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TIME TO WRITE

2012 short story prize



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BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

TIME
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BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

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Time to Write would like to thank everyone who took the ‘time’ to enter the 2012 short story prize and commends our category winners and honourable mentions who have made this publication possible.

Congratulations, you are now published writers!

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FOREWORD

DR KAREN SIMPSON-NIKAKIS

Welcome to the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's inaugural *Time to Write* anthology, a wonderful collection of short stories drawn from NMIT's Time to Write Festival: a writing competition, series of writing and publishing events and anthology launch held in celebration of NMIT's centenary year. The Time to Write short story competition once more demonstrates that the passion and commitment of Australia's writing community remains a vibrant part of Australia's cultural heritage, and that the ancient and venerable art of the storyteller is alive and well. The Bachelor of Writing and Publishing celebrates this heritage through its unique degree structure of writing practice and publishing expertise. This combination allows writers to bring their writing skills to a professional level and to possess the knowledge to produce their work through the degree's publishing imprint, Yarra Bend Press, in a range of paper and digital formats.

The inaugural year's entries included tales of families, endangered animals, time travel, illness and outer space among many other wonderful and inventive takes on the theme. The Bachelor of Writing and Publishing congratulates all writers who have had the courage to embark on the writers' journey and, in particular, those

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who took the time to submit their work to the Time to Write short story competition. For those who didn't, we look forward to reading your work as part of next year's competition.

Read and enjoy!

INTRODUCTION
ALICE ROBINSON

We have long wanted to hold a writing festival and short story competition in the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing - something that would celebrate and advocate for the wonderful writing that exists across age groups and locales in Melbourne's City of Literature, and beyond. NMIT's centenary celebration provided us the perfect opportunity, and gave rise to the theme of the festival. While in subsequent years the theme of the writing competition itself will change and we look forward to reading many more fabulous short stories on all manner of other issues, the title of the writing festival and competition - Time to Write – will remain. Time is something that is precious to all writers, who must work hard to juggle competing demands: school, employment, time with family and friends and even sleep, in order to find the time to write. We enjoy the fact that the title works as both an acknowledgement of this reality, and a call to action. For we believe that writers cannot afford to wait patiently for the perfect, quiet moment in which they may write to present itself – no such moment exists. Instead, they must prioritise their writing by recognising that now is the Time to Write!

Evidently, the theme of time was as provocative to the writers of Australia as it was to us; we received close to 300 entries from across

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the nation. It was a difficult task to choose just five winners from those hundreds of wonderful pieces of short fiction, yet after much careful consideration, our judges were able to identify the exemplary stories in each category. While these stories range in approach, style and subject matter, what is remarkable about each is the impressive quality of the writing, command of the short fiction form and imaginative interpretation of the theme. These qualities are evident across age groups; it is a delight to see stories constructed by writers as young as twelve holding their own alongside the most masterful adult entries.

Our youngest winning entry, *Snowy Survival* by Jessica Dance, is a wonderful example of this; a finer story would be difficult to locate among the collective entries we received and beyond. Focussed around a group of endangered Australian pygmy possums, Jessica's thoughtful interpretation of the theme in particular impressed the judges, as did her prose, which betrays a care and maturity far beyond her years. Similarly, Georgina Rychner's story *Soon* - winner in the category of 15 - 17 years - is startling in its imbued pathos. Tackling issues as divergent as old age, drug addiction and familial ties, *Soon* demonstrates well just how large short stories can be, showing how in good short fiction, a whole complex world can be captured in few words. Lightening the mood considerably, in the category of 18 - 20 years is a hilarious take on the life and role of our divine creator, or George, as He is named in Ashleigh Mounser's *Something Like That*. Reminiscent of Douglas Adams' clever, humorous writing, the wonderful strength of this piece is the perspective it provides on a well-worn circumstance. *Something Like That* is fresh, and very funny for it. We are very proud to see NMIT represented so finely by staff member Warwick Sprawson, winner of the NMIT staff/student category for his story *The Real Man*. Slightly absurd, poignantly observed, *The Real Man* can be enjoyed on multiple levels, including as a meditation on time spent in 'dead-end' jobs, as well as a subtle exploration of time travel. Taking up a wholly different and unique point of view is Rijn Collin's *Counting Red*, winner of the Open category. This is a story that, in its perceptive inhabitation of the mind of its troubled child-protagonist, showcases so beautifully the

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place of the unreliable narrator in fiction. In its deft assuredness *Counting Red* is a delight to read. Together, these stories - along with those that received honourable mentions in each category – constitute a wealth of quality creative writing, detailing the breadth and scope of narrative output that can be triggered by one small prompt: time.

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CATEGORY
12 TO 14 YEARS

TIME TO WRITE

WINNER
12 TO 14 YEARS

SNOWY SURVIVAL

JESSICA DANCE

The first glittering flakes of snow drifted down from the dark clouds onto the coarse grass of the snowy mountains. The last golden rays of the sun flickered on the snow brushed ground as the stunning sight melted into the darkness of night and the first fall of winter capped the cold rocks in a carpet of glistening white.

Snuggled in their soft grassy nest a small family of endangered pygmy possums blinked sleepily as the hunger gnawing at their tiny bellies awoke them. Yula, the gentle mother of the family rose to her feet and gingerly sniffed the cold damp air. Her babies' plaintive cries followed her as she crawled out of the narrow tunnel and into the mass of protective rocks that concealed their hidden home. Yula's delicate ears twitched as she strained to pick up any sound of danger. Quickly scurrying back into the hidden rock cave that was their home she roused her young and together, forming an untidy line, they carefully crept through the small crevice and into the cold air.

The bright moon shone gently down, illuminating the clean covering of thick sparkling snow on their territory of protective rocks. A chilly breeze ruffled their thick grey fur and small snow crystals clung to their faces. Yula sniffed the fresh air and, detecting no sign of a threat,

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she scurried through the soft snow with her little family running along behind her.

Using their sensitive noses to guide them through the rough field of rocks the small company foraged for any scrap of food they could find. To their ever-growing disappointment, none could be found except for a few spindly seedlings overgrown by tough tangles of thorny blackberry. Yula could just remember when she was young and they had feasted on the Bogong moths. But big scary machines had filled the air with thick nasty smelling smoke and cleared stretches of land. Then the clumsy humans had arrived, speeding down the snowy slopes on long narrow feet.

Yula didn't dare cross the sloping grassy stretches for there were no protective rocks to stay safely hidden in. She was stuck in a deadly trap that was closing tighter on her every day. Her main source of nutritious food was here, but the Bogong moths were across the very ski fields she could not cross.

A sharp whimper of surprise, pain and fright made Yula whirl around to see one of her young caught in a tangle of harsh blackberry bushes. The little possum was struggling to free himself but the sharp point of the wicked-looking thorns was scratching his soft skin. Tiny drops of glistening ruby red blood shone faintly on his grey coat. Yula nosed him reassuringly until his breathing slowed and his small heart stopped pounding in his shaking chest. Her agile forelegs enabled her to carefully remove the nasty weed from her young. Shaking uncontrollably he pressed his shivering body against her warm fur.

A clear thought entered Yula's cluttered mind. 'We must move on, this is no place to live! We are running out of time, we must find food!' Calling her nervous family together she turned to face the East. The morning glow stained the sky a fiery red as the rising of the glowing sun signaled a new day and a new time. 'That is where we must go,' thought Yula. 'That is where our future awaits us, whatever it may hold.' Gathering up her family, Yula led them to a small crevice in the warming rock, where together they curled up for warmth as the heaviness of sleep swept them away.

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A cold breeze ruffled Yula's thick coat. She crept out of the small space and gazed at the setting sun, her whiskers quivering. The cloudless sky, painted in soft pinks and purples, faded into twilight as the first stars appeared. Rousing her young, Yula took one last look at the place they had called home. Then, turning to face the East, her tiny body shivering with anticipation, they began their journey.

The little company travelled onwards only stopping to rest in the brightness of the day. The going was hard and there was always the constant reminder of growling bellies crying out for food. The recent melting of the sluggish snow had left the rocks wet and slippery and the ground, a muddy slop. The youngsters were growing ever weaker as they struggled painfully onwards.

Throughout the whole trip Yula could detect no sign of any other of her species. The land was empty and barren and not even a faint scent remained of the once thriving colony. Yula was aware that their kind was at risk and the only way she could help was to keep herself and her family alive.

On the fourth moonrise of their travels, a faint familiar odor reached quivering noses. Food! The little family scurried forward, anxious to ease the hunger gnawing at their empty bellies. A sudden sharp nasty tang made Yula freeze and whirl around only to come face to face with a starving feral fox. His ferocious jaws were opened in a snarl, revealing sharp, glistening, dagger-like fangs. He paused, then sprang at the vulnerable scrawny meal that had ventured into his territory. The possums scattered and fled, springing in and out of the large rocks that provided little shelter from the terrible predator raging after them.

Yula called to her young once, and then making sure they were following her, she plunged in amongst the rocks, heading toward the tunnel yawning in front of her. Her family tumbled into the empty space then retreated until they knew that the fox could not reach them. Yula paused. To her surprise smelt the delicious smell of Bogong Moths. At the end of the tunnel she could see a massive boulder field rich with plentiful food and shelter. She knew they would survive. At last it was their time.

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Author's note:

This story was inspired by the true tale of the endangered Pygmy Possum. The Pygmy Possum was thought to be extinct until one was found in a ski hut at Mount Hotham. Unfortunately though, their numbers have been dropping due to large areas of their only habitat, the boulder fields, being cleared for the snow fields and ski runs. Climate change, weeds such as the blackberry and feral predators such as the fox and cat have also reduced numbers. The National Parks and Wildlife Association built a tunnel under the ski slopes to connect the boulder fields and help save the Pygmy Possum from extinction in the wild.

I wrote this story because I wanted to make others aware of the Pygmy Possum and how it needs our help to survive. In my story I included all the threats facing the Mountain Pygmy Possums so others could become aware of the battle between life and death the possums were facing.

HONOURABLE MENTION

12 TO 14 YEARS

PRINCE EDWARD AND
THE TIME TRAVELLER
ANNINA MUELLER

I see a blurred boy of about eight walking down a deserted alley. The moon reflects just enough light off shattered pieces of glass for me to see another figure, hiding behind a thick lamp post of the kind you might see in olden day films. Its usual candle has been unusually blown out. That candle made me wonder, the first time.

I have been here before. I know what will happen. The boy will suffer a painful death. His whereabouts will remain unknown for 3 weeks. They find his body, rotted the colour of ash, with scarlet stained bones. Twice I have seen this. This third time, I am becoming quite nervous: I have an idea to do something.

I have always been able to control my movements when I time travel. That's what I call it, 'time traveling'. Just like how I call myself 'socially awkward'. My mind takes me to eras far away. Normally, I just see things like Christmas, or birthdays. But lately, I have seen this boy get murdered.

Everyone thinks that because I am dumb I don't understand what they're saying. I can hear them, and make sense of their sentences. I just can't answer. I have to write it down on my whiteboard, or use sign language. I have an odd case of Aphasia. I remember words and can

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make meaning from them, but words won't come from my mouth. I cannot make sounds. But after fifteen years, you get used to it.

As my mind returns to today, I shake my head and work out what we are doing in class. Ms Miller normally gives me easier work, though this time I ask if I can do what the rest of the class are doing. They are creating a visual report on a famous historical event. I know I have to write about this boy, but I don't want to write such a horrific story. I know I will have to face the murderer.

Once the bell sounds, I head over to the library and ask Mrs Lee if we have any newspaper articles from the year of 1850.

"Come over here. Now, what are you looking for, my dear boy?" She used a different tone for me to everyone else at this school.

I write, "Do you know the young boy who got murdered in the 1850s?"

"Oh, yes. A tragic story. Now let me see. If I'm right it should be right – aha! Here we are lad. It is titled *Young Prince Murdered By Serial Killer*. It says his name was Edward. He was a young English prince, who always explored in the day. One night he decided to explore in the evening. He found an alley."

Before she can continue, I scribble, "Thank you Mrs Lee!"

"That's OK Lucas."

I write, "Bye" and she winks. I walk out the door, taking a photocopy of the article with me.

The minute I get home that night, I begin sketching images for my report. I want to please everybody. I also don't want to go time travelling. I want to save Edward, I really do, but I am afraid. A flicker of Edward's pale face flashes past my eyes. I gasp. I haven't had any time to plan. I close my eyes.

I see Edward walking down the alley. The old man is hiding behind the lamp post. I look around. There is nothing around me. Wait! There is a broken bar of steel from a barred window.

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How am I to get it, without being seen? I ask myself. *Think!* I remember the movements of Edward and the old man. I see the old man moving toward Edward. I am shaking. I tiptoe as quickly and quietly as possible to the window. I pick up the steel bar below it. I freeze. The old man turns around. I duck. He doesn't see me. I inhale a silent breath and slowly exhale. Edward begins to hum a tune. The old man continues to move closer to Edward. I take a few steps toward the old man, raise the steel bar, close my eyes and allow it to fall onto the old man's head. Edward turns to see what is happening. The old man yelps and falls to the ground, unconscious. I look at Edward and the strangest thing happens. I talk. I not only talk, but I yell a full sentence.

"Run Prince Edward, unless you want this man to murder you!" The Prince turns and runs, a scared look on his face. Somehow I know he'll reach his castle. I drag the old man into the light where somebody will be able to see him in the morning.

I shake my head. Sweat is dripping down my face. My heart is racing a million miles an hour. I look at the article. Its heading has changed. *Mystery Man Saves Prince Edward*, it reads. I did it! I actually did it! For the rest of the night I continue to write about Edward and his experience. I am so happy with my work! I brush my teeth, throw on some pyjamas and flick the light switch. I jump in bed and fall asleep the moment my head hits the pillow.

The next morning I arrive at school. In my first period I get to read my report. It isn't due for a week, but I offer to read anyway. I explain all this to Ms Miller by writing it down. I stand up in front of the class and talk to them about Edward's expedition. I talk, explain, ask, instruct and tell for ten whole minutes. By the end my class is roaring with applause. Their faces are truly priceless.

I see a flicker of Edward as a grown man. He is happily married to a beautiful woman, with two children. I know I have done the right thing.

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HONOURABLE MENTION
12 TO 14 YEARS

THE BIGGEST GIFT OF ALL
LIAM NEIL

This is the story of a twelve-year-old boy who has gone through more in the twelve years he has been on this earth than most people will in their lifetime. His name is Gamba.

Gamba was born in Zimbabwe to a poor family with four other children. His parents don't have jobs or earn money in any way. The only way his family can eat is to hunt. They eat what they catch but they almost never catch anything that is big enough for the family to share. Not only is finding food hard for the family, but finding fresh clean water to drink is difficult.

On Gamba's first birthday his brother, who was four years old, ran away. A few days later when the family were hunting they found the brother lying on the ground with almost no life left in him. They took him to their village but he could not be saved. Three days later, he died while asleep.

Gamba and his family left to go to another village up north. They made it after six months of walking. They had barely any sleep each day and had even less food or drink. This village was no better than the other village and had no more resources to offer. What it did have was Gamba's uncle. The family didn't know much about their uncle but from what they had heard he sounded quite wealthy and nice.

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They lived with their uncle for four months, but he kicked them out when they were caught trying to steal from other starving families, even though their uncle was one of the wealthiest in the village. They had nowhere to go, stranded out in the dessert: no food, no water and nowhere to sleep but the hard sandy ground. This was Gamba and his family's life for the next two weeks.

Then some strangers came. They looked like nobody the family had ever seen before. They had pale white skin and wore clean and well cared for clothes. The people were from Australia and they fed the family a little bit of food and let them have some water. They also drove them to a nearby village to the east of their original village. There they lived for the next couple of months.

A few days after Gamba's third birthday his family made a decision that they were going to try to find the white people with well cared for clothes. They left the village they were at and went on a journey that they would never complete. Three weeks after they left, one of Gamba's sisters died of dehydration and starvation. They had no choice but to leave her body lying in the middle of the dessert and to keep searching. Gamba's first few years of his life were nothing but terrible. Watching an only brother and one sister die is something that no child should go through.

Gamba and his family were still looking for the Australians when they came across a village that had plenty of water, food and jobs available. Gamba's father and mother got a job immediately and everyone had enough food and drink. Everything was looking up. Then, two months after Gamba's fourth birthday the village was raided by an army of people with spears and sharp tools; sharp enough to hurt severely or even kill. Gamba and his family had to leave the village and go walking again. They walked for only a few days and found a very little village with what looked like some really nice people.

Gamba and his family were rejected from the village and were told to go, or else. They kept walking. Along the way another one of Gamba's sisters died of starvation and dehydration. Two weeks later Gamba and his family found a camp that was run by the white people. They were at a refugee camp that soon was going to take families over to America

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to live a better life. They stayed at this camp and were lucky enough to get taken to New York to live.

The family flew over on a big plane and when they arrived they were amazed at how many massive buildings and skyscrapers there were in one big city. When they landed, they were each given a bottle of water and some lunch. Gamba finished his water in under a minute. They gave him another one and someone said, “Slow down! You don’t get all the water in the world.”

Gamba’s mother applied for work at a bakery and got the job a week after they arrived. The family lived in a big hall with hundreds of beds around the room. There are two toilets and two showers but they only got to have two showers a week. This was their life for the next couple of years.

On Gamba’s birthday it felt like any other day to him. He never usually got presents, but his parents gave him the biggest gift he could ever wish for: an education. He started school at the beginning of term, with his sister.

On Gamba’s first day of school he made heaps of friends and loved every second of it.

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HONOURABLE MENTION
12 TO 14 YEARS

EXPIRY DATE
AYLA-JADE SCURRAH

“Get up.”

The scientist’s voice was deep and harsh, an unwelcome noise that broke me out of sleep. I could imagine the face that went with it perfectly: shrewd, squinty eyes the colour of mud, pasty skin and limp dishwater-brown hair slicked over in an immaculate comb over. Herbert.

I didn’t usually remember the scientists as individuals, but I remembered Herbert. He took me to the lab every morning. He recorded the results while they experimented on my human-cheetah hybrid body. He smiled whenever I screamed in pain.

My eyes flew open and I jumped to my feet, not wanting to give Herbert a reason to kick me. He did that, sometimes. The fluorescent lighting seared my sensitive eyes, so I couldn’t see the ugly man as he strapped a watch-like contraption around my lightly furred wrist. One toe out of line, and this dreaded bracelet would elicit a painful bolt of electricity that would have me thrashing on the ground.

Herbert reached down behind him and picked up a clipboard, just like he did every day. The clipboard consisted of meaningless information - my gender (female), the length of my golden-blonde hair and tail, the

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shape of my black tear-shaped markings, the number of spots on my mostly human body – as well as my schedule for the day. I stared at the schedule in frozen horror, knowing what it would read. I'd been dreading this day since the moment I became aware of my existence.

Herbert smiled. "Your whole schedule has changed. Today is your expiry date."

I'd run out of time. My stomach dropped. I'd known this was going to happen for a long time, but I'd somehow managed to push it to the back of my mind. Who wanted to think about the exact moment they would die? I was already experimented on daily; I didn't need a sword hanging over my head.

But there was a sword, and it was ready to drop. I could feel the weakness in my usually strong body, the dulling of my super-sharp senses. Each breath drew me closer to my last. Each second brought me closer to the end.

I didn't know how, but I was going to die.

"How long do I have?" I asked.

Herbert peered at me with scorn. "Your therapist will be here shortly. Ask her."

I didn't have to wait long. A moment later the cell door opened, revealing a beautiful, willowy black-haired woman. Ignoring pleasantries, she sauntered over and shouldered Herbert aside, causing him to squeak and stumble.

She looked at him. "Why are you still here?"

Herbert didn't even bother stuttering; there was no messing with my therapist. He handed over the electrocuting remote and promptly left the room.

Relieved, I threw myself into her arms. Valley was the one person I actually liked. She was nice (usually), displayed emotion, and seemed to genuinely care about what happened to me. Plus she hated Herbert.

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“You came!”

“Of course I came, silly. It’s your birthday!” She hugged me hard, then pulled back and scanned my face intently. “Three years old, huh?” She sighed. “You don’t look a day under sixteen.”

That comment brought me out of our happy reunion. Yes, I was only three years old – my body and mind matured alarmingly fast – but I was still going to expire. Age meant nothing. The only thing the scientists cared about was results.

“How will it happen?” I asked. My remaining time seemed insignificant now. It wasn’t like I was going to achieve anything.

Valley proffered her arm. “Take a walk with me?”

Normally I would never have taken it; physical contact required a trust I couldn’t give. But today was different. Today I died. So I rested my palm on her forearm and followed her through steel doors and sterile hallways.

“What do you know of the expiry process?” she asked.

“Not much,” I admitted. “But I’d like to know more.”

She grimaced. “I don’t blame you. But it’s pretty gruesome. Are you sure you want to know?”

“I’m sure.”

“When a hybrid reaches its expiry date, the human-animal cells split apart and deteriorate. Paralysis occurs. Organs stop functioning. Body tissue breaks down. From there, there are multiple ways the hybrid can die – suffocation, heart-attack, and so on.” Valley wrinkled her nose delicately. “Sometimes, the hybrid is unlucky and none of those things happen. Then they have to watch their body cave in on itself.”

A heart attack? Suffocation? Or prolonged suffering? Which should I hope for?

I never got the chance to decide. Valley made a sudden turn and we came to our destination: a locked, heavy, airtight door. So, this was it. I watched numbly as my therapist swiped her ID card and opened the door, beckoning me inside.

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It was time to expire.

Head held high, I walked into the room. It looked just like my cell. White paint, a wall of one-way glass, cameras in the roof. Machinery hummed in the corners. At the centre, two white-coated scientists stood before an empty metal table.

I relaxed. There were no scalpels, no knives! I was just about to say so when I got a closer look at the table. It was bolted to the floor, leather straps hanging from the sides. Spiders skittered down my spine. That didn't look good.

Without warning, the scientists strode over and grabbed my arms, dragging me towards the table. Panicking, I clawed at them, drawing blood. They swore, but didn't let go. I was nowhere near as strong as I should have been. In seconds I was sprawled on the table, tied down.

“What is this?!” Valley shrieked.

“We've had a recent breakthrough,” one scientist said excitedly. “On certain experiments, we've been able to permanently meld the cells together – with electricity!”

The other scientist secured electrocuting bracelets to my body. “It's a rare success, so don't get your hopes up.”

Don't get my hopes up? They had already skyrocketed. I had a *chance*.

HONOURABLE MENTION
12 TO 14 YEARS

THE POCKET WATCH
HANNAH WINSPEAR-SHILLINGS

All around him the house was quiet. The dark plains around were quieter still, empty except for a low, howling moan as the winds from the incoming storm rushed over the hills.

The house was silent as regret. Turning a corner he almost expected to see ashes floating in the air, eerie and disembodied as the portraits staring from the corridor walls.

He adjusted the gramophone, cranking it. The skitter-clockwork first strains permeated the dim air. He stared down at the watch - its white full-moon face, its revolving hands, the engraving - as the gusting breeze rattled the wind-chimes hanging by the door, and caused the turnip lanterns to whirl like wild dervishes.

Tempus fugit.

Time flies.

The thin sliding paper screen doors rattled on their runners; he ignored them. He placed the pocket watch slowly down on the Edwardian armchair's faded green arm, and stared down at the first of the letters in the heavy box at his feet.

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Signore,

Ho scritto per dire che accettare l'invito a trascorrere il pranzo con voi questo pomeriggio. La tua lettera di un "elicottero" mi ha incuriosito molto. Non vero l'ora di sentire di piu'!

Sinceramenta ,

Leornado di Piero da Vinci

Sir,

I have written to say I accept your invitation to have lunch with you this afternoon. Your letter about a "helicopter" intrigued me greatly. I look forward to hearing about it!

Sincerely,

Leonardo da Vinci

For millennia now, guided by the pocket watch, he had slipped unseen through various historical re-workings of the world, tweaking and burrowing into intrigue; instilling doubts, fears, hopes, dreams, bartering with kings, squandering information upon geniuses, each time stitching and reweaving the monstrous tapestry of history.

Because the way things had been developing was *wrong*. So, so *wrong*.

Because after all, what was a world without imagination?

As if guided by unseen hands, the letter slipped to the floor. Tired eyes furrowed with lines of weariness locked onto the next. The pocket watch ticked merrily on the armrest.

Monsieur,

Je suis ecrit maintenant a dire tu que j'aime votre information sur les Revolution. Ca vais etre de mettre a grande profit moi.

Merci,

Roi Louis les XVI

2012 short story prize

Sir,

I am writing now to tell you that I like your information on the Revolution. It will be of great benefit to me.

Thank you,

King Louis the XVI

So often, knowledge led to war.

The pocket watch chimed. Two eyes slid sideways to gaze at it. The small backwards pocket watch seemed to stare at him defiantly.

You're late, you're late; you have been for the past thousand years!

And to the next letter...

Dear Sir,

Although I do not know your name - and really, with such kindness you have bestowed on me as an editor, the least I can do is honour your only request that you remain anonymous - I would like to thank you. Your skills as an editor and confidante (even be it only through letters!) were of pivotal assistance to me throughout the writing of my novel. Really, with such ideas, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you are a famous author yourself! Your description of the meddlesome Rabbit was so vivid, it was almost as though he is a personal acquaintance of yours, although I know such things cannot be.

Words cannot express my gratitude to you, so I have decided to express it in a gift. I noticed underlying your letters was an ardent wish to own a pocket-watch of your own, so I have taken the liberty of purchasing one for you. I brought it from a corner-shop in Cheshire (hoping that you might feel more at home with a watch from your hometown?!) called Tempus Fugit – perhaps you have heard of it?

Best wishes for the future, and, should we ever meet, I wager my profound admiration for you will not have dimmed.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)

TIME TO WRITE

P.S. Upon seeing the pocket watch, I was struck immediately by how similar it is to your description of the White Rabbit's pocket watch in one of the first drafts of *Alice's Adventures Underground* that you sent me. I hope that this (hopefully not parting, as I would very much like for you to remain an old and dear friend) gift would forever remind you of the poor, struggling author you so kindly assisted.

The pocket watch - that little pocket watch purchased by Lewis Carroll from a small, dubious shop named Tempus Fugit - had started it all. He had taken it home that evening, delighted to own his very own watch. The next day he woke up in the 21st century.

It had taken him a long while – months of culture shock, disorientation, and the suspicion this was all a dream – to adjust to the newfound concepts in 2010. He just barely had time to adjust to the election of a woman known as Julia Gillard in a country he vaguely recalled as New Holland, before he went to bed and woke up in the fifteenth century. And again in the thirty-first. And so on.

Throughout his travels, the little pocket watch sat in his pocket, ticking evilly. And now, for the first time, it had chimed. What did that mean?

The storm seemed to be almost a physical presence stamping around on his front porch, and he breathed out. Aha. That was why.

His time was up.

Cassiel stood. The letters slipped from his grasp, fanning all over the floor. White wings unfurled to touch the ceiling. A bolt of lightning lit up the porch and the figure standing there.

“As you quite well know, meddling with the world,” Satan purred as he moved forward, “is very naughty, little angel.”

Cassiel closed his eyes. “Take me, then.”

A red light lit up the surrounding room. The pocket watch ticked slowly on.

HONOURABLE MENTION
12 TO 14 YEARS

WITH TIME
MONIQUE XUEREB

I bury my feet in the sand. It's still early. The sand is cold, though the sun will soon beat down and give it warmth. I look out on the teal sea. I see the emerald green seaweed washing up to shore; hear the sound of crashing waves. The horizon is crimson and the sky an electric blue. I cast my mind back twelve months to when it all started.

I had never been on a holiday. I was so delighted when my mother told us that we were going to the Great Barrier Reef. The eight months leading up to the trip seemed to drag on, each minute an hour. Yet while we were there, time flew. That was, until time seemed to stop.

It's funny how each member of my family perceives time differently. My baby brother Xavier has no concept of time; he's oblivious to the world around him and is fully dependent on my mother. For my younger sister Robyn, time goes as slow as a snail on a piece of driftwood bobbing in the water not knowing what to do. As for me, a young adult, I abuse my time, letting it fly. Then there's my mother, who always complains of having no time. She says it flies like a leaf in the breeze twisting and turning, taking her in different directions. And for Nana, time goes slow; she relies on my mother much like my baby brother.

TIME TO WRITE

I remember watching the gentle rippling of the sea and gazing at the first rays of sun on the water. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my younger sister, Robyn, approaching me. Robyn and I were very similar; our olive skin, straight black hair and jade eyes are features inherited from our deceased father. She came over, putting her hands around my waist. I squeezed her hands and bent down as I tucked her hair behind her ear and whispered, "It's going to be alright."

She nodded. "I'm not afraid anymore. I know it's going to be magical." She looked up at me as I gave her a reassuring smile.

We boarded the boat. The driver started it up while our tour guide for the day took us through what we needed to know and answered our questions. Nana went below deck to set up Xavier's portable cot, gently placing him in, while Robyn and I chattered and laughed as the boat skimmed across the water.

We soon reached our destination. Robyn and I were squealing with excitement. I remember the speed with which Robyn and I put our wetsuits on. Mother and Robyn went in first. Next it was my turn. I waved to Nanna, inhaled the fresh air, and plunged into the water.

I had never been in a place so magical, so thrilling. The scenery was pure, beautiful: the captivating colours of the fish, and the intriguing, vibrant coral. I looked around and noticed Robyn feeding the fish with a bread roll she must have stolen from our hotel. I decided to go in deeper. Once my tank was empty I rose to the surface, found our boat and kicked towards it. I knew Robyn and Mother would already be aboard, for I seemed to have lost the concept of time while experiencing the beauty of the coral reef. The hectic life under the water seemed no different to that on land.

I found the stepladder and hopped onto the boat. I saw my mother crying. Nana was comforting her. Initially I thought mum must have gotten stung; it takes a lot for Mum to cry. She is one of the toughest ladies I know.

Suddenly, my legs went numb and my mouth was dry. I didn't know what was going on. I saw our guide desperately trying to console Mum and Nana.

"Mum. Nana?"

"G-Grace." My mother threw herself on me.

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“What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Robyn, Robyn is lost at sea.”

I was confused. I didn’t know what she meant. The guide pulled my mother off me and sat her down.

“Where’s Robyn?” I sputtered, my brain foggy.

I watched Nana as she pulled herself together and looked me in the eye.

“The wind picked up and Robyn got swept up in a current. Robyn’s dead.”

I was unprepared, confused, shocked by the news. The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming. I blacked out.

When I opened my eyes, my vision was hazy. I focused on the white wall above. I felt my mother running her fingers through my hair, cradling me. I knew what had happened wasn’t a dream.

The agony I felt was overpowering. It was like someone had reached into me and had torn my heart into millions of pieces, making it impossible for me to mend. I was no longer living, just existing.

The nights were particularly hard. I would wake myself screaming for Robyn. During school I longed to see her. I was in a dark, deep hole waiting desperately for someone to retrieve me.

They say time heals all wounds, but I believe it’s what you do with time that counts. I found myself on numerous occasions running away from my emotions and avoiding my family.

A year has now passed since the horrific event, but I still mourn for Robyn every night. I still bolt into her room to tell her something interesting that happened in my day only to realise that she’s not there, physically anyway. I sit on her bed as I weep, though I can feel her presence as she whispers to me, “It’s going to be alright.”

I nod, “I’m not afraid anymore; I know it’s going to magical.”

I look up at her as she gives me a reassuring smile.

TIME TO WRITE

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CATEGORY
15 TO 17 YEARS

TIME TO WRITE

WINNER
15 TO 17 YEARS

SOON
GEORGINA RYCHNER

My name is Eve. I was born last century. I have survived two world wars in my lifetime; my husband was killed in one, my daughter died just after the other. I used to like drawing, but I can no longer hold my hand steady.

I have no idea why I am reciting these things, but they calm me. I suspect they have something to do with the uniformed girl smiling at me with encouragement as she opens the curtains and lets the world in. *My name is Eve. I was born last century.*

I hear the birds salute each other outside, their shrill harmonies conjuring ancient waltzes and boppy jives. My eyes close, I turn away. Tunes evoke memories, and memories are now painful. I don't listen to music anymore.

The window closes, shutting out the noise. This girl knows my thoughts, even though we rarely communicate – we are too different. She is from another species, this girl with soft pale skin adorned with rosy cheeks and bright eyes and a smile – a smile with the power of sunlight on the senses. She smiles now, and I know she is trying to help me. I don't smile back. I just sit very still, a monstrous being who no longer belongs. Until I say, "Where is Emmeline?" Something I ask often. I'd like her to come, it's been a long time since I last saw her.

TIME TO WRITE

The girl sets a tray of breakfast on my lap. “Emmeline hasn’t come in a very long time.”

The tray has two pieces of toast, a tub of yoghurt and some fruit, chopped finely so I can digest it. “Yes ... but I’ll wait for her. She’ll come.” I lie back and breathe slowly, thinking of my granddaughter. I hear the girl leave and silence reigns. There are no birds, no voices—I am the only human being on Earth. The pillow supporting me gives way to soft grass and I envelope myself in nature, staring up at patches of sky laced between treetops. I don’t think of the things absent, things that have defined my life: blackened streets and blaring sirens, dark hours after dark funerals, I think only of my granddaughter running through this vivid landscape.

Time is elusive; the girl has returned, and asks: “Are you going to eat that?”

But I don’t think of breakfast. “No... I think I’ll wait.”

They had snorted the stuff beforehand. The others just did it for kicks, but Emmy knew she needed it more than them. Her hands shook while tipping out the powder, but she needed it. She was hollow; an empty vessel, and this was her life source. It was the reason she could strut onto stage with purpose, fist the air with attitude and hit the notes with ease. Even in these final moments she had the crowd, a tribe of hundreds that coursed before her now, the frenzied beings creating a collective pulse that shook the Earth. There were no arching melodies, no mournful lyrics; she needed adrenaline, not melodrama.

Behind her, Joel and Demi initiated the final crescendo and her lips formed the words: *No time for sharing... even less for showing...*

They took the stuff again afterwards, in Demi’s apartment. There wasn’t much in the building; they didn’t waste winnings on the material world, making it easier to navigate through the haze of her perception. It was a dangerous, exciting world and she loved it. The floor tilted beneath her and she fell onto Joel, feeling soft leather hit her cheek. Laughter escaped her and it was contagious. Arms shoved her off. She stared at the snakes and skulls etched into them, and continued to laugh.

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Then Demi was up, asking her to dance, and they were moving around the room to an invisible rhythm. It was amazing how easily the words tumbled out, creating tangents of lost dreams and regrets. Demi wished she could dance again, Joel wished he could relive his youth.

Emmy said, “I should go see my grandmother.” Her cheeks felt wet and she looked up expecting rain, before Demi wiped the tears away. Emmy was still laughing. Her grandmother was the only family she had, ignoring family wasn’t *normal*. Her legs had barely moved and she was at the door.

“Where are you going?” Demi cried.

I’m going to visit her. Emmy was leaping down stairs now, she could hear Joel behind her and the chase was on, she could outrun him, she was at the apartment door and then she was by the road.

“Emmy, come on.” She felt dizzy, light danced across her vision. It was all so funny. He was moving forward, she backed away impulsively before arms clutched her, pulling her aside. The snakes writhed around her; she struggled against their printed tongues. “We have to get off—”

The world narrowed, dissolved by two glowing orbs. Emmy looked directly into the light and she was on stage again, yet this time there was no pulse of music. Only silence.

After four years of employment, Carmen didn’t recommend making spontaneous decisions in nursing homes, yet one unremarkable Tuesday she found herself doing just that. It had to be done; she could no longer stand that one repeated question. So she grabbed the faded newspaper clippings and thrust them at the old woman’s eyes; she didn’t consider the pain that would follow, she just wanted her to *know*.

The headlines were harsh, they screamed: *Tragic Rockstar, Death By Drug Trip*. It was only then that she felt regret. The old woman’s face had contorted in disbelief, her eyes moist as she studied the obscene images of her erratic granddaughter. The woman didn’t try to speak. Her eyes simply closed, and shut the world out.

TIME TO WRITE

The next day, the woman was calm. Carmen placed her breakfast before her. “When is Emmy coming?” the woman asked.

Of course. Carmen smiled reassuringly. “Soon. You’ll see her soon.”

HONOURABLE MENTION
15 TO 17 YEARS

SPRINGTIME PUPPIES
EMILY DICKEY

It was springtime once more. The leaves on the trees were just green buds, hardly even furred out. Like children they watched their leaf siblings who grew faster than them. The foliage would soon become dense; the bugs wandering around waiting for summer. But before summer could come, spring must end. A time of new life; spring was to be an unforgettable time. For with new life comes new death.

Springtime life on a farm is filled with busy days. New discoveries are found each morning, and they have changed by afternoon. I eagerly awaited the moment when the dew would be gone from the grass in the morning, when the nights no longer held the chill of a winter passed, and when the afternoon stayed warm as the mornings.

Winter had been harsh that year. Mother had stayed inside most days, scared to death of the snow and ice. When she was younger she had been left out in the latrine all night. It has been a stormy night, the wind and snow pressing into each crack. Shelly, her older sister had forced her to go out to the toilet, sick of damp sheets in the morning. The door had slammed shut in the wind; some how the latch had slid into place, locking Mother in. Shelly had been in the mist of reading *Little Women*.

TIME TO WRITE

Too late, she noticed the absence of the younger sister and ran to her parent's bedroom. Wasting precious time searching the house for Mother, it was nearly two hours later when she was discovered.

Of course, she most likely would have died had she been left out all night, but to Mother, it still seemed the end of the world that she had been found. In the morning it was discovered that her feet had suffered such frostbite that two toes were severed. For years Mother limped, re-learning how to walk. Even now, when the cold is especially bad, Mother leans a little on her right foot, remembering days gone by.

For any child, the Minnesota winters were like a wild bear. Usually they could be counted on to pass right by, cold and stiffening, but not deadly. But every so often there was the bear that hadn't eaten in a while, the bear that longed for the taste of death. Winter did sometimes long for the taste of death.

Mother avoided going out in winter, resulting in our home being the first on the street to have an indoor toilet. Duluth in the 1920s was a hick town. Father worked the shipyards, loading ore and wood. Each day he would come home with something special that he had found on the streets, a present for his many children.

Until I was nearly fifteen, I believed that winter was dangerous, that just leaving the house was almost certain death. For me, father was a hero, going out day after day for us. That was before I learnt of saloons.

A small stream ran by our house, frozen in winter and hardly even thawed by spring. Mother would wash our clothes each summer in the spring, and in winter we would just hope for the best. In those days 'fresh' was a word hardly mentioned from October till May.

Springtime brought new hope and life. But the spring of my sixteenth year brought something else: knowledge.

Cindy was pregnant again. A kindly dog, but not a smart one. Father hated puppies, although each one of his children longed for one of their own. Each year the puppies would magically disappear before the attachment grew too strong. Father's strong hands would lift them from

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the basket Mother made, his hands cupping gently each one. Where they then went, I have no idea, but I suspect they were sold for extra change. Although we weren't poor, eight children have a way of taking spare money and making it disappear into other things. Important things, but costly none the less. Puppies would never have a place in a house that used even the bathroom sink as a workspace.

Cindy stayed merely because she once saved Father's life. He had been drunk, coming home one night. The cold wind had blown him off course and before he knew it he had fallen into Lake Superior. Not only would he have drowned in his drunkenness, but the floating ice chunks of late autumn did nothing to help the situation. Luckily a stray dog looking for a master had followed him and gave a loud howl. The docks were always busy and soon Father was pulled from the depths, given a hosing off and sent on his way.

Real good samaritans were hard to find in Duluth and when one was seen in a dog, the dog was kept. Cindy did not ask for much, and once she was settled in the home she was happy to let the children play with her. But, each spring, despite Mother's greatest endeavours to keep Cindy in, she managed to become pregnant nearly every year. It was not her best feature. This springtime not only did Cindy produce six small puppies, but I fell in love with one.

Each year it was a guess to see what sort of puppy Cindy would yield. Although we had a vague idea what breed she was, her children were mutts of the best sort. Not only did they have a wonderful mother, but they were always a mixture of the best sort of dog. It was a terrible ordeal to wake up and have them gone, conveniently disappeared by our Father. But the fact that they were providing joy for another family, that we were able to spread Cindy's charm, was nice.

That was until that final spring, when the facts of life were most horribly shoved in my face and I was left to deal with them.

Father woke me up one morning as his loud boots clomped downstairs. I heard the squealing of the puppies and I was out in a flash, my own Henry one of the litter. I shouldn't have named him; I had known it

TIME TO WRITE

all along. But his large eyes shouted at me for a name and I melted into them.

Meanwhile, I watched Father downstairs as he stuffed each puppy into a brown sack, while Mother started breakfast. With hardly a word between them, father left the house with the puppies and Mother started to fry the bacon.

“Mother!” I called from the staircase, unsure as to whether my nightgown was appropriate.

“Anne! What in Lord’s name are you doing up at this time? Get back to bed, you’ll catch cold.” Her one fear was that one of us would catch cold like her, so long ago.

“Mother, what is father doing?” I asked for the first time. “Selling the pups?”

Mother watched me for a moment and I had a terrible fright. Wasn’t he? I scampered back to my room and throwing on my daily dress, saw Father make his way to the river. Running back down I narrowly missed Mother in the kitchen and I only heard her calls once I was past the back door.

Father was kneeling on the bank, his back to me. Creeping around him I watched as he raised his hand. At the same moment the sun came out, blinding me. For a second I was lost, until I heard the splashing sound. Father straightened up, and I yelled, my voice ringing out. Losing his balance he crashed into the stream, his skin colliding with the water at the same time as mine.

Instead of swearing and lumbering to my feet, I waded out, looking for the pups. But the current was swift I could no longer even hear the squeak of Henry, the last to be thrown.

“Father!” I said, turning back, but I saw he had gone. Even his footsteps had faded, leaving me in the icy water. My dress clung to my legs and my feet had become ice blocks, but I stayed. Leaving behind adolescence was a painful thing, and as the tears fell the loss of something was pressing. But I could not put my finger on it, and so I had to climb back out and face the day.

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The days before had been happy, springtime, but now they were deadly, to me and to others. The death of my pups was the birth of my adulthood. I was proud of neither one.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
15 TO 17 YEARS

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER
LIAM KEAN

An idea. It can destroy the greatest of men and raise the weakest to heights never before seen. An idea lodges deep within the subconscious, fighting into conscious thought, opening up the harsh facts of reality. An idea's greatest hope, and greatest fear, is time. Time may allow an idea to rise, overthrowing a nation, leaving the corrupt smouldering in its wreckage. Or it may fade away into oblivion, along with the souls of those who brought it to life. An idea is a disease, a curse that can only be cured with time. An idea is not a man, or a place, or an object. An idea is bulletproof. As bulletproof as the souls of those who brought it into the light. Time may ravage the bodies of those who followed the idea, but not the idea itself. Ideas are what sustain us.

Out of everything I've ever wanted, the thing I want most is more time. More time to spend with those I love, time to waste and throw away, time to make what I've always wanted to make of myself. But time doesn't change for anyone. It is an ally and an enemy to all men. It slows down at the worst of times, it speeds up when you least want it to, but worst of all, it leaves you out in the cold when someone you love is dying. I found this out the hard way a little over a month ago, when to my utter dismay, my mother was given two weeks to live. She had eight days.

TIME TO WRITE

Sitting in my bedroom, music blasting, phone ringing, a knock sounded at my door. A small knock, barely audible over the noise, only heard in the lapse of sound between songs. In walked my dad, a small man of impeccable respect and love for all things living. His face was downcast, not something that I ever liked to see, knowing that nothing but bad news could come from his lips. I watched as he walked into my room slowly and sat on the bed next to me. He grabbed my shoulder, and began to speak, his words slow, broken by long deep breaths.

“Two weeks. They’ve given her two weeks,” was all he managed to say. I broke down in his arms. Shuddering sobs ran through me, small whimpers the only sound that escaped. When I finally looked up at his puffy red eyes, I knew he didn’t think we had that long. I spent the next few days in a dream-like state, moving slowly around the house, not really hearing the words people said to me. My stomach wouldn’t take food, and even though my lips were parched, I could barely bring myself to have a glass of water. When I finally brought myself to go and see Mum, she was sitting in a chair in the living room, reading an old book. She looked up as I sat down next to her and smiled. She took my hand in hers.

“It’s going to be ok,” she said, but I knew it wouldn’t. How could this be happening? Why me? Why do I get to spend such a short amount of time with the amazing woman before me? Sixteen years is too short a time to get to know her. One hundred years would be too short a time. In this way I envy my father, who spent nearly twenty-six years getting to know her. Eight days later, I found myself being rushed home from school by a family friend, to find Mum lying in a bed from the hospital that had been set up in her bedroom. She smiled as I ran in and hugged her, my breathing very slow, very controlled. Now was not the time to let myself slip. This was the time that Mum needed me to be strong, for Dad’s sake as much as hers. A few hours later my brother and sister arrived home from university, and they too rushed inside, not noticing anything but the woman that had been such a monumental figure in all our lives. But as time crept by she started to lose coherence, and her thoughts began to slip, until she could not understand what we were saying. When she finally fell asleep, none of us moved. Our

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grandmother had come down with our uncle, and we all sat around Mum's bed, speaking of days past. Before Mum fell asleep, the last thing I had said to her was to tell her a story about me when I was a child. I regretted the fact that these were my last words. But a few days later, a nurse mentioned that of all the senses, it is hearing that prevails longest. In the end the last words I ever spoke to my mother were, "I love you Mum. Never will I stop loving you. Ever."

Three weeks later, when we were scattering Mum's ashes at Briggs Bluff, the same place my grandfathers ashes were scattered, two eagles appeared. We have never seen eagles in the area before, and I doubt we ever will again. But in that moment, I knew that those eagles were my Mum and Grandfather. The idea has stuck with me, and as long as I live I will tell this story. Some people may scoff, but to me, the idea that they are up there, watching over me and keeping me safe, is the only thing that has kept me sane these past few weeks. Though they may have gone and left us here, the memories of them will live on. They are no longer people to whom we speak; they are no longer bodies of flesh and bone. They are an idea. An idea that there is something for us out there. Something after we leave. An idea: our souls are bulletproof.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
15 TO 17 YEARS

IT'S NOW OR NEVER
TONY LUO

It's now or never.

Tick. Tick. Tick ... Ding. Dong. The bell swayed in the town hall. A shadowy figure drifted in the dull streets, the clicks of the boy's footsteps dominating the monotonous atmosphere. It was 11 o'clock.

"Only an hour left," Kendall murmured to himself. "I have to go. It's now or never."

Kendall swore. He picked up the briefcase and started running. His legs were shaking tremendously and his head was aching. But what was he worrying about?

Kendall hurried. As he ran memories began to spring into his mind. *Violet. Hang on there, sis. I'll get ya*, he thought. Memories of his sister ignited in his brain. Faint images flowed like a timeline, from the time they were playing as young children with a little girl who had diamond eyes, to their weeping faces at being evicted from their house.

Suddenly, a flash of light dazzled his sapphire eyes. A yellow car illuminated the night. It was a taxi. Tick, tick, the watch ticked. Kendall stretched out his arms and the car stopped.

TIME TO WRITE

“What’s the problem?” shouted a young man. He was sitting in the back seat. He was wearing a tidy suit and had a leather briefcase. “I’ve got to go home!”

Kendall glared at the taxi driver. Her eyes were diamonds in her perfect face.

Kendall stared, her familiar face shining in the sea of darkness. “Piper?” he said.

The taxi driver looked confused for a brief second, and hopped out of the car. “Kenny!” she shouted. “We haven’t seen you for ages! What happened when your family left the house? How’s Violet?”

“Look,” Kendall said. “It’s a long story. We’ve got to save Violet. She’s in danger. I’ve got to get you to drive me! It’s now or never.” Piper’s eyes widened. She gave a nod, and Kendall jumped into the car. The young businessman seemed offended as Kendall put on the seatbelt.

“What are you doing? I’ve got no time!” the businessman yelled.

Piper turned her head, “Sorry Aubrey, but you either get out of this car or stay.”

“But ...” Aubrey looked at his ticking watch, gave a small sigh but said nothing else. The taxi’s engine rumbled.

After a short while the yellow taxi emerged in an isolated place. Kendall directed Piper to park the car a distance from where they saw light glowing in the night.

“Hey!” said Aubrey. He lowered his tone as Kendall signalled him. “Where is this place?” He wiped his tired eyes and glanced at his ticking business watch. “It’s near midnight!”

Kendall’s heart pumped rapidly. He had not realised how fast time had flown.

“We have to save your sister and pay the ransom, or they’ll kill her!” Piper gasped.

“What? What ransom? What ‘kill her?’” Aubrey said. “I thought you were only giving him a lift.”

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Piper and Kendall did not answer. They stepped on ahead and sighted a shelter, isolated and haunted. The sky looked as if ink had been spilt across it. They decided to walk towards the shed. Aubrey took a step forward as well, frightened by the whistling gusts of wind. "Wait!" he growled. He looked at the ticking watch. "Let me call home first."

Kendall and Piper ignored Aubrey. They moved forward and Kendall carried his briefcase with him. Piper gave a concerned look as Kendall's briefcase fell. She stared at the open briefcase, "Oh, my. What is it?"

Kendall shut the briefcase and continued walking. It was hard for Kendall and Piper to navigate through the billowing bushes as they began to sprint towards the shed.

Tick. Tick. Kendall's heart was like being stabbed by a dagger. There was no more time to waste.

Piper and Kendall paused. "Take them inside," a strange man demanded as another man and a woman came outside to grab them. They entered the shelter as the door creaked open. There was Violet. She was tied to a chair.

"Kenny! Piper!" she screamed.

"Silence!" said the woman. Her skin seemed badly burnt.

"You promised to let her go if I give you the money," Kendall said. "Here it is. Take it and let her go." His hands were trembling again as he summoned his rusty looking briefcase. "Hand me my sister and I'll hand you your money."

"Very well," said the man. He focused on the briefcase and his eyes were filled with excitement. He waved his wrinkled hand and the other man untied Violet. Violet attempted to run towards Kendall but the woman pushed her from behind. The man grabbed Kendall's briefcase and it flung into the air. Piper pursed her lips as the briefcase opened. The man's smile died as the briefcase fell flat to the ground.

"There's no money," he shouted in anger. "Get them!" The man shut the creaking door. Soon Kendall's, Piper's and Violet's hands were tied

TIME TO WRITE

by a rope. The man walked slowly towards them holding a shining silver object. It was a gun. “Where’s all that money your mother gave you?” he demanded.

Kendall and Violet were confused. “What money?” they said.

The man pointed the gun at the three. “Three... two...”

Ding, ding, ding. An alarm was roaring. The man opened the door and there was Aubrey. Aubrey raised his arms, smiling. A dozen policemen emerged, pointing their guns at the group.

Before Kendall, Piper or Violet said anything, Aubrey said, “It’s now or never.”

HONOURABLE MENTION
15 TO 17 YEARS

THE KEEPER OF TIME
KEVIN TANG

John sat at a deserted workbench, watching the antique timepiece he held in his hand with intense interest. *Tick... tick... tick* went the ornate second hand, the sound shockingly loud in the silence. He stared, trance-like and obsessed, watching in fascination as the little hand of metal spun around in endless revolutions, steadily traversing the worn face of a clock engraved with graphic depictions of terrible demons and glorious gods.

“It’s losing time,” he observed, “at a rate of a millisecond an hour.” John despised tardiness, but despite this, he made no move, his exasperation soothed by the steady, rhythmic movement of the golden needle as it plodded across the clock face... round and round, round and round.

John didn’t flinch as the incoming train whooshed past him. It flicked his hair into wild tendrils that billowed around eyes that gazed unsurprised, unblinking and abyss-black. Although impassive in expression, John nevertheless felt a twinge of irritation slither through his body and blossom into an irrational surge of anger, simply because the train was several seconds late. “It’s always late,” he mused. “Always by the same amount, too.”

John had always suspected he was strange... well, not *normal* at least. Considered a musical prodigy at a young age for his unerring sense

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of rhythm, his mentors' enthusiastic encouragements in this area had waned dramatically once they discovered his inflexibility. It seemed he could not, or would not, alter a melody's tempo when required, such that his music, though technically perfect, lacked the wild, living beauty of spontaneity. The reason for this was that John had a metronome of sorts in his head – an inherent ticking that clicked away relentlessly, 24 hours a day and seven days a week, from the moment he was born to, in all likelihood, the day he died.

He wasn't bothered at first, until the physical toll of the relentless ticking began to distinguish him as different from the other children. Fascinated by rhythm though he was, this clicking proved perpetual temptation that distracted him from paying attention in class or studying. His physical performance also suffered, since during strenuous activity his heart rate and breathing sped up and became erratic, which jarred with the steady beating in his head. This invariably resulted in a splitting headache, such that he stopped trying to resist it at all.

It was not until he was about five years old that he realized that the ticking in his head corresponded exactly with the second hand on a clock. Intrigued, John decided to delve deeper into the mysterious world of time. Enraptured by the synchronous harmony between the analogue clock and his own internal metronome, John soon developed an addiction to the soothing feeling of being in coordinated resonance with timepieces. Unfortunately, as a result of his new obsession, he began to get more and more intolerant of inconsistent and erratic beats and events.

Yes, John was definitely not quite normal.

John clasped the antique timepiece gently, still staring while the golden hand yet again swept over the demonic engravings. He had obtained it from his grandfather, and was eerily comforted by the unchanging tempo as the needle methodically crossed the dial. He knew that it was slightly inaccurate, but for some reason it did not bother him as much as it usually would.

Wham! A shock of searing pain speared suddenly through his side, slamming him to the ground and wrenching him out of his reverie. He

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looked up, dimly registering through clouding eyes a figure swathed in black, brandishing a bright yellow shaft of light, much like the one sticking out of his side. The pain was explosive. John tightened his grasp on the pocket watch, seeking its comfort. The last thing he saw was the sunlight flickering over the dancing demon figures, before everything went black.

John's body stood up, a force not quite earthly controlling him, like a puppet on strings.

The figure opposite him grinned, and then spoke. "So, the Keeper of Time finally shows himself. Had enough of this charade? Why you decided to shirk your duty and hide yourself as a human I have no idea ...damn filthy monkeys. But the game's up now. You have no attacking power – you shouldn't even be part of the Pantheon. Surrender!"

What used to be John merely looked at the gaping hole in his side before running his fingers nonchalantly over it. The regeneration was immediate – the bleeding vanished, flesh reappeared and fabric knitted together such that there remained not one indication that a horrific wound had gaped just moments before.

When he was done, he looked up and murmured, "Do you know what I see? Do you, Keeper of Thunder? My eyes see the End. The End of all things. Everything has an end. It is a terrible curse, forever seeing destruction. Humans are so lucky, so carefree, only caring about their petty little lives and never having to be burdened by the great troubles of Immortals. Everything has an end, Keeper of Thunder. Everything. Even gods. This is the Curse of Time."

He saw the black-clad figure begin to angrily summon another murderous shaft of light. With a supreme burst of effort, 'John' bade his personal metronome to slow. The ticking, once incessant, was beginning to stop, and was bringing Time itself to a standstill. The winds stopped howling, lighting halted in mid-flight, and a god peerless in power suddenly found himself trapped, frozen in stagnant space and time. With a light push of a fifteen year-old boy, the Keeper of Thunder fell without resistance, straight into the path of an incoming train speeding to make up for lost time.

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The Keeper of Time smiled as he glanced at his pocket watch, knowing, *having foreseen* that this fellow god would lie at rest until the very End, never, *ever*, to rise again. Time itself had forsaken him.

The train was late, like always. But this time, it was right on time. He grinned.

HONOURABLE MENTION

15 TO 17 YEARS

THE LAST SONG
OF THE LYREBIRD
WILLIAM TRAN

The moon cast its pale luminescence across the dilapidated street, long shadows stretching like a veil. Once home to a bustling nightlife mere decades ago, the crumbling cafes and restaurants were left boarded over and forgotten; their elegant Victorian architecture but a relic of a bygone era. Far in the distance, in the heart of the city, towering skyscrapers wreathed in halos of light and neon colour thrust their mocking shadow over the abandoned neighbourhood. Any other day, this ramshackle relic would have been ignored yet again by the city's denizens.

A single light blossomed from the theatre crowning the neighbourhood.

The clock struck twelve.

New Year's Eve.

Veronica stood alone, her battered trench coat rustling against her knees, swept on by a passing breeze. In her hand she gripped a ridiculous iron-shod lantern, the flickering flame throwing erratic shadows across the decrepit theatre. Standing in the midst of it, Veronica seemed to be out of place, out of time. Her beautiful, porcelain features, slender form and platinum-blond hair were at odds with the oppressive gloom and the battered contours of chairs and fallen poles. But among all

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that devastation, there was a jewel. Veronica had but to find it. The pattering of her feet was largely muffled as she strode across the moth-bitten carpet, occasionally amplified by the sharp crunch of broken glass. The shadows tracked her steps, shifting phantasms closing in and out, like wolves stalking their quarry. Shivering despite herself, Veronica drew her coat tighter around herself and quickened her pace. Ahead, she could see the object of her hunt. It was indistinct, obscured by the dark. If only her lantern could pierce the gloom! Veronica rushed forward, barely able to contain her excitement.

Her momentum fractured the fragile floorboards beneath, the wood crumbling under her weight. She felt herself falling, heard herself screaming, and then... Nothing.

“Been years since anyone bothered to grace these halls.”

Veronica snapped awake, her lilac eyes trying frantically to pierce the darkness enveloping her. She felt battered and bruised, and even as she shifted her head she felt slivers of sawdust running down her back. The sudden sound of footfalls from ahead, echoing in the claustrophobic space, sent Veronica in a frenzy as she struggled to scramble away from noise. Her retreat was cut short by a cold wall. The footsteps stopped then, followed by a weary sigh.

“Relax, I won’t hurt you.” The voice was friendly with a distinctly theatrical bent to it. A shiver ran down Veronica’s spine. The man’s voice carried a false edge and the darkness shrouding them both did little to dispel her discomfort.

Rising shakily, Veronica kept her arm up to ward off any potential approach. Peering into the black, she called out, “Who are you?”

The man’s reply was condescending, “First soul to step in for decades and what’s the first thing she does? Knock a hole in the old thing!” The man paused and Veronica was certain he was rolling his eyes, “Apologize at least!” Veronica nearly jumped at the sudden volume in his voice.

“I’m sorry?” she said meekly, voice wavering with uncertainty.

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“Bah, you know what? Forget about it.” The man sounded disappointed and oddly enough, Veronica felt a tinge of guilt over her lacklustre reply. The silence stretched on awkwardly, neither party willing to break the quiet. It was the man who spoke first, apologetic.

“Ah, can’t see can you? I’ll fix that.” The bright light was almost too much for Veronica. She squinted as her eyes adapted to the sudden change. She blinked. The man looked nothing like what she’d expected. He was handsome and clean-shaven, if somewhat gaunt. Strangely enough, he seemed to be in his early twenties, about her age. He had eyes that appeared to be dark-brown, but in the uncertain lantern light they looked almost black. Haunting. The eyes of a ...

“Done staring?” the man snapped, glaring. Veronica looked down abashedly. “Er...Yes.” She glanced up. The man still hadn’t moved, though his face bore a disapproving frown. “I still don’t know who you are,” Veronica said.

His response was tart. “Elric.”

“Veronica.” Her response was equally rude. Elric didn’t reply, he only stared at her, his hands clenching and unclenching as the silence continued. Suddenly he laughed and motioned towards the set of stairs behind him.

“Come, we’re acting like children! Let’s walk. You’re here for a reason aren’t you? Tell me.” Veronica was loath to trust the man, but then, she didn’t know the way out either.

“Lead on then,” she muttered, avoiding his question. Elric simply smirked and continued on.

“Nobody comes here without a reason. Tell me Veronica, what’s yours?”

“Don’t call me that.”

His chuckle was almost mocking. “If you insist. You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I’m searching for something,” Veronica replied reluctantly. The plain corridor seemed to go on forever.

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“Something like this?”

Veronica didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

Situated on the stage, untouched by the decay that afflicted everything else, stood a lone concert piano. Its ebony wood was polished to a shine and the ivory white keys glistened in the lamplight. It looked perfect, priceless. Just what she'd been seeking. Elric smiled, his eyes drawn to Veronica's expression of disbelief.

“Worth a fortune, but I've never seen anyone actually play it. It's what you were looking for, isn't it?” Veronica didn't speak a word, but drifted towards the instrument. Elric's grin grew wider, encouraging

“Go on then, try it. Play a song. Entertain us.”

“You're sure?” Veronica asked hesitantly. Nothing was right. This didn't make sense. Yet even as she protested, her fingers were brushing across the velvety wood. Just one song, she resolved, giving in.

“Erik Satie's Gymnopedie.” Elric whispered into her ear. “Beautiful, Veronica. Beautiful.”

Veronica screamed.

The clock struck twelve.

New Year's Day.

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TIME TO WRITE

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CATEGORY 18 TO 20 YEARS

TIME TO WRITE

WINNER
18 TO 20 YEARS

SOMETHING LIKE THAT

ASHELIGH MOUNSER

In the beginning, George created the heavens and the earth. This was a controversial choice, and although it seemed like a good idea at the time, it has been the source of considerable fretting in the many years since. George did a lot of other stuff, too. Some of it was pretty neat. There were some dinosaurs, some solar systems, a rather large meteor. He was particularly proud to have orchestrated something called evolution. Sadly, his next creation - man - would attribute this to coincidence rather than divine intervention. Due to some unfortunate confusion in the beginning, George's name was often mispronounced 'God'.

George was a tall man with a walrus moustache and rather hairy arms. Popular culture depicted him with a long white beard, but George had never figured out why. He lived in a grand old place which he had come to know as 'The Boundless.' One is inclined to think that George named it thus ironically because it was an especially small space, but one would be mistaken. It was very large. Impossibly, mind-bogglingly large. If you met George and asked him to describe to you how impossibly large it was, he would sigh and say, "You wouldn't understand." And you really wouldn't.

George enjoyed crime fiction, a nice merlot with dinner, and chess. It was difficult to play chess by oneself, but George managed it, and

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he scarcely complained. He also liked to watch humans go about their business and enjoyed the trivial matters of their daily lives. In the morning he watched the Queen eat her breakfast. At midday he watched a young woman called Nina Hadley argue with her boyfriend; his uncanny aversion to belts, which would have protected the world from the sight of his Bart Simpsons boxers, knew no bounds. In the evening George watched Reg O'Doherty of Michigan University chat online to one Miss Lonely Hearts, whose desperate need for companionship was eased only by the ownership of Tibbles, Kibbles and Sarah Sweet Whiskers.

George lived a life of leisure, something that made time significantly more relative. For example, although George had lived for almost flibbetygillion years – if one finds oneself unfamiliar with this number they needn't be surprised, humans have no need for it – he could have sworn that he had popped into existence a few mere million years ago. He spent much of his time pondering the great mysteries of existence. Why was everyone so reliant on microwave ovens? What was the precise meaning of the online idiom *lol*? Why was everyone so fussed over who had created Stonehenge but never thought to check the bottom, where the artists name and date of birth had been inscribed with a pick? These people wandered about, taking things very seriously, and knowing an awful lot, and seldom realised that they were all talking monkeys on an organic spaceship floating through space. George thought it was marvellous.

The human race were a fascinating lot, and George was glad to have facilitated evolution. Sure, the monkeys had been interesting enough. They had been self-aware, yes, but it was much better to observe a race which was *too* self-aware aware for their own good - people who employed philosophers and physicists to think for them. George had enjoyed the Socrates hype immensely. Imagine, he thought, worshipping a man just for being argumentative!

The problem, because of course there had to be one, was that George had no-one to discuss these things with. If only the Creator Of All

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Things had a cat-equivalent to ease the loneliness. The only friend George had ever had was Delia, but they'd had a terrible falling out twelve billion years ago when she got it in her head that *he*, George - to whom daisies, puppies and candy were attributed - had told the humans to call her something tremendously insulting in a bestselling publication. George and Delia hadn't spoken since, and they lived at opposite ends of The Boundless. It would take George almost three million years to jog there.

When Miss Lonely Hearts died, George felt very lost. He had never quite worked out death, and it was confusing for him to have it so constantly accredited to his almighty plan. George began to wonder if he and Delia would ever die, and if anyone would notice if they did. He began to think that a girlfriend might be even better than a galactic cat.

And so, George began to jog.

By the time he arrived at Delia's corner of The Boundless, the human race had made a mess of things again. George wasn't exactly sure what they'd fought World War III with, but he was certain that World War IV, if it was fought at all, would be battled with sticks and stones. George was sorry he couldn't have helped, but honestly, his children were almost sixteen billion years old! He was beginning to wonder if they would ever learn to take care of themselves.

Delia was sulking. She was a very thin woman, with long red hair and an admirable haughtiness. She'd borne the brunt of the blame for the World War III fiasco. How was it, she wondered, that Dr. Christopher Walker had created a weapon of mass destruction whilst Delia minded her own business and she was *still* blamed?

George idled by as he decided what he could say to Delia. He idled by so long that the humans rose up again and rediscovered microwave ovens. How excited they were! It was then that the perfect opening line came to him: 'I hate re-runs, don't you?' Delia had been angry with George for just shy of flibbetygillion years, and she had been alone for just as long. But one could only sulk for so long.

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‘George,’ she said, ‘you know they’ve been mispronouncing your name again?’

‘Yes,’ sighed George, sitting down beside Delia. ‘I’d hoped they’d get it right the sixteenth time round, but...’

‘I was thinking,’ said Delia, ‘of creating a galactic cat. For companionship, you know. Of course if I do, they’ll say it’s the devil’s creature.’

‘Not in Egypt.’

Delia thought this over. ‘What’s an Egypt?’

‘A rather sandy town not far from where Jessie was born.’

‘I was meaning to ask you about that...’

‘Oh, heavens, no! Jessie wasn’t mine. Just a young man with some rather impressive card tricks.’

Delia laughed. She had a laugh like a church bell. ‘Easily entertained, weren’t they?’

‘Yes,’ agreed George with a fatherly glint in his eyes. He gathered his courage and reached for Delia’s hand. The people below rejoiced over microwave ovens as a great yellow stress ball George had abandoned as a child orbited the earth, bringing light to one side, and night to the other.

‘They’ve really got no idea, have they?’

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CATEGORY
OPEN

TIME TO WRITE

WINNER
OPEN

COUNTING RED

RIJN COLLINS

They tell me nine is a lucky number. They tell me I'm allowed to make the fairy bread because it's my special day and everyone's here for me. I chose the cake in the shape of a witch because I like the green snakes for her hair. I already pulled one off and ate it but I don't think anyone saw.

They told me to stay in the wardrobe while they hide. I know I'll find them quickly because it's my house and I know all the special spots. I'm so good at hide and seek.

I can't hear their footsteps anymore. I press my head against the door of the wardrobe and listen to my dog bark. She's a poodle and my dad says that makes her yap a lot. *Just like you, jelly bean.* I like it when he calls me jelly bean.

I can't hear my dog anymore and the song must've finished and suddenly all I can hear is nothing. Fat black pools of nothing swimming around my feet. And I know what that means.

I know what that brings.

Dr Archer says there are no creatures. When I hear them growling from behind my eyes he pulls at his beard and tells me to think of my

TIME TO WRITE

safe place. *A waterfall*, he says. *Think of a waterfall*. I don't tell him I'm afraid of waterfalls. Too many creatures waiting under the water to grab my legs and pull me down.

They come when it's still, when it's all still and quiet.

I don't sleep well. I have fuzzy pyjamas with Red Fraggles under the pocket. Mokey's my favourite fraggles but my sister got the Mokey pyjamas. She says I'm more like Boober anyway because Boober's the worrier. My sister doesn't seem worried about the creatures. I think maybe her bed's too far for them to reach but maybe they just come for me because I'm bad.

I wish I could hear something.

There was a pocket above Red Fraggles but my mum cut it off. I kept my hair balls in there and she cried when she found them. When it's quiet and they growl I pull hairs out and they can't come any closer. I used to keep the hair under my pillow but my sister said *Ewww that's gross* so I hid them in my pocket. Mum cut the pocket off so now I put them in my sock.

I can hear her breathe funny when she brushes my hair. *No-one will love a bald jelly bean*, she tells me in a strange voice, but I don't believe her. I know my dad will.

I hate the quiet. I have to count to fifty before I can go and look for everyone. I scratch my nail along the wood of the door. It sounds like chalk on the board at school but they don't come when there's noise. I can't breathe when it's quiet. I asked Emma-Louise once what she did when she heard the growling behind her eyes and she looked at me funny. She looked at me like Auntie Clare does when I come back from my talks with Dr Archer.

Once Auntie Clare saw me in the car with my hands in my hair. I had to pull out hairs because the number plates didn't match. I take the letters on the number plates and put them in pairs and if there's one letter left over the car will crash so I need to pull out hairs or my family will die. I wanted to explain but she looked so sad I didn't know

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how. Dr Archer gets to pull on his beard but I don't think he's putting anything into pairs, I just think it's itchy.

I can't hear anything. I listen hard but my breathing's too loud. And then I hear the growl.

I think it's in here with me.

I scratch the wood to scare it away. Splinters jam up under my fingernails. I wonder if the creatures will leave me alone if they know it's my birthday.

I hear a noise like my dog made when she got glass stuck in her paw. I think it might be coming from me.

I want my Fraggles pyjamas with the cut off pocket. I want my witch cake with the green hair and licorice broomstick. I want to be ten.

I think they might stop growling at you when you're ten.

I place my head against the wood of the door, and keep counting.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
OPEN

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE
RORY HAMBLBY

What do you say to the people you love before you die? It's not something I think about too often. Especially not at 9am on a Tuesday morning when I'm still half asleep, half way through my first coffee of the day and half a world away from home.

I'm thinking about it now though. Thinking about my little girl, who for the last two years has turned my world upside down and never been more than a smile away from breaking my heart. To realise that she will grow up and won't even remember me? That might get me before the smoke or the heat does.

The ache in my chest is so real it's as if something is growing in there, like I'm acting out a scene from *Aliens*. The set is right too. I fight back images of Lyra as a teenager, leaning her head on her hand as she flicks through smiling photos on a screen and hears the same old tired, disconnected stories about the man who was her dad.

What could I say to her that could possibly fill the void of all the things we'll never get to say, the things we'll never do, the laughs we'll never share and of all the hugs that will go unhugged?

God, it really could kill me now.

TIME TO WRITE

It may as well be midnight outside for all the light that is filtering through and the electricity is long since dead. If there's supposed to be emergency lighting then it ain't too great in an emergency. I can see my hands, illuminated and wrapped around the glow of my mobile phone, but not a lot else. It's all I care about now anyway, my world has narrowed down to Suzi's grinning face and a bright green call icon.

What do you say to the person you love before you die?

She's so far away but so close. Just one flick of the thumb and I could be hearing her voice. It's gone two o'clock in the afternoon where she is and she'll be going out of her mind.

After the first explosion no one had any idea what had happened. One moment I'm listening to two suits arguing over a project deadline and the next the air is full of glass and noise and the whole world has gone to hell. After that it was flat out chaos. Screams, blood, smoke, headlong panic and a whole lot more screams. The lifts were out, and when I tried to fight my way to the stairwell I was driven back by a tide of bodies fleeing the searing heat they found there.

"It's me, I just called to say I love you." It wouldn't be much to hang a lifetime of memories off, would it? A haunting one-liner from beyond the grave. She'll be watching the television screen right now, fearing the worst and hoping against hope for the best. And what will my call do? Her phone flashing 'Rory calling', telling her in a heartbeat everything she's desperate to know.

"I'm ok, it's ok, I wasn't there after all." Except I'm not, it's not, I am.

The roof was no help. It was only four floors up and that's where we headed next, herded together like so many sheep trying to escape the terrible heat bubbling up from below. The security doors didn't yield to any argument we could offer. I left a guy beating against the metal with a fire extinguisher. He may as well have tried the foam for all the good the canister was doing. And that's when we heard the screams about a plane hitting the south tower. I don't know who saw it, or how, but word spread through the offices as fast as people could run, and just then

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people were still running every which way. After that it didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened to us.

It could have been five minutes ago, it could have been five days. An eerie hush has descended on us now. Maybe it's the smoke that is deadening the noise, or maybe it's just that, like me, people have found a dark corner to sit in and wait for whatever is coming.

What do you say to the only woman you ever loved before you die?

My eyes sting so much I can barely open them to see my phone, and when I do it's all but obscured by tears anyway. Each breath is filling my lungs with black air. Off to my right I can make out the vague silhouettes of two figures as they swing something, a desk maybe, against a window. We're over a hundred floors up, where exactly are they gonna go?

A quick end would have been better than this. No time to think or to regret, to fear or to despair. If I had been just a few floors lower...

What do you say?

My thumb presses down and the call icon disappears. In its place my wallpaper fills the small rectangle of light, Suzi holding Lyra in the paddling pool. The warm sunshine on their faces, the hot pink of a swimsuit, the neon blue of the plastic, they look out of place here in a world where all colour has drained away. With shaking hands I lift the screen to my face and press dry lips softly against the plastic whilst my thumb searches out the power button. As the light vanishes I realise my struggles to breathe now have nothing to do with the smoke and everything to do with my ribs breaking open from the hammering of my heart.

That's what I'll say.

"Don't worry, it was quick. I didn't feel a thing."

That's the best I can do.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
OPEN

LAST THOUGHTS
LEON HEUSSLER

Linda turned to see her boss' defeated face. Sarn's voice rang hollowly through the room.

"So that's it. This is the end."

The entire command centre was silent as everyone stared at the satellite imagery of Doomsday's island blossoming in a fountain of fire. Soon the water surrounding the island would rush in, the ocean floor would give way and the entire Earth would slowly burn away.

Not that slowly, apparently. A timer replaced the satellite image on screen. The agency's scientists had already done the math on the impact of Doomsday's device. In six minutes and forty-six seconds the centre would be destroyed. A minute and a half later the Earth would cease to exist. People as insane as Doomsday shouldn't be allowed to be intelligent enough to do this.

Deputy Director Sarn hadn't barked an order since the explosion, unusual for him. Linda looked sideways again, into her boss' face and saw hopeless defeat. He hadn't moved or said anything more. It must hit someone that powerful really hard, to be this powerless. Linda realised all she was doing was standing there, staring around. There really wasn't

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anything else to do but stare straight ahead at the clock, ticking away the last minutes of human civilization.

These are the last minutes that would matter to anyone, ever. The last minutes that would ever be experienced. Reality itself would be meaningless to mankind once they were all dead and the Earth had crumbled into cosmic dust. All that the ones who knew could do was stare at the timer counting down those last moments.

Someone seemed to have followed Linda's thoughts, but decided to do something about it. One of the drones, down the lines of monitoring computers, stood up. Without looking up, he packed up hurriedly and ran from the room. Several more looked at each other and stood up to leave. Deputy Director Sarn didn't move or react at all.

George, Linda's best friend at the agency, walked across the room towards her and stopped in front of her.

"I think I can get home in the time we have left. If I speed."

George was incredibly law abiding. He would never normally say something like that so casually. But Linda barely reacted to him, it was like he was only half there.

"Do you need to go anywhere?"

She couldn't get home in time. And in any case, there wasn't any point. She didn't have loved ones waiting for her. Anymore.

"No." The word barely left her lips.

"I'll tell Mary you said goodbye."

It was so hopeless, but so sweet. Linda didn't say anything, she just stared straight ahead as George squeezed her hand, rushed past her and started running towards the exit.

Most of the people had left by now but there were evidently some people, like her, with nowhere to go. Including Sarn. Even if she had somewhere to go, Linda wasn't sure she would leave. If she knew where Ray was, if she could reach him in time. But she couldn't think of

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anything meaningful to say. Nothing worthy of the last two minutes of the human race. She could hold him she supposed, and be held by him. That could be enough. But he wouldn't hold her. She wasn't sure the fact that the world was ending was a good enough reason for him to take her back.

She stood there and counted down the time. Another one of the drones, one that Linda recognised, made his way between computers and said something to the girl he'd had a crush on the entire time he'd worked there. It was Ricky's defining trait; he adored Sally. Whatever he said, she smiled at him, beckoned, then grabbed his hand and ran him into the next room. Seconds later, moaning filled the air. Linda thought that it might be an appropriate noise for the end of the world. Humanity desperately groping at the edges of the void in order to stay alive, to remain. Humanity was about to fail, so it was better to go out trying, or pretending to try, or even just feeling something. At least they were feeling something. Linda was numb.

She looked over at DD Sarn. Not a muscle had moved. He looked like a balloon with all the air let out of it. She felt like he wasn't going to move at all, right up until the end. She wasn't going to get any more direction from him. He was gone. There was nothing left inside him. Linda glanced back at the clock. There were seconds left. The moans from the next room rose and it made her think of the last time she and Ray had been together. Properly together. She travelled back over their relationship, smiling at the good times, ripping herself apart over the bad.

It was a funny way to experience the end of everything, going back into the past, but everything that mattered to her seemed to exist in those few years. In the moments of those years. She smiled to herself and drifted in time. Everything ended. Linda didn't notice.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
OPEN

VENOM
KATE MOLONY

Claire sets down a box of linen on a sideboard, displacing a hundred years' worth of dust, more than half expecting the Tiger Snake that's apparently hiding somewhere to come hurtling out of the stale air, fangs bared and ready for a showdown.

I fucking hate this place. There had been a time, though, when she loved it: the earthiness. The infinite possibilities of the hostile universe. When terror was exhilarating. Hopeful. Now she feels nothing.

"Time to face your demons." That's what Chris has challenged her to do on this 'tree change', amidst the plethora of thousand-eyed, venom-dripping, gargantuan fucking creatures that live out here. Well, she won't be tearing up sheets to stave the poison in his lymphatic system.

"This place is great," Chris enthuses now, stepping through the flimsy screen door. It falls shut with a bang, and Claire whips around, expecting to catch a streak of cool brown from the corner of her eye.

You're an asshole! She wants to reproach him, but if she starts up now the three hour drive will have been for nothing. Instead, she takes out a cigarette and retreats. It's still a small victory, because she was *supposed* to have given up months ago.

TIME TO WRITE

Outside, the light is fading. The enveloping twilight sends out gnarled fingers of shadow. Claire takes a long, triumphant drag of menthol, exhaling into the frigid void. A long time ago, there used to be grapevines here. Now there is only a dustbowl that was once a dam, and a cluster of ancient eucalypts, indicating at least that the drought can be weathered. Some of the paddocks still bare evidence of staking; weary posts, tall and alien, but the sinewy green vines with their opulent fruit disappeared a long time ago. What in God's name are they doing here? Claire searches for nostalgia and finds none. The independence of the trees simply irritates her. It was a mistake to come.

The door snaps shut again behind her.

"Well, I looked everywhere, and couldn't find it," Chris informs her. "Still, might want to be careful." She explodes.

What happens next is etched in Claire's mind forever: the hollow bang of the tin door marking Chris' retreat. A vigorous gush of tap water, and the ancient plumbing groaning in surprise; antagonizing drips bouncing off the sink. The noises of a night time ritual. Close by, a magpie warbles to its mate in a cluster of gums, and she recalls a random fact from a crusty primary teacher: magpies will mourn their road-killed mates for hours, increasing their likelihood of becoming tyre-bait also. This is why Claire fucking hates wildlife. Finally, she hears the last angry slurps of dregs from a coffee cup, a door closes and there is silence.

Hours later, she goes inside. Turning on the bedroom light, a furious rope of mottled brown launches itself at her.

"Christ!"

Claire leaps onto the mattress and the tiger snake flees past her.

"Chris!" Her husband lies comatose. She's always said he could sleep through anything, but this is ridiculous.

"Chris! I've found the snake, for God's sake! Can you get up, please and deal with it?" No response.

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“Christopher!” His head lolls to the side and saliva oozes out onto the pillow, a sticky bungee rope of spit. His eyes are closed, but they snap open suddenly – he’s like a doll in a horror movie she saw once; the same pasty skin and neutral, paralysed expression; a pure, unequivocal panic moving across his retinas like a silent movie reel.

Alas, I have been bitten!

Help! I am overcome!

In the same movie, Claire’s character would scream. Wide, overly made up eyes would fill with saline tears, a dark mouth miming to the subtitles:

What shall I do? Nothing. A husband half dead, paralysis from the venom well advanced, immobilizing muscles, flat-lining his heart. Eighty kilometres from anywhere.

She *could* just do nothing.

The day the baby was born, its place inside her uterus - where it grew for almost nine months and filled her out, stretched her completely with anticipation that bubbled out of her in shining, incomprehensible tears - became the incubator for something else; a fury that gently bleeds out of her at the face of these cyanotic lips that tremble in jerking spasms, as her husband struggles to breathe. Maybe she should have called an ambulance.

She can’t go through this again after all. Those useless bastards with their pompous white coats and cold hands, the machine that failed to produce that second reassuring beat. She had wished then that it was her own heart that had stopped beating. When her husband’s cardiac contractions eventually failed, would it feel the same this time?

A car backfires. Claire is plucked from her reverie by its movement up the driveway, a tired old truck that rattles over the potholes to within an inch of its life. Uncle Jim was always a sucker for his old cars. The light flicks on inside the cabin.

Men, she thinks sullenly. *Can’t even finish a fucking daydream without getting interrupted by one of them.*

TIME TO WRITE

“Nice evening for it,” Jim says, in his ancient blue overalls and ‘Husqvarna’ sponsored cap. Claire nods, but the small talk pisses her off.

“I’ll make coffee,” she offers against Chris’ tense, “Hey Jim.”

She pours water from the kettle into three warped aluminum camping mugs, and stirs the black contents, the spoon clinking menacingly against the rim as the men talk. Their conversation about the snake is muted, but audible. She listens to each note of her husband’s voice, comparing it to the rasping of his death throes in her head. It had all seemed so real – the cyanotic pallor, the dull reflection of life seeping out through colourless eyes. A final stir, and she takes two of the coffee cups out onto the porch, setting them down irately on the table.

Undeniably, there is a twinge of regret.

HONOURABLE MENTION

OPEN

TEQUILA THROUGH THE VEINS

FRANCINE SCULLI

There once lived a boy and a girl who knew each other little more than to say hello or pass a smile between them in the mutual world they inhabited. Time moved like so for a while. Then came the day that they came to call *Fuck Friday*, and time stopped moving in that way.

On *Fuck Friday* they noticed everything about each other. The girl, on this one particular night, was brazen enough to ask the boy to join her for drinks after the gig. He just so happened to willingly accept the invitation.

Together they walked down Fitzroy Street and sucked up the final hours at 29th Apartment. When the final drink orders were called, they staggered out onto the street with tequila running through their veins and fire in their bellies. So uninhibited they hailed one taxi, headed in the one direction, without saying a word. Their hands slowly met, fingers interlocking. The distance between their bodies grew shorter and shorter with each minute.

The taxi's meter turned on at the same time they did. So consumed in each other, they hardly felt the taxi slowing at his house. She let him usher her down the weedy pathway to his front door. They caved

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into each other with no resistance, clattering at the door, tripping over and into each other, landing a leg in a pot plant, an elbow in the brick veneer.

They awoke the next morning, hazy and in each other's arms, when the sun rose. She squinted out his window and sprung upright.

"I've got to go."

"Can I see you again?"

She scribbled her number on a piece of paper and left it on the pillow. "Only if you feel so inclined."

Their messages bounced back and forward in the week that followed and their lives started to unfold into one another's path. They found out a lot in all of those messages. On Boxing Day they could no longer resist the temptation to see each other again. On a rooftop in Fitzroy, they talked for hours over cider. He walked her back to her car and it was the girl who could not resist his lips this time, and in his ear she whispered words that made his heart swim.

"I could drink a case of you."

They could have consumed each other right there on the pebbly footpath of laneway, but now it was the boy's turn to leave. His head was bending from the surreal nature of this feeling he had, this unquenchable thirst for her. The demons in his head were telling him to leave her alone, he'd only damage this like he damaged his last, and before he was even aware of his own mind, he wrote it all down in a message to her.

I would've loved to have gone home with you tonight, and come over to you the other night and so on, but I'm fighting some fucked up demons in my head. I can't believe I'm even saying this to you right now, but I figure it is clear we both really like each other so I don't want to enter into something under false illusions. I'd make anyone else look good.

She replied, *I'm not really sure what I'm out for to be honest, but I think you're rad and what makes me most excited is getting to know you. That's what makes*

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me the nervous schoolgirl I become. Believe me – I’ve got my issues too, so not all roses on this side of the fence either. Don’t compare yourself to anyone else.

You’re right, he wrote. We should never compare ourselves to anyone else, but unfortunately sometimes we do. Circumstances have made me this way I guess. Now, if you’re up for the best spooning session of your life, you’ve got the spooning champion of the town ready and wanting to hold you in his arms all night long!

How about now?

Address?

The boy and girl spent another night curled up in each other’s arms, and that night turned into another and another and another, until *Fuck Friday* had become a lot more than just a fuck and a lot more than just one Friday. The boy was falling, and so too was the girl. She called him the best Christmas present ever. He agreed. And time moved like so for a while to come. They made electricity.

Then along came a day that they came to call the last Friday and time stopped moving in that way. The boy, over days and weeks, had become more distant and the girl sensed it. One day she asked him about it.

“I’m terrified I’m going to hurt you and I don’t want us to end up hating each other.”

“I’m not sure why you think we are going to end up hating each other. You project too much.”

“You’re right love, I do project too much. I’m a worrier and a thinker. I guess past experiences have made me that way. I think I am better off on my own.”

The girl did not know what to say so she wrote it down in a card. She sealed the letter in an envelope with a lick of her tongue and gave it to him. In his own private place, he read it and called her immediately.

“I’m sitting in my car with a wee lump in my throat. I’m stuck for words, I really am. I dunno what to say, what to do or what I am feeling. You’re a diamond.”

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“Don’t say anything. Maybe this was all it was meant to be – short lived and magical.”

They wrote the end of their story about the boy and the girl who were perfect for each other in so many ways; but not this time, not in this lifetime and not in this universe.

HONOURABLE MENTION
OPEN

AFTER CARL
JOHN STOCKDILL

The funeral over, Gina made a decision. She would move out of the house she had lived in all her adult life. Carl's presence inhabited the hall, hung like fog in the wardrobe, but was strongest in the kitchen: his spice rack, the rude apron, a calendar he had made from his photographs. In the refrigerator his wine remained nicely chilled. Gina left the bottles in place, not as part of any prescribed grieving process, the right moment just hadn't arrived yet. How many years had she poured two glasses? The kitchen was his domain, the centre of his universe. She orbited around it. They had shared this tiny space for so long, forever really. The ritual of the after work drink she missed more than any.

The children had been wonderful after Carl, doing their best to keep her occupied, taking her with them to shows. Melanie even flew the pair of them up to Cairns for a real girl's week in the sun. Mother and daughter conversations at first danced gingerly around the perimeter of the chasm where meanings sometimes got lost, dropped words irretrievable. After a couple of days at Trinity Beach they relaxed into a new friendship, both stepping out of their former roles, laughing together like schoolgirls.

Back in Sydney, life imitated normality for Gina. She knew that if she were to sell the house, it was now or never. She needed her daughter's

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opinion, or was it permission? Whatever it was, she wanted to open a bottle with Melanie. Talk. Eat. Remember.

“What will he make of us, Gina?” Eleni whispered as Carl’s motorcycle thumped up the driveway of the house all those years ago.

“He will love you mama, don’t worry.”

They both watched through the venetian blinds; Papa in his chair on the veranda, sizing up the new arrival through a veil of blue cigar smoke. The black machine idled as Carl looked up, then it stalled, coughed and all was silent.

“Hello there. Mr. Mora?” Carl started to remove a glove.

“You shoulda been in bloody neutral.”

“Mr. Mora?”

“Neutral. Always when you stop it should be neutral before letting go of that clutch.”

Carl’s Adam’s apple went up and down, twice. “Righto Mr. Mora.”

“Bloody right. It’s a nice machine you have. Made in my hometown. Mandelo de Lario.”

Formalities over, Gino Mora ushered him straight to the kitchen.

“Eleni, here is the Carl we hear so much about.”

All night they were in the kitchen, with Eleni fussing over the woodstove and Gino plying Carl with red wine and endless questions about his beautiful Italian machine.

“Papa only let you into the house because of that black Moto Guzzi!”

That night Eleni had made small, thin crust pizzas on the wood stove. Carl never forgot them.

As a small girl Gina watched and listened and tried to be patient as Eleni’s recipe was rehearsed over and over. Just enough olive oil on the pizza dough. Slicing the potato thin enough to bake just so. A

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handful of fresh Rosemary diced fine. So simple, or so it seemed, and all acted out in the little kitchen to the soundtrack of Eleni's stories. The little Gina staring up at her mother, who told stories that she had heard from her own Nonna back in the old place. When Gina unknowingly entered the tunnel of adolescence she no longer had time for the stories.

"So Gina, sit down and chop some Rosemary and we can talk. Who knows, I might sing you a song..."

"Not now mum. I'll miss the bus to Ginette's place. See ya."

"Well, maybe we get to talk later. You be good."

Gina sat in the kitchen, waiting for Melanie to join her for dinner and wishing she had stayed home with Eleni more often, way back when. Sometimes, she thought, we just can't see our parents; they are too close and large. All this could be glimpsed only in long hindsight. Flicking vaguely through an old cookbook, she was contemplating the void she now found herself in. She told herself she was stuck in neutral. That was the feeling.

At fifty she felt emotionally raw, wary of talking to friends; they either became instant widow counselors, or their own lives suddenly became incredibly busy. At the first party she had attended after Carl's death, two high-heeled workmates asked her to go out on to the patio for some fresh air. As she had dreaded, they soon suggested she start looking around for a date.

"Just because you're fifty you shouldn't just give up. Two guys have been staring at you all night."

Gina's own rage frightened her. "What, do they want to eat me? I'm not a piece of old meat."

"Gina, just relax..."

Downing her glass, she whispered to them that the dubious pleasure they took in the sexual transactions of others at parties was really all they had to look forward to. In the moonlight, the womens' faces grew

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larger and whiter. Glasses aloft, they tottered off as casually as their heels would allow.

Now in the heavy silence of Carl's domain, she gazed blankly at the open book before her. What to cook for Melanie? The fridge shuddered and kicked into a low hum. She started to read at random. Ageing is a process intended to tenderize and develop flavour in meat. The tissue will relax, yielding a less resilient piece of meat that is easier to chew and more pleasurable to eat. Gina almost managed a laugh. The phone startled her. It was Melanie.

"Have you cooked anything yet? There's a party at Petra's and I really want to go. If you haven't I'll make it another time O.K.?"

"Of course Mel. We can talk another time. You be good."

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CATEGORY
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

TIME TO WRITE

WINNER
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

THE REAL MAN

WARWICK SPRAWSON

He stalked into the supermarket in a pair of shorts, their worn fabric barely visible between his heavy gut and chunky thighs, like a rag stuffed into a corner of a couch. Stopping in front of the line of registers, he looked up at the aisle signs. Shoppers described caution-sized arcs around him, their dark winter coats in stark contrast to his smooth pale skin.

I continued placing boxes of tea on the shelf. There is no door policy for a supermarket. One of the games I played to pass the time was to assign weirdness ratings to customers. Wearing only shorts on one of the coldest days of winter was a seven: moderate oddness promising further peculiarities.

The man continued to stand like a latex statue at a modern art museum. About forty years old, he had a broad, oddly faceted face – the planes of his forehead, cheeks and chin bluntly moulded as if from plasticine.

Suddenly he lurched forward into aisle nine (dog food, cat food, tissues, toilet rolls) and I abandoned my boxes of tea to follow him. His stomach lunged and rolled as he paced along scanning the shelves. When he paused in front of the cleaning section I stooped to rearrange packets of Omo.

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The man removed a mop from a rack. He hefted it, testing its weight, before continuing to the end of the aisle.

In the next aisle (Baby and Home) he stood before the tape selection, his bare feet splayed across the scuffed linoleum. After rejecting Scotch and masking tape he took a roll of duct tape.

I was no longer pretending to stack shelves. The man was oblivious to anything apart from his mission. I revised his weirdness rating to eight: too interesting to miss.

In aisle three (cooking oils, pasta, cooking implements) he stopped in front of the pots, pans and cutlery. Tentatively he picked up a knife – a Santoku chef's knife with a seven inch blade – before quickly returning it to the rack. He stood for another minute before selecting a slender Wiltshire fruit knife with a four inch blade and white, plastic handle.

The man examined the blade closely, as if trying to sharpen it with his eyes.

It was only then I realised there was nobody else around. At times like these there was never anybody else around. Customers and staff always melted away at the faintest whiff of the unusual.

The man twisted the mop head from the handle and threw it to the floor like a severed head. He tore off a length of tape and bound the knife to the mop's shaft.

I should have run, alerted management, called a Code Blue. But I didn't. This was life – weirdness at a level ten – and I was the only one here to witness it.

He lofted the spear in his right hand, gazing up at it with a look of stern satisfaction. Suddenly he turned to me, eyes piercingly intent, and I stumbled back against the shelves.

His eyes continued over me to the end of the aisle. He walked stealthily in a sideways sidling motion, spear raised, crossing one leg in front of the other. As he passed I smelt his sweat, sharp and briny, despite the cold.

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He continued to the end of the aisle and turned left.

I breathed again. I should have gone the other way, headed for the safety of the staff room. But after a moment to ponder the beat of my heart I followed him to the end of the aisle.

Peering around a display of corn chips I saw him twenty metres away stalking across the empty supermarket between the fridges and aisles, the spear held steady above his head. His movements grew even slower. Crouching, he moved like a traditional dancer miming the hunt. He seemed completely alert, completely alive.

He took a step, then one more, before coming to a rigid halt. He held the posture for an agonisingly long time before, in a single clean motion, he hurled the spear low and hard.

I stepped out from behind the shelf to get a clear view. The handle of the mop was sticking from a fridge at a forty-five degree angle.

The man removed the spear and with a triumphant roar raised a bloodied side of beef above his head, shaking it like a macabre standard.

The PA system clattered to life, 'Code Blue in the meat department, Code Blue'.

The man removed the meat from the spear, grinning wildly and letting out a long raw howl.

Dropping the bloodied spear, he strode towards aisle ten (plates, napkins, barbeque equipment).

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HONOURABLE MENTION
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

CHECKMATE - TIME TO GO
ROBERT BENNETT

Every week day morning, except when the weather is inclement, two elderly men meet at a suburban bus stop and play chess. It is a fine, peaceful location at the edge of a park and there is plenty of birdsong to mitigate the occasional harsh noises generated by passing cars.

The old men like this spot because it is not on the main road and the sun is generally at such an angle that it provides appropriate warmth or light depending upon the time of year. The bus stop is also shaded by two magnificent old pepper trees. The green feathery leaves droop and contrast with the dark rough bark of the trunk. In some ways the trees are a mirror image of the old men. Each of the men is a widower. They live in separate well-maintained retirement homes at opposite ends of the street.

Ernest is seventy-nine and tall with a fine thatch of grey hair. Apart from an irregular heart-beat and chronic arthritis he considers that he is in reasonable health for a man of his age. Ernest often describes himself as being in pretty good nick for an old bloke.

Murray is eighty-one. His ginger hair has retreated and now comprises just a few wisps. Murray regularly asserts his seniority whenever he sees it necessary to keep Ernest in his place, which is often. Murray

TIME TO WRITE

has been described by his doctor as a medical marvel because he has so far managed not to succumb to an impressive range of threatening conditions. Murray describes himself as a wreck and jokes that he may have a future as a tourist attraction on the Great Barrier Reef.

Parked at one side of the bus stop, fluorescent flags fluttering, are two ride-on scooters. The men agree that the trip to the bus stop seems to have gotten just a bit longer these days.

Ernest and Murray have been friends for so long that neither recalls when or how they met. In years of playing there has not been a single victory for either of them. They know each other's ploys too well. Both regard each new day as a blessing and a fresh opportunity to finally beat the other. Seasons come and go but their mutual ambition remains the same.

As befits mortal combat, Ernest and Murray trade blows for hours. A slash here, a riposte there. Across the width and breadth of the board the battle rages until the inevitable stalemate. A draw means honour has been served. However, over handshakes, each combatant silently vows to come back the next day and achieve the all-important win.

Harry the bus driver has been a bemused observer of the chess players for years. In Harry's mind they have become a permanent fixture. They always wave when he passes by. Now and again, Harry pauses to offer greetings and advice. Ernest and Murray welcome the greetings and politely ignore Harry's suggestions.

Harry's schedule has not changed much over the years. He always has the morning shift. Harry's working life is routine and that's the way he likes it.

Today is a day much like any other. The bus stop is bathed in warm morning sunlight and the players are setting up for the contest. As the first moves are being made, Harry slows down to wave and then drives on but as he does so, something out of the ordinary happens. A beautiful girl appears, possibly from out of the park, and strides up to the bus stop. Ernest and Murray are distracted. She is certainly worth a look. For her part the girl simply smiles hello and begins to

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watch the duel. Ernest and Murray instantly begin to play up to their audience and the level of banter rises as each strives for an advantage. They both imagine that this fair damsel will be impressed by their dashing display.

Pieces are moved and some are taken as the players try to land a killer blow. Murray can feel the momentum shift to him as he takes Ernest's bishop and knight in successive moves. "Check!" he yells, but Ernest moves out of danger and collects one of Murray's rooks as a bonus. As the battle rages the players cease to wonder why such a girl would spend her time standing at a bus stop watching two old men play chess.

All too soon, or so it seems, the game reaches stalemate. All strategies have been exhausted and their shoulders sag. However, the girl retains a keen interest and without a word she steps forward and makes a move that swiftly determines the game in Murray's favour. Ernest is incredulous. Murray is stunned.

"You can't accept that," whines Ernest, "the game was over and you had nothing left. Without her help it would have been another draw."

"Settle down mate," replies Murray soothingly, "you are right." Both men turn towards the girl who now stands closer.

She smiles and laughs. "Checkmate gentlemen. It's time to go."

"Go where?" they chorus.

"You know the answer to that. We have been waiting a long time for both of you but your drawn games have been holding things up, so I have been sent to clear the way."

Suddenly each man realises that the girl is an angel and their time on earth is up. Looking into each other's face they silently acknowledge the fact.

"Now?" they ask.

"Yes now. But don't worry; we have plenty of chessboards so there is no reason why your games can't continue. Forever, if you like, but some other people may have something to say about that."

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Warm smiles appear on the faces of Murray and Ernest as they contemplate dealing with some other people again.

Next morning, Harry slows down and sees that there is nobody at the bus stop. *It's a fine day. Something funny must have happened*, thinks Harry. He drives on, slightly puzzled.

Well that's one way of looking at it.

HONOURABLE MENTION
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

DEAR DIARY
AARON HUGHES

She held her breath and stepped into the attic. She fumbled along the expanse of wall for the light switch, and was rewarded with illumination.

Johanna had expected a single bare light globe up here. Instead, the long, narrow room was warmly lit by a half-dozen wall sconces. The grey light of the afternoon peeked in through the three front-facing dormer windows. She could just see the tops of the trees from up here and there was a smattering of snow against the glass.

This was not the sort of room she had expected. The attics in her other grandparents' houses were dusty, dank places. They usually held a confusing array of boxes, broken furniture and bric-a-brac. In contrast, this was a well-ordered, neat space, almost like a seldom-used second study.

An ancient desk waited in the far corner, along with a high-backed captain's chair. Glass cabinets stood along the walls. Behind the doors of these cabinets, hermetically-sealed against dust, stood a multitude of elegantly bound books and parchments. She wandered towards the desk, trailing her fingertips along the front of the cabinets, the glass cool to her touch.

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Tentatively, she sat down at the desk. She gazed up at the small portrait of her grandmother, then leaned in closer to inspect the photo. It was exquisite. The frame looked old and expensive. Her grandmother was costumed like someone out of the Arabian Nights, her lips curved into a faint, coquettish smile.

The desk was bare but for a wide, leather-bound book sitting on the blotter, which she opened. It was a journal. The last entry had yesterday's date. The writing was in a familiar long, thin cursive style. It reminded her of the entries in her family's large bible in her grandmother's formal living room. She read.

December 24, 2010.

I must depart today. They will soon find out, and that will just not do. I've been my family's keeper for so long, but I fear that my secret will soon be revealed. They will surely shun me. I shouldn't be surprised, though: this day was probably long coming. I hope to return someday, yet I don't think I shall.

Then, in light pencil underneath:

Johanna, please turn to the back of this journal.

Johanna paused at the sight of her name. She glanced around the room and shivered. She half-expected to find that someone had crept up behind her but she was alone.

She turned back to the journal and opened it to the rear cover. A heavy, cream-coloured envelope sat in the cover fold. Her name was written on the front in the same handwriting. She turned the envelope over, opened the rear flap, and withdrew a single page of matching paper. She hesitantly unfolded it.

Johanna, my dear. Firstly, please remove the message in pencil from my diary. There's an eraser in the left-hand drawer.

She opened the drawer and plucked a large eraser from the neat array of stationery there. But she paused as she closed the drawer. There, sitting next to the ink well, was a necklace. It was a silver Egyptian *ankh* symbol on a matching silver chain. She frowned: this was her

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grandmother's favourite item of jewellery, which she never took off. She picked it up and before she could think too much, stuffed it in her dress pocket.

Carefully, she turned back to the last entry in the diary and erased the message. She took the letter up again and read.

Johanna, it is a paradox to me that I don't have much time, and even less to explain. You will know by now that I have had to leave. But you won't know why. The easiest way for me to explain is for you to read some of my journals. They are my life; they are your life. Truly.

She looked around the room at her grandmother's cabinets. *Surely they can't all be her journals?* she thought. She looked back to the page.

Read them. Read them and understand me. That is all I ask. Judge me if you will. But know that I have loved and guarded you – and this family – with my very soul. With love, your grandmother, Elesia Stein.

It was signed with the familiar, stylised 'E' her grandmother always used in her correspondence. She turned the letter over and checked inside the envelope. She hoped for some further piece of information, but there was nothing.

Johanna pushed the chair back and considered her options. She stood up and wandered across the room, not quite sure what to do next. She chose a cabinet at random from the front-facing wall of the house. It hissed quietly as she opened it and took out a journal. It was dark blue, heavy and fragrant with the scent of jasmine. She opened it.

January 9, 1945.

This war is drawing to a close and I am thankful. I tire of war; of all wars. I have seen too many of them. My beloved Jonathon will safely return home soon, I hope . . .

She looked at the date again. She was talking about Johanna's uncle who had served overseas. Grandmother would have been much younger then, although she always looked younger to Johanna. Timeless, really.

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She put the diary back and wandered again across the room. She took a red volume from the bottom shelf of a cabinet and opened it.

June 14, 1879.

I grow weary of this interminable crossing. I loathe the ocean. I find the days drag with nothing to read. And I am so dreadfully hungry . . .

Johanna looked at the date. This couldn't be her grandmother's diary. She hadn't even been born then. But the writing was the same as the journal on the desk and the blue one from which she had just read.

She stepped to her left, opened yet another cabinet and this time took out a green journal. Her hands trembled slightly as she opened it. This volume looked even older than the previous ones. The pages were yellowed, but in excellent condition. She read.

May 30, 1799.

We have been discovered and must soon leave. I am tired of running. So very tired. I fear we will be running all of our lives. They will come soon. But I have my journals, and that is all that matters . . .

Johanna looked at the date again.

1799.

She felt dizzy for a moment. She clutched the front of the cabinet before her. When she had steadied herself, she noticed that she had left a handprint on the glass. She glanced at herself, semi-reflected in the glass. She could see her grandmother's face in her own.

And suddenly it made a strange sort of sense.

She looked around the room. There were many cabinets of journals. Some of the cabinets in the corner contained what appeared to be rolled-up parchments along with maps.

And if they were all grandmother's . . .

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Her thought trailed off. The room suddenly felt very still. She could see her breath in front of her. And she could feel the weight of history standing around the walls of the room, watching her.

If all of these journals belonged to her family's great matriarch, then the Countess Elesia Marigold Mayfield Cortington Stein – her beloved grandmother – had been watching over her family for well over *two hundred years*.

TIME TO WRITE

HONOURABLE MENTION
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

WINDSWEPT
ADAM MACKAY

It always felt the same. The world seemed to slow down a turn as he rattled across the small grated bridge and passed through the farmer's gate and into the camping grounds. It was as if he was able to hang his troubles on the farmer's fence and enter the grounds a free man, and remain that way for days at a time until he had to leave and reluctantly collect his unwanted baggage from the fence.

It was always that initial relief that kept him coming back. That initial lung full of clean, salty air and the booming crash of the waves just beyond the sand dunes. He would wind his way along the narrow dirt track that passed between open grassy camping areas on his left and the eternally shifting sand dunes on his right. He would follow the track until it ended at a wide circular car park and here he would veer to his left and toward his favourite camping spot.

He'd set up in the farthest corner, sheltered from the winds and surrounded by coastal versions of the teatree and wattle. Once set up, he could sit back and relax with a beer and fully appreciate the crisp smells and soothing sounds.

He hadn't always come down on his own. For years he and his wife would escape the city and retire for a few days at a time. They came

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down as often as they could but it was never often enough. They had discovered the place together, and over the years would bring friends along for the experience. But most of the time they enjoyed going it alone. They would spend hours aimlessly meandering along the vast stretch of beach, talking about their dreams and breathing in the salty spray from the surf. They'd hike through the windswept sand dunes and cool off in the river as it slid out into the sea.

If they were feeling especially energetic they'd walk all the way to the end of the beach, where the cliffs stood in defiance against the waves and the rock formations were as beautiful as they were unbelievable. The return walk was always more strenuous as the sand seemed softer and deeper and the wind stronger and head on. They would sit on the beach resting their legs and depending on the time of year, would either watch the sunset or an impending storm building far out to sea. They could go for hours like that, barely saying a word to each other, as they lay tangled in peaceful happiness.

But that felt like a lifetime ago. It had been eight years since his wife passed away. For more than half that time he couldn't bring himself to go back.

He felt as though he had no right going there without her. Finally he dragged himself back, reassuring himself that it's what she would have wanted. He cried as he passed through the gates for the first time on his own but still felt the familiar surge of relief wash over him.

He camped in the same spot they always had and walked the same stretch of beach. He had bought himself a fishing rod and would sit for hours with his rod cast, staring out at the waves, watching the birds dive for fish and feeling the fresh breeze play with his hair. He would look far down the beach where they used to walk till they could walk no more and he'd imagine a couple arm in arm, locked in a comforting embrace, and he'd smile. It was as close as he could be to her these days.

He'd sit on the beach until the sun disappeared and he'd talk to her. Just to say hello and how much he missed her and what he'd been up to and how he still loved her. He never bothered to say such things in the

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city in case the noise drowned him out, but down here he knew she'd be listening. He could feel her breezy embrace and on occasions he was sure he heard her whispering to him.

After a few days, he would say goodbye and head back to the bustle of the city. He'd feel the fear grip him as he passed back through the gate, and promise himself a return soon. It wouldn't be long before he'd find his way back. It was the only way he could feel alive, feel connected to something. It was the only place where the wind whispered to him and the solitude comforted him.

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HONOURABLE MENTION
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

GIRL ON A PLATFORM
MONIKA ROBERTS

She sits in the underground terminal waiting for the train. She looks down at her watch. *Nine fifty-three*. He will arrive at exactly 10pm and throw his arms around her, bury his face in her hair and inhale her sweetness. She imagines him older; his face is bearded and tanned, his hair longer. The summer sun was just what he needed, he had said. He needed to explore and cultivate and plant himself somewhere in the South Australian soil.

She had stayed in Melbourne to finish her business degree. She had gorged herself on mangoes and white wine in the evenings, missed him and slept alone. She was a little rounder through the hips, her cheeks fuller. She was healthy. And every day she had thought of him in the Clare Valley, a thousand kilometres from their home. It felt like more. The day he left her at Southern Cross Station she felt a part of herself leave too. He sat away from the little window and she hadn't been able to see him as the train pulled out. But she knew he loved her.

She looks up and sees the orange light coming from the digital clock. *Nine fifty-five*. There is an announcement overhead and she listens intently; the Flinders Street train has been delayed eleven minutes. She breathes relief from somewhere inside and her frame relaxes.

TIME TO WRITE

John's last email was a little over four weeks ago, telling her about his train home. Both of her replies had gone unanswered. He hadn't taken his mobile; he used the phone at his boss's house to make calls late at night, often talking about the purple sunsets that lingered at the end of a day's work. He said it seemed like they wanted to stay forever. She heard it in his voice. John had befriended his boss's dog, the man who owned the vineyard. She was a kelpie named Jane, and she fell in love with him right away. She had honey-brown eyes and always a wet nose. If the day was too hot, she waited for him to return by the truck, by the bucket of water he put next to her. She would dip her four paws into the water to cool off.

John didn't work on the weekends; most Saturday nights he went to the pub in town to have a few beers with the other seasonal workers. Men from all across the sunburnt country flocked to the valley for extra work. The soles of their boots were red with dirt; their skin more freckled than when they were children. John said there were a few women too; Elaina was a single mother, nearly thirty, who had brought her son Kip with her for a fresh start. The family she lived with looked after Kip while she worked outside. She listened on the phone one night as he told her Elaina was a strawberry blonde.

She checks her watch again. *Nine fifty-eight*. She thinks of Elaina; she wonders if John will notice that she has gained weight. She puts her hands on her hips, trying to feel the excess weight. It's warm in the underground; she thinks of going up for some air but is afraid she will miss John. She takes out her wallet instead, opens it, moves her thumb across the picture of them behind the plastic pocket. They had been at the beach that day, happy and sprinkled with salt.

She thinks to herself, *I am Collette and I belong to somebody*. She looks down at her watch. *Nine fifty-nine*. There hasn't been an announcement; she walks over to the timetable on the wall. There it is, the ten o'clock train from Bendigo—the connecting train. She tastes John in her mouth. She searches through her bag for lip balm; she keeps searching and finds that the bag is empty.

She looks down at her wrist watch. *Nine fifty-nine*. Her watch has stopped.

HONOURABLE MENTION
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

DOWN TO THE CORE
JAN ROBINSON

You begin. You sit down and write. You let it unfurl before you on the screen. You write in class, in your bedroom, in the library, at a holiday house, anywhere you can. You are driven to write . . . at last.

You know it is time. It has taken nearly a decade to be written. But now is the time. Your time, not his—the time to write about the years that are burnt into your eyes and brain, your heart and soul. The time you thought you would both die— he from the treatment for his illness and you from grief and exhaustion.

You both survived, utterly changed now, but alive. And now, it's time—time to write it out, to share it and help you move forward. Although he does not want to read it yet, you can feel his higher-self placing his hand on your shoulder occasionally, willing you on. You can feel the blessing of your beloved dead father urging you forward. You know it is time—the time to express it, to let it go, to let it all unravel. You feel that others might benefit from what you write, but mainly it is your soul's urge to get it down. Each word, sentence, phrase, paragraph and clause is drenched and contained.

That time: when you both travelled, in your own ways, down to the core.

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I sit through the nursing handover process with a knot of dread in my stomach. A few metres outside the office, he waits. Blood has been drawn, examinations begun. Fate dances in the wings. This is the last hour of ignorance and peace for many years.

Handover takes about half an hour; it feels like an hour. This ritual, shift to shift, is about passing on the details of the crisis psychiatric patients in the Emergency Department. This is the team I work in. I have one patient to see but it is only 2pm. I need to see my son first.

I leave the office with my pager and keys and head down the small corridor to his cubicle. Tall, big and oddly pale of late, Tarn lays quietly, an IV drip in his arm. He is my eldest son and has just turned twenty-one. I brought him into work with me at the Emergency Department an hour ago because his throat was closing over. He'd asked me for help. This was so unlike him—the proud, tough security guard.

“Hi darling, how are you feeling?” *Stupid question, he looks like shit.* His skin is pale grey like a limpid sheet; his eyes are burning but hollow, his big body shrunken into it.

“Not good,” he croaks. “The doctor’s taken blood and I’m dehydrated. Wish I could have a smoke . . .”

“Not with that throat. I’ll talk to Nat. She’s a great doctor and friend. I picked her for you, Tarn - got to be some benefits to working here. Back as soon as I can.” I can’t bear to take this all too seriously yet and don’t want to let him know how worried I am.

I stroke his head and turn away. Premonition casts a black shadow over my worry. I hurry into the main Emergency Department, a hubbub of noise, rushing figures, machinery and organised chaos. Telephones ringing, clerks typing, doctors talking, nurses hurrying, patients waiting. ‘Same day, different cast’, is the in-joke. I see Nat behind the main desk, writing up notes.

She looks up at me with her kind eyes. “I’ve taken some urgent bloods for Tarn,” she says. “I’m not sure if it’s quinsy or something

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else. If it's just his tonsils, he will need them out, but we're waiting on the bloods."

Somehow I don't feel comforted. There is a subtle message in there I refuse to decipher. "Let me know when you can. I've just got to see a patient." I rush away, too scared to think.

I go through the next hour on automatic pilot. I look for Tarn once more on the way back to my office, but he has been moved. The urge to run to him is tempered by the need to write up my assessment and answer phone calls. *Soon enough*, a voice inside warns me, *soon enough*. I try to concentrate on my notes. My stomach is clenched and I feel as if I am about to break into a sweat or cry.

As I am typing, Nat walks quietly into my office and shuts the door. She sits down beside me and reaches out, laying her arm on mine, as if to soothe and stop me. I stare into her face trying to decipher what is to come, to give myself an iota of courage.

"Jan, we've moved Tarn to the Short Stay Unit. He has to be admitted. I need to tell you that he has Acute Myeloid Leukaemia, a rare blood cancer for his age. I have already told him. We've made arrangements for the rest of your shift to be covered." She hugs me. I start to weep. My insides are churning around like boiling soup.

The nurse in charge of Emergency walks in and tells me to give her my pager. She has rung my manager who is on his way to cover the rest of my shift. Gail looks at me with tears in her eyes. She is a nonsense woman, not given to emotion. Nat leads me out of my office.

Tarn's big brown eyes look up at me; he is a frightened child again. He breaks my heart. I go straight to him and I hug him and we rock together, crying. We try words, but they make no real sense. We are in the eye of the storm.

The haematologist-oncologist and his entourage walk in. The treatment plan is outlined, the surgery he will need tonight. "Another two weeks and he would have been dead," the consultant calmly tells me.

TIME TO WRITE



BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

If you want a career in the creative industries, or simply love to write and want to improve as a writer, NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing is for you. The course is intended for people who already have abilities in these areas but want to develop them further. Employment possibilities include: professional writing, editing, design, and many other publishing positions, print or web-based. There is also an industry placement component. This course is unique in Australia as it is the only undergraduate degree in writing *and* publishing.

Gain skills and knowledge in:

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NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing develops creative, practical and critical skills for graduates who want to pursue a

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career in writing and publishing. The bachelor degree offers three years of specialised study in two strands: Writing and Publishing.

In the writing strand, students explore a range of fiction and non-fiction genres, read a wide range of texts, examine the creation and interpretation of texts and undertake commissioned writing projects and industry based work experience. The strand teaches creative skills in composition, methodologies and work practices to become proficient writers in both fiction and non-fiction. NMIT has an expansive library network and houses the Doris Leadbetter Collection which contains more than 1,300 course related titles.

In the publishing strand students participate in aspects of book and magazine publishing including: commissioning, structural and close editing, writing cover briefs, writing design briefs, liaising with authors, costing and managing projects, and planning and working to deadlines. Students learn grammar, editing, production, design and project management skills. A course component is the management of a series of publishing projects in NMIT's publishing studio Yarra Bend Press which produces a range of student led projects including literary magazines, books and digital media.

For more information about NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing degree:

Web: **www.nmit.edu.au/bwap**

Email: **bwp@nmit.vic.edu.au**

Telephone: **03 9269 1833**



BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's Yarra Bend Press operates as a live work studio providing students with an indepth understanding of the workings of a publishing house through the delivery of real production based experiences. The studio engages students in authentic projects with commercially defined outcomes while facilitating industry and peer to peer consultation including workshops, functions and seminars.

By allowing students the opportunity to be involved in producing commercial quality publications aimed at enhancing their future academic and employment possibilities, Yarra Bend Press addresses the problem of diminishing work experience opportunities within the publishing sector.

Yarra Bend Press student based activities include work flow management and the coordination of all aspects of production related activities; acquisition and maintenance of commercial publishing opportunities from the tertiary, public and private sectors; selection and liaison with suppliers in a professional capacity; maintenance of financial and business records associated with studio activities; liaison with clients, suppliers and industry

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representatives; development of an online presence as a vital tool in the promotion of live work folios for potential employment; the planning, development and production of a range of print and digitally-based publishing projects; estimation, print production, process and control; researching, cataloguing, ordering and recording ISBN, CiP; and copyright issues

Yarra Bend Press also instructs students on day to day publishing issues including dealing with authors; editing practices; design principles; typesetting; digital v traditional printing; book structure; numbering; imprints; rights and responsibilities; legal deposits; barcode and DW Thorpe; press releases; advertising; promotion; selling; online stores; search engine optimization; RSS; blogging; networking; distribution; terms; freight; sos; returns; discounts; GST; faults and returns; and so on.

For more information about NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's Yarra Bend Press:

Web: **www.nmit.edu.au/ybp**

Email: **ybp@nmit.vic.edu.au**

Telephone: **03 9269 1833**



TROJAN PRESS
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Located in Port Melbourne, Trojan Press is one of Australia's leading privately owned bookprinting companies.

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Email: **lazarus@trojanpressbp.com.au**

Telephone: **0400 680 424**



To celebrate NMIT's centenary, the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing launched its inaugural ***Time To Write*** short story competition offering writers a chance to be published by NMIT's Yarra Bend Press. In keeping with the centenary, the theme was TIME and we looked for 600 to 1000 word submissions from writers in the following categories:

- 12 to 14 years
- 15 to 17 years
- 18 to 20 years
- Open
- NMIT staff and students

Winners and selected shortlisted works have been published in this anthology. Entries were judged by a panel of Bachelor of Writing and Publishing lecturers and student writers. The winners were announced at the ***Time to Write*** festival launch on Friday 13th July, 2012.



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