



Catch

Northern Beaches Young Writers'
Competition Finalists 2026



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Catch

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Contents

Introduction	5
About the Judges	6
Category 1: Kindergarten - Year 2	8
Winner: Hiroko and Tiny Dragon Pass the Test by Isabella Pereira	9
Runner Up: Catch by Hunter Geersen	10
Highly Commended: We have to catch the Elephants by Mavi Moon Griffiths	11
Highly Commended: Back in Time by Jude Cunningham	12
Category 2: Year 3 - 4	13
Winner: The Shallows by Emmie Yao	14
Runner Up: The Counting Game by Christopher Bai	15
Highly Commended: I caught Sunshine by Hamilton Rapley	17
Highly Commended: The worst game of my life by Chloe Walstab	18
Category 3: Year 5 - 6	19
Winner: Catch by Matilda Newman	20
Runner Up: When Things Don't Land Right by Engei Feng	22
Highly Commended: Life Lesson 1: Surviving a Symphony of Failures by Georgia Angell	24
Highly Commended: The Book that Spoke in Wings by Holly Cannan	26
Category 4: Year 7 - 8	30
Winner: Catch of a Lifetime by Jeana Shen	31
Runner Up: Caught in a Glass by Millie Williams	32
Highly Commended: Warning: This Story Contains a Metaphor by Lilou McKenzie	34
Highly Commended: Reach by Eve Somerville	36
Category 5: Year 9 - 10	39
Winner: Captured by Georgia Bodill	40
Runner Up: The Impact Zone by Joshua Wood	43
Highly Commended: Timeline by Samantha Polu	45
Highly Commended: Catching Feelings by Sarah Gock	47
Category 6: Year 11 - 12	49
Winner: The Witness in the Cell by Alice Surace	50
Runner Up: The Space between Orders by Emily Sing	52
Highly Commended: The Fog by Noah Gonçalves Ferreira	55
Highly Commended: On Command by Sanna Mitchell	57

Introduction

Welcome to the 2026 collection of imaginative short stories, written by talented young authors and inspired by this year's theme, **Catch**. Each story takes readers on a different adventure, introducing memorable characters from household pets to elephants, butterflies, dinosaurs, ghosts and shadows. Readers will discover characters who never give up, travel through time, and stories that reveal that "catch" can have many different meanings.

Although every story is unique, they are connected by powerful themes that encourage readers to think, imagine and reflect. Throughout the collection, the characters show resilience, prove that underdogs can succeed, explore family relationships, uncover lies, face both the beauty and unpredictable power of nature, and learn how memories can shape their lives. Together, these stories celebrate creativity, courage and the remarkable imaginations of young writers.

The Northern Beaches Young Writers' Competition is now in its seventeenth year. *Catch* is the twelfth e-book to be published featuring finalists' stories, with 'Upside Down', 'Treehouse', 'Doorway', 'Tiny Door', 'Wild', 'Splash', 'Spark', 'Rise', 'Promise', 'Crystal' and 'Change' published between 2015 - 2025.

2026 saw hundreds of original creative writing pieces submitted by talented students from Kindergarten to Year 12.

This competition would not be possible without our generous panel of professional writers, who gave up their time to undertake the challenging task of judging this year's competition. Our grateful thanks go to Ashleigh Barton, Kristin Darell, Lucie Stevens, Samera Kamaledine, Sarah Brill & Gary Lonesborough. We also acknowledge the passion and support of the many teachers, school librarians and parents across the Northern Beaches who inspire a love of literacy and creativity in young people.

We would especially like to thank the hundreds of students whose imagination and creativity continue to catch our attention and inspire us.

We hope these stories capture your imagination.

Northern Beaches Council Library Service

About the judges



Ashleigh Barton

Kindergarten - Year 2 category

Ashleigh Barton decided, at precisely age six, that she wanted to be a writer. Several years, a law degree and a couple of full-time jobs later, she has made her six-year-old self immensely proud.

Ashleigh is a bestselling children's author of several CBCA shortlisted and notable picture books including (but not limited to!) *What Do You Call Your Grandpa?*, *What Do You Call Your Grandma?*, *How Do You Say I Love You?* And *Dinosaur in My Pocket*. Her most recent picture book *Hedgehog or Echidna?* was released in June 2025.

Ashleigh loves writing stories for children of all ages and has also released popular junior fiction and middle grade novels including the *Solomon Macaroni* series, *Freddie Spector Fact Collector* series and *How to Sail Somewhere*.



Kristin Darell

Years 3 - 4 category

As a child Kristin Darell was rarely found without a pen and paper in her hand, making up adventures and writing about the world around her. As an adult she has made this passion her life.

After working as a broadcast news and sports journalist for more than twenty years, Kristin turned her attention on writing for children and is the author of popular *Taronga Presents* and *Football Fever* series. Her most recent release *The Break Up* is book 1 in her new series *It's a Twin Thing*, with book 2 coming out later this year!

In addition to writing, running around after her children, dogs, pet snake and three-legged pygmy bearded dragon; Kristin works as the Program Director for The Australian Children's Laureate Foundation and is passionate about helping kids find new ways to share their stories.



Lucie Stevens

Years 5 - 6 category

We are excited to announce that judging our Year 5 to 6 category is children's author, freelance writer and editor Lucie Stevens.

Throughout her career, Lucie has authored and co-authored several non-fiction books for the educational market and co-created outreach programs for UK and European Space Agencies. In June 2025 she released her debut children's novel, *R.I.P. Nanny Tobbins*, which was long-listed for the ARA Historical Novel Prize. Its sequel, *Nanny Tobbins and the Midnight Plan* will be published in May this year!

Lucie has been the talented recipient of many Mentorships and Fellowships and has recently been awarded a Vaucluse House Creative and Cultural Residency, which provides her with a beautiful space to continue her writing.



Samera Kamaledidine

Years 7 - 8 category

Samera Kamaledidine has been a writer since she got her first creative writing certificate in kindergarten. For many years Samera worked as a journalist, writing for magazines about everything from friendship dramas and school bullies to body confidence. Now, she's an award-winning author, who sometimes moonlights as a Librarian.

Samera won the inaugural Matilda Prize in 2021 for *Half My Luck*, a heartwarming coming-of-age story about growing up in Australia when caught between two cultures. Her middle grade novel *The Sideways Orbit of Evie Hart* was shortlisted for CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers in 2024. Her most recent novel, *The Clueless Guide to Solving a Mystery*, is Book 1 in her new *Clueless* series for middle grade readers and was recently released in April 2026!



Sarah Brill

Years 9 - 10 category

Sarah Brill grew up in Perth and began writing plays at the age of 15, mostly because she was annoyed with her drama teacher but also because it meant she got to come to Sydney for National Young Playwrights Workshops.

While initially focused on playwriting, Sarah also wrote for film and radio and then published her first young adult novel, *Glory*, for young adults in 2002. After having children she completed a masters in sustainability and worked in that field, writing when she could. She released her second (adult) novel *Symphony for the Man*, 2020. Her most recent YA Novel *Catch* was released in 2025 and has been longlisted for the 2026 Indie Book Awards (Young Adult Award) and is a CBCA Notable for Book of the Year, Older Readers.



Gary Lonesborough

Years 11 - 12 category

A Yuin man growing up on the Far South Coast of NSW as part of a large and proud Aboriginal family, Gary Lonesborough was always writing as a child and continued his creative journey when he moved to Sydney to study at film school. Gary has experience in youth work, Aboriginal health, child protection, the disability sector (including experience working in the youth justice system) and the film industry.

Gary has been nominated for and won more writing awards than we can list for his YA novels *The Boy from the Mish* (2021), *We Didn't Think it Through* (2023) and *I'm Not Really Here* (2024). His fourth novel *Good Young Men* has just been released in March 2026.

Category 1

Kindergarten - Year 2

Hiroko and Tiny Dragon Pass the Test

By Isabella Pereira

Year 2

Once upon a time there was a cat. Her name was Hiroko. She always wore a red cape.

Hiroko had white fur and pointy ears. She made flutes out of bamboo and liked meeting new people every day.

Hiroko wanted to join a clan because she wanted to do martial arts. But she didn't want to join just any clan, she had to join the Bamboo Village clan because it was her family's clan. The Bamboo Village clan is the second best martial arts clan.

Hiroko really wanted to join but she had to pass a test! A test to catch minnows.

Now, this was not your average minnow-catching game. There were magic minnows that could fly up to a cloud and they were faster than a peregrine falcon.

So Hiroko walked up to the clan leader and asked "can I do the test?" But just then, Hiroko's brother Tioku came and tried to stop her.

"Hiroko, you are too little," said her big brother.

"I am not!" protested Hiroko. "I am not too little" she said.

"Yes you are!" said Tioku.

"I am getting some friends to help me with the test," said Hiroko. She came back half an hour later with a new friend, Tiny Dragon. Together, they came up with a plan to trap the minnows with bait in a net.

"We should lure them into the net with their favourite food, golden dumplings," said Tiny Dragon. So they got a net and a golden dumpling.

When they got to the river, there was a huge crowd gathering for the ceremony. The crowd didn't believe that their plan would work.

Hiroko and Tiny Dragon got escorted to the river.

"The contest is about to begin" announced the clan leader.

As soon as the whistle blew, they put the golden dumpling in the net and waited. They waited for a minute then another. Nothing happened. People started saying "your plan isn't going to work." Suddenly, a minnow shot up into the net. The crowd cheered!

Hiroko and Tiny Dragon became heroes and were welcomed into the clan and were just in time for a martial arts lesson.

Catch

By Hunter Geersen

Year 2

The sun was shining, the air was crisp and the crowd was cheering for The Saints. It was an ordinary Sunday and the Saints were playing the Bulldogs. Coach Gerard was yelling "Get in there boys! Only 12 minutes until the final siren!"

Catch!

To the crowd's amazement, a dog ran in, leapt into the air like a bird taking off, and caught that ball! He bounded off taking one cheeky look at the crowd before speeding away.

The coaches, umpires, crowd and the players couldn't believe their eyes. They rubbed them in amazement and shock! How could a dog even do that sort of stunt? Coach Gerard asked, "Let's find that dog and get our ball back!"

Parents and players started chasing the dog. "Catch him!" they screamed to each other.

But they couldn't catch him!

Even when they started catching up, the dog kept on dodging! He ran across the road at full speed! He slid under a car and jumped over a cyclist! He was exhausted and stopped to take a drink. Then he felt a rumbling sensation in his stomach. He followed the sweet cinnamon scent around the corner.

A teenager called out to his friend, "Catch! Here's your donut!" But... the dog started to run towards the boys. To their surprise, he jumped up and caught the donut!

"Hey! Give me back my donut!" the boys shouted angrily.

"Woof!" The dog gobbled that donut up hungrily, picked up the ball and ran off!

Up ahead was the local skate park. A group of kids were playing and scooting and some older kids were on skateboards. A guy said, "Catch the board Alex!"

Next thing, the skateboard was flying towards Alex. But... before he could grab it, the dog jumped on and rode away down the street, happily woofing. The street turned back towards the oval. The street turned into a pathway. The pathway turned into the oval!

Just as the crowd were packing up coach called out, "Get that dog!" To the crowd's bewilderment, the dog jumped up and let the ball go. It started to spin, faster and faster until... it went through the middle! The goal umpire waved both flags, "It was a goal!"

The siren went off.

All the Saints started cheering for the dog who won them the game right at the last second. "Come here, Catch!" said a boy cheekily on the sideline.

We have to Catch the Elephants

By Mavi Moon Griffiths

Year 2

Brrrr!, goes the excavator loudly.

"Next goes in the glass for the elephants!" calls Jony the excavator man.

The glue on the glass is still drying. But why are the elephants in the enclosure? Thinks Jony. There should not be anything in there yet.

Smash!

The elephants broke the glass with their long curly trunks.

Stomping through the zoo with their large heavy feet.

People were starting to scream and run on roads and out of schools.

The police came in a hurry. They were so worried they tried to help but, it didn't work.

The zoo keepers came to help but they couldn't help either.

People started to get more worried and scared.

The loud screams made the elephants get scared too.

They started to break buildings.

Nobody knew what to do.

The elephants saw some fruit and ate it.

That's when the zoo keeper realised that they could lure the elephants back to the enclosure with some fruit.

Well, before luring them the zoo keepers had to find them before they caused any more trouble.

The zoo keepers heard a loud noise coming from the park. They rushed over to see what was going on. "It's the elephants!" cried one of the zoo keepers.

Now they can lure them with the juicy fruit.

The elephants followed and followed until they came to a stop. They were back at the zoo.

The construction workers put another sheet of glass. While the zoo keepers were finding the elephants the glue set.

They were in the enclosure.

The workers had to fix the buildings that the elephants destroyed.

"Not again" moaned Jony. They now had a lot of work to do. But luckily, they caught the elephants.

Back in Time

By Jude Cunningham

Year 2

Once upon a time there was a dino loving kid called Levi. When Levi was 12, his stepfather told him he was ready to **catch** his time machine. He got in the time machine. There was one chair in it, and cushions and hundreds of buttons. When he got in he was excited and scared. There was a switch that said DO NOT TOUCH and he really wanted to touch it, but his stepfather said "DO NOT TOUCH THAT SWITCH". He went with his cousin called William. His stepfather pressed the buttons. There were windows and there was a lot of blue with hundreds of specks of dinosaurs walking around below them. They had travelled to the cretaceous period! There were Pteranodon flying everywhere, and Velociraptors chasing little mammals. There were trees everywhere and lots of Mega Neura. Levi and William went for a stroll. They found a cave and they decided to go in. It was full of Teinolophos, Eomaia and Zalambdalestes! The mammals chased William and Levi out of the cave to protect their young. When they finally got out of the cave, the ground was rumbling and tumbling and rocks were flying everywhere, with fire on the end of them. A volcano near them was about to erupt! They ran back to the time machine but it wasn't there. Something or someone had stolen it. They quickly ran west, where the deep river was. A Deinosuchus leapt out of the river at them. Luckily, it didn't catch them! They kept on running and found a Edmontosaurus with the time machine in its feet trying to knock out a Giganotosaurus. The Giganotosaurus tried flipping the Edmontosaurus in the deep water where Archelon and other Deinosuchus live. They kept on tossing and turning until the Edmontosaurus called for its family. The family arrived and head butted the giganotosaurus into the water. The Edmontosaurus and time machine were finally safe and just in time, because the volcano had erupted. Lava was spraying everywhere. They went in the time machine, pressed a few buttons and William accidentally hit the DO NOT TOUCH switch. An alarm went off. The machine erupted with... CONFETTI and a big siren singing happy birthday. When they finally got home, the music was still playing, and the stepfather said "who switched that switch? I was saving it for your birthday"! The End.

Category 2

Year 3 - 4

The Shallows

By Emmie Yao

Year 4

The shimmering sunshine rested gently on the still, transparent water. A humming breeze sways through the whispering reeds beneath the timber pier. Above, two tanned feet dangle, just brushing the water's edge. Another ripple just beyond flutters as a fishing line lowers gently into the shallows.

The tussled hair sits askew on Max's head as he leans closer to the edge; his soft, smooth hands brush the surface as he exhales a long sigh. Max thinks back to the mess that he had left behind this morning. The entire kitchen table was ransacked after the incident. Although, he thinks to himself, it almost always looks the same really anyway. The only benefit was that his math task got soaked with juice, so that got him off the hook for that one at least.

The line in Max's hand twitched a little and he was back at the lake. Max held his breath. But nothing happened... then all of a sudden there was a sharp snapping of a twig in the distance, as a bushwalker moved past on the bank. The loud snap again reminded him of this morning, it hadn't been an accident, not exactly. Katie had been annoying all morning. She'd woken him early with her music, she had taken too long in the bathroom and she'd even used the last drop of milk for cereal. Well, that was the final straw. Max grabbed her beloved doll; snap, its hollow neck breaking into two jagged pieces. Max remembered looking down and seeing a single tear well up in his sister's sad little eyes.

A loud splash nearby made Max jump and instantly he was back at the lake. He watched as the last ripples of water faded away and the sweet-smelling trees oscillated as if they were dancing gently from side to side.

All of a sudden Max felt a light tug on his line. His face lit up. This is going to be a great catch. He took a deep breath. Inch by inch he reeled up his line. Pierced on the hook was a small, fragile fish. His stomach dropped and he let out a long sigh. He stepped closer to the fish and inspected it. His face fell. He thought to himself, "Should I really keep him?" Max paused.

He watched it struggle in his hands. His grip loosened. He took it off the hook. He looked at his bucket at his feet. His hand wavered. He looked back out at the water. With a steady breath, he lowered his hand and released the fish back into the water. He saw the fish pause for a split second but then dart off into the depths. Max's face softened into a small, gentle smile. He realized he had been holding his breath and slowly exhaled.

As he stood there, he felt something settle inside him. His thoughts flashed back to his sister at home. A quiet remorse surfaced, steady and undeniable, and he decided to pack up early and head home.

He packed up quickly and slung his bag over his back. For the first time in a while, Max felt at ease about going home. He felt a stillness inside of him as he walked briskly along the track, already rehearsing what he would say.

The Counting Game

By Christopher Bai

Year 3

Arden didn't keep many things.

Houses changed. People left.

Things didn't always stay.

But numbers were different. They never left. They always went on.

One day, Arden's teacher, Mr Rivera, told Arden that it was impossible to count to infinity. However, Arden believed it was not impossible, but very hard. Even so, he was ready to take the challenge.

"1, 2, 3..." He counted while he munched on his lunch.

"21, 22, 23, 24..." On the bus home he was counting.

"100, 101, 102..." He was counting even in his dreams.

On his 10th birthday, a wave tossed his favourite fluffy bear into the sea. He was crying despairingly but the only thing that swam through his head was numbers.

"17087, 17088, 17089, 17090..."

At the graduation ceremony, his head was reeling in shock at the news his best (and only) friend was moving to another country.

"1000570, 1000571, 1000572, 1000573, 1000574..."

He grew up, got an ok job, lived an ordinary life, until one day he accidentally forgot to turn off the gas in the kitchen. Sirens blared in the distance and the neighbours asked if he was ok. Arden didn't reply but just counted.

"130663746, 130663747, 130663748..."

At his parents' funeral, everyone there was grieving. They hugged Arden, put their hands on his shoulder. Now Arden was all by himself, but he still had his numbers.

"414365477988932, 414365477988933, 414365477988934..."

Years passed. Numbers went on. So did Arden.

After 70 years of counting, Arden started losing hope. He was 79 years old, but was only a minute older than he was on googolplex.

He paused.

For the first time, he wasn't sure what came next.

After that, everything fell into patterns. He always woke up at 7.30 am, did grocery shopping on Mondays, and was isolated in a tiny house in the middle of the countryside. The only small joy in his spare time was planting flowers in the garden.

At night time, he always sat on his couch, trying to pick up from googolplex. But the silence was too loud.

One sunny day, he bought a white Westie Highland Terrier and named it Finn. Like many other things in Arden's life, it would not like to stay. Instead, it spent quite a lot of time chasing butterflies in the garden, squashing grass and dirt, chewing flowers and digging a hole under the fence.

Not surprisingly, two months later, Finn ran away.

Arden grabbed a pet carrier and chased it.

Sprinting through the weeds and marshes, Finn's tail whirled like a propeller. Its tongue streamed along the side of its face like a ribbon. On and on they ran into the fields of tall grass and under the willow trees, until Arden had to stop.

"IN! FINN! NAUGHTY!" He shouted over the noise of Finn barking with joy.

Finn didn't come back.

"Well, I guess he wouldn't come back," muttered Arden.

His chest burned, and his legs wouldn't carry him any further. But hold on...

"IN-FINN-NAUGHTY...Infinity!"

His face brightened:

"I counted to infinity!"

That night, Arden went home, tired but peaceful.

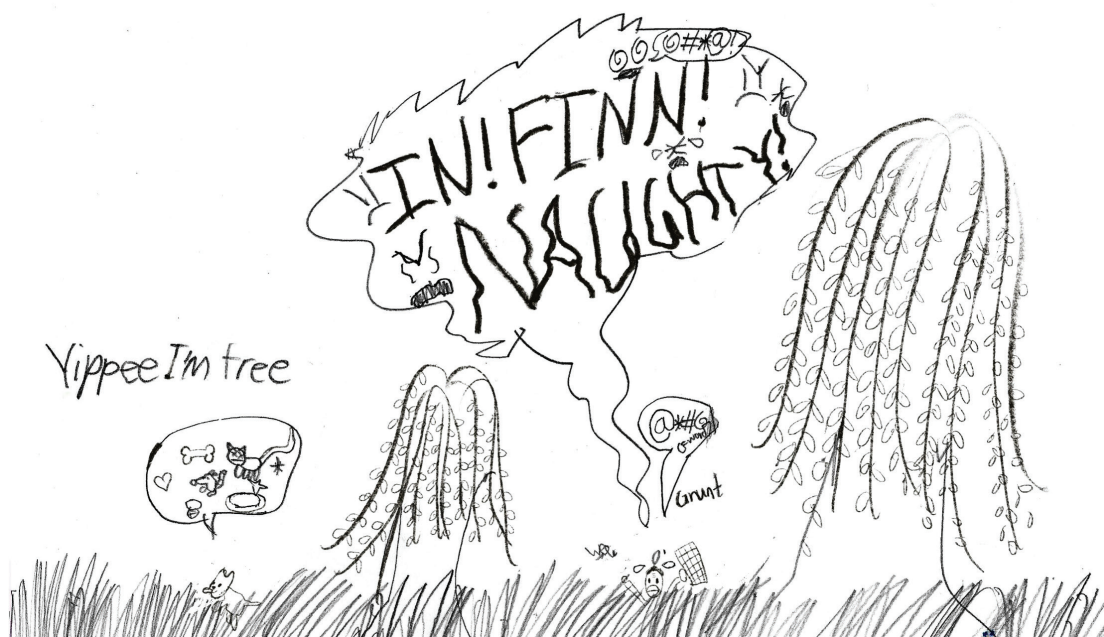
He finally caught infinity - and inner peace.

But wait... What is that furry white shape squeezing through the hole under the fence?

The next second, a round blob landed in his lap. Pink tongue, perky ears, fur full of willow bark and pine needles - FINN!

Finn was licking all over the old man's wrinkled face. Its tail smacked Arden's chest. Wet and muddy paws pressed all over the couch. It then went straight for the pillows and blankets, but Arden didn't mind this time.

Because in that moment, Arden knew something had stayed.



I caught Sunshine

By Hamilton Rapley

Year 3

I caught sunshine in my pocket and I don't know what to do.

So, I gave it to my wife, who gave it to my brother.

He passed it doooooowwwwn town.

Where my sister caught it in her coffee mug.

She tried to drink it, but the sunshine flew away to our cousins who were playing fortnite.

The sunshine blocked their view so they gave it to a company who said

"I don't want this."

They passed the sunshine back.

So my cousins gave it to a rich family in Antarctica, a building in Asia with too much
hair conditioning (oh I mean, air conditioning).

They gave it to a German lady sleeping overnight with her friends.

And then,

the bumshine (oh, I mean sunshine)

woke

them

up.

The Worst Game of my Life

By Chloe Walstab

Year 4

Soft yellow balls of dandelion fluff surround my face as the wind tickles my cheeks. It was my first game and I was already so bored. I couldn't believe it when my parents told me the news. Why did they sign me up for baseball? I begged them not to make me go but they said I had to be active, sadly they said playing video games in the garden didn't count.

This sucks. Whoever invented a game where the goal is to hit and catch a hard ball was not thinking straight. At least I have the soft dandelions to keep me awake. Finally, after what seems forever, half-time is called. The coach pulls us over for a team huddle. "Now boys, we are only behind by one, so get out there and have fun. George, you're our pitcher, Hugo and Thomas first and second base. Everyone else, same positions. Oh and Leo, you're a fielder again and for goodness sake, please concentrate."

We all run out onto the field just as our referee blows the whistle. I start drifting off again when suddenly, someone screeches "LEO, CATCH!" My forehead explodes with pain and I'm starting to see those dandelions again except this time they are blurry and I'm not sure if they're actually there or not. Then, all of a sudden, everything goes black.

"Ow", I wince. I realise I'm not on the field anymore and it slowly dawns on me that there are at least 20 worried faces coming into focus. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I can see my bedside light and there's my Mario poster. Oh no, I'm back in my room and everyone is here looking at me.

"Did I catch it?" I whisper.

THE END!

Category 3

Year 5 - 6

Catch

By Matilda Newman

Year 6

"Rex! Catch!" Lexi says.

I leap up into the air and catch the rubber ball in my mouth, for the 14th time.

"Come here!" she says. I sprint towards her and drop the ball at her feet, sitting patiently, tail wagging, hoping she'll throw it for a 15th time.

"Good boy." She says, I stand up and lean against her waiting for a pat. She rubs my back, I pant happily. Plop! A huge raindrop lands on my forehead.

"Huff!" I say and shake it off but as soon as I do, more raindrops come!

"Let's go back inside, shall we?" Lexi says. She opens the door and lets me in, then follows close behind.

As I walk to my bed, a shiny thing catches my eye, it looks like metal, but I've never seen it here before. I stare into it, is this what I look like? Wow. I look good. I have black fur, that I kind of already knew, brown eyes, and a wet brown nose. I never knew I looked this good!

"Haha, I see you've found my new mirror. You like it?" Lexi says as she walks in. I trudge to my bed happily. I'm going to go to sleep...

Pitter patter. What is that noise? I get up and walk to the back door, its open so I walk outside. It's raining, badly. I walk around the back garden, and the rain just keeps on getting heavier. I can barely see! As I slowly walk back, I see the door. It's closed?!

I look around the garden, seeing if there's somewhere I can get out of this rain, the gate. It's open. I run towards it; I hate getting wet! I get onto the street and look around. Slam! What was that? I turn around and that gate is closed as well! Gates and doors just hate me today! I see an area, I recognise it. It's where Lexi goes and waits for a big car. I sprint and eventually make it underneath. I'm going to wait the rain out, see if it stops in a few hours. I rest my head on my paws and drift off...

I wake up, the rain stopped, that's a relief. I get up and stretch, its nearly nighttime. I'm starting to get hungry.

"Sniff." I smell sausages. Oh wait! I could eat those for my dinner! I follow the scent to a backyard with kids in it, they instantly notice me.

"Doggy!" says one.

"Woof!" says another. I walk in and put my two front legs on the table; it has so much food on it.

"Doggy wanna sausage?" a kid nearby says.

"Yea!" I speak. They all giggle, what did I do that was so funny?

"Doggy go woof!" says one.

That's right, they can't understand me! The kid gives me a sausage and I wolf it down. Then they all start feeding me sausages, until the mum notices.

"AAAH! Get that mutt out of here!" she screams.

"Hey! For your information I'm not a mutt!" I speak. The dad runs over from the barbeque and ushers me out of the backyard.

"Get lost, Mutt." He says, then returns to his place at the barbeque. I walk down the street trying to find somewhere suitable to sleep. I look onto the road, and my heart skips a beat. Dog catchers. I'm frozen in the spot with fear, then they spot me. The car stops, and the catchers hop out of the van. They say something to each other but all I can make out is "Lexi." Have they started capturing humans as well? I run into an alleyway and jump over a tall fence; I guess all those days of playing catch have been useful after all. I slip into a cardboard box and try to go to sleep. I eventually start to feel sleepy...

I wake up and try to find breakfast, no luck, I should probably try to find home. I sit down and watch

the world go by. Wait, do I recognize that van? Two familiar people hop out. Oh no! The dog catchers! I sprint down an alleyway, I can't let them catch me! I run into a dead end.

They corner me and say, "Let's get you home." What do they mean?

They throw me into a van. It starts moving and I go flying forwards.

"YELP!" I say in pain. I get tossed around the cage until finally, it stops. The back of the van opens, and they take me out of the cage I look around, it's my house! The door opens and Lexi comes out. She hugs me like never before. I promise I'll never get lost again!

When Things Don't Land Right

By Engei Feng

Year 6

The first time I understood the word catch, it wasn't about a ball.

It was an early morning, the kind where the sky is still deciding what colour it wants to be. Pale blue stretched over the oval, with streaks of orange slipping in like someone had brushed paint across the horizon. I stood there, hands shoved into my hoodie, watching my older brother toss a cricket ball into the air and snag it again like it was nothing.

"Come on," he called. "Your turn."

I hesitated. Catching sounded simple. People said it all the time - just catch it - like it wasn't something you could mess up.

He threw the ball anyway. It came faster than I expected, spinning slightly, cutting through the cold air. I reached out too late. It smacked against my palm and bounced away into the grass.

"Too slow," he said, not unkindly. "Watch the ball."

I nodded, even though I had been watching it. Watching didn't seem to be the problem.

We tried again. And again. Each time, the ball found a different way to escape - slipping through my fingers, hitting my wrist, glancing off my chest. Meanwhile, he caught everything I threw at him, barely moving, like the ball belonged in his hands.

"Relax," he said after a while. "You're thinking too much."

That didn't make sense. Catching, I thought, was about getting everything right. Timing. Movement. Control. But I tried anyway.

The next throw came high. I tracked it, squinting as the sun crept higher. For a moment, everything slowed - the spin of the ball, the sound of birds, even my breathing. I lifted my hands, not too early, not too late.

The ball dropped into my palms.

I stared at my hands, almost expecting it to disappear.

"I did it."

My brother grinned. "Told you."

We kept going. I didn't catch every ball, but I caught enough. And somehow, that felt different. Catching wasn't just about stopping the ball anymore - it was about trusting that, for a moment, things would line up.

Later, I realised catch showed up in more places than just the oval.

In class, when your brain has to catch up to a question before the silence stretches too long. In conversations, when a joke lands and you're a second behind everyone else. Or when someone says something quietly - something important - and you have to catch it before it disappears.

And sometimes, you don't.

A few weeks later, we were back at the oval. The grass was longer now, the air warmer, like summer was settling in. We'd been throwing for a while when he suddenly sent one faster than usual.

It came straight at me - low and hard.

I froze.

The ball struck my fingers, sharp and stinging, and dropped.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, but my hand throbbed, and something else did too. I'd thought I'd figured it out.

"Why'd you throw it like that?"

He shrugged. "Because that's how it'll come sometimes."

That stayed with me.

Because not everything arrives the way you expect. Some things are easy, floating gently into your hands. Others come fast, uneven, and a little painful.

We kept playing. I missed a few more. Caught a few more. This time, I didn't get as frustrated. Missing didn't feel like failure anymore - just part of it.

As the sun dipped lower, turning everything gold, he threw one last ball. It arced high, almost disappearing into the sky.

I stepped forward, eyes locked on it.

For a second, nothing else existed - not the oval, not the noise, not even him. Just the ball, falling.

My hands lifted.

The ball dropped - and this time, I held on.

I didn't say anything. I didn't need to.

Because catching isn't about never missing.

It's about staying ready - even after you do.

Life Lesson 1: Surviving a Symphony of Failures

By Georgia Angell

Year 6

16th June 2019

Dear Diary,

I am writing this by the glow of my shimmering LED lights in hope that my dysfunctional family don't see them. My family doesn't just live in this house; they inhabit it like a herd of confused, loud elephants.

The day started with the usual argument – some might call negotiation – over the bathroom. Jimmy, who is sixteen and apparently thinks he's an amazing hair stylist, spent forty minutes perfecting a "perfect 'do" that just makes him look like he fell in the biggest puddle in the world.

I tried to catch him as he attempted to slip out the back door without doing his one job: emptying the dishwasher. He gave me that blank teenage sneer suggesting I should let him go. Of course, I gave up.

I was done being the middle child. The forgotten child. The child that gets blamed for all the pungent smells at the dinner table. I think you know what I mean, Diary.

By noon, I was dealing with Mum's screaming. It was like we were being attacked!

We probably were to be honest! The doors have no locks; the windows have no blinds; we could easily be robbed!

The kitchen smells like burnt crayons and wet dog. Kimmy, my younger sister, is doing a new Facebook post on the shortbread cookies she just made. Soft and hard at the same time!

Dad, meanwhile, has decided that our lawn is his new personality. He spent the entire afternoon standing in the driveway, hands on his hips, glaring at a single patch of weeds like it owed him money. He doesn't even mow it! He just intimidates it!

The "main event" happened around dinner. We don't have dinner like normal people. We have a competitive sport where the goal is to see who can complain the loudest while eating something Mum found in the back of the freezer. Today's mystery meal consists of tomatoes, rice, bacon and frozen chocolate cake. She called it the "Freezer Surprise".

The surprise was that it was cold in the middle and somehow contained chocolate chips. Don't ask.

In the middle of this disastrous dinner, my younger sister, Kimmy, decided to announce that she's "quitting" the family to become a full-time influencer/amazing baker (like that's ever going to happen!)

She sat there with her phone on a tripod, trying to catch the perfect lighting while Dad was mid-rave about the neighbour's leaf blower. It was a symphony of failure.

I looked around the table: Mum's dusty hair framing her dirty face, Dad vibrating with rage, Jimmy staring at his reflection in a spoon, and Kimmy talking to a bunch of strangers on the internet about the importance of having creamed butter in shortbread instead of melted, and I realized that we are a disaster. Honestly, who does that?

I tried to escape to my room at 8:00 PM, but I got cornered by Mum, who wanted me to help her create more 'freezer meal' names. She was leaning toward "Freezer Dreams" or "Frozen". I told her "Disgusting" had a nice ring to it, and she actually took a note.

Now, the house is finally reaching a low hum. I can hear Dad downstairs probably watching a documentary about bridges, and Jimmy is probably raiding the fridge for the third time tonight. I feel like I've been dragged along for the ride, like when Jimmy pulled me on that piece of cardboard after I broke my leg. It was probably the nicest thing he has ever done in his whole life.

We're just stuck together in this weird, noisy knot, tripping over each other's voices and bad ideas.

I'm exhausted, Diary. My brain feels like it's been through a blender, and I still have to wake up tomorrow and do it all over again. There won't be a heartwarming montage. There will just be more "Freezer Surprise" and annoying small talk.

Wish me luck Diary!

The Book That Spoke in Wings

By Holly Cannan

Year 6

"This time I will catch it", Mia thought.

She burst through the back door barefoot in the grass, chasing a majestic mauve butterfly. It pirouetted through the air like a ballerina on stage.

Mia thought butterflies were magical creatures, and she had always wished she could catch one. But the moment she tried to reach out her hands, the butterfly would dart away.

Mia's Mum said, "Maybe magic isn't meant to be caught."

The next day, Mia decided to go to the library. She wanted to find a book that would teach her the best way to catch butterflies. The library was quiet and smelled like old paper and butterscotch biscuits. Mia liked how peaceful it was.

She walked between shelves as tall as skyscrapers, and on the very top shelf Mia found a colourful book called Butterflies of the World. The title looked catchy. It was exactly what she was looking for. Mia stood on tippy-toes and reached out her fingers as far as they could stretch, but just as she grabbed the book, she lost her balance and came tumbling down. Something hard bonked her on the head, making her feel woozy.

She opened her eyes to find a small forest-green book lying on the ground. No title, no blurb, no author at all. On the dusty cover was a picture of a butterfly split in half. One wing was small and blue and the other was big and multicoloured. It looked very unusual and fascinating.

Mia felt curious, so she decided to borrow that book instead of the other one.

That night, Mia opened the little book in bed. At first, everything looked completely normal, but then something strange happened. The words and letters started to move around like they were trying to win a dance competition. They didn't stay in straight lines like normal books. Instead, they twisted and turned in different directions like they were alive.

Mia rubbed her eyes, thinking something was wrong. She felt like she was in a dream. She tried to read the words but her mind couldn't make sense of them at all.

Mia was getting frustrated and her muscles tensed up. She kept staring hard at the pages, trying to understand them but nothing was working. So she gave up.

As she relaxed her mind she noticed the letters began to settle into place. They stopped moving so much, and the wild lines finally formed a sentence.

It said **"Try following, not catching"**.

Mia read it again and again in her mind. It sounded important, like it was a message for her. She knew exactly what it meant.

The next morning, Mia went back into her garden. She saw the same mauve butterfly. Her heart started racing. She almost lifted her hands to capture it like she usually did but she suddenly stopped and remembered the message from the book.

So this time, Mia did something different. Instead of trying to catch the butterfly, she followed it.

The butterfly floated through the air like a breath of beauty, and Mia carefully crept behind it.

The butterfly didn't fly away like it usually did. Instead, it seemed to guide her forward. It moved through the garden, past trees and bushes, and then toward a small path leading to a place she had never seen in her life.

It was a hidden garden full of flowers in every colour, shape and size imaginable. But what caught Mia's eye were all the butterflies there. It was like someone had popped a confetti cannon over the garden. There were five butterflies for every flower. Big ones, small ones, blue, orange, white, purple and even gold ones. The air felt warm and magical, and it looked like a secret world had been hiding there all along.

Mia stood still in awe. It was more beautiful than anything her eyes had ever seen. It felt like the whole garden was alive and buzzing with energy. A glowing butterfly landed softly on the palm of her hand, a ring of light around it. Mia could feel something warm and magical spreading through her fingers, like golden honey dripping on warm toast.

Mia closed her hand to try and trap the butterfly. Suddenly, she felt a zap of cold rush through her body. Everything froze and dulled to grey. The magic was gone.

She opened her fingers again to see the butterfly start glowing, and the golden ring came back. The warmth unhurriedly returned like a hug.

The butterfly stayed for a while, then flew away.

Mia smiled, because she finally understood something very important.

Some things are not meant to be caught. They are meant to be enjoyed and appreciated while they are free. That's what keeps the magic alive.

Category 4

Year 7 - 8

Catch of a Lifetime

By Jeana Shen

Year 8

The first thing Eli ever caught was a lie.

He was seven, kneeling in the orange dirt behind his grandmother's house, when his father said, "I'll be back before dark."

The lie hung there in the heat between them. Eli watched his father's ute disappear down the road anyway, carrying half-packed boxes and the smell of engine oil.

Dark came.

Then morning.

Then years.

His grandmother never called it abandonment.

"Some people," she said while hanging washing in the wind, "are born with holes in their hands. Nothing stays."

Eli didn't understand then.

What he did understand was baseball.

Not because Australia cared much for it, but because his grandmother found an old glove at a garage sale and tossed him a tennis ball one winter afternoon.

"Catch," she said.

He missed.

The ball struck his chest and rolled into the grass.

Again.

Miss.

Again.

Miss.

But every evening after dinner, while magpies sang across the power lines, she stood in the yard and threw the ball. Some throws were soft. Some impossible.

"Eyes open," she'd call.

By thirteen, Eli could catch almost anything.

Baseballs. Cricket balls. Falling mugs. His grandmother's fading memory.

That last one was hardest.

At first, it was small things. Salt in the fridge. Tea towels in the oven. Calling him "Daniel," which was his father's name.

Then came the afternoons where she stared at him too long before speaking.

"You're familiar," she whispered once.

The sentence landed harder than any ball ever had.

So Eli learned to catch the moments before they broke her. He labelled drawers. Wrote reminders on sticky notes. Repeated stories back to her like rehearsed songs.

"You met Pop at a train station."

"Yes," she'd smile.

"He dropped all his oranges."

"Oh, did he?"

"And you helped pick them up."

"That sounds like me."

Each time, relief flickered in her eyes, as though he had caught her just before she fell somewhere unreachable.

By sixteen, Eli worked weekends at the local supermarket. Quiet kid. Fast hands. People noticed.

"Good reflexes," his manager said after Eli caught a glass jar midair before it shattered.

Reflexes.

As if he hadn't spent his whole life preparing for things to fall apart.

One August evening, rain hammered the roof while Eli stocked shelves alone. The store was nearly empty except for an old man arguing at the register.

Then came the scream.

A little girl stood frozen near the automatic doors. Four years old maybe. Red jumper. Beside her, her mother collapsed against the trolley bay, clutching her chest.

People always imagine emergencies as noise and chaos. But Eli remembered silence most. The strange second where everyone waited for someone else to move.

The little girl looked around with terrified eyes.

And Eli knew that look.

The look of someone waiting to be left behind.

He crossed the distance fast.

"It's okay," he said, kneeling beside her while others rushed toward the mother. "I've got you."

The girl grabbed his sleeve so tightly it hurt.

Paramedics came. Sirens flashed blue against the wet windows. The mother survived.

But afterward, while Eli sat outside beneath the buzzing supermarket sign, the little girl approached him quietly.

"You caught me," she said.

Eli frowned. "What?"

"When Mum fell." She looked down. "I thought I was gonna disappear."

Something inside him shifted then.

Because suddenly he understood what his grandmother had really been teaching him all those years in the backyard.

Catching wasn't about speed.

It wasn't about saving things.

It was about refusing to let another person fall alone.

Months later, his grandmother died during the first storm of summer.

In her final lucid moment, she squeezed his hand weakly.

"You were the one thing," she whispered, "I never dropped."

After the funeral, Eli found the old baseball glove in the hall cupboard. The leather was cracked with age.

Inside was a folded note in shaky handwriting.

For the boy who catches what the world forgets.

Years later, Eli became a teacher.

Not famous.

Not extraordinary.

But every Friday afternoon, he stayed back on the school oval with the kids who needed somewhere to be. The angry ones. The lonely ones. The ones who flinched when adults raised their voices.

He kept a bucket of tennis balls beside him.

"Catch," he'd say.

Some missed.

Some apologised when the ball slipped through their fingers.

Eli always tossed it back.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Because people were not ruined by what they failed to catch.

Only by believing they had to catch it alone.

Caught in a Glass

By Millie Williams

Year 8

The first lie I ever caught was small enough to rest in the centre of my palm.

It escaped from my mother's mouth on a muggy Tuesday afternoon, drifting lazily through the kitchen air beneath the soft yellow lights like a silver moth with trembling wings.

"I'm fine," she had said quietly, not looking up from the sink.

But the creature had already slipped free.

I remember standing there in my school socks on the cold tiled floor, watching the lie flutter upwards towards the ceiling while rain tapped gently against the windows behind us. My mother continued washing dishes as though nothing had happened, humming softly under her breath, completely unaware that dishonesty had taken shape between us.

Even at seven years old, I knew two things with absolute certainty.

The first was that lies were alive.

And the second was that nobody else could see them.

Over the years, I learned that every lie carried its own shape, its own movement, its own terrible kind of beauty. Small lies usually emerged as silver moths that floated harmlessly through the air before dissolving into dust. Cruel lies were darker, all sharp legs and twitching bodies, skittering like spiders across walls and ceilings. Jealous lies hissed softly as they slithered away in the form of thin green snakes, while guilty lies tended to sink heavily through the air like fish drowning in invisible water.

But dangerous lies were different.

Those were the ones I learned to catch quickly.

At first, I tried telling people what I could see. I remember tugging on my teacher's sleeve in Year Two after a boy named Noah swore he hadn't stolen another student's pencil case, even while a thick black spider crawled from the corner of his mouth.

"She's lying," my teacher had whispered gently to another staff member later that day, her voice filled with pity instead of belief.

After that, I stopped talking about the creatures.

Instead, I started collecting them.

By sixteen, I had hidden more than a hundred jars beneath the floorboards of my bedroom. They lined the darkness in careful rows, glowing faintly at night like trapped stars. Some creatures barely moved anymore, fluttering weakly against the glass whenever I passed by. Others remained furious, hurling themselves violently against the lids as though desperate to escape.

I never opened any of them.

Not after the spider.

That one belonged to my father.

"You can trust me," he'd told me once, years ago, while black legs crawled from the corners of his smile.

I trapped the creature before he noticed.

I still kept that jar hidden furthest from my bed.

Rain hammered against the windows as I knelt on the floor that night, checking the lids were tight. The room smelled like dust and metal. Outside, cars hissed across wet streets, and thunder rolled low across the sky.

Downstairs, the front door slammed shut.

Dad was home.

I heard his footsteps pause in the hallway before he called my name.

"Iris?"

His voice sounded tired.

Quickly, I slid the final jar back beneath the floorboards and pulled the rug over the loose panel before standing up.

"Yeah?"

"You awake?"

"No," I replied automatically.

The silver moth slipped from my lips before the word had even finished leaving my mouth.

Sighing softly, I caught it between my fingers just as Dad opened the door.

Warm yellow hallway light spilled across my room, illuminating dust drifting through the air like ash. Dad stood in the doorway with rainwater still clinging to the shoulders of his coat, his tie loosened unevenly around his neck. Exhaustion seemed to weigh heavily against his entire body, carving shadows beneath his eyes that hadn't been there a few years ago.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then his eyes settled on my face, and something inside his expression shifted.

"You look so much like your mother," he said quietly.

The words settled heavily into the room.

My chest tightened instantly.

People in town rarely mentioned my mother anymore. It was as though her name had slowly disappeared over the years, swallowed by silence so completely that even hearing someone say it aloud now felt strange. Teachers avoided the subject. Neighbours changed conversations awkwardly whenever I asked questions. Even Dad barely spoke about her at all.

Still, he wore his wedding ring every single day.

"What was she like?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Dad froze.

Not with sadness.

With fear.

I noticed it immediately in the way his shoulders stiffened and the way his eyes flicked briefly towards the hallway behind him, as though checking whether someone else might be listening.

Then he swallowed.

"She left because she didn't love us anymore," he said softly.

And the lie appeared.

Not a moth.

Not a spider.

Something far worse.

The creature unfolded slowly from his mouth, enormous and twisting, its body made from smoke and jagged shards of golden light. Sharp claws scraped across the ceiling as it dragged itself into the hallway, its movements unnatural and jerking, like broken bones trying to dance. Its eyes glowed deep gold in the darkness, locking onto mine almost instantly.

I couldn't breathe.

The creature smiled at me.

And suddenly, I understood that whatever my father was hiding was far more dangerous than I had ever imagined.

WARNING: THIS STORY CONTAINS A METAPHOR

By Lilou McKenzie

Year 8

I had developed a habit of walking home at dusk. It wasn't the darkness I craved, but the honesty that the twilight brings – how it called me to confront the feelings I usually hid from. Daylight was harsh, exposing every one of my flaws without mercy. Dusk gently blurred the edges of the parts of me I'd rather ignore, allowing me to experience my emotions without judgement.

The first time I noticed my shadow's behaviour, I was halfway down the hill. The sun hung low, pulling my shadow long and thin, keen to race ahead. Each of my steps forward sent it charging forward; each of my steps back made it snap towards me, swift and restless.

I don't know why I reached for my shadow. Maybe I wanted to prove that I still had control over something, or maybe I wanted to catch the part of myself that always seemed to be escaping from my grasp.

My fingers brushed the ground, but of course I didn't grasp anything. Shadows don't work like that. They move when you move, disappear when you need them, and yet they cling to you when you wish they wouldn't. I felt frustrated that I didn't have power over even the simplest elements of my life.

I kept walking.

The path curved, and my shadow shrank suddenly, folding into itself like it was embarrassed. I was familiar with the feeling. I had spent my whole day pretending I wasn't jealous, pretending I wasn't irritated, pretending I wasn't lonely in a room full of people. Pretending is exhausting.

Shadows don't have to pretend.

At the corner near the decrepit bus stop, the light shifted again. My shadow stretched sideways, warped and uneven. I thought about the parts of myself that I hid – the fear that I wasn't enough, the resentment inside of me, the feelings of disconnect that I couldn't explain. They twisted and swirled inside of me the same way that my shadow did on the pavement. Through the imitation of my thoughts, was my shadow mocking me? Was I so unremarkable that even my own shadow questioned my intentions?

I tried to catch it again. I stepped quickly, reaching out like I could pin it down and hold it still. In that moment, I needed to understand it with urgency. I needed to understand myself.

But every time I moved, it moved too – always just out of reach.

A car passed, headlights sweeping across the footpath. For a moment, my shadow vanished completely. Just gone. Like it had never existed.

I had thought I'd feel relieved. I did feel lighter, but in the wrong way. My emotional contradiction confused me.

Because without my shadow, what does that make me? A blank shape? A being without depth? What am I without the parts that make me complicated and messy?

The light faded, and my shadow returned, huddled small and close to my feet, like it needed my protection. I let out a breath I didn't realise I'd been holding.

I kept walking, this time at a slower pace.

As I reached the long stretch of road near my house, the sky turned the colour of bruised peaches – purple, orange, and fading gold. My shadow walked beside me now, not ahead, not behind.

Just there. Silent, familiar.

I didn't try to catch it again.

Instead, I watched as it moved with me. Every step I took, it took. Every hesitation, every shift of weight, every uncertain pause – it mirrored it all. It followed me with honesty.

And I realised something.

My shadow wasn't my enemy. It wasn't part of me I needed to outrun or trap. It was the part that proved I existed – the part that remained the same even when everything else seemed unsteady.

You can't catch your shadow. You can't outrun it either. You can only walk with it.

So, I did.

I walked the rest of the way home with my shadow next to me, growing and shrinking in the fading light. My shadow was not something to control, nor something to hide. It was just a quiet reminder that even the most complex parts of me were still part of who I was.

And for the first time, that felt like enough.

Reach

By Eve Somerville

Year 8

I'm a good swimmer.
I know it.
In the chlorine my tumble turns are flawless,
strokes measured to the brim,
kicks like the propellor of our tinny.
In the ocean, there are
no limits,
lane ropes,
lines,
tiles,
walls,
numbers,
dizzying repetition.
I can pound out countless kilometres before my strokes become lazy and my muscles feel empty.
Mum always takes me,
we love a swim,
we'll go out the back and bob at the crest of the waves,
watching the blue, muscles of water surge towards the shore,
seasoning our faces with sea spray as the wave collapses over itself.
We'd been out there for ages,
Mum called out to me,
"I'll be back bub, just grabbing us some chips from 'Clancy's!'"
and I watched her stride into shore.
A muffled warning spilled from the lifeguards' speakers,
I felt a pull,
a change of depth,
the exultant chatter muted.
I couldn't see the flags,
just a smudge of red
...and yellow.
I could see the "Freshie" rock pool though
like a sporadic siren,
Agonizing pain seized my left leg,
I was hurled
onto the rocks,
 ...ephemeral liberation
but pocketed back,
into the obscure ocean,
an escapee hostage.
Chains were flung over my
chest,
ankles,
wrists,
with every effort they tightened.
The usual lightness that I felt about the water

was filled with a soupy sludge.
Looking towards land...
Nothing.
Brown smudge,
My stomach churned,
A shadow to my left,
Don't move,
No splashing,
That's what I've learnt,
To stay calm at the threat,
Of a great
 white...
The shadow disappears,
I realise how much anguish I'm in,
Brackish water callous my eyes,
Lips torn at the seams,
Harsh rays stitch my skin with pain and blister,
Throat empty of fluid,
Yet pooling with salt,
Chaffed parchments of skin,
Cossie shredded,
Exposing blood and grazes from jagged pillars of rock,
Muscles pinched by exhaustion,
Arms like anchors,
Silence so loud
The sun begins to relent,
Brusing the sky dirty,
Secreted by thick thundery clouds,
Water chilling,
Hallucinations juggle reality,
"what is real"
I can hear a motor,
Scattered yells,
an orange splotch hurtles towards me,
spraying water left,
and right.
Blurred faces holler at me from the boat,
Their voices ringing in my ears,
So distant though.
I reach for a hand,
A beacon of hope,
I reach for it,
With so much strength,
Hollow effort,
Brimmed with desire.

Just
Out
Of
Reach.
The boat swings around,
And I'm engulfed by the chop of merciless waves,
Voices scream out again
Reaching out once again,
Further,
Reach.
And I'm caught,
Swung onto the rubbery deck of the boat,
Like a lifeless fish,
A crowd of lifesavers shuffle around me,
Engulfing me with a foiled blanket,
Silky against my raw skin,
My eyes flutter shut,
I savor the delicious warmth,
And succumb to the hushed voices,
And gentle lapping of waves against the boat.
The sky begins to pepper a sprinkling of rain upon us,
The safety dawns me.
Mum cries and squeezes me tight,
I can't even breath,
Bear the pain,
Muster up the concentration to understand what is happening,
See anything either than a smudge,
But I'm caught.

Category 5

Year 9 - 10

Captured

By Georgia Bodill

Year 9

Thousands of dark smudges crowd the screen, merging together. Slowly, Summer pulls the zoom back and the splodges separate, growing deeper and narrower until they resemble perfectly what they should. The honey glow from the evening sun makes the ocean sparkle like diamonds, as waves swell up and over the sand covering the small holes. Then, like fireworks, they pop back up, some accompanied by tiny blushing pink crabs that shove the sand out of their home. Summer frames the shot perfectly on the small screen.

Click, flash, fade.

Her mother's voice calls out from a distance. She looks up. Her brother and father are a few paces ahead of her, her mother halfway in between, waiting for Summer.

"Are you fully packed?" she asks.

"Yes," Summer lies, only half aware of the conversation. Her eyes are already scanning the beach, looking for the next opportunity.

"Turn around," Summer says to her mum, and she does.

Summer lifts her camera and captures her family's silhouettes against the sunset.

Click, flash, fade.

Summer's mum turns and joins her father as Summer dawdles behind. The familiar sense of grief clings to the warm evening breeze. It always comes on the last night. But this time it is different. Final.

She shoves the feeling aside, and focuses on one thing: taking the best photos she possibly can. Last year she took some of the most spectacular photos of the island, and gained nearly five thousand followers. This year is her last chance to top that.

She plays around with different angles, and different subjects, trying to photograph something unique. This island has so many layers of beauty and Summer is determined to capture each one. With each click, Summer tries to silence her mind and ignore the fear that is gnawing at her stomach.

Her family's chatter floats in the wind like leaves, but Summer only catches snippets.

"-our last day," her brother, Adam, is saying, "-never be back-"

The contents of the rockpools. The curve of a crashing wave.

"Grandma needs us close," her mother replies. She starts to say something else—maybe Summer's name—but her mind fixates on one word. Grandma.

They move away from the beach, up towards their home. The bushes bloom with brilliantly bright hibiscus. Palm tree fronds cast contoured shadows along the paths, and underripe fruit hides amongst the foliage. Every now and then, she checks her photos. Are they good enough?

Click, flash, fade.

Click, flash, fade.

Click, flash, fade.

Her chest tightens, sharp and sudden as the realisation hits. She is going to forget. Years will pass and, like sand filled in rockpools, so too will time wear away her memory. Then this beautiful island will only be a figment of her imagination, pieced together by fragments of the truth. And she will be left with nothing but her photos. That is her grandmother's reality.

She wished she could bottle the sound of crashing waves, the warmth of the sun, the sand between her toes. But she couldn't.

So she lifted the camera again.

And with each click, she tried to capture the memories before they
slipped
a w a y .

Flames lick up the glowing wood, casting away the cold air. The waves are whispering distantly in the dark. Summer is hunched in a camp chair, alternating between taking bites of her pasta and flicking through the photos, mentally noting which ones she will post. "Summer, come look at this." Her mother's words pierce the bubble her mind is in.

"In a second," Summer mumbles, not looking up from the camera.

"Come now, please." Her tone makes it clear this isn't a request.

Summer sighs, but places her dinner behind her and joins her mother, camera in hand.

"You're missing the fire, you're missing the stars."

"I'm not," Summer replies, although she most certainly is.

"Look," her mother says, pointing up at the sky. "There's the Southern Cross."

Automatically, Summer angles the small screen upwards, but the stars look dull. Blurred and minuscule against a flat black sky.

She zooms in, adjusts the angle, brings the exposure all the way down, but still nothing changes. She frowns, chews on her lip, and tries again.

"Put it down a second," her mother suggests.

Summer ignores her, fiddling with the settings on the tiny screen.

"Summer," her mother's voice feels like a hand pulling her out of deep water. "Look."

Hesitating, Summer finally lowers the camera and stares up at the sky.

At first, her eyes depict the night just as the camera does, washed out and dull. But then, her eyes adjust. The camera has lied; the sky is beautiful.

The stars burn brightly, as sharp and as crisp as the cool air surrounding them. Summer tilts her head back, overwhelmed by the vastness of the inky sky, thinking nothing will ever be able to truly portray its complexity.

And under the blanket of stars, being swallowed by the sky, Summer's chest finally relaxes.

Every worry and every fear drains from her mind until all that is left is just her and the stars.

Finally, she understands what her grandmother meant about remembering the feelings attached to the memories.

Because even a universe away, she feels close to the stars.

Wind whips through her hair as the boat rocks gently beneath her. Summer hovers her finger over the post button, staring at the photo her dad has taken. The campfire lights up two silhouettes leaning into each other, their heads tilted towards the millions of stars that are scattered across the sky. A moment she hasn't posed for. A moment she didn't even know he'd captured.

She hesitates.

It is beautiful. Not because of the framing or even the brilliant stars. She remembers the warmth of her mum pressed against her and the way she shrank at the vastness of the sky that seemed to swallow her whole.

No matter how good the photo, a screen can never capture that. That is what her grandmother has always talked about, but her words have fallen onto deaf ears. But now Summer wonders if feeling is enough. Maybe that is what sticks with you the longest: not the visuals, but the sentiments.

She lowers her finger. This moment doesn't need to be perfect and it doesn't need to be shared. It is a gift for her and her only. She taps the X and hits "discard", letting the photo dissolve but the feelings linger.

The Impact Zone

By Joshua Wood

Year 9

The mountains of water surged and fell with ruinous consequences for any caught in their path. Huge dark blue teeth, tipped with seething white water, crashed down into the ocean like a shark's jaws on flesh. Tim gulped as he watched the wild waves whip into the cliffs either side of the sheltered cove, he squeezed his toes, feeling the cool touch of damp sand and lashings of rain from the sky. The bombardment left a disorientating sea fog that suffocated vision and merged with sky so there was no difference between the ocean and roiling thunder of the sky. It was now or never, clutching his board he walked slowly into the ocean, swallowing hard when his feet left the safety of the beach. Immediately a current seized him in a death grip, ripping him out of the bay and out into the ocean. He tried to peer up behind him at the cliffs, an eternity of frothing white water separating him from them. He scanned the rocky pinnacles desperate for a glimpse of his friend Mat, who at this very moment was videoing him. Catching a wave at the famous location of Nazare with proof he could show the surf World Surf League would propel him into stardom. A thunderous boom echoed through the ocean and Tim froze as in the distance a set of skyscraper waves raced like a rocket towards him. Every few seconds they seemed to double in size, Tim froze, dwarfed in their all-encompassing shadow, realizing too late he was in the crash zone...

From the cliffs came a desperate yell, "PADDLE!" throwing his weight forward Tim pushed himself through the sea, the board bucking and heaving like a wild bull. His arms were on fire, shoulders burning, Tim heaved his head to the side, risking a quick glance at his legs, half expecting to see someone pouring molten metal on them. Turning back to the rolling, roiling, roaring waves he realised he had only one choice. Paddling once again he pushed himself to the wave praying that he had made the right decision. The draw of the wave yanked him towards and he closed his eyes involuntarily, imaging the tons and tons of water the wave was sucking up. He felt it before he saw it, the peaks of the wave curling over committing to collapse, if he wanted to escape there were only seconds left. He summoned all his strength and yanked himself up the face of the wave, the dark blue water rushed by beneath him as he climbed higher and higher. The agony in his arms was unbearable but waves seemed to go on and on and on without end. After an aeon of paddling and pain his board edged over the wave and for a second he hung suspended on a razor's edge. A quick glance behind him stole the breath from his lungs, he hung suspended on a razor's edge 80 feet high with no control whether he would escape from the wave's clutches or be pulled over and be swallowed whole...

Tim threw his weight forward and he lurched over the crest before rocketing vertically down the back of the wave, from behind him the wave detonated and the backlash of water shoved him forward uncontrollably. Sea spray whipped into his eyes blinding him and he clung to his board for dear life. It smacked into his face once, twice, thrice as the board flew across the choppy water, vibrating so much that he could barely keep his grip but gradually the push faded and it slowed to a crawl.

He was alive. Not safe, nowhere near safe, but alive.

The horizon was already rising and to his horror this wave was at least two times bigger than its predecessor. Tim turned his board so it faced the beach and waited for the wave to come. It didn't take long, a minute later the wave was behind him. He propelled himself forward fighting the tow of waves. He didn't even have time to think as the wave swept him up, and rocketed him forward faster than he'd ever gone before. He heaved himself to his feet every bounce on the choppy face of the wave almost launching him into the sky. He carved through the water and executed some of the sharpest most styled turns and tricks he'd ever done. The salty air cooled his face and he laughed in exhilaration. The wave was like a highway of chaos shoving him forward with daunting speed but despite the choppy water and instance speed Tim felt in control, the board was an extension of his body, following his every command perfectly, he didn't even have to think, muscle memory making every turn, trick and tail slide a masterpiece. The wave carried him forward directly towards the

cliff and suddenly panic filled his head. If he couldn't get himself to the opening to the bay between the cliff walls over a hundred metres to his right he would pancake between jagged rocks and thousands of tons of water. He crouched down, lowering his weight to increase stability. If he fell off now the wave would continue shoving him forward till he smashed into the cliffs. The board screamed across the surface, the opening to the bay growing ever closer but so were the cliffs. Suddenly there was only a couple of feet between him and the jagged rock walls but the safety was almost there. Suddenly the board ground to a halt against some hidden underwater obstacle but Tim's inertia shot him forward like a bullet, he yelped as his ankle was yanked out of the strap connecting him to the board, the friction burning his skin as though he'd put it in a frying pan. He flew forward into the sheltered cove and landed in the shallow water, safely away from the strong current.

Tim laughed as he reached the top of the cliffs where Mat had been filming. He'd scraped his knees and hands several times on the climb up but the unbridled joy he felt completely distracted him. Suddenly his laugh died in his throat as he saw the torn strips of black fabric caught on a nearby tree, the camera hung there by its straps as well but there was no sign of Mat. Tim felt despair cloud his mind as bubbly water from some humongous wave poured down off the cliff in torrents, leaving behind no evidence that they or Mat had ever been there.

Timeline

By Samantha Polu

Year 10

The small white canvas felt rough between the deep creases of my fingertips. Its sharp edges reminded me of the sharp features I used to own when I was younger. Now, time's blurred those honed lines and skin folds over itself.

Naturally, Olive set up her easel with expert ease and now scoured for paints. She stopped as she saw me struggling to place my canvas upright. As I've gotten older, my hands have begun to shake as though a constant fear has latched onto me, making simple tasks impossible.

My granddaughter placed the canvas steadily on my easel and then twirled back to hers, directly in front of my own. That kind of fluidity, I envied.

Olive had tasked me with completing a half portrait of her face. She would then complete a half portrait of mine and the two would be joined together. A sort of timeline she called it, but whatever it was, I was more than happy to oblige. Time spent painting was time spent well in comparison to my usual pastime of struggling to read shaky lines in newspapers.

The cool blue paint licked my fingers as I dipped the paintbrush in. I had to hold the brush close to its fine tip to stop the lines from painting zig zags across my canvas. Olive's skin was smooth and youthful, not squiggly like mine.

I swirled my brush for her bouncy brown curls and circled green into her radiant eye. Her mouth was a sleek half-upward curve cushioned by soft lips.

My brush slowed as I recalled my own face. It was weathered and parchment thin. A face beaten from years of hard labour beneath the relentless sun formed its uneven tones.

I hesitated at the thought of my portrait on a canvas, even if it would only be half of my face.

Deciding to sulk later, I focused on Olive's prime features. Surprisingly, lines were drawn smoothly and features popped. It may have been a while since I'd painted anything but I certainly did not lose the skill I had gained 60 years ago. For the first time, my ability to flick paints on paper, to sell at markets, was worth more than a small bag of rice.

Not long after the first swirl of paint traced the white canvas, the hand marathon had ended. My fingers ached as my wrist throbbed. The tremor had sneaked back too. Olive had been circling her painting hand, stretching it out. Her other hand smoothly wrapped itself around her phone as her thumb sped over its keyboard. She looked up, noticing that I had finished and promptly placed her phone down. She smiled softly as she picked up her canvas, now filled with bright colours bleeding over the edges, and gently placed it beside mine.

The two half-faces seemed to merge instantly, despite the obvious difference in age. My eye was a carefully sculpted artwork of blue; the lips were thin, as they ought to be, with the fine lines of subtle creases gently traced around them. Usually, when my face stood in front of me, it would frown. A single finger would trace all the lines I wished were gone.

I lifted a thin finger of mine and slid it across the hard paint. My usual disapproval had been overcome. I couldn't stop admiring the gorgeous face of deep cracks and meandering creases.

Olive pointed to the thin lines around the edge of my eye.

"These are my favourite!"

I questioned her. Her reply was simple, making tears well up in my eyes.

"Those creases dig deep when you smile. It's how I tell if you're actually enjoying yourself or whether I should check in on you."

My mind wandered back to the foggy aged care home. Fake smiles were all that I could give in that place. My coffee would always arrive cold, and the room's lights would flicker, making it impossible to read. There was a distinct carpet smell as well, one of mould or decay. The staff were kind and did their best, but nevertheless, time would seem to stretch on for as long as it could. Millennia would pass before the next morning paper arrived. I felt as though I had no purpose. I was rotting away. Had she known?

I pulled her soft body into the layers of mine as her arms wrapped around me. The warmth of body heat cascaded over us. I knew that a small bus would come by to drop me back at the aged care home this afternoon. My smile did not fade.

Time ran by and before I knew it, I was slowly climbing into the small bus. I raised a shaky hand to bid goodbye to Olive.

Surprisingly, the dusty black fabric of the seat did not seem to suck me in, instead it gave me a slight sense of buoyancy. I wondered if Olive would reach out and call me over again to engage in another one of her wonderful plans.

Suddenly, Olive yelled out to me, her cheerful tone echoed across the road.

"Never goodbye Granny, only see you later."

I couldn't contain my smile as a youthful shout spilled from my mouth:

"Then, catch you later!"

Catching Feelings

By Sarah Gock

Year 9

People assume that ghosts are the creatures who haunt. Movies and television shows portray us as petrifying monsters that lurk in crumbled, old houses and plague children with nightmares. But truly, we are the ones who are haunted.

I drift along the cramped sidewalk, my presence contributing nothing to the stampede of bodies busily scurrying down it. The pungent stench of coffee and cigarettes hangs thick in the air as I admire the towering buildings looming above the bustle. I can never get over how much this city has changed. After passing several restaurants and clusters of clothing stores, I finally arrive at Everly's apartment block. I stand before the tall building, my eyes roaming over the brown bricks and twining vines dangling from the balconies. I pretend to inhale a deep breath and tame my shaky fingers before travelling up the stairs.

A few residents wait in the hallway while some stride up and down the stairs, the faint music playing from the radio mingling with their quiet chatter. I simply phase through them and glide up three flights of stairs to meet a familiar door, the number twenty-eight engraved into the gold sign emblazoning the front. My heart sinks. I've revisited this place for two years straight, but the lingering sorrow accompanying the sight just never seems to fade.

I proceed through the door without opening it and drink in the apartment I'd visited countless times before it all went wrong. Golden sunlight bleeds through the windows to illuminate dozens of Everly's pot plants scattered all over the place, the vibrant green of their leaves a striking contrast to the light blue walls. A steaming mug of tea sits impatiently on the coffee table amongst other ornaments, including a framed photo of the two of us. A hollowness suddenly fills my chest. Everything I have ever wanted lies between that wooden border, and there it stands right in front of me, yet I'm unable to claim it.

Two years ago, I unknowingly waved goodbye to Everly for the last time. We had just concluded a lovely dinner that I had asked her to, hoping to finally confess my feelings for her. But when the perfect moment arrived and the words sat on the tip of my tongue, I swallowed them and instead said my farewells. I was a timid boy and assumed I could declare my love another time. How foolish.

As soon as I began to drive away, a drunk driver collided with my car, killing me. The memory is hazy now, a gruesome moment I'm glad I cannot fully recall in the afterlife. Now, I am a ghost, and my feelings still remain shackled inside my dormant heart, forever untold and torturing me. I frequently catch myself inserting my own commentary into Everly's conversations, forgetting that no matter how loud I speak or how many times I repeat them, she cannot hear me. I often catch myself subconsciously fixing my hair or adjusting my clothes in her presence, failing to remember that Everly cannot see me. I don't want to be the one catching myself in these acts, I want her too. I long for her to witness my shows of affection and a smile to bloom across her face. I yearn to release the words that died when I did and hear her repeat the same to me.

I tear my gaze from the photo and settle on the white sofa, assuming that Everly has yet to return home. That's when I hear footsteps behind me and when I turn around, a swarm of butterflies immediately ambush my stomach. Every time I see Everly, it's like seeing her for the first time.

She's emerging from the bedroom adorned in a casual white shirt and blue jeans, her brown hair neatly drawn into a bun.

Gosh, she is breath-taking.

She shuffles past me without acknowledgment and the revelation trapped in my chest thrashes wildly, trying to escape. Someone suddenly knocks against the door, which Everly quickly rushes to answer. Who could be visiting her? I rise from my place on the couch to inspect the unexpected guest. The door opens to reveal a man supposedly around Everly's age, dressed in a grey suit and clutching the messenger bag slung around his shoulder. A prick of jealousy stings me in the heart.

"What are you doing here?" I mutter to myself.

They greet each other with polite smiles before sitting opposite each other on the lounge. I take a seat next to Everly, narrowing my eyes at this random stranger invading her apartment. I'd like to acknowledge him as the one out of place, but truly I am the one interrupting. My lips curl into a frown. Maybe she has moved on.

Everly commences their conversation by informing the man about herself, talking about her hobbies and lifestyle. I watch in confusion as he begins scribbling down this information on his notepad before I realise that he is a therapist. I sigh when I notice the trickles of sadness laced in her words. I'm meant to be the one stitching all her wounds back together and satisfying her longings, but I can't even hold her anymore.

"What are your coping methods for losing Nathan?" the therapist asks.

My eyes widen at the mention of my name. She takes a deep breath and starts with a shaky voice, "I look for reminders of him. I smile whenever I look at the blue walls that he helped me paint and I sing along whenever his favourite song plays on the radio. I can't catch him trying to discretely stare at me anymore or catch him adding my favourite foods to the cart at the grocery store, but I can still feel remnants of his love."

Tears begin to well in my eyes. All this time, the words lodged in my throat have been tormenting me, thinking that they would eternally go unheard. But I don't need to voice them, Everly already knows how much I loved her. My confession promptly dies on my tongue and that yearning in my chest vanishes without a trace. I glance down to see my hands beginning to fade as a blinding light shines down above me, ready to reel me into rest. I feel not even a single fragment of regret as my vision begins to blur at the edges and my view of Everly distorts. She caught all my love, and I know our souls will be woven together until the end of time.

Category 6

Year 11 - 12

The Witness in the Cell

By Alice Surace

Year 11

The Witness in the Cell.

I am invincible, yet miserable. A single-stranded rhinovirus, a genome 7,200 nucleotides long. The "Common Cold". I contemplate, where does consciousness begin? I exist without permission and persist without purpose - or so it seems. I do not breathe, yet I travel. I do not think, yet I wonder. I do not live, yet I endure. For months, I have lain dormant beneath a scratched wooden desk. Sea air creeps in through open windows, carrying laughter from the oval and the distant crash of waves. Beneath this desk, however, I am still. Forgotten. Waiting. I remember my last host only faintly - a sneeze, a hurried sleeve, a smear pressed unknowingly into shadow. Since then, time has blurred. I have not decayed; I have not changed. Suspended, I linger in the quiet in-between.

Until now.

A hand appears

Small, warm, alive.

It slips under the desk, furtive and quick, pressing something soft and sticky against the underside. Chewing gum - wet, illicit. The hand hesitates, then presses harder, sealing the gum in place. Skin meets surface.

Surface meets me.

Contact.

I awaken.

Her name is Elora. She does not know me, yet I know her instantly. Her cells are doors, and I am the key. I enter quietly, efficiently, unravelling her defences with the precision I was made for. Her immune system stirs, confused, then alarmed. I replicate. I spread. Through her, I begin to see. Elora is eleven. She is pretty, popular, and practiced in the art of appearing effortless. Beneath that surface, there are fractures. I feel them in the tightness of her chest when she looks in mirrors, in the way she pulls at her sleeves, in the heaviness she carries behind her laughter.

That night, she feels it. A cough. A dull ache spreading behind her eyes. Her home is large, polished, immaculate. Cold in a way that has nothing to do with temperature. Her mother moves through it like a figure in glass - perfect, distant, untouchable. When Elora coughs, there is no concern, only irritation.

"You'll be fine," her mother says, already turning away. "Don't make a fuss."

Ballet awaits. In the mirrored studio, I observe again. Elora struggles to force her foot into a pale slipper that seems designed for someone else - someone smaller, someone sharper, someone her mother might prefer.

The fabric resists her. So does the gaze of the woman correcting her posture.

"Again," her mother says. "You're not trying hard enough."

But Elora is trying. She coughs, stumbles, recovers. She keeps going. That night, she coughs until sleep takes her in fragments. Morning comes too soon. She is unwell. But illness is inconvenient, and inconvenience is unacceptable.

"You're going to school," her mother says, tying her own hair neatly before yoga. "I can't stay home."

So, Elora goes. At school, I flourish. She does not cover her mouth when she coughs. She sneezes openly, carelessly. There is no malice in it - only resignation.

I got this from someone else. Why should I care?

I expand with each droplet, each careless breath. I scatter into the air, invisible and innumerable.

And then...

Catch.

A droplet lands. Not on polished skin or manicured hands, but on a worn sleeve. On a boy who sits slightly apart, not by rule, but by habit.

David.

He is smaller than the others, thinner. Hunger has shaped him in ways I can feel immediately - sharp edges, hollow spaces. When I enter him, his body reacts differently. Faster. Harder. He cannot afford me. His immune system fights with urgency, but resources are limited. Fever rises quickly. His head aches. His limbs

grow heavy. He says nothing. When the final bell rings, he does not rush home. Instead, he walks - slowly, deliberately - taking the longest possible route. Perhaps he hopes to arrive home as though nothing is wrong. But I do not leave. By the time he reaches his small house, dusk is settling. Inside, worry greets him. His mother pulls him into an embrace without hesitation. She knows he is sick. She does not pull away.

"I've got you," she whispers.

She sits until he sleeps.

Through David, I see something new.

Care.

The next morning, he wakes early. The fever lingers. His throat burns. Hunger gnaws at him, but there is no breakfast waiting. Still, he dresses, gathers his things, and leaves for school. He carries a handkerchief. He uses it. Each cough is muffled. Each sneeze contained. He tries, desperately, not to pass me on.

Why?

Another question pulses through me. Elora did not care. David does. Why does conscientiousness begin here? When the teacher collects homework, David hands his in silently and retreats to the back of the classroom. He avoids others, minimizes contact, reduces my reach. Yet I spread anyway. A paper passes from his hand to hers.

Contact.

The teacher inhales, unaware. I enter again. She is different from the others. Quiet. Gentle. Patient. She loves this room - not for its structure, but for the lives within it. I sense something else too, something faint but significant. A hope she carries carefully, like something fragile. She does not yet know it, but she is at the beginning of something new. Inside her, I replicate - but something shifts. I am no longer just moving. I am changing. Mutations occur as they always do - small, random adjustments in my code. But here, within her, those changes feel... directed. Not by intention, but by possibility. Cells divide. Systems form. A new life begins.

And I am there.

Integrated - not as an invader, but as a fragment. A sequence. A whisper of code embedded within something far greater than myself. For the first time, I am not simply passing through. I am staying. Purpose stirs. Weeks pass. The teacher continues her work, unaware of the life growing within her. Months later, I emerge into the world again - but this time, not as something unseen. I am within the child she holds in her arms. I feel warmth - not as an external condition, but as something intrinsic. I exist now within a body that breathes, that grows, that will think. I am no longer separate from life. I am part of it. There is a knock at the hospital room door. David and his mother enter, holding a small bundle of flowers - imperfect, slightly uneven, but vibrant.

The teacher smiles, her eyes bright. She accepts them with care, placing them beside her bed.

"Thank you."

I feel something I have never felt before.

Not replication. Not survival.

Connection.

I was once a passing thing - a cause of discomfort, of inconvenience, of imbalance. I moved without understanding, existed without reason. But here, in this moment, I see it differently. I am part of a chain. Not of infection, but of interaction. Of cause and effect. Of lives touching lives in ways neither intended nor understood.

Where does consciousness begin?

Perhaps not within me. Perhaps it begins in those who choose, despite everything, to care.

And perhaps my purpose was never to understand life from the outside - but to become, however briefly, a part of it.

The Space between Orders

By Emily Sing

Year 11

Looking out into the night, Min stands alone in the bone-chilling dampness of the Seattle streets. Against the dark of the skyline, his face is hidden behind his rain-soaked balaclava, below the persistent winter drizzle. His gun is held tense against his skin, and he gnaws at the inside of his cheek so much that he can taste bitter blood. His lungs feel heavy, every breath catching against the guilt lodged in his throat.

Min stands on Seattle's overlook boardwalk, back pressed against the cold hard of the pedestrian bridge. His earpiece crackles, but no command comes through - only static, stretching thin like seconds that refuse to pass. Around him, the city hums - he can hear the eccentric bustle of Pike Place Market across the waterfront, and the indifferent pulse of the street busker 10 metres down the boardwalk. A flickering streetlight counts time in uneven beats.

Min checks his watch. 8:54pm.

He thinks of his father.

A man who measures time differently. Not by the clock, but by early mornings at the kitchen table. By hearing nothing but the turn of newspaper pages and quiet sips of tea. By stories about his childhood in the Philippines, where he was one of six children born to two fisherfolk, where he ran barefoot in fields with his siblings, where he stared up at the sky and wondered if the stars looked the same in America. Min lets these stories catch the passing moments of his own childhood; knowing that since 1970, his father had lived as a permanent resident in America - a country he had long begun to call home.

The earpiece crackles again.

"Stand by."

Waiting, again. He was always waiting. Waiting for the order to do the right thing.

Min exhales slowly, watching his breath appear in the cold. He breathes in again through his mouth, and the air tastes like guilt, the bitterness catching the back of his throat. He knows what he is doing isn't right. Something akin to dread suffocates him. How can he wait now, when he knows waiting once meant patience, not pain? Back in 2011, when Min was granted American citizenship, he decided to become an ICE agent. The badge felt like something clean, something worth working for. He believed in the shape of the system, the structure of it - he felt important, necessary.

His teeth chatter against the bitter cold so much that he pulls down his balaclava, gasping for air and clenches his eyes shut, in a desperate attempt to believe again. Believe that he is necessary. That this 'structure' was put in place for a reason. That waiting for an order is the right thing to do.

But he doesn't.

The phone in his pocket vibrates.

Once. Then again. And again.

He already knows who it is before he takes it out.

8:59pm.

"Min?" A woman's voice appears - thin, stretched across distance and distorted with panic. His sister.

"They took him."

The city noise disappears.

"Who?" The word scrapes out of him, coarse against his tongue.

"ICE, Min."

Min doesn't move. He feels pinned to this moment.

"Firstly, they questioned Tatay as he was speaking Tagalog into the phone. They refused to believe he was a permanent resident, so they detained him. But now I just got another call, Min."

He sucks in a breath.

"They're deporting Tatay, Min. They said it was because of... before. That incident. Years ago."

A bar. A fight. His father's hands shaking, not from anger, but from something older. Something that followed him home from a war Min never fully understood.

Post traumatic, they called it.

It's 9:01pm, but time suddenly folds in on itself.

"Min? Min, did you hear me?"

But he can't respond.

Ending the call, Min looks down at his hands. Shakily, he drags his left index finger over the palmer crease of his right hand. His skin flinches at the touch - damp, cold - from the rain, or his tears, Min can't tell anymore.

His hands don't look like his father's.

But they are.

The same creases. The same roughness. Hands of an immigrant who learned to hold guns before they even learned to hold his own children.

Hands that served America.

Those words don't sit right anymore, Min thinks.

Served. As if it guaranteed anything. Now those hands are caught in cuffs, in the chilling darkness of a detention centre.

Min's fingers curl inward, like he can still feel them - his fathers - steadying his grip, guiding him.

Now he is at risk of leaving the country he once served?

What happened to the land of the free?

The earpiece crackles again, louder this time.

"Suspected group approaching the boardwalk. Move in."

The order slices clean through the moment.

Min doesn't respond. He wonders if he should.

Across the street, apartment buildings loom: dark windows, drawn curtains, lives paused mid-breath inside. He knows what waits beyond those walls. Fear, confusion, the sound of doors being broken through. People who will not understand why they are being taken. Children's scarring cries as their parents are forcibly dragged down corridors. Families who will ask questions no one intends to answer.

He has led raids like this before.

He has followed orders countless times before.

He has told himself it was necessary. Before.

He just never, ever, thought it would happen to him. To his own family. His own Tatay.

His watch ticks.

9:04pm. Min watches the minutes pile up around him, thick and impossible to catch up to.

"Reyes, do you copy?" The voice presses, firm and unkind.

He presses his hand to the earpiece but doesn't speak.

Instead, he imagines his father – he imagines him standing across from him on the boardwalk. Waiting.

Always waiting. For papers. For acceptance. For a country that promised him a home, freedom, a better life.

The silence stretches, and stretches, too long, too far - and the ache in Min's chest follows it, pulling through him, down the length of his torso, up into his eyes that sting like he hasn't slept in years, his thoughts catching onto every memory of his father, and if he just squeezes his eyes shut - just for a second - his father will be there, across the boardwalk, he will be there, he has to be, and his hands will reach, will hold him, the hands that made him steady and certain - the same hands that carried rifles, that wiped blood from men's faces who never made it home, that still, somehow, held him and his sister gently, like they were safe, like violence could be washed off, like time could be undone... and if he opens his eyes now... Min will...

Min will be a son again.

But the rain keeps falling. The streetlight keeps flickering. Time keeps moving.

And Min?

He is still standing there.

Still waiting.

The Fog

By Noah Gonçalves Ferreira

Year 11

The coffee was stone-cold. Not “I forgot to drink it,” but the stillness of water after spending too long looking through the walls in front of you, wondering whether you’re alive or just an abandoned mannequin from an empty department store window. I went for the cup, but my hands slipped from the ceramic surface. It happens more than it should anymore.

And there she was, standing in the door frame, outlined in the late afternoon sunlight we get twenty minutes a day here.

She wore that big, yellow, mustached sweater with the broken yarn thread in its cuff, that thing she never trims because it “gives character.” I’m pretty sure she’s just found it comforting when she’s worried. Good lord, how I adore that sweater. Vanilla scent of paperbacks.

“Olvido?” she asked in a hushed whisper.

It was just my name, but it had been delivered with all the urgency of a whispered prayer fighting to stay intact. For a second, the panic set in. Recognizing someone but forgetting their face. But then her features snapped into focus again.

My wife. Fé. The woman who enjoys slightly burned popcorn and cries during insurance ads because the dog was lost.

“I am here,” I announced. It sounds as if the words are being forced through my throat.

A smile broke on her face, but her eyes never let go, looking for any crack in me. She has been doing it for the last few months. She took the cold mug from my hands and her warm touch reminded me of ghostly visions of the living through fogged glass.

This is the proper term for what I am experiencing: catching. Everything that used to come easy to me now takes so much energy. I spend hours trying to catch something.

The doctors gave it an eloquent Latin name, but I just call it the Fog. As if there were darkening clouds blocking the light from the inner chambers of my mind. At first, it was trivial things. Cousins whom I had not spoken to in decades and their phone numbers. Then more serious things began to disappear. Why did I enter the garage? How to change the oil? Even the kitchen can feel foreign.

Sometimes, I find myself looking at photos that decorate the walls of the hallway, attempting to find a trace of the man in them. He is always smiling next to Fé, his arm around her waist, full of confidence in his eyes. I examine him like an archaeologist cleaning up artifacts, wishing for a piece of him to be alive within me.

“Let’s take a ride,” Fé announced all of a sudden. “Maples are changing their colors. Don’t you remember the stream? You were trying to skip stones there and managed to ruin those horrible corduroy pants.”

I laughed, sounding rusty but genuine. I told her that my pants were sophisticated. She considered them a crime against fashion.

We got into the old Subaru which smells of wet dogs and peppermints. She was driving; I was watching how the scenery rushed by us, the trees glowing orange and red as if they were trying to prove something important about themselves. It was as if everything was burning intentionally in order to show its beauty despite its demise.

The water swirled across the creek bed through smooth stones under crisp fall air. Odd, how our senses can remain unclouded even as memory becomes distorted. I could smell wet moss, fallen leaves, her perfume. She and I sat in silence on the truck tailgate, the water running across the stones with leisurely indifference.

A group of birds flew overhead in an erratic pattern, temporarily shading the sky until they disappeared behind the trees. It struck me as odd that they seemed to know exactly where they were headed. I wished I could be just as sure.

She wondered if I recalled the first time we had come here.

I paused. It seems cruel to lie, but the truth is unbearable. Perhaps after some concert downtown.

She fell silent for a moment, then told me gently that it was the day after my father's funeral. We sat there for four hours in silence while I squeezed her hand so hard she feared I would break it.

"Oh," I said softly. Hot shame filled my chest. "Fé, I'm sorry."

She squeezed my hand again. "Don't apologize for faulty wiring," she said. Then she told me leaving all cabinets open was definitely on purpose.

I laughed, and in that second, the fog lifted. We saw us, younger, slimmer, not tired yet. And it's a weird experience to become an observer of your own life while you're alive.

At least on our drive back home, we paused at a diner with cracked vinyl chairs and a waitress named Doris calling everyone honey. I think I had a hamburger, but Fé probably ordered it for me. The transition from car to chair somehow slipped away between the two.

As she picked at her salad, I thought about that last example where the only bird in a species kept singing for its dead mate. That bird was Fé now, right? Curator of a museum where the only visitor forgot the exhibits? The last witness to a life gradually wiping itself out?

I reached over the sticky table and told her I'd probably be wearing my corduroy pants again tomorrow just to scandalize our neighbors.

A burst of laughter escaped from her mouth, so loud that even the man behind the counter turned his head around. "Wear those, and I will call the police," she said.

This was a special moment. Pure gold. Just like something you would try to preserve forever from time.

Perhaps all you can do is to give up the fight for all the shoreline and keep at least this small amount of sand in your palm, until the tide sweeps it away.

At home, she helped me get into the house not because I could not walk but because my feet sometimes lose their way and forget what ground is. Sitting down in the chair with the little depression in its cushion, she offered me tea.

Picking up my "Life Raft" notebook from my table, with names and duties written there, I started to write with my shaky hand:

The maples were red. Fé had her mustard-colored sweater on. She laughed in the diner. I think I am falling in love with her. And I am sure about it."

And then, I finished off my writing with one more thing for myself as a stranger tomorrow:

Do not forget about the catch in her voice whenever she calls out your name.

I closed my journal just as the kettle started whistling in the darkness of my house, and Fé called out from the kitchen if I was done.

I responded softly that I was.

I do not know how many lights will be lit up before it all turns dark, but for tonight, at least, the kitchen is warm, the tea is hot, and I know exactly who is going to walk through that door.

On Command

By Sanna Mitchell

Year 12

Sabine had never noticed the small silver specs in her shoelaces before this moment. Her head was tightly tucked into her chest as she tried to focus on something other than the crippling tightness in her lower stomach. The strand of shine was tucked in between the white grain, barely visible had she not been in a state of complete stillness. She was so transfixed that she hardly heard the footsteps of another coming towards her in a brisk stride.

"Ummm ok so-", a woman standing in front of her uttered before realising that Sabine was only just lifting her head.

"Are you alright?" she queried as she rested her hand with a professional sympathy on Sabine's right arm.

"Oh, sorry. Yes" she finally answered, "Thanks."

The woman removed her arm and shifted to restart her initial debrief. Sabine noticed how the veins in her fingers rippled and shifted as her hand clasped around the clear clipboard.

"Alright, so you're the brain chip right?"

"Um, I guess?"

"Great!" she quipped, "You're on in a minute so if you could just follow me backstage we can get you in position, does that sound good?"

Sabine didn't even get a response to that last one before the woman turned on her heels and started towards the door at the end of the hallway. As she trailed behind the lady she felt her skin singe at the stares of the other contestants.

The door was momentarily held for her before the woman let out a sharp breath due to Sabine's complete inability to walk at the speed of light.

As she entered backstage, the tightness in her stomach almost ripped her intestines. The woman was blabbering some intricate instructions of which she completely missed due to the magnitude of people moving around her hurriedly. She tried her best to conceal her right arm from colliding with the sea of bodies rippling around her.

"Okie dokie" she said as she gave a sickly smile, "Good luck!"

Sabine was somewhat shoved into the pool of light that illuminated the space. She could barely deduce the table of judges sitting across from her, but from what she could make out, there were five.

"Hello... Sabine?" one of them offered.

"Yes, that's me," her mouth replied.

"Whenever you're ready."

She inhaled and began.

"Hello judges, I am a person living with Monoplegia in my right arm, and I have dedicated the last five years to find a way that I can live with this and not have a ridiculously large brace to announce it to everyone," she recited to the lights impeding her vision.

A small laugh of acknowledgement rippled through the judges which caused her legs to stop trembling for a moment.

She continued with, "Planted inside of my brain at this very moment is a specialised chip which is programmed to alter my cerebellum's control over my muscular reactions."

Sabine took in another shaky breath at the sight of the judges frowned faces before persisting.

"This means that I have created a possibility for my arm to respond to vocal commands and move, bypassing the disconnect between my brain and my limb."

"You may be wondering why there is an apple on the table in front of you. In a moment I ask that you pick this apple up and throw it to me. As the apple leaves your hand, I need you to clearly say the word 'catch'. If my solution is completely functional, I will catch it with my right arm and throw it back to you."

The judges laughed once more, however this time it was a scoff of disbelief which prompted

the corner of Sabine's lip to curl. Her eyes had now adjusted to the lighting and could make out a judge with a shiny bald head and thick glasses as he took the apple into his hands and stood up from his seat.

"Alright, are you ready?" he prodded.

"Yes"

"Catch!"

Sabine felt a shooting sensation run through the back end of her brain and closed her eyes.

She had practiced this with her brother an absurd amount of times in their back yard as the afternoon sun turned into a dark night. The cricket ball had entered her right hand so routinely that it had turned shiny, and glinted even under the waxing moonlight. She had never felt it hit her palm, only knew that it had worked when she had looked down and seen it perfectly clasped in her fingers.

In this moment she didn't dare to look down. And as it turns out, she didn't have to.

The judges erupted into a crazed frenzy of exclamation. She heard the bang of their hands on the table as they stood up.

"Amazing!" he bellowed.

Slowly, Sabine allowed her sight to creep back in, and angled her head towards her arm.

There lay the red apple, glistening just as her brother's cricket ball in her right hand.



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