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POETRY & WRITING

Children's Edition

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
JUNE 2019

CATHY ALTMANN
PRESENTS

SMASHING YOUNG POETS & WRITERS
FROM MELBOURNE

COVER ARTWORK BY IRISH ARTIST EMMA BARONE



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Lotus, Bali, Indonesia..

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Cathy Altmann is a poet, teacher and violinist from Melbourne, Australia. Her first collection, *Circumnavigation* (Poetica Christi Press, 2014), won the FAW Anne Elder Award. Her second collection, *things we know without naming* (Poetica Christi Press) was published in December 2018. She holds a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne and currently teaches English and Latin.



for if you will not hear me no one else will hear us at all

CATHY ALTMANN

'You have to tell the absolute truth, so far as you can dredge that up'¹. The late Les Murray's words about poetry are a fitting way to introduce this collection by young writers from Melbourne, Australia. This outstanding work has been produced by students aged 12-18. None of these pieces has been published before. The works are striking for their honesty, whether it is to lived experience or keenly imagined experience.

Jessica's prose poem, 'My Obsessive Thoughts', is a powerful declamation of self. The subtle internal rhymes she uses are also a feature of Kethmi's poem 'seeing/believing', with its haunting questions and the final chiming of 'eyes' and 'blind silence'. Both Gracie and Rhea have imagined the lives of others, with Rhea's story movingly recreating a refugee's journey, and Gracie's poem exploring grief. These student writers know the power of closely-observed details: Britney's poem weaves sounds, memories and 'coffee-stained' colours together to create a portrait of a Melbourne busker, while the mask in Rita's story is a 'brilliant shade of orange, intertwined with threads of indigo'.

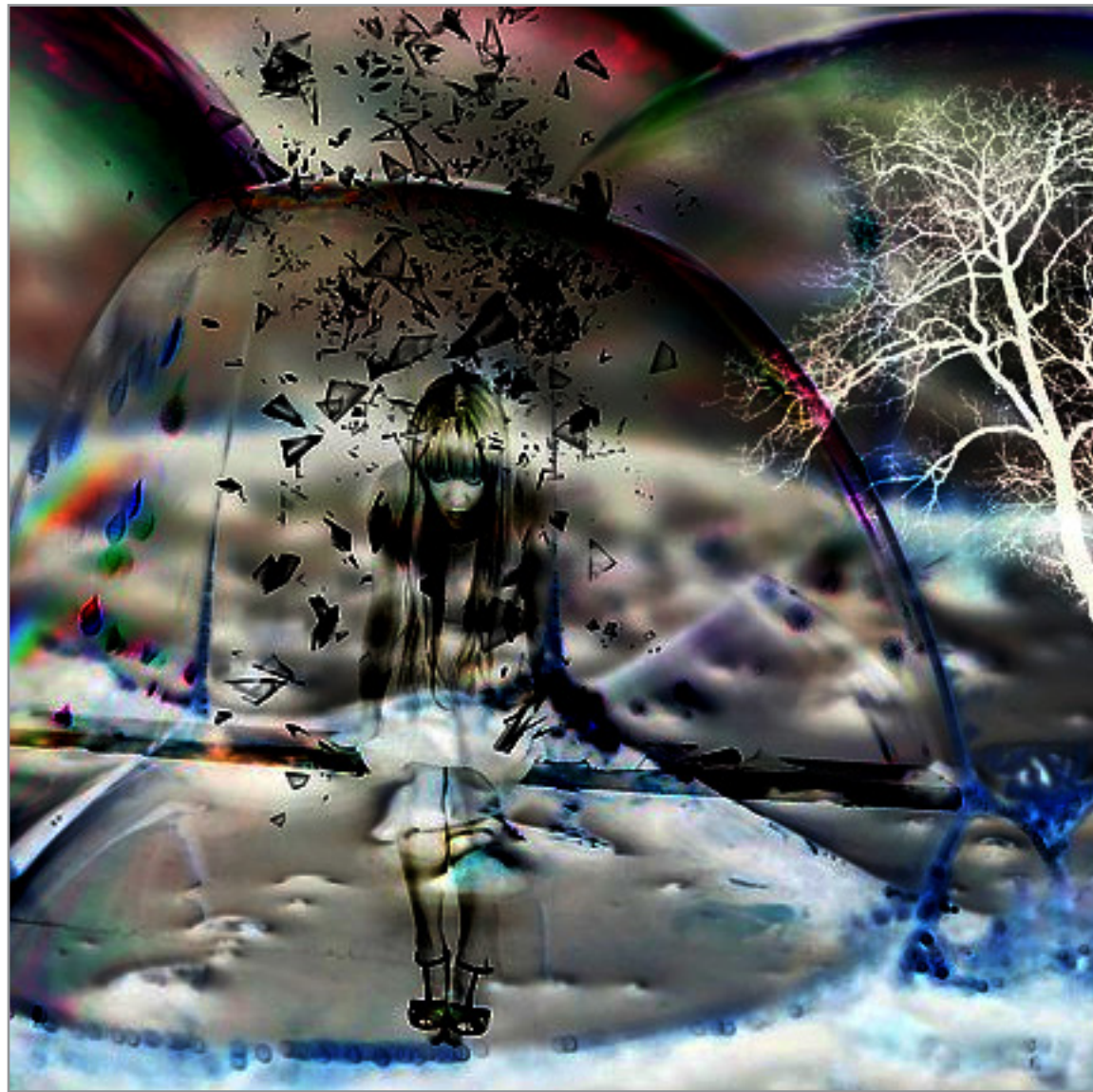
These works not only speak their own truth, but play with ideas, genres and language. Alicia's delightfully humorous story imagines an unlikely encounter between a baby and the pirate 'Scarface Sam'. Sarah's story has fun with the idea of 'pickpocketing' in a lavish Venetian setting. Leni's poem uses vivid metaphors and stunning rhymes. Other poems play with visual design, such as the haunting 'Rain Song' by Victoria, and the superb myth-making of 'I learn of division from The Age of Two' by Sandhya. Angelina also uses mythology in her poem 'stone hearts', evoking Medusa in her harrowing evocation of a truth that no one knows or hears. Her final lines are: 'for if you will not hear me/no one else will hear us at all'. This is the challenge thrown out to us by the writers in this collection.

Many thanks to Mark Ulyseas for providing the opportunity for these young writers to be heard.

¹ See Murray's 2005 interview for The Paris Review, titled 'The Art of Poetry': <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5508/les-murray-the-art-of-poetry-no-89-les-murray>

Cathy Altmann

Jessica is a year 11 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys riding horses and spending time in the outdoors. Her favourite author is Tim Winton. This poem was inspired by Jessica's own struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and the reactions and opinions of her peers and other people.



Photograph Pixabay.com

MY OBSESSIVE THOUGHTS

The urge to keep things organised is like the need to breathe, to be at peace is to have that chair there and, i'm sorry if my room is bare, my books aligned, my locker organised, and no, I won't sell you my notes because I spent time to work with my mind to create something that is visually pleasing, that keeps me from fiddling and re writing that word just one more time, and i'm sorry that I get mad at you when you put your pencil case there because the only things stopping me from ripping out my hair is that small amount of self control I have left and the therapy that tortures me every week, and I don't even know how I still live and manage the 3 quarters of my brain that is no longer mine, that's controlled by this other side and i'm sorry that shape must be in line. Because at the end of the day, this is my mind.

Kethmi is a Year 12 student from Melbourne, Australia. She is an avid reader, watcher, listener and writer, with a keen interest in everything from French existentialism to modern psychological thrillers. This poem was inspired by a particularly clear and sleepless night.



Photograph Pixabay.com

SEEING/BELIEVING

my eyes are
tired, aren't yours
tired?
we've stared at
silenced skies
too long, wanting the
outlines of clouds
to paint stories
— our lives. we've
seen in every shade
of blue, every hue of grey and
black, cold night — more familiar
black, cold night.

notice now how every restless eye finds stars
bright dead

clusters

And spends lifetimes falling over a single constellation
— how long do you need to stare before they form narrative?
letting light break and chip away at retinas
— how much do you need to lose before they form guidance?

Just close your eyes, for a second,
Blink,
Exchange sighs behind eyelids,
Suffocate the blind silence

Gracie is a Year 10 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys listening to and writing her own music, as well as dancing. Her favourite author is Markus Zusak, author of 'The Book Thief'. Her poem was inspired by the loss experienced by the main character of this novel, whom Death has robbed of those she loves, namely a boy she has fallen in love with. Her poem is intended to give insight to how this loneliness and grief must feel.



Photograph Pixabay.com

THE ROBBER, THE ROBBED

The silence eats me alive.
It devours me, as my eyes blister and boil over.
The floor bathes in the stream
Spilt from my hung head.
Death has robbed me a lover.

I close my eyes, and see nothing but blackness,
Nothing but blackness and intelligent brown eyes.
Eyes that haunt me in my restless sleep,
That lure me as I toss and turn
And reach an eager arm towards heaven.

The leaves on the trees the colour of his hair
Hang dead and limp in the frosty breeze.
I am an abandoned shell, as skeletal
As the winter trees that creak and grope
In the ebony night.

If there is a God out there
Who carved me my heart with such delicate hands
Why did he tear it, grasp it, rip it
Out of my chest with his iron talons?
Iron claws that left a mark, a disease.

A cancer that spreads day by day.
I will soon be nothing, but a calloused wound.

Death has robbed me my love.

Rhea is a Year 11 Student from Melbourne, Australia. She wrote this story in 2018 after being inspired by the stories of many refugees fleeing to Australia to escape their dangerous home countries. She enjoys creative writing, reading, baking and running in her spare time and wishes to continue her writing as she grows older. Her favourite authors include Marcus Zusak and Anthony Doerr. She hopes that this story is able to raise awareness for the growing and persisting refugee crisis and through this story urges us not to turn our backs on some of the world's most vulnerable.

A MIRAGE OF FREEDOM

*'The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more'**

The young girl rubs at her forehead, the small granules of dust which constantly adorn her skin fall from her fingertips and rest on her slick skin. Her skin is bronzed, tortured by the harsh and unforgiving sun which reigns over the camp. Her face is gaunt and her rough parchment-like skin carves out her sharp features, accentuating the hollows of her cheeks and the sharp edges of her prominent cheekbones. Her hardships are evident through the bruises and scars which mar her body and her ribs look as if they could pierce through her worn skin. Her eyes are those of experience; they have seen hardship and peril that some could not even begin to imagine. They had seen the once-proud city she loved fall into a woebegone rubble of bricks and blood. She is now just a faint and ghostly memory of the young girl who left her war-torn country with only a heart of hope and high spirits.

She struggles to forget the memories of the boat which taint her mind and crawl into her dreams. She tries to forget the oily grins of the smugglers, the long cold nights without warmth or shelter and the blanket of grime which coated every surface of the small motor boat. Sometimes, she can still hear the hushed whispers of the children, who seemed to melt into their mothers in order to avoid the harsh and icy winds. She remembers dreaming of the new country as she used to gaze over the caliginous sky, searching desperately for a glimpse of land on the blank horizon. She remembers the utopia she used to conjure up in her mind. A land which served as an oasis, far away from the war. She can still picture the gorgeous yet foreign landscape which would fill her thoughts. She can still see the soft curves of the hills which would extend further than her tired eyes could see. The hills would be a patchwork of green; the soft grass changing its hue from a fresh young green to a deep and rich forest pine. The soft green would carpet the ground and each gust of cool wind would flatten it into soft combed waves. The grass she imagined would flourish, unlike the wild, rough and slightly yellowing tufts found in her homeland. She imagined the sky to be a pristine blue canvas with soft white brush strokes dappled across it. The serene clouds would sail by, gently passing on to whatever distant place the wind willed them to reach. Everything in this land would have a purpose, even the dew which sat upon the morning grass would mean so much more. She remembered wondering if such beauty existed or if it was merely fiction which appeared in the dreams of the naive.

She now laughs at the optimistic young girl who boarded the boat that sad night. Instead of the remarkable landscape, her eyes now rest on the monotonous grey of the camp which lies in front of her. A tangled mess of barbed metal surrounds the camp, its dark presence looming over the neglected land. The rolling hills are now replaced with the identical bleached white of the collapsing tents, pitched to offer shade from the unforgiving sun. She turns her head, her view of the world outside obstructed by the repetitive criss-cross of the rusting metal fence. It has been so long now. The image of her ideal life has now become nothing but an empty dream. She used to hope for a day where peace would reign over the land and that the fields of war would be where people play. She used to hope for a lot of things to become of the world, however now she just hopes for a place when she can feel safe and is at peace. As she gazes at the barren land beyond the fence, a single tear rolls down her worn skin. She has no strength to wipe it.



*The Chronicles of Narnia by CS Lewis.

Britney is a Year 11 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys reading, swimming and writing poetry in her spare time and especially loves playing with her younger brother. Jules Verne and Enid Blyton are her favourite authors and she continues to re-read their books every holidays! This poem was inspired by the multicultural streets of Melbourne's Central Business District and a particular busker who sits outside Hamer Hall every weekday to play his lute.

MEMORY'S SONG

Day break.
The shudder of a tram pushes
into the bubble of the working day as shoes
shift beneath the crowds. Each mind drifting
beyond finger-printed screens. Spacebars begin their clicks,
every sentence a battle
between bone-thin fingers.

I never heard a call so calm yet bitter, each raspy
bellow a memory of my childhood. A single note stopping short
in momentary silence. The shuffle of music sheets
crinkles in the coffee-stained air,
playing company to muffled laughs.

This foggy Melbourne morning when the grey parts
just long enough to offer a breath
of wind between Chinese tourist groups.

Beside the Yarra a three-stringed lute sings.
With every bow stroke it carries a face
from my adolescence;
conjuring images of thief-ridden markets
and a blind beggar's song.

Coins trickle onto a flat cap as the day passes by.
The breeze blows a harsh but wonderful tune
into the ears of reminiscing strangers.

One voice rumbles, cutting a coarse melody
into the monotonous day:
Quê hương là chùm khế ngọt cho con trèo hái mỗi ngày...

The black braid of the busker sways,
cameras click and babies wail. There is no silence
in this colourful city for even as the sun dies (dipping
below unrivalled towers),
life is sustained by the throb-throb of heartbeats
united as they listen
to the croon of the lute.



Victoria is a Year 12 student from Melbourne, Australia. She has enjoyed the reading and performance of prose, drama texts and poetry for most of her life, stemming from her early childhood. She also enjoys jazz and music, particularly the atmosphere that various soundscapes create. This poem is inspired by a moment of chaos, contemplation and confusion.



Photograph Pixabay.com

RAIN SONG

I am lost.

In a dark, familiar city.

Beautiful Aspirations
plague my sight.

once Spotless, always Spotless,
yet lined with an irrepressible taint.

A cloud looms-
But never breaks;

I am fragile,
Let It Rain.

— — — — —

There is a new disease in town,
Perfection.

A fungus, dispersing its spores,
not onto the stainless steel structures,
But into the minds
of those who make a city A City.

Until every thought is dominated by the want
For More

& More

& More.

Irrepressible.

— — — —

continued overleaf ...

RAIN SONG *continued...*

Satisfaction.

A forgone saviour
buried under layers of Filth and False Promise.

But is it lost?

- - - -

When I lose something,
anything, everything;
I lose my
Self.

A backhanded *Slap*

that causes no physical print,
Rather, it takes its toll-
bruising my ego, spirit and self-worth.

Who am I, if I am not great?
Who am I, if I do not succeed?
Who am I? What do I do? Then.

- - - -

I am lost.

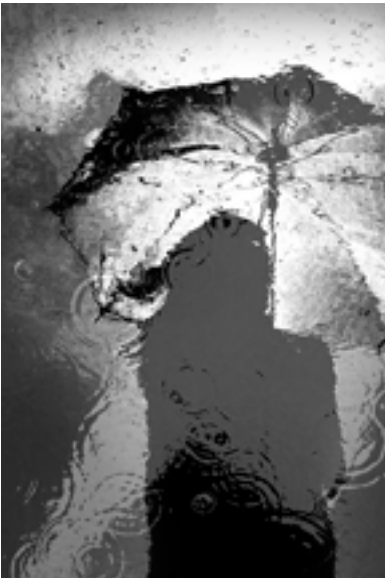
In a dark, familiar city.

Beautiful Aspirations
plague my sight.

once Spotless, always Spotless,
yet lined with an irrepressible taint.

A cloud looms -
But never breaks;

I am fragile,
Let It Rain.



Sandhya is a Year 12 student from Melbourne, Australia. In her free time, she enjoys photography, tangential conversations and Jaffa cakes. She discovered her love of poetry during her study of Gwen Harwood's works, where she found herself captivated by their simultaneous pith and poignancy.

I LEARN OF DIVISION FROM THE AGE OF TWO

Such is her escape from the prison of the senses.

On love's light wings was she flown at dawn,
Arms' grasp on the shore succumbed to the current.
Waves whisper to the melody of the boatman's tune,
Silver sewn eyes now reflect the moon.

Violets, and blood roses too,
Strewn across the mourning tomb.

But by night she lies awake,
Stripped warmth drips from her thighs;
Tomorrow morn will she cease to wane
When by her side lies company; she craves.

From lust she drew her final light,
Fruits of her existence loose at her sides.

Thin veiling difference from within extinguished,
The trap door is shut, and red curtain drawn.
She will now reunite with the one
From whose side her life was torn.

Eyes at the window have watched her escape
Never knowing the pleasure; she awaits.

The prism of colour returns to white,
As she begins her final flight.
A shard of sweetness slips from the Nightingale's lips,
At which point she crosses the bridge.

Across the plagued banks of the Styx,
A red cloak is strewn; her identity renewed.

With frailness of body and weight of soul,
Comes her departure from the hell-stormed home.

On clouds rest Eyes with tears of acid,
Mourning the loss of the trapped and placid.

*From the grasp of the guards his consciousness barrels,
Blazed embers extinguished by flames of rage.
His tongue tied yet mind no longer spliced
To the eyes of one whose heart was made blind.*

*Rolling hills of passion and anguish in life renewed;
Mortal wounds of solitude snake from the tomb.*

*Fish feel remorse for they were once fools
For only in shallow ponds are reflections cast askew.
Now free to flounder in an ocean of truth; they see:
Light breaks only where the sun greets Selene.*

*Ashen is the journey across dead wood;
The other side sees a rebirth from flames, on cue.*

*The new form is distinct in neither size nor stature
But cursed sight is no longer his nature,
Parlous quest for polarity put, now, to an end,
When eyes desire not to break but mend.*

*Once so carefully preened, coarse feathers
Slip to unveil soft wings of sweet spirit within.*

*Amongst the branches from which he was once removed
A fig is enjoyed whose seeds once grew
Hatred nurtured by the Words of One who knew
Not of the worlds He birthed; not one, but two.*

Such is his escape from the shackles of the mind.

Newly veiled are they both, as should have been before;
For only on fresh shores will truth be awash,
In which they are united, from above and below,
Perjuries evanescenced by the fresh blooms of Jove.



Angelina is a Year 11 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys performing arts, music, writes and reads in her spare time. Her favourite authors are Rupi Kaur, Heidi Wong, Neil Gaiman and Adam Silvera. 'stone hearts' is an allegory inspired by past events, and highlights how everybody deserves to have a voice.

STONE HEARTS

*did medusa ask to be made the villain?
to be the one with the knife in her heart?*

when young boys armed
with sticks and stones
(made from broken bones)
grabbed her hair.
carved out her heart
and felt like they were gods;
gods with nothing but smiles
on their lips who
took whatever they saw
and whatever they desired
just like that.

*did we ask to be made the villain?
because we hide behind bandages of fear
or because we too were stolen
from everything
we ever knew about the world;*

**and no one hears the voices
and no one hears the words
and no one knows the truth.**

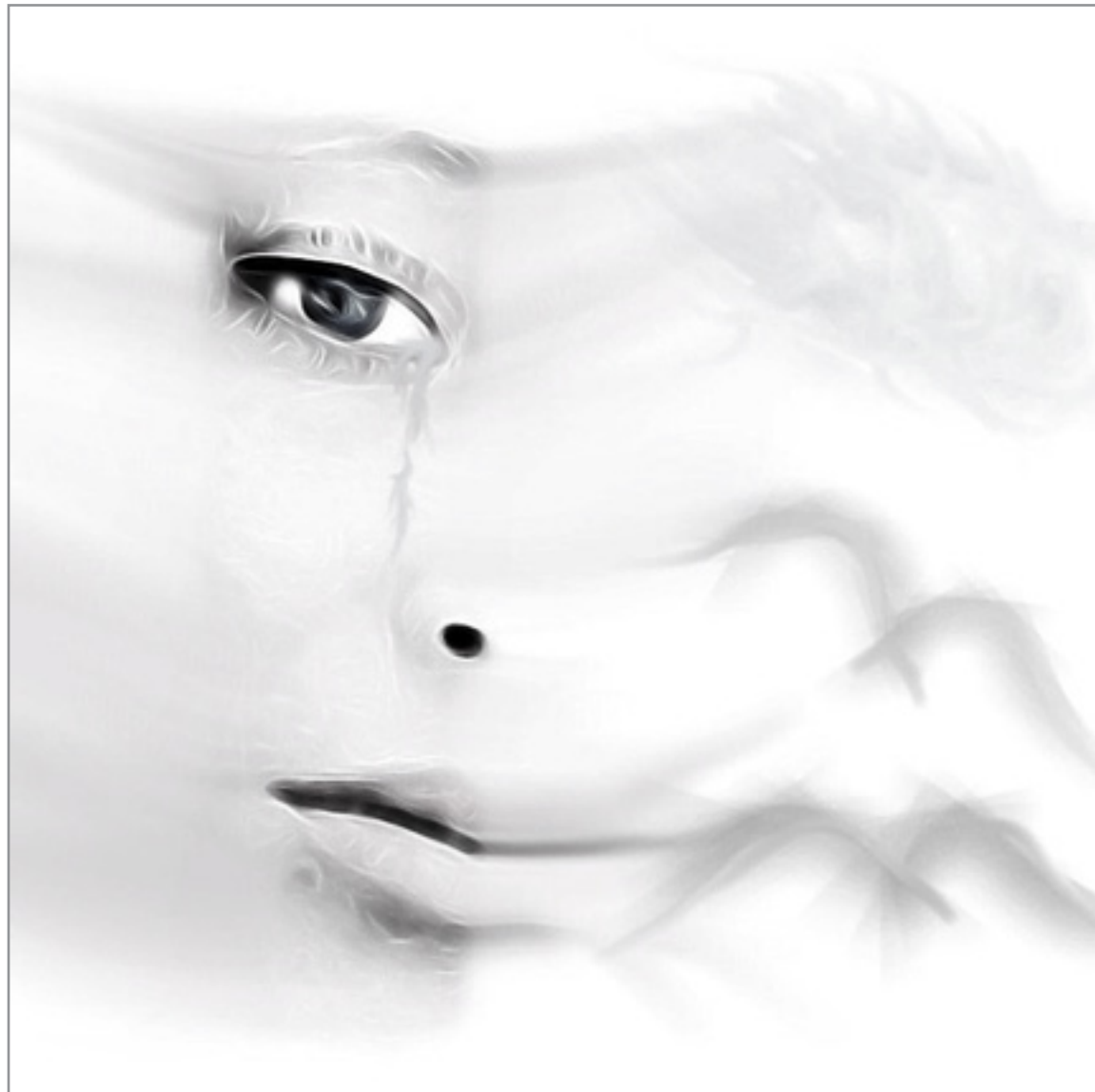
why would you fight with
words and cries when they deserve
to be frozen with snakes
with faces contorted into
distortions of terror

why would we fight when we
could just simply smile
and harden ourselves till'
our crimson hearts turn to stone
so no blade
will ever bleed us.
Again.

**for if you will not hear me
no one else will hear us at all**



Leni is a Year 7 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys playing sport in the rain and hanging out with her buddies. The poem, 'Confusion', is inspired by her love of playing emotive pieces on the piano. Her favourite authors are Patrick Ness and Neal Shusterman.



Photograph Pixabay.com

CONFUSION

Swirling colours bright and deep,
Kept inside, don't make a peep.
Once they're out you'll never know
How violently flying they will go.

Crying, screaming, pleas for help,
Did you just cause this damage dealt?
Emotions are tricky, spiteful things,
Possessing you; intoxicating.

When you forget all the familiar faces,
Have hopeless, painful, shrieking rages,
Just think back to when you started
How did your emotions turn you so cold-hearted?



A PIRATE'S TREASURE

Scarface Sam, Captain of the Blue Steel, Lord of the Seven Seas, was equipped to deal with a number of incredibly dangerous and potentially life threatening situations. He knew many excruciating methods of torture for prisoners and what to do if he became a prisoner himself. He knew self defence, how to navigate the oceans, survive a storm, loot a ship. He knew how to hold his rum, win (or cheat) at cards, and an incredibly large variety of creative curses that only someone with the foul mouth of a sailor would dare to use. Most importantly, he was ruthless and felt no fear, to the point where people whispered that he might, in fact, have a heart so cold it was made of stone. However, no matter how talented Scarface Sam was in his area of expertise, he soon discovered that there are some things one simply can't prepare for.

Sam gazed out at the soft waves, gently lapping against the boat. A summer breeze brushed over him, a welcome relief from the heat of the day. Something large and bulky suddenly thudded against the ship. It looked incredibly promising. With glee, the pirates pulled the chest on board, the promise of gold and gems right at their fingertips. Their greedy hands fought to pick the ancient lock of the chest. Sam jumped in front of the chest and raised his sword.

"Captain gets first dibs!" he smirked. Much outrage and moaning followed this declaration, but for the most part everyone was much too curious to argue. Suspense tingling, Sam dramatically heaved open the lid. There was a peculiar wailing noise, it was difficult to tell whether it came from the rusted hinges of the chest or the contents within. A cloth covered the treasure inside. Sam snatched it away and gasped in shock at what lay before him.

Its soft, pink flesh was dripping wet from where the water had leaked through the cracks of the chest. Cheeks dried with tears, it was wrapped in a thin blanket, which once may have been white, but was now incredibly grubby. The pirates were yelling and cursing in confusion. The Captain snarled at the baby in disgust.

"SILENCE!" Sam shouted suddenly, brandishing his sword.

"Surely we're getting rid of this?" cried one pirate in indignation.

"Of course we're -" Scarface Sam looked into the baby's eyes and felt an inexplicable jolt. He spoke quietly, "We're keeping it."

Alicia is a Year 10 student from Melbourne, Australia. She is a voracious reader and also enjoys creating her own settings in original stories. Apart from writing she loves playing and watching most sports, in particular Australian Rules Football and cricket. This story was inspired by the idea of putting two wildly different characters together into an unlikely situation and exploring how they could respond to each other.

It was a small hour in the morning, and the screaming was hysterical. Turning restlessly in his bed, the Captain groaned violently into his pillow upon hearing the wails. Sam trudged to where the baby was thrashing in its chest. He gave it his nastiest glare, and still the cries did not cease. He struggled to pick up the baby, as it was slippery as an eel. Cradling it awkwardly in his arms, Sam rocked the baby side to side in what he believed was a gentle motion. The baby continued crying.

"Shut up, you little devil," he muttered.

To his surprise, the baby's wee hand curled tightly around Sam's calloused finger. It gave a tiny yawn, then the baby's eyes closed and it fell asleep. Despite his reluctance, the soft bundle in his arms became a comforting presence as he pressed it against his chest. Sam suddenly realised what he was doing and jumped. Laughing at himself, he wrestled the menace back into its chest. The Captain ignored the cries ringing in his ears and marched back to his cabin.

It became clear to Sam and the crew that the baby would have to be fed. Ignoring the jeers behind him, the Captain collected a bowl of soup from last night's hearty meal, awkwardly balancing the baby on one arm. He carefully sat down and attempted to spoon soup into the baby's mouth. Barely seconds after success, the baby released an almighty roar and a stream of liquid poured over Scarface Sam. He struggled to hide his horror. A mighty captain like him, sprawled across the floor, dripping in soup? He had never felt less dignified in his life.

"What are you all staring at?" he growled. "Be gone, all of you!"

The pirates yelled out behind him.

"We've got to get rid of it, that wailing menace does nothing but cry!"

"It keeps me up all night! What reason do we have to keep it?"

"We should've just thrown it out in the first place."

Scarface Sam was indignant. "This is absurd, what do you expect to do with it, throw the child overboard?"

Their expressions told him that was exactly what they intended to do.

Sam swiftly hoisted the baby onto his hip and pulled out a long, shining sword. It was time to end this. Scarface Sam, Captain of the Blue Steel, Lord of the Seven Seas, realised that maybe, just maybe, his heart might not be as stone cold as it seemed.

Sarah is a Year 9 student from Melbourne, Australia. She thoroughly enjoys playing video games and robotics. Her favourite authors are JRR Tolkien and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. This short story was inspired by her love of mystery novels and the atmosphere of the Carnevale de Venezia which featured in a recent history lesson.



Photograph Pixabay.com

THE PICKPOCKET'S WALTZ

Bright strings of coloured light reflected off the murky waters of the Grand Canal. Thousands of diamontes glinted across the hundreds of faces in the dancing crowd, each bearing an ornate filigree mask. Gales of laughter echoed across the streets of Venice, overlapping the many conversations that filled the cool, night air. There were hordes of people dancing to the music playing in the background while others stood to the side and shared polite conversations. I smoothed down the front of my crimson gown and straightened my intricate silver mask. It was show time.

Unlike the hundreds of other people gathered in the Doge's Palace tonight, my work hours had just begun. I purposefully strode into the palace, careful not to stand out. With rent prices soaring higher than ever, tonight was my best chance of staying afloat for the next month. The familiar feeling of being swallowed up by the world filled my body, reminding me that this was just another day on the job. Albeit with a lot more people. More people meant more opportunities and my job was all about opportunities. Seeing that fatal moment where you had dropped your guard, turning to grab that second drink or to pick up a coin you thought you had dropped. I began my waltz. One, two, three. One, two, three. Every third beat was another item as I expertly navigated my way through the crowd. My hands glided in and out of bag after bag, taking wallet after wallet. I broke the rhythm only when a young man with a full raven mask and a well-tailored tuxedo stopped me and offered his hand up to a dance. I graciously took his hand and flashed him an innocent smile.

My waltz continued.

As the music started to slow, I knew it was my cue to leave.

"Grazie per aver ballato con me." I smiled once more at the man while slipping his golden Rolex watch into one of my hidden compartments in my overly elaborate gown.

"Grazie per essere stati con me." He bowed, being none the wiser that his wrist was a little lighter.

Effortlessly, I blended back into the crowd, careful not to linger in the same location while I inspected my prize. I rolled my glove down to see check my own watch. It wasn't there. Just as I was about to swear, I heard a voice behind me.

"Can I propose a trade, signorina?" It was the same man with the raven mask. His gloved finger had my silver watch hanging from it. I just managed to hide my shocked expression as I decided to play it safe and hope that he would back off.

continued overload...

© Sarah

"*Mi dispiace*. I don't know what you are implying, *signore*."

"I'm certain I'm not, Victoria."

"How do you—" I stopped myself before my confusion overwhelmed me. I summoned all my years of expertise to craft the perfect poker face. No one knew my real name. Not after my family's conning past was revealed. The mystery man glanced around at the crowd, clearly sensing my uncertainty.

"Look, it's too open out here. There are some people who still want you dead. Come with me and I'll explain."

Half of me wanted to find out what he was talking about, what he knew, but the more experienced side of me was wary of a trap. He was right about one thing though: There were still a lot of people who wanted me dead.

"Fine. But if you take a single step too close..."

"Done. Follow me."

He turned towards the exit, manoeuvring his way through the crowd as if he was familiar with it. Like me. As I trailed him, my mind worked to try and figure out who he was, how he knew so much and how he could have found me. He was clearly experienced but there was something about his manner that was so... familiar. As we left the crowded area of the party, the night seemed much colder than it already was. I rubbed my arms for warmth. A gown was good for blending in with the crowd but not great for warmth.

"Here."

Raven Man took off his suit jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. I was too cold to refuse the gesture so I nodded my thanks. Our brisk pace slowed to an easy stroll as we reached a residential area. I counted the blocks as we headed down a darkened street. The echoes from the party reminded me that I was still in the open. Eventually, on the fifth block, he stopped and produced a small key.

"Third floor. Number seven. Ladies first?"

He swept his arm out in a grandiose manner and gestured for me to enter.

His room was neat save for a stack of paper on a large mahogany table in the center of the apartment. Now safe from any prying eyes, I removed my mask; my identity was already compromised and the sequins were only an irritant now.

"I understand you have a lot of questions, and rightly so, Victoria."

"Masquerade balls are just the perfect opportunity for a surprise encounter." I replied drily.

"Seven years and you haven't changed a bit." He took a few steps towards me and I tried not to punch him. He reached behind his head and removed his mask. I could not stop the small gasp from leaving my mouth. A jagged scar ran down the face of the man that many knew as the world's greatest assassin. The man I knew as my dead brother, Albus.





THE MASK

All I could hear was my heart hammering against my chest, as a postman approached my house. He placed an envelope inside my mailbox, and I caught a glimpse of immaculate cursive writing on the paper before it slipped out of sight. Ominous silence followed, while my thoughts battled against one another. Should I go to fetch the letter, even though I already knew what I would see?

Stubborn curiosity won over the better of me. I rushed out of the house, towards the mailbox. I stretched my hand inside, grasping a thick, expensive envelope. My hands shook as I struggled to read the writing in the faint light.

My line of thought froze when I saw the words etched on the paper: 'Masquerade Ball'. Every two years, the council held this event, and the participants were chosen by none other than Master himself. They would be given the envelope, and could only open it precisely ten minutes before midnight. It was an honor to be invited into the ball, but some dreaded this because only ten out of the thirty people who attended it ever came back alive.

Tonight would decide my fate, one way or another: if I came back alive, I would achieve fame, and the rest of my life would be spent in wealth and grandeur. But—I tried not to think about what would happen otherwise.

Finally, it was time to open the envelope. My fingers fumbled over the gold lace. I couldn't help but let out a gasp of amazement as I gingerly pulled my mask out of the envelope. The front was a brilliant shade of orange, intertwined with threads of deep indigo. An intricate maze of patterns formed a delicate butterfly shape on one side, while priceless diamonds and pearls dotted the other. This mask was flawless. Putting on the mask, I stared at myself in the mirror. I braved a smile, but only the dark shadows under my eyes gave a hint of my relentless worry and the fact that I hadn't slept for days. Was I making the right choice about going to this ball? Was the promise of wealth and fame all a lie?

When I entered the ballroom, the first thing I noticed were the chandeliers that hung over the tall, domed ceiling. I then noticed the tension in the ballroom; everybody's quiet chattering was strained, and their dancing seemed rigid. Something was wrong; it nagged at the back of my mind, tantalizingly out of reach.

Rita is a Year 8 student from Melbourne, Australia. She enjoys the simple things in life, nothing more than reading a good book while sipping a mug of hot chocolate on a rainy day. She often finds herself immersed in thought, with story ideas occasionally finding their way through to nestle in her head. She aspires to become a musician while writing novels as a hobby, and this short story sprouted from an idea that she had while reading a magazine about masquerade balls. This is her first published story.

I walked around absent-mindedly for several minutes. As the orchestra finished a lyrical waltz, a wave of dread overcame me. I heard a sharp crackling noise, which soon turned into a roar. Flames. My instincts told me to bolt out of the door, to run as far away from this awful place as possible. But my feet felt like lead. Greed for fame and wealth kept me from running away. Fires engulfed the room. It was a ravaging monster, destroying everything in its path with its searing heat. Smoke rose to the ceiling. People were screaming and frantically running around. Their mask of calm could no longer be contained. I stood, stunned in complete horror.

"Go! Run through the emergency exit! Go!" Someone shouted in my ear. The ball of fire approached me. They shoved me out of the way as it went whizzing past my ear. Pain danced across my forehead. I staggered towards the exit. I didn't have time to see where everyone else was going, and who had saved my life. After a few agonizing steps, my legs collapsed under me. I fell onto the ground as a deafening explosion shook the whole world.

An impenetrable wall of silence followed the explosion. I had passed out, and no one seemed to be awake, except for me. How long had it been? What on earth had happened? I limped towards the man who had saved me. He was a lifeless rag doll, and the hair on his arms were singed from the fire. I peeled the mask off his face. He looked so innocent; why had Master done this? What had we done wrong? Everybody who had died—who were behind those masks? They were humans, just like me. Yet they were met with this terrible fate.

I screamed in frustration and helplessness. I finally understood: sometimes the truth was so awful that it had to be masked underneath a web of lies. We were only useless pawns in his little game. We had been lured into the trap, completely oblivious because of our arrogance and pride.

I would stop this, because I had unmasked the truth.

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