



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

14-18 Age Category

The 19th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2024

FAME

Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.

William Shakespeare

For some, it is a lifetime's pursuit, often slipping through their grasp while others see it fall into their hands by mere chance. However achieved, through talent or luck, Fame, can be an ill-fated prize.

The 19th Elmbridge Literary Competition, run in partnership by The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, asked for short stories and poems on the theme of the double-edged sword that is 'FAME'.

Previous Competition Themes:

2005:	Cook Up A Story
2006:	On My Way
2007:	A Life In Colour
2008:	Once Upon A Time
2009:	A Symphony of Life
2010:	The Elmbridge 100
2011:	Breaking The Barrier
2012:	A Dickens of A Christmas
2013:	One Act Radio Play
2014:	Dear Diary
2015:	Flights of Fantasy
2016:	Love
2017:	Luck
2018:	A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
2019/20:	New World
2021:	Music
2022:	Enigma
2023:	The Road

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Category: Short Stories

1st Place: The Painter

Freya Roodhouse

The Painter Creases score the papery skin where it hangs in loose, spotted folds from the woman's wasted body. The skin is so tissue thin that it is almost transparent, the thick, mottled blue veins alarmingly prominent as they snake their idle way down her naked torso. Her breasts are shrunk to nothing more than wrinkled apples hanging low and sore from her pale chest. Everything about her is somehow diminished inexorably. Even her lips are colourless, as if the blood and life had been sucked from them. Eyes that once glowed like burning coals have lost their lustre, nothing more than chips of stone. The heavily hooded eyelids seem strangely devoid of lashes. There is no expression in that aged face, no evidence of discernible thought in those dull, waterish grey eyes. Her naked body, stretched on the crimson chaise longue, is utterly limp. Lifeless. She is completely void of... anything.

The curator stares at her, head tipped slightly to one side. Abruptly, she turned away from the portrait.

"What's it called?"

"I don't know. I hadn't decided."

"Who is it?"

"It is me." the painter says simply, with not as much as a smile. The curator looks at the young woman before her doubtfully. She is talented, no doubt about that. An amateur could see as much. Yet there was undoubtedly something wrong inside that exquisitely crafted mind. The woman in the painting was not her. It couldn't be. The painter was... Well, she was young. Just 23 and already well renowned. It'd do the gallery good to have this latest piece. Wherever her paintings travelled, the crowds inevitably followed. Strange, to imagine this quiet, unassuming little girl to have such great renown. She looks back to the portrait. It was an unnervingly accurate, unflinching portrayal of the age and decay. Highly unusual in a girl so young. She must have had a live model sitting, for such a true to life painting. And yet, there were certain similarities, imperceptible similarities that might not be anything more than accidents. The painted eyes and the warm ones, both the same, unremarkable

shade of stormy grey. The mouth, set in the same non-committal frown. Even the long fingers, slender and white where they hang aimlessly over her concave stomach are the same. Artist's fingers, perfectly formed to grip a brush. But it is nothing. The curator shakes her head. They say the painter always gives some of herself to her work. It is nothing unusual. She admires it a little longer, moving closer to admire the tiny, delicate, infinitesimal brushstrokes, trying to shake off that uncomfortable sensation of being watched.

Eventually she steps back, shaking her head once more.

"It's no use."

The painter looks at her flatly. Her right eye twitches slightly.

"It is a fine work, of course. Masterful. But this kind of stuff simply doesn't sell anymore. The people don't want to see realism; they want to see emotion. They want to look at art and feel something." she explains, suddenly disdainful. How could a young artist grow so out of touch with her audience? "There's no market for this sort of work."

The girl nods slowly back at her, somehow unaffected by the news that she has just lost a thousand pound sale. Not that she needs the money. 'Bigger than Banksy' the Times had termed her last year. A dud piece wasn't exactly the end of her career. She had still expected something however. Artists were a temperamental lot, given to fits of anger and greater confidence in their skills than was, perhaps, always warranted. The painter just stands from the plush cream sofa, and shows her out.

Then the painter is left alone, entirely alone in that grand, empty house. It was part of the house's charm when she first bought it. A place far away from the city, where she could have grand parties and the paparazzi would not follow. Now it just makes her skin prickle, to be so far away from anyone and anything she knows. She stands before the portrait, slipping her satin dress onto the floor in one smooth, rippling motion. There she stays for a moment, bare before her latest work. The crimson paint on her mouth looks like a slashing, bleeding wound in the harsh light. Then she lies on the couch, her pose mirrored in the frame mounted on the bare wall. Her taut skin is raised in goosebumps, but she makes no move to cover herself. She only lies there, for a long, long time.

Night has fallen when she finally stirs, skin sliding silently over fabric as she moves. She pads across the carpet until she is almost nose to nose with her aged, worn soul. Then, carefully, slowly, she takes up a paintbrush and traces, in jagged red over her face, the title of the painting. FAME

Equal 2nd Place: The Muse

Olivia Merrigan

The first time I saw you since I left you was through the grainy, sepia hue of my home video camera. The small colourful string of lights above the mantle flickered like stars and the loud pop and crackle of the fire was distorted and sharp on the film. You were smiling though. Your smile was always strange to me, lopsided with deep set dimples that my mother thought was charming. You were tucked under the evergreen, your pretentious vintage camera dangling from your neck. But you only had eyes for me, even then, I was a fool if I ever thought otherwise. I laughed from outside the frame, a feather-light sound that was only mean for you. And slowly, so slowly, God knows you thought you had all the time in the world, you brought the camera up to your eye.

Click-clack

You were a firm believer in fate and lazy Sunday mornings, so when you realised I believed in neither, you were beyond outraged. From every morning onwards I would wake up to the sizzling of bacon and the hiss and spit of fried eggs, the hum of your hungry approval when I tucked in. The kitchen was robin-egg blue, hatching brightly with yolky sunshine. That same camera swinging around your neck. You told me stories of odd coincidences and times that you believed were meant to be. You avoided black cats and eggs of birds with yellow feathers and never seasoned before tossing it once over your shoulder. You said that we were irrevocable. You always saw the world so artistically, would always blush when I told you that. And I liked the way you framed me, seemed to string me up and study me with such precision. So when I look at you, smiling sunny side up, you stepped back to see me in all that breezy, Sunday contentment.

Click-clack

Disappointment painted your face shades of blue and grey. I could see it colouring the gallery walls, clouding above your head and striking out at your prints. I had watched you through rain and wind and sunnier days as you took pictures of the city that had captured your fleeting attention. You were like a child realising his talent for the first time. While you were happy the world was stippled and shaded and inspired. Maybe, I had tried to reconcile, it's the weather. The black and stormy sky forming above your head, a nonsensical scribble of failure. It was the first time I saw how much you wanted this, to be seen through and through. Appreciated. Revered. I tried

to gently to bring you away from the emptiness of your expectations and when you looked at me with that same attention and you reached for that comforting weight around your neck.

Click-clack

I argued whenever my father called. I got complaints from neighbours slipped under my door, strange looks in public, your own face scrunched up in sudden alarm. Because I always picked up that phone. Never missed and opportunity to scream and shout and berate. You used to beg me not to pick this fight, not here, not now, not while your parents could see me, not while we got groceries, not while you tried to sleep. Over time I claimed the car park under our window as my battle ground. I spent mornings, afternoons and nights pacing and standing my ground below that window. One morning while I was waiting for you by the car. You always made me wait while you took you time. The heat was cloying that day, dripping sunscreen down my skin and ice cream on my breath. When he called me with venom in his voice and a hiss in his breath and while I tried to defang his rage, I saw you from that window. Eyes gleaming. Hands fumbling to grasp this opportunity.

Click-clack

When I was a little girl, I had fancied myself and actress. Dressed up in feathers and glitter, the spotlight of my parents' attention had been on me. The leading lady. As I found out, feathers can be plucked and glitter can be washed off and the spotlight can dim. Scripts and stage props can be misplaced and damaged. And before I knew it the only audience I was ever going to have was the one in a board meeting. You, however, never found out. You loved the slow pauses in front of your photos, the slow nod at the depth and gravity of the print before them. You were adamant that people were too strange, too complex to capture; how could I ever question your work? Not when you photographed the cars and buildings and traffic cones and titled it poetically and... Oh, oh my, the meaning was oh so clear, how profound, what a talent. So, when you angled your head and saw me in that new lens, you couldn't resist.

Click-clack

You didn't like to lie very often. Your mistruths were few and far between, tucked away for a cold day when you might gently take it out and let its dishonesty blanket the room. They used to fill my mugs with hot chocolate, be the swirling steam that would warm my fingertips and sweeten your tongue. They used to be the hats and

gloves and scarfs your mother knitted me for the snow, vibrant stitches of red and blue and green. There was only one lie that soured over time. You poured it slowly from the bottle you said you'd been saving – just for an occasion like this – let it gush into the glass. You poured with such a generous hand that I should've known. Should've known it would be corked and sour and flat. That it would leave me flushed and spinning with betrayal, that your own glass was sweet and bubbly. "You're going to be famous one day," you lied.

Click-clack

You kept me waiting most days. I remember staring up at that window, our life reduced into that frame, waiting for you to buzz me in. I wondered what you saw looking out. If you saw me dressed in the boots you bought me on my birthday, an umbrella in one hand and the other heavy with shopping bags and saw it hung up on a gallery wall. If you saw my sad, rainy face and felt the opportunity heavy around your neck. If you captured that pout and the hair painted to the back of my neck.

Click-clack

I kicked up puddles and opened my mouth to drink up the rain. It had been falling for days then and I was maddened with it. Each droplet broke like glass at my feet, on my tongue and the shards scattered over my skin. You drew your upper body out of that window, that strange smile on your face.

Click-clack

I raised my hands out to the shape of you at that window, feet at a wide at a wide stance, the hair I had spent all morning straightening had been yanked by the wind.

Click-clack

I curtsied in my summer dress, grinning at you past that window.

Click-clack

People travelled far to see your collection. You were smarter this time, you had brought journalists and critics and connoisseurs with trained eyes. Your part of the gallery was a small slice of white walls and a frosted ceiling. Each photo had been printed in black and white on canvas, each piece was untitled and had no description. You were excited by the mystery of your art. I mingled with the black-tie crowd, dolled up in the dress you had bought me. Surrounded by photographs of me. You took me in your arms and placated me with bubbles and champagne. Every person who passed complimented me, dragged a hand down my arm, said, oh this was meant to be. You only saw me through the lens, every photo was

unquestionably a reflection of yourself. Each canvas print was a mirror into your own obsession in the pursuit of fame. And now that you had found it, I felt the emptiness of your love. Your mouth was soured, your fame somehow fated and now your fleeting attention had left, like the final curtain hitting the floor.

Equal 2nd Place: I Blame Fame

Isobel Coe

Dear Samuel,

It's been a while.

I'm not sure why I'm writing after all this time . . . I'm also not sure why I stopped. I'd have left this letter by the bench opposite the park we used to take Sophie to when she was young, when we'd not long been together and everything was still sunny, but I can't leave the house without being hounded by cutthroat and bloodthirsty photographers and paparazzi. Also, let's face it, you're never going to read this letter, are you ?

Those first few months when our business really took off were amazing - your clothes that you designed were stunning and my modelling secured us endorsement after endorsement until money would no longer be an issue for the rest of our lives. That honeymoon period was short lived and sweet - only for a few, blessed months were we showered with compliments and praise, and not for long were we invited to red carpet events and runway shows, and for only a few weeks did we manage to evade the tabloids as being gay. Your Saudi Arabian family disowned you and we were drowning in a tsunami of abuse from religious and homophobic communities alike. The one thing you can count on is that difference can bring anyone together if it's hated strongly enough, and a love like ours was despised because we were happy and different and powerful with our influence. For a little while at least.

I should have kept a closer eye on you. I know you shouldn't believe me but I had no idea how much you were taking. The pact we made not to go on social media, and to never read the comments . . . I thought it was working. You were suddenly so much more alive - you had more energy, your colour was back, your eyes were bright again. It was only after I found your other accounts, that I realised your eyes weren't so much bright as frantic and wild, and that you were never normally so flushed and sweat didn't always drip down the back of your neck in little teardrops. You had gone back to designing, your half-chewed pencil flitting across the page as it tried to keep up with your one-of-a-kind brain. I remember the gentle purr of the sewing machine the first day you turned it back on - its constant whir was a warm reassurance on those cold, dark days. Even today I'm not really sure what happened: what the last thing was that seemed to force your hand, and leave you with no other option. One day you were dancing to Rihanna while you cooked us my favourite meal, the next

morning i came to your study to find your skinny half-naked body convulsing on the floor, a small ring of white power around your right nostril. It felt like hours after you'd stopped moving until the paramedics arrived - their navy overalls rushing by in a blur as they took your pulse and tried to restart your heart. I remember the looks of sympathy and pity that seemed to replace their prior urgency all too quickly - no one seemed to be running anymore. I remember one of them delivering the news, right there in your study, the way his hands seemed clammy and almost suffocating as they held my icy ones.

It cost almost all of our earnings from our last show to cover up the real cause of your death. The paparazzi and their world took away your rights and your privacy, but I refuse to let them revel and take pride in the fact that they took your life.

Because it was them that killed you. The world believes that you died from a heart attack, and no one except you, me, Sophie and the paramedics are any wiser.

Me and your design team finished off your final project. The runway where they debuted sold out, and one the clothes hit the market, all stocks sold out within days. All the money has gone to your charity - me and Sophie set it up a week after your death. The Samuel Henry Foundation is a charity that supports out of work adults, women running from domestic abuse, and is a refuge for those who are struggling in the battle against drink and drugs.

Sophie usually stops by whenever she can. It's been 14 months now since your death and every day he reminds me more and more of you. When she drinks her tea she turns her little finger out and pretends she's the queen, when we're flagging a taxi she waves her arms about in the slightly psychotic way you always did, and when she's tired but stubbornly refuses to go to sleep until her show is over, she always falls asleep on the couch just like you did.

Maybe that's what I'm writing to say. Samuel, my love, it's been a while, and I still miss you as much as I did that day when I went to bed on my own for the first time. But I'm lonely. And I know that maybe it's not my place to say, or that I'm being dramatic, but when you swallowed those pills, you were selfish. You were selfish and put yourself and an easy way out ahead of me and our future together. So I think you can grant me this: I'd like to move on, Samuel. Maybe not this week, and maybe not this year but when I do, I'd like to think that you'd be okay with that, and maybe a small part of you is happy for me.

I hope you're proud my love,

Yours,
Robert Flowers

3rd Place: Dinner At The Millers

Mbia Mvondo

“Well”, I paused. “The Millers were a good family.

Proud?

Yes, but kind and hardworking. Of course they had their flaws like everyone does. Randal, their oldest son who was 19, would throw parties when his parents were away. It got really bad once, so bad that the cops came at 2 am because of noise complaints. Their youngest one Andy threw these awful tantrums some mornings and once during a church service. Their daughter Anne moved out earlier in the year after a big fight with her parents only to move in with her friend that lived a couple houses down the street.

The Millers were always punctual, Never late to any events, Lawn moved every week and they had these spotless white shoes on, every day. Patty and Ron, the parents, had a strong relationship. They were married 25 years as of last fall, but it was like They were still on their honeymoon. As if on cue, every weekday morning, Ron would walk out the front door and Patty would follow. They would talk for two minutes and then kiss. The kiss was small, Nothing special but it held so much passion. Every time they kissed it seemed like they fell back in love.

Three years ago, the Millers started volunteering at a homeless shelter. they enjoyed it much that they started a program called "Dinner at The Millers". Every Saturday evening they would host someone from the homeless shelter for dinner. Their guests would order their dream meal in advance and Patty would have it ready for them. All kinds of people would eat at the Millers. Young and old. Big and small. Dirty and clean.

Every once in a while their guests would show up at church with them the next day. One of their previous guests Julia became a church regular and a close friend of mine. She speaks very highly of the Millers and claims she couldn't have gotten back on her feet without them.

One Saturday evening Ron pulled into the driveway and opened the door for that night's guest. It was an older man with a faded shirt and bright blue hat that still had

the tag attached to it. He had a kind smile but strange eyes. They didn't fit with the rest of his character. They were eyes that had seen real pain. As he slowly exited the car, he stared at their house with a dropped jaw. He greeted Mrs. Miller with a firm handshake, and the two sons with cartoonish fist bumps. Then they all went inside.

The next day, I didn't see the Millers, not at church or the neighbourhood barbecue. Even though the car was in the driveway, I concluded the Millers had taken a surprise vacation, as they did often.

I began to gain suspicion as one day became two days in two days became four. On Tuesday, my birthday, I got a text from Julia asking if I heard from any of the Millers. She told me that she had plans to go shopping with Miss Miller the day before but she hadn't answered any of her texts or calls. That was when I noticed the newspapers piled up on the doorstep.

I knocked on the door, but there was no response.

In a perfect world, the Miller's would have been waiting at the door for me. The house would be decorated in my favourite shade of sapphire green. Randall, who rarely spoke to me, would hand me a hand written card with a meaningful message scribbled into it. The room would smell of the homemade strawberry cake that Mrs. Miller made once a year just for me. The kitchen and dining room would be neat and orderly like it always was and a banner with my name on it, would hang across the walkway. They would tell me that they loved me and that the whole thing was an innocent surprise.

In reality, when I opened the door, the house was silent. Dead silent. The house was decorated with splatters of red. Something else hung by a rope in the place of the Banner; the lifeless corpse of a man who wore a bright blue hat. A few feet away Randall ,laid in a dried puddle of blood. The room smelled of road kill. Broken glass was scattered across the kitchen and dining room floor and a trail of blood led upstairs. I should have stopped there.

The lovers, Patty and Ron were dead in each other's arms, throats slit nearly to the point of decapitation. Across the room I noticed Andy's arm, bloodied sticking out from under the bed. Nobody escaped.

That's when my memory gets foggy.

I was the one who found the Millers, rotting and lifeless. The cops said that the homeless man was the one who killed him. Apparently he served in Vietnam and had major PTSD from the war. He had suffered a severe mental break.

I don't really know what else to say." I whispered. The Doctor wrote something down in his notebook and asked me, "Anne, Why do you refer to your family as The Millers?"

I sat in silence for a while.

"It's easier to disassociate myself than to admit that I left my family 6 months ago to live with my friend. It's easier for the Miller's story to be someone else's tragedy. It's easier for the spattered blood to belong to people I barely knew. When I close my eyes at night I like to believe my family is somewhere far away. Maybe in a different world. You may think of it as denial but I- I am just an observer."

Highly Commended: A Starlet's Story

Caitlin Jones

How could I have known that one song would make me a monster. For a moment, I thought I caught a glimpse of myself, staring back at me in the mirror, but then my eyes adjusted and I realised it was that strange woman again, glaring at me with her perfect hair and angled eyebrows. Her hair is always flowing like she had been formed by the Gods themselves. Her eyes are always dark and smoky, her smile white as a bone. I suppose she is me, but I can't see how, not anymore.

When I used to write songs in my room, I wrote about the boys in my classes and the flowers in my garden, sometimes I cried when I wrote and sometimes, I wrote when I cried. Every word on the page was real, an emotion I had forged from my own heart and etched into the page. Every chord I played was played on my own heart strings, I belted from deep in my belly, deep in my soul.

Other people seemed to hear it too, they heard the tears rolling down my cheeks onto the page and saw the pen furiously scribbling in my eyes. They sang along, they cried along too. I felt it all; I felt their stares and cheers, I felt the salt sting my eyes as I looked into theirs, I felt the connection. I sang and I played and I cried and so did they. It turned out, among all of them was a swanky producer who had come down from the high clouds of New York City to see me sing and play and cry. He said he liked it, he said he could put me up there in the stars. I believed him, I believed I would see my face in the sky someday.

I kept writing my songs, just now my muses weren't the boys in my classes or the flowers outside, they were the crowds cheering my name, they were the dresses I wore to my first red carpets, they were the boys who liked those dresses. I liked it all. Nobody told me what to do, or told me anything at all. When I spotted my smile on a poster outside a venue, or on the middle page of a magazine, I smiled right back at her.

My mum stopped calling at some point and I never asked her why. The boys from my classes stopped texting me to say congratulations. My friends stopped sending pictures of the flowers they saw outside. I said, good riddance! What good are a few flowers when I can buy a hundred from the shop across the road, what good are boys when I can have any boy I like? My smiles were shinier now, though I struggled to even look at them when they popped up on the sides of buses in town.

The dresses got nicer, the flowers more expensive and the songs, the songs won prize after prize. First it was me and swanky Mr. New York, then there was three of us and then five. Now I don't even walk past that room, my time is better spent elsewhere. No more tears on pages or purple gel pens run down and chucked away. Sometimes, though, I look in the mirror and wish I could see that girl, the girl I would've been if that swanky man had never come across my little show. If my hair stayed short and my lips stayed small; I expect I would look just like my mother; sometimes I sit and try to picture her face now, all wrinkly, ripened by years of smiling and singing. Then again, she would never make it to the front page of Vouge. I would cry or shout, but it would only ruin my makeup. I wish I could just rip off my skin, scrub the dye from my hair and the peachy creams and velvet blushes from my face. I just don't understand it, why can I not be happy. Everyone wants to be like me, so why can't I? How much more will it take for me to be happy with myself, for myself to be me again. Instead, when I look at my reflection in a puddle outside my building or see my body plastered across a billboard, all I see is a stranger, someone I know but never really knew. Someone I wish I was.

Commended: The Fame Fairy

Hannah Green

Branches swayed to the rhythm of the wind and leaves fluttered to the ground like graceful butterflies as they watched the girl. The trees were nervous, sceptical. Celeste Raven was the youngest to make the climb and well aware of it. The creature next to her, with its pleading, purple eyes made a noise that sounded much like the tired huff of a human.

Armadillo's didn't normally look like Ernie did, official name Ernest. Celeste was also certain that they definitely did not have as much sass. Her parents had made him as a gift for her birthday some years ago. Her mother and father had specialised in creating animals, using sorcery and alchemy to form strange hybrids. One morning, Celeste had awoken to a group of walking fish in her room. She'd been so terrified that every morning after that she had kept a sharpened stick next to her bed, just in case she needed to fend off any monstrous morning trout.

"Just a little bit longer," Celeste murmured the words to Ernie but really she was saying them to herself, for the fame fairy's castle still seemed such a long way away. Her parents had tried to stop her, told her that she was being absurd but that conversation had only resulted in Celeste storming off, Ernie faithfully by her side, blowing raspberries at her parents. It is always rather convenient that in a coming of age story the wonderfully doting parents never seem to understand their child. They did not understand the way Celeste's dreams chased her through adoring crowds, they did not understand how every time she looked in the mirror she saw herself on a stage, a thousand eyes gazing up at her. So, a pouch of gold in her pocket and her heart set on the fame fairy's palace, Celeste began her journey. She had planned to leave Ernie back home; her perilous voyage was no place for an armadillo, but he had snuck his way into her satchel and Celeste was too far gone to return. Secretly, she was glad. She would never admit it but the thought of making the great trek to the palace alone was a chilling thought indeed.

The two of them had caught a ride on a boat with a kind old fisherman for only two golden pennies. Celeste had watched, teary-eyed, as home had gotten smaller and smaller until it was only a black dot upon the horizon. After reaching land, Celeste had graciously thanked the fisherman and been on her way, following her smeared, old map to the black wood. It had been a dark, tangled maze and the limbs of the thick, coiled trees had spread and twisted to form dark, overhead tunnels and

created secret paths. The dead branches that carpeted the floor had risen from death to grasp at Celeste's ankles like bony fingers. She had clung to Ernie like letting him go would be letting go of her life and the only thing that propelled her forward was the promise of that world she longed for. The world that threw roses at her feet and sung her song for centuries to come.

Her friends left offerings for when the fame fairy's servants came round to their village but for Celeste that was not enough. Only four dreamers had ever completed the journey, gotten to the top of that mountain and been personally blessed. One of them had become a world famous moonball player, one an acclaimed botanist, another became an actress on the world's biggest stages and the last an owner of a restaurant that people travelled far and wide to experience. The name Celeste Raven would not be forgotten.

Sighing from the blistering heat, Celeste pushed through a curtain of falling green vines. Her breath stopped.

Split, cracked and carved by the magic of nature, the rocks had created a path of shimmering pillars and arches. From high up on the summit of the mountain, there was a spectacular view of green meadows and streams like silver ribbons but it was another sight that Celeste was more interested in.

The grand, marble palace looked more like a temple than anything else with colossal pillars running up its length and turrets that spiralled up to reach the sky. The fame fairy was depicted along the frieze in various tales of greatness. It had well-kept gardens with fragrant flowers, evergreen trees and bushes bursting with splashes of bright orange and red.

"This is it, Ernie," and if armadillos could grin she was sure he was doing so.

The two of them made their way up the cobbled path, Celeste's heart beating wildly and pushing against her ribs as if begging to be let out. Did he know that she was here or should she announce herself?

Pride and faith in herself coursed through Celeste and with her newfound confidence, she pushed open the weighty palace doors.

She could not see his face for he was turned around, but his body was tall and almost feline with a silk, white dress draped across it. He omitted a glowing light and Celeste thought he was much grander than she had ever imagined he could be.

And then he was not.

Like the shedding of a strange, supernatural skin, the fame fairy twisted and contorted. It was a nightmare and Celeste begged to wake up. Suddenly, his smooth skin turned a bright, blistering, garish green and his dainty fingers broke and crunched, becoming hooked and jagged. Celeste had not realised that she had screamed until the fame.. thing, turned, bulging eyes the colour of nothing blinking once, blinking twice.

“You,” Celeste gulped hard, trying to dislodge the large lump that had formed in her throat, “You are a fraud.”

The goblin-like creature seethed, and then tutted, “Such a harsh word.”

Ernie cowered and curled himself around Celeste’s legs, “I do not understand,” Her brow furrowed, all her life she had looked up to the fairy that would grant her everything she had ever wanted, that would grant her fame and fortune but here he was, an imposter, “People give you their gold because they believe that you will grant them their dreams, stardom, but you are not real.”

“The world does not want something real, it wants something to believe in, to have hope for,” There was no malice in his voice, he was not ridiculing her, only telling his truth. If Celeste had not been so heartbroken by the revelation of what he was she might have learnt something.

“It does not make sense. The ones that have been blessed by you, have all gone on to be the greatest this world has ever known,” Surely it could not be a coincidence? The green trickster did something Celeste never could have imagined and smiled, “They crossed the seven seas, traversed the darkest wood and conquered the tallest mountain. They did not acquire their fame because of me, but because they were determined enough to do all of those things for their dreams.”

Celeste thought on it, and it made sense. The journey to the fame fairy’s palace was an extortionately dangerous one, someone willing to die for their dream would surely reach the level of distinction that they so wished. Yet, she could not swallow that sour taste of betrayal that lingered. Celeste could not count all the little girls across the land that saved up their pocket money for him, to wish to be princesses or the most awarded knights in all the land.

The fame fairy was a hoax but he gave people across the world hope. Was that really so bad?

“You crossed the world’s most vicious creations and because of that you will get your fame, not because I gave it to you but because your very soul demands to be known.”

She had been on the adventure of a lifetime and not two minutes ago she thought it all for nothing – perhaps not. Maybe the hands of fate had drawn her here so that she could write a new future.

“Every penny that the people of this world have handed to you for their dreams you will give back.”

He opened his mouth as if to argue but Celeste held up a hand, “I will tell no one of your façade if you donate your riches,” She gestured to the golden palace around her, “The fame fairy will give more than just the hope of stardom, he will grant the means to reach it.”

Ernie made a noise of agreement and wagged his tail.

The creature’s voice was quiet but Celeste heard it still, “Your dream will be yours.” In her heart she knew it was true, the fame fairy was right. Her soul did demand to be known – the world would hear her voice.

Commended: The Loudest Screams

Yamini Ramesh

You came to life in my arms, between the brown pages, blossoming from the curve of your letters and speaking to me with every flip of the page.

It's raining, and it's dark. Here I am, sitting by the windowsill, reading in the constant blaze of lightning above. I refuse to turn on my bulbs. You come more alive in the dark than in the light. The bright sunlight in the park doesn't spark you to life. The cold and dark corner of my bedroom with the dim light springs you to life. "Who are you?" I constantly wonder. I should not. I got to see the inside of you. But who are you in person? What facade do you put on? What mask do you wear? What beautiful face belongs to this ocean of thoughts? What hands have written these letters and words? How do you write 'y' like it's a woman with curves? You may think I have memorized your every word. I have. But then why do I keep coming back to it? Because each time I read, I find a different meaning, a different angle, a different perspective, and a different story.

Your diary is my Bible.

'Hannei'.

You say you are named after the word 'reflection.'

But you don't reflect me. I don't see myself in you. I see everything; I am not in you. Everything I have never felt, everything I have never seen, everything I have never been, and everything I have never lived.

I open a page where you talk about the rain and start reading.

'It's a sad day today. The sky is weeping and screaming. One must know I'm an envious woman. I even envy the sky for its boldness to cry and scream like that. Everyone thinks I do not cry, but I do cry. A lot. But no one ever knows. I even want to scream, but my silence has always been my loudest scream. The rain is clearing, and the sky is turning orange. Twilight is coming. Orange is my favorite color. But none know. I remember when I was 13, I told my sister that orange was my favorite color. She laughed at me. She said orange is no one's favorite color. I showed her the warm glow of orange at twilight. Then she said, I should go read the Twilight books. And now I am 23, and ever since, my favorite color has always been everything but orange. The best part of Twilight is not the sky itself. But it is the

warmth that shines on the world below. The green leaves of the plants have never looked so alive. The dark tar of the roads has never looked so ablaze. The soft patterns of my brother's skin have never looked so beautiful. And I have never felt so happy. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm a sidekick in my own story.'

I don't remember falling asleep. But I remember the hard texture of your diary, lulling me into darkness.

"You are the story," I tell Hannei.

The next morning, I find myself sitting in between my mom and my sister, Anne. It's Saturday morning at my parent's place. Which means talking about everything under the sky and painting our nails with obnoxious colours for the ladies. My family and I are scattered across the four corners of New York. My parents remain in the north.

Every weekend, all of us find ourselves at home in the true north. I don't tell them about the diary. It felt too personal to tell them. But they notice something is on.

"Why is my girl so jumpy?" Mom asks me.

"Maybe she finally found someone who pulls her." Anne laughs.

I want to correct her that it is 'Something'. But I stay quiet and roll my eyes at them.

Anne takes a large bag from her room. When I say large, it is almost like a barrel. I clap my hands together. It is nail polish time! We take our time selecting colours.

Hannei's words ring in my head. I pluck out the only orange polish from the bag and show it to them.

"I officially declare that orange is my favourite colour!" I announce.

Mom raises an eyebrow because my taste goes like this: pink, purple, Barbie, and clueless.

Anne scoffs. She hates orange. "You are kidding me, Cass," she sneers.

The day goes on with Anne torturing me because I like the colour orange. This happened to Hannei because of her sister, and I won't let it happen to me again because of a sister.

The weekend moves away, and it's Monday morning. Once again, I find myself re-reading Hannei's diary instead of coding. Just like I have done every day of the past week. Coding is something I love, like how a neurosurgeon loves brains. But Hannei's diary is like an insight into one.

I opened a recent entry, just two days before I found her diary.

'I don't know what day it is today. I can't name it happy or sad. Today, one of the best things in my life happened. I got my dream job. Yeah, I'm pretty happy about that. But I look around, and no one is beside me to share it with me. None of my family members took it as a big deal. So what if it means working all days of the week? I love it, and I will do it. I'm trying not to cry. I really do try. But it hurts so bad. I was there for my sister when everyone told her not to attend her dream school. I'm not asking anyone to be there for me when I'm down. At least be with me when I'm fine. When I'm happy.

Mom just said, "I'm happy for you, darling," and cut the call. Well, my sister...? I don't want to talk about her. I'm never left alone, but I'm always lonely. It's so gloomy in the morning. It feels like even the universe is mocking me. Am I overthinking?'

I bite my lower lip until I draw blood. I can't imagine being this alone in my life. Thank God, I have people who are there whenever I need them.

There are about a hundred pages left to fill. As I skim through the pages blindly, one page has prints of some ink in between. I flip back, trying to find the page. At first, it seemed lost among the blank pages. But I flipped each page patiently. Was I hallucinating? No, I was pretty sure; I saw. And there it was. It was just four words. But it hit hard.

It read, Please find me, someone.

Don't ask me how I found her. But I do. And I text her.

'Hey?

Louisa here.

I found your diary.'

I don't know why I lied about my name. I honestly don't know. I wait for 5 minutes, 25 minutes, 33 minutes, 56 minutes, and 98 minutes until I'm reading her diary all over again.

I picked up her last entry and read it.

'Something is wrong. Today, my sister hurt me pretty badly, but it didn't hurt. It pricked deep but did not hurt. In my bathroom, there is a mirror that I cry to. Everyone has a mirror like that, right? I stared at my face, and hot, blotchy tears rolled down my eyes. But it did not hurt. I felt blank. More like empty. There are so many questions that I don't have answers to. I want answers. I want it to stop. I want everything to stop. I don't want this world. I don't want anything. I want silence. I want'

Her entries end there. Her last entry was not complete. She lost her diary before she could finish it.

In the 99th minute, a ping pierces the room.

I hastily unlocked my PC and read it.

'Hey, Louisa.

I'm so glad you could reach me.

Can we meet somewhere?'

'Of course, The Central Park?'

'Certainly. Would you like to meet me in an hour?'

'Sure, how do I recognize you?'

'I'll be in complete black?'

'Meet you soon.'

'You don't know how much this means.'

'I do know :).'

'Thank you.'

I run around the house in hysterics. Finally, I'm meeting her! I'll ask her to be my therapist.

I pull on my favourite clothes. Black boots. Pink tank top and purple skinny jeans. Custom made. You don't get purple jeans anywhere.

I take my car keys, and of course, Hannei's diary, and drive to Central Park. It's a dark day today. My wheels hit 80.

Hannei stands in the middle of Central Park, her back to me.

And just as she said, she's clad completely in black. She's wearing a black hat, black hoodie, black jeans, and black boots.

The dress looks quite familiar. I tap her shoulders, and she turns.

And I stand eye to eye with Anne.

Commended: Spotlight
Sarah Curless

I could always count on my sister. Until the day I needed her most.

A buzz of anticipation vibrated throughout the dressing room, infecting everyone in its path. From people meticulously perfecting their makeup to frantically smoothing down their hair. But I didn't have time to dwell on superficial matters of that sort, I had a mission. My eyes scanned the room like lasers, desperately trying to hunt down a spot of red hair amongst the sea of blondes. Gazing longingly at the door, I hoped that if I just stared hard enough, she would majestically appear. I could picture her clear as day in my mind, rushing through the door in her red leather jacket, midway through applying lipstick. "Sorry," she'd say breathlessly, "I'm here!" Instead, a cool empty breeze swept through the door.

Despite the hum of chatter, all I could seem to hear was the clock's methodical ticks. Like a grim reaper looming in the background, they reminded me of the limited time I had left. I hoped, by some miracle, that it may pause for a moment, but it only seemed to be slipping away like sand in an hourglass. All that remained was the deep pit in my stomach that expanded as the moment dawned in. But that twinge of anxiety shifted and took a new form. Fury. How could she have left me? My whole life I had been fed the lie that I had talent. "A real and rare gift," were my mum's words. I longed for it to be true, but it was all an illusion. Lucy was the real gift. I could pour my whole heart and soul into a song and she'd always be one step ahead of me. Besides, she was the one with the dream. The one with the voice sent from Heaven. Me? I was blindly strung along. Like a bird without its wings, I was nothing without her.

"15 MINUTES EVERYONE," a voice bellowed, "15 MINUTES!"

This sent a chain reaction of panic spiralling throughout the room. Like dominos falling, one by one each individual descended into meltdown mode. And amid the chaos, I gingerly slipped away. I understood that the one rule of climbing was to never look down, so why did I choose to disobey the one rule of performing?

Peeking through the curtains. My mistake hit me instantly like a stab through the stomach. I only wished I could erase the sight I saw. But it was too late. Ingrained into my memory like a scar was more people than I'd ever encountered in my lifetime. It was as though the entire human population was herded into an arena, like pigs crammed in a pen. Each individual was so tiny that it was like looking down on

Earth from a plane. Tearing my gaze away, I retreated and flung myself against the safety of the wall, gasping for air. I felt it all at once. My body failing. Legs once sturdy melted into jelly, unable to keep me steady. Crystal-clear surroundings seemed to shift in and out of focus. Voices slipped out of my earshot until they were merely muffles. Apart from one, echoing in the background of my mind.

“Evie? Evie? Are you there?”

As if being catapulted out of water, the words became sharp and clear. Emerging from a blur of shapes was a woman presumably in her mid-thirties towering over me. Her piercing blue eyes stared down at me in confusion like I was a lost item swept up at sea.

“Evie,” she repeated impatiently, “You’re up soon.”

The reality of the situation snapped me out of my haze. Before I had the chance to think twice, words flew out of my mouth.

“I can’t do it,” I muttered weakly.

“What do you mean you can’t?” she gasped.

“I mean I can’t!” I snapped, stronger this time, “Okay?”

I half-expected her stern features to soften. For her to embrace me like a mother and reassure me that I didn’t have to do anything I was uncomfortable with. She’d handle me with care like a fragile child, which was what I felt like. Despite being a fully-fledged adult, mentally I was just a vulnerable, frightened infant still discovering how to navigate the world. But, of course, this was the real world.

Feelings didn’t matter here.

“Well, no, It’s not okay. There’s about a million, adoring, paying fans out there who have traveled for this. Oh, did I mention paying?”

“Well, I guess they’ll have to be disappointed then,” I shrugged. Despite the world spinning around me, I hurdled myself up from the floor. Flinging off my microphone, I did the only thing I was good at. Running away. Frantically, I began thrusting my things into bags, trying to mask the tears welling in my eyes.

All I craved at that moment was the safety of my home. No eyes on me. No expectations. Just having the permission to exist. But I couldn’t get away that easily. The woman, only seeming angrier by the second, stormed after me.

“What is this?” she persisted, casting a nervous glance at her watch, “What the hell has gotten into you?”

I’d learned from experience that the best way to deal with people was to pretend they didn’t exist. I didn’t so much as glance in her direction as I continued shoving items in my already overflowing bag. Flinging it over my shoulder, I dashed the door. But there, blocking my path, was the woman towering over me with her menacing stare. “Is this what I think it is?” she interrogated.

I looked at her stone-cold, dead in the eyes before pushing past and continuing my break for an exit. But she loomed behind me like a shadow, following me with a trail of chatter.

“It’s stage fright, isn’t it?”

Anger bubbles inside me like a volcano on the brink of eruption.

“Aha! It is, isn’t it? You know, out of everyone, I did not expect this from you. I’ve seen you up on that stage, you’re the most confident-”

“SHE’S NOT HERE!” I turned around and exploded. Once the spark in me was triggered there was nothing that could prevent it from bursting. I was met with a harrowing silence. Heads turned. People paused in the midst of applying lip gloss. The woman, who clearly hadn’t expected to evoke such a reaction, began awkwardly glancing around.

“My sister,” I elaborated, just below a whisper, “She’s not here.” I bowed my head in shame, painfully conscious of the eyes fixated on me.

Closing the vicinity between us, the woman placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Evie,” she sighed, in a sympathetic voice as though she was talking down to a child, “Your sister is-”

“I know,” I said, my voice on the verge of breaking, “My sister is dead.”

As soon as the words came out, I wanted to take them back. But it was like ripping off a band aid, I needed to carry on.

“I know it sounds stupid,” I continued, “And I’m going to seem crazy. But I see her. Whenever I sing, she’s right there beside me.”

Nodding slowly, she took a moment to try and comprehend the words that left my mouth. My mind latched on to the silence, tormenting me with thoughts of shame. I braced myself for impact. For her to look at me and tell me that I need professional help. That I’m deranged.

But instead, she gave a weak smile and said, “You’re not crazy.”

It's funny the value that we place on words. What amounted to a few random syllables made a whole world of difference. Because it was exactly what I needed to hear. For once in my life, I felt seen. Like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Like I could breathe. "I'm not?" I croaked, swallowing back the tears. "No. And I know it feels real, but all of those times you've been on that stage, it really has been you."

"You don't understand, I can't do it on my own."

"But you aren't on your own. She's with you, even if you can't see her. And you giving up would break her heart even more."

A voice rang out from afar, "Evie, you're up!"

"What do you say," the woman smiled, "Are you going to make her proud?" I nodded slowly. Then took a deep breath.

Before my mind could protest any longer, I took one weak foot in front of the other and stepped out on the stage. Bombarded by the roar of the crowd and the flashing of lights, I felt as though I was a clown at a circus.

But the second I took the plunge and opened my mouth, I felt the frequency in my heart. That was the moment I understood.

As long as I dared to sing, I'd never truly be alone.

Commended: The Mask
Giselle Tweeboom

Gas lamps cast flickering shadows on the cobblestone streets, their warm glow dancing across the worn paths. Leo trudged along, his footsteps echoing in the quiet night. With a resigned sigh, he kicked a loose stone down the deserted street, watching it skitter and bounce, a solitary echo of his own journey. Leo's head hung low in defeat, hands stuffed into the pockets of his tattered vest, as the evening chill swept into his bones. It had all been a joke, thinking that his dream could be anything more than that. The auditions, each one a glimmer of hope in a sea of uncertainty, all landed him at the familiar doorstep of rejection. Leo had poured his heart and soul into his craft, believing with an unwavering conviction that talent and perseverance could pave the way for success, but it wasn't enough. He had once been a renowned talent, famed for his uncanny ability to evoke great emotions from even the most unfeeling crowd. He indeed remembered those days of glittering popularity where everything felt in place. Until the day they moved on, his name fading like the dying embers of a forgotten fire. And now, all that remained was a hollow shell of what he once was, his spirit crumbling away with each failed audition.

With no clear destination in mind, Leo allowed his feet to carry him through the night. The thought of returning home to the miserable, dusty apartment and the bitter comfort of cheap wine held little appeal. And so he wandered, breathing in the musky air, still damp from the earlier downpour. His steps faltered, however, as he approached a familiar storefront, its windows aglow with soft light. Leo smiled. Edna's Antiquities stood proud, its extravagant costumes and props displayed at the storefront still as alluring and beautiful as the first day he laid eyes on them as a boy. It was here, amidst the many treasures, that Leo first glimpsed the magic of storytelling, kindling the flame of his passion.

His smile faded, however, as he caught his tragic reflection in the window—short, scruffy brown hair and sunken brown eyes. Leo sighed and glanced at the sparkling costumes again. He must be truly feeling sorry for himself, if he felt the need for a trip down memory lane. Sucking in a breath, he pushed the door open, a bell heralding his arrival. He was immediately hit with the heavy air of aged wood and musty velvet, mingling with the faint aroma of roses. Books, manuscripts, and accessories filled the shelves, but it was the racks of elaborate costumes that

captured Leo's heart, reminding him of the joy of becoming someone new in his younger days.

"Leo, darling, is that you?" came a melodious voice from the back of the shop. Leo turned to see Edna emerging from behind a heavy velvet curtain, her silver hair piled elegantly atop her head, eyes sparkling with warmth and familiarity. "Edna," Leo greeted her with a weak smile, feeling self-conscious under her perceptive gaze. "My dear boy, what brings you here on such a dreary night?" Edna asked, her voice filled with genuine concern. Leo shrugged, not unsure how to respond. "Just... seeking solace, I suppose." Edna nodded knowingly, her lips curling into a sympathetic smile. "Well, you know you're always welcome here. The costumes did always seem to cheer you up." She added with a wink. Leo managed a grateful smile in return, though he doubted anything could truly lift the heavy weight from his heart.

It was then that his gaze fell upon an unusual object nestled amongst a stack of crates in the corner of the shop. A mask, its surface adorned with intricate patterns and symbols, seemed to shimmer in the dim light. Leo felt drawn to it, his fingers itching to reach out and touch its smooth surface. As Leo approached it, he noticed a small Latin inscription engraved on the box beside the mask: "Fortuna audaces iuvat". The beautiful carvings of the mask had great similarity to those created for the Lumiere Theatre, the most prestigious theatre in the country. It had been Leo's dream to perform amongst the greatest thespians, but alas, like everything else in his life, that dream never came to fruition. Taking the mask with him, his mouth curved at the formation of an idea. Walking to the nearby mirror, he secured the mask on his face, his features now mostly obscured by the intricate details. His smile broadened. Trying on costumes had always been a favourite pastime. It erased the misery of his life, and allowed him to, even just for a moment, become someone new.

Leo began to turn to Edna, asking for the mask's origins, when it hit him. A surge of energy coursing through his veins like liquid fire. The world shifted around him, colours swirling into a kaleidoscope of brilliance and sound, merging into a symphony of whispered promises. When the sensation faded, Leo found himself on the floor, panting slightly, as if he was out of breath. With fumbling fingers, he made to undo the clasp, but quickly found it to be missing. Just as panic began to rise in

his chest, however, Leo jolted by a loud bang at the door. He rushed to the door, throwing it open to reveal a scene straight out of his wildest dreams. A swarm of paparazzi and adoring fans crowded the streets, their voices raised in a cacophony of cheers and chants. Leo's heart pounded with a mixture of disbelief and exhilaration. Was this real?

Could it be possible that the simple act of donning a mysterious mask had transformed his life? His mind raced with questions, but the roaring crowd outside offered no answers, only the intoxicating rush of adoration. Caught in the whirlwind of the moment, Leo hesitated only briefly before making a decision. With a sense of reckless abandon, he stepped out into the throng of admirers, the mask now an inseparable part of his identity. The cheers swelled to a deafening crescendo as he raised his arms in triumph, basking in the glow of newfound fame.

Leo, now dubbed the Masked Celebrity, found himself swept up in a whirlwind of glitzy events, red carpet premieres, and lucrative endorsement deals. It was a life he had only ever dreamed of, and now it was his reality. Days blurred into nights as Leo embraced the high life, his masked persona becoming synonymous with glamour and intrigue. Yet, at the edges of his consciousness, a sense of unease gnawed at him. But the allure of fame was a powerful force, and Leo found himself unable, or perhaps unwilling, to heed the warning bells sounding within him.

It wasn't until a chance encounter with Edna that Leo realised the gravity of the situation. He had been walking the same barren streets as that day, so many nights ago, when he bumped into her, exiting the store. Slightly buzzed, and clutching a champagne bottle, Leo smiled at the old woman, his mind in a drunk haze. But Edna didn't return the smile.

"My dear boy, what have you done?" she asked, a hand clutching at her heart.

Striding towards him with a mixture of concern and disappointment etched on her face, Edna's words sent a shiver down Leo's spine. His mind reeled as he struggled to reconcile the woman before him with his own memories, buried deep. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to place her in his memory, as if a thick fog had descended, obscuring the truth. It was then that he realised the true cost of his newfound fame. In his quest for validation and recognition, he had willingly sacrificed his identity, losing sight of who he truly was beneath the mask. Desperate for clarity, Leo turned

to Edna, her unwavering gaze piercing through the facade he had so meticulously constructed. With gentle yet firm hands, she reached out and began to untangle the mask from his weary soul, her face a guide back towards himself. Freed from the mask, Leo gasped as a sense of hollowness washed over him once more. Staring into Edna's eyes, he knew that he was the Masked Celebrity no longer.

Later that evening, sitting by the fountain's edge—mask free—Leo held his face in his hands. It appeared as though the Masked Celebrity had been forgotten by the public. Blowing out a breath, Leo looked towards the sky. Not a single star shimmered. A solitary tear traced its path down his cheek as he remembered Edna's sad voice. "Was it worth it?" she had whispered. The unfortunate truth was that, for Leo, it had indeed been worth it. The fleeting smiles, the adoration, the love of the crowds had all been worth it. For even scraps of attention for who we are not, feels better than a mass rejection of who we are. And therein lies the tragedy of fame.

Commended: La Petite Fleur

Sieun You

“Vincent!” I called out, running back from the track meeting. I first met Vincent in an alley in the Bronx. We were both around six when my situation was far better than it is now: both my mother and father were office workers who had decent jobs.

Vincent, on the other hand, was an orphan who was living only to survive. He had a slim figure and lived among the rats in the alleyways of New York. During my first time visiting the Bronx, I got separated from my parents, and it was he who helped me find them.

On October 17, 1966, my parents were on their date to celebrate their eighth wedding anniversary. Aspiring to be a chef when I grow up, I suggested making dinner for them. Because it was their ‘special day,’ they coldly rejected my offer. That same night, they were caught up in one of New York’s devastating fire incidents. Having no other family willing to take me in, I returned to where I met Vincent and spent my days with him.

Even though we couldn’t afford textbooks, we still attended middle and high school. Vincent, being an excellent chef, even made our high school’s first cooking club. He could create Michelin Star-worthy meals with leftover fish and fire fueled by newspapers.

“Vincent, I think I’m going to be a chef,” I said, trying to catch my breath. He stared at me with awe as the small hail pellets, like needles, pierced our skin in the cold winter weather.

To be frank, despite being homeless, I never gave up the thought of being a chef. Before being an orphan, I attended culinary classes. By no means can I forget the gentle staccato rhythm of the knife as the sleek metal gleams back at me or the whispers of the steam from the saucepan, cooking the pasta—it was home to me. Huddling closer to the crackling fire in the metal container, Vincent mutters back, “You don’t even have money to feed yourself. How can you afford to go to culinary school?”

“Who said you need a degree for cooking?” I laughed.

“Mr. Jenkins down the street said so – hat part-timer at the gas station?” Vincent uttered irritably.

“Yeah, and he’s wrong. There are so many chefs worldwide! There must be at least one chef who didn’t go to school to learn how to cook. Even if there isn’t—”

“You’ll be the first one to be one?” Vincent scoffed, “If you can be a chef, so can I.”
“Let’s both be head chefs. We can open a restaurant together!” I cheered excitedly.
“No, Rudy, I can be the head chef, and you can be my sous chef,” teased Vincent.
On November 6, 1989, after graduating from culinary school and receiving a scholarship, I opened a restaurant in New York, while Vincent moved to France and opened a restaurant a few years before me. Upon my restaurant’s opening, customers rushed in, and seats were booked weeks in advance. It was a small omakase restaurant on the outskirts of Brooklyn. A few months later, however, it was a rare sight to see people even remotely in the vicinity of the restaurant, let alone inside. As the sound of the clock ticking filled the room, my career as a chef came to an end until I contacted Vincent again.

I cautiously dialed the phone number Vincent gave me before he left. As my career was at its lowest point, Vincent was my last strand of hope.

“Bonjour, qui est-ce?” answered a man with a deep voice.

“Sorry, is this not Vincent?” I asked the man.

“Rudy?”

“Oh, Vincent...I know it’s been a while...How have you been? I couldn’t even recognize your voice.”

“Rudy! What took you so long to call me? There’s a reason why I gave you my number,” chuckled Vincent.

“Haha, yeah, sorry,” I laughed nervously. “You know...I know it’s sudden, but my restaurant didn’t go so well. Could I work under you in any way?”

Seconds felt like minutes as I pursed my lips, hoping for any kind of response.

“Is that a question? You were always welcome here and still are!” answered Vincent.

After talking with Vincent for a few hours, I ended the call with tears welling up in my eyes, moved by my friend’s consideration. La Petite Fleur was the name of his restaurant. He offered me a job there and insisted on paying for my ticket to France.

While waiting for Vincent to pick me up, I bought one of the newspapers translated into English. I read the top headlines: La Petite Fleur Sprouts In Europe. Under was Vincent in front of his restaurant. A sense of hollowness resonated within me.

Although Vincent was older than me, I started cooking when I was young, while he was only mildly good at it during high school. I wanted to be the chef first, but here I was, sitting on a bird-dropping stained bench, waiting for my soon-to-be boss.

A Rolls-Royce Corniche pulled up in front of me. As the car's windows rolled down, Vincent was sitting in the driver's seat, indicating I should go in his car. Upon arriving at his bistro, I stood in the kitchen as the aroma of potato soup tenderly caressed me. Cooks of different sizes and genders conducted an orchestra of sizzling pans and hissing oil.

"You're lucky my last sous chef left me," said Vincent. "I told you you're going to be my sous chef one day!"

"...yeah," I say through gritted teeth. "Can't wait to work tomorrow."

That night, when Vincent closed the bistro, interviewers were waiting for him. As I stood behind Vincent, waiting for him to finish his interview, I heard one of the interviewers ask: "Is he famous too?" I turned to where the voice came from. It was that feeling again.

Vincent gave me the keys to his apartment near the bistro. More like a mansion than an apartment, his house was fully furnished with... This life and luxury could have been mine.

My alarm rang at 5 am. I reached the restaurant through the back door and noticed Vincent prepping vegetables.

"Morning, Vincent," I called out.

"Good Morning Rudy. Did you get a chance to see the chef's guide I gave you?"

Vincent remarked as he stood up with his beaming smile.

"What guide?" I asked, puzzled.

"The one I gave you."

"No... You didn't."

Vincent went to his desk and grabbed a thick book with big splotches of tomato sauce on one side and an oil stain on the other. Something about this book seemed oddly familiar, but I could not put my finger on it. Is he looking down on me?

"Sorry Rudy, I must've forgotten. Can you read this before I open so we can be ready to go?" asked Vincent.

"Yeah, that's fine for me. I had my own restaurant after all, haha," I muttered.

The kitchen looked different today: unlike yesterday, it had a sense of hushed stillness in the kitchen with hints of lettuce and carrots lingering in the air. I circled each station, transporting me to simpler times in the kitchen. Moments after its opening, the restaurant was packed with customers, more than I had ever seen. With orders flying from left to right, it was hard to track each one. The fact that Vincent

gave me the chef's guide the first day I was going to work didn't help. The melodic beats from the kitchen, however, compensated the hardships. Thirty minutes after the restaurant opened, Vincent pulled me aside.

"Sorry, Rudy," Vincent started. "It's really my fault that I forgot, but I think if you read the guide more tonight, you will be ready tomorrow. For now, could you help out the waiters instead?"

Vincent didn't believe me or my talent for cooking. He was from the slums while I attended professional classes and college. Dejected, I simply replied, "No."

Before I could make my way out of the kitchen, Vincent began to speak again. "Your restaurant... You seemed far too busy to notice, but I actually came once. I thought your dishes were...distinctive, but they lacked finesse. Don't take it personally, but I couldn't trust you with my business initially, so I left the same guide at your restaurant next to my check that day. Look familiar, right?"

For a man so low to be above me, to insult not only me but my restaurant, my cooking? I could not watch. I could, however, watch him burn.

That same day, after the shops closed and everyone left, I locked Vincent in the freezer. Pouring gasoline all over the kitchen floor, I felt like the kitchen was home once more. First, my parents, now Vincent. Both dismissed my talent and suffered the consequences.

Category: Poems

1st Place: An t-Eilean Sgitheanach Martha Blue

Blue Skye gathers blue sea, yet remains itself,
whose outer world of widest skies and wider sea-scapes
are arcs and sweeps of fragmented stone and sapphire waters,
whose moors are as much home to curlew and lapwing as to machair grass,
whose cliffs and bluffs are territory to butter-tinted gannet, melancholy-grey gugas,
dappled fulmars, blackest storm petrels and brilliant-white-jet-black sea eagles
whose cry above red-dearg hues of Bealach na Sgairde slopes is so vertical
that soil cannot grip it.

Salt-spattered beaches and wind-ploughed trees are proof of harshest fragilities:
Quiraing, Storr, Prison, Needle - Pleistocene bastions of Triassic sediment and Mafic
sills -
stone sharp enough to pierce skies and blacker-than-night oceanic squalls,
and fluorescent with slime and wet and moss in patches scraped
against basaltic boulders crumbling into twisted, fantastic stone sculptures.

Skye, Eilean of extremes - mountainous Cuillins - colossal monoliths and pillars
beyond Bla Bheinn, the blue mountain, offering glazed and hazed glimpses
of the Outer Hebrides, where Hirta is grinding away into the surf-salted sea,
and microcosmic sheep and bones and stones, whose final-stepping stone
is Stac an Armin - *cruach*, warrior stac, fighting the sea in matchless futile rage.

Ramasaig - *raven's bay*, Annishadder - *eagle's place*,
shelters for birds from storms, sea-bound remnants of the air,
once wedged into broken crofts that remain in petrified ruin
like the shattered families, left blank, cleared through precipice
and eruptions of isolation to cling to their unmapped spirits.

Villages are now where tourists sleep, land is farms for cattle or indifferent sheep -

industrialised Skye, an island bridged between sea and scape, no longer

Camus Tianavaig - *bay of refuge* -

but more car parks, laybys, caravan parks, quarries and helter-skelter roads to scar the land, where continuous past becomes continuous present.

2nd Place: The Fame He Wants To Forget

Avishi Gurnani

twists turns taps. his feet
dizzily fast as he conjures up a rhythm. every beat a resounding
thump in the hollow hallway.
clinks litter the ground beneath his
feet but he ignores them, his
eyes closed hands moving of their own accord. lost,
to the music. people stop and
stare. unblinking. at the show of passion and energy and love.
never mind the fact that his eyes are
closed and it is almost as if he
is alone.
the whispers grow louder and now slowly they
are louder than the music. demanding his attention. then
the song finishes. his eyes open.
and he walks away. later he will come back. but only after nobody
in the hallway remembers. because it is
then he has peace and he has quiet. alone, in a crowded hallway. they
will all forget soon. they always do. and he will
keep playing his music, twisting turning
tapping without a care.

3rd Place: Illustrious, famed manatee (or not)

Ada Dawson

manatee did not worry about getting her body ready for the beach. instead, she hollered at the beach 'are you ready for ME?'

the sea lowered his sunglasses, smiled and said 'you betcha baby'

manatee stopped trying to please others with her perfect body, because what they really all fell in love with was her imperfect soul.

manatee swam past a big shiny thing. 'who dis ?' she hollered.

having had so many different bodies since she was born- growing, shrinking, young thing, ageing- she did not recognise herself.

the sea smiled again and said 'that's my baby! i've loved her always'

manatee sat alone on the beach. the sea called out 'all those years i waited! i wrote often to tell you i loved you.

'i didn't get the letters!' cried manatee,

'maybe they got wet' the sea guffawed.

and in she went to the whoops of the gulls and the waves caress.

when they acted like she was invisible, manatee lifted her chin and hollered 'here i am! this is me!'

the sea roared in approval, 'they got nothin' on my baby!'

Highly Commended: CÚ CHULAINN
Aurora Blue

Sétantae, son of Súaltain, Of Deichtire, sister of Cochubur.

Sétantae, Warrior of Ulster, of the Uladh, Hound of Culain,
ire of the Connacht.

You were reared at Airgdech in May Muirthemni;

You heard of the fame of the fifty Boys at Emuin Machae.

Your mother warned you not to go, but through your eagerness to play,

You ignored her and won your fame. Your war anger, ríastartha, came upon

You and you defeated the fifty at Emuin Machae.

Your uncle Conchubur invited you to Culain's feast.

But he forgot you were coming, and so his hound attacked you.

With your ball and your hurley you fought him. Your hands wound

around his throat, and you struck him against a pillar until each limb had fallen apart.

Glad you lived and were not killed, Culain mourned and lamented the loss

of his hound, guarder of his flock and family. So Sétantae became

Cú chulaind – hound of Culain. You guarded his flocks.

Cú chulainn, Warrior of Cúige Uladh, you chose fame over length of life.

Heir of Conchubur, you unknowingly killed your son; when dying he revealed

his name – Connlaí. Agonized, you wept.

Cú chulaind, husband of Emer, father of Connlaí, man of the Uladh. You fought

Trc, but through the power of the posthumous children of Calatin, your strength
gave.

You ignored signs of your encroaching death, Cuchulainn, son of Súaltain,

Warrior of Conchubur. Your horse cried tears of blood. Your armour

was washed in the river – presage of doom.

Wounded and weak, dying, you tied yourself upright to a pillar.

You would die erect and honourably. Badb, in the form of a raven, perched upon
your

shoulder, drank your blood – all knew of your death.

Cuchulainn, son of Súaltain and of Deichtire, sister of Conchubur.

Warrior of the Ulaid and of Cúige Uladh. Ire of the Connacht and of Trc.

The Hound of Culain.

Highly Commended: Shadows or Spotlights

Emma Deacon

To be in the shadows
To live in the background constantly
But I wish
That fame has always been a part of my life
It's the truth
Everywhere I go people stop out of recognition
How I wish that was me
Instead I'm forced to think
That I'm the girl hidden behind the curtain
The person no one recognises
How I long for that life of
parties and red carpet events
Whoever wanted my lifestyle of
school discos and fast food as a treat
I always dreamed of
Celebrities, sports cars and private pools
A life that never stops
How I would trade my fate of
Just being a face with no name
How I would swap places for
paparazzi following my every step
But I don't want to struggle every day
Have everything handed to me
Some people say I'm lucky that I will
never be remembered for my faults
But that's nothing compared to
The thing everyone wants
To be in the spotlight

(read back up to the top)

Highly Commended: Echoes of Adulation

Akshay Rajaraman

Once bathed in light, a comet's blazing tail,
A name on tongues, a legend whispered, hailed.
Entranced faces, a symphony of cheers,
A thousand echoes, drowning out all fears.

But fame's a meteor, streaking through the night,
Its brilliance blinding, yet consumed by light.
Applause, a drug, leaves cravings in its wake,
A loneliness that whispers doubt awake.

Mirrors reflect a stranger, painted bright,
Lost in the spotlight, shrouded from the light.
Friends turn to echoes, voices faint and far,
Love grows suspicious, veiled by gilded scars.

The fleeting warmth, a pyre's diminishing glow,
The embers settle, leaving dust below.
Forgotten whispers, memories turned cold,
The cage of expectations, now empty, unsold.

Yet in the hush where shadows softly creep,
A chance to breathe, where authenticity sleeps.
Beyond the stage, the masks and costumes shed,
A human heart rediscovers where it tread.

For fame's a loan, not given to possess,
A borrowed brilliance, destined to digress.
True value lies in what the soul holds dear,
Not in the echoes, but the life held clear.

So let it fade, that fleeting, fickle flame,

Embrace the quiet whispers of your name.
For in the darkness, stars more genuinely shine,
When I'm unburdened by the weight of what was mine.

Commended: The Imperfect Flight of Fame

Lydia Pannett

Fame seems to vanish as fast
As the faint tracks of a thrush
Fade from the thawing snow
Layers of pearly icing slowly enveloping
The fleeting brevity highlighted clear

What is fame? When the thrush's wing twists
Fragile body falling like an angel from heaven
Heaven unreachable, intangible to most;
That painful state of bliss
This is fame, slipping away agonisingly

Plummeting, pivoting and pitching
Down into an abyss, anonymity weighing heavily
Feathers failing, dropping dangerously
Spiralling towards obscurity
Body on the ground, fresh wounds glistening

Fame a high path to find again
She fumbles, tries to soar once more
But her wing dragging in the wind
Thwarts her motion towards flight
Still broken, sore yet healing

Now the thrush flies high and away
Nor do her scars hold her back
An ebb and flow of opinion
A rising reputation, a star in the ascendant
The imperfect flight to fame

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 30 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

