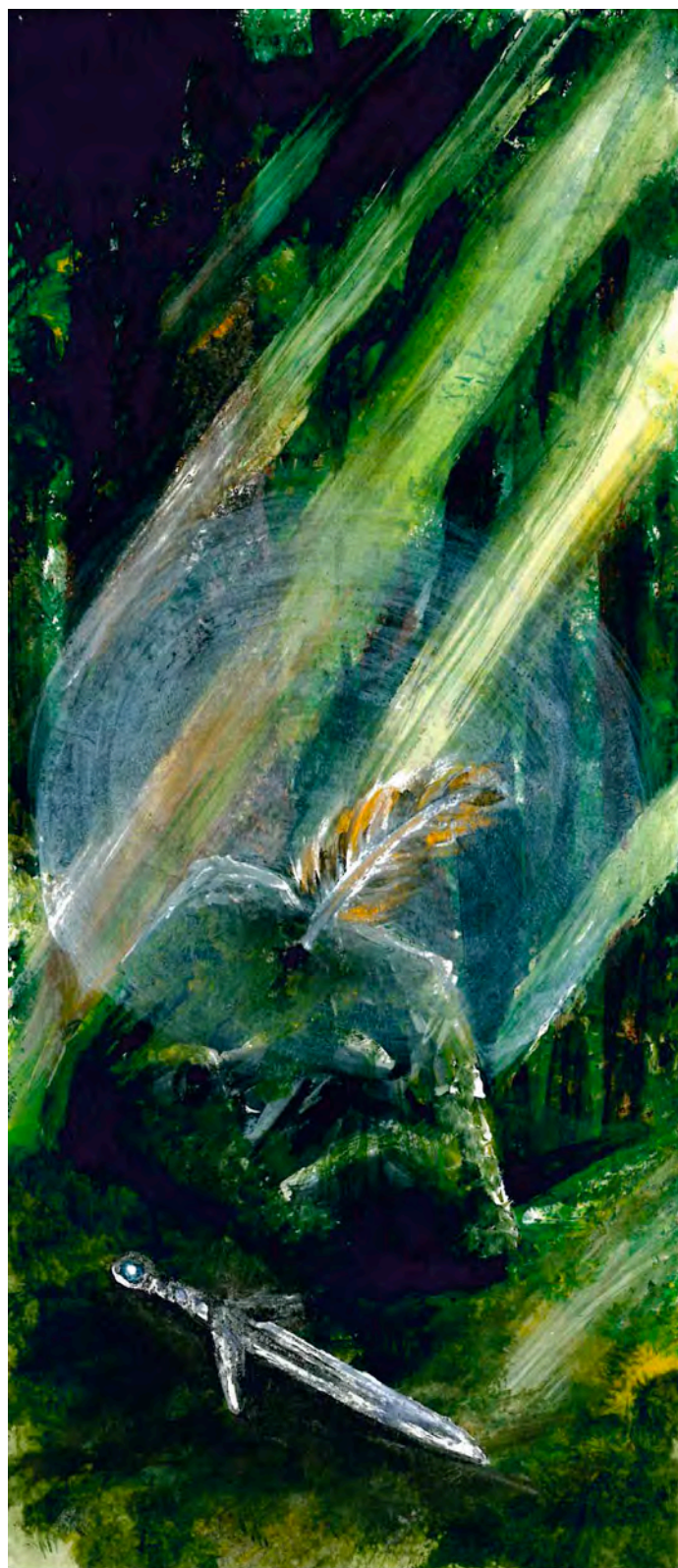


RAOHI E JESS  
*The Kōyūll*  
*is mightier*



*than the*  
*sword*





Naomi Sibson

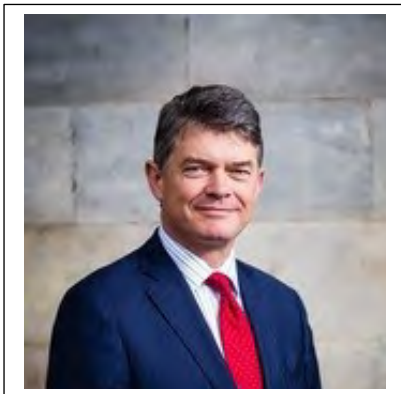
## Rector's Introduction

*I hope you enjoy reading this edition of the Kwyll as much as I did! Instead of 'reading' perhaps I should say 'experiencing', as this collection of writings brings all manner of things to life!*

*Our young writers certainly do not shy away from the big themes – time, love, life, death, identity and the future of our planet. Some of these pieces tell a clear story very well – a narrative of events related in a particular order – with characters drawn laconically or elaborately, drily or passionately. Others use poetry to compress and forge. But amongst them some explore the nature of the narrator, omniscient or otherwise, and authorial perspective, reliable or otherwise. And some look at the very nature of the English language itself. In examining the foibles of English what does this say about the consistency and coherence of our thoughts, feelings and political statements? Is truth better expressed as a mathematical formula if our spoken and written language is so quirky and illogical? And is English less reliable than French, Mandarin, Swahili, or Esperanto? These contributions have certainly thrown up many questions for me to chew over again and I hope they stimulate debate and discussion in you, the readers!*

*So, many thanks to all our contributors here for having the courage to express their thoughts, ideas and passions so openly for us to read and enjoy, and in such a wide range of subjects and styles. Above all, they demonstrate the power of authenticity and sincerity.*

Dr John D Halliday  
Rector



# FORM 1

TEGAN ELLIS

## Saffron Crocus

I am nearly across the bridge when I hear a scream. 'There's another one in the river!' I quickly peer over the side of the bridge and there she is. Her emerald eyes stare up into the sky, not moving. Her body is ghostly white, decaying, bloated by the river and covered in black splotches. The black splotches. I must be going crazy because I think she looks at me when I scream her name. Thisbe. I only saw her two days ago. She was as bubbly and kind and healthy as always but she had a bruise on her finger. Remembering back, I now fear that this was the black splotch and... the sign. The sign that she had the disease. The bubonic plague. I stumble backwards, nearly falling into a sewage ditch. Regaining my footing, I turn and I run. I run as fast as I can, not daring to look back... back at the horrors that lie behind me on the bridge. Where people just walk by like nothing is wrong but it is. A child is dead in the river and no one cares. Or at least they don't seem to. They are probably thankful it is not someone they know. God has spared them this time. I collapse on the grass, green with new life, gasping for breath in between sobs. She's gone. My colleague, best friend, gone. She was like a sister to me and now I will never see her again.

Near me, I see a collection of flowers and go to pick some. I pick her favourites... roses, lavender and saffron crocuses. They were her absolute favourites and I can see why. The petals are lilac, a unique, simple and rare colour in nature. Now, they spread, taking over the rest of the grass like this disease that is taking over the city. Cradling the flowers gently, I walk back to the bridge. I take the courage to go to the edge and one by one, I throw the petals in. "I'm sorry," I say when I finish throwing the flowers. "Rest in Peace and God... *(I can't do it)* God bless you and your family". I start crying again. They are genuine tears of sorrow. She was so young and beautiful and I know it should have been me. Everyone thinks that when someone dies. But death scares people and try hard as we might, deep down, we are thankful that this time, it wasn't us. Not me, I would trade with Thisbe any day. She deserved to live a long, happy life.

A person comes over to me saying she saw what I just did and wondered if I knew her. I say yes. I don't know why she cares. No one does, not even when a child cries over it. 'My condolences. It was a horrible way to die for someone so young. 'she says sympathetically. "Thank you," I whisper. She walks away and then I turn back to the bank. I walk at first and then I run. I throw myself onto the grass crying harder than I ever have and I sit up, leaning against a tree. Suddenly I am overwhelmed with anger. At the woman, at Thisbe's family, the government. The woman doesn't know what grief can do to a child. She doesn't know it's tearing me apart, knowing that I never said all the things I wanted to say to her. She doesn't know Thisbe was the closest thing I had to a sister. She just doesn't know. How can Thisbe's family do this to her? I know they couldn't afford a single grave for her but even a public one would be better than dumping her in a river. She's a child! She deserves to be remembered even if the gravestone summarises her as people! Instead she will rot at the bottom of the ocean because the government has no respect for the dead! I punch the ground so hard that I leave a dent and my fist stinging with pain. I start crying again.

I can see the Globe from here. It stands grand and tall, reaching up beyond the clouds into the heavens. There is a white flag flying meaning they will be showing a comedy. I could go because it might cheer me up but then again it could be A Midsummer Night's Dream and I heard that there is a play within the play where people die so maybe it is best not to risk it. I just sit there instead and watch the world go by. At one point I start making a daisy crown and eventually after a lot of tears and anger, I am at peace. I start to get up so I can head home when I notice something on my wrist. It looks like a bruise and I think it is a bruise from when I punched the ground. Then I realised that my wrist never touched the ground or got hit by anything. I scream because I realise that very soon I am going to have the same horrid fate as Thisbe. I start seeing multiple black splotches and then darkness.

## My Pet Hate – English is a Wasted Opportunity

I've always been a fan of logic.

Seriously. As far as I can remember, even the tiniest, niggling annoyance has always sparked a little shiver down my spine.

There is one thing, however, that always gets on my nerves more than most. In fact, so often, that it puts a look of disgust on my face that makes my friends ask 'what's wrong?' Not an object though. Not something people do. But something billions across the globe, me included, use every single day.

That's right. English.

Not the subject in school. It's the language itself that makes me, as a mostly logical-minded person, so mad.

Let's start with the alphabet. What's the point of the letter 'C'? It doesn't have its own sound; it just impersonates 'K' or 'S'. 'Q' is another obscure letter, which could so easily be replaced with the sound 'Kw' or 'Kyu'! However, we now come to the most evil, most despicable criminal of them all – who actually changes its sound, just to replace a perfectly good letter...

'X'. Even saying the name fills me with involuntary rage and loathing. It has exactly the same sound as 'eks', but that's not the worst thing. The worst thing is xylophone!

You might be wondering why out my anger at the letter 'X' in an innocent musical instrument. But the sad thing here is the spelling. Why on earth is it pronounced 'zylophone', and spelt with a 'X'? Stealing a perfectly good letter like Z's sound should, in my opinion, be as illegal as stealing a diamond.

Next we come to grammar. Not grammar specifically, although that is a problem. No. Something much, much more traumatising than that.

Exceptions.

Some are fine, of course. I understand, for example, why the possessive form of a name ending in 's' like 'Joss' is "Joss'", rather than "Joss's". I don't mind that because there is a relatively logical reason for it – there'd be too many "s"s...

I'm talking about things like 'fish' – there's a good rule that most words can be made plural by adding "s" or "es" on to the end. But "fish"! Fish stays the same? And here's the thing – there's no logical reason. Why can't it just be "fishes"? Sadly, that is by no means, the only example either.

Look at the word "romance". Many abstract nouns follow a rule – add "-ship" or "-ness" to the end of the adjective to create a noun. Now, there are little intricacies to this, like the odd removal of a double letter or an extra one here and there. But, in this case, why in the world couldn't it just be "romanticness"? It works well, sounds good, follows the rules. There's no reason whatsoever to make an exception.

Glancing back over these examples, which are just a few of potential millions, I realise that it's not so much the exceptions in themselves I despise so much, it's just the tragic lack of a plausible, valid reason for them to be there.

So why am I picking on English? Yes, I know other languages have much more exceptions and a much more confusing and often unnecessarily large alphabet. But, it's the fact that English has so much potential as an 'easy-to-learn' language. No genders. No adjective agreement. Few verb and article permutations. And then there are the countless exceptions and unnecessary illogics – no, illogicalities – that have no proper purpose. That, for sure, is what I hate most.

## VICTORY ASEKOMEH

I ran through the crowded streets of London. Many of us were heading in one direction: the Globe Theatre. There was diversity on the streets — the very rich in their horse-drawn carts, us, the groundlings, in our scruffy shoes and ragged clothes. I felt embarrassed not wearing a comfortable tracksuit with my comfiest Nike trainers. The Globe stood tall and proud in its rural area. The Globe always gave you a warm feeling in your heart every time you went near it despite the horrible smell of the river Thames, especially the horse dung lying everywhere in the streets of this crowded London of 1599. It was, by far, the worst bit about Shakespeare's magical London. Everyone was in a jolly mood, greeting and laughing with anyone they walked past as we all headed towards the Globe.

Back on 2019 we would say 'there are is a lot of hype' around Shakespeare and the Globe. There is especially a lot of 'hype' around this play. It's Shakespeare's newest one yet. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. There are rumours that even the Queen is going! It's is a very sunny day and I can tell it is already 4 o'clock. I am late. I hurry in anticipation to join the hundreds who are already crammed in this building us 'groundlings' would call a palace.

Being a groundling has its ups and downs. You can hear the actors clearly, see them clearly (if you are tall) and easily meet friends who are also there. The biggest down is that all of us STINK. We can't afford fancy baths, or anything like that. And when you put us in together in one place you would rather, probably, want to leave than bear the stink. I feel bad for the actors. I can't believe they can stand this every play.

The whole place is bustling and as the place begins to settle down, in comes the Queen! All of us bow in awe. The dress she is wearing is a bit too extravagant if you ask me, but what do I know, being a groundling? All I had was rags for clothes really. As the place is finally settling down, someone I think is the narrator walks on stage. As the play starts to begin, I look around and everyone, including the Queen, is looking eager to watch another magical Shakespeare play.

## DANIEL HIGGINS

### My Pet Hate: The English Language

Ever since I was born, I've been surrounded by the English language. The word I spoke – English. What I hear every day. The language with which I am writing this piece. It was not, however, until a year ago now, that I realised the idiocy in this language.

We had been working on converting verbs into nouns. To be honest, I was over-thinking and going off the beaten track, but I couldn't get it out of my head. Logic did not occur in this language, but I couldn't see how to prove it. Suddenly, I smelt victory: the conversion tables. The sense of overwhelming irony came to me:

Adjective	Noun
Logical	Logic
Illogical	Illogicality?

I could not understand why anyone would come up with this! How confusing would it be for foreigners, trying to guess the opposites of words?

Now, I could see something else, and I jumped back in alarm: prefixes. This was the list of prefixes I could think of to mean the opposite of a word: Anti, un, in, il, non, de, dis; but I knew that there would be more. More strangely, many words, like 'great' need a separate word to make their opposite – 'not great'!

Likewise, the number of synonyms for one single word is crazy. And most are not remotely similar, so foreigners who do not know a word cannot guess so easily. The 45<sup>th</sup> word in this conversion piece – idiocy; why would it not be idioticness? Romance – why not romanticness or romanticity? Why are the verb/noun pair of 'advise' and 'advice' so similar?

And yes, many people may say that I'm being pedantic...oh, another one: Pedantry. Why not pedanticness or pedanticity? Perhaps I am being pedantic, but my apology goes out to foreigners attempting to learn this pitiful language.

It was like a bolt of lightning had fractured my understanding when I realised this. My life was a lie. I had complied with the English teaching; had agreed it made sense to put the adjective before the noun. English was, like Trump, fake news!

The word which has been running through this piece is idiotic in itself: idiocy!

A saying once said: 'The bad workman blames his tools...' It is certainly fair to say that, however bad workman I am, in my original understanding; in my gigantic overthinking; and in my over-obsessive pedantry, I have every right to blame this tool!

Crazy? Maybe I am, looking back.

Strong-minded? Certainly!

But, if there is one thing I am above all else, it is very, very confused!

FLYNN HILL

White Powdery Snow

Gliding down at break neck speed

Chills you to the bone

ZAIN LATIF

Haikus are easy

But sometimes they don't make sense.

Toasters are perfect

AMELIE NISBET

Me and my friends had to be quick because we were running late. This was the most exciting day of my life. We were miles away so had to sprint, but my old man shoes slowed me down and I tripped up on some reeking sewage. My friends laughed at me because I had completely ruined my shoes and I fell in it, but we still had to run, the clock was ticking.

After hearing many cursed words, we were nearly there and I was exhausted. Seeing the white flag flying in the distance gave me plenty of motivation to keep running even in the old man shoes.

Finally, we made it! The Globe Theatre was standing right in front of us, high up in the sky looking proudly down at us. When we managed to squeeze through the crowd we got some nuts and found a good spot to stand. We had just made it.

I had never seen A Midsummer Night's Dream before and I had never even been to a play before. I looked behind me and sitting high in the stands was the Queen herself! The play was going to begin in 3...2... and that's when the screaming started...

The next morning, I woke up with a sore head and the memories of the screaming rushed back at me. Everyone around me was panicked. I had just witnessed the Queen's death.

## FORM 2

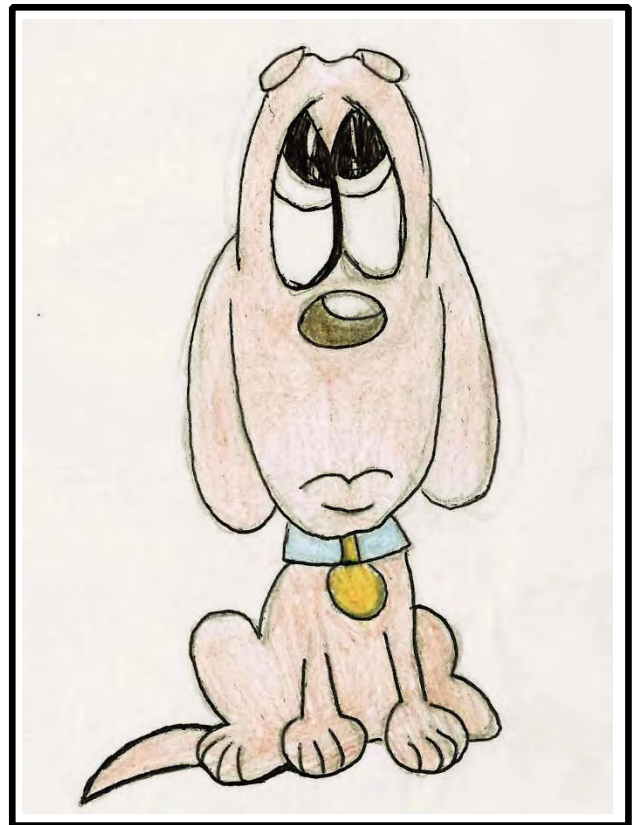
ANNA STRACHAN

### The Abandoned Puppy

He sits there alone by the side of the road  
Waiting, his sad puppy eyes fill with tears  
A horrible time for his tender years.  
His chocolate fur barely keeps him warm  
In the brutally cold, North winter storm  
His legs become weak, he falls to the ground  
But he still keeps hoping you'll turn your car around.

I feel broken inside  
Neglected and denied.  
You left me here, all alone to die  
What did I do wrong?  
What terrible things did I ever do,  
How can I show my loyalty to you?  
Overwhelmed with despair, my head falls to the floor  
I close my eyes with hope gone, forever more.

Gently picked up by large pair of hands,  
The puppy slowly stirred and then turned around.  
He was welcomed with a smiling kind face  
And instantly made him feel more safe.  
He snuggled in closer and he just knew  
That life would get better as he grew.  
With a new master, an owner, a lover of dogs --  
A new life had emerged safe and true  
For this little puppy, who deserved it too.





KIRSTY BETT

### The Pedestrian II

The car ride to the psychiatric centre was long, or at least felt that way.

Suddenly, the car came to an immediate halt and the door slowly opened. The robot-like voice forced Leonard out of the matt black car. Then a mysterious voice echoed through the hall calling out "Mr Mead we have been expecting you".

Leonard was dragged to a dark, cold cell with only a bed as hard as rock inside. He was told he must always stay in here or worse punishments would come.

Five years have passed since the horrible night Leonard was first taken away. Every day when he wakes up he faces the same routine where a small TV is wheeled into his room by two aggressive robots. They force Leonard to watch a clip of the day when his old town was destroyed by war and he was the only one to survive...

EMMA GILCHRIST

### The Pansy

Pansy by name but not by nature.  
Aroma like a scented perfume that is unforgettable and unique.  
Neon yellow centres change to dark purple and white tips.  
Soft, velvety petals of every colour imaginable.  
Yet, their beauty only blooms in the Spring.

SCOTT SMITH

### Acacia

Leopards wait  
In the shade of the acacia tree.  
The toxins inside could kill at the touch.  
The acacia blows in the African breeze,  
Standing on the spot like a soldier.  
The leaves are waxy to the touch:  
It is an eternal eucalyptus.



PHOEBE JENNINGS

Dear Mama and Papa,

I hope you, Tilly, Pippa are all well. Yesterday, I arrived at the new house here in Poland. It is a large, old building that can feel cold and unpleasant at times. However, I remind myself how lucky I am to be here, healthy and safe. The soldiers who live nearby can be kind but most are just full of hatred. However, I do not wish to leave as I must look after my new family. This family has found a place in my heart which I do not want to change.

The camp next to us is inhabited by hundreds if not thousands of people. Even though there are so many telling them apart is almost impossible. From far away they look like a village of clones. It is even hard to tell men and women apart. Even though this place is not very homely, the villagers don't look too miserable, they just look like they are camping or something.

My days are busy and full of chores. The other day I was cleaning the fire in the Commandant's office when I glanced at the logs and thought how magnificent they had looked the night before, all pretty and gold, they glistened in the darkness. But by morning all that was left was cold, black, dead fragments.

Even though Poland is not my real home and we are no longer close, parts of this adventure have made me feel a large amount of happiness. As there are less people around now, the children have decided to take more notice of me and Bruno (the youngest) even appreciates what I do for the family. Although Bruno has come around to understand I other people, Gretel (the eldest) is taking longer to come around.

I am going to try my best to help this family with their new adventure. I would like to think they need me for this.

I miss you all dearly but hopefully all will be well and I shall be home soon to see you and father before Tilly's birthday, to which I presume she will be pampered! I wish you all love and health. I wish to see you soon.

All my love,

Maria

BELLA PORTER

## I Am Human

I will destroy everything's land  
With just a flick of my hand.  
I come in different sizes  
With me, there are no surprises.  
Moodily, I will start a war,  
Killing people you adore  
I invented the gun –  
And I will kill...everyone!

I kill the arctic  
I kill the trees  
I kill the elephants  
I kill me.

It does not matter about my race  
To animals, I am a disgrace  
I melt their ice and steal their home,  
Because of me they are  
ALONE.



When the Bombs Went Off

The fresh, crisp air settled on my tongue as my mouth opened in shock at the incredible buildings standing before me. The streets were crowded with people, some hurriedly trying to get to work, others taking a morning stroll. The Scents of coffee and croissants wafted over from the cafes, waiting for customers to enter them. Further away a bell rang, marking the hour. More pedestrians walked by, shoving their way through the waves of heads. Suddenly, the bell rang again... and the bombs went off.

A tear ran down my face. Ever since the accident, my tears would slowly decrease each day and now only one tear would drop.

'BOOM' 'BOOM' 'BOOM'

Was all that I could hear coming from every direction. I was supposed to be going to my parents office but everyone was screaming and panicking and running around like chickens who'd lost their heads.

Chaos had been unleashed.

The back of my throat became dry and my blood pressure increased rapidly.

'Not again', I thought to myself, 'Keep calm and remember what the doctor told you - to breathe.'

I stood there. Not looking. Not moving. Not thinking. Just breathing.

People ran circles around me, the sirens of ambulances and police cars could be heard, people crying and shouting for others. And I just stood there. I was going to keep standing there, until a thought popped into my mind.

My parents.

Full pelt, I ran heading for their office. The bombs hadn't been visible to me. Worry and dread covered my face. Where did the bombs explode? Was it near my parents' office?

In minutes I reached the front of the office and stopped. I caught my breath. I tried to breathe but I couldn't. The whole building was destroyed, only rubble and rock were left. I retched. There were bodies, actual bodies lying on the ground not making any sign of life, drenched in blood. People who were actually dead, who might have had a family.

My parents. Where were my parents? They went to work earlier this morning and I was going to meet them to start my job here. This was meant to be my first day.

'They might not be..', I gulped, 'dead'. I thought to myself. 'They might be here somewhere or might have escaped or might have not been there at all.' The word 'might' kept going through my mind until I also lost hope. I had to look for them.

I called my mum. No answer.

I called my dad. No answer.

I shouted out for them. No answer.

I was starting to lose hope. The area was swarming with doctors and police officers and journalists. But my parents weren't here. The people who had cherished and cared for me, who were there when I fell over and bruised my knee, the people who put up with my tantrums and held me when I had breakdowns. The people who loved me the most. Tears streamed down my face and I collapsed to the ground. My hazel eyes were glossed over and my chocolate brown hair fell past shoulders covering the sadness worn on my face. A police officer came over.

'Excuse me miss, are you alright?' He asked me.

'My parents,' I sobbed, 'Are they still here?'

'I'm not quite sure, but I can find out for you. I suggest you go home and rest and we will do all the work. We'll try our hardest miss.'

I closed my eyes and took a breath. Whenever I told this 'story' I always had to close my eyes and breathe at the same moment each time. It always becomes too much.

I've been waiting for any sort of call or email or letter to tell me where my parents are. I know it's only been 2 hours but it feels like a lifetime. They mean everything to me. What would I even do without them? In fact, who even let off the bombs? It's not been in the news and no one at the scene looked like they knew. Maybe it was an attack in general or at a certain person. Just as I was thinking about the whole situation the doorbell rang. I slowly paced over and opened the door...



## FORM 3

JAMES GIFFORD

### The Others

I yawned, stretching in the bright sunlight that came streaming in through my shelter, wind whistling through my thin sleeping bag, leaving me shivering in its wake. I reluctantly swung out of my bed, sliding into my boots and cursing myself for not checking the fire before I went to sleep. I stumbled out into the bright spring morning, grabbing my plate as I go, headed towards the 'dinner hall', a grand name for a few stained logs and a tent with some cookers and such like in it. I mumble greetings to Mrs Brown, who runs the township of NewCamp, by the river Trent, and also makes the scanty meals, somehow supplying for a couple of dozen teenagers and the occasional passer-by. There are also a few adults, parents of the semi-abandoned kids who lived in this shanty town. These adults would leave for up to a year at a time, returning with whatever they had collected, sell it to Mrs Brown in exchange for food and other essential items, stay for a few nights and then leave again, with no goodbyes. I had never even met my parents.

I was named Albert after some guy who invented some boring stuff about physics. My mum died when a stray bomb from the war wiped out her laboratory in Cambridge. My dad was fighting in that war, trying to stop a crazy man from a country called Kazakstan taking over the world with his big robots. I was told my father was a hero, a really good soldier, but I don't understand how he could have died then? Anyway, a country from across the sea sent some missiles, and suddenly this country was all radioactive.

The next morning we set off in the usual harsh sunlight, sweltering in the heat. We split up not long after crossing the rusty, fragile wire fence that serves as the protection against the harsh realities of the outside.

I follow Jack, as usual, as we play to each other's strengths (at least that's what Mrs Brown says, I think there was something else as well), even if he irritates me a bit (a lot). Today we are heading east, towards the bright morning sun, in search of anything to fill the big cotton packs that are hanging off our backs. We stumble over a stony ridge, Jack in the lead with his knife and his ego, and suddenly are faced with a huge area of concrete, huge empty buildings, that have been rotting silently over the years. Jack lets out a loud whoop, challenging whatever has been sitting in these buildings all these years. What feels like an age passes, no response then suddenly we hear a faint buzz from behind us, getting louder every second. Then it appears, materialising out of the blue sky, a huge monster, black and menacing, brisling with what looks like weaponry. A mechanical click. A hiss. And then a door slowly lowers, revealing a small hold-like area, completely bare. A disjointed voice invites us to enter. It threatens us. So, we shuffle forwards, half expecting the report of a gun, a sudden pain. But no bullets come through. The moment we are inside this craft the ramp is lifted up, with another hiss, and we are suddenly plunged into darkness. I hear a scared voice "What happened, where are we, Al!" I realise that it's Jack, just not his usual confident self, scared, defenceless at last, without the overshadowing protection of his mother. "I don't know Jack, I just don't know." Me. I'm meant to know everything, meant to be the brain behind Jack's brawn.

Then we suddenly stop, I hear voices, then the now familiar hiss, and we are yet again blinded by the sunlight, but it is fading, getting darker. We emerge to find ourselves in a large, dim space, bustling with activity, facing three men, two of which are holding large, wicked guns but it's the third man who's most intimidating. His black uniform is creased perfectly, his heavy boots gleam, his flat hat, which I am later is called a beret, is spotless. His hair is combed perfectly to one side, the right side of his face perfectly shaped. The left side is not so. A bright red rash spread from what was left of his lower jaw, covering his cheek and leaving his left eyelid swollen. We stood there in awkward silence, unable to take our eyes off of his deformed jaw, misshapen and ugly in the bright spotlights that shine from above.

Finally, he speaks, a low, gravelly sound that doesn't sound quite human.

"Who are you then?"

"Err, I'm Albert, this is Jack" I reply nervously, whilst Jack stares at the man's chin, frozen in silence. Another silence.

"Where are we?"

No answer, then suddenly he turns on his heel, and starts walking purposefully away, with a curt "Follow me".

We jog to keep up, following closely as we enter a tunnel leading off of the big room, trying not to fall behind for risk of getting lost in the complicated maze of tunnels. We suddenly emerge into a spacious room, not as big as the first room but big compared to NewCamp's tents and ramshackle huts. Seated at a large shiny table in the middle of the room were six men, all in spotless uniform. The man at the opposite end was older, with wrinkles on his forehead, but still powerfully built. When he spoke, I could hear the authority in his voice

"So then, who are you and where are you from?"

I looked over at Jack, usually so confident, and saw a scared boy, seemingly fixated by his shoelaces. What had happened? I decided I must be the one to speak, replying with

"I'm Albert, this is Jack, we're from NewCamp" There was a sharp intake of breath around the table, followed by whispers around the table.

The man at the head of the table, who I had decided must be the leader of the soldiers that sat before us, tapped the table, and the room fell silent instantly.

"Well, I'm General Hutton-Penman, commanding officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Intelligence Corps. Welcome to our Isle of Man Base, The last bastion of the British military strength. The most technologically advanced place on what's left of this planet. I've been watching you, let me warn you, and I'm liking you already, you have the potential to make a difference, do some good in a country so dominated by the bad. You could help restore this once great nation to its former glory."

Oh. Wow. A job at this amazing place, helping these amazingly smart soldiers. But at what cost? I look over at Jack. My best friend. Possibly my only friend. For the first time in his life he was pleading with me.

The choice of a lifetime. This new-found haven, somehow a throwback to a cleaner time, but at the same time with an incredibly advanced level of technology. Or a simpler place, just me and Jack, wandering the wastelands on our own. The entire room waited. The choice was mine.

"I prefer it back at camp actually."

## JENNY BONNYMAN

The car jolts over the rugged road, which is really more of a path than a road, as we progress through the desolate terrain. Abi seems to know where we are going as she navigates our way through a maze of dusty tracks, but Lauren and I exchange a nervous glance as we wonder where she is taking us. I roll down the window and feel the warm summer air throw my hair behind me.

"So where exactly are we going?" I ask Abi even though I know she won't tell me.

"I told you, Amy, it's a surprise. And you'll find out soon enough, we're almost there," she says with a smug grin. She knows I hate surprises. I sigh and continue staring out the window, where the sun is starting to set over the jagged cliffs, casting obscure shadows in the dying light. I let my thoughts drift and wonder if what we are about to do is a good idea, considering Abi made us tell our parents we were at her house. She has it easy, her parents let her do whatever she likes - even if that means letting her drive their car when she's only fifteen.

"C'mon guys get out of the car, we're here!" Abi interrupts my thoughts with an eager smile and we step out of the car to find that the path has come to an abrupt end. Cautiously, I step forward to find myself before a drop into a quarry.

"Wow," Lauren mutters, coming up behind me. I take a step closer to see water, far below, reflecting colours from the sky above. The ripples shine amber, looking like something out of a movie or a fairy tale. Abi runs forwards and leans precariously over the edge.

"Isn't it incredible?" She shouts from in front of us. "I used to come here with my brother all the time, we would jump from this spot right here," she gestures to a ledge jutting out from the cliff.

"Jump?" Lauren asks, the quiver in her voice mirroring how I feel as I now realise why we came.

"Trust me, you guys will love it!" Abi is already slipping her jacket off, looking like there is no other way she would rather spend Friday night than jumping off a cliff. She walks back over impatiently and sighs at me.

"Amy, back me up here?"

"Um, yeah I'm sure it will be great," I say with a lump in my throat. I pull off my hoodie and shiver, only partly due to the chill in the air. Abi rolls her eyes at my lack of enthusiasm and then steps forward so her toes are over the edge.

"Well I didn't come all this way to chicken out. See you down there." And then she jumps. I'm frozen for a split second but then I rush to the edge and peer over. My fear vanishes when I see her laughing and waving back up at us. Suddenly I am desperate to join her so I turn back to Lauren who, rather than looking reassured, looks terrified.

"Mind if I go first?" I ask her, already knowing her answer. She looks at me, eyes wide, as if I have just suggested that we jump into a tank of ravenous sharks and then mumbles okay. I feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins as I lean over the edge. I take a breath. And I jump. The wind whistles past me as I soar through the air. The water is lit up from the sky above, as I plummet towards it. My feet hit the water first, my legs burning from the impact. I don't realise until my whole body is submerged, how cold the water actually is. I feel disorientated and my legs have gone numb but my lungs start to burn so I desperately flail my arms until my head is out of the water. Gulping down air, I smile. I've never done anything like that before. As I look at the horizon, the last light from the sun has disappeared, replaced by the silver glow from the full moon.

"It's amazing isn't it?" Abi says, swimming up from behind me. "Feeling like you're flying. You'll get used to the cold after a while," she adds after seeing my face.

"Yeah that really was amazing," I say, my teeth chattering. "Do you think Lauren will jump?" I ask looking back up to the cliff where Lauren is peering over at us, her hands firmly gripping the grass.

"Come on Lauren," Abi yells, "You'll be fine, just don't think about it and jump." Lauren must have heard her as she stands up and takes another step forward, her face conflicted.

"You'll love it trust me," I shout up at her. "And you don't want to miss out on all the fun." At this, she takes a few steps back, until only her head is visible behind the cliff and then she runs towards the edge. She half jumps half falls to the water, and an ear-piercing scream fills the still night air. I hear her hit the water and the impact makes the splash of water reach Abi and I. We laugh as we attempt to wipe some of the water from our faces. And then I realise that I haven't heard Lauren come out of the water yet. I look around. The water is still. Abi and I exchange a worried look and without saying anything, we both dive under the surface. I hadn't noticed before how murky the water is, I can only see a few meters in front of me. I frantically swim deeper, the water burning my eyes. Something grabs my leg. Lauren looks up at me, a wild desperate look in her eyes. Her foot is caught in part of a tangled mess of rusty metal. I reach down, grab her leg and yank it upwards. This isn't going to work, I tell myself. I need to think straight, but every inch of my body is screaming for air. I try to untie her shoe laces. Maybe if I can get her foot out it might work. But the laces are tight and my fingers are numb. In one final attempt to save her, I grab her hand and kick my legs wildly, trying to pull her up. Dark spots cloud my vision, I don't have much time. I have to make a choice. Her eyes find mine. And I let go.

Evie Campbell

### Where the Sky Meets the Sea

The girl perched on the stone wall, her hair whipping against her shoulders with the steady rhythm of the wind.

The sunset seemed to paint the sky in pastel watercolours, the different shades bleeding into each other like some peculiar masterpiece that would never truly be deciphered. The silhouette of the bridge ahead stood firm, casting subtle shadows on the surface of the midnight blue river. It was unusually calm that night; almost every other time she had visited this spot, the water had tossed around the little matchstick boats anchored in the harbour. Not far from this point, she knew, the river joined to the wide expanse of sea,

so deep and cold and so unreachable to her now that it might as well have been some imaginary land she had read about once in a book with a title she couldn't quite place. She distinctly remembered the grown ups dressing up in strange clothes, loading the boats with enormous nets and sailing off out past the estuary, battling the waves like they were demons.

So long ago that was.

Now, the occasions she was able to visit this spot, she could clearly see the boats were no longer used for fishing. Sailing competitions, perhaps, or tourist trips. The fish was all imported in the backs of great lorries. Some nights she watched them crawl like ants along the hilly passes right down to the heart of the town, but their progress was slow, and it hurt to watch. A stark reminder of how much her home had changed in the years since her death.

It hadn't been their fault, but they hadn't known that, she supposed. Oh, how she had longed to see the sea, feel the freezing North wind on her face, to watch the towering columns of waves crashing down over the stern of the ships she had watched leave without her whole life. She was too young, they had always told her.

And that's why she had climbed on unseen that morning, huddled amongst the stacked barrels and rope. Or was there some other logic for her illogical decision? Jealousy, perhaps. A flare of rebellion. But maybe, she sometimes thought, she just hadn't been thinking at all.

If she thought hard enough, she could conjure away the summer night and replace it with that cruel, blisteringly cold day. The ocean spray hitting her face. Goosebumps on her arms. Fear and excitement mixed, the knowledge of the consequences awaiting her if she was caught, and yet a total detachment from the rules of home. Everything was different there. The sky was a bizarre mirage of sun that could not be felt, white clouds that only offered rain, and a blustery gale that could not be seen. If she closed her eyes and focused, really focused, then she could just about feel herself standing up, the deck swaying beneath her feet, rising and falling with the swell of the water. The railing was slippery and bit at the touch, but she barely noticed. Barely noticed, even, as the wooden floor supporting her tipped alarmingly, launching her sideways into the icy cold.

The salty substance soaked into her clothes, snatched her breath away. It was like she was falling and flying at the same time, sinking slowly into the deep. Her arms scrambled for the surface but were met with nothing but water, water, water. Lungs burning, mind screaming, heart pierced with fear. Eyes open, but there was nothing left to see. Unable to control herself any longer, she opened her mouth for absent air, and freezing seawater flooded in.

If she concentrated hard enough, she could remember the exact moment she died.

After that, well, there hadn't been much. Glimpses of her home, her family. Not long after, though, they had vanished. Left the town for a comfortable life in the city, she assumed, like so many others. Sometimes she got to sit at the harbour for an hour or two, unseen by passers-by, inhaling the smell of fish and chips. Mostly, though, she was kept here, this little Eden halfway up a hill. She was never disturbed by visitors, though maybe that wouldn't have been unwelcome. No, she was abandoned to her exile here, so close to home yet so far, the one place she longed to go just out of view.

Her body was lost at sea, but her soul was trapped tantalisingly nearby it.





## FORM 4

Robyn Lansburgh

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a King and Queen who were living happily together in their grand castle in the centre of the city when they decided to have a baby. There was a huge celebration in the city, a party for the birth of the new heir to the throne. Three years passed by and the relationship between the King and Princess was closer than ever. But what came with this was jealousy. After the birth, the Queen suddenly became very unwell and therefore she had to stay in hospital meanwhile, the Princess was left with the King. During this time, the King had struggled to adapt to his new role as father. With the Princess not sleeping at night, the King became too exhausted to visit his wife. A month later when she returned home, the baby and father were closer than ever. They did everything together, hand in hand, just as the King and Queen had done before the Princess was born. One night, after the King had put his daughter to bed, the Queen sneaked into her stately room and tried to give the Princess some 'medicine' to make sure she never woke up. Suddenly, the King darted out from behind the bedroom door and smashed the bottle out of the Queen's hand. The King packed two suitcases, one for him and one for his daughter. They left the palace that night, never to return.

This is when our story begins, ten years on from that moment. King Leopold was now living in the deep, dark woods with his daughter, Princess Margaret. She always questioned him about her mother but he refused to answer her questions. It played on her mind day and night. Was mother still around? Did she still love her?

King Leopold worked down by the river, chopping down the trees during the day before returning to his countryside cottage at night. In the day, Margaret would stay in the house as she wasn't allowed out; it was too dangerous. Usually she never saw another human, but today would be different...

It was a crisp day, beautiful for winter walks and you could hear the crunch of the leaves under the thin layer of frost. As usual, Margaret had been awoken by the singing of the birds. Her dad entered her bedroom. It was petite with a gorgeous fireplace, just like the one in her old bedroom, not that she remembered. She had pink wall paper with a castle on it. She always dreamt about what it would be like to be a princess. Little did she know what was coming up...

As her father approached, she got up and hugged him.

"Stay safe, stay warm and don't answer the door to any strangers."

"I know father you've told me thousands of times!"

Margaret quickly got dressed, made her bed and raced to the front door ready for another day of fun. Now you think being stuck in the cottage everyday was boring? You'd be wrong! Margaret opened the door and started singing. This was her favourite thing to do. Suddenly, the garden was full of animals. Squirrels, rabbits, birds, chipmunks, deer and even a turtle, were all here to listen to her soothing voice. She sang all morning.

When it was time for lunch, she went into the kitchen and began making a pot of soup. Tomato, her favourite. Father would appreciate this tonight after being working outside in the cold all day.

Just then, she heard a knock at the door. She froze. This had never happened before. Father never came home at lunchtime. Another knock. She tiptoed over to the window to have a peak outside. There was an elderly woman, at least she thought it was a woman. She had grey hair, tightly curled. She wore a thin, black coat, which draped behind her on the ground and her hood was up. All she could see of the face was a nose shaped like a coat hook. She carried a brown wicker basket, picnic like. Margaret walked over to the door, she knew father's rules but this was just an innocent woman. Her hands were clammy and she could feel the sweat beginning to drip from her forehead. She couldn't remember the last time she had spoken to somebody, other than Father. What was the worst that could happen?

"Please. It's a very cold day. I would rather appreciate a warm bowl of soup before I continue on my journey."

How could Margaret let her leave without her request? She opened the modest door and let the teeny woman inside. Margaret led her through to the kitchen before she took down her hood. Just then, Margaret noticed her piercing brown eyes, which were quite similar to hers actually. She turned herself around and grabbed a bowl. She filled it completely with the scrumptious soup and handed it over.

"Oh, my young cherub. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Margaret gave a weak smile, she felt content. Cherub? That was what Father called her. Father would be proud of her, she had helped an aged woman but she couldn't help but worry that maybe he would be angry as she had let such a woman into the cottage. The decrepit lady unfastened the button on her wicker bag and brought out an apple. It was the rosiest, reddest and shiniest apple she had ever seen. Nothing like one that she would find in this forest.

"Take it and bite it. One bite is all it will take."

Margaret took the apple out of her hands. Those hands were woven with veins popping out of them. She had the longest nails. White, sharp and very-well manicured. Without hesitation, she politely reached out for the apple as she had been told and bit into it.

Suddenly everything began to fade. She could feel herself turning a bloodless pale. She felt as if she was being swallowed up into a deep and dark hole. Margaret wasn't thinking straight, she needed help. She fell from the chair unconscious and suddenly the only thing she could see was spinning downwards. Then darkness.

Some fairy stories have a happy ending, but not this one. There are bad people in the world; bitter, jealous and revengeful. The moral of this story is that you need to protect yourself from them.

Fraser Houston

### The Wrath Of Sin

'For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.'

The bitter air hung over Father Gennaro Vittore like an ice blanket. The wind moaned through the arches of the extensive monastery seeping into the small office which was bolted up with a heavy iron door. He knelt in the middle of the room by the empty fireplace on a thick red carpet which was hooded with mould. It lay sprawled out with the New Testament placed on top. The Father's robes were crushed under his bony body and his hair bonded to his forehead while the sweat oozed out of his pores, trapped in the cavernous ridges that adorned his misshapen head. He was entranced by a verse from Romans which had been lurking in his head all day. The words meaning more to him than ever before. All of a sudden, the trance was broken and he stumbled to get up from the uncomfortable position he was in even though he didn't want to. He liked the discomfort. The pain of his heels digging into his lower back. The heat intensifying with every second. But the pain was heavenly as his blood rushed to him delivering the pleasure that he sought. There was a noise. A strange noise he couldn't decipher. The striking of metal against the stone walls. The sound of disembodied voices echoing through the confinements of the church. He pulled his aching body towards the iron door as the noise he heard continued. He latched onto the locks. They clicked open one by one with each click returning him to his dignified self. The wind latched onto the door and with one push the door was slamming into the wall creating a pain in the Father's ears. He clambered over the step out of his office and into the nave which stood in darkness. The candles had been engulfed by the shadows. Father Gennaro Vittore scanned the darkness searching for the unknown.

The stone radiated the cold which nipped at him like ants spreading over his skin. He clutched a candle from a candelabra. Still wet with wax he struck a match he had found next to the other candles. The candle flame poured out around him to ward off the shadows. He made his way cautiously across the nave as the noises continued. The statues of the church sat high above the Father, stalking him. They saw the sin that had become part of him that hid behind the facade of respectful innocence. They saw the truth. Gennaro had to squint his eyes to see through the darkness as the candle proved useless against the shadows. The light flickered casting shadows that shifted into demon-like manifestations. The noises ceased. Gennaro

quicken his pace as an eerie silence hung over the nave. He reached the altar and stopped, breathless. He wasn't used to exercise of this kind. The adrenaline raced with urgency through his cold blood. On the ground in front of him lay enormous iron nails and a crown of thorns which were aligned carefully. The Father knew the objects' significance. Flashes of the story he was told as a child. The blood, the torture, the agony. He extracted that moment from his past. His mother standing in front of him, one hand clenching a hammer, the other nails protruding from her fingers like spider legs. This was the first lesson you must learn, she said. He stood there petrified. The memories caused a coldness to blanket his mind from the living reality.

Four figures materialised from the shadows, their black robes trailing along the stone, pulling dust up from the ground. Gennaro didn't move. He was still caught in the past. A fog was covering his eyes, stopping his vision. The figures were approaching. He awoke. The pain concentrated itself, forming into a single tear. He stumbled back in utter confusion and fear as the robed figures drew nearer. They were here for him. Sin had to be punished. He blundered towards the pews as his robe trapped itself under his feet, sending him plunging towards the corner of one of the pews. Gennaro lay there, dragging himself towards the exit. Blood stained his hair as it slipped out of his head. The trickle of blood slowly reaching the ground leaving a slug like trail. He gradually slipped into an unconscious state as the figures clutched onto his robes and heaved him back towards the altar. He could hear the clatter of nails. Sharp thorns dug into his head, tearing the skin. A hand grabbed onto his, placing it against the wall. Time slowed down rendering the impact of the nail into his hand more than torture. He could feel the shape of the nail as it drew deeper into his skin. His robes were torn. The air entered touching his skin. The cold surface of a knife lay upon his stomach. Voices started to form around him. *Peccatum ad mortem*, chanted the figures. The voices getting louder as the knife was pressed further into his skin. There was darkness as one made a deep incision across his stomach.



Lost

The mouth of the mountain gapes open as the roughly dressed man approaches. The harsh hot midday sun attacks anything in its sight and even the bravest beetle shelters from the rays of light. The shepherd stops his determined stride to look at the haunting darkness of the cave opening which is hidden by the bright sun. He wipes the dirty sweat on his forehead using his ragged sleeve and with a deep breath he makes his way towards the unknown.

As he enters into the shaded opening, the sun no longer taunts him and the heated weight on his shoulders vanishes. Walking on the uneven ground, the light swiftly fades away until only a small speck is visible. He reaches into his rucksack, pulls out his oil lamp and using a match, he lights it with his shaky coarse hands. As the lamp comes to life, the angry cave walls becomes visible from the red tint of the burning flame and they stare and loom over him with rage. The heavy rucksack is thrown onto his back and the man marches on around the corner where no more natural light is present. Black envelopes him like a swarm of flies but the flickering dimly lit lamp was barely just fighting it off. He brushes the limestone wall with his fingers and feels the protruding edges pointing towards him as if it was preparing for attack. With his frail arms, he licks his dust layered fingertips, pauses, and spits it onto the damp floor in disgust. Safety becomes further away every step he takes and his eyes are unable to adjust to this degree of darkness. All alone, monsters of the mind stalk him from every corner but his determined and curious thoughts keeps him sane. The bottomless pitch-black hole feels like an eternity and never ending but he comes to a stop.

Searching the walls with his hands the weak man finds an opening. He hauls his bag through the tight gap and going head first, he drags his frail body through. The jagged teeth of the spiked roof scars his back as he crawls through and his ripped shirt is stained with blood. He makes way across the cold ground clenching his oil lamp in agony as his hands and knees deteriorate from the sand paper floor.

No light at the end of the tunnel, only darkness and a pathway to the underground; Not Heaven. The man reaches the end and pushes weakly off the ground to get himself up. He leans against the cold and damp wall of the cave to tie his shoelace which hangs like a noose. He glances around with darting eyes every so often looking for danger but the space remains abandoned.

Suddenly whispers of wind threaten the cave.

He looks up and around but there is nothing to see apart from the frail light spluttering as it runs low on oil. Mind is racing and thoughts of evil take over; shaking him right to his core. Standing still, he makes no movements but his uncontrollable breathing is overwhelming.

He takes one slow and deep breath, and a group of menacing bats fly right over his head and through the tunnel from where he came from. A harsh breeze hits his sweaty hair which blows it wildly around as the bats skim over. The man ducks for safety in the unknown of the dark as he feels targeted by these viscous creatures. But they fly pass. A deep sense of relief fulfils him and his pounding heart slows. The dark cave becomes a dead space of nothingness again. His existence was insignificant and no soul would care if the man was to disappear into it.

He walks slowly ahead. The hypnotic repetition of water drips from the unknown height of the ceiling punches the mans dry hands as he holds them out for guidance in the dark. Cobwebs created walls of white in the corners of the cave which is thick enough to stop an animal that ventures this far. On it is a cluster of soft white wool which comforts the man of the feeling of being in a nice warm bed. Knelt on one knee, he feels the smooth texture of the wool and it reminds him of his purpose. He looks around for any movement but all he receives is the eerie silence of dripping water.

His footsteps are very careful but after hours of walking they begin to become like heavy sandbags on his feet, clumsily falling over rocks that stood in his way. The shepherd's mind was starting to drift as he advances further. He reaches for his water and eagerly holds it above his mouth but two slow drips painfully fall from the empty bottle. Violently he shakes it with frustration but nothing happens and his dry tasteless mouth remains. His head is attacked by a sharp pain which forces him to stop, pausing his progress. He collapses on to the ground, sliding his back on the wall until he reaches the bottom however he never does. The man



continues to fall as his mind slowly drifts away and light from his lamp slowly disappears from his sight. Walking for hours on end but time becomes irrelevant in the cave as everything slows down. He thuds onto the ground and watches his lamp on his lap fade dimmer and dimmer. A white ghost passes by with light footsteps to stop and look the man in the eyes. A daunting stare signals the man's time was coming to an end and he knows it but tears fill his eyes to the fact that he will never be missed by anyone. Nothing is said and the spirit flees leaving the man in total, eternal darkness.

At the opening, a stubborn sheep emerges from the cave and peacefully walks towards the undisturbed atmosphere of the night. It strolls away unaware and joins the flock outside the mountain that never sleeps.

## The Man in the Woods

The glass ground cracked under foot as she paced down the track. Beams of light shot down through the bare branches illuminating the morning mist and spreading a soft glow amidst the cruel cold. Rivers of poppies flowed alongside streams of water weaving red through the trees.

Realising a jacket would have been more adequate she hurried on down the path only slowed by the cold grip of winter. Fallen trees lay decayed and forgotten. Deep trenches of frozen mud water hide small voles and mice, displaced from their homes in order to survive the frost. An air of sorrow fell upon the woods as the light became obscured by the dense fog signalling the return of darkness. Once more she looked over her shoulder to make sure that the little scotty dog was trotting along behind her. She smiled at the small patch of long grass where she and her son used to have sandwiches when he was younger. Seeing it overgrown and weed ridden brought a familiar sadness to her as she was reminded of how much things have changed since then. The war had changed the country. All of the young men were fighting in France. Even her boy.

A fierce wind drifted through the branches forcing her to move on and leave her thoughts behind. The wind swept the fog away too allowing beams of light to strike the ground comforting the frostbitten leaves. A man was ahead of her on the path. The harsh light obscured her vision, appearing as just a shadow he walked away from her. She was not alone but yet she felt desperately lonely. The little scotty dog took off down the track towards the man. She shouted after the dog but the woods seemed to absorb the sounds. Neither the dog or the man acknowledged her and again she was left completely alone.

The path cut down through the trees and lead to an open field. Her dog was nowhere to be seen but a parting in the long grass lead out into the meadow. She walked and as she did she ran her fingers through the grass remembering growing up and how rare a childhood like hers was. Poppies grew amongst the grass painting a red hue over the field and as they did her thoughts changed to her son who was fighting in france. No letters had arrived home in weeks after he was relocated to the front line to fight. Faded posters, unused bed sheets and an empty chair. His life forgotten by everybody but her. Scarred and broken men arrived home frequently, greeted with emotional relief. Every week she waited on the train arriving, anticipating that maybe this would be the day he would come home. It never was.

Tracing the mans steps she weaved through the meadow and with the winter sun setting the need to find her dog was pressing on her mind. The tracks lead her out of the clearing and into the woods. Steep backs ran down the flaks of the path. Finally she saw the man again and paced on put of curiosity. He stood bent over patting the dog on the head. The low light blinded her as she ran towards them. Just two shadows in the path, but now they acknowledged her. The man stood up straight and stared at her. She stopped. Frozen in confusion she gave an odd smile. The man, closer now, was young and tall. He smiled back with a frighteningly familiar expression. There was an unspoken connection between them as if he were her son. The dog barked making her jump and spoiling the moment. She looked down to see the delighted scotty jumping up at her knees. Suddenly she remembered she had not actually thanked the man for returning her dog. She looked up to see an empty path with not a soul to be seen. He was gone. There was a strange sadness at a loss of a companion whom she had not even known the name of. It was as if he was always with her.

The final light cast long shadows down the forrest. Her mind drifted but always came back to the man she had seen. He was undeniably familiar to her. But the feelings which surrounded that memory were dark and empty. Trying to fill in the gap she felt rotting away at her she hurried home blocking it out. She passed patch of grass, now green and thriving as if she was looking back in time. Her dog pulled on the lead as she walked out of the woods and along the road to her house. The door opened and the dog ran in. She looked down to see a yellow envelope. Picking it up she pulled out a letter. It read, " I regret to inform you that your son Private First Class John Mellins was killed in action in Germany on December 14. His body cannot be recovered." The paper shook in her hands as she read the letter over and over again praying she had it wrong, that he wasn't dead and he would come home. Tears streamed down her face blotting the paper which she held steady now, clenched in a fist. She screamed and cried until no more tears would fall. Shouted at the person responsible for the bloody war. Raged at the man who had killed her son. The man walked away, out of the woods and disappeared into the poppy fields.



Ashes to Ashes

Heat. Waves and waves of danger roll off the building to the throng of panic-stricken people outside, streaming away from the blaze. The tortured and terrified screams of the inhabitants pierce the air, enough to wake any deep sleeper. Firefighters fight the colossal fiery demon that towers high above the other buildings in the street. Flames, reaching and grabbing and straining at the sky are mirrored in housing all over the city, tongues of fire licking dangerously close to other buildings. Freezing jets of water shoot up towards the red-orange beast but seem only to be feeding it. The desperate wails of air-raid sirens can be heard screeching all around, slicing through the shocked silence of those who have survived so far. They cling to one another, strangers supporting strangers, WVS women rushing children to shelters and away from the awful sight.

Inside the house it is black as night, lit only by flickering orange light and metal door handles glowing like red-hot lockers. Once-loved possessions have crumbled into piles of steaming ash and thick, acrid black smoke creeps like a monster, stalking every corner.

A teenage boy wakes, feverish in the heat, to the sound of sirens and screams. Staggering out of bed, he grabs a discarded shirt and presses it tightly against his face to fight the scorching air burning his nostrils. A glance around the room sees very little left to save so he stumbles coughing through the maze of flame and darkness to the door. The metal handle is glowing bright and red, but when he throws himself against the sizzling wood it gives way easily, leaving him to dodge blindly around the debris. Stumbling through the inferno, his body is racked with coughs, as malevolent smoke begins to infiltrate and assault his lungs. The fumes attack his insides as unbearable heat scorches his pale skin, darkened with soot. Tears try in vain to wash the ash from his face but are evaporated almost instantly. Sweat pours from every pore on his body as he attempts to avoid the exploding wood and fallen beams.

He reaches the top of the stairs and warily places a bare foot carefully on the first step, which groans underneath his weight. Slowly, the boy lowers himself down onto the next step, and the next, and the next until he is running down the stairs, ever-closer to the front door, shimmering like a mirage in the heat.

Crash!

The banister has given way and all of a sudden he is tumbling through the air, unforgiving ground rushing up to meet him. He lands in a heap on the steaming carpet, a tangle of limbs amongst shards of broken wood. The ceiling emits a low, menacing groan, the only warning before it begins to collapse, splinters sprinkling slowly downwards followed by plummeting planks of wood. He throws himself to the side, narrowly avoiding being crushed but his leg is trapped, held hostage by a heavy cabinet that has dropped down from the hallway above.

As the monstrous fumes battle for control of his lungs, his vision begins to dim and his laboured breathing becomes shallow, yet he spots his shirt beckoning to him from further along the hallway, just out of reach. A low keening escapes from his mouth as he struggles to drag himself along the floor, jagged wood catching on his bare leg and tearing the skin. With a guttural scream, he wrenches his leg out from under the cabinet and lunges for the shirt, the life-saving shirt that may help him to escape.

Clutching it tightly in one fist, held against his mouth, he rolls onto his back to catch his breath, chest heaving as he gasps in pain and shock. He slowly sits up, stretching a shaking hand down to touch the gaping wound, a hot mass of red and pink slowly seeping down his pale skin towards the carpet. Swears stream from his quivering lips, growing in intensity and volume until he is screaming with all the breath he can muster, screaming for help and hope and for someone to break down that door to rescue him.

"SOMEBODY! PLEASE!"

Tears flood down his face, too many now to evaporate into nothingness and he begins once more to drag his slender body in the direction of the front door. Bit by bit, he crawls along the hallway, his pitifully slow progress hampered by the need to keep the shirt pressed against his face.

Thin tendrils of smoke rise up from the carpet, weaving their way towards the ceiling and away from the pale fibres that are seemingly able to alight at any moment. He feels himself beginning to burn, skin blistering along his forearms. Wracked with pain, he grits his teeth and keeps going, the gateway to survival so close now.

Dread chokes him as he hears a long, low creak from somewhere above his head and his movements become frantic as he scrabbles desperately towards the door, fingers grasping at threads of carpet to speed his journey.

The noise swells until it is deafening and time seems to slow; from the other side of the door he hears a man's voice, barking orders, yelling for people to move away to the relative safety of underground. The plaster above his head begins to crumble, pieces falling all around the boy. A large chunk lands next to his

outstretched right hand, and a creaking threat above his head prompts him to flip over onto his back and look up.

The gap in the ceiling has been plugged by a dark object, and he strains his eyes in an attempt to recognise it through the thick smoke.

Suddenly, with a sharp whooshing sound, the ceiling gives way and the object plunges down through the air, followed by a sickening crunch.

Outside on the street, a woman gasps as she hears a deafening crash from inside the blazing walls of the building, no longer standing tall.

Inside, a boy is sprawled amongst the flames, crushed by a heavy wooden wardrobe, his forgotten body lying motionless in charred clothes.



## FORM 5

HARDIE BRYCE

### The Carousel of Life

I left my mind wide open and shut my eyes, to see where it would take me. It took me back; back to when I was a child; back to when my worries were soft and silly; back to where everything originated from. I remember a memory of a time when we were all together, sitting by a car on a blanket; a picturesque family with the crying children and a barking dog. I remember the memory like I was remembering a video -- a tape of the time we were all together — blank in places and recorded over by scratchy pictures of the Sunday races. I can recall waking up in the middle of the night, screaming, bawling, *my legs*, as I scraped along the corridor to a safer place. Crying on the kitchen table. Clambering on a forbidden roof. Cuts. Scratches. Bruises. *A 3 o'clock snack* and *Corby's lead*. Sterile corridors leading off in every direction one last time.

Suddenly I was older, just a bit, not a lot. Suddenly my worries were no longer soft and silly, there was further to fall and more to be damaged. Suddenly fragments of memories became snapshots in time, a holiday; fun, laughter, a chance to forget. Crying over the confusion of a short story. Laughing with Louise Roy. Different religions sitting out on Easter and different children sitting out on Mother's Day, reluctant to participate. Auntie Carol. Mrs Wombil. Central groups. Music lessons in the library.

The low and constant C that I played during the introduction of 'James Bond' rang through me, setting my pulse, while the mixed emotions of the journey home filled my head, making me dazed and confused. These memories were clearer: Every hen dead, *stop, they're still moving!* A new horse off a big lorry appeared, towering over my changing life. A cow escaped, I ran screaming, locking myself in the stable. Abseiling off the edge of the silage pit with bailer twine, *destroying the sides*. Moon cows herded into their pen by my trusty partner and his snow wolf. 10 beady eyes staring at me from the kitchen window, waiting for me trustfully to come back outside and waddle them away home. Carving my name into the family tree with a wonky knife, leaving its mark on my hand. Building a swing under the cover of the weeping ash, drying my tears to leave one last sign that we were here.

I was growing more. Our large house that felt empty and unloved surrounded by our new farm which, for the first time, we could not see from our windows. New neighbours brought a summer of fun and excitement, cutting down other people's trees and skipping off with them, the six of us. They left us, one last time after that cold wedding when we couldn't come out to play, *sorry*, never to be contacted again but the memories remain. A freezing winter and an old horse, taking with him his secrets and leaving behind his name, 'commodore's field'. New neighbours emerge, Anna and Jack, both bundles of wild enthusiasm, only a bike ride away. With them the friendships flourished. The new school full of strange people saying naughty things. Alex and Alex turned into Jason and Oliver, forgetting about the people I was scared to leave behind and racing to the lunch queue with my new friends instead. A primary one gave me the penguin I keep in my bedside drawer, once fresh and unscathed, now though it bears the scars of time. Fiona moved to Dundee, Keelin to New Zealand and all the rest of us into big school.

*You know some people you'll not be friends with in high school?* Maths, English, Science, Music, Drama, Tech, HE, Spanish, German. A moving timetable full of stress-free homework and intimidating new faces. I watched me develop excruciating acne, sticking out from the fair and clear skinned 13 year olds. *¿ Me nombre es tengo ?* No. My sudden 'allergy' to chlorine when the class was in the pool, lying through my teeth. The new part of this huge house and I get the smallest room, red and cream exactly like my old one, no need to move on when you can change your surroundings to suit, painting over the cracks. Jason and Oliver turned into Robbie and Scott and Ryan, running from Callum and Jack round every corner. I remember eating doughnuts in Mr Puller's classroom with Jodie every Wednesday or Friday, why animal testing is needed. The horses didn't tower as much now, both adapted to our new environment. I jumped on Archie in the moor, he dumped me in the pond, I remember squelching and laughing all the way home. My second funeral, leaving the nosey girls in my class stunned as I pack my bag early.

I remember the feeling of disappointment when I didn't feel older. Sports camp. Hockey camp. Club Camp. Tearing while in fits of laughter with the girl with the un-tamed red hair. The view of Milan from the plane, one side glowing while the sun set into the distance and the other already dark. Hotel Le Campagnol. Gladly leaving the foreign valleys to return home to the ordinary and plain. Spring turned into summer and the nights grew longer as my fears became real, another change. Disappearing off into the hills with my trusty steed, following every track we could find until in a flash we were sinking, panic, fear, in the middle of the woods and alone.

A new school filled with new faces I didn't know, hidden away every lunchtime, scraping my way forward through concrete walls of work, my new friends on the other side. I remember slowly changing, picking up words, accepting my new life far from the one I had imagined as that naive child. I hadn't realised how inevitable it would be.

A view over the whole world. Summer months. My black uniform scattered across my floor where it would learn to live. Someone else's house and family greeting me kindly as I pass through for a short while. No one cared when the days were long and dry, without rain to wash anything away. The ground was cracked and echoed with every hoofbeat over the dead, brown grass. I climbed up one of the tallest pines to grasp a glimpse of the sunset, almost in the north, from a happier view just with a greater risk of falling. Then I lay in the middle of the fading fields and listened to the silent grazing while the night became cold, and later I walked home in the dark with a beaming grin. Those are the memories I live for.

Now, with my eyes as open as they can get, moments in time captured and shared show me just enough not to forget about my former friends and those I used to know, now I live such a different life to the one we used to live together. I am aware that now, my memories can deceive me, and that over time I've probably changed them to what I prefer, but even reflecting on what I truly do remember leaves dark gaps where I chose now to let the light seep in. Now is where I can remember no further, as I have got a life of memories still to make.

MARINA LAWSON

You?

You wake up at three in the morning. This isn't uncommon. In fact, this happens almost every night. There's probably something you could take for it, but anything you've been prescribed always seems to go missing. Well, not exactly missing, more like stolen, but you act as though you don't know she takes them. It's easier that way, for both of you. You sit up and look around your room, or you try to, at least. The room is pitch black and your eyes are unable to adjust to the almost non-existent light level. You don't mind, however - you've done this enough times that you're able to navigate the room relying solely on muscle memory.

Before you can decide what to do you're already halfway to the door, your feet stepping over any invisible object hidden in the void that come in your way. This could be the copious amount of untouched books and assignments for school or maybe it's the mass of dirty laundry in dire need of a wash that has been there for weeks, or maybe it's the multitude of other things in your room which you've been too tired to even touch.

It's only after you enter the hallway that you realise your body is making its own way towards the bathroom. Almost as if your actions are not your own.

On your way there, you vaguely acknowledge that her bedroom door is closed, which is strange. She doesn't usually keep it locked unless she... never mind, you can worry about that later.

Once you arrive you switch the light on, the filament bulb flickers, before going out completely (that should have been fixed weeks ago). Luckily, your eyes have adjusted enough for you to navigate through the darkness and switch on the light beside the sink, almost blinding you after being in the dark for so long. With your new and improved vision, you see the complete and utter chaos that is your bathroom, as well as

all the rubbish littered around. The dirty tissues, the crumpled pile of towels in the corner, the empty bottle of pills that were prescribed a week ago.

Yet you don't seem to do anything about them, you stare at them for a few minutes, then move on. You look back into the mirror in front of you (has the glass always been this dirty?) and you see yourself.

It is yourself? You don't recognise the person in the mirror.

You seem... off, almost unreal, bordering on uncanny valley territory. Your eyes stare blankly, matching how you feel. Your hair looks like a rats nest and has the greasy shine akin to that of a Barbie doll. Your skin feels dirty, like every single piece of dirt and grime is under your skin (When was the last time you showered?).

You step back from your reflection, not wanting to see this identical intruder any longer. But before you can do anything to stop yourself, you clench your fists and smash them down onto the mirror. Glass flies everywhere. You look back down at your hands and notice that they now have shallow thin cuts all over them, and that some marks are deep enough to draw blood. Yet as you stare at your hands and your arms, you realise that they don't seem to hurt, not really. Instead, with the pain comes clarity, and with that clarity comes realisation. Because as you stare at your hands, you realise that they aren't yours at all, they're the intruders.

An all too familiar invader.

But how? How did they get here? And if they're here, then where are you? You're in exile. Trapped outside your own body, and you know one quick and easy way to regain control. It worked before, why not now? All you know is that you have to fix it. You have to fix it. Have to fix it. Fix it. Now.

With hands that aren't your own, you grab a shard of glass from the counter, the sharp edges digging into your left palm, yet you don't seem to mind. If anything, it helps. You try to think logically about what you're going to do, but logic is irrelevant when your brain is trying to win the fight between your natural survival instincts and an uncontrollable urge. Humans evolved to survive, and if this helps you survive then what real reason do you have to stop yourself?

The real question is: do you really want to survive?

Before you can answer the question, the sharp edge has already collided with the not-so-smooth outer layer of your skin.

Suddenly, everything is quiet.

No panic.

No questions.

No intruder.

You're on your own again. Finally.

You slump to the ground, your back propped up against the grimy counter. Your eyes stare vacantly at the open wound, the blood pumps out rhythmically to the beat of your heart. The shard of glass clatters to the ground, your hands too weak to hold it anymore. You have no further use for it anyway, it's just another piece of trash on the bathroom floor, like you're soon to be.

You don't really know what will happen next and you don't really care, you didn't plan for this to happen and you still haven't answered the looming question. Your eyes wander to the red stain that clings to the bath. Maybe, you think, if it's anything like last time, she'll wake up and come find me. But you know it's not like last time, it's three in the morning and you noticed that she'd been twitching all day, itching for another fix. You both have your addictions. You wonder if she's likely to realise that you're gone, or if she'll be too high to even notice. However, that doesn't matter any more. You know the answer to the only question that really matters, even if you don't want to admit it. And as you drift off into oblivion, your head throbbing due to lack of blood, you wonder whether she will be coming with you, or if it will be the intruder instead.

**C'est la vie**

My quota had to be met today.

St Joseph's Hospital slumped among the other buildings that were erected beside it. The sky was painted numerous shades of grey, white and black and the sun had stopped its feeble attempts to break through the iron curtain and lounged contently behind. I walked reluctantly up the worn road bordered by withering grass. Like the sun (and many of the souls trapped within the characterless walls) the green surrounding the hospital had surrendered and succumbed to the ever-infectious grey. Many in this hospital I knew well, some feared me more than anything and others treated me like an old friend, welcomed gladly into their arms. Regardless, it was imperative that my work was done.

The doors that so many crossed for the last time invited me in, automatically shutting behind me like the swish of scythe. Inside the stagnant air had undertones of bleach, the magnolia walls deeply scored by trolleys rushing past, their passenger fading fast. Insipid prints depicting joyous scenes dissolved into yellow underneath the electric lights. I pick up the clipboard and carry out the ward round.

The first one to be taken into my clutches stared at the polyester ceiling above their bed willing themselves to see through the fluorescent strips that flicker as though they too are coming to an end and out into the sky. Further through the hospital's highly polished linoleum floor, I pass antibacterial stations perched on the wall. I can hear the thoughts of the suffering blocking out the wails of mothers who try to hold on to their children. I do not choose. I simply do. I visit respiratory, cardiology and gastroenterology and by 12 o'clock I am still short. Whilst greeting the geriatric ward, which always makes me feel unquestionably welcome, I get an emergency call. The ringtone brings me rudely awake from my monotonous work. The calling is impossible to ignore and once set in motion it must be answered. I leave from the belly of beast and escape the macabre scene that I have set into motion behind me only to begin on another onslaught of pain.

The 11:32 train to Edinburgh was a mass of humanity, a mass of life. Strangers from every walk of life became acquainted for a short while. Soon to be acquainted for life, however short or long that would be. Only I knew that. Above the heavens opened and the sky wept. Tears raced down the train window's face traced by a little boy in a sunshine yellow raincoat trying to distract himself from the numbing boredom. Outside the passing greenery became a haze to the people on board who proceeded with life's mundane luxuries. Throughout the carriage cross words were completed, sleep was feigned and emails drafted never to be sent by the jostling voyagers. The once ravishingly red carpet spattered with old chewing gum exhaled dust as the trolley made its way offering unappetising sandwiches and scalding tea. The driver sluggishly drove her train onwards along the uncompromising tracks at a reckless speed. Muddled silence, only pierced by the colourless voice of the intercom, wove its way between the lives. All itching to make their destination, without the knowledge that the next stop would be one they could never depart from...

Without warning I watched as the vessel of lives derailed off the reassuring tracks and onto the Cliffside. Reluctantly, I began my work on the unassuming passengers of the 11:32.

A man, smartly dressed, was to be my first victim. Next, a nurse, a nanny and a student. All strangers crushed in the chaos and confusion. The windows smashed into violent fragments upon impact that fatally showered the family of four that were sat at the coveted table seat. The mother's look of love for her children, as I stopped her heart will haunt me like so many others. I gladly watched as a radiant yellow coat wriggled its way to the green verge of safety. I took a small break to check my rapidly increasing list and the passenger's shock had worn off and the relentless feelings of fear and pain hurtled into their feeble bodies like the waves that crashed into the perilous cliff foot below. Jagged rocks stretched upwards like the teeth of lions desperate to satisfy his gnawing hunger. The waves growled and roared to the passengers above taunting them. I stood and watched as the humans clawed and kicked each other, each person as desperate as the next to escape... Me. In all their agony to elude their imminent meeting the passengers still on board this nightmare dislodged the very ground the train was so perilously stationed on. A

cacophony of screams, cries come from the breaking metal and souls erupted and the remaining humans plummeted to their salty graves. A symphony of disturbing groans from the carriages, as the driver went down her ship. I wanted to be done, if there was anyone to beg to I would be on my knees sobbing the tears of those who had painfully died and those who will have to live with the consequences.

There I was back at the accident and emergency room working overtime as I waited for the ambulance to come screeching up to the doors. For those passengers who thought they avoided my grasp the gateway would shut behind them forever. Stretchers mechanically jolted out of the vehicles and rushed passed me into a operating room. The monitor rhythmically played out a melody as surgeons panted into their masks and sweat beaded along their furrowed brow. I willed them on pleading them to succeed. The artificial sun above the table shone onto the patient illuminating the translucent ghost face. Latex gloves squeaked and I could taste the dread filling my stomach as the melody that was amplified through the room spiralled ever faster. Waltz. Salsa. Charleston. And then silence. It echoed around the room and I went to collect the last soul of the day.

I looked over my quota, successfully filled and exceeding the necessary deaths. Today it had sky rocketed towards the heavens. It pained to watch the aftermath of my honest day's work. I hated it. But who else could do the job? Who else would?

MICHAEL ANDERSON

### The Heart and Soul of Aignen; Notes on my Father's Death

My late father - may God have mercy on his soul - only last year gifted to me a small, unassuming box of neatly stacked papers. I didn't grasp at the time the significance of the gift; only when news reached me of his disappearance and later discovery deep under the treacherous marshy terrain six miles north of home did I properly understand the dark, portentous purpose of that confusing package. The following months were, of course, wracked with grief and in all honesty the papers slipped my mind entirely, stricken as I was with delirious anguish. I'm sure you can understand why I deferred its opening and instead moved the box to the attic just over 9 months ago, and have failed to look at it since. Now I find it hard to believe that I could ever have made such a horrible mistake. The thought that I had not known the cause of my father's death for so long — and by my own will, I suppose, for I must have known on some level the significance of those papers — will surely haunt me for the rest of my days. The grim esotericism of the information held in the crisp pages he gave me leaves me feeling empty and dull, my mind an interminable desert of chalk, dust and nothingness. It's as if I'm stumbling through a smothering haze of sluggish revelation as the knowledge that I will never reach its end slowly rots a hole in my mind. At first I tried not to believe it, but its truth seems somehow incontrovertible to me now, and that worries me greatly. The authorities say they will look into it, but I don't suppose they will; an accident or a nervous breakdown is far easier to explain than anything so impossible as what actually happened. Tomorrow, I will ensure my admittance to a mental ward and they will help me forget all that has occurred over the past few months, but for now I put my thoughts to paper. Perhaps I will burn this manuscript later. I don't know.

Edward Denn, my father, was in life a truly unique man. He had a beautifully curious personality and an inventive, intellectual streak that lent him an eccentricity that never ceased to serve as an amusement for those around him. He was quiet, especially after he took up residence in his most recent house (in which I now sit), but he was a fairly old man and I supposed that the stress and strain involved in the moving process affected him in some small way. He was originally educated as an evolutionary psychologist but worked more as a social anthropologist (following a highly entertaining but entirely tangential series of events), with his passion for geology and history compelling him to lengthy expeditions and weekly excursions in his free time. This was what brought him to the peculiar town of Aignen, a small huddle of strange buildings perched on a mountainside in one of the more remote corners of northern England, built on a meagre burn that trickled down into the valley below. You're likely questioning the significance of this town, wondering if it had anything to do with the death of my father. Even knowing nothing of it as I first laid



my innocent eyes on those papers I was quite sure of it; its name headed the first of the many pages interred in the fatal box.

Aignen, according to my father, is a strange and almost mystical village, enveloped in an otherworldly, electric atmosphere that toyed with his mind and hinted incomprehensibly at forbidden secrets and obscure beauties. He said that as he spent more time there, he began to realise more and more, and not by way of conversation, that "there is more to the town than meets the eye". An odd description, perhaps. I had thought so also, at first; cryptic and unbelievable. As a man of science - hard and substantial science (specifically Mathematics, Oxford) I decided, sorrowfully, that my father's mind had simply begun to slip. I read on, nonetheless, following a brief set of rather messy notes taken 'on the fly' - opening hours for some village shop or other - and came to a more practical description. Despite its isolation (or arguably because of it) Aignen did play host to a number of small businesses of its own, some of which my father helpfully jotted down: a butcher, a chemist, a small local surgery and one rather miniature shop offering a large variety of general wares. How unremarkable, I'm sure you think to yourself. Yes, quite unremarkable in content, though the layout and architecture of the town was apparently quite out of the ordinary. My father wrote of its "conservatively circular layout" and the unfamiliar techniques utilised in the construction of its oddly shaped buildings. Many were round in themselves, low domed structures that could be mistaken for massive molehills. My father described others as tall spires set on arching pillars, reminiscent of the remains of ruined chapels, and others simply as being foreign in both makeup and design.

But more disturbing than the abnormal architecture or the unconventional layout or the strange, glittering quality of the buildings that seemed to gaze down at you like benevolent gods, was the unexpected behaviour of the people that lived there. I suppose that given my father's initial description of the place, it seems obvious that the residents would be so abnormal. What worried me, however, as I first began to read through his brief analysis, was how natural these traits and behaviours seemed to me. The wariness of outsiders - of course, for any town so unique as this would be unwilling to share its innermost secrets with strangers and passing fools. The airy, dream-like quality of their expressions was surely down to their isolation; not one of them had a care in the world, abstaining from the contemplation of the dim and distant future, as I like to call it. And of course their dozy sleepiness, their contented drowsiness; a simple effect of the town as a whole, I supposed. But now, thinking back, I wonder why I did suppose that. An effect of the town as a whole? No. Towns don't have that effect on people, lest due to a high concentration of noxious motor fumes or chemical waste, perhaps. But still, a nagging at my mind prevailed, and in the following confused re-reading of the entirety of my father's writings, I came to realise exactly what it was that had caused my father's death. I began to realise more and more, and not by any conventional mode of logic or reasoning, that there is indeed more to that town than meets the eye.

For I could not shake a feeling, an idea, from my mind. No matter how strange and unfounded I knew it to be, it would not leave me be, and as I slept it crept over me, ensnaring with strange tendrils and latching on with mystical claws and now, no matter how hard I try, I cannot refute its truth.

There is more to that town than meets the eye; a heart, a soul, a core that is entirely insubstantial but as real as the people that live around it.

My father was consumed by the delusion, the warm and comforting insanity of Aignen that I feel beckoning to me even now, every minute. But as I read, I find myself unable to see reason in many of the truths which seemed so incontrovertible when I sat down here to write.

Something draws me - and not Aignen - a presence. Another... body? Spirit? Soul? The essence of something just outside my reach. Something that I could reach if only I tried. Not Aignen, but something altogether more promising. New life, or something more? I reluctantly admit that Mathematics is beginning to lose its lustre.

And best of all: this thing, this soul, this feeling - it draws me only 6 miles north of home.



Being from Dundee, I knew much about being different (in a good way though). A stronger, more resilient type you would struggle to find anywhere else. But when you have a gift like mine it can flip your life in a matter of minutes, maybe even seconds. It can turn your whole life upside down, dragging you from the back of the crowd to the centre of the stage, where the blinding spotlight brightly shone by modern society dictates how you spend your days.

It was one of those chilly, crisp mornings, only one which the beginning of a cold winter can produce. A thin layer of frost dusted the long stretch of road. Like any other day I started off the day with the same routine: wake up, shower, eat breakfast, lock up and walk David to school. *'Left turn, walk on, take a right at the cemetery then follow the alley up to the church'*. Like any other day I nattered these clear cut instructions that my mother had drilled in my brain, with a pinch of salt and a crude mimic. But for some reason on this particular day, my gut instinct seemed to take me away from the norm. I recall getting the strangest sensation, which quite literally stopped me in my tracks. Was it Deja vu? Was I ill? I was clueless to say the least. As we were already behind schedule I made up my mind and took the alternative route along Cedar Road. As that long day passed, each minute seemed to get more painful as I impatiently sat in my lessons waiting to get home. I was still on edge after the occurrences that morning and was determined to get out and away from everything that was troubling my young, confused mind. I needed clarification. I needed answers, something to answer the question that was swallowing my day whole. And then came the breaking news alert, and with those words from the radio, I too rightly knew this was no coincidence.

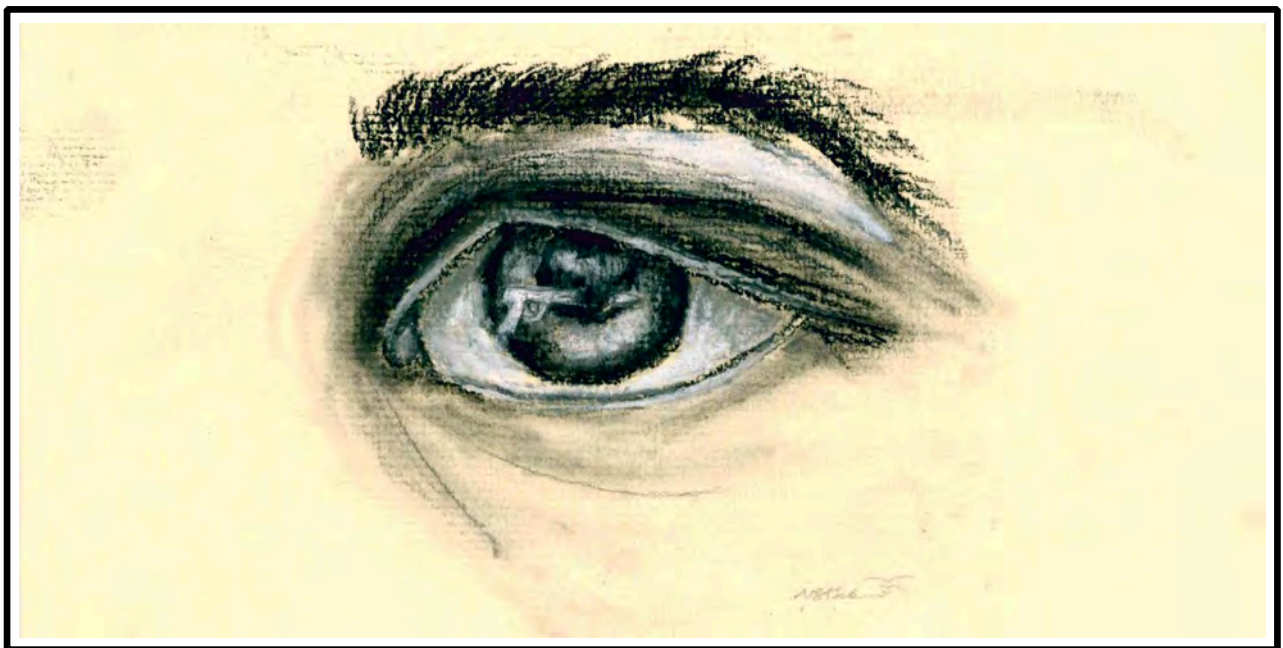
Nowadays it's not as straightforward. I can't just go out and protect people from the inevitable. As I grew older my senses became stronger, consequently making me weaker. Everywhere I looked -- everyone I saw, one thing stood out for me. Death. That was enough to send me into complete breakdown. That's why I take the pills. It takes the edge off. Without them I wouldn't know any better. I must keep it to myself, protect my gift. I would never dare compromise my secret. Since the incident, back when I was fifteen, I have locked away those urges and thrown away the key. The urges to tell people my story and save precious, innocent lives. I wouldn't dream of doing it though, in my sane state at least. Not once had I ever heard of someone being quite like myself, and to tell anyone, would put my dignity at threat. I knew what would happen. It's obvious. I would be used like a spanner in a builder's toolbox. It would throw my whole life away and that's not something I'm prepared to do. Yet.

Skip five long, draining years forward and here I am — finally out of my shell and doing some good for once. Not once in the past had I imagined this is what it had been like. Not only was I doing something that was morally right, I was also being looked after. I wouldn't say I was greatly sought upon in the slightest. My services are only required when completely necessary and I must agree to partake. I still do what I want to do, see who I want to see. When I want, how I want. I still get a life. I've only worked two jobs in the last three years, so you can see why I'm chirpy about it all. That brings me to today though. My biggest task yet.

Snowflakes painted the ground slowly as I took a deep breath of the ice-cold air and took my first step on frozen Russian soil. I had never worked internationally until today. It almost felt un-loyal to do so. Money is money though. A job is a job. With no hesitation I am hurried off to the president's suite of the Marigold Hotel. It starts here: Twenty-four hours then I am back to the airport heading home. My task though? Ride alongside and protect Putin during his main campaign day in Moscow. It may seem simple but a man with as high a social status as him, the unthinkable can happen in a split second. My first order of duty is to escort the president out of the hotel. Waiting for us outside, in the Arctic conditions, was a blacked-out Cadillac. Almost like a sniffer dog, it was here where I start to feel on edge and sense something is in fact not quite right.

Two seconds. That's all it took. It is perplexing how your conscience can change your perspective of time though, because to me it felt like that moment lasted for ever. I can still put myself back into the everlasting visions of that day. In that car seat, one eye on the target, one eye on the glistening glass of my watch. Each surrounding face was wiped clean of all expressions, as the sky darkened, and the daylight faded away from the exposure of the overhead sunroof. My forefinger tapped rhythmically on the trigger guard of the prowling glock, that perched on my right hip. My left hand swung over my body and reached out, thrusting the head of the president down, right in line with the barrel of my handgun. One slow squeeze. Blood painted the white face of the horrified agent on the other side of the vehicle, as he frantically tried to find his bearings. A bright flash blinded me at that moment, taking me away from it all.

For almost my whole life I had relied on my gift. Yes, sometimes I wish I was just normal. Or even just unaware of the powers I held. But in reality, I needed it. It had dragged me through the rough areas and brought me out on the other side of the light. Although now, I discover that my sense is too late for *me*.





AMY PAL-KERR

I am Anna

I was Anna. I was seventeen years old, boarding for my escape from Liverpool. My friends and I had finally finished A-levels and the final destination was Ayia Napa. I was anxious to soar away from my home, away from the stress and anticipation that had boiled within me all my life. Staring out of the window, the rumbling of the plane began. Peering out to the concrete landscape, peace settled within me as I waved goodbye to my home. What I'd have given for this to not have been the final goodbye. I was Anna and I was at a party. The music filled the room, drowning out the noises of girls laughing and guys dancing. I was sipping on my drink, talking to a handsome boy who my friends had suggested I should talk to, he felt safe to be around. But I was wrong.

Next thing I knew, I was isolated from my friends, as the boy walked away from them holding me tightly. His hands dug into my bag, with his clenched fists around my shoulder holding me up. I remember walking past another couple, looking into their eyes, pleading them to realise what was wrong. But they couldn't. Why would they? He was just a guy and I was just a girl who'd had too much to drink, or so it appeared. Later, I was knocked into the back of a car with the faint smell of cigarettes, that smell still lies with me to this day.

That's the last memory I have of Anna. Before that man. Before a drink. Before a dare which became deadly. I was Anna. I don't know what I am anymore.

Today my name is Maria. Wrapped up in a lilac dress, which is hanging from my bones, I'm forced into a tomb. Alone. In the shadows I can make out the shapes of an animal, hunched over, ready to pounce on its prey. Focussing, I can envision the man, one of many who'll claw away any innocence left within me. Through the cotton covering that is tied over my eyes, the many other shapes of men can be seen. I feel the calloused fingers on my back as I'm forcefully assisted to what appears to be the centre of a circle. Slapping their hands all over me, my dress is tugged at. This means to take it off. Letting the material fall to the ground, I can almost hear the animals licking their lips, hungry. One of them aggressively pushes my body to the ground, thrashing my knees to the cold concrete. Tears are burning down my cheek, my body trembles. I want out. I want to scream but all my voice lets out is the whimper of a mouse. The sounds of foreign men escape from the corner of the room.



Abruptly a salty drink is forced down my throat, gagging me. I instantly feel my body drown. I once again try to squawk. But. I. Can't. I want to fight. Anna would fight. She was an angry girl, running from the trauma of her home. Yes, her mum was vicious. Yes, she had glasses thrown at her for speaking when her mum was permeating her own pain with her 'personal painkiller,' but she was Anna. She was a lioness who fought everyday of her life. Anna would not let these men hurt her but Maria is cold. Maria is tired. So very exhausted. The black of the blindfold grows until the fear within me is replaced by a fuzz. Maria is gone.

Now, I am Jane. I'm not as angry as Maria. I'm plastic, perfect, positioned on a harsh wooden chair. The fantasy I'm fulfilling is not the same as the last. This snake is smart. The pinstripe suit, polished shoes, cleanly shaved man is perched in a chair placed in front of me. But those eyes are empty. They're cold. The orange flicker of a lighter appears as he ignites a cigar, calculating his next move. Peering around, pictures of what appear to be him and his family are evidently dotted everywhere. My face becomes hot. It burns me as I become increasingly angry. How could he, a married man, do this? I know what he'll eventually do but, why? He is obviously prosperous; he is wealthy. Why must he throw it away to torture me and dismantle my dreams, dragging them down? Acknowledging my discomfort, those eyes become clouded with pique. He strides forward, shedding his clothes. With his hand airtight around my fragile wrists, I'm thrust to the floor. The butt of the cigar is singed into my chest, marking me like a slave. He hisses as he strips me. I lie back, limp, there's nothing I can do. I promise. If I could. I would. As the heavy breathing intensifies, I think of Anna. I grieve the damaged dreams. I so longed for an escape so why am I imprisoned in this cycle? I'm sorry, Anna, you would burn this place down. I want to, I do but I'm not Anna anymore. The fire that once burned within me has been put out and in its place is clay, molded anyway for any man.

Sophie. It's a game of cat and mouse. Each day I forget more and more about Anna. I think she is broken. I think she was alone and longed for that feeling, where your heart quickens, face beams, you're gliding with only the weight of the wind in your wings. What surrounds Sophie is darkness. An empty void. No escape. Anna used to enjoy music, the bass pushing her to strive. Sophie only ever hears her own crying now. Anna used to cry and laugh. Sophie feels nothing anymore. I was Anna. I am Anna no more.

Each day I am controlled by numerous monsters in disguise. Whether it be dragons in suits or cheetahs in joggers, the cycle is repetitive. They come in, water-sickly sweets-ground/bed/wherever they deem acceptable. Every time am I left the same. Frozen. My lifeless body beat and ready to be tossed. I miss Anna. She was a person. She had feelings that coursed through her veins, throwing her into fits of rage. What's left is a puppet. A doll, dressed up to live out a story until I become redundant and must be refurbished.

My name is whatever, my identity is gone. I am Maria. I am Jane, Mary. Sophie, you, her, the list goes on. Once upon a time, I was Anna. I was sad and alone and dreaming of a chance to fly from the 'security' of the nest. I dreamt of nightclubs and starry nights, not dark rooms and blindfolds. Whoever I am lives in a constant state of inner fear. Scared of the ropes. Scared of the blue pills gagged down my neck. Scared of the next man I'll be given to. Petrified. I am so drugged up, I am poisoning myself. I am rotting from the inside out. Once I'm ruined they'll dispose of me and capture their next victim. I don't know where they'll put me but nowhere is worse than the lair I've been damned to. The only thing for certain is I don't want this anymore. I don't want to survive, I want to live. But that isn't possible. The life that was previously Anna has been murdered with the marks of men tattooed to her body, possessing her forever. Anna is dead and the game of 'pass the parcel' will continue for the rest of time.



Time for Justice

*"Daddy's taller than him. He had a beard like Santa and wore big green boots which looked like angry crocodiles. I didn't like his boots. He also had a little pet birdie who lived in a house on the wall. It popped out and sang to me every hour. That was my favourite part about going to Alan's house."*

Even prison felt safer than here. What was once my beloved family home, where organised chaos was the everyday norm; now nothing but lonely bricks concealing the dangers. Much changed in those 93 days spent in remand. Despite the many things I lost — my devoted wife and cherished children, my hard-earned career and my good reputation — my true identity remained intact until I walked a free man. I am a victim of the flawed justice system. People will always have their informed opinions, but I'm not like that. I promise.

It was just another day in Farnham. Most are spent surrounded by joyful sadness for me. My work is my ecstasy. Being a biomedical engineer, I am constantly aspiring to do better with respect to employment and temperament. Although only a percentage of projects which I embark on are triumphant, knowing that each startling second of my time which I dedicate towards them can result in producing some of the country's most advanced medical technology *and* result in potentially improving the life of even just one person is the reason I persevere. On top of this, I use my puissant platform to raise awareness for individuals who are in desperate need of such artificial devices, which replace absent body parts and internal organs, through a charity I founded named, 'Lend a Hand'. After all society has done for me, giving back seems equitable.

Following yet another demanding day of trial and error, I crashed through our front door like thunder, thrilled to be welcomed by anything other than the pollution better known as London rush hour. "The Farnham Fomenters started this," trembled my wife. Panic promptly passed through my body like gossip — something I should be accustomed to by now in this town. Paedophile hunters are the latest rage. One simple Facebook post and it's an open secret; that's how this rumour became reality. I've witnessed the way criminals are treated by this community and I was soon to be next.

Ghostly glares. Berated. Tires slashed. Threats. Just some of the abuse I was subjected to. Days longer than lawsuits had passed by before the police got involved due to a concerned nursery teacher reporting unusual behaviour from a young girl in her group. *"Alan says I can have my own birdie too if I keep coming to see him. I really want a birdie. Mummy says no."* I was usually fond of interviews — they are open doors to breathtaking experiences, but this is when I learnt that people mistake your mortification for an admission of guilt.

The four of us were living statues when the front door was knocked to the ground, along with my morale. I couldn't differentiate between their thunderous footsteps and my thumping heart. Thrown into the back of the police van, restrained like the wild beast I was portrayed as, HM Prison Coldingley was trialed as my new home. On the inside, every day was mimetic of the last: never anything to look forward to, watching irretrievable time pass by. As if being an innocent man in prison wasn't enough of an ignominy, firstly segregated from everything I ever knew and then from the general inmate population. You'd think being 'one of them', a fellow 'criminal', you'd be looked out for, however, I was a walking bullseye. On the outside, my family were near strangers.



*"Was the birdie who lived in the house on the wall real?" "No don't be silly!"* A warrant had been issued for the search of my house whilst time ran away from me, sitting in that hollow cube of concrete, wondering whether the suffocating darkness of night had crawled in to get me. I knew they wouldn't find anything, but trepidation filled my veins, keeping me awake for eternities at night. It's daunting watching what I anticipated to be a couple days turn into weeks and then months, knowing there's someone striving to prove me guilty. Time is a pursuer. For all I knew, they could be plotting this whole thing against me. My innocent conscience ate away at me like a starved animal. I began to wish I truly was guilty as time itself was a trap I found myself captured by. The longer this dragged on, the sooner I realised that time was both the ally and enemy.

Day 93. (Or so I was told.) I was woken in terror by an intruder towering above me, dressed only in black with a weapon tucked into his belt. Fear sprinted back and forth through each nerve as I fret for my family's safety. For one sublime split second, I forgot. It was the 6:45am wake up call. I got dressed briskly as if I had something other than time eagerly awaiting me. The day initiated with our hasty hour of exercise where black looks and the faint buzz of whispers encircled me like untouched prey. Word of my release spread like a lie, one I dared to believe. Hurlled down before me were the remains of my untarnished life, debris in a plastic bag. The unthinkable miracle of insufficient evidence.

All the strings of prison remain fused, controlling me like a puppet. My house, no longer a dull collection of concrete with boarded up windows and padlocked doors but a rainbow of sobriquets, spray painted with eloquence. The love of my life, wife of seventeen years, and my two most treasured, painfully beautiful princesses disappeared off the radar overnight, like wanted criminals escaping with no trace. My whole life is enacted in secret. The dreaded Monday night encounter with the local shop. I lurk in the shadows like death until as near to closing time as possible, longing to go unseen. The part time stock assistant job executed at first light in a nearby town, in hope of being unidentifiable. All things I have to do to live, except I would call this simply surviving.

Plockton, Scotland. Finally, I have found somewhere that can offer a fresh start at life, far from my past troubles. A bijou house on the mirrored waterfront, surrounded by crisp air and an abundance of grass as green as jealousy. It's make-believe having my clearly misunderstood accent being the only thing which makes me alien here. Nothing left but to add the finishing touches. I meticulously measure 1.8 metres high and place a wide wood screw in the wall. Once carefully placing a weight on each chain, I tensely turn the minute hand counterclockwise until reaching 12:07. I hang my prized cuckoo clock and it is in full swing. Oh, how I missed that sound.

## Black Watch

Bombs rained down on the battlefield, the ground trembling like the hands of those who dared cross. Soldiers, like pawns on a chessboard, were moved around the battlefield, negotiating trenches and craters, as body parts of friends and foes alike flew across their faces. Their ear-piercing screams of horror were muffled by the deafening thud of shells and the splutter of bullets shot into the foggy abyss. Flames flickered around the corpses like the devil dancing in hell as a stray horse ran in blind terror, tangled in spools of barbed wire.

The Black Watch regiment had been stationed in the supporting trenches at the Loos for seventeen days and had just been moved forward to the Front, awaiting the order to confront the enemy, unsure if they would survive this night to see the light of the morning sun.

Alfred was a private in the Black Watch. He was a skinny lad, barely five and a half feet tall, a reluctant combatant in this fighting field. He certainly wasn't the army type, but had felt a duty to sign up for his country. For the last three hours, he had been hunched beside a feeble fire, in a desperate attempt to feel some warmth, taking some comfort from his brother's closeness. The rain pounded down on the trench, causing waves of mud to turn the duckboards to a riverbed. His kilt had become sodden and was playing host to a metropolis of lice. Frank offered him a cigarette, which he gratefully took, hoping it would calm his fears; he took a long drag, relaxing slightly as the warm smoke circled round his lungs. In his brief moment of relaxation, Alfred managed to think back to the comforts of home – he yearned for their familiarity, for the peace. He remembered afternoons spent playing in fields behind the farmhouse with Frank, kicking a football around until dusk. Pictures crept into his mind of what life would be like after the war; marriage to his sweetheart, Doris, settling down in a nice country cottage, a few kids and definitely a dog.

Down in the dugout, Sergeant Smith was eating a tepid, greasy dinner, listening to the constant drone of whistling shells and explosions muffled by the metres of earth above him. The weak, flickering candle provided him sufficient light to comb his hair and shave his stray whiskers. He had a reputation in the division of being a stern leader, but the compassion he demonstrated towards his men earned him their respect.

Realising that only five minutes remained, Smith carefully lifted his only photo of his wife and children, from the safety of the carved, wooden, trinket box beside his bed, muttered a prayer and slipped the tattered, yellowing image into the breast pocket of his tunic. He pulled on his jacket, trembling as he fixed his helmet strap below his chin and grabbed his rifle. Making his way up the steps, he felt the familiar, fear of death in his stomach which had accompanied every moment in his life in this war.

Suddenly, Smith's orders cut through the air. Alfred, still in his trance fumbled clumsily to stretch the helmet strap over his chin and picked up his rifle, struggling to attach the bayonet with his rigid, icy fingers. He was completely oblivious to explosions and shouting around him as he clung longingly to his dreams of home. Stumbling towards the step, poking his head above the sandbags, the reality of his situation dawned. The thunderous noise closed in around him, leaving him trapped down a dark alleyway, unsure whether to run or stay. He looked over to Frank who gave him an uncertain yet reassuring, wry smile.

After a pause – Alfred had no idea how long – Smith gave a long blast on his whistle, signalling the moment of their departure. The men emerged over the parapet, walking in ranks, with a uniformity similar to war graves standing in a cemetery. They could barely see where they were putting their feet for the dense smoke settling on No Man's Land, now and then finding themselves

stepping in a puddle or trampling over a corpse. Upon reaching the initial layers of barbed wire, they crouched down to cut through the rich labyrinth of sharp hooks.

They traversed along narrow planks, their tired boots scuffing through the diseased water. Smouldering trees lay flat on the fields, conquered by the might of shells and bullets. Startled, Alfred shivered as he glanced to his right into the eyes of a defeated horse, whimpering as the cruel teeth of barbed wire tightened, digging into his exhausted flesh as he struggled for his freedom. Hopeful rats and swarming flies circled, eyeing the poor animal's wounds.

Resisting the temptation to cover his ears, Alfred crouched as the echo of spluttering bullets filled the darkness around him. Chunks of mud bounced into the air as bullets dug into the ground. Innocent men fell as the metallic monsters coughed up round, after round, after round. The noise seemed to pause for a moment as Alfred watched his brother; Frank collapsed to the ground as crimson blood erupted from his crown. Seeking shelter, Alfred pulled Frank into a crater. In his panic, his words were harsh – Frank had to live. His hands were trembling when he held his grubby handkerchief to the oozing wound. But it was futile. Frank's breathing withered in nothingness. Another innocent victim.

Fighting the urge to lie down next to his brother and wait for his own escape from this pain, Alfred resolved that his war could not be over. With tears misting his eyes, he took the grainy photograph of their parents from Frank's breast pocket and kissed his brother gently on the forehead. Fuelled by a new desire to avenge his brother and a desperation that his parents should have one son return home to them, he pulled himself out of the pit and, on trembling legs rejoined the advance towards the enemy.

Feeling his way through the thick barrier of fog and darkness, Alfred tried to shut out the sound of ferocious gunfire. Still with the warmth of his brother's blood on his fingers, he crouched low and edged towards familiar voices. Gratefully he joined his fellow fighters; never had Smith's commanding tone been so welcome. Following the shadows in front of him, Alfred stepped down into the alien trench. Words of surprise and panic and fear, in a language he didn't understand, filled the air. As Smith led his weary men into conflict to the right, Alfred turned left. As he dragged his feet across the slippery wet floor, it struck him that this trench was just as filthy as his own, the air just as rancid. Cowering behind a pile of sandbags Alfred became aware of a figure..... A skinny lad, barely five and a half feet tall and hardly out of teenage years. The boy, eyes wide with fear, raised his rifle and froze. Alfred closed his eyes and saw Frank lying lifeless on the ground; he thrust his bayonet into the soft flesh of his adversary. Crimson blood seeped through the boy's tunic. Alfred stepped back, horrified as the grim realisation dawned on him, he had taken a life. Tentatively he felt in the breast pocket of his young victim and took out a creased, tattered photograph.

Alfred wept.

## FORM 6

KATIE MURRAY

### Kick the Bucket

The scene through the window was enough to make my heart ache. A family, blanketed in warmth and love, blissfully unaware of what was to come. The sound of the television droning on in the background was barely audible underneath their laughter and conversation. It took me a few seconds to spot her, the one I was here for, sitting on the floor playing. She was in another world; indifferent to what was going on around her, oblivious to how lucky she was. It was always more difficult when they were young.

I wrenched myself away from the window and my foot made a loud crunching noise as I stumbled backwards onto the gravel. I winced, half expecting one of them to look up to where I was standing. But of course, there was nothing. Sighing, I wiped the condensation from where my face had been pressed against the glass. Enough. I knew what I had come to do.

Trudging around the house to the back door, my attempts to calm the uneasy feeling in my stomach had proved unsuccessful. My hand shook as I lifted it to the door handle and I stared at the dark wood in front of me. Images of the smiling family flashed through my head and I began to taste the familiar metallic tang of blood from where I had bitten down on my lip too harshly. "You can do this", I whispered to myself as the door swung open softly. Tiptoeing down the hallway I tried my hardest not to make any noise that would shatter the tranquil atmosphere. Following the sounds, I had observed earlier, I managed to locate the room quickly and slip inside before I gave myself the opportunity to hesitate. As I stood pressed into the corner of the room I was determined to take up as little space as possible and preserve the lingering happiness for as long as I could. A family portrait that hadn't been visible from outside caught my eye and caused my stomach to churn. Three smiling children stared back at me from the frame, the smallest caught in the middle of the others' embrace. She was the one. I clutched tightly at the picture I had been given that now felt as though it was burning a hole through my pocket. Breathe.

In the time that it had taken me to get inside she had moved from the floor and was curled up quietly on an armchair staring intently at the television. She couldn't have been older than three and was sucking her thumb sleepily. Blonde curls hung around her face like a halo and her rosy cheeks brought to mind images of cherubs floating peacefully on clouds. Slowly, she turned her head in my direction and looked at me, scrutinising my features with wide eyes an expression that was the picture of innocence. She didn't deserve this. All I had to do was walk over and carry her away peacefully. There would be no pain.

I could picture the scene that would unfold when they realised. Her mother would panic and scream as her world disintegrated before her eyes, "She's not breathing! What happened? Oh my God, she's not breathing." Her body wracking with sobs before she could finish her sentence, rocking from side to side and clutching her baby tightly to her chest as if that could bring her back. Her father would try to stay strong, tears welling in his eyes as he paced back and forth while he dialled an ambulance. Eventually collapsing to the ground beside his wife in a futile attempt to comfort her. Then in the weeks that followed, bunches of flowers and home cooked meals would be brought to the door by old friends and caring neighbours. Whispers of a wasted life, taken too soon by death, taken too soon by me.

A cough from somewhere in the room snapped me back to reality and the vividness of my imagination sent chills down my spine. It was the same outcome every time. Time seemed to slow down as I moved towards her, the air grew thick and it felt as if I was wearing concrete shoes as I dragged my feet along the ground. The sound of each step scraping across the floor reverberated around the room. She looked at me with wide eyes, as if she knew what I was planning to do and was somehow at peace with it. I looked up to the family portrait on the wall and back to her tiny face. I didn't even know her name. Aware that no one other than her could see me, I reached out and brushed a golden curl behind her ear then watched as the light in her eyes dimmed momentarily. I couldn't do it. I ran.

Outside the weather had gone from miserable to violent. Lashing rain soaked me to my skin and the world had been darkened by ominous clouds. A threatening clap of thunder tore through the sky and all I could hear as I walked down the street was the hammering rain on roofs. I couldn't help but let my mind wander back to the child whose picture was in my pocket. My next victim. What would they say about her? That she



was funny? Kind? Well-liked among the other children at playgroup? How would they measure her life- what possessions or achievements could she possibly have at such a young age? The unshakeable weight of guilt clung to my chest like a parasite. It was always more difficult when they were young. They had their whole lives left to live, a whole world of every-day occurrences that they had yet to experience. At least they didn't know what they were missing.

Death always has a greater effect on those who are left behind. Wondering what they could've done differently, worrying over the numerous possible ways they could fill the gaping hole that had been left in their lives. A vast expanse of emptiness stretching out towards the horizon. Broken families left to fall apart at the seams, relationships left to disintegrate. Even those who didn't know the deceased- coworkers, neighbours, the person behind the till at their local supermarket- left to wonder, 'what if it was me'? They sit and contemplate, perhaps write a Facebook status to show how truly sad it is. You cannot escape death. I am your friend and your enemy. I predict your future and steal your present. I am nowhere. I am everywhere.

I am the reason people gather possessions and achievements. Book last minute trips and out of this world experiences, before it is too late. They picture themselves lying there on their death beds and their greatest fear is looking back at their life and having nothing to show for them self. Nothing to be remembered by. They think it needs to be remarkable- skydiving or scaling Everest, making a discovery that shakes the world. It does not. Because, no matter what, after death we do not simply cease to exist. We linger. Held tightly in the memories of those who had surrounded us. Pieces of us left behind in music recommendations, recipes passed along, the worn pages of our favourite book.

I thought of the little girl, what would she be remembered by? Ten years down the line. Would it be a song? That her mother would have to reach to change if she ever heard it on the radio, because the memories were just too painful. Would it be her favourite toy? Kept in her father's drawer as a reminder of her presence, that he could hold tight when the strain of concealed emotions became too much. What about her brother and sister? They would be too young to remember her fully, snippets of her laughter held in that family portrait that had since been stuffed into the back of a wardrobe- to avoid questions from new friends and to dodge the agonising memories it triggered every time it caught their eyes.

The weather had begun to clear up as night drew in, torrential rain had slowed to a drizzle and moonlight spiking through the sky above illuminated the soaked street. Walking back towards the familiar house, I ignored the gnawing pit at the bottom of my stomach. She wouldn't be in any pain, I reminded myself. Standing at the front door, I noticed the way the dark grey building loomed overhead. Earlier, the atmosphere surrounding the house had been warm but now it was cold and threatening. I crept through the door and swiftly made my way down the corridor and up the stairs, towards where the child lay sleeping. Each creak of a floorboard seemed to split the air in two as if warning the family of my unwelcome presence. I stopped when I reached the end of the bed where she was sleeping peacefully, golden hair fanned out beneath her head as if she was already an angel. Gradually edging closer, I watched her chest rise and fall with each breath she took, as if counting down to her last. I knew what I had to do.

Gently leaning forward, I placed a kiss on her forehead and watched as her soul floated upwards past the ceiling. I watched her grip on the teddy she had been clutching loosen and her breathing slow to a stop. I shuddered as I turned back and glanced at the grave sight whilst shutting the bedroom door. My work was done. Stillness hung dark and shadowed in the air as I made my way back down the stairs, careful not to leave behind anything that would give the family a hint of my presence. Before I left, I took a detour through the living room where the happy family had been gathered mere hours earlier. I looked one last time at the family portrait hanging on the wall and imagined it with one less child.

# FROM THE SCIENTISTS

ISLA HUTCHINSON

## What Happens When Fossil Fuels Run Out?

I was born in the 20's. My parents moved into one of the first housing blocks, Block 3. Block 3 is one of the largest blocks, it's 750 metres tall. They would have kept building them higher but after the fire in Block 5, when 5000 people were killed, they set the height limit at 500m, to give everyone enough time to escape, should another disaster occur (but of course an exemption was made for existing monstrosities such as ours). Our country is broken and, unfortunately, it's my job to fix it. I'm the First Citizen of the United Kingdom.

They always made it seem as if the First Citizen had the best job in the country. You get heating and lighting all day and all night, a luxury not many people can afford these days. You get a free house with 3 bedrooms and you get 3 meals a day. The downside is that the country hates you, which is quite ironic as it's the country who vote you in. My house has bulletproof windows, as does my car (the latest Ford electric e-green 5) and the House of Democracy, where we meet and hold political discussions.

I've forgotten to mention why I'm writing this. Scientists at our last University think they've discovered time travel. They didn't want to send people yet, as it hasn't been tested very well, but they said they would try and send an object. As First Citizen, I asked to send my diaries back in time. The scientists said no at first. They said if people in the past knew what would happen to their planet, they might have acted differently. I pointed out that they did know, all the signs were there, but no one did anything about it. Why should my diaries make a difference if scientific studies and reports went unnoticed?

So if this reaches you in the past please take time to read and understand. We're aiming to send this diary to 2019 but it could go either way, we think there's a 5 year margin for error. I'm going to take you back in time, or forward from your perspective, so you can see how it all went wrong, and so you can understand how we got to be the way we are. You live in the time that I was born, but times have changed.

After Brexit, politics became more divided. the UK left the EU and Ireland followed, a few years later. the UK, Ireland and the USA formed the Triple Partnership. It's still going today - just about. It turned out ok in the end, but we do have occasional protests. The main thing to happen in politics was the attack of '22, when the Houses of Parliament were destroyed. The attack was interesting because it wasn't meant to happen. We learn about it in history because it practically destroyed the Green movement in the UK.

Up until '22, climate change protests were getting louder and more violent. At first, people were just breaking rules, not hurting anyone. They chained themselves to trains or lay down in the road, but then they started targeting individuals and politicians. There are climate change protestors outside my house right now. Mind you, I'm one of the better politicians for climate change. The last First Citizen had protestors breaking his windows and attacking him in the street. He had to have 5 bodyguards. I have 5 bodyguards too, but no one has ever tried to attack me. Anyway, back to the attack. The climate change protestors got even more violent. They planted bombs in government buildings, attacked politicians in the street and set fire to things. Most of the time they were stopped, before things got too dangerous, but in '22 that didn't happen. We still don't know if they were trying to destroy the building, they said it was an accident, but that was probably just so they didn't have to spend as much time in jail.

It was the day of a vote on energy use and the government was set to invest money into more attempts to find oil and coal. The protestors knew they would lose the vote, so they decided to stop the vote happening. They planted a massive bomb in the House of Commons. Then they told the government what they had done, and said that unless money was invested in green energy they would detonate the bomb. The government were shocked and were starting negotiations when the bomb went off by mistake too early. Nobody survived.

After that, politics was broken. People were incredibly angry with the protestors and began targeting them in the street. The country was divided and nothing was changing for the better. Something had to be done and so an incredibly rich businesswoman named Alco Rovel built the new House of Democracy. Everything needed a new name and a new title, it had to be fresh and different, to unite the country. So eventually Rovel made herself First Citizen (I still can't work out how) and took over running the country. Strangely enough, most people supported her. They wanted something to change because, for 5 years, no decisions had been made, as there was no government building. The House of Democracy was established in 2027 and since then there have been 2 more First Citizens voted in by the public, Mike Page and me, Thalia Greener.

Everything was good. Everything was fantastic. People made lots of money and spent it and were happy. But the old warnings from the climate change protestors came back. And this time, they were stronger than ever. Resources were running out.

It happened so quickly. We hadn't even been thinking about it, we were all too busy worrying about the House of Democracy. I was a teenager when oil and gas began to run out, coal was much later. Oil went first. Prices began to rise dramatically. I was from quite a well off family, but even we couldn't afford some things which were made with oil. As oil ran out, the prices increased, not just oil but all fuel, medicines, plastic things even toys! Soon, no one could afford it. It wasn't worth the effort of extracting oil from the ground because the price was so high that no one would buy it.

Many industries were hit hard by the loss of oil, ones I didn't even know contained oil, but in some ways we had prepared. For example, everyone in the country had electric cars as petrol and diesel cars were banned in 2025. People had stopped relying on oil for energy, as we knew it had to run out eventually, and switched to gas, renewables or back to coal, as coal was predicted to last for much more time.

The massive blow was the loss of plastic. Up until that point, almost everything was made of plastic. Phones, pens, toys, lamps, bags, you name it. Plastic was **everywhere**. And then it wasn't. Companies stopped making plastic so companies had to stop using plastic. In a weird way it was good for the environment, plastic was horrible for the oceans and the natural world, but it was bad for humanity. Millions of British citizens were thrown into poverty, and that was only in the UK. We regressed back into Victorian times, except with technology. Tech-torian. I say Victorian times because they didn't have plastic in the time of Queen Victoria, things were done by machines or by hand. Of course, there are some things we never got back. Chewing gum, makeup, re-usable cups, tin cans and clothes. Obviously, we don't run around naked, but we no longer have polyester, nylon, rayon, spandex and acrylic. Now, almost everything is made of cotton or flax.

It wasn't just lifestyle that was affected by oil shortages but life itself. People were dying. Medicine and healthcare were no longer as available as before. Doctors couldn't use syringes or rubber gloves and many medicines which were made from oil based products started to be scarce. The NHS could no longer afford MRI scanners or advanced technology as they were all made from plastic. Mrs Turner, who lived in the apartment beside us when I was growing up, was waiting for an MRI scan to see if her cancer had come back but she never got it. 2 years later, she died. These kinds of things happened to people all over the world, from the richest to the poorest.

Of course, as oil ran out, naturally, we turned to gas to try to solve our energy crisis. Gas could power the electricity generators and fracking seemed to promise a new supply of fossil fuels. However, the Pennsylvania fracking disaster of 2027 caused policy makers around the world to think again. In the UK, First Citizen Rovel developed a strange new concern for the environment and led a cross-party motion which effectively banned fracking.

Rovel started to talk incessantly about the prospects for coal. Sympathetic scientists published several papers showing how the UK could economically open up long disused mines and extract coal to use for power. However, the devolved administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff, where many of these mines were located, refused to allow unlimited access and instead began trying to hold the government in London to ransom by demanding large sums of money. The coal crisis of 2029 deepened - power cuts were worse than ever - the old and sick were worst affected and First Citizen Rovel was pictured outside a house where an elderly man had died of hypothermia. Rovel pledged something would be done and it was. Martial law was declared in all parts of the UK and the army took control of the disused mines and opened them up for a state coal company (UK Coal) to mine the coal. Devolution was suspended indefinitely.

But over time we realised that fossil fuels would run out and renewables couldn't meet the peaks of energy demand. The government extended martial law and gradually the nature of our country changed. Power cuts returned when the coal ran out and only nuclear was left to save us. Alas the world of nuclear power was unrecognisable from your world of 2019. Around the world, those countries which knew how to build nuclear power stations began to be much stronger, France assumed permanent leadership of the EU, Russia took over the Baltic states and South Korea demanded Korean unification on their terms, which the US and China agreed to. Nuclear was the new king. But trouble lay ahead on this road. The nuclear fuel for the power stations only came from a few select places and the superpowers eyed these greedily. The US signed the 'special nuclear security pact' with Canada, Russia promised 'total protection' to Kazakhstan and China sank an Australian navy warship in the South China Sea to remind the world who really owned Australian uranium. The world became a dangerous place with the threat of global war imminent at every turn in the battle to control uranium supplies. Eventually the Second Suez Crisis when Russia and France came within minutes of declaring war (over a consignment of uranium passing through the Suez Canal) caused the U.N. to act and the NNWT (non-nuclear world treaty) was signed which stopped any new developments of fission power but of course just made the energy crisis worse.

In the UK electricity began to run out. First Citizen Rovel was ousted after a newspaper scandal over her connections to UK coal and illegal bribes. New First Citizen Mike Page revoked martial law and did a lot to restore democracy. People began to hope again. Page encouraged the building of personal generators using water power, windmills and solar panels. It was said that there wasn't a house north of Dundee which didn't have its own wind generator. However the shortages continued and a gradual decline started on the country.

It's hard to describe exactly but I think it came about because people had to spend so much time just surviving. On the bright side, recycling became more popular than ever and people began to run their own mini-farms of fruit and vegetables. It was just a shame that this caused children to increasingly stay at home (to work the farm) rather than going to school. Universities began to close, the transport network became quieter and indeed the railways shut down at the weekend. I was in my early 20s during this time and I remember it as being as if we were travelling back in time. Luckily for me I had managed to get a good education from my granny Iris who was a retired teacher and taught me at home.

As I look out today at the country which I now lead (Mike Page resigned due to stress) I wonder about the past and worry about the future. Of course humanity has recovered but what damage have we done? Our society is turning into a picture of the past as energy has run out and we don't seem to know what to do. Worryingly the government climatologists tell me that global warming due to overuse of fossil fuels is increasingly making agriculture difficult and apparently we can expect water shortages for at least a decade. Their 'best case scenario' shows a 200 year recovery to 2019 temperature levels if the world continues its trend away from industry to an agricultural economy. Today I saw at least three buses cross Westminster Bridge pulled by horse and there is a man selling lumps of peat for fuel in Piccadilly Circus. I worry we are entering a new Dark Age.

So reader in 2019, read and understand. This world is yours - treat it with respect. Care for it and it will care for you.

## OUR PRIZEWINNERS

### THE TOM DURRHEIM MEMORIAL PRIZE

AKSHAY ANAND

#### A Writer's Block

It's the candidness of hard flaking wood against both thick hair and head that makes one shatter, much like an empty bottle thrown to the ground by a drunk. Of course, this cracking can only occur when the tirade and diatribe fully blossoms, flourishes. It's an ugly yet aesthetic dealing of cards between seemingly-loved ones. A smothering of bipolarity, they become caricatures, one throwing his hand to the fake elm over and over like a frustrated gorilla, with the other becoming equally as vexed. But as soon as I begin to see their exaggerated features, they mellow, suggesting a compassionate couple. Through all this, I feel a constriction around my heart, as it is slowly enveloped by anxiety, fear, and a glass casing. As the compassion fades, and again, eyes are wide and teeth are visible, the bloodied muscles of my heart can no longer take it; a shattering of shards upon shards, piercing sharply. I begin to cry. All this, just because I love to write.

I kept asking myself, '*am I worth any less than the 'medicine man'?*', as I felt hollowed out, sitting at that fake elm. The pair stalked around the rectangular frame, as their claw-bearing hands struggled against the wood, carving it. The vicious one stood and took a packet from his trouser pocket. Slitting the outer casing open, he threw the cards that hid inside onto the table. A full set, fifty-two cards were now sprawled, chaotically, haphazardly, in front of me. Most of them had no number or suit, merely blank white. However, I noticed four cards that were not. A king of each suit, diamonds, spades, clubs, hearts, was all to see amongst the milk-soaked paper. Each one, was harshly scored through with black ink. I turned to the sneering one, the mockingbird. It was the wry curve of the lips that gave me the answer to my question. I had thrown my crown in the bin, I was '*less than the medicine man*'. You may be asking yourself what a '*medicine man*' is, well let me enlighten you: it's the *Indian parent's dream*. Both the vicious and sneering one had wanted me to work in medicine, and for everyone to address me as Dr Anand. And for following another cobblestoned path, to become a writer, I wasn't just criticised for it. I was mocked, ridiculed. Another question arrived in my thoughts, and it posed this: '*should I lie to myself to uphold my worth?*', as in, should I veer away from a passion that's been bubbling inside me, just to avoid being the man that '*hings his head*' as the '*coward-slave*'?

This question had lingered in my head that night, after the 'conversation', as I lay thinking. The pulpy remains of my heart beat irregularly, jarringly, as the wedged glass pieces clink off each other. With this, my chest joins my brain in feeling an utter agony. My *scared* consciousness fixes the film reel to the projector and plays me a pessimistic movie about my future life, on the path of a writer: a single room apartment, a stack of five-pound coins to feed me for the next five days, and an open notebook, with the pages blank. '*What have I done?*', I ask myself. It was as if my consciousness had thrown me into the ocean, with the cold waters giving me a sense of *realism*. Maybe the gorilla and mockingbird had a point. I felt stupidly naive, and eventually dozed off as the glacial waters numbed my body.

A drowsy morning, I awoke, and somehow stumbled downstairs, to see the electronic light of the television. The vicious one was sat down lazily, watching what appeared to be an 'interview' between Andrew Marr and Phoebe Waller-Bridge, with the Scotsman praising Waller-Bridge on her smart and witty writing in '*Fleabag*', a fourth-wall breaking comedy-drama that explores the life of a sardonic, sex-addicted women in London, played by Waller-Bridge herself. And it wasn't just Marr that had seen the genius of her writings: the producers of the upcoming '*Bond 25*' have called upon her talents to add her wit and humour to the worryingly dull script<sup>1</sup>. Again, my consciousness plays a reel of film, but, crucially, it is optimistic: it depicts a famous, sought-after, *respected* man, with a more-than-modest house, enough money to feed and clothe me, and a notebook with the scribbles and scrawls of a thousand ideas. In the end, I realise that self-worth isn't determined by the '*ribband, star, an' a' that*' of a doctorate or six-figure salary, but rather ourselves. We have to shun away anyone who tells us we can't follow our passion and be successful. To be a writer does not forfeit my worth in any way.

Honestly, I feel idiotic for even allowing my mind to suggest the possibility of being untruthful to myself, just to please a few. I have to be honest, as '*the honest man, tho' e'er sae poor, is king o' men for a' that*'. And if they cannot accept my honesty, well, I've already got one form of writer's block to deal with, please don't give me another.

## FOR CREATIVE WRITING IN FORMS 1-3

Jessica Chen

### Goodnight Peter Pan

It was a cruel world. Dark and desperate times. Two parallel dimensions converged as many took their first cry, and many, their last. War was born, nurtured by despair and exhaustion. For in peace, it was the children buried their parents, but in War, parents buried their children. From a young age, Wendy was warned to never cry out, to never show her distress. In fact, to never let any emotions twist her face. If she did, it would come. He always came. Heeding the warning, Wendy never did. For she was a child of War.

Alas, Wendy's younger siblings did not understand. Young innocent children never do. Nightmare induced wails were soon extinguished by thunderous ticking, it was always ticking before he came. Wendy paced to her brothers' bedside, using her body to shield them from whatever the grotesque figure was forming in the shadows. She knew of such spirits, bewitching people into giving up their days of their future to power his cursed dust. Wendy reached back, subconsciously pinpointing her dagger stashed in the back of her nightdress, remembering her parents repeated phrase going through her mind again and again. "If you want to survive, you must say his name. Always go for his faerie."

A pocket clock materialised as the shadow's form stopped twitching. Turning slowly as it targeted the source of fear, reaching out with a beckoning finger. Wendy drank in the spirit's appearance, dismissing the charming, but disturbing grin of a thirteen year old for something more sinister. She refused to let her siblings receive harm. Wendy boldly stepped forward, the frosted touch she took to her forehead, accepted. The spirit was taken back, not used to such willingness, before grinning feverishly. The clock by his side immediately began to tick furiously anti-clockwise as they plunged into a world where no light thrives and gloom rambles chaos. The three living and breathing souls in the dingy room went down to two, as Wendy's siblings slept on.

Neverland was the land of the cursed. Land of the unfortunate. Land of infinite days that never came. It was crammed to the brim with disheartened souls, most were children who went missing. Children who fell out their prams on street corners or crawled out their cribs. Forgotten. It was a confusing place, hidden among the stars and nebulas. With jungles of skeleton ecosystems scattered around, barely covering the curious souls who came to see the disturbance. She only just became aware of the spirit, who sat crosslegged on a rock, lounging as he admired the clock face. The shadow sensed Wendy's stare, looking up and challenged her glare with his glowing eyes. Wendy would not give the spirit satisfaction, swallowing the rising dread of never seeing her brothers again, she glowered at the phantom with an empty mask. He let his gaze drift to his clock, pleased with the numbers, before waving his hand. Something beneath the earth seemed to snap, when Wendy had a horrible thought. Before, he was trespassing in her realm, this time Wendy was trespassing in his. Or at least, she was apart of his world now. The shadowed figure rose as the dry, cracked ground gave a lurch. Wendy stood her ground, never once tearing her eyes from the all-seeing spirit. The earth paused, then began to shake, cold breezes picked up the pace, rumbling and creaking with ease. It was as if abandoned cogs and rusty coils deep down were sputtering into motion. Wendy's breath hit the back of her throat, eyes darted around to confirm her theory. Neverland was a ship.

Wendy scowled as salty star dust stung her face, whipped into a frenzy by the racing breeze. Her nimble fingers flickered back to check her dagger, it's frosty, bladed edge greeted her hand like an old friend. Wendy peered down as she felt something tug on her tattered nightdress. A skinny raccoon, or a little boy, Wendy wasn't sure. His form flickered back and forth, but the child's wise, sorrowful eyes never changed. She knelt down, cupping the boy's hands in her own, almost flinching at how cold they were. The boy didn't object, but handed Wendy something flimsy, fumbling with grimy fingers in attempt of not being seen. She craned her neck, squinting in the dark at the object - a tiger lily. Wendy glanced back up in confusion. Only to see the retreating figure of two ghostly, similar-looking children, one of which was the young boy she met. Siblings... Wendy's heart ached, watching the raccoons amble into the safety of the woods. She was barely surprised when a little badger, bear cub, rabbit and skunk scrambled them. Their shapes sputtering from creatures to exhausted children. Wendy inspected the fiery flower again, taken aback at what she found written there.

The shadowed figure had long foreseen Wendy's plan, taking her attack almost too calmly, ridding her of her left hand in the process with a lazy swipe of a claw. It was too easy. Just like all the others. What he hadn't expected her to do was, in a swift motion, draw out a dagger and strike through the heart of his clock. The spirit doubled over, clutching and clawing at his deformed throat with his cold laughter trickling through the air. She had brains, more smarts than the spirit had thought. But not enough. Wendy stared down at the wretched soul, steel like expression veiling her smirk of victory. Her dagger twisted through the clock again, and watched as the shadow gave a wince but welcomed the pain. Wendy smirked for real now, letting a little emotion break her mask. Just enough to unsettle the spirit. He really thought he could still win. The spirit could hear his faerie screeching in agony, but did nothing. He knew that Wendy could not stop either of them, so he let her have her moment of victory before he could punish her. That was until Wendy stooped down and whispered with horrible grin. The spirit barely noticed a flower - a tiger lily - slowly waft down to the ground in the breeze. Wendy did not care about her hand, her life force sluggishly watering the ground into rust. What she did care about was kneeling down, savouring the silence, before breaking it with three words. Two of those words were necessary, but she felt like throwing one more for the sheer fun of it. Two was all she needed. The spirit flashed white before shrieking, light flooded the realm as he was dragged forcefully towards his faerie. Impish face no longer as charming as it seemed. The clock's cracked glass emitted red before mending itself. Thrumming with such power the faerie stored inside herself. Wendy felt a rush of happiness for the first time in years and let it dance on her face. She looked down at the watch, repeating the same phrase she whispered to the spirit, once more. "Goodnight, Peter Pan."

Wendy was still as agile as she used to be, still wearing her ragged nightdress from that one fateful night. Due to the loss of her left hand, she took her crooked dagger, curved from the impact of the faerie, and fixed it onto her limb. 'Captain Hook', her lost boys would joke. She would still look fondly at the watch. Long ago, Wendy had harnessed it's powers and was able to see her brothers, but only three times. Thrice and no more. A bittersweet smile made its way onto the captain's face as she flipped open the pocket watch a third time, old habits die hard, yet she would not prefer any other way. Captain Hook gazed longingly into the horizon off the ship, her blonde hair whipped into a frenzy by the wind in a way Hook gradually learned to love. Wendy shut the watch, fondly admiring the horizon as stars and nebulas sailed by. After all, it was no longer such dark and desperate times, but still, a cruel world.



## BLOCK PRIZE FOR CREATIVE WRITING IN FORMS 4-6

Cosmo Bobak

### Memories of Monsters

I live in a small town, just south of Nowhere, twinned with Dull, and as you might expect of such a location, very little of note ever happens here. To illustrate to you just how gruellingly boring it is, the most interesting thing that I have done in the past five years is successfully grow a pear tree in my tiny garden. Most days I while away by writing little poems or stories on my typewriter, and its repetitive clicking is background to my life.

So you can imagine that waking up in my attic, covered in mud, with a throbbing headache and no idea what had happened the night prior is possibly the most worrying thing that's ever happened to me.

I was awoken by the crashing noise of a truck driving down the road outside, and I could make out sounds of men shouting to each other. It sounded military, and I couldn't care less. All I wanted was a hot shower, a strong coffee, and to go back to bed. So I did my best to block out the ear-splitting ruckus of, well, something going on outside, and cleaned caked mud out of my hair, wondering at this point if I'd been drinking. It seemed like the only option, despite how unlikely the concept was.

The answer came when, after having sorted my disgusting situation out, I went up to the attic and found that the place I'd woke up in was, in fact, surrounded by pieces of paper. Each and every one was covered in hastily typewritten text and I wondered at how I hadn't immediately noticed them. I fished them all out of the squalor of the corner, and brought them downstairs and laid them all out.

I've done my best to record this accurately, but the nature of this is such that detail is certain to be lost.

Don't investigate. Read these notes, and then carry on with your life as if nothing is different. In fact, when you're done, burn these notes. Most importantly, don't go into the woods just south of town. You're probably confused, you're probably scared, but you need to understand what you did and what happened.

You're probably aware of those woods I just mentioned - nice place for a walk, but pretty dense and you'd worry about getting lost. Well. Last night, you, or rather I, went for a walk in them, and, well, I'll set the scene for you:

It wasn't that I knew what was about to happen. It wasn't even that there was anything wrong, but I do believe that at some prenatal level, some sort of mechanism exists within humanity that makes us aware of when the supernatural or the uncanny are around.

Just ten or so minutes into the trees, I heard a faint sound.

The sound of a child's cry has been demonstrated to be the most easily identified sound for almost any person. It's why alarms sound the way they do - it gets your attention immediately. The thing I found in the woods was not a child. It was most certainly not human.

This thing was the epitome of every ingrained fear that exists in the psyche, the terror evolved over thousands of years to keep us safe from the unknown.

And it was sitting, curled up in the fetal position, sharp, bloody fingers wrapped around its face as it cried.

The effect this thing had on me was enough to render me totally incapable of thought. I was no longer human myself. I was feral, thinking only of how I might possibly survive the next seconds. It was sure to notice me - in curiosity I had approached far too close to be considered safe - and when it did, every nerve in my body told me that I would end, right there and then.

I could have been stuck there for a few minutes, or a few hours, watching it with abject horror, unable to move myself away, when the spell was broken by a glint of light out the corner of my eye. One light became two, became many, and soon a whole line of bright lights illuminated the now dark forest. I was roused enough by this change to start slowly creeping away from the monster, still shaking, but composing myself and forcing cramped muscles to slowly edge me from death.

I was several metres away and feeling a reprieve from the being's primal aura of dread, when I began to make out what the lights actually were.

Each light was attached to a decidedly human shape, all dressed in dark camouflage and carrying guns - this small army of soldiers, despite the threat they posed to me on their own, were a source of joy, in that moment - a reminder of normalcy after my supernaturally hellish trip of the last few hours.

The direction I had moved put the thing in between me and the soldiers, and I doubted I could evade either of them without moving quickly enough to be immediately noticed, so I curled up next to a particularly secluded tree to wait it out.

It was at this point that what little strength my body had left gave out, and consciousness abandoned me.

I awoke in a concrete room; it was clinically clean and I was handcuffed to a chair.

There was a man standing in front of me, dressed in a white laboratory coat and holding a clipboard. The light was too blinding to make out his face. He asked me who I was. I wasn't going to be reticent; it was obvious who had the power in that situation. When I asked him what was going on, he said that I had been found in the woods and they had brought me in to make sure I was okay.

I asked him about the creature. His face fell. He had quite clearly hoped that it was merely a coincidence that I was in the woods, in the dark, on my own, unconscious.

He gave me a finely measured response - that it was taken care of, and that I needn't worry. It was clear he couldn't say much. He told me I was very lucky to be alive.

He then approached me, pulling out a small blue pill, and told me it would let me forget everything that had just happened.

I took it more than willingly.

You now understand why things are the way they are.

Really, I shouldn't have written this for you to read. After I consigned myself to blissful ignorance in however many hours

it would take effect in, he explained to me who he was, and who he worked for. That memory is the first one I can feel going.

The world is not as it seems. A whole pantheon of gods, monsters, and horrors beyond comprehension exist, and the first and last line of defence are these people. I think he told me this more to get it off his chest than to actually educate me, but I was receptive nevertheless - fear apparently makes me, or you, very interested in any possible information related to such threats.

I put on a show of early-onset amnesia for him, and to my relief he said that they'd just let me go home. It seems they're not quite the faceless amoral organisation I'd initially chalked them up to be.

These people, they saved me. From the monster, from the knowledge of such darkness, and then just let me go. It's hard to know just how much we owe these people, but one thing he said stuck with me:

"We die in the dark, so you can live in the light"

- Dear Me, From Me. -



# THE BURGESS PRIZE – OVERALL WINNER

SNEHA SRIPADA

For Ava

By Sneha

Can reality ever be unreal? Or is it something that you deem to be unreal that is, in fact, reality? September 15th, 2078, 8.28am. The precise moment we entered the chamber, into a parallel universe. Parallel in the sense that some of us would never meet again. There were four of us; Me, Diane, an aspiring author gathering inspiration for my upcoming science fiction novel. Ava, the *real* intelligence, a passionate scientist, my best friend. Christian, jaunty, juvenile, a renowned archaeologist. And then Jackson, our doctor, our smiles, our saviour. However, nobody could save us from what was about to happen.

Inside the chamber, it was tenebrous, like a vault possessing a secret that we were about to discover. Metal walls blocked us from the outside world, and the room was filled with emptiness. Suddenly, the door slammed shut. I shivered in the bleak gust of air behind. The VR activated.

“Good morning,” it enunciated monotonously. “My name is VictoR. Today, I will be transporting you to Old Dundee. The current time is 8.30am and the arrival time is 8.30am. The programme will last for one hour, concluding exactly at 9.30am. Do not hesitate to ask me anything. Remember, your wish is my command. Are you ready?” he asked, without waiting for a response. All I recall was a surge of light, a blink, and we were there.

“Welcome to Old Dundee,” Victor said, with not such a welcoming tone. “Our location is Dundee City Centre.”

It was the same city, but how different it was. We walked across our city, below us, slabs of concrete on the ground resembled dominos, dotted with chewing gum. In one glance, I witnessed so many crimes. I saw a mother, if that, who could have easily been wearing school uniform. She held her baby, or what she visibly considered a liability, so carelessly, whilst swearing to her drunken partner and smoking. Everyone around us was identical, holding their cigarettes, puffing clouds of smoke into the dismal sky. I bellowed coughs back into the exhausted air. Next to me, Jackson was observing a group of psychotic drug addicts, Ava collecting the plethora of syringes for lab tests. Here, humanity was at its worst. Jackson couldn't protect them if he wanted to protect himself. It was too late anyway for one; She swallowed some concoction, and that was it. She lost her inhibitions, she lost her vision, she lost her consciousness. She lost her life. And the public continued to walk past with their own milder tobacco, dismissed this incident for normality. We refused to believe that this was our past. Ava shed a tear.

“VICTOR! Take us away from here!” Christian yelled.

“Please specify a preference,” VictoR replied emotionlessly.

“ANYWHERE!”

“Please specify a preference.”

Infuriated, anguished, Christian took a breath and said, “The Keillor.”

VictoR then questioned, “Who?” He kept repeating, “Who? Who? Who?”

He was breaking down, distorting. Ava was the technical expert. She would know what to do. She always did.

“Ava, come here,” Christian called.

Two seconds later, Ava was obliterated by VictoR. When Christian said 'Keillor,' VictoR interpreted it as 'kill her,' and it was Ava's name that answered the question of 'Who?' Our doom was his command.

"BRING AVA BACK! Rebuild this dying city! Please VictoR!" I screamed in agony. But like the drug addict, it was too late for her. 9.30am. Back we went to 2078, safe, secure 2078. The door swung open. I trembled in trepidation. Ava only died virtually, it was like a dream, it wasn't real, I assured myself. I felt weak, drained, almost crippled. I looked behind me to see only Christian and Jackson, both old, wrinkled, withering away into the past. The reflection in the metal walls showed me that I, too, was the same. I went to 2018 as my present self, and here I was in 2078, 81 years of age.

"Go." I croaked to the guys.

Like VictoR, before I waited for their response, I slammed the door shut. The programme re-activated. However, this time, I was alone, and I didn't know when, or if I could return.

"Good morning," VictoR said again, in his cold, mechanical voice. "My name is VictoR. Today, I will be transporting you to Old Dundee. The current time is 9.30am and the arrival time is 9.30am. The programme will last forever and it will never finish. Are you ready?"

5.30pm. I strolled along the Tay Bridge. Reflecting. In an endeavour to save my best friend, I failed and ruined my own life instead. Like a prisoner, I will remain in the metal walls of this chamber forever, serving a life sentence with the harshest punishment. Living for eternity in the year 2018.

*For Ava*

Page 1

In the distance, I see a building. A silhouette, geometric, glistening on the waterfront. A voice announces the grand opening of the new art museum, the 'VictoR & Albert.' Perhaps VictoR did obey my wishes. Perhaps he was rebuilding the city after all.



# THE BURGESS PRIZE – HIGHLY COMMENDED

Rebecca Hamilton

They were a mixed bunch, two of them, Ben and Amy, were sporty and played outdoors and the other two, Ollie and Mia, played video games indoor all day. Nevertheless, they were ordinary teenagers and were friends as they walked to school with each other every day. They were excited to try out this new game and weren't sure what to expect.

Entering the room, they saw a table with what looked like bluetooth earphones. This seemed to be a low tech VR experience they thought. Putting them on, they heard a high pitched noise and then a loud voice.

"Good Evening children," the voice said, "This game will test you and see just how brave you are. You are about to enter the Victorian slums of Dundee. Your mission is to reach the old High School in 19th century Dundee. First one there wins a prize. I'm Victor R and I will guide you through your journey. You won't be able to talk to each other or leave the game until the destination is reached. These earphones will transmit strong electric pulses to different parts of your brain, giving the illusion you are someplace else, allowing you to interact with your surroundings. Good luck!"

As soon as the voice finished, the room began to change around them. A large clock appeared in front of them and began to angrily spin back, ticking. In a few seconds, they were in old Dundee. The street was busy but they now realised that they were completely alone. Their friends, who had been beside them a few moments ago, were gone. The slums began to show the children the high level of poverty that they were in. The windows of the houses were smashed and the walls were weak and wan. A cold wind rushed through the street and the stench of cramped housing was like off meat. There was people everywhere, getting on with their daily lives in their own little bubble. The children began to amble up the street towards the school that was in the horizon of their view.

"Decision time" said the voice. In front of all the children stumbled an old women in rags. She outstretched her hands which were dirty and covered in sores and said, "Any change for the poor?". She looked up at them, her face was disfigured and she had a mix of black teeth or none at all. The woman's frame was shrunk and bent over and she had no shoes on, they were too expensive for her to afford but the children didn't have any money to give her. As soon as this thought popped into their head, they could all feel a large weight appear in their pockets and they seemed to know already this was money.

Ben reached into his pocket and pulled out some coins, they were bright gold, like they had been made yesterday, the women looked at them with hunger and desire. He gently placed them into her hands and smiled at her. She nodded at him saying, "thank you sir, thank you", and shuffled on to the food market. He continued his journey down towards the school.

Mia studied the women, the graphics looked very realistic, she hadn't seen anything like them. She told the old woman that she didn't have any money to give her and walked on down the street. The woman was an obstacle in her path.

Olly scowled at the women, she was in his way. Giving her no thought at all he pushed her to the side, marching on.

Amy looked with sympathy at the poor women and went to buy her a loaf of bread and an apple from a food stall beside her and gave it to the women. The women nodded her head and with a simple "thank you Madame", she was gone. Amy watched her go and continued her journey.

Several other instances like this occurred and the reactions were very much the same.

Once all the children had reached their destination alone, there was a high pitched noise and they were all at the modern school. The voice read the finishing times, Olly and Mia had drawn first.

...



A few weeks after, Amy ran up to Mia and said, "Look! I got an email from the company!". The girls read the email, it said, "Dear Amy and Ben, Thank You for taking part in the experiment. This experiment was to test the effect of video games on young minds and to see if it makes people less compassionate and kind. It was repeated with several individuals from different schools. The results showed us that those who spend more time on video games, are desensitised. Your prize for your humanity is a £20 shopping voucher. Dundee Council."









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