

2013 short story prize

Time to Write

27 short fictions



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BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

Time to Write

2013 short story prize



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BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING

First published in 2013 by



BACHELOR OF **WRITING AND PUBLISHING**

Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE

Bachelor of Writing and Publishing

Yarra Bend Press

email: ybp@nmit.edu.au

<http://www.nmit.edu.au/ybp>

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Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Title: Time to write : 2013 short story prize / edited by Robyn Doreian.

ISBN: 9780987319210 (paperback)

Subjects: Short stories, Australian--Victoria.

Other Authors/Contributors: Doreian, Robyn, editor.

Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE.

Dewey Number: A823.0108

Senior editor/art director: Robyn Doreian

Cover illustration: Nathan Jurevicius

Typeset in Helvetica Regular 11/13pt by Yarra Bend Press

Printed and bound in Australia on 128gsm Matt Art by Trojan Press

Thank you



Time to Write would like to thank everyone who took the *time* to enter the 2013 short story prize. We commend our category winners and honourable mentions who have made this publication possible.

Congratulations, you are now published writers!

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Acknowledgements



The *Time to Write* short story contest and Bachelor of Writing and Publishing students' anthology would not have been possible without the help of Jan Robinson, Terry Ninolakis, Matthew Latham-Black, Peta Hawker, Amanda Kontos, Jessica Tait, Zach Gardner, Emmanuel Vitulano, Thys Pretorius, Christina Ratcliffe, Kristian Hatton, Megan Hanson, Mikki Joiner, Avrielle Bylok-Collard and the students of Writing Professional Practice 2013.

NMIT staff Karen Simpson Nikakis, Elise McLellan, Amy Espeseth, Brad Webb and Annie Fitton also contributed expertise; in particular, Dr Michael Kitson.

NMIT's Bachelor of Illustration students Alexandro Aguanta, Evie Cahir, Felicia Choo, Nina Elliot, Shawn Lu, Constance Hunter, Daryl Toh Liem Zhan, Jay Manley, Emma Wiesenekker, Kit Bennett, Ruby Halwi, Laura Lea, Zac Grenfell, Tom Van Gaans crafted wonderful illustrations, as did esteemed Australian artist, Nathan Jurevicius.



FOREWORD

Dr Karen Simpson Nikakis



A warm welcome to the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's second *Time to Write* anthology that, in keeping with our inaugural publication of 2012, celebrates the wonderful craft of writing. Of course, short stories are just one of the myriad forms writers use to express their creativity. Novels, novellas, flash fiction, poetry, screen and film scripts, graphic novels, articles, journalistic pieces, song lyrics, blogging, podcasting and tweeting are some of the others, and in keeping with the creative impulse that impels writers to write, the list keeps growing.

This year has been an exciting one in the program. The new degree has been finalised and is envisaged to commence in 2014. It reflects the massive changes that have taken place in the writing and publishing industries over the last few years and offers students a greater range of subject choices and digital skill development to support commercial or self publication — either in print or online. The year has also been an exciting one for staff member Ms Amy Espeseth, whose first book *Sufficient Grace* was long-listed for the inaugural Stella Prize and short-listed for a NSW Premier's Literary Award.

Writing though, is not about prizes, no matter how wonderful these are. Writing is about making that story you've been carrying around in your heart, either fully formed or half guessed at, into a reality. It is about sitting down in front of an empty notebook or blank screen and filling it with engaging characters and beautiful settings. It is about daring to write. Congratulations to all of you who had the courage to write your stories and to share them with us. Keep writing!



INTRODUCTION

Robyn Doreian



Firstly, thank you to everyone who entered our second annual *Time to Write* short story competition. Almost 150 entries were submitted and came from as nearby as Essendon and as far away as Edinburgh. But more astonishing than our entry from Scotland, was the enthusiastic and imaginative responses from each of the four categories: 12 to 14 and 15 to 17 years, open, and NMIT students.

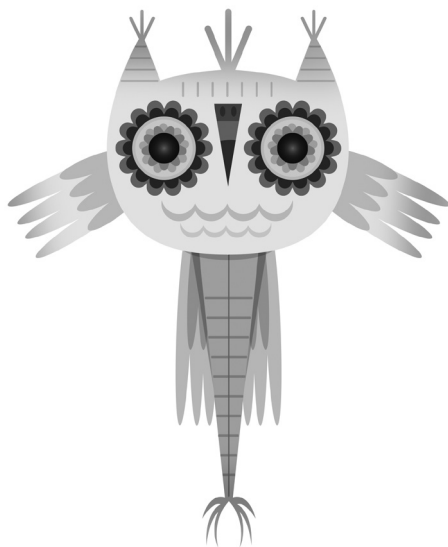
We received some truly spectacular entries, particularly from our youngest age group. The winning story, “There’s No Escape”, by Mark Lasky-Davison, left the judges stunned by its mighty description of a wounded soldier and its unexpected, quirky end. Similarly intriguing was “The Lair of Anarach the Cloud Breather” by Tristan Simpson. His painting of the dragon Eclipse was so fantastical, we could hear the beast’s giant wings beating.

Surprisingly, the 15-17 year olds preferred darker subject matter such as ghosts in “Warmth”, the winning piece by Samantha Walls. Anorexia and self-mutilation inspired “Scars and Bones”, a bleak tale by Alanah Mahon; the latter theme also fuelled “Blooded” by Vivienne Ngau.

The winner of the open category, Syie Mei Thai, adopted a sorrowful tone. “Marble Cake” begins with a husband in the kitchen following his wife’s recipe, but it concludes with a tender reflection on her residence in a nursing home. Kate Moloney reached a dangerous pitch in “Snakebite” as her character narrowly avoided the reptile’s fangs.

We were delighted to see NMIT represented by such high calibre stories as “The Wedding Cake” by Matthew Latham-Black. His winning entry spun a taught tale of retribution for adultery. Equally impressive was “On Any Given Day” by Thys Pretorius. Beautifully penned, this story told of a church-going man and his un-churchlike ways at home.

This year’s standard was impressively high. Please use these imaginings as a springboard for next year’s contest. So read on and be inspired.



CATEGORY
12 to 14 years

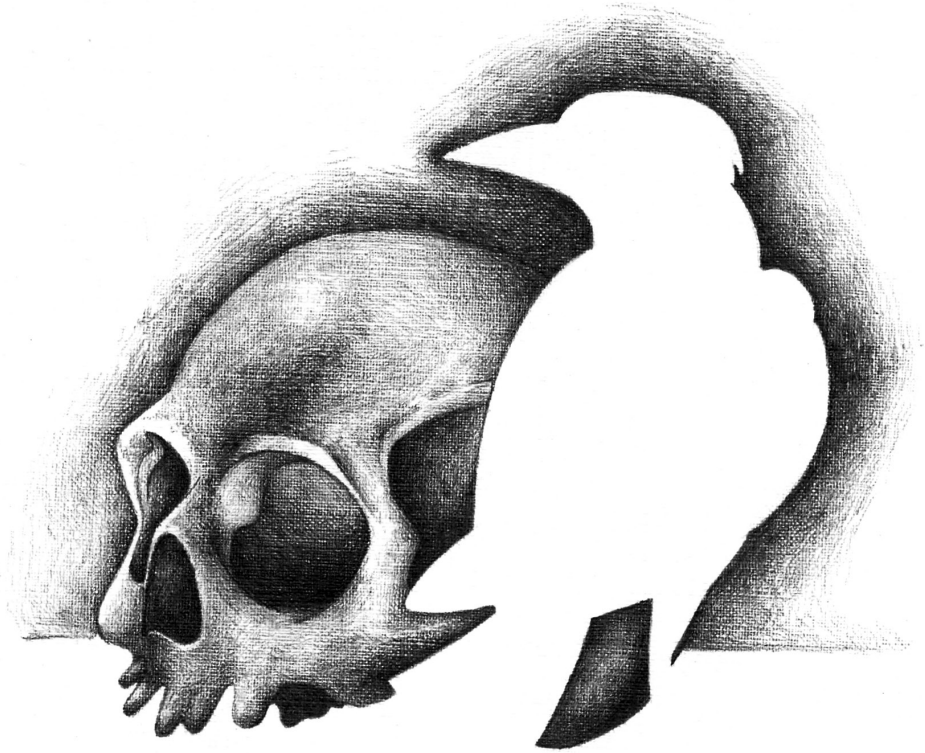


Illustration: Jay Manley

WINNER
THERE'S NO ESCAPE
Mark Lasky-Davison



The plains were deserted of life. A muddy flippin' wreck. Bodies littered the ground. Wooden planks scattered through the slush, once tramped upon by millions of soldiers, now barely able to hold off the rain. What had been a field of flowers and freely roaming sheep had become a sea of rolling mounds of dirt, rats and disease. Not even flies could live here.

Among the spaghetti limbs was a hollow figure, his eyes abnormally large in a featureless face. He hadn't eaten a damn scrap of food in almost six days. He was only twenty though you wouldn't tell. His skin was so loose you couldn't see where it ended and the tangle of bodies began. He didn't have the strength to blink and the ants had been feasting on his eyes. The field was deathly silent. He longed to hear a sound. Any sound. *Even the sound of a knife ripping through his chest.* It wasn't a blessing to live. When he had been stronger he had tried to end it but God just wouldn't let him go.

He tried to calm his nerves but his mind was torn. In the last few flippin' years of pain and suffering all he had done was kill. And what good came from that? Did it please some flippin' general? Did he enjoy seeing them blast each other's heads off? What must he think of us? *Little maids fussing about the length of his coat? Tickling his nose and placing cake in his mouth and milk by his side?* If he could've, he'd have let us chew his flippin' food for him. Probably too lazy to lift up his arm and make more orders. Orders to kill. Orders to kill more damn innocent people. And I could clearly remember the terrified face of each man I had killed. All men like me. No one had wanted to fight.

It's a terrible way to live, if you can call it that, kill or be killed.

I should be dead. My left leg is severed to the bone. I can barely see, thanks to the ants and the grisly face of some unfortunate, lying dead above me. But I can feel. If it weren't for the press of dead bodies acting as a tourniquet, I'd have bled to death already. Even if I am found I'll be tried for treason — for dressing up in an enemy uniform — just to keep warm at night — an act that accidentally got me fighting for the enemy side. Surely face the death penalty for that. So what difference would rescue make?

War seems like such a flippin' waste of time, money and lives.

Even I had better things I could have done with my life. Two more years and I would have finished my medical degree. Then I could have achieved my goals — to save people, not end them. And my beautiful girlfriend, Jeanne! We would have had such a happy life together with lots of children and grandchildren. We would have grown old with plenty of food and wine in our bellies. I had thought this war would be a grand time but in just days of arrival, I saw my brother fall, a bullet to his head. I cried out to him but to no avail. He never got to see his unborn child and now I fear I shall never be an uncle.

The pressure above me had shifted. I tried to yell out in pain but no sound came out. The blood in my legs began to run freely again; the pain riddling my mind. I drifted in and out of consciousness my leg becoming unbearable... light seemed to burn my face, still I could not see and my mind drifted... scratching, shuffling, such noises exploded in my ears... my body rose, lifted up and fresh pain rushed across me... a voice broke through... I was pulled from amongst the dead bodies of men... breath in my ear... two fingers on my neck... seeking my pulse... I'm in a car... in a bed...

I sit up and try to look about, I feel my leg — nothing — the shade of a man enters the room. I hear the steps come closer, he says something to me in my own tongue, German, something about three months and treason. I run my arm along the wall, feeling out what I recognize by touch as a bookshelf. In anger, I snatch up the weight of a book — just another thing that war has prevented me from seeing. Now bursting with rage I tear off the sheet that encases me, toppling out of the bed. I ram the bookshelf making it sway. Bring it down upon me. The top of the shelf, on my temple. I scream in pain but no sound comes out. I loosen my grip on the book. Finally, my time comes.

Now is when most people close their eyes and say goodbye.

Now — the time when most people close their eyes and drift into a peaceful goodbye — but no sound came out.

How ironic, saved from a pile of bodies to be killed by a pile of books.

HONOURABLE MENTION
CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT
Elise Bennell



The sun beamed down relentlessly on the students as they alternately complained of fatigue, blisters and sunburn, while endlessly stumbling over tree roots in the path or tripping over the next pair of heels in front of them.

At least it seemed that the trek across the river would remain memorable — if not for the right reasons — as Peta Kendall, year nine, had been noisily regaling any who would listen to her story of the time her uncle had made her eat oysters. So it's true to say that Peta wasn't paying proper attention when her foot slipped, and despite waving her arms frantically, crying out in surprise and grasping at the student beside her, it was perhaps inevitable that she would fall in.

While Peta's sister walked behind her snickering into her hand, Peta might have spent the rest of the day grumbling bitterly about her discomfort but fortunately the warmth of the day and the sun's rays made short work of her wet clothes and soon Peta returned to her chipper self.

On the path ahead of damp-Peta, Isabelle Walters walked alone. A school camping trip wasn't something Isabelle had been much keen to participate in but as her classmates straggled along chattering about anything but the immediate surrounds, Isabelle found her attention piqued and curiously drawn to the abundance of nature. The trees towered like skyscrapers. Birds fluttered madly as they launched themselves out of the canopy and it all served to make Isabelle's mouth curl up into a smile, especially as she thought herself the only one to notice it.

That first night the air was musty and hot, making the insides

of the tents suffocating and leading many of the campers to contemplate sleeping beneath the stars. That night — after most people had passed out from exhaustion by the day's rigours — a few figures remained awake and moving about in the shadows like restless spirits. As the night wore on, to amuse themselves they made noises into the darkness, imitating feral cats and sounds they thought to be the calls of monsters. Isabelle was woken by these very noises. At first she blinked, the gears in her head seeking traction as she tried to make sense of where she was. Beside her the last of the campfire's embers flickered, yellow and red against the charred logs. And it was as she shook off the stupor of sleep that Isabelle took in a shape that loomed behind the campfire and seemed to towering over her like the tallest of the trees in the forest.

"Come on sleepy head, we're going on an adventure."

The shape transmogrified and in its place, Peta stepped into the muted ring of firelight, grinning. From the shadows stepped four of Isabelle's classmates, all bearing equally smug smiles that screamed trouble.

Wiping her eyes as she sat up and swivelled about to face Peta, "We're not allowed to leave the campsite," Isabelle croaked. She was wary of the group that accompanied Peta and — even if there was barely enough light to see by — Isabelle felt sure that she could intuit Peta's growing Cheshire grin through the dark.

"And you're not the least bit as intrigued as we are?" Peta cocked her head to the side, hazel eyes taunting as they swept over Isabelle. "Didn't you hear?" Peta continued, not ready to give up before the fun began. "There's a secret."

"A secret?" Isabelle repeated and catching the contagious excitement which began to cloud her better judgement.

"You in or out?"

"Well," said Isabelle and a new voice piped up from behind Peta, unaware that Isabelle was now decided and positively raring to go. "Come on, what are you afraid of?!"

The group was indeed an unruly bunch. Looking like they had been mismatched on purpose just to create variety. Isabelle could make out Taylor Douglas, the stubborn headstrong tomboy who would probably have gone off on her own if it came to it; Alex Williams, who didn't know when to shut his mouth and constantly had something to say; the usually quiet, Hazel Baxter who by

fire light now wore a cheeky grin, and the notorious Daniel Reid, infamous for many of the most high profile school pranks.

The six set off barely able to contain their giggles, especially Peta. According to her, the teachers had been whispering that night about packing up and leaving early because of something that had occurred down near the river. She didn't say what, which caused a tiny sliver of worry to break through Isabelle's excitement.

"What do you think it is?" Taylor asked Hazel who was leading the group, her torch trained on the ground. Hazel shrugged in reply, maintaining her demeanour as the girl who didn't speak.

"How long is this going to take?" Alex whined, his expression contorting into one of anxiety, now that the group was slipping away from the familiar campgrounds. Alex's cool façade failed when Daniel surprised him by breaking the night's eerie silence trying to mimic a crow's caw. Utterly spooked, Alex let out a cry before darting away and running fulltilt back the way they'd come.

Unfazed everyone else walked on and only then did Alex reappear, his eyes narrowed as he glared at Daniel who just smiled back.

They walked until Peta paused in her step, making the group do so as well. At first, Isabelle had to strain her ears to hear the soft, nearly inaudible trickle of the river. It was melodic to listen to and she nearly lost her train of thought.

"It's beautiful," Taylor sighed as they approached the river. The full moon was a silhouette against the water, ripples disfiguring the mesmerizing image.

Everyone but Alex seemed captivated by the scenery. His eyes were glued upon a hunched figure a couple of metres away from them. Wary, Alex took a few tentative steps towards the shape before stopping. He took a few more steps until he was hovering over the form.

Isabelle turned to see what he was so intent upon, when her breath caught in her throat as a choked gasp. Everyone snapped their heads to attention at this sound, eyes widening to the size of saucers and mouths gaping. It was Hazel who finally spoke up, her voice — though it was soft — sounded excruciatingly loud, as she pointed to the object of their terrified fascination.

"Is that a real dead body?" she asked.



Illustration: Constance Hunter

HONOURABLE MENTION
THE JADE JEWELLERY BOX
Haini Jiang



My mother was always yelling at me and scolding me for my clumsiness. “Alice, you are like a bull in a china shop!” Vases, dinner plates, photo frames; I was forever breaking something through accident. But the day I broke my mother’s treasured, jade jewellery box was an entirely different matter.

Melbourne, April 15, 2012

The Year of the Dragon

My family came to Australia twenty years ago, fleeing Beijing after Tiananmen Square. My father and sister arrived with just a few reminders. But the jade jewellery box was the only thing my mother brought. I hate her. She’s mean to me because I was unplanned. Dad ran away because of me. Mum hates me because I shouldn’t exist. There was never supposed to be a me.

I had invited some friends over for a party. We had a great time turning the music up loud and dancing but then Mum came home. She took in the scene. She grabbed me and slapped me across the face. I couldn’t help but let a tear slip from the corner of my eye. She yelled at everyone in broken English, “Get out house now! Go! Out! Nobody allow here!”

I was so embarrassed. Everyone got up and left. I heard people mutter and watched as my friends filed out the door. I wanted to leave with them but I stayed, feeling the shame as the pain in my cheek dimmed into numbness and staring at the walls of this house, covered in pictures of China and scripts of Chinese writing. For the first time, I saw how Asian I was and I hated it. I hated her. I hated my sister. They were always in the clever Chinese world, speaking a

language I barely understand. I was a child born in Australia and so I was treated differently. I didn't belong amongst the cheongsams, lanterns and lucky bamboo. I longed for a big backyard, a cricket pitch and a barbecue. So, when she embarrassed me like that, I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to prove that I didn't care about the past and the old stories. So, when my mother had tired of berating me, I walked down the hall and into her room.

The jade jewellery box. The very last piece of Beijing she has here in suburban Melbourne.

I stared down at it, running my fingers over those fine designs of the dragons that danced. Then, I picked it up, hesitating for bare seconds before smashing it onto the timber floor. Upon hearing the noise, my mother came running. She saw the mess, the flushed look on my face and my shaking hands. She didn't move. Just stared at the scene. I pushed past her and called Thalia, my closest friend and asked if I could come stay with her for a few days. She wanted to know what was wrong and called out to her mum, asking if I could stay. When I heard her mother's 'yes', I immediately relaxed because I couldn't stay here. I packed a backpack with my school uniform and my phone. I heard a honk outside and I walked to the front door via my mum's room.

She was sitting on the bed, staring at the broken pieces of jade. I announced I was leaving but she didn't reply. I shrugged and walked out, slamming the front door behind me.

Beijing, April 17, 1989

The Year of the Snake

Fear surrounds the city as pro-democracy supporters are hunted and killed. It is not safe for us. We have said too much and written too much against the government. We have passage to Shanghai from where we can fly to Australia. They are providing safety for people like us. But we must hurry. We cannot take much.

How would you decide what to take? A lifetime of memories and objects that mean so much. I look around our small apartment, not knowing where to start. What will we need? What will I miss the most?

There is the jade jewellery box. Part of the Lau family for generations, handed to brides to remind them of their family's past. Centuries of precious rings, bangles and jewels have been stored

in this. Safe. Yes. The jewellery box can be reminder of home. I can build a new life with clothes and furniture but this box will be my link, my tie to my home.

Melbourne, April 15, 2012

The Year of the Dragon

I arrived at Thalia's house just in time for dinner. But first I went to their guest room. I sat on the bed amongst the things I'd brought and fell back, sighing with exasperation. Thalia asked, "Why did you ask them over in the first place?"

"I dunno. I wanted to piss her off," I replied, staring at the ceiling. I sat up and headed down to dinner with Thalia. I watched the easy relationship of mutual respect and laughter that flowed between mother and daughter. I felt jealousy. Then I pictured my mum. Alone in her room with the shattered pieces of her beloved jewellery box. "I have to go," I said and ran. I ran all the way home, tears streaming down my face. All the feelings boiling over. I flung open the door to find her still sitting on the wooden floor of her room. But she was no longer crying.

"Alice. I love you. I'm sorry I hurt you. I just want you to be safe," she whispered.

I hugged her for the longest time. I realised that all the rules and regulations were not to punish only to protect me. "I'm sorry Mum. I will try to be a better daughter."

Melbourne, February 10, 2013

Chinese New Year, The Year of the Snake

My mother and I stroll arm in arm, through the sights and smells of New Year celebrations in St Barice Street. In the corner of my eye, I spot a small store. "I'll be back in a minute," I tell her.

I search my purse and find enough money to buy the intricate jade box. It's not very old. It may not even be from China. But it will be our family heirloom. And I will give it to my mother for its safekeeping.

HONOURABLE MENTION
THE LOST LOCKET
Ciara Brennan



Fierce waves burst, white and frothy as they collided with the ferry, rocking it back and forth. Feeling unsteady atop the craft, Isabelle decided to go and stand at the prow where the wind could lash her face and the sea's spray shower her with its iciness. Her companion, Eileen joined her, where, laughing they looked beyond the seemingly bottomless ocean, out to the horizon and the gradual approach of an island.

Isabelle had woken early that morning, to see the sun slowly ascend into an azure sky, promising another hot summer's day. Shortly after, she and Eileen had assembled their luggage and begun the three-hour drive that had concluded aboard this ferry bound for Kangaroo Island. Over the pounding waves, Eileen exclaimed. "Look at the dolphins!"

"Where?" Isabelle scanned the waves and caught sight of half a dozen grey creatures diving in and out of the sea.

The next day, Eileen and Isabelle drove straight to the Kelly Caves where they joined a tour. In their group there was a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, a lady with a very wrinkled face and two girls who appeared to be best friends. Their tour guide was a sharp lady in her early forties, who wore a broad-brimmed hat, sunglasses concealing half her face, and a dull green 'Kelly Caves' uniform. Both her skin and hair were dark.

Guided around the cave, Isabelle listened to the click of the lady guide's boots as they echoed beneath the story of the cave's formation, millions of years ago. Very few questions were asked – in fact, the only people asking questions were the two girls.

Isabelle gazed at them – one of the girls was thin, with auburn

hair, soft brown eyes, and a pale face dotted with freckles. The friend was taller, had eyes that glowed sapphire-like, and were fringed by curly, honey-coloured hair. They asked questions that seemed peculiar to Isabelle and even the tour guide had trouble hiding her dislike for them, sighing whenever either of them spoke. With the conclusion of the tour, Isabelle and Eileen were trailing behind the guide, Isabelle deep in conversation with Eileen, when she broken off to ask, "What was that? I thought I heard something." And it was then that Isabelle saw a flash of metal out of the corner of her eye. "Look," she whispered to Eileen and stooped to draw a thin metal chain from off the cave floor. Isabelle turned the chain with a little metal container on it, over in her hands. It was a locket, dull silver and, in addition to some complex patterns, it had a square engraved on it. There was a diamante in its centre. It was both old and precious, vaguely resembling a flower on a long, thin silver chain and unlike any jewellery the girls had ever seen before. "It's beautiful," said Isabelle.

"But who could it belong to?" asked Eileen.

Over the next week or so, the girlfriends shared the locket between them. The next place Isabelle and Eileen travelled to was the Remarkable Rocks. It was a turbulent day with winds that slapped their cheeks and threatened to push them over. Completing the walk to their destination, the friends climbed up the awkwardly shaped rocks, where they sat and decided to entertain each other until the wind was less rude. Soon it was and Isabelle and Eileen could safely stand near the edge of the cliff, looking out over the stunning vista of sunny pure blue sea. After that they took a short drive up to an immense rock formation called the Admiral's Arch. There the girls watched a dozen seals lazing about on the rocks until early evening, when they returned to their accommodation.

On their third day, Isabella and Eileen visited Stokes Bay. At first, they weren't sure where the beach was, until they saw a sign directing them. Isabelle and Eileen made their way through a maze of rocks. Isabelle walked ahead. As she cautiously stepped out from between rocks, a pair of girls appeared on their way up from the beach. Something about their faces was frustratingly familiar. Then Isabella recognised them by the silver chain around one of the girls' necks. "Um... excuse me," Isabelle mumbled. But when she realised that the girls hadn't heard her, she cleared her throat, seeking their

attention before they passed her altogether. "Excuse me!"

All of a sudden one of the girls turned. It was the one with auburn hair. "Yes?"

"I um... is this um... yours?" Isabelle stuttered. She held up the leaf and its silver chain from around her neck.

"Why, yes it is," the girl replied. "Where did you find it?"

Together, Isabelle and Eileen told their story. Despite its return to its rightful owner, it was with some regret that Isabelle let go of the beautiful, diamanted silver leaf on its chain.

"Thank you. My name's Sally," Sally smiled politely.

"And I'm Adelaide," the girl with the honey-coloured hair said.

"Thank you. This locket has something very important in it. I can't thank you enough."

Without another word, Sally and Adelaide set off through the rocks away and from the beach.

Isabelle and Eileen had a very pleasant time at the beach, where they stayed for about four hours. As they tiredly wended their way back, Eileen noticed something lying in the sand.

It was the very same silver locket.



Illustration: Felicia Choo

HONOURABLE MENTION
THE LAIR OF ANARACH
THE CLOUD BREATHER
Tristan Simpson



I crouched low on the brown leather saddle. The wind pressing into my face and making me screw my eyes into a squint. The cloud was a writhing mass of tendrils with no body of origin. Adding pressure with my knees the beating of wings beneath me grew louder.

“Well?” asked Eclipse.

I looked down into the eyes of my mount – I had befriended him when the rest of the dragon tribe had shunned him, believing Eclipse’s black scales would bring ruin to the dragon tribe.

“There,” I said applying a different sort of pressure with my knees and we swooped into a whirlpool of clouds, where despite thick fur and cloaking, I was instantly soaked and chilled to the bone.

With the cloud’s parting I took in the whole gruesome affair. Men in furs were climbing down the ragged sides of a crater while green-scaled reptiles with humongous wingspans flew above. The crater was five hundred metres from side to side and at least one hundred metres deep and I identified these circling reptiles as drakes. They carried small reed buildings saddled on their backs and from out of holes in the buildings more of the men were rappelling into the crater.

Slowly, I eased one then the other crossbows from the saddle holds, attached my rapier to my belt and prepared a special type of pouch made from hardened leather, that I had invented to reload my crossbow hands-free. Finally, I placed a dagger in my sheath. I could count fifteen drakes and surmised about three hundred men on the crater’s floor.

“Vental?” asked Eclipse.

“Uh-huh.”

“You sure about this?”

“I’m sure. I mean, they’ve got Taalia.”

“It’s just. Well...”

“Well, what?”

“Don’t get killed, okay?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“That’s the problem.”

I said, “You worry too much,” and jumped, the wind whistling in my face.

I landed in a bracing crouch, my boots muffled on the solid scales of the drake. Estimating that this green drake was about thirty metres long, I moved stealthily towards the reed building, attached to its back by ginormous leather straps. The building had a hatch and I opened it.

Two men with long swords died before they realized my bolts had found their way to their hearts. Reloading, I turned to a whimpering that emanated from the darkest corner. “Vental?” A voice asked.

My heart rose. “Taalia. Is that you?”

Into the light stepped Taalia, the rich brown ringlets of her hair flowing over her shoulder in a wave. “Thank the Divines,” she said. “They took me prisoner.”

“Do you know how to get away from here?”

“Yup, I’ve seen these guys fly this thing enough.”

“Alright. Go north. Okay.”

“North it is. See you in Tarriel.”

From the building’s narrow entrance I call Eclipse, and springing onto his back, we spiral up amongst the green drakes. Flying from one drake to another, I fire a few careful shots from both of my crossbows, smashing the iron buckles on the leather strap and causing the buildings to topple and fall from the drakes.

I had managed to destroy five before they were even aware of me and just eight were left before they could defend themselves. But now the air bristled with whistling arrows. I wheeled about and shot both bolts. Slowly another construction tipped, and fell. I turned Eclipse to face the penultimate drake and readied my bolts.

On the ground below several men lay dead or injured, but they grimly fought on towards their goal, an abyss at the blackest centre of the crater. I watched one of the men, teeter upon its edge before

tossing his axe into it. There came first a thundering and then the crater floor began to quake as an enormous grey tentacle emerged from the hole. Where a giant octopus would have had giant suckers, here there were giant spines, jutting sharply at irregular intervals.

The tentacle fell to ground, crushing men and more of the fallen reed structures that littered the crater's floor.

This tentacle slid out and sought the furthest radius of the crater walls and slowly it began to roll clockwise, gathering speed and impaling the unfortunates as it went. It completed its circle and began to recede, pulling all, both dead and alive down into its lair.

My left arm felt numb, I couldn't hold my crossbow and it fell from my grasp. Then the pain hit me. I saw that an arrow protruded from my arm, blood staining my jacket. I brought my remaining crossbow to bear but a whistling enemy arrow struck me in the guts. And then, echoing the buildings that I had so recently loosed from off the green scaled drake's backs, I too was slipping and falling from my steed and into open space.

HONOURABLE MENTION
WE ARE BIRDS,
WE ARE FREE
Ella Crosby



The fence stretches forever, across the world, but to most it's invisible. It's there, tall and oppressive. Always on the horizon but unreachable. And on the fence's other side there are those who have clung to life. They're from all times, all places, all races and they must wait. Only someone who pines for a love lost to the other side can see the fence where they all must wait. But the most heartbreaking of those stranded are children. Lonely. Confused. Bewildered. Lost. Utterly alone. The children reach out into the ghostly void, searching for a warm hand; for the hugs they took for granted; for the people who loved them, unconditionally.

Some of these children stand bravely. Patiently waiting for the loved ones. Pressed up against the fence, they stare through to snatch glimpses of the living, seeking recognition in vain from the other side.

One of these children, one of the strongest was Amora. Amora was determined to reach the other side. On the other side was Carmen, her twin. They had been two halves of a whole. And without each other they were nothing. Amora would be reunited, regardless. And so she made a bargain with Death. In return for her service to Death in perpetuity, Amora might be reunited with Carmen. Amora's only condition was that should anything untoward happen to her or her twin on this day of their reunion, one of them would be granted freedom from Death's dominion. A freedom that would allow one sister to travel freely between the worlds, across the fence. And so it was that Death assented and Amora returned to her twin, Carmen, for one final day.

Amora appeared to Carmen and it was like old times, they

wandered the city, admiring the grand houses, splashing in the fountains, scattering the pigeons, behaving as if nothing had changed. But it had. And as the evening drew in, the city fell into muted pinks and oranges and Carmen drew forth a photo she held close to her heart. A photo of the sisters and their parents. "We were all so happy before pneumonia stole you from us," Carmen reflected and stepped onto the road that held the home they had shared.

To Amora, it was a shape out of the darkness. Crunching of metal. Cry. Brightest lights. She was kneeling by the body of Carmen. Her twin. And the sound that came out of her mouth was animal. A scream of primal grief. And then she did the only thing she could. She stood to make her sacrifice. "Carmen shall live," she said.

And with that Amora burst into purest white feathers that rode the air currents into the sky. And on the road's surface, Carmen's body drew breath.

So now, on one side of the fence, a girl tends to the trapped. She glides between them, offering comfort, anything, to keep them from the same desperate act as her sister. The children are still there but with a touch of her soft hand to their foreheads they sleep peaceful dreams.

And while Carmen tends to the souls on her side, she occasionally glances to the shared sky and whispers a prayer for her sister, Amora's soul, and that of her own — a prayer that ends with the words, "We are birds, we are free."

HONOURABLE MENTION
CLOSURE
Dinushka Gunasekara



“I’m not crazy,” I repeated for what felt like the hundredth time.

“I know,” Dr Richards replied. “I just want to talk.”

I tore my eyes away from the clock to narrow them at her in frustration, before going back to watching the hands count down my hour here.

“Skyla,” she began again. “You have to understand your parents and I are just trying to help you through this.”

I let out a frustrated breath. “I’m not going *through* anything!”

“Let’s talk about — ”

“No!” I yelled, standing up. “I’m done talking. I know what I saw!”

“Skyla, you know that’s not possible.” Dr Richards looked at me with pity, something that only annoyed me all the more.

“I saw Finn last night, at the park, where we always met, for the last six years.”

The next morning I sat on the school bus, The Imagine Dragons playing in my headphones blocking out the chatter and my breath fogging the glass. Last Wednesday night was replaying in my head. Of how I’d been sitting on the rusted swings waiting. How I’d been thinking about that playground, and a childhood of chasey and hide and seek in the tunnels with Finn. And how as we grew older, the playground became our place to talk. How I’d just been sitting there on the swing in the dark, when a twig had snapped and how I’d been frightened and I’d whirled about with my heart pounding and electricity in my mouth. But it was just Finn, wearing the same easy-going smile he always did. Only I didn’t know it then but it wasn’t possible.

“What took you?” I asked, shivering in the cold breeze.

“You could say I got held up by something,” he replied. His eyes drifted away from my face, landing on something behind me. I turned to see a beady-eyed raven watching over us.

I asked Finn, if he’d heard the new Paramore album and that’s how the rest of the night went, talking while the full moon rose high above us, and we’d had to finally say goodbye.

And then things got seriously surreal. My parents waiting up and so serious and telling me that my oldest, my best friend, that Finn is dead, that somebody found him dead but that was hours and hours ago, sometime that afternoon and I knew they were wrong and I all I could do was laugh at them.

I wandered between math, chemistry and English in a blur until I walked in the day’s last class to find them all standing together, waiting for me. “We’re so sorry,” my teacher said, “for your loss.”

“What loss?” I countered.

“I know this must be hard — ”

“He’s not dead!” I spun around and ran — out of that classroom, out of the school, and didn’t stop running until I got to our playground where I threw myself onto the swing and cried. It was so stupid, Finn couldn’t be dead. It just wasn’t possible. We were Finn and Skyla — inseparable. There couldn’t be one of us without the other. Finn couldn’t leave. He wouldn’t leave me alone.

I woke to the night sky over the empty park. I rubbed my eyes and stood up off the swing. I turned to go home when I heard a feathery rustle and then the twig snap. Through the dark, I could see a shadow walking towards me. I looked twice, by a trick of the light it looked like it had two heads. I watched as the figure stepped into a patch of moonlight and gasped to see Finn, Finn with his easy-going smile and a beady-eyed raven perched on his shoulder.

Finn held out his hand but he didn’t speak as he pulled me along but I trusted him. I almost laughed. I knew he couldn’t leave me here alone.

As Finn and I walked, the raven took wing. It circled us, its cry echoing in the moonlit night and one of its feathers spiraled downwards, coming to rest on the swing in my place.



CATEGORY
15 to 17 years



WINNER
WARMTH
Samantha Walls



I remember pain. I remember being forced to the ground with ropes, smelling anger, blood and smoke. I remember empty rooms, cruel voices that taunted and fire that burned. I remember metal chains and shadow-cloaked men and the loss of air and sky. I'm unlucky. Most don't remember how they died.

I'm wearing my favourite dark blue jeans, steel-capped boots and well-fitting black t-shirt. I'll always be wearing this; it'll never need to be cleaned, washed or changed, because ghosts can't get dirty, or bloody, or sweaty. We don't need bathrooms, food, water or warmth. Sure we can still eat. We can still taste it but as soon as we swallow, the food simply disappears — that's only if you can go corporeal, though. I can't yet. I'm still too young.

The generation that can see ghosts are called Mediums. If my brother and I had been born five days sooner, we would've been Mediums. It makes all this worse, knowing that if Mum hadn't gone into labour early, Hale would have been able to see me.

I'm in my sister Nora's bedroom. She's nineteen, like Hale. Like I always will be. Red streaked, blonde hair fans out across her pillow, gold skin turned white. I wish she'd open her cerulean eyes just for a minute, so I could see them. I love you, I want to say. But I know she won't hear me.

"Nora?" Hale's voice. Her eyes open. I wait for the jerk of my stomach, or the lurch of my heart. Nothing. I blink.

I'm in my car... Hale's car. Nora and her boyfriend, Craig, sit in the back seat. They don't speak. They don't make a peep. Hale drives. I'm beside him, on top of a ratty-old backpack that I know is filled with his clothes. Hale is running away tonight and I'm running

out of time. My chance is fading quickly. I need to speak to him before he disappears to some place I've never been — ghosts are limited to the places they walked in life and Hale wants to escape to a place that his memories can't taint.

"Wait," says Craig, "we need to stop by my place."

No — I'm standing in the middle of the intersection, alone.

I've never been to Craig's.

Damn! I need to speak to him! I need to tell him! I need to stop him! I need someone to speak to him... Blink.

I'm at the beach, where Nora and Hale and I spent long, endless summers chasing the sun. A seagull cries and an elderly couple laugh. I wander along to the docks then sprint towards the boardwalk. It's the middle of summer and people are everywhere. I should be one of them. A couple around my age sit and watch the sinking sun. They laugh and cuddle, touch and kiss. The boy starts whispering in the girl's ear. I turn away. It's rude to watch their stolen moment.

I see a girl staring at me with wide eyes and gaping mouth. She's pretty, with strawberry-blond waves and sea-green eyes. I move, fading in and out of existence, passing through the merrymakers, leaving shivering bodies behind — until I'm right in front of her and then she turns and runs.

I start sprinting. And while she bobs and weaves around people, I run right through them. She looks back and sees me following. I wave a hand and open my mouth but she turns away and ducks around a corner.

"Please!" I cry but it's been so long since I've used my voice. It's scratchy and deep. I'd forgotten how it sounds.

I turn that corner. She freezes. Takes a breath. Her shoulders heave under the thin material of her white lace dress. Then she turns on the heel of her black combat boot and stares at me. "What do you want?"

I take an unnecessary breath. "My brother is going to kill himself. He's catching a plane right as we speak..."

Her pretty sea-eyes widen. She nods. "Have you ever taken bus 928?"

The 928 carries us to the airport. I tell her some of my story; she tells me some of hers; she's sixteen but doesn't tell me her

name. I tell her that Hale is taking the next flight to Sydney. That we have to hurry.

I see him, Nora and my ex-, Kaylee sitting together. Hale and Kaylee are together now. I'm happy for them.

I stop, suddenly terrified, and the girl freezes besides me. Her eyes drift to where mine are fixed. "He looks like you," she says. Then she stalks right up to the three people I love most in the world.

"He wants you to stop blaming yourself." No introductions. "He wants you to move on. It's not your fault and you don't need to take your life."

Hale stares wide-eyed at her, while Nora and Kaylee gape like fish. I've never seen Hale so angry in my life.

Nora is the one to speak. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"No one you know," she says. "But that's the point, right, Jasper?"

Gasping, Kaylee finally finds voice. "Who are you to come here and — "

"The first time you kissed, his lip was cut on your lip piercing." (One of the stories I told her.)

"Jasper?" Hale whispers and it's the first time my name has been spoken since J died, 197 days ago.

Hale's left for home with Nora and Kaylee. Alive. The girl and I sit on the dark beachfront. "When we met," she says, "you looked so... determined. It frightened me."

"I know how it must have seemed... a ghost charging after you." The words are rushed, tripping back onto themselves in apologetic haste. "I'm sorry. Hale..."

"I know." She stifles a yawn. "It feels like a really long time ago, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

The world is quiet around us. "Eddie."

"What?"

"My name is Eddie." She takes my hand in hers. And I feel warmth again.

HONOURABLE MENTION

STAY

Sammy Liang



He was often dreaming, little Tommy. His dreams though were blurry... sketchy, almost as if a fog had been cast over them. But there was an element of realism tied around the fragile illusion, holding it all together. Like the pitch-black darkness that he had numerously mistaken as the midnight sky and the lavender, the sweet familiar scent of lavender. And there was a shadow. The shadow, who almost always reached out to him. But Tommy never ran away. He couldn't move but even if he could, he wouldn't have. Because there was always a strange desire in him to reach out to the shadow too. More specifically, reach out for the little glowing train that it held. The train. Radiating warmth and richness. It felt like it belonged to Tommy. Almost as if it was wrong for him not to have it. But that's when this little facade ends. When the two hands reach out for one another, trying to pass along the little train. Then the final train whistle blows. And the sun rises, his eyes awaken and all is disregarded.

He awoke upon Eloise's soft nudges. It must've been lunchtime already. Hesitantly, he pulled himself up and followed her to the cafeteria. They sat and ate in silence. It had almost been a week since Tommy had woken up in this orphanage. He couldn't remember anything at all. He just remembered waking to Eloise's gentle smile. She was the only one he could trust out of all the carers here. She never asked questions, she never judged. She was just there.

Something strange had happened today. Tommy had been approached by Ben, a boy he would normally avoid. Ben was older, bigger and much stronger than Tommy. As he approached, he had the strangest look on his face. "What are you doing?" he had asked.

“Just playing with Eloise.”

Ben looked at Tommy carefully, sighed and left. And that was it. But the next time they would encounter each other would be days later. And on that day too, Tommy would have dreamt of the shadow and the train again. Except this time it was different. Like the fog had begun thinning.

Loneliness only seemed to disappear when Tommy was with Eloise. She brought along the feeling of home and a sweet, familiar scent of bruised lavender. Lately though, she had been spending less time with Tommy and more time with Ben. Maybe it was jealousy, Tommy thought. But there was always something strange about the way Ben acted around Eloise. He never spoke to her. Nor she to him. And every time Tommy saw them, Ben would already be looking in Tommy's direction. Almost as if he had been watching for his arrival the whole time.

The whistles of the train grew louder and louder as a small light radiating out the shadow's hand grew brighter. So bright that the shadow began slipping itself out of darkness ... unveiling what, was it a face? But before long, the shadow dispersed, leaving little Tommy back in his room.

The days grew into weeks and the weeks into months. The dreams became more frequent and so did the meetings with Ben. It had almost been a month since Tommy had spoken to Eloise and today he had decided that it was time to speak up.

It was a dark winter's morning and Tommy had been reluctant to leave his little room especially after he saw the grey clouds looming over him. But it had been far too long and he had missed her comforting presence, her smile, her sweet purple scent. So on this cold morning, Tommy left for the park in search of Ben.

He found them, sitting on a bench together, silent, not moving. As Ben got up to leave he caught Tommy watching them. And then Tommy spoke with harsh words, “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to play with Eloise,” said Ben.

“She doesn't want to play with you.”

Tommy shuffled forward to face Eloise, where she sat on the bench wearing the strangest expression.

“Tommy, she doesn't want to play any more, okay? She's leaving.”

“How would you know? She's hasn't told me anything about

leaving!” Throb. Tommy’s head ached. “What was going on?”

“Oh so you can speak with her too, huh? That’s just great. Don’t you know how hard it is for me too?!” Ben’s voice grew louder, more aggressive.

Tommy stumbled back, rubbing his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Just trust me, okay? She doesn’t want to play any more Tommy. Eloise wants to leave. To go far away.”

“No, no, no —” Tommy’s vision blurred. He closed his wet lashes as a train appeared before his eyes.

“Don’t you remember? The train —” Ben’s voice was lost in the piercing whistles of the train. Tommy’s arms rushed to his ears but it was no use. The screeches were too loud, growing louder and louder before engulfing him whole.

And Tommy was back in his dream. Lost, confused, he stood in the endless tunnels of darkness. But it was different this time. He was holding onto something warm. Something so bright that it illuminated his pale fingers. It was the train that the shadow had held. He peered up, before coming to a sudden halt. And there it stood. The shadow. Except it wasn’t a shadow. It had never been a shadow. It was Ben. His brother all along.

Tommy’s head throbbed, once, twice before he realised the darkness had begun to fade. His surroundings blurred. The only thing that remained was the shadow, no Ben.

He stood right where he had been standing by the benches in the park. And then it hit him. Tommy turned around, desperation overflowing as tears in his eyes as he searched for her. For his mother. His head throbbed once more, followed by a faint, final whistle of the train, before he relaxed his eyes on the empty wooden bench.

“Don’t you remember?” Of course he did. Of course he remembered. He turned to meet his brother’s eyes. And the clouds finally gave in, loosing a drizzle of rain to wash away the light scent of dead lavender.



Illustration: Shawn Lu

HONOURABLE MENTION
SCARS AND BONES
Alanah Mahon



She stood in the centre of a room bleached of all colour by moonlight. She wore a white nightgown, the material clinging to her shapely figure. Her eyes were shadowed, pools of darkness against her stark white skin. Her dark hair framed her face and gave the impression of a movie star long dead.

“Just look at me,” she demanded with her voice shaking. I raised my eyes, trying to ignore her brimming tears.

“I’m hideous,” she said.

I spoke softly. “It’s not true,” but she shook her head wildly.

She turned her pale, inner arms outwards, thrusting them at me and exposing them to the moonlight. Line after line criss-crossed over the underside of her forearms. My eyes followed the ridges of white scar tissue and the newer angry red lines slashed across her skin. She never saw the sunlight and she had never shown anyone her pain the way she was showing me.

I reached for her hand, put her palm into my own, despite her flinching and trying to pull away. But I held on, raised her arm to me and brought my lips to her scarred wrist. “Do not ever...” — uttering each word with deliberation, speaking into her skin, into her very being — “ever tell me that you are not beautiful.”

Her knees buckled momentarily before I caught her and steered her onto the windowseat, which seemed a lonely addition to the almost empty room.

The window’s light brought her face into sharp relief, emphasizing every angle, every hollow and washing away the shadows. Her eyes were such a pale blue that they appeared grey and lifeless.

Here was a girl who believed she had nothing. My eyes skated over her figure, over the silk nightgown that showed her every angle. Every bone, the ridges, her stick-like legs and the dips in her wrists and collarbone.

Although her gaunt face wore the tears of the past, all emotion had slipped away, leaving her features blank. She wasn't her illness. She was fighting this. She was here. And she was beautiful. "They're disgusting," a mere whisper escaped her lips, as she jabbed at her scars. "I hate them. They disfigure me."

A whimper, another tear, her facade broken. "I'm so *weak*." Her shoulders shuddered as she held back another deluge of tears. "I can't eat. I can't. I've tried so many times," her voice rose, "I've tried so hard," and then it rose another octave where it bordered on hysteria. "I can't understand why you stay. Why do you stay with a broken, ugly mess like me?"

"No!" My voice was firm. "Can't you see? These, they're battle scars. They show you are strong. They are beautiful and so are you. When I look at you, I don't see a girl who can't eat. I see you, and what you are is beautiful."

Her lips met mine in a crush of emotion. For the first time in months, I felt her smile against my lips, and I smiled too. We would get through this. *Together*.

HONOURABLE MENTION
BLOODED
Vivienne Ngau



I placed my key in the lock, opened the front door and bolted upstairs. I was grateful that my parents wouldn't be home for a couple of hours. Burying my face in a tissue, I let the tears fall, salt on my lips and dripping from my chin.

The western sun was still high and its rays were hot on my blinds. I'd just been through another torturous school day. Of pretending to pay attention and lying to my friends, saying, "I'm good, thanks." I step into the bathroom and face myself in the mirror. I had changed so much in the past week. What usually filled my eyes had been replaced by black holes. While my once rosy cheeks were hollowed out. More tears blurred my sight.

I opened the top drawer to my right and retrieved a small shard of glass. I felt the cool material between my fingers as I shut and locked the bathroom door before sliding down against it and clutching my legs to my chest.

Scared, I lifted my right hand until the piece of glass came into contact with my wrist. I tried to stop myself from shaking and turned the shard of glass over and over in my palm, waiting for the voice in my head to stop this. But it didn't. I couldn't hear anything, nor process what I was about to do for the upteenth time.

I knew I should speak up. Tell somebody.

It had barely been weeks since the accident but I missed her as if it were years. I remembered the accident and it became overwhelming. I craved the pain that offered escape. I pressed the edge to my wrist. The delicate skin parting beneath it as blood began to leak. There was pain and regret, but I couldn't find it in myself to stop. I just wanted to hold her in my arms. Wrap myself

around her little body and bury my head in her fragile shoulders.

I felt rage as I pictured the driver's face. I was on the other side of the crossing, waiting for her when the speeding car appeared. I shouted to her but my baby sister was gone.

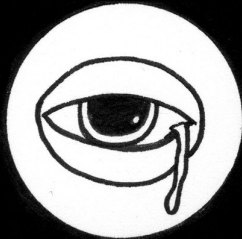
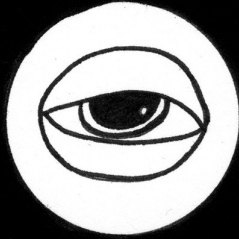
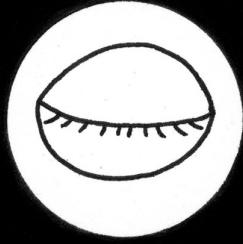
I dug the blade deeper, the flesh parting beneath the pressure. I bit my tongue and tasted of iron.

I tilted my head up and stared at the skylight. The sun wasn't shining anymore. Worried my parents would find me I forced myself off the floor and washed my hands. Red trickled down the sink and the wounds stung beneath the water. The glass still in my right hand, I clenched my hands into fists. The edge penetrated my palm and I gasped before my throat closed up.

All the emotions I'd tried to block out during the day came rushing in. I struggled for breath and winced as the cut became deeper and deeper. Lost, I let go of the glass and it clattered in the sink.

There had been another time, when she was five, myself thirteen, we were playing in our treehouse. She was the princess and was one of her maids. We played this game for hours before it was time to go inside. Forgetting the ladder, I remember her thoughtlessly placing a tiny foot in the open air. I protectively threw my body at her, pushing her back into the tree house but fell to earth and broke my arm. It hadn't mattered because my little sister was safe and unharmed. I could feel a building pit of nostalgia fill my stomach, making my knees tremble.

I heard the unmistakable click of the front door being unlocked. In a haste to conceal what I had done, I chucked the glass back into the drawer and splashed my face with water. I crept out of the bathroom, pulling the door too behind me and finding mum almost at the top of the stairs. Hiding my hands behind my back I faked a smile. Mum was wearing the same gloomy expression since the accident and I could tell that her day hadn't been easy either. I ran towards her, desperate to relieve her pain, and moulded my body to hers, my arms clinging to her tightly. We stood silent, hugging, for what felt like forever. Then we let go and both of us began to sob.



HONOURABLE MENTION
OMINOUS
Jake Jones



Have you ever wanted to escape so desperately that you would abandon everything you have ever known, just to start out fresh? I have. I've dreamed of escaping the shackles of my existence for longer than I can remember. I am trapped here, confined in this white-walled prison cell. It is my own personal damnation, for sins I have not committed. My only crime? Not being the perfect daughter; my mother is ashamed of my very existence. Yes my existence, I do not live a life, I simply exist, and every day of my existence starts the same, just like this.

I awake to the sound of thunder rolling off the clouds; flashes of light illuminate the house as I lie here motionless; overwhelmed with a pain that consumes my mind, my body and my soul. I take short sharp breaths willing myself out of bed but my body remains stiff; each movement forced and uncomfortable. I look myself up and down, survey the damage of last night and run these small hands over my swollen body. I cringe as the pain shoots through me. I support myself with both hands and push myself off the bed, attempting to stand.

Each step is excruciating but I make my way to the bathroom carrying towel, phone and fresh clothes. I make it to the bathroom but as I go to turn the door handle, my mother stops me. She grips my wrists tight. I drop my head down and avoid eye contact. I nod my head, and she lets go. I can't stand the sight of her.

I swing the door open, and slam it behind me. With my back to the door, I slide down the timber until my head lays in-between my knees. Tears run down my cheeks. Content to stay here, lacking the will to move. I have hit rock bottom.

I eventually stand myself back up and ready to shower. I drop my clothes and turn the water to luke warm. Under the showerhead, the water's force makes me flinch. I pull my long black hair to one side of my neck, exposing the worst of the bruises on my left shoulder. The pain is so excruciating my legs begin to shake. I lose my grip and slam my whole body into the tiled wall, causing the tiles to shatter and fall like dominoes.

The water's pelting is disrupted by abrupt banging on the bathroom door. It's my mother again, abusing me and ordering me to unlock the door.

I stay silent, unable to make any translatable sound.

With small uneasy steps, I move towards the basin where I left my phone. I dial three digits carefully and place it to my ear. A calm, collected voice, asks me questions. I answer them with detail.

Outside my mother begins to count, gives me five seconds to open the door. I'm stunned and can't even breathe.

The lock breaks away from the door frame.

The vein in her forehead looks as if it's about to burst. With eyes filled with hatred she stares through me. I put the phone down on the bench. I stand tall but frightened as Mother explodes into rage. I wonder whether this is it, if this is the end? Will I die naked, with tears streaming down my face?

HONOURABLE MENTION
WHEN LIGHT FADES
Allanah Showell



In darkness I wait. Time passes and I begin to feel the edginess that I have come to associate with the waiting. Each fresh second only increases pressure on my heart. I'm used to the darkness, yet I still have to keep my mind from getting lost in it. The only things that I can summon are based on memories and my only memories worth reliving are about her. I remember how her eyes smile, how she laughs silently, how she can never seem to stay still and how when she thinks, she makes facial expressions. But most of all I remember how she smells — warm, sweet and more mouth watering than words can describe.

To know a person's scent shows that you really know them. Anyone can know someone's quirks, their likes and dislikes. I recall her scent and before I know it my waiting is over. Light pours into the box room, revealing its contents.

The plaster walls are coated in a shade of light cream paint, and streaks of light spill across them, leaking down to the wooden floorboards. Each of the four walls is occupied: a creamy door, a time worn dresser, a well-stocked bookcase and a small window. The window is hidden behind a sheer white curtain — its intricate pattern casting oddly shaped pools of light and dark across the room.

In the corner of the adjoining dresser and bookcase, sits a bed, covered by a light purple quilt, and between this rests a sleeping body. With each unconscious breath the cover rises and falls.

Above the bed there are black words painted on the wall in elegant script. I attempt to make sense of the black lines but the scrawl is foreign to me. I have witnessed this morning scene more

times than I can count.

Right on cue the mass of purple heaves upwards as the body beneath it wakes. The blankets are pulled back to reveal the rising sleeper.

I note features as my eyes scan: pale skin, purple painted nails, a freckled nose, two sleepy blue eyes, a pair of smiling pink lips and bright orange frizzy hair. It is her. Her beauty never fails to snatch my breath, stop my heart and numb my mind — and today is no exception. I am frozen as she blinks her eyes, adjusting to the light.

In the mornings, she is at her most beautiful and not yet tainted by the expectations of a new day. Not many see her like this and, while I am pleased to say that I am one of the few, I am not the only one. This morning is quiet, calm and comfortable, but comfort can be terribly blinding. The difference between this particular morning and others is in a phone call. She speaks for long lengths of time and smiles during her silences. Normally I listen to her words, to the rhythmic sound of her voice as she tells stories, but today they flow over me effortlessly. Her sound is just as sweet and her meaning is just as real, but still she sounds so distant. Who is she smiling for?

She ends the call and dresses. We travel through the house, which is much the same as the box room, creamy and wooden with random splashes of colour here and there. We arrive at the front door. It isn't particularly special and looks no different from the other doors, yet still it stands as a beacon. It is the thing that separates her from the outside world. On this side of the door I can have her all to myself, mine to watch and adore. But on the other side of the door she is watched and adored by all the random nobodies that she meets.

I can't take that. She is mine and I don't like to share. I'm selfish but I know I love her more than anyone else. I have already decided that it is best for her to stay with me, the one who loves her most. With me she is safe. With me she is happy. With me she is loved. All she needs now is to know this.

Then I think back to this morning, to the phone call. Is it already too late? Did I get replaced before I could start to compete for her heart? Am I not her only one? Or was I never even a competitor? I'm afraid the truth will break me, but I think I know it already. My heart knows the truth.

Wherever she goes I am always there, loyally following. Through

the light I let her lead me as she goes about her day. Then when the sun goes down and day fades to black, I wait in the dark, waiting for her to return with the light so that I can once again be by her side.

But does she even realize that I'm here waiting? I will wait for an eternity if I must. I will wait for the day when she notices me, when we can be together, when I am hers. In the darkness I wait. In a small box room, lit by the fleeting light of the setting sun, there is a wall that reads in black elegant script *Shadows never truly fade, they are just waiting out of the light.*



HONOURABLE MENTION

BROKEN

Annie Kheo



Trembling hands, lingering touches, bodies intertwined, hammering hearts, whispered lies, broken souls. *Stop it*, he told himself. He brought his palms to his face, his whole being racked with thoughts of her. He rubbed his face in a failed attempt to rid himself of fatigue. To rid himself of these painful, unwelcome thoughts. It was not something he wanted to remember, but nor was it something he could forget. *How could he forget if his heart still beat for someone else? How could he have known that to entrust another with one's heart would be so unbearably painful.*

He sat crouched on the floor, knees drawn up to his chest, and sobbed quietly into his hands. *How pathetic he must seem.* He had fallen into an abyss of darkness, an endless pit of nothing that he couldn't clamber out of — no matter how much he longed for the light. He felt numb, all for the sake of this girl. Yet she was not just some girl. She was different, she was special. It was not as though he chose to dwell on a past love — he didn't want to remember the pain — rather it was that he had never fallen, never loved so hard, that he was forced to remember everything about her.

He remembered the way his heart would skip a beat in her presence. He remembered the smell of her hair. He remembered the way her mischievous grin could render him speechless. He remembered her fierce eyes — eyes so electrifying he thought her ethereal. He remembered how hauntingly beautiful she was. He remembered the violent pounding of his heart every time she kissed him. How his body would burn with her touch. How he had defencelessly welcomed in that warmth and allowed it to envelop him. *Oh how he now longed for that.* He wondered when that

warmth had turned on him.

When had something so wonderful turned so viciously cold? That feeling had frozen inside of him, shattered and pierced his heart like shards of glass. And his heart was bleeding, and it would now bleed until he was lifeless. *Was there a limit to how much love one could give to another?* Maybe he had been stupid to give her all of his love, and maybe he was delusional enough to believe she had done the same for him. Truth be told, even though he tried to ignore the feeling, he had doubted her love. He felt a twinge of sadness and guilt at that thought.

He had been so overwhelmed by the urge to hold her, to have her in his arms. He knew it would be a reckless, silly thing to do but his legs had moved of their own accord and then his arms had been wrapped around her.

It took him a moment to register what he had done. He would never have had the courage to do such a thing of his own free will. His head clouded and spun, he felt dizzy. She was so warm. His heart thrashed violently in his chest. He needed to let go. He needed to let go for his heart threatened to ignite.

Just as he loosened his arms from their grip, her arms came up around him in a clench. “No...” she had whispered. “Stay with me.”

How rare and odd for her to request such a thing. How ridiculously happy it made him. *Maybe he had caught her off guard. Maybe she had let down her defences to let him in. Maybe she really did love him.* His mind lingered on the thought of her loving him. How he wished this love would last. He lost himself in that moment of euphoria. Chests pressed together — in that fleeting moment he had felt the beating of her heart.

“Your heart is racing?” he said out of shock.

She was silent for a moment, hesitant in her reply, “For the same reason yours is.”

And then that moment was gone. She pushed him away, and she was gone. Gone was her warmth and gone was her beating heart. *Why had she been so reluctant to love him back? How was it possible for him to be with someone he loved wholeheartedly, yet felt so much sadness at the same time?*

Maybe he was to blame for loving someone who would never return that love. Maybe the yearning in his heart to be loved by her would subside. Maybe he could forget — but maybe he didn’t want

to. Maybe he didn't want to forget the love, or the pain, because there were times when he was so genuinely happy. How could he have known that to fall for someone would lead to such terrible fate? To love was a very strange thing.



CATEGORY
OPEN



Illustration: Ruby Halwi

WINNER
MARBLE CAKE
Syie Mei Thai



The butter was a soft golden cube that slid into the mixing bowl and smeared the sides. He measured out a cup of sugar and tipped in the perfect white powder. *If you could dry snowflakes* he thought, *this is what they would look like*. And Sylvia had always wanted to see the snow.

He turned on the beater, feeling its vibration in his hand as its mechanical paddles mixed the butter and sugar. His hands were brown and wrinkled now, liver-spotted. But he remembered when they had been strong and smooth, and had held Sylvia's hand for the first time. And placed a ring on her finger, and caressed her at night, and felt her belly grow big and round.

Carefully he added the vanilla extract, then the eggs — one at a time, otherwise it was difficult to mix uniformly. *Tap the egg on the side of the bowl, put your thumb into the yolk-yellow smile, a loud crack* and then, if you are listening carefully, a soft plop as the slippery contents fall into the bowl. *Repeat for the other two eggs — tap, crack, plop.*

Listening carefully was a skill he had spent a lifetime mastering. After the baby (stillborn, they'd said, but you can easily have another one), she had cried for a month. But grief doesn't kill, it merely maims and they had gone on.

"Beat in milk, then sift flour..." he recited under his breath. He peered at the piece of paper and handwritten instructions. Sylvia had written the recipe out for him. She had left it in one of the cake tins in the bottom drawer, years ago, where she always stored the tins and the beater. He'd found it one day searching for a saucepan lid — this was after she was gone and he was fending

for himself. He measured out the flour and baking powder and methodically turned the sifter's crank, listening to the blades, their each revolution creating a fluffy pile of flour in the bowl. It had been a good move to return to the little country town. Wide-open spaces had a way of soothing the soul.

Time to add the flour, in two lots. Too much at once would give you a lumpy cake. Beat — slowly at first, otherwise you raise a dust storm of flour — then faster until thoroughly mixed, then stop and add more. Some people were good at saying important things. Like, I love you. He wasn't. Sylvia was — she said it by baking.

When all the flour had been folded in, he divided the batter into three portions. To one he added a small crimson splash of cochineal atop the creamy yellow butter, and mixing it in with a spoon, so that the red stain disappeared, leaving a shock of pink batter. The judges liked a vibrant pink. Too pale and it offered no contrast to the vanilla. He wondered how many bugs he had just added to the cake. He knew it took about 150,000 insects to make a kilo of cochineal. 150,000 insects boiled to death, then dried and pulverized, to give such pink cakes their lurid colour.

He turned to the small bowl of chocolate he had melting over a saucepan of boiling water. *Never let the bottom of the bowl touch the water* but no one had ever bothered to explain why. He tipped the glossy molten chocolate into the second bowl of batter. It was dark chocolate and Sylvia's favourite. Gently, he mixed it. After the first bite of every cake she'd ever baked him, he'd always said, "You know, you should enter this in the show." But she'd never dared.

The cake tin stood at the ready, greased and papered all the way past the top edge of the tin — that was the secret to a cake with a clean edge. And icing was only allowed on the top, just the top. No way to hide sloppy edges.

From the top drawer he drew out three large spoons and used them to dollop the different batters into the tin. *Always start from the centre and work out.* First a dollop of vanilla, then chocolate, then pink. Vanilla, chocolate, pink. Vanilla, chocolate, pink. He'd learnt this from years of watching Sylvia in the kitchen. Next he took a butter knife and swirled it around in the batter a few times. Not too much mixing — the judges didn't like that. They preferred a patchwork, not a Pollock painting. He picked up the tin with both hands and brought it down sharply on the counter — to release any

trapped air pockets. Bang, bang, bang. Now was not the time to be gentle. A hidden air bubble was the competitive baker's nightmare.

The oven was preheated. Too hot and it would cause cracks in the top of the cake. A trap for young players. He carefully placed the patchwork cake into the oven and set the timer. A hundred and seventy degrees would be just right.

There might even be time for a kip. He wondered what Sylvia was doing. He hoped she was having a lovely nap too.

In the bedroom, Sylvia was waiting for him, smiling from her silver frame upon the bedside table. "Well, it's in the oven," he told her. "Let's see if we can go one better and nab the blue ribbon this year, eh?"

He decided he would go and visit her if he got back early from the show, bring those nice people at the nursing home some of the prizewinner. Sylvia might eat some too, and she might remember him, if it was one of her good days. She might smile at him and they would hold hands and laugh and eat marble cake.

He took his shoes off and laid down on the bed.

HONOURABLE MENTION
MONSTERS
Jo Antareau



“What time do you call this?” Margaret stood in the doorway in a halo of light, hand on hip. Alyssa knew the expression well enough. She studied her feet and elbowed past her mother into the hall. “Answer me, young lady. Where have you been?” Margaret’s voice rose shrilly. “At the library? I don’t think so!”

Alyssa turned and dragged her eyes up to meet her mother’s. “Yes, Mum,” her voice choking. Alyssa cleared her throat, “I went to the library and read. Then after closing time I just walked around. Reading.” She yanked a sheaf of magazines and a paperback from her satchel and slammed them on the hall table. “There, see.”

“I’ve been worried sick and all you do is give me attitude? I even called your idiot father — ” Then the phone rang. Margaret examined the window, lip curling. “Speak of the devil. He’s been ringing every hospital, every police station...” She broke off and jabbed the answer button. “Hello? Yes, she’s right here... just walked in bold as brass...”

Alyssa turned and strode toward the kitchen, snatches of her mother’s outrage glancing off her back until she pulled the door shut. She stood in the spotless kitchen illuminated by the neighbours’ light filtering in through the window. The dishwasher hummed and gurgled to silence. She breathed deeply. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Once, twice...

So her mother hadn’t noticed.

Alyssa filled a glass with water, and downed it in one draught. She refilled it and held its coolness to her face, eyes closed, letting it draw the heat from her cheek. She sank onto a stool, elbows on the gleaming benchtop, chin on her fist. The tap spooled droplets

into the sink, loud as a heartbeat.

She felt his presence in the room. Moving silently was his speciality. She straightened herself and drew open an eye. Bryce stood opposite her, feet planted. He flicked the light on. Alyssa winced and shielded her face.

“How are you?”

It was the command for an update. The drip-drip filled the silence between them. Alyssa clenched her teeth. “I. Am. Fine. How do you think I’d be?”

Bryce reached across the sink and with an abrupt flick, the tap fell silent. “Then how come so late?”

“I crashed on Jessie’s couch until the anaesthetic wore off.”

His mouth tightened. “What does Jessie know?”

“Nothing.” Seconds passed. Alyssa slammed the glass down on the counter. “You didn’t even bother to show up. There were protestors! They had placards. With pictures of... of... They called me a murd – ” In one movement he had crushed a finger on her lips. She recoiled at his touch, baring her teeth.

“Do you want Margaret to hear?”

Alyssa met his gaze. “Where would you be then?”

His eyes narrowed but Alyssa kept her face up, lips pressed together.

When he spoke, his voice was steely. “Think about your mother, Alyssa.”

Alyssa frowned. And just where was he going with this?

He continued. “She’s happy with me. You and her have it good under my roof. It means a lot to her after your dad dumped her. If she found out about what her daughter really is —”

“And what is that? What am I?” her voice rose.

“Oh, stop the amateur dramatics. You knew what you were doing, way you came onto me. But if your mother ever found out,” he dropped his voice to a hiss and leaned in.

“It would destroy her. She’d lose her daughter and partner in one fell swoop. Do you want that on your conscience?” He paused. “As well?”

Alyssa bit her lip. His gaze never wavered from her face. She dropped her head, her shoulders slumped.

He exhaled and smiled. “Good. You see sense.”

Margaret banged into the kitchen, replacing the cordless phone

in its cradle. “Your father and I agreed for once, Alyssa, this can’t continue — you’re grounded until you learn common sense.”

Margaret paused, and sighed. She reached out and took her daughter’s hand. Alyssa flinched, but kept her cold hand in her mother’s warm one. “Please, darling. It’s dangerous out there. Lots of strange people, predatory... monsters, some of them.”

“Yes, Mum,” Alyssa said. “It is dangerous out there.”

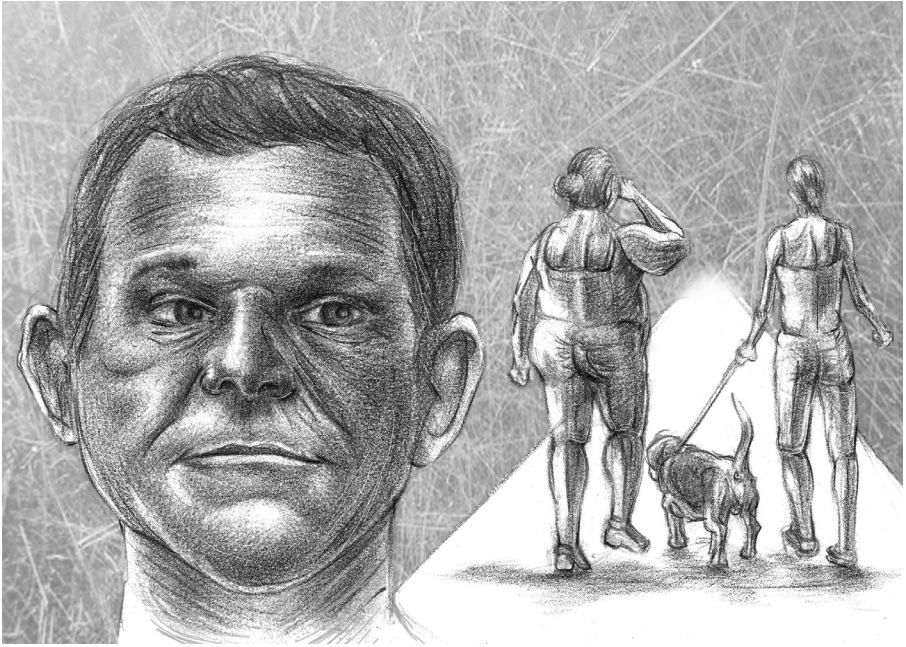


Illustration: Alejandro Aguanta

HONOURABLE MENTION
DO I LOOK FAT IN THIS?
Sandy Bennett



I walk past them all the time. The fat one and the skinny one. Skinny is the mother, Fat is the daughter. They both wear their nothing brown hair pulled back in tight pony tails and take their dog for a walk in the evenings — when I am walking home from work. Sometimes Fat tugs the dog along on its lead, but mostly she waits while it sniffs things out, she waits while it takes a piss, she waits while it takes a shit and then she pulls a plastic bag out of her pocket and scoops it up. I see her feeling the warmth of the excrement in her hand through the other side of the plastic bag.

Skinny keeps on walking, and takes the conversation with her, does not even pause to finish listening to whatever it is her daughter is saying, I guess the imperative to walk is too strong. When the dog is ready to move again Fat shuffles to catch up.

The other faces and bodies I pass blur into each other. Mothers and prams, joggers, businessmen in suits, secretaries in sneakers. But them, I recognize them coming no matter the distance. In winter, Skinny wears a sleeping bag coat that most of us would put on and ask, “Do I look fat in this?” It’s all grey and puffy right down to her ankles. It disguises her anorexia a little bit — but only if you didn’t know her. If you’ve seen her without the coat, you know. Fat also wears grey: track pants and an oversize hoody, stretched tight over her breasts. Sometimes in summer I’ve seen her wear cotton shorts.

They walk in all seasons, as do I. Sometimes I see them near my house and sometimes they’re as far away as the park’s city edges. I suppose they’re something like neighbours. I walk to get to work, and to home again — walk and wonder what I am going to have for

dinner, wonder if he will call me back and I wonder about them and their walking.

Skinny walks compulsively. Once on a Sunday when I was on my way to buy wine I saw Skinny walking on her own – walking fast. Perhaps some doctor told them to walk together, told them, “Get a dog.” Maybe he’s trying to normalize her compulsion — “It would be good for you both.” With a patronizing smile towards Fat’s fat figure and a shudder at Skinny’s bones. “Take the dog for a walk in the evening, do it together, that way you both get your exercise.” But really he’s thinking you’re some crazy old anorexic woman walking to escape the guilt of the lettuce leaf you ate. “And you, young lady...”, patronizing as hell, “you will get some badly needed exercise — so you won’t die of a heart attack at twenty five. What you girls need is to take a constitutional stroll.”

Fat is not fat like some teenage girls – who dress up in Sportsgirl and are fake tanned up to their armpits — Fat is not one of those confident fat girls either, fielding text messages from all her gal pals about what they’re going to get up to on the weekend. No one has ever told Fat that she is beautiful. If she has crushes on boys (or girls) they are buried as deep as you can go. Plain, fat teenage girls who go for walks with their mother and their dog every single night at six-thirty don’t have friends.

But they have each other, they walk and chat. I walk past them plenty and know that Fat recognizes me — even though she looks past me with her pebbly black eyes. I’d say we’ve been passing each other by for a couple of years now and we have not even evolved to nodding hello — back at home seeing each other that regular would make us cousins.

A little while back I started to see Fat walking on her own, just her and the dog. A little pale terrier thing — nothing fancy. She doesn’t walk far on her own, lazy girl. You don’t move subcutaneous fat walking around the block at puppy dog pace, I think. It’s warming up and she’s been in her shorts. You can’t help but notice how they ride up between her thighs.

The other day she and I were walking in the same direction and she stopped to wait for the dog. As I caught up I thought about breaking out of our routine of silent passing by. I rehearsed what I might say. “Evening,” I could say, or:

— “Hi, I hope you mother’s not dead.”

- “Hi, do you want to borrow my spare skipping rope sometime, as it’s great for getting the heart rate up?”
- “Hi, what’s your dog’s name?”
- “Nice evening for it.”

And that would be the beginning. But I don’t know if I want to be her friend. Don’t know what she’s walking to get away from. Don’t want that burden laid at my feet. As I pass her, her eyes glide over me yet again, refusing to engage. And I keep walking, keeping it as it is.

HONOURABLE MENTION
SNAKEBITE
Kate Molony



The snake stretches out across the sunburnt road. I watch with fascination where the glossy brown scales become a pale, frothy pulp. Split almost head to tail, it still commands respect. I want to touch it — not the bloody mess, but the part that seems alive, the amber eyes, its tiny diamond shaped head, perfectly formed of innocuous silk. Beautiful. My father yanks me back.

“Stay safe,” he whispers.

On the road again. The car is a cage. I wind down the window, and stick my head out like a dog, eyes closed. “When will we get there?” I yell, but the wind sucks up my words and carries them away.

When I do open my eyes to survey this new world, it’s amazing. The road is a ribbon of gravel winding its way around inverted dust bowls of emaciated sheep. It’s the drought of ’84. In a farmer’s economy, this town is going down the toilet. I’ve heard my parents arguing about it:

“What about our life in Melbourne?” Mum.

“The kids will be safer in the country.” Dad.

Despairing, leathery old farmers string themselves up beside the water tanks that haven’t seen a drop for months. I hear this too. But my mother is impassive when I ask her what drought is. “What it means for you is an inch of brown water in the bottom of the bath.”

We pull up on a road wide and tired.

Though paddocks stretch out behind it, the land adjacent to our perfunctory dwelling hasn’t been cleared. Grey box and red stringy bark rise into the air, their roots choked by mallee bush-pea and common fringe-myrtle. The ground’s a graveyard of undeveloped pods, stripped-off bark and dry leaves that have suicided in the heat.

“Claire!” my mother calls. “Come inside and unpack your room!”

But I don’t want a room. I want a eucalyptus tee-pee under the stars. And in the morning, I will go hunting for snakes.

“Don’t get into trouble,” my mother warns absently, her mind on the baby’s crying in the poorly assembled cot.

Outside, the country morning has its own melody: the mournful, even aggressive chants of sheep, magpies, tractors. The grass is jaundiced and I watch sheep stumble frantically after a lone green ute that is spilling grain in a wide arc from its tray.

I head into the bush.

The quiet shadows of eucalyptus meet the persistent resonating hum of cicadas. I carelessly traverse the grey, spindly limbs of saplings when a twig snaps crisply on my left.

Snake? I listen intently for the swish-swish of taut scales, pushing forward in an ‘s’ movement through the undergrowth.

Nothing. It might have been a rabbit.

The track winds purposefully towards the back of the allotment, there I reach a clearing and on the far side, the skeletal frames of a new estate being erected – the boring beginnings of country suburbia. In between is a vast expanse of tall, wild grass as bleached and desiccated as straw.

The whisper of a breeze reveals a ridiculous encampment of tarpaulins. Perched on a stump, this camp’s owner fluidly slices a blade through a switch. Though watching with the quiet caution of a hunted doe, he speaks, barely ceasing the slick paring of his knife along the smooth, young wood.

“I heard you blundering through the bush.” Scrape. “Lucky for you, so did the snakes.”

I curse every careless footfall.

The stranger laughs. “What’s your name?”

“Claire.”

“Didn’t your parents tell you not to talk to strangers, Claire-bear?”

He is shearing off elongated coils; one, two, they fall carelessly to the ground. “You like snakes, Claire-bear?” A third shaving drifts to my feet. I want to pick it up. “I could find you one.”

Snatches my arm he drags me roughly into a tee-pee of grass. My heartbeat hammers in my ears. I’m surrounded by grass; a tall, serrated prison.

“Do you like my hidey hole?” he asks.

“I have to go home.” His hand constricts my arm. “My mum gets worried.”

“Oh come on Claire,” he hisses. “You just got here.”

Yet the clasp loosens, only to snatch my jaw in a vice — a prisoner for the fangs that lash out of the air, the slurping, biting suck that tastes like sour sweat.

“I could teach you a thing or two about catching snakes,” he whistles. “Too right I could.”

But he’s indolent, witless and I spring and lurch blindly out through the grass. My arm aches from the giant’s pinch, and my mouth feels anaesthetized. There is an imprint of red soil on the back of my shorts. My mother will be furious.

I almost miss it — almost trip over it — a long and slender rope of mottled brown in a window of sunshine.

The tiger snake whips its head, and I get it — not a bite, but the certainty and shocking realisation that they will bite.

I trip backwards, and it strikes; the powerful, swift flight of an arrow head through the air, then the slithering violently into the mallee bush-pea.

My muscles liquefy at the crisp snap of a twig somewhere to my right, which could be snake. Or beast.

The baby is still crying when I stagger in, my mother listless.

“Wash your hands!” she snaps. “And don’t leave the tap running.”

In a shallow bath, I inspect bruises and angry welts that violate my milky chin. Dirt on my bottom, even my feet are black with it, and my ears throb with my heartbeat. Water laps over the evidence of grit, sweat and tears. My sullied shorts require stealthy concealment.

But no sharp perforations. No blood. A long snake of wood-shaving has caught in my hair. I don’t want to touch it. I shake it violently out where it falls to the floor.

And there on the cool tiles, a window of sunlight.

And a barely perceptible puncture in my left thong.



HONOURABLE MENTION
FROZEN TEETH IN
A SUNKEN FACE
Jack Waghorn



May 5th, 1973

This journal will have to stand until we can properly document our find. These notes will stay with me until the new season and our journey home. Even after all this time, these frozen wastes remain foreign to me, but today is one of jubilation, as today, everything has paid off. We found it roughly two hundred kilometres into the tundra, about ten metres below the ice. How anyone could build a structure on this scale, so deep into the frost is beyond me. Mountains made this area virtually unreachable for us, how to imagine another, older culture got here is incomprehensible. I'll venture a guess that the deep structure was an escape from the surface blizzards prevalent to this area. But the people who built this are beyond the label of primitive. This find will define me; define us all.

Team is enthusiastic. Their knowledge of the mountains is unlike anything I've ever seen, and I've been assured that we're in the best of care, but we all have our limits. The Norwegian language is frustrating, and despite my daily lessons I can still barely grasp it. From what my translators say, the foreign workers are nervous. Two men nearly died when one of our safety cables snapped. We're all shaken, but today has invigorated me. Starting tomorrow, we begin taking samples of the structure, and hopefully find a way inside. Here's to praying that the team stays in good health until we're done with this place.

May 6th, 1973

Our venture has taken a drastic turn, for better or worse, I can't yet say. Uneasy in this place as I am, I'm captivated by its

splendour. Structure consists of a large wall; wall's embedded deep into the thick ice, made of a dark stone. Maybe meteorite. It'll take at least three days for my team to properly identify its compounds, but the primitive's symbols, the symbols on the structure are like nothing any of us have ever come across in all our combined years in the field. This is the big one. We have confirmation that these graphemes are not some ancient Norwegian or any Scandinavian derived language.

We're documenting every with great care and this is going to take some time. Could this be a temple? A place of ancient worship?

Our second course (of order) is to open the door, if it can even be called one. The slab covering the wall is at least five tons, crossing the central expanse of the structure. Whoever laid it there didn't want it removed easily. This cavern is far too enclosed for explosives, so we've resorted to pick axes, chipping away at the side of the slab until we can make an entrance big enough.

As eager as I was yesterday, I'm exhausted. This place is draining. Team in disarray, all experiencing nightmares and the unrelenting cold. Equipment's not made for these conditions, been failing since we descended. The workers have already gone through an entire set of picks, and their progress is minimal at best. The workers are unhappy, they talk about me, about my team. They don't hide their contempt; they know the majority of us can't understand. But I understand enough. None of my team will discuss it, but we all know that the workers don't want to be here. Despite the possibilities, a part of me doesn't want to be here. But I keep thinking to the near future, and the prospect of what this means. When this find is revealed to the world, my career will be set. The name I've worked for will be made. Food and supplies sufficient for at least two months but I fear the commitment I have made may keep me in this cavern much longer than that, perhaps years.

May 8th, 1973

Uninjured but today's events have shaken me. Early hours, worker attacked one of the team with an ice axe. Nasty business. Dragged him off without fatal injury, but soon as we had him grounded, went into a fit of some sort. Medic says he's perfectly healthy, strong, young, and such an outburst is unprecedented.

Some sort of breakdown. Constantly mumbling as he drifts in and out, struggling against the bonds. Not ethical to tie him up but no safe containment available. Helicopter impossible, no hope of radio contact in these blizzard conditions. Bugged in until this clears. When? None of us are sure. Took every bit of persuading to get the men to come down here, and now I can't lead them out. Nightmares getting worse. For all of us, ever since we opened the portal in the structure. None of us have entered. Too deep. What we can see, inside stretches further than would seem possible. Last night, wind making sound inside the structure — alarming but a product of the blizzard, surely. Still, unsettling and echoes throughout the cavern. Come too far to turn around without the reward of documenting such a discovery. Nothing for it, tomorrow, I venture inside, got to find out why we're all here.

May 9th, 1973

If you have found this journal then you must be here — right here, inside the temple. If you have read this far, please, I implore you, you and anyone else you are with, you are in grave danger, do not... DO NOT go any deeper into the temple! Turn around, there is still time, do not make the same mistakes I did. Go — leave now, go as far away from this accursed place as you can. Nothing good will come of this place. Seal it up for God's sake. Something in here. Some thing, a living darkness. Whole team gone, I am alone.

HONOURABLE MENTION
CUNNAMULLA
Pavle Radonic



Daryl didn't mind you getting his name wrong. It must have happened to him regular. Daryl, Terry, Greg — he was of that vintage and strata. "Call me Nipper," he allowed immediately and a tad too rapid for comprehension.

Nipper? It looked a good while since Daryl had ever nipped.

The day before he'd discharged himself. Some trouble with his ticker. A stent had been put in. Drugs for opening up the little veins around the heart. Drugs to thin the blood. More drugs to control blood pressure. Then they'd run some tests for pancreatitis, Hep C and liver damage. But in the end, Nipper left hospital with a chest infection and the tests for nasties on the pancreas and liver, couldn't be conducted because Nipper couldn't very well be put under if didn't reckon he'd come through.

Greg could meet Nipper halfway — or some part of the way — in blackfella talk. They bounced off each other and evidently knew and liked each other well enough, though Greg had never mentioned Nipper, or Daryl. The blackfella talk was full of smiles and bright eyes — a completely unexpected vaudeville performed in Greg's dingy digs.

Nipper hailed from Cunnamulla. He left on December 17, 19--. The year was a problem for a while. Nipper was stuck in the '90s, which he knew was wrong. Eventually 1976 definitively returned.

A few weeks short of his seventeenth birthday. The apprenticeship papers for a diesel mechanic had just come through. And so on December 17, 1976, Nipper came home and while his mother looked on, he pulled out his drawers and emptied his belongings into his kit.

“Brisbane!” she screeched. “You’ll get y’rself killed in Brisbane.... You never seen a traffic light, an’ you’re off to Brisbane.”

Cunnamulla was seventy miles north and a thousand kilometres west –Nipper thumbed for inland in a single jerk. Cunnamulla wasn’t on the coast, and nowhere near the Gold Coast or Surfers. Nipper thumbed rides in those days.

Since 1976 he had been back to see the old lady three times. The last time he’d been, he’d been in thirteen fights in twelve weeks. These numbers came to him immediately and unimpeded.

Greg’s black jokes went down without a problem. Nipper’s large hands, raised knuckles, tattoos visible – even rugged up against the sudden winter blast – stayed put. No cause for alarm. Greg’s other black jokes on the state of Nipper’s health and his mental balance went down likewise. Nipper gave back to Greg’s cracks, but without nimbleness. “May as well put a gun to his head.”

To this last there was no protest.

Working in the mines, drink and substances were tricky even on days off. Each morning you had to blow. Not just .05, even .01 got you a window seat. On the aircraft to the mainland.

Talk of work on the islands brought out Greg’s familiar story about Hamilton. How the head honcho, who’ll remain shameless here, was called ‘God’ by his minions and wore a pith helmet and monocle. In his office, a large plaque on the wall declared, You Can Tell the Size of the Boys by the Size of their Toys. That didn’t stop Greg dropping his strides and brown-eyeing the monocle when he got fired. You could forgive Greg for returning to the story over the years. Finally it was the repetition of detail that confirmed its veracity.

The *Achilles* was the name of God’s runabout, a former mine-sweeper. When some Arab sheiks were being entertained by God and given a tour of the islands, \$98,000 of diesel went into the jaunt. Later, God bull-dozed a mountain to extend the runway for direct flights to his resort. The runabout had a waterbed in the sleeping cabin, mirrors on the ceiling – Greg poking one of the lasses where God alone had the prerogative. Nipper might have heard the story before too. It was hard to tell. Had it been a first-listening, Greg’s fragmentary delivery would have made it almost impossible to follow.

Nipper may even have worked on the island himself. Either way,

in Nipper's hearing no added bullshit would have gone down in such a story. Through the hour or so, Nipper remained on his feet, arms crossed on his chest like the quiet guy in the bar who needed to be monitored for the good order of proceedings.

More than strange to catch Nipper/Daryl, up close like this. On Fitzroy Street you could often see him with a couple of pals nursing a stubby. The same round in Gertie on the Koorie gym corner. Nipper roomed nearby. In Nipper's time there were no gyms in Cunnamulla — you be sure of that. Not many Marquis de Queensberry' lads would've made a round with Nipper in his day.

On the street, Nipper was always a little dauntingly squint-eyed, like now in Greg's bed-sit. Squint-eyed, hollow-cheeked, gap-toothed, heavily creased, in his winter clobber, cap pulled over his eyes, none of the signs of illness visible.

You couldn't imagine Nipper submitting to a medical regime, tests and pills, palliative care. So it was decided they'd pass round the hat for Nipper's fare. "Ride to Culla' take as long again as Brisbane almos'," one of them reckoned with some kind of wry truth that produced nods.

HONOURABLE MENTION

**THERE IS NEVER ENOUGH TIME,
FOR ANYONE**

Chris Rowley



When most people look into the future they see happiness. Their future-selves holding a baby or posing for the next tabloid photograph. For some it's both. A futile attempt to make the present seem better. If only they knew, then perhaps they would give up on their dreams of becoming a movie star or the next famous vampire novelist.

I too had dreams once. Each night, I would stare beyond the stars at the endless void that was space and wish that I could go back to before the world died.

I flipped the empty pint glass in my palm before slamming it down on the bar. Even though she'd noticed me, the lady bartender had to finish tweeting her precious status update; 'my life is shit.' *It will be, just not today.*

As she poured a new pint into the same glass, I watched my reflection in the mirror behind the spirits. A face like someone had scraped a piece of barbed wire across it years before. My pale, freckled skin didn't match the emerald colour of my eyes.

The pint was placed on a serviette before me, the head frothed over the rim and drops of beer trickled down the dirty glass. I took another sip, felt the warm breath of someone behind me. A pretty woman circled to my side and leaned against the oak bar. Her long, dark red dress touched her knees. A huge improvement over the extreme miniskirts the rest of the women wore.

"Hi," she said.

My eyes met hers, at least I could look her in the face. "Hello," I replied, before turning away.

"Amelia," she said. *Persistent.*

“Lack.”

Amelia took a seat beside me and ordered a cocktail. I wasn't sure if she was interested or simply trying to score a free drink. Amelia's eyes were like mine but had a amber tint around her pupils. Her auburn hair flowed over her shoulders.

“I work so much, it's nice to sit and relax,” she said.

For now.

“I don't get much of a chance to meet guys I don't work with. Where are you from?”

I took a swig of my beer before setting it down perfectly in the ring on the serviette. “Here,” I nodded.

“You're not,” Amelia replied. “I'd know if you were.”

“Not yet,” I mumbled.

“So, where *are* you from?”

“Here,” I replied. Her eyes rolled back.

“I travelled back from the future.”

A big grin appeared on her lips and she burst into laughter. “So why are you here, Mr Future-Lack?” She gently tapped me on my drinking shoulder. “Have you come to change my future?”

“Can't change the future.” Where I come from the Earth has gone to hell. Whether an asteroid hit the planet, war or climate change, never learnt the cause — the world's dying or it's already dead, hard to tell.

“Then why are you here?” Her smile disappeared.

“Because I thought it would be better,” I replied. *How wrong I was.* All those that resided in the bar scurried about as if the only important thing in life was what beverage they were going to order next. “A part of me misses the barren wastelands.”

Her gaze followed my arm and locked onto the bracelet fused against my right forearm. The engraved hourglasses and clock symbols intrigued her and she leaned closer, gently moving her index finger along the steel. Her touch shot a sharp, agonising pain up my bone and I yanked my arm away.

“Sorry,” she said.

I nodded and watched her reflection. Amelia remained for a few moments before she slipped off her stool as demurely as she could, leaving her Mojito untouched. I shifted the cocktail further away in the hope that she wouldn't waste a precious beverage — I knew how hard it was to get any form of fluid.

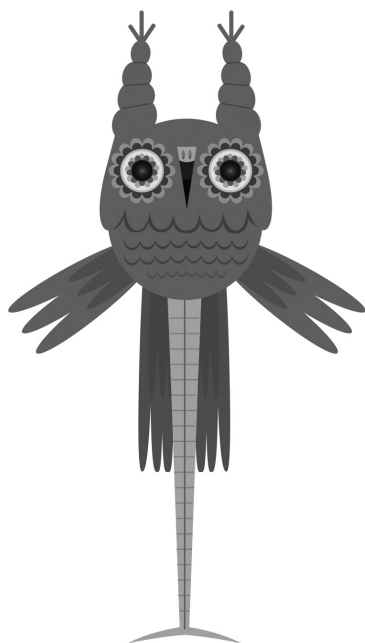
When I finished my own drink, I looked at the reflections, not myself, and caught sight of Amelia's. Some leather-clad biker snatched at her wrist.

She pulled back but the man was strong. Slowly and harshly, he dragged her in. The look of terror on her face was horrifying, even for me. I leapt off my stool and charged in.

Before the biker knew, I had hooked him in the jaw. Years of survival training had taught me a valuable lesson; never let your opponent rise. I lunged, pressed my knee against the biker's chest and blood splattered my fists as they smashed his face, repeatedly. Sickening crunches and snaps came from his head until the biker's face was unrecognisable; his nose, both cheeks, jaw and an eye socket bloodied and broken. Finally my eyes rose and took in the rest of the patrons standing in horror. Even Amelia was frozen as the man pleaded for his pathetic life.

I studied those watching me. Not Amelia, I couldn't look at her. I grabbed a used serviette off the adjacent table and wiped the blood off my raw knuckles. "He needs an ambulance," I said. "There's not much time." *For any of you.*

I walked out of the fire escape and stood in the dark, damp alleyway with the dumpsters and trash. It felt like home. And I really wanted to go home.



CATEGORY
NMIT students



Illustration: Evie Cahir

WINNER
THE WEDDING CAKE
Matthew Latham-Black



I watched as Kate stood over him. Vows of a forgotten time, written in a shaky hand lay next to his head. She was no devil; she would allow him time to understand why he was being punished. She looked for something to sit on. The beanbag in the corner was not the image she wanted him to awaken to. “Fuck,” Kate laughed, “I need a drink.”

She sauntered off to the cabinet. There on it’s own little shelf, an untouched bottle of champagne. It had been bought just after the honeymoon. She polished dust from its label.

Returning with a full flute of giddiness, she perched herself against the kitchen counter, and began her stare from where she left off.

He stirred in his drugged sleep.

“Why couldn’t you have been like this all the time?” she asked. “Quiet and pretty, I could have lived with that.” She knelt next to him, checked that her silk scarf was securing his hands to the table. And as she was thus engaged, I pulled at my own bonds — but if anything they grew tighter.

Eight years she’d been stuck with him: a man who lied about his personality until the day they were married. Then there was The Event, as Kate had come to call it. When the pretty new girl arrived in his office, and that little bitch had somehow managed to change him. But what stung Kate more than his philandering, was that for eight years she had been a wife to him, putting up with their life of repetitive, mind-numbing boredom, and then in just two months, he’d changed himself for that little whore.

Her black cocktail dress fit snugly, and her grip on the

champagne tightened.

“Why don’t you just wake up,” she screamed. I jumped in my seat, terrified of the sudden swing to violent outburst. Kate had already told me what she was going to do. I could see her hatred burning but she was brought back from her rage by the ringing of the phone.

“Hello, Hempstead residence,” Kate answered, choking on the name Hempstead. From the other end came the wispy voice of her husband’s mother.

“Hello Kate, good to hear you in good spirits.”

Bethany had always been kind to Kate; they had an affinity with each other. Both had been married to men that had driven them to insanity.

“Yes, last time we talked, I turned my frown upside down,” said Kate. Her husband began to stir.

“Sorry Beth, do you mind if I put you down for a second, I just need to wrap something up.”

“Of course dear,” laughed Beth. “Go ahead.”

Kate snatched a roll of duct tape and began to wrap it around her husband’s head. When she was done, he looked like a silver mummy.

“Sorry about that,” said Kate, picking up the phone, “I just knew that if I didn’t act now I would forget about it.”

“I know the feeling,” said Beth.

“Sorry, but why did you ring?” asked Kate. There was a slight pause from Beth.

“Er... oh I was hoping to talk to my son?”

“Oh... you just missed him, he went out to play golf, twenty minutes ago.”

His eyes flew open. Tied down, spread-eagle he bounced around like a madman on the oak table. Kate looked down at the receiver, surprised that Bethany had hung up without so much as a how-do-you-do.

Kate seated herself on the matching oak chairs and began to unwrap the anniversary presents. The first one was a necklace. Kate looked at her husband.

“How kind of you,” she said.

My heart dropped, as she opened the next one. It was a kitchen knife. I pulled and pulled at the fabrics holding me down. Hoping that somehow I could get free and stop this, or at least run away, so

that I didn't have to watch.

Kate tore the packet and the knife fell out.

"At least you got me something useful," Kate said to her husband. "You have two choices," she said kicking him. "You can either die and let the girl live, or you live and she dies?"

Kate reached down and pressed the blade against his taped lips and made enough of a slit for him to speak. I tried to scream through my gag, begging him to let me live.

"Kill her," he said, no remorse in his eyes.

I could feel my heart beat faster. Why did I hate him more than her? She was the one about to kill me. Kate walked behind the chair I was propped on, draped her arm over me and bent down to my ear.

"Do you want to say anything?" she whispered. I nodded. She cut the tape.

"Jack, I hope you rot in hell."

A snort of laughter escaped Kate's mouth. "She can't even remember your name."

The man who I thought was Jack looked at me apologetically. With nothing else to say he lay back and closed his eyes.

"I'm disappointed in you," Kate said. "I thought you had changed, but you haven't, you just changed 'cause it suited you."

She scraped the knife across his forearm.

"I didn't want to do this — " She stabbed her imminently to be late-husband through the eye.

Her own big brown eyes looked to me. I could see now the flood of her grief as tears. She murmured something.

I looked at him, the true devil of their marriage. Nothing he could have said now could fix the fate he had sealed for me.

I wanted to faint and miss my death. I didn't want to suffer.

"Don't worry I'm not going to kill you," Kate looked at me, "I... can't."

She crumpled at my feet.

I did what anyone else would have done. I comforted her.

HONOURABLE MENTION
BLAMELESS
Jessica Tait



“S’pose I’ll get breakfast for myself.”

The table shuddered and the coffee splashed from her mug. She traced a finger through the muddied stream, listening to his coiled sounds. The feral malice of his rummaging in cabinets and slamming doors, placement of coffee, cup, cereal and bowl while muttering under his breath, vicious little titbits of bile.

Her head thudded and she had trouble opening her left eye. Through her right she took in the shattered glass of the night before. Both of them were stubbornly refusing to sweep up, as though the act of clearing would imply responsibility. Was that the odour of stale vomit from the bathroom?

She was having trouble remembering. The girl’s night had started early with champagne cocktails at Bar Open. There’d been dancing, altercations, tears and laughter.

He sat opposite her with the same indecorous behaviour he’d been displaying since she woke, slurping his coffee and cereal as though enjoying every moment of pain and suffering he could inflict upon her. “Not talking to me this morning?”

She looked at the branching streams forming under her fingers. “Feeling a bit sore and sorry for yourself?”

Her eyes slid to the clock over the doorway, ticking every slow second away in an eerie vacuum of lengthened minutes until his departure.

“Can’t say as I’ve any pity for you, brought it on yourself. Don’t know how many times I’ve warned you.”

Gritting her teeth, her finger traced the tributaries formed by the coffee, and she observed him out of the corner of her eye.

Handsome as ever, and so very correct, so very right in every way. How did he cope with being so perfect at all times? Didn't it get tiring?

"You know how much I hate it. You're self-destructive!"

He spoke with restrained rage. She shrugged her shoulders, sick of his holier than thou attitude, sick of years of being undermined and made to feel inadequate — in fact, just sick really.

"Fine, have it your way." He threw his dishes in the sink. "Just in case you're wondering about the eye," he said as keys jangled and he swung his coat over his shoulder, "you rather elegantly tripped over your own feet when you got home last night. Or should I say, this morning?"

She flinched at the flashback. Trying to find her keys, one hand covering her eyes to protect them from the glaring sun. Falling in the front door and giggling as she kicked her shoes off. Stumbling down the hall and catching his eye as he stood watching from the bedroom door. A sickening vertigo, his smirk, and the rushing up of the hall table with its array of glass trinkets. A clashing of eyes. A shattering in her ears. Then nothing.

She heard his footsteps in the hall, the door handle turned and then hesitation, and she pictured him standing there, the image of respectability.

"Get yourself a good divorce lawyer, darling," came the sarcastic drawl. "I'm done."



Illustration: Tom Van Gaans

HONOURABLE MENTION
A SETTLING OF ASH
Peta Hawker



Esther sat hunched over on the shore, waves crashing at her feet, her head hung between her knees. At her back rose the elegant tower she could no longer call home. It was only a day ago that she had stood on the balcony of her parent's room and watched the army move on the city. Her family was dead. The royal family, the last hope of the nation, were not far from a gruesome end. Tears had slipped from Esther's eyes as she thought of the pain endured by her people. She had fallen on her knees, gripping the bars of the balcony. And then she had received the vision.

Looking up, Esther studied the black, shadowy landscape west of the ocean. This would be her destination. She didn't know what she would find there, but she knew that having direction, some purpose was the only way to force herself back on her feet, if only to keep the memories behind her.

A growling storm cloud advanced over the horizon, deepening the early afternoon into evening. Esther tasted the tangy scent of rising salt, and knew it was time to move on. She pulled herself off the sand and lifted the heavy bag of weaponry and timeworn books onto her shoulder.

She sprinted along the track, only slowing once she mounted the sand dunes. Now, the damp sand she trudged upon provided little respite for weary legs or the constant ache in her body. Still, it did not take her long to reach the dark path that led away from the beach.

The ground was muted grey, as though it was not earth, but a settling of ash. The trees were stunted, bare, and blackened — nothing like the viridian expanses of forests she had left

behind. The whole scene was cloaked in a gloomy haze, the sky threatening a furious rain. Esther could see the outline of mountains through the darkness; harsh and jagged, they burst through the ground and tore the sky apart.

With a sigh, Esther placed her foot on the path and a small puff of dust rose. A noxious odour tried to overwhelm her. She crinkled her nose against the stink of death and decay, against the vivid and painful memories the smell recalled. She knew this was a trial, a test of courage. Esther set her eyes on the mountains and strode along the path, using will power alone to turn her mind from the stench.

The city she had left behind was the only one to sit near the Bad Lands without falling to ruin. A demon reborn into human flesh had been master over the lands for centuries. Esther had heard many rumours of what lived and travelled there, though rumour alone was not enough to stop her from fulfilling her duty. Finding the Oracle was Esther's mission, a quest nobody believed in. Few now had confidence in the stories of the Old Ones, but Esther knew their tales to be true. Amongst the raging war and the demise of her noble bloodline, the vision Esther received had been one of grief and hope. More bloodshed, the failing of the Crown, her people enslaved; she saw then that the only chance for redemption was to find the elusive Oracle.

The vision had shown a mountain range, deep within the Bad Lands. There she would find the Oracle; there she would find hope. The forsaken paths of the Lands had never been safe to travel; however Esther knew that the demon-spawn was occupied with the bloodlust of the war. At least for the moment, her passage was safe from him.

Esther had spent two days moving among the mountains. This part of the journey was taking longer than expected. Then her food supply ran out.

The sun did not touch the Bad Lands, but there was a gradual shift in light that Esther understood to be the passing of days. She refused to give up; the vision had revealed that the Oracle was hiding in a cave deep in the mountains. The cave remained hidden, but Esther persisted.

Another day passed and Esther found herself much weakened. Late in the evening, she sat down and held her waterskin to her

mouth in an attempt to wet her lips. Her swollen tongue cried out in desperation, but the skin gave nothing. Esther hung her head, a silent tear sliding down her cheek.

When she looked up again, she noticed a gap between two large boulders not far away. Esther crawled on her hands and knees and inspected the gap. She got to her feet; it was wide enough for her to fit through. The gap led into a dark tunnel. Esther's heart beat faster as she recognised the rock walls in front of her as those from her vision. She began to run.

Esther's breath tore at her chest. Sweat etched its way down her face and her legs shook, persuading her to stop, to give up. Esther ran until she broke free of the stone tunnel and into a cavernous space. She stopped and her breath heaved inside her body. Swallowing hard, she looked up and saw the lake – exactly as it had appeared in her vision. Tears blurred her eyes as she stared at the expanse of blue-green water. Her gaze shifted and she cried out.

Where in her vision there had been a serene, older woman sitting by the lake, in reality, there was nothing but cold, unforgiving rock. Esther ran to the lake turning her head to and fro, searching every crevice for a sign of life. There was nothing. Esther fell to her knees in despair. 'Where are you?' she cried out.

Her hands gripped the cold stone and her knees bled. Esther crawled forward and looked into the lake. It was clear, reflecting nothing but the dark ceiling of the cave and her grey, tear-stained face.

"I need your help," she whispered, speaking to her reflection. "Where are you?" Her voice broke, and in that moment, she understood.

Illustration: Daryl Toh Liem Zhan



HONOURABLE MENTION
MISGUIDED
Amanda Kontos



Callie closed her eyes and pulled her knees closer to her chest. She tucked them under her chin and her aching body protested against any movement. She had endured enough torture, enough pain; she would have done anything to stop it, but she was stubborn. She wouldn't give in.

The darkened room took some time to get used to. Half a day maybe, but she couldn't remember how long she'd been there for. Days, weeks, months; it was hard to tell. There wasn't much in the room, just a makeshift bed in one corner, a table and a toilet in the other. Her body screamed with the need to heal itself but she couldn't risk closing her eyes, even for an instant. Callie had heard what they'd done to the other girl. She'd heard her screams through the night as they tortured her to death and she didn't want an end like that.

Callie shivered as her captor unlocked the door. The noise vibrated through the room making her jump, but she refused to give them anything. Opening her eyes Callie squinted, the light from the door too bright, and she barely saw someone get pushed through the door before it was locked up tight again.

"Callie," said a voice in the dark.

She knew the voice. "Clay?" Her voice was rough and husky from her time spent crying, screaming, cussing and begging her torturers to stop.

"Oh my God, Cal. You're alive. Where are you?"

"Here." She slowly unwrapped herself and placed her good arm on the wall and began to lift herself off the floor. Her foot slipped on something slick. She couldn't see what it was in the dark.

“Cal,” he whispered once he found her. His arms moved about her and it was enough to make her eyes well with tears. Her fingers grasped his shirt and she cried out as she moved her arm to try and hold him closer. She sobbed as the pain shot up her arm, Clay held her tighter, soothing her. All the pain and weakness she’d refused to show spilled onto his shoulders, like her blood that stained the floor around them.

The sobs quieted down as soon as Clay spoke again, “I didn’t know where you were. I looked everywhere. I was so lost without you.”

Why hadn’t he tried harder to find me, then?

“They — ” Callie pulled away from him and cringed as she knocked her arm. “They took me away and did stuff to me.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I’ve blocked a lot of it out.” *It was the only way she was still here. Still alive.* She lifted her arm and whimpered in agony as a nauseating pain shot through her body.

“Are you okay?” His concern had her shaking; she missed him so much. Part of her should have been more concerned with why he was here, but she was happy to not be alone. Happy that he was here with her.

“I think — ” She swallowed the bile that rose up into her throat, “I think my arm’s broken. I don’t remember how it happened. It’s too much.” She pulled away from Clay, panicked, as the images flood back. “There was something sharp... and res – restraints and a lot of pain.” Slices to her thigh with surgical knives and holding down her arm, screams so loud Callie couldn’t hear anything else. She cried to make them stop but they didn’t hear. No one did.

“Callie. Cal, babe, come back to me. It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

In the dark she could barely see him but she felt him move her face so that she was staring into his eyes. She felt like there was something new under her skin, something dark and different that replaced the Callie that had been there once. She’d become a shell of a person. Nothing was safe.

Safe was a relative term.

More images flashed back into her mind — fists flying at her face, feet kicking her ribs, restraints being retied.

“They — oh my God,” she turned away from him and dropped to her knees and gagged. They’d fed her less and less each day, so there was nothing left to vomit but it still burned. Clay held her

greasy hair back.

A subtle glow illuminated the room and Callie could see Clay's silhouette in it.

"Here," he murmured and thrust a glass of water into her hand. *That hadn't been in his hand before. Where had it come from?*

Callie took the glass from him and eyed it before taking a sip. *He was innocent, he had to be, he wouldn't lie to her.* Clay loved her. The never-ending circle they'd stolen from her finger was proof enough.

She was so thirsty, and without realising, she had downed the whole glass.

"Baby, we should set that arm."

She pulled out of his grip. He never called her baby.

Her vision blurred at the edges and she tried to blink it away.

No, this can't be happening. He said he loved me.

"Clay?"

The lights flickered on and she was blinded. Her body felt like rubber and her legs gave and she collapsed against Clay. He carried her to the table at the room's centre. Callie sobbed her body unable to do anything she ordered of it.

"This won't hurt, babe," Clay whispered as he restrained her and climbed on top of the table. A glint of something evil shone in his eyes; he wasn't the man she married. Everything went black and she let go, too broken to fight back.

She wouldn't survive the night. Clay would make sure of that.



HONOURABLE MENTION
ON ALMOST ANY GIVEN DAY
Thys Pretorius



The kind people of Sombreville nailed a bronze-plate with Dad's name to the new church building. A ribbon was cut, Dad's hand was shook and the heavy oak doors of the hollow church swung open with a lazy creak. An elderly gentleman with raisin-like skin motioned for Dad to step in. With the other hand, he patted his head, taking great care not to disturb the arrangement of thinning grey hair that rested on his shiny scalp. A small crowd of the Almighty's followers gathered outside, passing judgment, wondering if this new pastor would prove better than the last. Men with skinny legs and big bellies stroked their beards and puffed their pipes. Women in colourful dresses smiled from beneath proud hats.

Those were the days when rural churches were stark, yellow constructions, standing bare amidst dying cornfields. Men were men and were damned if they were to be anything else. Women were more familiar with the inside of a kitchen than the chittery-chatter of the modern-day housewife. Sundays were reserved for the word of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, except for those of darker complexion, who were not allowed under the church roof, or any public roof. Blacks laboured in the fields and worked the jobs that no pair of white hands would.

It was three months since we moved to this dry, abandoned stretch of earth. Mother pasted a pale smile on her face as Dad emerged from the car. He had been away most of the day, visiting the sick and the elderly, performing his pastoral duties. He embraced Mother with all the love and intention that was expected from a church-going man. Mother responded in a similar fashion, paying Dad the respect that she ought to. Her smile fell as her

cheek pressed in at Dad's neck, that familiar vacant expression washing over her like ice water. I stood watching from under the fig tree in our small backyard. Soon, Dad would summon me and I, too, will greet him with a fresh smile.

The wine at dinner instilled some colour in Mother's cheeks and her voice chimed with more warmth. Smoke whirled above her head as she stared through the small window in our box kitchen, thoughtlessly balancing a cigarette between her fingers. Boiled cabbage and cinnamon pumpkin mixed in the stale air with the smell of tobacco. Dad puffed smoke into his glass before every sip. His fat lips embracing the rim as if the last trickle of whisky were about to turn to dust in the bottom of his glass, yet the bottle between him and us stood almost full.

There was no "Amen" after dinner, no bowing of the heads and no Psalm 23. There was only a very polite "Thank you for dinner," and an almost urgent "Have another glass of wine." When Mother said, "No more," Dad simply poured another for her. Conversation was lifted as the white and amber liquids lowered in their respective bottles.

My estranged parents flirted cautiously from opposite ends of the table. Dad crept his hand over the faded tablecloth like a drunken mouse in a maze, working his way through the green patterns of vine leaf and grape. He paused this hand in front of Mother's. After a few hesitant seconds her fingers crawled in under his palm. He focussed on her. She shrugged, as if trying to hide under her own shoulders. They seemed like strangers meeting for the first time. Perhaps they were.

I cleared the table and put the dishes into the sink. The plates rarely needed to be scraped and there was never enough left in the pots for second helping. Over the slow flow of the tap, I could hear Dad murmuring. The words were unclear, but I knew what he was saying, or at least what he was thinking. He had Mother by both hands, his eyes wide and glazed, with a glint of love, or lust, for Mother.

Mother's cold hands and arms folded around me, my own hands in hot water, trying to wash away the last memories of the evening. I felt her lips press on my cheek before a shy, almost apologetic "Goodnight" fell from them. She took a deep breath and sighed, as if trying to suck the words back through her teeth.

“Goodnight,” she said again.

Another “Goodnight” echoed down the hallway. Mother followed it. I heard their bedroom door shut. I cleared the ashtray and the empty bottles from the table. There was still wine in Mother’s glass. Dad never left for bed without his.

Shy streaks of moonlight pierced through the trees and into my room. I watched the shadows play on my walls and dance over my bed. Through the thin asbestos walls, I heard my father’s grunts and my mother’s moans. Sleep never came easy on these nights. Sleep never came easy.

Not long after the sun stabbed its beams through the windows did I hear Dad pull out of the driveway. I listened to the old Datsun, puff-puff-puff, as it idled while Dad closed the gates behind him. Then, Dad was gone.

In the kitchen, the kettle whistled. No sugar. Only a little bit of milk. Strong, the way Mother likes it in the morning. I took the coffee to her room. She held out a bruised arm to take it. “I’ll just put it down,” I said, “and bring a cold cloth for your eye.” She tried to smile, or say “Thank you” but she couldn’t.

HONOURABLE MENTION

REST STOP

Chloe James



Dust finds its way into all the gaps and crevices, fills the cabin with a dry humidity that burns my nostrils and sticks in my throat. I imagine, with each shallow breath, the orange particulate coating the sacs of my lungs, so that even when I leave here, I'll be carrying a piece of this strange land within me.

The bus potholes and bounces us out of our seats. I've been on this rollercoaster for seven hours. The dust, the scratchy seat covers, the filthy squat toilets and the persistent heat would be just-bearable if it wasn't for the need for hypervigilance — my backpack strap secured to my ankle and a hand over valuables at all times has made this awkward, uncomfortable ride, anxious as well.

Hour ten sees us stop at a roadside restaurant. It's a shack really, with pots of cold curry sitting outside and uncovered for God knows how long. Not hungry enough to trade nourishment for ill-health, I turn instead to a side stall selling bamboo filled with sweet sticky rice. The woman looks weather worn and tired but she smiles. She holds up two fingers, and I hand her the 200 Riel — fifty Australian cents. She runs her eyes over my pale skin and hair — and beneath her scrutiny, I self-consciously adjust the band of my ponytail.

In the dirty restaurant I peel the bamboo and gouge the sweet sticky rice from its hole. There's not much to it but it's filling.

An emaciated old dog weaves around the rubbish and two small boys — one, a baby wearing just a t-shirt, the other, older, dirty-chested and wearing just shorts — play amongst the piles of refuse, apparently content, their laughter no different from a child's back home.

The familiar chug of the motos announces a young man with a brace of live ducks hanging from his handlebars. I notice one duck: it's motionless amongst its peers, blood running from its ears.

A pretty young-woman runs over to meet the motorbike. Her skin the warmest hue of brown, she has the now familiar, almond eyes and heart shaped face of the Khmer people. After handing the man money, she strides away with the wriggling, squirming ducks. Passing the two little boys, she calls to them before dropping the ducks at a piece of old board by a bucket of water. As the two boys run to her, the woman, whom I assume is their mother, has knife in hand. Sunlight flashes from the blade and I hear the struggling flutter of wings and squawk of frightened birds. I open my eyes to the gushing neck of the knife's first victim. The woman nonchalantly tosses the billed head into the bucket. Then a second duck's decapitated and its head drops into the bucket. The mother squawks at her children, passing them down a duck's carcass, which the children eagerly set to de-feathering for their dinner.

I sit pale faced in my plastic chair, head spinning and put aside the sticky rice; I have no stomach for it now. With a honk, the bus signals the continuance of our journey.

Aboard the bus, I look out again on the family preparing their food and the line of ducks' heads, oozing gently, their eyes blank and staring out at nothing.



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

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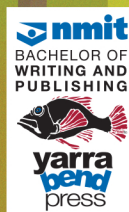
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The background of the entire page is a deep purple. It is decorated with several stylized, cartoonish owls in shades of pink and purple. The owls have large, round eyes with yellow and black pupils, and their bodies are decorated with floral and geometric patterns. Some owls are positioned behind the text, while others are in the foreground. At the bottom of the page, there are several stylized pencils in green and yellow, with black erasers and pink sharpened tips. The text is centered in the upper half of the page, written in a white, sans-serif font.

This
anthology
comprises NMIT's
second *Time to Write* short
story contest. The 600 to 1000
word entries came from 12 to 17
year olds, adults, and NMIT students.
Each was judged by a panel of
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lecturers and the winners announced at
the *Time to Write* festival launch on
Monday 27 May 2013. Inside are
stories about wounded soldiers, giant
dragons and cake baking. There are
others about adultery, ghosts and
love. They were imagined by both
young and more experienced
minds, but all have been
written with imagination
and care. Enjoy.



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