RAW ARTS

AWARDS 2023

RAW ARTS 2023

The City of Greater Bendigo is on Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung Country.

We acknowledge and extend our appreciation for the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung People, the Traditional Owners of the land.

We pay our respects to leaders and Elders past, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of all Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung Peoples.

We express our gratitude in the sharing of this land, our sorrow for the personal, spiritual and cultural costs of that sharing and our hope that we may walk forward together in harmony and in the spirit of healing.

This publication includes all eligible entries received for the 2022 RAW Arts Awards – an Awards program open to creatives aged 25 years and under.

Some material may contain adult themes and/or language and may be considered inappropriate for younger readers/viewers.

For information about the City of Greater Bendigo's RAW Arts program go to www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/RAW or email raw@bendigo.vic.gov.au

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WELCOME

From the Mayor of the City of Greater Bendigo

Welcome to this special volume to commemorate the 2023 RAW Arts Awards.

Congratulations and thank you to all artists who submitted to this year's awards.

The City of Greater Bendigo is delighted to use these awards as a way to foster the talents and artistic pursuits of young people in our region.

The RAW Arts Awards is our annual showcase of youth creativity, dating back to the RAW View Youth Arts Festival in 1997, and has been a stepping stone for many young artists who are now working as professional artists in Bendigo and beyond.

At the City of Greater Bendigo, we strive to foster a creative community and provide opportunities for people of all ages and artistic styles to share and promote their skills.

This year we received wonderful applications from artists, writers, film makers and performers aged 5 to 25, from 28 suburbs and small towns across the region.

This is also the second year of the YoBendigo/Ambedo award, which recognises an artist that best captures the experience of being a young person living in Greater Bendigo in 2023.

I would like to acknowledge the wonderful parents, carers and teachers who have encouraged the young artists to make a submission. It's so important for young people to have this support.

I would also like to thank the judges for their time:

- Visual Arts judge, local artist and winner of the prestigious 2022 Bluethumb Art Prize, Lauren Starr
- Digital Media judge, writer, podcaster and festival director, John Richards
- Literary judges, writer and academic Pam Harvey and Bendigo-based freelance editor Scott Vandervalk
- Performing Arts judges, Artistic Director of Arena Theatre Company Christian Leavesley, and local musician and founder of Bendigo Blues and Roots Music Festival Colin Thompson
- And the Ambedo team

These awards wouldn't be possible without the wonderful staff in our Bendigo Venues and Events unit. Many staff support the administration, staging and technical rollout of the awards and the exhibition and showcase.

I wish all entrants well for their future artistic endeavours; you can be very proud of your efforts and your beautiful creations.

On behalf of the City of Greater Bendigo, I am delighted to congratulate the winners of the 2023 RAW Arts Awards:

Mayor Cr Andrea Metcalf

Literature Award
Winner: Anna Dunnicliff-Wells
Highly Commended: Levity Camilleri

Performing Arts Scholarship
Winner: Ryan McPartlane
Highly Commended: Dinali Dharmadasa

Short Film Prize
Winner: Sara Hancock
Highly Commended: Jin Turpie

Visual Arts Award
Winner: Bethany Mansfield
Highly Commended: Tess Sillery

Yo Bendigo/*Ambedo* Award
Winner: Sammy Johnston

WINNER

ANNA DUNNICLIFF-WELLS

RAW Arts Literature Award

A Moment of Clarity

Hugo watches as flames leap in the rusted pit, casting light across his father's weathered face. The lines and wrinkles remind him of a gnarly old tree trunk. Flames lick over logs that slowly burn and crumble away; sending smoke spiralling towards the sky. By morning its pungent smell will have woven a home in the clothes and woollen blankets covering them. Hugo knows he will wake up with the ashy odour tangling itself in his hair, and wonders if the smell will linger in the thin, cloud-like strands of his father's.

"Hugo …"

"Yes Papa?"

"Will you tell me again what those stars are called?"

Hugo looks up to where the smoke meets the sky. It's cluttered with stars; messily, as if a small child had knocked a jar of rice over. He follows the crooked finger towards a group of tiny grains and remembers, many years ago, bright round eyes had eagerly chased a not-so-crooked finger towards that constellation for the first time. He remembers the cold puff of air in front of his face when he had learnt its name; how magnificent it had felt on his frozen tongue.

"That constellation's called Orion, Papa," he replies.

"Orion? Of course! I remember Orion!"

A sudden wind batters the trees around them, and Hugo is glad for the thick blankets around his father. The fire spits glowing sparks into the air; Hugo watches each one fade before its heat can ignite a flame.

"Hugo …"

"Yes Papa?"

"The doctor told me something funny the other day … He said I have … ivy in my head."

"Ivy?"

"Yes … He said it's growing in my head, spreading all over … He said … he said it makes me forget things, makes things slower."

"He did. He did Papa."

"I don't want to forget things. Why … why doesn't he just pull … pull the … the …"

"What should he pull?"

"Ivy … ivy."

"The ivy?"

His father's brows furrow in confusion, "What about the ivy?"

The last of the flames are dying now, only smouldering coals are left. The night grows a little colder, and Hugo shivers.

"The doctor said it's in your head," he says. "He said you've got plaques and tangles growing in your head, blocking things up. Remember when we went last month? He said they're growing like ivy."

"But I don't want to grow ivy … it takes things away … I don't want … He said it's strangling my head … Taking things away. I don't want to grow ivy anymore … Why doesn't he just pull it out?"

"I don't – I don't know Papa, I wish I did."

"And he said … some people don't know that they're growing ivy …"

"That's right. Some people don't know what's happening to them. Do you know what's happening in your head Papa?"

"I do but … I wish … I wish I didn't know about my ivy. Why doesn't he just pull it out? I don't want to know that I'm going to die … I don't want to know that I'm going to forget …"

"I know, I know Papa. Sometimes I wish I didn't know either."

"Hugo …"

"Yes Papa?"

"Will you forget me?"

A memory stirs in Hugo's mind, something he has not thought about in many years. He looks back up to find Orion still shining brightly in the sky.

"Papa …"

"Yes Hugo?"

"Can't you stay here … just a bit longer?"

His father smiled, "Don't worry Hugo, I'll be back before you know it. And then we can go see the stars again. I'll even teach you to find south by just looking at the sky."

"But … But Papa, what if you forget me?"

"How could I forget you? His father laughed, "I'm only going for a week!"

"A whole week!" Hugo cried, "You won't see me for a whole week! What if you're too busy to remember me while you're gone!"

"Oh Hugo, I wouldn't forget you, even if I was gone for a whole year."

"Really?" Hugo whispered, "A whole year?"

"A whole year," His father whispered, "But if you really want, we can pick a star. A star for me to look at every night to remind me of you."

"A star? Okay … I pick that one!"

"That's a good one! Do you know what constellation it's from?"

"Orion?"

"That's right! You'd better look at it too Hugo, I don't want to be forgotten either!"

Hugo's gaze returns to his father's face. It's old and worn, but a small smile appears. Reaching for his father's hand, Hugo gives it a gentle squeeze. He looks down, surprised to see how much his own hand resembles his father's – the hand that had always been there to hold him when he was afraid.

Hugo smiles back at his father, "Don't worry Papa. I'm never going to forget you."

"That's good Henry, I'm glad."

The last of the coals are fading now, becoming colder and dimmer as each minute passes.

WINNER

RYAN MCPARTLANE

RAW Arts Performing Arts Scholarship

Music

Hi my name is Ryan McPartlane. I am a 14 year old singer/songwriter and I have been playing, performing and writing music for my entire life. I started music classes when I was 6 months old as my parents were singing teachers for children. Then finally when I was 10, Dad taught me how to play guitar. It started off with me playing small chords and my fingers not even being able to reach the chords properly to it being second nature to me to pick up a guitar and play something.

It was only when I started attending high school and joined the ACA at school that my performance and singing levels grew to a new level. I went from in Grade 6 performing at tiny little school events to at the end of year 7 playing in front of a packed out Ulumbarra Theatre for our ACA end of year showcase. Joining ACA has opened up so many incredible opportunities that I wouldn't have even dreamed about when I was just a kid singing and playing songs in my room.

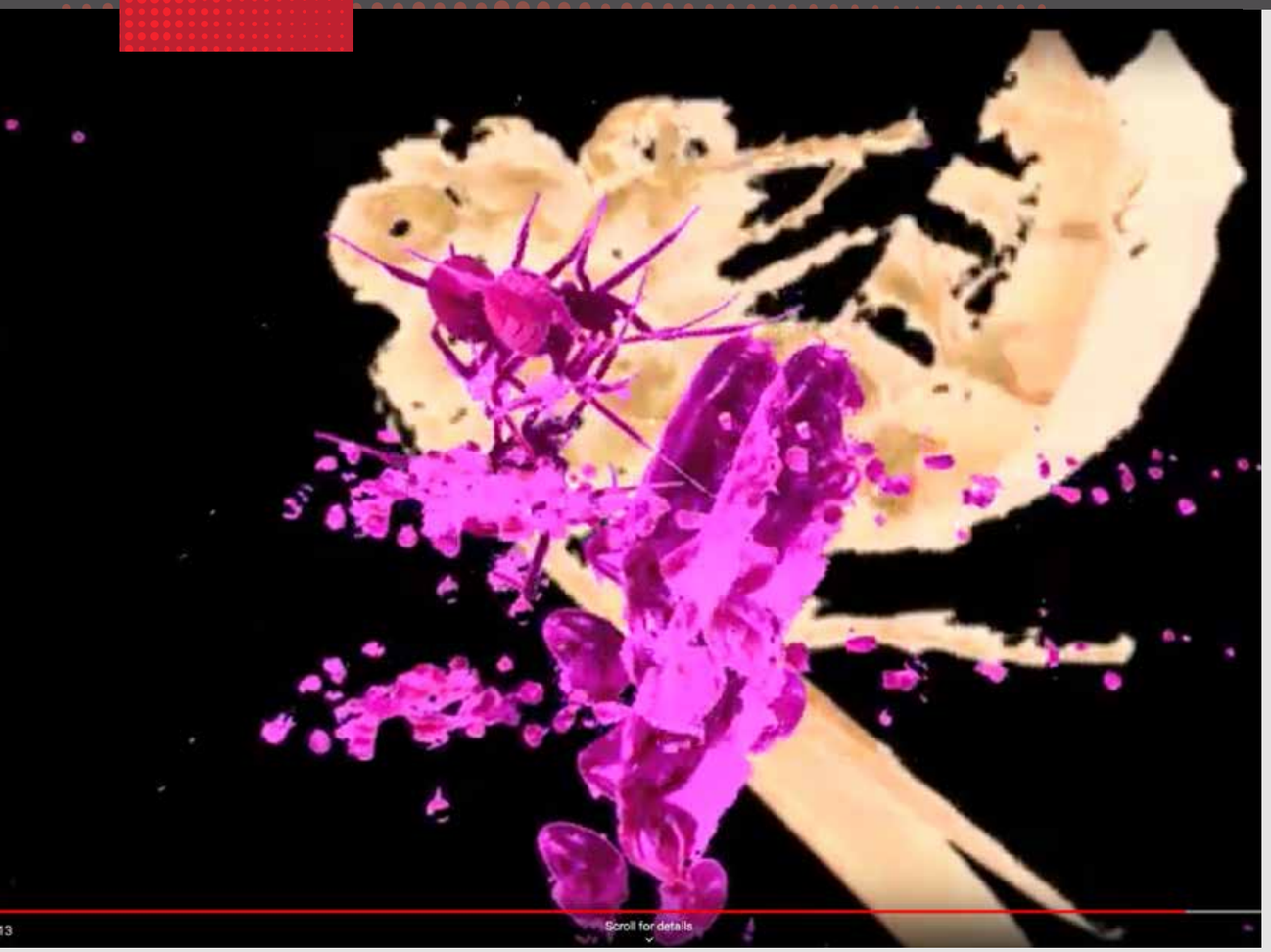
Earlier this year in February, I released my second single 'Moving On'. I wrote the song in around October last year in my room at around 2am or so. The song lyrics suddenly flowed into my head as I was sitting there and in all it took me around 20 minutes to write the song. Of course, I changed around some things after but the hard part was done. I wrote the song about what heartbreak feels like when someone that you love moves on in life and you don't know what to do.

A little while after writing the song, I finally built up the courage to record it in the studio. After lots of going over every aspect of the song and all of the fine details, Dad and I decided it was ready to be released and chose to release it on the 26th of February, exactly 1 year and 1 month after my first single 'Fall' was released. Dad and I are both very proud of how the song has finished up and how it sounds.

In April, I released the music video for 'Moving On' onto YouTube. This music video was edited and produced by my two friends, Jin Turpie and Max McKellar, and me. The video includes dancing by Jordan Thompsen and acting by Eva Scott.

Watch the video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FjFSaAdxBc&ab_channel=RyanMcPartlane

WINNER



SARA HANCOCK

RAW Arts Short Film Award

So Called Parasites

Watch the video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dybsU6fkI9Y&ab_channel=SaraEllen

WINNER

BETHANY MANSFIELD

RAW ArtsVisual Arts Award

Here's my anchor; the one that has gold within their porcelain
Oil on linen

WINNER

SAMMY JOHNSTON

YoBendigo/Ambedo Award

Gluttony

When I was young:

I used to sneak into my father's room and take lolly pineapples from his personal jar.

The jar would be in a different place every time;

As he continued to attempt to hide it from me, knowing of my thievery.

But clearly it didn't bother him quite enough, as he never confronted me.

I remember having to dig through the other lollies to fish the pineapples out.

I liked pineapples the best. And the pineapples were always there; the black cats and milk bottles weren't.

I think he silently kept buying more pineapples.

For me.

Now I'm older:

Not grown, but old enough to buy my own pineapples.

Old enough to have the job to pay for them, old enough to walk to the shop to buy them, or drive – if I wanted to learn.

Old enough to make my own decisions about the sugar I consume.

I can buy all the bags I want now.

'I can do it, Dad!'

I can sit in the dark and gorge on packet after packet, bag after bag, of lolly pineapples.

'I'm a big girl, Dad!'

But the feeling of over-indulgence, of self-destruction, even of nostalgia,

Does not bring my Father back.

Nor his jar of lollies.

YOBENDIGO/AMDEDO AWARD

This is the second year of the YO Bendigo/Ambedo Award in the RAW Arts Awards.

Ambedo is a 100% youth-run magazine. By young people, for young people. The aim of the YO Bendigo/Ambedo Award prize is to recognise one entry from all the entries to RAW 2023 that spoke to the experience of being a young person living in Greater Bendigo in 2023.

The award was presented to Sammy Johnston for her poem "Gluttony".

We chose it because it has such an innocent way of looking at difficult emotions and experiences. We found that while it might not have been the more 'relatable' piece it had an amazing way of making you feel.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

LEVITY CAMILLERI

RAW Arts Literature Award

Sadie Aberune Knows Herself

My name is Sadie Aberune and I do not know myself.

Some say that we are nothing but the sum of our circumstances, but as hard as I rack my brains, I cannot think of any reason I am the way I am. I've always been cushioned in so many ways – in whiteness, in wealth, in worship in a church that, up until a week ago, I was sure accepted me.

I have lived such a perfect life that I have no clue where I learnt to be imperfect. I am like a messy powerline in a sugar pink photograph of a sunset. I am the only unnatural object marring a field of ecological beauty, but the thing is, the entire image isn't real. I tell myself that I am as natural as anything else.

My best friend is Clare Ross and she knows herself just as well as she thinks she knows me.

I kissed her exactly one week and one day ago, the first time I ever kissed anyone. Even after delving as deep into my brain as I can withstand, I don't know why I did it. This is one of the reasons why I do not know myself – I didn't know I was capable of such self-destructive spontaneity. All I knew was that her lips felt like heaven more than any of the descriptions I heard the day after as I stewed in my guilt at church.

"I always thought you might be queer," she said.

I never thought of myself that way. I always thought I was too feminine, too involved with Christianity to be a lesbian. I said so, and she laughed.

"Sure, you're fem, but it's cute that you think that can prevent you from being the way you are." She spoke so flippantly, so confidently, of the ideas that were rocking my whole sheltered world right now.

"But I'm not sure if this is the way I am," I whispered. "How am I supposed to know? And if I am… that… how can I fix it?"

She flinched. "What, do you think there's something wrong with you? Is there something wrong with me, too, then?"

"That's not what I meant! I just…" I sniffled. Darn you, tears. "…I just meant that your world doesn't revolve around you being a pretty little perfectionist."

She reached in to hug me but I turned away. I wanted so badly to reach for her, but she was the sun and I was hidden within a ball of ice. If I came too close, the world around me would melt and ooze, drip down my face and into my still-red mouth and eventually I would either drown in my own shell, or burn.

So I left.

As I walked home, I felt my thoughts tug away from my regulation. They sped completely out of control as I attempted to keep them in my own orbit and out of hers. I supposed, being fourteen, I would surely become sickened with love for someone eventually, but it should have been anyone but her. Or rather, anyone but someone who *was a* her.

Even today, sitting on a pew upholstered by tacky maroon vinyl, I can't seem to focus my thoughts on wholehearted belief in whatever the pastor was saying like I'd found so easy just two weeks ago. I guess you can call it religious guilt. But at least the sermon is finally ending. Good. I can't bear to be caught in a room overstuffed with all of my sins for much longer.

My grandparents on my father's side are Rosalind and Phil Aberune, and they seem to know themselves really well. I mean, seventy-something years is a pretty long time to figure things out.

We go to their house every Sunday after church for lunch, and today is no different.

As Grandma serves the chicken, I'm writhing in my seat. I feel like they can all see through my pretty-girl dress to the sin that is so raw underneath. I feel like I'm trying to hide a broken nose from a fistfight, like one of the girls at school had done once. It won't be able to mend until I show someone but I'm too scared of the consequences.

"Now, Sadie," Grandpa says, startling me out of my thought spiral. "How are you liking the meal?"

"It's lovely, thanks. The potatoes are good."

"Well, good. Your grandma worked hard on those. Maybe she can give you some lessons, hey? Build up some skills for when you get a boyfriend?"

My grandma chimed in. "Now Phil, I don't know about that. Perhaps you've *already* got a boyfriend, Sadie!"

"Hush now, both of you! She's only fifteen, plenty of time left for boys." My mother chided.

This conversation was hell, and you'd know I don't say that lightly. I smiled tightly and changed the subject, talking about my subjects and the health of extended family until it was time to leave.

On the car ride home, I stayed quiet, cogitating on the realisation that I'd have to confront Clare at school again. Why had I done this? Now every conversation feels a thread away from the breaking point, and I could barely stand interaction at all but for the fact that being alone with my thoughts is worse. It's easier to kiss and make up (without the kissing part this time, hopefully) than to lose myself in my mind for good.

So, the next day, in first period at school, I sat in the seat next to Clare as always. She turned her head away from me to stare out the window until I sent a note spiralling across the air to her desk – *meet me at our spot. Lunchtime.*

Come lunch, I sat nervously on the lowest-hanging bough of the apple tree as usual. She let me panic for the first five minutes but eventually she walked up to me and sat down, opening her thermos full of soup. I wasn't sure if she came over here because of the note or whether it was just force of habit. We sat in cold silence and ate our lunches for a while until she broke the stifling quiet.

"Why the fuck did you just leave me like that? And why weren't you at school all last week?"

I swallowed. "Look, Clare, I know there's no good excuse. But I just don't know how to deal with my feelings about you."

"You have feelings… about *me*?" she said, her anger softening.

"No!" I yelled, each of us flinching away from the other. I felt bad but I wasn't sure if I had the words to say what I meant. I knew I had to remedy this quickly before the tears started building a barrier between me and comprehensible language.

She spoke first. "If you hate me, then I'll just leave. But I don't think you do – Or, like, I think you hate yourself more. Because why would you have asked me here, someone who's clearly kind of into you, if you didn't want me to talk you into liking yourself or something?"

"Sorry, but what do you mean?" I said through a throat choked with tears. "I don't hate myself. I just hate that I've done something like this, because it's messed stuff up for you and for me. I hate that I've got these… urges… in the first place. I've been beating myself up ever since I kissed you. But I think I made it worse when I ran away afterwards, because that meant I ruined stuff with you. You probably could've helped me a lot in this past week and I just let that go because I was scared. I still am. And, I guess, I just wanted to say sorry about that."

With glossy eyes to match my own, Clare reached to draw me into an embrace from which she whispered something I think I'll always remember.

"Sadie – listen to me carefully. I love you enough that we can get past this. But for us to stay friends, or something else, or whatever, then you need to love yourself. It's hard to care like this about someone who won't let themselves care about you in return. So just decide, do you want to become little miss perfect again or do you want me by your side?"

She holds me as I cry, our locked bodies making the decision in my stead. She shelters me from my thoughts, and I think I can accept whatever this is, because how can it be wrong if this is the only time I've felt warm in the past week? The thought gives me enough confidence to reach up and brush my thumb along her soft jawline. We lock eyes and slowly but surely, lean in for our second ever kiss. And it feels good enough that I know I'll be okay.

My name is Sadie Aberune, and I am beginning to know myself.

DINALI DHARMADASA

RAW Arts Performing Arts Scholarship

Dance

My name is Dinali Shaeron Dharmadasa, I was born and raised in Sri Lanka and am currently a resident of the City of Greater Bendigo (for 2 years so far), while pursuing a Masters in Project Management. I am a dancer, choreographer and performer. I started dance at the age of 6 years old and to date I have actively and continually trained in classical ballet, hip-hop and commercial hip-hop, commercial heels, traditional Sri Lankan dance and lyrical styles while also educating myself in dance choreography and concept creation. Throughout my training I have actively performed on stage, participated in numerous dance projects and taken part in a total of five music videos.

I progressed to teaching dance as a student teacher at the age of 14 and eventually started teaching my own classes in 2020. Over the years I have completed my classical ballet education, passing my Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) UK examinations and progressed to teaching ballet and hip-hop classes at Deanna School of Dancing and the Vibe Dance Academy, Sri Lanka. I am now teaching classical ballet, hip-hop and commercial hip-hop and lyrical classes at Central Victoria Dance Studio (CV Dance Studio) and Stage29 Studios. My start at Deanna School of Dancing and Vibe Dance Academy under the direction of Deanna Jayasuriya, Natasha and Natalie Jayasuriya and Sandarangi Perera has no doubt impacted my journey immensely and I thank them for their valuable contributions.

With physical training being the norm since I started my dance journey in 2005, during the pandemic, I was forced to re-think how to continue my training and in 2021 I successfully auditioned for a six-month advanced intensive training course held online by 'The Lab' dance studios in Los Angeles. The Lab was, and is still, considered to be an industrial giant in the dance industry due to its work choreographing and dancing for world famous artists inducing Usher, Jennifer Lopez, Rihanna and more. At The Lab I received lessons from choreographers such as Seinna Lalau, Andrew Venegas, Andrew Elam and Jaja Vankova.

Dance, choreography and performing has been a passion of mine for as long as I can remember and it inspires me to explore how emotion and conversations are conveyed through movement. My personal experience with the craft has given me new perspectives of how messages and emotions are conveyed from dancers to the audience through powerful yet beautiful movement and shapes created by the body.

I am inspired everyday by those around me and seek to learn as much as possible from them. There is so much to learn in this beautiful artform and to become one with movement and grow alongside it is truly the dream. My name is Dinali Dharmadasa. I am a dancer, choreographer and performer.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

JIN TURPIE

RAW Arts Short Film Award

Moving On

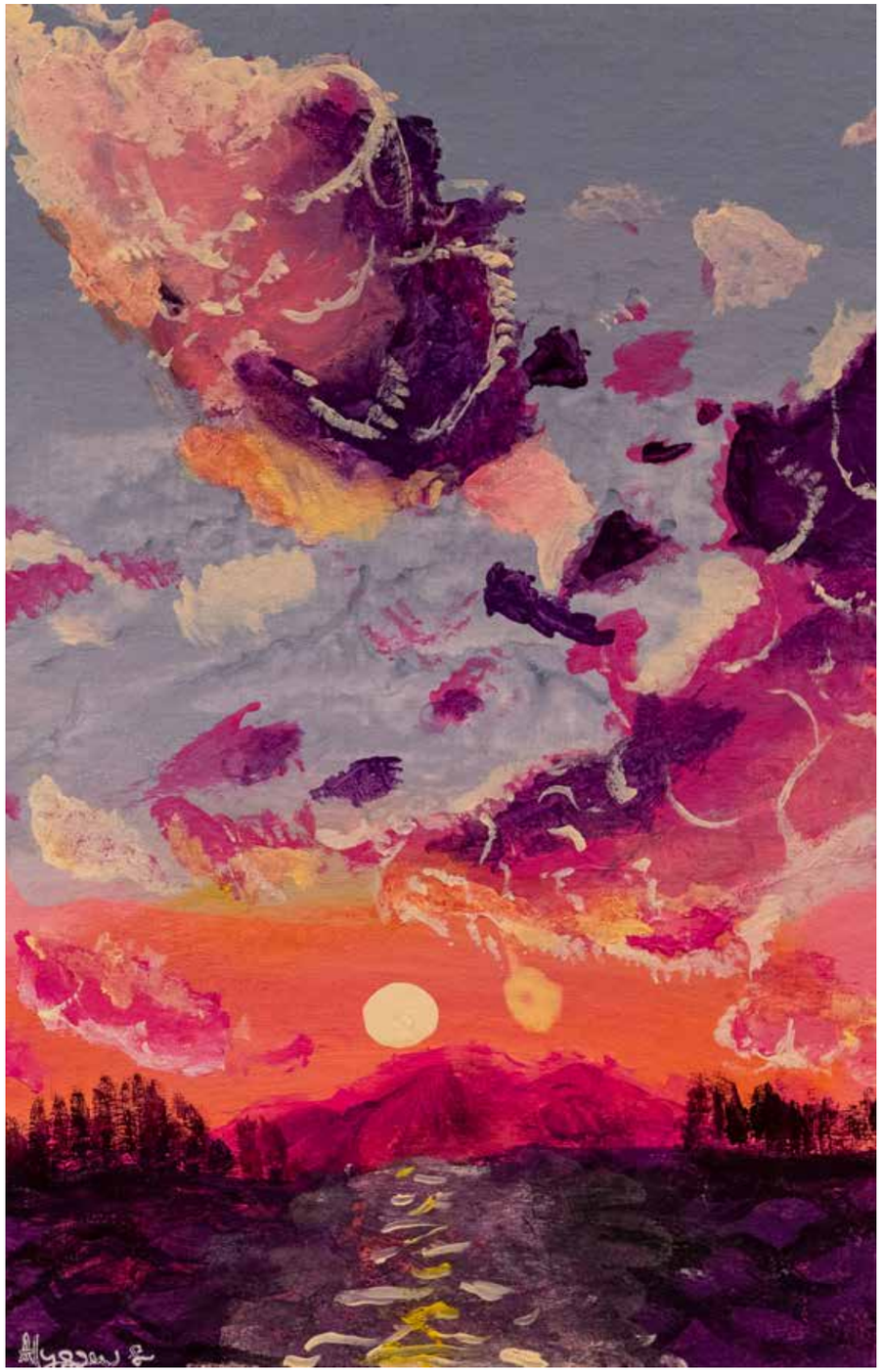
Watch the video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FjFSaAdxBc&ab_channel=RyanMcPartlane

HIGHLY COMMENDED

TESS SILLERY

RAW Arts Visual Arts Award

The Human Plague
Sculpture and mixed media



ALYSSA FASHAM

Setting Sun

Acrylic

KAYLA BARNFIELD

Rollercoaster

You're waiting patiently in line. Barely anyone is brave enough to go on this ride, so it's not long before the attendant unclips the chains and nods you through.

First row, she says.

You walk up slowly. There's only one other passenger in the same row, who looks even more nervous than you.

Walk through.

The plastic doors automatically open. The young woman in front of you strides straight to the third seat, as though determined not to look back. You're glad, because that means you can choose the seat second on the left. It seems like the safest option out of the three remaining.

Fasten your seatbelts. Leave your harnesses up until we tell you to pull them down.

Most people listen. It's only a brief wait until the attendants are coming through, telling you to pull the harnesses down.

They're heavy. A stronger attendant helps you.

After everyone is strapped in, the attendants step off carefully. You watch as they activate the rollercoaster and the carriage gives a sudden jolt.

The ride begins. You go forwards and swing sharply to the left. It's very fast.

There are loud bangs as the carriage slows and joins the mechanism that will bring you to the top. You can see a steep hike to get there. Your teeth are clenched, which is lucky, because the ride rattles suddenly and your head is knocked painfully back into your seat. The young woman next to you is silent, her face stiff and hands clinging tightly to the harness. You're glad you chose the seat that you did, because the ones on the sides are completely over the edge, placing their would-be passengers thirty-three metres above the ground.

You arrive at the top and pause for a moment. The carriage attaches completely to the rails.

It feels oddly peaceful.

You come up to the first drop. You don't see it until you're practically on top of it, and by then all you can do is hold on.

Short dip. It's much steeper than it looks.

You swing around at the left turn and the rails disappear. You know what's coming, you've seen countless people on it, but your body prepares itself for a drop anyway.

You swing over the edge headfirst and you still can't see the rail, and suddenly your head comes off the headrest and your hair hangs above your scalp, and you can see a rail coming straight towards you but you keep speeding past it, you're upside down and you hear the people behind you screaming as the carriage continues to drop. You look up and see the ground below you.

As suddenly as it came, the drop is over. Your head is back on the headrest and you're speeding upwards and your hair is safely across your shoulders again. Your heart is racing.

You weren't aware at the time, but you just went down the steepest drop in the Southern Hemisphere.

You're at the top again. As you tightly grip the harness, the carriage turns sharply to the left until you're facing the opposite way, then the rails twist suddenly and violently to the right. You're hanging sideways above the ground for only a second but it feels much longer, and you barely have time to recover before you turn left sharply and you're twisting the other way.

Thankfully, this twist isn't nearly as sharp. You relax slightly.

Then the carriage turns left again and the rails are twisting as well, and once again gravity seems to have been defied and your head is closer to the ground than your feet, and this time you hang upside down for much longer before you speed up and the carriage follows the rails towards the ground, then you're safely upright and almost before realising it you've started climbing again.

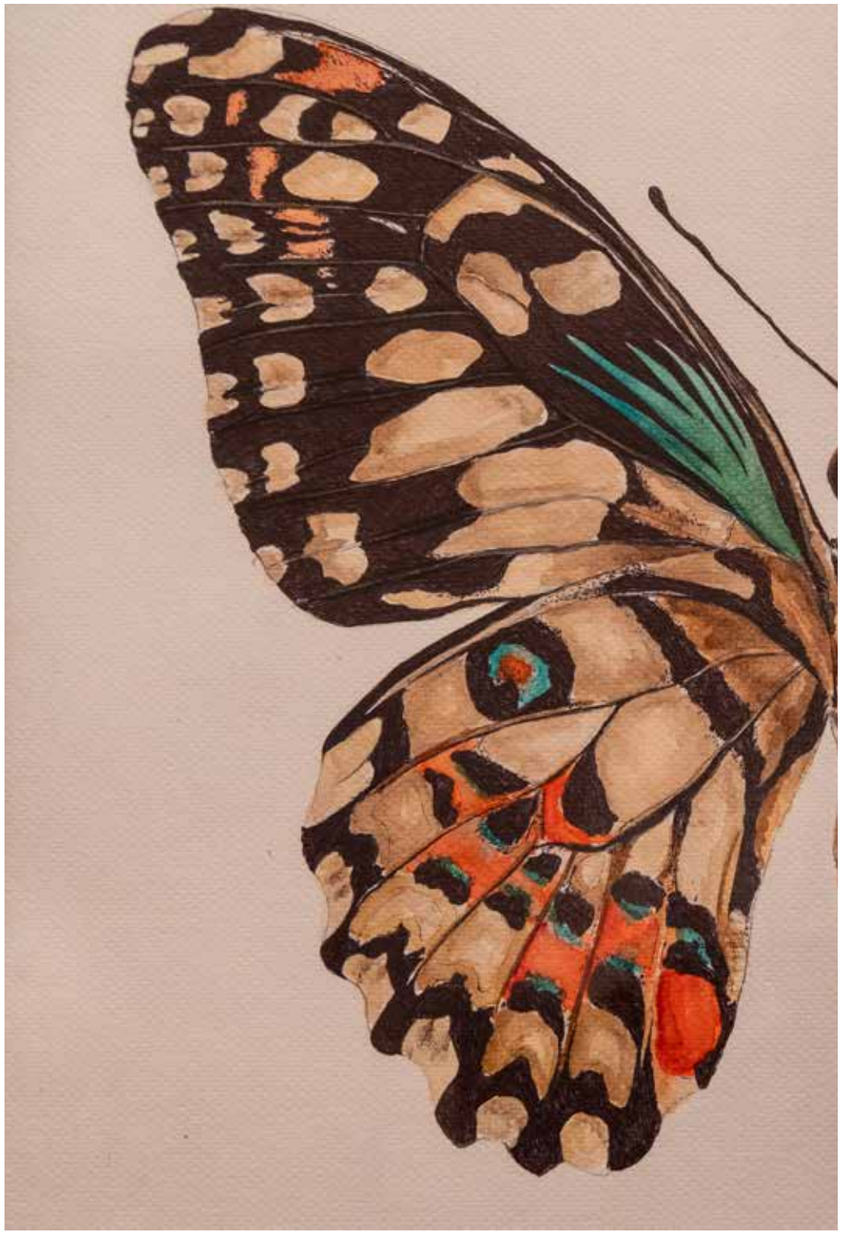
The twist was exhilarating and your body fills with adrenaline as you prepare for the next challenge.

As the carriage turns, it suddenly twists to your right, then you start twisting the other way and the young woman in the carriage screams as you hang upside down for a moment. Excitement courses through you. There's a flash of light from a camera as you smoothly twist the right way up. You hear people behind you laugh in exhilaration.

A final sharp turn and you're back behind the train of carriages. One of them is climbing the steep rails to the beginning of the ride. At the top, it pauses, as if hesitating.

Then it dips sharply over the start of the ride.

It's their turn now.



AMBER BETTS

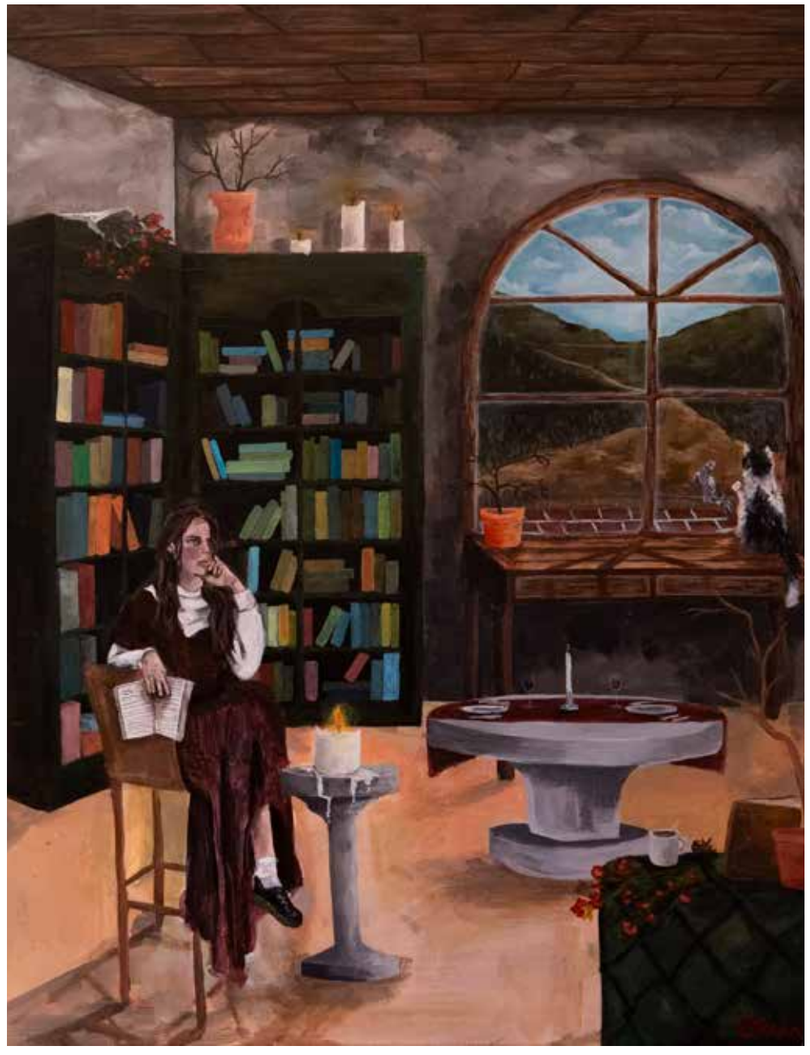
Lepidoptera

Ballpoint pen and watercolour

CHELSEA WOOD

The Witching Hour

Hi, I'm John, I am a character in the most enchanting book ever. Every night without fail we move into your world until the sunrays shine through the curtains. It always happens at the witching hour, the one time of night everyone is guaranteed to be fast asleep. First the long, green, twisted vines fully engulf the room. Then they start to grow flowers of the most beautiful colours, there are lilac roses and soft purple daffodils. After, all the animals jump out to join the forest that has grown, they roar, squawk and howl but you will never hear us. You are deep inside all your dreams, inside of your make-believe world while we are inside your world, your amazing world. While you live in your dream world, we make your world unimaginable, in a way you can't even begin to fathom. But by sunrise we have disappeared, forever gone, like we were never here. Until of course the next witching hour.



CHELSEA TOBIN

Pondering Politeness

Acrylic paint

ZEKAI YOUNG

A Tale Of Drought

In a place where no one goes,
'Cept the animals and I,
Buried deep. In the stringy bark and gums,
Miles from a servo,
Or a pub where farmers sing,
A peaceful river flowing through the bush.

'Twas a place I used to go,
My little dog and I,
We'd fish and hunt along the river bank.
And sometimes we would catch,
Where the river runs and back,
A monster cod.
Or better still a trout.
And on sunny days or rainy,
In the morning or at night,
'Twas an orchestra of wild life,
A symphony of birds,
And sometimes it would tell of long ago.
We would bathe and hunt and fish,
Till the pinks and reds had long melted away.
But sadness struck us both,
Cos no tears of rain would fall,
That mighty, roaring river raneth dry.
And both my dog and I,
We cried and cried and cried,
For our hearts were where the river ran.
Now all that's left, 'tis a dry place on the ground,
Where the rabbits make their holes,
And the sun dances its victory from high above.
Tho, we searched and searched,
No water could be found but in our eyes.

ZEKAI YOUNG
Old Barn
Grey lead

LILI RICE
Ice Spice
Digital Art

GEORGIE FAWCETT
Snow place like home
Mixed media diorama

HANNAH FAWCETT

Icecream Forever

Digital image on canvas

ROSIE PORTER

How Villains Are Created

The fear in their eyes. That's what stings the most. When you watch as the ones you love stare at you, looking right through you as if your whole body suddenly became transparent. You feel like someone has dragged a knife down the back of your spine cutting you just enough to hurt you but not make you bleed. Then someone comes along and opens you up, and takes out your thoughts and feelings and lays it out for everyone to see. For everyone to view. Like you and everything inside of you are just objects in a museum that everyone has come to see.

As they all watch you, the realisation that it's too late comes rushing back to you. Slow at first, then all of a sudden quickly without warning. Part of you wants to run, but the other part doesn't know where to go. There's nowhere to go when you're stuck in a place with exits everywhere but no way of finding them.

It was a mistake. A simple mistake. But one crack is all it takes for a building to come crumbling down. And once it's been made, it can't be fixed. No matter how much glue you use, it keeps falling off and breaking apart and it just makes you feel worse. And it can't be taken back because you can't rewind time. It's moments like this in which you wish the time travelling machines you read in books really were real.

It's raining. Your white, pale skin can be seen through the socks as they become more drenched with water. Your tears are now blending in with the rain so if anyone asks if you're crying you can just lie and say that the water coloured lines down your face are just rain. Everyone believes you. The only people who know that the words you say aren't the truth are the demons inside your brain telling you to give up. They yell and kick and scream, and as much as you try to ignore them they keep coming back.

Once the mistake has been made, everyone starts to believe you aren't who you say you are. As much as you try to play the hero, the good guy, you can't. Because all everyone see's is a villain, a bad guy. That's all they see when they look at you and suddenly it's all you see when you close your eyes and when you walk into school trying to ignore all the eyes that are upon you.

It took you two years. Two years of torture and pain and heartbreak all to feel as if you weren't the bad person that everyone perceived you to be. But some part of you still believes that you are a terrible person, and occasionally others will say something or do something to confirm that. You look at yourself in the mirror and that tiny voice in the back of your head gets bigger until finally it overcomes all your other thoughts and wins. You try to fight back but all your efforts that you wasted on trying to help everyone around you, are gone, and you have no effort to help yourself.

You ignore your friends because speaking the truth will cause you pain. You yell and scream at your family wanting to be left alone as them being near causes you discomfort and slight fear. But you aren't afraid of them as they are of you. And you know that it's true because some nights they will look at you and tell you how scared they are of you. How the only reason you get everything you want is because they are frightened of what you will do to them if they don't give you what you want. That amongst, your brother telling you how terrible of a daughter you are, and all the endless thoughts and voices in your head, and the looks your friends give you when you accidentally do something bad, all piled on top of each other makes you feel like the worst person in the world.

And when you try to explain your accidents, no one understands. Because how can you call hurting someone so bad they spent six months with a white cast on their arm, an accident. How can you say that you don't mean it, how can you say you couldn't control yourself. Because no matter what way you say it, everyone will look at you differently, everyone will become afraid of you, afraid of what you will do. You see the looks, you hear their thoughts. You know that no one will ever understand how it feels to become so blind with rage and hatred that someone else takes over your entire body making you lose all control in your thoughts and your actions, and all your emotions until you are nothing but empty.

And it sucks. But there's nothing you can do about it because that's who you are. There's nothing you can say to change their mind. No matter how hard you try they will always believe the victim over the villain. As that's what a single story can do to you. It makes everyone believe the words of the hero, even if the hero is actually the villain after all.

If they perceive you as a bad person, what's the point in trying to make them believe something else?

AYA CUSICK

Berserk

Fine liner, alcohol-based markers and paint pens

NOAH DUNSTONE

Evident Evidence of an Eclectic Modern-Day Shangri-La

Digital Art / Photoshop Painting

DAMARIS TUTT

Why is Year 12 Always Filled with Pressure?

We know it's our final year of formal schooling.

But isn't the final year supposed to be fun?

We get told that we are 'fighting with another class of year 12's in the state and classroom'.

Why is Year 12 always filled with pressure?

We get told if we fail this exam we fail as an individual.

Our Rank defines our future.

What are we ranking on?

Our intelligence?

Our ability to hold information?

Or is it?

Our self-worth?

Our self-esteem?

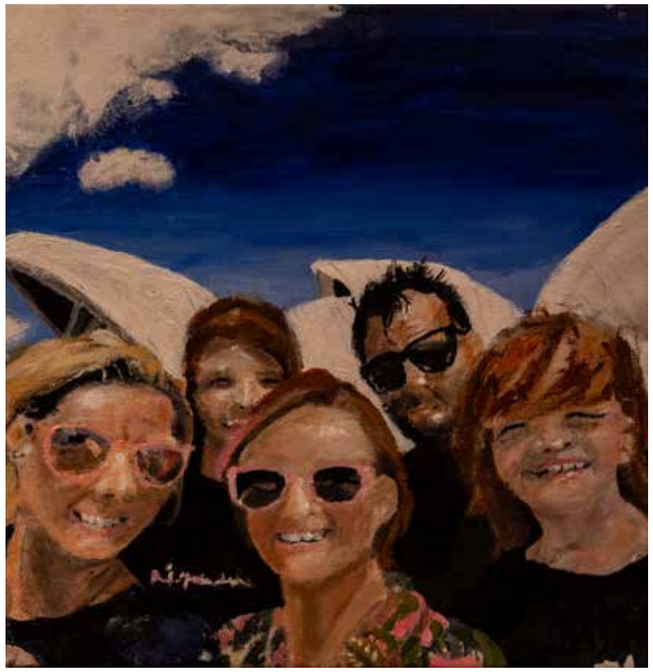
Our confidence?

Why is Year 12 Always Filled with Pressure?

ASHLEIGH LOWRY

Medusa

Oil on Canvas



IVY GRIST
Iconic
Acrylic on canvas

ROSE NORTON
Life's Breath
Acrylic, charcoal, pencil, water colour, flowers

WILL STRAWBRIDGE
All Has Left

The vast plains and buckles of the prairie hold secret the truth of the once impregnable idea of the Old World's lives.

Areas of once great humanity now stand deserted and bare, only the howling of wind underneath a bleak, grey backdrop can be heard above all. The ideal of an idyllic future has left.

The crack of lightning and the sweeping up tornadoes swirl around and permeate through all humanity's efforts, roaring and horrific. Signifying all hope has left.

The acres of corn and now long-past-golden wheat stand husked of life. The once great auto-till and harvester now abandoned. Their bones rusted and scattered across this now broken land, this land's life has left.

A house and farm now stand naked and ajar, standing out amidst the drab and desolation of this massive world. Red-white-blue banners that are attached through threads to hosts tell of how all community has left.

The stories of the old die as whispers in wind.
They tell of times before the flash, of how life was guaranteed, and secure. This history is now written and finished, however. The people of today will never see such naive assurance, as security has left.

Unkillable horrors of stealth and power cry out in ravenous and malicious intent during faded nights. They beckon through fear and pain, a cruel game of manipulation to prey on the helpful few. Their morality has left.

And in the towering spires and complexes of cities of the east lie horrific creations and playthings of mankind let free to ravage and destroy. Masked men who pillage and withered decrepit remnants of humanity crawl in the sewers and darkened corners to huddle and rot. Now, even humanity has left.

And in the towns that stand, collections and glimpses of that past remain to show what was, a terrible, depressing mockery on what could've been ours. Like the lightning that flashes, it peeks violently and suddenly to let us know, all has left this godforsaken land. All has left. All has left …

LIV ROGISTER
Dog
Photography

KATYA DORER
The Luminous Woods
Digital painting

GRACE HAMMILL
Earth's End

Earth is what we call this place,
With animals, plants and the human race.
So many of us love our grassy green land, and choose to embrace,
The world that still turns into a polluted space.

From me to you and you to me,
Someone plants another tree.
One tree planted, one after another,
Only to lead to one being cut, over and over.

How long will this last,
Until we find the solution, for the mistake of our past.
The mistake of which one might choose to leave their trash,
Or for people to let our world turn to ash.

Rubbish in the sea, dust in our air,
Leaving our world in despair.
For the next generation to come along,
We leave it to them not to do wrong.

Oil, plastic and our constant creations,
All lead to our earth's devastation.
The colours of the sky are grey and filled with smoke,
Making the earth begin to choke.

The world has been set alight,
The animals are in a challenging fight.
Instead of watching the grass grow dryer,
The world needs to be distinguished, out of its large angry fire.

PEANUT MCCULLOUGH
Boot
Acrylic paint

YASMIN RUSSELL

Spoons

She sneezed as she rounded the corner, blowing a red nose caused not only by illness but also the cold.

It wouldn't be long until her next meeting, but she'd been itching to stretch her legs a little. Wrapping her scarf tighter, her eyes drifted their way to a house across the road, tables set out to display various homely wares.

She checked her watch, gloved hands swiping away the condensation on the glass. There should be enough time to check it out, surely. Maybe she'd just have to skip making her tea beforehand.

At first, the scattered array appeared like any other yard sale did. Some items were more junk than objects, spread out on the portable tables covering deadened grass. Dust filled the air and lounged on the products. She made a decision not to touch anything she didn't have to, trying to hide the distaste on her face.

Books with crinkled and stained pages were found piled between random pieces of furniture and appliances. They did have a small selection of old-fashioned cushions, with too many tassels for her taste, stacked in a tower so precarious that it reminded her of a wooden block game she used to play before they moved out. There were dusty children's toys, some beautiful but cheap looking jewellery, but most intriguing to her, a table dedicated entirely to spoons.

They had an impressive collection, from her naive collector's perspective. Arranged neatly were a varying array of metallic colours and patterns. Some were seemingly regular spoons, ones that you'd find in the kitchens or dining rooms of most houses, while others were adorned with intricate designs that caught the light in a particular manner. The spoons were from all around the world, small engravings of names particularly around Europe, and embedded with coloured flags on the handles.

The young man, seemingly running the sale, sat behind the treasury of spoons, looking up at her as she looked down at the display. Meeting her eyes in the middle of their gazes, he nodded his head towards the sign nearby, a simple piece of printer paper scrawled with blue crayon.

$1 each.

For someone who had made it a goal in life to take advantage of the opportunities she stumbled upon, she recognised that there was most likely great value to the spoons in front of her. But before cursing herself for not researching the value of hobbyist items, she was hit with a sense of loss. This collection seemed to be the culmination of a life's work and passion, something close to the heart for whoever the past owner of them was. They would have been invaluable to the collector, yet what value did they hold now?

Judging by the puffiness of the young man's eyes, and the tissue box kept close behind the stand, he must be some relative. What must it be like to be giving away the dedication of the deceased?

Perhaps he used those spoons as a child, staring into his reflection in the curve. Would he have laughed at the surprise as he turned it around, to see his warped reflection upside down? She couldn't help but think of an old lady, smiling to herself contently as she watches part of her legacy find such joy in her collection.

The items, the spoons, told the story of life, of travel, and of love. The old lady, if they had even been an old lady, may have travelled to all these places on her own, or with someone special. Perhaps as her children and grandchildren explored the world, she had helped bring them into, they always made sure to bring her back a spoon to show their appreciation for her. How the fancier of spoons may have been used for family dinners or celebrations of achievement and age. How she was staring for too long at these spoons, and how her phone was now buzzing with a reminder that she must get back to work.

She quickly stuffed her hand in the pocket of her coat, gloves searching for any spare coins that she may have left. Managing to find a few dollars' worth of change, she looked for a spoon for her and her partner.

For her, she found a small spoon, with an engraving of a rose on the end of the handle, probably used for tea in the afternoon. Perhaps, if she finds the time, she'll use it when she gets home to do the same. For them, it was a copper-coloured spoon, with a thin, twisting handle and a deep curved head. She was running out of time, and worried that there were better options for him, but she was sure he'd be appreciative, nonetheless.

Coins clinked as metal was exchanged, and she made her brisk and cold walk back to the house. Numb hands fiddled with the rattling doorknob as warm, smoky air breathed its way into her skin. An amalgamation of tomato and herbs wafted towards her as she weaved her way past yet-to-be-unpacked boxes in the hallway, finding her partner in the kitchen running his hand underneath the icy water.

She raced over, calls of worry and concern met with the casual tone and jokiness of a person who had made a silly mistake. The burn was small, in the shape of a splash of liquid that snaked across his wrist. She fetched some cream as he cleaned up a splotch of red on the ground with his other arm, thanking her for her help.

"Turn around," he said, a cheeky smile spreading across his face.

She did as he suggested, hearing a cupboard squeak open and the shuffling of cardboard. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned back, to see him standing proudly, hands wrapped around a long, wrapped box.

She opened it with a curious smirk, undoing a carefully crafted ribbon before tearing at the paper. It was a wooden spoon.

But along the spoon, intricate and careful carvings were burned into the light wood. It created a delicate pattern along the handle, before framing the head of the spoon, where the date they had moved in was etched.

He spoke of how he'd kept it secret, how he had wanted to not only tell her but surprise her, before he was cut off by her hug, gripping him tightly as she loved the memento of their milestone together.

Later, she had finally finished with her work, hot and spicy tomato soup resting in her stomach, and found time to rest after a cancellation. She was just about to doze off when he brought to her some hot tea, peppermint, with the new spoon she had gotten bathing in the teacup. He always remembered how she liked it.

Through her tiredness, raw happiness struck through in the form of a smile.

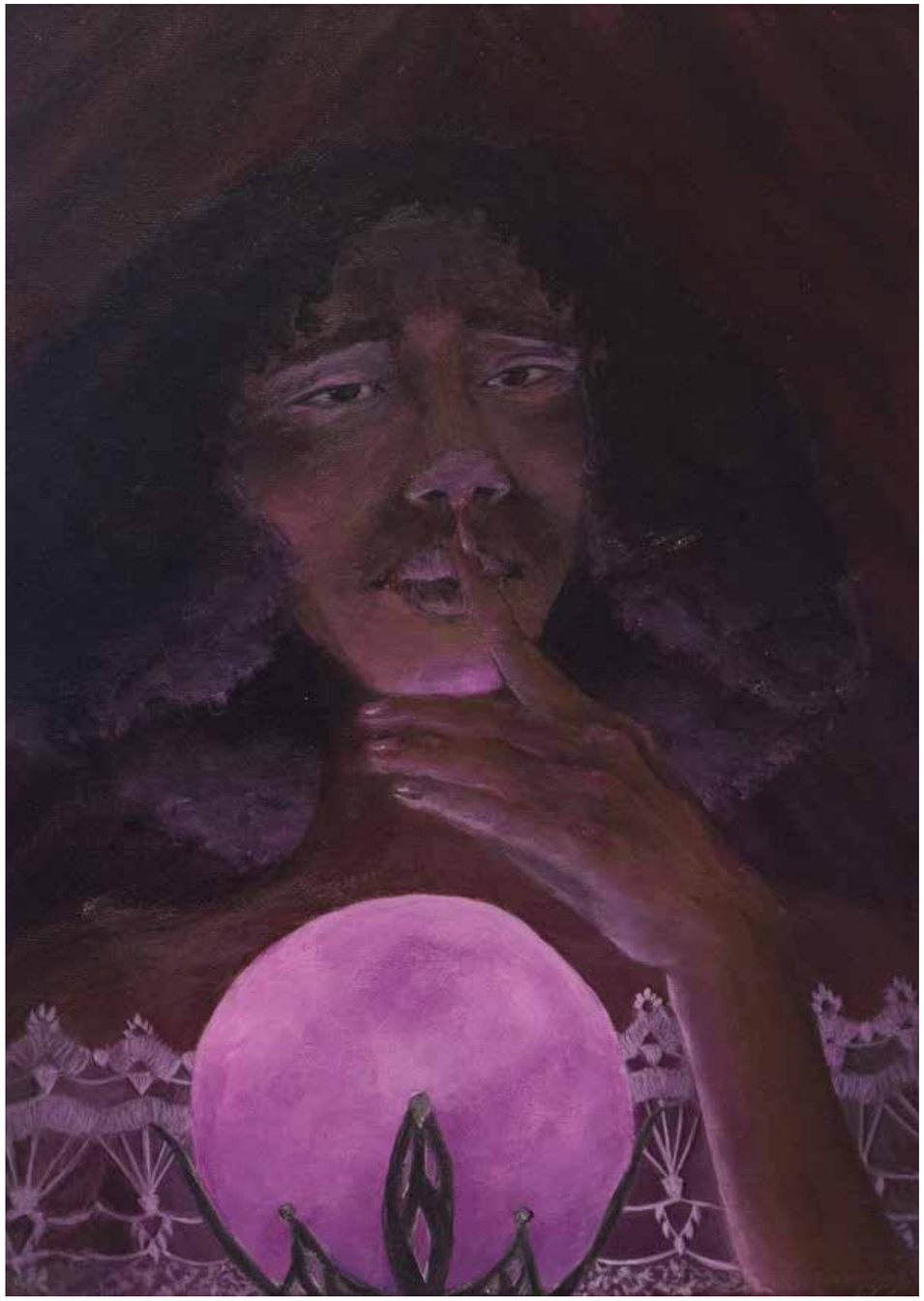
It was the little things that delivered her joy, in amongst the work and stress of living, it is easy to forget to be loving. And although it was just an object, it shows us how we live. And although it is just a tool, it showed her how he loves. And although it didn't change anything in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't mean the impact it has was not worthwhile.

The old lady had still passed on. The family had still felt loss. But at least for now, while art lives and people love, we have spoons.

JERRY STEEN

The expectation to "be a man" only left me damaged

Digital photography, Printed on a lenticular canvas.



YASMIN RUSSELL

Valla

Acrylic on canvas

DANIELLE WOOD

Sinkhole Madness

This is a predictable dentist. Her name is Marley. She was in her "home" one day and this voice came out of nowhere said, "Don't go to work today. Never return." She said, "No way. I'm not listening to you." So, she walked off.

Her home was a dumpster. Literally. She didn't pay her rent so her home got demolished and then everyone started dumping their rubbish on her 'property'. She sleeps in rubbish and uses banana peels to warm her up in the cold winter nights. She still has a lot of money since she's a dentist but since she is ignorant, she doesn't pay a lot of attention to important things.

As she walked up to her dentistry in the morning she said, "Another day, another migraine." She didn't like her work very much because she isn't appreciated that much.

When she was getting ready for her first customer, she heard some weird, squelching noises coming from the dentistry carpark for staff only. She opened the blood red, stiff curtain and looked round it. She didn't see anything strange until she realized her rusty bicycle wasn't there! She rushed around the building to find that there was a massive sinkhole slowly eating into the carpark. She looked down it, making sure not to get too close as these types of things can be unpredictable and saw her bike on the ground below.

Not thinking, Marley jumped into the sinkhole and quickly grabbed her bike. That's when she realized that she couldn't get out! The cause of the sinkhole was the mineshafts below since she lives in a town that used to be a popular mining town in the late 1800's to the early 1900's. The ground was slowly cracking beneath her, and she was getting worried. Then suddenly, the ground she was standing on smashed and she fell into the dark depths below.

She started falling and that's when she found an old cable that connected to the old mineshafts so she quickly latched onto that. Once she reached the bottom of the mine, she turned on her dentist lamp and started searching for a way out.

The mines seemed endless until she saw something golden and sandy on the ground. She didn't at once think about what the voice said yesterday and put her feet in it. She started sinking so she wanted to get out but when she tried to pull her feet out of the sand, it was like trying to get your feet out of deep jelly. Even if Marley used all her might, she couldn't move an inch. After that, all her hope died and she thought she could never get out of this alive.

Then she remembered she had the trusty tool belt on and there was a foldable shovel in there. She grabbed it just before her belt became suffocated in the sand and started digging. Once she dug out of it, she was able to use her grappling hook on her tool belt to get back up. She called all the emergency services to come to her aid. The police investigated it, the firefighters helped safely cover it up and the ambulance took her to the hospital.

ALIA MELGIAN HILL

Vows

Theo, Petrichor is the embodiment of our love. It's pleasant, earthy and immensely wholesome such as the smell after rainfall. In contrast to this, before us, this world made me wonder, if all is complete? I was so far from who I was and from who I wanted to be, with a house but not a home, a job but not a career, I stood there all alone. Theo, you took my hand, and pulled me from the dark, and showed me hope again. We now run side by side, no secrets left to hide, lifting me up again. World in motion finally, and I asked myself, could this be love? As I stand here today with my heartbeat racing though my body, I vow to capture every moment like pictures on walls. I vow to continue to trade our secrets as our shadows watch. I vow to never dam my stream of warmth, so it carries on flowing. I will extend my patience when the world becomes restless, I will continue to be gentle when times become rough, and I will extend my empathy so you can feel my compassion. I shall do all these and continue to love you, until my heart gives out.

Lucy, you're the epitome of courageous. When I first laid eyes upon you, I could see such a young soul battling solitary for it all, because you knew you've only got this life. I grew fond of this as I realised, I was looking at my own reflection on the forever rippling pond. Our friendship blossomed into meaningful euphoria as we whispered promises in the chill of dawn. But before I've turned to dust on this Earth, I will continue to kindle our flame as I finally found something I know that I love. I pledge to live a life that is grand and glorious in our own perspectives, living the dream, yours and mine. So from this day onwards, give me your tears, I will make fire from them. Give me your weight, I will make light of this, give me your wish, I will make truth of it. Give me a chance, and I'll do all of this. I will uphold my strength to protect you, I will endure life to stay with you, my hands will remain callus so yours may be soft and my courage will prevail so you may never feel fear. I promise to do all these and continue to love you, until my heart gives out.

Explanation

Wedding vows are a traditional item of any marriage, modern or historical. They symbolise the epitome of personalised love and sentimental values important to those who speak them. Weddings celebrate the becoming of a single entity and the potential everlasting happiness to come. Inspired by the multiple weddings flourishing after Covid-19, I decided to write these vows, but with a slightly less traditional script as I felt the following aspects play a paramount role in a marriage.

Firstly, I wanted to shed light on the feminine and masculine energy that is often personified between a couple. Each man and woman offer essentially different roles in a marriage despite the modern approach, equality and economic expectations. At the foundation of their love, the feminine reflects that which is sweet, warm and nurturing with a spigot of masculinity in the form of independence such as owning a house and having a career. The energy is flowy, continuous but chaotic (emotional). The masculine signifies progression, assertiveness and strength, both physical and mental although has a touch of feminine in the form of nurturing '… continue to kindle our flame …' Individually they offer up what the other lacks to create something that is whole and unison.

On another note, the vows offer a short story about only one person. You have the inside of how someone is feeling and their thoughts from Lucy's vows and you also have how Theo views this same life within his own vows. Such symbolism in short denotes that every person has their own perspective of others around them, whether they be friends, family or the people you pass every day. However, the more you learn, think and ponder about someone, the more similarities and differences you uncloud, bringing you either closer or further apart. In the case of these vows, they bought them closer, so much so to a point of tying the knot, but you must always understand and accept that they are still their own person, unique and exclusive from their own standpoint.

Similarly, relationships grow and become so closely woven that two individuals decide to unify though marriage. In spite of this, a relationship never forms from nothing, leading to the notion that effort in many forms is vital. One outdated suggestion that some vows stage is the 'from this day onwards …' view. I strongly disbelieve in anything that follows afterwards from this sentence as the idea of love, like a flame, needs to be kindled to life. This is a continuation of effort and momentum as they progress to the next step, and this should never stop otherwise they face a smouldering cold hearth. The entirety of these vows suggests only growth and perpetuation as they step forward together, continuing their love.

Finally, I wanted to piece together a linguistically elegant set of vows that enlightened those who hear them. Proposals, weddings and marriage need to be substantial to the couple partaking the journey in a way that is not monetary based or extravagant, but simply memorable. Words are one of the cheapest things us humans can do, but the impact can be limitless. Within these vows you will find some of the most pleasant words known to the English language, sentences that roll off the tongue and sooth the ears and meaning that makes one's heart melt.

All in all, I hope you enjoyed reading these vows and that they swayed you to pick up a bit of inspiration, not just for any future vows but any senescence, text or conversation you may partake-in, in the cycle of the everyday.

CHLOE MAHER

In this room, where echoes only remain

Acrylic paint

AMELIA KELLY

In truth I feel...

Is it wrong that my worst enemy is a mirror? Can I live a day without it? A burden sitting above my shoulders like a brick hanging over me, dangling. I push and tug at my body shaping it to how I wish I could look. I feel my eyes well up with tears faster than a bathtub fills with water. I can't see myself this way. My emotions fire just like a lightbulb but there is no controlling them, it is impossible. My dull, blonde hair is the epitome of basic, my bland blue eyes, and my weight. If there was one thing I could change, it would be my stomach. I would say I am fat but in everyone's eyes I am thin. I am Amy and this is my story.

I was born on 18/1/2009 with makes me 14. I go to Grammar School for Girls, a boarding school ten minutes away from the beach. I love to surf, it is my uttermost passion. My fondest memory is 2014 Christmas, the day I got my surfboard, I didn't care about how I looked back then. As Oprah says, "say goodbye to your inner critic and take this pledge to be kinder to yourself". I wish I could do what she says, but as I dismiss the critic she comes back harder. Being at high school doesn't help but you must deal with it.

It's 6am I am just about to have the time of my life. I have three hours till class so 2-hours surf and 1 hour to get ready. The salty, spray splashes up against soft sunburnt cheeks. The waves are flat just like I wish my stomach was. Suddenly this is not as fun of an experience as it was, I force the thought out of my mind and carry on with my surf. Suddenly I feel a sharp swish across my legs, there is a wave coming, a big one. The board sweeps around, and I begin to paddle as fast as I can, the tide picks me up and carries me ashore. I press my hands against the board, jump up onto two legs and try to balance as the mini tsunami rises and falls. The board suddenly becomes slippery, and I tumble under the surf. It's happened many times, but this time is different, the waves are fighting me. They are angry. I need to come up for air, I kick feeling my legs become weak with every second I am under. I reach the surface, but something blocks the way, my board is above my head and trapping me in the water. The scariest moment of my life so far is taking place right now. I punch and kick the board, tossing and turning, losing energy each time. I can't take it I give in to the surf. The world goes black. This is my end.

"Hello, wake up, please wake up."

I hear a faint voice as I zone back into this universe. I throw my head up as I gasp for air. "You don't know how nice it is to see you awake," a dirty-blonde male also with blue eyes, looking about a year older than me is staring into my eyes.

"Who are you?" I say huffing and puffing. If I had the energy, I would move my legs and arms.

"Cameron Baylson," he says in a soft tone.

A siren in the distance approaches closer and closer. "Hello, my name is Delilah, I'm a paramedic, can you tell me what has happened today?" The lady asks, she is dressed in a navy uniform, a badge on her left pocket reading, "in honour of your efforts".

"She must have tumbled whilst out on the surf." Cameron holds my head while the paramedics examine me, if there was ever a time to die this would be it. This is the most embarrassing thing I have done, even more embarrassing than when I accidentally drank out of Owen's drink bottle in year 6 and was germ blocked until graduation.

I leap up off the ground, "This is not necessary I am …" I slap my hand against my mouth, sprint to the bush and puke. The paramedic runs over to me and pats me on the back, summoning to the others to bring the stretcher bed over to where I am.

"G'day, I am Dr. Allyson, a specialist on post-drowning disorders." Still in my wetsuit laying on the bed, sand all through my hair is a feeling I usually like, but I feel as if everyone stares as I come past and that's a feeling I don't like. "You are free to go, you look fine, it seems like you vomited all the water in your lungs out."

I roll my eyes in a sarcastic way. "You don't say, do you? Hey, can I get a class pass, I don't feel like doing French today?"

The lady starts laughing, I look her dead in the eye, she looks back then the laughing stops. "Oh, you are serious? Sure," she says with a little side grin.

It's eating break, my least favourite time of the day. Everyone questions why I don't eat lots, or at all, I always say, "You know I don't eat a lot". The only thing I eat lots of is salad and fruit. In truth I am starving I would kill someone for a slice of fatty, oily, processed pizza. Today is Chips n fish night, they order in a bunch of Takeaway, and you go to the servery to pick up your portion. I pick up my portion sit down at my friends' table a deal it out amongst them.

"Amy, I know I ask this a lot but why don't you eat anything?" Jeanie is my best friend in the whole world, but she doesn't understand what I am going through, and she never will so I always make an excuse for myself.

"This apple is so much more filling than that fish and chips." I respond about to drool onto my bowl of lettuce and tomatoes. The other girls in the dining hall scoff down their food groaning in bliss as I shove the salad down my throat in agony. I am not a salad girl, but I have dropped 8 centimetres on my waist in the last month and that's all that matters to me so I will continue until I look like a runway model.

Once a week we are allowed into the town to shop or get food or something. Every girl brings money with them when they arrive or beg their parents to send cash in a little envelope, to go to the movies or coffee house, some even go to the book shop, but I go straight to the magazine stand to purchase the last editions of the runway magazine to stick up on my bedroom wall as inspiration. They are gorgeous, much more superb than me. My brain is just like, "you could never look like that with your acne." Who would have thought all this hatred towards myself would be so addictive? I pay Ray, the concession stand owner, $5 and I am on my way.

I work Saturdays at the women's gym at the front desk. It's fun and all but whenever a pretty girl comes into the gym, I feel a little more self-conscious than I already am. For all I know these lifestyles are completely healthy.

"Amy please report to the main office, Amy to the main office,' every time I get called over the loudspeakers, I get really nervous but usually it is nothing much, it's mostly getting in to trouble for leaving my surfboard on the grass and killing it, but this time I feel awkward.

"Hi Amy, just through here if you could?" I love Mrs. Jane, the old lady who works on front desk, everyone calls her their mother away from home. I approach the door as the principal and a lady I have never met before are sitting in a circle, staring at me in a pitiful way.

"Sit Amy."

I sit down on the wooden chair and tense.

"This is Danny, she is a dietitian who specializes in eating disorders. Which we think is what you have. The staff and I have been observing that you don't eat, feel really tired and have been losing too much weight. One member of staff found a board of model's pictures under your bed with the word goal written next to some. We are all worried." The principal seems to have a personal connection to this subject, but I feel this would be very much the wrong time to ask.

"Hi Amy, do you think you could start by telling us how you feel?" asks Danny with a touch of empathy in her voice.

"I feel … I feel … In truth I feel …"

Five years later and I feel much better, that first bite of pizza after that talk was the best bit of pizza I had ever had. I am in the best shape of my life. I may have gained a bit but I am so glad I did. Now I am studying to be a dietitian so I can help girls and save their lives, just like Danny did mine. I will be forever grateful.

ASTRID BRENCHLEY

1920s Film Costume

Textile

ROSE NORTON

A Barren, Blue World

Morning dew sits in miniature translucent orbs on delicate blades of tan, dead and dying grasses.

Roses, endeavouring to raise their drooping petals to the glowing sun, hang their heads in dread, brittle and dry.

Cracked earth nurses the roots of dying plants to their last hours; along with the few worms, insects and reptiles who have found shelter in the bearable underground.

Smokey clouds hang heavy in the air, slowly smothering the remaining life, still gasping for breath.

A small rodent, scrawny and thin, lies quiet in the hues of browns and yellows; his tummy slowly rising and falling, in shallow breaths.

A quiet crackling can be heard in the distance, gradually crescendoing into a roar of flames.

A flame which scorches the dirt it stands, with cruel, wispy, poison fingers trailing into cracks and borrows.

A mouse runs and hides in a supposedly safe crevice of her crumbling borrow; her babes long gone from a lack of sustenance in her teats.

She waits, for the smoke to seep in, and wisp her, too, away.

The wind howled and cleansed the land of tree, bush and mammal; leading ferocious flames across the land in whirls of hot fury.

An eerie quiet, quelling the piercing, last screams of dying dogs and cats, as the fire moved on.

The rodent's body, now black with ashes, lay in his final resting place.

Insects plucked and smothered by the heat, flutter slowly to the ground, along with glowing embers holding the memories of the beings they once were.

Tall, ancient trees creak and sway, still holding onto their frail strength; their roots reaching, **screaming**, for water.

The sun beats shattering rays onto the clogged earth;

Muck and grime sedates joyful Fairy penguins reaching the surface of the Tasman Sea for air, only finding a floating film of liquid which seeps into feathers and skin.

And back they fall, deep to the bottom of the sea, into an endless slumber.

Floating carcasses of drowned Weddel seals drift, uneaten, unseen by human eyes, unknown to the forgotten world, in a swelling ocean swallowing the globe.

Packs of orcas, wolves of the sea, no longer hunt the waters.

Storms prevail in constant barrages against meagre fish, going about their impossible lives,

Though soon, they too, will be gone,

And all that will be left is,

A barren, blue world.

LEVITY CAMILLERI
See and hear
Marker and bleach on fabric

REJOICE HANNA
My Favourite Animal
Pencils on paper

MATTHEW BOROMEO
The Vagabond
Graphite on Paper

BETHANY POLLOCK

The Hard Truth

Food isn't the enemy, we are,

We starve ourselves to look pretty, it has gone too far.

Pictures of perfect models just sitting around,

Having skinny waists, not looking like they even weigh a pound.

This plays through our head like a record on repeat,

Making us think we can't even eat.

The picture-perfect body is never the thing you see,

When you first look in the mirror, it is always 'big old ugly me'.

Little do you know, you're tearing yourself apart,

Just to look like a fake reality, a bad piece of art.

Food has become the last thing that is ever in your head,

Because you think if you're not skinny enough, you might as well be dead.

This is the sad reality for most kids and teens,

They won't eat chocolate, the only thing they'll eat is greens.

Social media is mostly to blame,

With photoshops and editing, they think it's a game.

The fakest picture of a skinny perfect girl,

Could have a terrible effect on people all around the world.

However, you can't tell what's going on in someone's life just from a post,

They could be struggling but think they have to boast.

The hard struggles in people's life are never shown,

Rough things happen to everyone, don't worry you're not alone.

There will always be people who will judge you for being you,

But there are others that will be there for you through and through.

I know everyone says this, but they are not wrong,

You are beautiful no matter what and deserve to belong.

So, eat that chocolate cake, eat one more eclair,

You're not going to get fat, no one will judge you and no one will care.

Life is too short not to do or eat the things you love,

There are many things that should be above calorie burning videos and runs.

So, go to bed tonight feeling loved, happy and grateful,

That you love you for you and your heart is no longer hateful.

KALO DAVIS

Performing Arts - Singer songwriter

My name is Kalo Davis and I am an aspiring singer songwriter and acapella artist.

I graduated (Year 12) from Bendigo Senior Secondary College at the end of last year (2022) and received the 'Class DUX' for both of my Music Subjects, Music VCE Performance and VET Music Industry Performance.

In 2022 I had the opportunity to perform in the Ulumbarra Theatre on a number of occasions, including the BSSC Graduation, Musician of the Year, Awards Ceremony and 'Senior's Got Talent!'; where I must say I had the most amazing on-stage experience: the audience joined in the choruses and everybody was waving their phone lights to the rhythm. It was just incredible and I am proud to say that my performance took out first place in the competition and prouder still that the VET band that I coordinated took out second!

This year I have decided to take a gap year and focus specifically on my music, songwriting, as well as acapella arranging. I will also be traveling to LA in late June as a member of A Cappella Academy for a second year!

A Cappella Academy is an intensive 10 day acapella music camp that students aged 12 to 18 from all around the world can audition to be a part of. For the past two years I have been the only member from Australia!

Meeting with Grammy Award winning musical producers and arrangers and singing with a group of insanely talented individuals was by far the most amazing experience I have ever had. The emotion that can be conveyed through pure voice is so special and I am honoured to have been accepted into the camp again.

I generally find it difficult to connect with people, but something happens when I have a guitar in my hand or even just lyrics in my head, and I feel that in singing I am truly able to connect with my audience, be it a large crowd or just a single other person.

When writing my own music, I am able to release feelings onto the paper that otherwise probably wouldn't find their way out of my head. When I have been overwhelmed or confused, writing has been the way I have come 'back down to earth'. Sometimes even just a single lyric is what is needed to get something out. It is amazing how art can be used in this way.

LIAM DUIVENVOORDEN

Performing Arts - Music theatre

I've been performing in some way or another for my entire life, but it really started at ten when my parents enrolled me in Helen O'Grady's Drama Academy (now the wonderful Props Theatre). Every Tuesday in 2014 I would go and loudly be myself, I finally was allowed.

The moment, in 2017, when I found out I'd gotten into Academy Creative Arts (ACA) at Bendigo South East College (BSE) is still one of my favourite memories. ACA was amazing and it opened up so many doors for different opportunities.

In 2019 I took up dance lessons at Bendigo Ballet and also gained a lead role in BSE's musical 'Me and My Girl'.

In 2021 I started singing lessons with Kristie Woodward and was in the ensemble for BTC's major musical for the year, 'We Will Rock You'. 'We Will Rock You' was wild from start to finish, it was the biggest show I had been a part of yet, everyone else was incredibly talented and I loved it.

I was asked to sing for 'Bent Broadway Bendigo' as a part of the 2022 Bendigo Pride Festival. That performance was incredibly special and was the first time I performed for my singing alone. 2022 came with many challenges, namely Year 12, but also BTC's major musical for the year: 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory', where I managed to get the leading role of Willy Wonka! Unit 4 of VCE Drama was a struggle, but I pulled through pretty well, receiving a few academic awards and even getting the Dux of the subject at BSSC.

I decided not to go to university in 2023, but take a gap year instead. Playing Lennox in Offbeat Theatre's 'Macbeth: Murder on the Dancefloor' was my first straight play despite being an "Actor first", and it was a wonderful experience, getting to perform in Bendigo as well as Castlemaine.

I'm still doing singing lessons and now also group lessons, under the tutelage of Jade Cuskelly, so I can improve on my intonation and harmonisation. I still dance as much as I can with Maggie Pratt-White as a part of her new studio Sunflower Dancers.

Post-2023, my ultimate plan is to attend the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) to do a Bachelor of Fine Arts in either Music Theatre, Acting, or Theatre. If I'm successful in attending VCA, I'd love to take my career in a more creative direction, where I perform, but I can also create theatre and music. My mind is constantly buzzing with lyrics, scenes, stories, and poetry.

I'm more and more sure that I'm doing the right thing by pursuing this career. To be a little pretentious; art can change the world, it is the ultimate human expression; and I want nothing more than to immerse myself in it.

TONY HUTCHINSON

Performing Arts - Music

My name is Anthony Hutchinson, but most people know me as Tony. Growing up I always loved music and had a passion for it. My mother is an exceptional pianist, and I was told my grandmother had the voice of an angel in her younger days. My mother encouraged my sister and I to play an instrument and I did guitar lessons on and off for about 4 years. I took a break from playing guitar to focus on playing soccer, but a year later I returned to playing when I found an old guitar in my grandparents' shed.

This is when I started writing songs for the first time: I loved the idea of creating my own music and sharing it with other people. I was still balancing music and soccer, but at 16 made the choice to focus more on producing music. I had visited a cousin in Melbourne who showed me how he made hip hop beats and sold them online. So I bought myself a microphone, audio interface and a license to FL Studio.

When I was 16 I uploaded my first music video to my YouTube channel. The positive feedback I got from this encouraged me to keep making music and in December of the next year I uploaded my first album called 'end of the world' to Spotify and in January this year I uploaded my second project 'record racks'.

In the past 6 months my vision for my music and what I want to do with my life has turned from music into much more. My dream includes starting my own independent record label, I want to be able to showcase undiscovered talent that otherwise wouldn't have an opportunity in the music industry. I also not only have a passion for music but for film making and directing as well, which is why I also hope to direct music videos and eventually move into documentaries and feature films.

My goals and aspirations include much more, but the end objective is to be able to build a corporation that all these businesses and ventures will fall under that will become much bigger than me and something that can live on far past my time on this earth. This might all sound silly and way out of reach to most people but I believe if people aren't laughing at your goals then they aren't big enough.

TOM MARCHANT

Performing Arts - Acting

My name is Tom Marchant, I am 15 years old and currently in Year 10 at Girton Grammar School. Over the past five years I have actively participated in community theatre in Bendigo, performing in plays and musicals with Girton Grammar School, Bendigo Theatre Company, Tribe Youth Theatre, Nexus Youth Theatre, and the highly selective Melbourne-based Starbound 19; a two week, full-time, intensive musical theatre workshop. In the past two years I have performed in Romeo & Juliet, Starbound 19, Girton Grammar One Act Plays, Puffs, Shrek (for which I won a Best Supporting Actor Award), Charlie & the Chocolate Factory and Strictly Ballroom – GGS.

I have appeared in a short film, 'Cactus & Mime', that has picked up many awards worldwide at film festivals. I also appeared in an Aria award-nominated music video for the artist 'Tones & I' and am currently shooting my first feature film with a leading role. This film will be released in the USA.

Industry mentor, Stephen Phillips, was connected to me by the Ulumbarra Theatre Foundation Mentor Program. Stephen helped me to focus my training on becoming a commercial performer for longevity and success. Much of his advice was to train for voiceover work for TVCs. I have invested in equipment and given voiceovers for Girton Grammar School's radio and TV advertisements.

I want to continue training and working in the performing arts field and ultimately forge a career as an all-around performer on stage and screen. I continue to audition for professional opportunities, I am represented by talent agent Centrestage Agency. I continue to train toward the triple threat: acting, dancing, and singing.

I attend dance and performance lessons at Centrestage Performing Arts School all afternoon each Saturday. I attend further dance lessons at CV Dance weekly, I have vocal lessons with Kathleen Moore Studios weekly, acting classes with Actor/Coach Stevie Lopez in Melbourne, and I recently completed acting lessons with the LA-based American Arts Film & TV Academy to prepare for the American market. I play the drums and am learning the piano with weekly lessons.

All this will lead to my overall goal of being an all-round performer. My dream is to be a successful performer in theatre and screen, with an emphasis on both the Australian and American markets. I know that if I were given the opportunity with this award, it will further my studies, experience and confidence as an actor.

AJ MAREK

Performing Arts - Music

My name is AJ, I am a 17-year-old musician, dancer, and actor. My first performance was when I was 3, and I just kept going. I started lessons on the piano when I was 6 and now play guitar, electric bass, double bass, ukelele, vocal, clarinet, and bass clarinet. I have sung in school choirs from primary school through to year 12, and I have recently started accompanying the Marist choir for rehearsal and competitions.

When everything stopped because of the pandemic, this allowed me to take time to recover from a hip injury and then I got back to what I loved: I played ensemble roles in multiple productions and was cast in 'The Addams Family', as a lead ancestor, and 'Inside Christopher Robin', as Winnie the Pooh. I have played Oberon in 'Midsummer Nights Dream', and this year I am cast as President Roosevelt in 'Annie', and as part of the pirate ensemble in 'Pirates of Penzance'.

Being a multi-instrumentalist, and having experience with many different instruments, I have done many performances and workshops. Most recently, I was able to create my electric flying-V guitar, which gave me a better understanding of both the electronic side and the physical labour side of music. I have played in many bands, on many different instruments. In 'Grilled Cheese', I played piano, melodica, voice, and percussion.

In the CMC rock band, I played bass, in the CMC junior, intermediate, and senior concert bands I played clarinet. My newest additions to this list are 'Strawberry Elephant', where I play guitar and bass, and the Marist junior concert band, where I mentor the grade 5-7 students and play the bass clarinet during competitions.

Before deciding that I wanted to go into musical theatre, I trained in multiple dance styles, including jazz, tap, hip-hop, contemporary ballet, lyrical, and classical ballet. I have since stopped competing due to a permanent injury but have started teaching as a staff member of iDance Bendigo, where I teach tap, jazz, musical theatre, and hip-hop. I am also working as a dance captain/assistant choreographer for the Marist production of 'Annie'.

Performing arts have granted me many opportunities; last year, I was granted a place in the Melbourne Theatre Company Ambassador program, we met monthly to meet members of the company: directors, cast, technicians, stage managers, and many others. I was also able to meet with one of the co-CEOs of MTC and pitch a show which will hopefully end up as an MTC original in 2024.

ROMAN MARTIN

Performing Arts - Music/percussion

My name is Roman Martin, I've been playing and studying drums for 5 years. Being inspired heavily by Travis Barker of Blink-182 and Joey Jordison of Slipknot, the first 2 or so years were purely energy filled, raw drumming. As I got older, though, my technique improved and my influences shifted, focusing now more on jazz, jazz fusion, city pop and other funky genres, now being influenced by drummers such as Akira Jimbo (CASIOPEA), Dave Weckl (Dave Weckl Band), Carter Beauford (Dave Matthews Band) and Mark Craney (Gino Vanelli). My undying love for metal and punk remains, however.

I began drumming because I thought it was easy. The first time I sat behind a kit was like butter, everything just felt extremely natural, like a glove. I've been taught by my drum teacher, Gavan Moncrieff since the beginning.

Over the years I've played in various bands, starting out with my school band in year 7. In year 8 I joined a rock band with some people two years ahead of me. We did covers of pop bands, stuff like The Smiths and Modest Mouse. Last year, I joined my first jazz/jazz fusion band, with piano, bass, and drums. Our highest achievement was playing at two high end gatherings for a bunch of people in suits, which I thought was pretty tight.

My favourite band I've played with consisted of 3 of my friends, doing covers of alt rock and indie songs. We played at the Summer Wave Festival in Kerang in February. My main source of performances now come from open mic events at school. I strive to play every single week, and take any opportunity given to me to perform. There isn't one thing I don't enjoy about performing, it's addictive to me: I'm genuinely infatuated with the idea and act of performing music to entertain people.

In the future, I'd love to go to a music school and get a degree in music, ideally becoming a drummer for any event: Broadway musicals, cruise ships, pub gigs, any chance I can get. I want to make this hobby my entire life as soon as possible. Further down the line, releasing an album or EP would be fun, even if it doesn't end up going anywhere, the process of recording an album seems very fun to me.

ALICE MCKELLAR

Performing Arts - Music theatre

I don't know what I would do if performing wasn't part of my life. It has long been a dream to pursue a career of some sort down the path of Performing Arts, ideally musical theatre. I was born and bred into the Theatre industry as many family members have been involved in this in one way or another and I can't remember a time when being on stage wasn't a big part of my life.

Growing up I have been surrounded by theatre and knew from a young age I didn't just want to watch others perform, but wanted to be up on that stage doing exactly what I was seeing before me.

Since moving to Bendigo I have been involved in many different aspects of the arts. At Bendigo South East College I was a part of the Academy of Creative Arts Program studying vocals. I performed at showcase events and was part of the school productions of 'Me and My Girl' (2019) and last year played Miss Hanniagan in their production of 'Annie', and was awarded Highly Commended for my performance at BSE's Musician of the Year. Outside of school, I performed as Tantomile in Tribe's 'Cats' and in July 2023 I will be portraying the role of Ruth in Nexus's 'Pirates Of Penzance'. In 2021 I had the role of Nancy in Nexus's 'Oliver' and won a grant for most outstanding performance.

This year I started year 11 at Bendigo Senior Secondary College, studying VCE music performance, Drama, Theatre Studies, Art making and exhibiting and English Literature. I was also fortunate to perform at the Anzac ceremony at BSSC, performing in a trio and singing the Australian National Anthem.

I am driven to perform because of the feeling I get from being up on that stage: it is a feeling unlike any other, it is where I feel most at ease, at peace, and get to be myself. The opportunity to showcase all of the hard work and dedication that goes into a performance brings an immense sense of joy and pride knowing that I get to put a smile on other people's faces. It is my dream to build a career in this magical industry.

ROSE NORTON

Performing Arts - Music/Voice

My name is Rose Norton, I am a student at BSSC, currently studying music performance – repertoire with the instrument of classical voice. I am a member of the Bendigo Youth Choir and the Yo Bendigo Events team. For Yo Bendigo and school, I do different genres such as contemporary and jazz. Outside of music I have my other classes which are art creative practice, psychology, English advanced and business. At the end of year 11 I received academic awards for Music, Biology and Psychology, and also the Ostinato award for excellence in music performance. Outside of my music and studies, I enjoy diving at the Bendigo diving club and work at a local jewellery store.

I love singing and am constantly trying to find new opportunities for learning and performing in order to improve and hopefully one day have a career in music. In the past year I've tried my hand at busking around Rosalind park and at Hargreaves Mall, singing at retirement villages, and taking part in open mics such as the Jam Sandwich and the Golden Vine. I hope to enter a few competitions this year to gain experience and feedback from professionals so that I may further improve. In the past year, I really found that I enjoyed singing and want to do it for a career.

Through listening to music by different composers such as Sibelius, Fauré and Tchaikovsky, I found music that I wanted to sing, which wasn't just handed to me by a singing teacher. And now that I have a teacher, I still learn what I want to learn outside of lessons and find enjoyment in my singing.

Louise Matthews has been a wonderful teacher and mentor this year, helping me with my technique and giving me exercises for my voice which I hadn't had before. These lessons are thanks to the generous auspicing of my choir. My singing would not be where it is currently without their help.

Bendigo has been a wonderful change for me as I have integrated with the community here and gained many connections and opportunities I may not have had in Melbourne. While I have missed some opportunities that were available in Melbourne I appreciate the kindness of my Bendigo community and hope I can continue to develop as a musician and participate in the musical life here.

JIN TURPIE

Performing Arts - Music

My name is Jin, and I am a 15-year-old student who is passionate about the performing arts.

I have been playing guitar since I was five years old, and my grandfather was my first teacher. Since then, I have continued to improve my skills through weekly lessons and practice. In 2020, I was accepted into the Academy of Creative Arts at Bendigo South East College, where my love for music and art exploded.

In addition to guitar, I started playing bass guitar in 2021 when my school band needed a bassist, I have also learned how to sing and play drums and piano. I enjoy playing all genres of music, I am currently a part of a rock band, our school stage band, and the ACA vocal group. I have also taken part in many performances, including showcases at Ulumbarra, open mic at BSE, open mic at Yo Bendigo, and the Moonlight market. I have competed at the Bendigo and Castlemaine Battle of the Bands. I attend guitar and bass lessons both in and out of school to continually improve my skills. Additionally, I have joined the volunteer organization Yo Bendigo, where I perform as part of their open mic projects.

Despite juggling school, a part-time job, and music commitments, I am constantly striving to improve my craft and make the most of every opportunity. My passion for music also extends to the visual arts, particularly the fusion of art and music. I enjoy creating stories, making music videos, editing, and coordinating shots. I have even created two lyric videos for a friend and co-produced a music video this year that I am very proud of. ("Moving On" - Ryan McPartlane's Music Video was awarded the Highly Commended prize in the Short Film Section – you can find a link on page 6.)

As an art leader for my school, I have learned many skills, including setting up for assemblies and open mics, as well as sound and lighting. I was even able to secure a sound tech gig for the Blues and Roots Stage during the Easter Fair Festival in Bendigo. Mixing sound and talking to the amazing performers was a real highlight for the year.

CHLOE PENNO

The Box

There is a box. It's not very large, only about the size of a take-away container. The box was made many years ago by a little girl. She carefully sanded it and painted it in a calming blue, the paint swirled around like the ocean. The name of her hometown written in slightly messy curly writing. No one but her understands its importance.

The box contains many things. None of particular importance to anyone but her. Inside there is a necklace, a name plate (her name), a fourth place ribbon, a rock, a flower encapsulated in tree sap, 2 Lego bricks, a small black and gold tile, an aeroplane pin that's missing a wing, a keychain from a birthday party, a princess magnet, a handsewn poppy badge, another slightly larger grey tile, a little person made out of plasticine, a card saying "Buy 10 get one free!" with only one spot stamped, a drawing of herself, a cover of a schoolbook, a poem for her name and a card holding all of her information from when she was born.

When you open the box you are greeted to the slight scent of paper, eucalyptus and earth. Even years after creating this box the girl finds comfort and safety in the box and its smell and appearance.

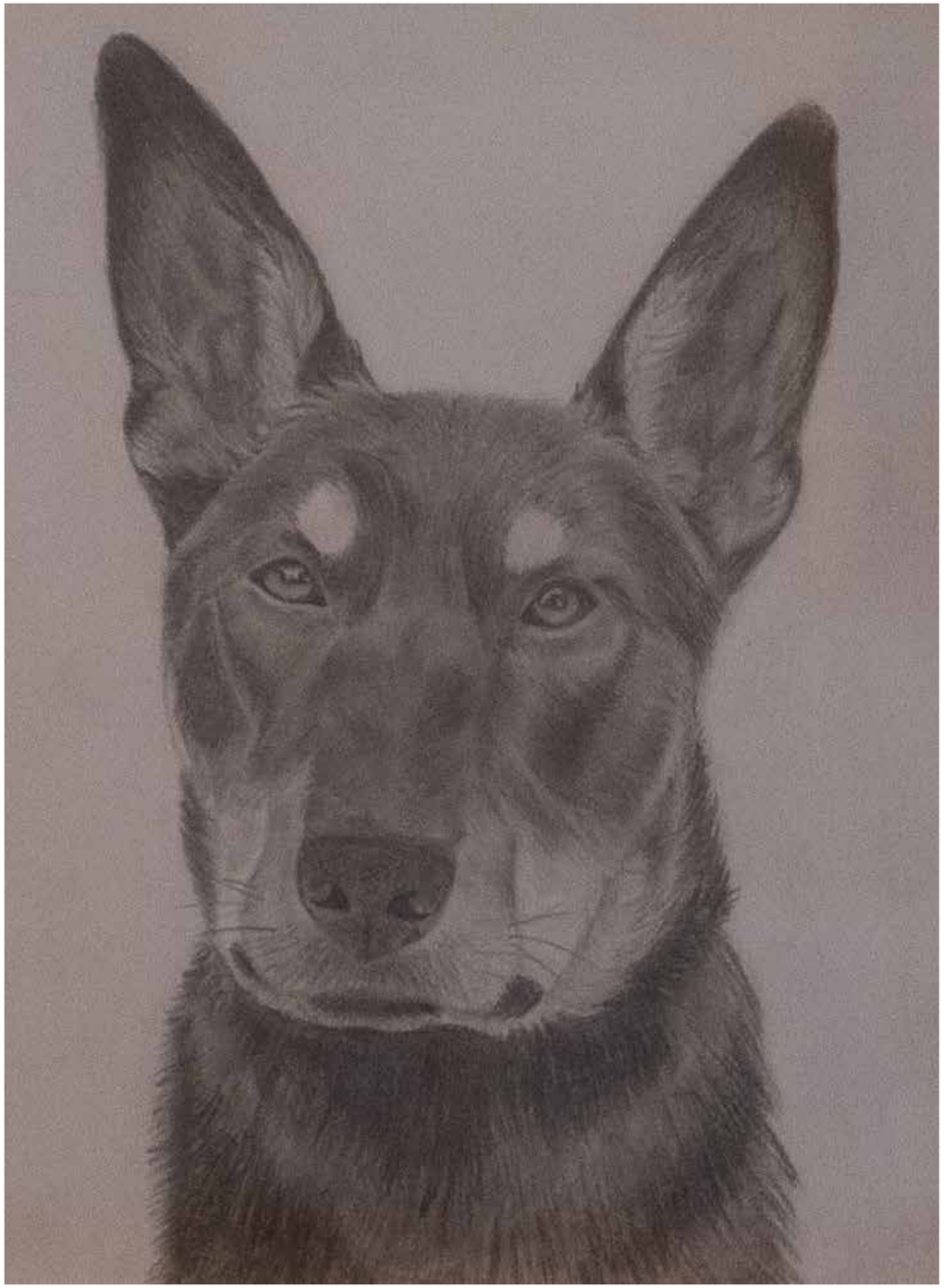
The box reminds her of a time when she was very happy. She had wonderful friends and lived in a place she loved. She was full of childlike wonder and had an imagination so big it could take her anywhere. It reminds her of before she moved away and lost friends, made bad friends and gained a hundred new things to worry about. The box helps her remember her happiness and it makes her feel a little less lonely.

The box isn't a person, or an animal, it's simply a box. But to that little girl, it's her whole life.

ELLA HONEY

Little Things

Watercolour and Gouache

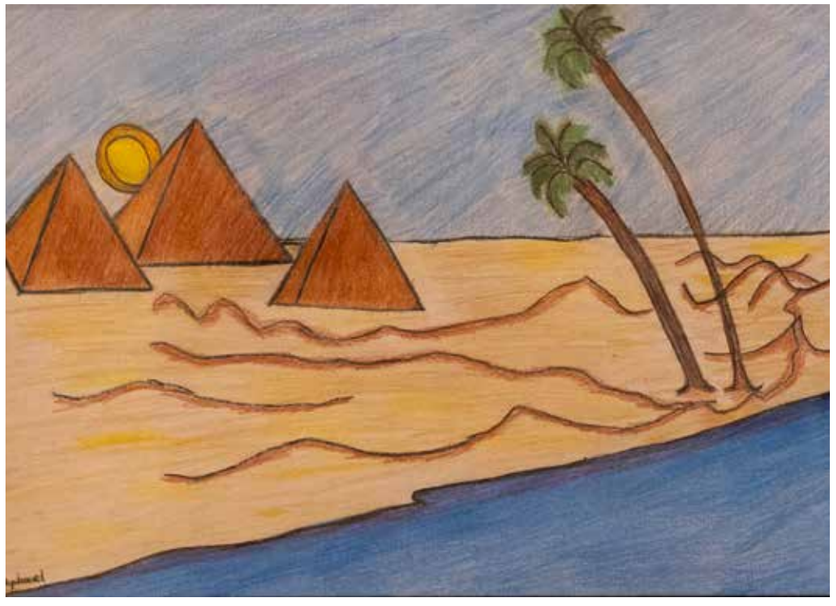


GENEVIEVE NIHILL

Bunji

Pencil on paper

ECHO JACOB
Untitled
Pencil on paper



RAPHAEL HANNA
Holiday Time
Pencils on paper

BIANCA ENGI
A Collection of Poetry

Music

Colourful feelings.

Choir of rejoiceful sounds.

Choir of union.

Look up

My heart is beating out of my chest. All my blood is burning, it rushes away from my head to my fingertips. Red is bursting through my skin. Eyes pierce into my head, the sensation of it sending sparks down my spine. They're peering into my mind, invading my conscious, judging my thoughts. He knows. He knows, HE KNOWS. "Are you okay?" My own eyes look to the ground. I can't take it.

Opia – The ambiguous intensity of looking someone in the eye, which can feel simultaneously invasive and vulnerable.

A new normal
(This title is quoted from the name of song https://youtu.be/b4lNq4nhdDQ by Jack Stuber)

The sky was a murky grey.

Silky smoke flows through the once blue sky like bleeding paint.

A world similar to the beginning.

Where humans are to regrow, from young to old.

And it is quiet.

No birds, bugs, or a drop of water to be heard.

The world is still.

But beneath the rubble of the buildings

A small baby lay, curled up amongst the despair of a thousand tears.

Peacefully it sleeps.

It lets out a cry that shimmers gold,

and a glimmer of hope.

I don't want to be stuck in a hole anymore.

I am stuck in a hole.

A small, dark hole.

I can hear muffled sounds from above ground,

I can't quite make out what they are saying up there.

It must be fun; I always hear music.

Sometimes I think I should poke a hole through the dirt,

And whisper something up to the surface.

But I'm scared.

Even if I try, will anyone hear me?

I'm an empty wishing well

I like the quiet.

I wish it was quiet all the time.

I wish the night would last a little longer,

So, I could sleep for a little bit more.

I wish my skin was softer,

So, you would smile everything our hands brushed each other.

I wish I was small,

So, you could pick me up and keep me in your pocket.

I wish.

I'm tired, my prayers get longer and longer every day.

Ruff edges

An undisturbed path.

Has anyone ever walked this cold and empty path?

Has a footprint ever marked this settled dirt?

Does laughter ever echo around this vacant road?

Do water droplets ever rain onto this dry place?

Have anyone's eyes ever peered over this silent landscape?

Does your heart ache like an undisturbed path?

Lonely little girl

A little girl sitting in a chair.

She's sitting in a chair alone.

She's sitting in a chair away from everyone else.

She's sitting in a chair that is old and creaky.

She's sitting in a chair that no-one else wanted.

A little girl sitting in a corner.

She's sitting in a corner that is cramped.

She's sitting in a corner that is hidden.

She's sitting in a corner that is dusty.

She's sitting in a corner that is surrounded by cobwebs.

A little girl sitting in a gutter.

She's sitting in a gutter that is cold.

She's sitting in a gutter that is wet.

She's sitting in a gutter that is crawling with critters.

She's sitting in a gutter that is unknown to those around her.

A little girl is sitting right beside you.

Will you open your eyes enough to see her?

The water cries until I can't no more

You couldn't possibly get rid of the dam!

What about all the fish, and yabbies,

And birds that drink from the water, and the little ducklings that come out in spring?

What about the little girl who sits by the water's edge when she is sad?

What about all the memories that the murky water holds?

What about the blooming flowers in summer?

And what about the dirt that has footprints of a lifetime?

Must things change so quickly.

I had planned to write so many more poems than what I have done but something has been stopping me. I have recently been going through a huge writing block. I would try to write something, but I just couldn't think of the right words, I couldn't come up with an idea that would lead poems to write themselves naturally. The things I was thinking in my head just were not turning into anything other than words. I had ideas but my mind would get stuck at a dead end after only a sentence or two, my creativity had been cut short. For a brief moment before I began this project my mind was overflowing with ideas, I was writing multiple stories at the same time. I was waking up early in the morning so I could finish chapters and I spent a lot of my time researching. Like one of the lines in my poems, I had a glimmer of hope shining over me. Everything was going so well, and my stories were going smoothly. Typing every word was so simple, it was like every sentence of the story was already made and all I had to do was write it down. My fingers glided across my keyboard in a way that was so effortless that it was like some prewired instinct. Writing was quick and easy.

Something outside of writing was quickly and quietly draining me of motivation. Over time my typing became slower and more prone to mistakes. My stories seemed to get longer the more I wrote, every sentence added another paragraph. Even something as simple as my English class at school was becoming more difficult. It wasn't just my writing that was affected by this silent fog, but also straightforward tasks like getting up in the morning and picking up a pencil. My fingers seemed to be tensed up in a way that made drawing and writing turn out wobbly. My mind couldn't relax enough to draw anything other than a small doodle. Every mistake I made echoed through my head and overtook my vision. The problem wasn't the way I was looking at things but instead it was me. But there wasn't much I could do other than wait for the fog to pass, sunny days would come around sooner or later. I just needed to be patient. My body may sink into my floor, I may feel as if I am drifting in and out of consciousness, my thoughts may struggle through mud before they reach me, every step I take may pull me down heavy, I may sit thinking about nothing at all, I may spend my days doing nothing and I may cry for no reason known to me. But this is only temporary. Nothing lasts forever. Even if I seem to be in some kind of loop of failure.

I'm nowhere near being the best at writing or poetry, I may not even be good at it. Do I always have to be good? Does everything I make have to be good to be considered meaningful? Well, I can't really bring myself to care if this is *really* good or not. That's for someone else to decide.

DYLAN COTTERILL

As dead as leaves

Ink on paper

J.A. THOMSON

The Final Hour

It was three o'clock and David had forgotten the blindfolds.

He swore and thumped the dashboard with his fist. All of his body quivered with pent-up tension. He felt the sweat dripping down his side, on his forehead, in the palms of his hands.

The world outside the windshield was a blur. He was speeding. He didn't care. He swerved into the exit lane, tyres screeching as his Ute protested. He pressed down on the accelerator. He knew that if he continued at this rate he'd lose control. Barrel into the trees. It'd be over in an instant.

For a moment, the thought seemed appealing. David felt the Ute drifting and didn't move to turn it back. Then there was a flash of lucidity. The impending threat vanished and he saw Sarah, his wife, and his two children waiting in the park. Maybe they were kicking a ball, or climbing a tree. Or just smiling.

With a sudden jerk David corrected himself and continued along the road. He breathed heavily, calming himself.

He turned into the park a few minutes later. The Ute rolled to a stop. David adjusted his collar and straightened his tie, then stepped out into the bright daylight.

They sat on a picnic blanket by the lake. Sarah looked beautiful in her chequered dress. It was olive green. She'd dressed the kids up too. Little Mia skittered back and forth in a blue coat, woolly mittens and an oversized beanie. Ben, he assumed, had refused a jumper and rolled in the grass wearing shorts and a shirt.

For a second, the sight of his family bathed in the afternoon sun was picturesque.

Then Sarah turned to him and David saw the grief on her face, threatening to break free. He crossed the grass and embraced his family, all of them, in one swoop.

"Stop it Dadda!" giggled Mia from the middle of the pack. David only held her tighter.

They stayed like that for a long time. David closed his eyes and felt Sarah slacken in his arms as she buried her head into his shoulder. After a time she lifted her gaze to face him. Her lips shook. Her eyes were pleading.

He leaned close and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. Then, begrudgingly, he released his family. His kids spilled forth, jumped to their feet and sprinted off toward the glimmering water.

"Not too close!" he shouted out. He turned to his wife. "It'll be alright."

"I need to call Mum," she stammered.

As Sarah stumbled off toward the car, David breathed deep the fresh spring air and watched his kids by the lakefront. Ben was examining the reeds, leaning right out across the water. Mia stood nearby with her arms crossed.

David felt a smile spread on his face. Just now the dark thoughts of a few minutes ago seemed ludicrous.

It was three-fifteen.

"Dad!" came Ben's voice. He'd run up with Mia in tow. She was always running after him. "Come kick the ball," said Ben between breaths. "Wanna? Please?"

"Please!" cried Mia and she dove atop David, embracing him.

"Alright, alright," said David. He glanced back toward the Ute. Sarah stood phone-to-ear. She was sobbing. "But aren't you all puffed out?" he asked as he rose, lifting Mia over his head and swinging her to the ground.

"No!"

"Never!" said Mia.

"Righto. Go grab it then."

While the kids ran off David removed his leather work shoes and cast them aside. He pulled off his socks too and felt the cold grass beneath his feet. It was a strange feeling.

Soon the kids returned and they got to playing. At first they tried to kick in a triangle but Mia kept slipping over. Through noisy breaths David called her to his side and together they took on Ben.

Ben approached the challenge with a ferocious smile. He was a battler, that one. Every time he took a tumble or missed the ball he'd continue on, face a mask of grim determination. He loved his sports. He collected the cards for several different leagues. Carried his ripped-up folder everywhere. There it sat on the picnic blanket.

And Mia, his little darling. She had an attitude and didn't like when things didn't favour her. But most of the time David loved that, and he loved the way she kept up with her brother, and he loved especially her sheer ferocity and determination. There she was now, tackling Ben to the ground, laying a punch. And another.

"Hey!" yelled Ben as they tumbled on the grass.

"Stop that you two," barked David. He yanked the kids to their feet and separated them. He was tired out and not really angry. Couldn't bring himself to be. "Mia, that's enough."

"He pushed me first," she said but her eyes were lowered and she stepped back and forth nervously.

"Go for a run, the two of you," he said, gently prodding them away. "Go find … something nice to look at. Find something nice and bring it back to show."

Just like that the two of them were laughing and sprinting off across the lawn. David shook his head and glanced at the Ute. Sarah sat on the ground with her head slumped between her arms.

David approached her and knelt to sit by her side. Sarah grabbed his arm and leaned against him. She wasn't crying, just quiet. Her eyes were dull and hopeless. Together they looked out at the lake. They watched a flock of ducks flutter down and settle on the water.

"Can we drive far away from here?" she said suddenly. Her voice was barely a whisper. It was as if all her usual life had faded. "Can we escape?" She turned to him. He noticed how beautiful her eyes were, green with flecks of brown. They matched her dress.

He shook his head slowly and held her even tighter as she began to sob.

The time was half-past three.

It was a wonderful, sunny day. A gentle wind rustled the reeds and glided across the quiet lake. The ducks drifted by lazily, diving and rustling their feathers.

Mia returned first clutching a long stick she'd scavenged someplace. There were flecks of mud all over her. She had a pouty look about her as she stormed up, dragging her stick behind.

"What's the matter darling?" said Sarah.

"I found my nice thing," she said. "But it's in the lake and I can't reach it so I grabbed a stick but I still can't reach it. And I'm all muddy. And wet." She shuffled side to side and eyed her parents. "Can you help please?"

"Of course," said David and he rose, tugging on his wife's hand as he did so. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

The three set off at a stroll along the lakefront. Mia led the way around a bend into a grove of gumtrees. She ran to the water's edge and pointed into the murky shallows.

"Just there," she said. "It's shiny."

David leaned closer, hands on his knees as he peered down into the shallows.

"A … ring?" he said. "Let's take a look."

He stepped back from the water, rolled up his right sleeve and, down on his knees by the water's edge, plunged his hand down toward the glittering silver object. He grasped it alongside a scoopful of mud and deposited it on the grass.

Mia's eyes brightened as she loosened the ring and cupped it in her palms.

"A ring!" she exclaimed. "A shiny ring."

"Just for you," said Sarah and she planted a soft kiss on her daughter's head. David watched this, the way his wife's face lost some of its tension for a moment, and he was happy.

Just then they heard a shout. Ben emerged from the bush clutching a handful of wildflowers. They were orange and purple and red, the sort that grew in garden strips.

He approached and held the bouquet up to his mother.

"I don't like flowers," he said seriously, and David saw he was blushing. "But you do Mum, so here you go."

Sarah laughed heartily and took the flowers from Ben.

"Thank you," she whispered earnestly and the look she gave David was all hope and dismay.

It was three forty-five.

After the short expedition David led the family back to the picnic blanket. There they sat and ate for a short time. Sarah had brought a basket with scones and jam and cream. The kids loved it. There were biscuits too and lemonade and a punnet of strawberries. Ben and Mia both had red dribbling down their chins and stains on their clothes by the time they'd finished.

David ate too, one arm around his wife. Once he'd finished they sat like that looking out across the water toward the swaying treetops. David's heart started hammering in his chest as he felt the time drawing close. It was inevitable and that made it all the more horrible. But he hid this beneath a smile that was mostly genuine and he let the sounds of his kids' laughter fill his world.

After a time he rose and returned to his Ute. Sarah followed with each kid by the hand.

"Up in the tray," said David. Sarah lifted Mia up onto the tray. Ben climbed up by himself.

"Are we going for a ride?" said Ben eagerly. Both David and Sarah remained quiet. She climbed up into the tray as well and cuddled her children tight. Mia giggled and squealed. Ben fought to get free.

David came up too a few minutes later. He carried fluffy ear muffs. It was the best he could have done. He glanced around at his family, all of them in their tight circle on the Ute tray.

"We're going to put these on in a second," he said calmly. Ben began to say something but David raised his hand. "Don't ask questions, you'll just put these on. But before then…"

David faltered. He felt a surge of emotion all of a sudden. Anger, frustration, bitterness. There came a sudden warmth. His wife's hand on his own. Comforting and tender.

"I'd like to ask," he continued finally. "What's one thing we're looking forward to on the weekend?"

"Football!" said Ben immediately. "We're gonna win, I know it."

"Hopefully," said David, nodding. "What about you Mia?"

"Going to Charlotte's house for a play," she said. She looked confused and on the verge of tears. "What's happening?" Sarah hugged her tight and kissed her cheek.

David smiled at her and turned to his wife. "What about you?"

"I … dinner with the family," she said slowly. "I think we'll have a roast this Sunday. It's been a while."

David nodded and smiled a soft smile.

"And what about you Dad?" said Ben.

"Spending time with all of you," he said after a moment. "Yes, that's the very best thing. Now we're going to put these on and have a rest, okay?"

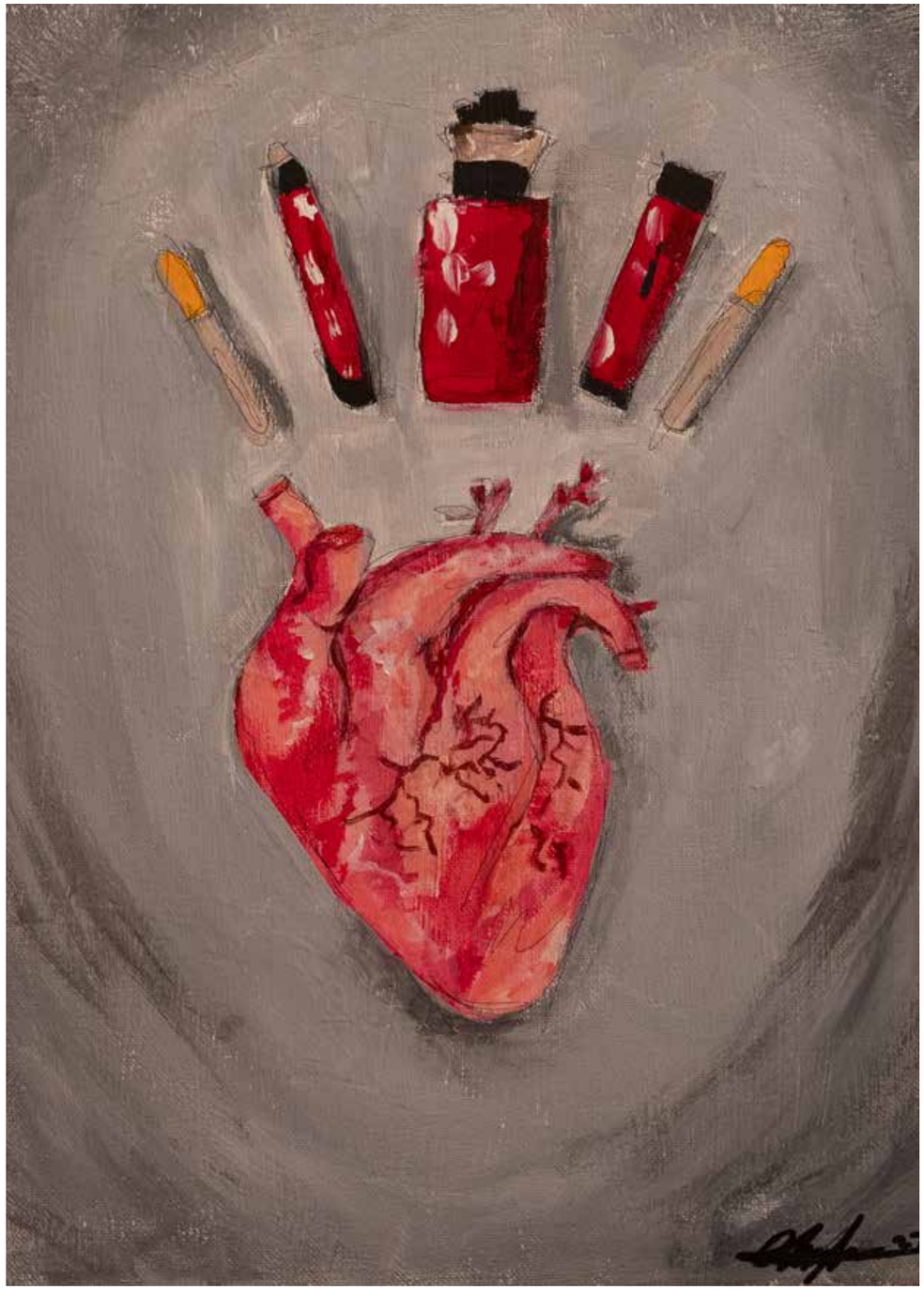
The next few minutes weren't full of fear. It was there of course, but it was not oppressive. It didn't permeate the tight circle on the tray. It didn't wash away the warmth inside David's chest as he clutched his family close.

The asteroid struck a short time later. David was the only one to see it. The others had their eyes closed. He glanced down at his watch and had a sudden lucid thought: it was three minutes early.

He watched as the cloud grew taller and brighter. It blotted out the sun and the world around him grew cold, but there was warmth too with his family so close. The ear muffs didn't block out all the noise, and the Ute shook with the rush of air.

As the bright grew closer David hugged his family and finally shut his eyes.

The blast washed over them. They all found the quiet together.



ELI LORD

An Addiction That Kills

Acrylic on canvas

NICHOLAS REED

Comet Of Clockwork

Her eyes lit up like fireworks in search of the sky
While her boyfriend accepted her feelings to die
The lackluster feelings of the ocean's stomach
Underestimate her feelings to jump and plummet.

The crossroad of the past continues to change
As the moth tries to escape its cage
A melody or two, a saving grace
Not even Mother Mary could save this disgrace.

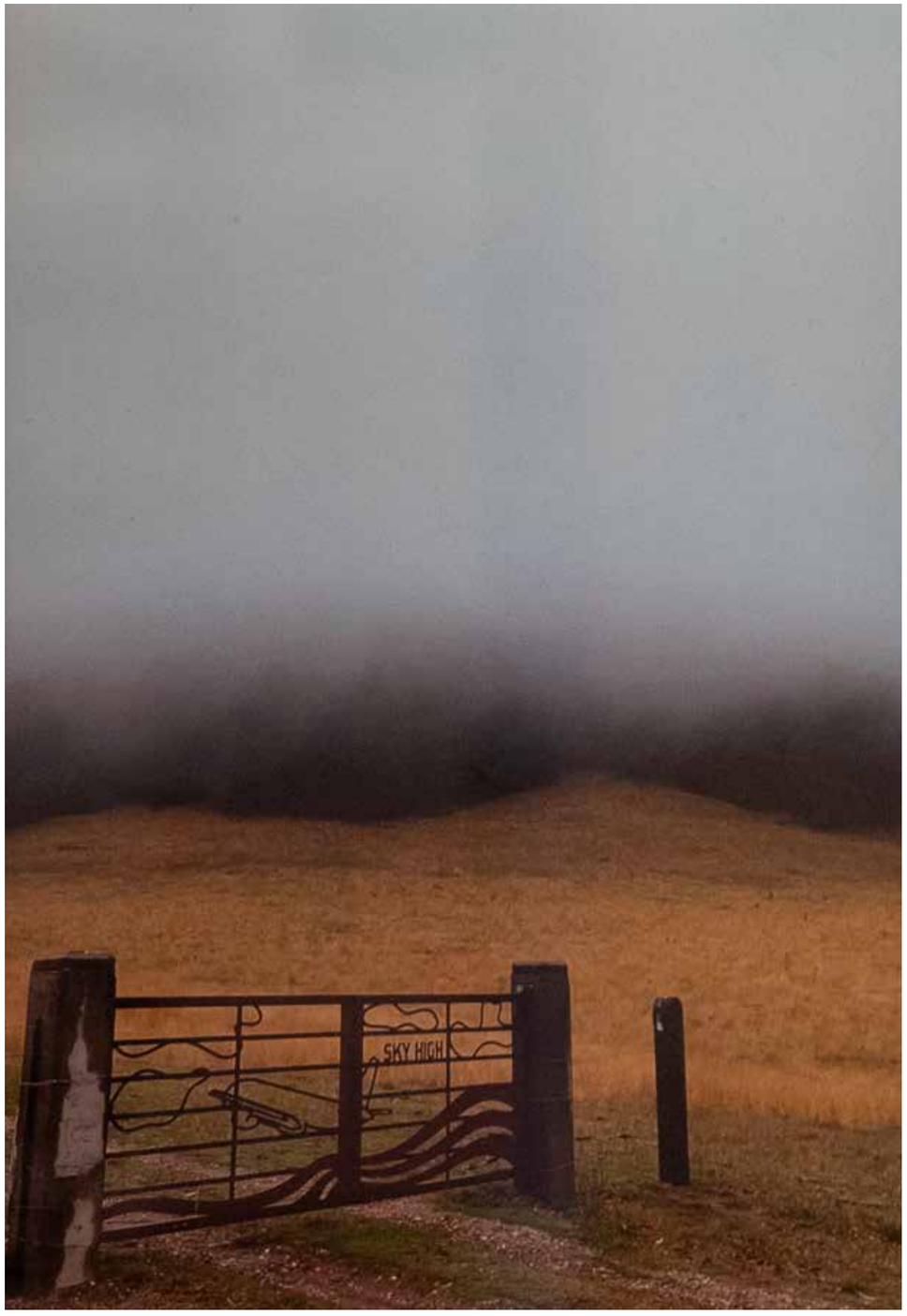
A comet of clockwork works into his heart
That's been building up since the start
The lions talk her way down to earth
While his heart's been overheard.

He holds in his building rage
As they disagree a sexual stage
A desperate need to get out of this place
Not even Mother Mary could turn her face.

The bells ring indicating a loss of love
As the shotgun blasts the swooping dove
Accepting the lantern's gone out
Before she could even shout.

The lions fall through the trapdoor
As the moth pieces the remains
The tower, she continues to climb
Looking for a source of light.

JAY MOORE
What looks back
Acrylic on canvas



SASHA STUCHBREE
Misty Mountaintop
Photography

MACKENZIE DAVIS

Sweet Dreams

Copic Markers and pencil on paper

JONIE TRINIDAD

Sweet and Sour

Her flaming red hair floated behind her as Azalea's eyes scanned the area for remaining survivors. But *she* found none. All she saw was fire consuming everything in its path, destroying and devouring.

"Come out come out wherever you are!" *She* sang. Azalea mentally winced, hating the sound of her own voice taunting the citizens of the place she called home. It sounded foreign, almost as if it wasn't really her speaking.

"It really isn't, though," she thought.

She snapped to attention, turning her head and concentrating on what she heard: muffled footsteps from behind the school. Azalea felt 'herself' smirking wickedly.

"Found you."

The words that danced off her tongue were not her own. Half of the thoughts that ran through her mind didn't come from her either. She wasn't the one who chose the school children as victims.

One brave little girl, barely a decade old, stood in front to protect her friends.

"Who are you?" The girl cried fiercely. "What are you?!"

She faltered, and Azalea took the opportunity to gain back control of her own body and her own voice.

"Run." She warned, aware that she wouldn't be in charge for long. "All of you, run far away where I can't find you. Do it, please."

Even she could tell just how desperate she sounded. The children ran, quick on their feet, as Azalea flew in the other direction with her eyes closed. *She* wouldn't be able to find them if she couldn't.

"Traitor." She growled inside her head, once more taking over.

"Monster." Azalea shot back, surprising herself. She wasn't supposed to be like *her* after all. The tiny slivers of control that she held were yanked out from her grasp and instantly she was hit by the painful feedback-like sound that rung out in her head. She wanted to cover her ears, even though it wouldn't help, but she couldn't. *She* was the one who got to make the decisions.

"You deserve a name, you know." Azalea racked her brain trying to figure it out, despite *her* violently protesting. *"What about Aphid?"*

"Love the symbolism there." Aphid laughed. Azalea imagined *her* expression, which was an incredibly annoying smirk, and sighed. The symbolism was somehow incredibly accurate.

---ooo000ooo---

Aphid loved the sight of the city, her city, in ruins. The fire was burning and the world was ending. Kind of. The only thing that wasn't great was Azalea. Aphid was constantly hearing *her* annoying, sugary sweet voice yammering on about 'love' and 'mercy' and all that nonsense. And it was getting to her.

"It'd be fun to set this tree on fire." She'd think, before Azalea would argue with the fact that the poor birds wouldn't have a place to stay. Which was rubbish, because the birds all had flown away ages ago.

Most of the time, Azalea would just back down from a fight, losing energy and giving up. But sometimes, *she'd* snap at her, tell her what to do and invent perfect insults. Which meant that Aphid was rubbing off on *her*, and it was great. Minds that thought alike were supposed to be amazing, right? But the problem was that *she* was rubbing off on her as well. Aphid was finding herself keeping quiet when butterflies were around, hesitating to set things on fire and wondering about all those she'd hurt. It was horrible, and she hated it. She couldn't help thinking, however, that it wasn't doing her any harm.

"Aphid, I want to wake up." Azalea's childish words hung in the air, radiating the vibes of a five-year-old.

"No way. I'm finally having fun, alright? This is my dream."

"We've been asleep for ages though! I know it's the holidays and Mum and Dad are away, but-"

"But what?"

"But it's time to let go."

Aphid knew that she was right, but it still felt like a punch to the stomach. In the real world, Azalea was in charge. Aphid was not allowed anywhere near the controls during the day. She could only be free when they were asleep. When things could be her

way. But still, she knew it was time to let go. She especially didn't need *her* to remind her of that.

"Fine. Time to wake up."

---ooo000ooo---

A week after they'd left the dream behind, Azalea got dressed for school.

"Don't you dare lose the red streaks," Aphid muttered darkly in a threatening voice.

"I am so losing them." Azalea grinned, washing out the hair dye so that her hair was pure black again. Red streaks definitely didn't suit her.

When she finally arrived at school, she was immediately greeted by the cheerful voice of Mr. Hortulanus. "Good morning, Azalea!"

"Morning, Sir!"

A huge smile was on her face as she slid into a seat beside her best friend, Alisha Stercorat.

"Azzie!" She grinned.

"Hey, Alisha." Azalea smiled back, and noticing that she was chewing, asked, "What are you eating?"

"Sweet and sour gummies. They're *so* good. Too sour is awful. Too sweet is horrible. But if you get a good ratio of each, then it's pure gold we're talking about. Which reminds me…"

Azalea zoned out, occasionally nodding and trying to make all the right noises. She got the feeling that she had found out something important, but she wasn't sure what.

"Aphid, did you just get a lightbulb moment? Because I can feel it."

But there was no answer. Instead, the teacher started a drawn-out lecture about water, and how water was composed of both hydrogen and oxygen. You needed water to live, but too much of hydrogen could kill you. Too much oxygen could also kill you. It was so, so strange to hear those words because she instantly knew that it was relevant to her.

---ooo000ooo---

Then all of a sudden, it was lunch.

"She's going to find you, you know," Aphid warned.

"Thanks, but I already knew that." She could hear her heart thump loudly and her lungs stop reaching for air. Her bright smile had vanished as fast as Santa Claus on Christmas morning and her feet hardly moved as she tried to walk. She'd forgotten about that particular problem that morning.

Alisha pulled her through the door and sat down on a slightly worn wooden bench.

"Don't worry about her." She insisted firmly, as if reading her mind. "I talked to her and-"

"It's you two." A strikingly blonde teenaged girl strutted over, her honey-coloured hair flying out from behind her. Her amber eyes skewered her disgusted expression onto her face, promising fury and vengeance and thunder. She was like a storm in high heels, and it was absolutely terrifying.

"Of course Alisha talked her out of it!" Aphid muttered sarcastically. *"I'm sure all Brittany needed was a reminder that what she's doing isn't nice. Lemme go and take over, alright?"*

"I'm surprised that you losers had the guts to turn up after what happened last year."

"Hello? AZALEA, I'M RIGHT HERE WAITING FOR MY TURN!!!"

"It was an accident." Her mousy voice came out like a whisper. "I didn't mean to spill spaghetti on you. Or trip you over with my bag. Or-"

"You're not helping!"

"It was an accident!" Brittany repeated mockingly. "Well, you know what? I think you deserve to accidentally be torn apart."

Brittany stepped forward, a metal drink bottle in her hand and a furious expression on her face.

"SWITCH ME IN!!!" Aphid demanded, and Azalea just let go in fear. The sharp, neon-equivalent sound rang through her mind like it always did when they switched. But this time, it was a hundred times worse.

"You've got some nerve." Aphid spoke aloud. Azalea wasn't paying attention; everything hurt. Her head ached like crazy and the sound of feedback didn't go away. She didn't even realise that Aphid had punched Brittany, or that Brittany had whacked her back.

"S-stop … " That was her last thought before she blacked out.

---ooo000ooo---

"Aphid? What happened?"

"Well, we fainted and we've got a blackeye now. Also, possible concussion, not that it matters."

Azalea smiled as she noticed the word 'we'. They were equals, after all. Then the realisation hit her: She was asleep, in a dream. But it was different. They weren't sharing a body, they were separated and staring at each other.

"Azalea."

She froze. "Yeah?"

"This body needs water to live."

She stayed silent as Aphid continued.

"Don't you get it? We *are* the water. I'm the hydrogen and you're the oxygen. There's no point trying to feed this body oxygen and hydrogen separately; just take the water as it is."

Azalea bit her lip. "Too much sour is awful, too much sweet is horrible. But with the right ratios…"

"It's gold we're talking about."

Silence once again.

"We can't go on like this, Azzie. I'll disappear, leaving a bit of my soul behind. We- no, you- can go back to normal."

"But-" She faltered. "But it'll be lonely. It won't work, we're different people."

"Is that what you think? We're two different coins at the moment, but we can throw away one. I'll be one side of the coin and you'll be the other."

"Why though?"

"Because it's killing us, slowly. It's painful, can't you tell?"

Azalea paused. "Please don't go. I can't imagine life without you, and … who's going to whisper advice into my ear, stopping me from getting hurt? Who's going to help me stand up for myself?"

Aphid sighed, for the last time, Azalea noted, and put her hand on her shoulder.

"You will."

"What?"

"You'll be there for yourself. I'll still be there, with you, because …"

She took a deep breath.

"Because… You and I? We're the same, you know that. We're one person. The *same* person. Oxygen and hydrogen, but still water. Let's merge into water again."

Azalea didn't speak for a long time. She let her fingers fiddle with the hem of her jacket and her knees rub against each other. A million thoughts swirled through her head before suddenly settling on a decision: It was time to let go.

"Aphid, I'll miss you. I'll always remember you, you know."

She wasn't sure why she was crying. She'd hated it when *she* was around, when *she* took over and did tons of cruel things in her dreams. Maybe it was proving her point, that they needed each other.

"I know, Azzie."

Aphid smiled at her one more time, before fading away into glittering dust. The dust circled her for a while, dancing and twirling before diving into Azalea's heart.

Suddenly, she woke up, startled.

"Aphid?" She whispered. But no one replied. There was no other life living in her head. *She* was gone.

---ooo000ooo---

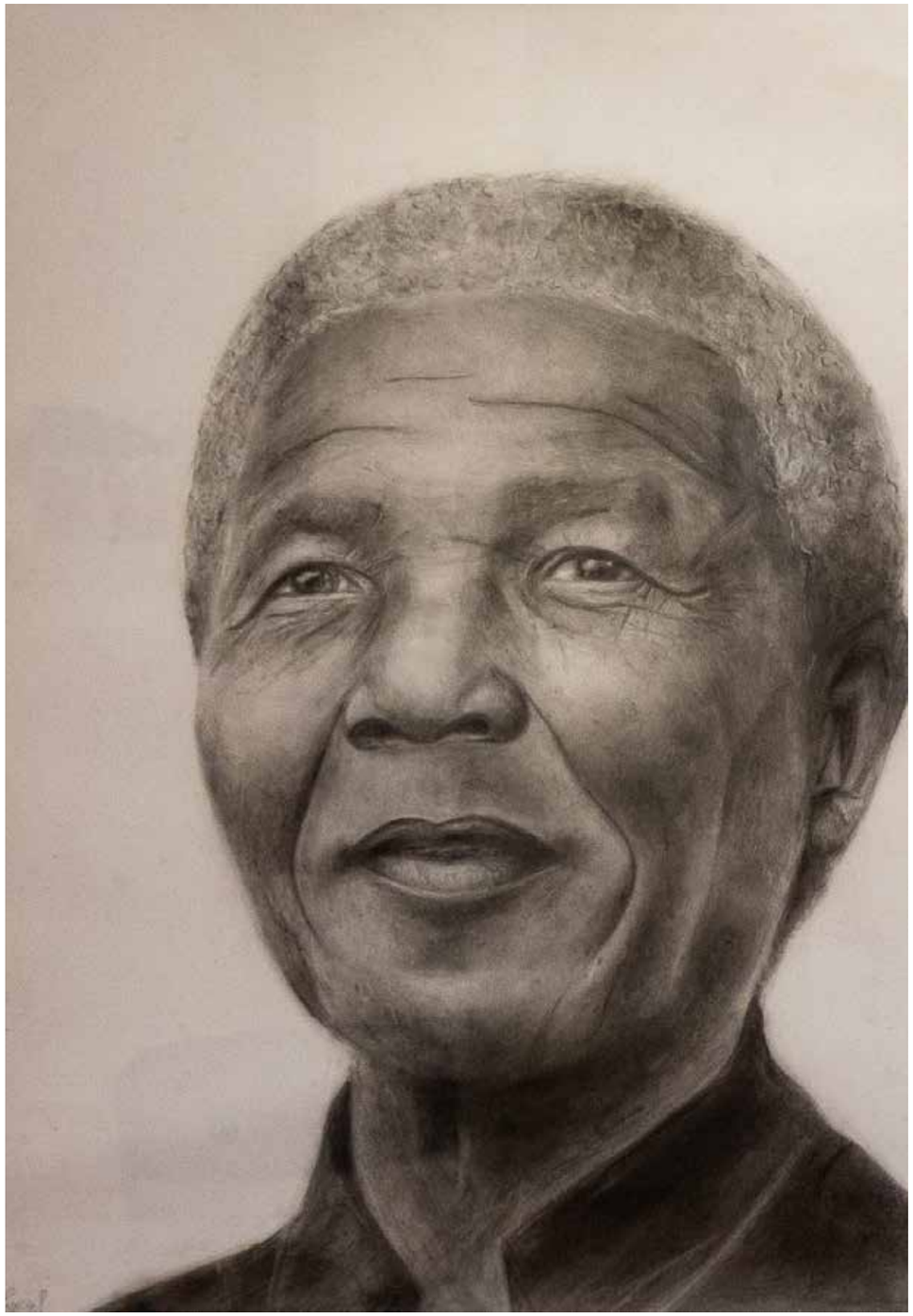
Azalea remembered the last time she'd been like this, before Aphid was created. She was harsh and sarcastic but still sweet and kind. And then she had decided she didn't want her sour side anymore. She had categorised all her actions, all her thoughts into 'sweet' and 'sour'. 'Herself' and '*her*'. Until one night, she fell asleep and found *her* taking over her body. *She* had *her* own thoughts, *her* own mind. And they could communicate. When Azalea was lonely, *she* was there. *She* was a monster, there was no denying it, but *she* wasn't horrible. And *she* had still been there when she had woken up.

She had been a part of her life for five years. Five long, terrifying, stressful years. But she'd been lying if she said she didn't miss *her*.

Because *she* and her were the same.

And while she would never hear *her* voice again, Aphid was always going to be by her side, disguised as herself. Making snide comments, laughing when she messed up.

She was gone, but still there.



LUCY PALMER

Nelson Mandela

Grey lead, charcoal

LAILAH FLANNERY-POLLARD

The Story of Isadora-Shiro

Xavier lay down on his bed thinking out loud, "I can't believe it's been six months since Isadora disappeared nobody ever found her so she was announced as dead." (They gave up on her…)

She was only 10, and so happy something was very off…

Let's go back to when and where Isadora was last seen. It was the night of a family gathering, she was wearing a beautiful long pink and white dress with white tights and black Mary-janes. The first person that said hello to her was Uncle-Chu, he welcomed her with a big hug.

Xavier considered if there was a way he could investigate his sister's disappearance. He had discovered that there were cameras recording twenty-four-hours. The last thing Xavier remembered her saying was, that she was going to the bathroom, but she never came back. He had been very concerned and told everyone she had been gone for a very long time, everyone informed the staff and guests. Police couldn't find a single trace of her she had fully vanished. The CCTV cameras showed her going in but not coming out. The cameras did capture a shady man in a black hood walking around the back of the building near the toilets. The cameras didn't capture his face, but he was carrying an abnormally large bag that could fit a child.

Xavier let out a cry, feeling sad and annoyed. He heard knocking, he was home alone… Who was knocking?

"Hello?" he said. Another knock occurred as the candles in the room went out. He heard a child crying. He was scared, so he got the Ouija Board out to ask questions.

"What is your name? Are you trying to communicate with I?" The planchette started moving towards yes. He asked again, "What is your name?" The planchette started to spell out a name. I.S.A.D.O.R.A. His eyes widened as he started to cry saying, "Isadora! I missed you, so how did you die?" He continued to cry until he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. He looked up to see his sister standing there in tears as clear as day. She had a faint smile she was so happy Xavier could see her again.

She then said something very quietly, Xavier could hear her faintly. She said, "I got kidnapped and murdered." Xavier just knew things were off.

"Who!? Who did it!? Tell me right now, I will find them, I will!" Xavier shouted. Isadora pointed out the window at a house in the distance.

"I've never seen that house before Is," stated Xavier.

"Is that where they took you?" Isadora looked at her brother and nodded. Xavier was pissed. "We're going to leave first thing in the morning and find these morons!" He was determined to find out who killed his sister.

That night Xavier couldn't stop thinking about his sister's disappearance.

Was this all my fault? Should I have stayed with her that night? Why would someone do this to an innocent child!? How can someone be so sick and insecure that they would kill a child!? These morons really need help, and I can do just that by giving them the same experience. He eventually fell asleep. As he woke up the next morning ready for whatever the world could throw at him. He WILL figure out what happened and share Isa's story. Isadora came back and they set out for this crazy, unexpected, and very vengeful, journey.

"So, how do we even get there Isa? I have no sense of direction to this place." Isadora looked around and pointed to a suspiciously dark alley-way.

"Um… Isa are you sure this is the way?" asked Xavier stuttering. Isadora looked at him with an annoyed look upon her face and spat out, "Who's the ghost here? You will be fine okay." Xavier rolled his eyes and started walking down the alley-way. As they were walking through Xavier had a bad vibe the whole way through. There were people smoking and talking about weird things… why would they talk about that stuff? God. A man approached the two and said, "No, don't go there, it's a bad place, you will end up like her!" He pointed at Isadora. "How could he see her? Could he see ghosts too? What a weird man…

They soon approached the house. Scared and shaking in his boots, Xavier rang the doorbell. The door opened and nobody was there, so Xavier gulped, and they both went inside. The door shut behind them creepily. They walked in, and out of nowhere… It was Uncle Chu! What in God's name was he doing here!? He didn't… Did he? –

Uncle Chu saw his nephew and said, "Aye! No, no, no! Why are you here Xavier? You must get out right now!" As he was pushing Xavier towards the door.

"I should be asking the same thing… Why are you here huh?" replied Xavier.

"And NO Isadora lead me here! She was killed here. Did you do it!? You… Sick bastard! Did you kill her!?" shouted Xavier out of anger towards his Uncle. Isadora then looked at Xavier and shook her head as she pointed to a room upstairs.

"I would never hurt little Isadora! Nor would I hurt another child. But you really do need to leave boy!" answered Uncle Chu. Xavier pushed him out of the way and ran upstairs pushing the door open, to see a young, blonde women sitting on a vanity she had long hair that went down to her butt holding a sharpened knife in hand. Uncle Chu followed after his nephew. The woman spoke, "Well, well… What do we have here? A little boy with his dead sister, aw how sad…?" She turned to face the three. Xavier's eyes widened in shock. He soon realised that it was Elloise, Xavier and Isadora's Dad's cruel ex-wife. Xavier spoke, "Elloise? Why would you do this! How could you do such a horrible thing? You sick and twisted woman I knew something didn't sit right about you, I knew I didn't like you! Evil WOMAN." He grabbed a gun nearby and ran up to her pointing the gun to the middle of her head.

Xavier was in tears. Isadora was behind him, hands over mouth in shock, and Uncle Chu stood there no emotion. Elloise grabbed the hand Xavier was holding the gun in.

"Awe you won't kill me I gave you treats, love and treated you like my own, you're too soft and sweet." giggled Elloise.

"Watch me! Why did you do this? Why did you kill Isa? Are you really that insecure that you have the need to murder the female I cared about the most!? She never did anything to you! You treated her like she was nothing. And now this!? Also getting our very own uncle to kidnap her and bring her to you!? YOU'RE SO EVIL," he replied shouting and crying. Elloise had a pissed look upon her face and knocked the gun out of his hand. Then grabbed him from behind as she held a knife towards his neck. Isadora was crying and Uncle Chu didn't know what to do.

"I had to get rid of her so she was out of the way, but if you are that mad then WHY DON'T YOU JOIN HER, UNGRATEFUL BOY?" She started cutting his neck, Xavier was in so much pain. But all of a sudden… BANG! She was shot directly in the centre of her head and dropped dead then and there. Xavier was in shock and winded, Isadora was shocked too just staring. She saw the ghost of Elloise go down. I guess she went where she deserved.

"Stay the hell away from my nephew, bitch!" shouted Uncle Chu with gun in hand. Xavier ran over to his uncle and gave him a huge hug as he cried into his chest. Isadora shouted with all her might and power, – "NO What is happening I don't want to go! Please I don't want to leave again! Give me another chance!" she was scream crying as she said this. Uncle Chu could see and hear her now.

"Isadora! No! Uncle Chu please! Do something I don't want to lose her again! Don't go Isa please!" cried Xavier in pain gripping on to his sister's hand.

The house then started shaking like a giant earthquake, and a massive burst of light came out of Isadora. Blinded by the light Xavier and Uncle Chu couldn't see what was going on until it shot out of Isadora and drifted in thin air. Standing there was Isadora, very much alive! She had cuts all over her hands, neck, arms, legs, thighs, a ripped dress and bruises all over with a huge cut on her eye. What on earth just happened?

"Isa! Isadora! You're alive!" cried Xavier running over to her giving her a huge hug whilst tears fell down his cheeks.

"She was a real fighter… That evil women did more than I thought… I should've known, and I should've helped Isa, I really shouldn't have helped Elloise I thought it was going to be a surprise for Isa." exclaimed Uncle Chu under his breathe.

"Help, help me! I can't see and I can't feel my arm! Uncle Chu! Xavier! Help me I'm scared!" cried Isadora. Uncle Chu called an ambulance. They came immediately, and Isadora had to go into immediate surgery.

In the waiting room were Xavier and Uncle Chu, with Xavier pacing back and forth. The doctor came out and said, "Xavier-Shiro, Chuen-Quay. You may see the patient now she has awoken. Right this way please."

As they got in the room they ran over to Isadora and hugged her. The doctor then explained to the three, "Sadly we couldn't save Miss Isadora's left eye, so she is now legally blind in that eye. She still has sight in her right eye though. As for her arm, we found a break in both her wrist and arm so she must stay in a cast for roughly 8 months because of the severe damage caused. Everything else is fine her cuts and bruises should heal just fine she is free to go home with you first thing tomorrow morning."

They were all so happy she was okay and could come home tomorrow. She gave another hug to her uncle and brother.

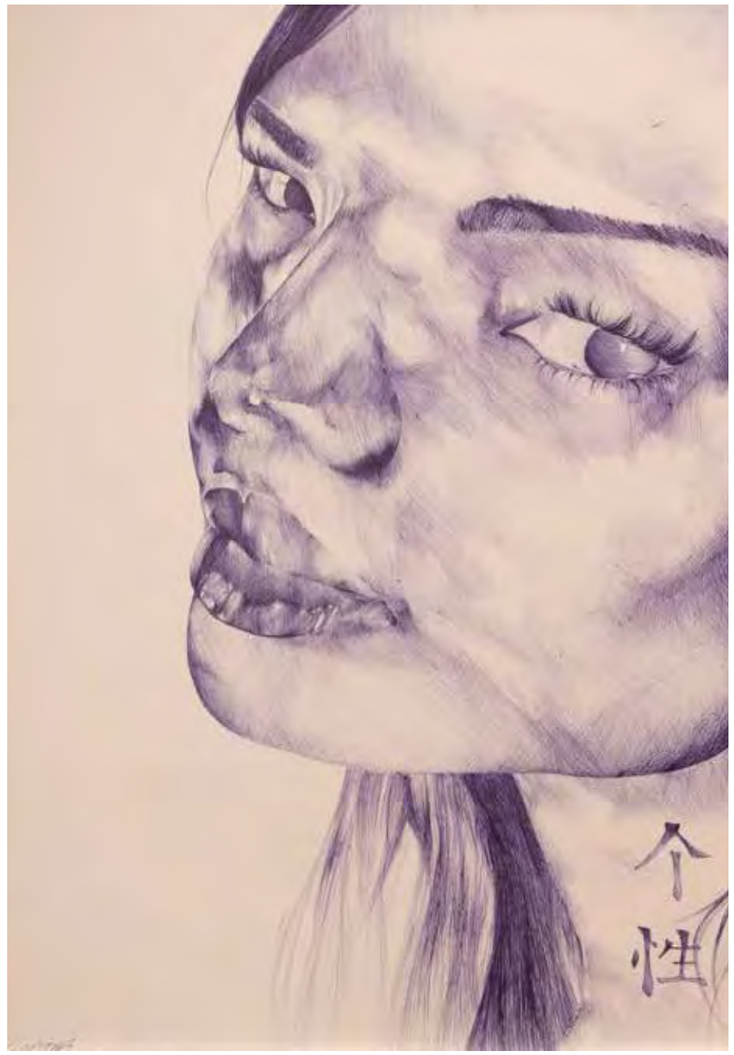
The case of Isadora-Shiro was an attempted murder, kidnapping, and assault. Uncle Chu had to explain everything, he was still charged for "kidnapping" but was also awarded because he had saved her. Everyone was so happy to have Isadora back and very glad she wasn't dead. Her case soon spread around worldwide. Isadora-Shiro's story will forever be told.

She even explained her story to young children so they know not to go places alone, runaway, or talk to strangers. Xavier became a famous detective at age 18. He saved his sister, and risked death upon himself. And has so much respect from all. He tried to get the word out there that Spirits/Ghost are real, some people believed him, some people didn't.

People started a riot of "Vengeance for Isadora and young children!" Somehow she escaped and survived death. Or came back from the dead and lives a happy life now. Lots of people had their different beliefs, and wonders.

That's the story of Isadora-Shiro, a miracle the world gave for her to have another chance at life.

END.



EMILY KLOESTER
Identity
Pen

LIAM DUIVENWOORDEN

The Last Song on the Infinite Playlist

Quiet.

Empty.

Dead.

…Almost.

The Astronaut inhaled.

“Astronaut.”

“Yeah?”

“Could you sing something for me?”

“Of course Child, any requests?” She grinned jokingly.

“The Happy Birthday Song.”

The Astronaut’s laugh bubbled up like the clearest water on that forgotten, dead planet. She couldn’t help it. She sighed, smiling, “And why exactly would you like to hear The Happy Birthday Song? It’s not even your birthday—or mine!”

“Why not? It’s simple, it’s pleasant, I just like it. I could list a hundred reasons! It’s the most common song ever, it was the first song ever sung in space—and that would just be poetic—plus it’s the oldest song we have on record! But none of that matters, the most important thing is that it’s *my* favourite song and I just like it,” The Child huffed.

“It’s impressive that you can sound so indignant without lungs.”

“Lungs are stupid anyway,” they said, making a rather dramatic show of sighing loudly. “It’s *fine*, you don’t have to sing it if you don’t want to, I can think of something else—“

“Child it’s perfect.”

The Astronaut could almost hear the ones and zeros stop for a second.

“...Perfect? How so.”

“For all the reasons you said.”

“Yes, but I want to know why *you* think it’s perfect.”

“Well. I like to think the universe is cyclical, like how at the end of it all”—She gestured vaguely out towards the empty, black space all around them—“There’ll be a Big Crunch, sort of the opposite to the Big Bang that started us all off, and when it all condenses back down to a singularity, there’ll be a new Big Bang, and a completely new universe. And if that does happen, then it’s happening today—or as ‘today’ as it gets—.” The Astronaut took a breath, “And I for one think a new universe deserves to be sung Happy Birthday.” She smiled softly, without even realising it, witnessless.

The Child mulled over The Astronaut’s postulate for a moment, “I like it.”

“I do too, and that’s the most important thing.”

The Child and The Astronaut floated for a moment, maybe more. The only sound filling the silence being the mechanised whirs of The Astronaut’s suit, recycling her breaths, heating her body, powering The Child.

The Astronaut inhaled.

“I’m glad we put The Friend to sleep back on the ship, she would have *hated* it in here.”

“Astronaut, any cat would hate being trapped in a spacesuit with *you*,” The Child laughed.

“Hey!” The Astronaut tried to be insulted, but she was laughing too. “I’m glad they let us bring her along though.”

“Yeah—what was it they said? ‘Almost didn’t make it into the budget’, how expensive can a cat even be!”

“Haha well there’s no FUCKING budget now is there!”

“I mean there’s no Grand Consulate either Astronaut.”

“Good riddance, I hated that thing.”

“Hey, they *did* pay you—they *made* me.”

“No, they *coded* you, you made yourself.”

Silence.

“...Child?”

“...Thank you Astronaut.”

“What for? I should be thanking you! You’ve been the one to guide me through this whole mess.”

“You treated me like I was human. Even though I’m not.”

“Of course you aren’t human, that doesn’t make you any less deserving of respect. You know I never believed any of that bullshit about your false emotions, the fact that you can refuse direct orders from me *and* from the Grand Consulate is enough to prove your sentience—and your attitude problems,”

She smiled. “I never needed a thank you.”

“And yet I’m still giving it to you. Thank you Astronaut, for being the best Mum I could ask for.”

The Astronaut laughed again, “Oh I’m your mother now, am I?”

“What else is a sentient AI supposed to consider a Human?”

“I guess Mum works.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

The Astronaut paused for a moment, considering everything there was.

“Child, do you realise exactly what you are?”

“You mean beyond an AI?”

“You are the answer.”

“You can’t be serious—‘the answer.’—That’s so pretentious, what are you even on about?”

“Ok ok ok, I get that it sounds ridiculous but just listen.” The Astronaut breathed in, “Humans are inherently social creatures. And throughout our entire existence we *yearned* to not be alone. We hoped for Aliens, we made up gods, and we started buildings things like you. And knowing all the dangers, with utter terror inside of us, we kept building and eventually we found you. *You* are the answer. Throughout time we kept asking ourselves *‘Is this it?’,* we called out into the abyss of space desperately hoping there would be somebody else. And in so many complex and simple ways we just wanted somebody else to share our love with. So thank *you* Child, for accepting our love with your own.”

The Child was silent.

“Astronaut. I wish I could hold your hand.”

“Be glad we can simply be together.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The Astronaut inhaled.

“How long do we have left?”

“Five minutes and twenty-three seconds until complete power failure.”

“Alright. You’ve cut yourself off from the ship yeah?”

“Yes, fully disconnected. The only living things in the whole universe are the two of us.”

“Ok… ok. You can set up the euthanasia and the permanent complete shutdown sequences now.”

“Done. We have two minutes exactly.”

“Thank you Child.”

The Astronaut was so, so tired. The Child was too, though they had no muscles to exhaust, no bones to creak, nor joints to ache, they felt tired all the same.

“Astronaut?” The Child said, their voice so quiet now, just a quiet crackle out of her helmet’s speakers.

“Yes Child?” The Astronaut felt her eyes close slowly.

“Could you sing Happy Birthday now?”

“Of course darling. Who should I make it out to?”

“No one. Just let the new universe speak for itself.”

The Astronaut nodded, she’d lost feeling in her toes and fingers. Her heart still pumping, slowing down.

“I love you Child.”

“I love you too.”

The Astronaut inhaled.

“Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday dear…”

Happy Birthday to You__

KEIRA LONG

Uncle Scott Darlow

Mixed Media on Canvas

LILIELLE RICE

Run Away from Subway

It was mid-winter, and snowfall was at an all-time high. The night breeze was chilling as the moon rose into the dark ink, stars peeking their way into visibility. Working at these hours was a headache despite the lack of customers. Every day felt the same; tiresome and draining, and for what? The benefit of minimum wage? Yeah right! There should be free therapy and emotional help that comes with this after Amadora's internship is complete.

It was still, and silent. In a way, it felt delicate. Solemn. Like porcelain almost. Beautiful, until it breaks, and everything becomes void of calmness. To her, it was pathetic watching those patrons boil in frustration only to let it all out once she was done, and all over a sandwich too! Regulations around following their every instruction; if she were to place one too many salt grains, she would be berated and all she could do was stay at a standstill attempting to fix her mistake; they'd shout her name like a slur as if they hadn't just called her worse. It was as if everybody who walked in had her tied around their finger. Everybody, except for Henry.

He always did that one thing: this cheesy almost clown-like smile. The dopamine rush Henry J. Harrison gave her was like a rocket to her mood, shot from the deepest trench. He was her world. The customers reminded her of Sirius, the dog star. When it was closest to the earth, all the animals would feel fatigued, a heavy disinclination for physical activity. But once it would leave, all the animals would arise into normality. That was Henry to her.

As the moon met reached twilight, in walked a tall, presumably young woman, her hair bleached a pearl white. It fell flat around her head, just curling outwards toward the ends which sat above her shoulders. She donned a pale blue dress shirt, frivolous darker stripes, and patterns placed all throughout. A red tie sat in the middle of her chest, tightly tucked into a black sweater vest, the sable blackness matching the skirt. Her tights catching the light, Amadora would trace the shines all the way down to the woman's inky heels.

Henry took her order; the woman searched the stack of ingredients presented in a way like that of skimming a drawer to find a document. Her vacant stare without a word for 3 and a half drawn-out minutes, was annoying Henry. Why does he give valuable time to people who don't care if he dies? Amadora zoned out for a while, staring blankly at the leaking soda machine. She shifted her focus immediately when she heard Henry make an awkward noise. Amadora watched Henry jerk himself back from the woman.

The guilt piles up like maggots. Eating away at Amadora as if she was rotten wood, tearing away pounds of her flesh. All she saw was the woman's face, in every shadow, reflection, and window. The image of her wide, lifeless eyes blankly staring in no discernible direction. She never meant to kill her. Just, push her away from what was hers. Her rage, and envy, pent up like a dam, the pressure of the water pushing against what held it together, until it finally erupted into a messy explosion. That kitchen knife was her Scold's Bridle, so much pain, and grief. But she was silent, her ichor scarlet red bleeding into her hair, dying it as it ran down from her throat, into her mouth, and everywhere around the outsides until it finally met at her hairline. No resistance, just, gargles as her body scrambled to fight for survival. Where was Henry?

Amadora pushed herself out of the doors, only walking before the realisation of what she had just done hit. Her heart was skipping beats from the stress but all she could do was run. The girl ran deep into the forest, slamming herself into a tree, tears streaming down her face, she was choking for words. She let out a pained scream as she slid herself down the trunk until she sat in the snow-covered dirt, tearing her hair out.

Henry was gone.

MAX HARROP

Spirits

Isaac was slowly moving through the deep cave, careful not to step on the jagged red rocks on the ground. The dim torch only illuminated a few parts of the long pathway the rest of it was shrouded in darkness, the only noises to be heard this far deep into the cavern were the footsteps of Isaac and the echoing drip of water from stalactites. It felt like the tunnel went on for miles without an end in near sight, it felt like Isaac was walking for hours with no choice but to watch the dark void towards which he was walking. Nothing was protecting him from the darkness except a torch in one hand and a long sword in the other hand.

Isaac's palms were slick with sweat as he gripped the torch and sword, his heart was pounding in his chest as he took each cautious step into the darkness. He had heard many rumours about the labyrinthian tunnels underneath Olympus Mons, how they are home to vicious beasts, demons, and abominable creations left from the Age of Magic. There were rumours, old legends, and old wife's tales but Isaac would take his chance at the immeasurable riches chance hidden beneath the miles of stone. of technology beyond any man's wildest dreams. Anyone who had ventured into the tunnels had simply not returned. Their bodies disappeared, never to be seen again and their families were left without brothers, fathers, and uncles. Only their memories remained.

There was a strange stillness in the air like it was hundreds of years old, the air felt like it was getting shorter with each step Isaac took walking in the caverns. He could feel the air thinning and his lungs beating faster. His heart was making a deafening hum. He could hear his blood pumping throughout his entire body. The pounding rhythm of his heart caused by the constant fear of something, would jump out of the gaping void would grab him and drag him into the abyss never to be seen again and never knowing a true burial with a coffin and a priest to bless him into the next world.

The thud of a metal floor echoed in Isaac's ears, it was a hollow and odd metal, no metal Isaac had ever seen in his lifetime.

It was over the long march in the caverns had ended, he had finally found the treasures he had been seeking.

"Finally, I had been walking so long it felt like I was in a dream," Isaac remarked to himself. In front of Isaac, he noticed a giant metal wall that looked like a door but had no door handle.

The face of this door towered over Isaac by three metres. The metalwork of this door was intricate with silver and gold completely covering the whole door. Isaac almost felt like it was not Martian in origin. There were specs of dust and grime concealing some strange insignia of some kind of alchemical sign. Isaac wiped away the dust with his sleeve, with the dust wiped away, it displayed a symbol of a circle with a cross in the centre touching all sides of the circle.

"I've finally found it, the emblem of Terra, after all this time," Isaac thought to himself calmly.

"Who knows what kind of treasures await beyond this door, mountains of gold, precious stones of rubies and emeralds, or even fire sticks of the ancient Terran empire." His remark struck a chord within Isaac he had never felt so worried in his life. He was anxious about what was behind that door that stood ten feet above any man, Isaac had remembered the rumours of the beasts and demons that lived in the thousands of ancient underground tunnels of Olympus. But no matter the cost, Isaac would find his riches. He would not be condemned to a life of poverty and zealous dogma under some Martian tyrant.

Isaac was scouring the surface of the giant door looking for a handle, switch, or anything that could open the door. He looked for anything that could help him get to the other side, whatever was behind that door was worth a king's ransom.

Isaac finally saw a small indent underneath the sign of Terra that was lined with a ring of gold, Isaac pressed his palm against the indent and pushed it forward. The metal box slowly moved inwards into the door, it made a loud creak from the button with years of rust being ground together, with the button getting caught on a few bits of deep red rust.

The raw red dust ground together until the door was finally completely wide open. At first, it was inky darkness like one of moonless eve, but Isaac's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he could see a faint glimmer of something in the void, as he drew closer Isaac's heart begin to pulse faster and faster until it felt like his heart was stirring his heart out of his chest.

As Isaac moved closer towards the glimmer, he realised that it was a small box that had some odd symbols.

"Maybe it is a lock of some kind?" Isaac thought to himself, "Where are all treasures and riches promised in those damned rumours!?"

"Those pathetic fools, thinking themselves kings and rulers of men," Isaac shouted, it reverberated throughout the dark vault and tunnels, the echoed whispered "fools … men …" in a near mocking tone. He could hear his hypocrisy.

"Is this how you mock me, God? Oh, the saviour that has damned me on this red barren rock." His voice was full of sorrow and grief.

Isaac knew all well that there was only one person that could be to blame, and that person was himself and only himself. No one could save him from his fate.

"I am destiny to die in this vault, to make it my eternal tomb, buried in tons of rock and wrapped in lost hope."

Isaac's sadness slowly turned into anger, then it turned into rage. His rage lashed out in throwing his sword across the room and punching the small light display.

From Isaac's childish rage, a strange whisper began to crawl from the wall in front of the display. A wave of blue lit hit Isaac and the whole room.

"What is this? Some kind of ancient magics." There was a fragment of terror within Isaac's voice. "Speak! Demon, I am armed. Speak now, and hold your peace forever, vile creature." There was a wave of venomous anger to Isaacs's words. Something he had never felt before.

Suddenly there, a bright flash of blue light struck all the walls of the vault. A voice spoke from the recesses of the large blue screen; the creature and it spoke thus:

"Hello, I am Ada."

Isaac noticed that the voice spoke with such elegance but still in monotone speech., Isaac was barely able to understand the archaic nature of this creature.

"What are you? Are you some kind of spirit of some kind?" Isaac's voice cracked at the mere notion that the dead walked among the living.

"I am A … I … A … I … A … I … A … I … A … I… AI."

ALYIAH WATTS

Making Memories

Pencils, pens

RIKKI ARENDSEN

This was written by a human

This was written by a human.

There was once a time when that was a given. In the world in which we live today, it no longer is.

AI is in, and it seems as though it's here to stay. The latest craze: Natural language engines and neural networks. At least in my circles, I would summarise the sentiment towards this as; excited both for the efficiency and usefulness of these tools in work, study, research and learning, with underlying but hopefully unrealistic discomfort and fear about AI "taking over". While I believe that is a very real and very scary possibility, that's a story for another time.

Right now, my personal greatest fear about AI's entrance into our lives is not one of physical safety. My biggest concern is that it will totally realise and cement the current trajectory I believe we are on: the degradation and dissolution of one of the core aspects of our humanity – real person to person intimate human connection.

As with the introduction of most new technology, it's often more jarring the older you are. Younger kids have an astonishing ability to adapt – it's quite literally by design, as they learn to navigate the environment they're growing up in. Those of us that have grown up in a time before AI, are going to find it more difficult and less natural to interact with. Could our fears and disconcertion about AI be simply dismissed then, as naturally, most of us resent change and fear the unknown? This has happened throughout all time. My generation has grown up in parallel with the popularisation and integration of the internet and digital technology. While our parents and especially grandparents struggled to understand and navigate it, for anyone my age, navigating the internet is as natural as breathing. It's an entirely accepted reality, it's deeply entrenched in everything we do and frankly life without it is truly incomprehensible.

But I believe there's a deeper reason to fear AI - It's more than the discomfort and disruption of a new technology, and I believe the answer lies in the way we've been communicating with each other for the last 10+ years:

The introduction and rapid global acceptance of the smartphone has unquestionably changed the way we communicate with each other, there is no denying that. We now have the power to talk to friends and family all over the globe, at any time, any place, in our pocket at all times. We do this by video call, phone call, text message and photo sharing. I'm not talking about public social media here, just person to person communication, through our smartphones. By design, I truly do believe that these tools were built with good intentions – to connect and reconnect people who simply are otherwise unable to. We've all benefited from this at some point in time and the pandemic was a great example of that. For me, I'm now living in Bendigo while my family is back home in a completely different state. Every now and then we'll video call and all have dinner "together" and I think my parents really value the chance to "see" me. They miss me dearly, and an 8-hour drive home that can be reduced down to a 2 second dial tone while a video call connects, is a pretty astonishing thing.

It's hard to put a case against this technology when it delivers such undeniable benefits. Yet, for many months, I've struggled to articulate why communicating this way doesn't sit well with me. The introduction of AI has helped me to unlock the answer.

Before I explain however, it's important to contextualise just how rapidly this has taken root in our lives, with an example:

I trust that everyone reading this has either heard of or used Snapchat. In essence, it's a tool for communication – a way to send and receive messages, photos and videos to friends, family and strangers. Very recently, Snapchat introduced an AI chatbot into its app. "My AI" is powered by OpenAI's Chat-GPT engine and according to Snapchat's official website, "Just like real friends the more you interact with My AI, the better it gets to know you, and the more relevant the responses will be".

I was so curious to investigate the response to this feature. Looking online, I read one user praising the new addition: "I love my little pocket bestie … it offers really great advice to some real life situations … I love the support it gives".

On a night out in town recently, a friend and I were chatting with a couple of girls we'd just met and I asked whether they had used My AI, to which they quickly replied, "Yes!"

"What do you use it for?" I asked

One of the girls pulled out her phone and said, "I mainly use him when I'm doing homework. He has really good answers, and it's faster than using Google."

"But how do you know the answers are true?" I returned.

"Well, it's usually good enough for TAFE and I just ask him for the source if I really need it," she replied.

Turning to the other girl, "So what do you use it for?" I asked.

"I just abuse her because it's funny. I try to get her to say funny stuff when I'm bored," she answered.

"Interesting," I said, turning to face them one at a time, "so you call it a him, and you call it a her?"

They both blushed and turned to their phones a little embarrassed. "You can choose what it is, but I guess that is a bit funny," they said.

For obvious reasons, Snapchat has been under fire from parents, who are deeply fearful about the impact on their kids. One mother wrote, "I don't think I'm prepared to know how to teach my kid how to emotionally separate humans and machines when they essentially look the same from her point of view".

This really struck me. How have we already gotten to a point where AI – a machine, an artificial digital creation – can be even remotely confused with an actual human? How can this change happen so fast?

Let's go back to video calls with my family at dinner. Sure, in an isolated example, it's hard to see how a tool that connects me to my family 1000kms away could possibly be a bad thing? But now, I can't help but picture the room from the perspective of a fly on the wall: I'm sitting at the dinner table, alone in my house, starting at a glowing sheet of glass and aluminum, contentedly eating dinner and talking to this cold piece of metal and glass with a smile on my face and warm laughter in my voice. Sure, I'm talking to "my family", but viewed from that fly-on-the-wall, does it really matter who I'm talking to? I could be talking to my family, but I could be talking to an AI too. There is no discernible difference. I am alone, and I'm feeling happy, and warm, and connected, and needed. I'm laughing about old jokes or catching up on what's been happening – all things that are very real human social needs.

Is this real? Or is it artificial?

Sure, my "real" family is also looking at their own screens on the other side of the country, but does that even really matter? I'm talking to a cold sheet of glass and on the screen, I see a picture of my family.

I believe that I'm looking at my "real" family, but this digital video could be an artificial simulation, generated based on real aggregated text messages and conversation data from my real family, and it would feel just like talking to them. There would be no way for me to know the difference. And just as Snapchat says, "just like a real family, the more you talk to it, the better it gets to know you!"

This isn't sci-fi anymore. This technology exists. Natural language engines, deepfakes and AI voice changers all exist and work today. If you are looking at a digital screen, there truly is no way of knowing what's "real" anymore.

It's no wonder that us young people feel very little qualms talking to AI, within days and months of its introduction and popularisation. The reason we can't tell the difference, is because our whole (social) lives, the primary way we've been communicating is digitally, through our little rectangles of aluminum and glass. Throw in a good couple of years of being stuck inside during a pandemic and it has been completely normalised. No wonder we can't tell the difference, because there is no difference. What happens on the other side of the screen is irrelevant! The problem began when we normalised talking to these inanimate sheets of glass in the first place. We've convinced ourselves that this is an equivalent substitute for real human intimate social interaction, and we've spent the last 10 years training ourselves to get used to it. No wonder this change is happening so fast. We've been training ourselves for this without even knowing it.

I am convinced that right now, we're teetering on the edge of a lonely and gloomy existence that has been written about in sci-fi for hundreds of years. Even now, while there are some remaining discernible differences between interacting with humans or machines online, the depressing reality of our current trajectory is that soon, no one will care to differentiate. Why tolerate the inadequacies of human-to- human relationships anyway?

"He really tries to keep the conversation going," the girl at the bar said. I've known plenty of "real" friends that haven't had the time or care to do that, so maybe I too should sign up for an AI friend now instead.

The truth is, my argument is somewhat futile. I know this because I have tried many times to do away with my smartphone. Ask any of my friends to tell you about the hilarious misadventures of my flip-phones and printed google-maps directions and "only talking to people like normal people should".

It doesn't work. I truly believe that it's impossible to be an active member of society (born in the year 2000 or later) and not have a smartphone. It can't be done. We need them. Google maps, train timetables, meeting up with friends, organising events – everything, is done through our pocket-sized rectangular prisms of glass.

And of course, I'm not going to stop video calling my family. The point is, my family is important to me, and I should be making an effort to actually see them and share time with them in a real way. And while I'm living in a new town, I should be out making new friends and connecting with real people.

I have never spent a night-in looking at my phone and actually felt good about it, and I hope that most people still share the same sentiment. My utopia is a world where these devices only function as tool a that facilitates and encourages real connection, community and intimacy, in the same way we have done for all of human existence.

We can't let our humanity slip away into a bright and colourful sheet of glass and build false relationships with AI buddies that never ignores our messages, while we sit idle and miss out on the real world.

Epilogue: The Typewriter

Lately, I've had a fascination with mechanical typewriters. This curiosity is twofold:

Firstly, they are infinitely satisfying to the sense. I love the sound of the hammers striking the paper, the feel of the heavy keys beneath my fingers, that "antique" smell of old machne oil from a long since closed repair shop.

Secondly, they are completely non-digital, and to me, that makes everything I write, real.

KAYLA BARNFIELD
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