

CITY OF
SUBIACO

CRAIG
SILVEY 2025
AWARD

FOR YOUNG WRITERS

LET YOUR
IMAGINATION TAKE
YOU SOMEWHERE
UNEXPECTED



CONTENTS

Lower Primary

Jimmy the Forgetful Dingo, Emily Graham	5
Monkey Power, Hans Teo	8
The Monkey Scientist, Olivia Wong	10

Middle Primary

Rong Fu and the Emperor, Clare Chia	14
The Other Brother, Caleb Kameron	18
Dinosaur Ate My Homework, Eleanor Mullen	22

Upper Primary

Into the Abyss, Felix Calautti	26
Life Through the Eyes of Gizmo, Daniella Fish	32
Forte, Beatrix Daly Reed	36

Lower Secondary

The Tide-Keeper, Chloe Chia	41
Cloudbound, Abigail Koh	45
When She's Born, Shaun Toor	52

Upper Secondary

BEAR, Tristan Adams	60
A Kite in Gaza, Misha Anwar	64
Faith in Blood, Evelyn Grayson	69



We received over 1180 entries for the 2025 Craig Silvey Awards for Young Writers. We saw jungles, main characters as animals, humour, heart and reflection. A wonderful collection of diverse themes makes up this anthology. These entries rose to the top because of their unique ideas, technical skills and passion. Please enjoy this collection of award-winning prose.



LOWER PRIMARY



JIMMY THE FORGETFUL DINGO



EMILY
GRAHAM

A long time ago, in the Dreamtime, there was a very forgetful dingo named Jimmy. Jimmy and his mate, Lyla, lived alone in Blaze Den, one of the many dens in the boiling Australian bush.

One silvery, scorching and silent night, Jimmy was awoken by a terrible noise. "What's that noise?" he mumbled sleepily, still only just waking up. Jimmy saw Lyla laying on her back, waiting and waiting and waiting. Jimmy gasped when he saw her. "You're having a baby!" he cried with delight. "Well," Lyla countered "I would like to know when it will come out." They both went back to sleep.

In the morning, Jimmy sets out to see Sally the magpie seer. Jimmy asks her when the baby will come out and she says in a hoarse voice, "Have a seat, I will be right back." So, she left. After what seemed like forever, Sally came back. "The baby will come out in two months." She said in her hoarse voice. "I will be on my then." Jimmy said "and thank you!"

After three months, Jimmy starts to get extremely worried. The baby should of come out a month ago. Sally never, ever, ever wrong!! Jimmy goes and check on Lyla. She looked more worse than ever. "So," Lyla said quickly "do you know what in a dingo's den is going on here!?" "I don't think that me knowing would make much difference." Jimmy admitted dramatically. "But do you know!" Lyla probably woke all the owls in Australia. Jimmy considered this for a moment. "Hmmm, no." He said. "I feel sick." Said Lyla suddenly. "Don't worry, I can look after you." said Jimmy. After five more months, Jimmy starts getting worried all over again. It should of come out six months ago!!! "Hello!!!" Lyla called weakly. "Hello!" called back Jimmy, but quieter. "Just come here!" She yelled back, furiously tired of his games. Jimmy wandered in, laughing hysterically. "Haha, very funny." Lyla said sarcastically. I've got an absolutely amazing plan! I've remembered something!" Jimmy sang over and over and over again.

The thing that Jimmy had remembered was that he needed to make Lyla medicine to make the baby come out. He also remembered the recipe. One rabbit, two gumtree leaves, some billabong water and a quarter of a lizard. all mushed up together. Once he had this, he gave Lyla the medicine which ate looking cunningly confused. "So, what's this and what's it supposed to do?" Lyla asked. "It's medicine and it will make the baby come out, which will make you feel a lot better. It's also what I remembered earlier." Jimmy answered her. "Then, I feel better already!" Lyla said joyously. "Well thats good." Jimmy smiled.

Three weeks later all was well again. Jimmy and Lyla had the baby and named her Betsy and Jimmy asked a very silly question. "Hey Lyla, what's a baby dingo called?" He asked her. "Oh Mr forgetful" Lyla said "they are called pups." She shook her head.

– THE END –

MONKEY POWER

HANS TEO



The scorching hot sun blazed directly on the fence and ground. That was where Malchy the monkey lived. He enjoyed roaming around the grassland and the freedom within the fenced area which was separated from humans.

One early morning, a group of construction workers took down the fence because they needed to relocate it to the local Primary school Mount Hawthorn.

The monkey was very furious. He bared his teeth at workers and with a murmured voice he told himself "I want revenge"!

Malchy went to the school to search for his fence. He brought along some weapons from the forest. The weapons were banana peels. He flooded the entire floor with banana peels near the classrooms. He hid and waited patiently like he was invisible until the recess bell rang. All the teachers and children rush out from their classes to the canteen. The floor was slippery with the banana peels and all of them fell over on to the ground and injured themselves. Children were screaming and sobbing while the teacher stumbled and fell over again and again trying to stand up.

Finally, the construction workers were left with no option but to come to a conciliation with the monkey. The workers agreed to replace a new fence and they planted ten more banana trees for him.

Malchy was on cloud nine after winning the war! This was his most memorably day ever!

– THE END –

The Monkey Scientist



Olivia Wong

Long ago, in the deepest and darkest part of a jungle, an old, clever monkey scientist named Mr Monkey Minestine was looking out the window and saw a big storm was coming. Now Mr Monkey Minestine was actually excited, in fact he just remembered it was the first day of Winter. Mr Monkey Minestine opened the door and ran outside with all his tools for his experiment. His hands became colder and colder and so moved a bit quicker. It then started to hail. Mr Monkey Minestine quickly got out his special, gold glass jar and collected most of the hail on the ground, when suddenly, he saw metal roofs fly away including his. Mr Monkey Minestine ran into his roofless house remembering about his other friend's roofs then running straight out of his house causing the door to fly off too. First he ran to his best elephant friend Sam. He was holding his heavy door back. Mr Monkey Minestine called out to Sam and said "my door is already off, come and help me!" They spent a good few hours chatting about the weather wondering how they were going to get the roofs and doors back. Sam and Minestine were standing near the doorway, and then suddenly they blew away in the storm. Sam tried to grab on to Minestine's hand and he did then they had a hard landing on a grassy hill.

Sam spotted a tiny, not gone door. Sam knocked on it and the door opened. Minestine pulled Sam into the house. Inside was bigger than it looked. Minestine looked inside and he was astonished. He found his things were all neatly in the room. His glass jar, 6 roofs and 2 doors that belonged to Sam and him. Soon they heard a sound bing bang bing bang! so they turned and saw a shadow then the shadow turned into a ...

"Monster!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Sam said, hiding behind Minestine's back "monster?" said the scary thing? "I'm not a monster!" Sam ran out the door screaming, making Kayla the koala wake up from her big sleep in her gumtree. Sam asked if he could come up the tree to safety? Kayla said yes in a sleepy voice. But as soon as Sam got up he fell off into the storm . This time the wind kept blowing harder and harder. Then he remembered about his good friend Minestine. Sam pulled himself down to the grassy hill and opened the little door again. He slowly pushed his way through and got a bit stuck before entering. The little girl noticed and pulled Sam's trunk through the door so that he could get in.

Inside Sam saw something very different than the last time Minestine was at the table having lunch with the monster, who was actually a little girl. Sam was confused. She explained what happened and said that she looks like a monster because she was doing a competition to dress up as something

really spooky and the winner gets 6000 dollars. After a long and tiring day, she offered for them to have a nap on her spare beds.

Part 2: The Scientists Meet

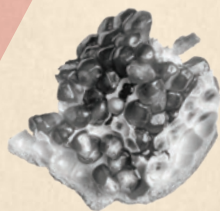
Sam was exhausted so Minestine woke up before him and looked around, and could hear peculiar sounds coming from the next room. Minestine peered into the next room and saw the little girl doing an experiment, similar to what he was doing outside with the pouring hail and she was using Minstine's special jar. He briskly walked to the little girl and said, "Are you using my jar of hail?" "Yeah I am, I thought while you were asleep I could help you with your experiment because I have always wanted to do this one but I didn't have a big enough jar for it." You could have asked me" exclaimed Minstine. "Hang on," said the little girl whose name was Lucy not even replying to Minestine. Are you the cleverest monkey scientist on this land? "Ah yeah I am" replied Minestine. Lucy explained how she had seen him in the newspaper and how she had always wanted to meet him.

Soon they heard Sam waking up from his big sleep in bed. When he looked around he saw everything except his dear friend. Sam marched out of his room to see what was going on and saw Lucy and Minestine in their white lab coats finishing the exciting, cool and unfinished hail experiment. Even though Sam was still feeling sleepy, his eyes opened wider as he looked around. There were large science posters, tall test tubes lined up on a shelf, vibrant coloured liquids, different types of growing plants plus a huge pool of different crystals surrounded by exploding vulcano-like things. He found it baffling as seeing a bird reading words.

Sam started helping them then said "I was looking for you Minestine ". After they finished the experiment they all celebrated and went outside to repair their friends' houses. Sam, Minestine and Lucy got a thank you gift from the animals that had lost their roofs. In the end Minestine invited Lucy over for a play at his house. At their house they played some Sciency games like Tip the Tube where you put different liquids into the tube and see what happens. Over the years, they had many playdates at both their houses, exploring new discoveries together. Sam sometimes came over to join them. They became well-known in the jungle as the three were an odd combination being an elephant, a monkey and a little girl.

– THE END –

MIDDLE PRIMARY



Rong Fu and the Emperor

Clare Chia



Long, long ago in a village with golden corn that reached towards the sun, with fields as green as the colour of spring itself and the pine tree in the town square was so tall that fully-grown men were gnats compared to the tree. Amidst all this colourfulness lived a magistrate named Rong Fu. He was a kind governor of the village and a young man. He always showed compassion to his subjects and had them pay low taxes but however he always tripped and fell and often (always) broke things. He dropped vases, bowls, plates, dishes and even spoons! I cannot tell you how many objects he dropped! The villagers teased him, "Clumsy Rong Fu," they said, "Always stumbling and breaking things. Whatever you do, watch out for clumsy Rong Fu!" They always said these things behind his back, so he never knew a thing and completely oblivious.

One fine spring morning on the twenty-first of June, a messenger came to Rong Fu's humble palace and gave him a letter from the emperor himself! He saw that it was genuine as the emperor's seal was on the letter. The letter was for the inspection of the year's crops; it said to come to the imperial palace in one month. Rong Fu was shocked, that he wanted reports on the crops so early in the year and usually he would send him a letter on the progress of the crops. What was going on? He thought to himself all night and finally decided that he must take action at once.

Rong Fu hurriedly rushed to get everything ready as perfect as he could. He groomed his horse that he would ride to the palace but not without clumsily upsetting a bucket of water and frightening the horse. He went to the seamstress and politely asked her to sew him a beautiful red silk garment with some silk he bought from the cloth merchant. She agreed, all the while thinking that he dropped the cloth on the way there and will drop his clothes on the way back and in a month's time Rong Fu looked as though he was the emperor himself. But there was something very dreadful and embarrassing that would happen in front of the emperor....

A month later Rong Fu had everything ready. His horse glimmered in the sunlight as the mud from last night's heavy rain stuck to the horse's shiny hooves. He rode his horse carefully to the palace trying to not get his garment dirty. The road was wet and dirty and the pond next to Rong Fu's house which was once a sparkling blue with lotus leaves and flowers floating on top of the water, was now a dirty brown colour and you could vaguely see the lotus leaves at the bottom. It turned out that the storm had made everything look terrible with its howling wind, crashing lightning and booming thunder.

Rong Fu thought about how he could see the emperor in all this dirtiness which would contrast with his clothes. Just then a rabbit hopped out of a rabbit hole and jumped in front of Rong Fu's horse which bucked and nearly threw him off.

When he finally arrived at the palace he was amazed at the luscious peaches growing and the golden koi swimming in a crystal-clear pond. Which appeared to have been cleaned a while before in the morning. What marvelled him most was two beautiful turquoise and green hummingbirds sitting in the cherry tree. At the doors two well-dressed servants in robes of verdant green escorted him to the great hall to meet with the emperor in person. The emperor had dressed in beautiful garments as blue as the sea itself with a wellmade pattern of gold and white koi swimming over the blue. The great hall was as big as the village square including the tall tree which was the tallest tree in the kingdom. In a shorter version, the great hall was enormous! The marble pillars were as white as snow with glass-like diamonds making patterns all over the great foundations.

The emperor greeted Rong Fu warmly and invited him to take a walk around the palace with him. The palace was as beautiful as the front garden. There was an orchid that held trees blossoming flowers, ready to grow fruit in the spring and countless servants dressed in an earthy brown some watering beautiful roses of every colour of the rainbow and some planting saplings in the muddy soil. It was clear that the emperor's garden was well looked after every day. Rong Fu clearly saw that the emperor's garden was much larger, but Rong Fu tended to it well every day (without the help of hundreds of servants) as a result the garden thrived and flourished in his care. As the two were leaving the back garden Rong Fu nearly tripped over one of the servants! As they were walking Rong Fu was trying to talk with the emperor. He stumbled over all his words and the emperor furrowed his eyebrows in utter perplexity. They stopped to look at the koi while sitting on a bench near the fishpond.

As Rong Fu was babbling like a brook about all his nonsense he slipped off the bench and fell face flat into the pond! This proves how clumsy he was! Rong Fu expected the emperor to be furious as him as he got out bedraggled with his garments soaked through and the once-rich red was darkened to a crimson shade. But when the emperor saw him and his clothes drenched through, he bellowed and hooted with sheer laughter. Rong Fu was astonished, even

more marvelled than the two hummingbirds in the cherry tree or the emperor's invitation to come to the imperial palace himself in the first place!

The emperor told Rong Fu that what he did was the most hilarious thing he ever saw in his life! He declared that annually, once a year, everyone in the kingdom should dress to perfection in their finest red clothes and accessories, decorate their houses with koi fish and most importantly, fall into a koi pond or any pond. He let Rong Fu name the event, and he named it a funny name: Fall into a Pond Day. Not one of his subjects had any clue that it was the magistrate clumsy Rong Fu, that always tripped and fell, made this hilarious and peculiar event.

– THE END –

THE OTHER BROTHER

Caleb Kameron



Jett

My little brother, Mikey, doesn't know what's happening to me. Should I tell him? I'm not sure. He's only seven...

I remember the day my brother was born. It's my warmest memory. The touch of his little marshmallow hand against my cheek, and the love that flowed through my heart – and still does. I peered carefully into his cot and whispered in his ear, "I will always protect you."

Right now it's like I'm watching a video on fast motion. I see myself zooming down the street, doing wheelies with Mikey in the pram. "faster," he yells. I hear crying and screaming in the night, but I'm not bothered. I even put up with the stink of dirty nappies. We play hide and seek and I fake surprise when he chooses the same spot Every. Single. Time.

The years whizz around like a tire swing. They're filled with bubble bath beards, flips on the trampoline, and my favourite, water gun warfare!

Youch! I'm snapped out of my daydream by the whacking of a stick. "lets fight," says Mikey. Ching Ching goes the clash of stick swords while I pretend to be Darth Vader with my rasping voice. Even though I'm in high school, I still love a good sword fight. "Pant, pant, pant – I'm just too tired, bro, I just need a rest," I say as I collapse onto the couch.

Mikey

My big brother, Jett, doesn't think I'm old enough to understand. But I know what's going on. It's hard to believe, but he's really a superhero.

Flash! It all started adding up one blustery night while I was brushing my teeth. All of a sudden my eyes were pierced by a bright burst of light. I ran to Jett's room but he wasn't there! I ran up to my mum and she said something had happened at the pharmacy and Jett had just run off! And in that moment, I just knew he was out there, catching robbers when they strike at night. Running, jumping, climbing like a speedy ninja.

Born a daredevil, Jett's probably the bravest person you'll ever know. I've seen him climb 10 metres high in a tree, plunge into 3 metre deep sea waters, and let's not forget that time he jumped off our roof!

Ding, Dong! I race to the other door wondering who it might... "OH HELLO THERE!!!" booms our neighbour, MR Williams. "Shhhhhh, be quiet," I warned him, "my brother's taking his regular nap after being out on duty all night." "Oh

I am so sorry to disturb, I just wanted to give this to him so he knows we're thinking of him," says MR Williams in a hushed voice, as he hands me an envelope. I add it to the pile of gifts from other people Jett must have rescued.

Jett wakes and scrambles off the couch, his heart racing. "Bye, Bro," he says as he closes the front door. "What's he doing?," I ask myself. Quickly I race to the window, just in time to see three people wearing secretive masks beckoning Jett into a van. "they must be other heroes too," I think, "It must be some sort of weekly training workout because Jett always disappears at this exact time each week." I watch as the van screeches out of the driveway, leaving only skid marks behind.

Just as the van turns the corner, I see a flash of a word written in bright red on the side door – Can-ker, can-cer. I'm not sure what it means, but I'll add it to my journal.

Jett

"Check mate!", yells Mikey as he knocks over my King. "how did you get so good at chess?" I wonder out loud.

Mikey gets off his chair to go make lunch, but a scrunched up dictionary page slips out of his pocket. Highlighted in yellow is the definition of 'cancer': any type of malignant growth or tumor, caused by abnormal and uncontrolled cell division.

Mikey walks back to the table and hands me a vegiemite and cheese toasty. Suddenly he notices the page and says, "Don't worry, I'll keep your identity secret."

It is sooooo time to tell Mikey, I think. Here it goes. I feel shaky, as though I'm about to race in an 100 metre sprint. I just want to get it over and done with.

"Mikey, there's something I've been wanting to tell you. I've been sick, like really sick," I say.

"Have you been poisoned by the bad guys?" asks Mikey.

"No mate, it's called cancer. I've spent the last few weeks in hospital," I explain.

Mikey's eyes widen and his face looks pale, as he pauses and stares for a moment. Then he asks, "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

I think for a while then say, "I wanted to wait until you could understand, like properly understand. And I didn't want you to worry until I knew I would get better."

Mikey asks in a small voice, “how will we know that you’re better?”

“I’ll get to ring a bell at hospital when I finish my treatment. “It’s a tradition,” I say.

Two weeks later

“Did you know you could fry an egg on your head if you stood outside for 3 hours?” jokes Mikey as we walk down the hospital corridor.

I feel like I’m dragging a bag of rocks with each step as we move closer to the bell room. I catch a strong whiff of that familiar antiseptic smell. I nervously open the door to a room with a golden bell standing on a platform. Mum, Dad, and a few of my oncologist doctors and nurses are all crowded around the bell waiting for my arrival. My hands are trembling, and the clapping sounds distant and muffled.

My legs feel cardboard stiff as I slowly approach the golden bell. Above is a plaque with the words engraved:

Ring this bell

Three times well

It’s toll to clearly say

My treatments done

This course is run

And I am on my way.

As my hands wrap around the bell rope. I feel a sense of love for Mikey and a reflection of everything we’ve been through. I ring the bell and hear the calming sound ding, ding, ding ring through my eardrums, echoing inside, as I think of the words...

My treatment done

this course is run

And I am on my way

As I step down the stage, I overhear my kind specialist say to Mikey, “remember, not all heroes wear capes.”

– THE END –

Dinosaur Ate My Homework

Homework

(A+)



Eleanor Mullen

Oh no. It's Friday morning, time for school. Let me tell you why that's so bad...

See, Friday morning means only one thing for me: time to turn in the week's homework, get all the maths questions wrong, get lectured for the fifteenth time that week about being "responsible for our learning" by my teacher, Miss Blake, and get on with the day. Only problem is, I don't have my homework. We've all left it at home before, but this is different. My pet ate it. My pet dinosaur.

I'm Amy Greyson, eleven year old year five C student. I'm a pretty boring person. Everyone says so. Well, I was up until a few days ago. That was when I got Rio, a fifty tonne Argentinian dino, when I travelled back in time with a toothbrush. Now... well, let's just say life isn't quite as monotonous in the Greyson household anymore.

Now, let's get back to the homework issue. Miss Blake always asks if anyone hasn't brought their homework. Jimmy Barns always has to put his hand up. He's the naughtiest boy in our year, and, trust me, that means he's pretty bad. Today, though, it's not just him. Miss Blake calls my name, asking me to explain. "My dinosaur ate my homework." I state, plain and matter of fact as ever. "Nonsense!" Miss Blake scolds. "That's as ridiculous as saying Hawaiian pizza tastes good. Sit down, you'll be losing your playtime for this. Really, I would never expect such disgraceful behaviour from you, Amy. Goodness!"

After that, the day goes past in a whoosh. You know that feeling when you've been waiting in line for the highest roller coaster in the theme park, and then you get on, do the huge loop-the-loop and it's not nearly as bad as you expected? That's exactly what I'm feeling. Before long, the school day's over and I'm back with Rio for an afternoon of humour and hijinx. But today, I've got a plan. I call to Rio, then shout to dad, who's baking, and mum, who's watching soccer on the TV that I'm taking Rio out for a bit. They never mind me doing that, replying, "Sure thing, love. Be back for dinner!" I head into the backyard, grab Rio and we gallop down the garden path, preparing to make mischief galore.

First stop: the pizza shop. That's right, we're heading down to my buddy Pepe's to grab a "Magnifico Hawaiian" as he calls them. Mmm, I can almost taste the cheesy deliciousness. But this one isn't for us. Nope, today we're making a special surprise delivery.

A few minutes of walking later, or in my case riding on Rio's head later, we've arrived at our destination: possibly the most bland, uninteresting house ever. It's gonna get interesting soon though. I peek through an open window, and, sure enough, there, watching Antiques Roadshow on an ancient television, is our client, the one and only Miss Blake.

The Dinosaur Delivery Service here isn't like Doordash, Uber Eats, Deliveroo, the lot. We don't leave your lunch in a soggy bag on the doorstep. We do more than delivery to your door. We do... Well, you'll see.

Rio grabs the pizza, still in its Pepe's box, in his mouth, before sticking his head and a quarter of his insanely long neck through the lovely Miss Blake's window, mumbling through his mouthful of cardboard, (yes, Rio is a talking dinosaur) "Pizza? It's Hawaiian."

– THE END –

(OR IS IT?)

(YEP, IT'S ACTUALLY THE END)

(I THINK?)

(THIS IS GETTING VERY CONFUSING)

(WE HAVE CONFIRMATION. IT IS THE END!)



UPPER PRIMARY





INTO THE
ABYSS

Felix Calautti

Trent entered the submarine for the fifth time, risking his life yet again. He was slightly more on the chubby side, with chestnut hair that flopped, uncared for, over his eyes. He was of average height and had a distinguishing crooked nose, not quite the person you'd expect to be going on a mission to save the world, and yet, here he was.

Trent wore a sleek skintight wetsuit, with it's colour perfectly matching the grey-black exterior of the machine he was entering. Once he was inside, Trent stared around in awe. Although he had been in here five times before, the constant whirl of buttons and screens still amazed him. He waved a quick goodbye, to nobody really, and closed the hatch. A hiss of air let out as the cabin pressurised and the submarine prepared to dive.

Trent could see the countless number of scientists looking down at him from the separate boat, each holding a perfectly blue clipboard. They were there to supposedly 'monitor' Trent's results, and yet he could swear all they did was just stand around all day and scribble gibberish on their papers. And then, they took credit for making it to the bottom of the Bacta trench.

'Ugh, stay focused!' Trent thought angrily to himself. He couldn't let his wandering mind hinder him. Suddenly, the floor lurched downwards and Trent had to grab his seat to stop himself from hurtling upwards. He had begun his descent.

After ten minutes of watching as the light grew dimmer and dimmer, Trent's ears began to pop. After another twenty minutes of staring out the window he eventually gave up and took a walk around the confined spaces of his cabin. Trent was just about to sit back down again when he heard a mechanical voice drone, "3 hours until Bacta trench reached. 3 hours until Bacta trench reached. 3 hours until Bacta trench reached." The name Bacta reminded him of why he was here. Bacta C40.

It was a virus, and a deadly one at that. In the past half hour he had sat in his chair, nearly twelve thousand people would've died. If it wasn't for the urgent work of scientists across the globe, the whole of earth's population would be gone. The one thing saving nearly nine billion people?

Sea cucumbers. Trent almost laughed, floating blobs were saving the entirety of earth? It never got old. But then again, they weren't ordinary sea cucumbers, it was a special species: Biotransescent Trinco's. And of course, they were

only found at the bottom of the worlds deepest trench, Bacta Trench, hence the name Bacta C40.

The mechanical voice rang out again, “Ten minutes until impact. Ten minutes until impact. Ten minutes until impact.” Had it really been three hours? Trent had spent the time reading, sleeping and staring into the depths. In just a few more minutes, he would suit up, and enter the seabed. His mission? Collect as many sea cucumbers as possible. They were huge, nearly the size of a small dog, and so a single animal could save over fifty people. That meant that a successful trip could save the lives of five thousand people.

“Put on suit. Put on suit. Put on suit.” The voice echoed again. Trent did as he was told, pulling the more chunky waterproof fabric across his body. He was equipped with a self pressurising helmet, a speargun, underwater goggles and a diver propulsion vehicle; all courtesy of the SPE Centre, otherwise known as the Save Planet Earth facility.

The facility had claimed immediate responsibility when the virus was first released, and was given an extensive amount of power by the governments across the globe. Trent thought it was fascinating, how when the earth was suddenly faced with a deadly crisis everyone put down their weapons and came together, a united world. Wars ended, conflicts swept away.

The thought put a smile on Trent's face, but it was quickly wiped away as he remembered what he was here to do. ‘We're here to save lives,’ Trent remembered his grandpa always saying that. He was gone now. He lived his every day saving hundreds of lives each week, and yet there was not a single person to save his own. Trent remembered the very day he'd died, it was a Sund - stay focused!

Pushing his previous thoughts to the back of his mind, Trent entered the airlock, listening for the satisfying hiss of his helmet sealing. After doing a quick safety check, Trent prepared to exit the hatch. Deep breaths in, deep brea - “Exit the vehicle. Exit the vehicle. Exit the vehicle.” Trent scowled, but eventually opened the hatch and stepped into an entirely new world.

Ever since Trent had first visited a beach, he had wondered why everything seemed so blue underwater. Just a few weeks later, when his grandpa had explained that water absorbs red light, Trent had fostered a life long relationship with the big blue.

Although he spent most of his leisure time reading books about the strangest sea creatures, or watching documentaries about the weirdest waters, Trent had never once imagined that he'd be standing on the deepest seabed in the world, let alone saving hundreds of thousands of lives through sea cucumbers.

And yet here he was, a single boy, millions of lives resting on his shoulders.

Trent had exactly one hour of air, he'd have to be quick. He would harvest the sea cucumbers through a vacuum, that would then pull the animals back to the submarine. It was a delicate process, probably a third of the animals that went in would not come out alive, but the world had to risk it if they wanted any hope at all.

The sea cucumbers were slow and easy to catch, but an hour? Trent didn't like the sound of that.

He started out searching around the ship for the glowing bodies but only found a few. He had two options, keep looking close to the submarine, or pick a direction and set out for larger patches. The first was safer, it wasn't hard to lose yourself in the murky waters, but then again he had limited time and the latter would certainly speed up the process.

Eventually he chose to head out in a northerly direction, after all, even if he only found a single sea cucumber more, it would be worth it.

After barely three minutes of walking Trent realised his decision had paid off, nearly ten cucumbers had passed his way, now off to save lives. Trudging further he uncovered a large patch of the animals. Within mere seconds five cucumbers were whooshed of down the vacuum.

Trent spent the better part of the next ten minutes navigating the treacherous terrain. Along the way he only found a few small sea cucumbers, and his hopes began to dwindle. He couldn't go back with only twenty cucumbers! 'Uggh, I need to stay on task!' Trent thought angrily to himself, 'Thousands of lives are at risk!'

Barely a few seconds later, Trent noticed the huge rock formation looming out of the dark. It almost looked like a huge pencil, with its tip burrowed deep into the murky sand. The blunt end seemed to be home to an array of strange looking fish, and an oddly shaped eel that swam in jerky bursts. Trent decided to move on, he was here to harvest sea cucumbers, not fish. But before he could even take his first step, Trent spotted something hiding in a small depression behind the formation, could it be a cucumber?

Changing direction, he made his way to the jagged pillar. At closer look, Trent found that the rock was on the verge of splitting down the side, it had clearly been there a long time. Making his way around the wide base, Trent finally got a closer look at the mysterious creature. It certainly looked like a sea cucumber. Trent was just about to use his vacuum when the figure shifted. Trent took a step back. And then it lunged.

Trent felt oily skin brush his suit, if it wasn't for the water resistance he would be dead. Now that the creature had finally come out, Trent realised what it was. Sort of. Its huge teeth and scaled body told him it was a deep sea dragon fish, but it was way too big. Normally creatures like this would grow to a maximum of 60cm, but this had to be at least three metres. Big enough to swallow him whole.

Backing away Trent noticed the creature draw back, about to lunge. This time he sidestepped, and managed to whack it with his vacuum. This only seemed to make the dragon fish angrier. Their routine repeated another few times, with it lunging and Trent dodging. Although Trent's wetsuit was designed for extreme pressure, the dragon's sharp teeth were wearing it down. He needed to get out, and now. Trent began to back away but his eyes didn't leave his attacker. At first he thought it was working, but that quickly changed when the eel like monster swam across to cut off his escape. Trent was tiring. Worse, his air was running out. Trent had started with an hour of air, and now he had ten minutes left. That was exactly how much time it had taken for him to get here. In short, Trent needed a miracle if he wanted to live. As chance would have it, a miracle came.

The monster had been circling the pillar when it happened. The pillar fell. The dragonfish was instantly killed, with half of its body lost under jagged rubble. But it wasn't all good. Trent had two tubes that led back to the submarine: his

vacuum tube and his air tube. The latter was no longer. His air had gone from ten minutes, to two minutes. Mere seconds separated Trent from death, he would have to act fast. He didn't bother trying to walk back, it was pointless. Trent needed a solution, he couldn't rely on another miracle. What was there? He could try cutting open the fish and see - no, he wasn't that desperate. Yet.

Trent already knew the lack of oxygen was affecting him, as his eyes began to see giraffes and rhinos swim by. Dots of pain appeared in the corners of his vision, and suddenly it seemed as if his suit had disappeared and the weight of the ocean rested on his shoulders. He collapsed to the seabed. And then his grandpa materialised.

Trent remembered the Sunday his grandpa had died more than any other day. He had finished a long day at school and was looking forward to spending the day with his favourite person, Arthur. Trent's mum, Maria, had died of cancer a few months after Trent had been born, and just a few years later his dad had left. Arthur came to finish what his son had started and took care of Trent for 13 happy years. In Trent's eyes, he was a hero. And then Sunday rolled around. Trent rode home on his bike, imagining the new things he would do this afternoon. He was less than a kilometre away when he saw the smoke. It took him another few minutes until he could smell it. Everything was gone, there wasn't even a speck of recognisable piece of home left. Nothing. Trent was later told that it was a bushfire but it didn't matter, life had struck again.

Trent awoke. His situation was the same. A minute of air. He almost wanted to give up until he found what he'd been waiting for. A chance. He crawled desperately over to his vacuum tube and peered inside. It would be big enough. He let himself squeeze inside, clicked the button, and then waited. He didn't have too wait long. His body zipped along the tube, gaining scrapes, scratches and speed. Trent lurched, it was over. He was safe.

– THE END –

LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF GIZMO

DANIELLA FISH



Hello! Let me introduce myself, my name is Gizmo, but most people know me as (drum roll please) Gizmo The Great! (No one calls you Gizmo The Great –ED) Okay okay no one calls me Gizmo The Great, people just know me as Gizmo. Let me describe myself to you, I am fairly tall and have a stunning body covered in white and black hair, on my elegant head are two tall horns and every girl has fallen head over heels for me. (I am sorry that I have to but in, but no girl has ever fallen head over heels for you-ED) stop butting in this is my story! (Okay I won't but in any more –ED.) If you haven't guessed already, I am a goat.

Another thing about me is that my life long goal is to get to The Bush. The Bush is the most delicious looking bush on the universe. The only thing stopping me from getting to the bush is a fence. As most of you know goats don't jump fences, only sheep jump fences. So that was a problem, but that wasn't the biggest problem. The biggest problem was Bill.

Bill is a small brown goat, he has brown hair and brown eyes and he hasn't stopped following me since Farmer Pete brought him home from the market. Yesterday afternoon a miracle happened, Farmer Pete left the gate open! As soon as I saw it open I bolted as fast as the speed of light (dude a snail overtook you –ED) stop interrupting. (Fine-ED) You will never believe what happened! I got to The Bush with Bill (sadly) and it was super GROSSSS! It tasted like Farmer Pete's old socks and the barns wooden table. (Oh so a bit like Brussels sprouts -ED) Yeah! Bill on the other hand, was in heaven.

Just as I was about to walk back to the farm a weird white blobby car rolled up to me. Then the window came down and there were more people like Farmer Pete inside. Except there was a little girl, an older girl, a woman and a man. The man was clucking a bit like Brenda the chicken. I decided that he needed help; to get him out I started to kick and head butt the white car. The car didn't like it so it rolled away. I saved them! Some now call me a hero. (No one calls you a hero –ED) Stop! (No-ED) fine.

Just as I had found some nice grass next to The Bush the clump of people walked up to me. I ran up to them. (Bill on the other hand ran home) Maybe they had food! The woman definitely did. I decided to be super friendly to the woman and when the older girl tried to go to her, I jumped on her protecting the woman. When I wasn't looking, the little girl went to the woman and hid behind her, the older girl hid behind the man. They all try to walk back to the house, but I don't let the woman go, I can smell food coming from her.

The man and the two girls have made their way to the gate and are struggling to close it. The woman makes a run for it, she is surprisingly fast.

The woman makes it to the gate and helps them push it and the gate closes with a clink. I start to run, my run turns into a sprint and this time I am really fast. The gate is getting nearer and nearer. As I try to turn I realise I can't; I can't stop either and then I realise the truth. I am going to hit the gate! The gate is now only inches from my horns and then CRUNCH!! I hit the gate! (Sooooo elegant-Ed) Stop you are being mean! (Just tell the story-ED) Okay, well I hit the gate so hard that my precious horns on my elegant head are stuck and wedged in the gate. I am devastated my beautiful horns are now stuck in their gate!

The people took photos of me and my horns because after all I am still a model (you are not a model-ED) Says who? (Says me-ED) Who made you in charge? (You!!-ED) Oh, but... (Just continue the story-ED) Okay where was I? Oh yes...

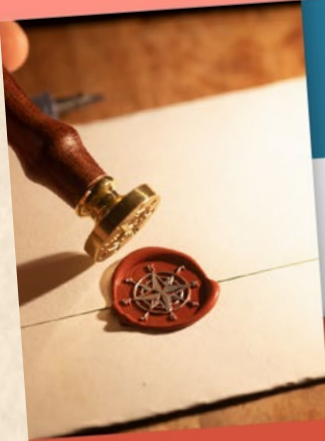
The people took photos with me then left. Not before calling someone special, Farmer Pete! I stay like that until Farmer Pete comes over to collect me. When Farmer Pete's ute comes to collect me, he has to cut the gate to free my horns, he then ties me to the back of his ute. He drives me home even though we only live next door. When we get home I am in so much trouble. Bill doesn't get in trouble. (Maybe because he came home and wasn't stuck in a gate-ED.)

As Farmer Pete was yelling at me, I noticed that Bill is standing behind farmer Pete. Bill sticks out his long slimy slobbery pink tongue at me and lets out a ha ha. When farmer Pete turns around I get ready to run to Bill. I do the same thing a bull does when it's about to run to its target and charge towards Bill. Even though I have perfect eyesight, I didn't see Farmer Pete in front of me. (Dude you need glasses-ED) No I don't (just tell me what happened-ED) Okay um... oh yeah! Then I accidentally hit farmer Pete in the back of his leg, he falls forward and with my bad eyesight (you admit it!-ED) Yes I do, anyway I mistake Farmer Pete's bum for Bill and bite it. Hard.

As punishment for biting Farmer Pete's bum, I get tied to a tree. Not just any old tree, my favourite tree, an olive tree. As I decided I don't want to be tied up any more, I also got hungry! I looked at my tree and its beautiful little olives shining in the evening light. Just begging to be eaten. Then a very good idea popped into my head (I will give you a clue it involves eating and olives) I think I know how to get out...

After I get in trouble with Farmer Pete about eating his tree, I head out into the paddock “to think about my actions” as Farmer Pete would say. Then something three different shades of green caught my eye, I see a new bush.

– THE END –



Forte

I press down on the pedal, my extravagant chord hanging in the air. I listen until it completely fades away before I turn to Agnes and bear the awaiting praise. "Beautiful Wilhelmina, absolutely breathtaking!" The corners of my mouth curve up in a shy response, "Do you think I'll be ready for the test on Sunday?" She doesn't miss a beat to respond, "I think you're ready today!" I feel a pat on the shoulder as she points to the clock. I turn the rusty door knob and bolt past the shops, my auburn hair flying behind me. I don't stop until I reach the little bungalow I call my home.

I place my book on the grand piano and chow down some cereal. "Hello mama." I muffle when she walks into the kitchen. No response. She's talking on the phone to someone, so I leave for school. I look down at my wrist then remember I forgot my watch. The Doesburg sunrise suggests it's about eight o'clock. I breathe in the fresh October morning and smile at the little buildings that house the street. I hang my head over at the sight of my old magnificent house, I miss the radiant garden and the cozy fireplace, but I know my parents couldn't pay the mortgage. I wince at the thought of Noah Janson, an obnoxious boy in my year, living there now.

The words 'Doesburg Junior School' tower over me, my piano playing helps me forget that I will only be here for another month. I grew up in this school, being part of the year group since daycare, but the piano scholarship test for the Doesburg Music Academy is nearing. My eyebrows furrow to think about an alternative for high school but I quickly brush off the idea. My parents are mad about music and if I don't win the scholarship, I doubt they'd be willing or able to pay the full fee. I run up to Lucille, my best friend. Some people say we look related, with our hazel eyes and petite stature, but I don't think we are. There is one major difference in our appearances, my auburn hair as opposed to her dirty blonde locks. I notice Lucille's prize possession (her cello) slung on her back. "Hi Helmet." She giggles, Helmet was a silly nickname she made for me in year two when we first met. For some reason, we both burst out laughing and skip off to class.

The day goes on as usual, maths and history for periods one and two, then music and English before lunch, and sport followed by spelling after lunch. I walk home and immediately start practicing piano the second I step through the door. If I really want the scholarship, I have to perfect my piece, 'Clair de Lune'. I wish Agnes was there to help me but my only company is a tiny finch perched on the window sill. A warm tear runs down my cheek and drops onto middle C, followed by countless more. My forehead presses down on

the keys creating a cacophony, 'What will happen if I don't get chosen for the scholarship?' The thought creeps up on me as more tears streak my face. I use the back of my hand to wipe my cheek and walk to the faulty computer which must be 15 years old. My shaky hands log onto a website called 'The International Conservatorium of Music'. I then grab the dusty video camera and film myself playing my song. Once it's all uploaded, my parents arrive home from work.

I can barely sit on the piano stool, my body is aching all over as I assess the damage from the belt. Papa gets very angry when I'm on the computer instead of practicing. He can be harsh, but I know my parents just want me to succeed. I can feel the welts on my rear start to swell as I try to keep calm. I finish the song flawlessly but receive no recognition. The day finally arrives for my scholarship test. I wake up with a start and check the time, seven o'clock. That will leave me enough time to visit Agnes before the test at nine. I pull a nice dress on and head off, I reach her house just in time before the rain starts pouring down. "You look quite nervous, Willie" she points out, stating the obvious. She hands me a tin of sugar biscuits. We sit there in silence, deep in our own thoughts, until she breaks it again, "You know Wilhelmina Bakker, I have nothing left to teach you."

I bite down on my lip and my fingers reach for the lace ribbon my mother put in my hair. My eyes are fixed on Noah playing in the sound room that I'm about to enter, he takes a charming bow and smirks at me when he leaves. How I hate Noah Janson, so full of himself. I replace my apprehensive expression with a bright grin as I enter the fancy room. I introduce myself and my piece. The panel of judges gesture for me to take a seat behind the dazzling grand piano. "When you're ready Wilhelmina" the middle judge tells me in a monotone voice. "This is it" I tell myself. Note after note after note, I don't even need to look at the music anymore, everything comes naturally. I press down on the pedal, my chord hanging in the air, a million thoughts rushing through my head. After answering a few questions about 'Clair de Lune', I curtsy and walk off. I've done it.

Weeks go by and everything seems to go back to usual. Lucille told me all about her test and is very confident that she will secure a spot. Everyone seems as happy as a horse but something keeps gnawing on the back of my mind. I can't put a label on it though. My welts have calmed down a bit but still hurt from time to time to remind me about the consequences of disobeying

my parents. Twice a day, I check the mailbox to see if I have a letter from the Academy, twice a day I'm disappointed. I start to lose hope, I can only manage a maximum of five hours of sleep per night. I can't miss this scholarship I worked day and night for, it will ruin me. One day, on my way to school, I see Noah in the front of his house, punching the air. There is an eggshell coloured envelope in his hand, I squint my eyes and make out the Academy seal. Oh no.

My heart beats like a drum against my chest, what will my parents say? What will Agnes think? What will I do? I try to run away but my muscles are frozen. I always knew there was a possibility of failure, but deep in my heart, I thought I would get it. I knew I would get it. Forcing myself to make it to school is a challenge, my eyes are blurry with tears but I managed to make out a head of dirty blonde locks in front of me. "Wilhelmina!" Lucille exclaims, "I won the cello scholarship!" I push my mouth into a smile and hug her. "That's great!" I reply with a wobble in my voice. I can't hold it back any longer, I burst into tears and Lucille doesn't need an explanation to know what's wrong.

When I arrive home from school, my parents are waiting for me on the front doorstep, I brace myself for punishment, they must have found out about Noah. My mama has her head down and a tear falls from her cheek, my papa has a unintelligible expression on his face but I know he's extremely disappointed. "Wilhelmina, we have decided to have you repeat grade six because you did not receive the scholarship for the Academy." My father tells me, my jaw drops, I can't believe they are doing this to me. "We think it's for the best." My mother adds. I run to my room and sob into my pillow. The next morning I wake up, rub my sore eyes and go check the mail box. It's become part of my daily routine and I still have the slightest hope that they sent the envelope to my old address (Noah's house) by mistake. I lift up the cover and find an envelope, my quivering fingers run over the smooth paper. I switch my attention to the seal, it is not marked with the Academy crest but a globe. I open it and read, '*Dear Ms Baker, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into The International Conservatorium of Music. You leave tomorrow.*'

– THE END –



LOWER SECONDARY



The Tide-Keeper



Chloe Chin

The town of Port Sorrow was a joke, a name the kids at the next town over had coined, and it stuck. It wasn't because of anything particularly sad, just because nothing much ever happened here. The main street was three shops long: the post office that sold lollies, the hardware store that was also a fishing bait shop, and the old milk bar run by Mrs. Pritchard, whose sole expression was a sort of weary tolerance. We lived on the tide, a steady rhythm of ebb and flow, and it felt like that's all we ever were—a place that just waited for things to wash up and then get carried away again.

Me? I was sixteen and mostly waiting. Waiting for the last bell, waiting for summer, waiting for something that felt more alive than the slow churn of the sea. My older brother, Finn, had been the only real spark in Port Sorrow. He was eighteen, a year out of school, and he had a way of seeing the world in bright, chaotic colours. He talked about cities with buildings that scraped the sky, about music that made your bones shake, about a life that wasn't measured in tide cycles. Then, three months ago, he'd packed his beat-up Commodore and just left. No fanfare, no big goodbye. Just a scrawled note on the fridge that said, "Gotta go find the music."

My parents didn't talk about it much, which meant they talked about it all the time with their silence. The house was a quiet place now, a ship with its anchor cut. I felt like the only person still trying to hold on to the rope, standing on the shore, watching it drift.

That's when I started finding things.

It began after the big summer storm, the one that tore half the sign off the milk bar and left a thick, dark carpet of seaweed and debris on the beach. While everyone else was cleaning up their yards, I went to the shoreline. The storm had spat out a whole new world. Among the usual driftwood and dead jellyfish, I found a lone, waterlogged paperback with a cover that had almost entirely peeled away. I took it home, dried it out page by page. It was a dog-eared copy of some old fantasy novel. On the inside cover, in faded pencil, someone had written a name: M. Davies.

The next day, I went back. This time I found a single, smooth, sea-worn chess pawn—a rook—and a small, ceramic shard of what looked like a bird's wing. My collection grew. I found a tarnished silver earring shaped like a crescent moon, a handful of smooth, perfectly round marbles, a tiny, intricately carved

wooden boat no bigger than my thumb. Each item was a single word from a long-lost sentence. I wasn't just picking up junk; I was piecing together a life.

I became the tide-keeper. Every morning before school, I'd walk the shoreline, my eyes scanning the sand. My room, once a mess of forgotten clothes and textbooks, became an archive. I had a shelf dedicated to the "Davis collection," as I called it. I would sit for hours, arranging the items, trying to imagine the person they belonged to. I pictured a girl, a few years older than me, who loved to read fantasy, who played chess, who had a silver moon earring. I gave her a life, a story, a face. It was an escape, a way to focus on someone else's mystery so I didn't have to think about my own.

The truth was, every item I found, every piece of a story, was a piece of Finn. Each day, I'd wonder what he was doing, who he was talking to, what new world he was discovering. He had promised to call, but the phone stayed silent. The emptiness left by his absence was a physical ache, a constant low-grade hum in my chest, and I couldn't figure out what to do with it.

Then, one Tuesday, I found something different. It wasn't a small, worn piece of history. It was a jar, one of those old-fashioned ones with a wire clip. It was tightly sealed and half-buried in the sand. My heart hammered in my chest. This wasn't a mystery; it was a message.

Inside, wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag, was a single photograph. It was of me, maybe eight years old, Finn's arm around my shoulder, his grin wide and mischievous. He was holding up a half-eaten ice cream cone and I was laughing. On the back of the photo, in his familiar, messy scrawl, were two words: Keep going.

The sea-glass, the chess pawn, the little wooden boat—they all fell away from my thoughts. I held the photograph, its edges worn but the memory sharp as a freshly broken shell. I turned the photo over again and looked at the words. Keep going. I wasn't sure what he meant, but in that moment, standing on the same beach we'd walked a thousand times, with the same wind in my hair, I felt it. The hum in my chest didn't disappear, but it changed. It was no longer the sound of an empty space. It was the sound of a voice. A voice I hadn't heard in months, but one that had been there all along, carried on the tide.

I tucked the photo in my pocket. I knew I couldn't keep collecting someone else's past, because I had my own to live. I still walked the beach, but I wasn't looking for fragments of a stranger's life anymore. I was just walking, feeling the sand beneath my feet, watching the waves roll in, and listening. And with the wind in my ears and the ocean's steady rhythm, I heard my brother's voice, telling me to just keep going. And for the first time since he left, I felt like I finally could.

– THE END –

Cloudbound

Abigail Koh



grief

/gri:f/ - noun

intense sorrow, especially caused by someone's death. evidence that something was loved deeply, mattered immensely, and made our life more than it was.

*

Max wandered through a forest.

A thick green forest, with shrub that curled lazily around his feet every step he took; the sunlight peeked through the gaps between the canopy of mingling leaves above him. Its light wasn't harsh, just dazzling enough for the rays to catch the miniscule insects that flittered around before his eyes, just glinting enough to warm him up.

He hadn't felt this warm in a long, long time.

His fingers brushed against the bark of a tree. It felt rough but alive, like the tree was breathing beneath its skin. There was a knot in the wood—smooth in the center, solid beneath the warmth of the sun. The life of the tree pulsed through the trunk, and he could feel it, steady and growing. It was like the tree breathed, slow and steady, under his touch. It didn't move, didn't flinch, but he swore it felt like it was listening. Like it knew things. Things about stillness. About growing tall even when the wind tried to break you.

Max retracted his hand.

He let go.

Then he continued his walk. *This place is cool*, he thought. *It feels like the back garden at home.* Striding over a line of scuttling ants that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, Max didn't look back. Ants always came here. Maybe it was refuge. Maybe it was a final destination.

A patch of white. Between the bushes, catching Max's eye.

He wandered over, calling out, his hands coming up to cup his mouth. "Hey! You!"

It ran.

Max followed. Worn-out sneakers - the kind that clung to his feet like old friends, no matter how many days passed here - thudded softly against the

forest floor, sending crisp leaves spiralling into the air like little paper birds, startling a small grey rabbit, its nose twitching as it tried to make out its new surroundings.

"I'm not here to scare you!" he cried again, chasing after the rapidly hastening white *thing*, arms flailing about as he attempted to gain balance - until the trees parted like curtains and spilled him onto a yellow bricked path with grass overgrowing around the edges. But then, the path melted away beneath him, and the grass turned soft and shining, endless stretches of pale silver-white, textured like whipped cream smoothed over by wind.

Clouds.

His eyes cleared and he could make out just what the white thing was - a retreating dog. A scruffy, darting little thing with a tail like a feather duster and legs made for running. It glanced back just once, like it knew him from a different story. The dog shifted from the yellow path, skidding onto the cloud-ground. Max, still intrigued by the white creature, tailed it.

"Hey - wait!" he shouted, still half-laughing, but his sneaker caught on a particularly rebellious patch of cloud and-

Whump.

Down he went, arms flung out, legs tangled beneath him like a puppet dropped mid-dance. The cloud-ground puffed beneath his fall with a soft *whoof*, as if it had been holding its breath and finally let go. He lay there for a moment, blinking up at the sky, which looked suspiciously like the floor, wondering if he'd just fallen upwards. A pause. Then...

Patter patter patter.

The white dog came bounding back, tail wagging like a metronome gone wild. It skidded to a stop beside him, nose sniffing eagerly, tongue lolling out in an expression of absolute delight, as though this had been the plan all along. The boy laughed again, full-bodied this time, and tried to sit up, but the dog beat him to it - leaping forward to lick his chin, his cheek, and then flopping down half across his chest, like a fluffy badge of honour.

"You're not very mysterious up close," he mumbled, ruffling the dog's ears. "Just very... dog."

"Well, that's rude," it said, voice a little scratchy like it hadn't used it in a while, but undeniably a voice. "I was going for enigmatic." The boy froze. His hand stayed tangled in fur. His breath hitched somewhere between his ribs and the clouds.

"...You talk?" he whispered.

The dog tilted its head. "Obviously. You think I was just running around for the fun of it? I was trying to lead you. You're incredibly slow, by the way." Max (attempted to) sat bolt upright. The dog didn't move, so he sort of half-sat, half-carried the dog on his chest like a fuzzy, opinionated backpack.

"You're a talking dog," he said, as if saying it more times would make it less absurd.

"Yes, and you're a boy with terrible coordination," the dog replied, rolling off him with a huff. "Now that we've established the obvious, shall we go?"

"Go where?"

The dog gave him a long, patient look, like he'd just asked if water was wet.

"To the beginning, of course," it said, as if that explained everything. "You've got a lot to remember, and not much time to do it." Then the dog bumbled a few paces ahead, tail swishing, and looked back expectantly. Max looked around - at the cloud-ground shimmering underfoot, at the sky that looked more like a painting than weather, and at the dog, who had just insulted him.

He stood.

"Okay," he said. "Lead the way, mysterious dog."

"Miso," the dog said proudly. "Like the soup."

"I like soup," Max said. "I haven't had it in ages, though." He paused. "What even does enigmatic mean?"

They walked for a long time - or at least it felt like a long time. There weren't any clocks here, and nobody was yelling at him to hurry up or telling him how much time he had left. That was nice. Max didn't even care what time it was. His chest didn't hurt when he breathed anymore, and the air felt big and light, like he could take a million deep breaths and still want more. If someone asked him how he felt, he'd probably just say, "Good." Or maybe, "Really good." He

liked Miso. But he talked kind of funny too - like the cowboy people on Max's cartoons, all drawly and slow, like every word was chewing gum.

Miso finally stopped at a hole. A hole in the cloud-ground, the pearlescent fluff, luminous, full of the hush of dreams, ending abruptly. "Watch your step. One wrong move and you're going to tumble down there," the quadruped quipped.

"Where?" Max asked.

"There." Miso raised a paw as to gesture to the hole, or more specifically, what lay below the hole. Max walked over, slowly as if he might fall again, and tilted his head down.

The people, they were undeniably people, were gathered in a cluster of dark shapes against the green, some holding black umbrellas though it wasn't raining. It was just *that kind of day* – heavy with silence, where even the birds didn't dare to sing too loudly. From this high up, they looked like petals dropped around a stone, all slowly shifting, heads bowed. A few shoulders shook, a few hands reached out and found each other. Someone knelt near the flowers. Someone else stood completely still, as if time had stopped just for them. There was a girl, probably a sister, holding onto a small, crumpled tissue in one hand. Her face was pale, and platinum blonde hair was messily tied into two pigtails which hung down each shoulder like a pair of unwilling mice. Her eyes were all red and shiny.

Max sneezed.

The girl's face was tilted up for a second. Like she was looking for a sign. And for a moment, just the faintest one, as he sneezed, a breeze moved her hair. He stared for a moment, then pointed.

"That's Lily," he said softly. "She has my Gameboy. I let her borrow it. I haven't got it back yet." The dog didn't answer. Just looked at him. Max caught the glance and furrowed his brow. "What?" he asked.

"Max," Miso said gently. "Look at the gravestone."

He hesitated. Then leaned forward, as if getting closer might help bring the words into focus. The clouds parted just slightly below, as if making room. The stone was worn at the edges, the writing etched with a delicate care.

Maxwell Orion Tully

1998 – 2005

Beloved Son. Always Looking Up.

“...That’s my name,” Max said, barely a whisper. “But... I’m right here.”

He stood still, like maybe if he didn’t move, none of this would be real. His eyes lifted to Miso, wide and shiny and a little scared. But there was something else too - something like... understanding. Like a puzzle piece had just clicked into place.

“Do they... still think about me?” he asked quietly. His voice sounded tiny. Breakable.

Miso leaned against him, warm and solid. “They think about you all the time, kid.”

“Really?”

“Really really.”

Max swallowed. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

They both looked down again. There was a long, quiet pause. Below them, the girl with the ribbon - Lily - laid a single white flower on the grave, her lips moving like she was telling a secret. Someone else, Max’s dad, maybe, reached over to steady her, his hand shaking as it touched her shoulder. Miso gave a small, knowing nod and stood up, tail drooping just a little. He looked back at Max with gentle eyes.

Max kept watching too. His hands were tight at his sides. His chest hurt in that weird way again. Not like before. This was something different. Like a balloon stuck in his throat. “...What if they forget me?” he asked, voice all wobbly now.

Miso shook his head slowly. “They won’t. Not ever. You’re in their stories now. In the way they laugh, in the way they cry. You’re part of their forever.”

Max wiped at his face, even though it didn’t help. The tears just kept coming, dripping off his chin like leaky taps.

“I want to go back,” he whispered.

“I know,” Miso said. “It’s okay to miss them. But you’re not lost, Max. You’re just somewhere softer now.”

Max didn't say anything right away. He just reached out and grabbed a handful of Miso's fur, holding on tight like it was the only thing keeping him from floating away..

"What now?" the child asked.

Miso looked ahead. The cloud path shimmered, soft and glowing like the sky was calling them forward.

"We keep walking," he said gently. "There's lots to see. Lots to meet. It doesn't end here."

– THE END –



When She's
Born
Shaun Toor

“Do you think she’ll have her mother’s nose?”

The question hovered in the air.

Morning peeled through the blinds in narrow gold bands. Margaret sat upright, spine rigid against the starched pillows, her body wrapped in linen so thin that it was almost translucent against her papery skin. Her hands rested in her lap, the wedding band loose on her skeletal finger, trembling as if plucking invisible harp strings.

The nurse stepped inside with a practised quietness, her rubber-soled shoes sighing against the linoleum. She adjusted the curtain with its frayed edges, sending dust spiralling through the sunlight. It settled on Margaret’s shoulders like misplaced snow.

“Whose nose?” she asked.

“My granddaughter’s,” Margaret replied, mildly offended. “My daughter will be delivering any minute now.” Her fingernails, still faintly pearlescent with the remnants of last week’s polish, tapped against the IV tube taped to her wrist. The doctors had diagnosed Margaret with dementia. And her heart was failing, too. “They’ve made her wait three days past her due date. Typical of her – always fashionably late.”

She pulled the wooden chair closer and sat.

She exhaled softly. “Big day.”

“She’s naming her Ellie. Isn’t that lovely? Simple. Sweet.” Her thumb rubbed absent circles over her ring finger. “Just like her grandmother’s middle name.”

The nurse nodded.

“She’ll be stubborn,” Margaret remarked, gazing out the window. “Just like her mother. Wouldn’t stay in one place long enough to take a proper picture.”

“Sounds like she made you laugh,” the nurse said.

“She was laughter,” Margaret spoke, her gaze distant. “All wind, never the leaf.”

Room 205 smelled faintly of lavender and antiseptic. The ceiling paint was cracked in the corners, and the TV droned on, cycling through a morning show no one watched. Outside, the hallway buzzed with quiet wheels and softer footsteps. Inside, Margaret’s world spun smaller.

Later, the nurse helped Margaret into her robe—a faded lilac thing with pockets stretched from years of carrying tissues, peppermints, and a silver locket that no longer closed properly. The collar bore a single brown stain from a long-ago spilled cup of Earl Grey.

They strolled through the corridor towards the hospice garden. The garden was a postcard of curated tranquillity. Stone paths wound between rose bushes pruned to obedient geometry. A fountain trickled somewhere nearby, its rhythm syncopated with the distant beep of IV alarms through open windows. The air smelled of damp earth and something sharper beneath—the sterile sting of cleaning alcohol beneath the roses. Margaret inhaled deeply. “My daughter used to braid wildflowers into my hair,” her fingers brushing her thin scalp as if recalling the weight of blooms. “Daisies, mostly. Said I looked like a fairytale witch.”

“I used to rock her to sleep,” Margaret spoke wistfully, more to herself. “She’d scream until the moon came out, then fall asleep like nothing ever happened. She had this tuft of hair—stuck straight up like a dandelion gone wrong.”

The nurse smiled.

“I sang to her. Badly. She said my lullabies sounded like dying cats.”

The nurse guided her towards a wrought-iron bench, its paint flaking like sunburned skin.

“Careful-” The nurse faltered, then went on, “Sorry, Margaret.”

Margaret, who didn’t seem to notice, chuckled, the sound in sync with the water gushing and the birds chirping. Her gnarled hand patted the space beside her. “Sit, dear. The ground’s too damp for your knees.”

“I told her the name,” Margaret murmured. “Ellie. Told her it was always my favourite.”

“I’m sure she listened.”

“She said it felt like clean sheets and open windows.”

The nurse looked away, blinking.

“I wish I could be there,” Margaret daydreamed. “In the delivery room. But they said I’d catch something. Said it wouldn’t be safe.”

“She understands.”

Margaret turned to her. “She told me I’d get to hold the baby first. Can’t believe my daughter is giving birth...” Her voice shook, but she blinked the tears back.

The nurse took her hand. They sat there, fingers knotted, nothing left to say.

Back in the room, lunch came and went. Margaret picked at the toast. Her eyes stayed fixed on the window, sipping her tea.

“I like this new tea. What blend is it?” Margaret questioned.

“Earl Grey,” the nurse replied.

A comfortable silence settled between them, broken only by the distant hum of the ward. Suddenly, Margaret’s eyes widened.

“She kicked,” she said suddenly. “I felt it.”

The nurse glanced up.

“She’s excited,” Margaret’s eyes twinkled with happiness. “She knows I’m waiting.”

“You’ll be a wonderful grandmother...”

Margaret stared at her hands. “Haven’t held a baby in years. I forget how tiny their heads are.”

“You’ll remember,” the nurse assured her.

Margaret reached for her tea again, missed, and knocked the cup over. Liquid spread across the blanket like a wound. The nurse moved quickly, dabbing it up.

“I’m sorry,” Margaret said, her eyes dropping to the soaked blanket.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s just... never mind.” Margaret’s voice trailed off.

The nurse paused, napkin in hand. Then sat again.

Neither spoke.

Evening settled, the sun’s final rays painting the sky with a mix of warm hues. The nurse helped Margaret into a fresh gown and tucked her in with practised care.

“Will you stay?” Margaret asked.

“I will.”

“She promised I’d hold her first.”

“You will.”

“I already love her,” Margaret said, drifting. “And I haven’t even seen her face.”

The nurse didn’t speak.

“I hope she looks like my daughter,” Margaret spoke with a distant gaze. “But maybe with my laugh.”

The nurse smoothed the blanket. “She’ll be lucky to have it.”

Margaret smiled, then sleep took her—soft and complete.

The hallway outside was still. The nurse stepped out and leaned against the wall, eyes shut.

That night, something stirred the nurse from her light sleep in the staff room. The hallway was darker than usual; the motion lights were slow to respond. A low beep echoed from a distant monitor. At first, she thought it was nothing—just the usual rhythm of hospice life ticking along without her. But then, a sound pulled her up straight.

A voice. Low, urgent.

She slipped her shoes on and moved down the hallway.

Room 205 was empty.

Her chest tightened.

She found Margaret in the east corridor, barefoot, her gown dragging like fog behind her. She stood near the window where a potted fern curled in the moonlight, looking out at the parking lot.

“I can’t find her,” Margaret whispered, eyes wide, breath catching like a child’s.

She crossed quickly, with a sigh of relief, gently wrapping a blanket around her frail shoulders. “You’re not supposed to be up,” she said softly. “It’s late.”

Margaret didn’t look at her. “She’s crying. I heard her. I heard her, and I didn’t go. I’m a terrible grandmother.”

The nurse knelt beside her. “You’re not,” she said instinctively.

"I had her right here," Margaret said, pressing her hand to her chest. "I had her in my arms. I was humming. I swear I was."

"You were dreaming."

Margaret's face crumpled. "Then why can I still feel her weight?"

She didn't answer. With tears at the brink of her eyes, she guided her back through the dim corridor, one slow step at a time. When they reached Room 205, the nurse flicked the nightlight on. The room filled with a soft amber glow.

Margaret paused by the doorway. "Is this the nursery?"

"It's your room," the nurse corrected.

Margaret looked around, uncertain. "Looks nice. Warm."

The nurse helped her back into bed and adjusted the blanket. She brushed a strand of hair from Margaret's face, tucking it behind her ear.

"Will my granddaughter and daughter be okay?" Margaret asked, voice barely audible.

"I'm sure they will be fine."

Margaret's eyes fluttered. "She'll have trouble sleeping. Just like me."

"Then you'll both be awake together," the nurse thoughtfully responded.

A small smile curled on Margaret's lips.

Margaret reached out, her fingers brushing the nurse's hand. "She'll have your eyes. That deep sort of blue, like rain."

She blinked. "You think so?"

Margaret nodded slowly. "And your patience. God help her."

The nurse almost laughed. Instead, she leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Get some sleep."

The monitor beeped softly. The room settled. She stayed for a moment, watching the rise and fall of Margaret's chest.

A doctor passed by, clipboard under his arm.

"Hey," he asked her. "You're still here?"

“Yeah. Just heading out.”

But she didn't leave. She couldn't sleep after that incident.

The nurse pulled a chair close and sat by herself outside.

When the sun rose again, it found her still there- eyes red, posture folded in. She got to her feet, rubbed her face, and stepped into the hallway.

“Stayed all night?” another nurse asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Couldn't sleep.”

She walked the long way around the corridor, opening the door.

Margaret was sitting up again, hair combed, eyes bright like glass catching the morning light.

“Do you think she'll have her mother's nose?” she asked.

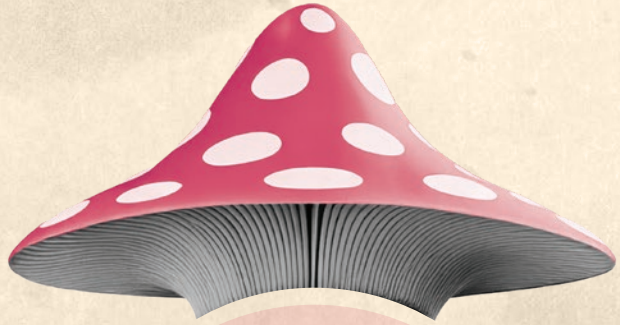
Nurse Ellie smiled, walked to the bed, and took her grandmother's hand.

“I think so.”

To love someone with dementia is to witness both love and loss simultaneously.

— Richard Taylor

– THE END –



UPPER SECONDARY





BEAR

Tristan Adams

Note: *Bear* is written as a chapter from a larger, unwritten fictional study. Chapter 19, titled *Speculative Harm*, focuses on a patient named Suzy and her experiences living with mental illness.

BEAR

XIX

SPECULATIVE HARM

While intellectual fraudulence and the undervaluation of one's achievements are linked to depressive cognitive errors, or an entire disorder for that matter, it is not, of course, the sole cause. This particular patient, Suzy, while not making it clear to her doctor, had suffered from a degree of adolescent trauma; prolonged neglect from not just carers but friendships as well, and familial favouritism, likely laid a foundation within the patient for her feelings of pervasive inadequacy and extreme self-criticism.

Dr. Hallbeck was able to transcribe one of Suzy's experiences during their third session:

"The dog was very big, but he was calm, his name was Bear and I enjoyed looking after him for that while. We had been out for a walk in the morning and I remember it was very cold, it was January, and it was snowing. I was walking him through the next neighbourhood, I can't remember where, it was like mine. We were the only ones out that morning, I think it was too cold, but then we saw another man with a big dog too. Bear started barking at the other dog, and he tugged on his leash and pulled us towards them, but then he jerked suddenly, and he was off, he ran and ran to this other dog and they started fighting. They fought and fought and fought, it was so violent and savage, and I tried not to cry. But then I thought, what if Bear had done that to me? What if he got so upset that he wasn't calm anymore,⁴⁵ he was like a real

⁴⁵ The line between projection and transference is razor-thin

bear this time, and his spur gashed through my throat and pulled my tongue from the back of my head, and there was so much blood, so, so much, and it was the only time you could ever see for yourself, watch your own blood spray so high above you,⁴⁶ as high as the ceiling, that it paints the entirety of it all. It was the only time I ever felt like that, while they were fighting, and then the sun came out and I felt it on my face and on my throat, and although the dogs were still fighting, I felt warm and calm.”

Dr. Hallbeck may have thought that Suzy wished to kill herself, but this would have been a significant misjudgement. Firstly, it is important to note that while graphic recounting or ideation may appear alarming in a clinical and confidential setting, such expressions do not consistently correlate with active suicidal intent. Dr. John Redfield (2006) presented such an understanding to the APA: “Imagining an end is, for some, the only way to endure the present.” Suzy’s use of speculative and conditional phrasing (“...what if Bear had done that to me”) places the entire experience within a hypothetical framework. It is possible, then, that Dr. Hallbeck’s clinical training, while extensive, may have been clouded by the affective force of Suzy’s language.⁴⁷ But language, particularly in the mouths of the traumatised, is rarely direct.

Suzy did indeed, weeks later, return to her story about Bear—this time unprompted, Hallbeck noted. Her tone had noticeably shifted to a more resolved perspective. Whether this indicated a processing of the event or a rehearsed narrative remains unclear. What was said, however, complicates the initial interpretation entirely:

“I’ve been thinking about Bear again, like what happened after it all. I didn’t tell you everything, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry. I said the other dog was big, but he wasn’t really, no, he was small and long and I think he was a girl because he was wearing a little pink collar. Bear could’ve killed her, but he didn’t, he just pinned her down and looked at me. And I don’t know how to explain it, but he was looking at me, I think, and was waiting for something, not help, not my help or the other man’s, but it was like he wanted me to decide what to do right then. Like I could decide everything then and there, and he was just waiting for me. So I rushed to him, I pulled him right off, and we ran away. We didn’t say sorry to the other dog, we ran. I told Bear he was a good boy, and I

⁴⁶ Wataru Tsurumi, *The Complete Manual of Suicide* (Tokyo: Ohta Publishing, 1993), ch. 4.

⁴⁷ This is by no means an attempt to undermine Hallbeck’s ability as a psychologist. Understanding suicidal communication is an acutely difficult task, even for professionals of his experience.

gave him a piece of my granola bar while we walked home. But when we got back, I didn't take him off his leash. I walked him to the back shed, and I locked the door extra, extra tight. Then I went back inside and read my big book

Dad gave me. For a while after, I heard his barking. Gosh, he barked so loud. And he scratched the door so, so much. I kept thinking how calm he was before his fight. But now he wasn't calm, no, no. He was a big bear now, a real bear, and he was very upset. After three days, he stopped barking and scratching. I said it was an accident and that he ran away.”

(Suzy pauses here for a full minute; Hallbeck waits.)

“I don't know why I did it. Maybe I wanted to know what it felt like. To end something so calm.”

In a case such as this one, self-criticism can become so extreme that it establishes a nihilistic worldview. In some instances, where an individual no longer sees themselves worthy of life, they may choose to inflict harm on others to initiate an angle of control, such as in the case of some mass shooters. Other individuals, like Suzy, feel the need to end things that once brought them a sense of “calm,” as she describes it, simply because they no longer believe they are worthy of them. For those who feel so fundamentally inadequate, even calm can seem undeserved.

*Walkin' 'round with a big gun in my hand /
And when I look you in the eye /
You're gonna tell me that you love me and
hold me tight /
'Cause you know that I have no fear.⁴⁸*

⁴⁸ Alexander Giannascoli, *Powerful Man* (New York: Domino Recording Co. USA, 2017). While Suzy's behaviour is undoubtedly strange, what is even stranger is Bear's. His almost farcical actions have led many experts to believe that his existence is entirely made up. A completely feasible and more straightforward substantiation of Bear, however, is offered through Giannascoli's narration. Guns as physical objects have long been used to symbolise theoretical concepts such as power, protection, resistance, and collective trauma. While Bear is an animal and cannot use weapons, he can become a weapon himself, completely controllable by Suzy. While it remains unclear how she can stop Bear's attack by simply looking at him, Suzy meets Bear with love and assurance, despite the fact that they both know exactly what he is capable of. A familiar phenomenon discussed in Chapter XV can now be driven back into focus: cognitive dissonance. Here, it may prove Bear's existence as an individual through whom Suzy negotiates guilt, control, and worthiness—not unreal, but instead, as Suzy insists: unbearably real.



A Kite in Gaza

Misha Anwar

سلام (PEACE):

“No way!” you exclaim. You’re practically bursting with excitement as you lunge to accept the gift from your Baba. Your Mama beams from behind him, her eyes shining like lanterns in the dim room.

“It’s the best one from all the markets,” your Baba adds, his voice gentle but tired. He didn’t want to simply make you one from scraps; he wants you to have the best.

‘My own kite,’ you whisper, as if saying it too loudly might make it vanish. You look up to your parents and meet their warm ebony eyes. All those months of begging, whining, crying, and now it’s really yours.

Your fingers brush over the shiny, smooth fabric, soaking in the vivid rainbow patterns. You couldn’t get bored looking at the kaleidoscope of colours and patterns that light up the full, empty grey room. A room where the only trace of colour was the faded, mottled blues of your mattress and the sickly browns of the water stains tainting the crumbling, yellowed ceiling.

There were stripes, swirls, and spots just like the sweets in the shop window you used to go to. And in the centre: a majestic white dove, its wings outstretched as if ready to soar to the clouds. You just know your kite will fly as high as that dove – higher, maybe than the blockades and the watchful towers, higher than anyone can reach.

But you didn’t know about the extra hours your Baba worked to get you that kite; you were asleep long before he got back. You didn’t know about the dirty copper coins that were pinched from your Mama’s plate; she only told you that her stomach hurt. You didn’t know the meaning of the words whispered behind closed doors when you were assumed to be asleep: ration, curfew, ceasefire. You didn’t know about the sacrifices made for ‘premium’ polyester, wooden dowels, and nylon string. But they didn’t know that you would’ve been just as happy with a plastic bag, tree branches, and thread.

تعطيل (DISRUPTION):

“Hold on tight!” your Baba cautions. But the wild winds howl at you, knowing that your frail 6-year-old body is unmatched against it. They chuckle at your flailing, they chortle at your knuckles turning white from the strain, and cackle at the fact you are mere seconds away from letting go. The wind in Gaza is a trickster sometimes it brings the smell of the sea, but more often than not, your nostrils are filled with dust and your ears with the echo of far-off sirens. The wind tugs and pulls at you, laughing as your skinny arms tremble. You feel the reverberations in your bones; it feels the same as when the ground quakes in fear when the tanks grumble by at night, and when the walls shiver from the distant booms. You glance up, squinting against the harsh glare to see that your kite is violently darting and dodging the invisible evils up above. Somehow, it seems to be reaching... no, straining for the sun, aching to leave for a place better.

As the blue skies become filled with the familiar grey blanket of smoke that threatens to smother it, you begin to lose sight of it. Soon, the kite is devoured by the clouds. As if it wasn't worse enough, the winds carry with them dust and sand, flinging it into your eyes, which sting, feeling like tiny shards of glass. Your eyes flutter in a feeble attempt to dislodge the shrapnel, but you remain blinded. You can't even breathe as every gasp takes in the dreaded sand, and something else bitter you can't name.

You don't know why the wind hates you, only that with a fierce push from behind and with a violent tug from the front, you are dragged forward and almost up into the skies. The kite soars higher and higher.

You try to dig your feet into the thirsty earth, your toes clenching to the thin soles of your slippers, but again the wind gives you no mercy and drags you forward, your feet drawing strikes into the dust and dirt. Holding on seems futile now, as one by one your fingers begin to unlatch. You groan with the effort, desperate to cling on.

Just as you were about to let go, your Baba kneels behind you and draws you in against him. Your head leans against his chest, and you melt into his warmth. His large, calloused hand grasps your bony shoulder, acting as a comforting weight that anchors you. His other hand envelopes your two hands whole, supporting your hold on the kite string. You let out a strangled sound of relief. You look at your Baba, seeing him already looking down at you with a small upwards tug of his lips and a twinkle in his creased eyes, “I've got you.”

يأس (DESPAIR)

Tears well in your eyes as you mourn the loss. You didn't understand how it happened, only that you're left to pick up the pieces and move on. Your kite... destroyed.

You stare numbly at the ruins in your hands; the now splintered wooden dowels you had heard break with a sickening 'crunch' like that of breaking bones. The kite itself has torn so violently, in so many more places you could count, you would've thought it was a merely a pile of ribbons. And the dove. The poor dove, almost destroyed to the point of unrecognition. The head looks like it was snapped backwards, its wings jutting out in unnatural directions. When once, the dove was cawing with a joyful cry, now its beak remained open in a permanently petrified scream.

Why didn't you listen? Your Mama told you that outside is too dangerous for you to play by yourself. Yet, you snuck out anyway, returning with fat droplets rolling down your tear-stained, sunken cheeks, and to your mother's pale face and trembling hands. Your heart was pounding in your chest as you had wondered what your punishment would be. You had expected a scolding, but you didn't get punished. Instead, you were scooped up and crushed in a bone-breaking hug your Mama pulled you into. All the breath in you had left your tiny body. "Next time, wait for one of us to take you." You tried to nod in response, but your face was smooshed into her chest, her hand was placed on the back of your head, and your snot from your blubbering induced congestion had leaked onto her faded shawl.

"It's just the winds," you remembered you had mumbled to yourself. The memories of the dust storm had faded from your head. However, you didn't know that your Mama wasn't talking about the wind. She made sure you didn't.

Now, you slowly wrap the remaining kite string around each and every finger, weaving in and out, around and about. You pull the string tight, savouring the tightness and marveling at how the little fat you have in your finger bulges out and flushes a brilliant ruby red. You notice how the string begins to fray and stick out in weird directions, just like the awful white hairs that stick out from an onion when you leave it out in the sun too long. The tight braids it was woven into are too intricate for your clumsy, bony fingers to stick the edges back into. When you try, it only makes it worse.

أمل (HOPE)

Gluing. Sewing. Stapling

Patching. Connecting. Joining.

Praying. Wishing. Hoping

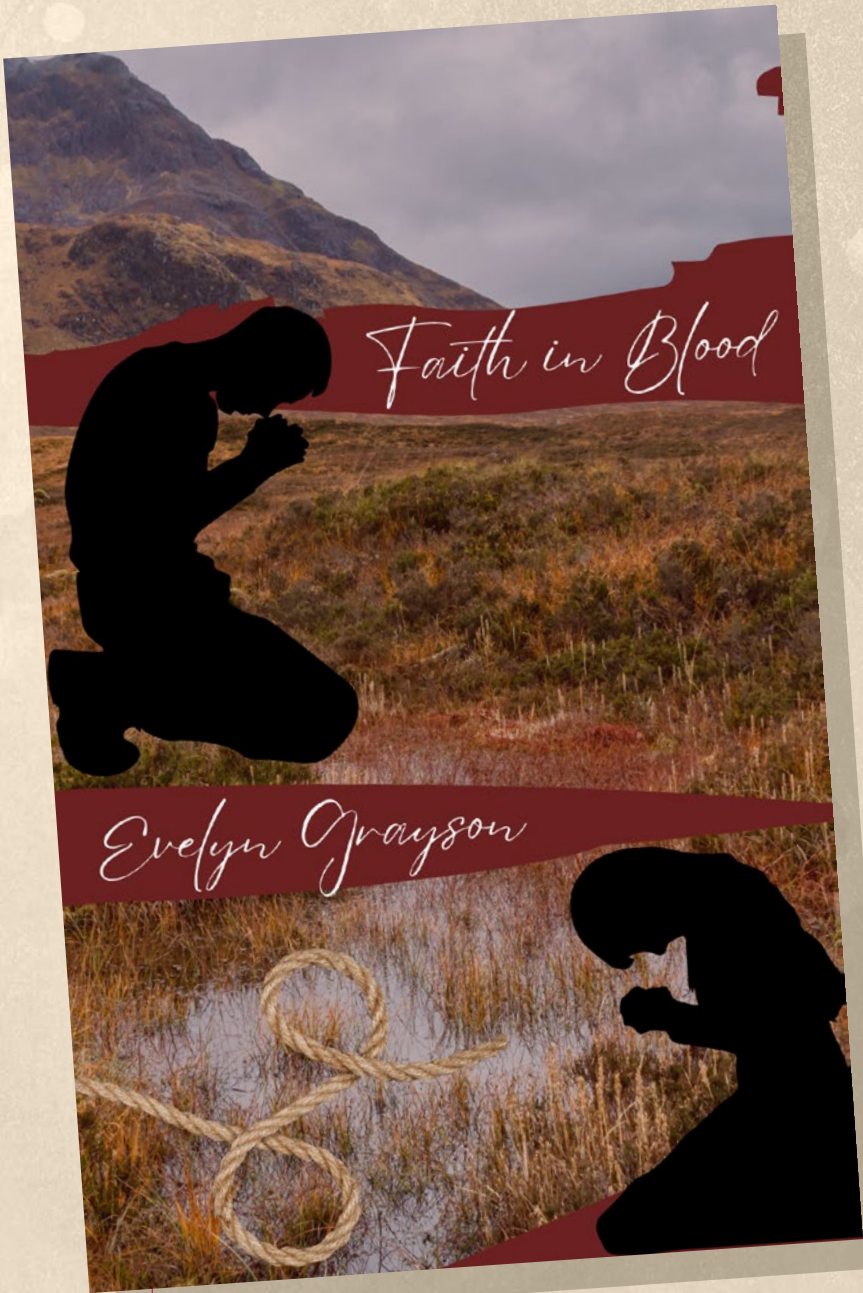
You and your Mama work side by side, fingers sticky and sore. You look at her, your eyes shining. "Will it work?" you ask, your hope fragile as an eggshell.

Your Mama looks down at your wide eyes and timid smile. "I don't know habibi", she says. She sees your face fall and your shoulders sag. She lifts your chin with her thumb and index finger. With a soft, tired smile, she adds, "We'll try it tomorrow, yes? Maybe tomorrow the wind will be kinder." You merely nod in response, pressing the repaired kite to your chest.

You ask if Baba will be back tomorrow to fly the kite with you. Your Mama gave you a tight-lipped smile that didn't seem to reach her eyes. She stills for a second. Then a second longer. "Not tomorrow, my love," she answers, her voice steady but far away.

سلام (PEACE)

– THE END –



Faith in Blood

Evelyn Grayson

I savour every bump in the road, every twinge of pain as the cart jostles me, the hard wood digging into my spine. They remind me that, for now at least, I am alive. Starkly, vividly alive.

I look out to the countryside through the slats as the tumbril rattles along. The rolling, crashing, tumbling ocean of green that holds so many memories. Thousands of years of blood spilling and soaking the ground. A thousand thousand bodies just below the surface, buried in the bedrock. My blood will soon soak the same sacred ground, enrich the earth, and appease the almighty Goddess.

I am numb, apathetic to my imminent death. Is this Her with me, soothing my fears?

The men who drive the tumbril do not utter a word to me. Perhaps they feel bad for me. Perhaps they're jealous. Maybe my death will mean something, unlike so many others. Maybe the violence will finally end.

Maybe.

Perhaps the land will flourish after my death, bring a bountiful harvest. Perhaps my blood will nourish, will protect, will unite the land.

Perhaps.

The bog is peaceful. Serene. I feel an odd sense of comfort in the earthy, musky, sulphurous smell. I feel in my bones the ancient, powerful sentience of this place that has survived so long. Water reeds sprout from the muddy earth like tufts of hair from the head of some giant submerged in the bog. I look down to my reflection in the dark waters. I see my mother's stern lips, my father's deep eyes, every curve and edge of my harsh face softened by the thought of all the people who have come before me and have entrusted me with carrying their legacy.

As I watch, transfixed, my face begins to twist and morph until its features are no longer my own. A faint silvery sheen tints the translucent skin; bottomless pits meet my gaze, a great tangle of reeds and moss and memories emerges from the scalp and drifts about the face, pushed to-and-fro by some dark current. My Goddess. She rises from the water with nary a ripple, naked as a babe. I know the men behind me do not see her. She is here for me.

I flinch as her icy hand cups my cheek, jagged nails scraping my jaw. Her skin is colder than the deepest winter night; a cold that could only originate in the endless abyss of an unborn universe before time or space or matter. She holds my gaze as her fingers trail down my throat, across my chest, until her palm rests against my stammering heart. I shiver.

She wants... What does she want?

She pushes against my chest, and I stumble back a step, my heart stuttering as her icy cold fingers delve into my flesh without breaking skin, brushing against my bloody, beating heart. She retracts her arm, and I understand: She wants me to leave, to live.

I stumble back a few more steps and begin to turn... As a loop of rope is strung around my neck. The coarse fibres scratch against my sensitive skin as I am shoved to my knees, waist deep in water. The bog no longer seems so peaceful. The coldness of the bog water leeches into my skin, bone deep, clutching at my lungs and stealing my breath. Every sound, every scent, every touch against my skin feels heightened.

"Wait," I say, moving to stand, "you don't understand. She-"

I am shoved to my knees again, my arms twisted and held behind my back. I thrash and flounder like a fish out of water, but their hooks are too deep.

The noose tightens.

I gasp out my pleas: "Don't" and "Please" and "Stop." My gaze meets that of the man tightening the noose. He hesitates, his grip slackening as silvery hands wrap around his. My Goddess! She is back! She will save me from these savages; she wants me to live and be happy. I am chosen.

My Goddess entwines her fingers with the man's, holding tight. Then the noose begins to tighten again. Together they pull, and pull, and pull. The man's gaze hardens, bolstered by the goddess who guides his hand.

No breath can enter my lungs. My heartbeat slows, sluggish and somnolent. My vision whitens and my limbs grow heavy. My thoughts swirl and eddy away.

The bog surrounds me, envelops me in its warm embrace. I sink down...

And down.

And down.

And...

I am... Nothing. And I am everything. I am the peat of the bog, I am the pods that float on the breeze, and I am every blade of grass and croaking frog and budding flower. I am every current in every river that flows across the land. I am every person who has ever or will ever live. I am.

But I am not, also.

A thousand times the sun rises, and a thousand times it sets. I begin to hate it—the sun. I hate its cheerful glare, how it watches all and does not care. An endless cycle of apathy.

My corporeal body rests in the muck at the bottom of the bog. It does not rot; it does not moulder. It hardly changes at all, kept by the bog. My goddess is long gone, as are the men she led here. She has abandoned me here. My death meant nothing to her.

I don't know exactly how long I have stayed here, in this bog, floating above my body, watching from afar as the world continues to crumble.

I feel a tug, as though a rope were tied to my rib. I see it: a silvery line that extends from my chest going... who knows where? I should follow it. I know I should follow it, but for what? Perhaps it will lead me to the afterlife, rather than this incorporeal existence. Perhaps it will show me the secrets of the universe. Do I want to know the secrets of the universe?

I grab the line, and I am immediately pulled away. My body, if you can call it that, is ripped from this plane of existence. I travel through a tunnel, of sorts. Space and time swirl around me, catching on my fingers as I reach out a hand. Flashes of history, memory and long passed times assault my senses. The crackle of a hearth fire, the warmth of an embrace, and the coppery tang of blood. Faces twisted in anguish, in pain, in pleasure. The lives of billions of people over thousands of years. Nothing ever changes. Pestilence, war, famine and death. There is peace, sometimes. There is joy, sometimes. But there is always, always pain.

I am jerked to a halt, deposited back onto the earthly plane. Where am I? When am I?

Cries and jeering reach my incorporeal ears. I am surrounded by a rioting crowd, hatred and rage twisting their gaunt faces. I follow the crowd's gaze to a raised platform, atop which a woman stands, blindfolded. Her torso is bare,

her head is shaved and coated in something black and sticky. Tar. A noose rests against her bare collarbones; phantom fibres scratch my neck.

Why is she here? What has she done? Wave after wave of red-tinged thoughts crash against my mind, emanating from the jeering crowd.

Whore. Traitor. Turncoat. Conspirator. Snake.

I hear only silence from the woman. She does not speak to me. I cannot hear her pleas. Does she deserve this punishment? Does anyone? To be humiliated and violated and murdered in cold blood?

Maybe her god will save her as mine did not.

I drift towards her until my face is inches from hers. Her gaze is defiant, but I see the tears that roll across the landscape of her face. I know her fear. I am her and she is me. I reach out and brush away her tears. I almost think she reacts to my touch, that she can feel me here with her.

She is beautiful. She is afraid.

Someone must stop this. I should –

The noose tightens, and I am pulled away.

Dizzying, disorienting, disconcerting shapes and colours swirl around me. A thousand voices merge and diverge, screaming, whispering, comforting, hurting. I try to grab hold of something, to pull myself back to her, but nothing is real here. I am pulled and pushed through an ocean of memories, my senses battered and bruised by every new sound, stroke and sight.

I am set down more gently this time, my motion slowing until I am dropped into some new place. This landscape is familiar: rolling hills stretching into the distance. I feel at home in these peaceful, empty fields. I must be here for a reason; there must be something here for me to see.

I turn and see a wide channel of cleared land, small rocks covering the dirt. This is not familiar to me. Two metal lines run parallel along the cleared land, spaced apart by wooden beams laid along the ground between them. These strange structures run far, far into the distance, disappearing into the horizon in either direction.

There is nothing man-made for miles around except for these strange metal lines. Except – wait. What is that in the distance? Before I can even form the thought, space and time warp around me, and I am beside the new object.

A series of strange metal boxes sit atop the lines, joined together into a long chain. I stand beside the last box in the chain. As I watch, a group of men emerge from behind the box. Four of the men are bound and held in place by eight others, struggling in their grip. The four appear young, on the cusp of manhood. I see their blue eyes and brown hair and sharp jaws. I see the tender looks that pass between them. Family. Brothers, perhaps.

They are speaking, all the men, but I cannot understand their tongue. I hear the animosity between the bound and the unbound in the pitch and tone of their harsh voices.

The unbound men take out more rope, looping it through the bindings at the brothers' wrists. As the rope passes through the eldest brother's ties, he spits in his captor's face. The man's face twists in anger, and he reaches for the brother's throat, grasping some charm strung about his neck and ripping it off. He throws the charm away.

It bounces once, twice, before landing at my feet. A plain, wooden cross.

The rope, now strung between the four brothers, is tied to a loop of metal at the base of the final box on the lines. The eight men move to the side of the box, slide open a door and climb inside. The brothers must be restrained while the other men rest, then.

The boxes begin to move, slowly at first, then gaining speed. The brothers stumble after the boxes, hardly managing to keep on their feet. I have seen this before, men trailed behind a horse speeding along. They rarely make it out alive.

I must untie the knot. I'm sure if my will is strong enough I could, even with my incorporeal form, influence the matter around me and-

The first brother stumbles and his feet are ripped from beneath him. I catch a glimpse of his brothers following, but I am again pulled away.

The now-familiar tunnel of memories surges about me, growing in intensity and crashing against my formless body. A deep sadness burrows into my bones, worming into my bloody, pulseless heart. How many times will this happen? How many gods will lead their followers to this madness?

I am buffeted and beaten down by thousands of deaths, thousands of violences, thousands of hateful beliefs: A throat slit for fertile land, A liberated woman burnt, A cudgelling for conflicting faiths. An illegitimate babe thrown

to the waters to gain the acceptance of people who were supposed to be family. And everywhere, everywhere, the glint of a charm strung about a throat, a whispered prayer, a faceless god, a cross, a star, a meaningless symbol of peace.

When will it end? Will it ever?

My body still lies in the depths of the bog. Someday, they will dig me up, preserved as a saint. They will know my story. They will hear my voice, though I can speak no words to them. And they will know, as I know.

That my death has meant nothing; that their deaths have changed nothing.

And that every victim will have their day.

– THE END –



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