

NEW WORLD



The 15th Elmbridge Literary
Competition 2019/2020

Winning and Highly Commended
Entries
14-18 Category

The 15th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2019/20

NEW WORLD

Whether the first day at school, the start of a new job, the tenuous steps into a new life or a strange landscape of the imagination, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower, this year's Elmbridge Literary Competition was looking for short stories and poems that explored new worlds.

Now in its 15th year and following the success of 2018's 'A Shiver Down the Spine', The Elmbridge Literary Competition was opening its entry criteria to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, it was open to all ages. Previous Competitions explored the following 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

Category: 14-18 Years; Short Stories

1st Place: Run

by Olivia Burgess

We have one chance.

But one chance is all we need.

The plan is set: at midnight, we run. Scurry, hasten, bound, whatever you want to call it. The only message to remember is to run. At least that's what they tell me.

It is an evening of last goodbyes, and savoured hugs. The last meal in our home. My little duffle bag by the door tentatively waits.

I kiss the floor as I say my prayers. It tastes of memories.

I go to bed dreaming of what we will find in our new home.

So this is how it goes.

The chilling gunfire that greets every morning, and the silence that follows.

My mother opens the door- and I swear I can see my grandmother's ghost waving goodbye-

And we're off.

Run

Run

Running for ages and ages, kicking up dust, passing the road where we used to play, passing school, passing my best friend's house, passing time, what is the time...

And there's shouts and screams, look around and there's a man holding a gun but my mother hauls me into a van-

A stray gunshot fires. It rips through my veins as if I were shot myself.

It's as simple as that...we leave our home behind. As if it never existed, as if I didn't care.

Out the window, I see desert sand. My mother sleeps for what seems like years.

A stranger passes around a can of fish gunk. I don't eat any. My mother offers to brush my hair with her fingers. I don't let her.

Stranger One asks me my name. I don't tell them.

Stranger Two offers me water. I don't have any.

Stranger Three asks where I'm from. I don't say a word.

Decades pass. My sunny skies back home cloud with thoughts.

Nightmares come in fitful patterns: my grandmother cries for us to return home. What a night it was...

They came for us in the middle of the night. They told us my father was a traitor, and we would have to pay for his mistakes. My mother hides me in her wardrobe. Grandmother grabs something sharp. There's glass smashing and painful cries...a whimper like an injured dog, thumping of the stairs. I run to the landing, bash my knees on the clump of plaster bashed by a bat, or a gun. Outside. Sky as black as the masks they are wearing. Stars twinkle gently. If it wasn't for them, it would be a beautiful night. Trees mutter their condolences, wind through my fingers...

Mother throws me back into the house, screaming horrors in my face. Grandmother is somewhere on the path. She chants prayers, praises, thanking for her life, her gratefulness to have Mother, and me, and our house, and her happiness. Until they

kick her and she cries out one more time. And the memory fades, as my Grandmother fades before me, holding my hand. Nature watches down. What a beautiful night it is...

We arrive at the border. Nobody comes to check the back of the van.

My mother offers me a hug. I take it.

Three days later we stumble onto new ground. I absorb the sunlight I have dearly missed.

We eat dinner in a house, a safe, warm house.

I don't kiss the floor as I say my prayers. It is someone else's home. Where is our home now?

My mother showers me with water and happiness.

"We are safe, my precious girl," she says in her sad voice.

The people look at us. It is our language, our normal world, and now it is their alien speak.

They chat to themselves, talking in tongues, milestones for me.

They say a name: "Sadie."

That's my new name, in their language. Where is mine? Can I thank them in my own words?

It seems as though my words are gone forever, encased in my duffle bag.

At night Mother curls into me, her arms trapping me in a maze of love. I watch her soft breaths, the steady rhythm, so at peace in a time of such crisis.

For the first time in a while, I get a full night's sleep without worrying about anything.

We have to leave.

We have to do more running.

Mother breaks this news to me as the nice strangers give us a breakfast of food I've never seen before. I'm afraid it's the last safe meal I'll ever have.

So this is how it goes:

We run to the coast, with the help of strangers. They breathe their language into their hugs, their hearts beating, their well wishes pressed into that delicious meal, the last safe meal ever. I see the sea for the first time, a vast block of blue, shimmering wave after wave pinned back by frothy foam, like the stray dogs used to have down our road. If it wasn't for what we had to do today, it would be a beautiful day.

But the blue is invaded by a storm of orange life jackets littered on blank dinghies. People with the same sad eyes and voice as my mother. Is this escape?

And that's where the days become sparse and unmemorable:

I see a fish skimming by- more freedom than I'll ever have.

A dinghy goes down, catching on a sharp rock.

I can't remember when I felt my lungs take a full breath.

Seawater tickles my tongue.

I think it is my birthday. Mother doesn't notice.

Finally, we crash onto the beach, counting who's survived. But where do we go now?

It seems like our new home is sand and rocks and blank dinghies.

There is no flurry of excitement, nor any happiness to be alive.

Where do we go to?

People lead us into the city, down alleyways, so nobody sees us. We collect newspapers and cardboard, bricks for pillows, rags for blankets. Mother holds me close.

One day I am sent out to hunt for food. A man comes up to me and takes my picture. The flash of his camera lingers long after he's gone.

That night, I am on the newspaper we sleep on.

People spot me in the streets, shoving newspapers in my face. Sometimes we don't eat for days, only drink the dirty rainwater that fills the pipes.

But it's the final time...

Someone in the street sees me walking with Mother. She touches my hand, ruffles my hair. She talks to my mother through another woman, who sounds like us, but too soon it's over and we're led into a fancy building, and I'm not sure if I'm allowed my feet on the carpet as it's so fluffy and nice-

So this is how it goes:

The woman feeds us with lovely dishes, and I want to invite the others up here. Where are they? Can we give this to them? Mother shushes me when I try to protest.

I shower and there are new clothes. I cry. Why is she caring for us?

But through the other woman she explains that we're safe and we're going to get a home, and she's just going to ask us some questions.

I kiss the floor when I say my prayers. It tastes of happiness, and safety.

My time with a refugee- the children of the streets

How a young girl found her way from Iraq to France

As a surplus of refugees from war-torn countries continues to rise, we can only watch and hope if they survive. By holing up in the back of vehicles, boarding dangerous rafts and escaping their ravaged homes, several thousands of people are still coming in the masses, looking for a home.

You may have heard of the recent 'refugee girl' who captured the attention of the country after being pictured on newspapers nationwide. If you haven't, the picture depicts her arriving on the shores of France after surviving the treacherous journey of making it across the seas. She is dirty, and looking for food. And I couldn't help but think about how lucky we are.

So I felt (in honour of this poor little girl) to pack up and get myself over to France, with, through the help of a translator, a chance I could find her. Maybe I could ensure her safety.

It was in a hotel, in which she looked ecstatic to be in. Her face when I gave her some fresh clothes melted my heart. Slowly, through broken sentences from the translator, I discovered her story...

Her name is Sadie, from Iraq. Her father is missing in action, her grandmother died, her mother by her side. They had to leave after her Mother's growing concern. They don't know where they're going next.

And I watch Sadie's face as she tells her story; how she ran all the way here, ran away from her home with seemingly no fear. It amazes me. I promise her she is going to be safe.

And that is how it went.

2nd Place: When I Saw Myself As Katie

by Jessica Treves

Today I crossed a border. Throughout my career as a neurosurgeon, I've observed the crossing of countless borders - those between life and death, despair and elation. Up until now the crossroads patients were confronted by, invaluable choices that were no longer in the hands of an omniscient surgeon, came to me as a relief. The knowledge that the imminent result was no longer a by-product of my actions was always followed by repose. Personally, choices have come to me as a burden - choices which haunt me and sit on my left shoulder, a crushing weight during the drive home in the twilight hours. This momentary release of control, handing the responsibility over to the patient, always came as a consolation.

Today my choices will make or break me. My choices today are not to the detriment of a patient whom my mind has placed behind a glass screen, vulnerable but ultimately separate from me. My choices today are to my detriment. I realise now that the crossroads I allowed myself to view from an external perspective are not simply a junction on a road but instead the deciding moment of somebody's life. Medical paternalism has become obsolete practice, with more focus on respecting the wishes of the patient. Often this allowed me to step back as the decision-maker, to present the options as a spectator. Detached. Sure, this necessary separation can be considered inhumane, a violation of the common humanity which some may say should form the basis for a healthcare system, and I've received criticism from my colleagues. However, what would attachment mean for me, confronted with the harshest realities of death and suffering daily? By this principle, I've kept my distance, even the most pitiful patients being locked away,

tucked into a box with the rest of my past successes and failures.

I looked up to glance at the neurologist sitting behind a desk much like mine: a mahogany surface barely visible beneath scattered documents and files, imposing to the clueless spectator. My eyes rested upon the woman sitting behind the desk, kind features hardened by the clinical white coat and grooves around her eyes. I was sitting in the seat of a patient; the rigidity of it came as a surprise.

“I do believe it’s imperative you make a decision. The faster we can operate the greater the chances of complete removal.” The consultant’s voice betrayed her. While her gaze conveyed an unmistakable strain, she was young. Despite the circumstances, I smiled faintly in recognition of what she was doing. I too would embellish my language, my erudite affectation seemingly placing me far above the anxious patients, to avoid the level interaction that can be so emotionally jarring. The consultant, who was yet to tell me her name, stared pointedly at the enlarged CT image. The meningioma at the base of my skull was benign, but by no means harmless. “Of course, surgery entails the risk of stroke, infection, internal bleeding...” the litany of complications continued, the monotony of the consultant’s voice starting to perturb me. Was this what I sounded like, reciting a list of fatal complications to the unsettled patient?

My response to the consultant’s monologue was that which I liked to hear the least as a surgeon: “Well what would you do?” As predicted, the neurosurgeon appeared disconcerted by this question, for obvious reasons. Her relief at having me make the decision was very much short-lived, as I handed the weight back over to her, watching as she formulated a careful

response, albeit one heard by countless other patients sitting in the chair I shifted in.

“I can’t tell you, it’s entirely up to you. Of course, surgery includes obvious complications, while the continued growth of the tumour can be equally detrimental.” Her response cut to the bone, and not because I was shocked. Quite the contrary. Her response was no different from the way I would have responded, in an attempt to console a patient desperate for some guidance regarding their meningioma. Perhaps this is what shifted my paradigm. From this point onwards, my career as a neurosurgeon became less about the anatomy of the human laying underneath the drape, but instead the fact that the human being underneath the drape was fragile, somebody’s *raison d’être*. As achingly human as you and I, simply emaciated by their sudden lurch towards the inevitable mortality that awaits all of us. That April morning I crossed into a new world, sat on the other side of the doctor’s desk to be the recipient of the grim medical recitation rather than the deliverer.

My new world was a strange collision of the two worlds I had so wished to previously separate. My personal life and career started to merge, my patients beginning to take human form to me, no longer fitting into the box where I tried to enclose all former demons. Instead, these ghosts began to follow me, drifting through my house with increased ferocity. While my headaches worsened and my stutter began to impede communication with my perioperative nurse, I persisted, driven to save patients with a different form of tenacity altogether.

First on my operating list this morning was a young woman, Katie. I entered the theatre that had become the most familiar part of my life after a 17-year career in neurosurgery. Even after a failed marriage and the loss of my personal life to a career

that was so all-consuming, the bright white lights in Theatre 4 continued to shed light on some of the greatest mysteries of the human brain. And so I created an incision in her skull, removing a part of the skull and then using my surgical microscope for an enlarged view of Katie's tumour and the surrounding region. I was told that removing all of the tumour would be a difficult endeavour, however I found I was satisfied with my results after using my instruments to suction the tumour off the brainstem, and left my registrar to close up. I walked out of theatre feeling afflicted. Again, having operated on a patient with a condition all too similar to mine, I was reminded of the separation I maintained that once felt like nothing more than a survival tactic, a coping mechanism. The chasm between the vulnerable and their physicians, elevated by medical jargon and solemn tones, left me now stuck in the middle perilously balanced between the two extremes. I was soon to be on the opposite side of the abyss, as fragile and defenceless as Katie left on the operating table. Utterly stripped down to bare skin and bone, her exposure irrelevant when it came to the brutality of saving lives. I too would become the picture of vulnerability, where I would take her place on the operating table, albeit in some foreign theatre with lights far too fluorescent and bright, sullen and stained walls that have seen far too much.

I had a restless night, stomach-churning from either the required fasting or the nerves. I understood the inefficacy of telling patients to "get some rest" the night before a big operation, something I had never considered the futility of until I was the patient, tossing and turning in sheets that were far too hot. And yet lying on the anaesthetic table the next morning, I realised that this stifling heat was preferable to the biting cold, and that the nightmares were preferable to the looming view of an anaesthesia mask. I mistook impending freedom from illness for impending doom, an easy mistake to make when

you're lying in that cold room. And then I woke up, lulled by the intermittent beeping inescapable in the ICU.

Briefly after this rude awakening I sat opposite the neurosurgical consultant, her face unnervingly constant from our first encounter to what would now be our last. Frighteningly inanimate. Whether or not this was a facade or the result of her profession having diminished her spark was a mystery.

I spoke first. "With all due respect, I do hope I'll never have to see you again." I had crossed into a new world, and I was no doubt eager for a way out, back into familiar territory. It's a shame that some journeys are one way, and a return ticket for me is yet to be found. I've ventured into a land without an exit route. My journey has begun to chip away at my protective barrier, and broken glass can seldom be repaired into the flawless sheet it was before an accident of sorts. And so now I view my patients without a glass screen, the mere air between us often feeling far too frail, and leaving me too in touch with those I wish to separate myself from. Perhaps this is for the better.

3rd = Place: The Dark Reality

by Jessie Stevens

It was the smell that woke her first; it smelt like burning tyres mixed with rotten eggs. The sort of smell that doesn't just wheedle its way up through your nostrils, no, it was the sort that consumes your whole body, giving you no choice but cough and splutter as it hits the back of your throat. As soon as the sleep-glue had disintegrated from her eyelids, Miv could comprehend its appearance: a low, lying cloak of black smog quickly strangling the house of its air supply.

The Ozone had crashed. She knew that for sure. How could she not? It was all the news had been saying for the last month-blaring it from the hecto pads and angulators- it was unmissable. However it had only been a week since that stifling, muggy afternoon. She had watched the Star Walkers of the Past slowly glide down the streets, carrying the circular coffin. Miv remembered how silent the air had been (apart from its usual electronic crackle), full of the muted sorrows from those who had not escaped soon enough and knew only of the countdown they had left. It had had a big turnout, with millions lining the streets watching as their lives slipped away. The lucky ones had left 5 years ago. This was before gas masks became obligatory to wear inside and out, before food came solely from the labs and before the Earth's state funeral. She had been told there would be at least 70 days before the planet became incompatible with life, but who trusted the Government anyway after all their empty promises and blatant lies?

Quickly she fumbled for the bedside lamp switch, but no warm glow appeared. Grabbing her hoodie and gas mask from the end of the bed, she flung off the bed covers, letting the black smog touch her virgin skin. The laminate was moist under foot.

Condensation from the sticky city air was mixing with the freezing space wind which was starting to filter through the earth's failing protective bubble. Miv knew things were different somehow. She couldn't think what, but she could feel the pulsate of her vagus nerve warning her, twinned with the beads of sweat multiplying on her skin.

Tentatively she stumbled across the hallway, blindly moving through the ever blackening air - desperate to know, but fearful for the outcome. Upon reaching her parents door, she knew... Through the chink in the semi-open door, Miv spotted the window. More importantly the open window.

For at least 7 years, it had been illegal to leave a window open - even ajar. In the day, the grey rubber gas masks had to be worn to filter the increasingly toxic air that had been building up in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution. However when sleeping, it was impossible to wear a mask, so many citizens defied the rules and slept with just the areofilters on for protection.

Miv stared at the stream of toxic air stealthily creeping under the minutely open window. One sentence reverberated around her skull: ' Never breathe the black'. It seemed that this what her parents had done... With one pallid finger she pushed open the door exposing the horrifying truth. Their bodies lay motionless, stiff and white. Her mother's lips a mottled blue just visible above the crisp sheet that entwined them both in a mass of limbs.

They had lived in fear for too long. Was this a last act of defiance, a suicide pact or an abandonment of their only child however strong they considered her?

No. She knew how desperate they were to feel the breeze on their faces as they drifted off to sleep. Not in her living memory had she not had to wear a gas mask outside and for her parents it must have felt an eternity. Miv could remember the family's conversation the previous evening as they discussed their fly date and what belongings they would take with them as they prepared for a new start. Her father's longing for a last touch of the outside world still rung in her ears and breathed a sigh of acceptance through her traumatised soul.

A faint waft of her mother's favourite perfume 'Serenity' stole its way under the tight suction of her mask. With that, Miv allowed a solitary tear to trace the path of her contorted face as she closed the door. Every ounce of her being screamed to stay and curl up between them in the familiar bed where she had always felt so safe. To lie, giving in to the warm wave of acrid fumes would have been so easy. But now she had to make her own future, paving the way to a new life and carry out their escape plan to freedom. Taking one final glance, she closed the door gently whispering goodbye.

As if on autopilot, Miv bundled up her wild mass of red curls clearing her face in readiness for the journey in hand. From under her bed she grabbed her worn leather rucksack which had been packed several weeks before in anticipation for their escape. She thrust her feet into the muddy trainers as she bounded along the familiar landing towards the front door. There was no point taking a key – she wouldn't be returning.

The stairway was almost impassable from the oily black air as it clouded her vision but it couldn't deter her. Lungs starting to tighten she staggered up the last flight passing the doors to flats she knew so well. There was no time to dwell on the future of her friends. As she forced the stiff fire escape open, a greeting

of flames taunted her, stretching their gnarled tongues out to lick her. Although metres away from the escape vehicle, nothing had ever seemed further. There were only minutes to spare before they pounced. She grabbed the iron door of the aeroflater and shoved her bag onto the passenger seat. The material was soft and the cabin familiar. It triggered memories of her father talking through the instructions in his slow methodical manner. His voice penetrated her mask guiding her through the intricate procedures to insulate and elevate the hydro powered vehicle.

“Grab the tiller and steer the cross by up. Slowly now, we don’t want a fall before we’ve even got up.”

As the air-jets raised the craft up, Miv could make out the burning city below her. The green tinged flames devouring the buildings that held so many memories: the library, her school and the parliament where she had sat outside every Friday for the past four years. Lurching higher and higher, her beloved home was now a speck on the horizon and would slowly become just another part of the burning earth below her. She looked ahead to the dark abyss that stretched out guiding her forward.

The low throb of the engine was a comfort to her almost like the reassuring purr of a cat. It steadied her pounding heart, allowing her to hear her father’s final message.

“Fly free my girl and start again.”

3rd= Place: The Attic – John Smith

by Monica Yell

The attic seemed completely alien to the rest of the house.

It was an afterthought, a pure necessity of the building's aesthetic, and not something anyone considered when buying the house, except to wonder if they might turn it into something else. Most of the time it was barely used, scattered with oddities nobody even cared enough about to throw away, and mischievously inclined to resist any attempts at central heating. Instead, it amplified to extremes whatever was the prevailing temperature of that time of year.

So determined was this problem, those who ascended in summer were immediately assaulted by the kind of air-blast encountered at the opening of an oven. The winter ascenders were generally tempted to wear one of the ancient ski-suits hanging from the rafters. They could then continue their perusing in slightly less dignified peace, without freezing.

John Smith did not wear a ski-suit. John Smith was freezing.

Of course, he wasn't really called John Smith. Nobody is, but his life had been defined by such a malevolent mediocrity it became unnatural to use his given name, which had always been unerringly adventurous.

The only thing he had ever managed to excel in was following instructions. He did well at school because his parents told him to. He pursued a career in medicine because his teachers told him to. He even started a pension in his teens, because the government told him to.

The wife he had been told to marry (and did) was similarly middling. To get an impression of her, simply conceive of any categorisation of a person, then add 'moderately' to it. She is moderately intelligent, moderately pretty and moderately kind. In fact, people only ever think to describe her as 'nice', if they think to describe her at all. With John, she had four children.

He had insisted on four. It was the right number because it meant they could sit neatly two-by-two on trains, and entertain each other, rather than running about the place like those *other* children. Ultimately, they would be white-collar lawyers or engineers. They would be able to choose which (he wasn't a monster), although the girls would just be mothers. He's old-fashioned like that. Before you judge him for it however, realise it was only because of the contradictions he found in modern sensibilities. Being a decidedly mild man, there wasn't much he hated, but if anything, it was contradiction.

So, there he was – citizen, husband, father - pottering about in that freezing attic in his mediocre clothes, sporting a mediocre moustache I'll let you imagine, when he came across a toy plane. It would be heartily rejected by a child brought up on iPads and iPhones and iEverythingElse, but to him, it was a masterpiece; technicolour wings reached out from its body, perfecting the balance and promising a graceful soar. With the very dustiest, most unfrequented corner of his brain, he remembered using it to play 'Pilot'. The danger and drama of a life in the skies had once excited him immensely. After he discovered the claustrophobia of a cockpit, somehow the opposite of the environment in which it operates, the career appealed less, but never quite lost its lustre. What he really wanted back then was to fly.

Upon this recollection, rather unwelcomely, he began to feel a stirring of pity for the little boy who didn't allow himself to live his dreams, who didn't allow himself to have any dreams. What if the choices he'd made weren't actually the right ones, if striving for security wasn't the best way to live? Had he stolen the lives of his children by drumming and drilling and droning them on the art of the average? If he had, he wasn't ordinary, he was evil.

He turned each one of them over in his mind: Victoria, so straight-laced and serious, Edward, who'd given up on his passion for music, Thomas, who resented his resolutely ginger hair, and little Lillian, who often cried when he put away her paints. Was it too late for them like it felt too late for him? Surely not for the youngest – her entire life was ahead of her. But then again, John had already paved out that life like a well-worn map.

As a single silken tear is lost in his moustache, John starts to entertain the urge to do something crazy. Something stupid and free and indulgent and inherently alive, and take his children with him. He won't act on it just yet, but the kernel is planted and there's little he can do to stop it growing. Right now, he feels more alien to the boy he once was than even the attic must feel to the rest of the house.

Highly Commended: The Outsider

by Rosie Kerven

We left. We left our home.

I was fourteen years old when we were forced out of Syria. Leaving was the hardest. Neither my Mum nor my Dad stood beside me when we left on the boat. Syria was just a scar of darkness left behind, in my past.

I can remember the moment they left us. Men, women and children were screaming in a torturous cacophony. I couldn't find them. A heavy, deathly-black monster was dropped from the open sky, as an ember-red cloud exploded from its jaws and hit my city.

This was the moment I knew I would never see my parents again. I hoped there would always be a tomorrow, from that moment on.

Now, I live in a country called Wales. Every morning I wake up to a measureless veil of blue sky laced with puffball-white clouds. Creatures I never saw before, dart and flutter past my window every morning. Its unearthly quiet here. I love the serenity and pureness of the silence. I've never seen a world so filled with beauty. I've visited window clear lakes, waterfalls veined with silver edges, beaches sprinkled with butter-gold sand, forests filled with trees coated in feathery moss.

Although, for all that, I still miss my home. I miss the dust, my neighbours, my friends, the familiarity of my own room and the food of my childhood. I miss my mum and dad. I can't even picture their faces that once beamed with smiles and laughter.

Every now and then a gripping pain tugs at me as I remember memories from when I was young; when life was good.

Today of all days, I will visit a school for the first time. Putting on my clothes feels strange. A cold, heavy jacket is hung off my shoulders and buttoned down the middle. Shiny shoes envelope my feet. I put on my hijab and stare at myself in the mirror. Just imagine if you couldn't speak the language, just imagine if you couldn't communicate properly, just imagine if you were worried where to find the bathroom at your school, just imagine if you had different beliefs to everyone else, just imagine you were fearful of the food you were going to have to eat, just imagine if your own parents weren't there to walk you to your first day of school. Just imagine you are a Syrian refugee.

A horrible sense of loneliness bleeds through me. I look down. My eyes flood with fear as the school gates loom over me like a towering giant. I breathe a deep breath that dislodges the hard lump in my throat and my legs propel me forwards to my destiny.

Walking through a playground filled with laughing children, who are playing as if there is nothing wrong with the world, should be easy; it's misery. Longing of my hijab to engulf and hide my face, I enter a warm clean building. Funny letters and shapes paint the walls and luminous petals of gold dot the ceiling.

A plump lady with a bumble bee waist and elfin ears steps towards me. Her arched eyebrows shape her acorn eyes and prominent nose. She flashes a sparkling, angelic smile that compliments the kind look on her face.

She ushers me into a room, filled with a sea of faces. Eyes drill into the back of my head. I try to move my frozen legs. I miss Syria. My home. I sit in a slippery blue chair; as cold as ice. What do I do? What do I say? My mouth feels twisted, as a butterfly gnaws at my stomach. I miss my friends. A relentless voice attacks me saying, "smile, smile, smile". I can't. Noises. Voices. What are they saying? I don't understand.

A figure. A girl. Someone is approaching me. Me? I bury my eyes in the safety of my lap; willing my hijab to hide me. Please. Please. I squeeze my eyes shut...

Open them. Open your eyes. You are lucky. Lucky to have a chance. Open your eyes. For your parents. All you have been through has led to this moment. Open them...

A small girl with blue eyes, casts a shadow over me. I force myself to look at her. Our eyes meet. I see sparks of kindness in her eyes like scattered stars in a sky. She sits next to me and rests her hand on my shoulder. No words are spoken but she is telling me all will be ok.

That night I marvel at the black void of beauty that paints our world. Stars wink at me like beacons of hope for all the lost souls of the universe. It reminds me of the girl. Kindness flowed from her like a gentle steam. She has given me hope, hope that there will always be a tomorrow. One day I will be able to communicate, speak her language and no longer be an outsider.

Highly Commended: Fog

by Lottie Armitage

The first thing he saw was the fog.

It surrounded him the moment he stepped out. It wreathed his feet and swathed his face in a silver pallor, like the surface of a stone polished to perfection, or a sequence of shadows in reverse, or the contours of an eye. He was disturbed by its lack of sound. It looked as if it would sweep and ring, like the sound of the word *sheath*. It didn't.

What did make a sound was the place beyond. He could tell there was a place beyond, because the new world carried with it a sense of space that he hadn't felt before. Here, things echoed. He stepped lightly, and yet his steps echoed. Things were caught in the spaces between his feet and the ground. Crunching things. Creeping things. Things that danced in the outline of the fog, jumping off the shadows and congregating in waltzing scrapes of dust and dirt on the ground's surface. He took a step. It *crisped*. He took two steps and watched as the fog was pulled out from under him. He saw...

...what?

He saw...something?

He saw a world. He knew it was a world. A deathless, ineffable world. He stood with his mouth open, breathing in smoke and feeling the world purr into the ground. It shook his bones and made his heart dance. It took the hairs along his neck and pulled them upright, turning his muscles to bows pulled taut, shaking and shining in the light that shot through the fog, pulling it apart like skin and laying bare the things that walked there; the creatures, if that was what they were; the herd of dark shapes laid out like a spine, humming and glistening. They breathed and coughed and he breathed and coughed, and he

was the world, or a part of it, and he screamed and it screamed back, loud and lungless, and he ran.

He didn't think he was running from fear, if only because he could tell that he was running *towards*, not *away*. There was more to discover. There was more the new world held for him that was not folded in the fog. He thought he would run until his lungs decided to stop. He thought he would run until the smoke decided to take him. He thought he would run until the creatures decided to -

A screech -

He spun backwards as his head connected with something. Two somethings. Two towering stick-legs stacked over shoes and socks, stock-still in the middle of the path. He knew from the warmth that it was a creature. He knew from the clouds of breath that lazily spun around its head, and from the sharp suggestion, in the dim light, of teeth. When he screamed this time, it didn't scream back.

Instead, with lungs full of fog and a neck arched like the great tail of a snake, it howled. It bared its teeth and flared its nostrils. It was bare itself, bare and blazing-pink in the sunlight all shining and thin-skinned like glass, wrapped in rags of cloth and sloughing a slow vividness from its skin. It lived with a terrible slowness, far slower than him; he could tell by the way it stretched its claw towards him, arm bent, cold bones creaking, open-fisted to catch his neck in its grasp, hissing with its terrible voice, through thin lips, through teeth. He was gone before it realised. He threw himself head-on into the grass. He let himself disappear.

The old woman stood and laughed.

First cat I've seen in a while, she thought. Definitely an indoor cat.

Highly Commended: The Writer

by Poppy Trower

'Ow ow ow ow,' I moaned as I squeezed myself through the door, my multiple bags digging into my fingers. It was five o'clock in the morning and I had just spent two hours on a plane stuck next to a man with body odour and wandering feet. My adventure to a new world was off to a great start.

After several uncomfortable moments, I popped triumphantly from the doorway. A tall skinny man in dirty jeans surveyed me, a cigarette dangling from his lip. 'Excuse me, but are you Gavin?' I asked tentatively.

'Aye,' replied the man and nodded towards his taxi.

The car smelt like stale chip fat, but I clambered in gratefully. In just a few short minutes, I would be at my luxury hotel and all my writing prayers would be answered... .

'Ah,' was all I could say as I stepped out of the car. My hotel was a mouldering ruin. Greedy fingers of ivy clung to the grubby stone, and the old windows rattled in the wind. Clutching up my suitcase, I set off up the neglected driveway, the gravel crackling under my feet.

The door opened before I could even ring the bell. A young woman with lank hair and grubby nails bowed me in, but not before giving me a look of incredulous distaste.

It was at this point I realised how far from home I was.

The steep staircase was rickety and the floorboards complained ominously under every step. I opened my bedroom door, cringing as the sweet smell of damp hit me.

Oh well. At least this would help me focus on my writing. After a hasty lunch, I wrapped myself in a scarf and headed for the village.

It was deserted, like some sort of ghost town. The mossy houses leaned precariously upon one another and the cobbled streets were rough and uneven. After about an hour, I was

about to give up all hope of finding the new world I needed, when I came across an old inn.

Deep breath. As I pushed open the door, delicious warmth washed over me, burning my frozen cheeks. Sadly, this was all I could say for the place, as the music and chatter stopped the moment I stepped past the threshold.

Old men with faces like wrinkled walnuts leered at me, and a young woman laughed raucously as I passed her. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and frail candle light trembled every time someone came near.

"A beer please," I mumbled to the barman. He was missing several teeth. After a few long awkward minutes, music and chatter restarted as suddenly as it had ceased, and a foaming tankard of beer slid across the greasy surface towards me.

I sipped, shuddering at the sour, yeasty taste. Wine was my usual drink of choice, but I needed to fit in and this town didn't seem like a place to ask for Pinot Grigio.

A stirring to my left gave me a start. What I had thought was a pile of coats was actually an old woman. As I stared, a gnarled claw shot out and grabbed my glass. With the air of a practised drinker, the woman downed the beer in one, smacking her lips appreciatively at my stunned face. "What are you doing in a place like this, lassie?" she croaked as she picked her teeth with a long fingernail. "I . . . I'm just visiting. I'm a writer - here to find ideas for a novel," I replied somewhat lamely. The woman didn't answer, but chose to scrutinise me for several long seconds.

Then an idea struck me. Here was someone who had clearly lived here her whole life, someone who could tell me the stories I craved to hear.

"Wait!" I said, as she made preparations to move. "I, er, would you like a drink?" She grinned, displaying her yellow teeth. "Aye, I would that," she said, as she settled herself.

Sure enough, after three pints, she began to talk.

She told me all about herself - about how she had lived here her whole life, with her mother and father, both servants who had worked in the old castle.

"I went to school, the one past yonder hill," she slurred, waving an arm at the mullioned window.

"I was a curious lass. Bit like you. Liked to explore and all that. And one day, I went up to the old castle at night and I heard - " she stopped, her eyes glazed, her mouth sagging.

"Are, are you alright?" I asked, shaking her arm slightly.

"I . . . I, er, what was I saying?" she mumbled, rubbing her leathery forehead.

"You were talking about the castle," I prompted, desperately trying to conceal my excitement.

"Never you mind," replied the woman. "Some things are best left unsaid . . . "

Over the next week I barely slept, tossing and turning as I thought obsessively about what the women had told me.

What was it that she had heard? The old abandoned castle - it was a writer's dream come true. If only I could be the one to solve its mystery!

How very arrogant and foolish I was.

One evening, it became too much. I decided to explore. Fog hung like a shroud over the moor and the grass crunched under my feet. The air was an intoxicating cocktail of anticipation and excitement and I could scarcely let myself draw breath.

After about half an hour of aimless trekking, a trickle of fear seeped through my eagerness as the trees grew thicker and the sky darker.

"Got to keep on going," I muttered, my breath rising in chilly plumes before me. Ah. The clichéd snap of a twig. "Just a fox or something," I murmured in a wouldbe casual voice.

Finally, the woods began to thin out as I reached a hill. A piercing slice of moonlight flooded the clearing, so that I could now see everything. I gasped. At the top of the clearing was

what had once presumably been a beautiful castle, now a mangled ruin. Was this the place?

Cautiously, I made my way up to the entrance, tripping over rogue tree roots as I went. The front door had been ripped off its hinges and the windows were opaque with cobwebs. I felt sick.

Somehow, I found myself inside the castle, marvelling at the lost grandeur. Rich carpet lay threadbare on the decaying boards and expensive wallpaper hung dejectedly off the walls. I made to leave the hall way when a faint noise stopped me in my tracks.

It was the tinkling sound of a piano being played. Heart beating a tattoo, I inched towards the door, following the sinister music. However, as soon as I got to the doorway, it ceased.

As I moved away, it started again.

I went to and fro from the door for what felt like an age, fear twisting my insides. "What is it?" I whispered, and I peered round the door, sure that my imminent death was seconds away.

Only nothing. I was inside a old grand ballroom, and there was nobody there. "Ha!" I said aloud, although I felt little relief. The chandeliers, dusty as they were, seemed to glint in the silver moonlight and the eyes of the portraits stared at me hungrily. It was time to go.

Apparently the house did not agree. As soon as I had swivelled round, the door swung shut with a neat click. "No, no, no, please, no!" I moaned, scrabbling at the door with desperate hands. The velvet curtains glided over the windows, blocking out the light, my one companion. "Please, no!" I screamed, tears pouring down my face, as I clawed the walls. I am going to die, I am going to die, I am going to die.

With a sickening jolt, I realised the piano had resumed playing

...

“Not bad for a first draft,” I thought to myself as I set down my pen. I could finish it tomorrow, maybe do a bit of editing. But now, off for a drink at the pub.

Highly Commended: The Enchantment of Spines

by Yvette Naden

The strange thing is, I never intended to walk inside. If it were anywhere else in the world, I surely would have glanced passed it. Instead, phantom fingers pressed lightly to the small of my back, guiding me towards the gaping eyes of glass. Huge cobweb windows. I paused briefly on the threshold, as if my body would crumple if I took another step. As if I would turn to dust. Could I breathe the air on the other side of the door? Would my weight change? Would I be able to soar over the ground in one swift movement? Or would everything crouch heavily on my shoulders, dragging me down? Without warning, something pushed me inside. And I was met by a sagging darkness which seemed to engulf me at first, then realising I was not a threat, receded. And gradually, everything became clear.

Burgundy blooms of carpet beneath my feet. Patterns of passion. A living, breathing heart, which soaked up the soles of my shoes. Almost sinking, I struggled onto dry land – floorboards. Floorboards crafted from a rich, deep oak, like a cask or the hull of grand ship. I could almost see it, swaying to and fro. An ocean of umber. A new horizon, one I'd never seen before. I was everywhere and nowhere and yet simply here. Everything around me was aged, as if the atmosphere itself bore wisdom, and somehow it was new. Innocent and guileless and new. Broad brushstrokes of black, grey, red, green. The walls were a tapestry, each lick of paint a fable. I could almost reach out and touch the skin of another world. A world of paper butterflies or a world of golden deserts. A mountain range of leather-bound manuscripts lay before me. And suddenly, everything which had frozen my pulse – the anxiety, the deadlines, the expectations – evaporated. Raised off my

shoulders as if the beams of the library had reached down and plucked them from my back. My posture changed, and breath, once static, now calm, flew out of me. It danced along the motorway of shelves, punctured every so often by an alcove where a stoic, yet wryly amused book-keeper stood awaiting the next awe-stricken newcomer. Stepping from one floorboard to another shifted reality, and I found myself avoiding the cracks in the wood, in case I tumbled into a chasm and couldn't drag myself out. Blindly, I stumbled through a jungle of coffee-coloured pages, of half-broken bindings in need of repair. In my blue jacket and jeans, I was out of place. A single triangular jigsaw piece.

Movement caught my eye, a smudge of red. A man in a jumper, his face almost blurred against the voluminous book. Perhaps merely calling it a 'book' was an injustice. On the wooden desk, a loch of knowledge lapped against a riverbank of citations. Trapped in yellowed pages. With trees of anatomy diagrams, elegant handwriting permeating the parchment like signposts on a road. The man in the jumper seemed to sense my stare and huddled down, as if hoarding the manuscript for winter. I stepped away, pulled by an unseen string towards another set of shelves. Even the lights on the desk, at first small lampposts, morphed into cream violins chorusing vivid brightness. Too vivid. Too bright.

I sat in an alcove, knees to my chest. Hunched. A troll in the corner. Closed my eyes. Breathed in the aroma of old stories and forgotten languages which floated as feathers around my nostrils. The bookcase was a monument at my back, keeping me upright. Steady. With a pair of white jeans and red shirt, I was crooked. Out of place against the cultivated field of scripts. The spines sat above me on the shelves, casting blackened shadows which seemed to elongate. I moved my feet so the

darkness could not reach me. The opaque cloud seemed to grow into a fist, uncurl into fingers with sharpened nails. It grasped at the air, tried to grab my ankle. Drag me down. I lurched past the book-shelf forest, dodging students in casual dress as they frowned at my fear. It was alright for them, I supposed. Their lives were on track. As straight and orderly as the walls which surrounded us. While leather-bound novels threatened to crush me under centuries of prose, the shelves seemed to part for them. A hardback sea with waves of pages curling to the sky. Allowing them to pass undeterred. I kept running. Breathing so hard and so fast I feared my lungs would snap in half. It was too much, all too much and I was drowning and kicking my legs and I wasn't getting anywhere.

I slowed to a halt around Ancient History. Put a hand on the bookshelf at first. Retracted it as if the covers would shunt forward and bite me. I wouldn't have been surprised if they did. All of a sudden, everything had turned bestial. Fight or flight. Everything was instantly so hard and brutal and too much and too much to bare. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, a small hand reached for mine. Clutching a small copy of *Winnie the Pooh*. The hand of a girl with mouse-brown hair and blue eye. A little chubby around the cheeks, like a tiny pixie from a glen. She handed me my waterproof rucksack as if it weighed nothing and placed the book inside. Smiled. Guided me through the tree-trunks of academic papers and published historical novels until we reached the Middle Ages. And when I glanced around, she'd vanished. In her place, stood a slightly taller girl. Same features, though the fat around her chin had receded somewhat. She grinned, passed me a copy of *Harry Potter*. I frowned and the girl giggled, as if she couldn't believe I was taking everything so seriously. I wanted to shout, to tell her I couldn't afford my accommodation,

tell her I wasn't good enough or clever enough or simply enough to be in this place. I never had the heart to tell her in the end. Instead, she led me through a city of textbooks, with knowledge built to bronzed skyscrapers above us. Us. I looked around. The girl was gone once again, replaced by an angst-ridden teenager with white air-pods in her ears, but a poetry book in her hand. Ripped jeans, yet the pocket edition of Shakespeare told me she hadn't changed at all. Not where it mattered. The same girl, brown hair bleached blonde by the sun. Blue eyes with dark rings under them from her chronic insomnia. She held out a pen. Indifferent to anxiety. The girl before me led me onwards until we reached the end of the aisle. A gaping window stood before us, an ice-rink in the wall. Dust skated upon it. My eyes trailed over to the new girl. The one in the window. A reflection. The girls – all of them – were me. Reaching into the bag, I took out my notebook and the pen my grandad had made me when I was a teenager. Leaning against the window, I opened the book. Stared at the oasis of lined-pages and raised my head against the blizzard of wordless paper. As soon as I scrawled the first line, the air inverted. Sprang up. Ballooned outward in an explosive carnival of flying statistics, rough pencil sketches, textual references. The notebook soaked up the walls, the porcelain skin of the windows. It soaked up the myriad of pyramids in the Ancient History Section, soaked up the sandstorm of social convention from Austen's Novels. And all at once, my thesis began to take shape. With a sigh of relief, I slumped against the wall. A wall where the manuscripts formed hands of golden paper to hold me up. I understood now. University was not a shadow hanging over me. It was another door to be opened. A door behind which I no longer needed to hide.

Highly Commended: Scars

by Lily Osbourne

My body survived the third war but my mind didn't. The memories bullets rattling around inside my skull punching holes through the meat of my brain.

I envy those who have a reason to stay in one piece while the world is falling apart. I've lost everyone and everything that mattered to me that's why I'm now sat in the clinical white waiting room offering myself up to be a test subject for the new memory manipulation and deletion experiments.

The haggard faces of the shattered souls surrounding me look up, one by one, I follow their gazes to a woman in a crisp lab coat who introduces herself as doctor McKinney. She looks too clean, too polished like this whole place. Her striking ruby lips curve into a feline smile as she tells us in a syrupy voice how grateful she is for our agreeing to participate. She wants 'To wipe our slates clean of blood.' Humanity left the shores of reason long ago to be swept up into chaos, most have forgotten the reason we even entered the war.

The subjects taken for experimentation don't return with the Doctor that I find strange but I tell myself suspicion is for wars where trusting the wrong person can get you killed. That time has passed, still, the hairs on my arms won't flatten. Exhaustion must be making me paranoid.

I can't sleep these days because my eyelids are scarred by the image of my numb hands pressed to my sister Clara's torso. Her blood oozed between my fingers gloving them the same shade of red as the doctor's lipstick. Colour was leached away from my world at the same pace the blood drained from Clara's fragile body; the light in her eyes ebbed away and now her name is carved onto my stone-heavy, stone-cold heart, marking it as a gravestone. I shake my head furiously as more brutal images flash in front of my eyes.

I don't want to remember Clara's death but no matter how I justify coming here to delete memories-shame squirms in my belly. Doctor Mckinney calls 'Zillah.' I rise and follow wiping sweaty palms against my trousers.

I sit in the doctor's office its walls painted pale blue, a curtain hanging on a chrome rail is hiding all the space behind the doctor's desk I strain my neck to peek behind but she blocks my view.

'Good to see you again i was worried about you after our last appointment?'

'Our last appointment' I echo.

'Zillah this is your fourteenth appointment.' My face scrunches up in confusion,

'You must be thinking of someone else... ' I begin she then laughs-a painful sound like nails being scraped down a chalkboard. An icy finger travels down my spine. I understand what she's done.

'You've taken away my memories' I stutter. Blood burns in my veins but more pressing fears keep my teeth clamped around my tongue.

'I am part of an organisation who have taken away millions already at the government's bequest, why did the war start? you don't know? Everyone told me that I couldn't undo history but I've told you twice before.'

'no, no, no.' I repeat. I forget how to blink, how to breathe.

'I've made you forget about our appointments, but you know you have to return each time. I never get bored of the shock on your face.' I shake my head in disbelief.

'You're lying.' My stomach churns. I daren't believe her because if i choose to doesn't that leave the possibility that I'm living a lie. I'm going to be sick.

'What colour were your sister's eyes?' I'm shocked into silence by the absurdity of the question but she only asks again.

'Blue.' I reply, she then produces from her pocket a photo of Clara. The eyes that stare back at me are rich earth brown. I shudder involuntarily.

'So far I've just been playing around but today we're getting down to business, emptying that pretty head of yours of all that clutter.'

'I want to leave ' I jump to my feet, the doctor then presses a glowing blue button on the wall behind her, the door slides open with a hiss. I hurry towards the door. I don't pause to think how strange her letting me go is. I only consider her illogical behaviour when I see a pair of armed men in all black. They tower above me,grim-faced, they block out the sight of the corridor- my only exit. I slowly turn back to the doctor.

'Zillah please don't look at me like that, don't paint me as the devil when I am mankind's salvation.' She scolds like I'm an insolent school girl, then motions to the guards who drag me behind the curtain, cursing and kicking where I'm forced to sit in an ice-cold metal chair. Leather straps are pulled tight across my abdomen, thighs and collar they are indented with marks where nails have dug in and torn at. The doctor rubs over my temples conduct gel, then fixes fluorescent wires in place. 'You should thank me your brain hasn't been fried in the process, many of my colleagues were too eager for results.' she declares in a monotone.

'You're insane.' I spit with as much venom as I can muster. I don't want to spend my life caged in a lie, my past has left wounds that run deep but I don't want them to fade. I want them raw and ugly. After all, I've survived I can't...I won't die this way.

2 days later

Shards of sunlight stab at my eyelids forcing me to open my eyes, I scrub my face with one hand. The window is open, letting a cool breeze sail through the room. A woman all in

white, her coat flapping behind her like wings stand at the end of my bed-My guardian angel? 'Where am I?' I mumble

'A hospital.'

She asks what the last thing I remember is, I hesitate before answering.

'I was going somewhere...a new world for people wanting a fresh start, a better world where all pain is forgotten.'

Commended: New World

by Punn Vattanorom

Dark. Dark, yet darker. A hooded figure streaks across the ground as fast as a shooting star on this moonless night. The noise of his running is the only thing that breaks the silence. The night is calm, and it is silent save for the patches of grass swaying in the wind. This is broken by the near silent sound of glass being cut. Bodies of various guards lie flat on the floor, still, unmoving. The dark figure reaches for the shining artefact in the sealed container, careful not to trip any laser alarms. Suddenly, the dark figure vanishes into the night.

“Another day, another crime, huh...” Sannon started as he vigorously chewed his fried egg for breakfast while glaring at the television. Sannon was a boy of 15, living with his uncle, Sam. Sannon had a well-rounded physique and was average height. His uncle, Sam, was wise beyond his years (even though he was old and wore thick spectacles).

“I wonder if he’s going to keep doing this. It’s been almost 2 years now, and he has been robbing precious artefacts and killing innocent people non-stop. Anyways, I’m not going to come home till midnight”

“You seem to know a lot about this terrorist, uncle.”, Sannon said.

“I may know more about this criminal than you think, Sannon”.

“What do you mea-”, Sannon started. Oh no, Sannon thought, I’m late

for school! “Sorry uncle, but I have to go now!” Sannon raced to school as fast as lightning.

The rest of the day was fairly normal. After school, Sannon’s friends were busy with a drama play that they had to watch, which prevented him from hanging out with them. He was just

going to go home early. Sannon started to stroll along the familiar path back home. Along the way, he passed by the city's museum, but he noticed something that caught his eye – his uncle's spectacles. What could Uncle Sam be doing at this time? Sannon thought, he isn't supposed to be home yet! Upon further examination, he also noticed something very peculiar. It was the terrorist's hood. Before he had the time to think, Sannon heard hushed voices behind the museum and his ears perked up.

"Are the operations complete yet?"

"Quiet! People are going to hear this! Don't you know how to whisper?"

This was getting even more interesting.

"Good thing we secured that objective, or else those guys would have gotten a real advantage."

Sannon's heart froze. Did he hear that correctly, were the words "Uncle Sam?" There was literally no way his uncle could be involved with the thief. Breaking a bottle of alcohol he saw lying on the ground, he went to investigate. When he quietly tiptoed around to the back of the museum, three gaping mouths were open, his own included. It was like time itself had been put on pause. After a few moments, Sannon mustered up the courage to finally speak.

"Uncle Sam? What are you doing? And why are you with..." Sannon started.

"Don't stop me, Uncle.", the terrorist said.

"Don't worry, I won't", Uncle Sam replied.

The next thing Sannon knew, he was on a bed in a small room with a chair. There was a transparent door to his right. Where is this place? Sannon thought, and why am I on a bed? Sannon rose from his bed, feeling fully rested. He decided to walk through the door, but as soon as he touched the doorknob, he could hear voices.

“Has he woken up?”, a voice said.

“Yes, just a few seconds ago”, a familiar voice replied.

“Are you absolutely sure that he would take the vows?”

“I sure hope so.”

That’s Uncle Sam, and someone else, Sannon thought, but how did they know that I had woken up? He opened the door and walked straight into Uncle Sam.

“Uncle? I have a few questions”, Sannon started.

“Child. I’m sorry that I haven’t explained this to you before. But first, you

must come to the room where we hold the rites.” Knowing that this day couldn’t get any weirder, Sannon reluctantly followed Uncle Sam to the room.

The room was relatively small, with a large chair in the centre.

“I suppose I ought to clear things up first.” Uncle Sam explained, “We are a group of people who expose government lies. People like the terrorist, your brother, have been working in many cities. The activities that we do are not intended to harm civilians. Only to strike out at the government.”

“How is the government wrong? I don’t believe any of this”, Sannon said.

“You’ll see. An example would be the ongoing coronavirus. This virus was a plan from the government to reduce the population in China.”

“I still don’t believe you.”

“Your mother, Bertha, was working here alongside your father until something happened. Your parents were two of the most helpful in our organization. Unfortunately, they had to sacrifice their lives when this institution became in danger. If you still don’t believe me, I’ll play you a recording.”

Sannon thought that this must all be a prank. He wished that Uncle Sam would knock it off already. As he was going to leave

the room, a female voice started to resonate from the walls.

“Sannon.”

It was his mother’s voice.

“If you can hear this, I’m already dead. Please don’t be angry with me. I know that we could have spent our days together as a family, but I chose this path because I value the truth more than anything else in this world. More than your dad and possibly even more than you. I know that

I’m selfish, but I wanted to become someone that you could have looked up to. I just feel the urge to do what’s right. If we die, I know that Uncle Sam will take care of you. Please listen to what he says. I love you very much, Sannon. You’re the one thing that I love most in my life besides the truth. I’m sorry that it had to come to this. Please don’t follow my path and join the institution, it’s for your sake. I love you, Sannon. I- I’ll have to go now.”

Sannon couldn’t stop the tears flooding from his eyes. He couldn’t believe it. It was his mom’s voice. It was as if a new world had presented itself to him. He now knew what he had to do, he had to fight the government lies and join the institution.

Commended: New World

by Serena Zhang

In the dim dawn light of 12 October 1492, Christopher Columbus led the Europeans to the untouched, new-fangled New World – the American continent. What he didn't expect was a fierce war between the Gods

“Three odd-shaped huge ships arrived”, the Indians said, “they moored in the gulf near the hills.”

All the gods and goddesses heard the news. Bmola and his siblings went with their people, curious about the newcomers who had stepped in their territory. They were surprised when they saw the gigantic ships, the strange-looking sailors, and the gods the foreigners had brought with them, standing on the gorgeous heads of the ships. These gods seemed arrogant. The only goddess was in the front, proudly raising her head. The bracelet of flower and leaves on her wrist seemed to shine brightly.

They were from a continent called “Europe”, the Indians learned before long. The two groups of people, it seemed, got along well. The Europeans had brought steel, gun powder, and lots of materials the Indians had never seen nor imagined before; in return, the Indians assisted them in building a camp, finding freshwater, and locally planting crops.

Bmola, who heard everything through his birds, knew that this peace had only happened among the people. For them, the deities, things were greatly different. He knew his haughty siblings well enough.

An intense battle begun between the Indian gods and the European gods. As the oldest Bmola stood aside, watching

them fighting for people's faith. After all, as the bird spirit, he didn't have to rely on the power of people.

He wasn't truly surprised when they all favoured their own people more – Boinayel, the twin god of rain, would only give crops of Indians suitable precipitation, so the corns were golden and full while the oats were grey and wilting; Nerrivik would form massive waves every time the Europeans approached the ocean; Juracán, the most irascible of them all, created a humongous storm and lightning to destroy the Europeans' camp. A crow, whistling hoarsely, told Bmola that the Europeans had been panicking, even suspecting that this land wasn't willing to accept them, yet they were holding onto their own gods.

Bmola laughed silently. His siblings were treating those people in the wrong way — the Europeans were pushed further away. As he was taunting his siblings, another black crow came. "The European gods were seeking revenge. They were angry about what their people had encountered."

Still, Bmola wasn't worried – he knew that as time passed, these gods would figure out a rule within themselves. Interested in this novel drama, he sent out other birds to trace the European gods.

On the first day, when deafening thunder roared and dazzling lightning shined within the clouds, a goldfinch returned with burnt wings and Bmola wrapped its injuries: "Thor, the God of thunder and war, was eager to revenge. An extraordinary thunderstorm appeared above the Indians' villages and burned their cottages."

On the second day, when heavy rains knocked on the ground, a whooping crane returned with a heavy fetter and Bmola freed it: "Wayland, the God of blacksmith, had damaged every piece of steel the Indians made. They now thought that this technique was forbidden by god."

On the third day, when bright sunlight burned the earth, a chickadee returned with dishevelled feathers and Bmola smoothed them: "Those fairies were aggressive – they kept disturbing the hunters and farmers in day and night. No Indian had had a peaceful dream since then."

Bmola heard these reports and sneered. These childish gods had not a single clue about attracting followers, he thought. They were acting like a group of fledglings who were in the same nest but disliked each other, fighting for more attention from parents.

But why would he help them? He was just a spectator of this protracted show. Unexpectedly, something interrupted this performance.

When the days became longer, squirrels leaped in the woods, and new leaves were sprouting on branches, Bmola sat on the crimson maple tree, leaning against the trunk. Just then he saw a flock, moving as if chased by ferocious predators.

He queried: What were they rushing for?

As the flock approached, it was clear that the birds were burrowing owls, all running in their quickest speed. Bmola, quite confused by this unusual scene, stopped one owl and asked: "Why were you hurrying?"

The owl was trembling incessantly: "The volcano on southside was about to erupt – we could hear the sound, Earth was roaring as if a giant of molten was striking the rocks, trying to breakthrough."

Bmola was thunderstruck. He sat there speechless until the owl begged for leave. He released it and forced himself to calm down. Things like weather and techniques were some matter,

but the power of the earth ... That was something completely different.

It felt like an eternity when he finally stood up.

Ominous dark clouds were gathering in the south, covering all the sunlight.

Bmola rushed to the populated area, where the Indian gods and European gods often fought. He knew that only an alliance of deities could stop this disaster; but would they agree to unite? As he arrived, he could see them fighting. Lightning, rain, and wind, all mixed together into a jangling discord. Suddenly he felt a fire was burning inside his chest, so scalding that he could barely control it. It was such an urgent situation, yet they were still arguing like immature children, unsatisfied with their birthday presents. And they were called the gods!

Driven by this fierce anger, Bmola hurtled to them. All the gods were surprised by his appearance – Juracán, Nerrivik, and Boinayel were shocked by their brother's unfamiliar mood; Thor and Wayland were astonished to see this foreign god for the first time. By coincidence, they all stopped fighting temporarily. Bmola told them about the volcano and asked them to unite. These gods were frightened by this news, as he could see from their pale faces and clenched fists; but they all refused his advice. They were too proud to reconcile with their enemies. He couldn't believe what he had seen: five grown up, powerful men were arguing for whom to lead this action. The ridiculous dignity they were holding onto! Bmola was truly irritated.

As the argument continued relentlessly, a tiny bump interrupted them. All in one breath, a series of stronger shaking went across the earth. Waves rose from the ocean, towering like the pine trees. The ground trembled and broke apart like eggshell. Cottages collapsed into wreckage while people fled away, screaming and yelling at each other.

After the shaking calmed, the gods looked at each other convinced. Bmola hoped they would realise how urgent the situation was.

He wasn't disappointed this time.

When they arrived, the bleak sky was full of dark clouds and purple lightning within. The lava streams, slowly flowing in a colour of ominous orange. This mountain of brutal fire was still quiet.

Without any sign, fiery flames appeared above the crater.

They had all used their complete power to stop that eruption from harming their people, he thought afterward. Boinayel created a massive rain to cool and slow down the thick lava.

Wayland lifted all the ore veins nearby and combined them into an enormous metal barrier. Thor restrained the violent thunders and flashes of lightning, forcing them to hit the desert. Nerrivik moved the sky-scraping waves far away from the land.

When the volcano finally calmed down, Juracán dispersed all the clouds. Bright, warm sunlight shone upon the bare mount, solidified mud, and a group of exhausted gods.

The optimistic Indians and brave Europeans gathered in the ruins that had once been their homes and began the reconstruction. Fairies, who hid in the field, flew back to the camp and secretly moved materials for people. Everything was on the right track again.

Except for one thing.

All the forests nearby were burnt in the lava, and only naked soil was left for the people.

How were they supposed to survive?

This was the moment the last god showed up.

Eostre, who had not been seen since the ships had arrived, ambled sedately to them. Every step she took was light and graceful, and fresh plants sprouted as she passed through. She could bring life back to this land, Bmola realised.

She stared at them silently for a while and turned around, facing the ocean. The water was gleaming with golden sunshine, countless pieces of light breaking apart as the waves rose and fell.

Then she started singing. It was a beautiful symphony.

All of a sudden, seeds in the soil germinated and quickly grew into towering trees and blooming flowers. Insects climbed out from their hiding places. Animals were awakened and stood up. This land was alive again.

“... Thank you.” After a long silence, someone murmured, almost imperceptible but loud enough to be heard by every god here.

The goddess of spring and life smiled.

Commended: New World

by Yoyo Fong

NO ONE COULD HAVE IMAGINED what it would be like living in a world without any colour. Darius is an extremely intelligent and talented boy, he is amazing at everything that you could think of, sports, academic, music, basically everything on earth. He is only 15 years old, but he has already done more than 20 public speeches, has participated in all different kinds of competitions and wins all of them. He seems perfect, but he has no friends. Not because no one wants to be friends with him, but because he has never wanted one. Yes, that's right, Darius doesn't want any friends, in fact he thinks he doesn't need any, his only dream is to earn money, lots of money.

It is an ordinary day, Darius is walking down the street on his way back home when he hears a voice, a voice that calls him, a voice coming from nowhere. The voice gets louder and louder, he is very confused but curious at the same time because he seems to be the only one on the street hearing the voice. Darius follows the voice into a back alley and sees nothing but a lot of money falling from the sky, he walks closer and reaches out his hand. The moment he touches the money, a dazzling light shines right into his eyes. After a while, he slowly opens his eyes and finds himself lying on a strange bed, he immediately jumps off the bed and realizes that he is standing on surprisingly warm ground. He gasps with his mouth wide-open as he walks round the room, especially when he sees tons of fireflies gathering on the ceiling of the room. While he is still in a shock about the things he is seeing, someone knocks on the door and walks in. It is an old man, he smiles radiantly towards Darius and says, "Hi Darius, welcome to the new world! Don't be afraid, I will show you around here and you will soon figure out everything."

“Wait...wait...who are you...no...where am I now...and how do you know my name?” The old man smiles with one corner of his mouth turned up and says, “Just follow me.”

They walk out the door and Darius is shocked at the view he now sees,

“This is the mountain top and from here you can see the whole picture of this new world.” The old man said proudly.

Darius looks out over an endless world; the sky and the sea look as if they are connected, he looks up and sees a big rainbow hanging up in the blue sky, clear lake water and green grassland, all kinds of animals running around in this harmonious natural world. While Darius is still enjoying the beautiful scenery, a little boy comes running up and shouted excitedly,

“Hurray! I am the first one to reach here! I beat the others!”

Gradually, his other friends also reach the top of the mountain, however Darius isn't impressed by their 'stupid game' until one of the boys says, "Let's race again." And that is what got him going, he asks to join their race and the boys smile indulgently and agree. When the race begins, Darius takes the lead and runs from the bottom of the hill to the top in less than three minutes. After a long, long time, no one appears. So he decides to go down and look for them, he finds them in the middle of the road all gathered around a boy. He walks closer and realizes that the little boy has scraped his knee and all the other boys are trying to help him. Darius feels very puzzled by their behavior, he cannot understand why although this was clearly a race, they gave it up just because of their friend...

Darius walks down the hill with this doubt in his mind, he sees many children running all around the hill, some chasing butterflies, some playing hide and seek. Everyone seems to be having so much fun with their friends. Suddenly, a burst of

applause rings in his ears. It comes from the nearby school, curiously he walks into the classroom and realises it is the teacher announcing first and second place winners of a mathematics contest. After the teacher announces the result, everyone cheers for the student who got first place, including the student that came second, Darius finds this shocking, very shocking.

The old man appears again, he comes straight to Darius and asks him,

“What are you confused about?”

“Everything! And everyone! No one here seems to like being a winner, no one seems to like being perfect and none of them are normal!” Darius shouts angrily, very unsatisfied with everyone’s behavior.

“Then what do you expect them to be like?” asks the old man.

“Just like me! To be perfect and to earn a lot of money in the future.” Darius answered without thinking.

“Why do you want so much money?”

“So that I can do whatever I would like to do!” Darius answered firmly.

“What do you like doing? And with who?” The old man asks.

“Umm....to...to...” Darius hesitates and cannot reply.

“Let me show you a place!” the old man says, taking Darius to a completely different world to the one he has just been in. This new world has no colour in it, everything is in black and white, everyone in this world is very quiet and none of them seem to be talking to each other.

“Where is this place? Why is it in black and white?” Darius asks confused.

“Because no one is happy, no one is smiling and no one wants to interact with others, not a single one.” the old man continues by saying, “Darius, this is another new world, and just like the one you have just been to, the colours here come from the

happiness of the people here, if there is no happiness, there won't be any colour." The old man follows this with a sigh.

"Then why? Why is no one happy in this world? Are they very poor?"

"Nope, it is the exact opposite, people here have a lot of money, but..."

"But what?!" Darius asks eagerly.

The old man makes no answer, but he smiles knowingly and then walks away. Darius suddenly feels a little hungry and finds himself with nothing, he wants to ask someone for some food, but in this new world of only black and white, no one offers him any help.

Darius feels hopeless then suddenly, someone taps him on the shoulder. It is a boy called Lucas, he hands over some food to Darius and brings him out of that black and white world. Lucas brings Darius to his house and offers him afternoon tea, they spend the whole afternoon together playing in rivers, up the hill and they both have a brilliant time. Especially for Darius, it is his first time ever spending time with a friend, he finally realises that the joy of sharing with friends is something that no matter how many awards he gets, he will never have.

"Thank you, Lucas, it is so nice to have you as my friend!"

"It is my pleasure to be your first friend." Lucas replies delighted, "but...but it is time to send you back to your world...because you have finally learnt your lesson. I feel truly happy for you!" Lucas lowers his head, shyly. Lucas then sends Darius back into a tunnel and through it, he shouts as loud as he can,

"Darius! Remember! You don't have to choose between money or friends or even perfection. But ask yourself, if you are really happy when you have a lot of money, own a lot of awards but have no friends to share it with?!" Darius takes Lucas' words back to the place where he belongs. He still hasn't recovered

from all those sudden events, but the new world has changed him. He is still perfect, very talented at everything, his dream is still to earn a lot of money, but there is one more thing that he now knows is the most valuable, most precious thing in the world – the happiness of friendships. WELCOME TO DARIUS' NEW WORLD.

Commended: A New World

by Chinmayee Bhattacharjee

Julia stared around the hall of her new school. She had been very nervous today morning, and had nearly come to the verge of having a breakdown. She generally was an introvert, but was known to be a good writer in her previous school. She loved playing the piano and drawing. The 11-year-old girl in her simply stared and tried to swallow a hard lump that formed in her throat as she stood in the middle of the chaos of the lunch hall that commonly occupies every school in the entire world during recess-time. Five more minutes to go for the recess to end, she thought as she stared at her watch. She had spent the entire morning just taking in the atmosphere of her new school. It was larger and more spacious than her last one, and she felt somehow intimidated by the sheer size of the hall and football-ground.

Julia came from a middle class family that had well-educated members. Her father was a businessman, and he dealt with book companies and publishers. He had a book shop of his own. Her mother was a full-time news-reporter with some channel, and usually came back home at night, weary after a long day of work. Julia had an average height, medium flaxen hair that she kept tied in a high voluminous pony and a wheatish complexion. The good thing was, she loved herself. But she didn't like her appearance. The thing was, she had vitiligo. It hadn't spread much yet, there was just an irregular white patch on her neck below her ear, and some patches on her arms. She usually wore a jacket or full shirt to hide that, but her neck showed. She really hated her condition. She didn't like it when she had to answer to ignorant people and other children about it, or when others stared at her outside. She just wished it would go away, vanish in the morning when she opened her

eyes as if it had been a horrible nightmare. There had been nights she had clung to her parent's arms, crying and wailing like a baby when she felt like it. Julia was a wonderful student and had been a favourite among her teachers. Her friends there accepted her condition, but now they were left behind in that school. Her family had moved to a new city in the vacations before her new school session started, where there were new people, new children, unknown places and strangers.

Now she felt trapped in a whirlpool of emotions. She felt fear and doubt grip her strongly, and a sense of anger welled up in her mind. Would she be able to make new friends? She doubted it. It was only her first morning, and a stylish gang of girls had giggled at her when she passed by them at the corridor. A tall, burly boy had teased her about her patches too. Julia felt stupid for forgetting her jacket at home. Although it was summer, she still wore it. She didn't think that she would be as popular in this school, except for turning heads because of her patches. The shrill gong of the school bell broke her chain of thought, as she saw everyone scramble back to their classes. She picked up her purple bag, shoved her lunchbox into it and started off for her class. She hadn't met everyone in her class as the first three periods had been taken up in the annual day function practice. Everyone had been on the football-ground and basketball-court, practising their dance moves and dialogues in the few weeks left before the final rehearsal. She saw a group of fourteen or fifteen year olds performing hip-hop moves.

Finally, she reached her class after a few minutes. It must nearly have had a strength of at least fifty children. She looked at the door. '6th A' was inscribed in bold letters inside a big round sticker on it. She entered the class quietly. A few boys were flying paper planes and exchanging fights of paperballs,

the other boys in the left corner were playing catch with some spectacled boy's pen as he looked on helplessly. Most of the girls were gossiping and talking in loud tones, and one was reading a thick volume Julia recognised to be a Harry Potter book. Everything was going on fine, till she entered. Then everyone just stared at her in complete silence. Julia felt awkward. After a minute or so, a boy started a fight with another one, and everyone started cheering on sides. Julia felt relieved their attention was diverted. After their fight got a bit severe, and the short one boxed the ear of the tall one, a girl called in the class-teacher.

Julia had met her class-teacher once before the school had started. She was a plump woman who had her long hair tied up in a neat pony. She always wore a tight-fitting formal blazer and a skirt, it seemed. A look of astonishment seized her face as she rushed to the crowd. The boys immediately stopped fighting, and stood like beaten dogs with their tails between their legs. The teacher scolded them as the others rushed back to their seats. She asked Julia to sit on the first bench between that curly-haired girl who was reading the book and the bespectacled boy. The girl smiled at her. She said her name was Charlotte. The boy introduced himself too. His name, Julia came to know, was Philip. Charlotte looked a lot like her, except that she had straight black hair tied in two pigtales. Philip was taller, had dark brown hair and was lanky. Julia had gotten into a conversation with them for a while till the class settled down. They told her that they were neighbours, and Julia could make out that they were best friends as well. Charlotte was cheerful, and Philip was funny. Suddenly, the teacher called out Julia's name. She stood up, unaware of what to say or do, and managed to utter an inaudible yes. The teacher started introducing Julia to the class. The entire room of sixth-graders looked at her, and she noticed that the boy who had teased her

this morning happened to be her classmate and was smirking in his seat. After that, she sat down, and everyone studied till practise time. When the next recess was over, all the children went to practise, and Julia was left alone in the class. She had doubts about what to do on the annual day, and talked to her class teacher alone for a while. Julia seemed satisfied, but was still disturbed by the comments that boy made. She tried to shake them off, and went to the football-ground where she found Charlotte still reading her book in a corner. She talked with Charlotte for a while about the Annual day.

After a few weeks of practise, everyone was ready. Julia seemed to feel the enthusiastic atmosphere in the class. It was finally the day Julia would perform on stage, and that tall boy had to ruin her morning. He had started interfering in her things. He was extremely extroverted and jealous. Because Julia had some kind of an interest in psychology, she could tell that he had a Passive-Aggressive Jealous personality. And yet, she hadn't started it. Philip and Charlotte had comforted her when they saw her crying in the dressing room. Today was her day, they said, and nobody would ruin it.

She waited behind the stage with the students taking part in the Play, and heard her name called out. She went onto the stage with a smile, wearing her best white frock, and sat down behind the piano. She took a deep breath, and looked at the audience before her. Although the spotlights focussing on her were blinding, she could see an enormous audience, composed mostly of parents. Slowly, she let her magic unfold.

The keys of the piano were white and soft. She started off slowly playing the notes with surprising ease. She played her favourite piece, Fur Elise. The audience was spell bound by her impressive ability. Julia poured out her entire feelings, rage,

sadness and frustrations on the piano. The emotions seemed to just release from her mind like wisps floating away. The music came out beautifully as she swayed with it. When she finished, she stood up, and gave a short curtsy. The entire audience erupted into a wave of thunderous applause, some people even stood up, giving her a standing ovation. Julia's happiness knew no bounds. she exited the stage and saw Charlotte rushing close to give her a big, squeezing hug. That performance told Julia that she could rise up from her past into a bright, strong girl. She didn't need anyone's opinions on her vitiligo or appearance. She had entered her own new world, and had done so brilliantly.

Category: 14-18 Years; Poems

1st Place: Foreign

by Logan Wade

His eager boat crawls on a trodden shore, its head
laid to rest on unfamiliar sand, coarse like glass
only accustomed feet can troop. Melting in the
balmy heat, he lets out a foreign smile, his white teeth
bared in the new-found haven. In disbelief, he sings,
his voice half-muted, sodden from the stretch
of covered sea. He spies the emerald forest before him,
broken cries drowned by the labyrinth of palm,
privilege drawn like rope from his breath.
Beneath the torrid sun, his kaleidoscope eyes
paint the sky a million hues of blue. Sat out
too long in summer's passion, he decides on shade
under spirited trees. The perfume of foliage
enters through bleeding nostrils, which royally
stain the tropical soil with his will. Human discovery
hums its vital blessing through the primeval jungle.
He marks signs of life upon a tree's honest spine,
wistful with each inhale, floating on a fickle breath.
His hands on bark burn red raw like metal does,
the trees remain impassive, native birds
like beacons with strawberry wings and
aiming smiles fly above the grand horizon.
An oddity in their flight imbues a meaning
he would call hope.

2nd Place: 40 Years

by Declan Musto

40 years ago,
I made a mistake,
Now I know
the consequences.

On the last day of a 40 year fine
I emerged on a world that was no longer mine.
The trees were still green,
The sky was still blue,
But, in sight, was no one I knew.

I wish I could tell you the glory of the day,
But my children, once young, were now aged.
A wrinkled face, familiar yet troubled
A grey, worn, lip trembled and wobbled.
A single tear rolled down a venerable eye.

I was given a 'life' sentence, and that was quite fitting
As prison had not simply taken my time,
It had rather taken my world, my life.
I arrived home and in place of my wife,
Was an old empty chair,
No person.
No Life.

I had come to realise my terrible fate.
To die alone, with no partner, no mate.
Unto me this world was given,
I threw it away, forgotten, not forgiven.

My New World.

3rd Place: Becoming A Refugee

by Esha Shahzad Aslam

Syria I'll apologise, you are led by an ignorant man,
a dictator, a tyrant, a heartless oppressor.
Too many deaths, your land is destroyed, blood sadly spilt
will it wash away in the valley of tears?

I am sorry your people must leave,
I am sorry the young have blood on their hands.
Forgive them for their sins,
they had no choice.

My brother should start school today,
I am ignorant to whether he lives.
Handed to a stranger on a boat,
a hole in mama's heart.

Me too now, it's time I leave.
Mama is staying, her land she cannot deceive.
I must go for the child I am now to receive.
Relief and uncertainty as I make it across
a line I wish never existed.

I'm here now, I can live freely.
Terrorist, immigrant they say.
They believe I am not human?
Rather they know me as scum.

Page 3 of 3

No-one understands
I'm not a thief of work.
I am here to ensure my child has a tomorrow,

so why can't they perceive?

Highly Commended: Forever Mankind

by Thomas Armstrong

Unexplored horizons, a new frontier for humans to overcome.
The great, swallowing blackness, like a carpet stretching to the
ends of the universe.
A burning ambition, held since the innocent days of childhood.
Space.

The beginnings. An inquisitive mind, honed on colours and
construction.
Prodigious talents, a desire to explore every one of the world's
corners.
Adventurous beyond his years, the boy could not be held down.
An untethered spirit, floating on the wind.

Education, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.
The new world of school brought paralysing fear - people,
routine, punishment. But he rose above.
Respected by his elders, loved by his peers, the once-timid
child left his new horizon a man.
His first ordeal, passed with flying colours.

There was only one path on his mind.
His cherished dream soon became a tangible goal, as he took
another leap forward.
Acceptance to perform his divine duty, exploration of the
greatest expanse.
The journey of the nomad began.

The training was rigorous, intensive, debilitating, but he came
through.
Imbued with a new confidence, the wanderer mastered yet
another domain.

What was once thought unattainable, a flight of fancy, would occur before his eyes.

Humans were to walk on the crimson orb for the first time.

The sights the astronaut saw simply amazed him.

Celestial, indescribable things, too beautiful for words.

The scarlet sphere tantalised him, without equal in its majesty.

Then the agony began.

Like Icarus, the boy was torn apart by his one true love.

Death was his deliverance in the end, a mere respite for the torturous pain.

He was revered as a hero, a pioneer, a champion of the great and the good.

But the politicians only wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer.

Highly Commended: Nythyngale in the Heeth

by Olivia Eaton

The benyne Nythngale in the Heeth
Alderbest to sparwe
Over the heeth in the morne
Ferre on its greet viage
Its wings nyce, quaint, gentil. Bellow sterres, above the
garland
Above dayesyeyes, sheene flour-de-lys and hardy holt
Overal is arught beauty. Pleyn delit to the eyes

The estaat is not affile always
Atte fulle there is droghte reyn
Fleing owher, the nythyngale in the heeth
Thereto the rein kerts the byrd to fall
Into the holt full of jolitee previously
Organicalls wente siherly to toun
The soote estaat soon to retun

Quhen the sun back-come
The Nythyngale is back in the Heeth
Back above deyesyes, sheene flour-de-lys and hardy holt
Embesett by mure birds
It is happely free happely alone again
The Nythyngale in the Heeth

Commended: Saving the World

by Olivia Burgess

A person from the future tells me of a new world.
It is dying...it isn't surviving.
They show me all we can't see.

We pollute our seas
With chemicals the fish didn't need.
The land is dusty, droughts and rain
Don't live together, they live in vain.
Children grow up without a tiger or bear.
Zoos are empty; they have nothing to share.
And for the forests chopped and burned?
It's all for a waste of money earned.
And for what of the government, twisted and cursed?
Dirty lies immersed in their skin.
The sight makes me sick.

I remember my own world, with hands to sow the plants and
lift up the trees,
A heart flowing through the rivers and seas,
And a smile. A beaming, glorious smile.
But this world won't last if we carry on hurting and breaking
and it's screaming for help-

Rich businessmen yearn for outer space
Discover new planets, find a new place
To call home. Yet we seek new options, relentless research,
painful plans, reach for the skies-
But who will care for our planet left behind? Who will love its
hands, its heart, its smile?
Who will dream of days gone past,
When the grass was lush and green and the fish swam fast

By themselves.

The person bids me farewell.

So I take it as a warning: I scream and shout to save our
world

I feel its hands, its heart, its smile. And if it could talk, I'm sure

My new and yet old world would say

Thank you.

Commended: Far Away

by Chinmayee Bhattacharjee

Far away in the woods
A woman wails
Over the dead body of her child

Far away from a balcony
A lady sings sweet melodies
to her lover below

Far away on the shore
Someone thoughtfully
gazes at the moon

Far away in a garden
A father plays happily
with his daughter

All the cries, words, thoughts
and laughter does
the flowing wind carry

It blows and plays softly
Bringing a new world to my ears.

Commended: New World

by Lily Wells

I am not perfect,
But, I find myself trapped,
In this perfect world.

Yet this is no new world,
But, somehow,
It feels like I have just appeared,
Here, in this perfect world.

Now I have come to realise,
That this is a perfect world,
Full of: perfectionists, critics and lovers.

I am one of these creatures,
Contained quietly in this cage of human existence,
This new realm,
Of which I am trapped.

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 25 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.

