

HORNSBY GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL
2019

Burning Bright is the annual publication of Hornsby Girls High School students' writing.

It celebrates the creativity, passion and versatility of our students and we hope that you will enjoy reading it.

Thank you to Penelope Brown and Lisa Schinckel in Year 9 for their beautiful cover design.

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Editor: Janet Walker

Year 7 Writing

Winners of the Old Girls' Union Writing Competition

Rachel Gibson and Alice Tan

KEEP FLYING

By Rachel Gibson

Everyone knew she was there. They just never really paid attention to her. Never asked her name or even talked to her. Everyone saw her - no one noticed her. Except me. I'd see her every lunch, her waterfall of long, dark hair swaying as she walked, no, *floated* to sit beneath the welcoming branches of the willow tree.

For the first few days since she arrived, everyone stared at her large, bug-like eyes, enlarged even more so by her thick glasses. Everyone whispered about her odd clothing, the way she would close her eyes and just sit there with a small smile flitting across her face. Then a new boy arrived, and everyone completely forgot she existed. I was one exception. I kept seeing how she always knew the answers, but never put up her hand. I kept seeing how beautiful her smile was, how it lit up her face and put dimples in her cheeks. So, I finally worked up the courage to go talk to her.

As I approached her, I felt nervous, but somehow her presence helped calm the roaring waves inside me. The girl looked up from her book with a small smile and gestured to the patch of grass next to her. Sitting there I felt big and clunky, as she seemed to almost float as she sat. I finally spoke.

"I've been watching you, you know?" I mentally face planted, my face red as a tomato. Now I sounded like a total creep. "I mean... uh... I've noticed - I've noticed how amazing you are." Great. Just great. Now she must've thought I was in love with her. But, to my relief, the girl smiled.

"Thanks," she said, her voice carrying on the breeze, a gentle, melodic sound. "That's really nice of you to say."

I looked up at her and tentatively smiled back. We stared into each other's eyes, a magical moment occurring. We were both silent, as if in a deep trance...until a branch whacked my face. We looked at each other, surprised, before immediately collapsing into fits of laughter, doubling over before gasping for air. Once we both had oxygen in our lungs, I put on a straight

face and held out my hand for her to shake. "Greetings my lady," I said in a posh voice, "I am Sir Jonathan, Annoyer of Trees. And you are?"

"Lady Hayley, at your service." We shook hands before giggling again.

That was how I met my best friend.

Over the next few weeks we did everything together, especially when the school holidays rolled around. We would explore the town, go on bushwalks, put on plays, make brownies or even study. However, as school started again, I noticed that Hayley was getting paler and more tired. The crashing waves I hadn't felt in so long were slowly resurfacing. I was worried about Hayley - something was up.

She didn't come to school the next day. When I asked, the receptionist told me she had gone to have a doctor's appointment. That made the waves rougher.

Hayley wasn't there the day after, either. The receptionist said she had gone to hospital to have some scans done. A storm was beginning to rage in my stomach, my worries being tossed like a ship on the sea.

That night we got the call that set off a tornado of fear in my mind.

Hayley had cancer.

I visited her every single day after that.

Monday, I went in and she looked tired but mostly her usual self. It was distressing and saddening to see her hooked up to so many machines; confined to a bed for the majority of the day.

Tuesday, to my dismay, she was sleeping when I got there

Wednesday she was paler and weaker.

Thursday - her once beautiful voice barely a whisper.

But Friday, oh Friday, was the worst of all. On Friday her hair - her beautiful shining carpet of hair, the hair that framed her freckles perfectly, the hair that was always straight, the hair I loved - began to fall out. I ran into Hayley's arms, burying my head in her shoulder. She ran her fingers through my locks as I hugged her tight. "Shh," she soothed, "It's going to be all right." But it wasn't all right. It hurt me so much to see my best friend so small, so weak, so alone.

"How do you know?" I asked her. "How do you know it's going to be all right?" She smiled and lifted my head from her chest.

“That picture over there. That’s how I know.” I followed her eye-line and saw where she was looking - a picture of multiple kites, all flying in the sky. “My parents and I moved around a lot. I’ve been to many schools. And every time I changed schools, I would close my eyes and pretend I was flying. I could soar away from my troubles. I think I am a lot like a kite. I love to fly, to be free, to run, to dance, to laugh. That is when I feel like I’m flying. Sure, the wind might not be blowing right now, but someday it will, and then I’ll be flying again.”

I smiled, but inside I was still worried. The doctors told me she was getting better, but I knew my friend. She was getting so frail and weak, and soon all her hair was gone, too. She had to wear a beanie to keep her head warm. There were increasing dark circles under her eyes, but through all of it, she kept smiling, kept believing she would fly again.

A few weeks after she had told me about the kites, she whispered to me as I was leaving. “Keep flying Jonathan. For me, for you. No matter what happens, keep flying.” At the time I was confused, but now I know why she told me that - she knew she was going to die.

Hayley passed away the next morning.

I knew as soon as Mum picked up the phone. I was sad, so sad, but I knew wherever Hayley was, she was flying free now, high above us. As I sat on my bed, silent tears blurring my vision, I knew what Hayley would’ve wanted me to do. She would’ve wanted none of my tears to be wasted on her, for me to move on and keep flying. And I will someday. But there was one thing I had to do as a reminder to me, her, the world, of her laugh, her smile and most of all, her resilience.

I flew a kite for Hayley.

SOUL PATH

By Alice Tan

James had never believed in magic until his mother told him he was cursed. Even at six years old, his childish mind didn't believe it, refused to. Then she led him outside to the garden, then to the pathway. He remembered asking what the pathway had to do with this curse, and his mother had shaken her head sadly. To him the garden was a place full of mysteries, a story lurking behind every tree, under every stone. He had frolicked there many times, dancing through the grass, the sun on his face. But his favourite was the pathway. He loved skipping through the pathway that wound through their garden. He would walk there every day, while his mother watched. Dainty fairy lights were strung through the trees lining the path, and cobblestones paved the way.

The path was his sanctuary. When he was upset because he lost a toy, he would run to the path and wander for hours on end. There were times where she would chase him through the garden and he would run onto the pathway. She would stop at the edge, her feet centimetres away from the pavement. Sometimes she would laugh and feign tiredness, but James noticed the fear laced in her voice and the uncertainty in her eyes. He didn't know what she was afraid of.

Now, he knew.

On the dawn of his sixth birthday, his mother had sat him down and told him of the curse that lay on his soul. While she told him, a crease appearing between her eyebrows, he could feel a burden settling onto his shoulders, and unease filled his conscience.

"There's no need to worry," his mother said, forcing a tight smile.

His eyes drifted to the window, and he bit back a cry of surprise. The fairy lights were gone. Instead, metal lamp posts lined the path.

"Ah... I see it has already changed." His mother sighed and, grasping his hand, she led him outside. Collapsing onto the grass, he closed his eyes and fought back tears.

He couldn't stop them falling.

* * *

She watched the roses bloom in the darkness, suddenly making the dark path more cheerful. A breeze blew the sweet scent her way. She wondered what was making James so happy. She remembered when thunder shook the garden's walls, and leaves yellowed and wilted. She remembered when sunlight would filter through the trees while rain splattered the pavement outside. Those were times when he was happy or sad. Unlike her, he let his emotions run

wild, while she contained them inside her head, forcing them down. She remembered feeling the weight lift from her shoulders, letting her soul free. She remembered and couldn't forget.

* * *

James felt as if he was being bound to the path, his emotions reflecting the appearance. He felt chained. He couldn't think freely. His soul was lashed to the unyielding rocks of his fate. Even at sixteen, his thoughts would constantly wander to the path, and anger built up inside of him. The path saw more rain than sunshine.

His grades dipped lower and lower, scraping rock bottom of the class. The anger inside him mounted.

Storming into the house, he thundered his way to his room and slammed the door. He could hear his mother pounding up the stairs, asking, always asking. He could hear the rain pattering on the window. He could feel the anger threatening to rise out of him.

"Go away!" he yelled, and his mother stopped knocking.

The rain fell harder, thunder rolling across the household. Lightning cracked like a whip, blinding him. Clapping his hands over his ears, he fought to block out the noise. He was fighting against his conscience. He writhed in agony, trying to break free of the curse. He needed peace. Silence.

Staggering to his feet, he wrenched the door open and shoved past his mother. He grabbed an umbrella and raced down the stairs. He needed to get to the path. The path, the path. The din inside his head grew as he stepped outside, and stumbled to the path. It rose to a cacophony, and with one last burst of strength, he stepped onto the path. The noise ended abruptly, and he was left in silence.

His sanctuary. He had found his peace.

Gentle rain pattered onto the slick stones, and he opened his umbrella. Then he started walking. He savoured the silence and drank it up hungrily.

Then he heard footsteps. Soft at first, then they grew louder. He whirled to find his mother standing there, her eyes pleading for him to come back.

He turned and kept walking, leaving his mother in a stunned silence. The dim lights lining the path went out.

Except for one.

He turned and kept going. The rain went on. It didn't want to stop. He didn't want to stop either. The lone light dimmed to a faint glow, until finally, it blinked off.

He felt his soul sliding into the grips of Death, and he let himself go.

* * *

She fell to her knees, agony ripping through her body. Pain clouded her vision, and she felt the burden shift onto her shoulders once more.

She knew the darkness took him. That he had more hatred than love.

She knew he was gone. Her nightmare had turned to a reality.

James had walked the Soul Path.

YEAR 7 POETRY

SANCTUARY OF DREAMS

By Saachi Singh

In a far-off land
Where the birds sing songs and the trees rustle
Lives a boy.
Well, he doesn't *really* live there,
He lives in a suburban house just like you and me
But the forest is his home.
In this land, the squirrels quarrel with each other
And the hummingbirds greet the boy like a long-lost friend
He says hello to the cream-coloured bunnies and they hop along.
The forest - it gleams in the dawn light
Calling him into its beating heart
It's a place of magic
Where the deer leap into the sunset
And the shrubs rustle in the wind.
The boy hops from one ancient, lichen-encrusted stone to another
And inhales the earthy aroma.
He admires the sunset, woven of lights,
where the mountain-tops weave through the mist.
The sanctuary of his dreams.

SHE WHO FOLDS

By Georgia Cleverly

She walks, heads turning,
Her past, a never-ending shadow.
They stare. Does she have no friends?

All they see are scars.
A scarred, lonely person.
They see her fully black eye,
and avoid.
They see the dark clouds of her thoughts,
and shiver.

But,
they don't see why,
they don't see the ashes,
the sadness,
the pain,
the loneliness.

But,
most of all,
all they see is her shell,
her appearance.
like most of society, they judge people by looks,
not who she truly is.

They don't see the true Amity.
The one who fights.
and then.
folds.

She folds paper.
paper, her only friend.
She may be alone in the world
but she still fights.
and then folds.

She would rather walk alone in darkness than follow anyone else's shadow - R.G Moon.

Year 8 Writing

Winners of the Old Girls' Union Writing Competition

Lucinda Eldridge and Yaorong Lin

AN OFFER TO DIE FOR

By Lucinda Eldridge

Mr Nottingham was dead.

He was also bothered for many reasons, aside from the fact he was aboard a seemingly endless train journey to approximately nowhere. His port-wine gingham business shirt clung to his sweaty back like a child to their mother on their first day of preschool. He also had a rather perfect hole left from where he had been impaled by a telegraph pole.

"What a good job I did of death," he smiled to himself proudly. Death was still fresh in his mind. After all, it was only the previous day he had been kicking around wasting time on earth. And now he was here.

Here happened to be a strange place. People wonder how their souls are picked up and transported to 'His Port of Afterlife Immortal.' They spend years philosophically coming up with trivial answers, to no avail. In fact, this role is fulfilled by none other than 'His Divine Steam-Train,' a high-speed engine that travels all around earth. Mr Nottingham was aboard 'His Divine Steam-Train' at that point in time.

Alfred Nottingham wondered where he was going. The train was suspiciously empty, until a portly gentleman, who had obviously spent too much time in the sun waddled in.

"Proof of death," an accent halfway between Kiwi and regional Welsh came from somewhere deep inside her chest.

"Sorry?" Alfred was quite taken aback by her question, and he half-raised both his eyebrows until they sat square in the middle of his crinkled forehead.

"Ah. I see. Good job there, bro. Straight through the heart, I suppose?" The woman seemed interested in Alfred's telegraph-pole puncture mark.

"Yes. Quite painful, actually." He drew a gloating smirk.

"Oh, I bet it was. You know, we don't get many deaths by injury these days. Not thanks to modern medicine. Nice to see even the medics fail sometimes. Anyway, cheerio, and here's

hoping He'll guide you to Heaven's doorstep, eh?" The woman leaned in closer and whispered something about a disguised bell. At least that's what he thought he heard. He wasn't actually listening, as he was distracted by the woman's odd footwear choice. With that, she spun on her chintzy heels, scribbled something on a translucent PVC clipboard, and trotted off to the next carriage.

As the last of her thumping footsteps faded, Alfred Nottingham heard the screaming and squealing of train brakes. As it came to a halt, his hands began to melt from view. A mere 4.37 seconds later, the rest of Alfred Nottingham had similarly evaporated and reappeared in a completely new location.

The new location looked remarkably like an airport. Except the destinations weren't cheap little holidays. They were forever. Humans of all shapes and sizes bustled about nattering to one another. It was not dissimilar to earth. However, everyone here was dead, and they were looking for a place to rest.

"Come one, come all! It's the most fun of all! We party all day, and every Friday night! Conditions may apply!" A joyous voice sung above the seething mass of people, straight into Mr Nottingham's ears. He wandered over to find the voice belonged to a tall man, who he guesstimated to be middle-aged. He was leaning on a blood-red door.

It was then that he noticed them.

There were no terminals, no metal detectors. (Except the occasional dodgy-looking man Alfred could have sworn was x-raying his pockets for coins.) Instead there were doors. There were so many doors, all leading to unique afterlives. But the one the unnaturally tall man had propped himself up against interested him greatly.

"Why hello, sir! Forget about those other afterlives, ours is the best! As I was saying before, we party a lot. Party, party, party. That's us! By the way – my name is Idvel!" Mr Nottingham thought this was a promising candidate, even though it was the first afterlife he had seen. It was a bit like booking a holiday with the first travel site you googled. But this wasn't a petty excursion away from home. Mr Nottingham truly had no concept of eternity.

He noticed things were moving behind the doorway Idvel was standing in front of. There were many people doing tricks, dancing and hanging from trapezes swirling through the air. They looked to be having a jolly good time, and he had a great desire to join them.

In his whiz of excitement about how good his afterlife was going to be, Alfred had failed to notice three foolproof clues that something was amiss.

1. An overly blithesome man advertising an afterlife is never good.
2. Blood red surrounded by cracked concrete with flickering lights and an overall dingy atmosphere clearly indicates the situation is not great.
3. People hanging from things aren't happy people, even if they are already dead.

"I'm in. Is everything you've advertised actually included?" Alfred appeared to be at Flight Centre booking a trip to Fiji.

"Of course, sir, I'll book you in right away! We are just perfect for people like you! People who have led interesting lives on earth. People who have made the most of their time, and let nothing get in their way. Even if it meant.... disposing of a few along the way."

Mr Nottingham winced at the word 'disposing.' He now knew what lay beyond that doorway. The woman on the train had not said 'hell.' She had said something remarkably similar. For, in truth, Alfred Nottingham was not a good man. He had broken possibly all 10 of 'His Divine Decrees' and had disposed of two people in his life. He was also not the world's best problem solver, and this had left him in quite the predicament.

"Sorry... is – is this Hell?" Alfred enquired in a strangely hopeful yet pleasingly innocent tone. Idvel's mask of a sunny disposition was yanked off, revealing a pair of ivory cheeks bleeding rose.

"No... You don't understand... We party... so much fun... See the people behind the doorway? You will be them. I have already made your booking, and He is waiting for you."

"No, no! Thank goodness! Imagine spending eternity with those do-gooders from Heaven! I think I can get accustomed to death here. At least it won't be... monotonous."

And Alfred Nottingham stepped into the loving arms of Hell's eternal circus.

[a boy and a girl who grew up together with a *platonic* friendship]

By Yaorong Lin, 8K

The flowerbuds appeared on the first day of spring.

Puo noticed first, as she swept the leaf-strewn courtyard. She came running, faster than I'd ever seen her, into our dining room. I was serving Mama porridge.

Puo's voice seemed to shatter as she spoke. "Flowerbuds." She panted, from the run. "Flowerbuds, on the vine!"

Mama's spoon fell with a clatter. A spot of breakfast comes flying onto my coat - it is ignored. I've already left, leaping, vaulting, *sprinting* to reach the wall. Hoping that Puo saw wrong.

The first thing I notice as I reach the outer wall is the striking red. The ivy crawls slowly, covering the white-washed bricks with carnelian leaves. Then comes the pink. Tender pink buds, dotting the vine, predicting the ruination of my siblings.

Yet the lower half of the wall remains unobstructed. While the wall lies bare of the vine, Yen and Zhu will not come home. They needed more time, and a way out of this danger predicted by the ivy.

A stray cat turns the corner, spooking me. It rocks on its paws, looking like death.

I smile at it. Time they need, so time they will get.

Throughout the night, auras of energy flow from the hut in the centre of the lotus pond. Seeing the urgent sign on Zhu's vine, Puo understood. She works her craft as the moon glides across the night sky.

To pass the long hours, I try to skip stones, but the pebbles get stuck on the lotus leaves, and I sleep against the bamboo grove.

When the rooster calls to the morning, I wake. My first move is to clean the dew from my hair and to make some tea. When I look in the cupboard there is only herbal tea, so I make it for Puo instead.

Pushing gently open the door of Puo's hut, I see her first, snoring against grey knots of hair. Bony fingers were wrapped around her work; a bronze statue, its life gone to guard over my siblings. The tea is left on her table, I leave to pray for my siblings' second chance.

Each spring, more white brick disappears to be replaced by flaming leaves. Yen directs her fighters well, and Zhu helps her, overseeing from atop a warhorse. At least, that is the story brought back by the merchants and salesmen. They scoff when I tell them their true names, the names I used to call them to eat, to play and in farewell. On their birthdays, we burn incense and pray.

The seventh winter of their absence, Mama suffered a bleeding inside her head. Whether from the biting cold, which kept its grip perhaps just to see the *mei* blossoms, or from the stress of two children out of sight, it was not known.

Even now, her care holds much of mine and Puo's attention so that we have time for little else. Her hair has dulled, dark bags are under her eyes. I remain merry and grateful for her survival.

Sometimes Puo gives me breaks. Not long, but enough for tea, or a few stale potato scones. We are beyond exhausted, between Mama's care and upkeep of the house.

On the first day of spring, she spoke.

"Qin Mei, let me see the vine."

At once, I was both startled and gladdened. For the last month I had neglected the ivy, discouraged by the slowness of growth it had shown in the last year and other affairs. The war was succeeding, quelling some doubts about flowers, or flowerbuds.

Pushing Mama gently into a small sac, I lifted her onto my back and struggled to the garden. Even that short distance made me fight for breath, and I longed for my childhood athleticism once more.

I set Mama down, asked for a reprieve (granted), then walked slowly to the outer wall. My steps were still sluggish, but I was motivated by my curiosity and concern. If I found flowers...

What I found was more significant than flowers.

My laughter disbelieving, I skimmed a hand over the ivy, the plant which now covered the wall in its red leaves, each fluttering like a feather in the spring breeze. My eyes closed. They would be back soon.

A few days later, I check the vine. As I frown at the now-covered wall, I hear a slight cough behind me, and turn. A man stands awkwardly.

"Is... is this the Hua residence?" His voice sounded weary. I can see a carriage behind him.

When I nodded, he waved the vehicle over. Some men dressed in full armour eased themselves out, and my chest squeezed.

It was very possible for Yen and Zhou's enemies to have found us. After the first month or so of beating, Puo had put an end to my blabbing, but word always leaked, no matter what you did.

As I stepped back, ready to run Puo, I saw a girl-ish silhouette in the carriage, and paused. Straighter hair. Darker skin. But the same hands, wiser eyes.

I would know my sister anywhere.

My call was loud and spontaneous. "Yen!"

The girl turned from conversing, and raised a hand, smiling. "Qin Mei. Good to see you."

Soon the carriage was gone, leaving Yen here. We talked, her with tales of war, sabotage and cunning, I with tales of the fish, bamboo and Mama. We agreed to keep quiet, to give the best surprise.

But when Yen crouched to surprise Mama, smiling up at me, I saw a hilt stick of her coat. I had been focused on her face, but now I pulled at the hilt, drawing out a length of steel I had heard about by the survivors running from the East.

A dao. Said to be wielded by the general, fighting in the war.

I stare. And see Yen's face change, shadowed with guilt, eyes shining, a clear trail working its way down her travel-grimy cheek.

"I'm sorry, Qin. But-"

I back away, the blood in my head taking away all other noise. My foot hits a root, and I trip backwards, too late for Yen's reaching hands.

My back crashes against the bamboo stalks, shaking them. As I gasp for breath, I see Yen's eyes trail upwards, so I look there too.

The wind picks up. My hands pluck a falling blossom from the air, and watch as petals descend from the bamboo canopy.

Jingyi Qiao won the junior division of the Mary Armstrong Public Speaking Competition. She spoke on the topic: “You are only given a little spark of madness. You mustn’t lose it.”

A LITTLE SPARK OF MADNESS

By Jingyi Qiao

You’ve only been given a little spark of madness, don’t lose it. This is a very big statement, very loaded and in order to fully understand it we need to ask some question about ourselves.

So, question 1: what is our mind?

Essentially our mind is what our brain generates to produce and store thoughts. It’s subject to much change, when we learn and when we think, especially when we are very young. You see, children are born thinkers, they question everything and develop their own ideas about their world. Here’s the thing: they are born into a world where others have been thinkers before them and those adults, yeah, they got a head start. They have the experience and the knowledge and then they educate. Children stop thinking and start learning, not from their own trials and errors but from that of another. They stop trying in order to discover. Because trying means failing and society doesn’t allow failure. It creates a locked box around our minds, walls paved with rights and wrongs, until we stop thinking, until we are all the same.

Now you might be wondering, “How does any of this relates to our spark of madness?” So let’s move on to question 2: What is madness?

It is a difficult question to answer but my interpretation of madness is that it’s the key to the locked box of our mind. It’s a small remnant of curiosity and innovation from when we still thought for ourselves, because remember, we are born thinkers. We all want success, that’s why you’re here and in our limited society by which I mean in our school, we are given the same intellectual restrictions. What sets us apart is our madness. Or more importantly perhaps whether or not we lose it.

Now for question 3: how do you lose your spark?

Madness sits within each of us, but not everyone has the courage to find it. Because madness is wonderfully, brilliantly, terrifying. It takes us beyond our walls, out of our comfort zone and makes us do things against everything we’ve been taught. It makes us unlearn the world in a way, but only so that we can rethink and form our own opinions. Unfortunately, it’s a difficult battle to reach your spark, it’s only too easy to sink away into your walls, and that’s when we lose our spark. We lose the only thing that sets us apart and is our key to success.

Your madness is a beautiful thing, the fact that it still exists is a testament to its strength. So please don't lose it, start thinking for yourself. Because remember, we are born thinkers and we are born mad.

YEAR 8 POETRY

MY GRANDMAS

By Deljin Javadi

I see my grandmothers(s) every day
Which doesn't make sense, if you think about it
12, 903 kilometres away,
Yet I see my grandmother with my own two eyes at any moment.

In cool yoghurt, and steaming rice
In a flower, a dress, a pair of warm eyes
In a doll, in a fabric, in a quick smell
A tasty chunk of lavashak, in a faint morning bell.

Memories of her float across my mind
She is sweet, she is emotional, she is every type of kind
She takes me to the store
She offers me the world
The smell of pastries
In the air swirled
When she held my hand
When she brushed my hair
When she helped me stand
When she held me in warm care.

I see her everyday.
I miss her still.

GRANDMOTHERS

By Sandra Tong

She's always delighted to hear me on the phone,
"Mahmah" I would say as she happily laughs.
While she's always been a little fierce,
Her raspy voice is filled with warmth to me,
And never fails to tell me to eat more than enough.

As the years slip past quicker than expected,
So do the familiar words as her mother tongue returns.
But her unchanging fashion,
Being hit with distinct scent of her home,
These comforts won't escape from me.

My "pohpoh" on the other hand,
Always ready with small gifts for me,
Even if I'm a little old for hair clips and pens.
Her hands craft the best kinds of treats,
And beckons for us all to eat.

Her hands are wrinkled but soft,
They hold my own firmly,
While she points out how I've grown.
Although we begin to drift a little,
I won't lose my grip on the memories.

YOUR YOUTH SHINES THROUGH

By Shirley Wang

Though you may be old and wrinkly
The beauty of your youth and compassion shines through

It shines through the way you tell me to get up
‘It’s late’.

It shimmers through when I see you making food,
more like culinary creations! Sweet, savoury, sounds superb to me!
It shines through the memories of you, using that strange stick for laundry, or
Just for my favourite shirt

It sparkles through your voice
Deep yet sweet, complimenting your laugh
Like the sun, bright and cheeky
It shines through your persistent struggle with english
‘Abcd’ or ‘can help me?’
Of course I’ll help

Or at least I’ll try,

I’ll try to wake up early,
and help you with the laundry,
I’ll use that stick to hang up the clothes
I’ll help you make food,
though bitter and bland, I’ll try
I’ll try visiting you more
More often than I had tantrums when I was little.

I’ll help you with English; E,f,g,
and whenever I’m being stubborn, frustrated or angry
I’ll think of the glimmer, the shimmer, the sparkle,
No, the shine
of your youth and compassion.
Because I think it inspires me to be a better person grandma.

LAOLAO

By Margaret Zhao

Your sturdy legs bent as you pick away
the washed up jewels from the
lapping water, to weave into crowns
fit for mermaids or princesses
or just little girls. My laolao,
hair black as night and curls
strong as storms, soft wrinkles and
steady voice weaving stories of dusk;

Now you stare back on a chair
in front of blazing fire, waxen hair limp,
you stare into the necklace of
seashells I hold in my grown hands
and your head turns to watch the
dance of smoke as they
chase and laugh and
slowly fade
away.

MOTHER'S DISH

By Savini Ratnayake

A generous glug of oil
burning blue beneath your biggest bowl
red onion, green chilli, curry leaves and ginger of hazel row
thin and great, stir fast, how long? Enough. You'll know.

Now veggies, fry until soft
Carrot, cabbage and spring onion tied in a knot
Whisk eggs, sloppy and sunburnt, dribble a lot
Add the chicken curry. How to make chicken curry?
That's another dish. Today is *Curried Chicken Kottu*.
A spoon of sloppy curry sauce and stir
until all is binned. At last, add fried roti
strips and toss till fine.

A sprinkle of fried curry leaves and mustard seeds. Ask who wants to eat.
Don't forget the coconut sambal and curry sauce.
A pinch of lime, a snap of salt.
Eat now, while its hot.

DUMPLINGS FOR DINNER

By Elaine Qiao

Everyone does it a bit differently,
Each bowl of dumplings,
is a record of history,
a book written with the tears of laughter,
from a thousand family dinners
and a million specks of joy
lighting up in children's hearts

And now I sit where so many
Before me have sat
In front of my grandma
Pressing the little triangles of dough
Which she cut from the plump dove
Sitting under the shade of a cloth

Flour, like fine snow falls upon everything
I can almost hear each speck drift
Into my hair
Taste the light dust tickle my laughing throat

My chopsticks determine how much filling
In each little dove
Right in the centre
Then I fold and the pattern
Push, pinch, pinch, push, my hands are clumsy

I can almost taste it,
As we line them up like a spiral
Like a nest
Then we boil them
Stirring, perhaps singing

Then a plate with vinegar,
I see it in their eyes,
The anticipation as
As a jaded purse of soup burst upon their tongue
Then the reward for the patience

YOU ARE NEVER EMPTY

By Anna Cui

Preparation time:
time it takes to sigh

Ingredients:

- i) Cement and water
- ii) a wistful gush of wind
- iii) some coloured pebbles, stones and boulders
- iv) the smell of freshly cut grass

How to:

Gather bruised hands
bruised sounds
find spaces carved to weed out silences
Stitch a home out of cupped palms
Secrets make birdhouses heavier
so place ruby whispers in hollows
Find some dreams too unpeeled,
slightly soft on the inside
These will flutter out of chirps
In the end let it hang on your bone in here
you are never empty

LISTEN TO HIM

By Chloris Chiu

he was diagnosed
when he was 3, and when I was 7
Now **he** is 7 and I am 11
Wherever we go
on the streets,
in the grocery store,
in the park

People look at him
weirdly, almost
as if he doesn't belong
They look at him
Like he came from outer space
an alien perhaps
When he rages
People are frightened
Parents shield their child
away
as if afraid he will attack
People distance
Themselves
Away from him
But he's not dangerous
he's the kindest person I know

but others don't believe me.

It's not his fault
he can't control it
Some people say
They understand
what he is going through
what my family is going through
But they don't

I know they don't
Because if they did...
they would listen to him.

His particular type of autism
causes him to not be able to
speak properly,
join sentences, and
communicate with others.
But he tries so hard
to make people listen
and none of them do
except me.
And let me tell you
my brother is amazing
he has wonderful ideas to share
a whole new point of view
about the world around us
and it pains me to know that
what he tells me
won't go anywhere else
except for me.

only I can listen to him

but deep down
I know it's true
others can too
you just need to listen
like I do
but
sometimes I think
to myself
Do I really listen?
After all these years
Of caring for him,
maybe if I left him alone for a while
I could live my own life
Hang out with *my* friends
Do what / want.

But I can't.

I can't just leave him I can't just slowly drift away
If I do, all I feel will be
Guilt
and
Guilt.
He is my brother

He *is*
my friend
always.

It is my duty to care for him
and
Every time I think like this
I go find him
sit down with him
and *listen to him*

When people don't understand him
I tell them
Give him time...
The same words follow.
"I understand."
But you don't
You really don't
You can't fit in his shoes
You don't know what it is like
To be left alone

The truth is
I don't know either
I say I help him
I say I care for him
I say I help him fit in
I say I listen...
But am I just trying
To make him one of us?
When really he is just being
Himself?

According to Autism Spectrum Australia, autism affects at least 353, 880 people in Australia. These are the people out there that want someone to listen to them and to understand they are out there, waiting. Just listen.

TAKE A SECOND LOOK

By Chloris Chiu

The woman walks down the street, holding a new phone in one of her hands, another wrapped with a leather handbag. You walk pass and notice her loud voice when suddenly she trips over. Her phone flies out of her hands and cracks. She angrily mutters, and looks down to see what causes her fall. You see an old man squatted on the ground, with an overflowing and twisted beard while the wrinkles on his face show the evidence of time, his irregular teeth stained in aged yellow with ragged clothes barely covering his sand papered skin. You turn to the woman and see her face filled with utmost disgust. She glares at the old man and kicks him away with her high heels. Just another nameless face in this busy metropolitan city.

Sydney has a dirty secret which people blindly ignore. It is time to face reality: homelessness is a major issue for our society and the human race. The Australian Bureau of Statistics stated that in 2011 there were 105,237 people experiencing homelessness in Australia. Homelessness is an issue because it is a violation against Human Rights, and it is often belittled and misunderstood.

Human Rights are a luxury to homeless people. These men, women and even children are struggling and experiencing hunger and poverty in their everyday life. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Covenant on the Rights of the Child state that all humans have the right to a good education, health, security, privacy, freedom from discrimination, shelter and food. These are privileges that I am fortunate to have, having being born in the right time, and in the right circumstances. Yet there are many people out there that are living in less than human conditions. Humans must be able to live a good life, whether wealthy or poor. They should be treated as equals. Homeless people are mistreated most of the time by the majority of people, and that is what I would like to change in our community.

People often think that homeless people deserve the life they experience. When someone sees a homeless person, they think that they have wasted their money, and associate them with drugs and alcohol. Yes, part of the problem lies in drug abuse, but what people do not understand, is the big picture. Homelessness is a multifaceted issue according to AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services data collection (2011–12), which stated clearly that some undeniable causes include domestic violence, financial difficulties, mental illnesses, relationship breakdowns, and housing affordability crisis. By addressing these causes, it could help homeless people to achieve a better chance in life.

It is crucial that we believe we can help and make a difference, by simply starting to treat homeless people with respect. Once we start treating them with courtesy and human decency this will provide them with the positive attitude they need to reset their lives. I can see that one day when the prejudice is removed from the society and a more tolerant and understanding community is formed, we will not see homelessness on our streets anymore.

You look back at the old man, you are taken aback at his appearance, but you are even more taken aback by the woman's actions. Humans should never be treated that way, homeless or not. You walk over and you realise that everyone has a story, and that the old man has one too. He's just another face, but never judge people by their appearances and always take a second look.

Year 9 Writing

Winners of the Old Girls' Union Writing Competition

Polly Vollet and Alice Xie

THE HARVEST

By Polly Vollet

I take the bundle of wheat and set it aside. I pull back my scythe and cut through another row of grain. My work is quick. Efficient. Consistent. I've been working on this farm for over two years now. I tried to say no to that old farmer but the living are stubborn. Persistent.

Mechanical reapers had long replaced manual labour in this field. The old man only employed me as a last ditch effort to postpone his fate. So I stayed. And he let me stay.

But I don't mind too much. Wheat is easier to reap than souls. Wheat is light. Souls are weighed down by sorrow and human guilt. So I stayed.

I sit by his fire in the winter, eat with his family at night. None but he can see me; I am not there for them. To his grandchildren I am but a fast yet invisible worker in the fields, save a dark shadow behind the barn at night.

After the harvest was over, I sensed the old man knew what was to come. He knew what I was there for.

"Please! Just one more harvest!" pleaded the old farmer, on his knees, tears forming clean lines on his dirt cased skin. I pitied him. So I stayed.

But I should not have.

You see, this ground was not fit for me to walk on for one day, let alone two years. The solid ground turned to powdered dust and the old man wept.

When one of his grandchildren fell ill, he wept. "Please! Don't reap their souls! Please just stay for one, just one more harvest."

"So," I sighed, "if I may not reap your soul, or the souls of your own or the souls of your cattle, what must I do? I am a reaper, I must reap! If not your family, I will reap what I have continued to reap for the last two years." And the old farmer wept.

He wept when I reaped the spirit of his earth. He wept when the wind blew and dust buried his town and choked his cattle. He wept when his grandchildren were blinded and when they cried in hunger, the same way many of them cried in those days.

Years passed before I told the old man what must happen.

“Brother,” I told him, “I have worked in your fields for over four years, I have watched you struggle for your family and that’s why I stayed.”

The old man closed his weary eyes.

“But I have also watched over this town. I have watched many a family starve when the dust buried their cattle and tore apart their farms. Your grandchildren are blind and your town is ruined beyond repair. I came only for you. How many more must die in your stead?”

The old man wept but I knew he understood.

I took them all that night while they slept. I took the old man and the townspeople, even little sickly Isabelle.

His earth will heal. I made sure of that. But that town will forever be uninhabited. Families lie under dust, their houses decrepit and their souls in my back pocket.

I am not a monster. The farmer and I are almost one and the same. Contrary to popular belief our ideals do not define us. It is what we choose to do with these ideals that make us who we are. The old farmer did what he could to keep his family alive and well-fed. But still I must take them, for I have my own family to feed.

End of personal log #36174, 1934

FALSE HOPE: IDEALS

By Alice Xie

She woke to the first stillness in hours.

The lack of motion felt alien to her after finally being freed from the eternal jolting of the road. Everything was frozen, heated tar-like air bated, hypnotic drugged silence of midday mirror sooth, as she peeled her cheek from its imprint on the window and sat up.

First, she saw the other passengers.

Then she saw where the bus had stopped.

Then she saw the man.

Over the rigid motionless heads of the passengers, a black waxy silhouette stood, melting outline framed by the sunlight streaming through the broken-down door.

A soft crack of her chapped peeling lips. Then closed.

Hello. You. Yes, you who-

Fears of a disturbing the dead moment forced her words down, and the soft press of a-
is reading this right now as the-

Sticky hand, shuddering in spasms of the young child beside her.

Then, nails clawing in as the-

Words rearrange themselves before your eyes. Don't look away. Don't read ahead. Don't stop.

First shot rang.

Much better.

Apologies, introductions have never been my strong point. I find they are quite dull and anticlimactic, considering you already know all of us. Just bear with the formalities for a moment.

We are your demons. The ones who watch over your flicking flame of life and tease it with breaths, breezes, storms. The ones, standing behind, in front and within you. The ones who filter, morph and break your ideals through ash, smoke and sparks. Despite popular opinion, your ideals do not define you. It is what you choose to do with them that make who you are. Which, in most of your cases, is foolishly. It's ok, don't be ashamed, we don't mind. It's our favourite type of fun.

The air shattered.

Silence, in bullet shaped shards, stabbed themselves into people, irreversible, with every shot. He was doing it methodically. First the aisle seat. Then the window seat. Row by row. Front to back.

Back, to her.

Cold, amid the sweltering heat.

Amid the screams.

Amid the scrambling.

Amid the still flushed and warm bleeding out bodies.

Her eyes widened, as she ducked, compressing herself into the space between her seat, pushing, thrusting, scratching, snatching, grunting, grinding, person, person, person, fear, fear, fear.

Fear. He's the big figure facing you with a million faces, dancing, dipping, dripping in and out of sight. He's the one to clog your veins to constrict every heartbeat, to settle like charcoal in your lungs, to send clouds muddling your thoughts. Impervious. Irrational. Immovable. He's the one to let you build your own prison, chaining you down to the present, tainting your future a single darkening tenebrosity. He's the one to make monstrous masks over your ideals till they tremble and shatter.

He is the smoke to all the fires before.

Finger. Closing on her arm, small nails making crescent indents, small face contorted, begging. Help. She pauses in her scrabble for space, to compact, to hide, to save herself and pulls the child close.

Close, to feel her heart, a wild bird fluttering, her breath strained and soft, her heat and life and *potential*. Feels the child, still gripping onto her arm, hidden from view. Feels everything fall: life, memories weighed down and crushing rubble, sensations in torrents cascading around her ears, dreams gossamer thin in veils unravelling just out of reach.

For a heartbeat, she wonders.

Wonders if the child was worth it.

Wonders if trading her life like this was worth it.

Wonders if ideals of holding others before yourself were worth honouring at the price of her death,

Wonders if anything was worth anything. At all.

Regret. She's the slim silhouette standing slightly behind you. She's the one with spiderweb fingers, impossibly thin, twisting, entwining, picking, slowly through every memory, every hesitation, every lingering dream. Everything that had been and could have been. She settles, a fine powder, into every breath, every movement, every thought. She is the one to make sure every ideal has its scars.

She is the ashes of all your fires yesterday.

A shot.

Numb fingers prying the hand off her, squeezing.

Another shot,

Footsteps. Another shot.

Her eyes screwed shut waiting.

Then:

Light, sirens. Disbelief, relief.

Another figure, gun raised, in uniform, walks in.

Safety.

The policeman shouted something, the native tongue.

The terrorist stops.

Tilts his head, narrows his eyes.

More foreign words. Calm. Why?

Then, sickeningly, a smile splits open, like a grotesque scar, a crooked line across his face, jagged, with blood coloured edges.

So who am I?

Her breathing hitches as the policeman lifts the gun poised, finger over the trigger.

Shot.

I am the one who you think of as a friend.

The one who will be there for you when you're broken, beaten, battered, when your dreams got shattered and you got cut, when you flew too close to the sun and got burned. I am the one to hold you tight, wiping away your fears and lachrymose edges from your eyes, whisper sweet senseless things, press kisses and smiles over your wounds. I am the one who puts you back up even though I know the inevitable fall and the heat of the sun if you fly too high. The one who stops your flame from extinguishing.

I am the one who polishes your ideals and glosses them over to a shine.

I am the spark that resides within, who has been and always been there to prolong your suffering from within your very soul.

The bullet pierced the girl's head cleanly.

She slumps, limp, marionette doll with cut strings, still smiling at his uniform with relief, eyes stained glass windows with sunset and ideals dying embers behind them.

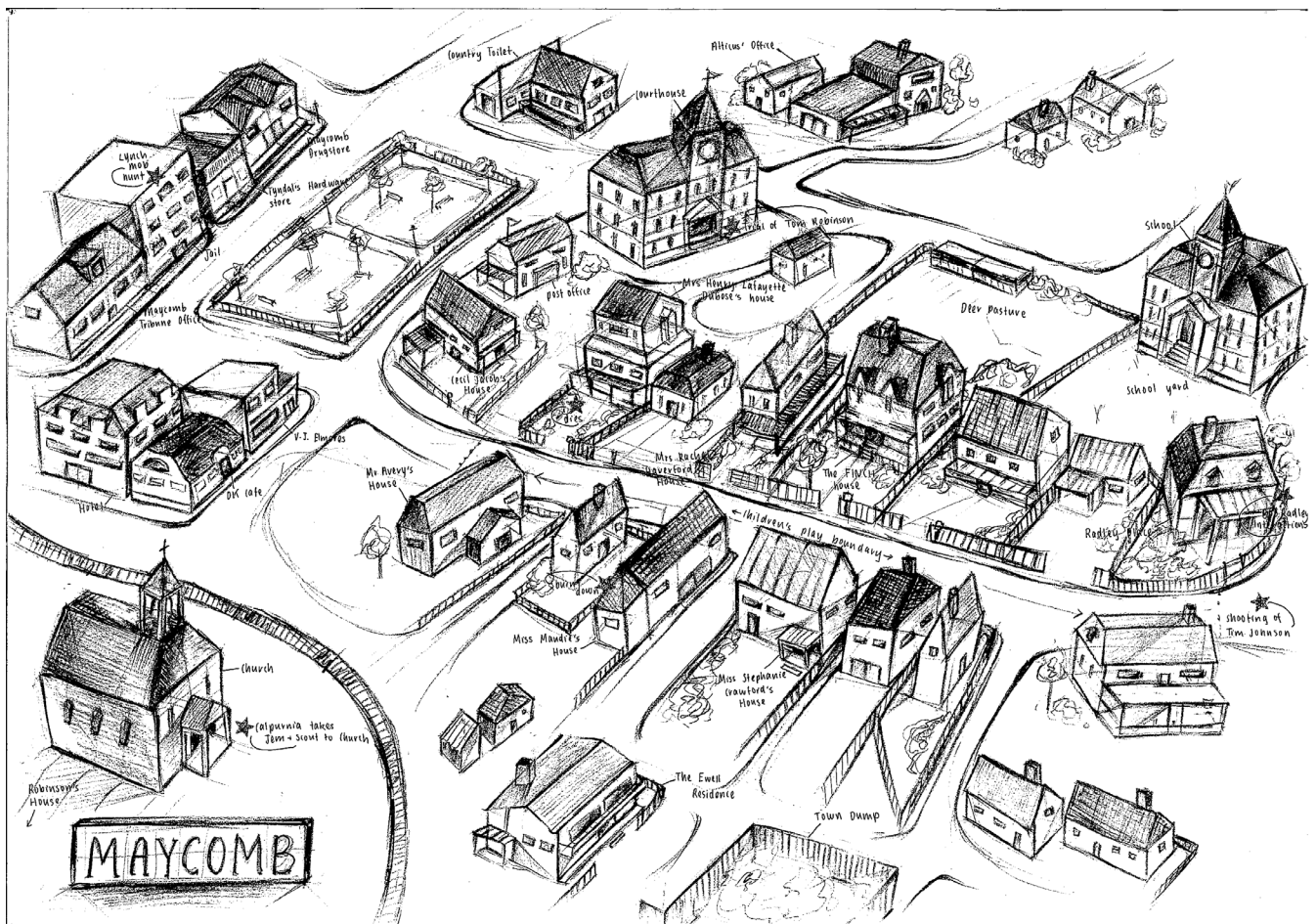
You call me

Hope.

Year 9 studied the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Sophie Li composed a visual representation of the town of Maycomb and Josie Kurnia wrote a piece of fan fiction from the perspective of the character Boo Radley.

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF MAYCOMB

By Sophie Li



BOO RADLEY

By Josie Kurnia

It is sunny outside. I can see this through the faint light behind the closed curtain. When you've been locked up inside your house for 15 years, it is easy to tell the weather without actually seeing it.

Fifteen years... time goes by slowly.

But I suppose it has always gone slowly for me, hasn't it? Not that it matters - being a Radley means we keep to ourselves and we close the blinds and shutters every Sunday. I only knew my older brother, my mother and my father.

Fifteen years ago, when I met that Cunningham, we had fun. I felt what it was like to hang around the town and to be gossiped about - after all, I wasn't deaf and I could hear what everyone else was saying about me. While my family was secluded on Sundays, me and the Cunninghams would ride the bus to Abbottsville to see the pictures. Sometimes we hung around the barbershop. Oh, and the feeling of whiskey at the Dew-Drop Inn & Fishing Camp. It was good until Mr Conner arrested us, but not without a fight - we were the closest thing to a gang that Maycomb had ever known. Nevertheless, despite our avid fighting, we were locked up in the outhouse. We were charged for disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, assault and battery, and cussing in front of a woman. The judge decided to send us to the state industrial school, but my father decided the opposite. He promised the judge that if I were released, I wouldn't cause any more trouble in Maycomb - and right he was. I often wondered what happened to the Cunninghams after they got sent to the state industrial school - the state industrial school was the best education in the state, so they must have done well with their life. Not like me, wandering the vast terrain that is my home.

And so we fast forward to present time, where a new group of troublemakers have arrived. Jean Louise and Jeremy. I have vaguely seen Atticus Finch scold the siblings for approaching my home, but if I were outside my home, I would not be scolding them. Instead, I would be standing there, staring at them until they decide to run away. It is the most that a man that has been locked up for fifteen years can do. The faint sounds of the children are unfamiliar to me, but it is refreshing. My only hope as a locked up man is to hope that they keep coming. As an attempt to start a friendship with the siblings, I gave them presents. Not face to face obviously, but I put them in the tree. I knew they would see it. When that house was on fire, I put a blanket around Jean Louise because it was incredibly cold. These children are not just Atticus' children, but my own as well. That is what I like to think. So what was I supposed to do on the day I saw Bob Ewell try to murder my children? I saw him ambush them. I did what any parent does. I protected them. Though I don't have much experience with children, I tried my best. I hoped Scout wouldn't see me stab Bob Ewell - she's too young to see that. I knew Jem was unconscious, so I took him to Atticus so that he would be safe. I knew Scout would be fine though - I had observed her enough times to know that she

could handle herself, especially after I had stabbed Bob Ewell. Inside Atticus Finch's house, I watched over Scout sit my Jem's bed with a tinge of fondness in my heart. They were safe.

I've been inside for a very long time. So long that all I can remember is the inside of my home. But I certainly don't mind it when Scout and Jem are around.

YEAR 9 POETRY

As part of their study of poetry this year, Year 9 wrote their own sonnets.

PETRARCHAN SONNET

By Dawn Lai

On days as such when the sky seems to glow
I turn my eyes to the heavens above
My mind begins to wander; thinking about the people I love
And cast my gaze upon the spring meadow

Later, I dream of a distant echo
Wrapped in the still embrace of the night,
That same feeling of warmth slipping on like a glove
One might dare to wonder if it's not all just a shadow

Curious, I ask: what did I do to deserve such joy?
The deities reply, fondness seeping through their tone
'You're the daughter of the planets, this you deserve to enjoy'.

Tonight, as I lie under the stars and mark this memory akin to a life-buoy
I'll cherish and remember the times we had: stitched and sewn
Easing the sun-kissed laughter, gentle and slow.

SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

By Alyssa Leung

How can we say that eyes twinkle like stars
When in the night sky there are no such things?
If the world before us holds secret scars
Then how do we rule like previous kings?

If they say that seeing is believing
How do we know that such dry barren lands
Were once pastures gloriously singing
Hidden hymns of life with nature's loved bands?

We can say that eyes sparkle and twinkle
Like when the sun disappears from our sight;
In our two hands, the world's riches tinkle
A green blue ball held up with all our might

Tune to nature's song to live forever
Colourfully whenever, wherever.

WONDERLAND

By Rachael Ye

Books of knowledge and stories from the past
Words of wisdom on stacks of bound papers
Roses and rabbits for all you escapers
But look around, will this Wonderland last?
The world is changing, changing maybe too fast
We no longer have the minds of creators
Rabid rules have become invaders
Stripping children from their colour and craft

The world has simply gone mad
Pointless tea parties over politics
A stained society without magic tricks
Screens, screams and crushed dreams aren't you glad?
We no longer have imagination
Freedom will be lost to expectations.

Year 10 Writing

Winners of the Old Girls' Union Writing Competition

Ikshita Pandey and Brielle Teh

LOVE AGAIN

By Ikshita Pandey

'Um-no, he's not with me anymore', I muttered inaudibly, my mind picturing a groaning silence drifting into the room, a few opinionated expressions robotically scanning my face. It was still caked with makeup applied from last night's shift at the restaurant, and my hair, powdery and stiff, from my excessive rage of hairspray, and my pants, strangling my thighs from binging on *samosas* in the fridge, and, of course my-

'Oh, Anita! Please, I am very sorry for what has happened. It would never have come across my ears to hear of such an unimaginable event,' Naitee responded. Her eyes darted in different directions as she drew closer to me, the smell of herbal mint toothpaste and her dented eyebags becoming more distinct. 'But you must find someone soon *beta*. Not for you. For this little one,' she breathed, cupping her wrinkly hands onto Meera's head, who lay tenderly cradled in my arms.

My room was still dark from the blinds shunning the enthusiastically bright lights of New Delhi, an exasperating reminder of the meagre appearance of sunlight I have seen due to my work ramming me into my bed covers before the sunlight could even stipple onto my face.

A steady trickle of water from the bathroom accompanied my fatigue as I stumbled onto a lounge chair in the corner, embracing Meera's soft face, as her almond-coloured eyes gawped up at me. It would soon be time to pay the water bill.

'Just for myself,' I alleged, as I lay careless of the thriving city around me, its youthful milieu too outgrown for me.

A square-framed photograph of Raj and I lingered peacefully on my bedside table, me, in an emerald green saree, and Raj, a cream white kurta. My stomach was bare as I posed on the side, an utter lack of stretch marks or blubber protruding from the tight-hugging waistline. Just Raj's hand tucked comfortably there, as we both gleamed our best, frame-worthy smiles at the camera.

The side panel of the frame had little, golden writing inscribed, '19th June 2008'. The day Raj and I had bought the house, and approximately after, claimed 'a polished and flawless couple' by my in-laws. We were at Boronti Park which was situated near the house, and its heavenly ambiance had intrigued us to carry on with our decision. The backdrop of the photo displayed

two large oak trees, which had been frolicking in the nonchalant breeze. I recalled a *bulbul*, which had flown over to her chicks, chirping as she placed crumbs of bread into their salivating mouths.

“Do you see that?” Raj had questioned that day, his eyes like two cups of coffee in a cloud of milk. Sometimes, I would gaze into them endlessly, until he sighed, exhausted, and tickled me all over, as I would skip back into the kitchen to mix another dish for us to taste.

“Yes, I do see them. The trees are so...whimsical!” I exclaimed, giggling as I relaxed my head on his shoulder.

“No, they’re faces peering at each other,” he suggested, as we both curiously gaped at the trees transforming into a clear, focused image of two faces having a beautiful encounter. A whirlpool of leaves had begun to encompass them jubilantly, as though strapping them together.

It was my twentieth birthday when I found out I was having a child. In between the deafening music and clattering of beer mugs, I abruptly decided to uncage the news, so as to sense the astonished, but approving nods from my family and close friends, that I too was competent enough to nurture another life into this household (as I was the youngest of five). After we arrived back to the apartment, Raj didn't say anything, stripped into his night clothes, and withdrew into a deep slumber. He would always sleep with the blinds rolled up and his desk lamp on, as he savoured the passionate warmth of the sun, gently burning his skin every morning. That night, he had slept in the guest room with the lights switched off. His face was tranquilly nestled onto the pillow and his breathing, quiet and serene. An unusual expression to see when he slept alone. I, on the other hand, did not sleep that night and shuffled outside with my arms crossed securely under my chest, wishing the cool breeze would extinguish my apprehensive state of mind.

I had walked for nearly three hours, past the street food stalls and down to Boronti Park, where the two capacious oak trees were seated gingerly, as I endeavoured to discover the enthralling faces hidden in the foliage.

I could not see them anymore. Just the natural outline of the trees, lifeless and cold.

In the morning, Raj had briefly told me he was feeling drowsy from the consistent clamour at the party and did not want to bother me, so I offered some turmeric milk, which he abruptly declined, and took off for work.

Many weeks passed of minimal interactions between us two, him arriving late from work, and me consuming dinner on the coffee table, in front of the inoperable TV set, gazing into its obscure, dark screen. On a Tuesday night, Raj had irrupted into the living room, which was permeated by the strong scent of incense sticks, as I had just sung my prayers. He trudged

down to where I was stationed, his one hand grasping onto a stained briefcase, and the other, a few sheets of crisp paper, fresh from his office printers.

Coming into view, it was the first time I had become disconcerted by his appearance. The feature which once attracted me, condensed to a hidden belief in the very back of my head. His pupils were slithered with red, his eyelids, swollen, and his face seemed worryingly unshaven, as he always shaved his facial hair so as to not be screeched at by his nephews that he vaguely resembled Ranveer Singh.

“What is it?” I had asked civilly, drawing my bony hand towards him, as he stumbled back and swerved away before I could brush my fingers against him.

“I-uh, this-uh, isn’t going to work out, Anita”.

“What isn’t going to work out?” I probed, my forehead immediately creasing into stressed folds.

Raj had mounted his stance, another poker face confronting my view, as I became enfeebled by his tranquility, a contradictory sentiment to mine.

“Is it me? Am I not good for you anymore? Did I do something wrong?” I queried incessantly.

No answer.

“WHAT IS IT RAJ, YOU HAVE TO TELL ME!”

“I want a divorce”, he slurred, the papers, which were crinkled from his powerful grip, were vigorously shoved into my hands.

A shuddering wail had reverberated from my stomach. I stood there for a moment. Nauseated by his aggression. He had momentarily turned his back towards me, and walked down, back outside the house, and into our Suzuki, the taillights like two beacons of light, spearing into the darkness.

To this day he had not told me why.

My parents had proposed it might’ve been the shocking changes my body had suffered. That lean, athletic build had birthed another life.

“Everyone changes *mama*,” I had retorted heatedly, “I may look different. But I am still the person I was when I met him.”

My eyes zoomed out of the portrait of Raj and me, as my conscience began to revive. It must’ve been a while since I had been slouched on the lounge chair, as another day began to creep through the blinds, the faint trickle of sunlight, lightening Meera’s face.

I peered down at her alluring character. Her little feet had popped out of the cream white blanket, as I carefully tucked it back in, only to examine her squirm, and instantly shove them out again. She was beautiful. Even the rolls on her arms reminded me of the heavily filled custard bun I would buy from the Brown Bread Bakery.

I unknowingly grinned, and brought her closer to me, lightly kissing her on the forehead. Her eyelids prudently fluttered open to reveal her nut-brown eye, which ogled at me.

The wispy undertone and her whimsical gaze took me back to Boronti Park. Sashaying in the sunlit sky, the two, towering oak trees infused my mind, as I began to squint at their presence. Meera was with me, clasping my leg, as she chuckled at the camera pointed in front of us.

As the flash of the screen revealed our faces, we peered at each other, a calming tension flushing throughout my body.

Meera was a welcoming beacon of light. The sketched face of the oak tree.

Promising me that I was no longer alone.

THE PINE TREE

By Brielle Teh

Everyone has a connection to something. Some people feel connected to a piece of jewellery, a place or a stuffed animal their father fished out of the clearance bin as an apology for forgetting their birthdays. Aiden had a connection. Not to a necklace, or a place or a stuffed animal, but to the pine tree outside his house. He just didn't know how much his life intertwined with the tree outside.

By age ten, Aiden's eyes still sparkled with joy. His mind was filled with innocent and imaginative things. His biggest worry in life was the weather and whether it would grant his wishes and allow him and his friends outside for a game of football. Every day, when he came home from school, his mother was there, sitting on the porch swing waiting for him. Every day, armed with a smile and a plate of freshly baked snacks. Every night, his father came home. 6pm on the dot. First, he'd greet his wife with a kiss on the lips. Then, Aiden would proceed with his daily attempt to tackle his father. They'd all sit down at the dining table and say their prayers, right before stuffing their mouths. Life was good for Aiden. He was innocent, still full of wonder about what the world had to offer him.

Outside, the pine tree stood tall. Towering over children, but not yet as tall as the other trees on the street. Its branches stretched out as if they were trying to grab something in the distance so far away that it was impossible to reach. Its leaves were green and adorned its branches. The tree, too, was innocent and full of life.

By age eighteen, Aiden's eyes still sparkled, but only at certain times. They sparkled when his favourite football team won. They sparkled when he told a good joke and everyone laughed. They especially sparkled when he laid his eyes on a pretty girl passing. At this time, his biggest worry was whether or not he'd pass his exam and get into a good college. He didn't come home every day anymore. Some nights he'd crash at a friend's place after partying all day and night. But some days he came home. When he did, his mother was always there, sitting on the porch swing, a smile on her face. Every night his father came home, but no longer and 6pm every day. Sometimes he'd come home at odd hours. Stumbling into the house so boisterously that the floors would shake. Aiden no longer tried tackling him. He knew he'd win. His father was too out of it to stand up, let alone take a tackle to the ground. His family hardly had dinners together anymore. Only when his grandparents came. That was once a month. Life was alright for Aiden. His eyes still sparkled and he was still excited about what life had to offer.

The pine tree outside still stood upright and tall, casting shadows so tall they reached the end of the street. It was one of the tallest trees in the town. Children would dare one another to climb to the top. At the top, the children could see the entire town. Not that

there was much to see. Its branches stood sturdy and firm, forced to carry the weight of young children scaling it. But if you looked closely at the branches, you could see it was rotting. Slowly its branches would be brittle, life having slowly beaten it until the end.

By age twenty-three, Aiden's eyes rarely sparkled. Only flashes of joy could be seen ever so often. His mind was no longer pure and innocent; it was corroded by all the things he had seen and done. The boy's biggest fear in life was whether or not he'd have a job next week or if he'd be able to pay rent, or if he would be able to pay child support. The porch swing was broken. It was past the point of fixing. Not that his mother sat on it anymore. She was too busy inside, perfecting dinner, setting the table, cleaning, trying to ensure that she'd still have a husband next week. Every night, Aiden's father burst through the door. He never greeted his wife with a kiss anymore. Instead, he'd sit down, eat dinner in front of the TV, make up an excuse about needing to go to work and come back smelling of beer and other women. His grandparents were gone, so Aiden and his family never had a reason to eat together. Aiden's life was going downhill and he had no idea how to stop it.

The pine tree was rotting faster. The inside was slowly dying. Children no longer climbed on it for fear that a branch would snap and break. They didn't want to end up like Timmy with his broken back and wheelchair. Leaves no longer adorned its branches. Instead it stood there, naked. The branches were far more brittle. One snap and you could take an entire branch off, separating its arms from its body. The tree was dying. Life had begun its final beating and the tree wasn't going to survive this one.

By age 30, Aiden's eyes no longer sparkled. When you stared into them, you no longer saw the eyes of a young, innocent boy. You peered into the shell of a broken man who'd been beaten down with no intention of getting back up. His mind was no longer filled with thoughts of dragons or sports. Now they were filled with thoughts of death and despair. His biggest fear wasn't the weather anymore, but rather if he'd be able to win back custody of his child. He never visited home anymore. Not that his mother would be waiting for him on the porch swing. The swing was gone and his mother lay in bed all day wondering to herself why she was so unlovable. His father didn't live in the same town anymore. He was off gallivanting overseas. Partying day and night. Going home with a new woman each night. Not thinking about the pain he had caused his wife and son. Aiden's family no longer had dinner every day, because, quite frankly, Aiden no longer had a family anymore.

At age 30, Aiden's life was no longer what it used to be. Instead of wondering about what the world had to offer him, he thought about where he messed up so badly that his life had turned out like this. Was it when he knocked up that pretty girl in the bar? Was it when he got a meaningless job at the factory? Whatever it was, Aiden's life was miserable now, full of pain and despair.

The pine tree outside was gone. Cut down by the council. Deemed too ugly for the community to be burdened with having to look at it every day. The entire tree was rotten

and bare. Was the tree doomed from the beginning too? Maybe it was just too horrible a place for anything to grow. After all, the minute anything is born, it starts to die.

Damya Wijesekera won first place in the High School section of the 2019 Henry Lawson Poetry Competition.

AUTUMN AT DUSK

By Damya Wijesekera

A thousand portraits of year-old leaves
Falling,
Framed by the day-old sky.
A choir of creek-borne insects crescendoes.
Two leaves compete to cling longest
Onto withered, weathered trees.
The earth patterned in patches of dirt
And mottled in abundant sepia, thick fawn, light ginger, sparse rust.
A dusky zephyr feathering the creekside rushes.
The sky inky with shadowed blue,
And the clouds losing their golden smiles to the vanishing sun
Receding from the softest of ballet slipper pinks
Into pre-shower silver,
To welcome another night.

Sophie Blewitt won the senior division of the Mary Armstrong Public Speaking Competition. Her speech was on the topic: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

A RACE PROBLEM

By Sophie Blewitt

America has a race problem. Black boys are being shot by policemen for standing on their streets. Latino families are being torn apart. Children are sitting in cages at the border, without access to food or hygiene. Ethnic and religious minorities are targeted by white supremacists regularly, and we send thoughts and prayers to their communities. We know this.

America has a very public race problem, one that many of us find inconceivable. At home in Australia, we find it unthinkable that a multicultural, “developed” country, built on ideas very similar to our own, could be so divided. The more privileged of us Australians get to watch international news and be surprised by what we see. The fact is, we are not so different to our allies across the Pacific. The United States is a former British colony with a wild frontier, tamed by brave men who nearly wiped out an entire indigenous population. Does it sound familiar to you?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were here 60,000 years before we were, and yet the last 230 years have permanently affected their population. A history of genocide, slavery, torn families and institutional violence has decimated a proud population, and seen them suffer incredible inequality. We cannot celebrate Australia’s relative racial harmony without recognising the facts: young Indigenous Australians are 24 times more likely to be jailed than non-indigenous ones. Their lives are expected to be about 10 years shorter. Only 65% of Indigenous children will complete Year 12.

Some Australians dismiss the struggle of our Indigenous population. We apologised in 2008; surely, that’s enough! Surely, reconciliation is over. Peter Yu, an experienced Yawaru advocate, said last year that ‘without a deep and meaningful understanding of our nation’s history, I don’t believe we can achieve reconciliation.’

I speak to people like me, who have been born lucky, in the suburbs of Sydney, or Melbourne. It is so, so important that we understand how a country that has treated us well has failed others so badly. We don’t see the stories of Indigenous Australians as often as we see breaking news about hate crimes in America. Many of us will never learn about the atrocities

committed against them by our own government and people, unless we seek that information out ourselves.

I want to clarify. This is not to compare the struggles of oppressed populations, but to spotlight the way that many of us in Australia focus on foreign race issues rather than on our own. We could blame this phenomenon on the Americanisation of our media; all our movies, all our Netflix originals and music videos are coming straight from Hollywood. It seems all the most interesting stories are happening in States, like their more divided political and social scene is more impactful, or even more entertaining.

Or, we could blame our own desire to distract ourselves from the 'unglamorous' problems affecting our society at home. Either way, we have a serious problem. We are dismissing the continued oppression of Indigenous communities here, choosing instead to condemn the treatment of minorities elsewhere.

Martin Luther King Jr. never said the famous phrase, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." The line cannot be found in any of King's writings or speeches. It was changed, made into something shorter, more catchy. He said something more along the lines of, "A country dies when its people refuse to stand up for that which is right. It dies when they refuse to stand up for justice, and for that which is true."

If we, in Australia, should focus on any part of the American fight for social justice, it is on this message. Our country, too, will die, unless we educate ourselves about our internal issues, and actively work towards solving them, rather than tutting at overseas incompetence.

Australia has a race problem. Let's focus on that first.

YEAR 11 WRITING

IMPERFECT CADENCE

By Kate Tarbotton

The dust had eight years to settle. It jumped as I took my first steps towards the stage. My footsteps echoed, bounding off of the high walls and amplifying my fears. Light flickered in mystical patterns across the stone arches, coloured by the stained-glass scenes. I ran my hand across the back of a pew, staring at the tattered green leather. Long gone were the days in which we ran around in our Sunday best, unaware of the heat whilst our mother fretted over dirt and potential tears. I could see the layers of grime covering almost every surface, but I turned away. I had a mind only for the piano several metres in front of me.

She was standing at the end, in the same position as the last time I touched her. Slightly out of place, on an almost imperceptible angle, but it was a sight I had seen thousands of times and no imperfection could go unnoticed. As I continued to force myself forwards, I pushed back the biting thoughts which threatened to overwhelm me, but when I stopped and stood toe to toe with the first step, I couldn't avoid them any longer.

Where most people would find their sanctuary, I had locked it away. I could not bring myself to play, certain that I would not be able to if she was not sitting beside me, but each day was getting longer and harder to bear. My fingers physically ached as they longed to move again, but apprehension had blinded me. *Magic*, she had said, *pure magic. Anyone can play a note, but only you can breathe life into a simple noise.*

My childhood passed in the pit of that church. Besides the Sunday mornings spent wreaking havoc in the dust outside, and the treacherous hours I passed staring out of a schoolroom window, I grew up in the filtered light that barely reached the music on the stand. The adults would chatter about the disturbing loneliness I seemed to possess, and my inability to make friends with those my own age, but my seven-year-old mind could not see any need for anyone else.

Time was spent everyday in deep conversation. We rarely talked, but would weave notes into melodies that formed the deepest philosophical ideas. No one could understand our communication, but she had taught me from the moment I sat down on the stool. If you can make music, there is no need to speak the same language. She had tried with my brother, but he would never sit still long enough to play a prelude, let alone a concerto. And so she focused her efforts onto me, and together we shared secrets that no one else could ever understand. It was my only escape, and every time I played to free myself she was there, playing beside me.

Despite years of trying to shut it away, those moments come back in the blink of an eye. Searing heat forcing the piano out of tune, anger pushing through my arms into the ivory, fingertips raw and bleeding from hours of vigorous effort. It was the only day that a rush of serenity didn't hit me, and the only day that I played alone. I had slammed the lid down, and as the final notes whispered away the church was engulfed in silence. A silence that had only been broken eight years later, when the creak of the wooden doors murmured echoes of past melodies.

I looked up again at the dirty wood and slowly led myself up the stairs. I tottered on my toes, as if one false step would bring the walls crashing down around me, and carefully made my way across the stage. My fingers burned at the thought of being able to communicate again, if only to the paintings on the wall. As I sat down on the stool, I could almost feel her beside me. The way she smiled lightly if I played a difficult section well, and how her eyebrows pinched together in a frown when I stumbled over a few notes. I had never played without her there, but I didn't think I could last much longer without her to guide me. It was a long shot, but to play again was my only chance to talk to her. There was the smallest chance that somehow everything she told me, everything she taught me, would come back if I could play again. That, maybe, she would continue to teach me, and I could teach myself. It was my only true communication with the world.

My eyes had not yet adjusted to the light, yet my fingers found the notes and began to move on a will of their own. I do not need to see. I only need to trust the memories and the sound of my childhood. With the first strike of a key, my thoughts are lost under a tidal wave of music. She was right. Anyone can play a note, but only I can pluck a soul from a web of noise.

NO LONGER FORGOTTEN

By Perlie Chiu

The click of the front door's latch pricked my ears. There was no need to investigate who it was: that unappreciative, lying, disrespectful rebel was sneaking out. Again. I marched to the entrance to confront the scoundrel. "Where do you think you are going?" I snapped. "To study," came the retort. I closed my eyes for a brief second, preparing to lash out a storm, but was apprehended by a sudden slam. My sister had left.

I charged towards the door, in hopes of catching up to her. Swinging the door open, I caught a glimpse of the lift doors closing. All I could do was thrash her name down the hallway, demanding her, in a futile attempt, to come back.

"CHARLOTTE YUEN LAI CHING! Fan lei!"

"You're not my mother, Jennifer!"

And with that, she disappeared. Fifteen years ago, it was the week before Chinese New Year, before my birthday, when I spotted a curiosity on the table. I inched closer to peek inside and gasped at the red kei pou; the traditional dress embroidered with majestic dragons in gold thread. My eyes lit up - was this mine? I removed the transparent sleeve to admire it in all its glory. But as the dress unfolded to reveal itself, my smile vanished. The dress only fell to my elbow length with cutouts smaller than my hands. It was meant for a toddler. I looked into the bag again - nothing. "You do not need a kei pou," my mother answered coldly. "Are you still at an age to play dress up? Your only priority is Lai Ching. You must think of her first. Always." As my lips parted to object, my mother's brows furrowed in warning. "Do not even think about talking back to your mother, you insolent child. Being the eldest is an honour, and you must uphold our family's reputation. I do not want us to lose face because of you."

I could no longer placate the tide of fury welling inside me. Decisively grabbing a cap, I followed Charlotte's footsteps closely. If she refused to be truthful, I would find out the truth myself. Turning onto the main street, my suspicions were confirmed. Charlotte was with her friends once more.

Hiding under my cap, I lingered at a safe distance behind Charlotte as they entered a bakery. I eyed my sister as she ordered an entire box full of delicacies. The image of her and her blithe friends laughing and smiling left a bitter taste in my mouth. That punk. Ten years ago, on the first day of Chinese New Year, on my eighth birthday, I found myself in the labyrinth of wet market stalls. "Happy birthday, Lai Hong," the owner of a stall called out as I hurriedly trundled to my next destination. I whipped my head around and smiled faintly. She remembered, I thought to myself. Every year on the way to my Uncle's, we would pass by Tai Cheong Bakery. I was dazzled by the rows of egg tarts – perfectly round custard fillings sitting inside

heavenly thrones. I always imagined the sweet filling dancing in my mouth. I tugged my mother's arm lightly. "Mother, may I have one?"

"What for?" she spoke sharply. My heart stopped. I didn't dare reply. Did she forget? Promptly pulling me away from Charlotte's earshot, she hissed, "You think your birthday gives you the right to ask me that silly question? Why should you be rewarded for doing nothing?" I reeled back in horror as she lifted her top to reveal a long gash that traversed over her lower abdomen. "Your birthday brought me this. Imagine, knives slicing me open, my insides exposed. All for what? To bring you to this world. And you want to celebrate the pain you brought me eight years ago?" I fought back a hot stream of tears that threatened to cascade down. She inched closer. "You are too selfish. I better not hear a single peep from you." And with that, she snatched Charlotte's hand and stormed off. As they waltzed out of the bakery, I was about to pounce on my good-for-nothing sister when she announced, "I had to get past my sister again. Even my mother isn't as uptight as her."

I was taken aback. Not possible, I thought. I could never be anything like that heartless woman. My whole life has been sacrificed to obey her ruthless law, to chase after her unattainable expectations. No way. I no longer pursued them.

Hours after clearing my head, I trudged home. As I nudged the door open, dim, yellow light suddenly flooded the living room. Charlotte appeared in front of me with her arms outstretched. "Sang yat fai lok!" (Happy birthday!) she wished me in accented Cantonese. I stood in stony silence. Those words, they were foreign to me. My birthday? Charlotte hauled over a white box and lifted the lid. Nearly two dozen familiar looking pastries - smooth fillings encased in their flaky thrones - stared up at me. Egg tarts. I slammed the lid shut. "Do you not like them?" Charlotte questioned. "I told you this before," I heaved a sigh. "Birthdays -" She grabbed my left hand and pressed a folded piece of paper into my palm. The yellowed slip was lined in rows of childish handwriting, in faded blue ink. Addressed to me, signed off by - my mother. I felt my chest tighten. "All Mah Mah talked about before she passed away was "Buy Tai Cheong egg tarts for Lai Hong." You know, I remember you gazing longingly at their egg tarts every Chinese New Year. I couldn't find any branches here, but I got the best egg tarts around. I bought you 21 - Happy 21st Birthday, Ga Che."

I glanced at the note. "My eldest," my mother wrote, "because of you, Lai Ching matured beautifully even without that a father. I knew you could do it." My vision blurred.

"Through your strength, you have brought honour to our family. You have done well, Lai Hong. I know it does not seem like it, but I am very grateful that I have a sister like you. Thank you."

With that, she presented the egg tarts to me once more. “Come on! I know you want them all!” My mind went blank. This was all for me? How could I have been the final thought on my mother’s mind? But then, as I took my first bite into the egg tart, it suddenly made sense to me. I was no longer a ghost, a mere childminder, but a proud member and head of the Yuen family. I am a daughter, an eldest sister, a woman.

I am Jennifer Yuen Lai Hong.

As part of their unit of work 'Reading to Write', students read the works of well-known writers and used these works as inspiration for their own writing.

AN OUTSTRETCHED HAND

By Carmen Yih

It was the price of freedom. The boat was small, twenty metres in length and three metres wide. My dad still remembers how he had to sit with his knees up against his chest in the lower deck of the boat with two hundred people packed around him so he couldn't move. It is a common story, the story of the 120 000 people that fled South Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. This number would soon grow to 1.6 million between 1975 and 1997. They were named the Vietnamese boat people.

He was eleven years old when his family of seven escaped. Over forty years later, he still remembers how dark the nights on the boat were, so dark he couldn't see his own outstretched hand.

They couldn't tell anyone. Deep into the night one day, they abandoned all of their belongings except their necessities and embarked on a long drive to the coastal area of Vietnam. He remembers lying on the hood of their tarnished car and looking at the void above them. He saw the undisturbed sky of stars shine before him. Soon he would be out of there, soon he would taste freedom.

The North Vietnamese had confiscated their savings and the jewellery my grandmother pawned was only enough for five of them. It seemed impossible. Then an old employee of my grandfather's factory stepped up. He offered to lend my grandfather enough money to allow the whole family to get on the boat. "Pay me back when you safely arrive," he said. All seven of them boarded the boat. It was a mentally and physically challenging journey but it was together. It has ingrained in my dad a strong resilient attitude my he would then ingrain into me.

He told me that within a day they had ran out of food.

And within two days their water supply dwindled to near nothing.

The drone of the engine and the sound of waves was all they could hear.

A little boy died. The body was thrown overboard.

An old man went mad and wanted to end his life. They pulled him back.

They were all so exhausted and thirsty that they tried to drink seawater, but despite all this, he persisted. He had hope. He wanted to survive. Hope is powerful.

Finally, they neared Palau Bidong. The boat couldn't get close enough to land because of the shallow waters but my dad and his family could not care less. My dad jumped off the boat, coral cutting his thighs, and waded to dry land.

He breathed in the air; it was free.

He felt the sand under his toes; it was free.

He felt free. For the first time since the fall of Saigon, he had hope, he could see a future. After they all arrived safely, the captain confessed that the boat they travelled on had several punctured holes. The crew hadn't told anybody. His story could have ended there.

When he was in Vietnam, he lost all hope for his future. He never thought he would escape. Just like Biggie and the narrator in Tim Winton's 'Big World', his dream of escape had become a reality. Winton's *The Turning* has allowed me to finally understand the loss of hope my father had experienced. Coming from an environment that actively encourages the new generation to stand out and be unique, is a far cry from the ideology my dad was fed when he was younger. In Tim Winton's 'Big World', Biggie and the narrator both experience the loss of their vision for the future and freedom. Their desire for escape from the dysfunctional community of Angelus parallels my father's desire to escape the confining society of Communist Vietnam.

I am lucky. Unlike my father's outstretched hand on the boat, my hand is illuminated. I can see my future right in front of me and I have hope. Many of Winton's stories in *The Turning* centre on the exploration and struggle with personal identity and aspiration as an adolescent. These stories have helped me gain a better understanding of Australia's culture back when my father arrived as well as the struggles he had with finding his identity in Vietnam.

After hearing about my father's experiences over the past three years, I have become increasingly invested in Australia's refugee crisis. Society in Australia has grown so much since the days of the Integration policy and I am lucky to be in a time where multiculturalism is celebrated, not tolerated or shunned. But, as I delve deeper into our government's actions, I am scared that soon this will not be the case.

As much as I understand the growing concern and reality of overpopulation and border protection, if Australia hadn't accepted my father into the country, I would not be here. As I hear about the terrible conditions of the asylum islands, I wonder if my father had travelled to Australia now, would he still be accepted with the same open arms that welcomed him back in the 1960s? With over 3,127 people on Nauru and Papua New Guinea since 2013, Australia's previous dedication to becoming a multicultural haven is slowly deteriorating. According to human rights groups, offshore processing environments are "totally inadequate,

citing poor hygiene, cramped conditions, unrelenting heat and a lack of facilities.” Holding asylum seekers in indefinite detention has been shown to cause psychological harm and high susceptibility to physical and sexual assault.

I read that in mid-July 2013, a new law was applied to the Manus and Nauru refugees. They are now banned from entering Australia if they reach Australia by boat with the aid of people smugglers.

"They must know that the door to Australia is closed to those who seek to come here by boat with a people smuggler. It is closed." Turnbull said.

"This will send the strongest possible signal to the people smugglers," Turnbull said.

But my father came here with the aid of ‘people smugglers’. Where would he have been if this policy was in place when he was risking his life escaping? It is true that people smugglers capitalise on human desperation but, for those like my father, it has given them a hope for a future.

At the time of the Vietnam war, there was a lot of compassion and sympathy for the Vietnamese refugees. Where is that kindness and compassion, the one my father had admired, now?

Reflection Statement

Hearing about my dad’s life journey, I reflect upon my own life and the value of freedom and hope. It has allowed me to more thoroughly understand the sheer enormity of what my father went through.

After arriving in Australia, integrating with 1970s Australian society was a constant struggle. He found himself wearing things that his classmates didn’t wear, having difficulty keeping up with high school with a limited grasp of English and trying to balance time between helping his family with chores while they were out working in the factories around Cabramatta and doing his schoolwork.

My father’s experiences have largely impacted what I value as a person. Living in Australia, it is too easy to take freedom of thought for granted but, after hearing about the education my father received under the communist regime, I was able to find a newfound appreciation for our society’s freedom. I am able to develop as an adolescent with my own views, my own choice of religion and many choices for the future.

As an adolescent now, I am still discovering my identity and becoming more comfortable with myself. Society in Australia has grown so much since the days of the integration policy and I am lucky to be in a time where multiculturalism is celebrated and not tolerated or shunned. Moving from a predominantly Caucasian primary school to Hornsby Girl’s High School was honestly one of the turning points with accepting my cultural identity as part of who I am as

a person. Suddenly, what I thought ostracised me from my primary school friends like eating dried seaweed or celebrating Chinese New Year was what made me fit in as a high school student. As I matured, I became more confident with talking in my second language in public and with my cultural background. As clichéd as it sounds, I have realised that I have wasted so much time forging an identity, an image I wanted to portray to fit in, that I lost who I truly was, as part of a community and as part of myself. I am still on this journey of understanding myself. After hearing about my father's experiences as an adolescent, I have realised that some things cannot be forced. Life is unpredictable, and sometimes you just have to let the magic happen.

DAY 1314

By Esther Suen

It's been 3 years and 218 days. I'm still stuck in the same stand, selling the same shoddy selection of beginner health potions, and assigning the same set of side quests. What turned out to be a simple trip to Mana Ridge to visit a distant relative to complete an assigned task left me trapped in the town. Why did she just dump the responsibility of running the town store on me and conveniently pass away soon after? Now it's impossible to bypass the field barrier - and, if by some miracle that happens, I'd be turned into ashes once those haggly sorceresses realise their little potion dealing slave has ran away.

The tinkling of the celesta along with the flutes and light plucking of strings fade out into all the lively hustle and bustle of Mana Ridge before repeating itself on loop once more.

Endless snow drifts down from the bleak sky. It piles on top of the players' heads gifting them with a chillingly soft embrace as they run around town gathering quests and pestering the blacksmith.

They're trembling with anticipation to go kick around a few poochums and frost goblins. I'm trembling with agitation to burn this godforsaken icy dungeon to the ground.

Here I am, tapping my feet against the weathered snow-caked cobblestone, waiting for this new cleric in front of me to respond. It's been at least a minute... Ah, finally. He managed to fish out the quest tab.

See what happens when you always skip the tutorials! We have to deal with your incompetence! And now I have to waste my breath with giving you this quest for poochum provisions TT

"Hey, you! Sorceress Tara just stole m-" [Esc]

Wait, are you for real...?

"I need you to g-" [Esc]

First the tutorial and now this...

"Collect 10 [Poochum Chow] from Icewind Valley-" [Esc]

Are you really skipping my dialogue?

He's already taken off to Frost Hill's portal further South down the town. I wish I could follow in suit - Leave this dreaded town and go somewhere. Anywhere. But no. I can't even daydream because a short Tinkerer with pigtails is shoving the poochum she captured from the Silent Cloister for her side quest [A Wild Poochum Chase (Lvl.5)] in my face.

Its writhing its pudgy little body and stubby legs around in an attempt to escape from its captor. *How futile.* I hand over 2 [Beginner HP Potion]s, 56 copper coins, and gift 233 EXP as always.

I send the hound back to his instance, the Silent Cloister. A horrible place really – it's filled with dusty cobwebs, empty bookshelves on the verge of rotting, and vampire bats with horrifying needle-like fangs.

I wipe off the remaining globs of saliva from the poochum's struggles. By now, I've lost track of how many times the Mana Ridge theme has repeated itself. It used to give me a sense of mystery and wonder but now it's just jarring to the ears. Painful.

The server time just reset. It's been 1314 days to be exact.

Maybe getting burnt to a crisp will be better than whatever I'm doing now. I want to go beyond this snowy dungeon. Leave behind all the poochums and potions. Leave behind all those horrible witches. Even those towering snow-coated spruces nailed to the earth are freer than me. But what can I do? I'm just the same Merchant Jenny still stuck in the same stand, selling the same shoddy selection of beginner health potions, and assigning the same set of side quests.

Nothing more, Nothing less.

GUMTREES

By Sienna Clarke

I sat on the warm brick driveway as I waited for Jason to come back home. The day had been pleasantly warm, even hot, but one of those cool summer changes had come through in the afternoon and it had crawled under my skin. Looking across the road I fixed my eyes on the twin gum trees rustling gently in the wind - a faraway crowd incomprehensibly chattering. I had so much to do, and no desire to do it. Laundry and dishes seemed so insignificant and far away. I couldn't get up, it would be admitting defeat, a surrender without a fight. I had run out here to drag him back home and I wouldn't leave my post without him.

There was a feeling deep in my gut that I had failed. Jason was having a hard time ever since his sister died, but that was years ago, and he *was* getting better. But every now and then I would still have to coerce him down from that precipice of overwhelming despair he sat upon. It would take about an hour, sometimes more, depending on what he needed. Soft kisses and gentle words. A milkshake. A laugh. Some attachment to the material world I suppose. My purpose. After eight hours of answering telephones with an overly enthusiastic voice to overly un-enthusiastic people. My words could make him smile, get out of bed, find energy, work. I was still needed and I needed him to work.

For days I woke up stomach lurching. And I had run out of patience. After a long train trip, I would get home, exhausted, to see him, lying in bed. And I, his wife, that endless fountain of smiles and kisses ran dry. For two weeks I told him to work, made dinner, was silent. I knew he tried but I had no patience for his half-hearted efforts. Jason was like a paper boat floating in the ocean, even the smallest of waves would leave him at the bottom, and all the rest of us doomed to drown.

He broke. Ran to the door.

I gripped his arm, knuckles white, hands sweaty. I leaned back and pulled feet scrambling, slipping, sliding. I leant back again. He barely slowed his march to the door. I almost stopped him at the doorway but he was so much stronger than me my fingers slipped from the frame of the door, raw from effort. He twisted my arm at awkward angles until I was forced to let go and run after him. He was stronger than I remembered. I was afraid.

Afternoon turned to evening; I lay my hands on the red bricks as their heat slowly dissipated. I looked up at the eucalyptus trees the pair of them, limbs spreading across the sky, so tall over the canopy of trees in the valley, each one, reaching for infinity.

You weren't running away. You were walking. It wasn't illegal to go for a walk. You just wanted to walk. Nothing wrong with that. Your arm burned red where she had grabbed you but you averted your eyes, refused to acknowledge it.

It was hours before you even thought of coming back. That uncomfortably hot room and the silence, you couldn't bear the silence. She seemed to resent your very existence no matter how hard you tried. You couldn't blame her. You ran, feet pounding against the asphalt up one hill, up the next, until you were in a place you only vaguely recognised. You wondered where she was. Hanging laundry up alone. Perhaps. Living like everything was okay? It wasn't. And only you had the power to fix this mess. Before you knew it the streets grew more recognisable and you were on your way home again.

. * .

Our neighbour, Rebecca, stared at me. Her perfectly made up face and stilettos seemed to mock me.

'Good afternoon?' A question rather than a greeting.

I glanced at her and quickly shifted my gaze, looking up at the blanket of clouds. I lay down. The bricks were warm against my back but the wind made me shiver. Rebecca's silent judgement and curiosity felt like a multi-legged creature crawling over me. I forced myself to lie still, suddenly aware of my bare feet, badly shaved legs, awkward yellow sundress and myriad of other defects. Her eyes left and I released a breath I hadn't realised I was holding.

Had she noticed?

The sun had been set for hours when I saw him turn up the driveway. He stopped as soon as he saw me. His face pale in the streetlight, his eyes wide, sweat dampened his hair. I stood up and walked towards the house.

Jason looked shocked. I could almost hear the thoughts that were running through his head. I was almost sad I couldn't watch him squirm as he realised how long I had been waiting. He followed me up the hill and into the house. We hardly spoke that night.

As we slept, a thunderstorm raged through the skies. A heavenly war of light and darkness. The house shook, and I clung tightly to thick blankets, grasping the illusion of safety.

One of the gumtrees across the road had fallen over and pulled the powerlines down with it. I watched from the window, Jason next to me. It was awkward but he was too curious to care. The SES was all over it and it was covered in yellow tape. The other stood tall lonely against the sky. Jason seemed to realise something, straightened up and walked with purpose down the hall and towards the kitchen. His exaggerated movements demanded attention. I turned and followed.

The sunlight fell onto his face, hair messy from sleep. He sat in his boxer shorts at the table with two spoons and a half full tub of double choc ice cream. His face broke into a grin.

‘Do you want some?’ he held out a spoon. When I responded only with confusion he explained, ‘The power’s out so it’ll melt otherwise...’

Then it was just the two of us eating half melted ice cream in the morning light. Our faces covered in chocolate, it dripped onto my clothes and got into his hair. I couldn’t stop smiling. We were children again. He did the dishes while I folded the laundry.

That night he told me about work. How he hated his job and wished he hadn’t given up on uni. He told me about running, wide open spaces, feeling alone .I told him about the baby. He smiled, spun me around and then we held each other.

The horizon was permanently changed, but slowly we came to know it again, the tree no longer looked lonely, in our memories two became one. Not a loss but a union.

A marriage.

Some students in Year 11 studied *The Handmaid's Tale* and wrote discursive essays exploring the future of the dystopian genre as part of their writing portfolios. A discursive essay represents the students' personal perspective of an issue in a way that is both creative and informative.

THE STORY OF HUMANKIND

By Vanessa Vu

Dystopia. A future yet to come, a horrifying prophecy. A distant world in which humanity as we know it has become so aggressively altered by our own inhumane ways that we no longer recognize it as our own. And yet it is. Our home, however warped and twisted it may be, is still ours.

Dystopia. To some people, it is an escape. But how can it be an escape? They write of a world where social systems are built so robustly that it is impossible to escape. Ah, but it is. It is an escape from reality that they are searching for. Reality is cruel, and harsh, and unforgiving. But creating a world that is crueler, harsher, more unforgiving. It makes reality seem like a fanciful dream.

Dystopian writers may say they are just speculating, commenting on the current state of society that they are in. But when those speculations become reality, and reality becomes too hard to face, where do we turn to? Without a fictitious, chaotic world to assure us that our society is much more pleasant than it seems, where do we turn to? I can't answer these questions, for I have not reached that point in time, nor do I wish to. All I can give you is the truth, the present.

The fabric of our society is riddled with many holes. Our global temperatures are rising. As North America becomes a winter "wonderland" (hellscape rather), news anchors are saying, "Move over Atlantis! Get a load of these headlines!":

***Help Us Caption This Photo of Underwater New York City**

***Photo of the Day: The Last Ice Cube on Earth**

***A correlative study on sinking morals and islands**

As global temperatures rise, the poverty line continues to widen. While the world's richest 1% are rolling in half the world's wealth, millions upon millions of people are barely living on one American dollar a day. Our technologies are becoming more advanced, tracking our every move, word, thought, action. With major corporations gaining access to medical records, phone calls, and Google searches, one wonders whether we can ever gain some sense of privacy, some respite from invasive conduct.

This world that we live in, were born into, want to escape from, is by no means perfect. How can it be when it is filled such creatures as us? We can only create the illusion of perfection, an idea that largely represents the dystopian genre. There. We have just unearthed one of

the many links between the real world and the characteristics of dystopia. Let us continue by first exploring the etymology of the word dystopia.

Dystopia derives itself from Ancient Greek, where "dys" translates to bad, and "topia," coming from the Greek word "topos", means place or region. Therefore, a dystopia is essentially a bad place. Now that we can equate dystopia to a bad place, the characteristics will follow through nicely (or at least as nicely as they can). These include the oppression of individuals, conformity, complete control by a governing body, the suppressive use of technology, dehumanisation, rejection of nature (anti-Romanticism) and the characterisation of society as the antagonist.

When we look at specific societies scattered globally, we can easily tick all the boxes for examples of a dystopian society. Oppression of individuals? The Taliban! Conformity? North Korea! Total government control? Increasing every day. Suppressive technology? Hello MyHealth record! Clearly, we are well on the way to building our very own dystopian society. Good job us! Little seed pods of dystopia have been planted everywhere around the world. All we need to do is nurture them, fertilise them, give them plenty of water, and voila!

You may say that we can draw these vague and somewhat coincidental connections between a dystopian world and our society. You may say that there are similarities, but that's beside the point - it's just a work of fiction. But you also have to take into consideration the perspective of the writer. They have to get their ideas from somewhere. And what better place to build a world of your own, by starting with the world you are in. In this sense, our world is a building block, the foundation of a dystopian society. We've drafted the story for them, with our constant stream of tragic news reports, and our global temperatures that break records year after year.

Dystopian writers are telling the story of humankind. The end. Dystopia meddles with the present to create a future - refracts it, bends it, moulds it, like a piece of art, a grotesque still work splayed by years of neglect and consumed by the black hollowness of the human heart. When dystopia becomes reality, dystopia shifts from a work of fiction to one of tragic history. They are telling our story, based on the story we have created for ourselves. We are the writers, and they have become the readers, retelling the story back to us.

If I may, I'll go so far as to say that as long as we remain humans, with flawed mechanics and moral ambiguity, there will always be a dystopian future waiting at the end of it all. It is impossible to create a 'perfect' world where each individual is so utterly unique; there is no 'one size fits all'. The illusion of perfection is all we can ever hope to achieve, and that means the end of humanity as we know it. After all, the desire for perfection has already taken the lives of so many...what's to stop it from taking the rest of us?

Students in Year 11 wrote a short story for their 'Reading to Write' writing portfolio. Ella experimented with an unreliable narrator and genre conventions in her short story.

CLEANSE

By Ella Bradford

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

She sits blankly on the cold floor of the shower. She's been there for a while. Just there. Every few seconds, the shower head leaks and a single drop furtively escapes, landing on her head. Each time that infernal molecule makes contact with her exposed scalp, her body convulses slightly. She hates it, she wants to move, she wants it to stop, but she can't.

She likes it though, likes the thrill of it, the rush maybe.

It's dark in the bathroom tonight. Not for any particular reason, she just didn't turn on the lights this time round. She likes to make things a bit more interesting.

Or maybe she just doesn't want to see right now. Seeing, she feels, will overload her senses. So instead, she just stares into the darkness as water leaks all over her face, drawing patterns with its cold, empty ink. She makes out shapes in the void; her discarded clothes scattered on the marble tile; bottles of shampoo, knocked over, trickling out onto the floor. Shadows of past lovers dance in her peripheral vision, bodies swaying, grabbing, tearing, screaming. She inhales the sickly sweet odour of old, cheap soap, holds it in for a few seconds as it bangs on the walls of her mouth, scratching at her tongue before she lets it escape again, hissing through her teeth.

She shifts slightly, a strand of wet hair falls onto her shoulder. She bites at her lip, nibbles at the edges, peeling off small strips of skin, in an attempt to feel something maybe. Her body begins to tingle from sitting in the contorted position she's in - her head leaning against the wall, spine sharply angled like a crowbar, left shoulder hunched up to her neck, right shoulder reaching for her hip. Painful pricks waltz along her veins - tiny, dancing people with spikes on their shoes traipse up and down her legs and back.

Her body moves by itself. It is a puppet that stands itself upright. Pulls the pieces of itself back together. There are things to be done, you know.

In the dark, she gropes aimlessly for her towel. She's fumbling around for it; there seems to be an endless amount of fabric on the floor, none of them what she's looking for. Frustration bubbles. She's sick of it. She's just so sick of it.

Movement catches her eye. She jumps, lands on a tipped over bottle, a squirting sound cuts through the blackness. Eyes wide and darting, she's huddled back, muscles tense and poised to spring. She relaxes, unclenches her fists - it's only her reflection in the mirror, the cloaked figure that's unrecognisable even to herself.

She inspects her face, leans right up close to the glass, balances on one foot, going closer and closer to the shadowed reflection of her vacant eyes – bottomless pits of milky darkness. The shampoo from the bottle oozes towards her like tentacles, reaching for her, clawing around her ankles, squelching in between her toes like mud.

Maybe she let it happen. Did she even know what happened? She supposed she did.

Maybe her body wasn't even under her control.

Maybe she let it all loose. Accepted it.

She didn't even really have time to think about it.

For a split second, a minute, an hour, a year even, she was floating. Mid-air, poised, perfect, everything she never was. Or perhaps all she ever will be.

Maybe now she will finally understand.

It's been a long day. Frank is on his way home from work. Only a few cases today – a minor car crash and a woman who died late last night. A young man sits beside Frank, tapping his pen on his clipboard absent-mindedly. Click, click, click. Frank wishes he would stop.

"Interesting, that woman." Frank sighs audibly. Frank hates interns.

"What woman?" Frank knows exactly which woman pen-tapper is talking about.

"The one who died. She slipped and fell?"

"Hit her head." Frank doesn't want to talk to pen-tapper.

"Such a hopeless way for it all to end isn't it. Kind of feels like, I don't know, like all this life stuff – worries, dreams, relationships - is all leading up to something big. But there's just always a constant reminder that it can all just be cut short so easily, so swiftly. And doing something as common-place as taking a shower."

Frank wishes the pen-tapper would shut up.

Frank finally gets home. He's worn out from the day. He's sweaty and bothered, clothes sticking to him like gum on the sidewalk. He kisses his wife hello and walks into the bathroom to take a shower, to remove the burdens from his life as if he's peeling off dead skin.

Frank turns off the light in the bathroom while he's showering.

He likes to make things a bit more interesting.

YEAR 11 POETRY

At the time of publication, this poem was shortlisted for the Katharine Susannah Prichard prize in creative writing.

A FRESH START

By Vanessa Vu

Turn over the fresh bed linen

Spread the white sheets flat

Stretch your arms over your head

Reach behind and arch your back.

Breathe in the morning air

Cool and crisp and clean in your lungs

Catch the drops of sunlight

Nodding and bobbing as you move along.

Shake out that dusty coat

Give those worn boots a clap

Hat, keys, journal, pen

A cup of tea before you go

Grab your things and lock the door

But don't linger for too long

Adventures will take you far from home

But you'll always end up where you belong.

YEAR 12 WRITING

Krystal Leung wrote this narrative as part of her Craft of Writing portfolio. Students were asked to write a short story that depicted a shift in perspective.

ORDER DIPTERA

By Krystal Leung

LARVAE

There's an odd sort of beauty in it. The cockatoo's feathers are unstained, still white. It looks as if it is resting, only its head is twisted in a grotesque parody of death. The girl crouches by it, runs her hands over its smooth feathered mass, lightly petting it as if it were a puppy, still warm. This is the first time that she's ever petted a bird. It feels like silken air beneath her fingers, like fine strands of thread held together by even smaller soft barbs against the back of her hand. She rights its little head, pinches its yellow crest, tugs at its wings, pulling its crumpled form slowly open. Its extended limbs make it look as if it is trapped in flight upon green clouds of buffalo grass.

She smiles at her work. It's beautiful, splayed on the lawn in all its stilled complacency. She gingerly picks it up, cradles its tired head against her chest.

In the distance, she hears it coming closer. The low buzzing of the swarm heading right towards her. They come from behind, moving forward in a mist of death. A thousand wings beat at her ears, all over her head, before her eyes, past her hair, descending onto her new pet, over her arms and her chest until what once had been white and pure and all that was beautiful is submerged in the seething liquid blanket of black buzzing bodies.

Her eyes widen. She drops the bird. Turns, runs, refuses to even look at it.

In the distance, a tattered yellow crest sticks upward at an angle like tiny defiant flag in the wind, above the shifting swarm. They wave a stiff goodbye to her as she sprints home, running from the sound of buzzing inside her head, the phantom feeling of flies' legs on her arms.

PUPAE

The summer holidays and the midday excursions that her family insists on having always make this a particularly vexing time of the year. She sits buckled into the driver's seat of their aged Land Cruiser, breathing in the intoxicating scent of melting plastic as she waits for her family to board the vehicle.

She turns her attention toward the window. There upon the sill, a heat-crazed fly slams its rotund body fruitlessly upon the glass again and again. Its wings whirr in the air, bring it

forward, toward the perfectly translucent image of itself superimposed upon the car's interior. She is bemused by the sight, watching on as the fly, dressed in its black and gold corset completes its deadly tango of exhaustion with a shadow.

Bzzt. Bzzt. Again. Again.

It is the unfortunate fate of some to desire perfection, desire it with hopeful envy, not realising the absurdity of their dreams. Some are simply not made to break any glass ceilings.

She disliked their faceless whole. Their commonness.

The fly's hairy limbs and fat belly drag on the spotless glass behind it as it walks. Disgusting. She sees them, everywhere she goes. Lurking behind fast food counters office cubicles, over some sensuous image of a half-naked woman in a low-carb chocolate bar advertisement with a caption that reads "Keep Australia beautiful". She finds them crawling over clothing in the droll stations, the sweat and heat of a thousand huddled bodies anticipating the arrival of the next train, moving as one, settling on station windows, a singularity of a thousand minds with their thousands of eyes, seeing everything, accomplishing nothing, only banging their heads against the glass pane, again and again and again in senseless desperation. It is the pursuit of their dreams that consume them.

They are the swarm, its monotonous droning. The extraordinary made ordinary.

Their indistinguishable bodies disgust her.

Bzzt. Bzzt.

The fly falls off the glass, tumbles down the smooth exterior of the car before it splays itself on the hot tarmac. Dead. She feels relief. Why then does she hear a buzzing ring in her brain, going around and around like a fly inside her skull?

BRACHYCERA

Arising from the cubicles is the senseless clicking and tapping of keys, the daily cacophony that is the anthem of the countless office men and women who speak without voices as they review. Across the far wall, the old decal sticker reading "team work makes the dream work" seems out of place. Too small to be taken seriously, but the wall is too empty for it to blend in.

One of many, a woman adorned in an A-lined black blazer and thigh length pencil skirt sits immaculately at her station, back straight, long fingers dancing across the computer effortlessly as if she were a maestro composing and then performing, correcting and undoing the default template on the development application approval form.

Perfect. Her tango is complete.

Her head aches with the constant soft whir not unlike the sound her computer's hard disk makes. She closes her eyes, opens them again. Sees a kaleidoscope of visions and dreams all mixed up and thrown haphazardly together, an unfinished jigsaw of her past, present and future. She sees everything. A thousand possibilities, choices, dreams lie shattered in crushed fragments in the ever-shifting complacency of one buzzing mind. She sees now that they are as empty and unattainable as the dust motes that are caught in the piercing rays of sunlight. She is older now, has traded the idealistic love of the little golden girl for an angry grey city, its drab concrete fingers insidiously groping upwards and outwards.

She rises, stretching out her back as if she is trying to emerge out of the pages of the pages of plainness like Aphrodite from the sea, and into the myth of unattainable satisfaction and self-fulfilled contentment. She doesn't know why she hungers for something more, something extraordinary and distinguishable in her life. It was a hungering for anything, no matter how insignificant. Something different, something new, anything. Even if it's just to batter herself again and again and again against the glass pane.

The air outside the building burns her lungs with its fiery breath. In the distance, a lonely cockatoo screeches its harsh protest. She catches a glimpse of a flurry of white feathers and yellow crest circling above her against an ocean sky. She blocks out the irritating cry with her own earphones and music, refuses to listen, cradles her blissful ignorance as she strides toward the train station amongst a multitude of bunned and slicked hair to join the swarm.

As part of their writing portfolio, Year 12 students wrote a piece of persuasive writing on a topic of their choice.

HUMANITY'S GREATEST CHALLENGE: THE STATUS QUO

By Sophie Ye

"Let us never cease from thinking – what is this 'civilisation' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them?"

– Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', 1938

What is it that humanity fears the most?

By asking those around you, you would be able to gauge a sample of what most people fear. There are hundreds, if not thousands of phobias but the same ones are often repeated: heights, death, spiders, the dark, confined spaces. Most people would understand, nod their heads sympathetically and admit to having at least one of these fears.

But in truth, humanity has a much more widespread fear which none of us seem to acknowledge.

Change.

Often change only seems to arise as a response to a catastrophe. The United Nations, which is fundamental to international peace and security was formed as a response to the atrocities of World War II, which undermined those principles to such an extent that the world determined such an event could never occur again.

Even when catastrophes should catalyse change, there can be no action at all. And this comes down to the unfortunate root of authority – the consistency of change often dependent on whether the politicians ultimately conclude that a new law determining how society behaves should be passed. Looking at the US government, we could conclude that the power to change how society operates often feels out of reach for ordinary citizens. We seem to passively watch as the government partakes alone in the ceremony of ruling over what society needs and does not need to progress.

But is it not frustrating, to see how inconsistent the government is in determining what needs to be changed? One only has to examine the actions of the US government to feel this sentiment.

The US government has had two differing approaches to how it aims to reform society. Gun control and the control of a woman's right to abort. Two issues which are determined by a few and yet, still have the impact of changing the lives of the 330 million people who reside in the US.

When it comes to gun control, the fear of change has become overwhelming for the American government. The Second Amendment is held onto tightly as the gun owner's safeguard and has set the status quo for the use of guns in the US since its introduction in 1791 where it declared that it was a fundamental right to bear arms. Mass shootings occurred over the years, thousands affected through the tragedy of losing their own lives or seeing the lives of those their loved ones taken in a single moment. In the last 20 years alone – names of shootings such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Pulse, Stoneman Douglas High School are ones that will be immortalised as tragedies of the greatest extent. And yet the US government has been obstinate in the face of calls to change – it was not a question of how the right to bear arms could be changed but instead how to leave it unaltered because it was a founding law of the nation and to break from tradition was not an option. Instead other responses were sought: thoughts and prayers, the possibility of arming teachers because apparently more guns would de-escalate the issue but none of these changes addressed the root of the issue.

Contrast this to the response to whether abortion should be banned. The government passed that in certain states a woman's fundamental human right to determine what should happen to their bodies was restricted. And who passed the vote to decide this? Twenty-five white, male senators. Whilst so reluctant to alter the right to bear arms, it seemed acceptable to change the status quo on a women's right to abortion just because of the word of twenty-five men. Does this change being enforceable seem appropriate? The government needs to stop being the sole partaker in these ceremonies of meeting collectively to discuss what change needs to be made and then deciding that because they are the authority of the nation, that they can make the change on behalf of all of society.

As humans, we are so reluctant to embrace change and that is why we leave the hard task to a select few – the government. Yet why are we scared, when change is how this civilization has progressed to where it is now? We are so quick to shut down the idea that change is needed because we think of the what ifs. What if no one else supports the change?

Same-sex couples were left abandoned in their quest to have their identity in society validated up until the late half of the 20th century. Though such a change was extremely overdue, in 2001, the Netherlands became the first nation to legalize same sex marriage despite values which date back centuries that unjustifiably judge members of the LGBT+ community as undeserving of the rights other individuals are entitled to. Whilst we have much more progress to make. In 2019, twenty-seven other nations have now followed suit and have also legalized same sex marriage. Once one nation said it was time to create a change, others followed soon after.

So why is it that change is so difficult for us to implement when we know that we can change the status quo? Part of it comes from how it can feel like change is out of our reach. We may have a desire to change an issue but as individuals, we often feel like we don't have a voice or the resources needed. Political apathy seems logical to many – why care, when I cannot do anything about it?

But as a society, we have forgotten about the chain-reaction that one individual can create. We have seen several of these people through history – Mahatma Gandhi pushing for the independence of India from the British, Martin Luther King of the Civil Rights Movement, Malala Yousafazi who advocated for the education of women against the Taliban. All these people at the time, held no power except their voices and a genuine belief that change was possible.

A single individual has the power to begin a ceremony – to invite other people in society, to join them and participate in this act of creating change. This person does not have to have a particular background, income, gender, race, religion to make a change. Just having the courage to put one's self against the status quo and say, this is an issue, this needs change is one that can inspire many others who were too reluctant to come forward, to speak up and agree. Even if it begins with only one other person – one should never underestimate how strong a different voice is in a world that holds onto the status quo.

We need to stop being fixated on the status quo, and realise that it is our collective responsibility as individuals to create a civilization that we are proud of living in. To do so, requires everybody to take part in the ceremony of voicing what changes need to be made. We cannot create an ideal world with the input of only a few members of authority, nor can we do it if we are only ever using change as a reactive response to a catastrophe. We must all actively think about how we can continuously make small changes that will make our civilization greater for all. To recognise that even though you are one individual, that the status quo can be overcome.

Michelle Ai and Katherina Zang wrote a story that is a wonderful reimagining of Shakespeare's *Othello* from the perspectives of Desdemona and Emilia.

MAY THE WINDS BLOW TILL THEY HAVE AWAKENED DEATH

By Michelle Ai and Katherina Zang

The lion of Cyprus stands bright against the sky, sunlight reflecting the colours onto Desdemona, dappling her skin with gold and fiery red. Up here, the wind blows frenzied and viciously, the ropes holding the Cypriot flag straining to keep it from blowing out to sea, never to be retrieved again. The vastness of the ocean awes her, deep blues and ceruleans extending further than the horizon, disturbed only by cuts of foamy white waves, crashing, fading, rising again.

She sighs, and the sound is lost in the gale.

"I seem to be finding you up here more often than not, Desdemona."

Emilia's voice comes as a surprise - though not one unwelcomed. She turns to look at the woman below, smile met with the other's own, as different in mien as they are. Desdemona steps back from her position on the crow's nest, gripping the barrier behind her with white knuckles. Part of her wishes she had not ventured quite as high as this, for the drop to the deck seemed tenfold taller when at the edge of the nest, but the other parts remain uncowed. Emilia is resolute for all Desdemona can see.

She completes the climb with very little grace but a great deal of dignity, stepping onto the platform beside her and gazing down to the deck from where she departed. "As many times as I ascend to these heights, I will never get used to seeing the world from this position. Remind me never to look down again!"

"The only reason we come up here is to enjoy the view, Emilia, and I have found it a common agreeance that the sky and the sea are much more impressive than the soldiers below, no?" Desdemona's grip relaxes marginally. "Therefore, there is no need to look down."

The flag billows above the pair, and the colours shift again.

"On my part, I find it quite enjoyable to watch people go about their duties...though it's rather repetitive when there's nothing new for them to do. I daresay many of their uniforms are in need of reworking, and even more so after the battle has been won."

Emilia's dark hair is now tinted red. It reminds Desdemona of sparks and burning coals.

"Oh, do not speak of battles!" She glances past Emilia with agitation.

Blue and cloudless, as far as she can see. The roar of the wind makes it hard to think. "What I would give to be with Othello in these troubled times. I worry for him, Emilia - but parallel to that is my worry for myself! I..."

She trails off, words caught in her throat. Emilia raises a brow.

"You worry for yourself? Why's that?"

"I - I know not." Her brows are creased, possibly in thought, possibly from stress. Golden hair swirls, tangles, casts harsh shadows on her face, and she bites her lip.

"...I told you of Othello's tales almost immediately after I first heard them. That you remember."

Yes, Emilia remembers - not the details of each story (for they struck her as rather outlandish), but how Desdemona spoke them, with animated eyes of fire and vitality, and an accent as far from Othello's as possible, but always naming the unknown lands and creatures the way he apparently would.

"He would show me trinkets from each of his voyages, some rare and more delicate than others. I have one on my person now."

"The handkerchief?"

Ebony-black cloth is retrieved from inside Desdemona's dress sleeve. Sheens of indigo and gold form waves, folding between each tiny embroidered strawberry, stitched with a red far more vivid than any European dyes Emilia had seen. She holds it so gently, cradling with such care as if it could tear into a hundred slivers to be scattered out into the sea.

"It was the first of his gifts when we began to see each other in private... behind my father's back."

"Are you afraid of the signior?"

The thought of Desdemona being afraid of Brabantio occurs as rather uncharacteristic on two parts - her mistress had never expressed any familial fear, and her father gave her no reason to. He said many things, often aggressive in nature (none were directed at Desdemona, thank the heavens), but hardly any of them translated into any semblance of action. Emilia's hypothesis is proven when Desdemona shakes her head, lightly crossing her arms.

"I know I do not worry about his opinion any longer, for he has made it... quite clear that he shall have nothing to do with me now. It is simply that I worry that I have wronged him. By rebelling against the rules of our house, running away and - even for loving Othello. Was he right in opposing our marriage?"

Emilia moves to grasp Desdemona's hand, giving it a squeeze. It was swiftly reciprocated.

"Of course not. As you said in the court-"

"- He is my lord of duty, but as my mother preferred him before her own father, I am too. I did truly believe what I said- and still do! I am justified, but even logic does not seem enough to free me from my anxieties. Alas, I cannot explain it very well."

Desdemona removes her hand from Emilia's, easing the handkerchief back into her sleeve. She remains in that position, nervous fingers fiddling with the lace trim of her cuffs.

"I understand."

Emilia tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, as Desdemona turns toward her, incredulous though she says nothing.

"Soldiers are trained to assess wounds and risks. They can estimate when one will die, or if it's possible to get care before they bleed out."

"Emilia-"

A raised hand silences her.

"When a soldier senses their friend is dying, they know he cannot survive without a miracle, and yet they'll remain by their side, praying that they'll live, hoping against all sense of reason for God's intervention. Rationally, they know it cannot be, but this does not release them from their optimism."

"A soldier in battle is very much like a woman in love, then," Desdemona muses. She gives Emilia a thin smile, resting her arms on the ledge of the nest. "You are implying that I logically know my father is in the wrong, but my love for him prevents me from accepting it?"

Emilia nods, grateful that she has gotten her point across. The other pauses.

"I see. Thank you for understanding."

They are silent for a while longer.

Behind them, the ship cuts through the ocean, leaving behind foam and waves in its wake, a bright white brushstroke lashed on an infinitely fathomless canvas of azure. But there is nothing but their ship against the sea - no boats, no land, nothing.

"We are so far away from Venice," Desdemona remarks. Her voice is soft and unsure. "Away from everything we know. Have you ever travelled this far?"

"I cannot say I have. Your father would assert that I stay with you during times of conflict. Even if I refused, my husband would have likely forbade me from travelling with him."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

It's obvious from her distracted tone that Desdemona is still caught up in her own little grievances to truly sympathise, staring absently into the distance. "I'm sure he has his reasons."

"Yes, yes, of course. His reasons I know not, however I have little desire to find out."

When Desdemona does not reply, Emilia looks upon her with a growing sense of perturbation.

"I brought up Othello's tales for I am worried about him. Which I should not be - he has convinced the state and I his military worth by not only his tales, but his accomplishments - he's a general! A general of Venice no less, and to have liberated himself from the tragedies he was born into, is more than enough qualification to lead an army against the Turks. I detest my refusal to listen to my own logic and reason! I very much want to learn how to stop myself from fretting and lingering on my past actions."

Her voice is even and strong with a sense of resolve and finality, but it tremors on the last few words - reminding Emilia of just how young, how sheltered from the world she is.

"I believe there's very little you can learn in regards to your emotions. Perhaps it's human nature to be irrational at times, so you're not alone in this."

"Everything I do - It feels wrong!" Heedless, Desdemona appears to be glaring - yet almost pleading - at no-one in particular. Her eyes are fixed on a point only she can see, and it pains Emilia's to see Desdemona so desperately frustrated, wallowing in her insecurities. She opens her mouth to speak, but the other continues before words form.

"Everything I do, everything I say feels like I've made a mistake. One that is irreversible, almost unforgivable."

She whips around, suddenly with little sense of self-preservation at these heights, and clasps Emilia's hands. Their eyes searing, one with concern, the other with distress.

"I don't like it, Emilia. I do love him, I do! I shouldn't be feeling like this, right? I should have faith in him-"

" - Desdemona! Listen!"

Exasperation strains her voice, slightly too harsh, and Emilia inwardly recoils from herself. The other is young. She is inexperienced in love. And her love is altogether a different kind than the type Emilia knows.

"Listen," she repeats, sighing. "Othello is the first man you have fallen in love with, and it is... a woeful coincidence that Brabantio disapproves of him. I know you've said you care not for his opinion, but you must recognise that what you say does not always reflect the truth on the inside. You do not like this. I never did expect you to. But take it from someone who has loved before - you cannot predict anyone's feelings in a new relationship. It will be precarious and unsettling, yet also spontaneous. Every day will give you something new. Whether you

should or should not be feeling whatever you are is not in your hands, at least for now. And to stay with Othello, to follow him to Cyprus despite it all... that is faith enough."

Emilia thinks she has done a decent job at imparting some sense of comfort, but apparently not. She does not know whether to be disheartened at her failure, or to try and try again. Taking a deep breath in, she vouches for the second option, but Desdemona looks away at the sound - a miniscule fraction of a movement, but it is enough to stop the other in her tracks.

They lapse into a tense quiet, the whistling of the now calm wind providing ambience amongst the idle chatter of soldiers and crew, and the continuous rise and fall of waves beating against the side of the ship. The Cypriot flag hangs almost limp against the flagpole, and Desdemona's face takes on a rather sullen expression in the lack of warm, reflected light.

To say the least, it is discomforting to Emilia, and she cannot imagine what the other might be feeling at the moment.

Another while passes, until the silence becomes intolerable.

"I have heard the soldiers talk of Valentine's day very recently," Emilia starts, watching out the corner of her eye for any reaction from Desdemona. "I do believe that is tomorrow."

"Y-yes," Desdemona answers. Emilia waits, expectant for a reply. "I heard Othello mention it on the afternoon of our wedding, though it was not to me - some soldier, I expect, to be involved in a grand spectacle of love."

She smiles, despite herself, and her cheeks tinge the lightest shade of red when she next speaks. "It was meant to be a secret, so I have never mentioned the subject to him lest he becomes suspicious - ah. I just realised... He was not expecting our departure for Cyprus, was he?"

Emilia shakes her head. Desdemona bites her lip again, hands subconsciously rising to smooth out the tangles in her curls. "That is quite... disappointing. I had dearly hoped we could have done something to celebrate the occasion."

Her eyes flicker down. "Many of them probably feel the same way."

'Them' refers to the other residents on the ship - soldiers, crew, attendants, and pageboys, most of whom were similarly wrenched from the security of Venice and the shelter of their loved ones, to this battle against the Turks. Emilia follows Desdemona's gaze and hums in agreement.

"Coincidentally enough, all this brings to mind the origins of Valentine's Day. Have you learned of it?"

Desdemona did not.

"I suppose I will tell you now, then.

"The story recounts the events of one particular Saint Valentine's life. He lived in Rome, under the reign of an emperor named Claudius. Though Claudius was not opposed to all forms of marriage, he outlawed the elopement of young men and their wives-

"No!" Desdemona exclaims, hand moving to cover her mouth.

"For unmarried men would make better soldiers. According to Claudius, they would focus more on battles and military exploits, and less on family issues, without have a family to care for.

"Saint Valentine, upon hearing of the news, was outraged at the decree, and consequently went on to perform marriages behind the watch of the law. He was, of course, found and arrested, and eventually sentenced to die. Wh-

"How could they! Unbelievable-

"Desdemona, let me finish. When they confined him to a prison until his execution date, the jailer's daughter would visit, initially to meet the man who married off a few of her friends, but then they grew closer and closer, and the daughter would stay next to Valentine's cell for hours on end, exchanging stories and sweet nothings. However, Claudius's mind could not be swayed, and Valentine was killed. Killed for love - wait - and we remember his name through a letter he sent to the daughter, signed 'from your Valentine.'"

Desdemona's eyes are wide, whether in awareness of the story's message, in pity for the saint, she cannot tell.

"Killed for love..." She sniffs, frowning.

"Tell me, Desdemona." Emilia decides to regard the soldiers below in their slightly garish uniforms, appearing in the gaps between criss-crossing rope and salt-soaked sails, as she braces herself.

"Do you think Valentine was a fool to die for love?"

The question strikes her as so ridiculous, she sharply exhales, almost bordering on a laugh.

"Of course not! He - he loved love, and it was incredibly heroic of him to right something horribly unjust! To have faith in a cause and to go so far as to risk his life and freedom for it is the farthest thing from being a fool! His passion for others is something I aspire to have, or otherwise be the woman such a man rested his eyes on."

Whatever Emilia's sentiment is, it seems to be almost the complete opposite of Desdemona's words, judging by the lowering of her eyebrows into a look of near perplexity.

"You... you would die for love? It could be possible that you'll be filled with such passion as you described, and sacrifice your own life for the sake of others happiness and content?"

There is no disbelief evident in her voice, a stark contrast to her outward expression, and no shock toward Desdemona's audacity. Their eyes don't meet, and when the other speaks, her voice is unfaltering.

"Yes. I would die for love."

Though an expected answer, it fills Emilia with a sick sort of disappointment. She drops her shoulders - when did they tense? She can't remember.

"And it makes no difference whether it is my own love or another's! I know you are talking about Othello, and I will tell you now that I can and will do anything in my power to make him happy. He is my husband and my lord, and I trust him with my life."

Emilia does not respond. Slowly, she looks away from Desdemona. For a long time, neither speak, the wind billowing around them.

"Emilia?"

"I'm alright. Merely thinking, that's all." It is not a lie, but about what, even she doesn't know. Perhaps nothing.

"Desdemona, you are one of the most lovely, sweetest people I have ever met." A small, tired smile spreads across her face, as she reaches to hold one of Desdemona's hands with both her own.

"Othello is a very fortunate man to have a Valentine such as you."

"O-oh." Her blush deepens, as her bashful grin widens. "Emilia, you flatter me!"

"How could I flatter you with the truth?"

"You deceive yourself, then! No wonder my lord calls your husband Honest Iago! Any man would have such virtue compared to a woman like you!"

She laughs, suddenly without a care in the world, and Emilia wishes they could stay like this forever.

"Don't worry, I'm simply jesting. I'm glad to be acquainted with you."

Red and gold filters through her hair again, an angel of Venice resting in a nest above the sea. She tilts her head, looking out toward the horizon and the light of the newly setting sun.

"We should -"

“Desdemona! Emilia!”

A deeper voice calls from beneath the two, gruff and slightly accented. Desdemona frees herself from Emilia’s grasp, turning and leaning over the nest to look down at Othello’s ensign, who’s waving up to them from the deck.

“Hello, Iago! Is it time for dinner?”

“Yes, on the berth deck! We’re expecting you in a few minutes!”

“And you shall see us there!”

They exchange a wave goodbye, Desdemona already clambering out from the nest (with equal lack of grace, but probably less dignity). Emilia can see her visibly relax when she touches the thick rope of the rigging, and her hands trembling only a little when she descends.

“...That was a nice talk we had, Emilia,” Desdemona says when the other sets foot on the main deck. “Thank you very much.”

It is not long into the next morning when the sighting of land is announced, and when the growl of thunder rolls from behind the ship toward Cyprus. Emilia hopes Desdemona’s anxiety isn’t rekindled at the absence of Othello’s warship in the harbour, or by the masses of strangers on the looming fortresses. She does not seem happy, but she smiles through her distress, forces a laugh at Iago’s pointed jokes, and peeks too many times toward the ocean.

Speaking nothing but defence, and praying that everything will be alright, Emilia stands by her side.

A trumpet blares from within the fortress.

Othello has arrived.

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