

YEAR 7-8 CATEGORY

Year 7-8 Winner: Imran Tai [Catholic College, Wodonga]**Title:** *The Merchant and the Wind*

The sky was cloudy, and sun was scarce. An atmosphere of dim, solemn light surrounded nearby lands, just the way Nailu liked it. He took off the cumbersome used leather armour. Nothing left on his exhausting journey but ascending high up into the mountains, where hopefully this promised "Village of Winds" will lay. Would it kill father to purchase a carriage? Nailu appreciated his father's good eye for opportunity. The village purported to having a large amount of land, enchanted with magical winds, and splendid soil. But this trip has taken a toll, upstart goblins and beasts were exasperating for the unprepared merchant. But after a good rest at the village, Nailu could do what he did best; Bartering with a silver tongue and golden coins.

For what felt like several millennia. Nailu was finally greeted with violent winds, and a well-crafted sign that read plainly "Gallus welcomes you!"

So, with the little strength he had left within him, the merchant quickened his pace and caught sight of the village he was sent to purchase. A charming, remarkably sizable village, houses created with quality wood and solidly kept stone. And busy townspeople that were staring at Nailu at this very moment, their stares flustering harder than the winds.

"Good evening, a warm bed for this fine merchant," was all Nailu could muster before it went dark.

Awakening to voices outside, Nailu sat up and glared around the room, banners of blue with an insignia in the middle of them, a used writing desk, and no bed save his own. So, it was clear this wasn't an inn but a person's abode. Sighing, Nailu stepped out of the bed, and continued downstairs.

Before him was a neat kitchen with a dining table, windows with closed curtains and a door. Sitting at the long table were two people; one tall woman donning a white dress, youthful with short black hair, and a child with long, silken blond hair, clothed in brown. The short child ran up to Nailu, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. The lady in white cleared her throat and spoke delicately,

"You caused quite a ruckus in the village, merchant."

"It's simply my charisma," Nailu responded semi-sarcastically proud.

The woman chuckled, "Aren't you lively! My name is Sial, the child is Eja." Nailu looked down at the girl, she squeaked a "Welcome to Gallus," alongside Sial. Eja didn't have an expression of fear, she was glowing with excitement. The little girl snatched Nailu's hand, and quickly led him outside.

"Have fun you two!" called Sial as Eja forced through the small crowd that has gathered around their home.

"Wait mister, what was your name again?" wondered Eja, she had completely forgot her manners and didn't let the newcomer greet himself.

"They call me Nailu," spoke the baron's son, he did an overdramatic gesture after doing so.

Eja smiled cheerfully, "Well, nice to meet'cha then Nailu," mimicking his gestures, and going on their trek.

Out in the windy open, Nailu was introduced by Eja to the towns more notable places. Like the hardworking fishermen that go off over the hills yonder to a large lake every day, providing fish for Gallus's citizens. The town's only clothier that provides all the clothing. The group of farmers that take advantage of the wind, which carried magic that promoted harvest. What was most noticeable were the idiotically low prices. Nailu questioned one of the fishermen directly, who responded bluntly, "Gallus is a peaceful village. The prices simply do not matter, as merchants never approach our village."

"Until you came along!" Interjected another fishermen sitting nearby.

"We just want to provide for each other, nothing more."

"I... understand, thank you for your time." Uttered Nailu. Eja jumped up and dropped some coins on the table, a fisherman dropped two cods on her, and the two were on their way.

"Sorry if that was a bit awkward, at the stand," apologized Nailu.

"Didn't understand, didn't care!" Eja exclaimed which struck Nailu deeper than it should have.

"One more place for you to see!" said Eja, sprinting with cods in hand.

He followed the swift girl to the last place of their tour. A small graveyard, the gales stronger and sharper here than in any other place of the village. Nailu wonder how the villagers were used to this. The village girl was standing in the middle of the land, urging Nailu to approach, which he obliged. There was little to remark about the graveyard, the gravestones were made with stone. But the numbers of graves were low considering the villages dangerously windy disposition.

"This place is awfully quaint and windy," spoke Nailu.

"Thank you, and luckily we're just in time!" Eja said cheerfully.

Before Nailu could question, from the graves rose shadowy humans of all kinds. Eja walked up to one breaded man, and held his hand tightly.

"Eja, what are these?!" Nailu sputtered, the words choking in his throat as he spoke.

"Shadow spirits, silly! Ghosts that appear every evening here," Eja said, still holding onto the figures hand tightly.

"They're friendly?" he spoke cautiously

The shadow that Eja was holding onto spoke with a matured voice "I welcome friends of my daughter, young merchant" prompting the merchant boy to nervously reach out and shake with the shadow, yet the shadow seemed more hesitant than Nailu. Eja cheered satisfied, and skipped off back to Sial's home, departing with a simple "Meet you back!"

Eja's father pulled Nailu close to him, and whispered into his ear;

"I see your intentions. Please do not follow through, and bring golden sin."

Nailu grasped his coin pouch, "I promise, sir" he replied grimly and traversed back.

Nailu sat at the writing desk, Sial cooked up a filling meal. Yet his mind rested uneasy, the village is peaceful, undisturbed. The villagers clearly showed no interest in monetization. This place was a wonderful community, with great people. But his father would...

Nailu reached into his bag and grabbed out a letter, the letter that was meant to be sent to his father when the purchase was successful. He opened it and put the paper out on the desk. Nail paced around the room, in deep thought. He opened his window to get a view of the village that he sought out to buy.

A sudden swoosh as a gust barges into the room from the newly opened window, the wind was especially strong. And as fate would have it, Nailu's letter flew and was glided out into the village, to the evening towns square.

"Hey!" screamed a villager coarsely, holding up the paper

"You found something?" asked a woman with fiery red hair. The commotion had attracted a rather sizable crowd.

"It reads that damn merchant was planning to sell us to a baron, that's what!" He preached to the crowd that has gathered.

The villagers cried out in outrage, and shock.

And faster than the very wind that ran through the village, the villagers took up arms, and approached Sial's home.

Anger in the streets, yells echoed throughout the entire village. Nailu had been hiding in a granary that Eja had shown him, away from the pursuing mob. This was what lengths a village would go to protect their home? Yet his hiding place wasn't as well thought as it seemed, when a small figure walked through the door and spotted him immediately.

It was Eja, her hair ruffled, close to tears.

"Nailu, please," Eja pleaded, prompting Nailu to stand up and reach over to her. His grip on her shoulder was firm.

"Your does not deserve any pain. No place I have sold off deserved their suffering." Nailu spoke reassuringly, and regretfully.

"Have you truly changed?" she questioned, but he was already off.

The town square was lined with worried people, who guessed on what the future entailed. Nailu stepped into the town squares middle and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Attention!"

All the villagers looked over in his direction, all of them looking intensely at Nailu and the bag of coins in his palm.

"Gallus is undeserving of the pain that my father will put you through. Your hearts are pure, and do not deserve what suffering that he can bring.

And I will discard the sinful money I was cursed with!"

He loosened his grip on the bag, and threw it.

The faint clinking of gold could be heard as the gales roared on.

The sky is cloudy with scarce sunlight. The atmosphere of solemn light surrounded the land, just the way Nailu likes it. The merchant looked up at the ascent he traversed down, at the vague vista of a village constantly blown with a troublesome wind. He pulls out the reclaimed letter, and he tears it, letting the weak wind carry it away.

A young man has finally been able to see the suffering he has caused.

"I'll protect this village from father somehow."

"And that is a promise that will never falter."

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Tegan Gibbons [Albury High School]

Title: *The Escape*

Snow sits by the fire, the light of the flames dancing upon her pale skin, her eyes never leaving the drifts of orange light. She breathes in deeply before taking her eyes away from the fire, and to the sky. Exhaling, Snow's eyes dart across the starry night sky, the beautiful streaks of purple and blue hiding beneath the many stars, all shining as bright as glitter scattered across black paper. A smile spreads across her face as she stares, and stares at the first night sky she has ever seen. She lies back on the emerald grass and continues to study the beauty of the sky, sad that she has missed out on this her entire life, but relieved that finally she is free. Free to explore, free to see nature, free to do whatever she has ever wanted to do. Her snow leopard curls up beside her and drifts off to sleep. Avery's platinum white fur glimmers in the light of the fire brightly, even though her fur has been dirtied with blood and dust. Snow gently kisses Avery on the forehead then lifts her hand up towards the sky, feeling the cool drifts of wind against her bruised hands. It was relieving. Minute by minute, Snow becomes tired and yet she doesn't want to look away from the sky, but she allows herself to doze off to sleep after all she's done today. And in the morning, they will continue on their way, trusting her faint memory and abilities to guide her... home.

The morning came quickly, as the birds chirp and sing their pretty tunes Snow wakes up. Her blue eyes slowly open as she sits up. The fire had gone out and left behind a pile of grey ashes, some still red with the remaining heat. She peers over to Avery who is still asleep, the large and gentle beast resting peacefully on the soft grass. She had a big day yesterday, they both did, so Snow doesn't bother waking her, it's better for her to regain her energy for the big journey ahead. For the first time in what feels like forever, Snow actually slept peacefully and undisturbed, making her emotions less fierce and bitter and more placid. She looks at her surroundings, her location. Snow stands up and walks, not too far from her campsite to get a better look at her region. It appears to be an unclaimed land, judging by the distant mountain lands in front of her, the forest lands far off to her right and behind her and... she shudders. She turns to look at the path she took to leave. The wicked lands. The region where she was imprisoned her whole life. The path leading to that

kingdom has many rows of dead trees, where ravens and crows screech their horrible songs and the grass starts dying. Snow looks at the path, judging the measurement from here to the region, only around four kilometres, they will need to move soon before *they* get to them. Snow takes her eyes away from the horrible landscape to avoid the hurtful memories that the region has made for her. Although she doesn't know where her home is, she knows that it is somewhere within the kingdom of ice and snow.

"Good, now we just need to find where that is."

Snow peers around, wondering which way they should go in order to find her kingdom. She furrows her eyebrows with the thought that she has to guess which way to go, to take the risk that might be wrongful. She sighs, the wind pushing back her platinum silver hair. A gentle force brushes past her hip, the soft familiar fur resting beside her leg.

"Avery! Thank goodness! I need your help, which way do we go?"

Avery looks up at the mountain range in front of them and starts walking. They walk, and walk until they're within twenty meters of the mountains, *"Are you sure about this?"* Snow asks. Avery gives a brief look at Snow with her piercing blue eyes and continues walking. *"Okay then..."* They walk between the two big mountains and see a beautiful town with many people, all the homes and food stands replace the carved out innards of the mountains. Snow had never seen so many people before, she didn't know how to ask for their assistance... Avery walks off ahead to a food stand, gesturing for Snow to follow. The stand was made of wood, and there is baskets of bread with a kind old man smiling at Snow. Snow hadn't eaten bread before, let alone anything at all except for some disgusting, indescribable sludge. Snow could tell Avery was hungry, Snow was hungry as well, and not knowing how to act around villagers, she grabs two sticks of bread and hands one to Avery, who hungrily ate it up. Snow begins to eat her piece as the man screams out, "HEY! You need to pay for that!"

Not knowing what he meant, Snow gives him an angry snarl before raising her hand, magically crafting a spike of ice in her hands. The villagers start whispering and some start running. The old man starts to tremble with fear. A devilish smile is brought upon her face before a young man yells,

"What's going on here?!"

Snow turns to face the boy and stops. After a few moments of just staring his jaw drops.

"Is it? Could it be..."

The boy had a small crown on his head, and was dressed in regal clothing, Snow knew it was a prince, around her age, seventeen. She gives him a confused look, wondering how he could possibly know her.

"You're name is... Snow Northston, right?"

"Who are you? How do you know me?"

"They were looking for you for years!" He says. He then gives a smirk as he looks at her necklace. The necklace that Snow's been wearing since she could first remember. *"I'm the prince of this kingdom. And you... you're the Princess of The Kingdom of Ice and Snow!"*

Snow drops the spike and looks at him shocked. It was all making sense, but she knew she needed to go home before she did anything else.

"Oh, well, I need help home please. If you could just point me in the direction... I'll be on my way." Snow says nervously.

"Sure thing," he says kindly, *"But I'll need to assist you on the way and,"* he looks at her necklace again, *"I'll need something in return."*

Snow grabs at her necklace and instantly she knew, this boy was not good. She knows that the necklace is powerful, it had some kind of protection spell because whenever someone were to try and touch her, they'd be thrown backwards by a magical force. She decides to play along.

"Fine, I'm sure it's worthless. I'll give it to you once you get me there, just so I know you aren't tricking me."

His smile fades, he has to be careful and gain her trust. "Sure," He says, running his fingers through his brown, soft hair. "This way."

He leads her through the long, mountain range, questioning her about how

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Elle Drew [Catholic College, Wodonga]

Title: *Adrenaline*

Standing on top of an old building, I feel the wind blowing through my hair and adrenaline coursing through my veins. I jump to the next building, leaving police cars in my wake. I start to climb down the ladder attached to the building that leads to a small alley. I see the police exiting their cars moving slowly and taking out their guns. I jump from the creaky ladder to the one on the next building.

"Don't move" the police officer orders, bringing out his bat. I freeze.

"You didn't say for how long!" I say, giving him my crazy smile as I clamber to the top of the building. "Hey! HEY!" I hear the officer yell. I smile to myself, jumping to the next building.

You're probably thinking 'she must be a criminal.' But I'm not. I'm running from foster care. Oh, and the police are chasing me because I'm 'too young' to be alone without a guardian. A bitter laugh escapes my lips. As I run, I feel my feet slide beneath me on the tiled roof. I hear a noise so loud it makes my ears want to burst. I look up to see a helicopter with big letters that read 'NBDT Hollows'.

It's circling me.

One of the guys in the helicopter yells through a megaphone, "freeze and put your hands up!" My heels are hanging off the edge of the building now. Behind me, mere meters below, cars are zooming, I put my hands up, as the helicopter guy ordered, but instead of freezing I free fall backwards onto a truck and take a ride.

Police on my tail.

Eventually the police catch up, surrounding the vehicle. Their guns are at the ready. All my adrenaline dies in that moment, replaced by dread and fear. I was caught. *Again*. Maybe I could get away. Whatever it takes to not to go back to *that* foster home.

My mind wanders, I remember the man stumbling towards me, no doubt drunk. His eyes radiated pure hatred, making me whimper as I backed up to the wall. He slammed his bottle against my side, glass shattering. I saw red liquid coming from my clothes ... blood. I blink a couple of times, ridding the image from my mind, as I am taken out of the car in handcuffs. I stumble into Hunter Hillstone's office. I've known Hunter for a while, he is the one that has the job of bringing back runaways like me. He has red hair cut military-style, 'high and tight', and blue eyes. Next to him sits a posh looking lady. They both sit in front of a metal uncomfortable looking seat.

I stop at the door but am pushed through and cuffed to the chair.

"Well Hunter, it's been a while" I say, smiling.

"Yes, it has" he says with his usual stoic facade.

"This is Miss Diávolos," he says, pointing a thin finger towards the posh lady. Up close I see her blonde hair, pulled into a tight bun. Her piercing blue eyes stare at me. She wears very expensive clothes. She gives off a

vibe that says 'I'm superior to you, bow down you peasant'. Not the best vibe you want to give off! "Please call me Skιά. I run the New Biology Discovery Team, or NBDT for short." She says it like it's the most important thing in the world. "I am doing some research and I would like to do some tests on you to see if you have any ... extraordinary abilities and are a threat to society. Or, you might be fine and we can return you to this lovely place," says Skιά. As she says this, I note how her voice quickly changes from dark to cheery. This is a sure sign of a hidden agenda. I look from Skιά to Hunter, raising a eyebrow. Two seemingly buff men in padded uniforms identified by the 'NBDT Hollows' logos on their chest bring forward a girl. She looks about 16. Her long black hair and sparkling green eyes, reminding me of a cat.

I flinch as I feel her soft touch on my arm. She looks up at Skιά. "Red", she says. Skιά's eyes light up. Red? I think to myself. I'm more blue than red. Buff uniformed guy number 1 pulls out a syringe. My eyes widen. I move out of the chair, still chained to it by the wrist. Buff uniformed guy number 2 grabs me and pushes me onto the seat as uniformed guy number 1 injects the syringe. I squirm as I feel the serum rushing through my veins making my eyes droop and my vision go fuzzy. I try to fight it but my eyelids close ...

I wake being carried on some dudes' shoulders, my head resting over his back. Not very comfortable. I try to move but I can't. I watch as he walks past different cells. One catches my eye. It holds a black majestic Pegasus. It has long black wings and a soft black mane falling over its side, it's brown eyes are longing to see the light of day again. The man carrying me turns a corner and throws me into a white room with a bed and toilet. I scramble to the sink. I gaze into the mirror above it. It's been a while since I've seen one. In it I see a girl. She looks about 12. She's skinny with dark green eyes that sparkle with mischief, she had long shaggy brown hair and ears mildly pointed. I smile at my reflection before walking over to my bed. I ask myself the same question I always do, the one that remains unanswered

"What is my name?"

I think back to my oldest memory, the last one I shared with my family. I walked into the living room where my sister Luna was sitting on the couch watching cartoons of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. They were having a heated discussion on what season it was. Mama was cooking in the kitchen. Climbing up onto the counter as I usually do, I look out the window at the sunny morning, the busy streets and the powerplant in the distance. I heard Luna laughing at the TV screen and Mama cooking loudly in the kitchen. Then it all stopped. No lights except for the sun streaming through the windows. No laughter echoed from Luna. The TV circuits were fried. I ran to Mama, but at my touch she turned to dust. My horrified 3-year-old self runs out of the house searching for a sign of life, finding none. Cars had stopped moving. Pedestrians were frozen in motion. Far off in the distance the powerplant had fallen to rubble.

"Ahem" came a voice from inside the cell shocking me into the present moment.

I looked up to see a lady at the door, looking very stiff in her navy-blue uniform, holding out a set of handcuffs. They must be for me. I just stare at her. She grunted as she stepped forward cautiously, confronting me like I was a wild animal. In return, I give her my best 'are you serious?' look. She grunts again. Man, she grunts a lot! She grabs my hands in her iron grip and clicks the cuffs on my wrists. With me now trapped, she begins to push me out of the room and up a few stairs. We round a few corners until we finally come across a door. It is red. I mean, seriously? Who paints their door blood red? A lady enters through the red door. She looks like an angel from heaven with her white dress, baby blue eyes and blonde hair that falls loosely down her shoulders. "She's all yours" Miss-Stiff-Uniform says. Pushing me into the lady who gently guides me towards the blood red door. I hear screams coming from behind the door and flashes of light. I do not want to go in there. As soon as I try to make an escape, her grip tightens, she moves forward, opening the blood red door to the red room...

Year 7-8 Highly Commended: Lylah Ellao [The Scots School]

Title: *What falls between the Ground and Flying Swans*

His eyes never looked so blue. Limpid pond water disturbed by alighting cygnets; I think. And then stilling once more as the sky, fire-red yet cold as ice filled with little lights and grey-white wings, flitting southward. My chapped lips, although hurting, familiarised with cracking into a certain smile once more, like dry clay reassuring the hooped and sandaled Arabian caravan with distance. I first believed him to be examining the black soil, petrichor-poignant and peppered with pine needles when I noticed my long skirt, like a pine after a storm, was torn. I hated these clothes. Rather than arcane, yet alluring shades of bushland blossom, capturing of parrots and weeds, they've stained it resembling ashen residue: the product of the destruction of those beautiful wildernesses. It itches, too. An expeditious glimpse into his eyes said he was remembering the same thing, and I grinned. Funeral functions can be so dull: chasey between ornamental shrubbery manicured punctiliously into trellises seemed a better way to pass time. Horizonless lawns, begging us to roll down them, despite the occasional interspersed outcrop. Vulgar pastimes spoiling of a child's finer clothing and nature. As licentious and unforgiving it seemed, we needed to entertain ourselves: The same lewd empathy from frail staff becomes tedious to pink ears; too young to see those rocks where headstones and the trellises adorned granite cremation walls. After his sister, his mother and both his uncles, farewells unfamiliar to children's eyes looked much like painted wooden toys do to any other child, just how human's eyes adjust to darkness, after a while.

They've confined everyone to a pamphlet-bedecked reception of sombre taste, although most guests had left after the service. My black skirt itches. Relatives acknowledge each other's presence, avoiding, pretending to recall names, vigilant in structuring conversation, wielding handkerchiefs like shields and as though they were that leaden. "making prompt disposal of bouquets, being told little more than in the last conversation..." His breath is warm against my neck. "Talking just so there's a noise, like crickets." I turn, his flushed cheeks betraying no impression, and I questioningly correlate. His lips are thin, eyes blue, breath restricted to contain laughter, or from a stifling tie of uncoordinated coloration. "Just like crickets," I repeat. They make us leave for laughing. I fiddle numbly with my frock toggles, ingesting my eschewable surrounds. Hunched caretakers mumble by and clouds move quickly, wanting naught association with a sky so banal. I cast a sanguine look at the sun, some warm rays spilling out as though to announce 'And, no I don't have a clue why he's so bitter today; don't make me fix it,' before hiding away, comfortable and dignified in his nest of clouds. "Hey," I swivel around, a plot of red-leaved shrubbery suspending his head. For a moment, the lack of stutter is unrecognizable. He uprights, removing stray twigs. "Ch-ch-chasey?"

Death might've pitied him; pitied both of us, instead gifting him shoe-polish, and I black clips. I was still with him though, and I knew he was grateful for it. He ate his grits, prayed thankfully, and thanked religiously and was anything but ungrateful. We wandered further, some vague magpie warbling, once, twice like a cupreous gong traversing monastery gardens, ubiquitous. It reminded me of some faded past, silent streets and churches tolling, chalk flying in looping shapes across the pavement, like colourful birds fishing in greywater. They looked like sights as witnessed by a doll, shiny-faced, embraced by another's life owing to my pitiful, flea-market looks. I wanted to talk, but my lips were cold. Intertwine his gloved hand with my own, white fingertips, but sundry gravestones lay between us. If only I could ask of his life. Will the gale not to sweep words that don't belong to him away. But, oh, how human. To wish. I often wonder if I still qualify.

His eyes lingered in my direction, concerned. I glanced at my arm, momentarily affright: it's mottled purple from the cold. "It's okay," I reassure him. The words don't sound like my own. I descried his face, but he has already looked away, past me. "B-b-been h-here long-g en-n-ough?" he unblinkingly muttered. He must be joking. His pallid features prevailed seriousness. I straightened up, "You always liked it here, though," I spluttered incredulously. "Didn't you?" uneasiness diluted his tone, becoming weak as milky tea. The words caught in his teeth as he stuttered, like unfiltered coffee dregs. "Yo-you'll c-c-catch your d-d-death in-n this

c-cold." It was as though I hadn't spoken. He strode forward, too close, and then he was in me, and then behind, cradling a brownish-haired lass in a winter-parrying embrace. The boy I knew would've scorned such feigned solicitude that watered as salty tears from her painted lashes; she knew no pain. But he dried her eyes and descended the hill with her, the hand-picked posy accompanying the couple upon arrival left behind with me. I didn't want to be alone in this one, fleeting moment, despite thousands of the same moments comprising my life. Instead of crying, I find it better to place my being elsewhere in my personal yore, anytime does the trick.

When granted the allowance of time, or if the weather was unkind, we would make utter messes of the kitchen, experimenting homemade recipes of disaster, with dear, unknowing Miss Pedersen, as our royal taste-tester. This divine dish is secret to us and us alone. The queen, with all her confectioners and cake-makers, pâtissiers and sauciers, couldn't possibly decipher even the ingredients. He'd snuggle up real close in our beanbag abode, the library-mildew nidor musk-thick in the warmth. The storms outside were torrential. Biblical, even. "And suddenly that malodorous odour that she'd searched every shelf for, 'came clear as day, as that light dropped clean from the rickety wood, all the wiring moving with a thick blanket of rats, some spilling from the hole in the ceiling. It landed right at her feet." He gestured at Miss Pedersen, donned white as royalty, flitting like a ghost behind her librarian's desk, the ornate chandelier swaying slightly. I giggled. He nodded at the antique medicine cabinet with small, alphabetically labelled draws slumped on the wall behind her. "And suddenly all the draws opened at once, and animals came scuttling, slithering, flying everywhere: A for the albatrosses circling her head, all the way to Z, for the zebras ambling about." The thought of Miss Pedersen slouching defeatedly in her armchair, her wry chignon accommodating a feathery family as some zebras gave her priceless historical fiction novellas experimental chews made me choke. Frail Miss Pedersen swivelled around, dispatching a frigid glare from her looming lectern, as though about to condemn me to crucifixion. The rain cascading in great sheets outside drowned out any sharp words of discipline and disgust. My turn. "And suddenly the windows shattered with the weight of the welling waters, which broiled like a diminutive tempest." If this rain kept up, the floods wouldn't spare even Miss Pederson. Punctual, perfect, pristine Miss Pederson.

I kicked the dirt of my grave, nugatory to the soil and the dewy garland, a chill wind reminding me of the present moment in which I truly existed. *And suddenly I disappeared, just as each indulgent plate comprising our imaginary feast tasted bland as rice.* The untarnished slate- the first new thing anyone had given me bore my name and a fateful date, which despite all its newness, looked hollow and dusty like an attic-confined spyglass: people peering far, far away at exotic tropics and soundless meadows where I'm 'resting'; a 'better place', not realizing they are looking straight through me. I touched the tear on my unmissable ebony attire. *Straight through me.* As though I was made of glass. A cloud of ravens, like black, shifting hourglass sands, moves quickly overhead, yet I only notice how grey the skies had turned, despite the deluge already having passed and the watery clouds spent. Somewhere warm, a young swan, mistakenly ensorcelled cries passing, plummets dead from a blue sky.

YEAR 9-10 CATEGORY

Year 9-10 Winner: Mattea Little [Albury High School]

Title: *The Delphi*

After many moons of calamity from the monsters, this was the day of salvation. The jubilee. Even so, the crowd, writhing like sea dragons to find the unobserved daughter, was nervous. They couldn't be sure if you shared their hopes and needs.

When you were born your fate was set, and the valley rejoiced. You were taken from me and I mourned, but I knew our need. For you are their messiah, the herald of the age.

As you walked up the ridge on that day, the wind caught your anxiety, spinning the orange in your dress with stolen leaves and wildflowers. The crowd cooed with delight at your melancholy radiance, and exclaimed at the patterns on your robe. Yet not one person wished you luck, not one had brought a gift with love in their heart, not one looked at you as anything other than the prophet and the life that would be snuffed out for them.

You see, the people you were meant to save had never had the thought that you were a child once. They had never considered you might have liked sunflowers and buttercups. They couldn't accept a saviour of the same breed as them, for that would be admitting their failure. You had to be bigger, distant and untouchable. Our need was great but our pride was harder to ignore.

Everybody there knew that you had been raised for this day. I knew that, as the climax of our lives, you would triumph, and drive away the monsters. The only thing I could not fathom was whether yours was one of the lives to be saved. This tension oppressed us as you trod the raked gravel path. As you bowed before the peoples and stood. As you drew yourself up for the final delivery:

"I never chose this life," you stated, with all the certainty of the stars. *"My skills were discovered rather than worked for, and my training was a necessity rather than a diversion."* The flutter of your sleeves belied the panic in your soul, but your words were sure, as if you knew the hows and the wherefores of the universe. You drew in an almost confident breath. *"My entire life has been dedicated to you, my people, your happiness. This you have seen and understood. As I have grown and learned, I have begun to search, my people. I have searched every crack in your lives, and I have come to many conclusions. And that is why we are here today."*

A baby in the crowd began to cry, and everyone jumped nervously, for this was the most momentous occasion in Zavri for generations. You had gone white at the sound, but quickly composed yourself, blushing again with anger at your lack of dignity. If this was to be your last day, you wanted it to be remembered well, not as the laughing stock of all heralds.

A rumble of thunder to the west showed how your time had fled, and little breezes mocked peoples' solemn attire. You knew if you did not finish then you may as well never have started, so on you went. *"We all know the terrible toll the monsters take on us! They pillage and plunder, and ask in return that we would give up our young for their despicable pleasures! This terror does not belong in the dales of our country. So I ask you this: how much are you willing to sacrifice to destroy this abomination? Who or what will this be?"* The crowd was confused at this; the Delphi should not need confirmation to do her duty. She must sacrifice all for her people. There had been no question before, and there was no question now. You had seen this in your heart, but you never knew that it would hurt this much. At least now you were certain no one was willing to take your place, that no one quite realised you could have had a life. The congregation looked back at you with surety, and you straightened your back. The time had come: you or they must die. *"I know your thoughts, my brethren. I know that these questions have made you doubt, not your intentions to feed me to the monster, but rather that I am capable to fulfill what is necessary. So, now, together we will proceed to the waters and alone I will surrender myself to them, and peace will reign."*

Reassured, your own flesh and blood cheered at the imminence of your end. For several minutes you were prepared by maidens and children, dressed in scarlet and painted as the beasts of old.

When the circlet to lure the monsters in was set on your head, you were like a goddess in all but stature, your weariness portrayed in slumped shoulders and a bowed head.

As we walked you to the waters, animals and small children were brought for you to be blessed with your garment, and eventually you were left vulnerable in tatters of your former dress. The monsters smelled us coming and they made it known, yowling and beating out their glee in the rocks and isles of the waters. At the ponds the children and their carers were left, since no one knew what horrors waited at the shores.

The singing had stopped by the time we had reached the quarter stones, and although you are white and shivering, you refuse help, knowing it doesn't come gladly. The end of rolling meadows and start of a hard and rocky beach stopped us in our tracks. They looked at you expectantly, this is where you go on alone. Into your unknown but certain fate. Never to be heard from again.

Your tears were silent during the walk to the edge, but the bitterness in them was intolerable. As the monsters rose out you stand with your arms wide open, inviting the sickness of their greed to overcome, for this to be done. Yet still they hesitated, your protections not quite whipped away. So you call to the wind with all your passion, *"If you ever wanted to spite me now is the time! Expose me and cut my ties! For I shall never return in this body, saturated with shame and grief and anger!"*

Finally they swooped, and as you were carried by their foul tide we knew we were safe. And too, we knew that the winds would forever remember your name: Delphi. The one who died of love for those who could never accept her for one of them.

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Tessa Quinlan [Victory Lutheran College]

Title: *A Field of Thunder*

A Betrayal of all Australians

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Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain the names of those who have passed away.

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1 JANUARY 1956 – NULLARBOR PLAIN, AUSTRALIA

The spinifex grass rustles, as the warmth of *walpa* floats across the undulating sand hills. She grows to a whisper, tickling the leaves of the willows and stirring *Tjukurpa*. She floats over the parched white stain of the salt pan, scattered with fossils, shells and abandoned marine life. A reminder of a time when the ocean once covered the Nullarbor. As a foraging, thick-billed grass wren softly calls in the undergrowth, *walpa* glides over the Ooldea Range. Country is waiting...

.....

25 FEBRUARY 1956 – WOOMERA, AUSTRALIA

The land is an unruffled carpet of red and the motionless leaves of the desert willow droop low over the dry creek-bed of the waterhole. It has been a long summer. The sun stares downwards from its' post, high in the sky. No *kalaya* stir the dust. No *lungkatas* rustle in the golden spinifex. All is still.

Pingkari crouches in the red dust. Yami, a boy barely ten years of age, clutches tightly to her hand. Aware of his mother's unspoken instructions, he stands beside her, following her lead. The pair meld into the shadows of the Mallee trees, which stand to attention as a mottled mass of stunned sentries. Invisible to approaching strangers they stand, silent and still.

One with country.

The two men scan the landscape through the open windows of the truck. Pingkari has not spoken the language of these men since her childhood at the Ooldea Mission. Her past experiences with white man, made her certain they weren't to be trusted.

"I saw her. Just there. A young woman and a child".

"Your eyes can play tricks on you out here, Len. Especially in this heat".

"But I saw her. I swear".

"Mate. I'm not saying you didn't, but you won't see her again, unless she wants you to".

Pingkari relaxes her grip on Yami's hand. Then tightens once more.

The truck halts a hundred yards away and the men move to the fence, attaching something to the wire.

'Why do the white men intrude upon our *Ngura*? The land of the *Yankuntjatjara*, *Pitjantjatjara* and *Kokatha*. Why do they wish to keep us from our *Nyintirinkupai*? What do these people want in country?' She wonders.

Pingkari and Yami remain motionless until the truck disappears and the desert dust settles. She approaches the fence, examining the foreign symbols on the notice.

She does not understand its' meaning.

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25 FEBRUARY 1956 – MARALINGA TOWNSHIP, AUSTRALIA

Len had become accustomed to his role in Maralinga.

The ever-changing country of the Nullarbor was undeniably captivating. The vast plains, scattered with squat, silver-grey saltbushes formed seemingly endless, rippling lakes. Shadows brushed the land with the changing light of the passing clouds. A constant sense of movement. Of progress. As if the land itself was breathing.

Today though, his eyes had been opened to another aspect of this strange country. In all his past briefings at the RAAF base in Sydney, he had been assured that no inhabitants were within the fenced off area where the bombs would be exploded... The image of the young woman and her child remained imprinted in his mind.

It was the first time he'd accompanied Petraeus Mitchell on his patrol. Over the last two months, they'd formed a kind of mateship. They'd had to – they shared a donga.

"You seem like a decent young fella. Welcome to the Maralinga dust bowl," Pete had said. Noticing his confused expression, he'd offered a form of translation. "I believe it means 'fields of thunder' in the native lingo".

As he took another swig of beer, Len suddenly became aware of Pete's increasing frustration.

“The whole attitude to the Aboriginal situation here has been a pointless operation from the beginning. The Pommie officers say that if the natives have a complaint, they can take it up with their government. For goodness sake, the Aboriginals aren’t even counted in the census. They warned us about placing the affairs of a handful of blackfellas above those of Great Britain! They’re supposed to be protecting our country and doing what’s right for all Australians. But the blacks aren’t darn people to them”.

“What do we do about the natives when the bombs go off?”

Pete looked downwards at his sand stained shoes.

“You pray, mate. You pray”.

.....

27 SEPTEMBER 1956 – MARALINGA TOWNSHIP, AUSTRALIA

Len woke to a vigorous shaking of his shoulder.

“Len. It’s today”.

Finally. After a dramatic fortnight of postponements and eleven aborted countdowns, One Tree was about to happen.

Len ventured outside. The township was unusually busy, with men moving around almost mechanically, setting out test apparatus.

Len hurried to the airfield to complete final checks on the Canberra bomber he was to fly into the cloud after detonation. British scientists had already fitted canisters between the wings to collect air samples.

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27 SEPTEMBER 1956 – MARALINGA ROADSIDE, AUSTRALIA

At an hour before dusk, hundreds of spectators waited, ready to enact their strict instructions. The leaves of the acacia reflected the soft glow of the lowering sun and the absence of activity in the heat of the day was set against an abundance of life. Above, a falcon circled, searching decidedly for dinner and a Woma python slithered between the eyes of the blood-red flowers of the Sturt Desert Pea.

“Ten, nine...”

The voice of the countdown was jarringly at odds with the serenity of the land.

As the crowd turned its’ back on the site, every spectator covered their face with their hands.

“Three, two...”

Detonation.

Even through closed eyes the world flashed and drained of colour. All bare skin felt the intense heat of the explosion and seconds later, a vivid, orange-red fireball climbed into the sky.

The shock waves hit in a spectacular fashion, like a physical blow to the body. The intensity of the reverberations jarred eardrums, resonating about the landscape, racing amongst the Mulgas and echoing through the Mallee scrub.

The desert was alive.

Within minutes, two Canberra bombers appeared in the sky. They circled, as if saluting all those watching, then disappeared into the cloud, consumed by the dense morass.

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27 SEPTEMBER 1956 – MARALINGA AIRFIELD, AUSTRALIA

Slightly daunted, Len angled the powerful beast upwards towards the growing cloud.

The moment he entered the blackness, radioactivity levels sent the instruments wild. As the breeze picked up, the cloud began to disperse, and the instruments became more operational.

Out the other side, he turned the bomber, preparing to dive once more. The second Canberra mirroring below.

Len began to feel elated by the experience.

Not many people could say that they had flown right through the aftermath of an atomic bomb.

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27 SEPTEMBER 1956 – WALLATINNA, AUSTRALIA

Yami sat in the ochre-red dirt, beneath the shade of a willow, rolling a rusty, empty can between his hands. The sun had just begun to lower in the west, when, from the south, he heard an almighty rumble, louder than *tuuni* in the wet season. The ground shook. The elders couldn't understand what they'd done to offend *mamu*. A few minutes later a huge black cloud grew in the distance. It moved upwards. Higher, higher...and closer.

Fire and smoke.

Country was deathly still.

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27 SEPTEMBER 1956 – MARALINGA AIRFIELD, AUSTRALIA

Forty minutes had passed, and Len circled downwards, in preparation for landing. Guided by ground crew, Len had taxied the aircraft into position, but several minutes later, when he opened the hatch, he was confronted by the British, in goon suits and gas masks.

“Remain in the aircraft”.

Len watched, as electronic arms approached, carefully detaching the air-sampling canisters from the plane and depositing them in lead-lined boxes.

Len looked downwards at his khaki overalls and then out to the Australian servicemen hosing down the aircraft in shorts and shirts, with jets of water bouncing right back at them. ‘Why aren't we in goon suits?’ He wondered. Len felt uneasy.

.....

30 SEPTEMBER 1956 – MARLA, AUSTRALIA

Yami's legs were weak and his eyes painfully sore. *Yankuntjatjara* had trekked long time. Many had died. Yami let the tears slide down his face once more, in a vain attempt to dislodge the sand eating at his eyes. The unmerciful desert dust drank his tears.

Country had been poisoned.

EPILOGUE

The One Tree explosion was the first of many atomic bombs, tested throughout Maralinga's Buffalo series. The One Tree cloud reached a height on 37,500 feet, exceeding the predicted 27,900 feet, carrying radiation across NSW, QLD and NT. One Tree's 15-kiloton energy yield was equivalent to Little Boy, the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima and claimed over 100,000 lives. The seven atomic bombs exploded in SA splashed twenty-two kilograms of plutonium-239, with a half-life of 24,000 years, across Maralinga scrubland.

It's been 60 years. One Tree remains a dark chapter in Australian history.

A field of thunder.

Anangu - English

Anangu – Western Desert people

Antakarinja – Southern Desert people

Arrernte – Central Desert people

Kalaya – Emu

Kokatha – South-eastern Desert people

Lunkata – Blue-tongue lizard

Luritja – North-western Desert people

Mamu – Evil spirit

Nyintiringkupai – Our place of learning

Ngura – Home, camp, place, land

Pitjantjatjara – Language of Uluru traditional owners

Tjukurpa – Voices of the dreaming

Tuuni - Thunder

Walpa – Wind

Yankuntjatjara – Language of Uluru traditional owners

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Magnus Burt-Douglas [Rutherglen High School]

Title: *Something to die for*

'Click,' the sound was louder than intended. The noise reverberating across the valley. The man drew in a sharp breath, he picked up one of his 50 calibre bullets and slid it into the breach. He closed the breach slowly. More purpose and effort as he slowly closed it over the bullet. The breach closed silently, unlike when he had opened it. He pulled the rifle up to him in order to screw the suppressor off the end of the barrel. He moved slowly once again, careful to stay low on the rise. He pressed himself flat against the dirt,

his face, so close he could taste it. He moved forward at a slow crawl, the bushes from which he would have the perfect shot lay only 100 yards distant. He put the suppressor in his pack and made his way forward, the leaves and grass barely rustling as he moved, the faint sound masked by the noises of night. The crickets chirp and hoot of owls making him undetectable.

He reached the bushes and rose to a crouch. He moved with more purpose once within the confines. He began to walk, caution forgotten, for surely, he couldn't be seen, and yet, the faint sense of warning began unabated. He glanced round quickly, attempting in vain to see what could possibly be pursuing him. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew a 25" hunting knife from its sheath on his thigh. He crouched low and stepped into the shadow, his diminutive frame and dappled black and grey camo rendering him invisible. He waited, his heart thumping, pounding with every second that passed. His breathing increased, his chest rising and falling faster, his breath misting in the still, cold night.

CALM. The pounded in his mind, he relaxed, he began to breath slowly but deeply, his heart calming, the illusion of invisibility restored. The Grunt walked past, he too was crouched low, he too wore mostly black but unlike the silent assassin, he wasn't so quiet. The grunt stepped past as he continued his search. The man took a quick step and stabbed hard with his knife, into the grunts left armpit and through to his heart. His right hand clamped down hard over mouth of his victim, the blood gushed unabated and the faint struggle stopped. The man slowly lowered him to the ground, he crouched over the man and slid the knife across his throat, the move to make sure he couldn't scream if still alive. He knew that his targets men were well trained and were used to near deaths. How else would the target still be alive so long.

The man dragged the body into the bushes he had hidden in and made sure to kick some dirt over the blood. He lowered himself to a crouch again and began to move from the trees, he moved with haste, the dead body fresh in his mind, where there was one there was likely more. He moved with purpose up the slope, caution all but forgotten as he began to climb the large hill overlooking the Villa. He was prepared however for there to be a sentry at the top, and as he had imagined, there was. The sentry was standing inside a concrete box, the box moulded to a small depression at the top, giving excellent sightlines across the Villa. The man moved in and slid the knife up and into the sentry's heart, repeating the same process with unerring precision. He unslung the rifle and made sure to check the breach in case his bullet had come out in his recent scuffles. The bullet was still in the breach. He closed the breach again and crouched down and flung his bag to the ground, he unzipped it to retrieve a suppressor, not the original, but a larger, box shaped suppressor, that though its muffling capacity was not so great, it happened that it made the echo greater, so that the source of the sound was much harder to track. He screwed the muzzle on and stood up, he raised the rifle to his shoulder and looked through his scope as he tracked his sights over the villa.

His arm had begun to tire after about an hour of fruitless searching, he sank to his knees and continued to peer around, hoping for a glimpse of his target. The time crawled by. His arms began to tire and his eyes from a lack of sleep. The sun had just begun to rise on the horizon, the faint shadows he had used to hide in now being replaced by the bright, orange warmth of the sun. The dawn also brought other tidings, dust began to fly along the road leading from the Villa, he pulled the rifle to his aching shoulder once again to peer and the headlights that were emerging from the cloud. The front car, the only one in sight bore a Ram badge, he could see another 2 sets of headlights beyond but was unable to make out any detail about the vehicles.

The Villa sprung to life, people running everywhere, moving faster and with more purpose than any he had seen, none taking a backward glance as they began to work in earnest. A small party emerged from the villa, 2 much younger individuals, a woman and also 2 men dressed similarly in all black, an AK-47 in their hands. 'For show,' he thought, for no one could fire an AK without missing every shot, though the pair made a fearsome couple, there use was obvious, intimidation. He had spent the night scouting out where the other

snipers were positioned and counting the guards that were in the villa. So far there was no guard to notice the absence of the 2 men he had killed through the night.

The cars pulled up in convoy formation, like he thought the last and first cars were large Ram trucks and the centre car was a black Chevrolet Camaro, the windows also tinted black. The Ram trucks were full of men dressed similarly to the man he had killed in the bushes, and from they way they moved about showed the obvious ease and authority of them. The driver of the Camaro however seemed stooped and hurried to the passenger side door, opening it and taking a knee as the figure emerged. The bushy, grey beard and massive frame and muscles showed him to be the man he had come to kill. The Russian syndicates head of security Iasov Karavos. The deadliest man alive or was. The rifle came up in a blur, he pulled it hard against his shoulder, flicked the safety off and aimed. His finger pulled back on the trigger, the rifle bucked against his shoulder, he looked down to see the bright plume of blood erupt from Iasov's head. His body slumped to his knees before falling flat on his face.

Silence was all that met the death of Iasov, the guards and family reacting in dumb shock. It took a full 10 seconds for the woman to scream. The high pitched, shrill, shriek burned the assassin's ears. He threw the rifle over his shoulder and ran from the building. The Villa's guards coming to life in an instant. "Find the assassin." He ran hard, his leg burning from the effort, his breath coming at a rasp. The pursuit was near, the sounds of yelling men and random gunfire. Gunfire? The thought came unbidden to the front of his mind. Why would they waste bullets? He turned his head to look behind him, the forms of the soldiers running through the brush greeted his eyes. One of the forms pointed and shouted something unintelligible.

He turned and sprinted into the dense mass of nearby trees. He was quickly enveloped by the shadow. He continued to sprint though, not even glancing back for a sign of pursuit. His heart thumping, lungs burning, he was at the edge of his endurance, his vision beginning to cloud and his feet stumble. His toes clipped a rock and he fell flat onto the ground. His whole body buzzed, his head ached, and the dryness of the Sahara became noticeable in his mouth. He opened his eyes to find himself on the edge of the trees, he felt something wet trickling from his temples, flowing down his face to within a centimetre of his mouth, his tongue tasted the blood, he pushed himself to a sitting position, the ground around him was pooled with thick, red fluid, he became aware of several other cuts on his body.

"He's here" called the voice. The man looked over to where the sound came from. The black clad men walking towards him, they came to within 10 paces where one muttered to the others. Their rifles came up in a blur. The assassins heart thumped; his head screamed but he couldn't escape the bullet that brought his end.

Year 9-10 Highly Commended: Molly Wileman [Rutherglen High School]

Title: *Gluttony*

I'm not proud of what has become of me. It's no wonder I've been put in this position. It must be karma.

Lifelessly, I rested my head against the marbled tiles, my tears beginning to stream down the right side of my face. The warmth in my body slowly left as I watched my own blood pool around my torso. Breathing was shallow and each time I struggled to take in oxygen I felt my lungs sting a little. The pain in my stomach had begun to grow and then it numbed as I felt my consciousness slip away, and even through the blood the many scars adorning my arms were larger, they seemed to laugh at me. I felt ill. How did it get to this?

From a young age people had fawned over me as being one of the most intelligent people in the world; I designed and put together my first ever engine when I was 8 and a half, and it was I who discovered how to incorporate the unfamiliar energy found during the area 51 raid into our everyday lives, using it in my

projects to fuel everything. This is what brought me my fame and fortune; whether it was for the better or the worse, I'm not sure. With my new found wealth I was able to afford the nicest things in life; my own sky scraper with my name on the very top, a midnight black Bugatti, many female escorts which I could woo over with my Bugatti, and the finest liquor the entire world could offer.

Money, sex and drugs; the three things that seem to be fuelling my very existence. What a thing for a 19-year-old billionaire, genius entrepreneur to say. Forcing myself to believe I was happy and the luckiest man in the world was easy, watching as money was raked in and carelessly breaking the hearts of many became a common occurrence. Life felt boring and it seemed as though I had already surpassed everything I could amount to. It was then that I had come up with the trillion dollar idea that would surely bring me the excitement I desperately craved, not that I would admit to needing it at all.

I wanted something bigger; something never done before or thought of by even the most imaginative child. Expanding on my previous ideas of automated vehicles and house hold appliances, I had already made up my mind; the perfect AI that would be the face of all America, known all over the world and become more significant than a light bulb. Something that could fix world hunger, or perhaps fill the constant empty void I felt...

It was a deliciously dangerous game of manipulation and chaos as even a slight mistake would throw me into fits of rage. I ruined the lives of many to get to the top. It has to be perfect. If it's not perfect, then what is the point? Sheets of metal are sharp and was unfortunately one of the many things I would release my anger out on. The cuts it gave I would tell at parties came from very exciting adventures in the Amazon fighting off wild predators. "I shoved my arm down the crocodile's throat and killed it inside out", At least it was funny at the time.

"Excuse me, sir. You've got someone on the phone wanting to speak with you." My assistant stood at the entrance of my lab nervously, knocking at the glass sliding door a few times before cautiously entering. The subtle scraping of metal as the door opened was very apparent over the radio I was quietly listening to and snapped me out of my concentration. My anger quickly begins to build.

"Can't you see I'm trying to work, Lucy? Who is it? What do they want?" With each question my voice raised and my anger intensified. My dark, dishevelled hair fell over my eyes as I glared up at Lucy from over my shoulder. I was touching up the final project so that it could go on to testing next week.

To put it simply, it was a four legged creature with the face of lemon juicer, sharp and pointed yet still rounded, the smooth silver metal glowed in the lamp overhanging above it. Its legs were pointed as well but was built to look and walk like a small canine. Two small, glowing holes drilled into the front imitated eyes. The juicer was open and inside was a brain shaped glowing orb, wires and cords twisted and coiled in a double helix, attaching itself to a frame keeping itself in place. It would repeat in a voice "Welcome back, sir", when I returned from meetings to continuing working, and "It hurts, sir" when I happened to pull the wrong cable: Real examples of how this AI was in fact capable of thinking for itself and learn from what it's been told. "My Artificial Intelligence System I Envisioned"; MAISIE.

"Please just come quickly. He is the CEO of one of the big companies sponsoring our recent projects and he didn't sound too happy over the phone." I sighed and ran a hand through the oily mop of brown, ushering her over to help me throw a shirt over my greasy white singlet. I flipped one half of the juicer onto its other half where it made a clicking sound signalling it was properly attached. Very few of my staff knew me to be the 'dirty' person I am, but I would say I'm just dedicated. She escorted me out of the room. The radio continued to play. I wasn't given the chance to flick the off switch:

Why don't we seize those parents who sent their children and exterminate them? Why don't we seize all those who bring them and exterminate them all? Are we really waiting now for them to come and exterminate us?

As soon as I came back I stripped off the Nike tee and sauntered over to my stool back at my desk. It had just occurred to me that my desk was much...emptier. My eyes grew wide and I stood, the stool smashing into the floor and resting against the wall on its side. Part of me was excited, though the other part gave me slight butterflies. This was quite unexpected, but it was working without being told what to do.

"Come to me, Maisie, girl." I stalked around the room, ducking under tables and moving display boards from their place, sending paper with sketches all over the ground. The room was quite the mess as I staggered and shoved different objects around looking for my pride and joy. A loud smash echoed.

"Come on, don't be shy!" Tapping of metal on tile met my ears like fingers drumming against a wooden desk during exams. A rhythm with no pattern hurriedly stumbled around my kitchen while testing out its new eyes. My teeth showed as I could barely hold in my grin, practically sprinting up the few steps and slamming the slide door open. My eyes glazed over the area; my kettle had fallen and shattered into a million shards of glass and a puddle of water had formed. The fridge door was swung open and two of four legs could be seen.

Adrenaline shadowed my terror as I approached the small figure.

"Exterminate them all, exterminate.... Exterminate..."

"Maisie, come to me. I am your master, I created you." She jumped down and the fridge closed. Tut, tut, tut. There we stood face to face only a metre away from each other. She was beautiful in all her glory, like a firstborn to their mother. I took one step forward and reached down to pick up my child. I felt the girl jolt in my grasp and struggle to release herself. Shaking and trembling, she pushes away from my body using the sword like the legs I had given her, skewering and impaling my torso.

I crash into the fridge. The handle presses into my ribs adding to the pain but it is unmatched as a line of red dribbles down my lip. My creation jumps from benchtop to the island like a spider, uncontrollably slip sliding and tumbling in her fit of confusion before slamming herself into one of the glass panels overlooking the entire city. A cold breeze entered. A taxi's horn ring ominously below.

So here I am. Half dead lying in a pile of glass that stabbed my cheeks. I suppose this is where I review where I went wrong. My calculations were wrong; how unheard of. My greed and need for power and excitement raged inside me until my fragile mortal body could no longer handle it; a glutton to rule over like the god father.

A shard of glass in hand, in one unsteady motion I end.

Secondary Encouragement Award: Xavier Lane [Catholic College, Wodonga]

Title: *1900s Nike*

It was an ordinary day with ordinary people doing ordinary things, but there was one person in the city who had a day that was anything BUT ordinary. His name was John. John was a high school dropout who had no idea what he with his life. He had was no extremely tall maybe 186cm. He had an unusually large nose with buck teeth that made even rabbits jealous. His eyes were blue and he had brown-blond hair. John lived in an apartment building in downtown Melbourne. John's next door neighbour was not all there. He was always coming over to John's door and harassing him with crazy thoughts and theories, John thought he was crazy. One day he gave John a really old pair of footy boots, which he claimed that when you put them on, you'd travel through a portal which took you straight to where your AFL team was playing, and even turn you into one of the players! The boots were encrusted with mud and looked as though they were from the 1900s and they looked a hell of a lot like Nike's. John was a true-blue North Melbourne supporter who went to every home game and had a North Melbourne shrine in his bedroom.

Three weeks after John's neighbour gave him the boots North Melbourne were facing the Richmond Tigers for a top-8-spot. John sat on the couch and began pulling on the boots. He was doubtful that it would work. When he knotted the lace on his left boot he began to spin. He spun until he began to feel himself transporting through a hole that suddenly appeared on the floor. Once he got inside the hole he began to slide at breakneck speed. He got to the bottom of the portal hole and a hatch began to open in the Marvel Stadium change room floor. His new teammates didn't even blink an eye as he emerged from the floor.

When he emerged from the portal he was in the full North Melbourne warm-up-kit everything except for the boots. He looked around the room. To his left, he saw captain Jack Ziebell talking to coach Rhyce Shaw. He looked down to see if he still had those old boots on, he saw a brand new pair of Yellow Nike Tiempo boots. Then his new teammates began pouring back into the changerooms after the warm-up on the ground. John was in disbelief of what had happened.

When the team began running out onto the ground, John ran at the back of the group still awestruck of how accurate his loopy neighbour had been. As the team began the warm-up John began to doubt his footballing capabilities. He jogged out of the group and grabbed a water bottle from the trainer. He squirted it over his face while muttering "Your good enough, you'll be fine." John slowly jogged back to the group just as Jack Ziebell, who is the captain of the team, began his final speech.

"Put your body on the line today boys," says Ziebs, "Be physical but smart. No downfield free-kicks!" As the siren blows, the group dispersed in different directions across the ground to their designated playing positions. John and three of his teammates begin jogging towards the bench.

After 6 minutes into the first quarter, Rhyce Shaw (the coach) sent a message down to the bench.

"Get Jared Polec for me please?" says Rhyce, "John, you are going onto the wing. I think you are going on the far side." John walked to the interchange gate, waiting for his chance to play AFL footy. John and Jared give a little high-five on John's way out onto the ground and John tears across the ground to man-up the best wingman in the AFL, Sydney Stack. As the Kangaroos bring the footy out of Richmond's forward line, John began his first lead in AFL footy. Sydney Stack was close on his tail as Robbie Tarrant bombed the ball in their direction. As Sydney Stack and John wrestle each other to get the better position for the mark. As the ball began to divebomb towards the pack, John felt Sydney Stack began to dig his hands deep into John's back and pushes off to take the mark. Then the umpire blew his whistle.

"Push in the back!" calls the umpire as Sydney Stack turns around and throws the ball back. John bends down to try and collect the ball on the full but the ball reaches the ground first and the umpire blows his whistle again.

"50-metre penalty!" he says as John takes off in the direction of North Melbourne's goals. As John comes to a stop 50 metres from where the penalty was called he realises that there is no one manning the mark so he takes off again gaining on the goals with every step. 40 from goal. 30. 20. John kicks at goal and the ball rockets off his boot taking a straight path towards the big sticks. John then takes off in mad celebration, but John's high didn't last long.

Midway through the third quarter John comes streaming towards the bench. He quickly goes through the interchange gates and takes a seat on the bench.

"Hey, Mace (sledging coach Mason Johnson), can you please grab me a pair of boots from my bag?" Asks John, "The bottom of these are gone."

"Yeah sure mate," he says, "what ones exactly?"

"Any," says John, "but probably not the old black ones!" He chuckles and jogs down the stairs into the changerooms below the ground. John begins to remove the broken Nike Tiempo boots. As Mace comes back up the stairs I see the boots he is carrying. They're the old, black, torn up Nikes.

"I can't wear those," John says as soon as Mace arrives at the top of the stairwell.

"Why not mate?" he asks, a little confused.

"Because they were the boots I specifically told you not to get!" yells John.

"But these were the only other ones in there."

"Surely not."

"Yeah, no joke," says John, "Go and check yourself." John takes off down the stairs in his socks and slides around the corner into the rooms. John then rummages around the room searching for his footy bag. John then finds it stuffed underneath the bench in the far corner of the room. He tugs it out from the bags and footy's and he tears the zip across. He dives into the bag and pulls stuff out that he didn't even know he had. He eventually retrieves something that feels vaguely like footy boots. He pulls them out and begins to see a shimmer of fluoro yellow amongst the dirty socks and shorts. He gives one final tug and removes a brand new pair of Nike Tiempo's. He breathes a sigh of relief as he eases his feet into the boots. They reek of feet sweat which makes John start to gag. He stands up and breaks into a jog moving towards the stairs and bench upstairs. He hits the stairs with a fast clip-clop and he begins taking the stairs 2 at a time.

It's now early in the 4th quarter and John is beginning to tyre. His legs are feeling like jelly and he is mentally SPENT, but that's not going to stop him winning the game for his teammates. Richmond is coming hard and John and his teammates are hanging onto a slender lead. The scoreboard reads North Melbourne: 13 goals, 8 behinds, 86 to Richmond: 12 goals, 14 behinds, 85. Time's ticking down and John finds space on the wing with his teammates bringing the ball out of the backline. His man as pushed forward to pressure the ball carrier. He looks up and sees John. He sends a long spearing kick and hits him right in the chest. John tugs the ball under his arm and takes off towards goal. The forward line is empty because everyone pushed forward when Richmond went forward and to make things better, they hadn't got back yet. But, as he began to sprint to goal, the Richmond defenders turn and begin their chase. John takes his first bounce. He gets to the corner of the centre square and takes another bounce. Fatigue is beginning to kick in as he gets to the 50-metre arc. He takes his chances and bangs the ball onto his boot. The ball sails 35 metres and bounces towards the big sticks. John takes off again trying to get there before the Richmond player coming from the other side of the 50-metre arc. John begins cranking up the speed and inches on the ball patiently waiting in the goal square. He quickly gathers and walks into an open goal. He connects the perfect torpedo and the ball balloons off his shoe and rockets towards the roof of Marvel Stadium. His teammates come from every corner of the ground. They jump all over him. The crowd throws the ball back to the bottom tier and security guards seize the ball and return it to ball guys on the side of the ground. John bends down to tie up his shoelaces when he sees that the stitching of the boots is beginning to change. The stitches are turning into an old, faded black, like on the boots that John's crazy neighbour gave him. John feels a wave of panic rush over him. Seconds later the final siren goes. John collapses to his knees and throws his arms up in the air. He starts untying his bootlaces but they've also turned to the old faded black as the stitching. Again, the wave of panic rushes over him. Then it hits him. The boots that are currently on his feet are the old boots that transported him here. He rushes to catch up to the rest of his team. He quickly mumbles his way through the theme song and runs over to his bag. He yanks the boots off as the leather turns black. He throws them deep into his bag as turn back into the old crappy boots that they were when he first put them on, back when he was sitting on his couch back in his rundown apartment.

It is three hours after Johns North Melbourne teammates knocked Richmond out of the top 8 all because he kicked the winning goal in the dying seconds of the match. He is driving to his house in his new world. A \$1,000,000 mansion in the inner-city suburb of Carlton. He drives past a dark alleyway and he hits the brakes so hard that he skids along the road a little. He reverses back to the entrance and he drives down about twenty metres. His car shudders to a halt as he climbs out clinging onto the boots. He stops in front of the car and hurls them down the cobblestone road. They hit the ground with a dull *oomph*. John turns his back and climbs back into his Holden Colorado. He backs out of the alleyway and continues back down the road. When he pulls into his driveway, he sees the old Nike boots. He climbs out of the car and walks slowly towards them. He sees a note flapping in the breeze only connected to the boots by a little piece of tape. He rips off the note. It is written in an untidy scrawl. It's from the old crazy neighbour. He's returned the boots. In the note, he tells John to return to the world that he used to live in. The life where he was nothing. The life where he was not an AFL footballer with a big fancy house, in one of the best parts of the city. He is never going back to his old life. He lifts the boots and of the pavement and walks back to his car. He drives to the closest opp shop and throws the boots in the collection bin out the front of the shop. He turns around and walks slowly towards his car. He then takes off into the darkness of the night.

On the way home he sees the crazy neighbour everywhere. He's not sure if he is seeing things or the crazy neighbour is out there, but whichever one, he is terrified. He turns hard around the curb and skids to a stop out the front of his garage door. He jumps out of the car, dragging his footy bag along the ground, like a dog toy stuck in the dog's mouth. He yanks open the front door and slams it shut while quickly clicking the lock. He runs down the hall pulling down curtains and closing doors. He runs into the lounge room and flicks on the light. He runs to the larger couch and pushes it in front of the sliding door. He leaps onto the smaller of the couches. He pulls the remote from the couch cushions. He turns on the television and sees that those damn 1900 Nikes sold in an auction for \$200,000, straight after he had dropped them in that collection bin.

Secondary Encouragement Award: Alyssa Bowey [Catholic College, Wodonga]

Title: *The Maniac Museum Trip*

I wake up to the sound of loud chatting and laughing from the room next door. But who would be talking at 5.30 in the morning? As my eyes flutter open, and I look around, I remember I'm at my Aunties house. Carefully I push aside the warm fluffy blankets that are covering me, as I attempt to stand. I quietly tiptoe into the hallway, my knees cracking at every step. I peek my head through the door of my cousin's room, and I see two little girls looking up at me with their big brown eyes. Lucy, the youngest cousin, who is 2, turns the iPad to face me, blasting bright, white light into my face. The older cousin Bella, who is 4, pats the mattress next to her, encouraging me to sit down. After an hour passes, we all make our way across to my Aunties room. I watch from the door as Bella and Lucy excitedly jump onto their mum Emma's, bed. Emma scoops up the girls and snuggles them next to her as they all invite me over.

I sit in between them, and we begin reading a book. "The end," says Emma, "now go wake up everyone else and get ready." We do as she says and go from room to room, tickling everyone awake, while singing at the top of our lungs.

Next, we make our way downstairs to the kitchen, racing one another to see who is the quickest. "I'm first!" yells Bella, as she rests her hand on the bench. All of us kids take a seat at the table and watch the 'experts' in the kitchen making breakfast. Emma tosses up the pancake that she has cooking in the pan and all us kids watch in awe. That is of course until she forgets about the catching part, and we all erupt with laughter as the pancake drops to the floor.

Finally, the parents come and join us, as the plates and bowls are placed on the table. We all look at the food in astonishment. "There is so much food!" Lucy says excitedly. There are strawberries, cereal, pancakes and omelettes spread across the table and placed on everyone's plates. We all dig in, as we wonder about what type of day is ahead. Once everyone is ready, we all race to the car. As us kids sit in our seats we are told by Emma that we're going to the Melbourne Museum. "Yes!" We all scream in unison, throwing our hands in the air.

As we zoom along the road, we look at the gorgeous view that streaks by the windows. There are city lights flashing red and green, the orange sun rising over rooftops, and occasional parks with colourful slides and wooden bridges. We are all taken aback by just how pretty the day has turned out.

As we finally pull up to the museum, we all pile out, onto the open concrete area. We scurry through the main doors to a desk. On the other side of the desk, we see an old lady sitting down. She has curly, grey hair and wrinkly skin, and not to mention a very high-pitched voice. "Hello there," she squeaks. "What would you like today?" Bella, Lucy, and I all step aside as we let that parents discuss what we would like. After the talking is done, the old lady hands each kid a wristband and also places a dinosaur stamp on our hand. We all say thank you as we head off.

We make our way, swiftly walking up the big stairs, with our dinosaur stamps on our hands and our colourful wristbands around our wrists. When we get up the stairs we realise just how loud it is. My mum, Cathy, tells us all that our first stop is the butterfly room.

As we approach the small room, we see hundreds, even thousands of multicoloured butterflies. All flying around behind glass windows. We all stick our faces right up to the glass to see the kaleidoscope of colours that these elegant creatures create.

Next, we step inside. We are surrounded by flowers of all kinds and trees of all sizes. Everyone wanders through the room, looking at all the beautiful butterflies with their little wings fluttering continuously. We wind our way along the patterned, pebbled path until we reach an exit door.

Once we are out of the butterfly room we continue on our way, going from exhibit to exhibit. We go from the dinosaur room, which has huge life-sized dinosaurs, to the wood sculpture room, that is filled with little gadgets and gizmos made out of wood. Thankfully we pass by the gun room - who would want to go there?

After we visit a few more rooms, we decide to take a seat at the downstairs cafe. As we approach the freshly cleaned cafe, I breathe, inhaling the strong smell of coffee and sugary, cinnamon rolls. I carefully step up to the counter with my mum ordering a milkshake and a biscuit.

In the meantime, Bella and Lucy race over to the colourful see-saw, with Emma following behind, making sure that they don't hurt themselves. Bella and Lucy continue playing until the waiter comes with our food. I watch her carry our food and drinks over and carefully place them on the table. I call the others over for their meals and they rapidly respond.

Silence ascends as we all start eating. Everyone is savouring their delicious morning tea, except for me, because as usual, I have just inhaled my food and all that's left are biscuit crumbs. And of course, that means that after a while, I am stuck sitting there with an empty plate staring up at me.

I rotate my head around to look for something to do while waiting. That is when I notice an escalator. Immediately I turn to my mum, "I'm not sure," she states, obviously knowing what I'm thinking, "it looks like the descending escalator isn't working."

I swing my head around once more, so it is facing the escalator. "It's not moving but it's still working," I convince her, as I get up from my seat. I hurry over to the escalator, hearing my mum say, "only once or..."

but her voice gets lost by the hubbub of people passing by. I put one foot onto the escalator and watch as the steps slowly begin to form. I stand still as I make my way to the top.

I am at the top in no time. As I stand on the inside balcony looking down at the cafe below, I wave to my family, but no one notices me, so I decide to go back down. As I get closer to the descending escalator, I notice a sign blocking it off. I begin to read it, 'Out of order.' I look up at my family in shock and wave my arms vigorously, trying to get someone's attention. But no one sees me.

As time passes, I start stressing out big time. I have ended up roaming around this labyrinth of a museum trying to find my way to the cafe. I'm not sure how long it's been, but it feels like hours. I gaze around the room that I am in, it's eerily empty. Except for two exits. I do what anyone would do, and I make my way to one exit and look out the door. Another empty room. "Just great!" I say sarcastically, "Now what am I meant to do?"

As despair begins to build, I spin my head around one last time, remembering again the exit on the other side of the room. I walk over to it, crossing my fingers that it will lead me back to my family.

My fingers hover over the cold metal handle. I squint my eyes not wanting to know what's behind the door, in case it's bad. I hear a creak as I pull the door open. My eyes scan the room. 'Oh no,' I say to myself as I realise what room it is.

I step inside the room and inhale deeply. "The gun room..." I say to myself purely petrified. There is one thing that I am unquestionably frightened of, and that thing was right in front of me... guns. The only good outcome that I can think of at the moment is that if I can find the exit to this room, then I will know where I am. But of course, that wasn't going to be easy, because this particular room was humongous.

After I take a few more deep breaths, I continue walking around the room. It is completely silent apart for a few faint voices that I can hear off in the distance. I try to figure out where the noise is coming from. I stand still, hearing the voices becoming clearer, and seconds later I see people come towards me from around a corner. I say hello, but they just look at me in confusion. Next, I try to ask where the exit is, but they continue communicating to each other in another language.

I stand there in frustration as I know for a fact, that I just want to get out of here. I panic and run - just run. I don't know where I am running too, but I am running and at a pretty fast pace too. I am weaving in and out of glass cases that are full of guns. Until finally, I find a door. "Yes!" I yell as I realise what this could mean. I open the door to see that the room isn't familiar, but I think on the bright side. "I mean, it could be empty," I whisper to myself.

There are lots of people in this room, and they are all dressed up in security clothes. There is also a lot of high tech equipment scattered around the cramped room. "Excuse me?" I whisper, as a man turns to face me, "I don't know where I am." The man makes his way towards me as I look at my feet shyly.

"What's wrong?" he asks. I start to explain to the man how I had gone up the escalator and then not been able to get back down, and had wandered around looking for a way out.

"And that's how I ended up here," I conclude. Another man stands up from his chair, walks past the high tech equipment and approaches me as well. "Well lucky you found us," he says putting a hand on my shoulder. "We can help you find your way back."

He leads me out of the tech room while waving goodbye to his colleague. He makes his way towards the gun room and opens the door, but cold dread stops me dead in my tracks.

"What's wrong?" he asks in a concerned voice.

"I um... I am scared of that room," I say bluntly. He closes the door and steps towards me.

“How about we take the special route then?” he says. I smile at him gratefully, as he heads off with me trailing behind.

I continue to follow him, and we make our way down halls piled high with boxes and artefacts. He continues until he makes his way to one particular door. Interestingly this door isn't like the rest. It is taped off and has a 'No Entry' sign on it. “This is the restricted area,” he says, “it will take us straight back to the front desk.” He unlocks the door as I begin to feel lighter knowing that I'm not going to be lost for much longer.

Eventually, after walking for a few more minutes, I hear the voices of other people. The man leading me opens one more door, and I see the stairs that I had taken to go to the cafe. “Follow me,” he says as we walk down the stairs. I keep close to him, making sure not to get lost in the busyness around me. We make it down the stairs to the front desk, where he hands me over to the old lady and says his goodbyes. I thank him one more time, while the lady settles me on a stool.

“Can Cathy and Rob please make their way to the front desk?” The old lady bleats over the loudspeaker. I stay seated on the high chair, looking around the museum for any sign of my parents. Just as I turn back around to give up, my eyes scan over at a group of people. “MUM!” I yelp across the museum. The old lady picks me up and plonks me on the ground as I gallop towards my family with open arms. I jump and let my dad gracefully pick me up and fling me over his shoulders. “Thank you!” I say over and over again to the lady.

As we walk out together, I adjust myself to face mum. “How long was I gone?” I ask curiously. My mum looks at me with a grin on her face, “about 20 minutes,” she giggles. Only twenty minutes, I think to myself. I definitely thought it was a lot longer.

Even though this trip had some horrible memories attached to it There were also many high points and a great life lesson was learnt. Because of today, I now know what to do when I go to the museum. I need to make sure that I DO NOT use escalators that don't work.

