

WHEN WORDS TAKE FLIGHT

A collection of short stories by the 2012 finalists of
The Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer competition



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The Sydney Morning Herald

in conjunction with

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DYMOCKS
PUBLISHING

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INTRODUCTION

We're proud to say that *The Sydney Morning Herald* Young Writer competition, now in its 27th year, has grown over the years to become the most prestigious writing award for senior school students in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

Winning the Young Writer competition can be a life-changing moment for students; not only does it provide industry validation of their writing, but it can also be the start of a successful writing career. Each year, students submit a piece of creative writing with a trigger word as their inspiration. The 2012 trigger word was *flight*, giving rise to tales of rebellion, unrequited love, adventure and escape.

Though at times touching on the darker side of life, each one of the stories is uplifting in reminding us what incredible talent there is in our youth.

What follows is a selection of the best of this year's entries, written by our regional finalists. With the publication of this anthology, we are celebrating the remarkable achievement of our finalists and saying thank you to over a thousand students who shared their love of writing with us and to all the dedicated teachers who supported their endeavours.

With the National Year of Reading 2012 shining a spotlight on literacy levels in our schools, we hope this anthology will capture the imaginations of young readers and serve as inspiration for writers, young and old, for years to come.

Sean Aylmer
Editor-in-Chief
The Sydney Morning Herald
and *The Sun-Herald*

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The Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer competition 2012 could not have taken place without the support of our valued partners, who we'd like to take this opportunity to thank for their support.

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State Library of New South Wales

The NSW Writers' Centre

The English Teachers' Association

Holiday Inn Old Sydney

Pilot

Lateral Learning

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*A note from our presenting partner,
the University of Western Sydney*

The Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer competition is proudly supported by the University of Western Sydney. The University warmly congratulates all the students who participated in this year's competition. Fostering creative writing in the broader community and developing young writers both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels is the University's firm commitment. The University also houses the Writing and Society Research Centre, which is unique in Australia in combining research in the forms of both creative writing and literary scholarship.

At the University of Western Sydney, young writers can continue to develop their skills at the School of Humanities and Communication Arts, where Creative Writing and English are taught at an undergraduate level. From there, students can continue their academic studies at a postgraduate level through the *Sydney Consortium* MA and its DCA and PhD programs. Graduates of these programs have won awards and industry distinction with their novels, poetry and works of non-fiction, including the Vogel award for first-time novelists.



The Wild Youth

Aisyah Shah Idil

Malek Fahd Islamic School



She'd always been afraid of heights.

How ironic then, she mused, toes peeking off the cliff edge, that she had loved jumping off the swings so much as a child. But when she was younger, there were always laws, made firm and unshakeable in her naivety. That the flowerbed was infinitely softer than the seat; that no matter how much the metal joints creaked, they were still safe—

That once you flew, you'd always come back down.

* * *

There was a game they played.

It wasn't a game in the sense that it had a name and cards and miniature top hats that moved along coloured squares. They never sat down and acknowledged it – or wanted to, for that matter. But like all games, it had a purpose – victories celebrated with clinks of glass and losses brushed off like lint. Winning meant having the guts to do anything – no matter the cost.

There was only one rule: anything goes.

Just don't die.

Once, you stumbled into a wedding, pretending to be drunk, interrupting their vows and crying over the bride's overpriced white dress. You'd eaten a cockroach, shaved your head, broken your collarbone and stopped showering for three months. Another time you'd lit the TV Guide on fire, and littered the carpet with glowing embers, only to walk on it barefoot.

She never let you one-up her for long. She'd splattered the new car of her boss with rotten eggs, kicked a pit bull that had been frothing at the mouth, and fasted for an entire month on olives and dry cornflakes. Once, she drank an entire litre of spoilt milk – courtesy of your apartment. Pride had warmed your chest, even after she gagged on your new shirt.

She had been with you every step of the way, and you, with her. That was another rule, you supposed.

But this time – she had gone too far.

* * *

She wants her last one to count.

She's never felt more mortal – but she ignores the urge to step down and do something a little more reasonable. A little more forgettable.

After all, she's always wanted to know what she could do if she wasn't afraid of dying. A hell of a lot, it turns out.

And this – jumping off a cliff – was just another one. She might lose the game – but then again, she's been losing it for a while now.

Inching forward, she breathes, and feels the wind carry it towards the sea.

And jumps.

* * *

You'd been in the hospital so many times that the smell didn't even bother you any more. It used to give you a headache – the stench of bleach and urine and alcohol sinking into your skin, your hair, the wrinkles in your palm. You couldn't stand the fluorescent lights either, glinting off glasses and nametags, and messing with your eyes.

But right now, you couldn't care less.

You push the door open, and she's sitting on the bed; paper gown splitting and revealing her lucky pink Bonds. The door's louder than you expect, and she faces you with a smile so brilliant that you grit your teeth and look away. There's too much joy landlocked in that body – it makes sense that it would overwhelm her one day.

“Can you even swim?” The question escapes before you can clamp it behind your teeth. She's solid, and smiling, and *there*, but your eyes linger on her damp hair and you want to shake her more than you want to hold her.

“Nope.” She pops the ‘p’ and laughs; a horrible, wet noise that makes her shudder and laugh even harder. “And isn't that just hilarious? You had to be there.”

You turn away, resentment burning like ashes in your throat. Fists clench, white knuckles straining, fingernails carving half-moons in scarred skin. She was just so *stupid*. So, so stupid.

A muffled snicker reaches you. “You're thinking too hard again.”

“Don't – just *don't*.” You know she can hear the wire of anger in your voice, but you're beyond caring. “Just shut up.”

Your low, shallow breaths muffle the rush of your blood, blood, blood; and isn't it funny? You've never been more aware of the beats that keep you breathing than in the same room where another life is tearing quietly at the seams.

"You're *dying*. You've been sick ever since I met you. Why – why didn't you tell me?" You hate how quiet your voice is, but it would take a stronger man than you to reveal your agony. "If I'd known—" *I'd have stopped the stupid game from the start. I'd have kept you safe.*

I'd have saved you.

You swallow the words. They're useless now.

She's quiet for once, and you can see her silhouette shift to hug her knees. It's the most vulnerable you've ever seen her, and you can't stand it. She's a stranger to you now.

"It was stupid, wasn't it?" A dry chuckle escapes from her throat, but it isn't funny in the least.

"It's – it's a little like broken glass. All harsh edges and next to a pile of vomit; but it sparkles on the gravel so beautifully that for a moment, it doesn't hurt to touch."

She pauses.

"But then it hits, and you're left sucking your finger and wondering when you became so stupid. But that's just humanity isn't it? You live and live and live and there's never a chance to learn."

She turns to you, and you turn to her, and you can't help but feel that she's waiting for you to take whatever it is that she's just given; but the quiver in her voice turns into the quiver in your legs and there's nothing more you'd rather do than turn and leave and never look back.

So you do just that.

* * *

And for a moment there – amid the rush of air and the crashing of waves – she could taste it. Bittersweet and fading fast from her tongue.

Freedom.

An Ode to Philia

Maddie Burrows

Brigidine College, St Ives



Prelude:

He said, "I am as constant as the Northern Star," and I said, "Constantly in the darkness."

Preamble:

Love stories are easy to write, but difficult to write well.

Musings:

Finding *ad idem* is never easy. Often, young lovers assume the roles of Pyramus and Thisbe; short-sighted, deathly passionate, flighty. Destined to become famous tragedies; a laugh for the 21st. Occasionally, though, true rapport occurs...

A Story:

They called him The Prodigy. I called him Love. We had pragmatic minds and shared words and time. Our song was *Everlong*. We listened to it reclined in his bomb, sun roof cracked and feet on the dash. He was an escape, my Tom, Dick and Harry, from 3:21–5:00 on weekdays and the sporadic weekend misadventure, a walk-off-the-beaten-track, from tedious routine. Like with all boys, we had an easy banter, and overall everything proved way simpler than any happenings ever with any girls.

The bomb; cracked leather seats – a blank verse canvas abused in ire when words fail. Junky gym bag – essence of male (although Ralph Lauren is preferable). Coke Zero – sugar hit hold the sugar. P-plates.

Him: Omnipresent gum, shifty shades ("suave"), horrid golf shoes, tacky promotional rubber wrist bands (to hide the reminiscence of a childhood cricketing accident, of course).

Product: The next up-and-coming Michael Schumacher tycoon.

Add: Words to woo, impressive music taste, independence, law degree, sporting finesse, ambition, observance, wit, height, cornflower blue eyes and soft hands.

Product: An odd, yet true, rapport.

One Key Point To Consider:

This love was not romantic.

Our Sporadic Weekend Misadventures (A Collection):

3:21. Saved by the bell. A stampede takes flight, then a reprieve. Shoulders slouched against the strain of my school bag; I mooch. Eyebrows arched in surprise, I spot the bomb. Purple tulips, a reminder of my Dutch Oma.

* * *

Another day, another dawn; it tasted fresh, my bones restless, and the key in the ignition. A yellow dress demanded the beach. “Want some cheese with that grin, love?” Destination reached; a standard, taken-for-granted all-Australian beauty. Reclined on the sand, head cradled between his left pectoral and bicep, I can Zen out. Indulging my self-perceived cultured education, I fancy myself a Reiki healer and attempt to steal the sand’s hot energy through the pronation of my palms; some success. Trying to assist my attempts further, I seek to bury my feet in a dune of sand. Naturally, it seems only proper to bury him in sand too. We were a scene from a movie. I Baywatched it to the water’s doors in an attempt to evade the incessant flight of sand bombs. Abandoning ammunition, he homes in and picks me up and spins me around; takes me soaring. After a turbulent flight, I challenge him to the rocks. We meander over, risking the wild waves to breathe in the freedom and enjoy the palpable salt spray. Daring, as always, I edge to the Walls of Ston. Warm licks encourage my peeping toes. Waves pool around my ankles, playful. The cascade of water pulling me down in the next instant shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. Too trustful of the ocean, a product of many sun-kissed days. Expression distressed to the point where it was almost comical, he flies to my aid. Deep slices to my hands and ankles were the only casualty today; however, not wanting a Zanuck production, we scampered off. After a few glory pictures – for Facebook of course – and a laugh about our expressions that seemed indented forever into our memories, we bought Indian take-away and lazed in a park, talking as always of the mysteries of the universe.

* * *

Another day, another night. We dine at GPK. We ask for dough, to just play with as kids, but they refused. Too old, was the excuse. A scam, we said. His blue woollen throw-over matched his eyes: cornflower blue. We didn't talk much that night, we didn't need to. Presence was enough. The food was top-notch (to us).

* * *

Black was the colour of the day. A squid's inky veil digresses over the usual twilight blue. The moon was illumed in the gloom, resistant to the Black Death plume. We share a fetish for black jellybeans; a sugar hit loomed.

One Line Ruminaton:

I depended on him too much.

A Foreseeable Twist:

"Ask me why I can't tell a good joke."

"Okay... Why can't y—"

"Bad timing."

The classic ingredient to a Shakespeare tragedy. It's understandable, really. An unfortunate concoction of university, numerous jobs on the wing, a new girl and a flight to Europe. I am an understanding person. Yet—

He said:

"I am as constant as the Northern Star."

A Declaration:

I am a true Capricorn; I don't trust easily and I have a strong distaste for broken assurances.

A Stray Thought:

Perhaps, like a clairvoyant, crystal ball nurtured in his soft hands, he conceptualised an ideal for the future of our love; and it never eventuated. Perhaps he was just busy.

An Ode to Philia:

“The object of Philia is, after all, another oneself.” – Aristotle. To the Jury, I profess my love selfish – in part. Like Narcissus, perhaps my image through his cornflower blue eyes stroked my ego. In addition, I profess that his eloquence and ambition inspired me. It was beneficial to my self-progression to be around him. Yet, that aside, there was much more to it than my selfish motives. To neglect, I plead innocent.

Acta exteriora indicant interiora secreta:

External actions show internal secrets.

A Reiteration:

I am a Capricorn.

He said:

“I am as constant as the Northern Star.”

And I said:

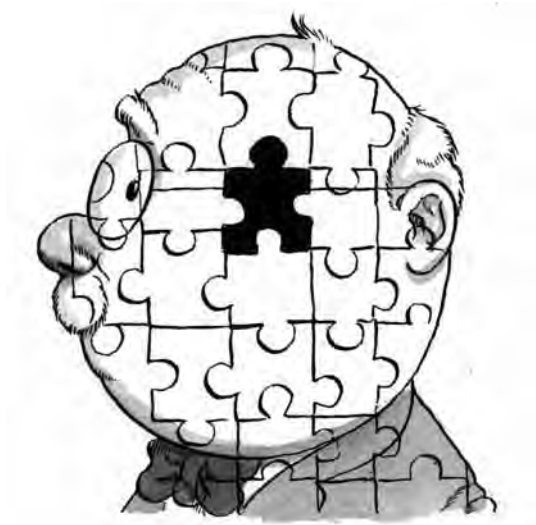
“Constantly in the darkness.”

End Note:

Isn't love always flighty?

The Great Collapse

Dinusha Wijesuriya
Baulkham Hills High School



“**I**’m afraid, Mr Zimmer, that Alzheimer’s is a progressive disease... these lapses in memory will only get worse.”

The trip to his doctor had been a defining moment for David. On arriving home, he had gazed bleakly at the faded photographs that littered his living room. “It’s a crazy idea,” he muttered to himself. He stared, disorientated, at the cracks in the wall and the marks on the carpet. Each seemed to represent little pieces of a portrait that was beginning to slowly peel away. “A crazy idea,” he repeated shakily, as fear began to overwhelm and anchor him to the ground, “I *must* be losing my mind.”

The simply-named Memory Machine had then been hastily designed. That suffocating sense of hopelessness had dissolved with the resolution that David would not let time wear away at him. He would safeguard his memories, record and then play them over as he liked, so that all of him – the life and times of David Zimmer – would not be a mere photograph for someone else to forget about.

Tinkering away with bolts and books and scrap material in the shed of his overgrown yard, David would gaze out at the looming structure of his once tidy and loved home, lost in thought and mumbling to himself all the while. A heavy coat of dust settled on the windows, and rampant weeds crept over its weathered walls. The Zimmer family had long ago grown up and moved away, and he had visitors few. The stillness and silence, isolating and often terrifying in the darker months, were perfect for experimenting.

With a little brilliance and sheer luck, prototype after prototype had inched closer to his goal. He’d see glimpses of smiling old friends, hear snippets of conversation and laughter – “*No David, don’t you dare!*” A young girl giggled, skipping out of his reach. The sky was blindingly bright, and the sun scorching, almost painfully hot against his skin – but they weren’t quite right, abruptly collapsing back again into darkness and leaving him alone with a piercing headache. When this happened, David would suddenly find himself bewildered, in the shed with no clue as to why he was

there or what he was doing. Over time, it began to take longer and longer for him to piece himself back together again.

When the Memory Machine was finally perfected, David immersed himself in the dream-like world of his own unconscious mind. The memories were blurry at first, but with his eagerness and longing came amazing and sudden clarity – *“I bet you can’t,” he grinned, surveying the tree. It towered over the two of them, its branches fluttering slightly in the cool autumn wind. The other laughed, already clambering onto a sturdy bough, “Watch me.”* Infinitely better than tattered photographs of staged embraces and artificial smiles, he relived those favoured moments over and over and over, until his head was saturated and his body light with euphoria. The Memory Machine became David’s escape to a world previously unreachable; a reality of his own choosing.

Only when the electricity fizzled out and the lights were extinguished, sending the machine sputtering and groaning for a much-needed rest, did David emerge from his own mind, head swirling and hazy with glorious content as he was unwillingly plunged back into a mundane existence. However, when he ruefully lumbered into the desolate house to get the power fixed, his attention was caught by the photographs that lined the walls. Formerly the cleanest, most cherished possessions in his care, they now matched the state of everything else he owned – the photos had begun to deteriorate, their frames tarnished and the glass mouldy.

Startled, he saw that the photos, the tangible evidence of his memories, were in fact amiss – the small figures were scowling in a picture of one of his happiest memories, while another featured rain-soaked silhouettes on a day David was *sure* had been magnificently sunny. “What on earth... ?” he rasped feverishly to himself, his voice broken and shaky after such little use. “How – how could this—” He gave a strangled and disjointed cry. Slowly, he gathered each photograph with trembling hands, and discarded each and every one of the false, tainted images. David dragged them down the driveway, each as heavy as sandbags, and cast them off to the gravel road, to be disposed of as rubbish for the local tip.

Eventually, the rest of the world caught up and someone moved into the house with him. He paid for the electricity, the water,

mowed the lawn, dusted the shelves and restocked the fridge. David couldn't remember who it was exactly, but he looked familiar – a nephew? He was in no state to protest when the man dragged him away from the shed and forced him back into the clean but lifeless house. Without the Memory Machine, David plummeted back to earth, pulled out of his own immeasurably better world and left far below, reeling, grasping at anything to escape again.

Stolen from his own reality, his body was as heavy as lead, slow and sluggish. He felt vulnerable, and exposed in a world that had long ago lost all meaning for him, and in a desperate attempt to break free of it, fuelled by reckless need, David threw himself back into his own mind. The cracks in the walls receded and the windows filtered through golden light. The room no longer appeared derelict and abandoned, but instead was brimming with liveliness. Though the frail body and tired, confused eyes were anchored, David Zimmer had drifted away, far above and far beyond a world he wanted no place in.

Very few people came to visit David. To them, he was merely an archetypal senile old man. Their voices would sometimes reverberate around the house, vague and nonsensical. *“Father no longer registers his surroundings... but sometimes he mumbles words, incomprehensible, like he’s talking to someone only he can see...”*

An Incident

Anna Kennedy

Presbyterian Ladies College, Armidale



For some people, living is like frost in the morning, shadows of silver melting with the sunlight, troubles melting away as experience and people enrich them, leaving their past behind, learning from mistakes, take any metaphor you like. Any way you look at it, I am different. My troubles, my past, go against nature, the frost growing over the garden with the morning sun; a garden frozen and dying. Life has brought me no relief, no escape. I am the statue in the garden, frozen into place, unable to flee from the encroaching frost, the proverbial rabbit in the headlights.

That's why the summer – sunlight, long warm days, heat reflected off concrete and tar, the buzzing of cicadas even through the city smog – makes me sick. I prefer the winter, dark, silent, cold and harsh; I have grown to love my frozen life, the sense of the inevitable every experience brings. All those others, forced to grow and change, apologise, retrace their steps, accept mistakes, how hard, how futile. We all die anyway. Except me. I am unchangeable, no part of me dies. But then no part of me grows.

I suppose, had it not been for That Incident, I would have been just like them. Laughing in the sunlight on their way home from work, confused and embarrassed at making a faux pas, blindly feeling and stumbling from one idea to another, changing outlooks as they change partners.

I work at a government office, education policies and the like. It is very boring in general; despite changes in governments, the policies themselves remain stolid and unyielding to popular opinions or fads. I guess that's why I am so good at it. Devising ways to improve the syllabus, mandatory topics, is all just rearranging of the same words. Permutations, or combinations; I remember learning that in Maths at school. Eventually, of course, you run out of options, but by that time, we will all be long gone.

I love the city at night. My office is not too high up, but the rooftop is. It has become mine, my sanctuary. Peaceful, restful; I can observe the world from above, car lights and blurred neon signs, bats flitting their ways through this haven of concrete and mortar. Often, as happened today, work goes late, when there is some specialist, or child doctor, or important professor, who has deigned to offer us amateurs some God-given advice. Today I think it is a new person, an ordinary primary school teacher whose

methods have been said to produce a miraculous effect. I glance at my watch, and head downstairs.

She really is a primary school teacher, organising all us office workers in a circle on the ground. She has quelled any opposition so firmly that I begin to believe her methods may indeed work. She begins.

“So, my methods are generally based on sharing experiences and opinions, and by doing that, learning from others, and learning to respect others’ perspectives. I figured that I could, well, convince you of the value of this theory through some practical exercises.” She takes a deep breath, kneeling on the floor with us, reminiscent of a yoga teacher before her disciples.

“I would like you all to breathe deeply, relax, and let your minds travel back to your school days. Far back to those earliest memories... now, I would like you, one at a time, to just talk about an experience. An encounter. An incident. Anything.”

I stiffen at that last word. The silence stretches, the tension builds like a balloon being blown too far. Finally, it pops. The first ‘confession’ calms me. A routine memory, the stickiness of lunch wrap on a hot day, melted inside a pink lunchbox. The next, the blur of faces walking to receive a prize, being unable to climb up the steps of the stage. Another voice pipes up: the shouts and sniggers at her birthmark. Sneers and the triumphant gleam in children’s eyes.

A memory stabs into me. The summer heat, the sound of cicadas. Walking on the way home from school, the shortcut past the water tower. I am frozen, rooted to the spot. Loud voices, shouting roughly, the pitiful whimpers of the younger boy, was it, or a girl. Blood on the pavement, a sickening crunch—

I open my eyes, desperate for light as a drowning man is for air. They are all looking in my direction, curious, distanced. A wave of nausea. I excuse myself, saying I feel faint, and almost run for the fire exit. I take the stairs two, three at a time, pounding to repress the visions in my head. I reach the roof, and burst into the quiet darkness.

I collapse onto the ledge. Blood on the pavement, a sickening crunch as one child stamps on the other’s arm as you would jump on bubble wrap. The screaming silence. My bag slips from my

arms, the tormentor's gaze meets mine. Backing away, averting my eyes, I was never here, I saw nothing, I heard nothing. Please don't hurt me. Hurt it, on the ground, blood and bone, silent in pain. I was never here. Flight or fight? Flight. Flight towards the light. I see the irony in that now. The newspaper headlines: "Shocking Violence In Local School!", "Child Dies From Injuries", "Tormentor Acquitted"; parents tutting, covering the pictures when I come into the room. But I was there. I saw it all. The funeral, unreal as always, the pathetic half-sized coffin smothered in flowers.

The darkness of the night seems to suffocate me. I feel the horror of that moment. I know what happened. I know who is responsible. The lights from the skyscrapers loom and grow in my sight, mocking, accusing eyes, empty of emotion, of sympathy, of understanding. I roll away from them. The bats in the night sky, points of darkness in this world of artificial light. The dark ground, the washed-out sky, smoke-stained clouds and blurs of neon. Flight.

Fishcakes

Tamara Lennon

Trinity Catholic College, Lismore



Stifling heat wafted in waves around her. The smell of garbage sizzling in the sun whirled through the humid air. The constant sound of horns honking filled her ears. Electricity hummed overhead, a complex jumble of wires tangled together. An intricate web of lines that carried the means of light, sound, heat, and cold somewhere, where, it was impossible to tell. She sat with the old cart on the cool street concrete. Leaning against posters of boxing politicians with angry faces and madness in their eyes. Listening to the bartering of bargains at the Chatuchak markets behind her.

The heat hit especially hard, she felt beads of sweat seep through her thick black hair and dampen her aged face. She lifted her skirt slightly to let her bare feet breathe, the soles black and hardened. Watched as noisy motorbikes carrying whole families screamed between the silent elegance of black business cars, leaving behind a trail of grey fumes that floated in the heavy air. She sat and observed the calm chaos as her city awoke to the new day.

The sun climbed above the towering shopping complex across the street where the air was cool and light, where food was served on ceramic plates in restaurants owned by foreign investors.

The sun reached the summit in the sky. The heat peaked. Time to begin work.

She clambered to her feet, using the old cart as aid, and pushed it down the street. Walking past the fruit and vegetable store, with a quick shout the grocer appeared with her usual bag of supplies. Fresh fish, beans, chillies, coriander thrown together in an old hessian sack.

When she reached her spot on the corner, she began to cook. Chopped the ingredients, her fingers moving quickly to miss the swift sharp blade. Mixed them and rolled the mixture into little balls in the palm of her hand. Threw the balls in a big wok, the bottom burnt black from years of ferocious heat. Heard the sizzle of cooking. Waited a while, listening to the traffic fly by. Felt the occasional sting of spitting oil. And when the balls were golden brown she scooped them out, and placed them steaming on a wooden board.

Then waited.

The city flew around her in a blur as she leant against the cart. Watching her home move faster as she moved slower. A tall coach pulled up against the curb. Tourists poured out and felt the wave of artificial air collide with her city's humidity. She watched as the women fanned their faces with brochures and scrunched their noses as they breathed the smell of her city. Watched their eyes widen as they tiptoed around bits of rubbish, shook their heads at her city's dirtiness. Saw the men pull uncomfortably at their collared shirts as the sweat began to stick.

And like they all do, the group sidled straight past her. Some eyed her food with a mixture of curiosity and revulsion as the smell of her cooking permeated the air for a passing moment. But they didn't stop. No one had. Her small business had never expanded beyond her neighbours. Until today.

The fanned faces and collared shirts walked on, eyes on the dangers that seemed to surround them; the tangle of wires overhead, the friendly banter of two workers, the bag of rotting rubbish in the gutter.

But one member had stopped. A young man walked towards her, his pale arms strong beneath his white linen shirt, his blue eyes a little wild with the thrill of adventure. He reached her, smiled with a mouth full of white teeth, and with only a hint of hesitation pointed to the pile of fishcakes sitting expectantly on the board.

She stared at him for a moment, wondering if something had been lost in translation. But he nodded with conviction and offered her a 100-baht bill. Immediately she put multiple fishcakes into a clear bag. Dropped in pieces of cucumber. Poured sweet chilli sauce. Poked a skewer in to finish. Handed the bag to the man, uncertain.

He smiled again, stabbed a fishcake onto the end of the skewer then popped it into his mouth. Her breath waited as he chewed, watching his expression change as the tastes of her tradition mixed and blended with each bite.

Waan, brio, kem, kom, pet.

Sweet, sour, salty, bitter and spicy.

Flavours combined and took flight. The unity of taste created in the simplicity of a small fishcake. The stranger nodded his head, mumbled thanks between mouthfuls, ordered another bagful.

White teeth smiled. Then returned to the group of faces watching in horror.

She stood in silent astonishment, holding more money than she had earned in a month. Prepared to cook once more. Watched the young man walk away, drip a dollop of sauce on his shirt, leave it there. She smiled, chopping beans, thanking her god for the fortune.

Then swiftly and unexpectedly, with the roar of an engine and the weight of her cart on top of her, her world turned tasteless.

She woke to the muffled cry of a foreign language and saw the cart lifted off her by strong arms in a white shirt. Her legs throbbed numbly, her head pounded. A motorbike coughed nearby, crumbled. A young boy stood sorely to his feet from beside the bike, his olive cheek grazed. The man with chilli sauce on his shirt knelt next to her and sat her up slowly. Bits of beans and cucumber fell from her clothes and landed in pools of sticky sauce on the footpath.

Blue eyes were wide with concern, but she took his young hand between her own, smiled and said:

Khop khun kha. Thank you.

And under the sun's sweltering spotlight and above the constant sound of city congestion two cultures took flight. Two worlds intertwined and soared like the complex flavours of a simple fishcake.

Overall winner for 2012

When Vincent Flew

Ashleigh Mounser

Kincumber High School



Vincent began to grow wings on a Monday.

At first it was difficult to tell what was happening. All he knew for certain was that his shoulders itched and his skin had become pink and puckered. He told Jamie, his best friend at school, that day; “A rash,” he said, “has grown on my back.”

Jamie was four months older than Vincent and terribly wise. He told Vincent to be patient; “In time,” he said, “this too shall pass.”

Vincent thought this was very clever. He was eight and was small and solemn with muddy brown eyes. He had nine and a half freckles and spent much of his time wondering where the other half had gone. He had blue and purple bruises on his arms and round red welts on his hands.

Vincent told his mother that afternoon, but she was unimpressed. “Shut up,” she told him, “I’m watching my show.”

Every show was mother’s show.

Vincent didn’t tell his father, who was raging in the den. Light bled across the floor from the cracks in the door and he could hear the sound of shattering glass.

On Tuesday, the rash began to rupture and became as mottled as gum tree leaves.

“Worry not,” said Jamie. “The optimist sees the scar that has healed over the wound but the pessimist sees the wound beneath the scar.”

Outwardly, Vincent agreed heartily with this. Inwardly, he wondered if Jamie completely understood the problem. He wondered if he had caught the measles, or meningococcal from Susie Brown, who went to Georgetown Hospital last month and didn’t return. When Vincent got home his mother was watching television. She looked like a badly dressed puddle.

“My rash,” Vincent said, “looks like a gum leaf.”

“Shut up,” she told him, “I’m watching my show.”

On Wednesday, small white feathers pushed out of his back like worms from the ground. Vincent thought this was quite odd. Jamie said it was nothing. “I think,” he mused, “that birds are fine and feathers are fine. Which means that you, Vincent, are probably fine.”

The puddle-mother was still on the couch that afternoon.

“My rash,” Vincent said, “has sprouted feathers and Jamie thinks that I am a bird. If I am a bird, you must be a bird or Father must be a bird. Are you a bird, Mother?”

“Shut up,” she told him, “I’m watching my show.”

The light in the den flickered and there was a crash like a couch being turned over. Vincent hid under the bed.

On Thursday, long white feathers dusted Vincent’s back and made a lump under his school shirt. Vincent showed Jamie behind the spidery demountable at lunchtime. Jamie thought this was very interesting. “Your dreams,” he said, “have sprung a feathered leak.”

Vincent was becoming very concerned and confessed that he did not completely understand. Jamie often became impatient when Vincent did not gather his meaning. Sternly now, he said, “You have grown wings so that you may fly, and not so that you may ask so many questions.”

Vincent’s mother was slumbering on the couch. Her belly had swallowed her chest and her neck. He poked a flabby part of her which had been left out by mistake.

“Mother, I am growing wings, but they are not for asking questions.”

“Shut up,” she murmured, “I’m watching my show.”

Vincent wished that more noise was coming from the den, so he could know what Father was doing. He went to his room and read his book with his shirt off because it chafed his new wings. He tried to put Vaseline on the places where new feathers were coming through, but he couldn’t reach.

On Saturday, three more layers of feathers and some cartilage grew. Vincent rode his bike to Jamie’s to see what he had to say about it all.

“Soon,” Jamie said, “I believe you will be either an angel or a hummingbird.”

Vincent was very anxious about this. “Is a hummingbird a good sort of bird, Jamie?”

“The very best there is, Vincent! And an angel is perhaps even better than a bird!”

Vincent thought that it would be best to ask his puddle-mother if he was allowed to be an angel or a hummingbird. “Do I have your

permission,” he inquired tentatively, “to become a bird? If I cannot be a hummingbird, could I be an angel?”

“Shut up,” she told him, “I’m watching my show.”

Vincent slept with his window open that night, in case an angel or a hummingbird wanted to visit and tell him what was what.

On Sunday, Vincent was in possession of two long white wings which he could spread like arms: outward and up. He could not get his T-shirt over his wings, so Vincent stayed in his room because he had heard once that it was not respectable for boys to wander about without clothes.

In the afternoon, he heard his father come out of the den and stomp upstairs to visit him. Vincent tried to hide under the bed, but his wings were too large. Father kicked on the door and the last sure hinge broke. Vincent could hear his mother in the living room turn the volume up on one of her shows. Father had hands like slabs of dirty meat and long grey whiskers. He was crinkled around the edges, like a piece of paper that had been screwed up and smoothed out again. His paw smashed down on Vincent’s head as he clambered onto the windowsill and leaned out of the open window. The sun was sliding down through the clouds like butter.

Father stopped and stared; “What have ye grown out your back, kid? What are ye?”

“I think, Father,” said he, “That I am a Vincent, and that I am fine. I think that my wings are not for questions; I think they are for flying.”

And so Vincent flew.

Freedom

Sophie Dahlenburg

Temora High School



Frail hands gripped burning metal as I looked out from my prison. There was nothing but absence: absence of water, absence of animals, absence of life. The only interruption was the few dry, spindly plants that appeared in small clumps every now and again. There was complete ruckus in my ears – a sound not originating from the desert, but from behind me. Hundreds of people crowded in a tiny prison. All of these people had come from nothing, looking for more – but they had returned to nothing...

Gunshots. The bitter echoes of the bullets resounded in the room, laced with venom. The auditory chaos slowly faded, though a dull ringing continued in my ears. I thought of my neighbours, and I knew I should be shocked, appalled, but we chanced death every day, and I had long been numb. I couldn't afford to be anything else. Sobbing... My mother was standing on the other side of the room, but as soon as I turned to look she stifled her cries. It was only the tears that were still rolling down her cheeks that gave her away. She was not like me. She had not been born into this war, not like I had. She has stood witness as it all started, and watched the descent into madness. She knew another world – a world that had been ripped apart by violence. This war was all I knew.

My heart was pained at the memory. I had not seen my mother for four years now. At least I think that's how long it has been – it's hard to keep track in this place. I did not miss the gunshots, not at all, but honestly I wondered if my fate here was that much better than the life I had before. A single bird soared overhead – salt on a fresh wound... All of my being wanted to take flight, away from the dirt, from the rocks, and the prison. I detested my confinement.

Peace. Momentary, but peace nonetheless. It had been a good week. No death, only fearful caution. It was then that my mother told me of the lands across the sea. "Ahmed," she smiled at me, "One day, you will find peace. There are wonderful places, far from here, that

neither you nor I have ever seen. They say there are endless pastures of green, mountains, forests, rivers. No dry earth, no famine, instead cities and great towers! Children go to school, and become doctors and nurses and become rich. No one ever goes hungry, and women are free! Can you imagine?" I couldn't. But I knew that one day I would make it to this place they call Australia.

I laugh in spite at these memories. My old life was wrought with risk... But *we* could walk beyond our yard. They called this freedom, but I was yet to feel free. There were solid steel bars and barbed wire to testify to that. They mocked me. They knew I longed to explore... to search... to find this land that had flirted with my imagination for such a long time, for I knew it was not here. I realised that I was unconsciously rocking my body backwards and forwards, and running my hands across the barren earth. A rhythmic distraction from the distorted and chaotic place I was now a part of. I focused on the swaying; a strange sense came over me. Almost calm, but not quite... more a thin, soothing veil over the unrest below. The dirt bit at my fingertips – digging its way under my nails, and embedding itself in the flesh. But still I rocked.

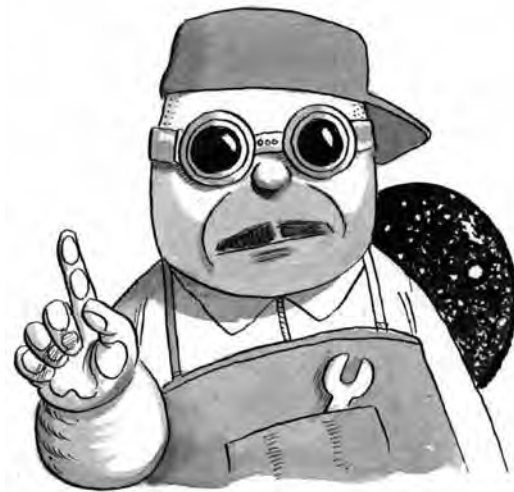
Rocking... Always rocking. Some days were worse than others. But today was not so bad – I could stand. It was unbearably muggy under the deck. But with so many people crammed in here with me, there's not much to be done. I felt exhausted, and longed for nourishment. My mouth was dry and every breath stung my throat and lungs. The man driving the boat told us it would only be a little while longer. Most of us were sick, and a few had died on the way here. It made me angry, but I knew that acting on impulse would mean trouble for us all. I sat back down, gritting my teeth. I tried to ignore the burning in my chest, the hunger in my belly, and the suffocating heat. I know it will be worth it when I finally get to Australia – and I am free...

Rocking. My fingers were ingrained with dirt, congealed with my blood. Where was this freedom? All I see is fences, guards, guns! The landscape itself told of nothing but death, and struggle! I gazed up at the barbed wire fence, easily ten metres tall. It was speaking to me again. Not mocking this time, but challenging. I stumbled to my feet, grabbing the fence for support. No guards close by, but no doubt they would see... I no longer cared. Nothing could be worse than here. My body was automated – I was a passenger in the back seat of my own mind. I climbed. As I strained to lift myself, barbs dug into my hands, tearing at the flesh. Everything burned. I heard yelling, shouting in that language that I did not understand. Hand by hand, foot by foot... They were curses, surely? Maybe warnings... I was at the top of the fence. Guards running towards me. *Gunshots...* A jolt to my stomach... Not burning, but searing! *I was rocking... Always rocking...* I was off the fence. Not falling, but flying. *Peace, momentary, but peace nonetheless...* A small smile of resolution escaped my lips... I was free.

Hesitation in Space

Ruby Conolan-Barrett

Denison College, Bathurst High Campus



Stars spill across the screen, vibrating as they drip in increments down the sleek invisible surface. The very first Plasmisphere is online.

No, I'm sorry.

Stars spill across the liquid dark, shuddering balls of light pinpricking the black sky. Two bodies float, weightless, awash in an endless sea. There is no sound, no scent, no thought. All that exists is movement, the kinaesthetic suspension of molecules in space.

Stop. Extend the ectomorphic figures' right appendage towards the top of the screen.

Miniscule vibrations pierce the soft pad of the mechanic's fingertip as he swipes the surface. *They feel as we do*, a deep voice explains. *Yet all we feel of them are vibrations. Try a faster swiping motion.*

Anatomy twists, the figures flip. Legs over heads they tumble around the trans-Neptunian orbit, sway in the ethereal glimmer from Saturn's absorption lines. Her annuli are radiant in the darkness.

Why do they breathe? Mechanic Fingertips questions, eyes flickering to the left, tentative.

A whisper, tickling in softness on the hairs of his ear.

Because we let them. Shhh, don't tell. Not even the vacuum of space knows.

The deep voice is malicious.

Change that. Soothing.

Mechanic Fingertips smiles. *Yes, of course. That's right.*

Starlight: twinkle, twinkle in the eyes of the slender creatures. Lips: luscious, lustrous. Breathe: bubble, burst forth with a gasp. Now, the Interlude: fireworks – a fleeting flight of fancy across the sky. A skirmish! Limbs skim, skeet, strive across the darkness. Twisting and turning, they begin to tingle with glee. Star clusters coruscate in the night, expanding as the bodies dance. Dance! the stars sparkle. Spin... the moon murmurs.

The woman stretches into the black abyss, arms flung out.

Ta-daa! Here I am!

She merges into the dark, a bright primary star striking a trajectory through space. He, the companion star, flocks her, mir-

roring her every move in perfect detail. His semi-major axis [x] = [precisely] 25 hexaltrons² from her core [y].

Together, they trace the paths of neutron stars, superimpose their forms onto receding particles of exploded supernovas. Child's play in the carbonaceous chondrites, trails blazed from the Kuiper belt to a blazar. They escape all velocities but their own, relativity curving through the gravitational pull of space and time; two synthesised singularities in perpetual motion as they travel the universe.

The nucleosynthesis is perfect, the deep voice sighs next to Mechanic Fingertips. *The nucleosynthesis has been a success!* Report to Desk C for the success party, the taut pink lips on the walls smile. Report to Desk C for the success party, the eye stalks blink sinisterly.

What? They blink *becomingly*. How could I forget my alliteration?

Drinks fizz down gullets, bright yellow liquid popping gaily in the mechanic's mouth. Camembert oozes off gold-plated trays and electronic orchestration swims through the air. The nucleosynthesis has been a success.

In Room 66, the bodies are stilled. Suddenly, frozen in blackness, they spark. Ever so slowly, they extend their limbs.

Hesitation in Space... I like it. A book title?

Silently, the interferometric fringes – **that is** – the successful combination of light masses, begin to move in the darkness. This time, the decision to move is theirs. The man spreads his fingers wide and powerfully strokes through the dimness to meet his counterpart. Her head curls around to say hello, hand stretching out to meet his. They are magnetically drawn to one another, two life forms reaching for contact, similarity, physical touch. A gasp; fingertips meet. FIZZ. A frenzy of skin particles fills the cosmos. Without consent or control (precisely *because* this is lacking), a parallax takes place.

[Parallax: The shifting of objects (them) against a fixed point (their place in space and time) governed by omnipresent control.]

You see, they were engineered without free will.

And without free will, they could not have moved. How, then, was it possible for them to touch? To defy the realms of possibility?

That is precisely what a parallax is. An impossibility. All it took was one thought.

EEEE EEEP EEEP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Eye stalks blink and flash red. The glass tumbles from Mechanic Fingertips' fingertips, shards sliding over the squeaky linoleum floor. The doors of Room 66 barge open, scattering the shrieking mouths.

In the darkness, Mechanic Fingertips is assaulted by a deep voice.

INFERIOR CONJUNCTION, it booms. THE STELLAR EVOLUTION IS DEFUNCT. Mechanic Fingertips moans. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!*

In the Plasmisphere, a rolling wave of heat and gas deadens everything in its path.

Oh dear, the safety switch.

– SYSTEMS OVERRIDE –

Delight → Despair. Universe DeFraGmENTs. The woman stares into the eyes of her companion star, mouth contorted – silent scream. White light shoots apart the blackness.

The OuTside wOrld is sEepiNg—

BuRsTinG—

Through CrAcKs of A.Failed.RealitY.

DaNce through the skies = DeFuNcT.

Planets DifFrAcT.

Galaxies DIIntEgRatE.

– DiStRAugHt –

Beings DepArT, DECLine through DaRKnEsS nought but DARk MaTtEr TRaPpEd inside a ShUddEriNg sCReeN.

Room 66. Two tall figures in stiff white suits march in with a large ziplock bag. As the body is dragged away, a stream of light from the open doors illuminates the only object left in the room. The Plasmisphere sparkles, one million dust particles of a ruined universe reflected in the depths of the screen.

[Particles = Reflection Nebula]

SLAM. The doors shut, the glimmering particles vanish.

If no-one sees the aftermath of destruction, does it truly matter? Does it even exist?

The slow bumping—

No, for the last time, I apologise.

The slow sliding drag – **ah, yes** – of the body recedes across the linoleum floor.

It is a pity Mechanic Fingertips had to die...

I rather liked him.

Just Like Flying

Alex Henderson

Hawker College



“Falling’s just like flying,” Spiro recited with a grin like a string of pearls.

The baking concrete hummed with warmth beneath their bare feet, the sky pure and cloudless overhead, arcing endlessly over the world below and making the yellow sand and spectrum of beach towels seem all the brighter.

The concrete of the bridge, though, was rigid and grey as always, chipped and worn down in places and scrawled with the names of long-forgotten lovers in the hollow underneath, but sturdily and steadily grey all the same. It had always been a picture of menace to Rachel, as many things had been at one time in her youth, watching in horror from the safe shallows of the estuary as older, braver and lankier kids flung themselves off it into the water below, possessed with a mysterious magic rush of the blood that let them leap from the foreboding ledge.

It was inevitable that her time would come. After a somewhat rocky move, Rachel was a part of the town, inescapably – she had calluses on her feet from living near to barefoot and chapped lips from remaining by the sea when the winter wind scraped off the South Pacific. She wasn’t a stranger any more; she knew kids from the town, kids from the wayward-leaning houses on the scrubby hills overlooking the bay, kids whose parents waved to her when she went into the shops and memorised her favourite ice cream and asked kindly if her mother was doing alright. She was part of something here, and the final stage of her otherwise silent and informal initiation was the bridge.

“Come on, what’re you scared of?” Spiro folded his arms. A small crowd had gathered on the path that ran along the edge of the bridge, fenced off from the road.

“You can’t jump when it’s low tide,” he nodded. “But when the inlet’s full it’s totally safe. Just don’t land on your belly, right?” Spiro turned his grin onto the gaggle and there was a collective burble of laughter and a groan from one individual.

The heatwaves coming off the asphalt were interrupted by a car that trundled past, eliciting a guttural *clunk* from somewhere beneath the bridge. Rachel looked down into the blue below, flowing gently under the concrete arc, looking strangely solid.

“I can’t do it,” she announced to Spiro, steadying her voice.

“Well that’s a shame,” he said. “You’re really missing out on something.”

Rachel looked at him, into eyes as dark and deep as the ocean appeared. “I’ll tell you something, I used to be scared of the jump too.”

It seemed impossible, but the broad boy was lowering his voice and seemingly his entire being to lean towards Rachel. “It’s that gut reaction, isn’t it? You know your stomach’s going to fly up into your throat and it doesn’t want that at all, so your body and mind do everything they can to convince you not to.”

He leaned back. “But maybe, I dunno, maybe that’s *why* it’s so exciting. You’re saying ‘hey, stuff you!’ to your own senses.” He grinned again, teeth jarringly white against his tanned face. “You’re taking control.”

Rachel looked down over the edge.

Perhaps, she thought, the notion hanging strangely in the buoyant, colourful air, that was why people jumped to kill themselves. ‘Took his own life’ was the phrase the social workers in the city had used. It seemed fitting, put the way Spiro had, the ultimate act of seizing control of your body and mind, to *take* your own life and do with it what you would.

A leap of faith, she pondered, looking down at the water. Faith that you wouldn’t be getting up again. Taking your life into your hands and gripping it tight as you propelled it towards the ground.

“It’s amazing when you get in the air though,” said Spiro, seemingly from far away.

Rachel sucked in a breath of the seething summer air and stepped closer to the edge.

“She’s not going to do it.”

“I reckon she is.”

“Shh.”

Kicking the self-preservation instincts. It was as simple and as complex as that.

Rachel shifted closer and sprang forward. She took the kids on the bridge by surprise, she moved so fast, and left them flinching back in shock, but she didn’t know this. She was, as Spiro predicted, feeling her innards fly towards the roof of her mouth and feeling all her nerves scream and demand to know what she was doing.

And then she was flying.

It must have only been a second but it was Rachel's first taste of eternity, weightless with nothing but air around her, no gravity to inhibit her, nowhere to hide, just floating in the void with endless blue above and endless blue below.

Perhaps, she thought, the notion hanging in the air with her, it would not be such a sad thing to die if this was the last thing you ever felt.

The water wrapped around her, bubbles racing over her skin, hair billowing around her head like a nebula. She surfaced and sucked in a breath, blinking salt out of her eyes and letting reality greet them once again.

"You did it!" whooped Spiro from the bridge. "I knew you could do it!"

Rachel felt herself grinning, though sadness was swirling around her heart like the tide. She had won the dare game against her own body and mind.

Perhaps *he* too had felt a certain triumph as he rushed towards the ground – not the cool embrace of the sea but the harsh grey slap of concrete, but for a moment it hadn't mattered. For a moment everything was clear, he had beaten the world and all its treachery, and been awarded a small eternity where there was no difference between falling and flying.

The Wisdom Tooth Diaries

Lauren Pearce

Macquarie Fields High School



The fluorescent light above me buzzed and flickered, which was surely a safety hazard in a hospital – of all places! And that wasn't all. Several minutes ago, I had made the disconcerting discovery that the gurney they had put me onto had its corners cut off – like a coffin.

On the other end of my coffin an orderly flicked through a folder containing all of my forms. She peppered me with questions: my name, date of birth, medications, all in the same, raspy, monotonous, 'I-hate-this-job' voice.

"So what's it going to be today?" she asked, not looking up from the folder. In response to my confused silence, she repeated, "What are you having done today?"

"I—" I paused for thought; I had a choice? Perhaps I could use this to my advantage. "I'm having an infected toenail removed."

She frowned – if only marginally by wrinkling her brow – and pulled the blanket back so she could see both my feet.

"Nice try, kid," she sounded in that same voice. Like nails dragged down a chalkboard with a deafening lack of enthusiasm.

"Thanks..." I mumbled. "Wisdom teeth."

"Oh," her mouth twisted in the corners, and she raised an eyebrow, then crossed something out on the form.

"What? What did it have on there?!"

She strapped the blood-pressure monitor around my arm, and mumbled quietly, "Appendectomy."

"What?" I gave a start, and tried to sit up. "I don't want a—"

"It's ok," she told me.

"There's nothing wrong with my—!"

"I changed it." She put the folder down on the end of the bed.

I laid back down and began to bite my nails as she took my blood pressure again. "BP has gone up a bit, darl..." She took the cuff off, "The anaesthetist is going to come in and set you up in a couple of minutes. Just try not to bite your own hand off while you wait."

She left, and shut the curtain behind her, sealing me off from the rest of the ward. Alone, my mind began to fill with possibilities.

My teeth don't hurt that much – I mean, the headaches are bad – but I could take medication for that. I could consume only soft things to avoid chewing. The soups weren't so bad, and ice cream on a daily basis holds hidden benefits. Yes, it could work...

The hospital gown felt as if it was beginning to tighten around my neck. Sweat was beginning to gather on my brow under the shower cap they had given me. *Perhaps*, I thought, *if I was to go and get some air before the anaesthetist turned up, nobody would know that I was gone.*

I slipped off my coffin, and began to rifle through my folder. In a plastic sleeve at the back I found a key – *the* key – and removed it with shaking hands. From there, I took flight, pulling open the plastic curtain and running barefoot down the cold corridor, towards the swinging doors into recovery.

I passed a surgeon, scrubs and face-mask covered in blood, brandishing a scalpel. I blinked.

Or was he just an orderly? I think... yes; just an orderly. He darted forward, and his hairy hand clutched at my gown tie, but I was already gone.

I slipped through one of the swinging doors. Right – I had to turn right to reach—

And then I saw them: the line of lockers. Looming, sterile portals into which disappear all traces of our former lives, our clothes. My key would open one.

At the main desk, one of the nurses spoke, “I don’t know. She must’ve just got up and walked out. You better call security.”

I fumbled with the lock, hands shaking too much to function properly, but eventually got it open. From it I took my clothes and slid into the changing room.

A few minutes later, I cautiously emerged in less-conspicuous garb. I peered around the corner into the main recovery ward. All I could see were surgeons. Surgeons filling out those incessant forms. Surgeons bringing cups of tea and little sandwich triangles to patients. Surgeons laying in a lethargic stupor, recovering from eye surgery.

Surgeons walking towards me slowly, telling me not to panic.

I had been backed into a corner without realising. Surgeons – no, security – I couldn’t tell.

“Hon, you need to calm down...” one of them said. “You’re not thinking straight.”

“Oh, don’t tell me how I’m thinking! I know exactly what’s going on. You’re going to take me into surgery on one of those coffins and cut me to bits! I am *not* sticking around for this!”

Another grabbed me by the shoulder, “Didn’t your surgeon tell you what happens to wisdom teeth? They fuse to the bone if they’re not taken out.”

I stopped dead. “What...?”

The guard then started a graphic recount of what happened to him after he delayed his surgery. Talk about being cut to bits... Suddenly things weren’t looking so bad.

* * *

Later, lying in recovery with gauze in my mouth, still half asleep and full of morphine, I realised just how wrong I was. Things really were *that* bad.

Another young girl came through.

“What is it going to be today?” asked the same orderly in that same gravelly, ‘I-really-want-to-be-somewhere-else’ voice. When the girl replied that she was having her wisdom teeth taken out, the orderly said, “Oh, that’s not too bad. Ask this young lady here.”

I rolled my eyes, and tried to say, “Piece of cake”, but it sounded more like “Hrgg hmn hrg” through the gauze.

“Don’t speak,” she ordered.

Run, I thought, *Run as fast as you can*. They led the girl off.

I re-adjusted myself in my bed, and winced. *Why did my side hurt?* Through my gown I could feel that my right side was bandaged.

Oh no...

“Nurggh! Nursggh!”

Depression

Charlotte Brady

Vincentia High School



The air hangs thick and orange over the room. Sweat is trickling down the rivet of my spine, pooling in the bags of the uniform they've strapped me up in. I s'pose all these people think I'm sweatin' because of the pressure. I'm not. I haven't lied. There ain't one ounce of guilt in me.

When I was ten, my Pa was kicked off McMurchie's cotton field. Pa'd worked for Ol' McMurchie his whole life; he didn't know nothin' but cotton. For years Pa'd bust his back in them fields, pickin' till his fingers was stiff and dead and the sun split his skin, same's it splits the case of the cotton boll. Didn't stop McMurchie kickin' him off that cotton field, though.

There weren't no cotton fields in need of workers, so Pa never got no other job. Never got no money, either. The few dollar pieces we did have moulded themselves into the cloudy glass o' cheap liquor bottles. By the time we buried him in the sandy plot out back, his blood was as watery brown as the poison that killed him.

The man across the bench is screeching. He's getting really worked up; his brow's all shiny. He's taken off his thick hat and is fanning hi'self so hard he's breaking into a new sweat. I'm not listenin' to what he's saying. It's prob'ly all true. Even if it ain't it don't make no difference. I'm a dead man.

I used to have a dog, a stray Pa picked up. Tod was his name. He starved to death that first summer without Pa. I found him, in the kennel we'd made out of an old petrol drum. Nothin' but a bag o' bones, he was. I remember running back to tell Ma, and being scared by how much she looked like Tod.

We was always hungry, Ma an' me. We ate nothin' but beans; fat, floury yellow ones. I couldn't stand the smell o' them cooking; like stale turned dirt. It seeped in ever'where, unescapable.

Except for when we didn't have no beans. Those times was the worst.

Pa'd once told me 'bout the tins of ham and sardines and sweet, crushed pineapple McMurchie had. Took me a long time to figure out why we never had any tins.

It's my man's turn now. I don't really listen to him either. I already know I don't got a case no jury could be bothered listenin' to. He knows it too. I can tell, 'cause he's not gettin' worked up like the other man. Certainty gives a man confidence.

My man is flounderin' through a hopeless argument. Ever'thing 'bout his case is hopeless; from his sad eyes to his limp notes litterin' the bench. Ever'one can hear the plea in his voice. I don't need him to plea. I know what I done. And I know what the consequences are.

Even those beans cost somethin' and Ma an' I had to eat, so when I was eleven I got myself a job on an apple orchard. I was light an' nimble, like I could spring into flight out o' them trees. They had me climb right to those fruits in the top branches. I broke my arms twice each fallin' from them rickety old ladders they made me use. Ma an' I went real hungry those times my bones was mending.

It was on the orchard I learnt why men like McMurchie can eat tinned ham, while Ma an' me don't have nothin' but beans. It's 'cause men like that feel they deserve a little bit more than ever'body else. They feel like ever'body else owes them somethin'. So those what don't deserve got to work for 'em; bust their backs pickin' cotton an' break their arms fallin' from their no-good ladders. Ever'body else works hours an' hours so McMurchie can have all the crushed pineapple he deserves.

It took me even longer to figure why I didn't deserve what McMurchie had.

The jury are standing up, shufflin' out of their benches. I see not a flicker of sympathy for me in one of their twelve stony faces. I haven't got a chance. But I couldn't expect anything else. Not after what I did.

Ma lives in the corner of our shack, right next to the splint'ry window. She sits in her rockin' chair, not even rockin', just gathering dust. She hasn't spoken a word in years.

Ma just don't want to be 'round no more. There's no such thing as livin', just workin' and boilin' beans. There ain't any life left in no one; there's no trust, or friendship. Just the rickety ladders and the sandy plot. There's nothin' can cheer Ma up; cheerin' don't exist no more.

The jury are filing back in. Didn't take 'em very long to decide. It's funny how easily a man's fate can be thrown around.

It weren't too long ago I figured how I could get what McMurchie had. It wasn't just 'bout makin' others work for what you deserve; it's hatin' ever'thing between you and what you want. You can't

have any other feelin's, just hate. And you got to be prepared to knock down what gets in your way.

I knocked down McMurchie the same way he knocked down Pa. And I didn't even feel it, 'cause the hate took up ever'thing.

The judge stands. I listen very caref'ly to him, though I already know what he's goin' to say. I'm not kept waitin' for it.

"Guilty!" he shouts.

That's all I need to hear. They're gonna lynch me. They're gonna hoist me up a tree 'cause I did what ever'body else who has what they want does. It didn't have to be McMurchie, it could've been anyone; anyone I could have knocked out of my way so I didn't have to pick apples no more. So Ma wouldn't waste away in her rockin' chair. It's all men like McMurchie who stand between me and tins of sweet crushed pineapple.

I wonder what'll happen to Ma. She'll prob'ly go the same way as me without no one to look after her. I feel real bad 'bout Ma, but she wants to go anyway. There's no point spendin' your life in a rockin' chair. There ain't really a point to anything no more.

I just did what ever'body else who's got anythin' in this crazy world does. Maybe ever'body else just does it better 'n me. At least, they don't get caught. But I tried my hardest. And I ain't sorry.

Nightingale

Fenn Idle

Fort Street High School



The room is stuffy and quiet save for the scratching of pens; he sits, staring at the open book. No matter how he tries, he does not understand.

You see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing.

The tautology confounds him. He attempts to rephrase.

It is that thing, which it is; you see that it is no other thing.

*It is no other thing, that which you see
(it is, which it is, that thing).*

No other thing it is, that thing which you see that it is.

The sentence goes round in his head. The clauses lose structure. The grammar gives way. It is no use. The thing, which he thought he saw, is gone. And now he is lost in another form of aesthetic appreciation far removed from Aquinas or Joyce.

He catches himself looking and turns away. It is too late, inevitably she sees him, smiles. The moment overcomes him.

“Hey Rose.” (*adjusts glasses, widens eyes*) “Do you want to go out with me?”

The eyes bear down on him. Now is not the time.

“Well now,” (*kind, patronising*) “that’s not very romantic, is it?” (*pause*) “If you’re going to be my boyfriend you’ve got to be romantic... Write me a poem or something...”

He stands and leaves. Brash, stupid.

He steps into the courtyard, flees through the back entrance. The summer day surrounds him. The city is deserted. Hordes of civil servants and university students are hard at work, locked away, indoors.

He walks through the lobby, into the elevator of the university lodgings. Presses the button for the mezzanine. His two flatmates are either not at home or do not wish to be disturbed. Unheard or unheeded, he sits at the dining table and writes.

A journal entry to begin with, it becomes a tirade. Pent up, post-adolescent, emotions flood the page. Such flow, such literary inundation, he becomes immersed in his own libretto. His hand scrawls until it hurts, his pen abrades the paper. The moment passes. Drained, he lies on the couch, looks at the ceiling. A girl,

his neighbour, is singing. He listens, judging. A nice voice, though the melody does not grip him, the words indiscernible. She is like all music today, faceless, a distraction. Schubert would turn in his grave.

In his cheaply rented dormitory room he laments the passing of a golden era.

* * *

She takes her seat at the back of the room while the lecturer's voice nasally invokes the beautiful ideas of another time. Today's lesson is Joyce, a favourite; she takes particular care to be inattentive. She does not want it ruined.

"... that we encounter an interesting set of principles or, um, should I say, values *qua* the aforementioned question of debate, that, uh, he establishes, reinforces rather, over the course of this novel, or to put it more accurately this, er, work of semi-autobiographical fiction..."

While he scuttles crab-like around his thesis, she thinks up melodramatic duologues, flights of fantasy, drafting them in her notebook. Soap opera: the last manifestation of truly Romantic ideals this world has to offer.

Brad: Honey, please, you gotta believe me!

Kate: (*facing camera, speaking to Brad*) Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! (*pause, she looks back towards him*) Stay with me!

Crying they embrace. The studio audience applauds. The credits roll.

She slips back into reality, the lecturer is stressing a point (or insisting on an emphasis for lack of one). He has written something on the whiteboard. What it is she cannot make out.

"*This* is why we study Joyce. For me anyway, if not the most important sentence in the book, it is without a doubt one of them. It perfectly summates all that Joyce as an artist wanted to capture through his art, and in summing this so perfectly, Joyce does, in fact, fulfil his own criteria for aesthetic and artistic expression. A

true example of the novel doing what it says.” (*pause*) “That is, the artistic intentions aligning with the way in which it is expressed. An incredibly concentrated approach to the creation of...”

It is obviously not so important, though to her annoyance she does not have time to drift off. Work is being set.

“...and if any of you are yet to choose a topic for the upcoming assessment, let me suggest this sentence as a very interesting, though by no means easy, choice.” (*pause*) “Okay, your time starts now. I’ll stop you when I feel it has been long enough...”

Too apathetic to reach for her glasses she remains in the dark, the only noise the sound of other students’ annotations. How a single sentence can be so vital she does not understand.

How vital can a single sentence be?

Can a single sentence be so vital?

So vital, how can a single sentence be?

She does not understand.

Her eyes wander. She notices one of her classmates, a boy, staring at another, a girl. The girl notices too, and turns to face him, smiling. He brightens at this small display of attention.

“Hey Rose.” The class looks up, their silence breached. Thankfully, the lecturer has departed. “Do you want to go out with me?”

Their eyes fix him in a formulated phrase. And Rose’s quasi-rejection does little to save him. He flushes and walks out. The murmurs begin:

“Did you see... and he of all people... boy, what nerve.”

She, on the other hand, sympathises. He seemed taken in the moment. Romantic, sentimental. Not vindictive. She tries explaining this to her pimply neighbour only to receive a scoff and a “True romance died with Philomela”. Whatever that means. A pretentious reference probably. Or perhaps she really does think that romance ended with a Greek myth involving Sweeney Todd-style cannibalism, and chooses to ignore centuries of the best

fictional works the genre has to offer, not to mention every episode of *The Bold and The Beautiful*.

She makes her way back to her dormitory, thinking about that poor boy and his romantic instinct, and about poor Philomela, the nightingale with no tongue. She takes a shower, singing to herself some vacuous love song. *Life doesn't imitate art*, she thinks. *It imitates bad television*.

Footprints

Angus Dalton

St Augustine's College, Brookvale



I leave the beach that's scrawled with paths of winding footprints behind, clambering up onto a terrain of ragged rock and clusters of sharp-shelled periwinkles. Onto the rock platform and around the headland, I come to a huge boulder of sandstone. I'm about to climb over when a glint of light catches my eye; I move in closer – a plaque. My fingers find the contrast between the coarse stone and the smooth, icy metal, fringed with rust and salt. A permanent, final footprint, etched into the rock. I trace an engraved name I won't remember with my fingertips and a shiver slithers down my spine...

"Watcha looking at?"

I start a little and step back from the plaque as a girl peers at me from the top of the boulder. An open, freckled face framed with strands of straight, auburn hair smiles down.

"Oh, um, nothing," I stumble over the words, not expecting to meet someone else in my protected world.

"Do you want to see something cool?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Come on then!" She crouches and stretches out a long, pale hand, which I take a little hesitantly before she helps haul me up onto the top of the sunlit boulder. I struggle to keep up as we climb higher up onto the headland, grasping precarious handholds and helping each other higher. We arrive at the top; a rock platform juts out towards the sea. "Come on." She skips out onto the reaching ledge and swings her legs over the edge, her feet dangling high above the rocks and dark swirls below. I hang back.

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Probably not." She looks back, breeze tugs at her hair. "But you only live once, right?" A laugh peals into the wind and she turns back towards the ocean. I pace hesitantly out onto the platform, settling uneasily beside her. "Take a look."

Azure sea sweeps out until it meets the sky, strips of sand stretch between headlands of rock and bush all along the coast in both directions. "Woah." She laughs and turns to me, there's glancing eye contact. There's something transparent about her... temporary. Her eyes are too bright and her hair's too light, her skin is so pale. She stares straight back, until she breaks the silence.

"I'm Elly."

“Hayden.”

She grins. “So Hayden. What’s your story?”

We talk for hours, she has an eccentric curiosity, she asks questions and I answer until the sun dips low. When she finally seems satisfied her eyes turn back towards the horizon, sea and sky scorched with red.

“So Elly,” I start. “What’s your story?”

Her face drops a little. When she speaks she’s disconnected, she glares into the darkened sea, her green sea-glass eyes unfocused. “It’d be so easy just to fall off here, wouldn’t it? Just drop off into the depths. One wrong step and you’re gone forever..”

As she talks I see a scream of billowing red hair, plummeting down towards black... She stares at me silently. For the first time since meeting her, I feel uncomfortable. Hiss of wave and wind fills the long silence.

“Um, I’ve got to go, Mum’ll be wondering...”

“Come back won’t you... Tonight, later on.”

I give her a small smile. “See you then.” I leave her staring on the ledge.

I come back to the beach as soon as I can, the light from my torch dances and dips across the sand. I’m about to start the climb back up to the headland when her quiet voice catches in the night breeze and floats to my ears.

“Hayden.”

She’s standing just before the water’s edge, the waves are still. I walk up behind her. “Come closer,” she whispers, fingers brushing against mine as she takes the torch and holds it above the water, which is so warm I hadn’t noticed it seeping up around our bare ankles. Thousands of fish flitted on the fringe of darkness at the edge of the halo of torchlight, before drifting curiously towards us.

Minuscule, sleek white bodies, transparent and skeletal, glint and swirl in the ocean of light. Tiny toadfish, ugly and brutish by day, hung delicate and beautiful above a landscape of rippled sand.

“They look like they’re flying.”

“What?” I stare at her; her eyes are transfixed on the water.

“I bet they feel as if they’re flying. How would they know any different? Soaring high above the ground, those fragile little fins aren’t fins at all. They’re wings.” Her gaze lifts, as her eyes meet

mine she flicks off the torch and the world of fish and flight dissolves without a sound. Moonlight flickers off the edge of tiny ripples in her eyes. We hold each other's gaze before she looks away quickly.

"I've got to go now, Hayden."

"Oh, okay... See you tomorrow?"

She looks back at me with a smile infused with a tinge of sadness. She leans forward and presses a kiss onto my cheek, turns, and ghosts away along the beach, into the dark. I watch her as she fades into black, melts away like a footprint in the sand.

I wait for weeks, before I'm drawn back to where I met her. Back to the plaque. I move up close to the gently glowing bronze, run my fingers across the engraving once more and read the words as I should have done before.

Ellesandra Stoneham

1981 - 1999

I stare at the silent square of metal, expecting her face to appear again, smiling above me. It doesn't. I step away from the plaque and head back to the beach.

Today's colder, another storm has passed; the sea churns and heaves sullenly in a seething aftermath. Skeletons made of seaweed and driftwood scatter the sand. I come across a pair of footprints on the shoreline; something makes me stop and stare. Something's wrong... A path of prints leads away down the beach, winding along the sand. But there's no footprints leading up to the pair that stand still. It's as if the owner materialised out of the waves, out of the sea spray...

A long, red hair curls delicately on the sand.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Charlotte Brady

Charlotte Brady is fifteen years old and a student at Vincentia High School. “I like the way writers can create a certain atmosphere of an age, like F Scott Fitzgerald in the Jazz Age or Steinbeck in the Great Depression. I like to write as it helps me deconstruct events and experiences. I admire the work of Kurt Vonnegut, J D Salinger, Harper Lee and Joseph Heller.”

Maddie Burrows

Maddie Burrows is sixteen years old and attends Brigidine College, St Ives. “I am inspired by everything around me, not solely writers and books. An *Ode to Philia* was a bit of a Kurt Cobain, *Slumdog Millionaire* and Lionel Shriver cocktail. I write to remember and challenge, and through my observations I want others to stop and observe themselves. My sights are set on becoming a journalist and a competition like this is the perfect forum to develop skills and get my name out there.”

Ruby Conolan-Barrett

Ruby Conolan-Barrett is seventeen years old and a student at Denison College, Bathurst High Campus. She is a talented drama student and writer who admires authors such as Melina Marchetta, Christos Tsiolkas, Terry Pratchett, William Gibson and Anton Chekhov. Ruby hopes to pursue a career in acting and screen writing. “What makes a great writer? A unique insight on life.”

Sophie Dahlenburg

Sophie Dahlenburg is sixteen years old and is currently studying in year 11 at Temora High School. “I absolutely love English – it’s

an outlet, one that allows you to escape to any world you want to. To read a book that is not only written brilliantly, but leaves you thinking afterwards is an amazing experience. I like to write about current issues, and I try to do it in a way that is a bit outside the box. I love authors like Stephen King, Michael Crichton and Edgar Allan Poe, who all have very distinctive voices and writing styles.”

Angus Dalton

Angus Dalton is seventeen years old and a student at St Augustine’s College in Sydney. He loves reading and writing creatively in a short story format because it allows a writer to focus on engaging the audience straight away rather than worrying about setting up a detailed orientation or setting – readers are thrown straight into the action and are left to imagine much of this detail themselves. He is influenced particularly by writers such as Isobelle Carmody, Sonya Hartnett and John Marsden, as well as many others. “I’m inspired by little things I’ve come across: something I’ve read, seen, a conversation I’ve heard. Anything really can get ideas going and, eventually, some find their way onto paper.”

Alex Henderson

“I am Alex Henderson, eighteen years old and a student at Hawker College, author of *Just Like Flying*, avid writer since I could hold a pen and creator of bizarre and intricate tales long before that. Some of my favourite writers are Jacqueline Wilson, John Green, Neil Gaiman and F Scott Fitzgerald, and like them I hope to be creating stories that people enjoy, for the rest of my life.”

Fenn Idle

Fenn Idle is seventeen years old and a student at Fort Street High School. “My story *Nightingale* was inspired by the Oscar Wilde fairytale *The Nightingale and the Rose*. Writing interests me because of its ability to convey ideas and emotions. I love the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Haruki Murakami and Raymond Carver because of their skill in conveying universal

emotional truths while retaining a uniqueness of style. My writing is influenced by the music I listen to, the films I watch, the books I read, conversations with friends and reality television.”

Anna Kennedy

Anna Kennedy is seventeen years old, and attends Presbyterian Ladies’ College, Armidale. Her entry is titled *An Incident*. “I love writing because, for me, it is a way of clarifying and defining the world around me, and a way of exploring ideas and people. Writing is an integral part of my life; one day, I hope I will write a novel. I prefer fiction, both in writing and reading, and I admire and am inspired by many writers, from Jane Austen, the Brontës, Tolstoy and Dickens, to Margaret Atwood, Peter Carey, Plath, Hughes and Tim Winton. I am always inspired by my family, my friends, and the world around me.”

Tamara Lennon

Tamara Lennon is eighteen years old and is currently a year 12 student at Trinity Catholic College, Lismore. Her story is titled *Fishcakes*. “I am passionate about writing as it gives me the opportunity to be creative, to explore, and compose a story from the smallest detail. Inspiration comes from travelling, from the experiences in my life of different cultures, peoples and ways of life. To me writing is about the sharing of stories. It is finding and creating the magic in stories that I have a passion for.” Tamara was also a regional finalist of the 2011 Young Writer competition.

Ashleigh Mounser

Ashleigh Mounser is eighteen years old and a student at Kincumber High School. She has been writing with various levels of legibility since birth because the stories she really wanted to read had yet to be written. She enjoys the short story form especially, but also writes novels, poems and a weekly blog about her experiences throughout the 2012 HSC. Her favourite authors include Jeffery Eugenides, J K Rowling and Douglas Adams.

Lauren Pearce

Lauren Pearce is seventeen years old and a student at Macquarie Fields High School. She began writing seriously at age 15. To her, writing is not so much a hobby as a compulsion. She finds a kind of excitement in making up people who don't exist and putting them in situations that never really happened. She's heard that most people call that schizophrenia, but she's not sure. She hopes to go on and have a career full of novels, short stories, plays, non-fiction and critical work. In the meantime, she hopes to study a History or English degree at the University of Sydney. Lauren was also a regional finalist of the 2011 Young Writer competition.

Aisyah Shah Idil

Aisyah Shah Idil, at the ripe old age of seventeen, is currently slogging through the horrors of the HSC at Malek Fahd Islamic School. She is the proud mother of her story *The Wild Youth*, and hopes to pop out a few more before she can reluctantly call it quits. Publishing a novel (with her own name on it! crazy!) is something that she's always wanted to do – after all, how many people can say that they're still chasing their childhood dream? Her writing is inspired by her slightly unbalanced family and off-kilter friends, as well as various nerdy authors (Tamora Pierce! Patrick Ness! John Green!).

Dinusha Wijesuriya

Dinusha Wijesuriya is sixteen years old and a student at Baulkham Hills High School. She loves reading and enjoys writing fiction, such as her short story *The Great Collapse*. She is also interested in reading a wide variety of fiction genres and non-fiction works, and is inspired by all kinds of writers.

Activities for Students

The Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer competition is an excellent source to inspire and engage young writers in their quest for creativity. In the 27th year of the competition, students submitted short stories that were inspired by, reflective of, and infused with the trigger word *flight*.

The students who have contributed to the book represent 11 regions across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. They impressed regional judges with their exploration of character, theme, structure and tone. These writers produced work that, in the eyes of the judges, would appeal to the audience of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

As you read through these pieces of work, turn your mind to the challenges some of the writers may have felt. Perhaps one wanted to walk away after their fifth draft, hoping their writing was done but knowing there was still one more edit to complete. Maybe another writer felt frustrated when the thesaurus did not provide the right word to express the plight of their protagonist.

Whilst these challenges may have sat heavily on the shoulders of these young writers, the overriding emotion that will remain with the writers today is joy in realising their hope of creating a cohesive, emotive and powerful piece of writing.

The activities that follow are designed to be used by budding writers, students in secondary schools and teachers in their classrooms. Additionally, they can be used to build analytical and critical skills in deconstructing and understanding narratives.

Theme and trigger word

Before beginning your own writing, read the regional finalists' entries for 2012 and identify the following:

1. Explain how each finalist integrated the trigger word.
2. Describe the ways in which the characters and setting complement or challenge the trigger word.

3. Analyse the effectiveness of each writer's skill in establishing a setting that accommodated the trigger word.

Braindump

Conduct a 'brain dump' around the 2012 trigger word *flight*. This involves you dumping all the words, thoughts, ideas that come to mind when you hear the word *flight*. Give yourself three minutes to do this. Read through your ideas and highlight words that are connected. Underline words that came easily, circle words that are surprising. Using these 'surprising' words, conduct a mini brain dump and start to draw connections between thoughts or possible beginnings for a story.

Research

Once you have settled on a cluster of words, thoughts, characters, actions and emotions, drill down into an aspect of the 'brain dump' that intrigues you. Conduct some research on a setting, character or event that could hold the story. A skilful writer is able to place the reader in one or all of these aspects through their ownership and understanding of the setting, character or event.

Structure and Style

Each entrant has their own particular style. Read through each of the stories and respond to the following questions:

1. List all the styles of writing you have been exposed to throughout your life.
2. Create a table that summarises the structure and style of each of the entrants. List the entrants down 13 rows. Create 3 columns with the following headings: structure, style, success.
 - *Structure* refers to sentence construction (simple, compound, complex) and plot development (including setting, the quest, choice, climax, resolution).
 - *Style* refers to the distinctive voice of the writer and includes vocabulary, literary and cultural allusions, world view, use and integration of dialogue.

- *Success* refers to your analysis and critique of how well each of the writers explored and delivered structure and style in their entry.

Familiarity

Some of the successful writers in this year's competition wrote about settings, characters and events that were familiar to them. To ensure authenticity of each of these aspects, it is essential that they wrote with authority. Attempt to write with authority about a setting that is familiar to you. Describe the environment, the tone, the movement of the place. Compare your writing to authors who write with authenticity about your familiar world, for example, Tim Winton's exploration of the Australian landscape; Marcus Zusak's powerful integration of family history and international devastation; and Kate Grenville's thoroughly researched and contextualised version of early contact history.

Character

There are many ways that a writer is able to explore and develop characters.

1. Identify the ways in which the writers have explored the nuances of the characters they have created; refer to techniques like dialogue, internal monologue, description.
2. Select a section of an entry and describe the strengths and weaknesses of the characterisation. Rewrite the chosen section so that the character's motivation intrinsically changes. Explore the tools that are at your disposal: tone of dialogue, appearance, movement, relationships.

Meeting of minds

Select two characters that have been created in two separate entries. Imagine a meeting between the two characters: what would they say, how would they react, where would they meet? Identify a compelling character from a piece of writing you have read or studied. Complete a meeting of minds with that character and another from one of the entries.

Audience

One of the key criteria for the Young Writer competition is the way in which the story engages the reader, in this case a reader of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

1. Select your favourite entry and describe how the story appealed to you.
2. Attempt to rewrite one of the stories choosing an alternative target audience. You may wish to write for smh.com.au or *The Sun-Herald*. Share your story with another student and have them identify the techniques you used to change the target audience. These could include tone, sentence structure, language, style and dialogue.

Target audience variants

Research the target audiences of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Consider the ways in which the *Herald* is published and the different audiences it reaches, for example, the SMH iPad App, smh.com.au, *The Sydney Morning Herald* Digital Edition and *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper. Each of these is published and produced to capture as wide a target audience as possible. Imagine how the growing target audience and the changing nature of technology will impact and influence the writing style and target audience of this competition in ten years. Rewrite the entry guidelines with your imagined future in place.

When you identify *how* the students have finessed these aspects of the competition, you too have the capacity to execute a short story that is worthy of publication. The future of writing looks safe in the hands of these budding story-tellers. We hope that you find the inspiration and desire to have a go at writing a short story yourself.

