

# WIMBLEDON BOOKFEST



# THE GAME

Senior Young Writers  
Competition 2024

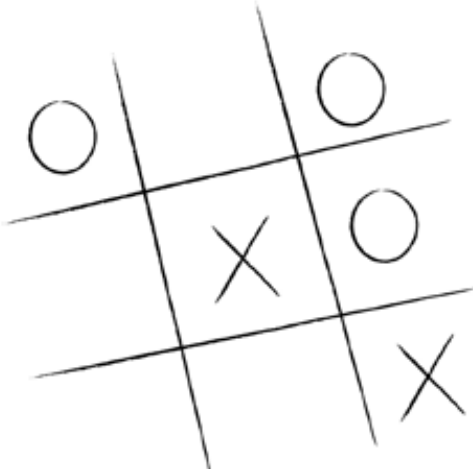
Collection of Short Stories & Poems



# WIMBLEDON BOOKFEST

## Young Writers Competition 2024

Collection of Short Stories & Poems  
By Senior School Pupils, Age 11-19



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## Notes

School names have been abbreviated in some places; a list with schools' full names can be found at the back of this book. Special Educational Needs categories and schools have been abbreviated to 'SEN' in some instances.

All the poems and stories are published as students submitted them. Only minor and essential grammatical punctuation edits have been made.

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# Young Writers Competition 2024

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*Research Fellow, University of Roehampton*

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Georgie Morley

*Wimbledon BookFest*

Margaret Reeve

*Teacher & Education consultant*

Tori Wyatt

*MA Student, University of Roehampton*





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Indira Bhuskute *Wimbledon High School*

Joseph Sikorski *Rutlish School*

Mattia Bonnincontro *Southfields Academy*

Milly Davies *Raynes Park High School*

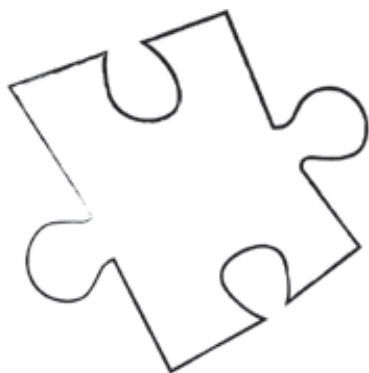
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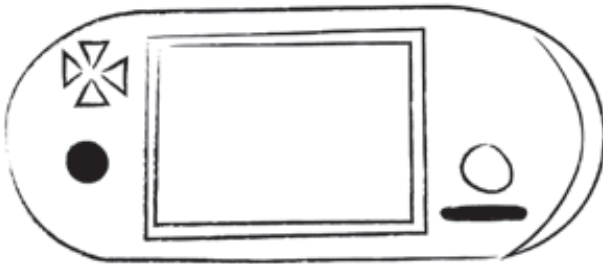




# Introduction

The Olympic Games lifted and inspired so many of us this summer. Athletes performing on the world's stage after years of training; of intense blood, sweat and tears. To be an Olympian is to reach the very pinnacle of human endeavour. To stand alongside one's teammates and competitors with the shared goal of doing one's very best. It is this gargantuan spirit that inspired the theme for the 2024 Young Writer's Competition and our writers have certainly risen to the challenge.

Games sort the winners from the losers. The wheat from the chaff. They test our strength. Or our logic. They challenge, confound or champion our abilities. We turn to them when we want rule and order, yet also seek them out for play, escape and experimentation. We can see such 'playfulness' emerging in the writing here: a joyous pushing of form, rhythm and language - a delighted (and delightful) revelling in the possibilities of poetry and prose.



There are also, however, lots of dark and dangerous games in this anthology. Games where the 'blood, sweat and tears' sting differently. Where the outcome can mean the difference between life or death. These games are terrifying: they can make us want to give up. Or shut down altogether.

But more than anything, games have the remarkable ability to bring us together. To unite us as participants, spectators, teams, punters and fans. And the underlying uniting force, as the wonderful entries across this anthology demonstrate, is hope.

Hope that we'll score that goal. Hope that we'll make the right move. Hope that good will always - even in the darkest of times; against the most dangerous of opponents - win out.

So, come closer. Listen carefully to what these talented young writers have to say about the world. Because they're ready for it.

Game on.

Dr Amy Waite  
Chair of Judges  
University of Roehampton

overall  
winner





# The Old Man

Justin Brown

*Melrose School, Mitcham (Year 10 - Age 15)*

My name is Justin Brown and I've seen many things in my time.

I've seen relationships disintegrate in an instance. Disappearing like breath on a mirror.

It makes me wonder how love ties into our evolution. How love ages and changes us and makes us into the humans we are. Love ages us. Love has aged me.

My hair is thinning, grey like ash from an old burnt out cigarette. My fatigued eyes, as black as coal, but my pupils still twinkle like stars in a night sky. Too many pub trips with my mates not yet extinguishing that sparkle. My cheekbones, however have not escaped my life of excess. Hollowed out. Holes dug out by the good times long past.

Plagued by jaundice, my pockmarked skin makes me want to tear it off piece by piece and emerge renewed like a butterfly. My once lush beard cuts into my face. Itching like someone picking at a stitch. It hurts.

My family gave up on me at the age of ten. My dad would have rather have had a Mercedes Benz.

In some ways I look like an old Mercedes, rusty rotting wheels instead of legs that barely work. But there's still quality under the hood. There are still reminders of what there once was.

People that disrespect others make my blood boil and my skin crawl, I know how those people got there, they used to be like me, forgiving until that one person comes along and changes

you, could be an, ex-wife, ex-girlfriend, ex-boyfriend, even an ex friend.

But disapproval hurts most from the people you love most and that reality destroys. Carves lines, deep furrows, into every facet of your being. It makes you appear a hundred years older and having toiled every one of those years.

Everyone claims that they do not want violence. Screaming "Be kind!" As they spit venomous words. But you need violence to protect love and love creates violence, does it not? I don't know. I do not have the answers.

All I know is I have been in too many fights. The worst with my dad.

I've been invisible to people for years. They don't care to know who I am. Until I'm in the news, 'another homeless man dies due to hypothermia' on the streets of London and suddenly everyone cares.

You say you pray for my safety but no one does anything until it benefits them. Why am I on the street!? Because I disobeyed the 'system' and broke the 'ideals' and they did not like that. So they threw me away for being too 'useful'.

My clothes are tattered and slashed by hounds, big hairy beasts of the night with sharp teeth and skinny physiques chained to fences of local parks.

It is a sad truth, people just abandoning their companions at a gate in their local community, leaving them there for someone else to deal with, like a discarded dustbin bag. Everything is always someone else's problem.

A lot of people say to me, "Get a job bum!" I say to them,



“How am I supposed to get a job without a postcode or good clothes or a house to live in!” I know what you’re asking, “Why don’t you just sign up to a homeless shelter?” I have tried but they are horrible people only after their pay check.

I really want to teach people how to care for each other but in order to care for others, I need to care for myself... I’m getting there.

And if you see me on the streets of London, please remember, you are not so far removed from me.

My hair still grows, grey like an alpha wolf. My eyes that have seen everything, as black as obsidian, my pupils explode like a supernova.

Memories of joyous nights stoke the fire inside of me. Cheekbones, high and defined, the envy of any runway model.

My wings have started to unfurl.





**WINNERS**

# The Games I Play

Juliet Capgras

*Raynes Park High School (Year 8 - Age 13)*

I've been playing the game for as long as I remember  
See, you've got to be careful  
Too careful.

I know how it goes now, I'd like to think I've gotten pretty good,  
But still not good enough.

Think before you speak, but I still never do  
Regret is a feeling I'm familiar with.  
Cold in your stomach, burrowing deep like a beetle.  
So I drum rhythms and melodies onto school desks, tapping my  
foot on every other beat.  
Again.  
And again.  
You made a mistake, start again.

I seem to be the only one playing the game,  
They're all miles and miles ahead, leaving me in the dust.  
A friend told me I hum subconsciously,  
so that's something else to add to the constant noise in the back  
of my head  
I'm still waiting for my prize, surely,  
I've been doing so well.

This game is wearing me thin at the edges,  
When will I get to stop playing?  
But you never get to stop playing.

I drown out my thoughts and the noise in my head with words  
That  
Mean



Nothing.

But no matter how far I throw myself over the finish line,  
It throws itself ever further.  
This game will never end, I'm sure of it now  
Society will make sure of that,  
With its always changing rules  
I can't seem to write them down fast enough.

I've been playing the game for as long as I remember  
And I can't see a way out of it.  
No 'exit' button in the corner of the computer.  
No final boss.  
No high score to beat.

But no matter how you look at it,  
The clocks will tick faster,  
And the blackbirds will still sing on electrical cables  
The game that is social acceptance will  
Never  
Ever  
Stop.

# The Game

Aseel Tabrini

*West London Free School (Year 8 - Age 12)*

I sat there. Looking. Staring. Wandering. It lay lifeless on the ground, dead. It's blonde, string-like hair oozed out of its sack-made head. Its eyes were lost, the googly eyes trembled, reflecting a hollow sadness. Her dress bore the timeless, faded elegance of a bygone era.

My hand was tingling, the waterfall of tears streaming down like a herd of waves. It couldn't be.

I would grab Nipa by the hand and sprint into the Arabian breeze, the sandy gusts of wind encircling me and tugging me back playfully. I would laugh, smile, and giggle. Me and Nipa were inseparable she never left my side. Together, we sat by Ms Mustafa's stall and played a handclap, although it wasn't successful as her hands were flopping, due to her being created from a sack.



“Nipa, let’s play a game!” I giggled.  
“Come on!”

I would hold her knitted hands and swing her around. She smiled at me; I know it's not possible, but she did! I could see her plum -coloured lips form the shape of a smile, a smile so innocent, jubilant. Running, I would hold her against my chest

protectively, down the steps of Damascus, running to the shore. I would gaze so intently at the ultramarine sea, hoping I would try to catch each glistening spark formed from the waves. Then there it was when I heard the first air raid siren in months...

They all zoomed past me. All alone on the shore. I was too shocked to move.

I screamed into the void; my voice lost amidst the chaos. Alone on the shore of Damascus, I felt bereft, paralyzed by the despair. Just then, I felt the hands of a man tug me by the waist and throw me on to his shoulders like a bag of rice, screaming in haste. Just then, I lost grip of Nipa.

"Nipa! Nipa," I screeched, "Come to me, come to me!"

Even uttering 'Nipa' used to cause me pain. That moment was the most painful thing I had ever experienced. Thump. Thump. Thump. How she lay there on the shore, waiting for me to come back, looking at me in disbelief. I abandoned her. I abandoned my best friend, my everything.

"Nipa, wait for me," I cried, "I'm coming!"

Next morning, after the air raid, I leapt out of bed empty handed, burst open the door and scuttled to the beach. Sucking in the wintry air, I scanned the shore for Nipa. She's not here. Could she have got carried by the sea waves? But before I even reached the sea, one helpless strand of blonde string lay in a row. Was that Nipa's? Is she okay? What happened? I couldn't stop all these questions swirling through the forefront of my mind. Tears streamed down my cheeks in torrents, unstoppable as the crashing waves by the Arabian shore. I sat and cried. Cried, and cried.

I was ten years old, on the shore of Damascus, crying my heart out.

# An Everlasting Ordain

Honey Williams

*Raynes Park High School (Year 10 - Age 14)*

I am told that it takes a leap of faith to transcend a disbelief  
So, with flaky limbs  
I scuttle forward.

Aby, I scrape through the grit  
Fingernails gunky, I embrace the filth  
I believe it's easier to reside in its  
sludge than to abort

such a drop of life from an  
aching soul

So, willingly, I inhale it's mud.  
To think that I sheltered a heart  
mellow with prospect,

so charming and certain  
A cologne so sweet I dared to taste  
That popped and crackled like popping candy on my  
tongue

Down below, as night reigns above  
I settle.

Alongside the sludge, I stare into her lustful eyes,  
I cherish her dearly.

Here I can accept that I was stripped of the legs needed to pace,  
The breath so fair their rationale would falter,  
Estranged, because though I make the rules here, the

stars seem to wink at those I gape at with a strained,

misty, sight



# Latrodectus

Jessica Reeves

*Ursuline High School (Year 13 - Age 17)*

Seawinds swept across my bare arms,  
Carrying beads of sand in its grasp.  
The wind was a desperate market seller  
thrusting his beads  
And bracelets upon me yet  
I saw them for sand. It coagulated against the damp sweat of  
my body  
And nestled in my hair like the eggs of a cuckoo.

In the orange glow, on the boundary of land and ocean,  
I lugged my rattling suitcase up a quiet hill, back to my car.  
As colour bled across the sky, I wondered whether it was  
merely a reflection  
Or blood  
Which made the waves spurt red froth like a severed artery.

Could you use a hand, draws a voice from behind  
and I turn,  
Grinning with every tooth,  
And tell him I have far more than he'd expect.

From being a first-time player, adrenaline made me bold.

Our cars, we conclude, are together, parked nearby, over the  
brow of the hill.

We laugh together and trade possessions briefly:  
His eyes say I am too weak for my luggage. His mouth  
confirms as much.

We jostle onwards, his rusting, red bucket of exoskeletons  
swung in my hand

While the handle of my suitcase splintered in his.

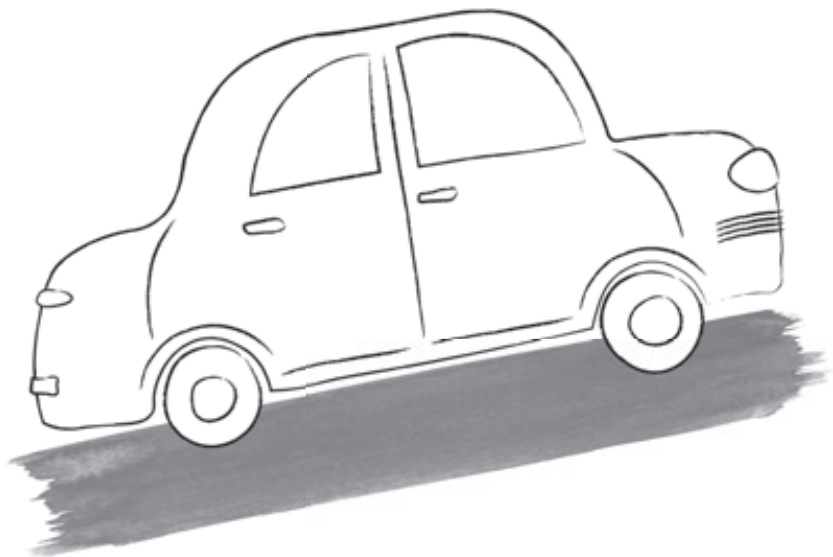
He tells me about harnessing the bounty of the sea and,  
as a fishmonger, how he has navigated  
with his 'pappy, the great Atlantic under the starlight.  
He tells me that nature herself knows how to kneel if you talk to  
her nicely.

I picture his hand under thick, rolling waves,  
Desperate to skim the surface, to breach, while he sinks further.  
I smile. Nature would seal his mouth shut  
With currents.

She was a seasoned player of this game.

I, too, want to learn her secrets.

My boot opens like a blood eagle,  
With tarpaulin tumbling out like ribbons,  
I snatched my gutting knife, shimmering like the scale of the fish  
That he, as a fishmonger, must be so accustomed to,  
As I sliced my way from belly to throat.



A solitary peace followed. In the same way the horizon divides  
the sky  
From the sea, his parting was as natural as it was necessary.  
In the quaint parking lot, I fold his bubbling body away into the  
very suitcase he carried,  
I twist and snap till he fits.

My game was one of loss and love. The fishmonger with  
Family,  
Friends,  
And once a future,  
Could have also had me.  
The mechanics of my game were determined long ago,  
And had become calloused and calcified, like overworked fingers  
or a broken, lost heart.

My dance was one of death. I am the true widow, Latroectus.

I drag that heavy suitcase by its bruising, swollen hands back  
home.

The twisted game I play drips through his final presentation,  
strung up like butcher shop chops.

The empty gape in his chest

Reflects a void of my own hunger.

His pooling blood drops like my tears, in a grisly puddle,

And I wonder whether either of us really enjoyed this game.

# The Discovery

Rose Dempsey

*Holy Cross School (Year 12 - Age 16)*

I stand idly, feeling the cool night breeze strike my skin. The tangled strands of my hair whip against my face, my bare feet firmly planted on the damp grass below me. I find myself staring up at the moon longingly, although I know it's not really there. The half-shattered, star-filled screen above me flickers rhythmically, sparks spitting at me viciously, angered that I have discovered their well-kept secret of the simulation they've been keeping me in, whoever they are.

I know I should be horrified, even saddened by my discovery, but for some reason I can't find a single flicker of emotion within me that could possibly express how I feel. It's an ineffable sense inside of me. I shake off my thoughts, settling on staring mindlessly at the manufactured sky above me, trying my best to ignore the feeling of existential dread as it bubbles up in my chest, ready to burst out at any moment. I don't think I've processed it yet, the fact that my reality is just a game designed for someone else's amusement. But that's not enough to stop the hot tears trickling down my face, the despondent feeling hitting me at full force. Each breath I take rests regretfully on my lungs, suffocating me before I can think to do it myself. Every second I had lived was being watched by someone else- perhaps even controlled. How humiliating.

I feel exposed, unconsciously adjusting my night dress as the heat rises to my cheeks, finally ripping my gaze away from the sky as I glance down at my body, running my hands across the soft fabric of my dress. I can feel it. I extend my shaking hands, wiggling my fingers individually to feel some sense of control in my moment of vulnerability. I could act on my own



accord. Finally, I come to my senses, grounding my wandering mind. I feel my knees give out, collapsing to the ground.

My tears burn into my skin as I unearth the grass below me, wailing like a child, begging and screaming at the false idol above me for answers, pointlessly ripping out chunks of dirt and throwing them up at the screen, as it continues to sadistically flicker.

Eventually the dirt had burrowed under my nails as I continued my incessant tantrum, wallowing in the pitiful feeling of helplessness. Now it felt like all I had left to do was cry. I find an odd comfort in my own sobs, weakly hugging myself, my hands caked with mud dirtying my once clean skin, my nightdress ruined...

But none of it matters. If it's not real, if I'm not real...then truly nothing matters and that's enough to stop my crying. But it's enough to ease my mind, there needs to be more. I need a purpose.

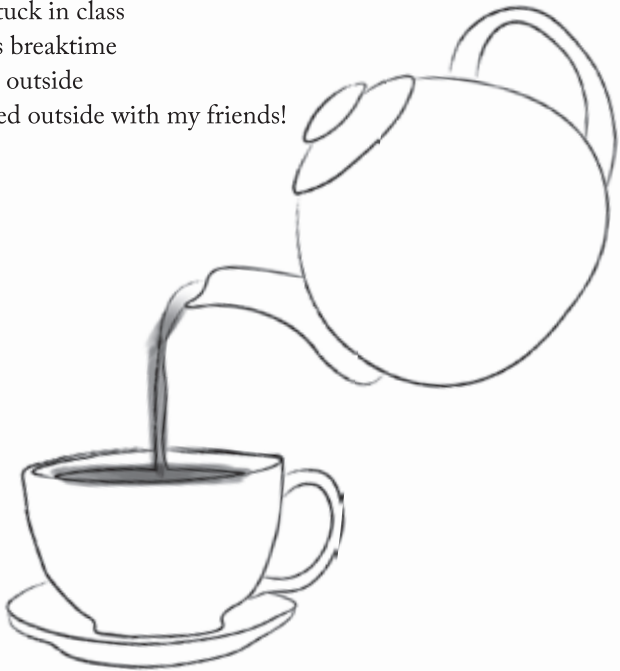
So now I sit, with an underlying sense of hunger for something more, I stare up at the moon. Silently yearning.

# I am Stuck

Megan Harris

*Cricket Green School (SEN) (Year 11 - Age 15)*

The kids are happy and content and relaxing  
And chatting and eating biscuits  
I wish I was there  
But I am stuck in class  
They are in the playhouse and having a tea party  
And skipping and hiding  
I wish I was there  
But I am stuck in class  
The kids are skipping and in the tent  
And relaxing in the hammock  
I wish I was there  
But I am stuck in class  
Finally it is breaktime  
I am going outside  
I am allowed outside with my friends!  
Hurrah!!!



# Denilson and Amelia

Denilson Goncalves Semedo

*Cricket Green School (SEN) (Year 13 - Age 18)*

Running through trees  
Hiding breathing  
Shh. Birds singing  
People talking  
Stay still, don't move  
She is coming  
What should I do?  
I'm running through bushes  
She is attacking me  
I fall down on the floor  
She is trying to kill me  
Her eyes are angry  
She moves quickly  
Panicking  
Kicking  
I'm dying, I can't breathe  
I hear feet faster and faster.  
She is here  
Amelia, Amelia  
She pushes,  
'Get off him!'  
I'm free  
I'm alive  
I'm happy  
Amelia feels happy with me  
My heart feels calm  
We are going to win  
We can escape  
From the game.



# **The Battle of Kane and Undertaker**

Christopher Ballentine

*Cricket Green School (SEN) (Year 8 - Age 13)*

‘What on earth is that?’ Mrs Dawson was pointing at a huge wrestling ring in the Cricket Green School field. The whole school was shocked because they’d never seen anything like it. Out of nowhere, the most exciting wrestlers in the world came out of Emerald Class and onto the field. It was Kane and Undertaker!

Kane and Undertaker were brothers. They were in a house fire together when they were young and have hated each other ever since. They were about to have a match and these brothers had the same attitude. They were feeling confident. Kane’s face looked like it was about to explode with his famous fighting face. Undertaker stood at the ring staring at Kane with a straight face.

The fight began and Kane was getting fired up. They did nothing but beat each other up. They were going back and forth with blow after blow, punch after punch, chokeslam after chokeslam. Kane was just about to get the win but then suddenly the ref put his hands up to make an announcement. The ref was an ugly man with grey hair, tiny legs and eyes that were too big for his head.

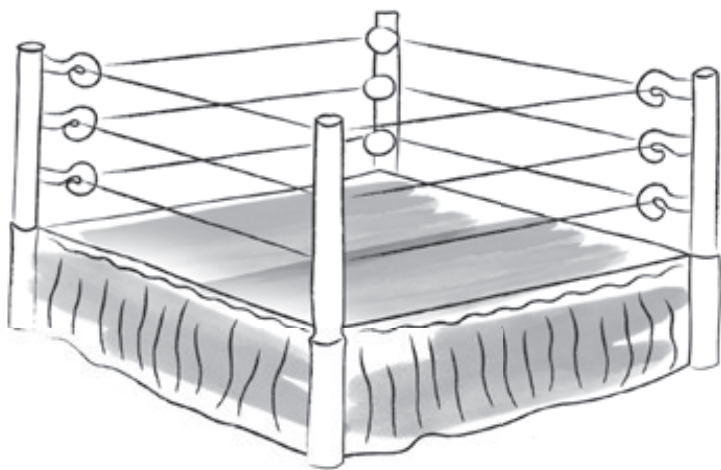
‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said the ref. ‘Prepare for the greatest Battle Royal that Cricket Green School has ever seen.’

The crowd went wild (except for Ms Dawson who was seen walking away shrugging her shoulders with a face that said ‘I give up’).

A whole group of wrestlers came through the door of Emerald and shouted BATTLE ROYALE! They looked mean and vicious. They were flexing their muscles, showing off and looking horrible. They were all confident, but Undertaker on the other hand did not agree. He saw red. Undertaker threw every single wrestler in the ring over the top rope. One by one he put his hand on their chests and pushed them over the top.

Finally it was only Kane and Undertaker left. Undertaker took Kane by the throat and looked him in the eye. Without a word, Undertaker lifted him up chucked him over the top rope. Kane stood back up silently. He knew he messed up. He walked off the field and disappeared into the school. Undertaker was chuffed.

Mrs Dawson looked out of the window and sat down. 'Just another day at Cricket Green,' she said.



# Barbie

Zoeya Ahmed

*Cricket Green School (SEN) (Year 9 - Age 14)*

Once upon a time I was playing with Barbie. I was telling the barbies to get married. I was playing in my bedroom and I was happy.

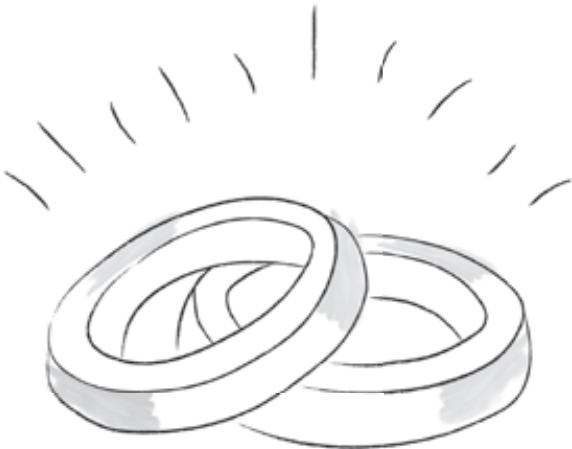
Suddenly I heard a loud voice shout “stop I don’t want to marry Ken.” I noticed it was Barbie. I was surprised because Barbie was talking.

I said “stop fighting. Why you don’t want to marry ken?”

“Because I want to marry Daisy” said Barbie.

“But you have to marry Ken,” I shouted. “You are my dolly. I tell you what to do.”

Barbie listened to me and married Ken. I don’t want to be a Barbie. I want to marry someone I want.





# **RUNNERS UP**

# Dear Ma

Eliza Godfrey

*Ursuline High School (Year 9 - Age 13)*

Dear Ma,

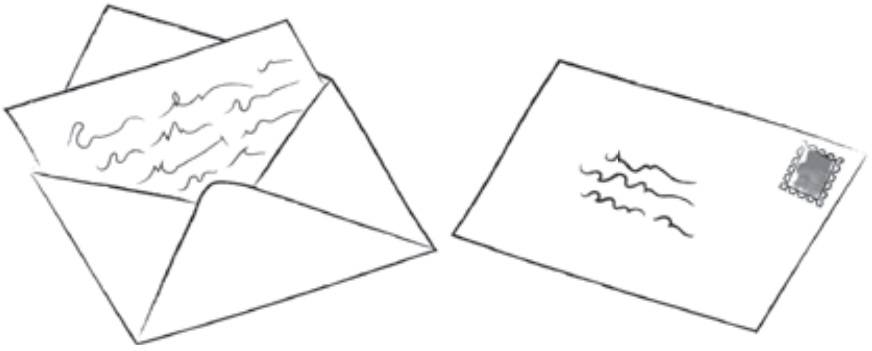
The days bleed together,  
Pictures of life before become muddy,  
The glow from all those I love is now damp and faded,  
Friends turn into blank faces, gormless and alone,  
I will return home.

I lie here, waiting for dark earth to drag me back down to the hell  
from which this war came,  
We are the pawns of the powerful,  
We make the moves,  
And invade occupied lands,  
And still we are the ones destined to be piled into unmarked  
graves,  
It's a sick game they play,

We are moved around the board,  
Taking lands and prisoners,  
Boys die for their country,  
Children shot, for fear of what would lie at home,

These pits reek of death,  
We clamber over the top,  
Scrabbling rats in the murk of war,  
Hundreds of thousands of husbands, sons, sweethearts are  
murdered in as many seconds,

Those in power twist and contort the rules to their own advantage,  
Where we see smeared portraits of blood and filth,  
They see only a square on a map,



Or a check on a board,  
Scraping our hardened boots closer and closer to imminent fatality,

Amidst the devil's orchestra of screams and cries,  
Someone feels that they will win,  
I see no success, no victory or pride,  
Except my assurance that these children have not died in vain,

This world has blistered beyond repair,  
I see whole futures trampled underfoot,  
Somebody's son died in my arms today,  
He screamed, desperate for his mother,  
Like a newborn child,  
Limp in my arms,

I stepped through the corpses,  
There was a serenity washed over me,  
A blush of red through the earth,  
A glimpse of sordid hope, all alone,  
Dear ma, I will return home.

# The Game

Lua Gestoso Cabezas

*West London Free School (Year 11 - Age 16)*

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6

7, she feels pretty -  
she's wearing a pink dress,  
and her father called her a princess.  
Everything's right, and she feels content,  
she didn't think that feeling would ever go away...

8, tucked safely in bed,  
eyelids fluttering, in an attempt to stay awake -  
Because dreams are nice, but life feels even sweeter,  
Why sleep it away, when she could be living it?

9, creeping into the kitchen,  
Pulling an all-nighter with her cool, older sister.  
Guzzling sweets without a care in the world,  
wishing the night wouldn't end at all.

10, a boy called her ugly.  
She feels upset, and wonders if, maybe, it's because she's chubby.  
From that moment on she never feels the same,  
her confidence destroyed in a single day.

11, she feels inadequate.  
Not quite slim, but not enough 'curvy'.  
It's a foreign feeling - her body doesn't seem to belong to her,

she feels like a stranger, trapped in an unwelcoming prison cell.

12, her confidence plummets.

She sighs when she wakes up, rushing to pound on make-up.

Maybe her friend was right, she could lose some weight.

She'll skip a few meals to compensate.

13, sitting up straight,

Her room dimly lit in a faint, moonlit haze,

She creeps into the bathroom, gazing into the mirror's silver sheen,

She doesn't like what she sees, a grotesque monster, peering  
straight in.

14, huddled on her bed,

wondering what she could do to make herself feel less afraid...

less afraid of herself, and the monster living in her head.



15, thoughts swirl around her head,  
nightmares plague her, even when she's wide awake  
They are growing stronger, she can't escape!  
eventually, she'll  
suffocate.

16, she's laying in a crumpled heap,  
The world swaying under her buckled feet.  
Her senses blurred by the bitter poison she sips.

17, the drink is a staple,  
She knows it's bad but she sees no alternative.  
The voice is persistent, and she needs an escape  
A simple drug to drown out the ringing in her head.

18, the battle's been lost,  
Her childhood ended, her innocence gone.  
She knows it's sad, and she should feel upset,  
but all she feels is a hollow numbness in her chest...

30, the voices are gone,  
Their whispers are faded, and their influence lost.  
She's slain the monster, killed the beast,  
yet, in the back of her head, she will always hear its echoing screams.

40, she finally feels pretty.  
She's still not okay, but slowly, she's healing.  
The scars are fading, the wounds closed up,  
reminders of the war she fought once upon a past.

80, sitting on a hospital bed.  
She wishes the little girl within her hadn't been so afraid.  
She knows it was hard, but life is short,  
Too short to waste wishing it hadn't happened at all...

For life is a game of self - love, one we all play, and one which can  
never truly be won...

# Sunday Evening

Shon-Shon de Peyer

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 11 - Age 16)*

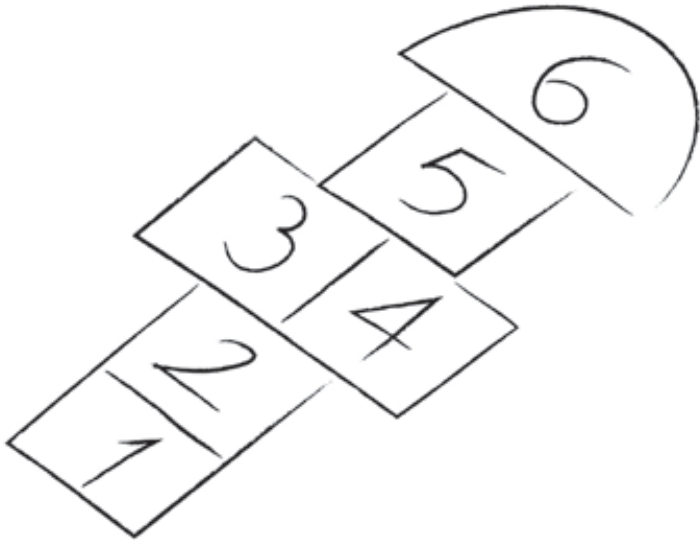
An instantaneous modicum,  
Instantaneous pool of glee --  
Will it be okay?  
If I let it go, let it float away?  
This idling glimmer of an idling feeling.  
Dashed like cirrus.

Row by row, I line my chalky colours,  
Carve a hopscotch grid, in the steaming  
mess of asphalt,  
Pastel little pallors,

You're besides me, not on the swing or slide,  
but in the gravel with me,  
Down here with me -  
I breath a brocade air, head rested on your shoulder,  
(from the cat's cradle of your skirt),  
"Eye-spy, eye-spy, with my-"

Meddled with our rotting apple drops,  
Think of a wooden chair, painted by the door,  
Clamber amongst iron plaits together -  
And I'm swinging with my childhood friend,  
throwing ourselves up at the sunset.

The light, it tastes of talcum,  
But the whistle of saliva in my throat/  
Happens to spew a dew-lined web of sugar,  
I wrap her blonde hair in it and -  
leave cascades of the sound 'cross her brow.  
This is the beauty of reaching for cumulus //



She will be my first love, a new game, beyond any one footed leap -

Garnished in the garments of the gathered garnet winds,  
I watch her pirouette,  
Glaze my form over hers in eye and soul,  
Caught against the dying gloam,  
Immortalise her fragmented silhouette;  
As the chain breaks above me, aged as it was /  
Oxymoronic to my youth (that's time's game),  
And the tarmac doesn't even chafe as we bang into it,  
and I lose my last milk teeth.

And I'm laughing bloody mouthed,  
under the broken swing, giggling besides you.  
Just another happy childhood game.  
Cemented in my mind, a flame.  
As my mother calls from the benches,  
you pass me a balsam-scented tissue.

# My Next Move

Maryam Aslam

*Raynes Park High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

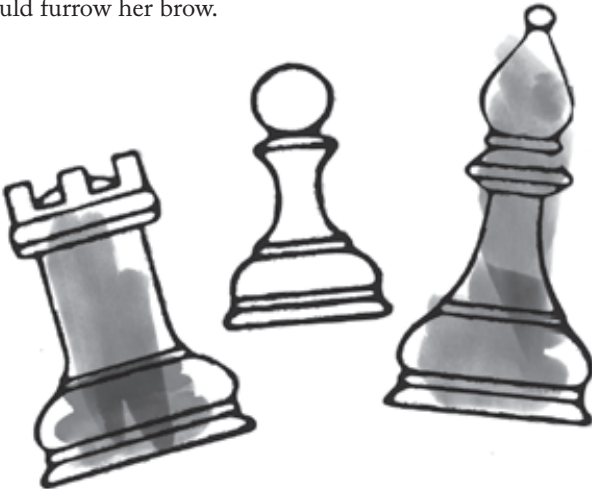
At gripping moments like this, I hear my Nanni Ma's hoarse voice turning over in my mind, engrained with the sound of her rocking wicker chair creaking after every swing:

'Go on. It's your turn.'

And before me -more often than not- would be a small board with 64 black and white squares and another set of 16 black and white pieces at either end.

'But I've already lost; is there really a need?'

At my protest, her eyes would narrow into black slits, and she would stare at me, like I had just ridiculed her. So, I would move my pieces in a useless effort to prevent my inevitable defeat. In her response, she would merely press her lips into a thin straight line, her frustration palpable in the way she would furrow her brow.



‘Be bold. Never accept defeat.’

With that, she would once again refurnish the board, and every piece would be back in its designated place, and we would start another game, which would always end with my defeat.

My Nanni Ma was usually communicative in a reserved way, and her advice, which I wouldn’t have known at the time, would mean a great deal to me.

In the short six years we had spent together in the same old room playing the same game every afternoon, she had taught me the intricacies of playing chess and the invisible art of victory regardless of situations; though I had never been able to defeat her, not once before the day she was blanketed in a white cloth and placed in her khat.

And so it came about in my early 20s when I saw my life branching into a barren, fruitless tree, its branches twisted and empty, mirroring my own bleak future, wordless and unknown. It stood like a naked pawn, always on the board, always present and thought of, yet lacking and limited in movement and power. I had found no reason to love that sight, yet amidst the desolation, there was a beauty of growth. As my Nanni Ma had snobbishly suggested, and I had snobbishly repeated, the tree will continue to flower when the time is right, and the smallest pawn can become a queen with time.

And with that, I let myself wander with the warm wind through the carefree clouds, until before me was a chess board and opposite me a skeletal tree.

Silently, I worked out my next move.

# Perpetual Chess

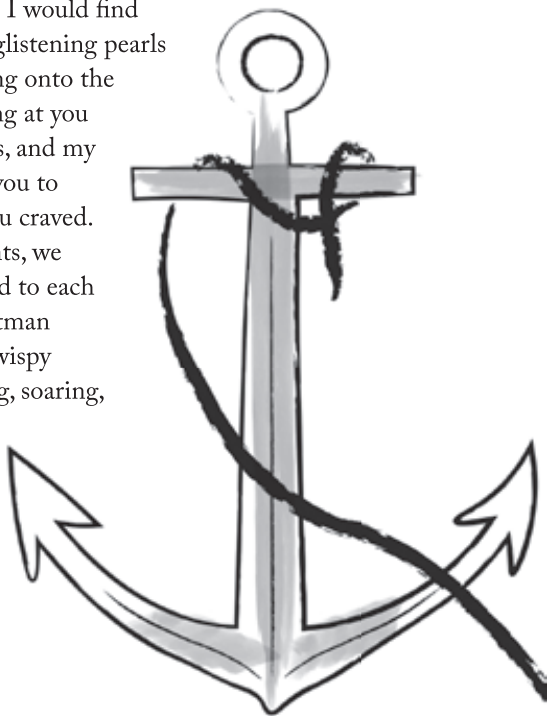
Maya Grkovic

*West London Free School (Year 13 - Age 18)*

As a million times before, I welcome you into my arms again: your crocodile tears spilling onto my shirt and your silver tongue ghosting at my ear. Lies and excuses spun and woven at the precision of a spider. You returned once more, and I was supposed to be thankful. You're all I know after all.

As always, I welcome you back. Let you step on me again. I am your footstool; you use me to get what you want and disregard me.

Before I figured you out (that is, the way you drained me), our love was pure. When I would find you on your knees, your glistening pearls (reptilian poison) dripping onto the carpet, my comfort sprung at you like golden orchid sinews, and my gentle embrace encased you to bring you the warmth you craved. Anchor. In those moments, we were bound. We belonged to each other. I saw your Devil atman for what it wasn't- for a wispy pirouetting spirit bending, soaring, surging through the air yet not disrupting anything, but I was not completely wrong. You lay in concealment, feeding off snatches of my soul without making yourself



known, much like a Bluefin glides just below the water without so much as causing a ripple's disturbance of the surface. I destroyed myself for you, harnessed my strength to provide to your hollow chest the solace for which I yearned.

But I learned your delusion.

I am yours, yours, yours, until you decide I'm not. Then I will be yours again when you want me to be.

Since then, I've looked at you no longer with the gaze of someone who beholds the pinnacle of ethereality, but in the same way one looks at the same cup of coffee in the morning after every restless night. It's familiar. It's comfortable, our game.

You think I'm oblivious, thick as tree trunks. I'm a creature to you, sucking up your fabricated apologies. You think you're so smart.

I figured you out, and yet nothing has changed. You still take from me, and I still let you. We get too close; you push me away. But you never leave. You know it too, I'm sure. The very essence of our beings are permanently bonded- body and soul to body and soul; atom to atom. You could no sooner remove yourself from me than you could remove the ocean from its water. You can push me away a million times more, but you'll always come back to me, and I'll be waiting for you. We're stuck in a perpetual game of chess, and there's no one I'd rather be playing with, babe.

# HIGHLY COMMENDED POEMS

Key Stage 3

Years 7-9

Age 11-14



# Pieces of the Board

Angel Ghumdia

*Saint Cecilia's School (Year 8 - Age 13)*

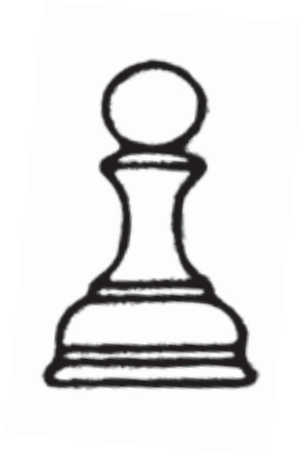
We are all chess pieces  
Intricate and uniquely designed  
Crafted by God's hands  
We're good and bad combined

Life is a chaotic game  
You don't get to sign up to play  
It's irregular and crazed  
Like the rhyme scheme on this page

Some of us are pawns  
Unable to make a change  
A bird stuck in its cage  
Trapped by horrid restraints

Some are closer to rooks  
Free but still bound to rulebooks  
They have their set paths  
Little room for fun or laughs





Bishops move near erratically  
Wishing they could break the pattern  
A bad habit, how they wish to be set free

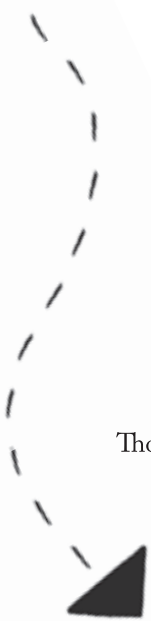
The Queens ruling their lives  
Royalty moves wildly, their like free of strife  
We are victims to their horrid devices  
But still praise their dirty vices

To whomever the player may be  
Hear my silent plea  
Make better choices at least  
Ones that could benefit you and me?

# The Fateless Game

Avik Gaglani

*Shrewsbury House School (Year 7 - Age 12)*



In shadows deep, where whispers creep,  
There lies a realm where dreams ever leap.  
A stage of tales, both bold and tame,  
A dance of life, the timeless game.


Upon this board of black and white,  
Figures move in the dead of night.  
With every step, a story weaves,  
A tapestry of hopes and greaves.

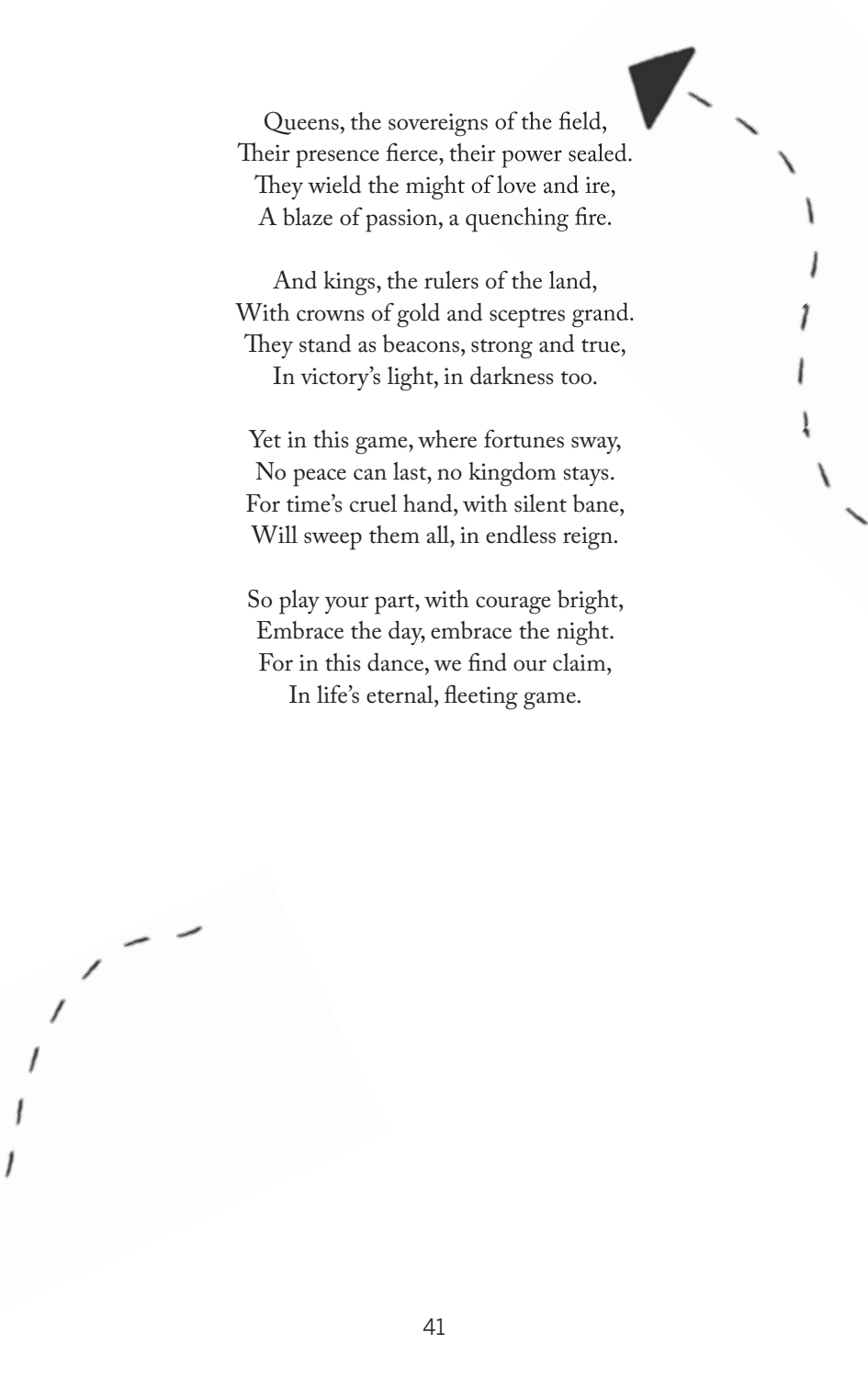
The pawns, mere souls, in humble guise,  
Yearn to reach the distant skies.  
Thought, promotion, importance, They tread the path of fate's  
design, Seeking glory, leaving woes behind.

The knights, in armour gleaming bright,  
Ride forth to vanquish the dark of night.  
Their steeds like thunder, hooves aflame,  
They carve their names into the pivotal game.

Bishops in robes of crimson hue,  
With wisdom deep and eyes like dew,  
They move with grace, in sacred art,  
Guiding souls with a gentle heart.

The rooks, like towers, stout and tall,  
Guard the borders, never fall.  
With walls of stone and steadfast will,  
They hold the line, through good and ill.





Queens, the sovereigns of the field,  
Their presence fierce, their power sealed.  
They wield the might of love and ire,  
A blaze of passion, a quenching fire.

And kings, the rulers of the land,  
With crowns of gold and sceptres grand.  
They stand as beacons, strong and true,  
In victory's light, in darkness too.

Yet in this game, where fortunes sway,  
No peace can last, no kingdom stays.  
For time's cruel hand, with silent bane,  
Will sweep them all, in endless reign.

So play your part, with courage bright,  
Embrace the day, embrace the night.  
For in this dance, we find our claim,  
In life's eternal, fleeting game.

# The Game

Benedict Cardwell

*Wimbledon College (Year 8 - Age 12)*

In hot July's beating sun  
swimmers will swim and runners will run  
as they ferociously compete for that elusive gold  
"the best feeling ever" past winners have told  
families rooting for their nation  
watching it televised or listening through a radio station  
"go uk!" we shout loud  
will the brits do us proud?  
as the athletes of the world make their way to France  
their fans say hopefully "could they have a chance"  
from 100m to 1500m, yes the track events are hard  
but events like judo and boxing may leave you bruised and scarred  
hammer throw, pole vault, long jump, high jump and javelin  
all events were just one moment of glory could get you the win  
once you become champion, your life will never be the same  
because once the torch is lit, its anyone's Game

# It's Not a Game

Chloe Dent

*Ibstock Place School (Year 8 - Age 13)*

The enemy approaches. Closer. Closer.  
Each press, each click - the feeling of a great composer,  
The gun, your instrument, you shoot without care.  
You fire! They're down! You lean forward on your chair.  
And you've won! Receive your trophy: go and press 'claim'!  
Playing until you're bored, then you exit the game.

But now the pixels have become 3D reality,  
But it's no longer fun - it's full of brutality.

Each foot squelches in the mud of the trench,  
The icy chill, the pungent stench,  
The echoes of other's cries tormentingly linger,  
The pull of the trigger, the cold metal on your finger.  
And suddenly you don't feel like a winner -  
You can't just exit and just to go for dinner.

Crash  
The bullet tears through the sky  
Bang  
They fall, you hear a penetrating cry  
Boom  
A bomb smiles with malice as it flies.  
Blood.  
Screams.  
Cries.

A friend, a parent, a cousin, a child gone,  
You can't come back, switch off or on.  
War is not a game, there aren't second tries-  
Once they're gone, they're gone, they cannot arise.



The shot of a gun, a bullet piercing the air,  
It makes the hit; that's their life gone, right there.

When you see a person fall  
You know their parents will get 'the call'  
You can't use 'heart number two'  
And that's when you realise the next could be you.

There is no winner, there is no trophy to claim  
Because war is merciless and is never a game.



# The Puppeteer

Ciara Dwyer

*West London Free School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

I run I run I run,

The strings pulling me back one by one by one,

My heart pounding beat by beat by beat,

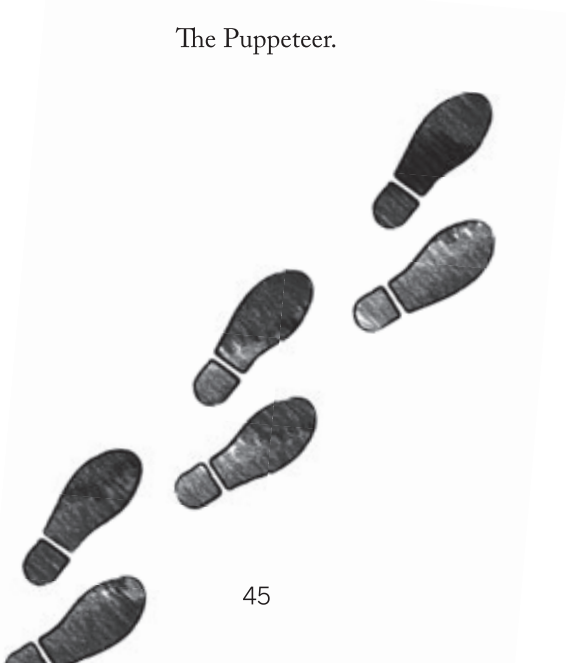
This surge in me to be controlled,

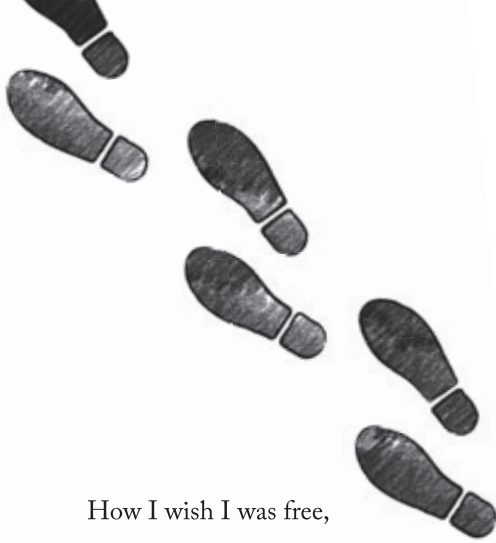
And yet, I follow him,

His every instruction surging through my brain,

People watching my every move, I look up and see him,  
standing there, watching with his  
menacing eyes,

The Puppeteer.





How I wish I was free,  
A chance to be who I want to be,  
Rather than playing this silly game,  
As if I'm a lion who needs to be tamed.

I run I run I run,  
The strings pulling me back one by one by one,  
My heart pounding beat by beat by beat,  
This is defeat.

# The Game of Life

Eliza Godfrey

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 8 - Age 13)*

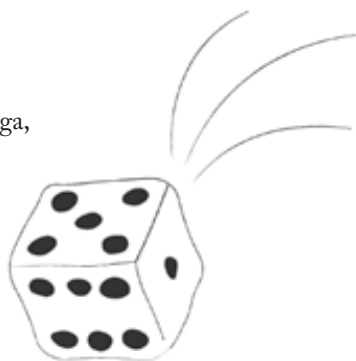
Life is like a game,  
You've got to watch all your moves,  
Like in snakes and ladders.

There's always that fear of going wrong,  
Who thought small numbers would be so scary?  
Like on a dice.  
Get this six and you're fine,  
Otherwise, you're back to square 1.

Like monopoly,  
You must watch where you go,  
Watch what you buy.  
Get out of jail card?  
That's in the game,  
But not in the game of life.

Life is like twister,  
Getting into sticky situations.  
But changing one small thing  
Could fix everything.

Like when you pull the wrong brick in Jenga,  
Life all comes tumbling down,  
But one you put it all together again,  
It turns that frown the right way round.



Life is like a game of uno,  
You could pick up 4 cards,  
Struggle with the weight of it all,  
But give it a little while,  
And you'll be good after all.

Life is like a sports season,  
You win some.  
You lose some.  
But it will all still help the end result.

Life is a game of Minecraft,  
Use the things around you  
To make something even better.

Life is like a game.



# The Fate Game

Elizabeth Massey

*West London Free School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

Dappled light raised its fingers  
And all that was created  
Held the essence of craft  
That's what they told us  
As they numbed us  
Before  
The eventual onslaught of rain  
Like the wind  
Like death  
Every step  
Like the wailing that cut deep  
Hurt  
Towards the swirling hell  
Like the wind  
The wind whistling through  
Every child distorted brain  
As the queue got shorter  
To the door of the wailing wind  
To the Flare Territory  
Face, icy  
Body, frozen in time  
The step through  
Like wind  
On tender skin  
Darkness  
Yet the candle still flickered  
And grubby light like a sliver moth  
A curl of daylight  
The smell of alcohol  
And rot  
And white walls that ate up

The thoughts of escape  
And the drones  
That brought fate  
To its knees  
Finally  
Real earth under foot  
And the real sun  
And real final silence  
The Split  
And the ghost of living followed  
The broken feet of youth  
And half of them  
A gun in their  
Unbridled hands  
And then left  
Alone  
In the Flare Territory  
With silence and decomposition  
Their only companion  
As who wants to be with  
Future murderers  
As the Flare Territory word states  
Si non occiderit te non vivet  
And like the twist of law  
They leave  
Eyes sharp  
Knives sharper.

# The Bitter Taste of Fury

Francesca Dazeley

*Raynes Park High School (Year 7 - Age 11)*

Every petal that falls from a withering rose,  
Is a fresh shade of red.

All of the trust has been broken  
By all of the thorns that grew.  
All of the sunlight has been taken  
Left drowning in the thrashing rain.

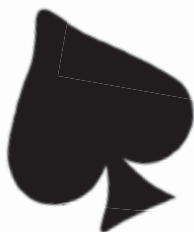
The bitter taste of fury  
And all of the chaos we're left with  
Only for them to be left with luxury.  
History is left repeating itself yet again  
But will it ever be rewritten?

We live with the cards we're dealt with  
But what if they were all the jokers in the deck?  
Yet we're still forced to play  
Every time the dice cascades.

They will always know  
Every scar that is left  
Will never disappear out of sight  
And every time we burn  
Our ashes shall rise.

Remind them of every drop of blood we shed  
All because the rules were as sharp as knives  
Ready to be bent.  
We shall only see  
The rest of their rotting corpses  
Never to be deceived again by the bitter taste of fury.

Was this finally the end?



# Games are These Pretty Memories

Indira Bhuskute

*Wimbledon High School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

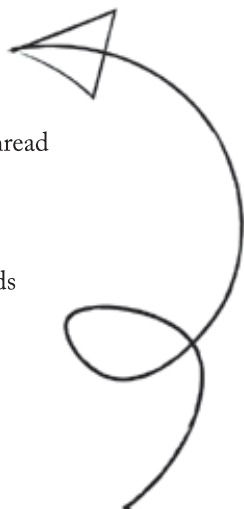
3, 2, 1! Ready? Cause I'll never be  
I am trying to find you  
Where are you hiding?  
There you are, caught you! Hiding  
Under the bed  
But I bend down and see nothing there

You're spraying me with water from the garden hose  
I tackle you to the ground but  
You flow free from my grasp like you are just thinning air

Okay, last spin! You're chasing me with a blindfold  
You're running in the opposite direction  
Why are you going so fast? I can't even catch up with you  
There you are, caught you! But you're still slipping  
You're going and that's what's left me weeping  
My grip is loosening  
The tighter I hold, the further you go

You're hiding behind the bright green sofa  
There you are, caught you!  
But you weren't there  
I imagined you there because  
Your spirit was the last golden, shimmering thread  
Hugging me tight to this Earth  
The earth I was on because you were

That was the last thing I saw behind my eyelids  
(I couldn't save you, so why stay?)

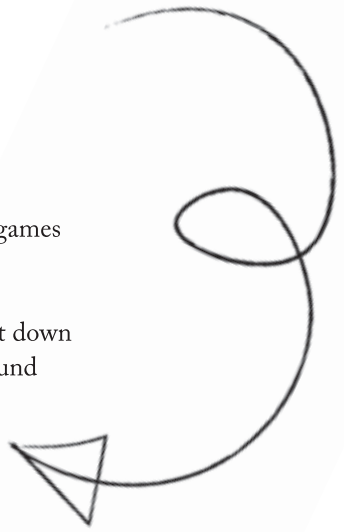


When I left this house  
The house I was in because you were

I offered you memories about our little games

(And I thought that would be enough)  
To save you from the fate of being 6 feet down  
But it wasn't, and now you're in this ground  
The ground I am in, because you are.

There you are! Caught you. Finally.



# Fun

Joseph Sikorski

*Rutlish School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

Since the dawn of time, everyone has always had their favorite  
game to play,  
Some play competitively,  
Some just for fun,  
Everyone has their favorite game.

First we played in parks,

Then we had arcades which we all invaded,

Just to have some fun,

Then the first console came, now we didn't even have to leave our  
homes.

We used to play football, now we play Fifa,

We used to run, now we play Sonic.

We used to play soldiers in the streets,

Now we can be soldiers without leaving the comfort of our sofa.

What has happened to the golden days of playing tag in the park?

Just chasing each other with sticks.

We used to disappear like ninjas in bushes,

Now we disappear in front of our screens.

Our parents played hide and seek in the park,

We just hide in our screens

This can't go on!

Let's take a break,

Let's go have some real fun.



# The Game

Mattia Bonnincontro

*Southfields Academy (Year 8 - Age 12)*

I'm making a poem, I'm trying to rhyme,  
I look at the clock, I'm running out of time,  
"Only 18 words?!" a guy said to me,  
"You know you need a hundred at least."

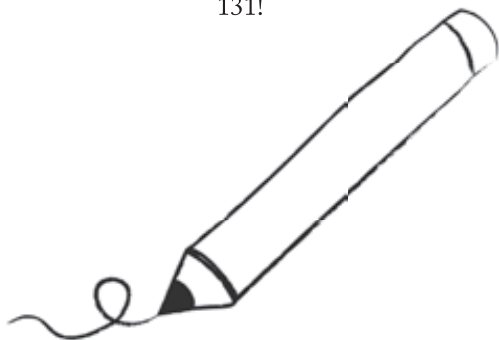
I look to my left, I have a great plan,  
A guy we'll call Jake will make me a man,  
I see the paper, I start reading the text,  
"I score" "They shoot" "He saves!" "You're next"

The teacher glances, I look at the clock,  
I look at my poem, my eyes start to lock,  
Okay students, it's almost the end,  
I start to panic, I can't comprehend.

This is part of the poem where I try  
to make time and finish thi—

"Time is up, I hope you are done,"  
I look at my text.....

131!



# Never the Lion

Milly Davies

Raynes Park High School (Year 7 - Age 12)

*A poem inspired by Tola Okogwu  
Your weakness is your greatest strength*

Always sly, always cunning.  
Crammed in the shadows and burnt with their fire.  
Never content, always running.

Never the lion, never the hero.  
Watching the glorious return.  
Losing the game, forever on zero.

Tactics.  
Rumours.  
Secrets alike.

Playing the game of ice and fire.  
Through a keyhole of emerald envy.  
Burning the fox with the wrath of a liar.

But heaven favours the strength of weakness

And finally, struck with ice, lions fall fake.  
And in a crowd of jealous eyes  
Comes the plot of the fox and the snake.

Winning the game, winning the pride.  
Spy masters aplenty, to the dozen.  
Winning the crowd, winning the mind.

Ruling over the games at last.  
Ruling over a sea of burning lions.

Struck with ice oh so fast.

Never boasting, never proud.

Never the hero, always the crowd.

Never looking for an admirer, only a crown.

Always sly, always cunning.

Never to see the shadows again.

Gone the lion, long live the fox.



# The Waiting Game

Paisley (Hoi Tsun) Tam

*West London Free School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

My eyes open to a sight  
A flash of room I never saw  
And my mind hasn't thawed.  
The room was bright,  
Like the Sun  
A colour of fun  
But the next thing that happened made me wanna run.  
I stand in a room  
Of a backyard garden  
But I never knew the place spelt doom.  
Corners added with birch trees  
Their leaves flowed with a little breeze  
But I never knew they would make me freeze.  
The middle holds a large autumn tree  
The leaves a magnificent shade  
Of rich fiery auburn  
Like the Sun,  
And the bark a little flayed  
Its durability strong  
Like the Sun.  
Fixated on the tree  
My eyes forgot  
To remind my brain  
About the others beside me.  
My head turns to face  
All the different races  
That I can see.  
A sign pops out of the wall  
One so broken it looks like it's 'bouta fall  
And it says that I'm IT.  
My head tries to understand



This information I have  
While I unconsciously touch a shoulder  
Of a female folder.  
A sudden beep rings  
Then a yell, scream  
And a flash of red  
Like the Sun.  
Everyone starts running,  
Panicking, shouting  
Away from me  
Then the tree reveals its wiring  
Of dying  
And the next person erupts in red  
Like the Sun  
Except I didn't touch them.  
My eyes blur  
As my arms swing with a flur  
And my legs run like a whirl.  
Out of instinct  
Not even to think  
I grabbed the nearest purple branch  
And held on with my life  
Until the next one that I'll grasp with my soul.  
Blood flies onto me  
Like an annoying insect...  
A fly.  
And it goes everywhere on my pants, jacket, shoes.  
I reach for leaves, a rich red  
Like the Sun  
And hope I find my way.  
But then....  
I see it.  
A crimson button, the colour of the leaves  
And the Sun  
With a poorly pasted paper  
Of "ESCAPE" written on it.



But....  
Another also sees it.  
Then another.  
And another.  
Atheism leaves my blood  
As I begin to pray to every god in existence.  
Pray that I press that button  
Pray that I survive.  
But my legs are suctioned.  
My hands are stuck.  
My chance of escaping's almost gone.  
So, I leap for it.  
I leap like the cow that jumped over the moon.  
I leap like Kobe Bryant, leaping to score a three-pointer.  
Well, I'll meet Kobe Bryant, if I don't leap far enough.  
I close my eyes.  
I hit a hard object, but unsure it's  
The button, the grail of survival  
Or the body of another, the grail of death.  
I land on the grass floor, expecting death.  
But I open my eyes....  
I see red  
Like the Sun.  
And the broken sign reveals...  
"Congrats, Player 16. -- Successful  
escapee... Proceed to..... door."  
So, I pick myself up, and head to the door  
Waiting for more deaths, more trauma,  
more sadness  
Waiting for what's more to come.



# The Game

Ronnie Winter-Dobson

*Southfields Academy (Year 7 - Age 12)*

This is a poem about a boy called Owen

Owen loves playing tennis

He plays with his friend Dennis

Owen has a nickname for him, and it's Dennis the Menace

They call him that because he is really good at tennis

But Dennis has some tics

Dennis has Tourette's syndrome and he can't help it

This annoys Owen a little bit

But they keep playing

They are both aiming to get into their school's team

But the school is strict and mean

They say Dennis can't play because of his tics

This annoys Owen more than a little bit

He tells the coach, for he fears the tennis team will lose

But the coach just keeps tying his shoes

The boys go home and make a comment online



They go to sleep and the comment starts to outshine

The internet blows up about how there should be equality

Owen and Dennis go to school in jollity

But what they don't know is the online fans reach out to  
their school

And the school say anyone can play - they enforce a new rule

The pair know what to do

And the famous Dennis the Menace can play on the team.  
They let out a big woo hoo!

# The Game

Roshan Sood

*Wimbledon College (Year 8 - Age 12)*

I crouch, sniffing the dewy fragrance of last night's drizzle,  
My whites stark against the emerald grass.  
Brows furrowed, eyes narrowed,  
As I survey the distant opponents.  
I stride out onto the lush, verdant oval,  
The golden orb steady on my tense face.

As I approach,  
Adrenaline surges through my blood,  
Knees weak, hands clammy, ragged breaths,  
Heart pumping so loudly it almost  
Drowns out the ferocious bellow  
From the stands.

At the crease,  
Tighten my helmet, strap on my gloves,  
Scrape my studs on dry dirt.

Then, tapping my bat, that comforting hollow sound.

I lift my head,  
Take my guard,  
Check the field,  
Those toy soldiers scattered around the pitch.

A hush around the ground...  
The bowler sprints towards the crease  
An asteroid hurtles towards my bat  
The Game has begun -





## HIGHLY COMMENDED STORIES

Key Stage 3

Years 7-9

Age 11-14

# Childhood Games

Ada Onur

*Wimbledon High (Year 9 - Age 14)*

Silently, I slip my grimy fingers into the soft silk-lined interior of the handbag, rummaging through the clutter with expert ease. As I finger each object, images form in my mind, summoned easily by shapes and textures I know so well. I tube of lipstick, a packet of breathmints, housekeys. I delve deeper, until my hand closes around a small rectangle. smooth, yet bumpy surface, the knobbly teeth of a zip shutting off one end. My target. Gently, I prise it open, feeling for the tender rustle of stale notes beneath my fingertips. I count them out in my mind, taking some, but not all, to win me time. Then I scrunch them up in my sweaty fist, thrusting them out and stuffing them into my pocket. As I walk away I can feel the bulge through my threadbare jeans and I know that I have won.

Back at home, dad is waiting for me on the sofa, his eyes expectant

“What’ve you got?” Proudly I hand him my stash, knowing for sure, that this time, I have beaten him.

“I did it, didn’t I dad, I beat your high score, do I get my prize dad, sweets, like you promised!” He sighed in mock sorrow

“50 points, close but not quite, we’ve been over this, in order to win, you need to take more.”

“But you told me not to dad, you said a smart night takes just enough so the witch won’t notice its gone.”

“Well, then steal from more people!” I back away, sensing the danger in his voice. He sighs again, sadly this time. “Look, you need to score more points. You know the deal, if you don’t beat

me, I get the prize, remember? Don't worry you'll get better, it's all about practice, it's not winning that's important, it's how you play the game, nobody saw you?"

"No dad." I say, hanging my head. Sometimes, I wish he would create an easier game, one I could actually win.

"Want to come with me to collect my prize?"

"Yes dad."

We walk hand in hand, dad giving me tips I already know, like always play with clean hands and always choose the pretties handbags, because they'll have more points. We stop off at the shop, where he collects a plastic bag full of heavy bottles of dark green glass. On our way home, their meta caps clink against one another in victory, and I ignore them because I wasn't good enough and now I'll go to bed hungry because I lost.

The next morning I am angry. I want to win so badly that I'm not quiet, or careful. I dig around handbags and take too much and hide them too slowly, until a many ringed hand grabs me, and the gnarled fingers of a witch close around my wrist. I twist and pull, as a strange shout echoes through my burning ears, and a thousand heads whip around to glare at me

"Thief!"



# The Game

Alex Foster

*Ibstock Place School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

This is it. The 101st year. Anxiety and fear sweeps over me as the lumped hand creeps into the perfect glass bowl like a snake. Ready to ruin it's victim's life. Or end it. A small paper sheet is chosen, lifted and unfolded. 'Lexarius Bank'. No. No. No, this isn't happening. I am not getting chosen. I stand there blankly until I am reeled back into reality by the hard shove onto a large golden carriage. The carriage is beautiful inside, with silk cushions, and luscious seats lined with diamond studs. It's ironic how they only treat you nicely when you may do the country good, yet the country does not treat you well.



Allow me to explain; 10 species. 11 planets. 1 universe. Each species took refuge on a planet. One planet left. They created a game, a match to the death. After 100 years, the planet with the most wins would have the planet for their own, which would be very important, as it contains rich food, and hunger is the main cause of death. This is the 101st year, as all of the planets had the same amount of wins. How convenient. This year is the winning game. And I've been chosen.

Just like that, I'm on the planet. It all happened so fast, the hiding and collecting the sweet berries for the first 3 days. The sharp blade of the knife which I stole from another talented boy who

made it sharpening on a rock. The screams for help, the last groans of the boy who lay at my feet after I had slashes him down like a mere tree. The arena changed me definitely. But I'm not sure it was for the better. The once-sweet, kind Lexarius Bank, who wouldn't hurt a fly is no longer here. I have a new name now; Slasher. Given to me by

the locals. I'm not really sure if I like it. Sure, it has a ring to it, but it reminds me of the screams of pain of the 7 people

I cut down on that planet. I took others' lives, so I'll take my own. I'll take my life on the rock, where I put all the other bodies. I'm not superior to them. I hope this proves that. I'm not just a player in their game. I will have the same fate.



# The Game

Alexander Morgan

*Southfields Academy (Year 8 - Age 13)*

It's the same thing every time, for me at least, it starts with me being one of the first to be put forward and almost immediately being taken. I can't help it, everyone else has all these fancy moves, the rook can go all the way along, the knight can jump over pieces, heck even the bishop goes diagonal, but me? I'm just a pawn. I go forward, that's all I do. Sometimes I can capture another piece, but it's only another pawn. Nothing new ever happens to me.

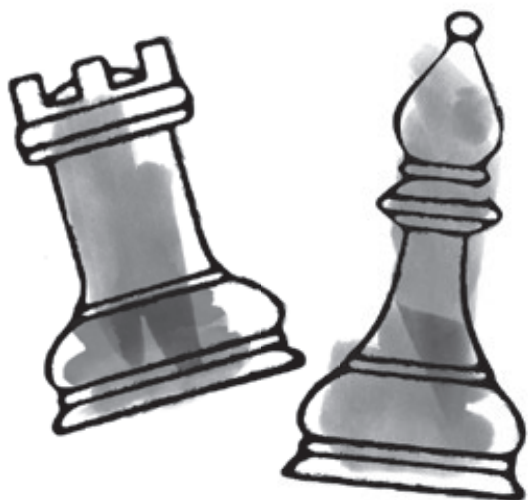
However, there's one piece that always has a different move each time, can you guess? You probably can, it's the queen! She's so powerful she can go anywhere on the board! I always wanted to be like her, so every time we got put back in the box, well, there's this little hole in the side, far too small for any of us to fit through. However, it faces the window and every night I can see a pair of lights flying past, they're so mystical they must be the chess gods! So every night I asked them to turn me into a queen so I could do more. This happens every night but the next day it's always the same thing again.

Except this game was different for two things, I didn't get taken out as quickly as last time, and Michael, (a human) must have been really tired today because he didn't see the trap that Julissa (his wife) had set up and so the queen got captured! I couldn't believe it! But now I could see a path to the end. Michael must have seen it too because he started to gradually move me to the other side of the board.

Now I was only 2 spaces away from the end. A bishop moved to the other side, a knight took a pawn and I was one space away from the end. Julissa moved her rook, Michael picked

me up and I could feel the power building inside of me. I touched the last space and I could feel an explosion of energy that was dormant for so long, and had finally been unleashed! I wondered what I was going to turn into and then I heard Michael say the word queen and I realized I was growing taller, my base wider. I could feel a high collar forming! I couldn't believe I was an actual QUEEN! This was amazing!

I looked around and could see that everyone was just as amazed as I was then I saw a path straight to the enemy king. There was no one to stop me. Then I looked up and saw that Julissa's mouth was agape with shock and Michael was smiling over a job well done. Now there was nothing Julissa could do to protect her king so there was only one thing left to do. She tipped over her king in the traditional show of defeat and we had won.



# The Castle's Dark Secret

Alfred Somorjay

*Wimbledon College (Year 8 - Age 13)*

“Race you to the top!” I  
shouted, as we  
clambered  
over the  
fence  
and ran  
up the path.

It was a dirt track  
solid with generations  
of feet compacting it, that snaked towards the castle that  
stood proudly above us on the heather-covered hill. The stone  
fortress, cracked with age, overlooked a village nestled between  
the feet of a huge pine forest and a distant mountain with a  
peak surrounded in cloud.

Soon, we stood before the towering oak door, panting in  
anticipation and excitement. It was early evening, so the doors  
were bolted against any prying civilian eyes. We didn't care  
about safety, or restricted public access though, so I led the way  
to a gap in the neighbouring battlement, which I could just  
about squeeze through. The others followed swiftly and we all  
huddled together before the central keep.

Every Friday evening, my friends and I used to meet up at  
one of our houses for some fun. However, lately this fun had  
become more boring; we were hungry for more. We decided  
to go bigger, better, more dangerous: the castle. It has become  
our new tradition to sneak in and use it as our playground  
ever since. We haven't been caught. Yet. One of us is Seeker,  
and they have 2 minutes until they can come and find us.  
Once caught, you would help until every person was found.

The last one standing wins. Today I was hiding. I was also very determined, as I had lost the last few games.

“Go!” Seeker shouted! I sprinted toward the keep and up the narrow, slippery stairs inside. Once at the top, I glanced out of the smashed lattice window. 60 seconds. That’s all I had left. I tore across a bowing wooden bridge, sodden with decades of rain, and into a cavernous hall. The herringbone patterned floors were similar to that of a church. “I must be close,” I thought to myself. Down another mossy staircase, through another grimy hallway. 10 seconds left. Into a cramped room filled with coffins. 5 seconds left. Behind one propped against the back wall. 2 seconds left. Crouching down, I held my breath. Time up.

In the silence and calm of the burial vault, I felt oddly nervous and jumpy. Never had I ever experienced this kind of worry running within the twisting structure of the castle. Then I heard it. A low, throbbing hum filled the room. A purple-blue glow splashed menacing shadows across the buckling walls. I crawled out from behind the coffin, all adrenaline of the game seeping away, unnoticed. Before me, an amorphous beam of light bulged, as if trying to escape from some unseen grasp. I suddenly glimpsed a room beyond, the same room but... different. There were the coffins and the black walls, but sunlight streaming through the windows and two people deep in conversation. I just could not comprehend what I saw. But what I did know was that it was pulling me through.



# How Far Will I Go?

Egan Rimmer

*Marymount International School (Year 9 - Age 13)*

They took us, and are making us play a game. They said it'd be fun, they said we'd all be fine. Liars. My forearms are bleeding from crawling along this tunnel and I can hear my heartbeat, it's so fast. They put poison in us, we're all dying, there is one antidote in here, if we find it, we will survive, everyone else will die. We will win. That's what they asked us before we came in, "How far would you go to win? How far would you go for your life? How far is the line, and will you cross it? How far?" I keep saying it in my head like a motto, like it will solve everything if I know the answer. They gave us all weapons; they gave me a knife. I will not use it. I know where my line is and I will not cross it. But I can still hear them in my head, mocking me. How far. How far? It doesn't matter how far I'll go because I won't have to do anything, I will find the antidote first, I will go home.

My little brother used to say that to me when we played board games. He's a dirty little cheat and whenever I caught him he'd say, "I know how far I'll go to win.

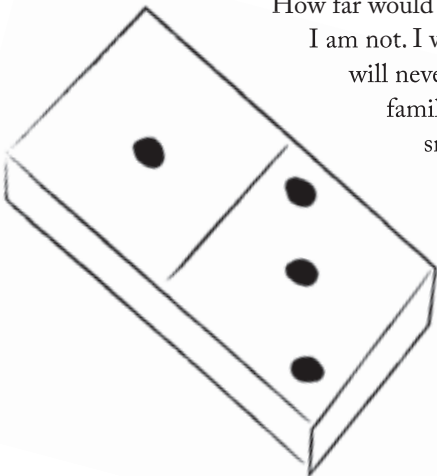
How far would you go?" My eyes are crying but I am not. I will go home but 91 other people will never. They will never tell their

family they love them. They will never smile, never laugh, never cry, never

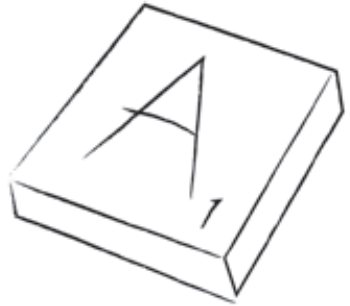
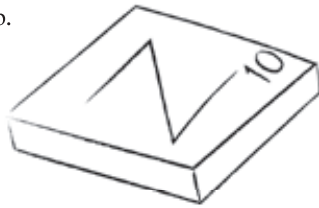
live again. Can I do that? Can

I trade 91 people's lives for mine? The tunnel opens five feet in front of me. I push myself through the gap, bracing for the hard fall.

The ground hits my back and I can't breathe.



But I have to. I haul myself up.  
I can see the syringe, just  
lying there, as if it's some  
random piece of junk  
and not the thing that  
will save me and kill  
everyone. I limp towards it;  
I injured my leg. It's there. It's right  
in front of me, the one thing, the only  
thing that will save me. Then a hand  
closes around it. I look up. He's  
looking straight at me. His eyes.  
They've started to turn black. It's  
the poison. I wonder if mine are  
doing the same. We're only two  
feet apart. I was so close.



He raises the syringe to his arm. His eyes are locked on me.  
“I’m sorry.” He says. I can feel the knife in my hand. “How far  
would you go to win?” It’s not them this time. It’s my brother.  
How far would I go for my life? I meet the black eyed boy’s  
gaze. He’s telling the truth, he is sorry. He’s talking but I can’t  
hear him. How far, how far. How far will I go? He says it again,  
“I’m sorry”.

I raise my knife. “I’m not.”

# Welcome to the Mad House

Eloise Magne-Coke

*Saint Cecilia's School (Year 8 - Age 12)*

If you peered through the windows of Heathwick Manor, you would see many things. From the attic window, one would see a young girl dangling from the ceiling fan, an unknown breeze gently twisting her body round and round.

In Mr Heathwick's office, he lay slumped over his chair, with a burning poker through his head.

The first of the victims, the butler had twenty-three stab wounds gushing blood out like a crimson waterfall. Servants were tied up, muffled sobs coming from hoarse throats.

Yet in the drawing room, Mrs Heathwick, her son-in-law, and journalist Lyllanna Finch were very much alive.

The room was lit by two chandeliers, casting jagged shadows around the room. Ridiculously expensive furniture decorated the space, along with ancient oil paintings hung on the walls.

Mrs Heathwick had made herself comfortable in a stiff leather chair, her eyes practically piercing through Lyllanna's skull. The son-in-law, Matthew, chose to stand, a small, relieved smile that made Lyllanna's skin crawl. The journalist smoothed out her blood-stained satin dress, large blotches of dark green stains coveting the garment resembling an abstract art piece. Matthew started gushing on about how they were lucky to still be alive, pondering aloud where the killer would strike next.





“Perhaps we ought to phone the police? Alert anyone about what has happened?” Lyllanna asked, questioning the man’s morals. Something didn’t feel right to her, something was off, the last piece of the puzzle hadn’t fit properly. Matthew’s face stretched into a creepy grin which prickled at the hair on the journalist’s skin. “Don’t be stupid Miss Finch, the authorities would never make it in time. This manor has no neighbouring buildings for miles on end. There’s no point.”

This set off alarm bells in Lyllanna’s head. They were loud, so loud. She fought the urge to rock herself gently or cover her ears with her hands. Fought the urge to shout and scream and lay in a sea of broken glass. But she didn’t do any of those things, and instead sat meekly like a sad little girl. Mrs Heathwick must have spoken up about something, but ended up with a strike to her face. It was all a blur to the journalist, trying to figure out the last pieces of the puzzle. And then, looking up to Matthew, she noticed a bulge in his blazer pocket. She watched him intently, waiting for the lining of the jacket to reveal itself. And it did. And so did the large knife with a slight reddish tint. It was a game. It was all a game. And now it made sense. It was a game, a deadly charade. The pieces fell into place—why invite so many? The realization hit. She was just a pawn in their twisted game.

# The Game

Georgie Clements

*Southfields Academy (Year 7 - Age 12)*

I could feel my heart beating outside my chest. Sweat piling upon my face. My legs slowly giving up, but I knew I couldn't stop running. Behind me, the shining figure was getting closer, like it was an angel coming to tell me my time was over. One wrong move, and I would disappear for all eternity.

As I continued rushing away from my fate, all the walls looked the same as if I was running in circles. No matter which corner I turned it felt like I had been there already before. Whilst my mind was begging me to find a way out of this hell, I looked up to see if there were any other routes, but all I was greeted with was darkness, as if someone turned every light off in the world. I tried to remember when I first came here, and how, but I couldn't even tell how long I'd been here. Had it been just hours? Days? Months? Years...I felt my eyes blur and suddenly I could taste nothing but my own salty tears.

Ahead there was a light. A different kind of light to the one following me. I silently prayed and hoped it was an exit out of here. It wasn't, but I was faced with something different. Food. Cherries.

I hadn't eaten many cherries in my lifetime, but I knew there was something unusual about them. They were made up with squares. Almost like they were pixelated. I lunged towards them, my stomach sounding like a hurricane, until I felt no more hunger. I felt a new objective. I no longer wanted to escape. I wanted revenge.

A sudden rush of adrenaline forced itself through my veins and my whole body. I turned to see a group of the figures. No longer

their colorful selves, but all dark blue. I watched the terror slowly make itself known on their faces. They stared deeply into my soul. I stared back, and smiled deviously. I was now in control. I bolted towards them and they ran for their dear lives. Karma is the best medicine.

I'd never run this fast in my life, but seeing them suffer was my motivation.

*Chomp*

1 down, 3 to go.

I started to feel weary again but I just ignored it. My next snack was right in front of me.

*Chomp*

The last one, or so I thought, started gleaming blue and white, almost blinding me. I tumbled into a corner, guarding my eyes. I saw shadows forming in front of me. I counted four. I thought I just killed two, how were they back?

The words "Game over" appeared across my screen.

*I'm never playing Pacman again .*



# Dust-Mote Ballerinas

Joanna Croft

*Saint Cecilia's School (Year 8 - Age 13)*

The moonlight slanted through the high windows like the blade of a knife, cutting through the darkness and throwing the shadows into sharp relief. I felt a lot like a shadow. Cold, yet numb and feelingless, invisible to all but myself. Sometimes a feeling would cut in, like moonlight to a shadow. It would shatter my frosted surface like glass and flood through me like fire. But tonight, as I glided towards the chink of lamplight, I was frigid and impenetrable as ice.

Covered by the chill that shadows death.

The door was high and towering, its hinges well oiled. Stepping over the threshold, for all he noticed, I may have been a pillar of smoke. The room was grandly furnished, with a vast bookcase of faded, leather bound books and a wide desk before elegant French windows. He sat in the high-backed chair, the scratch of his pen the only sound but for his low breathing and the soft breeze of a midsummer night through the French windows, causing the wispy curtains to drift and ripple through the air, making the dust motes twirl like tiny ballerinas. My senses were heightened to every sound and sight. As though they were trying to thaw me from the inside, my feelings like glowing coals. I almost felt sorry for them.

Almost. For their efforts were in vain.

The gun was pressed against my hip. With steady hands I withdrew it, silent as a creek caught in winter's spell. Time seemed to slow down as I drew back the trigger. It was such a quick movement; it might have lasted twenty seconds or twenty years. The summer wind ceased, and the dust-mote-ballerinas paused their dance.

It was over.

The gunshot seemed delayed. It felt like the room had become sealed in ice between the shot and the sound.

He was upright in his chair, his hand poised over the paper. The dust motes stood frozen in pirouettes and arabesques, like miniatures inside a music box. The calm before the storm. But now the rain had come. Scarlet blood gushed from the back of

his head as he slumped forward, pooling onto the desk and running down the table leg onto the floor. Every color seemed to stab at my retina; every sound pierced my eardrums. The simplicity, yet complexity of what I had done brought me to my knees as the once gentle wind rose to a wail, lifting my hair from my shaking shoulders, and chasing it across my dampened cheeks. I thought to kill would be harder. To take a life, to silence a beating heart, to end something so incredibly full, should require more effort, perhaps resistance. But almost without trying, I had taken something alive. And killed it.

The sky was stained with rose gold when I rose from my aching knees, closed the door, and strode along the corridor, the shadows slinking away as dawn approached.

His game had ended.

But mine had just begun.



# My Opponent is the Eyes

Katie Skerritt

*Ursuline High School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

“Do you have a counterargument for that?” my teacher asked me. Eyes of many colours swivelled and stared. *Grey like swords, brown like dried blood, blue like frostbite, green like arsenic*, my brain automatically recited.

I could feel the redness of embarrassment beginning to show on my face. This needed to be quick. I had to answer soon, otherwise my teacher would say something like, “Hello? Do you have a counterargument or not?” or say my name. Perhaps there would be a silence then people would start laughing.

I had to avoid that at all costs.

Really, I did have a counterargument for that, in my head, but saying something that isn't carefully planned out is dangerous. So, there were two moves I could make, since this was a yes or no question.

If I said yes, then I would have to keep talking, maybe for a few minutes. People might listen, but presumably not too closely. Hopefully. If they did, they would hear the trembles in my quiet voice and figure out that this was actually really hard for me. Not good.

However, if I said no, then I wouldn't have to talk anymore, which was good. People would think my reason for saying no was that I didn't have a counterargument. Really, I just didn't want to stand in front of everyone anymore, each eye on me a knife stabbing and slicing into my confidence, which was barely there anyway. I could feel them all still staring at me. *Swords, dried blood, frostbite, arsenic.*

All of those thoughts flashed through my head within three seconds. I kept a concentrating look on my face, pretending to read my notes, which I had raised slightly higher to hide the fact I was blushing. I would say no. I couldn't afford to have my face get any redder.

"No, sorry."

My teacher looked up at me. *Frostbite.*

"Are you sure?" she asked.

An alarm sounded in my head. I didn't expect her to make that move. I had to counter it.

"Yes. I... didn't write much about that in my notes."

I accidentally did a decrescendo in my voice as I said that. I silently cursed myself for it.

"Ok," nodded my teacher. She asked my group, "Anyone else?" They glanced at me for a heartbeat. *Dried blood, arsenic, dried blood.*

"Yes," one of them spoke. She smiled at me, as if saying, *don't worry, I'll do it.* Her eyes met mine briefly. *Dried blood.* I made the move of doing a grateful smile back.

As the debate continued, I stood there, feeling out of place in front of an audience. Our counterargument was good, and we won the debate. Not that I cared. I just wanted it to be over. These are the games I play with my own mind all the time. I don't want to. I have to. They are part of me. In these games, my opponent is the eyes.

*Swords*

*Dried blood*

*Frostbite*

*Arsenic*



# Double or nothing

Kersteen Abena Antwi

*La Retraite School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

Call me what you want. A player, manipulative. But what I won't stand is being called a loser. I'm everything but a loser. Because I. Don't. Lose.

Life is like one big game of Mario Kart. And manipulation is my steering wheel. I can make anyone do anything with just the slightest turn. It's quite easy; shed a tear and everyone with a heart feels bad for you. Of course it doesn't work on me though; you need a heart. Not just one that beats and pumps blood, one that feels for others. But why would I want that?

"I win," she yelled in excitement. Did she though? She held her hand out for me to give her my money. I almost felt bad for what I was about to do. Almost.

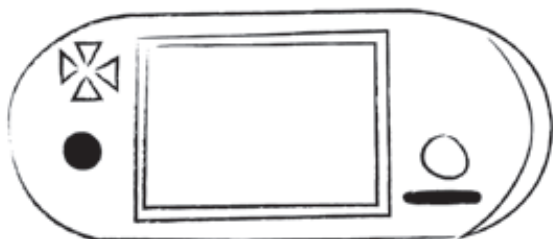
I took a deep breath as I waited for the tears to catch their cue. They rolled down my face, each perfectly placed as I hung my head.

"I- only b-bet money because I-I t-thought I would win," I stammered 'emotionally' "I-I need to buy my little brother lunch because he got in a fight with my mum and now-" my words soon became incomprehensible as I was in desperate need of a new lie.

She was quick to comfort me. It was so hard not to laugh in her gullible, childish face.

"Oh, I'm uh so sorry I-I," I knew I was winning; she was speechless.

"Could we do uh double or nothing?" I mumbled wiping my 'tears.' "I just need the money really bad. I promise I won't pull any of that dumb guilt trip stuff I just want a second chance,"



Too easy. It was frustrating that I couldn't laugh at the fact she was naive enough to agree but I had to keep the act for just a little longer.

I won. Of course. The act was getting kind of fun.

"Thank you so much," I took the money and walked by her, whispering in her ear. "Also, I'm an only child," I blew a sarcastic kiss at her as her face filled with rage.

"You. Game. Now." A voice called from beside me. What did he think this was, a casino? We played the game. I didn't expect to need 'double or nothing' because I didn't plan to lose.

Until I did.

"No way in hell did I just lose. Double or nothing now," Now wasn't the time for some pity excuse. I needed to beat the life out of this kid.

No way. I lost again? I play fair so I handed the kid my money.

"No one beats me. How did you?"

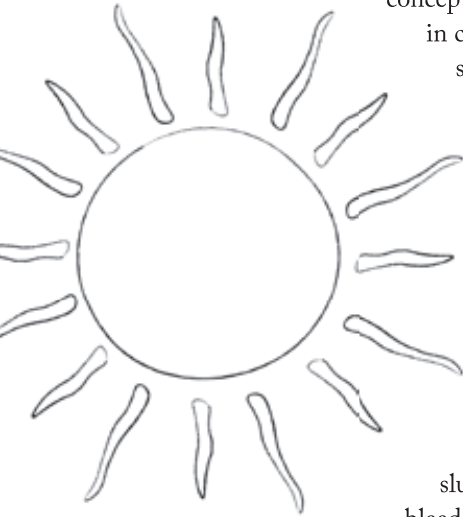
He smirked "You may be a master of manipulation but I'm a pathological liar. You could have walked away with the win the first time if you'd checked. It's my game now and who needs money when the stakes are life or death" It was then that I noticed the gun in his back pocket.

# Entertain Me

Marisa Shand

*Wimbledon High School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

The roar of a crowd thirsty for death shakes the cold, limestone Colosseum; richly attired lords and ladies cheer hysterically from the stands, dignity a paltry, irretrievable concept. Swooning women are garbed in colourless silk tunics and vibrant shawls with lavishly strewn pearls are draped from hunched, fidgeting shoulders; pallid, pasty men dressed in gaudy togas boast with a breezy smugness to friends casually feigning interest. I watch, disgustedly, as a hollering mob of drunk, obese lords indulge in the bulging leather wineskins they have purchased; the thick, rich red liquid drips sluggishly into their laps and bleeds onto the spotless marble bench. I was one of them?



Squinting hazily into the glare of a gilded sun, I walk hesitantly forwards; the sand feels like smooth, scorched ashes beneath my feet as I place each one tenderly forward; the harsh, steel chains hang limp from torn, bleeding shoulders, the manacles solid and unyielding. The harsh crack of a whip wrenches me from subconsciousness; I wince as a second stinging blow bites a barely mended gash. "Move it, vermin!"

The stadium lurches, giddy with anticipation as the huge, steel gates rumble steadily upwards. Seven trained warriors and one

Roman fool, clothed in the most impenetrable, thick brass armour Rome has to offer. As each gladiator stands I hasten to imitate them; hands on hips, legs outstretched, armour gleaming with a daring, dauntless flame of fury.

Daring the impossible power of Rome.

Eight combatants stride forward, heavy weapons swinging from oiled, muscled arms. The hot ground is tinged with the oozing, pulpy white flesh of charred, deformed victims; a common practice against heresy is burning at the stake, I recall. Gagging, I lift my spear with the utmost reluctance as the timeless words we are forced to proclaim ring out into the suddenly hushed arena. "Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant!" ("Hail Caesar, those who are about to die salute you!")

High, high above us I can just make out the blurred figure of a shadowed, seated roman cloaked in a robe of ruby red, as though the blood of his enemies is slowly but surely staining the cloak of a bitter conscience once so pure. Two Egyptian slaves smile demonically from either side of him; one clutches a soft, emerald palm branch and gently fans the reclining dictator with the air of a satisfied toddler; the other holds a bunch of plump, purple Greek grapes. I catch an alluring sneer as she sways the vine, her tantalising eyes locked on mine. Julius Caesar, ruler of Ancient Rome, barely looks up from his discussion; he waves his hand impatiently-

-the spear I hold foolishly limp is jerked from my hand-  
-and the silver prongs of a trident are thrust deep into my skull.

The Games are not fair.

# I May Be Broken

Mia Ehlers

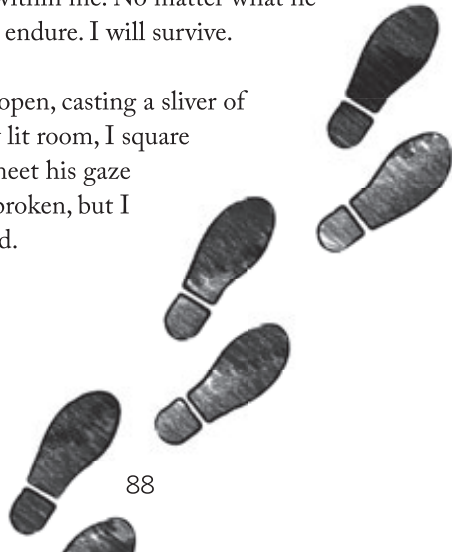
*Raynes Park High School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

I lie on the cold, hard floor, my body trembling with fear. A surge of trepidation runs through my spine as I muster the strength to lift my aching head. Finally upright, I lean against the white walls, my gaze fixated on the cracked tiles of the barrier that stands between me and freedom. Thoughts of my family and friends flood my mind—they don't know where I am, what I'm doing. They don't know if I'm alive. But those thoughts evaporate as I hear his footsteps approaching. He's coming back, ready to assign another daunting task.

I quickly wipe the salty tears from my face, catching a glimpse of my reflection in the shattered window before me. My face appears sickly, like a ghost's. My hair hangs limply just below my shoulders, and my eyes are sunken, surrounded by dark circles. It doesn't take long for me to realize I'm crying again.

Each footstep reverberates through the room, amplifying the dread in my heart. I steel myself for what's to come, knowing that escape is a distant dream. But amidst the despair, a spark of defiance ignites within me. No matter what he throws at me, I will endure. I will survive.

As the door creaks open, casting a sliver of light into the dimly lit room, I square my shoulders and meet his gaze head-on. I may be broken, but I refuse to be defeated.



# The Game

Oliwia Golabek

*Ursuline High School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

In the heart of the Wyoming wilderness, where the wind whispers secrets and the sun paints the landscape with hues of amber and gold, stood the formidable Wyoming State Penitentiary. Behind its towering walls, stories unfolded like chapters in a gripping novel, each inmate a character with a tale to tell.

Amongst the confined souls, there existed a group unlike any other - the Wyoming State Penitentiary All Stars. A group of felons, of men, considered not worthy of life for their crimes, yet still deemed skilled enough for the entertainment of others. Led by the enigmatic figure of Jackson "Ace" McCoy, a man whose eyes held the wisdom of a thousand lifetimes, the All Stars transcended their confines through the power of sport. On the dusty prison yard, they played baseball with a ferocity that echoed through the ages. Their movements were poetry in motion, a symphony of grace and grit, as they defied the limitations imposed upon them.

But fate, unpredictable as always, had other plans. The annual Penitentiary Tournament approached, a chance for the All Stars to prove their dominance on a grand stage. Yet, adversity loomed like a shadow, threatening to extinguish their hopes.

In the days leading up to the tournament, tragedy struck. McCoy, the linchpin of the team, fell victim to a vicious altercation within the prison walls. His absence cast a pall over the All Stars, like a dark cloud obscuring the sun. Nobody knew where he went. Not even the sheriff, the dear sheriff that gave them hope on the playing field, to live another day, to escape karma's tight grasp once again. The dreaded buzz of the electric chair rang through the ears of the players, reminding them what could happen.



Reminding them what could have happened to their leader. What could happen to them.

Desperation set in as the tournament drew nearer. The All Stars, once invincible, now faced the daunting task of competing without their captain. Yet, in the face of adversity, they discovered a resilience that bordered on the miraculous.

Enter Jake “The Phantom” Reynolds, a recluse with a talent for the game that bordered on the supernatural. Like a spectre emerging from the shadows, he stepped into the void left by McCoy’s absence, his presence electrifying the court with an otherworldly energy.

The show, seemingly innocent, played on, as the footsteps on the court were drowned out by the sound of something hitting the ground. Something heavy. Something dry, and cheap. Something that had fallen from the balcony above, aimed right at Jake’s head. Jake, although he managed to dodge it while he was unaware, suddenly stood still, silently watching the bag of sand that had been dropped on him. People screamed, people yelled at him to “Keep running!”, “Keep playing!”, but the only sound that got through was the loud silence of the bag.

The final buzzer sounded and the dust settled on the court, yet Jake remained still. His team had lost. As they had promised, the day that they lost, would be the day the their death penalty would catch up to them. The day that their karma caught up to them.

# The Century Games

Rishi Sidharth

*Rutlish School (Year 7 - Age 12)*

It is time!

A century has passed since the last time we came together for this race.

But I am ready.

I hear loud voices. The commentator has begun introducing all the participants. My heart races faster, and suddenly the sounds all seem muffled. I take a deep breath of the musty air through my large nostrils. "Therinos from Zabbetera", says the commentator - and I hear a cheer go up. The same happens for On'os from Titania. But the loudest cheers are for the defending champion - Dolpheans, from the planet Odrillon. He is the one to beat.

I quietly mutter to myself, "You got this, Yacca."

The tuba blows once. Loud and powerful. It's time to race.

The tuba blows once again. This time, it's longer.

And then, I'm off. Speed is all that I need to win this race. And I am going to make my planet proud.

As I approach the halfway point, there is high-pitched noise that cuts through my thoughts. It's the emergency siren.

I slow down. That's when I notice the sky over us. It has turned a dark shade of orange - almost like it has been set on fire.

*BOOM*

The noise is so loud that it almost knocks me down. I pick myself up and look to my right. It seems to be coming from



beyond the depths of the lush, green forest. I pause for a moment and wonder whether I should get back to the race and finish it, or investigate. A few meters ahead, I can see Dolpheans clutching his knee in pain. This is my chance to win the race. But curiosity gets the better of me.

I quickly run over the rich terrain, using my sharp tusks to cut through the long, sharp blades of grass. Beyond the forest, I hear the sound of metal screeching against the rough, rocky outlands.

I reach the edge of the forest, and hide behind the biggest tree I can find. My heart beats faster and louder than ever before.

In the distance, I see a tall, cylindrical tower with a sharp cone at the top. There is thick smoke all around it, and as the smell reaches me, I shudder. It smells horrible

I wait patiently, still hidden in the shadows of the tree and the forest.

Just then, a small door opens at the bottom of the cylindrical tower. Two odd-looking two-legged creatures, dressed completely in white, with a circular window for their head, slowly and clumsily step out. They look around, and then turn in my direction. I let out a low grunt.

There is a loud beep. And, suddenly, a powerful light cuts across the forest, and falls over me.

I panic. I grunt again - this time, louder, trying to scare these creatures off.

*BANG*

There's a sharp pain under my chest. As I fall back, I hear one of the creatures say, "Houston, we have a problem."

And then it all goes dark.



# Girl Missing

Sean Arthur Cox

*Harris Academy Wimbledon (Year 7 - Age 11)*

9 Months. 9 Months since the disappearance of my little sister, Ellie White. The police dropped the case only last week. So, I have decided to take this case into my own hands. I am detective Charlie White, although I have worked on many cases, this might be the hardest one yet.

First, Let Us discuss where this happened.

August 11, 2019. I cannot remember much about that day. All I remember was that it was a summer night at 9pm. Laying battered on my single mattress. The wind from the window brushing against me and then I got up, holding the walls to help me up from the mattress. I open my door, unaware of what might be behind it. I see a figure jump out of the window then run away in an instant. W-Who is that? I check the house; the garage, my parents' bedroom, And the bathroom. Only my sister's bedroom was left. I creak the door open, little by little until I reach a halt. My sister is gone... What happened to her? Was she the one I saw? Where is she?

And that is all I remember of that night. After that, my parents obviously reported her missing. The police have dropped the case since there is not any sufficient evidence to continue. This is the first night I start on the case. Her room has been cleared out by mum. I don't go in there anymore. I just get sad memories of me and her playing...

First, I should go knocking to see if anybody knows what

happened that night.

Walking up to the first house feels like a fever dream. I knock. Hoping to get an answer about what happened that night. An odd-looking old lady opened the door.

“Hello there sweetie...” She uttered.

“Excuse me did you happen to see anything suspicious on August 11 about the disappearance of my little sister Ellie White?”

“Oh no dear, I am very terribly sorry to hear about your sister. I am so sorry. Goodbye.”

She closed the door with no hesitation. I walk away from her porch disappointed.

I walk up the porch stairs of the eerie house and knock on the door. A muscular teenager opens the door. In my head I think to myself, oh my... Wait I can't focus on hot boys, I must do this fo- “Hello?” I just noticed he was staring at me. “Um hi do you happen to know anything that may have happened on the 11th of August considering the disappearance of my little sister Ellie White. “Um yes there was a party.” A party? “Where?” He tells me the address. I'm not sure I recognize that house. I walk on the pavement, on my way to that house. Wait... What is that. I stare deeply into the forest.

Looking at that. A light blue bike otherwise known as my sister's bike. And in the basket of the bike. Her phone.  
Where are you, Ellie?

# Sore Losers

Sophia Salviato Cesar

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 8 - Age 12)*

I grin as I bring my hand down heavily on the dice popper, and shriek with laughter as it comes out of its socket. The die beneath the grime-encrusted dome lands on a six, so I leisurely advance one of my little plastic men forwards; 1... 2... 3... 4... 5 a-a-and 6. I've landed on my little sister's character, so with a swift flick of my wrist I fling it out of the spot before settling my own tiny orange figure into it. My sister glares at me and snatches up her fallen blue man.

"I'll get you back, you'll see," she promises, sniffing disdainfully. I shake my head and tap tauntingly on the head of my figure; the last of the five to get to the finish and only a roll away from it.

I was unbelievably far ahead of both my mother and my sister, and relished my success – which, mind you, hadn't even happened yet. Mum rolled a meek two and advanced halfheartedly as my sister cracked her knuckles with a mean look smeared over her face. She rolls a four.

"Ha!" I cackle at her, knowing that her three-strong army of plastic people was too far behind for a four to do anythi—

My orange man is on the floor.

She's been waiting. This whole time, I see it now, her figures have been just a breath behind mine – the whole game, she's been stalking behind my soldiers waiting with incredulous patience for the right number to let her wipe me out at the edge of victory.

Her head raises to meet mine, and I know my eyes are wide and round as her own brown gaze holds mine, seeming to utter the simple oath she took not half a minute ago.

Revenge.

Before I can blink the board is somersaulting through the room. The die is bouncing helplessly beneath the dome; the figures have been wrenched from their places; the dice-poppers are loose in their sockets and there is my battalion of now four comically orange men drifting through the atmosphere.

Their contorted faces, stretched into ridiculous angry manners which despite their silly extravagance couldn't come close to my own rage, seem to watch me with an air of disappointment as they float by. Only now do I realize that I am on my feet, and it is my hand that is aching from smacking the board. The slow-motion wears off and I am showered with Ludo pieces.

I am stepping on something. I lean over, not taking my scowl off my sister, and pick up the orange man. I don't hesitate to hurl it at her.

"STUPID LUDO!" I roar, thundering out of the room, out of the spotlights of my mother appalled eyes and my sister's venomous, gleeful, hissing laughter.



## HIGHLY COMMENDED POEMS

Key Stage 4

Years 10-11

Age 14-16



# The Game

Anjardie Drummond

*Ursuline High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

I don't want to play this game anymore.  
I said time out. Time out!  
Why don't you listen don't ignore?  
Don't they hear my scream and shout?  
I don't want to play this game of man hunt anymore.  
As I didn't realise what was hiding behind the door  
Said the Boy lying in his own blood on the floor.  
As he joined the game of man hunt but didn't know what the  
game was really about.  
As he joined the game  
To add some respect on his street name  
Until he realised this isn't the game for him  
But he was in and the chances of getting out is slim.  
As the person stood over the bloody body  
His heart thumped with guilt and remorse.

Whilst his back was thumped with glee and pride by his  
'friends' of course

As he looked down at his hands that held the metallic  
smelling knife

The hands that once innocently held his mother's  
took a life.

He ran off with the rest of the hunters.

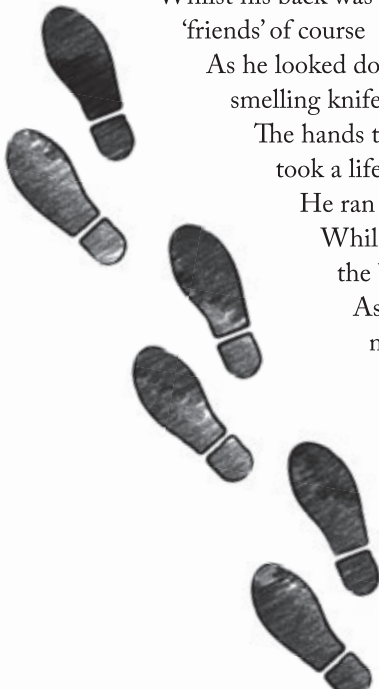
Whilst the rest were laughing, he forced  
the biggest smile he could muster.

As he felt guilt as that person had a  
mother

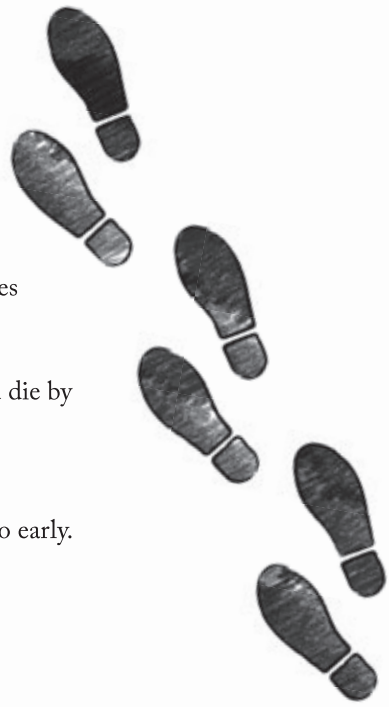
who only joined the game for money  
for his little brother,

He joined to help his mother pay  
for food and rent,

However, he didn't understand



the game to its full extent,  
That people would be gunning  
after him.  
That 5 people would attack him  
until the light in his eyes were dim.  
As his only crime was being on the foes  
side  
And trying to provide  
But as the Bible said live by the sword die by  
the sword  
But again, it was ignored.  
Ignored like the boys' cries of mercy.  
But it was too late, and death came too early.







## **HIGHLY COMMENDED STORIES:**

*Key Stage 4*

*Years 10-11*

*Age 14-16*

# Duolingo

Adam Gluch

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 10 - Age 15)*

I trek homeward, the afternoon sun casting shadows across the quiet street. Rows of lawns stretch out on either side, dotted with bursts of colour from blooming flowers. As I reach into my trouser pocket, a faint buzz interrupts the tranquillity. It's a notification from a game I downloaded a few days ago to aid with my Spanish, called Duolingo. The message read,

“Remember to do your Spanish, time’s ticking!” With the game’s mascot – a green owl – smiling in the corner. Sighing, I swipe left to delete, making a mental note to switch off the notifications later.

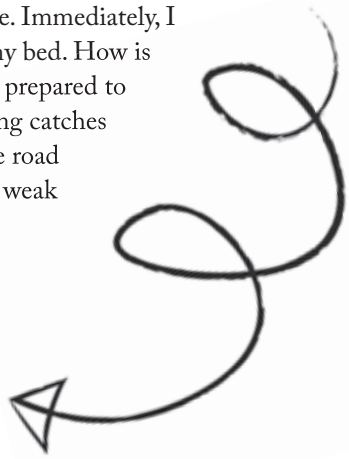
Feeling the worn-out wood against my knuckles, I knocked twice on the door. Silence. Another knock. Nothing. My confusion arises, Mum is supposed to be home, where is she? The thought lingers in my mind, even as I fumble trying to get the key to fit in the lock. With a final shove, the door finally thuds open. A gloomy interior reveals itself to me. I clamber up the stairs to my room and fall on the bed. Another buzz sounded from my pocket. I groan as I pull out my phone and see. It was that game again.

I roll my eyes and open Settings, about to uninstall the game. Yet just before I could, the phone turned blank. A single message appeared on the screen.

“Don’t try it.”

The green owl stood next to the message; this time, a lot more sinister.

Almost like- like it was watching me. Immediately, I turn off my phone, throwing it on my bed. How is that possible? I walk to the window, prepared to pull down the curtains, but something catches my eye. Darkness had swallowed the road beneath my window, apart from the weak streetlamp flickering occasionally. Underneath that very lamp stood a tall creature. It had legs covered in fur and wings that could easily be double my height. But the strangest thing about it was its colour: green. I couldn't move, paralyzed with fear. What is it? A familiar sound came from my bed. A buzz. I didn't want to look. I couldn't. Yet something urged me to.



“Spanish or Vanish”

My head turns towards the window. The creature had gone. I fall to the floor, opening the game. I notice the time. 23:58. Just two minutes before I lose my streak. My heart beats louder and louder as I try to translate Spanish, but my mind won't focus! 23:59. Blood pulsing through my veins, my breathing becoming heavier. I look up. 00:00. No. Please. A Knocking reverberates through the room, sending shivers down my spine.

I accept defeat.

With trembling hands, I rise and approach the door, my heart pounding with fear. I swing it open. Nothing but darkness waiting on the other side, the hallway eerily empty. I exhale a shaky breath and close the door, relief washing over me. But then, in the reflection on the door, I see it—something lurking in the shadows, a green owl...

# The Game

Azaria Logan Jones

*West London Free School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

It's a rainy autumn afternoon. The sort of afternoon for puddles in pavement cracks and the smell of moss. The sort of afternoon where you lay your rain jacket on a wet park bench and read a novel. The sort of afternoon with the expectation of being filled with contentment.

However, I'm here to contradict all of your expectations about today. If you let it, today will change your life forever.

Now listen very carefully to what I tell you.

At five o'clock, your doorbell will ring.

Do not answer the door.

Yes, I know that now your mind is alight with burning curiosity that I am only kindling with my lack of explanation. But you seem smarter than the others were and I hope that you have heard me.

However I did not come here with the expectation that you will do as I tell you, merely the desperate hope. If you listen to me, I will be free. I'll no longer be tied to a life of trying to save people and then watching them destroy themselves with their own temptation. It's a looped tape, a cat chasing its tail, a game with no end.

But where's the fun in playing?

Just like all those unfortunate souls that now turn in their graves as they rue their foolishness, you will most likely

conform to my expectation of human nature. The forbidden fruit effect in in all its tragedy.

Now I'm not quite sure why I'm here.

I have realised that by me telling you all this, it is inevitable that you will meet your end tonight. If only I hadn't mentioned it, perhaps you wouldn't feel the eagerness to throw that door open that you do now.

Maybe I'm the reason why they're all gone.

What else was I to do? Even without my insufferable need to meddle, naturally they all would've answered the door. You would have too. Perhaps your book arrived. It's arriving tomorrow morning, by the way. I'm sorry that you won't ever get to read it.

I shouldn't be bothering you on your last day. For these last few hours, you deserved the peace and comfort promised by this beautiful afternoon. Now you will spend it in crippling anxiety and dread. All because of little old me and my need to make the world a better place.

You'll be the last one I bother.  
I think I'd better go.



# In the Words of an Emperor

Eva Fletcher

*Ursuline High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

Julius Caesar once said: “No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected”. I tell myself that’s all it was – unexpected. I tell myself that soon my courage will return white hot and bloody, with vengeance clutched in between its teeth and torn flesh in its claws.

And yet I am rooted in my fear.

Fear is the one with my neck trapped in its teeth; caught in its gums. My bravery black and blue.

I am a gladiator battling with my own fragility. I stare my weakness in the eyes, and blink.

Prior to the event that landed me firsthand seats to my own assassination, I had never before been to Rome. The Colosseum was even more breathtaking in person, though I found it rather difficult to appreciate the architecture from my position on the stage with over a hundred-thousand beady eyes beaming down at me, greed in their stares, hunger coating their jeers and taunts.

The gladiator initiative had been globally introduced a little under 2 weeks ago, supposedly as a method to control the rising populations. Every day new fighters are selected from all over the globe. The night before you’re flown into Rome, adorned with armour, thrust onto a rising platform, a weapon shoved into your hand.

It’s like suicide. The idea of it happening seems unnatural – it can’t reach you. Until it does. It happens to someone you know; starts invading your life. Infecting it. Like a rabid dog.

The platform is rising; I tighten my fingers on the sword at my side, my opponent stands across from me. She looks scared, innocent, but the molten carmine splattered on her side says otherwise. Something inside me is bubbling, deep within my gut. The girl charges at me – merciless – that sticky substance is rising. It reaches my throat, pools around my mouth and spills from my lips like chalice wine.

She lets out a war cry, but my throat is plugged with tar. She draws her blade; clips my side, ichor drips, drenches, drowns my skin.

And suddenly, adrenaline is coursing through me. I'm maniacal, inconsolable. I brandish my sword, animalistic. Swing it back and strike. Savage.

Sweat coats my forearms. Except it's not sweat, its blood. The shattering of fireworks and celebration echoes in my head – I breathe – and it's the cracking of bones ringing in my ears. I clench my fists, squeeze my eyes shut. Blink. And I'm foaming at the mouth: rabid.

The cheers surround me, suffocate me, till I'm encased in their sound. Silence me, their volumes drown out my screams. Sacrifice me, they have me strung up on a cross, crucified. I am no messiah. I am a product of this arena, white hot and bloody, with vengeance in my teeth, torn flesh under my fingernails.

I am a gladiator.

I stare who I once was in the eyes and plunge a knife into their chest.

After all, "Which death is preferably to every other?  
The unexpected."

# Alan Loves Football

Harriet Quinton

*Wimbledon High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

‘Are you ready to leave, Alan?’ Lucy called upstairs, tying Eddie’s shoes. ‘We don’t want to be late!’ She smiled absentmindedly at her son, patting his head, wondering where her husband was. He had been excited about this match for weeks – and with so many extra hours at work, Lucy felt he deserved a break. Alan loves football, he loves football matches, he loves Crystal Palace, he loves her, he loves the children. She repeated it to herself again as she helped Eddie put on his raincoat. She didn’t really know why. It was like a mantra, a game. Alan loves football he loves football matches he loves Crystal Palace he loves her he loves the children. It made her feel better, though she couldn’t understand what it was she was feeling bad about.

‘Mum, hurry up, we’re going to be late!’ Sophie called from the car.

‘Just coming darling, we’re waiting for your father!’ Alan loves football he loves Weetabix he loves roast dinner he loves Sunday mornings he loves me he loves the children.

Just then, Alan stumbled down the stairs, still in his pyjamas.

‘Alan! What are you doing, it’s 10am!’

Alan blinked. ‘Lucy, what are you...’ He looked around. ‘You’re not... angry?’

‘What about? What’s going on, Alan? Why aren’t you dressed?’

‘Lucy, I... I don’t understand, you said yesterday... I assumed you didn’t want to go to the game anymore, after last night, after I told you about her... I, I can’t—’

‘Mum! Now!’

‘Sophie, give your mother and me a second, please,’ he shouted at the car. Sophie started crying. ‘I can’t tell you this again, Lucy. I don’t know what you’re trying to do but I can’t... I can’t tell you about her all over again.’

Lucy felt something shift in her heart. She felt like she was desperately holding herself together like water in cupped hands and she didn’t know why. She dropped her house keys and knelt to pick them up again. He’d done something awful but she couldn’t let herself think what it was. She started whispering her game again:

‘You love football you love football matches you love me you love the children. You love football you love—’

‘Lucy! You have to stop! Now! I don’t know – I don’t know what to do... are you trying to trick me? Are you trying to trick me Lucy?’ His voice got louder.

Lucy settled herself. ‘Alan, calm down. If you get dressed quickly we’ll still make the game. You love football!’ She looked straight at Alan, who gave her a long look, frowned hard and disappeared slowly upstairs. Alan loves football he loves football matches he loves Sunday mornings he loves me he loves the children.

Just not as much as he loves  
Linda in HR, her brain filled in  
at last.

She was holding herself like water  
in cupped hands and it overflowed as  
she let herself remember.



# The White Rabbit

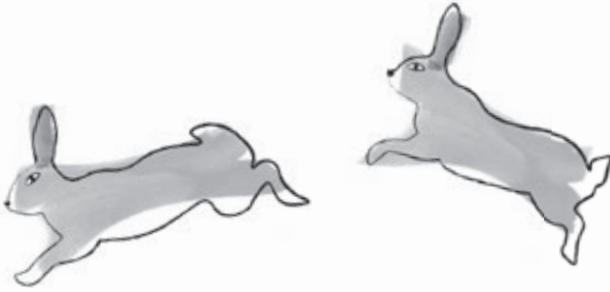
Kymanuele Nelson

*La Retraite School (Year 11 - Age 16)*

Piles of books stacked on the desk paired with the faint smell of burnt coffee and a Cuban cigar. There was the loud hum of the broken fax machine. Everything was normal for a Friday afternoon. Officers looking forward to spending their weekend with their families, other detectives excited for a peaceful two days where no one contacted them about any break-ins or missing keys. That seemed to be the only crime that ever got reported here since I transferred.

I picked up my folders and my coffee, swiveled around my desk and made my way to the boss's office. He was a family guy. Pictures of his wife and kids everywhere. He liked to put pieces of bread on top of the door and window sills to "ward off evil spirits" as he liked to claim. I placed the yellow folders down when suddenly, something caught my eye. A brown envelope. It looked so peculiar hiding amongst the scattered papers as if someone had just left it there not too long ago. I brushed off the thought and returned to my office to pack my things and head home.

"Hey Junio." I greeted my cat who rubbed his head on my leg in response. I went to the kitchen to make myself a sandwich when suddenly, the doorbell rang. "Who is it?" I shouted. No response. It rang again. And again. And again. I shakingly took up the knife and walked quietly towards the door. Balancing on the tip of my toes I peeked through the peephole. There was no one there. Just a brown envelope placed neatly on the 'Welcome Home' mat. I opened the door and picked it up. The cool evening wind seemed as if it wanted to freeze my bones. Quickly, I brought the envelope inside and opened it.



“You don’t know my name but I know yours,

Follow the stars and keep in the hours

Don’t get distracted and do not cheat

Behind the red brick door is a secret

I must eat”



My heart felt like a car on the freeway. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. Junio started hissing, the room started spinning. I felt like Alice when she was falling down the tunnel, bound to get lost in her mystic wonderland. Running upstairs, I packed my bags, took my keys, and put on my shoes. I ran into the bathroom and picked up some toiletries, stopping at the mirror to gaze at my reflection. Taking a deep breath, I stuffed everything into my big backpack and walked out the door. My white rabbit had returned and this time, I was going to play along.

# The Game

Lente Ottink

*Marymount International School (Year 11 - Age 16)*

The lights dim and the curtains in front of the screen shift apart. A gentle thrum runs through the seats, and I feel the audience hold their breath as they await the first seconds of the film. But that's not what I'm here for.

He said it was the only quiet spot where we could talk without being overheard. I don't understand what he meant by that. It's only a drop-off. No words should be exchanged if everything goes according to plan.

A shadow moves through the audience and slides down into the seat beside me. I reach into my pocket and grab the envelope of money, then pass it over the seat as they simultaneously drop a pouch into my lap that jingles quietly. I clear my throat and gently rise to my feet. Just as I turn away, I feel a hand resting on my shoulder. I look back and dodge the fist flying towards my face. I'm on my hands and feet staring into the lifeless eyes of the person who handed me the pouch. A blunt object hits me in the back of my head and my face smashes against the ground.



The first thing I see is a pair of black leather boots as I feel two people strapping my arms down to a chair who leave the room once they are done.

The strength it takes to hold my head up is making my neck sore, so I just let it loll to the side. The man with the leather boots steps closer and grasps a tuft of my hair, forcing me to look up. I notice a knife in his back pocket. Something cold is injected into my neck. The man lets go and my chin falls to my chest.

I look at my twitching fingers and realise that my vision is clearing. The pain still makes it hard to focus but I can feel my senses returning. I no longer have to fight to stay awake.

The man leans towards me. An obvious mistake. I grab his knife as my mouth opens. I clamp down on his ear until I taste a bitter metallic flavour. The man howls as he stumbles back, tripping over his own feet. Soon he is rolling on the ground, and I begin sawing at the ropes.

Once I am free, I run to the door where I am confronted by a group of people waiting for me. I tighten my grip around the knife hilt, preparing to fight. But instead, they clap.

A woman steps forward, "Congratulations. You passed your test."

Bewildered I say, "I thought that was last week."

She laughs, "Had you never opened that pouch?" I shake my head and someone hands it to me. I tentatively open it and pull out a badge with the AGM logo on it. "This was the real test. Welcome to the Academy of Game Makers" she says smiling. "We can't wait to see your first design."

# Checkmate

Sarina Azari

*West London Free School (Year 11 - Age 16)*

Laura's footsteps left heavy marks on the ground as she stared down onto the snow-kissed earth, which crunched beneath her.

It was all a lie.

Every. Single. Moment. Every single word, every single laugh, every single longing gaze which was held every time amber eyes met cerulean.

And she hated herself for falling for each one.

Julien had played her. The game began when she first met him, frustrated and stressed in his office. When she was chosen to be by his side. As his assistant, lowering her head when all the other agents looked at her with envy.

The pawn had moved forward after their first mission. She had taken a life; though it was not on purpose, the blood that stained her shirt, her hands left her sobbing, screaming, pulling her hair out in her apartment.

And then the knight stepped in. He had held her, that evening. Held her tight. And told her that no matter what- he would be by her side, he would be the one who would comfort her when her morals stepped out of bounds.

But the king always leaves the queen, doesn't he?

The king always lets everyone fall. To survive.

She saw him with someone else. It shouldn't matter. They weren't together. They were never a 'thing.'

All those little whispered moments, gentle touches and shuddering breaths meant nothing.

Julien had called her beautiful that night. When she wore the dress for their 53rd mission together. He had stepped back, admiring her. And he had kissed her. And that kiss was worth a thousand miles. A thousand words. A roll of the dice which made her heart flutter, a strike, a goal, and it was as if everything in the universe had collected together; leaving an exploding supernova and forming her, the brightest star in the galaxy.

After the success of the mission, they had sat down to play a game of chess. Julien's eyebrows furrowed in concentration, tender hands waiting for Laura's next move. She hadn't played before, and was hoping he could teach her.

'You're in a good spot.' He sighed, voice husky. 'Damn it.' He chuckled.

She flushed, feeling the maroon splash into her cheeks, heating them up.

'What do I do next?' She replied, voice soft. She hated that. She hated that he made her feel like this.

'You check the king.'

Of course. She had got it all wrong, hadn't she?

The queen was the one who left. The king was the one who held on to her love, held on to them through the storms and winds and all the agonising pain.

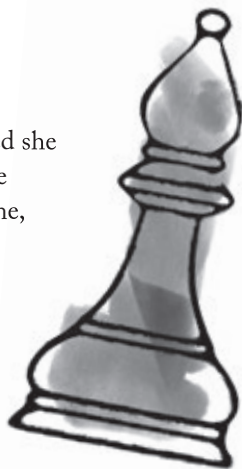
*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

She came to a halt in the snow.

She didn't understand the game. She realised she never would, a single tear dropping onto the snow beneath her. Because after all this time, she was the one who was left standing.

And he had left her. To fall. On her own.

'Checkmate!' Julien yelled, his laugh radiant. But *cold*.



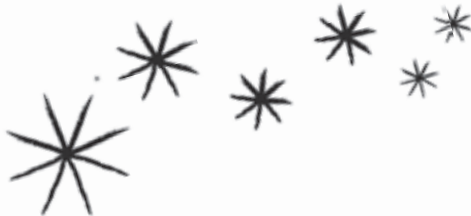
# Truth or Dare

Siobhan Coek-Man Woods

*Wimbledon High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

## Truth or Dare

My personal favorite. Always got the girls giggling their guts out, and the boys barreling brazenly through the questions. Mirthful smiles were contagious in the game, insidious sniggers that wrapped themselves in humor as the dares got more and more... ambitious. Kids would squish into the cramped toilet stall, humid breath suffocating them as they placed bets on how far they'd go. Limerent obsessions were revealed, deepest secrets were uncovered, and treacherous acts were committed. But no one batted an eye to the destruction it caused, not even the plonky teachers. It was the money that made it interesting, and it was the money that drove people to more heinous crimes. I didn't personally take part, I knew better, but it was so interesting. The way their eyes sparkled iridescently as the crisp paper bills were drawn out, the way cheeks flushed, and skin pricked at the numbers. Who knew something that started out so small could blow up so much.



Truth or Dare.

My questionable favorite. More people started playing, playing into the corrupt hands that nearly ran the school. Barked out laughter accompanied violent slaps across the back as they expanded their reach to the whole toilets, instead of just the singular cubical on the end. And yet still, skin flushed skin, clothes rubbed consistently as people fought for space, fought for attention. No one would accept defeat, be it publicly hurling bleeding animals at the teachers, urinating messages out on the pristine walls, or even jumping on other students, the dares only got more voracious. The truth's weren't much worse, crimes were confessed, family affairs were aired, and private photos were leaked. Yet no one batted an eye, the teachers lay as prey to the vile game that was slowly taking over the school. I still didn't play thought, just observed, and remained silent. But it was only getting worse.

Truth or Dare.

My loathsome favorite. The entire school now lay claim to the corruption that only grew with a ravenous need. Money was no longer the prize; drugs, alcohol, even people were sold now. Packets rippled through the crowds, viscously being torn at as the contents spilled over a handful. Glass bottles were smashed in the fight, students staggering mindlessly through it all. Ropes were bound and the sonorous, languid rip of clothes filled the classroom, playing over and over and over again on the overhead speakers. I cowered in the corner, despising what had come of the school I once loved, the people I was once proud to call my friends. Labored breaths condensed as clammy fingers grappled, accompanied by slurred susurrations in the shell of my ear. And to think, all of this had spiraled because of one mischievous question I'd asked on that fateful afternoon,  
Truth or Dare?

# Checkmate

Sophia Brique

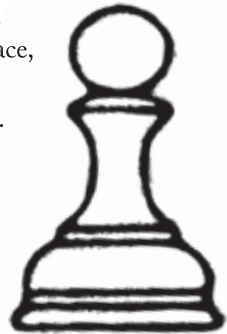
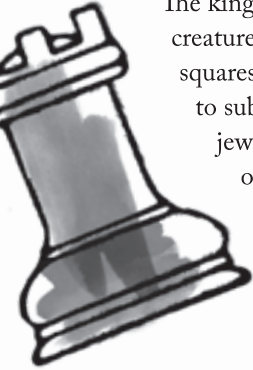
*Ursuline High School (Year 10 - Age 15)*

Move forward and don't look back. Attack or be attacked.

Amongst all rules, these were the most important.

The kingdom was not one of citadels, castles, and mythical creatures, but rather a vast expanse of monochromatic squares – arranged in a pattern which no leader would care to subdue. But this king was a ruler. Despite the lack of jewels and architecture, this king took such pride in his ownership of this barren board that he surrounded himself with loyal rooks, knights, bishops, and pawns, to act as his gold and silver - when in truth, they were only there to shield his internal weakness.

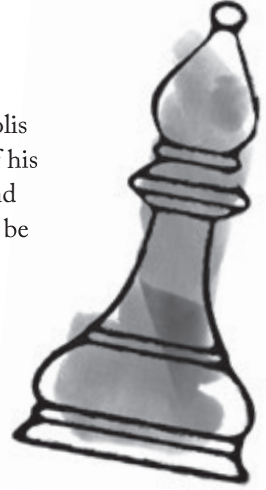
While the king joyfully boasted about his people's loyalties to his wife, the people hid their repulsion of their leader by distracting themselves with working laborious days to protect him. The board had been untouched; the king was unthreatened, but not until two beings sat across from each other, the winds of their presence sending the dust into a dance. One of the entities shook a bag onto the board, unleashing heaps of white pieces, and mirrored the formation of the black pieces opposite. The king, in disbelief, glared at his ivory counterpart – a fellow man of power, an enemy – with hostility. But as a symbol of peace, the beings above them shook hands over the land, casting shadows over the two kingdoms. The clock ticking was the metronome to the sounds of war amongst both sides, as the hands suddenly moved each piece: knight to F3, pawn to H3, pawn to H4 – commands by which the king did not have any power over. Each



move was betrayal; enough to make a necropolis out of a kingdom of greatness. At every lift of his hand, the mortal above had caused knights and bishops – both strong in faith and power – to be slaughtered by white pawns.

The beings, so concentrated and remorseless, continued to play their game whilst the King stood tough like a Herculean God, awaiting for his fate. The wife who he manipulated, the pawns he deemed unnecessary, the bishops, knights, and rooks who lived in agony protecting his prideful, boastful self, stood peacefully defeated to the side of the board. Perhaps the death of his countrymen was the only way they could be saved; the only way to escape the mess and disgrace of a kingdom that he created. Without them, he was unshielded and forced to run away from the enemy, one step at a time, alongside nothing but a few pawns. Did this war diminish him to become one of them?

Surrounded by the enemy, surrounded by the monochrome squares which he once exploited, he awaited for the flesh of the hand to make its next move. He watched his people die at the hands of someone else, and he couldn't avenge them. The being above him sighed, shook hands with his opponent, and like a sword, swiped his finger over the king and resigned.







## **HIGHLY COMMENDED POEMS:**

*Key Stage 5*

*Years 12-13*

*Age 16-18*

# **Girlhood**

Sasha Cumming

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 13 - Age 18)*

Born into the hands of a man,  
He brings you into the game.  
Under bright lights you are inspected,  
judged,  
received with a sigh. "A girl".

Through day-one judgements you are forced to be a fast learner.  
A maze of social cues and graces awaits you:  
What to wear,  
What not to wear,  
The impossible task of choosing who to dress for today.

You grapple with the art of provocative modesty.

As you continue to play,  
aged clouds creep above you  
crying acid rain that burns wrinkles into your skin.

You cling to your arsenal of old makeup brushes  
that doesn't quite seem to be  
enough  
anymore.

Desperate, you seek help.  
Led by Mary Kay crusaders, you resume your pilgrimage towards  
perfection -  
A promised land you, too, can reach for the price of a starter kit.

You fantasise about your best self amidst a haze of forgotten  
dreams that are too late to go back for now.

Not realizing that as you do so,  
you are marching along an endless path with an army of women  
fighting for their own discontent.

Though you are aching for it,  
There will be no satisfying conclusion to your story.

True happiness will never meet you,  
For you have never met yourself.

Striving always to be the perfect player,  
You have still failed,  
For this is a game that can never be won.







**HIGHLY COMMENDED STORIES:**



Key Stage 5

Years 12-13

Age 16-18

# Its Back.

Lara Ellis

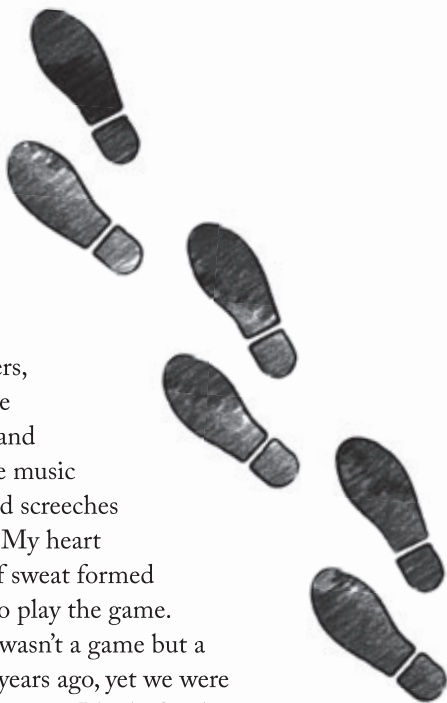
*Ursuline High School (Year 12 - Age 17)*

‘Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!’, he said. I couldn’t move, barely breathing. He apologized again, explaining it was the harsh bang of the old grandfather’s clock that triggered his hands to fly to his defense so aggressively. I sat on our worn-out sofa, too afraid to make a sound. I was shaking, I knew what was happening. My face was throbbing; I gently lifted my hand and grazed my cheek with quivering fingertips. Blood. Warm scarlet blood ran down my cheek and I smoothly erased it with a swift movement of my palm. My face was burning. I flinched and pulled my hand away as I watched him leave and return with a damp cloth. He placed a gentle kiss on my forehead whilst I nurtured the back of his hand. He whispered, ‘please tell me you heard it too...’. I had. Of course I had.

I left the room and walked into the kitchen, warily pouring myself a drink. It wasn’t until I heard the agitated noise of my teeth clattering against the glass that I realized I was still shaking. I felt the colour rush from my face as I heard it again. The ominous boom of the clock’s chime rang throughout the house and the faint noise of ravaging animals, and the wet drips of raindrops followed. I took a seat and waited for him to emerge at the doorway. We looked at each other in horror and quickly ran to each other’s embrace. It’s back. That GAME. We slowly pulled away from each other and I stared up into his crystal blue eyes. His fear mirrored mine and we knew what we had to do. Our gentle footsteps were accompanied by the growing sound of each boom from the clock. I hesitantly pulled down the ladder to the attic and shakily climbed up; he followed closely behind.

Walking to the corner of the room, I reached for his hand instinctively and we knelt down. He pulled the box out from

under the table and away from the array of defenses we had attempted to cover it with. I blew off the dust and was met with a crashing sound of screams and screeches. I rushed to cover my ears as the box sprung open. The old characters, broken and weary, slowly arose from their sleeping positions and whirled around the board. The music started up and the screams and screeches played faintly in the distance. My heart was pounding, and droplets of sweat formed around my hairline. We had to play the game. We had no choice. Though it wasn't a game but a battle, we had done it before, years ago, yet we were faced with the same challenge again. I looked at him sporting a comforting smile. We took each other's hands, "To the end, Agent Dagger?" he questioned, "To the end, Sir Mooney" I replied. A blinding light stole us, and we were gone, leaving nothing but dust and an old leaf.



# The Mist

Luiza Thompson Bezerra

*Ursuline High School (Year 12 - Age 17)*

Through the Hangar's gate and into the Hollow there resides the Mist. It had turned dark already, and the broken green lights of the exit gate began to flicker. The travelers came back from their mission into the Mist, not many returned this time, most of them were wounded and others missing. Clearly, they were overpowered, it's not like it hasn't happened before but this time their team was well prepared.

Since its first appearance the Mist has either grown, changed shape, or color but now its form is eerie white and grey with blood red spines hovering out of it. It takes over each Hanger one after another, its last victim was 2090, now it's merging with ours, Hangar 2091. The situation gets worse while leaks out the walls. Reinforcements are due to arrive but it's a pointless game, the government tries to fight it, sending out more hopeful recruits to test them against it. They will eventually understand what they applied for if they survive. The contract binds them to enter the gate at most. All they can do is guard themselves while they wait for it to open again like I did. The last thing you want to witness is the horrors inside. You will never forget. Most survivors can't live with the guilt that everyone who was with you is now gone.

There was a government announcement made through the grainy speakers of Hangar 2091. Those in Hangar 2091 and additional members of 2092 must prepare to face the Mist. A timer was projected onto the metal gate and everyone's focus was placed on their survival. Nothing was in our favor as the government had already locked the exit leading to Hangar 2092, and the Mist was just behind the other. Many people broke down, you could see it in their pale faces. There was not much

to do in terms of my own preparations to face the destruction before us. I didn't have many belongings as most of it was lost when this nightmare took over.

Everyone knew this forced mission wouldn't end well. The influx of new recruits was mainly made up of people aiming to earn rewards after surviving. In the end, after the horror of the experience the only reward you earn and try to preserve is your life. Still, the years' worth of food that the government provides seems to be effective enough in how it encourages more to join. They still don't realize the situation all of us are in, while some of the older members of Hangar 2091 were still thrashing and shouting at the gate of 2092. It was all going to be over soon, it will be quick, the Mist will devour us all before we can react.





## **HIGHLY COMMENDED POEMS:**

*Special Educational Needs Schools  
(SEN)*

# Acrostic poem: Gaming (Candy Crush)

Anete Punkule

*Cricket Green School (Year 13 - Age 18)*

Grapes are sweet  
Apples are good for health  
Magical fruits  
In candy crush  
Numerous stars  
Gems win the game.





## **Basketball**

Weston Fianko-Nicholas

*Cricket Green School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

**B**asketball is my favourite sport  
**A**way game are the best  
**S**orry you are not playing  
**K**eep moving the ball  
**E**asy to play to this game  
**T**alk to me nicely  
**B**edtime story  
**A**ct like a winner  
**L**eave me alone  
**L**et the music play on



★ **HIGHLY COMMENDED STORIES:**  
*Special Educational Needs Schools*  
*(SEN)* ★

# The Golf Game

Albino Barbosa

*Perseid Upper School (Year 13 - Age 19)*

One day Charles Smith, a tall boy, went to a green field to play mini golf. The big field was full of thick green grass. Sneakily, Charles' enemy Grace Blue ran to him and said 'I will win'. Grace did an evil laugh. Charles was stood with his arms crossed, Charles was not happy. It was time to pick their golf balls, let the game start. Charles chose a blue golf ball. Grace chose a purple golf ball. They both ran to the field. It was Grace's go first. Grace chipped the ball and it landed in the hole. Grace had a party to celebrate, she cheered 'woo hoo!' with her fist in the air. Now it is Charles' go. Charles whacks the golf ball and...it went in! Charles jumped up and down. It is a tie! Suddenly, a pig ran onto the field. Oh dear! The small, pink pig charged at Grace and Charles who run away scared. Grace put her arms around Charles and told him to hide with her in a bush. The pig gives up and trots away. Charles takes a deep breath. Grace takes a deep breath. They slowly climb out of the bush and go back to mini golf. Charles and Grace are now friends. Grace gives Charles a red coca cola, his favourite drink. Charles wolfs it down and burps loudly – EUGH! Charles and Grace shake hands and say 'good game'. The end.



# Pigeons in the Park

Fahima Noor

*Perseid Upper School (Year 13 - Age 18)*

On the grass, the pigeons sit.

Coo, a boy pigeon with

grey feathers, began

to coo and a hoot

'ohhh ohhh'. Coo

was hungry! Coo

wanted to eat

the seeds but

there were too

many pigeons

trying to steal his

food. Coo decided to scare the other pigeons so they would

fly away into the sky. Coo clapped his wings and cooed loudly

'coo coo'. Suddenly, the other pigeons flew away. Coo ate his

yummy seeds. Coo was feeling good. Just then a human entered

the park. A girl with a hijab on, gold eye shadow, dark brown

lipstick, concealer, mascara, black eyeliner, natural eyebrows

and a black and white striped t-shirt and a jumper looked at

Coo. She said 'what is that on the ground?' Coo is now on the

grass and happy to see the lady. She has a lovely smile. There

on the grass they were gold clip on earrings. She bent down

and picked them up. She had a yellow bracelet on her wrist

to match. She had a yellow ring on her left finger. She buys a

jewelry and a necklace and she is sitting on the bench there in

the park. She was feeling happy and excited because she like

a looking on the pigeons. After few minutes' pigeons fly away

into the sky and a girl to say goodbye pigeon and a she goes

back to home.



# The Broken Console

Izzad Hossain

*Cricket Green School (Year 9 - Age 14)*

Once upon a time, I set out to a second-hand shop, eager to score a Mario Kart game and a PS4 console. Arriving, I searched the shelves for Mario Kart. I asked a shop employee who promptly located the game. With that sorted, we also bought a PS4 console. After paying the \$550 price tag, I bagged my purchases and headed home.

Upon reaching my home, I wasted no time in hooking up the PS4 to the TV and plugging it in. Sliding the game disc into place, I eagerly awaited the loading screen. Armed with controllers, I dove into the world of Mario Kart, dominating the leader board for a solid hour before taking a snack break. Disaster struck as the console crashed midway through. Frustrated, I called upon my mom for aid, who called a technician to fix it. She spoke to Wang who said he would be there quickly.

The technicians arrived, with a twist. Technicians of various cultural backgrounds, including Indian (Sadiq, Raj and Sunil) and Chinese (Lee, Lin and Wang), accompanied by their gods – Allah, God and Buddha and the Power Rangers. At the beginning they argued and had conflicts. The Indians and the Chinese didn't get along with each other. The gods were all thinking of a plan to control the rivalries against India and China. The gods and power rangers said, "Listen guys, we don't like conflicts and arguments, so we want all of you guys to work together using teamwork to fix this faulty console. The Indians and Chinese thought, "okay, this is not right, we should help each other, not argue with each other. We should work together." Soon they all calmed down and they all encouraged each other, even though it was stressful. The gods and the power rangers

felt proud because their plan was working. “We finally made the Chinese and the Indians allies. Now they will never fight again. Now they will just be respectful and work together!”

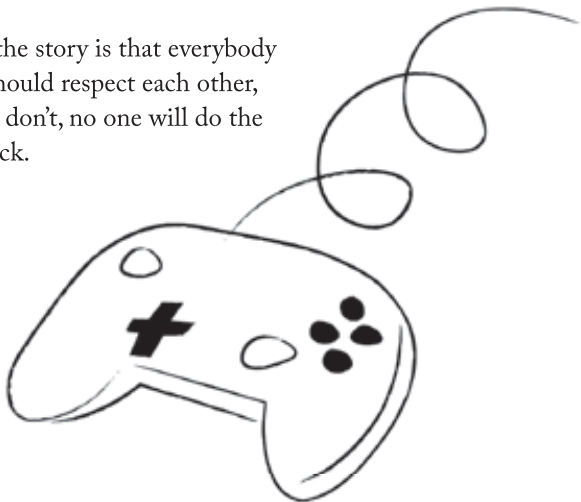
Unexpectedly, more professional people came. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis joined the fray, followed by Koreans and Thais. I thought they were here to mess around, but I was wrong. Each group brought more help. Despite initial tensions, apologies were exchanged, and they learned how to respect and collaborate.

Working together, the technicians, including Mr. Lin and his brother Mr. Wang fixed the console to perfection. During the repair, Mr Lin said “Ni Hao Ma” to me. I was honoured because I responded “Wo hen hao”. Cultural exchanges blossomed, with languages shared and friendships made.

In a surprising turn of events, Mr. Wang extended an invitation for me to attend Cricket Green School. I accepted, joining Mr. Lin's class alongside my new friends. With laughter, the group celebrated, embracing the lesson of mutual respect and equality.

The End.

The moral of the story is that everybody is equal and should respect each other, because if you don't, no one will do the same thing back.



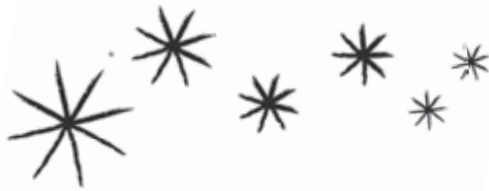
# The Boy

Kieran Hopton

*Cricket Green School (Year 11 - Age 16)*

One day there was a family who moved into a new house, a house that no one knows. However, Oliver the little boy didn't like the feeling of the house that they moved into. So they entered the house and they started unpacking their things but then Oliver heard a noise coming from the basement. Elizabeth said "Are you ok Oliver" Oliver said, "Yeah I heard a noise coming from the basement". Mum shouts and says "Dinner is ready!" The family start eating their dinner but then Oliver hears footsteps coming from upstairs. Oliver's face is scared. The noise of the footsteps is getting closer and closer and CLOSER... Then Oliver shouts, "LEAVE ME ALONE". The family was petrified and then they all got out of their seats and then mum shouted angrily "GO TO YOUR ROOM" Oliver started running up the stairs bursting into tears. Oliver starts saying to himself "Why is this happening to me? I don't deserve this". Oliver hears a knock on his bedroom door, he walks over to the door, opens it and it is his sister Elizabeth. Elizabeth asks him "Are you ok Oliver you looked pretty scared back there?". Oliver replies "Yeah, I'm fine for now but ever since we got here it doesn't feel right". They carried on talking and then they went to bed.





The next morning everyone woke up to have breakfast but ... mum didn't look happy she was staring at Oliver while eating. Oliver was confused, even with his sister, so he asks Mum "Why do you look so angry?". There was no reply from her but she got up and the lights started flickering. Oliver and Elizabeth started panicking then the lights went out and it went quiet.... then they heard footsteps coming closer towards them, Elizabeth's breathing got heavier and HEAVIER. But then, the lights came back on and she was gone. Oliver started crying but he heard a door opening very slowly so he looked at the basement door and then heard a whisper saying "YOU'RE NEXT!". He then got pulled into the basement and then the door slammed behind him.

Oliver wakes up suddenly and starts screaming. His mum rushes into his bedroom saying "Oliver are you ok? I heard you screaming, what's up Oliver?". "I'm fine Mum just had a bad dream that's all" said Oliver. Mum replies "OK then" so she walks out of the room and Oliver went back to sleep. At 3:00am Elizabeth heard a noise coming from Oliver's room so she got out of her room and went to Oliver's room but he was not there, she was so confused. She started panicking and started running into mum's room and told her that Oliver was not in his room. Elizabeth heard a creaking and a voice that said "thank you for playing my game Oliver, do you want to play too Elizabeth...?"

END

# The Shape Shifter

Mouad Rizki

*Cricket Green School (Year 8 - Age 13)*

## CHAPTER 1

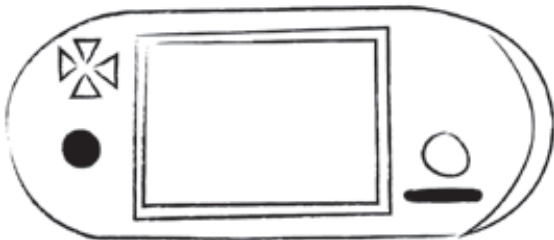
### The Hack

There once was a boy named Hubert. He was at home playing a video game, when all of sudden a virus hacked his system and he got pulled into the game. When this happened he opened his eyes and he saw a digital realm which looked a lot like the game he was playing in his bedroom. He was looking around himself and he saw a purple slime blob.

“errrrr bruda errrrrrr what’s that bruda” said Hubert.

Then the purple slime blob shape-shifted into a lion and tried to attack him.

Hubert dodged the attack by running in the opposite direction, He saw a sword in the corner and grabbed it. He swung it at the lion and luckily he connected when he did the lion shape shape-shifted into a large metal brick as Hubert swung the sword at the lion again he hit and it broke into pieces. Hubert thought all hope was lost! But at that moment his friends appeared and saved him. It seemed his friends also got pulled in this digital realm but they appeared already with digital weapons, when they all attacked the giant metal brick he shape-shifted back into a purple blob and ran away. Now they had to figure out how to fix the system and escape back to the real world.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Secret Chip

After they escaped that shape-shifter they walked through a door, when they entered they saw what looked like a group of stick men with weapons. They also for some reason attacked Hubert and his friends. They had to fight back. This battle went on for 2 hours, Hubert and his friends destroyed all the stick men. They took a rest and talked about what was going on and then they decided that they had to move on and continue their journey. They came to a dark creepy hallway they looked around but when they looked back the way they had come they saw a giant creepy face, Hubert and his friends started running as fast as they could.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Boss

They kept running down the dark corridor even though they couldn't really see what was in front of them, they ran and ran until they fell down a trap door. The door slammed above them and left them in darkness again. In the darkness they heard a sound, it sounded like a giant bird, as their eyes adjusted to the darkness they saw that it was indeed what they thought. The bird saw them and started to fly at them until one of Hubert's friends grabbed their weapon which was a slingshot and shot a giant rock at the creature and it fell to the ground killing it. They saw the shape-shifter they encountered at the start of their journey, they all lifted their weapons together at once and swung at the blob they hit the shape-shifter and they killed it, then as if nothing had happened Hubert was back in his room and back in his chair sitting at his computer, the screen read Game Over?

# Journey To The West

Riylee Shearwood

*Perseid Upper School (Year 8- Age 13)*

There was a mountain in the fruit mountain kingdom.

There was a monkey his name is Sonrukan, he was born from a rock. He has brown fur, cream face, feet and hands and blue eyes.

He want to be a God and King so he made a Kingdom. So next he found a huge boulder and turned it into a white temple palace. Sonrukan lived in the palace with this subjects, the monkeys and apes.

When they got their names bowed down to Songrukan and called him their king. Songrukan wants to live alive forever and not die. He deiced to kill some demons and demonesses to stay alive forever. He met them in a different places and countries and asked them to fight him.

He used a magical red iron bar with two golden knobs on it one at the top and one at the bottom to win the fight. He used a magical spell written on the iron bar to turn himself into a golden lion. He whispered “horsegarwhobeayuoooh” until the spell worked Sonrukan, in lion form, ate the demon bodies and said “they taste like oranges”.

After eating them, they turned back into himself and went to the Jade Palace and told the emperor to get off his throne. The emperor bellowed “No get out of my palace I will not let any monkey tell me to get off my throne. “They fought over the throne. And then the emperor won and Sonrukan was angry. He was so angry that he whacked emperor.







# Young Writers Competition 2024

## Participating Senior Schools

Ashcroft Technology Academy, Wandsworth

Cricket Green School (SEN)

Harris Academy, Wimbledon

Holy Cross School, New Malden

Ibstock Place School, Roehampton

Kew House School, Richmond

King's College School, Wimbledon

Marymount International School, London

La Retraite Girls' School, Clapham

Melrose School, Mitcham

Perseid Upper School (SEN)

Raynes Park High School, Wimbledon

Rutlish School, Wimbledon

Saint Cecilia's Church of England School, Wandsworth

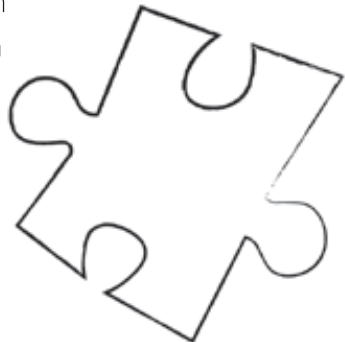
Southfields Academy, Wimbledon

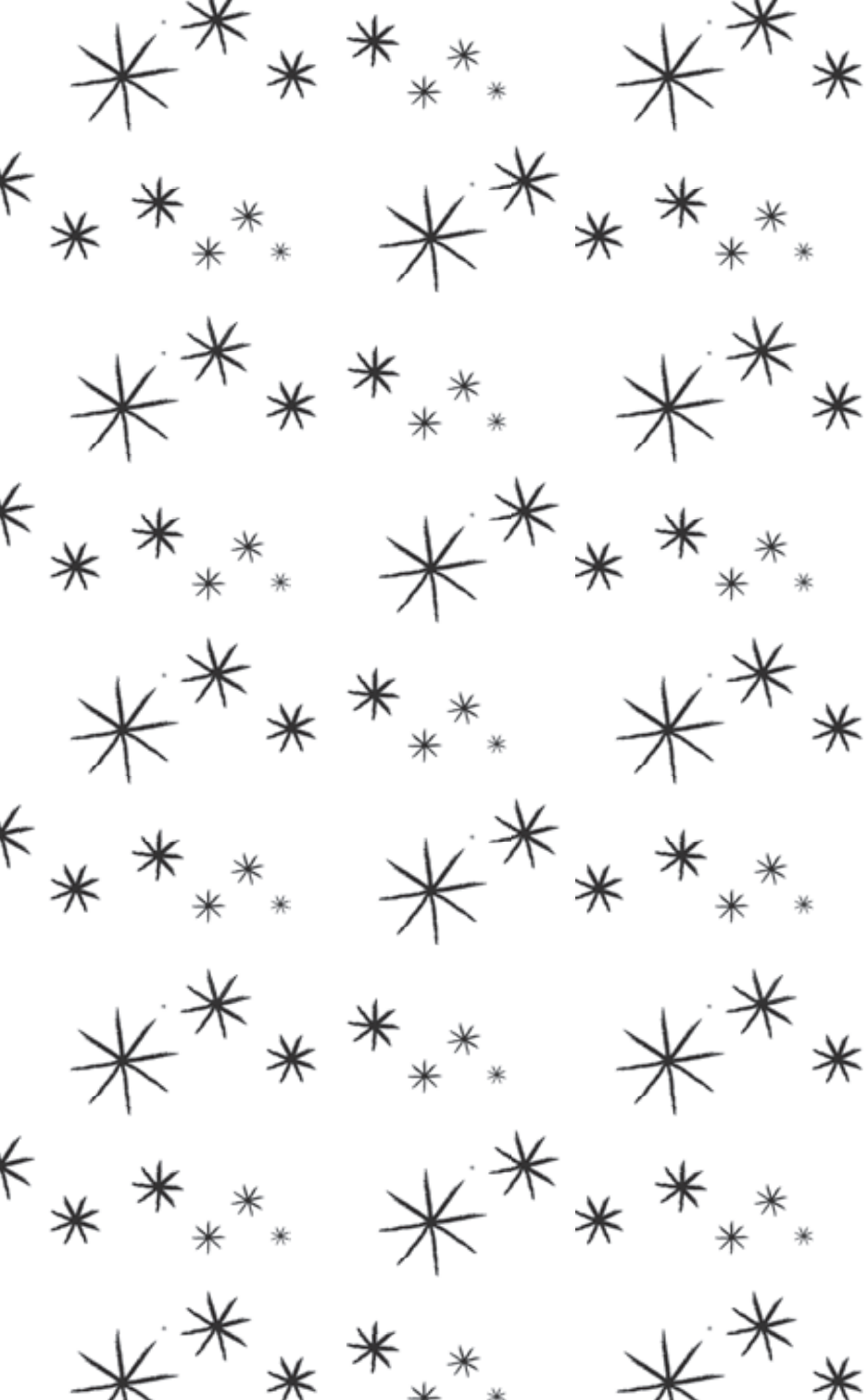
Ursuline High School, Wimbledon

West London Free School

Wimbledon College

Wimbledon High School (Senior)





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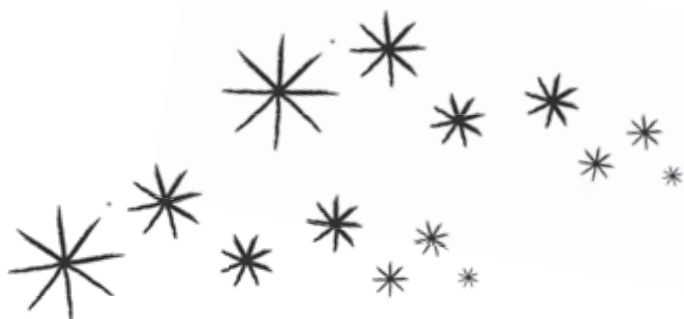
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