the chain in one hand, Abraham grasped a candle with the other and searched for the trapdoor that he knew was hidden beneath the floors. He leant to the ground and ran his fingers through the frosted stone in search of a discrete key hole, and as a crooked smile struck his face, he inserted the key. As he revealed the trapdoor, keeping it wide open, his foot mechanically trod on the first step down the basement.

Darkness assimilated the cellar and Robert noticed the unaccountable numbers of termites and wasps that writhed through the rotting walls. He instinctively walked towards a large sac, made of heavily waxed canvas that concealed thousands of golden coins. He placed his fingers against the hood of the cloth and heaved it against his back. His foot walked back and stepped onto the staircase, when instantaneously his candle along with all the others in the house went out, leaving him in absolute darkness. Just keep walking, his brain shouted, as his foot stepped onto the next step, and the next.

*

He will climb for an eternity, as he continues to search for the hole in the ceiling to escape from. His mind will continue to race frantically as he pursues sprinting up the never-ending staircase, into a deeper, inescapable world. His mind, decaying like that of the house and the old man, is forever possessed by the golden chain that will live off his soul until its next victim. It will haunt Abraham evermore, and the house will become the graveyard that will nestle the souls of the two men for eternity.

After Liesel's Death

(after Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* – ed.)

So, the day had finally come.

Violet in the sky with shots of amber interrupting the sea of stars. Every star shone down at me, mocking me, as I tried desperately to count them, to use them to distract myself.

You'd think that after all this time, after seeing genocide, suicides, and everything in between, I'd be prepared. You'd think that after watching, reading and feeling her story, I would have realised it would never last. But you'd be wrong.

I knew it was her – her soul – as soon as her broken heart stopped fluttering.

I moved towards her home, the four walls that replaced those back in Himmel Street. The hand-painted walls, the simple home-grown garden and the plain wooden door all showed how happy she had been in Sydney, how safe she could feel and how the war had never truly left her.

I wandered through the walls which were plastered with images of her new family, her youngest grandchildren, her husband, and I felt my own memories of her.

About My Memories

I do not see my memories as I have been
told humans do, I smell, hear and feel
them. I didn't realise this was unnatural
until I took time to learn about
the book thief

I felt the blinding colour, the glaring white light that had always chilled me. The colour bled through my being, causing me to freeze up, reminding me of the first time I saw her.

I smelled the charcoal black sky, the harsh fragrances cutting into my senses. My being pulsed with the memory of the coughing engines, as I smelt the change of hues in the sky. The sweet-smelling morning sun combined with the scent of blue, chasing away the darkest time of day.

And finally, I heard the red sky, streaked with blood. Despite my long and successful career, I remember this moment so vividly. It remains to haunt me; like humans, in my memory, always reminding me of the cruelty of this race.

I could hear the book thief's howls shatter through my body in the deathly quiet room. I could smell what most would identify as death: blood, rubble, skin, and, of course, the stiff air, with no life to be found.

These memories haunted me. Some of the most successful times in my career; some of the least rewarding outcomes. I will never regret being there, only regretting not being able to understand humans enough to know why. But that will never happen.

As I looked down on her peaceful body now, I can remember looking over her. Her skin stained black from the trail of rubble. Her fingers, which had written and held so many books, bleeding. Her eyes, so bright and full of youth swimming with agony from her wounded heart, now glazed over, not a streak of pain in them.

I stood there and looked up to the sky one last time, wanting to remember these specific colours with her story. I moved into her room, which had life and beauty

in all corners of it, except in the shadows, where the memory of her childhood remained a constant part of everything she knew.

I breathed the still air of her room.

An Impossibility

I do not need to breathe, nor do
I have a nose, yet I still inhaled, as I often
do, as reason does not affect me.

I saw her soul waiting for me. It had been so damaged, yet it was still so beautiful. She waited for me like old friends at a snowy railway side. She rolled into my arms like a pilot coming into land. She held me like I had lemon yellow hair. We spoke in the silence, walked on the beach and remembered our time together.

After I told her about her story, about my fear and about my pain, she finally understood, something that I will never understand how. Her soul finally relaxed in my arms as her life crumpled. I felt my job calling me, and for the first time, I didn't go immediately. I stayed and looked at the book thief, her head surrounded by books, her room surrounded by life.

I waved goodbye. No-one waved back.

Seven Mile Beach

Blurs of blue and yellow rush by,
the wind's sweeping hand brushes my cheek.
I am flying,
soaring across the sand,
leaving behind the monster of reality.
I am free of its rule.

The wheels creak; a soothing sound,
four bikes in complete harmony and unison.
Push, turn, push, turn.
I find comfort in its rhythm.

Seven stretching miles of a sandy, silken scarf
winding beside a stream of purest water,
which mirrors the cyan firmament.
The soft, golden sunshine caresses my face
and whispers a promise of days of joy.

It's just the four of us,
cycling side by side,
the world somewhere at the back of our minds.
There is a comfortable silence,
However, we each know what the other is saying.
Like a mother's kiss,
it is a feeling that can't be expressed enough by words;
the feeling is love.

As we near the end,
the sounds of reality tug my thoughtful mind
back to the world I had left.
Although the beach is seven miles long,
the journey isn't over.
I have a feeling it will be longer,
longer than any other journey I have travelled.



Francesca Aron, Year 10

I Will Never Forget

I will never forget that day, when I heard a year seven girl scream 'gun'. I can still remember hearing the gunshots ricocheting off the walls. One after the other, it felt as though it went for eternity. I've seen school shootings in America on the news, but not once did I think it would happen here in Sydney, at my own school. For days after, I couldn't go anywhere, not even to the psychologist that the school recommended. All I wanted to do was stay at home under the covers of my warm bed with the windows and front door locked. I can still hear the frightened words of my teacher as she told us to get down and take cover. Mrs Bound was a teacher that you could ask anything of, and tell anything to. She was one of the good people on this planet that drove for change, when no one else would. She had two daughters, Estelle who was six and Maya who was four. She had countless photos of them around her classroom and I remember seeing a picture on her desk in a red frame of her with a man, they looked happy together. I think it was her husband. She never mentioned him.

*

I walk into the waiting room and sit down slowly. I have never been to a psychologist's clinic before. My mum walks to the front desk and confirms that we are here. My eyes wander around the room, checking the people, searching their belongings and looking at possible escape routes – one door, three windows, which are all about ten metres away. My concentration is quickly disrupted when a tall lady with long brown curly hair and blue eyes calls out my name, 'April, April Dawn.' I stand up immediately as though I've been summoned to the principal's office. I feel eyes piercing me.

'Do you want me to come in, darling? It might be better.'

'I'm fine, honestly,' I mutter.

I stare at the shiny white tiles as I follow the lady to a light, colourful room. On the door, it says Khloe in letters with the bears you have on your bedroom door when you were five.

The lady sits down and says, 'Hi, I'm Khloe.'

'I'm April,' I whisper back.

'I've been talking to your mum and she says that you've been through a rough patch. Do you want to tell me about yourself? Whatever you tell me I will keep private,' she continues.

Does she know everything? She probably does, it was all over the news. Journalists wouldn't leave for days; they were camped out on our front lawn waiting for a glimpse of our existence, as though we were celebrities.

'April, are you alright? You seem very reserved and quiet.'

'I'm fine,' I reply after a moment.

Although, I know I'm not, I know I'll never be the same, I can't. I can never forget the things I saw or the people I lost. No matter how long it's been, I'll never be the same person I was years ago.

'April, shall I get your mum?' she asks gently.

'No, it's fine, I'm just really tired,' I reply with a yawn. 'I was born in Sydney and I've lived here my whole life. I go to Sydney School and I've been there since kindergarten. My best friend is called Annie, and she is the greatest friend you could ask for. We've been through too much to fight, and we will always have each other's backs.'

'Tell me a bit more about Annie and what you've been through together,' Khloe gently asks.

'What do you mean?' I stammer.

'I think you know what I mean, April. Was she with you on the day of the shooting?' she asks directly.

I immediately freeze, my stomach feels as though it's about to turn upside down and my head hurts as though someone hit it with a shovel.

'Yes, she was there when it happened. I don't think I'd be alive if she wasn't there with me,' I say, hardly fighting back my tears.

'We were in English when it happened. I was sitting directly opposite Annie when I heard the shouts of a girl. She yelled "gun, gun, gun" – at first, we thought it was a dark joke. However, after seeing her white, motionless face, I realised this wasn't a sick prank. It was real. A few seconds had passed before the alarm blared. Mrs Bound was very good with everyone, she told people to hide under anything that might protect them, and swiftly locked the doors and pulled the blinds down. I had never seen her this serious before. There were no tables left to fully protect Annie and I. We squeezed into a tiny cupboard that was meant for school supplies.

'Mrs Bound made sure that we had enough room to breathe and then she said words that I will never forget, "don't open this unless I tell you to or the police force it open, but don't open it for anyone else.'"

'I can still hear the strain in her voice as she closed the small wooden door.' I take a big deep breath and wipe away tears.

I look up at Khloe, her gentle smile and caring eyes peer back at me.

'However, it was the moments after that I will never forget no matter how long it's been. Annie and I were whispering a song that we had learnt a week earlier to try and calm ourselves down. A minute later, there was the sound I dreaded the most... gun shots and they were very close.'

'After that, we both wouldn't let out a sound, we were even careful with how loud our breathing was. I remember hearing violent banging and screams of innocent people running for cover. There would be moments when we couldn't hear anything, and we were waiting for Mrs Bound to open the cupboard and say everything was going to be alright.'

I take a big deep breathe. I haven't told anyone about that day for a long time. My heart pounds. Khloe looks at me, I can tell she wants me to continue. I mumble my next few words and then continue.

'It felt like days before the screaming stopped, although It must have been only a few hours. I remember Annie shaking uncontrollably next to me, I remember the tears starting to swell up in my eyes. There were moments when I wasn't sure if we were going to get out alive.'

'April, what happened to Mrs Bound? Your mum said she didn't make it. Do you want to share this with me?' Khloe asks.

'She was shot, by the killer,' I breathe. 'It was only when the police finally unlocked the cupboard and helped us out that I saw her lifeless body. They tried to block us from her, but I knew it was her.'

Khloe stares at me with sympathetic eyes.

'I won't ever forget that day, the horror and violence of it and the grief it caused my friends and I. I know I'll never be the same, and I know I'll never feel the same comfort and safety at school again.'

The Mango Tree

Just fifteen and her life was nearing its end. Amira sat on the edge of the bed and waited patiently, obediently for him to come and remove the red silk veil covering her face. Few minutes passed before her patience was beginning to wane.

She started pacing about the room, fingers entwined in front of her. She could smell the sweetness of Iranian rose water and pistachios from the treats that her cousins and grandparents brought her but she wasn't hungry. It reminded her of being at home when Mâmân would assemble the bridal basket for neighbouring families. People she had never even met before would approach her and comment on her beauty with each passing year. She remembered going with her mother to place fragrant petals and spices in small satin bags and leave them on the bridal bed as a sign of respect and purity. Today, those smells lingered in her clothes, not just in memory.

At school, Mâmân would sometimes put honeyed noghl in Amira's lunch as a small treat after a wedding had taken place. She and her friends would sit under the low branches of mango trees, where they used to whistle and giggle about the boy they would marry one day. Of course this dream belonged to a far off future, one which followed university and a career. A future that was going to be different from Mâmân's, their female teacher assured them.

Amira had always been a bright girl, and eager to learn new things. She was the first girl to sign up to high school, the first girl to join the athletics team, and she was determined to be the first girl in her family to be able to read and write properly.

As their high school years continued, a girl from their group would disappear and they would say a small prayer for her, keeping vigil under the mango tree, for the future had come too soon. After a week or so, the gap in the circle seemed to disappear as they huddled closer together, grateful it was not them. Soon the fantasy of a husband turned to a fantasy of freedom.

A year later, she was sitting on the satin sheets of her own bridal bed, thinking about the girls waiting under the mango tree until they were ripe enough to be plucked. Most people in the novels she had read seemed happy to be marrying and in love, but her unseen husband was no love of Amira's. Not knowing what the future held for her was uncomfortable but not knowing who he was frightening. She had seen him once, a pair of black eyes peering through the curtains when his family came to discuss a dowry, and other arrangements, only a month ago. She barely saw him at the marriage ceremony, when she sneaked sideways glances at him through her silk veil before he caught her eye and she looked away. She so desperately hoped he was not like her own father, and that he would allow her to pursue her love for writing and reading. But that seemed impossible. She closed her eyes and tried to visualise his face and imagine that she loved him. She did not feel anything. No love, no passion, no excitement, no hatred, no anger, no resentment. Nothing. Yesterday he was a stranger but today he was family.

'I have made my choice. You will obey.' Bâbâ's commanding voice rang.

Impulsively, she looked around for a pen, or piece of paper, so she could practise her alphabet to distract her mind, but the room was bare. She tried to avoid the vision of the bed but she was tired and all she wanted to do was lay her head down. Her heavy headdress gave a constant reminder of her restriction which would be her new life.

Her eyes caught the corner of a faded photograph of Mâmân and Bâbâ on their wedding day, a photo Mâmân had given her to remind her of her origins. She did not know when she would see them again for it was tradition to live with her husband's family from now on. She observed the happy smiles on her parent's faces and thought about how lucky they were to have married someone they love when her first brother walked in and wrapped his tree trunk-like arms around her.

Strong and warm, just like they had always been. He kissed her forehead and pressed her closer to his chest.

'If you have an open-mind and are patient, give it time, you may find yourself falling in love, just like Mâmân did.'

'Like Mâmân did? What do you mean? She loved Bâbâ before she married him.'

He shook his head and gave a slight smile.

'That's never happened in our family Amira, this has always been the tradition.'

A knock on the door interrupted them. Her heart raced. It was only the maid bringing her a cup of tea. Amira resumed her seat on the bed as her visitors left the room. The smell of fresh cinnamon made her unconsciously touch the deep scar on her arm. It reminded her of the time second and third brother who were playing outside. She was not allowed to join them. Instead, she was told to watch from under the mango tree where she sat along with other women, sipping cinnamon tea, gossiping and playing cards. Instead, Amira read a novel which her mother allowed as long as her father did not see. The boys played until they decided that annoying their sister was more fun. Enraged, she grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it in their faces to which they retaliated, throwing her book into the highest branches. Mâmân told her it was too dangerous to retrieve but Amira was determined. Like a bear cub climbing for the first time, she heaved her limbs onto a low hanging branch reaching her hand out until her fingertips reached the book. As she pulled herself up to grasp the book, the branch broke and came tumbling down to the ground. She screamed at the searing pain that flamed through the deep cut in her wrist. She could never have imagined all those years ago, how that one scar could now comfort her, a memory of her determination.

Outside the bedroom door, Amira heard footsteps growing louder until there was silence. She heard the clink of his hand on the door knob and a hesitation before entering. She could hear her heart thumping loudly at the anticipation, and she wiped her clammy palms against her dress. Her new husband still lingered at the door, then closed it behind him, cautiously making his way towards her, his unfamiliar wife. Amira could tell that he was as nervous as she was when he stopped in front of her. Carefully, but with shaking hands, he removed her veil. Her eyes slowly took him in. He reached one hand out presenting her with a perfectly ripe mango.

'I thought this would remind you of home,' he smiled.

Amira reached out to take the fruit, haloed in gold skin. The sleeve of her dress moved, leaving her arm bare. His fingers circled the raised mark briefly before he reached into his back pocket and brought out a small notepad and pen, handing it to her.

'Write!' he said. 'Tell me how you got this mark.'

Toujours

Her eyes hooded with the darkness of years of despair, the woman stood alone beside the tree, assessing the desolate scene before her. As if in an attempt to conceal the forsaken abode behind, long gnarled branches splayed in all directions and shrouded a majority of the old weatherboard house. The house stood in a parody of its former grandeur, a wretched beacon of persistence against the years. Curtains hung limply in the windows, heavy with disuse, and the windows swung lazily on their joints, moving indecisively with each sporadic breeze that transpired upon the glade. Strained pillars bent with the heaviness of time rather than the weight of the house. The place was a shell, it bore nothing but a broken soul.

She clasped her eyes firmly shut, blinking repeatedly in an attempt to erase the memory before it came, but it was relentless...

Her mother was standing upon the bough of the tree, a blank expression on her face and a lifeless look in her eyes. Swathes of fabric from her best dress billowed hauntingly in the breeze and she seemed to shake slightly, whether from the wind or fear.

'Ma, you've been up there for hours. The sun is setting.'

There was no reply but the whistling of the wind through her dress. Rich acrylic tones of blood red and tangerine orange splattered the sky and seeped through slits between trees, bathing the house in a subtle glow. It looked majestic, serene.

Maggie's mother did not answer. Instead, she precariously stepped out further along the branch. Her expression gave nothing away, except perhaps a sense of resigned determination, as if the closing of the day spurred on a certain sense of urgency. Then, only a few seconds later, she was no longer there. The bloodcurdling crack below told her fate.

A feeling of immense pain struck Maggie so severely that for a moment she was overwhelmed by memories she had tried so hard to forget.

Once the house had been a sanctuary. Now, it breathed a haunting tune of anguish, that infiltrated all else in some way: it had taken her brother; it had taken her mother, her father, all she ever loved in the world. As for her, it consumed her in a permanent state of misery, with a vice-like grasp so strangely powerful she could not explain it.

In times like this, when she questioned her reasons for staying, when the silence became too much to bare, she remembered the words of her father, 'Je t'aime, mon cherie'. Words that had been gently whispered in her ear at the sinking of the sun each day, now were imprinted in her mind with a permanence that would never leave her. Such was the sense of comfort, brought with his eternal promise of 'toujours', that he would love her forever.

He had come to Maine for them, leaving the reassurance of home in Paris, because he loved them. He would always love her. She must stay. She could not leave the house in which he had lived with her, her mother, her brother, the house in which he had spoken those words to her. The house that had once been a home.

Maggie felt a strange sense of unease settle upon her. A sudden coolness washed over her skin, and she shuddered. Maggie looked at the house, and back at herself. Dilapidated and broken, both had lost all sense of purpose. The soul and warmth had been extracted from them both, replaced with an eerie despondency that portrayed itself through the vacant windows, Maggie's own blank eyes, the groaning pillars and Maggie's bones that ached with the passage of time. They were perfect reflections of each other.

A sudden invisible and inexplicable pull drew her towards the house, placing her feet in front of her, one at a time, slowly taking her away from the tree, from her mother's memory.

'Toujours.'

It was murmured on the breeze. A single word uttered hoarsely and faintly, barely discernible above the pulsation of blood that pumped noisily in her ears, and the rapid drumming of her heart.

'Toujours, mon cherie, toujours, toujours...'

Her footsteps were faster now, long grass snatching at her ankles and the last dregs of sunlight fading with every passing moment, her legs pounded along the ground of their own accord. The front door received her just as darkness overcame the forest and blanketed the trees like a thick smog. The shrill screeching of the door's hinges as they swung open fell on deaf ears. The memories were all-consuming. They flashed before her eyes in a warped and unrelenting cycle as her knees sank from beneath her.

He had loved her. He had not meant to leave her.

'Toujours.'

The word was louder now – it rang with meaninglessness. What good was a promise if it could not be kept? When her mother was gone, she had had no one else but him, and he had left her. Tears built up in her eyes and threatened to run down her cheeks. Indignantly, her hand brushed them away, but they came up again, trying in vain to wash away the grime of years passed. If love was stronger than all things, more powerful than any force, why had it been overtaken by death?

No answer reached her, and it never would.

A wail escaped her cracked lips, at first broken and soft, but gradually growing to a piercing shriek that filled the house, and only continued to rise in volume and force. Fury had overcome her, fury towards the unfairness of it, fury towards the higher power that had enabled it all, and fury towards her father more than anything.

‘Toujours.’

Her screams penetrated the darkness, pitiful pleas for relief that were lost in the void. The word, the promise and the memory would continue to haunt her. Toujours.

The Red Flood (excerpt)

The population was secure. Births were sanctioned, deaths were welcomed. The widespread use of an illegal hallucinogenic, Lacra, resulted in the fatal Red Flood. The distribution of a potential cure was at the discretion of The League.

*

'I have never met a criminal who has only broken the law once,' Jacob remarked, arms tucked up against his black jacket and his eyes crinkled in disgust. He had found three of the diseased just that morning and brought them in to be quarantined and observed.

'Well, at first they're only breaking little laws,' Ida countered as she shifted uncomfortably and tugged at a constricting skirt.

'Now look where it's got them.'

'Yes, it is an unworthy punishment,' she refuted the revulsion in Jacob's tone.

'I don't know about unworthy, but definitely unexpected.'

The air was cut with the stinging scent of antiseptic. The Research Hospital extended back at least a hundred metres, encompassing the basement of The League's entire complex. Glass ran from the towering ceiling down to the finished concrete, separating the scientists from the diseased. They observed from the corridor, wishing to disassociate themselves from criminals.

Just through the glass lay endless victims of the disease, the Red Flood. The pathology of the illness was vital to her research. Watching the harrowing suffering made her feet melt into the floor, but she could not turn away.

'It's starting to take hold quickly. A woman this morning refused to come with me. Said she wasn't sick yesterday. She can't have more than a day in her,' Jacob observed as he swapped his jacket for a white coat.

'Let's find out.' Ida pressed her identification against the glass and a handle popped out to let them through.

The aisles were never-ending and the number of beds incalculable. With every step, Ida calmly passed yet another startling white sheet now tie-dyed with pestilence and incontinence. She could tell the new patients from the old. The new thrashed about whilst the old were virtually unmoving, as insubstantial as ghosts. What they all shared was the inability to prevent their tears.

Without flinching, Ida registered the hideous sounds of sickly moans. They drowned out the slow clip of her heels as they ricocheted off black screens which covered scuffed walls. Sharp blue text on a large tablet above each bed detailed the patient's identification number, key symptoms and an inexorable list of trial drugs which pumped through their veins. The woman before her was assigned no. 2715. The sheet had been discarded and legs were splayed uncomfortably. Her skeleton heaved with every ferocious breath.

'This is the one,' Jacob said.

'May I?' Ida took a step towards the exhausted body.

Her suffering was caused by numerous demons. Ash-coloured skin was crusted with a lining of salt. Eyes twitched and occasionally rolled open, however they would quickly retreat to a still state.

'How long have you been here?'

'I don't know,' 2715 managed to rasp. 'They don't tell us.'
'And do you know where you are?'

'We call it the waiting room.'

'Yes.' Ida understood. Nothing would cure them, and they deserved to suffer for disobeying The League.

2715 clasped her jaw as she scrutinised the scientist, 'What do they want?'

Whilst Ida formulated a generic and evasive response, the woman's pained eyes widened. Every muscle released its tension into her bed and the relentlessness of breath ceased. Her silky green irises were rimmed with a diluted red. The moisture in her skin had evaporated, allowing scales to form. Ida stroked her golden hair. Pulling her hand away, it slid along the surface of the woman's dry, white pillow.

'That's another gone,' Ida muttered to Jacob. His dark eyes had a light twinkle, lips revealed a sliver of a smile.

'Good.'

She followed his gaze to The League's obnoxiously large crest ingrained upon the glass. The black snake an ouroboros, lifeless eyes drilling into people as they wailed, every cry a first and final act of rebellion.

Heat. Sweat. Blood. Death.

I didn't know what happened on those monstrous ships. That was until I was aboard the nightmare myself.

Unforgiveable sunrays beat upon my back as I struggled up the gangway, the looming ship forming pools alongside the Freemantle port, a wave of heat suffocating everything in its path, constant sweat coating my body. I could only begin to imagine how the sheep must have felt.

I'll never forget the first question I asked the captain as I boarded the Awassi Express – 'Is there air-conditioning for the sheep?' It seemed like such a basic question... a guarantee provided to these creatures. Yet as I look back on all I've seen, I realise these basic rights we take for granted are not extended to all.

Aboard such a colossal ship, everyone had their role. Yet there always seemed to be so much time left waiting. From orders, to dinner, to arrival at the ports, I always seemed to be waiting. That's what brought me to find what I did – constant waiting.

*

We had entered the death zone – scorching temperatures, constant humidity, and of course, an absence of wind. I lay upon the rock hard mattress within my meagre cabin, my eyes hypnotised by the blades of the fan above, somewhat soothing my sweaty skin. Unexpectedly, the vessel lurched to the side, as if a deep-sea creature had collided with the ship. I watched as a wave submerged my porthole. It was strange to have swells in these temperatures, for usually they required a relieving breeze, yet this was not the case. I rolled over, ignoring the movement – that was until I realised the sudden turn had caused my fan to short circuit. I groaned as the heat began to swamp my room, every inch coating my skin in sweat. After allowing my body to roast for a few minutes more, I decided to leave my tiny oven in hope for a cooler spot to wait. Down the eerie passageways I went, until reaching a ladder leading towards the hull.

Awful clangs and distant cries filled my ears the further I went. An intimidating steel door stood before me as I reached the end, my hand instantly grappling for the handle. To my surprise, it heaved open. An overwhelming stench. I stepped into the room, urgent cries bouncing off the bulkheads, drowning my ears. A horrific sight met my eyes. Masses upon masses of sheep – yet you could barely call them that. Thinning wool, bloodshot eyes, stick-like limbs poking out from their malnourished bodies. Baking in the heat of the room. Dwindling troughs of provisions lay at the front of the group, constantly bombarded by the foremost animals. Those at the back struggled to reach the food and water, instead, they were left suffering from starvation. Piles of faeces lined the steel floor, acting as a form of bedding for the poor creatures. Then there was the blood – dry, thick, the metallic scent piercing my nostrils, bright red against the white wool. Piles upon piles of lifeless bodies scattered across the floor.

With a heavy heart, I began to document the devastation – the animals, their condition, overcrowding, a lack of food, blood, deaths, all of it. With a sickened stomach, I dragged myself out of the room, footage in tow, leaving the door slightly ajar to allow some air to relieve the tortured creatures.

The weight of the deaths lay in my heart: guilt began to form. I decided to alert the captain, for if anyone was to help it would be him. Yet as I informed him, I realised he had ordered this tragedy. His voice shook with fury at my mentioning of the sheep. He made it clear that if I told anyone of what I had seen there would be consequences.

Later, I returned to the door, only to find it locked. That night, as I watched over my footage, raw with guilt, I knew I had no choice. I had to let someone know. I had to bring justice to the sheep.

*

It was the final night of our journey before arrival in the Middle East. We sat together, a TV playing in the background.

'Breaking news,' it abruptly blared, our ears pricking up at the mention. 'Shocking footage has been released of the horrors of live export upon Australian vessel, Awassi Express.'

My heart skipped a beat as the captain moved towards me. Justice had been served.



Sasha Barakate, Year 10

Walls

'The definition of a trauma ... requires [direct] exposure to an event involving life threat or serious injury, as well as a peritraumatic emotional response involving intense fear, helplessness, or horror.'

Marx, B (2014). *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in DSM-5: Criteria, Measures and Implications for Assessment*.

The diagnostic criteria for PTSD, as substantially revised for Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—5th edition (DSM-5), includes five components: Criterion A, B, C, D, and E, each PTSD patient must meet two or three of the DSM-5 Criteria B-E and all must meet Criterion A.

Criterion A: Event

Exposure to an event involving life threat or serious injury (A1), or a peritraumatic emotional response involving intense fear, helplessness, or horror (A2).

On the night of April 25th, 1942 a series of German Luftwaffe bombs plunged down to rupture Britain's major cities, including the meek town of Bath, United Kingdom — these 'Baedeker Raids' created the Bath Blitz.

The pilot's face was piqued as he leaned over his window to see pin drops of fire press against the ground and catapult back into the sky: a flurry of colour.

Thirty-four dead. Two of the last name Brown. The only Brown to survive was twelve year old daughter Isla Brown. *Patient* Isla Brown.

Crumbling homes remained. Their fresh silhouettes resembled snapped shortbread fingers — the kind the Browns' would find in their tea each afternoon.

Bricks and sticks consumed the streets as pieces of Earth floated around in what remained of the abyss — where hope vanished until September 2, 1945.

The Brown who remained had barely moved before they found her wedged between a wooden beam that once held up an attic ceiling, and a bookshelf she had in her bedroom. Her escape, miraculous and inexplicable, was protected by three roaring vans stamped with a red cross which arrived to her solace.

The girl was prodded and poked.

5,000 units of anticoagulant, then 13,000 units across the next twenty-four hours. 30 mg of morphine for the pain relief, 15mg twice for the next twelve hours. Yet, despite a brain hemorrhage and four broken ribs, two false and two floating, still prevailed.

That night, Thursday April 25, 1942, the Emergency Hospital Service station saw more patients than the number of bricks lining the west wing of Bagshaw Hall.

No matter. The nurses still managed to give her bread and butter pudding. It quaked in a perfectly rounded bowl as the weakened nurse crept towards her, wreaking of spoiled milk. But Isla would never dare to complain.

Thirty-eight minutes later — the bread and butter pudding had become sodden and soaked — the vase of flowers which sat next to it now held withered, veiny petals. Isla Brown had not eaten the bread and butter pudding.

She wanted to. Oh, did she want to. Her mouth drooped and drooled as the nurse walked toward her, meal in hand. Yet the moment it was in front of her Isla felt chunks of last night's parsnip and cabbage barge up her throat to her mouth.

Criterion C: Avoidance

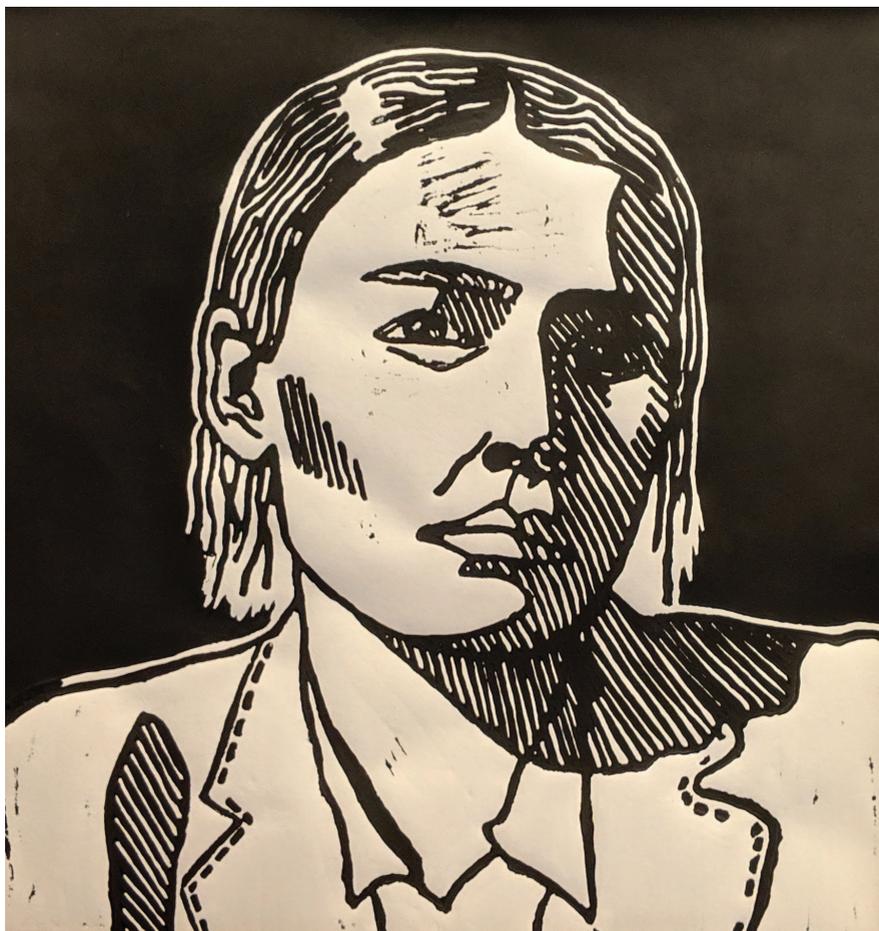
Avoidance of trauma-related thoughts and feelings (C1) and activities and situations (C2).

She couldn't eat it. So she didn't, leaving her stomach to rumble and roar – hollow and aching. But this cloaked blessing distracted her mind from focusing on the truth and on her memory of that night.

Nurse Sarah Wilson was instructed to manage Isla Brown's dispatch to The Railway Orphanage. That was all. Her expertise was in the handling of hospitalised children. A very stern woman Sarah Wilson was — but she always executed her job well and in a timely fashion at that.

'Miss Isla Brown of 34 Fairfield Avenue, Bath, Somerset. How are you doing? That's it, take it one day at a time. You certainly are a very brave little girl I am here to collect you and escort you to The Railway Orphanage. From there, we will get you settled in amongst the other children, and you will feel right at home in no time.' Nurse Wilson read the long list of clichés off her blistered clipboard with a monotone register.

The nurse noticed Isla was not paying one ounce of attention to any word from the clipboard. She did, however, notice Isla took a liking to hand painted frames hung from a weakened hook on the wall above her, tilted to one side. Splashed with the planets of the universe, the moon and the stars — Isla Brown was not the first patient to become distracted by them.



Milla Jarvis, Year 10



Georgina Sundich, Year 11

