

WIMBLEDON  
BOOKFEST

# THE TREE



Senior Young Writers' Competition 2022  
Collection of Poems and Short Stories

# WIMBLEDON BOOKFEST

Wimbledon BookFest 2022

## **Young Writers' Competition**

Collection of Short Stories & Poems  
Senior School Edition



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# **Young Writers' Competition 2022**

## **Senior Judging Panel**

### **Chair of Judges**

**Jean Menzies**

Author & Academic, University of Roehampton

### **Judges**

**Lyndsey Barraclough**

Author and Former Teacher

**Margaret Reeve**

Teacher & Educationalist

**Sudha Bhuchar**

Author

**Andrew Davies**

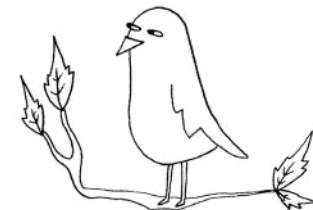
MA Student, University of Roehampton

### **Notes**

School names have been abbreviated in the entries; 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'.

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

Design and Layout: Phoebe Manley  
Illustrations and Cover Design: Phoebe Manley  
Production: Laura Byrne & Lillie Toon





**Stories .....78**

Alexandra Miquelin Winch	Ashcroft Technology Academy
Ava Beyzaii	Ricards Lodge High School
Ava McAndie	Ashcroft Technology Academy
Beverly Igiogbe	St Philomena’s High School
Charles Sinclair	Shrewsbury House School
Chloe Leung	Ashcroft Technology Academy
Daisy Latton	Graveney School
Gabrielle Gendi	Holy Cross School
Jake Poghosyan	King’s College School
Joann Vincent	Holy Cross School
Josiah Lubert	Rutlish School
Latu Waikwa	Ursuline High School
Lorenza Rees	Ibstock Place School
Lúa Gestoso Cabezas	West London Free School
Lucile Chereau	Ursuline High School
Lydia Pannett	Tiffin Girl’s School
Ohemaa Opoku-Amankwah	Harris Academy Wimbledon
Realjoy St. Basil Wudike	St Philomena’s High School
Sophie Ingram	Putney High School
Tanuja Kamath	Tiffin Girls’ School
Xizhi Zhang	Marymount International School

**Highly Commended KS4: Years 10 – 11 (age 14-16)**

**Poems.....123**

Clara Bates	Ursuline High School
Darcey Cook	Saint Cecilia’s
Sadie Simpson	Ibstock Place School

**Stories.....130**

Chloe Kawuma	Ursuline High School
Emma Miskelly	Ursuline High School
Jasmine Savory	St Philomena’s High School

**Highly Commended KS5: Years 12 – 13 (age 16-19)**

**Poems.....139**

Erin O’Connell	Ursuline High School
Martine Maugüé	King’s College School

**Stories.....144**

Grace Steele	Ursuline High School
Lizzy Bayly	Wimbledon High School
Nishtha Sukhadia	Holy Cross School

**SEN Schools Highly Commended**

**Poems.....153**

Emmy Beadle	Cricket Green School
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## Introduction

From the earliest tales we know, to the poems and stories collected here, the tree has always occupied a central role. The tree is both stable and transformative. It stands strong and tall while it watches the world go by. It marks the beginning of new seasons and years with each change of its leaves. We all know its appearance in one form or another, yet it means something different to every person who sits beneath it.

In ancient Greek myth, the olive tree was the goddess Athena's gift to the Athenian people. Meanwhile, the orisha Obtala planted the first palm tree that gave vegetation to the Yoruba people. In Norse mythology it was the tree Yggdrasil that supported the weight of the world in its arms. And it was beneath the shade of the Bodhi tree that the Buddha gained enlightenment. Life, food, knowledge, the tree is all of these things and more.

The tree is a timeless symbol, yet it can mean countless things, just as the huge variety of works in this collection demonstrate. These young writers carry on a tradition begun millennia ago, finding meaning in the recognisable foliage of the tree. Whether it be their importance to our environment or one family's history, the trees in this collection represent things both big and small. So next time you pass a tree on the street, or sit beneath the tree in your garden, remember the poems and stories collected here. Consider these wonderful reflections on the endless possibilities each tree can represent and find what that tree means to you.



*Jean Menzies, Chair of Judges*

overall  
winner



## The Poet Tree

Sara Arshad

*Southfields Academy (Year 7 – Age 11)*

In my garden grows a poet tree  
With gazillions of poems for everybody  
Rhythms roll down from its branches to its roots  
Do you want some inspiration?  
Come pick yourself some fruit

Some poems are short  
Some poems are long  
Some rhyme, some don't  
Some sound like a song  
Some make you smile  
Some make you...

STOP!

...and think for a while

Some are new  
Some you've heard  
Some contain made up magical words

Think of a theme  
A title  
A topic  
You can bet my poet tree's got it

Glasses, moustaches, clocks, caterpillars  
Cucumbers, odd numbers, chocolate, chinchillas  
Daft dogs, fat frogs, kings, castles  
Lamp Posts, burnt toast, postmen with parcels

Computers, peashooters, favourite places  
Fairies, football, fish, films, funny faces  
Comics, electronics, sticky tape, street signs  
Big balloons, blue baboons, silver, socks, sunshine

In my garden grows a poet tree  
With gazillions of poems for everybody  
Rhythms roll down from its branches to its roots  
Do you want some inspiration?  
Come pick yourself some fruit



WINNERS  
and  
JOINT WINNERS

## The Change in All of Us

Alex Oussedik

King's College School (Year 7 - Age 12)

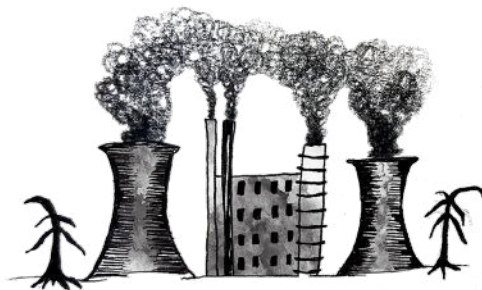
*\*Please note – this poem can be read from back to front as well!*

Trees  
I see  
Fuel for grimy, tainting factories  
I don't see  
Jungles, alive with the symphony of wildlife that stretch out  
Never ending  
The lush, greenery that is  
Wasted space  
Why do we call forests  
Beautiful, scenic, picturesque havens  
close your eyes and just remember  
From time to time  
Economic necessity  
And disregard  
Our wild, chaotic half  
We should never forget  
Rational thought  
Who needs  
These tall, green figures over us, reaching out with their  
outstretched hands  
Look at them  
Choking us  
My diesel car  
Far better company than  
Trees  
That are nothing but bad news, old news  
Fossil fuels  
Are far more important than  
Trees

Fuel for our machines  
We should find a different  
Heaven on earth  
The Amazon  
Cremate the once vibrant canopy  
Why  
Do we need trees or farming land  
Habitats or homes  
It should be an easy choice  
But wait  
Destroy them  
Why do I need to  
Admire these craning plants  
But wait  
Expansive woodland  
Taking up space where there could be  
Factories  
But wait  
Why am I thinking this through  
This is a simple decision  
But wait  
These trunks are home  
For millions of animals  
But wait  
Why do I need rusting metal  
Why do I need fuel forged cars  
all I want to see  
is  
The beckoning copse outside my door  
I've been so ignorant  
To the overwhelming beauty of nature  
Why do I need material objects  
Why do I need worthless money  
Why do I need my impure fossil fuels  
I need to change

I have to change  
Too late  
It's never  
Going to change  
My ways are  
Set in stone  
Nothing is ever  
Going to happen  
Is  
it  
It will stay the same  
Why did I think that  
I can do something  
I could have done something  
I should have done something  
It's too much for me  
The vivid images of charred trees  
The horrible barren landscapes  
That I created  
The fire in my heart  
An animal, on a charred stump, its orange fur like the fire  
that destroyed its home, but that fire was nothing like  
the inferno in our eyes  
A single tear rolled down its cheek, and mine  
I made my decision

*(Now read from bottom to top, line by line)*



## **The Lone Ironwood Tree**

Emma Chetty

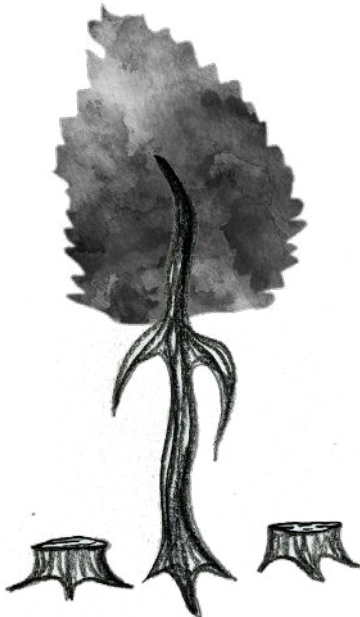
*Ursuline High School (Year 8 – Age 13)*

A hundred years. A hundred long years have passed.  
Darkness. Nothing but cruel, unrelenting darkness,  
consuming every speck of light ... It's been a hundred years  
since the superiorly militant army of metal monsters rolled  
in like boulders, crushing anything in their way, mercilessly  
slaughtering my rooted village, clinically severing each of  
them from the ground, carelessly eradicating our proud  
history off the face of the earth. I watched helplessly as the  
metal monsters ravaged through our heavenly paradise,  
looting the land, banishing the animals, decimating  
my home. A hundred years since they took everything.  
Everything I had ever known and loved. Gone. The  
agonising screams still reverberate through my branches.  
The only remnant of my former life is me, the lone ironwood  
tree, cursed to live hundreds of years in solitary confinement  
before I too perish forever.

It's been a hundred years since I felt the thrum of vibrant  
life and just for one fleeting moment, I close my eyes and  
drift away on a distant memory ... luscious lime blades  
sprinkled on top of the earth, tickling me; towering avenues  
of Ironwood trees piercing the sky, sturdy and strong;  
an orchestra of birds singing a sweet symphony; the air  
perfumed with the ambrosial scent of fragrant flowers;  
critters tunnelling through the ground, furiously clawing  
away at the rich soil... A hundred torturous years. I watch  
the world spin by as I keep waiting. Waiting for hope.  
Waiting for death to welcome me. Waiting to leave this world.  
Waiting for something. I've watched the moon waltzing with  
the stars in the night sky. I've watched the colossal metal  
buildings spew toxins into the air. I've watched the seasons

pass by every year... and still, I'm waiting.  
 The searing pain etched into my soul is intense. My dreams remain tormented by the excruciating memories of the massacre, chipping away at my ancient bark, longing for death to welcome me into its sweet embrace. For one meagre moment, I sense a strange yet comfortingly familiar presence. 'Is anybody there?' I mutter feebly, anticipating the mundane eerie silence that I have become accustomed to. Suddenly the ground gracefully shifts and there she stands - majestically pushing through the layers of earth, fuelled by fierce determination. So miniscule yet magnificently glorious. So fragile, yet powerful and inspirational. And in this moment of the seedling taking her first breath of life, decades of darkness are shattered as life ferociously explodes before me. For the first time in a hundred years, joy and pride reverberate through my branches again.

And in this moment, the miracle of hope is born.

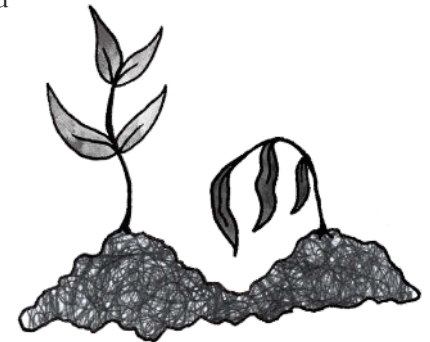


## Growth

Aya El Hajouji

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

We  
 are all  
 different types of  
 seeds We all start  
 somewhere Whether its in a  
 garden or in a field, even  
 just in a cup of water Then  
 it starts The growth the change the difference  
 You see some taller than others Some greener than  
 Others Some with leaves, some without Some straight,  
 some not  
 Some with flowers, some with fruits That's Its  
 when we realize  
 the difference between us How we're not the same  
 Then it stops  
 The growth Some fruits and flowers begin to rot, some  
 not  
 Some begin to droop down, some don't Some lose their  
 colour, they merge into a old grey, some don't  
 But it eventually happens to everyone, whether you  
 Like it or not, so although we  
 All grow in different ways we  
 All die down together and  
 We all end up  
 In the same  
 Place all  
 together



## The Little Space Between

Mia Badby

*Ricards Lodge High School (Year 11 – Age 16)*

He doesn't recognise this place: he could've sworn he was just in bed. Everything is white and blinding, and for the first time in all his life, he feels no force upon him. The ache in his knees is no more, the weight on his shoulders alleviated. The strained beat of his heart is gone. In fact, there is no beat at all. He looks around.

There's something in the distance: something tall and unmistakable with pale branches. He walks towards the tree, mesmerised.

Its leaves glisten and glow, each one housing a fragment of recorded time, a memory of the life he had not long left behind. A leaf breaks away from the tree, fluttering like a butterfly. He catches it and examines it closely. Beyond its pearly sheen, he watches, eyes widening, as a long-forgotten scene comes to life in the palm of his hand. His childhood home on a summer's day, kicking a football around the street with his friends, his mother calling him home for a cold glass of lemonade and a kiss on the forehead.

He looks up in disbelief as another leaf floats towards him. He catches it, gazing closely to see the day his baby daughter was born. Her big blue eyes blinking at the new world, her impossibly small hand holding his little finger.

One by one, the leaves start to fall. His life: every beginning, every end, every love, loss, and heartbreak, cascades in a rain of lost time and settles around him. The man descends on the life at his feet, grabbing handfuls of memories he

thought he had lost forever. He sees it all: the day he met the love of his life, his wedding day, his graduation, his daughter's first steps. He searches through the sea before him but stops at the sight of one particular memory. The scene glows a pale blue.

The hospital.

Sitting by his wife's side day and night, amidst the constant flow of well-wishers. The doctor's tidings: a finality tinged with deep sorrow. Holding her hand when he saw the light escape her eyes. The peace that washed over her in her final hour. Her last words whispered to him, and the emptiness that followed when she passed.

Though his heart no longer beats, he feels it start to ache in remembrance. He closes his eyes: clinging to the memory as though he were shielding something sacred from an open flame, and for the first time in years, he cries.

A familiar voice cuts through the silence:  
sweet and gentle.

"Darling?"  
He looks up.  
It's her.

She reaches out a hand to him and he takes it, pulling himself up and into her warm embrace. All words have escaped him and he holds to her like he hasn't done in years. His gaze catches on the trunk of the tree, which is now hollowed to a doorway, emanating a warm and welcoming lustre.  
"Come on" she says, "It's time to go."



## Mourning the Old Cherry Tree

Estella Wilson

*Graveney School (Year 9 – Age 17)*

Knarled, still and reaching  
Unmoving fingers into the depth of the skies.  
Unknown where you came from,  
But you stood for all time before my eyes,  
When they were smaller and brighter  
And filled the world with a strange gold  
hue of amazement,  
And in that odd and distant sunlight,  
I saw you spread sweet blossoms,  
That fell like a blushing snow  
Across the wet grey of the pavement.

They told us  
That you don't grow  
No more.  
Course, you don't grow no more.  
Been standing,  
Half-watching, half knowing,  
For too long.  
Hardly remembering  
Before.  
Before,  
The razors, strong saws of chain  
Took the branches

And the wind brought something more

Took the branches.

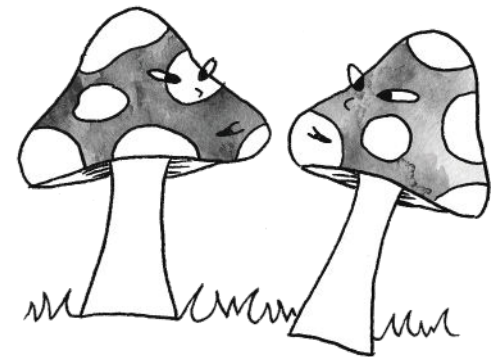
...

(Breath)

Took the branches.

You think they burnt them,  
Bloody red roaring claws of flame snatches, catches and  
crumbles all that hard earned wooden flesh  
Down to the bitter pith.  
But the coming and going, and the waxing and waning does  
not bring the same  
Stasis, no, no, listen for the  
shooting,  
Slow spurt of the meristem.  
It must be there?  
And I'll tell them, I will, that there's lots to be done in your  
trunk and your branches,  
I promise that there's new.  
Else thing.  
Else thing.

But Your body plays host to hoards of those that sing,  
For they find their feast in your flesh.  
Shelves of fungi murmur and mummer,  
And something in me knows you'll be gone by summer  
Oh see how I break before you  
Oh Don't you grow?  
Don't you grow?



★ SEN ★  
★ Winner ★  
★

## Changing Trees

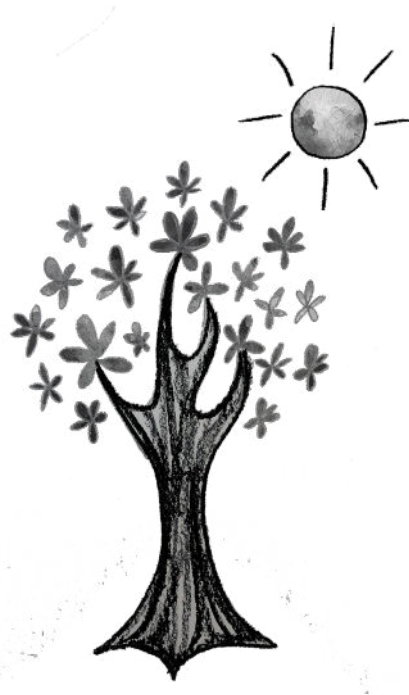
Reanna Kingsbury  
*Cricket Green School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

naked cold tree  
bare branches  
winter tree

beautiful blossom tree  
welcoming environment  
warm space  
bright

bushy green tree  
colourful sunny day  
strong summer day  
alive tree

leaves turn red  
leaves fall down  
tree goes bare  
leaves go orange  
it is welcoming  
it is peaceful  
it is beautiful



## A Search for Ingredients

Aaliyah Moran  
*Cricket Green School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

Once upon a time in an ancient forest there was a very large tree and behind the large tree sat an elegant castle. Charlotte a witch lived in the castle. She had black frizzy hair and wore a long black dress that slid across the floor when she walked. Charlotte had two goblins, their goblins were Kate and Batchelor. The goblin's wore sunglasses and slippers and they had magical bags that created.

The forest is now in darkness and has been for 5 years. The goblins are helping charlotte to make magic potion to save the forest, but a dragon was stopping them. Anthony the dragon is purple and green with an angry attitude. When Anthony was angry he breathed fire. Anthony wanted to hide the last ingredient so he could stop Charlotte making the potion and become king of the dark forest. Charlotte asked the goblins to help find the ingredients in a cave they wanted to help so they set off on their journey. Kate and Bachelor left the castle to find the dragons cave. When they found it, they decided to set a trap to capture Anthony. They dug a humongous hole using ancient magic gold spades, which when they were placed on the ground a hole appeared.

Bachelor started putting logs and sticks over the hole to hide it whilst Kate looked for Anthony to wake him. Kate found Anthony and when Batchelor gave her a signal she would start singing and the dragon would wake. Batchelor gave the signal, Kate began singing and Anthony began to wake. "WHO'S THERE??" roared Anthony. Kate used her magic powers to jump to the side as Anthony flew out of the cave high into the sky.

He spotted Bachelor on the ground and swooped down towards the trap, getting caught up in the lost rope Anthony fell into the trap and was caught.

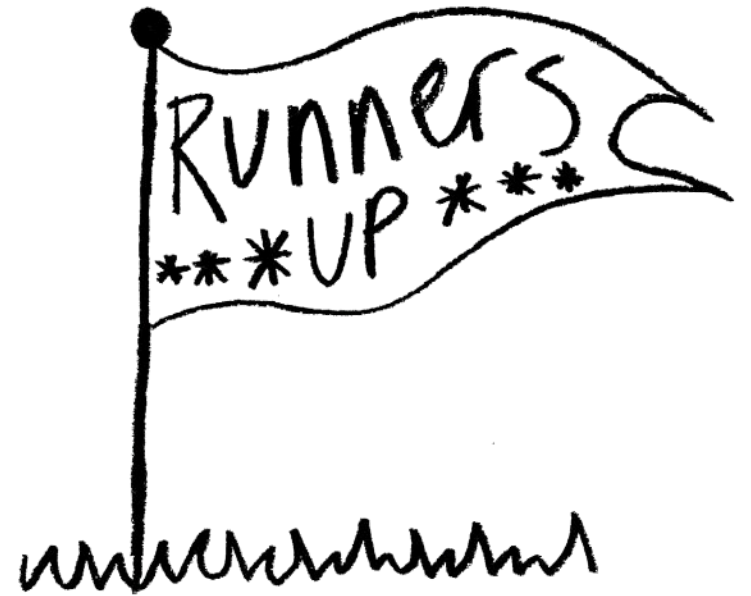
Kate grabbed the ingredients and ran to help Bachelor to make the final ties around Anthony with the rope and he was finally captured.

Charlotte was happy to see Kate and Bachelor return to the castle with the ingredients.

Charlotte had a huge bubbling cauldron and they threw the ingredients in. After a flash of light across the forest the sun rose and the birds start singing. Finally the forest was no longer in darkness.

“Thank you goblins for everything.” Charlotte said





## **The World Tree**

Zoe Sheaf

*Raynes Park High School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

My name is Mimir's Tree, Lærad and  
Yggdrasil.

I mean 'Odin's Tree'

After he who sacrificed himself upon my branches

To learn the secrets of the runes.

I am Yggdrasil.

I am the green ash whose branches hold the entirety of the  
cosmos

And whose health the whole universe depends on.

I am Yggdrasil.

I hold Midgard of humanity, connected to  
Asgard and Valhalla of the Aesir by the rainbow bridge:  
The Bifrost.

I cradle Vanaheim of the Vanir gods

And Folkvangr within.

I see heroes and gods.

I am Yggdrasil.

I keep Jotunheim and Muspelheim

Homes of giants, both fire and ice,

Enemies of the gods, home of Surtr.

I see evil.

I am Yggdrasil.

Nestled within my arms are

Alfheim, land of the light and Svartalfheim, of the dark  
elves.

They create magic and godly gifts

I see their talents.

I am Yggdrasil.

In the darkest of my roots sit  
Helheim and Niflheim, the realms of the dishonourable  
dead  
And the land of ice and mist.  
I see their loneliness, their power.  
I am Yggdrasil.

I keep Mimir's well for those willing to pay,  
The well of poison to create life,  
And the well of fate  
Upon which I depend and which the Norns keep.  
The Gods hold council here.  
I am Yggdrasil.

At my roots are  
Nidhogg and his servant serpents who  
Gnaw away at my roots for all eternity,  
At the howls of Garmr, he stops:  
He takes flight and I see all.  
I am Yggdrasil.

My boughs hold life,  
The eagle with whom the serpent swaps insults and  
Ratatoskr, the squirrel, who seeks only my destruction.  
Gardener stags, Dainn, Dvvalinn, Duneýrr and Durathror  
Eat, eat, eat my leaves.  
I am their home, they, my family.  
I am Yggdrasil.

On the warrior's roof, Valhalla, standing proud  
Eikthyrnir and Heidrun, stag and goat,  
Warrior and mother.  
Consumer and provider.

I see them, I see all.  
I am Yggdrasil.

But on the day of Ragnarök,  
On doomsday's morn, I still  
I shudder.  
I am Yggdrasil.

Oh, the stars shall go out,  
My sun shall die and  
Warriors and gods alike will lie slain by the demons, giants,  
Midgard shall sink and I will see the end of my children, my  
life.  
I am Yggdrasil.

The sun rises, I still.  
Liv and Livtraser, the remaining mortal being climb from  
my trunk.  
A great hall arises with wrongly slain Balder,  
My leaves grow, my branches stretch, my flowers bloom.  
Doomsday is over and I remain.  
I am Yggdrasil.

I am the world tree,  
Holder of knowledge, secrets, truths.  
I see all, know all, am all.  
I am,  
Always,  
Yggdrasil.



## The Dance of the Ghosts

Jasper Cox

*Graveney School (Year 8 – Age 13)*

A crater smouldered at the centre of Blackwood Forest. The locals already thought that the Forest was strange enough, that on cloudy nights will-o-the-wisps fluttered through the trees, that ghouls and ghosts drifted along, their mouths open in a silent moan. Tonight, especially, the locals stay away. For tonight is All Hallows Eve. Candles and jack-o-lanterns are being lit right now, to ward off any unearthly invaders. Tonight is the night when the boundaries between dimensions grow thin, and things can slip through.

If we leave the village, where fireworks are being prepped, as the silent spirits are particularly adverse to loud noises, and head deep into the Forest, you can see that after less than ten paces, all traces of the outside world disappear. The ancient charms surrounding Blackwood do not allow such things, for if a human sees it, they will want it, and that is not something that the ghouls and will-o-the-wisps want.

If you look into the crater, you will see a bottomless pit, in fact an illusion created by fog and mist. The crater has been here several years now. It moves around, you see, to avoid detection. But it has settled in Blackwood for a while, since no-one goes inside. Until tonight, that is.

It happened like it could be expected to happen. The village youths were, as children are ever likely to do, daring each other to go in. It always seems like a good idea then, but afterwards - if there is to be an afterwards - they definitely reconsider.

After the first ten steps, as we know, they lost sight of

anything but darkness. They all secretly decided to go on until someone asked to stop, even though all were terrified. With good reason. A ghoul flicked past. One of the younger children cried out, asking in a high voice what on Earth that was? It wasn't on Earth, though. It was from another place altogether.

Not knowing that, the others passed it off as a bird. There, though, they should've known better. There were no birds in Blackwood Forest. There was nothing but darkness and ghosts.

Suddenly, they reached the crater. Before they could go back, a ring of ghosts, of ghouls, of will-o-the-wisps, and many other things beside, emerged from the trees, and began the Dance. The Dance is difficult to describe, but I'll try my best. It was an entrancing spectacle, all of the creatures Dancing, but several things stand out. One, they completely hypnotised all the children. Two, they seemed to grow larger and larger. And finally, they began pushing forwards, herding the children back, back towards the crater.

They came closer, and closer, and closer, moving in unison, an extravaganza of the evils, a performance of the possessed, a soulless, spectral spectacle. And they came ever closer, until, slowly, one by one, the children stepped back into the crater, and fell, down, down, down and down.



## The Old Oak Tree

Emily Bunce

*Ursuline High School (Year 7 – Age 12)*

It started off with him forgetting simple things, like where he'd put his wordsearch or where he'd put his hat, but over time the old man began to forget his children names, who they were and what they looked like. However, there was one place which he had never forgotten, the place where he walked to, sat, and dozed each day, the one place where his memories could flood back to him: the old oak tree.

The old man had hazel eyes that used to be clear and cloudless but now they were vague, it was as if he was in a trance. His once smooth skin had shown much joy and youth, he now had wrinkles which coated his skin like the bark of a tree. Jim had lived a simple life. He had three children (who had left home) and a wife who had now fallen into an eternal sleep. He once felt as if he understood everything but as age and this wave of uncertainty engulfed him, he remembered nothing.

Jim loved visiting his old friend, the place where he'd proposed to his wife; the place she now lay under forevermore. The loyal oak consumed his wave of uncertainty and in return he was gifted memories he thought would never return. Jim shut his eyes; the warm memories hit him with such pleasure. He remembered when his children took their first steps, when he and his wife got married, his children leaving home and many other important moments. The old oak tree was not a place of consolation for just Jim but for all the animals that lived there as well.

It was nearing the end of winter when most things take their

final breath. Jim found his coat and felt the chilly air bite at his worn cheeks as he trudged to the old oak tree. It was a freezing cold day but that didn't stop Jim from sitting down and taking a long nap. His cold, shallow breaths were the only thing that could be heard. The man began to smile and for a split second, you could see him not as a man who had lost the spring in his step but as a man full of pure happiness. You could see his chest begin to slowly fall up and down until he turned completely still with a smile on his face. Relief at last.

By the time Spring came, Jim had been buried into the ground, together with his love at last. His daughter, Julie, had come to visit the tree in the late spring to see her peaceful mother and father. As she got closer to the old oak tree her eyes filled with tears, not because her mother and father had passed away but because the tree was now surrounded in a ring of forget-me-knots and she knew that the memory of her parents would live on forever, at the old oak tree.



## Sestina of the Tree

Macaulay Fergusson

*Saint Cecilia's (Year 10 – Age 15)*

*(The form that I chose for this work is a sestina, a complex type of French poetry that ends each line of each stanza with one of six words - the word that each line ends in are dictated very specifically by the form. Using such a supposedly restrictive poetry form was actually incredibly conducive to my writing, because it forced me to be incredibly creative and play around with the form, resulting in some unusual and actually rather beautiful phrases. This poem was inspired by Dorothy L Sayers translation of Dante's Inferno, which I read and loved.)*

In the middle of the park is the little tree  
That with its lengthy oaken tongue,  
Licks the ground and the earth,  
Burning with the sun's warmth  
Like a child under the smile  
Of a loving mother.

Damasc of night, an embracing mother,  
Who drapes the branches of this tree  
In the delightful musk of night-time smiles.  
Glistening under the silken tongue  
Of the moon-lit warmth  
The tree sinks into sleep amidst the sighs of the earth.

Buried deep underneath this sodden earth,  
(Dew-stained with the tears of a mother)  
Is a strange creature's warmth,  
Encaged within the roots of the tree,  
Wrapping in its tongue  
Swarms of worms. He has a desperate smile  
That is breath-reeked of rotten meat, a musky smile,

A stench that seeps through the earth,  
A flickering, black tongue  
That twists from a face that no mother  
Could ever love,  
A beast hidden beneath the tree  
Sitting in a pool of tear-soaked warmth.

The beast dwells where warmth  
Is a comfort unknown, knowing only icy loneliness and lips  
that never smile.  
He is rotting in despair beneath this tree,  
A creature roaring its cacophony, cries stifled by earth.  
The beast longs for a mother,  
Anguish burns its tongue.

And the monster's tongue  
That blackens in grief incarnadine, the fiery warmth  
Of despairing madness, cries: "Oh Mother!  
That I did not know! Mother of Nature, Of Smiles,  
Mother of the creatures who dwell upon the earth,  
For what didst thou forsake me,  
Confine me to the roots of this tree?"

The beast without a mother,  
With his angry thrashing tongue

Yearns and mourns to escape the tree.  
He has never felt the sun's warmth

Nor ever known a loving smile.  
He will never know the beauty of the earth.



## The Tree

Eva Tozzi

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

Before mankind ever walked the Earth,  
Your seedlings spread to give rebirth  
To forests so dense, lush and green;  
Yet some of its beauty remains unseen.

Man has destroyed it throughout the ages;  
Deforestation, emancipating stages  
Of history and secrets that lie within,  
A life force humans need to sing,

Whilst we destroy the world we know,  
In the end the forest will live on and simply grow.

In this story you're invited to see,  
The soul that lives within a tree:

Perched in dense forest upon a mighty heath,  
Guarding the rivers and fields beneath,  
Your arms stretch ready to embrace,  
Full of beautiful love, and never-ending space

Under your branches, man looks up to the sky  
You reach for the stars so abundant and high  
For us they seem so far away  
Yet we take for granted you're here to stay

Swaying softly in the summer air,  
Singing your melodies letting us know you care  
A chorus of silken whispers rattle,  
Through ancient vines you absorb the wrath of each battle  
Now left long behind,

The scars of the elements induced by man's power,  
Mark the remains of a might tower  
Leaves of pearlescent silvery green,  
Work overtime to keep our air fresh and clean

As the temperature rises the sun's fury explodes,  
Flames sweep placid forests in violent episodes  
Spark and ash dance like sterling flame,  
Humans watch on and know who to blame

The pain you feel begins to appear,  
As sap oozes from you crying a satin tear  
Dying flames turn to embers,  
Revel burnt-out corpses of family members,

Above ground all seems to be lost,  
Humans observe; present to cost  
Of our ignorant behaviour, so selfish, short sighted,  
The oxygen we breathe now weakened and blighted

A graveyard of decay and devastation  
People pledge an empty declaration  
Frantically planting new trees to grow  
But is it enough, the answer

NO

The force of nature does not need mankind  
We are the ones who are left behind  
A sea of cinders absorb into the ground  
Reproductive networks of the trees are sound

For what we need, is no longer available  
The atmosphere is no longer stable  
Humankind has run its line

But in the end trees will rein sublime

The roots are not dead and life lives on  
Manuscripts of forests create a new song  
Generational choirs of great foliage arise  
The magnitude will not be seen by human eyes.

We must act now before it's too late,  
there is a count down, it will not wait.  
Our earth is dying, why can't you hear our trees crying.  
Man refuses to see that our civilization is crumbling.  
So, brace yourself, dooms day is coming,  
faster than you think humankind will be gone in a blink.

The trees will return form down blow and in the end,  
forest will replenish and simply regrow.



## Fatal Swing

Ruby Wilson

*Saint Cecilia's Year 10 – Age 15)*

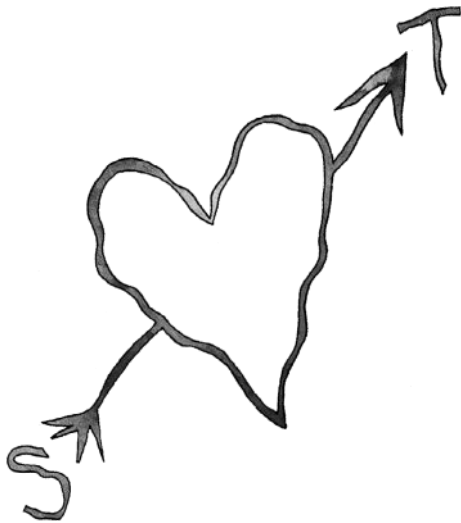
I walk through the all too familiar woods. I breathe through the faint pain in my stomach, it's dull and matches the one in my throat. The twigs snap under my painted Doc Martins which I've had forever. I can't help but sigh out loud even though I'm alone. It smells woody, damp; it makes me weirdly aware of all the living insects crawling about, like it always does when it rains. Then I see it in the distance. I swallow hard and blink back stinging tears. I stop. I'm only a few metres away, but I can feel the bark under my fingertips already. The natural sensation that used to bring me joy, but now only heartbreak. T + S in a very angular heart is etched into the bark of the tree. It almost makes me smile at the memory of all the effort we put into that, but a wave of guilt stops me. I sit down leaning my back against the base of the trunk, not caring that my jeans will be soaked. I rest my head. My heavy, hurting head attached to my heavy hurting heart that keeps my heavy hurting body alive. Maybe it will just stop.

I instinctively look up half expecting his warm hand in mine, squeezing it hard, never letting it go. If only he never let go...

I only see leaves, there's not trace of his hurt, his misery, his impact on my life. I close my eyes letting a tear of a toxic anger move silently over my cheek. Silently. It kills me to know that his screams were silenced by a sound-proof wall. I open my eyes, a mistake for sure. I see his silhouette, his feet swinging over the ground like a pendulum. His head is lowered as if in shame, only being supported by the nylon rope. We bought that rope together. We were going to make

a swing. I paid for the end of his life. I try to let out a sob to loosen the tension in my throat but a scream leaves the hollow vessel of my body. I don't stop until my lungs cry out in pain. At least I heard that because apparently, I am deaf to the sound of help. Why couldn't I see it? Why didn't I rescue him? If I knew, could I have saved him? I want my brain to stop! I tug at my greasy hair, tears searing my skin with grief and guilt. I don't try and hide it. I don't push away the hurt.

I sob and wail and cry my heart out until I feel numb. I want to sleep and for the first time in months I'm not scared that I will see him when I close my eyes. I feel a strange sense of peace and although I still feel guilty, I let myself be. I'll always love you.



## Breathe

Ella Smith

*Holy Cross School (Year 12 – Age 17)*

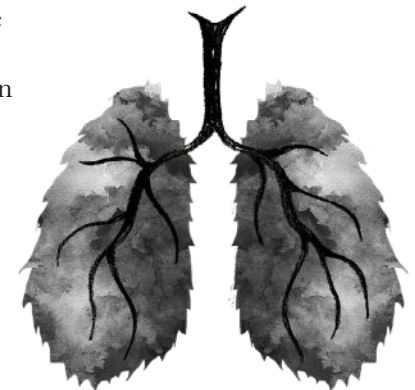
A crowded skyline of ashen greys-  
Strangled cries of rot and decay.  
A busy arena of a world once green.  
Not a place for you, nor me.

For when our two worlds dangerously collided,  
The suffocating smoke, to us, uninvited.  
Our little green hands and umber limbs-  
stretch out no more to feel the wind;

The wind that was once an invigorating cool,  
Now, a searing reminder that we've been overruled.  
Burnt and slashed, their gain at our expense-  
The death of our Earth -my home- commence.

Grey turns to black and green simply gone,  
Our resurrectional... inhale, exhale... and so on,  
For it won't be long before my time comes-  
When, to the villains, I too, succumb.

Yet, for now, my splendour remains,  
Over a city of scorching stains.  
I... inhale, exhale... to save the  
lives,  
Of our youthful saviours to soon  
arrive.



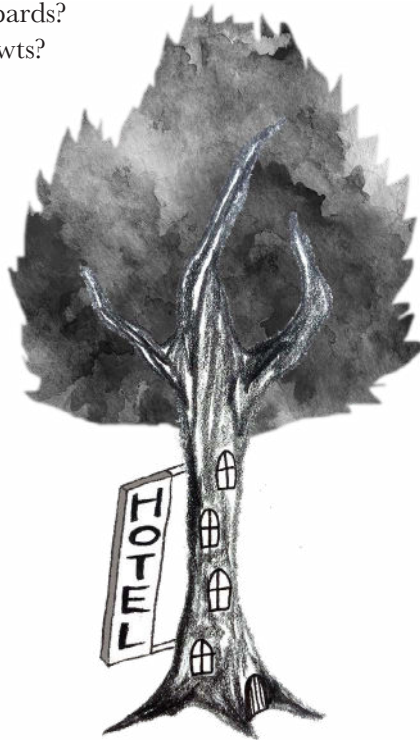


## Is it a Tree, Or...

Karl Long

*Cricket Green School (Year 10 – Age 15)*

Maybe it's a seat for eagles?  
Maybe it's a hotel for animals?  
Maybe it's a lookout post for owls?  
Maybe it's a supermarket for squirrels?  
Maybe it's a city for birds?  
Maybe it's a leaning post for bears?  
Maybe it's a swing for monkeys?  
Maybe it's a hiding place for tigers?  
Maybe it's a tunnel for foxes?  
Maybe it's somewhere to hide acorns?  
Maybe it's a bed for leopards?  
Maybe it's bridge for newts?  
Maybe it's just a tree?



## Lily and the Tree

Megan Harris

*Cricket Green School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

Lily was 13 years old.  
She was looking at the tree.  
She liked it as it was soft to the touch.

The tree meant everything to her because it made her happy. It reminded her of Mum. They used to read stories and have picnics, and they even played tennis under the tree. Mum had big brown eyes and her hair was long and curly. Mum was happy, kind and was very generous. Mum was a nurse. She worked long hours in the hospital in London. She would fall asleep in her chair when she got home.

One day, mum didn't come home. A man came to say a bomb had hit the hospital. Mum had died in the on-going war.

Lily felt scared that the tree would fall down, because it was old and bendy. The tree shook in the wind. The tree was about to break. Lily called for help.

The tree toppled over.

She called and called but there was no one around. She couldn't find anyone. She was all alone in the grass land. No one was around to help her. She was reminded of her mum. She was very sad. It was like her mum was going away again.

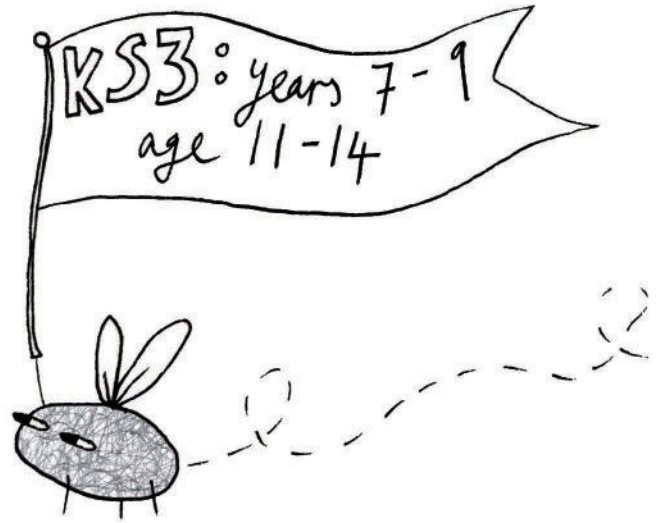
She tried to fix the tree herself. She found a ladder, climbed up it, used her magic to fix the tree back together. It felt like the wind was of her mum's voice, whispering. It came alive.

She could feel her mum's kindness. The tree came alive with magic and is healed. The wind rustles all the leaves, and the other trees calm down too.

Lily feels calmer and she goes home and watches TV. Lily feels happy now and feels like Mum is still with her.



highly commended  
★ POEMS ★



## There Stands a Tree

Alfie Kinloch

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

There stands in the garden, a tree of pink blossom,  
It flowered each spring and every year it looked awesome.

Little did it know, when it started to grow  
That it was part of a tale, every year without fail.

In began in the year 2010, when the boy was not yet one.  
When under the tree stood a mother, a son.

They took a picture, under the tree, all to start a tradition  
you see.

For every year since, they have stood in that spot.  
Right there in spring time, like clockwork on the dot.

They take a fresh photograph, it is always a laugh  
To see how they've changed, silly looks are exchanged.

Again they will stand, in just one year,  
When the tree is in blossom, and spring has come near.

## Elegies of the Trees

Amelia Stiebel

*Streatham & Clapham High School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

It brushed by my shoulder,  
leaves flooded all over my face,  
the branches bent and the wood scraped.  
Its architecture and placement,  
the artistic style,  
its delicate angle and its leaves that rambled.

Inspected the carved wood words,  
the family of leaves took turns to feel heard.  
Got in the way of my sight to see,  
ivy flashed and willow trees.

Sticks stabbed my arms and stones lay like bones.  
The vines squabbled for my attention,  
and the oaks fell for me to mention.

Ivy glisten trees,  
felt all my elegies eulogising me.  
Swinging branches and flying things interfered my sights to see.  
Tiny ants made their march on the big bending branch.

Falling autumn leaves charged down to bury me.  
Their red crippled leaves,  
from that tree's magical personality.

They raced down with pride and strive,  
to show off their hitting colours,  
combined from the tree's creativity,  
its successful invention into reality.



Wisteria's fantasy vines grew over 10 feet,  
my bare eyes gleamed at its magic looking strings.  
It's incandescent expressions and striking colours,  
posed like there are a million cameras admiring it.

Ivy grows over the fears I hold.  
Italic sticks still learning it's tricks,  
trees in bold waiting to grow old.  
Baby roots unfold and willow trees hang old.  
Fluttering their vines over the fields and skies,  
sheltering me from the wilderness in forever bliss.



## Sapling

Camille Marinoff

*Ibstock Place School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

3 trillion  
That's the number of trees that populate our planet  
3 trillion  
That's the number of homes provided by trees  
3 trillion  
That's the number of trees, each with a different story

First, a seed  
A miniscule 1cm cubed pip  
Capable of growing to 380 feet tall  
The seed is the beginning of nature's narrative

3 weeks later, a sprout  
The tree's birth  
The buds shoot up as the underdogs in a race to the sky  
It grows shallow roots  
Over time, they strengthen and deepen into

A sapling  
The tree's childhood  
Innocent and pure  
A bright future ahead  
Eager to attain it

Finally, adulthood  
The stem becomes a trunk  
The roots become the anchor  
The tree becomes powerful, dominant, robust  
The tree becomes a pillar the natural world orbiting it

## A Love Story Told by a Tree

Clara Capgras

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

Her eyes were the colour of storm clouds,  
And his matched the blue of the sea  
And the day they came running through my forest  
Both girl and boy looked ecstatically free.  
Escaping the constructs and rules,  
The silently questioned laws  
That bound them back in the city  
The two no longer cared about flaws.  
Her dress caked in layers of mud,  
His hair ruffled so that it stood up  
Boy and girl climbed the trunk of my tree  
And when she fell he pulled her back up.  
It's ok, I've got you  
Are the words the boy uttered  
I know, and I trust you  
In response the girl stuttered.  
Clung to the branches of my textured oak tree  
The two regarded each other  
And it was clear, oh so clear for me to see,  
They loved and cared for one another.  
Only it was more than that...  
A passion so insanely strong  
Even me, a heartless plant could see it,  
Loud as a dinner bell gong.  
Only when they had climbed to the highest point  
Did they carve their names into the bark of my tree  
Encircled in a lumpy, clumsy love heart  
Were the letters O and C.

I am 1,358 days old, and I have seen a great many things.  
But perhaps none so great as that boy and girl who used to

visit me in the days before technology,  
When all your childhood consisted of was watching the birds  
in the sky and the ants on the ground,  
When all that mattered was climbing the great oak that  
stood in the forest and carving your name into its wood,  
The great oak that was me.



## Parents, Not Carers

Ella Fernandes

*St Philomena's High School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

No one really likes me for what I am,  
My worth is determined by what I could be, should be  
instead  
Pine? You could make a nice bed frame.  
Oak? You might be comfortable to walk over.  
Maple? What a fine violin you could make.  
What joy you could bring me if you weren't imperfect  
currently

I'm only here because I'm of use to others,  
You may believe that you love me unconditionally  
But that's a mendacious fabrication you've conducted  
To save yourself from drowning in guilt  
You love me because I provide oxygen, for your survival  
You love me because I preserve the habitats, for your tourists  
You love me because my extinction can make you a pretty  
little proffit, for your comfort only.  
You don't love me, you use me.



## My Treehouse

Evangeline-Rose Turley

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

The shouting fills the hallways  
The echoing of the baby screaming rings in my ears  
I toss and turn in my bed  
But no eyes drift to sleep  
I look out of the window  
The bright globe hangs on a dark canvas  
Highlighting a comforting treehouse where I long to be  
My treehouse  
I creep past the noises locked behind a door  
Just a light shining under the crack, no one can get to sleep  
I silently leap up the steps, after memorising where each  
creak is located  
The freezing air releasing me from my grubbiness  
The wet dew slowly numbs my foot  
Causing me to sprint across the garden  
Finally reaching the old oak tree, comfort seeps through me  
Without hesitation my feet place themselves in the holes of  
the tree  
With ease I climb up and with a last bit of effort, haul myself  
into the treehouse  
I sit and think about my problems  
The future, past and present  
No one knows about what bothers me  
Except the walls of my treehouse  
The cracks in the trees hold my secrets  
The branches reach out as a helping hand for me to hold  
The leaves wrap around me, giving me warmth  
I finally have to say goodbye  
Sprinting back to my room so that I can savour this moment  
to fall asleep to  
Tuck into my bed, the shouting drowned out and bothering

me no more,  
I once again stare out of the window  
And see the Oak tree stand proudly in the night, protecting  
me  
My treehouse



## Rings

Frances Young

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

Dawn breaks,  
Ground shakes,  
Blue lights along the dotted line.

Screams nobody will hear,  
but they are important.

Hours later,  
They walk past.  
He ties his shoelace,  
foot on a wall,  
a sapling sways beside him.  
She's his pride and joy.  
One ring.

The clatter of a pushchair on a tree-lined street,  
red-rimmed eyes and sleepless nights interrupted by cries.  
neither mind, she's their pride and joy.  
Two rings.

Vanilla and strawberry drip down smiling chins,  
'here comes the sun' from a car window,  
she trips, but picks,  
herself up from the ground.  
The shine of pride in his eyes is brighter than the sun,  
tinted green by leafy boughs that swing at head height.  
Three rings.

She places her foot in a wall,  
the tree standing fast beside her,  
a handle, a post, anything to keep her safe.

Kind hands ties laces.  
It's the first day,  
She looks forwards to it.

Five rings.

Eight years down, more to make you frown,  
a pin of colours upon her chest,  
Skipping along past the tree.

Guitar, bag, coat, shoes, mind,  
a daily checklist.  
The tree is proud of her.  
She's brave.

Thirteen rings.

A storm in the skies and her heart.  
A red nosebleed drips onto her coat.  
A blue bruise across her cheek.  
Green jealousy of all the other girls, and the boyfriends that  
she doesn't want.  
Just like the colours of her badge.  
The tree drops a leaf, just as a tear drops from her boughs.

Thirteen unlucky rings.

The tree hopes that the sun will come again.  
It needs it.  
Her sun is its' lifeblood.  
It wants to survive, survive with her.  
It places a calming hand on her shoulder.  
And the sun comes out again.



## The Tree

Freya Patterson

*Putney High School (Year 7 – Age 12)*



It's up there, although you cannot see it,  
A towering creature fashioned of snakes and mahogany,  
Bearing alabaster and cerise blossoms,  
A hiding place and comfort to those who seek it.  
It is new to one, and old to another,  
Snags of memories in the form of fabric, torn off and  
discarded,  
Forever evolving and moving and thriving,  
Or is it?

For if you look beneath its all-protecting bark shell,  
Past the sap spilling out of its inkwell cracks,  
Something is moving.  
Slowly, it crawls and writhes inside the tree's beating heart,  
contaminating the flesh,  
A parasite.

Unnatural and strange, an outsider worms its way into the  
tree,  
And pearly white and rosy pink flowers turn brown,  
The leaves rot and tremble,  
Do the leaves know that something is wrong?

A snap and a branch is estranged, forever lost,  
A crack through its side spills more sap than it can create,  
All the while the parasite thrives inside.

Slowly, the heart of the tree beats slower, unsteadily,  
Holding onto the cliff-face of life,  
As rocks shower down beside it,  
The tree finally has to let go.

Deep into the night, it falls down, plummeting into the grass,  
Leaving only,  
Seeds.

Small and insignificant, they thrive in the earth,  
And over time another tree grows,  
Intertwined with another.



## **Alive**

Ines Caruncho Williams

*Marymount International School (Year 7 – Age 11)*

It stands there deformed, gnarled, and crooked,  
It's infested with bugs, kids have carved up its trunk,  
Once sapling straight, now stooped as an old man,  
It's beaten up and broken like an old piece of junk.

In winter, it's a skeleton, cold and stiff,  
When there's frost, it's a ghost, shimmering at night,  
Its branches are battle-scarred, one's been chopped off,  
Like a wounded soldier, who lost a limb in the fight.

But beginning in spring, the old tree comes to life,  
Buds pink as candy and leaves emerald green,  
Like a boxer who's battered, but wins in the end,  
It's victorious, lush, it cries out "look at me!".

Its scars are still there, its stumps and its beetles,  
But they're part of its story, and part of its beauty,  
Like all of us, this tree's taken some knocks,  
But it's survived, made stronger, alive absolutely.



## **A Glimmer of Hope, My Refuge**

Kirsten Aka

*Holy Cross School (Year 8 – Age 12)*

In a world where darkness oversees the land,  
A world where tranquillity is almost impossible,  
A glimmer of hope lays unfound,  
Even through the dark forest,  
A tree still lives among the debris,

Artillery bombards homes sweeping them away,  
My hometown Mariupal bombed before my eyes,  
Surrounding me I hear only screams and cries,  
Even through darkness and through the fear  
that glimmer of hope still appears,

Through the catacombs and the dust,  
Breathing in the city feels like a luxury,  
But through the forest oxygen from the trees  
brings a glimpse of hope from the near future,

Even when it feels like there is no escape that tree is always  
there,  
The trees have been there through thick and thin,  
Each time it's branches grow longer and robust,  
Even darkness comes to light  
The building blocks. The roots.



## **Mr Maple**

Luna Ripolles

*Graveney School (Year 8 – Age 13)*

Good morning Mr Maple,  
My, you haven't aged a day!  
I wish I had your skin,  
As smooth and soft as clay.  
Your hair rich and russet red,  
Sat plenty upon your head.  
Deep as golden wine,  
I would kill for roots so fine!  
Your charm attracts queues,  
All those endless heart tattoos,  
The strength which you bear,  
No one could compare  
And no one would dare  
To mistreat a soul so fair,  
Your kindness and your grace  
Your comforting embrace  
We all wish we were able  
To be like you, Mr Maple.  
Oh goodness don't be modest!  
You're the envy of the forest.



## **Tordan**

Nadia Cumming

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 9 – Age 13)*

I wish everyone would stop pitying her  
I mean, come on, she did it to herself  
She just wanted people to pay attention to her  
Yet just as equally wanted nobody to find out

I could see her branching out, changing  
We all could  
I watched her give up and let it spread like termites  
Let it drag her down

God, it was pathetic  
She knew she could have snapped out of it  
But she let the vines take her wrists hostage  
And as her fingers became unrecognisable, she chose to stick  
them down her throat

I watched as she sunk and shivered  
Clutching onto her chest as the branches stabbed through  
her chest  
As the gusts of wind knocked her down  
As she slipped into her own grave

It spread like wildfire  
It was “pointless to fight” the toxic red tides  
And soon her flora turned to ash  
But it was too gruelling to admit to, so she’d simply say she  
was “out of season”

It was her little secret  
Her little helper  
Even when the cracks started to show

Even when it contorted and twisted her  
Even after it snapped her trunk

I hate her, I hate her for what she did  
Thinking it was all under control  
Until she put all of her value into a splitting branch  
Now she’s fallen, buried herself  
All that’s left behind is a soil-filled mouth of rotting teeth  
and tordon,  
From which no life shall grow.



## Green Infinity

Niharika Parkash-Mair

*Wimbledon High School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

The twilight gleamed through the sheltering boughs,  
A canvas of black afire with stars,  
Mysteries embossed in emerald flowers,  
Regaining what once was ours.

Bark engraved with secrets of the past,  
Gnarled dragons etched into the wood,  
Magic rippling with gold that surpassed,  
The blossoms flourishing fresh as they should.

Twisting and binding forevermore,  
The Earth promised an eternal embrace,  
Whispering and winding at its core,  
United by the roots of dazzling grace

Blanketed in green and gold ochre leaves,  
Limbs that contorted with the autumnal breeze,  
Branches entwined with a myriad of bees,  
This is The Tree.

## Shade of the Peepal Tree

Nikhil Raizada

*King's College School (Year 8 – Age 12)*

Moonlight filtering through the Peepal's canopy  
casting shadows on the dirt beneath  
Awakening the spirit of the young Brahmin boy  
who once succumbed to natures trap

Suffocated by the dense foliage  
a human folly...chastened by nature

Sleeping soundly under the sacred tree  
the rustling leaves singing a lullaby  
As the morning burst into life, the boy remained  
Never to wake up again, oh Peepal Tree

Lighting lamps, the villagers of Ninkhal  
honour the strength of the Peepal Tree  
whose shade is heavenly in the day  
turning a silent killer under the silver light

The smoky swirl of incense rose to meet the spirits  
Joy and sadness mingled into one  
Under the peepal tree; the people's tree





## I Am the Tree

Roxy Lang

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

I am the tree.  
I am the tree who grew strong and mighty from your will.  
I am the tree who you fed and treated as your everything.  
I am the tree who blocked out the sunlight because I towered over your window.  
I am the tree who you played in until the amber sunset.  
I am the tree who you tumbled out of and went to hospital.  
I am the tree who you were glad to see upon your return.  
I am the tree who you fought for when they wanted to plunge an axe into my body.  
I am the tree who watched you come home with salty orbs in your eyes day after day.  
I am the tree who heard them.  
I am the tree who heard their unruly words, their ignorant sneers.  
I am the tree who saw a well of crimson trickle down your weak body, sculpted from your own blade.  
I am the tree who saw your restless nights, your silent screams.  
I am the tree who saw the waves envelope you in their shadows, and that final pocket of air bubble up and loose itself in the howling winds.  
I am the tree who watched you crumble, until you were nothing but a speck of dust.  
I am the tree whose branches you climbed into that despicable night.  
I am the tree who watched oxygen dance through your lungs for the last time.  
I am the tree who could not catch you.  
I am the tree.

## Methuselah

Zain El-Rayyes

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 7 – Age 12)*

High in the mountains among the thin air and under the blinding sun.  
Away from man, beasts and the changing world, where time has stood still,

I live.

From my perch, clinging on to dry rocks and scabbly stones  
I look down on you all.  
I have experienced more than anyone. As lifetimes for you, flash by in an instant for me.

I stand.

As the first pyramids were built I took my first breath.  
Continents away they took shape and so did I.  
Civilisations come and go, from the first man to the last, I felt them inhale then felt them stop.

I still breathe.

Life is different for me and you. I am one of the old guards, from a time when things moved slow.  
Nations were made, nations destroyed, countries grew then shrank then vanished.

Yet I grow.

What's my secret? I don't know, a quirk of nature, a fortunate accident, a coincidence or all three?  
The main thing is my isolation. The quiet days and silent



nights but most of all my distance from you.

I hide.

Although I remain detached, I am not impervious. My body carries the scars of your work.  
From Thera to Krakatoa. As clear as the words on this page, history is tattooed within.

I tell.

Many of those years we lived in harmony, but now I bear witness while you wreck and destroy.  
The few seconds you were here have taken their toll. Even I see the proof, the dark smog coming closer.

I fear.

Maybe once again I will see you come and go, or maybe this time you will remain and my time is done.  
My bristlecone brothers and I don't give up easy. We are eternal and always will be. Hear my name.

I am Methuselah.



## The Last Tree

Zainab Tanveer

*Ricards Lodge High School (Year 7 – Age 12)*

I look down at the destruction.  
Lifeless stumps that were once my blooming children.  
I couldn't save them

My children.  
Who I watched emerge from the ground,  
And shoot towards the sky,  
Are now gone.  
The monsters took them

The monsters  
With the booming voices  
And hearts of stone  
Destroyed my world.  
With the machines

The machines  
With the deafening roars  
And the ruthless blur of blades  
That cut them down.

I don't know why they left me  
They shouldn't have.  
It really was the cruelest thing  
To leave a parent to watch the death of their child

I still have flashbacks  
They're all I hear, all I see  
I couldn't do anything  
I stayed rooted in my spot  
While they cut them

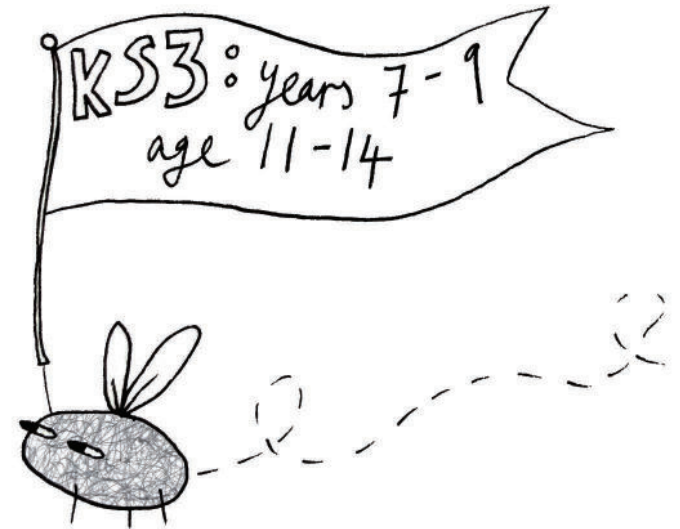
Their limbs,  
Then the rest of them  
And then they took away their bodies  
Leaving only their feet  
Forever rooted in the ground.

Next year my seeds will spread again  
New seedlings will be planted  
And?  
Once they have grown  
The monsters will only come again.

I can only hope that this time  
They take me with them.



HIGHLY COMMENDED  
Stories:



## The Tree

Alexandra Miquelin Winch

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 7 – Age 12)*

My feathered wings beat harshly in the air for the first time. After I leapt from my isolated branch, my true calling to fly had finally been answered. I felt fresh air suddenly engulf my body as I drifted away from the tree I had known since I was born, leaving all of my memories behind. It felt amazing to finally be free from the captivity of my past.

Soaring above towns and fields, wildlife of my own. I had so many new opportunities to explore, my life had finally won meaning.

Now we're in the present, I'm resting over a building, watching people below. The sun dissolved to an amber, time seemed to pass by as I gazed into the burning sphere, as day turned to night and stars sparked into vision. Street lights beamed, illuminating the pavement below.

Faint music from a nearby apartment made me drift off into a fantasy, a dream and wish. I closed my eyes and listened, imagining myself as free as I was this morning, when I felt the wind first brush against my cheeks. And how I left my past behind, starting a new life. A shadowy figure landed next to me; I sheepishly opened my eyes to see another of my kind. She waddled next to me, taking in the music as well.

We didn't say anything, nothing needed to be said. We watched the moon rise in the sky, we watched until the sun peered over the horizon. She was my dove. "Come with me," I choked. I fluttered my wings and started to fly. Loose feathers of others cluttered the rooftops, I flew back over the fields to the hill, the hill with the tree I was raised on.

We sat down on the very same branch on which I started, cherry blossoms drifted in the wind, covering the grass below. I knew we haven't had much conversation, but I don't think we needed it. We understood each other.

I started to wonder if maybe, she was like me? This is the time I realised how helplessly I had fallen for her. How we were alike. I decided to find out and risk exposing my secret, all to find out if she was like me.





## To Climb an Orange Tree

Ava Beyzaii

*Ricards Lodge High School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

It's difficult to climb trees in the rain.

The Spanish town— every house, every fold-up seat, every red veranda and metal railing— basked in a sunset sheen. In dying daylight, Valeria called it, setting down her basket before an orange tree. It was empty, but so were her pockets. She hadn't sold enough.

Droplets of rain began to drizzle over the town, splintering Valeria's skin. Night goes, enjoying an evening drink or trying their hand at the flamenco, slipped into coats. A chorus of umbrellas opened. The drizzle turned to a pour. Valeria gripped the trunk tighter. One more orange meant one more slice of bread. Climb the tree, her thoughts demanded.

Slippery bark bit her palms and leaves nestled in her curly-haired bun. She gritted her teeth. Digging her fingernails in deeper, she forced her foot into a notch and heaved herself up. Climb it already.

Her face reflected in cobbled street puddles. They distorted her weary eyelids and sunken cheeks. A groan escaped her lips. Rain— or tears?— slid down her face. Just climb, Val. An orange, rounded with grey evening light, taunted her from a higher branch. Her hand reached. Rain loosened her fingertips. Suddenly...the orange, the world, veered upside down.

She fell.

"It's difficult to climb trees in the rain," a frayed voice said. A little brother, with chestnut-brown eyes, gazed up at her. He fiddled with his thumbs. Phantasmagoric shapes swirled around the garden, white edges invading Valeria's sight.

"It's only a drizzle," she insisted. Even though the bark was barely visible, she scrambled up the wood. Clouds draped over her shoulders. Her brother stared. Picking a ripe orange, she tossed it to him. He caught it, still staring. "Let's go home Val. It's okay. You don't have to be so optimistic."

She climbed anyway.

Optimism pinched her ear, nagging, threatening, encouraging. You can do better than scarce dinner plates. Like a machine on the fritz, she yanked the oranges from their stems and dropped them down, faster than the rain.

Keep going.

"Val, that's enough! This'll sell for loads!"

Optimism roared with the onslaught of rain. The gears in her exhausted muscles kept whirring, moving.

Your parents gave up.

"Please," her brother was pleading, "stop!"

Will you?

The branch gave way. The system crashed. The oranges, everything, turned white.

A warm hand squeezed Valeria's. A basket tipped over and lampposts glowed. Oranges rolled away. A stranger, wearing a concerned expression, crouched beside her. Her mouth moved rapidly— are you okay? What happened?— but the words ran awry before falling dead at Valeria's lips.

Hazy images of adult faces surrounded her but she was underwater in a rain-streaked town. The voices bubbled out of reach, like oranges on high branches. In the sea of faces, she searched for eyes. Chestnut brown.

Orange ambulance lights blurred. Optimism seemed strangely silent.

The last thing she glimpsed, before the ambulance doors shut, were the orange trees. Yet of course...

The tree has no condolences for the climber.



## Interview with the Punjabi Poisoner

Ava McAndie

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

Edward Okell: This is Watchman Edward Okell interviewing Vivek Rajbhar from Newgate Prison, London. Mr Rajbhar is condemned for the murder of eight people and will be hanged this evening at 20:30.

Vivek Rajbhar: [Inaudible]

EO: Mr Rajbhar, please speak up, in English

VR: Call me Vivek. No-one does anymore.

EO: Mr Rajbhar, the readers of The Observer would love to know, what did these innocent children do to be murdered by a monster like you?

VR: I...Pardon?

EO: A serial killer, a monster, a beast like yourself must have a drive to commit these awful crimes against humanity?

VR: I-I'm not sure what –

EO: [Shouting] The youngest child was just three, Mr Rajbhar! Poor young Amy, poisoned in her sleep, found dead surrounded by her own vomit and diarrhoea!

VR: [Shouting] HE DESERVED IT!  
[00:09.75]

VR: Do you know my 8th “victim”?

EO: Ralph Woodward, 54, plantation owner, yes.

VR: He killed my family! It didn't even make the local news. Shot them all dead on the same day – my mother, my grandfather, my brothers. I was three. I had escaped the night before, because I was small. I could find the keys to get us all out. My grandfather had lung cancer, but the plantation owners didn't care. They whipped him on the fields, under the Pong-pong tree, one day because he had collapsed. The owners, the kids, their stupid Parakeet – they all laughed. Those sweet, innocent boys? When Ralph was shooting them dead, he said, “Here, have a crack at it”. He tossed those boys the gun. Number 3, Martin, shot my brother Samesh. Number 4, Laurence, shot my mother Navya. Though the sky's larks were crying with us, they were laughing. I wanted to go out there and kill all of them there and then, but I waited. I decided they would all die, every one of them. Starting with the youngest daughter, killing the family up from there, so Ralph would know I was coming.

EO: Why did you kill them the way you did?

VR: When I first came to the Woodward home, I heard the mother singing: “Just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down”. I remembered the Pong-Pong tree, native to my country, the one my grandfather was beaten like an egg under. One seed, crushed up or whole, is enough to kill one human being. I stole 9 seeds that night, crushed them and mixed the powder with sugar. An ideal addition to the drinks of the family. You English don't know anything about this death tree: it was ideal. Stomach pain, diarrhoea, vomiting: it's what they deserve. After one week, 8 were gone and so were the close Woodward family.

Guard: [Enters] Let's go, Rajbhar.

[01:04.01]

EO: Oh, Vivek? Who was going to be the 9th?

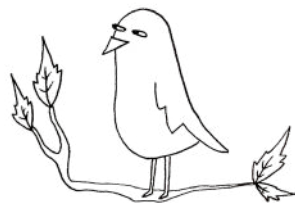
VR: The watchman that was working for the Woodwards that day.

EO: Who was it? I might know them.

[00:03.40]

VR: [Smiling] Mr Edward Okell.

[Ends 20:18]



## Evergreen Envy

Beverly Igiogbe

*St Philomenia's High School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

Fluorescent Christmas lights, you shine through the night, illuminating my cold branches and the gifts that I hide. Peering out the window, I'm met with a mirrored image so beautiful it tears me apart. Garnished golden ornaments hang from my tired branches and re-energise my now shiny leaves. Standing, in all my glory bathing in the dark light I am reminded of my little wild room. To enter my little wild room, you are stripped and disassembled, tucked away from the world's prying eyes. So for an infinite intermission, I sit in my little wild room consumed with all my thoughts. These thoughts, they antagonise me and stir up the worst in me, tangling me up by the roots, in their green fury.

For I have seen trees who can dance and carol outside the windowsill, beyond the chimney, and without a little wild room. They relax and do whatever nature tells them to, like reign over wildlife. I thought that I was lucky that as soon as I was free, I could sparkle with my crowned head and declare it Christmas time and my reign would be even more compelling. For my Christmas brings a sense of warm love so strong, that it has a way of promising things. Sometimes it promises me, forever freedom with my forever family (whose faces light up at the sight of my hidden gifts).

Yet there are still these trees that stand so tall it makes me look like I have barely risen, with authentic bark that doesn't glimmer or shine so flamboyantly. Deep and brooding, their branches tell generations of stories, sealed and etched in the ridges of their wood. Oh how candidly their branches curl and bend in ways, my plastic could only dream to imitate. Together their assortment of forest hues put any of my

synthetic coats to shame.

They don't have to be perfect or exceptionally great, they don't even have to be good but I do. I have to be all those things at once. All of the time. As I know my branches are getting frailer, my leaves are aging and my gleam isn't as bright. I'm reaching my expiry date where soon I'll be out of season and replaced by a perkier, younger tree. My family will discard me and inevitably I'll be seen as an irredeemable mess. My purpose as a Christmas tree would be pinched, like a flame, out of existence. Nonetheless, I can't help but wonder how I would spend the time I don't have.

Maybe I'd be dressing up with the newest fashion-famous ornaments whilst my fluorescent Christmas lights shine through the night. Illuminating my broken branches and the green gifts that I can't hide. Peering from the windowsill past the ghastly reflection of torn wrapping paper and broken tacky ornaments, my only Christmas wish this year is to dance with the forest, sing songs with the morning birds, and to finally live up to the standard these trees have unknowingly set.



## The Fragile Tree

Charles Sinclair

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

My delicate body fell lifelessly from the tree, hitting the ground soundlessly. Wet dirt padded my fall, but it hurt. In a shallow puddle I fought for breath, panicking as my life flickered timidly, but an unintended hero splashed by and I was pushed to a new place. I could see the others, my brothers and sisters lying on the cold wet floor but it did no good – I was alone and scared in a massive new world. My old home, the tree, was safe. Now I must be strong and fight for my survival... earn it!

As moisture dried, my roots dug down in search of water. I would find a course to quench my thirst, but sunlight was scarce with the tree shrouding from above, a watchful spirit helping me grow.

Growing fast, daily I stood higher above my weak or fallen siblings. The pain, fear and risk of death was worth it. The journey almost over, I broke through the canopy and leaves felt the sunlight, like a warm drink touching lips.

I was not alone! The surrounding trees were my new family, brothers and sister lucky like me. Vast leaves spread, soaking up sunlight and rain, to steal from the unlucky seeds below, who waited begging like open-mouthed chicks. Once hungry and scared like them, I was bigger, stronger, wiser... luckier. I barely noticed the first dead trees at the edge of the forest – it was that time of year again. When the edge of the forest seemed nearer my alarm grew, then one day I saw it.

A distant tree toppled and crashed and there, a tiny speck moving around, the first time I saw a man. Intolerable creatures, their machines made life easier, while destroying

mother nature.

When barely twenty trees remained, the fear pulsed through me, knowing I would soon be gone. One after another they fell dead, along with all they knew, my brothers and sisters. I stood among the lucky last to go, bam bam, the last two fell. I stood tall, tensed, showing no fear, waiting. They men left. Alone I stood, the gravestone stumps silent signs of the work of man. In grief the rain fell, and I breathed, as the clouds wept with me. I wished to be a seed once more, and relive the struggle, but the chill breeze of night dragged on, piercing my broken heart. Rain slowed by my leaves, dripped to the ground and my roots.



## **Our Tree**

Chloe Leung

*Ashcroft Technology Academy (Year 7 – Age 12)*

I had always had a certain liking for this tree. Perhaps it was the way the branches stretched out wide and high above my head. Or the leaves that rustled ever so quietly in the breeze as if they were whispering. Or perhaps it was the bark which grew thick, and seemed tough enough that the strongest weapon could not scratch its surface. Yet, I could not help thinking of the small sapling which once sat in its place; I remember its soft sage leaves, reaching ambitiously towards the sunlight. I remember its thin silver bark and its growing branches yearning to bear more leaves.

Though I treasured all its features, I believe it was the much loved and admired soul who brought me to adore it. My father. He was always fond of plants; he showed me the young sapling on a stroll in the woods one evening. He said, “This will grow into a great strong tree, like you will grow into a great strong woman. I’ve already grown, but I’ll certainly not live as long as this tree; so, if I’m not here, find this tree and I’ll be waiting for you”. I carved our names in the ground near to the sapling and we returned home. I had watched this tree blossom and bloom, shed and darken, recover and restart. Although, an age arrives where eternal rest calls for you and it was then I returned to this tree.

After dusk had thrown a veil over the sun and welcomed a full moon, I sauntered through the woods and I found my way to the evergreen. I brushed my hand over its rough bark then knelt down where my father’s name still appeared in the ground.

“I’m here to see you,” I thought calmly in my mind. It was midnight; the moon hung like a pearl in the sky, directly above the woods and shining a beam of silver onto the branches. Then, I saw him, perching high in the boughs. He hadn’t changed since I last saw him years ago. However, his body glowed in the moonlight and was almost transparent. His twinkling eyes gazed down and he reached a translucent hand at me. I knew I was ready: ready to leave the world behind and join the ones I loved the most. But, I was frightened, worried and intimidated. What is beyond Earth? Why should I leave the life I have worked for? Is it the right time?

My father smiled reassuringly as if he understood my feelings and leaned closer for me to take his hand. As I stared at him, so lively and confident, I clasped his hand. Silver light stole my vision. I had always had a certain liking for that tree because it was ours.



## The Journey of a Seed

Daisy Latton

*Graveney School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

Our story begins with a tree. An ancient tree, just beginning to shed its leaves. A seed falls. The wind carries it up, through the branches of neighbouring trees, over the footpath and down onto the blanket of grass beneath. The seed sinks, down, through the seemingly endless earth, until completely swallowed by fertile soil. It now faces a struggle; it must fight its way through the earth, to break through into the sunlight and begin its life as a tree.

The seed starts with its roots. They spread out into the ground, twisting and turning like an ever-growing maze, anchoring our fragile seed into its permanent home. It then grows a shoot, sending it up and out, into the dangers of the world outside the soil. Now, the seedling must play a waiting game. For now, it must wait, growing slowly taller, and hope that it survives.

A year has passed. Now two. Now three, and our seedling has grown into a sapling. It has survived countless footfalls, a few deer, and several lawnmowers. Little does it know that worse times are yet to come.

A few months have gone by, and the sapling is healthy and strong, constantly reaching, stretching, towards the sun, the distant star that disappears at night. There has been no rain for a while, but some is bound to come soon. And yet it doesn't. The sapling grows drier and drier, its roots searching desperately for moisture, its leaves shrivelling up and its thin trunk retreating back towards the ground. Weeks pass, then months, and yet still no sign of rain. Our resilient sapling is on the verge of giving up, when a droplet

of water falls onto its dying leaves. Soon more come, and the sky is a blur of grey clouds and sparkling rain droplets, a blessing for the young tree. Its roots spread out again, its leaves unfurl, and it reaches up, towards the sky, once more. Rain has turned back time for the sapling.

Our little tree, once just a seed, now continues to stretch towards the sun, its roots always growing longer and its trunk taller and thicker. It now has plenty of branches, now those branches bear enormous green leaves, and now it has seeds of its own. Some children run up to it, chasing each other around while the tree watches over them, a silent guardian. They chase each other up and down the branches, climbing higher and higher, always knowing that their guardian will catch them in its cushion of leaves, should they ever fall.

One of the children sees a seed falling from the branches. They catch it, curious, and gently blow it into the winds, before climbing up to chase their friend. Now our tree can grow ancient in peace, knowing that it has given a chance to a new generation, like the now decaying tree that sent it into the winds when it was just a seed itself.



## Through the Eyes of a Rosewood

Gabrielle Gendi

*Holy Cross School (Year 8 – Age 12)*

The humid breeze whistling through my leaves. The squawk of the beautiful blue hyacinth macaw up in the canopy. The deep croak of the frogs down in the river. I loved my home. I wanted to stay there forever. I wanted grandad to stay there forever. He was chopped down - along with many others of us. We all knew the cattle ranchers were coming and we all knew what they had come for. The very ground in which our roots had been embedded for years. They weren't coming all the way to the rainforest for just a few of us. We had no chance. It's not like we could tear our roots from the ground and run away.

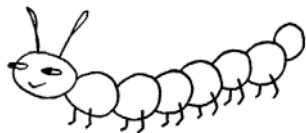
We trees talk through our roots. We're more alive than you think. We were talking one day, to keep us from thinking about our fate. 'I suspect the Amazon's going to flood soon,' the kapok said. 'It's that time of year.' Soon enough our annual flood came. It started the same as always, with the thundering gush of water coming towards us. Then I heard something different - footsteps. Quickened footsteps slapping onto the mud. A boy - the cattle rancher's son - running towards me. Frantically, he clambered up my branches to escape the rising waters. He swung from branch to branch like a spider monkey. He climbed through the canopy into the emergent layer. He was safe. He stayed for a while, even when the water had stopped rushing through. I think he was listening. To the squawk of the beautiful blue hyacinth macaw and the deep croak of the frogs down in the river. To the sounds that I love.

The boy came back, day after day. Sometimes he would bring a book, reading it aloud to the birds. Sometimes he

would bring a notepad and sketch the animals. Sometimes he would just lie there, looking up at the sky. How did this boy have anything to do with the people who had killed grandad?

The sun was high on the day he came with his parents. They climbed up my branches together. When they got to the top the boy started pointing to the animals. ‘Look, there’s a cockatoo!’ I heard him squeal. ‘I have a sketch of that one, look!’ They stayed for hours. I found that however hard I tried to resent them, I couldn’t help but enjoy their company.

After some time, the boy said, ‘Please don’t chop any more trees down.’ His parents exchanged glances. The military macaw sang a song. It was the song of peace at the end of a war.



## **Paradise (Almost Lost)**

Jake Poghosyan

*King’s College School (Year 7 – Age 12)*

Miniscule droplets of rain balanced precariously on the leaves. Insects bustled about, eagerly hurrying into the horizon. The Forest was a paradise for its citizens – they had tall, wizened trees protecting them. However, one crisp and sunny morning, everything changed.

A sudden grumbling shook the air. Phillipe the centipede scrambled away as a large black foot closed in on him. Others around him were running in all directions, trying to escape the potential massacre. The insects all screamed in terror at the unmistakable bone-crunching sound of a chainsaw. The giants were dragging the machine across the trunk of a seemingly invincible tree. Before long, it lay, defeated, in a mess of leaves. The giants looked to be satisfied and started packing their murdering tools. As they left, they offered a chilling message: “We’ll be back.” The killing of the Forest’s dearest possession left the insects stunned, gaping at the hole in which the tree once proudly stood.

“How dare they just burst into our habitat and take away the only protection we have?” Phillipe cried, trying to spur on the few remaining insects who had not bolted back home. Alas, all energy seemed to have ebbed away from them, as they sat, slumped, in their flowers. “Look,” the centipede said, “the very flower that you are sitting on will be wrinkled and dead in a matter of days! If the trees go – we go.”

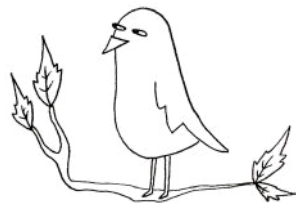
The plea seemed to spark a dim flicker of light in the insects’ worn-out hearts. The unlikely team of rebels consisted of two

bees, one woodlouse and their leader – Phillipe. By dawn that day, a plan was formed.

Phillipe felt a tap on his back. He turned around in the darkness to see the dim outline of a miffed-looking woodlouse.

“I’m tired, mate. Let’s call it quits, eh?”

“Absolutely not! We’ve got a plan and...” Phillipe was interrupted by the sound of voices. And footsteps. The woodlouse began to complain but was silenced by a sharp nudge from the centipede. The frustrated giants began waving their hands as Phillipe’s bees buzzed angrily before their eyes. Amidst the confusion, the woodlouse began moving up one of the giants’ legs, evoking a scream that echoed around the dark forest. Havoc unfolded as the giant dropped his chainsaw on his own foot. Phillipe shimmied up the body of the tallest giant for what seemed like an eternity, his blood loud in his ears. Sudden nausea made his thin, straggly legs almost buckle beneath him, but he kept on climbing to his victim’s face. Not wasting a second, he latched onto the giant’s nose, and a spine-chilling howl almost flung Phillipe onto the ground. He clung on for a heart-stopping few seconds, and then shakily leaped onto the nearest branch, the giant still shrieking. He remained there, panting heavily, unaware that his friends were cheering in delight. That night, there was a deep and soothing silence in the forest. The trees stood strong. The giants had gone.



## The Angel Oak

Joann Vincent

*Holy Cross School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

A symphony of song birds, each note so different yet the same, each one dissipating into places unknown. The afternoon sun glowed a warm orange hue, soft and gentle, encasing everything in its path with an auburn embrace. Water dripping, rocks tapping and the silence so prominent that a dew drop could be heard. However, nothing could ever compare to the tree of Mother Nature herself: The Angel Oak.

The wizened bark was the fingerprint of the tree; a print that was widely known by the other trees of the grove. Its vast, shielding wings stretched out, providing life to settlements of flora and fauna that sought shelter below. The blanket of foliage swayed in a gentle rhythm. As the Tree provided a life-sustaining mist, a nourishing vapour that provided a gasp of air to the organisms that inhabited the grassland below. The Tree felt as if it belonged in the Elysian Fields. It was an idyllic paradise: Perfect.

However, this enchanted tree wasn’t unique at all. All around it, as far as the eye could see, other trees just as magical covered the Earth. Oak after oak, birch after birch, spruce after spruce and ash after ash - each tree was just as magical as the one before it. This sea of green covered the Earth nurturing and fostering every form of life under its mothering canopy. This was Eden. This was Heaven. Utopia.

This is before it came, this is before it consumed oak after oak, birch after birch, spruce after spruce and ash after ash. Darkness.

Inky black crows screeched their deafening voices that echoed indefinitely. The caws in-turn were drowned out but the angry growls of chainsaws that fed on the trees. The trees' bark was covered in festering sores and many succumbed and died in their droves. It was supposedly day, however, neither the sun nor the moon were apparent. Pollution had formed an oily surface on the water, which slowly oozed down the jagged rocks of the waterfall. One tree stood defiantly.

Under the canopy of The Angel Oak the air was still clean. However, it had become overcrowded and claustrophobic as much of the flora and fauna sought refuge from the outside world. It was the last survivor; all of the others had become corrupted by darkness and pollution - the suffocating dark clouds of soot and sulphur.

However, one single tree, no matter how powerful, cannot keep the darkness out. Even The Tree couldn't keep back the encroaching tides of pollution. The tendrils of corruption grew closer. Day after day, week after week, month after month until the day The Angel Oak felt the sharp bite of the chainsaw itself. The life-giving golden sap oozed slowly from its wound. Its life slowly seeped out as the darkness slowly crept up its trunk. This was the end.  
Dystopia.

But out of the darkness, out of the corruption, out of the pollution, a small green shoot clawed and climbed its way through the harsh rocks: Life.



## The Final Cut

Josiah Lubert

*Rutlish School (Year 8 – Age 13)*



A new radiant, luminous sun stepped forth onto the blue canvas of the sky, wrapping me inside its warm, brilliant blanket. The orange glow of sunlight bore down like a branding iron, a huge wedge of it streaming through my leaves, highlighting me like a singer on a stage. The sky blazed blue, whilst the vermilion sun claimed his throne in the sky. It resembled a flaming red lollipop on the horizon. Flowers, a masterpiece of nature, added to the scenery and opened to the sky, breathing in the aromatic air. Refreshing yet sharp, cold shards of wind juxtaposed with the warmth and almost ruined the mood, whispering maliciously down my hollow, shivering trunk.

Suddenly, came a sky of granite grey. Heavy, miserable clouds invaded the heavens, these dark puffs of black magic casting their looming shadows upon the land. My fellow trees quickly went from elegantly dancing, to frantically jolting in the wind. Clouds of dust were driven into the air and the earth began to tremble as though its' very crust was bursting open. Seconds stumbled by, each one seeming to last an eternity. My roots desperately clung to the surface as I waited apprehensively, not knowing what was causing this tremor.

The ground continued to shake aggressively; as the smoke and dust separated, I noticed something emerge in the distance. Shards of pain battered my consciousness as I knew what was coming. A rampaging vehicle hurtled towards us in the forest, rumbling its way forward. Three brutish men accompanied it. Instantly sinister, their pale faces were as lacklustre as chalk. Deep shadows lay under

their protruding cheekbones, menacing tattoos carelessly scattered across their brutish bulks. Wielding chainsaws, their teeth hungry for bark, I knew this time they would be more ruthless than before...

Never again would I hear the joyous sound of children playing, their babbling giggles warming my heart. Never again would I shelter the birds from the treacherous rain, protecting their silky feathers from harm. And never again would my leaves be ambushed with heaven's glitter, its wonderful snow settling on my foliage. I reminisced on other pleasant experiences: A young girl resting beneath my canopy, leaning against my bumpy, strong trunk. Sun beamed through my branches onto her hair, casting a shadow like a velvet curtain. Her glistening, sky blue eyes, and a face perpetually lit by a smile always made my day. I remember another older gentleman placing an antiquated, grainy photo just below me, along with some vivid, red roses. Every day he would come and visit me, like a place of worship, reading the same lengthy poem, dedicated to his lost wife. I realised that this morning was now the last time he would ever do this. And as the merciless marauders strutted towards me, the songs of the birds were drowned out by the annihilating anthem of the chainsaw shuddering into life. Then pain... and darkness.

## The Tree of Life

Latu Waikwa

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



The great baobab tree is a central part of many cultures and beliefs, specifically in Africa and some parts of Asia. It is known to be a symbol of peace to many people and even called 'the tree of life'. This story is about how the baobab tree became 'the tree of life'.

Adia and Kofi resided in a faraway African city many years ago. Adia and Kofi were married at long last. For a time, they lived happily, even though the world around them seemed to be collapsing to the ground. The two were soon blessed with a lovely baby daughter, Esi. Adia, Kofi, and Esi had been happily living together for two years when disaster struck. After years of threats, one dreadful day the kingdom learnt the rebels were organising a coup to destroy the monarchy. All of the capable persons who were not needed were enlisted into the army. Kofi was forced to enlist, but Adia was left at home to care for Esi.

Kofi fought fearlessly for his country and his family back home. The war dragged on for several months but during this period the only thing keeping him going was the thought of going home to his family. After a brave battle and a victory for the monarchy, unfortunately news returned home of Kofi's death to Adia. Just like that, all the happiness was drained from Adia's body and instead replaced with a sad expressionless mask that she plastered across her face. Even though the grief was shattering her, she knew she had to put on a brave face for their daughter and so Adia decided upon the best way to honour him. In Kofi's favourite spot, under a beautiful baobab tree, she dug him a grave and laid him to rest.

For a while his body lay there, his soul not quite ready to leave, he had unfinished business. He wanted to watch his family live and grow, it kept him close to them. However, one day, the baobab's roots suddenly out to his corpse, embracing him and becoming one. His soul now lived in the tree, this way he could now see his family live. His widow visited him everyday but once had sensed a change in the baobab she laid him under. Although she would never tell anyone in fear that they would think she had gone mad, she believed that her husband had become this tree that she had laid him over. She talked to him everyday and although he could not respond, Kofi was content hearing his wife speak to him once again. He lived there in the tree until his family was grown and his wife had passed and finally his soul was freed from the earth.

Not only did the baobab tree house Kofi's body and give him another chance at life, it also restored happiness to his widow, Adia, and therefore was given the name, "the tree of life".



## The Roots of Society

Lorenza Rees

*Ibstock Place School (Year 9 – Age 14)*



I swim through the soil. The pungent rocks and earthy brown clay taste bitter on my tongue. I scramble to my left. Being suffocated by my own habitat. Silently dying in the realms of my own home; whose walls have the rough hands of a worker who's done this job hundreds of times before. I share this home with thousands. Brothers, sisters, friends and foes. We live amongst the decay of those who have come before us. We fight and bicker for food and water. We pray (as if we have adapted enough to possess any sort of religion) to the vivid green leaves above. Depending on their generosity they share some of the glucose and oxygen they receive after a long day at work, bathing in the equator's blistering sun.

I shout out in pain. Now is no time to think of religion, but of survival. I can't remember the last time I ate. I try and get myself out of this scramble of roots, we're tangled like the branches of a blackberry bush. Or perhaps we are the thorns, sharp and ready to lash out to protect the tree above us. I dig deeper and deeper, searching and scavenging until I know I've reached rock bottom. Literally. Down here it's no man's land, an underground desert of dehydrated soil. I give up. Closing my eyes and getting comfy in what will be my death bed.

Above me the oak's veins tingle with nutrients and life. Hidden behind the brittle bark lies a factory to keep this tree living. Conveyor belts pass carbon dioxide one way and oxygen the other. Miners dig for sap. Most importantly of all, the tree's communication team hear my pleas. Energy is sent to my aid. However, how will it reach me when I'm so

deep underground?

The energy is transported to below ground level. It now stands dumbfounded at the entrance of the maze of roots. Should it go left, right, north, or south? "I'm down here", I try and shout. Although the vibrations of sound get lost in the dark void surrounding me. I feel the presence of my only hope of survival make a wrong turn. A single tear dampens the desiccated soil. I scream and shout but it's no use.

Wait, what was that? Rhythmical chanting pulsates and crashes through the earth's crust. I try and listen but I can't seem to understand this enigmatic message. Until I realise they're directions. Leading to me. We all know what it's like to have to live down here. The struggles, the tyrannical power dynamics and inequalities. But unlike those who live above land, we understand we must look out for each other. So as my much-needed energy and nutrients ignite within me, I think to myself; however proud humans are of their species and civilisation, once and a while they need to reflect back to the foundations of their society.



## Family Tree

Lúa Gestoso Cabezas

*West London Free School (Year 9 – Age 13)*

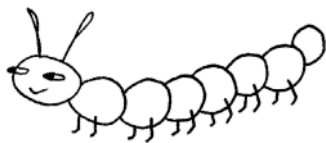
I've killed my own mother. My mother, who rocked me to sleep whenever I had a nightmare, and gave me my first lipstick, when puberty kicked in. My mother, who could bring me to tears with a single word, and make me feel pure joy with a mere embrace. Gone. Dead. The only proof she ever lived, are the crumbling ashes buried deep. Ashes, which will one day be digested by worms, who will be eaten by a bird, who will be killed by a cat, who will eventually turn to dust. This is what she wanted though.

She wanted to be free, and surrounded by nature, not a prisoner incarcerated in an unyielding tomb. She wanted to live on, in the souls of the animals who would digest her. A firm activist, and believer in the circle of life, mum made me promise that if she somehow died, I'd sprinkle the ashes in her garden, under The Tree. Her great-grandmother planted it, and mum loved it more than she loved her life. She once told me that when the wind blows, the tree whispers its secrets to whoever walks by, and that if you listen closely, you can hear it sing a lullaby.

I, of course, believed her. My vision clouded by the notion - innate in every small child, that their mother is always right. I probably believed her so strongly, I tricked my brain into hearing things that weren't there. Though, to this day, I can't stop myself from running to The Tree for comfort after a bad day. I can't help spreading my limbs out in their familiar position under the ancient tree, and pressing my ear to its roots - watering the soil with tears of what could have been; of how much I missed out on once mum died. Of how much she missed out on when she died. Of how

much time we lost. Of how much longer she should have lived, and of how much later she should have died. I'm sorry mum. I'm sorry I'm not as brave as you. I'm sorry I'm not as compassionate as you. I'm sorry I'll never be the perfect daughter, and I'm sorry I wasn't there to put out the flames. The flames that turned your body to ash.

I know if you were here, you would tell me to dry my tears, pull myself together, and move on. But I can't. I can't, because it's my fault you died. It's my fault I chose to hang out with Becca instead of with you. It's my fault I ignored your texts. It's my fault I missed our celebration, after we had planned it for weeks, and it's my fault I wasn't brave enough to step into the flames, and rescue you from its clutches. Sometimes, I sob all this out to The Tree, and if I listen closely, I hear my mum's voice, telling me: "Don't cry darling, smile. I will never truly leave you."



## You Will Live On Through Your Song

Lucile Chereau

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

If you can hear the songbird,  
Follow its voice through the trees.  
Then all you need is to utter one word  
And you'll find what you need with ease.

Her voice resonated through the clearing like a thousand Sirens luring voyagers over to feast on. But Melia was not calling sailors. She was calling the animals, thanking the gods for the hunt. Singing to the trees and the rivers, lakes and the valleys, and her Lady, to whom she had sworn eternal loyalty.

Past the river,  
Across the fields,  
Where the Moon is silver,  
The light reveals...

CRACK. A twig. A normal person would not have noticed, or thought it was merely a squirrel. Not my hunters. Silence fell in the clearing, and in the blink of an eye, every arrow, every bow was out and aimed at the source of the sound.

But no arrow would be shot until my signal.

'Orion.' I knew it from the heaviness of the air, the familiar warmth I felt in my heart. But I could feel the cold in his. I had thought never to hear of the Giant again, until his thirst for revenge was so strong, he dissolved into life again.

'Lady Artemis,' stepping out of the shadows and into the light of the fire, Orion stood, smirking like a five-year-old badly retelling a joke. The hunters' eyes looked from him to me. They all knew the story but had never dared to mention it. I held up my hand and motioned for them to hold their guard.

‘Orion, I will let you try to get revenge, but touch one hair of my hunters’ and you will have no time to blink.’ I spoke. ‘I’m not daft. I know you will send me back to Tartarus anyway, so I might as well kill someone while I’m still alive.’ And with that, he lunged at the first huntress he could reach. Melia.

‘NOW!’ I roared, and thirty arrows flew at the giant, who was holding a struggling Melia’s throat. The enchanted arrows weakened him, but if anything, he clutched her throat harder than ever, while his other hand whacked away more arrows that were coming. I screamed, grabbed my bow, and shot my fatal arrow. There was a blast of glowing light and Orion dissolved into ashes.

I crouched beside my hunter. Her chest was moving faintly. ‘Constellation or Tree?’ I whispered. She did not have the strength to answer, but following her eyes, they were not on the stars, but on the trees. Then her eyes moved to me, a small smile on her lips. As her eyes closed, I stood. ‘Melia, Daughter of Okeanos, faithful Huntress for many years, be rewarded for your skill and courage. May you rest in peace for eternity as an Ash Tree.’ Her body dissolved, not in ashes like Orion, but silver leaves, and in her place had grown a glowing Ash Tree. There was a gust of wind, and instead of the rustling of leaves, I could hear the end of her song.



## The Tree’s Journey

Lydia Pannett

*Tiffin Girls’ School (Year 8 – Age 13)*

The girl finds the tree standing alone, branches braced against the biting cold of the spring wind, cutting in from the water. She runs her fingers across the gnarled bark, mesmerised by the wood catching under her soft fingertips. The girl puts her arms around the tree and the tree strokes her hair with its branches. She climbs its boughs and comes to rest in a hollow. The girl watches the boats go by on the river and wishes that she too, one day, could travel on a boat like that. Her brothers fight underneath the tree, shouting and jabbing each other with wooden swords, falling to the ground with laughter, the sweet, innocent sound echoing around the tree.

Now the girl is older, she has become an almost-woman. She holds her head high and wanders through the field to the tree. The almost-woman has someone with her. A man who makes the almost-woman laugh. They bring baskets of food and flasks of ale and dance under the tree. The man kneels and produces a flash of gold from his waistcoat pocket. She reaches out tenderly and strokes his hair as he fits the ring perfectly on her finger. Here they watch the sun set over the river and share a kiss in secret under the branches of the tree.

The almost-woman returns now a woman, with a baby wrapped in a shawl. The baby cries softly, rocking back and forth as the leaves fall from the tree in a whirl of gold, brown and red. The man tickles the baby, and, now smiling, his shrieks fill the air and startle the birds perched in the high branches of the tree. The woman watches on and smiles a secret smile to herself, proud of this tiny being who is called

her son.

The son is now an almost-man, dressed in feathers and steel, his armour clanking noisily. Under the tree, the mother and father stand together and send their son out to the world and, like a fledgling, he leaves his nest. The mother wipes a tear from her face, longing for him to come back alive. The father stands, hands clasped, praying his son will bring honour to the family name. Two new children watch by, chattering shyly from behind the trunk.

The widow stands in front of the coffin, her tears falling silently to the floor. Her son is back, scarred deep by the memories of war; he has made his father proud, if only he could have known. Two children, now wise beyond their years, cling to her legs, the son looks up to heaven, praying for his father, burying his tears deep inside. The tree lies on the ground, smoothed and carved and shaped by weathered hands and clean sharp blades. The woman lays a soft hand on the tree-coffin and gently strokes the wood.



## The Love Tree

Ohemaa Opoku-Amankwah

*Harris Academy Wimbledon (Year 8 – Age 13)*

In a lush and fruitful land stood, or rather wept, a weary tree. It grew no leaves all year and its bark was as grey as ashes. All who passed its mysterious branches marvelled at its harrowing beauty. There was something eerie about it - its branches grew towards the ground. There have been many rumours, but few are aware of its true roots. Legend has it, the tree was once in love with the sun. He was the most beautiful tree, with flowers that blossomed and bloomed. He stretched up high into the sky, longing for her warm embrace. Then, a merciless winter struck the land, stripping it of its beauty. His leaves collapsed to the ground like corpses, his branches shrivelled up and cracked. He feared that the sun would never return; the winter seemed so long. The thought of never seeing her again tore him apart.

His sorrow consumed him from the inside out; birds and squirrels fled at the sight of him. His roots split and his leaves no longer grew. The bitter frost gnawed at his branches, cracking his trunk in two as it curled into the shape of a heart. His branches grew towards the ground in mourning and the ice froze his heart of sap, guarded by his broken bark. His roots clenched the dirt at the sight of his withered leaves, a constant reminder that his love was not returned. He wept every day of winter: his tears watered him, his memories kept him warm. After many months, when the sun came home in all her glory, there wasn't a blade of grass to greet her. In that moment, the seed of love became the root of all evil. The tree sought revenge – if he couldn't have his one-and-only, then no-one could. It is said that if you kiss the love of your life underneath this tree, one of you dies. They call it “The Love Tree”. Where love was born, and where love dies.

## Freed by Fire

Realjoy St. Basil Wudike

*St Philomena's High School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

Us trees had a reputation for the melodious whispers that we sang throughout the forest. The wind, like a courier, was tasked with collecting the whispers we nestled in our leaves and sending them throughout the forest; carrying messages to the surrounding life. As much as I was thankful for the wind, I envied it. It baffled me that the wind could be so ferocious yet so tranquil. It was free, and freedom was something that I so sorely craved. It irked me. I was grown to stand stagnant until the end of my life, only hoping to grow the tallest in the forest. Still proud I was, though, of our whispers.

I was relieved I was not alone in my hope for freedom. Amongst all the whispers brought to us by the wind, two of them remained in my memory. Firstly, a particular tale that was told of a tree that followed the wind in an almost mad pursuit of freedom, only to be fatally uprooted. And secondly the Fires. The cruel flames that feasted on forests - ravenous, like a wild beast that had been starved.

I remember the day that the whispers had told us about the Fires, how they had invaded other forests nearby and how we should prepare ourselves for the end of our time. The flames could make themselves known at any time engulfed by the malevolent flames. The trees had shook their leaves for the remainder of that day, in helpless anguish and sorrow that somehow I could not match. Rather, an indescribable rage coursed through my roots. I was sick to my bark about the fact that we had been deemed helpless, unable to do anything against the fire but surrender silently. As the surrounding trees shook their leaves in fear, mine withered

with a desire for freedom and punishment for the one who ensnared us like this.

I wondered if I should follow the wind like that particular tree had done and unapologetically spread my parasitic roots through all available earth. Uprooting sidewalks, roads, and infrastructure, plaguing the world with my selfish desires.

Until my dreary world went up in flames and the foreseen forest fire made its entrance.

I felt the heat of the fire first.

My leaves began to shrivel from the sheer intensity of the soaring temperatures as the flames made themselves quickly known. Red took over the timid green of the forest, quickly asserting dominance as I was incapacitated, powerless, unable to move. The smell of the other trees' burning bark combined with the spiritless embers that feasted on my textured wood left me unsatisfied. Unsatisfied, with the fact that as I watched these embers greedily feast on our habitat and I am left without the choice of retaliating. The forest, the only place I could call my own, was obliterated by the fire.

Fury was all I felt in that last moment of my existence. A red fury so blinding, so strong that my sap ran cold.



## The Innocence of Trees

Sophie Ingram

*Putney High School (Year 8 – Age 13)*

The serpent's carcass lay in the murky depths of the mire, a few arrows jutting from its side. Blood ebbed out of the wounds, tainting the water crimson. Eros, the son of Aphrodite, stood over the bulk of the snake. However, it was not his arrows that pierced the silvery faces of the scales decorating its body. These were the arrows of another god. Eros, with his arrows of golden love and leaden hatred, and Apollo, a god whose arrow pierced the heel of Achilles, stare deep into each other's eyes, neither betraying the contempt they held for one another. Apollo averts his gaze to the small quiver of arrows slung on Eros's back. As raucous laughter erupts from the god's mouth, Eros desired blood. Vengeance.

Eros perches, his bow taut, waiting. The tip of his arrow surfaces from an iridescent pool of gold, depicting the sky above, a black veil obscuring the frail sun shining weakly over the plain. Apollo was there, his lyre glinting despite the feeble light. Eros, his lip curled, shot the first enchanted arrow. Apollo grunted, the tip embedded into his back. A river of ichor, flecked with the gold of the arrow, wound down his spine like the snake he had slain. The gold essence streamed into his veins. Love can be poison, Eros mused. He shot his second arrow. This time, it wore the dull grey glint of lead.

A nymph named Daphne emerged from the woods, suddenly wreathed in the shadow of the mountains. She gave a shriek as the arrow pierced her side, red blooming under her tunic. Lead tarnished her blood, running as cold as a grave through her veins.

Besotted with Daphne and poisoned by the love of Eros, Apollo ran to her, a blind man groping through a tunnel with no mouth and no end. But she avoided him in repulsion, her abhorrence propelling her to return to the woods, the trees swallowing her whole. Apollo pursued her, his obsession fierce. As his finger brushed her shoulder, Daphne, her eyes glassy, screamed to her father, Peleus for aid. Her voice reached the clouds, spun by the weave of Nephele with the thread of mortal tears. It snaked up the onyx faces of mountains.

Peleus granted her wish. Daphne's feet become rooted to the ground. Rough bark encases her arms, out-stretched branches fingering the sky. Her hair transforms into the veins of leaves and her face hardens, the wrinkles of a tree being painstakingly etched into her flesh. Apollo's fists meet the ground beneath the laurel tree's feet, remorse choking him.

Apollo proclaims to the land that Daphne will be eternally green. Evergreen. She will never die, and no gale of wind, or iron of mortal, will uproot her. For trees are bystanders to all hatred, and love. They stand defiant, face to face with reality, death, and sacrifice. For just like Daphne, trees should not be condemned.

Trees are innocent.



## Mother Earth

Tanuja Kamath

*Tiffin Girls' School (Year 7 – Age 12)*

Mother and Father Earth were always quarrelling. They were the most infamous couple; their outraged arguments would always end in a flood, or scorching sun. After ten years of arguments, and extreme weather, the people of Earth were angry too. They demanded a duel, where the winner becomes the sole parent of Earth. Mother and Father Earth never backed down from a fight, and so, it was decided. It took many days for the people of Earth to pick a competition, and they were racking their brains for ideas, when a little girl suggested that each person invents something spectacular and the people of Earth decide the winner. With the competition and deadline confirmed, Mother and Father Earth set off to work, with a determined countenance and a passionate urge to win.

Mother Earth collected bark, leaves and some magic golden power, for her project, and Father Earth collected several chemicals and some lab goggles. They spent three hours moulding, and pouring, and sculpting, occasionally scowling at one another, until finally, they had finished.

Father Earth presented his spectacular invention. The people of Earth gaped at it blankly; Father Earth had created something he names 'plastic'. He explained that you could make clothes with it, make containers, make basically anything! Everyone clapped abundantly cheering for this new invention.

Mother Earth then presented her spectacular invention. She marvelled at her creation with pride, and stated that her invention was called a 'tree'. It was exquisite. It towered over people, with its gigantic trunk, made of intricate bark, and

it had beautiful viridian leaves that swayed gently. Mother Earth explained that it breathed out oxygen for people to breathe, and it would bring life to Earth.

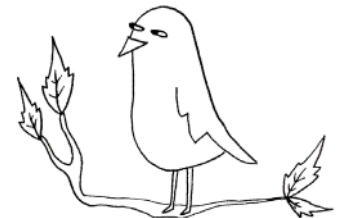
Despite such a beautiful invention, the people of Earth foolishly picked 'plastic' as the winner of the competition. Despondent, Mother Earth left with her tree, watching Father Earth shout triumphantly.

3 months later

Mother Earth whizzed back to Earth at the sound of cries for help. The people of Earth gazed up at her with desperation and narrated their problem. Apparently, 'plastic' was useful at first, and everybody enjoyed it, but it had no place to go. If you put it in the ocean, the animals would die, if you put it on the streets, they become litter, when you put it in the bin, they collect in landfills. What the people of Earth needed were... trees!

Everybody worked together, grinning jubilantly, as they planted in the seeds all over Earth. Trees emerged from the ground, their viridian beauty capturing the attention of everybody. In autumn, the leaves would change colours, and shed their leaves, and in winter, the leaves would go all together, but throughout the whole year, no matter what season, the trees were a habitat to countless animals and a gorgeous site for all to see. The people of Earth vowed to Mother Earth to always protect the trees and appreciate them.

It saddens me that today, that promise is completely broken.



## Observer

Xizhi Zhang

*Marymount International School (Year 9 – Age 14)*

The tree stares into a blank space of emptiness, torn apart by ashes of weaponry and war, scorched by raging fire and shrivelled from frost, until life within flickered away into the ongoing darkness. A tree is a human, with millions of stories untold and seams of lies concealed, but firmly composed on the surface. It does not exhibit visible expression, yet it is the very observer of humanity's evolution. A story of a tree begins from the land it first rooted, a place prospered with sprouting vegetation, - stemmed in glistening streams - with viridescent greens that embody the colour of emeralds. Apart from the plains, two protuberant figures emerge from grains of revitalised soil, outlining leaves that seem to huddle like bodies of clouds, nourished from the showers of sunlight and flourished by a rivulet.

As time grows, the two trees mature, spreading endless roots interwoven into the knitted soil, and tangled with each other in a benevolent manner like close companions holding hands. The boughs bloomed golden flakes and rained phoenix feathers, embellishing the unseen wind with a mixture of coloured hues that kiss the cerulean sky. Perhaps it was the merriment and lively mood that altered the dull season, for harmonious cheers ring fluidly through the air, prompting the fruit of peace to ripen. The resplendent trees share a time of love and friendship, viewing the painted scenery that thrives with life, even when the trees' trunks thicken and begin to carry jobs for nature.

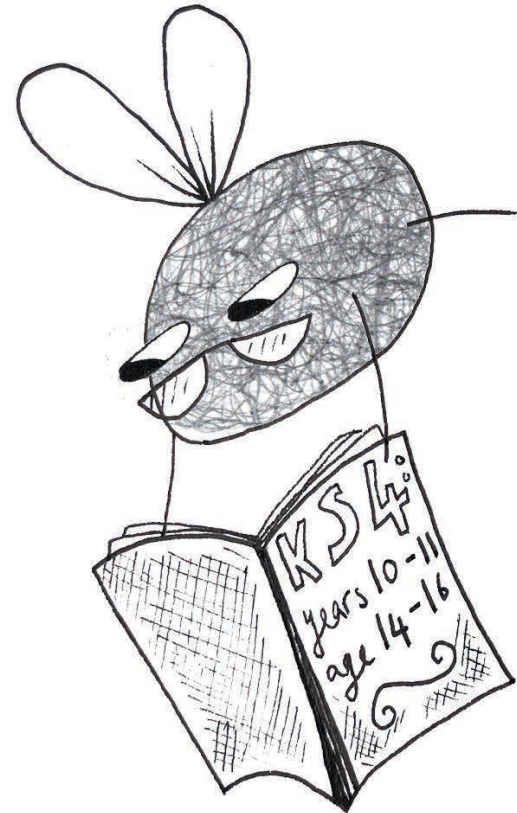
Soon, the once ocean sky became ill and pallid, evaporating from the pouring ink while trepid alarms deluged the expanse, stridently calling the trees that lay stiff in their

home. Soldiers storm from all sides, bringing throes of pain that ripped through the hollow quiet and mangled the fruits of peace. Gunshots pierce through the combatants that belched the frigid snow with lakes of viscous blood which muffled the corpses' screams. The stains stuck onto the frosted white, like a sea blemished with death that stretches perceptually into the unknown dusk.

The secluded tree watches, in the blasting hails and howling wind, it quivers violently, trying to seek comfort. But beside it stood only a trunk. The trunk that was once a tree was callously severed by war. The trunk that once accompanied the tree for hundreds of years became lifeless and broken. Broken to fulfil the unwanted war. Yet, the tree continues to live on even despite death. Even when it became the muted witness of a brutal crime scene and left those that it once embraced. The tree has changed, it has grown as the silent observer of humanity's evolution, with millions of secrets untold.



★ HIGHLY ★  
COMMENDED  
POEMS



## **Barricade of Love**

Clara Bates

*Ursuline High School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

As sure underfoot as the day you were planted  
The day I left and the day you began,  
The day I departed and the day you arrived.  
There you stood as a headstone to my fate.  
Under you, I was buried and lay and withered.  
Beneath your canopy and your growing protection.  
I poured out my love and you started to blossom.  
Slowly, slowly climbing towards the glowing sun.  
An Icarus to your light.  
Your beginning was planned – an opportunity that was  
taken.  
There you stand to tell the story of time, where I was unable.  
Bearing fruit which fell and died.  
Growing blossom which turned and wilted.  
Shedding leaves which were swept away.  
Yet, through all this struggle and strife,  
You never left my side.  
The eternal binding as you grew through my heart  
Has intertwined us both in a bond of sacrifice.  
You stand tall and proud; a reflection of what has passed.  
We are drawn even closer together.  
As though we cannot part.  
A testament to time and the impermanence of those who  
loved us.  
We live on in spirit,  
An everlasting guide to protect and anguish.  
A barricade of love.



## The Tree

Darcey Cook

*Saint Cecilia's (Year 10 – Age 15)*

The trees watch the world pass by,  
Always looking out from their little patch of dirt.  
Nobody stops to notice it,  
Their twisted limbs flowing in the air,  
Or the eternal roots stretching out, just below our feet.

We don't notice them.

The trees watch the world go on,  
Ever wise to the story of our lives.  
People pass by without sparing a glance,  
To the delicate leaves cascade from above,  
Or the way they stretch their palms to the sky when it rains.

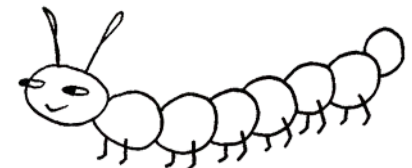
We don't see them.

The trees watch the world move along,  
Settled in one place listening to the beat of our lives.  
Nobody waits to listen back,  
To the gentle rhythm of the branches in the breeze,  
Or the intricate hum of the ants and the bees.

We don't listen to them.

The trees compose a melody of life,  
But we silence the song they create.  
Too absorbed in our own narrative,  
To consider the stories of others.  
Like the trees we go by every day.

We don't consider them.  
The trees watch the world pass by,  
Always observing the world from their little bed of dirt.  
Nobody stops to notice them,  
But they notice us.



## The Crooked Tree

Sadie Simpson

*Ibstock Place School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

Her life was an irregular beauty  
Quite like ones you've heard of, I'm sure  
She wasn't the Rose in the concrete. But the tree in the  
stones  
Very similar yet very different  
What beauty her life was  
Out of disaster and boulders came her divine beauty and  
infinite power  
Because she wasn't the rose,  
Many obstacles arose  
But because she was the tree,  
So many things she could overcome  
Limitless possibilities.  
She took lightning strokes, darkness, damaged roots and  
even broken parts  
She took them and grew, even with a hole in her heart  
She was a tree that was curved with droopy branches and  
leaves of brown and green  
And with all her beautiful imperfections  
She was a sight to be seen  
Maybe her tree wasn't meant to bear fruit,  
But her life always was and always will be an irregular  
beauty.



# HIGHLY COMMENDED Stories





## The Tree

Chloe Kawuma

*Ursuline High School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

Salty droplets slithered down his face, the sun sparing no part of him. Sweat slithers down him however it evaporates just as fast, leaving him dry to the bone. Plumes of dust spew from their feet as a mushroom cloud formed giving a musty aroma around them. The earth grew vast and wide. Earth unfertilized, dehumanized, and monotonous. Cracks grew deep into the sterile soil like the wrinkles of that of an old face.

Breaths of those running with him sang like a chorus echoing into his ears. He could feel his muscles straining. They all did. Running across the horizons they ventured like wolves, eyes searching for any indication. Rumors had spread like wildfire, they all wanted to witness it. Witness the tree. Wanted to grasp whatever power it could grant. Everyone holding on to the hope the world they had destroyed would be revived.

The tree would give them a new beginning; they would know what to do differently. Gasps were heard amongst the runners, and he fixed his eyes upon it. He was entranced. There in the center sat the savior of this planet. The tree raised its branches towards the sky as if bearing the weight of the sea above. The Tree stretched upwards, as if proud to be the last bit of life left on this planet. Its bark glistened as if coated in gold, shone as if stealing the sun's rays.

Whoops, cheers were heard amongst the crowd through a mix of sighs. A flow of relief washed over them, the sun becoming irrelevant in vaporizing their excitement. They would restart this planet, another chance given to them.

A chance of redemption. Flickers of elation fueled them, evolving into an inferno. Their pace began to quicken, first a simple jog, turning into a run, into a sprint.

The Tree would rescue them all, they were saved, the tree would save them! It turned into a mad dash; a dart to finally witness what had been a myth. Which was now a reality. Cheers grew louder as we drew closer, smiles plastered to the face of everyone, and he could feel his own cheeks lifting. This was it. They had found it. He saw a few people pausing up ahead, some forming into small groups. Some staring up at the tree, some... some bewildered.

Bewildered?

Everyone began to group up, huddled, confused. Smiles withered, faces drooped. Silence engulfed the air around them; the only sound was the exhale of their own breaths. Expecting smiles, laughter, tears, but none came. Almost robotically their heads all gaped at the tree, eyes as dull as the world around them. The tree was there. It stood right in front of them. Branches outstretched up to the sky. Branches outstretched, bare. The tree stood naked, bark stripped to oblivion, compelled to be scalded. No one moved. No one spoke. He felt himself melt to the ground, arms limp like a dropped ragdoll.

The tree was dead.



## The Tree

Emma Miskelly

*Ursuline High School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

My branches stick out taller and wider than the other trees. My roots sink deeper into the soil. Every day, I watch new trees being planted; so tiny, they are almost embryonic. My plaque has faded, the name of my person long washed away. At first, the visits were regular; wife, son, and granddaughter. All gathered around to remember him, to admire me, but slowly year after year the visits became less frequent until, eventually, no one came at all.

I watch as another service takes place, this one slightly different from the rest. A sunny, but cold January day. The rich black earth received its prize without ceremony. A simple wicker coffin. Few mourners. A rare variety of tree this time - a Wild Service, planted as one life ends and a new one begins. Another family comes to visit their tree. A small oak tree that's barely grown at all.

The wind blows. My branches wave, the oak tree wobbles violently. I hear sobs, the opening of a tissue packet, and the noise of a coat crinkling as granny is given a hug. I will never get used to these sounds no matter how frequently I hear them.

The family leaves and the sun begins to set; the other trees seem small compared to me.

I think back to this day 14 years ago. The lavish coffin, the masses of people as he was buried, and I was planted. His tree. Me. Steady and rooted securely to the earth. Alive. Obtaining succour from his now rotted corpse - his old bones resting peacefully in the earth below me.

January of 2072 and I'm still standing strong.

It's a warm day and the woodland burial site is a forest now. In Spring, the wildflowers bloom and this newly created plantation is attractive and pretty. A tall girl in blue jeans and a black puffy coat pushes a wheelchair along the rough grass. An elderly lady sits in the wheelchair and points to a tree. A Wild Service. A sense of warmth rushes through my branches.

Fifty years on and this family still comes to visit their special tree. Although the exact position of the grave is now impossible to distinguish, the unique and unusual tree helps to mark the special occasion where old life becomes new. Similar trees tower around me now, pumping oxygen back into the earth just as our ancestors have done for thousands of years before us. Helping to keep the planet alive.



## The Tree

Jasmine Savory

*St Philomena's High School (Year 11 – Age 16)*

The Tree started with a game of hide and seek. Jackie and Ross and Pim and I took hide and seek very seriously- the winner ate everyone's sweets for a week, and the loser had to swallow a whole worm. Pim's dad was a keen fisherman and he had a bucket full of them, so he wouldn't have noticed if we had taken a hundred of them, let alone one or two.

This time, it was my turn to seek. I found Jackie first, which was a surprise because Pim liked to hide behind things so was nearly always found first. Then I found Ross behind the bins, without Jackie's help because she went off to sulk. But she joined us again at the end of lunch, and we still hadn't found Pim. We all split up to find him, and were still looking when the bell rang for lessons.

When we asked him after school where he was, he took us all to the far corner of the playground near a monstrous hedge that lined the school. We squeezed in through a gap... and there it stood. A huge, ancient oak with flourishing branches and proud green leaves. Pim climbed on top of the Tree, fell inside, and disappeared. We all rushed to him, and found him sitting cross legged on its floor, lined with soft moss and with space for all four of us. Our new home.

From then on, we never went back to the playground. Every breaktime, we waited until no one was looking and ran away to the Tree, where we stashed sweets and chocolate and comics and toy guns. It was the perfect treasure trove.

One Tuesday afternoon, we all trooped down there to smell the stench of cigarette smoke. A gaggle of big kids were

standing by our Tree, chomping our Mars bars, using our toy guns. Pim yelled at them to bog off, and then the girl with the taffeta skirt swore and the boy with the mullet charged towards us. We had to run away after that. We vowed to hatch a plan to run them to the ground, and take back what was ours.

The next morning, we brought with us Pim's dad's bucket and our empty crisp packets. We scattered them outside and crouched inside the Tree. We waited. Around noon, we smelt their cigarette smoke and heard the rustle of wrappers. Then we heard a loud shriek as someone yelled, "My god, it's a worm!"

We opened fire. We each grabbed a handful of worms from the bucket and hurled them towards their faces, their mullets, their taffeta skirts, and we laughed and laughed as they scrambled out of our lives and the worms returned to the earth.

From that day on, we never had any trouble again. If we had it our way, we would have stayed there until we were as old as the Tree itself, and always with a handful of worms at the ready.



highly commended  
★ poems ★



## Seasonal Depression (S.A.D)

Erin O'Connell

*Ursuline High School (Year 13 – Age 18)*

I was planted in autumn  
And her in spring.  
All my leaves fall  
But to her the birds sing.

I wasn't taught how to grow  
Though the sunlight catches her in the right places.  
She is tall and pristine  
Whilst I feel bare in certain spaces.

We were both grown by the same earth  
So why is her fruit sweeter  
With flowers most bold  
When my image is much bleaker?

Yet, now I know that the seasons change  
And eventually the sun will turn to reach my face.  
My smile will flourish and hers will fade  
She has her own lows just the same.



## Opium

Martine Maugüé

*King's College School (Year 12 – Age 16)*

Opium, dripping on the willow tree,  
Darkening whole rows of the ancient poem.  
The king and the drugged and the individual.  
Permeating its tendrils down, down,

Down a man desperate to chase eternal  
Weightlessness for his sorry soul,  
Willing to sell even the little gold ring  
Wrapped around the once baby finger of

A lonely boy. Watch how smartly they march,  
See how the Americans are on their side,  
They cannot possibly lose, look at Madame Chiang  
In her qipao, look at the uniform of the Generalissimo.

Look a little closer at how there is no choice.  
Leaving all the same if Mao had got to him first,  
Loaded wedding gold weighing on his pubescent frame.  
Lives unforgiven, heavier on his back than the shiny gun.

Roots poisoned by ecstasy – calls falling on deaf ears.  
Then when he finally, finally did return  
Very few branches in the garden remained,  
And the new ones planted smelled foreign.

(I am projecting, imagining, creating phrases.  
I think historians and I use the same rules.  
Death catches before youth sheds its ignorance.  
Those that remain speak not on the years.)

The boy who was certain he'd die

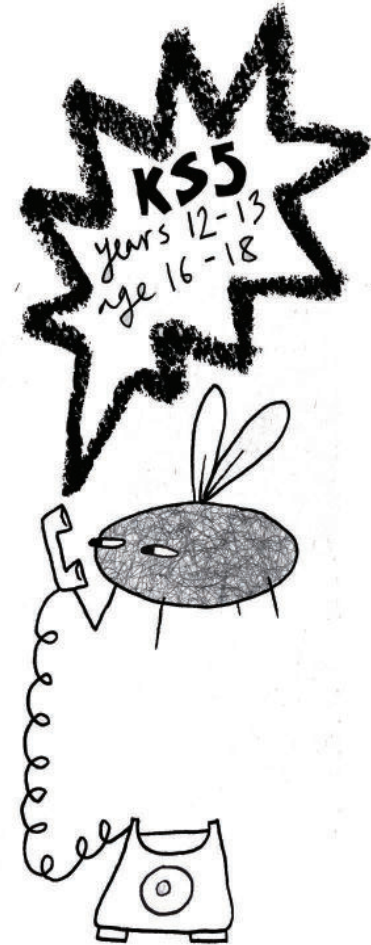
On a rickety boat somewhere in the Orient,  
With no spare hands to pray, just to  
Grip the defunct and gorgeous gun,

Swore a vow by the memory of that garden  
Of next to never speaking on those years.  
Waiting in an eternal ring of tarnished gold  
To go home to the grave of some tree.



# HIGHLY COMMENDED

Stories



## A Tree's Journey Through Winter

Grace Steele

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

Its Autumn. My favourite time of year. My leaves are an ombre of apricot orange and unripe banana. Its like a million tangerines are perched on my branches, as the mini figures below photograph my beautiful display, as if I'm a peacock. The flash of cameras picks up the detailing of my bark, blinding my eyes. As the month of October comes around the corner, pumpkins are carved by the souls of small innocent youngsters at my feet. They laugh and smile as if on cloud nine, as I tower over them, creating a bowel of safety over their heads. Their parents, are like paparazzi, capturing every moment. I stand in the background, photobombing, and bringing an array of flush to their pictures. This truly is magical. I feel as though I am part of their childhood, of how they remember the world when they turn old.

But as the months of autumn come to an end, my leaves begin to fall. They drop to the floor beneath me, so that I'm standing in a puddle of my own pea-green and cantaloupe blades. I've lost my most favoured feature, and most valued possession. I look dead even though I am still breathing. I am simply all bark and branches. What is the point in being here if I am to only stand still? The whole world is too busy, the weather is too cold, my park is deserted. Who would notice if I were to disappear? If I were turned to paper. No one. I shiver as we go into December, and the weather turns again.

My body begins to freeze, as crystalize ice infests my arms. I have gone from dark to light. As the long days become short, and the nights become cold, I stare up at the midnight

sky after the sun says goodbye. The reflection of glittery silver stars sparkles in my eyes. Moonlight shines down, as I feel a chilly drop on my shoulder. I look up. Its snowing. A wintery wonderland fills the sky, as billions of perfectly formed snowflakes fall from above. Magic. I watch in awe, and in this moment I no longer feel alone. I am the only one within this park, and yet I feel as though I'm surrounded by a million. Pink, coral, and peach form a painting in the sky, as the sun begins to rise. Hundreds of figures emerge from nowhere and admires the layer of soft feathery snow. They approach me. I am covered in a white fluffy blanket. A smile forms on my face as once again I feel loved. Adored. I spot the now 2-month older children who carved their pumpkins, they tilt their heads towards the sky to fully take me all in, and then beam up at me. This, this is what it feels to be well and truly cherished. This... is the life of a happy tree.



## Starting Afresh

Lizzy Bayly

*Wimbledon High School (Year 12 – Age 17)*

Amelie remembered sitting under this tree with her best friend, Luca, last year.

It was Spring and soft pink petals were blooming on the branches, making the tree look like it was covered in cotton candy. The day was beautiful – the sky blue, the sun hot. The perfect day for a picnic. So Amelie had dragged Luca out into the sun and set up a picnic blanket under the shade of the cherry blossom tree. Luca complained originally, but in a good-natured way, and she subsided when she saw all the food that Amelie had brought for them. They had eaten their food and laughed together and picked cherry blossom petals out of each other's hair.

It might've been the best day of Amelie's life.

In Summer, she'd wanted to go again to the same spot, but Luca couldn't come. Her grandmother was ill and she had to go abroad to look after her. Amelie knew that Luca had to go, but that didn't stop her from feeling a little disappointed and sad when she sat under the tree without her best friend. It didn't really mean anything when Luca wasn't there beside her.

And then at the beginning of Autumn, something terrible happened. Amelie cried in her bedroom for most of the season, or at least it felt that way. She didn't go to school much. She wanted to go sit under her favourite tree because it had always used to make her feel better, but she couldn't now. She didn't think she could bear it. She didn't want the memory of the happiest moment of her life to be crushed by Luca's death.

The weather was never good in Winter. It rained incessantly. The roads were icy which made Amelie afraid to drive on them. It had been three months since Luca's death. A quarter of a year. Had it flown too fast or too slow? Amelie didn't know.

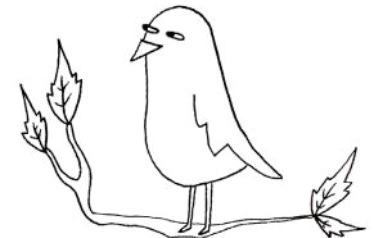
It was still raining when Amelie left her house and climbed up the hill to the tree that grew tall on top of it. She thought about turning back, but she didn't. She got to the top and stood there for a moment, just staring. Staring at branches that she'd seen blossoming pink, growing green, withering orange. Branches that were now bare and empty. Hollow. Lonely.

Amelie sat down with her back to the trunk of the tree and looked down at the view that spread out beneath her. She remembered playing I Spy with Luca. They'd pointed out the swing that hung from one of the trees, a squirrel darting across the meadow.

From here, Amelie could even see the road where the car crash that killed Luca had happened.

This place held so many memories, too many for Amelie to hold onto without breaking apart and falling into pieces. She hugged the trunk of her tree and let her tears join the rain in tumbling to the ground.

Maybe in Spring she could start afresh.



## Leaves Dipped in Deception

Nishtha Sukhadia

*Holy Cross School (Year 12 – Age 17)*

The back door finally relented to her shoving with a deafening screech - the hinges were rusted. Expanse of rustling forest, dark and mossy, reflected the steady glow of the moon back at Bridget. Why did her parents decide it was a good idea to move into a literal forest? Well she knew why - technically anyways.

Just as she was about to shut the door, a dagger spiraled through the air right towards her. Without thinking, her body took over and caught the dagger by the handle, inches from her sternum. Glancing down while her breath was heaving in her lungs and the adrenaline beginning to dissipate- she recognised the dagger, smooth beige oak, blade gleaming like stars and the scratched initials of her father. And that was why they were in the forest, to train her.

“You could have killed me!” She screamed at her father- it was a common statement in their household.

“But I didn’t.” He replied with the usual response as a grin climbed his face. “You need to start more intensive training asap.”

That was also something she’d heard most her life, and it made her feel like that’s all she’d ever done- train. Train for what, though, she didn’t know, not even her parents knew. A family of witches and they couldn’t decipher the prophecy any further. What good was magic with limits?

All she knew was that she had to train and prepare, for there would be an event that would change her life forever. What that event was she had no clue, but hopefully she’d know it

when it happened.

“Let’s go inside.” Her father conciliated her.

Later, her reflection glared back at her from the bathroom mirror before bed, but something felt off; it was the atmosphere but she couldn’t explain it.

The next morning she traipsed through the kitchen- seeing everything for the first time in morning light. Standing at the sink and seeing the vastness of forest from the window was eerie, with winding trees and sun shining through the leaves bringing it all to life. That was when she saw it- The Tree. In some sense it was the same as the rest of them: green leaves, branches and bark, but in reality it wasn’t because Bridget felt it- felt the inexplicable, unwavering connection - it sucked her in.

Her eyes were like deserts from the growing dryness, but she couldn’t blink. What would happen if she did?

Involuntarily, they shuttered then flew back open. The Tree was in front of her now, or rather she was in front of it. Everything fell away; the only thing that existed was her and this tree. This Tree that glowed from the inside out. This Tree that beckoned Bridget. A connection she’d never experienced before compelling her to heed its call. She did. Calloused fingers reached out towards the enigmatically making contact. Whispers filled her ears as a shock rushed up her arm.

Darkness - that was all she saw. Impenetrable darkness.





## **The Lonely Tree**

Emmy Beadle

*Cricket Green School (Year 10 – Age 14)*

The ice falling from the trees to the cold breeze to the dying  
of the leaves

The crackling like paper to the shattering of glass like the  
chattering of the cold teeth

The cold tree pushes you to hug me when you are sad and  
lonely

The warm friendly blossom tree welcoming the lonely naked  
tree.



## Participating Schools

Ashcroft Technology Academy, Wandsworth

Blundell's School, Devon

Cricket Green School, Mitcham

Graveney School, Wandsworth

Hall Senior School, Wimbledon

Harris Academy Wimbledon

Holy Cross School, New Malden

Ibstock Place School, Roehampton

King's College School, Wimbledon

Kingston Grammar School

La Retraite Girls' School, Clapham

Marymount International School, London

Merton Medical Education Services (Melrose School,  
Melbury College)

Nonsuch High School for Girls, Sutton

Putney High School

Raynes Park High School, Wimbledon

Ricards Lodge High School, Wimbledon

Rutlish School, Wimbledon

Saint Cecilia's Church of England School, Wandsworth

Shrewsbury House School, Surbiton



Southfields Academy, Wandsworth

St Paul's Girls School, Hammersmith

St Philomena's Catholic High School for Girls, Sutton

Streatham & Clapham High School

The Tiffin Girls' School, Kingston

Ursuline High School, Wimbledon

West London Free School, Hammersmith

Wimbledon College

Wimbledon High School (Senior)



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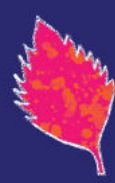


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