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SOUTH PERTH
YOUNG WRITERS
AWARD

ANTHOLOGY

City of
South Perth



The City of South Perth Young Writers Award

The City of South Perth Young Writers Award, now in its 37th year, celebrates the talent and creativity of school students in the City of South Perth. Originally called the Christobel Mattingley Award for Young Writers, entrants were able to submit prose or poetry. In 2007, to better reflect the community to which our young writers belong, the award was renamed to the South Perth Young Writers Award and entries were limited to prose.

This year saw well over 100 entries, which were judged by a panel of educators, industry experts, advocates, and enthusiasts of children's literature. Shortlisted entrants were invited to work with Shirley Marr, award-winning West Australian author, on ways to edit and finesse their work before the final placings were decided. This unique process gives our shortlisted writers an experience of editing and publishing, by reworking and resubmitting their entry.

Prizes are awarded in five age categories across primary and secondary school. The most outstanding entry overall is awarded the Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion. The awarding of prizes and highly commended certificates encourages young writers to challenge themselves and extend their writing prowess.

This anthology presents all the finalist entries and will be added to the City of South Perth Library collection. We hope you will enjoy the original ideas, immersive settings, sophisticated writing, ambitious and important themes, and gripping storytelling from these young writers of South Perth.

*This Anthology is published by the City of South Perth
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* Winner of the Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion

Lower Primary Years 1-2

Illam Otome	<i>Magic in the Savannah</i>	Highly Commended
Aveline Long	<i>An Owl and a Fox</i>	2 nd Place
Preet Ahluwalia	<i>The Mysterious Case of the Stinky Sardines</i>	Winner

Magic in The Savannah

By Illam Otome

Once upon a time, there lived three cheetahs called Liona, Caden and Ryan. They lived with their mother and father near the Masai Mara River, in Africa.

One Wednesday they woke up and had no food! Their mother said to her almost fully grown adult cheetahs "You have to go out and hunt some food by Thursday, otherwise we will have no food, and we are traveling to Kenya tomorrow."

The cheetahs rushed to get food. The buffalo was there and wanted to eat some food too! He wanted cheetah stew.

"What are we going to do?" said Caden.

"We have to get food by tomorrow." Said Ryan.

Suddenly they remembered their mum taught them a trick. It took them a long time to remember and try.

"Remember, we have until tomorrow," said Liona.

"What's the trick?" asked Caden.

"It's been a long time since I've remembered...it is flick the dirt"

"Oh yeah, flick the dirt." Said Caden.

"Well," said Caden. "Well," said Ryan.

"Let's go hunt," said Caden, Liona and Ryan.

Then came a turtle "What's your name?" Said Caden to the turtle.

"I don't have a name but lots of animals call me silly different names, but I like my name to be...Michael!"

"Wow, what a great name," said Caden. "Can I help you?"

"CADEN!!! He's not strong enough to join our hunt. We must keep going." said Liona.

"Coming! I have to go, but I will come back later" Caden said to the turtle.

"It is time we go hunt," said Ryan.

"Why is it so gloomy?" said Liona.

"Because there is fog," said Caden

"Oh, look!" said Ryan. "There is a big buffalo"

“Crash!! Bang!!”

“Oh no! Look it is Hyden Gang. He will eat us.” screamed Liona. The cheetahs were worried and scared.

Michael, the turtle, who had been watching them, came and shouted “Caden, here is a magic egg! I found it near by the riverbank. I tried it and you can do whatever you need with it. It will help you. You deserve it and you can hold on to it to keep your family safe.”

“Okay, I will try my best.” said Caden “Make us stronger than the buffalo.” He said to the egg. They managed to get past the buffalo because he was too weak to get them.

At sunset, they managed to get some food by flicking the dirt. They got a rabbit and they took it back to their mother and told her about their amazing adventure.

Their mother had been waiting for a very long time, so she was so happy to see them come back. Now, they could eat some food.

All of a sudden, the Hyden gang came back to get them. They were back on their feet feeling stronger. With a wish to the magic egg and a “POOF!!” the Hyden gang was gone!

Their mother was so happy that she said “This is great. We can go to Kenya!”

The kids jumped with joy and cheered.

At six o'clock their father arrived home and they said to him “We have got some food, father!” Their dad replied, “I have some water too, so let's pack the food for our travel to Kenya.”

They travelled to Kenya and they got some more food. They invited the elephant, flamingo, crocodile, and then even the Hyden gang to come as well. Their special friend, Michael, the turtle came along too!

On Thursday they arrived in Kenya. They were so grateful to make it to Kenya in time to see their friends. They realised the turtle was trying to help them and without the magic egg, they may not have survived.

The cubs learnt that friendship does not have to be based on strength or weakness and kindness is important.

An Owl and a Fox

By Aveline Long

Once upon a time a baby owl was in its nest. And its mother wanted for her baby to fly. And the baby was playing in its nest. But the baby owl fell off the nest! OH NO SHE FELL ON TO THE GRASS! Her mother couldn't find her.

The baby owl is in the forest and it saw a shadow, it looks like a fox! But it was only a baby fox so she was not so scared anymore. So days passed and they grew up. They became friends and lived together. They became six years old. But one day the baby owls mum came back. When the mum saw the fox she threw it away. Because she thought the fox was going to eat her baby owl.

The baby owl got angry. The baby owl got so so angry that he flew away. And the baby fox followed her.

And then the fox realised the mum was just trying to protect the baby owl. So the fox told the owl that you just need to step up and tell your mum all the things that we have done together and that I'm not a scary creature. And that I'm a friend and I have no family.

So I can live with you and I won't hurt anyone as I'm just a baby fox and I'm nice. My parents used to hunt for creatures like you and I don't. I just want to be a good creature and be in your family and not be alone anymore.

Then the baby owl told her mum everything and the mum realised her baby was sad. So she said to her baby owl I'm sorry I said that. Then her mum agreed. So you can live with us, we love you so much the mum said to the fox.

Then the baby fox made dinner for them. And then they had a disco party. If you want to know why the baby fox made dinner this is your answer, it is the baby fox made dinner because she wanted the mum to be happy. THE END!

The Mysterious Case of the Stinky Sardines

By Preet Ahluwalia

This is Captain, Sir Snowy. I am a detective penguin and I live in Antarctica along with my buddies, Officer Bellbottom, Officer Calimungus, Officer Slacksmack and my brother Smellyfeet. We are a team of penguins with extra ordinary skills. We are different in many ways, like no one else could gobble down fish really fast like Officer Calimungus, and he was also good in quickly writing down notes especially when we have a case to solve. Officer Bellbottom is super tall so that helps us in looking far and beyond, and also in spotting for trouble without us having to walk for long distances. Officer Slacksmack and Smellyfeet could knit and make sandwiches. We had a constant supply of colorful wrist bands that made us look cool, and the constant supply of sandwiches that kept our tummies full. That also kept us away from constantly pestering our parents for food. Our parents thought that we were geniuses' and not rambunctious penguins because they got to save money on hiring baby sitters or on after school care. We basically looked out for each other and solved some serious crimes until our parents got back from work.

I was on patrol today, just frolicking around looking for a case to solve. I was off to a sizzling start and deliberately wanted to do it quick, but my blubber always got in the way and I would fall on my face every time I tried to sprint. As I was tripping and getting up, I could smell something awful, I was bamboozled. It wasn't coming from Officer Smellyfeet, as he was making sandwiches at the headquarters. I knew I was on to something. I took out my phone to inform the rest of the team, but there was no network coverage so I took out my walkie talkie and got hold of Officer Slacksmack, she was on a new knitting project of making sparkly wrist bands using some fancy yarn made from Marino sheep in Australia.

Everyone immediately had to stop doing whatever it was that they were doing as at this point we finally got a case to solve.

I was super ebullient and squealed, "Captain Snowy here, we have a case to solve!"

Captain Slacksmack screeched, "What? Where? How? When? Who? Why now? I'm in the middle of making brand new designer wristbands."

Those were too many questions for me to answer so I explained to them to just head over to the snowy cliffs, immediately!

And there it was, that's where the fishy smell was coming from... over there! There was a trail of rotting sardines from the great storehouse where all the penguins would store their sardines just in case we ran out of food due to climate change. The rotting trail of sardines was stinking and I knew right away that there was something fishy going on without a doubt. This is where Officer Bellbottom's height would help us to figure out where the trail was leading. "The trail goes beyond the snowy dunes and towards the research centre", said Officer Bellbottom. That's where scientists from different countries do all sorts of research

and experiments. At this point we were dispirited and couldn't do much so we headed back to our base camp.

We had a serious meeting where no jokes were allowed. "We should follow the trail and see what's going on at the research centre, since the trail leads there", I insisted. But the others were not convinced and strongly felt that it was probably a trap since following a trail would be too dangerous and it could have been laid out as a bait to lure us into the hands of a crazy scientist. Smellyfeet was perplexed and asked, "Why would a scientist want to set a trap for us?"

Officer Calimungus replied, "Obviously to tag us and perform experiments on us".

Officer Smellyfeet cried, "We need to inform our parents about these crazy scientists!"

"No, no, no, no, no and no! We finally got a case to solve and we need to get to the bottom of this, we can't give up and weep about it" I yelled.

Officer Bellbottom agreed and convinced everyone that we should solve this mystery. We planned on sticking together as this could be a dangerous mission for us. We packed our detective packs. It had notepads, phones, tablets, binoculars, magnifying glasses, and salmon sandwiches thanks to Officer Smellyfeet, wristbands thanks to Officer Slacksmack and some disguises. And now, we were ready for solving our case.

We set off quietly in the dark around and over the other side of snowy dunes so we couldn't be noticed by anyone. We spotted the trail of our sardines that led to a research centre where the humans live.

Officer Bellbottom could see a human carrying a big, brown sack on his shoulders and Officer Bellbottom commented "I think there are sardines inside the sack."

I asked "Could I please waddle up on to your shoulders?"

Officer Bellbottom replied "Of course you can."

So I hopped on his shoulders and took a peep and I saw a tiny hole in the sack.

I told my buddies "Hey! The obnoxious human has our delicious sardines!"

Officer Calimungus suggested that we should put on disguises and ask them to give our sardines back.

And I said "Great idea!" So we put on disguises as humans so that the scientist would not suspect that we are feisty penguins.

After we wore our disguises we headed back to the place where we saw the human. I knocked and as he opened the door, I asked in my best and brave human voice, "I think you might have our sardines?"

He said "What sardines?"

I replied "The sardines you took from a great storehouse that you thought belonged to no one but it was actually mine!"

I said to myself “Even though the sardines belonged to a flock of exuberant penguins?”

He said “Oh yeah” “Are you talking about the same sardines that somebody left at a funny looking silo just for me to become an exceptionally rich scientist by experimenting with them to make the best finger licking sauce in the world?” I thought he looked just as cunning and obnoxious as he was at first impressions. Firstly, he took every single of our sardines without consulting us. Secondly, why is he calling our great storehouse a silo? What even is a silo in the first place? I need to investigate more about a silo later, once we’ve solved this case. Is it even a bad word that no one is supposed to say?

Finally, why does he want to only use our sardines to make himself famous? Why not someone else’s?

I need to be able to outsmart him to get our delicious sardines back because it seems like the mad scientist thought this through very carefully. Here goes my first try, “Would you like some extremely posh designer wrist bands?” The scientist was hesitant at first but when Smellyfeet asked if he wanted some salmon and peanut butter sandwiches, he greedily accepted our offer.

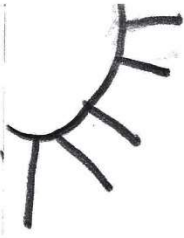
We handed over our sandwiches and wristbands and he gave us only one bag even though he had two. I asked, “Hey, can we have the other bag too?” After deliberation, “Err... sure.” He replied in a puzzled tone. I took the other bag and commented, “We’d better be on our way, bye!”, as we waddled away, I heard him mutter to himself, “Oh well, I can make fancy wristbands and sandwiches and still be famous in a way.” He shrugged, and then shut the door.

When we got our sack of sardines back, we snacked on a few then collected all the ones that dropped out from the sack. By the time we reached home, our parents were already back from work. I gave the sardines to our mother to return them to the storehouse. She also put some of the sardines on icicle plates and handed them out for us to eat while we told them about our adventurous case.

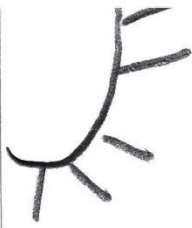
Middle Primary Years 3-4

Neave McCaffrey	<i>The Cooking Tree</i>	Highly Commended
Tik En Toh	<i>Yeti</i>	2 nd Place
Jackie Sun	<i>Revenge of the Mighty Swordsman</i>	Winner

one Day Peter was looking for a spot to dig her barrow? after a while she found a good spot right in front of a tree! so she could store all her food in the roots. she dug her barrow but when she got to the roots she found that a bit of trunk was there and in the trunk was a fridge and a oven!!! Peter wondered why? So she stored all her food in the fridge and cooked her food in the oven! She thought that it was great!

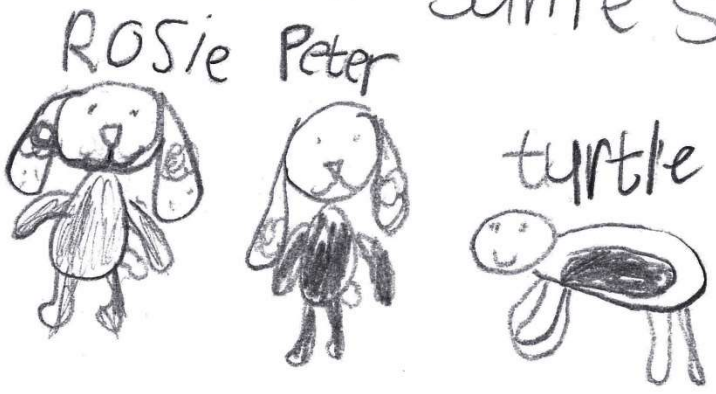


One Day when Peter
came home the tree
spoke to her "What can
I get for you?" "Waw!" "You
can talk!" "Yeah I am
the cooking tree!" "You
have been here this
time?" "Yes I have!"
"I get you anything off
my menu?" "I haven't seen
your menu yet!" "Can
I bring my friends Rosie
and turtle?" "Yes I want
to tell you my story!"



The Cooking tree's
chapters

- 1 Menu one The COOKING tree
- 2 Menu two NO COSTERMES
- 3 Menu three the other COOKING tree
- 4 Menu four Same same.



Menu one
The cooking tree

"Hi I am the cooking tree"
And here is my costerm
Peter Rosie and turtle"
Here is my story: "About
A week ago I had a lot
of Oysters."

"Hi COOKING tree." "Can I have
COOKIES AND ICE CREAM
PLEASE" SAID ROSIE "CUMMING
RIGHT UP" SAID THE COOKING
TREE "HERE YOU ARE"
"THANK YOU" SAID ROSIE
"SEE YOU LATER" SAID ROSIE
"SEE YOU OF
NEXT PLEASE" SAID ROSIE
"HI" SAID ROSIE
"CAN I HAVE SAID
AND LETTCE PLEASE" SAID
"OK" SAID THE COOKING
TREE "HERE YOU ARE"
"THANK YOU" SAID PETER.

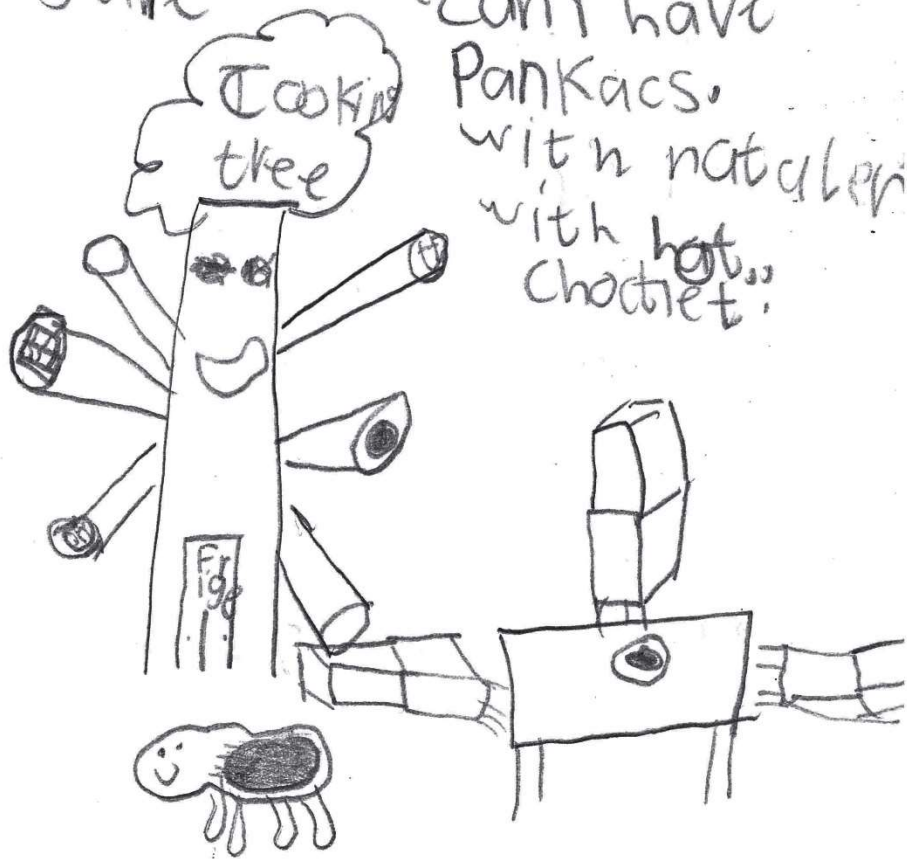
"Next please"! "Can I
have lettuce on toast"
Said turtle. "All Prepared,
for you" here you
go turtle." "thank you"!

The next day
the same thing,
happend so the,
COOKING tree thought,
I will, change my
menu. Now his comster
mos could have
some thing different.

Menu two
No customer

Rosi wanted chicken
and chips. Peter wanted
ice cream, and chips,
and turtle wanted,
lettuce, and ice cream.
But Sadley only
one customer

Came the next
day. That customer
was turtle! "Where
are your friends
turtle?" "I am not
sure" "can I have



PanKacs.
with n natulen
with hot
choctiet.

"Skure thing th turtle"

"here you go turtle"

"thank you"

"See you
tomorrow"

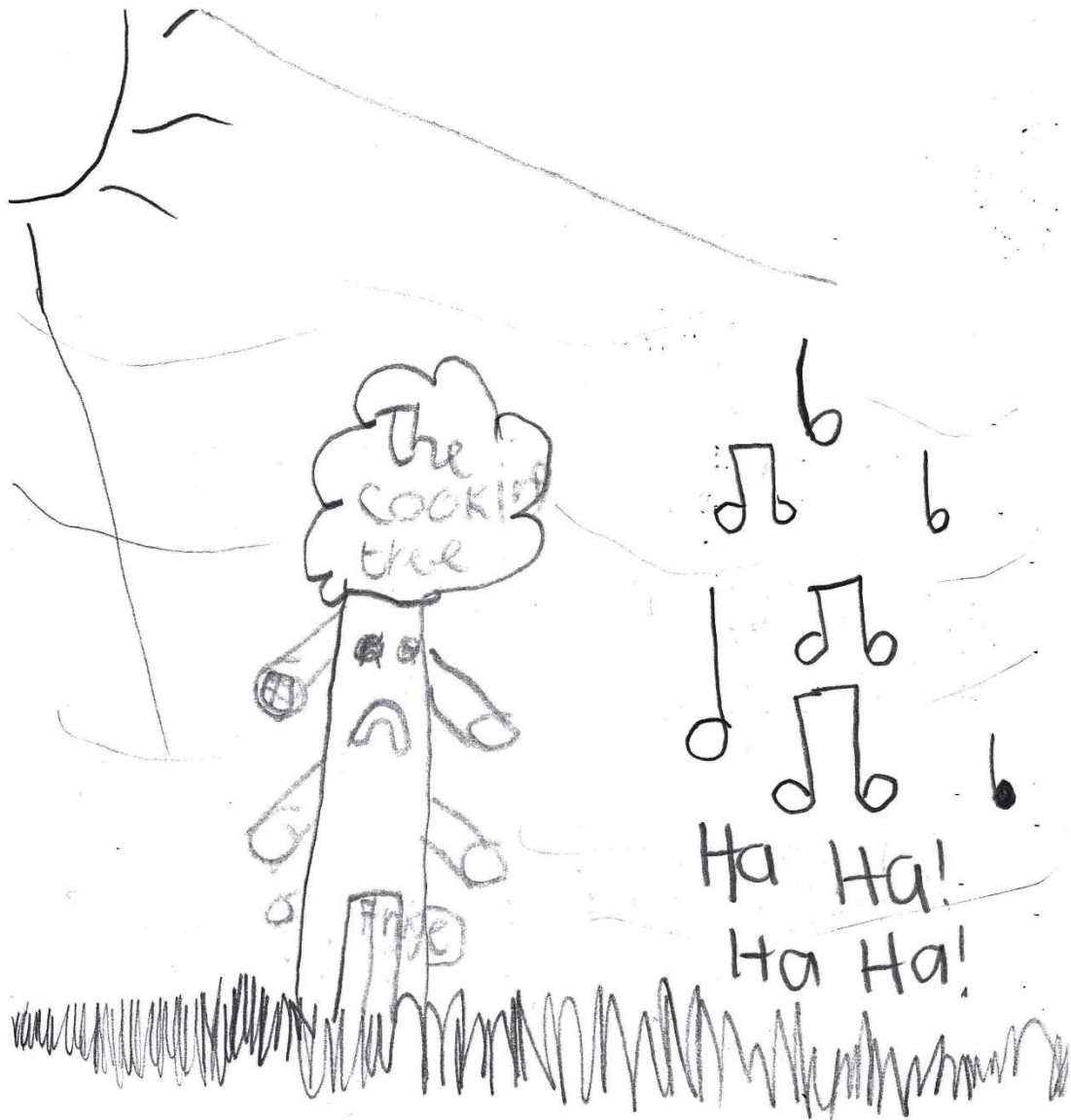
It was
the next day and
the cooking tree

was sprised that

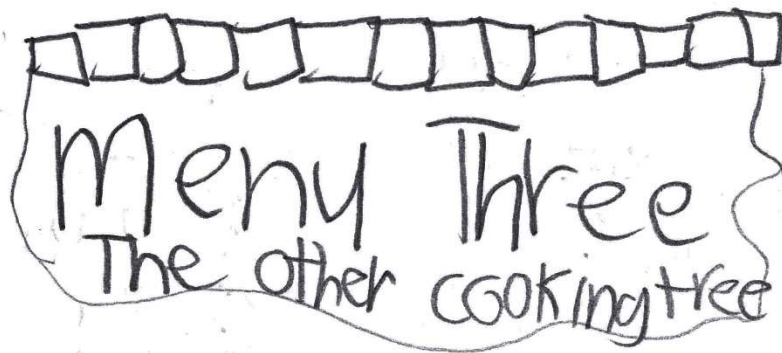
no one came for

a snack. I was
really sad. Over

a few weeks this kept
on hapning to me.



Who is that laughing?
Then all of a sudden things?



Menu Three
The other cooking tree

Turtle, Rosie and
Peter were walking
in front of me with
shaks and drinks!

"Where did you get those drinks from?"

"Oh hi cooking tree there is a nother cooking tree down there"

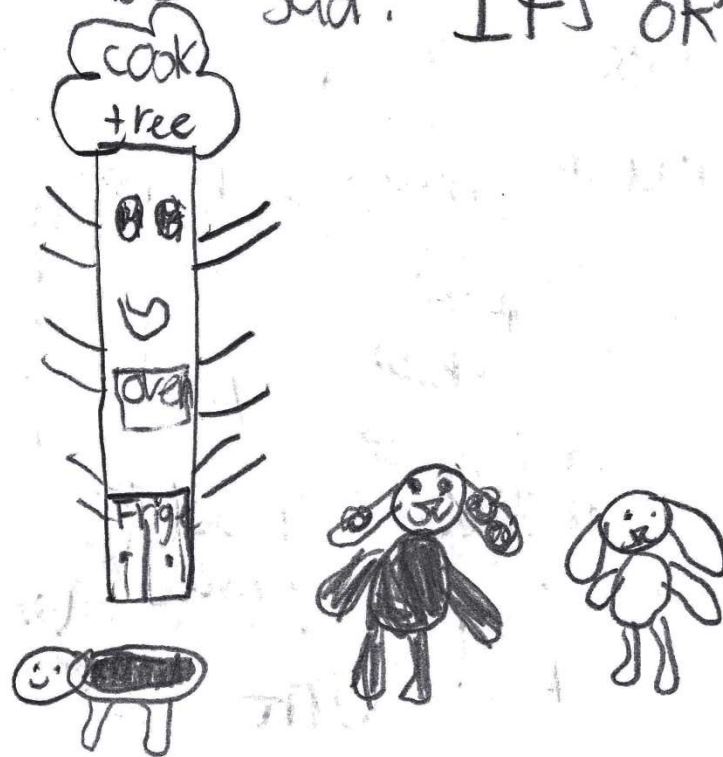
thought we might just have a bit of a change for a bit. "we might

cum back but I dont think so." said Peter. "OK were of. They didnt relise

till two weeks later"

"But how come you are sad I don't get it, what is rong?" said Rosie

"What is wrong is that
you Peter and turtle
are going to that cooking
tree and I feel left out
that's what." "Oh." "Sorry cooking
tree we didn't think you
would be sad." "It's OK"



"How about this you guys
cum on monday, wensday,
friday and sunday and,
you go the other
days to the other cooking
tree ok deal? deal"
who's up for a hot chodet
and Pankak's me!



W. R. ...
Cooking tree 2

The other cooking tree
dosent agree with this
Plan! What are they
going to do! Let's find
out soon!



The Yeti

By Tik En Toh

Once, in the past, there lived a yeti. Born to be alone and betrayed because of his big, dangerous look, he had always dreamed for a family to play with and love. But, as a yeti, he couldn't go anywhere close to the village a few miles away. He lived in a small cave, surrounded by trees that grew very tall. He never went out, instead, hoped a friend he could consider family would come to him. Then, one day, everything changed.

It was a snowy day, like usual. Yeti was in his cave, eating his breakfast, the big acorns in the tall pine trees. Suddenly, out of the blue, a small figure walked into his cave. The Yeti was curious. Was this the moment he was waiting for? Slowly, the figure came closer and to the yeti's surprise it was a boy!

The little boy was as small as the acorns he ate. The small boy looked up at the yeti's great height. He didn't seem that scared of him. The little boy ran up to Yeti and offered him an acorn, he was wobbling wildly in the process. As the Yeti was taking the acorn, he was thinking, this was the moment, the moment of truth, the moment of belonging. The little boy smiled at the yeti. He wouldn't be alone anymore.

Days past quickly, with the boy, the yeti was never alone. And every night, when the boy had to go back to the village, he always felt heart broken. Then, one morning the boy came to the yeti with someone else. It was another boy. Once the new boy saw the yeti, the boy sped of back to the village. The boy ran after the other boy but left a note by the entrance of the cave. "John went to tell the village you're here. Run. From, your friend Jack." It read. The Yeti trusted his friend. He knew it wasn't a prank, so he ran.

The Yeti ran out of the cave and for the first time since he was born, dashed out into the white world. But, as soon as he got out of the cave, a group of people came rushing at him. The Yeti dashed for his life. He needed to get out of there. And in his head, he was thinking, he'll save me, I just know it.

The villagers finally managed to get him in the ropes they were holding and slowly began to move him to the village. After several days of swapping draggers, they finally managed to get him to the village, it seemed as though they had set it all up for him. There was a huge metal cage that would have took years to build. The hope of being saved drained from him like a vacuum. Straight after he entered the big dome, escaping wasn't a choice. As he entered the dome, he felt like his life was fading away from him, slowly, he entered.

Jack was planning an escape plan for his big friend, he had planned it all out perfectly, but he didn't have the materials for the awesome plan, although he was still not willing to give up. He ran like the wind out of his house and started to run to the forest. He searched for hours until he found what he was looking for.

Meanwhile, Jack was stealthing his way to the metal cage with his plan. Jack stopped in front of the huge dome and beckoned the plan to break through the dome. A rip formed in the dome. On the other side of the dome, there was a small little yeti and the little boy Jack. The small yeti ran up to him and gave him a warm loving hug. Yeti smiled. This is what he was missing out on all these years and days, love. A noise of displeasure was suddenly heard from the hole. They weren't alone, the whole village charged into the big area. The big yeti thought, this won't happen, never again! He didn't know what to do, but that wasn't a problem, the small yeti had found a way to charm all of the angry and afraid people. He ran up to the villagers and gave them a new perspective on life.

From then on, the yetis and villagers lived in peace. They helped each other in their problems and it made the yeti's and villagers overjoyed as they lived in peace with each other forever. None of the villagers complained about the yeti's, everyone thought, this is a new world, a new era.

Revenge of the Mighty Swordsman

By Jackie Sun

This story started in 1914, when Tanjiro's Mum and Dad were killed during World War 1, on the Turkish coast of Gallipoli. Shots were firing as the family of Tanjiro were running for safety, but a sniper was waiting for a target. Boom! A bullet fired and the parents of Tanjiro collapsed. Luckily, just before they died, they hid the newborn Tanjiro in a small wooden cabin. Cries could be heard as gunshots and bombers flew around the coast. A day later he was found by three American soldiers. As young Tanjiro's heart filled with rage, he was determined to fight for his parents sacrifice!

They delivered the baby safely to a dojo in the Southwest of Central America, where there was one man who offered to teach him how to be a Samurai once he could stand.

A year later the 16-month-old, wielded his first wooden sword. His Sensei knew there was something special about this baby. Once he was 2 years old, he was already swinging his sword like a master, and young Tanjiro felt like a dream of his would be fulfilled as he worked harder and harder each day. He was entering the intermediate Samurai stage.

The years of hard work had passed, 10-year-old Tanjiro knew how to speak fluent English and he had mastered the total concentration breathing. This allowed him to send his heartbeat to being slow and smooth and to see through the transparent world. Allowing him to see his opponents next attack. This would help him greatly in the future.

5 Years passed and Tanjiro had become a master Samurai and he had mastered He No Kami Kagura. This would allow him to transit sunlight into a powerful Aura around his sword, helping him unlock different abilities. Now that he could fend for himself, he was going to set about destroying the Turkish Army for the evil deeds they had done when he was a baby. He concentrated his mind to one thing, his mother and father, and how if he honoured their sacrifice, they would be smiling down at him.

Travelling to Turkey on a helicopter, Tanjiro would intrude the Turkish military bases one by one until there were no more. All the Turkish would not expect any mercy from the enraged human.

Two days later he was at the first military base, but with the speed he gained from training, he was able to slash everyone in the Turkish Army. Finally, after all those lonely and sleepless years had worked out, the anger and rage broke through his heart, and joined the bloody smell of blood in the air. His heart filled with fulfilment and justice as the holy lights of his mom and dads' souls shined down on him!

Tanjiro thought that if he wanted to continue his legacy, he would have to raise a child of his own in honour of his parents. This would ensure that their spirit would be passed through future generations. Tanjiro's memorable journey would be remembered forever! As he would be an inspirational part of modern history!

Upper Primary Years 5-6

Millie Jones	<i>Our Family Tree</i>	Highly Commended
Avalea Heather Curtis	<i>My Aussie Birthday</i>	Winner
Charlie Prout	<i>Here Comes the Sun</i>	Winner

Our Family Tree

By Millie Jones

They've been raging all week. There's no internet, no power, no nothing. The air's so hot, it's almost impossible to breathe. Taking one step outside, is like taking one step into living hell. Snowflakes, except they burn your hand to a crisp if you touch them. Grey, thick, misty clouds, as dark as midnight, exploding out of trees. Nothing to keep us updated, except the old, run down radio, perched on the kitchen bench. Mum sits there each day, waiting, just waiting, for someone, or something, to tell us we need to leave.

An awkward silence, something not uncommon lately, especially at the dinner table, my least favourite part of the day. Dad's usually here to break the silence, but he's not home. Neither is Ziggy, Our family's beloved pet Greyhound. Mum is confident they're still out in the paddocks, but I'm not too sure.

"Well," mum sighs, with dark rings, below her sorrowful blue eyes. "How was your day?"

Kai rolls his eyes at the foolish question, pinching the bridge of his nose. He shook his head and began to answer the question.

"Amazing mum!" he mumbles sarcastically.

Kai aggressively stabs his knife into the chewy steak, and storms off to his bedroom, before slamming the crooked door behind him. I agreed with him. Dad and Ziggy are the only ones that can keep us entertained during this time, but both were out all day. Silence falls across the room, once again.

I'm Fae, and during the last few days, my life has been turned completely upside down. Our family has moved to the country, to the property my grandparents have always lived on but now they've moved into town. We've just settled in, but unfortunately, we've run into the trail of a bushfire. It's scary, and many houses have burnt down. Everybody is on edge, and short tempered. I'm not sure how to pass the time, as there's not much to do, especially because Ziggy's not home. That's what I'm most worried about, as he's never been gone for this long. Yet again, tonight I'll go to bed worried. Not only for the house, but for Ziggy.

"Grab the sandbags! Don't forget the hose! Kids, pack your bags, just in case," Mum bellows from outside.

Another horrible way to wake up. No sound of birds chirping merrily in the trees, or the sheoaks whistling, as they wave their leaves in the breeze. Instead, all I hear is the deafening crackle of the burning flames. I hurry out of bed to help Mum and Dad fireproof the house. The smoke is as thick as wool, and the heat stings my eyes. as I run to turn on the hose, I take a glimpse of the surrounding trees, and wonder if they'll be gone soon. My morning routines are completely different to girls my age. Some might take it as an advantage not having to go to school for a week, but really, I miss it. There's no way to communicate with any of my

friends, and sometimes, I feel extremely lonely. Another day is spent, spraying water all around the house, and Dad cutting firebreaks. But as the day turns to afternoon, the sky becomes darker, nearly midnight black.

I sit awkwardly on the couch. Another day gone, no Ziggy. At this point, I think he's disappeared. "Come on Fae! He'll be fine. Greyhounds are tough." Dad says.

He had a point, but nothing was going to stop the amount of anxiety I was holding in. I curl up into a small ball and glare up at the clock. Every second feels like a whole minute. If only the ground could suck me up, so I wouldn't have to put up with this. Kai and mum sit on the windowsill, and stare into the abyss of the dark sky. The smoke and fog covered the sun, and the flames paint red around the burning trees. The heat is nothing like you could imagine, like being in a sauna, but ten times worse.

Everyone's overworked, dehydrated, and tired, but to make matters worse, suddenly, the radio flickers.

"The fires are travelling North, they're coming fast! Everybody in its trail is recommended to evacuate!"

"Grab your bags! We've got to go!" Mum yells, as she screeches down the hallway to her room.

"No! I won't leave!" Kai responds.

He stays seated on the windowsill, watching the fire come closer and closer.

"Kai! The house isn't as important as our lives! We're leaving!" Dad screams back.

Everything happened extremely fast. But all I could think about was Ziggy. He wasn't home, he wasn't in the paddocks, and he wasn't with me. I stared into his empty bed. He was gone.

"We can't leave mum! Ziggy! He's still out there!" I refuse to leave as well.

"Ziggy must have run away, he'll be fine. We'll look for him afterwards, ok?" Mum tries to reassure me.

I can tell she's trying to be nice, but if I look deep into her eyes, she's not telling the truth. This was the end. He was gone. There was no finding him. Salty tears streamed down my burning cheeks.

Nothing could be worse than this. We're all squashed in our miniature family car, pillows pushing against our faces. It's burning, but all I can think about is Ziggy. I've been with him my entire life, but now he's gone. I don't even know if he's alive. As I stare into the red and orange, flashing flames, I wonder if we'll ever see him again. The rest of the car drive was a blur. We arrived at the gym just before they had closed the doors. Everybody seemed overworked, fatigued, and exhausted. There was no air conditioning, which made the room squelching hot, like it could burn your skin. Sweat dripped down my forehead, as a million thoughts rushed through my mind. Would the house stay? Will we go back? And the hurtful question, will we ever see Ziggy again.

The most tiring day ever, of head counts, panicking, and attempts to sleep, passes. Finally, an old, scruffy man, with a beard reaching down to his chest, stands and announces,

"It is safe to leave the building."

Sighs of relief travel across the room. Parents hold their kids tightly, and cross their fingers, hoping their properties haven't burnt down, and their livestock was still alive. Everybody was relieved, everybody, except me. I couldn't stand the thought that we were going to have to live without Ziggy. It just didn't seem right. Suddenly, we hear the sound of huge, metal doors scraping along the concrete floor. Crowds of people rushed outside. Mum and Dad gestured for me and Kai to follow. Nervous, I crept out of my seat, and headed for the door.

We've finally arrived home. We're one of the lucky few. Our house is still standing, but our sheds are all burnt down. I can only imagine how others are feeling. The fires are finally under control, but it doesn't change the state of our property. There is not a single twig, or speck of grass left. It's like living on Mars. No birds chirping, no creeks, no living things. It's like a dessert. I look around in shock. I can't believe everything is gone. Beside me is Mum and Dad. They're appalled at the amount of vegetation destroyed. I glance over to the left and see Kai, staring, but squinting into the distance. I suspect it's from the smoke, until he speaks.

"Hey, the family tree's still here!"

Our family tree is extremely special for us. We've always had family picnics there when my grandparents stayed at the property. The whole family has marked our heights on it for years. Finally, I had hope, like a tiny ball of fire, burning in my eyes, something I thought I would never see again. We sprinted down the hill, adrenaline surging through our bodies, and anticipation gleaming in our eyes. Ziggy just might be there. As we finally reached the bottom of the hill, a long, skinny grey figure, stares into our tired, baggy eyes. I sprinted as fast as I could, Tears welling in my eyes. It must be Ziggy. It must. I finally reach the trunk of the tree, to find Ziggy laying there, without a scratch. No words could describe my happiness.

"He's here!" I yell.

Mum, Dad, and Kai come rushing over, the relief and happiness is obvious. Everything begins to fall into place, and after all this time, I imagine a bright future ahead of us. We can always rebuild the property, that we had planned to live in and pass down for generations. Sometimes things can be rough, but moments like this, our family together, Ziggy pouncing all over us, showering him with hugs, remind me that no matter what happens, family is always what's most important.

My Aussie Birthday

By Avalea Heather Curtis

The musty smell of smoke filled my lungs with each inhale. The rhythmic chugging sound of the train reverberated through the eerie stillness. The engine roared and smoke billowed into the dimly lit sky. This was my chance, my life depended on it. That too, of my family. I couldn't give up. The sound of that train signalled the start of a journey that would change my life forever.

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I woke from my nightmare and could feel perspiration beading on my forehead. The darkest experiences of World War II in my beautiful homeland, Lithuania, etched into my memories. Despite the passing of many years, the trail of suffering and despair that Hitler and his merciless regime inflicted, continued to haunt my sleep. Taking a deep breath, I let my mind drift into a cloud of gratitude. It was a special day; May 21st. Once only dreamt of, I was surrounded by luxuries; a beautiful home, creature comforts, my wife, June and our daughter, Lynlea. A familiar smell wafted in the air, instantly recognisable. On the bedside table, June had left a steaming mug of tea and a piece of Vegemite toast to coax me from slumber. Knowing that I would get a telling off if I "forgot" to make the bed, I cheekily pulled up the doona, to conceal the crumpled sheets underneath. In the distance I could hear the music from the outdoor shed as June did her aerobics.

"Daddy!"

I heard Lynlea's sweet voice from the living room as she played with her dolls.

"My darling!"

I swooped Lynlea into my arms to greet her goodmorning, taking in her sweet smell and ruffling her hair. She went back to playing with her dolls. I went back to listening to the comforting, familiar sounds of my life today, humming a song of sunshine. Though filed away, were the memories and sounds of my past...

.....

My mother called from the next room. The walls incredibly thin in the temporary housing we were residing in. I pretended not to hear.

"Algirdas! Come here this instance!" Now she had her grumbles on.

As a child of 10 years, I was vulnerable to my mother's smacks, so I cautiously walked down the hallway, my threadbare socks muffling the thud, thud of my feet. It was war-time, and our farmhouse now occupied by ruthless soldiers, forced our family to live crammed into a few rooms of a ghetto. My mother and father's conversations revolved around the harsh reality of feeding and clothing our family.

Mother stood on her tippy-toes, reaching up to the top shelf. She stretched right to the back of the cupboard, and pulled out a worn slipper. She carefully peeled back the sole to reveal crumpled notes. Mother set five notes aside on the wooden table and advised me to spend wisely before returning the slipper.

The racket at the market was always a comforting sound for me. The smell reminded me of life on the farm, before war had extinguished our family dreams. For a small moment, I felt normal amongst the crowd of people and market stalls. Lost in my own thoughts, I hadn't noticed the lingering footsteps and watchful eyes behind me. As I paused to take in the chaos of the market, out of the corner of my eye I caught an unwelcome glimpse. My heart began to pound. I fled around the corner and didn't dare look behind me.

I could feel the uniformed soldier in pursuit, the pounding of his heavy boots on the cobbled path, becoming louder as he closed in. I suddenly felt hands roughly grasp my shoulders from behind. I gasped.

"Don't move."

As I was spun around, I came face to face with the soldier from the market. His breath, reeking of stale alcohol. He demanded my details.

I told him, "My name is Algirdas Baikauskas."

"Papers!" he barked.

I shook my head. He looked at me menacingly.

"No papers?"

The soldier lifted his hand, as if to retrieve his gun. A sudden drama unfolded on the street, momentarily capturing his attention. It gave me just enough leeway to break free and escape. I sprinted back through the market square, pausing only to snatch two loaves of bread. Dirty, hungry bodies lined the sidewalks. The cries of children echoed through the air. The stark reality that is war. So visible. Everyone, in some way, a casualty.

As I reached the corner of my ghetto, the street was quieter than usual. No army barking orders at the children playing chasey. It was peculiar. I cautiously pushed open the gates as a loud screeching noise sounded in the distance. I ran to our room, no sign of my family, instead clothes strewn all over the floor, beds and furniture upturned. With a sudden realisation, I knew I had only moments.

I sprinted from the ghetto, heading to the train station. The platforms were bare as the carriages pulled away, still within view. I ran with *all* my might! I could see the train, every detail, the engravings in the iron, the icy condensation dripping from the rails. With sheer determination, I ran with speed that I didn't know I possessed. This was the only chance to remain with my family. I lunged for those iron handles and held for dear life for the 150km freezing cold journey, a testament to my sheer desperation.

At a stop, I made my way into the carriage. By some act of God, my mother found me. Shivering uncontrollably, her arms wrapped around me, she promised to never let me go again. My sister Danute, and my father were also on the train, too stunned with fear to speak. Crammed like animals into a carriage lined with hay. It was the longest of journeys. Men, women, and children shuffled to the corner of the carriage to relieve themselves, deprived of dignity. Nothing left but self-preservation. The journey was unbearably long and as we arrived at a displaced person camp, we were harshly directed by the soldiers.

"Women, children- here. Men – over here."

The soldier pointed in two different directions. We kissed my father goodbye. I clung to my mother and Danute as we moved to the designated area.

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In the camp, we slept in bunk beds, with nothing more than a scratchy blanket. Food was scarce. Our days in the camp became weeks, the months slipping away through the grasp of time.

Australian soldiers were next door training, and through the fence, I watched them with curiosity each day. One day the Aussies waved and came over to give me some food; a weird sticky, brown concoction spread onto bread. I tentatively took a nibble and gave a strained smile. The Aussie soldiers laughed. I laughed with them as they gave me a thumbs up. I had forgotten the joy that laughter can bring. Each morning the Aussie soldiers smuggled me half a "Vegemite" sandwich. I shared it with my mother and Danute to dull our incessant hunger. The Aussie men had given me happiness and hope. They had shown me kindness, which I could *never* forget.

As the months passed, the friends I had made in camp begun to leave. Yet still my family remained. Others had received invitations to migrate as countries provided refuge. Finally, our invitation arrived to begin a new life, with offers to move to Canada, South Africa or Australia. The Aussie soldiers had shown us true character and raised our spirits when dark clouds loomed. So we chose Australia as our lucky country.

We caught a train to Genoa, Italy and boarded a ship bound for Australia. We passed through the Suez canal. The journey was long and we were separated from one another. On 21st May 1949, we finally arrived in Fremantle. As the boat anchored, I stood on deck carrying nothing more than a small backpack of belongings. I stepped onto unfamiliar land with a mix of hope and trepidation. I felt grateful to leave behind the past and was ready to embrace the

possibilities ahead. I admired the beautiful land that graciously offered us a new start, a place to call home.

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I drifted back and in the stillness, stood basking in the sounds of my Aussie life. I gave quiet gratitude to my lucky country for the abundance of blessings it had shared.

I heard the familiar creak of the flyscreen door opening, and looked up.

“Junie?”

“Happy birthday, Algirdas.”

I leant in and kissed the forehead of my freckle-faced, Aussie wife. Lynlea wrapped her small arms around our knees. Our morning embrace; *our* way of saying we loved each other. I smiled. Despite enduring such hardship, I stood now with a full heart.

It was time to celebrate. It was a special day, May 21st. My Aussie birthday!

This story is in memory of my late, Great ‘Old’ Grandad, who would share his cold toast and vegemite with me, and sing, “You are my sunshine”. I have dedicated it to my Old Granny and Granlea who share Old Grandad’s stories often. It is his journey from Lithuania to Australia that gave my family the life we have today. We love you to the moon and back, Old Grandad.

Here Comes the Sun

By Charlie Prout

The blistering heat had engulfed us days ago. The blinding light filled our eyes to the point where the ground at our feet seemed invisible. The roaring, gigantic orange ball of fire blocked out almost every other sound. It was sucking us towards it with some unseen force. The bubbling roads and the burning houses were proof of this. My mind was brimming with despair. *'This is it. The end'* I thought.

The crackling static of the old, plasma tv was barely audible over the cranking air conditioner in the basement. The news reporter's voice repeated the same words he had been saying since Friday. "Stay in a cool, closed room, and don't go outside! If you can make it, shuttles are leaving for Mars from all major ports in all cities and towns. It's coming". Pessimistic words.

I am not the kind of person who enjoys a dark ending to the story. Nor am I one to stay inside. But if I was to survive, both of these outcomes would be inevitable.

I couldn't stand it anymore. The cold oppressive air blew against my soft, tanned skin, like an irritating rash that couldn't be cured. My long, muscular arms and legs felt like they were being compressed. I needed fresh air. My mother protested, but despite her cries for me to come back, I ran up the stairs, across the kitchen which was so hot it could have cooked an egg without the stove top, to the living room, and out the front door.

I ran... and ran, making sure my feet weren't on the liquid tarmac that had once formed the bike path, bubbling at my ankles. It led through what was left of the park, which now was only charred trees and piles of ash where shrubs once stood. I finally stumbled onto the sandy shore of the river. Diving desperately into the water seeking relief from the madness I only found myself stroking pointlessly through boiling waves back to the beach. The satisfying pops and sizzles of water that bounce off a of hot plate brought me back to reality. No towel was needed to dry off.

"Jake!" came a scream from a distance. Not just any scream, my mother's scream. Bounding up the riverbank through the inferno, I was desperate to find her. Tripping over objects and stumbling through debris unable to see a thing, every step hurt until I collapsed on the front verge of our family home. *'If I'm going into that horrible flaming beast of a sun, I am going into it with her,'* I thought. And then I remembered. I remembered that my brothers had been in the city the last few days in a communal shelter. They were out having lunch when the inferno blasted through the atmosphere.

At the shelter, they found a way to communicate and contacted my mother. The city had multiple ports where shuttles would arrive from Mars to save them. Surely they would be safe. They had to be. Maybe they had already left. I had found my mother. We could join them. But only if we left now.

A woman with long, sandy blonde hair, deep blue eyes and weathered skin with freckles dotting her cheeks, and one brown spot the size of a large pea on her left cheek. The doctor called it a mole, but she called it her beauty spot (she always had time for a laugh). And there on top of a concrete slab she rested on a bench in our front garden. My mother. I slumped down next to her, ignoring my swollen, pink body, which was riddled with burns.

It was such a dismal sight, and when a tear rolled down my cheek and dripped on to the boiling pavement, it disappeared instantly in a puff of steam. Arms clasped around each other, we sat, bawling our eyes dry. She leant over and gripped my hands. "It'll be okay, Jakey. Don't worry. The civilisation on Mars are sending shuttles to evacuate us. Your brothers are already there waiting for us. It'll be alright," she said with conviction through her quiet sobs.

I wanted to believe her more than anything, but I had an awful feeling that this wasn't going to end with us on a shuttle headed for Mars to reunite us with the rest of our family. Surviving this would mean deserting our furnace like planet immediately. Yet we sat, wrapped around each other; no tears left to cry. Our sight slowly diminished and before long, consciousness escaped us. Our tight-knit cocoon rested on the bench, unbroken. Our time was up.

Lower Secondary Years 7-9

Kylie Woon	<i>Reach</i>	Highly Commended
Leo Durey	<i>The Prospector</i>	2 nd Place
Johanna Kingsbury	<i>Shattered Reflection</i>	Winner & Winner of the Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion

Reach

By Kylie Woon

The flowers stopped swaying side to side. A bee perched on a soft cushion of pollen, bathing in the scent of delicate fragrances. Cautiously, the bee raised its head. It swept its wings front to back, front to back. Its dainty black legs lifted off and it flew over the wooden fence, but not before casting one last look to the mesmerising tapestry of vivid roses and mellow lavenders. Saying goodbye to beautiful gardens was always sad.

As it carried on, it noticed a shift. A shift in the way the plants leaned, in the clouds that hung in the sky, in the noisy dog that always sat at the corner of the street.

A dashed moment of hushed silence passed before the stillness was shattered by a single snowflake. It came down slowly, drifting and dancing before resting on the ground. Then one more. And another. Then a whole barrage of them. They hammered down faster than the bee expected snow to fall. There was a slight tilt to the bee's head as it stared. They were ultraviolet. It had never seen ultraviolet in *snow*.

Though curiosity niggled at the back of its mind, humans were already piling out of homes clad with puffy jackets and long pants. With a graceful motion, the bee propelled itself into the air, weaving through the legs of careless and excitement-filled people. It settled on a discoloured flower outside a window. Near it, one little girl with her brown hair in pigtails tucked underneath a beanie too big for her head was jumping up and down at a door. She scooped a lump of snow into her bare hands. Her brows creased. Her rosy lips turned downwards. Soon after, a slender woman emerged, and the little girl tugged at her thick woollen jumper.

"Mummy, mummy. Why isn't it cold?"

The mother laughed and called the girl silly. Of course it was cold! She reached down and placed her palm on the layer of snow. The blue in her eyes stormed. She rushed inside. The bee peered through the window. Tapping her foot anxiously was the mother as she grabbed the remote to turn on the TV. She dialled a person named "Darling", muttering a steady stream of stressed words. The bee observed this with muted interest. But it had no time to wonder about peculiar human activities. Work beckoned. A news headline flashed across the screen and the remote clattered to the ground, but the bee was already on its way, dodging more humans feverishly tumbling out of houses.

Both the wind and the next flower it landed on carried the stench of death. But something else bothered it. The humans were pointing up with wide eyes. Hundreds of heads littering the streets were staring *up*. It didn't know much about human emotions, but even the tiniest ant felt what they were feeling. Fear. Following the stretch of multiple arms, the bee lifted its head and took in the sky. There was a tear. Stars blinked beyond the blue canvas. The edges of this tear were crumbling, as if the very fabric of the sky could no longer hold onto the

weight of the world. It disintegrated into tiny, ultraviolet pieces. They cast an eerie glow that sent a tremor coursing through the bee. It longed to be with the other bees, back safe in the hive, spinning nectar into honey, and basking in the presence of its queen. Do anything but face this gaping tear that loomed before it.

Amidst the chaos, the girl with pigtails appeared, except she wore no beanie now. She bent down to the dead plant. Her eyes were impossibly big and blue, and they held such an innocent kindness that the bee couldn't help but have its racing heart calm by just a bit.

"Mummy says I can bring something I love with me. I love bees. You want to come with me, cutie bee?"

Her whispered words brushed against its wings and rustled the crispy, twisted petals. She clutched a daisy in her hand and she pushed it up against the dried flower the bee rested upon. Its instincts taking over, it clambered on. The familiar sensation of pollen beneath it anchored it to the world it knew. The little girl held the daisy close.

"Thank you, cutie bee. I hope you make mummy happy. She loves bees too."

Slowly, she walked to her mother, whose tightened mouth softened as she saw her daughter and the bee. She clutched the little girl's hand tightly. Then she marched.

"Mummy, where's daddy? Where are we going? I'm scared."

Quivers ran through the little girl's lips and the bee huddled closer to her chest, which was rising and falling quickly, in sympathy.

"Shh, sweetheart. We're going somewhere safe," the mother's eyes scanned their surroundings, "Just stay close."

She pulled the little girl in and stroked her head, crouching down to meet her eye level as she did so.

"We'll be fine, baby, and so will your father," she murmured.

The worry in her eyes told a different story.

They walked for what seemed like ages. They trudged through the snow-covered streets, ignoring the ache in their backs and calves. It was dead quiet, the lack of the hum of cars amplified by the scuffle of shoes against concrete. It was suffocating. The bee buzzed with heightened awareness as swarms of people brushed past them, some with families, some by themselves. All with faces etched with fear. The tear had stretched and more snow flurried down. The bee thought it saw an outline move in the smattering of stars. One step. Two steps. The bee started to count. The more it counted, the quicker they moved. The quicker everyone around them moved. People were running now. People were shouting now.

"Hurry, hurry!"

"Peter quit lagging, for once in your goddamn life *run*."

"Faster, before it comes!"

Everywhere the bee looked it was blinded by the blur of frantic movement and a kaleidoscope of ultraviolet hues. Every hair on the bee's body stood on end as it buried itself further into the little girl. The flood of people pushed them in all directions, but the little girl held on firmly. She wouldn't let her mother be alone. Snow had piled up high, but they relentlessly carried on. The mother's sights were set on the emergency assembly area where the local news had said to go. Where everyone was heading. Towards the chance of safety and, she prayed, her husband. She thought of him. Watching movies with her until the break of dawn. Making sandcastles with their daughter. Joking together as they cooked. How desperately she wanted to keep living that life.

The little girl stopped.

The mother looked down and tugged on her arm, but still, the little girl wouldn't budge. She was looking at something. And then everyone heard it. The bee's antennae twitched as it tuned into the sound coming from a small band on the painted stage in the middle of the town. It was a beloved stage. Every time the bee passed by, someone was on it. Now, this unnamed band bared itself to the crowd. Other bees darted around beside them with fluttering wings, their striped black and yellow bodies arching to the rhythm of the band's music. The singer's voice cut through the dense atmosphere and each note that landed unfurled like blossoming flowers. The few who had stopped to listen closed their eyes. The drumbeats were soft, the guitar melodic, and the lyrics were raw. Sweat beaded on the players' foreheads and the strange snow coated their feet. You could tell they weren't professionals. You could hear the slight mistakes that came from their fingers trembling. You could see they were just as scared as everybody else. Yet, they *played*.

And so beautifully.

A smile graced the little girl's face, a fragile spark of joy. The mother couldn't help but do the same. Somewhere off in the distance, the father thought of his wife and his child. And for a few moments, it felt like the bee could return to its hive and prepare for the next day of work. That it would go past this colourful stage and see yet another group of people perform.

"I wish daddy was here to see this."

"We'll be with him soon, sweetheart," her mother's voice cracked. She had to believe he was going to be okay.

She squeezed the little girl's hand and then gently pulled her away. They had to go on. One step. Two steps. The bee started to count again. The band vanished behind the crowd. With each number, their music faded a fraction more. The little girl hummed, carrying the echoes of the moment they had allowed themselves to smile. It was an odd feeling to feel at the end of the world. One the little girl carried with her even as a hand reached through the tear in the sky.

The Prospector

By Leo Durey

1897, Kalgoorlie, Four years after Paddy Hannan found gold

David set out from his small shack to a normal day's work. He said goodbye to his daughter and wife, then stepped down from the three wooden stairs onto the red rocky dirt. He began walking at a fast pace towards the bitumen road. Once he reached the road he stood there for a minute or two, squinting to the right side of the road, until he heard the rattling of a horse and cart coming. He straightened his posture, then began to walk towards it.

'G'day,' the rider greeted him. The rider's sunburnt face was contorted into a demented smile.

'Hi,' David said back, grinning.

The horse carriage rider put his cigarette to his lips and blew a puff of grey smoke out of it.

'Back to the mines again, Dave?' he queried.

'Yes,' David replied.

The rider nodded, blew another puff of smoke, then whipped the beautiful chestnut horse, signalling to it to make it go faster. The horse neighed and trotted in the direction of the mine. As they passed through the small mining town, David spotted scaffolding and a few builders grinning at a lopsided sign being placed at the top of the building, saying 'established 1897'.

The horse rider caught David gazing at the construction site. 'That's been getting built for weeks now. They 're calling it the Kalgoorlie hotel. What a creative name!' the horse rider bellowed sarcastically.

'Yeah,' David murmured back. He wasn't particularly interested right now.

'Everything alright, Dave? Ever since the gold rush began you've been acting a little funny. Not talking to other blokes that much I mean.'

'I'm good,' David paused, 'everything's fine.'

The horse rider gave a worried glance at David. 'OK. Let me know if you ever need me.' The horse suddenly stopped. 'Looks like we've arrived. Time to get out.'

David waved goodbye to the horse rider and strolled out, walking beside the smallest mine. Hundreds of people from all over the world were scattered all over the red desert-like plains. He walked towards the galvanised iron shed full of tools. He chose his trusty old pickaxe. This pickaxe had stayed with him for two years now. It was looking battered and exhausted. 'Just like me,' he thought.

He wobbled to the group of young miners who were chatting. 'I'm the next Paddy Hannan,' one of the taller miners bragged. 'Shut up Collins,' another miner shot back at him. The air

around the small group was becoming a haze of smoke. David was starting to feel a little queasy. Then he fell to the ground and began coughing.

The group stopped talking and looked at David, who was still on the ground coughing. 'Wow Dave mate, ya feeling good?' Collins the miner said.

David crawled back up to his feet. 'I'm alright,' he said hurriedly.

The group dispersed and began mining for gold once again. David went to the small mine and began to hit his pickaxe into a rock. He saw a glimmer from inside the rock. He slammed his pickaxe into the rock surrounding the glimmering thing. Was it gold? He found new power, hitting it with more strength. Once the rock had finally crumbled, he got a decent view on the shining ore. It was fool's gold.

He gazed at the rocky dirt near his feet, defeated. He had gotten so close. But he couldn't give up. His daughter and wife were relying on him to find gold. He had to keep going. The bell for the end of the day sounded. He trudged back unenthusiastically. The group gathered around again. They all saw David's expressionless face.

'Better luck tomorrow,' one of the miners called.

David nodded solemnly. He hopped into the horse and cart and went back home.

David walked up the three wooden stairs towards the weathered spruce door. He pushed it open slowly but the door hit something.

'Ouch!' came a voice from the other side of the door.

'Oh sorry, Charlotte,' David apologised.

'That's fine,' Charlotte replied. 'Did you find any gold today dad?' Her eyes looked pleading.

'Uh no. Not today.'

'Okay. Mum's inside making dinner. Come in.' David stepped through the door frame and walked on the grimy floorboards into the kitchen.

'What's for dinner?' he questioned. 'I'm starving.'

His wife peered at him. 'Just potatoes for tonight.' She paused. 'Get out of your work clothes, you're filthy,' she said. David nodded. He walked to his room and changed as fast as he could. As he emerged, his wife called, 'come to the table!'

They trudged to the table and sat down on the jagged chairs. No one spoke for a while, just helped themselves to the lukewarm spuds sitting in front of them. Rain pattered onto the weak tin roof above their heads. The small analogue clock made light ticking noises around the room.

'Have you ever found gold dad?' Charlotte asked suddenly. Her mother faked dropping her fork and dived underneath the table to retrieve it. David gazed at his daughter blankly.

'Yes,' he replied slowly. He didn't know how she would react.

‘Well tell me the story!’ She begged. ‘Please.’

‘OK. If you insist.’ David took a deep breath and began to tell his story. ‘Years ago, before you were born, even before the gold rush, your mother and me moved to Kalgoorlie. Things were getting... complicated. We made a gamble which we couldn’t pay for. We drove far away from town, hours, until we finally decided we were alright.’

‘Kalgoorlie was a small town back then, barely 100 people. I decided to work in the mines and became good mates with a few miners. On one expedition I went down with Paddy Hannan.’ Charlotte’s jaw dropped almost to the floor. ‘We found gold together.’ David stopped. ‘I started coughing. I couldn’t keep going. Paddy noticed, and realised a rockslide was about to fall right onto me.’

‘Paddy realised he had a choice. He could get the gold all to himself, leaving me to die, or not getting the gold and saving my life. Paddy was a good man. He ran out towards me and dragged me out of the way. Fortunately for him, there was still a gap between the rocks. And he became a legend.’

David glanced at Charlotte who was fast asleep in her chair.

‘Oh well,’ David said, ‘maybe another time.’

NEXT MORNING... David set out from his house to a normal day’s work. He said goodbye to his daughter and wife, then stepped down from the three wooden stairs onto the red rocky dirt. He began walking at a fast pace towards the bitumen road. Once he reached the road he stood there for a minute or two, squinting to the right side of the road, until he heard the rattling of a horse and cart coming. He straightened his posture, then began to walk towards it.

The horse rider looked at David fearfully. ‘Is everything alright? I heard what happened yesterday.’

‘I’m good,’ David paused, ‘everything’s fine.’

‘Dave, I’m not that stupid. You should tell your family your problem.’ David was still standing next to the bitumen road, waiting to get into the horse and cart.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ he said with a fake blank expression on his face.

‘You do. And I’m sure of it.’ He waited a few seconds. ‘OK, come on, get in.’ David stepped into the horse and cart and took a seat next to a window, gazing blankly outside the window. He entered a mindset of reflection. Should he tell his family what had happened weeks before? Why he had spent a full week off work?

A memory flashed into his mind. He had a flashback of a local doctor telling him of his disease. “Lung cancer” he had called it. He was prescribed to a week of rest and to tell his family if things escalated. His senses slowly refocused. The horse and cart rider was yelling at him to get out of the cart. He quickly jumped out of the cart and walked towards the galvanised iron shed.

The questions buzzed around his head as he absent-mindedly grabbed his pickaxe and headed down to the largest mine. On the way down he met up with Collins, the young miner who bragged he'd become the next Paddy Hannan. They both walked down the mineshaft and began to work together to mine. After tireless work, a glimmer appeared in the rock. Collins gasped. The next few minutes passed in a flash. David collapsed to the ground and began making a guttural coughing noise. Collins, so distracted in the gold, didn't realise what was happening behind him.

The boulder above David's head slightly shifted. Collins spun around and realised. But it was far too late. The boulder dropped off the edge. 'Say goodbye to Charlotte for me,' David croaked. David's vision slowly faded as he left this world.

Shattered Reflection

By Johanna Kingsbury

Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion Winner

The light flared on and off statically, like lightning during a storm. Her feet padded on the cold ground in time with the metronome of her heart. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end and goosebumps spread like a rash from her shoulders to wrists. The hallway stretched out before her, narrow, long and winding. The walls of dark oak cast sharp eerie shadows along the floor that grabbed at her ankles and tried to stop her from going any further. She winced as the floorboards creaked underfoot as she crept along, their screeches piercing through the silence. The air was thick and heavy, and she felt as if the building was watching her.

No, she was letting her thoughts run wild. The shadows were just shadows, the feeling of being watched was simply her imagination. She was going crazy. She *felt* crazy. But she knew better.

Mary Jane Bell was not crazy.

At least, she hoped so. But thinking back to the paralyzing shrieks and screams that had woken her up, she knew she hadn't imagined it. It was back. The phantom, the ghost, the cliched axe-murdering psychopath; whoever it was, *whatever it was*... It was here. She had no idea what it looked like: it only came ever so often, scuttling throughout the building and ravaging everything in its path, leaving Mary Jane running for cover, wide eyed and gasping for breath every time. Earlier tonight, she had been sleeping peacefully in her bed before she was startled awake. She had known instantly that her tormentor was back, and frankly, she was fed up. Determined not to end another encounter huddled in the back corner of her closet, she had grabbed a torch out of her drawer, shrugged on her robe and slipped out of her room. She held the torch now, her palm over the front of the torch to prevent the beam stretching too far in front of her. She had been searching for a while now and her palm had become unbearably warm, her skin itching from the built-up heat.

Mary's eyes darted from side to side, her shoulders tense. Her whole body was on edge. The hallway was lined with portraits of long-forgotten people, straight-backed and sterned. They peered harshly down at her as she made her way down the hallway, inch by inch. An abrupt clap of thunder caused her to shriek, and she clamped a hand over her mouth. Shaking, she slowly lowered her hand and glanced behind her. Of course, there just had to be a thunderstorm tonight. Another factor to add to the already chilling experience. Making sure that no one was behind her, she lifted her sweaty palm from the front of her torch and let the light stretch out in front of her. She swept the torchlight back and forth, making sure to get to each and every corner. Satisfied that she was alone, she swished the torch around one more time and-

She wasn't alone. There was someone. There. On the other side of the hallway. Watching. Watching *her*. She glanced over her shoulder and saw a reflection in a mirror on the wall at the end of the hallway behind her, before whirling back to face the creature in front of her. Dark, thin greasy hair grew in clumps dangling from a mottled scalp. Its hair hung in rat tails over a face of sagging grey skin and hollow cheeks. The creature's mouth gaped open, showing an almost empty mouth save for a few rotting, yellow teeth. Its head hung awkwardly, as if its thin neck might snap at any given moment. The creature's figure was sickly and thin, its bones jutted out against skin that hung limply from its frame. In sunken sockets were black, bottomless pooling eyes. Eyes which fixed right on Mary Jane Bell.

Another scream grew from the pit of her stomach, clawing its way up to her lungs and drowning her. It slithered up her throat, pried open her mouth and leapt into the air, shattering the silence. She couldn't move. Her body had stopped responding. All she could hear were sirens screaming in her head as she willed her body to move and snap out of her trance. Frozen, she watched as the figure

leant forwards to prowl on all fours to reach her. Her breath came out in ragged gasps as the creature came closer and closer. It continued to move slowly, tantalizingly, teasing her with every inch it crossed. Five more metres until it reached her. Four... Three... Two... Mary Bell swung her arm and launched the torch at the creature. The torch flew into its chest and knocked the creature back. At the same time, Mary felt her lungs deflate and her chest burst into pain as if she had been hit as well. She willed her legs to move, and to her relief she was able to turn around and sprint down the hallway. The creature lunged after her, giving chase. It was gaining on her; she heard its panting breath and thundering heart. She could almost *feel* the muscles in the creature's arm strain as it tried to reach for her. Her breathing became labored from shock and fear, and her knees threatened to give way beneath her. She looked ahead and cursed. The hallway was long, but soon she would reach a dead end. Why on earth had she run this way?

The walls closed in on her as she ran. Mary felt the creature slow down and tense its muscles in preparation to pounce. The creature crashed into her, and they tumbled forwards together until they both crashed into the end of the hallway, the collision throwing them to opposite corners. The mirror crashed down onto Mary and shattered. It sprayed shards of glass everywhere and Mary felt a warm trickle of blood make its way down her face to her cheek as a cut was slashed across her forehead. Her body coursed in pain, covered in cuts and bruises from the shattered glass. She rolled onto her stomach and glanced into a large share of glass. Her eye caught onto her reflection, and her whole body stiffened.

Mary Jane Bell was not crazy. She couldn't be. But her faith in herself dwindled as her doubt overwhelmed her. Was the sight before her real? Mary didn't want to believe it. She couldn't. But now she didn't know if she could even trust herself.

Mary leaned closer to look at the creature's eyes, its gaze hungry and focused. Her mind was whirling, and she had tunnel vision. She shook her head in denial. She could make out the creature's face, could see the gaping mouth and mottled skin. A cut on its forehead sparkled as blood streaked down its face and dripped down onto the shard of glass. And its eyes...

Mary's own eyes gazed back at her.

She was found hours later when the sun had risen, and the outside world was starting to stir. Mary Jane Bell was slumped in the corner of the hallway. Shards of glass were scattered around her like snow. A woman dressed in a white nurse uniform hurried towards her, a phone in hand calling for assistance. When the nurse reached Mary, she knelt onto the ground and reached for Mary's hand. The nurse lifted Mary's arm and read the details on the band strapped to her wrist. Thundering footsteps echoed throughout the building, as the woman read the tag that spelt out "SAINT BERNARD'S PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL." Her eyes followed the smudged ink to the next line. "PATIENT: MARY JANE BELL, AGED 23, BORN 1868." The nurse felt for a pulse and was relieved when she felt the faintest beat emanating from Mary's wrist. This was the girl who had been reported missing from Ward C last night. The nurse clucked her tongue sympathetically, gently stroking the hair away from Mary's face. The poor thing had been admitted for hallucinations, so severe she often ended up injured after an episode. The nurse started to dab at the cut on Mary's forehead with her sleeve and tried her best to clear the glass away. She stayed at Mary's side until help arrived. The other nurses helped carry Mary back to her ward. The nurse that found Mary placed bandages on her cuts and balm on her bruises, making sure Mary was warm and covered by the blanket. She stayed until Mary stopped shivering, her breathing became deep and easy, and her faint heart rate had grown stronger. The nurse left as Mary began to stir. Mary was alone when she woke up. No one was there to reassure her that she was safe. No one to watch over her small frame. No one to watch her open her eyes. To notice that they had become black, bottomless pools.

Upper Secondary Years 10-12

Mahum Bashir Naveed	<i>Hey Princess</i>	Highly Commended
Qian-Qian Wong	<i>The Bounty</i>	2 nd Place
Eleanor Jones	<i>The Visitor</i>	Winner

Hey Princess

By Mahum Bashir Naveed

Damian

It's a full moon tonight, dark, and wet; the crickets are chatting loudly. The autumn leaves crunch as I take my steps. I can't see a thing, only the light coming from her window.

"I found you," I say with a grin on either end of my face. Zara thinks she can hide from me; she doesn't know that nothing can be deleted from the cloud. It's her mistake, not mine; she teased me and practically wanted me to see her again; it doesn't matter what anyone else says; I know she loves me.

Rustling autumn leaves shift with every step I take towards her, maybe loud enough for her to hear me. I tip-toe towards the cabin, shifting my body weight with each step. I press my back against the wooden wall, and the chill air itches on my back. I peer my head to the window; There, I see her gorgeous amber hair and chocolate eyes. She's washed her hair, I can tell.

"It's nice to see you again, Zara," I say under my breath. Fogging up the window.

Only if I was inside could I smell her coconut-scented shampoo, my favourite. I imagine her beautiful hair against my nostrils; every breath makes me think of her. Oh, Baby. I peek my head back to catch another glimpse of her. My jaw clenches, and my eyes narrow; I can feel my blood warming my face, making my face pulse. I lock eyes with her computer. She's talking to someone. Who is it? It's not me. Why isn't it me? I vaguely hear words from inside. I put my ear against the icy cold window; the wintry feel travels from my ear to my toes. Murmurs are the only thing my ear can grasp; nothing sounds like words until I hear a name. Camilla.

Zara

I exit the dewy wet chamber of what is my bathroom, water droplets slowly dripping down my back. My warm Pjs rub against my skin. All I want now is a warm hot chocolate drink and pizza.

As I walk past my warm rustic living room into the rugged wooden kitchen, I pick up my phone with my pruned hands and enter the number of my local pizza shop. Domino's is my favourite. I order a margarita pizza with extra tomatoes. The man on the phone is kind. I tell him my address, then I end the phone call.

A sudden ringing noise comes from my computer. I jolt my head back towards the living room and walk closer to my laptop, the cool stone floor tingling my toes with every step I take. I look at the screen, and my shoulders immediately drop. I answer the call to see my best friend, Camilla.

“Hey girl, how’s it been in your cabin?” She says with a welcoming smile on her face.

I reply, “It’s been great; I just showered. I’m waiting for my pizza to arrive.”

I then glance towards my window. I squint my eyes just to be sure. My eyes stare, not understanding what I’m looking at.

“Umm... Zara, You okay?” I hear Camilla’s voice in the background.

Zara

I wake up from my gaze, “Oh, sorry Camilla, there’s just like a fog smudge on my window, like one you would make on car windows as kids.” My eyes are still locked on this smear, investigating every minute detail.

“Zara, it’s probably nothing; those things just happen sometimes. Stop being paranoid; I promise he isn’t out there; you’re in the middle of nowhere; how would Damian know?”

Damian. My whole body pauses. A deep feeling in my throat lies under my neck. That name. It lingers in my mind, my body. I will never forget his touch or the places he shouldn’t have touched.

“Please don’t say his name, Camilla.” A deep silence enters my already vacant cabin.

“I’m sorry, Zara, just-, I promise you, nothing will happen to you. Never again.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath counting down from eight. My throat starts to loosen up.

“It’s fine, Camilla.”

Her eyes start to soften; a smile appears on her round face, dimples on both sides. My heart eases as I feel her warm embrace through the screen. I smile back. And for just a split second, I forgot everything.

Damian

Camilla, that snake. She knows what she did. She kept me away from her. She’s why I’m outside on a cold, loud, pitch-black night. I should be with Zara, my arm around her neck and her head on my shoulder. I put my head in my hands and start to rip on my hair. Aggressively grunting and groaning, and my thoughts consume me.

“This isn’t right. I need her. I need her!” The words start to fly out of my mouth; my voice gets heavier, and my mouth starts to drool.

Two bright white lights start to appear from the thick woods. A roaring engine sounds begin to get louder and louder. I slap my hands against my mouth, holding my breath in, trying not to make an echo. I twist my body back, gain the wall, and bend my knees to the ground to ensure the person in the vehicle doesn’t see me. I slowly twist my head around the wall

peeking at the strange car. Thousands of questions fluster my mind, Camilla and now who? Who else would she want now that wasn't me? She's really done it now. That jerk went behind my back; what the hell is wrong with her? She knows she isn't allowed to see anyone but me. I raise my head back towards the car. And notice something strange. A Domino's Pizza sign. She ordered pizza.

Pizza Guy

I enter the thick, pitch-black forest; I can only see from the light of my car. What chick would want to live all the way out in the woods? Some weirdo, I guess. I enter the front of the cabin and put my car in park. I leave the headlights on; without them, I wouldn't be able to see my hand in front of my face. I exit out of my car as the cool breeze starts to hit my face. I bring the warm pizza closer to my body for warmth. I should have got a jacket.

"Oh, I can't wait to return; this place freaks the hell out of me." I take my only free hand and start to brush over my hand rapidly. It supposedly makes you warmer, but I don't believe it.

In the corner of my eye, I see a humanoid shadow, their hands on either side of the weirdly shaped body, breathing heavily. They're standing right at the corner of the cabin. My head rotates to face it; I don't know what I'm looking at. Is it a big foot, a ghost, shadow figure? My minds start to wander. Then something changed. They stopped breathing; they straightened their posture. It seems to be staring right back at me. Their loud crunching steps get closer and closer. Now I'm Panicking. My shoulders bounce with every breath; my feet start to backpedal. I can tell now; it's a man. He intensely pounds his feet to the wet ground sprinting towards me, his arms rapidly moving every second. I don't know what else to do than run.

I try my best to pick up my legs, but the mud slows me down with every step splashing brown residue on my pants. I start to slow down; I can't hold on for much longer. For just a second, a second, His hand reached my shoulder, he's pounding my head into the ground.

"Goodbye, boy, thanks for the costume." Those were the last words I heard.

The last thing that caught my eye was his smile, the smile of a psycho, a pure villainous smile, nothing that I had ever seen before.

Zara

Minutes go by as Camilla and I chat, for what seems like hours. I allow myself to let my guard down in front of her. Suddenly, a louder and louder tapping sound comes from my wooden door.

"Was that the door?"

"Yea, it was. It's probably the pizza man. I'm surprised you heard that. Anyway, I'm going to have dinner now, bye!"

"Alright, Zara, bye, stay safe!"

I hang up on my computer and close my laptop. I finally feel at peace. I lift the computer from my lap and place it on my coffee table. I take a deep breath and walk towards my tall red oak door. I grasp my hand on the cold brass doorknob. I turn the doorknob 90 degrees and proceed to ease the door open. I slowly look up from the door. A nonprocessable sight. I feel my heart sink to my feet. Memories return, filled with panic, helplessness, and pain.

Damien.

“Hey, princess.”

The Bounty

By Qian-Qian Wong

Elk watched as a man and his dog entered the nearby underpass, littered with rubbish and the occasional person hurrying by to get home. He looked skywards and took note of both the setting sun and the dark, ominous clouds that caused the air to shimmer with uncertainty directly overhead. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled nervously as he moved to follow his target, being careful to step soundlessly along the walkway. He made sure to stick to large shadows and avoid the occasional puddles that were scattered across the pavement, as he hoped to stay out of sight for as long as possible.

Once he fully entered the underpass, Elk glanced up, knowing what people whispered about this place. The sight that greeted him immediately stole his breath away. Sharp, glistening stalactites protruded from every available space on the roof, each one flooded with colour that reflected off the inside of the tunnel, making it look like the walls were alight with a rainbow flame. He marvelled at its sheer beauty and at long last, he understood why his parents had spoken so highly of this place.

Eventually Elk stopped gawking like an idiot and focused himself back on the task at hand. He turned around to find the man he had been following, now facing his way and watching him curiously. His target looked to be in his mid-thirties and was dressed in many layers to accommodate the gradually decreasing temperature. The man eyed his pursuer cautiously and asked, gruffly “Who are you? And what do you want kid?”

Knowing that now he had been spotted, Elk winced, as he could no longer avoid speaking to the man. “My name is Elk, and I...I was wondering if you could help me?” He raised his hands to show the stranger that he was unarmed. The dog tottered over to Elk unworriedly and gave him an experimental sniff.

Both watched as the dog noticed a small folded piece of paper in Elk’s pocket and snapped at it with her jaws. The boy did not dare move, as the only thing that stopped him from receiving a dog bite was his dark green hoodie.

Finally, the paper dislodged and fell onto the pavement, revealing a carefully broken wax seal that looked to be a crescent moon with two arrows diagonally crossing through it. The man inhaled sharply at the sight of the seal and the dog jumped back and growled threateningly.

To try and defuse the misunderstanding, Elk reasoned calmly “Look, I know what it looks like –”. He didn’t get to finish that sentence. The man thrust a hand into his back pocket and pulled out an object, before he loaded it with ease that only came with years of practise.

Elk stepped back swiftly, unsure about what the man was holding. But knowing from his expression and body language that it was probably a weapon of some kind, Elk backed away just in case. “Look, I’m...I’m really sorry but...Really! I’m not a Hunter! I...I need your help t...to...”

He stumbled over the sentence, unable to get the right words out. The dog growled in Elk's direction, making him freeze in place. With the stranger's odd weapon levelled at him, Elk tried to calm himself down by taking a deep breath.

However, the exercise was ruined when he noticed the man casually place a finger on the trigger of the weapon, causing Elk to panic and burst out. "To-get-away-from-the-Hunters!" The declaration caused silence to fall between the two in the deserted tunnel, before the man broke it.

"And why would a kid like you want to get away from the most elite group of Bounty Hunters in the Seven Planes?" He asked, scepticism practically dripping from his voice. However, he did take his finger off the trigger and lower the object.

Elk dropped his arms, relieved the man was giving him a chance to explain himself. Gesturing to the folded piece of paper that had fallen on a dry part of the pavement, he explained hastily, "I have a bounty on my head and have nowhere to go. I heard that your bounty has been active for more than ten years; so I thought..." He trailed off, not really knowing himself.

The plan had been to find the person people called the 'Fools Bounty', a man who had never been caught, and somehow, Elk had. Now that he was face to face with the most wanted person in all the Seven Planes, he wasn't sure what to do. He was only ten years old and understood that it was a miracle that the Hunters hadn't caught him already.

Tears collected in his eyes and Elk wiped them away rapidly with his sleeve. The man's aggressive demeanour collapsed and he asked gently, "And why would a kid like you seek help from the most notorious criminal there is?"

Elk shrugged, trembling slightly at the relief that the man wasn't going to attack him. He wrapped his pale, skinny arms around his torso and looked down, not wanting to meet the criminal's sympathetic gaze. That's all everyone wanted to give him, sympathy.

After everything that happened, Elk didn't want sympathy, he wanted to live. And not just from the charity of others, but by his own rules in his own way. To hell with what the monarchs thought he was, Elk was going to live a long and happy life, just to ensure his parents didn't die in vain.

His thoughts continued to pour out of him like a tidal wave, so he didn't notice when the man stepped forward and unfolded the paper dropped on the dirty pavement. He didn't notice the look of surprise that flashed across the usually stern face. And he didn't notice the way that the man and dog looked at each other and silently agreed on something without either of them uttering a word.

The man put the paper into his coat pocket and moved gingerly towards Elk, as if he was worried the child would burst back into tears the moment he got too close. Once he was near enough to look down at the boy he said sincerely, "I'm sorry about what happened kid... Look. I can give you two options."

Elk looked up, more hope filling his teary eyes than there had been in months. "Option one, you can live with some friends of mine and get a new identity. New life, new family, new you."

The boy waited, unsure about what was making him pause. Elk was positive any kid in his position would pick that option in a heartbeat, but he still held out for option two before he made his decision. "Option two." The man spoke, so uncertain of himself that even Elk could detect it, "Is that you stay with me and Solaris here, and I'll teach you how to survive on your own. Now, if you need some time to think about it..."

"Option two." Elk blurted out instantly. The man looked at him in surprise, confused as to why a child would pick a life on the run that would be full of crime, rather than a fresh life where he could start over as someone new. Elk took a deep breath and answered more steadily, "Option two, I want to learn from you please...sir!" He added on hurriedly, almost as an afterthought, as he realised this man would be his mentor for the next few years, until he learnt the skills he needed to survive alone.

The man stared at him for a few seconds, no doubt waiting for him to change his mind before he eventually asked, "Are you certain? A life as a criminal isn't something most people want." Elk nodded vigorously. The man sighed and Solaris approached Elk curiously. He held his ground and she gave him another sniff, as if confirming his scent or something before she licked his palm and barked happily at him. The man sighed at his dog, but he had a small smile on his face while he watched the interaction. "Come on then." He started walking down the tunnel once more.

Elk hurried after him with a large grin slowly spreading across his face. He was so focused on being accepted and the knowledge that he was safe, that he almost missed it when the man said to him softly, "Oh, and by the way, my name's Keith."

The Visitor

By Eleanor Jones

The suburb sleeps. The sun peeks over the rooftops and birds take flight from the trees in huge dark clouds, black shadows against the golden sky, but the streets are mostly deserted except for the black car. Inside two men, with grim faces and bags under their eyes. They were both woken early by a ringing phone and a list. They do not speak as the car rumbles down the street. They have a job to do, and they can't let time slip away from them.

A woman wakes. Her curtains are open a crack, allowing pale morning light to stream into the room and giving her a glimpse of a morning sky that's already fading to a gentle blue. She can hear a bird warbling in the tree outside the window. There's an awful feeling in her gut she can't explain. Somehow, she knows that while she has slept, she has lost something. Instinctively she looks to her husband who slumbers beside her, watching intently to confirm the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Somewhat comforted by what she finds, she slips out of bed and heads to the kitchen to start on breakfast, telling herself the lingering unease is simply the vestige of some horrid dream she can't remember.

As she waits for the kettle to boil, she can't stop her eyes from drifting towards the wall on which hangs a row of framed photos. Throughout the years she has made a point of capturing all the important moments; there's everything from chubby-cheeked toddlers behind flaming cakes to slouching teens with forced smiles. She often enjoys admiring them and reliving the memories they hold. This morning, however, her gaze is drawn like a magnet to the last photo in the row. It's of her youngest son in his freshly ironed uniform, back straight and beaming at her behind the camera. She had insisted on taking it the day he left, proud as punch. She still feels that pride when she looks at it, but it's joined by a nauseating blend of shame and guilt. He had left dreaming of adventure, but she knows that when he returns, he won't be a hero.

The urgent whistling of the kettle jolts her out of the memory. She hurriedly takes it off the stove as her husband lumbers into the kitchen, tie slung around his neck and newspaper in hand. He gives her a peck on the cheek as a greeting before taking his place on the bar stool on the other side of the kitchen counter. He yanks open the paper noisily and scans the headlines as she slides him a mug of coffee.

"Anything?" She asks evenly as she liberally butters some toast.

"No mention of his division – it's all about some fighting in the south today. He was in the east, wasn't he?"

She gives a noncommittal hum as a reply. He was in the east- according to a hurried letter from him they received a couple of weeks ago. A lot can change in that time.

The husband continues to read snippets from the paper to the woman between mouthfuls of food. The news is bleak, and they have heard it all before. There's that number, printed

without fanfare in black and white, that represents the number of soldiers who will never see their families again. It's a number that climbs and climbs every week and makes the woman feel like a fist has closed over her heart and is squeezing ever so gently. Then there are the stories of bombings and destruction, of families ripped apart and homes destroyed. It's hard for her to imagine mornings that are torn apart with gunfire and filled with sirens. Not when, out the window over the kitchen sink, she can see that the sky has transformed into a vivid blue and she can faintly hear a child, one of the neighbor's little ones she guesses, shrieking with joy.

As her husband finishes reading in his gravelly voice, comforting to her in its familiarity, the words hang in the cool morning air between them for a long moment. Then he pushes the paper aside and launches into an impassioned tale of an issue at work and the tension bleeds from the room as she sympathetically nods along in her usual way. At moments like this tragedy feels very far away.

The black car pulls up outside an idyllic house on a quiet street. There are thousands of other houses just like it, but the man will later remember every detail of this one like he'll remember every detail of all the others. He knows exactly what will happen once he knocks on that front door. Grief is horribly predictable. Someone will answer and they will see them in their uniforms and matching apologetic expressions and, before he's even opened his mouth, their world will collapse. Then they will make their apologies and it's on to the next address, leaving trails of anguish behind wherever they go. He takes a deep breath to steady himself. Then he gets out of the car, gesturing for his partner to follow him. It's a pity to have to destroy a family on such a lovely day.