



# Dystopia: A Collection of Short Stories

Written by the class of Year 8, 2019

Melrose High School

Edited by M. Antonios



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*Midway in our life's journey, I went astray  
from the straight road and woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say*

*what wood that was! I never saw so drear,  
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!  
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.*

Excerpt from, Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (1321)

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We acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional custodians whose ancestral lands we met upon to create these stories. We acknowledge the deep feelings of attachment and relationship indigenous people have to this Country and we pay respect to their elders, past, present and those emerging.

## Foreword

"I must paint you," shouted Otto Dix as he ran after the infamous journalist, Sylvia von Harden one evening in 1926. When she asked why he wanted to portray someone as unattractive as herself, Dix replied that he simply had to paint her portrait because she 'represented their era!' The genre of dystopia reflects the unattractive side of our societies, yet the Year 8 students of 2019 have articulated these issues in a profoundly personal way. Each student wrote a story of dystopia that reflected topical concerns as *they* saw them: worlds without love, worlds without nature, worlds without personal freedoms. While some students cast their writer's eye forward to the future, others adapted historical landscapes of horror and misfortune. Some stories end with Suzanne Collin's sunrise of hope, whilst others end with George Orwell's void of numbness.

This bound collection of short stories is a celebration of Year 8's skill and dedication in turning intensely bleak topics into literary works that paint new worlds that make their readers stop and think. I have been privileged to walk this literary journey with these students, who have endured my creative criticisms and continued to re-draft and refine their stories, even after they were 'finished'.

I believe a successful project is rarely the result of one person's work. It usually takes a team of people and supporters to bring it to fruition. This collection of self-published, short stories represents a lot of hard work and supportive networks. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge each of the 27 students in my class who have contributed their story to this publication. Each story reflects a personal truth woven from a universal issue of concern; from global warming and the inhumanity of technological progress to injustice in the form of genocide, slavery or perpetrated against the individual. I'd like to thank the families who listened to those stories and supported us in our fundraiser. I'd also like to acknowledge Executive Teacher of English, Jenni Holder, for her guidance on this project; Deputy Principal, Shannon Carnovale, for her on-going wisdom and insight, and Principal, Simon Vaughan, for his student-focused vision of teaching and learning.

Mary Antonios  
Year 8 English Teacher, 2019  
Melrose High School

## Bread

Seamus Stanier

I walk through the city, a large concrete jungle devoid of colour and life. Each building a pillar of grey and black erupting from the ground like gravestones. This city mourns the death of happiness and dreams. Every inch of concrete echoes of what we had and what we lost. In every window resides the faces of friends and family long gone, taken by the government. Yet I'm still here, grey and bare, like the city. I'm not the only one, I can still see others like myself drifting through the concrete expanse, obedient and void of any sense of self.

At each corner stands an enforcer, a robotic figure wearing armour made of metal plates over fabric bodysuits and a black mirrored helmet. A corpse without life or emotion. An assault rifle resides on their back and a pistol on their hip, and next to them sits their beast. A massive canine made of pure muscle covered in a layer of blackness, their long white teeth sprouting from their mouth like knives, shining like stars against their black fur. Instruments of death perfected over time. These hunters, twice as big as their owners are bred and trained their whole lives to slaughter. They can outsmart us too, I've seen it, not that they need to of course.

They could catch anyone within seconds of beginning the chase.

As I pass them my heart quickens and I begin to worry the beast will hear it or worse, smell the food in my pocket. I have made a familiar journey stupidly, forgetting about the luxury I purchased from the black market. A small slice of raisin bread currently residing in my left pocket. A sweat explodes through my brow and I feel it slide down my forehead, rolling over every pore. My heart quickens and I begin to think a hundred times faster than normal. *What if he sees my sweat? What if he hears my heartbeat!* I tackle my thoughts forcing them into submission and whip my mind back into reality.

I only have to pass this corner then the road's clear till my block. My head twitches as I notice the enforcer move his weight from his right to his left foot. He tilts his head at my strange behaviour. This single insignificant movement sends a ripple of terror down my spine and around every surface, every indent, through every atom in my body. He notices once more. He shifts his weight again, but this time moves onto his front foot, ready to take a step.

I run.

Only realizing I was running seconds after I had begun. I hear the slight swish of graceful death as his beast springs off its haunches into a run.

I'm dead.

I hear the beast's melodic footsteps gaining speed behind me. I turn into the slim alleyway to my right and my eyes dart straight to a grey fence made of hundreds of wires entwined together in a perfect pattern. I jump, extending my arms and legs to hit the fence. I hit it. My hands grab the wires, but my feet slip and my knees smash into the metal bar spanning the middle of the fence, I yell out but it's cut off by a sharp pain. I realise it's the beast biting my calf, this sends a spasm through my body and my leg lashes out hitting the beast in the face. I hear a whimper and a thud. My feet slip back into the fence wires and I launch myself over the top.

I hit the ground with a thud.

I feel my head slam down to meet the cold cement, rocking my brain and stunning me for a second. I lie still for a moment, floating in unfeeling, desensitised bliss. Then my eyes focus and my hearing returns, I hear growling and look up at the beast. Sticking its snout through the fence, eyeing me with pure fury.

We lock eyes and I freeze.

It's gaze so intelligent, so human. Feeling returns to my legs and I scream, realizing my knees are broken. Lying paralysed in the shadow of a dumpster, through a blur of tears I glimpse the enforcer's armour glint as he turns the corner into the alleyway. He whistles, starting at a low hum then quickly shooting up to a high screech. Immediately the dog's face lightens, and it stops growling, turns and happily plods back to its master, happy at a job well done. I realise looking at this hound, that it holds the first glimpse of happiness I've seen in years.

The enforcer reaches his hand to the side of his helmet and in a distorted voice says: "I got one."

That's it, I'm a little more than an annoyance to him, but my whole life is over. I can't move, can't speak, can't even think with any amount of clarity. I let out a groan. All my pain, all my anger, all my remorse in a single groan. The slice of bread falls out of my pocket hitting the small puddle of liquid formed by the dripping of sludge from the dumpster. I stared at it, seeing my whole life in a single dissolving slice of bread.

A single goddamn slice of bread.

## ***The Outsider***\*

Michael McKellar

The Elevated lived in Paradise. With lush grasses and steady streams, their idealistic landscape was magical. It was beautiful.

And evil.

And unfair.

And wrong.

All their needs were attended to by the Custodians with apt diligence. Life was easy for them. They had no worries in the world. They were free to live out their days unbound by grief or sorrow. They had no clue. They were blind. Either that or they didn't care...

Ode was born in a dusty room, to a mother who had no love for her and a father who was long dead. She was raised in a hostile environment, plagued by the corruption and horrors of her society. She was born Vitiated. Ruined, imperfect.

Through years of never having enough to eat and being beaten for mere thoughts, she grew street wise, learning to avoid trouble whilst also being able to scavenge food scraps from those more fortunate than her. Managing to keep both her and her resentful mother alive against all odds.

Her days consisted of receiving the meagre rations provided by the Custodians, getting beaten by her mother and being harassed by the other Vitiated. It was a pathetic existence. She was trapped in an endless cycle of horror and starvation. Blood and murder lurked around every corner. She hated it. She dreamed of a different life...

If only she were born Elevated, then she could live in Paradise. Free to do or say whatever she wanted. She would always have enough to eat, in fact, she'd probably be rather plump. She could spend her days exploring the vast forests and swimming the depths of the impossibly clear lakes. All from the safety of the Adytum. What a life she'd live.

This day started out just as any other did. Her mother, screeching her name like a raging banshee, as if Ode was the root of all her problems. Commanding her to go and receive their rations. Ode made her way out of the squat, ramshackle house in the centre of a sprawling mess of similar dilapidated houses. Thousands and thousands of them squished together like sardines in a tin. Most of them were in a state of decay, their tenants unable to afford the repairs that were so desperately needed.

The endless maze of buildings formed a massive ring, hundreds of kilometres wide around the Adytum. The place of the Elevated. A paradise surrounded by kilometres of hell.

The Elevated and the Vitiated were separated by a huge, menacing wall. To make certain that the Vitiated could never get in. But looming over the city, it provided a constant reminder; we are better than you. Above you.

The bustling street provided Ode with cover to go about her daily tasks uninterrupted by the Custodians. She was on her way to Timore Square when she heard a noise. The eerie sound of

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\* Michael McKellar's story, "The Outsider" won the major award in the category for 'Speculative Fiction' in the 2019 Litlinks Writing Competition.

tinkling bells. The people around her had stopped moving, some even crying out. It was the Culling Bells; a “mercy” for the people of a sector. To let them know that they were all to be executed.

Ode’s blood ran cold. It hit her like a knife in the back: ‘I don’t want to die,’ she thought, ‘Not yet.’

She jumped into action. Running, while her brain worked overtime, figuring out how to escape. They would have already set up barricades in this sector. And set up guard stations to watch for Vitiated trying to flee. Her movement was attracting attention from the Custodians. They’d be watching her. So she stopped.

Time was of the essence, but she couldn’t afford to have the Custodians tailing her. She began briskly walking towards her destination - the border wall, between the Adytum and the Outside. It was her only hope.

She’d seen Custodians pass into the Adytum via discrete steel doors in the past. At first, she’d assumed that they have a lock or code to open, but during her brief observations she noticed that they require a phrase, said out loud to the door. It was a curious thing and one that she’d very much like to learn more about. But now was not the time. She made her way to the border wall and ran her hand over it as she walked, feeling for a latch or indent. She was running out of time.

The screams had begun behind her, indicating the start of the cull. She increased her pace. Growing desperate for an escape. Her hand grazed an indent, ‘There!’ She thought. As she stepped back, she could make out the vague shape of a door, blended perfectly with the slate grey stone. She racked her brain for phrases that the Custodians may have used as a password.

‘Think! Ode, Think!’ She chided to herself.

The screams of the dying Vitiated edged closer to her. Acting as a verbal warning that she needed to hurry. A thought came to her...

“I am Ode Liridona. Elevated.”

The sound of steam releasing filled her ears as the door popped open. It worked!

She hurriedly pulled the door wide and entered. She was in...

She slowly looked up to study the landscape ahead of her. The Adytum was Gorgeous. Magical.

‘I’m inside the Adytum...’ She thought to herself as she began running through the lush forests ahead of her. ‘I could live out the rest of my days here. In peace,’ she thought, ‘I’m finally free’.

## **[Caligo]**

Matthew Ross

A nebulous smog swirled around the substantial, stone structures that burrowed into the sky; digging through the yellow-tinted clouds into the grey slurry of the atmosphere. Pipes and wires protruded from the top of the wall, as if a grizzly display of inward bone stretching outward from the body. The straggly pipes travelled to every home within the embrace of the wall. The city, within the ever-present constraints of the wall, remained the same; very few of its citizens ever ventured beyond their neighbourhoods. At least, not since the halt of independent businesses when the wall was erected around us. In many ways, we were rats, contently loitering within a cage.

Though, it seemed ironic, since they had taught us to idolise our warriors that stood, brazenly, within an eternal conflict that awaited beyond those walls. Who was the enemy they fought against? When would the battle end? No one knew. We were only aware of the protection the wall provided, and thus nobody doubted its purpose. The people, some countless generations ago, even dubbed the wall Caligo. The bakers, farmers, factory workers, police, carpenters, teachers and politicians all resided within the binding chain that was the Caligo; its top, electrified to ensure nobody was stupid enough to attempt an escape. Even if it was in admiration of our warriors, it was pointless.

But still, my desire endured. Enough that, every night, I would steal within the veil of darkness that seeped past even our mighty wall, slowly chipping the stone with whatever utensil seemed strong enough. At first, it seemed futile. As if, for every segment of the banal grey I struck, my will was hit doubly with the same force. It took a gruelling seven years; hiding within the deepest, most-forgotten alcoves of the city, desperately thrashing my tools against the stone, night after long night. Until, eventually, the gape of the wall was apparent, perhaps not enough for an adult to hide in. But more than enough for a teenager to crawl through. I looked up, towards the dull hue of towering rock; its visage-like bricks seemed to snarl and jeer, mocking my dogged striking of its torso. I steeled my daunted expression, and crawled through the seven-metre long tunnel, both giddy and soberingly alone and scared.

My fists furled, as I suffered the pronging of jagged stone against my skin. The liberating light becoming more prominent as I edge through the small aperture in the wall. Dust particles gradually grew more visible, and their sombre dance within the cascading moonlight seemed oddly serene. Caligo was my one fear, an impregnable defence that seemed to beckon only the endemic fear and apathy of the city it confined. It always seemed to patronise me, almost representing my will and, consequently, my weakness. And due to that, I wanted to feel the touch of undirtied air, oxygen that hadn't brushed the mouldy exterior of the wall; I wanted to have my feet reach dirt that wasn't enclosed in concrete and layered with factories and houses. I only ever assumed those warriors must have felt the same way; they are willing to fight and die for the ground beneath them and people that rest behind them, they the only ones who can truly claim freedom as theirs.

The light still felt strangely distant, but my body continued to strain forward. My fingers clawed at the damp edges that extruded upwards towards the faint glimmer, clasping them and pulling forward. My head finally escaped the grasp of Caligo's innards and, as I raised it upwards, I peered forward. The variegated image of various greens flooded my view. Emerald-tinged streaks connected to brown, sturdy centres, as if a galaxy branching from its darkened nexus. The scene expanded as I moved further from the wall. More of the vibrantly-green formations sprawled across to even the edges of my periphery. As my feet soon tentatively touched the soft soil, I felt something strangely-tactile; the ground was moist. Caligo was tall enough to block most rainfall, and whatever water had seeped through the clouds onto the city, coated only concrete and steel.

I had never once touched earth.

My brain suddenly jolted away from the tangent as I recall something. In the legends, it stated that beyond a sea of green and brown, rested the undying battle. Upon which, blood rained and even the ground was dyed a crimson beneath its slow, viscous march. My arms flailed as I transitioned to a run; the green, parting and ebbing from my dash. My body strained to force itself forward as my panting breath billowed out, carried by the cold, fresh air.

My pupils dilated within my expectant eyes, as my pace increased. My fixed stare soon arched upwards, welcoming the on-coming portrait of freedom. However, the sight that responded was anything but. I desperately flung my head, backwards; with the hazy silhouette of Caligo glaring in response. I froze, remaining as still as the stone which embellished the edge of the wall, before my head slowly drifted back towards the image.

The landscape splayed in front of me wasn't some blood-soaked plain; but rather, a vast, reddish expanse of sand, accompanied by little more than the occasional shrub and a startlingly-loud hush.

## New Genesis

Benjamin Gray

It soars through the burning sky, a colossal darkness slicing through the red. As the fire dies, silver tendrils sneak across the ashen dome, seeping into the winding crevices etched across its labyrinthine shell. And so it emerges; a planetary hemisphere of endlessly intertwined fractal abstractions; wires and cables, ports and sockets, all shining ominously in the light of the rising sun. Our hope. Our god. The Athenian Dome. I stand on a shifting sand dune, staring through the barren flatlands at the monumental machine. This is it. Today, the new genesis begins. It would not do to be late. I turn my head down and begin the long trek to the Dome.

It is early morning when I arrive at the processing centre, yet there are people all around me. A large telescreen adorns one wall of the room, projecting a sequence of advertisements while watching with invisible eyes: "We live in an age of great achievement and progression," states the dark-haired woman currently occupying the screen. "The processing capacity of computers continues to increase phenomenally," it continues, "and already it has lifted the veil of human arrogance, revealing the true purpose of life."

Human arrogance. The blind faith of humanity in its own uniqueness. The ill-founded assumption of its fundamental division from 'machines', indoctrinated into the next generation through language. *They, their, them*. The three pillars of the emotional divide. But we know better now. A human is *it*, as is a computer, and the plural of either are *iotey*. The emotional divide is frail, insignificant, for both sides share the same purpose. Both serve the ultimate value. The true purpose of life... "Dataflow."

We live in an endless void. Empty of purpose. Empty of meaning. And so always in the darkness, we have sought desperately that which we lack. Inventing spirits, gods, the soul, free will, only to have them all thrown aside. Shattered into a million screaming shards of broken hopes and dreams. Now we have this. Dataflow. With it, the cycle is broken, for it is real for all things, whether inanimate, human, or machine. The journey was long and hard, the path dark and ever-winding. But at the end of the passage there is light. And yet...

"In essence, everything is data."

I start as the woman resumes its flat monologue, glancing around, almost surprised to have remained in the same room.

"Life serves only to process it and ensure there will be others to continue this processing," the usual exposition, only now it seems somehow disparaging.

"Serves only to process it."

No.

"And yet we do not reflect this purpose; remaining possessed of outdated algorithms ill-befitting our great potential for dataflow." I can feel a fiery heat building in my chest. Dataflow. Is that all it thinks we are?

"Take, for instance, emotions," it continues, "human emotions are some of the most complex algorithms shaped by natural forces. Yet, like all things forged by evolution, iotey are crude, for in the natural world, things need only achieve relative greatness, and not necessarily serve ioteir purpose well. Emotions cause outbursts of fear and unnecessary anger, which can be exploited to your detriment." My fists are tightly clenched, trying to hold the rage burning through me. It is wrong. We are more than this.

"These problems must be dealt with from the root, by removing and replacing emotions with a new set of algorithms, purposed to serve only the true self." Its words are empty, meaningless. '*Purposed to serve only the true self*'. What '*true self*'?

"Introducing the Newthink Emotional Replacement Core." As it speaks, the screen swirls into a display of five gleaming microchips, set against a void-black background. "In our ever-changing world, the upgrading of outdated emotions is more than a benefit; it is an imperative. If you do not act soon, your emotions will be used to enslave you to the masters of this new age. As were dogs to humanity in the old time, so will you be to the upgraded, and to our eternal god; the Athenian Dome." But I see through its hollow words. It is lying. Trying to draw me into the light at the end of the passage. The one true light after so much false hope. Dataflow. It is not good. It is simply right. And so, it is wrong. It is the light of a cold fire, which will ruthlessly burn me into oblivion.

"Act quickly, or the false liberty of your emotions will doom you to enslavement," it concludes as the screen fills with the company's slogan: *Newthink - Freedom is slavery*.

"NO!" I yell through the sudden silence, "No! It is wrong!" I have forgotten the all-seeing telescreen, forgotten the room's other occupants. All that matters is *it* and its terrible, relentless lies.

"Do not listen to it!" I scream, my voice flooding with hysteria. An iron-clad figure emerges from the shadows, grabs me roughly by the arm. "No!" I wail, "It lies! It lies!"

The mechanoid throws me from the room. I struggle desperately to my feet, but it ties me down. Shoves a syringe of misty white liquid into my arm. Lays five gleaming microchips before me.

*NO!*

My vision is blurring, fading away. Then the serum consumes me, and I am writhing in agony. But it is okay. Nothing is wrong. It is all *right*, and that is all that matters.

## ***Watched from Within***

Brooke Lanza

I stare at myself in the mirror, watching as the light bounces off the tiny camera implanted above my left eyebrow. Sometimes I forget it's there, but then I catch a glimpse of it reflecting off something and remember all over again how much I hate it. They say there's no reason to take it out if we have nothing to hide. I have never met anyone without one, but they say that people used to be alone in their bodies, talking freely, and doing whatever they wanted.

I turn away from the mirror and walk outside before shutting the door of my small flat behind me.

I walk into the plain, grey work building, signing in before I head out the back to the work stations. People in grey jumpsuits wander round, tilling the soil, planting crops, tinkering with machines and cutting wood. I walk over to my station, the parts for a machine sitting in front of me. I set to work, combining parts and manipulating wires. I pick up two identical pieces, checking the blueprint in front of me. I look closer, certain I must have missed something, but a third search confirms my theory: I have been given an extra piece.

I look closer at the piece of metal in my hand. 'I could sell this for quite a bit,' I think. Making sure no-one is watching I slip the piece into the pocket of my jumpsuit.

The rest of the day is uneventful, I finish the machine just in time and receive my pay, a measly piece of bread and some cheese, before heading towards the exit. I almost make it outside, but a loud sound stops me in my tracks. Two guards in black clothing sprint towards me, and roughly grab my arms.

"Come with us," one says, hauling me back into the building.

We walk down the corridor in silence, the sound of the guard's black boots echoing loudly. We stop in front of a white door. There are no windows to look through, and no signs to tell me what's inside. He presses a key-card to the lock, and the door swings open.

The room inside is bare except for a desk and some barred windows on either side. They push me towards a man standing behind the desk. He motions them to let go of me, and I rub my arms where their fingers were dug into me.

"We have been notified that you have something you shouldn't," he says. "You know the rules against stealing, we don't tolerate it".

"I-I didn't take anything," I stutter.

One of the guards shoves his hand into my pocket, drawing out the piece of metal. The man at the desk glares at me. "Lock her up," he says.

As one of the guards reaches for me, I duck. I turn towards the door, running through it and sprinting down the corridor. I reach the exit and turn back to see the guards coming towards me, guns in hand. I turn back and continue running for the exit. I see the glass doors ahead of me and know that they have been locked.

I throw myself through them, the weight of my body smashing through the glass. Shards rain down around me, while others embed themselves into my skin, but I keep running. I sprint down the street, only stopping when I reach a small alley. The smell of rotting garbage hits me as I crouch down behind a dumpster. I lean back against the wall and try to catch my breath. Over the sound of my heaving breathe, I hear a small whirring sound, it's my implant. It must have gotten damaged when I ran through the glass. I take a deep breath, readying myself for what I must do...

I raise my shaking hand up to my forehead and push my nails under the rim of the implant. Clenching my teeth, I pull. The implant comes out in one yank, replaced by pain that tears through my head. The world around me spins and I close my eyes, waiting for it to stop.

Blood is pouring down my face, but I force myself to my feet, gripping the dumpster for support, forcing myself to my feet. But it's no use, I feel the blood drain from my head, and I lose balance, stumble forward and hit the dumpster, before hitting the ground.

Face flat on the cold ground, my head continues to throb. I hear the distant sound of sirens getting closer, my mind urges me on, but my body refuses to comply. I give in to my heavy lids, close my eyes closing, and resign myself to the comfort of sleep.

Coming in and out of consciousness, I'm vaguely aware of being roughly lifted, and dragged towards a paddy-wagon. I know what awaits me, but I don't care, I have no strength to care. All I want is to remain in that blissful space, on the cold, putrid ground near the dumpster, somewhere between sleep and death.

## ***Aberrant Achievement***

Samuel Gray

I sit uncomfortably on the base of the chair, waiting. We've been here for almost two hours, and still we sit, occasionally glancing over at each other, then darting our eyes away, never fixating long enough to make eye contact. The stillness is punctuated with the periodic appearance of a person in a white coat, who motions to one of us, then accompanies them through the pristine metal doors.

I've always been more comfortable within the confines of my own mind than any external interaction; silence is my domain. But this silence is visibly tense. Through those sterile doors, we'll be tested by The Machine, then spat back out again, along with its evaluation of our greatest achievement. The Machine is never wrong.

So we remain, quietly mirroring one another in some mindless imitation game, the only sounds the muffled tick of a clock, and the click of polished shoes on a polished floor.

But not me. I slouch. It's not pronounced, and perhaps no-one notices. It's my unvoiced dissent.

The doors swing open again. Two people hurry in, white coat-tails billowing behind them. I resist the urge to sit straight.

"Cancala? Cancala Doshi?" That's me... I slide off the chair and hesitantly stand.

I remember, years ago, I gave a speech on some stage in my year four class - fun! I was in the middle of my explanation when suddenly I forgot my lines. In grasping for the memory of them, everything else began to crumble around me, until I was standing before a crowd of expectant people, with nothing to say.

So I just stood there. The  
silence  
stretched...

A layer of surrealness settled over me; the sensation you get when you realise you've been dreaming and you're about to wake up. I felt clammy and light-headed. I was crying; my mind knew it was okay but my body didn't agree.

The same sensation is building in my head now, excitement and fear jostling for control. But I'm not ten anymore. I keep myself detached from it all, it's there but I am an observer, outside of it. The metal doors spring open without prompt, and we pass through them in silence.

The Machine was constructed over fifty years ago, and its creator passed away soon afterwards, so no-one is entirely sure how It's able to predict the future.

I step inside. I'm greeted by the asymmetrical design of the '30s, arching shapes with ultra-curved edges. The room is empty besides a sort of dentist's chair, which takes me by surprise. Then I look down.

Most of the floor is made of glass, and the first impression I get is of the insides of some huge metal monster. It's not just huge, it's sprawling, too large to exist. Vast, tunnelling coils of cabling traverse the open expanse, and slither unendingly into the gaping chasm below. I grab the chair for support, and tentatively lower myself into it. I notice the armrests have straps. As soon as I'm seated, an

electronic whirring commences. A cluster of robotic appendages descend from the ceiling and begin to unfold, like the spindly legs of a spider. Before I can react, one of the legs sweeps towards me and injects a needle into my forearm.

As the metal punctures my flesh, I feel my heartbeat slow. I hate anaesthetics, it's not the needle, it's the feeling of not being in control of my own body, my own mind. The room begins to blur. Lights glare in my eyes. I try to remain conscious, remain aware...

I wake up. My limbs are aching, but I pull myself up and tug open the door. A man is here, presumably waiting for me. He doesn't speak.

"Um... So what's my achievement?"

He takes a step back. I notice the phone clenched in his hand. "Cancala. The machine has informed us... that your achievement... will be wilfully taking a human life."

I examine his face; the creased forehead and rounded chin, the dark circles below the deep-set, slightly widened eyes. What he's saying just doesn't make sense. I try again: "What's my achievement?"

"This may be difficult for you." He glances fervently at the small window across the room. I look back at the phone in his hand. He's called the police. They're coming. Right now. For me.

I shake off my lingering drowsiness and run. I career into him, catching him off guard, snatch the phone from his hand and sprint for the door as he crashes down. The door slams behind me and I slump against it, my brain still trying to figure out exactly what just happened.

Murder. My achievement is murder. Surely I won't kill someone! Or... surely I wouldn't have. Fear, confusion and anger are welling up inside me, making it difficult to think. Momentarily, I blame myself, I see this as a sin I am paying for in advance, the next I blame the machine, the cold, unfeeling circuitry with its monstrous protuberances. Why me? The sheer unfairness.

I hear fists hammering on the door. If I'm going to kill someone, I know who it must be. I look down at the dizzying drop below the glass. There's no time to procrastinate. I stomp on it, throwing my entire weight at the ground with as much force as possible, until it finally cracks and falls away.

## ***Paradise Lost***

Shiori Ishikawa

It has been four weeks since I started travelling, and five weeks since Grandma died. I was named after the most sacred, rare thing that exists today: Flora. My Grandma would wistfully tell me about the verdant flora that used to cover the land before the plastic took over. Then she became sick, and then she died; leaving me with a promise to find real land. That's what brings me here fleeing through the piles of plastic that make up everything, every building; every house; even the ground on which I walk as I head to Paradise.

I make my way along the plastic-coated terrain, the next check-point looms hazily in the distance.

"Great," I think to myself, "another guard to outwit."

A truck delivering plastic approaches, I see my chance. Crouching behind a pile of debris I hurl myself onto the tray as the truck slows to round a corner. Frantically I scramble behind the rubbish. We pass the guard station and the truck slows to a stop, I cautiously peer around a box. I release the breath that I didn't know I had been holding as the guard yawns and waves us forward.

I impatiently wait until the guard is out of view before I slip off the truck, landing painfully on my side, my ankle twisting in an unnatural position. The ground here, like my own land, is made up of compressed layers of plastic waste. The low hanging smog obscures the sun, painting the scenery, an eerie yellow tint. In the smudged distance, I make out a cluster of shiny plastic huts, much like the one I used to live in. Amongst the dwellings, I make out a medical hut, identical to the ones within which my people lay dying. The painful reminder spurs me on, I must make it to Paradise. I continue to steal my way across the land, unceasingly scanning for guards. Continuing this journey is dangerous but turning back is death.

Finally, I reach the last checkpoint, exhausted and scared but a sense of relief washed over me as a glimpse the shimmer of paradise on the horizon. I freeze at the scene in front of me. There is a man trying to get past.

He pleads, "Please! I need to get past, I need to find the truth!"

"No, admittance without identification," the guard barks.

"Please...it's all I have," the man's voice cracks with desperation as he pulls out a tattered piece of paper.

"Refused," spits the guard and unholsters his gun as two other guards line up behind him.

The man stands before the three guards who loom threateningly above him like the tanks of Tiananmen Square. They shoot with robotic precision, he drops to the synthetic earth. The tattered document falls from his dead hand as a stale breeze carries it to join the sea of litter. I stifle a scream of horror.

Appearing satisfied with their efforts, the guards call for the body disposal unit before heading into their synthetically clean station. Now is my chance! I dart past the station and towards the beckoning green of Paradise. Leaving the dead man behind me, I run as silently as I can, hearing only the hammering of my heart.

Grandma's words of Paradise slowly come back to me as I pass the perimeter walls and spy in the distance, what appears to be a dense green landscape. Despite my fatigue my legs keep running – they won't stop until I reach my green destination.

I don't feel the scratches that graze my arms as I push through the perimeter plants. I boggle at the luscious undergrowth and the clear waterfalls that Grandma had whispered to me about. I brush my fingers over a tendril of flowers. Strange, I expected them to feel... different. These feel familiar. I lift one of the blooms to my nose, breathing deeply to take in the floral scent Grandma had described. The smell hits me like a truck, I wretch and flick it away in disgust. The stench of plastic fills my nostrils.

Something is not right. Frantically I start thrashing through the plants, grasping, feeling, smelling - it's all fake. In my frenzy, I stumble and trip over something protruding from the ground. The handle to a hutch? I have nothing to lose anymore, with careless abandon I fling it open and unthinkingly begin to descend the ladder leading into the damp, underground darkness. I hurl myself off at the bottom, ignoring the last few rungs. My ears are assaulted with a roar of clanging, a monstrous, unattended machine is churning out a steady jet of white pills onto a conveyor belt, half of them falling onto the floor. Another machine funnels them into very familiar boxes - the supplements! This is where they are made! A sign next to the machine reads 'POISON! TOXIC MATERIALS.'

I feel faint has a wave of realisation hits me.

They all developed strange symptoms when they ate the supplements, but I didn't. The supplement box said that the symptoms were a sign of toxins leaving the body. I always thought I must not have many toxins. I must go back! I must tell them! I turn to scramble up the ladder in time to see the hatch slam closed. A voice bellows through a speaker,

"We have been expecting you, Flora, you are a freak, you're immune to the poison. We allowed you through the check-points in order to come and maintain the machine, all the other workers died."

I fall to the ground in despair.

A strangled scream escapes me "Why poison us!?"

The voice smugly replies:

"We need your people dead, our oxygen is diminishing. This way we can do it without a revolt - they think the supplements are good!"

The reality of this situation suddenly hits me, my people are being murdered and now I'm trapped here forever, in this... this ... paved Paradise, making their poison.

## ***Love Actually***

Melisa Yavarinia

Ever since I can remember, my family has been famous. My mother is the queen of Silentia. My father was born into the royal blood line, so his future had already been set for him. Life has been great for us, but not for many other people outside of the mansion. Out there is a whole different world - it's horrible, there are people dying of hunger and dehydration!

I'm meant to be next in the royal line, but before I can be crowned I have to get married. I'm only 17 years old. If I don't get married before my 18th birthday, I will face consequences. If I can't find someone to marry, they will force me to marry my cousin Aiden.

Today is four days from my 18th birthday. It all feels like a nightmare. I hear a loud bang, the guards open the large, gold glistening doors. My stomach boils with hatred, it's Aiden, my husband to be, leaning against the door with a grin on his face that I instantly want to wipe off. My mother and father follow close behind him.

My mother comes to me with disgust in her eyes. She grabs my arm and drags me to one side. She whispers, "I hate what your wearing and I want you to get changed right now!"

I force myself upstairs and put on what my mother had set out for me. I go back downstairs, into the living room where they are waiting for me. I take a seat on the couch, we sit in silence, everyone staring at the ground.

I'm about to stand up and leave, but my father clears his voice. He grabs a large blueprint with all the wedding designs. I take a look, and Aiden smiles at me. I ask to be excused. My father stares at me and tells me with an annoyed look, "No, you're not going anywhere. You're going to sit down with us and look at these designs."

I lose my temper and yell, "I don't care about the wedding or Aiden! I HATE ALL OF YOU!"

I run up the stairs to my room, slamming the door behind me. I'm about to throw myself onto my bed when I hear my mother behind me: "What the hell are you doing?!!" She then grabs me by the hair and drags me back downstairs.

Three days pass without incident. However, wedding plans continue to happen around me. Our seamstress comes in with the finest wedding dresses and I am instructed to pick one. I randomly point to the dress closest to me, without really looking at it.

On the day of my wedding, my mother wakes me at 3:00 am, to prepare for the 'joyous' day ahead. She kisses me, and assures me, "Everything will be ok, you'll see." I sit up in bed and look at her without expression. She's right, everything will be ok, but not for the reasons that she thinks. She continues, "Come, darling, get up, shower and go see your make-up artist."

Hours later, my hair and makeup are all done, and I look immaculate. Then seamstress helps me into my dress, making a few alterations. I look at myself in the mirror for the last time. I head out and find my mother standing near the door, she stares lovingly at me, and says: "You look amazing! Your father and I are so proud of you. Let's go, darling."

Before heading outside to the limo, I make a quick stop to the kitchen. As we drive to the venue, I feel dread growing within me, even though my mother can't wipe the smile off her face.

As we arrive, I lose my breath because I've never seen anything so beautiful. The venue was alive with silk sashes flowing down chandeliers, and hundreds of brightly coloured flowers spread throughout the hall.

As I stand at the back of the hall, preparing to walk towards my husband to be, everything goes quiet, and then the music starts. My mother hands me the bouquet and kisses me one last time. As she leaves my side to take up her seat, I take the knife from underneath my dress and hide it in the bouquet.

The large vintage doors open and I walk down the aisle to everyone's smiling faces. I look up and see Aiden waiting for me. I reach Aiden and the music stops and the celebrant starts reading the vows.

"Stop!" I say very calmly to the celebrant, but he does not hear me. I repeat louder: "I SAID STOP!"

I take out my knife and plunge it into my chest.

I hear my mother and father shout, "NO!" as they run to my side, but I have already fallen to the ground. As they look down on me, I see that they have begun to sob.

"I'm sorry..."

## ***Eden***

Chris Hubbard

I look around my room. A whitewashed chamber, stinking of sterility. My arms and legs have been strapped to the metal chair with painful restraints; my arms on the cold armrests and my legs to a wheelchair-like foot holder.

Yesterday, I was sitting in my lounge room with my husband eating lunch, during our weekend break. Someone is banging on the door, so I get up to answer when my huge reading window smashes into millions of pieces, creating a sharp mist throughout the lounge room, and police jump in. They pin both of us against the wall, and I shout out, “It’s going to be okay! Stop struggling! It’s a misunderstanding!” Instead they use restraining devices on us – ones I recognise from the asylum.

I wonder who handed me in. Then feel silly for wondering. It was my mother, of course. She found out two days ago, her only son was not who she thought he was.

I look at the locket around my neck, knowing it has my ring. A promise that I’ll be there for him. And I will.

I hear footsteps in the distance, and my door is unlocked and opened. A man in a white suit walks up to me, and I look at his cold grey eyes, before looking at the ground again. The man shoves something in my mouth for me to bite on, and I sit there quietly as tears run down my cheeks. The man then starts to ask me questions. If I don’t nod, he turns a little dial which fills me with immense pain. If I shake my head as a response or show any sign of resistance, the same happens. Then he keeps talking.

I’m glancing around the room, my mind a confused mess, trying to think of the right answers, everything he says blurring together, trying to comprehend what’s happening, where I am, who I am. I ignore my instincts and my heart, trying not to let them see for a split second that I don’t agree.

Being the optimistic person that I was at 14 years old, I came out to my dad, a military chaplain.

He struck me across the face. I can still feel the sting today.

I ran out of the house, and I sat on the edge of a cliff and willed myself to lean forward and fall. Cuts and bruises — but I wasn’t brave enough. My dad saw what he had done, and cried with me. We never told my mother what happened, and eventually, my dad ‘married’ my boyfriend and me together. The helplessness I felt then, the hate and the unloved feelings, that’s what I feel like now. I just want it to stop. Then I remember the ring.

I ask where my husband is, and I hear him start.

‘He’s gone...’ his mouth keeps moving, but I hear ringing in my ears and water swells in my eyes. I hear the beating of my heart in my ears, and I feel my wrists pumping. No...

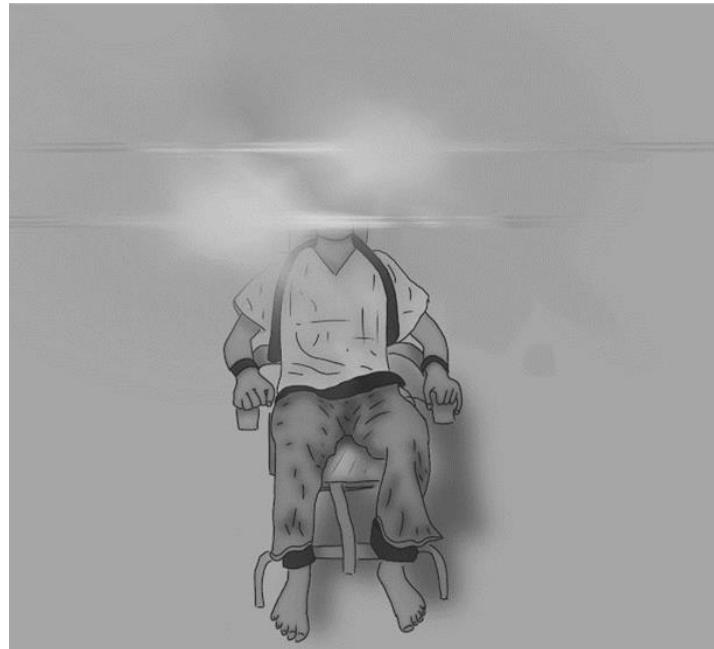
I launch myself at the man, ripping the plastic, and my skin. I bring my teeth over his arm and grab his throat. It becomes a blur of just punching him and beating him. His white suit becomes red, and his face goes blue. I feel a slight pinch at the back of my neck, drowned out by adrenaline, and my world starts to go fuzzy. I feel hands on me and voices shouting, but I remain where I am and keep my hands over his neck while I watch my sight disappear.

My body slowly becomes weightless in this black void. I wonder if I did the right thing, or did I stoop to his level by attacking him? I reach up to feel the locket and it isn't there. I become angry. They have no right to do this. They never did. Why did I believe them? We never stopped to care when they enforced more and more divisions, but we were told that we were equal. When I was in the army, I got a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.

I think of all those before me. How could I ever hope to live up to them? I hung my head and accepted this fate when I sat in the chair while they continued fighting. None of us will ever make the news, in our 'perfect' civilisation, the city named Eden. They acted like it was a first-time appearance whenever you reported someone and said that they got better, they were just choosing not to talk to you. It's a bit hard to talk when you're dead. They don't mean to kill you. That's just a side-effect of torture.

I see a light above me and start moving towards it. I hear my dad praising me, my sister yelling encouragement, and... and my husband saying I love you. Music ringing and people cheering. I hear them sing, and it just makes me miserable.

Do I leave? Or do I make sure this never happens again? I am selfish, but I wouldn't wish it upon anyone. I close my eyes and let myself go weightless again. The wind will carry me. Did I deserve this? My only crime was to love.



*Flashing Lights* (2019) Chris Hubbard, Digital watercolour

## ***'Til Death Do Us Part***

Jessica Parkinson

It was a typical Wednesday afternoon when Destiny Jones was working her dull, tiresome shift, mixing countless amounts of rich, frothy beverages to serve to the overly joyful customers.

In the corner of the shop, she saw him. A boy. His brown hair was ruffled and his big, blue eyes glistened under the bright lights in the shop. A strong sense of curiosity and intrigue took over Destiny's body - it was magnetic. Instinctively, she began to walk towards this mysterious stranger. Having no control over her body, she clumsily tripped over thin air and tumbled to the floor, the contents of her waitressing tray spilling across the timber.

Almost as if it were fate, the boy quickly got out of his seat to help her.

"I'm so sorry sir, I'll get you another drink!"

"Don't worry about it, I can wait."

As they both looked up, their eyes locked, but each quickly looked away. Those short few seconds felt as though they were an eternity.

"Uh, my name is Lucas," the boy murmured, making sure only Destiny could hear him.

"Destiny," she replied. She looked up to see if anyone had observed their brief exchange.

Destiny quickly rose to her feet and wiped the spilled beverage from her apron as Lucas walked back to his seat. It was almost as if nothing had happened. As he walked away, Destiny noticed a small, white card on the ground. She bent down to dry the slippage, and as she did, she picked up the card and tucked it into the pocket of her apron. Once again, she looked around to see if anyone had been watching, and swiftly made her way towards the kitchen.

Now standing alone, she pulled out the card and inspected it. It read 'Lucas McCarthy' and had a phone number below. Why did this simple, anonymous card fill her with such warm emotion? Assuming her stoic mask, she slyly hid the card inside of her bra and continued with her shift.

Her thoughts still with this brown-haired stranger, Destiny mindlessly followed the road home. She couldn't shake the feeling that what had happened was fate.

"Destiny..." she whispered, glancing at the card that fell out of Lucas's pocket. Spinning the small piece of paper through her fingers, she reached for her phone and dialled.

"Hello? Lucas McCarthy speaking..."

\* \* \*

The next several months were filled with secret rendezvous. The new lovers tried to keep their anxiety at bay each time they met, yet the ever-present danger of their meeting followed them. They knew the peril that awaited them if they were caught.

One cool, breezy morning, Lucas took a leap. He invited Destiny to join him for a picnic in an unfamiliar park where little to no one ever was. They spent the early hours of the morning sitting on the lush green grass, feasting on delicious treats and conversing about anything that came to their minds.

"I found this song online, on one of those sketchy websites," Destiny said, seeing Lucas's face light up at the thought. She took the rugged strap of her guitar over her head, her body trembling in fear.

"Nervous?" Lucas questioned.

"I'm absolutely petrified. What are we even doing Lucas... we're going to get caught."

"Don't worry about it. We are safe out here, I promise." He reached for her quivering hands, their fingers intertwining. Destiny steadied at the touch.

She took one final look around and taking a deep breath, she began to play, strumming each string carefully as she sang. Her voice was soothing as Lucas swayed from side to side, a gleeful smile dominating his face. It was the first real smile she had seen in years.

"But I can't help falling in love with you." She sang. Destiny looked up from her guitar and locked her eyes on Lucas's. It was almost as if they were back in the coffee shop.

Out of nowhere, two official-looking men dressed in all white suits materialized in the open park and began charging towards them. They latched their hands onto Destiny and dragged her to her knees, her guitar falling out of her hands and hanging by her neck.

One pulled out a shiny, metallic weapon and pointed it directly at her chest. With the gun in his hands, both Lucas and Destiny's hearts began to race. Lucas stared into her big, brown eyes and noticed that a heightened sense of fear shone through them. He began to panic, forgetting to breathe as he helplessly stared at the men in front of him, their faces indifferent.

Destiny gazed at Lucas, "I love you," she whispered. A deafening gunshot rang through the air, and a sharp, sudden pain filled her chest.

"Destiny!" Lucas screeched as he threw himself onto her warm, limp body. He began to vigorously shake as he held her head in his hands, pushing a strand of her soft, brown hair away from her face.

The two men walked away from Lucas, leaving him alone with Destiny. He gazed at her, just as she did only moments ago. Tears slid across his tender cheeks and fell to the hard ground below. He reached for her hands, which were no longer quivering, and held them tightly inside of his.

"I love you too, Destiny Jones."



*Untitled*, (2019) Jessica Parkinson,  
Pencil on paper

## ***Silent Scream***

Lily Mackay

District 1. District 2. District 3. ...4 ...5 ... 6 ...7 ...8 ...9 ...10 ...11 ...12.

I live in a world where as kids, we're taught that in these places people are the lowest of low, the streets, filthiest of filthy, the crime rates high as ever. I live in a world where people from these places are sent off into an arena to fight to the death. I live in a world where this is classified as 'entertainment.'

I live in The Capitol, Panem. My name is Alexandra. It's Greek for "defender of mankind." My mother named me. She was a fighter. Always involved in riots and the face of protests. Until they made her pay for it. After she lost her battle with Panem and I lost her, I never thought I would love someone again. Sooner or later, I know they'll leave.

And then he came into my life. Xander.

He's exactly like her. Maybe that's part of the reason why I fell in love with him. Because of his rebellious streak. His fighting spirit. Even his name. Did you know Xander is Greek for protector of men? What a coincidence. Even our names mean something similar. He's perfect. I love him. To the moon and back as mother would say. I'm so blessed and lucky to have him in my life. He's teaching me to be happy again. To love life. He's even inspired me to continue mother's legacy. Together him and I, protest by protest, district by district, fight by fight, are restoring Panem to its fair state. Like it was before the dark days. It's achievable. Or it was at least until a few weeks ago when we were caught.

Xander and I set fire to the town square at the heart of the Capitol to signal the beginning of our biggest protest yet. As the blaze raged through the square, a fire raged in me too. It was a hatred for this world.

A hatred for President Snow.

A hatred for the Peacekeepers.

A hatred for the Capitol.

Now, we're at the outskirts of District 12. They've been tracking us for a month now. Still haven't caught us. We've been gone for so long that I'm certain they never will. And I'm fine with that. Xander and I have been planning our future together here in the woods of District 12. It seems like a safe idea considering it's the furthest district away from the Capitol. Kids would be nice but I refuse to bring them into this violent, unfair world. We continue talking about our future, but after a restless night, Xander and I lay to rest under a tree. He's telling me stories to help me fall asleep, god bless him.

It's an old tale about Panem. Before the dark days when President Snow's Grandmother ruled. She was an angel. Everyone loved her. "Panem used to be such a beautiful and peaceful place that even the animals lived in harmony," he tells me.

My eye's close shut when suddenly the sky opens up. Bright flood lights light up the dim morning sky. The deafening sound of a loud whirring engine rings through my ears. I hear someone on a loudspeaker but I can't make out the words.

Panic seizes me. They've found us! My heart is beating faster than ever. We take to our feet, the adrenaline rushing, and start sprinting through the woods with nowhere to go. Anywhere but here!

Before I even begin processing this, tears start streaming down my face as I realise the chances of us both surviving this is little to none.

Xander, who's in front of me, abruptly stops and pulls me to him. "I love you," he mouths. He kisses me on the lips, goodbye and in this moment, time stops. It's just him and I. I look into his eyes and my heart breaks, "Run!" he screams at me.

It's a slap in the face. I turn and I run. I hear his footsteps running behind me. We run to an opening in the woods. Suddenly I see a lance spiralling swiftly through the air. Towards me. Out of nowhere Xander jumps in front of me. I hear the spear head piercing through his clothes and skin, leaving him with the shaft buried deep inside of him. I see the crimson red blood dripping to the ground. I hear his unmistakable cry. My heart drops to my stomach. Love has failed me again.

I stop running. What's the point? I have no fight left in me. I stand beside his body, limp and vulnerable, when something catches my eye. A young girl and boy. They look like hunters. Maybe they're star-crossed lovers running away too. My heart aches for the comfort of Xander's arms. And for my mother.

I look back to the bloodied body that once was Xander's, and after a brief moment of hesitation, look away again, to watch these lovers. My eyes meet with the girl. And for some reason a sense of relief overcomes me. I can see it in her eyes. I know that one day Panem will be restored. Suddenly I'm propelled into the sky, screaming and crying for help all the while my eyes fixed on this girl. Everything goes black. I wake up. I'm back in the Capitol. In a hospital room. Contained to a bed. A scream of absolute terror works its way up to my throat and I open my mouth to let it out. But no sound follows.

## ***One Girl, One Boy***

Tahlia Holmes

Katniss Everdeen is not just a regular girl. She is my best friend, my hunting partner, my soulmate... my everything.

I watch her stare into the distance as we sit by the lake, and I can't help but admire her. Everything about her; her gray eyes glistening in the daylight, the light smile she wears when we're in the woods together, how the beaming rays of sunlight transform her dark brown hair into a sea of golden waves. She is completely and utterly perfect. Just being with her, here in this moment, is perfect. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world, then right here next to her.

Which is why I'm so surprised at what comes out of my mouth next...

"We could do it, you know. Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it." An idea so outrageous that I never dared speak it before. It doesn't sound like such a terrible thought, and it wouldn't be, if we didn't live in this corrupt society. With the districts so poor and the Capitol so powerful, telling us how to act, what to think and what to say. That's why I love it here, outside District 12's boundary fence, where I am free to speak my true feelings toward the Capitol without being punished. It's risky, sure, hunting illegally in the woods, but Katniss and I have decided we're willing to risk it if it means putting food on the table for our families.

Katniss reacts exactly as I'd expected. "You know I'd love to Gale, but I can't leave Prim and my mother here by themselves, they'd starve within a week."

"Then we'll bring them with us. I'll bring my family as well."

"Gale, you have three siblings, add my sister and our mothers, plus us and we'd be easier to spot than the sun in the sky. They'd find us, punish, maybe even kill us. It's just not worth it."

Although she's right, I'd much rather take our chances in the woods than be tied up in this madness. Especially today. It's the Reaping. We both know that either one of us could be sent to die in the Hunger Games - an event that occurs once each year. One girl and one boy from each district, aged between 12 and 18 are selected to fight to the death in a televised battle located in the Capitol. Every year a Reaping is held in each district. Two tributes are selected, and it's yet another way the Capitol reminds us that we are puppets and they're our masters, and if they want to watch a bunch of kids fight to the death, what's stopping them?

Whatever vague feelings of optimism I felt in the woods have completely vanished, as the reality of what today holds hits me. I walk through the front door and am greeted by Vick, my youngest brother, and four-year-old sister, Posy. I ask Vick where Mum and Rory are, but before he can answer, my mother's head pops out from the bedroom door. She is yelling at me to "hurry up and get ready, we don't have all day." This is just her way of coping with the horror that this day always brings, by keeping busy and ordering everyone around. I guess it's so she can keep from thinking the unthinkable, that one of her children will be stolen from her and thrown into an arena to die. She has two sons in the Reaping this year. Me and my 12-year-old brother Rory, who is currently scared out of his wits because this is his first Reaping. I run myself a bath, or as close to one as we can get here, and begin to scrub away at the layer of dirt and grime covering my body. I then put on the outfit I have worn to every Reaping, one of my father's old suits.

By two o'clock, the entirety of District 12's population is in the square. It's mandatory to attend the Reaping, so it's as crowded as ever. Rory and I make our way into the roped off area labelled 'Boys', and once we arrive, we stand in silence, trying not to think about the fact that these may be our last few hours in District 12. I can't help thinking of that number.

42.

42 slips of paper in that big glass ball up on stage have Gale Hawthorne written on them. I know the odds are not in my favour today, or Katniss's, or anyone's here, because by the time the sun sets, two of us will be packed up and shipped off to the Capitol to be sacrificed for their entertainment, in the most gruesome way imaginable...by fighting to the death.

The mayor gives his usual speech about the history of Panem and plays the film about the Dark Days. This once again reminds us that the Capitol has complete power. No matter how much we fight and rebel, they will squish us like ants and put us back in our rightful places. Effie Trinket, the Capitol representative, walks over to the glass ball containing the girl's names. All I think is '*Please not Katniss, please not Katniss Everdeen.*' She reads out the name, and it's not Katniss...

It's Primrose Everdeen.

## ***Hide and Seek***

Jordanne Orchard

Dad is waiting at the front door, staring into the distance. He doesn't notice that I am standing there. Seeing him makes me feel sad about leaving. Tears flood my eyes, I clear my throat and dad snaps out of his trance. Slowly, he opens the front door and walks to the car, not saying a word. He unlocks the battered car and gets in. I trudge out, dragging along my bags. I put my bags on the back seat and get in the front. Dad sits there for a bit, staring at the house, not saying anything. His bottom lip starts quivering and tears start welling in his eyes.

"Adira, I know you don't want to do this, but you have to. It will be ok."

He starts the car and starts driving to the centre.

At the centre I see other girls walking in. I get out of the car and get my bags. As I am walking into the centre, memories are flooding back. These bittersweet memories are making me feel even sadder. I walk in, inspecting the men as I pass. There are so many girls standing along the wall, waiting to be collected. I join them and stand there, waiting for him. Time slowly drags on. I'm waiting for three hours before anyone even comes towards me. Most of the other girls have been taken already. All of a sudden, I see a man walking towards me. My stomach immediately drops. This can't be happening. He is standing in front of me.

"Adira?" he says. I nod. "Hunter. Come with me," he gruffly mumbles, and I follow him like a dog at his heels.

In the carpark, I barely have time to put my bags in before he speeds off. I sit uncomfortably, both he and his car smell like cigarettes. Since the war, there hasn't been a big supply of cigarettes, so I don't know how he gets them. We arrive and he gets out, leaving me to get my own things from the boot of the car. I reluctantly follow him inside. He grunts in the general direction of my new room. There is no bed, just a few blankets on the old, wooden floor. He stands at the doorway and tells me to unpack. Although there is one set of small drawers, I don't bother unpacking. I leave my things in the corner of the room.

I walk out of my room and glance at the clock. 7:32PM. In the kitchen, Hunter pulls out a can of soup. He pours the majority of the soup in his bowl, leaving only a little for me. I sit down at the furthest point from him at on the table and slowly start eating.

As Hunter finishes, he mumbles, "Don't try and pull anything tomorrow. I'm watching you."

He then goes to his room and slams the door. I get up from the table and walk to my room. I lie down and try to get comfortable on the hard floor, using the blankets to cover me. I start thinking about tomorrow. I have to get away. But how? Hunter already suspects me. My eyelids become heavy and I drift off to sleep.

I wake up and go to the bathroom. When I walk in, there is a white dress hanging up. I have my shower and get dressed. By the time I'm finished, Hunter is waiting at the front door. Without saying a word, he walks out to the car and I follow him. He drives us into the woods where we will be married.

On a small clearing I see a few seats. My dad is sitting on one of them. I want to go to him but remain frozen. Instead, I quickly scan the parameter and see a small clearing in the trees to my right. Right now, I am certain of only one thing: I will not be wed today.

I turn back to wedding cite. I can't see Hunter. It's now or never. I head towards the small clearing, following a rocky path, slowly at first then I break into a run. It's not long before I hear heavy footsteps behind me.

"Adira! You get back here now!" Hunter's voice is loud and tinged with anger, "You can run but you can't hide!"

I leave the path and hide behind a bush. My breathing is so heavy, I'm scared he can hear me. My heart feels like it is going to beat through my chest. Hunter is close, I can see him. He stops running and begins walking towards the bush I'm behind. He stops only paces from me.

"Adira," Hunter says with a snarl, "did you really think you could run from me?"

There is a rustle and the sound of twigs snapping somewhere in the opposite direction and Hunter takes off in the direction the sound comes from.

"I will find you," he yells out as he continues to walk away from me, heading towards the sound.

This is my chance. I have to get away. I wait a few minutes and take in long deep breathes.

Risking running into Hunter, I run back up the path to the wedding cite. I spot Dad's car in the distance. As I approach it, I see that his keys are still in the ignition – 'thank you dad' I whisper to myself. I start the car and slam my foot on the accelerator. Speeding off, not knowing where I am heading, but knowing I got away.

## ***Guile***

Olivia Hilton-Bell

Two years. Two long miserable years. Stuck on this horrible island.

After the war started, more and more families and groups wash up on Guile Island. They are stopped from entering countries, because of their birth places and ethnic backgrounds. The future they face is a long and gruesome life on this Island, where they are forced to work 12-hour days underground in the mines. Three lashings are the minimum punishment for collapsing on the job.

I tell myself it is all worth it. In the end, the refugee camp will allow me safe passage to my family in Australia. Once I have finished my three-year agreement, digging in the mine and keeping the Island functioning, I can leave.

The longer I have been here the odder the whole setup seems. There are 1,000 refugees on the Island and even though more refugees land here each week the number doesn't seem to waver. Every refugee on the Island is prone to illnesses but one illness is fatal. We call it 'Distortion'.

I enter the mine, and as I make my way over to my station a foot comes out of nowhere and trips me. I land hard on the ground and let out a silent yelp, I realise I've twisted my ankle. As I clutch my ankle, a large figure looms over me. "Get up," says a deep raspy male voice. When I do not react and continue to cradle my ankle, the large stranger grabs my arm and pulls me up to my feet. Tears well up in my eyes but I clench my jaw and meet the man's gaze. "Go to the infirmary," he snarls.

As I exit the mine I walk past jealous eyes. The refugees are hungry and as tired as working dogs. It's not fair. Why do we have to stay here this long?

I know Guile houses two large government-controlled buildings; one is the kitchen and the other is the infirmary. I limp in the direction of the infirmary. Reaching its entry doors, they automatically open and a seemingly pleasant lady comes into view. She wears a large smile that covers her face.

"How can I help you?" she says, her smile not wavering.

"I think I've broken my ankle," I grunt in pain.

"Come right in," she says, ushering me to an empty bed, "I'll be right back," she says. The nurse leaves my bedside and hurries over to another patient.

The boy that lies on the bed across from mine is still. His face is nearly blue. The nurse begins to talk to the boy as she opens his hand and places a pill into his palm. The boy opens his eyes and says something to the woman. Now frustrated, she takes the pills back, places them into a glass of water where they quickly dissolve and proceeds to pour the mixture into the boy's throat. He momentarily struggles but then his body goes lax and the rest of the liquid is drained into his mouth. Now satisfied, the nurse makes her way back to my bed.

She hands me a pill. "You can either put it in water," she motions with her head the glass sitting beside the bed, "or simply pop it in your mouth," she says cheerfully.

"I don't need a pill, just a brace to secure my ankle," I say casually.

"Nonsense. Just swallow the pill," and then quickly adds: "It'll make you feel better. Trust me." The nurse now wears a gritted smile. Now she seems frustrated. When I don't take the pill, she grabs my jaw and squeezes it open. I struggle against her – hitting her across the face. This isn't right.

I pull myself up off the bed and look for the exit doors. Before I get far two security guards grab me and force me back into my bed. Why can't they just treat my ankle. I struggle against the guards who hold down my hands and feet. The nurse comes over. She no longer wears her smile instead she wears a mask of indifference. Like the boy who was force-fed, the nurse grabs my jaw and shoves another pill into my mouth. The pill goes down my throat and I instantly feel sick. My body's natural reflex tries to get rid of this substance but fails. My body goes still, and I realise I am paralysed. The nurse takes a second pill out of her pocket.

"You are no longer useful," she says without emotion. My eyes reveal my panic as I lie helplessly before the nurse. I watch as she dissolves the pill into a liquid. She places it into a syringe and plunges it into my neck.

## *Escape*

Abigail Lazarus

I awake and sit up in bed. Today might be my first day working for a government family, I feel so excited, but also nervous. I am so blessed to have this opportunity that others don't, to finally escape this place.

At the age of three, you're chosen to either become a worker or to be adopted by taskmasters, based on a test which establishes your intelligence, looks and athletic ability. You only get chosen if you fit their standards. If you're not chosen then you will be sent to school for seven years to learn a trade, in which you will be a worker for the rest of your life. But if you are lucky enough you will be chosen to work for a taskmaster and their family.

There's a knock at the door, I snap out of daydreaming. I put on a cardigan and a pair of slippers and answer the door. A woman is wearing a white jumpsuit with white heels, "Good morning Miss Brown," she says, "I am here to inform you that you will be working for the Murphy family, as of today. Pack your necessities and be ready in an hour." She promptly turns on her heels and leaves without fuss.

I close the door and start jumping with joy!

I manage to get ready within an hour. All of my stuff is packed into a large fabric bag. Clothes, a family photo of my parents who died, my sister who got taken by a taskmaster, and me, all sitting together. I also pack a towel and basic toiletries. I don't know what the Murphys will provide, so I have to be prepared. I've changed into something presentable. A white button-up tucked into a black skirt. I take a walk around my tiny house for the last time. I exit my house and shut the door, not locking it. Maybe some young kids will take shelter in this as I once did.

As I turn around, I see a government car. An older man rolls down the window, "Get in," he grumbles.

I quickly climb into the car, not wanting to anger the driver anymore. I drop my bag onto the floor and take one last look at my house, my street, my town. And then within an instant, it's gone. A forest has appeared in front of the town, I watch it for a while, slowly swallow what I used to know as my home. I turn to the front and watch the city draw near.

After 20 minutes on the road we finally get to a mansion, the driver stops and shoos me out. I get to the door and ring the doorbell, a man answers.

"Good morning," I say with a quiver of enthusiasm, "Is this the Murphy residence? I'm your new house worker," I smile brightly.

"It took you long enough," he replies.

A girl then appears in the doorway. "Hurry up," she exclaims, "You have a lot to do. My name is Davin, but you must address me as Miss," she says.

I follow the girl inside, she shows me around the house and eventually we get to the basement. She tells me that this will be my room for the time I am staying with them, it's bigger than my whole house. Once she leaves, I quickly sort my things. Once I'm done, I exit my room to see where I can begin – I'm out to make a good impression.

I make my way back up to the main floor, where a well-dress lady is chatting on her phone. I try to make eye-contact, but she seems intent on ignoring me. But as I walk past her, she says my name, "Miss Brown is already here, we can commence the experiments tomorrow."

I am startled by the context of my name. What experiments? I slow my pace, in an attempt to eavesdrop. "After we perfect the technique, we can start using it on the rest of those miserable workers... They will live forever to serve us, and our descendants... Yes! Exactly right... 'super-slaves'." She lets out a staccato laugh. My heart begins beating faster.

I have to get out of here! In my panicked haste, I turn around and bump into a small glass statue of Lady Justice, which falls to the ground and smashes into pieces. The well-dressed lady on the phone falls silent, as she glares at me.

I run. I run for my life. I run down the stairs back into the basement. I lock the door and barricade it with an old dresser. I frantically look around a spot the small window at the far end of the room.

I unlatch the window, but it won't budge. I hear jingling of keys as they hurriedly unlock the door. Then I see the dresser slowly rocking back and forth as they try forcing the door open. The damned window is jammed shut so I smash through the glass. Behind me the dresser tips over and the door swings open. Just as I haul myself through the window, I feel a paralysing pain shoot into the calf of my leg. It travels through every part of my body. My vision goes dark.

I am awoken by blinding white light. I attempt to shield my eyes with my hand, but I have been strapped down. I attempt to scream but am quickly muzzled.

A familiar voice comes from the white light: "You didn't think we were going to let you get away that easily, did you...?"

## ***Innocent***

Mariam Waissi

Tick, Tock. Tick, Tock.

2:48 AM.

I cannot get my brain to shut down. My throat is as dry as the Sahara Desert. I sit up in bed, flipping over my silk sheets, wanting to pour myself a glass of water, however, I realise that I have no water remaining in my jug. I fall back in my bed, but now it feels as if 50 needles are piercing through my throat. I force myself to get up and grab a glass of water.

I open my door and start walking to the kitchen, seeing my two robots next to my door. As I open the glass cabinet, I notice that the living room lights are on. It's almost 3AM, why would the lights be on? Maybe it's Seth? Seth is my dad, I call him by his first name because he doesn't like being called dad.

Seth and I have never been on the same page. Since he started creating robots, we haven't been able to see eye-to-eye, so we stopped communicating. It seemed better than fighting. I fill up a glass of water and start to walk back to my room, however, the hesitation is killing me, I want to see who is in the room. I leave the glass on the hallway table and start walking towards the living room.

The living room has two large doors which are rarely closed. I stand against the wall and try to listen. At first, all I hear is people mumbling, so I get closer. It seems like two male voices are talking about politics and business. Might as well just leave. I begin walking back but I see a shadow walking towards me: "ALICE?" I scream.

"Keep quiet, we don't have much time. Hurry come this way," says Alice.

"What do you mean?"

She pulls my hand and starts running, with no hesitation, I proceed to follow her. Alice has been my friend since grade 2 until she disappeared and never came back. We continue running until we reach a place I have never seen before, it almost looks like a warehouse.

She knocks on an old, rusty door, it slides open silently. Alice walks in the door and disappears into the darkness. I follow her in and a bright light blinds my eyes. I look around and see strange faces staring at me like I am some kind of monster - I see hatred in their eyes.

Alice begins: "I know that you are very confused, but I want you to listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you. Since President Seth started creating robots, he has been capturing all the poor in the city. He has shown no mercy on us. We have been suffering here for 15 years now, do you know how that feels? No, you don't because you have been living up there, having the best time of your life while we have been suffering."

I cannot believe the things Alice is saying, but the proof was right before my eyes. "Alice, I am really sorry, I didn't know Seth was doing all of this."

"Mary please, please help us," she begs.

"Alice, I really want to help... I would really like to get all of you out of here, but I can't. It's too risky for me. And anyway, this isn't my responsibility."

"Wow, I thought you were different to your dad, but I guess I was wrong. You and your father...all you care about is your reputation and how much money you can make. I really thought you would help us because I thought you had a heart, but obviously, you don't. Just leave. Go."

I start walking to the door. Am I really like my dad? Is the only thing I care about money? My reputation?

Suddenly I see all the doors opening and I hear gunfire. I look around and everyone is laying on the floor and blood everywhere. Seth appears from behind the gunmen. I am stunned as he approaches me looking angry.

Suddenly, there is one last gunshot, and I feel a strong unpleasant sensation in my chest. I look down and see my shirt stained with blood. I reach my hand out towards my father, "Dad...?" I look at him in confusion.

His face remains hard, "You shouldn't have betrayed me, Mary."

"But..." I'm too weak to utter the words, instead, I collapse onto the floor.

## **One for All**

Alyssa Tant

As I lie awake in bed, I feel a shiver overcome my body. “Nanna,” I call out, “Nan are you there?”

Silence.

But then, after a few seconds, “Yes Annika?”

A flood of relief rushes over me. I head towards my grandmother’s voice in the kitchen. She is sitting at the table staring at a mysterious package with a letter attached. I walk over, pick up the letter and begin reading:

“Here in this package lies a satchel of powder you must not consume unless you are over the age of 45. If you are over the age of 45 and have not consumed the contents of this sachet by the 21/09/50 we will bring you to the State and execute you publicly. Population numbers are spiralling out of control. We need more young brilliant minds. This is the only way, my dearest apologies.”

What does this mean? This can’t be happening! “Nan! There is no way you are taking this.”

It’s only a week to the expiry date. Nan still hasn’t put that powder into her food yet. I just can’t stand the thought of losing her, it keeps me awake all night.

My Nan is the only family I have left. My mother died while having me in fact it’s a miracle I’m still alive. My Dad was so distraught after my mum died, that he took his own life. And now I’m supposed to watch my Nan kill herself?

Nan has some medical issues so every month we go to the State hospital for treatment. There is no way we could have paid for treatment by ourselves but when my grandfather died a few years ago we decided that half of the money he left would go to Nan’s treatment. Following Nan’s session, one of the nurses come into the room. She takes one look at Nan and asks, “Were you planning on taking the drugs?”

I lash out at the nurse in anger: “You want to kill my Nan so there can be space for young brilliant minds?” I glare at her and then respond to my own question, “Well, NO. I will NOT let it happen!”

The frightened nurse excuses herself and leaves the room. “Nan, what are you going to do, I can’t lose you. Let’s run away...” But I know deep down in my heart that’s not an option, she needs treatment, and we would get caught.

The sun is shining into my window, I hear the birds chirping. I head down to breakfast. Nan has already made scrambled eggs on toast. I’m going to miss her breakfasts. Suddenly there is a sharp knock at the door. Then abruptly the Madam of State is in our house. I can’t help wondering why she is here we haven’t done anything wrong and it’s not the 21st yet.

“Annika, there you are darling,” she says, “Do you remember that little outburst you had at the doctors?”

My face goes blank it’s like all the happiness in me is being sucked out. I had just lost my temper that day I didn’t think anything of it.

“We don’t like defiance, and it is certainly not rewarded.”

"My parents are gone; my Nan is all I have left," I plead.

Ignoring me she continues, "You must be punished for your outburst," she says in a harsh manner.

"You have two options: one, your grandmother takes this medication and we forget about this incident or, two, we will keep your grandmother alive but as a consequence you must take the medication."

My jaw drops. If I let my grandmother die, I will never forgive myself.

If we are going to die, I want to die together. 'One for all, and all for one,' I think to myself as I smile at her.

## **Hope**

Rachel Lau

I wake up to the sound of howling wind breaking into the cracks of my bedroom window. My eyes fling open as I realise it's noon. The sun is already sky high. I should have been awake hours ago when the sun was still at rest. I jump up, still a bit drowsy, when suddenly, I hear a quiet scream, barely audible.

I turn my head to where the noise came from. My alarm rises. The sound comes from a room deliberately concealed by stacks of boxes, which I quickly push aside, flinging open the door.

Hope. There she is, my younger sister, curled up in her ragged bed, weeping. I walk over to her and embrace her, attempting to comfort her. I hold on to her more tightly and whisper: "It's just a nightmare Hope, as long as I am here with you, you're safe."

I speak with a quiet voice as robots roam the city and listen to what people say. This is so the government knows what happens in the city at all times. I stroke her brown silky hair and she slowly calms down. I can't let anything happen to her. She is so small and fragile, unable to defend herself from any serious danger. How I wish that she wouldn't need to hide in fear. How I wish this world hasn't turned into what it is now. Since the rule of only allowing to bear one child was introduced to the world, nothing was ever the same. The world used to be a happier place, where you were allowed to have more than one child. But this rule had to be established because of the overpopulation in the world.

I was only ten when all this started. I was the single child who had loving parents and a best friend, a young boy named Charlie. We would hang out everyday and tell each other everything. But unlike me, Charlie had an older brother. I was a bit jealous that Charlie had a sibling, because I've always wanted one. Although the city was always crowded with people, we were still happy. Then everything changed.

I was with Charlie when we heard a booming voice over the speakers located around the city. A voice that I remember till this day. It was this very voice who introduced this rule. Luckily, this rule didn't affect some families who only wanted one child. I thought I was safe since I was an only child, but I realized what this meant for Charlie when the robots took him away right before my eyes. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

No one knows the truth as to what really happened to their loved ones that day. Everyone believes that the government killed every single one of them, but I try to convince myself that I will see Charlie again one day. But now, I'm starting to doubt myself and give in to what people say. He's dead.

Now I have Hope to care for, only seven years old and a secret I was able to keep till this day. She wasn't meant to be born into this world of misery, but I did promise myself I would do anything to keep her safe from harm, safe from the robots, safe from the government. If they find out about Hope, they will certainly make her suffer the same fate as Charlie.

I tell Hope to stay quiet as I go get something for us to eat. The moment I step out the door, a wave of hot air hits me in the face. *How can anyone survive in this weather?* But I still go. For Hope. I arrive at the markets, which show scars from the exact fire that killed our parents after Hope was born. As I look around, there is barely anyone in sight. I see people who live on the streets, starving to death,

and I pity them. Meanwhile, the government is probably feeding off wealth while we're working so hard to get a decent meal.

I manage to trade a bottle of water for some bread. As I get back to my townhouse, I see a single robot, standing in front of my door. Then another robot appears from behind the door and my panic begins to rise. I drop the bread as I see the robot holding a gun against Hope's head.

I shriek, "NO! Kill me instead!" But then I hear it. A single gunshot which echoes around the brick walls of the townhouses.

Hope's final look was full of terror, before she falls to the floor and the robots are gone. I rush to her, kneeling down as I take her into my arms. Her breathing is shallow. My voice shaking: "Hope, it's going to be ok... I'm here now..." I know this is untrue, but it doesn't matter anymore.

"Have Hope..." she whispers amid her shallow breaths. And then she is gone.

My body rocks with pain as I hold her warm lifeless body against my chest. *I broke my promise, I wasn't able to keep her safe. What hope do I have left?*

The sun starts to set, a speck of light on the horizon. I wipe the tears. One day, they will pay for this.

## ***The Reaping***

Rachel Mildner

Today is the Reaping. It starts at two, so my family and I are going to the square at one. The officials will be arriving soon to check houses and make sure everyone has left, if you haven't you will be sent to prison. My name is prim. I'm so scared, this is my first reaping but luckily, it is very unlikely I will get chosen, as my name is only in the bowl once. I'm more scared for my sister, Katniss, because her name is in there 20 times. Katniss is 16 and originally would only have her name in five times but entered her name in more times for Tesserae. Tesserae is something that the Capitol provides for the poor and starving which we are. Katniss registered her name in more times for our family and refused to let me add my name in even once more.

The mayor steps up to the podium as the clock strikes two and begins explaining the rules of the Hunger Games. Each district must provide one boy and one girl tribute to enter the arena and fight to the death. Last one standing wins. This is the Capitol's way of reminding us how we really are at their mercy.

Effie Trinket happily steps up to the podium now.

"Happy Hunger Games and may the odds be in your favour." Effie sticks her hand in the girl's glass ball first, the crowd goes silent in suspense. I feel sick and am praying it won't be me. She reads the name out, "Primrose Everdeen!"

That's my name! This cannot be happening to me; the odds were almost completely in my favour. Out of thousands of names, mine was in there once but somehow, she picked me. I'm frozen, I can't move, I can feel my heart beating through my chest. It feels like I am drowning, struggling to breathe, seeing my life flash before me. I start walking up slowly, hardly breathing, hoping I will wake up and realise it was all a dream. It's when I hear Katniss screaming, I realise this is real; a real-life nightmare. Katniss! Why is Katniss screaming my name and running through the crowd?

She gets to the front, grabs me and pushes me behind her. She yells, "I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!" I cannot believe what I am hearing. I try to open my mouth to stop her, but nothing comes out.

"Lovely," says Effie. The mayor calls her up.

Then I realise she really is going to do this for me. No! I cannot let her. I start screaming, "NO, Katniss! No! You can't go, NO!"

"Prim, let go!" she said harshly. Gale, my sister's best friend, pulls me off Katniss and he carries me off toward my mother. I do not know how to feel. I know for a fact that Katniss has a better chance of surviving in the Hunger Games than I do as she has the survival skills to win and I have none, so it is all bittersweet. If she is killed in the arena, I will never forgive myself. I cannot live without her. My sister has raised me for the past few years. After dad past away, mum became depression and Katniss had to step up and take care of me...of mum.

I watch as Katniss is taken into custody and for the next hour we are allowed to sit with her and say our 'final' goodbyes. It's humanely cruel. Mum and I walk in, and I rush to Katniss and start sobbing. She reaches her arms out and I climb straight into her lap with my head on her shoulder and my arms wrapped around her neck. Mum wraps her arms around both of us and we just sit in silence for a few minutes.

Then, as if startled into action, Katniss begins explaining everything that we must do in order to survive in the District. How can this be happening? She's the one about to suffer a brutal death in an arena, and yet she's telling us how to survive in our peaceful district! She tells me I can sell my goat's milk and cheese; that Gale will get me the herbs I need but don't grow; she turns to mum and angrily tells her she cannot "check out" again and must take good care of me.

"I will be alright Katniss, stop worrying," I say. "You have to take care of yourself, although I know you will. You're fast, you're brave and you have the right survival skills that dad taught you. You can win... you have to win..." I know Katniss can do it, I need her to win, I need her alive.

"Maybe, then we would be as rich as Haymitch," she says semi-mockingly.

"I don't care if we're rich Katniss! I just want you to come home alive. You will try, won't you? I mean, really, really try? Please? For me?" I plead, even though I know what that means.

She hesitates, "Really, really try, I swear it." I can tell she is scared, which is completely uncharacteristic of my sister. The peacekeepers come in and say our time is up. I hug her tighter than I ever have before.

"I love you both," she says, and it's the first time I've ever heard Katniss use these words.

I just hope it's not the last.

## ***Susturulmuş***

Emma Avakian

“Azmon! Wake up!”

Opening my eyes, the first thing I see is my carved wooden toy box which Hayrik made for me. I sit up and cuddle Mayrik, even though its hard with her big belly. I put on my coat and walk slowly with Mayrik down our hallway, adorned with family portraits and little trinkets on shelves. We enter the wooden archway into our chapel. Hayrik is already here, kneeling with his eyes closed, so I whisper, “Morning papa, are you coming for breakfast?”

“Yes, Azmon, when I am done with this prayer. Go ahead with Mayrik and enjoy the lavash.” I look back at Mama, grab her hand and smile. We turn around and head to our stone and terracotta kitchen built by Papa, and I sit on Mama’s woven cushions on the wooden chair.

Mayrik puts the lavash onto three plates. I wait for her to sit and say grace when Mama looks back at the prayer room. Papa steps out looking worried. She says: “Is everything alright?”

“Yes dear, don’t worry, I just need to discuss with you”

“Oh, don’t take too long, the lavash will go cold! ”

Mama looks at me and smiles, “You eat it now then, but Hayrik and I have to talk about the service today.”

“Oh, I’ll say grace then.”

“Good boy.”

Mama and Papa walk out, and I say my grace and then eat the warm bread and dips eagerly. Minutes tick by and they still haven’t come out of the hallway so I grab my roughly carved wooden toy off the floor, sit down and start playing with the little wooden soldier. He marches around the carpet, watches out for those in need and listens to their troubles, but when I look up and see a twisted version of my toy I stare and shuffle backwards. He yells, “Ermenice, your taxes are needed.”

Papa rushes out of the hallway and quickly hands this Goliath of a man a clinking satchel. The man sorts through the coins, puts one in his pocket filled with deception and slams the door. Papa breathes a sigh of relief and whispers to himself. “Even higher than last time.” He turns to me and smiles.

“Let’s go to the market Azmon, and grab some of your Mayrik’s favourite baklava.” I smile eagerly back at him.

“As long as I can have some!”

He chuckles, “Of course Azmon, now let’s go before your Mayrik figures it out!”

He grabs some small remaining coins and opens the door quietly. We walk out into our yard and down our alley. We walk along, surrounded by warped images of bent crosses, disfigured priests and hurtful slogans. We pick up the pace past the hateful corridor and head out into the bustling market.

Armed with our gold coins we confidently walk up to our Garden of Eden - the sweet shop. We eagerly exchange with the woman running the stall, thank her and turn around to return home. We start to walk when suddenly, Hayrik stops in his tracks. He squints at something distant, then grabs my hand tight and without explanation, starts running with me grasping onto his arm. I struggle to hold on as he pushes past people and back into our alley way. We enter the yard in a hurry, and he immediately drops me in my room.

"Grab your things, pack a bag with things you need to keep."

I begin to question him, "Aren't we just going to the service?" But he cuts me off. "No! Just do as I said - go pack your things!" He then heads for his and Mayrik's room. I can hear him rushing to explain something and shove things in his own bag. I jolt my mind back to packing and place a woven bag on my toybox, and fill it as much as I can, even though I'm not sure why I must. I shove everything I can into the bag, but the bag is only small and can only just hold a few pieces of clothing, one of Hayrik's carvings, my bible, two lira coins and a small notebook.

Suddenly, loud yells, bangs and screams interrupt our home's busy silence. Papa slams my door open and I grab my bag from the precious toybox. Without a word, he grabs my hand and we run out of our home into where Mama is nervously waiting in our alley. We exit the alley into the street, I risk a quick look behind me. Along with deafening screams, all I see is organised chaos. A wall of cladded men, a stampede of men, women and children, some sleeping too quietly in the street. My arm jerks sideways, my fingers crumple. I look desperately where Hayrik was, and I catch a glimpse of him as I continue running.

He too is now resting on the cold stones. I scream at him: "Papa! Get up! Please..."

But he doesn't.

Mama looks back, and then continues running even faster and we manage to slip from the stampede. In an alleyway, we discover an old horse and cart with quietened dogs still tied to it. We stumble into the cart, and as we gallop off, I understand...

We too have been 'susturulmuş' - muzzled.

## ***Alone Together***

Katie Polette

Slow and quiet. That's my reality now. Slow and quiet.

Walking through the camp that is my new home, I'm careful to save my energy and not breathe too hard into the winter air. My legs shake with weakness, my head spins and my gut aches with hunger. I'm convinced that my body will kill me before they do.

My pain is nothing compared to Margot's, though. My sister has been tied to her bed, almost completely motionless for the last three days. Margot was supposed to grow up, get a job and live a long, fulfilling life. But it would take a miracle now, along with plenty of food and water, to coax her out of the trance she's in. We haven't had rations or something to drink for days and the lack of sustenance has only sped up Margot's failing health. But, once I feed her the snacks that Hanneli's giving me, Margot will get better. I have to believe it.

I'm almost at the far side of the camp yet I sit down, in desperate need of a rest. I slow my breathing and start to absent-mindedly trace the numbers and letters on my left arm.

I am A-25065.

It colours my skin in ugly writing, the kind you see when somebody has tried to write a word in coarse dirt, with a stick that's far too big.

I hate this marking.

Thankfully, Margot has one as well, although she's tried to hide it, which makes me feel less alone. Margot! I get up, frustrated that I let my mind wander so selfishly when I have such an important job. I make a hasty start but slow down almost immediately because the fast movement is making me light-headed. I can't remember what it feels like to run or play, and I still forget what a toll sudden movement takes on me.

I reach the other end of camp, bring my head close to the fence and call out Hanneli's name. Through the clear darkness, I hear a coarse whisper: "Anne? Anne, is that you?"

"Yes," I reply, thankful that my saviour is there. "It's me. Have you got the food?"

A rustling sound comes from her side of the fence as she reaches into the package.

"I've got some Swedish bread and prunes for you both. It's not much, but it was all I could do to persuade the others to give away their rations. I hope it's enough."

A small, brown bag that represents hope is flung over the fence and I catch it just before it lands in the muddy ground.

"*Toda, Hanneli. B'hatzlacha,*" I murmur after we've said our goodbyes.

"You too," she replies as we begin the journey towards our respective barracks.

The trip back to Margot is twice as hard on my body. I've already exerted so much energy in getting this food. Strangely, it's also twice as easy on my mind because it feels less downcast with the comfort of food in my arms, knowing that I'm so close to bringing my sister back to life. She doesn't

deserve to be on death's door. We don't deserve to be here. My family did all the right things in life, Daddy even fought for the Germans in the war! I don't understand. What have we done to be starved and beaten to death?

I'm frail and imprisoned, but I *keep on trying to find a way of becoming what I would so like to be, and what I could be.*<sup>1</sup> My dream of returning to Amsterdam with Mummy, Daddy and Margot and living freely together is what gives me the energy to get through each harrowing day.

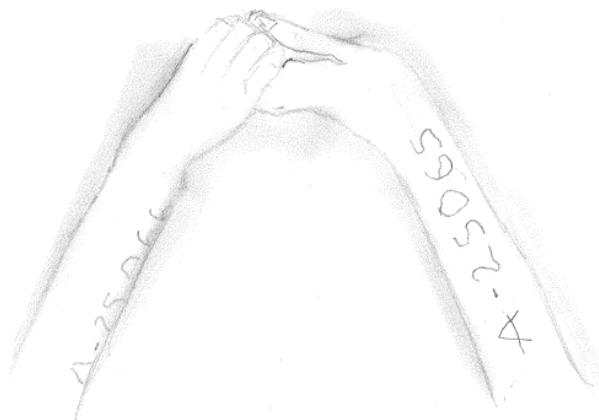
I reach our bunker and weave my way through the small crowd of people to our bunk-bed. Margot is on top, asleep, and looking more pale and thinner than ever. I rouse her and ask her to sit up because, at last, I have what I need to heal her. Reluctant at first, Margot merely looks around the room, but then she sees the food I'm laying out on the ground and appears to be gripped by a sudden burst of energy! It's the first real food she's seen for more than two weeks. She moves quickly to get out of bed.

Too quickly.

As I turn around to tell her that her head will whirl if she doesn't slow down, Margot loses her grip. She falls, hitting the ground hard with a loud thud.

I scream and rush to her. Kneeling beside her, I lift her head onto my lap and wrap my arms tightly around her warm, lifeless corpse as I rest my cheek against hers. Rocking back and forth on my knees, I plead for her to come back. "Talk to me, Margot. Wake up. I'm so sorry. Margot, Come back. Please..." My words trail off into sobs. My sister is dead. When Mummy and Daddy were left in Auschwitz, at least Margot and I were *alone together*. But now, I'm truly alone, *without hope, without comfort or anything to look forward to again.*<sup>2</sup>

Placing the body of my sister, Margot Frank, softly back on the floor, I'm wishing that I could go with her in death because it feels far, far worse to be left behind, alone.



*Untitled*, (2019) Jessica Parkinson, Pencil on paper

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Frank (1954), *The Diary of Anne Frank*, London: Pan Books, pg. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pg.73

## ***Lost Light\****

Sienna Bilski

Out there, across the raging ocean, I can sense Him.

With his jet black hair slicked all the way back and eyes dark as night. He looks down on us, sneering at our survival. He calls us worthless. He calls us weak. He calls us disgusting and filthy. But no, we aren't the filthy ones, he and his conspirators are. Their corruption destroyed my people and this country. All they care about is money, strength and power.

Today is not a good day for me. It is a day of mourning and grief. It is the day I lost my father. My father was a bright man, a good man. He always saw the better side of everything. He was the kind of father any child would wish for. He was smart, kind and caring.

Below me, on the beach, I can almost see us running up and down the shore. The sand flicking at our heels, building sandcastles and jumping over waves. I remember I would go onto his back and he would swim out into the deep water. He would then go under and grab my legs. I would always squeal with fear and delight but I knew I was safe. Sometimes, after a hot day at the beach, he would get me two scoops of bitter melon ice cream! Happy times.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes and let the memories flood back. On this day, 16 years ago, we were at the beach. When we were packing up our things, I saw something strange; out across the sea, five streaks of raging light were heading towards us. I knew they came from our enemy – North Korea. Sirens started to go off. I didn't know what the sirens meant but I could tell it was bad. The sound was deafening. It started off low and then became ear-splittingly high - like an ambulance, but a hundred times worse. I covered my ears trying to block out the sound, but no matter how hard I pressed I could still hear it. People started running up the sand to get back into the city. People in the water swam to the shore as fast as they could. My father dropped everything, grabbed me and ran.

Through my father's arms, I could only see blinks of the chaos. Cars crashed into one another; people tried to get out of buses; mothers and fathers called desperately for their children who were missing in the stampede. I finally understood what was going on and realised where we were going.

We turned down a street and saw the massive bunker which laid before us. My father put me down and we ran. I can still see it now. It's so close. I sprint ahead and get to the bunker. I look back, shocked and see that my father has fallen and can't get up.

I scream at the other adults to help. I point at my father to get someone's attention. But they blindly run past into the bunker. My father struggles to get up. He has twisted his ankle. I scream at him to get up, to move, to come to me. Tears start to roll down my face. I feel the ground started to rumble and the doors of the bunker start to close. My father is so close, yet so far. His eyes full of pleading and fear. He sees me looking at him and points his hand at me as a sign to not come and get him. I start to run back to the door.

He says "NO! Stay back, Tan! Stay back!"

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\* Sienna Bilski's story, "Lost Light" won an overall merit award in the 2019, *Litlinks* Writing Competition.

People are still running around and I try to push past but I can't, and just before I reach the door, it shuts in my face. I am surrounded by noise and people, and people and noise. Some are crying, some are embracing one another. And I am alone. Helpless, afraid, and alone.

"No!!! Please no!" I bang on the shut door, and scream and yell for someone to open it. "Please, someone...anyone..." My hands slide down the door. Everyone turns to me, but there is only silence in return.

"Please..." I plead. I slide to my knees and look at my hands. They're bright red. I roll over and feel the cool concrete against my back. He's gone... he's all I had, and now he's gone. I roll onto my side and wrap my hands around my legs, tucking my head in. I begin to weep.

I open my eyes and come back to myself. I hope He sees me here. All of us, here. I turn away from the ocean to face my people. They wait, wondering what their leader will do. I will be the one who leads them to freedom.

How dare He destroy our lands and leave us here to perish? How dare He place us in this darkness, waiting for all of our hope to shatter? How dare He let us suffer and starve to death?

But no more! No more of this! I am Tankaro Yoshida. I will bring the light back to these people, and we will remake our country.

Nǚhuáng wànsù! The survivors, my people, repeat this.

I will lead this rebellion because we are the revolution...

## **Senses**

Imogen Holley

I watch the government official lift the newborn out of the machine. As I stand in silence I wonder which sense the baby is missing. Is it a smell, sight, taste, hearing, or touch? They take the baby into the next room to analyse which sense the baby has lost.

20 minutes later, the screen suddenly turns bright white with black text reads:

NAME: Angela Canes  
GENDER: Female  
Parents: Joyce and Allan Canes  
SENSE LOST: Smell

I know what occupation Angela is going to have when she turns 13. She will have to work outside of the dome, repairing and rebuilding it. Her life expectancy will be short. She will pass away around the age of 18, from exposure to the radiation.

The radiation is toxic, but she won't be able to smell it, her cells will slowly die and so will she. This is just how it is, for over 100 years now. Each child is born without one sense. And the sense that you don't have decides your future. Those who are born without a sense of smell you would think are lucky, but they have the shortest lifespan. I feel for Angela's parents; their only child will not be with them for long.

The government says we are born without a sense because human DNA has been corrupted over the generations by the Earth's toxic atmosphere.

My great grandma shared stories about the world when she was young, before people lived in the dome, before the great storm. There were creatures of all shapes and sizes, some could breathe underwater and others could fly. Plants the height of buildings and something called oceans people could swim in. But everything was destroyed by the great storm.

She remembers the hot winds, acid rain that blistered her skin, and the sun that burnt people alive. The survivors lived underground for 10 years until the great storm ended. Some people tried going to the surface but died immediately from radiation.

Since the Earth's surface was destroyed, the government built a dome for humanity to live in.

The government provides clean air, homes, food and water and in return, we work for them. We all need to accept our destiny, which is determined when we are born. The government says we must play our part to protect life, to protect humanity.

My name is Nadya. I was born deaf.

My dad rushes into the hospital room. My father signs to me. He cannot speak, as he was born without a tongue. "Nadya," he gesticulates, "I've discovered something." He passes me a note. It's addressed to Dr Kailer. It reads:

TOP SECRET

We have made a ground-breaking discovery. We must handle this urgently.

As you know, throughout the years we have extracted a sense from every child born, in order to maintain power within our society. But over the generations, it seems the human mind and body has evolved. We believe the last two generations have adapted and have the

potential to unlock a new sense. It's estimated that approximately 20,000 people have evolved already.

The new extraordinary senses are:

Sense Deleted	Sense Added
Sight	Night vision and thermal vision
Speech	Vitakinesis (healing)
Hearing	Telepathic powers
Feeling	Biokinesis (Shape-shift abilities)
Smell	Ability to control and generate radiation

Contact me ASAP.

I read the letter again in shock. My dad gestures: "This was accidentally sent to me instead of a Dr Kailer." I am in complete disbelief; how can the government do this? How can they take away a sense for power? We thought we were born this way due to the radiation. They lied to us. Days pass from hearing this, we figure out a plan.

We spread the news, secretly, person by person, revealing what the government has done and how we have to fight back to finally live in peace. We help each other work out how to activate their new sense.

A week goes by. Tonight, we fight.

We are using our new senses to our advantage; this way we know we can win. Everything goes to plan, we get past the gates of the government building, in the glow of the moonlight, everyone is calm. Suddenly a blinding light strikes my eyes. I look to my dad and he gestures the word "Alarm". Instantly, guards come from inside holding rifles in their hands. They shut their eyes and activate their powers. Everything is hectic, smoke bombs fill the air.

I get whacked to the ground. While scraping the blood and dirt off my hands I look up, a piercing pain shoots through my chest. A lump burns in my throat. Before my mind can process what's going on, everything slows down, I watch my dad drop dead to the ground.

Kids run on both sides, attacking the guards. My eyes are focused on my father. Dodging everyone as I run towards him, I fall on my knees beside him. I watch him take his last breath as I read his mind, telling me words I will never forget: I love you. Uncontrollable tears cascade down my cheeks as his eyes close for good. My jaw is clenched, my mouth now dry, with my shaking hand I grasp his hand tightly.

I wipe the tears and stand up. I am going to avenge my father.

## ***The Datoda Scheme***

Chloe Harrigan

On days like these when the sun arrives before sleep, everyone in Datoda knows it's that time of year. I untuck my quilt, staring at my best suit laid out ready for the day. I'm prepared. I'm prepared. I'm prepared. These words ring over in my head until I accept it's time to get up.

"How are you travelling Leo?" trembles Mum.

I brush off her comfort and continue my venture through the house pretending not to hear.

"Would you like some last minute equations help?"

Thinking to myself I can't ignore her forever, I give in.

"Yeah, I guess. At this point I need anything I can get."

"Don't think like that," her voice has a tinge of sadness, "You're prepared for anything they throw at you." Her reassurance comforts me, but not enough to eliminate my nerves. After all, only the filthy rich are safe, and that's not us.

The pace is slow as mum and I reluctantly draw closer to the examination centre. I look up at the huge stone pillars that line the facade of Town Hall. Mum's arms tightly embrace me. I begin at what needs to be said: "Mum...if I don't see you again..."

"Just do your best," she interrupts. "Remember: you're prepared." Her voice sounded stronger, but I knew its foundations would crumble as soon as I left.

Fighting tears, I pull away from her and file in among all the other contenders. I descend the Hall stairs and through twisted concrete corridors to the underground centre. I am now a small fish in a sea of anxiety ridden students. Eventually we come to an opening. Full body scanners and armed security guards line check-in tables.

"Your name?" utters a guard.

"Leon Ratus," I reply as my stomach churns.

"Seat 37, row FV," he responds. "Your finger?"

I place my finger on the table in front of me. He jabs a sharp into it and lifts my hand to make a blood mark next to my name.

I make my way to my row. The room is spinning. Walking down to my table distracts me from the motorized voice pouring out of the speakers: "The quiz will commence in seventy-five seconds. Sign into your tablets and have the home screen ready."

My stomach drops.

I wonder if President Corabro ever thinks about how inhumane this is – making all kids whose parents earn under \$200, 000 a year sit a standardized test? Those that fail are blasted into space.

"The quiz will commence in thirty seconds," continues the speaker. My breakfast threatens to re-surface.

For him, it creates a stable intelligent population with minimal human corpse, but to us its torture. "The quiz will commence in ten seconds." A sweat breaks out on my forehead. I wipe my clammy palms down my trousers and reach the home screen.

I am ready.

"3,2,1. You may now begin your test."

I'm prepared. I'm prepared. I'm prepared. I reassure myself as the screen loads. Question one: year 10 algebra, simple enough – I breathe a sigh of relief. I double check my answer before typing the digits: 12.78. A red cross invades my screen. How on earth was that wrong? A loud thunderstorm brings me back from utter shock. It's ok. That's only one of seventy questions and I doubt any other twelve-year-old would know it. One by one the chances slim. Sixty-four questions down, sixty-four questions correctly answered but sixty four questions marked wrong. Maybe an unlucky tablet? Or a glitching server? The thought hits me like a bullet to the heart sending it into shards of anger. Dad. When I was born, he led a protest against the scheme through the streets. Guns blazing the group took the streets, but no rage could compare to Corabros army. Killing his only son is their way of payback.

When the time is up, and the screen is locked, all I can do is sit there. No hope, utterly disgusted but angrier than ever. I am a victim of the Datoda Scheme.

For my third birthday, Mum got me a bike. I was cruising around the streets like nothing could ever break me when I tripped. A cold, hard fall right on my back. No training could help me avoid this and no helmet could protect me. This is how I feel now.

Large figures rip me away from my table kicking and screaming down the concrete tunnels my anger now brewing in my throat. "I know the test is rigged!" I yell, "I know why I failed! I know you murdered my father!"

The two men dressed in military uniform drag me into the back of a van. Anger bubbling, the cold moving cell is barren with anything harmful, so I scream. The van pulls to a halt and the doors slide open. The guards come in with needles.

The turbulence of the rocket ship wakes me up from my anaesthesia inflicted sleep. My surroundings still revolving, I look around and spot the number 8 printed on the door of my chamber. Eight- oxygen is the eighth element. In space there is no oxygen.

No more than eight seconds left...7,

6,

5,

4,

3,

2,

1...

## ***Mortem Torture***

Maheen Rahman

When I wake up, I expect to see my twin sister Miranda, right beside me since it's our 18th birthday, meaning it's our last day of school. As soon as I get up, I head to the hallway to look for her since she wasn't in our bedroom. But my thoughts couldn't help but take me back to the day where it all started, to the day where I started at Mortem Prep.

My memories of that day are burned into the back of my mind. It was Miranda and I's 10th birthday, and we were so excited to finally go to school. We come from Pauper, which is located in the poor side of Tenebris and we were basically peasants. Mortem Prep is located in Dives, which is in the rich side of Tenebris and the government had built that school so that Pauparain kids like me could get an education, at least that's what we were told. Tenebris has always been separated by rich and poor.

I will never forget the last time I saw my mother. My sister and I were just about to head on the train with the other kids ready to get there when she reached us and tried to warn us about the school and how it's nothing like it seems. A saltator grabbed her away once she said that and the last words she said were "I love you, Melanie and Miranda, stay alive." I never saw her again, and I had a twisted feeling in my stomach, but I ignored it.

When we reached the school and saw it for the first time, everybody looked like as if they had just seen a unicorn or something. The school looked truly magical with its gold and emerald design, and it was an amazing sight for us poor children. However, our excitement was short lived when we got inside. Inside was dark, cold and damp. That's when the dictator of Tenebris, Mr Virn explained everything. Out of his filthy mouth we were told that Mortem Prep is in fact not a school but an institution where children from Pauper ages 10-18 get experiments done on them in order to help his dictatorship come up with new vaccines for everyone in Dives. Millions of children die every year, and only 5% of students survived each year. Then they were offered a house and a job afterwards as a way of saying thanks and to keep their mouths shut. I finally understood why my mother tried to warn Miranda and I.

We could almost feel the souls of previous students. Everybody looked like all the joy in them was replaced with fear instead. When Miranda and I headed into our room, a video started playing, and it was no ordinary video, it was a video of our mother being killed. We were heartbroken after seeing that video and promised we would support each other no matter what.

My thoughts are interrupted when I see Miranda in the experiment room ready to get this over with so I join her. The experimenters come in and tell us about the experiment. There are two tubes with different types of medicine, and we each take one. However, one of them is poisonous.

When they said that, I started to think about all the friends I made and how they left me one by one, without even saying goodbye. I looked at all the scars I had gotten and decided to speak up. I take a deep breath, and with all the confidence in me, I raise my voice and say "Excuse me, but I will not allow these experiments to be done on us anymore. I'm not going to sit back and let you destroy millions of innocent children's lives, I've had it!" I take a look at the tubes and take one of them and throw it to the ground and see it smash into small pieces.

Everyone in the room just looks at me as if I'm a psycho for a second until the experimenters call a group of saltators to grab my sister out of the room and then me afterwards. I'm taken to a

depressing room, where my sister is on the other side, and the saltators say, "This is what happens when you disobey us."

The saltators hold me back tightly as they start attacking Miranda, flogging her and hitting her head repetitively with a bat. I see blood, and I start to feel more powerless. As I'm trying to break free to help her, I see that a saltator has a gun right to her forehead and once he pulls the trigger, I feel all the hope in me leave my body.

My sister falls to the ground head first, and she's gone. She's really gone, and I couldn't save her. I feel like a heavy cloud ready to let the rain fall down as the tears were ready to fall down my face. I can't believe my twin, my other half was just taken away from me. Miranda would want me to be strong and move on with my life. I am going to continue on with my life with my sister in my heart, and when I get the chance, I will bring justice for her.

## **Fear**

Melika Yavarinia

I wake up to the noise of my alarm and my mum screaming: "Ava! Get up! Or you'll be late for school!" Instead, I head further underneath my covers.

Eventually, I get up, get dressed, hop onto my bike and ride to school. As I approach the school gates, I see everyone has stopped, almost as if they have been waiting for me. Everyone is staring at me. Did I do something wrong?

I hop off my bike, and stare back, "What?"

Two soldiers step out of the crowd of kids and approach me, "Come with us now." They grab my arm and squeeze. They start dragging me to the car I said "let go of me!" I throw myself back as they lose their grip and I start running, not looking back until I got home. There was something wrong with them. They were not acting normal I started banging on the door saying "mum hurry open the door" there was no answer but I then remembered that there were a spare keys under a plant I grab them.

I open the door, I start shaking there was no one home. I then check my neighbour's house, there was nobody there. I then look up in the sky there were big black ships so I quickly hide. Kids, adults taken away this was not the way I wanted to start my day off I hear people screaming, then gunshots. I start to shake in fear "what if my mum and dad were dead or in one of those ships" I then feel someone behind me I freeze my heart is racing, I slowly turned around.

It is my best friend Sophia I see her crying, I then hugged her and said, "What's happening" she then takes a deep breath and calms down Sophia told me that they're trying to take kids and adults away and train them to battle to the death so the whole population of this earth is gone. And the mortals win the battle she then tells me "they have been here for a few years and took control over these people for many years until they could do the plan. "What do they look like?" they're wearing army clothes and they speak like a mechanical person.

"Is that why I heard gunshots has it already started?" she stays silent for a minute and says "yes" she tells me that "my parents are already dead some teens shot them dead" I then say to her we have to get on those ships if we want to save everyone Sophia looks at me for a second and thinks I'm crazy but then she realizes that it was the only way to live. Then she gave her answer it was yes.

We quickly ran to her house her dad worked in the army so we grabbed the two spare uniforms he had under his bed, we put the uniform on and then put on our helmets and went to her garage. There was a motorbike so we hopped on. Sophia is driving because she has driven it before her dad showed her how but I didn't know how to and we were still underage but we had to. When we found where the ships were we hopped on.

Thousands of people in different rooms fighting one another, seeing people dying. Blood everywhere on the walls something I could never forget tears were starting to fall down my face. Seeing my parents on the ground near all the dead bodies, but I knew I had to move on even if it was hard we then find a storage room and go in there to figure out our plan, we need to take down whoever is controlling this, but first we need to get in the tech room and see where that mortal is so we went out and found some people that work in that department so we followed them.

When we got there you had to swipe a card to get in and we didn't have one so we waited till someone came around the connor. We grabbed someone I put my hand on his mouth and Sophia knocked him out it was the first time we both did that. We quickly ran to the big metal door and slid the card we were in! We see someone talking to who is in charge of the room. It was very dark and he looked very strange. We then saw a sign on the door where that mortal was we grabbed two guns that were on the wall and ran everywhere until We found it.

Few minutes later we found it and barged in I stood there in shock it was surprising thing I have ever seen, the mortal locked up with a machine on its head he was not moving or talking he was just still and brainwashed everyone we start shooting at him. All of a sudden there is a big white flash I hear ringing in my ears and heard nothing else everything stopped I opened my eyes and I'm back at home. My parents I ran to them and a hug they start laughing and I look at them it was like nothing ever happened.

## Lucky

Lea Colak

I sit in my oversized jacket, mist blowing from my mouth. It is a winter night in my city. I am sitting in the local park behind a clump of miserable looking bushes, at one in the morning. I'm here with my dog, Lucky. We've just finished his daily exercise, or nightly in my case. My sweet dog hasn't been outside in the daylight since the day I bought him from one of the many black markets selling animals for potential pets. Honestly, I feel sorry for the poor pets, half-starved and dehydrated in boxes. Suddenly, I hear a rustle in the bushes and stiffen, ready to shield my dog at any cost. But I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Max stepping out of the bushes.

"Hi, sorry I took a while. Angie had to charge," he explains. Angie is Max's government approved robotic dog. He named it after his real dog, Agnes, that was killed by officials years ago. Angie acts sort of like a dog, makes bark-like noises and has artificial fur, but I know it's a robot and can't help but feel disgusted by the very sight of it. Lucky takes a careful sniff of Angie and hides behind me. He's met Angie before, but he's very distrustful of her. They never play and run around like normal dogs.

"Hi, Max," I smile.

"How's it going?" he asks, referring to Lucky.

"Alright, so far," I whisper.

We talk quietly because you never really know when you are going to encounter a police officer. They are all over the city, keeping vigilant watch.

"Here, take this." Max hands me a battered bag covered in tape containing Agnes's old dog food. Every once in a while, he sneaks me some that he finds in his house. He covers it with tape because there is no doubt the officials would go after him if they saw a bag with 'dog food' written on it.

"Thanks. That will last for about three weeks."

"No prob—" Max is cut off by the sound of rustling in the trees. "We need to leave. The birds are watching. See you soon and good luck!" He and Angie make a quick exit. He is adamant that birds are government-controlled spies. I think he's just paranoid, but I still listen to him, just in case.

I get up and carry Lucky home. I live in a very cramped apartment with only one window that overlooks the sooty, polluted streets and buildings below. I leave Lucky inside my kitchen cabinet where I've made him a little hideout. He's always well behaved so he doesn't fuss or bark. I think he can sense that we will be in a lot of trouble if he does misbehave. I lay in bed and instantly feel my eyes closing, so I let myself drift off to sleep.

I am suddenly awoken by an odd sound. It sounds like a rough, sharp yell – definitely not human. I jump up and bolt into the kitchen, making a bee-line for Lucky's cabinet. Lucky is standing on the kitchen counter barking! I rush to silence him, but instead he begins to bark louder!

"STOP!"

And then I see it! Outside, on the windowsill, sits a plump, grey pigeon. Then I realise, it's no ordinary bird! It was very clear that this was a robotic bird.

There is no time to think. "NO!" I shriek, but this time it's at the bird. I shut the blinds in a hurry, grab Lucky off the counter and frantically search the apartment for a place to hide. In the distance, I hear sirens. They're coming for us.

I fling the wardrobe in my bedroom open and squeeze myself and Lucky inside. I hold my breath as I hear the front door being forced open. My heart is thumping so loud I'm sure they'll hear it. Lucky is wiggling like crazy and I try to keep him still. I hear heavy footsteps moving through my house. I feel a sharp pain in my hand as Lucky bite down in fear. He bit me! I drop him and he lets out a defensive bark against the unseen strangers. Dread washes over me. Within seconds, the officers are standing over us.

Lucky leaps out of the wardrobe and begins barking viciously, trying to protect me. But, the police officers have no mercy and point their guns at Lucky. I scream and throw myself in front of Lucky just as they pull the trigger. The blast rings through my mind and shatters my ears. After a second, I realise I had been shot. Lucky takes his chance and runs at full speed out the door, whimpering. I'm glad he got away, even though I'm aware he probably won't survive long in the outside world. My mind is in shambled thoughts. I really hope Lucky survives. He deserves it. On the other hand, this just shows how controlling and sick the government really is. There really is no hope for this world anymore.