

The  
Creative Writing  
Excellence Program's

Short Story Anthology  
2014



## *A Picture of Consequence*

Celine Kelly © 2014

Urangan State High School

Caster watched the red liquid run down before him, staining the white surface. He'd mixed too much water into the paint. He waited, irritation rising once again in his chest, as the paint dripped down the canvas. The effect left the painted lady resembling a vampire. Caster snatched the ruined picture off its easel and threw it onto the pile of failed pieces beside him. It had been his second last canvas. He dropped the brush into the water jug, before drifting to the window. Peering through the curtains, Caster hoped to find something in the street to draw inspiration out.

The square below his apartment was, to his disappointment, dull and uninteresting – the complete opposite of how it usually was. The area had been closed off due to mild earthquake damage. The square was normally lined with brightly coloured stalls, street performers of all sorts would gather and children would weave between the legs of consumers. But there was no rainbow like plaza, just a lifeless cobalt street lined with deep cracks and a broken fountain.

As Caster turned away, he saw something that didn't help his mood; the café where he and his girlfriend had broken up. It hadn't been that serious but Caster's chest still tightened. Turning away, he decided he should have his lunch.

As he closed the fridge door, a half empty orange juice carton in hand, Caster saw his rent notice stuck on the door. He was two weeks behind in the rent. Groaning, Caster took a swing from the carton.

'Mum, says you shouldn't do that.'

Caster almost choked. He'd forgotten about her. Little Aggie, his niece, was staying with him for the week while her parents were renovating their house. Any other time, Caster would have loved to have his niece over but his "Lady in Red" portrait had to be finished before the weekend if he was to hold up his end of the deal. Aggie's presence wasn't helping. Caster smiled at her, regardless. 'Really? Why's that?'

'Mum, says it's rude and not healthy.'

'Does she now?' Caster chuckled, taking a place at the table. That was just like his sister-in-law. Aggie hummed, tugging at her braid. 'Aggie, is there something you want?'

'Uncle Caster, can I, um, use your paints?'

'Go ahead. I'm not using them today.'

'Thanks, Uncle!'

Caster watched her race out of the room, before picking up his paper. 'To be in single digits, again,' he muttered, just before the phone rang.

Aggie hadn't heard what her uncle had said or the phone. The moment she entered Caster's art studio, she went straight for the blue paint. *Uncle Caster always makes blue things for me when I'm sad. Maybe, if I paint something blue, he'll cheer up!* Aggie giggled at her brilliance then set to work.

Meanwhile, in the other room Caster was glaring at his phone. *They want it finished by tomorrow. What am I – a miracle worker?* He glanced at his watch. The art store would be closed by now and he only had one canvas left. Sighing, he got to his feet; he'd just have to not mess this one up.

Aggie, tongue wedged in-between her teeth, finished the last stroke on her picture, She sat back beaming then she heard the sound of a door opening behind her. Aggie turned expecting to see her uncle smile at her painting, but what she saw wiped the grin off her face.

'Agatha! What did you do?' Aggie flinched as Caster stormed towards the easel. 'That was my last canvas!' he yelled, seizing the painting. 'My deadline's been moved to tomorrow and now I have nothing to work on.'

'I'm sorry, Uncle. I didn't know—'

'No, you just didn't think!' Caster snapped, turning to look at his niece. His anger abandoned him at the sight of Aggie's face.

'I'm s-sorry, Uncle Caster. I just wanted to cheer you up,' Aggie sobbed.

'Aggie, I—' Caster began, but she was gone.

Caster dropped down on the floor, rubbing his temples. *What a mess.* This month had been one of the worst, but it was no excuse for how he behaved. He looked at the painting that Aggie had made, the same picture that might have just ended his career. The painting showed a small cage on the side of the canvas, but a blue bird in flight dominated the page.

*Oh, Aggie.*

When Aggie was four, Caster had taken her to the park. Aggie's parents had hit another drawback in their relationship and had asked Caster to mind Aggie. It had been the middle of winter, when nature offered little that was bright and vibrant. The sky had nothing to show but a dreary grey and murky light. Aggie had been miserable as they went to leave the park. Caster had tried everything he could think of to make her happy but to no avail. In the end, it was a small blue bird, completely out of place in cold that made Aggie smile.

'It's so pwetty,' he remembered her cry.

'Hey, try to keep that look on your face.'

'Wha' look?'

'That one. Don't stop smiling, Aggie.'

'I don't know if I can.'

'Of course you can. Tell you what, if you get sad look for something blue, like that bird.'

'My happy colour?'

'Of course not. It's our happy colour.'

The picture before him had no elaborate colours or textures. It was innocent and simple just like that day. Smiling, Caster took his phone out sent a quick text before headed to his niece's room. 'Aggie?' he asked, knocking on the door. 'Are you in there?' No answer. 'Aggie, please I'm sorry. I didn't mean it, honest.'

It was silent for a while before Aggie spoke. 'Honest?'

'Honest.'

'I don't believe you.'

'I don't blame you.'

'That was really mean, Uncle Caster.'

'I know. Am I allowed to make it up to you?'

'That depends.' Aggie's voice sounded closer this time.

'On?'

'What are you gonna do, Uncle?'

Caster grinned. 'How about you help me paint a picture.'

The door opened just enough for Aggie to peer through. 'I'm not as good as you.'

'You're right,' Caster smiled a little. 'You're much better.'

Aggie opened the door, watching him suspiciously. 'What about your work?'

'You wanted to cheer me up.' Caster knelt down in front of her. 'And nothing could make me happier than painting with you. Besides I think work can wait until my niece goes home.'

'Can our painting be blue?'

Caster drew his arms around her. 'It can be anything you want, sweetheart.'

They walked back to the studio while, in Caster's pocket, his phone displayed one message: *Sorry, Mark. I won't be finishing the portrait. You'll need to find someone else to do it. I'm going to spend some time with my niece.*

## *Guns and Green Eyes*

Rachel Bryen © 2014

Murgon State High School

### After

Dull, green eyes. Flat, straight brown hair. A face that holds no secrets; has no soul. That's what I see every time I look in the mirror. Or that's what I used to see. Now I see my hair sway in the almost non-existent breeze. My green eyes sparkle beneath my long black eyelashes. Each time I blink my eye shadow makes my eyes look darker, more mysterious. I haven't changed much in my appearance, but I have changed in unimaginable ways.

How?

I shouldn't burden you with knowledge, but someone has to know.

Just in case.

### Before

My heart pounds in my ears. I start at every noise. I swing my head 'round and check the door again, I turn slowly and reach toward it. As my hand grasps the cool stainless steel, it happens. The gun fires and suddenly I can't feel the necklace anymore. I gasp, but I already know who it is before I turn. The only person that could hit something so fine is Emily. My anger is rising, I try to cool it but her mistake could risk our pay.

Before I can yell at her, we hear it. Sirens, police. I grab the necklace and run out of the store. We run down a dead end alley and whisper the words. The wall shimmers and disappears. Rider and Regan are waiting on the other side. They slap us on the back and congratulate us on a job well done but all I can think about is when Emily shot the necklace out of my hand.

She knows I'm thinking about it. She always knows what's on my mind. When the boys suggest we go get a drink, she jumps at the chance to have people around so I can't yell. It takes most of the night before I can get her alone. She has a beer in her hand and is sipping it, looking around the dance floor. I walk over to her and grab a wine from a passing waiter.

'What was with you back at NYC?' I watch the dance floor as she takes her time answering.

'It doesn't feel right anymore, taking from them. They didn't do anything, it was their ancestors. We shouldn't make them pay.'

My eyes leave the dancers and drift to Emily. 'But they did, remember? Just last month.'

Her eyes meet mine. 'I don't believe the council anymore. Not since they didn't help Bryce and Ryan. We could've saved them, but the council wouldn't let us. I've made my decision, I'm leaving.' I try to hide my astonishment but, by her expression, it's not working. She glances down. 'Haven't you thought about it? You know, no harsh rules to live by, we could be free!'

I stare at her. 'But what about Rider and Regan? Would you leave them behind? Would you leave me?'

She's torn. A battle between her heart and mind. 'Will you come with me? I'd ask Rider and Regan as well, of course.' All this time she's had her head bowed, but at this she looks up. I slowly shake my head and her face falls. 'Will you at least cover for me? Please?'

I stare at her, then at Rider and Regan, who are dancing with a group of girls. I look back and nod. Her face lights up.

‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’ She gulps the last of her beer and rushes out. I stare after her then I move into the dancers. I have to yell in Rider’s ear for him to hear. ‘I’m going, Emily’s left already. Enjoy the rest of your night.’ He nods and I push my way out of the pub.

I go to Emily’s room and knock. I wait. ‘Emily, are you in there?’

Everything’s been cleared out. I stare at the room for another minute then I gasp. The wall, she’s leaving now! I run all the way to the wall reaching it as it shimmers back to solid. I fall down and hug my legs to my chest. That’s the position I’m in when the boys find me later that night.

They race toward me. ‘She’s gone, and she can never come back.’

The boys look at each other then grab me, helping me stand. I sway on my feet and Regan picks me up. I’m numb; I don’t remember where the boys take me. Regan lays me down and pulls the blanket up. Rider closes the door and they pull up chairs to the table. I close my eyes and wish the day to be a dream.

I pry my eyes open and the sunlight hits them. Groaning I roll over opening my eyes again. I open my mouth to scream, not knowing who it was and then I realise, Regan. I look around and find Rider sprawled across the two chairs from last night. I turn back to Regan and his crystal blue eyes lock with my own. Time passes but we lay still. It’s not until Rider groans and the chairs squeak that we notice the world. Regan springs up and walks to the kitchen and turns on kettle on.

Rider rolls over and falls to the ground. ‘Uh, you better love me lots, girl. I wouldn’t sleep on two chairs for just anyone.’ I roll my eyes and crawl out of bed.

‘Anyone for coffee?’ Regan calls out from the kitchen. We stumble into the kitchen and move around, getting breakfast.

A bell rings and that can only mean one thing, a traitor has been found. Everyone races to the main courtyard. A girl is lead in and pushed up the stairs. Her blond hair is a tangled, bloodied mess. Her face is filled with pain; her forest green eyes dart everywhere, then land on me. My eyes water but the tears don’t fall.

‘The charges against Ms. Emily Rhoda are as follows; abandonment of her squad, forcefully using weapons against colleges and—’

A gun fires. A scream. Emily falls, dead. Everyone turns. The gun shakes in my hand. Someone tries to pry it from my hands, but instead it clatters against the pavement, the sound loud in the dead silence of the courtyard. I drop to my knees and the tears finally roll down my face.

Emily was laid to rest in the cemetery. I attended but I didn’t go near. When everyone left, I went up to her grave and knelt next to it.

‘Hey Em. I know everyone thought I shot you because you were a traitor but I know the truth. You didn’t want to die by their means. You wanted a death where you would be remembered as a girl that served her people with courage. I miss you Em, I promise to end your mission.’

### After

Regan and Rider crawl up behind the men.

I keep talking, not that they are listening. They are focused on my looks. My hair sways in the breeze. My green eyes sparkle beneath my long black eyelashes. Each time I

blink my eye shadow makes my eyes look darker, more mysterious. I give the silent signal to Regan and Rider and they leap grabbing the men's arms, and pin them behind their backs.

'Now boys, if you listen and give me the answers I want, you might live. If you don't, my men will take you away and no one will ever know you've gone, no traces, no nothing. You get it, easy is it not? You may know us, you may not. First question, where is Jordan Shaw?'

The men look at each other and laugh.

I raise my hand and Regan and Rider bring the knives out. They press them to the men's throats with enough pressure to let them know that they are there.

'You obviously don't take me seriously enough.' I bring out Emily. I twirl her around my fingers and release the safety mechanism. I train the gun on the men. 'See this gun? Her name is Emily after my best friend who she killed. She was my first kill. I use her when people don't listen to me.'

The fear that passed through the men's eyes was enough to let me know that they know who we were now. They listened after that.

We have been chasing them down for months. It turns out that Emily is a spy and her target was Jordan Shaw, our leader. He was using the jewellery we were stealing to buy drugs and worse. Her mission was to take him down and stop us from doing more harm to the humans. We will finish her mission, for Emily.

## *I Hate Mash Potato*

Tia Dullard © 2014

James Nash State High School

*I can't believe she gets to sleep in my bed for the next three nights. She is the visitor, so she should sleep in the freaking spare bed, not me. We live in a democratic country, for goodness sake; there has to be a law against this atrocity. I mean, what kind of visitor steals your bedroom every time they visit? I swear that is a breach of my human rights or something.*

*I can't take this any longer. This is the worst start to the holidays ever.*

*And this mash potato is gross! Where did Mum buy these vegetables? I hate mash potato, I hate the spare bed and I hate the way she is eating her stupid broccoli with her stupid mouth, chewing like a grade-A moron.*

*'Thank you so much for having me, Auntie Kay. These vegetables are just delicious. Where did you get them from?'*

*Oh my god, suck up much? Why is she so damn annoying? The stupid bits of broccoli stuck between her teeth are driving me insane. She should take classes on how to eat properly. She's like a starving golden retriever that has been abandoned for two months and has forgotten how to eat. Stupid girl.*

*Man this mash potato sucks. Mum should take cooking classes. Maybe Mum and Ellie could go back to school together because they are both being completely and utterly inhumane.*

*'Ellie, you are too kind. We love it when you come to visit darling, especially Issy. She doesn't have that many friends, you know. Oh, and the vegies are from the organic fruit and veg shop down the road. I'm glad you like them, darling. Issy is always whingeing and carrying on about how boring they taste. Very immature of her, if you ask me. Thankyou, Ellie sweetie, for appreciating my cooking. You know you're welcome here anytime.'*

*So, apparently, I don't have many friends. Gee, thanks Mum! And I don't think these vegetables taste boring, they taste like curdled cat snot. Just yesterday, Mum told me to be nice to Ellie because she doesn't have any friends. Wow, 'Hypocrite of the Year Award' goes to you, Mum. The silly old woman told me to be nice to the golden child while she stays with us. You know what, screw you Mum and screw that idea.*

*Instead, being the mature young lady that I am, I have taken a secret vow of silence. Sixty-four hours and roughly twenty-seven minutes remaining until my freedom of speech can be returned. Come on, Issy, if you can survive this, you can survive anything. Oh man, this is going to be so difficult. Just watching the stupid brat chew her stupid food makes me want to spit this stupid mash potato on her stupid curly hair.*

*Oh for Pete's sake, Mum is eyeing Ellie like she just won a Nobel Prize for inventing the cure for cancer. Geez Mum, if she is so perfect why don't you just marry her?*

*'Aww Aunty Kay, I hope I can help! Mum said you were having some friendship issues, Ellie. She says you lack social skills and have turned into the wet fish of the family. That's unlucky for you, but, with some of my advice you'll become a more interesting person. You know what I mean, babe? I have a lot of friends, you know?'*

*Holy shrieking badgers. Mother of ducklings. Get me out of here before I drown myself in this hideous mash potato. Look at that sympathetic smile. I hate her smile.*

*Friendship issues? What the hell! Does my family talk about my so called 'issues' over the phone or something? I want to jump across this dinner table and stab her in the eye with my fork. And why is she giving ME advice?! I do not need my hideous troll of a cousin to help me find friends.*

*I hate my family. Why am I related to this beast of a cousin? I am pretty sure she is adopted. Maybe I am adopted. Yes, that can be the only reasonable explanation. I'm the wet fish, hey? Oh, I'll show you a wet fish. You better sleep with one eye open, you stupid horse. .*

'Ellie sweetie, you are just too kind. I wish I had a daughter who was as sweet, innocent, smart and caring as you. Issy has not said a nice word to me for longer than I can remember. I haven't even seen her smile in the past fourteen years. She has changed, Ellie darling, and I want you to help me get her back. On a positive note, Issy is really excited that you are here, Ellie darling. Aren't you, Issy?'

*I need to get away from this horrible conversation. I would rather be lying in a pool of dog's vomit right now than sitting here listening to my mother talk about how much she loves my beastly cousin. I am the opposite of excited. I am bored. I am so bored, I'm comatose.*

*And what have I ever done to my mother to make her hate me this much? Does the stupid woman realise I am sitting at the same dinner table? Is it 'pick on Issy day' or something?*

*And what is in this stupid mash potato to make it taste this bad? It is so hideous. I want to throw this white squishy abomination at both of their stupid, ugly faces!*

'I know what'll cheer up our wet fish, Auntie Kay. Did you know, Issy, you are my third favourite cousin! I only have three cousins, so, I suppose you could say that you made it to my top three, if you really wanted to. I'm really sorry that I can't stay with you over the holidays more often. I know you aren't the best-looking person to be seen with at the mall or the nicest person ever, but that's okay. I'll still take you shopping, darling cousin of mine, because you obviously haven't been shopping for the past five years. Look what you are wearing? It's nasty and you shouldn't leave the house wearing that. Although, we are blood related so I suppose you can wear it if you want to, because I really do love you for who you are.'

'Oh my god, if she gives me that saccharine smile one more time tonight, I am going to break my vow of silence, chuck these repulsive vegetables at her nauseating face, and give her some 'advice'

'And thank goodness she can't stay with me more often. I'd throw myself off a building, scoop up my smashed entrails, hike up those stairs and throw myself off again. What the hell? So, I'm not the best looking person, hey? Take a look in the mirror, Ellie 'darling', because you look like a female version of Mr Bean wearing last season's Malibu Barbie haute couture.

'Holy badgers, this mash potato tastes worse with every single bite. I think Agnes' dog food would taste better.

'Oh man, I can't wait until I'm asleep; then I won't have to look at my mother and Ellie's crabby faces for a whole eight hours. Seriously, Ellie looks like a smashed crab, with a bit of broccoli sandwiched between its teeth. Wait, do crabs even have teeth? Whatever, I better give her a quick smile so she stops staring at me. Jeepers, she looks like she's suffered a head injury. Maybe crabs are allergic to mash potato. Doesn't matter, I hate her crabby face and I hate mash potato.'

*Strange. Mum's face looks a bit funny too. Not funny ha ha but funny as in she has the same head injury. Everyone is looking at me. What's wrong with them? Have I got something on my face? I can't believe how dumb they look. Their forks are frozen halfway to their mouths. Seriously, if looks could kill right now, I would be dead. Lucky I decided to take this vow of silence. I'd be kicked out of home if they could hear what I'm thinking. But, it wouldn't be the end of the world. At least there would be no more of this hideous mash potato.*

*Man, I really do hate mash potato.*



## *Lily's Stones*

Ayla Logan © 2014

Aldridge State High School

The first time my father raised a hand to my mother was the first time I started collecting. I ran to the park in the night in an attempt to escape the shadows of violence and fear that had invaded my home, but the dancing figures followed me. I squatted at the lake bed and dug my fingers into the mud, fascinated by the array shapes and textures. I counted stones when I was frightened.

When I came home that night, I'd collected five. It may seem a harmless number, but as my father's beatings grew more frequent, my collection expanded. My sister found the stones one day, stashed in a box beneath my bed, and tossed them in the garbage. I cried for hours.

I wasn't confronted with my problem again until my Year Twelve Formal, when my girlfriend dumped me in front of her silver tongued friends, each adorned with vanity and contempt. I got drunk at an after party and found myself stumbling home, kicking chunks of gravel as I wandered. In an attempt to distract myself from the stormy torrent of resentment that the alcohol wouldn't numb, I'd stoop and gather the jagged rocks at the edge of the road. When I came home, my pockets were almost as heavy as my loneliness.

Of course, the next morning it wasn't loneliness that pounded in my head and brought the taste of bile to my mouth. My mother washed my clothes, getting rid of the stones while she was at it, and I hoped to never think about them again. Never think about *her* again.

For a long time, I didn't. Instead I lived. I got a job. I moved out. I even dated, but nobody I met, no matter how lithe of humour, kind of heart, or quick to smile, came close to the splendour of my high school 'sweetheart.'

Not until I met Lily.

I'd always hated those chick flicks where it was love at first sight and all that conventional bullshit, but I remember thinking the first time she spoke to me: *This is her*. I knew this was a girl I could love.

There isn't a thing about her I don't miss.

The soft comfort of her lips when I'd awake shivering, memories of tears and smashed plates in the kitchen hovering over me. The milky white of her skin; the colour of the flower she was named for. The sound of her laugh, made more beautiful by its rarity, and the crinkle beneath her eyes when she'd smile.

I would lie awake in the nights after she'd left, envisioning her beside me, trying to recall the smell of her hair and the warmth of her touch, until the picture faded and Lily became a concept; a time, rather than a person.

Staring at the flowers on her coffin was when I felt the almost irresistible compulsion to collect. I'd kept myself together for too long; no tears shed when I found her, none when her family embraced me, and nothing except unfeeling silence when I listened to the eulogy. But when I got home, tossing my jacket to the floor, and laid eyes on the bed, I lost all pretences of being okay, and the last shred of composure escaped me. How cold would the sheets be without her by my side?

The air pressed upon me and I couldn't bring myself to remain in the house a moment longer; I fled to the backyard, dropping to my knees in the dirt and letting out a stream of pitiful sounds, my hands doing nothing to muffle the noise. Damn the neighbours. I didn't care who heard me break.

When I fell silent, and the numb tendrils of loneliness had taken hold of me, I opened my eyes. My fingers sunk into the ground and brushed against something rough. It was a stone. White and freckled with grey. It held no value, but it was solid.

Something I could hold on to.

My obsession started with one per day. Before sleeping, I'd find a stone. I soon found myself thinking of her during the sunny hours, and needed more. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away. How could I? The slow infestation of sickness, isolation, and addiction began.

Drink would have been an easier vice, people might argue, but the vile taste, the money wasted, and the stink of my breath every morning, would be a hundred times simpler for me to give up, than the compulsion to pick up the God forsaken stones.

One by one my friends left, dissuaded by the clutter across my table tops. Nowhere was safe from the reach of the rocks. Lily's stones were everywhere; the disease spread to the bathroom, the kitchen, and the bedroom. It filled the window sills. Sat atop sinks. Perched on my bedhead.

One day I stopped collecting them for her and instead started collecting for the people who'd left; for the bills I'd forgotten to pay; for the smell of cigarettes in the morning, and for the taste of alcohol at night. A stone for the growing stubble on my cheeks, and another for the cracks in the windows. It got to the point where I'd take a look around me and be filled with the utmost disgust. A stone for that. I couldn't look in the mirror. Another stone.

They were no longer Lily's stones, but mine.

Waking in my usual tangle of sheets, sweat clinging to my skin, I plodded downstairs, the fourth one creaking and paint flaking from the baluster. Flicking the switch on the kettle, I listened to the rumble, spooning instant coffee into a mug. When my temporary cure for the poison in my veins was in hand, I made my way to the lounge room, where I stood for several minutes, sipping my coffee and eyeing my chair.

The most ironic thing about my entire situation was my catalyst.

I was about to sit when the sound of shattered glass filled the room. Rays of sunlight reached inside, shedding light upon my surroundings and making me cringe. The window had broken. The cause lay at my feet: a rock. I heard the sound of children's laughter from outside and, by the time I'd gone to see who had thrown it, they were but a flash of fleeing coats down the street.

Was this who I was? The shut-in on the block kids laughed at and the neighbours steered clear of? Had the disease of my mind been made so visible to the outside world? Had I fallen so low that I was worth nothing but derision and mockery?

I had.

Placing the mug on the nearest surface, I stooped and picked up the rock. No bigger than my fist. White, flecked with grey. I stared down at it for a long minute before I realised, and knew with every fibre of my being, that I did not want to hold onto it for any longer.

Despite the tension in my muscles, and rise in my heart rate, my breath was steady as I turned and launched the rock out the window. But that wasn't enough. I found no release, and the action only fuelled my anger. I let out a huff when I kicked over the coffee table and the precarious mess of stones it held went flying. I swiped my arm across the surface of the window sill, scattering more rocks. Another kick here and there and I still hadn't burned out my anger, nor found an inch of satisfaction.

Shouting, I dug my fingers into my scalp, finding only more sickness and ill memories. Before me lay the main feature of my room; the huge cabinet that once held pictures, books, and other decorations, but was now a cluster of stony madness. I strode across the room, one objective in mind, and placed my hands against the cold glass of the shelf front. Any other day, I'd be frightened by the face reflected from it; the rage, despair,

and loathing in the eyes. Too long I'd held onto these stones. Too long I'd been weighed down by my loneliness, the shadow of memory, and the denial of my condition.

With one heave, the cabinet toppled over. The glass doors shattered. The contents of the shelves, the stones, the stupid God damned stones, scattered across the floor boards, bouncing around my feet in a chaotic haze.

My anger subsided. I let out a cry before I sunk to the ground; silence descending upon the room. Shards of glass dug into my knees, and I grasped at the stones; the significance they held rendered obsolete. I was short of breath, panicked I might have made the wrong decision. Whatever it was, I couldn't turn back.

'Oh God,' I whispered, despair creeping over me.

My eyes happened on a flash of white amid the broken shelves, glass, and stones. Fingers bloody, I reached for the picture. There she was, freed from the tyranny of my stones. Years had passed since I last saw her. My grip tightened on the photograph. I heard her laughing again. I remembered the smell of her hair: the warmth to her touch.

'Oh, Lily,' I said, a tremor in my voice.

I closed my eyes. There was nothing I could do. Nothing I could say to her. My hand trembled as I put the picture down.

It was time to let go.

## *One Mind Fits All*

Sarah Kaing © 2014

Kingaroy State High School

A FINE LAYER OF SNOW had accumulated on your body in the few minutes you spent sitting still. You shake it off as the man approaches. He is a young, well groomed gentleman but, although he is dressed like the locals, his smooth face betrays him. Without a trace of a beard, he stands out from the other men on the street.

‘Do you still decline my offer?’ he asks.

You don’t respond immediately. Instead, you gaze at the young girl across the street. Her ragged clothing doesn’t afford much warmth in this weather. Nonetheless, she is out looking for you. You shake your head in response to the gentleman’s question. You will not take up his offer.

‘Do you *like* being a cat?’

He is looking down at you. His gaze makes you feel uneasy. You only relax when you feel little hands lift you from behind. It’s not comfortable, but you let the girl cuddle you. After all, she is nice to you.

‘And who might you be?’ he asks her.

She is frightened by strangers. She runs away, carrying you with her. You purr in her arms, thankful to be away from the strange man. She reaches the next street when you see another strange person. A woman, dressed warm for the winter weather. If you did not recognise her cold smile, you may have dismissed her as an ordinary citizen. However, you remember her well. She stretches her arm out as you approach. The girl runs underneath and the woman grips a fistful of the girl’s hair, tugging her backwards, causing her to stumble. She glares at both of you with large eyes that reflect the grey of the sky. She intertwines her fingers with her tangled hair. Pulling the girl’s head to the side, she makes eye contact with you. Her voice is taunting when she talks.

‘And where do you think you’re going?’ she asks, flashing her unusual teeth. Neither you nor the girl offer an answer. The woman grins at you. ‘What’s the matter?’ she says. ‘Cat got your tongue?’ Her laugh is shrill.

The girl struggles to break free from the woman’s grip with no success. You take the struggle into your own hands, swiping at the woman’s wrist with your claws. The tips dig into her flesh and blood flows. The woman shrieks and releases the girl to cradle her wrist.

Free, the girl runs again. You can feel her heart beating and hear her weary breaths. There is little you can do but remain calm as she hugs you to her chest. To her, you are almost a stuffed toy, an item of comfort.

You lose sight of the crazed woman, but you know better than to breathe with relief. Further ahead, you see a paper boy, or rather, a boy disguised as a paper boy. Even from this distance, you recognise him as the woman’s son.

The boy sees you as the girl runs past the newspaper stand. You catch a glimpse of the smirk on his face as he seizes a walking stick from an elderly man and swings it with both hands. Everything feels slower once you realise he has hit the girl’s legs. She falls face first onto the cold road, sprawled with you beneath her. Bystanders stare.

‘This girl doesn’t own that cat!’ shouts the boy. You wriggle out from beneath the girl and prod her to rise. Two streams of blood flow from her nose and her forehead is red. You touch your nose to her face. She doesn’t respond. The boy grabs you, holding you in the air, much to your displeasure, and shakes you as he speaks.

‘Can’t you see? This cat’s a pure bred pedigree! What a fine white coat! There’s no way this pauper could own a cat like this! Why do you think she was running away?’

You hiss at the boy.

‘Ah! The cat’s a rabid beast! Perhaps it should be put out of its misery! Does anyone have a bucket of water?’ The boy snickers. You hiss again and swipe at him, burrowing your claws into him as you did with the crazed lady. He flings you to the ground and you run, leaving the girl behind. You are the target, she’ll be left alone.

You dash for a dark side street. A bad idea. You keep running anyway.

The strange man is standing at the walled end of the alley. You are relieved by the sight of him, despite the nature of your past interactions. A mew escapes from your mouth. His offer is more preferable than being apprehended by the others. He is not as cruel.

You run to the feet of the man and place your paws on his trousers. He doesn’t look down. Mewing again, you try to capture his attention. He neglects to notice you at all. There is crude cackle behind you. The woman and the boy stand there, blocking your exit. The boy is holding onto the ankle of the girl. He has dragged her. Anger boils inside you.

‘Grab her,’ instructs the woman. You move to run, but you react too slowly. The strange man is holding you with both hands. Straining to inhale, you mew, a strangled noise leaving your mouth.

‘Take it,’ says the woman, this time to the boy. He drops the girl’s leg, tossing it to the ground, and approaches you. With one hand, he grabs your neck at the base of your skull. With the other hand, he draws a knife from his coat. The man tightens his grip on your body and you feel the boy pull on your head as he brings his other hand towards your neck.

There is a sickening noise and a sharp pain before he throws you to the ground, the cobblestones rushing to meet your face. As you roll along the ground, you glance at the rest of you, hanging limp in the man’s hands. His eyes are sad.

It seems they only needed your head.

When you wake, your body feels different. Heavier. Bigger. Your head hurts and there’s an odd noise, like someone sobbing. You realise you’re lying on a table in a dark room. The walls are made of stone and dripping with moisture. You see other tables, littered with complicated apparatus. The dim light in the room emanates from two small oil lamps. There is only a single old wooden door. A cat’s head stares at you from a liquid filled jar. The top of the head is still removed from the rest. As best as you can, you bring your forelimbs to your field of vision. Arms. Hands. Your skin is coated in dust and filth.

Trying your best to coordinate your movements, you manage to prop yourself up on your elbows. You look at your clothes. They’re familiar, but they’re not yours. The sobbing is louder now. The door opens, you flinch, as if you were a puppet being jerked around. The strange man enters the room. A muffled shriek echoes briefly. The man looks at you, his eyes full of pity. He extends his arm, holding a hand mirror. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

You take the mirror from him and hold it to face you. What you see makes your stomach churn. As you stare into the mirror, the girl’s eyes stare back. Her face is odd. Her nose hasn’t healed correctly and she is missing several teeth. Looking closely you see the scars on her hairline. At least they didn’t ruin *her* body.

‘This isn’t science,’ says the man. ‘This is sadistic.’ He leaves the room, slamming the door behind him, his footsteps resonate beyond the walls.

You hear a murmuring. You can only understand a few words. ‘Where is my cat?’ says a voice. The girl’s voice, muffled and echoing, yet close. You are struck with a realisation. You wish you had let the man kill you and destroy your body. It would be better to be a dead cat, than have the girl subjected to this. If only you had accepted his offer.

## *Toy Soldiers*

Sacha Smith © 2014

James Nash State High School

*Brothers forever! Brothers no more!  
The battle of brothers, the cruellest of all!*

The trumpet sounds and we begin our march towards the vast battlefield. Row by row, we make our way forward, sinking in mud and water. It invades our boots and soaks our socks, making the long trek uncomfortable. The rice grass adds to our discomfort. It grabs at our arms and legs, clutching with needle-like fingers, scratching and piercing the skin through our heavy jackets. Gradually sand begins to mix with the murky water, making the mud thick and grainy. It sucks at our boots and makes it hard to walk. Occasionally a bank of untouched sand appears and we take refuge until the swamp water begins to lap at our boots once again and we march on. Beyond the rise lies our destination: acre upon acre of desert; sand dunes, palm trees and blood awaits us.

We were once a battalion of two hundred: fierce, strong and united; brothers bound not by blood, but by war. Undefeated, we were the pride of the army. Casualties were rare and those who did die, died with honour knowing they were serving their country. Our regiment was regaled with medals and treasure and songs of our triumph. This spurred us to fight harder, win more, to make our country and our families proud. We defended when we were attacked and attacked when others didn't defend.

War became a drug to us. This was what we were made for. The fight. The gunpowder. The blood. We craved it like a dog craves water on a hot day. We searched for it in everyone and everything until there was no one left to fight. When there was no one left to fight, we turned against each other.

*Marching together. Marching apart.  
Brothers marching to the beat of one heart.*

They say that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. That's not the case with us. When the going gets tough, we get tougher. We push on through the dense forest, cutting down the thick vines that threaten to strangle us if we linger too long. The sound of cracking and splintering followed by a crash echoes through the forest as a hulking branch falls from high within the trees. No one reacts. We keep our backs straight and our heads forward. Some of the men are probably thinking of home: a warm bed and loving arms, but most are thinking of what's ahead of us.

On the other side of the trees, fathers and sons, brothers and uncles wait for us. They wait for us with guns and hate. Waiting for us to spill their blood so they can spill ours in return. A vicious cycle that ends in nothing but bodies, sand and heartache. No glory. No triumph. We won't be remembered as mighty and brave, defenders of king and country. We will be remembered as weak and cowardly, killers of kin and clan.

Birds sing in the distance, mocking us with their joyous song. We ignore it until someone starts to sing, tainting the birds with his own sad lyrics.

‘Tonight we march to war my friends,  
The battle begins at night’s end,  
With the clash of swords and the ring of guns,  
The battle will begin with the rise of the sun...’

It’s an old war song that fathers have sung to their sons for generations. One by one we join in, singing our lament to the uncaring birds.

*Two hundred fathers. Two hundred sons.  
Two hundred that will soon be none.*

Between the fall of one boot and the next we’re no longer dragging ourselves through the thick, sandy mud of the marshland, but instead are standing on the fine sands of the Kismet Desert. The horizon ripples with the glow of heat, promising sunburn and dehydration. We steel ourselves, drain the remaining drops from our desiccated canteens and continue our march through the desert to our doom.

The sun beats down on us, drawing sweat from our pores, soaking our hair and skin. By the time we reach our destination, our uniforms are stuck to arms and legs, the deep blue now black with perspiration. They are waiting for us, their crimson uniforms stark against the muted colours of the desert. Behind them, the vivid green of the forest can just be seen.

We stop one hundred yards away and wait. We wait for our shadows to meet at the imaginary line that separates us. Drawn out and distorted, they creep towards the border, when they meet, it’s the end. All relationships will be forgotten. Family and friends discarded like the debris left from a storm.

Midday comes and the battle is on.

We run at them. They run at us. Neither side has a strategy. No battle plan or formation. Just guns and blood lust and impatience. It feels like millennia before the ring of the first gunshot is heard, followed by an agonised cry. After that no one holds back anymore. Bullets fly and screams fill the air. Adrenaline pumps through our veins and into the atmosphere. It smells of blood and sweat and gunpowder. Bodies from both sides litter the ground. For every two shots a soldier falls.

*Red against blue. Blue against red.  
Brother’s united, brother’s now dead.*

By the time we’re close enough to use the blades on our bayonets, there are barely fifty men left on each side. Half of us gone within minutes. The dead lay where they fell, while the wounded claw their way to the edges of the battle, hoping still, that they will return home to their families. We all hope to go home, fewer than we like to think about will.

Steel slices through wool and flesh. Blood soaks the golden sand and runs in rivulets around us. It splashes our boots and sprays our faces, the crimson flecks marring our faces into ghoulish masks. If our wives and children were to see us now, their horrified screams would scar us in a way no battle could. A shadow passes over the field and an earth shaking boom rattles our bones. Those of us that remain turn our faces to the heavens, frozen in place at the sight of the suddenly dark sky. The shadow moves from one end of the battle field to the other, almost as if it’s deciding which side is the least worthy of survival.

We look at what’s left of us and the reality of what we’ve just done finally hits us. Not only have we killed our brothers, but the husbands and fathers of those left at home. The wives now widowed and the children fatherless, calling out for the loved ones that they will never see again. All around men fall to their knees, weeping and crying in anguish. The

shadow above us moves once again, disappearing from view. After a while a desolate silence settles over us, suffocating us with regret and sorrow. We begin to stand, apologies and forgiveness waiting on our lips. Before they can be uttered the shadow, more tangible than any of us could have thought, swings down from behind, scattering us across the barren landscape.

*Brothers forever! Brothers no more!  
Little toy soldiers on the living room floor!*

‘Tate! It’s time to put away your toys and get ready for dinner!’



## *Twenty Cigarettes*

Brittany Thompson © 2014

Aldridge State High School

He awoke alone, toasted stale bread and sighed when there was barely a teaspoon of sugar left. He sipped his coffee and flicked through the television channels. From his pocket he withdrew a cigarette. Tobacco ablaze; skin soaking up the thick smoke. Inhale. Exhale. Ash on the floor. Two before eight to wash down his tasteless breakfast and another at nine when his lips began to crave the burning sin.

He showered at ten and scrubbed himself raw of the infidelity he could smell on his skin. Staring at his reflection, he brushed yellowed teeth, gurgled Listerine that was harsh on the back of his throat, and promised the poor excuse for a man standing before him that he would quit.

By ten-twenty-five, he took a lengthy drag of a fourth. He dressed plainly – black shirt, an inconspicuous hole near the hem; baggy shorts, too big. Time passed and he threw his lunch together with an eighth hanging precariously from the corner of his mouth.

The phone rang.

Nobody important ever called. Setting his plate on a dirtied newspaper, he sat and waited for the machine to take the message.

*Hi there. I've been calling all week and you haven't answered. Anyone would think you were dead. Be there in a few.*

Appetite lost, he pushed his plate aside. He took three from the packet and placed them beside one another in perfect symmetry.

The knock on the door was ominous. Her voice followed, barely audible. 'You home?' Before he answered, she stepped inside. He met her in the living room. 'The place is a mess.' His gaze surveyed the space. 'Look, I don't want to be here, but—' She ran a finger along the bookshelf, drawing it back with a coat of dust. 'When was the last time you cleaned?'

A shrug said he couldn't recall. It told her he never had.

'I can't believe you allow yourself to live like this. You look terrible.'

Her fingers were harsh as they gripped his chin, turning his head. 'How long has it been since you shaved? You never did suit facial hair.' She rolled her eyes, wiping her hand on the leg of her jeans. 'Can I use your bathroom?'

She navigated her way down the hall. The light from the bathroom illuminated the dank abode. On her way out, she brought a towel. Beige. Soft. 'I was wondering where this went. Have you been using it?' She hadn't cared before. 'It's still damp. Anything else of mine you have lying around?'

He wondered if that was what she came for; the unimportant belongings she had left behind. Towels as soft as her hands, stroking his skin; mugs upon which he was sure he could still taste her lips; the paintbrush in her old studio with a permanent smudge of red ChapStick.

'Michael and I are getting a place together,' she said. 'He doesn't want to live with his mate any more and I'm tired of sleeping alone.' When he didn't respond, she let out a laugh. 'I know you don't like him. If you didn't wallow in your own filth all day, you'd meet someone new. Maybe you'd understand what it's like to love someone.'

The words were poison. Her voice carried on someone else's breath. It sounded false; twisted. He didn't know her.

She sighed. 'You still keep photos of us?' She took the silver frame from the mantel. 'I don't think you need this any more.'

In her hands, where two unfamiliar faces laughed together, it looked no better than trash. Walking over to the bin, she dropped it in. Shards of glass clinked against the metal. By the table, he picked up a cigarette and patted his pants in search of a lighter.

‘You smoke?’

He lit it, inhaling deeply.

Was it as simple as a ‘yes?’ The role of tobacco resting between his lips should have been enough to tell her all that he couldn’t. How his stomach ached from every bad thing he hadn’t done, but still felt guilty for; from the beds *she* had made, but not yet slept in.

It was he who paid the price for her sin. He wore it on his calloused hands and tasted it in his shallow breaths; felt it brush past his cracked lips, and nest in the depths of his chest, where a rotting cage built for loving another was left to resent itself. The addiction wasn’t just, but it was all he knew to keep the life circulating in his broken soul.

‘It’s a bad habit,’ she said, snatching up the packet. ‘I’ll take these. Do you a favour.’

Certain she had done enough, he held out an open palm.

‘Smoking will kill you.’ Her red lips pulled into a tight smile. ‘But if you want to waste your life, go right ahead.’

She handed the packet back.

‘I came here for a reason.’ From her coat she withdrew the papers and a pen, resting them on the table. ‘I need you to sign it. Not tomorrow. Not three weeks from now.’ She frowned. ‘Today.’

He took the pen and pressed the point to the blank line.

‘Yes, there.’

It felt too familiar – the verdict between his sweaty fingers and one thousand *what if’s* suffocating his thoughts. He yearned to tell her it was his choice; what happened next was a decision they shared.

It wasn’t.

The choice was hers. It always had been.

Her touch was foreign as she placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘I know you hate it. I’ve waited long enough.’ She squeezed. ‘Sign it.’

Shrugging her hand off, he dropped the pen.

‘Sign it,’ she said.

He raised his hands in protest.

‘Please.’

Taking his tenth from the table, he put it between his dry lips. At the tip of the cigarette, he fiddled with the lighter.

‘God dammit,’ she snapped, taking it from his hand. ‘Could you stop smoking and sign the papers?’ The sharpness of her stare burned into him. ‘I don’t have time for this.’ She rubbed the spot between her eyes. ‘You’re being selfish.’

He wished she would stop talking.

‘Get rid of that toxic waste,’ she pressed, ‘pick up the pen and do us both a favour.’

He spat out his cigarette.

Her eyes barely widened as he swung. The sound was repulsive; a thunderous crack that resonated through his bones. She crumpled to the floor. He dropped the ashtray and kneeled beside her. With trembling hands he brushed the bloodied locks from her face. He searched her eyes. Nothing. Vibrant one moment; dull the next.

What had he done?

No cry could escape him.

Standing, he stumbled into the kitchen and scrubbed his hands three times over. He took his keys from the mantel and headed outside. The drive to the corner store was longer

than usual. The cashier looked up from his magazine with a friendly smile. 'Ah, hello again. The usual?'

He shook his head and slid the cash across the counter. 'Pack of forty,' he signed.

## *Upside Down*

Tegan Hawkins © 2014

James Nash High School

I'm being watched.

A grim face with tired eyes is holding my gaze, white knuckles and quivering arms complimenting their dire expression. A drop of moisture snakes down the pane of unbreakable glass that surrounds me like a box. I reach out and swipe away the droplet travelling across my reflection. These gleaming opaque walls separate this realm and the next, leaving the world's inhabitants to wonder if two places really exist. It is unbreakable glass, after all.

The chains of my swing creak and the empty swings around me rattle in the mysterious ever-present breeze. I suppose it's part of the punishment.

I will always be cold.

I will always be exposed.

I will always be alone.

A small cloud tickles the instep of my foot as it lingers for a moment before drifting onwards. I look down and think of the beauty. This sky is as beautiful as any. When people look up, *they* see the sky. When *I* look up, I see the ground. Cobblestones so old and dirty, they look ready to crumble. I don't remember how it feels to look up and see beauty. I once looked down and felt nauseous but now my eyes only accept the beauty.

My gaze once again captures the tired eyes before me. On the other side is a place exactly like this one. With creations that are perfectly the same as the creations that reside here. No one is unique anymore.

I exist under the earth, though *I* is a term used loosely.

Living under earth is the highest level of punishment my society can impose. I am the only one here, which means I am the only one anywhere to be sentenced to this punishment. So here I sit, on my lone swing, careful not to sway for the fear that my swing will give way. I don't want to plummet to the ends of the sky, dying as I fall through the atmosphere. I hang on to my swing with the fiercest grip. I dream of redeeming myself for the crime I can no longer remember by staying on this swing. Falling is easy, hanging on is harder. I will show my strength and my plea for redemption. With that determination in mind, sleep comes easily.

I peel my eyes open and feel a warmth on my back. Alertness pricks me and I am afraid. A jingling noise reaches my ears, but it's out of rhythm with the steady flow of the wind that rustles the surrounding swings. My breath puffs from my lungs as my grip tightens on my swing's chains. I turn.

Once I see him, my body reacts before my mind and lunges forward, away from the presence behind me. It takes all of my strength to remain on my swing. My body has frozen as the swing continues swinging from the sudden movement and I fear my swing will let go. I fear the fall and I am paralysed until my swing stills and I can breathe again.

He is pale and ugly, with a pointed nose and an eye-watering stench. I know I must face him for there is no escape, so again I turn. His eyes lock with mine and he is uglier than I remember. I have nothing to say so I find myself staring.

His lips turn up into a sneer that half disappears behind his big nose. 'Hello, Imara.'

‘Hi,’ I whisper.

My eyes snap to his leg as he raises it outward, his foot just close enough to touch me. I try to move away but have nowhere to go and I panic, my heart trying to surge out of my chest.

His foot hits my swing and my entire being rattles. Terror races along my spine as my hands turn to stone around my swing’s chains. There’s a moment of relief when his foot moves away but it soon returns with even more force, throwing my swing forward in one jerky movement. Small fragments of the cobblestones holding my swing up crumble, and feather-light pieces flutter down, landing onto my once-white dress. My body shakes but I will it to stop, not wanting to cause further movements.

He laughs as he continues to kick at my swing.

I will not let go. ‘Why are you doing this?!’

He doesn’t answer.

My fingers begin to slip.

As my swing travels backward, I know something is different. Then the next kick strikes the centre of my back and I’m falling, my swing falling with me. I refuse to let go of the chains. The world is suddenly the right way up and my eyes brim with tears. I don’t scream. The only thing to do is fall.

I cry. ‘This isn’t fair.’

*It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair.*

The sky darkens and I know it’s almost over.

*It isn’t fair. I never once let go.*

Shock is my first emotion. The last thing I remember is falling and now I’m staring at the ceiling in a sterile room.

*Where am I?*

I don’t believe in heaven and I’ve always regretted that. It would have been nice to have never been afraid, of the after. I try to get up but my arms are stuck. My skin is clean, no longer covered in the grime that accumulated in my time of despair, but there’s a horrid rust coloured chain encircling my wrist. I turn my head; my other wrist is manacled. I lift my head and see my ankles are also shackled. I struggle, yanking on the chains.

‘Stop.’

I freeze then strain my neck, seeking who spoke.

In the doorway stands a normal enough looking man with a normal enough looking expression. He rushes to my side. ‘I’m so sorry. Someone was supposed to be monitoring you. Pathetic, I tell you. Here you are, thinking I don’t know what, because some idiots are too busy having a ciggy instead of doing their damn job. I swear—’ He trails off, shakes his head and tugs on some keys hanging on the wall.

I hear the clinking as he starts fumbling with the locks. ‘I know you have no idea what’s going on but I assure you, we will explain everything.’

I sit up.

‘For god’s sake, Phoenix!’

I jump.

A man strides in, looking like - for all intents and purposes – the boss.

Phoenix finishes unchaining my ankles and doesn’t look at the man. ‘She deserves to be unchained.’

‘She’s a prisoner.’

‘She’s a person, that’s what she is.’

Boss-man scoffs.

Phoenix looks at me. ‘Imara, are you feeling okay? Do you need anything?’

I shake my head, rubbing my wrist. I sit straighter and cross my legs.

‘What’s going on? I’m supposed to be dead.’

The men look at me, Phoenix with gentle eyes that match his kind wrinkles and Boss-man irritated that I was in the room.

Phoenix speaks. ‘Yes but things change. I’m sorry we had to chain you. You just never know how some people will react to ‘the jump’ but you seem well. You have good colour in your cheeks and seem capable of the proper thought processes, considering the situation. There are no lasting problems from your punishment, though it was rather harsh, in my opinion, considering your crime.’

‘What was my crime?’

Boss-man replies. ‘You were a part of an extremist group. You, along with several others, thought it would be fun to set fire to the National Sanctuary Building where some important ‘people’ were meeting. They were bastards but you still needed to be punished for your crime to keep the order. You sent them to oblivion so your punishment was fitting. Though your fellow arsonists didn’t have the same will to live that you did. They all let go.’ He smiles and a sick look of pleasure fills his eyes. ‘And we can’t blame you for that crazy guy kicking you off.’

I feel a flutter of hope in my chest replacing the fear and panic of the unknown. ‘S-so, what are you saying?’

Phoenix smiles. ‘You are in the second limbo, for those who are on their second chance of life. This is much like any place, but we’ve all come here by different ways.’ He pauses. ‘Congratulations, Imara. You’ve found your redemption.’

My eyes brim with tears. *It’s true. Death isn’t the end.* For the first time in the longest of times, since before my punishment, I smile.