RAW ARTS AWARDS / 2026

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This publication includes all eligible entries received for the 2026 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

**Photography of artwork and opening celebration by Bill Conroy, Press1 Photography.
Catalogue design by Jacqui Lynch, Preloaded Design.**

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.

WELCOME

From the Mayor of the City of Greater Bendigo

Welcome to the 2026 RAW Arts Awards - a celebration of imagination, courage, and creative expression, as we gather to honour the remarkable talents of young creatives from across Greater Bendigo.

Since 1997, the RAW Arts Awards have recognised and encouraged young artists, writers, performers. And today, it remains an important way for the City of Greater Bendigo to foster the talents and artistic pursuits of young people in our region.

Each year, RAW gives young creatives a platform to share their ideas, experiences and stories with the wider community. Through Visual Arts, Literature, Short Film and Performing Arts, these awards showcase not only artistic skill, but also the unique perspectives, energy and voice of the next generation.

This year, the RAW Arts Awards received an outstanding 105 applications from 93 artists aged 11 to 25. That is a remarkable response and a wonderful reflection of the depth of creativity across Greater Bendigo. To every young person who entered this year's awards, thank you. Thank you for your passion, your dedication, and for sharing your incredible work with us. I am in awe of your talent.

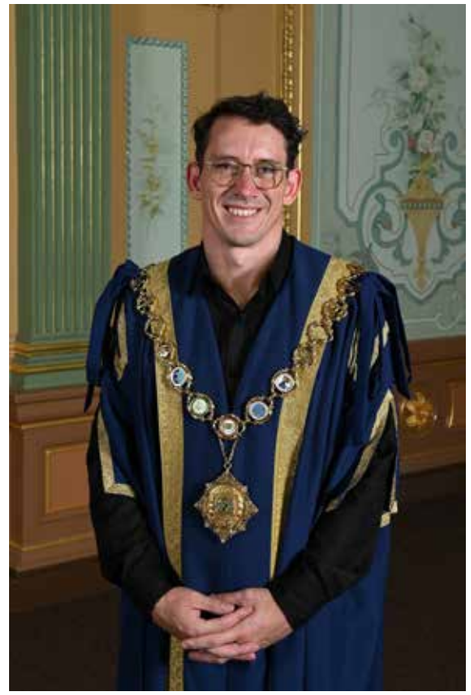
I would also like to acknowledge the families, friends, teachers, mentors and supporters who help nurture creative talent and encourage young people to keep making, performing, writing and dreaming. Your support plays an important role in helping these artists grow in confidence and pursue their creative ambitions.

To our judges, we extend our gratitude for the generous energy and expertise you've brought to the task of nurturing emerging talent:

- **Visual Arts judge Emma Busowsky** — curator and writer with a special affection for artists hailing from Central Victoria, and has curated exhibitions and published on artists including Klytie Pate and Christian Waller, and Agnes Goodsir. She is part of the team at Bendigo At Gallery, and loves cats.
- **Short Film judge Ivan Sun** — multimedia artist, software engineer, educator and founder of the Bauhaus Metaverse™
- **Literary judge Scott Vandervalk** — former scientist and Bendigo-based freelance editor and writer
- **Performing Arts judges Sarah-Jane Fawcett** — Bendigo playwright and theatre producer with Uncertain Curtain Theatre and **Colin Thompson**— drummer and event organiser, best known for the Bendigo Blues & Roots Music Festival from 2010 to 2022.

RAW has built a proud legacy over nearly three decades, and many past participants have gone on to successful careers in the creative industries. That is something we can all be proud of. These awards are not only about recognising excellence tonight, they are also about opening doors, building confidence and investing in the future of arts and culture in our community.

To all finalists and entrants, congratulations on being part of this year's RAW Arts Awards. You should feel so proud. Your creativity enriches our community and reminds us of the importance of supporting young and fresh ideas.



Mayor Cr Thomas Prince

Literature Award
Winner: Yasmin Russell
Highly Commended: Grace Barter

Performing Arts Scholarship
Winner: Matilda Wilby
Highly Commended: Zac Baumann

Short Film Prize
Winner: Jordan Spencer
Highly Commended: Sara Hancock

Visual Arts Award
Winner: Isabella Hocking
Highly Commended: Clementine Gray

WINNER

MATILDA WILBY

Performing Arts

Musical Theatre and Classical / Operatic vocal

I am an emerging soprano and musical theatre performer from Bendigo, Victoria. I made my operatic debut in May 2026 in the world-premiere of "Operatic Servant Girl."

I began performing in year 8 and have since played leading roles in musical theatre, including Elle Woods in Legally Blonde and Mabel in The Pirates of Penzance. I received the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria award for my role as Mabel.

Other achievements include first place in the Bendigo Society Vocal Competition, several local performing arts scholarships, and runner-up in the RAW Arts Awards.

I attended the WAAPA summer school in 2024 to further my training in singing, acting, and dancing.

My vocal teachers and participation in the Academy of Creative Arts have supported my development in musical theatre and classical singing. After a standout performance in The Music Man in 2025, I was invited by soprano Merlyn Quaife (AM) to study opera. Mentored by Merlyn Quaife, I embraced the challenge of operatic singing, dedicating myself to developing new techniques and expanding my vocal abilities for the stage.

> *I embraced the challenge of operatic singing, dedicating myself to developing new techniques and expanding my vocal abilities for the stage.*

I continued my musical development while on exchange in Germany, performing in choirs and as a soloist. During my time abroad, I developed resilience and independence, performing with school choirs for Gottesdienst (Christmas Eve service) and as a soloist in my host village's church, drawing from my AMEB classical voice repertoire.

My recent work on The Operatic Servant Girl has opened new opportunities in opera and performing arts.

I am completing year 12 in 2026 and continue my vocal studies, preparing for Grade 5 AMEB exams and singing with the Bendigo Symphony Orchestra Chorus. I hope to continue my performing arts education at a leading Australian institution.

WINNER

YASMIN RUSSELL

RAW Arts Literature Award

Empty Nest

The magpies lurked behind the fly wire door. Even without their garbling, she could hear their scratchy feet scrape the ground. Flashes of black and white ruining her garden of colour. A trip to the lemon tree shouldn't have incited an ambush, yet here she was, trapped in her own house. At least the slice had turned out well. The magpies sung and begged and called out to him.

Stupid things. He's not coming out of the house.

She yelled at them to scram, but it just made her throat tighten. They didn't move, tilting their eyes towards her in what could only be mockery. Fine. She'd try something else.

The broom had been wedged between Amanda's deflated netball collection and the tangled Christmas lights that he hadn't put away properly, but she managed to pry it out. Screeching the fly wire door open, she waved the broom wildly towards them. She didn't want to get close—he'd told her they remember your face. And with swooping season coming, she didn't fancy wearing one of those spiky helmets every time she needed something from the garden.

The magpies obeyed this time, taking to the air away from her wild swings. But they didn't leave the garden completely. Some loomed underneath the pittosporums, watching with beady eyes from the cover of twigs and leaves. Eerie things. She'd said not to feed them, but of course he hadn't listened.

"They're harmless!" He'd said while chucking them a piece of stale bread.

"I could've used that for breadcrumbs, you know. And the neighbours won't like it if they start swarming. What if they swoop one of the kids?"

"The Smiths are barely home anymore, and the old Bennetts love birds."

"And the kids?"

"They're grown now, Carolyn. They won't care."

She shut the fly wire door quickly, hoping the noise would deter them further. The mess in the kitchen stared back at her, but she was in no mood to clean up. Besides, she loved the faint citrus scent. Carolyn flopped onto the couch, grabbing one of the throw pillows to hold close. It still had the stain they'd tried for years to get out, from when Amanda had spilt spaghetti all over herself.

She pointed the remote at the TV, avoiding glancing at the cards on the coffee table, partially obscured behind a box of tissues. Hoarder Hunters, that would do. Even though she'd seen the episode years back, she let the couch swallow her. But it just reminded her of the mess in her kitchen, the mess in the supply closet. The mess in her house.

Carolyn went to change the channel, when the presenter walked into a room filled to the brim with movies and cassettes and collections of video cameras. Her finger hovered over the off button long enough to spot a familiar, old video camera.

His video camera.

God, he'd loved that thing. Her eyes flicked to the spare bedroom. Maybe she still had it. The kids had gone through his stuff, but they wouldn't have wanted it. Probably wouldn't even know how to use it.

He'd insisted on setting the camera up each Christmas, each birthday. Even if it took him a while to get the damn thing running, and the girls were just wanting to get straight to the presents.

She was glad for it though, she realised as she stood outside the door to the spare bedroom. Amanda and Riley's childhoods had flown by too quickly. She just wished he wasn't always the one *behind* the camera.

Carolyn was almost tempted to knock. But it was just her house now. And Amanda had told her she shouldn't put it off any longer. Her hand trembled as she gripped the spare room's doorknob.

She willed herself to breathe as she surveyed the boxes. But where the rhythm should have calmed her, it only brought her the faint scent of Riley's perfume, and the memory of Riley's face after the news had hit. Her youngest had spent hours in the room, and Carolyn didn't know what she'd been doing in her time between the boxes. Amanda had to go in to bring her out once Riley was running late for her shift at the old Video Ezy. It'd all go to the op shop next, after Carolyn had gotten around to sorting through his things. But even standing in the room with it all... She took a step back towards the door, biting her cheek. No, she'd made it in. She'd better make the most of it.

The video camera wasn't hard to find. Coated in a thin layer of dust, Carolyn pretended it was her allergies that made her weak as she grabbed a few cassettes. Quickly making her way back out to the hall, she clicked the door latch shut behind her. Amanda would be happy with her.

She inserted one of the cassettes into the video player, and it took a few jabs of the buttons to get it going. Scooting back to the couch, a bright summer sky cast the room in blue as crackly audio began to play. God, the girls looked so young! Their sparkly fairy outfits shone in the sun as they sprang on the trampoline. Oh, and there she was, with the gardening hose. That sunhat had lasted her a while. The girls screamed in joy as past-Carolyn sprayed them with water.

And there it was. His laugh. Loud and proud. She could even hear his cheesy, wide grin through the distorted audio.

But all too soon, a magpie outside began singing for him again. Carolyn paused the recording, Amanda's glittery wings keeping her aloft in the pixilated sky. She shooed the bird away from the door, but it only crept closer at the sound of her voice, calling for its friends. Taking a slow breath in, she shut the blinds. There. Store closed.

She pressed play again, and now they were on the beach watching the kids. Amanda was trying to build a sandcastle, but Riley kept stomping on it. How they used to fight... But before there were tears, there she was. Strolling towards them with her floppy sunhat and hands full of ice creams. They'd already begun to drip down the cone when she handed them to the girls, whose hands were sticky with sweat, sand, sunscreen and sugar. The taste of summer.

He zoomed the camera way too close to her face, highlighting sunscreen that hadn't been rubbed in properly. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway. They'd burnt and burnt and burnt under the Aussie sun. He said something to her then, but it was too hard to make out with the noise of the waves, and the fact he had his hand over the microphone.

Past-Carolyn laughed, reaching for the camera.

Present-Carolyn sighed, reaching for the remaining tissues.

The video showed the backyard now. Not too long ago, judging by the flowers. His long, hairy legs rested in front of him as he panned the camera across the lawn. A dozen or so magpies had gathered, and he was attempting to count them all, laughing as more came flying in. He zoomed in on one of the magpies near the back, whose feathers were lighter and frame smaller than the others.

"Look at that one!" He told the camera. "A young one, that is. You can hear him call for the others to feed him. They won't though. He's gotta learn how to fend for himself. But don't you worry," he continued, following the young bird as he neared a crumb. "There'll always be some food for you."

The camera flipped, showing that goofy grin once more as he waved goodbye. The screen turned black as he put the lens cap on, and Carolyn went to stand and change the cassette.

But the recording didn't stop.

She hesitated. The black screen sighed as it was sat down. The magpies called out, both on the screen and in her yard. She lowered herself onto the couch as he began to whistle a familiar tune, but she couldn't quite place it. His whistling gave in to the occasional chuckle as the camera continued to eavesdrop.

And then he spoke again. Not to the camera, not to her. But to the magpies.

"I just don't want them to worry," he sighed. The magpies didn't respond. The whistling didn't return.

"I should've told them when I had the chance. But it's a bad time."

A magpie squawked.

"I know, I know. It's always a bad time. But they're all doing so well. Amanda's got that netball tournament she's been working her butt off for. I can't distract her from that. And Riley, well, if I told her, she'd tell Amanda, and then we're right back at square one."

The spaghetti-stained pillow fell to the floor as Carolyn leaned closer.

"They said I'll be able to make it to the tournament. She's going to do amazing. And Carolyn's going to make that lemon slice I love for the netball team. Oh, well, now you're an ambitious one, aren't ya? Here, grab this big bit out of my hand."

He chuckled to himself. "Bit too big, eh?"

One of the magpies garbled as he let out a deep sigh.

"I just can't do that to Carol. She'll worry and fret and... I just don't want the last part to be sad, you know? Is that selfish? To leave it all to her?"

She couldn't hear the magpies outside anymore.

"You guys will take care of Carol, won't you? Keep an eye on her for me? Even though I won't be here to feed you all."

She kept waiting, tears now streaming down her face, for another sentence. Another word. Another laugh. She went to pause the video, but it had already ended. The camera had ran out of battery, and she was left with nothing but the hum of the refrigerator.

He'd known.

He'd known, and not told them.

He hadn't told *her*.

She raked her hands through her hair, watching the blurry stain on the pillow warp below. How long had he held it in? She was supposed to have been there for him. In sickness and in health. And he'd told the magpies. Not her. The stained pillow flew across the room as she kicked it away. It bounced off the corner of the coffee table, knocking over the cards.

It wasn't fair to her, and it wasn't right to the girls, and he shouldn't have had to process the news without—

A magpie squawked outside. Carolyn blearily looked to the blinds, hair falling in front of her face as she took a slow, deep breath in. It squawked again, as if it could see her from behind the fabric. As though it knew.

She slowly made her way over to the door. Peeling back the blind just enough to see out, a single magpie stood perched on the back of the chair he'd been in.

They met eyes. Carolyn did not reach for the broom.

The magpie shuffled, moving closer. She looked to the black screen of the TV, to the scattered cards, and then back to the magpie, who had begun adjusting its feathers with its beak. And she slowly opened the blinds.

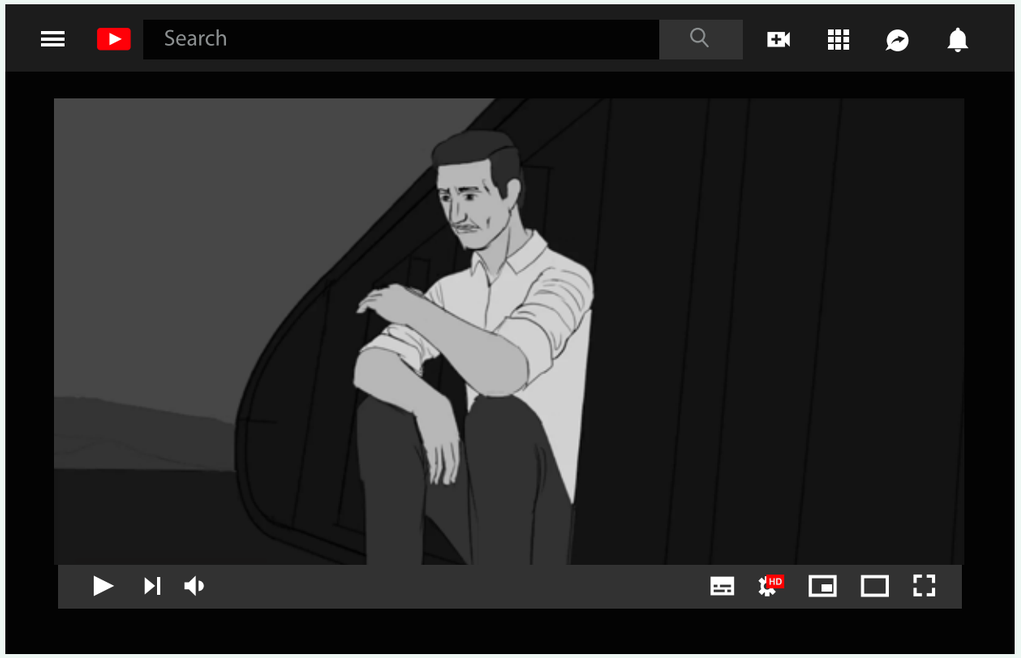
Light filtered back in as the magpie jumped off the chair, strutting to the door. Her hands shook as she made her way into the kitchen, not registering the mess. She wearily grabbed herself a piece of lemon slice—there would still be plenty left for the funeral—and hovered behind the fly wire door. The magpie edged closer. Did it care that she wasn't him?

Carolyn watched the bird as she ate, letting the sunlight dry the tears onto her skin. And she listened to the magpie as it sang a call to the others to join it in watching her.

A call that reminded her of a familiar, whistled tune.

> *'Empty Nest' pulls at the heartstrings with poignant emotion in many of its small beats and it speaks volumes of the past, present and future.*

WINNER



JORDAN SPENCER

RAW Arts Short Film Award

Dagon

> *Jordan Spencer's 'Dagon' is awarded First Prize for its ambitious and disciplined solo vision. Adapting a classic tale from the Lovecraftian horror canon through entirely language-free visual storytelling, the film demonstrates notable maturity in atmosphere, composition, and symbolic image-making. Its restrained style, careful use of negative space, colour, and strong sense of scale create a compelling feeling of cosmic isolation and dread. Rather than relying on spectacle or dialogue, the work communicates through visual expression alone, showing confidence in cinematic storytelling and a clear personal artistic vision.*

WINNER

ISABELLA HOCKING

RAW Arts Visual Arts Award

Grumpy old Lady
Pencil

> *I absolutely love this drawing, and not just because it is a 'hard relate'! Isabella demonstrates a great command of the medium of pencil and a confidence in using line: some areas are rendered in considered detail while others are suggested in outline only. It's a lively, well drawn picture with a great humour to it.*

Highly Commended

> *A Nexus director saw the show and invited me to perform with them the next year, giving me a real sense of accomplishment and marking the start of my journey.*

Zac Baumann

RAW Arts Performing Arts

Musical Theatre & Classical vocal

There is something magical about being on stage—the thrill and excitement are unmatched. My passion for performing arts began as a toddler when a Stevie Wonder song sparked something in me. Soon after, I spotted a red ukulele at Toyworld and started busking, charming people even before I could really play. One memorable moment was performing in my Superman costume on the Aldi supermarket packing bench. Looking back, these early experiences were just the beginning.

I began taking performing seriously in year 8, landing the lead role of Jack Kelly in VCC's 'Newsies' (2024). This role unlocked a new side of me—filled with energy, determination, and pride. A Nexus director saw the show and invited me to perform with them the next year, giving me a real sense of accomplishment and marking the start of my journey.

That year, I also participated in events like Kool Skools, where I wrote and recorded original songs with friends in Melbourne. Our band's songs 'Trapped Inside' (2024) and 'Art of Grove' (2025) expanded my skills beyond theatre. Singing on 'The Storms Not Going,' shortlisted for Best Rock Song, was a highlight. Musical icons like Elvis, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson inspired me, and these experiences broadened my understanding of performing arts.

In 2025, I pushed my limits, landing lead roles in both 'Aladdin' and Nexus's 'The Music Man.' Balancing rehearsals, school, and karate tested my time management, but I gave my all to each performance. My efforts paid off with a 'Best All-Rounder' award and a deeper appreciation for the performing community. Nexus helped me realise just how much I could achieve.

This year, I'm performing in 'Dare to Dream' and playing Gaston in Nexus's 'Beauty and the Beast.' Applying for the RAW Arts competition was another leap toward my dreams. Looking ahead, I hope to break into voice acting, connect with agencies, and improve my dance skills. My ultimate goal is to study at WAAPA or audition for professional shows in Australia. With dedication and perseverance, I believe anything is possible.

As the great Walt Disney once said: 'If you can dream it, you can do it.'

Highly Commended

Clementine Gray

RAW Arts Visual Arts

The Hidden Truth

Found objects

> *A humble, discarded kitchen appliance becomes a portal into another place – a peaceful arcadia set within a chaotic, man-made techno-world of graffiti-like markings. This is a terrific work that brings together drawing and sculpture, demonstrating a great sense of colour, design, and pattern.*

Highly Commended

Grace Barter

RAW Arts Literature Award

Silence

The sound of silence
Scares me to death
It's what got us in this mess
The silence is haunting
As we wait for morning
Together again and again

And I'm reaching out
But you run further away
You I can't save
And my voice
Silenced in the cave
And I watch you walk away

And I'm calling
For so long
And I'm falling
To the ground
I called out a warning
But you can't hear me
Fear is gripping
Silence scares me
And I call out
But you're on your own
I'm faced with the crowds
Where there's no way out

The sound of silence
As I watch the leaves
On the trees
Blow in the breeze

Silence makes you
Wish you'd never asked
What's buried beneath all my scars

And I'm reaching out
But you run further away
You I can't save
And my voice
Silenced in the cave
And I watch you walk away

And I'm calling
For so long
And I'm falling
To the ground
I called out a warning
But you can't hear me
Fear is gripping
Silence scares me
And I call out
But you're on your own
I'm faced with the crowds
Where there's no way out

I'm trapped in your embrace
Why can't I pull away
I wake up from my dream again
But the silence is everyday

The silence scares me
As I sit alone
Thinking of what I know
I miss the way that it used to be
Before it all started changing
The silence
makes me
Want to leave
Cause I can't believe
What I see
Something that's long gone
in my dreams
I'm still dragging along

So the silence
Still scares me to death
But at least we cleared up this mess
The silence over the phone
As I ignore
All the messages that you sent

Cause I just want to see you
Without the endless silence
In my dreams
I forgive you
But I know I've got to move on too

In your embrace
I don't want to pull away
I'll see you again
As the silence slips away
We call it a day
And tomorrow you'll come home
And we'll sit and watch the storm
Until the feelings of before
Make us realise that
silence scares us all

> *There's precision in the words in 'Silence', and it is evocative, speaking of something deep and taking you to unexpected places.*

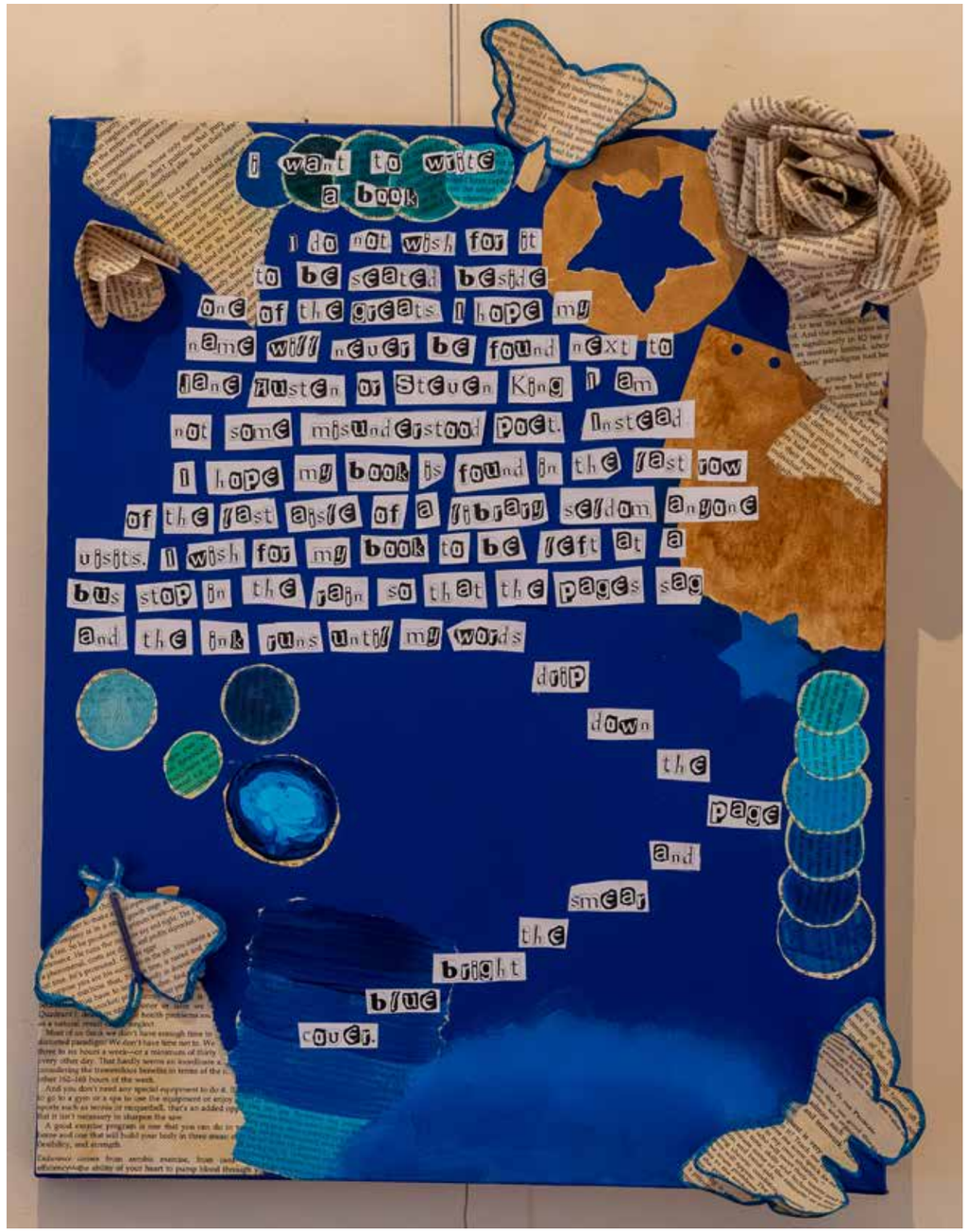
Highly Commended

Sara Hancock

RAW Arts Short Film Award

Magenta

> *Sara Hancock is awarded Runner-Up recognition for her cinematography and mixed-media animation work in Magenta. Integrating torn-paper framing, recurring graphic motifs, grain-textured imagery, graphic overlays, pop-colour control, and layered compositing, the work creates a dynamic and cohesive visual identity that strongly complements both the band and the music itself. While polished and commercially fluent in its execution, the video retains a playful handcrafted energy and strong creative individuality.*



KJ Avers

I wish to write a book

Multimedia on canvas

EMILY ABLITT

The Weight of Morning,

Morning arrives uninvited, indifferent to readiness.

It seeps between the blinds like diluted light through a sieve; cold at the edges, stripped of colour. Morning again, though I have not yet finished with the night.

'I don't make wishes often. Not on candles, whose wax melts into itself, collapsing into smoke before a thought escapes my lips. Not on shooting stars that vanish before I can find the language for my wants. Not even on dandelions that crumble so easily, between tired fingers. They have never offered anything but the brief illusion of wanting. Perhaps they were never meant to.

Morning comes anyway.

The mirror is foggy around the edges. My breath clings to the glass as if holding something it cannot name. I lean closer until my reflection disappears within the vapour, incomplete and uncertain. For a brief moment, I exist as a mere possibility; an unformed version of myself. When the mist finally recedes, I reappear. The same arrangement of bone and skin. A face remembered so long it begins to lose meaning; familiarity masquerading as truth. Pressure blooms behind my eyes. Thoughts stir but will not articulate or settle.

I turn the tap too far. Cold water bites my skin so sharply, starting a breath loose from my lungs. I gather the water anyway, letting it fall through trembling fingers; the cold spreads across my face in uneven droplets. I watch as they linger, forming trails across skin. My reflection distorts, misaligning and fracturing my features before it settles again. In that blur, I disappear for a heartbeat, then surface again, unchanged, though something imperceptible within me realigns. My reflection catches me again. She looks back; measured, deliberate. Not sad, simply aware. Eyes trained to gauge how much existence can be offered without repercussions.

The bathroom tiles sting my soles. The house hums softly; a fridge, a faucet dripping, a car retreating down the street. The world persists without consultation; an indifferent current that neither condemns nor consoles me. Toothpaste foams in my mouth, mint biting sharp and artificial. I brush too hard; gums bloom faintly with blood. My movements are automatic: Brush, rinse, breathe, continue. The body remembers, even when the mind cannot recall why.

The whispers did not arrive all at once. They accreted over a silent sediment of years, gathering like dust, invisible until thick enough to see. Their language was gentle, their meaning sharper:

Do not take up too much space.

Do not laugh too loudly.

Do not draw attention, or worse.

So I learned to fold. My shoulders complied. My voice softened until it lost its colour. My face reorganised itself into something acceptable. No one ever said it outright. It hid in diverted glances, subtle withdrawal of attention, in the constant suspicion that I was slightly misaligned with the world. Eventually, I stopped noticing. I became my own diminishment, internalised the restraint, wore it like a second skin. Now I feel it in every movement, in how I craft tone before I speak, weigh presence before I enter a room, shape myself to fit the expectations of others.

Once there was a girl who was still too solid to disappear.

Her hand clenched the pen until her notebooks bruised, pages devoured by contour maps, dreams and imagination. Like she was aware of how much society enjoyed erasing, so she kept creating. She stayed in the sea long after her skin-tightening lips turned blue from the cold, her body shaking, yet she remained because leaving felt like forfeiture. She was uncontainable; Vivid, driven by a quiet hunger for freedom, certain of her existence.

I cannot mark the moment she fell silent. Perhaps she was pressed down gently, like paper smoothed flat. Perhaps she was not erased but diluted; spread too thin across the versions of me that kept others comfortable. Or perhaps she sleeps beneath these calmer surfaces, waiting for air. I search for her sometimes, in reflex, the urge to speak too loudly, to take up space without apology. They rise without warning, as if breaking water, then vanish just as quickly, pulled under by habits. Not gone, rather held beneath what I have learned to be.

The kettle clicks behind me. I do not remember entering the kitchen.

Light drifts through the window in a pale spill that softens everything it touches. Even the air feels worn, recycled by too many mornings. Steam curls from the cup as I pour; rising, then disappears, over and over, as if it cannot decide between presence and absence.

The warmth pools between my palms, a minor miracle of certainty. Some mornings are heavy, not through events, but through feeling almost like texture; every act thickens into effort: the breath, the thought, the insistence to continue. I turn toward what is stable: the porcelain heat beneath my skin, the faint agitated tremor in my hands. The quiet cadence of the house breathing around me.

Someone once said the sea has no end. Maybe I invented that to comfort myself about the expanding unknown. Still, people walk into it without measuring the distance. One stroke, then another, water moving around them, offering no promise except the rhythm that keeps them from sinking. There is air if you surface at the right time. Rest if you stop resisting. It may not be true, but it feels near enough.

I am still here, still swimming. Still whole, though not unchanged.

The window gathers my reflection and softens it. It is more merciful than the mirror; blurred, it makes me gentler to behold. For a moment, I linger within that softened outline of myself; half in, half without. For once, I do not adjust.

Nothing visible alters, yet something recognisably mine flickers beneath: a trace of that younger girl, the louder one. A thought arrives with the calm precision of light crossing the table, quiet and unhurried as if it had been waiting years for articulation.

I make a wish, and do not take it back.

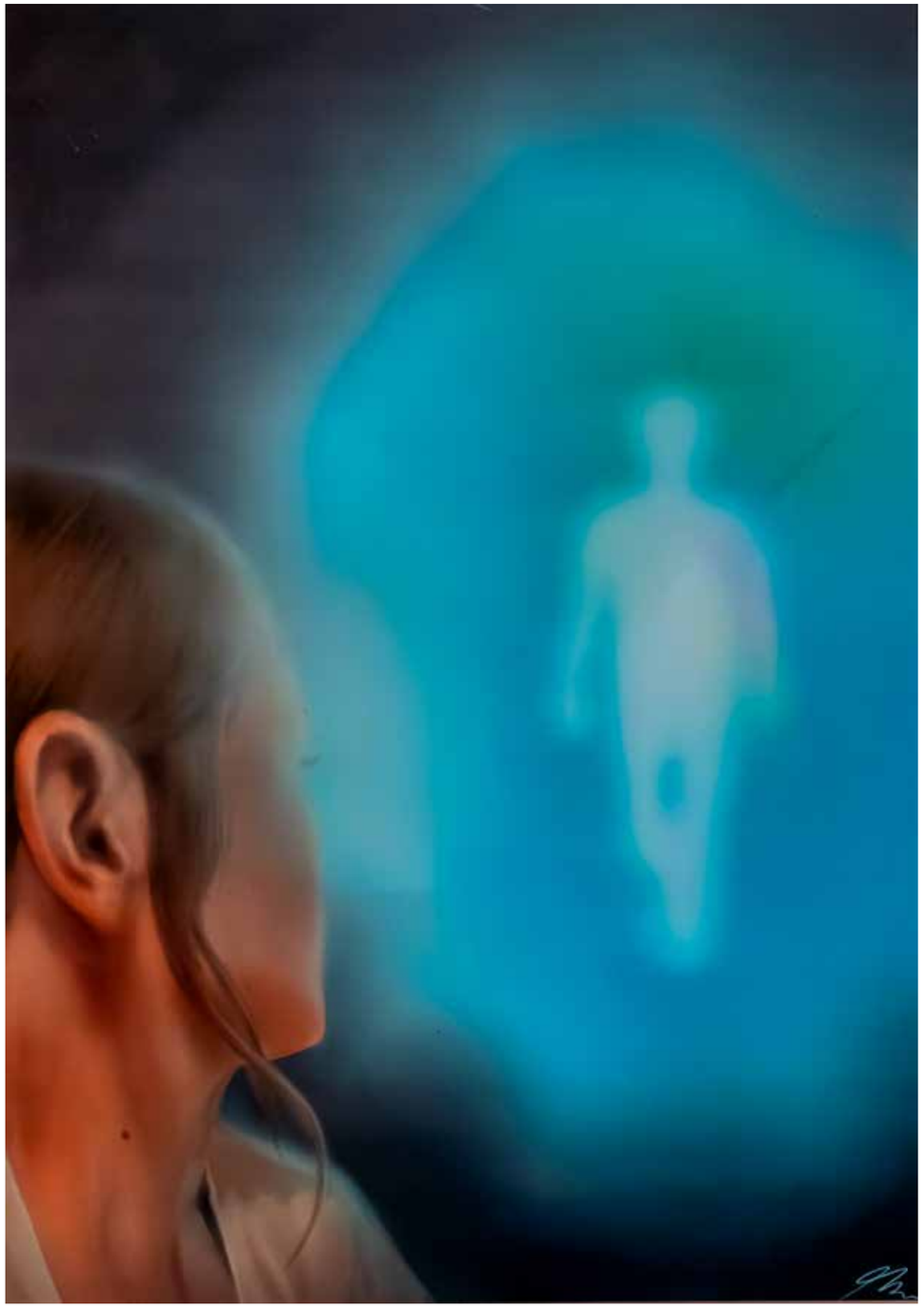
Perhaps this is what survival truly entails. It's less about conquest and more about calibration: the slow reclaiming of what stays and endures beneath layers of fatigue. It is the weight of morning itself; the ache of awareness, the grace of persistence, in a way, it's the quiet discovery that I am still here.

The words hover without designation. There are no answers...nothing hears, or maybe everything does. Morning continues: impartial, infinite in its ordinariness, and within it I keep swimming.

LEXIE ADAMS

Easter in Bendigo

Crochet/woodwork



OLIVE SALMON-WATSON

Crushed
Digital artwork

ARKIE STARR MACRAE

Ad Mortem, Inimicus
Acrylic paint on canvas

NOAH DUNSTONE

Mistaking the Honk for a Horn
Digital painting

JAY MOORE

WAR
Acrylic on Paper, Linoprint

ESTHER JOHNSTON

Consume

To do:

-Write something that helps someone to feel whatever it is they need to feel

-stop wasting time on my phone

-read more books

-do something with my life that helps others and not be held back by the fear of being seen because I felt it last Monday. The kettle boiled and it got louder, it started screeching. But still I made my tea, just one sugar-I'm trying to cut back. I hope the caffeine will give me back the 3 hours of sleep I lost to my black mirror. It doesn't. I go about my day, my life with this anxiety that I'll be average and blend into the ordinary. My tired eyes reflect back at me as I turn off my phone and its that black mirror again. I don't know anything and I'm afraid. There's so much I want to be and do but where do I start.

-buy some almond milk

-consume

-turn the page

LOTTE TAYLOR,

Treat the paintbrush with kindness

Acrylic

DANIELLE WOOD

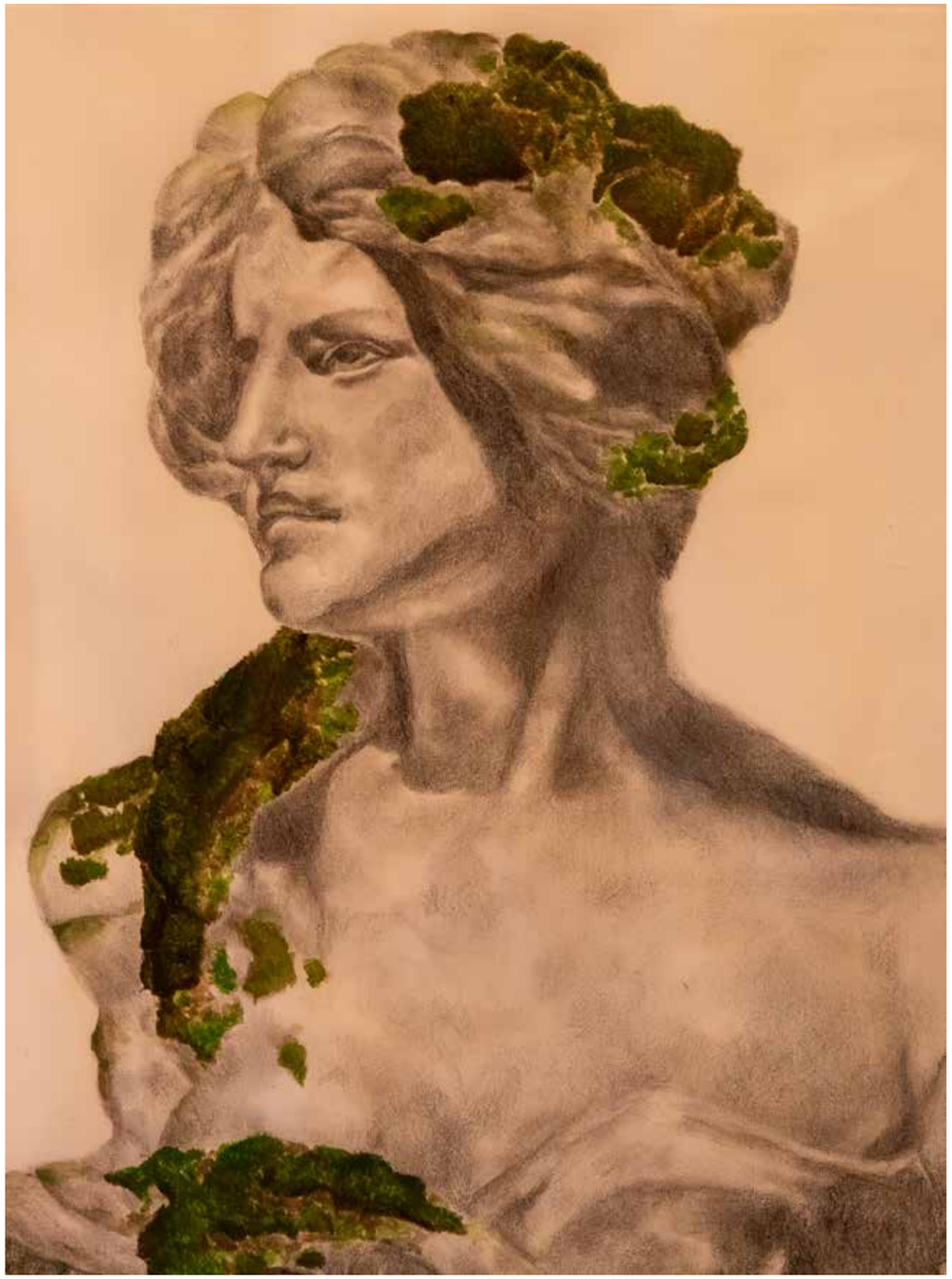
Transformation

The sea is like a spirit. Sometimes, she is loud and wild. I feel small but excited looking at the boundless ocean. The rugged cliffs embracing the shore are exceptional to see, bearing no resemblance to any others. They look out into the horizon and seem to morph every moment into something surpassing your wildest dreams. They are swirling escarpments with jagged rock protruding, and they are destined to crumble into the sandy shore beneath. At other times, the gusts stagger the rough rock, and the sea's disposition impacts this transformation. She washes her ocean spray completely over the moist grains to support the buckling inclines, covered with coastal flora and fauna, by forming dunes of sediment. Even though the sea's deep waves soothe the charcoal cliffs, the water does not incessantly guarantee safety.

As I look out into the abyss, I can feel the crisp sea air brushing against my face. It's almost like it bestows a spell on me to be weightless. My body, it feels like it's soaring through the amber clouds surrounding this serene area. As I soar, I can spot many different sights. I can see a pod of humpback whales innocently thrashing about the cerulean sea, a flock of seagulls rambunctiously dunking their heads in the water to grab their flounder and cod, and a fluffy cluster of clouds, transforming many times. Sometimes they look as comforting as a pillow, but other times they become a monster, roaring down its iridescent fog on us all. This vision given to me by the relaxing tones of this changing seaside escape is the most amazing of all.

The feeling of emptiness belittles me. I sense numbness all over my body while I stand on this grit, thinking through my mind. The beach is a sacred, relaxing space that offers many opportunities. Many people of many differences meet at the coast. It is such a placid place where everyone can get together and pray. Pray that there will be peace and unity around the world. Pray that people remember that we, as a collective, are all humans that feel empathy, sympathy, and apathy. Pray that although we are separated by oceans and beaches such as this, a single act of kindness can change a person's whole perspective on life.

When you are on the edge of the continent, you think about these things: how one single act of kindness can transform an individual's life so far away, how this beach can take you around the world, how this sand between your toes could have been to China, France, or England, and furthermore, how the world surrounding you can change in front of your very eyes.



KAT MEILAK

Over Time

Black pencil and watercolour

EMILY ABLITT

Captive Reef

Acrylic and ink on canvas

ANAÏS LYONS

Spilt Tea

No alarm wakes me up. Instead, I wake up to a bird song. The morning sun hits my face bathing me in warm light. It feels nice, as it reaches out inviting me to rest a while in its glowing arms. I do and lay back, falling back into the cushiony grasp of my couch. My eyelids flutter close and I drift out of consciousness.

I wake again. The morning sun is gone. Clouds now cover the sky. My leg aches as does my chest. Reminders of last week? Last month? I'm not sure. Gritting my teeth, I heave myself up to a sitting position, needing to get some pain relief.

I hobble over to the cabinet. Looking around in it, I find a dusty box of pain relief tablets. I grasp them gratefully and take out 3 pills. I stumble over to the tap, for a glass of water. I reach up to grab a glass from the overhead cabinet. A wave of tiredness rushes over midway through getting the cup. This is too hard. I force myself to finish the motion. I get the cup and begin to bring it down. "See that wasn't so hard, was it?" I say to myself. I smile, relaxing my grip on the glass, and pills. They drop to the floor, the glass smashing on impact. A tear runs down my cheek, as I gaze at the shards of glass.

I make my way back to the security of the couch, collapsing. I try to fall back into sleep, but thoughts keep crossing my mind. Scenarios play out, twisting, distorting, blending reality with my overactive imagination. Screams echo through my mind. The smell of alcohol slipping through me. I curl up, shaky hands over my ears, trying to block them out.

#

I must eventually get to sleep, because next thing I know, I am rubbing bleary eyes. The clock mounted on the wall says half past one, its hands daring me to clean up the shattered glass in the kitchen, to clean up my life. I am just about to crawl under the blanket when I hear a rap on the door.

I get up, back cricking, and make my way to the front door. I grasp the handle, unlock it and swing it open. On the doorstep stands my friend Adrien. I start to back away. He must hate me. "Hi Beth," he says not unkindly, just quietly, as if he's far away. Which I thought he was. Before everything, he was on a cruise to somewhere in America. I guess he's back now, or the incident really did damage me, more than emotionally. "Beth?" he asks hesitantly. My tongue feels thick and heavy, too heavy to speak, so I nod to say hi. He gestures to the door. "Can I come inside?" I beckon him inside. He follows me through the hallway.

I pull Adrien into the kitchen. He registers the mess on the floor; but does not comment. He picks up a dustpan and starts cleaning up. Once done, he offers me a cup of tea. I nod in thanks. I watch as he methodically fills up the kettle, waits for it to boil, gets out a mug, puts a teabag in and pours the hot water in. I like Adrien's order of things. It's practical, ordered, like he does this thousands of times a day, which I suppose he could.

Soon enough I am gripping a steaming hot mug of tea. I take a small, tentative sip, feeling it rush through me, sending warmth to the frozen parts of my body.

Adrien sits beside me, watching as I sip. "Hey Beth," he says gently. "Can we talk?" My insides clench, and my hands grip the mug, turning white with worry. "Beth?" I nod. "I-I-it's about Elena," he says carefully. My insides go quiet at the sound of her name. I'm frozen. Of course that's why Adrien came here; to talk about my mistakes. "What about her?" I whisper. "I want you to know..." He looks me straight in the eyes. "What happened, it wasn't your fault," he says. The air turns sour. "If anything, it was partly mine," he continues. "I should have been there to protect her," he says, a sad expression on his face.

It was my fault, I say stiffly. "No, it wasn't," he says, still quite confident with this statement. I dig my fingers into my palm. "I could have stopped her. Saved her," I say. "If anything, it was her fault. She should have known not to accept drinks from Tyla Kennedy," he says. My brain is too fixated to see the fact in this statement. My brain can only see him, not caring about Elena. Don't blame her for MY mistakes, I growl, throwing my mug at him. I misjudge the throw and it crashes against the sliding glass back door, shattering, running milk and tea down the shiny surface.

"Get out," I growl. "Beth," he starts. "Beth I..." I motion to the door. "GET OUT of my house," I scream at him. Adrien nods. Sets down his cup of tea and gets up. He walks out, the door not closing behind him. I grab my blanket, cocooning myself in it, tears pouring down my cheeks, stinging, burning lines down my face.

Too tired to think about the conversation that just happened, I try to sleep.

I dream. I know it's a dream, because it's that night. Vivid images, details, blur across my closed eyes. I dream of horrible, terrible things. I dream of splintered glass, bent metal, and the skid on the asphalt. Her stiff body. Warped. Twisted. Like the windscreen. Broken like my glass from earlier. Empty beer bottles. Rolling across the intersection.

I dream of words. Words I said. Words of pure hate. Of fury. Of anger. I dream of clocks, my phone screen, 10 minutes too late. I'd always prided myself on being punctual.

I dream of that bottle, laced with something I should have questioned. Stopped Tyla. "It was only fun," she'd said when I looked at her. "Live a little, Beth."

I dream of the drinks Elena wolfed down. Didn't think to question them either.

Then comes the fight. I'd wanted to leave, she hadn't, she was having fun. I wasn't. I watch our fight replay, in my mind like a movie. I know what happens next. The "suit yourself." The slam of a car door. She'd gone to pick up more beer. I hadn't even thought to stop her, I'd been in a haze of anger. I'd only realised till it was too late, till I'd seen her body warped around the boot of the car.

Next comes the what ifs... the why's... the could ofs.

I wake again. Hands shaking, body cold. I'm too shaken to go back to sleep. I open my eyes. In front of me lies a cup of tea. I adjust my eyes. Maybe it's the tears obscuring my vision? It isn't. There in front of me lies a fresh cup of tea, its tendrils of steam drifting through the air. Next to it lies a chocolate chip cookie. I recognise to be the local cafe's. I look at it for a moment unsure if I should eat it. Do I deserve such a luxury? It beckons me to take a nibble, so I pick it up, and bite into it, it's still warm, and the chocolate sends warmth down my spine. Underneath it lies a note. I pick it up with chocolaty fingers. It says in Adrien's tell-tale shaky handwriting: "You're not alone, I've got you. We will survive this." I almost laugh. I haven't earned this kindness. I look closer and realise that; Maybe I don't have to go through this on my own. This situation is like a fire. It might have burnt the forest, but it can regrow. I can regrow. I clutch the note to me, breathing in the scent of paper and ink. Adrien's right. I will get through this, eventually. I offer a shaky smile to the world outside and still clutching the note, I fall back, finally, into peaceful sleep.

HARPER WEST

Like a Girl,

"What are you, a girl?!",

But girls are powerful,

More powerful than the world!

Though every battle that comes before them,

Every battle is brought down.

"Girls can't play football",

Yet girls aim higher than the goal,

Beating all the boys who told them no.

Respect is the start,

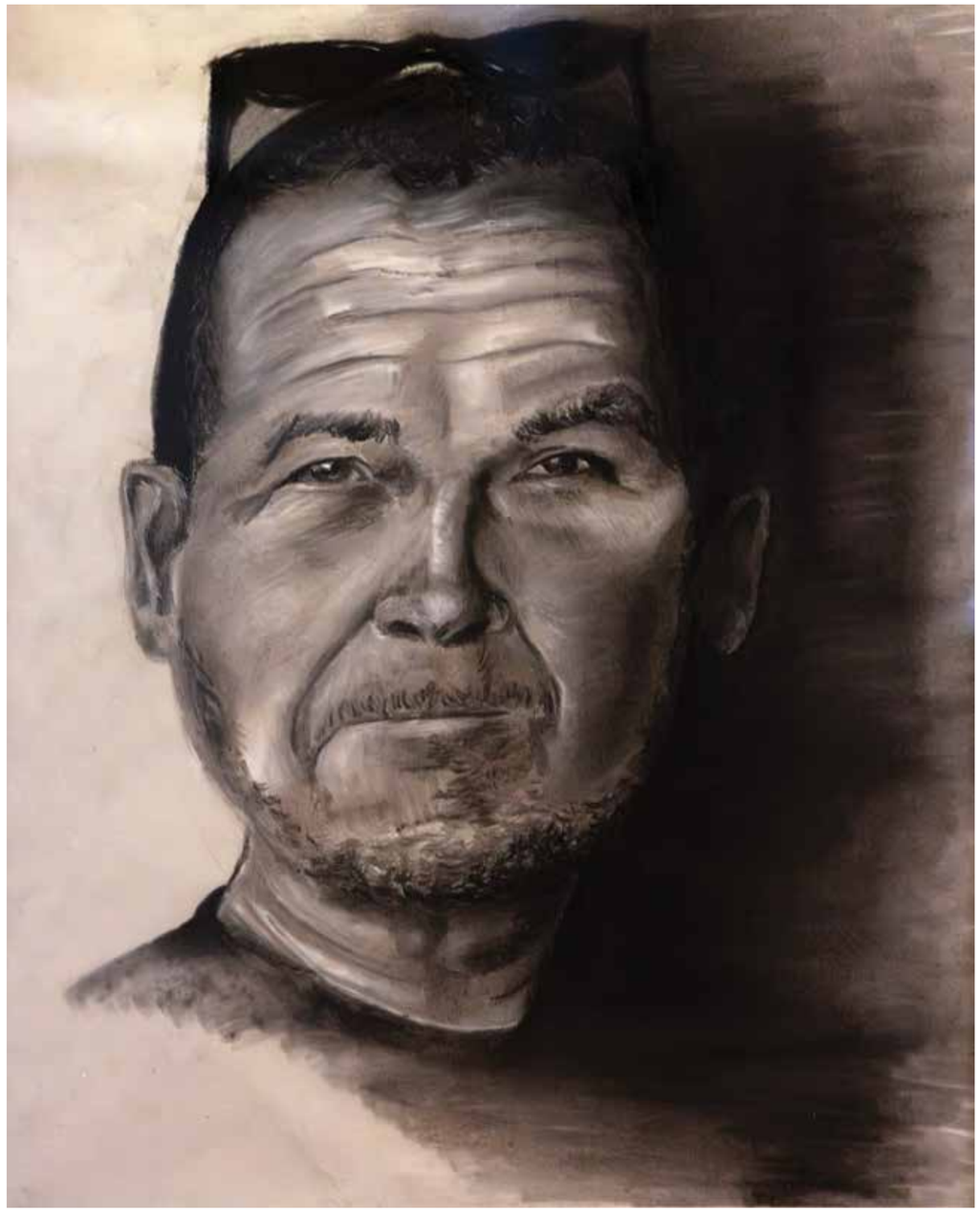
And respect is the end,

Respect in every step between the start and end.

For if I am told I throw like a boy,

It means I did well,

But why is "like a girl" an insult to end it all?



CLAIRE SALT

Worn Silence

Charcoal

AMY MILLS

Starry Golden Lily

Acrylic

OLIVIA BLUEMORE

And when the rivers have dried up

And when the rivers have dried up,

and the desserts have flooded,

and the children are begging

whilst the rich throw money in the trash,

when the colours turn grey,

and the light is blinding,

will then be the time you open your eyes?

when the time has passed,

and its too late to start over,

then will you say it's time to stand up?

When cement turns to stone

because it's already been laid,

with money that you willingly gave

only then will you realise we're too late to be saved,

only then will you realise,

its not enough to close your eyes and pray.

PEREGRINE

Shifting is freedom

I felt a retching in my gut, pain shot across my body. Blood oozed out from the gash, sluggish as it congealed. Fog coated my head, static blared. The sticky damp trickled down my legs. Hot gunk. I managed to regain focus, just for a brief moment, looking up as a translucent form rose above them; beautiful, eerie, familiar. The shape grew, billowing out, feathers spread, wings stretched, beak fixed on the sky. It was gone. I couldn't understand, I felt wrong, something wasn't there, something that should be. They were gone.

I woke up. The blood was gone, the pain was gone; my body felt numb. What happened? I didn't know. I opened my eyes. Crackling flames, cozy candles, a Persian rug, rich hues. Gold, blue, blood. A deep, almost brown red. Blood. The room spun. Where was I? The blood? What had caused the blood? Questions, so many questions. I looked down. I seemed the same, same body, same hands, same legs, all of it wrong though. Skin stretched too tightly, muscles that always ached, numb, fine hairs growing; where did they come from? I reached up, touched my face, that skin was flabby. I recoiled. Stubble. That couldn't be there, it felt wrong. Scratchy, brittle.

The room smelt of bread, freshly backed, I could taste it. Warmth filled me, spread up, consoling that emptiness. I shuddered, not able to move, but slowly mending. Enclosing me was a blanket, soft wool, the most layered greens, forest, moss, emerald, jade, all stacked, interconnected, shifting, changing. I racked the space, searching for clues, hints, snippets, anything that might tell me where I was or what had happened, and why I was lacking, hollow despite the balms coddling me. A crackling fire illuminated everything, casting long, stretched shadows; shadows that merged, dancing, prancing, gafforing and giggling. As the party raged, a flicker twitched within me then faded. A glimmer of memory, floating in a brain soup, sinking, then emerging just long enough to tempt me before vanishing again. The shadows grew, the fire rose, I fell again. Sweet dreams.

Time folded, split and ran. I don't know how long I was out, but all I can say is my dream hunted me, doggedly pursuing me across worlds.

It started in a caravan, run down, chipped paint, mold building. A shape had risen at the window, yelling, screaming. 'Unlock the door, let ME IN'. The sounds filled my head, a stove left on, gas spilling into the air. A horrible wailing. BOOM. Next I tumbled through the sky, a plane flew overhead, the wind rushed, tugging at my face, the straps of my parachute dug into me; comforting I thought. A face loomed, leering. A quick slash and WOOOOSH, I fell. The world changed, the sea became cold, smooth, brown. I was on a floor. I didn't recognise it, voices around me. I didn't understand what they were saying. Gunshots raged around me, a pain in my chest grew deeper, searching every crevice of my body. White. Then a fantastical palace stood before me. Phoenix carved over the entry. No signifier, no coat-of-arms. The gold plated spires shot right up, piercing cloud. Radiating out of the leaf pattern gates was calm. I have no other way of describing it, calm. Behind me, turmoil, a roiling, undulating smog of fear. Ahead, what I knew I'd lost, what was taken, what the blood was lost for. Answers.

Suddenly a rolling ocean rushed past me, engulfing the palace. It shrank, shrinking, further and further down. Darkness consumed, the faint light, tantalising, vanished.

I awoke, trembling, eyes scrunched shut. I had a vague feeling that I'd been screaming while asleep. Cloth brushed my hand. I flinched. The coarse fabric returned, brushing my hair aside. It stuck to the side of my face, sticky, covered in a gunky ooze; blood again. Then a second, cool, damp cloth brushed the blood away. I opened my eyes. A faceless man sat next to me. He was dressed in a business suit, grey, dull, yellow tie. I felt I knew him. His presence made me want to curl up, rest my head on his lap. Peace flowed from his every movement.

I made a double-take, I knew him, he was the most dear person to me. Why couldn't I see his face, remember his name? His touch caressed me. I wanted to scream again, to yell his name and sob into his chest. As if he could sense me, his hand clutched mine, thumb rubbing the back of my hand. Smooth skin, calloused on the finger-tips. I gripped him with all my strength. I didn't want to lose anything else of him. He tightened his hand, holding me close. Bright, yellow, golden warmth.

My head hurt as I sat up. The man pressed a bowl of soup into my hands, chicken, my favourite. Although I couldn't see it, I knew a smile crossed his face as I devoured the broth, slurping it in my haste, spilling a little down my front which he wiped away, care and tender comfort in his motion. I tried to speak, to ask him his name, but no sound left my mouth. I gasped, silence arresting all the joy I had. I grabbed at my mouth, pulled my lips apart, felt teeth, felt tongue, reached down my throat. It should be working. My Adam's apple throbbed under my fingers, reminding me of my shape, the way I was. I crumpled, scratching at my throat, pulling my tongue, why couldn't I speak? Why couldn't I remember his name? Why couldn't I see his face? What was wrong with me? What had been taken?

I felt soft sheets beneath me, a heavy blanket, no, a doona, being pulled over me. Arms wrapped around me. Sleep took me again. Without dream, hours sped by. Morning came, I dressed, garments made for another body, not wrong, but not right either. The man was gone, a note left beside me telling me breakfast was made and a fresh pot of coffee was on the stove. I cracked a smile. My gut heaved. I stumbled into the kitchen, pancakes, still warm to the touch, waited for me. I woolfed them down. Outside, faces swam. A stranger moved closer, to close. I ran. I let fate lead the way, shoes slipping on my feet. I tripped over a speed bump, instinctively lurched backwards, toppled and crashed into a bush. Thorns racked my skin, tearing at whatever they could reach. I crawled to my feet. Then, seeing the stares, shrunk into the shadows. Down a lane. Right, left, right, right, left. Dead end. I slumped on the cobbled road, shaking. Hours passed, time losing its consistency. Shadows, jagged, sharp, threatened to cut me again. I covered my face, balled into a little animal, head tucked away. Night approached fast.

Days passed, I scrounged for food where I could, begged for change from strangers who ignored me, pleading with eyes at people who deliberately looked the other way and quickened their steps. I felt a tug at my gut constantly, I was lost. My sight faded with everyday pictures swimming in and out of focus. I clung to my scraps; dropped coins, discarded clothes, a torn sleeping bag. Dirt soon took over, grime covering me. My hair knotted, skin cracked and sweaty, cheeks sunken, legs thin, stomach grumbling. I lost track of everything, just an image of his arms and that warm glow shone like a beacon.

Week rolled by, months followed.

Footsteps woke me. The air was crisp, goosebumps rose and teeth chattered. Ice crept along in front of the stranger. Shadows masked their face, but the silhouette was familiar; that balk, stretched clothes, shambling gate, it was the same person I ran from. I froze, I was exposed, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. A hand lunged out, grabbing my wrist, I pulled back. The person's nails dug into my flesh. Pain shot out, I screamed, nobody heard. I second hand grabbed my throat, pushing me back. I slammed into bricks, rage built within me, a red-hot anger surged. I pushed them back. Nothing happened. I looked down, I was sprawled on the ground now. The person reached forward, his face now visible in the dim light twisted, grinning, tongue sneaking in and out. I screamed, I couldn't do anything, I was helpless again. The man reached for me, running rough fingers down my chest. I flinched, trying to get away, danger screaming in my ears, hate, rage, murder burning my mind.

I blacked out. Crumpling under that brute. That murderer.

A light bloomed, piercing the dark. The man leaped back, staggering. A form began to emerge; a shaky body, feathers, wings, talons, beak, tail. Flames coated the phoenix, blue, yellow flames, burning the man away. His ashes fell, muddying the goo that covered the cobblestones. The phoenix hovered over me, eyes piercing my soul, connecting. It dove, head-first, wings stretched back, beak pointed. Bludgeoning my body, it hit me, knocking me back, skating across the stones. It passed through me, became part of me. Returned to me.

I rose, through the air, tendons stretching as the breeze carried me upwards, wings flapping softly. My feathers ruffled, eyes spread wide. I soared across the sky, higher, higher, and higher still. Twisting, rolling, cartwheeling in and out of form, each change releasing another burst of joy. I felt whole, I felt like me, nothing was wrong now, I was all there. I dove, racing faster and faster, trying to catch light itself, tail trailing behind me, fanning like a cape. I pulled up at the last minute, reveling in the rush I felt. It spread throughout my body, even as it changed. He was there, waiting for me. I remembered him now. His warmth radiating from him as always. Standing calmly, short hair fluffy as if he'd just got out of bed. I looked into his deep green eyes. He smiled at me, I smiled back. The world fell away as I reached for his hand. He placed it in mine, his strong grip relaxing me. I felt home. I felt free.

JOBE THOMSON

The Living

A dog limps down an empty street beneath a grey-brown sky. One leg tapers off in a scabbed over stump. Upon his protruding spine rests a gaunt hand belonging to a girl bearing a skeleton's body. Her mousy brown hair falls in wispy strands. Her eyes are unseeing; cloudy white and scarred like thicktwined rope.

The uncanny pair carve a line through the rubble-strewn street. The girl often stumbles. The dog waits for her to rise, brush off her knees thin as matches, and catch up.

As she walks, the girl lives in a dream world of reverie and memories. The flashes of her life as it existed before come like lightning strikes, swift and unbidden. She watches Papa tuck her into bed, feels the warmth of a flickering lamp, gazes up at glow-in-the-dark stars on a ceiling interlaced with spidery cracks...

Papa strokes her hair as she drifts off to the distant explosions of fireworks. He tells her favourite stories, and when something bursts on the street below and she jumps from her bed he is there, Papa, and he is holding her tight in his big hairy arms.

Later in the night she awakens. It is dark except for the blurry green stars on the ceiling. She slides out from beneath the patchwork blanket and pads across the cool floor to the window.

She stands straddled in her pink pyjamas watching the fireworks trace arcs across the starless night sky. She watches them strike and erupt in plumes of smoke. Burning pyres silhouetted against the night.

The girl repeats this ritual many times. The fireworks are strangely beautiful.

The night she loses her sight, she remembers staring out at the blazing shapes. She remembers music from the street below and muffled voices. Laughter. Children's laughter, like her own. The stamping of feet. The smell of street food. Life. Whirling, noisy, smelly, beautiful life.

Then the window shatters and the walls collapse in around her.

The dog barks. The girl halts in the middle of the street. She feels the earth beneath her soles begin to tremble. She crouches low and hugs the dog.

Roaring now, from some crazed beast, and the grinding of many wheels, the rattling of steel, the smell of diesel as some monstrous vehicle, something she cannot see but can sense and smell, passes somewhere in the distance.

The girl waits a long time until the roaring of the beast is long gone. Only then does she rise and urge the dog on with a gentle prod. Together they continue their slow passage.

The girl sees in different ways now. Without her sight, her imagination runs rampant. She imagines the desolation surrounding her, the collapsed town she once knew so well. The stores and parks and streets, all of them brown and distorted. Pictures held to a flame and burned so that they are misshapen, melted and malformed to the very fringes of recognition.

When she grows bored with the bleakness, she imagines the world around her as something she knows it isn't. She sees pink trees made of fairy floss and imagines eating them, park benches of red liquorice, grass crystallised into toffee.

She tried eating grass once. She vomited until she passed out.

She understands the dog is the sole reason she is alive. His old nose has a way of sniffing out food, however rotten, however stale or musty or inedible it may be. He has led her into the bowels of many a ruined house, downstairs, into basements, attics, hidden pantries.

For several days they stayed in a house with a kitchen so large and well stocked she thought she had died and gone to Heaven. She and the dog gorged themselves on packets of beef jerky and cartons of orange juice.

In a room with a window she found a child's xylophone. She enjoyed playing and listening to the resonant sounds. She would play music for the dog. He enjoyed it, she thought.

Then one day she heard voices outside, men's voices, and the dog led her away in the night when they finally slept.

The dog stops. He raises his head and sniffs the wind. Atop the smell of death and rotting corpses he whiffs something. His scruffy, splotchy tail perks up. She feels the tail against her knee and her heart patters.

She has learned that food is a distant memory. Like her father and his scratchy beard. Like the stories he told, which she now tells herself whilst walking the lane of death. Like clean water and warm, safe shelter and smiling people who don't hurt and steal and slaughter.

Yet now the dog leads her down a side-street, across a pile of bricks charred black, down a lane baking in the heat of the afternoon sun to a door she feels wooden and splintering beneath her tender fingers. She opens it gently.

Down a staircase, her footsteps loud and meandering. The dog is eager now. He barks his happy bark. The girl smiles for the first time in days.

Suddenly the dog runs off. She hears him start to eat. He is gorging himself, filling his empty stomach. There comes through the dark the sound of crunching bones and meat pulled apart.

The girl stumbles toward the noise. She falls to her knees beside the dog, crouching with her head bowed low. She places her hands on the unknown thing the dog is consuming. Fingers pass over cloth, across a cuff, into the cold blackened palm of a corpse.

The girl waits in the corner while the dog finishes eating.

They are out on the street illuminated by a dying red sun. Long violet shadows dance in the shade of fallen buildings. Her stomach is cramping. She has not eaten in one week. The dog is stronger, if only a little.

Her mind makes a friend out of the corpse in the basement. She imagines it to be a girl, much like her, the sister she never had. She imagines the girl walks beside her, helps her up when she falls, drapes a hand across her skeletal shoulder. Sometimes she talks to the phantom girl.

The phantom girl is naked and missing part of her stomach where the dog fed. The phantom girl is not angry. Neither is the blind girl. She, more than anyone, understands the desperation of hunger.

The phantom girl says that if the dog gets hungry again he can continue eating her. Without the dog, she reasons, the girl will die. So he can eat some of her fingers and toes. The unnecessary ones. The phantom girl smiles at this like she is proud of her joke and wiggles her fingers and toes.

The blind girl laughs. Her laughter tinkles on lopsided eaves and shattered shingles high above.

Night arrives with the howling of the wind and familiar cold that settles deep in her bones. The phantom girl shrugs her shoulders as if to say no cold night can best her. Her skin is milky white in the light of a full moon. She shines like a fairy. The hole in her stomach glows scarlet.

The blind girl feels her stomach turn violently. She retches and then vomits a bile that makes her throat and mouth feel as if it is on fire. When she has finished and lifts her head, the phantom girl has disappeared.

The girl thinks phantom girl has returned to her home on the moon. She imagines a cloud passing over the moon, and the phantom girl fading forever.

She is alone now. Alone again. She is tired, so very tired.

The girl's head is spinning. What is real is not real. All that is real is the act of walking. One foot in front of another. Footstep, shuffle. Footstep, shuffle. There is only walking.

From a distant street she hears the clamour of voices. The dog barks. It quickens its pace. She hastens to keep up.

People are shouting and jostling. Where moments before the street was empty, now the survivors have sprung from their tents and holes. In the rush of sound and movement the dog darts away and the girl stumbles to the ground. People step on her. She cries out.

The dog is barking. Something whirs overhead. The people are crying out, hands raised toward the blue sky as if in prayer. Beneath their feet, the girl struggles to rise. Feet black and brown and burned pummel her into the road. She tastes blood.

White crates begin to plummet like gifts from above toward the roaring throng.

The girl cannot see the crates falling. She can only listen as joy turns to terror. Thud after thud after thud. Screams chortled to dust as the white parachutes fail to deploy, one after another. The crash of splintered wood. The gargling of people choking on blood.

The survivors pick crates clean through bleary eyes. The wounded crawl and stumble away. The dead lie crushed beneath the blood-stained boxes that were meant to be their salvation.

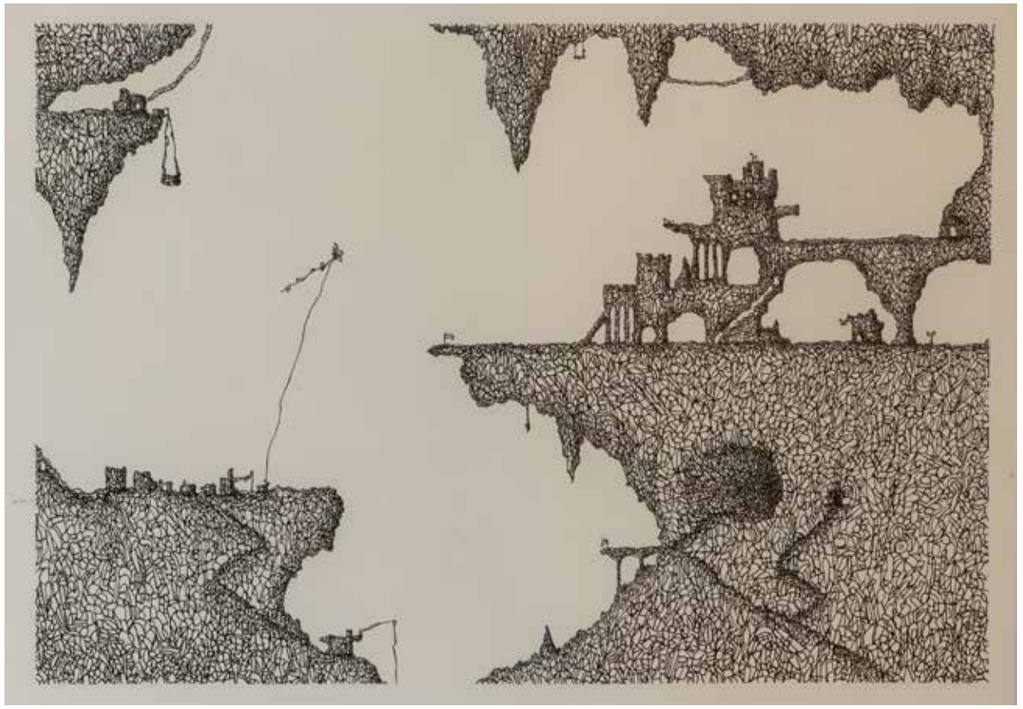
The girl lies surrounded by dust and splintered wood. It feels like her arm is broken. She struggles to sit. Everything is aching. Warm blood runs down her cheek.

The dog approaches. He licks the blood from her cheek and drops something in her lap. Her fingers brush against plastic. She pulls apart the packaging. The food is hard and crumbly. She breaks off some of it and passes it to the dog.

They eat in silence for a long time.

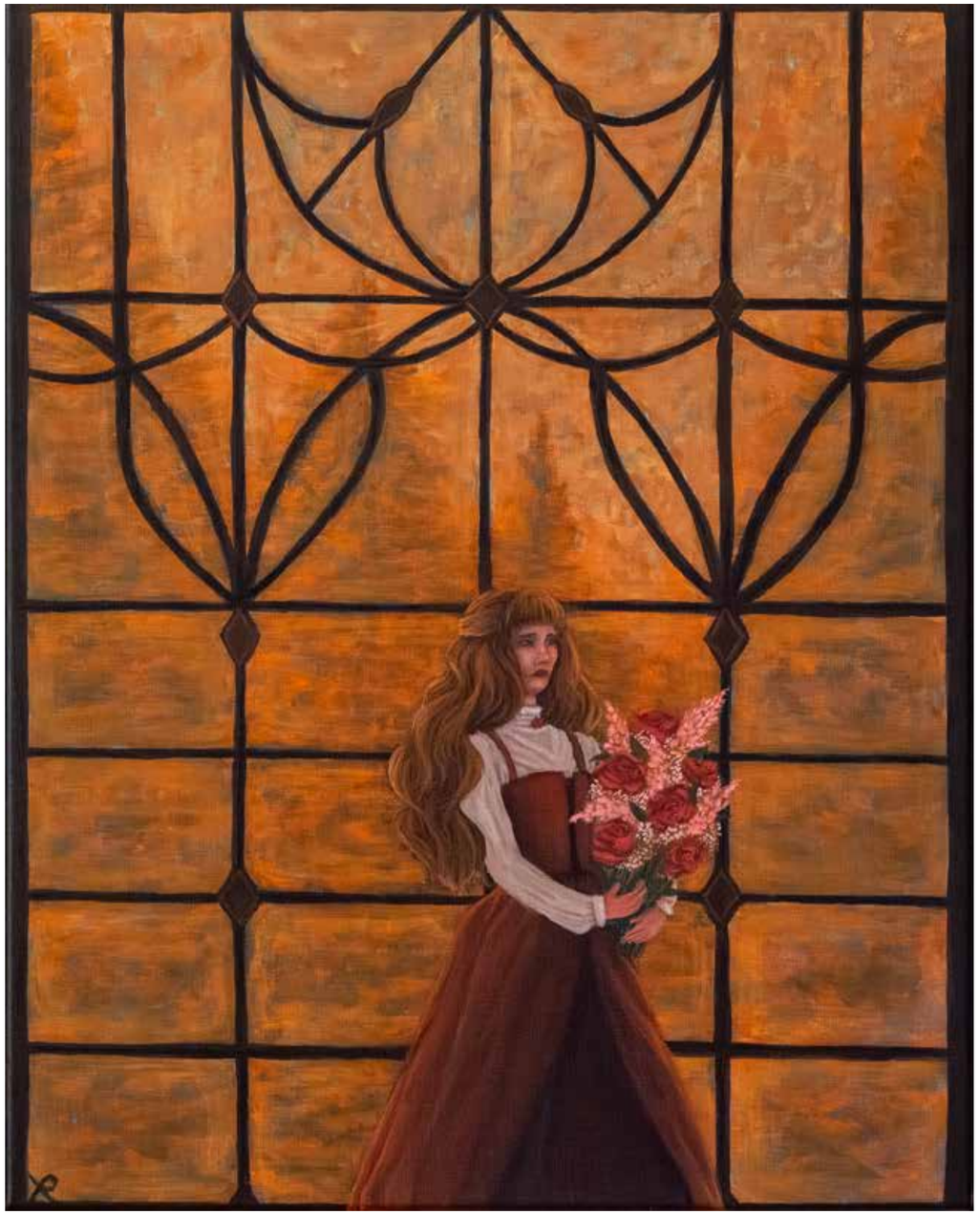
The sun begins to set above a shimmering horizon. The girl finally stands up. One hand rests on the dog's back; the other she clutches close to her chest. Head bowed, she turns away from the death and dying and begins to shuffle toward an uncertain future.

The two are soon lost in a haze of smoke and dust.



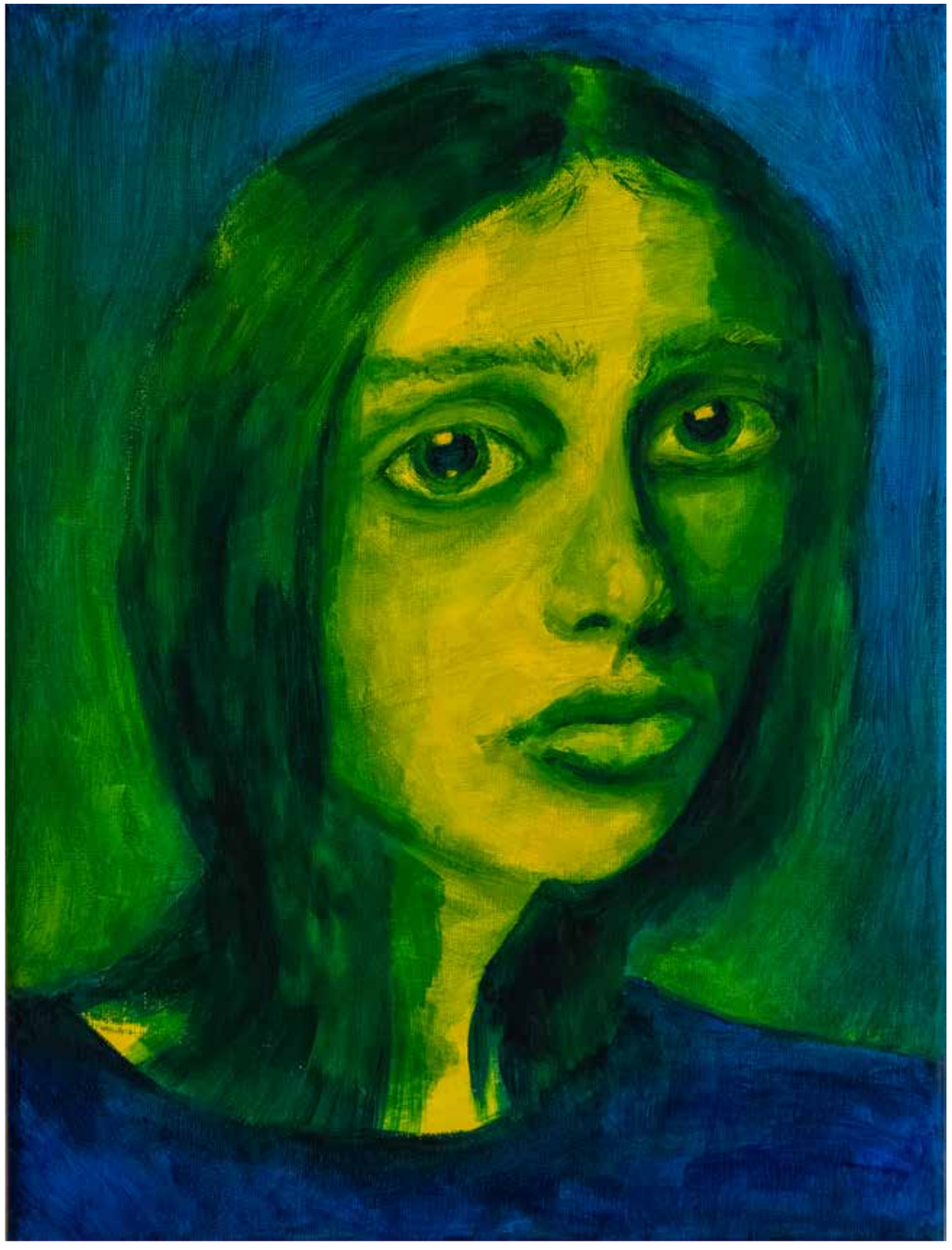
MATILDA WILBY

Underground Exploration
Ink on paper



YASMIN RUSSELL

Monarch
Acrylic on canvas



CAM LOURIE

Untitled
Acrylic paint on canvas

AMALIE SINGE

Coffee Cat,
Coffee on watercolour paper

DYLAN STOCKWELL

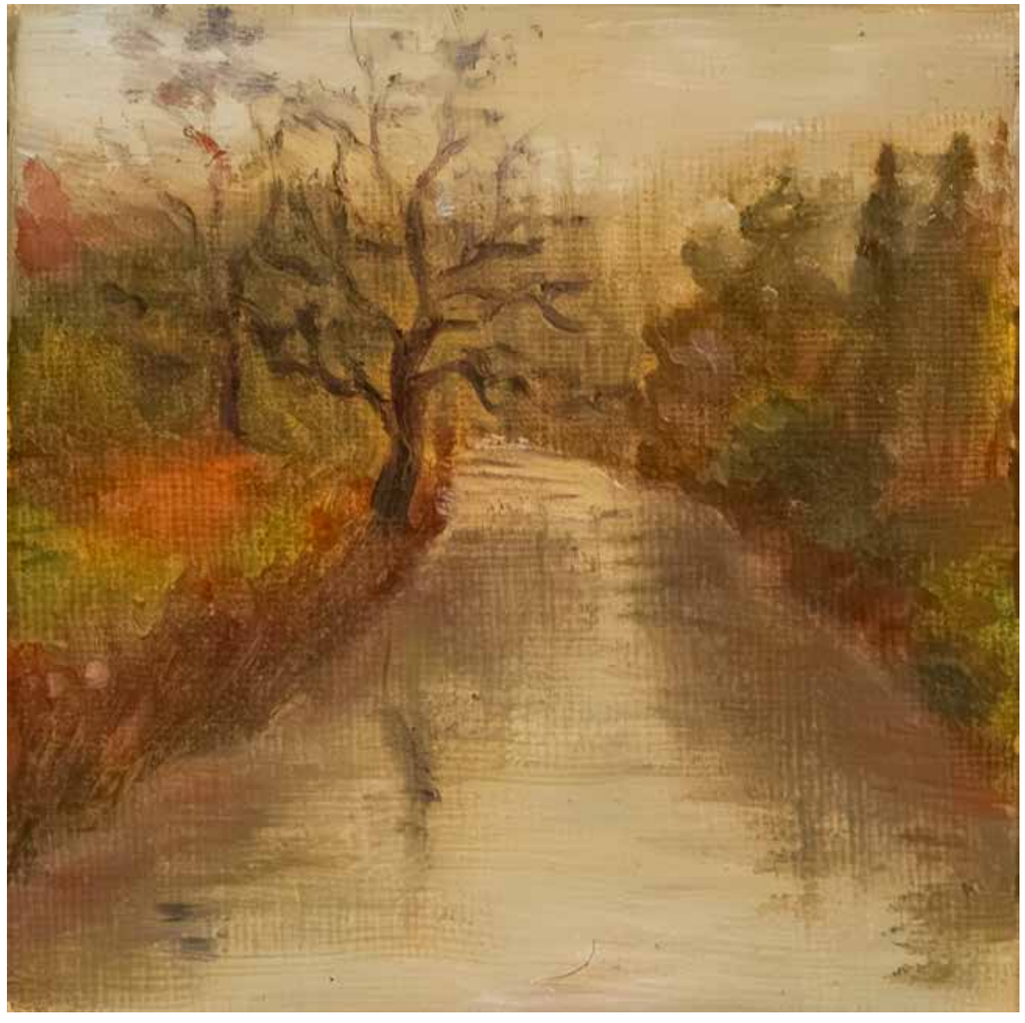
Too Much or Too Little

If a person who is mixed ethnicity ever tells you that they feel that they're "too white for the Filipino community, and too Filipino for the white community" believe them. Believe in their struggles, believe that what they're thinking is genuinely a thing that can run through the mind of a child. Believe it because those are the same experiences that I went through and still even do. There's been many instances in my life where growing up as a mixed kid will make you feel like an outsider or an outcast to multiple groups, not just one like the usual outcome of a racial divide. My name is Jacob Gonzales, and this is the story of what happens when a 7-year-old boy is first exposed to racism. But this isn't just that, this is a story about feeling like you're always too much or not enough for anyone you share culture with to relate to and how those issues evolve through mine and many people's lives.

The first ever time I faced racism was when I was 7 years old... young? I know. I was 5 months into grade 2 and there was an older kid, he was in grade 5 and his name was Xavier, he was tall, muscly, athletic, and aggressive. Everything that would scare a child. Xavier had been aggressive toward me and my best friend, Adrian for a while at that point but it had never become too serious, that was until he started threatening us to make us do something dangerous on the playground. I refused out of fear, but he persisted, eventually he would call me "ching-a-ling", which as a racial stereotype, wouldn't really even fit a Filipino boy like me. So, in hindsight, Xavier wasn't the brightest. But being 7 years old, I didn't look at things that way. In 2016, I'd have gotten sad and annoyed and would've tried to prove him wrong but that's only what I wanted to do. Instead, I shut up, I stopped talking and I was about to go through with what Xavier told me to do, but then, Adrian saved me. Adrian fought our battle for the both of us, he usually would around that time. This had been the first time in my life that I felt real isolation, especially since my father Antonio had left to be with someone else, we were all on good terms, but it made facing racism for my Filipino side that much harder without my Filipino father there to talk to about it. I didn't even try to talk to my mum; I thought she wouldn't get it and probably would've brought it up with the school which would just make things worse off. Anyways, she would've been busy enough with my older brothers and older sister without me adding more to her plate.

That whole ordeal with Xavier was difficult, especially when feeling alone, but the most serious time I've experience racism was in year 8. Some small stuff happened between but nothing I couldn't just brush off and move on from. That was until year 8 when I was going out for my first job, which may or may not have been to impress this girl, Allison. But this isn't about Allison, it's about Jade. A girl that was so crazy that she wanted to literally take my rights away. She thought someone of my ethnicity didn't deserve the work placement that she wanted and that I'd only been hired as a "diversity hire" which already had so many problems but I'm pretty sure she was missing the point of what DEI was. Jade wasn't aggressive like Xavier, but what she lacked in ruthlessness, she made up for in manipulation, she was so cunning that she'd spread rumours about me, make me feel small and stupid in group conversations. Just like that, I was back on the playground, more isolated than ever. This wasn't even touching on the fact that it had already expanded on the issues I had making friends. The Karen kids were able to relate to each other, Filipino kids could relate to each other, white kids could relate to each other. I couldn't relate to anyone in that regard because I'd always get hit with the same "but you're not really Filipino so it doesn't matter". But back to Jade, just like with Xavier, I did nothing about it, I was afraid that no one would take my side and they'd say, "she must've had another reason to be so mean". So, I ended up quitting the job. If Jade wanted it so bad that she'd be racist about it, she could have it. I didn't end up impressing Allison, but it wasn't necessary, once she realised what I'd been going through, she tried to get to know me which would then lead to our first date and now were still together, at least what happened with Jade had something good come from it, and hey, I still had Adrian with me so win-win.

But that's not the end. Flash forward 3 years to now, I'm almost done schooling, I finally found my people, not with people who necessarily share my skin tone but instead my taste in movies and comic books, I bond with people over my love for the things that make me the person I am, not the skin tone that changes the look of my body. As well as that, mine and Allison's relationship is going stronger than ever, I think I'm gonna marry this girl with how much we've been through together; Adrian's been with me since kindergarten, I couldn't ask for a better third brother. I've even bonded more with both of my parents, Antonio and Julie now that I feel more comfortable having more serious conversations. But again, that's not the end, this story ends with a man named Scott, where do I even begin? He's changed my life for the better and I only met him a year ago. When I met him, it was like being thrown into the deep end of a pool and everyone expects you to learn to swim, to be fair that literally didn't work for me, but in this situation, I was thrown into senior school, into year 11, I'd lost many of my "friends" if you could even call them that because the second they got the chance, they left. But with Scott, I was instantly able to relate to him, I didn't need someone who shared my ethnicity, I just needed someone who shared my same perspective and understood my experiences. Scott taught me that I could use my experiences for good, they weren't just stories that would be forgotten in time, no, they were just another Tuesday for so many people out there just like me and even ones who aren't like me. I learnt that these problems weren't weaknesses, they were my strengths, they built me up to the person I am today. Even though Jade and Xavier can go get screwed, I thank them. I thank them for making me the man I am today so that I am strong enough to speak up for those who weren't so lucky.



BETH FOWLER

Ogmore in Winter

Oil paint on canvas

ANGEL BELL

September 30th, 1998

Acrylic on canvas

CAITIE HORE

Intertwined

Acrylic on canvas

AZLAAN QURESHI

The Angel of Grief,

There. Yes, there, upon my stygian black gravestone, where ashy cobwebs hung like the oppressively low clouds, grieving in the night sky. I had learned that my goodness had faded into the howling winds and whistled a passage to my own spot in hell. This very incident that abandoned my goodness had happened, due to my drunkenness, I was so drunk that even my levels surpassed those of the mad hatter drunk on tea. However, I never thought that this incident would happen in my very own mansion.

Perambulating across the halls of my mansion, I had come across two of my very new creatures entrapped in a petite auriferous cage that gleamed under the poignant hues of the moon. In the first cage, a snow-white dove with, oh so pearlescent wings, chirped with a small twinkle within its eye, as if God had sent an angel towards the gates of its soul. I gasped in awe. How can a creature be so pulchritudinous? However, in the second cage, an ebon Raven shrieked and cried, as I hearkened to its unavoidable burden and yelled, it turned towards me, divulging a big and cerulean eye that was popping out of its very head, while being veiled in Persian blue, and sanguine veins that screamed to be let out of its misery. I stared at the raven for a second and then compared it to the evanescent dove. The raven looked depressed, as if it needed love; it resembled me.

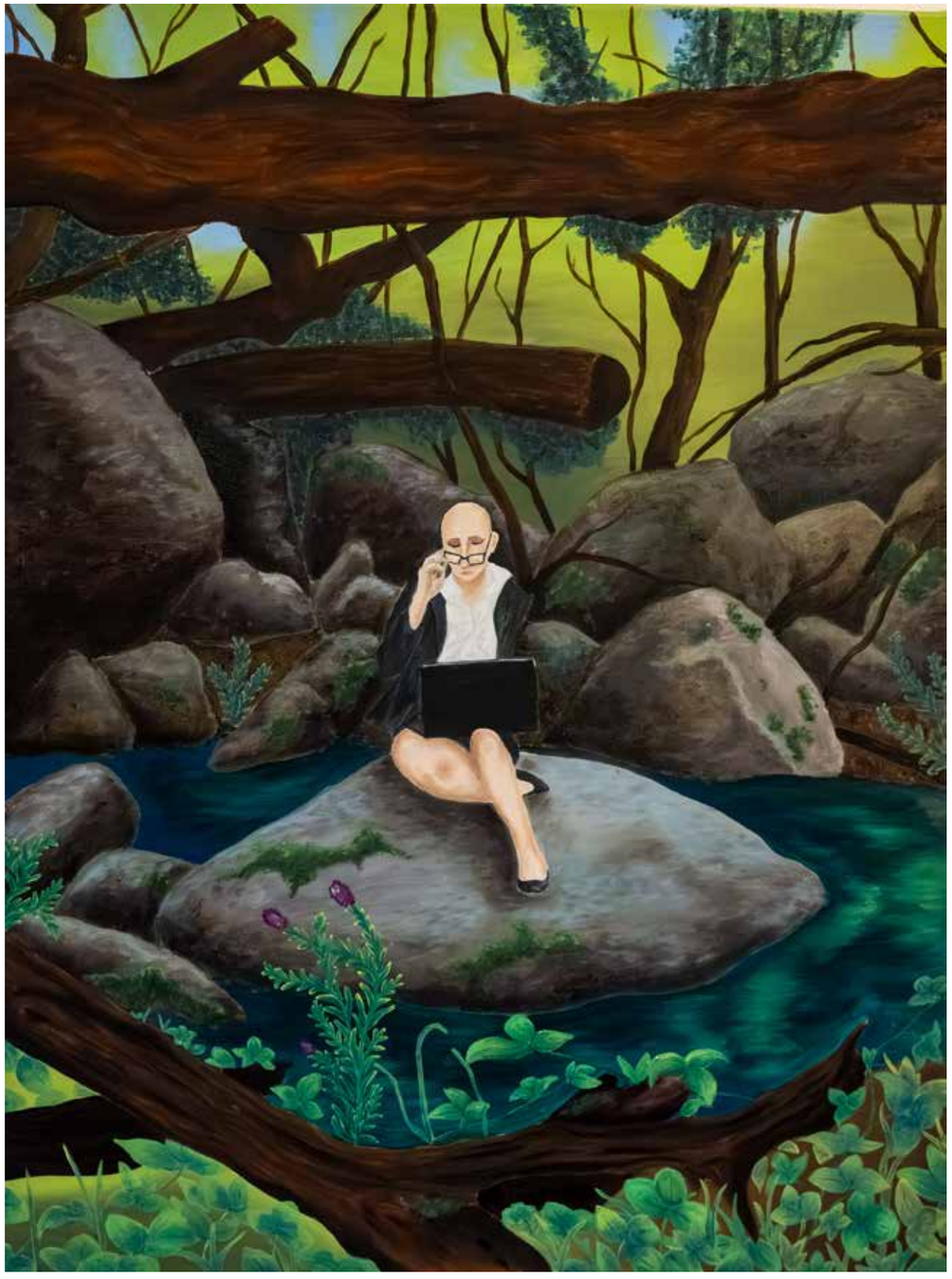
So, I did the unthinkable, I began favouriting this raven as if it resembled my very own soul, it followed me, and each time my attachment grew stronger, while it let out a Mephistophelean guttural that resonated a devilish laugh. It got me to do bad, like taking a desolated apple just out of reach from an army of ants, it told me to like these things instead of seeing it as a sin. It was evil, it accosted me! Each time I devoured its words and listened, the dove became even quieter than it already was, almost like I had become the very devil. I needed help, but so much trust had been inside this raven that I couldn't let go!

One day, oh, once upon a time, that would be the very sin that would determine my very faith, the raven unfurled its obsidian wings and was soaring in the petal soft wind. "No come back!" I yelled and ran towards it, not letting it go away an inch from me. There it landed on a skeletal tree that was desiccated due to its wizened state. As I caught up to the bird, I descried a sound, but it wasn't the tree languidly dancing with the wind, an unwilling ballet partner. It was an eldritch and screeching sound coming from the raven, almost like a desolated spirit from hell had been asking for forgiveness while it burned eternally.

The raven was speaking in English, "Bring me her oh so snow white wings, to be put out of your misery, or else." Or else? Could this be? No, it couldn't! Was he asking me for the wings of my oh so precious and quiet dove that led me to the goodness of my heart? The raven let out a devilish growl that sounded like an ancient language, and passed me a small silver dagger that had a vexing twinkle to it in the pale moonlight. I grasped onto it, scared of its threats and what could happen next. As I reached my precious dove with the small silver dagger in my hand, I sliced off its snow-white wings and slowly watched as its crimson blood oozed out of its now cadaverous body. There I held onto its wings, my eyes trembling with tears, turning the sclera into a deep claret. As I brought it over to the necrophagous and rapacious raven, it laughed and cried, transforming into a person with horns, flaming hot red skin, and gigantic wings that also had pointy black horns, and that's when I noticed that it was Satin in disguise, "Now to put you out of your misery." As those very words came out of his fiery mouth, slowly, the ground dried up and felt like a billion hot iron nails had been pressing into my feet. I could feel the ground slowly sinking into the boiling mantle, and later, the core. That's the moment that my whole life had been a misery; I was now put to my death by my very own silliness.

A few days had passed in hell, and God had finally allowed me to see my grave. As I rose upwards to the foggy gates of the cemetery, when I saw my grave, I was on the brink of trepidation and vacuousness. There I saw a statue of an alabaster angel, not any ordinary emaciated angel, but a replicated grieving angel, as it read all my countless sins. However, when I saw the inconsolable angels back there, there the silver dagger that I used to kill my dove stood, statuesque under the cut off wings. I screamed so loud that it sounded like a tintinnabulation, and suddenly, once I knew the truth that the dove was my goodness and angel, while the raven was the devil, satin himself, I was pulled back by a pair of spectral hands formed by smoke from the embers of a fire, and dragged back down into hell straight to my eternal misery.

But there was one last question: was this all a test of God or a game of the devil?



SARA HANCOCK

Out of Office

Oil on canvas

TAHLIA ANDREWS

Music / Singing

I'm a 16-year-old musician and performer currently in Year 10 at Bendigo South East Secondary College. My artistic journey began as a dancer competing in state eisteddfods, but in recent years, I've shifted my focus to music, performing at festivals and gigs across the region. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, I taught myself ukulele and discovered my passion for singing. In 2024, I picked up an op shop acoustic guitar and it quickly became my main instrument alongside vocals.

In 2024, I successfully auditioned for the Academy of Creative Arts (ACA) in both band and vocal streams. ACA has helped me build confidence, collaborate with young musicians, and start busking and booking paid gigs. This year, I'm honoured to serve as Vocal Captain, leading students and working closely with coaches for our mid-year and end-of-year showcases—true highlights that let me create and perform with friends, family, and our community.

I was also invited to be lead vocalist for the BSE Stage Band, performing throughout the year at school and local events. We earned Gold Standard at the Bendigo Eisteddfod, where I was praised for my stage presence, and I'm excited to participate in Generations In Jazz. The Stage Band has expanded my musical horizons, introduced me to new instruments, and connected me with amazing people. Thanks to both ACA and Stage Band, I received the Ulumbarra Foundation Holdsworth Bursary in 2024, which helped fund my music education and equipment.

I've been busking and performing solo and with bands at local markets, town festivals, and events like the Sustainability Festival, Funloong Fun Day, Play in the Garden, and Newstead Live. Newstead Live, in particular, was a fantastic opportunity to grow as an artist and gain confidence on bigger stages.

I recently performed the national anthem at Red Energy Arena for the Bendigo Braves Basketball games, a special chance to represent myself and the youth music community that means so much to me.

AYESHA MCMURRAY

Music / Singing

I'm 15 and a student at Victory Christian College who has a passion and a dream. Music has always been always been a huge part of my life for as long as I can remember. I began learning guitar at 8 years old, and that was when I really fell in love not only with listening to music but with writing my own. It was only around 5 months ago that I started teaching myself piano to help me with my own writing and work. I've been able to use this to grow my skills and express myself more deeply through the music I play.

I am also a student at Victory Christian College, which has provided me with many opportunities to not only perform in events, but also record my own music in Melbourne as part of the 'Kool Schools' program. I also have the honour this year to be in VCC's college production, Dare to Dream, in which I play player 4. I also have experience in performing in gigs and local events such as the Moonlight Markets and Nexus Youth Theatre.

I chose to perform my own cover of this song because I find it often reflects my own emotions and struggles. My mum has always had a big part in supporting my dreams and giving me encouragement when no one else would, which became a big setback in my life when I lost her to cancer at 12. She was always the one right there telling me I could do anything I set my mind to, and ever since then I've promised myself to do everything I can and work as hard as I can for her, because I know that's what she'd want. I would also like to acknowledge my dad, who continues to help me and support my ideas and passion for music now.

My dream is to pursue a career in music and release music that helps young people feel understood and relatable, just like I needed when I first started writing.

ORLA PATIENCE

Music / Singing

I am a 16-year-old singer/songwriter at Bendigo Senior Secondary College. Music has been my passion since childhood, from dancing in the kitchen with my family, to developing my own path in songwriting. I began learning guitar at age eight and, with encouragement from my teacher Plum Green, grew confident enough to sing. When I was ten I wrote my first song that I was proud of, and even received encouragement from Gretta Ray, an artist I have always been inspired by. My singing teacher Sherri Parry told me to 'never lose your passion for music' which has always stuck with me.

Moving to Castlemaine opened new doors for me - work experience at Sound Recordings and supportive friends deepened my love for music. In 2025, I joined friends as lead singer in our band, The Lexies. We do lots of gigs around Castlemaine and surrounding areas and became close friends - they mean a lot to me. Performing on stage is when I feel most myself. We created activism through music, including organising 'Gig 4 Gaza,' and creating our activist group, YACC.

I love sitting in my room writing and playing, and it's where most of my songs have come to life. I often write lyrics about mental health and social issues, in hope to give listeners something to relate to, and use my voice for change and connection.

ZALIAH MOSES

Music / Singing

Over the past few years, I have found my voice as a singer and my identity as an artist. What began as a personal passion is now a defining part of my life and my vision for the future.

I began my musical journey with uncertainty, keeping my singing hidden from my parents. Everything changed when I performed "Birds of a Feather" by Billie Eilish on stage—a turning point that revealed my passion and gave me the confidence to pursue music openly, thanks to my parents' supportive reaction.

Since then, I have performed at local venues and events, including The Handle Bar, Four Posts Hotel, Bendigo Agricultural Show, Sound Shell Showdown, and Live on View. Sharing my original song at the Generations in Jazz Festival in South Australia was a milestone. These experiences have strengthened my stage presence and helped me connect with audiences.

As a multi-instrumentalist (piano, guitar, drums), I use these skills in songwriting and live performance, which has built my independence and versatility as an artist. Busking at local festivals has taught me resilience and adaptability. I collaborate with other young musicians and perform as part of an ensemble, building my teamwork skills. Performing at community events, such as the Marong and Boort Christmas carols, reinforced my appreciation for music's role in bringing people together.

I take professional singing lessons and participate in music classes at school, including songwriting and music industry studies, to deepen my skills and understanding of both creative and professional aspects. Songwriting is my greatest passion. Participating in the Kool Skools program, where I wrote and recorded my original song "Day by Day," introduced me to professional recording and boosted my confidence as a songwriter, as it became the most-played song from the 2025 Empire Studios recordings. Sharing my music on Triple J Unearthed has shown me that my work can resonate beyond my local community.

I am currently writing new material and aim to record more original music to further develop my artistic identity and reach a broader audience.

Music is fundamental to who I am and who I want to become. I am dedicated to this journey, embracing new challenges and sharing my voice.

JAMIE DEARRICOTT

Music / Piano

I have been playing music for a number of years and having the opportunity to apply for this award is something I am very grateful for. I would like to thank the people involved with making this happen. Music opportunities in Bendigo would be very hard to come by without the Bendigo Council's support.

Music brings people closer to experience something together and the instruments we play are just ways to express our creativity and passion for art. Piano is a very important part of my life and without it I wouldn't be where I am or who I am today. Looking ahead in my music, my main goal with piano is to refine my technique and proficiency and explore deeper emotional depths to convey through music writing, improvisation and practice. This award is a wonderful opportunity to move from a student to a more confident and expressive performer.

I would also like to attend further workshops and lessons to help me take my skills further. I participate in music groups with fellow musicians and want to further explore different musical styles while continuing with classical piano.

I am looking forward to contributing more to Bendigo's flourishing musical community.

ELIZA LADNER

Music Theatre

My name is Eliza Ladner, and I am 16 years old. I have been performing since I was 4 and discovered a passion for drama at age 8, after playing Peter in a recreation of The Last Supper. I began acting classes with Props Theatre in 2018 and went on to play Susie Bones, a lead in 'Puffs' with Tribe Youth Theatre. Since then, I've appeared in 10 shows, with highlighted lead and featured roles:

Over the years, I've had the joy of stepping into a wide range of roles and productions, each one shaping me as an actor and performer. From bringing Moth to life in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with Marist in 2022 to joining the Police Ensemble in "Pirates of Penzance" with Nexus BYT in 2023, every show has been a new adventure. I've taken on characters like Duffy in "Annie" (Marist 2023), Silly Girl in "Treasure Island" (Bendigo Theatre Company 2024), and Mrs Alexander in "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time" (Tribe Youth Theatre 2024). I've also been a Featured Singer in "Cinderella" (Nexus BYT 2024), Martha in "Guys and Dolls" (Bendigo Theatre Company 2024), and Ethel Toffelmier in "The Music Man" (Nexus BYT 2025). Most recently, I played Mrs Brill in "Mary Poppins" (Marist 2025) and am currently in rehearsals as a Silly Girl for "Beauty and the Beast" with Nexus BYT (2026).

Earlier this year, I participated in a Screen Acting Bootcamp at NIDA. I completed VCE Drama Units 1 and 2 with straight As and am currently completing Units 3 and 4, as well as Theatre Studies.

Additionally, I've trained in musical theatre-style singing with several teachers and took dance lessons at Stage 29 (formerly Sharon Saunders Dance) between 2021 and 2022.

I am passionate about pursuing drama and acting for life—whether on stage, screen, or through voice work—and am eager to explore more opportunities beyond Bendigo. My experience at NIDA inspired me to keep learning from new mentors and schools.

AUBREY MCKENNA

Dance / Musical Theatre

Performing is a huge part of my life, and I am dedicated to continually developing my skills in dance, singing, and acting. Growing up as a regional performer from Bendigo, I am proud to be part of a strong and supportive arts community that encourages me to grow. My dream is to pursue a career in musical theatre, with long-term goals of performing professionally and studying at a leading institution like WAAPA or VCA.

I train in multiple dance styles and singing, spending around 15 hours a week refining my technique and versatility. Performing regularly at competitions across Victoria has helped me build confidence, stage presence, and resilience.

I've participated in workshops with industry professionals, including the PAC Summer Musical Theatre Intensive, gaining valuable insight into professional standards.

Other highlights include learning audition techniques with Queenie van de Zandt and working with performers from major productions through Stage Creative workshops.

Notable roles include the Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz and performing in Chang'E: Goddess of the Moon, which challenged me to combine acting, singing, and dance.

I've recently been recognised for my performance and technique with achievements such as High Distinction in Grade 4 Cecchetti Ballet, Honours with Distinction (100%) in Grade 5 Jazz, Honours (Distinction equivalent) in Juvenile Silver Tap, multiple championship titles at Bendigo Competitions Society (Tap, Jazz, and Theatrical), Under 12 Champion at Front and Centre (Kyabram) including the Born for the Stage Award, and Tap Championship Winner at the esteemed Royal South Street Competitions in Ballarat.

These experiences reflect my dedication and passion for performing. I know that growth in this field requires discipline, consistency, and a willingness to keep learning. I am motivated, committed, and passionate about building a future in musical theatre.

ROWAN EGAN

Music / Singing

I'm a fourteen-year-old musician from Axedale who loves playing guitar, harmonica and drums. I also sing. I enjoy an eclectic mix of genres including folk, blues, punk rock and country.

Living with Tourette Syndrome and OCD has brought challenges, but music is my best medicine. When I play, my tics and compulsions fade, and even my worst days improve by jamming with my teacher Pete or listening to relatable music.

Early on, I attended Skip's "Nappa Dacka" jam sessions and benefited from Axedale Primary School's rich musical opportunities. I learned guitar with Jo Woodward, joined the school rock band, took singing lessons, and was introduced to the stage by my harmonica teacher Peter Gavin—which got me hooked on performing.

Currently, I'm in Year Eight at Catherine McCauley College, playing in the contemporary band and participating in the school's production of "Rock Of Ages"—a first for me. I continue lessons with Peter Gavin and work on my singing with Merrin Torpy.

Last year I participated in the Raw Arts Awards, (I'm that good lookin' dude on the poster this year) It was a wonderful opportunity to meet other local musicians and artists as well as perform at the Capital Theatre where I have seen so many of my musical heroes perform.

Since then, I've performed at school showcases, played the November Blues and Roots MiniFest at Bendigo Brewing, placed third in the school Musician of the Year Awards as the only Year Seven student, and played "Rock in the Square."

My favourite performance, however, was at the Axedale Community Christmas Carols. I played "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)" by John Lennon and one of my favourites, "How to Make Gravy" by Paul Kelly. The crowd stopped to listen, people were singing along, and there were even a few tears. Little kids were running around as the sun began to set—it perfectly captured the sense of community that makes Axedale feel like home.

I love how music brings people together. After gigs, I often chat with new people, making it a two-way gift. Bendigo's great venues and community have given me many chances to share my music. I'm not sure of my exact musical path, but I hope to keep connecting with people through music.

TESSA GINNIVAN

Ballet

Ballet has been my passion for as long as I can remember. I'm 13 years old, in Year 7, and have danced for ten years, training at The Extension Ballet Studio in Bendigo for six years.

My teacher, Emma Acton, is a beautiful dancer and an encouraging mentor who has guided me through most of my journey.

In 2024, I joined the Victorian State Youth Ballet for The Little Mermaid production. Dancing alongside professionals inspired me and taught me new skills as I performed three roles.

This year, I'll audition for the Ballet Teachers Workshop and compete in my second eisteddfod with a solo piece. I'm excited for these new opportunities.

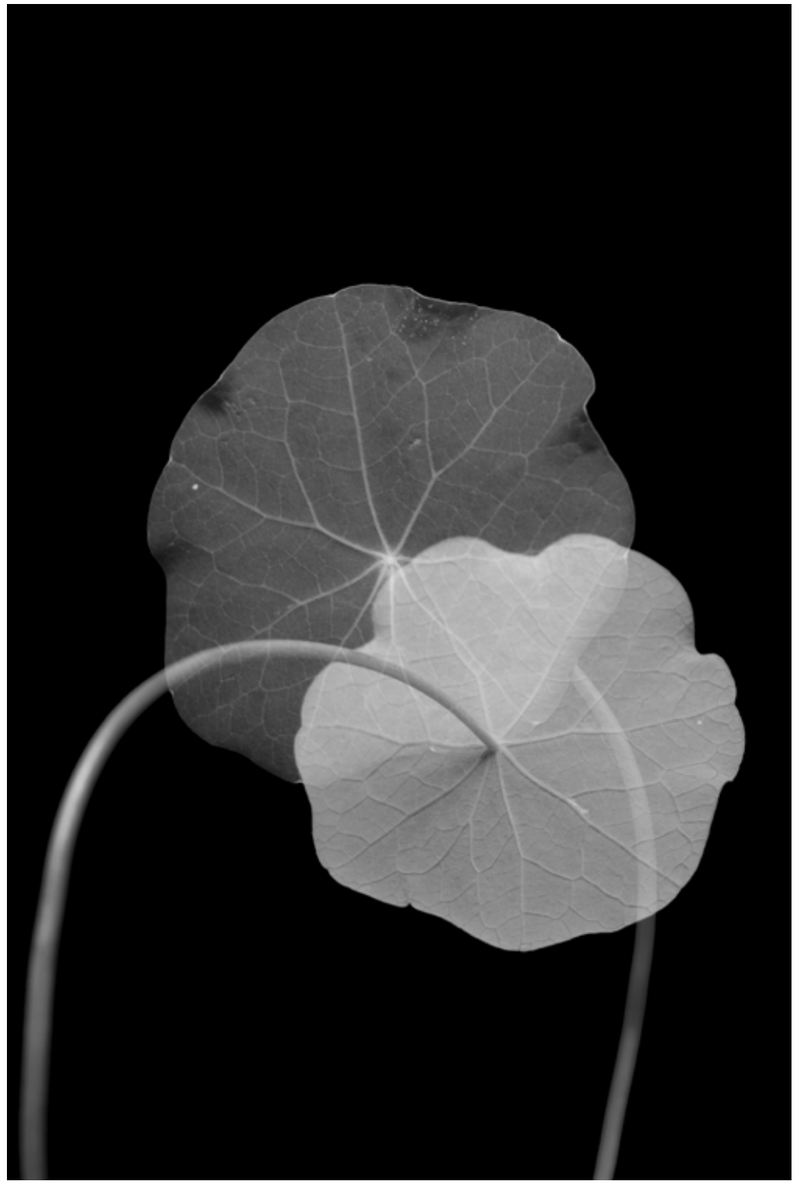
Every year, I perform in my school's end-of-year concert, dancing roles such as Snowflakes and Waltz of the Flowers in Nutcracker, Little Red Riding Hood in Sleeping Beauty, and parts in Coppelia and The Wizard of Oz. I love the freedom of performing in these shows. I've won two end-of-year awards, which makes me proud of my hard work.

Last year, I performed my first solo at two Bendigo competitions, winning first place at one and an honourable mention at another. I look forward to competing again this year. I also earned my first pair of pointe shoes last year and have been working hard on strength-building exercises.

Recently, I started learning contemporary dance, which gives me more freedom than classical ballet.

At my ballet school, we study the Conservatoire method. I'm preparing for my Level 3 exam in August and have received commendations in most previous exams.

My dream is to be a principal dancer with the Victorian State Ballet and continue exploring new opportunities in dance.



JAKOB WALSH

Nasturtium leaf (double exposure)

Photography, Giclee print

SUMMERLEE FERGUSON

Ink fades, life moves,

You took the pen
and rewrote my life,
not all at once,
only in angle.

A small correction,
to where things were heading,
as if direction
could be softened
without consequence.

The line moved,
I didn't.

Margins narrowed around it.

Space reorganized itself
to make room for preference.

What I was
became something
slightly out of alignment
with the page.

Ink held differently
under your hand,
some words pressed darker,
as if permanence
could be assigned.

Others faded.

There were signs left behind,
pressure in the fibers,
indentations where attention stayed
long after it passed.

Nothing clearly removed.

Only rewritten
until origin blurred,
into version.

I learned to exist
between edits.

Then repetition broke.
Return points loosened.

The page stopped insisting
on the shape you set for it,
to keep following.

Now structure shifts,
without permission.

Spacing opens itself.
What you held in place,
no longer holds.

There is a margin,
that no longer behaves like one.
A line that doesn't return,
to where it began.

And I remain-
not restored,
not erased-

But no longer arranged
by the hand
that once believed

it was the only author...

CAITIE HORE

A Door Left Open,

Charlotte stretched her arms up into the sky, slowly coming to. The sun was rising, a colourful array of orange and blue. She glanced over to her left, checking to make sure the small, feathered creature by the name of Peep still sat there. He did, the light reflecting off his dark pupils. He cheeped, alerting her to his hunger. Charlotte groaned as she rolled over to push herself up from the dusty ground next to her mat, which Peep had taken over. "It's okay, Peep, I'm coming." She rolled the mat up, stuffing it into her small sack. She picked up the soft feathered bird, placing him onto her shoulder. "Let's go."

The pair arrived after seven hours of clomping through the ragged terrain. A hut, tall and looming, stood ahead, a sign on the front – 'Murfie's Huut'. Peep squealed, and Charlotte instinctively placed her hand on his side, calming his nerves. The leaves underfoot crunched as the two walked towards the cabin. The door creaked under the weight of Charlotte's hand, swinging open.

"Hello?" Charlotte called. "Anyone home?" There was no reply. Peep leapt off his perch, fluttering to the ground. He ran ahead, disappearing into the shadows. Charlotte paused, knowing he'd need a second to complete his task. The lights flickered on and Peep came running back, proud of his achievement. "Good boy," she whispered, handing him a tiny dark seed as a reward.

The room was much larger than the outside of the cottage, and Charlotte spotted a recently lit lamp sitting on the edge of a blue sheeted bed. She advanced, sitting on the bed and calling Peep to her. He was there in seconds, as though he had teleported. Knowing they'd need to rest after such a big day, Charlotte placed Peep next to her and snuggled into the warm covers of the bed, asleep in minutes.

The next day, Peep stirred first, chirping directly into Charlotte's ear. A figure sat hunched in the corner, awaiting Charlotte's waking. The hooded creature murmured a phrase, although it was inaudible due to the sound of the birds around them singing. "Murphy," Charlotte spoke. "You're back."

Murphy glanced up, the grey fabric of his cloak revealing a small goblin with pointed ears and sharpened teeth. Peep flew to him, cooing a greeting in an unknown language. Pale claws reached out to stroke Peep as Murphy resisted the urge to ignore. "Hello, friend, I has missed you. Ready for snackies?"

Charlotte found Murphy in the kitchen a mere five minutes later, a gourmet feast scattered across the benchtop. "SNACKIESSSS!" Peep squawked in surprise at the sudden call from the tiny goblin. "Zere is snackies, and snackies and.... snackies!" Murphy announced proudly, clearly happy with the spread. Charlotte sat next to Peep, who had already assigned himself a seat. The three devoured their meal, knowing they'd need it for the big adventure ahead.

Murphy reappeared, his massive black boots and silver tin-can hat looking ridiculous. "I is ready for trip!" he screamed. Charlotte sighed, "Okay bud, let's go."

Peep snuffled as Murphy kicked the orange sand around them into his lungs. He ran ahead, only stopping to alert Charlotte when the outline of an abandoned petrol station came into view.

Murphy used his teeny fingers to break the rusty lock, allowing the group access indoors. In the amount of time it takes to blink, Murphy had raided every shelf and taken anything he could. "Food is yum," he grinned through a mouthful of mouldy cheese. "No, Murphy," Charlotte said, snatching the rest of the cheese, "it is not food. You'll get sick."

Something glinted behind Murphy's eyes, and he leapt at Charlotte, hissing desperately for the food. He quickly retrieved it, returning to his normal self and apologising repeatedly for 'being bad.' Peep was there instantly, whispering and helping to calm Murphy's nerves. An arm reached out to help also--Charlotte. Murphy flinched at the sudden movement, growling and lifting his hands to shield himself. Charlotte stopped, feeling awful for frightening her friend.

As the sun began to set, Charlotte pulled the wrinkled green suitcase out of her bag, the colour of it matching her vivid eyes. She lay it down on the grass, flicking a piece of her curly brown hair off it. She lay down on the fabric, clearing space for Murphy and Peep, and looked up at the rapidly darkening sky above. Rolling over, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

"Another day, another walk," Charlotte murmured to herself as she dragged herself off the dirt.

She turned to her right, expecting to see Peep sitting in his spot as usual. Instead, all she saw was blank space. "PEEP!?" she screamed. "PEEP, WHERE ARE YOU!?"

A little mole stuck his head out of the ground at her yells, disappearing quickly after. "No, no, no, no, n-"

She jerked awake, Peep pecking at her freckled nose, safe and sound. Murphy sat across the grass, a small lizard on his knee. "You is safe, friend. Meet Morph. Morph is friend too." Morph froze, seemingly disagreeing with this, and ran off as soon as Murphy's hand left his back.

Charlotte stretched, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Peep still sat perched on her chest, but he was no longer chirping: he was staring straight past her, feathers puffed and trembling. Murphy noticed too. His ears flattened, and he shuffled backward. "Friend," he whispered, his voice thin. "Something is coming." The wind shifted as the grass around them bent as though something enormous had just passed through it, unseen. Charlotte's breath caught in her throat. Peep let out a single, sharp cry warning she had never heard before.

The grass parted again, this time in a slow, deliberate ripple as though something enormous was walking in a circle around them. Then the air shimmered. A shape flickered into view: tall, thin, and wrong. Not invisible, just unfinished. Its outline glowed faintly, like moonlight trapped in glass. Eyes - too many, too bright - blinked open across its shifting form. Peep let out a low, warbling chirp Charlotte had never heard before.

Murphy scrambled back further still, whimpering, "No, no, no, please, no, not again." The creature tilted its head, and the world around them seemed to hold its breath. Charlotte, shocked, screamed at the sight of herself standing across the plain.

Charlotte's eyes snapped open to darkness - not night, but a thick, velvety black that clung to her skin like damp cloth. Peep no longer sat on her chest. His frantic chirping echoed somewhere far above her, muffled as though she were underwater.

An eerily pale glow pulsed in front of her.

Her own face stared back at her, but this time it wasn't standing across a field. It hovered inches away, features stretched thin like wax melting off a candle. The duplicate blinked - once, twice and each blink sent ripples through its form, distorting it into something less and less human.

"Charlotte," it whispered, voice layered with too many echoes. "You left the door open."

The ground beside her shifted. No, not ground. A hand. Murphy's hand. She felt him shaking her shoulder, his voice trembling.

"Friend, wake up now. Wake up, please. It sees you."

The darkness cracked like glass. Light poured in. Charlotte gasped and sat upright, heart pounding.

She felt Peep against her neck, his feathers slick with fear. Murphy crouched beside her, eyes wide and wet.

Across the clearing, the tall, unfinished creature still stood, but the other Charlotte was gone.

Only a smear of pale light remained, drifting upward like smoke.

Murphy swallowed hard. "It followed us," he whispered. "It wants you. It always wants the ones who dream too loud."

Charlotte's lungs burned as she sucked in air. She was lying on her side; cheek pressed into Murphy's hand. The world swam in and out of focus, colours too bright, sounds too sharp. Peep's frantic chirping buzzed in her skull like a swarm of bees.

"Friend! Friend, look at me!" Murphy's voice cracked. His free hand shook her shoulder with surprising strength. "You went all empty, like lights off."

Charlotte blinked hard. The sky above her was the same pale morning blue as before, but something felt wrong. The air tasted metallic, heavy, as if she'd swallowed lightning.

Peep pressed himself against her neck, trembling so violently she could feel each quiver through her bones. His feathers were puffed to twice their size, and his eyes, normally bright and curious, were wide, glassy, fixed on something behind her.

Charlotte pushed herself upright. Her limbs felt slow, as though she were moving underwater. "What happened?"

Murphy didn't answer. He was staring at her hands.

Charlotte followed his gaze.

A faint glow pulsed beneath her skin, soft, silvery, like moonlight trapped in her veins. It flickered once, then faded, leaving only the memory of warmth.

"I didn't do that," she whispered.

Murphy shook his head violently. "No. I know you didn't. It did. It touched you. It marked you." His voice dropped to a terrified whisper. "It knows you now."

Charlotte's stomach twisted. "What was that thing? Why did it look like me?"

Murphy's ears flattened. He hugged his knees to his chest, rocking slightly. "It shows you what you fear, or what you want, or what you hide. It shows different things to different people." He swallowed. "But if it showed you you, then that is very, very bad."

Peep let out a low, mournful chirp, a sound Charlotte had never heard from him before. He nudged her cheek, then pointed his beak toward the treeline.

Charlotte turned.

The tall, unfinished creature was gone.

But something else wasn't. The same pale light hovered between the trees, drifting lazily like a lantern caught in a breeze. As Charlotte watched, it pulsed once, twice, in the exact rhythm her glowing veins had moments earlier.

Her breath hitched. It was answering her.

Murphy grabbed her wrist. "Don't move. Don't look at it. Don't."

The light stretched, thinning into a long, delicate line. Then it bent, forming a shape unmistakably like a hand. A hand beckoning her forward. Charlotte's pulse thundered in her ears.

Peep screeched, feathers flaring. Murphy clung to her arm, voice breaking. "Charlotte, please. If you go to it, you won't come back the same."

The light-hand curled its fingers, calling her. Charlotte took a single step toward it.

And the world snapped to white.

MIA POWER,

The Overconsumer

Acylic and oil paint

MINNA JAMES

Jannik Sinner - Wimbledon 2025
Acrylic paint marker and acrylic paint

NIAH PAINE

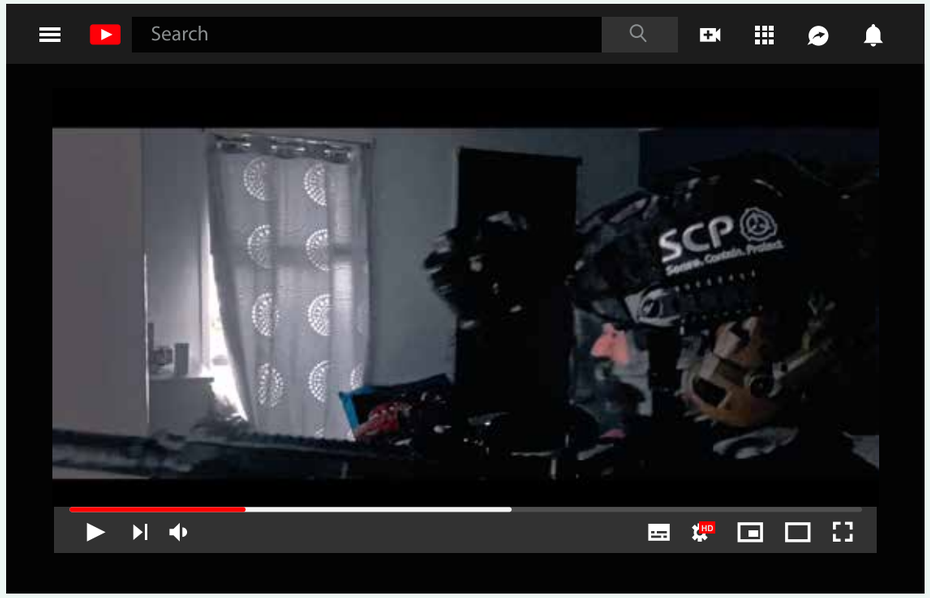
Cats' eyes
Posca on canvas

M GIBBS

Sinking
Graphite on paper

DARCY

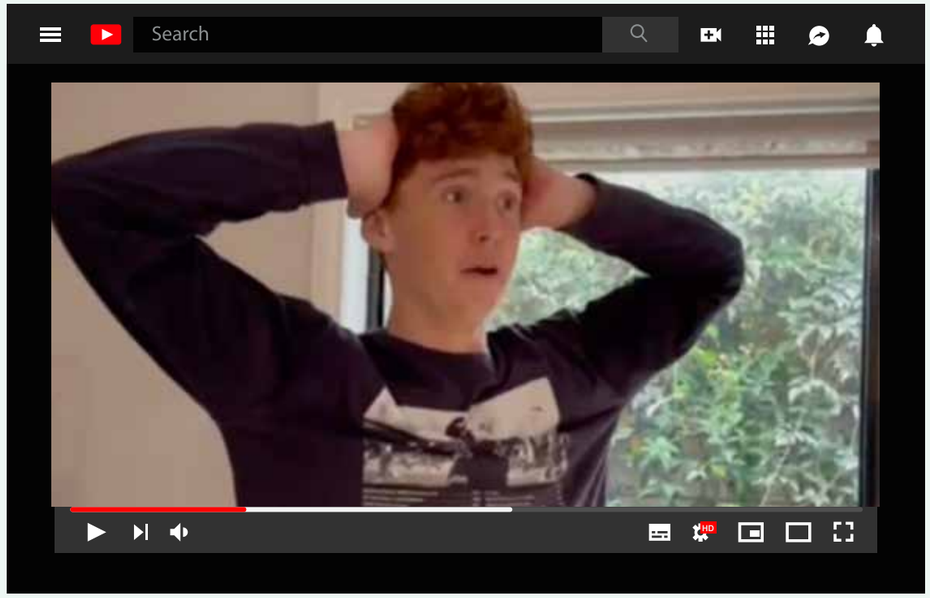
Innocence
Gouache



ELJON BUENBRAZO

SCP: Umbra Nefaria

Short Film



COEN GOULD

Crunch

Short Film

BRONTE FLANAGAN

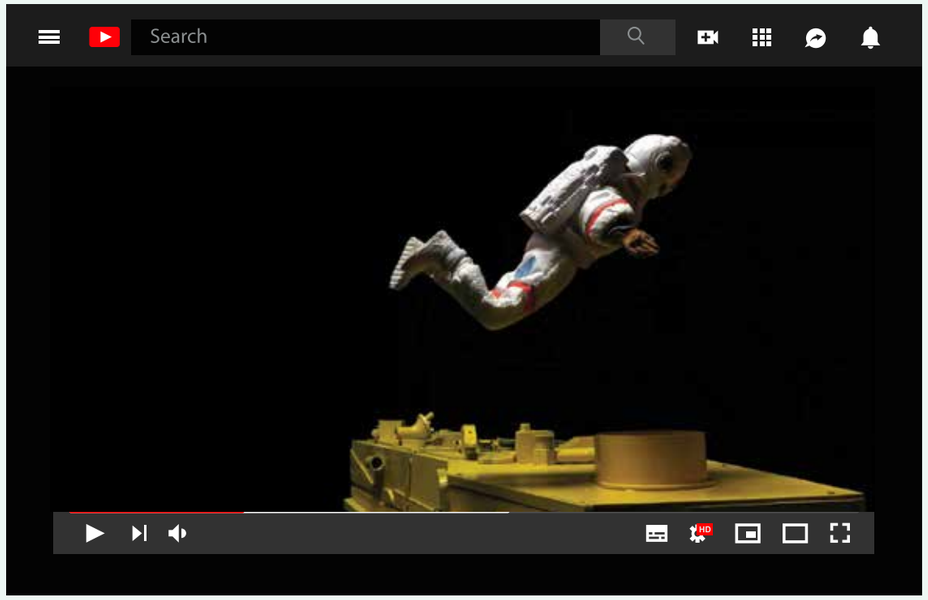
Too Far Offside

Short Film

AYVAH LINDSAY

Friend

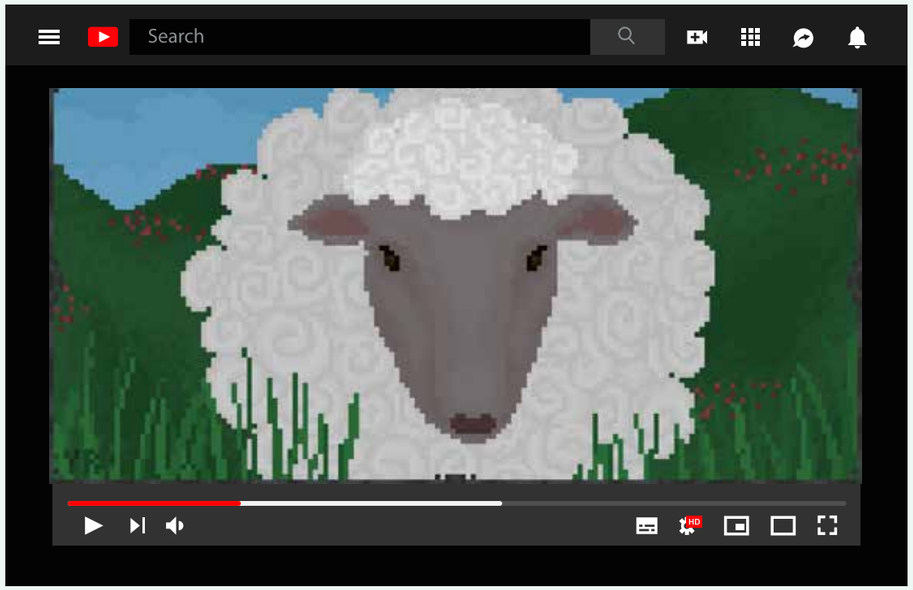
Short Film



ZAK WESTCOTT

Days without incident

Short Film



YASMIN RUSSELL

Shepherd of Light

Short Film

AMALIE SINGE,

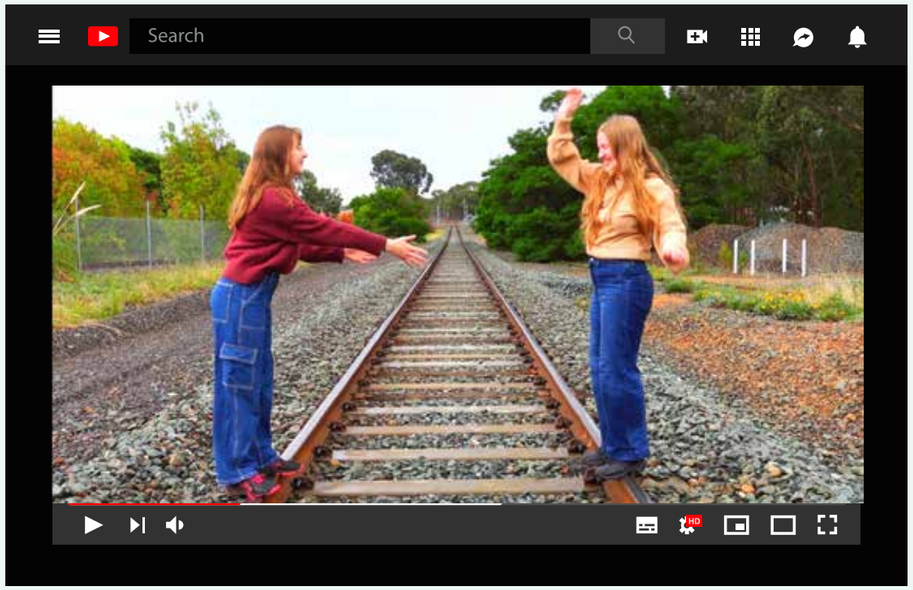
The House Keeper

Short Film

DYLAN STOCKWELL

I Wish I could

Short Film



SHARNI THOMPSON

Slip Away

Short Film

MATILDA BARBER

Apple

An apple is infront of me
It has a bite taken out if it
I'm chewing
Slowly, calculated, greedly
The bite i took is choking
I took to much
Like always
I can't breath
My throat is closing
Is it the apple
Is it the panic
Is it the guilt
I can't tell
The apple is taunting
Laughing at my mistake

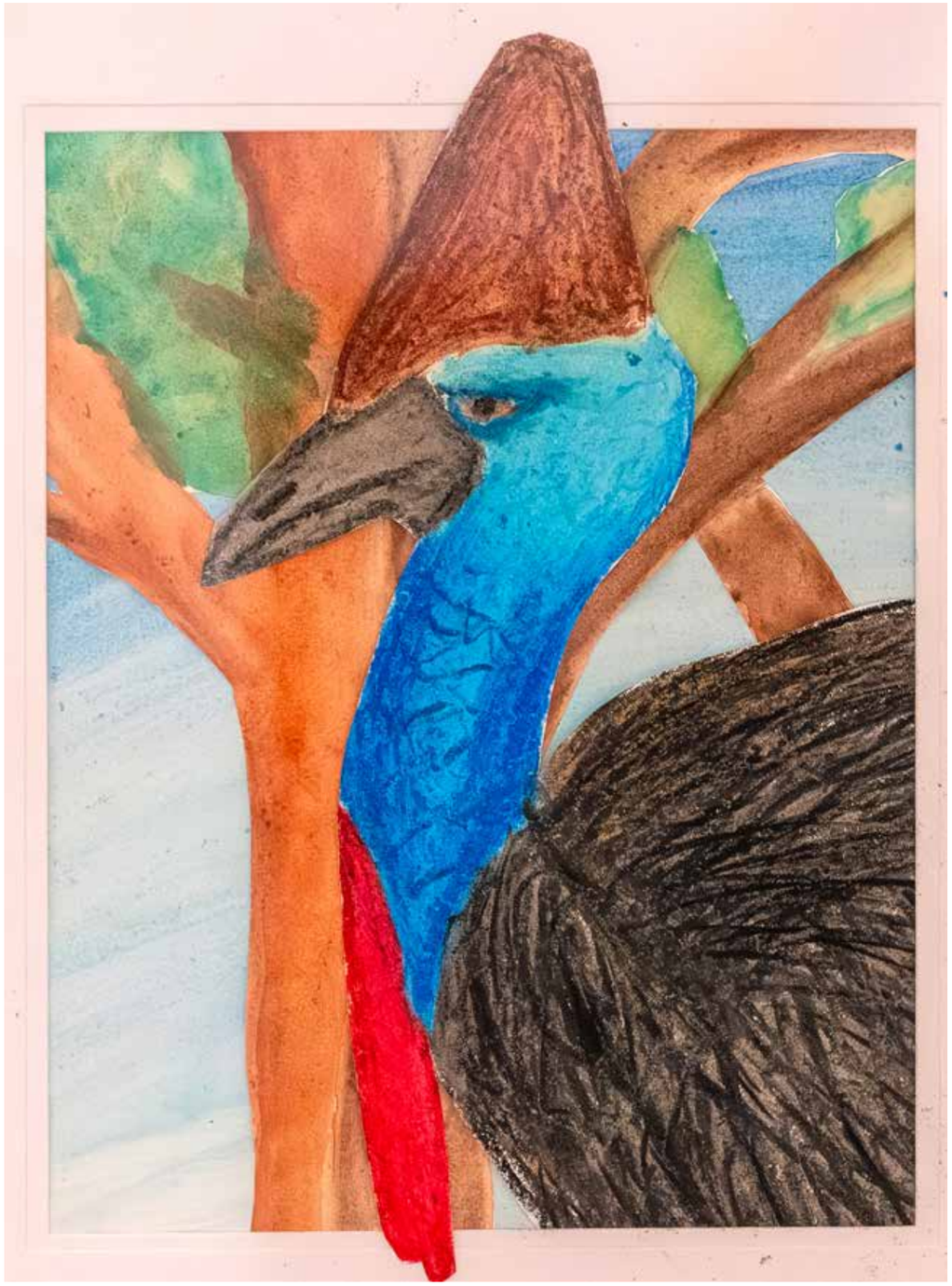
A bite taken out of it
To large
To mean
I want to put the piece back
But I can't
The apple is ruined

Never to be the same
It was fragile
But I took to much
Changed
Destroyed
I'm grieving what it could've been
I can't breathe because an apple is infront of me
With a bite taken out.

JESS SACREZ

Pieces of Me

Collage



SEBASTIAN GIUDICE

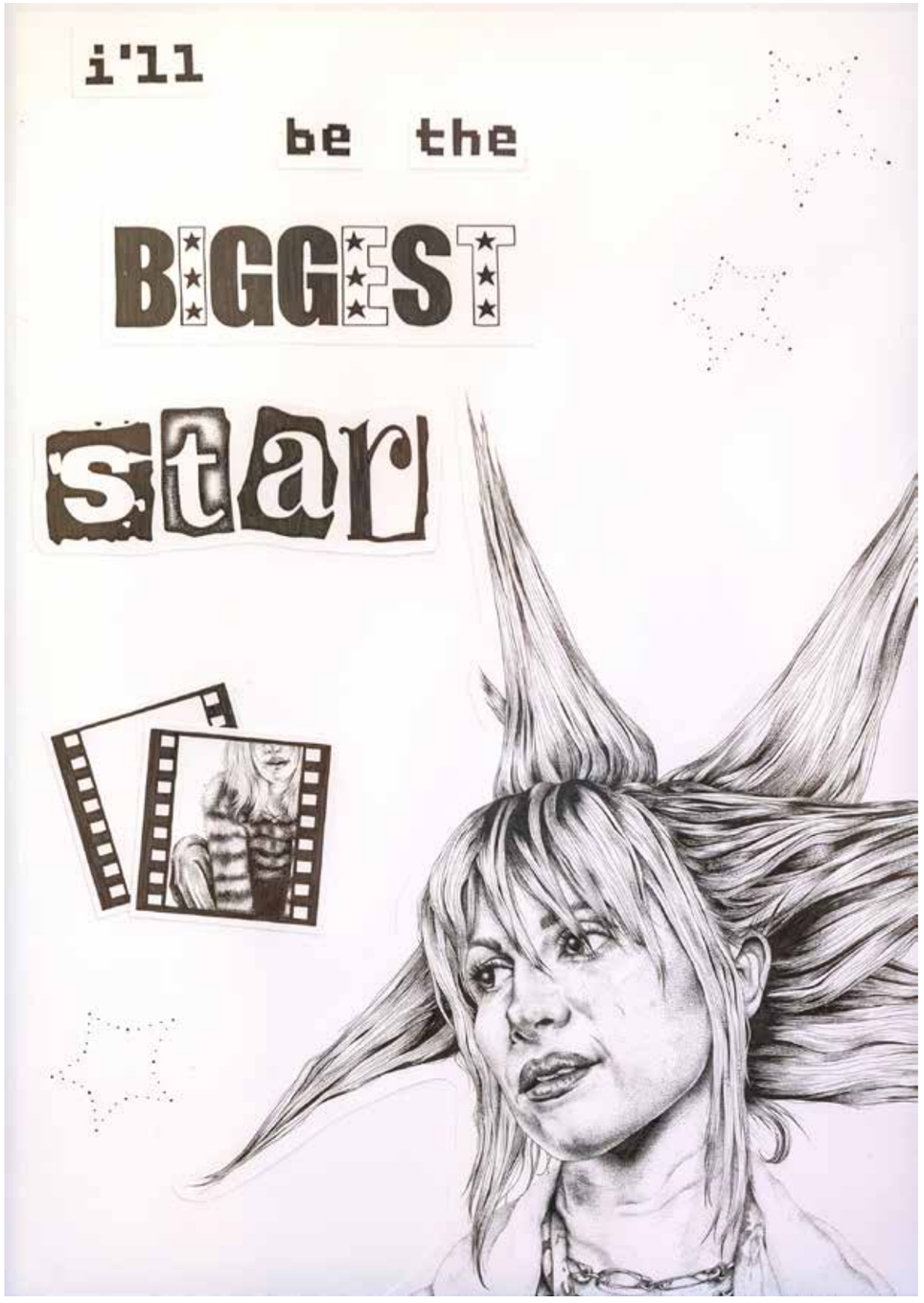
Cassowary

Oil pastels, water colour

MABEL HOGAN

Petals and Pages

Collage



VANESSA CAMPI

Miss Williams... if ya nasty
Fineliner

SUMMER SAUNDER

Beaded Botany
Acrylic paint

PAIGE PENNO

Friday

Farmer

The dishes are done, the car is packed, the grass is wet, and I can only pray for my horses. A voice tells me it's time to go. One last look out of the kitchen window. The wave of smoke rises up, over the hill, over the wheatfield. An angry, red-orange monster licks the treetops and barley crops. A single tear is all its worth. It's not the first time, and it's not the last, but for now, a single tear.

Fighter

Sirens blaring, breath heaving, voices shouting, fire screaming. Streams of sweat roll across my face as the wall of fire creeps closer, closer to the boots on my feet . I suck the black-thick smoke into my lungs, desperate for clean air. The hose is hardly steady in my shaky hands. I pull the handle. A tango-dance of flame and water swirls around the bush, hissing and cracking, fighting and biting. The suit is heavy, heavy on my shoulders, on my arms and legs. It pulls me down, and the big yellow-orange fills my eyes. The officers' yell-bark orders crow around me, but I can't feel their words. I close my eyes. Goodnight.

Fire

Somewhere, some time, someone will do it. *It'll be fine*, they'll say, gathering sticks. *The grass is wet,* as they strike the match. *And it's hardly windy*, as a single spark flies through the air. One spark to make a monster. In a strange cycle of sadness I move, and the pure earth blackens, shrivelled and empty. A car, a house, a shed, a fence, gone as I go, walking my imaginary legs while I hum my melancholy song.

1 week later

Farmer

Bumpy roads, fallen trees, crops charred, reduced to ash. The sun peeks through the fresh sky, the smoke clearing just yesterday. The car clunks up the driveway like an old generator coughing into life. I look around, at the paddocks, at the stables, everything black. It's no different as my old-generator-car pulls up to the house. Piles of soul-sucken wood lie between rubble and tin. The hearth of the chimney stares at me, a strange thing to see standing untouched in a garden of coal. A single tear rolls down my cheek. Then another, and another. The dinners we ate at the table, the shows we watched in the living room, the things we told our pillows before we went to sleep, eaten and spat out by a cold hearted blaze. My one-single-tears keep ticking down my face as a noise begins behind me. A steady beat of hooves on dusty ground. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's sad, and it's not fair, but it's nice to know my horses are alright.

Fighter

A beep, a squeak, a rustle, a word. A throbbing in my head tells me something is wrong. A memory fills my head of a swirly orange monster, crawling across the ground, reaching up for treetops. My eyes flicker open.

...and we can confirm that this year's fire season has claimed another life, bringing our total death toll up to 5. Our thoughts are with their families at this time.

The T.V. sounds fuzzy, like a dream. Maybe the hospital smell makes me dizzy. The lights seem too bright, and my legs feel like lead. My eyes close, and I drift back to my orange monster dream.

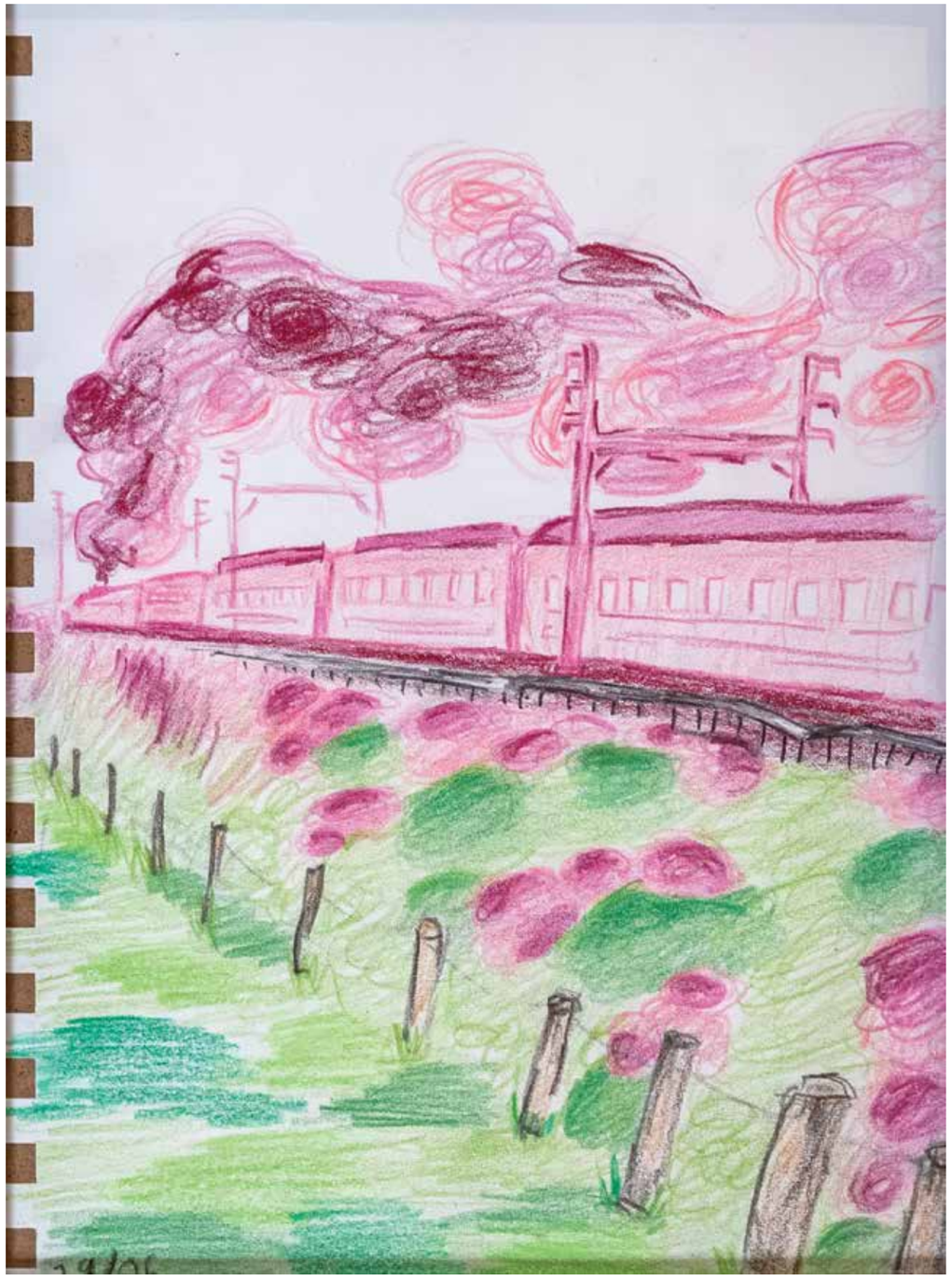
Fire

The trees stand lifeless, the grass is ash, the ground is still warm. A farmer returns to her ash ridden land. A firefighter lies aching in a hospital bed. A joey sits alone without its mother. The fire is out, but the feeling still burns. It will burn as they rebuild their homes. It will burn as they return to work. It will burn as the trees begin to sprout, and as the season moves to autumn, and as it starts to rain. It will burn when the grass is green and you can hardly tell the land was ever burnt at all.

ALBY MOKO

Psychedelic dreams

Felt



ELLIOTT DOWNEY

Untitled
Pencil on paper

JASLYN GIUDICE

Winifred
Oil paint

MAKK KELLY

Untitled 13

My dad was meant for the sky.
Runways in his veins.
A uniform pressed sharp with promise.
A degree with a name too fancy for our kitchen table.

My mum was meant for pages.
Stories written for women who never saw
themselves reflected back.
Classrooms full of kids
hands messy with paint
heads loud with ideas.

And somehow
I took that future from them.

Now my dad scans barcodes.
Beep.
Beep.
Beep.
Dreams priced and shelved between cereal and bread.

My mum carries hope like loose change in her pockets.
Always there.
Never enough to last.

Some nights
I lie on my back
staring holes into the ceiling
asking it questions it never answers.

Would my dad have medals instead of name tags
a hero instead of just tired

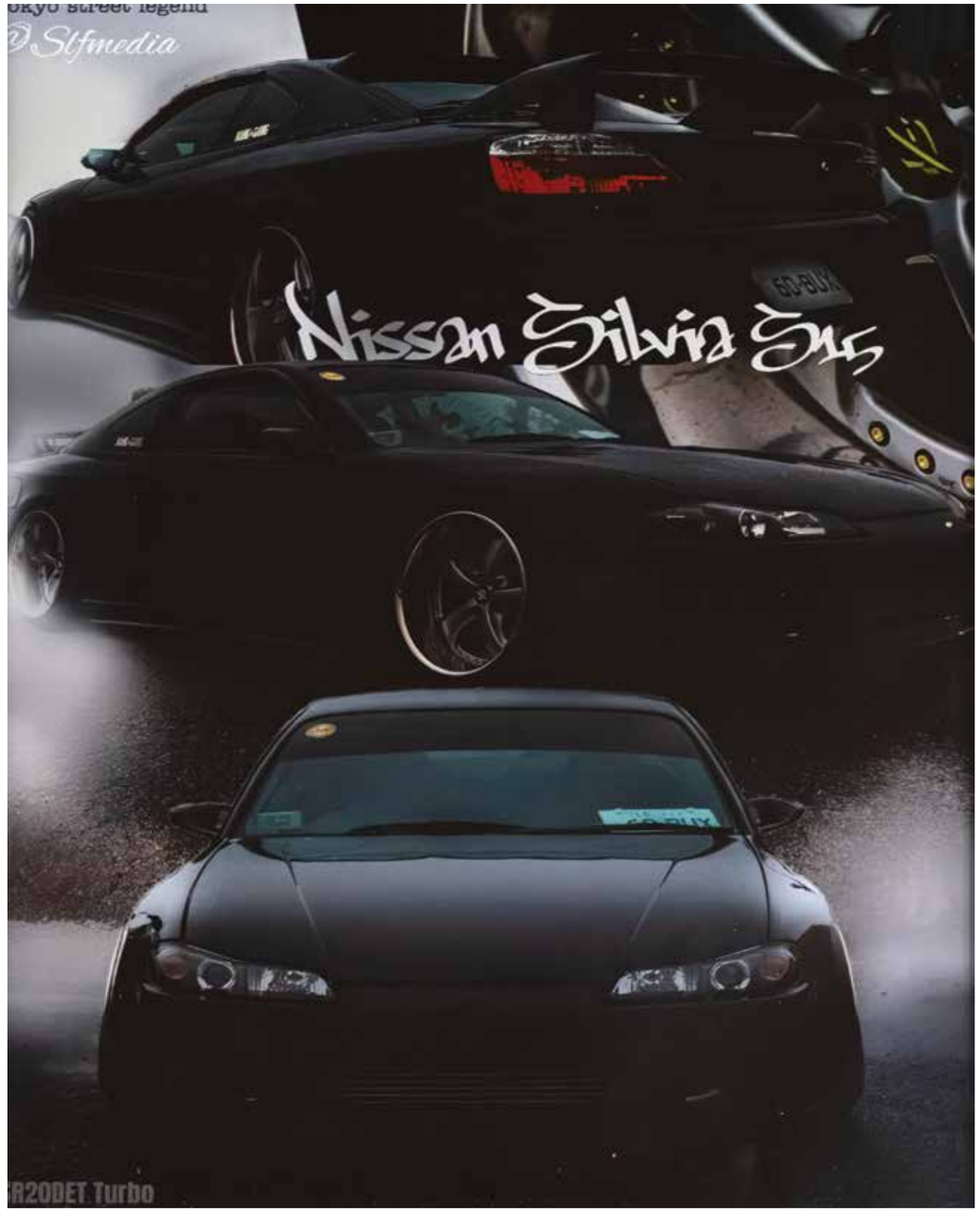
Would my mum have awards instead of unfinished drafts
her name on spines instead of job applications

Some nights
I look at my arms
and they turn back into sketchbooks in my head.
Blank pages.
Waiting.

If I could
I would hold their stories there
let them live somewhere permanent
somewhere undeniable.

Not just what was
but what could have been.

What should have been.



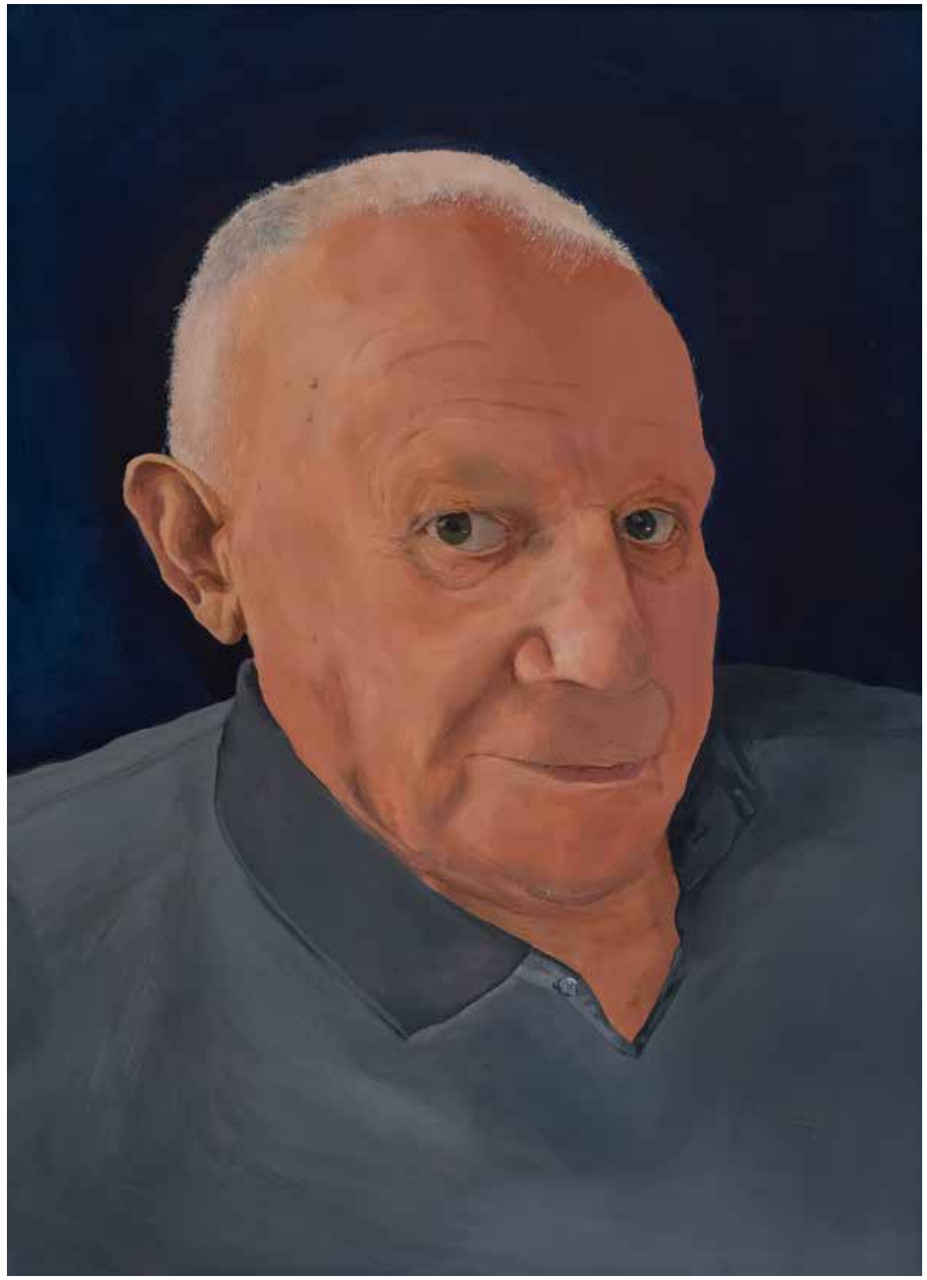
SUMMERLEE FERGUSON

Midnight Street

Photography

CHELSEA TOBIN

Celeste
Acrylic paint on canvas



BEN MARTIN

Grandpa Bruce
Acrylic paint

ZOE NICOLE LAGMAN

The Flood

"Tony, quick! Get up, we need to leave. Now!" My eyes fluttered open and I saw mum's weary eyes looking down at me. There was fear in her eyes. *Leaving? Leaving for what?*

I looked up at my clock, 3:54am. I sat up, vague on what was going on. I looked around the room. The floor was covered in murky green water up to knee height. "Mu-" before I could even ask what was going on, she was already out the door and screaming orders. There was a panicked tone in her voice, and lots of splashing water. I took a deep breath and put one foot down into the water, it was extremely cold. I got an old back pack that was sticking out of one of my top drawers and stuffed a bunch of random clothes in. I turned to leave and glimpsed something shining in the corner of my eye. The first ever medal I ever got. *U13 Boys Basketball championships*. The game was tied with only ten seconds to spare. We were up against one of our fiercest competitors. The whole thing felt like it played out in slow motion. Lucas, one of my team mates, came charging up to one of the opponents and snatched the ball off his hands. You could see his tight grip grasp the ball and his body jerk backwards as the ball slipped out of the opponents hands. But Lucas took his chances and sprinted down the court. You could feel the wooden floor boards shaking as the ball bounced and weaved through the players towards the net. The ball went up, up into the air and swished into the hoop. It's like I could remember it as if it was in the present. The sweat dripping off our foreheads to the wooden ground that hadn't been mopped in ages. The heavy breathing of all of us, every breath filled with hope. The happy tears of joy that hid in the drips of our sweat. Then the roar of the crowd shouting and cheering our names. Then us finally being crowned champions, cradling our necks down to be awarded that same medal I look up to now. I remember mum always said to put it in the display cabinet so I wouldn't lose it in my chaotic mess of things I never cared about putting away, but it always just hung there collecting dust until I'd feel like wiping it off. I felt a small tear trickling down from my cheek. Next to it was a group photo of our team and my face beaming with happiness. Our arms linked together like one. I smile. *Thud!* My mind switches back to the present. Dad's head pokes through the door.

" You okay? We're loading up the bags now in the boot, want me to take that?" I stare at him, we share each other's gaze. "Oh. Uh..sure. Thanks." I pass him my bag, he turns around and strides down the hall. I let out a big sigh and realize that the water has already risen up to my waist, and my bed half submerged in the water. I push towards the door and out into the hall. It's scattered with all sorts of items from in the house, floating clothes, mum's favourite rocking chair, books, and even Emma's favourite rubber duck with its shades on, floating upright in the pool of mess. I pick it up and stuff it in my bag for an item in the house to remember. Tables were turned and picture frames shattered. It looked like a crime scene. I lunge towards the living room and see basically the same thing. Clothes, towels, books, lots of books, one pot plant and the sweet candlestick that would have an aroma that would have your nose glued on it forever. I roll one of the curtains slightly ajar. It was still dark and it was raining heavily. I could see several flashlights here and there but other than that it was completely dark. I start heading to the door but then realize my right legs caught on something underwater. I push forward. Nothing. I push forward again. Still nothing. I put my left leg up and then..... *KICK!* My right leg flings up followed by a ripped hand towel. *Ha! I am... KARATE KID!!* I make my way through the water and try to climb over objects. A few minutes later I'm at the front door, standing on the table by the mirror my mum would always apply her lipstick on before waving goodbye to us. The waters slowly creeping up by the minute and sucking up anything in its way. Unfortunately the door handle is already submerged in the water which is going to be a problem to get out. *I can do this. I can swim.* I chuckle nervously. I put both my feet in first followed by my belly and shoulders. I slowly paddle towards the door wishing myself luck. I take a deep breath in..*1...2...3* and out...*1...2...3* in and...under it was all hazy and unclear. I close my eyes to prevent anything from coming in and put one hand in front of me and feel for the silver handle. I can feel the wood of the door, I move my hand to the right. Nothing. A bit more to the right? Nothing. Then I felt it, an easily missable little hole that once held a door handle we'd touch nearly everyday. Could it have really fallen off? how? Suddenly my lungs felt like they were about to close up on me, I rise up and up but I can't find any air. My lungs were ready to explode, my head was up, my feet kicking for its life and my eyes squeezed tight. Every bit in my body was aching and my arms ready to weigh me down and sink to the bottom. That's when I hit it. I hit it really hard. The ceiling. A sharp pain rushes through my nose and I gasp for a breath.

A stream of blood comes trickling down from my nose and into my mouth, but I don't care. I keep inhaling as much air as I can carry. *How long have I been under for? How is it already risen up to the ceiling? Has my family already left me? Do they think I'm dead?* I could feel the water slowly rising from the side of my cheeks. I take one big deep breath and descend into the water. *I'm sorry mum. I'm sure you'll understand*. I take one of mum's vases with pretty flowers printed on it that she got from dad on Christmas eve and smash it against the window. Unfortunately that didn't work. I was running out of time until my lung would give out. I force one of the table drawers open and rummage through the stacks of bills and other, wet paperwork. A screw driver. Dad must have left it in there when he was fixing mum's work chair. *I owe you one dad.* I thrash the screw driver against the glass and soon enough it gave way and broke into pieces. I used the tip of the screwdriver to clean the excess glass off the sides so I don't have to worry about getting cut on the way out. Thankfully the shards of glass drifted the opposite way from me, which gave me a clear path outside into the water. I swim up just fitting through the gap, and up into the surface and to my surprise I see family waiting there for me, on a boat that read *The Sandpiper*. The letters were unclear but could easily be repainted. It was dull looking and worn out. The boat was old with layers of paint flaking off. "Tony! Tony!" Emma's chubby hand pointed to me and mum and dad entered the picture and I could see there hands flapping about like crazy. " Yeah, yeah. I can see you guys" I say. Mum and dad stop and I can't tell if there laughing or crying. Or both. Dad helps me up onto the small boat and I talk about my 'Adventurous' story of how I got out. " So, dad, I thought you said you'll put my bag in the boot. This sure doesn't look like a car." I joke and force a laugh, but instead dad's smile turns into a frown. I sigh, the sun's starting to rise and yet no sign of any rescue boats.

Emma's playing with her doll grooming its hair and making sure there's no hair sticking up or tangled. Then she props the doll up on the edge and smiles then gets mini teacups, places it in Zoe's hand that she named the doll after her other one got lost when she brought it to the beach. *Did Emma even bring any clothes?* I couldn't blame her though, she was only four, Emma was just pouring them a cup of tea, which was just water, when there was a sudden jolt that let Zoe flying into the air and into the polluted water. "NO!" she screamed and ran to the edge, but before I could stop her she leapt into the water. I freeze. She can't swim, dad got up and started shouting. *That's not gonna do anything, I've got to do something or she'll drown.* I dive into the water, grab her from under and swim back up. I swing her up onto my arms and on my back. She sputters out water, looks up and lays her head on mine. I lift Emma back up into the boat. She cries out and goes silent. Then I remember the duck. I pull it out of my bag and walk towards her. " Yeave me ayone! I laugh, she still hasn't learnt how to say a few words yet. "Well if you don't want Daisy," I say slowly, "I guess I'll go now." She turns her head slightly and sniffles. I extend my arm forward and she takes the duck holding it close to her chest. " Awww.. I missed you so so so much." She hugs the duck again and turns to face me. "Tank woo Tony! Tank woo!" I smile and this time I don't correct her. I go back to mum and dad who are trying to find help. I lie down on the boat with just enough space for my legs and I feel all woozy. It feels like the world's spinning. "Tony? Tony!" mum's shaking me but everything's inaudible.*Thud!*

I wake up to see myself on a small sofa and three pairs of eyes staring down at me. "Mmm...where am I?" I ask as I sit up and scan my surroundings. There's a small firepit and peculiar objects that are oddly shaped and bizarre. "Welcome to Mayflower village." an old lady's voice filled the air. It was an awfully cringey name for a village. "You've been out for two days," she continues, "I think you have an ailment called *Termurphia*. I think it's from drinking contaminated water. You regurgitated some unusual things." She continues, " I've given you antibiotics, you've had a serious scrape on your left leg. Possibly from a sharp metal object? Glass perhaps?" I force myself to sit up and look at my leg, there's a big elastic bandage covering half my leg with a horse pin on it. "Grandma?" I say. " Yep! That's me." she laughs, " So, how are you enjoying Mayflower?" she jokes. I'm in the lounge where I would always sleep for a night or two. It's a bit spooky to be honest- the old grandfather clock chime that will make you pee your pants. But at least I know one thing, is that I'm SAFE.

VIHARA KONARA

The Masks we Wear

Acrylic on canvas

DAISY SAUNDER

Bloomed in Confession

Acrylic paint

NOAH DINEEN

Out to Pasture

Cotton, yarn, and wood

MATILDA WILBY

Rise or Regret It,

February 1st 1960

"Can we get four sandwiches and a pot of coffee, please?"

The young server st ood nervous and unsure, his pale, pimpled face gleaming with sweat in the warmth of the crowded lunch bar.

"Uhh..." his voice wavered, "I don't know if -"

"We've got money, don't sweat." on the right of Franklin, Joseph searched his coat pocket and pulled out a few crumpled green bills.

"It's alright, Joseph. He knows." That was Ezell from Franklin's left, his rich, deep voice tainted by a hint of anger.

The four young men sat perched on padded stools in the Greensboro Woolworths lunch bar. Outside, the summer sun shone onto a classic American street with parked cars in a procession of colourful paint and white-rimmed tires as bustling customers walked in and out of lined shops like busy bees, their day's purchases held securely under pale arms; a picture perfect scene. All except for the tense lunch bar crowded with agitated customers in which the four boys sat.

"I don't think this was a good idea." whispered David - the youngest of the four - to Franklin, "this was your plan, man. You're taking the blame if this goes south."

But Franklin responded, determined, "No, we all signed up to this. We can't stay silent." David looked unsure. So Franklin persisted, "Listen, if we don't stand up to them now, we'll regret it. Nothing will change. Keeping silent only enables it." David frowned.

"But we're not speaking up."

Franklin sighed, "No, not exactly." David gestured to the chairs on which they sat.

"And we're not really standing up either." Franklin glared at David, but he continued. "So if we're staying silent and sitting down, how are we fighting injustice?" Franklin laughed at the irony.

"You'll see."

As if on cue, a middle-aged man with sun-weathered skin and a decidedly outraged expression walked past the seated boys and, hacking up a particularly phlegmy gob of saliva, spat directly onto Joseph's polished leather shoes.

"What the hell, man!" Joseph sprung up in surprise, but before he could react, the man reached forward and seized Joseph's collar, pulling him in forcefully. Franklin held his breath and watched the two closely as the tension built and the room held their breath with him. The man's face was in such proximity to Joseph's, with his warm, youthful skin contrasting starkly to the wrinkled, sun-worn hands that gripped so tightly to the fabric.

"Listen here!" Spittle flew from his mouth in a rage, "This is America, I'm not gonna have you negroes discolouring this fine establishment."

"We're simply sitting in for some lunch." Franklin's heartbeat rose as he tried to placate the situation; all that he knew might happen was coming to pass. "We don't want any trouble." The man shifted his fiery gaze to the new speaker but another customer interjected - younger - with a wife and young girl and boy in the booth with him.

"We don't either. Read the sign." His skeletal finger pointed to the cream-coloured sign above the seated boys, that read: 'WHITES ONLY', ironically written in black.

Franklin didn't have a chance to speak further as, quite suddenly, more men stood and raised a comment - or rather - a threat.

"Joseph, please sit down." Ezell pulled Joseph away from the leathery man's grip and Joseph fell back down into his chair. The anxious waiter spoke once more to the boys over the clamour of raised voices.

The tension in the room was an intangible yet palpable thing, rising in the air and catching in Franklin's throat.

A sharp cry came suddenly from Ezell's left. Franklin glanced over his tall friend's shoulder and saw the young David holding a hand tenderly to the back of his neck; a cigarette butt had been put out on his skin and the well-dressed man to whom it belonged stood menacingly nearby. Then, from Franklin's right, another cry - this time from Joseph

- was heard as the boiling pot of coffee had slipped from the muscular manager's fingers and into their laps; it seemed he too wanted in on the action.

In a heartbeat, chaos broke loose and before Franklin could say a word to defend them, a rough tug pulled his collar and choked him. He jerked in surprise and was abruptly dragged to the floor by invisible hands who did not mean well.

Madness descended. Hands grappled and boots kicked and Franklin tried vainly to rise from the floor. A blur of ghostly faces created a canopy over him and a cacophony of slurs and hatred prevented him from rising. Again and again, fists pummelled Franklin's vulnerable body and soon, David joined him, terrified, on the vinyl floor, pulled from his seat in the fray. Franklin peered at him through a haze of pain and kicking feet and saw the fear and hopelessness on his companion's face.

Why this hatred? Why? How? Franklin's mind searched for answers - for hope now, when he felt the world could never change. For a moment, he wondered if being silent and staying down would be better than resisting.

His eye drifted and caught sight of the young girl and his brother, their skin like glowing porcelain, polished and uncracked. Franklin watched as the boy got up decisively from his seat and joined his father at his side, adding their threats to the torrent of abuses. The little girl remained, unsure, her fragile face beginning to fracture.

"Frank, get up!" David's muffled voice broke his reverie. He had somehow managed to get out from under the crowd and stood by the door, his bloody nose crooked and his eyes wide with panic. "Get up now or you're gonna regret it!" As he spoke, the hostile crowd began to surround him and Franklin watched the young man succumbing to fear like cornered prey, risking one last glance at Franklin before running out onto the street and to safety.

Franklin smiled grimly. He couldn't blame David for saving himself. Plus, he was right; if he didn't stand up now, he'd regret it, but not as David saw it. He thought of the young girl whose face was full of fear and uncertainty. He thought of the dream he and his friend shared; of sitting in the bar to eat the most delicious sandwich - in peace. And he thought of this very hatred that prevented them from doing just that.

Injustice fuelled him and with each aching push, he rose from the ground - much to the shock of his attackers and, even more so, his friends who watched on with wide eyes as he retook his place between them at the bar. The barrage of abuses did not cease nor slow, but the boys endured it in stoic, silent protest; an unseen pride driving their defiance and determination while they awaited the police and their inevitable consequences with triumphant satisfaction.

*

5 months later...

"Can we get four sandwiches and a pot of coffee please." It was a warm summer afternoon, and the four boys sat together on the leather stools at the Greensboro Woolworths lunch bar. An uneasy placidity filled the restaurant, but the boys took no notice; instead, quietly revelling in their success.

"You got it." The pimpled server hurried away, eager to oblige as Ezell turned to David.

"Nice nose, punk." David laughed nervously in response bringing a hand up to his bent nose, his eyes shifting apologetically to each of the others, awaiting their retribution. But the other boys just laughed at his skittish behaviour and Joseph rubbed a knuckled hand to David's curled hair endearingly.

"Ow, ow, ow! That hurts!"

Soon the food came and the boys didn't wait a second before wolfing down the sandwiches hungrily.

Franklin took a second to look at his meal before biting into it savouringly, only to spit it back out. The others had done likewise, with faces pinched in disgust.

"This tastes lousy." Ezell searched his bread for signs of spoil as David chimed in incredulously.

"This is what we rose up for?" A look of disappointment and regret crossed his face. But Franklin held his friend's shoulder firmly.

"Never regret fighting for change." Franklin could see understanding filling David's eyes, "Even if it is for the lousiest sandwich in North Carolina." The young boy chuckled and Franklin nodded, smiling as he poured himself a cup of lukewarm coffee and looked over the lunch bar contentedly.

There, in the booth at the back of the room, the little girl sat staring at him. But this time, he couldn't see confusion or fear. This time, her bright little face lit up in a smile, and she cautiously raised her pale hand to wave. Franklin winked in return, but her mother soon caught the interaction and pulled the girl away from his line of sight. Franklin could only chuckle. Some things - or rather, people - would never change.

But there was hope and that was all he had come to fight for, after all. Franklin turned back to the boys and took another bite of the tasteless sandwich, washing it down with a gulp of bitter coffee. He didn't care about the sandwiches; it was never about the sandwiches. It was about protesting for the freedom to be treated equally-like humans.

"I dunno guys. Tastes like victory to me."

SUCHISMITA BARUA

Fractured recollections

Pencil and oil paint on canvas

RAPHAEL NELMS

Sister, Daughter

Enter the man; traversing a mountainous hill. A church of God sat upon the peak. As he made his climb, the man saw his Mother on the pinnacle on the hill. His ring, cutting off the circulation of his fourth finger– a small price to pay for God. Of course, that ring was ordained with the cross. The man wore a robe of decadence. His feet lacerated, grass soothing nothing. Wind growing in temperament, towards what the man assumed would come to a climax. He tried to wrangle loose his ring, but no vengeance came to the wrath of God and lack of will, fell to the small angels who gave no encouragement to the man. In vain, he gave no thought to it. Pride came to the man who, in philosophical moments, thought of the human condition, but gave his vainglory up, in doses of metaphorical medicine. Perhaps that was his human condition. His Mother atop the hill, called his name. Looking blankly at the woman, he gave her no notice. In an unnoticed moment, the women practised the signature of the crucifix. In fixed ambition, the man staggered up the hill, falling, numerous times against the rocks of faith. Blocking the path to enlightenment. His Mother, dressed in a white dress, sat in an uncomfortable fashion. Looking out towards the industrialised landscape. Tears of perverted memories, barstadised her mind. The thoughts of old and new thundered in the background, of intellect so undeniable a factor, that the perverted memories looked upon nothing but barbarism and the Tatar's that roamed the land long before known time and known men. Men of ugly mouths, who spoke words of unintellectual tongues. The Mother's eyes blinded in discontent. The implications of memory not known to men, who wallow in their own problems, that end at the road of desires. The man struggled with the thoughts of his own desires and in a flurry he denounced his faith. A man broken by the will and wants of God. His dead eyes, he was not blinded except if in the fact of his own faith. Sullied by his dulled eye colour. He at this time saw his Mother. Her warm smile. The sun of God. Except the son of God had already come. He thought, tongue in cheek. Of course. Broken glances from his Mother, a farcical grin on her face towards the man. A smile not unknown by the man, yet it was a rarity for his Mother to smile. The crooked smile of the man himself. The wise men had said something of prophecy unfulfilled, thrown to ground in anguish. That was his mind. Summiting the mountain of God towards enlightenment. A happy coincidence that his Mother sat in her quaint nature. His conscience was lighter than usual. He looked to his Mother, nodding at her son, in admiration. A distant admiration. One that couldn't be known as the man. Who was old enough to know the ideas of admiration. The unachievability of such goals. He knew that goals fell short and desperation hid in beauty. The funny things in life came in bouts and if it did. Life was a game of bouts, like waves. Knocking over the men who were fickle of mind. Though the mind of the man was not fickle nor was it a mind of archaic wisdom, though some did argue. His Mother knew it too well. The endless nights of teaching forbidden lore. Through her scholarly practice. Did not have much in terms for her son. Except the clear wit of her. Which her son had inherited. Now his body was a point of fascination. The ribs that poked through his skin.

"Son, Augustine, have you eaten much?" says the Mother, now steadfast in her motherly tone. Augustine, the man, in a rude manner, addressed his Mother. She gave her son no notice. Yet, the inklings of sorrow still remained in the voice. These inklings convulsed into a proper beast of rage. The Mother stood up, gesturing to Augustine. He followed her into the chapel, her hand covered in scars.

"Mother, you've been bleeding." Augustine, hurried into the chapel, he grabbed ahold of the scarred hand, his thumb caressing the wounds that to no surprise, had caused, ruptures of the skin, creating a labyrinth of scars that only led to the conclusions of multiple attempts of causing such wounds, Augustine crawled through the labyrinths of his own mind. Every possible route of thought, mined for its resources of logic. The pastor beckoned Augustine into the light of the chapel. Augustine made a foreign gesture to the pastor. Who took it with unadulterated confusion. The body laid in the middle of the chapel. Hair pulled back into a bun. Her face now stricken in a sort of grief, though the dead couldn't grieve. The Mother followed Augustine into the building. Augustine had let go of her hand now, leaving it to fester away in its brutal entirety. The Devil's hand. Once again, alone. The robed men that were situated around the chapel. Paying the respects for the woman's life and though no one wanted to admit it. The woman was dead. A bronze elephant was stamped into the casket.

"Pride? A question of faith? Augustine, is this your answer to this tragedy?" questioned the old man. "People die every day, rotting away in misery, and only the cycle continues.." he trailed off. As through a concealed door, The Father entered. A man of an obtuse ego and a luscious gluttony. Draped in fine purple silk, yet as he saw the coffin, reality of the situation came to light, and despite many days that he had spent, trying to recuperate his prideful persona. He came to tears over the sight of the elephant. An older man held him in his arms, that became no more twigs. The Father shoved the man off with the barbarity of a dying martyr. He lay his thick arms atop the coffin, he called the name of Augustine. The diligent Augustine. Sat next to the coffin.

"Why call on me Father?"

"One day this will happen to you."

"I'm confused? it is happening to me"

"She was prideful to a fault, wasn't she?" Quipped The Father

"I hate to admit, now that she's dead..." Augustine trailed off, lost in his own thoughts, he could not contemplate the death, in the vogue existence of being. Her face undoubtedly squashed against the prized wood of her coffin. A perverse comfort.

The Mother, situated in a small corner, a mouse, with Devil's hands. The well of the conscience of Augustine filled with fear. Over what he couldn't know. The unknowable had arising in the questions of his mind before but never in this dire of circumstances, but he knew one thing, the Devil dances around the souls of the weak, just like it had done with his Mother. Who must have become a slave to ugly fits of paranoia. At the present time, she was butting her head against the church wall. A petty salvation to the larger problems at the time. Men shuffled around her, in anguish of a mad woman, as if they hadn't seen her.

It was a short celebration of one's death, if that could be called a celebration. The men walked out of the church, and down the hill. Muddying the soles of their feet. When they got home, they would bathe and eat. While The Mother would bathe in her own tears, which poured towards the floor, and stained the bricks. Augustine resided himself, next to his pompously distraught Father. They both watched as The Mother, feeble in foot, walked towards the coffin.

"Augustine, son. Come and console your Mother."

"Yes Mother," said Augustine. Now leaving his Father to be at one with his Mother's skin. They embraced towards each other, knowing glances at one another, that life would never be the same and if normality ever thought to come back, the Devil's hand would twist it. Just like the scars that twisted around the Mother's hand and forever into the small abyss of death and grief. That Augustine opined would only begin a cycle of death and grief. As the pastor, who had been absent from the room for much a time, scurried back into the church, paying his respects to the family before taking the coffin away, with the help of some robed men. Of course, The Mother cried, even The Father too, Augustine, dejected by his own. Like it would always be now. Augustine in the shadow of his sister's rotting corpse.

Augustine, now soured by the taste of death, left his grieving Mother and Father to walk down the hill, one more time, he swore he would never come back to this place again. A rash decision, perhaps. However as he walked back to the place of homely delights. The sky showed signs of a storm, although to Augustine the tempest of life had already begun and behind him God followed him in staunch belief, the last time God had such faith in humankind.

PHILLIPA PEARSE

I'm glad it was you

The embers were beginning to grow cold. The flames had died out long before I got up, and long before the sun began to rest behind the hill. Yet, I waited. As I watched the ashes of those letters and photos settle, I waited for the feeling to leave and the memories so embedded in my soul to disappear; as if they never existed.

But they didn't. No matter how hard the tears fell, how loud I screamed at the sky, or how many hours I spent regretting laying my naïve eyes on you; I could never escape. For a while, I blamed it on the power of love. I feared that maybe such a deep feeling would be forever, perpetually and indelibly engraved within my soul; as if you had carved your initials there with the purpose of never allowing me to be liberated from the pain. I thought it would ricochet off my every hope, seeping into every dream and slowly turning them to nightmares, and methodically destroying every desperate attempt my weak heart had at repairing and moving on. I fought it, I battled it every day. But as darkness began to fall, even the faint glow of the embers were struggling. My eyes caught the flicker of a lonely star appearing through the darkness, and I closed my eyes to make that foolish wish. Once upon a time, I would've begged upon that star for us, for *you*. Wished with all my heart on that tiny incandescent spot in the distance that we could find our way back, even if it meant losing myself on the journey.

But I realised something in that moment, I realised I felt more love in letting go than I did in holding on. So instead of wishing for a story that ended long before I wanted it to, I asked that lonely star to give me a chance, just one chance at turning my deepest emotions and pained memories into something I could be proud of.

The page stared at me, mocking me, waiting for even a word to be formed. Nothing. I stared enviously at the array of books lined along my shelf, and I wondered how they did it. How did those great poets harness their emotions, their experiences and inspirations into words that people cared to read? All I know is emotion, yet the only thing I seemed to be able to write was that one sentence I scribbled in my notebook, before I thought a life without you was even a possibility. "I would rather know a piece of you, even if I felt it piercing my heart and chipping away at my very soul, than be left a heart with a wound the shape of a love we once shared." Those were the cursed words I'd contemplated erasing or burning on many occasions since. The words I've never been quite able to fit into anything I write. So, I put them there. Out of place on the paper? Perhaps. But never out of place in how they once resided in my heart.

As pen hit paper, I hoped by continuing where I left off back then would make that wish upon a lonely star come true.

I always thought that erasing the past was the key to moving forward. I thought that by deleting the photos, burning the letters and elegies that were inspired by you, and burying those insurmountable memories; I would somehow, magically, be able to forget it all and return to a version of me untouched by your cruel disposition. But moving forward didn't happen by waiting around for that feeling to find me. Nor does it happen by erasing an entire chapter of you. It happened when I finally realised that my heart doesn't need to repair or forget to feel whole again. I had placed you on a pedestal so high that when it began to crumble, there was no direction I could run that would protect me from the debris. But as the dust settled around me, I realised that in the shadow of where I placed you, I had forgotten, that love wasn't – and never will be – the fragments of a heart you left behind, nor the pieces I had to learn to put back together. It was everything else.

Love was the quiet pair of hands that helped me clean up a mess they didn't make. The arms that held me through the hours of tears I thought would never cease, and guided me through the darkest hours. All that empathy, compassion and understanding; that was the real love, and where I found the courage to overcome a pain I thought would forever keep the embers burning.

Peace came as I walked through the trees just beginning to be caressed by the early signs of autumn colour, and I recalled it all. I remembered each passing word, every gaze and every touch. I prepared for the tears to trickle ever so quietly down my cheeks as it had done every day since; but nothing came. I looked up from the grey pavement and into those soaring trees. The sun poking through where it could and the gentle breeze lifting those first fallen leaves. Peace.

And through the pain of a broken heart, I learnt more about *real* love than I ever thought possible. How sometimes, the tumultuous cascade of what seemed like forever can lead to the realisation that there's no passion in knowing forever, only the impasse of certainty.

My pen stopped; exactly where I needed it to. All the repressed inspiration appeared in front of me in scribbles of inky passion. My own words taught me my greatest lesson; difficult chapters don't need to be erased to continue the story. They just need to be finished. So, I stopped trying to erase you and what we were, now I can reread and smile at what was and who it made me. And eventually, I closed your chapter, but continued the book.

PEREGRINE

Confliction

Photography, printed with inkjet printer on 250 GSM paper

VIOLET POTTER

Letters to F (Prequel)

She didn't want to go in the water; all she wanted to do was stay. He wanted to go in the water; all he wanted to do was go. But there February sat, eyes swollen with tears and nose running with pain. The water had rippled as the other kids made their way into the reflected sun that rested upon the lake. She was left there to plead by the sand, begging the camp leader to change her mind. February was bound to a command that could be released with an impossible scenario.

And there was Charlie, limited by only the pace he could go, running to make his way to the ripples. You couldn't have noticed him as he followed the wrinkled surface that they made. He was just another normal kid. You could feel the excitement exuberating through his skin. It was electrifying. But still, February was left there to cry.

"February, I'm sorry but you can't sit out unless you have a friend with you", the camp leader said once again. She was immune to the poor girl's vulnerability. She was burying her face in her arms and hugging her legs towards herself. She hadn't made a friend. She couldn't. How could she if she couldn't speak? Her demons had always stolen everything she wanted to say.

But Charlie kept running. Just like any normal kid. He was the remaining piece of a puzzle that you couldn't spot after it had been put in place and she was an oblivion. And she still was left to endure the loneliness that was given to her by the cards she had drawn. She'd thought that a lifetime without a friend would do her fine eventually but never had she thought about the unsolicited consequences.

"It'll be fun", the camp leader had continued. "You get to go in a kayak and enjoy the lake. You don't have to go into the water if you don't want to." February continued shaking her head. She was convicted in her decision to repel all opportunities of getting wet. "Come on", her voice began to grow louder along with her frustration. Not a head turned. All except one.

February continued to resist the command and stay situated in her belief. Every tear shed seemed to not have done her any justice. That was until Charlie had focused his attention to the lake, then to the camp leader, then to her. Turns out his pace wasn't the only resistance he could face.

Just as the camp leader was going to follow through with another plea, Charlie was drawn by the pull of his curiosity that felt more compelling than gravity itself. And then she continued, "I understand, Kiddo. I really do. But I can't just let you sit out if you don't have a friend with you."

Shaking her head stubbornly, February managed to articulate an argument that she thought would end it all. Everyone who knew her knew that a word spoken from her was earned by an internal battle that was won with great pain. "No", she tried. "Nuh-uh".

"Feb-", she was cut off by a little boy standing there, consumed with wonder and concern. She cocked her head towards him. He smiled sweetly at the poor girl whose green orbs that belonged in her eyes drowned in tears that had become shameful. They peered at him fearfully as they studied him with wary; and slowly, they softened with hope as she saw it glimmer in his eyes that reflected her own.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She tensed at the question. The camp leader intervened, telling him that she was okay and informed him that February was just nervous to go into the water. With pure sincerity, he watched as she cried, searching for a way to replace her tears with a smile. He followed through by asking if there was anything he could do to help. The camp leader replied saying that she needed a friend to sit out with her. After he thought, he rubbed the back of his neck as he did when he was nervous. "I can sit with her."

"That's okay, Charlie. You moved into this group just so you could go kayaking. You should enjoy it", the camp leader responded.

"It's okay. I want to sit with her instead."

"Alright then." She got up, took one last look at February, and went to go sit and supervise.

Charlie lowered himself to be sitting next to her. He hadn't noticed her before until now. He smiled delicately at her as she did the same back. From not being able to breathe or slow it down, February focused on being appreciative of his gesture instead of fearing it. Years of therapy and support may have helped her be able to somewhat manage in conversation, but it could never had prepared her for this moment; a moment where someone had wanted to talk to her.

"I'm Charlie", he said proudly. After a few seconds of silence that was filled with a shy smile from her behalf, he continued. "What's your name?"

"February", she eventually gave in, heart pounding against her ribs as her voice became fragile.

"That's a weird name", he giggled, then he recovered by telling her that he liked it. A quiet sense of solace settled over her. She was used to people leaving it at the first part of his statement, forgetting the second.

The sound of amusement from the rest of the kids laced the wind melodically as it danced through the leaves on the tree that towered over them. Where the sand met the grass, their toes buried beneath the earth. Despite still longing to be on the lake instead of beside it, Charlie couldn't help but be intrigued by this feeling of comfort that had crept up on him as soon as he saw her. Although her silence was somewhat awkward, it brought him a sense of familiarity.

February fiddled anxiously with the frail string on her shorts. Words never came naturally to her, that she knew. She knew how to wait out the uneasy tension that she would build. She knew how to tune it out. She knew how to persist through it. Charlie probably knew as well. But he also knew how to overcome it.

"How old are you?" He watched as she turned her head back to him, light reflecting off the glasses that were too big for her face. Eventually, she held up nine fingers.

"I'm nine too. I'm going into grade four next year in a whole new town. I've never moved schools before. Have you?" She shook her head. "Well, I'm really nervous. I don't want to leave my friends. Mum and Dad said I'll be fine, though. They got a job in Woodcast. Do you know where it is?" She nodded.

"Do you live there?" he asked. She nodded again. She had lived there her entire life. Excitement sparked inside of him. He had already made a friend. "Really? That's so cool. Do you like it?" She shrugged this time, trying her best to keep the conversation going.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

"Sorry", she murmured.

"That's okay. I love to talk. I can talk for the both of us if you like?" Ease washed within her, bringing her to a slight excitement coated in security that pinched the corners of her mouth to accentuate her dimple on the left side of her face. A quiet giggle had escaped from her and Charlie held onto it, hoping that it wouldn't float out of his grasp. But like most things do, it eventually faded into time.

"Mum and Dad got me a Rango figurine to make me feel better. Have you seen Rango?" As she shook her head, his eyes widened as he knew that he had found what they were going to talk about. "It is the best movie ever! I named my cat Beans after one of the characters in it. So basically, it's about this lizard, Rango, who..."

He felt a rush as he broke down the entire plot for her. She was captivated by the exuberance of his words as she looked at him, her gaze lingering as she dissected the peculiarity of his mannerisms. How he moved his hands a lot and took time to stop and think, glancing up at the sky, then to continue without worrying about the amount of sunlight he was burning up. She listened genuinely, absorbing his pure enjoyment as he spoke to her. Even in this unfamiliar territory, she rested her head on her knees, quietly watching him ramble on. Not many people had taken the time to talk to her.

"...I highly recommend it", he finished. February then looked away, chewing the side of her cheek for an answer. The words were there; they just didn't know how to come out.

"Okay", she finally managed.

Smiling at himself smugly, feeling proud that she answered him, Charlie continued. "So, do you go to Woodcast Primary or do you go to the other school?"

"Primary", she whispered almost inaudibly. A spark ignited as Charlie had realised he wouldn't be alone.

"Really? That's perfect! Now I won't be lonely on the first day", his teeth bared and so did hers. "So, what do you like to do at lunchtime?"

She scanned her brain, trying to think of something worth saying. All that surfaced was the fact that she'd either stay in the classroom with the teacher or in her own solitude on the buddy bench. Both of which she didn't think was worth saying. She shrugged to reply, letting it carry the weight of the emptiness in her response.

Charlie compensated by telling her that he liked to play soccer at lunch with his old friends but wouldn't be opposed to just sitting with her and chatting instead. Understanding had grown between them, bridging the synapse they shared with knowing and familiarity. As February's distress had faded into a soft joy, Charlie's nerves had electrified into excitement. It was as if both of their souls had merged into one flame that kept the haunting thoughts of worry warm, despite them being cold for what seemed like an eternity.

And there they sat, content in each other's company, exchanging stories through different mediums. Saving parts of them that were abandoned with the simplicity of interaction. And then soon the sun fell below the lake. The lake that one had exchanged for the other. The stars shone bright, lighting their way to another time. In some way, they were their first friends, February and Charlie, and they had entangled with one another into a bond they couldn't have known the vulnerability of.

Eventually, like most scenarios, they had departed from each other, wishing each other a goodbye. A goodbye that was thought to have come to an end on the first day back at school when they would reunite with one another. A goodbye that was only supposed to last a few weeks. A goodbye that wasn't expected to last years and years. They both couldn't have known the despair that would come when Charlie didn't see February on the first day of his new school and when February had exchanged Woodcast for Eastman, a town in another state.

But somewhere in the stars above them, their story hadn't ended. They both lived their lives, still thinking of one another from time to time. Jumping from year to year, growing older and further apart. Wondering where the other one had gone. Expecting that goodbye to be permanent. Eventually giving up on holding onto their ephemeral moment from getting lost in translation. Not knowing that one day, eventually, that goodbye would expire.

MELANIE MCLEAN

Untitled
Oil on canvas

DAISY SAUNDER

the fragrance of us, hypothetical

lime green is not a warm colour,
until it spills generously from your eyes to mine...
(clover, almond milk, pale honey.).
a shrink-wrapped second, airtight and trembling,
suddenly everything softens.
(a ripe pear, fresh linen, sweet jasmine).

crimson gloss bitten thin, a seam of dirt beneath it.
(pomegranate, fresh blood, black cherry pit.)
fingers that were never quite intertwined,
we kept stopping one breath short of touch.
quietly demanding something of me...
something i was more than willing to give.
(swan feathers, cold milk, powdered sugar)

we once dreamed of a cottage by the sea,
(musk, almond, ivy),
thinly pressed against the sand
where we used to play... *in my head...*
a childhood we never got to share,
soulfully nostalgic for something
that never really happened.
(burnt sugar, bedsheets, soap.)

we sat on the edge of it once, sweet as jam,
drawing ants and bees
to our stickiness.
(ripe fig, crystallised sugar, white peach).
we soon learned that even sweetness rots,
if you leave it out long enough.
we said nothing about it.
(cashmere; thinning to velvet, fraying into denim.)

you whispered to me once...
starry sky, late summer:
"you remind me of the september sun",
short promises of warmth in the cold,
a heat that knows it won't be forgiven.
some sort of gift, a sweet-release.
(white silk, sunlight, honeydew)

after hearing that,
i look at you with guilt...
finding my reflection,
in the vibrant jade of your eyes.
(black ink, stone, a stick of charcoal...)
hard resentment.
look at me...
i had built a saint out of sugar glass.
fragile, fake, breakable.
what a fictional fable of myself...
of someone who can keep her promises.

dried roses collapsing inward on the mantelpiece,
dropping onto the couch
(brown leather, cheap tequila, broken glass)
i beg you,
with my pupils widening at each breath i take.
i promise you,
i can't keep promises.

you sit back,
adjust your expectations to laughter.
(coffee, candle wax, yellowed paper).
like you've already folded me into the past tense,
like a picture you keep in your wallet,
but never really look at.
and as sad as it may sound,
we never had it...
and still,
i lost it.
(metallic, cracked concrete, a cigarette).

now, i try not to look at you
like you ruined something sacred.
like you cracked a stained-glass promise,
one that we traced with our fingers...
but never spoke aloud.
maybe you shattered it;
but maybe i was the one
who called it holy.
(spilled communion wine, smoke, damp stone.)

we never let it touch our tongues
...but i still taste sugar when i swallow.

we kept it unnamed
...and i still bleed from the glass.

we never made it real
...but it sure as hell bruised like it was.

so, i pretend i was always lighter alone.
(bruised peaches, crusted honey, cheap perfume)

one april afternoon,
the spirit of a cyclone
twists the ends of my hair...
it slides into us
like a fishing hook-shaped question mark.
(saltwater, rusted tin, steaming asphalt)

you choose motion. i choose permanence;
fossilisation.
(marble, bone, drying clay).

because my love,
didn't you smell it?
i have always had a way of spoiling sweetness.

but for once, i didn't want to just taste it.
i wanted to swallow it whole,
let it sit thick inside me.

and for once,
i wasn't in love with the almost.
i was in love with you.
(bruised cherries, warm honey, overripe figs)

and didn't i tell you before?
i don't keep promises.
it's almost cruel, really...
that this is the one time
i wish i had kept one.

i wish i had kept you.
(rotten pear, vanilla turned sour, warm milk.)

CITY OF GREATER
BENDIGO