

Young  
**Writers'** Awards  
Anthology **2018**



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Literature lives in sentences, and that's how you build a book – in the sentences. Ideas matter, of course, you don't just want a book of pretty sentences, that would be a vacuous thing, but it is how you express the ideas that makes all the difference.

**Michelle de Kretser** – Winner, 2018 Miles Franklin Literary Award for her novel *The Life to Come* (A&U).

Source: <https://thegarretpodcast.com/michelle-de-kretser/>

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# Anthology foreword

**This volume celebrates the talents of the Top 10 entrants in La Trobe University's Young Writers' Awards 2018 – and of the hundreds of other accomplished young writers who participated in the Awards.**

I say to them all, congratulations! Your aim may be to pursue a career in writing, in business or media, in education or law. Your aspiration may be to become a journalist, an entrepreneur, a human rights advocate, a diplomat or a creative artist. At La Trobe University, we offer over 80 undergraduate degrees. This means hundreds of exciting career options. Whatever you choose, we are committed to helping you achieve your ambition.

And our commitment starts early - even before you begin your degree. By collaborating with secondary teachers, we develop opportunities that enrich your school curriculum, sharpen skills valued by future employers and raise awareness of career choices post university study.

One such opportunity is the Young Writers' Awards. Initiated by the Department of Creative Arts and English, the Awards celebrate the emerging talent of young writers in year 10. Intensive writing workshops run alongside the Awards and see hundreds of students from regional and northern metropolitan schools work intensively with prize winning Australian authors to improve their writing skills and to gain professional insights.

When studying at La Trobe, opportunities to integrate study with work and travel assist our students become ready for their career. Hands-on opportunities such as industry placements and internships enable the application of theoretical knowledge, build networks and help students learn about future careers. Study tours, available in over 40 countries, assist our students become globally aware.

Congratulations on your wonderful achievement in the Young Writers' Awards 2018. Whether you choose to further your writing career at La Trobe or join us to pursue a different career path, communication skills are highly valued by employers. Well done!

My best wishes to you for continued success in your writing and future career.

**Professor Simon Evans**

Pro Vice-Chancellor  
College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce

**The Department of Creative Arts and English grew from the desire to harness the creative talents of students across the disciplines of Screen Studies, Visual Arts, Theatre and English.** Our students have the opportunity to study many forms of writing including short fiction, script-writing and story-telling across a range of platforms. We are therefore delighted to have this opportunity to support young Australian writers who exemplify the imagination and commitment to creativity that we aim to foster in our students, teaching and higher degree practice-led research.

The department leads our community in providing distinctive subjects and courses that allow our literary-based students the potential to draw on both theory and practice. We employ specialised creative writing staff who, as award-winning authors, offer the kinds of practical and reflective or analytical skills that drives Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe. Students in the Bachelor of Arts can take English and Creative and Professional Writing majors which combine genre study, literary history, theory, creative non-fiction and creative writing. In a more interdisciplinary framework, students can also take the writing major in the Bachelor of Creative Arts where they have the opportunity to explore multiple forms of literary, professional and performance based creative writing.

It is indeed exciting to see the breadth of talent in this collection of writing by creative young Australians. Our congratulations not only extend to these selected authors, but also their teachers, mentors and parents who nurture such creativity. We can only hope that you will consider a future with Creative Arts and English. The very best of luck with your current studies, writing pursuits and exceptional stories that we look forward to reading in years to come.

**Associate Professor Terrie Waddell**

Head of the Department of Creative Arts & English  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
College of the Arts, Social Sciences, and Commerce

# SCARRED

BY LOUISA BATH

**Reagan's skin was flecked with scars - thin white lines along her arms and torso that served as a reminder of her experience – only just beginning to fade a year onward.** She traced the lines thoughtfully, remembering the coppery tang of the blood in her mouth and the sound of the sirens drowned out by screams. Scars were not uncommon among those in her part of town – the cobbled, winding backstreets of the outer city, where potions and poisons could be exchanged for souls or favours in dark backroom apothecaries, second-hand bookshops dealt in ragged-bound spell-books and wayward teens dabbled in witchcraft in attics and basements. Spells could go awry and both the experienced and naïve alike could find themselves thrown through a window or sporting a third arm.

"I'll have a small black coffee, please." Reagan recited her regular order to the café cashier and slid into her usual booth to wait. The barista flashed a smile in greeting, a pair of glistening white fangs briefly catching the light against the rest of his teeth. Reagan waved back, unfazed as she collected her drink and strode out onto the street, past sigils scrawled on alley walls and protective runes carved on doorways. She strolled briskly through the winding labyrinth of open backstreets and lanes, her chunky black combat boots clomping against cobbled pathways and her thick head of dark curls streaming around her face. Reagan impatiently brushed it out of her hazel eyes and turned into the dark shopfront, the doorbell chiming sharply as she entered.

"Well, well," A young woman with smooth dark skin and a mane of frizzy brown hair emerged from the back room, her eyes glinting with dark amusement. "If it isn't Reagan Nightshade. What can I get you, Rea?"

Her tone was friendly enough, but you had to be careful around Sabine Salem. She may seem generous and hospitable, but underneath she was full of tricks and schemes. The locals knew never to bargain with her or accept any more than what you came to buy, no matter how good she made the deal sound. There was no such thing as a freebie with Sabine; everything came with strings attached.

"I need some dried celosia leaves, a bottle of moon water and some linden flower extract, please" Reagan replied, pulling a list from her bag.

"Brewing another potion, are you?" Sabine grinned, turning to sift through a rack of dried herbs. "You know, I just got in some powdered ginger root the other day. How 'bout I throw that in as well?"

"Come on, Sabine," Reagan warned. "We both know you don't do things for free."

"Worth a try," she shrugged.

Ingredients safely packed in her shoulder bag and coffee cup in hand, Reagan returned to the wide main street of the magic district, the sounds of the city traffic a few streets over drifting through the area's quiet bustle. As she wandered along the cobbled road, a new set of sounds broke sharply through the city rhythms;

shouts, jeers and cries. Reagan stopped still in the middle of the road as a line of figures came into view at the intersection between the district and the rest of the city. Instantly she knew; something was very wrong. The jeers echoed off the buildings, reverberating around the street in a cacophony of taunts: *Monsters, freaks, beasts*. It took only a second for the situation to escalate catastrophically as the gang set upon everyone in sight, screaming anti-witchcraft slogans and smashing windows. One of the men hurled something across the street and Reagan unfroze, diving sideways to take a young werewolf by the waist, dragging him to the ground as a makeshift bottle-bomb exploded where he stood, spraying them both with shards of glass and shrapnel. Reagan heard her potion bottles smash, scattering the ingredients across the road. Her coffee cup spilled across the stones, the dark brown drink pooling among the growing red stains.

The shouts were now drowned out by screams as the gang fanned through the crowds. Smoke filled the air as more fiery blasts were let loose and the quiet street erupted into chaos. A rough hand gripped the back of her head and wrenched Reagan up by her hair.

"Look at me, witch," the man spat, twisting her head painfully so that her dark eyes met his. "We're here to put a stop to you freaks and your unnatural ways. We don't want you in our city, monster."

Reagan yelped and kicked out at her attacker's legs. The man grunted as her foot connected with his shin, releasing his grip on her hair. She scrambled to her feet, her bloodied hands grabbing at the limp form of the young werewolf as she tried to pull him out of the way. The man recovered quickly though, and seized the back of her jacket, hauled her backwards and tossed her through a shop window.

The glass shattered around her, slicing through her jacket and embedding itself in her torso. Reagan gasped, tasting the metallic tang of blood in as the glass split her lip. Rage filled her body and fire bubbled through her veins, sending a bright white glow flaring from her fingertips.

"You want a witch?" she hissed, gritting her teeth against the pain. "You've got one."

Her attacker flew backwards through the air, slamming into another of his gang as he skidded onto the street. Another ran towards her, a baseball bat in hand and she flung him backwards as well. After a moment's stunned silence, the rest of the gang fled in cowardice before a fleet of police cut off their escape.

One year later, Reagan traced her scars as she walked the main street. A collection of flowers had been assembled at the shopfront window, where the young werewolf's blood still stained the stones. Burns still marked the street, but no gangs ever bothered the forbidden district again; This was not where the real monsters dwelled.

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**The opening scene of 'Scarred' develops both curiosity and concern in the reader. The 'flecked' scarring of Reagan's skin had me caring for her by the end of the first sentence! Particularly impressive is the confidence with which you establish the fantasy element of the story, seamlessly mixing it in with the everyday. The writing is regularly enlivened by heightened images and phrases such as, 'her eyes glinting with dark amusement' and 'remembering the coppery tang of the blood in her mouth'. Also noteworthy is the way the framing device ties-in neatly with the theme of 'one year later'. Keep up the excellent work, and keep writing!**

Roger Averill

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# HIBA

BY RUKAYA DIRANI

## **Hiba, my *hadia* (gift) from god. Broken, malnourished and weak; my body stung at the bite of the boiling boulder I lay against.**

The eternal dunes of the Nubian Desert beamed with murderous heat. My body was giving up after weeks of travelling along the Nile and finally reaching the Nubian Desert, in hope that we'd settle in Egypt in a few weeks. However, this thought of continuing this arduous trek had no meaning to me anymore. "Um, 'um, mama!" (mother, mother, mum!) Hiba sobbed in sorrow.

Eyes filled with tears causing my vision to blur like a daydream. The sun pierced at my eyes but was soon blocked by the youthful beauty of my daughter. Young, gentle and so fragile; how was she going to cope without me. Foreheads now against one another, I cupped her brown golden face in my hands so soft against my worn skin. Staring deep into her mournful eyes, I uttered,

'Patience is the key which solves all problems'

She came close again, now sharing breaths; my final breath...

...

Amal, my *al'amal waltumuh* (hope and aspiration) from god. Hurt, well fed and lost as I gazed at the towering Pyramid of Khafre. It had been a year since my mother's passing, those few weeks of travel became months. After crossing Egyptian borders my

two younger brothers Asim and Kafeel, my grandfather Majeed and I were taken in by authorities. We now owned the title of 'Asylum Seekers'; we had been relocated from camp to camp now finally settled in a few miles away from the Pyramid of Khafre.

'*Ful mudammas*' (Broad beans in sauce). I've been eating the exact same breakfast since we got to Egypt - now my favourite food although that wasn't the case with my brothers, they had been complaining for the last month.

'*Alsabr hu miftah kl almashakil*' (patience is the key to all problems). It was an old Sudanese proverb, one that my grandmother used to recite to my mother when she was younger; my mother did the same with me. It was implanted in my head. It became a daily prayer that I'd recite under my breath whenever I was unsure what life had in place for me.

*Our home before was a hay shack surrounded by mountainous boulders, rocks of earthy greys, sandy browns and dark hues of orange. Random bushes of greenery were snuggled in every cranny and space in the fortress like rocks. The day settled and the heat was overthrown by a cool calm breeze that seemed to be hugging the homes of Kassala. My mind was lost in the cloudless sky: alone, blue and tranquil... Then it happened, the screams of the villagers who lived at the bottom of the mountain rang through my ears.'*

'*Ukhrujo 'aw sa naqtulukum jamyeen*' (get out or we will kill you all) threatened the rebels.

*At this moment the world became cloudy and unclear. I don't have a visual memory as to what occurred during these moments as I had been enclosed by the arms of my father. A barrier against my feeble body...although, his protection didn't last as I was taken by my mother and we prepared to set out on a cart. The grey donkey who I named 'bati'(slow) began to trot through the chaos ahead. I turned to my mother.*

*"What about dad?" I innocently asked.*

*Before my mother could answer, the shooting began. Bullets were ripping through the air causing an aching pain to echo through my ears yet, the cry of my father pierced across my chest.*

*"AMAL! HIB... aaa," groaned my father, as a bullet found home at his heart and stole it from him.*

*Thunderous agony overcame my body...numb, confused and scared. My mother screamed a deafening sob that caused the mountains to rumble.*

The thought of moving forward alone was painful however, the discomfort I witnessed in my parents' eyes before their souls were taken only motivated me to bring happiness and comfort to my siblings...

"Hiba, are you okay?" asked Nour.

Nour (light), Nour had become a dear friend, mother figure and the sister I never had. Face was warm and comforting, her skin golden like the sand of the Nubian desert. Nour was a nurse. She came to the camp 5 times a week, checking on the individuals who stayed here; she came to check on my grandfather today.

"I'm good...How is my grandfather?" I inquired nervously.

"Paramedics are coming to pick him up soon, he is very tired and his body can't fight any longer," Nour answered with concern.

What was I to do? Who was going to care for us? How was I going to care for my brothers? The tear drops gradually trickled down my cheeks, falling free into the air before disappearing into the earth. Nour cupped my wet face in her hands wiping the tears from my eyes using her thumbs in a delicate motion. Staring at each other deeply my frayed,

agonised and mournful face mirrored onto her eyes. She knew I couldn't cope like this, that I needed someone to guide and care for me.

"Patience is the key which solves all problems," Nour explained, pulling me into her arms and squeezing tight.

"Stick close to your brothers and everything will be okay.

Nour gave me a reassuring glance, then turned toward our tent to grab her things and left. The authorities had taken us to an asylum centre which was more like a jail cell; we were informed that we'd stay here until they could find suitable care takers or another camp. Hope was still flickering in the darkness of my soul grasping on the last thread of light.

*Tawkid* (assurance) from God. Hope, light and patience. Those awful weeks in the centre became months and that thread of light snapped. Although, my soul began to blossom again...yesterday:

*Two officers who worked in the centre came and retrieved my brothers and I. They notified us that we were being relocated to a new area, no emotion tugged in my chest at the news. It was a bleak 2 hour drive before we stopped in front of a home built from alabaster. There standing at the door step was a kind young woman whose smile filled the night sky with light...Nour.*

Patience is a gift own; aspiration bestowed light into my life.

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**The author has written a well constructed, deeply moving narrative. The sophisticated treatment of the central themes of patience and loss were particularly impressive, as was the use of descriptive language to effectively convey emotion. This was an imaginative and touching story that I greatly appreciated reading.**

Melia Donk

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# FATE

BY FINNLEY GREET

**The sun had flitted through the trees like millions of tiny, falling crystals.** A young boy and a young girl (because there always seems to be a young boy and a young girl) had sat by a sapphire brook that shimmered and waved, creating the perfect bubbling sound to compliment the song of nearby birds. The boy and the girl had talked, had liked what they had heard, and moved a little closer to one another. They had, of course, kissed, because the most perfect couples always do kiss in the most perfect places, at the most perfect times and should, by all rights, live a perfect life together thereafter. That's what happens in fairy tales and love stories, in books and movies, in all other references and recommendations – that is how it happens. Therefore, it was quite understandable that Christopher truly believed that was the way it would work out.

The boy and the girl sitting by the brook, listening to birds and water and watching the patterns made by the sun... that had all happened - just as perfectly as described - almost exactly one year ago. Christopher and Audrey had been dating ever since. For just over a year, the two of them had been together. Each radiating in each other's happiness, basking in each other's perfection, and simply shining in their own absolute joy at being in each other's company. At least, for a little while.

Over the past year, Christopher had grown a little (and he did hate to use this word, but it was, unfortunately, quite appropriate) bored. Audrey simply wasn't the girl he wanted. It

wasn't that she had changed, or that he had ever had any misconceptions about the sort of person she was, or even really about her at all. Christopher simply didn't think of her the same way he had one year ago. She might not have changed, but it seemed that he had. He didn't want to lie to her, so he had decided to break up with her as soon as he had had this epiphany - and was quite sure of it, of course. He had chosen to execute his plan in the same place they had first admitted their feelings: by the perfect sapphire brook.

"...anymore," he concluded, licking his lips in a vain attempt to wet them. His lips always dried out when he was nervous, or doing something particularly unpleasant. He wasn't exactly *excited* about breaking up with the only person he could ever safely claim he had loved.

"Just to be clear," Audrey began in a voice that was neither sad nor angry - the two emotions Christopher had expected her to present him with - but was, rather, quite calm and reasonable. Quite normal, if you like. "You are breaking up with me, correct?"

"Well..." Christopher, a little stunned by Audrey's reaction, took a moment to recover, "Yes. I just think that if it's meant to be, it'll be, and if it's not, it won't. We'll find each other again if we're meant to, and then we'll... we'll know for sure that it's right," he recited what he thought was the best part of the speech he had prepared for this moment. Audrey frowned a little.

"I'm sorry, did you say 'meant to be'?" she parroted the boy who had, up until approximately one minute ago, been her boyfriend. Whom had told her countless times how utterly in love with her he was, and to whom she had repeated the phrase equally as often. Christopher was almost offended by her apparent lack of shock at the proposed break-up.

"I...did," Christopher admitted warily. Audrey had a way of always being right, and proving with ease that she was right, that irritated Christopher to no end, and was also one of the things he had loved most about her. Her voice was argumentative, a sure sign that she was about to prove a point, or to convince Christopher of something he didn't particularly want to be convinced of.

"Meant to be," Audrey repeated a little. There was a pause. Then, quite suddenly, Audrey laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, but the kind of laugh one employs when one is absolutely astonished at another's lack of intelligence. A laugh of sheer disbelief.

"It seems to me, love," Audrey began again. She only ever called him 'love' when he had done something exceptionally stupid, "that you are leaving far too much up to fate. Whether or not it's meant to be, I intend to make it be. Because, as well you know, I've never really given a damn about what other people think is right. 'Right' is relative. There is no real 'right'. No one answer to anything. Just what is and what isn't. And what isn't can always be."

There was a very long pause in which neither party spoke. Audrey smiled at the ground, and Christopher stared at her, his mouth open. Once he noticed this last fact, he closed it at once. He licked his lips several times. He had never felt this nervous in his entire existence (not that his existence had been exceptionally long). He knew he had made a mistake, though he wasn't quite sure what it was yet. Which made him even more nervous.

"But it's fine," Audrey said, and smiled at Christopher, "Really, it is. In a way, I imagine it will be fun to win you over all over again. And trust me, I will succeed."

Audrey turned, with one final smile, and walked away. That was that, Christopher supposed. Although, his heart was still beating very fast. His face felt unnaturally hot. He licked his lips.

The sun flitted through the trees like millions of tiny, falling crystals. Christopher, although he didn't realise it at the time, felt exactly the same way he had just over a year ago: a naïve boy, deep in the thralls of new love.

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**This is a very well-written piece. The pace is perfect and the tone is wonderful – it is mature, and very amusing. The characterisations of Audrey, and particularly Christopher, from whose perspective it is written, are very well done, and the dialogue is handled well. It is the author's own narrative voice (and bracketed asides), and their handling of Christopher's thoughts which really shine though.**

**Very well done.**

Janet Butler

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# YASMINE

BY JEMMALIYA MOKHSIN

**The cheap plastic layer on the floor clung to the soles of my worn out black shoes, making a quick peeling sound with every step as I walked through the hallway, ensuring the tea on the tray I held did not spill. The door creaked as I pushed my back against it gently.**

"Selamat pagi," I said quietly. She returned my smile and gasped with joy at her breakfast.

She giggled. "Selamat pagi! Brushing up on your Malay?"

"Sikit," I said shyly. She let out a laugh followed by a cough as I set up her depressing plate of coconut rice and fried chicken.

As I sat at the edge of her bed whilst she proceeded with her meal, the back of my foot hit something metal. Puzzled, I took a look under the bed. It was a safe, and it was open.

"Don't mind that. I don't trust the banks with my money. Fools! Taking it and using it for their own wealth," she exclaimed, rice flying from her mouth and onto the sheets.

"The safe is open Julita, do you want me to close it?"

"No, no don't! I'm too old to be remembering passwords. I'd rather an open safe than the government handling it." She was a cute old lady. Crazy, but cute.

I noticed a tall sunflower sitting confidently yet elegantly on her bedside table. The vase was

clear and looked heavy. My fingers felt across the pretty engraving of patterns on the glass, looking at the blurred yellow petals floating upon the water. I tried hard not to let my head take the image to other places in my mind and memories, but it was inevitable.

The sunflower was beautiful; its yellow was bright and confident, its body tall yet slouched, its water giving it life yet drowning its petals. It looked happy and pure, radiating the idea that everything would be fine despite living in the same chaos we do; oblivious. She was beautiful and yet not meant to be here. She was meant to grow tougher and taller against the soil, not to be given a life expectancy amidst the tragic waters.

"You mentioned it last week, Helianthus right, Maryam? I kept thinking about it, so I got that curly haired nurse to get it for me. So pretty," she said, tilting her head longingly at the flower. I nodded with a smile, tightening my neck and chest as dread took its physical form and rushed through my stomach to my heart. My heart pounded when she said her last name, if only Julita knew her first. I walked myself back out the room and into the dimly lit hallway, making my way to the break room. Hand against my heart with the other sliding against decorticated wallpaper, feeling the sequence of smooth and rough. My worst enemy teared from my eyes, fleeing and falling the way we did. It was those petty injustices in life when I thought about it; what I cowered at the most lived within me.

I trudged through the room, fumbling for a chair. My breath was beyond my own control. What pumped life throughout my veins was hurting me, aching and racing. I gripped at my stomach, vision blurred by salt water. Scenes played out like a film. The ocean smacking against itself hammered into my ears. The skin and sweat of others invaded my space, pressing against me as I tried to screech the pain out through my throat as if it'd make anything feel any better. My kidneys groaned as if they were going to push my lungs out of my body. My spine felt as if it was breaking against the wooden floorboards. The urge to vomit grew with the motion of the waves.

To hear her voice, to watch her hands search the sky, to watch her eyes go to sleep. But, to watch her eyes close forever, watching her lay still with every nudge and shake I gave, one less wail on what seemed like a never-ending boat ride, swallowed those happy thoughts every time. My panting grew harder and got to my head as the room began to spin. At this point, I felt my nails digging into my skin, gripping at her old home harder. I began to hear my own voice wailing, screaming the same words over and over again. She was dead weight to them. The feeling of a million hands dragging me back into the frame of an endless journey as I tried to reach for her tiny body being lowered into the water, it was my duty to be with her always and I failed.

"Oi!" I jolted upwards, eyes widened and now staring at three women in the generic blue uniform that we all had in common. I didn't hear the ocean anymore, but the slow squeaking of the fan that came and went, murmurs and footsteps.

"Go home, rest, we'll cover for you," said the "curly haired" sunflower-giving nurse.

...

The sand was brutal today, burning beneath my feet, its coarseness sinking into my skin. The dreadful sound of waves crashing, and the rolling of water, sent a shrill down my spine that made me sick to my stomach. She was innocent and all things pure, yet born country-less and running. She left, sinless and stateless.

To strip her of her right to grow and be, made no sense.

The setting sun glistened upon the ocean and for once in a long time, I saw its beauty. It didn't look so bad; so traumatic. I frowned. 'It's human nature,' I thought, 'to wrongly put the blame onto one thing forgetting the whole concept; where it stemmed from, where the fault really is.' I glanced at the ground and at my feet that stood against this land. The thought of her 'dead weight' set off the broken lightbulb in my head. I smiled. I wanted to fill the void she left with all of the rocks that surrounded me. 'My pockets,' I thought, 'my alternative.'

The gravity began to feel stronger, and I felt heavier. Her grave washed the sand off my feet, and this vast cemetery was inviting. And I thought to myself, if no country wants us, then perhaps the ocean will.

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**The use of descriptive language throughout the piece was carefully crafted so as to progressively add to both audience understanding and empathy for the old lady as the story developed. The old lady or 'Julita' became a vehicle to express the author's subtle understanding of how the weight of events in life can shape the fate of individuals in cruel ways.**

**The use of descriptive language also created a sense of atmosphere, changing mood and tension within the piece. Small or minute detail was effectively deployed to create a particular transitional world through which both the living and the dead were to pass. On a more prosaic level such detail supported character development and allowed the plots progression to be carefully marked.**

Con McGillycuddy

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# INTO THE EARTH

BY CHARLOTTE MULLENS

**A year after the telegram was sent, when they told his family that he was missing, a farmer came across him.** He was tilling the fields for the new season, they said, the war and danger was over, and everyone needed to move on. The mouths of the country were starved, and hope had grown dim. They found Percy swallowed by the earth of a foreign country, the same country that had promised him an adventure. Another telegram was sent and Percy was laid to rest in a grave his mother and father could never visit, in a country he had never loved. It would never be his home.

He only went to war because of Bill. Bill was wild and fearless, with a wide and wicked smile he would flash back to Percy whenever he truly felt the rush of danger, of adventure. Neighbours, I guess you could call them, but everyone was neighbours in those days. In little towns, families were knitted together. Their sons and daughters played near the river under the shade of the towering gums. They played in dirt and learnt to swim in the murky water. Bill and Percy never questioned their friendship; each stitched into each other. The simplicity of it all seems unthinkable now; the simple life is forgotten, the same way you forget the feeling of heat after summer is over.

A boy like Percy would be a farmer, a nurturer of the land he loved. He would be just like his father, and his father before him and all the other men in our family since we came across oceans to this land. You could not call

it fate, or destiny, but merely tradition. All the other men had done the same, a life at the mercy of the sun and the rain. Praying for seeds to grow and weeds to die and cattle to thrive at church on Sundays. Percy was not remarkable and to him, the world outside felt big and impossible. He ached to know what purpose felt like; most Sundays he did not have any idea what to pray for. He bowed his head, his mind as silent as the room around him.

The crackling voices on the wireless talked about things that worried his mother. War, they said, had begun. They needed men to enlist, to fight. His mother held her heart and prayed, leaning against the kitchen bench. They all sat around the kitchen table, waiting for the potatoes to boil. Sometimes Percy wondered whether his mother wanted to end up like this, her heart drained and her mind weary. The words that had been spoken over the wireless had settled in Percy, the words made him want more than anything his family had. Percy never slept again without thinking about what we needed to do. He wasn't sure whether he wanted the life they were going to give him.

War was much different than Bill had promised. The posters had talked of adventure and bravery. They never talked about the mud, the death and the complete hopelessness. He wanted to tell his family, his mother, that they were right. He should never have come. The life that had been offered to him was gone, and he would never get another chance.

Percy would never know it was his last day alive. His last meal would have been bleak, bitter, nothing like home.

Before they left the trench, Bill looked back at Percy. For the first time, he did not smile. Instead, his eyes were filled with fear. He was not scared when they held their breath under the muddy water of the river, or when they jumped from the paperbark trees. Percy, he had said to him once, you just have to learn to hide your fear.

That day was the first time Percy had ever seen Bill afraid, and the sharp feeling of stone in his stomach grew deeper and darker.

Bill came home from war without his best friend. He tried to apologise and explain to Percy's family, to his mother, that he didn't know where Percy had gone. The mist, the guns, or the earth must have taken him. Everyone knew it was the way of the war. God's will, they said.

He married Percy's sister not long after the final telegram arrived.

In dreams, he sobbed as he held the boy who felt like his brother.

They say this country was born in the dead of night. Not by the custodians or by the parliamentarians, but by the soldiers. The boys like Percy. In truth, this country was born by the death of men who died for others. The men who survived told us that peace was ours; they had lost their friends and brothers and minds

for our peace. I can never feel the peace they talk about. All I know is my great grandmother's brother died for a cause he didn't understand.

Each breath we take is stolen from our men and women who lay in foreign lands. My mind is war-torn, wondering whether to be grateful or guilty for all those who died for me, for this life. Percy could have lived a life on the land, maybe loved a girl. He was short-changed a life he could have loved. The flowers grew over Percy and all the others. They told us it was a sign to move on, to let go. How could we ever let ourselves forget?

When death comes for me, I hope it swallows me whole. The same way it swallowed Percy, and the others who lost their lives.

---

**The writer uses a gripping opening to frame a story that artfully grapples with the futility of war. This wanton waste is captured devastatingly in the painting of life before the men left; the life that has been ripped away.**

**It is a story with heart, that captures a sense of place in vivid colour, and that builds characters fulsomely using an economy of language.**

Nino Bucci

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# EVERY MIDNIGHT

BY OPHELIA MURRAY

**His face was etched with wrinkles that carved out his features.** With eyelids ringed with crinkled skin that resembled creased paper, his eyes seemed to weigh something, almost as if all he'd seen in his many years of life weighed him down. A slightly crooked nose beneath an un-healing scar set his face apart from others, and now his mouth was turned as though something was pulling the sides of it down.

Her features were different, bright and young, and mind not yet tired out from decades of wisdom. Her face like a fresh canvas, awaiting the impact of the world upon her skin. She had noticed his upturned nose at the box of unopened sparklers sitting on the kitchen table, and how he avoided the banner reading 'HAPPY NYE!' that hung from the wall. With a curious mind, she hesitated before directing her question to him, but went ahead anyway, as she knew that family would appreciate her inquisitiveness.

"Grandpa, why do you hate New Year's Eve?"

Grandpa smiled at her, one that fully crinkled his eyes. "Why would you like to know?" he asked.

"Because I like it. It's exciting. Fun,"

Grandpa paused, thinking for a second. "Pheeb, do you know how many days there are in a year?"

"Yes," Phoebe replied. "Three-hundred and sixty-five,"

"Good. People celebrate by staying up past 12 o'clock for New Year's Eve on a certain day. And there's 12 o'clock 365 times a year." Grandpa continued. "Why is that any different?"

"Because it's a new year,"

"No, it's a new day." Grandpa watched Phoebe's reaction, her head bowed in thought for a moment.

"It's starting from the top of 365 again."

Phoebe smiled, as it was grandpa's turn to pause momentarily.

"At midnight 365 days a year, we change the date." He said carefully. "12 times a year, we change the month. Once a year we change the year, let's say 2018, but only by one, to 2019."

"Yes, that's exciting. It only happens once every 365 days!"

"Why is that important?"

"It's a new start-"

"But what was the start of the start?" grandpa asked. "When was 0000?"

"It was whenever somebody started counting." Phoebe smiled. The prospect of an intellectual challenge excited her.

"Ok, then if it's 2018, what happened 2,018 years ago for it to start? What happened on that first day?" Grandpa continued before Phoebe even had a chance to reply. "The earth has been around for millions of years, but we're only on year 2,018. It's impractical. Why are we not turning over the year at midnight in mid-September... or July?"

As he spoke, Phoebe's mother came in from the kitchen, carrying a stack of paper party hats. She didn't look over, instead heading straight for the small crowd that was gathered in their backyard. Grandpa waited for her to cross the room and exit through the patio doors before adding-

"I don't understand why it's important. What happened 2018 years ago to make someone start counting?"

Phoebe was already aware that Grandpa knew her answer.

"I don't know,"

"Then why," Grandpa whispered, leaning close into her, a wide grin spread across his lips. "Do you celebrate it?"

Phoebe shrugged but didn't look away. His face relaxed as he lay back in his seat.

"There will come a time, Phoebe, where you'll have to decide what YOU think about things," Grandpa said. Phoebe's vision floated from Grandpa's eyes to the small scar on his crooked nose. "The easy thing to do is go out and celebrate New Year's Eve with everyone else. The hard thing is to ask why,"

An image arose in Phoebe's mind. The past returned, memories humming in her mind like a nearby radiator heating up. She remembered sitting in Grandpa's lap, small and dainty, tracing the lines of his face with her pointer finger. The shape of his nose intrigued her, she ran her finger over it, tilting her head, inspecting it.

"What happened grandpa?"

"That's what happens when your opinions get the better of you, Pheeb." Grandpa smiled.

"But it's good to have opinions, right?" Phoebe frowned.

"Yes," he said simply. "But others sometimes don't think so,"

The memory evaporated, the humming was gone, as if the radiator's switch had been flicked off.

"Phoebe!" Her mother called.

"But grandpa," Phoebe asked, turning to him.

"Doesn't that mean... that it's New Year Eve every midnight?"

Grandpa smiled and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

"Now you're getting it."

"Phoebe! Come here!" Her mother stuck her head in from outside, gesturing for Phoebe to follow her. "There's only a few minutes!"

Phoebe watched grandpa smile at mother. This smile was crinkle-less. She hesitated before replying-

"Coming mum!"

With a leap, she bounded from the living room out the patio doors.

"Come on now! The midnight fireworks are going to start in a few minutes, let's watch," Phoebe's mum clasped her hand, pulling her close. Phoebe glanced over her shoulder, back at grandpa. He leant back against the couch, mouth agape, asleep.

"Does grandpa want to come and see them too?" Mum inquired.

Phoebe shook her head. "No," she replied. There was a pause. Phoebe's mind strayed, stumbling upon a familiar sentence. *The easy thing to do is go with everyone else. The hard thing is to ask why.*

"Actually, I think I'm going to bed too,"

Mum frowned. "Are you sure? You'll miss the fireworks! It's New Year's Eve!"

Phoebe shrugged, turning back towards the house. "That's ok, I'll celebrate next week!" she called behind her.

Her mother watched her run inside, perplexed. Then she slowly turned to face the way the masses were and waited for the fireworks to start.

---

What is ostensibly a dialogue between a young woman and her grandfather on the turning of one year to the next becomes an exploration into the meaning and relevance of time and a questioning of the status quo. The capturing of the conversation is beautifully handled and provides an insight into the relationship between these two people – the love and familiarity they feel. It also hints at where future-Phoebe may form her ideas about life. 'The easy thing to do is go with everyone else. The hard thing is to ask why,' says Grandpa and the reader gets the feeling this will become Phoebe's mantra. As this story is told mostly through dialogue, there is sparing use of figurative language. Where it does occur, it is fresh and meaningful; 'his eyes seemed to weigh something' is a beautiful repurposing of the 'heavy eyes' metaphor also carrying with it the sheer volume of things Grandpa has seen in his life. The structure of this piece is simple but effective, flowing well from beginning to end, and finishing with a line that shows Phoebe's mother is much more of a conventional thinker than her daughter will ever be.

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Neil Grant



# BEYOND THE HORIZON

BY VICTORIA PHAM

Dear Kai,

If you knew how many times I've snuck into your room these past few weeks, you'd be furious. Being in your room makes me believe that you're still around. Your wall is decorated with pictures of you, your friends, Mum, Dad, and me, living, loving, laughing... being genuinely happy. I find myself longing for summer to return, longing to be in the warm sand, watching the sun sinking behind the horizon in beautiful hues of pink, purple, blue, and gold.

But I forget that you wouldn't be there.

You wouldn't be there today. You wouldn't be there tomorrow.

You are long gone. One year exactly, today.

Do you remember the day I was so absolutely outraged at Mum and Dad that I stormed out of the house? Remember how you found me on our rock? I had faith in you, faith that you would come and sit with me and make everything alright. And you did. You climbed onto the rock and sat beside me, enveloping me in a shield from the cold.

"The cure for anything is saltwater," you whispered, as if it were a secret, "sweat, tears, and the ocean."

That day, I had so much faith in you. I had so much faith that you'd break the surface of the water, gasping for air, and perhaps even flash a toothy grin as you swam towards the cliff.

Thundery skies and ominous waves should have been all the warning we needed. The howling winds and the bitter downpour should have stopped me from letting you go. But you sounded so desperate, like the world would've ended if you didn't complete the dare. Little did either of us know that the world was going to end as soon as you dived off the edge.

None of your friends chased after you. They were shocked to see you dive in, and they were even more shocked when you didn't resurface. It seemed that I was the only one that could have jumped in.

I should have jumped in.

After all the times you saved me, I couldn't save you.

Mum and Dad never talk about it. Mum still looks so worn, and Dad leaves home even before the stars have disappeared, only to return when tomorrow has almost begun. It's like they're stuck underwater, and if they don't swim to the surface for air soon, they'll drown.

I want things to go back to the way they were before, when we had dinner as a family and visited the beach in the summer. Most of all, I want you back.

I am going to save them.

I had a dream the other night. At the cliff overlooking the entire bay, I was clutching your telescope, your most prized possession. As I held it up to my eye, I caught a glimpse of you, sailing toward the horizon on a boat. Somehow,

I could see the entire world that you were yet to discover, and it was beautiful. When my gaze returned to you, you were smiling up at me in the lighthouse, as if you were challenging me to come after you.

I know what I must do.

Tomorrow, I will see Dr Lekarz. He will greet me with a smile and invite me to sit down on his tattered sofa. After he takes a seat in his black office chair, he will turn to his ancient cassette player and make it click three times before the speakers crackle to life. Lapping waves will sound against the sand and the wind skipping across the calm water's edge will play as distant seagulls cry. As these familiar sounds ring in my ears, Dr Lekarz will ask me some questions. *How are you? What did you do today? What do you want to talk about? Are you still writing to your brother?*

Every other time, my voice has disappeared, and my throat has become tight. Every other time, I have broken out into cold sweat, tears have clouded my vision, and my heart has contracted in immense pain. Not a word has ever left my mouth in the presence of Dr Lekarz. But this time, things will be different. This time I'll tell him that I'm doing well. This time I'll tell him that I woke up and took a deep breath and that I felt alive for the first time in a year. This time I'll tell him I want to talk about moving forward. And all the while, the sound of the ocean will take me to the thought of you, smiling at me from our boat.

Voyaging forward into the vast unknown, Out of this great big storm and into a world of adventure.

When I'm ready, I will turn off this computer and that will be it. This letter will be finished. A part of me doesn't want to stop writing to you, but I need to. It's been an impossible year without you, but I know that we'll meet once again, in a boat that will take us beyond the horizon.

Goodbye, Kai.

---

The style of writing, almost like a letter matched with a personal narrative style article is really engaging. There is also a level of suspense as it progresses to see what happened, so you executed the timeline well. There are some wonderful passages in this also such as: "Mum and Dad never talk about it. Mum still looks so worn, and Dad leaves home even before the stars have disappeared, only to return when tomorrow has almost begun. It's like they're stuck underwater, and if they don't swim to the surface for air soon, they'll drown." This level of writing belies your age. Great effort!

Chris Canty

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# ONE YEAR LATER

BY LUCY SKELTON

**When I was young everyone would tell me that the world was too dangerous.** They would tell me to be smart and to be brave but not to be the hero. They told me to not walk alone at night but not to be afraid of the dark. They told me to shout for those who couldn't make a sound but told me not to whisper to the person sitting next to me. They asked me to stand up and fight for what's right but don't stray from the social norms. They told me to do well in school, go to a good university, get married and have kids by a certain age and that, that will make me happy.

The thing is though, I don't think it will.

One hand pushes down on my scratchy seat as the other makes my gaping mouth disappear. My eyes wide, I turn to my friend next to me; she lounges in her seat, staring up at the ceiling; she doesn't care. I turn to the girl on my other side, her figure is practically the same. She explains to me later that she already knew everything the speaker had said because her parents are environmentalists. I look around the dim lit auditorium and only a few people of the thousand and one that are here match my position. I turn back to the speaker as she continues to point to the screen which holds her presentation; repeating the horrifying statistics. She desperately turns to the crowd telling us that we're running out of time. I can see the clock ticking away as she repeats the science, repeats the cause and I feel like I'm about to vomit as I hear the effects. My head starts spinning but I can't stop listening.

As the teachers start letting us out for lunch, I feel my legs walk me towards the speaker. I get there and she turns to me. I don't know what to say. Maybe thank you for making me feel as if every choice I now make impacts the whole world. Maybe thank you for making me feel guilty and resentful of every consumeristic choice that I have ever made up until this point. Maybe thank you for pulling my head out of the sand and opening my eyes to another world I hadn't even known had existed. Maybe thank you for giving my life a purpose. Although I thought those things the only thing that comes out is "how long do we have, how long do we have left before things are irreversible?" She looks to me, understanding in her eyes as her solemn face says "50 years or so". I take a deep breath in and before I can think, the words that rush out of me say: "what can I do, how can we fix this". What I really was thinking though was how do I save the world when I feel like I'm the only one that cares. She told me it was the little everyday things I could do, the things that I can control like riding my bike to school instead of getting driven, turn the lights off when I don't need them and just keeping myself educated.

Kayla had waited for me by the door, her blonde hair swishing behind her just like Edna Mode's as we walk out of the room; all I can think about is how I hadn't already known. When someone had talked about greenhouse gases all I had ever imagined was a literal greenhouse, where you grew literal green plants. I told Kayla this

and she huffed a chuckle at my naivety as we sit down with the rest of our friends. She asked me how was it that I didn't already know. Kayla lived in what was known to be the hippy part of town; the type of place where you would get a weird look if you didn't bring your metal straw and keepcup for your daily morning kale and quinoa breakfast smoothie and soy, broccoli, chai latte. The behaviour changes the presenter had told us about were already normal for Kayla. It was just normal for her because it was normal for her parents and for her family. I look over at Kayla's waste-free lunch as I remembered that I didn't even really know how to recycle.

On the way home I quiz 5 different people on what this horrific issue actually is. They give me bewildered looks and say something to do with polar bears, ozone layer and ice caps melting.

I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders with the realisation that every choice I am currently making is not only ruining my future but my children's future and their children's future, but what was worse was that I wasn't the only one who didn't know.

This day means something to me. It was on this day with the scratchy auditorium seats and the dim light that I realised that I wouldn't give up trying to save the world, that I wanted to be a hero. That I didn't want to be afraid of the dark and the unknown. That I would always shout for those who could not make a sound, that I would always stand up for what I think is right

even if it goes against the social norm. That I'll still be ok if I don't do well in school, get into a good university, get married and have kids by a certain age because, to be honest, I don't think that will make me happy. I know that for me I can't be happy without helping people and this planet. I don't want to be scared, I want to start doing something and I hope that one year later I will say the exact same thing.

---

**This is a really interesting take on the topic – looking forward a year, from a moment of change and understanding. I particularly like the first paragraph, and the skilful use of juxtaposition and repetition. It sets up the moment of change perfectly, and raises so many questions in the mind of the reader. Well done!**

Kelly Gardiner

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# THE FACE AFTER THE FLAMES

BY EMILY WRIGHT

## Contents

- I. Before
- II. Now
- III. A month later
- IV. 91 days later
- V. Half a year later
- VI. 8 months later
- VII. 304 days later
- VIII. One year later

## Before...

In a time gone by,  
A girl I once knew,  
Lived a happier life.

Unscarred,  
Unscathed,  
Untouched.

She lived in a quaint cottage,  
With her ma and pa.  
She played in the sun,  
And slept soundly by moonlight.  
Blissfully unaware of the fate that would befall her.

## Now...

Today I stand as a woman,  
Scarred,  
Scathed,  
Touched,  
By the flames  
Cast by the devil himself.

Who was I to think my parents could protect  
me forever?

How could I be so naïve to believe that the  
devil's clutches would never reach me?

Innocence is a deadly thing.

## A month after...

Puckered, angry scars cover every inch of me.

Like a maze.  
Vines of red creep up my body.

Forever flames threatening to engulf me  
With,  
One,  
Last,  
Breath.

I walk on glass.  
From shattered mirrors.  
Baseball bats and tears I took to every one.  
Screaming.  
The flames took everything.

I live in darkness.  
For light took everything I loved.  
And for any love left.  
Is a love lost.  
For who could love a monster?

I am invisible to those around me.  
They see through me.  
As though I am glass.

They tread around me.  
As though I am fragile.  
As if they speak.  
I will crumble under the weight of their words.

## 91 days later...

Have you ever woken in a pool of sweat?  
Dragged to consciousness by the screams  
of your mind.  
Escaped from your thoughts by staying awake.  
Dying from fatigue.  
For the prison your mind casts in your dreams,  
Is worse than any torture you could endure.

Sometimes I feel like the masked queen.  
Veil to cover my scars.  
Hide my mutilated face.  
Conceal the monster beneath.  
-tribute to Levana

If I ruled the world,  
I would order for all mirrors to be,  
Smashed  
&  
Burned.

Just like Aurora's father,  
I'd rid the world of evil,  
For vanity is a sin,  
And so is every witch's plan to meddle with life.  
-call me sleeping beauty

## Half a year later...

We teach our children not to stare,  
At the disabled,  
At the physically damaged.  
For to stare is rude,  
But why do we never teach them,  
That to avert their eyes every time we walk by,  
Is the same as piercing a knife through our heart.

But the blade of knives I am used to.  
The cool metal pierces my skin.  
I watch the scarlet river flow from me,  
As they replace my damaged flesh,  
With grafts from healthier parts.

I feel exposed,  
Bare.  
Every part of me has been seen

I couldn't even keep my soul to myself.

Shrink after shrink.  
Ask me what I need.  
Ask me what I have.

Question after question.  
Aren't you supposed to help me! I scream.  
I have nothing left.  
I just need my family.

## 8 months later...

Kindness still exists.  
I met a woman today,  
Who when she saw my scars did not,  
Gasp,  
Stare,  
Or look away,  
But simply said,  
'You're a warrior I see,  
Keep on fighting sweetie'.

It's funny how a simple phase can affect you.  
A saying,  
Quote,  
Speech,  
Word,  
Becomes the mantra for nations,  
Can influence millions,  
Or just make someone's day.  
-the sun shines a little brighter today

My scars don't pucker so,  
They aren't as angry,  
I guess they're just like me,  
Less angry,  
Softening,  
Accepting that this is me.  
Accepting my new body.  
-the road to self-acceptance is a long one.

## 304 days later...

The walls I built up,  
Are slowly crumbling down,  
I don't walk with my head down,  
I don't cower or hide,  
I am a warrior,  
And I will fight.  
-my scars are my armour

I watch the people I pass,  
The looks they give,  
Instead of being in shock,  
They are in awe.  
-I feel like a goddess

Bring on the rain,  
Let it pour,  
I'll just dance in it,  
And sing till it ends,  
Because this storm is passing.  
-tribute to Vivian Greene

#### One year later...

The simple brush of skin,  
A trip against a doorframe,  
Deep sea green irises,  
Twinkling like a lighthouse in the dark of night,  
Crinkles smile like the sun's rays,  
The brightest star to light up my world.

Instead of the burning red that once crept  
up my body,  
This red warms me as it reaches my cheeks,  
My lashes flutter against them like little  
butterflies,  
My eyes look up at him,  
His smile is like a beacon in the night.

I can feel the thumping of my heart,  
Running marathons in my body,  
Lost for breath,  
I feel like I just ran the longest race.

I feel myself smile back,  
My face must be alight,  
I'm beaming like the sun.

His deep green eyes fall to my arms,  
Cradled in them are my precious treasures.

"Lovelace?" he asks  
I nod, meeting his eyes.

He tells me how he loves her poetry,  
How they are so expressive,  
How she manages to make him cry,  
With every word she writes.

I tell him how her words saved me from myself,  
How poetry became the key to unlock my cage,  
That now I write out every spiral,  
Instead of letting it consume me.

I watch as his face turns into an expression  
of understanding,  
He nods along I speak,  
Something about him makes me want to unravel  
all my fears,  
Bear my soul,  
Untie all the knots around my heart,  
And so, word after word tumbles out  
of my mouth,  
And into the air,  
It encircles us like fairy dust,  
Then disappears.

When I'm done,  
He looks at me and asks,  
'Would you like to get coffee?'  
Smiling, I agree.

'It's Felix, by the way.'  
Looking at him now,  
I can see a clearer future,  
'Lydia,' is my response,  
And with that,

We walk towards a new chapter.

---

**This is a very moving contribution that totally engaged this reader. I liked the response to the challenges over time and the journey towards redemption and a relationship with a special friend. I was also fascinated by the transition from "a year later" back to "now." The promise of the former has been replaced by a more reflective maturity. The reader is left to wonder what happened to Felix. This is a masterstroke!**

**Well done.**

John McKenzie

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# THE BOOKSHOP

BY LEALA XU

**The bookshop sits on the side of the road, and at once I rush in gratefully.** The rain that tormented down on me evaporates away as I scramble into the bright warmth of the bookshop. A windchime sings out softly as I swing open the door. The store seems to be the complete opposite of the world outside, which is dull and joyless under the sheets of rain that threaten to choke it. Although I'm the only customer in the shop, the shop is teeming with life; books from every walk of life appear to fill up the space. Shelves struggle from the sheer volume of words that they are loaded down with. An armchair faces the shelves, beckoning you to sit down and peruse the endless amount of wisdom that the treasure trove holds. The counter at which a balding man sits is also stacked with books; tacked to the counter is a green piece of paper, reading *OLIVER'S PICKS*.

The balding man, who I assume to be Oliver, looks up from the book he appears to be reading. He pushes his spectacles up his nose and smiles genially at me. "Well, hello, hello," he says pleasantly, shutting the book close.

I offer a smile back at him and disappear between some of the shelves; I find myself in the General Fiction section, not looking at anything in particular. I'm still drinking in the atmosphere of the shop; the rain scurrying down the honey-tiled roof feels a million miles away. At my feet, an old milk crate holds a stash of vinyl records. I flick through them briefly, finding a Buddy Holly record I faintly

recalled my dad having. I see a lot of other knick-knacks scattered around the store – little Russian dolls, fake crystals, old alarm clocks that probably haven't worked since the seventies.

I wander back to the counter and take a closer look at Oliver's picks. I'm surprised to see that they're children's books – Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, *The Famous Five*. I pick up *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* – it's a softcover copy, and the thin pages have clearly been thoroughly thumbed over.

The man's voice wafts up to me. "Harry Potter, eh? I knew my Oliver had good taste."

I look up at the man. "Your son?"

"Was my son," the man smiles, softly. "Got the bookworm genes from his old man. Should've seen him at bedtime . . . he'd kiss me and his ma goodnight and scurry off into his room; he'd swear he wouldn't stay up late reading, but we always knew that's what he'd be doing. Not that Maria or I minded, not one bit; it overjoyed us, in fact, having this little rascal that would beg us every Saturday to make another round to the library."

The man's eyes have grown misty. I picture Oliver in my head. A small, energetic boy, with a floppy head of auburn-brown hair falling over his eyes as he entered the world of Harry Potter. The book I'm holding suddenly feels heavier in my hands.

The rain has calmed down. The occasional drip of water dances lightly across the roof now. Through a window, I see a peek of the sun, spreading its rays gently over the world again.

The man smiles mournfully. "Ah, the rain's stopped," he says, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his shirt. "Sorry, dear, I'll stop talking. You can go take a look around the books without me bothering you."

My eyes have flicked over behind the counter. Propped up on a shelf, I find a photo of a grinning, toothy boy. "Is that Oliver?"

The man heaves himself off his seat and carries the frame over to me. I cradle it in my hands. Behind the glass, the photo shows signs of wear; the edges are slightly crinkled and yellowed. The boy in the picture has a smile that defies the passage of time, radiating out sunshine that reaches me in the bookshop. Thick black spectacles sit crookedly on the tip of his nose; they seem too heavy for his meagre frame. He couldn't be more than nine or ten. Three words have been Sharpied onto the photo with soft curlicue – *Our little survivor*.

I'm lifted out of the microcosm of the picture by the man's voice. "That was right after he got out of hospital, the day after his tenth birthday. His lungs had nearly stopped working during the night. Infected. Cystic fibrosis . . . We didn't know a darn thing about it till our Oliver came into the world."

I picture tiny Oliver, hooked up to millions of IVs and monitors, his long, thin eyelashes fluttering as his body fought against himself. His father and mother, pacing round and round the unit, occasionally slumping into those stiff plastic chairs that had been chained down into the ground. Maybe he had a sister, a brother. I don't know.

The silence falls over us, dimly blanketing the store. I'm aware of my heartbeat, churning away slowly in my chest.

"That day, as soon as we got home, I bought this store," the man says. "Words had been a constancy, something to rely on, all throughout

my life. When our Oliver came into the world, I wanted him to learn that too. I wanted there to be something that could be there for him, even when his papa couldn't be. He died exactly a year later, after I bought this store. My poor little fighter. So this bookshop . . . it's his legacy."

My voice finds its way back into my throat. "I couldn't think of any better legacy."

The edges of his mouth curl up wistfully. "Yes . . . this bookstore became his haven then. Everyday after school he'd huddle up in that armchair, his feet swinging above the floor, reading something. Books, words . . . they all mean something different to each of us, don't they?"

---

**The delights of wandering in a bookshop. This essay makes you feel that you are there. More importantly, it explains how events in life can impact upon others. Impact on those very close to Oliver and, through the bookshop, to those further away in both space and time.**

**The essay is well written. An editor would have little to do to bring this fine contribution to publication.**

**I enjoyed reading this work.**

John McKenzie

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**WINNER OF THE YOUNG WRITERS' ENCOURAGEMENT AWARD:**

# THE UNFORGETTABLE

BY MOHAMMAD DAGHAGHELEH

**As a child I used to wake in the night and wish for the sun.** The darkness worried me, my imagination supplied many beasts with fantastical jaws to lurk beyond the range of my vision. But now I embrace it. The night provides cover from the flesh and blood monsters of the day, the ones with their guns and official badges, the ones who can be judge, jury and executioner in the name of freedom. Even on the most moonlit of nights I blend into the city shadows, staying clear of those pools of yellow light that flow from the street-lamps. The neon and white lights that used to flow from the restaurants are extinguished. The only reason to venture out at night is to join the game, the game where everyone loses, and the only prize is knowing you fought.

Children were left crying in the dark, the tears of cheerfulness and sorrow run down over the bloodshot cheeks of relatives. Goodbyes are everywhere. This is it. My journey begins. I was only 8. In a cold hailing night in winter, I and my family packed our luggage to save our family from this disaster. We were told that in Australia, every religion or person is accepted equally and there is no discrimination. This was a utopia that me and my precious family have always wanted, but never had. Basic human rights. But, never had.

There was no hope, just disappointment and sense of failure that kept me thinking, what will happen after this? Will I and my family live? Or will we

lay deep in the bottom of the ocean, just like our friends and family that endangered their existence? Well let me ask you this, will you rather die a painful and traumatized life than a painless death where your body will rest peacefully, and quietly. In school, I was treated so dreadful, because of my race. Asking for a drop of water in school, speaking Arabic, made the teacher punish me horribly with a metal rod. My face was scared, my legs were bruised and my hand was tortured. "We do not speak this here!!! Go back to where you came from, you do not belong here!!" the teacher repeated harshly. What she said was inhumane.

Every individual with a different religion caught living in Iran will face death I was so frightened and terrified at the airport. The only thought running through my mind, was getting caught in 'check-in'. My mom was holding my hand so tight at the borders. Not enough blood was getting impelled to my wrist, because she was terrified that the government would slaughter her only son. There was only one thought running in our minds. Getting caught. Fortunately, the border management allowed us to escape our biggest nightmare.

From my home town Ahwaz, where water was limited to special race people and a large amount of people getting slaughtered, we flew to the capital city of Iran, Tehran. There was still an immense chance of us getting caught. The sky's were not blue any more, they were

dark and frightening, the clouds were roaring and the sound of their lighting was harsh. The flight attendant treated me with a dry and bald biscuit. It reminded me of home town. The light brown represented the dust that refilters our lungs every day, and the light flake of sugar reminded me of the lacking and poor conditions of water that we can consume to survive. After hours of traveling, the plane traces contact with the ground in Indonesia.

I was sitting in a small, overcrowded cabin when I overheard an old crooked man whispering to my mom. He said that "tomorrow night is it". I was over thinking this. What is it? What does he mean? At night, the biting cold chilled my fingers into clumsy numbness, cold seeped into my toes and spread painfully throughout my feet as if they were my bare feet on the pristine icy whiteness rather than sneakers. It was time. Me and my family were smuggled into a filthy, construction trucks. The droplets of sand irritated my skin membranes. Everyone was covered with a blue sheet to stop the reorganization of people being smuggled. The levels of oxygen were dropping. Shortage of breath was the first sign. I'm constantly breathing but the air just won't go in, like my lungs were surrounded with metal bands.

We arrived at the beach. The water was dark and cold, the waves were curving towards each other like they were connected somehow. We were placed in old, rickety boats. The engines sounded half alive. After three days, and surviving a deadly and frightening waterspout, we are saved. A ten thousand tonnes of freshly painted metal can be seen from a great distance. The laughter's of joy were everywhere, "we are saved" people were screaming. The Australian Navy had saved our lives. We were sent to a detention camp in Christmas Island.

After one year, I was learning about how fortunate I was to have escaped Iran. After three months, I had learnt to speak English and write. This provided me with the chance to access a dream education, the one that I never had.

In Australia, I have the right to speak freely without someone knocking on my front door, I have the right to express my opinion and practice any religion without being slaughtered. Every morning, my mom would be sitting and admiring the blessed sunshine. The way her lips lifted upwards. The way her one dimple crinkled. The way her teeth were perfectly aligned. The warm glow her happiness gives. Her smile is a ray of sunshine that reflects on what she has been through. This journey was unforgettable.

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**While it has some grammar, spelling and structural issues, this entry points towards this young person becoming a very fine writer if they are given some additional support. The mechanics of writing are something that can be learned but gutsy lyricism is, I believe, innate.**

Neil Grant

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# Judges

## NEIL GRANT

Neil Grant was born in Glasgow in the Year of the Fire Horse. He has sung 'Throw Your Arms Around Me' on a five and a half thousand metre mountain pass in Ladakh and loafed in the bombed-out Buddha niche in Bamian.

Neil is the author of *The Ink Bridge*, *Indo Dreaming* and *Rhino Chasers* and co-editor of *From Kinglake to Kabul*. His latest novel *The Honeyman and the Hunter* - a story about fish, bees and belonging - is set in coastal NSW and India and is due out in April 2017.

He lives in Melbourne's outer north with his partner and a lot of books.

## CHRIS CANTY

Since gaining a Bachelor of Arts (Media) at La Trobe University, Chris has been a travel journalist for the last 17 years. He has written for over 30 publications worldwide and co-authored five travel books, focusing on a broad range of travel related topics from business travel to budget guidebooks. He also a Masters Degree in Tourism focusing on publishing and is a Member of the Australian Society of Travel Writers.

Chris has also taught extensively, currently teaching Masters Journalism at the University of Melbourne. He is a regular contributor to the Saturday Age and is the founder of TheHappiestHour - Australia's Number One food & drink specials platform.

## SHARYN BRADY

Sharyn's background is in the corporate communications sector, working across internal communications programs and public relations campaigns. Sharyn has a Bachelor of Arts in Communications & English, and a Masters in English Literature from Macquarie University, which included a research thesis on the figure of the underground man throughout literature.

Sharyn currently works in a communications and marketing role at La Trobe University. She enjoys storytelling and creative writing and has previously been a finalist in the Qantas Spirit of Youth Awards for the written word category, and her poetry has been selected for the Montreal Poetry Prize's Global Anthology.

## NINO BUCCI

Nino Bucci is an investigative reporter for the ABC. After graduating from La Trobe University with a Bachelor of Journalism in 2007, he started his career at The Bendigo Advertiser, before moving to The Canberra Times, and then to The Age as a crime reporter focusing on justice issues such as the corrections system, family violence and drug and firearm trafficking.

He has been a finalist in the Quills, PANPA and Migration Council of Australia media awards, and was awarded a World Press Institute/US Studies Centre Fellowship in 2016.

In 2018, his first book, *The Stoccas: Like Father, Like Son*, was published by Penguin Random House.

## MELIA DONK

Melia Donk graduated with first class honours in the Bachelor of Media (Writing) from Macquarie University, where she was awarded the Highly Commended Certificate at the Macquarie Writing Awards for her non-fiction writing. Since graduating, she has assisted on a number of collaborative short film projects, working as a screenwriting consultant and script supervisor. Her articles have appeared on the *Writer's Bloc*. Her short story, *Marnie and the Old Man*, was short listed for the FAW WA Lyndall Hadow/Douglas Stuart Short Story Prize. She has worked as a tutor in media and communications at the University of Melbourne, and regularly assists the Student Administration Communications team at La Trobe University.

## ROGER AVERILL

Dr Roger Averill is the author of the novel *Keeping Faith*, and a travel memoir, *Boy He Cry: An Island Odyssey*, which featured on Radio National's First Person program. In 2012 he published a biography of his late friend Werner Pelz, who taught him at La Trobe University in the 1980s. *Exile: The Lives and Hopes of Werner Pelz* was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and won the Western Australian Premier's Non-fiction Award.

His latest book is another novel, *Relatively Famous*, which is currently shortlisted for the Mark & Evette Moran Nib Literary Award.

Having gained a PhD from La Trobe in 2000, Roger now teaches at Victoria University.

## JANET BUTLER

Dr Janet Butler is an Honorary Research Associate in the History Program at La Trobe University. Her research explores the personal accounts of Australians at war, to shine new light on this aspect of our nation's history.

Janet's book *Kitty's War*, based on the diaries of First World War army nurse Kitty McNaughton, was awarded the New South Wales Premier's History Prize for Australian history and the WK Hancock Prize for a first work in Australian history. It was short-listed for the Magarey Medal for Biography and the National Biography Award.

## CON MCGILLYCUDDY

Con McGillicuddy is a La Trobe Alumnus, having undertaken both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at La Trobe.

Con has been a secondary school humanities teacher in the northern suburbs over the last three decades. He has a range of interests which include music, gardening and more recently vintage wirelasses, mainly from the thirties era. This was then a fairly recently developed and then mass produced technology which did so much to popularise what we now recognise as 'electronic mass media' even though it was via the 'valve.' Con's interest stems from the fact that this technology conveyed so much of the great social and historical turbulence which was to unfold, over the airwaves.

Con is currently employed at RMIT Training.

## JOHN MCKENZIE

Emeritus Professor John McKenzie AM FAA, is an eminent scientist, regarded as a world leader in ecological and evolutionary genetics.

John has served on numerous boards including Bio 21 and the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. John is a visionary leader and passionate advocate for science education and is highly regarded for his mentoring of the next generation of scientists, teachers and research supervisors. He excelled in his role as Secretary for Education and Public Awareness of the Australian Academy of Science, where he pioneered an innovative science program being used in most Australian primary schools today.

John was awarded an AM in 2011 for service to higher education through administrative roles, to professional associations, and to the community. He also received a Distinguished Alumni Award from La Trobe University in 2014. John is a former Deputy Chancellor at La Trobe University and Life Governor of Ivanhoe Grammar School.

## KELLY GARDINER

Kelly Gardiner writes historical fiction and fantasy for readers of all ages.

Her new series is the time travel trilogy, *The Firewatcher Chronicles*, which begins with *Brimstone*.

Her previous novel, *1917: Australia's Great War*, was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Young People's History Prize and the Asher Award. Kelly's other books include the young adult novels *Act of Faith* and *The Sultan's Eyes*, both of which were shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and CBCA Notable Books; the *Swashbuckler* pirate trilogy; and *Goddess*, a novel for adults based on the life of the seventeenth century French swordswoman and opera singer, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

Kelly teaches creative writing at La Trobe University and is the co-host of *Unladylike*, a podcast about women and writing.

## FINALIST JUDGE

### PADDY O'REILLY

Dr Paddy O'Reilly is an award-winning Melbourne writer. Her work has won the Norma K Hemming Award and been nominated for the USA Kirkus Prize as well as shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal and the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. Her debut novel, *The Factory*, was also in numerous best books of the year lists and was Highly Commended in the FAW Christina Stead Award for Fiction. It was broadcast in fifteen episodes as the ABC Radio National Book Reading. Paddy's latest book, *Peripheral Vision*, was published in 2015. She has also written screenplays and worked as additional screenwriter for films. Paddy has been Asialink writer-in-residence in Japan, a fellow at Varuna: the Writers' House, writer-in-residence at Kelly Steps Cottage, Tasmania, and The Lockup, Newcastle, presenter and reader at the International Conference on the Short Story in Toronto and Arkasas, and a full fellow at the Vermont Studio Center, USA.



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