

Winter 2024

Issue 7



Spoken

The Oakham School Literary Magazine

Foreword

A very warm welcome to the wintery seventh issue of SpOken, Oakham's pupil-led original literary magazine, edited by students and editors-in-chief Dr Reddy and Ms Curtis. We have selected creative pieces written by the students, ranging from poetry to encouraging speeches, to brighten your winter break!

In this issue you will find a wide variety of works of different themes, lengths and forms - superb imaginative writing of former Form 5 students, passionate poems about truth and dreams, insightful and inspiring speeches, fantastical fictional stories that will break the boundaries of the ordinary world, as well as non-fiction articles presenting outstanding knowledge. All passages come from talented Oakhamians of almost every age and year.

We hope that SpOken will encourage our young writers to continue experimenting and growing, while also unleashing the creative potential of more students! If you submitted a work that hasn't been included, please do not feel discouraged – it might very well shine in the next issue! And if you wish to share your work in the magazine, you are always welcome to contact us or Dr Reddy via email. We wait to hear from you. Finally, we want to say a huge thank you, our readers, because without you this wonderful space of creativity and sharing would not come to life.

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Front cover by Howie Parford, Form 7

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The following poems were written to celebrate Black History Month and as part of a poetry competition inspired by Langston Hughes' poem 'Dreams':

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

Life is Like a Ship

Edward Johnston (F2), First Place

Life is like a ship

It hits you with force

The good the bad

The calm the storm

Don't let it make you mad

Because if you do

The waves will swallow you

You've got to look up

To the beaches and above

Use it like the waves

It might chill all you could see

You grow like a tree

The branches and the leaves

**Wesson Smith and Will Fennell
(F2), Second Place**

Dreams come back
Like a pat on the back
If the dreams come true
The world will open upon you
Never give up on your dream
Because it will always gleam
If your dreams run away
Catch them and let them play

***Dreams*
Sara Hollingshead (F1), Third Place**

Dreams are like a balloon
Don't let them pop
Don't let them go
Follow your dreams
As they can turn into a reality
If you believe
You can be happy
Dreams can build up
Like a jigsaw
Into a life
A good life
Always try
Never give up
Don't hate
Hate has 4 letters
And so does love It's ok to ask for help
And friends can help your dreams come true.
Never give up.

Go live life!

Dougie Tierney and Preston Efele (F1)

Hold fast to your dreams

For when dreams grow

Life will never be slow

But it will surely grow.

Hold fast to your dreams

For if dreams show

In life there will be no foe

And no friend will go.

Hold fast to your dreams

For when they ferociously fight

The only slight light

Will be loose dynamite.

Hold fast to your dreams

For when it is so blindingly bright

They will soar like a kite

At the greatest height.

Go live life!

Dreams

Jemima Wilson and Scarlett Dixon-Dale (F1)

Dreams do not happen if

You don't believe

Life flies by so you've

Gotta believe

Try and make your dreams

Happen or just believe.

Everybody has a right

To have a dream so take

It, don't leave it and believe

All you need to do

Is believe, believe

Believe!

Dreams

Theo Swann and Josh Walker

Life without dreams is like being in the rain without a coat.

You will find yourself damp and cold,

But when you have dreams you can swim free!

Free to explore anywhere in the sea!

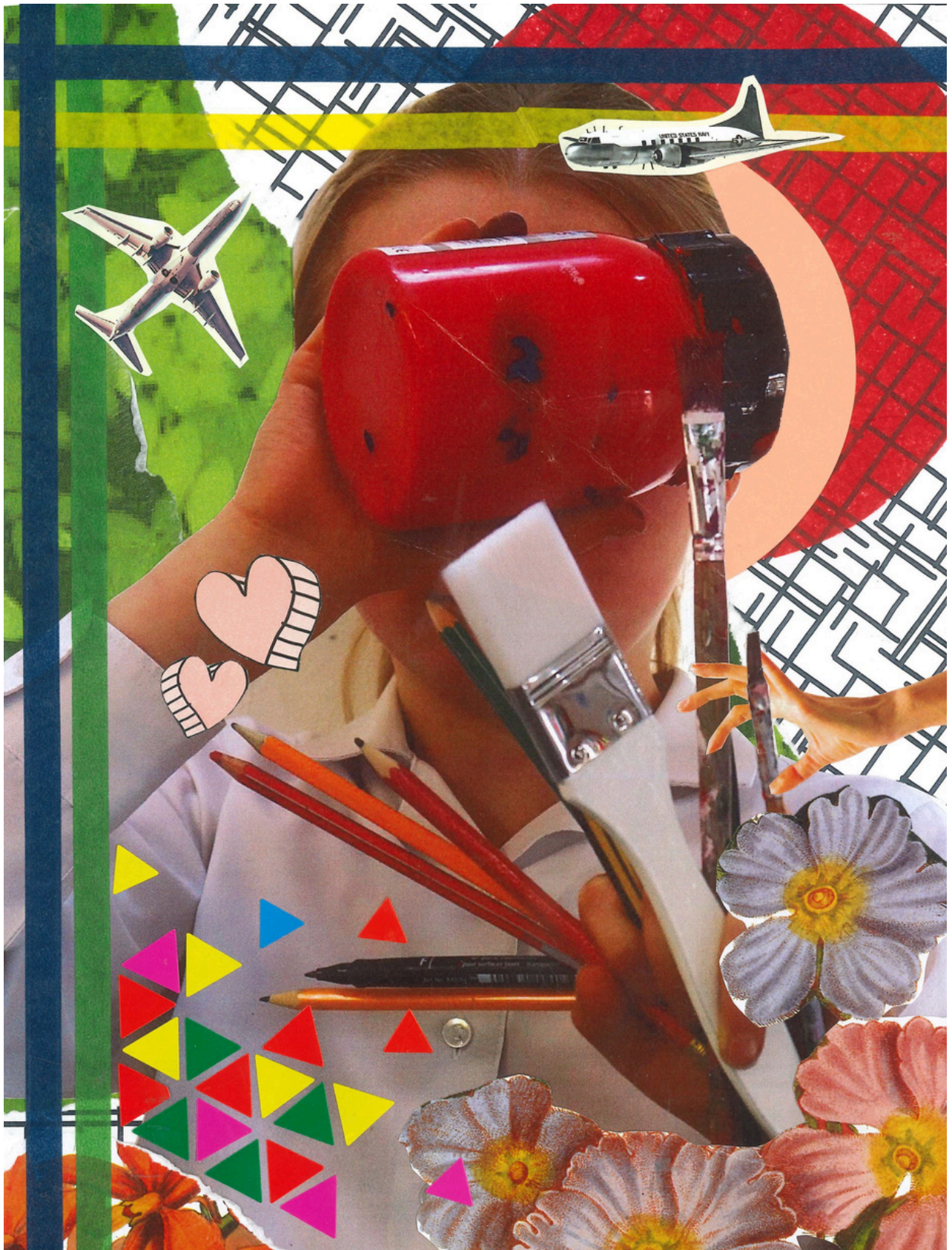
If you don't have dreams, you will feel cold inside.

You will feel sad and confined.

If you have dreams, you will soar and fly,

You will be able to live sky high.

Lower School



Artwork by Martha Lister F2

*What is Truth?***Madeleine Barber**

Truth makes you grow
 Truth opens your eyes
 Truth replaces belief
 Truth cuts through lies
 Truth can hurt or heal
 Can bring justice or guilt
 Tear people apart
 Though on friendship is built.
 Truth lies within Science
 It can be expressed via the word
 but whatever its form, it must always be
 heard.

*The Reality of Truth***Joe Reddy**

The truth about the world isn't
 Vain politicians
 Or get rich quick missions.

 It's not about followers and likes
 Or the latest motorbike.

 Your truth is what you like:
 Walking your dog
 Or going on a hike.

 It's also lazy weekends
 And enjoying time with friends.

 I like what I like,
 You like what you like,
 And that's the truth.

Biscuits
Ben Rumbelow-Lall

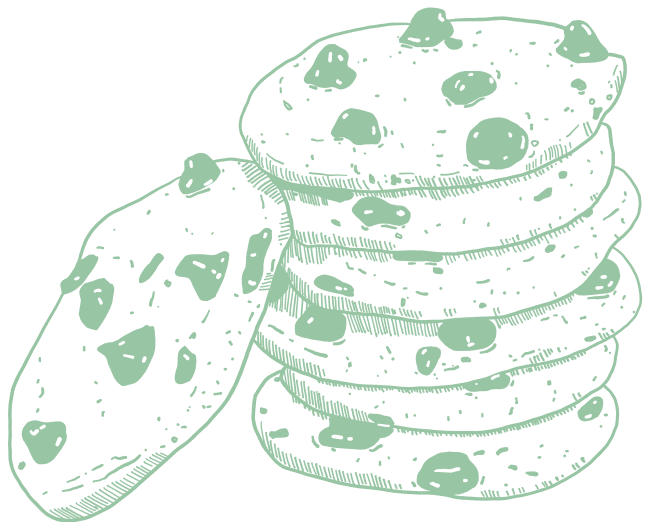
I have a secret biscuit stash
I've kept for many years,
I hid it from my relatives
And almost all my peers.

One morning when I woke for school,
I craved a bourbon biscuit.
I had a jammy dodger too,
I thought that I would risk it.

But as I went on down the stairs,
My mother spotted crumbs.
She also asked me why I had
Some chocolate on my thumbs!

And as I stood there on the spot,
I looked for an excuse.
To get rid of the evidence,
I quickly downed some juice

But mother knew it was a lie,
The crumbs provided proof.
So I decided to confess,
And own-up with the truth.



Pressure
Coco Jordan

With a sweeping glance, you can observe many things
Like the tick of a clock, and the emotion pressure brings
Whether it's school or friends, work or family
If you keep it bottled up, it could become tragedy.
The feelings inside you rage and roar
So you close the gate, close the door.
But then you realise:
Mountains can't emerge without earthquakes.
Rainbows can't form without the rain.
A match can't catch until you strike it,
Because it is friction that causes the flame.
You take a deep breath, and genuinely smile,
Because you know the stress and pressure makes everything worthwhile.
And although it still loiters and hangs in the air,
You know what to do and how to take care.
You know how to laugh and trigger your dimple,
And every day it is becoming more simple
Because in the end, diamonds are formed under pressure
Take it step by step and life will become much fresher.

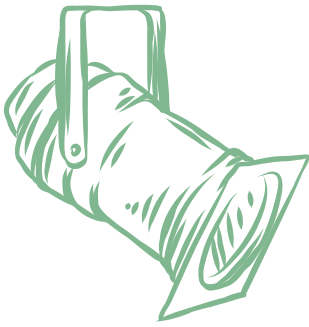
The Four Seasons
Aiden Chung

Spring slowly approaches
The day lights get longer
And the nights get shorter
The warm wind blows
And the green leaves fall
But not for long

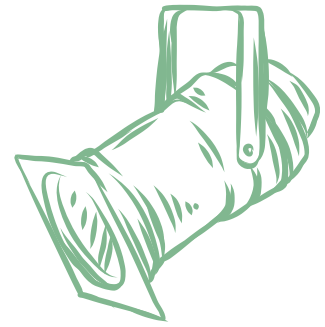
When the weathers start to get hot
Is when summers falls
The sun shines its brightness down to the ocean
When sunset arrives, the sky slowly turns orange
The warming summer breeze
Slowly the fun times turn into memories

The sound of the autumn footsteps slothfully gets louder
The leaves turn orange, the air gets crisp
The temperature gets cooler by time
It is a perfect weather for outdoor activities
In a blink of an eye the time was over

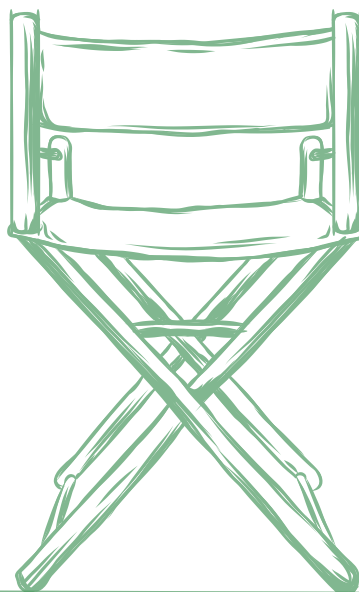
Soon the temperature starts to drop faster
Is when winter arrives, the coolest and the darkest season
Snow starts falling for the sky
Soon enough the landscape is covered by a blanket of snow
The trees are full of layers of snow
The mountains slowly disappearing out of sight
At night deer start to appear on the sky is when the best thing about winter starts



Theatre
Georgia Howett



I could see the water vapor escaping from my mouth
I could sense the tingles dancing down my back
I could smell the obviously expensive perfume from the lady in front
I walked towards the decorative doors
To seek the warmth of the theatre
I felt the blood-coloured seats skimming my fingers
I could hear the mutters and giggles of families just like ours
I was on the edge of my seat
Let the show begin...



Never have I ever...
Clara Olleros Mateo

Never have I ever
Seen the whole truth,
Because the world has it
Hidden behind curtains of tulle.
It's kept in a safe,
Guarded by a slave.
"Never have I ever
Given the safe's key," says the slave
"They keep me here,
And I'm never to leave."
"Would you give me
The key to that safe?
Would you let me
Read its words?"
Never have I ever
Heard anything but the whisper
Of never-ending lies
That last forever,
In a place where
Truth changes every minute,
And only lies
Last in it.

The Harsh Reality of Truth

George Gaskell

In a world of shadows and deceit,
Where lies are told and secrets eat,
The reality of truth we meet,
A bitter pill that's hard to beat.
The masks we wear to hide our fears,
The words we say to soothe our tears,
The lies we tell to ease our pain,
All conceal the truth in vain.
But truth will rise, it never sleeps,
It rises like a morning creep,
And though we try to hide from sight,
It shines like light in endless night.
So let us face the truth we hide,
And let it cut like a sharp wind,
For only then can we be free,
And view the truth we're meant to see



Our Environment

Isobel Styles

The leaves that fall like autumn stones,
The crash of waves that calm my bones.
The star-lit sky that covers our rooms,
Seem to silence the dreadful booms.
What has our world become,
“It’s our fault”, “what have we done?”
Our forests once lush,
And our winds were clean,
But both are now dreadfully keen.
Our oceans were shining,
But now are whining.
To stop the axes, chopping our land,
It is now that we will stand,
Stopping the plastic that plague our seas,
We will do what it takes, even if we beg on our knees.

Skiing Heaven
Edward Johnston

As I tighten my boots
I hear a clack
As I see the metal bind on to each other
I put my toes in my skis and stamp down
I grab my poles and my goggles, and off I go
I take in my surroundings
The snow is blinding in the morning sun
I make soft turns
As I go down the perfect piste
I enjoy the quiet of the morning
I speed up and cut into the freshly battered snow
I cut down the piste
Snow flies all around me
I stop on a sharp turn
Look down the pistes all around me
I see the towering sign
The piste is steep
But that's not stopping me
I speed down taking sharp turns
I speed up and cut through the snow
My skis glide across the perfect snow
I leave the run at pace
And cut into another
I keep going at pace not slowing down
I weave across the wide-open piste
And don't stop
Not for anything

Middle School



Photograph taken by Toby James F5

The Beautiful Truth
Jessica Warke

The path may be narrow;
full of brambles and with spikes.
Though those who stumble through it,
will find joy beyond delights.

The path may be narrow;
But the wide one that some take,
only leads to harm and hurt.
Sorrow at a later date.

The path may be narrow;
hidden from the peering eye.
When you take the turn of faith,
those you love may pass on by.

The path may be narrow;
the journey long and winding.
But there's beauty in the thorns,
and flowers for your finding.

The path may be narrow;
At the top you'll turn and face,
golden steps with pearly gates,
Leading to a realm of grace.

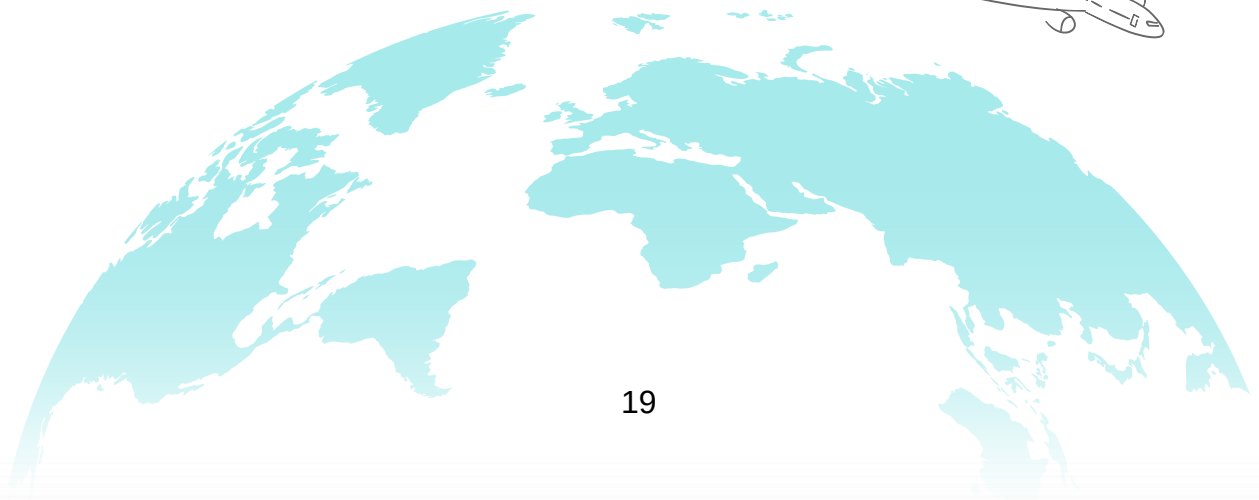
Home Sweet Home
Emerick Cheung

How much I miss home
Cannot be described
I'd eat my homecooked rice
And put the Barraclough food aside

How much I'd love to go home and sleep on my bed
Than to wait for my roommate with flies around my head
Flew 10,000 kilometres above the sky
Played my first rugby game and scored nothing but a try

It's extremely hard to call 2 places your home
When both stand so far apart on the globe
Went from the view of the harbour and skyscrapers
To bringing my organizer with a pencil and paper

Made a mistake and took my family for granted
Everything changed when this enormous school started
Now I miss everyone that cares about me
I hope one day to go home, I can't stand under 10 degrees



*Memories***Elizabeth Bagnall**

Sometimes I feel as if my brain is a
 light bulb switching
 on and off, remembering
 and forgetting memories
 which I try to hold on to
 so dear.

Memories are like smoke; you can
 sense them there but can
 never quite put your
 finger on
 where.

Memories are like bones in your body,
 supporting and holding
 everything together.
 Important to have
 and impossible
 to live without.

*Truth about the Internet***Max Bell**

I hear the sounds of anger when I browse the words
 Every morning when I hit my phone
 I feel misheard
 And every post makes me more blurred
 Then even word feels slurred
 I put down my phone and get to work
 And remember I am just a clerk
 I find out the media is full of jerks
 And everyone online is a liar
 Social media is causing fire
 Fake news and fake hires
 Causes the world to not know what is real
 They do not know how I feel
 The world is not ideal
 People love to spread misinformation
 This is a ruined generation
 Unless we start communicating the truth
 To not hurt the youth
 And allow them to understand reality
 Let them run past the grass trees
 And not spread this disease

What does it mean to be rich? Two Speeches

Madeleine Cartwright

Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for having me. Today I will be talking to you about what it means to be rich. Specifically, challenging the typical definition of 'rich' and the related attributes of being rich. By the end, I will share with you my own definition.

Look at the media. These days our view of being rich is directly related to physical and material possessions. We see these people with big houses, modern cars, chunky flasks and branded jumpers – that they have due to the money that they have earned or been given or been born into or in any other way. And we, either subconsciously or consciously, tie it to the attribute of 'being rich'. Which is totally understandable. From early ages this process has been engrained in us. As children, jobs were described as something you do to get this thing called 'money' that will help you get another thing called 'stuff'. So, as children, we were obsessed with 'stuff'. The more stuff you have, the better. Although, now being older, it's a bit more complicated, it's fundamentally the same. The typical concept of being rich is having large amounts of stuff that you want and can afford. That is being rich.

And yet, we as British citizens have access to a tap, while 29% of the world don't have access to water. We can buy a packet of chocolate digestives while a whole nation live in famine. We wear worn-down, unsupportive trainers which your brother borrows while they walk on broken ground with barefeet. Being rich is relative. How could it not be?

A BBC reporter, called George Alagiah, wrote a book called *A Passage to Africa*. In this book, he writes: "In global terms, if you have a roof over your head, food on the table, a doctor who will not charge you if you are ill and a school place that does not depend on an ability to pay, then, my friend, you are rich." This completely throws our understanding of the definition of the word 'rich' out the window. It's saying: if you have life's essentials, then you are rich. If you told a child, starving on the outskirts of Somalia, that you had take-out fish and chips from the local shop, you are probably the most well-fed person they have talked to. A person, who cuts people's hair, in the slums of Mumbai could be a well-respected businessman in the community. We are lucky for our definition of 'rich' to be so non-essential.

And now, my listeners, what if I told you that being 'rich' has nothing to do with what you have but the things you experience. Think back to the holidays or the weekend. Something that you enjoyed. What do you remember? Do you remember the way that you got there, or who was with you, or what the weather was like? Do you remember exactly how much it cost, or how excited you felt while buying it? Being rich, is living. We are rich because of freedom of decision and choice, and we are able to dance and run. Believe it or not, people out there do not have this. We are rich because of this variety of life that we call 'everyday'.

So, are you rich?

Isla Debenham

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for welcoming me here today to talk about my views on the meaning of the term 'rich'. I hope that after listening to me, you all will spend some time reflecting on what it means to you.

So, when you hear the word 'rich', what comes to mind? Is it stacks of cash? Private jets? Diamond jewellery? In the dictionary, the definition of 'rich' is "having a great deal of money or assets", which is essentially being wealthy. The word 'rich' also seems to come with a sense of hierarchy: we often deem people with lots of money to be 'superior'.

But does having lots of money really make you rich? In my opinion, for someone to live a rich life, they should be happy and feel fulfilled. They should have strong and healthy relationships with others, good physical and mental health and well-being, and they should find things that they love to do, and make sure that they do it often. They should always be trying new things, to discover more enjoyment, and this means that the person should be open-minded.

In the world we live in today, inequality can be seen wherever you go. There are homeless people living on the streets of glamorous cities, and there are still plenty of people who cannot afford access to clean water, or enough food to feed their whole family. In their eyes, to have the basic means to live is to be rich. In George Alagiah's words: "In global terms, if you have a roof over your head, food on the table, a doctor who will not charge you if you are ill and a school place that does not depend on ability to pay, then, my friend, you are rich." Therefore, if you are lucky enough to have those, if you are lucky enough to have the chance of living a good life without having to worry about how you are going to afford your next meal, you are rich.

I'm sure many of you in the audience may still be disagreeing with me. But you see, it is all about perspective. If you are bankrupt and forced to live on the streets, anyone with a place to live in is rich to you. If you have a steady income, but it is only enough to pay for the necessities, then you see 'rich' as having money to spare to spend on luxuries like holidays, or expensive clothes. Even a billionaire, someone in the highest percentage of income, could still feel as though they do not live a rich and fulfilled life. It is in human nature to feel as though what we have is not enough. We always want more. We are a greedy species.

I hope to change that, and I hope that all of you here today will help me. When you leave this room, I want you to set one goal for yourself: I want you to try your hardest to live a rich life. Tell your friends and family that you are grateful for them. You could even try to make some new friends. Find time to relax and do the things you love, whether that be reading or rock climbing, or anything in-between. And most importantly: try new things. Be open-minded. You never know what may surprise you and bring you joy. Appreciate everything around you, and then you will feel rich.

*A Journey from Germany***Henry Jordan**

5, Five days to go before we cross to the west,
my mum and I will wake up and get dressed.

I will go to school like a normal day,
But little do I know I am on my way.

4, Four days to go before we cross to the west,
tensions rise and I feel unrest.

I will wake up and begin to pray,
But little do I know I am on my way.

3, Three days to go before we cross to the west,
I am way too stressed.

My dad is angry and my mum's away,
Little do I know I am on my way.

2, Two days to go before we cross to the west,
I can't fall asleep or get any rest.

I am packing my bags ready to go,
I can only bring one bag though.

1, One day to go before we cross to the west.

I won't get any sleep,
I won't see my home,
I won't see my friends,
I won't see my dad.

A true story from my German Grandma escaping from East to West Germany, leaving everything
behind just for safety.

Why must lives be forfeit
Lowri Watts

Why must lives be forfeit for man's poor judgement.

Tis not something so simple

As a token a gambler easily loses.

Do you know naught but numbers

When people are worth less than Jewels?

Watch grieving families scatter poppies

Mocking the blood spilled at your fool's command,

Same fools we pretend to know.

Make my sisters, my brother, and me

Know nothing of war.

But this and more.

"History repeats itself"

Excuses!

Are you blind or deaf?

Both even?

You repeat history.

Make it something.

We can smile about it tomorrow.



*Truth***Fraser Cameron**

If you do not seek truth
 live a life of fallacy;
 a folly of fiction,
 masquerade a mask of malice.
 For lies may bring you comfort
 and are painless to embrace,
 but in this world, you will have no face.

Manipulative media.
 The dread of divergence.
 What we know, what we are.
 All coerced by a cyber current
 into a foreign shell.
 A prison.
 That is not your truth.
 Not your nature. Not your character.

Truth is uncouth;
 it has no rhyme,
 no pace,
 no shape,
 no form, no boundary.

To live your life you must open your eyes.
 Be free of the mold, no longer entwined.
 Disregard their wicked tongue
 and belittling gaze.
 Find your Truth and let it blaze.

*Pollution is the Truth***Juliet Bell**

Truth hurts like a piece of plastic,
 Lost in the sea,
 Stuck in the mouth of a turtle,
 Taken in by the sea,
 Hidden in the coral,
 Swallowed by a whale.
 It swallows the sea whole,
 Just like a whale.

Truth hurts like a cloud of smoke,
 Seeping into the sky.
 Smoke billowing out of factories,
 Out of cars, and us, and you.
 We must know what to do,
 Before it swallows us whole,
 Before it swallows you.
 Hidden by the stars in the sky,
 Pollution is the truth.

Seven Truths

Isabel Hurst

one world
that's dying
who cares?
who's trying?

two genders
they say
what about those
who aren't included?

three big parties
in our country
when will they realise
this is not monopoly?

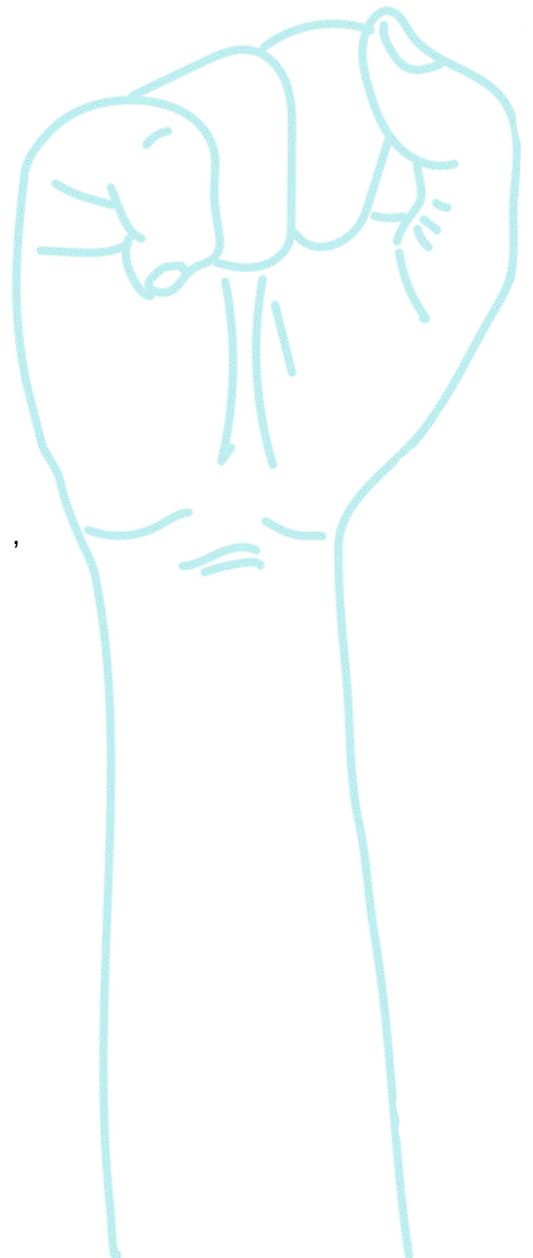
four things featured
in the news
murders, clothes, celebrities
and designer shoes

five wars
well-known
what about the others
with no home?

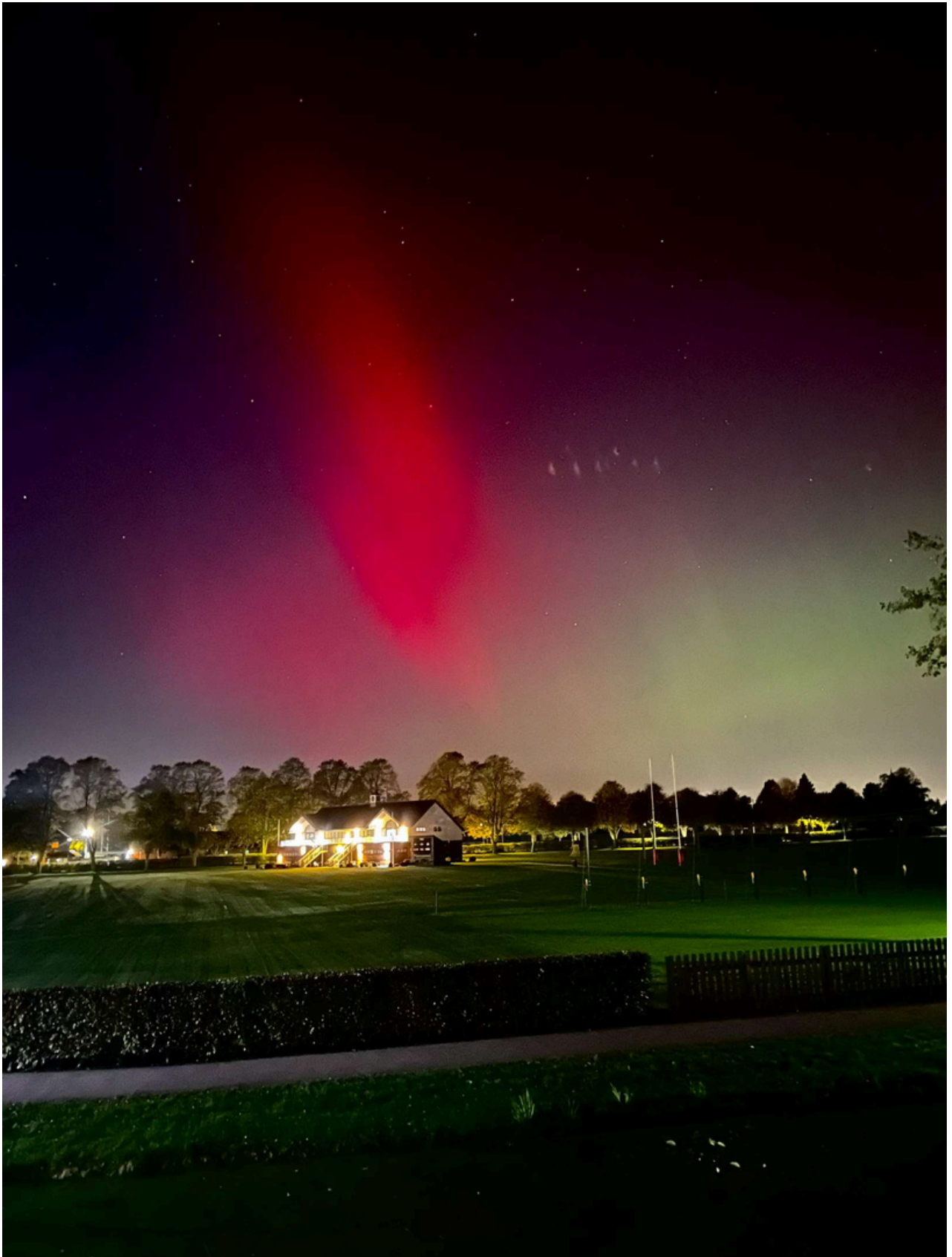
six women's rights
education, abortion, their own life,
marriage, religion, to feel safe
walking home at night

seven continents
all inhabited by humans
why can't the same species
get along?

for a month...
a minute...
a second...
all too long



Upper School



Photograph taken by Abby Tragen F6

*'I'm fine'***By Agnes Reddy**

'I'm fine', you say, a simple disguise,
hiding the weight behind your eyes.

A smile, a mask, a practiced line,
beneath the surface, nothing's fine.

"I'm fine," a whispered armour we wear,
protecting the truth, fragile and bare.

To people around that do not care,
You hide your pain and will not share.

The world accepts what it can see,
but inside, you're longing to be free.

"I'm fine," you say, a beautiful lie,
as the truth stays silent, passing by.

Make today count**Agnes Reddy**

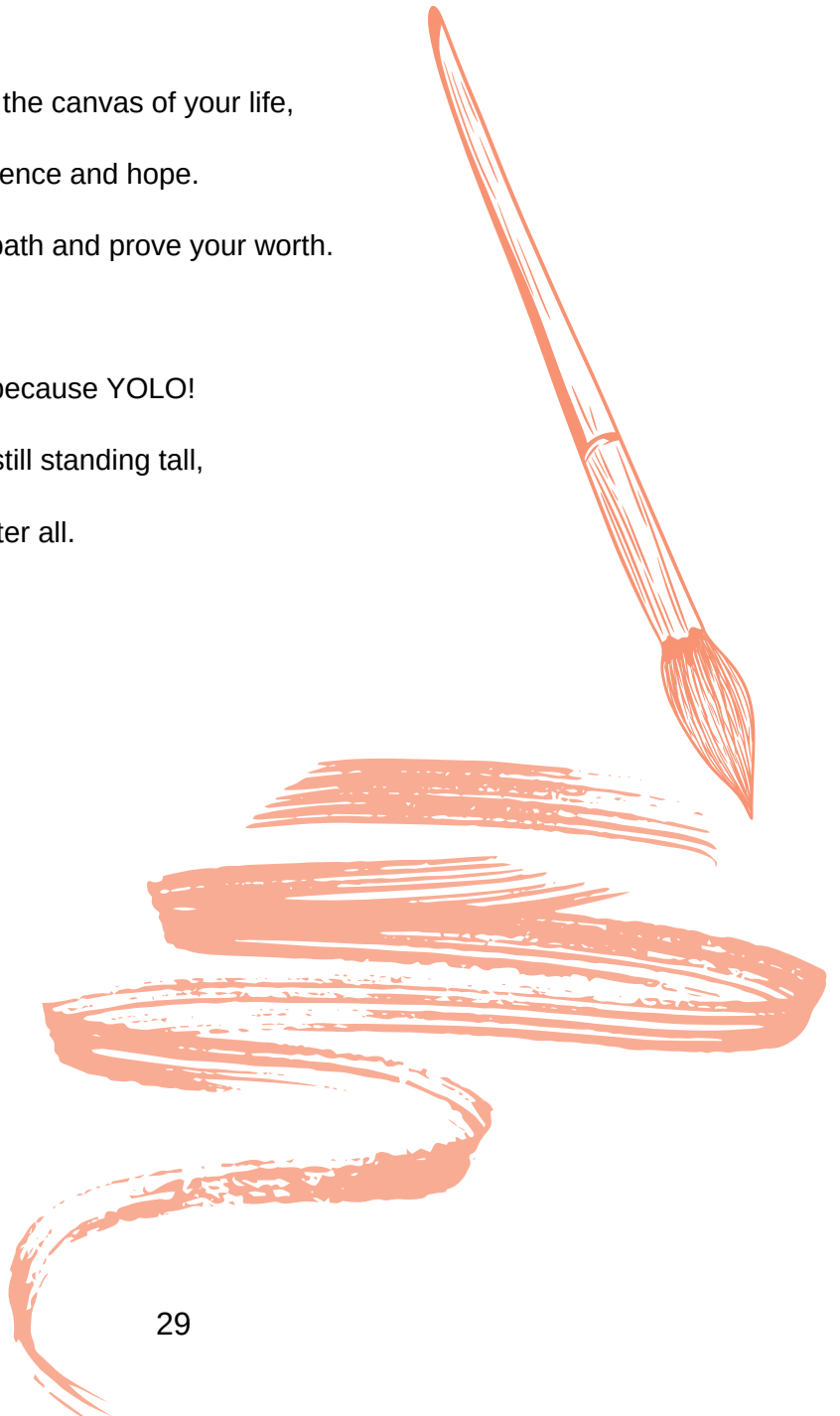
Rise and shine! Or, you know, just rise... the shine is optional.

You've got 24 hours to make some magic,
or at least try not to trip over your own two feet before noon.

Today is a gift, wrapped in possibilities,
a chance to write your story anew.
and focus on the beauty of now.

Every choice is a brushstroke on the canvas of your life,
painting a picture of resilience and hope.
With every choice, you shape your path and prove your worth.

Make today count fam—because YOLO!
And if by evening, you're still standing tall,
That's a win, after all.



The Bus Stop
Edward Fairweather

Sophie ran down the street, sheets of icy rain lashing down on her as she splashed past the closely packed terraced houses huddled together in long rows. A sign to her right, dripping with water, advertised fresh food while a drenched one to her left announced the presence of lottery tickets. The ugly orange glow from the streetlamps bathed the waterlogged street in an artificial light, refracting off the puddles that had formed down the yawning maw of the road and casting an eerie haze into the saturated air.

A car sloshed past, sending a spray of water at Sophie who cursed as the cold droplets drenched her already soaking form. Freezing rivulets trickled down her neck as, wiping the water from her eyes, she looked ahead and saw the bus stop in the distance. Thank goodness, she thought and hurried over to it shaking off her umbrella as she sat down on the cold metal bench, breathing a sigh of relief as the rain fell down harmlessly on the cheap plastic roof.

She flattened out her damp skirt and leant her umbrella against the side of the shelter. Laying her schoolbag on the ground, Sophie looked ahead of her at the other side of the street. A brightly lit coffee shop glowed across from her. Inside she could see people laughing and chatting as a few bored looking employees milled about. The strong smell of processed sugar, salt and fat wafted across causing her to nearly gag. She coughed and drew her woollen cardigan more closely around her, shivering as a chill breeze slithered past.

Looking up to her right for the arrival of the next bus she studied a digital sign that told her it would not be here for another half hour. Great, she sighed, more time spent in this God-forsaken part of the city. She opened her schoolbag and checked her phone. Its flickering ghoulish glow bloomed up - and then died. She cursed again. Would this day never end? Instead, she brought out the day's newspaper and began to read, trying to focus on the words as the time stumbled by.

It was then when it sat down next to her.

Sophie ignored it at first until she noticed out of the corner of her eye that two jagged antlers crowned its head like the branches of a tree. Not registering this for a few detached seconds, she continued to pore over the crossword - until she nearly dropped her newspaper with her palpable terror. Its desiccated body was enveloped in a thick layer of matted shaggy fur, its limbs were too long, its hands were too wide, its feet –no- its claws were the size of dustbin lids. Sophie began to shake uncontrollably, she nearly tore the newspaper in half with her tensed hands as she saw that it didn't have a chest. Instead, great spiny arches of its ribcage jutted out of a gaping black hole as it sat reclined on the chewing gum encrusted bench. Its head was drawn out in a long bestial snout with wicked bone white teeth. Saliva dripped from its panting jaws while its eyes –oh lord its eyes- burned with a crimson fire.

It turned to look at her.

All the colour drained from her face and dripped onto the dirt-strewn ground to form a defeated puddle as it opened its gnarled mouth and met her petrified gaze. Then from its scabrous jaws it uttered a guttural choking growl,

"11 down is Hyacinth."

Sophie blinked.

"Your crossword? 11 down, a small genus of spring blooming perennials. Hyacinth."

The silence seemed to smother them like a muffler. A car, cruising past, kicked up a haze of water while the rain, hammering a staccato rhythm on the roof, dripped onto the filthy floor.

Sophie debated with herself on how best to reply. She tried to say "sorry" but ended up giving a high-pitched squeak. The Thing shifted its jaws in a way that suggested a smile as it indicated the inky scrawl on her crumpled newspaper. Sophie's stomach crawled across the ground as it pointed with a blood-stained claw at the grey sheet. She nodded a little too quickly as she brought a trembling pen to the paper and began to scribble a wobbly line that vaguely resembled the word "hyacinth." Sophie shook her head. Was she dreaming? Was this real?

She brought her hand to her upper arm and pinched it. Sophie continued pinching until she was convinced she was feeling pain.

The Thing withdrew its arm and lay back on the rusty seat, looking at some of the more tattered posters with mild interest, its spindly antlers rattling. Sophie's heart, already pounding like a drum, began to beat - if possible, even faster. She spun her dinner plate sized eyes to stare at the Thing, its bored figure absently admiring some intricate graffiti sprawled over a dank wall. The writhing clouds above continued their onslaught with renewed vigour, but this didn't seem to bother it.

Sophie wanted to run. To scream. To sprint away from this... Thing and never look back.

Desperately she looked up at the blinking sign in despair, willing it to announce the bus's arrival. Five minutes had passed.

Sophie stood up. She walked towards the edge of the bus stop and unfurled her still dripping umbrella. Mournfully, she gazed out into the wall of descending water, already clawing with its icy tendrils at her ankles.

"Leaving so soon?"

She turned around. The Things abhorrent head was cocked innocently to the side at a quizzical angle, its molten eyes boring into her.

"There's still 25 minutes until the bus arrives."

"I-", she began, looking from the repugnant creature perched on the bench to the curtains of rain draped across the street.

"Well?" it asked, a pendulum of blood and saliva swinging from a jagged tooth.

For some reason, unbeknownst to the man sat at the bus stop that rainy day, the girl began sprinting away. She had left her crossword, he mused, idly watching the downpour swallow her fleeing figure. He shook his head, kids these days. Sliding the newspaper towards himself, he dabbed his lips with a handkerchief, and began to study the next clue. As Sophie ran down the street.

The Tightrope of Life

Ryewin Bridger

Tear tracks leave behind a pale champagne stain on my cheeks as they spill and as if someone has knocked over a glass of water, I desperately wipe away at it with the sleeve of my shirt. My chest heaves but my brain is clouded. Frightened, the muscles of my body twist into a weaved cage to hold my rapidly beating heart that drums a melody of both chaos and confusion. Screeching, ringing, and deafening: all other sound gets lost in the cacophonous thrum in my ears, coming and going like the waves overlapping on coarse sand.

Lip quivering and legs trembling, I feel like a new-born fawn. I am new to this midnight world of unknown fears with its spindly demons that would snatch you away with its sword-like fingers and a sinister smile. This is the real world. It couldn't be more frightening. I desperately want to grab onto my mother's hand and gain warmth and guidance from the lighthouse of her love; she would take me into her arms if she could and I imagine an angelic ray of heavenly light to cascade from her, blessing me and giving her protection from the demons lurking in the darkness. However, she is not here. She is lost. The night has taken her to some place in the crevices of memory and has bruised her into surrender. Cowering silently, my chin tucks into the blanket that I have delicately wrapped around myself and my eyes, flickering like burnt-out embers, are downcast where they thoroughly search the cracked pavement for a route to take me back to my mother.

An orange glow, dim but familiar, is gifted to me by the lamppost. The image of kind Vesta smiles fondly down at me, radiance interwoven in the threads of her shawl that flickers like an everlasting winter's fireplace. I continue along the pavement yet my feet yearn for the routine of traipsing across the creaky floorboards, of the muscle memory of sneaking past undetected, of contently basking in the refrigerator's lazy mimic of moonlight – but where does it go from here? Without those floorboards to waltz a peculiar number to, my memory becomes nothing; it becomes purposeless: a ghost left on the dancefloor forever waiting crestfallen.

The more I become sullen with sorrow, the more the slithering shadows become restless on the side lines, the more they ache to pounce and latch onto me with their poisoned fangs of misery. In my wavering moment, the walls crumble down. Ruins. Grey ash. Splintered wood. Everything lies at my feet. Childhood paintings. Mural twisting up the stairs. Dusty photographs. Colours fade into an inky pool of oblivion. If everything I love is gone, then what do I have to live for? I lose myself while the vultures crafted out of the shadows with feathers sculpted out of Stygian[RB1] water and eyes whittled out of obsidian consume me. When I was younger, I would swim parallel to the surface and I would wonder how long I would be able to hold my breath before the pressure expanding in my lungs became too heavy a weight. A horrible feeling, yet thrilling all the same – to have the cost of your mortality in your hands, traipsing precariously across the tightrope of life as the jaws of death wait below to eat you whole. In the end, I would always rise up, breaking through the glass surface but now I sink. I am weightless, drifting down as if flying like the small bluebird that used to grace our garden. I sway; falling, sinking, drowning. My breath echoes in my throat. Inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale. It should be easy, and yet my heart aches; the grief is a cruel dancing partner, laboriously exhausting me until death.

I close my eyes. For just a moment. All goes quiet. Halted. Shushed. The shadow snakes and vultures stare at me with watchful eyes. A figure goes against the tide of the procession, breaking apart the mindlessly crashing bodies, each of which having nowhere to go, simply following what they know. Curiosity rises. My eyes open and I instantly recognise the sight of smoky wood-coloured blinking eyes that is often paired with the tinkled laughter of windchimes in the moonlight, the sun-painted freckles twinkling and honey-tinted skin crinkling like a worn-out and faded photograph, the creases telling a story of fondness and time: how it passes and how the seemingly long years have been blurred together by the summer moments, laughing and joking about small moments that I had almost forgotten.

Mother!

Her embrace is my anchor, stopping me from sinking further into the murky grey waters of my grief, and she quietly speaks – the melodic sound fluctuating like the joyous morning hummingbirds – to me. It reels me to the surface. The shadows are gone. Moonlight dances peacefully. The wind whistles a tune of hope.



Reflections

Elsa Milne

My eyes stare back at me. They are distant and cold, floating beneath the glassy surface of the mirror like a crystal orb. I notice, not for the first time, that they are the blue of cornflowers, one of the few things in my reflection that have not changed. The cracks of glass mingle with the wrinkles wriggling across the familiar face, connecting wide eyes, snub nose, pursed mouth. A look of disgust breaks across my features, a grey-tinged wave of coarse hair falls across my wretched face. I take it in my fingers, feeling the once glossy texture ebb away from memory. My face, once youthful and glowing has faded, sunk. The stunning girl who would smile from my reflection, confident and bold, is long gone, lost to a torrent of years, I mourn her.

The fissures that cover the glass spiral out from a centre, meeting and diverging like the network of cobbled roads and narrow alleys that make up London. All paths end at the golden gilt frame, a perfect oval. Perfection, marred by the fall from faded wall to unforgiving floorboard. I reach out to touch it and the fractured surface is sharply cold to my touch, impassive. I trace my thumb along the shimmering web of lines, feeling the ridges like seams on glittering fabric. Thoughts of seven years' bad luck flit vaguely across the back of my mind, barely registering; I sit mesmerised by its broken beauty.

"It's just a mirror."

My voice pierces the silent room, echoing around the sparse furnishings. The wooden slatted wardrobe, spindly washstand and unyielding bed do little to deaden the startling sound. It subdues the shouts and clatter of the bustling Soho streets below. It drowns out the howl of rain on the slate roof. Even the silvery rays of light, having to fight through the window misted with thick smog, seem to quiver in shock. The shafts fall onto my hands, which twist and knot like rope in my lap. My rings flash as they pass in and out of the beams, as if signalling in morse code. They clink together as they meet, and the disjointed tune is eerie in the wake of my outburst. Once snug on my fingers, in recent years they have become loose on the bones now clearly visible through papery skin. I cannot deny that it scares me. My hands plainly show the passing time. The once cashmere soft skin shows a tally of wrinkles and callouses. The war effort did not just affect those martyrs of the trenches, but those left to carry the burden of wartime industry. I shake the frayed ends of my sleeves over my hands to hide them from view. I am a magician who maintains a skilful illusion.

But the mirror is not deceived. The images that it throws back at me are disconcertingly truthful. It is not fooled by my attempts to halt the relentless march of time. I did not notice the change in other people, the way they dull and shrink, how all beauty expires. Each day, the face that greets me is a sharp slap, a change I refuse to accept. The mirror mocks me with its frank indifference. I have taken on its relentless blows over the years, resigned to the inevitable.

Not today. Today I broke like a brittle porcelain figurine. I examine my actions like a fresh crime scene. A reel of images unfolds before my eyes, novel memories. I wince at my stabbing screech of helplessness and rage, recognise my hand clawing for the nearest throwable object, recall the vase flying in a graceful arc, smashing the mirror that now lies on the floor. The all too fleeting satisfaction that was lost all too soon. Surrounding the shattered glass, the vivid splashes of crimson roses splayed around the ceramic wreck that used to hold them. They too are lost to passing time, their velvety petals slowly wither at the edges, the virus of age turning them a dull beige.

I delicately take a stem and roll its treacherous thorns between my fingers, before bringing the softly velvet petals gently to my nose. The smell, with all the sweetness of a summer garden, pulls me back through the years. Her luminous features appear. Her spectral form glitters with the joy of a summer ball. Her ebony hair shines as it falls in waves along her back. I notice the gleaming trellis of ivory beads trailing across the beautiful bodice and puffed sleeves of her gown. Spinning slowly, her pale gold skirt fans outwards catching the gentle blush of the candlelit chandelier. I almost feel the lusciously heavy silk tickle my ankles. She laughs, a bubbly chime, gifting a smile to the face of the surliest onlooker. Vividly blue eyes twinkle under her thick lashes, blissfully aware of many stares fixed on her extraordinary face. Her rosy lips curve into the honeyed smile I have not seen in a long time. How has her face become mine? I have grown old, and horrible and dreadful, but she will remain always young, never older than this particular memory.

I fall back into the present with a grudging jerk. I blink and she is gone without a trace, like she never existed at all. My pensive mood vanishes with her. I abruptly stand with a heavy sigh and shake out the stiff cotton of my dress. The cruel day will not condone my reflection. I march swiftly towards the door and throw it open. I crack an imitation smile onto my face and step out into the chill breeze. Time does not wait.

The Graveyard Shift

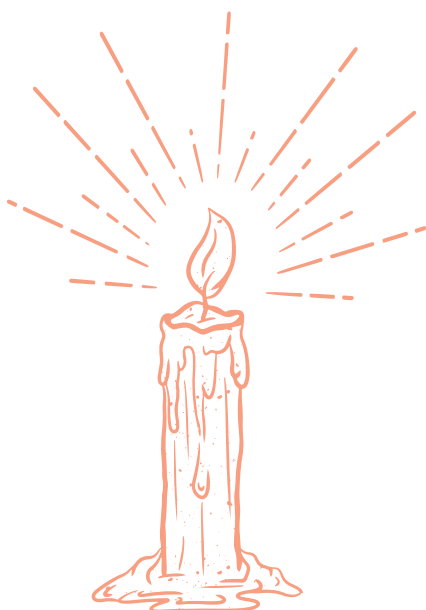
Shonali Banerjee

I wrap my coat tight against the biting wind,
a cruel whisper through the soft cloth.
Iron bars clang; the gates groan.
Gelid metal pierces my fingertips,
shooting through my veins like arrows,
imprinting a bitterness upon my tongue.

Frost-flecked fingers fumble with the keys,
the crescent moon, a sickle in the sky.
I pay my respects to the newcomers,
careful to avoid unturned soil.
Smooth, freshly cut slate gleams,
stark against other mossy stones.

The alarm chimes as I lock the door to the office,
my body sinks into the silence.
The clock's red digits mock me: 3:11am.
I file the records of those laid to rest,
cataloguing memories, each name a ghost,
counting down the minutes until dawn's mellow glow.

Screens flicker, sleepless sentinels,
cameras lying in wait of the spirits that linger.
Spectral shapes flicker in and out of the frames.
After eternity in passive fixation,
my eyes strain, reality melts,
and sleep overwhelms me.



3:13am blinks on the clock,
the last thing I see –
then she's standing in front of me.
That sinister, hollow grin.
My bones shudder.
My heartbeat echoes in my ears.

Her bony arm extends towards my frail frame.
Rotten nails pierce my flesh,
unravelling my skin, my sins to ash.
Her touch sears me – hell's fire in her hand.
I scream but no sound escapes,
my eyes clenched in surrender.

Drenched in cold sweat, I awake from nightmare's grasp.
Silence screams. Relief washes over me.
The clock's face is frozen at
3:11am.
Candles flicker.
A chilling breeze penetrates the silence.
The unlocked door creaks.
The air thickens, heavy with an unseen presence
whispering secrets of the grave.

The Auditorium
Max Stamenkovich

Smoke curled in the weaning orange glow of the sun. A strong scent of incense crept up my nose, clinging to me. The all-familiar jangle of the thurible echoed in my ears and the powerful voice of the high priest reverberated throughout my body. I was stationary, kneeling on the hard stone floor as I pretended to pray, somehow my mind was elsewhere. I'm unsure as to where as I had never been anywhere else other than the Auditorium. Through the slats in the window I could make out the golden glittering of the dunes in the evening sun.

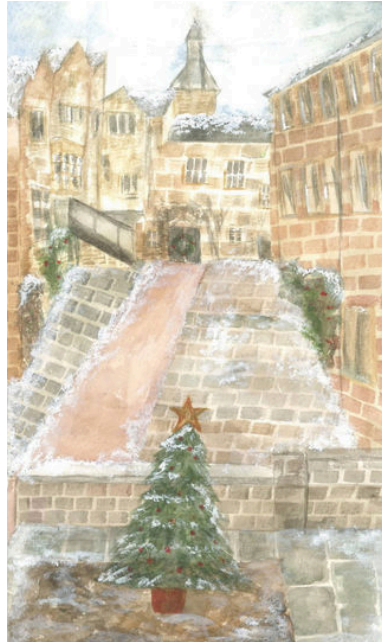
Outside of this place there was nothing, or at least nothing that I knew of. There were rolling sand dunes for as far as the eye could see through the slatted windows, yet whispers still circulated about a place far away from here. It was said to be a dwelling for people, a place in which one could settle and live freely, if such a place could indeed exist. I am at a loss as to where these fables may have originated as none of us had left the Auditorium, with the exception of the priests who certainly never spoke of anything beyond our walls. Every single resident here had been bred for the single purpose of worship and to carry out God's divine will. We did not know where we had come from, indeed how we had arrived here, all we knew and had ever known was the Auditorium. For us it was not a home, it was a past, present and future. It was everything.

And yet I wanted more. I wished at that time to know where I had come from, if there was any truth in the stories I had grown up with from the other brothers. The stories had been passed from brother to brother, and undoubtedly been tampered with and distorted for effect. But what if some truth remained in them? The Bible spoke of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Babylon, if they were indeed all real then who is to say such places cannot exist now? These questions had burned in my head for some time. In fact they had burnt a gaping hole in all that I had been taught, making me question my teachings internally. I never externalised my doubts, not even to my brothers. I was not slow, I understood the treachery of my thoughts. Devoted followers do not like all that they believe in and hold dear to be questioned so aimlessly, in fact they fear such an eventuality. What humanity fears it kills. I kept my blasphemous theories to myself.

Christmas Card Competition entries



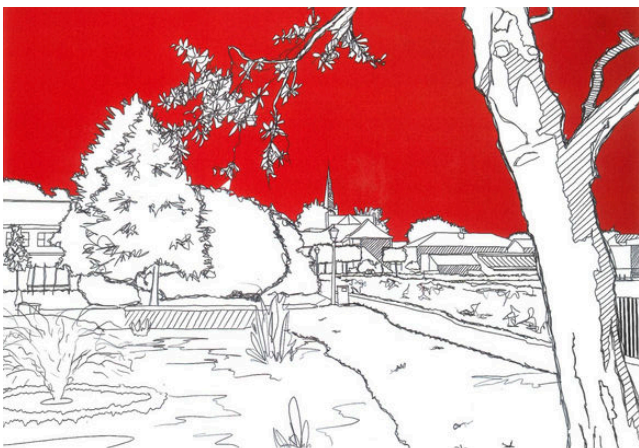
Edward Fairweather, F6



Riya Hirani, F7



Isabelle Blythe, F7



Howie Parford F7



Olive Tatham, F6



Sophie Cartwright, F6



Chelsea Wang, F7



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