

Scribblers
Festival

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Explore the World of Creative Bravery



The Golden Pen

2023 ANTHOLOGY



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We had many amazing entries to the Golden Pen competition in 2023.

We asked writers to step out of their comfort zone, take a deep dive into the impossible, soar across the unimaginable and explore the world of Creative Bravery.

And creatively brave you certainly were! We received over 300 entries, by turns enchanting, hilarious, whimsical, poignant, nerve-wracking, sombre and beautiful, but all imaginative and delightful to read.

The Scribblers Team and our Golden Pen Judges, Jenny, Laura, Daniel and Sharon, would like to extend a huge thank you and congratulations to everyone who entered. We loved reading every single entry and we can't wait to see what you write next.

We would also like to thank CBH Group, Fremantle Press and Boffins Books for their valuable support of this initiative.

If you'd like to see what Scribblers is up to at the moment, make sure you visit:

www.scribblersfestival.com.au

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Happy Reading!

Scribblers



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The Serendipity Cake and the Miracle Bee

Violet

Junior (Year 4 – 6)

Winner

Prelude

There was something missing. There had been for a long time. Opal, my two year old Stimson's Python, was wrapped around my forearm. Her tongue flicked as she sniffed, fliffing as I called it, at my skin as I pondered the problem. There was near total silence. The only sound was Nanna pulling up the bed sheets next door. She itched at the cotton against her skin and continued her dreaming. The lavender bush outside my window was almost empty but for some small violet flowers I'd been hand pollinating in our garden for years. It wasn't ideal but hopefully if they come back, they'll appreciate the gesture. Abruptly, the shrill cry of my alarm clock filled the room interrupting my thoughts, it echoed and bounced off the walls replacing the tranquility. It was the second alarm of the morning, it was just as important as the first alarm if not more so as it reminded me I would soon be running late if I didn't put a little bit of boogie in my step. I placed Opal gently back in her enclosure. She coiled around the tree branch, as all good pythons do, relishing the heat from the lamp.

"Misssing you already" I hissed to Opal on the way out.

I grabbed a muesli bar and slipped it in my backpack. I threw on my Marie Curie T-shirt (the one that said 'I tried to lie to Madam Curie but she saw right through me'), shorts and sneakers, ready for the day ahead.

"Bye Nanna!" I called but I got no reply (she is a sound sleeper). I raced out the door onto the direct path to school rather than the road. My backpack jingled and clinked; full of bottles and test tubes, reminding me just how much my backpack was different to most girls my age; not a lipgloss, scrunchie or K-Pop related item in sight. I slowed to a walk. Even though it was quieter than it used to be or should be, the bush never failed to calm me from my early morning rush. This was despite the absences. The wombats were gone. The mobs of kangaroos had since left. The kookaburras had nothing to joke about. There was no buzzing left.

The honey bees had gone and with them the hope of a future.

...

I arrived at school 20 quiet minutes later, our school motto 'INVENTIO PER VIRTUTEM' blazing in the sun. I opened the doors to reveal the figure of Principal McCarthy in her usual no nonsense suit waiting for me.

"Good morning, Sting." Her eyes narrowing in thought. "Jacko said he saw a bee yesterday down at Tommo's farm. That'll be the first in a year."

I thought hard. "More like 18 months Miss."

I pulled out my records notebook, the inspiring message of 'Explore with courage, lead with curiosity' embossed on the front cover. I paused before writing, a question formed itself like a cloud in the sky.

"Did it have impaired flight performance?"

She gave me a small grin and nodded her head, "Do you mean was it flying wonky?"

"Yes, I suppose so." I replied.

"Well Jacko said he was out feeding the pigs, when he heard a buzzing behind him, he turned around and" she clapped her hands together, "it smacked straight into his forehead. That's how he saw it was a bee."

I nodded continuing to write the information down.

"Sounds like the last one; flight impaired." I paused thinking about my timetable, wondering how soon I could get out to Jacko's farm. "Thanks Miss. I gotta go though or I'll be late for science."

I waved and raced off down the corridor. I looked out a window to see the garden, empty of flowers, empty of bees. Empty of life.

I decided to take the garden shortcut, that would make up a couple minutes of time. Everyone used to take the shortcut through the garden but now the garden is dead and that's just depressing. Then a noise made me stop. It was a noise of life. I stopped and turned around. Buzzing close but faint. It was a noise I had never heard, but dreamt of every night. I rummaged carefully through my bag for a collection jar, keeping an ear intent on the sound. Then I had it. I slowly put the bag down and unscrewed the lid. If it was a bee, I would be

able to study it and maybe get a sample. I had only seen bees in pictures. I was born after the mite apocalypse.

I had to catch it.

...

The buzzing got fainter. My heart sank. It was getting away. Standing still was pointless. I chose a direction. I moved ready to backtrack. My ears strained to hear the noise. My eyes desperately scanning the garden for any signs of movement.

THERE!

I froze. It was definitely flying erratically just like the ones in the videos. It dropped suddenly onto the lavender, exhausted. Jar ready, I hunted towards it. I carefully stretched forward, gently placing the jar over the bee and bringing the lid up underneath. The bee was safely trapped. I slowly slid the jar and lid off the leaf before screwing it together.

Yes! Success! But before I could examine it closely, I heard Principal McCarthy.

“What’s in the jar, Sting?” I held the jar up to the sunlight to show her.

“Hope.”

Chapter 1: Serendipity Cake

In our family it's called a serendipity cake but really, it's just a plain old vanilla sponge. Serendipity is a happy accident and this cake changed the world...sort of. Much like the happy accident that led to the discovery of penicillin I was about to have my own Alexander Fleming moment with the varroa mite. It all started on the day I saw and caught my first bee.

Emotions swirled around me. Thoughts demanded attention while others relentlessly tried to push their way to the front. One thought was particularly stubborn, pestering me for icecream on a Summer's day.

What do I do now?

I couldn't go back to class. Everyone would crowd around me like fans at a concert which was not what I had in mind because who knows what would happen to the bee. No, I decided. It had to go home. All my equipment was at home and last time I checked no one made a great scientific discovery at a Black Pink concert.

"Sting?" I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder.

I came back into reality. "Principal McCarthy?"

She drew my focus from the bee. I looked at her. She looked at me. We both knew I had to go home to my lab.

"I'll see you when you get back. I'll let your teachers know that you'll be a busy bee for the next few days."

She gave me a warm grin. It was all the encouragement I needed. I raced off in the direction of home.

I burst through the door.

"Nanna!" I cried.

Nanna is my inspiration she spent her entire career discovering new ways to live through architecture but all the men on her team took the credit. I wanted to do the same through science except this time I am going to get the credit.

“Shoes off inside.”

“But...but Nanna!”

“Shoes off.”

I kicked my shoes in a furious flying frenzy. “I got one.”

Nanna knew what I meant by ‘one’. She put on her glasses and peered in closely. “So it is. I haven’t seen one since before you were born. Although this one looks like it needs a good cup of Milo.”

Nanna always kept her sense of humour despite the circumstances. I asked Nanna the most bothersome question of them all: “What do I do now?”

“Well, I can’t answer that question, but I know what I do when I’m faced with a problem, I make a good old vanilla sponge with a hearty cup of Milo.”

I thought about it. It wasn’t the answer I was looking for, but it was still a good idea. I nodded my head, she didn’t hesitate; “Right, you know what to do. Aprons on and to the kitchen.”

I was unsure, I was looking for answers not cake but Nanna’s no-nonsense advice was always pertinent. What happened next was how the cake got its name.

...

An hour and a half later we were ready to dust the cake. I love this part. The powdered sugar looks like snow falling. I was so engrossed in the effect that I didn't notice that I accidentally sprinkled a lot on my jar. Worried I had doused my bee in too much powdered sugar even for their tastes I squinted, peering into the jar at the bee. It was only after the icing sugar had settled I noticed the shrug and flick of the bee's wings as if it was freeing itself from a great burden. I needed a closer look. I had just the thing. I raced up to my bedroom, snatched my magnifying glass from my desk and headed to the kitchen.

Using my magnifying glass, I delicately moved my jar around to get a sufficient glimpse of the state of my bee. The icing sugar moved. Not by my bee but by itself. The grains of sugar shuffled off as if something was underneath them. In an instant I realised it must be the varroa mite. I flicked my eyes back to the bee. The mite was no longer clinging onto the bee but had ejected itself. The magnifying glass was no longer enough, I needed to look closer. I bounded up the stairs to my room. Once inside I began to carefully take my precious bee out of the jar with a pop stick. It crawled on board, and I placed it in a new jar separate from the varroa mite. I poured the remaining contents of my jar into a petri dish and placed it under my microscope. I used a probe to slowly search through the powdered sugar until I found the varroa mite. Then there it was. The hairy, flat, amber coloured destroyer, only it was white now. The powdered sugar was stuck to the fine hairs of the mite making it look very uncomfortable. Suddenly there it was. The way to stop all of this.

Chapter 2: Sweet Idea

Nanna says that creative thinkers are running low these days. People don't need to think for themselves with all the AI around. If you're stuck, you just say, 'Hey Siri' and you have all the information you need. That's why the bees have been gone for so long because Siri doesn't have the answers to these questions. That's the problem with AI, it only has the answers to things that have already been worked out so I'm on my own with this one.

Time to go old skool with the trusty pen and paper. My pencil tapped on my desk unsure what to do. Would a bee walk in powdered sugar on its on? Only one way to find out... scientifically. I bolted down the stairs and into the kitchen where I grabbed a container and filled it halfway with powdered sugar.

"Just borrowing the icing sugar Nanna!" I called out.

"What on earth do you need icing sugar for?" "For my experiments!"

"What experi... never mind. Just don't get too much on the floor."

I smiled. Nanna knew well. I put the container down on the island and ducked into the laundry to grab a spare T-shirt before taking all my equipment up the stairs again. On the floor I lay down the shirt and placed the container on top and poured in the icing sugar. The next three hours were amongst the most frustrating of my life. Nothing I did worked. I tried luring and enticing. I tried prodding and provoking. I got so frustrated that I tipped the bee right in and it still scampered out. How was I supposed to get millions of bees to crawl through it if I couldn't even get one? I decided to take a break.

Chapter 3: Wood for the Trees

One quick sniff of my T-shirt made me realise I needed a shower. When I have a shower, it makes me feel like I enter my own little world. Not hearing other sounds, just me and my thoughts. Sometimes I pretend that I have entered a rainforest. When the water hits your shoulders and rolls down your arm it makes you feel so much calmer. Hearing the water above you hit the ground just gives you a sense of serenity. I thought about my little hard working bee. He should have a shower. That's it! A sugar shower! If I pour it above the bee, it can't scramble out and I could do a lot at once. I turned off the shower and quickly put on some clean clothes before sprinting to my bedroom.

I gently placed the bee on my desk and began sprinkling the sugar on to him. The sugar clung to the scopa. It just continued walking around the container, oblivious to what was going on above him. Success! After three hours I finally got it! That would definitely be enough to upset the varroa mite but there was a problem. You can't hand treat millions if not billions of bees. So I grabbed a large sheet of butcher's paper and began drawing up plans... I sketched for days and weeks until I had a prototype that was possible to build, easy to use and would efficiently dust the bees.

My only issue was I would never have enough money to build and test it so all it was, was a drawing. Frustrated, I looked around my room. On my far wall was a poster for IBOTCS (International Bureau of Twenty- First Century Scientists). IBOTCS fund the latest inventions and come up with some of their own as well. The great scientist Rachel Logan founded the institution, and it is a community of like-minded scientists. Then I knew! I would take my invention to them and if it got accepted, they would fund my project. I had seen the wood for the trees, I had the answers, and now there was no turning back.

Epilogue

Looking back reminds me to keep pushing. All the struggles are a good reminder to never stop. It's always important to push through so you can get to where you need to be to help people, the planet and be a force for good. The serendipity cake that day eventually led me to IBOTCS where they agreed to fund my project and develop my invention to use worldwide. I ended up working for years on that invention. The many setbacks and miscalculations and the constant tinkering was worth it. Every bit of frustration and alteration paid off for a thriving bee population. As Albert Einstein said, 'If the bee disappeared off the face of the Earth, man would only have four years left to live.' I showed bravery and fortitude that day and now I have the courage to tackle any problem. There are different types of bravery but my type, creative bravery, brings forward the most innovative ideas that makes the world it is today.

Glossary:

AI: Stands for Artificial Intelligence which is a man-made intelligence that is able to develop and learn a type of understanding to help humankind.

Alexander Fleming: A scientist from the 20th century who discovered penicillin.

Apocalypse: Is a catastrophe or disaster that usually an unwanted infestation.

Inventio per virtutem: Latin for discovery through bravery.

Microscope: Is a device used to magnify different objects too small to be seen by the human eye.

Penicillin: Is an antibiotic that treats a range of bacterial infections.

Petri Dish: Is a glass dish with high edges using in scientific experimental work.

Prototype: Is a model or draft of an idea that is used to estimate or present things like price or materials and is often given to a company to see if they will invest in a product.

Scopa: The hairs of a bee made to carry pollen.

Siri: An artificial intelligence which uses voice recognition to assist users.

Varroa Mite: A 0.5mm long insect that clings to the hairs of bees causing them to not be able to fly and eventually die when they unable to get home. They spread very quickly so are causing a rise in bee deaths.

My Name is Jenna

Lianne

Middle (Year 7 – 8)

Winner

After: I used to be a girl. A girl who was confident, determined and blended in like colours that compliment each other. I was Lenna. But now I'm just a smudge shadowed by a perfect palette of harmonised colours. Sometimes I wish I had just taken the 'what ifs' instead of exchanging that for the reality. What if I had just taken one step back. What if I just let the other team win. I wish I had the power to just change one thing from the past. That would change everything in the after. There would be no after. Because I would have had my hearing.

Before: "Good morning, Miss Waites". She smiles at me. Her brown ombre hair cascading down like a river streaming through her face, discontinuing as it lands on her slender shoulders. "Morning Lenna can't wait to see your presentation on bravery today". I sit at the front row, in the middle. More girls start to come into the class, each one bundling in through the room. It's not long before Eleanora, Livy and the rest of the group come in. Eleanora clinging onto Livy by linking their arms together. It's typical for Eleanora to always be around so close to Livy, she thinks they are inseparable. Well at least I know that Livy is not genuine about Eleanora, we've been best friends since kindy, and I know that Livy won't change that.

After: I know that Livy is trying to be kind, but harshness is defined through Eleanora's face. Through the menacing, abbreviating scowls she gives me. As I hesitantly walk into the classroom, Miss Waites embraces me with a smile that I know is fully of sympathy and pity. She does this every day because I can't hear her, because she thinks somehow that that one smile would change the past. But nothing can change the past. I don't look at her, instead I just look down at the dull carpeted door like I do every day. I can feel the intriguing glares fire their invisible lasers cutting through my skin, staining my veins. I can feel the uncomfortable vibrations of their voices echoing through my bones, shattering the happiness that once fulfilled me.

Before: "Braveness is most commonly defined as the confidence to show no fear in facing intense challenges. But as much as I agree with this statement, I believe braveness can take part in many forms. Every individual has their own type of brave whether that is showing confidence in our work, sports, or talents. In conclusion, I believe that braveness might not be seen by other people, but it is always within us and something that no one is able to take away from us". A reverberating wave of applause comes after the last word. I look over to Miss Waites. She is radiating smiles as she scribbles down something on her assessing board. Hopefully that was enough for a passing mark.

After: I disagree that bravery can't be taken away from us. I had mine taken away with my talents. It's all just a lie. I'm not Lenna anymore. I'm Lenna without her mind. I'm Lenna without her words. Lenna without her hearing. It's like I'm facing the universe spinning with no boundaries forever and ever. Sometimes I don't know why I still should be alive even after the before. The bell rings before the cluster of perfect kids bombard for the door. I impatiently head for the door, just as I am pushed against the middle crowd. I look around swiftly, alarmed at the presence of my teacher casting a shadow over me. She motions for me to come to her desk. I hesitantly walk towards her. I'm not scared about what she might say to me. I'm scared about how she will say it to me. I see her scribbling something on her customised pink glitter clipboard. Just staring someone in the eye who knows your past is as painful as the actual accident. She looks up at me and gestures to her clipboard.

Hi Lenna,

I know you're having trouble fitting in with the rest of the class especially considering your accident. I just wanted to help you, so I am encouraging you now to join our school's special needs club. I know this is not what you want but it will benefit you and your education. It is not compulsory, but I am going to send you on a day trial to see if you like it. This is a good opportunity to be able to show what a bright child you are.

The words ring through my head. 'Special needs club'. 'Accident'. 'Day Trial'. But the word that hits me hard is 'bright child'. I was a bright child. I don't know what I am now, but I definitely don't need to be a part of a special needs club. My face is hot, and I can feel my ears burning. Then without thinking, I pace out the door into the open air of uncomfortable words.

Before: I emerge from the hot air of the classroom into the sunlight. My arms catch warm glimpses of the sun hiding behind the thick smokes of clouds. The comfortable comradery of recess flows through like an unbreakable bond with the wind. Livy pats a spot next to her that has been saved for me. Next to her is Eleanora who whispers something in her ear. I look at the array of lunchboxes lined in the middle and join my lunchbox against Livy's. Then we all take what we want from the buffet of everyone's lunches. Livy and I started this tradition years back when it was just the two of us that sat together in Year two. Since then, our group has gotten so big it may have well consumed most of the girls in Year seven. We munch away from the varieties of lunchboxes apart from our own, but we soon get interrupted by the challenging voices of the boys playing soccer. "Hey girls, are you up for a rematch game of

soccer or are you too worried about your dress getting muddy”. Livy answers back calmly, “ Hey, you barely won last time, there’s not a chance you’re going to win today”. Livy and I are both in the same soccer team and we haven’t lost a match all season. We start with the ball, and it rebounds across the field from Livy’s strike. I can hear Eleanora’s constant voice saying “Livy, Livy, pass it here”. Her high-pitched annoying tone makes me interject the ball from Livy. Daniel comes at me, ready to object the ball into his own goal. I’ve quickly estimated in my mind that it would only take 5 more steps until I strike into the goal. 4 steps... I can hear Livy catching up to me, ready to intersect the ball but I think I can get a goal on my own. 3 steps... Some of the boy’s try to tackle me but I leave them restless with my energy. 2 steps... I see the goalie as he prepares to do anything to prevent this goal but that’s not gonna happen today. 1 step... I strike. Goal.

After: Goal, the word that destroyed my life. I don’t ever want to think about it again. I try not to remember the day, but it seems like the only thing that I can remember, the people, the slippery grass, the uncontrollable ball. But life continues without you, the boys still continue to make rematches with the girls, the traditions that you start move on without the most important people. Everybody judges from who you have become now and not who you were before. I slide through between the fence and the shed to the lonely stump of the tree. Lonely just like me.

Before: We make plans on the weekend, but Livy and I can’t make it this week because of the extra training session Coach Conner had organised before our finals in two weeks. I can tell Livy is desperate to go but I ignore my reciprocating feeling as well. We need to win. Eleanora looks disappointed in Livy, especially since she missed out last week as well. Livy shrugs indecisively but I know my priorities.

After: The night after we got back from the hospital, was also the first night of the after. Everybody lowered their expectations, isolated me in a thick inevitable blanket of darkness. I fell behind, catching each step before it all left me, and I was left too far away to catch up. Every piece of me seemed as if it had been torn apart individually to increase the pain that I barely survived. But I’ll never get back what I lost. I close my eyes against the old tree full of scars that show the sagacious marks the world left on it. The cool wind suppresses against my skin and gets inhaled by my hair. I can feel the congruous vibration against my wrist, the consistent reverberating watch telling me that recess had concluded. But I’m not ready to go back. I let the incessant vibrations lull me to release the tension that had crept its way back into my mind. The vacant land surrounding me felt like the most safest place after the before. A place where my thoughts could seep through the moist layers of soil, suspended deep where no one could intrude them. I get startled by the rustling figure shaking the

nearby leaves of a jarrah tree. I thought I was alone, but a freckled puppy emerges from the windows of the bushes. It comes hurtling towards me. It's tongue bouncing side to side, slobbering against my uniform. A boy with tanned skin and a carpet of brown hair erupts from the same bush that the dog came out of. I stare at him, his peculiar reflection resembling masses of dirt infiltrating his skin, ragged clothes that have had an adventure of its own and freckles surrounding his large dimples. I don't know what I should do. He starts talking, his mouth moving at the speed of light. But I can't hear him.

Before: I propel the ball across the field. Then I sprint to the other side before striking yet another ball into the goal. I keep going. Beads of perspiration running down my back, sweat filled with determination streaming down from my tarnished hair. The whistle goes before I am unreservedly lacking energy. I gulp down the fresh water, not caring that some of the water leaks from my mouth into the creases of my neck. Coach comes up to me. I can feel his strong figure obscuring my view from the scoreboard we had won. His sharp breath thrashes against my skin. "Good job today Ms Lenna, but I want you to be our midfielder for our grand finals next week, playing in every quarter". I nod, too tired to speak. We have to win next week.

After: I enter the classroom with people nothing alike me. They don't know anything about me. I'm greeted by a young woman with slender shoulders and a sympathetic smile. That's all I have to know to know that she I just like everyone else. She knows that I'm made of a boulevard of broken dreams. My eyes draw to her teacher badge, Mrs Callahan. I can see the uncertainty in her face. She doesn't know how to communicate with me. I know she is trying so I scribble on a piece of scrap that I know how to lip read. She nods. Another girl comes in, she almost looks scared, she trembles into the room rather than walking. Her pink flushed face indicates that she had been crying before. Still remnants of her tears left drizzling across her face. She comes over and sits down next to me. She gulps down her tears before it escapes as little hiccups through her mouth. I watch her intently before she senses my appearance and turns her head to look back at me. Then it's her turn to observe me, her expression changing as her eyes follow my figure. After an awkward silence, she says something to me which I interpret as "Why are you in this class?". But I don't know what to say so I keep silent.

Before: I emerge through the back door of our old crimson, blue house. Sweat tickling down my back. Dads in the kitchen, his rhythmic chops echoing off the walls of the hall. "How was training today?" he asks while passing the bottle of water coated with layers of small droplets. "It was our last training today, I think we might have a good chance for the finals", I say. "I'm sure you do, especially with you in their team champ".

After: I ask Mrs Callahan if I can leave to go to sick bay. She frowns at me. The hard gravel thumps at my feet as I sprint towards the tiny building on the side of the main entrance. But then I quickly change course to the exits of the school gates. As soon as I know I'm out of sight, I slow down my pulsating heart then I grab the nearest wall, digging my nails into the wrinkles between the concrete and the paint. I don't know where I'm going so, I just keep walking and ignore the bright flashlights shining a seam of light through my eyes. I keep going, the inky road guiding my way until I am brought back to my senses that someone is staring at me. There's a boy, standing on the steps of his small and rusty house. His peculiar dimples and wrinkles around his eyes make me realise that he was the boy. The boy who talked to me.

Before: The sun illuminates the white walls of my room before dispersing into specks of filtering light. It's the day. I tie a ribbon around my silky ombre hair. I smile in the mirror, my face casting a beautiful spotlight against my reflection.

...

Unmitigated roaring sounds tearing through the crowd. I take the start off kick, intersecting it as it comes belting down from the lubricious grass. I can feel the shadows of other team players coming up against me. A tall muscular girl kicks the ball out of my control before scoring a goal. The reciprocating pattern continues, and I look around me at the tired gasping faces collapsing on the floor. The scoreboard doesn't change, we're always one behind. Just one more quarter left.

After: He waves to me. I don't usually wave back anymore but today I have the longing feeling to wave back. He pats the seat next to him just like Livy used to do to me. I don't know what I should do so I awkwardly open the grating gate and brush against the jungle of overgrown weeds to where he sits cross legged. Dirt is smeared across his face and his socks have jagged edges from where they have been ripped. The straggly boy gets a nearby stick and starts writing words in the chapped dirt. He writes that he is sorry that he didn't realise that I was deaf. We share a smile. I grab the next stick nearby. I write to him that I can lip read. He then starts talking. It's weird that I can't hear him, but I can listen to him. I don't talk to him though, just let him keep talking because it makes me feel belonged.

Before: We're so close behind them. If we get two more goals, we'll win the finals. Adrenaline is rushing so fast, wind slapping at my face, rain licking my sweat. But none of that matters now because I have the ball. It's somersaulting through my feet, turning figure eights across the unreliable slippery glass. Armies of strong girls come into my prereferral vision. They're coming for me. I look desperately at my teammates, but they've been obscured by the players swarming around me, all targeting the ball. The goal posts lunge their arms out to me. I push my way around the other players, aware of the race against time. I count about fifteen more steps until I can propel the ball into the posts. The grass is slippery, but I manage to keep my ground. A girl is running towards me, her steps trembling through the thick blades of rain. My surroundings dissipating quickly as the rain thickens. I still have the ball. I see bright flashlights standing tall against my position. But what I don't see is the blackness that comes after the light.

After: I wake up in the middle of the night. My mouth is opened, and an inaudible sound convulses my weak body. Tears and sweat running a pool of stream against my dampened pillow. It's still dark out, and a figure obscures the light from outside the corridor. He comes in, his green eyes reflecting the surface of an impenetrable forest. Just like mums. He sits on my bed and as the foggy tears disperse, I realise I'm not the only one crying.

Now: It's a perfect day today. We're all together. Me, dad, the boy with scruffy hair, and his mum. I still don't know his name and he doesn't know mine, but I like it that way. Autumn leaves have just started to fall, and remnants of summer still procrastinate around the bed of illuminating flowers. I go off with the boy on the swings. He starts laughing but I don't know what he's laughing about. So, I start laughing with him, my voice for the first time belting a syncopated rhythm. He looks at me surprised. And then he laughs even harder.

Memnoirs of the Sea

Joselyn

Senior (Year 9 – 12)

Winner

It all started when I was thirteen.

He was taller than me, with long arms and legs. His hair was dishevelled and unbrushed, tangled in knots and clumps. His skin was dark and tanned, like the colour of the tea my father was so fond of. His eyes, they were the colour of the deep dark sea.

‘Bahir’, if that was ever his name, swam like he was a part of the sea. His normally clumsy limbs worked like machinery, as he dived and dipped into the invisible nooks and crannies of the ocean.

He looked like he belonged there.

We were miles away from shore, the hot sun beating on our backs. My father casted his nets back and forth as he waited patiently, sweat dripping down his nose. My feet dangled over the cool waters while I held a sketchbook in hand.

I thought Bahir was a dolphin coming by for a curious look. But when he propped himself on the boat with that stupid grin, I knew he was anything but.

“Pa!” I yelled out. “There’s a boy!”

The boy smiled, water dripping down his chin.

“That’s just Bahir, sayang.” He said, wiping a harpoon clean. “Say hi, Bahir.”

It was unusual for him to speak and when he did, it came out all slurred and dribbly in blunt, short sentences. No one understood him better than me and my mom. He liked to stay silent because of that.

‘Bahir’ gave an unconvincing wave, his mouth in a stupidly wide grin.

Where Bahir went, my father followed.

We always got enough fish that way.

My father always looked sad back when he was in the village. Here, in the middle of the ocean, he looked at peace. People liked to say I resembled him a lot, but really it was only because of our lightly coloured hair and our shared blue eyes. He had a sort of sandy yellow tint to his hair, and golden sun-kissed skin from his long hours under the sun. His eyes, old and wrinkled around the ages, still held its pearly blue colour my mother fell in love with.

My father came from a place far away from here, my mother once said. She said he washed up on shore one day, forgot who he was and couldn't utter a coherent word with the tip of his tongue sliced off. She fell in love with him, and they had me. He hasn't left since.

Sometimes I asked him about the place where he once lived and who he was before he came here. He never remembered, maybe he never wanted to.

"It isn't about who you were." He would always say. "It's what you make of you, now."

When I was younger, I was scared the sea would come for him again. That it would swallow him whole and wash him on another foreign shore.

I told Bahir about this fear, as silly as it sounded. He looked at me with those strange dark eyes and laughed. It was light and airy, his gentle neck arched back. I was angry and threw pebbles at him, saying how cruel he was. To this he said:

"A shore is a shore," he smiled, lips curved around the corners, "as long as there is the sea, I am at home."

When the sun began to cast its colours across the ocean, my father rowed our way back to the village. I sulked next to him and sat as far away as I could from Bahir.

Bahir only laughed as he blew into a strange hollow object. It made a lovely sound as he covered and uncovered some of the holes using his fingers. His eyes were held shut in concentration.

"This is the song of the sea." He smiled. "Remember it."

To me, Bahir reminded me of the stories the village elder liked to tell. Things from deep beneath the sea with monstrous faces and dark scales, unworldly creatures from a place we'll never reach. When he gazed at me with those dark eyes, I thought he must've come from the sea.

...

Over the next weeks, when I wasn't in school or helping my mother plant in the padi, spin yarn, tapping rubber trees or feeding chickens, I would beg for my father to take me along with him.

He would grumble, sigh before shrugging his shoulders. But he could never say no.

The days were blistering hot, I could feel the sun burning my arms and legs even after slathering them in the yellow paste my mother insisted on me bringing. I wondered how my father could stand it. He always had a tough skin I supposed.

When we got far enough from land where fishes swam in abundance and there wasn't anyone out there for ages, my father got to work. So did I.

I still have many small, tiny portraits of him just as big as my thumb. A charcoal portrait of his bare back. Tiny ochre doodles of his figure. Pigmented fluid-like paintings of his face. My mother loved them, and we'd keep them hidden from him. She told me one day I might make beautiful paintings. I laughed back then and said, maybe.

When it got too hot, I'd toss my sketchbook aside and dive into the cold waters.

Bahir would show me each rare, oddly shaped pearl he found at the bottom of the ocean floor, the scales of fishes with iridescent patterns, the best spots to find brightly patterned slugs with dress-like membranes, each and every nook and corner of the ocean.

"The ocean gives and takes." He said. "The same way we do."

In Bahir's palms was a yellow striped fish with a curious beak, it swam gently between his makeshift pool of water.

“It can live without us, but we cannot live without it.”

In his dark eyes held a careful glint, like a blade. It made me shiver, like I was gazing into the depths of the ocean. His eyes were cold, but his smile was so warm I could hardly bear to look away.

...

“Shouldn’t get so close to him.” My father said. “Don’t tell your mother.”

“Why?” I asked, the ‘I won’t’ was left unsaid.

The sun was setting. He was unloading the fishing nets, fingers nimble and quick. I think I knew back then exactly why; I just didn’t want to admit it. I think back then, he knew that as well.

“Because” he said in such a tender tone it surprised me, “he is from sea and we from land. Don’t mix.”

I did not say what I was thinking back then. I was always scared of speaking out. In my head, it sounded so prim and clear, but I knew that if these precious thoughts spilled out, they would turn into an inconceivable mess. They were very tender, these thoughts of mine. Mine alone, mine to think over and roll in my palm like a precious pearl. I won’t share them. Not now, not back then either.

But what I can tell you, a sliver of the truth, is that before birth we all breathe amniotic fluid. When we’re born, our lungs push out all the fluid and we start to breathe the air.

I suppose in some manner, we were sea creatures once.

The sea met the land here in our tiny village.

“Oh.”

I shuffled my feet in the wet sand, watching the waves sweep them back.

I’ve always respected the ocean. It bordered on fear because it’s hard for great things to instil just respect.

The ocean is neither wicked nor cruel, only omnipotent.

In Bahir's words, 'the ocean gives and takes'.

The ocean gave me all I wanted. The coolness on my skin, the bountiful catch which fed me, the lustrous pearls which made my mother smile, the hoard of shells I buried beneath my pillow, the flutter of fins from fishes. The ocean has given me so much.

The ocean has taken many things. Men, women, children. The old, the young. The weak, the strong. The ocean has taken my heart as well. It has stolen and spirited it away, seized it at every smile, every glance, every time the stupid boy showed me a passing fish.

I am a fool, I think to myself, to love a thing like him.

...

When I was sixteen, the ocean took my father.

The thing about grief, the unexpectedness of it, is that the world keeps going. The ocean waves still sways, the sun still rises, the rain still falls, light still shines through the gaps between the trees, but I knew I'll never see his small smiles again.

I was the one to find his discarded clothing on the beach, his boat still anchored, the cold imprint on his and my mother's shared bed, each and every material possession left untouched.

I was scared. More scared than I've ever been in my life.

But more than that, I was furious.

For a week straight, I would row out to the ocean on my father's boat. Some part of me still wanted to believe he was out there somewhere on a foreign shore. Some part of me knew he was gone. Another part of me cursed the ocean.

I rolled over every word he said, how to tie knots, to cast the nets and to throw harpoons. I forgot/abandoned? my soft charcoal sticks and feather light paper in favour of cold metal and the roughness of ropes. Grief hardened my heart; anger sharpened my mind.

For a week straight, I laid in bed thinking of my father, the ocean, and its intricacies. Why, I asked, why him? I whispered it in the dark of the night, in every groove of a coral reef, every passing turtle that would lend an ear, and I whispered it to Bahir.

He didn't smile, not this time, his lips a thin straight line and said, "Sometimes there is no 'why'."

His strange black eyes gazed at me so fondly and tenderly my heart ached.

I yelled at him, threw fists at him, screamed till my voice was hoarse. I begged, pleaded. I cursed him, blamed him. I cried, wept. When the sun was down, I was gripping his soaked white shirt, tears and snot all over it. I felt like a fool, I felt like the world was laughing at me.

We stood silent for what felt like hours only interrupted by my sniffling.

"Do you want me to find him?" He asked. It sounded genuine for how impossible it was, but hell he sounded genuine. Or maybe I was stupidly hopeful. "I can, if you want me to."

I stood there dumbfounded as he stared at me with those dark eyes. It reminded me of the first time I met him for some reason.

"Come with me."

His hands around mine were the warmest thing I've felt.

And we tumbled in the ocean, limbs wrapped around one another. The waters were cold that day but Bahir's arms around me were deathly warm. He looked beautiful in the ocean, sunlight streaming through the water in disjointed shapes upon his skin, dark hair swimming in the water. My chest tightened at the sight. For the first time in a week, my fingers itched for a canvas, so I could forever embed this memory. A painting, so I could forever remember his fluidity. A carving, so I could etch this memory forever in stone.

...

I unbuttoned his white shirt, watched it float to the top of the water like a cloud. As I traced the curve of his naked shoulder, he brought a hand to my cheek. Our lips met clumsily, my hand gripping the back of his head, fingers treading through hair.

That day, I made a wordless promise witnessed only by the ocean.

“Setia...”

“Setia...”

I heard the ocean calling my name.

...

Two weeks after my father's disappearance, a strange creature washed up on shore. It was the biggest thing I've ever seen, its body slender like a dolphin but enormous in size. The entire village surrounded it, watching as the village elder poked and prodded at it.

“It’s a whale,” she said in her frail voice, hands slightly trembling as she traced the grooves along the whale’s upturned belly, “the last time one washed ashore...was fifty years ago.”

I couldn’t help but gaze in both awe and pity at the washed-up creature, its dark eyes reminded me of Bahir. They looked strangely human-like in nature, gazing at me with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. My tongue sat heavily; my teeth aligned in an uncomfortable manner.

“We will have to thank the ocean for its offering.” The village elder murmured, hands shut in prayer. Her milky white eyes glazed off far away. “It is only in her fickle nature that we live.”

As she started murmuring a lengthy string of words, low in tone but fervent in nature, the mouth of the whale opened.

A figure crawled out of it, soaked to the core with seaweed tangled in its hair. In his arms, held another larger figure. As it approached us, the crowd parted like the figure was poison, and as it got closer and closer, I realised why.

Bahir stood metres away from me, my father's still corpse held in his arms. Bahir's familiar face was still. My father's face had never felt more stranger to me, and tears welled in the corner of my eyes.

The face I had grown accustomed to drawing had never felt so foreign. I choked as I gazed back at forever shut eyes, a million questions left unsaid. My knees grew uncomfortably heavy, but I felt as though a weight were to be lifted off my shoulders. I could've cried then and there.

My eyes flicked back to Bahir as he handed my father to my mother gently. His eyes were dreary, dark and tired.

"Hold me."

His words spilled out like hot coal, jumping from his lips. Bahir collapsed into my arms with his arms limp around mine. Like puzzle pieces, I leaned into his cold embrace.

"How?" I whispered into his naked neck. "How?"

"Sometimes there is no 'how'." Bahir said, his arms around my shoulders. "Just like there's no reason why the rain falls, or why the sun rises."

I felt a little angry. But I didn't show it.

"I'm glad I even met you."

They weren't strange but something about his words scared me. They were so soft, so tender and open. It was as if he was baring his heart for the whole world to see.

"Stop it." I said. "You're acting like..."

He sat upright, dark hair falling on his shoulders. He looked like he was about to cry, dark eyes shiny in the dark. My heart ached.

That night, I dreamt of the bottom of the ocean floor. Dark. Cold. Its inky endless blackness. I realised that in that dream, I was a whale. I remembered what the village elder told me about whales, that once they die, they sink to the bottom of the ocean floor to be eaten by other animals. She told me that one whale could feed them for decades.

“Setia...”

“Setia...”

I heard the ocean calling my name.

A fish swam up to me. It had a long body with a monstrous face, with freckles of bioluminescence scattered across its body. It was strange to me, how a creature of the sea resembled the night sky.

“All that meets must split.” It said and grinned, pearl white teeth shining. “The land cannot meet the sea forever.”

I woke up, hot tears pouring down my face. My bed felt so cold and empty.

...

I never met Bahir again after that day.

I wondered and rolled the thoughts and feelings I had over and over and over again in my palm, thinking that someday I would figure out what all of this really meant. I sometimes wondered what my life would've been if I had never met him that fateful day, if I had never heard the song of the ocean, if I had never made a wordless promise towards it, if I had never loved him as much as I did.

Over the years after he left, I dove back to the paper, paints, and charcoal sticks I had once foregone. My heart had become tender from the constant aches he left behind. A seeping wound I could no longer plug.

I painted countless portraits of Bahir's face, so that I could remember him.

I painted the faithful day he left, the beached whale.

I drew whatever I could of the ocean.

When I was 20, I got a scholarship in the arts in the mainland for my paintings. I was scared I would lose the ocean and its song. Scared I would lose my one last memory of Bahir if I went to the city.

It's been 40 years since I left but sometimes, I still hear the ocean calling my name. It sounds like Bahir. I hope he's alright.

Escape

Lucy

Junior (Year 4 – 6)

Runner-up

It was like a tear falling. It was bright but at the same time gentle. Sure, I saw blinding neon signs all the time, but nothing like this. I jumped off the roof I was standing on and carefully moved to the weird waterfall of light. It was near the hole that led down to the Slums. I reached the edge and crouched, looking down into the Slums. Someone down on Level 5134 in rags had grabbed a bucket and attempted to fill it up with this strange light. For some reason it didn't fill. I hesitated and cupped my hands around the light. I glanced down. The light had stopped flowing. "No, no, no, no" I said, panicking. The person with the bucket looked up and shouted some insults at me. "Sorry" I said sheepishly and removed my hands. The light flowed again. I tilted my head curiously. Then I heard it, the unmistakable marching footsteps of Silencers. "No, please not yet please, please" I pleaded. I cast a longing look at the ray of light, knowing it would be the last time I saw it, then turned away and fled back into the Stacks.

...

My name is Nyx. In case you're wondering if you've never seen me, I'm 15 and I've got blue eyes and dyed teal hair and I wear a white shirt with black cargo pants and brown boots. Yes, I am going through a rebellious phase. I live in Eternity, specifically Midgard, an underground, futuristic city where everybody lives. The Silencers are not our heroes, though I assume you already know that. And no human has ever seen sunlight in five thousand years. Well except for me. Now that we've got that out of the way I'm going to give you the story of how I escaped Eternity.

...

I jumped down into the trash and graffiti filled Smugglers Lane, where I met up with Zori. Zori was from the Slums. She was the same age as me except she was leaner and much too skinny. Her skin was olive, and her eyes were green. Her lime green hair had rainbow streaks covering it and was tied back into an ankle length braid. She wore navy jacket and metallic brown trousers that had been repatched too many times to count, a bright strapped yellow shirt, fingerless gloves and light brown boots. I jumped down behind her. She whirled around to face me. In her hand was a soda from the vending machine behind her. "Did you see it?" she asked. "Yeah, long enough for the Silencers to come in and ruin everything" I replied. "They're gonna patch it up" Zori said, "If we're going to go, we need to go now."

I sighed. I knew what she was talking about. Two weeks ago, we had risked going up to Amethyst to try to make some money. Instead, we found this paper note, obviously from the time of the Ancients. After two weeks of gruelling effort, we had finally been able to translate it. It instructed us how to escape Eternity. Escape it. Actually, escape it. The first people in five thousand years to leave the underground city would be two children. "If you want my opinion: we shouldn't," Zori said suddenly. "Are you kidding!? We get a note that's basically giving us freedom and you're saying no!?" I asked her hysterically. "Well for all we know it could be a trap" Zori argued. I snorted "for two underworld kids..., don't think so." "All I'm saying is that we should be more cautious." She spoke. "We're a bunch of homeless orphans who have nothing, what do we have to lose?" I asked her. Zori grumbled, defeated. "Come on, the lift to the Slums should start soon." I whirled around and strutted forward. Zori sighed something like "If you get killed don't blame me" and followed me.

After a while we reached the lift. It was rickety but large and it led down into a dug-out stalagmite. Surrounding it were a bunch of teary-eyed people. You see, no one actually went to the Slums freely, unless to gloat and see all the poor people, who could no longer afford their rent wasting away in the mines. Thanks to a thing called taxes that was about seventy-five percent of people. I grabbed a loose piece of fabric and wrapped it around my shoulder, Zori copied me, and we hung our heads low. I instantly picked out two Silencers in their white and gold uniform. Not grey thankfully, not the military. They tried to stay as far away from the homeless wrecks as they could.

I peered down into the Slums. Surrounded by points of earth was a giant hole. If I squinted, I could make out the different levels of the Slums and at the very bottom tiny lights, houses and smoke. I silently thanked the omniscience for not growing up there. We shouldered our way onto the lift and tried to blend in with the crowd, hanging our heads low. As soon as everyone was on, the Silencer hit a button and the lift descended down into the Slums. Everyone around us moved towards a crate in the corner, where the masks would be. I tapped

Zori on the shoulder and motioned for her to get the masks, I could already smell the fumes. Zori pulled out two black masks and handed one to me. I put it on my face and pressed the two circles at the end. Clean air rushed into my mouth, and I breathed it in happily. I looked down and saw that we were approaching the bottom. Suddenly the masks air didn't seem so clean. The slums where all the workers lived. I've never heard a good word about the slums. It was overpopulated, in poverty and the fumes radiating from the mines drifted into it, making it so that everyone needed to wear a mask just to breathe.

With a clank the lift landed, and I jumped out and ran. I got some weird faces from everybody walking past, probably wondering why I was so eager to enter the Slums, but I ran past them. I was running fast, but I still noticed the plastic, the litter, the dirty streets. The street was so crammed in I could just barely run past. The houses were made out of stone and fake wood and were stacked on top of each other, some were even hanging off precariously on cliffs or stalagmites. Lamps were scarce and once or twice I bumped into someone.

In the distance I heard the clanking off machinery from the mines and forges. Even through my mask the smell was horrible. Decaying food was everywhere, and dirt and grime covered everything. The smoke stabbed at my eyes, making them water. I passed a murky river with rubbish filled to the brim. I saw geysers spewing smoke and lava and the houses near them were burnt down. I entered a market which had stalls so crammed in together that I had to jump on top of the rickety metal roof to keep on moving. Noises and smells assaulted my senses. I heard stall owners' hoarse voices shouting, almost begging, for someone to come to their stalls. The food that was being sold was all rotting and decaying. When we came back onto the street I gasped with relief. I saw the beggars, mothers telling their children it would be okay, the people without masks coughing, dying. I looked over and saw Zori behind me. Her mask covered her face, but I could tell she felt sorry for them.

After a while we reached the communications tower. It was the tallest structure in the slums. It was stalagmite riddled with ladders and platforms that almost reached Amethyst. Almost. I fished out two bags from a nearby alleyway. I zipped it open and looked inside. All our supplies were there. Phew. I chuckled Zori a bag and put mine on. "Ready to go?" I asked. "I still think this is a bad idea." Zori replied. "Don't worry if things go bad you can tell the Silencers it was all my idea." I laughed. Zori snorted and walked up to the tower. She studied it and smiled over at me "Ladies first." "You're a lady as well" I grumbled. I bounced on my heels and bolted towards the tower jumping off roofs and buildings before gripping onto a ladder. I hauled myself up and continued to climb. "Come on." I yelled back down.

Zori copied my movements and landed just below me. I nodded at her and continued climbing. Left. Right. Jump up here. Climb that ladder. I was starting to get exhausted and was thankful for the mask. After what seemed like a million years, we finally reached the top. I hauled myself onto a small platform and lay there, panting. Zori pulled herself up as well and sat down. Her face glistened with sweat and her breathing was ragged. "I...am... never...doing...that...again" she said between breaths. I hit her arm and sat up. I reached into my backpack and brought out two water bottles. I handed one to Zori and quickly took my mask off to have a drink. I stood up and looked over. Just as the note said there was a cliff platform over a big gap in pitch darkness. I grinned down at Zori "Ladies first." She used some colourful words and stood up. I moved out of her way as she backed up to the edge of the platform. She steadied her breathing and took off, leaping across the gap.

I held my breath and heard a clunk. I stared into the darkness. According to one person I met; humans had evolved to have better night vision than the Ancients because of us living in a cave. Sure enough, I saw Zori scrambling to her feet. "It's safe." She called out. I scoffed and backed up to the edge. I breathed deeply preparing myself. I bounced on my heels and counted to three. I bolted across the platform jumping at the end. I flew through the air and approached the cliff. I held out my hands. I came short. I missed the platform plummeting to the ground. My backpack came off my shoulder and fell down. Zori, bless her, just managed to grab my arm. I looked up at her. She was hanging onto the edge by just a fingernail. She pulled me up and I scrambled for footholds, climbing up. I tumbled onto the ground ripping off my mask. Zori knelt beside me and pulled off her mask too. The only thing disturbing the silence were our breaths. I glanced at the edge, silently thanking the omniscience that the backpack wasn't the bag with all the important supplies. "Do you think the Silencers will figure it out," Zori asked suddenly. "Nah they're too stupid," I replied. We shared a glance and burst out laughing. "We should probably get a move on" I said. "Yeah, you're probably right" Zori smiled back. I held out a hand and Zori pulled me to my feet. "The note said to travel east as Cleopatra's sun rose, which would be that way" She explained, pointing to some steps. "Okay then let's go." I smiled. We started walking up the steps.

(A little advice, rest before doing it, there's a lot of steps). When we reached the top, I nearly cried with relief. From this view I could see nearly all of the Slums. The smoke blurred most of it, but I could still see some small houses. I glanced back at the passage. There was a wall about five metres tall, granite. I turned and cuffed my hands. Zori knew what to do. She ran forward and pushed off my hands and pulled herself up. I looked up expecting her to pull me up as well. Instead, I heard laughter. "What," I called up. "Oh Nyx, you gotta have a look at this" I heard Zori say. Her head appeared and she pulled me up as well. I expected a big door encrusted with jewels and gold; twenty metres high that would take years to open. I was not

prepared for what I saw. It was just a simple wooden door with a rusty lock on it. I furrowed my brow, “okay what?” “I’m guessing this is the final test: seeing if we can unlock this puny door” Zori laughed out. I hit her arm and crouched to have a look at the lock. Zori was right it was a simple, easy lock. I turned it in my palm, searching for the mystical technology of the Ancients. I found nothing. I smiled up at Zori and held out my hand. Zori pulled out a lockpick from her backpack and handed it to me and I got to work. The lock was so simple it was actually hard. Two times I got a small electrical shock when I failed. On my third try the lock made a satisfying click and I swung the door open. A stone passageway led up. I took Zori’s hand and together we walked up the passageway.

The first thing I noticed was the light. It was like the teardrop I had seen before but this, this was so much brighter. I shielded my eyes and stepped out. I heard a weird sound and saw that I had stepped onto weird green blades. Something clicked inside my brain. Grass. I gasped and surged forward into a clearing. There were brown towers with strange greenness at the top that were easily bigger than the communication tower. The greenness was the size of the lift. Trees. Leaves I heard chirping and saw a strange creature. It had feathers and wings. Bird, my brain said. It was beautiful. I would be lying if I didn’t say that I was crying. It was so beautiful and bright and alive. I looked over and saw that Zori had the same awestruck face as me. I took a step back and I heard the familiar sound of metal.

“Zori” I warned. I brushed some leaves aside and saw a metal trapdoor. I put a finger to my lips and pulled it open and gasped. I saw Eternity. I saw the Slums. I saw Amethyst in all its disgustingly noble glory. The light had already begun to spill out into the city. I pulled out binoculars from Zori’s backpack and looked down. Silencers were already rushing to get rid of the light and people were looking up in awe, most likely never before seen light like this in their lives. I looked over at Zori and we came to a silent agreement. Amethyst didn’t deserve freedom, no, but the Slums did. I pulled out a voice recorder and pulled all of my memories from the last hour into the front of my brain. I sat down by a tree and started telling it what we had done, and I also told it what we planned to do. Escape 6 Once I had finished, I handed it over to Zori that strapped it to the Ancients note. She aimed it carefully over the hole that led to the Slums and let it drop. I closed the trapdoor. To whoever got this message, tell everybody in the Slums and Midgard freedom is waiting. Leave Amethyst to their tea parties and riches. We will be waiting for you. See you soon.

...

Ms Peeta stumbled down the road. Like everyone else she wanted a glimpse at the strange light before the Silencers covered it up. Her frail and old body couldn't move fast enough, and not to mention she had her baby granddaughter strapped to her chest. She moved through the streets of the slums at the quickest pace she could. She came to an opening in the vender stalls roof and glanced up at the light. Suddenly it disappeared. Ms Peeta was confused. She had never heard of a light that just suddenly vanished. She heard a loud crash behind her, and she whirled around. "Who's there" Ms Peeta asked. She moved forward carefully. Little Alice cooed and tried to have a look. "Shhhh" Ms Peeta said gently. She had found the source of the crash. A voice recorder. What would a voice recorder be doing here? Where did it come from? Ms Peeta snatched it up and studied it. The voice recorder had a note attached to it. Ms Peeta unfolded it. It read 'dear citizen of the Slums, this is an instruction of how to get out of the slums.' Alice cooed a question. A tear escaped Ms Peeta. She felt something blossom in her chest. Hope.

Prisoner of the Desert

Anya

Junior (Year 4 – 6)

Runner-up

It was horribly hot in the desert with no life to give, apart from the only man in the vast land of golden doom. Dry, bronze sand stretched out endlessly on a rocky landscape as a group of camels plodded by, moaning from the lack of water and food. The desert only provided hostility, no comfort at all.

Phil didn't know how he got here. He just blacked out and found himself on a bed of cactus. Food and drink were scarce, but still enough for him. He couldn't remember who he was. He only knew his name. For the last 20 years, he'd been living on the food that the desert provides him; camels, cactus, jerboas and water. It was so bland and felt like eating a tissue, and Phil always got hot sand in his mouth which worn his tooth enamel.

The hot sandy wind stung his face as Phil kept on walking, surprised how he wasn't dead yet. As days passed, Phil pondered how he'd got here. It couldn't have been a plane crash, there was no sign of plane remains, nor any sign of dead bodies.

A few vultures flew over Phil's head, cawing in despair. Phil was sure that these vultures were waiting for him to die so they could eat him.

Sweat beaded his temples and his red, red skin ached underneath the sun. It was so hot that he wanted to run to the north pole and stay there. Panting, Phil climbed up a dune and saw a camel, just before he slipped on its dung and fell onto an evil green cactus that waved its hands and danced, mocking him when Phil got a huge cut on his hip.

He sighed in relief when he saw the camel again. He'd been searching for food for a few days to find a feast in front of him. Using all his strength, he grabbed his dagger that appeared next to him when he first got into the desert. 10 minutes later, Phil drank camel milk and ate roasted camel. Since there was no salt, and the camel wasn't cooked that great, Phil could still taste some blood in his mouth.

Little did he know about the truth of the desert.
The terrifying truth of how he ended up there.

Fierce winds swept hot golden sand onto Phil, who gritted his teeth. He'd had enough of living here. 21 years now. How could he not have escaped? Gnashing his teeth, he felt thirsty and hungry. How was he still alive? Why wasn't he dead? Why couldn't he die?

He grunted as a green cactus reached out and prodded him, trying to see his reaction. Phil kicked it away, only to get the thorns on his feet. The cactus swayed lightly and happily, as the wind laughed.

Phil wished he could get out of the desert, but the sun was so hot that it was frying his brain so he couldn't think straight. He bellowed before continuing his way for food. His stomach rumbled and he felt like he had circled the whole desert.

The hot sand left a long trail of red blisters on his feet and his skin was so red from burns that Phil didn't feel like he was in an oven, but he was one himself!

He hated this place. How long was he to stay here?

He daydreamed of escaping this land of doom, but it was like the desert was a planet itself, with no way out.

His blood churned and his eyes went red when the day passed. The temperature dropped and Phil felt like he was in a freezer. Phil grabbed his camel skin that he got after killing a camel in his 4th year in the desert. The bitter cold stung his skin and the howling wind whipped his hair.

The next day, Phil woke up to the scorching desert sand and walked to a nearby cactus plant. He sighed. The same bland usual breakfast. Except this time, the cactus was so juicy, and its juice suddenly started to pour down Phil's throat, choking him. It was like someone shoved a garden hose to Phil's mouth and blasted it on. Everything went dark...

Then the world somehow glitched around Phil. He was in a bright room, strapped on a chair. Something was choking him. He yanked out a tube out of his mouth, which was gushing out some green liquid. He coughed and gasped for breath before he slowly examined his surroundings. His heart was beating so fast.

Phil looked around. Why were several people sitting next to him, all wearing helmets with wires and cables attached? He couldn't get out from the chair. He felt something on his head, possibly the same helmet. That was the thing that made his brain feel like it was roasting. He couldn't take it off, no matter how much he yanked and twisted it.

Then suddenly memories started filing up in his head, as quick as a rollercoaster.

He remembered drink driving and killing 2 primary students before fleeing the scene, leaving the unfortunate victims dying on the road. He was then caught by the police after a week at his hideout.

At the trial, Phil showed no regret nor remorse for his actions and refused his life sentence. Then he remembered being dragged to this room, and that was when his hellish life in the desert began.

Phil was so mad. This virtual desert was even worse than being behind bars or being dead. Was this desert his prison for the rest of his life? Phil felt red hot hate boiling up inside him. Unable to control himself, he let out a scream of rage.

“Quick! Sedate him!”

Phil turned to see a prison guard, glaring at him. “The tube's fixed?” he called over his shoulder. Another guard nodded, approaching Phil with another tube. Before Phil could protest, the guard had put him to sleep.

Phil woke up, only remembering his name and that he'd been in the desert for 21 years. The desert was like a plague, punishing and killing him slowly with no mercy.

THE END

Journey to the Dark Abyss

Sue Ning

Middle (Year 7 – 8)

Runner-up

The Abyss Sea. One of the darkest things to come from this world- or more likely, the oceans.

There are many rumours of this dark place. It is known more for two things, however.

Its treasures, and its monsters.

For even the darkest depths have their secrets...

My feet shook as I stepped onto the platform, my hands numb from the cold and my lips chapped and dry. I would never be nervous on a typical day, no.

But this wasn't one of those days, and the only reason for my trepidation was simple.

So, I sat at this dock, with an oxygen mask strapped to my face and gloves that were much too big for my hands. By all accounts, I shouldn't be here. I should be in my room, playing games or screaming at the top of my lungs for the sake of it. A 16-year-old should live their life to the fullest. But-

"Xavier?" The stern voice came out from far away, pushing me out from the depths of my mind. This was a class of 10, and the smallest, shortest person in the group would easily be spotted. I looked up to be greeted by a slightly upset face, framed by a dash of silver among a sea of black.

"Sorry," I muttered. She sighed, and my face flushed with embarrassment. My nervousness was getting ahead of me.

"As I was saying," Kairy continued, shooting me a look. "The abyss sea is incredibly dangerous. It is not just the ocean that brings risk, however. I'm sure that you all know about the monsters of the abyss sea, so be careful. You're all here for one reason- to find abyssal pearls."

Abyssal pearls. What our lives were on the line for, just a small and tiny thing. However, one of these could go for a quarter of a million dollars. Why were they so expensive? They were gorgeous. Tales and stories showed that the pearls were so gorgeous that they enhanced a person's beauty, so much so that people fell in love with them.

It was irony, really, that such beautiful things were found in such an ugly place.

“Everyone, please align your feet onto the platforms,” I stepped forwards, correcting mine into the outlines of the boots. Several gaps showed from either side of my feet. Just a stark and simple reminder of everything that was wrong. I strapped the buckles around my waist, tightening them as hard as I could.

Thoughts shot through my head. I want to go back. I don’t want to be here.

Well... too late for second thoughts.

The platform slowly began to lower, and it was at that point when my heart began to race. The glass helmet gave a clank as it snapped over my head. We were now submerged, and my brown curls of hair started to look black in the darkness.

Slowly but surely, the dark embrace of the ocean came to meet us, and the last cracks of light disappeared.

After what felt like forever, the platform came to a stop, and I unstrapped myself from the buckles, hands shaking.

I took a deep breath, propelling myself into the depths of the abyss, the metallic fins strapped to my boots pushing me away from the platform. The water seemed to swallow all the sound, the strange moment broken only by the sound of my sharp and fast breathing. For a few seconds, I floated around, taking in the environment. The black, slick rocks sitting nearby mottled blue coral, as though infected. Beside it hovered an octopus, eyes inky black. I shuddered in horror and moved on. As I descended further, the strange feeling of isolation and quiet began to overcome me.

Was this it? Was I going to go insane?

No. I had come too far just to be broken. I kicked and swam, my natural diving instincts taking over as I whirled through the abyss. A gift was what my grandfather called it. A natural talent. I focused on those words.

But even amidst the small wonders, I couldn't shake a feeling. The feeling... of being watched. I turned, and the shadows danced in my vision. It was then that I knew that I wasn't alone. The rumours, the visions, what I thought were lies... they were all true. The monsters of this sea weren't figments of anyone's imaginations. They were real. Turning, my mind went back to a conversation Kairy, and I had two weeks ago.

"Monsters are myths," She had said. "But here, all myths are real."

The shadows moved once more and I gasped, a piercing sound that escaped from my body. It was so quiet, too quiet, like the creature had drunk all the noises from the waters. Don't move, I told myself, pressing my figure against the black rocks. I made myself as tiny as I possibly could, hugging my knees and keeping quiet. Then, the shadows began to form something. It began as a simple, small shape in the distance. Then I saw it.

It seemed humanoid, but with too many curves. It had a sleek body that was ended off with a fine black tail that darted around, dark as midnight. Atop the tail, a flowing silver cloak billowed. I looked up, and the creature came even closer. I quietened my breath even more. Atop a dark blue splash of curled hair sat a tiara, adorned with a shining object.

An abyssal pearl. But what was it doing on a creature's head? Another thought came to mind, from a book that I'd read as a child with my grandfather, of how abyssal pearls gained their powers of beauty.

“They belonged to mermaids, Xavier. Each had a pearl. However, when they lose it, many say that they’re cursed to turn into something else. A monster.”

Was that what this creature was? A mermaid turned monster, a legend turned real?

As I held my breath, its eyes saw mine, mesmerizing in the darkness. Cobalt blue, just like my grandfather.

Suddenly, something in me changed. Fear turned to courage, and I remembered the stories my grandfather and I discussed, about empathy with the ocean and animals of the deep.

“In the unknown, it’s important to understand the other side of the story,” He had said. Keeping that in mind, I slowly came closer, and to my surprise, so did the creature, its movements mirroring mine.

It occurred to me that although dissimilar in appearance, something in this creature seemed special. Like although it was a monster, it felt more human than the divers who had come with me. The doubt started to vanish, being flooded by something more. Like that small moment of eye contact enlightened a new thing inside me. Hope. I edged close enough to touch the creature, and it placed a grey, webbed hand atop mine, and I stiffened. It began to speak, a melodic and haunting tone.

“Little child, what brings you to my waters? What is it you seek?”

I swallowed, gathering strength to respond. “Abyssal pearls,” I whispered. It tilted its head, and I got ready to swim. But it didn’t move.

“That is not all you wish for.”

“I want to prove myself to my grandfather, a great abyss diver,” I replied, so quiet that I was surprised it heard. “I want to conquer my fears of the darkness.”

As I watched, its expressions softened, showing empathy. “Good luck, my child, but remember that true beauty lies deep within. It touched the object on its head. “The abyssal pearls hold great power, but on the outsides are nothing but a small, black sphere. They are not what they seem on the outside. Keep those words with you, land dweller. Don’t lose your inner beauty.”

It gave me a gentle smile, and within those few seconds I felt the layers of terror shedding away, comfort sinking in.

“I won’t. I promise.”

It nodded, and the creature disappeared into the dark. I floated there for a moment, thinking about what it said. I felt my oxygen begin to fade away and swam back up towards the light. It felt different, like the abyss was more natural, the land more inhumane.

Back atop the platform, the rest of the group was already there, discussing their successes. The chatter dissipated when I arrived, and I could see the curiosity in their eyes to what I had brought.

Kairy arched her brow. “Xavier, did you find anything?”

I took a breath as though ready to sink into the ocean once more and allowed the words to flow like music. “I didn’t find any pearls, but I found more. Knowledge. I met something within the depths, something that taught me that there is beauty within us all, and a purpose,” I swept my arm towards my group. “I know my purpose now,” I said, this time in a quiet voice. “To protect the creatures that live in the darkness and bring their beauty into the light. We are not the only living things here.”

A brief silence stilled the chatter, before another voice broke it. Kairy's, filled with pride. "Congratulations on your discovery, Xavier. I hope that your purpose is accepted and accomplished by all."

Another pause, followed by nods of agreement. I smiled and turned back towards the sea. The sea that only hours ago, I had considered a breeding ground for doom. But now, it was something else. A place of hope, a place where new discoveries and adventures would be made.

I then came to realise how tired I was and knelt on the metal platform, which was cold against my knees.

And in the distance, I thought I saw a small black tail move as though waving, before disappearing into the depths.

Extraordinary

Laraine

Middle (Year 7 – 8)

Runner-up

Present Day

Childhood prodigy Elanor Tonks had settled down for a life of mediocrity at the age of fifteen. Ten times in a row youth scrabble champion in the UK, three titles internationally. It took her ten years to figure out that she absolutely hated scrabble. But it's very difficult to be terrible at something you were once very good at, so mediocrity seemed like a good solution.

She stared blankly at the wall. Trophies, medals, certificates. That's what she was. A trophy child. Nothing more than the awards she had won. Defined by her achievements. 'Nothing wrong with that'. Even her thoughts were somewhat passive-aggressive. The shelves were filled with remnants of the game she hated. Dictionaries, tiles, boards. She started mouthing the words under her breath.

Aah

Aahed

Aahing

Aahs

Aal

Aalii

Aaliiis

Aals

Aardvarks

It was no use. She'd be having a midlife crisis before she even got to the b's. But considering that she wanted to scream right now, knowing so many conjugations of the word 'ahh' would be useful. She aahed, is aahing, and will probably aah in the future. If that was even grammatically correct. It probably wasn't, but she didn't care.

Loud gardening came from the garden next door. Considering that the other residents of the street were almost a century old, such noisy gardening was unexpected. In fact, noise at all was unexpected. Elderly neighbours are generally protagonised because they are kind and sweet. Miss Ledell may have had good intentions, but introducing Elanor to the thing she now hated more than anything in the world was not kind or sweet in her eyes.

She shuddered at the thought of scrabble. The tiles, the rules, the words. A ping came from her pocket. It was her friend.

Did you know that a man who didn't know French managed to win the French scrabble championships by memorising the words?

As much as she tried, she and her friend weren't fundamentally compatible. The only thing they had in common was a love for scrabble. And that would be in the

pastest of past tenses. Pastest would not be found in any scrabble dictionary, not being a word, and Elanor loved it all the more for it.

2019

For a game so steadily associated with nerds, a surprising amount of people here at the competition had hair in absurd colours. The fact that she was one of them was insignificant. Dying her hair bright purple as a pre-tournament celebration was a stupid idea. For someone with an IQ well over genius levels, she sure had stupid ideas.

The next four days were a haze. If she won, she would doubtless qualify for some other competition. But she didn't really care. She just played match after match after match. Until her final opponent. She looked so smug that her was going to win, with a smirk plastered all over her face. She placed the final tiles on the board. C-A-Z-I-Q-U-E-S. The highest scoring word actually played in a match of scrabble. She seemed to pale several shades. Elanor hadn't expected her to display any great show of sportsmanship, but what she said next was beyond ridiculous.

“SHE CHEATED!”

In competition, it wasn't uncommon for sore losers to throw around ridiculous accusations. Elanor turned out her bag, placing each item onto the desk. Her phone, on silent mode and disconnected from Wi-Fi, as per tournament rules. Elanor was the last person to be caught with even the slightest of infringements. A scrabble dictionary, a few novels, and a jumper. “Your pockets.” She obediently pulled out the contents of her pockets. Some noise-cancelling earplugs. A packet of tissues. And four loose scrabble tiles. She was screwed.

Present Day

Elanor hated scrabble, the entire community, and most of all, Jocelyn Merry. Who ended her entire career. And what was she going to do about it?

2019

SCRABBLE CHAMPION ELEONOR TONKS ACCUSED OF PALMING TILES IN OVERWHELMING TOURNAMENT WIN

Francesca Strout

Scrabble champion Eleonor Tonks has been discovered to be cheating in the National Junior Scrabble Championships on May 18th, 2019. Palming tiles is one of the most serious offences in the game...

Ugh. The idiots couldn't even be bothered to get her name right. Even her family couldn't bear to look at her. They didn't shout at her. They just stared at her with mournful eyes and disappointed expressions.

Present day

She stared dejectedly at the St Michaela's scrabble club in vain. The kind-hearted librarian would never have kicked her out, but she knew where she wasn't wanted. Basically everywhere. The kind-hearted librarian had always believed she didn't do it, and as much as that meant to her, (admittedly quite little, the librarian was very fond of everyone and was far too much of an optimist in her opinion.) she gently and not-so-gently refused her constant offers to rejoin the club.

"Elanor dear, you're ever so talented at scrabble, are you quite sure that you won't join the club? Your..." she dropped her voice to a whisper. "Little scandal was four years ago, I'm sure they've all forgotten about it."

She was sick of the constant harassment. "Alright. I'll join."

Optimists are incorrectly cheerful. Whispers and stares from every direction. They clearly remembered. She sat down and began to play. Every second was torture. But the pain of scrabble was quickly overcome by the satisfaction of winning. The whispers were louder and less bothered about being heard.

"I want to sign up for the tournament." Screw what the world thought. They wouldn't be laughing when she won. The room was filled with a stunned silence. They stared at her. An over-dramatic blonde girl pointed at her and shouted "But you've cheated! You can't compete!"

"I was falsely accused." Elanor spoke in a flat voice, maybe even bored.

Next thing she or anyone else knew, she stood just near the door of the regional championships. Cheating in an international competition was not a scandal anyone would forget in a hurry. She no longer had purple hair. At least she had that going for her this time round. Her hair was auburn and stuck up in funny angles. It wasn't an intended look, but she rather liked it.

She pushed open the door. It squeaked slightly on its hinges. There were dozens of eyes staring at her. And she stared back into every one of them. Especially the smug ones of Jocelyn Merry. She'd be far from her namesake when she got beaten again. She strolled in to the room, trying to look nonchalant and confident at the same time.

She won match after match after match. The looks of astoundment and disrespect turned into ones of confusion, then into outrage quickly. She smiled at them and went to face her final opponent. Jocelyn.

She placed the first word in silence.

LIAR

She didn't want to win. But she wanted to make a point.

CHEAT

Jocelyn put down.

FALSE

Elanor stared her dead in the eye. She could win this.

Four hundred and forty-seven points later, Elanor had won.

“AND THE WINNER IS ELANOR TONKS!” the announcer read out.

Everyone rushed to congratulate her. Not a cheat or a liar now, was she?

She sat in the car on her way home. She reached into her pocket and pulled out five perfect rounded scrabble tiles.

Electromagnetic Interference

Marysia

Senior (Year 9 – 12)

Runner-up

**"To translate is never simple. To translate is to betray at the borders,
it's to cheat, it's to trade one sentence for another...**

**To translate is to risk understanding better than others
that the truth about a word is not single, but double,
even triple, quadruple, or quintuple."**

At Night All Blood is Black, David Diop

Like the scrambled egg sizzle of the liminal void between radio stations, talking to my mum in English will never compare to the hymns she hears when I speak her native tongue. No matter how much I turn the knob of this language, I know that I must change my frequency altogether to truly speak to her. It is only then that I can hear all the words that have been muddled and marred in translation.

My mum originates from Toruń, a Polish city known for its flourishing gingerbread industry and medieval architecture. I grew up learning English and Polish simultaneously, and as a result, fell into the habit of replacing words like 'bread' and 'shoes' with their Polish equivalents. My family continue this tradition today, as if the exchange of simple words were as routine as gifts at Christmas.

These accidental multilingual exercises kick-started my lifelong title as Translator at all intercultural family affairs. Since my mum and I are the only ones who understand both dialects, our capacities are utterly exhausted by the time our reunions conclude. But despite our perceived success in untangling the messy vines of European sound waves, translation always leaves a few knots and tangles behind.

Like some foreign form of antanaclasis, the words metamorphose upon reiteration. These modifications take on verisimilitude, and since no one can understand and therefore correct me, these unintentional miscommunications form a fraudulent narrative.

My brush-stroked words fail to impart the singular hues first present in the colour of my relatives' minds. Their cultural contexts considerably influence their broadcasting of messages. When my Babcia tries to explain the struggles of living in post-war communist Poland and how they'd have to make their own chocolate because they couldn't buy any, I can't help but wonder how I'm supposed to convey all that in my Australian voice, a voice that hasn't felt those emotions of desperation and scarcity. Not to mention the weight of deciding which of the 171,000 words in the English language to choose from to best encapsulate the essence of the original remark. The last thing I want to do is cheat a relative's truth by making an inadequate trade with some sketchy word wizard.

For all my years of practice, I never seem to sound the way my mum does. My inflections feel too exaggerated, and my Slavic stresses too tight.

Despite their cultural differences, my Polish grandparents surprisingly parallel their Italian counterparts. My Dziadek, with a belly so heavy it looks as though with one lavish leap it would slide off entirely, shares an inordinate fondness for food with my Nonna, whose cooking arises from instinct rather than a recipe. My Nonno's sentimentalism mirrors that of my benevolent Babcia, and they bond over their marriages to dominant, though loveable, spouses.

These shared characteristics make translation significantly easier. Often times I can explain dishes by comparing them to ones they know of and love. To my Nonna, pierogi are just overweight ravioli and kruschicki are crostoli's sister. In a way, I translate these foods just like the verbs and nouns that season their conversations. And although these meals are fundamentally different, and there aren't always the most accurate ways to describe them, these small understandings fill in the honeycomb holes their lingual individuality leaves behind.

Language, with all its knobs and buttons and electromagnetic hills and valleys, will always reside in the sun-dressed, salt-weathered beach house I've assembled for it in my heart. It is only through persistence that I reach the stations of language that rise above the tumultuous waves of interference beyond. But when my freckled foot caresses the silky shores of understanding, I know that the melodies which echo back are worth each sun-burnt confusion I endured on the way. It is a trip I take often and one I'd recommend wholeheartedly.

On Her Whim

Zara

Senior (Year 9 – 12)

Runner-up

Darkness, pure warm darkness. Light filtered through her fragile body, illuminating the network of surrounding veins, her home. She shifted uncomfortably, a crack, a sudden sound breaking her blanket of silence. She struggled, fighting the unconscious urge to break free. She remained like that for a time, torn between two worlds; painfully aware that one was slipping away and she was entering a much scarier new world that she could never have imagined.

It was bright. So bright her eyes burned. She screamed. A shrill, piercing scream. A shadow moved above her - a strange lumbering shape moving into view. The sharp edges of her broken confines scratched her paper-thin skin as she struggled to move. The bright blue sky opened up above her as Mother dragged her out of her shell toward her soft, body. There she slept exhausted and dreamt of the warm darkness she had left behind.

A muffled light and muted cawing from above woke her. Keen to investigate she wiggled free of her mother's weight and slowly, hesitantly she stepped out into the open air on wobbly legs, staring with wonder at her new world. All around as far as she could see were thousands of her kind, snow white and bulbous with cruel pinched eyes. They wandered around the cliff's edge calling out to their mates and chicks in a raw cacophony, a jarring chorus. A big grey-blue beast swished and swirled against the cliff face, turning over itself again and again until it was white with fury, simmering far below. On the cliff itself, there grew thick green tendrils, burrowing through the red earth, seeking the rich soil beneath the rock. She felt the beast's salt-tinged wet breath on her face and allowed herself to be tucked away into her mother's warm body.

She soon learned that there was a cycle to life on the cliff. Her mother and father would take turns hunting and watching her closely as she explored her surroundings. She found particular joy in watching her kind dip and fly in the raging breath of the beast. Catching eddies in the air, their dark eyes were always searching. Even under the cover of darkness when the beast slumbered and the sky slipped below the horizon she found pockets of life, catching flashes of streaming copper in the pinprick studded sky.

But one day the breath became heavier and stronger, the beast howled in pain and the sky turned black and grey rumbling with its anger. She squawked for her parents, frightened and alone as her kind whirling in the air were brutally knocked down to earth, one by one. Terrified, she burrowed into the soft down of her nest, tucking her head away from the sky's furious tears as jagged flashes of light arced their way across its gruesome face.

It was this day that taught her the most brutal of lessons; she must learn to survive on her own. For the first few weeks, kind mothers took her on with their own, but before long she became just another mouth to feed. Faced with the problem of acquiring her own food she had to become resourceful. The food came from the bowl, the cavity where the beast had gnawed away at the cliff, creating a lagoon where fish would shelter from the swell. The only way to get down to the bowl was to fly, so she began to prepare. She practised in the cover of darkness, and as time went on her soft down moulted into sleek white feathers, her wide eyes darkened. She began to improve, until one day, she knew she couldn't wait any longer.

It was dusk and the smell of the minty saltbushes hung thick in the air. Peering over the cliff's edge, she sucked in sharply. The beast was wild tonight, snagging the cliff face, desperately seeking purchase in nooks and crannies, frothing foam gleaming. As she anxiously weighed up the risks, she wasn't sure if this was a good idea, but she trusted the world would take care of her. She stepped back from the cliff and with a running leap, wings outstretched, plummeted off the precipice. For a brief moment, she was euphoric, buoyant in the air, the horizon laying beyond her like a smear of pigment. The sights and sensations swelled into feelings that she couldn't justify, couldn't identify, could scarcely believe. She perceived a great balance, a tension ruled by raw power and yet sheer delight, one that completed her and yet was still mostly a mystery.

Reality snapped her out of her trance with sudden brutality and she abruptly began to plummet down toward the beast's open jaws. Buffeted like a kite in a hurricane, she was suddenly small and powerless against the beast's dominion. Petrified, she flapped her wings in vain against the violent gale, now spinning uncontrollably in the wild current. She called out, clamouring for, anyone to help her, to save her. Almost as if in response to her anguish, the gale subsided and she righted herself, pounding her wings with a power she was unaware she possessed. Her heart racing, she spotted the bowl, her prize and her reward. As she soared toward the cavern with a renewed strength she tried to make sense of what had just occurred. Through pure serendipity, she survived what should have killed her and she was beyond grateful.

She would never forget that moment of wonder, the thin connection forged between her and the pulsating heart of the world. She never forgot nature's vastness, her brutal but benign power that she caught a glimpse of in that fleeting, fanciful moment. In that instant, she had escaped the fate laid out for her, fuelled by the immense strength she'd conjured out of nothing. When she grew old and had chicks of her own, she would remind them that they were all just living on nature's whim; at any given moment her power could overwhelm them all.



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