



BROMSGROVE ANTHOLOGY 2026

PLAY



Introduction

Welcome to our anthology of the best of Bromsgrovians' creative writing for 2026.

The first half of the anthology comprises the entries for the annual Housman Verse Prize, one of the School's oldest competitions. The theme for this year's competition was 'Play'.

The best poetry captures something that one recognises instantly as true, but somehow hadn't seen before, or had forgotten. The memories our young writers captured in their poems clearly took them back years; for many older readers, it will be decades! And you will find them all the more moving for it.

In the second section, you can enjoy reading a selection of the best short fiction produced during the year from the imaginations of our most talented storytellers.

Mr Paul Dinnen, Head of English

The Housman Verse Prize, 2026

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The Housman Verse Prize, 2026

Play

Housman Verse Prize Winner, 2026

In prep, I stood every morning by the chessboard.
Black and white squares; a small world of our own.
We walked around it, weightless,
As if the day were endless, and play was all we knew.
But slowly, the edges blurred,
And the game grew quiet as we grew up.

Two years along, the games grew heavier,
The air between us taut like tall fences,
And play becomes a quiet negotiation,
Gradually losing its certainty.
We stood, still a crowd, but on the brink of something new.

Now, essays fill the space where a play once lived.
Each word a move, each deadline a dare.
But still, in every question, every page,
I remember play, the first language of freedom.

And soon there will be no pick up point, no morning call,
Just an open space, a new chapter awaiting ahead.
As I step forward, knowing this is a different kind of game,

I must learn to play in a world without squares,
Where every move is unknown, and every step is a beginning.

Darcy McCormack, Upper Sixth

Play

Peaceful silence of the twilight dawn blankets the air,
Holding the haven safe.
Gold silk ribbons become meticulously arranged to be
Scattered artfully to flaunt the sunset's blush glow.
All of this just to be known.

Ember sun-metal rays wash over the ocean
Hopeful to do more than a gentle caress, a graze.
More than a one-way motion.
The lustrous light longs to create a ripple, it tickles and toys
Trying to tease. But it only creates a shimmer.
The glisten of the ocean skin.
Light wants more than to glimmer.

Unknowingly, the liquid amber veil let
A lonely white petal to drift and sink through her fingers.
The blue caught it as carefully as a secret, destiny set.
A ripple.

Ella Kenyon, Lower Sixth

Play

At age two I played a lot.
I played with my parents.
I learnt to play with four-piece puzzles
And how to expertly play snap
I learnt to cook in my little kitchen
And to pretend that I didn't need naps

We danced around the kitchen
On a random Thursday night
And I would whisper quietly to each teddy
Before telling them to sleep tight

At age five I played a lot.
I played with and copied my sister.
I learnt to play with the doll's house
And to brush barbie's hair
I learnt to dress up as Cinderella
And to have picnics with my teddy bears

We played with chalk on the pavement
Creating new hopscotch runs to try
And we played on the trampoline until it was dark
When we were called to come inside

At age seven I played a lot.
I played with my helper
I learnt to play snakes and ladders
And to pick forget-me-nots
I learnt to play on my purple scooter
And to colour with all my crayons

We played with slip n slides all summer
And rode our bikes up and down the road
I made gymnastics routines for her to judge
And we made cakes out of play doh

At age nine I played a lot.
I played with my best friend.
I learnt to play mermaids at the beach,
And to take turns on the swings
I learnt to play party games
And that it's okay to try new things

We danced in ballroom studios
And explored to secret hideouts
We played tag in the rain
With never a single fallout

At age twelve I played a lot.
I played with my school friends.
I learnt how to take higher risks
And to play as part of a team
I learnt to play more complicated games
And to think about my dreams

We would ask for sleepovers every weekend
And play heated uno games past midnight
We would ask our parents to judge our fashion shows
And we battled through every pillow fight

I am now fifteen and I still play a lot.
Though I no longer play with my pink tricycle
Or twirl in a princess dress
If you ask me to play tag or dance in the rain
My answer will always be yes

Sophie Glover, Upper Fourth

Gramps' Model Railway

Inspecting splintered oak,
From my knee-high view.
He raised me up and spoke,
While locomotives thundered through.

Majestic mountains sprawled,
Our empire on a tabletop.
Beside landscapes Nana painted,
We found our place where the world stopped.

He handed me the controls,
Turn up the throttle, flick the switch.
Guiding the freight was now my goal,
I held the dial in my grip.

The track-circuit snapped.
The hum sinks to a shallow sleep.
I stand as a frosty gust blows in,
To where the floorboards creak.

The steam engine stopped mid-play,
Abandoned. Without your hand to guide.
I miss the memories, the model railway,
And the silence left on the line.

When We Were Children

“Ready or not, here I come!” someone shouts,
and we scatter without thinking, rushing all about.
Through gardens, behind a wall,
into spaces too small for bodies at all.
Holding our breath as footsteps went by,
learning how silence could help you hide.
Then your name would cut through the play,
and you’d step out laughing anyway.

Tag was louder, faster, and wild;
every runner, a reckless child.
“You’re it!” and suddenly you had to run,
like being too slow meant you’d already lost, already done.
A hand almost there, a sleeve half-caught,
that thin line between am and not.

Capture the flag, a game of whispers and plans,
crouched in the grass with dirt on our hands.
The “flag” just a jumper, a stick, or anything,
but we ran like it mattered, like it meant everything.

Simon says. Listen, don't guess,
one wrong move and you're out of the rest.
Miss one word, just hesitate,
move too early, tempt your fate,
and suddenly you're out, just like that,
caught in a simple verbal trap.
It taught you patience, taught you delay,
that not every move should be given away.

Monopoly nights stretched out too long,
where small-town empires felt so strong.
Coins and houses, deals gone wrong,
winnings short but grudges long.
Arguments over rules we swore were right,
money piling up in fading light.
And when it all collapsed at the end,
we'd clear the board and start again.

Toy trucks and cars rolled across the floor,
making noise and asking more.
We built up roads from what we knew,
and broke them down just to redo.

Barbie dolls with hair to brush,
soft-made worlds in a quiet hush.
We gave them lives, we gave them names,
and turned the house into our games.

We built whole worlds out of nothing at all,
then called it play in a back garden hall.
No clocks, no rush, just endless days,
just childhood stitched in simple ways.

Now we're older and time moves on,
those voices are quieter, nearly gone.
But sometimes it slips through the grey,
that same old echo from that day,
where me and my friends agreed:
"Let's go out and play."

Emily Wiggins, Lower Sixth

The Swing

In the town, there's an abandoned playground
In the abandoned playground there's a swing
Overgrown with moss and weeds intertwining in between the chains
And that swing, swings
Nobody swings on that swing
But it swings without a care in the world
In the world there are many swings
Some swings swing, some swings don't swing
But in that town
And in that abandoned playground
That swing still swings as if it still remembers how it used to
That swing still swings, warm only from the wind's touch
Not from a little girl squealing whilst she goes up and down
Not from a bunch of teens trying to jump off at the highest point they can
Not from a couple having their first date there
Not from a man who wants to relive his childhood
This is dedicated to those swings
Who nobody wants to swing on
Who nobody will swing on
But those swings were once used to swing on
But now they aren't
But they don't care
The wind still remembers them

So they still swing
Swinging in that abandoned playground
Whilst rust settles into the chains.
Whilst the playground grows older.
The swing still swings
With the wind never letting go

Ben Critchley, Lower Fourth

Play

As a small fish in a big pond, I stand,
Already it is my turn in the spotlight from what I understand,
On this stage I have spent only a few years (a little over ten),
Why ever was I chosen for this play again?

Tension bubbles deep in my gut,
My knees buckle with the weight of terror uncut,
My palms drip with cues missed and lines forgotten,
My fear a sickly sweet so rotten.

How is it that some seem to bathe in that light?
Did I ever stand a chance in this fight?
I drown barely able to break the surface,
An amateur against an expert, a veteran and a novice.

Yet if I look closely, I can see the crease of a brow,
Anticipation and anxiety, I understand it now,
The tightening of the jaw I can recognise,
Who will be the first to improvise?

The light once bathed in reflects a bead of unease that rolls almost
unnoticed,
I suppose not everything can be practised,
Something within that resonates deep in my core and my patience thins,
As if my inhibitions would allow such a thing.

Yet unbeknownst to my mind, my heart speaks a line,
I have only to hope that it reaches a soul other than mine,
Strange, did the lights always sparkle so?
Did my dialogue ever like this flow?

My mask slips and boundaries begin to blur,
Undeniably something inside begins to stir,
Immeasurably my palms dry and my words tremble just a little less,
Are these feelings perhaps mine that I express?

Joy such an overwhelming feeling that washes over your entire being,
Sadness so engulfing that your heart feels as if it has stopped beating,
Fear, bitter and slick, seeps through your pores soaking into your very
essence,
Anger a searing sensation eliminating rationality in an instant.

As the curtains draw to signal the end,
I feel a twisting pain of something I cannot comprehend,
On this stage I have spent a few years (a little over ten),
With all the years I have left to live, I hope I am able to perform again.

Anoushka Gurung, Oakley, Fifth Form

I played with fire

A ribcage of burning crimson archives

A narrative screaming below

Trapped in a ceasefire

alone

Raging coal

Separate lives

calling force into

narrow margins

I played with fire

striking matches

fire walking

ember screeching against skin.

How much smoke from cinders before

angry sin of blistering burn?

Courting disaster.

Who flinches first?

Who calls for water?

Now trapped in archive of our own undoing

The arrogance' tempering nerve

Fairplay of oxygen dept

The glass

ripping at the jacket

liquid anguish

choreography

hoarding vessels

Aching ashes

drooling knots

paradox haunting

Flustered neck

keep safe

fiery lasso

moulded face

abandoned room

stop the fighting.

Heat wins us

dispute aside

no breath left for being right.

A smudge of soot on your cheek.

resentment crushed

Faces pressed into fabric

breathing each other's air

No resolution. No rescue
Reach of the hand
the raw game of choosing
shadows - smudged pathetic petty
fallacies playing
dissolved into air.

kisses of shelter
bury the hatchet
muted dispute.

Arina Atnasheva, Fifth Form

Short Stories

Apotheosis to Martyrdom

Martyr. The word for a person who is killed or made to suffer for their religious, or other, beliefs.

Rows of rye rustle together in the vast fields of a lightless hill, overlooking a city bristling with streams of cars, their flaring headlights miniature suns against the dark backdrop. The patter of rain, pouring through the leaves, is soft like a lullaby told by nature — of a foreign tongue, yet not unrecognisable.

Time seems slow, almost as if the world were waiting with baited breath for the two underneath the tree, leaning against the bark with their backs to the life of the urban buildings. The two with hands splayed against each other, fingers intertwining in a mechanical, almost artificial display of love.

And yet, it was a love so gentle and forgiving. A love that turns your head, grasps you by the arm and tugs you along, and all you could do is follow on without a second thought.

With a soft exhale, the brunette turns her head to the boy, staring intently, her eyes like gemstones carved of all the misfortunes in the world, seated with fathomless depths of grief for something they never lost. Like a murky fountain reflecting the stars above.

Next to the dark-haired one remains the blond with his eyes closed. To brush some of those blond strands out of his serene expression would be akin to guiding gold, silken rivulets away from a cold and sculpted, yet familiar landscape. Such a person was beautiful enough to fit the description of an angel, or at least the brunette thought so.

Remaining sat and motionless once more, the girl simply watches the rows of rye still slipping with the wind, like smoke to a clumsy hand which wishes to grasp what it can and should not. On a day like this, it was here that the two of them had sworn to never part ways, to remain companions throughout life or death.

Memories, bubbling up like glass shards. Of smiles and blond hair and the smell of orange lilies. Of soft touch and childish innocence and nothing like the guilt that weighed heavy on his shoulders now. Of confessions and promises and things they'll never do. Of love. Of lies.

But memories, just like glass shards, were dangerous like this. Sometimes they cut and leave blood, even if kept away in a hazardously-wrapped box, yellow and black tape keeping it shut. It doesn't matter the colour, whether it was a sickeningly sweet pink, a rueful blue, or a heartbreakingly familiar green. A glass shard will cut a hand all the same if it grips too hard, keeps for too long, whether it's out of love or out of rage.

Only a selfish person would allow themselves to be cut over and over just because they want to hold onto something. Perhaps, this brunette was worse than a selfish person, because even a selfish person would stop holding on at some point like this. Perhaps, this brunette was in love with the angel beside her.

Sirens in the distance haul her out of her imagination, the blond still unmoving. This was the sound of freedom. The sound of freedom was sirens and clanking metal, of tires screeching on tar. It was like listening to a road accident, but even a road accident had chaos, had freedom to it. Unfortunate, yes, but free.

They had run far for this freedom, for the smell of a city, of rye and wheat and fields across a smoke-filled town.

"It looks wonderful," the angel had softly spoken, smiling breathlessly at the darker haired individual as though she held the world in her grasp. Three words. Sometimes, three words could express all the compassion you needed to convey. 'This is great', 'That's so nice', 'I trust you'. All of these were things she had heard from the affectionate blond, too.

And yet the one thing she yearned to hear, of one, four, three letters and three words. The sweet reassurance she needed, before it all had gone so wrong.

That same reassurance slips off of her own tongue easily, again and again, each word in her throat feeling like thin, bubbling glass ready to burst under the pressure of raw pumice. I love you; I love you; I love you. The wintery palms of the wind ghost her skin, goosebumps left in their wake as she curls closer to the blond.

Silence is the only reply he gives to her litany of love. The brunette has learned that at times, silence can be an answer all the same as it can be a question. Silence is the result of a gap of knowledge: a hole in the truth. Sometimes when the truth hurts too much, when the lies are too sacchariferous, only silence can be given.

“We’re free,” she whispers, penitence nestled in every syllable.

The angel, in all of his gelid grace, does not respond.

Of course he does not. Freedom does not come without a price, without a sacrifice. A cruel fate, one that left dirty rubicund stains in its wake, bleeding itself out like a wounded dog licking the hand that keeps it at its mercy. Love was dead long ago, long before the rye swayed in the wind, before the cornflowers could bloom.

And love had taken her angel – its own martyr – with it.

Neeloh Sunuwar, Fifth Form

No Escape

A familiar clearing of chirping pine trees welcomed Roberts as he dismounted his horse. Snow crunched beneath his feet, and his shovel dropped to the ground with a crisp thud. The earth was frozen, reluctant to give away, but Roberts began to dig with a steady rhythm.

He had done this for years: digging and burying, digging and burying. The idea of it bettering him was now as distant as the sun’s warmth. The only warmth for miles at this point was his mind’s inferno.

A bullet in the dirt is good enough for ‘em. Hell, even that’s more than they deserve.

Dirt spat in his face as he struck it harder.

Think you’re gonna sleep easier at night, knowin’ they got a proper hole in the ground?

Roberts’ strikes began to get shallower, faster, and more erratic, as if he was stabbing the terrain.

You don’t get to wash the blood off just ‘cause you say a prayer over ‘em.

The rigid soil seized his shovel and Roberts stumbled forwards. He collapsed to the ground with his head in his hands, a despairing murmur following soon after. The echoing chirping quieted, acknowledging his existence.

The forest brought him comfort in this way, and he sincerely wished it brought the same comfort to his victims. Whether it be for a late debtor, a rival gang member, or a bounty on a serial murderer, he brought them to the same forest and gave them the same painless (or at least short) death- a quick shot to the skull.

It was morbid, he had to admit. But he admired how the forest went silent at the bang, as if it grieved with him. He didn’t think the relentless grieving made him a better man, but paradoxically, at least the silence made him feel less alone.

Roberts pushed himself up off the ground, the frosted grass biting at his fingers. He hoped the forest would join him in mourning his next victim, John. He had sought him out many times before, venturing far, far away from home to end his life. However, every time he cocked the gun, every time he pulled out the notebook...

To preface this, Roberts had a notebook with a list of entries and haunting strikes through them. The only left uncrossed was the second, maybe third one, which dated back to his early days of gunslinging. "John."

Roberts tried not to care for most of them. Externally, he remained apathetic towards the liars, the poor, or the ones who thought they were faster than him. However, John was different. Roberts had tried to end his life countless times, yet he left physically unscathed each time.

Upon their second, maybe third hostile encounter, he brutally drove the gun towards John's chest, the barrel almost sitting flush against his bone, and... he heard a crinkle. Roberts peered down into his coat pocket, and his unsteady hands revealed a worn tear of paper that he hadn't spotted earlier. Shaky lines, unsuitable colours, a sun far too big, far too blue, and a family of three, a bond far too strong to break. They lay on the grey, grey grass, gazing at the green, green sky. It was an eyesore, but a heartsore at that. On the back was written, "To Pa from Jak Jack".

It was peculiar, as Roberts tried not to care for the ones that were family men either.

Every time he saw John's face, he wanted to shatter it. He resented himself for being too soft. He only wanted to cross John's name off and end his life as an outlaw.

The shovel bit at the damp earth, the thud dulling with each strike. He looked up and noticed the impending storm watching him, and that he had dug too far. He wasn't sure how it'd be possible for him to shovel it back in, but he decided it would inevitably resolve itself, as most things tended to do.

He felt the grave swallowing him whole, like a yawning black mouth. Roberts was too tired to climb out of a ditch this deep, so he slowly crumpled to the ground and carved the meagre wooden headstone for now, steadily etching it with care. The soil started to freeze over and so did his bones, solidifying his burrowed position in the corner.

The next morning, the storm wind had blown most of the dirt back into the grave, as he found himself knee-deep in it. The forest was quietly stirring, like an audience gathering around a fistfight. The solemn sky that loomed over him appeared to be growing darker (or closer if that was possible).

Even in the depths of this dirt hole, gusts of wind threw him back and forth like a circle of cruel hands unwilling to let him catch his footing. It seemed to permeate his body, howling, spiralling in and out of him, taking with it every last vague variation of comfort that arose when he thought of the big blue sun.

His heart convulsed; he convinced himself he heard Jack's laughter in the wind's turmoil. Hopelessly trying to grip onto something, his fingernails began to crack, scraping shavings of dirt and ice to clamber out of this prison. The world above him seemed so vast and endless and yet he couldn't escape.

The once consoling pine trees contorted over him, growing, waiting for him to commit the inevitable. Roberts suddenly stopped clawing at the frozen walls like a tranquilized, caged animal. Dread crept over him as his heart slowed.

He took the wooden headstone and tried miserably to push it into the icy ground, reaching up as far as he could, then shakily drew his revolver and cocked it, pressing the barrel to his stomach, aiming at the notebook tucked in his coat pocket.

Oddly enough, the sky seemed to clear, the pine trees seemed to straighten, and the forest went silent in mourning. The headstone rattled and dropped into the grave, poetically landing on his forehead, eroding into a twisted metaphor.

"Here lies John Roberts."

Armin Hayer, Fifth Form

Sheila

A bitter breeze whistled through her ears as she stumbled down the familiar path she had once passed by with her mother whilst visiting the women's shelter in Camden. Few noises came from the road ahead, only the pungent stench of smoke fumes from the east side of Camden drifted amid the sullen sky. A deafening silence. Rainwater pierced through her shoes, flooding her torn socks and swallowing her frail feet. "What a day", Sheila murmured to herself, questioning her existence as regret of leaving her family inundated her mind.

She hesitated upon entering the down-at-heel establishment, fingers grazing the flaking blue paint of the doorframe as if it might bite back. The shelter loomed with an unknown hollowness where bricks had been darkened by decades of rain and soot, and windows were glowing weakly like watchful eyes. Inside, cool air swept over her, carrying the mingled scents of boiled vegetables and damp clothes, yet something indefinable lingered, a hope, perhaps, worn thin but stubborn. Sheila stepped in, the door sighing shut behind her, sealing her off from the accusing drizzle and the city's restless growl.

The foyer was narrow and busy. Movement pressed in from all sides, impersonal and close. A kettle screamed somewhere, then fell quiet. Silence followed, abrupt and heavy. Voices overlapped: soft laughter and a rattling cough. Sheila felt herself shrink, a visitor to a world she had skirted for years. What was once silk had been replaced by itchy wool which scratched her skin as her shoes scuffed thin at the heel. Her hands were shivering and red and her posture has shrunk as if she had learned to take up less space. She signed her name with a borrowed pen, the ink blotting where her hand trembled, and was guided onward by a volunteer whose smile was careful and kind.

Time thickened in the shelter, stretching and folding in on itself. Sheila stayed. She stayed through evenings where metal trays were filled with steaming stew and bread torn by grateful hands. She stayed through mornings when the windows were silvered with condensation and the air carried the silent shivers of her new family. Stories from those around her split into fragments, describing jobs lost like keys down drains and families frayed by silence. Each tale settled on her chest, heavy yet clarifying, as if grief, when shared, learned how to breathe.

She found herself helping without noticing when it began: wiping tables that stuck to her palms, stacking cups still warm from tea, folding laundry until her fingers learned the rhythm. The shelter had a pulse, and she fell into step with it. There was comfort in the predictability: the bell for meals, the rota pinned straight with red pins, the way dusk softened the room into a gentler place.

It was in her third week when a visitor arrived. The reception door was slightly ajar with light spilling into the corridor. Inside, a woman moved with quiet authority and a steady voice remained, her presence anchoring the room. Sheila caught only a few glimpses at first: a familiar tilt of the head. Sheila noticed the decisive way papers were aligned in order and the absurd habit of smoothing creases from a sleeve before speaking. Recognition crept in, unwelcome.

The corridor seemed to narrow, the walls leaning closer as if to listen. Sheila's breath stalled. Memory surged. The specific smell of starch and perfume entwined with a voice that could be tender or unyielding, depending on the day. A rush of memories engulfed her mind, looking down at her weak self. Her heart paused. She knew who it was. Her mother.

Hangma Limbu, Fifth Form

“A girl of that sort”

I am laid out beneath a light that does not burn.
It exposes. His chamber is spotless in the way only a bone orchard is
- too clean, too deliberate. The ivory tiles were like the uncluttered
seaside homes in the interplay of dusk and dawn. Almost serene. The
air hums softly, machinery breathing for us all. And yet beneath it all
lingers the lacerating truth. Formaldehyde bites at the back of the throat.
I can no longer breathe. I remember the taste. Chemical. Bitter.
It settles behind the tongue and refuses to leave.

They say modern rooms are well ventilated.
That nothing truly offends the senses.
This is a lie designed to comfort those who stand on the right side of the
table.

He stands over me.
Masked. Gloved. His voice is reassuring, almost professional. When
he opens me, there is a brief, honest rebellion from the body-
an earthy, shameful smell. The kind that strips away the concealed pretense.
It is a performative pause.

The brisk air rises and is swiftly
controlled. Extracted. Contained. Cleaned away.

How familiar that feels.

I have lived my whole life like this : opened, judged, corrected,
and quickly tidied, so no one else need feel uncomfortable.

“Poisoning,” he says. “Bleach.”

The words echoed. Bleach. White. Clean. Acceptable.

I swallowed it because I had been swallowing things my entire life. Insults
softened into reprimanding; cruelty disguised as misunderstanding;
demands wrapped in politeness. I was told to cleanse myself of anger,
of neediness, of desire. Told, repeatedly, that if I were better, quieter,
smaller, more grateful- I just might deserve to exist. Arthur Birling was fond
of cleanliness- washed his hands of responsibility while insisting others
wash harder. Eric called me a ‘good sport,’ like our time together was just
some game he was playing to pass a ‘drunken evening’. He treated me like
an animal, not a person with a life of her own.

He tried to help in the end, stealing money from his own father to give
to me. But I could not take it. I may be poor, and I may be ‘a girl of that
sort,’ but I would never let him cleanse me of my dignity to save himself
the guilt of what he’d done. He is just another Birling, really - wrapped
up in a world of privilege, only realising the cost of it when it’s far too
late for people like me.

The bleach burned as it went down. It stripped. It erased. I remember
thinking, in a strange, detached way, that at last I was doing something
correctly. At last, I was clean enough.

“Why?” he asks, and though he does not look at my face, I know the
question is for me.

Why is always asked too late.

Happiness, I learned, was temporary by design; a decent wage, a man
who looked at me as though I mattered. Each time I believed it might
last, it was taken back, politely at first, then without apology. They could
afford to lose it; I could not afford to keep it.

I speak of the factory, of the sharp bell and sharper voices. How a word
said firmly, reasonably, could send me out into the street with nothing
but my pride. I speak of shops and committees, of doors closed with
smiles. All the while, the pathologist writes, nods, categorizes. He does
not interrupt. Perhaps, he knows interruption is a luxury.

“Was there anyone besides you?” he asks.

There were many. That was the trouble.

Do you regret it?” he asks.

I think of regret as something the living use to soften the past. I regret
that it was necessary. I regret that my death must do the work my life
could not. But I do not regret speaking now when they can no longer
stop me.

He works slowly, with a carnality that borders on reverence to debase
the value of perseverance. I lay still beneath the lamp, my face emptied
of expression, features softened by death into something almost neutral.
He dips his fingers into the clay first, cool and damp, and presses it gently
against the skin. The clay yields easily, filling the hollows of the cheeks,

tracing the ridge of the nose, sealing over closed eyelids. Each touch is deliberate, as though he is afraid of disturbing what little dignity stays.

Paper follows. Thin strips soaked until they sag, heavy with paste, are layered carefully over the clay. They cling to the face like a second skin, smoothing into the curve of the jaw, the line of the mouth. The smell of glue mixes with the sterile air of the room- chemical, faintly sour- lingering at the back of the throat. His hands move methodically, repeating the same motions repeatedly, as if repetition might turn this act into something ordinary. I do not resist. I cannot flinch when the paper presses into the shape of my lips, capturing the faint downturn that life etched there. He pauses at the eyes, brushing the surface flat.

His darkly artistic act played as the guillotine of the high society. But really, he cannot speak for us. He found comfort in our pain. He saw desire in our suffering. His mounting ardor broke the speechless femicide minds. He was a collector. He made Papier-mâché for the theatre of horror where the performer surrendered their theatrical persona for the audience to see. He believed they had to know of me. He treated the mannerism of the elite not as sanctuaries, but as a farce. A stage. To him, it was a masquerade of people who had spent their lives perfecting a script of wealth, and ego. He viewed this silence as a form of self-inflicted femininity, a methodical killing of the authentic self in favour of a polished, porcelain exterior.

When he finished; the faces were identical. They lay scattered, careless. He told me he moulded them from me. I laughed, and the sound surprises us both.

“Not just from me,” I said. “From all of us.”

I see them then, the girls in factories, in shops, in houses. Girls taught to smile, to wait, to be grateful. Girls who disappear quietly yet efficiently. Millions of masks, worn until the features blur.

The light dims. He steps back. She is gone.

He is wrong.

I am here, in every mask, asking a simple question: What did you do?

Arina Atnasheva, Fifth Form

The Crash

I was around nine when it happened - when I was cycling down a sheer, steep hill with my dad. I remember it being a Sunday in Hong Kong; I remember the gentle breeze hugging my body and the sun painting the sky with soft, warm strokes. At the time, it felt magical: we swooped down the mountainside, the towering trees blurring into flashes of green. I have never feared occasions like this; my bike felt secure under my grip - it was pink, and its worn handlebars felt as familiar as my own skin, the same bike that had grown up with me. And although I didn't know it at the time, the fleeting sense of safety was about to shatter...

I saw the tree before I could react – it appeared suddenly like a magician's trick.

The world seemed to hold its breath as I swerved sharply to the right with a desperate, dangerous jerk, as though an audience sat at the edge of their seats, waiting to see what would happen – waiting to see how I would react. My heart rate spiked in an instant, so high that everything else was muffled: the cawing of the birds, the rustling of the bushes, the whirring of my dad's wheels ahead of me. All I could hear was the fierce, frantic pounding of my heart against my ribcage as if it were about to burst and splatter onto the roads, painting the trees and bushes in a sickening shade of red.

My brain reacted instinctively – desperate to save me from catastrophe. It felt detached from the rest of my body, as though I had no control over it, like my brain was programmed to be set on one goal - and one goal only. Instinct seized control, my fingers wrapping tightly around the brakes in a death grip, the icy metal sending a spark of hope through me like an electric shock. The handlebars were sticky and clammy beneath my palms - as though I was holding onto a deity, praying for a superior being.

My hand slammed down onto the brakes, and the wheels jolted to a halt. The screech of rubber against the ground sang with salvation. All that was in front of me stood a wall of brown - only inches from collision. My body was trembling; my hands were shaking - welded to the handlebars from pure fear. A fleeting spark of victory raced through my veins, as though every cell in my body had erupted into cheers and applause, strength surging through me with a brief buzz of relief.

However, the victory was short-lived.

The world tilted at an axis as my bike collapsed beneath me, lurching to the right. Everything seemed to spin the wrong way around when my balance gave out. My heart was still shuddering from the rush of adrenaline - but all I could feel was a dizzy fog clouding my mind. Every muscle tightened, as though tension could somehow save me. Through my disorientated vision, I caught a patch of grey concrete rushing towards me, and my legs scrambled for safety - searching for any bit of safety.

Sophie Tang, Lower Fourth

The Sepsis Scare

It was the middle of the night in the hospital. I was there at seven years old, dazed and confused, my helpless little body asleep in bed. My mum was asleep in an armchair; her restful face was contorted with fatigue and worry.

Suddenly, I felt myself being dragged out of my bed and into a bright room where a group of doctors placed me on a bed and I lay on my side. Mumbled words were spoken between my parents and the doctors. Mum's face was painted with reassurance, but I knew that she was shaking with fear.

To my horror, I caught sight of an enormous needle was in the doctor's hands. (Bearing in mind, at this time, I was so small that this treacherous weapon was as long as my forearm.) I will never forget the burning sensation of the juice being syringed into my back.

My little wails floated around the room, making my head swim as though I was spinning. How long the needle was in me for, I do not know. All I can remember is the pain that was so great, there are no words to describe it. The last thing I can remember from this memory is the hot stickiness of blood, bubbling out of my back...

Flo Martin, Lower Fourth

Sleepwalking

The bright lights only worsened my pounding headache. My body had been moving on autopilot ever since it happened. I clutched my dad's hand, hoping it would bring me comfort; instead, it only made me more aware of the emptiness in my other hand. Walking through the dull hallways, I dreaded the worst. The sickly sterile air smothered my senses but did nothing to block out the whirlwind of thoughts behind my skull. Without realising, we had made it to her room. I knew, even as we planted smiles on our faces, that the next few minutes held the power to change our lives.

A seedling of dread had begun to bloom in my stomach.

When the doctor arrived, I did my best to anticipate what she would say, scrutinising every detail, selfishly hoping to prepare myself. But before I had the chance, she delivered the news in a calculatedly gentle tone that did nothing to soften the blow. The day suddenly felt overwhelmingly insignificant. Despite feeling as though my life had ended, the world outside this bleak room seemed to continue with painful ease. For someone so full of love and life, I felt as though she deserved something more dramatic, even as the colour drained from her face.

The seedling had now grown so large it pinched at my eyes and obstructed my ability to speak.

However, I knew I couldn't cry because then everything would feel too real for all of us. The room had become humid with uncomfortable silence. Regaining my composure and pulling a taut smile on my face, I waved off the doubt glaring at us from its traitorous spot in my heart. In that moment, I selfishly wished for the privilege of blissful cluelessness that my sisters did. Immediately, I internally scolded myself for it, convincing myself I was glad I could be there for her. Yet even then, I knew I didn't truly believe it.

Once, I had read that the body's pain receptors didn't know the difference between physical and mental pain. The stabbing pain in my gut was brutal evidence that this information was scarily accurate. The pain didn't ease even as it grew dark outside and that same nurse gently warned us that visiting hours were nearly over. With no one else at home, my father and I didn't really know how to act. For those few days, our house sat on a knife's edge with us both trying to patch our wounds in private, careful to avoid any topics of conversation that actually mattered. In the days that followed, despite never being religious, I prayed...

Eden Hall, Lower Fourth

The Crimson Door

I lean in, trying to see what he is reading. My muscles tense with horror as my eyes lock onto the exposed image on his computer screen.

I had only arrived at the café half an hour before—a quaint, old, family-owned local café that had been passed through generations, within which I particularly enjoyed seeking refuge for their silky cappuccinos and the tranquillity the homely space offered. The walls were aged and beginning to crack open, revealing the classic Tudor style of an exposed wooden skeleton. The owners had scattered old portraits around the wooden panels to add to the half-timbered style, paying homage to the centuries of history buried within the pale wattle-and-daub.

I had ventured into the café for the first time a few months ago, seeking asylum from both the relentless rain and from the noisy environment that pollutes my university's compact library. It seemed that since then, my newly unearthed study spot had become quite the trend. It was visited frequently, as almost every time I went in, I struggled to locate a seat. The room was bustling with people, all of whom were leaving coffee rings on their oak tables and gently sipping their teas. These were the kind of people that I could not bear to disturb. Especially not today.

Peering up from my vessel of warm sentimental liquid, I study my surroundings. My eyes trace the steam sizzling off the espresso machine as the thin trail dances its way to the side of the room. A gentle old man is sitting on the corner table, and he gently swipes his pencil across the local newspaper's Sudoku. A young couple, both perched on the edges of their seats, sit just two tables to the elderly man's side. I note the bouquet of flowers nesting next to the girl's lap, her flushed grin mimicking the colour of the roses adjacent to her. Abruptly, I notice a peculiar-looking man slumped forwards with his back facing me, typing away furiously on his battered laptop.

The haggard man catches my attention at once. I feel as if I recognise him. No—or is he just a recurring customer?

I immediately creep forward in my velvet vermillion seat, curious as to what the sullen man is so furiously driven to type. He pauses his typing right as I can finally see the entire screen.

I freeze. He drags his cursor across the screen.

Click.

An image pops up. A front door? I cannot tell. I lean forwards. He drags his cursor to open the next image.

Click.

Then I realise what it is.

The obscene sight propels me back to my impending reality. I blink a couple of times for confirmation, hoping my eyes would reopen to something else. I swallow deeply in a desperate attempt to dissolve the panic that is slowly slinking up my spine. Surely there must be some mistake.

A sizeable wooden door, its vibrant red a faded memory, appears before me on the shrouded screen. The image lights up the mischievous face that is obscured from my view. The anonymous figure, cloaked in a dark hoodie that conceals their malice, quickly scans the room for any indication of alarm.

My gaze jumps like a live wire between him and the screen, the only frantic movement in the peaceful café. It contrasts sharply to the peaceful clicking of my neighbouring coffee-consumers twiddling away on their computers. As the intimidating figure scans the room, I can just make out the contours of the man's face. His harsh stubble coats his jaw like landmines in a field—scattered and volatile.

He whips his head around before I can piece together any of his features. As he turns back to face his computer, the man's broad shoulders block the bottom corner of the screen. Perched on the edge of my seat, I can barely make out the lettering "14A" mounted in an embossed golden plaque across the faded crimson planks.

I shift in my seat uncomfortably, a metal key with an identical "14A" engraved into the side jingling tauntingly in my pocket.

I had only bought my own apartment six months prior, following my decision to move out of the university's grimy living quarters and into my own space. I thought it would be well worth it—for the privacy, more direct access to the city, and to be only a few minutes away from the main campus. Was I wrong to perceive this place as safe? Am I that naïve?

Seeing something eerily similar to my own place of residence petrifies me.

The hysteria hits me like a wall. I begin to curl my fingers around the wrist of my left hand, gripping with such pressure that I fear if I let go, my hand might fall right off. I can feel the pulse under my skin quicken, threatening to burst through the thin layers of ligaments, blood vessels, and flesh. A hastening thumping against my pointer and index fingers is the only indication to my mind that I am even still alive. For a few seconds, I swear there are gaps in my heart's rhythm—A beat. A beat. A stop. A beat. A beat. A stop. I struggle to swallow a few shallow breaths into my lungs as discreetly as possible.

I grapple to conceal my trepidation, well-aware of the peaceful environment I would be disturbing. But in truth, I am more worried about what will happen if this ominous figure notices my mounting perturbation.

Then the image switches.

If my heart could sink any further, it would be plummeting through the ground beneath me and out the other side of the globe. I let out a sharp gasp as I try to comprehend what I am seeing.

The same crimson door, this time unlocked and slightly ajar. A thin trail of light intruding its way into the apartment: my apartment. I recognise the miniature black and white tiles dispersed along the floor, guiding my trespasser directly inside. Inside to me.

This feels like a nightmare. Maybe it was a nightmare. It was the only logical explanation.

Pity

Unaware, I tighten the hold on my wrist. A slow gradient of pale to flushed skin spreads through my hand, but my eyes remain fixed on the glowing screen. The blood in my wrist seems to dissipate at the same rate at which my heart sinks: slowly and painfully. Eventually the blood flow is too little, and a twinge of that pain jolts me back to reality. The pain forces me to release the hand I did not know I was gripping as the reality hits me that this is not, in fact, a dream.

I try to search through the labyrinth within my mind for who this man might be and what he would want with me. I think back to the beginning of the school year. Was I ever absent from university? How does he know me? I am desperately untangling the questions in my mind.

My breath gets caught in my throat and I apprehensively peer up at the screen. I manage to glimpse it right as he clicks on the final image.

Crushingly, in that moment, I remember.

My eyes brim with horror as I see myself—sound asleep in my own bed.

The flash of a foreign camera highlights my face, my calm expression unaware of the looming figure standing over my unsuspecting body. My stomach churns in agony and disgust from being so blatantly exposed.

Suddenly, the enigmatic character slams his computer screen shut and whips his head to the side like a startled hyena caught eating its prey.

We lock eyes, and I can hardly piece together his features through the copious tears pooling in my eyes. But now I know.

It was him all along.

The frozen peak dominated the landscape: a frigid alp that would remain desolate longer than the night would swallow the life-giving sun. Snow deep enough to bury a man covered the ground in a blanket of white, and rocks sharper than Damascus blades hidden throughout made for an almost impassable crag. Soft powder snow piled across from the palisade of the mountain. In the barren tundra, only the spruce trees could save him from the biting gale.

Red snow trailed behind them as far as could be seen through the thick blizzard. The path that they had trodden just moments ago had already been covered in sleet. Muffled by the flurry of wind, hid the howling and hooting of animals suffering to abide the harsh storm. The trees rustled in the gale, creaking with the wind as spruce needles soared like pins through the air, spreading a woody smell to the far corners of the rough alps.

Snow slipped off the side of the crag, disturbed by the movement above it. He was staggering on the edge of the alcove, one calloused hand tendering his side. He was clad in matted, black furs with flecked white snow making him look more beast than man. His face had a tawny look to it; his nose fattened like a snout and eyes the colour of the slate buried beneath the snow. Sullied hair flowed down to his neck, blowing into his face. Thick brows protected his eyes from the wind, and his eyelashes had become frosted with the sleet landing on them. Looking across the vast expanses of fog and snow, not much could be seen by the man. Determined to continue, he carried the weight of his burdens and bindle on an already exhausted back, walking onwards into the void.

By the time he had reached a small outcrop, the moon had disappeared behind a mountain peak leaving the world in utter darkness. The storm had become more ravenous, swallowing all in its wake under layers upon layers of snow. Sleep had begun to claim his limbs and his faculties. He struggled to continue as his mind was lulled by the forest. His body was begging for rest as he pleaded with himself to remember what the old innkeeper had told him before he left for this monstrous place.

“It’s getting’ colder northwards,” the innkeeper said gruffly as he poured the newest in a long line of meads for him, “You should bring a tent”.

"I don't have one," he got out whilst slurping a watery rabbit stew.

"Well, your goin' to the wrong place then", he said as he placed the tankard beside the soup.

"Maybe, but any other way isn't an option", he replied before placing two gold coins on the table.

"How much for a room my friend?" he queried.

His unmoving face replied "that'll be enough for a night or two. How long do you want to stay?"

"Just the night" he said as he slowly arose from his stool, grabbing the mead began to walk towards the stair." I'll just take an empty one".

Lumbering up the stairs a realisation dawned upon the man: what if it is too cold? I could slip past them and just go... Make my way as far south as I can before running into a freehold. I could make it work; I've done it before.

The oak stairs creaked as he climbed, then coming upon a hallway with two routes, one to the left and one identical one to the right. Turning left, he continued, counting the doors as he went: One, two...

Reaching a seemingly random door he knocked and, receiving no reply, entered.

It was a well-lit room, having a stained-glass window and a small candle atop a cabinet next to the small straw-filled bed. The window reflected his plaited hair and deep-set eyes. The whitewashed walls carried stains of long since spilt tankards and food. The wooden floors were shining from wax.

Charming he mused whilst setting down the mead beside the candle on a wooden side table with three drawers. Stripping off his damp clothes, he revealed a scared and wounded body: blades, teeth, lashing.

Looking towards the side table, curiosity took hold of him and he began to look through the draws. The first came out empty, the second came out filled to the brim with dust mites, and the third contained a sole book. "The beginning books". What a bunch of fanatic bull, a waste of time. Disappointed by the abrupt ending to his exploration he clambered into the bed. Soon he was drawn into a slumber only awoken by the piercing sun at the dawn of daybreak.

Beginning to make his preparations, he gathered his belongings and stumbled down the stairs, the mead not fully out of him.

"Oi!!" Hollered the inn keeper "you best not stop in that dam storm, its how ya die. Stop and ya'll regret it, sleep and ya won't be able to regret it. Get me, lad?".

A whining captured his attention among all the noises of the forest; it was sharp and untimely. As he walked on, regretting his lack of preparation, the whining didn't cease even after what felt like hours. Whining and whining, then howling and howling, almost never abating. He needed to see what it was that made these creatures become so fretful, and so he walked until it felt like he would never be able to hear anything else again.

Zoning out from the noise, he almost stepped on the poor creatures. Three white dogs with long and silky fur with a layered coat lay in the snow. They all crowded on top of each other around a sleeping dog, prodding and poking it with the short snouts and biting the bigger one's short ears. Their mother possibly, but why then had it not awoken to its pups? The man pushed that thought aside. It would never wake for its pups.

"You poor things" he said in less than a whisper.

The babies were covered in a thick mucus; they'd freeze soon in the harsh wind unless they could escape the biting gale and get dry.

As he walked on, the silence screamed through his heart.

Conor Carter, Fifth Form

Pecking Order

Not far behind the church is a little blocked area. A couple of years ago it was smothered by hundreds of various plants. Ash trees stood proud over the terrain with smaller oak trees next to them standing just as grand. Bluebells blossomed as spring arrived; buttercups bloomed during the summer; chrysanthemums came in Autumn as others died out; then primroses were produced alongside the winter air. Now, though, this beauty is destroyed - not a single flower or sprout in sight ever since the humans took over. Now concrete covers the land: towering streetlamps sticking up from the ground every ten meters or so, dirty wooden benches sitting between each of the lamps just wishing for people to rest on them, and a measly rubbish bin in the corner with more waste around it than in it.

Surrounding the grounds is a brick wall, made of rocks and pebbles of all contrasting shapes and sizes perfectly making a two-foot wall, just the right height to perch on.

In the middle of this, the small black pigeons regularly sit, waiting for a pedestrian to come and feed them the scraps of food they may have left from lunch, screeching every time anyone even passes the fence.

Today, a man stands in front of them, almost taunting the birds with a piece of heavenly, soft bread. I've seen him before though, even if the others don't recognize him. He seems no taller than five foot ten inches, he always has a mop of scruffy hair that's like one of the birds' nests. I believe his name is Bill or something like that, so that's what me and the others call him. He wears a tight, coal black T-shirt and almost matching trousers most days but now he's got a strange midnight coat over it; I've never seen that before. Even though he may look a bit different, I still know he won't give much bread to them other than throwing a piece or two of the dull scrappy ends. Sadly, we must pretend to like it as written in the pigeons' code, but there is nothing better than the squish as you peck on the center of a fresh, new slice. Especially the seeded loaf - we love the seeded bread!

It's the sixteenth of December, so few people flock to this place (most are preparing for the holidays), but those who do come here around this season stay, stay for a while... especially Bill. He spends hours at a time here. I question quite a bit if he even does work; he's always around the area but then he gets a suspicious call and subsequently leaves swiftly which mostly kills my doubts. Every day he's doing something different that just wildly annoys each one of us, throwing food as far as humanly possible, attempting to pet us, or even trying to pick us up.

We are not pets to be played with.

The hundreds of times he's done this, every time I go over and scream. He never acknowledges me though; he just keeps on whistling this happy little tune. The first time I built up the courage, I squawked him "Get out of my home!" but he didn't even budge. I've tried every single time. Yet he never seems to leave when I ask.

Today is the day I figure out how to get rid of him, take revenge...

How to do it though? I could peck him; no, that's a bit too violent. I could discard my waste; no, that wouldn't work either as happens every day to people. I know - the classic act of food thievery! He has a packet of crisps open on the bench, perfect to steal; a green foil bag with a giant logo over the plain background, could be any flavour, but I'm hoping for cheese and onion today. I only found out that crisp flavours had names last week: four whole years and I didn't know that. I've just got to wait until he grabs one out of the pack to swoop down and take it.

While I waited, I went down to talk to my fellow flock members as I haven't got anything better to do. Deciding whether to tell them my plan was hard, but I conclude that there's no reason not to.

I flew over to Cotton (as a little girl had named her) and told her my idea. I thought she would agree with my marvelous plan. However, I was instead greeted by her confused eyes and then she questioned "How is that any different to what you normally do?"

"Last time was with another person not him so we don't know how he will react. Hopefully, he'll leave and never come back!"

She huffed, then exclaimed "Well I wish you the best of luck because that is one of the most unrealistic things I have heard all week, and yesterday Ava said she's never going to fly again!"

I ignored her: she just didn't understand what I was aiming for as she's a Jacobin, just a slow breed of pigeon. On the other hand, as a supremely swift Fantail, I'll get this packet.

Suddenly, I turned to see Bill picking up the goal. Now is the time to get this prize and get rid of him.

Best of luck to me.

Jess Gallimore, Fifth Form

First Foot

December thirty-first: The date that draws people all over the world to New York City to witness the incoming new year in the city that never sleeps; where dreams are made. A voltaic, exhilarating feeling rushes down your spine when taking each step, walking past every person who holds a story of their own; soaking in every precious moment here; the hastening to Times Square to watch the famous ball drop next to millions upon millions of creatures in the concert jungle; the sickeningly sweet smell of 'Mary Joanna' that overcomes the senses suddenly; intense, artificial lights on buildings like giants towering over the city.

After living here for over a decade, the billboards and adverts on these upraised buildings, never cease to amaze me, with their embellished products that nobody needs but everyone desires. I catch myself inspecting one particular promotional billboard and almost choke on my breath when I see a poster of an upcoming film about a young daughter...with a murdered father.

I attempt not to dwell on this impelling thought but, this backfires tragically. For the first time in around two days, (a world record for me), I discover myself thinking all about my father: his jokes that would cheer anyone up from having a dreadful day, his solacing hugs or his delectable meals. Growing up, family members and friends would always comment on the fact that I was the spitting image of him. They would mention the fact we both had chocolate brown hair, azure blue eyes and a smile that was contagious.

Something my father had taught me, before he had passed, was how to read people: A person's posture; the way their eyebrows twitch; the pace of someone's voice when they speak, or even how they stand can summarise their whole life in a matter of minutes for a person like my father or me. Since his absence entered my life, my guilty pleasure has been reading people's minds. I find it comforting to step into the minds of others, which is why I am in this colossal city, on the busiest day of the year - which also so happens to be my father's disappearance date.

I notice someone else staring as intently as I am at this billboard: a man, mesmerised. I zone in, studying my newfound subject. From afar, I make an educated guess that this man was shy of five-foot-ten, about average height for a caucasian male. I creep forward for a better look at my suspect: I can now make out a lot more about this captivating stranger. I first take a mental note of his posture: collapsed and diminished, with his shoulders pulled down. From previous experience, I presume that his posture relates to embarrassment and shame. I silently scream thousands of questions: what was he hiding? What is his secret, and what does he have to be shameful about? His sign of shame intrigues me further. I stalk his face with curiosity, but come away disappointed when I see his stoic poker face. I decide to leave his face for now and started taking notes on his clothing. He is dressed in a considerably large and pitch-black trench coat which sat perfectly on his broad shoulders. I assumed that he wore a suit underneath, although its make and colour were not visible. His hair was pulled back neatly with no imperfections. The posture and look of this man did not correlate; he dresses smartly and it is safe to say that he is dressed business-like without looking at his posture. But the lack of professionalism and demeanour of a businessmen made me doubt the thought that he was, indeed, a businessman.

Lost in thought, my worst fear came true. My suspect caught me inspecting him. Staring at me, he decided to break the silence.

"Can I help you?" he questioned me.

I clocked his British, exquisite accent.

When I did not answer straight away, the curious man raised an eyebrow. I instantaneously ceased profiling him.

Shaking my head, I was able to mutter," Sorry."

We continue to study each other as if we were in an intense staring competition. I could sense him trying to analyse me, but failing. I was skeptical of what conclusion he was trying to make, so instead decided to break the glaring contest between us.

Almost immediately, the pieces of the puzzle started fusing together. When I looked back up at this man, he looked like he had seen a ghost: his face went so pale and his gaze so wide, I could see all the whites in his eyes. His newfound look suggested the persona of a guilty man. As a natural profiler, many questions and ideas flooded my brain, but I could only focus on one, ethereal thought. Every relative, teacher, doctor, and even stranger, would especially inform me on how indistinguishable my father and I were.

“Did you know, James Thompson?” The British accent broke the silence once again, but stuttering slightly.

I felt the world stop for a moment. I wondered voicelessly why this peculiar man knew who my beloved father was. Before I was about to respond, the ethereal thought came back to me.

I took a few steps back, my breath growing heavier by the second while the panicked grasps of truth hit me. The man I had been reading, analysing, profiling ... he was not just a person at random. He was my father’s murderer. James Thompson’s murderer.

Aanika Sanikop, Fifth Form

Acherontic

A Death’s-head hawkmoth attaches itself to the lamplight, its thickened antennae caught in the glare. Meteoric drops strike the ground, drumming last year’s dirge. Behind the wrought-iron windows, draped in mahogany curtains, lies a view of trees starved of chlorophyll. There is no croaking of the frogs, no bleating of the lambs, nor is there a hoot of any owl—no life.

Dr. Hades sat opposite his patient in his lugubrious office with the four walls painted in muted, dark shades of grey. They set down their black teas on the coffee table amid piles of dog-eared psychiatric books and case files, the ghostlike smell of tobacco hanging low in the air. A grandfather clock behind the doctor and the patient is ticking arrhythmically, incongruous with the paralysing silence.

Dr. Hades coughs, “Tell me about your mother.”

“Why?” His patient’s brows knit in distaste, his voice metallic, tight at the edges.

“I am your psychiatrist,” Dr. Hades states. “How have you been since your mother’s passing?”

“Lifeless, like a flaneur,” his patient answers stiffly. His eyes stray around the office, inspecting each detail carefully coalesced into a paragon of neoclassicism. He pauses. There is a subtle, squeaking noise from something alive that deviates from the discernible tick of the clock.

“What is that sound, doctor?”

“The moth has been haunting the lightbulb since last year,” he replies placidly.

Snarling wind and the low rumble of a thunderstorm encroach on the room’s stillness. Outside, the trees thrash their twigs with aggression, while the potted plants’ mildewed leaves curl and grey, mottled with decay; Dr.

Hades' Kafkaesque office is now perfused with an earthy odour. The heavy moth, its forewings speckled dark and pale brown, remains embosomed in the lamp's lustre as if it were a matter of life or death, frozen apart from its clubbed antennae twitching in futility.

"Moths are positively phototactic," Dr. Hades explains. "They are attracted to light and will endure harm rather than relinquish it. This promises them a premature death."

The second hand of the grandfather clock advances at last with a loud tick, as though time were misremembering. Leaning forward, the doctor takes a sip of his black tea, now cold, before he strikes a match to light the candle on the coffee table.

Eagerly, the moth flutters from his desk's lamplight into the candle, dropping into the wet wax before time could mull over mercy. Its wings collapse first, receding from view. As its head spasms, the pale sigil on its thorax contorts. Its six legs become crimped curls; blackened, stiffened, cold. The hawkmoth smoulders while its musculature remains intact, dressed by the blonde shine.

Like a haruspex before entrails, Dr. Hades returns to his seat opposite himself and observes the iridescent hawkmoth flare into ochre-yellow flame until it dwindles and eventually, runs out of wax. A moth once of a remarkably large size is reduced to a nub; a phantom.

"Death is natural, some come faster than others," the doctor says to his patient, looking back at himself.

He sees the glass that mimics the curl in his cheek, changing the angle at which the light found his irises. The Acheron carries off the raindrops outside and the moth alike, leaving his office scented with ambrosia and the trees rich in green.

The hands of the grandfather clock tick rhythmically.

He broods over the melted candle.

A moth to the flame.

A man to the past.

Stephanie Zhang, Fifth Form



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