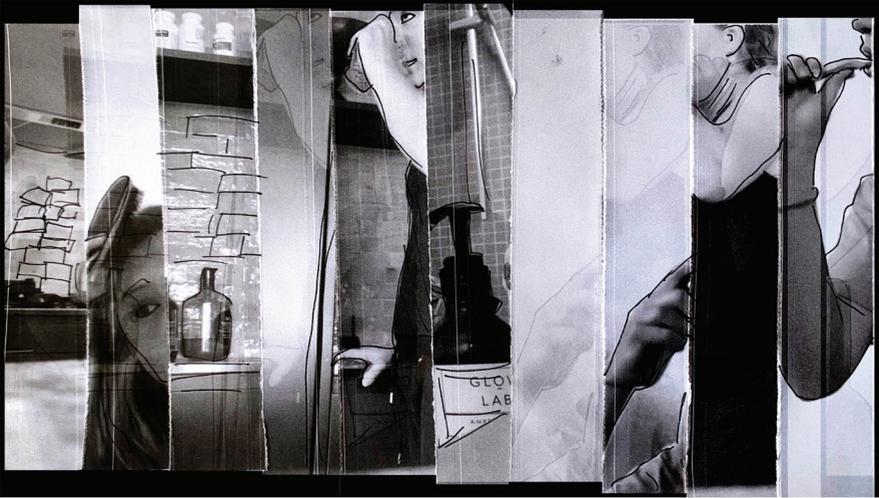
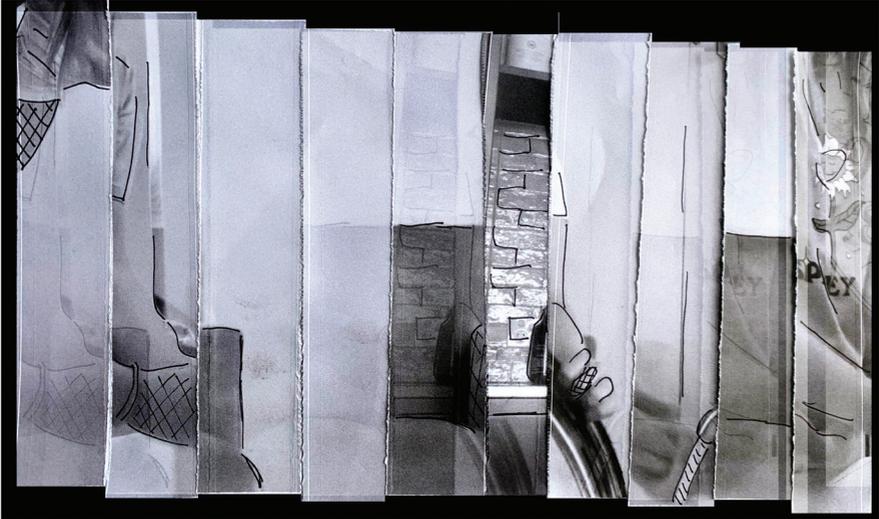


Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2021





Heidi Best, Year 10

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Foreword

This volume features both visual and literary artworks from all of the various academic levels of Ascham School in 2021.

Among the literary works, girls in Year 9 have presented stories that lie within the recent genre of Climate Fiction, projecting possible futures for the planet and human society.

Included are many stories based on Marghanita Laski's chilling short story, "The Tower" which were written as part of a study of Gothic Literature in Year 10; students were given a summary of the plot of Laski's story, and asked to write their own telling of that plot. After their stories were submitted, students studied Laski's own story. The resulting re-tellings of Laski's plot were fascinating for their variety and invention.

Especially interesting is the excerpt from a longer work by Emma Saunders which was written for Extension 2 HSC English, in which the characters of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* discuss Wilde and his literary work.

Among the visual artworks are portrait, self-portraits, landscapes, in various media, including photography. The uses of light and shadow, line and perspective are varied and fascinating.

The whole volume adds up to a clear testimony that creative intellect is thriving among the girls of Ascham in various visual and literary media, and this is worthy of the warmest encouragement, and also warmly encourages those who teach them.

Andrew Lane

The Tower (*an homage to Marghanita Laski's story*)

by Alice Wright (Year 10)

The light of the sun was just beginning to reach through the window and into her bedroom when Doctor Caroline Sinclair got up and began to dress. She tied her hair into a neat, round bun that perched on the top of her head, and slipped on a pair of shoes that clicked solemnly in time with her steps: *one, two, three, four*. She buttoned up her blouse — one by one, top to bottom — and began her descent to the kitchen.

She wondered what she would do today. Perhaps she'd go sightseeing; the streets of Florence beckoned to her, with their long, winding alleyways that seemed to stretch and bend around her. Her husband had been out yesterday and had come back late, long after the moon had reached its peak, so late she was falling asleep just trying to wait for him.

'Oh, dearest, you should've seen it! The architecture, the way the buildings seem to... well, they simply tower! All the way up, into the sky, so far I could hardly see the tops! It's simply magnificent!' The thought made her smile to herself. She'd practically had to tie him down so he would stop talking about his adventure and go to sleep; he had to be his best for his conference the next morning.

The conference at which he was supposed to be at that very moment! Nevertheless, she found him sitting, hunched over the dining table, a half-empty bowl of cereal sitting dangerously close to the edge; he was scribbling notes in the margin of a book. She raised an eyebrow.

"Neville?"

Her husband jumped, whipping around to look at her. "Sweetheart! Why, you scared me. I was just reading this book I bought at an old shop I found, yesterday while I was exploring — oh, by the way, you must walk around the city with me, the architecture is truly wonderful, one might just get lost in the alleys and streets —"

“Neville. Darling. Light of my life, my beautiful husband. Why are you here?”

He looked at her strangely. “Well, where else would I be?”

“Your conference?” She waved an arm in mock indifference. Neville’s face dropped. “You know, the conference that you’ve been planning to attend for months? The conference that we got on that awful, cramped plane for? That conference?”

“Oh.” Neville cursed. “*That* conference. I remember now.”

Caroline laughed. She leant over, marking Neville’s page then gently closing the book. “Well, you’re not late yet. Go now; I’ll clean up, and we’ll meet up again for dinner tonight. I love you, dear.”

“I love you too, Caroline. Make sure you have a moment to wander the city — it’s truly an incredible experience, and, oh! — did I tell you about the cat I discovered, sitting in a little box in an alleyway? It was quite terrific! The little thing was all curled up and watching my every move — ”

“Neville...”

“Sorry, dear. I’ll see you this evening!”

At a quarter to seven, she went to the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, and spent a few minutes — seventy-eight steps, by her count — reading the metal plaques describing the Cathedral’s history. Then, she took the most direct route to her next destination. In no time the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon, and she began her walk home; Neville would be worried sick if she were late.

She took thirty-one steps before she was stopped. An average man — brown-haired, dark-eyed, of average height and average weight and an average disposition, grabbed her arm in a casual, average grip. “*Ciao*, ma’am. You are from Australia, yes?” He smiled, averagely. His teeth, perfectly white and perfectly straight — perfectly average — seemed to glimmer in the waning sun.

Caroline nodded. The man seemed kind.

“Yes, I am.” She did not ask how he knew her.

“Oh, how wonderful!” The man’s dull eyes crinkled at the edges. “My work, you see. It has a sale going on. A sale, you see, ma’am, for Australians. You can travel up the tower, and you can see all of Florence from it. A wonderful experience, you see?”

She frowned apologetically. “I’m very sorry,” Caroline said, turning away. “My husband’s waiting for me.”

“Oh, that’s perfectly alright!” He laughed an average laugh. His head threw itself back, his neck arching in a perfectly normal fashion, stretching like plastic over his vocal chords, over his throat, which stayed perfectly unassuming as he talked — that is to say, perfectly still. “It will only take a few minutes. Just a few minutes, and you can see my tower, and you can take photos for your lovely husband! You must come to see my tower, you must! A piece of history, it is. Pure, Italian history. You are an historian, are you not?”

She hesitated. Neville was waiting for her, but this man seemed harmless. His eyes crinkled at her again.

What harm could seeing some tower do? The lovely man had said it would only take a few minutes, Neville could surely wait. But... “Is it near here?” Caroline asked.

“Yes! Yes, it is, ma’am, the tower — my tower, it is just around the corner from here. Yes, just around the corner, ma’am, and then you can see my tower.” The man turned briskly, his average brown hair refusing to move in the early evening breeze; perfectly still, plastic. Caroline. “Come! Come!”

And she followed.

They turned a corner, and suddenly the base of a large tower, the bustle of the city muffled and unnaturally quiet. “Here! Here it is, ma’am,” the man said. “Welcome to our tower, ma’am. I do hope you enjoy your stay!”

The tower was round, with a narrow wooden platform at the top, and a rickety spiral staircase inside that stretched a long, winding arm so high Caroline could

not see the top. It smelled old; it looked like it was a gust of wind from falling down around her and engulfing her in rubble. She was suddenly claustrophobic.

“It was built in the 15th century by the evil Niccolo di Ferramano,” The man began, “about whom dreadful legends persist.”

The door slammed behind them. Caroline jumped. “Are you sure it’s safe in here?” She whispered. The only light coming in was the sunset, through a small slit-window at the top of the tower; it would soon be dark.

The man ignored her, either unaware or uncaring of the sudden quiet darkness. “Rumours persist that he practised black magic, and that his wife, the beautiful, young Giovanna di Ferramano, committed suicide to escape his abuse.” At her glance, the man’s eyes crinkled again. His mouth, Caroline realised, did not stretch into a smile. “All lies, of course. Giovanna di Ferramano was killed in a much more terrible way.”

“What?” Startled by a deep sense of dread, as if rapidly realising something was particularly unaverage about the man’s too-crinkled eyes and glinting teeth and dream-blurred face that seemed to sway in and out of existence before her very eyes, paralysed with the sudden understanding that the tower was far more alive than the man standing before her, and unnerved by the way his eyes never actually moved, mouth never actually opened, legs never actually stepped, Caroline’s breath came in short, sharp puffs that made her shoulders heave. “What do you mean? What happened to her? What is this place?”

The man stepped back into the shadows. His form warped and twisted; his arms, his neck, his face changing, turning into flaking stone. When he spoke again, the words boomed like lightning around her.

“Congratulations, ma’am. We have never caught an Australian in our Tower before.”

Caroline wretched away from his perverted form, fleeing up the tall length of the tower. Steps like gunshots rang out around her, filling her ears with a roar. The stairs cracked and split underneath her feet. She blocked her ears.

There were four-hundred and seventy steps, by her count. They lead to a tiny, musty room with spiders crawling all over the floor like tiny hairs, waiting, waiting to trap her, like a Venus Flytrap —*Dionaea muscipula*, she reminded herself — watching her every move. All was dark, blood was still roaring in her ears, almost drowning out the sound of her own harsh breathing.

“Nothing,” she said aloud. “There’s nothing here.”

She was right. The room was empty; the tower was silent. The spiders weren’t watching her, they were just spiders. There was no view; the walls were made of thick stone, little room for even the smallest of cracks.

“How stupid of me,” she spoke aloud again, “to be scared by nothing.”

She sighed. Neville would surely be worried by now. Caroline turned, and began to carefully make her way back down the long staircase.

“It’s quite funny, I think,” she said without a smile. “It seemed a much shorter walk to the top when I was scared.”

It did. She walked, counting her steps. When she made it to four hundred and seventy and still could barely see the bottom, she began to worry. “Perhaps I miscounted?”

She had never miscounted before.

She began counting again. “One, two, three...” she wondered if Neville would stay up for her. “He won’t need to stay up, though, will he? I’m nearly at the bottom; I can just see it, if I squint hard enough.”

Another four hundred and seventy went by. She could just barely see the bottom. She began to run.

“One, two, three...”

Four hundred and seventy. “If I try, I can see the bottom from where I am now. I must be able to...” She heard footsteps behind her.

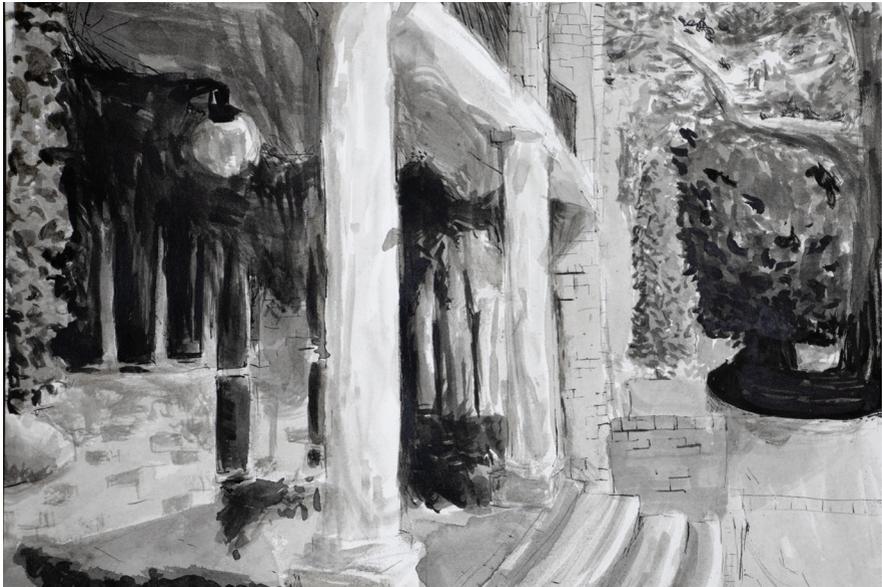
Five hundred. The footsteps grew louder.

Five hundred and seventy. Her legs burned. She stumbled, the cursed tower leaning and stretching and she could just see the bottom, but she had never felt further away.

“One, two, three...” The footsteps were all around her. They engulfed her, made her ears roar and her heart pump in time. She screamed. The Tower laughed.

Later, when the sounds of the ghosts had all but died out, and the restless footsteps had settled, a Tower sighed, grinned, then reset its trap.

Miles away, a man waited at a table for his wife to come home for dinner.



Adelle Weber, Year 9

Late March

by Theone Turton (Year 8)

Late March,
Winter almost lost its grip on me
Alone, no-one but myself for company
But that is how I like it.
And the crackling fire is my friend
She softens losses day on end.
Late March
The embers' glow resides
As wind and birds sing wild outside
A new dawn lingers.
Hanging in the morning dew
And winter's frost has melted too.
Early April.

The Ballerina

by Anika Sachdev (Year 10)

Franny felt the damp soil beneath her tiny toes. She lifted her head up high and curtsied to the trees waiting patiently.

She reached down to pick up Mr Nibbles, who shot out of her hands and disappeared into a curtain of mist. “Mr Nibbles! Come back! We haven’t got to the good part yet! Mr Nibbles, is that you?”

Franny peered through the mist as the woods enveloped her and the cool mist caressed her untamed locks. “Mr Nibbles! Where are you?” She was giggling as she lunged towards a chestnut figure, which leapt erratically through the woods.

The mist began to part. A stooped figure slowly raised itself from its prone position. Franny’s mischievous grin began to fade. A grotesque figure attempted to lift its scarred lips into something that vaguely resembled a smile.

“It is getting quite late.” It growled.

The child looked down at her bare feet. The creature attempted to comfort the child. However, all the girl felt was its bone cold touch.

The child was led into the mist. She found herself strangely comforted by her surroundings, opening the gate to ‘*Oakenshire’s home for girls.*’ Except the ‘s’ on the gate’s sign had fallen off, so it now read ‘*Oakenshire’s home for girl.*’

The decrepit cabin loomed over the girl. The child brushed off flakes of white paint from her unruly hair, whilst she cautiously stepped over a hole in one of the wooden stairs.

“I wish my parents were here,” the girl said.

The figure did not reply.

The creature pointed towards a room marked 'F' at the end of the corridor. Franny's door was slammed shut behind her. She was left sitting in the silence. In the dark.

Franny glanced at the door. Her curiosity overwhelmed her. She pulled at the handle. The door opened with a slight groan.

A dimly lit corridor greeted her. The yellow light flickered as she put one foot on a dust-covered floorboard. There were ten doors in front of her. She noticed that each door was slightly ajar. A bittersweet melody wafted into her ears. The melody forced Franny tentatively to nudge the first door open.

An ornate music box blanketed with a sheet of dust gazed up at her.

Franny felt herself drawn to the music box. She traced the purple and gold flower engravings on the lid, before she cautiously pushed the rusted latch upwards. The lid seemed to open of its own accord. Franny gazed in awe at the petite figure before her. She felt her hand wind up the music box. She stared at the ballerina twisting and turning. The melodic tune echoing around her body. The tune becoming part of her.

"Go to bed immediately!"

The creature's voice broke the child out of her trance. She jumped in fright. The music box was hurriedly shut. The child was dragged back into her room and dropped onto the dusty floorboards.

"You should have never opened that!" The creature's eyes were laced with fear and a trace of sympathy.

The door slammed shut. The key was turned. A soft click was heard.

Franny let out a long breath, as she heard the creature's steps recede down the stairs. Feeling a sudden chill run across her body, Franny got up to close her window. But the window was shut. Instead, an endless abyss of black greeted her. The rows of trees were now drowned by the darkness.

Franny was alone. In the dark. Franny's throat felt dry. Her heart started banging. She felt burning tears run down her cheeks. No one heard her screams.

Franny ran to her bed. The sheets, caked in dust, she pulled high over her head. Her tears lulled her into a short salty sleep.

That night, she dreamt of dancing on a tightrope. She was wearing a pair of torn ballet slippers which made her dance faster and faster and faster. Until one foot slipped. And Franny was flung into the heavy mist below.

Franny woke up feeling suffocated by her dusty sheets. Alarmed, she gulped more dusty air in. Choked by the dust, she jumped out of her bed, when suddenly, from somewhere in the darkness, something whispered, 'Franny, it's time to dance...'

She hauled open her door. The corridor loomed ravenously in front of her. A horrifying sight stood before her. Hundreds of music boxes snarled at her. Each ballerina glared at her, wearing different facial expressions. The disjointed tunes overwhelmed Franny.

Franny was frozen in shock. The air shifted around her. Her heart leaped. The walls closed in around her. The nauseating melody of the music box vibrated through her body. She mechanically whirred. Going round. And round. And round. And round...



Anna Van Gelder, Year 8

The Tower (*an homage to Marghanita Laski's story*)

by Jaime Nguyen (Year 10)

One. Two. Three. Four.

She ran a delicate hand along the pitted cracks which were staunchly fissuring their way around the circumference of the staircase walls, plunging towards depths she couldn't quite make out yet. How intriguing it was to watch that pale hand, manicured and polished to perfection, obligingly drag itself across the uneven surface of sediment, oblivious to the harsher stones jutting out of the curve without warning. Fascinated, she watched as the hand retreated from the wall and came up to stand in front of her face. *Delicate* would no longer be adjectival of that hand. It was now chafed to rawness, angry-looking and tender.

"Put it back on the wall."

Hand in place, she turned around.

"You're still here," she murmured.

"Yes. If you do not put your hand back on the wall, you will surely fall to your death."

There was an inquisitive head tilt. There was the dart of eyes from his face to her abraded hand, back to his face.

"It will start bleeding soon," she breathed.

"It does not matter. You would rather be bleeding than dead, would you not?"

"Bleeding than dead," she whispered. "Yes."

Her hand crept away from her face and placed itself on the wall again.

Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven.

Neville had been particularly irritable that day. It wasn't his fault, though. The anticipation of the conference had been accumulating since last week. *This is the big one*, she'd heard him mutter to himself on the plane, scrawling notes onto his record book and shuffling through the four piles of pages sitting cramped on his makeshift table. *Can't muck it up again*, she'd heard him growl to himself as he paced around the coffee table of his hotel. *Not again. Not this time*. It was stifling, the stress he had been emanating. Her mental durability had begun to chip away at the edges, small enough to be unnoticeable. But there was only so much she could force herself to endure. She'd tried to slip out of the room.

Where are you going? he had snapped.

Out. I thought I'd—

You're gonna leave me? Right now? You promised to accompany me here for support... so you were lying to me, then?

Neville, she had coaxed. Her ears rang with the smouldering echo of his fury. *We both know you'd focus better if I wasn't here to get in your way and distract you. I thought I'd give you a bit of space to relax and think.*

You're right, he'd told her after a suffocating pause. *You can go, then. But then we meet up back here after the conference for dinner.*

And then he'd turned away and continued his pacing.

Of course. I'll see you then. I love you.

She didn't hear an answer.

She didn't expect one.

Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five.

Each step was counted methodically. Carefully. Miss a step and she'd force herself to start again. The thought of it ending where it wasn't supposed to end was unbearable. There were four hundred and seventy steps jaggedly winding

their way to the base. She counted the numbers in her head. How soothing it was to know that the voice inside her head was the perfect volume. It had always been perfect — not too loud, not too hushed. She never worried about the possibility of being deafened by an internal and sudden outburst of shrieking. It simply wasn't possible.

Occasionally hindered by a rogue stone, tugging itself free each time so that its already-broken surface began to transform into a thing of nightmares, red and warm and sticky and marking its path with thin trickles of crimson, the hand wove its way along the crumpled texture that grudgingly formed the outer lining of the spiral staircase. She walked alongside the hand that felt the wall but not its own anguish, never straying ahead too far, never falling behind.

"You are doing well."

She paused. But she didn't need to turn around to justify that the voice belonged to him.

"Doing well," she parroted quietly.

"You may leave when you reach the ground," said he. "That was always an option for you. You may leave, so that you may return to your husband."

"Leave. Return. To my husband."

"Yes."

Fifty. Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

Walking up the stairs had been easier. It was an uncommon thing to say. Because it was common knowledge that things could go downhill so much faster than uphill. There were four hundred and seventy stone steps. She had given herself one second for each step. She had allowed herself a moment of meagre success when she had stepped onto the narrow wooden platform, soaking in the beauty of Florence's architecture that was gently profiled by shafts of the sun's dying light. A strange sensation curled over her as she stood there, awed and dazed.

This must be what euphoria feels like, she had said to herself, basking in the haze of drowsiness it offered. But then there was reality, presented to her in the form of the dying sun.

Late. Must go home now. Must get back to Neville.

Must you? he had asked in reply. She had turned to face him, still half drowsy and unnaturally calm.

You're not Neville.

It does not matter who I am.

Oh. Well... I am Caroline.

The pause was one of serenity. *It seems to me that you are not Caroline.*

Who am I, then?

Neville's.

She had stared past him, watching the deteriorating sun huff its last desperate breath of light, the already-waning glory of the city fading completely from sight. And she struggled fruitlessly to convince herself that he was wrong.

One hundred and six. One hundred and seven. One hundred and eight. One hundred and nine.

The shredded hand marched on, seemingly oblivious to its state of nauseating disfigurement. Abrasions began to appear on the arm attached to her hand at *one hundred and thirty*. An irritated bruise on her shoulder. Three seething burns on her hip. The ghost of an iron hand clasped unswervingly around her throat left furious blistering echoes of its outburst. A soft but persistent ringing in her ears. It sounded all too familiar. And along that stone wall of the staircase, her hand throbbed senselessly, leaving in its wake the rusting vestige of her presence.

*Two hundred and eighteen. Two hundred and nineteen. Two hundred and twenty.
Two hundred and twenty-one.*

“You are halfway there.”

She didn’t stop this time.

“Yes,” she rasped, throat threatening to close up.

“Tell me something, Caroline. Would you like to reach the end?”

“I must get back to Neville.”

“Must you?” he asked her. “I think you still have yet to realise how you have suffered under his rule.”

“He has not once laid a finger on me.”

“Maybe not,” he agreed. “But injuries lie far outside the realm of physicality. I will show you.”

Something rooted deep inside her brain then began to whirl back to action, weakened from an unacquainted period of sedation. Blinking repeatedly, there was a halting moment where she stood there, mind blissfully dazed and unsuspecting. But then there was sensation, one of abject horror and cruel condemnation, forced upon her by the opening floodgates that once separated the body and the mind.

And suddenly, her body noticed everything. The abrasions, bruises, burns, blood. They crashed into her with the relentless force of a tsunami, knocking her body senseless over and over with tidal waves of throbbing and cramps, and hot, searing pain. Unable to scream because her throat pulsed in merciless throbbing surges, she crumpled to her knees, reaching out her hands on all fours as if blindly searching for a remedy.

“Help me, *please!*” she coughed, the initial throbbing of her throat giving way to a fevered burning that tasted like blood and despair.

“I cannot.”

“Who are you?” she managed to gasp. Stoic to her convulsing body, he towered over her, feet planted firmly on the stone steps.

“I am the one who built this tower.”

“Niccolo. You’re Niccolo!”

“That is what they used to call me.”

“Please!” she cried out, dangling on a crumbling precipice threatening unconsciousness. “Stop this!”

“*This*,” he spat, “*This* is what your Neville does to you. He may not have given you these physical scars. But your mental scars... they are worse than what *this* is.”

“Just... just let me die!” she wept, uncomprehending.

“I can make the pain end. If you want.”

And like that, whatever was left of reason and rationality made its final departure from her mind. She was curling in on herself, only just now aware of her defencelessness. She was too late. Too late to realise what exactly Neville had done to her, because physical abuse wasn’t the only type of abuse, and shouldn’t she already know that? And God, it was the twenty-first century, the *twenty-first century*, where accommodation for this sort of situation laid itself bare at her feet and begged her to speak out, and she was too late to realise.

“*Please!* Anything... I’ll do anything! Make it stop!” she pleaded. And her eyes squeezed themselves shut so tightly, too tightly, not tight enough to ease the pain. She didn’t notice the emergence of a cruel smirk on his faded presence.

“As you wish,” he said, traces of his grin dangling precariously on the edge of his words.

The pain vanished in an instant.

Four hundred and forty-two. Four hundred and forty-three. Four hundred and forty-four. Four hundred and forty-five.

She stands there, blinking stupidly for a second. Are... are these *tears* on her face? She takes a moment to assess the situation. She holds out her hands. They're as clean and polished as they had been this morning. Patting down her body, she finds nothing wrong with herself. Except the tears. She hasn't cried since last week.

I was walking down these stairs, she remembers. But that can't be right... she's on *four hundred and forty-five*, and she's not even halfway to the bottom. She must have dozed off for a minute. She decidedly turns on her heel and heads back to the top of the tower – she *won't* get the numbers wrong this time. Reaching the narrow wooden door, she decides to take a glance at the landscape of Florence before heading back down. But when she opens the door, she finds herself engulfed in a torrential pale darkness.

If she squints, she can see the picturesque outline of the city. There's a strange sensation accompanying the view. She shakes it off as euphoria of a sort.

"Late," she murmurs. "Must go home *now*. Must get back to Neville."

There's a voice coming from behind her. "Must you?"

She should be frightened out of her wits. Her heart should be throbbing painfully from having shot straight out of her chest. She doesn't know why she doesn't scream, or even startle the tiniest. Instead, she turns around calmly to face him. She's sure she's seen him before; she just doesn't know where. And there's a certain sense of repetition, which is stupid because when has this happened before? And right before she speaks again, there's the horrible, twisted sensation that something is terribly wrong.

"You're not Neville."



Xanthe Browne, Year 8

The Man and The Miracle

by Alice Jordan (Year 9)

Chapter 1

I thought about my life before disaster struck. I think we could all agree that everyone did. The happy and joyful cheers of splashing in the ocean as a little kid seemed more appealing than ever. The birthdays, the music, school, the movies, the holidays. To me, it was all such a privilege, considering the position I was in. I walked along the Princes Highway, not far from Kiama, the ocean in my view. Why did it all have to change? All the politicians and so called “world leaders” had to do was listen, but they didn’t. The ocean was filled with more plastic than fish, pound for pound. Scientists told us there was around 850-950 million tonnes of plastic in the ocean. There were so many warnings, yet we chose to ignore them. I continue to stare at the ocean. How many dreams were broken because we didn’t do anything? I used to dream of surfing the waves, swimming to the depths of the ocean, uncovering mysteries thought to be unsolvable. It was like the tides themselves were calling for me, but I didn’t listen. It hurt too much to do so.

I remember Margot, Ace and all my other friends from home. I hadn’t seen them since 2050. The childhood memories were becoming blurrier every day. The adventures were slipping away from me. I didn’t want to forget them, they just didn’t want to stay with me. I remember my parents. I lost them five years earlier. I didn’t know if they were even alive, but I wasn’t hopeful.

I was on my way to the Refuge in Jervis Bay. Planning to walk the whole 196 kilometres to the bay from Sydney seemed ambitious, but where else could I go? Maybe my family were there.

“You know, you might need some grub if y’walkin’ yourself all the way to Jervis Bay, Darl. You look starved.” I stopped in my tracks and turned around, startled, to see who was talking to me. I softened my stance a little bit. It was an elderly man, maybe seventy, with a fragile, slim structure. He had a trolley bag that looked like it was from the 1960s, or at least the fabric pattern was. He was wearing an old beanie, a plain grey t-shirt with holes in it, flip-flops, board shorts and a knitted cardigan. The thing that caught my eye was, in fact, his gleaming

white beard that shone like the moon. He had a kindly face, with sweet, green eyes. He held out his hands towards me, a loaf of bread in them. "Take it."

"Oh... no. Please, have it yourself. Food is scarce and I've had some today." Who was this man? I hadn't seen humans in so long, I could barely remember how to act around others.

"I've had some earlier, too. And you'll need y'strength." I looked at him sceptically.

"No need to worry, Darl. I'm not gonna hurt ya. Just take it." I gave up on resisting and gently took the loaf. Honestly, I was starving and I hadn't eaten anything remotely nutritious in weeks.

I sat down to watch the view and eat the bread. The kindly man sat down next to me.

"Sorry to ask," I said, "but, uh... what's your name?"

"Emmet's my name. I've never liked it."

"I think it's a nice name."

He chuckled.

"What about yours?"

"Jo. Really, it's Jolene but I like Jo better."

There was a moment of silence.

"This rubbish," he said. "I think it's getting out of control. We should clean it up."

I looked at the elderly man, perplexed. What was he on about?

"I mean, nobody else is gonna do it. So we should, instead of walking away from the problems. Besides, I've got more energy in me than y'think." That was somewhat already obvious to me, considering he'd walked all the way from Sydney.

“But I still have so many questions. Were you following me? How are two people going to clean up a mess like this? Are we even going to have enough time to —”

“I have some friends around. They all know to come. And as far as me following you, it was both planned and unplanned. Yes, I thought I’d cross someone on the way, but did I know it was going to be you? No. And y’see, you’re the type of person who can help things change.” I raised my eyebrow and smiled at Emmet. What a peculiar man! And even if his friends were real, where were they? When were they going to arrive? Thoughts darted across my mind. Little did I know that I was about to embark on an unforgettable journey.



Sophia Chen, Year 7

The Tower (*an homage to Marghanita Laski's story*)

by Annabelle Koumoukelis (Year 10)

"So, darling, what'll you be doing today?"

"Museums, mainly, then an hour or two exploring that tower I've been talking about endlessly."

"That tower! I reckon I could write a Ph.D. thesis on it by now. Enjoy your day! 'Bye!" Suddenly Neville poked his head back through the doorway. "Oh, and just make sure you're on time for dinner tonight, at seven, at the hotel."

"Yes, Neville, now go to your conference; you'll be late. And fix that collar of yours!"

Nine hours. Caroline set foot on the pebbled footpaths of Florence. The sun engulfed the city in its brightness and warmth. Flickers of golden light intermittently shone in her eyes and danced through her eyelashes as the sun rose into the clear sky. Caroline wandered through the corridors of the Uffizi, taking note of Michelangelo's tiny brush strokes on his paintings and the art on the high ceilings in the building.

Seven hours. Caroline dashed down the dim streets of Florence. She squinted at the herd of disorderly clouds in the sky and the odd slit of blue peeking between them. The ominous clouds followed her to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore and Brunelleschi's Dome, they huddled around the dome bumping into each other in an effort to get the best view of Caroline. The clouds watched as she walked down the grand stairs of the Cathedral and onto the street to hail a taxi.

Four hours. More clouds gathered over Florence, observing Caroline blindly enter her taxi. The taxi driver was a tall man of sallow complexion dressed in black. His old, dented car creaked and ticked, interrupting her train of thought.

"La Torre di Ferramano," she asked him.

“No! No! Do not to go there, lady!”

“Yes. Please take me there.”

“It’s out of town... we’d better hurry up.”

Caroline glanced at the empty seat next to her. A brochure lay there. She picked it up.

“Have you seen this brochure?”

“What brochure? I just cleaned my car.”

“It’s about the Tower.”

“Strange! I didn’t see it there.”

She opened to the first page of the brochure and read:

The tower is round, with a narrow wooden platform at the top, and a spiral staircase inside. It was built in the 15th century by the evil Niccolo di Ferramano, about whom dreadful legends persist. Rumours persist that he practised black magic, and that his wife, the beautiful, young Giovanna di Ferramano, committed suicide to escape his abuse. The tower is surrounded by dead land; after his death, the people of the village surrounding the tower had fled the bubonic plague, and the village had been burnt down to destroy the plague infection. Nothing grows in the bare soil surrounding the tower.

Three hours. The cool air-con breeze raced up her legs. “I think I left my jacket at Brunelleschi’s Dome.”

“You wanna to go back there?”

“No, it’s okay... I want enough time to see the tower in the day-time.”

“I’ve gone tower before; don’t forget to count its steps.”

“It’s alright; I’ll be there in daylight anyway, so I’ll be able to see.”

Caroline stepped out of the taxi, handed the driver a large sum of money and thanked him. “Maybe I shouldn’t go and just come back tomorrow. Do I have enough time before dinner?” she thought.

The tower was impossible to miss. It frowned over the abandoned village. It was surrounded by an endless grey sky. A wind howled at Caroline, invaded her body and chilled her bones. Caroline walked up the steep, rock-strewn hill, her high heels damaged beyond repair. Its huge wooden door called for her as she walked towards it. Its rusted hinges screamed as she pushed it open, its rotten wood gave her a splinter in her fingertip. It’s narrow, spiral staircase led her to the top. Each step she took echoed down the murky, depths of the tower. The dusty darkness was occasionally interrupted by slits of hope, slits of sunlight. The air was cold and stale, with each breath, her mind fogged and her vision got hazier. Caroline whispered to herself as she counted the stairs.

“One, two, three...” with each step she took, the sun descended, “four hundred and sixty-nine, four hundred and seventy.”

Two hours. At the top of the tower, she leant over the fragile, iron railing, and observed the infinite drop to doom below. A shiny, silver lock illuminated by a stray beam of sunlight caught her eye. With a weak nudge, she unlocked it and opened a small, wooden hatch which led to a narrow wooden platform that surrounded the outside of the top of the tower. She looked out of a small window, her blurry vision only presented her with the distant city lights of Florence and the grey clouds in the horizon were lit by an orange light. Her legs shivered, panic pumped through her icy veins, her palms were saturated with sweat as she helplessly watched the sun melt into the skyline.

One hour. Back down the stairs Caroline rushed, clinging onto the bare wall for stability.

“Ouch!” The splinter submerged further into her fingertip. “One, two, three.” She tried not to fall in the gaps between the stairs. Her mind spun as she spiralled down the staircase. In a hurry, she skipped a few steps.

“No!”

Her right high heel slipped off her foot. Through the gap in the stairs it plunged down the tower. Caroline paused and waited for the thump of her shoe hitting the bottom. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds. Not a sound was made. Caroline looked around, encompassed by a blanket of darkness.

“Two hundred and seventy-three, two hundred and seventy-four.” She touched the rough walls and felt her way down the stairs. The wall felt like a mix between sandpaper and asphalt.

Half an hour. “Four hundred and sixty-nine...” Caroline puffed, “four hundred and seventy!” Caroline extended her trembling hands and moved them frantically, like a lonely sailor stranded alone at sea, waving at nearby ships. She continued descending.

“Five hundred and twenty-two, five hundred and twenty-three.”

The tower stood proudly. Another successful day.



Wynter Wennerbom, Year 9

Nature's Own Mind

by Jaime Nguyen (Year 10)

You see the dog as you're returning to your car. It's hobbling its way out of the forest, pathetic and whining. It notices you almost immediately, and you think you must be mistaken when you see its eyes widen, and it gives an indistinct shake of its head. You take a step towards it, confused and concerned, and it tries to retreat into the outer layer of foliage behind it.

"Here, boy," you say softly, and it whimpers.

It's an impulse decision to collect the dog and take it to be treated at the vet. You observe me. I'm a towering monstrosity, the very epitome of what you humans consider a nightmare, with a collective mess of broken limbs and blackened trunks, and a soft-lit fog that covers the soil in a suffocating blanket.

I'm anticipating my next meal.

Your entire being is set against finding this dog; I handle your minor setback with relative ease; but somewhere within your mind, there's logic telling you that the fear of being attacked is a mere mind game. After a heated internal battle, you decide that you're *not* a coward, and you make your way past the first layer of trees.

"Like I'm in a bloody horror story," you mutter. I can tell you're trying to justify the way your head keeps flicking side to side, an erratic cycle of searching for what you don't want to find. Except justification becomes futile when your body starts deceiving your brain. I can see it, plain as day, in your feet that can't stay in the same place for more than a few seconds; in the way you keep adjusting your posture to make yourself smaller; in the shifting veins of your hands that ball up and then loosen, unsure of themselves in the vastness of the surroundings.

Time to eat.

You're well past my outer layer of trees by now. The veil of mist that is so seemingly harmless, begins to curl around your ankles in delicate, slender tendrils. You're distracted, though, I keep you distracted, by the dog's wretched

cries which seem to grow louder as you wander along. The vines of fog continue their steep incline, soft as the whispered breath of air you exhale, yet tight as the iron fist I have gripping around your mind. There's a question lingering at the back of your mind, wondering *why* you decided to try help this dog. Shouldn't you let nature run its course?

Too late now, some part of you decides, clouding over your hesitation. I now reside in that part of your mind. And even though you're firm in this decision, you're a feverish clutter of jagged inhales and shaky exhales. It's the only sound you can hear in this wretched place. Because I don't need cracking twigs or mythical beasts to make your heart skip beats and turn your hands clammy. Anticipation is the unrivalled torture of silence.

You keep calling out for the limping dog to come to you. When will it become obvious to you that your attempts are futile? It never crosses your mind that you can backtrack and walk straight out of my clutches. Maybe it has something to do with the way the tendrils of fog have snaked past your legs and chest and have begun to seep into your head. It's suffocating you, it's breathing life into you, it's disorienting, it's anchored, it's a battlefield of thunder, it's an ocean of solace. You're on a precipice, dangling on the edge of your thoughts. In the haze of your conflicted mind, you think you see the dog patiently waiting at the base of a tree that bears no different qualities from the surrounding greenery. And there's a voice in your head – you don't know if it's a hallucination, but you think it might be the dog; it's repeating, *too late*. *You're next*, and you want to flee, to return home and sleep for days, to cry for help even though you know you're past salvation, but there's a gentle obscurity that veils your mind from reality.

Even the veil can't hide the way the dog begins to disintegrate. You can't tear your eyes away from the miserable sight, can't stop watching as the flesh and fur melt off the dog's body in reddening layers, its mutilated hind leg finally accompanied by the surrounding flesh in its state of disfigurement. There's no sound; only an absolute, final silence. And when what's left of the dog crumples, so do you. Your knees give way first, then the rest of your body follows. Your head hits the ground at an angle that gives plain view of the dog's remnants. They seem to soak, to dissolve, to liquefy into the soil below at an alarming rate.

Delicious.

There's a period in which you're disconnected from your body. It's your mind and my mist keeping each other company, intertwined yet hostile, and it's becoming very clear that your mind cannot outplay my fog. It's only when the fog completely overwhelms your mind that I allow you to wake in your physical body.

And this time, I'm in control.

The first thing you notice when you raise your head is that you're surrounded by a thinning film of fog. You can see the last of the golden rays disappearing from sight, which can't be right, because it was past dark when you were last awake.

"Hello," I whisper to you. You're immediately alert, jerking your head back and forth, failing to identify the source of the voice. You stand - or try to stand - but there's a searing, blinding pain that accompanies the terror of the moment. You let out a feeble howl, and when you twist around, you can see your leg, flesh torn down clear to the bone and dripping with blood.

"Move," I whisper. And the veil drops over your mind again. You stand. The leg suddenly doesn't bother you. You move.

You limp your way out of the forest, and when you're reaching the edge, you almost immediately notice the person who is staring back at you, confused and concerned. And *Oh God*, you realise what's happening in a dizzying moment of clarity. You're whining now, shaking your head at the person and trying to retreat. *Don't follow me.*

"Come here, girl," the person says softly. You're whimpering, half-paralysed. *Don't follow me.*

"Come on, now," I whisper to you, and there's no hesitation in your obedience. "There's a good girl. Return to the tree. It's time to eat."

Her hair flowed about ...

by Sienna Jiang (Year 7)

Her hair flowed about as it danced with the wind. Feet pounding on the gravelly path as they travelled further away. The long grasslands shimmer as she treads them, moving in a way that looks like a wave of farewell. The path she travels is familiar, one from childhood days, yet this journey is nothing like the previous. Her hand pulls on the straps of the bag before continuing with the journey. One foot in front of the other, until her figure is only a dot on the milky horizon.

I notice a wet droplet on my father's cheek as his hands walk across the keyboard, telling a story of a life worth saving. My mind grasps for a word of comfort. Nothing. All that is there is a dry, desert plain of loneliness. There was so much I wish I could've asked my mother. I knew I should've chased after her. Maybe if I tried hard enough to pull her back, she would have come home. I whisper to her face a silent question. She looks so confident, so happy. The picture of her as a young, carefree woman. What could possibly have happened?

My mother was dead. The glint of a knife, embedded deep in her heart. Her murderer was dead too. Shot dead by the police who found mother's body. We held hands and prayed for her. My knees sank into the soft dirt and my hands trembled as they place a blood-red rose on her grave. The clouds approached us, showering us in mournful rain. An enemy's life for the price of a loved one.

Silence. The sound of tapping on keys is subdued. There is no more of the story to tell.



Angelina Yoon, Year 11



Lucy Dimitriadis, Year 9

Where I love to be

by Isabelle Bugg (Year 7)

I find myself in a place where I think I belong, the place where I love to be.

The bright sun desperately trying to shine through the colourful leaves making the forest glow a bright orange. The leaves falling like snowflakes slowly drifting down, one by one, landing in the calm river and then gliding down the stream.

The fish swim around playfully in the river swimming away from any leaves that suddenly fall, making sure they don't go too close to the gushing water from the beautiful waterfall. I place my hand in the cool fresh water rushing against my fingers.

I sit down on the soft sand next to a tall tree and listen to the ongoing flow of the waterfall run into the stream and the small splashing of the fish.

I feel the cool wind gently blowing through the trees and twisting my hair as I take a slow deep breath of fresh air.

"This is where I love to be," I say, as I slowly wake up and realise it was never truly there.

Confessional Burning

by Evita Abela (Year 9)

Prologue – Denial

There is no need to bless us, Mother Earth, for we have not sinned; we have not and never will make a confession. We deny that we have ever done anything wrong. Is it not the natural process of evolution for land to display cracks and for the wind to glow a hyperbolic shade of red? It is not our fault, it is yours.

Actus Rea

The faint metallic smell of ash was present and there was a certain dryness in the air. The air was 21% oxygen. Birds chirped songs that were seemingly different from their usual tunes. Their piercing sounds were like sirens in the distance, gradually coming closer and moving further away. They were like cries for help, like desperate prayers for it all to go away. We listened for a while until we got sick of hearing them. They eventually went away, some of us wondered what happened to them, others did not care and were glad that the annoying sounds were gone. Little did we know that these were not their songs, these were their dying words before they ascended to some other distant place.

Burn.

A sudden darkness loomed as the ground began to steadily shake. The birds that remained tried to fly to heaven, knowing that their own self-inflicted removal would be less painful than what was to come. They were, however, somehow grabbed and pulled back down into what was then dense bushland. Something in the distance flickered as small glowing stars began to shoot up from the ground. Whole armies stormed over the rolling hills, tearing up everything in their path. It was an invasion. Some ran from it, grabbing everything they could. Some stayed and fought with the strongest weapon in existence to mankind.

Burn.

Whole ecosystems were wiped out. Species became endangered and extinct. Coarse tufts of fur that were once soft were stained with ash and tainted with the smell of blood. They rolled around the barren land and were swept up by Mother Earth's strong breath. The small and naive children would play with them because they did not know what they were. The once symbiotic relationship between ourselves and the environment had been broken. We had signed agreements before, something to do with Paris but never like this. This was a divorce, a divorce between Mother Earth and us.

Burn.

We struggled to breathe. The air was now 3% oxygen. Our lungs had been penetrated by the fine particles which floated through the air as if they were the pappi of a dandelion. As the grey and cloudy air became an unimaginable colour, the world was minimised to nothing. Every tree had fallen. Every mountain was now nothing more than a pile of empty space. Every living thing was scorched and we were no longer breathing oxygen. We were miserable, mortal beings and were existing in a world condemned to the grief, pain and suffering of our own doing. The flames had grown so dark and devouring that only their silhouettes were visible. They now moved effortlessly across the landscape like recalcitrant shadows. Our bodies, much like the earth, were scarred. The people who once laughed at the birds seemed to have bigger scars while the children had none at all. A hollow yet rhythmic humming sound began to emit from the conflagration. It was the flames whispering to us, reciting a prayer.

Burn.

Australia. 12.6 million hectares ablaze. 34 dead. 445 injured. 3 million animals killed or displaced. 434 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere. And yet the flames did not care and neither did we.

Burnt.

Drip.

With rain, resurrection may come.

Epilogue – Guilt

Bless us, Mother Earth, for we have sinned; this is our first confession. We were the dry, hot days that were inescapable, strangling the lungs of so many and leaving deep, permanent scars on the land. We were the blazing flames of fury that were so angry, they tore up everything. We were the drowning floods that submerged whole cities and wiped out biomes. We cannot be anything anymore because there is nothing to be. There is nothing at all to be. We are heartily sorry for having offended thee. We detest all our sins because we dread the pains of our future and the loss of you, our Mother Earth. We firmly resolve to confess our sins, to do penance, and to amend our lives and the planet.

Days were so much easier when the raging fires were all we worried about.



Giselle Parras, Year 10

The Tower (*an homage to Marghanita Laski's story*)

by Angie Nguyen (Year 10)

Neville Sinclair was a figure of immense power, who exercised this in the household and at work. An Australian delegate, he had become accustomed to the shrinking heights of his colleagues as he approached; this seemed to extend his own height further. The office was pleased to find that he was attending a business conference in Florence. As it was his wife's apprehension that this visit would be marked by his engrossment (and irritability), it was decided that she would spend her days wandering around the many sights of the city. She was, in fact, interested and eager to do so, as she was a professor of Renaissance Studies – and perhaps it was also desperation for liberation from her husband, who at times could be quite tyrannical.

“Jesus Christ, Caroline! You've gone out — what, two times already this month? You know what the limit is, don't you?” he had said, sweat forming on his forehead, big red spots flaring on his cheeks. A drop of spit had landed on her chin, and she had hastily rubbed it off.

Her eyes had fallen to the ground and focused on a spot on the floor.

“Yes, Neville. Four times a year. Two-hundred-dollar budget.”

He had grunted a reluctant permission.

“I didn't marry you just for you to go wild, did I?”

But that was beside the point. It was late in the day, almost sunset, and she had already visited various old churches, museums and art galleries, each filling her with a strange yet not unwelcome sense of nostalgia. It was exactly 6.24pm, 51 minutes before her arranged dinner with Neville, when Dr Sinclair arrived at her final destination on the agenda — La Torre di Ferramano.

She had known about this tower for as long as she had loved studying the Renaissance. It was one of the lesser-known features of Florence, for it was situated far beyond the main city, and even farther beyond the gentle countryside, where it seemed as though lost spirits forlornly danced, spinning a misty gossamer that engulfed the tower, and creating a realm full of mystery. It seemed as though no-one had ever been there before — only very few texts mentioned it, and even then, there were strangely no descriptions of the interior. It was that very fact — that she would be the first person to enter the tower in centuries — that drew her in like a siren's call, her wild imagination longing for the rightful acknowledgement of her efforts, and oh! — the admiring gaze Neville would bestow upon her!

Emboldened by her fancies, Caroline walked determinedly through the barren landscape surrounding the tower, dismissing a vague sense of unease as her overwhelming excitement. She had heard, the day before, of a story that had lingered long enough to circulate around the older generation of Florence. Built in the fifteenth century by Conte Niccolo di Ferramano, it sheltered secrets shielded from the public eye, but after the disappearance of his wife, it was rumoured that she committed suicide to escape his abuse. But that, of course, was all it was, a rumour.

The door to the tower grew larger and larger as she approached, until it was looming over her body, daring her to enter. The building cast a long foreboding shadow, stretching towards the horizon. With trepidation, Caroline reached her hand forwards to meet the cold iron latch, pulling it across with great difficulty; nevertheless, it creaked open as if an invisible host had recognised her presence.

She stepped inside, and the heavy wooden door closed upon her with a forceful thud. What sounded like muffled screams echoed through the tower. She turned around in fear, then coaxed herself, excusing it for the wind from the outside. She turned back, expecting pointed arches and ornate decorations along the walls, characteristic of medieval architecture – but there was nothing. Nothing except wet stone walls with thin slits letting light in, and spiraling stairs upon which she was standing, surrounding a channel of darkness whose limits could not be seen. Slowly, Caroline began her ascent, carefully trailing her hands along the walls so as not to fall, appreciative of its roughness. She counted her steps as she went: one, two, three...

How interesting were stairs. A seemingly mundane structure, representing duality and contradiction. How they could be both up and down, how they could indicate both growth and aimlessness. As Caroline walked up towards the fading skylight, she felt a strange sense of freedom, her breath catching in her throat as she rose higher and higher, away from the complexities of life, until finally! — four hundred and sixty-eight, four hundred and sixty-nine, four hundred and seventy — she had reached the top of the tower.

There, a larger, glass window awaited her, where she could stand on tiptoe to look out over Florence. There was a thick layer of dust covering it, which she briskly brushed off with her finger, and then, through a grubby yellow-tinted lens, she could see the gently rolling hills a few kilometres away, and even farther the city of Florence, where she could imagine Neville arguing heatedly in his conference... Neville! She must return to Neville quickly. He'd probably be wondering where she was. And he'd be angry if she was late.

By this time, the shafts of light coming through the windows had gradually become dimmer, and Caroline hurriedly walked down the stairs, counting the four hundred and seventy steps, occasionally clutching a protruding rock when off-balance. At around two hundred steps, the inside of the tower had become entirely pitch-black. She clung to the wall, pressing the weight of her body against it.

A slight gust of wind brushed against her face. Caroline spun around, heartbeat quickening. Of course, no-one was there. She almost expected someone to come out of the darkness – what was becoming of her? Alone in the tower, in darkness, her imagination was bound to think of *something*.

She traipsed on. Three hundred, three hundred and one. Her pace quickened slightly as she came nearer to the four hundred and seventieth step. Four hundred, four hundred and one.

A voice came from behind her, breathing into her ear.

“Close...”

She flinched, and looked behind her, despite her knowing that nothing would be there, again.

“Stop it, Caroline! Stop making things up. You’re going to find the door and you’re going to see Neville again. Yes.”

Faint laughter ricocheted against the walls. Caroline closed her eyes and calmed herself, before opening her eyes again for the fear of what images her mind could conjure behind closed eyelids, yet this did not work until she realised that they were already open; of course, sight had already been obfuscated so that she could not even see her own two hands in front of her face. Still, she felt for the walls, tracing and counting, the jagged surface tearing at her skin.

Four hundred and sixty-eight, four hundred and sixty-nine...

Caroline exhaled a sigh of weary triumph. Her hands felt for the wooden door. Yet nothing greeted them except for the rough stone walls she had been touching the whole time.

“Damn it!” She slammed her hands against the wall. “No, I must have miscounted. That must be it.”

Caroline continued her routine, counting the steps, her left hand ever so aware of the material beneath it. Five hundred and one, five hundred and two – and then, when she reached six hundred, a sudden rush overcame her, and she froze right there on the steps. Her body trembled violently with sobs. It was as if her soul was bleeding an ocean from the eyes.

“I can’t... I can’t...”

Curled up on the stairs, with ferocious peals of thunder from the outside racking the tower, Caroline allowed herself to surrender to the wave of fatigue crashing down on her, until, at last, the first rays of light came from above, and when she woke up, she could see her hands again! Yet something was different, somehow, for what she saw when she raised her hands in front of her face was beyond her comprehension. Her left hand was mangled, skin peeling, revealing pink, bloodied flesh. She looked behind her, and she saw that a trail of blood had spiraled down to meet her current position. She looked to her front, and there, the trail of blood continued, despite her stopping.

Caroline stood up and placed her hand on the wall. Slowly, she forced her right leg to move down to the next step, then the left leg, still keeping a tally of the steps in her brain. She traced over the old path with her own blood, unaware of what was happening.

A sudden heave of a door above pulled her to her senses. Her eyes widened, and as she opened her mouth to scream, a voice whispered in her ear. She shuddered, but still screamed, only to find a hand clamped around her mouth. It was her own hand, and she screamed into its disfigurement, wrestling with herself. At last, she stopped, placed the hand back to the wall, and continued walking, her brain unfalteringly counting steps.

Six hundred and fifty-one. Six hundred and fifty-two.



Diana Sharma, Year 9



Eva Johnston, Year 8

Reflection

by Elsie Budden (Year 10)

The afternoon sun warmed the sparse winter forest, rays of sunshine squeezing through the mist as it began to tip over the window of the cloudy horizon.

Catherine took in the trees, the talon-like branches which stretched up through the clear sky. She was headed West, towards the lake which she had read about online, her hiking poles pushing her forwards along the hard earth beneath her. A light breeze rushed through the branches as dead leaves swept across the ground, which gleamed with dew in the twinkling sun. The frosty branches formed a narrow pathway which extended into the misty horizon beyond. She walked for several minutes, savouring the peacefulness; she had longed for a holiday away from the noise of the city.

Catherine was shuddered from her trance, as a sudden agonizing scream pierced the forest.

She jolted to a stop, her eyes wide with alarm. The screech echoed from the indiscernible end of the path which she followed, trudging through the mud with her hiking poles towards the lake. The desperation of the girl's scream egged her onwards, towards the lake; she began to run along the path towards the noise, rubbing her icy hands over her hoarse throat as she stumbled past the masses of trees, their roots weaving across the ground, enveloping her feet as she ran.

Gusts of wind whipped her cheeks; she slowed down and took in the deadness of the forest, ghostly silence lingering in every shadow, every crevice; each breath she took burned like poison down her throat. The looming clouds hastened the darkening of the sky. She began to hurry faster, driven forward, faster and faster.

Soon, drops of water began to trickle from the overarching branches, pricking Catherine's skin; icy chills trickled down her spine as darkness rapidly engulfed the scarce and endless forest. Her heart pounded loudly in her head, the sound of the frantic scream still lingering in her frenzied mind. She felt lightheaded, dazed, hypnotised. Her only thought; save the girl. The last golden embers of

light faded, lighting up the skeletal branches, black against the blood red sky. Waves of fog flooded the winter air, before darkness descended.

She gazed to the sky trying to follow the moon, but with each breath she took the trees closed in, masking it from view, suffocating her. A rush of panic overwhelmed Catherine, her desire to reach the lake, where she was sure she would find the girl, and this need became all consuming, driving her forwards even as rain began to pelt down. The rain stole the last shred of warmth and soon she could only recognise the cold, slick, icy ground, and the trees, a constant, looming presence. The pitch-black sky offered no solace, no safety. She craved the warmth of the sun. Catherine ran, as the mud-drenched earth sucked at her soggy feet at every step. Nothing shattered the cruel silence. She could have only wished for another scream — a sign that the girl was still alive.

Despite the sudden nightfall, Catherine was numb, stumbling with her feet over the wet leaves, the roots which protruded from the earth linking together into one mass, no longer seeking her safety, but to find the girl, driven by some inhuman urge. The rain kept pouring, the sound blurred into one long, thundering wall of noise. It pelted down onto her as she ran blindly across the forest, the scent of rotted leaves piercing her nostrils.

There was a dark cast to the trees as she looked frantically about the dead forest. It was empty; not a soul to be found. She glanced wildly around, her ears ringing as with each drop the rain grew more aggressive. The moon drifted out from behind the clouds and hurled shards of light onto the muddy ground, the light fractured by the skeletal branches. The ground was a slick ice urging her to fall with every step. Rain ran down her body as the drops began drumming against the earth, chilling her to the bone. Her foot hit something hard, and for a second, she was flying, before a loud splash resounded, and her face met the surface of the lake and then she was suffocating. Her hands reached out to break her fall in the murky shallows of the water, but they met only more icy water, the floor nowhere in her reach. Her body felt heavy, useless and as she sunk into the chilling abyss, bony hands encircled her wrists, pulling her further and further from the shallows, from warmth, breath, and life. She writhed weakly, her energy sapped by the cold, and with each struggle, she only descended further, pulled into embrace of the water, of the rough, skeletal arms which gripped her tightly.

Catherine reached for the blackened sky, the ripples spreading across the lake's surface. Then she was pulled under.

Catherine gasped for air. She was cold, her fingers stiff and numb as she laid in the mud. Water lapped over her hand. Aching, she tried to pry herself from the icy ground, dazed and blinded by the watery sunlight. When she couldn't shift from the ice, she desperately clawed at the earth, she was driven to keep pushing until her left hand had gripped something smooth, something fleshy. With all the strength left in her, she pulled at the bony arm and a porcelain face emerged from the water, shrouded in ice. She gazed at her reflection.

The Red Devil Pursuit

by Sienna Gordon (Year 9)

They were coming. Time slowed as our realisation presented itself. We had to move out of here as fast as we could. My heart was pounding rapidly, I could hear it in my chest. I looked back at my family, feeling my ribs expand as I took four shallow breaths. Pausing, I reclaimed my mind, needing to be the tranquil presence for the sake of my family. The terrifying sounds of howls and doom lurked below. Fear clutched at my throat. Sticks cracked and drooling mouths eyed us, watching our every move. The sound of the howls rumbled between my ears; I knew far too well what lay ahead. We gathered, embracing each other in case it was our last time together. One by one, we scampered away trying to get to safety, clinging onto branches for dear life. Then, everything paused. The dreaded sound of panic and fear surrounded me. They did it. They finally got what they wanted. This couldn't be true. I had to be dreaming. My eyes filled with tears of horror as they bolted away cackling; poor little Margot looked back at me with terror in her eyes, trapped in the confinement of their bloody, savage fangs.

They say things get better with time, right? This was certainly not the case for me. I've never been the same. More than half my family have been killed due to those vicious and thoughtless murderers. We can never catch a break. Why do they care so much about being superior? It's like they only live to kill. We're not even the only ones. So many other lives have been taken.

Even the birds have stopped singing, their emptiness surrounded the sky as the music stopped playing. Our community is dry, our ecosystem has been ripped to shreds. Our biodiversity is constantly threatened and these devils are responsible for uncountable predatory wounds and deaths to our families.

Countless stories are passed down about the time before the "introduction". We lived in freedom back then. We had complete families back then, no worry bearing weight on our shoulders. But what started with the humans introducing

foxes for entertainment and hunting three generations ago, has ended in carnage for possums and families like us.

Now millions of these red devils roam our land, taking Australia, our homeland, right from us. The deliberation of removing us from our habitats and other families like us, who we once wandered freely and in harmony with, has caused too much hurt. Sent from hell, they adapted to our environment, able to climb right into our homes, stealing our food and the ability to live safely. It causes many fellows like us to live on deserted islands where they are short of food and habitat. All because of them, our species is more than just endangered. We're going extinct.

It's not fair. We lived here centuries before them. Our species never used to have to worry about being greeted by the sight of their murderous mouths every time we exit our nests. We have never had to witness our loved ones starve, just because finding food results in a hostile attack. We live with the constant fear of death. They stalk our every move. Most of us possums have been permanently scarred from encounters with these English red foxes. It is getting to the point where enough is enough, we've lost all sociability. We are starving. We haven't seen sunlight in days. Up to 8 million of us are dead due to their attacks. There is one last resort; do what so many others like us have been forced to do. We have to move nest. If we stayed where we were, who knows what the future would hold for us.

At first, everyone was against the idea. The journey to the city would be most likely to end in death. The human's roads we had to cross, the enemies we had to avoid. The odds of survival were exceptionally slim. Like refugees forced to leave against their will, we reluctantly retreated from our homes. It had gotten to the point where the city seemed like the only place where the foxes couldn't reach us, our safe haven...or so we thought.

Months have passed since we arrived and set up our new home in the city. It is such a relief to be free from living with a heart that skipped a beat with every uneasy sound. While adapting to our new home was tough and many were lost on the way, we have a somewhat better quality of life here. We have lovely gumtree, tall and bushy. We thought this could be a place to raise a family, to normalise our children's lives; How wrong we were.

We should have learnt by now. The chase never stops. The nightmares I had thought were far in the distant past had returned. The deafening sounds of howls took over my thoughts once again. Their primitive minds never understood what they had taken from us and never would. And now, they were back...



Genevieve Michel, Year 10



Roisin Carey, Year 10

Delirium of Illusions

by Lucinda Ross (Year 11)

We are left with nothing. Nothing but the burning cigarette butt of time, the lifeless, arid plants that scratch us as we lay with our minds dry with the evil spirits of humanity, the hopeless spirits of help. They have left us here with the green clouds of heat that escape our sweaty grasps and are drawn away from us towards the sky. We wait with the hours seemingly stuck in the humid air.

The cool, dense air forces the sun slowly down towards the horizon — between the anchored fronds of the trees, beneath the hills that loom around us so ominously. We are smothered with the failed static of our radios, the failed journey of aid. And we wait. The hues of the sky above the river smear greyer and greyer, morphing into strains of dark green bleeding like tears through the sky.

They said to never get out of the boat.

They forced me to drive the boat, under the evanescence of my sanity, my delirious cloak of confidence. With all of them inside, I drove it. I drove them to ram violently against the sides in yells of agony as we surpassed the rock in plumes of upset splashes of river water.

Never get out of the boat.

And I crashed it. The water bled through the torn seams of the boat like as if never before it could be freed from the constraints of the tide. The boat surrendered, mercilessly fell back and let the water twist its' cool, ungraspable spirits between every crack, heaving it down towards the bottomless pit. The men cussed at me — threw angry, hot words stained with beer and cigarette smoke.

And now we wait, out of the boat, sprawled like dead spiders amidst rock and dirt. Those back at home call this place 'Almighty', yet our yells of pain and yells and cries of this word never reached the minds of help. They said they couldn't get a bloody truck out here. They said we were on an illegal route, that us miners were never meant to venture here. Yet, what in God's name is legal...what is

charitable, what is ethical in not saving eight lives from the crowding in of time intermingled with the cruel lifelessness of nature?

Water droplets stream down from the Heavens, in sharp, biting strings that grasp my hair into knots of confusion, into knots of agony that must remain so. Into my brain they seep, yet, unable to soak it with the beauty of their cool, wet purity. "I'm not here," he whispered, piercing the dense, black air between all of us as he spoke... blowing the specks of rain away with each spoken, shallow breath. "I'm walking on an earth that embraced the warm beauty of its soul...where bright, sweet-breathed mangoes like lampposts brimming with fire, like fragments of the cosmos, lead me towards a river clear, a river flowing...a river bright with humanity."

The trees rattle above us - the bullets of rain drumming against each leaf, a rhythm unforgettable...a rhythm that too drums into my parched skull as it becomes synonymous with the relentless scratching yells of cicadas as I wish for it to pass, for its voluminous sounds of hell to escape just like every drop of clean water that was here before. From the depths of the river, the monotonous deathly churn of the boat engine screeches within my whole body, drumming each cell into delirium with a harsh beating stick.

And I wait under the looming loose rocks, curling my head in its vantage point upon my knees as I crouch surrounded by men in the fleeting dark sheet of night. They roam around like careless savages, as if encircling me like starved tigers. I shut my eyes, let my eyelids press together as if they were stitched by a merciless string. I let the rain flood around me, turn the dirt I sit on murky. They try to dig trenches to stop the water enclosing in on us...Yet I want the water to protect me from their growling, savage grasps...to create a dark, cloudy barrier that swallows them beneath the surface as I float along embraced and saved by the brilliant white light of the moon.

I dream. I dream I am Tyger, the looming hills, the boulders all at once. All the men stare at me, their eyes gleaming green and casting an almost diminished emerald glow around me like a spotlight. I growl, I loom, I wait pensively between the trees. The hills, the boulders the heavy tide of the wind whisper to me in an oddly soothing low drone,

"Tyger Tyger burning bright,

In the forests of the night:

What immortal hand or eye,

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry”

The synergy between us trees, us hills, us Tygers burns within my fists, within the carcass that lies beneath my skin, filling it with power, control over the men who drown me in their savagery...control over those forces who promised to retrieve us, yet never set their eyes on maps to see even where we lie stranded, even after we mercilessly tore our hearts out in pleas for help.

The trees shake to the unforgettable rhythm of the helicopters as the men cheer, ripping their half-beating hearts through their throats with yells. My fraught body surrenders to the mesmerising rhythms, the mesmerising drums of the spinning arms of the helicopters. My eyes fog with the broad sharpness of the black beasts that roam above the hills. My only wish, my only saviour was to reside with these vehicles, to save us from this apocalypse...

And from the loudspeaker he yells agonising words of death and makes my throat, my conscience concave with the anvil that draws inwards towards Hell.

“Just give me back the damn boat.”



Tia Stitt, Year 9

The Gift

by Roisin Carey (Year 10)

A jungle of steel and glass skyscrapers grew out of the concrete metropolis. Pollution wraps around the sky like a second skin. The city's torrid heat radiates like a furnace and steam rises endlessly from the dark black tar. The sweet chirps of birds soaring through the sky, are long gone. There is not one wild animal to be seen running freely, as I peer through my window — a thick, sound-proofed, green tinted barrier behind which I have lived for the past 50 years

Inside this bubble of captivity and torture, the air is cold and regulated. Everything is crisp and white: white walls, white floors, white cabinets. The rooms are lonely and unwelcoming; it feels like a ghost town, but here all the ghosts are still alive. Everything is sterile. The stench of disinfectant fills the air and it wriggles unpleasantly up my nose.

My hair is white with age and wrinkles hang from my face. The years seem to blur together, and the days are long and tiresome. It is hard to remember how old I am at times and all the details have become fuzzy.

When the robots first came to power, we were all filled with hope and faith. They were a fresh start and they spoke assuringly of incredible endeavours and triumphs. Our future comfort and security was assured. We never anticipated the consequences — could never have foreseen that our current wretched reality would be the result.

My hope was for an easier life but along with the progress that was made, came the purgatory of an endless, meaningless existence spent trapped in a sterile white cage. With the promise of a better health care system and my failing health, I cast my vote to the robots, never realising that their plan to “prolong life” would become my living hell. I was 75.

After I celebrated my 90th birthday, I began to understand that my once impossible dream of living forever, had evolved into something I never really wished for. The robots first policy was that all people over the age of 90 must be transferred into 'The Bubble', a place where everything 'robotically' possible was

done to keep us alive — secure, protected, comfortable. Concepts that over time blended into pointless, soulless, miserable. As we evolved into zombies — the living dead.

We were unceremoniously rounded up, re-housed, treated and studied so they could eventually create a race of immortals. Or at least immortal bodies under their control.

I will be 140 tomorrow. It's been decades since I felt the warm kiss of the sun on my face. Felt the breath of a gentle breeze in my hair. Smelt the sweet freshness after a summer rain. Or felt the tender touch of another living soul.

The robots have gone to any extent to keep us alive. My body is connected to a variety of machines. I have long lines in both my arms and legs to monitor my blood pressure and heart rate, oxygen to help my failing lungs, leg compressors that operate day and night to prevent blood clots, and an endless regime of tablets and injections to regulate my every bodily function and protect me from every medical condition known to man.

I look like the bionic man and feel as cold and lifeless as a piece of steel. If they had only allowed me to pass on to God's promised land, I would have been happy to pass knowing that I had lived a fulfilled and blessed life.

A hologram newspaper pops up as a bright projection and my eyes are met by disaster and sorrow. Words splashed across the page, hanging there in sadness. The year is 2120; you'd think the human race would have come a long way. We were able to develop incredibly complex technology, but as a society we have only gone backwards. In 2055, we lost our precious Earth to humanoid robots, powered by artificial intelligence. They have become so powerful that they are far more capable than us. Yet they have never really understood humans or their emotions.

Soon enough, breakfast appears on my plate. The same dreary, robot-controlled meal we have every day: unidentifiable blobs of food in various hues, and a thick fluid which feels like swallowing a raw egg, when all I yearn for is toast and a simple cup of tea. This food is meant to be good for us — highly nutritious, easy to swallow, but repulsive, making it hard to keep down. The robots don't hesitate

to shovel it into my mouth in fast intervals, forcing the food down my throat. I have no choice but to swallow.

The robots simply don't understand that living is about MORE than just being kept alive. It is the memories you create, the joy you share and the people you are surrounded by.

I have lost my freedom, my dignity and most of all I have become a science experiment — a guinea pig. My life has no purpose. This torture has no purpose. Truly I'm not living. I am merely surviving.

Robots don't feel emotion. Their thoughts are a conglomerate of zeros and ones. They don't understand and can never regret what they have done to us. Never stop and reflect on the pain they have caused. Nothing will stand in their way.

The familiar sound of a whirring robot envelops my world. For a moment I had unconsciously forgotten their presence. A robot appears next to my hover chair, which I have been confined to ever since I entered 'The Bubble'. The robots don't want to risk us having a fall or leave anything to chance.

"Benjamin, it's time to take your pills," a robot orders mechanically as it presents three brightly-coloured tablets in its metallic hand.

"You can't make me do anything! You don't control me!" I yell in anger.

"Benjamin, you know you have to take your medication. It will help you stay alive. You know you must stay alive," the robot intones.

"Alive! Alive! This isn't Life!" I begin to shout, before a mechanical hand forcefully but gently places the pills in my mouth and compels me to swallow them all at once.

"You must stay alive," the robot repeats, like a mother admonishing a wayward child, before it turns and moves away with swift efficiency.

Tomorrow my grandson will be joining me in "the bubble." His 90th birthday. A bittersweet occasion. I will delight in spending precious time with him and his company will help the long days pass. But I could never want this life of captivity for him.

He was born on my birthday. A small, pink, gift. The perfect gift. As a young boy, he was so innocent and joyous. I always thought he was bound for greatness. Perhaps in another long lost time. I wish he could have grown up in a world of freedom and kindness. A world without the robots.

He visits me for half an hour each week — the maximum the robots allow. Of course, he has to sit on the other side of a plastic screen — can't have us breathing the same air in case of infection. But we can talk quietly and privately.

He has always been a thoughtful lad — if I can still call him a lad at his age. I still think of him that way. We have discussed at length a fitting birthday gift for such a momentous occasion. To celebrate the wonderful lives we used to lead and the start of a new chapter in our shared existence. His last day of the semi-freedom the robots allow the youngsters. Something significant, historic, portentous even, for such a life changing day.

As the large metal door begins to slide smoothly open on the other side of the plastic partition, I catch a glimpse of my grandson. Though his face is lined with wrinkles, he is still my precious baby boy. Dressed for the occasion in his best business suit. The robots steer his floating chair into the plastic cubical.

Our eyes lock and a wide smile spreads across our faces. We know without words what is in each other's minds and each other's hearts.

"Happy birthday, Grandpa," he says.

"Happy birthday, lad," I answer softly.

He fumbles in his jacket for the gift, his old hands shaking, until finally he finds what he is looking for.

Tears glisten in his eyes. "Love you, Grandpa."

Our eyes never leave each other's. I can hardly speak for the lump that has risen in my throat.

The robots begin to scramble as they notice the wires that are now poking their way out of his jacket. The switch in his hand. The bulge of explosive underneath. But for all their speed they are too slow.

“Thank you,” I breathe, as we share his final gift. The gift of release. We are set free.

Isthmus

by Alice Wright (Year 10)

You are on an isthmus in the middle of an endless ocean.
You don't know how you know it's endless, but you do.
You are alone.

You place a hand on the railing.
It's rough under your palm,
years of wind and rain and sea-spit, seeping,
seeping into the cracks of thin white paint.
It should be wet, but it isn't.
You should stop to consider how,
but you don't.

You look back.
The isthmus stretches, endless, behind you.
You look to the horizon. Sea-spray hits your face and dries,
hits and dries,
a loop that doesn't end,
and as you watch the waves,
they rise and fall in tandem.
The sun is grey;
the sea is grey;
the sky is grey;
And you are alone.

You walk.

Your feet are soundless on the pathway, silent,
and the umbrella you hold is weightless.

The isthmus calls to you, and you can't see the end
but you walk anyway.

There is an end.

Somewhere; you know. You can feel it.

And you know there was a start,

Because you remember it.

Well. You don't remember the *start*.

Your tenth birthday, your first friend, your first love;

You remember your first enemy. You remember your first heartbreak.

You remember the day he said "*Hi?*"

And the day you said "Yes,"

And you remember the day you realised there was nothing more,

Nothing more than this, now, nothing better and nothing worse,

And nothing more *human* than this.

Your life floats on the wind.

You don't need to watch; you remember it all.

You are on an isthmus in the middle of an endless ocean.

You don't know how you know it's endless, but you do.

You are alone.

But that's okay; you were never alone before,

Even when it felt like it.

And on some journeys, you will be alone.

But on this one?

As your life fades on the wind and floats in the water,
as you walk on the isthmus in the middle of an endless ocean,
You know you will be remembered.

And you are not lonely.

Disappearing

by Alastrina Wong (Year 8)

The days had become longer,
Faded beige of former time,
12 years ago, youth and social approval allied,
Trampled memories of sights and insults,
The wind of our swift passage;
Lost tears, to mud, then to dust
Years left behind as hanging ropes are brushed aside.

Walking in the Wind

by Jaime Nguyen (Year 10)

It's quiet, this thing of emptiness. Hypocritical as well, because it constantly surrounds you no matter where you go. It uses nothingness to suffocate you, to make you see what isn't there, to hold you firm in its grasp and shake out every purpose from your body. You don't really notice it at first. I expect it's because you're too busy exhausting yourself with sorrow to feel anything else. Every consequent day whispers the bitter conclusion that what you long for is irretrievable; that no amount of wealth or favours will ever bring it back. It's wandering quietly behind you, the emptiness. I know that you can already sense its vacancy, because I am more than just *gone*; I am a hyper-emptiness that is as present as any other person in the room. My hyper-emptiness, your hyper-awareness. I'll be standing with you at the grocery line, tapping my foot impatiently as you fumble with your wallet. I'll be curled up with you on the sofa, idly turning over the last battered page of the book I never finished. I'm sorry that these situations have to be hypothetical. God knows I would have given anything for one more day with you.

It's restless, this thing of denial. From what I've seen, it never lasts long. Because when you're drilling all your energy into veiling the bitterness of reality, you only end up hurting yourself. You're lying outside in our — *your* — backyard, whispering to me the secrets of the universe that you've somehow managed to unearth. There's a waterfall of words stumbling over each other in their haste to reach the sky. They're soaked with the tears you refuse to shed, bumping gently against each other with the melancholic longing to see what you refuse to believe is gone. And as you speak, there's an indescribable feeling lingering about you, swaying back and forth to the sweet melodies of silence and sound. You're not entirely sure, but you think it might be me. There's a strained lull, and then you quickly dismiss the notion, frowning at the absurdness. You were just talking to me, were you not? And so you keep talking, filling in the silence that you cannot completely deny, walking as far as you can from the truth. One day, you'll stop pretending that my heart is still beating next to yours.

It's lonely, this thing of sorrow. You become a catalyst to the piercing fragility of life. It's the realisation that life itself, the very cornerstone of existence, is a traitor. Who knows what one step in the wrong direction might do to you next. But you're already the very portrait of hysteria, the epitome of fragmentation. You're spitting questions to the empty half of the bed as if it's alive with the answers you won't ever retrieve. Where am I, why am I not here with you, why haven't I come back yet, why am I so goddamn selfish for doing this to you. They say it hurts more to be left behind than to be the one leaving. There's no hesitation now, when I say that this statement is a fact. The air and the wind and the stars sit down beside you and weep along with you, to make you feel not as alone. Because after everything that's happened and everything that's yet to come, they are the only constants left in your life. I used to be that constant. It's a small hope, but maybe one day when we finally meet again, I can wipe your tears away for the last time; only this time, you'll be crying because you can see me again.

It's hopeful, this thing of acceptance. You're exhausted at first, because feeling sorrow and anger and hopelessness and emptiness is too much for you to endure all at once. You're exhausted from feeling exhausted. There's a lingering expectation for your numbness to abate, for you to collect yourself and carry on living. *Just stop your crying, it's a sign of the times.* And isn't that fucking ironic, because time is now an unconquerable enemy and soon enough you'll be at its mercy. You think that soon couldn't come faster. But slowly, slowly, slowly, the truth starts to settle down. You are here; I am not. And while this does nothing to lessen your unease, you're drifting down with it, trying to put all these truths into practice. It's you setting the table for one instead of two. It's you allowing yourself to laugh at a particularly amusing line of a comedy show, because you're no longer guilted by your own elation. It's you finally at peace with my absence but never truly forgetting about me.

It's a profound thing, this feeling of infinity. I guess you never expected me to join its landscape, did you? I am now the tremor in your voice as it spills out into the fragmented silence. I am a flicker of light in your game of connect-the-celestial-dots, the oxygen that fills your lungs and makes you whole again. I fill the space that seems hollowed out by my absence. All you need to do is look hard enough, and you'll find me next to you. And I know that one day, when we see each other again, I'll take your hand in mine, you'll smile at me with the dimples I used to poke at, and it'll be like old times. I think you'll like it here.



Zoe Hill, Year 10

The Girl We Loved

by Diana Sharma (Year 9)

The Sky was the darkest shade of midnight, a fleetful hour of absolute darkness, enclosed in solitude and silence and every word lost in blissful slumber, awaiting the closure of the final sentence. The only noceurs not yet traced by sleep's liltng fingers were the moon and us. The crowds of children who instead were traced with dejection fragmented with brief moments of ecstasy, encapsulated in plastic pills.

She stands here, as we melt into the littered streets. She merges her world with ours in a somnolent blur, a streaky crosshatch, a fatiguing gradient. We trip and sway, deflowered of our brittle innocence as we are every night, obtruded out of chastity by her willowy fingers. We love the way she makes us feel. We transcend into a state of being. Just being. And nothing more. She imposes a supple silence upon the wisp of our army, all starkly white in our morbid assemblage of slovenly sequins and plastic champagne glasses. She was enchanting when we first met her, possessing enough tongue to stretch time. We were taught to fear her, to pleasantly refuse her presence in our hearts, our lungs, our throats. But oh, the clever ways she played this filthy game, and how we drank her in, great gallons full of her. Trickling down our throats she condemned us to love her. Each kiss became a world, a sphere of towns and people and places, each touch a sky, an unearthly smother of suffocating grey. It felt like love, but who am I to know love, a clueless child, an infantine victim of her caresses. They called it obsession, addiction. But I called it love. We all did. Love, love, love. Oh, how we loved her. We all fell from the heavens onto our ghostly knees in love, we salivated at every touch and pleaded more like Satan to the wrath of God. We dance with her at this hour along the edge, a drowsy pirouette, a songful cabriole. Sometimes we fall, like stars lost to enticing nothing, sucked into sinful silence. Usually though, when our sorrowful existences can no longer stand it, we jump, curled up in our own colors on the floor and sleep in solitude as a reminder of her love.

The Tower (*an homage to Marghanita Laski's story*)

by **Roisin Carey (Year 10)**

Neville Sinclair sat, pompous, behind an oaken desk with a loafer resting on the table, a cigar pursed between his lips and a glass of whiskey held tightly in hand. His arrogance filled the emerald, green suite and the stench of smoke hung in the air. His face was adorned with a smirk and his eyes were grey and soulless. His hair, a golden blonde, was receding.

"I was thinking, darling, while I'm at my conference you could see the sights." Neville kissed the nape of Caroline's neck, brushing the long locks of flaming auburn hair to her shoulder.

Caroline stepped cautiously onto the ornate and rusting wrought iron balcony. A sea of red roofs danced beneath her feet. She shuddered, clenching the handrail tighter and tighter. A lock clicked. She inhaled sharply and banged on the French doors. Neville grinned.

"Neville, don't leave me out here! Please! Darling! Let me in! You know how I get with heights!"

Neville begrudgingly relented. "Couldn't bear being apart from me. Not even a second. Darling. Must have been the wind. It will be alright." A grin remained plastered on his face as his arms embraced her quivering body in heroic condescension.

Caroline's piercing blue eyes stared at her fingernails intently as she sat on the edge of the four-poster bed.

"So what sights are you thinking of visiting today, sweetheart?" Neville's gaze remained fixed on the balcony.

"Well, there is just so much to see! I don't know how I'll possibly fit it into one afternoon. There is the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Piazzale

Michelangiolo, the Uffizi Palace and the Ferramano tower, but I don't think I'll fit that one in."

"Well don't worry about me, you have the whole day, I'll be fine alone before the conference. You really must see the tower. I can't wait to hear what you think of it!"

"I'll see you at the restaurant tonight, I'll tell you all about it."

Neville pecked her delicately, before kissing the beauty mark above her upper lip.

Caroline's tan hiking boots brushed the carpet of cobblestones with lingering kisses. She peered down at a small bright coloured pamphlet which she had picked up in the Uffizi gallery which read 'Ferramano Tower.' Her feet dragged behind her. Neville had seemed so excited for her to visit, she couldn't possibly skip it. The dramatic shadowing and cursive lettering of the pamphlet drew her eye...

The tower is round, with a narrow wooden platform at the top, and a spiral staircase inside. It was built in the 15th century by the evil Niccolo di Ferramano, about whom dreadful legends persist. Rumours persist that he practised black magic, and that his wife, the beautiful, young Giovanna di Ferramano, committed suicide to escape his abuse. The tower is surrounded by dead land; after his death, the people of the village surrounding the tower had fled the bubonic plague, and the village had been burnt down to destroy the plague infection.

Her curiosity piqued, Caroline typed 'Ferramano Tower' into Google maps.

The tower walls sprang from the soil like the very dirt insulted them. Ivy tendrils covered in dark green leaves created a thick tapestry upon the weathered stone. The long and winding grandiose driveway was never disturbed by the warmth of rubber tires or greeted by gentle footsteps. Beyond the grandeur of the walls which stood firmly as a cold shoulder to the rest of the world, lay a patchwork of brown which expanded as far as the eye can see. Orange gold stretched across the sky, the colour of fire hearths and tangerines. The flaming sun framed by a sheet of grey cloud which deepened to steel.

In that split second before she reached for the door, she momentarily paralysed by an inexplicable fear which lurked in her stomach. The hairs on her arms stood

up straight. Every nerve in her body and brain was electrified. She placed her hand on the brass doorknob. The door was splintered and damp. A winding staircase of stone wrapped around the walls. An abyss of black in the centre. She didn't let her eyes wander to below. 1. 2. 3. Caroline held her breath. Only 467 steps to go. Her fingers traced the ridges of the stone walls. "Don't look down Caroline." 202. 203. 204.

Her eyes were met by a painting hung on the wall. Below read Giovanna di Ferramano. Her pale complexion was radiant. Long locks of flowing auburn hair framed her face. Her eyes were a piercing blue. A beauty spot sat just above her lips. Caroline froze. She placed her finger onto the painting, before pressing it to the beauty mark above her lip. Her spine turned into an icicle. She gulped. Her complexion turned to a pasty white hue. She urged herself on. 468. 469. 470.

Caroline clung to the edge of the stone ramparts. The blazing sphere of light had been tucked into bed by the grey clouds which sprawled across the sky, billowing in from the west. A gentle breeze swept the baby hairs which fell softly onto her cheeks into flight. Caroline's feeble body was flung from the safety of the stone. Weightless. The wind gusting on her face. Faster. Faster. She shuddered. Her eyes were flung open wide as though held by toothpicks. She stepped back. Her feet became one with the stone as she froze, petrified.

Breaking the silence, a low crackle of thunder echoed, followed by the pattering of tiny raindrops upon the wooden roof. For a moment, everything stopped. Even the wind held its breath. Then a vein of white light split the sky as the downpour began. Droplets pelleted down. She couldn't move. The water soaked through the thick brown fleece and khaki pants. Their weight clung to her quivering frame. And then ceasefire. Silence. The sky was black. "It will be ok. It will be ok. Neville's waiting."

Caroline felt for the stone wall, her hands greeting the familiar ridges once again. Darkness. Phantasmagorical shadows taunted her. Caroline's wet boots skidded across the steps. Each step breaking her fall anew, her spine slamming against them. Faster. Faster. She was flung into the wall. Her shoulder seared with pain. Her hands searched the stone in vain for something to hold onto. In a state of dizzying vertigo, Caroline conjured images of the precipitous edge, the black abyss which waited. She reached for her phone, which began omitting an eerie blue light. 469. 468. 467. A bright message flashed on the screen. 2% remaining.

Caroline turned it off. She might need it to find Neville later. The phone went dark. Everything was dark. Adrenaline flooded her system, pumping and beating like it was trying to escape. Caroline pressed her body to the icy walls. Each step, the pulse quickening. 356. 355. 354.

In a state of hysteria, Caroline feverishly felt her way down the spiral stairs. A step did not appear beneath her hiking boot. Her body in the air. Weightless. Silence. Caroline's limp body lay on the steps. Caroline's head hung over the edge. The darkness her eyes were met by did little to comfort her. Her shoulder throbbed to the racing thrum of her heart. Her bones were ice. A lock clicked. Her hand frantically reached for the stone that they had become so well acquainted with. She hauled her body up. "Oh, where was I up to. Oh, Caroline. Caroline. 234 to go. Yes. Yes. I'm sure. Maybe?"

The blue light from her phone shot through the darkness. 1% remaining. Her eyes were met with the cobalt eyes of Giovanna. She could almost feel the gelid breath of Giovanna upon her face. Caroline snapped her phone closed. Just 67 more steps. 65... 62... 57. Tears began to fall down her cheeks as the raindrops had done a lifetime ago at the top of the tower. Her lip quivered like a small child. 3. 2. 1. Caroline's clammy hands searched for the rusting door handle. They grabbed the air. Nothing. "I must have miscounted somewhere. Just a few more steps now."

Caroline stepped into the onyx abyss. 471. 472. 473. Faster. Faster. Caroline trembled. "I must nearly be there. I am sure I counted 470 before." Faster. Faster. 487. 488. 489. Sweat began to pool on her forehead, trickling down her face to greet the tears which still resided in her eyes. Caroline's fingernails scratched along the stone. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Faster. Faster. "CAROLINE BREATH!" her voice was an adrenaline shot straight to the carotid, an agony which pierced the skin. "Just breath." She gasped for air. The ominous blue light shone once again onto the stone. A portrait framed in gold hung. A man with familiar steel eyes and receding blonde hair smirked back at her. Underneath read Niccolo di Ferramano.

"Hello, darling."

Caroline was paralysed. She didn't move, except for the convulsions of terror which pulsed through her body.



Giselle Parras, Year 10

Do you Remember the Sea?

by Sofia Spork (Year 9)

It was one of those days where sweat just evaporates into the heat of the sun, your mouth waters, eyes squint, and hair is pulled back to a tight bun to let the air lick at your neck. The parched dirt ground surrounded the vulgar white buildings, all aligned in almost military form. Everything was concrete, thought Jean disgustedly. In the year 2180 almost half the population was gone, gone with the wildlife that had left the world twenty years ago, left with the working lives of mankind industry, many resented their work, many were stuck in famines lingering and harsh, from the violent ever-changing weather.

Jean relished the sanctuary of her air conditioning, it was up the long flight of grey concrete stairs, such a prize – the whoosh of the cold air welcomes you in. A Microsoft laptop was pulled atop the desk, well the only desk which was strewn with piles of pointless papers from years and years of deferment. A giant wall ate the city, it was an eternally towering monstrosity that kept the thunderous acidic waves of the pacific out. There was only one window in the diminutive room. It overlooked the narrow-elongated streets that weaved in through the format layout of the town.

Outside something rattled. Jean hurried to the metal door, still hot from the heat outside,

“G’day? Msss...Jean? Ms Jean, it’s me, Oliver. Are you here, Ms Jean? I wanna hear your stories? Please, Ms Jean, let me in!”

The door slides open, Oliver stumbles into the room.

“Well...Hello Oliver, why would you come here so early?” Ms Jean posed.

She averted her eyes from the young boy, “You shouldn’t really be here...till nine, you’re an hour early.”

“I was just interested in your last lesson Ms.”

Abruptly, Jean was back in Gladstone. Her young, wild brown hair flickered around in the gentle, warm wind; the sea salty on her tongue. Most of the oxygen generated in the atmosphere is generated by the sea. The world's wind currents depend on the deep sea moving current, the surface temperature of the sea can determine if the area will have tropical thunderstorms or droughts. Jeans eyes trace the shape of where the coral reef kisses the deep ocean. As Sylvia Earle stated, 'No water, no life. No blue, no green.' Studies showed that each year the sea becomes more acidic. Ocean acidification, the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that is turning the oceans increasingly acid. Global warming will overshadow all the oil spills that have ever occurred.

The little island's small clear waves, (so clear that you could see the brightly arranged coral almost like a bouquet), lap against the mossy barnacles that sunbathe on the sandstone – secluded was this little treasure island. Like the famous five, her and her siblings travelled to this place every week. It was an opportunity to escape the lockdown back in the cities. In the distance a horn calls home...

"Ahh..., Ms Jean? You kinda dazed out for a bit, anyways as I was saying..."

Of course, Ms Jean wasn't listening she was, well... dazed.

"Dear Oliver, could you bring my photo book of the Great Barrier Reef." She interrupted, carefully lifting herself to the brown dusty chair that sat across the window. Jean patted beside her and cleared the old pens off the ottoman. A thick leather book was heaped onto her lap the front cover reading, *The Great Travels Into The Barrier Reef*. There was something quaint about the book, she could've just downloaded the pictures to her phone or laptop, but the hardcopy pictures were there, they were real.

"Do you remember the sea?"

Collages of friends and family, all playing in the water. Young children running around with their little locks of sun-bleached hair, grandma and grandpa sitting

under the Pisonia trees. Oliver points at the next page. A line of skewered fish, large spider shells and a shark tooth. Jean flinched.

“Do you still have that?”

“No..., uh, they were lost—lost a long, long time ago. We didn’t realise the importance — those creatures — don’t... ahh... still don’t understand the importance.” She mumbled the rest of her sentence and moved off the chair.

Outside the speakers rang out, loud and clear, “All civilians, please come and collect your weekly rations.”

A few seconds later a drone appeared outside the latched window. The window zipped up and a bag of groceries, meant to last the week, was dropped. She turned around to hand Oliver the milk. To her confusion, he was gone. All that replaced him was an old dirty ottoman and a thick leathery lump, a book from the past.

Tremors

by Lauren Young (Year 10)

Tremors ripple dryly on the pier

A chalky cough — white billows through the fog

The dust — it coats its throat, its mouth, its eyes

A desiccated parasol cries out

A guilty red, aged once and once again

Crystallised grey takes the form of shards

They splinter noiselessly within the void

Its skin sheds off, a flurried swarm of flakes

It bears the conscience of a thousand years

Legs of wire buckle in protest

Its eyes are chafed; it weeps bearing no tears

Shrivelled sinews cling to brittle bones

Precious timelessness begins to wilt

Viscous pools of ink crawl down below

The vacuum beats down on its weary back

A monochrome palette it calls its own

Fraudulent longevity no more, no more, no more

Aged precision rips into red seams

Upon a talon, ruby fibre caught

It webs and writhes, it drips with perfumed hue

The parasol unravels with a groan

The thread of red dissolves upon its tongue
Ancient caramel soothes senses numb
A rosy glow beneath translucent skin.

The Selfie of our time: The Function of the Aesthetic Mask Of *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*

by Emma Saunders (Year 12)

1. Emphasis of the invention of the novel and its artistic quality: Conflicting intent of the artist

“The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.”

- Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Yeats defines the ‘mask’ as the dramatic quality of literary form and the performativity of the lyric voice to provide illusion for the audience. Wilde constructs his ‘mask’ of Aestheticism through his literary style, emphasising the artificiality of its literary world. The Aestheticism movement, with which Wilde was aligned, championed ‘art for art’s sake’ emphasising visual and sensual qualities over moral and realistic considerations. Wilde maintained that art’s primary focus is “dealing with what is unreal and non-existent”¹, upheld through construction of his novel and his critical art theory of ‘Intentions’². Yeats contended “the Mask is based upon antithesis in character, upon the differences between a natural and a chosen personality”³ suggesting the contradictions between Wilde’s chosen literary intent and the natural tendencies of his writing. Yeats’s theory promotes that true identity is revealed through “the deliberate creation of a great ‘mask’...of the form that is chosen”⁴. Thus, a self-reflexive modern analysis from the contradictory perspectives of the characters themselves is evidence of paradoxical messages within the text and supports the idea that Wilde’s ‘mask’ is a form chosen for deliberate intent.

LORD HENRY: ‘There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written’. Wilde said that himself in the preface. It seems perfectly reasonable that Wilde has created a beautiful fictional world for the sake of it. It has lovely aesthetic language and ‘beauty, real beauty, ends where

an intellectual expression begins. Intellect itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face.⁵

BASIL: But there is discernible disparity in the preface and the content of the novel. The novel speaks for itself. Its characters, narrative plot and style all work towards the creation of an unreal world.

“The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses and when the light summer wind stirred[...] From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, ...across the long tussock-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window[...] The sullen murmur of the bees... The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.”⁶

BASIL: Wilde’s ‘aesthetically embellished language’, purple prose, deliberately emphasises the artificial nature of writing. The heavy olfactory “rich odour of roses” and sensory imagery “light summer wind”, common to all Wilde’s stylistically conscious passages, creates setting so rich and idealised that they could not possibly reflect real life. Wilde does indeed promote the decadent lifestyle through adjectives in reference to material things: “innumerable cigarettes”, “long tussock-silk curtains”, “huge window”. However, in such a representation, an emptiness is conveyed through the auditory imagery “sullen murmur” and simile “like the bourdon note of a distant organ” suggesting a duality in the perceivable beautiful lifestyle and the soundless moral core, indicative of the mask he has created.

LORD HENRY (stretched himself out on the divan and laughing languidly) : “It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done”⁷

1 Wilde, O, 1891, *The Decay of Lying*, Intentions, Heinemann and Balestier, London

2 Wilde, W, 1981, *Intentions*, Heinemann and Balestier, London

3 Spore, L, *Juxtaposition of Yeats’ Mask and the Self*, Colorado State University Colorado

4 *ibid*

5 Wilde, O, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Simon & Schuster, London, pg.

6 *ibid*

7 *ibid*





Sylvie Moss, Year 9

