

Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2022

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Foreword

This volume features literary contributions from all of the academic levels of the Ascham Senior School, written during the 2022 academic year.

A study of Gothic Literature in some Year 10 classes has produced a number of chilling tales in the Gothic mode, full of derelict houses and terrifying thunderstorms; others do not fall into this category, such as the remarkable “Flightless Birds” with its refreshing imagery and beautiful rhythms, and the four inventive poems by a Year 10 student.

It is noticeable that the writing often includes striking imagery which reflects the visual impact of a visual stimulus.

Once again it is a joy to report that creative applications of intellect are flourishing within the student body of Ascham School, and this is worthy of the warmest encouragement.

Andrew Lane

Shades of Amber

By Olivia Pryor (Year 7)

The smell of damp pine swirled around my untethered hair. The breeze caressed my skin sending cold, prickling waves over me. My feet became heavy as they plodded through the slivers of moon light and snarling shadows. My lips were dry and icy, my water bottle long since futile. The wandering was endless, and every turn led to a wall of wood.

After stumbling over moss carpeted rocks and twigs for what felt like an age, I came to a clearing; it was a pocket of grassland dotted with dying flowers. But as my eyes dragged over the dull meadow, they came to an abrupt stop at a cobblestone well. The well seemed misshapen and the moss was only so good a mortar. Through the patchy grass, the jagged stones protruded. A silvery pail hung by a limp rope that snaked along the misty forest floor.

I edged my grimy slippers closer to the well. And as if in answer the wind whipped my hair into my face. Still, I edged closer, sliding my feet along the damp, foliage carpeted floor. I remembered the burn in my throat and the scratchy feeling on my tongue at a moment of subdued curiosity. I dared to hasten my approach.

The glinting pail seemed to beckon to me.

Come, come, come a little closer...

I shoved the strange calling from my mind and picked up the pail. The metal was frigid against my hands and the rope rugged and splintering. Rope in hand, I peered down the well. I saw only a quiet darkness. The blackness was consuming but not bleak. This darkness saw me, heard me, and stared back. I took a pebble from the mossy floor and tossed it into the liquid night. The water began to ripple, and the moonlight caught the waves, flecking the well's onyx night with stars.

I considered, the pail in my hands, the burn of my throat and the consuming dark. My hands tightened on the fraying rope. I cautiously lowered it into the well's depths.

Lower...

A voice called. I stamped the voices away. The water flooded the pail, and I held the rope firmly, allowing every fiery strand to slice into my palms. The liquid was tantalisingly close, and a wave of relief washed over me as I rested my load on the cobblestone lip. I cupped my stinging, crimson hands together and dipped them into the water. Resurfacing, my hands were filled with the swirling liquid. I touched my cracked lips to the makeshift cup and drank.

My eyes fluttered open, and I blinked away the emptiness of my mind to find a sky full of stars. The flowers glowed amber, and the trees swayed to their own music. The sea of constellations above lit up the night and chased away the shadows. The owls sang and the winds swirled. It was the same meadow in another light. Despite the stars clawing for my attention, I walked back to the well. The darkness there seemed to call still.

More ...

I found the rope and pail curiously where I first found them and let the silvery metal dissolve into the ocean of ebony. This time the pail came up *almost empty*. A rhythmic clinking got louder as I heaved the pail closer to me.

As I lifted it from the pail and set it down on the cobblestone rim and studied it. It sat in an unpolished frame that formed a cylindrical capsule around it. I slid my finger down the glass surface to find that at my touch the hourglass became laced with frost. The cold clanged through me and then the biting cold was everywhere, snaking up my arms in trembles that chilled my heart.

In response my heart's thrum quickened and my breathing became shaky. The memories of the barren forest and the wilting flowers flooded back. Anger clouded my mind in a sickly, thick fog and splattered my vision with inky splotches. Bile started rising in my throat and I found myself still holding the wretched hourglass, but to my surprise the ivory sand began falling through the ice crystals obstructing their path.

The world around me stuttered. The trees stilling, the flowers wilting and the stars winking out, one by one. The sand kept falling, and the world around me seemed to collapse and shudder at the weight of the miniscule grains of sand.

I tried to tilt the hourglass but no matter what I tried, the sand continued to fall whether it bowed to gravity or not. I wanted nothing to do with the frosty menace and threw it back into the well. I waited for the splash or the *thuck* of the hourglass, but none came.

I picked up the pail that now blistering cold. I dropped it down the well while I held the rope tight and braced my knees for the impact when the rope went taut. But again, I waited for something that never came.

Peering down the well there was nothing but the rope leading into the velvety wisps. A tug of the rope told me the pail was still there and getting heavier.

The rhythmic clinking neared, but I didn't hesitate as I took the hourglass in my raw hands. I pummelled it against the well willing it to shatter. After endless pounding the glass gave way. The shards lay strewn, and the sand smeared in the dirt.

And then darkness ...

Before light ...

I stared through the grove of trees toward a withering flower and in that moment, I imagined it blooming and revealing the most striking shade of amber.

The House of Knight

By Victoria Wang (Year 10)

"Clara Fritz. Remind me again why you are in Austria?" coughed the speaker of the car stereo.

"I'm going there, Jim, to the house. Remember how I told you about the nightmare that I kept on having? I don't know how or why, but it really does feel like somebody else's memory. It's so vivid — the same old house, the same address, and the same high-pitched screams. So maybe if I went there, the nightmares would finally stop," replied Clara.

The nightmares had started ever since her mother had come back home from her trip to Austria for her tech-company conference. Her mother had never been the same. She would never know how to turn on the TV or take phone calls, as if she had ever touched technology before. And that forced, uncanny smile on her lifeless, grey face would give Clara chills every time.

The car jolted Clara brutally from her thoughts, allowing her to regain her senses and recover her composure. Ghostly scarves wrapped the valley in a maze of mist as darts of icy rain spat onto her windshields.

"Clara, as your brother, who cares about your safety, don't complain if you end up dead! Dead! @&*% dead! D—" The audio cut off, coughing in crackling static as if punched in the throat.

"Hello??" snapped Clara, thumping the speaker, hopefully, to somehow repair it, only to accidentally cut her thumb.

That was weird. It never glitched. It was only a few days since she had recently bought her first car at a 2020 spring special sale. "No wonder it was so unusually cheap," scoffed Clara, sucking on her bleeding thumb.

After three hours of endless roads, she arrived at the very birthplace of what scarred her every night. A certain aura of the house felt so familiar to her, and it was even more strange that she was able to recognise it, although she had

never seen it before in person. The dilapidated house had a daunting, demon-like presence, which pierced through the parched, drought-stricken plains like a virus, intimidating any source of life that dared to cultivate before it. A chilling fog drifted between the displaced boulders as if threatening to stir the peace below the earth. There was a disquieting sense of loneliness, although she somehow felt the weight of not one — but *many* pairs of eyes over her ... or whatever they were. It seemed to be abandoned, so Clara knew no one would catch her if just took a little peek inside.

Engraved on the front portico was 'House of Eustace Knight 1495'. Must be the former owner, she assured herself. As her palm cramped from hauling the biting door handle towards her, a musty odour of a tobacco and dust infiltrated her nose. She closed the door hastily behind her to block out the loathsome gale that made her shiver even more due to her dripping wet shirt. A dull, lifeless hall, its paint peeling on the walls, appeared before her. Cobwebs lingered in every witchy way, and the antique furniture that was probably gleaming centuries before was now crumbling and fragile. With every step, Clara's high heels squeaked in sync with the weak floorboards — she wasn't usually scared of heights, but she agonized over how the floor could fall at any moment, and no-one would notice. The thunderclouds began to prevail in their battle with the sun as the sunlight began to drain away. Clara continued down a long hallway that seemed to be smothered in handprints of blood and ferociously scratched, as if by savage claws.

A splinter in one of the plankboards caught her heel. She tried uncomfortably to pull her foot free, only to plunge forward onto the floor, as her high heels plummeted down into the empty abyss of a hole that raged behind her. A trickle of red sludge oozed out of her knee, unveiling her flesh. A strange, chilling breeze itched her exposed neck like needles upon her bare skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps. Trying to move away from the uncomfortable, frosty air, she paced softly forward until the floor seemed to drop into a staircase. Strange energy seemed to lure her, as her body lost control and involuntarily moved forward, entering into the dark, hollow abyss, as if looking into a black pupil. After endless thrusts forward, her energy seemed to die out until her breathing became heavier and heavier, and her limbs became weighted chains dragging behind her. The same ghostly air tickled her fingertips, and the hallway was suddenly lit up by fire-lanterns drooping on the walls. A door appeared in front of her signifying a dead-end, so she tiptoed inside and

discovered what seemed like the owner's bed-chamber. The caliginous sky outside the window was now turning dark. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of a beautiful young woman dressed in red velvet. She blew the dust off the frame, revealing a name engraved: 'Margaret Fritz'.

"She has the same last name as me," said Clara.

"Why did you touch me!?" The high-pitched whisper pierced Clara's skull. Alarmed, she glanced back but saw nothing, not even a figure. An overwhelming sense of dread flushed through Caroline — her palms were sweaty, throat in knots, heart pounding in her head — she felt paralysed, as if being chained down.

"Get out, get out before he comes. Before he puts the curse on you," it continued.

Certain that nothing was around her, she casually glanced at the portrait again, and her eyes immediately shot onto the portrait woman's blood-curdling, ghastly, black eyes which dripped blood as if her eyeballs had been savagely carved out. Appalled, Clara shrieked in terror, violently slamming the portrait into the floor, which emitted a distressing cry as if it had been untouched for centuries and was now provoked.

"WHO DARES TO FREE MY PRECIOUS MARGARET!!" roared a grotesque, low, warped voice, that shook Clara to the core. A vicious thunderclap of the devil bellowed outside, as doom-black clouds, pregnant with malice, churned and rolled, draining all light from the room, as daunting shadows leapt towards Caroline from the corners of the room. Shrieking with a flush of impending doom, she sprinted towards the door, only to be delayed by the weight of her hair and ankles being hauled by some invisible force, overwhelming her resistance.

In one last desperate attempt at survival, she pushed again, freeing herself, as she pounded in fury — the uproarious thuds of her footsteps on the stairs echoed in a maddening crescendo as if her own sound was chasing herself. "I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU, MISS FRITZ!" — a clash of thunder and ghostly screams ground on her ears like a thousand bats clawing at a rat corpse, building into a crescendo that strikingly pierced her eardrums, twisting and compressing into a warped voice, faster, and madder, and faster. Her breaths were sharp and frantic; her bloodshot eyes were gaping, drowned with tears.

The blackness rapidly closed in around her in a suffocating clench, mashing her lungs like being buried alive in a coffin — the walls felt narrower, and narrower until she could no longer feel her legs nor the floor beneath her.

A black void seemed to surround Clara, as she noticed a rectangular frame floating in front of her. Peering through the frame, unable to pass through, she noticed the same bed-chamber, but this time, everything was neatly polished as if new: the bedsheets freshly washed, and books and candles piled on the table. The trotting of horses caught Clara's attention as she gazed out the window and observed a carriage passing by.

"Clara?", uttered a familiar voice. She glanced to the right and noticed a wall full of portraits of women engraved with the Fritz surname. However, one of them looked strangely familiar.

"Mum?"

Atticus

By Scarlett Adams (Year 10)

"We interrupt this broadcast with devastating news from Glenville. Four children have been found dead in the Cantry Lake. Autopsy results are currently confidential; however, police forces suspect homicide as the cause of death." The news reporter spoke solemnly but quickly, every few words obscured from the static of the television.

"Oh my God, Blair. That's right near here." Sophia's eyes widened at the screen.

"No way ..."

"You know what? I bet it was that crazy lady from ages ago."

"What?"

"What was her name... Candice? I'm pretty sure she used to live on that lake."

"Who?" Blair furrowed her brows for a moment. "God, you're not talking about that *urban legend*, are you?"

"Yeah! You know the one! What was the husband's name? The one who tried to kill her?"

Blair pondered, "Atticus ... I think. Apparently that's the only word she'd say after being thrown in the mental asylum."

"Wait, how did she end up there?"

"I don't know, Sophia. He tried to kill her."

"But at least she escaped, from the mental asylum, I mean."

Blair paused and stared at Sophia, dumbfounded. "She's not real... You know that, right?"

“Of course she is! She used to live around here!”

“What? I don’t believe you.” Blair narrowed her eyes

“Yeah, she lived in that abandoned house on the lake.”

Blair paused. “Hmm ...” A smile crept across her face, “Maybe we should go, then — investigate for ourselves. Then we’ll know, once and for all, right?”

“Oh my God, Blair, are you insane? Four kids were murdered there! I’m not going anywhere near it!”

“Come on. What? Are you scared?” she asked, narrowing her eyes further.

“Of course not” she gulped, a lump in her throat.

Sophia noticed that the sky was now drained of its colour as the sun hid behind the Western hills. “Should we leave now? It’s getting pretty dark.”

“Yeah, let’s go. Do you have a flashlight?”

“Pfft, no. But I’ve got my phone.” She looked at its charge. 10% should be enough, she thought to herself.

Blair with confidence, and Sophia with a feeling of dread, crept out the front door into the night.

Leaves crumpled between feet and cold concrete as Sophia and Blair strolled down the street. “Atticus!” Blair mimicked in a childlike voice, attempting to scare Sophia.

“Shut up, Blair! It’s not funny.” Sophia softly shoved Blair’s shoulder, frightening the crows above them. A cacophony of monstrous caws erupted into the empty sky. The shrieks reverberated and echoed for what seemed like ages. Where the streetlights ended, dead shrubbery began, and Sophia knew the house was just ahead.

A rusted gate creaking in the night wind welcomed Sophia and Blair as they emerged into the abandoned garden. Sophia switched on her phone’s torch as

every last glimmer of light had been consumed by darkness in this forbidden residence. The white light illuminated a carpet of rubble and seven wooden steps leading through a doorway. Sophia cringed at each creak on the warped stairs, but it wasn’t enough to overwhelm her with fear. A strong scent of mildew caused a shiver to curl through the hairs on the back of Sophia’s neck and continued to cascade down her spine. Her head shot over to Blair who seemed oddly undisturbed by the rancid smell.

Upon entering the house, a thick layer of dust blew through a draught, causing Sophia’s throat to tighten. She shone her torch around the room. A mouldy couch, littered with cigarette burns, sunk into the floor. Ugly splinters emerged from the rotted wood of a coffee table. A smashed radio sat atop, alongside water-damaged stacks of manuscripts, their titles obscured by bleeding ink. A long, narrow corridor lay ahead. Sophia could just make out through the faint light, stairs leading to a basement.

Before Sophia knew it, Blair had swung open the basement door and began to disappear into the basement’s forbidden darkness. “Blair! What are you doing? Don’t leave me alone up here!” Sophia screamed.

“Oh, you’ll be fine!” Blair replied distantly. “Just explore those rooms and I’ll be back soon!”

“Ugh, fine,” Sophia grunted as she stepped cautiously toward the first door. Every muscle in her body tensed as her hand reached for the doorknob. Her fingers finally met the handle and slowly twisted it. The doorknob let out a moan as the door creaked open. A room filled with torn wallpaper and ancient decorations presented itself. A huge painting of a man, mounted on the far wall, stared down at Sophia, his evil eyes piercing through hers. On the other wall, a large window revealed nothing but the lifeless night sky. As she began scanning the rest of the room, she was interrupted by her phone’s light violently flickering, and quickly dying.

She froze. Tears began forming in her eyes. She viciously smacked her phone in desperate hopes of it turning back on, but the room remained pitch black. “Blair!” Sophia screamed, “My phone’s died! We need to leave!”

Sophia wasn't answered with her best friend's voice but was instead met with the hand of another, gripping her sweaty palm. "Oh! Thank God you're here, Blair! I'm so scared! We have to leave! Do you know the way out?"

The hand tugged hers and directed her to the exit of the house. Her feet fumbled underneath her in the darkness. Goosebumps carpeted Sophia's skin as a gust of night wind hit her and she realised that she must be finally outside. The hand continued to direct her for few seconds before the tugging ceased. The soft rippling sound of water came to Sophia's attention as an eerie silence fell.

The lake.

"Blair, you took us the wrong way, we're at the lake. I just want to go home!" Sophia yelled, her voice edged with fear.

"Sophia, where did you go?" Blair called out from inside the house.

Sophia's stomach dropped. In that moment, she became instantly aware of things she hadn't noticed before. The cold, wrinkly hand gripping onto her didn't feel like that of a sixteen-year-old girl. She assumed that she was talking to Blair, but there was no answer.

"Blair?" She was barely able to get it out.

The world fell silent and the hammering in Sophia's chest was the only sound that could be heard, until ...

"Atticus?"

The Sorcerer's Crown

By Lauren Bridde (Year 7)

He whizzed through the undergrowth on a barely discernible track, passing unwelcoming trees with dark, gnarled bark. The sun barely caught glimpses of the forest's floor through gaps in the canopy. He gripped the map tightly as he ran, trying his best to avoid vines and tree roots that snaked along the ground. He had been decoding and following Edward's cryptic map for days. He reached into his satchel and felt around — the crown was still there. The flats of the woodland were coming to a rapid end as he grew closer and closer to the steep incline. He frantically scanned the area for the cave the map described, to no avail until ...

'Perfect,' he declared, as he spied a shadowy opening in the hill.

Without a second thought, he sped towards the cave, his pursuers' voices echoing through the forest. The sound of galloping horses stopped as the riders dismounted and began looking around.

"We can't find him, sir," a voice said.

"He has to be here somewhere. Fan out and start searching," a commanding voice replied.

As the guards began to spread out, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you have it, Henry?" a voice came from deeper in the cave.

He spun around defensively as a figure came out from the light.

"Oh, Edward," Henry said, letting out a heavy breath.

"Yes, I have it." Henry pulled out the crown.

The golden crown was encrusted with brilliant jewels: rubies, sapphires and peridots. Even in the dimness of the cave, the crown seemed to glisten. For the

first time, Henry took a moment to admire the sheer beauty of the crown. Then, he remembered the weight it carried:

Years ago, a powerful sorcerer had enchanted the crown to give the wearer rulership over the kingdom. On a full moon, the wearer of the crown would take reign from the previous ruler. For this to happen, one had to be close to the full moon, which meant one had to get to the highest point one knew of, and fast, as the full moon was tonight.

“We have to get out of here — this way,” Edward beckoned.

They walked through the cave which was dark, damp, and generally disgusting. A glint of sunlight caught Henry’s eye, as he ventured closer and closer to its source. The cave opened up into a valley. As Henry and Edward emerged from the cave, they were taken aback.

The forest stretched as far as the eye could see, a plethora of shamrock green trees covering the sweeping green hills. Birds of all colours sung pure melodies and soared gracefully above the treetops. The cool breeze swept gently through the woods, enveloping all within, and the fresh smell of morning dew and honeysuckle wafted through the air.

Edward took the map from Henry, studying it intently.

“I’m pretty sure we need to go ... *here*,” he said, pointing at a spot in the middle of the valley. It was not clear what was there, but Edward seemed confident.

Following the path marked on the map, it only took an hour to walk there, and soon, they were staring up at a steep, grassy mountain. This was harder to scale, as the path was rocky and uneven. They walked as far away from the edge of the path as possible, and by the time they reached the top, the temperature had dropped dramatically.

The top of the hill was a plateau, where two spiraling towers stood boldly. The towers had a firm base made of black stone, which faded into a greyish colour and then ended with calcite. The circular roofs were made of crystal: pure and pristine purple amethyst, held up by the dark oak wood that lined the base.

As Henry walked around, he noticed an orchard filled with all kinds of fruiting trees, which surrounded the towers, complete with luscious emerald-green grass, and shrubs and trees boasting an abundance of vibrant flowers. Next to that, a beautiful weeping willow hung over a small pond, its water shining brightly in the radiant sunshine.

Henry and Edward stood apprehensively at the bottom of the tower, content to stay firmly on the ground and enjoy the beautiful scenery. They had to do this. For too long the crown’s power had been abused. It was time for a change. As they locked eyes, their minds were set. They were ready to begin the climb. Originally, Henry had assumed they would have to scale the outer wall of the tower, but Edward had a much simpler solution. There was a rickety spiral staircase on the inside of the tower. Henry closed the door behind them as they took their first steps on the staircase. There was no going back now.

While climbing a staircase may seem easy enough, climbing a thirty-story spiral staircase with no balustrade was quite dangerous. Henry felt sickeningly dizzy after only a few minutes. Edward stumbled, but Henry snatched his arm before he fell.

Moments later, they stood on the roof of the tower, firmly grasping a pole in the centre.

When the sun set behind the large hills that surrounded the valley, the sky first turned yellow, then orange, and finally pink before the light from the sun disappeared completely and the inky black sky was lit up with millions of stars, twinkling brightly. The full moon loomed above their heads, seeming so much larger than it had from the safety of the ground. As the moon rose directly above them, Henry handed Edward the crown. Edward gulped and grasped it tightly. He closed his eyes and placed it onto his head.

Time Flies

By Olivia Russell (Year 10)

Aroa Highland was on time.

She'd made sure she would be, leaving the house awfully early that morning, not wanting to spend the night away. Her long drive out of the city consisted of checking her watch, the car's clock, and her watch again.

When Aroa pulled up to the house she paused, took a moment to take in the property, and pulled out the paperwork and keys she had collected earlier.

"I hereby give my estate to my first living female descendant, payable on my death."

Aroa sat in her car wasting time staring at the house, her house. From the sanctuary of her car, her eyes tracked the cracks in the walls of the decrepit house, and she wondered why the house had not been demolished within the past hundred years of its having no owner. The keys that she had pulled out of her bag only minutes earlier had started to make an indentation on her hand and her sudden realisation of this fact was what spurred her into action. She checked the time once more and reached for the door handle, hesitating for another moment. She pushed open the door and stepped into the furious wind that she had also only just registered. Walking the short distance to the house Aroa was hunted by the shadows the setting sun cast upon her.

Right before she reached the first step, Aroa paused, overhearing a few unclear words mixed in with the wind. She whipped her head around and looked for the source of the young child's voice. Her ears strained against the howls of the wind but didn't hear anything more. She took her time to have another glance over the house, wondering what life would have been like for her distant relatives years prior, a lonely father and son.

It was as Aroa was setting her foot down on the first busted step that she noticed the flutter of an old, broken blind covering a second door to her right. She watched the wind assault the blind and felt the same wind push her forward once more, taking the next step up. She continued her delicate climb and as she got

closer to the door, she could hear the voice again, making out only snippets. She took a heavy pause and listened to the young boy's voice, her slightly shaking hand holding onto the rusted doorknob. The only thing keeping her from fleeing right back to her car.

"Father — it's just ... I — wait, — no, no, stop! Sto—!" the voice whispered behind the door.

Aroa shook herself then. Embarrassed to have let herself get caught up in playing the flighty damsel. She shuddered partly from the wind and partly her own irrationality and finally pushed her key into the door.

As she stepped into the entrance hall Aroa felt her stomach drop. The door slammed behind her, and she surged forward in alarm. Something settled in the base of her spine, making her stand up straighter. She groped the wall to see if there was any light switch before giving up and reaching for her phone. Her eyes, as they always did, first went to check the time. But for some reason her phone had stopped working; it showed no time. She turned it off and on again but there was no change. She haltingly dismissed it and reasoned it was the loss of signal, apparent from the sign in the corner of her screen. She turned on the flash to shine it on her wrist.

Before she could read the time, she heard the voice again.

No, no, she reasoned to herself, it was just the wind and an anxious part of her mind. But still she listened.

"Father says I must be home by 6:30. It's going to be well dark then. Next time —"

It was then Aroa truly felt panic setting in. This house was supposed to be empty. She turned the phone to her wrist, saw that her watch read 6:30, and at that instant the phone slipped from her grasp. The house was plunged into darkness. She forced herself to reach for it. She tried to urge herself into calling out to the child, but her breath was trapped in her lungs and the words died in her throat. Her hand ran along the floor as she prayed to any god above that the voice was really just wind. Just anything other than what her brain was thinking.

Aroa gave up on locating her phone and turned to flee but as hard as she tugged and pulled and yanked at the door, it didn't open. She turned her body inwards once more and squinted her eyes, trying to see in the dark. She tried to locate where the source of her panic but couldn't pinpoint where the voice had come from. Only that it had been all-consuming. Her mind, her thoughts, her body. She had to find a new exit.

Aroa started to shuffle forward, hands stretched out in front. She tried to guess the layout of the house but without any previous knowledge or light she was completely clueless and abandoned to her overwhelming fear. The wind was still murderously and relentlessly smashing into the walls. She heard a door crash into a wall further to her right; she realised it must have been the one she had just seen previously. Although for the first time in her life she couldn't quite work out if it had been just previously.

"You can't just leave; I want to play first."

Aroa realised that the boy's voice was more all-consuming than the last time she had heard it. She rushed, using her hands to propel her forward to the banging door and out into the world. Winds pushing her back to the house. She fought against them and in her determination to do so, the horse-drawn carriage in the road went completely unnoticed. But it wouldn't take Aroa long to realise she truly had lost her grasp on time. Her time.

The Hooded Shadows

By May Allen (Year 10)

Efronia flowers on Efronia Street. Their oils had seeped through the hands of those who held them, those who crushed them, ground them. Five generations of people had marched within these walls, working to grind the flowers for their medicinal properties.

The bus chugged along, puffs of black smoke billowing from its rear. Helen perched on the edge of her seat, her head turned to the left peering out the window and following a near glimpse of light from one end of the window to the other, until it was completely out of sight. The sun had long past set and the big oak trees stood in a gloomy shadow on the other side of the glass.

With an intrusive 'ding' Helen's phone chimed loudly, and she brought it up in front of her face to read the text from her husband Robert, asking her where she was. They were moving into their new house that day, and Helen was meant to have met him there half an hour ago. She scrolled to the bottom of the text to view the address, when without warning her screen went black; her phone had run out of charge.

"Number 10 Efronia Street," Helen told herself. She knew it was Efronia Street, but she couldn't remember the number; it was something like ten, so that would have to do. Helen's foot tapped more urgently on the floor and she fiddled compulsively with her fingers as the bus edged on through the darkness.

The bus came to a halt and Helen hastily made for the rear door. She stood in complete blackness. The location was more rural than she had anticipated; there were three houses bunched closely together, and a few more at least twenty metres away from where she stood, none of which had any lights on. Helen traipsed along the dirt towards number ten; at the front door she tripped on an abnormally high step and landing in a heap. She picked herself up and extended her arms until they met the damp wood. Upon contact with her hands, the door backed inwards, creaking on its hinges.

“Robert? ... Robert?” Helen called timidly, the volume of her voice increasing upon each exclamation. The floorboards creaked under her weight as she crept further into the house.

By now Helen had taken about ten steps and was fully consumed by the gloom. Her mind was paralysed, and she ran her hands over the walls as she walked. Before long the hallway ended, and Helen’s arms were left suspended in the air, she spun around slowly, feeling the size of the room encompassing her body.

“Ahh!” Helen cried and her arms retracted suddenly into her chest, her mind spun, and she turned back the way she had come, fast walking so as to not collide with the walls. She continued until she knew she had gone too far; walking back the other way and feeling the walls on both sides, Helen searched for the door, a door, any door so that she could leave.

“Oww!” Helen yelped in pain; she ran her fingers over her palm, feeling a big splinter sticking out of her soft pink flesh. Helen winced as she plucked it out and squeezed the wound in an attempt to slow the blood flow, she assumed would be there but couldn’t see.

Pressing her hand into her chest, Helen’s trembling body lumbered on through the dark. Feeling her way around a corner, Helen squinted into the gloom where she saw a thin, indiscernible beam of light. Moving closer, Helen felt a cold brass handle and eagerly twisted it, willing for the door to reveal her way out. The wooden door was swollen with damp and had to be shoved with great strength. It gave in and Helen’s body was flung forward.

Lifting her head, Helen’s eyes were met by a room, untenanted by anything except a gleam of white light shining through the decrepit ceiling down onto the ground, where it created a circle of light. In the centre of the light, was a royal blue flower growing through the damp wood, an Efronia flower.

The ominous pressure of the room was overwhelming; however, Helen was overcome by the sudden urge to reach out and touch the beguiling flower. Only for a moment, Helen felt the silken texture of the petal before it shrivelled up and was carried away by a chilling gust of air. The crinkled, grey petal floated away towards the entrance to the room.

Helen’s heart sank and she stood to continue her search for the door. Upon leaving the room, Helen’s arm brushed against a tarp which fell to the floor, revealing a window. She gasped excitedly at what she saw through the fogged-up glass.

“Robert! Robert!” Helen clamoured desperately. “Rob ... Robert!” She banged violently on the glass, shrieking, anything just to be heard. Robert stood on the grass just metres away, he was unpacking the car. Helen moved along the window, her cheek turning bright red against the icy glass; her nails scraped fiercely against the window, and she continued to shout. “Robert! ... Please! ... Rob! ... Robert!” Her voice dwindled and her body shook violently. Helen gasped for air, choking on her panic.

Helen pressed her back against the window, her enlarged pupils darted frantically through the darkness. “Who’s there?” she exclaimed; “Who’s there?” She moved wildly through the house, knocking her shaking body on every turn.

Out of one room and into the next, Helen was running in circles, her mind emaciated. Forever in the corner of her eye were the shadows that followed her wherever she went, making her jump.

Chilling gusts of cold air touched her neck, and then her arms, as if someone was breathing on her from behind; Helen swung around restlessly, only to be met with perpetual blackness.

Drip ... drip — the faint sound of falling liquid caught Helen’s attention. She followed it through the house until she came to a pool of yellowish liquid in the circle of light coming from the ceiling where the flower used to be. Helen bent down to smell the oil.

Her eyelids fluttered, and her body made a soft thud as it hit the floor. Helen lay prostrate on the wood; the shadows came to her side and waited ...

The Fume Hood

By Amelia O'Connor (Year 9)

The atmosphere in the chemistry classroom was a cold one. The frigid air was a result of an air-conditioning unit constantly being pushed to its limits by the teacher to whom the room belonged. Anne had been his student for the past two years, and she'd never once known the temperature on the dial to read above 21°. Glancing at the clock on her teacher's wall, Anne noted the day was almost over.

"Is everything alright over here, Annie?"

Anne almost jumped out of her chair as the familiar voice interrupted her studying.

"Yes, thanks, Mr. Miller. I'm just about to finish up now."

Mr. Miller's presence didn't make her nervous as it did many of his other students; in fact, the opposite would be more accurate. He'd always taken it upon himself to check up on her progress with her assignments and had helped her out with problems at home once or twice. She knew he favoured her greatly and couldn't help but to enjoy it. This was likely due to her exemplary results in all of his assessments, placing her far above her peers academically and in his mind. Miller was the type of man who got frustrated at failure very quickly. Sometimes Anne wondered why he'd even become a high school teacher in the first place.

The buzz of the final school bell for the day cut through Anne's thoughts. Sweeping her books off the desk, she sluggishly rose off her chair only to be interrupted by her teacher's hand on her shoulder.

"I hope you have a bit of spare time — this won't take long. I know that with ... recent events, let's just say, everyone's been a bit on edge. I just wanted to check up on you," he smiled. By 'recent events' her teacher was referring to how not one, but two students from her year had disappeared. They had left for school in the morning, showed up for classes, and never come back. The first girl's vanishing hadn't been much of a surprise; everyone knew that Ella

Dixon had run away multiple times before. But when Chloe went missing too, people had started to worry.

Normally Anne would find it weird if a teacher asked her to stay after class just to check up on her. But with Miller there was just something ... different. He'd always cared for her, pushing her to go further and improve her chemistry skills. Her teacher was swinging his keys absentmindedly around his finger as he asked her, in a concerned voice, if she was doing alright.

"I know some parents are keeping their children at home, after what happened to poor Chloe. Have your folks said anything about doing something like that?" he asked, and Anne shook her head.

"Nothing like that, no," she hummed. Something had caught her attention, her bored mind latching onto anything 'new' in the room.

"Okay, okay. I just wanted to assure you that nothing bad is going happen to you. You're safe, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, sir. That means a lot, especially coming from you," Anne smiled, and then tilted her head. "What's that smell? It smells ... like rotten fruit," That got Mr Miller's attention. He snapped his focus onto her face, eyes flicking over her, while his expression remained unnervingly calm.

"Oh that — don't worry about it, Annie. Just some students left their experiment out in the fume hood. It smells bad, doesn't it?" he laughed, "I'd best be going now, though."

Anne wasn't stupid. She really, *really* wanted to trust Mr Miller, but the alarm bells ringing in her head were deafening. The cupboard underneath the fume hood had caught her eye. The door was slightly ajar, as if someone had pushed it closed but forgotten to lock it. On its own there was nothing unusual: the thing was, Mr Miller never left those cupboards open. She could feel him fidgeting behind her, waiting for her to leave — but Anne just had to check the fume hood. Striding over before she lost her nerve, she reached out to open it.

“Annie, wait —” Mr Miller called out, but she’d already pushed it open and was greeted with the sight of Chloe’s face, dead eyes glazed over and a pained expression frozen onto her bloodless face. Shakily, Anne stepped back. She made a move to push her way out of the classroom but was stopped by a firm grip on her wrist. “Anne ...” Mr Miller started, voice terrifyingly low, “I’d really hoped it wouldn’t come to this.”

Missing Persons

By Eva Peres (Year 10)

The dawn was icy. The highway whispered nothing but silence. Jane’s breath steamed the air as she fuelled her car alone at the deserted petrol station. She was in dire need of a morning pick-me-up. Coffee it was.

“Hello, anyone there?”

Stillness answered.

Being in a rush, she yelled to no one, “I’ll leave the cash on the countertop.”

She grabbed a daily newspaper on her way out and drove off down the empty road, prepared for the gruesomely lengthy drive to visit her relatives in Witham. Fog billowed through the trees and over the grasslands, hanging low in the air masking the road in a ghostly grey with a heaviness you could cut with a knife. A bank of dark clouds massed above her, writhing, twisting, growing and swelling as if they were alive. Tapping on the window turned to pounding — a storm was coming.

Trees shouted profanities as gusts of winds whipped through them, violently shaking their branches. Torrential rain consistently drummed into the grounds, obscuring the road ahead. The wipers aggressively swept away the floods but were barely helping.

Reaching for the little warmth provided by her coffee, Jane briefly removed her eyes from the road only to turn back and see a child. Screeching the car to a stop with her hands on her thumping chest and adrenaline pumping blood to her squeezing fingertips, Jane froze.

Did I just hit a child?

Despite her expensive jumper soaking a darker grey, she ran into the dreadful weather, expecting the mangled body of a child, instead finding ... a doll. Staring back with one big blue eye and split ringlets of hair, its once white bonnet and dress were soiled similar to a coffee-stain. The skin was scuffed with scars with

its body, contorted in varying directions beyond repairing. But Jane was sure she had hit something. Dismissing the thought, she abandoned the doll and returned to her car, already eradicating the startling events. Turning the ignition back on, the car was quiet. Trying again, it remained motionless. No, this couldn't happen to her — the car wouldn't start.

Through the vicious storm, Jane's eyes creased to see the outline of a building cast off from the road. The dark stickmen used their bony blackened hands to shield the house from the world and any unwanted visitors. *Why would anyone live in the middle of nowhere?* An abnormal whisper in Jane's mind persuaded her to look closer and explore. Jane rationalised, *my car is broken down and I should take cover from this storm to contact someone, so it won't hurt to go inside.* And so she did. The house, utterly ruined from centuries of brutal weather, leaked from its cracked panels and splintered beams. Outside, clumps of rotten leaves clung to the base, and a few clawed out of the dirt and up the wall.

Safe from the thrashing rain, Jane attempted to call her husband; there was no signal.

Ignoring the irregularity, her ears perked up to the sounds surrounding her. At every heavy step and pressure, it seemed like the creaking from beneath got louder. Rats squeaked and scuttered about the shadows and the erratic thunder roared. Everything you expected of an ancient house, but there was something else. A faint humming echoed along the narrow hallways, singing a tune — no — a lullaby. She was imagining things. But the soft voice sang again, reverberating from the shut door at the end of the corridor. Jane's feet involuntarily moved until her hand grasped the dusty doorknob, turning it before her intellect counteracted. As the door moaned open, the mellow tune muted and cobwebs lingered before her, varnishing antique furniture that belonged to that of a nursery.

Chills crept under Jane's skin and she shuddered in the dim atmosphere. In the corner lay a hand-crafted mahogany cradle with intricate woodwork designs. Everything else was covered with dust sheets, perhaps to protect it from the damp. Yet moving closer, Jane observed the cradle was untouched by dust, as though someone had recently wiped it clean. In the centre of the room lay a thin, moth-eaten rug, its pattern no longer decipherable. The cold chewed uncomfortably at her bones. Next to the cradle there was a rocking chair, made from the same wood — dark and solid — and it too was free of dust. The

wallpaper was strangely bare and stripped of all colour. *How drab for a nursery.* Feeling the rough edges of the wall, she found strange gouges, as if someone had dug their nails into the wall and torn at the paper. Jane paused at a framed newspaper article hanging by its lonesome. It read from 10th January 1907 about a ghastly accident of a three-year-old trampled by a horse carriage and a mother hanging herself from guilt. Her heavy breathing intensified as she read on, growing thin and ragged. The mother's screams of misery pierced through the decayed pages as the dreadful details continued. Her eyes transfixed with horror, unable to look away no matter how much she wished to. But finally tearing away, uncertain whether to scream or breathe, Jane pulled her eyes to the photograph next to the article. Terror twisted in her gut, and she had the urge to vomit her insides. It was the same girl she imagined running over with her car. Shuffling back, her foot hit something. With her heart hammering in her ears and her head throbbing from confusion, hot tears trickled down her pale cheeks as she glanced down. The doll gaped back into her wide eyes and with horror overwhelming her wholly, a blood curdling, shrilling scream sliced the still landscape.

"We've got an abandoned car on Highway 7, likely belonging to a woman, judging from the lipstick-stained coffee cup. No sign of a phone or credentials."

"Hey, check this out. The newspaper dates back to three months ago."

"Why would someone leave their car in the middle of a highway?" Surveying the scenery, nothing but trees and grass hills remained in the distance. "Guess it's just another missing person's report."

Flightless Birds

By Evita Abela (Year 10)

Prologue

That emu has been there for centuries – can't fly nowhere. I suppose its longest friendship has been with the southern cross. My dembart lives up there on the emu's beak, protecting it from the jampas threatening it with their spears. Dembart used to tell me the story of Dinewan the emu and Goomble-Gubbon the turkey. Goomble-Gubbon spirals into a fit of jealousy when she sees the emu flying high above the land. Driven to cut off Dinewan's wings, the emu is left flightless.

I live in my own secluded town on the border of Bilinara and Ngarinman country, where the Victoria River intersects with Timber Creek. Where the brown snake slithering down from the north fuses with the stagnant water from the west. Where the sands so red make you cry if you look at them long enough. When I was a boy, Dembart would take me to the river's edge and sing to me. She'd tell me to watch where my feet were going, to never step on the crabs that burrowed under the sand. Those young mud crabs were hiding from the schools of white cod waiting for them to reach up their dark claws so they could be swallowed whole. The crabs never knew it was coming. Dembart sings to me now from her perch on the emu's beak.

*I sing not to disturb you;
come listen to the voice from a spirit.
Don't forget your story.
Those crabs keep hiding 'cause the cod won't swim away.
Turn to the dust on the land,
find your truth in the water,
find the dots of your ancestry in a painting.
Don't forget your story.*

Pants rolled up my legs, I waded into the shallow depths of the river where my bony feet sink into narrow crab holes. I see my reflection in the water tainted with micaloo faeces: white plastic bags, white foam cups, cartons with pale milk still seeping out from the disintegrating cardboard folds. My face shakes in

the reflecting ripples extending from the body of a nearby cod. I see Ngaboo, Ngunyntju and Boorie. I become the people I see in the river and I recite their stories to Dembart. Their stories become my story.

Ngaboo

“He bleeds. His deep veins rise to the surface, no longer pumping blood.”

He had the biggest hands of anyone back home in Karangpurru. He could catch grown goannas and fight off whole kangaroo mobs, but he would never spear a cod. He used to tell me that it was an act against the spirit elders to catch cod. I never realised that it wasn't because he wouldn't catch the cod but that he couldn't. They always seemed to swim off too quickly like they didn't want him near them. Maybe his dark skin hurt their fragile eyes. Sunday morning after hunting inland for emu eggs, they stopped him on the path back to our house, back to our family. Their soft white hands, made strong only by the presence of their shiny badges, grabbed his wrists as they started questioning him. One of them kicks him and squeezes his fingers and arms. He starts to bleed as he pleads for freedom.

*I am pained by your ignorance;
I am pained by who you make me.
Your hands are clean,
you bear no scars,
your knuckles are not wounded.*

They let him go and watch him run home in fear. He turns to glimpse their clean hands.

He holds his breath.

Ngunyntju

“Run, run to the whites of her eyes.”

They came noiselessly over the hills and gently undulating valleys formed by the Rainbow Serpent. She heard them first. The terrifying shakes of the earth

reverberated as the elders started to realise. She was only nine years old. The children ran into the bushes and dispersed; she couldn't see anyone. She scrubbed her skin with a piece of a blackened bark off a nearby gum tree until it peeled and blistered. Horrified screams ricocheted off nearby rock formations as children were dragged away. Elders struck their foreheads with rocks and muttered prayers to the Dreamtime spirit. She knew what her Ngunytju told her at night.

*When the ghosts come riding in,
take no time to find me.
Run to the mother tree and seek shelter,
from their empty spirit hearts.
They'll take you all away.
Cry, cry.*

They got 'em all and left. Sisters, brothers, cousins — all gone. Left her behind hiding in the umbrella of the Cootamundra Wattle.

She holds her breath.

Boorie

“He reaches for the drink and his hand fills with glass splinters.”

My young boy. It'll kill him one day and he knows it. He'll collapse on the ground, and he won't stand back up. He looks at the sunset and can't see where the sunlight hits the horizon. He thinks he's a migaloo, he can't remember the generations before him. He's like one of the victims in the early mob — the mob poisoned by the stuff they were given from the ghosts on their eleven floating ships.

*Stop running from your sorrow;
stop hiding from your pain.
It comes from many times before,
when so many others suffered.*

His visions are infected with shadows and darkness which cloud his connection to the land and culture of his people.

He holds his breath.

Epilogue

I see teardrops stream from my neck down my right arm, my Ngunytju's side. I see scars and lacerations on my left arm, my Ngaboo's side. I see barley grains lined down my sternum, my young Boorie's centre. I look back at myself in the muddy water. The light distorts my reflecting gaze. I see myself looking up at the big blue territory sky, where the emu emerges at night. To the south of Dembart on the emu's beak, Ngaboo and Ngunytju lie on its back riding out into the open sky, freer than the cods still ignorantly circling in the river.

I submerge my head under the turbid water.

I hold my breath with no knowledge of when I'll come up for air

The Hidden Secret

By Raifa Bowens (Year 7)

Statuesque trees towered majestically to the sky and stood side by side like distinguished soldiers. Shafts of golden sunlight diffused through the almost impervious canopy, illuminating the blanket of darkness that had enveloped the forest. Teeming with wildlife, the forest came alive. The screeches of insects, the bursts of melodious chirping and the occasional scampering of bristly creatures scurrying through the undergrowth engulfed the forest. As I ventured deeper and deeper into the morbid, gloomy part of the forest, 'The Well' stood right in front of me, the well from which no-one has ever come back out alive. 'The Well of Doom' it was called.

"Daisy! ... Daisy! Where are you?" I bellowed whilst I rushed through the muddy terrain looking in every possible direction to find her.

My heart began pummelling like a wild animal endeavouring to escape from my chest.

"Oh, there you are! Don't tell me you raided Mr. Gren's garden again?" I giggled, almost expecting an answer to come out.

Daisy's guilty expression told its own story whilst she tried to hide the truth with her *'she's so innocent'* face. Daisy has been my best friend, the person I talk to in my times of sorrow and despair, ever since my long-lost-sister, Jenny went missing a few years ago, in a suspected abduction. Whilst I think otherwise, my parents obnoxiously believed what the police told them, instead of investigating the case further. Ever since then, Daisy has been and still is, my soul friend. There is a deep secret I've discovered five years ago, ever since my sister went missing and my father bought Daisy from the shelter — Daisy started to develop peculiar human characteristics. Daisy was always a unique puppy but what sparked my suspicion was the way she behaved around The Well of Doom ...

"Come on, Daisy! We need to get home before the sun sets!" I snapped, irritated that Daisy kept on jumping out of my arms.

As I hopped onto my quad bike, I revved up my engine and headed back home. When I got home, I stopped in awe and simply stared at the phenomenal sky. The sky was a canvas of kaleidoscopic colours ablaze with fiery tangerine hues and amethyst streaks as the sun edged closer to the horizon. In the mere distance, I heard some distinct voices talking about something important, I pressed my head onto my bedroom door. As I realised what the voices were saying I burst my bedroom door open ...

"Mother, father, NOW — after all these years — you actually make time to talk about her!" I cautioned, as my wrathful eyes narrowed into a piercing glare and steam billowed from my ears like a dormant volcano about to erupt.

"Honey, you know that the year Jenny went missing was a very difficult year, the situation was out of our hands," mother sighed.

"NO! You're lying, because when you heard about the news, father and you never did *anything* about it!" I retaliated.

Father and mother simply stood there like inanimate statues, rendered speechless by what they had just heard. I was beyond rage and finally voiced my opinion on what I had about things. Deep down I knew it was futile as opposing an earthquake with an argument.

BANG! I kicked the front door open and grabbed my trusty puppy, Daisy.

"Where do you think you're going?" shouted father, as his livid eyes narrowed into glazed spheres of indignation.

"Nowhere you need to know of!"

I sped up the rocky roads and into the forest before my father could find me. It was dark. It was scary. It was cold. I couldn't possibly know what was lurking in the depths of the forest.

"They don't spend enough time with me to know me!" I yelled as my voice echoed then trailed off into complete silence.

It was all silent as the sheeted dead until I released all my rage.

“I-HATE-MY-MOTHER-AND-FATHER!”

For every word I said I threw a rock at any tree in sight — it felt good. It felt as though the melancholy and despondency that was once inside was finally released. I was free at last. Whilst I trekked deeper into the forest I stumbled upon The Well of Doom. In the corner of my eye, I could see something glowing- anticipation was sky high. As I leaned over to see what it was- my heart sank. BANG! BOOM! CRASH! I couldn't believe what trouble I brought upon myself ...

The fall was a long way down; it seemed to be an endless journey.

“Ahh! Help! Somebody help me!” I sobbed as I reached the bottom.

My despondent heart sank to the ground and warm tears began cascading down my cheeks- I was inconsolable.

Frenetic thoughts ricocheted through my mind like a swarm of frenzied bees. How long would I be stuck in this treacherous well? Who would rescue me? Would anyone find me?

“Ahh! What's that?” I shouted, and my heartbeat pulsed erratically as adrenaline accelerated through my veins.

Surrounding me were skeletons and human remains. I soon began to realise why the people called it 'The Well of Doom.' What caught my attention was the object that was glowing. As I edged closer to it, I realised it was simply a book — but not any book. I quickly flicked through the disintegrated book and stumbled upon a chapter about humans turning into animals. My suspicion heightened, why was there a book about this particular subject?

As I flipped to the end of the book, I saw the initials engraved into the old book it read 'J.W'. The situation was tense — you could cut the air with a knife. Nothing made sense, but I remember mother telling me, *God works in mysterious ways*. Puzzled thoughts ricocheted through my bewildered mind as I struggled to comprehend what was going on. Was someone looking to cure themselves from

being in the form of an animal? Or was it all simply a misunderstanding? Time would tell ...

As I looked up the well, I saw Daisy barking persistently. As I connected the dots together it all made sense, or was it all simply a coincidence? The bizarre human characteristics. The connection to the well. The book about humans transforming into animals. It all seemed too familiar.

“Jenny?”

In Mortem

By Beatrice Bailey (Year 10)

Death.

Death — a concept that I of all people know well. It is something unexpected; it is something that you can't stop when the universe deems it your time.

Adrienne and Hayden Harper moved to Killin, Scotland after graduating from the University of Edinburgh with a specialist degree in teaching to work at Killin Primary School.

The journey into town was beautiful and showed the couple an elegant display of flora and fauna. The taxi driver showed them around the city on the way to their new house.

After being driven for an hour, they passed a house that was falling apart. Dwarfed by the surrounding hills, the house looked almost pitiful. It had no windows and no door. The walls, built from local stone, were consumed by green and black moss. Dead grass reached high up its walls; it looked like it hadn't had any visitors for years.

Adrienne took interest in the house as if it called her. The taxi driver took notice of her attention to the building and immediately warned her, "Don't ever go there, it's dangerous! Fifty years ago, something very ... strange happened."

Adrienne looked into the rear-view mirror, eager for him to continue.

"A young couple had moved into the town here. Everyone loved them, thought they were lovely young kids. One night, the police arrived at that house; they'd gotten a call from the neighbours who said they'd seen a murder. They walk in; there's two bodies lying on the floor, throats sliced open. Murder-suicide, they said. I'm not so sure."

Adrienne shuddered as they reached the driveway. She noticed some blood trickling down her index finger; she *must* have pricked it on a plant before she got into the car.

That night, a house appeared to her in her dreams — *The House*. Images flashed before her eyes, they were nearly impossible to make out: blood, knife, house, death, blood, bodies, house, murder — BLOOD HOUSE.

She awoke, sweat trickled down her face. Her sheets had a damp outline of her body. With a harsh exhale, Adrienne got up and tried to get ready for the day like nothing had happened.

Days turned to weeks; each night filled with nightmares.

One afternoon, the benighted sky darkened the classroom. Thunder crashed all around as Adrienne was teaching her class English whilst wearing her favourite floral dress. She was reading them an excerpt from *The Grey Woman* when, in the blink of an eye, all the words on the page muddled together: *Death, death, death. You will die.*

She looked up from the book. All the students in her class appeared dead; blood and bodies were scattered all over the classroom.

Muttering "No! No! No!" to herself, Adrienne sank to the floor in a fit of tears.

A hand was placed on her shoulder. "Miss, are you okay?"

She flinched away.

Trickles of sunlight bled into the classroom through the gaps in the clouds. Composing herself, Adrienne got up from her defensive ball to see that her students were fine. Dismissing them early for the day, she decided to go home and get some much-needed rest.

After dinner, Adrienne drifted off to sleep, remaining in her clothes. The nightmare started, like it always did. Images of the house flashed before her eyes. This time it was different; this time she felt like she was there. The images flashed faster, as if making a movie.

The girl in her dream walked towards the house wearing a green floral dress. Her left hand was holding her husband's hand, her right, a knife. They walked together in sync through the doorway of the house, eyes blank as if nobody was behind them. They walked through the house into the main room. The fireplace was already lit. Using the knife, the girl, as if possessed by something, brutally killed the man to her side and watched as he fell to the floor.

Suddenly Adrienne awoke from her dream. Taking a moment to take in her surroundings, she saw that she wasn't at home anymore. Rain trickled down the windows as she stood motionless. A body lay lifeless by her feet — Hayden. She wanted to reach down and try to save him, but she couldn't move. Her heart beat faster and faster as she took staggered breaths and looked down at her bloodied hands clutching a knife. As she stared at the shiny blade, it began to rise to her throat, as if being lifted by an invisible hand.

The blade swiped at her throat, hitting every blood vessel possible. A fountain of red began to pour from the wound. She couldn't scream nor run. Weariness consuming her, she slowly swayed and fell to the floor. As she lay there, barely able to keep her eyes open, two white transparent figures appeared before her with long lines across their necks.

Welcome home.

Love, War, Loss. The life of man.

By Sienna Jiang (Year 8)

He trails the steps she once had took,
Before the wired rails shook,
And once the warmth had left her breast,
Buried deep, he knelt and wept.
Till this day, he vows revenge
On those whose blows stole the rush
Of blood to red petals flushed, a gush
Of Love. Lying there, green stalk on snow.

March 2022

Dearest Sister

By Anrier Ingleton (Year 10)

“Hey, you’ve reached Mary. Sorry, I can’t come to the phone right now, please leave a message after the beep.”

“Hey, it’s, uh — it’s Jane. I’m sorry I disappeared the other day. I, ... *uhm* — I know this sounds crazy, but I think Liz is alive. I’ve been having dreams about her inside this ... house. I think she’s been telling me to come and get her. I’m going to Bastrop. Bastrop, Louisiana. I know it’s been three years but ... she’s still my sister. I have to go find her; I have to find out what happened ... I’ll call you when I come ba—”

It was nearly noon when Jane arrived at the derelict house. Outside the heat was overwhelming, with the humidity making it worse. Stagnant water sat in puddles around the back of the house giving a sickening smell that permeated everything. Fly infestations clung to the rusted drainpipes at the front of the house, and chunks of animal faeces lay on the uneven staircase. She took a moment to look at the house, thinking of all the times she had seen it before in her dreams; it all looked too familiar.

“It’s real! She must be here.”

Jane anxiously entered the house, and when she closed the door, the darkness engulfed her for a second before she quickly turned on her flashlight to find her surroundings. In front of her was a long hallway, with pieces of broken wooden panels and empty picture frames scattered along the floor. Across the hall was a large window that was sloppily boarded-up, tiny blades of sunlight filtering through the narrow joints. The air was stifling, and she could already feel her forehead beaded with sweat. She walked shakily to the end of the hall and turned right, reaching the kitchen.

The first thing she noticed was the big dining table in the middle of the room. On it sat a cooking pot and several dusty newspapers. Slowly, she lifted the heavy lid of the pot. The stench of decaying food struck her with disgust. Stooping to see clearly, she saw inside the lid taut strings of brown mucus. From inside the

pot a flurry of giant cockroaches scurried out. Horrified by the repulsive sight and smell, she screamed and fell backwards, cutting her hand on a piece of broken glass on the floor and shattering her flashlight. She would have vomited if not for the stinging slash of pain across her hand.

“Oh, my God! What the hell is this place ... ?”

From the other side of the room a quiet voice croaked.

“Help ... me ...”

“What? Liz? Liz, is that you? It’ — it’s Jane! It’s your sister! Are you there?”

Feverishly Jane looked around her, searching for the source of the voice, only to be met with nothing but silence and the house’s stench of decay.

“Liz ... please answer me! Please! I’m here to save you! Please answer me, Liz!” Once more she looked around the room, waiting for a reply.

Again, nothing.

“Maybe I’m going crazy ... maybe it’s ... not her.”

She laughed nervously to herself, trying to dismiss the strange voice that had sounded a little too much like her sister’s.

Looking back at the table again, her eyes fell upon the stack of dusty newspapers spread out across the tabletop. She picked one of them up and skimmed the front page:

*“Over 40 missing in 3 years.”
“Disappearance of mother and child horrifies Bastrop!”
“Jason and Margaret Parker: Missing.”*

As she read through the different columns in the newspaper, sweat from her forehead dripped onto her face, her neck, and into her eyes. Something wet felt like it was crawling up her back and clinging to the sides of her body.

Immediately, she dropped the newspaper, and wiped her face with her hand, leaving a dark red streak of blood smeared across her face.

“Help ... me, Jane ...”

She heard the same voice speak again, but this time it was a little louder, and it eerily sounded like it was coming from underneath the floor. Is there a basement? She asked herself.

She carefully looked around the room, searching for any signs of a hidden entrance.

After minutes of probing around the kitchen, she finds herself searching the inside of the fireplace. She notices hanging from the throat of it a rusted steel chain. Moving closer to inspect it, she loses her balance and grabs the chain to steady herself. But the weight she brings to bear on the chain suddenly triggers an opening in the wall in front of her.

She hesitates, for a moment, questioning what might await her, but eventually she decides to venture into the opening. Inside, she finds an empty room with a large ladder descending through a hole into the basement. Her knees scrape against the dirt floor as she crawls to the opening, positioning herself so as to comfortably climb down the ladder. Already feeling the effects of the intense heat, she struggles through the humid air and carefully finds her way down, step by step. As soon as she reaches the bottom, her senses are assaulted by the vilest odour, and she can feel the intense pulsing of her veins underneath her skin.

She feels her way through the dark narrow tunnel, shakily gripping onto the sides of the walls. As she gets further and deeper into the tunnel, she can feel herself slowly starting to be submerged in a thick swamp-like cesspool. She starts to wonder whether she should go back or continue walking through the growing body of water, she doesn't know. She's scared. She doesn't know if she'll be able to go back to safety. She doesn't know where her sister is. She's alone. She can't feel the ground. She's drowning.

The Book of Runes

By Isabelle Hodges (Year 7)

My mum is the epitome of a Norwegian stereotype. Her hair is white-blond in a small frizzy mop. She wears black thick framed glasses that bring out her alabaster skin. She loves wearing her oversized knits with bits of threads sticking out, and she always has a cup of tea in her hand. Freya is her name, and she is a romance novelist.

I, on the other hand, could not look any more different. My hair is of a dark walnut hue; I like wearing my tie-dye sweats, and I can never sit still to read a book, let alone write a novel like my mum. We move around a lot. She always seems to want to live in great, creepy houses that have a wild garden. She says they give her inspirations for her next novel.

One Autumn afternoon, I had finished my homework and was idle in our backyard, throwing pebbles into the abandoned well. From the corner of my eyes, I saw the glimmer of a plastic bag buried in the grounds. I picked it up and inside was an emerald book with gold embossed writing: 'The Book of Runes.' I flipped it over and read the back: *“The Book of Runes is something very special: a part of the ancient past and perhaps, a part of your future ... Based on a tradition over one thousand years old, the Viking runes are seen by many as a contemporary oracle and collectively, be an aid in practical decision-making.”* The book came with a velvet drawstring bag. When I tipped the content out, twenty-five pebbles fell onto the soft grass. Each pebble had a symbol carved onto its smooth, flat surface. I put the pebbles back into the bag, picked up the book and ran back into the house to show my mum. I stumbled into her bedroom where she was typing.

“Mum, look!” I said eagerly. Her eyes lit up. She took the bag and the book from my hands and began examining it. “What have you got here?” she asked, before reaching out and almost dropping her jaw. “Oh my,” she said, “that’s the Book of Runes.”

She went on to explain: “My grandmother, your great-grandmother, had told me all about the Book of Runes. She was a proud Norse, you see, the runes are symbols of art, mythology and paganism. They can tell you about your ancient

past or your future. *Bestemor*, grandma, always carried on about us being royalties. I guess that's why I'm a novelist, she had such a vivid imagination."

My mother went on to explain that each rune has a symbol or glyph, which is used as a script. The runes or *halristningar* date back to the Bronze age. The carvings represent men and animals, parts of the body, sun symbols and more. Practitioners of *runemal* would shake their pouch and scatter the pebbles on the ground; those glyphs falling facing upwards would be interpreted. We shook the pouch and dropped the pebbles onto the soft rug under our feet. A number of runes were facing up, so we started interpreting using the book.

*Let Light stream forth into the minds of men
Let light descend on Earth
In the Well, you shall find ...*

We looked at each other and followed the instructions to the abandoned well. We opened the book and repeated the scattering of the runes again, this time they read:

*From the point of Light within the mind of God
In the Well, you shall find
Three lifetimes ago
You were divine*

We looked at each other with excitement and climbed into the well together. Surprisingly, it had a staircase. The walls were mossy and wet. The stairs had pearl-like mildews cascading from step-to-step and it seemed like an endless circular formation. The occasional cold, icy wind tickled our hair and the whole place seemed like a dungeon. Then suddenly, my mother slipped ...

A sheer panic came over my face as I watched her fall into the dark hole beneath us and her eyes widened in fear reaching back at me in shock. She disappeared and I could no longer see anything as darkness engulfed all.

I did not know what to do. I felt sick to my stomach. How could I have been so stupid as to lead my mother into this place? I did not know whether to go back up or continue on until ... the stairs suddenly flattened into a big slide and I fell, sliding down what seemed like an endless downward spiral!

When I reached the bottom, I landed with a jolt on soft grass. Looking up, the well no longer existed above me. Instead, there was a clear blue sky with large birds flying and chirping in the air. I looked frantically around me and all I could see were fields of grass. I got up, dusted myself off and ran as fast as I could, screaming for my mum. I came to a sudden halt. I was standing on a precipice looking down a fjord. A stunning river was before me, separating mountains with glaciers over them. A sudden tap on my shoulder and I turned around, only to see my mother. Except she was no longer wearing her oversized knit. She was dressed like Royalty in a teal-coloured, long dress.

My mum winked and pointed down at the river. I could not believe it, she said "Look at all the boats looking up at us. I think your great-grandmother's spell from the Book of Runes has come true." I looked down at the boats and heard celebratory drums and cheers, people were chanting:

"Velkommen, prinsessen var."

Timus

By Anna Scruby (Year 10)

The jagged cliffs rose imposingly in the distance as the downpour left droplets on the dashboard of Flora Canarvon's car, veering along the road that bordered a churning grey sea. Flora, feeling rather lonely as she gnawed at her now bloody lip, decided to turn on the radio. "*We now have news of an unforeseen discovery of a rare species of raven...*". But there was nothing but static. Flora delicately adjusted the dial with her manicured nails. "*... of raven...*", but the static continued. The inconvenience grating on her already frayed nerves, she slammed it hard with her palm. "*...which has been seen throughout various regions of the country*" the calm voice of the announcer continued. Flora sighed with relief. Everything in her life, it seemed, had been unforeseen since the call.

After receiving a message left at her architectural design company on that balmy summer evening, she had rushed to the address left by the law firm. Unable to resist the suspense, she had cancelled the day's carefully planned appointments.

The solicitor, a greying, middle-aged man who cut a rather despondent figure in an ill-fitting suit, had, after a few preliminary greetings, pushed forward a yellowing scrap of paper, on which the following was written in long, flowing script:

I, William Douglas Canarvon, hereby devise and bequeath the property of Timus, Villamoor, to my great-niece, Flora Rose Canarvon, upon my death.

On reflection, she thought these words had been very little to go upon, yet, somehow, it felt more than enough for her to clear her schedule and investigate.

As Flora drove on, the moors emerged out of the flat grasslands, the landscape rising and falling with rich green mounds of earth. As she drove closer, she could just make out the deep purple of the heath that dotted the landscape, the neat wooden houses and dim regulation street lamps that looked as if they had been cut out from a magazine and hastily glued against this wild sprawl of vegetation. Using the grainy image of Timus as a guide on the screen of her phone, Flora suddenly realised that she was no longer within the confines of the neighbourhood. Her cloudy blue eyes froze over with fear as she clutched tightly

at her merino dress, cramping her toes together inside her heels. She saw only a single building, a vast mass of stone. Its façade was smeared with a thick layer of mould, its rotting wooden doorway asymmetrical, a detail that chafed against her architect's love of symmetry. At last, there was no further to drive, no more decisions to dissect — she was here, and she was, it abruptly occurred to her, alone in the disarray.

Hesitantly, Flora opened the car door to the bitingly cold air with the glowing orb of the sun beginning to darken to night. She approached the entrance. Clutching the floorplan that the lawyer had hastily passed her on the way out of the office, together with her phone and a torch, Flora battled her way through the reddish thicket of weeds that grew without restraint across the door. The caw of a raven gurgled in the distance; her wispy blonde tresses the sole recipient of its beady glare. Taking out the key, she began to turn it into the keyhole. Without so much as a faint click, maggots housed in its rotting cracks fell out onto the bracken as the door of Timus groaned open.

The vestibule reeked of the dirt and must spread thickly across its cracking wooden floors and the walls were dotted with the torn vestiges of patterned wallpaper. In the centre of this chaos, repugnant to the neatness of her person, stood a gleaming mahogany table with a newspaper atop its polished surface. "How peculiar," Flora murmured. "It looks almost..." But something distracted her from completing the sentence. The neatly printed date, "May 29, 2022", with a photograph of the raven. How could it be?

Though perturbed by this discordance, Flora felt that the neatness of the carefully labelled floorplan soothed her, a balm to her disquietude. Somewhere at the limits of her consciousness, she dimly perceived that reflecting on what she had seen too deeply would exacerbate her sense of unease and so she proceeded through the building, guided by the glowing light of the torch. Her calf strained to turn back to the safety of the car, her eyes hunting for means of escape. But she could not leave.

There was something else. A chamber, bare but for a rusted ladder. Presumably, she thought, used to access what she now saw to be a chasm that lay beneath. Glancing back down at the floorplan, she realised that the room was not there. Beads of sweat gathered on her palms, and she felt the smooth glass screen of

her phone slip out of her hand. Expecting to hear the crash of glass against the stone, she rushed to the centre of the room. But she heard nothing, besides the scuffling of the rats up above in the deep fissures of the ceiling.

She suppressed a scream, which became a gasping sob of dread. What a choice lay before her! Either to proceed without her only tie to the outside world, or to go down into the void. She felt, however, that the choice had already been made. Grabbing the ladder, Flora swung herself down and began the descent, using one hand to clutch the rung whilst the other gripped the torch. Her eyes fixated on a single maggot, writhing in a crack of the floor. Blood was now flowing from her gnawed lip, a red slash on her chin. Lifting her hand to her face, she felt the torch crack against the ladder. The light had vanished. She was entombed in darkness.

Outside, the sooty black raven sat on the bonnet, its deep gurgling croak filling the misty dawn. It was morning, and on the driver's seat, a creamy leather handbag lay untouched.

Aphrodite

By Ruby Rubinstein (Year 8)

I asked her one day. Why she seemed so closed off to others, why she never wanted to know more, probe into people, learn their lives, their triumphs, their hardships, their in-betweens.

She said to me that words weren't her language.

That she couldn't express herself through the lips that frame the art of her verses, her poems. That there weren't enough syllables, enough letters, enough *infinity* to articulate her brushstrokes, the delicate stanzas she's composed of. If there isn't enough for her, then what is there?

Her fingers tell her stories for her. Her hands are her autobiography. You could look at them, calloused, but still soft, taken care of. They showed her life in stunning simplicity, lines and ridges, valleys and hills, all decorated thoughtfully, as though they weren't at all, the stones and the ores, all implanted, as though they were there all along. They told her stories without speaking.

She could be presented with everything, on the finest platter there was, and she wouldn't touch it. She wouldn't say a word about it. She wouldn't because it wasn't hers. She didn't know what lay between the lines, the syllables, the brushstrokes. She herself hadn't adorned it thoughtfully, she hadn't given it her infinity. She couldn't tell its story without speaking.

So, she touched instead.

She ran fingers—slim and slow—along the lines, the cracks, the valleys, the hills. She listened to the stories as though she had all the time in the world. She could've been presented with beauty so bountiful, so ethereal, and multiply it with a single press of her fingertips. She could infuse her thoughts, *her* bounty, into anything. She was the blood in the sea, she was the shell on the shore. *She was, she was, she was.*

She was Aphrodite.

4 Poems

By Cate Arnold (Year 10)

Magic Words

You were proud of how
I wrote,
Magicking people into existence.

I don't think my words are that magic,
Cause if they were,
I'd be able to write you back.

Like I Do Music

I want to love someone like I do music.
Music is my escape,
My muse.
I always come back to it.

I want to find someone to be,
My escape,
My muse.
Someone to always come back to.

I need to love someone like I do music.
Music hears me,
Understands my pain,
Gives me the words I cannot find.

I need to find someone to,
Hear me,
Understand me,
Give me the words I've lost.

All this talk about music,
Maybe it's time for a favourite song.

Pieces

I write poem
After poem
After poem...
Trying to use
words?
to piece
myself
together.
is it working?
I'll
never
really
know.
Will I
be forever
dis-jointed?
Maybe one day
It will all
come
together?

In Conclusion

These words have saved me,
These words have raised me,
Up from below the ground,
And are leaving me safe and sound.

I write only when I'm sad now,
And anyway,
I don't think I'm that sad now.

The narrative of my life,
With all its godforsaken strife,
I will not let it define me,
I will not be confined.

I was sad then,
I was drowning then,
But somehow now I'm floating,
Along with the tides,
And coping.

As much as I love these words,
As much as I hate these words,
I owe my life to them,
And always to Em.

(untitled)

By Charlie Foster (Year 10)

Tuesday 8:47 pm

My phone buzzes against the cheap Ikea bedside I stole from my mum last week. Streaks of the shiny black sky leak in through my 'blackout curtains', I ate dinner four hours ago, it's late now. Maybe it's important, but I'm settling into a highly climactic fight scene so I tell myself I'll check later. My phone dings. For the second time. I grab it sluggishly, sighing, guess I'm not reading tonight. I flick open my home screen to see a message from an unknown number, along with two attachments and a message from my mum on our family group chat. But the singular message, from a number labelled as blocked stands out. One attachment. Reddit stories have trained me to never open messages from blocked numbers, 90% of them are scams. So, heading the advice of Reddit as you do, I swiped left on the message, deleting it from my screen and my mind.

Wednesday 8:52 am

I'm running unrealistically late for work leaving me no better option but to catch the... bus, the school bus. Now, in the likely chance that I'm running late for work I would usually just take an Uber, but since inflation is a thing and Uber prices are more than the price of lettuce right now, my last solution is to take the bus. Don't get me wrong, the bus is a highly useful mode of transport, but since it's the first day back at school, not so much. I tap my Opal card and station myself at the end of the long, long, long, long... long, line of people also waiting. Great. Eventually the bus pulls up and we all pile on, crammed in like pilchards, I can feel the hot, moist breath of the person behind me, on my neck, it makes me shiver in disgust. I shuffle up against the window, wishing the driver would open it, but sadly, he never does. Looking around, it's hard to see anything through the sea of bodies, so I just continue to stare meaninglessly out the window. Until we come to a stop at a set of lights. I'm staring at a mere tree, watching how it's leaves sway freely in the wind, jealous of the copious amounts of fresh air it must be getting right now. Something beneath the tree catches my eye. A man. Staring at me. Me? I look to my left, then to my right. Yep, he's staring at me. He pulls out

his phone and types something. My phone pings. I look at my phone. A message. I open it. An attachment.

A photo. Of me.

My naked, lifeless body lying crumpled on a patch of grass, splattered in blood. Human-sized corn plants surround me, concealing my whereabouts. Both hands are severed, attached to my arm only by a string of membrane. There's blood everywhere. So much blood.

The shocked expression must resemble ghost face. No pupils stare back at me, just white.

Bile rises up in my throat and sour vomit projectiles out of my mouth in slow motion, showering the people in front of me with chunky goop. I don't wait to see my victims; reactions and when the driver pulls up at the George Street Stop, I stumble off, nausea contaminating my mind, hindering my ability to think, and talk, and walk... and breathe, and move. My throat closed as I tried to thank the driver, but no sound comes out and I just sound like a rude teen. Even in this time of crisis I note to thank my next bus driver twice to make up for this incident. I get off the bus and stagger over to Starbucks. I need a coffee. Coffee will help. I don't even like coffee though. Convincing myself that what I just witnessed was a result of extreme sleep deprivation, blocking out that quite obviously what just happened was anything but that.

I grab my soy, chai latte off the counter and sit down in a corner booth, opening my laptop and pulling up Tetris, the only way I can calm down, born out of my schoolgirl days. Then I see him. The same man. Again. Then he's gone.

I've got to leave. I abandon my \$8 chai (I normally wouldn't pay this much for a drink, but this incident has impeded my common sense) and sprint out the door, taking out a child on the way out. I hail a cab and tell the man my address. I take the complimentary water out of the holder next to me and chug half of it down in one go before gasping for breath and gulping down the rest. The man turns to face me, and I become conscious of his hideously bad breath and stale teeth. He smiles from ear to ear, why do I feel like I've seen him before? He eyes the empty bottle on the ground, his smile widening. I look out the window, where am I? We

are driving through the outer parts of the city where my friend Heather lives, her family are farmers. Corn farmers. My brain clouds up and the intense feeling you get before fainting overpowers me. I'm paralysed and can't say anything, his hot, sticky, smelly breath is against my face, he pulls a scratchy bag over my head and then nothing.

Hypnosis

By Maya Murphy (Year 8)

I have always found the dichotomy between our conscious mind and subconscious mind rather curious, the way one's body can seemingly betray one's self through instinct, the way we perform elaborate functions in order to live without a thought, and think to a frankly ridiculous extent over matters inconsequential. But, by far the most fascinating of such concepts was hypnosis. What was at work there that enabled one individual to take control over another's mind with seemingly little to no effort? Yet this feat, which was to me rather monumental in its significance, was never seriously entertained. I had been told, when I cannot place, that hypnosis was a bridge between the conscious and subconscious, and so, in hindsight perhaps against better judgement, I chose to probe further.

That was, in hindsight, almost certainly a mistake. Nonetheless, when it began, the experience was a great deal more professional than I had thought it would have. The hypnotherapist, at the time, dispelled any reservations I had about the experiment, she was calm and intelligent, her office clean in that modern, minimalistic way. The entire experience was clean... It was washed in disinfectant that cleared it of anything wrong, it was the kind of place that I often find disconcerting and fake, the kind of place I would normally spend hours trying to rip apart at the seams so I could expose the snarling horror within. But I did nothing.

The appointment was no different to how I had expected, for most of it I was simply told to visualise a room or to scan my body from top to bottom. When I was finally directed to watching a swinging pendulum, I expected no more than half meditation I had achieved for the past half hour or so, but as the metal ball swung back-forth, back-forth, something began to flicker at the edge of my gaze, light reflecting off teeth too sharp, eyes that seemed hollow in their elegant beauty. The woman, not worried, never worried, perhaps she never felt anything at all, told me, "Don't look now.." I listened to her, though I'm not sure why. I remained fixated on the pendulum as with the world around it seemed to fall apart, as I felt as though something was seeping out of my eyes, ears, mouth, a silky liquid that seemed to bring my thoughts with it. Something had gone, something inside had left to become all sharp edged, and my brain just said, on repeat, don't look now,

don't look now, don't look now, her words becoming tinged with my offbeat heart and acid fear. And then it stopped. My insides were within.

She had placed the pendulum in her pocket. She told me our time was up, that the session was over. All thoughts of discovery were gone. I fled the office. Yet for days after, people around me were different. I don't have anybody, not in a friendly or familial way, or god forbid romantic, but on the streets, in lectures... people possessed a strange duality now. When they faded into my peripheral extra appendages echoed around them, the edges of their humanity whispered, and that liquid pooled into something inhuman. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. It was like when you know someone's behind you. You can't see them, you can't hear them, but you KNOW THEY'RE THERE.

Most vividly, I remember one man I saw on the train, rather unremarkable, dressed for work I presume. He dropped his bag, it didn't make much of a mess, not like a movie, but it brought my attention to him. I think I've already said, I found him completely unremarkable. But when I looked away, something around him changed, his eyes, which I seem to recall noting were slightly lazy, were watching me, all hundreds of them. He towered over everyone else on that train, he couldn't have been taller than 5'8, but his shadow engulfed us all with a hungry predatory need. I got off at the next station. Something in me felt that if I stayed a moment longer I would have been devoured. Which was ridiculous I suppose. Nobody else in that train ran, any kind of negative thought was inconsequential compared to my need to put him down. That was what I found the most terrifying. That this man, who made everything within my body want to flee, would have gone right past my notice less than a week earlier. I would have ignored the man with innocents' screams clinging to him and warth amiss like it was never there.

Eventually, the effect wore off. People went back to only themselves, only the body that stood on the ground. It terrified me to be honest. Over the past few months I had gotten so used to easy judgements on character, that extra dimension to the world. So I decided to look up the woman from the appointment. But I couldn't remember her name. And once I started thinking about it, I found I couldn't remember anything about what she looked like either, or even where her clinic was. It was like the entire thing had been a trick of the mind, a dream that I had fooled myself into believing as real life.

But there was one thing. Two weeks after I tried to find her, I saw on the news that a man's daughter, sixteen if I'm remembering right, found a picture of a dead woman while putting clothes away in her father's drawer. After further investigation, it was found the picture was one of many people the man had killed. And all I felt was a strange sense of vindication, for the man was the one on the train.

The Day

By Eva Jacobsen (Year 10)

Six-fifteen. The hammer reaches the bell on my alarm far too fast.

Birdsong knocks at the window already - clear, crisp and pear-green. A small lamp does nothing in the wake of awokeness, the *flick* on lost in the chirps and subtle radiance of a spring morning. As my eyes adjust, yellow lamplight is dwarfed in grey, and I concede to the morning, all hopes of *five more minutes* dashed in the harshness of the light.

Swaddled in white walls, the glow is not nearly as arresting, I attempt a pilgrimage, socked feet thunderously loud in their muffled patter to the kitchenette. Clicking the gas stove till butane billows, unseen, I put the kettle on, oblivious to its instant boil.

A misfit crew of bedraggled houseplants wane in the cloudy glow of crackling frosted windows. It's a mere shade off charming – this seventies relic of an apartment just dreary and chipped enough to ward off retro fanatics. I peer at the wilting armada on the kitchen counter; an unconscious formation, wizened soldiers remaining stalwart even after the new-plant novelty wears off and they realise with increasing clarity that they won't be watered anytime soon, all photosynthetic hopes abandoned in the weak luminescence of imitation frosted glass.

Nevertheless, I feel increasingly cornered by their guilting stare, morning consciousness sharpening sluggishly to paranoia as I realise the parched handmade mugs that clutter sills and sitting tables, circling me in the ceramic crush. Suddenly, I'm a passenger on the metro in my living room, antagonised against a windowpane by tortured foliage as beleaguered, lumpy pottery rifles through my pockets for spare change. I don't have the presence of mind to crack a window in this concocted carriage, so I let myself be compressed, slowly – stiflingly, feeble against the weight of morning chaos.

I'm nearing withering point when the cap of the kettle bursts, unconscionably outraged by my spellbound unreaction to its incessant whistling and

Arcs through the air

a ping-pong ball buoyed by unseen racquets

Performing a physically impossible loop

Before hitting the exact same spot on the freckled tile as the last seventeen instances of kettle neglect with an ill-omened *CRACK*.

The tile in question, fed-up, snaps in two, both halves dropping from about 4 feet up the wall to *plip-plop* into the only half-full ceramic, producing a pathetic mushroom cloud of cold coffee.

Now awake, I sit in the absurd silence.

The train has stopped, finally, breathing room blooming as its passengers disembark. Only long-distance stragglers remain, heads following the gravitational pull into collective stasis.

Briefly, the kitchenette is a sage-green oasis.

Once the greenness fades, mundanity is a little less daunting.

The Evening

Nine-twenty-two. The streets glint dully in the twilit damp, abandoned by daytime denizens who instead sardine into pubs and restaurants, which crackle with human electricity. Loud light spills redly from Thai restaurants packed with fatigued businesspeople, ties unanimously loosened in collective wordless agreement, the post-work vigil of conversation flowing unfiltered over stir-fry.

Amber light grids the glistening tarmac, seeping from late-night convenience stores [scratched plexiglass steeped in yellowish grey, the nicotine-stained work of chain-smoking supervisors and drained collegiate employees.]

A cheerful jewel amidst the monolithic darkness of the CBD, the *R* in an *EZY-MART* sign gasps and sputters before slumping into darkness, defeated; after a

moment's pause, I slip under the remnant blaze of *EZY-MAT*, the misspelling so abruptly whimsical that I'm drawn through its robotic doors by pure entertainment value, swift as the laugh it evokes.

The automated entry tone chimes, jarringly alert, as I enter a sealed-off 24-hour oasis. It's quiet, still for the deep humming of the drink fridges lining the back walls, soda cans floating in their white-shelved prisons like miniature Han Solos, sarcophagus-clad pharaohs entombed in colourless neon.

Plastered against the dreamily cold glass in the furthest corner, a papier-maché waif held together by khaki and grey sucks on a boxy e-cigarette like a siphon, the instrument so large two hands seem not enough.

The bluish glow of snack signage casts over row upon row of coloured confections with an undeniably aquatic tint, and with the burbling hum of the overhead lights, the idea slips into my head that the convenience store at night is a fishbowl.

Time slows as the clocks adjust to the sluggish pace favoured underwater.

The non-slip charcoal mats beneath my shoes shift into placid skates and rippling manta rays, the wall-eyed stares of Skittles packets and chocolate bars following me in their schools like sugary cichlids.

Amidst the rocky pillars and reefs of shelves and aisles, I become aware of the uneasy triptych formed by the three remnant organic forms:

myself, the smoking silhouette, and a bearded cashier with a stony, beleaguered brow and weary eyes, presumably exhausted by Sisyphean attempts at making the night-shift tolerable. Consequently, they seem to realise the fishbowl. Wrapped in the tinny, winding strain of something 70's playing on the speakers – *Doors, the Underground, Dylan?* – the unthinkable horror occurs.

We lock eyes, all at once.

The next minute is agonising.

Acute awareness of just how isolated we are
[of the we that now grows suffocating, symbiotic, vulnerable to the speculations of suits and city-dwellers sparing a passing glance through the plexiglass]
grasps and *squeezes* its victims, precious oxygen retreating through the ceiling vents.

Without gills, my eyes pufferfish in their sockets, prickling in panic. The smoker spills a thick cloud like octopus ink, enveloping the ephemeral seaweed of trailing clothes and slippery strands of hair as they succumb to the threat of perception – the universal predator of tragically cool hipster types.

The delicate ecosystem of night-shift tedium is clearly not built to withstand the psychological climate-shock of introspection: behind the fossilised remnants of the till, cashier and desk have merged in defeat, resigned to deep-ocean sedimentation in the face of the Lovecraftian beast that is acknowledging another soul in one's place of work at quarter to ten in the evening.

Where I was, a quivering mollusc drifts, paralysed, beneath the anglers of overhead LEDs, awaiting the silencer of monstrous, unseen teeth.

Then the motion sensor chimes.

Three heads whip round in a panic, forgetting for an instant our wordless commitment to the pretence of individuality –

An intern in an ill-fitting suit blushes quizzically at no-one in particular, ducking his head in a fearful scuttle at the drink case, canned energy in hand as he skids to a halt before the equally frazzled cashier, fumbling his card as he pays. It declines twice before accepting with a mocking *ding*, cheerful scorn chasing a flapping tie and strapped-on backpack out the automatic doors.

I can't help it. I smile at his mad dash from the mortification of a payment error. It bubbles into a grin, then a laugh, and I sway unconsciously closer to the doors. They open again, and with them, the water of the fishbowl drains in a king tide of relief.

The rhythm of my shoes on the linoleum is markedly inaudible as I walk up to the front desk, purchasing a pack of gum before stepping into the humid night air.

My apartment is just down the street, its windows a jigsaw of opalescent light.

In the shadows, the night is turquoise.

My Father's Daughter

By Georgia Slack (Year 7)

**Winner of the Senior Dalton Essay Prize 2022,
celebrating 100 years of Dalton: "No Two Minds are Alike"**

My father died a long time ago. Sometimes, when I am tired, I struggle to see his face. But I never forget his words. His words are as much a part of me as my now aging skin and bones. He was a quiet man but when he spoke people listened. His words were always carefully chosen, almost as if he weighed and measured each one before allowing it to pass his lips. He was reflective. A deep thinker.

As a little girl, he always encouraged me to think before I spoke and, above all else, to be an independent thinker. To be anything else was to ignore, what he called, my responsibility to self, and to society. I asked him what he meant by this, but he just smiled and said that I would need to work that one out for myself. He left a helpful trail, of course, breadcrumbs for my journey of survival.

When he was a boy, my father's father routinely told him that no two minds were alike. Each was a unique as a snowflake. My father, as was his way, considered this. At first it seemed to be true. How could it not be? One person was the sum of her genetic parts – the meeting of DNA through cell division. The very nature of our conception made it simply impossible for two minds to be alike. But as he witnessed the effects of the digital revolution, my father's certainties began to waiver. People, it seemed, were no longer capable of thinking for themselves. For the most part, he said, people were like a swarm of digital locusts devouring the cheap offerings of the internet, what he called the World Wide Wasteland. Information was consumed and regurgitated without analysis. Fiction became fact simply through its repetitive retelling. Collaboration was the act of unquestioning consumption. In the age of diversity and inclusion, diversity of thought waned, and inclusion came to mean unquestioning agreement with the philosophy of the moment.

Father died before the world he knew became truly terrifying. Of course, artificial intelligence was around when he was alive, but it was still early days. In the years after he died, its operability increased a thousandfold. Pictures were able to be manufactured (sometimes deep fakes they were called), events contrived but

most alarmingly, original thought largely destroyed. Based on decades of being fed digital and meta-information, many humans (d)evolved such that the ability to critically evaluate information was lost. Generations and societies became monochrome, manipulated and subjugated. Democracies fell by the wayside. Dictators, oligarchs and billionaires controlled the world, its resources and most of the people in it.

I say most of the people. There are some who remain on the outskirts. Those who still value and practice independent thought and clarity of thinking. Those who will not accept that all minds can and must be alike. I am one of them. I regard this as my responsibility to self and to society. I follow my father's breadcrumbs and continue to fight the good fight. I am regarded as a terrorist. I am dangerous they say. And they are right. I am dangerous. I am a girl who can think for herself. I am a girl who will always evaluate and analyse. I am a girl who will not be subdued and told to run with the herd. I am my father's daughter.

Vellichor

By Jasmine Keenan (Year 11)

**Winner of the Senior Dalton Essay Prize 2022,
celebrating 100 years of Dalton: "No Two Minds are Alike"**

Vellichor. An invented word, a pseudo-word if you will, which finds no sufficient translation in the English language. Defined truthfully, it is *the pensive nostalgia and temporality of used bookstores*. A shared solace in the pages yellowed by hours of intimate study and frayed under surging desires to know their end; a universal comfort in the sweet, musky smell of peculiar worlds suspended in time and gathering dust.

Perhaps, you slide your fingertips between the grooves of broken spines. Trace the golden lettering of deified authors whose word you trust long before first encounter. Choose to open the book, and you seat yourself to dine, to feast upon venerated intellect, with the greatest minds of ages passed. The room is loud and the voices are many and you hear your thoughts, meticulously crafted though they were, dance off of other tongues.

In the antiquated bookshop your modern word floats alongside the Romantics and twists under a Modernist candour - but to no avail. The shelves are full. Époques of literary cultivation, already scoured for their riches, surround you. Look closely and your revolutionary ideas have already arisen. Characters and stories that you conjured up in guarded silence have been mumbled into ink that dried long ago. It becomes clear that down the literary canon, great springs of influence have trickled into poisonous subtleties. Silent boundaries, suggestions, cornerstones, for your beliefs. It is an inheritance of thought; one which French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) illuminated under his structuralist theory of mythology which proposed myth as a foundational language.

Leaf through the pages studied since the empires of Ancient Greece and Rome. Insulated by unassuming leather jackets, these grand tales of Gods and war, these legends of love exalted by tragedy, establish the primitive fundamentals of humanity. The myth therefore gives birth to an "intellectual impulse", Strauss offered, which shall be carried through time, by imitation or extension, until "it is

exhausted". Though the myth and its "linguistic ground" remain structured, Levi-Strauss introduced mythology's concomitant 'spiral growth' in which its timeless principles ever flow down tributaries of derivative thought. Watch as patterns weave through the stacks of books which encircle you. Strum the invisible thread that runs up infinite bookshelves - it ripples through time itself.

You are complicit in this cosmic network of thought, there is no denying. Consciously, or not, you are in constant consumption of another's novelty; directly or indirectly; in its pure form, or diluted by the inspired and appropriation. Before you lies a labyrinth of artwork bound by the cyclical relationship between the craftsman and his apostles. You question your mind's ability to think originally for your epiphanies are anchored to a catalogue of mastery. Yet the construction of the literary canon itself, the backbone of literature, elucidates the reciprocity between imitation and innovation. With a canon being established by the emulation of nonconformist aspects that authors introduce, the ancient literary theorist Quintillian inadvertently assimilated the canon with modern accounts of cultural evolution - dependent upon this very deviation. Like sequences of DNA, the survival of the mind's creations relies upon emulation, but it is the imprecise imitation which inaugurates the new. Our minds are interconnected within the genealogy of literature, but they are not confined; not condemned to homogenous thought.

Look up at the Greats and the quieter voices of their companions, encased in immortal bookshelves. Let their words always remember human touch. Hold tight in your grasp all that they have to offer; but toy with it, torture it, manipulate it into obscurity. Now, you must take it to the blank page and make it your own.