



STORIES  
& POEMS  
2020



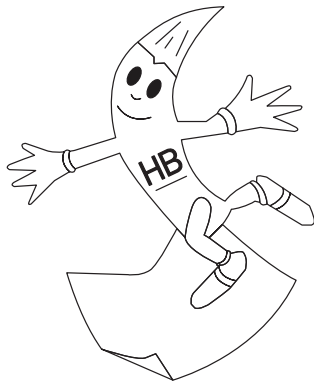
STORIES & POEMS 2020



WESTERN UNION YOUNG WRITERS  
imagination creation

WESTERN UNION YOUNG WRITERS  
i m a g i n a t i o n   c r e a t i o n

—— 2020 ——  
STORIES & POEMS



Imagination Creation, 2020  
Compiled by Dayle Dunshea  
Cover art, layout and editing by Damian Archer  
This anthology is a collection of the prize-winning  
submissions to the Western Union Young Writers /  
Imagination Creation Writing Competition 2020.  
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WESTERN UNION YOUNG WRITERS  
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# 2020 WRITING COMPETITION

Sponsored by:

Western Union Writers

Wyndham City Council

Wyndham Community and Education Centre

Kirpal Singh Chauli

Margaret Campbell

# AWARDS

## Age 15–18 Poetry

First Prize: Alexander Dalton  
(Unconditional)  
Second Prize: Katie Hutton  
(Woke Up)  
Highly Commended: Matthew Lee  
(The Gardener and the Yew Tree)

## Age 15–18 Story

First Prize: Amy Richardson  
(One Little Thing)  
Second Prize: Alisha Diacono  
(Watch)  
Highly Commended: Alisha Diacono  
(Uber Eats)  
Highly Commended: Alisha Diacono  
(When the Lights Fade)

## Age 11–14 Poetry

First Prize: Joann Manoj Jacob  
(The Final Moments of a Particular Butterfly)  
Second Prize: Joann Manoj Jacob  
(Marionette)  
Highly Commended: Jacob Burfoot  
(Money Talks)  
Commended: Scarlett Haynes  
(The Wind is Sick)

## Age 11–14 Story

First Prize: Odin Mazza  
(Money Money Money)

Second Prize: Meha Modi  
(Today)  
Highly Commended: Joys Chui  
(My Journey Home)  
Highly Commended: Emily Ascough  
(The House Across the Street)  
Commended: Aditya Yarravajhala  
(The Tree of Last Night)  
Commended: Bonnie Miller  
(Voices)

## Age 10 and Under Poetry

First Prize: Odessa Zubanov  
(Puppet)  
Second Prize: Odessa Zubanov  
(Behind My Smile)  
Highly Commended: Tessa Manoj Jacob  
(Nothing is Impossible)  
Commended: Odessa Zubanov  
(Al Gatto)  
Commended: Odessa Zubanov  
(My Grandmother's Hands)

## Age 10 and Under Story

First Prize: Abdul Raheem  
(Orphaned)  
Highly Commended: Hazel Mazza  
(The Price of the Ocean)  
Highly Commended: Molly Cronin  
(The Birds and the Man)

# AWARDS

## **Sherryl Clark Award**

Alisha Diacono

## **Shortlisted Entries 2020**

### **Age 15–18 Poetry**

Danielle Collins (Capture)

Omar Ghanem (I Am the Horse and the Horse is I)

Owen (I Want to Believe)

### **Age 15–18 Story**

Emily A. Norton (Like Dragon Fire)

Alisha Diacono (Itch)

### **Age 11–14 Poetry**

Senaya Pimburage Dona (Time and Change)

Vasish Vasireddy (Virus)

Ananya Singh (My Name)

Tashreet Kaur (Coloured Soul)

Yi Chiao Chou (Snow)

Yi Chiao Chou (Clouds)

### **Age 11–14 Story**

Senaya Pimburage Dona (Life After Death)

Grace White (Plan It Red)

Jennifer Tran (Happiness)

Areeb Rayann (A Hero Named Egg)

Avani Malali (Tit for Tat)

## **Age 10 and Under Poetry**

Odessa Zubanov (Isolation)

Odessa Zubanov (The Maid)

## **Age 10 and Under Story**

Anshika Thakur (Missing You)

Sanvi Parikh (Dolphin Fun the Dolphin Run)

Geet Mata (The Power Went Off and I Heard a Scream)

Rediat Yohannes (The Hidden Christmas Present)

Kaavya Niranjana (Pay Back)

Christiana Vadysinghe (Miss You Already)

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# UNCONDITIONAL

Alexander Dalton

A mother's love is unconditional,  
Until you tell her you're her son,  
To which she replies that  
*It's just a phase*

A father's love is unconditional,  
Until you tell him you're his son,  
To which he replies that  
*He feels like he's losing a daughter*

A sister's love is unconditional,  
Until you tell her you're her brother,  
To which she replies that  
*You've made life so hard for us*

As time passes, people tell you that  
your family is so good with everything,  
that you're so lucky to have your family.  
That you should be grateful.

For a family's love is unconditional,  
Until you come out as transgender,  
To which they reply,  
*Love is a privilege*

# WOKE UP

Katie Hutton

I woke up to him  
A slap in the face  
Ice down my back  
Shivering from his cold heart  
Trembling, Sweating, burning, hurting..  
Kick in the gut  
Another slap in the face  
Not surprise really, just shock of the pain  
Conflicted  
Aching  
**I woke up to myself**

# THE GARDENER AND THE YEW TREE

Matthew Lee

Are you still here? Have you laid down  
Roots in my place, in my land? What  
Are you doing. Why do you not spread  
Your wings and make free your sky?  
There is such a chasm

Before me, and I am afraid. I have cut  
You and used you as a bridge.  
Well, then, do you feel my weight? Do you  
Feel the aching of your scar? Are you  
Capable of hurt?

I am questioning a fool.  
A deaf, dumb fool.  
Year after year you drop  
Your sad fruits, I collect them when you look  
The other way. I have tasted them, they are  
bitter.

What sickness plagues  
Your cracked bark? Unload your griefs  
At my feet. I am no god. I am merely  
A gardener. Your god  
Watches over you.

# ONE LITTLE THING

Amy Richardson

They put a pill in your drink.

You didn't want them to, but you didn't protest.  
Now you watch it fizzing away in your lemonade.  
The drooping lemon on the side of the glass  
looks depressed. You don't even know where  
your friends got the pill from. To be honest,  
you were fooled into thinking they were better  
people than that.

But it's too late now. The drink is paid for.  
The pill is dissolved. You don't want your  
friends to think you're no fun. You can see in  
their eyes that they're way up in the clouds  
with the effects of alcohol.

"Drink up," slurs a friend. They all stare  
at you as the little voice in the back of  
your mind tries to persuade you not to drink.  
Tonight, you were supposed to be the designated  
driver, and you were doing so well. Until now.  
You've got no idea how crazy this concoction's  
going to make you, but you pick it up. The  
glass is smooth against your fingers, but your  
whole body burns as it tries to plead with you  
not to drink. As you shake out of fear, you see  
multiple pairs of eyes staring back at you,  
waiting. The glass wobbles in your hands as you  
bring it to your lips, and you swallow the first  
acidic gulp. Your friends all cheer. Somehow



you know this night is only going to get worse.

"More! More!" your friends chant. You take a moment to close your eyes, trying to banish the burning feeling encasing you. You push it away long enough to swallow some more. The lemonade doesn't taste any different, but that makes you all the more scared. When you realize you've already emptied half the glass, you try to hide a swear.

As a quick diversion, you check the time on your Gucci watch. The one that cost so much you had to practically starve the week you bought it, only surviving on chocolate stashed at the back of the cupboard, and a few too many biscuits with your coffee at work. But then again, your friends cheered. The whole world did. You became part of the in-crowd.

"It's getting late," you announce, hoping your group of friends don't force anymore of the spiked drink into you. Thankfully, they nod and tilt their heads back to get the last drops of the liquor from their glasses. They start to head for the door, and you follow them outside into the chilling night air. You would've liked to stop at the toilet first, but you don't want to hold them up. You walk into the parking lot, all too aware of how swollen your bladder is.

As you walk around the carpark, you shiver in the cold. Maybe you should've worn something warmer. Your friends all brought jackets and coats.

*Where is it?* You think as you stumble, literally, in circles around the parking lot trying to find your car. *The pill is kicking in, it has to be.* You groan inside your head, not realizing you're actually doing it out loud too. *I was sure I parked it near the entrance to the pub. No, maybe it's at the back of the carpark. Why can't I think properly?*

You rummage around in your pockets, searching for the keys. You stop panicking when you find them and pull them out of your pocket. For a moment you watch them swirl and catch the moonlight. When it hits your eyes, you close them and grimace. Whatever was in that pill is making you feel seriously weird.

A friend calls out to you: "It's over here, ya doofus." You stagger to where he stands and find that, yes, he's found your car. You thank him and open it. It's a white Hyundai Kona. Another expensive asset, but it makes you look rich and it's shiny. As soon as you enter, you find it hard to draw air into your lungs. Riddling the air inside is the lasting stench of cigarettes. You scrunch your nose and wish for home. You start the car.

On the way, you know your perception isn't right. Streetlights are too bright, and everything else is too dark. Your vision flickers and swirls like a Van Gogh painting. Your friends are all singing in the back, but it's terrible. You clutch the steering wheel tighter, and without realizing, your foot decides to push

down harder on the accelerator.

Then, you think you hear sirens as you enter onto the highway. *Oh no, do they know I've been taking drugs? Will they know if they pull me over and run a test?*

The sirens grow louder now, and they aren't just a hallucination.

"Hey, be quiet for a minute!" you yell toward the backseat. Your tongue feels funny in your mouth, like its filling with air. You blink hard to try and feel as if you *haven't* taken a pill as the sirens shriek and draw closer. The noise hurts your head. You check the rearview mirror to see if it's the cops, but all you can make out are blinding flashing lights. Then the vehicle comes up beside you. You almost wee yourself with fright. You clutch at your stomach to check everything's still in there. It is. You turn back to the flashing lights and release a breath you were holding. It's only a firetruck. Not the police.

They pass you and everyone in the backseat starts to copy the siren noises as it continues on down the highway. You're glad when your back in the suburbs again. You're feeling tired, but you're almost at the first drop off point. Your friend's house is only seconds away.

Suddenly, without seeing, you hit an animal. The body makes the car jolt and you disconnect with your seat for a moment. You decide not to

touch the brake. You continue to your destination, hoping the animal is dead, or soon will be, instead of thrashing in pain on the bitumen.

*First stop. First death.* Your friend falls out of the car yelling a slurry thank you.

*Shut up.* You tell that insistent voice at the back of your mind. *There won't be any more deaths.*

But you should've listened to that voice.

You should've listened hard.

You don't even get out of the street you're in before death spreads its disease again. Your vision begins to ripple, and you no longer know which side of the road you're on. The irritating voices in the backseat are making your whole-body twitch. Your stomach starts to twinge with pain from holding so much liquid. You want to take control of the situation, but you have no control. All you want to do is *scream*.

And as you round a corner, there it is.

A truck.

A beeping horn, headlights making the backs of your eyes throb. Glass breaking; it looks like it's snowing tiny ice crystals. Limbs flying in midair, sounds of last breaths. Air bags inflating, and then...

black.

\*\*\*

You wake up. Everything has changed from black to white. Are you in Heaven? No, you don't deserve to go to Heaven.

"You're awake," you hear a lady say. Your eyes struggle to focus in on your surroundings. "You were in a terrible car accident."

Oh, yes. Now you remember. And you realize where you are. Lying in a comfortable bed, in hospital.

"You and the man in the truck were the only survivors. I'm sorry."

The ache in your skull makes the anger even worse. Your fists clench under the bedsheets, and your eyes glance around the room for something to make it go away. Something to knock you out, or to stop the tears from falling. An ache in your chest starts to emerge, and all the words in the world couldn't let you describe how wrong you knew it was to take that pill. You knew you shouldn't have given into the pressure. Yes, that's what it was:

*Pressure.*

Now, go and think about what you did.

## WATCH

Alisha Diacono

The tunnel is approaching in ten minutes. No one has to inform me; there is no announcement, no signs, no countdown. But I know it's coming. After all, I've been travelling on the same train for four months now. At 9:45 AM, every second day, every single week. A routine has been established in my mind - the first thirty minutes of the trip, I observe the window beside me. For the last twenty minutes, I observe the carriage.

Of course, the carriage itself isn't the particularly interesting part. It's quite bland, honestly. Grey exterior, white walls, blue linoleum floors with indecipherable stains. The seats are colourful and ugly. The poles, on which multiple hands are curled, are yellow and cheerful. I often wonder how many diseases are on each handle. Surely more than is on a toilet seat, even the ones at the train station. That's partly why I sit in the window seat; the view is just an insignificant bonus.

But, overall, the carriage is incredibly ordinary. The people in it, though, they are interesting.

Businessmen, university students, high school students, families, mothers with screaming toddlers, busy people on smart phones. All rushing to get somewhere, all unaware of what is happening.

An analysis. Not of all of them; the train ride

only lasts fifty minutes, and to analyse each person would require much longer than that. No, just the ones I think would match.

It's hard work to find them. Not everyone has the right tone, or weight, or expression. Of course, expression hardly matters. People cannot express the same emotion for too long of a time, and so that factor is temporary, but worthy of consideration when there are multiple candidates.

I look at them now.

A man, tall, average build, even, pale skin. He checks his watch once, twice, and does not seem to find whatever he was looking for on its' face to remove the pinched expression from his own. He fidgets constantly. Although I wanted to analyse him, as soon as I see him tapping his foot, I try to rip my eyes away. Its' difficult; I can see him doing it out of my peripheral vision. Once I am aware of it, I can't seem to stop noticing it. Perfect. That was exactly what I was looking for.

A girl. Short, chubby, dark, smooth skin. Younger than me, but not by much. She is biting her nails, every one of them, down to the quick. It's incredibly annoying. I cannot seem to stop clenching my hands each time she does it. But however annoying it is, it is what I was hoping to find.

A woman. Average height. Tan skin, long, dark hair. Remarkably attractive, although I do not find myself attracted to her. She clicks her nails over and over as she reads the book in her lap. Even though she sits four rows ahead, I can hear the clicking, taunting me, telling me I have

once again found the right sign.

We reach another stop. It is not long until the tunnel now - soon we will be inside the darkened passage and no one will be able to see anything but black. I estimate six minutes. Enough time for the train to take off, slow to a safe speed, and enter the tunnel. I feel my body hum with the anticipation. Although I have taken this route countless times, I have never quite had enough reason to do what I wish to do today. I'm waiting for the right match, to tell me the time is right.

As the doors open at the stop, I see my match.

He walks into the carriage. He is short, young, my age. His hair is black, his eyes are covered by glasses that are so darkly tinted, I cannot discern his eye colour. Before I get a chance to move to a better vantage point, he sits beside me, in the only aisle seat available. It may be easier if he is closer. In other ways, harder.

He instantly shows the signs. He is sweating ridiculously. As the train takes off again, I can see it rest on his skin, droplets of perspiration, his body smelling like salt. I am instantly irritated. He takes out cards from his pocket, small, palm-sized cards with writing on them. He highlights some words, the noise of the scraping marker echoing in my ears. I can barely focus enough to make out the words, but he is whispering whatever is on it under his breath. I can't understand him, and it infuriates me more. My palms start to sweat. I am overjoyed with luck.

Nobody else seems to see as he begins tapping his foot. It taps, over and over, like a metronome,



relied on the first person to show him kindness after his world had fallen apart. He hated how he filled every void with admiration for someone who would, inevitably, end up taking advantage of that innocence that could only be ruined with experience. Damien didn't think of himself as particularly naive; after surviving through a less-than-loving household, the foster system, and two repeated senior years, he thought he had pretty much experience all he could have, good or bad. But apparently, he hadn't even thought of the way betrayal would feel, of the way being replaced and finding out through a third party would tear down every structure Damien had built around his fragile trust. He had never considered that to be an option, at least, not when it came to Kole, who had been beside him for three years. Damien hated it, hated him, hated himself for thinking that negatives weren't possible from someone who had been nothing but a positive. He spat the cigarette out of his mouth and onto the road far below.

He knew it wouldn't do any good to wallow in his own misfortune. He had done enough of that, and achieved nothing out of it, to teach him the same lesson a million times. He groaned as he slipped off the desk, stretching his limbs once his feet hit the floorboards of his apartment. He could feel the chill of the wood even through his socks, but he refused to close the window. It allowed him to think he wasn't as trapped as he felt.

With another glance at the clock on his desk, he reached for his phone.

His friends had texted, the closer ones worried about him after hearing of his breakup, the more distant ones wondering what he was up to tonight. He didn't reply to any of them; he clicked onto Uber Eats and scrolled through the options.

Ten minutes later, and Damien was seated on his two-seater couch in front of his TV. His pizza would arrive in a few minutes. He yawned as he watched the driver's car make its way slowly to his apartment complex on the small on-screen map. The only sound in his living room was from the window, the quiet breeze and slow drizzle mixing with the roll of tires over wet roads. The sound was almost calming enough to stop his head from throbbing.

Within five minutes, his phone chimed again from its spot beside the whiskey bottle on his coffee table.

*Do you want me to knock on your apartment door, or would you like to meet me in the parking lot to collect your order?*

Damien considered the Uber Eats driver's message and glanced at Daisy.

Daisy was in her usual sleeping spot, on a pile of blankets beside the door. At five months, she was a small Jack Russell, her dark body almost invisible in the night-time shading his apartment. Damien didn't want to wake her. She was excitable and difficult to quieten down. And she loved visitors a little too much. But after looking from her back to his message waiting for a reply, Damien sighed. What was it that his foster mother said? You can always be kind to

others when others haven't been kind to you.

Fuck that, he thought. He didn't want to walk four flights of stairs at 3 AM. Knowing full well the elevators were out of order, and ignoring the twinge of guilt, he tapped out a reply.

*It'd be better if you came up to apartment 56, but I have a dog, so be aware. She does not bite.*

He sighed, guessing that was sufficient enough, and threw the phone back onto his couch, moving to stand in his small entryway to wait for the driver.

After what felt like ten minutes but Damien knew was probably only two, the door shook slightly as someone knocked lightly on the thin wood. Before he could even take a step, Daisy shot out of her bed and jumped up so high that Damien had difficulty getting around her to reach for the door knob. He thanked whatever God existed that she wasn't a loud dog; she was just incredibly excitable. She didn't bark, but she did whimper with excitement as he twisted the knob and pulled the door open a crack.

"Order for Damien Evergreen?" The voice asking the question was young. From his spot behind the door, Damien could barely see the speaker, but he saw a white sweater, wavy hair and almond-brown skin.

Damien pulled the door open more, enough to allow a person through, but not enough for Daisy to dart out in front of his barricading body.

"Thank you." Damien said, reaching his hand out to take the bag. The boy in front of him looked

up and smiled politely. Damien's heart skipped a beat, and his own distraction bought Daisy enough time to slip between his legs and crash into the driver's beat up Converse.

"Oh!" He said in surprise, and Damien cringed, ready to apologise, but the boy only bent down and scooped Daisy up into his arms. He cradled her to his chest despite his white jumper, watching as she sniffed at his sleeves and pawed at his pale blue jeans. The boy laughed and stood up.

"I'm so sorry, she's so active." Damien said, and the boy just smiled again and shook his head. He didn't hand her back over yet, and he still held Damien's food in the plastic bag swinging from his wrist.

"No, it's fine! My roommate refuses to get a dog, even though our landlord allows it," the boy rolled his eyes, but his smile was still in place when he looked back up at Damien. "What's her name?"

"Uh, Daisy." He said. He mentally cursed himself for his dull voice. He didn't have half the friendliness in his tone that the driver did. Damien resisted the urge to pick out every difference between them and instead watched as Daisy calmed down in the bed of sweater-covered limbs.

"That's cute. She's cuddly," the boy rocked his arms as if to prove his point before looking at Damien again. "I'm Xavier, by the way."

Damien finally did more than look at Xavier stupidly and instead opened his door wider. "Do you want to come inside, Xavier?"

Xavier hesitated only a moment before stepping

through the doorway. He smiled at Damien, head tipped to the side. "I just realised I haven't even given you your food yet."

"It's fine, you can put it on the coffee table when you're ready." Damien said. His want to be inconvenient just because he was having a hard time had worn off when he saw Xavier's kindness.

He didn't want to rush the boy; he couldn't imagine that his job was very lively at this time. Xavier didn't hesitate, though, and placed Daisy on the floor gently before leaving the bag of food on the table beside Damien's bottle. Damien tried not to be embarrassed about his poor diet as Xavier turned back to him.

"Sorry for the lack of professionalism," he said, a shy look on his face. His brown eyes were incredibly dark in the dim light; the TV was playing a sitcom, and the light danced across Xavier as Damien tried to form a response.

"It's okay." He ended up saying, and Xavier nodded, turning to leave. Damien had internal battle with himself.

He had broken up with his cheating boyfriend two days ago. A cute boy happened to be his Uber Eats driver, and he seemed nice. But Damien wasn't dumb, and he knew that right now any attractive, kind person would make his stomach do somersaults.

Even though he was aware of that, he still said, "You don't have to go."

Xavier paused mid-step to hesitate. Damien tried not to slap himself for being so desperate, but Xavier turned before he could beat himself up over it.

"Really?" He asked. Damien nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Xavier waited for another moment before nodding, a smile forming on his face. Damien wondered if his face hurt from smiling so much.

"I'd love that." Xavier said, and Damien's mouth twitched in an attempt at a smile. He waved a hand behind him at the couch.

"Let's sit?" He suggested, and Xavier nodded. They walked over to the couch, and as soon as they had sat down, Daisy jumped onto Xavier's lap and burrowed her head into his stomach. He laughed as Damien unpacked the food.

They didn't speak as Damien uncovered his pizza and took the first slice. Xavier stroked Daisy with his left hand and tapped his right hand restlessly on his knee, his gaze fixed on the puppy in his lap.

"You can have a piece, if you want." Damien said. Xavier looked up at him and nodded before reaching out to get a slice with his right hand, ceasing his tapping.

"So, what's wrong with you?" Xavier asked. The question was blunt enough that Damien did a double take. Xavier seemed to realise his own tactlessness, because he swallowed his bite and continued. "It's Saturday, or more like Sunday, at 3 AM, and you're alone with your ridiculously cute puppy, ordering a pizza and finishing a bottle of whiskey."

The evidence was astoundingly obvious. Damien looked at his pizza slice and shrugged. "I could have ordered it after a night out."

"But you didn't." Xavier said, tone light and



playful, and Damien nodded, finally allowing himself to smile softly. The expression felt weird, but he didn't remove it, not even when Xavier returned it.

"No." He admitted. Usually, Damien didn't admit anything beyond an 'I'm fine' to the friends who asked in the morning. But the encouragement of the whiskey, added to the allure of dumping all his problems onto a kind stranger, was enough for Damien to let his walls become transparent.

"What's wrong? An angry girlfriend? A failed class?" Xavier prompted, and Damien shrugged again.

"I got dumped." He said, and Xavier raised a brow.

"She must have been blind." Xavier said jokingly, and Damien let himself feel complimented even though he knew it was a standard polite response.

"He had perfectly good vision, that's why he saw a girl and thought she'd do better than me." Admitting the truth was nauseating and relieving all at once. Xavier's face was blank with minor shock before he recovered in an instant and put a hand on Damien's wrist as he reached for the pizza. Damien stilled and waited until Xavier removed it.

"He was an idiot, then, and you deserve someone better than that." Damien didn't know how to respond, so he just nodded with a jerk of his head.

They continued to eat in silence. The sitcom continued in mute as the subtitles danced along the bottom of the screen. The window blew even

cooler air into the apartment, and through his open bedroom door, Damien could see the shadows of his bed and the shelves crammed with books. Daisy's breathing from where she sat in Xavier's arms was louder than any noise either of them made, but Damien was too afraid to break the silence. He was worried that if he spoke, Xavier would realise he had much better things to do than sit in a stranger's house and listen to complaints about heartbreak.

"What do you study?" Xavier asked, before Damien could build up the courage to even move his hand. He relaxed at the simple topic of conversation, and as they talked, he relaxed even further.

He allowed himself to spill his own every day lifestyle, from the lectures of visual design he attended to the workouts he did five times a week to the part time job he held at the supermarket below his building. He listened, interested to listen to someone that wasn't Kole, as Xavier spoke about marketing lectures and his Uber job and his friends who he went out with that day.

Damien finally yawned at 4.48 AM. Xavier copied it and stretched, causing Daisy to wake up in his arms. She fell asleep again as soon as he placed her down on the living room rug, and he stood up to collect the rubbish.

"Thank you, for staying." Damien said. Xavier turned back to him after he'd thrown out their trash and smiled.

"Thank you for letting me talk and eat your pizza." He replied. Damien laughed lightly, and led a yawning Xavier to the door.

"I hope your drive home is safe." Damien hoped

he didn't sound creepy, but Xavier didn't seem like he'd thought that, because all he did was smile again and hold up his phone.

"I'll text your number to let you know I'm home safe." Xavier said, and showed Damien how he'd copied his number from Uber and to his contacts. "Or maybe, if you want, you can come to my place next time for pizza."

Damien let himself be eaten alive on the inside by a million restless nerves as he smiled back. "That would be nice." He said, and Xavier nodded.

He spared him a final smile before he turned and walked down the long corridor to the stairwell. Damien watched after him, before turning back into his apartment to finally crash.

He lay on his bed, his living room window closed, his TV off, his front door locked. He fell asleep without his mind working in overdrive. Instead, he thought of pizza and rain and a warm hand on his wrist.

## WHEN THE LIGHTS FADE

Alisha Diacono

The light streaming through the living room window was gold. Not a bright gold, like the metal, but the cool gold of afternoon rays. The light fell on the couch he was on, and James watched as it cast shadows across the room, the brightness of it magnifying the darkness of the shade. Maybe it was a metaphor, he thought, an eye for an eye, or a positive for a negative.

Lately, life had been feeling that way. He had fun at university, with his friends, and he did like being a film major, despite the heavy work load. But something itched under his skin whenever he came home. Even in moments like this, where he was seated on the living room couch, and Danielle was in the bedroom upstairs, something inside him felt misplaced.

Maybe it was that stupid seven-year-itch that older people joked about. Danielle had been in his life since he was fifteen and progressing from mid-adolescence to early adult hood wasn't easy to do on your own, let alone with the fear of letting someone down. James knew that Dani hadn't changed much - she was still unfairly beautiful, ridiculously smart, outrageously funny. He knew that this irritating hesitation he was feeling was probably because of him. James, who was constantly changing. James, who was dynamic to the point where it was confusing. James, who loved passionately and hated unapologetically.

James, who sometimes loved and hated the exact same thing. He knew he wasn't easy to love, and yet Dani had loved him for more than a third of their lives. They were James-and-Dani, to everyone who knew them. James hadn't been just 'James' for a long time.

Maybe that was what he missed, James considered. The freedom and simplicity of being alone. Life with Dani had been a kind of freedom, at first. That time had changed, James was aware, but how could you remove someone from your life when they were almost all of it?

Two days later, and it was Sunday. James could smell coffee, the strong aroma wafting upstairs into their bedroom. He opened his eyes and looked around blearily. Sundays were always his favourite, the easy, calm way that each hour bled into the next one. The light in the room was a cool blue, and James knew it would be midmorning. Dani must already have been downstairs, James thought. She was always an early riser, ceaselessly productive and efficient.

James sat up, but he wasn't ready to go downstairs yet. He didn't want to face Dani, who would already be in her gym clothes, with his bedhead and sleepy eyes. She would just kiss him anyway and remind him of what she had planned for that day. James couldn't do wrong in her eyes, and although he had loved every part of that affection for so many years, now it seemed like a cop out. James sometimes wished Dani would be more diverse, but it seemed cruel to him to think something of someone who he was supposed

to love unconditionally, and so he pushed the thought aside and finally rose from the bed.

Downstairs, the light was even more terrific. Cool gold, the colour of midmornings and easy starts. James hesitated at the last stair, his foot hovering over the floorboards, but before he could turn himself around, he forced his foot down.

The creak that he made caused Dani to turn. She smiled at him, and James knew she was brilliant. Thick black curls and deep, dark skin. Eyes that always greeted him with a smile. James returned it to her, his stomach in a knot.

"How did you sleep?" She asked. James stepped to the side of her, his back towards her as he reached for the sugar tin. Dani wound her arms around his waist from behind him, and although she couldn't see his expression, James closed his eyes and counted to three.

"Good. Are you about to head out for a run?" James dumped three teaspoons of sugar in his coffee mug. Dani stepped away from him and he let out a breath, turning to face her.

"Yeah, you want to join?" Her offer was genuine, but pointless, because James hadn't been on a run in three years. He used to, but now he was on a soccer team with his university friends, and it felt pointless to run on Sundays when he did it after class anyway, with his mates beside him.

"Nah, you go ahead." He replied, and Dani nodded. James stirred his cup after adding his hot water, keeping his eyes on the mug. James could feel Dani scrutinizing him, her psychology

degree coming in to play, but he was determined to hide the way he couldn't meet her gaze.

"Are you alright?" Dani asked. She said it softly, a tone of voice she reserved for moments when she could sense the tension in his shoulders, but James just shook his head, finally looking up at her.

"No," he replied, the smile on his face tight-lipped, "I'm fine."

Dani nodded. She leaned forward to kiss him, slow and sweet like she always did, before she pulled away. James sent her a last smile before she turned, and by the time he opened his eyes again, she was gone, the sound of the door locking echoing through the empty house.

Guilt was strange when you hadn't done anything wrong. It was hard to place, like a particularly difficult crossword puzzle, or a pulled muscle that you couldn't name. James knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what had caused it. 'It' being the way he avoided going home.

It was now Wednesday, and James' soccer team was ahead of the opposition. His city-centre campus was alive with the sounds of the soccer match that they played at lunch times, a few dozen students standing by to observe. James stood in the goal, watching his team run on the field, trying to stop the opposing team from getting the ball anywhere near the goal that James was guarding.

His mind was distracted, as it had been for weeks now. Dani was as sweet, popular and pretty as ever, and James kept dodging her hugs and

making excuses as to why he was out late. The fact that they went to different universities made it so much easier, but James knew that the guilt he felt was obvious, and it was only a matter of time before Dani questioned him. James was prepared, though. He knew he hadn't wronged her, hadn't cheated or lied, and although that made his own guilt so much more confusing, it also cleared his conscience. He hadn't done anything bad, not really. James had just fallen out of love, and Dani hadn't caught up yet.

The game continued for another fifteen minutes. James blocked five goals, and his team won by two. He jumped around with them on the field, the small crowd that had assembled cheered, and James forgot about the tense knots in his stomach. When they all settled down to pick up their bags and leave, James felt lighter.

"Hey, are you going out with us tonight?" Ezra was James' best friend, and he asked James to go out every single day. Ezra was always invited to a party, always with a friend, and never angry with James when he always said no. Today wasn't any exception, and although the answer James gave him was the same as always, the need to reach out and tell Ezra the reason for his sweating palms was new.

"I can't." James said, and Ezra shrugged, but before he could turn, James grabbed his shoulder. "But can we talk? Just you and I."

Ezra turned to face him properly. His hair was messy as always, his sarcastic smile for once not present as he put his full attention on James. Ezra's support was forever unwavering, and that

made James' mind calm, albeit temporarily.

"What's up?" Ezra asked. James looked around, but their team was already talking to the girls on the side of the field. James sighed.

"I think I'm going to break up with Dani." He said. It came out fast, a rushed confession that James half-wished he could stuff back into his mouth. Ezra's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he feigned calmness.

"Your Dani? Your Dani of seven years?" Ezra clarified, and James nodded. "Why?"

James sighed again. He was relieved that Ezra hadn't accused him of anything, that he hadn't assumed that James had found someone else who could possibly measure up to the perfect Dani. Ezra was unassuming and non-judgemental of James. Although Ezra was also friends with Dani, and had been since they were children, he and James were like brothers. Ezra had spent more time at James' house in their teens than at his own, and now they were no less close.

"Because, my feelings have changed. I'm just not..." He trailed off, unsure how to describe the tornado of emotions he was feeling.

"Into it anymore? Passionate?" Ezra offered. James nodded. "And now you're feeling guilty, because you changed, and you don't want to hurt her, because even if you don't love her, you don't hate her."

James nodded again. Even if Ezra had seen him cry before, James blinked hard as he felt his eyes well up. "I don't hate her. I still love her, just not the way I did before."

"Then tell her, mate, or she's going to end

up hating you." James looked up at Ezra. His words made sense, but James could hardly imagine looking Dani in the eyes right now, let alone telling her that he was about to let her down immeasurably.

"But she thinks that we're supposed to last forever. I don't want to ruin all her plans, and she's good for me, isn't she?" James asked. Ezra sighed, and stepped closer to James to lay a hand on his shoulder.

"The fact that you're questioning that yourself is answer enough. She'll be fine, and so will you, so just get it over with. Even though it's hard, and it'll break her heart, it's better than staying silent. Just say it to her tonight, or even tomorrow if you can't today, and let her go."

James thought about Ezra's words as he sat on the train home. It was only a twenty-minute trip, but it was enough time for him to think, with his earphones in as he stared out the window. James knew that Ezra's advice was speaking from experience - Ezra had broken up with enough men and women that James had forgotten all their names - but James still fought back a wave of nausea at the thought. Was it better to speak? Or was it better to let this go on, let his frustration bleed into something more sinister? If he said nothing, he wouldn't break Dani's heart, not yet at least. James sighed as the train arrived at his station. Like Ezra had said, he knew all the answers to his own questions. James just didn't know if he could

admit that they were the right ones.

Two weeks later, and James was staring up at the ceiling of Ezra's apartment. From the kitchen, he could hear Ezra talking to their other friend, Micah, as they prepared dinner for the three of them. Living on his best friend's couch wasn't so bad, James thought as the ceiling fan blades rotated faster than his eyes could track. But James would be lying if he said he didn't miss the smell of coffee in the morning, or the sound of Dani's footsteps as she ascended the stairs each night. James had to admit a lot of things to himself since they broke up, and one of them was that he didn't miss Dani, but he missed having someone to love, and having someone love him. Those were different things to miss, James knew. It didn't make the ache any easier, though.

Dani had accepted his revelation gracefully. She had stared at him in silence before going upstairs, and he didn't see her for hours. But when she had finally come back down, she'd told him that it was fine if that was what he wanted, but he needed to move out, and she wasn't going to compromise on that one. He had agreed easily - he would rather stay with his friends than alone in a neighbourhood where everything reminded him of Dani.

And so here he was. Micah shoving his legs over to sit beside him and Ezra putting the plate of tacos in front of them. Every night spent laughing with friends or dodging the people Ezra brought home, every morning rushed and crazy and never planned or methodical, every day fun and

different and exciting. He sometimes felt a twinge of grief, or maybe that was James reminiscing, when he saw couples on the street, but he knew that he had done the right thing. It was better to live honestly, James knew, than to love in a lie. He just hoped that Dani knew that as well.

## THE FINAL MOMENTS OF A PARTICULAR BUTTERFLY

Joann Manoj Jacob

wafer-thin wings crumbling against his warm  
flesh  
porcelain trail of grace halted prematurely  
spotted with ink so indelible it stains  
the sheets of egg-white flowing from your back  
and outlines the tiny meticulous lines that  
curve around your body  
a lifetime of flawlessness  
inhibited by one last breath, so loud that it  
tore the ground apart  
no man heard your cries  
your protruding button-black eyes pleaded  
not for help, you were beyond that  
but for an explanation, useless words clumsily  
strung together  
as a hasty barricade against the thunderous  
clap of human hands  
that ended your life as if it were nothing  
he laughed, you know  
he laughed and waited for us all to laugh with  
him  
but we didn't, if that is any consolation  
his cupped, dirty hands were undeserving of you  
your broken body shivering slightly in that  
cool autumn breeze  
which spirited you away gently, puffing merrily

to warm your frigid face  
and let you feel the wind under your  
outstretched wings, one last time  
that breeze was your only friend that day  
that day in which you touched the sky  
and fell to the welcoming soil once more

## MARIONETTE

Joann Manoj Jacob

Lively marionette, how can you dance

With those bone white strands of a dead crone's  
hair

Levitating your r i d i c u l o u s l y dainty  
feet

Her sacrifice, your propellant

Lest you fall into the abyss of the blackened  
stage

The puppeteer is i n c r e d i b l y tempting,  
with all his power and vulnerability

A fantasy that is f a r too real

As he tightens the noose e v e r s o c a r e  
f u l l y

Pretty lies that slip through the cracks in  
your porcelain skin

Forgiveness that is cruel judgement in disguise

Woven as d e l i c a t e l y as the daisies  
that dot your nylon stockings

Drops of blood taken from a place of undiluted  
venom

Streak through your cotton pinafore like  
e m b r o i d e r y

The s w e e t poison he spoon-fed you

Stains your plump, pouted lips

Firm, pale curls

Betray the wild, thin wisps that fall out after  
a night of

M i s t a k e s and hatred

Anger and e n v y

L o v e

Then your strings are c u t, with a dull blade  
that stings

And you are a lump of b r o k e n



# MONEY TALKS

Jacob Burfoot

Corporate giants  
Who only care about the weight of their wallet.  
Corporate liars  
Who only care about the coin in their pocket.

Paying for our demise  
"We're just playing the game of life"

Do you resent this planet?  
Or did you never really care?  
Did you see the writing on the wall?  
Or did you turn your coat though you were aware?

Maybe one day you'll see  
The great scar you left  
That you chose not to foresee

One day  
When we're all dead and gone  
The next generation  
Must clean up your mess  
You've pushed your burden onto them  
While you are the one  
Who should be condemned.

Your tongue was silver  
Your voice was silk  
We believed your lies  
While you hid behind your faceless guise.

One day  
When we're dead and gone  
Will the next generation look back and say  
"Look at the God damn mess they made"  
Or will they fall back into the downward spiral

Because a chain is only as strong as its  
weakest link  
A weakest link that resents this planet  
Or maybe never really cared  
One that might have seen the writing on the wall  
Had they turned around and saw the past

"Those who forget the past are condemned to  
repeat it" - *George Santayana*

## THE WIND IS SICK

Scarlett Haynes

The wind is sick  
Snoring  
Coughing  
Sniffling all night

In the morning he sneezes  
Light shower  
Comes from above  
Bless you we say

Using clouds as tissues  
To not spread the germs  
As he finishes the box  
Slowly comes a new one

Coughing sends a loud bang  
His throat goes dry  
Water brought from below  
Feeling ok

Blowing his nose  
Pounding on the grass  
Sending all down below  
Inside

As his temperature rises

The thermometer breaks  
Sending sparks  
Down below

He waits for medicine  
To bring a relief  
From this terrible cold  
That has been annoying him for weeks

He waits and waits  
For someone to help  
But until then  
The wind is sick

# MONEY MONEY MONEY

Odin Mazza

Joe sighed.

He kept thinking about his experience a few minutes before.

He had bought a seven-speed racing bike from a bicycle store and been offered change of \$35 dollars, a \$5, a \$10 and a \$20. He had looked at the notes and saw, or thought he saw, the queen on the five shifting to a more comfortable position.

He had said, "No way am I taking those notes. They don't look right. There's something strange about them."

"Are you accusing me of trying to cheat you?" said that indignant little shopkeeper that had been standing in front of Joe. "They're just like any notes, just don't hold them up to the light."

Now Joe was the type of kid that wanted to figure out why people warned him not to do something. So he held the money up to the light, hoping for an explanation. All he could see was pink. Swirls and swirls of it, and suddenly he was standing under a massive branch of a tree.

He looked down and realised he was standing on a massive letter F, and the next letter along was an I. As he walked on he realised he was standing on two words that spelt in capital letters, 'FIVE DOLLARS'. Weird. He kept walking and came to a word hanging on its side. He read

the letters sideways and saw it read 'AUSTRALIA' in copperplate letters. With a sense of dread, he realised he was stuck inside the five dollar note the shopkeeper had given him.

He saw someone walking towards him and he called, "Good afternoon, Your Majesty."

"Tell me you didn't hold the money up to the light," said Queen Elizabeth

Somehow Joe felt very small, and only managed to mumble "sorry".

"Ahem," said Queen Elizabeth sternly. "I couldn't hear you."

"Sorry," said Joe, louder this time. "Anyway, how do I get out of here?"

"You're avoiding the present subject," cried Queen Elizabeth.

"The reason I held them up to the light was because I was confused and decided that it might give me an explanation," explained Joe.

"What were you confused about?" asked Queen Elizabeth.

"Well, the notes looked strange to me but not to the bicycle shop owner," said Joe.

"That would be because that shopkeeper has already been through these notes and was pretending to not see anything strange about them so he could give them away and get them off his hands," said Queen Elizabeth.

"And he didn't want to take the risk of accidentally holding them up to the light?" asked Joe.

"Yes," said Queen Elizabeth.

"Anyway, how do you get out of here?" asked Joe.

"That is hard. You have to go through each

note. This one, the ten and the twenty. You're lucky you don't have to go through the fifty and the one hundred. But one day you will go through them."

"Anyway, it sounds easy to get out of here," said Joe.

"Ah, but for every note something dangerous happens, this one will explode as if all these bombs were dropping," said Queen Elizabeth.

"Then we have to get out of here," said Joe.

"Yes, are wishing now that you hadn't held the notes up to the light?" asked Elizabeth, scornfully.

"Yes, but we have to get out of here," said Joe.

"Follow me," said Queen Elizabeth.

As Joe was running, suddenly there was a big explosion in front of him, he heard three explosions behind him. He saw in front of him a pool of clear plastic.

"Jump!" said Queen Elizabeth.

"What? You're crazy," he shouted.

"I'm risking everything for you so you get the hell into that pool," she shouted. "Now just jump, you fool."

He took one look at the plastic and jumped. He was surrounded by a gradually disappearing pink, a vivid blue flashed at him and he and Elizabeth were standing near some bullocks and a cart. Above was another 'AUSTRALIA' in copperplate.

"You were right about jumping," said Joe.

"Of course I was," said Queen Elizabeth, still very annoyed at him.

A figure was walking towards them.

"Good afternoon, Mary," called Queen Elizabeth. Mary Gilmore approached Queen Elizabeth.

"Good afternoon, Elizabeth, another disobedient one," said Mary.

Joe was bursting with questions and he blurted out, "Why do you keep referring to me as a child?"

The queen snorted in a un-royal like way, but Mary said, "You are a child to me. I was born in 1865 and to Elizabeth, because of her rank, everyone's a child."

BOOM. A massive wave, like a tidal wave, came crashing down.

"Run," shouted Elizabeth.

They ran for it and all of a sudden they were on the edge of a note which was still blue.

"It isn't red," exclaimed Joe.

"But you haven't met dear Mr Paterson," said Mary, sarcastically.

Joe saw he was standing on a 'T', and in front of him was a horse and rider.

"Mary Gilmore, those poems are what thee would clean a dusty corner of a barn with," came a voice right by them.

"God almighty Banjo, you scared the living day-lights out of me," cried Queen Elizabeth.

He looked at Joe.

"Ah, an adventures young chap," said Banjo.

"The name's Joe Barkley, sir."

"Andrew Barton Paterson, but please, call me Banjo."

CRASH. They all new what it was. They all started to run. Soon the water was getting so close Joe knew he and the others would be drowned. Suddenly they came to a some horses and hopped

on them. They had been riding for about a minute when they came to a pool of plastic. All as one they jumped and the flash of red came. This time they landed by a plane.

"That was close," said Banjo.

They walked along. Banjo shouted: "John, my old friend."

A man in glasses came along.

"Banjo, man, is that really you," cried the man called John.

"The only one you don't know here is Joe," said Banjo. "Joe, this is John Flynn. Minister, author, and founder of the Royal Flying Doctor service. John, this is Joe Barkley, adventurous young lad."

"Let's get moving or the fire will get us," said Queen Elizabeth.

They all walked off. After about half an hour they came to a ship.

"We will be coming to Mary Reibey soon," said Queen Elizabeth. "An Australian merchant ship owner and trader."

Joe thought she sounded like a park keeper voicing the attractions.

"Good day Mary," said Queen Elizabeth.

"Good day, young Elizabeth," said a fast-shrinking Mary. "Another disobedient child, I see."

"Ah yes, Joe's the name," said Queen Elizabeth.

Joe cleared his throat.

"I hate to interrupt, but what about the fire?"

"Oh yes," said Queen Elizabeth.

They ran off but it was too late. John, Banjo and Queen Elizabeth all disappeared in the flames.

"Noooooooooooo," shouted Joe.

"It's all right," said Mary Reibey, "they've just gone back to their places on the notes."

Joe saw the clear pool of plastic and jumped in. He appeared by his new bike. What a weird adventure, thought Joe. He hopped on his bike and rode home. When he got home his father said,

"Ah, Joe, you got that bike. Um, can you go into town and get that \$150 dollar watch that I wanted when we were last in town?"

"Yeah," said Joe.

"Thanks, here's the \$150," said Joe's father, giving him a \$100 and a \$50.

Oh no, thought Joe.

## TODAY

Meha Modi

The gods are angry. The waves are slamming down on shore ferociously and the winds howl in outrage. I quiver in terror and look upon the humans shrieking in their language with longing. If only I had legs instead of roots, hands instead of leaves. Then I could escape from this disaster.

I shrivel as seawater hits my trunk and wind rips off my leaves. Nobody spares a glance for me, even though my branches are whipping around in terror.

Today is not a good day.

The skies are wonderfully lavender, tinged with gold and flushed with pink. The sun is hovering just above the water, reluctant to leave. Its light causes the deceptively calm surface of the water to shimmer. The sand is a wonderful bronze, shining like the lights the humans carry around with them.

A human child comes up to me, eyes, hair and skin the colour of earth. It points to me with a slender finger. Soon I feel the dampness of water hitting my soil, some of it coating my trunk. I rustle my leaves in satisfaction.

Today is a good day.

A low keening is filling the air. It is heavy with distress and melancholy. The being creating it is lying helplessly on the warm sand, twitching. Its fins are shaking and body moving desperately. It looks straight at me and

I see the anguish in its eyes.

The humans gather around it, spraying it with water from small buckets. Many help, but some just watch with an unusual light in their eyes - I suppose this isn't too common.

A little girl squabbles with a man and I see tears fall down her face as she gestures at the animal. The man only shakes his head and I understand. It is too late.

The flame of life slowly burns out in the animal and the human girl lets out a loud screech. I have not heard that mournful sound in a long time.

Today is a sad day.

Under my boughs, a family rests in the shade. The older of the trio - a female and male - lean against my trunk. They intertwine their fingers.

The woman clutches an infant to her chest. It is wrapped up in a purple blanket and all I can see is a fair face and bright, inquisitive eyes.

The male talks to his child, gesturing at the beach. The infant looks at it in wonder, giggling joyously. The woman swoops down to kiss it, and then turns over to do the same to the man. They both laugh.

The baby gazes at me and I whisper a quiet greeting. It giggles again, stretching a chubby hand toward me. I smile and drop a flower on her blanket. The small ones always seem to know.

The parents gasp in delight and tuck the flower near the infant's ear. They all smile and I look at them fondly.

Today is a happy day.

I see men coming in bright red and yellow jackets and sigh. These people are only here for

one of two reasons. They come up to me, feeling my trunk. One of them smiles smugly and yells to the others.

Two men carrying a saw appear and I shiver. I knew this would happen. People are now crowding around me and I see a human child with eyes, hair and skin the colour of earth, a little girl carrying a poster that shows a picture showing that creature that died all those days ago and a couple with a baby that had a flower in its hair.

The blade cuts into my skin and my honey blood runs down my body. It hurts but I resigned myself to this fate a long time ago.

Today is the day I die.

## MY JOURNEY HOME

Joys Chui

Through the long frosty winters and breezy summers that followed, Finch and I grew up together. He was my best friend, buddy, pal. We would've looked like brothers, if not for that tuft of snow-white hair on his mane. We went everywhere together, ate and slept together. But I will never forget the day, the day I would never get to see him again, the day that changed my life forever.

It was just like any other day, Finch and I were playing on the green grassy fields just beside the stable, when suddenly the ear piercing honk, that I had been dreading to hear, happened. Rough hands were on me, dragging me further from everyone into a rusted, grey, oversized vehicle. I was being taken away from everyone, my family, my friends, it felt like everything I once had and loved was all gone.

Hours had passed and I was awakened to the chill breeze of the night wind, a dark enormous figure approach me as I backed away. Reluctantly, I was aggressively led to an old outdoor stable that looked like it had been abandoned for many years. Against the dark night sky all I could see was the pealed paint that hung from the wall, and the wood planks that had fallen from the roof. The muscular man tugged me into the

stable, threw some hay and ran back to a tiny cottage not so far away.

Throughout the night, falling asleep was a real struggle. It was like being caught in a carousel of thoughts; every idea, motion and event from the day would replay in my mind. Being taken away from my family, and Finch, all my old memories suddenly came back to my mind about the times when Finch and I would play together on the fields and how we used to race each other and make all sorts of jokes. I sat up determined, and thought to myself, "I have to find a way home."

As the sun rose from its slumber, I was forced to work and train non stop, even though it tired me out I couldn't stop or else I would get beat up badly. At times I felt like disappearing away from everything in the world and all the pain and struggles would go away - but I couldn't quit now. I still had to find my family and Finch to continue the life that I was meant to have.

As soon as I got to rest, I knew that it was now or never I have to make my move, leave this place and never come back ever again. With all my strength, I budged my way out and ran off. I kept going, running, galloping and soon enough the farm looked like a tiny speck in the far distance. My skin shuddered, as I felt my legs starting to shut down, and as the moon illuminated in the tenebrous night sky, I decided that when the sun rose the very next morning I was going to find my way back. Nothing was going to stop me until I got back to where I belonged.

I awoke when a ray of sunlight fell across my face. As I looked around I was able to see the multicoloured leaves streaming down. Large trees all scattered everywhere, and a path lit up by the sun above shining its way through the leaves. I took that as a sign and followed the never ending path that led me to a huge grassy field and a small little house that looked quite similar to the man's but something was slightly different. It had more life and colour, whereas his was dull and empty.

All of a sudden at the corner of my eye I noticed apples that hung from the largest and most beautiful tree that I had ever seen. Their skins were work of art, perfect blends of red, green and yellow in pattern that my hooves could never paint. I dashed across the field straight to them, but before I could even devour a single juicy fruit I was stopped by a young lady, who looked twenty-one. She stoked me gently on my nose, and spoke to me in a calm gentle voice, "Where did you come from?" as she looked around to see if anyone was there. I didn't reply but kept staring at the apple that just looked even more delicious each second. Soon enough she noticed what I was looking at and fed me the apple. I had never tasted anything better, it was just like heaven.

She left back to the little house and minutes later came back out and fed me warm oats. As I stood close to her I sensed a feeling that there was someone there for me and I was never alone, a



feeling I had whenever I was near my parents or Finch, but whatever it was it felt great.

Days passed and so far my life was beautiful. I loved hanging out with Hannah and playing together, but I never forgot about Finch and everyone else. One night as the stars dazzled, brightening the whole sky, Hannah and I walked around on the freshly cut grass. I really didn't want to leave her but I needed to find Finch and I missed him so much, she looked into my eyes like she had just read my mind. "Why do you look so miserable today? You aren't acting like yourself. You miss someone don't you?" Then she paused. "Don't worry I had that same feeling before when my mum passed away. Your expression looks exactly like mine." If you need to go, just do it, don't let me hold you back." At that moment, I made a decision to find Finch. Not by myself, but with Hannah.

As the sun started rising higher than the horizon, Hannah and I started our day as usual. Little did I realise that today was going to be different. At breakfast I saw Hannah browsing through a brochure of different types of farms. The pictures looked almost similar, until I saw that tuft of snow-white hair. Finch! It's Finch! I started making noises and when Hannah pointed at the picture of Finch, I neighed the loudest I had ever before. "Is this where you belong?" In my mind all I kept thinking was yes, yes and yes!

That afternoon, as I waited in the back of the truck I was filled with excitement. I was finally

going to see Finch again! There was so much I was going to tell him. Hours passed but it felt like an eternity and as the car engine stopped and the front door was opened and then slammed shut, I questioned myself "Are we there yet? Can I see Finch again?" There was some chatter going on outside and finally minutes later Hannah opens the door, and each step I took felt like I had finally accomplished what I set out to do.

I was finally home! I ran straight to Finch, who started racing towards me too. The smell of the air and the wind that blew past my face as I raced to him made me smile even more. We played and raced together just like how we used to. Leaving Hannah was the hardest part. I couldn't bear to leave her especially after all she had done to help me. I galloped to her as she was getting back into the truck. I nuzzled my face and she stroked me gently on my nose just like when we first met and whispered quietly into my ear "I'll come visit you every chance I have. Don't worry you're with your friends and family. Now everything will be alright." And with that she left. As I watched the truck move out of sight, I knew in my heart that I'll see her again.

## THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET

Emily Ascough

Something was wrong with the house across the street.

Outwardly, the house looked like a regular, normal house - white bricks, navy blue roof, neat lawn - but it felt unnatural. The bricks were a slightly lighter white compared to the rest of the street, the roof looked too shiny and smooth, and the garden was in pristine condition. Nobody had ever met or seen the people who lived there. They had no car, and nobody had ever seen them leave the house, which was odd.

And then there was the singing. Every morning, at exactly 7.15, you could hear the soft, melodic voice of a woman singing obscure and mysterious songs. No one had ever seen her, but you could tell it was the same woman. Her voice was special.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked Jack for the 100th time.

"I'm sure," He replied. "It'll be fun!"

We were crouched outside the house across the street. Jack was staying over at my place, and had the brilliant idea that we should sneak inside.

"But what if we get caught?" I asked. It was only five o'clock and plenty of people were still out. What if one of them saw us?

"Relax Ethan, nobody will notice," Jack said. "We'll just have to be careful."

"How do we even get in?" I asked Jack. "I'm

pretty sure the front door will be locked."

"We'll go through the backyard. Normally, people have windows or a back door open."

I wanted to say that whoever lived in this house probably wasn't normal, but Jack was already sprinting to the side gate.

"Come on!" He called, before scaling the blue wooden gate.

Reluctantly, I followed him.

The Backyard of the house was just as neat and well kept as the front yard. The only features of the yard were a green lawn, and a path leading to a wooden door. There was not a single tree or plant in sight. It felt soulless, as if whoever owned the house had tried to create a nice backyard but didn't get it right.

Jack was leaning against the door, a grin on his face. "It's unlocked."

I started to sweat. I didn't actually think that any doors would be unlocked. I figured we'd get to the backyard, not be able to get in, and then go back. I didn't want to go inside.

"Are you sure we have to go inside?" I asked him. My voice was an octave higher than usual.

Jack laughed. "Of course! It'll be an adventure."

"Mum'll want us home soon," I said, searching for any possible excuse. I was a rule follower, and I never liked getting in trouble or doing risky things, unlike Jack. If someone caught us, we might get arrested and I didn't want to risk it.

Jack seemed to notice my nervousness. "We won't get caught," he assured me. "And besides, haven't you been the one who's always wanted to know

what's inside?"

He had me there. "Fine, I'll go in."

Jack grinned. "Let's go."

He pulled open the door and we stepped inside. The inside of the first room surprised me. The walls and floor were so pearly white that you could see your reflection in them. The whole room was so bright that it was almost blinding to look around. There was no furniture, and the house looked like a place where nobody lived. It was hard to imagine people actually living here, especially that weird singing girl that you always hear.

"This place is weird," Jack murmured, squinting as he looked around. "Why is it so bright?"

I was thinking the same thing; there were no windows, and there was only a single light in the centre of the room, so how was the place so well lit?

"Let's keep moving," Jack said, walking over to a door. "Maybe the next room will be slightly more exciting."

I started to leave, when suddenly I felt a cold hand reach out from behind me and touch my shoulder. I spun around quickly. Nobody was there.

"What was that?" Jack asked me from across the room.

"Nothing," I told him. My voice was trembling, and my heart was racing. "Probably just the wind." Yet as I left the room, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Jack was right: the second room was more interesting than the first. For one thing, there was furniture.

On one side of the room, there was a bright red armchair, and on the other, a large piano, it's dark timber a contrast to the brightness of the rest of the house. In the centre, there was a light grey rug.

"This is better!" Jack grinned. "Finally something normal."

I walked around, having a better look at everything. "Hey, what's this?"

Jack came over to the piano, where I was. I pointed to the large scratches on the otherwise flawless wood.

"Maybe they have a cat or something." Jack responded, moving on to another part of the room.

I thought it was strange that people with such a perfect and neat house would own a cat, but I didn't know what else it could be.

"Hey, have a look at this." Jack called. He was pointing to a small trap door in the corner of the room, made up of a light-coloured wood, so it didn't stand out that much.

Jack pulled on the handle, but it didn't open. "I think it's sealed," he told me. "Maybe there used to be a basement or some—" Jack was cut off by a loud tapping noise.

TAP TAP TAP!

I jumped. "What was that?"

"I don't know." Jack replied, his eyes darting around the room. His usually calm face looked fearful and worried.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

"I think it's coming from the trap door!" I yelled urgently.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

"Let's leave!" I urged. I hastily started walking off.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

Jack followed, almost sprinting out. We tried to run back into the previous room but the door was locked.

"Let's try the other door!" Jack yelled frantically.

He pulled on it but it was also locked.

"We're stuck!" I yelled.

TAP! TAP! TAP!

"I'm sorry, Ethan." Jack's face was white with fear, and he was close to crying. "I never should have made us go in!"

TAP! TAP! TAP!

All of a sudden, I saw a figure on the other side of the room, near the piano.

It was a woman. She had long hair and skin as white as paper. She was wearing a flowing white dress that had been torn and stained. When she saw me and Jack, she smiled and started singing.

Everything went black.

The next day, two boys were reported missing to police. They questioned a few people but they weren't worried. They would probably only be gone a day or two.

The next week, there was a massive police search to try and find the two boys who had gone missing the day before. Police officers knocked on every house in the street and most told them everything they knew. The police started searching harder.

The next month, a neighbour heard the woman's voice singing, along with two new male voices.

They alerted the police who went to investigate.

The police found the bodies of the two boys along with an unidentified female. They were found in the basement of the house across the street.

## THE TREE OF LAST NIGHT

Aditya Yarravajhala

It started off as an ordinary Saturday morning. As usual, I woke up to the obnoxious screech of my alarm clock, displaying '7:00' and slid my warm, fur coated slippers on. I flopped them all the way to the bathroom and picked up my toothbrush, to which I sparingly added a speck of toothpaste. A few minutes later, I walked into the kitchen for breakfast and a mug of coffee.

I set one piece of bread in the toaster, while I took the coffee that I had pre-made last night and put it in the microwave.

During the walk between the kitchen bench and the microwave, I had seemed to notice something peculiar. The coffee smelled unnaturally strong. Or had I kept the ground coffee tin open all night? I looked around and found that the tin was in my pantry, with its lid shut tightly. Shrugging my shoulders, I put the overly aromatic coffee in the microwave.

Once I had gathered my buttered toast and coffee, I hastily gobbled down my toast, and strolled towards my front garden to enjoy the sunshine. As I came closer to the front door, something even more odd seemed to happen. The coffee's smell was getting stronger and stronger. It was when I closed my hands around the door handle, as much as I enjoy my morning coffee, I actually had to crinkle my nose to partially stop the smell from getting in. But when I opened the front door,

things started to get really quirky.

Outside, in front of my house was... No. There couldn't be. There was usually a small tree on my lawn, which was probably a head shorter than me. Now however, was an enormous tree, its branches covered in what looked like cabbages, varying from the size of a peanut, to the size of a beach-ball.

I looked around to see whether everyone else's trees had had this unusual spurt. But they hadn't. They were all the same as they were yesterday.

Suddenly I had a thought. Why hasn't anybody else reacted to this like I have? I ogled at Mr Hopkins, my next-door-neighbour, going about his lawnmowing like it was an ordinary Saturday morning. This prompted me to think: What if they couldn't see the tree? What if it was only me who could see it?

I thought of a way to test this. Quickly, I caught Mr Hopkins' eye by waving at him. The low revving of the lawnmower came to a halt.

"Mind if I use your lawnmower later next week?" I asked, "Only my lawn's looking a bit shabby." Mr Hopkins squinted at my lawn.

"Yes..." He said in his usual nasal tinted voice. "It's grown like crazy. Only if your tree would as well." He said, looking at about a quarter the way up the now elephantine tree. "By the way Edward, your coffee's a bit strong today isn't it?" He added with a hint of a smirk. "I can smell it from here and mind you this mown grass is quite a reek as well." He went back into his house, leaving his lawnmower outside.

So, I was right. For some reason, only I could

see this tree. Then I had another thought. I remembered what Mr Hopkins had said about my coffee. Could perhaps the strong-smelling coffee have something to do with this tree? But no. Surely it couldn't. I had made the coffee yesterday, and this tree had... I guess 'arrived' today.

I walked over to the tree and examined it curiously. I picked one of the cabbage-like objects hanging over a low-lying branch. This one was quite tiny and might have been confused with a small Brussel sprout. As I picked it up, it seemed that there was another miniscule object rattling around inside. With my curiosity now burning like a flame, I couldn't wait anymore.

I cautiously peeled off a bit of the leafy covering, to reveal... A coffee bean. I stared at it, a bit perplexed. I wasn't a botanist, but I knew that this was not the way coffee beans grew. So, did all the other 'packages' with need for a better word, contain coffee beans as well?

I picked another one, about the size of a tennis ball. This one rattled slightly more. I opened it. It had several coffee beans in it. So far, I knew two things: That this tree grew coffee beans in an unusual way, and that the reason for the strong smell of coffee was that there were thousands and thousands of coffee beans outside my house.

That night, I sprayed the whole house with lemon scented air freshener. I couldn't stand the extreme smell of the coffee beans outside the house. Deciding that I had enough of coffee, I went straight to bed, not making my usual cup for the morning.

The next morning, I woke up to the usual 7 o'clock alarm. I had a stretch and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. After this, I walked into the kitchen for coffee, but I had remembered that I had not made the coffee last night. Then I remembered why.

All senses seemed to come back to me at this moment. I could hear the rustling of leaves outside. I could see the massive tree through the front window. But most of all, it hit me like a gust of wind. The most pungent smell of lemon that I had ever experienced. It was as if the smell of the air freshener that I had sprayed yesterday had multiplied by a factor of a thousand.

Knowing where to go now, I rushed to the front of my house, a bit of my pyjama's collar covering my nostrils. I clicked open the front door and went outside. It seemed that the cabbage like objects containing coffee beans had all gone, and been replaced by what looked like lemons, but from past experiences... were probably something else.

I heard a familiar sneering cough come from beyond the fence. 'Dropped a lemon in your coffee today have you Edward?' It was Mr Hopkins. He seemed to have come out of his house just to make this comment, as he headed straight towards his front door after making eye contact with me.

I watched him carefully as he entered his house and locked his front door, and then started to the now lemon tree. I picked one of the lemons. They were uncannily light. This confirmed my suspicion that these were not lemons despite

looking like them. I slowly peeled off the skin, and to no surprise didn't find what would have been inside a real lemon. However, when I opened the lemon, a puff of air came out and diffused into the surroundings of my face. I realised that it was lemon scented air. The kind that would come out of a certain aerosol can back at home.

Then I realised something even bigger. It was as if I had had a massive brainwave. The night before last, the final thing that I did before going to bed was make coffee. The next day, the tree grew coffee beans. Last night, the last thing I did was spray the house with lemon scented air freshener. Today, the tree grew lemons filled with lemon scented air freshener!

I knew what I was going to do tonight.

Before going to bed, I opened my drawer, and took out a one hundred dollar note, and looked at it for a few seconds. Then, putting it in my pocket, dropped onto my bed, and fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up extra early. The alarm clock showed '5:30'. Without even brushing my teeth, I put on my slippers, and eagerly paced to the front door. As I opened the door, the most splendid sight met my eyes. The tree, huge as it was, was covered in lots and lots of hundred-dollar notes. I couldn't help but smile and think of all the things I was going to buy. I stepped forward, still grinning ear to ear. My fingertips almost touched one of the notes, when... 'BANG!' As if the tree were struck by lightning, it caught fire immediately. I recoiled, and watched helplessly in horror, as all the money burnt to a crisp. Suddenly, it stopped, and the burning,

massive tree was replaced by the small, puny tree that existed there a few days ago.

\*\*\*

Some of you may think that this was quite a story, and go to bed tonight, thinking about all the things you might do if this tree did exist. But for all we know, there could be such a tree somewhere in an unexplored corner of this world.

The tree never returned to Edward's house again. And as for Edward, let's just say, he copped a comment from Mr Hopkins about his coffee and a bit of burnt toast.

## VOICES

Bonnie Miller

**Laboratory 186**

"We need everyone evacuated immediately!"

A mass of workers in white coats rushed down the hallways, shouting commands at one another. Smoke wafted through the air as wailing alarms sounded throughout the lab, people coughing and wheezing from the smoke. Meanwhile, in room 186, reinforcements came with fire extinguishers desperately attempting to clear a pathway. Dr Saruez, the head manager of the project, rushed into the room coughing.

"Quickly grab the experiment!" Dr Saruez shouted.

Getting to the cabinet where the experiment was kept, he arrived to find his workers arguing. Noticing his presence, they quickly looked up at him with worried faces.

"What?!" Saruez demanded.

"The case... we accidentally dropped it, and... ," one of them stammered.

Dr Saruez stilled, his face falling.

"It's gone?" Saruez asked, already knowing the answer.

They nodded. Crap.

**Skye**

"Skkkkyyyyyeee."

I shot up out of bed with my heart beating quickly, I scanned my room, my hands tightly clutching my sheets. I held my breath, counting to twenty and was met with silence. Still feeling shaken, I took a deep breath, relaxing my grip on the sheets. Doing another overlook of the room and seeing nothing out of the ordinary, I somewhat relaxed. It was the weirdest thing; it didn't even feel like a dream. I remember my name being called right against my ear.

\*\*\*

I walked out of Collingwood's café, sighing after completing a gruelling waitressing shift. I observed that the sun had just about set. The city lights became my guide as I made my way past people, taking a turn into an alleyway, relieved to be on my way home.

"Sskkyeee"

I froze. My breath catching, I slowly turned around in a full circle, scanning for who had spoken. The voice sounded like it was close to my ear. An unsettling feeling arose inside of me. I had completely forgotten about my dream from the morning, but it all came rushing back to me, the feeling of déjà vu so strong.

"don't be scared Skye."



I whipped around, searching for the owner of the voice. I gulped, feeling myself start to panic. I needed to get out of here. Now. I bolted, sprinting down the alleyway, my heart pounding rapidly against my chest.

*"Why are you running skye?"*

I ran for my life down the alleyway, only daring to stop when I could hear no one following me. Scanning the alley behind me I couldn't see anyone, but as I turned around, I suddenly came face to face with a man.

I screamed.

The man was slightly bent over, his long hair falling across his face. Veins ran up along his arms and legs, starkly vivid against his pale body. He looked so old that I wondered how he was still alive. And he was staring at me with pure black eyes. I bolted.

I rushed out onto the road, pushing myself to run as fast as I could. Finally, a taxi drove up and I frantically waved it over. Jumping in, I yelled at the driver "GO!" The driver sped off, and I looked behind to see where the man had gone. There was no one there.

\*\*\*

*You're not crazy, you're not crazy, you're no-*

My parents had gone out for the evening so I picked up my phone, dialling my friend Julian's

number and waited with panicky breaths.

*"Hey Skye--"*

*"Julian, come over to my house now... PLEASE!"*

I quickly hung up before he could ask questions.

It didn't take long before I heard knocking on the door, and I flew downstairs, opening the door to see a worried Julian.

*"Are you OK?"* Julian asked, concerned.

*"Not really. Just... come in and I'll tell you everything."*

\*\*\*

*"You're hearing voices?"*

*"And seeing people! I swear I'm not imagining it Julian!"*

*"I believe you,"* Julian said, tenderly brushing a stray tear from my face.

*"Now no more crying, it kills me to see you upset."*

I sniffled and wiped my eyes.

I decided to get up and go into my bathroom. My face was slightly red from crying and my hair was a mess. I splashed cold water onto my face, and heard Julian come up behind me.

*"Julian I--"*

When I looked up in the mirror, I didn't see Julian standing behind me. Instead I saw... the man from the alley!

I whipped around, my blood turning cold. With a devilish grin he came at me with inhuman speed. I barely managed to escape from his grasp as I slammed the door in his face.

I began to run past my bedroom until a thought struck me. Julian! I swerved into my room, hearing the man's thunder like footsteps getting closer.

Tears streamed down my face as I locked myself in my bedroom.

"Julian!"

What had happened to him?!

BANG!

I tripped, stumbling away as loud hits were made to my door.

I edged away, desperately searching for a way out. The window! Before I could make an escape out of the window, the door came crashing down. Terrified, I had no time to act when I suddenly felt his hands grab me and I was flung into my mirror, pain bursting through my side, smashed glass raining down. Dazed, a stinging sensation appeared along my right arm and I dared a look, gagging as blood trailed down from the multiple slash wounds against my skin.

I was then hauled up onto my feet and pinned against the wall by my neck. I started gasping for air as his hands tightened, his soulless black eyes staring into me.

I struggled against him, kicking and flailing about. Black dots started to obscure my vision as I struggled to remain conscious. Suddenly, I had this odd feeling as if something was going into me. My emotions spiralled into a frenzy of hatred; my self-control gone. I couldn't control my actions. The evil man pinning me against the wall was now transferring his image and energy into me.

And left Julian standing in his place.

Julian let go of my neck, looking puzzled. I crumpled to the ground, gasping for air. Not on my own accord, I grabbed a large shard of glass from the floor and even though I'm screaming at myself to stop, I couldn't. I glimpsed into the mirrored shard, it wasn't even me staring back, it was the man.

I aimed the shard at Julian.

"Skye! Stop!" Julian cried as I lunged towards him.

Suddenly there was a burst of energy and I was in control of my body once again. I saw Julian staring at me fearfully, the shard clattering to the ground. I saw a figure standing behind Julian, giving me a reassuring smile. My deceased Grandfather.

The ground washed out beneath me as I collapsed. The last thing I heard was Julian calling my name before I slipped into unconsciousness.

\*\*\*

My eyelids fluttered open as I groggily awoke to a fluorescent light shining into my eyes. I glanced around at my surroundings. I was lying in a bed in a small white room. Julian was sitting next to me holding my hand.

"Oh Skye. I was so worried," he said.

Everything rushed back to me.

"We're safe." Julian assured me. "There's a doctor here that's going to answer your questions."

The door clicked open and a man wearing a white coat walked in. He closed the door behind him and turned around to face me and Julian.

"Hello Skye, it's great to see you're awake. I'm Dr Saruez, and I'm here to answer all your questions. Firstly, how are you feeling?" he asked with concern.

It occurred to me that he was talking about my arm and looking down, I saw it was bandaged from top to bottom.

"I'm fine... I think." I answered.

"Can you please recount to me everything that you remember?"

I told him everything that happened, right

until I blacked out. Dr Saruez stood there for a moment, thinking.

"Ok, well, I'll start right from the beginning. I work at a top-secret laboratory here in Melbourne. Our latest project which we named 'Spirits', proved a success after testing it. We were eager to commence with further trials, but an incident occurred in the laboratory. Something went wrong on one of our other experiments which lead to a massive fire. I tried to retrieve 'Spirits' from the lab but one of my workers dropped it." He said, frustrated.

"'Spirits' is a microscopic flying bug made from technology and we still aren't sure of everything it can do. This bug navigates into the ear, close to the brain."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"You've already experienced it," he stated. "It connects you to the afterlife."

I looked at him with an incredulous expression.

"The thing that attacked you was an evil spirit."

I just stared at him.

"But I didn't see anyone except us there?" Julian exclaimed.

"Ahh, only the person that has the bug can see the spirits. Unfortunately, we didn't realise that these spirits could also possess people,

which is what happened to you."

Julian's face paled.

"Was... Skye also possessed? She, um, tried to stab me with a piece of glass." Julian looked away from me.

"Julian! That wasn't me! It was the evil ghost! If what Dr Saruez says is true, then it makes sense! You couldn't see the spirits because you didn't have the bug." I told him.

Wait then that means...

"So, you're saying the bug went into me?!" I shrieked.

"Yes, but it's out now," Dr Saruez said

Relieved with that, I calmed down.

"We put a tracker on the bug and found you before anything got too out of hand."

I nodded.

"Wait, I saw my grandfather before I passed out. What did that mean?"

"I have a suspicion he stopped the evil spirit."

I decided to believe this doctor, because after all that had happened, I wouldn't doubt anything at this point.

"I'll leave you both to talk; I'll just be

outside" he told us, leaving the room.

Julian and I stayed quiet for a few seconds until he broke the silence.

"I'm so glad you're ok" Julian whispered.

"Same goes for you." I whispered back.

We stared at each other for a few moments.

"Look Julian I--"

He leaned in towards me and our lips met in a soft kiss. A kiss that couldn't have been more perfect.

\*\*\*

Dr Saruez walked into his new lab, smirking.

"They believe they're safe now," Saruez laughed.

"The rooms are now being prepped for testing subjects No.2 and No.3" his worker smiled smugly before retrieving the briefcase.

## PUPPET

Odessa Zubanov

He was just an old toy, which had been  
forgotten,  
Never to be loved again.

The Puppet sat on the old cabinet,  
Day by day growing more and more dust on his  
soft felt skin.  
If only his strings were still new and his  
smile still broad,  
Then maybe he would prance once more.

The old cabinet had no life, no spotlight,  
Nor did it have his white puppet horse.  
The hours were painful for the Puppet,  
Knowing his days on the stage were long gone,  
Knowing his horse was lying in a dump her  
stitches beyond repair.

When the days were still bright and his strings  
still new,  
He would often take pleasure in making children  
laugh and dance.  
Of course when they left he was a little bit  
lonely,  
But he had his horse,  
He had his earned pleasure and  
He had his leftover brisket from the kitchen.

Now he had no horse,  
No pleasure and  
No brisket.

## BEHIND MY SMILE

Odessa Zubanov

Look at me and see,

A Fourth Grader with an orange paint stain on  
her tie.

A petticoat a size too big and mismatched socks.

Two thick plaits and silver braces.

Nothing too unusual, except for my wide dimpled  
smile.

Nor my braces or my dimples make this smile so  
unusual. Rather, it's the fact that it is all  
fake.

The smile, the giggle and even the skip in my  
walk, all fake.

Like puppets on a string. I or someone else  
just had to pull the string and my face would  
raise an eyebrow or a smile would appear.

The truth is, when my string of anger, fear or  
depression is pulled then all behind the mask  
gets shattered.

All behind the lying face shatters.

It is better this way.

No one sees the tricks up the magician's  
sleeve, no one sees my true unpopular self, nor  
do they hear my silly remarks or my opinion.

No one sees me, they see a mirror.

Nobody sees the person Behind My Smile.

# NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

Tessa Manoj Jacob

Go to school in a UFO,  
But return home in the eleventh apollo.  
Go to the shops with a unicorn,  
Then race a car and toot the horn!  
Be a fairy, tall and proud,  
Then a rockstar, cool and loud!  
A secret agent, a spy, a snoop,  
But also the brains behind the ice-cream scoop!  
A technology wizard, like none before,  
But also being able to eat a thirteen kilogram  
apple to the core!  
Being a magician and conjuring a bunny,  
Up on stage being oh so funny!  
Being an author, a writer, a story teller,  
And also a singer, a dancer, a music seller!  
Operating on people to make them feel better,  
And making incredible dishes topped with garlic  
and feta.  
Making dresses that are featured in every  
magazine,  
Then bowing to Her Majesty or also known as the  
Queen!  
A day in my life is anything but boring,  
Except for the part when I'm exhausted and in  
bed, snoring!

# AL GATTO (TO THE CAT)

Odessa Zubanov

Under the black night sky the dying street  
lamps flickered,  
That was when Gatto came.  
He carried a dead white dove between his pearly  
sharp teeth,  
This was Gatto, the captor of attention.

Eyes of amber and whiskers of silk,  
Greedy and sly, the drinker of milk.  
A rough red nose,  
Precise dancing on tip toes.

Small but still svelte,  
Ears soft, like felt.  
Gatto sits high on the throne,  
You never see him, but you're never alone.

He awaits praise,  
And if he doesn't receive, he'll set your heart  
ablaze.  
Always looking his best,  
Quick with his sorry, but never confessed.

Gatto,  
The one who has it all.

# MY GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS

Odessa Zubanov

I hold my grandmother's hands tight in my own.  
They are old and frail, no longer white and new  
as they were years ago.  
Across her smallest finger is a purple scar she  
earned after falling during her first steps.  
Below her thumb is a red dot where her first  
kitty nipped her.  
On her right palm is a dent from where her  
father held her hand so tight each and every  
night.  
Above her inner wrist is a white patch, where  
she had stitches at the age of eight.  
Around her knuckles is a tender spot, caused by  
the glass from a broken jam jar.  
Below her left wrist is a burn from her fifth  
time making bread.  
I loved my grandmother's hands and I kissed  
them one last time.  
And as she rose into heaven above, I saw a new  
mark on her wrist, a pink kiss from my last and  
final goodbye.

Dedicated to my lovely baba and inspired by her  
too.

# ORPHANED

Abdul Raheem

Zara was a girl who lived in England. She had a  
mother who came from Iran as a refugee, she met  
her dad in England and they married. Her dad was  
an English man who worked as an IT technician.  
On her 12th birthday, her mum and dad decided  
to take her to Iran for her to learn about her  
culture and background. It went all well; they  
had lots of fun and did shopping for souvenirs  
as well as other cultural items to take back  
home. But when they were on the last day of their  
holiday, they found a new shopping centre. They  
stopped there to see what it was selling.

While they were shopping, they suddenly heard  
people shouting and running. Zara and her family  
sensing something was wrong, started running  
towards the gates. When through them came  
multiple big strong men with semiautomatic guns  
in their hands. They started firing random shots  
into the crowd and killing many instantly. Zara  
and her mum and dad turned around and fled. When  
abruptly she heard two louder shots and heard  
mum and dad fell to the ground. She looked at her  
dad and could see the hole it had made in her  
dad's chest. When she looked at her mum's face,  
she mouthed the word run. Then her eyes rolled  
back into her head, and her body went limp.

Zara left her mum and dad and ran as fast as he  
could run, zigzagging so that the gunmen would



not be able to shoot her. She ran and ran until she came to what looked like an abandoned house with the front door slightly ajar. She entered. She explored the house and no one was there. She sat in a corner and cried herself to sleep. She woke when she heard voices coming into the house and people walking around. The people got closer and closer until she saw a person peering around the door frame, looking at her with a face of astonishment. He called to the other people in a language Zara could not understand. They all came into the room. This time, it was Zara's turn to be astonished, the voices were all children dressed in rags and other dirty garments of cloth.

Zara tried to speak to them, but they could not comprehend what she was saying because Zara could only speak English. The other people, which Zara concluded must have been orphans as well took Zara under their wing and taught her their ways. Even though the language barrier made things harder, Zara was able to learn quickly. She learnt how to scrounge for food and beg as well. However, they still had limited food and money. They had to live in conditions so unhealthy that the common cold was even proving deadly. One day, one of the orphans told her to go to the police station. At first, she thought he was telling her to run away.

Zara approached the police officer there and told him the situation. However, he did not understand and yelled at her for staying around. She went back to her friends, completely deflated and

miserable. She had lost all hope for returning to England. Seven months passed and she stayed in Iran, living in the streets and eating all the food that she could find. She had never valued money like this. Without money, it is hard to live. Sure money cannot buy you happiness, but it is still needed.

One day, she was hanging around a shopping centre when she heard a language she could understand. Zara hanged around and listened to what the ladies were saying. They were talking about which clothes to buy and which ones looked best. The security guard near her told her to go away. Zara, not understanding looked at him blankly. He started beating her for staying around. One of the ladies noticed and came over to him and asked him to leave Zara alone. He did, and Zara thanked her. The lady, shocked by her pure English accent, called her friends to come and see Zara. They asked her some questions, and Zara answered all of them confidently. The lady who had helped her to escape from the security guard became her legal guardian until her grandparents came to pick her up from England.

Zara enjoyed her stay because she stayed with the lady in a nice hotel. When her grandparents came to pick her up from Iran, she said goodbye to her friends, and before she left, she enrolled all of her friends to an orphanage and gave a vast sum of money for their welfare. When Zara left, her grandparents told her that her mum and dad' bodies had been recovered and buried in

England. Zara had been assumed dead, but they never found her body. On the plane, she reflected on her time in Iran. She had met many kind people and had been forced to live on the streets. She might not have her parents, but she was alive, and she was thankful for that.

## PRINCE OF THE OCEAN

Hazel Mazza

Once upon a time, a baby was born. He was a healthy-looking baby, and quite well formed. Except for his hands. The skin between his fingers was higher than usual. But other than that, he looked quite normal. His eyes were blue like the ocean, and you could almost see the waves in them.

His parents were going to call him Michael, but when they saw him the name did not fit at all. They decided to call him Baby until they could think of a name.

A few days after he was born, Baby was crying and his mother was trying to get him to sleep. His father was watching them, trying to sing lullabies over the screaming. There was a cup of water next to the bed, and Baby reached out and stuck his hand in it. He immediately stopped crying. His mother pulled his hand out. He started crying again.

"He likes it!" his mother gasped.

"But it's freezing," said his father, putting his finger into the cup.

In the end, they resigned themselves to the fact that the only way Baby would be happy was to let him put his hand in the water.

As the months went by, Baby's love of water increased. He was always excited about getting in the bath. He always tried to put his hand into any water. When he did, Baby always had a big smile

on his face. In the end, his parents decided to call him Coral because of his love of water.

When he was eleven months old, Coral went to the beach with his parents. It was a lovely warm day, and after having a picnic, his parents lay down to have a rest.

"What about Coral?" his mother said.

"We'll keep an eye on him," said his father.

But the day was so warm that they drifted off to sleep. Coral began to crawl down towards the water. His parents woke up to the sound of splashing, and saw their son in the water. They ran down towards the shore, and as they reached him they realised he must have been in there for a long time. Yet, his head was still above the water. In fact, as his mother scooped him up, she realised he was doggy-paddling.

"He can swim!" said his mother.

"But his only ever been in the bath before," said his father in disbelief.

"He must be a natural," his mother said, and Coral let out a sound that was awfully like "yes".

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By the time he was seven, Coral was a very strong swimmer. In those six years of his life, he spent most of his time in the pool in his backyard. For his seventh birthday, his parents promised Coral a boating trip to French Island. He was very excited.

Coral had grown into a rather handsome lad, tall with black curly hair. His eyes were more like the ocean than ever.

The day of the boating trip was a little bit

disappointing for Coral and his parents because they woke up and saw black clouds in the sky. Coral's parents had hired a boat for 12 o'clock. At 11.30 they had a quick lunch and left home. They scanned the marina for their boat, and Coral was the first to spot it. He ran down to it, followed by his parents.

The sailor who was to take them greeted Coral and his parents with a cheery wave.

"You're just in time!" he yelled over the sound of the waves.

"Isn't it a bit dangerous to go boating in this weather?" Coral's mother asked anxiously.

"Don't worry," said the sailor. "This boat is completely safe."

"OK," said Coral's mother reluctantly.

Coral climbed over the barrier and plopped down onto the boat floor.

"Let's go then," said the sailor, and Coral's parents climbed on.

When they were a few metres away from the jetty, the sailor said:

"In fact, this is fine weather for sailing."

Coral cheered when he saw a school of fish whilst leaning over the railing. But his mother called him away.

"Coral, there's a storm brewing and you might get blown off."

She was still feeling a bit concerned even though the sailor had assured her it was safe. The clouds had gotten bigger and it was raining heavily.

After an hour the sailor said, "We're almost there."

"Look at that other boat," said Coral. He was looking at another boat which was about ten metres away. It was a pretty old boat, and occasionally through the waves he caught a glimpse of dirty grey paint which was peeling away.

As Coral watched, to his sudden horror, he saw a figure tumbling into the water from the other boat. Above the waves, he could hear the sound of a man calling "Lily! Lily!" in a horrified voice. Coral took a deep breath, and leapt into the stormy waves. He swam more strongly than he had ever swum before. He looked around, trying to find the girl. Suddenly he felt a hand grab at him and he took hold of her.

"Don't worry, I'll save you," he yelled above the waves.

Coral began to swim, though slower now he had the extra weight of the girl. He was swimming towards a boat, he didn't know which one. He managed to catch hold of the side.

"Help!" he yelled. "Help!"

Suddenly a stout rope came down and he got hold of it with one hand. Then someone slowly hauled them up. Coral could see that it was a man, who reached out and grabbed Coral and the girl, pulling them up onboard.

As the man held his daughter close to him, he thanked Coral for saving her.

Coral noticed the man's leg was in plaster, and that must be the reason he hadn't jumped in to save his daughter.

"And what a strong swimmer you are," said the man. "You are a real prince of the ocean."

## THE BIRDS AND THE MAN

Molly Cronin

There once was a man named Bob who lived all by himself in a little house. Everyone felt so sorry for Bob and tried to help him. What they did not know was he wasn't lonely, he had birds as friends.

He knew how to talk to birds and he understood what the birds said to him. The birds were also really, really kind to Bob and Bob was so, so kind to the birds.

Every day Bob went to the park holding a little brown bag full of pieces of bread, except on Tuesdays. On Tuesdays, he still did nice things for the birds as he filled up his bird bath in his beautiful garden. He had lots of flowers. Rows and rows of colourful flowers.

One day, when he was just about to go to the park, his sister named Lil, who he did not like at all, grabbed his arm and took him across the road to her car. Lil shoved Bob into her car and quickly drove to her house.

Lil's house was not as nice as Bob's. The house had no windows because she was allergic to sunlight. She put Bob in a dark room in the dark house and she gave him stuff that she thought old people like, like word searches, jigsaw puzzles and a torch. It was enough stuff for a long, long time.

Then one day Bob said to Lil. "I feel sick. Can we go to the doctors?"

Lil said, "Yes." So then she called the doctors on the phone to get a home visit.

When the Doctor arrived, Lil opened the door very slowly. Bob whistled to get the birds to come to him. All his bird friends flew into the house and rescued him by lifting him up and flying him out the back door.

When they were outside, Bob realised that it was the middle of the night. The birds flew Bob to his home and he finally got a good night's sleep.

The next day, everyone learned how the birds had rescued Bob and how they were truly his friends. To celebrate this, they all planted pretty flowers, they all built bird baths and they all left out seeds.

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