

"The Kwyll"



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Issue 12

Summer 2017

A collection of writing by people you know!

Welcome to the 12th edition of the Kwyll. Our writing magazine was established to provide an outlet for the many creative talents of our pupils. Each edition we bring you some of the finest work being produced in class and at home. I have included many pieces which were written for submission in the portfolio of writing for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher levels to help inspire our younger pupils.

The writing is as varied as you would expect and has been collated by theme. This year our stories and poems explore, and test, the human capacity for suffering and endurance. Ultimately our pupils have offered an optimistic outlook as each writer seeks to find a compassionate or redeeming feature in their characters. Furthermore, many of our writers force their protagonists to face the consequences of their actions, and in doing so explore the interconnected nature of human life.

Of particular merit are the pieces by our department competition winners: Malcolm Campbell, F6, Lucie Kelly, F5 and Emily Baxter, F3. So too are our longer pieces such as Imogen's "The Friend". I hope you enjoy the varied pieces and are inspired to write your own stories and poems.

Mrs Morven Ovenstone-Jones, English Department
September 2017

Animals and the Natural World

Bright Flamingos

by Ella Stanford F2.

Standing tall, bright beaks to the sky,
corals, oranges, reds and pinks puffed and feathered,
thin slivering necks poised and stretched,
stick legs bending both ways at the knee,
wild flirtatious flamingos gather in the shallows
like pink plastic lawn ornaments - but much more!
Free in a flamboyance of flamingos
with toucan beaks and alert eyes -
exotic creatures of the skies,
eye catching and stalk walking.

Flying in a flock they are graceful yet gangly
with large batting wings bellowing,
long legs dangle and necks stretch out for flight.
A troupe of flamingos glide across the stage,
flying with the clouds bold and bright
plumages of feathers ruffle in the breeze,
vivid in rich colour reflecting light.
They parade around proud and at ease
but wade about in the mud as they please
like emperor penguins, beaks-bright.

But short from flight
they no longer fly through the night
but, flamenco bright, two romantically stand
beak in beak, like a heart their necks curve, on the sand.

Caterpillar

By Ellie Hunter-Franks F3

A spherical gem of life, so tiny,
Incubating, ready to hatch, cracking,
Within this world brand new and shiny
Blossoming, the start of the beginning.

A squirming, wriggling, caterpillar,
Munching away, on leaves, every day
The segmented green hairy wriggler
The fuzzy larva, paralysed in a haze.

The pupa suspended, isolated,
Encased by leathery exterior,
Chrysalis protecting them secluded,
A brown wrap concealed like a barrier.

Then unfurling beautiful wings,
Waiting to see what its future brings.

Haikus

Rebecca Ritchie F1

The flower stalk bends
To wind's commanding presence.
Springs back graciously.

Poppie MacKenzie F2

Standing outside, cold
Wind breezing against my face.
Thoughts drifting away.

Eleanor Anderson F1

A storm is coming.
Crashing waves against my face.
Stuck on an island.

From a Mouse

by Ivan Kapelyukh, F6

Thee - wickit, tow'rin, murd'rous beastie,
Ere winter's whistling winds come hasty,
To which thy pleughing has condemned me,
- I curse! Damned, rot!
Thou feignest virt'ous sympathy,
Yet giest nocht!

The honest schemes o' mice look fair,
Nigh man's selfish, cruel warfare,
Tae fellow man, the trees, chaste air:
Doom. Nature grieves!
Ye plunder Earth without despair,
Then call mice thieves!

Sic simple a life's a blessing, ye say,
Yet heaven holds nae bird o' prey,
Which hunts man's bairns thro' night an' day,
Thou, fiercest beast!
Grim time both beasts an' man wull end,
Dear mortal friend.

Broken Friend

by Alice Inman, Advanced Higher

Single cell shifts,
Silent,
Depth of the obscure abyss,
The balance undone.

A whisper- I ignored it-
But it latched on.
Assertive,
Growing untended.

Clusters of cells divide;
The whisper amplified by many voices.
Feeding, nibble by nibble, festering,
The poison leaks into my bloodstream.

Denial.

Suffocated by the unavoidable mass.
I tried to run. Confrontation caught me.
You seized the opportunity and tore me with your tongue.

Hatred nursed me through round one.
But the poison gutted my strength.
Fluorouracil killed the memories, numbed the ache.

Emotions resist- the pain fights through.
Mastectomy was needed, the knives sharper than needles.
My tarnished treasure:
Amputated.

Slice her. Make a clean break.

Ensure no recurrence.

Drastic. Surreal.

The choice was never mine.

Harsh words cease, an eerie silence falls.

Were her eyes swollen and sore from the hours spent at a loss?

Her forehead tight, tensed and stretched,

Her heart sickened with hate?

Did she even grieve our death,

Or does she dance on the grave?

Unanswered questions haunt and linger,

Fresh wounds remain beneath my scars.

Regret invades, infects, infests.

Years roll by, bravery matures.

No longer hiding, hating, crying.

Youth reaches expiry.

Acceptance.

We learn to listen to the whispers.

Our lives progress,

The blame decays.

Lies gone.

Things went wrong,

It doesn't matter why.

Flight 175 by Nicoll Butter F5

I didn't open my eyes until the wheels hit the tarmac. With the final thud, a husky voice exclaimed to us that we had reached our destination. As the passengers clapped like sea lions, I exhaled loudly, not realising I'd been holding my breath the entire time. I flexed my fingers- which were still a pale eggshell colour from clenching the armrest. As blood began circulating through my hands again, I tried to take deep breaths and slow my heart, which was thrumming like a hummingbird in a cage. Neil yawned loudly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He saw the state I was in and patted my knee, as if I were a collie rather than his wife. Light glared through the tiny window. In my exhausted state it was as if I had woken up in a glossy magazine. New York. Galway seemed so far away; three thousand and sixty four miles away exactly, I found that out before we left. Also, that aeroplanes were the cause of over a thousand deaths last year alone. My legs had not stopped shaking since I sat down in seat 3C; the first eleven rows are the most dangerous-I read that too.

If the flying experience was bad, getting out made it look effortless. As bags dropped from the overhead like dogs in summer heat, there was a competition, apparently, for who could get out fastest. The rabble brought my anxiety right back; I hate crowds. How the hell was I supposed to last two weeks in the city? Neil dropped his hand on my shoulder, "Clodagh," he says. "You need to get up now love." True I was getting questionable looks from the other passengers, but I wasn't sure I could stand. I hadn't had feeling in my feet since we boarded. My legs shook like a shirt in a hurricane. Grabbing the seat in front like a guard rail, I slowly lifted myself off the leather seat, peeling my clothes off that were sticking with sweat.

Trundling down the steps, clinging to the banister, my surroundings adjusted in the bright sky. It wasn't long until we arrived at the John F. Kennedy International Airport terminal, a large curvy building with a very busy atmosphere. Tourists, businessmen and employees were running past us, a blur in the ongoing crowd. At the immigration desk, I

handed over my passport to the young man who eyed me suspiciously as I tried to steady my shaky hands. I must have looked like a fugitive. Neil couldn't stop laughing. I'm ushered over to a spot by a big, bulky man who pats me down, trying to find god knows what. I couldn't help but stare at him- I've never seen a black man before.

The only sort-of illegal thing I've ever done is when I accidentally drove into my neighbour Siobhan's hydrangeas when I turned to scold my daughter in the back seat. And even then I apologised for weeks, even baked her an apple pie to say sorry. Apple pies seem to float around in my mind as we gather our suitcases from baggage claim. Thinking of the hydrangeas and pies and my daughter snapped me back to reality. I'm going to see my son.

Connor has been in New York for three months now, training to be a big businessman like in the movies. The scholarship paid for his flights over and even for his tuition at NYU. Thank god my other children stayed in Ireland with us, I could hardly cope losing one. People thought I was crazy raising my triplets on such a small income, but if anything it brought us all closer. We relied on each other more. Cristopher studied medicine and settled down with two kids. Catherine plays football for an all-girls team and has ambitions of being some superstar athlete. I told her what my mother told me, "Women are no use in the world of work dear, just have kids and love them." I took that very seriously; I love my children more than anything in the world. The thought of losing any of them is unthinkable, and all of a sudden I'm crying in the middle of the airport. Neil's used to my episodes and random outbursts. He just leads me aside and rubs my back, mumbling in my ear, calm, calm down. I blame it on my hormones, these new pills I'm taking for menopause. He doesn't ask questions.

Connor. The thought brings me back, he's waiting here somewhere, ready to take me in his arms; I can almost smell him. See his devilish smile, hair bright and orange like the most beautiful sunset. I don't have favourite children, but he's always had a special place in

my heart. The only one who didn't sneak around when my back was turned, or drink down by the burn with friends or kiss random girls who don't deserve him. And all of a sudden my fantasy is reality. He's holding a placard of cardboard which reads "Kelly". And I can't stop running. My tears don't stop, and I'm in his arms. He's laughing, a beautiful sound, deep and cheerful. "Mammy" he says over and over. My arms don't seem to work, or my ears, and I can't let go of him. I've missed him so much.

Neil shakes his hand, and I realise how much alike they are physically but so different as well. The same green eyes I love, but different attitudes. Neil has always been a man's man, and Connor has always been my little boy. In the taxi to his apartment, he's filling us all in about his wild life in the big apple. I can see stubble sprouting under his chin. My boy's a man, I think. His flat is pretty small, the scholarship he applied for provides education and a work placement but no accommodation so he's rooming with another Irish boy. He has polaroids hanging on walls; my heart leaps when I see he has a photo of me and him when he was a baby. Another photo shows the view from his office. "North tower" he tells me, "89th floor Mammy, amazing views."

Despite the grey sky, the air is warm for September. My instincts tell me to lick my finger and rub his cheek, there's some marmalade still there. Connor's having work experience at the twin towers. I've never seen such tall buildings. Like two legs of a giant reaching into the sky, they stand over us, huge, intimidating. One hundred and ten floors. Neil and I have a busy day ahead of us, I've got my eye set on the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Before we head off to sight-see, we head into the north tower to see what all the fuss has been about. Connor kisses my forehead, Neil gets another affirming handshake. A tear manages to escape my eye despite my best efforts. He turns, smiles and waves before heading into the elevator. The doors close and my baby's gone. The numbers go up, 9, 10, 11. My pride is unmeasurable. 45, 46, 47.

My heart soars like a plane in the sky. 87, 88, 89.

Nadia: a short history of the passing of time

By Hannah George, Advanced Higher

1 // that old vcr

A high pitched hum of static pierces the air. Black and white fragments flinch across the screen and a picture tentatively emerges from the haze. The two of us; cheeks red with exertion, grinning up towards the camera. Just for a moment. We scamper off towards wizened trees that beckon to us with gnarled branches outstretched. The leafy foliage is full of mystery, an impenetrable labyrinth seething with the magical creations of our imagination. Our plaited hair unravels, tangles, tugs. The present is all that exists. The videos flicker past, condensed, a blur, like our childhood. Yet it seemed infinite. Only now do we realise how short it was. Abruptly the VCR clicks off.

2 // greased lightning

Another summer and we're older now. Too old to be girls, too young to be women. Like the clothes that hang awkwardly on my self-conscious limbs, nothing quite fits. We're trying to grow up but time will not be rushed. It is stubborn. Obstinate. And does not succumb to peer pressure. It is early evening but the heat of the sun stays trapped by the stagnant air. We share a polystyrene box of chips and soon our fingers are slick with grease and the salt stings invisible cuts. The last sliver of sunshine skims the horizon and the sky is ablaze, burning up the last minutes of the day. And then it's time to go. Only now am I becoming aware that time is running out.

3 // silenced by the night

It's night time. We lie on my trampoline staring up at the stars, the deep blackness of the sky swallowing us up. Words flurry freely from our lips. No matter how well you think you know someone, you never truly do. Our delicate thoughts float in the air around us, half formed and unanswered. The night is so still, as though everything is holding its breath. I hold my breath. The sound of nothing fills my ears. The orange glow of the city has never seemed so distant. Right now I am certain time has stopped. This moment is hanging in a state of torpor, wrapped in a cocoon of mercurial moonlight waiting to be woken and reborn as something new.

4 // Edinburgh

The cobblestones of Edinburgh drum beneath my feet. Lost in my own head, I turn a corner and there you are. We both run. The time since we last saw each other melts into insignificance. You have grown your hair long but it is unbrushed as usual. Teetering on the cliff edge of adulthood we can't stop grinning like children. We sit in a cafe that only sells bagels and talk until it is closing. Is that the time? I have to leave. Again. As I walk away I can't help but think we are still the same two girls that we were seventeen years ago, still stuck in our dream world and completely unaware of the passing of time.

The Friend

by Imogen Samuel, Advanced Higher

After he said what he'd got to say they sat in silence. They sat that way at the kitchen table for a long time until he stood, the skin on his face tight as a child's telling a lie. She wanted to say 'I hate you.' But she didn't hate him, and the silence felt like something, something she didn't want to break. They stared at one another, his stare was intense, a stare of unsettling concentration.

When he left he took his coat, a bright orange jacket – the type workmen wear in the road. He wouldn't be back for his other things, she knew. He didn't have much – a pair of trainers that needed throwing out, a couple of T-shirts, three pairs of shorts and a rucksack, a kid's one, with a cartoon character on it she didn't recognise. In it she found a screwed-up shopping list, a broken mobile phone – not that she'd been looking. His things were his. They had his smell about them – slightly musty, not good, but not bad either. After he'd gone she walked around the house trying to see it as he must have seen it when he'd first come, as he'd see it if he ever came back. She paced from room to room, knocking over a vase filled with wilting flowers obstructing her path. Saddened, she gazed into the bathroom mirror hanging precariously above the sink, the damp light feebly illuminating the four walls. She saw that he'd left his wash bag, its contents strewn across any available surfaces. She knew he wouldn't change his mind for a toothbrush.

Back in the kitchen she made a cup of tea, took it to the table and sat there, staring at the vivarium. She did not like having the snake in the kitchen. That had been Ryan's idea. It needed the warmth, he'd said. She hadn't liked it glowering over the upstairs landing either. She wondered how she could get rid of it, now that he'd gone. Her throat felt dry, her skin hot. She went to the cupboard, took out a coffee mug and held it for a moment before dropping it. It made a dull noise as it hit the floor and broke. She broke some plates, too, but nothing made the noise she wanted to hear. She felt she was underwater. The snake stared at her, blankly.

'You depress me'. Those had been Ryan's last words to her.

No one at work knew about Ryan, about the snake. No one at work knew anything about her at all. If you keep yourself to yourself for long enough people start to leave you alone.

To begin with they used to ask her to go with them on their nights out – bowling, to a nightclub, for a meal. She said ‘no’ because the money she made she needed. She never offered an explanation. She didn’t want their kind of sympathy. She always tried to give the impression that she was older than the others, even though she was only thirty-five and there were plenty older. They stopped asking her out after she didn’t go to the Christmas party the second year. That was the year they said they’d treat her and it wouldn’t be a proper celebration without her – Debbie and the others saying ‘she must come’, that it would be a ‘laugh’. But there was nothing in the world that Lisa felt she must do, least of all drink warm white wine in the basement of a Mexican restaurant where she’d be sat in the corner, her view obscured by a plastic cactus plant, and where the Polish waiters would be obliged to wear sombreros, where the smell of chilli would not quite obscure the smell of armpit sweat and where she would try and fail to follow the fractured conversations of people who would not, in any case, be talking to her.

The next day she slept until midday. When she woke she remembered what had happened, what had happened with Ryan. She left a message at the office to say she was sick and then went back to sleep. It was only after dark that she remembered it was a Saturday and that no-one would be there anyway.

Before she went to work on the Monday she hunched her shoulders, dulled her eyes. She found a way of applying make up so that her face looked closed, beyond inquisition. She wore a pair of flat, black leather shoes, a short woollen skirt and thick, purple tights that rode above her knees a little. She combed her hair so that it looked uncombed. She smelled slightly of antiseptic. She tended to alternate between two cardigans – one mustard, the other an uncertain blue-green the colour of municipal paint. She chose the blue-green. The cat slept on the one she wasn’t wearing.

Lisa had once told the girls at the office that she looked after her elderly mother. She did not know why she had said this. At the time it had seemed a convenient lie, but soon she was asked questions she could not answer easily. She was asked whether her mother needed a lot of care, whether she got out at all, whether she was forgetful. The girls began to talk to each other about her caring

responsibilities and about the status of carers. They informed her that, as a 'carer' she was entitled to help. Her new status absolved her from all remaining expectation that she would join their coffee club, or that she would laugh at the e-mails they sent around the office headed this will make you laugh. She nodded at their questions, at news of their engagements and pregnancies and separations and in this way was freed from the obligation to show interest. She was careful not to lie, or not outright.

"How's mum?" she was asked one Monday morning.

"Not too good," she said with a little shake of her head and a solemn smile.

"Can she manage the stairs?" asked Debbie.

"Not at all," said Lisa, which was true. Her mother had been dead for ten years, and they hadn't spoken for ten years before that. Stairs were certainly beyond her.

Back home that evening she found no message from Ryan, no message from anyone; only the snake awaited her, perfectly patient, as if it was waiting for something important. Ryan had named the snake 'Frank', but she called the snake 'Snake'. "Hello, Snake," she said, leaving a pause, as if expecting an answer. It stared back at her, unblinking, its eye alien and cold.

After a fortnight she thought the snake looked hungry. "I can't let you starve to death, can I?" she said. The snake seemed too weak to reply. She went to the freezer and took one of Ryan's white rats from it, hammering its ice-hard head on the kitchen work surface before dropping it into a glass dish and putting it in the microwave. She pressed 'defrost' and let it turn there for fifteen minutes, performing its cruel pirouettes before it exploded with a small thud, globules of liver-brown flesh spattering against the glass. Lisa opened the door, turning her nose away from the smell of warm and gutty death. She felt guilty, as if she had waved a child into the path of a speeding car. She remembered that Ryan had always thawed his rats in a bowl of hot water, weighing them down with a heavy plate. She took another rat from the freezer and did what Ryan had once done. After twenty minutes the rat sat warm and limp in her hands, as if the water had brought it back to life. Its fur was matted from all that frozen time. She let it drop from one hand to the other, half expecting it to spring from her hand and scuttle off into a corner. She remembered that Ryan used to borrow her hairdryer to 'fluff it up'. He used to take particular care to heat the dead rat's brain, because it was the brain, he said, that snakes were keenest to devour. She passed the dryer backwards and forwards over

the white fur. She thought of the word lovingly. She thought it a strange word to apply to drying a rat, dead or alive. She thought it a strange word to apply to anything.

She opened the lid of the vivarium and moved the rat about in semblance of life, of terror, of futile escape, but the snake did not move. In the morning the rat was gone and Snake seemed more content. "Happy now?" she said as she left to catch the bus. As she checked her keys and closed the door she thought she heard it mutter something unintelligible in reply.

Lisa worked hard at the office. She dealt with all her calls and e-mails each day and wrote business summaries that were superior to those that Kay, her manager, could produce. In this way Lisa protected herself from the threat of being dismissed. Kay was a vindictive woman, but she was also too lazy to rid herself of someone who was useful to her, however eccentric that person might be. Lisa's neat and accurate figures allowed Kay to remain in her office most of the day eating Jaffa Cakes, trading in Manx cats on the internet and growing morbidly obese.

Frank did put on a few centimetres, and then a few more. Lisa began to feel that it was cruel to confine him to the vivarium, which had been bought for him when he was so much smaller. She let him free. She would come home to find him lying under the radiator in the living room, or coiled half-heartedly around the immersion heater. One night she found him lying across the floor just inside the front door. Inadvertently, she kicked him. "Ouch," he said, coiling himself around her leg. "Sorry," she said. He loosened his grip. Quite often he'd be in the bath. One time he was swimming there, in two feet of water that Lisa was certain she had not left in it. Another night she could not find him at all. She looked in all his usual places: beneath the radiators, in the bathroom, in the kitchen cupboards, under her bed. Just as she was getting worried, wondering who to ask for help, her head brushed against something and, looking up, she saw Snake hanging from the light fitting in the hall. "You had me worried!" she laughed in relief.

He smiled.

"You're a tease," she said, warmly.

"I try to keep you amused," she heard him say.

On the Thursday she came home to find both the cat and Snake gone. She called them both, looked in every possible place, but there was no sign of them. She wondered if they might have run away together. They'd not grow hungry – but it was November and a python wouldn't last long on the

streets of Salford. She walked the empty sodium-lit city calling for them. The cat was called 'Jarvis'. Her calls of 'Frank!... Jarvis!' sounded oddly formal in the dark, drizzly night.

On Saturday morning she found Snake under the kitchen sink. He was sleepy. "I expect you've had quite an adventure," she said, feeling elated, wanting to pick him up and embrace him, "you and Jarvis." He shifted contentedly, signalling his agreement. But Jarvis never did return.

Snake did not eat for two months.

One Sunday night there was a pounding on the door. For a long time Lisa ignored it, but eventually she went and saw that it was Ryan who stood there. Rainwater streamed from his blue-black hair into his eyes, down his nose. It poured from the cleft in his chin like a tap.

"You're wet," she said.

"Yeah, it's wet," he said, looking up, extending his arms, as if to suggest that he had conjured the weather himself, like a god. He gave her a smile. He had beautiful teeth.

"What do you want?"

"To see how you are." He blinked slowly, trying to squeeze the rain out of his eyes.

"Where's your coat?"

He shrugged, then laughed.

She didn't believe that he'd come to see how she was. "Why didn't you send me a text, at least?"

"I did. When was the last time you charged your phone?" He was smiling, his voice warm in the rain.

"If you've come for Frank, I sold him."

"You what?" Ryan tilted his head to one side. His smile changed, revealing the bottom row of his beautiful teeth, which is what happened when he was angry.

“Yeah,” she said, and she gave herself a little nod of agreement, “Yeah. Got a hundred quid for him as a matter of fact. But I’ve spent it now.”

She saw that he’d begun to shiver. She thought for a moment about letting him in, about lighting the oven and standing him in front. She wanted to dry his clothes for him, to warm him up, but then he might see Snake, take him from her. She shut the door.

To Mean Well

By Joe Carstairs, F5

“Sorry, Emmeline. Budget cuts. They’re wanting a 10% reduction in compassion.”

Emmeline’s chin sinks a little into her neck, somewhat like a stone might sink into the deep folds and bubbles of a sinkbog.

“Ah.”

Miss Summers begins to tidy the wee round table. It’s a habit she can’t drop.

“So A’ll be makin ma ain tea, then?”

Miss Summers purses her lips. Then she turns briefly towards Emmeline, and puts her hands up – palms toward Emmeline – as if to say, ‘under orders!’

“Wouldje like a cup yerself?”

“Yes thanks. No sugar thanks.”

“Right.” Emmeline creaks herself up and doddles off to the kitchen.

“Awful mess on the table again. I don’t know where you get all this rubbish from... you’ve got to bin this junk mail, I keep telling you.”

Emmeline speaks loudly from through in the kitchen, struggling a little to make the sound stretch. *“A oughta read it. Some of it might be useful, ye know, Miss Summers.”*

“Is that so? When, exactly, are you going to wear Underwood & Thompson London Boutique... or go on a Weekend South Indian Cookery Course... or – goodness me, I didn’t think they still did this sort of thing – somebody’s wanting twenty pound a month for ‘organic produce’. Honestly, Emmeline, you’d be better throwing the lot of it away.”

Emmeline has a quiet chuckle. *“Twenty pound,”* she says to herself.

“Oh – and I keep telling you, call me Caitlin. None of this ‘Miss Summers’ business, it’s far too formal.”

“Sorry, Caitlin, A’m always forgettin,” she sighs, “It’s got ta be yer uniform makes me want ta use yer surname.” Emmeline carries the teas through. She gives a little exclamation when she spills a drop on the carpet.

“I can’t understand why they insist I wear this silly nurse’s uniform. If I was just coming to... well, make sure you were taking your pills or whatever else, then I’d understand. But how am I supposed to be your – well, your friend, wearing a uniform?”

Emmeline hums in accordance. *“Oh, don’t worry, Emmeline, I’ll get a cloth for that,”* Miss Summers adds, seeing the splodge of spilt tea.

Miss Summers had been visiting for more than a year by now. Ever since her husband had passed away, Emmeline – Emmy to her friends – had been largely alone. She didn’t go to the theatre, or have tea with friends, or go to the whist club. It had really been him that had just brought her along anyway. No, she had simply kept to herself, thanking-you-very-much.

But that wouldn’t do, so the doctor said. No good for your sub-psyche whatsit-ology; everyone needs a friend, so he said. She really oughtn’t have mentioned it – he just made a mountain of a molehill – but so he did prescribe for Miss Summers, the philiatrician. So she came round from the Infirmary every Sunday afternoon to have tea, check she was feeling fine, and, most importantly, to be her friend, free at the point of need. As it was, it sometimes seemed as if Miss Summers was her only friend.

“There, that’ll have to do. Always a real pest, cleaning carpet stains.”

“A’d say so, aye.”

Miss Summers perches herself on the chair opposite. The hard wooden one with the even harder green felt seat. Nobody else ever sat in the hard chair, even if they had to stand, or sit on the floor. It was generally considered decoration. Somehow Miss Summers had never picked that up.

“Haven’t you been out at all this week?” she enquires. Emmeline huffs through her nose.

“Oh, well, I did do a bitta shoppin, I suppose –”

“I’ve said it before, I’ll say it now, and heaven knows I’ll say it again: You must get out more! You spend much more time stuffed up in here, you’ll start to mummify!”

Emmeline huffs again. *“A’m perfectly happy the way A am, Miss – Caitlin.”*

“You are not. Just take one look at that frown on your own face – ‘Miss Emmeline’!”

Mrs Emmeline doesn’t say anything.

Miss Summers leans forward. She tries to look Emmeline in the eyes, which takes some squinting, the way she’s boring her eyes into her slippers.

“Come on, old girl. Howsabout you give somebody a phone –”

“Will ye quit naggin!”

“Will you stop whinging?”

But there had always been something about it that just didn't click. Not to be ungrateful - she was a fine girl herself. She was generally full of good chat, friendly, helpful, and all the rest of it. That's why they hired her, you have to suppose. But there was not that kind of sense of rightness – like if you squish the backs of two jigsaw pieces together, and they fit, but then turning it around to see the faces, they aren't from the same picture.

Perhaps it was simply because she was a professional. People still like to bake each other cakes, even though everyone secretly knows the ones out of M&S are probably nicer. In any case, Miss Summers always seemed to be on the wrong side of the friendship coin. A friend's advice became Miss Summer's nagging; a friend's favour became Miss Summer's service; a friendly joke became a spiteful slur; kindness became servility. Somehow. She couldn't say how. But the sense was definitely there. In fact, it was terribly present.

“Ye're still here.”

Miss Summers gives a little laugh. “I do beg your pardon!” she replies in a mock sophisticated voice.

“No, no, A mean it's five o'clock. Ye need ta be gettin home.”

“Well, if I really am disturbing you so much...”

“Now dinna be silly. That's no what A meant, an ye know it fine well.”

It's February. Outside the small window, one thin, sprinkling snowflake is floating down as if it were a tiny feather, or a flake of dandruff.

So Miss Summers gets up, leaving a cold, empty mug on the wee round table, and collects her bag, and puts on her coat and her shoes. Emmeline comes to the door to see her away.

“Well, I suppose I'll see you next week then!” says Miss Summers as she steps out onto the front patio.

“Bye, then!”

And off she goes, walking down the road toward the bus stop for her evening commute, her young legs marching. Before she gets too far, though, Emmeline steps out and shouts:

“Miss Summers?”

She turns to her.

“Don't come back.”

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not.

By Lucy Graham, F5

A buzz of excitement travels throughout the church, bursting through the front doors and overflowing into the street. All I can see is a sea of beautifully styled hair and extravagant hats as the guests chatter excitedly about what a wonderful day this is. Soft music is playing inside the church and the sweet smell of flowers fills my nostrils, so intricate and beautiful. I turn around to face myself in the mirror and a perfect, poised figure stares back. I can hardly recognise myself, dressed in a sophisticated white lace dress with a silver tiara balanced on top of my perfectly curled hair.

My thoughts are interrupted by a sharp knock on the door which tells me I don't have much time left. I take a deep breath and try to reassure myself. This is the happiest day of my life. Everything is perfect; I have an amazing venue, the most beautiful dress and the man of my dreams waiting for me at the altar. The man of my dreams. So why does this feel like a nightmare?

"Anna? People are starting to sit down now. Will you be ready in 15 minutes?"

It's my mum. She's taken her "mother-of-the-bride" role very seriously, practically organising the whole wedding single handedly.

I manage to squeak the word "Yes" but I can hear my voice crack.

"Are you okay sweetheart?" My mother asks, with concern in her voice.

"Yes mum, I'm fine. I'll be there in fifteen, okay? I love you." My reply must sound sincere enough as I can hear the sound of her footsteps fading away, leaving me alone once again.

The familiar fluttering feeling returns to my stomach as I look down at my bouquet. I hold it to my chest and a single petal floats gracefully to the ground. I feel a thud in my heart as it hits the floor. I'm reminded of the childhood game I used to play as a little girl - he loves me, he loves me not.

He loves me.

He tells me that he knew I was "the one" from the moment we met. We were at university. I studied art and he studied law yet somehow our paths crossed. He told me that his name was Harry and we just seemed to click. A small smile settles on my lips as I recall the happy, carefree times. We would spend everyday together - joking, chatting, laughing. We travelled around the world. First around Europe then further afield to Thailand, Australia, New Zealand. Waves of nostalgia wash over me and I float in the warm tranquility of the memories. New languages, new experiences, new places - we did it all. Together.

Another petal falls.

He loves me not.

Harry is so ambitious, it's one of the things I've always admired about him. However I sometimes wonder whether there is room in his life for me. Am I in the way? Am I holding him back? It's a thought that I can never seem to let go. A tide of doubt crashes through my mind, bringing with it storm clouds of angst that fog my thoughts and turn my world grey. Will I ever be enough for him? I guess that answer is one that I can't know for sure.

Quickly, I tear another delicate petal from the bouquet.

He loves me.

Of course he does. If he didn't love me then why would I be here today? The proposal was unexpected - completely. It was October I think, so there was a chill in the air yet sunshine filled the sky as we walked through the park beside our tiny, tatty flat. When I close my eyes I can still feel the sun's glow on my face. A feeling of utter contentment spreads throughout me and I can almost recall the overwhelming sense of love I felt back then.

Harry pulled out that life changing little black box and got down on one knee. That day I said yes without any hesitation. I wonder what my answer would be now...

I fight back the tears that are threatening to spill over as I rip the next petal from the nearly naked flower.

He loves me not.

If he truly loves me then why does he shout? Why does he take his anger and stress out on me? Sometimes when I see his furious, raging face, I find it hard to recognise the Harry that I used to know and love. He is replaced by a figure of fiery eyes; a blaze burning, out of control, which renders me weak and powerless. When I listen to him rant on and on, I feel paralysed by fear. Previously I could never have imagined him laying a finger on me or hurting me, but with this new Harry I just can't be sure - and it scares me.

Three harsh taps on the door again interrupt me from my little game. It's time.

My beautiful bridesmaids escort me from my little waiting room into what feels like an arena filled with thousands of spectators. The famous music floats up from the organ and fills my heart with dread. Here comes the bride. My eyes dart around the room, trying to avoid contact with anyone else. I try to remind myself that this is the happiest day of my life, but I don't believe it anymore. I lock eyes with Harry standing at the altar and feel a wave of emotion wash over me. Time stops.

What happens now?

I focus on putting one foot in front of the other as I make my way up the aisle. Everything seems to be in slow motion and the music is warped, as if I'm underwater. My head is spinning, bursting with thoughts and questions that I can't find the answers to. Panic builds. I'm ticking, just waiting to explode. I reach the altar and Harry smiles at me. He whispers "I love you" but I don't know whether to believe him.

A numb feeling spreads throughout my body as I listen to Harry's vows and newly formed tears sting like acid in my eyes. I manage to stumble my way through the vows that I prepared earlier but the words sound fake and forced, there must be a reason for that. The words "I do" float away from Harry's mouth and linger in the air in front of me. Each syllable feels like a stab wound to the heart. The minister turns to face me and asks me the question I have been waiting to hear all day.

"Anna Louise Smith, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I..."

Do I or don't I?

I rip another petal from a flower in my bouquet. He loves me. I love him too, so why am I finding it so hard to utter those two little words? As I look up to face him, I feel something brush past my hand.

The last petal falls from the flower and I watch it dance through the air onto the ground.

A Life Endured

by Kirsty McRobbie, F5

I sat uncomfortably on the street looking up at my surroundings. The air caked in thick, grey dust. It always caught in the back of my throat and made me cough, not that coughing up black substances was unusual in this part of Dharavi. People's washing hung like limp bodies from the wires threaded from rooftop to rooftop. All around me people are bustling about, not taking any notice of the young girl sitting in the join where two buildings meet, covered in black dirt, hair tangled in knots. The roads were like a maze, twisting and turning around the

patchwork of makeshift houses. No wonder so many children like me get lost, and never found. A plastic bag floated down to my feet, briefly pausing then carrying on, only stopping when it gets stuck in the mud river, near the sewage pipe.

A thin pain sliced through my stomach. I couldn't move, I breathed through the pain- then it faded. I had been sitting in the same corner for many days now. The stench was disgusting. I reluctantly took in another breath. The air was so dry, I was tempted to let the drips from the corrugated tin roofing land on my tongue- it had been many days since I'd drunk anything. There was no infrastructure to this sewage city. The buildings stacked on top of one another like layers of a cake. A rolling sea of blue tarpaulin sheets. My vision blurred again and the roar of the ongoing traffic seemed to fade. I felt the heat of the midday sun pressing down, a blanket of fumes smothering me.

Not a day goes by when I don't think of my brother. I could see him lying beside me, slumped and suffering. His ragged clothes not fit for a good person. Shoeless, his feet red and sore. I felt the heat of his body next to mine. His tepid sweat stung my arm. I closed my eyes and mimicked his breaths, in and out. He looked at me as if he was searching through my mind, a canvas of sympathy painted across his face. I couldn't cry, I had no tears, but my eyes burned thinking of the brother who had died a long time ago.

I could just make out a woman sitting opposite me on the street behind a table. As hazy as my vision was, I saw the woman stand up and come over with something held tightly within her grasp. It was a small wooden doll. For some reason I couldn't seem to move my hands as she slowly offered it out to me. She placed it gently onto my lap, but before I could move to muster a thank you, she was gone. Her smile and soft eyes reminded me of my father.

I thought about how long it had been since I last spoke to my father. I couldn't be sure if he was still alive as the last time I saw him he was sick. I had gone to buy herbs for him, and lost my way in the twisting passages. My mother had died shortly after giving birth to my brother so I was alone. Here, no one knew me and suffering was no stranger to the slum. People have their own families to care for. Here in the filthy slums of Dharavi we are all slowly dying. There was no telling if anyone would save me, but I was beginning to think I was too far gone to be helped. In the distance light bells danced through the air chiming delicately in my ears. My inner ears felt filled with water, creating a muffled sound.

I felt more peaceful now, everything moved so slowly. My eyes were becoming heavy, in need of sleep. I was so tired. My muscles relaxed. The rough earth seemed almost comfortable beneath me, the hard walls like a soft caress. The thoughts in my head began to calm and the voices that had kept me company for so long faded away like a distant memory.

Everything around me had a dull yellow tint. Nothing seemed real anymore, as if there was a glass wall between life and I. Everything that was close seemed far now, and everything that was normally far seemed to fade away. I was no longer there. Detached from the world's grasp. I felt free, entranced by my ability to leave the awful life I had found myself in. I was no longer drowsy, but I did not feel awake. A slight chill tickled my spine, a warm haze then filled the air comforting me like a soft bed of cotton.

The following morning, a child wandered past looking intriguingly at the girl lying stiffly in the join where two buildings meet. A dry tear had left its mark, like a small stream in the dust down her face. The child cautiously moved towards the girl to check if she would wake. He plucked the doll from her limp hands and bolted up the dirt road. Leaving nothing behind but a story of a life endured and the body of a girl with a sweet smile decorating her pale, dry lips.

The Child Refugee

By Ethan McColgan

Life was horrific.

This was no place for a child - no place for anyone.

I stared deep into my mothers tear-filled eyes
for what seemed like an eternity.

She held me tight.

They had destroyed my home.

The stench of death, desolation and heartache were everywhere.

I knew that I had to make the journey.

I sobbed until my tears ran dry,

Torn apart from my family, my life, my country.

The cries of babies, the muttering of prayers and the crashing of waves,

Gave the flimsy boat a sickening, eerie ambience.

I buried my head into the shoulder of a women beside me.

She put her slender arms around me.
Eventually, I slept.

The shrilling sound of screams awoke me.
There was deathly panic all around.
The icy water at my feet was threatening.
The heartless ocean was wrapping its deathly cloak around us.
The gentle woman had gone.

As I began to drown, a man grabbed me.
With me on his back, he swam strongly.
Behind us scores of floating corpses marked where the boat had sunk.
I closed my eyes and grimaced,
Trying to erase the haunting scene.

In front of us land appeared. Hope!
But we were slowing down - my hero breathing more heavily.
Then, we stopped.
Through his uncontrollable panting, my hero said his goodbye.
He was swallowed by the ocean.

Tears welled in my eyes.
I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell. I wanted punch and kick.
I swam hopelessly, tears blurring my vision
My strength slowly fading as the heartless sea plotted to devour another victim.
I was going to die. Then darkness.

I awoke to a sea of faces staring at me. Strange faces. Threatening faces.
" This is The Jungle , " they told me, " The Camp."
They took my name and my age.
They moved me to a crowded room and they called me an " Unaccompanied."
I was surrounded by other children with stories similar to mine - alone, vulnerable
and frightened.

Life was horrific.
This was no place for a child - no place for anyone.
Children would disappear by the dozens - taken by the traffickers.
Soon they would knock this place down.
What would be my fate? A child. A refugee. A statistic. A burden. A child!

The Shoes

By Dara Alijani, F1

These are the shoes

I played with my friends,
Playing football in the street,
And climbing trees in the forest
These are the shoes I ran to school with my brother
And wiped his tears when he left his mother,
Buying food in the market
and counting the few pennies in the kitchen
Wondering what chocolate tasted like
These are the shoes I spent the last weeks in my hometown

These are not the shoes I ran from soldiers and avoided shells ,
And spent those weeks in cold, damp shelters wishing for a blanket and some bread,
Watching my mother get sicker until she didn't make it to morning ,
These are not the shoes I told my brother everything would be okay,
and gave the last piece of bread to him,
Hearing men shouting and children crying,
Sitting on one of the tiny boats as we awaited the call to sail ,
Cold sea soaking my feet and face
Hearing desperate, terrified prayers
Finally stopping at a strange land,
Knowing I was one of the lucky ones

The Shoes

By Rebecca Hamilton, F1

These are the shoes that
Ploughed waterlogged fields
That pulled the share
Through the rocks and stones.

These are the shoes that
Were blackened by coal
That were worn away
From their labour deep in the core

These are the shoes that
Made children shriek with joy
Along pier and sandy beach
Slipping on salty pebbles.

These are the shoes that
Rode through the trenches
Carried soldiers to their death
And heard the guns fire.

These are not the shoes
That fuel the tractors
Or pull the combines
Through the artificial crops.

These are not the shoes that
Dig into the sea bed
That suck up oil from under the sand
And burn it for heat and light.

These are not the shoes that
Call friends who live next door
That play games on devices
Then stare at a glaring screen.

These are not the shoes
That are controlled electronically
That are faster and smaller than the shoes
That are so secretive only few know them.

These are the shoes that
Hang in an Inn above the fire
That give good luck to all travellers
That are now used mainly in man's sport

These are the shoes that horses worked in for all of their days,
Now cast aside undeservingly forgotten.

Walked In No More

by Noah Chapman, F1

These are the shoes that he walked out the door in,
These are the shoes he will never come home in,
These are the shoes that were once carefree,
These are the shoes that lie over the sea,
These are the shoes that once walked amongst clover,
These are the shoes that stepped up and over,
These are the shoes that lie alone in the mud,
These are the shoes that were painted in blood,
These are the shoes he fought the war in,
These are the shoes he will walk no more in,
These are the shoes he walked out the door in,
These are the shoes he will never come home in.

London

by Duncan Prentice, F3

At the heart of the Thames River lies a place
Of beauty in concrete and leaf and stone
With both an ancient and modern face
From a glass shard to an abbey of kings' bones.
Sea of faces from all points of the Earth
Flowing language and music and culture
Travelling miles from the place of their birth
Fortune or freedom with a powerful lure.
A city of inspiration and huge bright lights
A city of ruin and long dark nights.

The Reluctant Vendetta

by Asad Jafferbhoy, F5

His hands shook and shivered, sweating uncontrollably. Droplets lingered around his ashen, haggard face that accentuated his bloodshot pale blue eyes. The pupils dilated staring at the decrepit corner of the dimly lit room. The weak guttural flame etched long, haunting shadows that danced across the derelict walls. A slender figure sat hunched lifelessly in a splintered chair, face covered by a grimy black sack that was loosely knotted around the figures neck. Cable ties were bound around the bare ankles and wrists and a thick rope tightly coiled around a torso that expanded then contracted gently at sporadic intervals always accompanied with a distressing wheezing noise.

He pointed his gun at the hooded figure trying to focus, trying to push the thoughts from the past out of his mind. His arms wavered.

10 years earlier - Sarajevo, Bosnia

The men came out of nowhere. They were described to have descended on the city but the locals always remembered it as if they ascended from the deepest, darkest corners of hell. They shredded the city without mercy or humanity. They slaughtered men, women and children alike, brutally. The city became a shadow of itself. The iconic Baščaršija ruined. Six hundred years of history was reduced to ash and rubble by the Republika Srpska. A once glorious city was filled with crumbling facades and cracks and crevices that were results of the firefights that raged across the city. The gunshots echoed as they ricocheted off the ancient fragmented brickwork, the noise like the howls of a hundred banshees. There were hole-riddled bodies strewn on the abandoned streets, their odour concocting with the rancid ashes of burning buildings to give a pungent miasma that emanated around the city. It was the smell of death. The smell of war.

Amongst the carnage and bloodshed there was a young boy that lived with his family, trying to get by, to go under the radar, to survive. The father was a doctor and a pious man that loathed the fighting and the conflict and in an attempt to keep his impressionable young son from violence and to preserve his innocence he sought to instil his ideology in the boy. He drilled into his son a simple statement, "if you kill a man it is as if you kill the whole of humanity". The mother was a simple woman, daughter of a land owner that lived as a housewife. They lived in a ramshackle bungalow at the outskirts of the town. The house was wooden, with white washed plaster walls that had over time developed a sickly yellow tinge and paint peeled off revealing the decaying wood underneath. Two small bulbs hung from exposed wires that attached to the yellowing ceiling. The house was relatively untouched by the warfare that mainly was focused in the central areas of the city until one day. The day a young boy became an orphan.

A lone soldier gawkily stumbled into the kitchen, his rifle and ill fitting uniform inhibiting his movement. The soldier was young, barely a man, acne covering his hairless face covering the skin around his wild eyes. The soldier turned to face the startled residents all paralysed by a combination of shock and fear. The father was the quickest to react, lunging to the table and grabbed a large kitchen knife and pressing it to the exposed

throat of the soldier. The soldiers' pupils expanded like a rabbit caught in headlights. The father shielding his son growled at the soldier to leave their home forcing the glinting blade further, stretching the smooth skin. Stumbling backwards the soldier instinctively grabbed his rifle and pulled the trigger releasing a stream of bullets.

The barrage tore through the father and the mother, the boy being protected by the body of the father. Time froze painting a gruesome picture that would resonate in the child's mind. The bodies were ravaged as they fell as if for an eternity. Volcanoes of blood erupted from the bodies spurting crimson rivers that formed puddles which effused a metallic smell. The boy sobbed, a pained cry as he collapsed with anguish on the chest of his parents. Frothing blood the father forced out a nearly inaudible word, "forgive".

The crying resonated around the room, around the house, around the street. Opaque droplets that rolled slowly down the pale round face before falling into the pools of blood, leaving clear islands in a deep ocean of red. The boy stayed there clutching his parents, head gently resting on his fathers chest that would never rise again, his head spinning with anguish and fear and pain and grief. The endless sea of grief that was drowning him, the slowly rising cold water that filled his lungs and his heart with ice.

Present day - Sarajevo, Bosnia

His shallow breath stuttered as the bleak memories flooded over him, the images that had lingered in the back of his mind for so long acting as a horrific reminder of his tragic past. A past that he could never forget, that as far as he ran it always appeared in front of him. But this was his time now, his time to vanquish the ghosts and to bring himself peace. To avenge them.

As the anger just slightly subsided, the doubt slowly crept in on him that just possibly he was not avenging his parents but himself, maybe he wasn't doing this for justice but for guilt and for the obsidian anger that has claimed his heart and mind. It had controlled his thoughts, the relentless hatred that had suppressed his morality, his judgement and the dying wish of his father. His father...who was savagely murdered in cold blood in front of his innocent eyes, who had done nothing wrong but to spare the soldiers life. But he had spared the soldier's life, he had not done the unthinkable, his morally incorruptible father. His mind being stabbed by uncertainty, the conflict with riposte after riposte, attack after attack of revenge against forgiveness, hatred against compassion, murderer against saviour. Was he a murderer? Was he willing to break everything his father stood for to avenge him?

His senses bleary, he heard the bellowing of a man "hurry up, you useless wimp".

As he snapped out of his stupor he realised the colonel was livid with anger at the indecisiveness of the young man and the unnecessary elongation of the process. Exhaling he steadied his breath, his pupils adjusting to the sliver of light that illuminated the room, hands suddenly calm, still. He released the safety catch and with hard, determined eyes stared at the cadaverous man still sat slumped in the decrepit chair. He pulled the trigger, releasing a single bullet that streaked through the air embedding itself deep into the target as it crunched and tore through. It left a cracked hole in the derelict wall barely a foot above the head of the slumped silhouetted figure. The young man hurled his gun on the floor and swivelled to face the colonel and calmly uttered, "I am not a judge, I am not a jury and I sure as hell am no executioner." He strode out the room his father's words echoing in his mind.

Her Soldier Boy

By Eilidh Maclean, F5

Although it could have fit in the palm of her hand, it seemed to tower above the rest of the world. It craned its neck upwards, searching for the sun smothered behind the shroud of grey that clung to the sky. Softly, she touched its snowy petals as she cast her eyes around her village.

Scorch marks littered the ground on which she ran barefoot; the once grand school now lay as a pitiful pile of dust to her right. A stray animal scrabbled through the remains. Behind the spot where the school once educated young minds, what used to be houses, melded into a heart-wrenching mound of rubble. This area was pretty much deserted. Those who had survived had tried to flee from their grief, but the majority remained lost in the labyrinth of debris. There was no hospital to speak of - it was one of the first to fall.

She heard a cry to her left, and saw her mother charging towards her.

"Come away from there, it's not safe!" her mother cried.

The little girl didn't see how standing in a different area of the town, or even in a neighbouring town, would make her safer. The girl didn't want to leave this place, it was all she'd ever known. Besides, she found the burning rain quite fascinating to watch. The blazing flashes brought light to her eternally dark world; she couldn't quite understand her mother's horror at her intrigue.

"But look," she retorted, "I found a flower!" pointing at the glimmer of green and white that peeked out from the surrounding colourless wasteland.

Exasperated, her mother turned on her heel and returned to her husband's volunteer station, too exhausted to listen to the girl's whimsies. In her dreams, she was young again, filled with aspirations, ambition and arguments. There was little fight left in her now.

Watching her mother stagger in to the murky smog, she refocused her attention on her astonishing discovery. On her knees, she gazed intently and wondered whether she should pluck it from the ground, to preserve it, for a little while, from the fire, or to leave it to grow in time with nature.

She looked up, suddenly distracted, sensing something out of place, and on the periphery of her vision, she saw a silhouette rise from the summit of a charred hill, almost indistinguishable from the sombre haze. In this instant, it looked to her almost majestic, and she scrambled to her feet, unsure

whether to be scared or excited. Abruptly, the figure crumpled to the ground, startling the little girl. Losing what small uncertainty she had, she ran over to investigate the creature, with no further thought to any danger.

The body had not fallen far from where the girl stood, or so she thought, but her legs, ridden with cuts and scars, could not carry her very fast. By the time she reached the hill, she was panting heavily and her legs ached, but curiosity kept her alert. She stood a couple of steps away from him, when the man - she could see it was a man now - turned his face towards her. Across his cheek, there was a gash oozing blood, almost purple in its deep shade. His camouflaged shirt was ripped down the back, and she could see the crust of red hiding extensive bruises. His camouflaged trousers were tucked into stocky maroon boots that were caked in ash, the soles barely hanging on to his feet.

It wasn't his injuries that shocked the girl, during her short years on the earth she had grown accustomed to such sights. But the man's clothes made her stop short. She was never allowed this close to a soldier before.

"Are you a soldier?" she whispered to him. There was no need for her to lower her voice, but for some reason she felt this encounter required a certain amount of secrecy. He nodded his reply wordlessly.

"Can you stand?" With that, the man struggled to his feet. She offered him her shoulder to help him maintain his balance. Now that she could see his whole face, she noticed he was a lot younger than she had originally thought. He reminded her of the boy that used to live next door to her family. He brought his withered hand up to his chapped lips, emitting a quiet groan, and the girl was struck by a sudden feeling of fear, at a loss for what she should do with him. The only thing she could think of was to deliver him to her father. With leaden steps, she led him towards her hometown, but the boy was weak, and collapsed as soon as they reached the first house.

The girl, shattered as well, fell down next to him, weeping in frustration. It was lucky that her mother had been frantically searching for her all afternoon, for when she heard her daughter's cries, she soon rushed towards the fallen duo. Scooping up the girl in her arms as she used to when she was just a baby, it took her a few moments to fully register her daughter's new companion. A fury took over her then, as she placed the girl down and kicked the boy in the stomach.

The girl started wailing once more, begging her mum to stop. "We have to *help* him!"

"We don't. He's not one of ours. I won't do it. You should have left him where you found him," said her mother, barely audible. Strangely, her burst of anger had gone as quickly as it had come. It was

as if she was completely void of emotion now. Looking at him, he was so young. Like that boy who used to live next door.

"We have to take him back to the house!" the girl pleaded. Their house was one of the few still standing, although everybody knew it would never withstand another big raid. They had taken in some of the survivors who had lost their own homes, and as a result, those in the town viewed it as a sort of safe haven.

Her mother ignored her. However, the spectacle of the trio had drawn some attention however, and people emerged from their shelters to see what was going on. The girl's father raced up to them, screaming. When he saw the young man, he turned to his cowering wife, and struck her hard.

"He's only a boy," she gasped, revealing hidden strength in her defiance, and began praying to God to help her.

"Ha!" he spat at her. "Praying won't help you! Maybe there is a God - but he wants cash. Not your prayers."

Some of the onlookers shouted their support, calling for the man's blood, but just as many went to his side, trying to heal him with words of forgiveness, the little girl among them.

It was then the earthquake came. The ground shook with fear as several monstrous tanks approached the gathering, shooting aimlessly all the while. Grabbing the little girl by the wrist, her mother hauled her howling daughter away, sprinting, clambering, over the debris and the bullet holes, searching for somewhere she didn't know how to find. Around them, her neighbours and her friends were struggling to get away. Bullets soared, people falling like puppets with strings cruelly cut.

On top of each other, the mother and daughter toppled, tripping over a misshapen rock. Close by, a fire had been ignited, slowly eating its way through what remained of their home. The girl didn't like the bullets and grenades so much anymore. They lay like that, as the tanks sauntered arrogantly past. Her fallen soldier boy sat atop one, clutching a gun. He looked at the girl for a moment, and he saw the flames in her eyes, yet he turned away, as the tank's wheels crushed a small white flower.

Silent Night

By Rachel Strachan F3

Snow was settling over the mud filled ditches and trenches. The ladders were ice cold with the wood starting to rot away as troops fell. Dead. We all knew that Christmas was tomorrow and the peace and joy that had been murdered due to this gruelling war. The presents that we couldn't give. The faces of the ones closest not to be seen. The boys' screaming for their mothers was amplified as I sat taking watch on Christmas Eve. It was worsened by the dreadful conditions that surrounded us. Mud. Blood. Bodies. It destroyed me that I wasn't to see the ones I loved most. Mother. Father. My wife. They said the war would be over by Christmas 1914...

Stuck with Death sitting in the other trench, we had no attacks planned for that day as we were still recovering from heavy losses a week ago. I saw movement. Weapon poised. Ready. I expected to see German helmets to be advancing. Nothing. All I could see were Christmas trees weaving their way through the maze of mud and wood.

"Silent night, holy night..." I started singing softly at first. The men around me joined in.
"All is calm, all is bright."

Then we heard something else. A response to the same tune but in German. Our enemies had joined in voice, in harmony. We all sang until the hymn finished. The silence warmed us. I knew that something special would happen when the sun's rays spread amongst us again.

I woke with a startle. To gun fire and bombings? No. Silence. The cold, clear air bit as I stepped out onto the crisp mud. "Merry Christmas"...

A movement had caught the corner of my eye. It was one of them. The enemy. With my rifle ready, I crept along to where they were. But at a closer look, I saw that they had no weapon. Nothing. At first he stood there, but a small cry of "Merry Christmas" came from his mouth in our language - English. More of them came all crying "Merry Christmas".

My feet had left the cold mud and were climbing onto No Man's Land. Some of the boys looked on in shock as I walked over to the first soldier. Face to face, his hazel brown eyes softened his sharp, dirty face. A smile came over him as I stretched out my hand.

"Hi, I'm Charlie. Merry Christmas!"

"I am Alwin. Mine English is not good", he proclaimed.

I sensed that more of my men were now coming over the top and greeting the other soldiers just as I had.

One of the young lads brought a football with him and was starting to kick about with his pals and the Germans. Alwin and I joined in tackling each other and scoring into the goals made from the men's coats. When night started to creep in, gunfire was heard South of us. I looked for Alwin. Although an enemy, a stranger, he was a friend. We shook hands for the last time and then we both went back to reality.

The morning came too quickly. We were under a heavy attack. Weapon poised, we started to fire back. Rapidly. Deafening. Our friends from the day before. He was also with them. Alwin. I focused on him as he approached. Bang. A bullet flew towards him. Hitting him square in the chest. My heart stopped and my surroundings blurred as I watched him sink to his knees. Dead. Gone. I couldn't do anything. Helpless. My breathing quickened as his body lay still in the place where he fell...He would never see his family again. He would never say another word. He would only be a memory.

Silent.

“In 1971, a team of psychologists designed and executed an unusual experiment that used a mock prison setting, with college students role-playing prisoners and guards to test the power of the social situation to determine behaviour. The research, known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, has become a classic demonstration of situational power to influence individual attitudes, values and behaviour. So extreme, swift and unexpected were the transformations of character in many of the participants that this study -- planned to last two-weeks -- had to be terminated by the sixth day...”

- American Psychology Association

I jolted as I woke up and peered at the chain choking my leg – it shone a hazardous black, reflecting in the sulfurous lighting in the room, a constant reminder of imprisonment. The stink of urine filled the cell – the guards did not allow us to dispose of the bucket, and it sat there disgustingly for days. I glanced over to my right at the deserted bed # 8612 used to occupy. He was a weak one – quitted after 36 hours - I was a hero, a veteran. I overheard two of ‘them’ sniggering “acute emotional disturbance” behind our backs, behind the bars. ‘They’ were erringly identical – khaki outfit, club and an accompanying whistle shrieking us awake. I saw myself looking into the dark, endless void their sunglasses created – the more you looked, the more disappeared. I blacked out as anger rose within me. I wanted to go back. Go back home.

It has only been a couple of days... Endless days since I started playing this “game” – a volunteer just like the rest. In that time I absorbed my number and disposed of my name. I was now # 819. 819 forever. The last words of # 8612 were stuck in my mind – “You can’t leave. You can’t quit”. Rebelling was useless. At first it was a game. A game of ‘fun’, a summer job – effortless money earned in pretense. A game where you were stripped instead of welcomed, chemically sprayed like a rat because you were ‘hazardous’, poisoned, shocked, driven into a corner, forced to clean the toilet with bare hands because ‘they’ were in a bad mood, and ‘they’ were superior, those sadistic bastards. This stopped being a game a long time ago. It stopped being a game on Day 1.

We rebelled – they sprayed us using fire extinguishers: skin-chilling painful with nothing to cover behind, exposed like skinned pigs in a slaughterhouse. We whispered – they beat us

up: “It is a silent system”, they screamed. We slept – they shrieked us awake with horrid whistles for pointless counts before dawn. We rebelled – they brought us down. We hid and cowered in exposable darkness – they stripped us naked for their fun. They forced us to go against each other – there was no one I could trust. And yet – ‘they’ were ‘humans’.

“I want you to do push-ups for... hmm... 2 hours?” one of them said looking at his fellow shift colleague who grinned and nodded his head in agreement. “Yes, Mr. Correctional Officer.” I stated as I simultaneously knelt down on the cold grey floor – it was defeat. The clock in the hall pounding, as endless seconds were counted out loud *Tick...Tock...Tick...Tock...* We only had 3 short hours of sleep.

I lost myself in myself – I couldn’t go back. It was all a lie – there was no way out. We couldn’t quit. We couldn’t leave. My bruised arms buckled under me as I crashed down. I heard footsteps as they echoed across the hollow corridor – I didn’t even last one minute. Air whooshed out of my lungs with a moan as I was kicked in the ribs. I slowly lifted my head staring into the perfectly polished military boots. My reflection was pathetic – eyes bloodshot with a lack of sleep and rage, my face a shadow of a man – a man with a name, a family, a life. They did this to me. I winced as ‘he’ forced me to look at the officer standing above; his superiority an aura that was sickening me and infecting me. He grinned – satisfied with his self-appointment as the ‘leader’, the ‘frontrunner’- yet a volunteer like me.

“Number 819 stand up!!” he screamed, grabbing me by my feeble arms and hoisting me up - vision blurring for two metronomic beats of the clock. They dragged me down the corridor, and relief flooded through me as we headed towards our cell...*Tick...Tock...* They hauled me past. Everything stopped in that moment – it was silent. I was to be punished. I was to be forgotten. I sunk even further, as they screamed, “You are nothing? You understand? Nothing. You are no one. Understand 819? No one”. I was pushed inside a lightless cupboard, my last hope extinguishing as the lock turned – *Tick*. I heard shuffling along the door – almost immediately the door shook as dozens of fists banged in unison against me – the pulse resonating in my head. “819 is bad” “819 is a bad prisoner” repeating again and again. I covered

my ears in vain... But I still saw them – I saw them everywhere. I *am* 819. I *am* no one. I *am* nothing.

Suddenly, I was sitting in a room – obliterated from the chain. Confused. My face streamed with tears. “I am nothing” *Tick...Tock* “This is not a real prison. They are students. You are a student. You are not 819. Let’s go”. I looked up, and registered my freedom. Slowly, steadily rising to my feet – hand shaking forward. I ventured out of the corridor, shuddering, into the sunlight. *Limitless*.

Months later I still remember the pulse... the sunglasses... the sniggering. I wanted to jump at them, gouge their eyes out, tear their flesh apart with my teeth, bruise, choke, strangle, scar, slaughter. Obliterate them and their lousy laugh, their worthless presence.

I am no longer human. I am 819. My instinct now is to kill.

“I now only think of killing -- killing those who have beaten me and treated me as if I were a dog. I hope and pray for the sake of my own soul and future life of freedom that I am able to overcome the bitterness and hatred that eats daily at my soul. But I know to overcome it will not be easy.”

- Prisoner in solitary confinement for several years

What we deserve

By Oliver Imrie Cook F5

The first time you get shot is the first time that you feel truly human. For a lifetime one can believe in their strength, their courage, their perseverance all the time keeping faith in the natural balance, of getting out what you put in: push harder get stronger, eat better live longer; any energy put in is released in some way shape or form; just look at the bullet: the power of a small explosion condensed into a scrap of metal no bigger than my thumb, tearing through me like I'm dust in the wind.... This is the moment I realise something: life is balanced but it's not fair.

Emptiness, that's all I can describe. I can't feel the pain. I can't feel the fear and terror I should be feeling. I can't even remember my own name. Who am I? Where am I? I need to think, my name's... Eric... Eric Howell

and I... I think I'm going to die. The pain is returning. It's growing from my core like a wildfire, spreading with a crimson rage, burning everything in its path. It hurts, god it hurts!

God it hurts! I thought, twenty years ago when I was only fifteen. Why is this the first moment I remember? Birthdays, Christmas, over 9,000 days to choose from and I jump this one; maybe that's because (like today) it was one of the worst. Jacob Bruce, the guy used to beat me up, trying to give me a chip to match the one in his shoulder. We were going opposite directions in the hall one day, neither liked the other enough to move so as you'd expect we hit shoulders; not hard, just enough to get on his nerves as usual. "In the future, get out of my bloody way!" He yelled, that made me angry "at least I have a future!" I snapped, that made him angry. Whenever he clenched that square jaw of his I knew what was next. I'd think about that moment (and the beating I took after), even today, on what could be my last, I think about what he deserved, what I deserved, do I deserve to die?

The world is expanding around me, the pain anchoring thoughts to reality. It's dark but I can still get a sense of my surroundings: I see the graffiti covered brick walls, I feel the damp concrete, I hear the gun click. I always imagined the barrel of a gun as a black hole, a void draining all will to fight, leaving only fear; but it was just a steel ring, not frightening; the real fear comes from the man behind it. He is shrouded in darkness from the surrounding buildings but I can see his eyes from a single crack of light. Every twitch in his all too familiar eyes screams silently with rage. He exudes conviction as he towers over me, paralysing me; but why hasn't he done it? Why hasn't he killed me? He puts the safety on, but I don't feel any safer as I lie here lying on the ground, some anger is beyond mercy, and his is beyond reason. "No" he says with a growl, letting it boil inside of him, fuelling his rage like a steam engine, unstoppable; he puts the safety on, "I want you to feel yourself break". I'm about to take one more beating, but this time, I won't be walking away.

My attacker hits me with the butt of his gun as I fall, he moves closer towards me into the light, I can see the outline of his face now, his square jaw... Jacob? How can this be? How is he walking? If he is here right now with a gun in his hand, I have no doubt he intends to use it.

Back then, Jacob wasn't a martial artist; he fought sloppy (learned from his father first hand), but what really made him fearsome was his ferocity. For anyone else to attack the way he did -like an animal- they'd have to push, but for him it wasn't a push-it was a release like opening a window on a stormy day. That day 20 years ago, he shoved me to the ground and continued to attack. I didn't even try to fight back, what was the point? I was helpless. His girlfriend Nadia ran up the stairs, she tried pulling him back, but I knew it was pointless. The most he ever did for her was hesitate, clench that square jaw of his and continue; I could see the worry in her sapphire blue eyes and the conviction in his, I don't know who she was really worried for: me or him. Jacob walked towards me, ready for more, more humiliation, more pain. It was then

I realised something about people like Jacob, people that cause pain with the excuse of their own: some people are just monsters.

I feel my shooter's fist hit me like a battering ram, the pain rippling through my stomach. I don't even feel the pain anymore just the impact, like a drum beat through my body. Just like that day. If history wants to repeat itself then fine, because that day, I fought back, that day: I gave Jacob what he deserved! As he was walking towards me Nadia shouted one last time, he hesitated just for a moment; so I ran, not towards the door but towards him, tackling him down the stairs: we rolled as he took most of the fall, he tried to get up, but his ankle was broken, he'd lost. I was suspended, he got expelled, it wasn't his first offence. This is the most important lesson I had ever learned about life, if you don't fight, you don't survive.

He grows tired and stops for a second, "You fight pretty sloppy" I cough out, "learned it from my father" he says angrily. This stops him and I tackle him to the ground trying to grab the gun as I struggle on top of him. I'm weak from my wound and he gains the upper hand, He raises his gun to my head, and pulls against the trigger.... Forgetting he put the safety on. I grab the gun before he can correct his mistake. I throw it out of arm's reach as I begin to punch him repeatedly. He lies there, not unconscious but defeated. He looks tired, malnourished; he must barely eat anything.

He looks like he has no more fight left in him. "Why?" I ask out of breath "Why are you trying to kill me?" "Because I hate you", he spits out in loathing.

"Do you even regret what you did twenty years ago? What you did to him?" He begins to well up as tears fill his sapphire blue eyes. I see it now, he had a son: Myles Bruce. "I... I didn't-", I can't finish that sentence: anything would just sound wrong.

"You're a monster!" He yells, "You destroyed everything". I try to apologise... "He stopped being my father after what he did to me, after what he did to mother. His leg never healed properly, he couldn't do any manual labour: you destroyed him, his anger grew until.." He couldn't finish, he didn't need to. I always thought myself the hero of that story, standing up to the bully; he was just a kid. It was the kind of world he lived in a world that's balanced, not fair.

I want to say I didn't mean to break his ankle, but in that moment I wanted to hurt him; I justified myself on what I thought he deserved, but what about those around him? I think of the people I've hated: every one of those people have others that must share their mistakes their hardships. Those left with nobody: they are already suffering more than they deserve to. I don't know what happens next, but I make a promise, I'm going to make this right.

Competition Winners

Each year the English Department enters our pupils into local and national competitions, as well as running our own. These are the winning entries.

Life and Death in Mosul

By Malcolm Campbell, Advanced Higher

- Block Prize for Creative Writing, English Department

Streams of light emanated in, like dazzling arms outstretched;
Through smouldering bullet holes in the crumbling wall they offered futile help.
Swirling, luminous, in the sweltering air, dust glowed
Like Diwali lanterns under the light of the silent sun.
The harsh light blinded her waking eyes;
Throbbing violently, flesh, purple, swollen,
Pulled tight across the light, closing out the world.
A wave of nausea crashed inside her, retching,
Her body clawed at nothing.

Distant explosions shook the room, gently,
They urged her to leave.
Dust fell from the ceiling: she opened an eye, irritated, dry,
And through blood and dirt, tears dripped off her chin.
Her body lay, emaciated. Embalmed
In damp, fetid cloth she was theirs to use.

Attempting to sit up, her skeletal neck, weak, strained under the weight.
She raised a head, full of memories too dark to remember - too awful to forget.
Slowly - cautiously - wincing until the forgotten chain
Yanked her back. Jolting her frail body, it forced her down.
Back in her place, captive, forgotten.
Rusted metal echoed in the shattered consciousness of self.
Her vision blurred, her limbs; limp, she fell
Into a sleep of raw, searing torture, acrid, the memories burned deep.

Hot bullets filled the trembling air, a cataclysmic coruscation,
Crashing, clanging, shattering shards of shrapnel,
Brutal blasts of detonation threw metal,
Molten. An infinite inferno, bricks, homes, fell
Like rattling rain, saturating the apocalyptic
Land, flooding with free-flowing fire the desolate destruction.

There. Through the smoke. Alive.
Standing alone on the dusty road he smiled, angelic,

As merciless bullets shot through his tiny chest,
Through his favourite blue shirt now stained with young blood.
The toy bear dropped out of his soft hand,
His green eyes looked down and then up, innocent.

"Mama," he whispered.

Dead.

She burst into consciousness screaming and shaking,
Her body writhed in twisted despair.
Her soul ached relentlessly in deep throbbing convulsions,
Her body spasmed in heart-wrenching pain.
Agony burned inside each nerve of her body,
Every fibre of her being
Drowned in anguished torment.
He was just there, she was with him - and now...

A bird flew into the crumbling room,
Silently, it saw her and stayed.
Her lip trembled as her tears ran dry.
Its eyes met hers; understanding?
If it could would it help?

Would anyone help? Or had the
World grown indifferent whilst she
Willed for death, sang for it under each strained
Breath? An aria of hopelessness sung till the end.
Her faith ran dry, like the dust of the desert beyond her confinement.
Her body a spectre, a splinter, a shadow,
Of the young girl that once looked through her eyes.

Her aura was dead. But her body endured;
Scraping, grasping onto the thin entrails
Of life that it so blindly, foolishly tormented itself with retaining.

She begged for the end, but the end would not come.
Time washed over her, Dead Sea waves
In which she could not drown. Hours turned to days
And they did not return.

Each day the agony moved further away,
Her body no longer her own.
The warmth of the pain grew distant, colder.
She shivered, defeated, under the Arabian heat.
Blood congealed, organs slowed, fingers, now numb,
Failed to grasp at reality. Lungs deflated, each breath
A soft wheeze. Her heartbeat faint, murmurous
Tappings in the walls of her rib cage.

She beckoned him into her mind, hopeful,
His face, his smile the last thought of her life.
But he kept slipping, like sand through her fingers, falling and
Bleeding into the dusty road. Young hands grasping at cruel bullet holes.
Slowly the blood dried, memories dissolved, she let go
Of the pain, of the trauma, of a life so full of
Promise cut short by men of violence.

Silence filled the room no longer rattling with destruction.
Dust settled, softly, on the concrete carpet as the call for prayer echoed out, defiant.

Outside, a single white flower caught the eye
Of a soldier, growing from debris, he picked it.
Roots cut short, soon to be dead.

Inside she was ready, for the cold, for the void,
For the expanse of nothing which she expected before her.
Her heart beat with the joy of the end -
One final beat
To end them all: it was time.
The shackles of life loosened its grip on her soul.

Not cold, not empty; but different, unimaginable,
Indescribable sensation, no longer numb.
She felt it begin, flickering into light,
Soft and white, a warmth, a calm.
It flowed from her chest and into her arms, her body filled
With resplendence, divine. Aura from above, engulfing
Her in light, burning the pain into soft oblivion. Glowing
Warmth she dazzled, ethereal, Incandescent, a white
Flower picked from the debris she shone, sublime.
Something stirred her heart; a hand, soft and small,
Reached out, she took it, overcome, overjoyed.
This time he would not leave, this time; forever.

The final release, the chains fell away,
Mercy brought by the end.
Relinquishing her suffering, restoring her peace,
She departed the world; free.

Streams of light emanated in, like dazzling arms outstretched,
Illuminating the body, cold and thin, an innocent girl, dead.

Kate O'Shanter (née Souter) A Confession by Lucie Kelly, F5

- Winner of the Tom Durrheim Memorial Prize for Writing in F4-6

Ah semple Tam, it gars me greet
Tae think o' a' the lang deceit,
The lies I've tauld ten years or more
Since first I rove to Carrick Shore,
The tangled web seamlessly woven
To veil my visits to the coven.

semple	simple
gars	makes
greet	weep

Your "nights out" meant I had the chance
To grace the weekly Witches' Dance.
Your bousin's been a fine excuse
While you were fou...I was footloose!

bousin'	drinking alcohol
fou	drunk

I tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum;
That frae November till October,
Ae market-day thou was nae sober;
That ilka melder wi' the miller,
Thou sat as lang as thou had siller;
That every naig was ca'd a shoe on
The smith and thee gat roaring fou on;
That at the Lord's house, even on Sunday,
Thou drank wi' Kirkton Jean till Monday.
I prophesied that late or soon,
Thou wad be found, deep drown'd in Doon,
Or catch'd wi' warlocks in the mirk,
By Alloway's auld, haunted kirk.

skellum	rogue,	scoundrel
blethering	talking	nonsense
blellum ilka	babbler	
melder lang	each	
siller	grain grinding session	
naig	long	
gat	silver, money	
	horse	
	got	
wad		
catch'd	would	
mirk	caught	
	darkness, night, gloom	

But Ayr has earned its reputation,
Known length and breadth of this great nation,
For honest **men** – not honest lasses.
In truth, my scheming far outclasses
Maist ither acts of great deceit.
But I must now repent this feat.

maist	
ither	
	most
	other

For a' the while I wasna' blameless,
Involved in exploits plainly shameless.
But since thon Sabbath eve now past
I've vowed, of witchcraft, that's my last!

The journey to Kirk Alloway
Had, in itself, been full of wae.
The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last;
The rattlin' showers rose on the blast.

wae	woe
------------	-----

First, heading to Jean Souter's hame,
 She there awaits me – fidgin'-fain,
 My auld acquaintance – (Jean lang kent
 Since with my brither John she went.
 We kenn'd her then as Jean O'Shanter.
 Each night to her hame John would anter.
 Soon, John and her - a cannie pair -
 Were waddit well within a year,
 And syne... Jean's brither, Tam, and me
 Were waddit 'neath the auld bourtree.
 We lasses wad the ither's brither.
 Soon, Tam and John grew chief thegither.
 Now that's been twa score years sinsyne –
 That John's been Jean's and Tam's been mine.
 A guid, lang while!)

But to our sonnet!

Jean's brankie in her hap and bonnet.
 Though now we're crankie, crochly, crookit,
 We brave the storm – ere lang baith drookit.
 Then near the thorn, aboon the well
 Whaur Mungo's mither hang'd hersel',
 And thro' the whins and up the brae Intent
 upon Kirk Alloway,
 (Jean never passes by the cairn
 Whaur hunters fand the murder'd bairn),
 And past the birks and meikle stane
 Whaur drunken Charlie brak's neck-bane.
 By this time we had reached the ford,
 Whaur in the snaw the chapman smoor'd,
 And hirplin' thro' the raging storm,
 When Jean, as aye, starts cursin' John.
 Altho' the Souter's her ain choosin',
 The man's a man owre fond o' bousin'.
 So on and on, wi' clishmaclaver -Jeannie
 has lang been gi'en tae haver.

Then onward head we to our splore,
 We've howpit for a year or more,
 Whiles glowrin' at our cantraip charter,
 Whiles holdin' fast Jean's bluidy garter,
 (I've never spiered from whaur it came -
 Jeannie's aye been a sleekit dame)
 To place upon the Kirk's high altar
 We hasten on and never falter.

And still the gleams the darkness swallow'd;
 Loud, deep and lang the thunder bellow'd.

But on arrival at the kirk,
 We left behind the storm and mirk.

hame	home
fidgin'-fain	eager, excited
auld	old
lang kent	known for long
brither	brother kenn'd knew
anter	venture
cannie	knowing, pleasant, good
waddit	married
syne	then, directly after, next
bourtree	elder tree
wad	married
sinsyne	since chief friendly
thegither	together
sonnet	song, tale
brankie	spruce, well-dressed hap cover, shawl, wrap, plaid
crankie	unsteady
crochly	slightly lame
crookit	crooked, lame
drookit	drenched aboon above
whins	gorse bushes
brae	hill
fand	found birks birch trees
meikle	large
neck-bane	neck bone smoor'd smothered hirplin' limping, hobbling
aye	always
owre	over, too
clishmaclaver	idle talk, wordy discourse gi'en given, inclined
haver	gossip, chatter
splore	revel, party hoped,
howpit	anticipated
glowrin'	staring with wonder
cantraip	trick, spell, magic
bluidy	bloody
spiered	questioned, asked
sleekit	sly, hypocritical, smooth

For in the kirk's bright bleezin' light,
Before us lay an unco sight.
The witches' ceilidh underway,
Unseen by light o' any day.

bleezin' blazing
unco strange, peculiar, unknown

The kirk now viewed frae this aspect,
From floor to rafters lay bedecked
With objects furnishing the scene.
And vow! Sic objects - coarse, obscene.
The rev'llers in the piper's thrall,
Weel wordy o' a witches' ball.
And ere the night had grown much older
We carlins had grown ever bolder.
And at the centre of the rant,
Jean's Nannie, dressed in claes sae scant.

frae from

vow sic wordy -an exclamation of surprise such worthy

carlins rant claes witches romp, boisterous frolic clothes

Now lang syne, Jean had scrimp'd sae sair,
Wi' thoughts o' Nannie – chuffie, fair,
Her lass's bairn – a bonny mite,
And coft for her a sark – snaw white,
Wi' twa pund Scots ('twas a' her riches).
Now here it grac'd this dance o' witches!

lang syne long ago
sair chuffie very, extremely
coft pund fat-faced bought pound

Tho' Nan had grown fae bairn tae quean,
Her sark the same fate hadna' seen.
For like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white – then melts for ever,
The days o' childhood quickly pass –
Wee Nannie's noo a strappin' lass.
A cow'rin, tim'rous bairn she'd been
But here sae cantie - turn'd eighteen
And growin' ever fain and thick,
With eldritch piper – 'twas Auld Nick!

quean girl, young woman

strappin' tall, handsome

cantie fain thick eldritch lively, merry loving, amorous friendly, intimate frightful, hideous

The piper loud and louder blew,
We dancers quick and quicker flew.
We thought na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps and stiles
That lie between us and our hame.
We danced as tho' we were na lame,
And tho' not in our early youth,
We reel'd and jigg'd wi' rattlin' fouth.
Queens may be blest but we were glorious,
O'er a' the sleights o' death victorious.

slaps swampy ground

fouth abundance

And how young Nannie lap and flang,
A souple jade she is and strang,
Just then, there came a sudden shout
As “Weel Done Cutty Sark!” rang out!

lap flang leapt
souple danced
cutty supple
sark short
shirt, chemise

And then it was, I caught the sight
O’ guidman Tam, at dead of night.
Glowrin’ and gawpin’, amaz’d and curious,
At sight of him, the thrang was furious.
As dark descended, out they flew –
The angry crowd would Tam pursue.
But ere the guidman got tae hame,
(Expecting there a sullen dame!),
I knew I had to forrit skelp,
(He had the horse – that didna’ help!).

guidman
gawpin’ husband
thrang stare open-mouthed
crowd

forrit
skelp forwards move
rapidly

Nae time tae bid fareweels tae Jean –
I had to wing my way unseen.
As I maun shank through dub and mire
Whiles dreamin’ o’ hame’s bleezin’ fire
And fearin’, on approaching Doon,
I wad be found deep-drowned there soon.

maun
shank must
dub walk, cover on foot
mire puddle
peat bog

But then... the dwalling... hame at last!
The race is over; the flight has passed;
The secret safe – nae mair tae fear.

dwalling
dwelling

Now, when will drunken Tam appear?

At last, he stoiters through the door,
Mair fou than any night before,
Raiblin’ an’ whinging about “Meg’s tail”,
And how it had na’ come hame hale.

stoiters stagger, stumble, totter
mair more
raiblin’ babble
hale whole

Sinsyne that night o’ devilish tryst,
Each Carrick coven’s meet I’ve missed.
My wiccan ways I’ve left behind
- and Tam – now sober’s gude and kind.
Since he’s been stayin’ aff the nappy,
We’ve sheerly never been so happy,
And noo I ken what’s what fu’ brawlie,
We two are baith weel-faured and waulie.
Of cantraip ways I swear I’m done -
I’m glad the winsome Tam I’ve won!
Who’d hae thought it? – Tam sae loosome,
But noo we mak’ the perfect twosome!

nappy strong ale, liquor
sheerly surely
ken know **brawlie**
well, entirely
baith both
weel-faured well-favoured
waulie jolly **loosome**
loveable

So wha **this** tale o' truth shall read,
Ilk lass and guidwife tak' ye heed:
Whene'er to witchcraft ye're inclin'd,
Or dancing warlocks fill your mind,
Think! maybe best to stay at hame,
And play the sonsie, couthie dame!



Brian Travelling www.flickr.com

Bridge Beyond the Grave

by Emily Baxter, F3

- Winner Burgess Prize
- Winner Old Boy's Club Prize for Creative Writing in Forms 1-3

The icy, biting wind, rattled the aged, wooden window frames of 'Bouch Bridge Designers' Offices, as the violent storm continued. The office over looked the Howff Graveyard and, in the far distance, gave a panoramic view of the Tay Rail Bridge. A flash of strong white lightening dashed the pitch black sky. A roar of thunder and shriek of the bitter wind which was enough to slice to the bone, any flesh bared to it.

In the office, a fresh faced, school girl, Alice Bouch, was working late. She was tidying away old files and throwing out unwanted documents, dreaming of her chance to own the office herself one day and become the very first female engineer in Scotland.

The office was ornately furnished in oak with leather. Alice rose from her desk-chair, she paced over to a tall, filing cabinet, and lifted out some yellow tinted files.

"Nothing in here needs kept" she said, gently flicking the pages between her fingers.

Just then, the window behind her rattled harder than ever and Alice got a cold shiver running through her body. The file blew open, pages dispersing into the air like confetti at a wedding. She noticed a single piece of crumpled up parchment had fallen out. Picking it up, she read,

"Sir, we wish to alert you to failing in the castings of the last batch of steel we supplied...." It was from the foundry in Falkirk. "We have had numerous complaints about the maintenance and the quality of the castings."

"Was this the steel used in my father's bridge construction?" she mused.

The letter was stroked and scored with red ink, as if it had been read but the contents not intended to be made public.

Puzzled, Alice slotted the paper back into the file, trusting her father's judgement.

Realising the time, Alice tidied away the remaining files and blew out the only source of light in the room, a wax candle.

Making her way back home, bustling streets had turned eerily silent. Only rustling of branches and the clicking of the tram, broke the silence. She spied the typesetters in the D.C Thomson offices, "What will the headlines be tomorrow?" she pondered.

As a shortcut, Alice cut through the Howff. Most people were terrified by the graveyard, but for some reason, Alice never was. Maybe the thought of her mother, who lay here following her untimely, mysterious death, comforted her.

Two lonely gas lamps, gently started to flicker on, off, on, off. The wind picked up, stronger, faster, louder... Alice felt as if someone was watching her, or was standing beside her. But no one was there. Thinking she was going mad, Alice walked on.

Suddenly the wind whistled lustily in her ear, as if to say something to her. She heard a gentle voice "Alice.... Alice... The bridge... The bridge".

"Mother?" she turned in confusion to see a row of grave stones emitting a soft glow of light. She began to slowly walk towards them, crouched to a kneel and brushed away the dirt, uncovering the name. It read 'John Campbell, aged 36, died 28 December 1879'. "But that's today..." Alice murmured.

"Alice, the bridge...", the voice had gotten stronger. Then, all of a sudden, it dawned on her...

Bong! Bong! The Steeple Church bell struck seven o'clock. Alice, without waiting, ran to the water's edge.

Any moment now the train from Wormit would cross the bridge, with many innocent passengers on board. In the distance she heard the relentless chattering of train on tracks. The constant snowfall made the lights unfocused but gradually the circles grew larger and larger.

Alice had to move, but found herself restrained by a strong, broad hand. She turned to see her father standing before her.

"How did you know?" How did you find out?" He yelled

"Find out what?"

"What would be happening here tonight."

"I heard voices..."

"Voices?"

"Yes, in the graveyard."

"Ahh! That explains a great deal. Did you have visions too?"

"Yes, on the grave stones." Alice paused " And the letters of complaints. Father there's no time, the train is coming, and we must help!"

"No. If we try and save them, they'll realise I knew about the bridge. It will ruin me Alice, I cannot let you do this."

"I trusted you!" Alice insisted, pushing past her father. Grabbing a lantern, she ran towards the track. But in her haste she lost her balance and it just took the slightest of pushes, from behind, to send her over.

"You always were like your mother. Now you can join her..."

The last whistle of the train and creek of the falling bridge blocked out Alice's last scream...

70 passengers on board died that night, and one gifted school girl...

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