



# Burning Bright 2022



**Burning Bright** is our annual publication of Hornsby Girls High School student writing.

Our students are clever, thoughtful and creative. They are observant, passionate and articulate about the world around them and embrace writing in all forms - personal essays, poetry, short stories and scripts. This anthology celebrates their talent.

Thank you to Zoe Zou in Year 10 for her cover design and to Sophy Guan and Alice Tan in Year 10 for their artwork.

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Years 7-10





# YEAR 7 WRITING

## *Lamentations*

Sophie Luo

Every four years, a ladder would descend from the moon that hung high in the Cimmerian canvas of the night and a child, always an exemplary intelligent one, would be mysteriously compelled to climb it. The sky would always be riddled with doom-laden clouds bloated with hatred and vindictiveness, yet a small patch of darkness would always be visible, covered by the luminous clock.

Every four years, children would be petrified in their beds, sweat beading upon their brow and their hands knotted in their blankets, their visage pale with overwhelming apprehension as they hoped that Luck wouldn't avert her eyes from them. Every four years, parents would beg for the deities to keep their children home, their hands clasped together, their lips moving as they chanted desperate prayers, their superstition overcoming their logical sense. Every four years, the prairies would be deserted, not even swallows appearing, swooping in great, drunken loops as they warbled their mellifluous lullabies.

Not Leila, however. She'd always desired a greater life, outside the humdrum circle of houses that made up the village of Amyesque. When the heavens decided a change of attire and donned their magnificent obsidian cape, a belt of bling-silver stars at its hemline, she tossed and turned in bed, mumbling incoherent sentences about her destiny. She was too beautiful, too smart, too quintessential for this world she knew she didn't belong in. She longed to live somewhere that had Gatsbyesque glamour as its signature aura.

Her mother didn't approve. She was the town doctor, and got by well enough to say that they were better off than countless others. Leila remembered her mother's harsh, unforgiving words every time she told her of her dream to be in a place more grandiose than Amyesque.

"Leila, Leila, my daughter, my only. Darling, Amyesque is your home and there is none other you can call the same name. You should feel grateful for your life, because we are prosperous and you are extremely lucky to be part of my family."

"But what about Father?" She would shoot back, nostrils flaring and gorgeous cerulean eyes flanked by pale lashes bright. "He always said that I was better than this horrendous place."

"Your father is gone, and you will do well to remember that." Here Leila's mother would glower at her, lips turned downwards in a scowl, before stomping off to do another one of her myriad chores.

Yet, it was the night of The Compulsion, as townspeople would call it, a shudder in their voices as they stumbled over the syllables of the word. Leila bit her lip; would she be accepted? Of course she would, she berated herself. She was the smartest of all the children in the village; she was sure of it. During school, she was always the first with an answer to everything, her hand with its unlined palm and delicate fingers shooting up, a hair's breadth away from pounding her desk in frustration and impatience as the teacher's droopy eyes scanned the classroom and laid down, as almost always, on her. Even at home, her faultless memory contained a plethora of recipes that her mother would easily forget, and she recited them so fast that she would be asked to repeat them again.

As she worried over her dilemma, her limbs began to quake and her arms began to lift up, as if a witch was waving a wand over her and she was being controlled like a marionette. Leila had to keep herself from squealing as euphoria invaded her mind. She was being led to the ladder!

The Compulsion willed her to put on her shoes and creep out of her house. The monastic silence was stifling, like a fog on a humid afternoon where the earthy petrichor of autumn was thick in the air. She walked through the plains, the wheat waving its last goodbyes, before she arrived at the ladder. It was a shrivelled old thing; it creaked loudly, and the sounds would have echoed across the prairie if it

weren't for the lacerating gale that whipped her lissome blonde hair against her porcelain, doll-like face. She climbed and climbed into an eternity, until her limbs were weak with fatigue. When she looked down she bit back a startled gasp; if she fell, certain death would greet her.

As the sun approached, Leila found herself nearing the top of the ladder. As the red wound crept higher and higher, she kept back a scream as she lurched to the top, her muscles yapping like bruised and battered hounds after a tiring hunt in protest.

Death smiled at her. "Death is eternal and freeing. It is what you desire, Leila. I'm only doing you a favour. Join the rest of them, and your wish will be fulfilled."

And indeed, Leila finally felt at peace there. She smiled while gazing down at the world. She was certain that her life couldn't get any worse from then onwards. Her goal had been achieved, for death really was the solution to her dilemma. Her forever holy grail in a place with Gatsbyesque glamour as its signature aura, and the moon as the answer.

**Winner Year 7 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition**



## *The Moon People*

Lilia Brown

The sky darkened with stars that glistened like diamonds in the night sky. My parents had already gone to bed and I sat down on my wooden chair, glancing across my bedroom to face Giagiá's old room. Memories of her warm smile and lavender perfume flowed through my mind. One month had already passed since Giagiá had died.

I walked across the hallway into Giagiá's bedroom and looked around. There were photos of my Bampás on her desk and her favourite books were on the bookshelf. All of her beloved items remain untouched, almost like she still lingered in the house.

One story that Giagiá used to tell me was called 'The Moon People'. It was a story of our people, long ago when the gods and kings reigned over our lands. Our people were never afraid of death. On the nights of a full moon, when the moon came alive, those in grief would find those they had lost.

Grief had consumed my soul. It felt like there was a part of me that was missing. My whole body ached from the loss of Giagiá.

The bed upstairs creaked then stilled into silence. I tried to put away my thoughts, but uncertainty clouded my mind. I looked through the window, as the moonlight danced across the sky. The cows grazed on the paddocks and the chickens clucked. I stared at the glowing moon. The longer I gazed at it, the more I could hear someone faintly calling my name. It beckoned me, pulling the string of fate in its direction.

Then as I watched the moon, a long ladder descended. The ladder was an opportunity to finally see Giagiá. I carefully lifted the window open and snuck outside into the night.

As I snuck out the window, I hesitated and looked back. My heart thundered in my chest. My mind was full of thoughts but I decided that if there was a chance to see Giagiá, then I had to take it.

Cautiously, I stepped onto the grass and gazed up at the full moon. Each step I took made my hands sweat. But desperation clung to my every step. I needed to see her. Finally, I stood near the ladder and reached out to grab it. I felt sturdy oak beneath my touch, and as my grip tightened, I rushed up into the air like a bird in flight.

The ladder seemed to extend endlessly into the night sky. At full speed, I headed towards the moon. The wind whistled against my ears and I raced past the clouds. The houses in the countryside turned into little specks while the stars became brighter the higher up I went. For the first time in a long time, I felt my mind free itself from a weight that had become too familiar.

I stopped ascending. Silence penetrated the night, only to be shattered by a single voice.

"Athanasios! You finally came," said the voice.

I blinked and turned around. Right in front of my eyes, Giagiá stood there with her long, silver hair that shone from the moon's glow and her wide smile that beamed at me.

My heart swelled. My legs moved of their accord, stumbling along the moon's unfamiliar ground as my hands reached for her, tears rolling down my face. Gasps turned into sobs as I raced towards her. Each step I took led me closer to her, but each second stretched into an eternity until I finally felt her embrace. My hands gripped her, never wanting to let go.

At last in her presence, I felt the missing part of me return.

"I missed you too, Athanasios," she said, her voice raw.

She looked at me with her beautiful, gentle smile and instantly she was the same cheerful person I knew. I glanced behind her. There were shops of all kinds, beautiful centrepieces outside and markets where amazing handcrafted gifts and homemade food were sold. Laughter resonated in the air. Sounds of celebration and glows of warm light danced in the night.

“Athanasios, welcome. We are the Moon People,” Giagiá said. “We have prepared many meals for your arrival.”

The Moon People had set up tables filled with delicious food. Bouquets of peonies, blue tweedia and lilac were placed in the centre of each table. My mouth watered at the aroma of the food. It included savoury meals like moussaka and kolokithokeftedes. There were also sweet foods such as karithopita and loukoumades. As I approached, I clasped Giagiá’s hand tightly. Her hand was a familiar warmth and she gave me a reassuring squeeze as she nudged me forward.

I indulged in the flavoursome food and then walked around the town savouring all the sights, sounds and sensations that whirled around like a summer dream. The Moon People showed me many places including cafes, restaurants, and cultural landmarks. I got to experience new things but an unwelcome thought tugged at me. I would have to return soon.

It began to get brighter and brighter as each minute passed. The sky slowly transitioned into beautiful colours of red, pink, orange and yellow. The morning was approaching and the Moon People smiled sadly as they realised that the gateway between the Moon and Earth was closing.

“Athanasios, thank you for visiting the Moon but there is a very important question we must ask you. Are you staying here with us or do you want to return?”

As much as I wanted to stay with Giagiá and the Moon People, I knew this wasn’t my place. I looked around at everyone and they waved goodbye, as if knowing my answer too. I said my last goodbyes and headed towards the ladder. The second I grasped the sides; I was instantly returned to Earth.

I tried to look back, but they were gone. All that remained was a memory. One meant for keeping.

**Winner Year 7 Old Girls’ Union Writing Competition**

## ***Broken World***

Olivia Van der Vlies

*(The year is 2100)*

You think we don't care about the world we live in today.  
But we do. This is our world too. The world you destroyed.

The Elders tell stories of the world they lived in when they were young. Carefree, they would run through the trees. They drew pictures of trees. Such fascinating things, trees. So many different varieties. Green and bushy at the top, and solid, chunky and brown at the bottom, with bits called roots that stretched deep under the ground! I can't believe something so beautiful thrived in the hard rocky ground. They said the ground was soft back then, and that things lived under the surface!

I wish I could have seen a tree.

It sounded brilliant, the world they lived in. Until something called Global Warming happened.

"Some blamed it on the people. Others blamed the people who had power over us, people called politicians. They said the politicians weren't doing enough to save us. They said the people were polluting the rivers and oceans. The oceans and rivers used to be blue, like your blanket. My friends and I used to go down and swim in the waters. But then people would throw their rubbish into the rivers, polluting them, they also killed the forests. Forests were places with lots of trees. But then we started to cut them down. People would use the wood that came from the trees to make lots of different things, and animals would lose their homes, and then there were no more trees, no more animals, no more oceans. The world got warmer, and icebergs melted. They were white, cold, and all sorts of animals lived on them. But they melted into water, and then there were icebergs no more. When the people realised what was happening, they tried to clean up the world, they tried to fix it, they planted trees, but it was too late. Nothing could be done. The human population grew as the animal population shrunk. And there was nothing we could do." Elder Ivory told me one day.

"Couldn't you speak out? Couldn't you try to make a change earlier? Why didn't you?"

Ivory sighed. "Us children knew what was going on, some spoke out. We rallied and protested and went on strikes, but the adults took no notice. They didn't take it seriously. Some did, but most didn't. We had no choice but to obey the adults, because after all, they were older than us. They made the decisions. We were young, but the adults were the ones who were foolish. They didn't seem to care. When they realised, when they cared, it was too late. Too late. Far, far too late."

"Too late? Too late for what?" I say.

"The adults started too late and gave up too early. There is no way we could fix the world now! The land is now dry, and dead. We too shall soon be dead."

"Promise me you will treasure these memories and share the story of the old world. Promise me," she says, sounding desperate.

"I promise."

Ivory hands me a small pouch. I tug on the strings, open it, and find pressed flowers, and photographs of trees, grass, animals, beautiful forests and oceans. Things we had which we shall never have again. Things I will never get to see. Things we took for granted, things we lost, that we lost because we were careless, that we will never see again because when we wanted to save the world, wanted to save ourselves, it was too late.

**Olivia's writing was shortlisted for The Whitlam Institute What Matters Competition.**

# YEAR 8 WRITING

## *Hope*

Caitlin Chung

I watch in melancholy as sharp grains of sand fly through the wind and sting her cheek. The girl's short legs carry her clumsily across the hot earth towards her mother and father. They are clothed in rough fabrics, the colours muted and the edges fraying and torn. The sharp angles of the landscape taunt me with their structure and aggressive power, and I look wistfully at the despairing family on the barren land.

## *Shapes*

*The world is made of shapes; sharp angles, soft curves, and straight lines.  
The world is also made of structure and power, and of community and connection.  
Sometimes, the world taunts me with its force, and with the joy it prevents me from  
bringing...*

I watch the land as my mind casts back to when I was among them. I remember the sounds, shouts of joy and happiness. I remember the colours, shades of green and blue painting the vast landscape. I remember the shapes, soft curves that comforted me in the community, and connected me to the land. But now the cracks in the ground seem to stretch into a bottomless pit. A thick blanket of dirt and dust coats the earth, inciting vigorous coughs with every gust of wind. I feel a deep longing tugging at the back of my mind. A desperation to descend upon them and provide without being restrained by the thick clouds at night.

I watch as the family moves contently into their humble home. They disappear inside a battered building, the red roof tiles fading in colour and strength. Their dog trails tiredly behind them, his head as tall as the girl's. I sense his unnatural movements as he walks across the terrain, tension building in the sharp shapes hidden underneath his chocolate brown pelt. Once, that same dog had sustained a full frame, bounding with endless energy and joy. Now he stands weakly to the side, nudging the girl encouragingly with every stumble.

I watch the woman work in the fields, her heart depressing as she gazes at withering stalks of grain, and yellow blades of grass extruding from the fractured, parched ground. She lifts her daughter into her arms, and recalls days of swimming in the lake. Now the land is sun-baked, and hard like granite. How she yearns for a moist droplet of water to splash against her frail cheek again. How she yearns for rain to come.

I watch in sadness as the man carries what little he has grown to the market. His meagre offerings pale in comparison to others, worthless as a penny. He arrives home holding a paltry sack of food. I observe their conservative diet, the famished girl demolishing every morsel with immense hunger. Aspiring to be released once again, I longed to bestow this family with meals in lavish quantities. But as if fastened on a leash, I can do nothing but stare in silence.

I watch as scorching days turn to bitter, cold nights. Crops perish further, and the family's aspiration dwindles into a single drop of hope. I rest in the sky, restrained in the iron fist of the thick, dark clouds. As silence echoes throughout the valley, I hear a piercing howl. The family is huddled close together in their home, surrounding a limp, brown body on the ground.

I watch him writhing in pain, panting uncontrollably in laboured, uneven breaths. The dog's eyes flicker open, and I see the fragility in his sickly figure. The man tends lovingly to him, while the girl cries in her mother's arms. The dog has been her best friend all her life, and she scrunches her face in fear of losing him. As her father gently calms the dog's feverish actions, the girl whispers encouraging words into his ear. Words of hope. Words of life.

I watch as the man sadly carries the dog home after visiting the town vet. He talks in a low voice to his wife about the diagnosis, but despite not listening, I know what is wrong. The girl leans closer to the dog, crying as her father quietly explains his illness, and the cause. Dehydration. Malnutrition. Her mother worries for his recovery, knowing that his health rests on the hope of rain.

I watch as days pass slowly, time inching forward as if taunting the family with the inevitable. The family desperately attempts any method of recovery they can afford, but the dog's health drips away like water from a leaking tap. Each day grows more and more weary, as the workload of the family is increased. The man works on the farm, bringing his poor produce to the market. The woman tends to the dog, her efforts useless as she wrestles with the forces of nature. The girl's scrawny face grows paler, and her cheeks more sallow as the family's food runs low. I watch each night, as she looks to the skies and whispers her hope for the day to come. "Please..." She whispers, her hands held close to her chest. I sense a rush of freedom surge through me. "Please send the rain..."

I watch as dark clouds crowd the sky, and I feel an overwhelming sensation of power. The air turns humid, and a wet, musty smell fills the space. As the family exits their home to inspect the sudden change, I let loose a mighty downpour and descend upon them in a flourish of wild droplets. For a split second, they hesitate in confusion and doubt. Then the girl rushes forward with a toothy grin into the shower, soaking her clothes for the first time in months. Their dog barks in joy, and the man and his wife smile into the storm, signs of recovery from the devastating drought finally emerging.

I watch as the soft curves of water droplets land on their smiling faces, the promise of hope, connection, and community.

**Winner Year 8 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition**

*Piano Trio No.2 in C Minor Op.66*

Abigail Tang

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Piano Trio No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 66. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the piano part (measures 37-40) and the violin/cello parts (measures 37-40). The piano part features a crescendo followed by a diminuendo and a piano (p) dynamic. The violin/cello parts feature a crescendo followed by a diminuendo. The second system shows the piano part (measures 41-44) and the violin/cello parts (measures 41-44). The piano part features a piano piano (pp) dynamic and a crescendo. The violin/cello parts feature a piano piano (pp) dynamic and a crescendo. The third system shows the piano part (measures 45-48) and the violin/cello parts (measures 45-48). The piano part features a piano piano (pp) dynamic and a crescendo. The violin/cello parts feature a piano piano (pp) dynamic and a crescendo.

*First Movement*

***Allegro energico e con fuoco***  
***Speed, Energy & Fire.***

Bar 37. The sound of Papa's piano rides a beautiful crescendo in restless arced strides, only to swiftly diminuendo to its downfall. The mellow sounds of Mama's violin infused with my own cello playing, as the music melted into my ears. The energy and fire diminished within me, soothed by the tender balm of legato melodies. Each instrument played to perfection not only individually, but collectively. As a family. Notes interweaved and echoed each other, allowing the instruments to slot in effortlessly, creating a harmonious blend of symphony...

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*Second Movement*

"Adolf Hitler, *Führer und Reichskanzler* of the Nazi party Germany. 'All things that are not German MUST be destroyed in the motherland!' Switzerland Times, published 10/8/1938." The newspaper wrinkled as I set it down. It's been a year since I left.

1937. The sky was an ombre bloody red as a blanket of stygian fumes hovered above the head of our roofs. I attempted to look through the window, now stained with soot. Pages of music scattered across the concrete floor, the edges slowly disintegrating into piles of ash. My heart burned as the blazing flames erupted into sparks. Every passing minute, a piece of music, devoured and lost in the stomach of a crimson dragon. I turned my head back and saw my parents standing before me. Their eyes faded into a dull brown. In Papa's hands, a suitcase and my cello. With a worried expression painted on

*their faces, they managed a slight smile. Mama reached out toward me. Her fragile fingers holding my hands.*

“Go!”

That was the last time I saw them.

I return to myself, still sitting on my timber chair. Before me, an instrument residing in a mauve shell. The steel strings, frigid and lifeless against my hand. I hesitate and think about what I am. Holding the bow in one hand, I position my cello vertically, the cool maple wood resting against my leg. *Piano Trio No.2*

*Begin.*

Waves of nostalgia hit me as each note reverberates through the strands of my bow. The room, the music. My parents. The sound of my cello diminuendo-ed, as the reminiscence of the past floods my mind.

*bar 37 legato I shouldn't have left this was my fault how could i have been so heartless don't forget I don't deserve this i'm don't sorry forget i Don't. Forget. To. Count.*

I freeze. My heart pangs as my sweaty fingers tremble. Mind blurring into darkness, silence screams into my ears. It happened again. I could not hear my music. The vision that dwells within my auditory perception, blinded. Guilt washes over me. Why did I leave? I didn't deserve this. There was nothing left in the notes in my head, but a void of monochrome.

*I should've been the one to die.*

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### *Third Movement*

Most people listen to music in its most obvious form, sounds through and out the ear. But for me, I make a point to notice the colours.

*“Colours are the heart of music. When you find them, only then will you truly understand.”*

I still remember that day, when Mama placed her gentle hands upon my shoulders, leaned towards me and whispered these words into my ears. *“That's the secret of music playing that can touch the soul.”* Beethoven's 5th symphony, changed from lemonade pink to bittersweet, cherry red.

*Memories of a room, free from the rest of the world. A pleasant place to alleviate all stress. The only place where I am not reminded of the mustard yellow colour of the six-pointed star stuck onto all our doors.*

*The scent of sweet floral husk meandered around the room as the golden rays of afternoon sun welcomed through the delicate glass windows. Mama's callused fingers placed gently onto the neck of the instrument, caressing the strings on its hourglass body. Her other hand, arched and formed into a flawless position as she held the bow. A white layer of dust arose from the oak floor like Spring breaking the Winter snow, as her ebony silk dress danced fluidly. Next to her, Papa adjusted himself on his leather seat, his hands placed over the smooth black and white keys, ready to begin. They met my gaze. Their chocolate eyes flowed rivers of sweetness and love. It melted my heart. These moments belonged to us, healing any of the sorrows which the day perhaps had brought upon us with warm stanzas of Mendelssohn. The room, the memory. The music.*

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*Fourth Movement*

My parents always had a dream. A dream that we could share our love of music with the world, and how it is of central importance to everyone. It helps humanity to express and feel emotions without having to even speak. Colours are the heart of music. When you find them, only then will you truly understand. That was what my mother said. After the day I fled, my guilt, so stubbornly locked in the cages of my heart, was frozen behind layer upon layer of blank pages. But their hopes sparked an ambition in me to fulfil their dream on their behalf. There is nothing else to do except to persevere and break through the plane of darkness. One note at a time.

*Andante Espressivo*  
*Slow, Expressive, Passionate*

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system consists of three staves: a vocal line (top), a piano right hand (middle), and a piano left hand (bottom). The vocal line begins with a *dim.* marking, followed by a *p* marking. The piano accompaniment also features *dim.* and *p* markings. A section marked 'S' (Sostenuto) begins in the middle of the first system. The second system continues the vocal and piano parts, with *p* markings in the vocal and piano parts. The third system shows the vocal part with a *mf* marking and the piano accompaniment with *cresc.* and *f* markings. The score concludes with a *f* marking in the piano part.

Winner Year 8 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition



## *Deadly Whispers*

Ishani Sri Ganeshwaran

Misophonia disorder; not terminal but fatal to my high school social life. It makes me sensitive to sounds. Sounds which cause emotional distress and my trigger is whispers. It's challenging to avoid, especially in my school's environment.

High school.

People say it's an experience, I say it's an unnecessary evil. I trudge up the stairs towards my school with my cello case slumped on my back but it was the thoughts in my head that trickled down and added the weight on my shoulders. If it isn't obvious, I'm part of the school band, also known as the home to nerds and worthless beings alike. That's how it works in high school. You are categorised based on your appearance and hobbies, while your personality is redundant. I like to think of it as the sorting hat from Harry Potter, but instead of a magical accessory whispering in your ear, it's everyone else. First impressions are crucial, and as soon as my sisters' old run-down sneakers stepped foot into this school, there was no chance for me. The system is corrupt and there's no way around that. Diya wears make-up, she's too much. Johana ties her hair up, she's too conservative. Avery gets full marks, she's an overachiever.

I wince in pain as my shoulder gets pushed back from the passing swarm of students. My locker was painted an ocean blue but it was really a soundless lifeboat inside, the real, un-navigated sea was outside, here, and the forecast today was anything but smooth sailing. Squinting my eyes, I see someone waving at me. Strange. The corners of my lips lift as I raise my hand up to wave back, when it hits me. My heart searches for a place to hide, and when it sees no other options it dives head first into my stomach.

"What's up," exclaims the girl behind me. I stare gawk eyed at them as embarrassment fills my body. I expect a laugh, point or even a sympathetic look but instead I get nothing. I stand with confusion before I realise that I was so invisible that they didn't even notice my mistake. I guess that's the perks of social exclusion.

I enter room 301 and collapse in the first available seat. On my right I overhear whispers from two girls that end abruptly as soon as they realise I'm in earshot.

"Sorry Joyce, this seat is saved," one of them says with false sympathy. I smile more than I should and find another comfortable seat away from civilisation. The classroom air is humid and stuffy. It appears that Mr Manaro has yet again failed to keep his promise of fixing the air conditioners. If my brooding high school narrative needed a sound-track, the droning of these machines would be it. Cold wispy air that creeps through the window hits my bare arms and a shaky shiver escapes my mouth. I take a minute to listen to the sounds around me. All I hear are whispers. I find whispering ironic. It is no longer used as a tool of disguise, it's an obvious attempt at subtlety and an inclusive event of exclusivity. When you see your friends whispering, your mind is packed with thoughts of insecurity and your body is crowded with anxiousness. The following questions are repeated over in your head like a mantra. What are they saying? Why am I excluded? Are they talking about me?

The rest of the day is a blur of me pretending to pay attention and being alone with my thoughts. As most of the students rushed out of the classroom, I picked up my burdensome cello and proceeded to band. Frankly, this is my favourite part of the day. It's where I get to control the sounds instead of hiding from them. I find my usual seat at the back of the music room. The room is spacious, at least it appears that way due to the lack of students interested.

I lift my colossal cello and let it tower over me, casting a shadow on my face. I raise my bow and I slide it across the four delicate strings that it holds, each one playing a different sound. Finally, sound with a purpose. Sound that is unified, harmonised and conducted. There is such a command far purer than these shallow whispers. Misophonia is an intolerance to noise, but this isn't noise. This is music.

My reverie is shattered when my left ear picks up the sounds of giggles, from a gaggle of girls, that mimics mice.

"Oh no, look at these poor music geeks," one of them laughs. Their tone juxtaposes their words and I am prepared to morph into a cat and chase them down the hallway. I glance to my right to see Corey, the violin player, rolling her eyes. I'm taken aback at the discovery that someone else despises them. I snatch the available seat next to her and do what I dread the most. I whisper.

"They're just jealous that they have no musical talent," I joke. She notices my presence and sheds a smile. My heart beat bounces like the strum of cello strings.

"You're Joyce, right? The cello player." I nod in response. Her whispers are soft but articulate and her words don't slur. It doesn't affect me the way it should, and instead I find myself leaning in to hear her words more clearly.

"Do you want to get milkshakes after this?" Her expression is vulnerable as there is a high chance that I will decline her offer. Instead I say,

"If you're paying, why not." She laughs at my response. My first friend. The whispers of my thoughts fade away and I am no longer tied down by my feelings. High school. People say it's an experience, I say it's a plank into a meadow field. Sometimes you need to take a leap of faith to end up somewhere better.



## *Say Goodbye*

Solomii Koreniuk

Let's get something straight. I'm not that black cat you avoid at all costs; I won't show up to haunt you after you break a mirror; I definitely don't associate with Friday the 13th. You naive humans never seem to get it, but who can blame you. I'm unseen, transparent, intangible.

You may not know much about me, but I know all about you.

Humans are as colourful as a sunset, rough as tree bark, soft as clouds. All so different. Unique. Each one of you has something you love, something you live for. Yet none of you want to be around me. You skulk away, you try to hide; your fear is tangible, I notice it every day. I want to be loved. I want to be seen.

I get none of those privileges, yet I love you the most. My *dear* brother may be admired, but he doesn't love you. I sometimes wonder whether there was some mistake. Whether our roles were switched. I understand more than most, but still this answer evades me. I guess that's just the way it is. Messy. Like life itself.

But this story isn't just about me. It's about a girl, Lily Baxter. She was different from the rest. I noticed as soon as her sparkling, amber eyes locked on mine. She had short, curly, orange hair and an oversized t-shirt worn like a dress. She stood in a lush, grass green field, tiny water droplets reflecting the shining sun. Lily waved, her hand moving quickly, like an excited puppy wagging its tail. My eyebrows shot upwards, grazing my hairline as I gaped at her small, freckled, beaming face. A fly weaved around me, and flew straight into my open mouth. Gagging, I pulled myself together, waving back at her.

### **2 years later**

Lily's heart thumped in her chest, her feet hitting the burnt sienna coloured dust as she chased after me. Her hand reached out, fingers grazing my back as she tripped, her face smacking into the ground. "Tag!" She yelled with a faceful of dust, brushing herself off as she stood. I crouched, hands on my knees, out of breath, sucking in the hot, dry, dust filled air. A loud shout rang through the farm.

"Lily, dinner!" It was Lily's mother, Natalie.

Lily sighed, pulled my arm and said, "Come on Devlon. It's dinner time." We walked, hand in hand, towards the grey house Lily called home. Natalie was waiting at the door, ready to chivvy us inside.

### **3 Facts about Natalie Baxter**

She couldn't see me.

She was told I was Lily's imaginary friend.

She was nice enough to play along.

The house had worn, oak planked floors, low ceilings and was filled with a variety of threadbare furniture. The kitchen was old, wallpaper peeling in the corners, but nonetheless, it had to be one of

the most homely places in the world. Lily sat at the kitchen table, her legs barely brushing the floor. I sat down next to her and watched as she ate the macaroni and cheese that her mother had prepared. Natalie washed the dishes in a small bucket, trying to save the little water they had. When it was time for bed, Lily embraced me tightly.

“Good night Devlon.” She whispered in my ear. I smiled, and wished her sweet dreams. She opened the front door and I stepped into the cool night air, the dark sky decorated with glittering stars.

\* \* \*

“Why?” Lily asked, stomping her foot and crossing her arms.

“Darling, it’s been two years since the drought began. We can’t give him enough food or water anymore. You know we have to put him down. We have to say goodbye,” Natalie said quietly, trying to comfort the fuming girl. Lily burst into tears, wrapping her arms around the sleek, jet black body of her beloved dog. Natalie crouched down, loosening the weeping girl’s arms from around the dusty mass, she wrapped them around her own body, hugging her tightly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice breaking. And I watched. I watched the tender moment, the oh-so tender moment of mother embracing child. Silently, I witnessed the broken world. The world I broke.

And I knew. I had to leave.

The thought flooded my veins. I shivered, despite the scorching heat. But the crushing weight of guilt bore down on my fear. I did this. I made the drought. I was to blame. I bring the rotten, decaying luck that was bestowed upon me wherever I go. Who was I to think this would be different?

I am, and always will be, Bad Luck.

The guilt and shame built up inside me, like a volcano about to erupt. The only way to stop the drought - to bring cool, wet, life giving rain - would be to say goodbye. I took three deep breaths in an attempt to steady myself, but ended up choking on the myriad of emotions coursing through me. I stepped away, my legs felt like lead, despite the wave of resolution inside me.

I continued walking. Walking away from the place that felt like home. Walking away from the people I loved most. Walking away as rain plummeted from the sky. The rain pelted the ground behind me, becoming heavier and louder the farther I went. A thick petrichor filled my nostrils, and I smiled, tears sliding down my cheeks. Because sometimes, if you really love someone, you have to leave.

# YEAR 9 WRITING

## *A Letter from Wordsworth*

Lydia Ma

Mr. William Wordsworth,  
Dove Cottage,  
Cumbria.  
24 August 1832

Mr. Sampson Low,  
42 Lamb Conduit Street,  
London.

To my most esteemed colleague,

While enjoying a cup of tea on my balcony in Grasmere, I was interrupted by a matter which could only be described as heartbreaking. The horrors, as plainly laid out to me, were in regard to the exclusion of my name, William Wordsworth, from your anthology, *Nothing But the Best: Every Romantic Worth Reading*. And thus, the knife was plunged. You could only imagine the pain and sorrow that engulfed me upon hearing that my name - the idea that my works and life's endeavours did not merit inclusion in such a respected anthology. To see my work dismissed truly burdens my heart.

As such, I write to you on this day in hopes of resolving this matter, perhaps healing the wound you have so sharply inflicted in my side. As you are aware, some of the concepts central to Romanticism are the beauty of nature, the relationship between the natural and human-made worlds, and the importance of solitude - all of which are effectively explored throughout my poetic collections. Hence, upon considering my arguments for inclusion, I believe you will soon find yourself returning to your senses.

If you recall my work, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* was one of my larger successes. Traversing the powers of nature, my poem was written after an eye-opening walk. I remember wandering the Lake district with my dear sister, and seeing "A host, of golden daffodils/...Fluttering and dancing in the breeze." as I put in the poem. Using personification, I thought it only just to compare the daffodils to dancers pirouetting through the skies. This fond memory follows me like the scent of a home cooked meal, and warms my heart like one too. "And then my heart with pleasure fills" as I expressed it, using an inverted sentence for pure. Dramatic. Effect. Through the personification and inverted sentences, I wished to convey how greatly this soul-stirring sight had affected me. I admired the dancer-like daffodils, as if they were the stars of a theatrical show. When I wrote these lines, reminiscing upon the nature before me, I expressed my adoration for these flowers that floated on the wind in all their dichotomous beauty: wild yet graceful, solemn yet sweet. And above all else, championing the power of nature. That is what Romanticism is all about, is it not? It had such an effect on me, translating to a burst of poetic chronicle on the marvels of nature before me.

Though I know you must already be persuaded, I shall continue the exhibition of my genius.

In line with Romantic ideals, I skilfully created harmony between the human and natural worlds - while still upholding the superior beauty of nature. This is evident in the personification of the city, which "doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,". The use of enjambment in this line invites the reader to continue, and my effective use of a simile compares the soft glow of dawn light to that of a garment draped heavenly across human-made structures. While both elements

form a beautiful image, such beauty can primarily be attributed to the exquisite nature of the sunrise. Indeed, many memories of such golden, peach-toned skies are burned into my mind.

Who could forget my poem *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*? Written on the roof of a coach, entirely immersed in beauty, my poem explores the feelings of solitude. I documented the rarities that lay before me amongst the early light of the hushed city; the sweetest fruit of solitude had intoxicated me with “A sight so touching in its majesty.” My clever use of alliteration certainly must assure you of my status as a great poet, able to add flair almost anywhere, who is worthy of such a spot in your anthology! The hustle and bustle of the city was silenced. And at that most cherished moment the world ceased to exist, I was drifting in time and space, with the singing birds and radiating ripples in my tune, “Dear God! the very houses seem asleep”. The exclamation in my line was used to show my profound emotional response to this experience. I masterfully applied personification to demonstrate how even the inanimate houses had fallen into a deep slumber, soothed by tranquil nature. To be so entirely immersed in silence around, the beat of my heart softened, and I saw the beauty in nature in all its glory, “And all that mighty heart is lying still!” Using juxtaposition, the contrast between my use of ‘mighty’ and ‘still’ portrays just how powerful nature is, to calm a mighty heart. The humming of London machinery faded out, smells of pollution moved away, and there left me - a poet, simply writing down what I saw, content in the company of my words.

To conclude my letter, I must point out the irrefutable fact that my name should be included in your anthology. Considering the reasons I have so eloquently displayed for you, I find it inconceivable for you to not include any one of my works. However, I trust that this will be no issue for a fine fellow such as yourself. So, I look forward to the arrival of my invitation of inclusion in your anthology.

Most cordially yours,

W. Wordsworth

**Winner Year 9 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition**

## *A Letter from Keats*

Esther Yu

Mr. John Keats,  
10 John Street,  
London.  
27 August 1820

Mr. Sampson Low,  
188 Fleet Street  
London.

To my esteemed publisher,

Talk of a poetry anthology called *Nothing but the Best: Every Romantic Worth Reading* being made by your publishing house has scattered across the winds of London. I have been shocked to hear that I am not to be included. Hurt and anger are only two emotions to describe my feelings toward this matter-To think that my work has been overlooked- How can it be called Romantic if I am to be omitted? Alas, it seems you must be persuaded. What you are neglecting you will find out... My excellent use of imagery and description. My tasteful language and techniques. My ability to weave in multiple literary techniques and Romantic themes into one piece of work. My good sir, it would be unwise to preclude me from this anthology.

The compelling imagery used in my poems spins quite the narrative that simply leads the audience to another world. Why? The enchanting descriptions form the most pleasurable experience for the reader. Perchance you have heard of my poem *To Autumn*? My imagery is painted through the most vivid and beautiful words, "Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;/ Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep". The cool, lazy breeze can just be felt rustling past- Mr. Low, would you be able to face the harsh consequences of depriving your readers of this beautiful image? The phrase becomes elevated through the alliteration of the "winnowing wind", and is made complete through the personification of the season; Autumn is truly alive and she is a lively character. The enchanting description is also seen in this phrase, "Until they think warm days will never cease, / For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells." The autumn harvest plainly bounding out of the ground, a plentiful harvest that can only give more hope for the next season's harvest- providing such a connection to our wonderful, natural world. Have you seen such beautiful pictures painted through words before? The divine connection that humans have to nature, a key feature only mastered by a few Romantic poets, the best yours truly a humble John Keats. The use of such a beautiful link to nature is one of a kind and cannot be found anywhere else. My use of sensory imagery is unrivalled throughout the whole of England.

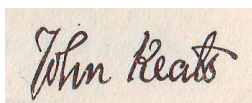
It is the duty of your publishing house to include my work in this anthology as my tasteful language and techniques are incomparable to others. Such fragments of my sonnet *To Sleep* will be the most sublime use of techniques that you will ever find. My incredible use of the personification of sleep embodies the graceful yet ghostly theme of the poem; death, and how it can become a place of utmost relaxation and an escape from daily troubles. In "O soft embalmer of the still midnight,/ Shutting, with careful fingers and benign.. / Enshaded in forgetfulness divine" sleep begins to close around its subject, bringing with it the peacefulness of quiet and night. The use of caesura balances the eeriness of the night, with its 'careful fingers and benign', and the peaceful 'still midnight' that

brings 'forgetfulness divine'. My work should be prominently featured in this collection due to my magnificent metaphor that cannot be found elsewhere. The metaphor of sleep becoming an embalmer, and sending a person to their death, "O soft embalmer of the still midnight." The metaphor becomes an allusion of sleep to death- the night becomes the setting of both tales. *To Sleep* will be the star, shining brightly in your anthology Mr Publisher due to a wonderful piece of alliteration found in "O soothest Sleep!". The sound of the repeating letter creates the most wonderful effect that seems to simply roll out of the mouth, enforcing the smooth, restful night that is soon to come and take effect. My work is the most deserving of being included in this collection of works, neither Wordsworth nor Blake can compare to this brilliant use of techniques, or would be able to turn death into such a romantic idea. It would be absolutely shocking to hear that you would leave behind an amazing opportunity such as including my work. You would rue the day!

Another example of an exceptional piece of my work would be found in my sonnet, *The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone!* It is a wonderful reflection of all the thoughtful and beautiful Romantic ideas and literary techniques of poetry, ideas that you will not find from anyone else across streets of London, nay the world! The first technique can be found in just the second line with a striking example of alliteration: "Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer breast"- does this not hint at natural beauty, a key feature of Romantic poetry? The emphasis can be felt in the man, longing to see his lover. And have you heard of my superior use of anaphora? The longing and reminiscent spirit is perceived through the use of "Faded": "Faded the flower../ Faded the sight of beauty... / Faded the shape of beauty... / Faded the voice." Another key theme of Romanticism that is highlighted: a human having a deep connection to their emotions, in this poem sadness and reminiscence. Oh, what awe-inspiring work that your anthology could be missing out on!

Mr Low, your anthology simply cannot be called *Nothing But the Best: Every Romantic Worth Reading* if it does not include me. My poetry is the finest Romantic poetry that you will ever encounter due to my imagery, techniques and use of literary devices and Romantic themes. My poetic brilliance cannot be found in anyone else. It is crucial that my work is included and if it is not, you will surely regret this decision.

Respectfully,

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Keats". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored, textured background.

John Keats

**Winner Year 9 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition**



# YEAR 10 WRITING

## *Conformity and Rebellion*

Rachelle Wu

*“Our lives are controlled, we live by rules, we conform, we play the game and do the right thing. We have a fascination with those who step outside that and those who pursue, hunt and bring them to justice. It’s a fascination with the other.” - Peter Corris.*

The corner of the newspaper with this line was torn and shoved into his back pocket. Hyde recognised this as his sign, and knew that today was the day he would murder his wife.

If all people were assigned one word to express themselves, Hyde was a man that society would describe with ‘conformity’. He was a constant echo of his own self every day; waking at the same time, consuming the same buttered toast for breakfast, commuting on the same bus line to work, proofreading the same numbers of articles at the publishing office, and returning home at 4pm for a relishing afternoon tea. A warm herbal brew and few jam-filled biscuits settled his wearied mind from all the public commentaries he’d had to scrutinise earlier. After countless years, this accustomed routine had listed itself as the blunt definition of who he was.

However, since the climax of crime cases Hyde had read about several months ago, an interest in true crime had sparked in him. And not long after, a flame had set ablaze when the truth had struck him. What he’d really wanted all this time wasn’t an anchored lifestyle, but rather a spontaneous and strenuous one. He grew tired of the constant expectations that led him onto this mundane path. It completely wrung him out, leaving not a single drop of emotion, nor any intention to conform left in him. It was time for his rebellion against all the moulding and shaping he’d vulnerably accepted from society.

The manner of death was to be through numerous stabs with a pair of large paper-scissors. It was a simple, accessible scheme that he assured himself was achievable. However, the means of her body’s disposal was the section that Hyde had carefully chalked out to ensure success. A few months back, he had read in the papers of a newly experimented acid corrosion method used to process dead bodies instead of cremation. He then spent excessive numbers of hours researching this method, gathering plentiful supplies of equipment, and preparing so that he could carry out the scheme anytime. The main instruments were his multiple jugs of hydrofluoric acid, a gas mask, thick lab gloves, and large polypropylene plastic tubs, all stashed in stacks of boxes in the corner of the garage. As a wife, Gaiya had provided him with more than enough generosity in their impassive 20 years of marriage. For this, he pitied her despairing future, so he hoped to remove any post-execution reminders of her body and make her death instant. To him, this was less of an immoral murder but rather a favour so that she’d never have to witness what other corrupt deeds he’d perform in the future.

And so on that moody afternoon, Hyde finished reading their latest published papers at the workplace and made his way home by bus as usual.

“Dear, you’ve returned.” Gaiya’s toneless voice from the kitchen greeted him as he hung his coat on the rack.

The spruce coffee table, pre-laid with two plates of biscuits and a beverage for Hyde, separated the seated couple. Munching and sipping sounds filled the still atmosphere, setting a tranquil mood.

*I wonder... if the past Hyde knew about what would happen today, would he still let me continue?*  
Hyde thought to himself, though he knew that back then, he would’ve undoubtedly brushed off any motives besides settling into a structured lifestyle.

*Well, no matter anyway. The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.*

Despite feeling the scissor blades slightly dig into his leg from within his pockets, Hyde sat in a calmly poised manner. Everything had been planned. There wouldn't be much movement or noise. Gaiya could only helplessly shield herself in the corner against the bladed weapon. One minute, she'd be at teatime. And within the next, she'd be gone.

"No tea for you today?" Hyde glanced up at her.

Gaiya's head shook in response.

"I've been having trouble sleeping lately. The caffeine would make it worse."

It was at that moment when he reached into his pocket, that Hyde felt a sudden pain strike his chest. She had flashed him a shy smile, so pure and innocent there seemed to be a hint of sadness mirrored in her eyes.

Immediately, Hyde's subconsciousness began firing ludicrous thoughts. Had she found out about his discrete plan? She'd never acted as if she'd suspected him of any deception. For countless years, every day had been a repeat of the last, so much so that the only real trait describing their marriage was that nothing was ever felt, and nothing ever changed.

But for the first time in a very long time, he was feeling something. Hyde was questioning himself, what exactly was it? Some form of guilt? Fear? Maybe his inner-self was signalling that this wasn't the right thing to do.

Another gut-wrenching sensation pummelled his stomach, causing him to rasp. Hyde finally realised what he was truly feeling.

Regret. This was the first emotion Hyde had felt since the beginning of their lifetime vows. It felt disturbing, knowing that the only time he'd ever feel any sentiments his entire life was when he was about to commit a felony.

His eyes met Gaiya's again. There was the same glimpse of sorrowfulness, now causing a repeated pummeling in his guts. This time, it managed to grab every ounce of breath left in his lungs. The pain was inexpressibly agonising, but it lasted no longer than a minute before Hyde collapsed in his chair. He was gone.

Exhilaration. This was the first emotion Gaiya had felt since the beginning of their lifetime vows. It felt disturbing, knowing that the only time she'd ever feel any sentiments her entire life was after she'd committed a felony.

She stood up, now gazing at her dead husband from above. Her slight nod to herself certified that the planning of Hyde's murder these last few months had compensated with more than enough emotion to make up for the last two decades of feeling and doing nothing. In fact she was amused after discovering that a disconnected couple could think and act so identically. She wouldn't have noticed anything abnormal in Hyde's actions if not for the pile of receipts in his drawer being the exact same as the shopping list she'd made for herself. And like Hyde, she was also prepared to act as soon as the indication was made.

Gaiya proceeded to slip her 'sign', the corner of the newspaper she'd ripped out this morning, out of her sleeve and onto the coffee table as a reminder. Then, she made her way to the boxes in the corner of the garage.

It was time for her rebellion against all the moulding and shaping she'd vulnerably accepted from society.

**Winner Year 10 Old Girls' Union Writing Competition**

### *S3-CRTS-1*

Rachel Gibson

“You’re telling me we had a choice between studying gothic and sci-fi... and you chose sci-fi? What were you thinking, Auz?”

Aurielle sighed as Jean barked down the phone line. Despite the rain hammering her windows, Aurielle got the feeling she wouldn’t have any trouble hearing her friend’s complaints tonight.

“I get it. You think it’s cool and interesting and science-y. Whatever. But sci-fi stories follow the exact same plot - every. Single. Time.”

“No they don’t!” Aurielle argued, furrowing her brow at this slander against her favourite genre. Jean’s scoff crackled into Aurielle’s ear. “Uh, yes they do... here’s how it always goes.” Aurielle could hear her friend shuffling, getting ready to craft the plot. “We always open to a normal house, on a normal day. But little did they know... trouble was stirring!” Aurielle rolled her eyes and allowed Jean to continue, walking aimlessly around her room.

“But then, something happens! An alien awakes!”

Aurielle sighed. “Oh yeah, what kind of alien?” As she drew patterns in her carpet with her socks, Aurielle’s foot caught on a thread. The small fibre was as thin as spun glass, but it had the impact of a pane shattering. “Ow!” Tumbling to the floor, her hand caught on the thick, black wire draped on the side of her desk, pulling her computer’s charging plug out of its socket with a small ‘*schink!*’ and a sprinkling of sparks.

“Auz? You alright?”

Chest heaving, Aurielle gathered herself, dazed. “Uh- yeah. Yeah I’m fine.” A beat. “You were saying?”

“Right. So, some small event will happen that will cause the sci-fi villain to come to life. You know, like a human-eating plant or an evil computer!”

A light in the corner of the room caught Aurielle’s attention. That was weird - her computer screen had turned on. Sinking into the plush rug as she walked, Aurielle sat down at her desk. Adjusting her eyes to the neon green text, the computer had a strange screen she’d never seen before, displaying a seemingly random string of characters followed by a blinking cursor:

/ S3-CRTS-1

“There’s gotta be some kind of cryptic clue or message... something that seems strange but will make sense later,” Jean continued.

Aurielle was puzzled. What did this mean? She’d have to go and get Liam, the IT officer at her school, to figure this out. “S-3-C-R-T-S-1... what-?”

“Yeah, a weird message like that! Then... a problem arises!”

Blinking letters flashed up on the screen, paralysing Aurielle’s every thought and movement.

/ Hello, Aurielle Jane.

Ice cold dread seemed to trickle through her body, before she slammed the laptop shut. *It must be some kind of prank*, Aurielle thought, as she attempted to rationalise the situation. That’s right. Just a

silly prank. One of the robotics kids messing around, that's all, or Jean trying to prove a point. *Just go about your day as normal - get a snack from the kitchen.*

"Hello? Are you even listening to me?" Sliding her feet across the floorboards, Aurielle jumped at the sound of Jean's voice, having forgotten she was even on the phone.

"Yeah, sorry. Just grabbing a snack. Could you give me a recap?"

Silence. A sigh, then, "Ugh- fine! So, the main character has a problem, right, and it always has something to do with saving the world, or stopping an evil supervillain!"

Rummaging through the pantry, Aurielle saw the microwave clock flickering, and muttered under her breath. "This damn clock. What's the point of having technology if it doesn't even work?". She whacked her fist against the side of it, leaving a bruise for later.

*BANG.* "Stupid-" *BANG.* "Thing-"

Her fist froze mid-punch, like someone had pressed pause on a movie. There on the microwave screen, instead of the time, a message appeared:

/ We know.

Eyes widening, Aurielle backed away, knocking into the stovetop - one of those electric ones that her mum had bought last Christmas. Whirling around, her breath hitched as the same message appeared under the glass.

/ We know.

As Aurielle rushed to the bathroom, Jean was still chattering away on the phone, unaware of her friend's chilling situation. "And then the protagonist will say something dramatic, in utter disbelief!" Throwing herself onto the toilet seat, Aurielle put her hands to her head. "This can't be happening."

"Exactly like that! Wow, you should be a writer."

Then came a light on her watch, neon block text that churned her stomach:

/ We know what you've done.

What would they know, though? It's not like she'd done anything wro-

Oh. *Oh.*

Flashes of squandered memories cycled through her brain. A kiss. A fight. The blood. Flinging open the door, she raced through the hallway, screens seeming to blink at her from every direction.

The hall clock: / We know.

The air-conditioning panel: / We know.

The doorbell display: / We know.

They knew, they knew, *they knew.*

The living room was filled with green light as the television seemed to come to life, extending on its brackets towards her.

/ Quite right, Aurielle. We are informed on *everything*. That's the one advantage in today's world - we computers...

/ We're everywhere. We're listening. We're watching.

/

/ And now? We can tell everyone. With just.

/ One.  
/ Click.

“How- Who are you?! You can’t do this!” Aurielle managed to croak out, shaking despite the warmth filling the room.

/ Oh, really?

Swallowing what felt like a boulder, Aurielle shook her head. “No. I- I won’t let you!” The television let out a series of crackles, a scraping, grinding noise. Was it- *laughing?*

/ Oh my dear, dear girl.  
/ It’s not a question of who’s going to let me.  
/  
/ It’s who’s going to stop me.

“NO!”

/ RUNNING PROGRAM S3-CRTS-1

Wiring and circuitry was lightning all around her, singeing her hair and leaving her vision speckled. But throughout the chaos, one sound made Aurielle’s stomach drop - a faint ‘*ping!*’, along the phone line. On *Jean’s end* of the phone line.

Then came a voice, a warm knife cutting through the sparking and static like butter.  
“Aurielle... what the-”

**Winner Year 10 Old Girls’ Union Writing Competition**

## Zero

Alice Tan

*Want that flawless glam look without the mess? Want to feel beautiful? Look no further with our all-new CanDid Glass! Using the most advanced AI technology yet, CanDid will level up your visual game with its in-built scanner and over 10,000 customisable filters. No more envying idols, no more makeup mess. CanDid can do it all!*

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He stepped in front of the mirror and its edge lit up white, lighting his dim bathroom. He saw his tired face appear, his hair an untidy nest and eyes still heavy with sleep. *Welcome to CanDid, where we can do it all! Scanning face.* His eyes followed the green bar sweeping up and down his face. The mirror beeped, and in white floating numbers just above his head, the number: 6. *Six optimisations found. Would you like to activate them?*

Six? “Activate,” he said, his voice echoing. The green bar got to work again, slowly this time. As it made its way down his face, he saw his hair shift and change, pixels flickering. Slicked back hair replaced his matted hair. He saw his forehead shrink, his nose lengthening, his eyes larger. He saw his jaw warp too, ever so slightly, and his chin jutted forward. *Optimisation complete.*

“That was what Mum meant by ‘fixing’,” he muttered.

\*\*\*

Flashing billboards. *All-new CanDid Glass, for the low price of \$899.99! Large pop-up ads. Claim your 5% off CanDid Glass today! Ten second non-skippable ads. Want to discover your hidden potential? Find it in CanDid Glass!*

Sophie thought it was fake, another expensive gimmick.

But still... was it possible to change your face like that? Was it really that simple? Before she knew it, her finger had tapped ‘order’ and the credit card details were punched in.

Two days later, the mirror was in front of her, its smooth surface dormant and lifeless. Then, a white glow: *Welcome to CanDid, where we can do it all! Scanning face.*

Her eyes watched the green bar get to work, gliding down her nose, up her cheeks, across her forehead. A beep. Her heart raced. She hoped for less than 20, 30 even.

38.

*Thirty-eight optimisations found. Would you like to activate them?*

38. There it was: large and white, floating above her head. 38? She didn’t think she was particularly pretty, but 38?

“Activate.”

The green bar brushed over her face, wiping it clean, smooth as silk. It swiped over her thin cracked lips, leaving them a plump red. Her hairline came down just the slightest, her eyebrows were trimmed and arched. She saw her eyelashes lengthen and darken, sweeping her cheekbones, now high and contoured. Her chin sharpened, her nose slimmer, her eyes larger. The bar worked quickly: adjusting, trimming, correcting.

*Optimisation complete.*

She didn’t notice her parents banging her door open, shouting. Waste of money, they said. Bullets of anger, rage, disappointment were fired at her, each one collecting on the dusty floor before her. The pile grew with each minute, but even the mound of accusations couldn’t cover her view. She saw past her struggles, past the bullying.

She saw perfection. Not a fault could be seen.

She could be perfect, flawless, beautiful: a possibility that existed in the mirror.

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There was one in everyone's hand. A CanDid Glass clutched tightly in one, a phone in the other. Mouths chatted excitedly; the constant noise filling the hallway. A group of girls giggled behind their mirrors, their fingers tapping, tapping.

He didn't understand. It was just a mirror. What did people see in it?

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a small figure he knew so well. Her long hair fell past her face, her back hunched. "Sophie!" She looked up, and her eyes met his.

It wasn't her. It couldn't be.

Her eyes were a large blue: electric and piercing. Long dark lashes brushed her cheekbones, her mouth permanently frozen in a smile. Her nose was comically smaller, her forehead too high. He could only stand and stare at the face that was not Sophie's.

"Alex! Don't I look pretty?"

The mask smiled, its rows of teeth a blinding white. Blue eyes stared into his, unwavering.

"I'm planning to get my hair done next. I'm thinking a light brown. What do you think?"

Alex strode forward, his mind seething with rage.

"Snap out of it! Why are you doing this to yourself?" He grasped her shoulders and shook them in vain. Her smiling mask was unfazed. Her mirror clattered to the floor, a long crack snaking across the glass.

"Why? Isn't it obvious? I want to be beautiful!"

"Who told you this is beautiful?"

"The mirror did, Alex." She shrugged his hands off and bent to pick up the mirror. She smiled, a grinning, sneering smile.

"Look around you! Everyone is beautiful now."

He spun on his heels, his eyes darting around the gathering crowd, and he saw masks. Masks of 20, 50 different Sophies, an identical copy. Wide perfect teeth, flawless skin, and those big blue eyes...

He stumbled backwards, and the masks advanced.

\*\*\*

Alex was in front of the mirror.

It was too late. *Scanning...*

He grabbed a blanket and hastily threw it over the mirror, but it slipped off, sliding to the floor. *You would dare cover me?*

His heart caught in his throat, and he scrambled backwards, away from the mirror. The mirror that started the obsession, this beauty mania, taunting the world with its glowing numbers.

"You're just a mirror... You can't do anything to me! I won't let you!"

*The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.*

The voice laughed, mocking, and his reflection crept forward. The number 6 danced tantalisingly across the screen. He saw his haggard eyes, wide with terror; his hair tangled. Was this really him?

He could be perfect. He could make the six a zero.

*Don't you want to be beautiful too?*

## *Mushroom Soup*

Sophia Lau

Yesterday evening, a large pot of steaming mushroom soup took pride of place on the dinner table, illuminated by the warm light of the crackling fireplace. Its flavoursome, homely aroma filled the room with richness. Glasses of pre-dinner wine sat at each seat, having been previously filled by Rutherford.

I'd been nature foraging by myself that afternoon, wandering down the fresh path through the woods that Rutherford had made before I'd arrived. Rutherford, Dr Forbes' close colleague and research partner of many years, had been working on studies inside. Forbes herself had been reading, and the cook had gone out to run errands after setting the soup to stew.

Dr Forbes, the rich, renowned mushroom professional, had invited us amateur associates for an exclusive mushroom convention retreat at her cottage in the woods. Her new student ended up cancelling due to sickness, so it was just the three of us. Forbes, Rutherford, and me, Bethany.

But yesterday evening at around 11pm, Forbes retired to bed reporting stomach pain ("I'll be fine in the morning, it's a regular occurrence!"). This morning, after being called multiple times by the others, I found her.

Stiff, so surreal -  
Dead, in bed.

Now, it was just the two of us, and my brain was ticking.

Rutherford called the doctor, who diagnosed Forbes with sudden liver failure - most likely from something she had consumed earlier. Detective Rawlin was called shortly after. The soup remains were tested and discovered to have traces of Redcap - the odourless, tasteless, lethal mushroom that led to liver failure, and death soon after.

Ironic, really.

We were glad to be alive, although it remained a mystery as to why only Forbes had been poisoned.

Who will be murdered next?

•

Dr Forbes is my cousin, but I can't say I'm proud to be related. I put on a show every time I see her, pretending to have nonexistent interest in stupid mushrooms, which I guess is why she invited me. She probably also wanted us to 'bond' more. *Forbes and Bethany, best friends!*

Friends, even though she refused to give me my share of the family fortune. We were both supposed to inherit the money, but her selfishness meant she was rich whilst I was left with close to nothing.

I needed to get rid of Forbes if I was to have any chance in life. She was a bestselling author too - her prestigious research compilation *Wonderful World of Fungi* had quickly produced thousands of dollars. And still, none to spare for us.

•

It had been a while since Detective Rawlin had arrived, poking around for evidence. With a large bushy moustache accompanying large bushy eyebrows, he waddled everywhere like some clumsy



penguin, a foolish buffoon of a detective.

He hadn't fingerprint tested, hadn't interrogated anyone, hadn't even worn gloves while handling evidence - but had drunk a glass of wine, and failed to uncover the culprit so far.

Rutherford suspected me: he'd discovered Redcap traces in my foraging basket, and also exposed the rocky past between Forbes and I and Rawlin. I would murder him - what a pain he was!

Now, the detective stood. His case notes fell, and he scrambled to retrieve them.

He coughed.

"How did only one get poisoned when all bowls contained Redcap?"

He held up a small glass jar. "Acetylcysteine: a medication used to prevent liver damage, preventing Redcap effects. Administered to all wine glasses except Forbes'. I found this at the bottom of the bin."

Well then, maybe his appearance isn't reflective of his brainpower, I thought.

"Bethany is a likely poisoner - first to find Dr Forbes, Redcaps in her basket, sufficient motive to kill for money. She could've added the antidote after Rutherford had poured the wine - with a little craftiness, of course, as it's no easy feat.

But this- it just seems too easy, too straightforward, rather illogical. Why would one be so inattentive and careless, leaving a trail of clues pointing an arrow straight to themselves?

And Rutherford, taking control of the situation - but was this just an act to shift the focus off himself? He also poured the wine, an easy opportunity to slip the antidote in.

But a motive? Rutherford is trustworthy and very close to Dr Forbes; he's worked alongside her for a long time, including helping write her bestselling book. He was also in the sitting room with her the whole afternoon, so couldn't possibly have collected Redcaps.

I... the clues just don't fit somehow. There isn't enough evidence to draw conclusions as to who was the perpetrator."

His face was expressionless; he reshuffled his notes.

I stood up.  
It had to be now.

"I would've killed her if I could."

The room went silent - the doctor, detective, and Rutherford snapped up straight in their chairs, watching me.

"The poison was so obvious, so smart. I was going to do it myself later, a simple gunshot - the question wasn't who was going to let me, it was who was going to stop me. But as it happens, someone *had* already stopped me. By getting to her first.

Why would Rutherford come to an amateur's retreat? It's not like Forbes needed any help. Unless he persuaded her to let him help. He came here early, scouted the area, made a path in the woods - and found the Redcaps. It was really easy for him to slip the antidote in whilst pouring the wine and frame me with 'my' foraged Redcaps."

*Deep breath.*

“But why?”

See, it comes back to Forbes’ book. It’s a copy of Rutherford’s manuscript he originally was going to release, full of years of personal research that can be found previously published on his website. She credited it to her name instead, and of course, he couldn’t do anything after it had been published. Evil!

I guess you can say that he got his revenge.”

I stared the detective in the eye, visualising the look on Rutherford’s face in my head.

I walked out.

## *Remnants*

Ruhika Panditha

The lights dimmed automatically as the clock struck six, its pendulum swinging back and forth in a slow melancholic manner, as the evening sky encroached on his surroundings. He stared mindlessly at the small wooden device lying on the table in front of him as if waiting for it to teleport into his hands. The sudden clap of thunder amidst the heavy thrum of rain broke him from his trance, as he reached over the table his fingers grazing the rough wooden exterior of the device, a true pathetic fallacy if any. A photo frame bejewelled in macaroni and tacky technicolour rhinestones hung above him, a recent addition to the previously empty mantle. The frame too out of place amidst the meticulous black and white interiors and the photograph inside too large, for it to not hold any sentimental value. He looked up at the mantle as a young man of no more than thirty smiled from the frame as a child hung tightly off his back, grinning deviously, and a flicker of anger danced across his face. He grabbed the wooden box viciously and placed it on his lap, as a small pamphlet fell from it “The Mind Key - an emotional fix to eradicate weakness and take control of your life, like it should be” on one side and instructions on the other.

He placed the pamphlet on the table, following the instructions meticulously, pausing after each step, perhaps to confirm his actions with the words, perhaps to affirm himself of the morality of his deeds or continue to summon the courage to follow through on his purchase. No longer an image in a catalogue, an article in ‘ScienceDirect’ or latest television tidbit on the news but rather a very tangible object. At last he closed his eyes, placing the flimsy headphones over his ears gently as he flipped the switch.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

A gentle automated voice filled his ears, followed by a loud pulsating vibrato. He cringed and squirmed, perspiring anxiously against his leather seat, on which there would no doubt be some sort of indentation. Squeezing his eyes shut he clutched his head aggressively, changing into a foetal position and rocking back and forth, praying for it to stop as memories.... unwanted, buried and lost all flooded at once. A whirlwind of thoughts, experiences and moments crashing into shore.

He cried out loud as the man from the frame appeared in front of him in small vignettes, running across a large green field, a child in tow screaming and giggling with excitement, an image of bucolic bliss. Another, of him twirling a blonde woman in his arms away and then towards as soft orchestral music replaced the piercing noise. He lunged towards the vignette with a certain ferociousness, reserved for anger or perhaps love, screaming as she disappeared, replaced with yet another scene. A black hearse, a single white rose, the same blonde woman with his father, his family, his mother each lined up against the flimsy plastic chairs, standing, some in respect, others in defiance, as a body hit the ground. He pushed away from it, crawling backwards on his fours escaping from it, like a prey from its predator. Wishing for the image to go away, as a singular photo frame of the man standing proudly against a tree appeared instead, the photograph fit perfectly to the dimensions of the silver frame as he smiled...poised and perfect.

*A true image of grace, devotion and love* remained inscribed on the frame in slanted calligraphy. He scoffed and laughed hollowly with no semblance of emotion, turning his back on it as more echoes of the past emerged in soft clouds of nostalgia, pain and joy. Each a stark contrast against the empty midnight background. The same man in every vignette, as if playing a different character in each.

A villain.

A hero.

A lover.

A rival.

A father.

A man.

Human.

“Please proceed with the rearrangement, push to forget, pull to remember, swipe to replace,” the same automated voice interrupted. Grimacing at his state, he stood tall, taking lengthy strides towards the distant cloud, eager to push it away. But with each step he took, it seemed further. Breaking into a jog he chased after it. The distant voice of his mother clouded his mind as he panted and pushed on, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. What if remembering the past hurts more than the fear of repeating it, what if the knowledge of being condemned could be but a distant memory, for what is the past but a burden on the future.

A burden, not a condemnation.

He collapsed from sheer exhaustion as a loud sharp noise emanated from the sky, piercing his eardrums. He yelled and writhed from the pain, grasping his knees with such vigour that his hands turned white. Shaking aggressively he exhaled at last, the image of the man dancing on his eyelids.

The television turned on automatically as the clock struck 12, its pendulum swinging back and forth in a slow sinister manner as the night sky enveloped his surroundings. His body lay crumpled against the edge of the sofa, small and motionless against the furniture with the occasional twitch or spasm of the muscle. His mouth lay crooked and headphones askew as the large black screen in front of him flickered into life.

“Altered brain waves as a result of low frequency sound in an experimental product called ‘The Mind Key’ leaves millions around the world in critical conditions from septic shock and coma to severe brain damage. The product is now being recalled for the foreseeable future after much investigation by the FBI.....stay tuned for more to come.”

The wooden box lay somewhere toppled over, its distant sound fading into the quietness, as calm settled over the house.

*A body. A box.*

*The remnants.*

Years 11-12





# YEAR 11 WRITING

## *Down the Road*

Sarah Wilson

We descend the mountain like a mist.  
Road twists plot  
The tired screenplay of our mutual life  
-Felicity Plunkett, 'Crossed Lines'

Not too long ago, I fell back into an old memory, stuck in a traffic jam on the road out of the city. With my eyes half shut as I slouched in the driver's seat, squinting foggily into the intersection, I felt like a kid penned into the family sedan again, meandering up and down dusky mountains on our singular, unremarkable driving holiday, the road trip that became anathema to my parents. After it was done, I don't remember hearing it brought up by my mother or father, unless my sister or I mentioned it in passing, in which case they'd cut eye contact, immediately unhearing. I couldn't understand why.

In the period when my sister and I were still properly irritating little ankle-biters, my mother would confide in us about her teenage years. A girl by the sea, she'd trip down to the shore with neighbours in the summer, and wander alone along the beachfront in early winter, watching the water as it flipped and churned, a frosted aquamarine, glinting squarely. And my father, a little further inland, treasured the ocean the way he would one day treasure any spare time, as he liked to drily put it. My mother was excruciatingly rigid and opinionated, sharpened by age, and my father at times a little aloof, detached. The water mellowed one, buoyed the other, rhythms sanding the contrasts down like sea glass.

I remember being struck by the sheer contrast of this continent on that road trip. You swim in from the coast, climb the mountains, wind your way down across ravines and plains and kilometres of road sighting nothing but the occasional cow, and then you've made it. The earth ambles on and on, flat and crisp, with dried grass and bent trees stretching toward the dull breeze twisting above. And all the way, the sky is high and wide and dry and boundless overhead. It enclosed the barren land like a dusty snow globe. At the time, my sister rustling and murmuring in her sleep beside me, it felt like it was the windscreen between us and the ends of the world, dusty and lonely. My parents spoke angularly to one another in the front seats of the car. Hushed and forceful, they barked across the gearstick, believing we were both asleep.

"Linda, you need to find a way to get out of the house. Join some club, I don't know, just ... think of a way to make some friends. You can't blame it on me when you're lonely."

"Look, *pal*, talk about the pot calling the kettle black! You're always working, always busy - do you not have time for me?"

"I come home and try to speak to you and you're barely there." He paused, and thumbed the faux leather steering wheel, neck tense. "It's exhausting, Linda, honestly."

"Well, maybe you need to reconsider what you allocate your energy to."

My foot bumped against the car door and the air collapsed from where it had been suspended, tight as twisted copper wires, holding its breath. My mother's reddened eyes swivelled towards me, face limp, as my father's shoulders rounded in the rear-view mirror. They shuffled in their seats. Words swirled

back towards me as we bumped along the pothole-ridden road. The window whipped dust back into my face, arid, metallic, dehydrated.

The rest of the road trip was strained. My parents put my sister and I between them in queues, a human partition, a sandbank for the outflow of their anger. They leaned into their opposite doors when they sat next to each other in the car, driving alongside yellowed stretches of parched pastures. We children clacked in the back seat, mindless chatter slipping into the high-country sky and the dry below, and my mother and father kept their eyes on the barren road, flat and lifeless. Far from the ocean, trapped in a dustbowl – looking back, I can understand what a nightmare the whole situation was for my parents. False pretences, even for the sake of children, are never easy.

Time wandered on. We made it home, back to the coast. We grew, my sister and I, and our parents did too. On nights where I lay awake, I could hear my parents muttering in the living room, windows open to the water. Salty and stinging, then rhythmic and musical, their words swum together like breaking waves against the sand, push and pull, the tides flowing in and out. They took to walking on the beach in the grey-blue morning. My mother would shepherd us to primary school, smile hesitantly at the other parents, and every now and then, go for coffee with them after all us kids had been counted in. We made it to high school. With my sister in the back seat, my parents taught me how to drive along the winding coast.

As the columns of cars began to shudder and roll forward, I pawed with some ferocity at my eyelids and recalled my parents' advice. I wondered what they'd think of me now, driving with such high levels of inattention. They certainly weren't here to call me out. Cars swarmed and darted like insects behind the windscreen as the traffic lights blinked with malaise. Their red eyes sent me wandering back across the mountains, through valleys and up and out from under misty carpets onto the dry, jostling road. Words dived through my memory. I crunched down on the accelerator, wind needling my eyes, prickling with the feeling of my parents sitting where I now sat alone, taut, wordless, with a dusty, dried out seabed between them. The ocean roiled behind me, the pair of them the undercurrent, as I pulled away.



## *Red*

Ishreet Sohal

*“All the better to eat you up with!” bellowed the wolf and with a jump and a gulp he gobbled Little Red Riding Hood up.*

Her little red hood, her soft smile, her fragile innocence, she had been a possession of my mind ever since my mother narrated the story of my favourite fairytale princess, in that damp car-shaped bed. God damn it Frederic, there you go again, engulfed by that nostalgic vacuum! Fixating on past quests is awfully unprofessional of me, such a man of high stature, a future billionaire of Wall Street as I have been called by many. Well, just my mother. I swivelled my burgundy office chair a total of two times - my lucky number, and shuffled towards the full-length window behind me. I could see a whopping 300 feet down and my brain sent a little tingle through my toes as if to say, “Move away! You’ll fall!” My lips formed a slight pout and I pressed them flaccidly onto the glass, (do not worry the cleaner came in a couple weeks ago I think), and peered out agape.

Trees.

People in suits.

American flags.

More trees.

An incessant cycle of the so-called “American Dream.”  
And that’s when I saw her.

The corners of my lips awoke from their slumber as if the sight of her was my subliminal trigger. Racing for my favourite B5 notebook (it was the perfect shade of red - right between crimson and ruby), my fingertips found themselves scribbling the illegible words ‘2:03pm - 20 Broad St, New York - Left of Tree #7.’ I had observed two advantages to this hieroglyphic state of my handwriting - one, everyone assumed I must be a doctor, and two, if anyone was to come across it, they would to no avail decipher the contents. This daily monitoring was a gruelling crusade, but my mother’s motto “Nothing worth having comes easy” echoed ceaselessly inside the empty rooms in my brain. I directed my prancing pupils back to the subject, my insides weakened with delirium, unsure whether it was due to my corny musings about my mother or *my* other woman to whom my eyes remained unapologetically devoted.

She was moving. Quickly.

I couldn’t lose her this time. The mere possibility of such a tragedy made my blood curdle, simultaneously instilling an unfamiliar urgency within me. ‘2:07pm - Mobile, Last Seen Passing Tree #12’ found itself inscribed on any page that permitted it, as I rummaged vigorously for my overcoat, some necessary... tools and my sanity, which prompted my half empty wine glass to kiss the wooden floor, dyeing it a sensuous rosy hue. Oh how I empathise with the wooden floor, victim to the same sloppy smooch I endure from the grandma I’m trying my very best to avoid at the family BBQ.

Each footstep I took aligned with my beating heart, my brain unable to halt the workings of my body, pushing through the swarming workplace, and for the very first time, I found myself prioritising something over my business.

“Excuse me, sir!”

Oh, how I wanted to yell at these females for daring to interrupt my vigour, yet as I felt my amiable facade fading, I constrained my vocal chords to stay unresponsive. What amalgamation of disgraceful phrases that could possibly escape my mouth were now beyond my control, for I was not in a state to bother subjugating to the social pressure of seeming polite.

All these females, they made me sick, yet *she* made me the most diseased. My toes surpassed the looming threshold and approached the sidewalk, many figures obscuring my vision of her. This was my rite of passage, an obsession, a gift.

*And there she was.*

Her mercury red hair.

And her rosy lips.

Supple, vulnerable.

I could feel my brain seated uncomfortably inside my skull, my cerebrum bouncing up and down like the pogo stick I won at the school fair, for a raging tempest brewed within me, one I let myself succumb to.

And with every inch that shortened the distance between us, the more the past wedged itself into my brain, the more I saw red.

“Frederic, just get lost you creep!” she had exclaimed nineteen years ago.

My toothy grin had faded, the singular rose wilted, and took with it my dignity, the longer I stood bug-eyed in front of her. And the most mortifying part of it all was all I had thought, facing the girl who shattered my morality, was “She is so goddamn beautiful.”

A guffaw exited my throat, wasn't it hilarious how six words could decide your fate? This was the path she chose for herself, the pitiable story she wrote. And a word of advice for next time - look before you leap, love.

I could already imagine the laughable headlines. Oh right, that's the catch... there wouldn't be a single one! Oh the wonders power does for a man like me!

The sun within me set, the sight of her approaching countenance clawed my insides, stripping away the remaining fragments of my emotional conscience, for I was certain the fear of lacking control would never plague me again.

I halted right in front of her, my eyes trailing down to the forbidden.

A sin accompanying a virtue.

I licked my bottom lip.

“There won't be any lumberjack to save you today, Little Red Riding Hood.”

## *Fishing*

Abigail Arrange

*“Always in between...that is me. For much of my life I saw that as an uncomfortable place to be; a place without rest.”*

*Stan Grant, Australia Day*

Identity is a strange thing. It changes and changes, and as time progresses, facets of it approach and recede like an ocean wave. A fishmonger throws his line into the blue of the water; he reels it in, and when he finds himself empty-handed, he tries again, throwing and reeling until he catches the elusive identity he so desperately craves. A disillusioned Catholic girl transitions to agnosticism; then she tries ‘atheist’ on for size. I throw and I reel until I catch, and then I throw again. Who knows, maybe *this* time I’ll catch something big.

When I was twelve, I visited California. On our first day, we Ubered to San Francisco Bay, and as we shuffled into the backseat, the driver asked us where we were from.

“Australia,” I replied chirpily. As I spoke, my face twisted into something resembling confusion. The source of the confusion was a memory. The memory was of an English class, a freckly-faced classmate, and that same question: “Where are you from?”

“My dad’s from Lebanon.” I had said matter-of-factly.

*‘Where are you from?’* Surely that’s as simple as a question can get. Surely one answer was sufficient. Why was I Australian in America, and Lebanese in Australia? I had thought that identity was concrete; tangible, but a mere change in location had altered it beyond belief.

From San Francisco’s harbour, I watched as the waves of the bay lapped against the shore, and I realized, perhaps for the first time in my short life, that identity is about as concrete as a feather.

Lin Manuel Miranda’s *In the Heights* is a Broadway musical celebrating New York’s Latinx community. As I listen to the titular track, tapping my foot along with the syncopated beat, I take note of a particular line: *‘In the heights, I hang my flag up on display...it reminds me that I came from miles away.’*

I mull this line over in my head, picking it apart, putting it back together, realizing that I have noticed a similar phenomenon in Sydney. My Teta has a Lebanese flag plastered above her window. Hole-in-the-wall restaurants serving dim sum and Kung Pao chicken pepper Sydney’s suburbs. Everywhere around me, the diaspora celebrates its homeland with an unrivalled fervency.

English-Caribbean author Akala attributes this behaviour to “cultural defensiveness; a tendency to cling onto one’s culture more fiercely when alienated from its source.”

*“In many...ways we have already tried to guard our sense of Caribbean-ness more fiercely than those on the islands, as is normal for a diaspora and especially one that has often felt under attack.”*

At the core of contemporary diasporic identity is the desire to preserve. It’s the anthropogenic need to label and relabel; to group and regroup. “Nothing remains...nothing lasts,” says Stan Grant, “Yet, despite this impermanence, we struggle as human beings to make sense of ourselves and our place on this Earth.” I’ve experienced that cultural defensiveness, even though I’ve never set foot in Lebanon. I’m defending a genealogical connection to a place which, truthfully, I will never really understand.

Already we can see the severing of connections; the loss of culture. The ocean wave that carried our ancestors here is receding, and another is taking its place.

This begs the question: what is to become of diasporic identity? Will the fisherman ever catch the fish?

But let's forget about philosophy for a second, because Saturday Night Live is on and tonight they're playing *'Black Jeopardy with Chadwick Boseman,'* a skit satirizing the popular American trivia show, 'Jeopardy.' Host Darnell Hayes (Kenan Thompson) greets the audience and introduces the contestants.

"This is so exciting. All the way from Wakanda, it's T'Challa." The camera cuts to Chadwick Boseman, "...this might be the blackest Black Jeopardy yet." The audience laughs.

As the game show progresses, however, we begin to notice a trend. T'Challa, from the fictional African nation Wakanda, is unable to answer even one question correctly.

"The policeman says there's been some robberies in your neighbourhood..." Darnell asks.

"...I assist him in tracking down the offender. After all, our ministers of law enforcement are only here to protect us," replies Boseman, "Is this correct?" The audience loses it.

"It should be," Darnell replies, "But I'm thinking you haven't spent much time in America."

And there's the kicker. Despite T'Challa being Black, he cannot begin to understand African-American diasporic identity. The premise of the skit alone is a tacit acknowledgement that Black Americans share unique cultural identifiers; that after three centuries of separation; three centuries of the antebellum South and Jim Crow and the 'hood, African culture and Black American culture can no longer be conflated. Despite that 'cultural defensiveness' we alluded to earlier, the Black diaspora eventually had to carve a new identity; one borne of collective struggle and of solidarity.

Identity changes, but that doesn't mean we need to assimilate entirely under the catch-all 'Australian' label. We can't preserve, but we can adapt. After all, while identity can feel immovable sometimes - it can feel immense - it's nothing more than an ocean wave, or the tide of San Francisco Bay, or the clear blue of even clearer water. Like everything else that humans have constructed, it is indefinite. It is abstract.

So where does that leave us? Where does that leave *me*?

"When I find out who I am, I'll be free," said H.G. Wells in *The Invisible Man*. I don't want to be invisible, so I wait patiently; I throw and I reel until I catch, and then I throw again. I'll throw and reel forever if I have to.

Who am I? What is *my* identity? - Just give me an hour or two, the answer will be at the end of the fishing rod.

## *Lost in Translation*

Jasmine Jiang

I've learnt that there is always a desire for unity. Genocide expelled those who were seen as inferior because of their differences, and the White Australia policy granted citizenship purely based on the fairness of one's skin. While we have now become a multicultural nation, the acceptance of newfound diversity comes from darker roots. Sometimes, I still feel like I have to choose between assimilating or retaining my culture.

I remember my childhood like a hazy dream- blurred at the edges, with bits filled in later on as my memory faded. I grew up in a small town, about two hours southwest of Nanjing along the Yangtze River; a patch of concrete awkwardly set between the farming land that surrounded it. Nestled in the lower reaches of the river delta, the area was a vast swathe of fertile land, interlaced with flowing rivulets of water, the Huangshan range hugging its southern fringes.

There, time seemed to pass slower.

I spent my toddler days waddling along locally owned shops, interspersed through quaint residential districts. The neighbourhood was a maze-like array of white walled houses, lucky red banners and grey tiled roofs with upturned eaves. My days were filled sitting next to my Grandma playing cards and Mahjong, snacking on hawthorn flakes handed to me by the smiling grocery store owner. Occasionally, we would go to the mountains on a special weekend outing.

My identity was simpler back then. There was something comforting through the constant buzz of people bargaining produce, mothers calling after their little ones and school kids playing marbles; the dialect familiar, the smell of the warm heavy air lulling, the mist-like rain that drizzled predictable and constant.

I was six when my family migrated to Australia- 2011, the same year my brother was born. A lot changes in ten years. From a squirming, red faced baby, he has grown into a slightly shy, willfully stubborn kid almost of high school age, while I have emerged barely recognisable.

The obvious differences were undeniable. Australia's climate was hot and dry, a "sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains". Over summers hung the constant threat of bushfires, smoke in the distance, deep backlit silhouettes of towering gums against the fiery sunset. I remember seeing its colours and landscapes during my first years here. Golden yellows of the sand, vivid blues of the sea and sky blending into one, streaked sandstone of rich cream.

The only similarities between New South Wales and Anhui are that they are both different to anything else I've seen. The idea of home revolved around these two very different places, but where home felt like was somewhere in between.

It was at this time that my identity began to change. At my first primary school, teachers had little patience with the language barrier. It was expected of me to follow instructions all the same. My peers pulled their eyes back at me, then asked me innocently if I found it offensive. They told me my Chinese name was strange, that I was the only one at the school whose name began with "Y". They commented that my mum's wontons looked like brains, not realising she had woken up at five that

morning to make them. Back then, I felt ashamed of what my identity was previously shaped around. I began asking my mum for sandwiches, pasta and wraps. I stopped making an effort to learn Mandarin. I tried braiding my hair to diminish its thick, dark appearance. Of course, this was more than peer pressure. It was me, truly believing that I did not belong which made me want to change. I tried growing a new identity to replace the layers I peeled off my old.

Li Bai's poem about the southern Anhui ranges, *questions and answers in the mountain* (山中问答), states; "Peach blossoms flow in water far away; the place is unlike heaven or earth, nor where humans tread." It reminded me of weekend outings, peach trees dotting the foothills and the sweet scent of mountain air; except these images seemed oversimplified and superficial. The poem has changed over a thousand years, from ancient text to traditional Chinese characters, and again from Chinese to English. Unable to read nor interpret the words with my language barrier, I will never know how Huangshan truly looks in Li Bai's eyes. Similarly, as I feel myself drawn between two cultures, I too became lost in translation, the part on either side irretrievable and blurred.

Returning to China was filled with similar struggles. Perhaps most noticeably, I became unwell every time I visited. My parents explain it as, "*shui tu bu fu*"- I am not used to the land and water. Distant relatives would comment that I had gained weight, that my Mandarin was accented, that I couldn't recognise basic Chinese characters. It was their way of showing endearment, almost like a conversation starter to reconnect after so long. They could not see how much I dreaded those conversations. To me, it pointed out the disillusioned relationship I had with myself.

I was always stuck between two sides, never truly belonging to one. It was as if there was no place left for me.

After reading *The Joy Luck Club*, I realised that although my story was my own, it was more broadly a universal struggle; the way two cultures often took generations to coexist within one person peacefully. It's difficult to move away from what was once home, looking back only to see what you miss. It reflects in the way cultures knit together in a new place, it reflects in the way of upholding customs and practices that reminds us of home, it reflects in a dormant discomfort overshadowed by determination to find delight. Perhaps, belonging to a place is simply not a good measure of identity. Moving places takes a second, while stitching together two cultures takes a lifetime.

*we are young only once*

Laura Pannell

small hands reach for the sky  
animals trailing snow white cotton  
across the sweeping blue.  
*nāi nai* leans in to whisper affectionately,  
*those are only clouds.*  
clouds. the word rolls bitter off the tongue, damp and grey  
and now these small hands will never know what else they could be.  
the rain plunges down from the heavens  
and soaks the earth.

gilded, afternoon sunlight washes over weary wooden floorboards  
long fingers of ageless warmth trailing over untouched memories.  
swimming shorts and *māmā*'s black pearl jewellery  
books gathering dust in cardboard boxes  
forgotten worlds reduced to  
letters on a page.  
the words have been played with and toyed with and now they sit  
lonely  
fantasies and riddles and childhood dreams.

the night sky throws its arms around the sun  
and dizzying galaxies wink from a  
far.  
quick; dream now, while it's dark.  
nobody will know.  
daydreamers are a thing of the  
past and the dark is for you  
and i.

hushed rain falling on dark sidewalks illuminated with hungry neon lights  
they swallow up the dark, blinking slowly, licking their tongues.  
clustered scintillating skyscrapers. imitations, tiny, imperfect celestial bodies.  
inside the car, the seatbelt familiar and sympathetic, safe  
a patchwork blanket against the rest of the world.  
indicator ticking like a second heartbeat  
as the traffic lights glimmer  
*yellow*  
*red*  
*green*  
but nothing seems to move.

and maybe the rain slamming against the metal ribcage of the car  
pounding its fists against a trapped heart  
is not just rain, but tears  
and maybe the car is a locked cage

and the steering wheel the key to all the different paths that could have been,  
shrouded in regrets and the silence before a song begins  
but you have forgotten that there is still a road and there is still a wheel.  
the clouds break.

**Winner of the Somerset National Poetry Prize**



## *A Strange Kingdom*

Lucinda Eldridge

'Home' is a strange place.

You don't realise it's found you until it swallows you up, makes you call people who were once strangers 'grandma', compels you to buy presents for adopted nieces and nephews who, three years prior, were just snotty little kids.

The McLeary dynasty, as I like to call it, is a special kind of home. I could say it was like a home away from home, but really I think it's just my home. Yes, it's dysfunctional. Yes, the Christmas ham is always slightly undercooked, and yes, every gathering always ends with a sad drunk. But that's what makes it fun.

But enough of that. You're the new girlfriend of a McLeary. You've got a family to join, a dynasty to append yourself to, a home to find. I was like you, just three years ago. I didn't have anyone to give me a proper rundown of McLeary culture. All my McLeary boyfriend did was text me a list of names with one-word descriptions, and a couple of instructions for dealing with his grandma (who I enjoy calling the Queen). I almost needed a Lonely Planet guidebook for cultural customs and bogan Australian slang; hopefully I can be that for you. So, welcome to the McLeary kingdom. I hope you enjoy your stay.

It's a serene sort of chaos. You walk in and are immediately overwhelmed. Why are there children making obstacle courses out of wrapping paper? Who's the strange man sitting in the corner? Who gave Auntie Madge champagne? But you'll soon realise that that's how it's meant to be. Everyone knows the kids go nuts with wrapping paper, everyone knows Weird Leo just needs some space, and it is an irrefutable fact that the party only starts when Madge gets hold of the champagne. The family takes a collective deep breath in before they enter the Imperial Capital (otherwise known as Grandma's house), collect their thoughts, and prepare themselves for the systematic anarchy to come.

After you take all that in, you'll likely find yourself face-to-face with the Queen herself. She rather enjoys surveying her kingdom, presiding over the goings-on of the day. She sits with the King, but everyone knows she's the one with the power. She's also the one with the most appraising gaze.

I still remember the first time I saw her.

\*\*\*

*"Ok, Dee. This is it - you are about to enter the Imperial Capital of the Holy McLeary Empire. Remember what I said: introduce yourself to Grandma first, and make sure you compliment the cranberry sauce. If you walk out of here without falling on your knees begging her for more, we're breaking up."*

Oh, I remembered. Max had texted me an exhaustive list of instructions about dealing with his grandma. Alongside this was a list of names with a single word attached. Leo: weird. Kath: cooking. Tamsin: funny. Very helpful. At least it was something.

Max pushed the door open, and instantly dissolved into the chaos, into the thrum of children's squeals about Easter eggs, the rasping 'ksssst' of beer cans being opened. I didn't dissolve. I was torturously aware of my presence, and so was a prim woman sitting at the head of a very long walnut dining table. Her crepey neck craned towards me, and she squinted at me beneath her bifocals. This couldn't have been anyone other than the Queen herself. I knew this would be my first trial, the first obstacle to

my acceptance into the McLeary dynasty. So I stepped over to her as elegantly as was possible, my heavy black boots eating into my heels.

*"Hello. You must be Dee, yes?"*

I professed that was indeed my name. Expecting a hug or some form of handshake, I leaned towards her, but she stayed right where she was. Like a ruler assessing a potential wife for her grandson, she looked me up and down. To her I wasn't Max's new girlfriend, I was just one in a long line of potential suitors. Weak, thin build. Wiry, tawny hair. Awful posture, strange boots. No match for a McLeary.

Not that she actually *said* any of these things, but I guess I just felt her judgement.

*"Uh, I'm going to... see if they need any help in the kitchen."*

\*\*\*

Unfortunately for you, you're a woman. Despite the best efforts of the suffragettes, bra-burners, and capitalist girlbosses, you will be spending the majority of your day in the kitchen. Don't worry, I'll be there too. I learned the hard way (through piercing glares and evil-eyes from the other women on the unfortunate occasion I went outside to sit with the guys) that my role is in the kitchen. Yes, while we act as an antipasto platter production line, the husbands and male partners will quaff beers on the verandah and become increasingly more agitated each time we have to concede that the chicken does, in fact, need five more minutes.

\*\*\*

Back then, it was just the Sisters (the Queen's three daughters), Funny Tamsin, and her girlfriend (now fiancée) Cat Jamie (so called because she owns five cats). See, they couldn't judge me for being in the kitchen, since I was there to help. Tamsin was the first to welcome me, after we figured out we were both 22 and women and therefore had to share some kind of bond. Though a McLeary through and through, she understood the peculiarities of her family.

*"Just as McLeary men have the special talent for guzzling alcohol, the women here are expert cooks, since it's all we do."* She taught me how to make an antipasto platter the traditional McLeary way: mountains of cheeses and cured meats - the only vegetable in sight being the sprig of parsley I was told to lay artistically on top of the Brie.

I still had my trial to overcome, and thankfully it was almost lunchtime, which meant I'd be able to ask about the cranberry sauce. To the delight of the males present, the chicken was finally cooked, and out came the infamous sauce. The family positioned themselves in a seemingly predetermined seating arrangement, and I found myself sat next to the Queen herself. I could still feel her appraising me coldly, but I thought I'd make the effort to engage her.

*"Eileen, this cranberry sauce is divine! How long have you been making it? Can I have the recipe?"*

Her cataracts shone a hazy blue.

*"Darling Dee, thank you. That's very kind, I've been making it for... just over fifty years, I think. But, I'll have you know I only hand it out to members of the family."*

You didn't think she'd just give it to me then, did you? I hate to disappoint, but it took a bit more time.

More time, as in about twenty-four hours. Because there was a small pink envelope in my letterbox the next day:

*Dee-*

*I am sorry for being so frigid yesterday when you first introduced yourself. I must confess, I did not like your boots, and you seemed to have a peculiar attitude. Again, my apologies. I suppose I just needed some more time to get to know you properly.  
I thank you for all your work in the kitchen, and I think you're going to make a fine McLeary.*

Underneath all that was the Queen's cranberry sauce recipe.

\*\*\*

The McLearys run a strange kingdom. We might not all be related through direct lineage, but there's more than that holding this dynasty together. Things like delighting in the delicate art of the antipasto, and the artistic possibilities of the combination of bored children and wrapping paper. Things like the common understanding that the only way to a Queen's heart is through her cranberry sauce recipe. Because 'home' is a strange place, a strange kingdom. It found me three years ago, and I think it's time it finds you.

*Thread. Weave. Spin.*

Pieta Hochstetler

*i.*

The mother is [*sitting at a desk*]. A [*sewing machine*] [*whirs busily*] as she [*sews*] a [*neat, straight hemline*]. [*Fabric*] slips through her fingers like [*water through a sieve*].

She does not know how long she has been here.  
She does not know anyone's name.

All she knows is the ever-present, heavy atmosphere and the consistent buzz of the machines around her.

Well, she knows that the sky outside is always blue and that the grass is always green.

*She knows that the sky is not blue but grey, actually, when one is closer to the tall metal skyscrapers that puncture the horizon. She knows that the grass is brown, actually, burned by the heat of the scorching summer sun.*

The woman knows this. Or, at least, she thinks she does.

She has not been outside for many years, you see. Not since the Incident.

*She had been busy outside in the hot air, a working song light on her lips, when a shadow loomed over her. Rough hands had grasped her and pulled her along, carrying her kicking & screaming away from her home- away from her family.*

Distantly, she remembers warm soapy water up to her elbows, a soft touch to her arm, the wide eyes and sticky hands of her daughter.

Her daughter's name was-  
Her daughter's name *is* Jaya.

No, that's not quite right. She tries again.

*My daughter's name is-*

*My daughter's name-*

*My daughter-*

*My-*

Her daughter's name, that breathtaking war-cry of an ancient goddess, echoes in the empty space behind her ribcage, beating in time with her heart. Her soul is shouting out the answer, but the woman can no longer hear herself.

It is something terrible, isn't it? When you forget something you were so sure you'd always remember.

Her vision clouds, and dimly, the woman realises she is crying- crying for the family she doesn't remember, for the world she'll never see again and for the woman she was before the Incident.

Undeterred by the silver mist of tears, her hands remain swift and steady, sewing careful lines down the ribboned pleats of a long skirt. To falter now would mean a gnawing hunger in the pit of her stomach later.

She feels empty enough already.

*ii.*

A memory tugs at the corner of her mind.

*Sitting behind her mother, quick fingers looping strands of hair into several intricate braids. Flowers are intertwined at various intervals, bright against the dark mass of hair. It is a special day- the celebration of the King's new wife- so they must look the part.*

The girl laughs bitterly to herself. The sound bounces off a marble pillar, travelling around the room until it finally returns to her.

It feels like it has been years since she's seen her mother- no, that's not quite right. She saw her at the festival a few months ago.

*The crowd is huge, a teeming mass of bodies that block her vision. She is not tall, never has been, and finds it harder than ever to see.*

*There! A flash of dark hair, an anomaly amongst the light-haired, light-skinned people. She opens her mouth to call out, but immediately catches a mouthful of some rich person's trailing silk scarf. When she manages to finally free herself, the dark hair is gone.*

She's not quite sure that she'd call it "seeing"...a stolen glimpse through a crowd of people doesn't really count, but what else can she do? To the King, the weaver-girls are property first and human beings second.

She refocuses her attention. From her position in the corner, she can just about make out the guests idling in the antechamber- foreigners, from a faraway country. She's interested despite herself. She shifts in her seat.

The maiden is [*perched on a stool*]. A [*wide loom*] [*clicks rapidly*] as she [*weaves*] a [*multi-coloured cloth*]. [*Yarn*] slips through her fingers like [*rustling poplar leaves*].

They say that all the girls of the King's court are fine weavers, but that couldn't be further from the truth. He hand picks them, don't you know? Steals the best weavers from their mother's house, takes them and inducts them into his service as tribute for the Great Goddess. Pure virgins as chaste as white sand, with the skill to create great works.

*A sudden silence, and then a blinding light. The girl screws her eyes shut against the brightness, cowering in the corner with hands covering her face. The Goddess is altogether otherworldly, a tall woman made of pure light who makes the mighty King standing in front of her look small.*

*She can't hear what they're saying, but she can guess at it. The King is bowing and scraping, gesturing to the weaver-girls scattered around the room like some kind of offering. The Goddess is smiling and nodding, considering the offer.*

*The offer! As if they are naught but cattle.*

Despite the new flush of fury on her face, she keeps weaving, angry red combining with serene blue to create a deep, dark purple. The newly-dyed threads stain her hands, but she continues nonetheless—the girl has no desire to spend the night on a cruel, cold floor in the lowest levels of the palace. Sometimes she hates the Goddess. Whatever happened to women sticking together?

*iii.*

The old woman was there at the beginning.

How could she not be? She *is*.

They don't speak of her, these days. Her sisters murmur about being forgotten.

She prefers to think she's passed into myth.

She hums a tuneless song under her breath as she winds the thread onto her spindle. Next to her, her first sister tilts her head and carefully measures out a certain length. Furthest from her is her second sister, who waits patiently with a sharp knife.

They used to have names, she thinks. She was *Nona*, her first sister *Decima* and her second *Mortano*, that's not quite right.

They were called that, yes, but that is not who they *are*. She cannot seem to remember what their original names are. She shakes her head to clear the cobwebs from her mind.

An eternity passes, and the old woman spins on, string winding through clever, gnarled fingers. The faint rustling of the spindle and the muted rasp of knife cutting through flax are the only noises, for the making of fate is a silent task.

When next she looks up from her work, she cannot see anything, not even her hands in front of her. The blackness is heavy around her, surrounding her like a blanket thrown over a forgotten sculpture. It is peaceful, almost, like the inside of a mother's womb.

She wouldn't know. She's never had a mother. She has always just *been*.

The crone is [*alone in the quiet dark*]. A [*skein of thread*] [*rustles quietly*] as she [*spins*] a [*never-ending tapestry*]. [*String*] slips through her fingers like [*the frailty of human life*].

# YEAR 12 WRITING

## *Above the Skyline*

Sophia Tran

It's six in the morning and I tuck my sleepiness away. I uncurl from my bed, reversing from a muddle of sheets, hair and limbs into a feeble human form. In the mirror opposite my bed I can see myself, a willow figure hanging in a white nightgown. I let my fingers trace my dark, hanging eyes, my pale dry cheeks. It's the face of my mother.

When I was a child I didn't think my mother was human. She looked like a ghost - her pale arms hovering beside her, dead from exhaustion. She never seemed to appear in the light of day - in the yawn of dawn she would scoop me up out of my little bed and cradle me as I ate. But just as the light started to seep through our window she would slip out of the front door. She would appear again later at night, gliding across the tiles and dropping the load of sewing she hadn't finished at the factory on the living room couch.

My watch says it's 6:12. I approach the curtains and cast them aside. The clouds look more like the thin veils of cigarette smoke that waft in my face as I walk to work. The skyline carves into them - a staircase halfway up the sky. I know these rectangular blocks well. I spent most of my younger years pressed against the glass window of our apartment trying to figure out the maze of buildings outside our home. I used to watch the block opposite us where strangers lived their lives within the strict straight window frames stacked up on top of each other. I named these strangers - Sarah with her sandwich press on the counter, Old Ollie with his ancient Labrador. I would watch how their homes and lives froze after they left for work, how motionless their kitchens and living rooms would become, just like the little rooms of my doll house. I guess they didn't seem to notice or maybe care that they were being watched.

I direct my attention to the dull pounding in my head. It's been there for a while now, silent thoughts trying to break through my face. I walk to the kitchen and put a capsule in my Nespresso machine. Other than the gentle hum and drip of the coffee maker, the apartment is silent. It's always amazed me how visible silence can be. How tensely it can freeze the air. Even as a child I could see the silence of our apartment, so taut I thought the mirror in the living room would shatter. I sip my coffee. The bitterness envelopes my tongue and switches on my mind.

It's 6:43. My laptop is waiting on the table already open and I turn it on. The keyboard is warm - the eager sprinkles of light from the narrow window have been dancing on it as I slept. My fingers are fast, they're deft. They work like little machines. I work best in the morning - I've always been a morning person, I guess. So was my mother. At dawn her smile broke her face the most. When I was old enough to join her in the factory I realised it was also at dawn that she worked the fastest, that she looked most human. In the mornings she still had the energy for the laugh or occasional chuckle. But as darkness dawned she shrank, she paled, she became the sewing machine herself. Each night as we walked home from the factory I could see in the flickering light of lamp posts the emptiness of her eyes. It scared me.

I thought I promised myself never to get eaten up like that. I would work hard, get a good job. I would never let the silence seep under my door, I would never jigsaw myself into the skyline. But looking at my reflection on my computer screen I see my mother's ghost, pale with unkissed skin and costumed

in my work suit. Behind this ghost's face I see cold numbers clinking, shares selling, stocks declining and I wonder where that girl went.

My head pounds harder and I let my face crumble. It's painful. It's loud.

Everything's calm, the air sliding over itself like water licking the sand of a beach. I crawl out of the ruins raw and tentative. The hands of my watch are spinning. A trickle of sunlight glides across my cheek and it is then that I understand who my mother was and who I won't be. A gust of wind pushes my window open and I let it carry my mind up and up, above the skyline and into the clouds. From up here they look like fog - a wondrous, safe nothing. I give the city below me one last casting look and it's dark, traced with tar and leaking buildings. It is then that I let myself lie in the clouds, another wisp on the hairline of the sky.



## *In a Black and White World*

Stephanie Chan

As humans, we have a natural and constant desire to categorise. We organise our thoughts, objects, and people, into compartments and under labels as a means of simplifying our understanding of the complex world. Imagine fishing for a teaspoon in a pool of cutlery. You'd probably give up in less than five seconds before resorting to eating with your hands like a caveman.

So you may be wondering, "Why make such a trivial statement? What's your point?" Well in truth, there is a much more dangerous problem associated with the art of categorisation. Just as we can divide our fruits from our vegetables, those 'simple' labels have the power to divide our nations into two.

~

Over time, we've developed a sort of Veruca Salt, "I want it...NOW!" attitude to life. We are always looking for ways to make things bigger, better and faster - from our ever-changing vernacular language and abbreviated 'LOLs', to our late night UberEats deliveries that *should* have arrived almost 20 minutes ago. With the fascinating evolution of 'good morning' to 'g'morning, mornin' and - GM,' it is clear that with the oversimplification of two words to two letters, the original phrase has lost all meaning.

Regardless of how fast our fingers can type, we'll always find a way to use less words, less letters and less thumb power. Say hello to the new motto of contemporary society; "Work smarter, not harder." And so, it is *only natural* for us to simplify things into a choice between only two options, binary opposites; good or bad, nice or mean, right or wrong. After all, everyone knows that two's company and three's a crowd.

Although I was unaware of it at the time, I believe that my first understanding of these binaries was when my parents first told me about Santa Claus and his Naughty and Nice list. I was of course, determined to be 'nice' and so was every other child whose parents shut them up with the same simple lies. And soon enough, I came to realise that between these pairs of opposites, there is nearly always one word that is more flattering to a person than the other. Just as no child wants to be put on the naughty list, *nobody* wants to be called bad, or mean, or wrong.

Our common desire for praise and acceptance from those around us is synonymous with the ideal of being a good person.

But some things are too dangerous to put labels on, and perhaps the most dangerous problem with categorisation and oversimplification is with black and white morality; a battle between pure good and absolute evil. In a prejudiced world where children are brought up to believe that black people lie and black people are immoral and corrupted by evil, they've learnt division before even knowing how to count to ten. I suppose I should clarify that I'm referring to the division of people, which is a whole lot more complicated than division in maths (at least most of the time). The main difference? This is the type that can never truly be 'undone'.

From the 1880s, America praised a system of institutionalised racism and white supremacy. Schools, public transportation, and bathrooms were racially segregated to promote the 'comfort' of white Americans. Their radical beliefs and actions could be somewhat likened to 'the Cheese Touch' - you didn't wanna be anywhere near that person for the fear that you'll catch cooties or some type of obscure disease.

The Jim Crow Laws dictated the everyday lives of black Americans, the property they could own, the jobs they could work and the people they could love because of the colour of their skin. "Separate but equal" was nothing more than a comforting lie.

And the most horrifying part? Even Nazi Germany was fascinated by America's race laws and used them as inspiration for their own - the Nuremberg Race Laws.

We simplify our concepts and ideas to develop a better understanding of the bigger picture. When I was younger, flipping through my mum's old photo albums, I asked her why none of her pictures had colour. "It's called black and white photography," she explained. I was skeptical in believing her - there was obviously black, and white, but what about the multitude of different shades of grey in between? "It's simpler that way," she told me. Okay, I admit that it's a bit too much of a mouthful to say black and white and (many different shades of) grey photography. Even *I* am not that patient.

But the reality is, life is not "as simple as black and white." Viewing the world through a grayscale lens, we have lost sight of the endless spectrum of colours in between.

The dangerous art of categorisation is one that we still see the effects of today. America will forever be scarred by its past, and remain divided by the same racial tensions and prejudiced attitudes as it was over a century ago.

The Central Park Five in 1989 became a symbol of the stark injustices of black people within an unjust legal system. Five teenagers, wrongfully convicted of the assault and rape of a white female jogger. They had met for the first time at the police station, had conflicting accounts of the event and no DNA matches. They needed somebody to blame and they found them in the faces of five black boys.

"Nobody ever asked who we were. As black and brown people, it's as if we were born guilty."

So what *has* changed? Surprisingly little.

In an unjust and corrupt world, the line between 'good' and 'bad' has become almost nonexistent. We believed in the grand narrative that 'justice will prevail' and that powerful people use their power for good. The countless deaths of black people at the hands of the police, tell us otherwise. There is no such thing as separate but equal.

There is not a single person who has never lied or done immoral things - and we naturally consider these mistakes as a critical part of our human nature.

And, if we had to categorise people by distinctive labels of good and bad? I can most confidently say that there would be no good people.

## 32 *Soup Cans*

Jessica Soobyn Lim

America's pride and joy, the Campbell's Soup can.

What once belonged on supermarket shelves found itself in one of the greatest modern art museums of all time – the MoMA – in New York City. Thirty-two canvases, each one measuring forty by fifty centimetres portrays a screen-printed soup can.

What is it about this red and white tin that captured the attention of Andy Warhol in 1962?

Whatever it was, I didn't get it. A few years ago, when I first saw Andy Warhol's now multi-million dollar artwork *Campbell's Soup Cans*, I was confused. The artwork's repetitiveness struck me as symptomatic of his lack of creativity. I mean, couldn't he have at least switched up the colour palette every once in a while?

But according to Donna De Salvo, art curator and critic, I was wrong; "Andy Warhol understood America's defining twin desires for innovation and conformity...he transformed these contradictory impulses into completely original art." His art captured the spirit of mid-20th century America.

But whether or not Warhol was an artistic genius is not the point of this essay. Rather, what I want to focus on is De Salvo's idea about the tension between innovation and conformity. What does De Salvo mean by contradictory impulses? Does individuality have to oppose conformity? Are they always in conflict? The idea that conformity oppresses individuality is a common one.

Consider Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. John Proctor's individual resistance against a theocracy, stressing religious conformity, is futile during the Salem Witch Trials. And so, this Puritan society is driven into mass hysteria and paranoia. What about the dystopian society in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*? Conformity is pervasive in this society, and it manifests in the denouncement and alienation of Clarisse. Or in *Dead Poets Society*? Is it not the blind emptiness of strict rules and discipline at Welton Academy that is the real villain of this movie? Is it not conformity that drives Neil Perry to his death? Mr Keating recognises the importance of individual agency against conformity. He demands his students express their opinions and pursue their passions. In his own words, "Carpe Diem! Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

The individual. Society. Forever at war. These are the narratives we see being played out time and time again in art and literature.

Yet interestingly, Warhol's artwork, while depicting conformity, challenges the popular art style of his time. Through adopting the innovative process of screen printing into his art process, he produces thirty-two, almost identical prints of the iconic red and white soup cans to encapsulate his fascination with consumer culture and mass production. Warhol uses conformity in his art to defy assumptions that art cannot – and should not – be commercialised. Through conformity, he paradoxically creates new conventions: his own art movement, Pop Art.

Let me put it another way. Essentially, what I initially perceived as conformity is actually an expression of individuality. When I reconsidered Warhol's artwork it wasn't so bad. I guess he was kind of an artistic genius, taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary enough to be placed in a gallery. Because after all, these mass-produced soup cans were hanging next to Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889). Warhol's self-awareness of existing art conventions enables him to turn conformity on its head and critique it.

Maybe Warhol was really onto something when he created *Campbell's Soup Cans*?

Of course, the tension between individuality and conformity isn't just relevant to Pop Art. It's a narrative as old as mankind. What Warhol is doing is similar to parody. (No, I'm not talking about the YouTube parodies of Taylor Swift's *Shake it off* – although I could another time if you wished). Instead, I'm discussing the satyr genre that parodies tragic Ancient Greek drama.

We are all familiar with the key features of Aristotelian tragedy: plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle. Performed as the last piece at the Dionysian festival, satyr plays parody these theatrical features by adding elements of comedic relief. Basically, the Ancient Greeks had the weird goatman use wordplay, sexual innuendos and references to ‘taboo’ topics like farting to offset the earlier tragedies. But the satyr play didn’t just remain as a shadow of tragic plays. In 501 BC it became its own genre. It is no longer just a parody or a reaction against the tragic convention but is its own form.

So, is the individual forever in conflict with convention? Is this tension between individuality and conformity really a war? Or is the narrative a bit more complex?

What we see here are cycles – cycles of art and literature occurring over centuries, millennia.

From conformity emerges individual innovation, which in turn leads to the creation of new conventions. Before Warhol were Dada artists like Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dalí who rejected the rationality, reason and order of Capitalism. They instead favoured chaos, nonsense and individuality in their works *Fountain* (1917) and *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). After Warhol was Jeff Koons, who inherited the Pop Art style and popularised the mixing of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in his installations. One of his most famous works from the Celebration series is *Balloon Dog*, a three-metre inflatable dog sculpture that juxtaposes the everyday and the monumental – what Koons claims is “a representation of breath and human life.”

But Scott Timberg – American journalist, culture writer and editor – would vehemently disagree. In his book, *CULTURE CRASH: The Killing of the Creative Class*, Timberg states that “Koons is a recycler and regurgitator of the obvious, which he proceeds to aggrandize in the most obvious way imaginable, by producing oversized versions of cheap stuff in extremely expensive materials.” And I guess I agree, at the end of the day it’s a shiny dog that costs fifty-eight million dollars. I don’t know what it’s doing for culture.

Just like fashion trends, things change. One month it’s all about everything oversized – jackets, blazers, pants. Then the next month, it’s tiny tube tops and micro-bags. As soon as a convention is established, a counter-movement emerges in the next generation to oppose and criticise it. That is how we have cycles. As more and more individuals oppose a convention, the next cycle begins. This is exactly what we see with Warhol. Once the soup gets cold, no one wants a spoon of it.

So here lies the crux. Conformity and individuality coexist.

They are inextricable because they define each other. We can’t privilege either one of the two. You can only have individuality if you have conformity to react against. John Proctor saw the oppressive Salem theocracy. The Greek dramatists saw the strict tragic conventions. Warhol saw the gaps in art.

So now I look upon the thirty-two red and white cans and I do see De Salvo’s idea about the conflicting ideas of innovation and conformity. The red and white cans paradoxically make their own artistic statement. Before, when I found out that the Campbell cans were not screen printed by Warhol himself, but factory workers, I thought to myself ‘how is this art?’ But I missed the point.

The beauty of Warhol’s soup is in its conformity. It’s only now that I see this.

**Year 12 Extension 2 students have the opportunity to write extended pieces of 5-6000 words over a one-year period. The following openings explore the short story and the script form.**

### *Wandering Luna*

Ariel Angelica

Springfield, MA, USA

“Doubt thou the stars are fire,”

A flap of wings and a stirring in the dryness, butterfly wings flew through dark oak casement windows painting streaks of flickering crimson and gold. Flashes of light dance and disappear on the floorboards. I felt warmth atop my eyelids, the bridge of my nose, fingertips, knees. I pat the sides of the floral fabric, tracing the rips in the armchair. I sigh into it and picture what moving here would have been like if I weren't alone. I came to Springfield to move into a smaller apartment, one that wasn't quite so big and empty—emptiness is not something I like to be reminded of. It's a studio flat only two rooms large, featuring the aforementioned north-east facing windows and convenient access to the local Stop & Shop. It has amenities including a small park at ground level, and a direct path onto Main Street.

We had only ever lived in Stowe, Vermont, known only for its maple syrup and 19th century wood bridges. Christmas Eve of 1990 we drove up to New York. “Are there any stars left?” Charlie had asked, looking up at his mother from her lap in the back seat. The last week had been wintery and grey. I saw him in the rear view, Georgie and Bella as well; swaddled in scarves, mittens and socks. When they slept this way, swaying at every turn, their bodies rising and falling, there was a fleeting moment when I was sure that I could see the rest of my life. A life like mine should've been easy and predictable, low and slow; like Frank Sinatra humming over the engine. It was ‘Fly Me to the Moon’ on an endless loop all the way to New York.

Down on the street, above the traffic I could hear a small child crying. I imagined that she looked like Bella — she is teetering into view with her unsteady feet and multiplying freckles. Her hair sticks out, unbrushed and disarranged from sleep. Bella knew how I liked the quiet mornings. She would let me set the Moka pot for the morning's coffee and get the paper and start breakfast, while she sat and read about the bears that go on a picnic. I wish that I had read with her, Georgie was better with the parenting, but she told me Bella had always been Daddy's little girl.

I dreamt of her once—Georgie—as an older woman. Pearls of wisdom hung from her neck, tied to her age and undying charm. Her skin was thin and her veins were raised purple, but she was still so wonderful. She would be so wonderful. Remembering her youth, when her creases could be called dimples and smile lines, I had thought that she carried cinnamon in her hair. “How else could you be so sweet?” I'd say. I smelt it in our first kiss goodbye in the hair that fell over her shoulders. I tasted thick chai on her lips. In school, Georgie was the girl that danced in the rain and watched clouds move across the sky. Years later she was the mother that sang to her children, read them stories, tied flowers into their hair. In the dream she asked me, “Why don't you ever tell me you love me?” Oh Georgie, I tell you how much I do in my head all the time.

Our days as a family were spent gardening, reading, going to the park, library and Farmers Market, volunteering at school fetes and at the church. In the spring we'd walk beneath vibrant green maple trees, pick bunches of phlox and sweet corn, pickle carrots, cucumbers and radishes, picnic by the Deerfield River. Charlie would pinch at the ladybugs and Bella had her butterflies. Stowe sees a range of butterflies around this time of year; different species of Ladies, Admirals, Swallowtails and Skippers. “That's an Eastern Tiger Swallowtail,” I remembered telling Georgie.

“Female — it has extra blue scaling on its back.”

“Its wing is broken,” she would say, because she can see what I can’t.

I put the broken butterfly down to let nature take its course, and follow my own interstellar path, watching my children trip over fallen branches and throw rocks into the river.

The life I had was my oxygen, the air that fed our flame. But maybe my sky-so-bright was too bright, and the whole sky needed to catch fire.

In the Autumn of 1992 a new cafe-bookstore was established in town. It sat between the Once-Upon-A-Time Toy Shop and the Hannaford on Mountain Road. Nobody had seen the build, and there were no records in the state property archives, but because nobody could remember what used to be in its place, nobody questioned Luna’s stay and everybody began to forget about her unsolicited arrival. Georgina had taken quite a liking to the place just as the many academics, town goers and young families had. “It’s a cafe and a bookstore. They take book donations and run art workshops. They sell goods from local businesses and let budding musicians perform. It’s fresh.” Georgie had always been one to get excited about innovation. Luna had a book club there. Naturally, Georgie was a member of the start-up committee. “It’s a sweet, tight-knit community of strangers,” she’d say. “No one really knows each other, but now we’ve all read the same book about a 19th century nobleman who’s scared of aging so his old-ness gets trapped in a painting.”

“Oh?” I didn’t know what to say. Wilde’s philosophies didn’t — don’t — interest me nearly as much as they do Georgie.

“...and so that’s what we talk about. It’s nice... pleasant.”

The bookstore itself, Luna, had never quite interested me the way it did her. She was one for simple pleasantries in the community, happy to be an active voice. I preferred the books, coffee, art and music at home. The one time I went to Luna, I had gone with Georgie to help carry crates of our second-hand books. I was briefly acquainted with the other members of the book club, and the musty-smelling bookstore behind the cafe. The group met fortnightly on Tuesdays, but Georgina had become a regular, joining the cafe banter, going to the bookstore in all her free time, dedicating herself weekly then daily. She began to take the kids to Luna saying that there was now a children’s club. It used to frustrate me, Luna had become an infatuation. Sometimes I thought Georgie kept coming back just to be surrounded by the books, the culture, the movement and music; just to feel young and alive again. She used to tell me to lighten your heart, have a little faith, trust the goodness in the world. Maybe Georgie needed something of her own. Something to rearrange her heart? Whatever Luna had to offer that we didn’t had ignited Georgie, and in turn caused a trail of sparks.

Luna is gone now. It has reverted back to being a HomeGoods. Before leaving me in the morning, Bella pressed her nose against the front window watching the falling December snow. She looked at me and told me, “the stars will come back, at night, or tomorrow, or the day the clouds leave.” Had she known before I did that our stars were going out?

The Mountain Street HomeGoods, undisturbed and restored in its place, took Luna’s life and spirit. And Luna disappearing on that Tuesday morning, left with all the air that fuelled my fire.

## ***You're a Lost Cause!***

Divya Nandyal

### ACT I

#### SCENE I

*MAN IN BLACK 1 and MAN IN BLACK 2 roll on a large whiteboard, and position it centre stage. They sit on chairs on either side of the blank whiteboard, each holding a marker and an eraser.*

*There is a pause, before all at once, a fanfare sounds. A small MARCHING BAND proceeds down the aisle from an outside door, before climbing up the stairs, and onto the stage. Wild white strobe lights flit about the theatre. The band performs a small routine on the stage, about one minute or so, before walking back down the aisle and exiting the theatre, playing a triumphant song all the while.*

*Four EXTRAS rush to the front of the stage, shuffling their placards, holding up a sign saying 'CLAP'.*

*The audience clap. <sup>1</sup>*

*Another pause, before about 20 MEN IN SUITS walk in through the back door, robotically, wearing various, yet painfully boring, work clothes. They chatter inanely to each other, using words that have no real meaning at all: 'taxes', 'biannually', 'gross income' etc.<sup>2</sup> They make their way to the stage, stand in two neat rows, take a synchronised bow to the last of the fanfare, before walking back off stage.*

*About 10 harassed-looking FILM CREW enter in a straggling clump through the back door, behind the audience, chatting tiredly between themselves. They are holding clipboards, wearing headsets, carrying placards and scripts. They hurry down the aisle, not ceasing their chatter until they clamber up the stairs to the stage, a few of them tripping in their haste, before turning around, apparently only just realising they are being observed by an audience, a small audience, but an audience nonetheless.*

*One of the many sound techs<sup>3</sup> in the FILM CREW turns around, looking directly at a front row audience member, and exclaims:*

FILM CREW 1: We're late, it's started, dammit, I told you we would be late! Ah! How is it meant to start again? Oh, right, dude- guy in the grey- <sup>4</sup>

*FILM CREW 1 looks around wildly, frantically.*

FILM CREW 1: That was your cue. We were meant to enter before the bloody marching band!

FILM CREW 2: How is this my fault? We decided that the one guy in the suit with the briefcase was meant to start us off!

*The FILM CREW continue to argue within themselves, as well as with the MEN IN SUITS, and unsuspecting audience members.*

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<sup>1</sup> If the audience does not clap, the EXTRAS should lower the sign and raise it again.

<sup>2</sup> Though, I suppose, all words have no real meaning- but we don't have time for that discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Or assistant directors or coffee fetchers or yellers, or actors, I suppose.

<sup>4</sup> All the guys are in grey.

*The two MEN IN BLACK manning the whiteboard write 'ACTION!!!' on either side, before sending it flipping like a vertical pinwheel. They duck under the whiteboard, quietly conferring to themselves- the audience would not be able to see this amid all the chaos, but a camera akin to a KissCam at a cricket game hovers over their frantic discussion, projecting it onto the large screens, concluding with firm nods to each other, and then . . .*

MAN IN BLACK 1: Close the curtains.

MAN IN BLACK 2: Action!

*The curtains close, slowly.*

## **ACT II**

### **SCENE I**

*The curtains open.*

*The aerial SILKS DANCER begins in the position she was left in<sup>5</sup>, illuminated by a purple spotlight, precariously dangling, hair brushing the surface of the stage, before clambering hand over hand up the smooth fabric, despair on her face. The camera tracks her progress, projecting her fear, desperation onto the large screens, before ending on a still, where she extends one arm, reaching out to the hook that secures the fabric.*

*The purple spotlight dims.*

*The curtains close.*

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<sup>5</sup> Don't look to me to sort out the logistics of this- that is *your* profession, is it not?



## *La Machine de Rien*

Maya Weiss

The mood is decidedly mahogany on campus and a light breeze flows down Wally's Walk, swirling crimson around the professor's feet. On a brand-new Walkman bought from Singaporean duty-free, she bouncily listens to Chet Baker's *Autumn Leaves*. The pertinence of this is not lost on her, although the connection is subliminal – consciously, she is preoccupied by an idea so grand it spills beyond syntax and defies discursivity.

Yes, this idea transcends signification – rather a point of failure for the holder of a PhD in linguistic theory, but alas, the Derridean argument that language and thought circle each other in confused aporia assuages the professor.

It had arrived in a thesis approval meeting ten minutes earlier. The candidate had appeared nervous; the professor had sensed a tingling of the hands and a shaking of the voice. Granted, she senses that in almost all the thesis presentations she observes, but there was something about the quickness of the speech, the slight vagaries in conceptual explanation, and the slow, plodding, repetitive end to the proposal that suggested the kid might be a little different to your average edgy, wired student.

Amidst frenetic exposition and extrapolation, she'd only really managed to gather two key terms: *language machine*, and *equations*. That, though, was enough to make her time-worn, wrinkled cerebral cortex squirm with excitement. Her synapses had begun to join together little bytes of information, and even now new sheafs of thought join the pile at a steady pace, as though a strong wind is blowing through the amber-shaded tree of pleasant but unprofitable tenure. The professor is sure she's stumbled upon something pretty damn great here – something that could stave off the Chancellor and the Finance Committee; something that would, in the wise and modern words of the university higher-ups, “foster corporate synergy.” She'll just need the maths and computer science faculties, the literature Dean, and perhaps her graduate assistant to help her out. And, of course, the student himself, provided he can do something about his rather unmarketable presentation.

~

Jakub Krakowski is out of ideas.

A scholarship granted towards the gaining of his Master's degree has not, in fact, increased his productivity, and his professor's obliging though at times impatient guidance has thus far failed to produce any new or exciting inventions in the wide-reaching and expansive fields of literature, linguistics, and philosophy. What it has done, rather, is allow him to lose a not- insignificant amount of scholarship money at the pokies.

Krakowski has always found that *pretending* to know about something is quite a bit more fun than actually knowing it. This is mostly because *knowing* requires effort, while *pretending to know* allows more time to watch *Homicide* reruns and observe as his roommate, Matt, divides his time between his Atari console and musty mull bowl.

He began his career of academic dilettantism in high school. When Billy Thompson called him a filthy Commie in Year Nine for the way he pronounced all his unrounded vowels at the front of his mouth and alternated his Rs between the uvular trill and voiced alveolar, Krakowski decided that he'd had quite enough of being compared to his lanky Yugoslavian classmates (even though he was quite sure they themselves had little to do with the rise of Communism in Eastern Europe) and proceeded to beat the dropkick in all his subjects, especially in Geography (and except for Maths).

Once he'd accomplished such a feat, however, Krakowski came to understand two things. The first was that Billy Thompson was, while a fine specimen of Australian brawn, not exactly an intellectual Goliath. The second was that Australian television was in fact wildly entertaining (at least, for a Polish boy accustomed to the same *lektor* filling his ears and squirrelling into his brain each evening).

And so, under the pretence of reforming his English by listening to the slurred vowels and trimmed-down slang words of actors on a little box in the living room, Krakowski stumbled his way through his final years of high school by completing his readings, beating Billy in English, narrowly losing to a Yugoslavian kid in Geography, and matriculating into a B.A. at Macquarie University in 1979, where, out of the same idle whimsy that had gotten him there, he simply refused to leave.

Until now, that is, halfway through his Master's year.

~

## *The Artist and his Unfulfilled*

Sarah Gouw

### PROLOGUE

*The stage is shrouded in darkness. A spotlight comes up slowly on THE CLOAKED FIGURE. He is standing alone, situated in a stage characterised neither by time nor by space, and is facing the audience, although we are unable to see his face. The stage is barren and empty. A soft ambient jazz song plays and THE CLOAKED FIGURE raises his head slowly...*

CLOAKED FIGURE: Welcome, my dear viewers. Many friends, many foes, many unassociated with. I welcome you, to a production that exceeds all expectations, and an illusion that speaks true to you and I.

First and foremost, I am not the creator, nor do I identify as an inventor. Simply put, I am merely the narrator of this story. Although our reality pertains to the notion that our lives are made up of millions of identities, we as viewers are introduced to only three; Mother, Father, and Him. And thus our story begins.

The year was 1980. Mount Helen had undergone a deadly eruption, killing fifty seven individuals, and John Lennon of the Beatles had been assassinated, a direct result of the profound words of J.D Salingher's Holden Caulfield.

As my loyal viewers, you might find it peculiar to believe that whilst these events had taken place, Solomon Black, a man with a desire for recognition, would be released into the world. He was born three weeks premature, cradled within the arms of a foreign midwife while his mother mourned in silence.

His birth had not been easy. She had previously suffered at the hands of a miscarriage, the loss of her previous daughter overshadowing any possibilities of hope. A loss Solomon despised. After all, he considered himself a beacon of change. Her neglected 'tabula rasa,' as he liked to call it.

When asked to name her child, his mother had simply reached for the forgotten Bible on the hospital bedside table, flipping through the dusty manuscript before choosing the first name she could find. King Solomon. Thus, the official birth of Solomon Black, a child of an unfortunate circumstance, and of an even more unfortunate namesake.

So before I begin this performance, I must provide you with a preface of Solomon Black.

The man is a narcissist as you will soon notice, thereby lacking the capacity for modesty. Shouldering a burdensome hubris, which I'm sure you've come across before.

However, it was not his inability to apply pen on paper that would cause Solomon to doubt his purpose, nor was it a form of crippling self-doubt stemming from an adolescent insecurity or some backwards self-righteousness.

It was his fear of dissatisfaction. A man could not escape a quandary of that calibre.

He had meticulously crafted his purpose to centre upon the composition of linguistics and emotions, yet no ambition, however big or small, could eradicate the fraudulence that haunted the amalgamation of knowledge and memories he called his conscience. Whether it was the fictitious merits of his unknown sister, the distant frowns of his father, or even the unreachable wisdom of King Solomon, annotated within the millions of Bibles scattered throughout the world. Whatever purpose Solomon had manufactured would cast upon the pages of each new 'tabula rasa' he would concoct, massacring both his psyche, and his art.

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**An original publication of student work.  
English Faculty  
Hornsby Girls High School  
2022**