



KING'S
SENIORS



THE KING'S SCHOOL
**CREATIVE WRITING
COMPETITION**

Creative Writing Competition 2020

During the 'lockdown' period of 2020, King's pupils were invited to submit their imaginative writing to a competition. Over 60 entries were received and the following pieces stood out for their bold, brave and unusual plots, as well as memorable narrative styles. The collection spans a range of inspirations: from grave stones, to broken memories; from mythology to domestic tensions and ghostly turns. The stories all brim with memorable characters, uncanny settings and intense emotions. This collection seeks to bring together the different pieces so that the pupils can enjoy sharing in the work they have produced.

Dr Mair, June 2020

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King's 2020 Competition

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Gone by Zach Hard Af Segerstad-Smith

Shells Gladstone

The shadow passed over our town of Forester at early sunrise. Normally, when I wake up I can see the glistening red and pink sunrise glaze the sky across the horizon, illuminating the many Tundrah houses that littered the vast, green open landscape. But not today. Not the day when I turn 14, the considered day of maturity. I should be waking up to celebrations and festivals, the main rituals of our dear planet. But not today...

I step outside of our grassland house, like many of the other residents who aren't already going about their daily businesses. I look up, almost hoping there to be a giant storm cloud, that of which our town has tackled before. But no. Not even close. The structure is huge, if not moon-sized. A streaked-black, shadowed object. It's build is that of a spherical orb at the centre, with a giant ring encircling it around the outside; sleek, with no visible interior structure like many of our Tundrah vehicles that lie in Forester. Everyone is out of their houses now, muffled voices of confusion echoing. But no one could prepare for what was coming. No one.

I run inside quickly, not knowing my intentions. To everyone, I'm just another one of the 'free', the children who's parents were lost during the Old Wars. I'm a free. I like it. I've adapted to it and learned to live with it. This considered, my home is a small alleyway that I've suited up to my own. I quickly, with fear of this object in our sky, run to my sleeping bag, picking up my light rucksack and stuffing my belongings inside. Just as I'm heading out of my area, the muffled voices become un-muffled, the gasps becoming more frequent. With action starting to stir around me, I look up at the cause. Sudden fear strikes me in bones, destabilising me for a few seconds. Luminescent red lights have appeared on the hull of the object. They show lines of structure, making the object seem more vehicle like. Someone shoves past me making me stumble forward. And all of a sudden, the town panics. People running, instant screams occurring. But they're peace is short lasted. Their chances of happiness crumbled. A colossal red beam of anguish comes raining down on our town of Forester.

It's as though all reality halts around me. All I see is red and more red and destruction. The sounds are deafening with screams short lasted. My vision becomes blinded with a light so powerful I think I'm hallucinating. I become unlatched from the earth below me as the energy hits. Feeling. But no feeling. A sense un-senseless. A pain so extravagant, the feeling of weightlessness overwhelms me. But before the end, I see blue, I don't know where from, but I see a small blue. A spark. A hope. But its gone, down to oblivion. Down to nothing. And so am I. Me, becoming nothing. Me, gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

The Grave in the Lane *by Eleanor Rogers*

Removes

A lane is defined as a narrow road in a rural area. This story is about such a lane. Seems boring. From the outside. Although narrow and quiet, over 250 years countless people will have walked, ridden and more recently driven along the lane. All without noticing an unusual stone hidden by undergrowth, sitting still at the side of the lane. A gravestone. The top of the stone destroyed. At the bottom, the number 1777, indicating the year of death, was just visible. All the other words above lost in the ravages of time.

The few who know of the grave are ignorant of its story. Nobody living knows the true story. It starts with two brothers, horse traders and friends. Their business meant that they were itinerant, moving from place to place buying and selling horses. One day they were staying at their father's Inn while visiting the area. They had just arrived after making a profitable deal at a nearby farm. At about two or three in the morning, one of the brothers was woken by a noise from the stables and went out to check on the horses. The stables stood across the lane from the Inn, in darkness save for a single roadside lantern, swinging in the breeze. The younger brother heard his brother wake and went to the aid of his sibling. When he walked out, the elder brother was in the middle of the lane looking around. A figure on a horse, one of their horses, was sneaking out of the stables. Seeing the brother the figure panicked and kicked the side of the horse. The scared horse started to gallop in the elder brother's direction. The younger brother shouted but he didn't move in time. The hooves of the horse swallowed the brother. All that was left of him afterwards was a lifeless body. The younger brother ran to the body. But it was no use, it was just a body, nothing more, nothing less. The stable boy was sent to fetch the vicar from the local rectory, the only authority in the remote area. It was only about thirty minutes before the vicar arrived at the Inn but in that time he had twisted the story in his mind into a dark ruthless murder. For there was no love between the innkeeper and the vicar, and he was able to think only the worst of his sons. He looked at the body and straight away, without any thought blamed the younger brother, said he had the "motive". He was hung without trial for the murder of his own brother. He was wronged.

But perhaps I am biased. For this is the story of how I died. This is my story. The grave was my grave. I lie there with my brother but not at rest. For 243 years I have walked the lane. Perhaps now that I have spoken the truth of what happened, I can rest in peace with my brother.

Never Judge A Book by Scarlett Wright

Removes

Edward pulled back the curtain. The clock chimed eight and a cloak of darkness cast a menacing shadow over the village. It was around this time each evening that strange things would happen in his neighbourhood. Captain Tom's precious war medals had gone missing, Mrs Claptrap's prize sunflowers had disappeared from her garden and, most recently, Mr Kim's bagpipes had somehow evaporated into thin air. A thief was on the loose and Edward was desperate to solve the case.

Edward was an intelligent boy who was different to his peers. Few understood him. In his spare time, he would read comic books and dream about being a superhero. He was often bullied at school and it was his way of escaping reality.

Edward hovered by the window with trepidation. His eyes focused on number 22, which was directly opposite. It was the residence of Mr Grumpster, a lean, spindly old man, who rarely spoke to anyone. The death of his wife several years ago had changed him from sweet to sour. Thereafter, he had chosen to cut himself off from the outside world and voluntarily self-isolate. He was Edward's prime suspect.

Suddenly, something caught Edward's eye – a dark shadow loitering down the side of Mrs Bloomsbury's greenhouse at number 26. Consumed with fear, Edward reached for his binoculars, but by the time his gaze returned to the window the mysterious shadow had disappeared. Did he imagine it? Was he hallucinating?

Without hesitation he ran down the stairs and went outside to investigate. Immediately the cold, crisp night air enveloped his body and he regretted dashing out without his coat. There was however no time to waste. He had to try and apprehend the stranger lurking in the shadows.

Nervously, but with a sense of excitement, Edward raced across the road. He could feel his heart pounding and his chest rising with each and every breath.

As he turned the corner of number 26, he tripped and hit the hard, concrete floor, sending a rake flying into the air. It hit the culprit on the back of the head, knocking him to the ground. Edward lay motionless, too scared to move. He was probably only still for a matter of seconds, but it felt like hours.

Slowly, he rose to his feet and stared at the dark heap of evil. Like a hunter stalking its prey he crept towards the silhouette, before pouncing and tearing off its mask. To his horror, it wasn't Mr Grumpster but his biology teacher Mr Jacques!

Edward froze in shock. Before he knew what was happening Mr Jacques had wrestled him to the floor.

Then, as if by magic, Mr Grumpster appeared. He came to Edward's rescue by hurtling a plant pot in the direction of Mr Jacques. It was a lucky shot, incapacitating Mr Jacques instantaneously.

Edward breathed a sigh of relief as the sound of sirens echoed in his ears. He vowed he would never judge a book by its cover again!

Love at First Kick: How Jason met Medea by Lily Ella Barnard

Shells Grovesnor

Medea sat drinking her coke as she watched the Greek walk towards her father's throne. The Greek stole a glance at her, the goth-princess no-one wanted to marry, let alone kiss. She didn't understand why most boys wanted to look at her. 'k she was a princess but surely the black make-up, hand-embroidered skulls and crosses on her robes were a pointer to 'don't mess with me unless you want a biker boot in the chest.' Yep the Princess of death, the nickname she had been given by the first prince she met as he was carried off on a stretcher...

Anyway, a tale for another time. She stared back at the Greek. He was handsome, a bit like those pics of Ariadne's boyfriend she kept posting.

After the hearing with her father, the Greek had asked her if she would walk in the grounds with him.

"Don't get sappy, I have a killer kick," she replied staring at her phone and wrapping her chewing gum round her finger.

"I need to find the Golden Fleece..." he started to say.

"Say what!!!" she screamed in his face with a tinge of annoyance.

"...and I need your help. And look... I was asked to by a goddess and I swore on this ancient river and... and..."

"What did my dad say?" she asked. "Please don't tell me that he did the old skeleton warriors' gig!"

"Uh, you weren't listening?" he said, giving her a pained look.

"I take that as a yes," Medea sighed.

After a moment's thought she continued, "take me as your bride, hot cheeks, I can help!," her mind working overtime with plans to get away from domineering dad.

"Are my cheeks that hot?" the Greek stuttered, his hands migrating to his now-blushing face.

"Well, no, totes Lolz by the way!" she laughed. "I can't just call you 'The Greek' can I?" she continued, performing air-quotes as she said his 'name'.

"Yes, sorry, good point, erm..., OK, yes, right, erm... well I'm er... Jason, erm... leader of the Argonauts," he said hesitantly but standing to attention as he mentioned his team. Then he bowed and kissed her on her hand. It was a mistake.

THWACK.

"I said no sappy stuff," she said, bringing her foot down calmly, "I told you I had a killer kick."

And that is how Jason met Medea, and how she knocked him out for the first time.
Love at first kick.

Swim by Eleanor Williams

Removes

The icy air whipped my face, the waves fiercely splashed up the edges of the undulating dinghy. My frozen fingers clenched mother as she hugged me with everything she had. Tears were trickling down my numb face.

"We will be ok," reassured Mother as another wave soaked us causing all the terrified faces surrounding me to shudder in the bitter weather. I desperately wanted Dad; his arms and gentle eyes. I pictured his panic-stricken face telling mother and I we would be fine and he would get the next boat and we would be united in England. They were the last words he told me before the dinghy was released into the roaring cauldron. Why did it have to be me whose home was destroyed and forced to flee? However, above all the deafening noise I constantly heard Mother's trembling words of comfort.

"We are nearly there," and "Dad will meet us in England".

In the distant horizon England was finally coming into sight. After countless hours of exhaustion and terror we were going to arrive. We were until... A colossal wave surged up shaking the boat and launching it to capsize. I screamed in horror.

"Mum!", I yelled. All I could hear was shrieking.

"Mum!", I cried.

"Layla swim it isn't far, don't wait for me JUST SWIM," urged mum.

"I can't,".

They were the last words I ever spoke to mum. Petrified, heart-broken and distressed I surveyed the water. The more I recalled the last few moments, the more determined I was to swim the last mile or so. Although it seemed impossible, I was going to make it possible. Strong-willed I had one last glance over my shoulder at where I had last viewed mum and then I began swimming. Despite the arctic ocean around me, the heart-wrenching thoughts racing around my head and the fatigued feeling in every muscle I was going to make it. My heart raced and incessant emotions darted around my mind. Infuriation. Arduousness. Persistence. Abruptly, everything went tranquil and the water started to feel warm. Is this what it felt like to die? Nevertheless, I wasn't going to stop yet. I was going to make it for mum, for dad, for everyone on the boat, for everyone whose homes were destroyed like mine. Every kick and every pull were getting me slightly closer to Britain. To safety! I was a lion determined to catch its prey.

The water calmly washed over my feet and the sand felt like a cozy bed. Gradually my eyes fluttered open and I spotted a swinging light heading towards me in the pitch-black night neighboring me. Eventually I realized where I was, ENGLAND. I had done it! It was as if I could see mum beaming down from heaven whispering phrases of praise.

Red Icing by Phoebe Davies

Fourths Werburgh

The young couple sat on the terrace as sunset began to creep into the garden. Oranges, yellows and pinks blushed the clouds that drifted lazily by.

Doing their best to ignore their inevitable parting, they chatted idly about things that didn't really matter, and when it got too sad and silent, Edward cracked some awful joke that made Florence laugh gratefully and brush a thumb over her engagement ring, which sparkled in the evening's golden light.

They danced until the early hours of the morning to an old record that Edward didn't remember buying, until he insisted that he had to go. Neither knew if they'd see the other again.

...

The scent of vanilla wafted through the kitchen as Florence opened the oven. With gloved hands, she pulled out a deep blue cake tin. Bringing the cake up to her face, she inhaled deeply and smiled. It looked rather bare, she thought. It definitely needed some icing once it had cooled.

Smoothing down her red polka dot dress, Florence realised how deathly quiet the house felt. The record player looked awfully lonely in the living room all by itself. It had stood in solemn isolation since the party last night, unattended to after all the guests had stumbled off drunkenly down the gravel driveway. It seemed an awful crime not to have music in the house when you had the good fortune of no neighbours.

Dancing her fingers over the large collection of records, she picked something at random and placed it on the turntable. The record was old and took some time to start, but as it did Florence was surprised to hear the leisurely notes of a song that was intimately familiar to her.

A wide smile plastered her face as she slow danced by herself around her living room to a song she and Edward had listened to the night before he went off to war – the night he had promised to marry her if he got back in one piece. It had been so long ago.

Slow dance turned into a ballet, leaping across sofas and chairs above the sea of cushions and party streamers, Florence laughed to herself. Home alone she could do as she pleased, with no more drunken friends to usher into taxis home. She leapt down from the sofa and turned pirouettes in front of the vast bay window looking out on to the garden, which was illuminated by the living room's comfortable warm glow. Wallpaper, photographs and vases of flowers transformed into a giddy flurry of colour as she spun around and around.

Stumbling, she collapsed into a blue velvet sofa, laughing to herself. The song was over, and the next one sputtered into play. She sighed.

If anyone were to gaze around the room, they'd find it easy to see what sort of marriage Florence and Edward had had together, as it was proudly displayed upon the wall in pictures, each one of them framed. In all of them, the pair bore achingly wide smiles and in the more recent ones, Edward in his uniform. How proud of him she'd been. How much she'd cried when he emerged from that train, all tired and thin looking. He had arrived home a very different person to the one who had left.

The Anniversary cards had already been placed upon the mantelpiece. Ten years felt a very long time to be married – a very long time for most anything at all. But there they stood in a cluttered row, amongst the various gold plated ornaments, mocking Florence. She had dedicated ten years to this man. Ten long years. She decided not to look at the cards anymore, and looked up at the ceiling instead.

Dead centre was the most beautiful chandelier you could imagine. A million cold diamonds strung together glittering, and, at the right time in the morning, scattering small rainbows across the wine-red wallpaper. It was Florence's favourite thing about the house, although it was difficult to place one wonder over the rest, with expansive bedrooms and glamorous staircases that Florence had only dreamed of as a little girl. She had finally become the princess she'd always wanted to be.

Leaving the record player to merrily recite her memories, Florence waltzed back to the kitchen; it was time that the cake be iced, and removed a spotless, white apron from the hook.

Red icing would be the most appropriate, Florence selected a deep, scarlet food colouring as well as some white buttercream icing, glacé cherries and a fresh pot of strawberry jam from the cupboard. The lift on rationing in July of last year had proven itself a very welcome surprise, as she had begun to believe that it would never end. She had picked up baking shortly after.

Cutlery clattered as she pulled open a drawer and carefully removed another freshly sharpened knife from it. She caught a glimpse of her face in its surface. She smiled.

After meticulously measuring where the middle of the cake was, taking millimetres into account, Florence plunged the knife into the cake's side and sliced efficiently into two, perfect, golden halves. Unscrewing the pot of jam took some effort, but she pried it open eventually, submerged a silver jam spoon into it and spread the dark crimson jam over the freshly cut top of the cake's bottom half. She sandwiched the two pieces together. Perfect.

...

Edward leaned against the balcony that overlooked their landscaped gardens, outlined by the soft glow of lamplight.

"So what now?" Florence asked quietly.

Edward flicked away his cigarette out into the darkness and closed the window, turning around to face her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well you've kept all your promises, and I've kept mine, you came back and we married," she paused to swivel the gold ring on her finger "so what's the next step?"

Putting two and two together, Edward's face drained of colour.

"Well...I don't know-"

"Wouldn't you like to have a proper family? Make it three?"

"You don't think we're a proper family?" He raised his voice.

"No, no, of course I think were a proper family! I- "

"Well, good. I love you too, Florence." Cutting her off, Edward clambered into bed, hunching most of the silk sheets over himself, and didn't look at her until the next morning. Florence switched off the lamp and lay awake in the silence.

That night's conversation lingered in Florence's mind for a few weeks, she occasionally played it over, saying different things and trying to predict their outcomes. She could never quite shake the feeling that something was terribly, awfully wrong.

A few quiet months passed. The couple spent their days trying their best to enjoy the world despite its fresh wounds and the horrible atmosphere it seemed to hold. It was as if everyone was in on this great and terrible secret and refused to say anything about it. Trips to the pictures and weekends by the sea were a welcome escape from how lonely the house had felt recently, and how closed off so many of their friends and acquaintances had become.

Edward had been having increasingly lengthy work days, and this one was the longest yet. Shrouded in the darkness of the living room with a patchwork quilt draped over her shoulders, Florence sat reading by candlelight. It was some sappy story which left her memory as soon as she turned each page, and she couldn't seem to make any of the sentences sink. She found herself reading and re-reading the same thing again, glancing at her watch.

At four in the morning, there was a lazy knock at the door. Startled awake, Florence threw off the patchwork quilt and padded barefoot over cold tiles to the door and opened it a crack. Peering out, she could see Edward stood at the doorstep.

"Where on Earth have you been? What time is it?" More questions filled her mind as she opened the door wide to let him in.

He opened his mouth to say something and then stumbled through the door, bringing the stench of alcohol along with him. He clumsily removed his coat and boots, leaning heavily on a wall, whilst slurring something incoherent. As Florence took his coat to hang it up on the coat stand, Edward made a vain effort to grab it from her, almost falling over as he did so. She frowned and helped him up the stairs and to bed, where he lay, mumbling more nonsense.

He fell asleep quickly.

Padding down the stairs, Florence reached a hand into Edward's coat pocket, she drew out a ticket to the opera. A performance that had taken place that night. A performance that she had quite obviously not been to. She noticed something else too. The coat smelt of perfume. A perfume that wasn't hers.

She did not fall asleep quickly.

...

She swirled the crimson food colouring around with the buttercream, using her best wooden spoon, to make a deep red icing. Florence plastered the entire cake with it, creating a seamless coat. Using the rest of the untouched, white buttercream, she piped intricate details around the cake; small swirls of white icing dotted the cake's edge, making it look rather professional, in her opinion. On each swirl, she daintily placed a glacé cherry. Now for the final touch. In the middle of the cake, Florence piped a message to Edward (not that he could read it). She stepped back to admire her handy work and promptly tripped over the corpse.

Edward's eyes were glazed and stared upwards at the kitchen ceiling. His mouth was open slightly, blood crusted and coagulated around it, his hand curled around nothing. The knife was still buried deeply in his chest.

Efficiently, she cut herself a generous slice of cake, wrapped it neatly in a clean linen napkin and placed it in her leather handbag, a birthday present from Edward.

Draping a black cashmere coat around her shoulders, Florence said a fond farewell to her kitchen before swiftly exiting down the black and white tiled hall. She opened the door to the morning's first blushing light, set off down the path. She didn't glance back.

A Prison of Steel and Fire by Isabel Sykes

Fourths Gladstone

Note from the author: My piece is about how hard it can be, sometimes, to ask for help, and the experimental style symbolises the breaking of the character's mind, as she struggles keep everything bottled up.

I don't know how to say this. I only know how to think It.

It echoes in my mind, bouncing around inside my skull.

Let me out! It screams. But It doesn't understand - It never has and never will.

It has never understood anything outside of Its little prison. It doesn't understand reality. It doesn't understand the way my mouth dries up whenever I try to release It. It doesn't understand the way that the words wrap around my throat,

choking

squeezing

threatening me

with the worst things.

I don't *want* It to understand, though. It's the one part of me that is oblivious, blissfully unaware of reality.

Why would anyone want to unleash that to be exploited, taken advantage of, tortured for someone else's gain?

But I don't know how much my mind can take - holding, hiding, waiting for someone, anyone and no one at the same time.

My mind will break.

Won't it?

I've managed to protect It all this time, surely my mind can hold onto its pathetic fragments for a little while longer?

I've been holding my breath for so long, afraid to loose just one in case It slips out with it.

It pulses and pushes at my skin, scouring the underneath for the tiniest crack - the weakest point which only needs a tap for it to collapse and crush me, so heavy so heavy so heavy.

But I'm pushing right back.

The pressure building up inside is threatening to

e x p l o d e

and what if it takes me with it?

I need to breathe - *DONT BREATHE.*

I won't.

Sometimes It comes out to play. It messes with me - tries to convince me that *yes, I should open that cage door -*

I always realise when It plays Its tricks on me, tries to lock me up in Its place.

How easy it would be to do that. What bliss it would be to just *hide*.

But I don't have the luxury of doing that.

Because I have to protect It - and myself - from the harsh reality that-

No one's there.

No one can hear me.

Can you hear me screaming?

I thought not.

It is the only thing in me that has no idea. It, too, cannot hear my screams, my shouts, my prayers for *someone to...*

You see how easy it is? To just let It roll out with a slip of the tongue.

All I want to do is take a deep breath of the cool night air, smell the soft scents of blossoming flowers in the spring.

But I don't dare let out that small sigh of relief, that even smaller gasp of surprise.

No, I soldier on. My mind is my commander. My limbs its soldiers.

I just march along with the rest of them. I'm rapidly losing the battle though, and I don't know how long I can hold the lines before I have to retreat.

It's an uphill battle and bullets are raining down on my

face

and it's

cold

and I'm so, so

tired.

I'm the last one standing and I can't even do that because I feel my knees

buckle

and I feel my back

popping

under the pressure which is so heavy so heavy so heavy and it's heavier than before and it *hurts* and I can't-

I can.

I will.

I have to.

There's no other option.

I hear the silence scuttling around me, non-existent voices echoing into the dark.

I wish they would just choose - I'm getting tired of the stillness and the motions swinging all around me, indecisive and uncertain of where to go next and maybe the quietness will hit me like a brick while the movements hide in the corner, too afraid to do their job unlike

me,

breaking and shattering like a pane of glass every time I take a *breath-*

Because I never do. Because it's never that easy plain *simple*.

It's always waiting, wishing, watching for the perfect time to strike.

I never give It such luxury.

I feel a *jerk*, like Time's started moving again, finally after Its deep, deep sleep.

I can't tell if the earth is shaking or if my mind is shattering.

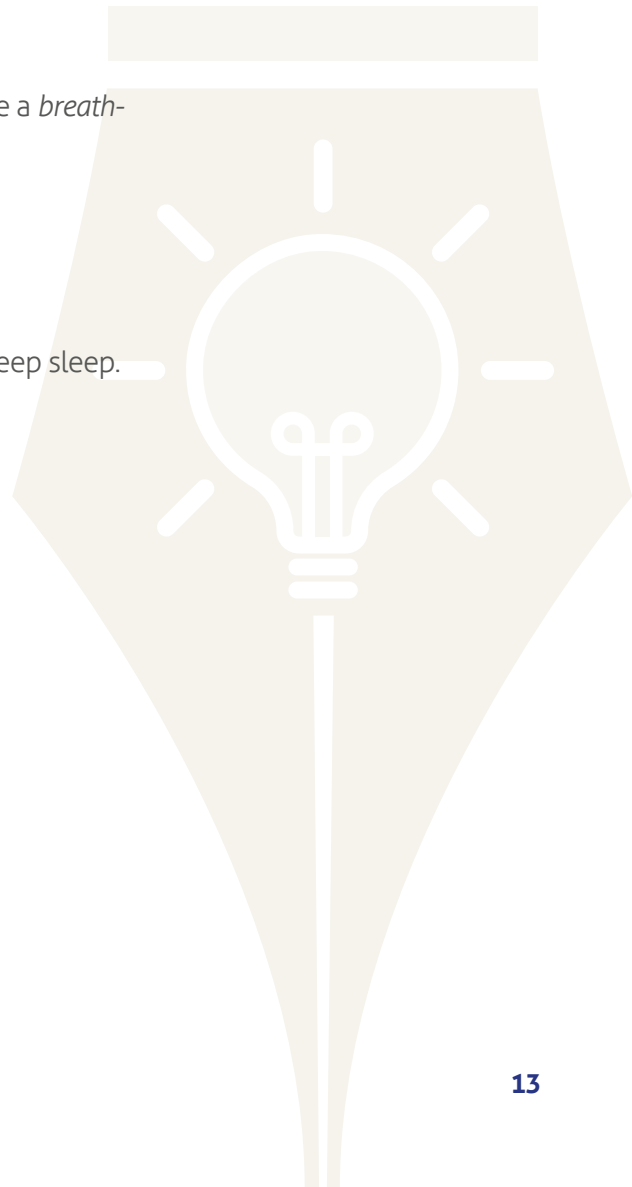
I don't know why I'm here.

I don't know where I am.

All I know is that they won't stop staring at me.

I know how long I've been here. That's because they tell me.

They pick up their little silver box and speak into it.



Today, "Day 57."

Day 57. Day 57 57 57.

I repeat the numbers over and over in my mind, relishing what little knowledge I have.

I count down the seconds until the next day, day 58, 59, 60, 182-

I've lost track.

I feel like it's only been moments since the man with the wonky glasses last spoke, but my body aches like it's been centuries.

Who are you? I want to ask him.

But I can't. I can't utter a single word in case It escapes and *then*

what

am I

to do?

The man with the wonky glasses and the face with a thousand wrinkles.

I count them, too.

I sit in my little glass chamber, always watching, always being watched.

And yet - I've never felt lonelier, even with It screaming from within Its cage.

I used to treasure Loneliness.

We were best friends, once upon a time.

I left Loneliness for a while, forgot about her until now.

She laughs at me, mocks me.

You deserve this, she hisses in my ear. *You left me to rot.*

Every day, I push Loneliness back down into her little box in the back of my mind, next to It - that *thing* that can *never* be spoken of.

"No reaction from Subject 42," the man speaks. I expect it, every time, but it never fails to completely jar me from my thoughts.

There's something wrong with his voice.

I can't place it.

He looks slightly different every time I see him.

Each wrinkle slightly less prominent, both eyes slightly more inquisitive.

He stares me down like a hawk circling its prey. He reminds me of It.

He's been doing this for 57 days - or is it 209? Maybe it's somewhere in between.

He turns to his left and nods at someone.

I hear a *clang* and look down to the small slot opening in the wall.

The red hot tray hits my bare foot, and I forget to feel the searing pain that *burns* me and I jump back - too late - hitting my head on the top of my tank.

The slop on the tray stares at me, as if *I'm* the most disgusting thing in the room.

Though I can't say that I disagree.

The wrinkled man tuts at me.

He flicks his pen on his clipboard, says, "You need to eat. You're going to need your strength today."

And then he leaves.

They all do.

And I hear Loneliness kicking and screaming to be released.

Days later - or maybe hours - they return.

I'm not sure if it's the same day, I rarely notice when they come to do their twice daily inspections.

Muffled footsteps.

Hundreds

thousands

millions,

so I press my face to the glass, immediately shrinking back from the bright light flashed in my eyes.

It's a torch on the end of a gun.

And the barrel is pointed right at my forehead.

I freeze.

I sit.

I stare.

But *It* presses forward, seeing an opportunity to escape and almost seizing it.

Time has given up on ticking over correctly because *It* waits for ten lifetimes to finally lower the gun.

There are torches everywhere, but now none of them blind me.

There are soldiers everywhere, but now none of them hold a gun to my head.

They seem to be working silently, but every one of their movements sounds in my ears.

Or is that my heart?

I can't tell the difference between life within me and around me anymore.

They're equally as awful.

I sit, stare at them work, ransacking everything; breaking open the filing cabinets, throwing papers around like confetti.

Who are they?

A soldier appears in front of my window.

He raises his gun.

I hear a crack - think it's my skull.

NO! My mind screams.

You mustn't

let it

e s c a p e.

But I'm still alive.

I look up.

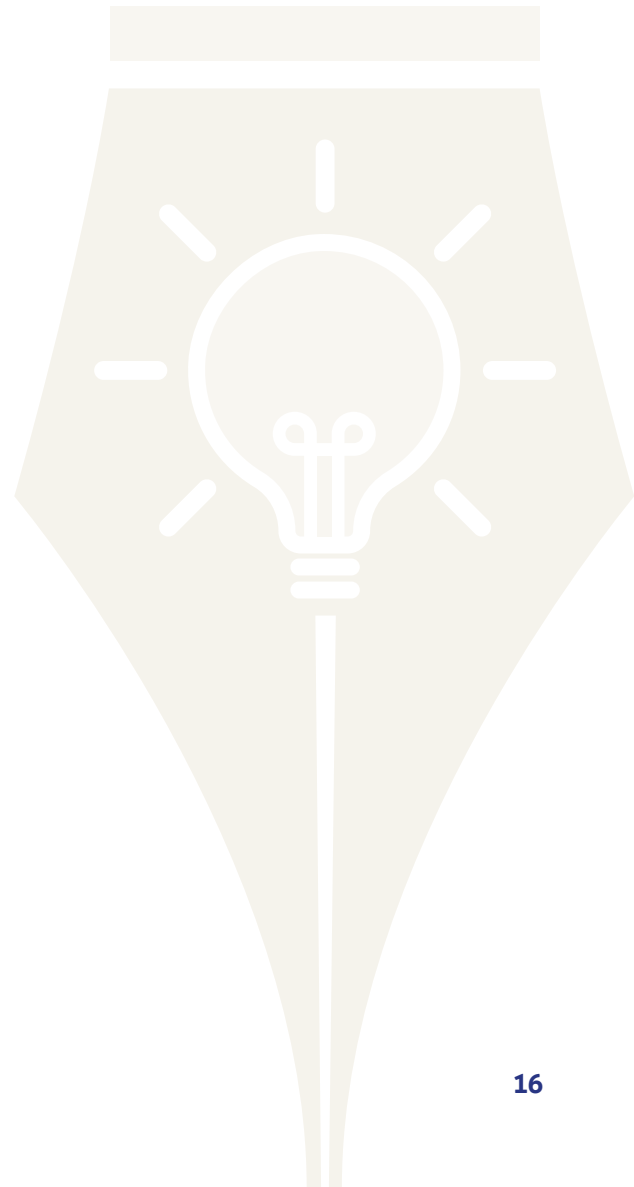
Cracks spiderweb across the glass.

I slowly bring my hand up and place it on the web.

One small push is all it takes.

I'm out.

I'm free.



I've forgotten how to breathe.

I've forgotten how to breathe fresh air.

I ignore the tingling feeling of glass cutting into my palms and knees - the blood pooling around me.

I hear metal striking metal.

What is it?

I have so many questions, so many sentences that I want to piece together but I don't know how and I-
can't.

Don't let it out.

I stumble through the broken glass, the shards piercing the skin on the bottom of my feet and I realise that I don't know how to feel

pain;

the kind that makes your body cry and ache and feel *alive* at the same time.

My pain resides in my mind, its evil seeping into my bones and my blood and my *hands...*

Oh God my *hands* - the unspeakable things I've done with these hands.

The pain that has commandeered them and not my mind which lost control so long ago.

It's because of these hands that it has to hide behind the invisible steel bars of my mind's prison.

I'm sorry! I scream into the depths of its dark, dark cage and I never receive a reply.

Never anything but

SCREAMING

back, right in my face.

Metal on metal

Where are you?

A door. They're pushing me through a door and I've never been so close to freedom. I can taste it on my hands and hear it on my tongue and smell it so vividly, drinking it in with my eyes which are overflowing and the

sounds

smells

sights

are all tumbling back out before nudging their way back in.

It's so easy to open - to reach out and push lightly on the flat plate of metal with the word 'PUSH' and even the door is telling me to escape and I wish I wish I wish

that I could.

But there's something missing. There's something that I left behind and I felt something

S H A T T E R

along with the glass but *what was it?*

I push through the door and fall onto my knees which have always borne so many burdens and no longer are they

buckling

and for once my back's not

popping

because there's no one there.

And even as the man - the man with the wonky glasses and the face with a thousand wrinkles - speaks into the silence that surrounds him, engulfs him like an ocean of stillness, I can't help but think that

I

know

you.

"Subject 42, you have failed the test. Take her to be terminated."

And I realise that there's something missing, again and again, like the realisation is

new

and

fresh

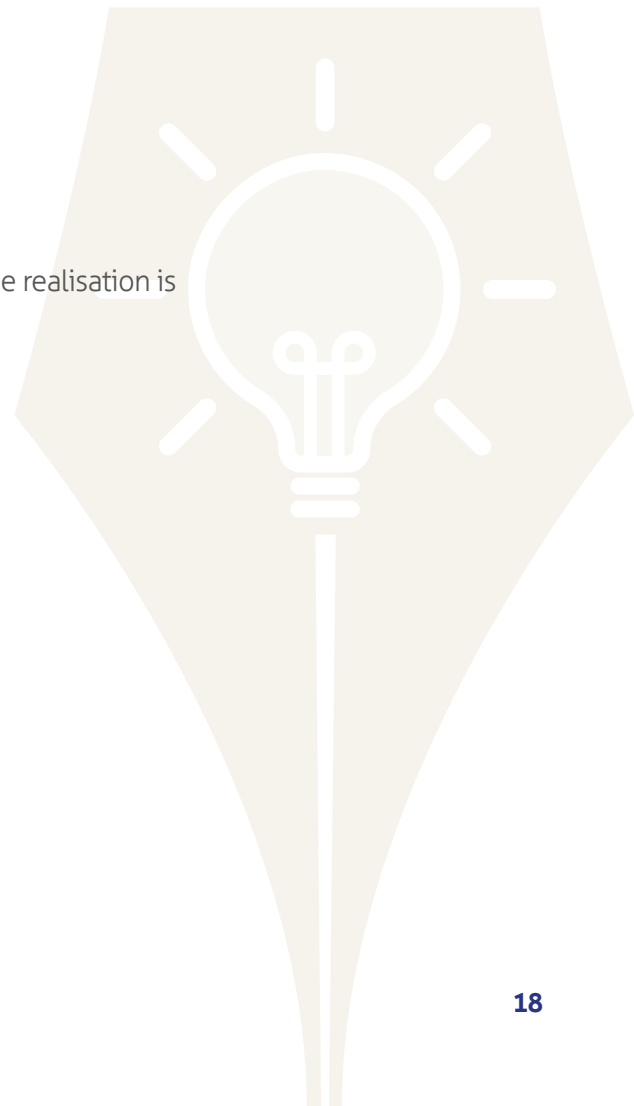
and ready to

crush

me all over

again

metal on metal.



It has wrapped itself in steel and fire and has been made into a weapon which carves its way out of the steel bars and slips through my mind and rolls onto my tongue - right to the tip of it.

It's on the tip of my tongue and it'll slip and fall and *then*

what

am I

to do?

And then it rolls off my tongue and hangs suspended in the air, two words which could *never* be uttered and yet they want to be spoken and they want to taste reality and see the light of day and I can't help them as they force their way out and wriggle through the cracks and I can't help them so they say to someone, anyone and no one:

"Help me."



When We Fall Asleep by Isla Plass

Fifths Werburgh

A tide of coral and lavender ink transfigured the sky as the perishing sphere of light sank below the horizon, relinquishing a shard of dark orange fluorescence. The diaphanous rays of residual sunlight sliced through the saturated mist, embalming the silhouette of a young girl, whose wilting figure could now be determined behind the panes of snow-dusted glass that embossed the small cottage. The girl was hollowed and bleached like an antique doll, bound to the sunlit shelves of a Victorian drawing room by a child's forgotten love. She possessed the kind of beauty that transcended that of fairy tales; a type of delicacy that the imagination could only dream of reproducing. The eye's meticulous line and ethereal thread spun around the sooty ring of her pupil, conceiving an incandescent spindle of jade that scintillated against its darkness. Her verdant irids stood proud like waxing moons, kindling crests of taupe waves that lapped against the edges of her placid eyes. The forehead was stippled with large molecules of gold that tainted the phosphorescent hue of her white flesh, whilst a faintly pencilled nose peered between two vast meadows of lashes which imprisoned each eye. A dusty-grey gown made of soft, muslin fabric fluttered against a pair of plain charcoal plimssoles that peeped out from under the ankle-length skirt, which shrouded her emaciated frame.

The sour taste of blood lingered on her maimed lips, emanating from several deep incisions made against the grains of its rosy flesh. Swathes of vermilion liquid trickled down her marbled skin, rippling over sunken cheeks and protruding bones before pooling at her feet. Her fingers had relieved the finely seamed skin that hung under her hollowed eyes from the bone; its surface was peeling like melted wax, denuding the unripe flesh that looked as if it had been enamelled by a box of red and purple crayons, their indiscriminately weighted strokes resolving in a gauze of scribbled colour. She had a small razor with a baby-blue handle wrested between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, the kind that one used to peel carrots and potatoes with before it was rendered so unavailing. I watched as each blade penetrated the initial layer of flesh on her thigh, producing thick sinewy strips of paper which twisted into tightly bound coils and tumbled to the ground, as if a snake shedding its calloused scales. She draped her attenuated leg over the small basin in the corner of the bathroom, the festering pain mitigated by the hollow chink of water droplets threshing the copper piping above. The bowl intercepted every bead of crimson liquid that licked the open wound, staining the nacreous stone with constellations of scarlet. Each constellation in turn began to unfold into undulating paths of monochrome existence, like a translucid wash of water-colour its presence distinguishable, yet submissive to the graphite strokes of its barbed predecessor; the whole image became a realm of achromatic hues, leaving only the remanence of light and dark to testify to its being. Tendrils of light were prised from the edges of the illustration and drawn to the central point of my vision, melting into a column of dense fog which curled as the picture receded, like the oscillating rays of a school projector.

My leaden eyelids snap open like the shutters of an archaic camera, capturing any motion in my surroundings mid-frame. In the veneer of sepia light, all looks stagnant and sempiternal. Outside my window, the dew-laden grass is peppered with half-blown roses, rising serenely on their jaded stalks like sapphire flames frozen into billowing hurricanes, their petals entangled in a single mass of colour. The heads are dipped in a pale cyan hue that fades into deep cobalt towards the tip of the stem, as if wounded by the weight of water. Upon each of the petals rest hundreds of prismatic beads, every one of them an unblemished sphere of liquid lustre in the morning's rays. Although merely the weight of a feather the droplets exert enough force to incline the blooms toward the earth, kissing the emerald shards beneath it.

There she stands.

Forsaken of life; too soon revealed to her the shade of death. Perhaps she was better off for not having lived so long; for why should we grieve the fall of the rain if it makes the irises bloom? Her decisions, a product of a misguided childhood for which she atoned with her life, were mocked by those who had a penchant for human suffering. Yet the serrated fangs of guilt soon penetrate my mind, absolving it of the safe fold of reason. The synonymous form who I have witnessed before is staring back at me just now, with those same green eyes and that long silvery dress. Just yesterday she tasted the balmy aroma of life. Today she is reduced to coffin dust.

The panic begins as a thin membrane, a tangible film that my fingers can perforate, allowing oxygen to diffuse through. My breathing stops. For just a moment. It re-emerges like a drowning victim surfacing for their final breath, desperately trying to stay afloat without becoming water themselves. Something of fear I taste for the first time; a bitter wine it seems upon swallowing, descending into a flavour bearing the semblance of corroding metal. The looking glass in my room seems to herald a darker reality than what my sight will disclose to me, yet my own reflection pertains to its existence as part of me. Perhaps what agitates me so, is not the fact that it brought a wolf to my door, but that I never knew it was within these walls.

Strewn in a puddle of blood on the bedroom floor, she writhes and convulses as her spirit turns toward sleep, resigning an assembled mass of decaying organs to the earth. She lies like a doll on the ground, limbs positioned at austere angles and head held in such a way that does not resemble sleep. Peering out from beneath the undulating cotton sheets lays a single, lacerated hand, severed from her left arm which lays outstretched on the carpet, still attached. Its ligaments extend like half-starved fingers, clawing their way towards the dismembered arm, desperate to retain any life which still palpitates within it.

A splash of burgundy wicked into the hem of her grey dress, the scent of warm blood stained onto her skin.

There is more than one type of death; it is clear that she died some time ago. She did not mean to. Her heart still pulsated, though only as a cold pump displacing blood throughout her body, whilst the embers fell damp on her disintegrating peace. The second death follows, a correlation to the first but not of consequence. A kingdom, a visionary world, a promised land. Promises made to be broken.

The mind can be a devastating weapon. They tell us to use it wisely.

I draw the blush coloured sheets from the double bed, spreading them out along the floor like a picnic blanket. The scab on her thigh is cracking and begins to weep a pale, viscous fluid that clings to my fingers like oil. After having plugged the wound with several wads of paper, I implant my trembling hands under each arm, dragging her inert body onto the large square of cotton fabric; I can feel her auburn hair rippling over my spine as I uproot her, whilst her head lays limp on my shoulder, mouth agape. Tying the fabric in a swollen knot, I slide the parcel of flesh along the corridor, which seems to infinitely extend. Shadows waltz on the plastered brick, an apparition of sin as it conceals itself from God's watchful eye, like eclipsed phantoms wandering the grave. I tear through the passageway, travelling with more momentum it seems than light. The problem with being swifter than light, of course, is that you can only exist in darkness, which is something I have become well acquainted with in recent months.

The garden path outstretches before me, bending towards a dilapidated shed whose roof has sunken in the onslaught of the rain. The antiquated stone is woven into the ground by a criss-crossing mesh of braided stalks, assuming the path as a piece of wilderness. Weeds radiate from the silvered stone so freely, their arrogance wedded to their liberty, their growth to the creed of nature's right hand. There is something of a celestial quality to the path; the way in which it slices through the garishness of nature, divining the course of life with its artificial perfection. Wings fanned like two paper snowflakes, a butterfly floats across my vision, making tucks, darts, and pleats before resting on the handle of the shed. As I draw closer, the full brilliance of its display can be seen, the canvas pigmented by lemon coloured strands that wind and coil around the centre of the wing like peppermint drops. I trace each movement that it contrives until I dare not tread any further, for fear of exciting the tiny creature.

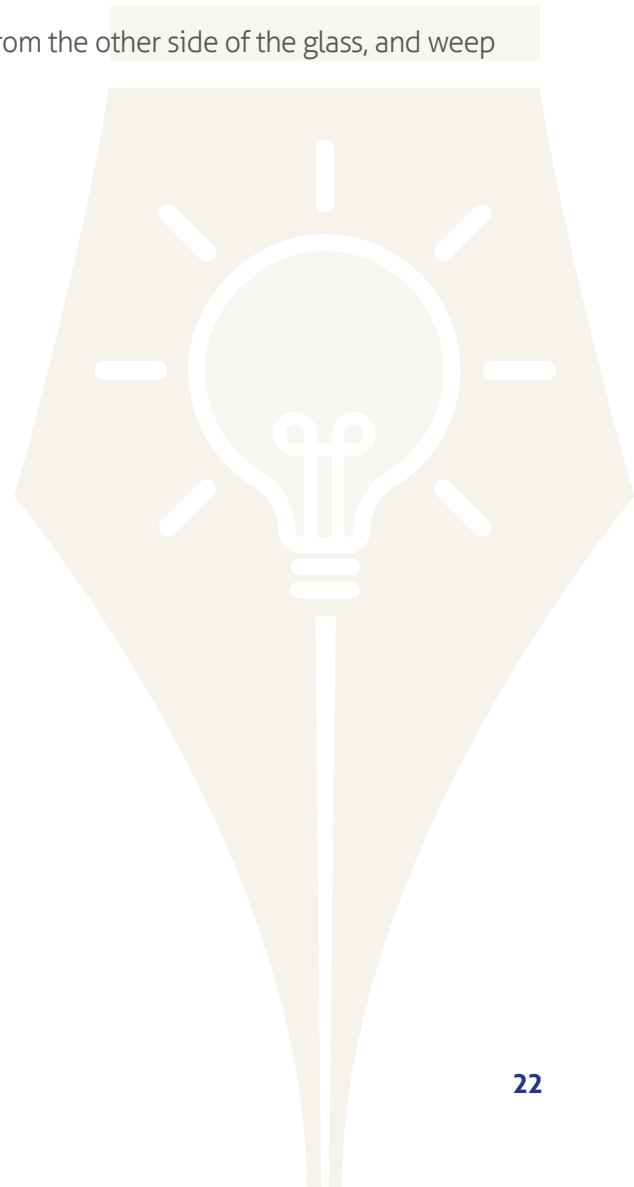
The shed rests against a large apple tree, the foundations of which rouse the earth beneath it so that the structure is elevated on one side, causing it to furiously slant towards the ground on the other. Its roots convolute like worms immortalised by stone, issuing from the desiccated ground in jets of coarse brown bark, twisting and spooling until they coalesce with the tree. As each branch tapers, an apple hangs below its dense foliage, fastened by the twig to an inexorable fate. The red has blossomed from near the earthy-hued stalk which curls softly into the light, and cascades down the side like strands of fine ruby toffee, interspersed with

saffron threads that promise summer. Perhaps if left another week, drinking in the glassy rays and sugary resins from the emerald leaves, the apples would have been entirely red. I clutch the rusted, copper-coloured doorknob, wrenching it in a counter-clockwise motion, before prising it from the wooden frame. The door hisses and whines like a plaintive child whose toy has been plucked from its hands, exposing a world wrought by a hundred years' worth of bodily dust. I reach for the gleaming ornament whose tip flashes in the narrow shaft of light which the door permits, and venture further into the field.

The ambrosial perfume of the roses palliates the insufferable scent of dried blood that inhabits my nostrils, soothing the inclination to be sick. Clenching the ashen shovel between two hands, I upturn monolithic fragments of earth, piece by piece establishing a cradle of ageless rest for which to lower her body into. As I enshrine her in the bed of roses, the soil violently sprays into each crevice surrounding the body, accumulating likewise in the pit of her mouth, and choking the light from the narrow aperture, committing her corpse to the ground. Drifting across the overgrown field and gliding beside the slow-grown wisteria trained along it, I arrive at the ebony coloured doorway, positioning the shovel against the side of the house before stepping across the threshold.

I find myself situated within the partitions of my own room again, alone to resolve the conflict between several of my thoughts. I stagger towards the basin, cupping my hands under the tap so as to ensnare the stream of running water it produces. Dispensing the deluge from my hands, I observe the veiled blue as it cascades onto my blanched face like a miniature waterfall, dissolving into white foam as it penetrates my skin. When the heavy liquid douses my eyes, the room breaks apart into a thousand glittering facets, each one producing a thousand more prismatic strokes of light which cast every colour imaginable onto the ceiling. The looking glass arrests my attention towards its reflective surface, displaying a graven image of my own identity in exhaustive detail.

I rest my mutilated hand against the girl who is returning my gaze from the other side of the glass, and weep into her jade eyes and her pleated grey dress...



Breathe by Carina Chau

Fourths Fox

What goes through the mind of an artist? A race car driver? A book?... A book with their spine being torn and their pages being whipped from right to left; left to right, over and over again. Something new and something borrowed, something ancient and something out of this world. This is what life is like, isn't it? A bright, beautiful painting with a mad scientist stroking the page lovingly and leaving lustful stares at the extraordinary masterpiece. Painting from left to right and right to left, confidently smothering the canvas with an excessive amount of colour, hoping to set a new background and restart its journey from the top to the bottom once again.

Life... Such a beautiful concept trapped into a hot core of dirt which humans identify as Earth. What was it known as before some mad scientist decided to name this magical place?

What am I standing on? Is it Earth or is it some unknown platform that the government enforced the mad scientists to put down?

I want to go home where all my family are, my parents, my sister, and aunt Nelly with her dog, Ted, I feel so strange in this virtual reality but everything I touch seems to turn to colour and then back to the dull and grim grey that it was before. I don't understand why everything's grey. Am I grey? Walking around I see humans, people, walking around as if the life was sucked out of them and their souls were in a happier place up there where mythical creatures are welcoming them with open arms and cooing the crying children whilst everyone down here is dead? Alive? I don't know, these people or should I say the shells of these people are wondering endlessly on the streets and look as though they are begging to find a way into the land of the Devil.

I snapped out of my trance and began walking down the shallow streets of emptiness hoping to find my mum or my dad or anyone, at this point I am desperate to find anyone as I have never liked the feeling of being alone. I shudder at the feeling of being alone forever as I continue my pilgrim in hope of finding the saint who will end my solemn streak and tell me exactly what my purpose here is. Out of the corner of my eye I see quick flash of movement, more importantly a sign; a sign that there is hope for me, for me to figure out where I am and how to get out. As I approach the figure carefully, I see a boy facing away from me and blending into the dim background of a grey wall with his dark waistcoat and a slightly disfigured cap that looks a little damp from being out in the rain. He wore light grey dress pants with some slightly tainted areas which looked as if he had fallen over many times, my immediate thought was pity and sorrow but that soon evaporated and was replaced with a sense of triumph as I knew he was going to be my answer to escape the gateways of Hell.

He looked at me in disgust, but his eyes mirrored a sense of relief, was he relieved about the fact I wasn't a murderer? They say the eyes are the window into the soul and I'm starting to make sense as in why that is as multiple emotions flash through his eyes, he seemed as shocked as I was but I could tell that there were many different reasons for his shock compared to my own. Before I got here, I was already a socially awkward and timid person but the fact I was in a whole other universe must have changed my personality because I was suddenly moving my hand forward for him to shake, I stared at my hand as if it was alien and slowly lifted my eyes from his fascinating pocket watch to the cobalt blue that had me in a daze instantaneously. The deadly cobalt blue glared at my hand but what I didn't expect was for Mr Blue to slowly lift his hand to meet mine, the air was thick with tension and I looked past his head to try and distract myself but I couldn't seem to get his eyes out of my mind. I could feel the engravement beginning to form into my memory and I knew that even if this state was temporary, I would feel accomplished because all I needed were these exquisite cobalt eyes and I felt peace for the first time since I appeared in this universe.

Electricity. The dynamic sparks that shot up my arm and made my heart skip a beat. A simple handshake was all it took to paralyse me as I stared at the delightful specimen standing before me, I suddenly felt shy as all the blood rushed up to my cheeks causing me to turn as red as a tomato and cast my eyes towards the ground. Is this...Love?

Love at first sight?

I quickly detached my hand from his, but he seemingly had other ideas as he latched onto my wrist like a predator that's afraid of me disappearing, and quickly dragged me out of my trance. He pulled me along like deadweight; no words spoken between us, only the calming fizz that sparked every time he gripped my wrist harder. I ran up beside him as I fell into step with him and silently admired the surroundings that now look just a little brighter.

I was too busy in my own world to realise that I had suddenly stopped at what looked like the Devil's cave, with its never-ending tunnel to doom, death plagued the air and I felt suffocated. I tried gripping for him, but he had seemingly disappeared – I was alone... again.

I woke up slightly disoriented in a little room of what looked like a really run-down apartment, I checked my arms for any sign of bruising or grazing but nothing, it was like I magically healed in my sleep and now I'm not even sure anymore. Where was Mr Blue? He disappeared without saying goodbye, I felt slightly disheartened that he decided to leave me here all alone in a random apartment. The feeling of loneliness started to creep its way inside of my mind once again and smothering all the happiness that I felt towards the boy who helped me. I guess it was time to leave anyways, I've overstayed my welcome and no-one wants to deal with a burden like myself, no-one needs a little girl to add to their sadness any further.

As I trudged downstairs, I found a little lady sitting in the living room with a pair of knitting needles as she crafted a lovely little scarf fit for a king. The sound of needles clicking against each other reminded me of the times I would perch on my grand-mothers lap as she taught me the basic stitch that she had learnt from her mother back when she was a little girl. I smiled fondly at that joyful memory and tried to quietly tip-toe my way towards the door in hope of not being caught, I guess my luck was running dry today as I felt a looming figure stare straight through my soul from the back of head and I knew that I had been caught. I cast my glance downwards once again as I slowly pivoted round to face the stern figure, to my relief I saw the little lady throwing a glance of sympathy at me as she beckoned me to sit down at the crackling fireplace. She watched me with pity as she left to the kitchen, leaving me with the blank space that is my mind, I glared at the fire as if it was the boy who left me yesterday. My thoughts were broken once again by the slight creaking of the floorboards as the little lady toddled back into the living room carrying what looked like a delicious bowl of soup. She offered me to take it with a painful smile plastered on her face and her eyes crinkling in the corners as if she knew my fate was ending soon and this should be a moment I relish. I sipped the soup as the little lady turned away and once again picked up her knitting needles and began to click away, the sound of clicking filled the room with a comfortable silence as I debated on whether to question her about her hospitality. I quickly gulped the soup down and nodded my head as a sign of gratitude and got ready to leave out the front door.

As I placed my hand on the doorknob, I felt a slight tug on my jacket sleeve. The little lady was standing behind me and gesturing for me to bend down slightly, as I obliged, she wrapped my neck with the scarf she had just crafted and gave me a last sympathetic smile before disappearing off into the living room once again. I shrugged off the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as I wandered down the little pathway and onto the road where people were scurrying past me as if I had contracted the plague. I continued my journey until I stopped at a little park with a few families dispersed around the perimeter, my inner curiosity succumbed as my feet decided that I needed to go there with my brain committing to this decision before I could get a say in anything. As I sat on a little park bench just staring at the happy families around me, I found the feeling of loneliness creep up on me once again, but this time it was followed with another feeling, a feeling like danger.

I felt a shadow eyeing me as if I was prey and instinct took over as I ran. I ran. I ran until I spotted a familiar face parked across the street. Those brilliant cobalt blue eyes. Chills ran down my spine as we locked eyes, my legs seemed to have a mind of their own as I started sprinting towards him as though he was the only one to save me from this real-life nightmare. I was scared. I wanted to cry. As I neared him, he eyed me with concern and worry but that didn't stop me from leaping into his arms as if it was my last chance of survival. I needed safety, as I buried my face into his firm chest and he wrapped his arms around me, almost shielding me from danger.

As tears cascaded down my face, I felt my exterior break down and melt into the puddle beneath me, and for the first time since I entered this fantasy world, I knew that this boy had the missing key to my fragile heart.

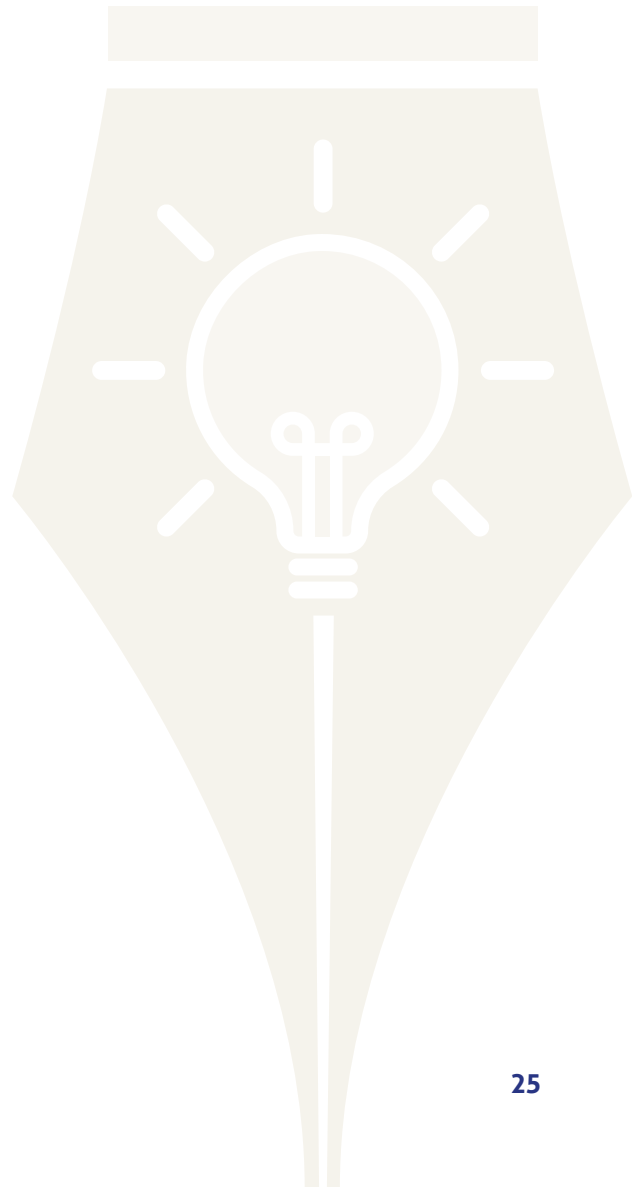
I felt myself being picked up and placed onto soft leather seats, I felt suffocated in the pine smell of the car interior, but I knew this smell, it was so familiar, my safety net. As he pulled away from the park, I felt numb from the emptiness of adrenaline that once coursed through my veins, the once shaking hands were now entwined within his and the once erratic breathing was now calm.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a vehicle heading straight towards us, with no intention to stop, no intention to stop, no intention to stop...

I feel nothing. Darkness, we meet once again.

Beep... Beep... Beep. I slowly opened my eyes to see the colour restored in every moving object. My parents, my sister, my aunt Nelly all sleeping peacefully on the hospital chairs. My slight disorientation caused a piercing pain to shoot through my head resulting in a groan to escape my mouth. As memories start flooding my head, I hear the door open and close as I squint my eyes to see.

I see blue cobalt eyes. Breathe.





Red Sky in the Evening: Heavens Relieving by Victoria Froehling

Fourths Gladstone

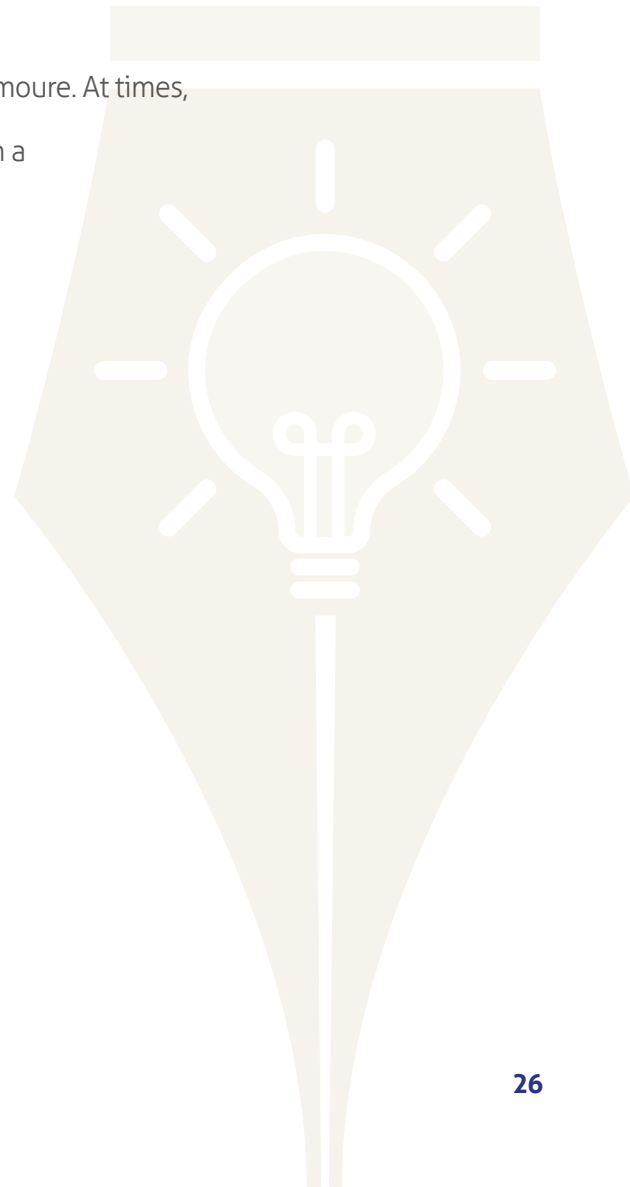
A blush is interwoven in the heavenly waters,
So meticulously woven as unnaturally woven.

Why does she blush?
Why does she paint her pale bottle-blue cheeks
With the rouge savoured for a shepherd's tale?
The scarlet depletes her yielding pores and
You wonder why she cries:
Surely she holds the world in the pigment of her
Skin...

Dead in a house and she dead to you,
You wonder how she gleans your suffering and
Startle at her intense emotion.
You wonder why she imprints on her pristine facade with the
Too-heavy weight of water and why she is so inconsiderate
As to drown you further in this flood of despair.

Sometimes you see her so timid that she
Appears to hide behind her veil of grey satin. You wonder further whether she will survive –
Whether you mightn't. Clouding her vision,
The brash hiss of a teenage tantrum
Depresses the spastic sophistication of a wiser –
Leaves of mémoires bellowing within her hurricane of deadened amoure. At times,
Within the stacking and steeping bricks,
She seems healthier, her pure blue blood colouring her cheeks with a
Ferocity reserved only for the gleam of a setting orb –
Her one companion in a vanquished world.

But then you see once again the tears shed as she peeks
Through panes of glass to the state of a
Screen within. You know she is not healthy
And you wonder when her last, lone tear will streak the endless
Rivers of blood.



It All Started with a Rabbit by Ava Hardstaff

Removes

I've never eaten lunch so quickly. Mum wasn't happy one bit for she says I eat too much before I go to bed which apparently is what's causing my 'unhealthy sleep schedule' and, of course, the more she makes me eat at lunch, will automatically solve this. She says it's for my own good, but we all know she just wants more time to herself because me and me four brothers may be a lot to handle. I guess I'm actually helping her by playing outside all day every day, which brings us to this very story...

It's the summer of 1941, World War 2 is raging and all anybody talks about. Lucky for me, I live in the most beautiful depths of the Lake District. Well, it was, until the population came to pretty much 50% evacuees. Mum says it's really good- and don't get me wrong, it is, protecting loads of children is a privilege for the whole community but they can get kind of annoying. Like when a cow scares them to the point of tears. Ok, that may be a little insensitive, but you can probably get where I'm coming from. Mum says, if anything, it's a great opportunity for making new friends. But I don't need any, I've got my best mate Jack.

That's where I was going at the time. Jack's house. I'm running so fast but I'm not out of breath at *all*. I can hear water jiggling about in my tummy, which always puts me and Jack in fits of laughter. I arrive and do our secret knock so he knows it's me on the oak door of their fairytale cottage. It's only him and his mum there at the moment, so they don't need a big house. Their dad is fighting on the frontline and honestly, I miss him, he's like the father I never had, he *is* the father I never had. My dad left us before I was even born but mum is great and an *independent woman* so we don't need him. I hate him anyway.

I can hear Jack's boots running towards the door. I'm so jealous of those boots, they're real leather with these red rubber soles, not that they look red anymore but never-the-less, anybody would want them. I've been tempted to ask mum a few times for them in blue, so we could match but not match, you know? But I couldn't bare to see her do that face when I ask her for something but she has to say, 'we can't afford it'. And then I regret ever saying it.

"C'mon Jules, I heard there's a dead rabbit near the stream," greets Jack, I don't know how he finds out this stuff, but it always turns out to be true.

"No way, let's head over now!"

We were almost there. Almost there, when something changed our lives and I'm sure many others'.
"Hang on mate, let me tie my laces," I say to Jack.

"Huh? What was that, thought I heard something! Meh, never mind," mockingly, Jack skips down the trail. I laugh, but it really wasn't even a little bit funny. He clearly thought it was though as I could still hear him giggling and skipping away. Then, silence. He must've gone further than I thought. I get up and meander down the track.

"There you a-,"

"Shushhh!"

I tip-toe towards him. "What is it?" I say under my breath. He points towards the old slaughterhouse. No one goes in there. No one's allowed, and anyway, why would you want to, after the *accident*.

"What about it?" I whisper as quietly as possible, slightly frustrated with how little he's giving away.
"I saw the door close."

"It's probably just the wind, and besides, who in their right mind would want to go I there!"

"Exactly," Jack makes ghost noises and thinks better of it, we continued down the track. "Wait, what if there is someone in there?" I put my hand across my neck and stick my tongue out as a joke. He didn't laugh. Just stared. Then, without the slightest warning, ran towards it.

He had a smile on his face, then, bam! He turned over as quick as a bullet, to have his back against the rotting wood of the slaughterhouse. He didn't look at me at all, just straight ahead, and swallowed, suddenly very pale.

I had that feeling when you are concerned, but don't want to show it in case they're just joking and you don't want to give the satisfaction. Something, however, told me this wasn't *just a joke*.

Looking back, I risked everything just by running over. But I did. Soon enough, I was next to Jack, both of our backs leaning on the rotting wood, that felt as though it could collapse any moment this *definitely wasn't a joke anymore*.

We looked at each other and smiled, both thinking the same. *What's the worst that could happen?*

We turned over so that we were facing the shack; looked through the cracks in the wood and there, silhouetted was, a child and a skinny, tall, lean man with a bowler hat and a long coat. I recognised him to be the new person who lives in the next village. I know this because once we had to post something there and mum and he struck up a conversation. I don't remember what it was about, but it went on for a while, let's just say that. I have a billion questions whizzing around my head, but they all merge into one. *Why?*

I look harder, and I see he's reading something, which is probably why they aren't talking.

Jack has seen it too. We smile at one another. But then he must've lost his balance or something because a long, loud creak sounds from the shack. *Footsteps, walking, running, out of the barn.*

That was all it took for us to flee. Down, the meadow, through the fields, to our favourite spot. This huge tree, with all the branches in the perfect places to climb and be hidden from the outside world. Adrenaline surging through our bodies, we practically jumped up there, shocked at whatever we had just discovered.

"What do we do know?" asks Jack nervously, but excited.

"Nothing, pretend like it never happened; tell no one," I reply. 'Easy!'

"No no no, we *have* to tell someone. What if they are *spies*," reasons Jack.

"First of all, they won't be. Second, who's gonna believe us? And third, what will our mothers and farmer Joe say if they find out we were hanging about near the old slaughterhouse?" I shiver and raise my eyebrows at him to make it seem *really* obvious.

"Fair enough," says Jack. "How'd you fancy finding that dead rabbit now eh?"