

THE BROMSGROVE

ANTHOLOGY 2023



## Introduction

This year we aligned the theme of our Housman Verse Prize with that of National Poetry Day: 'Nature'.

What shone through in all the entries was a sense of passionate connection with the subject matter. Some gave powerful voices to environmental concerns; others resonated more meditatively with their surroundings, and the winner combined both with echoes of an older tradition of a more mysterious and magical natural world.

I am sure you will agree that all were crafted with no little amount of literary skill.

The second half of this anthology comprises a selection of the best short fiction our student writers have produced this year. I have no doubt you will enjoy their darkly imaginative creations and artful storytelling.

My thanks to this year's brilliant cover artist, Alicia Wong (Lower Sixth, Oakley).

Mr Paul Dinnen, Head of English

## Contents

Introduction	Mr Dinnen
<b>The Housman Verse Prize</b>	
Darkness At The Heart Of Our Love	Imogen Thomas, Upper Sixth
Bullet Rain	Khai Nguyen, Lower Fourth
Paradise	Gabriel Brown, Lower Sixth
The Course	Xanthe Matthews, Lower Fourth
Sunset	Joshua Coyne, Lower Sixth
New Beginnings	Charlotte James, Upper Sixth
Palace	Jasper Page, Upper Fourth
The Lost Springtime	Fred Hanson, Upper Sixth
Nightfall	Harriet Williams, Lower Fourth
A Final Message	Jordan Nonyelu, Fifth Form
<b>Fiction Anthology</b>	
The Pogues	Orla Douglas, Upper Fourth
Any Other Day	Tiffany Wong, ALP
Raindrops	Erik Markus Pedaja, ALP
The Woods	Alexander Lebedev, ALP
My Star-Cross'd Lover	Victoria Kwok, ALP
Whispers from the Forgotten	Alexis Chiliment, Upper Fourth
Finding Nemo	Vidushii Saha, ALP

## The Housman Verse Prize 2023

**Housman Verse Prize Winner, 2023**

**Darkness At The Heart Of Our Love**

So earth once again compliments her beauty,  
And its sun's answering blush cascades the skies into a parting rosy  
glow  
Before the night arms can clasp earth in his cold embrace,  
Sending the soft songbirds of the day speed for their nests,  
And manic mammals moving for shrubbery and hidey-holes.  
An unspoken sign of the pitiless predators of the nights yet to come.

Not all recognise, though, and continue to run and fly free,  
Unaware.  
Shrieks and yelping echo through the fields and mountains and forests,  
The barn owl stretching out its wings to hunt once more on the  
ignorant few,  
Eyes gleaming at the prospect of the bountiful meal it will track down  
and chase.  
The fox leads her cubs from her den,  
Stalking.

Unseelie fae scheme to trap foolish humans in their circles and traps  
under the Moon's eyes,  
Redcaps succeeding in their murderous revelry, taking their prizes.  
Little moths flutter through the cool air, seeking out the trees' rotted  
fruits,  
Are seized viciously by the swooping and swerving bats.  
Alert rabbits poking their heads  
In  
Out  
Cannot outrun the sharp talons and beaks seeking them out.

The treetops loom and bend over night time strollers,  
Rubbing their withered and clawed hands together in the wind,  
Their otherworldly equipment eternalising all it sees,  
Sharing it to the others of their kind to view in their own bizarre  
shelters.  
The ones destroying the open spaces and forests, tearing, destroying,  
endlessly taking,  
Not all follow this path, crying out for the little ones they extinguish,  
the melting caps, and more.  
But not enough.

Turning Death's merciless gaze onto all they touch whilst seeking  
progression,  
He and Father Time cannot stop the destruction they wreak and  
speed along.  
Not when they love seeking more and more, using more and more  
they have taken to do so.  
Only magnifying  
The darkness at the heart of their love.

Imogen Thomas, Upper Sixth

### **Bullet Rain**

Running, running; running through the rain  
Running away the grief and running away the pain  
Running away the loss of a person due to a knife  
Running away the empty gap left in my life

Pounding; smashing; crashing down  
When will this rain leave this town?  
Pounding and smashing its way to my heart  
I can feel the numbness and coldness in every part

Waiting; longing for it to come back  
The loved one and the sun that I now lack  
Waiting and craving for a warmer time  
Which I could spend and could feel sublime

And then; though no sun, a person arrives  
And now there is not one, but two jogging lives  
A ray of light and I feel so wet but so warm and so free  
For what I had lost I had gained: some company

Khai Nguyen, Lower Fourth

### **Paradise**

The garden he sees  
is only a pretty dream  
but the morning dew

soothes him better than wine ever could  
or the music or the books  
better are the

lilies, the sunrise,  
trees blowing in the cool wind,  
birds singing purely,

in the space behind his eyes,  
he's built a hazy paradise,  
this little untouched Eden

keeps him peaceful,  
swaddled in a soft pollen blanket;  
aura of protection...

the light of a campfire flickers and he smiles,  
melancholy gone,

he watches as the fire sings  
and the ashy wood burns  
but then the nightingales sing sober lullabies,  
and as they mourn, the sunlight dies,  
the rocks,  
the statues,  
the fountains, all lift  
into the air as gravity  
disintegrates, until all that remains is fire,  
desperate,  
he clutches at oblivion in his fields of daisies...

Useless.

He will still wake up, drunk on the cold hard floor.

Gabriel Brown, Lower Sixth

### **The Course**

The irate trees are raging  
The peaceful ground now shaking  
I see the birds fly up above  
I see, them flailing  
In fret and in panic  
The erupting Earth turns manic.  
You cannot stop it,  
you cannot see,  
Just what the problem seems to be.  
You cannot fix it,  
you cannot think.  
But – This is nature,  
This is the course.  
You must not stop it,  
For this is nature's law.  
And once all settles  
you will too.  
For this is nature.  
This is what – it is supposed to do.

Xanthe Matthews, Lower Fourth

### **Sunset**

A canvas, devoid of beauty, possessed by colour,  
An insult to nature, stands before me. I feel  
Nature's fingertips softly holding the brush, whispering  
To me colours of joy, shades of elegance, the icy wind of  
Winter, but all to no effect. As if I was dreaming,  
I immediately feel her guidance of warm rays of sunshine upon my back,  
Leaking softly through the glass behind me,  
Curing the corruption of this painting,  
Even bringing out the beauty of this wicked thing,  
It was then I knew how to paint nature. That which  
Marks the whispers of the day, and our peaceful slumber  
At the door of night. That which controls all her beings below.  
The sunset.

Joshua Coyne, Lower Sixth

### **New Beginnings**

The rose that grows  
under summer sun  
Knows nothing but gentle rays  
The autumn breeze  
Bringing leaves from trees  
Buries it all away  
When winter creeps  
And snow sweeps in  
Barren soil remains  
  
Spring will come,  
When all is done,  
And The rose will grow again

Charlotte James, Upper Sixth

## **Palace**

Your eyes only see rolling fields and hills,  
A bright sun rising above the mills.  
You see bright colours, shining stars,  
And every fear seems to be so far.  
There is no land beyond your walls,  
There is no wrath of any storm.

You have never witnessed the raging fires,  
Never walked through the deepest mires.  
You have turned your head, walked alone,  
While those that suffer sing out to your home.  
You cannot see beyond your walls,  
To a world that cries out for your pause.

This world will break the hardest wills,  
Crush any hope that dares to call.  
You cannot control the whirling winds,  
The whistling sands, nor the fire that kindles,  
You are only safe behind your walls,  
Just an image of justice, your mask of law.

You cannot hear the silent pleas,  
Of those destroyed by the swirling seas.  
Those starved by the will of the wilds,  
Only watch the world take their souls, their child.  
But you are safe behind your walls,  
To shield your ears from the helpless calls.

There is no kind will that guides these fates,  
The hands of time and the hand that creates,  
Heaven and hell are but concepts to the wise,  
That watch and wait as the ages pass by.  
They watch the winds break down your walls,  
And know that one day they will fall.

It scares me how there are so few here that know,  
How dark the night is and just how cold the wind can blow.  
You are no ruler of any land you see,  
You are ruled for as long as you will be.  
No matter how high you build your walls,  
This earth you tread on is not yours.

Jasper Page, Upper Fourth



### **The Lost Springtime**

He landed on the lonesome branch as the final flake of snow fell.  
He did not mean to kill the last remnants of winter;  
Yet in his eagerness to land  
He had brought forth the coming of spring.

Spring would be different from the winter;  
White blossom to replace the white snow  
That once clung to the trees and sweet green leaves,  
Giving a new lease of life to succeed their predecessors.  
That now fell, earth-bound,  
Littering the ground,  
Shrivelled, golden and brown.

Spring would never come, however,  
As the trees fell into a gloom  
And would never bloom  
As the problem for the little chap  
Who landed on this branch  
Was that the tree from which the branch did grow  
Now stood alone and abandoned.

For that winter a terrible storm had come  
And ripped up the trees and plants

That once made the branch, upon which he sat  
A nice place to sit and watch the world  
That unfolded beneath him.

Yet this storm was not of wind or rain  
But of pain for nature and personal gain  
For the men who had come to obliterate,  
To terminate, annihilate, eradicate  
The earth that gave them life in the first place.

This chap knows not of why  
We try to pry every last dime  
And dollar out of the ground;  
Every last penny and pound  
That can be found  
Just to increase their wealth  
Without any consideration  
For our planet's health.

Fred Hanson, Upper Sixth

### **Nightfall**

The forest seems so different  
When night falls.  
With light absent,  
And leaves rustling like waterfalls  
In the tall, skeletal birch trees.

I, myself, delight in this time  
And its ambience,  
I feel at peace, and in my prime,  
When listening to the silence  
Of the midnight forest whispers.

Give me a steady birch to lean on,  
And a dim oil lamp,  
Only then I may become  
A shadow, and be safe to camp  
In the deep, tranquil, silent forest.

Harriet Williams, Lower Fourth

### **A Final Message**

Cold water to cleanse my body.  
Cold showers, with no buddies.  
Cold food for my lifeless body.  
All I think is one phrase,  
Cold-blooded.

But lecteur\* remember that,  
It takes one heartbeat to start a flow,  
And it takes one spark to start, make and spread a wildfire.

So what am I saying mentoré\*\*  
You need one dream to be successful.  
You need to work towards that dream.  
I don't care if you have to twist and bend the rules,  
I don't care if you become a selfish shower-bag in this cruel world,

And finally and most importantly.  
Opening your eyes to analyse that  
Not everyone is looking out for you  
Figure out who is your friend and who is  
an imposter, a distraction, a chameleon.

The day I kick the bucket  
Is the day that you become your own man, mentor.

Once you do all of this son.  
I'll be up there, proud of you  
With God and Gabriel.

(Lecteur\* - French for reader)  
(Mentoré\*\* - French for mentee)

Jordan Nonyelu, Fifth Form

Fiction Anthology 2023

## The Pogues

The smell of salt and sand filled her nostrils. She rolled over, adjusting to the light as the sun rose, its iridescent rays beaming across the island. She remembered very little from the storm last night: the ferocious waves slamming against the rocks, brutal and remorseless. She was left stranded, alone, with no possessions.

She stood up cautiously, her memory blurred. The palm trees swaying gently in the soft breeze whilst the undulating, deep blue waves crashed into the shore. The island was large, secluded, and mysterious. Tiny, broken branches and debris that had washed ashore were dispersed across the sand. Rocks fringed the water as though creating a border between the island and the ocean. There was only the faint sound of the wind to break the silence: it whistled gently, blowing small grains of sand into her hair.

Her long blonde hair sagged down onto her shoulders as she tucked it behind her ears. She withdrew her gaze from the sunlight revealing her restless, pale eyes; the sun reflected off her porcelain skin. Her clothes hung loosely on her shoulders; the wind gently brushed against her skin as it escaped through the holes in her t-shirt. She was dressed in dirty, hole-filled denim shorts and wore only one brightly coloured pink trainer.

She moved consciously, unaware of her surroundings - the heat enveloping her like a blanket. She moved cagily deeper into the island: the sound of scrabbling behind the trees became audible. Her spine shivered with trepidation; she jerked backward, concealing herself behind the trees stood beside her.

A teenage boy was crouched behind the tree, rummaging through his backpack and discarding of any items with no use. His face was dimly lit; his chestnut brown hair framed his humid eyes. He had tied a blue patterned bandana around his neck and wore a pale orange top with long, grey corduroy trousers that he'd rolled into shorts. He was

crouching barefoot, despite having shoes tied to the exterior of his backpack. His eyebrows furrowed. He hauled his backpack onto his back, pulling a compass from out of his pocket and staring into the gleaming gold reflection as if it were a mirror. He held the compass in his small, filthy hands and tilted it from side to side, appearing mesmerised as he gazed down at it. The compass clicked, the arrow pointing North towards the island's depths that had not yet been explored. He gave an exasperated sigh. Uncertain of what the island may hold, he studied the area in front of him, hesitant to enter. He walked slowly and stealthily into the centre.

She rummaged through his remaining possessions and gathered everything in her arms. Clicking the button on the end of the flashlight to ensure it worked, checking for any leftover food in the plastic containers and shaking the box of matches in hope that one may fall out. She wished she knew where she was; she wondered how long she would have to stay there. How would she get off the island? These thoughts clouded her head as tears began to form in her eyes and roll gently down her face.

The scorching heat eventually turned into a breeze of frigid air. The sky was aflame with the fire of the setting sun; the crescent moon swiftly filled the sky. She lay down onto the sand, observing as clouds sprawled across the sky. Flicking the flashlight on and off in an attempt to attract attention by signalling for help. It was hopeless. Rolling over, she attempted to contain any heat by curling up into a ball. The sound of soft waves against the sand formed quietly.

Orla Douglas, Upper Fourth

### **Any Other Day**

Just like any other day, she didn't notice it.

After all, she was quite busy. Trembling from lack of sleep and food, her hands were spattered with a rainbow of colours ranging from boysenberry purple to garnet red, the paint swatches marking her from the wrist all the way to her raw fingertips.

Just like any other day, she wouldn't have noticed the tension in the air, how he no longer nagged at her and instead chose to keep silent.

Exhaustion was evident in those bloodshot eyes, loose white shirt acting as a clear giveaway of her alarming weight loss. She couldn't recall the last time she had slept for a full seven hours – not that she was trying to remember, anyway. She had enough on her plate, thank you.

“Please listen to me,” he had begged. “You need a break—you're going to pass out at this rate!”

She stayed silent.

Just like any other day, she didn't notice the cluttered apartment brimming with frustration, with the weight of a thousand unspoken words. Perhaps she chose to not notice it, to ignore it.

She chose to ignore how the hairs on the back of her neck stood tall under his pained gaze as he watched her kill herself slowly, more and more layers of paint caking up under her fingernails.

(I'm not killing myself, she thought. I'm doing work.)

She chose to ignore the hand tangled in her shirt, his knuckles so tense they were tinted with white. Perhaps, if she had had just a little more time to spare – if she hadn't been slaving away at the damned canvas – the stubborn grip on her shoulder would have alarmed her.

Maybe, just like she had ignored the little things, she chose to ignore him. Of course, that hadn't gone well. Whatever focus she had left was ripped away from the overwhelmingly cluttered canvas the second his voice cracked into a sob.

Just like any other day, she still loved him.

Paintbrush landing with a faint clatter, she cradled his tear-stained cheeks — as though he would shatter into a million fragments all over the carpet — and embraced the familiar tingling sensation thawing her numb fingers.

(When did his under-eye bags get so dark? Of course, she hadn't noticed.)

She ran her fingers through his hair, clutching him through the sobs racking his frame. “You know I've got to work on my thesis, and this painting needs to be perfect – and, and there's so little time, but once I'm done with them, we can do whatever you want–”

“Shut up!”

Flinching as though she had been electrocuted, her eyes widened in shock. Sure, they had argued before, but he never told her to shut up.

“Do you see yourself? Do you realize what you're doing to yourself? You haven't eaten a proper meal in over a week, you haven't taken your supplements in ages and you barely even sleep – and you only drink caffeine!” he cried.

She sighed, exasperated from once again hearing him nag. “I just don't really have time to eat, or to sleep, if it wasn't obvious.”

His anger melted away at those words, deflating into... something akin to anguish. The sight of him looking so devastated gripped onto her heartstrings and tugged with all its might. Her heart was screaming at this point, yelling to just hug him, he needed it; her

head was reminding her that you have work to do – and she always listened to her head.

“Don’t you understand?!” he yelled, voice straining with the burden of his agony. “Are you trying to kill yourself?”

All of the raw emotion pouring from his eyes dragged him down, knees crumpling as he fell. The haunting melody of his sobs soon replaced the tension that had occupied the apartment just minutes ago.

She huffed, tucking stray hairs behind her ears and picking up her paintbrush. ‘We’ll be fine,’ she thought to herself. Just like any other day, his tears would cease after an hour, and he would retreat to the kitchen to cook a meal that would inevitably be left untouched.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft snuffle.

“Please, don’t destroy yourself,” he whispered softly, his features contorting in desperation. A sinking feeling in her heart told her this would be his last attempt – and yet, she felt her throat close. He knew, and she knew, that there would be no changing her mind.

Her silence told him all he needed to know. As if he was ashamed of her, he brushed himself off and stood up, his hand already gripping the door handle.

Wait. He wasn’t supposed to leave.

Scrambling after him, she cleared her throat in a panic. “Where are you going?”

He stared at her with indignation, any last trace of his pain all cried out onto the carpet. “I’m leaving. You can do your work without my nagging now. I won’t bother you from now on.” With that, he slammed the door shut behind him.

She fell to her knees. “No, no, no, you can stay, please stay...”

Regret trickled into her heart to the rhythm of his fading footsteps. She wished and wished and wished for the clock to tick backwards, for him to turn around and look at her one more time, and maybe he would remember that they were in love, and maybe he wouldn’t leave – but in her heart, and in her mind, it was clear she had no chance.

The growl of her stomach cut through the deafening emptiness that he had left behind. Snapping out of her trance, she glanced at the clock wearily only to recall that this was the clock that they made together on their first date, when he had brought her to a craft studio, when he had first told her he loved her.

The stupid lie of gold that he had spun, that she had once found so romantic, that she kept locked up inside her heart, that she had foolishly abided by for so long–now made her want to be sick.

“Just like any other day, even if the sun dies and the moon dies and everything dies, you will always have me.”

“No,” she whispered. “I have nothing.”

Tiffany Wong, ALP

## Raindrops

It was raining outside. Again. It had been raining every day for the past week and a half. A slow drizzle, which sooner or later turned into a heavy downpour. I watched the droplets of water race down the window. Coming together and splitting apart, occasionally a new contestant would join the race, but eventually, they all disappeared from view.

The bell jingled as someone pushed open the door to the café. A young lady, presumably seeking shelter from the rain, stepped in and shook the water off her umbrella. The café itself was fairly empty this time of night. The evening rush, having long passed, left most of the seats unoccupied. Customers that remained were all absorbed in their own affairs, oblivious to the newcomer in the room. I was the only member of staff working at this hour. The café is of the small local type, so they hardly have the funds to employ more than two at a time. But I preferred it this way.

At first glance, it was nothing special. A small, family-owned café with maybe half a dozen tables, all separated by sturdy bookshelves, surrounded by large rectangular windows. The café has a serene aesthetic, only possessed by ancient oak trees and lone concrete streetlamps. Only the hushed voices of customers and the jingling of the front door occasionally impede the tranquil atmosphere. It seems like it had existed long before me and would continue to exist long after my death. I could never quite figure out its charm, but it has always had a relaxing effect on me. I refocused my attention on the lady. Having wiped the excess rain off her clothes and hung up her coat, she began to make her way to the counter. I started to greet her.

“Good evening, what can I get started for yo-.”

She quickly interjected with a question of her own. “Do you still serve coffee this time of night?”

Before answering, I looked at the lady. If you work as a barista long enough, you develop good deductive skills. You become able to judge a person and their personality with a quick glimpse at their face. She was tired - very tired - with almost bloodshot eyes and blue bags underneath them. Dark brunette hair had been hurriedly tied into a bun, with the odd escaping thread streaking across her pale face. Deep lines of frustration chiselled into her forehead spoke of an anxiety-ridden occupation. In a way, she reminded me of a statue, immovable, absorbed in her own thoughts and ideas.

I took a breath before I replied, “No, not usually, but seeing as you are one of our only customers, I can make an exception.” She quickly replied, “Oh, thank you so much, my shift starts in fifteen minutes!”

Hearing the sense of urgency in her voice, I set to work. Quickly, I measured the dosage of ground coffee and evenly distributed it over the filter making sure no air pockets formed while I worked. My hands moved in a smooth, efficient manner, reaching for the boiling water on the stove while lifting the filter onto the pot. Then, gently pouring the boiling water over the filter, I tried to make conversation as I worked.

“What brings you here this time of night?”

“Coffee, obviously,” she replied in a sarcastic tone. Sensing that she did not desire my conversation, I stayed quiet.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’ve been pulling double shifts at the hospital. They have had a nurse shortage ever since this entire pandemic thing started. Guess it’s finally taking its toll.”

“No, it’s all right. I’m in a similar predicament, most of my colleagues have quit, and I’m here working overtime,” I replied in a sympathetic tone, setting down the pot of boiling water. She rewarded my sympathy with a gentle chuckle. The coffee had just finished

brewing, so I turned around and poured it into a large takeout cup. I turned back around and handed it to her. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the warm caffeinated beverage. To her, it must have felt like a saving grace in between her shifts.

“Thank you so much!” She pulled her phone out her pocket and quickly glanced at the time. “Damn, I’m late, what do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry. This one is on the house.” Her eyes met mine. A grateful glimmer in her eyes thanked me for the gesture. Then she was gone, pulling her coat over her shoulder and opening the door with one hand while balancing the cup of coffee in the other. The bell above the door jingled as the lady disappeared into the autumn darkness.

Funny. How similar we humans are to small droplets of rain trickling down a window. Running the same race. Converging and diverging until we all eventually race right off the edge, into the darkness.

Erik Markus Pedaja, ALP

## **The Woods**

### *The Beginning*

It is a warm, sunny day with nothing other than the worry of what to do today. Let me introduce myself: my name is Franck Williams, and I live in a small cottage in the middle of the country. I once lived in the big city, and worked as a stockbroker, but soon my career in the finance industry came to an end, and I ended up living here, in the middle of the country. I live in a small house by the woods, with nothing other than trees and bushes within a 10-kilometre radius, which are all as still as if in a coma. It’s small and humble, and I have grown to love it, but still, I have many doubts.

The trees peacefully waltz from side to side, and the flowers bloom in colours of the rainbow, but once the moon knocks at the door, everything becomes still, and fear makes its way along the beautiful sandy paths. Whilst the beauty of nature tries to blind me with its lush colours in the day, my fear of this place grows at night-time, bit by bit.

### *Complete Darkness*

Silence, darkness and fear fuels this place. Something straight out of a horror film, is what the woods could be described as.

However, I can’t deny that I was warned. This same silence, darkness and fear was reflected in the eyes of the old man that sold me this small cottage. With the final words, “Do not keep the door unlocked at night,” the mysterious old man disappeared, leaving me behind with a cottage next to the silent, dark and fearsome woods.

Since then, it has always seemed to me that the woods have something magical about them, something so familiar but distant at the same time, but no matter how hard I try to remember why they seem familiar, my mind goes blank. Nonetheless, I have always kept



the door securely locked with the fears of what might happen if I don't.

However, one day my thoughts got the better of me.

*The front door*

"Open the front door, we just want to be free and soar like birds across the sky", my mind is telling me, but how could this make sense? Am I making everything up?

"Open the front door, we just want to be free and soar like birds across the sky."

A sharp pain in my head. I resist. I wait. I ... stand up and open the door. What am I doing? Am I really that stupid to ignore the warnings that I have been given?

But at this moment, my mind is already somewhere else. I wait in fright, as my petrified mind awaits further instructions.

*Silence, Darkness and Fear*

Silence, darkness and fear follow my actions. The silence gets the better of me and I can feel a violent pulsation, from... the woods? My heart races and races, and the darkness of the woods seems to somehow lure me into its grasp. I look closely, and I see a light coming from the trunk of a tree inside of the woods. It seems to come from a rather strange tree, which clearly stands out with its healthy green leaves, whilst it appears that the rest of the trees are deep in a coma. I contemplate it momentarily. "Come to me, I shall reward you," speaks a voice. I am flabbergasted.

Hearing this voice, my mind is induced into a state of relaxation and as if in a trance, I want to move closer to the light. I approach the light and all of a sudden it is not...

*Silent, Dark and Fearful*

Anymore. I feel joy. I want to leave and never come back, as long as the light in the woods is near me. As I come closer, I hear a voice.

"Doctor, he is opening his eyes!" There are gasps. Screams. Shrieks. I start to run towards the light, ignoring everything beside me. I run like never before, stumble across the rocks, but when I eventually reach for the light and when I touch it, I...

*Open my eyes*

I open my eyes.

I am in a hospital bed with some weird technology attached to me. There is a woman and two doctors standing by my bed. The woman is quietly sobbing, and after a moment of silence, I ask, "Where am I?"

In a shaking voice, the woman responds, "Mr. Williams, you have been in a coma for the last 7 years."

Alexander Lebedev, ALP

### **My Star-Cross'd Lover**

Ba-bump, ba-bump.

5:00 pm. All around me is the tranquillity of nature. The ribbon-like rivers winding their merry way through the forest trickling and tinkling are met by the chords of soft light spearing down from above, bathing their surface in gold.

“Darling, I understand losing such a close ... friend must be difficult, but you’ve got to get your act together. You can’t keep wallowing in your misery—I’ll let you go catch some fresh air,” Mother had suggested earlier.

I remember staring at the crinkle between Mother’s eyebrows, watching it slowly deepen as she waited for my answer. Her hand held the newest Daily Express –wrapped and unopened — displaying the bold headlines of the assassination of some... Duke from Austria. I shifted my gaze away from the never-ending column of words and noticed Mother’s expectant expression. Deep down, I wanted to refuse, but as the word ‘friend’ escaped her mouth, I knew that I had no choice but to comply.

“Hustle, dear – your brothers will be returning from the factory at quarter past five, you must get back quickly to help with supper! They will be much fatigued,” she added as she wiped her hands on her stained pinafore and treaded out of the room, the wooden floor creaking with every clack of her heels.

As I mindlessly wander away from my chamber, my feet still lead me here — where it all began. I close my eyes as I let the melodic chorus of birds fill the air; and yet, the only birdsong I can hear is her laughter. The faint scurrying of rodents through the leaves echoing her gentle footsteps, the wafting aroma of the pine bark reminiscent of the sweet scent of her skin, the life of the thriving forest reflecting her

once-blossoming heart. Everything. Such a serene place, but why is my mind still disturbed by echoes of a distant past?

Ba — bump, ba — bump. It beat slower this time.

6:30 pm. I now sit atop the treehouse we built. We used to come here and watch the dimming sunset on the horizon, hemmed into a streak of gold. Beams of sunlight lit up the sky casting a honey-coloured hue, mirroring her hair which tousled into buoyant curls under the force of a gentle breeze. Cotton candy clouds blushed with the warm touch of the receding sun, the silhouettes of the birds fading away with the daylight.

She had an insatiable love for Mother Nature, a thirst for discovery. I saw it every time I drowned in her eyes, those eyes that beamed even brighter than the glittering rays of sunlight filtering in through the woodland.

Now, the skeletal wood groans with my weight as I lay upon it. I stare out into the sky, the sun shying behind a featureless grey blanket, followed by the piercing wind cutting my skin as it blows past. I smear my finger across the engraved names on the surface of the wooden boards, but her name, just like her, is weathered by the lifeless days following that night, becoming barely visible. A heart still encloses our names, hidden to the eyes of outsiders, yet forever privy to us. The rain begins to drizzle down, masking my bitter tears dropping onto the eroding wood as I reminisce about the moments spent with her.

Ba — — bump, ba — — bump. Slower.

7:00 pm. The beating has been echoing for ages now. Staring into the endless abyss, my eyes search for the source of the sound. I sit there, vulnerable as an empty shell, as I embrace the torrent of despondent memories. Fragments of that night replay—each hazy scene becoming

more and more vivid with every beat –sending an icy chill down my spine, tranquilising each bone and each nerve and each muscle in my body.

Ba — — — bump. Even slower.

7:05 pm. Everything is coming back to me now. I remember sitting by her hospital bunk. As she lay on the cusp of death, the ocean in her eyes was replaced with a lifeless grey. I remember taking her hand, just like I did all those times in the woodlands. I remember holding it close to my chest, hoping for something—anything. Perhaps, upon hearing the heavy beats of my heart against my chest, it too could give her life. But it failed. Watching her ashen face go slack and her body go limp, I knew I had to let go. To let go of the one person who redefined my perception of love, to let go of the love that broke past the strong barriers of gender; to let go of my star cross'd lover: because of fate, we were never meant to be.

— Silence.

Just like that, her life in this world expired.

Victoria Kwok, ALP

### **Whispers from the Forgotten**

The old living room was a warm, inviting space. Soft light filled the room through the yellowed windows, casting light to luminesce over the room. The armchairs were inviting you to sink into their embrace, and the sofa was old-fashioned, yet still had a lot of comforts to offer. A small table was nestled between the armchairs, and on it sat an exquisite exposition of old drinks, glasses foggy with age.

An old billiard table was camouflaged between the thick layer of dust which remained untouched beside a pair of beautiful bookshelves, nevertheless, it's the table's green felt still vibrant despite the years. There was a game set up, with a pair of cue sticks patiently waiting for their opponent to make an appearance. Alongside, the billiard table was a table, upon which was laid a hand of unfinished Blackjack.

In one of the armchairs sat an elderly man, his face filled with lines of confusion and worry. His mind was an untangled node of thoughts, one that could not acknowledge where he currently was. The room seemed familiar; however, he did not remember where he was. "Why am I here?" he asked himself. He slowly threw a glance at the other side of the room, and asked "Who are you?" Gently, he looked away from the dusty mirror.

In the doorway, a mysterious figure appeared: cloaked in a long raincoat, his face was hidden by the shadows. The man was dressed in a dark outfit, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. The old man attempted to rise from his chair, but his legs refused to help him. He was unable to escape the figure that was closing in on him. The stranger stepped into the room, his footsteps slow and deliberate, each step echoing through the silence. Closer and closer. The old man's heart raced, fear and confusion gripping him like a vice. Closer and closer. The stranger reached him, towering over him like an ominous statue, his shadow engulfing the room in a cold winter breeze. The old man didn't recognize the figure - nothing about him was familiar.

Then, the stranger turned around and left the room as silently as he had entered. The old man was left alone, trembling in fear.

Silence.

The room felt suffocating, the silence like a heavy weight pressing down upon him. He was surrounded by shadows, by the unknown, by the frightening. The creaking of the door shattered the stillness once again, sending shivers down the old man's spine again. Slow and deliberate footsteps introduced the stranger's entrance, yet again. "Who are you ? Why are you here?" cried the old man. The glass was shaking as the old man's trembling hand gripped the little table beside him.

Cautiously, the stranger took a seat opposite the old man. The stranger's expression was blank. Slowly, he leaned back in the well-worn armchair, meticulously placing his calloused hands on his legs and carefully placed them on his knees. Methodically, he placed the drenched hat on the side table. His round shaded glasses reflected the gloomy weather outdoors. Still, not a glimpse of emotion was shown by the stranger.

The old man's head shook uncontrollably in distress as if desperately looking for something - his hand shook wildly – his mouth was open with a silent scream. The stranger reached into his pocket, removed a bottle of pills, and tenderly took the shaking hand of the old man.

He spoke, his voice gentle, yet firm.

"Hi dad, it's me."

Alexis Chiliment, Upper Fourth

## **Finding Nemo**

### *The Antihero*

I watch as the windows start to frost over. Its icy fingers take more and more of the glass, covering it until you can't see anything outside. The chill starts to creep in too, but there is something about Christmas that makes it bearable.

Or maybe I've just gone numb.

Surely, it should be unbearable. The smiles and giggles I'm missing. The torn Christmas paper, and shrieks of delight. And all the little shenanigans my angel got up to, even the rebukes I got from her mother, I seem to long for. 'No chocolate for her before bedtime. You know she gets hyper.' Sarah's voice – still fresh in my mind.

But I can't dwell on the past; I shouldn't. It's a choice that I made, and besides, it's not wholly unpleasant.

James looks up at me, imploring with his eyes. She looked at me just like that, her eyes clinging. Sometimes it was suffocating, every day the same as before, the cloying cycle never-ending. Perhaps that was the real reason I left, though I told myself it was for James. But there were good moments too, there were.

I could have just brought him into my family instead of abandoning it altogether, they wouldn't have truly minded. But how could I, after hiding that part of my life for so long? No, it was easier to leave, that way I wouldn't have to explain my past to Sarah, and my present to James. I should've told them both a long time ago, one's my blood, the other was my wife, but the shame wouldn't let me.

My eyes wash over him dolefully, now. He looks so much like her; I wish they could have met. Lizzy would have liked an older brother, maybe then she wouldn't have had that unhealthy obsession with

Nemo, her precious pup. Such thoughts dissipate as the present catches up with me, reminding me of why I'm here in the first place.

'Dad, do you want to do this puzzle with me? Mum...' He doesn't finish that thought, and I don't let him. Losing a mother is not easy, I know that. I wish I could talk to him, but I don't know how. No one ever talked to me, and... I turned out alright, didn't I?

'Come on, let's do that puzzle,' I say, ruffling his hair.

He beams at me, and I'm ashamed to say I feel sick. It looks too much like another smile, but I can't do much about it. The boy needs me. I can't just disappear as I did during his birth.

James picks at the pieces with a diligent eye, eager to solve them. I rather think they're all missing pieces, which seems rudely symbolic, as if to point fingers at me. Taunt me, as if to say, 'You never did fit in anywhere, did you? Didn't like anything good, got scared, and bailed. Coward! Marring everything wherever you went, as if that would fix it? Useless, you're a bloody mess!'

I don't try to suppress the voice that has always been with me, my only true companion. The monster I carry with me, built of all my wrongs, and all the wrongs done to me. After all, what do you expect from the son of a deadbeat father? It's in my blood, but not James', not Lizzy's, no, they took after their mothers. That, at least, brings me some comfort.

### *The Boy*

Jake keeps grumbling about missing pieces, and he's doing a horrible job at pretending to enjoy this. I pretend too, all the time, it's just that I'm better at it.

I pretend like I'm twelve, which I am. But I don't feel like it. Growing up was just something I had to do, but I act like I'm still a gullible little

boy for him. To make him feel less guilty, a promise I made to Mum. I might call him 'Dad,' though he is anything but. Coward of a man left us without a backward glance. Were we really so disposable? Was my birth really so abhorrent? Yet I must store my expired childhood in the freezer like Mum's cold spaghetti, enough for three, but only eaten by two.

I can't complain though, not when he's finally back. I mustn't do anything to cause him to leave again. I'm far too dependent on his bank account, maybe even a little on his failing fatherhood.

Regardless, I continue to pretend, like everything's grand, that I'm not mourning a mother inside. Like I'm not barely holding myself together, feeling the chasm in my chest grow wider with each passing day.

Does he hurt as I do? Does he even think about her? Mum was a force of nature, something to be reckoned with, but cancer was a greater one, I suppose. I know that's why he's here. I'd take his pity if it meant I wasn't alone in this, I grudgingly admit to myself.

I hate him. But you can't let him go either. I feel pathetic. But he's all you have left now, and you just want to feel loved, don't you? And wanted? You seek validation from a nobody. He's not nobody! He's my father, though I wish he wasn't. I wish he was the one to die, instead of her.

With a shaky breath and a heavy heart, I return to my play-acting. 'I'll drop the act once he does,' I whisper to myself and to that pesky voice inside me, though I have a feeling he never will, as long as he's breathing.

*Jake*

James left a couple of minutes ago, frustrated with the puzzle. He said he wanted to go out and meet up with a neighbouring friend. I let him, needing some space myself.

Now, I see it was a mistake. My mind seems to puzzle out old memories.

Liz and I were just two lonely, depressed teenagers with too much on our plates. Somehow, we found each other, a blessing, and a curse. We didn't know any better.

Memories that should be left un-pieced rush over like a broken dam. This place, James' face... it's all too much.

Skipping school, late-night conversations, and big dreams. We had the whole thing mapped out, but one thing led to another, and....

I take a deep breath, needing to collect myself, but the tears fall anyway, tracing their familiar path down my cheek. Her face seared into my mind, the stubborn image refusing to leave. She used to be my best friend.

And then James happened. She still wanted to go to college, and I'd get a job. Everything would be fine, we'd make it work, but I never really liked surprises.

I'm suddenly reminded of Sarah, Lizzy's mum. Another brunette with big dreams, except she got to see them to fruition. I laugh bitterly to myself; guess I have a type.

Gosh, I really need some of the hard candy I gave James.

*James*

The puzzle really was missing pieces. I went out to the park needing some fresh air but found a puppy instead. The poor fella was looking

lost and forlorn, whimpering by the benches, scared eyes seeking help. I decided right then that I would.

The collar said, 'Nemo, Lizzy's dog' and had the address engraved on the back. I planned to return him to his owner, but I needed Jake to drive us.

Now, as I wrench the door open, I catch Jake munching on the candy he gave me. 'Dad, look I found this little guy in the park. I think he's--'

But I am cut off by a sudden yelp from Jake.

It's almost comical. Nemo sniffs the air excitedly, while Jake looks like he has seen a ghost, paling at an extraordinary rate. But something's not right, Nemo scrambles towards him, his eyes alight in... recognition? Surely, that can't be right.

I'm just about to ask what the hell is going on when Jake lets out a strangled sound, his hands digging into his chest as he starts to turn blue.

With my eyes wide I go over to him. 'Sh\*\*!'

He's choking. He's choking on the candy he gave me.

Panicked, I go over to call 9-1-1, but he's already limp on the floor. Bending over, I try to check his pulse like we were taught in school. 'No, there's no way.'

Hysterical laughter takes over me, it's candy for God's sake. 'Stop, James this is not funny,' I reprimand myself. But I'm just a kid.

Once I've regained some semblance of calm, I check his pulse again.

Nothing.

Vidushii Saha, ALP



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