

YEAR 7-8 CATEGORY

Year 7-8 Winner: Charlie Pinard [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *Imagine*

May threw back her head, laughing.

Huge pines stretched above her, she jumped from log to moss-covered log, skirt bunched in her hands.

She leapt for a large boulder, covered in moss. Her stockinged feet missed by inches, and her stomach dropped.

She opened her mouth to scream, but Ed caught her, twirling her around.

Suddenly, the two children froze.

Someone was crunching through the forest towards them. Putting May down, Ed began brushing twigs from her hair and straightening her dress. May lunged for her shoes, checking her face for dirt.

A woman appeared, her face set. She had greying hair, and a corset so tight it was no wonder she was irritable.

"May-belle Hammond!" She exclaimed.

May straightened her shoulders, fixing the woman with the same fierce look. "Hello, mother."

"What happened to your dress? And look at your hair!"

"Sorry mother, Ed was just..." "May turned to look at Ed, but he was gone.

"Imaginary friends again? Come on."

"No!" Cried May, stamping her foot, "I want to play!"

Grasping her wrist, Mrs Hammond dragged her daughter back through the forest.

May stopped screaming and sighed as her mother dragged her up the steps. She *hadn't* been playing imaginary, Ed had really been there that time.

Hadn't he?

"I've organised for May to play with Enid Becker." Mrs Hammond announced at dinner.

"Is that so?" Mr Hammond said lightly.

"She's a lovely girl Max, just a little older than May and her mother is in book club with me!"

May got up from the table and trudged out of the room. Thumping down onto her bed, May, closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, Ed was standing there, smiling.

"Hi." He said, sitting down next to her.

"Hey," whispered May, "remember to be quiet, Mother's downstairs."

Ed nodded solemnly, pressing a finger to his lips. "What's up?" He murmured.

"Mother's making me play with Enid Becker." Sighed May, "she wants me to make new friends."

"You already have me!" Laughed Ed, lying back on the mattress, "why do you need new friends?"

"No one else can see you." May said quietly, "Mother thinks I'm imagining."

"You're not though," chuckled Ed, "I'm right here!" As if to prove it, he poked at his face, and stretched it into an hilarious, frog-like expression.

"So..." Said Enid Becker.

"So" May said, smiling nervously. They were in Enid's bedroom.

"Do you know Jane and Clancy Ivory?" Asked Enid, turning to May.

"Um...I don't think so. Sorry." Said May, looking down at her hands. She had never played with other children, only Ed.

"Oh, well. Who *are* your friends?"

May noticed Enid only looked mildly interested, her mind was obviously elsewhere.

"Er..."

"Your mother told my mother who told *me* that *you* have an imaginary friend."

At these words, Ed appeared at Enid's shoulder, grinning from ear to ear. May looked at him sharply, giving him a warning look. Ed held up his hands, as if to say: "Okay, okay!" and backed into the corner.

"May?" Enid's voice, slightly irritated.

"Oh, um," said May, "yeah, but only when I was little."

She could see the hurt in Ed's face, as though he'd been slapped. She ignored him.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Giggled Enid, a smile breaking across her face, "I thought you were crazy!"

May laughed along, each chuckle feeling like a stab in her chest. As the two left the room for tea, May, glanced behind her. Ed was gone.

"Enid *is* a lovely girl, *isn't* she?" Asked Mrs Hammond as she and her daughter walked the short distance home. She was in a particularly good mood, having caught up with all the local gossip from Mrs Becker.

"I s'pose." May replied flatly, trudging behind her mother. She hadn't stopped thinking about Ed all day, and the hurt on his face. "Could I play in the forest before supper?" She asked hopefully, looking up.

"All right then," she said, much to May's surprise, "you've earned it."

May tore through the trees, branches and leaves catching on her dress.

Taking a deep breath, May, sat on a log, closing her eyes. She pictured Ed standing in front of her, smiling. His long eyelashes catching the evening sun, messy brown hair tangled around his face...

A twig crunched and May's eyes snapped open. The clearing was empty.

"Ed?" she whispered, her eyes searching the trees. The forest was silent around her.

"Ed!" She screamed.

"At least eat your peas, May." Mr Hammond said timidly, studying his daughter. Twigs and leaves were caught in her curls, and her face was carefully blank.

"Not hungry."

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" Asked Mrs Hammond.

May looked up in surprise. Her mother wasn't really one for pet names, and 'sweetheart' sounded odd. "Fine." She sighed.

There was a long silence while everyone's knives and forks clinked on their plates, and Mr Hammond took a long drink from his wineglass.

May stood up.

"Where are you off to?" Mrs Hammond said sharply.

"Bed."

Slamming the door, May, collapsed onto her bed in tears.

Eventually she fell asleep, a single last tear rolling down her cheek, her arms wrapped around herself in agony.

She woke in darkness. Sitting up, she studied him in the moonlight.

"Why?" Said Ed quietly.

"I'm sorry." May whispered, searching his face. He avoided her eyes. "Really." She said, her eyes filling with tears, "you've always been here for me, but it hurts no one can see you."

"You could have said something else."

"I know. I missed you."

Ed looked up his face pained. "Really?"

"Yeah. The forest isn't the same without you." May tentatively put her hand on his arm.

"I know." Ed said, a sly smile playing at his lips.

May laughed, her whole body relaxed in relief. "Want to go play?"

In the forest, everything dripped, the leaves delicately poised in the moonlight. Their footsteps and laughter echoed through the trees.

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Clara Rocchiccioli [Wangaratta High School]

Title: *The Secret*

(Aleka)

The day started off normally. I woke up and called out to Room Service. "Good morning, Aleka," Room Service said in its cool, pleasant voice. "What can I do for you today?"

"Pass the e-reader, Room Service", I commanded. A drawer slid open next to me with my new e-reader sitting in it. A TechBook 74. The best of the best. The one everyone was talking about. I'd gone to the e-library yesterday and swiped ten books onto it. I tapped on the first book. The Cursed Book by Mario Kart. It was about someone who finds an old book- an actual paper book- but a virus on its cover ends up infecting everyone.

I was not to read this e-book today. A message in red flashed onto the e-reader's screen.

ERROR-574\TYPEA7\FILE INCOMPATIBLE\ERROR

I'd checked! The e-book said it was compatible with newer e-readers! Ah well, I had nine other e-books to read.

But the same message appeared every time.

It's got a virus, I thought. Brand new, state-of-the-art and all! I ran down the escalator to the kitchen.

"Mum, I need to take my e-reader back to the shop," I said. "They've sold us a bugged one, can you believe it?"

"Alright," Mum sighed. "You can take the single person pod."

When I arrived at the tech store, I saw there was a long queue outside and a sign stuck in the window.

Product recall: TechBook74 Error. We apologise for any inconvenience.

Great. I was going to be waiting a while.

I turned and wandered down an old laneway. The walls were made of brick instead of fiberglass and plastered with anti-tech stickers and graffiti. It looked like the Gaming Faction (devoted to destroying the germ, fragile paper books) didn't come here often. It was peaceful, in an odd way. I sat down with my back against the wall and folded my hands behind my head. As I did, something brushed against my hand. Curious, I turned and looked at what I'd felt. It was a raised image of a paper book. I prodded it, hard. There was a click and part of the wall slid aside. It was a door! I stepped into the space beyond the door. A corridor.

The door shut behind me with a loud thud, making me jump. My palms were getting sweaty. I was torn. It would only be a quick look...

The corridor ended at another door. I hesitantly opened it and stepped into a massive room. There was a strange, musty smell in the air that made me feel like whispering. The room was filled with shelves and on those shelves were...

Books.

Paper books.

I'd stumbled upon a secret library.

Some crazy impulse made me go forward, walking like in a dream among the shelves. I reached out and trailed my finger down the dusty spine of one of the books, then pulled it from the shelf. The cover, protected by a layer of plastic, was smooth under my fingers. It smelled like magic and secrets. I opened the book, and it was like stepping into a new world. I read and read and read. Sadly, I realized it was getting late. "I'll be back tomorrow," I promised the library and turned and ran, auto lights fading out behind me as I left.

(Thorn)

"Sorry, gotta go, bye!" Aleka yelled as she ran out the door, blonde hair bobbing around her ears. This is how every day had gone for a week, with Aleka leaving early and returning late.

"I don't get what's with this new behaviour, do you, Thorn?" Mum said from behind her news-pad. The screen's glow cast an eerie light on her face. I nodded. "Got to get to work early today," I said absently, grabbing my bag and heading out the door. I heard Mum's murmur of "like sister, like brother," as I stepped outside.

I hopped into my pod and activated voice control. Gliding down the street, I saw Aleka's pod turn the corner. Suspicious, I followed her. Aleka stopped near the tech shop. Waiting a second before parking my pod, I stepped out and followed Aleka down a scruffy laneway. I ducked behind a dilapidated bin and watched her.

Aleka bent down and poked something. The wall slid open like a door, and she slipped inside.

I quickly found what Aleka had pressed; it was a button in the shape of a book. A paper book.

I groaned and held my head in my hands. I knew protocol. If my sister was mixed up in illegal stuff, I was duty-bound as a member of the Gaming Faction to report her. I pressed the button and stepped into a corridor.

At the end of the corridor, I peeked around a door which had been left ajar. My worst fears were confirmed.

Aleka had found a library.

Aleka was reading a book.

I stormed into the library and snatched the book from her hands. "Thorn?" Aleka gasped.

"You have to forget about this place! None of this..." I waved my hand at the library around us, "none of this ever existed. If you come back here again, I will not hesitate to report you to the Gaming Faction." I grabbed my foolish little sister by the wrist and tugged her towards the door. But the weight of the book she'd been reading was still heavy in my hand and seemed to comfort me. It swept away all my doubts. I opened the book and its delicate scent drew me in. I felt the subtle roughness of its pages. I couldn't help but start reading, and the story swept me away...

"Uh... Thorn?" Aleka's voice snapped me out of my trance. I smiled.

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Hannah Nelson [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *Alizeh and the Fortune Teller*

Alizeh sprinted through the bustling streets of Iran. She darted through crowds of chattering citizens, uttering a small apology under her breath as she sped through the centre of their conversations. She dodged around buses packed with obnoxious tourists and holidaymakers. Alizeh wove through the stalls selling exotic items and delicious smelling food until she reached the end of town. She snuck through a shadowy laneway between two ancient sandstone buildings until she reached the clearing.

Alizeh had been coming here since she was tiny. The pleasant scent of incense and lavender filled the clearing. Fortune tellers sat perched on chairs around the square. Alizeh felt right at home with their robes, turbans, and bracelets. Her favourite teller (and friend), Arman, sat in a shady corner of the clearing and wore a long, purple velvet robe with a matching silk turban, and glossy, black, polished shoes. She ran to the short line of people and when it was her turn, greeted him warmly, and placed, two gleaming, golden pennies on the table.

Alizeh sat in the cheap, plastic chair, and waited patiently for Arman to tell her what the future would hold. Then, terrorized screams came from behind her interrupting this pleasant moment. Two men were making their way through the small square and towards her booth! In the commotion, she was pulled away from her friend and into the cluster of people that had gathered. She watched in horror as they stuffed her only friend into a cramped van and drove away up into the mountains.

Alizeh shoved through the crowd and sprinted after the van, but no matter how fast she ran, she couldn't keep up with it. They had kidnapped her best friend. What was she going to do?

At dawn, Alizeh woke, threw some clothes on, packed a backpack with muesli bars and water bottles, and slowly crept down the stairs, avoiding the ones that creaked. When she reached the bottom, she took the key from under the doormat, pried open the front door and stepped out into the night, locking the door behind her.

Alizeh ran through the empty markets, past the bus depot, between two buildings, and into the clearing. Where Arman always sat, she scoured the ground, using only the moonlight. She wished she had brought a torch, although it was too late to return home. But that didn't matter, because after scouring the ground for a while, Alizeh found what she was looking for. A footprint.

She followed them out of the clearing, all the way to where the van was the day before. Here the footprints stopped and turned into tire tracks, which she then followed up to the base of the mountain. There she stopped and took a sip from her water bottle and ate half a muesli bar to prepare her for the long walk ahead.

Alizeh trekked up the mountain, stopping occasionally for a drink or a piece of muesli bar but was careful not to eat or drink too much, as she only had enough to last her a few days. She thought about what Arman was doing now. Did he have food and water? Was he even alive? She cleared that thought from her head. Of course, he was alive. Arman knew what he was doing. He would be fine, she hoped.

Alizeh soon became tired, so she stopped for a while to rest. After a quick break, she continued her journey. Soon enough, she sighted a large building up ahead. It was made from sandstone, but unlike most buildings in her town, it had a substantial roller-door on the side of it, which was beige to blend in with the building itself. It also had a sizable fence

around it, that she expected she would have to climb. She continued up the mountain until she came to this building and walked a couple of laps around it. She was cautious, as she didn't want to be noticed. After sizing the building up a bit, she clambered over the fence and walked over to the window that she thought Arman might be in, as it was the only window that had its curtains closed. The only problem was that this window was on the second floor and was probably locked. She still decided to at least try to climb up there and open the window, just in case they had forgotten to lock it.

Alizeh searched around the window for a possible way to reach the window. She found a rather skinny pipe leading directly up to the roof, past the window. She thought if she could somehow shimmy up there, she might be able to drop off onto the windowsill. She grasped the pipe tightly with her hands just above her head. She slowly wrapped both bare feet around the pipe (she had taken her boots off before this) and started to slowly shimmy herself up the pipe. After a short while, she reached the windowsill. Alizeh anxiously stepped out onto the windowsill and let go of the pipe. She wobbled a bit, but then found her balance. She tried the window and to her delight, it was unlocked. She looked inside and there was Arman, sitting on a chair in the corner, mouth taped shut and wrists tied together. She was so happy, that she ran up to him and hugged him tightly. She helped him undo the rope around his wrists with her pocketknife and removed the tape from his mouth. Then gave him water from her backpack and helped him down the pipe. After that they both walked down the mountain together, enjoying each other's company. They were so happy that they had found each other and had never been happier together. The next day the men were caught trying to steal a precious piece of pottery from one of the locals. They were never seen again.

YEAR 9-10 CATEGORY

Year 9-10 Winner: Jaz Tutt [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *The Day that Killed Tomorrow*

Everyone was scared after August 6th. Scared for their families. Scared for their friends. Scared for themselves. But through my eyes, it was pure and utter confusion. Daddy had been gone for a long time now, and over that time, Mum grew more and more unstable, losing herself in the world crumbling around her. She told me she was fine, and that Daddy would be back soon, but with every day that passed, the truth of it fell further and further away.

The steam of the rice spat into my face as I lifted its lid. Mum seemed especially upset today, so I thought I could help by assisting with lunch. She diced the chicken as she read the papers. 'Hiroshima Bombed. Many casualties are yet to be confirmed.' It was yesterday's paper, but Mum seemed to like it because she read it over and over again.

"Is this ok?" I point to the rice. She nods, not even looking at it.

Before I can say anything, I hear a knock on the door. Mum seemed to notice as well. "Go get it please, Satsuki." I obey and attend to the door. As I open it, a round-faced woman pushed herself inside.

"Hello, Satsuki." Her voice was stiff and had a noticeably rough edge to it. It was Daddy's sister, Aunt Natsuko. I hadn't seen her since my 7th birthday last year. Mum emerges from the kitchen, her face a little flushed.

"Natsuko, what are you doing here?" Natsuko's gaze drifted to Mum,

"I suppose you've already heard about Hiroshima." The mention of it sent the house dead cold. "You know what this could mean for the war. I can't help but think of Osamu-" She was talking about Daddy.

"He's fine. I should be getting a letter home any day now." Mum sounded as if she was trying to convince herself more than us.

Natsuko shook her head. "When was the last time you heard from him?" She took Mum's silence as an answer, so she continued to speak. "Everyone's traumatized from the bomb, the state of the city is appalling. It has everyone wondering what's going to happen next..."

"I know. I've seen the papers." Mum's voice grew distressed and she seemed desperate to change the topic. I think Natsuko got the hint too.

"Well, I'm just grateful we are safe. That bomb could have landed anywhere, we are lucky that it wasn't here, we're lucky it wasn't us." Mum allowed some time before giving an answer.

"Yes... yes we are." And with that, Natsuko excused herself, leaving as if she were never there.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in silence, and I didn't dare try to break it. That night I thought about what Aunty Natsuko had said. About Daddy, about the war, about the bombs. It made no sense to me. I couldn't comprehend the purpose of it all. How could I? I was only eight. Though, my final resting sleepy were the words that comforted me most. "We are safe."

I wake up to see the calendar plastered on the wall. It read August 9th. Nothing seems to have changed since Thursday, but I realised things seemed to go wrong long before that. I wanted to go back. Back to when Mum was happy. Back to when Dad was home. Back to when life seemed normal. Yet, deep down I felt like I knew it never could be.

I open Mum's bedroom door so that it is slightly ajar. I watch her, sleeping alone in a bed meant for two. I didn't want to disturb her, as this was the first time in a while, I had seen her look calm, peaceful almost. I exit the room, deciding to leave her a little note in the kitchen. "Gone to get milk for breakfast. Be back soon. Lots of love, Satsuki." And with that, I kiss the note and walk out onto the street of my home city, Nagasaki.

It was the first time I had been outside since Thursday. I savour the taste of the sweet air as I observe the city, familiarizing myself with its beauty. The birds in the sky, the laughter of a baby, the greetings of friends. For a moment, life almost felt humane. It felt like something more than a war. I listen to the soft rattle of yen weighing down my pocket. It wasn't long before I found myself standing in front of a little corner store. It was slightly less busy than usual, which was pleasant, as I didn't want to leave Mother for too long.

Collecting a bottle of milk, I make my way towards the counter. I lean on my tippy toes to reach the top of the desk, heaving the milk onto it. "Just this please." The wrinkled man nods. "That will be 12 yen." I dig into my pocket and retrieve a handful of coins, exchanging them for the milk.

I carry the bottle outside with me, as I enjoy the last of the summer sun. I gaze up, soaking in the rays of sunlight. It took me a minute to notice the dark speck darting across the bright blue sky. It was a plane. I watched as it glided in wind, before releasing something large that

began speeding down to earth. There was little time to comprehend everything. It was foreign to me, and that's what scared me most. I wanted to run. I wanted to sprint home. I wanted to be held in my Mothers protecting arms. But I didn't. My legs froze, my eyes watching in awe.

In those moments, I watched the world catch fire. I watched life glow a blinding white to pitch black in a matter of seconds. And then, nothing. Silence. I could almost say peacefulness. 8 years of life, fading from existence. I waited for someone's footsteps to run to my aid, I listened out for a voice, any voice at all, to come to help me. But no one came. I'm so sorry Mum. I promised I would be back soon, but I'm so tired, so sore.

I don't want to leave you, but I feel I don't have a choice.

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Amelia Wakefield [Trinity Anglican College]

Title: *The Things We Love*

Every day the footsteps came past, and every day was a deeper plunge into the darkness. *They* didn't care, *they* only cared if you tried to escape. The rest of the time though, they were stuck in the same hellhole as the rest of these sickos, this was a god-forsaken place. Every known criminal was stuck behind these bars, rapists, crime-lords, murderers, arsonists, the worst of the worst. Then there was him, the one who's love landed him there. Ren curled up into a ball in the far corner of his concrete cell and waited, 5... 4... 3... 2... 1. . . and there were the footsteps. Ren curled himself up tighter, as if curling in on himself was the only thing keeping him tethered, keeping him from floating into the dark, lost forever. It wasn't really his fault he was in here anyway. The fault was in his love he thought, and his dealer for him onto that illegal drug, the one that he so loved, the one that made him feel so powerful, the one that almost killed him, and did kill everyone around him. *Just take it man, you know you want to, you know you love it*, those were the last words of his dealer before he had taken it, it ... the thing, the thing that made him crash, the thing that made him burn, the thing that made him rage, and it unleashed that on everyone around him. At least they died quickly, that was the only comfort for his conscious, a small mercy in this bitter trapping. But this was the only thing keeping him tethered, and keeping the drug's bite out of his veins, where it still ran, alluring and all the more deadly for it. He dreaded to think what would happen if he succumbed to its icy bite, if he plunged into the darkness.

If Ren had had a normal life before the prison, he didn't show it, adapting to the icy grey interior faster than anyone else ever had, falling into a stagnant silence that everyone else had yielded to when they were brought in, of course some of them were already like that but there was a certain defiance in not saying anything there, a certain line in the sand that if breached would send everyone into chaos. The guards in their olive-green military uniform were silent as well, as if to enforce that orderly silence, however strained, tense, brittle or dangerous it might be for they knew that if they wanted to then the inmates could overpower them if they so wanted to. There was also a certain solace in being in alongside each other each of them perhaps hiding from the things that each had done when the world still bothered to remember them. Perhaps though if one of them spoke up it might not be as terrible, to reveal themselves, and to let themselves care.

Months passed, and the oppressing silence grew, each day it wound around him tighter, a nose around his neck, waiting for him to condemn himself with it, and he could bare it no longer. He opened his mouth and with a trembling tongue spoke, 'I wonder what they put in this concrete, silent stone perhaps?' Even tucked away in the corner of his cell he could practically feel the glares, the eyebrow raises, and the grumbles coming from everyone else, but he persisted, 'hmm, does that exist do you reckon, silent stone, or was there something put into your food to make you so silent, did one of you put poison in? I wouldn't put it past you.' That was the one that broke the silence, and a flurry of murmurs went around, 'who said that', 'they dare criticize me!', 'can't they just let us be', 'stop talking I'm trying to sleep', and there was a louder one, coming from a cell near Ren 'you moron, look what you've started. The sludge will never let us up now!' Ren supposed that 'the sludge' was a pretty fitting nickname for the olive-green clothed officers that patrolled the tiers of icy grey concrete. But someone snorted, 'the sludge?! They kinda do come from a swamp though, and they aren't very pleasant', 'pleasant!' The first voice echoed back, 'you ain't very pleasant yourself!' Ren had to but in before anything else happened 'then what are we going to do about it! I say we get outta here personally, I don't really have any plans to wave my life away in here but by all means I'll amend them to suit my new rotations but if you want to get outta her I'm all in. The prison went eerily silent after the last remark and he could practically hear the cogs turning in the inmate's minds, thinking, could such a thing be possible? No one spoke for a while after that, contemplating the possibility, no one had ever escaped before, but that didn't mean escape was impossible especially for this lot. Then ren spoke, 'so do you think we could do it guys I mean there isn't many guards, and the guards aren't a particularly bright lot. 'There was another flurry of hushed murmurs, going around like a flock of starlings, brief, fleeting, never staying still. There were several discussions on how they might accomplish such a thing and there were several gruesome ones involving severed limbs, explosives and decoy trails, acids and other nasty things. No wonder these people had ended up here. They were truly horrible and if they were freed then they would be able to go back and do the things that they love, however horrifying that may be.

Within a week a plan was made and then it was time to put the plan into action, it seemed very simple really, when the guards let them out to the cafeteria, the brute force murderers would take care of them, they would then steal their weapons, and deal with the other guards and the security cameras had to be taken out first though because then the alarms would go off, the guards would come in and the inmates element of surprise would be ruined. Then they would set off the fire alarms and the sprinklers with the help of the arsonists that would cause all the doors to open, and they would all go free, supposedly anyway. That was how it needed to go, any upsets would result in failure, possible death (not that there wasn't going to be any deaths in the plan now though), and a dive into the black because ren knew that if he didn't escape now then he would sink into that black hole, and he might never come out. The thing he loved couldn't save him from that. The countdown came and the inmates between rounds of the guards straightened out the details. Then it was time, it was like a Christmas Eve countdown, suspense held the airtight and then the evening meal came, these things were better done under nights sweet veil, and then they came, the guards opening the doors of the cells one by one, freedom was tantalizingly close. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1. . . the heavy iron door to rent swung open, light spilling into his cell, and 5... 4... 3... 2... 1. . . 'NOW' ren shouted, the guard whirled to face him, but it was to late for him, the plan had begun, and the great escape was on!

The block was in chaos as a pandemonium went through the jail, killing then looting the guards, quickly, quietly, efficiently and not an alarm was sounded, the mobs of murderers swept through the halls, dousing the place in a thick sticky red it looked in some places like the walls themselves were bleeding as Ren prowled through them, taking a certain pleasure in surveying all the death that reigned around him, and then it rose up. The thing that he loved, the thing that he feared, the thing that made him murder everyone around him in rage. And he fell to his knees. The drug had woken up and he spiraled into its blood-stained depths, Ren howled, bowed over with the drug ripping apart his mind, and in the depths the drug clung onto him, leaving him defenseless, just as he had plotted to get out of the prison the drug had evidently waited for him to be alone and vulnerable so it could latch on. He thrashed against its raging terrible grip, but all effort was futile, it dragged him down further, swallowing him whole and his mind succumbed. Footsteps came past him, not caring that he was practically unconscious. Then the drug melded with him, and he couldn't tell where the drug started and he ended he was stronger now, stronger than he had ever been. Ren rose from the bloodied floor surveyed the damage and smiled, a wicked, warped smile and he left.

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Abbey Orzeszko [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *The Figures*

The hot sun beams down on me as I lay on the rocky ground. My two older brothers are laying close by, we are pretty new to this whole living on our own thing, no mum watching out for us like when we were cubs.

Since it's the three of us we do pretty well. We have a waterhole close by, and we're not bad at hunting.

As the daylight fades, I walk over to the waterhole, past my sleeping brothers.

I keep walking, dodging trees and avoiding thorn bushes until I reach the place where the water meets the dirt at the very edge of the Waterhole.

I turn around and start walking back, when suddenly a loud noise rings through the air, it echoes in my ears, making me flinch. I lower my body keeping low.

Again, another loud noise pierced air.

I find a gap and see 3 tall dark figures dragging my brothers away. I badly want to run after them, to kill them. I knew they were dead and there was nothing I could do. I knew that if I went out there I would die too, there would be no point. Feeling helpless and weak, I stayed quiet.

The figures

I pull myself together and stop myself from spiralling as there's nothing I can do to change what has happened. I take a deep breath and look around. I have to be more alert.

From now on I'll have to sleep with one eye open and try to stay unnoticed. I search for a sheltered spot where I can lay at night. I think of my mother... I stop myself. I can't think about this right now. I'll think about it in the morning. I'll try to find Mum tomorrow.

Finally, I stumble across a sheltered spot between some bushes. There's a gap big enough for me to lie down. I push through the branches and lay down on the cold ground. I curl up in a tight ball like a cub.

I try my best to look confident and strong, I push my chest forward and try to hold my head high, as I start the journey to try and find Mother.

My mind wonders as I walk, and it comes back to the stories she told us: of figures that come in the night. I think of how she spoke of the way they would take, and they take and how they kept on coming back for more.

Mother said that they'll never stop; they'll take and take until there's nothing left and once there's nothing left here, they'll just move on to somewhere else.

It was in the early hours of the morning, I was hungry, my stomach aching. I knew I needed to find food, or I'll be too tired to make the rest of the journey. There's nothing in sight that catches my eye so I keep walking slowly and carefully. I'm keeping low to the ground trying to go unnoticed, walking with such light feet that I barely make a sound. Sliding through bush, barely making a sound as I get closer to a small water hole, I see a lone elk.

This is the perfect opportunity the elk would be enough to last me the rest of my trip.

It would give me the energy I needed, that my stomach craved for.

My eyes narrowed on the Elk and I slowed down my movements, I got lower to the ground and moving through the long grass undetected.

I wasn't far away from the elk in fact I was so close I could almost taste it. I was so focused on the elk that nothing around me mattered, I watched it's every move making sure that it didn't know I was there. Making sure that I was in the right spot for my attack, I ran as fast as I could jumping onto it's back. I dug my claws in as it tried to run.

I had it. My teeth sank into its side and my claws stuck in like daggers. I pulled it to the ground and with no mercy, killed it. I was so pleased with my kill that I ate until I was full.

I realised that this had been my first kill, by myself, with no help from my brother's. I did it by myself. It brought a smile to my face and I felt my whiskers move as I smiled. I know my brothers would have been proud of me.

I finally reach a spot that feels familiar, I stop and sniff around, it smells like family. I look around but there's not much to see except open land, some trees and a couple of rocks here in there. The light fades, and I find a spot between a rock and a tree. I set myself up against the trunk and try to fall asleep.

I hear a noise my tired eyes crack open as I try to see where it's coming from. I didn't think too much of it until it dawned on me that that noise was the same, I heard when the figures came. I shook myself and peered around the tree but what I saw was not what I was expecting.

I came face to face with one of the figures its eyes met mine we were metres apart but this time there was only one of them. He had a knife in his hand. He froze, I wasn't scared but I wasn't calm either. I could tell that he wasn't calm, he was scared of me. How could he be scared of me?

I'm the one who's supposed to be scared of him, they're the ones who took away my brother's, who hunt us, the ones that kill. I can hear his heart beating in his chest, it's racing a mile a minute, he tries to take some steps backwards but ends up falling over now he's freaking out and trying to scramble back up onto his feet.

I walk towards him, head up high, chest forward, I give him a warning growl to get back, he stands up tall and he holds his knife out at me trying to scare me off. Then his friends came out from behind the trees, there's two of them, these two, have guns.

I was scared of those men I knew what the guns were.

The loud things that made the sound that killed my brothers. I didn't know how they worked, and I didn't know how to stop them, so I stood still, frozen in fear.

I wished I could go and hide. I wanted my brothers. I wanted them to come and help me escape from these horrible figures.

Then I saw something creeping in the shadows behind the men, this time it didn't seem to be one of them but more like a tiger lurking in the shadows.

Then, I realised it was my Mother.

One of the men tried to step closer with his gun, from the shadows my mother jumped and dug her claws deep into the man, the other figure with the gun dropped his weapon and tried to help, this was a stupid, I charged at the man with the knife he started to run away leaving his two friends behind but I didn't care, all I wanted was to help my Mum.

I launched myself at the figure that was trying to get my mother off his friend, tackling him to the ground as we wrestled, he tried to push me off, but he wasn't strong enough.

He didn't have claws like I did, he didn't have teeth like I did.

Within a few of seconds they were both dead, lifeless on the ground, just like my brothers.

We had our revenge. I looked up and met my Mother' gaze. I knew it was her by the patterns on her face, her unique markings.

I feel like I'm a cub again. She looked at me concerned, I probably wondering where my brothers were. I looked at the bodies and then looked at her and I gave a quiet growl. My Mothers knees gave in as she fell to the ground, she wept as she knew she had lost her son's.

I curled up next to her with my head next to hers, trying to comfort her.

She opened her eyes and looked at me, a tear falling down her soft face. I lick the tear off and look at her. My mother is not as young as she used to be. This fight has taken a lot out of her. I think I'm going to stay with her for a while and help. I have missed being around my mother. I think it will be good for both of us.

We pick ourselves up and begin our new life as some of the last Siberian tigers left on these open plains.

YEAR 11-12 CATEGORY

Year 11-12 Winner: Arwen Cropley [Beechworth Secondary College]

Title: *Spring*

They've been sitting there, overgrown and unloved for years. Wild green weeds turned yellow and dry under the sun. Now the rain's come, a fresh mass of matted hair is sprouting up. I don't know why they've caught my attention today, but after two and half hours staring at my computer with nothing going in, I'm up for any distraction I can find.

The garden beds sit neglected, right outside my home office window. When I got particularly antsy the winter before last, I moved my bed into the spare room - marginally more secluded - and started using my childhood bedroom as an office space, where every day I bully my brain into clicking and dragging, scanning calibri text until the plastic white desk clock tells me my shift is over.

Apparently, going fully mental behind a screen from 9-5 and nearly chucking my computer out the window multiple times counts as a 'real job'. When I got the email, Dad slapped me on the back and opened some bubbly.

"Congrats kiddo, you're part of the rat race now" he laughed.

Two too many gap years had made the folks a little concerned I wasn't getting on with life in the right way. As if I had any idea how to function as an adult after being coddled my whole life. Now, the stretched orb protruding from my middle is a more pressing issue for all of us. The baby's big for six months. In all the ads and movies and things the women look so elegant. Like pregnancy brought out their utmost femininity and made them light up like brilliant mirrorballs, hanging over the rest of us commoners. They reflect my flaws back at me with a glittery condescension, from tv ads and Instagram posts. Smug and secure with their clean-cut husbands. Meanwhile, I have to cover hormonal spots with concealer every morning and try and convince myself my good for nothing ex isn't worth the amount I'm spending on tissues. Not quite as glossy.

Snapping the laptop shut with an angry bang, I take my worn out self into the garden. Fresh air is soothing in my chest, easing the tangle of tension that coils tighter with every hour caged inside. It somewhat smooths out the lines that have been engraved on my forehead since May, when two blue lines on a white plastic stick snatched all my plans and hopes away in a heartbeat. Last night's downpour means the lawn is slightly squelchy underfoot, and the damp grass on my bare feet is surprisingly refreshing.

A decade ago, I'd've been tumbling and flipping over the lawn, dad manning the barbeque for a Sunday lunch and mum hurrying out the back door with a tray of dips and crackers. Still just about the only thing I can put together in the kitchen by myself. The pair of them have left for the week, using long service leave to stay in a motel by the sea, a couple of hours away.

"It'll be good for you darl."

"Give you a taste of independence, hey kiddo." Dad winked.

As if. Independence roughly translates into leaving me to clunk around a too big house on my own and sweat over recipe books with titles like '*Quick, easy, delicious*' every night.

Resentment gleams, cold and hard. Against easy going dad and paranoid mum who stuffed me in a bag of cotton wool and contained the struggling package with bubble wrap. Funny, since she was happy for me to spend most of my childhood hurling my body around in death defying feats. As long as mum could sit in the viewing area every training session to gossip with the other mums about the recent comp scores and their daughters' advancement to level 4 tricks on beam, she was happy.

Not so much when I said I wanted to quit.

"Where's this coming from?" she'd asked in pleading bewilderment. Seventeen and scraping through year 12 I'd snapped. I wanted to go to parties, eat whatever, to shake off the crippling guilt welded to me if I missed training for a day. Only a few years ago, but it feels like a lifetime.

Awkwardly, joints in need of oiling, I lower myself into a crouch. Spindly roots fight for purchase in the sodden earth. With a tug, the first clump of green comes free.

Growing up, I never simpered over pudgy babies in prams or longed for one of my own like my friends had. Funny that. Now they're prancing around the city; drinking overpriced coffees in hipster cafes and talking about whether to visit Florence or Amsterdam over the summer, while I'm stuck in my parent's house. Alone. When I told Jake about the pregnancy test, he'd turned as pale as I had.

Nothing like a pregnant girlfriend to make someone re-evaluate their life choices and dream bigger dreams. Suddenly he was moving to the city for a uni course he'd scoffed at a couple of years before. Jealousy stabs me when I think about the rest of our classmates finishing their degrees and taking off into the world like jack in the boxes, like fireworks bursting brightly. I catch myself wondering how Jake is, and have to loudly echo Sarah's advice she gave over the phone last week.

"He's a deadweight piece of shit. You're better off without him." I try, and fail, not to come back to the next bit that crushes my insides every time I think about it.

"You know Tim said he's already been out with three different chicks since he moved here, right?"

You dodged a bullet for sure"

Soon, there's a small pile of weeds next to my right leg, and it's growing steadily. It feels good to sweat, to use my body for something meaningful. The life blooming inside me is somehow justified with this labour.

I'm focussing so strongly on the next tug and the next, that when I sit back, slightly disoriented, half the bed's clear. It's like when I was sorting through my bedroom's years of accumulated junk.

Unearthed from where it had fallen from the spot behind my bed was a photo I'd sticky taped to the wall when I was fourteen during my Pinterest inspired photo mural phase. Me, mum, dad standing with awkward sticky sweet smiles, fairy floss in hand, the saturated colours of Disneyland in the background. My chest caved in when I found it. We looked so...if not happy, then at least hopeful. There was a lot still coming.

A slow journey back to standing and I'm hobbling to the rickety wooden shed in the back corner of the yard next to the washing line. Pulling the lopsided door, I find the trowel and gloves I was searching for, but stop by a green plastic storage box tucked idly out of the way.

'Baby clothes'

Mum's rounded capitals in thick black marker on the side. The plastic clasp handles are easy to free. Inside lie neatly folded jumpsuits, hand knitted cardigans and teensy beanies, the soft pastel reminders of a tiny life. Somehow I'm crying. Damned pregnancy induced hormones. From somewhere, I'm hit with the realisation that mum fought through the same jungle of love, terror and joy over me that I feel for the embryo inside me.

"This will be a big change, but we'll always be with you." A tide of pain and worry flooded from behind my brave face. For a few days I was reduced to litres of tea and a box of tissues crumpled around me at all times. Then I turned silent with the weight of the future and the feeling that my life wasn't mine anymore. That shadow still creeps in at the edges of every day, but it's faded somewhat. For all her faults, mum's never left me to suffer alone. She's a sturdy tree I can shelter under when I need.

I grab the gloves and trowel, and some seed packets - marigolds and geraniums - and walk back to the beds, feeling lighter.

When the last of the weeds are out I gently sprinkle in a few seeds every inch or two. The people on Gardening Australia would probably cringe at my methods, but I have a good feeling that little shoots of green will be springing up before long. I pack on some mulch, breathing the thick scent of sugarcane. I want to protect these seeds from every hurt, every pain, every discomfort the world hurls at us. Maybe we can find a little corner of refuge together. For now.

Year 11-12 Runner-Up: Isabella Tozer [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *Careful What You Wish For*

On a typical school morning in my younger years as a boy I was asked the common schoolyard question, "if you could have one wish what would it be?" Thinking I had found a loophole, I replied, "Infinite wishes." I remember the unsatisfied look of the girl who had asked, her insightful eyes looking me up and down, and if only I had responded differently my entire life may not have unfolded as it did.

It was a fortnight after I'd unwittingly answered the girl's question, that remarkable yet unexplainable things began happening. For instance my mum had taken my PlayStation away in an effort to bribe me into hanging the laundry, and as I reached my backyard with a tub full of soaked clothes, out of aggravation I said aloud, "I wish the laundry was hung, dried and folded by itself!" In the blink of an eye, the once soaking laundry was neatly stacked in the tub as dry as a desert plain. Wishes continued coming true for weeks, and I had come to the conclusion that my wishes would be infinite just like I had said to the girl.

From then on, I decided I was going to get whatever I wanted in life, and that was exactly what happened. I got everything I ever desired with minimal effort, I aced every test without opening a textbook, I influenced people to like me whether or not I liked them myself, I always had the trendiest and most high fashion clothes, I hadn't worked a day in my life but I had more money than I could ever spend. Travel eventually seemed dull as my wishes granted me access to be anywhere, I wanted to go. I had done it all before I was 30, just by starting a sentence with "I wish".

One promising year I decided I would attend a family gathering for the first time in a while. My parents and sisters were overjoyed to see me despite my long absence from their lives. All of a sudden, I felt loved again. While I'd wished this for myself from countless others, nothing compared to the sense of belonging I got from my family.

My youngest sister had 3 kids of her own now. Her 11-year-old son reminded me a lot of myself at his age. It was when he approached me to ask "Uncle, if you could have one wish what would it be?" that my eyes opened wider than I thought humanly possible. In that instance I realised I'd spent the first 30 years of my life running around like a spoiled kid, abusing my wishes instead of noticing the good they could have done from the moment I answered that girl's question so many years ago. My nephew helped me realise this.

In response to his question after taking a long sigh, I told him my final wish, I said, "If I could have just one wish, I wish my wishes were yours, and that you will do better with them than I did." He looked at me startled, and slowly turned towards his mum and said, "I wish there was a cure for your cancer mum." My sister looked at her son and wept.

Our attention was then suddenly drawn to the TV. In breaking news, an oncologist was reporting the remarkable life-saving discovery of the cure for cancer, and I knew in that moment that I had done the single best thing I could have ever done with a wish.

Year 11-12 Second Runner-Up: Matilda Robb [Victory Lutheran College]

Title: *Coota 2020*

Her position on the hard, rocky ground where they chose to seek refuge tonight makes it impossible to rest and she awakens from her light sleep. Above her head is a colourful sky, glowing with anger. Like an artist's palette messy and smudged – red, orange, grey and brown. She notices the distinctive jet engine roar of the blaze her father had described to her and as she lifts her head from the uncomfortable rolled beach towel, nausea floods over her. Inhaling smoke she coughs and splutters as it pierces her throat and lungs. The girl reaches for the already ashy tea towel tied around her neck and pulls the makeshift mask up over her nose and mouth in an effort to relieve the burning sensation. Two puffs from her Ventolin prove ineffective in alleviating her wheezing. It is eerily cold and the towels as temporary blankets, damp from the beach trip the previous afternoon, do little to warm her. Gas bottles burst in the nearby town, combusting with tremendous bomb-like explosions.

Old towering gum trees can be heard crashing to the ground, defeated by the heat of the flames, which lick tirelessly at their trunks. Century old trees – soon to become nothing more than charcoal poles amongst the ashy remains of the East Gippsland bush. The amber glow and menacing scarlet flickers race closer to unburnt tinder and leaf litter. Snap. Crackle. Pop. The sound of debris burning up in the fierce heat rings in her ears. Through the haze she sees the blurred blue and red flashing lights to which she has become accustomed over the past 24 hours. They bring the harsh reality to mind and emphasise the urgency of the situation. Like guardian angels the trucks sit on the hill, a comforting barrier between the inferno and her family. The girl glances at the restless silhouettes of her parents – dark forms in the ominous night. Overwhelmed by her senses and an intense feeling of loneliness and fear, tears fill the girl’s eyes impairing her vision. She feels like running but there is nowhere to run to. Though the urge to escape is powerful, the thought of being alone is even more terrifying. The girl had never wished to disappear. But that day she did.

* * * *

The campsite was a chaotic mess as tourists and holiday makers hurriedly closed up their tents, camper trailers and caravans. In a frenzy, kitchen set ups were packed away and surf boards were loaded onto cars. Chairs were abandoned as parents ushered kids into cars, still wrapped up in towels, barefoot and clothed in wet swimmers. Never before had the girl and her family seen their normally sophisticated and clear-headed friends so panicked and rushed. The girl’s father, unlike many, decided they were to stay. “It is safe here. We’ll go closer to the water. I’ve seen it before”, he reassured her mother with quiet authority. As instructed the youngest reluctantly packed away her stuffed toy and the eldest folded the worn canvas tent into its small bag. She held back tears of terror, for she knew that if they began to roll down her cheeks, the waterfall would not stop. There was no time to show emotion let alone time for people to care. Stoic and masked, she stuffed clothes into an already full suitcase – an attempt to distract herself from the looming situation.

Just twenty minutes prior, the camp ground was relaxed and calm. Beach-goers returned from their afternoon tan, sandy thongs in hand. Dogs shook off salty water from their coats and lay in the sweltering summer sun to dry off. In the hot, dry breeze washing was pegged onto guy ropes which extended from temporary awnings. Children played backyard cricket and the adults read books in their hammocks. All was normal. All was calm. That was until word of the meeting spread. Unsuspecting families, teenagers and the elderly strolled up to the local oval, met by fire trucks and crews. Still unaware and oblivious to the potential threat, they quietened for the chief fire coordinator. Murmurs from the gathering were heard by the girl and she noticed visible panic amongst the wide array assembled as he uttered those words without hesitation – “It is coming and there is no time to wait”. Repeated expletives and frightened exclamations from the crowd competed with his voice through the microphone “Leave now or wait it out”. Like school children before the bell they listened intently while eagerly awaiting the meeting’s end. As everyone dispersed with haste, vertigo overtook the girl. Her head sat heavy on her shoulders and dizziness turned into racing thoughts and consuming anxiety.

Possibilities filled her head as she played out scenarios and situations and felt the intimidating presence of the unknown. What about the township which she so fondly remembered since being a small child? Images of the 'Coota' main street in flames made her shaky. The thought of such an idyllic paradise disintegrated into ash and ruins engulfed her ability to remain calm and the vision of an approaching fire front made her heart pound. Her hands were clammy. Her head throbbed. The girl had never prayed. But that day she did.

* * * *

The footsteps of the fire and traces left behind will always be motifs of destruction and havoc, hand in hand with a strengthened sense of community and unity. The girl will never forget the horrors of that New Years Eve. No one will. Forever triggered by the once comforting smell of a bonfire or distant call of an emergency vehicle, the dizziness will return and her heart will pound just like it did that night. Mallacoota, the place she loves, will never be the same. And the girl won't be either.

