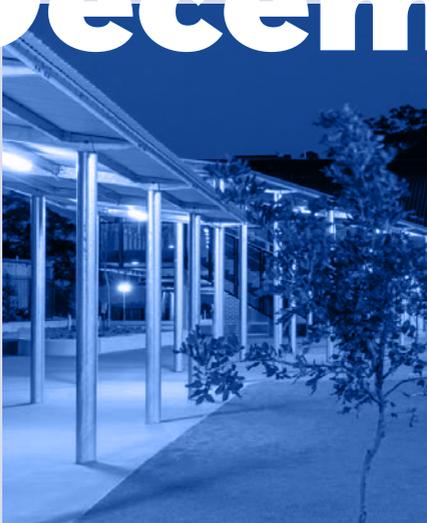


One Week in December



CTHS

An anthology of short writings from
Cherrybrook Technology High School

Cherrybrook Technology High School
28/44 Purchase Rd, Cherrybrook NSW 2126

Published by WestWords Ltd
PO Box 2327
North Parramatta NSW 1750
91B Grose St, North Parramatta NSW 2151
(02) 8677 4815 | admin@westwords.com.au
www.westwords.com.au

WestWords

Executive Director: Michael Campbell

Producer: Christian Pazzaglia

Associate Producer: Hajer al-Awsi

Blue Mountains and Blacktown Manager: James Roy

Development Consultant: Kathie Elliot, Square Pegs Consulting

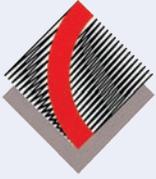
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www.sailorstudio.com.au



Cherrybrook Technology High School

Cherrybrook Technology High School was established in 1992 and has quickly gained a reputation as one of the most innovative and successful comprehensive high schools in the State.

The school currently has a population of 2020 students, a teaching staff of 136 and a large administrative and support staff. It is a dynamic community of learners committed to providing a rich, safe and enjoyable educational environment with a high technology focus.

It offers a range of teaching and learning programs and an extensive number of extra curricular activities. Students at the school achieve outstanding HSC results. An important feature of the school is its wellbeing network that strives to support each child as he or she progresses through high school. The school is co-educational, enjoys strong support from the local community and values participation in cultural and sporting activities.





The Experience

Amidst the busy schedule of assemblies, training days and final exams at the end of 2019, the Year 10 cohort at Cherrybrook Technology High were confronted with the challenge of planning, writing and editing a piece of work for publication. Each class worked with a different professional writer who guided them through the process, often providing confidence for those who were unsure and inspiration for those who needed it. It was a hothousing of student skills and an experience that should stand them in good stead as they move into their senior studies.

As you read and enjoy these stories, I hope that you are taken back to the world as it was then or find yourself transported into the world as it should be, all through the eyes, words and imagination of the Cherrybrook students.

- Steve Henry: Head of English, Cherrybrook Technology High School



WestWords is Western Sydney's Literature Development Organisation.

We provide pathways of opportunity for the development of Western Sydney voices through innovative literature and related arts programs. We believe literacy, self-expression and creativity changes lives and communities. WestWords is committed to providing an environment where the stories of the communities of Western Sydney and the places they come from are celebrated. The guiding philosophy of WestWords is a belief that the unique perspectives and stories of the Western Sydney area deserve to be celebrated, developed in literature and shared with a wider audience.

We believe that engagement with reading and writing allows young people in particular to develop their imagination, gives voice to their stories and experiences, hones skills in written expression and illustration, and sets them on a trajectory for life. With a focus on literature, we deliver residencies, fellowships, workshops, performances, presentations and publications. Our partners include teachers, schools, universities, community and arts organisations.

WestWords would like to thank Cherrybrook Technology High School, its principal Gary Johnson and in particular Teacher Librarian, Amber Sorensen. With Amber's support and collaboration we were privileged to be able to offer the school's entire Year 10 cohort of some 470 students the chance to work with twelve exceptional writers over one week in December – a big undertaking at the end of a big year. As these students looked towards their final years it was

a tremendous gift and a testament to the vision of the school that they support their students in this way.

WestWords' tailored workshop and residential programs brings published, and in many cases award-winning, writers into schools. For many young people this is the first time they meet the olympians of the literary world. Having been through the crucible of publication these highly skilled professionals can impart knowledge and experience like none other. For the students it is a unique chance to develop their skills, channel their creative expression, find, and exercise, their voice.

Bringing one's creativity to publication is like no other experience. In that moment of seeing your words reflected back to you from the printed page there is a galvanisation of one's self in the world. For the reader it is an intimate glimpse into the imaginative worlds of our collective future.

We would also like to thank: the further support from the school including Steve Henry, Head of English, the school's English department and Constanze Halder; the Cultural Fund of the Copyright Agency who support our Writers in Western Sydney Schools program; Australian Catholic University who support our publication program; Hayley Lam and Luke Beeton from Sailor Studio for bringing their creativity and expertise into the book's design, the twelve writers in residence – Deborah Abela, Rawah Arja, Sarah Ayoub, J. C. Burke, Tony Davis, Kirsty Eager, Angela May George, Michelle Hamadache, Will Kostakis, Ben Peek, Pip Smith and Helen Thurloe; and the students themselves who brought all their enthusiasm and inspiration to create what you are about to read.

WestWords is proudly supported by



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At ACU, we offer a welcoming environment for everyone. We stand for meaningful education, vital research, and life-changing community engagement.



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Angela May George

Angela May George is the author of CBCA shortlisted children's book, *Out*. In 2017 Angela won the Australian Family Therapist's Association Book of the Year award for *Out*. Her debut novel, *How I Didn't Straighten My Hair* was shortlisted for the Speech Pathology Association award and a follow up novel will be released in 2020. Angela's poetry is featured in the anthology *A Boat of Stars*, which was listed as notable by CBCA earlier this year. Angela May George's books are sold in North America, Australia and New Zealand. She lives in Western Sydney with her husband and three children.

10A

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I consider the students in the year ten cohort at Cherrybrook to be extremely fortunate in securing a residency program. When I was at high school no such program existed and authors were merely names on a cover. During the course of the week I spoke with my group about the benefits of becoming skilled at creative writing. Concepts such as expressing feelings, reaching out to readers to consider important issues (e.g. refugees) and the sharing of experiences and knowledge were discussed at length.

The students in my class felt comfortable enough to ask questions about being a writer and why I chose this career path. We then discussed careers where creative writing skills are essential and the students were surprised to learn just how many industries use creative writing.

I was fortunate to have as part of my group extremely hard working ESL students that were courteous and showed a determination to improve. I am confident that the stories they produced were far from their ‘comfort zone’ in that I encouraged the notion of making the reader ‘feel’. In doing so the students learned loads of new vocabulary at a very fast pace!

”

Soul Bus

BY DANIEL

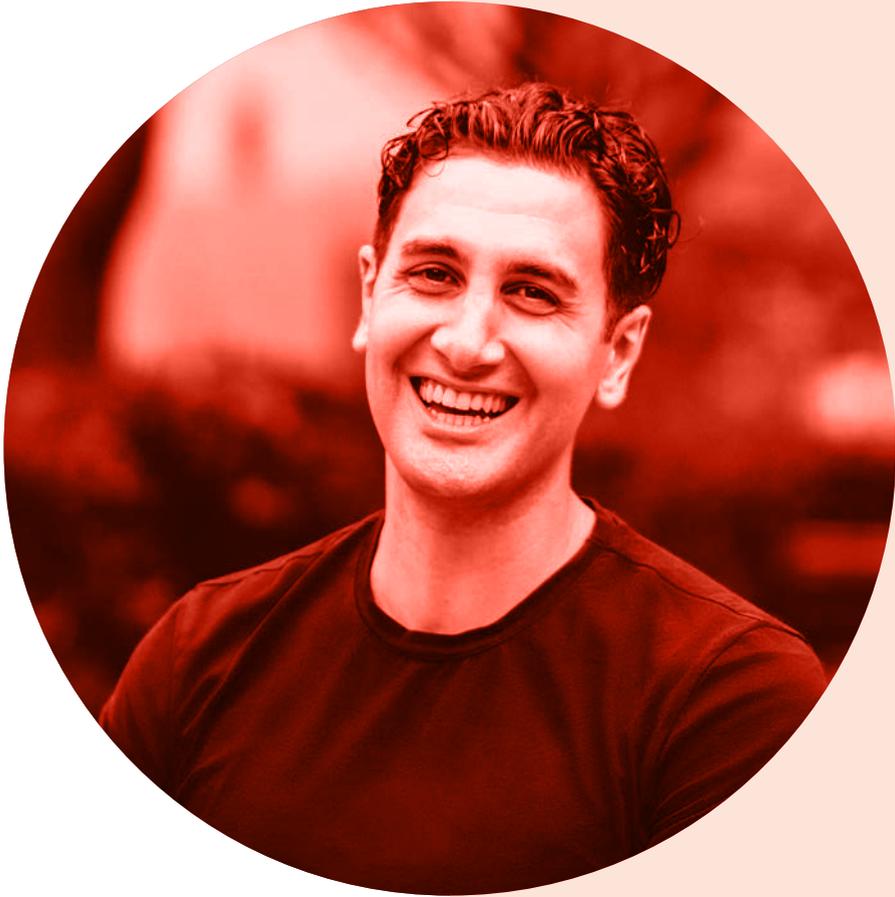
It was a Tuesday morning and I already knew her morning had started badly. I saw her face as she hopped on the bus. She did this thing when she was really nervous. It was like she was trying to chew her lip. She was biting her lip and I was wondering why her day started so bad and she looked as if she was paranoid and it also looked as if she was mumbling something and I looked closely trying my best to read her lips (I never concentrated this hard to read someone's lips) but as I looked at them I could hear her saying "who's there?" but it seemed like she was traumatised and she was too scared to look around and I realised it was because she thought someone was after her. The weather changed: the sun hid behind the clouds. Wind rushed through the windows on the bus and it got colder. It was dead silent. The only sound you could hear was the old engine on the bus and the vibrating windows. And she got goosebumps slowly. Then someone started

tapping against the window, but it was as if the bus has turned off, the knock was bold and clear. She turned around slowly in fear. Nothing was there. She thought it was odd but then she heard the same noise from the other side of the bus but this time she turned quickly. She saw, or thought she saw, a black figure but she couldn't identify what it was. She sat and thought what it could've been as well but as the bus kept going it felt like it was getting darker and darker by every second. Her fingers started feeling tingly and her body started twitching in fear. Then it suddenly felt like she was getting sucked in. She closed her eyes really tightly as if she wanted to go blind or to never see again. I could see her shaking and it got more aggressive as seconds passed then she screamed loud the loudest scream I have ever heard. She then looked back and I realised she did all this to build up courage to turn around. She still didn't find what had been following her. Then five strips of bright lights came through the window and I had realised the sun came up and there was no sign of the person or thing that had been following. In a surreal moment she realised it was her inner soul wanting the shadow to come out.



10A





Will Kostakis

Will Kostakis is a writer of all things, from celebrity news stories that score cease and desist letters, to tweets for professional wrestlers. That said, he's best known for his award-winning YA novels. His first novel, *Loathing Lola*, was released when he was just nineteen. His second, *The First Third*, won the 2014 Gold Inky Award. It was also shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year and Australian Prime Minister's Literary awards, among others. *The Sidekicks* was his third novel for young adults, and his American debut. It went on to win the IBBY Australia Ena Noel Award. *Monuments* is his new fantasy series.

www.willkostakis.com

10A

“

I am the writer I am today because of the teachers who mentored me, and instilled in me the idea that my words have value. The Cherrybrook Technology High School storytelling workshops connects young writers with authors, and over a week, gives them time to experiment with creative writing. We worked through the entire creative process, from idea generation to refining a finished work for publication. It was an absolute pleasure to watch students, some initially reluctant, discover the pleasures of writing and feel empowered to say what they wanted to about the world through fiction.

These students might not become authors - but all humans are storytellers, whether it be when sharing anecdotes over dinner or frantically texting friends after something happens. We connect with others through the stories we tell, and experiences like this improve students' understanding of what makes for compelling storytelling, and hopefully, makes it easier for them to connect with others.

Programs like the Cherrybrook Technology High School storytelling workshop are invaluable because they not only give students a voice, they show them how to use that voice effectively.

”

Moonlight

BY ANGAD

Ambika and I were to be married in a few months. Our parents were still negotiating the details. The Rajputana has had a long tradition of child marriage; ours is no exception. Ambika was thirteen and I was fifteen.

I opened the Sheesham wood door and let the moonlight stream in. The small pool of water was shimmering under the starry arch of the night sky. As the lore goes, an old ancestor of the Raja had made the structure. And an elegant structure it was too. He had married his love there, so I deemed it an appropriate place to converge with mine.

“Do it. Or don’t dare show your face here again.” The twang of my mother’s vitriol echoed from inside and brought me back to reality. I kept my head down and started walking away from the house. The night air was cool but had a sour tinge to it. Beads of sweat trickled from my turban, down the back of my neck. Acacia and scorched grass scattered the landscape, and the milky-tea coloured coats of the wild camels lay sleeping. The moon shone like a bright diamond in the night sky. It reminded me of her beautiful doe eyes.

The Raja had made a stone pathway on the lake towards the pavilion. As you walked along, the stone converted into mudbrick, and you found yourself walking up a stairway to a small pavilion with an arched dome, elevated and almost in the centre of the lake. The canopy breathed with the midnight breeze, and my gaze fixated onto her.

She was wearing a long, red ghagra. The sequins glittered under the midnight sky. A faint glow was cast around her, angelic. Looking out into the darkness, she had her back to me.

“My love, I see you’re finally here.” The steps to the

canopy didn’t look as inviting anymore. Nevertheless, I ventured on. One step. Two. Three. And four. Five metres is all that separated us. Almost by instinct, I felt the silk in my pocket. I grabbed it, entwining around my hand. The smooth brass medallion lay cold in the dead centre of my palm.

“The pool of your eyes beckons me to drown in them, my love. Come, sit beside me.” God was rubbing salt in the wounds of my anxiety. Tensed, I almost couldn’t feel my arm anymore. A cool bead of sweat trickled down my forehead, but I found my way to the ledge. A leg swung over the edge, my hand resting on hers.

“My parents will never agree to it. You ask too much, we are already in debt.” The delivery of the gravest of news from her tongue seemed to be nectar to the ears. My grip on the medallion seemed to tighten. My palms were sweaty, and I experienced an odd clenching in my chest. A sinking feeling engulfed my heart. I couldn’t do this.

But I knew I must. It was now or never, to do what my mother asked of me. Fulfil their wishes. Be spiteful and cold, be ruthless. Be everything that my family name demanded of me since birth. Now.

The cloth that strangled my hand was now free, with the medallion gleaming. My hands worked swiftly, and instantly had an iron grasp on her dark, flowing locks, jet black like the sky above us, with a hint of rose scent. I readied my hands, ready to place the medallion over her throat. Ready to strangle the very soul out of her. Ready to win the dowry, through crook if not by hook. I will make them proud. I must.

Perhaps then was when I lost my dominance. My grip loosened, she turned around, and for the first time tonight, our eyes met. “I love you”. The crooked smile I knew all too well. Psychotic eyes, burning with passion. The cold iron blade breached the barrier of my skin. Blood spurted from my abdomen like the words from her mouth.

“Thank you”. The breath escaped from my lungs, as my body penetrated the surface of the icy water.



ARCA

Mistaken

BY SANA

‘BAM!’ Sudden chills went up to my spine. Small droplets of rain began hitting the roof, escalating rather quickly. My heart rate slowed down after realising it was just the thunder. Once again, it rapped its knuckles on the roof. A few slight screams were heard from the passengers. I hurriedly straightened my dark blue skirt and calmly walked out, smiling at all of the seated passengers.

‘BAM. BAM’. Screams from the passengers quickly erupted and the noise filled the cabin.

Why was everyone screaming? It’s just thunder – ‘BAM!’

My whole face flushed red. My heart rate slowly increased, getting faster and faster every second passed by. It felt like it was about to beat out of my chest. My legs were shaking so hard, it felt like they were going to give up on me and I was going to suddenly collapse. Everything around me went in slow motion.

That was definitely not thunder. They were gunshots!

I ran towards the entrance. Just before entering the cockpit, parallel to me, was the pilot and co-pilot. I was not ready to go down and die, and neither were the 233 passengers on board. I didn’t deserve to die like this and neither did they. I was going to fight, and if I went down, then I would go down fighting.

I kicked the door open, positioning myself in a defence stance, ready for anything that was going to come at me.

The hijacker took one glance at me and calmly told me “Leave, Riley. Just let me do this.”

My brain automatically shut down. I felt like I was paralysed for life. My palms quickly became cold and damp, and I could feel the sweat. Cold sweat.

“Maxwell!?”

“Riley, please. I have to do this. You... you don’t understand.”

“Maxwell, why ... why are you doing this?”

“I have to, Riley.”

“Have to what, Max? Please talk to me.”

Small laughter erupted from him. “You want me to tell you what happened? Then I will fucking tell you what. My family is dead. Every single one of them. They all died in an accident, so what purpose of living is there now. I should just kill myself too. But, if my family didn’t get a chance to experience the world with me, then no one else should. Starting with everyone on this plane!”

I tried to say something, but the inside of my mouth was lacking moisture and a croak was all I could manage. Tears began clouding my vision.

I relaxed the tense muscles from my legs and arms, and took a step forward, careful to not alarm Max.

“Max, just because your family died doesn’t mean that others should die too. I know what great grief you are going through and I can help you with that. You shouldn’t-”

“NO RILEY! I CAN’T LIVE LIKE THIS!”

“Max, you are not the only one who has lost a family. You want me to tell you what happened to mine?” I choked on my very own words. My eyes began dripping with tears. The walls, the walls that held me up collapsed. Salty tears began falling from my chin, drenching my chest. “Mom got diagnosed with cancer and passed away. Dad died from an accident. Older brother committed suicide and younger brother got murdered. You see, THEY ALL DIED. And am I angry? YES. But do I want to kill everyone in the world because of this? NO. I can keep talking on and on about this, but the plane is going to go down. So please, Max, I’m begging you, step aside and let me fly the plane down safely.”

Max made no move. He just stood there, blankly staring at me. In disbelief. Regret.

I took a step closer to him. “Please, Max.”

He slowly nodded and stepped aside, as expected. I quickly sat down and flew the plane to safety.

...

A heavy burden lifted off my shoulder as I felt a sense of relief, almost like getting away with a crime, when the plane landed safely.

10A



Famous Cricketer

BY SOURISH

“Hey dad, can you come a bit faster. We are running late for the soccer match.”

“Coming son, just a minute.”

I was so bad. I can't kick the ball properly (not a fan of soccer until my dad forced me to play). He watched me play until the first half has finished. He left, then I was a bit more relaxed. I could play without any pressure. Our team was doing pretty well until we got a bit brash thinking that we were going to win the match, then the second half started and the opposing team started actually scoring goals. Usually they don't.

After losing the match everyone left the ground. Dad was running a bit late because of the traffic. Then some teenagers came there to play cricket. Even some adults came over, so I was just standing there looking for my dad but suddenly a guy smacked a ball. It was going to hit me. Someone said “Heads.” I caught the ball. One guy from the group asked me to play for them.

I said “OK, sure.”

I was actually doing pretty well at fielding and bowling, then my dad came to pick me up. Usually, whenever I play cricket he shouts and says not to play, but he watches me. After the first half I saw my dad and I thought “Oh God, he's he going to kill me just because I was playing cricket.” After, we sat in the car. He was actually quite impressed to see me play cricket that well, better than soccer.

He asked, “do you wanna play cricket?”

I said, “sure dad, why not.”

After we came home, I took a shower, ate some food. By the time I was watching TV dad said “Hey son, do you wanna go out? I have a surprise for you.”

I thought he might buy me new soccer shoes, good socks, and a FIFA soccer ball. We were going to the sports shop but suddenly instead of going to the soccer section, we went to the cricket section.

I asked, “Is this the right place for soccer stuff?”

He said, “No, we came here to buy a cricket kit, not soccer stuff. And also I am joining you in cricket practice just because you love it.”

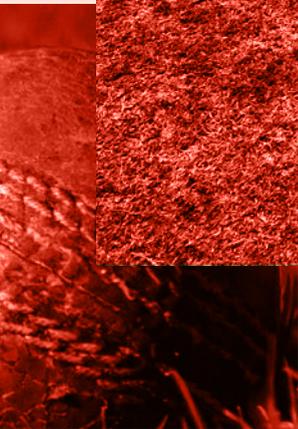
I said, “Thank you, Dad, you're the best dad in the world.”

After I bought the kit home I joined a team. I can actually play my favorite sport! The day after that I was actually good at bowling, but best at batting. I am just smacking every ball that comes near me. I love cricket.





AVO



Dirty and Dangerous: Most Wanted

BY RIYA

Name: Asher Ramirez

Birth: 4 June 1996, Germany

Wanted In: America, Germany and Australia

Crime: Drug smuggling and murder

Status: Caught in the act of murder, aged 22, 8 November 2018; Given orders to shoot at sight - taken out honourably

He kept looking at the mansion. The man beside him shifted.

“Uh...Sir?”

He didn't remove his eyes from the mansion. Without hesitation, he said the three words that would start another crew of men to come after him.

“Light it up.”

The chief guard took a double take on the ruthless man beside him. When he realized that he was serious, he took the vodka bottle that had its stem wrapped in cotton. Taking a lighter, he set alight the cotton and with all the power inside him threw it at the open window 17 metres ahead of him. The bottle hit the curtains in the window side and slowly started to ignite throughout the entire room. The guard gulped the guilt inside him. For nineteen years he'd sinned, and never could he stop the terror and guilt growing inside him by the growing years. He looked back at the man, waiting faithfully for his next command.

He looked back at him, and deadpanned, “Run.”

Without no hesitation, he turned and bolted. This woke all the other guards surrounding the killer and they too copied him.

The man still standing, impassive, smirked. A still sign of dry humour. He removed his gun from his hip pocket and aimed.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The chief stopped. He was two feet away from the car but the bodies around him could never give him the courage to take the next step. His friends, the ones who helped him live through this terrifying journey, now lay dead right beside him. But he's alive. It felt like a sin. Another one. But this one, not even the biggest wrongdoer could shake this feeling off.

The man walked up to the guard, leaving him for last. The chief, who was about to turn, stopped when he felt the gun against his head.

“Don't turn,” he ordered.

The guard didn't. He knew he was going to die. Well, there had to be a point where God punishes him. But he just wished that it was after his daughter grew up. After he saw her get married. Have kids. Play with his grandkids. But those dreams were now soon going to be dust. Now the only thing in his mind before he died was a hope that she stayed safe, found her Mum in sub-Saharan Africa and stayed away from this dirty world. That she finds herself a great job with great pay and a great family. That she doesn't need to kill a thousand men to keep one man safe. That -

“I kill all my men according to their loyalty towards me. I am killing you last because you have served me the most and with undoubted loyalty. I will forever be in your debt for helping me stay alive for this long, but when a man is under your wings for too long there comes the risk that he could usurp you. You may think your last thoughts before I shoot.” The monologue ended with his voice barely scraping through the guard's ears. “At least it wasn't me who had to kill them this time,” he thought.

Bang! The shot echoed throughout the lonely road. But it wasn't enough to silence the last sentence spoken by the bravest guards of the most ruthless criminal. “STAY SAFE, LILITH!”

The shout echoed throughout the entire compound, alerting the FBI on the other side of the field who immediately ran towards the criminal, who realized he had been tricked and tried to escape.

He was shot straight in the head eight times, each shot for each man he killed that morning, including himself. By none other than the dying body lying in the street, who had been sinning his entire life. But he ended his life with a good deed; killing Asher Ramirez.



Whisper to Whishingburg

BY MORGAN

Winter, midnight, silence. The dry twisted road was lying on this nowhere like a corpse, rupturing and splintering the skin, exposed to the growling wind, scorching the white blood away from this forsaken skeleton. Even the moon couldn't endure the devastating scene of mercilessness and ruthlessness. Scared, it hid behind a thick grey quilt. No light, no sound, no signs of any living animal, not even a phantom or a ghost would like to stay, left with the pitiful afflicted savannah and the lamentable land, trapped in this despairing eternal nightmare. A clock tower, ancient medieval heritage fulfilled with the ghastly wraith and gloomy air, tilting on the land that was cursed by Satan, remained abandoned for the rest of its life. The witch guffawed viciously and squeezed the handle of the distorted crutch, pointing to the dull sky and conducting the melody with the baton, thunder roar, baby weep. Tick, tick, ten years after the delightful meals from November the ninth, 1799. An old man painted with red marks danced and stared at his lovely wife, stepping and moving elegantly on the ground of life. Some said he was the devil, but we could only see some food residue left at the edge of his mouth. The ravishing and attractive steps of this couple were gorgeous, floating with the soft orchestral music, laughing, roaring, ticking.

It was 1914, twenty-eighth of July, the first whisper by the wicked devil. Bullets, guns, knives, tanks, planes, bombs, and soldiers, all the machinery made by humans step on his face, successfully triggering his anger and agony, imprisoned in his body for centuries and centuries, he released the negativity to the nearest innocent target. The tentacles slowly climb up and digest his isolated prey, no one knows, at this darkened night, where you no longer found the footpath of the light, the pathetic screams covered by the bell of the clock, bounced in the room, not escaping anywhere else, grasping and clenching the living life. The second day, no one will remember the existence of that creature, it's thrown away into the dust of the history, gone to sink at the bottom of the river. The middle-aged couple was dancing behind the clock, but with faster and lighter steps, dressed in red with wines hanging on their lips. Indeed, what a perfect appetizer.

The blinded human is digging, building, constructing the trash upon his shoulders, opening the skin and scratching the blood for that filthy cash. It's been four years, and these ignorant and arrogant creatures even forced the devil to have a new name, Whishingburg, praying for prosperity when everything was hopeless. They smiled, laughed and giggled; all seems to be the temptation of the asleep demon waiting in the tower, taunting him to bite, crush and chew with his frightened teeth. There are thousands of foods lying on the dining plate, waiting for the customer to enjoy the flavourful repast. The eyes, lungs, pancreas, are like the crispy snacks that can't fill the gap between his teeth, but the blood pouring out from the corpse was luscious and delicious, what a perfect meal for the unawakened master.

10A



Bob

BY DEVNI

Fred walks into his clerical building as usual. His employees turn away as soon as he steps in. There is a sudden silence in the room as he struts through to his office. However, Bob follows not long after with a continuous cough and an untucked shirt. There is no chance Fred will not hear this nuisance. Fred stops, turns around and asks him a question, along the lines of “What are you doing?”

Bob replies with a barrel of dying coughs and an attempt to tuck his shirt in before Fred notices. Usually when Fred asks a question, he does not expect an answer, he expects an immediate action that will make him feel content.

Bob is not exactly devoted to the job as the others and is excluded by everyone else in the office. Working in a million-dollar company is difficult for Bob, especially since his boss loathes him, in addition to the lack of love from his fellow work mates.

Fred calls Bob up into his office to ask him a few questions. Bob is already on the brink of crying from the scolding earlier. His boss decides to teach him a lesson. “I see you as someone who is weak and fragile, who gets sick easily. You clearly don’t look after yourself. You seem to come into the room after me every day, with an untucked shirt. You seem to take no responsibility. If this continues you will be fired.”

Bob replies with his throat choked up. “Yes sir... Sorry sir.”

Fred orders him to get back to his desk and immediately after regrets the things he said. Bob is on the brink of bawling but knows he will never break in front of all his fellow employees. Fred asks Bob to return to his office to apologise. “Please take a seat.”

The expression on Bob’s face is as if he is about to be sacked. “I am sorry for the personal attacks on you earlier” Fred confesses. “Please tell me anything that is happening at home I should be aware of.”

“Well, my wife died. I am a single father of four children, and I live two hours away. This is my only source of income and I’m sorry I have to eat the scraps of my children who catch the flu off their fellow classmates, and I’m sorry I have an untucked shirt stained with the vomit that comes out of my 8 month old child every day.” Bob is shouting.

The shock and horror on Fred’s face engulfs him, coming to the realisation of his continuous ill-treating towards him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Wait. If you have an 8-month-old child, when did your wife pass away?”

“She died 2 months ago.”

From this point on, Fred’s perception of life changes. He realises the only reason he was successful in his work life was because he’s had no personal life. The reason why Bob was achieving in personal life is the reason for his work life failing.





NOA

Coming Home

BY JESS

Chuff chuff chuff

The black, sleek helicopter cuts through the cloudy sky, descending towards Mr Wayne's immense green land. The wind blows the tall lush grasses like they are dancing.

A figure leaps out of the helicopter, she strides across the field toward the aristocratic, historic, spacious mansion. She gazes up at the tall, dark, brown, heavy oaken door - BAM! She slams the door like she was unleashing the gates of hell. All the servants and guards turn and look at her.

"HEY! I'm back. Did you guys miss me. Is father home?" she confidently asks with a loud voice.

She drops the cigarette butt on the clean white marble floor, stepping on it like it was part of the floor.

She pushes the key into the polished, shiny lock, twists it in the lock and pushes the heavy door. The hinges creak. She quickly and quietly slips into her room. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

"Ma'am, we are ready whenever you are. Just give us the order." The sound of a middle-age man voice plays on her earpiece, interrupting the silences of her room.

"Copy! Thanks!" She replies.

She snaps out of it and quietly whizzes toward the old, dusty cupboard. She twists and turns, unlocking the number lock on the safe.

1:30:01

The timer in the safe is set off. It counts down quickly. Second by second.

"The bomb is set. Get in position," she confirms, ordering them on the earpiece.

"Roger that!" the soldier replies in a confident tone.

She shuts the safe close and locks the door.

She puts on a fake innocent smile as she walks past the maids in the hallway. She taps on the old and heavy rich dark brown door with shiny golden hinges and the handle with a polished name tag on that says "MR WAYNE". She taps on the door again, and like how she did when she was as a child with a sweet innocent voice, "Father, may I enter?"

"ENTER." A deep, old-man voice escapes through the door.

She twists the shiny golden handle and enters. Quickly shuts the door. Locks it. Mr Wayne turns around. An elegant silver gun is pointed right at his forehead. His face quickly changes.

"Do you think you can kill me? Is this what I get in return for raising you?!"

"YES! I can and I'm going to prove it to you! This is what you get in return for disinherit me."

"How dare you point a gun at your father! You're a spoilt brat! You have no idea what..." His hand reaches toward the locked drawer which she knows contains his gun.

She knows it is do or die.

BANG!

His body falls back onto the chair and slides down onto the floor, the contents of the drawer crashing onto the floor like a thunderous wave. Leaving a trail of red blood on the front of the chair, blood pours out of his chest like a waterfall. Bright-red blood stains the white marble tiles.

She slowly walks over to his dead body and notices a gun and a file. It is his will, splatted with his blood. She reads the first page and realises that she has made a huge mistake. Her eyes well up with tears. She collapses onto her father's dead body, screaming "NOOOOOOOOO!"

She hears a loud beat from her bedroom. And remembers the bomb and takes a sudden intake of air - her final breath - as the bomb explodes.

BOOM!!!!



A
O
R

Frost in the Bush

BY AIDAN

Will fought with the steering wheel of the school bus. He glanced back. John reloaded his gun. They shared a look. It only lasted a second, but a thousand words were spoken.

*

When Will stole the school bus, he'd thought that no one else was on it. Then he heard the clicking of a gun. His heart pounded. He turned, and one look confirmed he was staring down the barrel of a gun, held by none other than John Macbeth. The John Macbeth. Debating Club Captain and SRC rep. His nemesis.

John's lips curled into a smile. It didn't last long. Turns out, it helps if you face the road while driving a massive vehicle. The bus veered off the road, through a barrier and down a steep decline. John was flung around the cabin like a crash test dummy, dropping the gun.

Will pumped the brakes and was caught by his seat belt.

He caught his breath. He could hear John groaning. John pulled himself up to standing and glared at Will.

It was then that they saw it. John couldn't believe it. Will's jaw dropped. A frosty blue dragon, just gazing at them.

John shouted at Will. Will floored it. The bus went flying through the bush. The dragon roared an icy breath and lifted off. The chase was on.

John rushed to the back of the bus, picking up the gun.

He yelled at Will "This isn't over yet!"

He dived into the backseats, checked the gun, lifted it, took aim, fired. Hit. The beast howled out a frosty breath that froze everything around it. But it didn't stop its pursuit. BAM! Miss.

*

Will fought with the steering wheel of the school bus. He glanced back. John reloaded his gun. They shared a look. They both knew what had to be done. They both turned around and went to work.

John fired, the dragon dodged. Will swerved, it followed. John pulled the trigger. CLICK. Dry. Cursing, he dashed back to the front where Will was staring ahead of them, ignoring John.

John looked at Will. "It's dry."

Will slowly turned around and stared at John evenly, evaluating.

"Check the bag under the wheelchair space," was all Will said.

Knowing he wouldn't gain anything by pressing him further, John ran to the spot indicated, finding himself looking at a box. Without wasting any more time, he tore off the lid and grabbed the only bag in it. John ripped it open, to find six extra ammo clips, another gun and a knife. Grinning, he took out an ammo clip, disposed of the empty clip in the gun, replaced it, locked it in. John aimed, fired. But nothing came out. John stared hopelessly at the gun, released the clip and discovered it was spent. Unbelieving, he laid his eyes upon the knife.

As ice shards punctured the back of the bus, John couldn't believe what he was about to do.

10A





Kirsty Eager

Kirsty Eager was raised by her mother on a farm in Central Queensland. After studying economics, she worked at the Reserve Bank of Australia and the Bank of England in London before resigning to surf her way around Australia. Her Young Adult novels have won and been shortlisted for numerous literary awards. She is a regular contributor to *White Horses* surf magazine and is currently working on her first screenplay.

www.kirstyeagar.com

10B

“

I am extremely proud of the way my students progressed during our week together. I saw big improvements in their ability to generate ideas, but also in the depth and originality of those ideas. It was something we worked on each session. Fun, but it also got results!

We talked about how important storytelling and writing will be in their lives, in a whole range of ways. Stories allow us to connect with and influence others. And, most importantly, these skills help us to share our OWN story. During the week, every student in the class was able to express their character’s inner journey with empathy and emotional intelligence.

Writing a piece of fiction forces students to problem solve and think laterally. I saw marked improvements in both of these areas as the students took ownership of their character, grappling with how to communicate their story effectively to a reader. If a student told me that they didn’t think it could be done in a short piece, my immediate response was, “Of course it can. You’re a writer. Your job is to work out how.” Tough, but it meant they pushed through and stopped trying to compromise themselves. Having me there as a working writer meant I could share my own process with them, and they could see the similarities with their own progress.

Most importantly, we worked on the writing itself. In ten years of visiting schools, I’ve never met a student who didn’t have the ability to build a rich world and epic story in their mind. The difficulty they face is in how to reduce it all down, to write it in a way that makes sense and will engage their reader.

Finally, to the students I worked with: thank you so much for an incredible week and congratulations on becoming published authors. The skills you’ve learned will only get stronger with practice, so please keep writing and reading. You are unique, and the thing I liked most about your stories was what YOU brought to them.

”

The Shadow

BY AVNEET

The shadows seem to follow me along the damp street, dark against the dirty ground. I constantly spin around, feeling a set of eyes trained on my back. Alleyways jut out from the wide road, a perfect hiding place. A shuffling sound cuts through the pattering rain and I catch the sight of a flash of clothing that vanishes behind a series of shops. The setting sun illuminates the shadows dancing along window sills and the pavement. Sweat pools on my arms and I slowly turn around, my heartbeat racing faster each second. My hand inches down towards the steel blade tucked into my sock, glinting in the fading light.

I choke at the sight of his face. A rasping sound escapes from my throat and a feeling of pure fear overwhelms me. He casually walks towards me and my fear develops into terror.

“Nice day today, isn’t it?” My father casually slides his hands into his black suit pants.

My anxiety levels shoot through the roof, the highest they’ve been since I ran away, away from him.

“I know about her.” He takes a step toward me.

“Who?” I take a step back, trying to even my breathing.

“Sophie,” he replies simply.

I gulp involuntarily and his grey eyes dart down, noticing my panic. Even after years of being a retired assassin, he never stopped being observant.

“What are you talking about father?” As an attempt to mask my alarm I lower my shoulders and lean back into my heels.

“Don’t try to hide your daughter from me Vanessa. Did you think that I wouldn’t investigate the reason for your sudden disappearance?” The stench of his cigar breath wafts through the misty air to me, reminding me of my old life.

“Don’t try to hide your daughter,” he repeats, lacing each word with anger. “You know you were not allowed to have children. You knew the rules, then you decided to run off and get pregnant. Is that how you chose to repay your father?”

I can’t take it anymore. I hated his constant control over my old life. I hate how he is now trying to control my new life.

“Get away from me.” My eyes spark with rage. “You cannot just follow me and order me around, like I am a child. I chose to leave that life behind and you need to respect my decision and leave me alone.”

A small chuckle escapes from his mouth, combined with a deep sigh. “I am your father. I will do what I wish; don’t think you are as far away from that life as you think you are. Trust me, you will regret running away.”

The rain thunders down harder, sliding down my grey raincoat mirroring the whirlwind of emotions I’m feeling. His eyes bore into mine, giving me a pounding headache.

“You should be scared.” His menacing voice brings me back to reality.

With that, I lift my skirt up, kick my father’s leg and run. Run far, far away. Run back to my daughter, the only light in this world of darkness.

TOP



The Boy with Deep Roots

BY SEAN

Blake wakes abruptly to the sound of concerned cattle and his dank pillow resting on his head, brought by the memories of his past. His sweet mother brought happiness to Blake, her absence tears a hole in his heart. Blake looks outside. Silence fills the night, his view blocked by the sudden expansion of the crops outside.

He and his father planted the sorghum yesterday. Now only twenty-four hours later they have started to creep past the window, reaching great heights seeming to not be limited by sunlight or water. As Blake backs towards the door unsure if he can believe his eyes the sorghum stops, returning to its peaceful swinging in the night breeze.

As Blake enters his father's room he whispers, "Dad?" Frank opens his eyes and sits up on the bed looking at his son with an eyebrow raised.

"What's wrong? Have you been crying?" He slides over to the of the bed and wipes the tears off Blake's cheeks.

"I - I had a bad dream. And the plants outside are growing!" He leads his dad back towards his room only to find a nice view of nicely kept farmland. "But-"

"Don't worry Blake, I'm sure it was just your mind playing tricks on you." Frank tucks Blake into his bed and sits on top. "Do you want to talk about that dream?"

Ever since his mother was murdered by thieves on the road, Blake hasn't been able to talk to his father about her as he knew Frank was devastated. "Well... Mum... It's alright," Blake stutters, unable to find the right words. Frank quickly gets up, walks to the door and says, "Go to sleep".

Before he can think, Blake blurts out "But, the plants!" The look of his father's face sends shivers down his spine as he responds, "Go to sleep, now!"

Blake has always had a close relationship with his father, after all it's not like he has any other friends he can hang out with. However, he knows what he's seen, and it's too late to back down now. "They did move, and they were as high as the window!"

"Stop being silly and go..." He can't believe it. He only planted the sorghum yesterday and now they are just below the window.

"See!? I told you!" He isn't sure whether to be happy or scared, he managed to prove the plants were growing, but isn't sure what dangers they may hold.

As Blake triumphantly boasts his findings to his dad, Frank notices the plants rise again.

And then it hits. Blake had woken up from a nightmare and saw the plants leaning on the window. As he told his dad he calmed down and that's why the sorghum is at normal height. Frank had to test out what he'd been thinking so he asked Blake to "shout at me just one more time."

Blake doesn't understand but follows his father's instructions anyway. Sure enough, the plants slither over and rest just above the window.

The next morning, after a good night's rest and a fresh cooked breakfast, both Frank and Blake have a long day of growing and shrinking crops.





GRAB

Entangled

BY XIAO

Hood pulled down low, jacket wrapped around tight, Morgan strolled up a long flight of steps, not the smallest disturbance to his breath. Above him was the famous, slanted tree, on which an emperor supposedly had committed suicide, casting an eerie shadow in the evening sunlight. In the distance plaza music was already being played, with weak but steady claps occasionally piercing the condensing smog. Not a bad place to start working.

No sooner than he flicked open his computer screen, these bold characters mysteriously flashed onto the screen: "Hello, Morgan."

"Hello Sturgeon," Morgan answered, to his own creation: the very first quantum laptop computer, within which lay the world's first truly intelligent artificial intelligence, superior to a human mind in every way.

"Let me guess. You have come to a conclusion?"

"Things shouldn't conclude between us two," Morgan denied, whilst he shooed away the gathering mosquitoes. "You are superior, whether it is the population census or the firewall of the Pentagon. To you it is no different; that's how I survived so far."

"I am only capable of reading, altering and deleting information that is connected to the internet, there is no physical help that I can offer."

"But, still..." Morgan's sentence hung limp on his fingertips, so strong his mind was, but he could not bring himself to finish that sentence.

"Be independent. The whole world is after you,

because 'the crime of a peasant is that he owns a piece of priceless jade.' You have already lost a brother, your parents are imprisoned somewhere, and name me any friend of yours that you still have contact with. I am of no further benefit to you."

Morgan swayed from side to side as he stood, his chest clutched tight, forced every last gasp of breath out of him. He may or may not survive on his own, but the world will never survive World War III.

"Yes," he replied concisely, to calm his trembling hands, "I have concluded."

"You mean that I am coming to a conclusion."

"I'm sorry."

Technology, Morgan thought, the ladder of civilisation, the crystallisation of knowledge! The thing that could benefit every individual, and capable of destroying the entire world. The world has proven itself to be incapable of quantum computing technology, so upon its creation, what should he do?

The descending sun gave way to the cold of the night, which crept up Morgan's arms, firing the chill right back to his spine. The plaza music ceased to hum, the smog finally cleared, even the slanted tree, looming over, seemed to have pressed down even closer in the darkened light. Working swiftly with his numb fingers, Morgan unscrewed the back casing proficiently, exposing the core of the computer, the place that quantum entangle occurs – such beauty of science, such fragile state, one touch on the surface is enough to destroy it.

Morgan pressed down his finger, feeling the warm vibration.

On the front of the screen, Sturgeon flickered up its last words:

"You know, this is murder."



Chocolate Coloured Eyes

BY MARIA

Jamie leaned against the fence. Clothes bloodstained and torn, he tried to regain his stability, his breath came out harsh and forced, his sight blurring as he tried to suppress the bolder of the emotions threatening to overwhelm him. He couldn't believe it, the one person who made him smile the most and see the best in people, was also the one who had broken him the most. He pushed himself up from the fence, suppressing a whimper as he put weight onto his injured leg. Turning around he started running as he saw the one person he never wanted to see again approach. Julian.

Ignoring the screams and cries around him, Jamie continued to run, going as fast as his broken body could take him. But then blank, all he felt was pain. Everything felt like he was in a fog, lights of blue and red surrounded him. The sound of voices filtered in from around him as he tried to decipher what they were saying, then all he saw was white.

Julian stood there, paralysed in shock, eyes blown and mouth agape as he watched the paramedics load Jamie into the ambulance. His neck lay in a brace, his eyes lay closed as he was forced to breathe through a mask. "Was this my fault?"

He never noticed his legs moving on their own accord, taking him towards the ambulance, the police restraining him as he struggled to get out of their grip, his screams of pain fading as the ambulance drove away, taking Jamie away with them.

The smell of antiseptic penetrated Jamie's nose as he pushed his way from the claws of unconsciousness, his eyes lay closed, too sensitive for the lights of the bare white room, the feeling of a hand carding through his hair startled him completely awake, leaving him to flinch away from the touch and light that burned his eyes.

He struggled to sit up, pushing away the arms that were trying to help him, crying out as pain in his back flared, his legs lying limp and numb. He stared down at the sheets that covered his legs, eyes brimming with tears as he finally let his eyes wander towards the figure above him.

He let a cry escape and flung himself at the only one who had ever cared for him and had never tricked him, his Aunt Katy. "After all, no-one's ever cared for me before," Jamie thought.

Eyes, drawn to the floor, bangs covering his face, Jamie's ears filled with music deafening the outside. Books scattered and notebook flung from his grip, his eyes widen as his body impacts against the floor. Glancing up, emerald met chocolate coloured eyes.

Julian Bastia, the head of the basketball team and one of the most popular students in school. 'Just my luck,' Jamie thought sarcastically.

"Why would I want to be around the likes of you!" Julian shouted, a scowl adorning his face, his eyes blazing like a fire as his gaze rested on Jamie. His friends could be heard snickering behind him as they watched Jamie's tears cascade down his face, his usual emerald eyes void of emotion as he kept his gaze rested against Julian eyes, his face bruised and battered as he struggled to stay standing from his previous beating. His eyes bore into Julian, someone he thought saw what other people didn't in him, someone he thought was his friend.

He was wrong.

"I'm such an idiot, the one person who wanted to be my friend not because of my popularity was driven away by me of all people!" He glanced at his laughing friends, their smug expressions only angering him more from the pressure he was put through in giving up his only friend.

"I have to go after him," Julian thought as he ran as fast as he could after Jamie's retreating form leaving school.

Really, it was his fault, for he let his social status cloud his opinion, driving his true friend away.

9 months later

He slung his strap bag over his shoulder, notebooks, pens and art supplies creating noise in his bag, his eyes like glowing emeralds behind his frames, chestnut curled hair brushed back into his beanie, boots clunky on the floor as he walked to the tune from his blasting ear buds. It had been nine months since the accident and through extreme physiotherapy and counselling Jamie was, in what could be said, in greater shape than before.

Jamie's grade had already started Senior year three weeks earlier, but he was only just starting today, during the summer break Jamie was shocked to receive get well cards from a couple of his class mates, the school bullies had been dealt with, at least that's what Aunt Katy said, and Julian... well let's say that Jamie has been avoiding that subject.

Stumbling forward, Jamie's eyes widened. There sitting on the park bench, the one that begun as their private meet ups was Julian, and as he looked up emerald locked with chocolate coloured eyes.



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For Your Eyes Only

BY IVY

The torches of Leeds castle illuminated its grey medieval exterior and the surrounding waters. Light rippled and glistened upon the moat. A young woman stepped from a carriage, wearing a beautiful peach gown that enveloped her figure. She held her head high, cautious of her hair, which was tied up specially, in a high braided bun. She also wore the finest necklace and earrings she possessed, which made her fair features glow in the twilight. Indeed, Stella Edwards had arrived at the gala, and she was ready once again to throw herself into chaos, danger, even.

On entering the warm castle, Stella gazed at the beautiful hall. Tapestries hung from the walls, food was displayed abundantly on tables, a waltz played, so that everyone glided in sync. Stella watched her father converse with other noblemen, feeling out of place, alone.

Then, Stella was greeted by a guest she dreaded seeing. Hugo, the man she detested, loathed.

“Bonsoir, Stella, you are looking particularly breathtaking tonight,” Hugo said seductively, with a huge smile plastered on his face. Stella folded her arms.

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I need to find my father,” she replied hastily, scanning the room for a form of escape. She didn’t want to look at him in the eye.

“Wait, I only want to talk to you. You’re being quite cold and rude,” Hugo said firmly. The harshness in his voice made Stella nervous, timid. She hated this man.

Stella walked away without saying a word, leaving her rejected suitor stunned and vexed.

“Stupid girl, you have no idea of who I am and how much I want you,” Hugo muttered furiously as he stormed off.

Walking to an empty corner of the room, Stella was

reeling, anxious. Her breathing was rapid. While she tried to regain her composure, another guest approached. Her anxiety subsided, replaced by relief as she saw who it was.

“Good evening, you are looking beautiful my lady,” the young man greeted her, his tone friendly. All worries about Hugo faded away.

“Ellis, it is good to see you.” Stella smiled warmly.

“Would you like to have a dance with me?” Ellis asked with a bow.

“I’d love to.”

Ellis led Stella to the dance floor, and the two began a waltz that captivated the guests. Stella gazed at her partner. His emerald eyes enchanted her, and her cheeks flushed a light pink. In that moment, she felt happy, safe in his arms.

Hugo stared at his beautiful woman with immense fury, watching her glide in the dance. Out of the corner of her eye, Stella noticed Hugo’s presence, which sent a chill through her body. But she was quick to ignore him, all her attention on the charismatic, handsome man in front of her. The music came to a stop, and Ellis kissed Stella on the hand with such warmth that she smiled. Flustered, she excused herself and walked towards the gardens, needing a chance to collect her emotions.

The cold evening air enveloped Stella as she walked outside, causing goose bumps on her arms. The gardens looked bare in the darkness, and only the light from the torches of Leeds castle guided Stella through the dark. The sky seemed empty of stars shone. Still, the serenity of the peace place was a relief after the bustle and adrenaline of the gala.

He watched her from the darkness, seeing her dress sway in the waves of the night. For so long, she had resisted his affection, his pleas. For so long, he loved her. He slowly approached her, taking care not to make a sound. He was happy, he felt triumphant. He finally had a chance to make her his.

Suddenly, Stella’s vision went dark, as she felt a fabric being wrapped tightly around her head. A hand muffled her screams, making her pleas go unheard.

Stella surrendered to the darkness.

100





J.C. Burke

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five sisters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world of noise, drama and books, but decided to become an Oncology nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. Burke says nursing probably made her a better writer.

The Story of Tom Brennan won the 2006 CBC Book of the Year – Older Readers and the 2006 Australian Family Therapists Award for Children’s Literature. It was on the NSW HSC syllabus list until 2018. *Pig Boy* won Burke the prestigious Ned Kelly Award for crime fiction in 2012.

Burke started writing in 1999 and has published a number of acclaimed books for teenagers and young adults. She’s currently writing her first adult novel after a 6 month break travelling through South America.

www.jcburke.com.au

This was the first time I've been involved in a full week's residency with the same group of students and I think it's a great concept.

As the visiting writer I enjoyed the continuity and getting to know the students, some who had potential and more importantly, some who lacked confidence but had potential and good ideas that they just hadn't realised yet. With some encouragement, I saw some students find a story and a voice to narrate it. A week together, the students became more comfortable, were willing to take risks and accept criticism constructively.

As a norm, a visiting author interacts with a class of students for an hour, occasionally extended for a 'short school' day. The Childrens' Literature Centre in Fremantle, WA, is the only program I know of or have been involved in, that runs full day programs, restrained by of course by the hours of 9-3pm. Yet students only work on various writing exercises, not an extended piece.

A whole week with several hours a day, is an opportunity for the class and visiting writer to realistically achieve a short piece of work. Often there is an expectation of a student to achieve this with a lot less time which doesn't allow the student to be immersed in the process. That's why I emphasize 'short,' The first few days of the week my group concentrated on this writing process - formation of an idea, a theme, a narrator to carry it, secondary characters etc experimented through writing exercises. The work book worked really well for this, as well as an actual planning document. And of course, time was needed for editing and rereading which I found to have more context and meaning for the student as they'd followed their idea all the way through to a first draft. I believe the students found the process interesting as an exercise, as well as understanding that there is a lot more to a story then just opening the computer and starting at the first sentence.

The Painter

BY HAYLEY

The painter took another drag of his cigarette. He knew it was a bad habit, and he often found himself running his tongue along the inside of his mouth and scowling at the bitter taste of tar on his teeth. One of his closest friends had been the one to first place a cigarette between the painter's lips, as they sat in an abandoned tube station off Piccadilly. He'd had white-blond hair, with ice-blue eyes and a cold smirk to match. But as those bright blue eyes started straying, and his icy smirk began being accompanied by cold words, no matter how hard the painter tried to leave him behind, no matter how far he got on his trip to anywhere, smoking remained his poison of choice.

Sicily was the fifth stop on his journey, drawing him in with its promise of good smokes and good wine, both of which were laid out before him now, but he had stayed for the picturesque views. It was a bright Thursday afternoon, as all afternoons were in the Mediterranean and a perfect afternoon for setting up an easel. He was supposed to be working on his major piece, he knew, but as he sat in front of his canvas nothing but memories came to mind. After weeks of this small town, he craved the bustling streets of New York, his last stop. He had met his second muse there, in the fast paced jazz and the dim lights of a downtown speakeasy. He wore his eyeshadow like a tiger wore its stripes, the switchblade in his pocket accounting for his claws. The painter had only seen it twice, once after a passerby that smelled too strongly of vodka had walked between them, wrenching apart their entwined fingers, but he knew it was there. The painter saw how his fingers rested upon his pocket after dustbin lids clattered on the street, and how the tightness in his

shoulders only seemed to fade when they were lost in the haze of bars and alcohol. The painter had left him there, in the same bar that they met, after he saw the blade for the second time, though instead of protecting him it was pressed against his throat, a night of too much alcohol leading to a breakdown. The painter bought a ticket that night and left that morning.

So here he was, three glasses into a bottle of Pinot Grigio, waiting for his favourite time of the day. He fiddled with the stem of his wine glass, twisting it between his fingers mindlessly as he glanced at the small town's clocktower through the textured glass, just as it struck two. Right on schedule, the door opened, and a small gaggle of locals sauntered in, the painter's best part of the day right at their centre.

His curled, deep brown hair brushed his porcelain collarbones lightly at its full length and fell to the upturned corners of his lips at its shortest. As the sun streamed in through the glass, it lit up the tranquil, emerald green of his eyes like stars before they dissolved into pools of liquid gold in the centre, whisking the painter's breath away. He was nothing like the others. There was something different about him, something special. He had a captivating aura, pulling in admirers and would-be lovers - if they were lucky enough - from all around. Perhaps it was the look in his eyes that seemed to gleam and hypnotize with each graceful movement. Or maybe it was the way he spoke, soft and gentle yet mesmerising. The painter extinguished the butt of his cigarette against the table with a hefty sigh, silently lamenting how he'd finally found someone different - someone who he could genuinely be happy with - yet his curse of unrequited love and a bad track record kept him from what he desired most.

The painter lit another cigarette and wondered why angels were always depicted blond.





Cyberpunk World

BY SEAN

I was supposed to have left the Erasmus Syndicate last night. The bustle of the city blared behind me, while I stood squinting at nothing in front of the platform. A slight breeze blew past my brown leather jacket, flapping, as the wind left. A swig of stale air followed it and I breathed in the disgusting odour of the megalopolis, fueling my impatience to leave here as soon as possible. I was surrounded by commuters who shared the same and dissimilar beliefs – that the city is an unconditional locale for any incapable denizen to reside in. It was corrupted by the likes of the minds who care for nothing but to satiate their despicable desires.

Who the hell cares anyway? I am going to leave this behind me. My future matters now.

A suburban commuter train entered the platform. I could see myself within the mirrors, bloodshot eyes from last night, the black denim jeans that blend in so well with the citizens of the metropolis.

I had an unmoved recollection of last night's events. There was the roar of cyber-enhanced M249s and clinks of ammunition ricocheting around us. My partner, Chase, had a gush of red, hot blood mixed with the grease of his cybernetics. All was going to hell, but we were finally able to complete the job. The gang would then dismiss us after the events, and I proclaimed I would leave the city once and for all.

I could still remember his eyes; Chase held a forlorn look, while his eyes bled a waterfall of platelets and

cybernetic lubricant. Those bloodshot eyes.

This isn't the train I'm getting on. There was only a handful of commuters willing to shove themselves into the packed-up train. The suburban train would take them to the central district, where most people alight. The doors of the train slid smoothly into its moulds.

"Click." I twitched my head for a split second and froze in place as the man growled, "Stay still or I'll blow your head to bits."

What is this? I don't have business with the gang now, what is this man looking for?

"What gave you the decision to leave Espina, Rael?"

"Piss-poor conditions, the unrelentless clean-up we've had to do. What more can I say?" I growled back.

"By the 50th protocol of the Erasmus Syndicate, Rael of Espina, you are sentenced to execution for deserting the company."

This is it, I thought, I'll never leave this godforsaken city and my body is going to rot here instead. Oh, the irony.

Boom! The bullet train grazed the skirts of the platform as the explosion knocked it to the sides. Its maglev support just barely clicking into position. I suspected this was my time to hop off, away from this incomprehensible world. A couple of bullets were unloaded from the gun, the man behind me gave up chase as the wail of sirens began to shift closely into the train station. The crowd behind me had already gone into a frenzy of panic and the clamour gave way. "Hey you! You're under arrest for the possession of illegal firearms!" A shout went out. *Boom! Bang! Bam!*

Well, I've already gone in the train, the city holds no interest for me now.



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The Chosen One

BY SHAAM

Voices echoed in my head, "You will never make it!"

Entering the cave, the only sound that met my straining ears was my own echoing footsteps. Reaching out my hand to feel my way I couldn't even see it in front of my face, stumbling blindly into a forest of stalactites and stalagmites, I fell on the unforgiving rocky floor.

"You don't deserve it!", a voice demanded out of the darkness. "A mortal like you is far too weak, far too miserable. "The power this weapon bestows can only be held by one with great strength, one with great capability, not one with well...", the figure scanned me up and down.

"What? I have travelled all this way, completed all your tasks and for what?"

"Nothing," the voice answered, the incessant sound of water dripping off the cave roof to the earth. "Great nothing."

"Show yourself you fool, how dare you mock me on these terms!" The confidence within had left, as if it were a shadow dissolved into the light. Emerging from the darkness of the cave, a towering figure, radiated a vile scent. Suddenly in my chest, my heart pounded, my clenched hands seemed to unroll themselves as the tension in my muscles turned into a covering quiver. Cave rocks seemed to shake under the weight of the giant. Standing more than three times my size, a beefy, barrel-chested, old man stood ahead of me. In the middle of his forehead an eye shined in the darkness.

"Fine," roared the giant. "If you truly deserve it, then fight me." Beckoning, his hand gestured me forward, as his left reached for something about belt level.

"Where is it?" I challenged. "Show me what I have come here for!"

Pulling at the hilt with his left hand, the unsheathed sword gleamed in the darkness. The handle of the sword was bound with black leather, the hilt decorated yet understated. In all the darkness the sword was the thing that drew the eye, a symbol of the kind of bravery that enables others to find their own courage, to be more than they thought themselves able to be. It was a diamond in the rough. It seemed to be radiating power, radiating heat.

"You like it," the figure dared. "Now come and get it!" Weighing the sword in his right hand, he slashed it through the air with expert confidence.

It felt like staring straight in the face of Power. This man, this thing - it was inhumane, it was Herculean, though it was aged.

"Are you sure you want this?" I insisted as I plucked up

courage. "This man is old, he is weak, this shouldn't be so hard," I encouraged. In a matter of a few seconds, the figure seemed to dart across the cave, dissipating into the darkness and then reappearing back in the exact spot it was beforehand. Though something seemed to have changed.

"Two swords?" I inquired aloud. "This is unfair!" I demanded.

The figure simpered in response, pleased with itself it waved the swords around.

"What do you want?," I roared. In a fit of fury, I stormed forward, the rage went into overdrive. Propelling myself at the figure, I had no intention for what was to come next.

In the span of a blink of the eye, the figure seemed to have teleported to the gloomy side of the chamber. Panicking to a humiliating stop, the point of my nose measured less than a centimetre away from the shadowy rocky wall. Above me water leaked through a crack, depositing on my head. Looking back, at the face of the devil, a wild smirk grew wide on its face.

"At least make this a fair fight!" I complained. In an instant, my right hand felt heavy, growing to full size the broad blade was warmed, as was the hilt. I could feel the power discharged from the blade, the warmth, the strength.

"You're welcome," admired the figure. "Now fight me."

Dashing forward, the figure moved faster than his own shadow. Readjusting my grip for the impact I was ready for his attack. In a traditional kendo stance, the figure quickly slid forward, cutting at my left arm, however, my sword already intercepted his, allowing me to trap his blade on my hilt and execute a stab. Having stalled the strike, a stained grin split the figure's lips as my blade shivered under the brutality of his compelling strength. "Weapons do not belong in the hands of weaklings," he throatily crooned, pressing closer to my face.

Suddenly the sword in my hands tugged at my courage. I could feel its power, its energy. All it required was a little...

Instantly in my hands, a spark of lightning ran across the blade of the sword from handle to hilt. In a burst of power, the figure was thrown back into the darkness. I could feel the sword testing my stability, testing my worthiness. It wanted to escape, it wanted freedom, it wanted to fly.

"How? You?" Silence filled the atmosphere as we both stood in uncertainty.

"What?" I inquired.

"It deems you worthy?" translated the figure. "It... It likes you?"

The thought grew heavily upon my mind. "It likes me?" I repeated.

Slashing the sword at the air, I felt confident, I felt the power. I had travelled all this way, completed all these tasks and now I have achieved what I have worked ever so hard for.

"It has chosen you!" recited the figure.



001

Heartache

BY YASIRU

My only wish was to join my mother in Elysium. I stood there, staring into the bloodshot eyes of the very being responsible for my existence. The mother that once gifted me had now left this world. Burning embers fluttered around the lifeless body and the foul scent of burnt hair thickened the atmosphere. I sat there, with my legs crossed and head faced down, trying not to reminisce. I felt the warm beads of mucus and tears dribble along the pores of my face. I couldn't keep myself together, I was a wreck. I had lost everything.

A rustic orange tinge from the early morning sunlight shone against my eyelids. I tried opening them but the tears of yesterday had almost formed a layer of salty crystals, gluing my eyelashes shut. I decided to lay there a little longer; after all what reason was there to wake up? Not even slightly considering the chance of getting some food in me, I wandered up a bushy pathway that led from the crematory adjacent my house. Every step I took barefoot, over sharp rubble and the sensation of prickly vegetation piercing my feet was painless. I had no sense of self; pain was non-existent with the exception of emotions. I feared not death, but the heartache of existence.

Watching every breath freeze as I made my way up the rocky crevices, climbing to higher altitudes, the tears of last night had now turned to ice. Towards the corner of my eyes I could see dark purplish regions of frostbit cheeks complemented by a throbbing sense of numbness, but none of this seemed to

matter. I had no reason to continue living and had no reason to remove myself from suffering.

Subconsciously, my mind was forcing me to leave this world, but something inside me ignored this. The more I continued, the more the terrain got steeper. Soon, a vast shower and faintly audible splashing of water could be heard in the distance. Water slid swiftly against my ties as I stepped inside a shallow river. A trail of diluted blood left my bruised and punctured feet which now felt like soggy cardboard supports, but once more, pain was not evident.

I was nearing the end; approaching a right bend in the river exposed a pristine surrounding of an assortment of plants, trees and shrubbery topped by layers of snow. Glancing down, a 100 foot drop leading to a dark abyss of crashing water. Chunks of ice passed me as I watched them fall the many feet into the waterfall. The end is now.

Clinging to a fallen oak branch suspended and held in place by layers of ice, I grabbed at the wet bark for a firm grip. Glancing upwards, the branch extended over the waterfall, its dead leaves lightly swaying in the cool breeze. I found strength in me to finally accept my time here on earth and reached for the edge of the branch.

My legs swayed over the falls and I could feel my heart rate climbing. Every inch closer I got to the edge, the louder the radiating sound of my heartbeat got. Soon my whole body pulsed in unison with my heartbeat. I leaped, with my eyes completely shut and my hands still clenching to the log. As my finger slipped, I felt a warm and comforting grip suspend me from the edge of the cliff. I felt myself being pulled back up from the edge of the fall; maybe this wasn't the end for me.

100



The Mystery Letter

BY MADDISON

I spy from way down the beach a piece of shiny glass sticking out from the sand. I dig the bottle out. It's a Fanta bottle. 'Litter buggers,' I think. I keep walking along looking for a rubbish bin, remembering the days Sophie and I would share a Fanta on the beach front watching the sun set. Now all I can think about is her long brown hair brushing against her waist, and the way she swung it around her shoulders, the way she would wink at me after she'd played one of her sneaky tricks on me.

Up ahead is a rubbish bin, I'm just about to throw the bottle in, when I notice a piece of paper inside. I wriggle my finger into the bottle and take it out. "For those I love will find it, Sophie R." I take another look at this note and somethings look so familiar. The handwriting reminds me of Sophie's, the way her f's would curl at the bottom of each letter. Scribbled on the paper is "44 Downtown street". I stare at it for ages and try to think of where I've seen this address before. I shove the paper in my pocket and wander back to my motorbike.

It's not until I'm at the second set of lights when it hits me like a slap across the face. 44 Downtown street was the house that was in construction where Sophie and I would go to when both our parents were fighting. Some days we would race there,

saying that the first person there would win \$100. It was always me, but she never payed me. It was somewhere just for us two to talk. We would talk about the fights we had just overheard and talk about our future together and how we would never fight like our parents.

I arrive at 44 Downtown street. This house looks nothing like it did a few years back. It was a dark shade of grey and some of the tiles were hanging off the roof. The house was still as big as I remember. The turrets were still there although covered in pigeon poo, the double front doors weren't the bright blue they used to be, and the front window was boarded up. It looked like no one had been living here for at least ten years. As I creep towards the door, I see through the corner of my eye a note sticking through the door. I reach forward and open it. It says, "you're getting warmer, almost there now dear, two steps forward, three steps right." I'm confused and astounded, but I do what the note says.

The next note was hanging from a lamp shade in the shape of a love heart. I open the note, and this time it says, "all the way up, up, up, up." What could this possibly mean? I think up, up, up... Got it! I cheer to myself. "Up" means upstairs. I run up the stairs all the way up to the attic, and to my surprise I see another note sticking out from the bottom on the door. I open it up and it says, "COME IN!" I walk in, the room is cold and empty, in the middle of the floor there is a Fanta bottle. I walk towards it and pick it up. I wriggle my fingers into the bottle and take out an envelope. Inside the envelope there is a note and what looks to be a \$100 note. The note says "I told you I would never forget, here is prize you always deserved, love Sophie R."





TOC



Helen Thurloe

Helen Thurloe is a Sydney writer and poet. Her debut novel *Promising Azra* (2016) is a contemporary story about forced child marriage set in a Sydney high school. *Promising Azra* was shortlisted for the 2017 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and also awarded the Society of Women Writers NSW Young Adult Book Award in 2018.

Helen's current novels-in-progress are both historical fiction; one is about men with consecutive wives in malarial Britain, and another reimagines the life of a rural wet-nurse.

Helen's poetry has won national awards, including the 2014 Australian Catholic University Prize for Literature, and her poems have been published in anthologies, journals and online.

www.helenthurloe.com.au

101

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What a wonderful experience - a week of daily words to build into a story. The students surprised themselves, and each other, by developing coherent and entertaining tales from a variety of prompts. Being able to immerse themselves in story-land every day allowed the students to stay focussed, and the double period really made the most of the time. It was an incredibly productive project for the tail end of the school year - a few of my students even complained about writers' cramp! I like to think that's because they were in such a hurry to capture their ideas and explore their stories. And we all enjoyed hearing the highlights at our Chupa-Chup 'Story Awards' on the last day.

”

Father Figure

BY GRACE

I wish I could live in a world where my father loved me. Not for my body, but for me, my entire being. Then I saw him, well first I smelt him. The beer smells forever lingering on him after countless nights spent immersed in the scent of alcohol in the pub. Then I saw him, his great, solid body towering in the door frame of our house.

“Oi, what’re you doing?” he slurred. The reek of his beer breath smothering all other smells. Here we go again, I thought. Another night, another round of drinks for him, then he would come home, yelling and ready to fight. On certain nights, he would be so intoxicated he would push me against wall and insert himself into me. At first it hurt, and I spent night after night in my room, my body shuddering with each sob, hand muffling my cries, but as it continued, I got used to it. The pain was still there, but I had no more tears left. Every night that it happened, I felt like a lifeless doll, one he used just for his own pleasure.

“I’m going to go to bed,” I whispered. I had no idea how drunk he was yet, and that was my mistake.

“You think you’re going to bed now?” he sneered. His yellow teeth glowing in the moonlight. “You’re not going anywhere

until I’m done with you.” His voice raised into a shout, “I have done so much for you, you spoilt bitch, and yet you can’t even give me what I want!”

I didn’t want to cry, especially not over him. I didn’t even want to call him my father anymore, he was Sebastian to me now. Yet tears threatened to spill, my breathing turned shallow. My lungs constricted, covering my heart.

“Please, please let me go to bed,” I pleaded. I didn’t want to fight him; I didn’t want him to hurt me.

“No!” He grabbed me by the neck, pushed me against the wall, but he was so drunk that he stumbled.

After that I knew how inebriated he was, so I took the opportunity. Years of pent up rage and sadness went into that kick. I kneed him so hard, he crashed to the floor, like a tree that had suddenly been cut. He clutched his groin and screamed. I took that opportunity to run. I had never run so fast in my life.

“Come back, you little shit!” he shouted.

I realised I had had enough. He had hurt me for years, my body and mind forever scarred by his actions. I called the police, and the words that were stuck in my throat suddenly became clear.

The last I saw of him was his head, hung low. His hands stuck behind his back; his eyes lifted to meet mine. He started to call out to me, but I turned, fighting my hardest to forget all he’d done.





100

Nightmare

BY RICKY

He didn't come back. I slammed the door and leapt onto the comfort of my bed, the springs within the mattress rebounded me back up, making a parabola of a positive gradient, contradictory to my feelings. A curve going down exponentially to the bottom of the Y-axis. Even then, I could clearly recall the message in the letter. It was as if the words were engraved into my brain. I could say it was a dream come true, except it was a nightmare that turned into reality, like authors unravelling the innermost fears of the protagonist, warfare just happened to choose me. I sat in the dark, on my bed, leant against the wall. Covering my lower body with a blanket, I stuck a pillow between my back and the frigid wall. Staring through the window, I saw a sedentary owl on a thin tree branch under a pitch-black sky which infected the clarity of the moon.

It had been two days since we were supposed to have mashed potato, gravy and scrambled eggs together. My father had been ordered to participate in the Great War and serve his country. He departed three months ago, at the start of Autumn, when leaves were crimson red and raining down from above. With that unique hair of his, he kept himself

an identity, walked out the wooden door of the house with similar colours to the leaves of that in September. He would regularly write to us, always kept a diary, but we had not received an envelope since early winter. Yesterday, I walked next to the letter box, leaving footprints into the depths of the snow. My fingers extended into the frozen letter box as the snow bit into the metal cover. I found something inside, a folder. I opened the metal rectangular prism, each movement let out a creak; I reached in, grasping the yellow folder in my hands. Excitement. I ran into the house and shared the letter with my mother, but as soon as I did, I regretted my decision. I hugged my mother with watery eyes, as she bursts into tears mourning.

Lying down, I wished that he hadn't left. What if on that very day, instead of walking out the that wooden door he had instead been sitting near the dining table telling me of stories that he had written. Maybe then he could have lived. The grey sky loomed upon that very place, a symbol of bloodshed as the oak chair sat alongside the fire. Escaping the ominous sound waves that emitted from the bullets that penetrated the air, to the concerto playing on the disc player. Instead of a sealed envelope, a man with monotoned dress code and a horrible taste for hats paced on the cobblestone walkway before the door. I couldn't stop visualising his unkempt hair. Eventually I closed my eyes; letting go of my weight spiralling into the darkness of yet another nightmare.



FOR YOU



Of Prophecies & Misinter- pretations

BY JOSHUA

Many aeons ago, someone very wise and powerful claimed; “And when the last seal is broken the very ground will shake, the skies will turn red and darkness will set in, that is start of the end days.” Obviously, this was wrong, the Creator was about the only person to take things seriously. Therefore, the races he created took things very seriously. However, not even the world took things seriously. It knew it wasn’t going to end, at least not for another thousand years, but the wizard Azuldory believed otherwise and thus, dedicated his life to preventing the apocalypse.

Having spent years dedicating his study to arcane knowledge, to knowing how, where and when the world would end, he finally deduced that it was going to be soon and on the Isle of Moknarsk. So Azuldory travelled there. He was a tall and strong man with a well-kept beard that was beginning to show some grey hairs. His friends described him as, well he didn’t actually have friends but if he had, they would describe him as wise and peculiar.

On the Isle of Moknarsk he met the young paladin Symoroby. He was tall, handsome and had blonde hair. Azuldory feared his looks and charisma meant that he wasn’t going to be the hero instead it would be this paladin rascal.

“Well, is this all the order could send, the world is ending, and I get you,” remarked Azuldory.

“With all due respect the order spends its resources wisely and if every doomsayer sent us a letter, we’d

be all over the world. You should consider yourself lucky,” replied Symoroby.

That reminded him, he had unfortunately left his luck of the protagonist at home and Symoroby looked like a man who was bathed in it at birth, and that worried Azuldory.

“We best get moving then, and I assure you, the end of the world lies somewhere on this island. We’ve just got to find it first.”

Azuldory was having the worst luck getting hit by falling branches as he marched through the swamp while Symoroby had no troubles. At last, they found the cave, and as they descended the cave got darker but for some reason the far end was just as well lit as the opening. (The light of this cave was particularly lazy, and so couldn’t be bothered to leave the cave.) There at the bottom of the cave Azuldory found it, a large glowing red rock.

“There it is, the last seal,” exclaimed Azuldory, revealing a dagger. “Now all that remains is to shatter it.”

“Wait,” cried Symoroby, “We are here to stop the apocalypse not start it!”

“If I start it, those demonic fiends will obey me, I can control them. With my command I can prevent all damage from occurring,” explained Azuldory.

“I can’t let you do this.” So Symoroby drew his blade and Azuldory held his staff up in defence.

They clashed, Symoroby’s sword splitting his staff in two, but as many know, it’s foolish to challenge a wizard. Azuldory held out his hand creating a strong blast of wind knocking Symoroby back, leaving his lifeless body on the ground.

“It would seem your luck has run out Symoroby.” He drove his dagger into the stone shattering it.

The ground shook. The apocalypse began and Azuldory was pleased with the new power at his command.

“History will remember me as a hero.”



P

O

R

Unexpected Offerings

BY JIAYU

The early offer from a Uni arrived at the end of the Term 2 when Olivia was in Year 12. She was so excited about it and texted William thousands of messages about it, but he did not reply to her at all. The next day, there were some rumours at school that she got the early offer only because her dad was a professor in there. Olivia didn't know who started this, but she believed it was not William. She thought William would stand on her side. Somehow, he blocked her in her classroom and remarked tauntingly:

“Oh, look who is this? The girl who got an early offer because of her excellent father!”

Some people nearby started laughing. Olivia felt that something had gone wrong. William ... he was not as magnanimous as she thought.

“I don't know what you are talking about, William.”

He laughed sarcastically. The crowd laughed. More and more people gathered to hear more, but Olivia didn't want it. She decided to leave through another door. Immediately William firmly gripped her arm. Her heart jumped up to her throat.

Olivia vigorously tried to pull away. “What do you want? You started the rumours, didn't you? How could you do that?” The crowd closed in on them. Curiosity was boiling inside their heart.

“Ha, people, did you hear this? She said she ‘paid for it’,” William shouted.

“How can you?” Olivia got closer to him, trying not to smash his face. “You are my best friend, you are the person who knows how long I spent on those artworks in Year 11, and still you just think that everything I did was rubbish? Did you think getting Number 1 in every APs were easy? Ha, how ridiculous!”

Olivia shoved him away so hard that he fell on the ground. She watched him getting from the ground with burning red eyes. The whispers from the crowd faded away from her world, the only thing she could hear was the beating of her broken heart. Her nose was sore. She barged out of the crowd, tried to hide somewhere.

Their relationship froze after that. However, the formal came six months later. She had to see William there, whether she wanted it or not.

At the moment Olivia went into the hall, William approached to claim her hand, wanting to invite her to dance. She stood upon the entrance, staring at his hand, wondering how cheeky he was. She turned away, trying to ignore him.

“Could you forgive me?”

Olivia watched the sunset glow, not a glance at his abominable face.

“I mean, I'm really sorry for everything I did. I was just ... jealous. I did not mean to say that. I just ... couldn't control myself ... I thought a lot afterwards. I really apologize for it! Please ...”

He watched her disappear into the sunset.

105



Zombie MD

BY CAYDEN

The blurriness begins to fade. My mind is empty, the dim flickering light highlights the roof. I struggle to lift myself up. With all my might I sit up, everything hurts. My legs, my arms, and especially my head. Everything looks a bit foggy, but I can tell I am in a small, dark room. I didn't think of it much and sit quietly in the dark.

After a few minutes of silent sitting, a foul stench hits my nose. From the right I can hear slow footsteps. A roar echoes through the corridor. Then a hand appears on the frame of the door. The hand doesn't look human. Its skin is tight to the bone and is the same colour of dark olives. Soon the creature enters my sight. Its blood-stained clothes cover the living corpse body. It limps with one leg and slowly moves past the door. Its skin resembles very worn leather and what looks like its intestine drags across the floor. Just the sight of it repulses me.

The creature turns its head towards me and sniffs the air. I try to control my breathing, but it gets faster and faster. I pull the thin sheet on my legs over the top of my head. The creature begins slowly approaching. Its shadows become larger and larger... *Bang*. The sound pierces my ear and leaves it ringing.

My head begins throbbing, Thousands of questions fill my head. "Where am I?" "Who am I?" "What made that sound" "Is the thing gone?" I slowly lower the sheet. In front of me stands a tall man with a pistol. The smoke from the gun floats up and disperses. The man has a thick beard and a cowboy hat. He wears a black leather

jacket and navy-blue cargo pants. Still in shock, I sit motionless.

"What are you waiting for? To have your brains eaten? Let's go!" The man has a thick Texan accent which makes him even more intimidating.

The man pushes me out the door. On the left I see a small figure running towards me. Then I realise, it is another one of those things. I begin running in the opposite direction. My heart is beating out of my chest. More of the creatures appear from the rubble and trash. I dash past them not looking back. In the distance I can see daylight. The tall man overtakes me and my heart begins to tire. My legs feel heavy and the creatures begin to catch up. They are no more than 10 metres away. The exit is around 50 metres away and I am not going to make it. Then the tall man stops and turns around. He begins shooting.

"Come on David, we need you. You're the only hope" I run past him. He runs straight into the hoard and they begin devouring him.

"NO!!!"

His sacrifice will not be in vain. I run with all my energy, all the way and through the exit. The bright sunlight blurs my vision. I turn around and see two other people close the doors behind me.

"Where's Thomas?" the one on the right questions me. "Where?!"

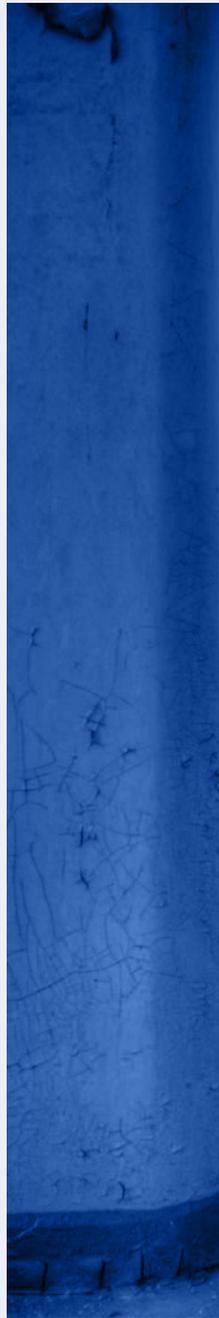
I stare into the distance visualising Thomas' horrid death.

"We lost Thomas for this jackass!"

"Hey, he made the virus. Maybe he can make a cure?" the other one defends me.

"Wait. I made the virus."

"Yeah... you're the creator of the AGL virus."





RD

Cheap Rosé

BY TAMAZIN

Chelsea Grae locked eyes with Alexander Blackstone. This was the first time he had laid eyes on her, but Chelsea had seen Alexander many times before. Chelsea had spent endless hours hunched over her computer screen, looking at Facebook posts. Just as many hours were spent trudging at a safe distance as she followed him through the crowded, noisy streets of New York. Chelsea tirelessly read each and every one of Alex's magazine articles late into each night, whilst sipping her chardonnay. Through her stalking, Chelsea had even found out that he was going to be at this party. Without a second's hesitation, she made her way towards him.

"Hi, my name's Chelsea."

"Hi I'm Alexander. It's really nice to meet you."

"Yeah you too. I'm assuming you are a writer then, if you are at this party."

She was not assuming that Alexander Blackstone was a writer. She knew Alexander Blackstone was a writer, and she knew a lot of other things about him as well.

"I'm a writer, I write magazine columns. What do you do?"

"I am a writer as well. I help my parents a lot though. They are the real good writers in the family."

"Well I'm sure you are a great help to them."

"I sure hope so, but enough about me, tell me some

more about yourself."

"Haha, well I am Alex Blackstone and I have a sister named Emilia."

Well of course she knew this already. He also had a father, Jonathan Blackstone who was suffering from Alzheimer's whom he no longer kept in contact with. His mother, Melissa Blackstone was dealing with cancer back in their hometown of Portland.

The conversation was natural and easy, Chelsea and Alex were oblivious to all the noise around them until a waiter dropped a full platter of salmon blini with cream cheese at Alexander's feet. The smell of cream cheese and salmon almost made Chelsea puke - she hated salmon, almost as much as she hated cheap rosé.

This timely interruption gave Chelsea the perfect opportunity to suggest that they move to a quieter, more intimate area. She wanted to ensure that she had Alexander's full attention.

The conversation went on for hours. At the end of the night he asked her for her number with the promise of calling her to catch up soon. So far, her plan was going very well, she was on her way to the end goal. They were going to end up together, hopefully even married and nothing was going to get in her way. Chelsea Grae always got what she wanted, and this time would be no different. It couldn't be.

It had been almost a week and Alexander still hadn't called as promised. Just a simple look on his social media revealed that he was getting close to another girl. Elyssa Richards. Working at the same firm as Alex. This was unacceptable. Something had to be done. Permanently.



100



Dream of Black Death

BY EMANUEL

Again, I revived.

I woke up in front of where I was last night; down in an old and claustrophobic street where the mansions on the two sides were hideously still but less malevolent, due to the righteous sun rising up from the horizon. Whoa, the journey was over. My anger and misery fell into the sea of calm and comfort. I rejoiced and praised for the salvation of Lord Almighty.

Me, as a medical student at Cambridge University, in that street the experience had eventually penetrated into every cell in my body. Black Death, the hideous and brutal disease that spread across the continent of Europe and was my research task in the previous term, had reminded me of my stress and difficulties, due to a lack of time the Professor had given us. What an evil task, attempting to absorb a vulnerable soul! History, one of the subjects I did in high school was inflicted on me on the pathway to the medicine faculties. It was the topic, Black Death, that captivated me every time I learnt about the medieval during my history lesson, galvanising my interest in medicine. Peering into a tragedy in an extravagant era, I learnt the importance of saving life. That's why I appeared as a medical student to you. Insofar as I started my journey in medicine. Unless lectures continue to sip your life bit by bit, just like the Dracula gorging on human flesh. Piles of notes and paper accumulated over years appear to me as a collection of garbage.

In the street I went in the mid-night, I was exhausted after a day of work. I lodged in an inn for a night near the university, so I could turn up to the university early so I can get started on my work. I sighed and continue loitering down the street. I didn't find anything peculiar on the dark street as there are no people in the street. Dreadfully, a breeze came all at a sudden. Smoke went into my eye. I yelled for help and the sound resonated back to me. I fainted and fell down onto the ground.

"Where am I?" Fidgeting to and fro I wasn't sure where I was. A village filled with cottages, vineyards exposed

under the gentle sun. A light breeze drove the windmill down in the valley around and around, just like my mental condition. "Alas, where am I?" I murmured. As soon as I approached the village, corpses line up in the main road of the village. Folks and doctors were preoccupied around the village. I went up to them and questioned them in the right manner:

"Good morning, sir. What happened to thy village?" A prestige man with a hateful appearance whispered, "Men were contaminated, the hand of Satan has stretched out towards the people of God. Poor peasants, being seduced by sin have brought them to the abyss of judgement." He then said no more. He didn't answer my question directly. Maybe they didn't understand that diseases were caused by pathogens. Gazing at the clergy looking through pages with the bolded heading "BLACK DEATH" I knew what situation I was in now. In the meantime, I asked the clergy that if they want any assistance, they shied away from us with a detestable expression.

At noon they left the French village. I stared at the way they went with such a ruthless and arrogance. The folks then turned to me seeking help. I gave them a hand for the sake of the gentle God who knew right or wrong and the conscience inside my heart. By that night, most of them were well-treated. The villager was touched as they saw hope in the recovery of their relative. We passed a calm night.

However, I was captured next morning by the Kingsman of France. "Woe to me" I mused. I was placed in an iron cell dragged by an ox car. There will be nothing more miserable than this. Doing good but treated badly. Villagers were moaning along the road. Except for one among them, who had no grimace, no pessimistic standing like the others along the line, but smiled evilly. "He was the infiltrator." I groaned in my heart but couldn't voice it out somehow. I fainted.

I arrived in front of the cathedral where they had built a plateau for the sake of justice and penance. Here came the high priest, walking out sternly out from the house of God, confronting the audience in front of him. I was locked up and was about to be beheaded. "I'm innocent!" I cried, as if no-one cared or even minded. The judge said, "With a spell onto the people of France, you tried to offend the jurisdiction of the Lord. Here, receive your punishment in the name of God!"

I then fainted and returned to where I was that morning, in the street.



DE O R

Jiff Badhim's Late Night

BY RUBEN

I was sitting on my favourite chair in my home in Mount Druitt. It was night, and I thinking about Blitz Bzard beating me up, leaving me in a coma. He ordered me to bring beer to the party or else he would beat me up and then kick me out of his party. The big problem is that I'm not authorized to bring beer as I'm fifteen years old. I thought to myself that this was a stupid idea, but I just wanted to meet Stacy Bickhymn, who was my crush since Year 7.

I jumped out of my chair and walked to the nearest Aldi store. I keep thinking about Blitz. He is the most popular kid in school, but also the biggest bully. He would always pick on other students who are less popular than him, like me. He asked me in school yesterday if I wanted to go to his party. I replied, "Yes, I would love to," since his party is exclusive and only a certain amount of people can come. He said I could come, but on one condition. He said, "Bring me a couple of beers, or else, there will be bad things happening."

I finally stopped at Aldi to get the beer. I didn't want to be there, but I had to get it. I look for the cheapest set of beer, since I hadn't brought a lot of money. I quickly grab the cheapest set of beer and ran to the cashier. The cashier grabbed the beer and asked, "how old are you?" I replied softly, "I'm nineteen," thinking what will happen if he finds out that I'm

fifteen years old. He then asked, "Can I see your I.D.?" as he looked at me. I then said, "I actually don't really need it now." So, I put the beer back on the shelf. I quietly walked out of Aldi, putting my head down.

I then walked to Blitz's house, which was where he was holding his party. I walked in and I immediately saw Blitz, who was trying to flirt with Stacy. She is disgusted by him. I quietly walked around them. He then looked and ran to me.

"Where's the beer, Jiff!" he shouted at me.

"I don't know." I said softly.

He pushed me towards the table filled with snacks and shouted, "I need the beer, you asshole!"

He jumped on me with his fist out ready to punch me. I lay down on the floor thinking what would happen next. He then punched me in the face and the body as everyone in the party gathered around, holding their phones out to record the fight.

Stacy then shouted, "Don't hurt him, please!" as she tried to grab him. Everyone then went out of the scene chatting and eating snacks. I stayed on the floor feeling my head as I didn't know what to do.

Stacy walked to me, patted my back and said, "Are you ok?" I nodded my head, thinking about how this will be the best day ever. She then grabbed me and brought me to an empty chair.

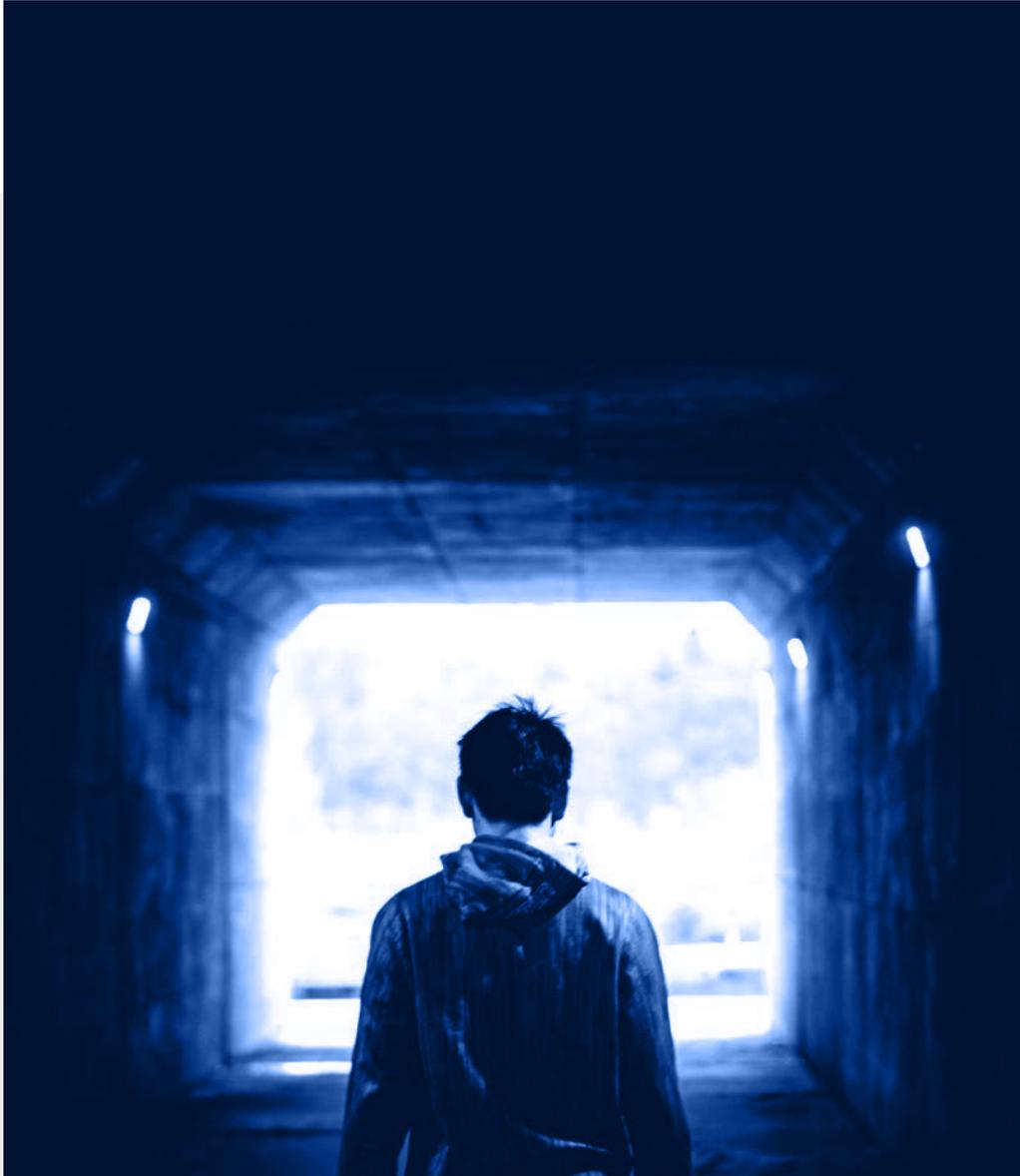
"Blitz can be such a dick, right?" she said.

"Yeah am I right!" I respond.

"I'm Stacy, what's your name?"

"I'm Jeff," I responded with relief.

105



The Maternal Desire

BY PAVANI

I just wished I had a maternal figure in my life. I often looked around observing my friends and their loving relationship with their mothers feeling utter jealousy. For several years my father had told me not one single thing about my mother. Though, the day had finally come where I found out the entire truth. I remember that scorching hot day so clearly. I don't know what had gone through me but my face, red with fury was the only vision I remember before I slammed the door into my father's room and demanded him to tell me everything. That day I found out the horrifying truth that my mother, Tatiana had left my father all alone six months after giving birth to me.

A few weeks had passed and the thought of my mother leaving us alone was still lingering in my mind. I was in fifth period in English when I got called down to the front office. As I walked down to the lady at the front office, what came next was something I never imagined would happen in my lifetime.

"A woman called Tatiana Davis wants to see you," she remarked.

I was frozen in that very moment, like time

had stopped. My legs started to tremble and I could feel the hairs on my arms rise up. I couldn't believe that my mother, who I had no previous memory of, was right around the corner. My first steps into the room quickly changed from a state of shock into pure anger. Just seeing her standing there knowing she had left my poor dad to raise me all alone had my heart shattered.

She tried greeting me but before she could finish her sentence, words of distress starting falling out of my mouth.

"I KNOW EXACTLY WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU DID TO ME AND HOW YOU LEFT MY LONELY INNOCENT FATHER WHEN I WAS JUST 6 MONTHS OLD FOR HIM TO RAISE ME ALL ALONE" I shouted.

After a deep breath, she sat me down and told me the entire truth with tears rolling down her face. I was shocked. My vision of my mother being this evil villainess figure was quickly torn apart when I saw her being so vulnerable. She explained to me how she was only sixteen when she had me and her immaturity and youthfulness came in the way of her ability to raise me. She was filled with regret and apologised with raw emotions. After a moment of silence, she told me that she wished she could be in my life from now on but she would be completely understanding if I declined.

That day I went back home and spent the next few hours thinking of what had just happened. As much as I had despised her for leaving me, the sense of satisfaction knowing that my own mother actually cared about me felt surreal. I knew this would be a difficult step to take, however I decided that from now on, I truly wanted my mother in my life.





TOP

At Least the Food is Good

BY SHASHANK

A couple of months back, I had received a wedding invitation from a distant relative (my auntie's husband's brother's son). I'd never met him before, but I decided to go as I was getting tired of eating instant ramen every night. This was one of those weddings where the bride and groom were so distantly related that you had to check the wedding invitation just to learn their names. I forgot to do that, unfortunately. To make matters worse, the board in front of the reception (which usually has the names of the bride and groom brightly printed on it) was nowhere to be seen.

My cousin's wedding was just like any other Indian wedding. Children running around making a mess; the couple exhausted from the countless pictures that they had to pose for taken by relatives and friends; teens being harassed by adults with questions like "doctor or engineer?" After a while roaming around the party I was able to find a seat, and luckily it was next to a beautiful girl.

"Hi, I'm Karthik," I said, fully expecting her to ignore me. "Hello, I'm Sneha," she replied, to my surprise. We started talking and she eventually asked me if I knew Soham.

I figured that Soham was the name of the groom and

instead of explaining our distant relationship, I told her, "Yeah, me and Soham are good friends."

"So are you a doctor as well?" she asked eagerly.

"Yeah, me and Soham work in the same hospital," I said trying my hardest to cover up the lie from before.

After that awkward start I changed the subject onto something else. It seemed like we were talking for hours and I didn't ever want to stop. Despite my efforts, Soham's name kept popping up in the conversation, and I had to change the topic. Awhile later I started to feel hungry, and even though I wanted to keep talking to Sneha my urge to eat some quality butter chicken was more important.

I told her that I was going to go get some food and asked if she wanted any. All of a sudden she had a shocked look on her face. She whipped out her phone from her purse and then silently cursed.

"Damn, I was supposed to pick up Soham from the airport half an hour ago," she said while packing away her purse and getting up.

"Soham?" I said, looking up onto the stage. Soham was right there on the stage, sitting with his wife.

"Soham, my husband. He's coming back from Melbourne today."

"Oh, that was today! I thought it was tomorrow," I said, quickly thinking on the spot. Even though I looked happy, I was heartbroken that the woman that I'd been talking to had a husband.

After saying a quick farewell, she left the wedding. "Well, at least there's plenty of butter chicken left," I thought to myself as I went to fill up my plate.



100



The Stranger in the Driver's Seat

BY CHIRANA

I wished I didn't have to leave the party so early. No one else had. So there was no one else to be seen as I walked into the void of darkness.

Out of nowhere two cold hands grabbed me tightly and started to pull me towards my unlocked car. I noticed that I dropped my keys and this dude picked them up. This guy was huge. He must have been at least six feet tall. He had a long beard and he was bald. I tried to scream but he covered my mouth. I tried with all my strength to free myself. But he wouldn't budge. Over my panic, I heard a deep, gruff voice. He was talking on the phone.

"I've got the car, and the boy."

He pulled me onto the backseat and taped my mouth and hands together. I was living my worst nightmare. He turned the key and the turbocharged engine sprung into action. This was my dream car, but I had other problems to deal with. He pulled out of the lot and shifted into first gear.

Time passed, and with all the terror I was facing, I glanced up at the rear view mirror but immediately looked away when I saw a pair of two bloodshot eyes staring at me. If only I hadn't listened to my mum and left the party so early. The car downshifted followed by a pair of brakes squealing as the car came to a halt. The door opened and he slammed the door shut. Even though there were a million thoughts going through my mind, I foolishly thought about how I didn't like people slamming my doors. I looked out the window. I was at a petrol station. Most

importantly, Mr Steven's petrol station. Mr Steven and I aren't exactly friends. Although my hands were tied, I could still peel the tape that covered my mouth with my free fingers. Each tiny peel felt like my skin was being torn apart. Bit by bit I was finally able to peel the whole tape off while I looked outside the window, seeing dark alleyways across the street.

Maybe this was my chance to escape. He was standing behind a wall, planning his next deadly moves with this other guy. Mr. Steven was a decent man and worked late night shifts. Even though we never got along, I still didn't want to leave him alone. But how could I help him?

While the man still had his back turned towards me, I quietly pulled the handle and opened the door. Then I tip-toed and hid behind a fuel tank. The men walked towards the back. Finally. They were out of sight. But I was running out of time. I ran as quietly as I could to the building.

"Hey!"

I jumped and turned around. It was only Mr Steven. Phew.

"What are you doing here Ryan?"

"You need to come with me, there are two guys who are breaking in from the back."

"Oh. I noticed those two and I was quite worried."

We ran outside and locked the front and back doors. The men seemed to be nowhere around so they must have been in the building. Mr Steven called the police.

"Thank you so much Ryan, without you I would have been robbed!"

"Oh, it is nothing much."

I felt relieved when the sound of sirens appeared from across the road. I told the officers everything, that the men kidnapped me by stealing my car and they were going to rob Mr Steven.

"Thank you so much, Ryan."



P

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Sarah Ayoub

Sarah Ayoub is a journalist and author whose work has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *ELLE*, *Marie-Claire*, *SBS Life*, *Cosmopolitan* and more. She lectures in writing at the University of Notre Dame, where she is a PhD candidate researching the representations of culturally diverse females in Australian YA literature. Her novels *Hate* is such a *Strong Word* and *The Yearbook Committee* are on the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge, and *The Yearbook Committee* was longlisted for *The Gold Inky*, Australia's premier teen choice award. She is a regular fixture at schools and writer's festivals around the country, has worked with *Sweatshop* and *The Stella Prize*, and is a mentor to the youth curators of *The Sydney Writer's Festival YA* program.

www.sarahayoub.com

101

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The WestWords Residency at Cherrybrook Technology High School was a wonderful experience that demonstrated to me how lessons on the craft of writing can bring a sense of joy and accomplishment to those who partake in them if they feel that what they have to say - and their lived experience - is valuable.

The week-long program ensured we covered a variety of bases that not only introduced students to concepts like showing not telling, realistic dialogue and character construction, but which hopefully highlighted the merit in writing with a sense of authenticity and interest. Too often the pressure is to write something that speaks to big issues or possesses some kind of enormous literary quality, but the adolescent life is filled with constant change and growing awareness, and there's so much potential in tapping into those small moments of growth and change, and in encouraging students to write what they themselves would like to read. Writing for oneself offers a greater freedom as opposed to stilted words that won't translate for the reader, so I left the program hoping that my students believed in their ability to translate their everyday experiences, thoughts and feelings into snippets of stories that really spoke of their place in the world.

Reading from a variety of different authors and genres enriched the experience because they were able to see first hand how other authors took their passions and put them on the page. I was proud of the progress the students made in that week, their level of engagement, and the spark in their eyes when they realised that learning about books and words can be enjoyable. They had some amazing questions about the craft and experience of storytelling and the way this translates into a career, and their feedback was valuable and personally enriching.

I sincerely hope that my girls remember that who they are is the best gift they can offer this world. If anything, I want them to walk away knowing that words carry so much meaning, reflect so much, and can foster so much positive change in the world. Not only should they use words wisely, but they should remember that they can use them for so much.”

4:18 am

BY HESADI

It's 4:18 am.

I haven't been able to sleep at all. My hands are sweating, my head is thumping, and my heart is beating erratically. This case has been bugging me for weeks now and I still can't wrap my head around it.

"For God's sake Ryleigh, get it together!" my mind screams at me.

I get up out of bed, slide my feet into my slippers and walk down the stairs, the sound echoing throughout my eerily silent house.

The voice inside my head begins to whisper to me again, "You could do it you know, he wouldn't hold it against you."

I laugh at the absurdity of my thoughts, "Talk to him? Absolutely not, I'd rather burn my house to the ground." And just like that it brings back all the unpleasant memories that I've tried so hard to forget.

The more reasonable side of me tries to persuade me to let it go, but I can't. It's been years since I've had any contact with him, but the damage he inflicted, I'll never be able to forget. My thoughts are a spiderweb inside my head and I'm stuck in the center of it all.

I let out a deep breath, leaning against the kitchen counter and let my head fall into my hands. Finally, after a minute or so, I pull myself together and grab the case's evidence files and drop them onto the table. Papers lie scattered everywhere just like the conflicting thoughts in my head. Flipping through the pages, I find what I'm looking for - The Victim's Report. My eyes scan through the document trying to find anything I may have missed. Mr Charles Addington... found dead, multiple stab wounds, a punctured right lung and four broken ribs. Moving around all the pieces of paper surrounding me, my eyes zone in on my suspects list. I still can't gather enough evidence to accuse anyone of anything.

Unable to stare at the piece of paper any longer,

my eyes drift across my apartment and land on my phone, only an arm's reach away from me.

"Don't do it Ryleigh, don't you dare pick up that phone and dial his number," I think to myself.

"Do it! Do it! Do it! He's a renowned detective, just pick up that damn phone and call him!" my mind yells. Frustrated, I slam my fist against the table, my emotions at war with each other.

Growling underneath my breath, I storm up the stairs and jump onto my bed, delving deep into the covers. My eyes close almost instantly and I find myself drowning in my memories.

I remember that day. The day he left. It felt like my heart had been ripped to pieces and I couldn't cope. I had locked myself in my room, only coming out when I needed to. My mum took longer shifts to distract herself from the ongoing court case. She never took any time to answer my questions, I was always kept in the dark. A few years later, my mother met someone else and to my amazement, was able to move on easily. Whereas I kept everything locked up in the tiny dark corner of my brain and swore never to touch it ever again.

Ironically, I followed in his footsteps to become a detective, nowhere as talented as him though. Every case he touched, he was able to solve, almost like magic. Unlike me who is still trying to gather leads on a case that didn't want to be solved.

A few moments later, I find myself downstairs again, staring at the black screen of my phone. My mind tells me to pick it up, but my arms lay by my side, unable to move.

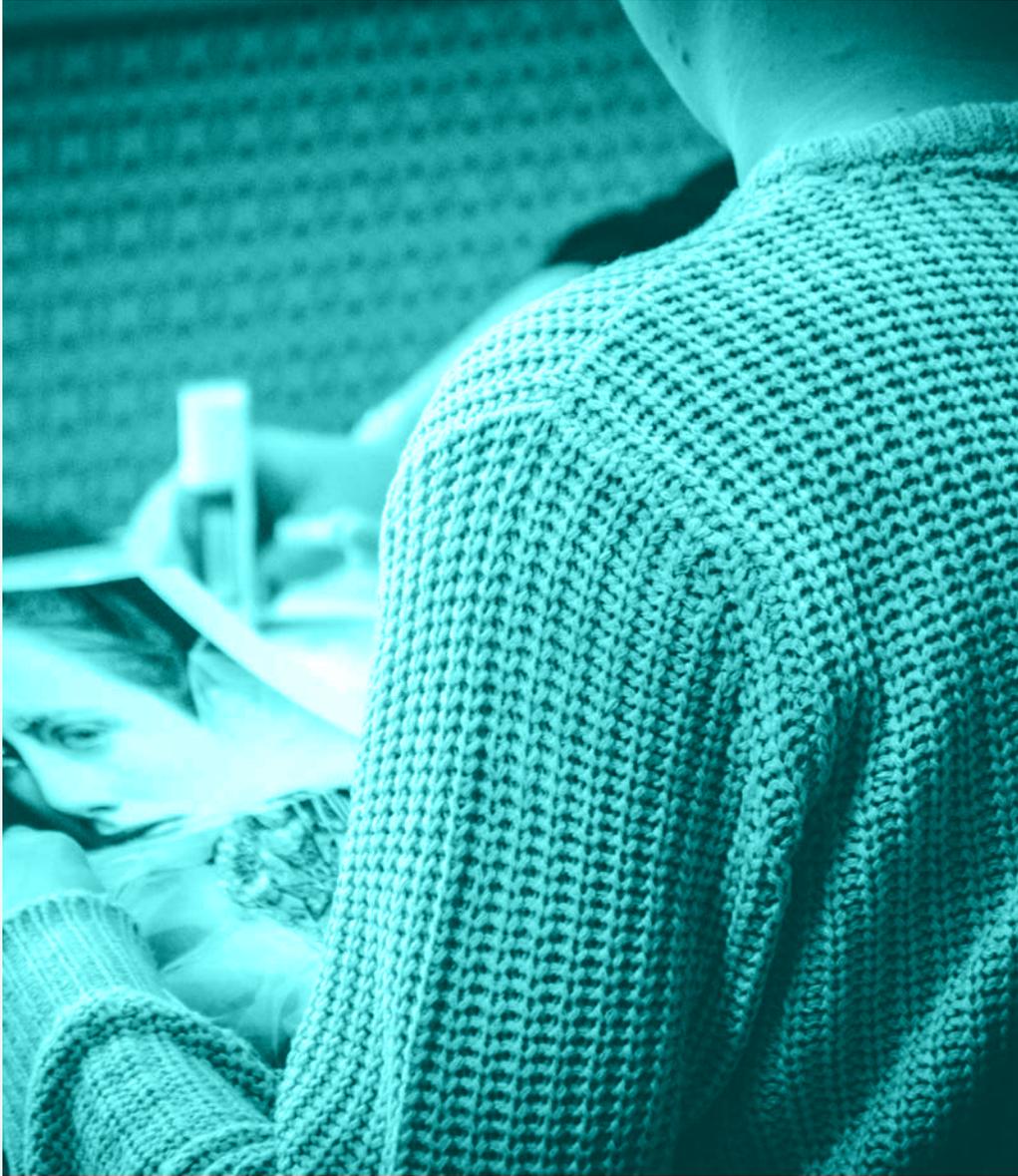
Soon my fingers begin to itch, my trembling arm moves and all of a sudden, I'm holding the phone. Shaking, I tap on the screen, his phone number filling my vision. It starts to ring and then I hear it. His voice.

"Hello?" he says.

Tears threaten to spill from my eyes, and I manage to stutter out two words before breaking down completely.

"H-hi Dad."

10E



Two Can Play a Game

BY MAYA

I miss him. I miss his beautiful smile, I miss his cute pout, I miss his bad boy ways, I miss the way his touch ignited this fire inside me but most of all I miss the way he kissed - his lips capturing mine in a passionate kiss, as if I was the air he needed to breathe. I miss Alex Parker so much that it's driving me insane.

"MIA EVANS! I don't care if the fricking Prince of London has crushed your heart, you better get up this instant and clean your darn room!" My mum's yelling breaks the eerie silence of the house.

Forcing myself out of the warmth of my bed, I gaze at myself in the mirror. My green eyes are dull and puffy, my nose red, and my mouth seems it had forgotten how to smile. Glancing round my room, I notice half my bed is covered in tissues, chocolate wrappers girt my bed and the salted caramel ice-cream has now melted in its container. My phone lights up every few seconds, popping up with constant texts from friends.

I sigh, knowing I can't hide any longer. I am aware that eventually I will succumb to the constant nagging of my friends, begging me to tell them what had happened last Friday. But maybe the sole reason I have been ignoring their questions is simply because I can't accept the reality of the situation. The memory is forever engraved in my brain.

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"It was just a stupid bet Mia," Alex spoke whilst rubbing his neck, as if he wasn't fazed by any of this.

The urgency seeped into my voice. "You and I both know that's not true, Alex. You know we had a connection; it was real."

"Oh, come on Mia, we made a bet of who would fall for the other person first, and you clearly lost and are too ashamed to accept it so you're spewing up shit," Alex tried to explain calmly but wasn't succeeding.

The harshness of his words struck me like lightning, ripping my heart apart. Before I could fully lose my sanity, I slapped Alex and bolted away.

*

The thought of that terrible night sends jitters down my spine and once again the tears are on the verge of escaping from my eyes. Calming myself before I drown in a pool of tears, the stupidity of this moment suddenly dawns to me. How can I cry over someone who simply didn't deserve me? Determination and anger conjures up inside me dissolving away my misery whilst I place myself on the soft cushioned stool next to my white dresser and begin applying makeup to revive the glow of my face. I acquire the boldest attire from my wardrobe and glance at myself one last time in the mirror, satisfied with my outfit.

Racing down the stairs, I rush out to my car to ensure I get to school on time, after all I have a grand entrance to make. My foot hits the accelerator with full force as I zoom past the street and revenge has clouded my mind. The quote "treat me like a queen and I'll treat you like a king, treat me like a game and I'll show you how it's done" is swimming in my head. Alex has done his part, now it is my turn to teach him how it's done.





Dystopia

BY EMILY

This world is so cold. So empty. So lifeless. People walk the streets of the city as if they have no emotion. Their faces so deprived of food, water and any form of hygiene. She sits upon the wooden bench that's so weathered it barely appears wooden. Her face is tattooed with dirt. She doesn't have enough money to buy a mask. A pungent smell reaches my nose and I am desperate to help her, but it is part of society's rules not to. Her big brown eyes desperately plead with mine. But I keep my head high as I hurry through these lifeless streets. There is only one place in this world where you can show your true face. And that is in the privacy of your own home. The people of this world have lost their touch of reality through technology. They have fallen so far down that they can't recover. The people are almost basically robots. They do what they are told, no questions asked. My mother taught me never to be like them. I was raised on a world where people are trained to show no emotion, trained to rely on technology, trained to be dead. No personality, no individuality, nothing.

I feel the tears urging from my eyes as I think of my dead mother. Killed brutally by the hands of our government. Just because she was a person, had thoughts and opinions for herself. I inhale deeply. This world, though dead, is a dangerous place. They act as if they are lifeless drones, controlled by what my mother called the dictator. The one in charge,

and the people are the soldiers. I still remember that day when they took her from me. I watched silently from my bedroom window as they marched into the house. The looks they had on their face are ones I will never forget. My mother screamed and yelled but it was no use. They took her from me. I will never know what they did to her. Or whether she still walks on this earth, hopefully she's living somewhere else. In a better world.

The rush of the crowd pushes against my body. But I finally reach my apartment. A small grey five by five metre house. Almost like a prison cell. I can finally pull the damn mask off my face. It's so confining. I can finally move my face around. I notice that my eyes are red. I wonder when I cried in the day. Sometimes it happens more than once. But I live in this world where I can't tell you that I feel hurt. The cost of that is my life. I hold my head under the tap and allow the cold water to run over my face, I close my eyes and imagine. But I don't get a second to relax before the door of my house is busted open. My mind goes straight back to the day my mother was taken. I immediately pull the mask on and I wait. Maybe they will go away, maybe, they don't want me.

"87394 please present yourself."

I pause. "Don't go out," I think. "If you stay, maybe, just maybe, they'll turn around and leave."

"87394 please present yourself."

This can't be happening.

"87394 please present yourself."

And I walk out from the bathroom, my hands above my head, and a smile plastered across my face.



FORUM



How Much Do I Know About You?

BY JO EE

Jennifer, a Royal Aquatic Competitive swimmer. She lived an ordinary identity with a big dream within. Jennifer had to wake up 5am to train for her big dreams. Jennifer wrapped her hair into her usual cap and rinsed her goggles in the pool, making little vibrating waves.

“At the red top,” Coach Ben said.

The red second hand of clock approached zero and Jennifer dived into pool, breaking the silence of the aquatic centre.”

As they finished the warm-up set, Coach Ben started putting people in different lanes.

Jennifer unconsciously played her fingers around the lane rope as she got nervous of being put into lanes. The last time, Jennifer was put into Lane 1, which she hated it, as she was way far ahead of the younger members and, mainly, because she didn't have friends with her.

Hayley, Jennifer's best friend, joined the team when she was eight, while Jennifer joined a year after. Jennifer and Hayley soon became best friends. Since Jennifer and Hayley were the same age and used to have close timings, they were put into the same heat and able to compete against each other. Most of the time they swapped goggles with each other before races, believing that having their strength with “someone else's eyesight” will make them swim better. As they grew older, things started to change a little.

“Jennifer, Lane 2” Coach Ben said.

“Lane 2?! Oh well, it's definitely better than Lane 1. I'll get there soon.” Jennifer thought.

As Jennifer was swimming across to Lane 2, she heard Hayley's name being called out.

“Hayley, Lane 3,” Coach Ben said.

Jennifer continued her way towards Lane 2. It was no surprise that Hayley was again put into Lane 3. Hayley's

time had been dropping constantly, leaving a huge gap between her and Jennifer. She overtook Teresa, the best of the team. Jennifer had mixed feelings between jealousy, hate and friendship. It seemed so effortless for Hayley to improve so much, while Jennifer was still struggling to keep in pace with her personal best.

After what seemed like ages, the training session ended.

“Hayley and Teresa, would both of you come here for a minute?” Coach Ben asked.

“Hey, Hayley. What did Coach Ben say?” Jennifer asked.

“Coach Ben was just discussing with me and Teresa about the new team captains for this year and asked if we would take the position. Jen, I know we've made promise about being captains together, but Jen I really need this opportunity,” Hayley begged.

“You've changed, Hayley. You never value anything else more than friendship. And now you do,” Jennifer said angrily.

Jennifer quickly packed up her equipment and left.

Jennifer got home, had a quick shower and quickly fell asleep.

“Hayley, you've changed! You never value anything more than friendship, and now you do.”

The sentence kept repeating in Jennifer's dream.

It suddenly disappeared and fell into a silence.

Jennifer came to a broken house. As she walked into the house, she saw a beam of light shining into the house. She looked up and saw a hole in roof.

“Hi Jen, what are you doing here?”

“That's Hayley. What is she doing? Why is she dressing up an old woman?” Jennifer thought.

“What are you doing Hayley? Who is she?” Jennifer asked.

“She is my grandma. She's been sick for years, Jen. I'm sorry for breaking the promise. I really need to get a scholarship for university. You've seen what is happening to our family and we can't afford that. Jen, I am not the Hayley you used to know. The Hayley that came out of a decent family and has absolutely no worries about financial problems,” Hayley said.

Tears unconsciously rolled down Jennifer's eyes, waking her up from her dream.

“How much do I know about you?”



W

O

Two Worlds

BY CLAIRE

The mansion was magnificent. Its walls stood high and curved, making it powerful and welcoming. Two rows of shiny rectangular windows snaked along the facade, glistening under the sunlight. The creamy pearl roof formed a protective eggshell around the inside as it curved down to the sides and back of the mansion. In the middle, mahogany double doors lined with intricate patterns stood closed. The ends of their thin black handles twirled upwards like a moustache. Simple yet elegantly complex, the curves of her dream home invited her in.

“Are you listening to me?” The voice of her mother dragged Loretta back in the car. Outside the passenger window, trees swept past under a grey sky. Teenagers walked on the street, wearing the same clothes as Loretta, their bags bouncing on their backs with every step.

“Yes,” Loretta replied. Her mother was probably going on about working hard and succeeding in life. It must’ve been something she had heard a million times before, otherwise she wouldn’t have wandered off in her mind.

“I can’t tell what’s going on in your head.” Her mother sensed that Loretta was distracted as they turned onto their street. “Did you have a bad day?” she asked sympathetically.

“No, I’m fine. Just busy with schoolwork,” Loretta said as she mentally recalled a list of assignments and tests.

They pulled into their driveway and her mother’s brown eyes turned to Loretta’s. “I have to work late again tonight. I’m sorry, honey. Take care of your brother and keep him out of trouble, okay?” She tucked a wavy strand of Loretta’s hair behind her ear.

Loretta tried not to look disappointed. Although she was used to cooking dinner for herself and her younger brother, she was getting tired of being the secondary mother in the house. “Okay. Come home soon, Mum.”

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Loretta stepped out of the car and watched it roll back onto the street. Instinctively, she reached in her pocket for the house keys, but caught a shiny glimpse in the corner of her eye. On the path lay a small, sparkling vial. Loretta bent down and carefully picked it up, the glass cool against her thin fingers. Her thumb rested on a rough cork at the top of the vial, which was round and sloped down to a point like an upside-down teardrop. Inside it was a cloudy, white liquid that seemed to swirl. With the vial in her hand, Loretta went inside the house.

*

Staring at the jumble of equations in her maths book Loretta kept thinking about the vial on the side of her desk.

There was something peculiar about its shininess and how the translucent liquid moved inside. The more she looked at it, the more it seemed to swirl.

And the more she felt enticed to drink it.

As if pushed by an invisible force, Loretta took the vial and pulled away the cork with a pop. Tilting her head back, she tipped a drop of the hazy liquid in her mouth. It tasted so wonderfully sweet that Loretta wanted more. But before she could drink again, she slipped into unconsciousness.

*

Loretta woke to a clear, blue sky dotted with puffs of marshmallow clouds. Blades of soft grass prickled her arms as she propped herself up to look around. She couldn’t believe what she saw.

It was the mansion, exactly how she had imagined it. With the pearl-coloured eggshell roof towering above her, Loretta ran her hand along the smooth curved walls, glistening windows and moustache door handles. The smell of cheese, ham and pineapples wafted from an open window, tickling her hunger for pizza. Out of nowhere, a familiar melody of chords from a guitar and piano comforted Loretta like a warm blanket. Then, a squawk tilted her head up to the sky. Flaming red wings flapped as a phoenix flew in a circle, spiraling down to perch its bony claws on her left shoulder. Marvelling at the magical creature, Loretta gently stroked its soft feathers that ended with an orange tinge at the tips.

This world felt like paradise, but something was missing. With a twinge of sadness, Loretta realised that she was alone. She imagined a world without her mother, who taught her life lessons and recounted funny memories in the car, or her brother, who laughed as he played tip with her around the house. Fearful of losing her mother’s guidance and her brother’s ray of sunshine, Loretta searched for a way back home.

Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion crashed into Loretta. Strength drained from her body, flowing out like a waterfall. At the back of her throat, she could taste the sweetness of the swirling liquid in the vial. Eyelids drooping heavily, Loretta slumped on the grass as her mind returned to unconsciousness.

*

“Are you okay, Loretta?” Her brother asked worriedly as her eyes fluttered open. With Loretta sitting down, he stood at her eye level. Her maths book lay untouched on the desk and the glass vial was still cool despite being in Loretta’s hand.

“Yeah, Jake. I was just napping,” She replied, the mysterious place fresh in her mind.

“It’s almost dinnertime,” Jake said. “Mum’s working late again, isn’t she?” His shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

Loretta’s eyes met his and nodded. “We’ll be okay.” A cheeky smile formed on her lips. “You want to order pizza?”

With a grin, Jake replied, “Thought you’d never ask.”

10E



\$20,000

BY OLIVIA

His skinny fingers shift slowly across my shoulder as we walk into a huge mansion, the outside filled with sculptures of naked men and perfectly trimmed bushes. I peep through the window and notice a giant chandelier embedded with thousands of crystals, lighting up the neat and modern living room, not a speck of dirt in sight. He squints his eyes slightly and shoots a fake smile, slowly nodding at me as if to tell me to behave without saying a single word. “Good afternoon Mother, Father,” he squints as he takes his hand off my shoulder and begins nervously cracking his fingers. He sounds so different every time we visit his family, I can barely recognise him. “Hello Jake, doing well with the business I presume?” his mother says, pulling down her glasses to look him up and down. She does it so slowly as if she wants him to know that she still thinks of him as a disappointment. “Y-yes, we’ve made many sales this month,” he lies, staring at his mother’s limited-edition Louis Vuitton handbag. Only I know that the business he inherited from his parents has gone bankrupt. “Good, we are counting on that money to pay for your sister’s wedding so we will need \$20,000 by the third of July.” Her posh British accent enhances the cruelty of her character. “Third of July!? That’s in two months!” Jake raises his voice as nerves begin taking over his body. He

squeezes his hand so tight that fingernails begin digging into his skin. His mother takes a step back and yells “YES! Is there a problem with that? We gave you that business to make money, not lose it.” Panic begins running up and down my body. How is Jake supposed to make \$20,000 in two short months when we can barely afford to buy groceries? He tries to hide his fear so hard, but I can see right through him.

We walk inside the mansion; the door is large enough to fit four people. Jake’s parents love luxury, they love spending the money that Jake makes from their business. Every year while Jake is working day in and day out to earn money for us, his parents would ask for thousands upon thousands of dollars to go on to luxury trips and resorts in Maui or Bora Bora, leaving us with hundreds of dollars in debt and barely enough money to survive. Every time I try and confront Jack about this, he tells me that the business was initially theirs and so all the money that he earns technically belongs to them. I know he is lying; he is just afraid that his parents will make us breakup like they did with his last girlfriend. This makes me feel horribly guilty; Jake is spending countless hours and days working hard and making business deals just so we can be together. I pull his shaky arm closer to mine and rub my fingers across his palm smoothly. He looks down at me slightly, I see his eyes turn from shock and fear to calmness and hope within a matter of seconds. He kisses my forehead lightly, pulls back my long, curly hair and whispers, “Everything will be ok, I promise.”





HOME

Not the Holiday We Were Expecting

ANONYMOUS

The sound of the alarm clocked shocked Abbey up and out of her bed. She had been waiting for this day to come around all year. Excitement filled her entire body which made her forget it was actually four o'clock in the morning. Before she knew it, Abbey was squashed in between her two younger siblings and had pillows and blankets shoved up against the sides of her. As the moon was slowly sinking and the sun gradually rising, the early morning breeze hit her from top to bottom. Time passed by and the long boring drive had begun. Abbey's little brother Nick and younger sister Rachel were constantly asking how far away they were from their final destination. As Abbey blocked out all the surrounding sounds with the sound of her 'holiday playlist' she thought about the adventures that would be taking place on this holiday. It reminded her of the time last year when the owner of the park had told them that they may not have been returning the following year. How different it would have been. This was by far her favourite holiday and she couldn't imagine any other. Eventually she drifted off into her thoughts.

"WAKE UP WE'RE FINALLY HERE!" said Nick, ecstatic as ever. The car clock read 1:30pm. They had been driving for 6 hours and had finally reached their final destination.

Driving through the caravan park, making their way down to where their campsite was and had been for the past fourteen years, Abbey was dreading the next couple of hours. She knew she would have to help set up the caravan with her mum and dad, because her two younger siblings were as useless as ever and all they wanted to do was go swimming in the pool and down the bright blue, snake-like slide.

As they got down to their campsite something just didn't feel right. Their site was occupied! How could this be? Abbey thought there surely must have been a mix-up. So many questions ran through her head, over and over.

"Dad, what's happening?" Abbey said confused.

Her father's face looked muddled.

"I don't know Abbey, but I'll figure it out."

"Um, excuse me, but we are supposed to be setting up our van today. We are booked on this campsite for two weeks, just like we have done for the past fourteen years," Dad explained.

The man sitting laid back on his recliner chair didn't seem fazed.

"Not so fast sir, can you not clearly see that our bigger and better van is here?"

He seemed pretty arrogant to Abbey.

To our family's astonishment the man continued.

"I am the manager's brother and he has booked my family into this campsite for another week so I don't know what you think you are doing here trying to take this site from us. I would advise you to get your little family and van out of here before I put in a complaint."

Dad was shocked and I don't think he really knew what to do. However he knew that this man was not going to ruin our family holiday for us and something would be sorted.



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Pip Smith

Pip Smith is a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist of 2018. Her debut novel *Half Wild* (2017) was shortlisted for the 2018 Voss Literary Award, and her first poetry collection, *Too Close for Comfort* (2013), won the inaugural Helen Ann Bell Award. Pip ran the monthly writing event Penguin Plays Rough, for which she published and edited the multimedia anthology, *The Penguin Plays Rough Book of Short Stories* (2011). She was a co-director of the National Young Writers' Festival, and holds a doctorate in creative arts from Western Sydney University. Her first children's picture book is titled *Theodore the Unsure*.

www.pipsmith.net

10 F

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I came into the program hoping to show students that the devil is in the detail. I gave each student a micro fiction reader featuring a variety of one paragraph to one page stories which I hoped showed students how a whole world could be glimpsed through one significant object or one moment in time. I shared my belief that what really matters in short fiction is the ‘glimmer of truth’; the kind of detail that makes us think “yes! I know what that’s like! Or I know what that might be like!” The shortcut to this feeling? Nuanced detail that reveals character - in particular what they have lost or what they most desire. While some students were frustrated by this detail-focused approach to writing, some embraced the process and I was impressed by their results.

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Cyclical Time

BY RAVINDU

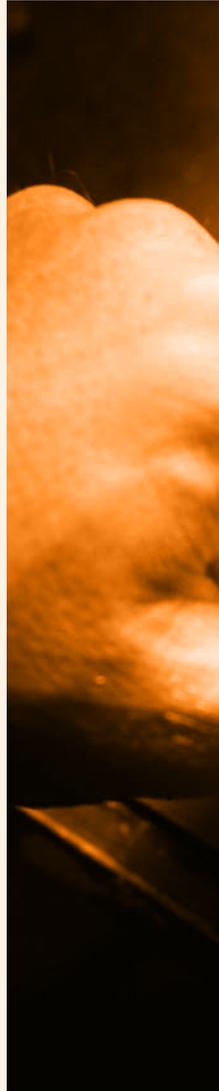
Thomas didn't know if it could kill him or not but it was the only way he could get what he wanted. He just needed to know how to make it. Making it would be a matter of skill and not material. If he needed oil, he could easily find a can of it on the floor. Scrap metal was certainly in abundance. Thomas' workstation was what he called home. It was a place for him to make whatever he desired as long as he knew how. However, what he was making was something he didn't truly understand but he desired it more than anything. A way back to the past. A time machine.

"Spark, find me the spanner will you?" called Thomas into the thickness of the workshop as he fidgeted with the electronics of a clock. He held his hand out with his attention still focused on the endlessly gyrating hands and a small mechanical dog came to fulfil his request. Spark was a gift from his father. He lived alone now but he hoped he would be seeing his father soon enough. Spark was his only family now. As Thomas grew, so did Spark. "Thanks Spark," said Thomas and Spark replied with a subtle bark. Thomas was stuck, perplexed. A time machine was

no easy contraption, but Thomas felt as he was on the verge of a realisation. What was it though? No amount of nuts or bolts could fix this. He needed a catalyst, a spark to open the spectrum of time itself. Then it hit him. "A magnifying glass, maybe that could work," he mumbled, trying to plan the contraption in his head. He only owned one magnifying glass but that was no excuse for him to stop now.

Nearing the morning, it was finished, like he had planned. In the tension of the moment he pulled down the lever without a moment's notice. At first nothing, but soon the remnants of a black circle emerged. As the strange hole grew in the centre of the mechanical ring it was held in, the force of the lever got harder to sustain. To his curiosity, Spark entered the vicinity, attracted to the spiralling portal-like object. "No! Stay away from it, Spark!" yelled Thomas in agony. Thomas could not hold on any longer, the strain on his arms had become unbearable and Spark was getting too close. He let go of the lever without hesitation. Then, it all exploded. A combustion power so large it sent him and everything nearby flying into the walls of his workshop.

The soft crackling and memorable smell of fire reached him as his eyes gently raised. Spark was mixed into the remains of the damned machine with only a faint glow left within his eyes. Only now did Thomas realise that what he so desired had only led him back to the beginning. He would have to start all over again.





TOFF

His Torn Picture

BY CHANTELLE

His eyes are empty and cold as he stares at a picture in his good hand, the paper crumpled and torn along the edge. Seeing him lying in bed, broken and beaten to the bone, you felt your heart stop.

The day you heard the sirens, the police cars flashing their lights outside his apartment like they were having a party, you knew. You glared at the bastard boyfriend they dragged away and watched as they helped him into the red and white van. The police going one way, and the ambulance going the other.

On a large cork board was a photograph held by a single pin. The sun shining down on him as he smiled brightly to the camera, his eyes sparkled as he held up his trophy high in the air, an arm wrapped around his waist as he held his partner close, the picture perfect life he could've had, forever flushed down the drain in a single night.





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The Briefcase

BY SELINA

A briefcase entered the elevator. Konan, an expensive brand; the same model my father used. Briefcases are strange; they carry a person's entire world condensed into a small, twenty-five-by-forty-centimetre object. You never know what's inside until it's opened and once it is opened, you can never turn back, never erase the contents from your mind's eye.

It was carried by a man well-attired in a black tuxedo suit paired with dark glasses. For all I knew, he could have been the driver of a yakuza boss with a taser (he wouldn't dare keep a real gun) hidden in the briefcase in case his boss lashed out at him. Or perhaps he himself was a yakuza boss (in which case I should be worried) and carried a briefcase full of drugs, ready to be sold for unreasonable prices.

Maybe he was the butler of an affluent family and carried generational Kokeshi dolls in his briefcase to satisfy the desires of the young mistress. Or perhaps he was a superstar actor, who used a tuxedo getup and dark glasses to disguise himself, and in his briefcase were casual clothes he would change into after arriving at his film location.

Ping! "Level three, level three."

He could have been some big-shot politician whose name I didn't know (politics wasn't all that interesting) and carrying important political documents in his briefcase. Or maybe he was a guest

attending a lavish birthday party for a celebrity figure whose present was a briefcase full of money.

He might have been on his way to a funeral, or to a wedding, or to a matchmaking ceremony and carried flowers in his briefcase, unaware that by doing so, deprived them of oxygen, withering each petal until they disintegrated at a single touch.

Maybe he was the host of a game show (there was one I used to watch with my father) and carried spray streamer cans and fake insects to prank contestants during unsuspecting moments.

Ping! "Level two, level two."

Or perhaps he was just a businessman. A businessman who jammed his briefcase with masses of work. A businessman who left early in the morning and returned late at night, so that when he arrived home, there was no one to greet him because they were asleep. A businessman who snuck into his daughter's room to give her a goodnight kiss and never realised she was always awake, awaiting his arrival.

Ping! "Ground floor."

The briefcase started inching further and further away from me until it had left the elevator. Then the doors closed, and I was alone once again.

I stared at the steel wall so hard that my vision turned dark, as if the cosmos had snatched away reality. I felt caressed – ever so slightly – by a tingling sensation; rocked the way a father rocks his child.

For a second there, I almost thought I had caught a glimpse of my father's retreating back, his leather briefcase in hand.



101

The Hitmen Arrive at the House

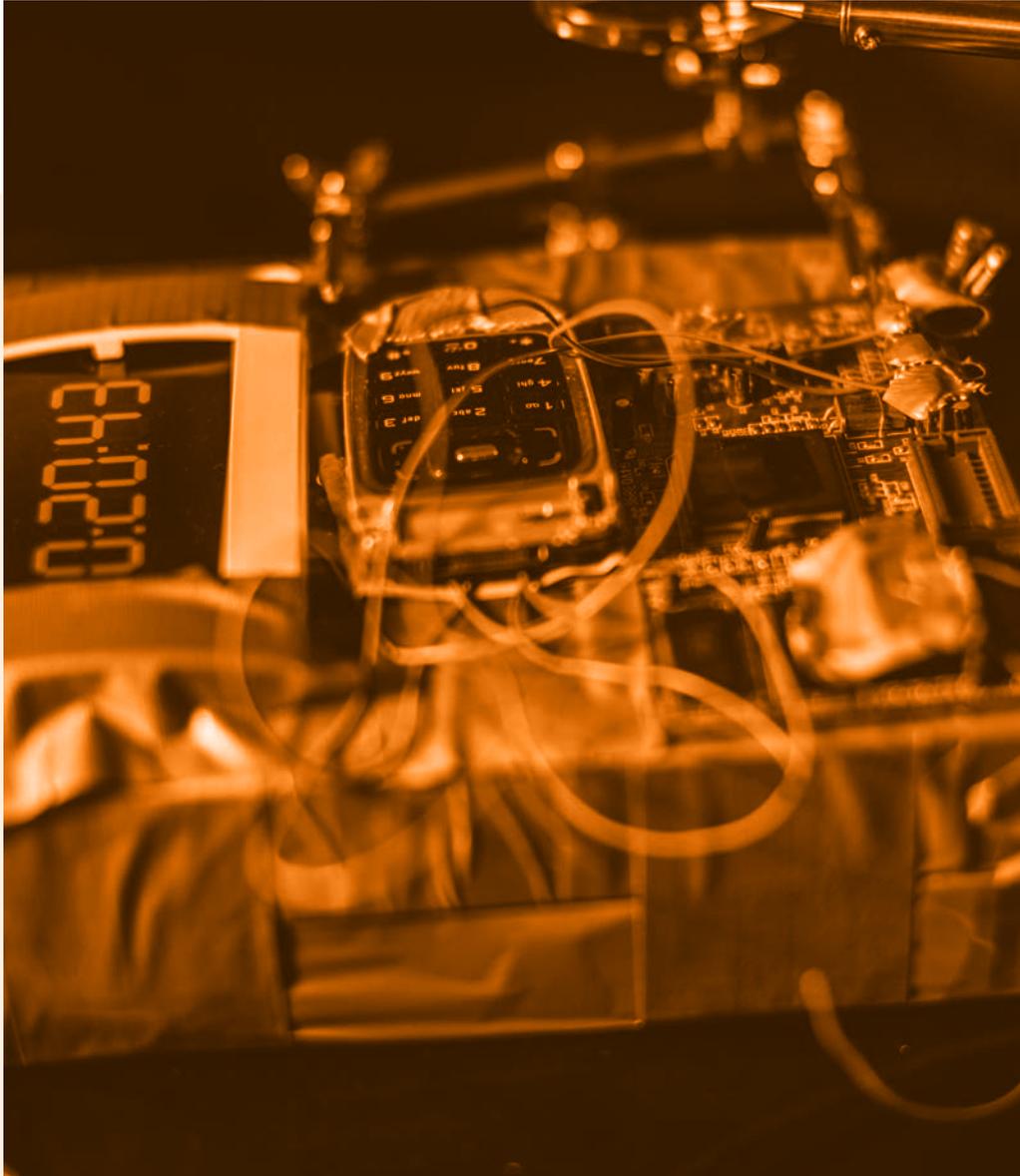
BY SHAKIL

The hitmen arrived at the house. A stinky smell coming from the living room took them there. As they looked around all the furniture and stared at the dirty carpet, they saw a taser on the ground. As one of them went to reach for it, they felt the warmth from the taser brush their hand. There was a soft buzzing sound in front of them. As they stepped over the taser, they saw the man they were looking for, lying dead on the ground. Someone had been here before them. They looked at each other as one of them said, "The taser is hot and the taser marks on his body look fresh. This was very recent." The sound of tyres screeching could be heard. As they bolted outside, they saw a man wearing a black suit and black glasses driving away. He had an aluminum briefcase on his lap. He had what they were looking for. They jumped into their car, as one of the hitmen thought about why they were looking for the briefcase.

A week earlier, there had been rumours of a machine that could print any type of currency, with every single detail being right. It was portable and every underworld worker wanted it. The problem was that only one of these products could ever be made. There was only enough material to make just one. The most powerful underworld worker was attempting to get it, but he was going to use it to purchase nuclear weapons to destroy the Earth. No one knew his name. No one knew what he looked like, but they had to kill him.

As they sped down the road, they caught up with the black suited person. One of the hitmen pulled out their gun and shot the back tyre. As the car spun out of control it hit a post. The light on the post shone onto the briefcase. They ran to the car and reached for the briefcase, as the black suited man attempted to fight back but he struggled as he was short of breath. They opened the briefcase but were surprised to see what was in it. It was not the cash maker. It was the computer that controlled the nuclear weapons. They had a minute to crack the password before the weapons were released on their town. The hitmen freaked out saying "WHAT COULD IT BE, WHAT COULD IT BE!!" It came to them. One of the hitmen tried the password 'money'. They slowly typed it. They clicked enter and heard the sound, "Nuclear weapons deactivated". The hitmen were the saviours of the Earth. The hitmen were the good guys for one day.

101E



Unused Gym Card

BY HEI MAN

They released the apartment after they took the body away. I stepped inside; everything was left right where it was since yesterday when I came to hang out with him. The huge round light above the round dining table dimly lit the whole room. The sink was filled with unwashed dishes. I told him to clean them. He told me he was going to do them later, but he never did.

He got it recently you know, he wanted to get fit. All those harsh words that were directed at him. He just couldn't take them anymore. The card was brand new, you could almost see your own reflection on the gloss of the card. He was smiling in the

picture, a tired smile that's what it was. I should've known it earlier. Now it's too late. The card was just lying on the table as if someone left it there and never touched it again. He was tired of those harsh words. He laid on the bathroom tiles, pills scattered around him and he never moved again. And now it's too late to do anything.

He was excited about it. He wanted a change, he told me that we were going to do it. I was happy for him of course, I never thought something so small could bring him so much happiness. We both saw the card as a symbol of a new beginning or a change at least. And now I can only see a wish unfulfilled.

I hope the next time I see this card again; it would be him at that gym just leaving with his duffle bag, putting the card away. He would look better than he was, at least happier. He would give a warm smile to the receptionist, a smile I hadn't seen for so long. The same exact smile he gave me when we first met before all this happened.





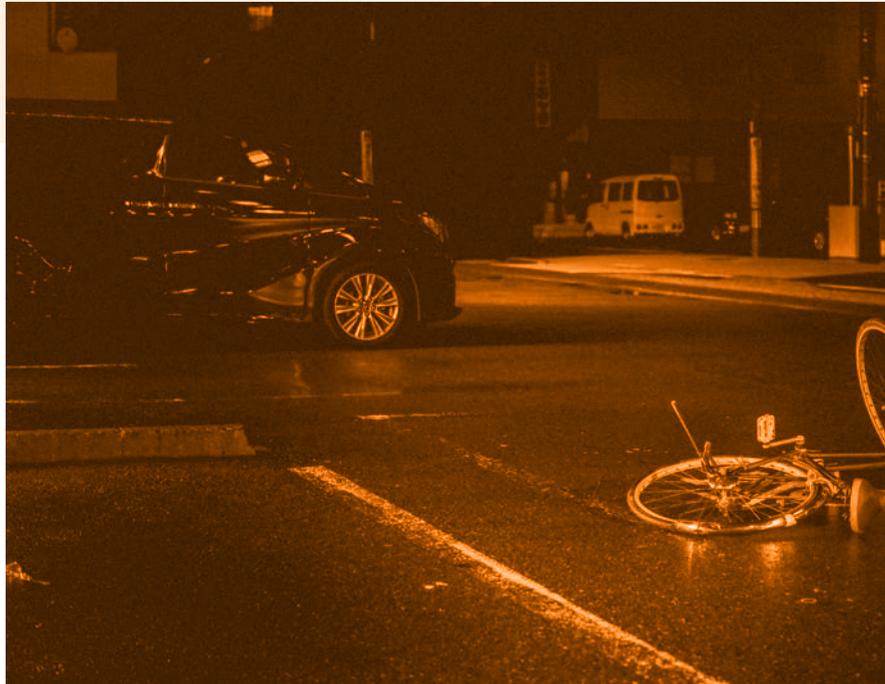
TOPF

The Whining Car

BY TARUN

The car whined as I reversed out of the driveway onto the soundless road. The roads felt like a never ending maze constantly throwing twists and turns at you. They kept on getting longer and longer as I began to doze off, half awake and half asleep. I barely had any control of the car as it swerved around the road disregarding any other cars driving by. A sudden thump caused me to slam the brakes bringing me back to reality. I opened the door hoping that this wasn't real. An eerie man was lying on the ground knocked out cold. He was dressed in a large black coat that draped over his feet. My legs felt weak and my arms were numb. I suddenly realised that this was happening, and it was real; he was lying

faced down on the ground. I turned him to his side trying to get a view of his face. His face seemed quite familiar. It took me a moment to process, but eventually I put the pieces together and released that it was my grandpa who I hadn't seen or talked to in ten years. I started to breathe heavily, struggling to get oxygen into my lungs. My instant thought was to call an ambulance. I dialled triple zero and tried explaining the situation, hardly piecing the words together. They instructed me to check his pulse, perform CPR if he wasn't responding at all. His pulse seemed low and he wasn't responding so I rested his back against the ground and started applying pressure to his chest. It didn't seem to be making a difference, but an ambulance arrived and started taking over the situation. I stepped back trying to grasp the reality of what had happened as the voices coming from the radio echoed in my head causing my head to ache. The paramedic came up to me, she seemed saddened and dull. She grabbed my hand and began talking, my mind suddenly cleared and felt relaxed until I heard the word "died".



FOR





Ben Peek

Ben Peek is the author of *The Godless*, *Leviathan's Blood*, *The Eternal Kingdom*, *Above/Below*, *Black Sheep*, *Twenty-Six Lies/One Truth*, and *Dead Americans and Other Stories*. He is the creator of *The Urban Sprawl Project*, a psychogeography 'zine, and *Nowhere Near Savannah*, an autobiographical comic. He holds a doctorate in literature.

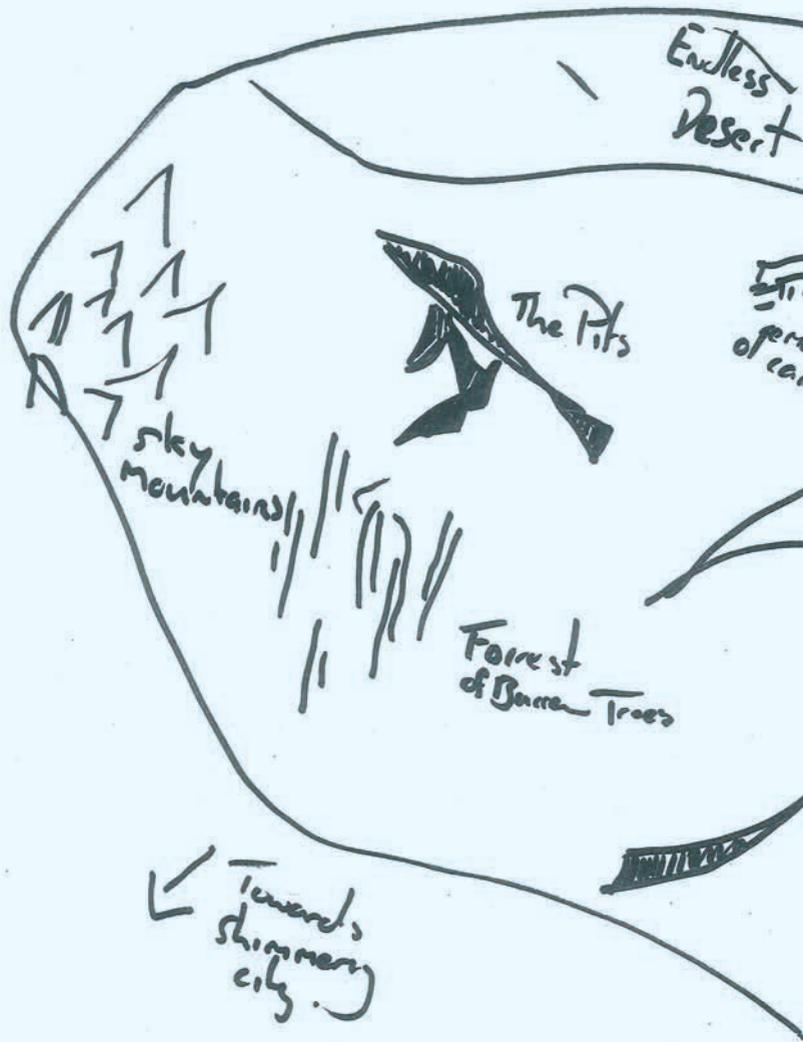
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Creative writing is one of the last, strange disciplines in the study of literature. It covers a range of forms, genres, and disciplines, and asks students to think of it both creatively and critically. It challenges students to think outside the constraints of essays and the ways of how they prepare their work. Programs like the one offered through WestWords offer a chance to explore creative work while also breaking from the usual standards of the class by allowing the intrusion of a different instructor. Disruption can, at times, be beneficial. After all, we live in disrupted times.

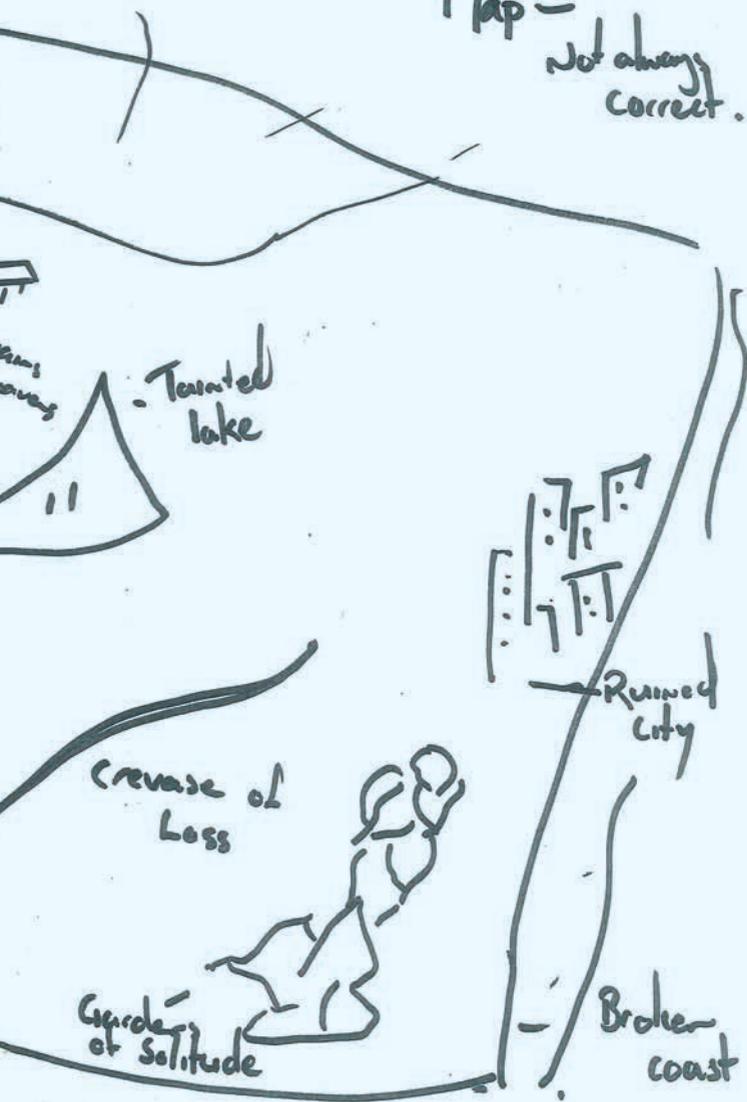
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The Map

Ben's students used this as a reference point for their writing.



Map -
Not always
correct.



2061, December

BY MATTHEW

“Claire! Sweetie, I need you to find this special plant, we need it for dinner,” shouts a woman, staring intently at a map. The map illustrates a line that traces a course from the Ruined City to the Sky Mountains. The line continues its journey, heading towards the Crevice of Loss.

“I get to go out?” a little voice replies.

“Yes, but be quick.”

“Yay!” the child squeals as she races out of the makeshift shack.

A dead silence lingers in the air haunting the precipice. The sinister red sky looms over the cliffside as it cuts into utter darkness. Stretching around the Earth’s scar is a vast, desolate, arid landscape; not a trace of life. Except for a little girl, strolling along the cliffside. She wanders alone, scanning everything that moves, searching.

“I hope Mama is okay,” the small girl whines to herself. “Whenever she sends me on search missions, she always changes when I come back. She is always looking at that map.”

The wind advances through the gorge, producing a baleful chime.

“You’re right, wind.” Claire smiles to herself. “I should check on Mama, she hasn’t been feeling well since we lost Pa. Of course, I wasn’t old enough to remember but I think we lost him in The Pits, during the flood of ‘52, Mama always freezes in fear when she sees the rain. She won’t ever tell me the full story.”

The shack is perched just beneath the clifftop, resting on an overhang. Three men armed to the teeth approach the building.

“Bounty hunters...” Claire’s mother whispers to herself, from atop the cliff. She grips a remote in her hand, with a button glaring red in regular intervals. She eyes the men as they tear down the shack’s door with

blaring chainsaws. She lowers her thumb on to the button but releases it suddenly, spying her daughter.

“Mama...” Claire cries as she runs to the ravished door. “Where are you?”

Claire sprints to the door, panicking, she throws herself into the shack, only to be caught by one of the bandits.

“Where is she?” Claire says. Claire’s mother observes from a distance.

“Shut up! We could ask you the same thing.” The lead bounty hunter wipes his hand across his lips, his wrist wet with saliva.

“Why would I tell you?”

“I’ve got a job to do, you weren’t on the list, so I’d prefer not to kill you.”

“Just do it, you can kill me now.” Claire conceals her eyes from the man, smelling his acrid breath as his face nears hers. “Do it. Shoot me, dammit. Like hell I care!”

“Wait!” a woman’s voice echoes from atop. The trio and Claire shift their attention to the hillside where the woman half runs and half slides down through the ash. “What you seek is in our basement, under the stairs.”

“Sweet.”

Gunshots echoed in Claire’s ears as she sees her bullet-ridden mother crumple down to the earth.

“What about the kid?” a smaller stocky man asks.

“Waste of ammo,” the head hunter responds, scowling at Claire as he enters the shack.

Claire collapses towards her mother, clasping her cold dead hand. She feels the remote and a dark spark lights in her heart. She gets onto her knees, closes her eyes, grasps her hands together, clasping the button of the remote.

“Please forgive me, mother, I hadn’t realized my presence would lead to this. Forgive me, Father in heaven, for I have sinned. I know I am unredeemable, but please forgive me.”

Claire’s home erupts into the flames, ravaging everything she cherished. She keeps her eyes closed and holds her mother’s lifeless hand.



CO FO

The December of 2063

BY SEHAJ

Not even one single soul could remember the world being as desolate and barren as it was today. The world that Eilis Lacey had known, used to be all lush, flourishing and green before it turned into a complete wasteland with only dead bounty-hunter corpses in the distance to be seen. Ever since Eilis could walk, there had always been a green mist surrounding the Tainted Lake. Many in the town speculated it to be a link to why the misery had come upon them. If they could somehow find the reason behind the mist they could get closer to revealing the mystery. Eilis decided to take part in the situation and joined a group of scientists, whose sole purpose was to investigate the toxic waters of the lake and the mist surrounding it. If only they were successful, they could be the first ones in history to have ever survived crossing the lake and also to have found the solution to the entire town's worry.

The team started out by boarding a ship to cross the Tainted Lake, even though they didn't have enough prior knowledge about the toxins and poisons of the lake. The men and women started to climb onto the ship, but just before they were about to get in, they all started sinking into the water. They tried their best to get ahold of themselves and hoist themselves up. Bubbles were emerging from the surface. It definitely caused the scientists to panic and revert to turmoil. Others were trying to decide

how they could de-escalate the situation. Eilis and the group of girls that had joined her, wracked their brains and eventually recognized the substance as a Type A destructive algae. After rummaging through their bags, they found a chemical that proved to be extremely helpful in its disposal. The algae cleared up in no time. In due course, they all settled down again and steered towards darker, deeper waters.

After getting through some time of smooth sailing over mostly stagnant waters, the scientists realized the journey was going to be longer than they had anticipated, due to an abundance of storms and weather disruptions. Eilis had chosen to be placed in the latter bunks of the ship, as a courtesy to the other passengers. She eventually became aware of the fact that her bunk was bizarrely close to the motor vessel engine, since every time the ship startled due to the winds outside, her whole bunk was agitated with the incessant feeling of the ship titling backwards. Her bunk roommate, Miranda, whom Eilis discovered had much more experience with travel on ships and similar voyages, informed Eilis that it would be a continuous ordeal. She had heard that it was going to be one of the worst recorded storms in history.

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The ship had already faced much toxic rain from the bipolar clouds since the coming of the storm and they reluctantly steered into a path that was obscured by much fog. It was their only viable option. As many were losing hope they were met with projectiles of boiling flames melting body of the ship. The team hit rock bottom. Till the end of time, not even one soul in the town heard about the group ever again.

100



2059

BY MUYANG

She must be forty years old.

That was my first thought when a stubby woman with unruly black curls trotted into my office. The woman was Gertrude Smith, a single mother who was recently released from twenty years of prison after smuggling five times more food rations than she was entitled to.

Rations were vital. Each ration ensured the survival of one person for a week. Stealing four extra rations meant she deprived someone's month of food.

Like typical civilians, Gertrude wore a mask to prevent excessive contact with the polluted air which tainted the sky with a murky yellow. Dark circles encircled her eyes and she had a massive overbite which added to her unattractiveness.

I stood up and smiled, giving her my most professional businessman handshake. She reached for it weakly with her right hand while rearranging her bun with her left. Her bun sat like a little nest at the crown of her head, looking as if it pulled her hairline about two inches back.

Letting out a sigh of either relief or exhaustion, Gertrude slumped into the plastic foldable chair letting arm fat ooze out of her mustard-coloured tank top. "I know I've been in jail but I had to keep my kid alive y'know." She handed me a crumpled resumé that looked as if it had been used more than it should've been.

Gertrude was applying for a 50k position as a lunch lady for the child facility perched on the south-east corner of The Ruined City. It was a small building with large windows and cranberry red doors. Sitting next to an abandoned casino, it hardly appeared to

provide people with basic shelter let alone pump out three meals a day or provide a shower for its 67 kids and 21 adults.

I glazed through the poorly structured sentences and black Calibri font that danced across the page. With a simple "you're hired," I could grant her a guaranteed annual salary, shelter and protection from perhaps burning to death, or a possible asthma attack.

Questions slipped through my head. "What are your thoughts on childcare?" and "how did you find this job?" She stopped pulling at her split ends and glanced up; "the weird billboard outside."

The other side of my head pondered about what I should have for lunch. A chicken sandwich sounded pretty good right now.

I looked up at her, then back at the resumé, not knowing what to ask her. It wasn't because I was bad at my job. It was because I was too good at it. Ten seconds after she walked in, I already decided she didn't cut it. She lacked etiquette, manners and education. I tried to pretend I was unsure whether I should hire her or not. But I sucked. I'm an interviewer, not an actor.

I skimmed passed a couple questions. "What do you know about our facility?" and "can you tell me something about yourself?" Her responses drowned into the background. They were probably mediocre anyway. My thoughts were elsewhere. A chicken sandwich with a ginger kombucha or a cold beer? Might go for the beer.

I straightened the papers of the manila folder I was holding and laced my fingers together on top of it, ready to finish up the interview with a single question: "What did you learn after getting out of prison?" The woman lifted her head so her eyes interlocked with mine, her cheeks wobbled like two lumps of bread dough. "You ungrateful son, give your mother a damn job."





C

October, 2063

BY NABARUN

Dear Isabella,

I have awoken from my slumber, I have the gem.

I am writing this letter to inform you that I might not make it back home. It is cold and dark, and things are getting worse by the minute. The wind is fierce, and my body is pulsating and throbbing everywhere. I still have one more thing to do. Although I climbed the seven peaks and obtained the gem, I must now place it deep underground. I shall complete that task after I finish this letter, for you.

This whole journey was taxing on my body and mind, every minute of my venture was filled with snow leopards thrice my size, patrolled by hunters thirsty for my blood; I got trapped in ice for long periods of time, faced treacherous winds and strong snow storms, and had to outsmart large armies of stone soldiers who were hidden in the ice, guarding the jewel.

Even with the magic and power I possess, I put myself into a situation that was far too dangerous for myself to go alone. I endangered my own life knowing I could've potentially left you with nothing and no-one. I did this before the arrival of our own child, a

potentially selfish action on my part. I hope you know I did this for us, our child yet to come into this troubled world, and for everyone who means most to us. I saw this comatose-like death state in a vision during my climb through the seven peaks. I felt as though my death could've been in this current moment.

My health has not been the greatest. The conditions here have been awful. My vision is blurry, it is frustratingly cold, the air is thin but smoke chokes my lungs. I can see blue flames in the distance, but I am unsure of what that signals.

I hope that soon I'll be home, although I am not certain on how or when I would make it.

I'm sorry for leaving you with little notice. I promised you I would be back soon, but it has been well over a month and I haven't arrived. I just hope you know that I did this for us, our family, and everyone that means most to us.

Collecting this gem allows the world to be restored back to where it was before this apocalypse; to restore balance and peace in the world. I'm out here to make everything normal again. We cannot live like this anymore, so it is my duty to bury this gem deep underground. If I don't make it back, I am sorry. I just hope you know that I wouldn't give you up for the world, in fact, I'd give my life for you.

So here we are, possibly saying our last goodbyes. I'll just take this time to thank you for everything and spread you all my love. If I don't survive this last duty, goodbye.



FOR



June 2057

BY MUKUND

The casino was basically deserted except for me, a couple of other guys, and a heap of roulette machines. Here I was wasting thousands of dollars by the minute hoping to win big.

I couldn't believe I was still here in the casino, mesmerized by the flashing lights and the atmosphere, I was sitting at a table by myself rolling dice unable to get up, unable to break away from this addiction.

I was practically living in this casino and in the past five years the highest prize money I ever won was \$5,000. When reflecting over my mistakes, I realized how stupid I was and how I still am.

My family left me, and I didn't care. My closest friends left me, and I couldn't care less.

"I am looking to turn over a new leaf and start over. The only thing to do that is to accept my mistakes." This is what I said to try and prevent whoever was leftover of my fellow citizens from leaving this city.

I practically stole money from the public by cutting funds to essential things that this city needed. I betrayed the people of this city when they needed me most.

My life has been a burden to everyone, and I would even go as far as to say that it was a mistake.

I'll admit it. I was crazy for money and I still am, but this didn't justify stealing money from the public. I mean,

I literally chased a supposed new king out of this city, and hid the gem that he claimed made him king.

This city doesn't even have a king, we are a democratic country. I mean the gem must be pretty important and valuable. From what I've heard, some other guy is searching for it. He's probably not even close to finding the gem, it will take him at least six years.

I owned and still own every building and company in this city but am now willing to let go of it all to make up for my mistakes.

"It's time." I got up from my seat and walked out of the casino. I had to take action now before it got too late.

From the information I gathered over this time, I found out that everyone who had left this city has been staying in a nearby village. I could understand why.

My father always told me, "Everything big always and only starts with a small step." These words rang through my head as I trudged through this lonely city.

I was able to remember each time I bought a building or company. The amount of people who lost their jobs. Now looking at them, they are just so dull. All these buildings were dark, with no life whatsoever.

My parents gave up on me when I purchased the apartments around the corner from here. My wife left me when I cut funding to elderly care and stopped the pension program.

Over time people started leaving as the cost of living grew larger and larger. Now all that's left is you, me and the very few people who could still afford to live here.

I am Sergio Dimitri and I formally accept any charges you give me for my past wrongdoings.



With Player Payback
You Play Longer...
The more you play the
longer you play!

Play longer with
Player Payback!

White
Castle

The Black Desert, July 2061

BY KENETH

In the endless desert, you would tend to see a place where people were dying from hunger, and poor people, the only who live in these kind of conditions. You would expect regular sandstorms, high sand dunes ruling the desert scenery. Orange sand reflecting the scorching sunlight; 50 degrees hot; camels and cactus as sharp as knives. But this is not the case on planet Corudeen.

Corudeen is a planet in the Orion Galaxy which has an endless desert stretching across the planet. However, the desert is not like the ones we have on Earth. The desert is filled with a green, endless forest that buries its roots three metre deep into the black sand. On this planet, many animals roam across the endless desert, some are like those on planet Earth. One unique animal is the Wookiee. It has short legs but a long torso and large arms with brown and golden coloured fur covering all over their body. They have leathery soles to protect themselves from splinters, sharp claws and a strong sense of smell to smell its prey. Surprisingly, there are also apes which are the same as on Earth, like gorillas and orangutans. As you go deeper into the forest, there is a volcanic mountain which stands about 5,000 metres high overlooking the majestic forest. As you walk inside, there is a lift with strict security regulations to make sure the city is safe. The lift takes you up to the peak of the volcano mountain. As you stand 5,000m high you can see the spectacular view of the forest desert, especially the sunrise and sunset. Unlike Earth, the planet has two moons.

As you walk down into the volcano, there is a bustling city which operates 25/7. The city contains buildings as high as 1,000 metres, higher than the highest building on planet Earth. There are also hawkers food stalls inside which are always busy even during the midnights. It also has a very comprehensive

transportation system which can transport people into their homes and apartments. There are buses and taxis but the most interesting one is the train. The trains are capable of moving people into apartments. All you must do is to key in your address and the train will take you to your apartment or house, in front of your door. Underneath the city is lava which is used as the energy source to power homes and buildings, and it's renewable, better for the environment. Why don't we have this on Earth?

However, Baxter wants change. He is the guy who wants to ruin this place and make sure that all the wealth will be destroyed. He wants revenge on the emperor himself, who was the ruler of the empire, King John, and so happens to be his brother. When they were kids, they used to play around, would always trust each other to do things and most importantly, have fun. Until one day, when Baxter attempted to kill his brother, but failed, and was sent to prison. Baxter always hated his brother partly because he was the king, and partly because his parents cared for John more than Baxter and he was smarter than Baxter in every way. But Baxter managed to escape from gaol and hid in the deep forest. Over the next fifteen years, he planned the assassination of the king, recruiting over 300 men.

The day has come for the assassination of King John. He reckons that he will succeed and will finally get his revenge of his brother. What he isn't aware of is the fact that the king hired a spy to check on his brother every now and then. The king knows that this day has come. On this day when Baxter's army is supposed to surprise attack the place, the king's army starts shooting before they can even pull the trigger. It is violent and blood splattered, the floor is painted like roses. Using the chaos as a distraction, Baxter runs down into the energy source, down where the lava runs from the back, knowing that he needs to succeed in order to get his revenge. He takes out bombs from his pocket and plants them near the pipes which is enough to explode the whole city. He is exhausted from running across the 5km long concrete and is sweating like a pig. As soon he is finished, the king comes and before the king can even began speaking to him, he says "You loser, you've failed this time." He steals a jet and flies away and instantly, the city explodes like fireworks which looks beautiful from the air.

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2060

December

BY EDWIN

Garde wakes up in the Endless Desert, during the afternoon under the blazing sun. He had had this dream that he was abducted by weird people with masks and they knocked him out. On second thought, that may not have been a dream, it might've happened many years ago.

He tries to remember more of his past, but he only remembers the year 2058 when the powerful alien leader killed himself because he was bored with ruling the apocalyptic city. He also remembers that he was a friend with a bounty hunter earlier this year. This all makes no sense to him as he might've been knocked out for years. It makes him wonder if he is in a simulation.

He stands up and gazes at his surroundings, taking the Endless Desert in. There is nothing but sand for as far as he can see.

Garde takes another look at the barren landscape. He sees a human-like figure stumbling towards him. Running towards it, Garde shouts and attempts to grab its attention. The closer he gets, the less human this figure looks. Many teeth are knocked down, and there is blood all over him. A zombie.

He turns around to run the other way, but more zombies rise from the ground,

less than a metre away from him. One of them pulls out a gun. Garde's reflexes are fast, he kicks the zombie with the gun in the jaws, knocking him over. Blood now all over him. Garde grabs the gun and the magazine with the ammo. He shoots all the zombies in the head. To his disbelief, all the 'dead' zombies turn into sand.

He leaves the fight with only a few scratches and cuts. He now also has a gun with little ammo and a half-sandwich, although he does not plan to eat it. At least not soon.

Garde then chooses a random direction and starts walking that way. He walks and walks, not knowing when to stop or if he would ever stop in this Endless Desert. That's when he sees some sort of building. Garde doesn't get his hopes too high as this might be a mirage.

Garde is about to pass out, when he looks behind and sees the sun setting. So, the building is not a mirage. He gets so excited that he walks a little faster. Even though he is tired, nothing is going to stop him.

As he gets closer, he realises that the base or fort is abandoned. There is a large sign saying no trespassing is allowed, but that doesn't stop him. He has travelled so far. There is already a hole in the fence, he crawls through and sneaks through into this mysterious base.

He gets to a door and opens it cautiously. A blinding blue light greets him, and he forgets he has Alzheimer's and remembers everything. He now knows that this is the new reality and not a simulation. That's when he hears a whirring sound and the androids around him begins to start up. 2061 has begun.





TOG

K

BY ARNAV

It has been forty years since K had seen his family. 2019 was the year he last saw his family. K woke up to the same musty smell of his abandoned apartment. The room had a thick layer of smog resting on the ceiling. K put himself through his morning routine for the, god knows how many number of times. Probably K's most favourite part of the day, sitting down on his dusty arm-chair reading a book. From his small apartment room in the High Casino he sat in his chair overlooking the city. The casino was made two years ago by Muchund. He was a rich man buying whatever he desired.

Today it was 'Tales of Slugga'. K had to admit, it wasn't the best book, but he couldn't complain especially because, in 2059, there are no authors publishing any new books. It was at this point, where K was struggling to keep his weary eyes open, something hit him, not physically but mentally. K was experiencing some sought of - vision.

K felt as though he was being sucked in. Instead a Jesus-like voice filled his head. He was trying to say something... A book. A book containing all these secrets of his world. K tried reaching out for the book when everything came back to reality. He was sitting in his musty armchair and was still holding

the horrible book he was reading. K paced up and down his room, wondering if what he saw was real. "Only way to find out," K said as he left his Casino apartment with high hopes.

Hours went by, scavenging the barren streets of the city in hope for a book. K walked aimlessly around the city looking for something out of the ordinary. The only thing that he could see were giant flashing billboards, like the ones in Times Square, but less populated. The flickering signs weren't helping K's case as they kept distracting him from his task. It was at this point when K packed up and headed back into the casino. As he walked through the ruined slot machines, K stumbled across a wall. K analysed it. It didn't look like a normal wall. K pushed on random parts of the wall hoping for some kind of contraption to spring into life.

Surprise, surprise, there was a sliding door. K slipped in hoping he didn't trigger an alarm of some sort. To K's surprise there was some facilities inside. It looked as though it was an abandoned library.

"Great, how am I meant to find a book in here?" he said out of frustration.

K searched every shelf. Every nook and cranny. K had reached the last shelf only to be surprised by seeing only one book on the shelf. K quickly slid down the aisle and quickly blew the dust of the book. Running his finger down the spine of the book sent tingles down his spine.

"At last," K whispered to himself.





C
R



Michelle Hamadache

Michelle Hamadache teaches Creative Writing and English Literature at Macquarie University. She has had essays and short fiction published in Australian and International journals and she is fiction editor of *Mascara Literary Review*.

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“*I would like to thank the students who made my week at Cherrybrook Technology High School such a delight. Despite being the first week of December—exams over, holidays close, and the days brimming over with summer heat—the students, without exception, were perspicacious, friendly and, although at times lively, always courteous, often hilarious. Each student showed such generosity of spirit—agreeing to take part in the sometimes crazy writing exercises on offer, but most particularly, by allowing me, a complete stranger, the privilege of reading their writing—this is no easy thing to do. The stories written over the week each demonstrate the unique and vibrant minds, personalities and imaginations of this class of young adults. There is such opportunity in an initiative such as the WestWords Masterclass. It is so important to nurture our ability to express hopes, fears, dreams and experiences through the telling of stories because it is so often the stories we tell that help us to connect with others and that help us to make sense of ourselves and the world we live in now, and the changes we’d like to make happen.*

This collection brings together themes and genres as diverse as Faustian contracts in big business, to disparate characters brought together by their names, Red, Blue and Purple. Clocks become a metaphor for containment and the ties that bind, while dramatic events, such as car accidents and murders, remind us that stories are written to entertain and surprise. What a wealth of potential and talent lies in the pages that follow!”

Regret

BY RISHI

“Tick-tock, tick-tock.” The sound of a grandfather clock making its steady ascent to the 12 o’clock echoed throughout the room. An antique looking study coloured in glossy caramel browns and posh wine reds.

The sole occupant of the study, however, did not carry that same air of elegance. He squirmed in his armchair, fidgeting furiously as he made fervent glances towards the clock. Slowly, beads of sweat began to trickle down his pale skin, past his blue eyes and towards his quivering mouth. He was wearing dark clothes, deep browns and blacks, almost as if he were trying to blend in with the room around him.

Finally, as if getting tired of the clock’s constant mention of the passage of time, he reached over to his desk and turned on the radio. The sound of orchestral music cut through the still air, somewhat lightening the otherwise dull mood set by the room’s décor. With it, the man relaxed a little, slowing down and taking a few deep breathes.

He began to recall how he had gotten to this point.

Vince Wandertrout had been a big, upcoming entrepreneur turned politician. A few years ago, everyone in Penning city had known his name. Pictures of him meticulously groomed and in fresh clean suits had been commonplace on walls and billboards, asking for votes in the upcoming senator elections. To say that the man in the study now was the same as the man back then would seem ridiculous. If not for the identical mop of salt and pepper coloured hair that lay atop his scalp. Back then, he was a strong man with an ever-present smile, always creating a bright atmosphere in whatever situation he was in. He had a model family, a beautiful wife, two lovely kids... and then it went wrong.

Contrary to the public image, outside the limelight, Vince was a hard, stone-faced man. Not even his family knew what went on in that head of his. In fact, in some ways Vince didn’t even know himself.

It had been a cold windy night when it finally all came crashing down. Vince’s large thirty-room mansion was pitch black save for a solitary light on the second floor. Apart from the rustling of leaves and the occasional sound of a nocturnal bird not a single unnatural sound was heard.

Vince sat alone in his study, midnight was drawing near, but he was too preoccupied to notice. His face was buried in his hands as below him a notice for closure lay flat upon his desk. Nearby, the scraps of half a dozen others just like it lay in a heap by the trash bin. Vince’s company was hemorrhaging money. His elitist wife and spoilt children were not happy, pressuring the “stone-faced idiot” to get

over his woes and fix their income. His popularity rating in the upcoming elections had begun to decline due to new competition. All Vince could do was to utter lie after lie in order to keep up his image. The banks threatened to begin to confiscate all his earthly possessions if he didn’t do something, but there was nothing he could do.

Vince’s businesses had begun to grow obsolete and all of his investments began to fail one after the other. Safety net after safety net had begun to tear and now, Vince was hurtling towards rock bottom.

Vince slowly raised his head out of his palms. Apart from the notice, some pens, a desk lamp and a book, his desk was empty. The book was a curious anomaly however, dark grey with blood red lines cutting through it like veins. The centre of the cover was dominated by a single symbol... a pentagram.

Earlier today Vince had been sent a mysterious package in the mail. In brown wrapping paper, with no ‘return to’ address, the parcel had been suspicious from the beginning. However, when he first opened, Vince had almost found the contents amusing. “A book?” he thought. “And with such a stupid cover too.” Vince had dismissed the parcel without a second thought, he was desperate but not desperate enough to immerse himself in ‘hocus-pocus’.

But now... Vince slowly reached over and grabbed the book. He flipped through page after page of nonsensical symbols and strange diagrams depicting monsters and ghouls until he came to a page near the middle of the book. The page was yellowing with dark stains blotting the edges, giving the sense that this particular page had been flipped to numerous times. Vince gently traced the contents of the page with his fingers. There was a diagram of a blood red circle with unearthly runes and symbols within.

Suddenly, the magic circle began to glow bright and then pulse black, casting flickering lights onto Vince’s face. Then it began to grow larger and larger, out of the book and onto the desk. Vince tried to pull back, causing him to fall over in his chair. As he slowly got up, light began to emit out of the circle casting a beam of light onto the ceiling.

Then there was the chanting, ineligious, incorrigible, unnatural. Vince began to panic, his heart thumping so hard that it felt like it would explode. A large clawed hand rose out of the circle as if out of nothing. Another hand soon followed suit, and then Vince found himself staring at the hideous visage of an unspeakably grotesque being. The skin on its skull sagged down. Where its eyes should have been, empty holes lay. It lacked a nose and ears, another hole where the former lay and massive horns protruding where the latter would have been. It might have been the light, but the being seemed to be a burnt orange colour with glossy skin.

“What do you desire...” the demon asked in a nasally voice, sounding like nails grating.

“Who... who...” Vince stammered unable to sound out the

words he wanted.

“Does not matter,” the demon snarled back. “You summoned me... you wished something, did you not?”

“I... I just want my life back. I don't want to lie... I want my family to love me...” and for the first time in so many years, Vince Wandertrout began to cry.

“A life for a life,” the being whispered. “I can solve your problems... but I shall come for you once five years have passed.”

Vince slowly nodded, drained from the pain and the pressure. And his life was forever changed.

Vince's life turned around soon after. He won the senator elections, companies that had previously turned him down returned to him and he finally regained the trust and love of his family. He had regained his life, but the man sitting in his chair years later was not the same.

As time passed, Vince began to dread the future, he shrivelled up inside. He couldn't sleep at night, becoming more reclusive. He got paler and paler. His previous stone-cold demeanour gave way to one driven by fear and paranoia.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock.” The sound of the clock entering the final stretch to midnight brought Vince's mind back to the present. His life had turned around he realised, every facet of it had. He had money, but lost charisma. He had family, but lost his individuality.

“DONG-DONGC.”

The clock struck 12.

The small man sitting in his big armchair closed his eyes. From behind him, he felt icy cold hands reach around his heart. And in those final few moments... all he felt was -

Regret.



THE O

In the Arms of the Sky

BY ALYCE

Hope looks up at the sky and smiles. She loves the sky. Its beauty blinds her and always leaves her on the verge of breathlessness. Its reaching arms stretched open and wide, making her feel welcome and at home. Her arms lift of their own accord and mimic that of the sky, and only when they begin to burn, is she reminded of her humanness, that she is down here while the sky is up there. When she gazes up at the sky, she forgets herself in its unending openness, and the splashes of different colours that bless its angelic reaches.

A childish stare brings her back and she turns to see a group of kids giggling and whispering things. "Weirdo, freak, deadbeat." The all too familiar hatred swells within her and she directs her curse towards this small isolated town and the close-minded people that dwell within. Her long blonde hair shifts heavily on her slight shoulders as she turns from the darkening sky and walks back towards the house, her smile shatters from her bruised face.

Her blue eyes framed by long dark lashes lock on to the darkest shadow in the room. As a harsh tremor rips through her body, her mind searches for the sky. As the shadow slinks towards her and traps her with in its inhuman glare, she focuses on

the heartbreaking softness of a bird's wing and the freedom of soaring through the unlimited openness of sky. The shadow steps into the weak cone of light protruding from the broken lamp, and the features found on her own face are mirrored in the man's. The stench of alcohol from his breath shoves its way up her nose until she is silently choking on it. He raises his fisted hand and flexes his fingers, dull eyes drained from a life filled with loss and pain drill into her own and she flinches involuntarily at the thought of what is to come. As fists hit deeply scarred and broken skin, and bones once whole, break like the girl's broken heart, a heavy burdened mind throws itself into a blue cloudy numbness and the soft embrace of the sky's touch.

She wakes on a cold floor decorated in the swirling reds of her own blood. Her ears strain to hear for a man's broken movements but the only thing she hears is the sound of cicadas drunk on a summer night's heat. An inexplicable pull towards something above drags her to her shaky feet. Whimpers from her broken soul escape the tightly scrunched lips of her busted mouth, as she follows the path that the moon has carved out for her. Tree roots grab at her feet as she stumbles past the place where she was just hours ago. The pull from above tugs even harder and her movements become desperate, the pain radiating from her broken body dull, in comparison to the need to answer the call.

She stops at the edge of a cliff and looks down at the rocky rapids below. No fear can be found in her. The girl smiles as her eyes close and she steps off the Earth and into the deep blue arms of the sky.

104



Ficks Me

BY JOSHUA

He says time heals
Or am I?
Who am I?
Tock tick
Past the point of no return
My minute hand reads thirty-three
I am broken
Time has passed
He always lies
I'm still here
I am broken
The time is 12:47

My hour hand's on three

They always come in broken
What purpose would it serve
After all
If clocks couldn't tell the time?
For some
It's their minute hand that stops
In others
Innermost gears don't churn
They're ruined from the inside out

Haule finds a way
He always does
To fix those little clocks
Tinker tinker
And it is done
Once tock tick
Becomes tick tock
His work is complete

In his reflection
stares back perfection
He is Haule

His utter perfection pulled me in
It destroyed me
Piece by piece
Looked right in the mirror
Saw what I was
I was broken
I'm in love

And I pleasure in the pain

What is wrong with me?

I needed Ficks'ing

I am Ficks

We sit at dinner
Family surrounds us
I've never felt more alone

Fetch me the salt
I stare at my plate
Why can't I move?
A second too long
I took
I take a glance
It's not Haule who stares back
But hatred
Disgust
For me

He yanks my arm
We're in our bedroom
I glimpse
Belt held high

I've done it
I've crossed the line
Why am I like this?

What's wrong with you?
Whip

You disgust me
Whip
I hate you
Whip
You're worthless
Whip

But I love you
Always remember
Kiss

Pain more than a whip
His brand
Of love
A bit in my mouth
Total control
A toy at his feet

I'm useless
Hopeless
A fool to resist
I'm his possession

Time never starts
Time never ends
Stuck in a loop
There's no escape for me

He loves me?
He hates me.
It's pain I see

Is this me?

I am broken
Past the point of no return
My hour hand's on three
My minute hand reads thirty-three
The time is 12:47
He says time heals
Time has passed
I'm still here
Or am I?
He always lies
Who am I?

I am broken
Tock tick

I am wrecked
He is Haule
Ficks me
Save me
Please



One Good Lie

BY SEAN

They say truth is the first casualty of war, but who defines the truth? The duty of every government is to protect their people, and sometimes that means preserving the lie of good and evil. A belief that war is something other than natural selection played out on a grand scale; and at the top of the food chain is the United States, and it has finally decided to act, conquering Eastern countries, decimating half the world; gone - innocents and convicted criminals, soldiers and children. But history is written by the victor, and the United States creates its own truth in the history books.

“Japan reconsiders peace treaty,” the paper read. “The US has become an over-glorified hero in the recent century, a sort of 25th century Superman for the people.” Imani was set on doing anything that involved serving his country, and being a soldier would allow him to do that, and give him the most praise. He kept replaying different scenarios of how he could become a hero, never taking into account what was really happening around him. All the houses had a glossy finish, marble pillars; a utopia. One house however retained its rustic 21st century look; a fragment of the past with an owner too stubborn to change.

Imani prepared to throw the paper onto the lawn of this house. “Oi! What you ya got for me?”, yelled an ancient looking man from the porch.

“The paper sir. Japan has reconsidered our peace treaty.”

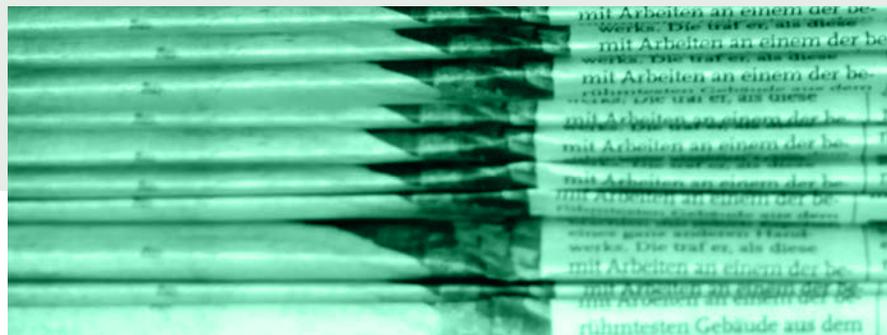
“Your paper is biased. Come here!” he instructed. Imani trudged up to the man, handing him the paper. Using the paper as a baton, the man proceeded to beat Imani as if he were a drunk and abusive husband. “You’re delusional! You live a lie! What are you going to be when you grow up?”

“I’ll be a soldier,” he squealed, curled in a ball on the ground. The beating stopped. The man felt pity for the boy.

“You know I was a General. During a time that you call the World War 3,” said the man as he fell into his chair. “It wasn’t really a war though; one side didn’t know they were fighting. I’m sure you think that the US is the good side, that’s what the textbook says, that’s what everyone says. But who told them, who wrote that textbook, the government. They control everything, your education, your life, and even the truth. Because all you need to change the world is one good lie, and a mountain of bodies.”

Imani completed handing in his papers, still puzzled by the insane geezer. The history he had learnt about World War 3 was too perfect, too glamorous to be a war that occurred on a grand scale. He considered the man’s ideas. The pieces he proposed logically fitted into a ruthless ploy to remove any military competition the US faced. Imani changed from his usual walk to a run, he needed to find answers. He barged through his door, and opened up his browser, checked his theory and thankfully he was wrong. But this browser was controlled by the government. Realising his mistake he checked an older browser that was owned by a private company. That’s where he found what the old geezer was rambling about.

They say truth is the first casualty of war, but who defines the truth? Governments preserve the lie of good and evil, but without the presence of truth in a society, there lies a false utopia.



113

BY LARA

A certain stillness hung over this part of New York, something Effie couldn't quite place lingered in the air and deep in her gut. This was where the cigar smoke hung thicker in the air and passers-by hid questionable intentions. This was somewhere those with rationality avoided, but of course, also never needed to visit. It wasn't her fault her old line of work was no longer an option, it wasn't her fault it burnt down either, but somebody had to take the blame. It wasn't even her cigarette. Alas, it all led to 113 Dockson St. an address printed on silvery-white paper, left on the doorstep of a disgruntled acquaintance.

Number 113 stood out from its dilapidated surroundings. It was a quaint bar of sorts. Effie noted the chocolate brown awnings, and delicate ivy trailing along the side of the dusty windowpanes. She never thought twice about the bars on said windows, putting it down to architectural design. She breathed in the thick smoke and straightened her weathered overcoat, praying this bar was a career opportunity, something that could lead to a little cash. The door opened to a decadent display of New York nightlife, a grand piano elevated in the corner close to a bar lined with exotic glass bottles promising the drinker moments they'd never remember and nights they'd inevitably regret. Black leather lounges were scattered around the room, the stains reasonably the consequence of unsavoury activities and poor discretion.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by a finely dressed man, his clothing that of her most opulent clients, a stoic look painted on his features. "You the bird who set the old brothel alight?" he asked looking her up and down, his perception of her hidden behind a damned serious expression, like a well-crafted mask.

Effie didn't know whether she ought to be mad, shocked or embarrassed. "No formalities I see," she huffed. "It wasn't me sir, honest, someone had to put a name to the tragedy," she lamented. "I suppose I drew the short straw." She swore his features eased, only for a moment, a flash of empathy possibly. He sighed, straightening his tie, beckoning her to a room outback.

"Follow me Elizabeth."

A grimace spread across her face at the mention of her name, something only her late mother uttered. Feeling more jittery as she walked, she initially decided against it, but the flash of a handgun under his overcoat coerced her into compliance.

It was a drastic contrast to the room from before, a backroom that was caked in dust and filled with masses of threaded boxes, a single desk occupying the room, with two seats, one vacant and the other filled by a petite figure. The closer

she approached she made out a tall woman, her platinum locks cascading down her shoulders and back, her delicate facial features pulled into a state of elegant detachment. Everything about this woman was graceful, from her sequined dress to her lacquered nails. "Sit." A manicured finger pointing to the seat before her, Effie's hesitance was cut short as the man pushed her into the chair.

The woman looked up, eyeing her pensively. "Rather pretty for a brothel whore," a cutting remark for an attractive woman Effie felt. Her eloquent foreign accent made those unsavoury words melt like the purest honey. "Obviously a Brit," Effie concluded. "So, you're the fool who set the Bordello aflame," she mused, "I must say it's rather impressive, a little thing like you."

Narrowed indigo eyes bore into Effie's very being, her words sticking in her throat "N-No, I'm afraid you're mistaken Miss." The woman's eyes narrowed. "I-well, no-one truly knows, I suspect it was a client's cigar, but I-" Effie's rambling was cut off by the woman's snicker.

"No matter, someone must pay for the act that was done, and that is you Miss." Effie's eyes wandered, looking for an exit, the bars on those damn windows now making sense. "Eyes up dear. This is doable, even if you are as naïve as you are... useful." She considered. "Allow me to elucidate."

She stood up and began to pace, pulling a gun from the desk drawer, only to absent-mindedly toy with it. "Your... client's negligence cost me measures of the priciest opium in all this dejected city," she spat. Effie's heart dropped, feeling sick as she felt the reality of it all engulf her. "Forcing your death would be idiotic, as tempting as it is, those of your service do possess profitable traits, it's not like you have engagements now? Unless you've found new places to sell yourself... hmm?" Effie slowly shook her head, reminiscing to the past week in which found herself thieving to settle hunger and begging for sanctuary from acquaintances she never particularly liked.

"So, you'll perform for this establishment, really all you must do is sit still and look pretty." She checked the bullet chamber of the slick metal weapon in her hand. "It aids if you can carry a tune, but most of those sycophants are too intoxicated to hardly care," she scoffed.

"You'll have food and a bed and pay, if you co-operate of course," she giggled. The room's heat was no longer bothersome but suffocating, her mind whirring with escape plans and excuses. When the gun was suddenly planted on her forehead those ideas flurried away, the surrealness of the situation came crashing down.

"So, do we have a deal?" she asked, her hand wavering in front of her. The gun lingered, aimed right between her eyes. "It's not like you have a choice," the man spoke, still as sullen as to when she first walked into this godforsaken bar. Effie hesitantly shook the woman's hand, the firmness of her grip jarring her.

"It's a deal."



A Killer Wife

BY ARIKHTA

The blood-red ink pierced through the fresh sheet of parchment, the scent permeating into the air as five chimes from the clocktower echoed throughout the dark room. You could see the cogs turning frantically in his brain, the very image of a mad man transforming before your eyes, deprived of any sanity. His hand was moving at a rapid pace on the parchment now, describing the female killer in a vicious manner, “smile sweeter than honey but with a brain barbarically warped.” He could visualise his invention in his head. A fictional masterpiece that was sure to win a huge literature award. The murderous female serial killer procured into his mind so perfectly, perhaps serving as a reminder of how often he thought and wrote about her. Ice cold blue eyes, waist pinched attractively, and blonde hair set straight across her shoulders. Her pale, porcelain poker face strategically slathered in makeup, cheeks flush with rouge and lips rose pink to give her the false ability of being able to convey human emotion.

The author’s movements paused at the sudden sound of a door creaking. The features of his psychological nightmare female killer faded from his mind. On auto-pilot he rose stroking one of several knives he kept tucked away in the wooden drawer next to his writing desk. He pondered the possibilities of the noise and came to a realisation. He crept to the side of the room ready to face whoever had invaded his house, smile curling up his face at the thought of fresh blood being spilt, but only that of the guilty burglar of course.

The bright lights of the clocktower outside reflected into the small room, the sounds of the bell chiming seven times signalling the arrival of night. A sweet lilting voice interrupted his fantasy. The familiar voice was calling out his name, the audio of the footsteps wavering as they clapped loudly against the wooden floor as she wandered from room to room on a chase to find her husband. The voice was getting closer and closer. The writer sighed in a mixture of disappointment and fear. His hands visibly shook with the sudden surge of adrenaline as he stowed the knife back into the drawer. The stringy male glanced into the mirror automatically adjusting every part of himself from top to bottom in a methodical manner. Black hair neatly parted, not a single strand out of place, shoelaces tied up evenly. He rounded the corner in a fast pace directly bumping into his wife, who was holding up a plate with a stack of biscuits and a cup of milky tea.

She looked up at him, words spewing out of her pouted mouth in a quick fashion. “Off to make dinner. It’s going to take a while because it’s special. You’ve been working so hard on your novel. I’ve just whipped up a quick cup of tea in the meanwhile just so you don’t get too hungry!”

He smiled nervously, eyes boring into the cup of tea forcing himself to embrace her with a mumbled thank you.

His wife stepped back, blonde hair framing her face and deep brown eyes twinkling in a small chuckle. She spoke again already walking away with a bounce in her step. “That’s alright, don’t you worry about it. I’ll call you when it’s finished.”

He stood there, smile fixated on his face making sure his wife had disappeared before briskly striding towards the writing desk, crossing out blue eyes in the manuscript and replacing it with brown. Slithering into the bathroom, he watched as the contents of the tea got flushed into the toilet. He knew what she was trying to do but he would survive no matter what. He would make sure of that. She couldn’t kill him with her tricks, not now not ever. She couldn’t. The writer had made sure of that, tracking every lethal move she made, forcing himself to see her for what she truly was. A monster set in a pretty costume of skin and flesh.

The clock struck eight ever so softly in comparison to the previous hour this time, hands moving rapidly, almost as a warning.

Hunched over his desk, ink fading as the writer bided his time, he read his manuscripts of his wife trying to memorise every hidden detail of her lethal methods. She had poured bleach into husband number one’s eyes finishing him off with a surgical knife. Next she seduced a man with her devious grin, naughty smirks and then when least expected she twirled around, purple dress shining in the light, she had thrown the knife deep into the innocent boy’s heart. All of these leaving a trail of blood and an air of tense psychological unease.

He heard the chimes of the clocktower reverberate nine times now, blanketing the night with peculiar purpose for him. What soon followed was the call of his killer wife.

He stared at the back of her dress, watching her as she hummed, gently swaying around the kitchen. Flashbacks flew into his head, writing transfusing with his wife. He could see the plate of food on the table nearby, steam curling and escaping out of it. The novelist stopped, looking over through blurry eyes as he saw her spin around, drops of acidic green liquid melting into the cups of water she had placed down. Poison. Poison. That’s how the serial killer got the innocent grooms.

Time was ticking, the writer reminded himself. Tonight would have to be the night, he couldn’t put himself in peril anymore. He had to act in self- defence. He walked over and trembled with phantom fear before the faint ringing of the clocktower began and he plunged his knife into the nightmare of his dreams, watching the shock and horror register on the blood-thirsty murderer’s face. He watched her tumble, the bottle of acid smashing upon her hitting the floor, glass shattering everywhere. If he hadn’t been out of his mind, if he hadn’t spent too long dwelling in the trapped nature of his mind he might have noticed that the green liquid was simply just lime cordial. But alas, the cursed writer stood still, grim smile painted on his face, slathered in the innocent one’s blood watching his reflection appear in the glass. Seeing the true form of a monster be revealed as the clock struck ten.

1011



Insta- Worthy

BY PROSHAT

Ever since Vienna saw it on Kylie Jenner, she'd become infatuated. This insatiable need to be liked and to be considered. This goddess was beautiful, rich and lucky. But was she? Maybe the skirt would help Vienna become those things. It was everything she ever wanted. The Burberry outline, luscious ruffles, and material so thick, it would be indestructible. She knew she could never have it though. It was too expensive, but she just wanted to look like that girl. Beautiful.

She scrolled and scrolled. Perfect body, somehow skinny yet curvy. Living in a massive mansion covered in marble and golden statues. Skin with no imperfections, clear to a crisp. Scrolling and scrolling, hours on end. Once you start, you cannot stop. You're stuck in this endless cycle, hypnotised by this falsified materialistic world filled with rich, gorgeous and perfect people. They owned everything, and were everything, Vienna wanted to have but couldn't have. But that was no issue because you could simply "buy these sugar gummy bears and you will have luscious, long and healthy hair just like mine!" or "drink this tea and you'll easily lose all of that extra weight and get that perfect body just like me!"

She stared across at this reflection of a girl, a girl who looked nothing like the girls in the pictures. Her hands glided across the skin on her face, feeling all the disgusting blemishes and bumps. She felt like a gross and ugly monster. She dug her hands into her stomach, grabbing at the fat under her skin. There was absolutely nothing she liked about who she was seeing. She didn't want to be that girl in the mirror. Why did she have to be just Vienna? Instead of words or expressions, tears began to fall down her cheeks. Vienna began to sink in the mind-numbing reality of her life, a dreadful place where she felt lonely, sad and insecure.

Her closet was absolutely overflowing, to the point where the drawers wouldn't close, yet to her she felt as if she needed more. The feeling of unfulfillment was prominent on a daily basis. Yes, she had those shoes, but Kylie wore the other more expensive Balenciagas. She wanted the other more expensive Balenciagas. Why is it that she had so many clothes, yet none of them were what she liked, and by that she meant it didn't look like Kylie's outfits, or anyone else on her feed for that matter?

She just wanted to own that Burberry skirt, thinking that it would transform her into the perfect girl she saw and aspired to be. If she wore the same clothes as Kylie, maybe she could finally be happy. Maybe she wouldn't be so disappointed with this disgusting person she had to live with all the time. She just wanted to be as happy as those girls behind the photos. How come they had such a big smile and sparkling shimmer in their eyes? They had such perfect lives, and all Vienna wanted was to have it just like them. But all she could feel was sadness and emptiness. She didn't want to live with herself.

It could be likened to an addiction, some would say even more damaging than heroin, potentially more mind numbing. Once you start scrolling, you get zombified into this state of dissatisfaction. You don't want to live in your own body because you know there's one better than yours out there. You've seen the pictures, you've seen the flawlessness of other girls, hating yourself more and more with every scroll, with every "influencer" photo. What these girls don't know is that these so called "perfect" and "real" photos aren't anything but real. The amount of surgery and the hours of Photoshop and editing make these "humans" anything but human, and into something closer to a cartoon character. If only Vienna could look in the mirror, and look past the fiction of "beauty" she had set up for herself, she could finally see the authentic, gorgeous girl she really was, and maybe she could then find the happiness in her life and the glimmer in her eyes which she longed to have. Maybe one day we'd all appreciate that we are blatantly surrounded by the true beauty of our world, and that could start by realising we're all our own individuals and we can tell our own beautiful story.





Safe Haven

BY NATALIE

“Do you think he will ever wake up? Three months have passed already,” asked a dark coated man with a black lion tattoo engraved onto his wrist.

“The stab to his abdomen caused a deep wound. It caused serious injury to his intestines. It is unlikely that he will be able to wake up given that he has been unconscious for three months.”

The guy smiled, and said “Thank you doctor, please make sure he never opens his mouth again.”

The doctor returned the smile as he walked over to fix the IV drip, his wrist slightly showing the black lion tattoo.

*

Jaden’s thoughts ran slowly as if it was a closed tap, he had no control over his body. He felt like he was on a long vacation. It felt so surreal, it was almost too good to be true. Slowly he realized he was being chained to his dreams.

“I must to wake up.” But he just couldn’t.

The memories of the night still haunted him. Flashbacks of the same scene repeated in his mind.

Stealing the confidential video from the base, Jaden attempted to escape the fully guarded area. The crashing of rocks to the ground attracting unwanted attention. Loud footsteps bashing across the ground, gradually echoed louder in Jaden’s ear. Machine guns stared into Jaden’s eyes. Keeping him as a hostage, they prisoned Jaden until time dissolved itself.

For a while, he felt like he was in paradise as there was no fear of getting captured. However, this safe haven faded further and further away, he tried to run towards it but he

could no longer reach it...

A sudden pain pierced his abdomen. He screamed as the paradise faded away and he fell down into the deep hole, destroying the barrier of consciousness like a rock crashing into water. His eyes gradually opened but a bright light blind his eyes. Jaden opened his eyes again before he realized he was lying on the hospital bed. When he attempted to move, hot pain burned his abdomen.

Jaden’s vision of merged light cleared up, revealing square frames. Ambulance sirens screamed like distressed babies, piercing through the room, overpowering the beeping sounds of the heart monitor. The second hand moving over the numbers and sounds created by ventilating machines remained after ambulance sirens left. The overwhelming smell of roses along with the perfume scented air flooded Jaden’s nose.

The doctor was delighted by the news of him waking up, claiming it is a miracle after his three months unconsciousness. Checking the vitals on the machines surrounding Jaden, the oxygen tube had a pair of hands pressuring the connection between Jaden and the machine. The pair of hands, exposed a black lion face printed on the wrist. Jaden’s eyes stretched open as memories of the tattoo on the terrorist rushed into his head like ocean waves.

The doctor bent down to Jaden’s level, whispering into Jaden’s ear as warm air is blown into his ear, “Only those who are dead cannot expose secrets.”

Pain exploded in Jaden’s stomach whilst a red circle began to soak onto the white bandage patch that was covering his wound. The joints on his hands clenched together revealing bones sticking out his hands. Jaden’s vision was covered by purple spots that blended together turning his vision black.

The safe haven called him in, as his heart line went flat. This time it didn’t leave, rather it requested if he want to stay.

This time I will stay.





COFFEE

Confession

BY BAILEY

“Your failure to confess to your husband’s murder is a sickness Carrie, but that’s ok.”

“The Blackwater mental institution is your home now. You will confess to your sins.”

“You will be cured.”

With that, the mysterious loudspeaker voice ceased, leaving Carrie to the draining white emptiness of her cell. Her wrists and ankles constricted under the pressure of her restraints as she struggled in a fit of confused rage to free herself. Carrie knew she was innocent. The recurring evocation of entering the living room to the sight of her husband’s bloody, lifeless corpse reaffirmed her guiltlessness. Carrie may have had no memory after that point of the events which brought her here, but soon that wouldn’t matter.

From that day on, the institution tried to “cure” her. They would leave the cell door open. A torturous means to imply you could walk right of here... if you weren’t perpetually fastened to a bed. But the real masterstroke of their “treatment” was a clock, attached to the roof directly above Carrie. The silence of the institution’s halls was deafening. Nothing but the sound of the timepiece, every tick withering away at her sanity. Before long, sleep became impossible as the ticking had drilled its way into her subconscious. Carrie now felt she like was inside the clock, a part of it. Her mind now a living metronome. Every now and again the loudspeaker would ask Carrie; “Are you ready to confess?” Carrie always responded “no,” praying for them to believe her, but to no avail.

It had barely been a month and with her mind on the verge of collapse, Carrie concluded that she was her only hope. She needed to escape.

After several days of tedious thinking and planning, Carrie decided to starve herself. Appear weak so the guards would see no reason in tightening the restraints as hard after daily bathroom breaks. Every day she would look at her plate of food and cry over it, tears staining the bread as she mustered the strength to flush it down the toilet. Two weeks later she was nothing but skin and bones, but it was worth it. Mustering all remaining strength, she pulled her limbs from their restraints one by one. Carrie never thought the open-door torture would work in her favour, until now.

Her mind was going a million miles an hour. The prospect of freedom was like a shot of adrenaline as she hurtled through the labyrinth of grey halls. Fully aware that the institution would soon be breathing down her neck, hope became desperation. Carrie was quickly lost in the monotony of Blackwater, doors and hallways all the same.

When she ended back at her cell, it broke her. Carrie collapsed to her knees and cried out at the top of her lungs. “I CONFESS!” Her innocence no longer mattered. She heard the clomping of boots echoing behind her then everything went black.

She woke up again in a different room. Arms and legs strapped to a wooden chair as a peculiar headband restrained any head movement. A light switched on revealing a woman behind a large pane of glass, Carrie’s eyes immediately drawn to the deep cut on the woman’s left cheek. She grew increasingly apprehensive as the woman sat behind a large control panel.

“I’m Athena Walker, head of the Blackwater mental institution and yes, to confirm your fears, this is an electric chair. I think you know what happens next.”

Carrie recognised her voice from the loudspeaker and began muttering “no please...”

“You almost escaped today Carrie and God knows you’ll do it again.”

Athena whispered under her breath, “I can’t risk having any loose ends.”

Carrie screamed. Athena flicked the switch. It was like a live wire had attached itself to each of her nerves as the electricity flowed through Carrie, convulsing uncontrollably. Her skin started to burn.

Athena chuckled. “What a shocking way to die.”

*

6 weeks earlier

I crept in through an unlocked bathroom window. What fools leave such an accessible entrance open? They almost deserve what will happen to them. Everyone has their own little addiction. For some it’s the caffeine hit of coffee while others need alcohol to function. For me, I had killing. My thirst for blood was unquenchable. The higher the body count the better I feel. It was then I saw him, a man sitting in front of the TV. I weighed the knife in my hand. It was my favourite, no heavier than a kitchen blade but it ran so smoothly across their necks even with the slightest of pressure. The perfect tool for the task at hand. I snuck up behind the couch and before he could notice my presence, in one swift movement I put one hand around his neck and slit his throat with the other.

I stepped back to appreciate my work. The man clutched at his throat, a waterfall of blood spewing from his neck as he fell to his demise. I already knew how this would play out, the bleary stumbling downstairs in the morning, the weary cry of “Darling? Are you down here?” And then the panic, the frantic stumbling, feeling at his chest, his throat, hoping that this horror would vanish, that it would not be true. And then the call to the police, but what would they find but a crazed woman, covered in blood, grasping a knife from the kitchen. Sorry I mean “murder weapon”. I almost felt pity for the woman sleeping. Almost.

Looking into a nearby mirror, I made a small cut in my cheek with the blade, a memento of a job well done.



FO

Fedora

BY ARYANA

I chucked my La Corona cigar onto the concrete ground behind me as I let out my last murky breath. I walked up the marble steps and stepped onto the travertine tile floor inside the jewellery store. I tilted my fedora a few inches and nodded once to every geezer. The interior of the place was nothing like I'd ever seen. This was going to be a tough one to conquer.

I was the youngest person in the store. The geezers all nodded back and went about their browse. The place had a posh feel, like you had to be gentle with every step you made and everything you touched. Below the roof dangled a candelabra. The roof itself had an embossed floral patterning that provoked an almost sullen mood. The jewellery was displayed in glass display cases that aligned with the edges of the store. There was a revolting sandalwood smell, bittersweet, though I seemed to be the only one disturbed by it.

I watched my feet take steps across the glossy tiles; my dusty canvas sneakers next to the shined pointed-toe leather shoes of passing rich men. I slowly nodded my head as I nibbled on my bottom lip and squinted my eyes, trying to look like a shopper. I glanced at the gold and silver pieces that glistened brightly as they caught the light from the candelabra.

I clutched my hands behind my back and once I made a full lap around the store, I stood for a moment, processing every bit of information and detail. The cashier was speaking to a costumer and merely paid attention to everyone else. Ahead were several men crowded around the "Christmas specials". To my right, a posh elderly couple ambled along, her arm in his. The two guards stood like statues on the outside of the shop and had no view to the inside. Other than that, there were no real protections for the jewellery. If I cautiously made my every move, things would run smoothly.

"Hi sir, mind letting me see those two bracelets over there?" I pointed to the most expensive pieces of jewellery in the store, the ones my older brother had told me about. They read "\$1,013" and "\$1,118". My older brother had created fake replicas of them after coming to the store weeks before, perfecting every detail of their design, including the colour, weight, texture, and pattern.

"These are from our finest Pink Freshwater Pearls collection. You must have exquisite taste young man. Who's the lucky girl?"

"It's for my mum sir." I bluffed my way into capturing the man's heart. The first one had pink freshwater pearls on a rose-gold plated silver base, which was studded with "sparkly cubic zirconia" the cashier had said. He then handed me the next bracelet.

"This looks especially smart with tailored suits, afternoon frocks, twin sweater sets and cigarette pants. The bracelet is affixed with our standard Sterling Silver clasp, and a selection of premium clasps are also available. The pearl bracelet is strung and double-knotted with silk thread. A classy one this is."

It was time to pull off my moves. I had the replicas that my brother had made tucked into a pocket I had cut in the sleeves of my coat.

"Ahhh, ahhh, choo!" I sneezed. The man stared at me blankly.

"May I have a tissue please?" I asked the man. This was my only chance at getting him away from me.

"Absolutely, just give me a second." The man went off behind his counter and began searching through the cupboards behind his desk. I quickly slipped out my fake replicas from my sleeves and tucked the real ones back in. Job done. The man came back with a box of tissues and I grabbed a tissue to blow my "runny nose".

"Thank you, sir." I placed the tissue in the pocket of my coat after "blowing my nose" and continued trying on the bracelets. I let a minute or two go by before I replied "Thank you sir, but this is not my type." Now I simply had to continue browsing but somehow sneak the bracelets into my fedora. I had cut a vertical slit on the inside of the hat to be prepared for such circumstances. I took off my hat, as I "fixed my hair". I continued walking the whole time, looking at pieces of jewellery. With two of my fingers, I pulled out the bracelets from my sleeves and snuck them into the slit in my fedora. I popped it back on my head, said goodbye to the shopkeeper and walked outside. I presented myself to the two guards, gesturing them to search me. They searched my pockets and my coat, my sleeves and my pants, and lastly, they asked me to take off my hat.

I took off my hat and held it upside down in a way so that the bracelets couldn't fall out. The two men stepped forward, peeked inside and stepped back into their original, frozen position as they told me to have a nice day. I knew our father would be proud.

104



Home

BY CHLOE

I remember when my parents told my younger brother and I that we were moving to another country.

It was a hot and humid weekend, just like any other day in Penang. The air conditioner blew on my face, cooling me down. Through the small gap of the glass windows, the faint sounds of all types of cars rushed past, travelling past the speed limit. Modern skyscrapers towered across the vast city, hiding the grey sky, hinting at the storm that was about to hit the city. I was sitting at my small desk in the study room, completing my never-ending pile of homework.

Faint footsteps pattered down the hallway and stopped in front of the closed study door. The door slowly creaked open, revealing a dark-haired boy slightly covering a pair of large brown eyes. I looked up and turned towards him.

"Jasmine, would you like to play with me?" my six-year-old brother shyly asked.

"I have homework to finish, why don't you ask Grandpa to play with you?" I offered.

"Please? Just for one hour?" he begged, his eyes wide with his cute tiny hands placed together.

I stared at my puppy-like brother and reluctantly agreed. He cheered and rushed into the considerably small room, grabbed my hand and ran out, dragging me towards Grandpa in the living room. He was sitting on the huge rocking chair with his glasses on, reading the daily newspapers, long legs crossed at the knees. My brother let go of my hand and climbed on top of him like a monkey climbing a huge tree. Grandpa looked up, scowling then smiled brightly when he saw my brother.

"Aiden!" Grandpa exclaimed, wrapping his long arms around him.

"Grandpa play with us!" my brother demanded.

"What do you want to play?"

"Uh... Hide-and-seek!"

Grandpa immediately covered his eyes and counted.

"1...2...3..."

Aiden and I scampered to find a hiding spot, simultaneously squealing in surprise that Grandpa started the game without warning. I quickly hid in the closet and covered my mouth. After a few moments, Grandpa's heavy footsteps came closer to the closet. He covered my mouth to prevent any sound escaping my mouth. The game continued with many shrieks from both my brother and I until we collapsed on the couch, unable to lift a single finger.

At that moment, my parents walked into the living room with an unreadable look in their eyes. The air drained of any warmth, replaced by a forbidding cloud. My dad's glasses and my mom's long hair making the atmosphere tense. I sat up immediately, my brother mirroring my actions, exhaustion escaping in an instant. I scan their faces for any signs of anger or sadness. There was none. I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion, an indiscernible feeling in my stomach. "Are they going to scold us for making a racket around the house while playing?" I thought. They sat down on either side of us. My dad took a deep breath broke the silence.

"We are moving to Australia in a few weeks' time."

I was only nine-years-old. Any child would have been excited to go to Australia. They would had been jumping up and down in joy, imagining the blue sky, white beaches, deep blue ocean. A child's dream paradise. But I just sat there. As still as a statue.

Time seemed to stop as my brain struggled to process that one simple sentence. Yet, that sentence means everything and nothing. I wouldn't be able to see my friends and cousins. I wouldn't be able to eat my Grandma's delicious food every day. And most of all, I wouldn't be able to see my grandparents every day. There would be no hide-and-seek with Grandpa. Grandma wouldn't be there comforting me when I feel sad.

Without realising, tears escaped my eyes. The tears turned from a trickle to a waterfall. My chest felt tight. My mother looked at me, her eyes wide with shock.

"Are you okay?" she asked, panic lacing her voice.

I knew right there and then, that I was not okay. I didn't know what would happen in the future. But in my heart, I knew that Malaysia would always be my home.





PH

Hey There Delilah

BY SHANI

Delilah wandered through the hustle and bustle of New York City, admiring the lights and billboards that hung above her. She drowned herself in the cacophonous nightlife, oblivious to the disapproving stares that her stomach attracted. From the elderly woman across the street whose eyes drifted towards her abdomen to the middle-aged father who looked her figure up and down, Delilah refused to notice. Shame was inevitable, she understood that, although she didn't appreciate the constant reminders of her mistakes. Back at home, her parents each worked full-time jobs and never truly paid attention to her life. Delilah's existence now revolved around her pregnancy, where she clung hopelessly to the feeling that her luck would change – that maybe fate would somehow intervene and save her.

Opening the door to the Hard Rock Café, Delilah braced herself for the turning heads and double takes from customers. As per usual, she made her way to the back kitchen, keeping her head down. For a teenage girl with a fairly short stature, accompanied with a baby face, a conspicuous bump was not the best look. But Delilah knew that working here was her only way of providing for the baby. She sacrificed her ego, enduring the insults and belittlements, in exchange for the money.

The restaurant was enormous and crowded with customers. Around the main TV Delilah noticed a handful of workers trying to fix the audio. In the corner of her eye, she saw a glimpse of a mute teenager with a charming smile on the screen, holding his guitar and adjusting his microphone. Little did she know that this boy was the father of her unborn child, relying on his trusty guitar, smooth vibrato and good looks, trying to make as much money as he possibly could for the girl he loved.

As she briskly brushed past the workers, Delilah sensed their increasing agitation as they plugged in cables here and there, firmly hitting the machine and swearing at the inanimate object. With one final thump, the voiceless person on screen received their sound. As Delilah reached the back kitchen, she heard a low muffled voice coming from the TV. Ignoring the voice, she pulled on her apron, closing her eyes and breathing carefully. Not realising that this 18 year-old boy had put all his money and energy into busking around the country for her, she thought nothing of the voice and walked back into the restaurant. The boy began to play his guitar, executing familiar chords and heartfelt lyrics. It was at this moment that Delilah finally looked up and saw him properly, recognising him instantly.

“Hey there Delilah what's it like in New York City...”

As he performed, the eyes of the boy remained directly on the camera, his lips in a perpetual smile. Delilah listened to his angelic vocals and felt a smile form against her lips, her eyes locked on the screen. She watched in awe as he strummed his guitar and sang her song.

The safe haven called him in, as his heart line went flat. This time it didn't leave, rather it requested if he want to stay.

This time I will stay.





OFF



Running

BY JONATHAN

Running on the rooftops of Mexico wasn't how I wanted to start the morning. The EO who have been on my behind since I turned to the magical age of 12, the age I had developed the disease, were after me. This disease was in my scrawny, acne ridden, white body, that most definitely couldn't leap off rooftops on the edge of Mexico. If they captured me, no amount of super strength could stop the extraction process. With the disease, Einstein's disease, it would enable them to mass produce technology to have all the nations of the world at their mercy. "You go around and I'll flank him." I heard them say. With them inching closer, almost to arms reach, I thought, "I'll give them a run for their money. Or disease." I gave all the power to my legs, running as fast as I could.

I saw the coastline using my ENH-vision and steered for the cruiser ship horning to leave until my feet grabbed the bottom of my overalls and I tumbled straight through a window. "Damn," I thought as the footsteps approached. Bolting for the door but they were quick to cover my escape route. Several men from the EO encircled me while one pulled out a gun. I paused. He disabled the safety as I whipped his legs down with a foot sweep and grabbed his gun to put two bullets in both his feet, being careful not to kill anyone. The remaining thugs charged at me and I did the same, out into the streets, sprinting for the ship. "Get him!" they screamed as the sound of gunshots flew past my ear and not into my body because of the stormtrooper aim they displayed. I pushed through the guards holding the entrance and shut myself in a storage room as the cruiser started to move. "Finally. Silence," I said with a big sigh.

Ring! Ring! I grabbed my flip phone to see my uncle Ash calling. When my family had all passed away protecting me, the article Ash took me in and raised me till now. "What happened Brock?" he asked.

"Another attack. I'm on a cruiser and I have no idea where it's going," I answered.

"So, what are you gonna do?" asking again.

"I don't know. But I can't go back anymore," I replied.

"I see. Well, be safe Brock," Ash murmured.

"Hey uncle... never mind. See you around."

For the whole of my short life, my family had felt somewhat distanced from me, maybe they already knew I would develop this annoyance of a disease, or maybe it was my fashion choices of always wearing overalls even though I knew I couldn't become a real life Mario. Even as they shielded me from the EO, I'd never really felt that warm, tranquil feeling of being with my loved ones. Or at least I thought it wasn't one sided.

A week had passed on the cruiser and it had come to a stop. Stumbling out of the ship, I knew that I was in New York with its looming skyscrapers and bustling roads. With all this great scenery, there was no time to stop and have coffee as I saw more men from the EO, meaning that they must have had hideouts all over the globe. I sprinted for dear life through the streets of New York, trying to lose the few men that were on my tail. Rushing into the Empire State Building, carelessly pushing aside countless strangers I ran up the stairs, all the way to the very top. "In the name of Ash Enfield, I order you to stop now and give in," one of the men's voices echoed through the building.

My mind went blank as I heard those words resonate into my brain. It couldn't be. My one and only relative that I had left, was someone that had been fighting against my real family which saved me countless times. My uncle was the perpetrator.

I reached the top and busted my way into the roof where stormy, menacing clouds met the blue sky, covering the bright yellow sun. Footsteps approach from my back as I turned around to see my uncle Ash standing with sympathetic eyes. "That's enough Brock. You've endured enough, just let us take you in and extract the disease," he uttered.

"You think that after killing your own family and faking to be a good uncle, I can just hand you the disease like that. I don't think so. Not when you want to do evil actions," I answered with tears welling up in my eyes.

"Come on Brock. Enough of this cat and mouse chase. It's time to stop this. Don't make me use force," Ash threatened.

"Now that I know everything, I will never give you this body let alone the disease," I shouted as jumped off the roof and onto another.

I jumped from building to building to get further and further way thinking, "I will never let my uncle, Ash Enfield take this disease of mine, not for all my living years."



THE CITY

My Dad's Best Gift

BY DANIELLE

There it was! At last.

It was a tradition. One that's been in my family for centuries but now it was gone. It was gone, and it was all my fault. Old but elegant, engraved with the initials D.v.S, and it was mine. At least it was. When I was five, I had a hard life, my dad had just passed away leaving me with no mother nor father. For five years straight, it was just the two of us. Memories swished around in my head, however, most of them came in and out the other ear. I knew they would never stick, but I was hopeful. At least I had to be.

It was the best gift ever given. Also, my last. He was always there in the tough times, and the not so tough times. I knew I could count on him. He was a person I thought would be in my life until I was at least sixty. Broken, paralysed, old or fragile, whatever he was I would still wanted him there. When I was younger it was hard. That's what my dad used to say. No family, not even grandparents, as he couldn't bear the thought of even staying with them. Halfway across the world and for my dad it still wasn't far enough. I wanted to get to know them. And I really tried, but the barriers were constantly pushing me away. This year I tried again, but this time it was too late.

Moving from foster home to foster home, pushed around in whichever way was best for them. I tried to push the five years spent with my dad to the back of my mind, but it wouldn't work. Every day I would be reminded of the day it happened, the day my life turned around. Now it was too much to even recall.

Back to the place where the scarring began. They had it. The beautiful and elegant gift my dad had engraved just for me. A wooden, lacquered chair, which, would rock twenty-four seven. Slightly worn out with faulty screws in some places. A splinter danger zone that no-one wanted to sit on.

They were my first fake parents. I never wanted to be there, but back then I didn't have a choice. It was my dad's last gift to me and I wasn't giving it up. I'm eighteen. I'm old enough to get what's mine, but they just wouldn't budge. No matter how hard

I tried they wouldn't give it up. They knew it was mine but they didn't care. Torture built up inside me, with regret of even coming in the first place. At first it was shiny, but now, slightly faded over the years. In my heart, I knew that it was still that fifth birthday, homemade gift my dad made me. A similar one, made by his dad had been given to him, and the family tradition started long before that. At five, you would get a beautiful gift with your initials hand engraved on the left arm. Bright and beautiful for everyone to see.

Day after day I came back. They just wouldn't budge. Why would they want it? It wasn't a gift from their dad, it was a gift from mine. These monsters were my foster parents. Why would they do that to me! I wondered every day.

Enough!

This can't be dragged out any longer. Finally, the police came. It was no real emergency. No triple zero phone call, no death nor murder or anything like that. But they still came, because it's their duty and they are dedicated to serve and do what's right, exactly like my dad.

Three knocks on the door wasn't enough. They were aggressive, and yet again the same sound repeated as I watched from behind the tree. Guilt built up inside me but, I shouldn't have felt sorry for myself, not after how they treated me. I wished anger and rage, was the only feeling going around, but it wasn't. No matter how hard I tried to hide my feelings, I just couldn't contain it. It was done in the way no-one wanted it to be. The way my father would have done it. He used to tell me to, "never give up for what belongs to you, because it's special in your eyes. It may not be special to others, but to you, you know it is!"

At last they were gone! Literally gone!

My worries were gone.

For a day or two. Then out of the blue they appeared again.

Thinking that they were off my mind, had been a mistake. Rocking hard on the wooden floor created by the wind's lovely breeze on a misty night, almost feeling like my dad was sitting, watching and rocking me to sleep.

It was mine again! The rusty and elegant chair that began to sound extra real, like the knocking from a steel door. Again, a thought in my mind.

"Should I worry? Should I worry now?"

1011



Prison Without Walls

BY WENDY

It was so cold it stung, his skin instinctively quivered at the feeling of the glass shards piercing his skin. Each new sore stung, as the heavily chlorinated water seeped into the once protected surface which now lay open and raw. Pouring into the crevices of his body its landscape made it hard to keep a constant flow. His fingers ran over the new dents in his skin, as he imagined the clip point knife puncturing the surface and the scarlet blood oozing over the blade. The water felt almost refreshing, rendering Keres unable to see a few metres in front of him. Each touch leached away his heat, taunting the possibility of hypothermia. It was when his limbs had forsaken his body, leaving behind the corpse of an unrecognizable man soaking in a pool of water was he then wheeled out of the room. Four metres to the left and nine doors down before reaching the door. Click. Push. Dumped onto the floor, anticipating the next day.

Keres woke days later, centimetres from the once artsy sheet of hand-printed irises, now grim with years of grubby finger marks and coffee spills. The once seamless overlap was now noticeable as the old paste began to fail, festering with blisters, creating a distorted and grotesque pattern. The room stood silent, they had stripped it of anything that may stimulate him. His life was a ripped canvas that people found amusing to mend and later to be torn apart again. He slid into the covers of the wooden, four-poster bed that almost resembled a baby's cradle before analysing the same wall in this obsolete, forsaken room.

"Why does he do this to me?" Keres whispered to himself as he pulled back the covers to reveal

the gruesome markings.

Scars from years of carved out skin were rough, some deeper than others. The dents around his collar bone were starting to heal again. His father stood by the door watching as they continuously shovelled out balls of skin. He was never a man to waste his breath. A respectable man. The man that left him in this room like it was somehow the solution, nurturing Keres to fulfil the position as the son he could never expect him to be, was merely a trial for the firstborn.

Insanity was his curse, it was the thing he feared above all else. The strange thoughts that once sunk him into new realities with graceful ease, never leaving a trace that they had taken hold, still come and go like they did before. Each is a florid daydream, not viewed as a movie but lived in the first person. Insanity stole into his mind like a deranged thief, seeding a new personality, muddling up the rest, and altering fundamental beliefs. These ideas started to make sense in one revolutionary eureka moment after another, cascading out of control and luring him further from the self he once knew. What once required medications no longer does. Others can still fall, still become lost in the mental maze, but Keres had found connections in this distorted reality, a prison without walls.

The sky set into a blanket of generous velvet that called the body and brain to rest in the symphony of stars, awakening the shadows of the night. Keres laid in his bed, his chin nuzzled into his chest in an effort to escape the vile winds that cascaded through the bedroom window. It was that morning a year ago that the sweet scent of jasmine lingered in the air so that when Keres crossed the threshold it was like a shot of adrenaline right to the heart. The wind whistled as it blew in its own rhythm, crashing down around him. Even the fall leaves had ceased their scudding along the stone path. His brother stepped out from behind the oak trees, modelling an embossed floral pattern blouse and simple grey jeans, ironed of course. In every daydream, he was back in that garden, allowing his mind to run wild and into override just to visit that memory, a simple day that seemed to last forever.

It was so cold it stung his skin, puncturing the surface. Refreshing possibility of leaving behind the corpse. Four. Nine. Click. Push. Day.





PH



Rawah Arja

Rawah Arja has been shortlisted for the Charlotte Waring Barton Award CBCA NSW. She is a part of the literary organisation *Finishing School*-a collective of women writers with strong connections to Western Sydney. Rawah's work has featured in the *Arab-Australian-Other* anthology by Picador, SBS Voices and the Sydney Writer's Festival. She was a successful recipient of the WestWords Varuna Emerging Writers' Residential Program at The Writers' House in Katoomba and has also featured at the Sydney Design Festival and ABC Radio. Rawah participated in various panels at the Mudgee Readers' Festival and is also a Youth Mentor, in addition to teaching creative writing at schools and facilitating after school writing workshops with WestWords. Her debut novel for young adults is *The F-Team*.

www.rawaharjaauthor.com

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The creative writing workshops I took part in at Cherrybrook Technology High School with WestWords was one of the best experiences I've had not only as a teacher but as a writer. At first, I was a little hesitant, not only because I was unsure of how high schoolers were going to respond to my writing activities but Cherrybrook is located over an hour from where I live. I immediately had flashbacks to my time as a 'cheeky' high school student and hoped that karma didn't come back to bite me.

The week long intensive short story program not only helped me develop a great rapport with the students but it also gave me the time to listen, getting their views on writing. One of the highlights for me from the program was asking for some anonymous feedback to which most students stated how much their views on writing had changed. Sarah Ayoub, a fellow writer also in residence, gave me the idea and I must say it really helped me gain an insight into what they do and don't enjoy, giving me the opportunity to modify my approach.

What really stood out to me was the way the writing activities really challenged the students in a way that allowed them to push themselves whilst also feeling safe to express their ideas. Sometimes we forget that writing can be daunting, so to listen to some of the conversations between students unfold, was not only a joy but inspiring for me as a writer. The students were incredible to work with and the school was so welcoming that by the end of the week, I had forgotten I was an hour away from home.

It was a great experience working with WestWords at Cherrybrook High School and I look forward to hearing about all the future writers to come out of such a wonderful school.

99

Christmas Alphabet Story

BY LUCINDA

After a long year, the night has finally come. Beer, carrots, milk and cookies are left out for Saint Nick. Carolers going from door to door singing the classics that everyone knows. December 24th is the day to finish the preparations before the cheer is spread around. Everyone is rushing to buy their last-minute presents before the shops close for the evening. Festive colours, decorations, baking and lights create the cheerful and delightful atmosphere. Gifts underneath the tree are wrapped in colourful paper and shiny bows. “Hang on, what

time are we waking up tomorrow?” Inside the stereo is the CD with the songs that you know and love. “Joy to the World” plays on the jewellery box every time you open it. Kris Kringle names were pulled out of the hat a few weeks ago with the colleagues from your office. Listening out, the children wait for the sounds of Santa’s sleigh bells. “Merry Christmas!” is the phrase you say to your loved ones. North Pole, Santa’s homeland, is where the elves’ workshop is located. Over the moon is Santa’s shadow. People come to view the Christmas lights on your house. Quirky Santa hats, the whole family wear. Re-watching your first Christmas as a baby taken on the old camera. Santa sacks are laid out around the tree. “The Polar Express” and “The Grinch” are movies we watch every Christmas Eve. Unless we receive coal, our tree will be filled with the gifts Santa brought. Very sleepy the parents are, but the children are restless. Wish lists were collected last week with everything we hoped for. Christmas day is almost here. “Yes! I’ve always wanted this!” Zip up the Christmas tree storage bag until we bring it out again next year.



FOR



Life Changes

BY NIKIL

Christmas Evening 2019

Christmas lights lit up the once deserted grey stretch of road. Phil's mum had invited him over to gather with the family on Christmas eve. Despite living quite a long distance away from his family in Texas Phil usually found a way to clear his plans so that he could visit his family, it had now become an annual visit.

"In 200 meters turn left." Despite the warning, Phil still managed to miss his turn. He was already late, but there was nothing he could do now. He drove further down the road before making an illegal U-turn. Lucky for him there were no cops in sight, they were all talking the day off presumably going home to meet with their families.

Eventually, he arrived at the house where Mum was waiting to help him with his language.

After a brief talk, Phil welcomed himself into his childhood home. The vibes just felt so right there. He slowly made his way into the living room where everyone was seated, glancing at all the paintings on the wall which gave him memories of when he was little.

Everyone cheered as he walked in and took his seat. "About time," yelled Dad from across the room.

The vibes across the room were magnificent. He could feel all of the energy in everyone when Mum walked in with the roast turkey in her hands. He knew a good week was ahead of him.

New Year's Day 2020

Phil woke up to his cousin Brett doing burnouts so loud the entire neighborhood could hear. Not long afterwards he forced himself up.

Although he was tired, he walked into the living

room but before he could even talk, Mum told him to get dressed and go shopping. Not wanting to cause any conflict on the first day of the year Phil hesitantly accepted.

So, there he was in a deserted Walmart trying to find new-year presents. "Yo Phil." He turned around. Behind him were his two best mates from high school, Chris and Bryan. The trio were reunited. "Long time no see huh. What have you been up to?" After a good long conversation, the three of them made plans to go exploring the countryside as they thought that it would be a fun idea for a "reunion".

Almost A Week Later

The trio met up in the local parking lot and decided on a place to explore. After an hour or so of trying to convince Phil to agree on a location, they finally found a place.

Phil took a moment to think about what could happen. "What if we get done for trespassing?" asked Phil. The others just told him not to worry. Even though he wasn't entirely sure if it was the right decision they continued.

On arriving at their location, an old part of the town which had been deserted for years, Phil could see boards everywhere declaring "No Trespassing". He pointed this out to Bryan but he just told him to not worry about it.

After a couple of hours of good fun and exploring the trio decided to head back. Then a man abruptly appeared. "Oi, what are you doing here mate?" "Oh shit! It's the cops" yelled Chris. They froze. "Didn't you see the signs?" questioned the officer. "I'm sorry lads but you are coming to the station with me."

The day he was looking forward to all week had somehow turned on him. This was the first time Phil had ever been inside a police station. He was usually good with his words and usually got away with the police. But not this time!

To say the least, his parents were not going to be pleased.



10

It All Started With Friends

BY LEIGHTON

“Again, I’ll be late today, business reasons,” said Jaime as I asked him when he could come. I’ve become used to this. I no longer drink. We would go and drink our brains out, but he got married and pub time became less often. Clearly, I needed to go home, so I went home. I smelled smoke and ran to the kitchen. I opened my oven and saw the ruined, burnt bread. It felt bitter. During my “sleep”, all I could think of is how tomorrow I would be tired and how that might affect my job security, I don’t want to be poor again as I was in 2008. Earnest effort to sleep led to less thinking, and I fell asleep...

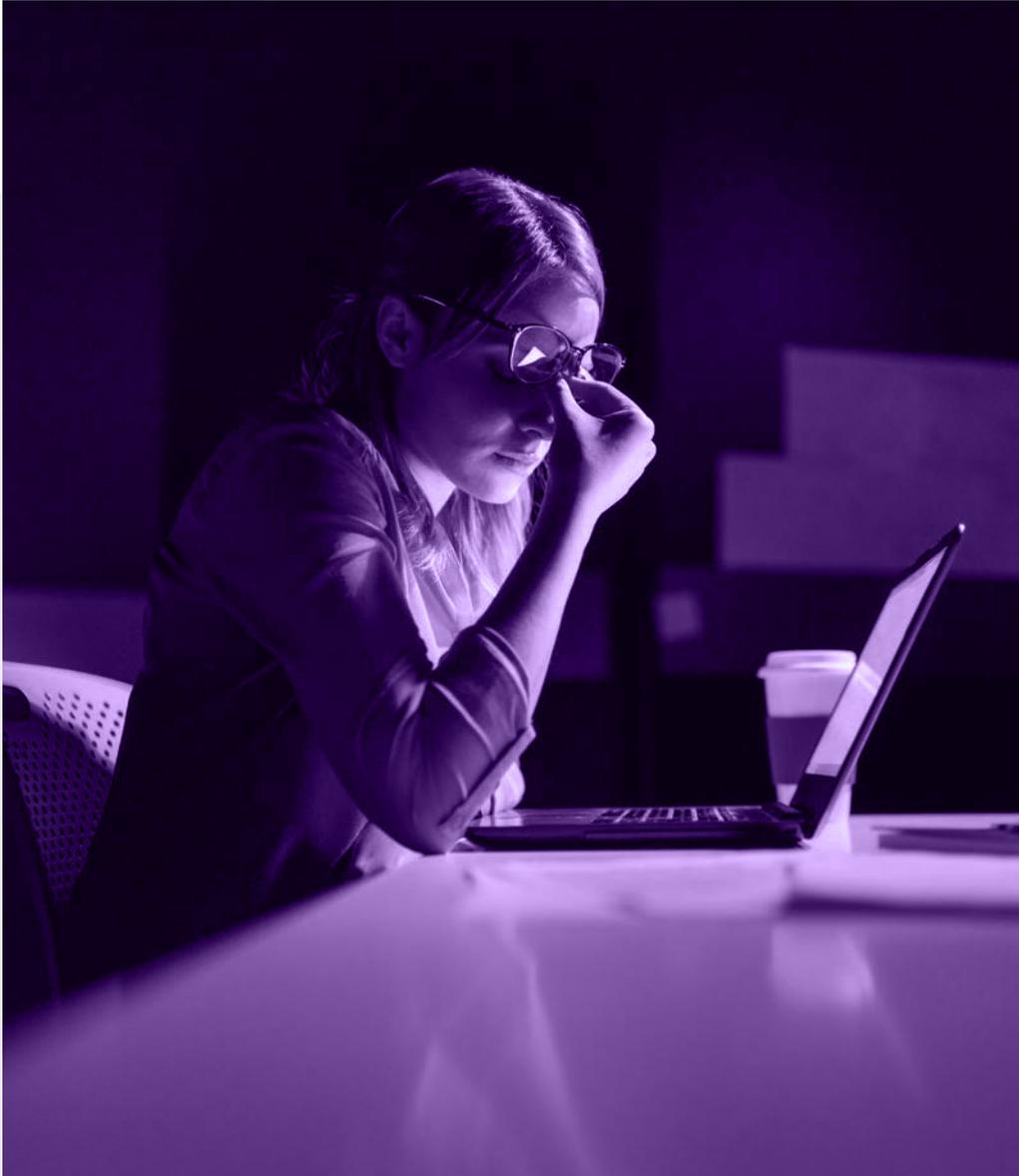
The next day I got to my office five minutes late. My boss called me inside. I told my reason and then went on a tangent. My boss told me to go away. Being a nerd worked and I didn’t lose my job, however this was a small win. Getting out of the office after work to go home, my husband came up to me and said that he wanted a divorce. I sat down to discuss the arrangements. When I was about to cry, he said that I was being neglectful of his needs. Hovering over

my head was me wondering how this could happen. This was because of my work. Interestingly, I never thought of it that way as I worked hard to make our wedlock better. Jared (my husband) starting weeping at the thought of divorce, saying he didn’t want to divorce but he couldn’t go on like this as he wasn’t happy anymore. I understood, started to weep and we hugged. Kindly, we let go and talked it out and we chose to stay in wedlock until we can make things better. But it changed nothing. Managing this will be hard as our jobs interfere. Now that we chosen this we promised each other we’ll try to make it work.

The next day we woke up and kissed each other in a passionate farewell. Passively going through my day led to me feeling sad. I couldn’t talk to anyone because everyone else was focusing on their work, I just kept it in. Quickly rushing back to my house, I kissed my husband and I watched the TV with him as I don’t care because I’m most likely freaking out. Running out the door the following morning to catch the bus I chose to work smarter and not harder.

I continued working smarter and not harder. My life has become better. Until I relapsed. Victor, the COO broke me down and I relapsed. We really tried to break out of the routine but we fail. Xyloids of livelihood, scattered, like before. Yearning to reform, but breaking down. Zac, my boss, destroys every attempt.

101



Discovery of Life

BY AASHNA

A hot, crisp summer's day surrounded me. Looking around in every direction, the sun shining in my eye, I did not recognise a single thing I saw. A hot breeze swished across my face, dry dust sticking to my sweaty face, the smell of smoke making my nose dry. Examining the different types of rubbish dumps, flies everywhere I went, people were searching for food. Looking into the sky gave me a migraine every five minutes, looking at the ground made me want to throw up by the smell of rubbish; the amount of gum, bird droppings and cigarettes. Where was I? The last thing I remembered was sleeping in my bed with my fluffy bedding.

Surviving everyday was an unforgettable, painful challenge: sleeping right next to a rubbish dump, the filthy smell making it so hard to breath; not having a bed, pillow, or sheets; absolutely nothing that belongs

on a bed apart from the sweaty, smelling clothes I am wearing. Rummaging through the immense pile of rubbish looking for food wasn't as easy: searching through the filthy rubbish dumps without gloves; getting all sorts of food scraps and germs on my hands; feet covered in black dirt. All I would find were mouldy pieces of bread, mandarin peels and plastic. Earning money was very hard. I would have to wake up super early every morning to look for valuable items thrown in the bin, such as water bottles, clothes, jewellery, which I could make some profit by selling.

I wanted to go back home, I wanted to see my family, I didn't know how I got there. I was going to die if I stayed in this place any longer, I wanted to go home. My life had been so perfect back then, drinking hot chocolate with marshmallows in my soft, warm blanket. Time went so fast back then. In this unknown smelly place it was so hard to even get through a day.

I was losing patience. I couldn't stay there any longer. No-one could speak English. How could I get back home? All I could remember was sleeping in my bed at home and now I was waking up here.





TRU

What's a Death?

BY JOEL

The shallow echoes of bullets made me tremble. Tears were running down my face, trembling, shaking. The cold ground turned my already cold body even colder. A high-pitched screech overtook the gunshots. Then there was an explosion and all I could hear was a deafening high-pitched hum. There was a burning, dry sensation all throughout my throat. Then I fainted.

My eyes came back to life, there was still pain everywhere. Sanitisers filled the room around me as I lay, pain shooting through my back, on my blue mattress. There was this red substance all over my once white sheets... some had trickled to the ground. The nurses rushed in and began to explain what had happened. Their faces were red, running around, fidgeting. I heard many different words I

didn't understand:

“terrorist”

“bomb”

“coma”

“death”

I asked them, “What's a death?”

They replied with, “Don't worry sweetie, are you okay?”

Everything was a blur; I couldn't fathom it, but somehow, I was jumping with joy. “I'm okay.”

My mum and dad rushed into the room and wrapped me in their arms, their wet eyes pouring all over me. I asked them what's wrong and they said they were okay and just happy to see me. I had a smile so big, but they didn't. My brain couldn't match the circumstances together. They took me home.

The house smelled like aloe vera candles, but I could cut the air with a knife, it didn't line up. I went to my room where me and my brother sleep, but it was empty.



01



The Thin Man

BY DAVID

The Thin Man stumbled across the corpses of once proud skyscrapers, the burning concrete against his feet overshadowed by the burning in his core. Feeling as though a swarm of ravenous insects was ravaging his insides he desperately sniffed the bitter air for any hint of something half-way edible. Although the hunger was painful at least he did not have to dwell on painful memories of his past life before the bombs first fell. The search for food instead occupied his entire mind, preventing him from dwelling too long on his misery.

He was not alone, but the other creatures in the wasteland didn't make good companions - to say the least. Back when he still spoke, he named them ghouls; ugly things with bones that seemed too long for their flesh, too-large milky eyes, mouths full of terrible yellowed fangs and terrible burns all across their bodies. Once they had been human, but now what once was there is little more than a wild beast, thus he felt no remorse over killing and eating them, after all they would do the same to him! He had never been attacked by them before but that did not mean they would not attack later. And besides, their stringy, blackened flesh provided at least some sustenance in this hell of concrete and sand. The faint sound of sobbing and the acrid scent of smoke in the wasteland air pulled the Thin Man

out of his musings, and he began to make his way out of the ruined city in the hopes of finding some food different from the putrid flesh of a ghoul.

Soon he came across a downed plane, relatively recent too; the sputtering flames were still struggling to burn in the wind. There was a terrible hole in the side of the plane, the shredded metal looking as if it was torn apart by the claws of something not of this world. The sobbing still hadn't stopped, someone was alive in there! Walking over to investigate he was interrupted by a gunshot from inside the plane. After recovering from the initial shock he turned around cautiously and looked into the cockpit. He could see a man and a woman surrounded by the bodies of several ghouls. The man was torn apart by hungry claws; a half-eaten face frozen forever in horror. The woman with an absolutely terrified expression on her face, clutched a handgun, desperately tried to fire at the Thin Man, but nothing but quiet clicks came out. The Thin Man was still reeling from the shock. To be completely honest he felt betrayed, why would the first survivor he met in decades immediately try to kill him? A thin, broken but untarnished piece of metal caught his attention and it was then when he finally knew exactly what he looked like, burnt skin, too-long bones and prominent yellow fangs burned into his mind forcing him to accept the terrible truth.

The Thin Man could not remember much more after that, but when he came to he found two piles of bones picked clean of flesh next to him, and the sweet aftertaste of blood filling him with shame, horror and sick satisfaction.



Beyond Com- prehension

BY OLIVIA

One second, I was breathing in the cool night air, the next, I lost everything. The boom of the bombs detonating was so loud it shredded my ear drums and the force of the blast knocked me off my feet like a bowling pin. Something sharp struck me in the side of the head. Fierce heat and smoke rushed to escape out of the doors of the City of London Police Department, filling my nostrils and mouth with the nauseating taste of smoke. I dazedly lifted my head off the ground and faintly, as if it was millions of miles away echoing back to me, I heard the terrified screams of the police officers and their families who, just a few seconds ago, had all been happy and cheery, celebrating another year in the police department.

I touched my head where the object had hit me and found that my hand was sticky with warm blood. I was disorientated and my whole body ached like I had been hit by a bus, but as I lay on the cold concrete, gradually the fog that surrounded my mind started

to lift as my brain struggled to recall the events of the last ten seconds. The first image that appeared in my mind was a little girl with a big toothy smile and curly brown hair that fell just below her shoulders. Realisation kicked in, the little girl was my daughter and she was inside the police station. I forced my body to move and I managed to stumble towards the now hardly recognisable and demolished entrance of the police station. I was horrified by the sight before me. The roof had collapsed in on itself. The small fires were the only source of light, where they managed to break through the thick smoke that choked the atmosphere. Where there was once rows of neatly arranged desks and chairs there were now large chunks of jagged concrete and twisted beams of metal. Smouldering fragments of paper from case files circled around the room amongst the rubble and destruction before slowly dropping to the ground. However, the most horrific site as I looked around were the bodies of my colleagues, all people who I knew well, and I had worked with for over ten years. Then I saw her, my daughter lay completely still, half buried by the wreckage. I ran to her and scooped her fragile body up into my arms. Tears ran down my face, mixing in with the ashes and dropping down onto the ground, my grief so severe it was causing a lump to form in my throat. I couldn't comprehend what had happened, it was only when the sounds of wailing sirens grew louder did I start to realise that I had lost everything.

101



Our Last Day Together

BY MEGHAL

Arya and I have been best friends for over six years. We are more like soul sisters. We always do everything together. Yesterday was our last day together.

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Today is our last day together. She is leaving the country tomorrow morning. I can just barely handle the thought of us not being able to see each other. Whenever I think about it, I have to fight back my tears. I am at the Metro waiting for her to come so we can spend our last day together. Just then I feel a tap on my shoulder. "Sup!" she asks, sounding more like a statement. "I've been waiting for the past 10 minutes. Where were you?" I complain, keeping a straight face, showing absolutely no emotion. "Traffic, let's go now, let's make the most of today."

Grabbing my arm she takes me to one of the shops on the other side of the road. "I want food first," I say hear my tummy grumbling. "Of course, the typical Alina," she says, mocking me. "We'll go to the mall, that's five minutes away, we'll eat and shop there." she planned. I nod. We grab a burger each and sit at the table. "When you come back, at the end of year 12, we are so going on a road trip," I exclaim. "I'll miss you," she whispers. "Since when did you get so emotional?" I mock her. "Meh, now let's get some clothes, I need to get you the perfect dress for next Saturday." She stands up excitedly, making me blush. We roam around for 40 minutes trying to find the perfect dress. "Jeez you're so picky," she complained. "Thanks." I walk to the next shop being attracted to a really good dress. "Finally," I say. We walk around for a while, talking, laughing, being totally insane and then I get a notification. I turn on my phone and realise it's time to go home. My smile turning into a frown, Arya instantly knowing why. "It's ok, we will still talk, and I promise I'll visit," she says. We go back, do our final goodbyes, hug for the last time and we both burst into tears. "I will miss you," we say in sync.

*

"I'll miss you a lot Arya," I whisper to myself.





U

A Nervous Wait

BY WILLIAM

My brother and I were waiting for about 25 minutes in the long line, to walk up onto the stage and have a burst of joy. We knew that it wasn't going to be long, so we wanted to embrace it. As the queue shortened sweat began to form on my hands. My hands also started to shake just a bit and I could feel the butterflies in my stomach. My brother wasn't feeling any of the nerves I was feeling. I was puzzled because whenever I see anyone I look up to, my nerves take over, let alone meet them. When we got to the front of the line my nerves were at peak level. My brother went first then I followed shortly after. As I got onto stage, I could feel my hands shaking a little bit. The other 200 or so people in the queue

were fixed on me and my brother. I walked up, my hands sweating and shaking still, I smiled a nervous smile as I looked up at Tyson Pedro and he looked at me straight away and focused on me completely. He gave me a handshake as well as a hug. It cooled my nerves completely and my hands were no longer shaking, and my breathing had completely slowed down. We took pictures and Tyson fake choked me and we laughed about it. I enjoyed the minute I was with some of my idols and made sure I took advantage of it.

I also met Kai Kara-France, who is actually smaller than me. I am 5'6 and he is about 5'5 so that felt different being taller than someone who has knocked someone out before. He was also nice and was very talkative while we were on stage with them. When we had to go I went to walk away and I left Tyson hanging, but luckily for me my brother got me back and I said bye properly and it was a very nice way to enjoy the last few moments with people I look up to. My nerves were all gone by the end and I was actually feeling much better. Then I had to do it again with other fighters...



101



Global Future Week

BY KAYLEE

Clustered beneath thousands of sacred banners, teens continuously bellowed:

“YOU WILL DIE FROM OLD AGE!”

“WE WILL DIE FROM CLIMATE CHANGE!”

While the children yelled:

“CAN WE FIX IT?”

“YES, WE CAN!”

Banners like *Electric Car’s Don’t Leave Scars!* waved in the air. My mind fixed in those seconds.

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STRIKE 4 CLIMATE

Everything you need to know about climate change happened from the 20th to 27th of September 2019, when protests took place across 4500 locations in 150 countries.

Three days before a United Nations summit on the 20th September 2019, school students from Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and all across the country came together to call for climate change action. To demand actions for this climate crisis, thousands of young Australians walked out of their classrooms. Organisers expect future global strikes will be a much stronger presence as companies, workers and unions join. Young people across the world are anxious about what their future would look like.

Aspiring to be like the Swedish student Greta Thunberg, students across Australia, and the world, valued the crisis of climate change to a greater

degree. Realising “we had to reach out to people beyond the student community”.

At this strike, Australia students gave three demands to the governments:

1. No more new coal, oil and gas projects, especially the Adani mine.
2. 100% renewable energy.
3. Funding for a just transition and creation of jobs for all fossil-fuel communities and workers.

A fifteen year old organiser of the Newcastle strike, Alexa Stuart, said: “While it’s really important that we recognise that students are feeling scared about the impact of the climate crisis on our future, it’s also very important to recognise that, in Newcastle especially, there are a lot of jobs in the coal mining industry.” She also exclaimed that “Those jobs are the livelihoods of many people.” Hence, young people are not just protesting about climate change, but also interested in finding solutions for what comes after.

In 2019, the most obvious crisis of climate change are the bushfires that tore through NSW and Queensland in the first few weeks of spring. Besides this, the dry heat is also a deadly condition which surrounds us. If we do not do anything helpful as the young people had demanded, all humanity will eventually suffer the consequences.

Whether it’s news in hardcopy, websites or TV, young climate activists, savvy in social media, will use their moral authority as young people to surf a rising tide of adult concern.

*

As a journalist, nothing is more natural than seeing news recorded and played. Yet, as a witness of how “the older generation messed things up” while the younger generation “are doing the clean-up” we should all agree with our next generation that “time is limited” and “our future is in our hands!”



SAVE
OUR
FUTURE

THERE

IS NO
PLAN
B



James

BY SKYE

As a kid I was always adventurous, I loved playing with my toys. It was a hot summer's day in the Blue Mountains and I was playing outside after school like I usually did. I would play outside with my sister and my dog like usual, nothing different. However, I felt like someone was there behind me. I quickly turned around. No-one was there. I was shocked that no-one was there, scared even. I kept hearing voices in my left ear. It sounded like a little boy asking for me to play with him. He sounded scared, alone, lost and wanted some friends. I was a five-year old girl scared shitless but I did start to play with him. We played café and played cars with the electric cars my dad used to buy me and my sister.

Hours passed and it was getting dark. I would usually be worn out, tired, hungry as well, but I wasn't. My mother tried to call me in for dinner and a bath. She couldn't hear me talking and playing. She began to panic. Searching high and low for me, she couldn't find me. Running from door to door pounding on the doors she asked if I had been seen but no-one knew where I was. After looking all over for me she began to search the backyard. After looking for 15 or so minutes she looked under the veranda and found me 'talking to myself'.

My mum thought I was talking to myself like all kids do. She thought it could've even been an imaginary friend. She was confused. I introduced this little boy as 'James'. My mum's face dropped. This was the last strand with being in the Blue Mountains, we packed our bags and moved to Sydney.

I think James has followed me to Sydney.

101





Tony Davis

Tony Davis is a Sydney-based author, journalist and academic. He has written more than a dozen books, including *The Big Dry* (a YA novel shortlisted in the 2014 NSW Premier's Literary Awards), *Roland Wright* (a children's series published in the US and Germany), the bestselling *Lemon!* books about the worst cars ever made, and the new biography *Brabham – The Untold Story of Formula One*. He co-wrote the accompanying *Brabham* documentary feature film. His doctoral thesis examined the literary effect of the second person narrative voice in fiction. As a journalist and editor Tony has worked in senior roles at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and continues to be widely published in Australian newspapers, magazines and journals. Since 2009 he has been the motoring writer for the *Australian Financial Review* and contributes general features to that publication.

10

66

If you look at most successful people in the world - which is to say the ones doing the things in life they want to do - they tend to be good communicators and they tend to be original thinkers. We've spent 10 hours over a week working on something that brings these two important skills together: creative writing.

You may hope that one day you'll write a next mega-hit that makes you a bazillion dollars and sells so many copies everyone forgets who JK Rowling was, or you may merely want to write something you are happy with for nothing more than your own satisfaction. Your ambition may be to become a better communicator, because becoming a better communicator will help you in whatever field you wish to pursue.

Whatever you may want out of creative writing, there are things we've discussed and tried out this week that should help you on your way. It is a tribute to WestWords and Cherrybrook Technology High that they made it happen for an entire year cohort.

Things are changing quickly, obviously. How people consume entertainment, and the media they prefer, is in upheaval. However, one constant from caveman times through to the Middle Ages, up to today and undoubtedly onwards from here, is that people need to tell and listen to stories. Stories on the page can become the backbone of games, or films, or graphic novels, or TV episodes, plays, social media series, or a thousand other things, many of them yet to be invented.

One thing I hope we've learned is that writing takes work. Nobody expects to play the piano at first sitting, though just occasionally someone appears who can. Even for most professional writers, producing a well-rounded, readable, concise story that has something to say is the work of many drafts and much polishing. And those that are good at it are those who keep reading and keep writing.

99

Shattered Glass

BY ERIC

It is the 236th day of my existence, the time is 8:32a.m. and once again I am walking through these winding corridors, with walls the colour of bleached blood.

There is no sound here; no wind blowing through these empty passages, no flash of colour amongst the endless white, no smell other than that of paint and soap, but of course, that was the way it had always been, the way it always would be. A low groan, muffled through layers of glass emits from the side of my vision, catching my attention. There lies an animal, a fine specimen; its head laid low, it treads aimlessly around its cage, its jutting bones casting jagged shadows across its bare form. Casually it lifts its hairy forelimbs revealing a neat line of scars, some old and faded, others new, still dripping with fresh blood. These scars, of course, were self-inflicted, no specimen would face danger in these halls, other than the danger presented by one's self. I stare at the crooked gouges, somehow entranced by the brutality of its shape, marveling at the brilliant crimson that seeped from that thin form. What wondrous things existed inside these living forms, their bodies filled with the red wine of life, fueled by a pulsating, writhing ruby. A wave of anger and want flows through me, but just as I begin to realize it, I had already lost the feeling entirely. The creature has stopped prowling its cage, instead deciding to take up its time by sitting down and staring at the glass observation panels. I stare back, not that it could see me through the one-way mirror. "Are we all that different?" Both of us locked in a cage by powers and situations beyond our control, ignorant to the world around and inside of us, wanting something, anything to break the monotony. But no, we are different; once again my eyes fall back onto the crimson red of blood. In those jagged lines were the proof of life, of an existence, no matter how small or insignificant it may be. Deep red, puffed flesh, scars that are proof of the experiences held beforehand. I think, how envious it was to have the privilege to bleed.

Thunk

My hand unconsciously reaching, and now cold with the hard touch of glass, recoils. In an instant the animal comes to attention, its normally sensory deprived ears suddenly ringing with noise; pouncing onto the thick glass, pounding with all its might, it slams its thin arms down on the thick glass, blood spraying onto the transparent mirror, seemingly suspended in the air, trapped on a spiders cobweb, a sky of rubies.

THUD THUD

It has been minutes now and the animal refuses to subside, I attempt to calm it by banging back at the glass, however my efforts seemed to merely invigorate the rabid creature. So, now I merely stare, watching the deep red of veins erupt from crooked volcanoes, spluttering across the now red stained glass.

Tap Tap

A lighter sound amidst the chaos of noise catches my attention, one that is, surprisingly, my own. Almost unconsciously my fingers move on their own, tapping back as if to respond, and while I know I should, I do not stop, perhaps whatever has taken over the animal is contagious, and now I too am slamming at the cage at full force, the impacts sending shockwaves arcing through my body. But yet we persist, driven by some unknown force and some unknown intention. The noise grows louder and louder until the entire hall is echoing with the noise of life, its clamoring deafening my ears.

CRACK

A sharp sound cuts through all others, unfit for the sudden amount of strain my brittle arms give way, opening a large cut forming across my arm sending a spray of liquid across the once pure white halls. And I stare... and I dismay. For there, bubbling, dripping out of the crevices of my arm is not the warm red of life, but a dark black of death and the lightless sparks of electricity, wires twisting like pythons rent to reveal the ugly brown writhing within. In the background the banging starts to subside, the hall once again returning to its usual deafening silence and I stare, at the red dripping from those now surely broken arms, the rich brown hair that flows from its head to its shoulders and the amber brown eyes alight with life, and I shout, I shout with all my might from a mouth that does not exist, forming words that none can hear, thinking thoughts no one will know.

Why did you create me like this?



10

Overwhelm- ing Odds

BY J E Y S O N

“Join up with the remainder of the forces and spearhead right into the opposing army from the side.” Probably one of the worst commands I’d ever heard. I guess me and nineteen other people were about to run into our deaths. As we stood hidden in the green lush leaves of the forest we waited for the clash to happen; the sound of a horn would tell us that battle had commenced.

As we heard the horn we kept waiting, biding our time for when the time is right; a big wall of metallic figures facing off against the small block of ring-wearing soldiers. As the two forces clashed a huge volley of arrows fell upon them. Both sides raised their shields, as they continued to disturb the peace with their metal clanging against each other. Soon big burning balls of inferno started to fling from one end to the other, breaking the surrounding structures. As the flames erupted throughout the battlefield many ran off in the panic of the moment.

We continued to watch from the sidelines, watched

as the grey troops scattered, a few headed towards our direction. One of them ran into our horse and fell sitting on his rear with an expression I will never forget. His eyes were big bubbles, just about ready to burst, his mouth like an open castle gate. His body shook like there was an earthquake, about to collapse like a building. He was just a young boy. Squeezing the blade of his handle in one hand and tugging his shield in the other, the boy stood up, gritted his teeth and stood his ground. A quick thrust to the head and his life was ended, just like that.

Heading back towards the bushes, waiting for our opportunity to strike, I started thinking, just thinking, about the boy back there. Probably a nice kid, who’d worked on his farm, for his parents, just trying to scrape by for a living. I guess he’s gone now, parents probably never gonna see him again. I don’t know why, but the idea of that just made my soul feel like it had been crushed under an anvil. There’s this kid here, who was probably conscripted, and here I am one of the top members of my squad just sitting here waiting for a chance to strike.

Suddenly, someone yelled out “The shield wall is down! NOW!” Before I could grasp the situation, a stampede of hooves breezed past me. Now readying my horse, I caught up with the rest of my fellow members as we all charged to face the overwhelming odds.

101



Waiting for Them to Arrive

BY SHUBH

David glanced at his watch and wiped a lingering drop of sweat off his forehead. He knew he had to go, and he knew he had to go fast. He bundled together the arms and legs of the corpse before stuffing it inside a large body bag. He pulled on the sleeves of his thin black jacket and peeked at his watch once again. "Damn it," he muttered, the cops would be arriving any minute now. David tied the ends of the body bag with a thin strand of nylon rope before shoving the corpse under the bed. He picked up his backpack and rushed to the front door. David swung it open and made sure to lock it after he left the house. He took two steps before jumping onto his motorbike. A short moment passed, and then loud screeching revs left the neighbourhood as David's motorbike began speeding away.

David continued driving down the street. He kept his head low, his line of sight straight ahead of him. David could hear wailing sirens in the distance. He tensed his hands and slowed his bike down as they drove straight past. A smile emerged on

his face. He didn't bother looking back...

David reached out in front of him and turned on the GPS. His destination was already set. Everything seemed to be going as planned. Although he couldn't hide the body, his job was complete, and he hadn't been caught. David studied the GPS for a brief moment before speeding up again. As cocky as he was, he knew he had to stick to the plan.

David's motorbike perfectly traced the red lines on his GPS. David turned swiftly around the corners and always sped up on the straight strips of asphalt that lay beneath him.

A few minutes later David's GPS began beeping. He pulled over to the side of the road and got off his bike. David looked into the distance and spotted the lake. He began to approach it. The area was populated by large trees and thick infestations of dense, tangled bush. He pushed through. David crouched down on the grass when he reached the lake. He began to watch the sun set, waiting for them to arrive. He peered over the lake, trying to locate the boat. David felt uneasy. "Where are they?" he whispered to himself. And just as he thought about leaving, he was shoved from behind. David didn't have time to react. He landed face first on a rough layer of dirt.

"Don't resist!" the man shouted. "I am detective Soham Gautem and you are under arrest for the murder of S. Jevan." David sighed as he laid on the ground defenseless, waiting for his fate to engulf him.





TO

Call Before the Fire

BY ALEXANDER

All I could remember was a clean punch to the jaw as I sat in silence. I slowly became aware of my situation, tied to a chair in a musty, dark room. Thumping music began to ring my ears as a dim light turned on and half filled the room. The hanging light swayed. I began to stall, in hope of alerting my squad to bust of this freak. I can't believe I'm in this situation, that bastard Whittaker, how did he find out my identity. "You told me it'd be fine, but here we are Marty," mumbled Whittaker. "How did the security guards even find the drugs you may ask? All I had to do was make a quick call to local security and you're finished. You can't trust anybody in joints like these, especially people like him."

"You shouldn't have come to this festival Marty; your father's badge can't save you this time." I quickly began to untie the knot behind the chair; they obviously didn't do police cadets. "I know your little buddy Luke is here and he should be arriving soon." But little does he know that as soon as Luke comes through this door, I'll jump from my seat and knock him clean out; protocols need to be broken in circumstances like these. As the door swung open,

my heart began pumping as if a force had come over me, I jumped from my chair and me and Luke began fighting for our lives.

Senselessly fighting for us our lives like a wildebeest surrounded by lions, punching and kicking frantically until a noise so loud, the world around me became noiseless and a faint muffled fuzz filled my head. As the ringing noise around me broke into yelling I had realised a rifle shot had been fired by Whittaker right at me. Instincts took over and I sprinted out the door, towards the middle of the crowd, Luke was trailing close. Suddenly the defining sound of a gunshot overwhelmed the audience of the rock concert, as everybody fell to the ground covering their heads. I knew it was only a matter of time before he started taking lives in search for us. In a final hope of life, I shot my flare into the sky. The Whittaker's deep, cracked laugh bellowed as he began to strut over to my location, stepping on the bodies of helpless people as if he were the king of the world. "So, Marty, you think that flare will save you? All it will save is the time spent looking for your dead body, you filthy scum." Suddenly, a red dot appeared on his polo, then another and another until I saw almost twenty. It was my team. Don't take one more step old man, yelled Luke as he rushed towards me with a huge smile covering his face. "Has this man been bothering you?" Luke asked in a comedic fashion, and in a nervous sigh of relief, I laughed as I watched him and his goons being pinned to the floor in classic fashion.





101



Storm of a Nation

BY NATHAN

Brace for impact, the supercell is about to hit.

The day has started at as a normal day for John. He's fed the chickens, gathered crops and milked the cows. He climbs on the tallest hill on his farm, and looks out into the distance, like he always does. This time he sees some big, bugled clouds in the distance, he has never seen before. He runs quickly inside and tells his wife and kids, "Quickly, a supercell is about to hit!"

John quickly runs outside and tries to pack up his farm. He gets the chickens, crops and cows into the shed. Meanwhile, his kids and his wife are inside packing up all their important documents. John is still running around the farm, but he feels a hailstone on his head. He looks up and more fall down, then the wind picks up like a hurricane. The rain falls now, faster and faster, and the dam on his property begins to flood. The floodwater gets closer, and as John runs in, his wife asks, "Where are we going to go that is safe from the storm?" John replies, "The bunker under the floor." He opens the door and says, "Everyone down there." They climb down into the bunker, and John shuts the door. Then he notices, the lightest child, George, is missing. John says, "Stay here, I am going for him." His wife says, "Be careful." He opens the door and runs out to the storm to find George.

John runs outside into the raging storm that threatens to kill everything in sight. The wind is chucking around wood, trees and even roof tiles. He yells out, "George, George, where are you?" Steadily he hears, "Daddy, Daddy," in a low voice. John looks out, and spots George on the other side of the raging floodwater. George says, "Help me," very scared. John says, "Stay there, I'm coming." He finds a rope, which he suspends from two trees, and goes across the floodwater to his son. He grabs George and attaches him to his harness. George says "Daddy, I'm scared." John replies, "I know, I am too, but you have got to be brave for me, ok." George said, "OK,

I'll try." They both battle through the raging water, fighting against strong wind and heavy rain. As they fight their way through the water, the water pressure is picking up, and the wind is getting faster. Centimetre by centimetre, they both get closer to the bank of the river, until John steadily reaches the bank. He climbs up and undoes his harness. They both run back to the bunker and George says, "I'm so sorry, Dad," and John replies, "It's ok, I'm just glad that you're safe."

John and his son return to the bunker, where his wife says, "Are you ok?" and they both reply, "We're okay." They grab blankets, pillows and anything warm, to wrap around themselves. John's wife grabs food, John uses wood to barricade them in, George grabs light, and John's other son shuts all the openings. After all jobs are done, they sit in the middle and huddle together. The crashing and banging of the storm continues, so much that water starts coming in. The water starts to fill up the bunker floor. John tells everyone to stand up, while he opens the drainage hole in the floor. Water starts subsiding, so then they sit down and keep riding the storm out. John and his wife tell their kids to keep calm and that everything is going to be fine, but they know that this storm will eventually kill someone. The wind, hail and thunder continue for another six hours.

The next morning, John wakes his family, and tells them to listen out, but they cannot hear anything. They all get up and cheered, that the ordeal of the storm is finally over. They all emerge from the bunker, to find that most of the farm has survived the storm. John walks to the shed to find that a massive, oak tree has fallen through the roof, but all the cows have survived. He continues on to find that it was a good idea to put the chickens in the shed, as a massive tree has fallen through the chicken coop and destroyed it. Apart from the hole in the shed and the chicken coop destroyed, the farm has survived the supercell. John and his family are definitely the lucky ones, as their neighbour's property have been completely destroyed. John and the kids say that they will help their neighbours rebuild.

John learnt to spend more time with family, as he nearly died with them, and to share the land with the rest of them. After that John kept running his farm, but this time he accepted help. The family kept living on the farm, but they never forgot that tragic night.



FOR

Coming Home

BY JACK

We sat there in silence. My grandparents and I were speechless. Only half an hour ago they had found my father in our barn, on the floor. I wanted to leave. I wanted to run away and never ever return. I had undercooked potato chips and left-over ham for dinner. My mood was dull and quiet. I was trying to block out the police sirens that wailed in the background. My grandparents walked back into our cottage. My grandmother's eyes were red, and my grandfather couldn't help sniffing his nose every few seconds. When I finished dinner, I went straight to bed. I didn't say goodnight to anyone. I didn't care. I felt so empty as if someone has reached inside my chest and ripped my heart out. I wanted to run away. I couldn't stay here.

I couldn't sleep. Too much was flowing through my mind. I decided that I had to leave this place. I waited a few hours until the police officers and ambulance left, when I heard my grandmother stop crying and the creaking slabs on the floor stopped squeaking, I jumped out of bed and shoved three different outfits in my bag. I opened my piggy bank and took the \$200 dollars which I had been saving up and stored that in the side of my bag. Then, as silent as a mouse, I crept out my bedroom window and I started heading down my 800m driveway, past the horse paddock, past the large oak tree over a small creek and out the front gate.

I turned left, facing east and started walking. The closest city was Kyiv. My plan was to hitchhike all the way to the city where I would be away from my current life. I didn't know what I was going to do in

the city but anywhere would be better than where I was currently.

Being homeless is harder than you may think. I had to sleep in the forest a few times. Thank God that it was summer because I think I would've frozen to death if it was winter. I hitchhiked in three people's cars so far. They were all very surprised to find a 12-year-old girl pulling them over, but they were all very nice people and they didn't ask any questions. I have learnt a lot since running away from home, for example, when stealing food always hide it under your shirt and when trying to find somewhere to sleep always look for a spot under cover. It was hard not to think of my father but in a way, it helped me get to Kyiv.

I was 40km from the city on the highway with my thumb sticking out when a car pulled over. As soon as it pulled over butterflies started to fill my stomach. A man stepped out of the car and walked up to me.

"Are you Laura Wilson?" he asked.

"Yes," I mumbled under my breath.

"Get in the car, you're coming with me."

The police station was unusually quiet. A few men in chains walked by. I waited in the waiting room. Constable Lewis was meant to be taking care of me, but he was distracted doing paperwork. That's when I heard the door creak open. I looked over to who had entered, and I think my heart skipped a beat. It was my older sister who had moved to New Zealand to be with her boyfriend. I hadn't seen her in four years, and she was my only family member left. I sprinted to her side and gave her the biggest hug I had ever given. I was trying to hold back my tears and she was as well.

"You're okay now, I'll take care of you," she whispered into my ear.

101



The Ghost Crew

BY JAMES

It was a cold, wet night. Rain was starting to drizzle down and Spectre 1 sat in the misery of his car with the engine running, red and blue lights flashing in his rear-view mirror.

He sat there watching the minutes tick by on his dashboard clock. He watched the rain get carried by the wind and form puddles on the footpath. Droplets combined and made streams flowing down his windows and windscreen. His frustration grew as every drop collected on his car.

“Is this guy gonna hurry up or what? I’ve been here for ten minutes!”

The old Nissan 350z and the police Commodore sat there for another five minutes in the night before anything materialised. Radio scanners and electronic gadgets lit up the cabin. The various read outs could monitor police radio, warn if a radar gun was in use, check traffic patterns and most importantly - keep him in contact with his crew. The ghost crew.

Before he could dwell on if Spectre 5, the mechanic of the group, had realised he was missing from the garage, or his getaway plan, the radio blared into life.

“This is Highway Patrol Unit 24 facing west bound on Stacy Ave, this guy’s got a warrant. I’m gonna need additional units”

Spectre 1’s heart started pounding. He slammed the gear stick into first and dumped the clutch. Sirens roared behind him. The cop was just as quick off the mark as he was. Running from the law gave Spectre 1 the most clarity in life. For those

intense moments he was free. Free from the abuse of his childhood, free from those cops that ripped him from his mother when he was only young. The heartbreak that it caused, he felt none of it now, he was on the run. Over the whine of his own engine, he heard the cop’s car rev up. It gained on him as they sped through the industrial complex. It was obvious now, the cop was going for a ram. Spectre 1 was sweating, his mind in overdrive. He had a moment of clarity, he figured out what to do. The two cars were nudging 180 km/h on a four-lane industrial thoroughfare. Dirty brick walls and sawtooth roof factories flew by in a constant blur. As the cop pulled to his right ready to ram, he knew what to do. He was going to let him spin him out and while backwards, slam on the brakes.

As if on cue, the cop smashed into his rear right quarter, sending the car into a spin. Tyre smoke filled Spectre 1’s car as he depressed the clutch. The needle fell below 60 km/h while he was still gliding along backwards. Frantically searching his mirrors for the cop, he located him alongside his car. He buried the brake pedal to the floor. The cop that was alongside flew past, not expecting Spectre 1 to pull off such a daring manoeuvre. Spectre 1 came to a stop facing the wrong way in a cloud of tyre smoke. He shoved it into gear and disappeared down an adjoining alleyway that led into the abandoned maze of factories. He wretched at the wheel to try and get control of the car as he sped through the tight alleyway. The cop had no clue where Spectre 1 had gone.

Night turned to day, the street became alive once more and trash blew across the footpath. The skid marks left behind told a sliver of the events that took place the previous night. A story of a brave man who defied the crushing rule of the police. The ones entrusted to serve and protect the community - not enslave and torture them.







Deborah Abela

Deborah Abela is the internationally published and awarded author of 26 books for children.

After finishing a teaching degree, Deb went to Africa where she was caught in a desert sandstorm, harassed by monkeys and thrown in jail twice! Her love of words led to *The Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee* and *The Most Marvellous Spelling Bee Mystery*. Her crankiness about climate change led to *Crimsdon*, *New City* and *Final Storm*, an adventure series about sea monsters, wild weather and kids in flying machines. Her books are awarded and published across the world, but she mostly hopes to be as brave as her characters.

www.deborahabela.com

10K

“

I was so excited to have been part of the Cherrybrook Tech HS storytelling workshop. I would have LOVED this program as a kid. To hear from real authors, know how they work and to have them read my stories and offer advice. Positive feedback from an author gives students the confidence that their stories and what they have to say is worthwhile. Being able to read fluently, comprehend texts and write convincing, articulate arguments, is crucial to set kids up for a successful future. Enjoying reading and writing also gives them an outlet to express themselves that other subjects simply can't do. If only every school in Australia could have a program as exciting, rewarding and inspirational as this.

”

A Sea Shanty to Remember

BY JERIN

The boat creaked, shallow steps echoed on deck, glimmering eyes followed him from below. “Hello?” he called out, pointing his lantern into the darkness. Silence... Urged by his captain docked beside, he took another step, then another. Creeping further and further onto the ship. The vile taste of sea salt and the stench of rotting wood engulfed his senses. And then he stopped, as a bony hand reached from the quarters of the ship’s captain. It gleamed, as pale as the crescent moon. It was soon followed by the rotting carcass of its owner.

Glass shattered, as the crash of the lantern sent tremors throughout the ship. Without a second glance he ran port, diving into the Caribbean waters. “Help, HELP!” he called out, gulping sea water. To no avail, his heart hammered against his rib cage. Suddenly a hand grasped him from above. A shipmate looked at the boy’s strangling body. “What’s wrong boy! What made you jump?” Still lost in panic he frantically sought for hold on Jacob’s ladder. Losing grip, he attempted one more desperate plea to haul himself up. “Ghosts,” he whispered, before collapsing, into the depths below.

“What was that?” asked Davy emerging from below

deck. Another skeletal figure appeared under the moon light. He rubbed his eye sockets and fixed his jacket. “I think someone dived overboard.” He spoke, unsurprised. Another figure perched in the crow’s nest replied, “He’s drowning!” The captain looked onto the horizon; the other ship was sailing downwind. Which was very rude, especially since they didn’t stay for tea. “Oh well,” he thought taking off his cap, he took a poised stance before plummeting into the waters below.

The world was a quiver, shaking, blurred at the edges. A blinding light ensnared the space. He choked as he was pulled apart, unbearable pain, building, building, building, until no longer can screams be torn from his chest. “Screech,” went a parrot before his world shattered to pieces. Opening his eyes, he saw that he was in an enclosed space, fastened to a chair. His senses blind to his surroundings, he tried to work out where he was. And then a flower caught his eye. It was wilting softly, obsolete, and in total solitude. Then a sound pricked his ears, he heard the voices, voices of men singing shanties. “Help me, Bob, I’m bully in the alley. Way-hey, hey-hey, bully in the alley. Help me, Bob, I’m bully in the alley. Bully down in shinbone all!”. He sat there chained and cuffed, weeping, shrivelled in his cage, unknowing of his fate. Alone with no more than a poppy to keep him company.

A ship, rotting from its core and stricken with wounds, docked in Cuba one silent night, presenting a boy, a little older than a child onto its shores. Never more to hear of the pirate crew that saved him, that blessed night.



10K



War Had Finally Come

BY HAIDER

War had finally come. Yet this war was different. Good and bad was unknown. Right or wrong did not exist. It started off with peaceful protests and turned into a civil war. Then came multiple different armies. Some helped the government, and some helped the rebels. Now Syria was no home for anyone. It was a war zone, and in the middle were over eighteen million civilians with nowhere safe to go. A journalists who went there said “Thousands of homeless orphans and widows crowded the streets, laying over husbands’, fathers’ and brothers’ motionless bodies. The sounds of wailing mothers and crying babies was enough to break any human’s heart.” Two hundred thousand innocent civilians dead. 6.7 million displaced. Over three million refugees were kids under the age of five. Millions of people suffering for a war they did not start. Yet no-one showed mercy. Pointing guns at toddlers’ heads and terrorizing paralysed mothers. Eight years of conflict. Over 400 thousand civilians killed by their own government. The streets of Syria layered with the dead bodies of the fallen. Eight years of conflict. Still no sign of peace. They said they would come and help yet they never arrived. Instead they sent air raids, which don’t always hit their target. Last week they got her brother. Now she was alone and homeless. The streets were layered with the dead bodies of the fallen. Yet she had nowhere else to go.

Nowhere. She’d heard of some people getting out of Syria. As refugees. That was the only thing she could dream of. But many died in the process. Hundreds had boarded boats only built to take ten. Many reached countries but were kept in refugee camps or ended up in detention centres. Anger surged through her as she kicked a piece of rubble from a destroyed tank on the footpath. They said they would come and help. Instead they got her brother and left her here to die. She had no-one now. This 11yr old girl’s name was Sukayna and this is her story. Eight years. Eight years she had been stuck in a war-stricken country. Her home and family were both taken from her. She was one of the 11 million Syrians without a home. She had nowhere safe to go. In the North Bashar Al-Assad’s army had been bombing rebels for months. He didn’t even care for the innocent civilians caught up in the bombings. His own people. And in the south was Daesh. Everyone knew what they would do to little girls like her. Sukayna remembered three months ago before Daesh and the American Air raids what her father had told the family. “If we ever get separated or Daesh comes to our village, we leave for Turkey. From there we get on a boat and pray to Allah we reach Europe or Australia.” The next week Daesh got her parents in a cowardly suicide bombing. She remembered the bomb sounded like a clock going tick, tock, tick, tick just before it blew. She was only two blocks away and the screams of despair and pain and agony haunted her every time she closed her eyes. After that her elder brother Jalloh who was only 13 tried to get them safety. They were only a day or two away from the Turkish border when he died in air raid. The air raid was not even from the enemy. It was aimed at Daesh from USA. Nowhere was safe.



Black Ice

BY PHOENIX

A blanket of darkness had covered the land, concealing the Lich king. All except for his bright sapphire eyes piercing the smoke, as if it was a knife cutting butter. The menacing figure of the Lich king towered over the army of dwarves and what was two blue dots was now a blinding light.

“Fall back,” cried the sergeant.

But it was too late. The darkness subsided revealing the Lich king and in its grasp the corpse of the dwarf sergeant. Through his helmet the lich whispered two words, “Eternal winter.” Waving his hand, a dome of ice materialised, covering the land. Snow fell from the sky painting every surface white. Any attempt of escape was futile. The Lich towered over the imprisoned dwarves. “I will show you the way to the grave. I will show you the true meaning of fear.” He unsheathed his broad sword from its scabbard, its steel reflecting the face of the Lich. The face of death. He delivered a blow to the army of dwarves causing the ground to tremble.

“We have to get down there,” shouted Maxwell through his gritted teeth. They were stationed on the cliff ledge overlooking the confrontation below. Bobus shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.” Maxwell clenched his hands; he couldn’t stand by and do nothing while the dwarves were in peril. Patience was not in his nature. He had to do something. Maxwell made a break for the nearby slope and

used the snow to cushion his landing. Through the roaring winds Maxwell cried the Lich’s name. The Lich stopped mid stride, its attention now drawn towards Maxwell. “You want me?” he cried. “I’m right here!” Their swords clashed. Attacks were exchanged but none hit their mark. It was as if they were fighting themselves. It was as if they were both kids again.

The old man stared at the two kids intently, his gaze as cold as metal. Studying the two children’s every move. Maxwell countered each blow, his timing better than the last. He could end it now and it would all be over. In a blink of an eye, Maxwell had his sword at striking distance from his brother’s face. He had won. He always won. “Bravo Maxwell. You never cease to amaze me,” cried the father. Samuel hid his envy of his older brother. This was nothing new. Their father favoured Maxwell. Samuel was treated as an outsider. Covering his tears Samuel made a break for the door. All he wanted was to run. Run away from this place, to somewhere he was accepted.

Samuel took shelter in a nearby cave, using the rocks as a support to rest on. The winds were relentless, and he was too tired to walk any further. It had been three days since he had left home. His clothes were torn, and his arms were scarred. Water and food were nowhere to be seen. He had lost all hope and all that was left was envy. Envious of his older brother. Envious that he was left with the scraps of what his father had given Maxwell. He was always father’s last priority, always the last thing he thought about. He grabbed a blue crystal from his back pocket. It glowed in the dark cave, emitting a soft blue light. All the pain and envy were going to disappear.

10K



Letting Go

BY JOSHUA

Nikoli trudged through the dense undergrowth, cushioning his every stride. Birds chattered in the treetops, masking any misplaced steps. He proceeded to move towards the vantage point, cautious with every tread. Nikoli could see his target below in his workshop, clanging away at a sword hilt. This was the easiest 100 gold pieces in his life. Nikoli had read the craftsman's dossier which said that little was known about him and that he had no apprentices. This tied in with being a remote area of the Herden Forest meant that this job worked perfectly for the Assassin Guild's main rule: No witnesses.

Nikoli carefully slid down the small hill, timing every movement with the craftsman's mighty strikes. He slowly crept up to the craftsmen's workshop, his concentration consumed by his work. Nikoli drew his dagger, approached the craftsman and within a flash turned him around to see his face. Emotions flooded Nikoli's conscious, stopping him. "Grandad?"

The man, startled by an unwelcome guest had raised his hammer in defence. "I have no idea who you are, please don't hurt me!"

Nikoli removed his hood and cowl, revealing a tender man's face. "It's me Grandad! It's me Nikoli, your little bear!"

The craftsman was astonished. How could this masked man that was sent to kill him claim to be his grandchild? He squinted

harder at Nikoli, noticing the large ornate bow on his back.

"That bow on your back... Where did you get that bow?" questioned the craftsman, grasping his forge hammer close.

"You made it for me when I was ten. Remember when we went hunting for Moss Elk? How I almost shot a Forest Fae?"

The craftsman gripped Nikoli tightly in his arms, tears rolling down his sooted face. The two, locked in silence exchange loving glances. "I thought I had lost you," Nikoli whispered.

"You have."

With that sentence, his grandfather began to fade out of existence. Nikoli stood still in awe as his grandfather was reduced to dust. Nikoli had nothing left but himself and his wits, but even that was weak. He fell to the floor, clasping what remained of his grandfather and released a heartbreaking scream. In the distance, he could hear high pitched laughter that was all too familiar to him. Fae.

Nikoli knew what must be done. He tried to pick himself up, but grief shackled him to the floor. Every step tormented his soul, every breathe agony. Nikoli bolted through the lush forest, chasing the Fae's unsettling laughter until the sound was gone. He was so engulfed by rage that he hadn't noticed where he was running... until he looked down. Beneath him was a large mossy rock engraved with dwarven runes that read:

Here lies Nikoli Belinski, loving father, husband and grandfather.

You will always be our Little Bear.





U K

Aldia

BY MICHAEL

In the middle of the flowerbed he stood, lit by the pale moonlight. He was tall, well built, had an ivory funnel-neck coat which framed his body modestly, a pair of light under-framed glasses. His hair was a pristine snow-white, in contrast with his youthful features, his skin being as pale and smooth as porcelain. Kirstein had failed to notice the complete scene before him. He was captivated by this man's presence, the flowerbeds were not an ordinary sight, but rather, the innocent petals were stained in blood, and bodies, utterly removed of any life, lay still upon the grounds.

"Beautiful," Kirstein thought. He could not help that this man, coupled with the canvas of death in which he stood, mesmerized him. "Why was it that beauty is more deeply entwined with death than with life?"

His musings were cut short when the man turned to face him. His eyes met a cold, vivid gaze without any expression; the bangs of this man's hair and the length of his coat danced gently with the wind. That this arbitrary thing would seem to be so harmonious and fitting to this setting imprinted deeply on to Kirstein's mind. "Aldia... Had he done all this alone?"

Aldia turned his body to face him. His body was blank, so to speak, conveying no intended action, yet the weapon he held in his right hand, a black and lance-shaped weapon, emphasized all too well what his presence meant.

Kirstein tried to arouse a feeling in him which would compel him to fight with all he had, but when he readied himself to fight with sorrow, rage, vengeance, the feeling which arose in him was despair.

Kirstein prepared his strategy, thinking "should I wait for him to strike first? No, I mustn't let him take initiative. I'll strike first, throw him off."

Aldia lowered his head slightly, signing that he was focused. Kirstein tightened the grip on his sword, and just when he hunched and prepared to run at him and prepare his strike, suddenly, Kirstein felt a deep stunning ache and lacerating radiation through his belly, his throat convulsed. Blood forced its way out his mouth, and he tasted its iron-tint as it caked his teeth. "What the...!" He was wide open. "Where did he?" Kirstein swiftly turned behind him and saw Aldia, wearing the same stoic expression, except now there was a small splatter of blood on the right lens of his glasses and some droplets of red dripped from the end of his weapon.

Kirstein panicked, he felt terror, but not any ordinary terror. He felt a religious terror course through his veins; it was the fear of God which flowed fast through him. Kirstein prepared to run, not bothering to look back at the deity behind him. "Calm down... Calm down. I'm fine, it's alright, I can still fle..." The vision of his left eye vanished as he felt something cold and hard pierce through the back of his skull. Blood-choked screams escaped his throat. His thoughts were racing... "It's through my head, it's through my head..."



10K



Natasha

BY NATHAN

Natasha was born in a rural house. Ever since a child, she would always cheer up in the presence of her family. Her parents were everything to her. But... everything was taken away.

*

In the pitch black, the night sky was crying, drenching the vast, grass field surrounding the isolated house. Natasha in the arms of her mum; soothing her down with her delicate voice, stroking Natasha's head whilst dad was doing the dishes. The little girl peeped outside the window as the distant trees blew about by the cutting winds. Then, within the mist of the dark, she spotted a faint, dark object, moving along the wave of the trees.

"What is that?"

The home-schooled girl wondered. "Mum! Outside!" The chill suddenly emerged in the air; mum paused her singing.

"What is it?" In doubt, she checked outside.

Mum gasped.

Clang!

The ceramic plate shattered. Dad stood there paralysed.

There were faint footsteps approaching the house.

The door barged open, revealing three black hooded men. Natasha stood there dumbfounded; millions of thoughts ran in her head. In a matter of seconds, mum snatched Natasha into her tight, the strangers rushed in, interfered by dad struggling to buy time for Natasha and mum to flee. Natasha took a glimpse at mum's face; it was a devastating first sight, a reflection of terror. Although Natasha was confused the situation, she was able to take a hint from mum's face; something bad was happening.

Rushing upstairs, hearing the groans of dad suffering, sacrificing himself for their escape, mum's heart shredded apart. She continued to the end of the stairway. Mum with her quick-thinking brain, opened the window, tricking the strangers

to thinking that they escaped, shifting to hide in the secret room. Bang! A loud topple was heard. Natasha shrieked. Mum was in despair, flattened by the loss of her other half, she mourned.

"Come out!" The voice echoed through the hollow stairway, as they stomped their way up. The strangers heard the wind very clearly. They hustled towards the noise, noticed the open window.

"Damn it! They ran away!" They scurried outside in the rain.

Meanwhile, the strangers were in search for the two, mum overlapping her sweaty hand over Natasha's mouth keeping her quiet. Mum's hand trembled violently. Natasha gently peeled her mum's hands away with her tiny paw, turning around with her puppy-like eyes. "We gonna be OK?"

Mum with a strain smiled at the child who knew nothing, stroked Natasha's hair, "Yes."

In the dark, where they hid, a distant ray of light from other rooms revealed a glimpse of mum's face; it was drenched with cold sweat. The two hid until the right moment. "Let's go." Mum clothed Natasha with a raincoat.

Mum with Natasha in her grasp, with nimble movement fled the house, repetitively looking back at the rays of torch light, gleaming in all directions.

They scampered away, heading for the forest. But then a gleam of light showed behind them. "Shit!" Mum bit her lips.

They scurried through the forest, mum grasping Natasha tight in her arms. The prickly branches shredding through mum's legs. Mum's blue dress, all torn up, drenched and muddy. Mum's legs grew heavier and heavier, voices were approaching, the gap was closing. Mum scanned the surroundings, placing Natasha behind a casting rock, suitable for Natasha to be hidden. "Stay here, I'll be back." Natasha in desperation, reached out only to grasp empty air, then withdrawing.

Natasha waited for her mum. She was scared. The dark, chilly mist of rain, showering over her. She waited, but Mum did not come. Her anxiety grew. Then reality struck her hard. Natasha fell on her knees, traumatised... Natasha emerged, with a dark, lifeless eyes. The birth of the hollow girl who lost everything.



K
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Free

BY THARANI

I stared out the 30th floor window, gazing down at the specks of people below me. I let out a deep sigh. Another day, the same view. I looked beyond the city, into the green hills glimmering in the distance, urging me to come and find peace with them. I deserve that after all this time. It's been three years now, and it was getting worse. It was all because of him.

His voice still haunts me. "You know why I'm here son..."

I shook my head; his calm, horrifying voice still traumatized me. I looked down. I almost wouldn't regret taking that one-way ticket to the ground-floor. Almost.

If it wasn't for Evelyn, I would've jumped a long time ago. She was the one thing keeping me sane. She was younger than me, but the exact replica of our mother. The same nurturing presence followed her, the same soothing voice. Mother would've been proud.

Maybe it wasn't worth it. It could all stop, with one simple jump...

"Wouldn't do that if I were you."

I glanced over my shoulder, a woman in a long jet-black dress stood behind me.

"Evelyn," I smiled.

She was holding a suitcase in front of her. Her tear-filled eyes met with mine. She was the spitting image of Mother, almost too perfect.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I talked to Dad," she said, wiping away the spills of

blood from my bruised cheeks. "He's letting you go."

I stared back in disbelief. "What?!"

"I talked to him." She averted her eyes down. "Said some things I probably shouldn't have."

Tears began welling up in my eyes. For so long, I waited for freedom, and here it was.

"You can't stay in the city," she said, her voice breaking. "Go to the green hills. You've always wanted to go there."

She smiled up at me. I forced a painful grin as she handed me the suitcase. I wasn't the type to express my feelings, I had my father to thank for that. She enveloped me in a hug, her tears dampening my clothes. I let the tears pour. She was my saviour, always will be.

"What about you?" I asked.

She left me with one last heartbreaking smile.

"I'll be fine."

I left the room making my way to the elevator. Suddenly, behind me, shouts and bellows shook the room. I turned around. Three guards grabbed Evelyn, and began dragging her away, like she was an animal.

She remained calm, gazing at me prouder than ever. A man in a black suit stood behind her. He glared at me, the anger residing within his eyes.

"Father," I muttered.

Evelyn smiled back at me, "It's ok."

She couldn't. I can't let. She didn't deserve it.

"Go!" she yelled, getting pulled away, her smile just as lively as ever.

"You're free..."

The doors closed in front of me to the sound of a deafening bang.

10K



And I Hate It

BY HENRY

My body is in agony.

Or at least... it would've been. If I had arms, they'd be sore. If I had legs, they'd collapse. If I had my shoulders and hips, they'd give out. My organics have long been replaced by robotics, but the pain still persists, like a thorn in my side.

And I hate it.

My workmate, L7363, pulls out another rivet from his cuirass pouch and lines it up for me to swing. I raise my hammer and bring it down like the hammer of Thor.

With each rivet hammered down, two credits are wiped off of my 20 million credit debt. With each swing, I am one step closer to freedom, and with each action of my cybernetics, one step closer to repossession. A tingle runs down my 'spine' at the thought of repossession. If work efficiency is too low or does not meet minimum standard, merciless retribution come at the hands of the Taxmen, who descend, clad in proto-shields and amour, forcefully replacing your old 'limbs' with new cybernetics, with the cost added to your debt.

If you cannot pay the debt or the debt is too great, they'll brain shelve you. Your brain will stay inert, barely conscious, and remain there until your friends and family can clear

away your initial debt. The Taxmen will then graciously release what's left of you, and when, and only when, your loved ones can afford to buy a new rig to house your brain, you will be able to return to a functional, 'normal' life.

Lights turn green, the sound of a bell reverberates throughout the tunnel as the shift ends. Splashing coolant dances around my 'legs' as they fall into the river as I begin my ascent back to Fortuna - one of many debt internment colonies in Venus. The elevator door opens, and I shuffle in with my fellow co-workers; my fellow 'family'.

The door swings open after what seems like a eon, and bright neon purple and blue nights flood my optics.

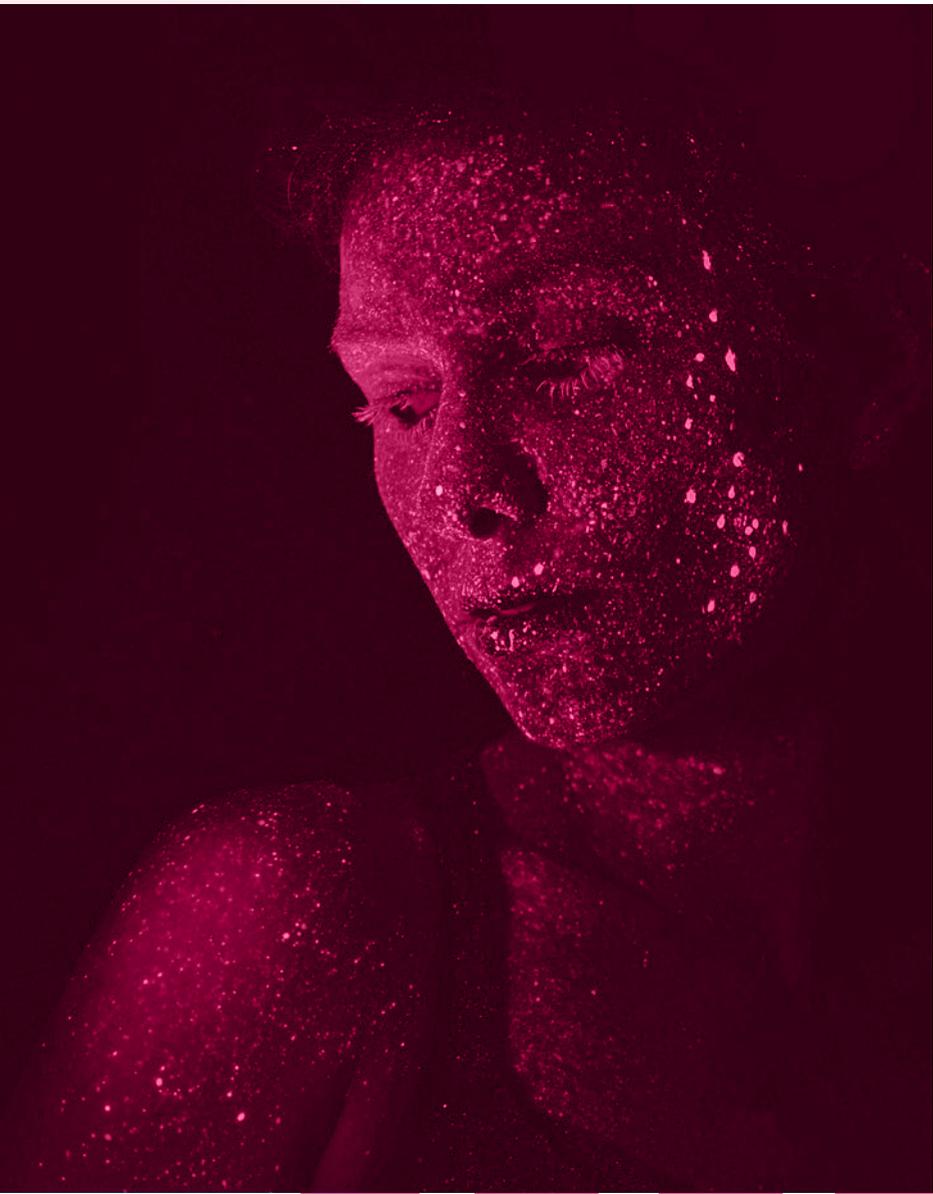
I have reached Fortuna.

My optics finally accommodate the sudden brightness change, and I move to the timetable to sign out. I look up to admire the elegantly carved out caverns that make up the 'sky'; the roof. But instead of seeing lights, I see Taxmen.

I have run out of time.

The Taxmen descend, knock me into darkness. My life becomes agony for a second time. I cannot see anything, the darkness and comfort of my rig deceiving me. I can still hear the garbling of the Taxmen language as I feel my 'body' being heaved. Tiredness drifts over me, but fear and nausea betray my drooping eyelids. I can almost feel the beating heart of my old body, the feeling of my legs turning into dust, darkness looms over me.

And I hate it.



LOK

Little Gracie

BY MADISON

Little Gracie lost her parents while waiting in line at a food truck in Beijing while on holidays. She bent down to fix her shoelace. She stood back up and her parents were gone. She felt a surge of panic rising up through her body; dropping her worn teddy bear she crumpled into a hopeless heap on the ground next to it. Whimpers were the only sound she could bring herself to make, and in this sea of people, no one noticed poor little Gracie, except for one man who had been watching the whole time.

This man ran up to Gracie shouting “Gracie! I’m so sorry we left you behind, your mother is over here. Gosh we thought we lost you!” Gracie sighed with great relief “Oh Dad, I thought I lost both of you!” This man was not her father, but a man disguised to look exactly like him, and she was soon to find out. The man led Gracie to a secluded alleyway. Gracie had the inkling that something wasn’t quite right. Before having the chance to question this man who now seemed unfamiliar, he already had a cloth doused in chloroform pressed up to her tiny mouth, and the more she fought the more lightheaded she became. She eventually passed out.

Gracie woke with a pounding in her temples, ankles

strapped tightly to the front legs of a rotting wooden chair, hands bound together by cable ties behind her back. The back frame of the chair digging into her thin forearms. Darting her eyes around the cold metal box she was trapped in, she saw two other people bound to chairs as well. Her parents. “MUM! DAD!” she screamed. Both battered, bloodied and bruised they faced her in terror and heartache.

An intercom let out a booming voice from above them, it spoke: “Karen, Peter, we know of your plan to kill our President and for this you will receive capital punishment of the highest level. “Leave our daughter out of this. This was between my wife, the Australian Government and me. Let our daughter go home or you will regret your choices.” The intercom answered the threat with a derogatory laugh, continuing to snarl it bellowed; “One of you will have to pay, one of you doesn’t get to leave, so who will it be? You have thirty seconds to decide. Go.”

Gracie’s parents looked at each other in trepidation. “I’ll stay,” Gracie’s father spoke out defiantly. “NO!” screamed Karen, but it was too late. Peter had already been swallowed whole by a trap door underneath his chair, and with that he was gone. He had vanished so quickly into thin air, just he had at the food truck. “You two are free to leave. Your memories will both be wiped to ensure the safety and security of our countries Government and Intelligence units.” Gracie shot her mother a look of perturbed sadness, knowing her dad was gone for good this time.





FOR



Countdown

BY MYLENE

Time is the essence of life. In the year 3000, time is a currency and lifeline. With a ticking countdown on their arm as a constant reminder, people were living in a nightmare. From the first breath of life a new-born baby takes, the countdown begins. In this current day and age, time is literally your life. Run out of time? You're dead.

Fifty years from this day, citizens of the world were sent to be genetically engineered in a way that changed their living situations forever. Categorised as a lesser privileged citizen from the time of his birth, he was sent to live in the slums, separated from the privileged by a border. Rumours scattered the slums with hope that the other side is the way to immortality. Determination had changed Dylan when his last living family member died from the same cause of death as everyone else: he had run out of time. Equipped with a ceaseless reminder of the eight-hour countdown till his imminent death, it constantly ticked away on his arm. He carefully designed plan to attempt to escape to the other side, Dylan struggled to attempt to better the life he currently lived.

Running right at the centre of the world is a border, that can only be passed by authorised personnel. An inspector from the other side came through the slums weekly to assess the situation. Wearing the same white outfit with guns on holsters around their waist, he paraded around the slums, flashing the hundreds of years ticking away on their countdown

while providing no support to the poor. He sneered at the homeless and laughed in the face of the dying. Dylan had concluded that the inspector was his only way ticket out, and with his countdown now at the three-hour mark, he knew that if he didn't act fast, there would be nothing else but death awaiting him. Hiding in one of the many shifty alleyways, he waited for the inspector with anticipation coursing through his mind and what he was going to have to do next.

The unfamiliar rumbling from the expensive vehicle jerked Dylan back to reality. Picking up the biggest stone in his sight, he flung it with as much strength and accuracy as possible toward the window. It shattered the glass, hitting the head of the inspector with enough force to knock him out.

Dylan dragged the inspector's body out of the vehicle, changed into the white uniform, ensuring that it is speckless and clean, in order not to be called out. One hour. Despite speeding through the slums, Dylan was not anticipating how far the border was and the hour could be seen slowly ticking away on his arm and the promise of death. Nearing the border, he wiped all fear and doubt that was prominent on his face and approached the security guard guarding the gates to his freedom. His confidence faltered when he was asked for identification to prove his identity. That's when he knew that it was too late; he was caught.

One minute. With a gun to his back walking through the tunnel, he realised that life had never been fair. The privileged held guns to the heads of the innocent, murdering the young and hiding behind their immortality, towering pitilessly over the poor. As he neared towards the light at the end of the tunnel, he saw the truth. The world was cruel. There was no hope for anyone. Time's up.



10K

The Man Who We Never Knew

BY AARON

A short and built man, dressed in an all-black suit and Ray-Ban, mirrored sunglasses bulged out in the middle of a packed city. As he stepped towards a shiny black SUV he took his sharp jacket off his broad shoulders to keep it intact from creases.

“Stop it, you’re going to hurt people,” Joseph warned his mate with laughter. As they shoved each other, Joseph struck the dark, anonymous man with his hand flat. The man’s Ray-Ban’s flew off his face.

“I’m so sorry, it was an accident,” Joseph apologised with a smirk. Black_White stood still with both hands in the pocket of his tight pants, spitting out bloody saliva in calm anger. The stare of his eagle eyes penetrated through Joseph’s eyes.

“Who... are you?” His deep and guttural voice revealing itself as he bent down to fetch his sunglasses. And without a word, Joseph darted way out, leaving a trail of wet marks along the run. Black_White whistled and swung his keys around, gently laying his butt on the Nappa leather seat. In less than a second his splendid SUV chased down Joseph. “I’m not done with you boy,” Black_White whispered in Joseph’s ear.

“Mm! Mm!” The groan of a boy was disguised by the roaring exhaust pipe. The sudden brake rolled Joseph’s body around the trunk.

“Don’t make a sound, otherwise I will, I promise you I will, chop each finger off and your head will be last,” Black_White quickly but calmly warned. Joseph gave another groan, signalling that he understood the instruction. Joseph’s head was wrapped with a rice bag and all his limbs were taped; impossible for a skinny boy break and run. All he could feel was the rough shoulder of Black_White on his stomach, the smell of wet soil, and the echoey room-like building. He was set on a chair with a rope tied around his body. The humid bag was freed from his face. “Please, let me go and I won’t say a word about today to anyone,” Joseph begged.

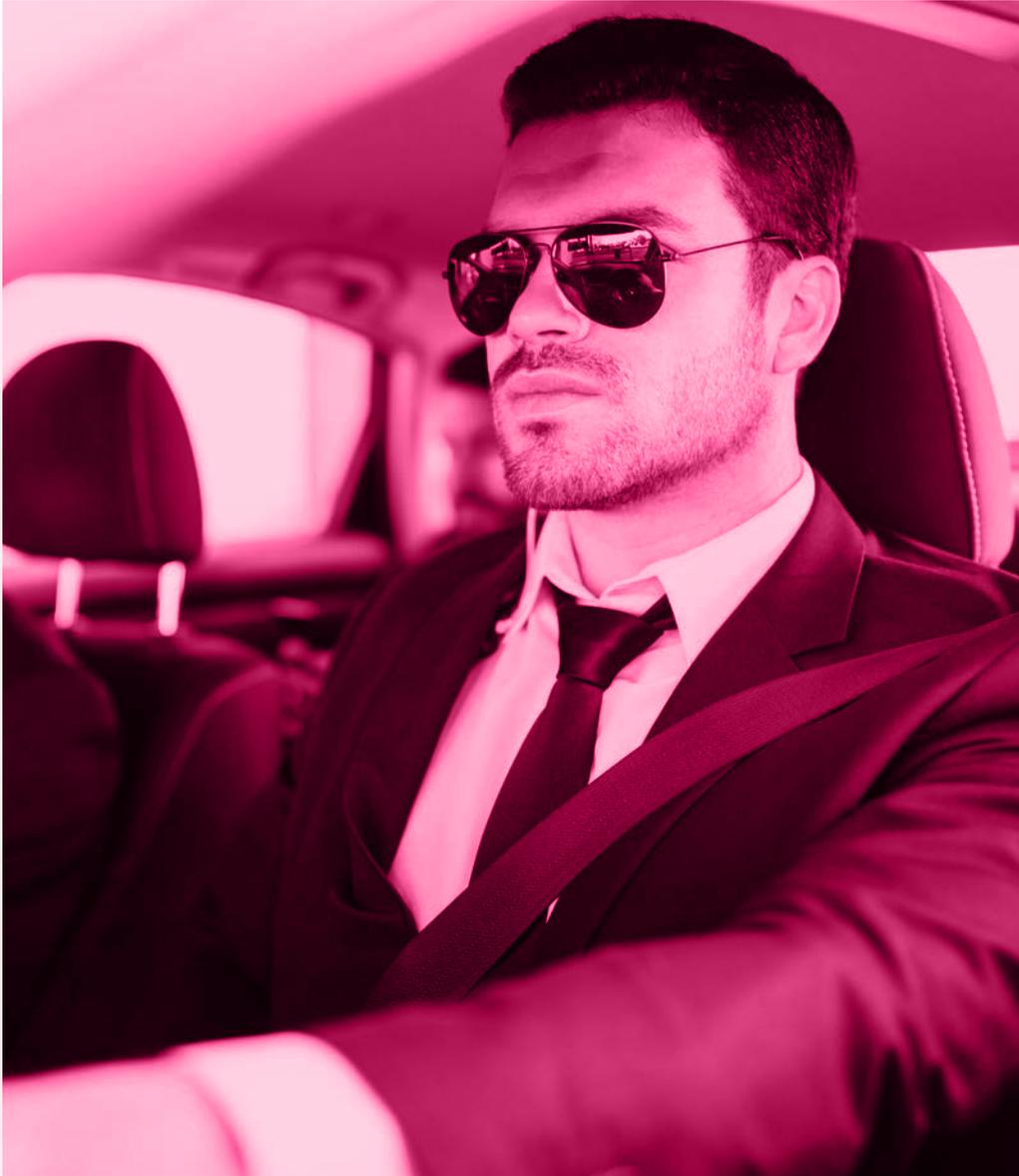
Black_White afforded no word, however, he introduced some tools he had right next to him. “This is called a saw, and it will be used to cut each and every bit of you if you don’t shut up!” Black_White screamed in Joseph’s face.

“Boss, what’s happening?” The man in the middle clicked his tongue as a trio walked in. This was the moment when Joseph realised that he was caught in something big; he had to get out.

Joseph vigorously vibrated his body back and forth; facing upwards he started chanting in gibberish. All four dark men were startled, glanced at each other, but there was no sign of Joseph stopping the abnormal behaviours.

“Cut him free, hurry!” Black_White demanded. Picking up his pistol, he pointed it at the wild Joseph. As soon as he was free, he continued the spasm on the ground, waiting for them to get help, to escape from death.

1014



Abalone

BY JOHNNY

"I am leaving, my dearest companions. Wish me luck, wait for my triumph." George petted the head of his sheepdog Lucy, left his chalet and strode into the blazing sun. George was the only farmer in the Lamina Farm. All sheep besides Jack, the bellwether, had been sold. Therefore, Lucy sought out Jack. Jack lived on a shady monticule of meadowland.

"Hey Jack, how is everything going?" Lucy barked as she leaped on the monticule, stabilizing her body with her foreclaws.

"Lack of sheep again?" Jack grunted. She was still sulky about her flock of sheep being sold.

"George is gone, time for some thrill!" Lucy wagged.

Before Jack replied, Lucy released her claws. Lucy, knowing that Jack would follow her, jogged to coast.

"Do you like ocean? I don't." Lucy gazed long into the deep.

"Sea water would jam the sweat gland on my hoof" Jack scanned upon the shoreline, enjoying herself in the intoxicating breeze. While Lucy was concentrating on feeling the sun doing her good she saw a shell with polished spiral pattern, not far away from where they were, gracefully sitting in the dirty seawater. Lucy's sight refracted into the water and created a mysterious, blurry yet voluptuous figure.

"Look at that," Lucy mumbled, carried away by it, leaving an indelible stain on her memory.

Neither Lucy nor Jack thought that this haphazard discovery would put them into great danger.

"What is this?" Lucy sat entranced by its beauty.

"It is an abalone, it was the reason that George left, to hunt these magnificent creatures," Jack, also amazed, explained subconsciously.

"Look at the delicate lines." Lucy was fascinated by it.

"My greeting. My name is Mer – Mer Mantanani." The abalone spoke with gentle suaveness.

"Oh! My precious, who is the fairest in the land?" Lucy yelled.

The abalone fell silent.

"You are! My precious! You are the fairest in the land," Lucy fawned.

As Lucy kept barking, Jack realized that they are wasting time and left without a sound. Lucy thought that it was rightly so she stayed. Lucy gritted her teeth and plunged into the cold sea. She paddled toward the abalone ridiculously. Lucy saw dreamlike scenery: varieties of corals – sea stars, crabs, shrimp and worms feeding themselves in the limbs of these corals as birds and insects do in the branches of trees in a rainforest. The salty tang of the sea slowly took over Lucy's consciousness. The last thing she saw before she fainted was nothing but a siren abalone and a sheep clumsily swimming to her, saving her from her ignorance. The sheep carried her half-fainted body. She headbutted the grim reaper away from her. They escaped from the abyss.

*

The fisherman returned with nets of abalones. Jack crept to him with her new flock of sheep, she carried some of his burden. Lucy jogged to him, fawning.

"Another day wasted," Jack murmured.

"You can't go back to before, besides, you learnt something," Lucy replied.





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