

KEDST Aspire Programme
Short Story Competition
Summer 2021

An Anthology
Of Winning Entries

Organiser & Chair of Judges:
Katerina Bogdanova

First Place: Caitlin Norman

The Storyteller's World

It was a night for the storytellers. The sky was a murky black, with torrents of rain pouring down. Clashing thunder could be heard all around and the sky was frequently rent in two by forks of flashing lightning. No-one stepped outside. On nights like these, electricity was cut off and people huddled silently around flickering fires with blankets, waiting. In one group, it was to an old lady that everyone looked. She had lived for as long as anyone could remember and the stories she told seemed almost unfathomable. After a particularly loud clap of thunder, she began.

'The world used to be full of life and dusted with magic. Nature stood tall and proud, cared for by the little folk and guarded from the evils hidden in the depths of the earth – the giants that had been trapped in wars long ago. The fairies ruled everything that grew: ancient forests that whispered secrets as you walked by; meadows of wildflowers full of pops of bright colour, like sprinkles on a cake; pools of water and flowing rivers so pure you could see your reflection in them. Colour was everywhere, ranging from the richest, fieriest ruby reds to the brightest yellows to the deepest, most vibrant purples. Animals, insects, birds, sprites, pixies and fairies could be found everywhere in this world of idyllic serenity.

Then there was the realm of the spirits. The non-corporeal beings roamed the deserts. Massive dunes stretched as far as the eye could see. Sand lay still, occasionally whisked up by a passing spirit and arranged into a new, swirling pattern. The land, like its inhabitants, was neither fully one thing or another – stuck between two worlds. The sands were solid, yet flowed like water; made up of rocks, yet silky smooth underfoot. Similarly, the spirits had no physical form and could not be seen but their presence was felt strongly wherever they were. Some wanderers might be lucky enough to see one, as they appeared like lights to guide travellers safely through their lands.

The mountains didn't feel the same as the forests or the deserts. No strange aura could be felt as you approached; no magic in the air, carried along by the winds. But if you looked closely, you could see how the rocks and the caves told their own story. For it was underneath the mountains that the real treasure lay – in the lands of the dwarves and the goblins. Beneath the massive mounds of rock lay sprawling tunnels and cavernous pockets full of precious metals and stones. Rubies as dark as blood, emeralds bright and glistening, sapphires which shone blue as the sky, all could be found in abundance in the mines of the goblins. Diamonds bigger than your fist and brighter than stars sat in piles, carefully cut and polished in the dwarves' workshops. No craftsmanship was more perfect. A few of the mountains were the guardhouses of the dragons – the last line of defence which kept the giants trapped beneath the earth. The dragons would occasionally send a burst of flame through the top of their mountain, leaving a cloud of ash and molten rock as a warning to the surrounding people.

For a while, the humans lived in peace with the magic of the world, making deals to keep everyone happy. The humans gave music to the fairies and, in return, were allowed to cut down a few trees to build their houses. They would write stories in exchange for animals as meat, paint pictures and take a few jewels. This balance kept the world running smoothly for years.

But then the humans began to get greedy, to forget about the magic they were allowed to take advantage of. They started chopping down more trees to gain more space, burning dangerous fuels in order to run giant factories, stealing the earth's resources, like oil, and not caring about the consequences of spills. The lands were commercialised and humans took jewels and metals without giving back. The world became polluted and the darkness within began to stir. The humans ignored the signs and refused to change their ways. Eruptions from the dragons became more frequent but, by this point, the humans had forgotten what they meant. The effects were too great – too many trees burned, too many rivers polluted, too much smog. The humans blamed the magic then, for not being enough to save them, and the natural caretakers of the world were hunted down.

The day that magic left the world was the day that the sky turned red. The dragons fell silent and turned to stone, trapped in their own prisons. The little folk became wraith like, nothing more than

passing shadows. Smog blanketed civilisation and, what had once been full of life, was now a barren wasteland, drained dry by the humans. They tried to create their own magic, developing advanced

technology and experimenting with different chemicals but nothing worked. They discovered it was so much easier to destroy than it was to create but by then, it was too late.

Without magic keeping the balance, the giants grew restless. Although they were trapped deep below the ground, they could feel the bonds holding them there weakening. They started banging on the walls of their prisons, sending earthquakes shuddering through the human cities. Floods became more frequent and humans fled the devastation, hiding out in small groups and doing their best to survive. There they remain to this day, waiting and hoping for the magic to return.'

A small girl stared at those around her, she could see lots of wide eyes at this story. She wondered if any of it was true, if that was really why the ground sometimes shook and the world was so dark. She wanted to see a world full of colour and light and she vowed to herself in the darkness, that one day she would go looking for magic. One day she would find it.

Second Place: Jasmine Davies

Mirror Ball

One summer day Cassie Finch woke up and realised she didn't resent the world anymore. After months of being a spectator. She watched as the sun shone on the rest of the world, whilst she was a target of downpour. Envy dictated her. But now, things were different, she felt like the world was devoted to her again, however she had yet to learn that sometimes loyalty can be mistaken for treachery.

The girl with the caramel eyes, not as dark as her hair that was close to midnight, skimmed through the pages of Little Women – only looking up to check the clock on the wall. She caught herself reminiscing on the days where she would dream as tremendously as Jo March would. So much ambition! So many aspirations! But life decided to put her on a different route, although that route started off with desolation and despondency, she had finally settled at her destination. She refused to take any alternative roads. It was easier this way. She was content, right?

Ticking and ticking became the main focus of her attention, causing her to become distracted from her book, she centred her gaze on the hands of the clock on the wall: it was now 5 o'clock. Outstretching her hand over to the pill bottle she reached in, grabbed one and consumed it, it was part of her daily routine now, it aided her and that's all that was significant to her. Just as she was putting the pill container down the ringing of the doorbell interrupted her; Cassie turned her key in the lock and opened the door, her mirror ball keyring bounced off of the sun as it sat in the lock, she wasn't surprised at all when she was greeted by the presence of her mother.

Nobody knew the real Cassie. The complexities of her. Besides from her mom. Everything in her life seemed to move so much more swiftly with her in it, spending time without her is like dancing without music, you can dance without it but it's so much more thrilling with it.

"Have you been up to much today?" her mom curiously asked her.

Cassie briefly paused before responding, "Not much really, I've just been catching up with some reading.."

Her mom sighed at her answer, "I wish you would get out more, I feel like you've been spending so much time inside."

Cassie frowned at her mom's comments. Where was all this coming from? Thinking back to last week she remembers they had a homemade meal and watched reruns of their favourite shows, it was as if there wasn't a care in the world – which is exactly what it felt like. It was like she was a child again, a time where she wasn't suffocated by troubles, a time where she wasn't burdened with having to carry different facades with her. She felt light.

"Why are you suddenly telling me this? I've barely been out in months? What's changed?" Cassie enquired, with confusion laced in her tone.

"Cassie, honey, I would check your pill bottle if I were you," her mom responded sympathetically.

Instantly the bottle was in Cassie's reach, taking the lid off she violently shook it: it was empty. She was so caught up with replicating the life that she had lost, she forgot to think of how instantly it could be snatched away.

"I'm going to need you to move on," Cassie's mom told her as she wrapped her arms around the frightfully vulnerable figure in front of her.

Whilst she was in her mom's embrace Cassie had lost track of time, and before she knew it her mom was gone...again. Turning her eyesight to the door she noticed her keys were in it, it had drawn to her that she must have left, her attention focused on her keyring: there was no light in the room for it to reflect off. The day she got that keyring was one of last quality days that she has had...well one that wasn't fabricated by a lie, her and her mom had gone to a theatre show together. Her mind will

forever picture the wide grin her mom had on her face when she bought that mirror ball keyring as a souvenir and gave it to her. It was the last gift that the woman gave to her daughter before she passed away.

A few months ago, Cassie started taking some pills, she wasn't sure how she was going to make it through the summer – that was until she discovered them. They proposed solace to her. After that she found a way to keep on moving. Hallucinations took over her cursed life, pretending her departed mother was there was better than facing the unmerciful reality. Refusing to accept that she now had to live independently. Refusing to spend any more time drowning in grief. But was this any better? Spending her days enclosed indoors, because nobody else could see the vision she intoxicated herself into having.

To put it simply, her life had become a mirror ball. On the outside it was beautiful, however it was ever so fragile. The mirror ball had just fell. Everyone thought it was securely in place. It may be broken, but it wasn't damaged beyond repair. Although there were cracks, they may even get bigger, one day it would be put up again and reflect thousands of rays of lights in multiple directions. It would shine again.

Third Place: Rosie Willetts

The sun drips through the fractured stained glass. It was once a glorious picture of the Virgin Mary. Now smashed. The sun smiles over the church. I stand on the stone floor but quickly retreat back onto the carpet as I feel the ice chill from the cobbles travel up my bare heels, ankles then finally calves. My eyes follow the red carpet up to the altar. One which had split fiercely in two. One side stating 'The Pure' in blood and the other, the bigger section stating 'The Ugly' in black ink. There's a serene silence as I gaze upon the broken stone table. The tarnished chalice and dish for communion lay discarded on the side under a worn statue of an angel. Her wings broken and scratches tracing down her curves.

Someone had pleaded for their life here. They'd knelt at her feet and clawed for salvation. But whether she had granted it at the time is a mystery to me. She looks kind enough. But a fallen angel has no wings, like this one. Maybe she fell from heaven and was enclosed in stone as a punishment to watch those who seek refuge. A prison sentence with no end date.

I have the beauty of death surrounding me. Broken and beaten all around. Some preachers say they can beat death. I believe so. "You can cheat death." I whisper looking at the clawed angel. I then turn to the altar and announce my belief. "You can cheat death!" The altar replies with a piercing noise. Scratching my claim into the stone, the side which stated, 'The ugly'.

'You can cheat death?'

I nod.

'Prove it.'

I raise an eyebrow at the sentence left by the stone.

"How?"

'You will see how.'

"That's informative." I look roll my eyes and turn on my heel as I feel a cold hand crawl up my back. A slow, smooth voice presses to my ear.

"Oh you will see how. It's a game we play. You were cursed the second you stepped into this... this..."

"Church?" I offer.

"No. We worship no God. There is no God. God's are feeble. No. We simply watch life. Lives of those trapped."

"You still haven't said what this is."

"A prison. The sentence is life."

I feel the ice crawl up my legs again as I am pushed off the carpet. I turn to try and see the voice but I am pushed back once again. I hit the floor, my head crashing against the floor. Tears sting at my waterline as I look around once again for the voice. "Life?"

It has now been... well I've lost count of days... months? Maybe years? I've been in this world, this prison for a long time.

The voice talks to me every morning. Their voice haunts me. Life haunts me. I wish to leave but as I found out. I can't leave this place. Imprisonment for life forgot to mention immortality. It must've been in the fine print of the scratched alter

Highly Commended Entries:

Eleanor Hardwick

Slithers of sunlight latched on to the wood-plank patio as myself and somebody else kicked back in our long chairs and lounged languidly. We were separated only by a small glass table, electric blue painted on its one leg and rimming the edges: it held up a darker blue umbrella that might have protected us in the day but now, with the sky painted in the calm greys of dusk, small white flecks dotting the picture, there was no use for it. My own deep blue eyes darted towards the person seated beside me. She held my stare longingly, lovingly. A warm smile flickered across my face, almost bashful, and then I brought the wine glass that I held up to my lips and took a sip of the pastel pink liquid it held.

Chilling on my tongue and teeth and tingling on my throat, yet When it fell down into my stomach the prosecco cocktail burned: the kind of burning one might have felt when doing something they had wanted to do since a child, and the kind of burning I felt now with my lover beside me, alone yet together with the waves lapping at the cliff side and the far-off mountains holding the sun up. The children adored this place too, and always found some way to entertain themselves if ever they found the landmarks to be dull. Sophia had grown up here and, when our twins had been born, made it a point to come here as soon as we could.

Silvery-blue waves rose and fell in a rhythmic harmony with the soft breeze. Seagulls, squawking with the same mad excitement I and Sophia and Tomi and Katja surely felt, now nestled in their dips in the cliffs and settled down for the night. Tomi and Katja had shortly followed suit: they were kids after all, and, no matter how much energy they had in the heat of the morning, the evening thick and heavy with humidity always weighed down on them in the end. Night was falling fast now, the sun's rays now hidden from view behind a horizon, way off in the distance, just barely separating deep sea from deep sky. This was what we had come here to witness, what I had planned since we had first met many years ago. My home land, as beautiful as it was, could never match the scarlet sunsets of Italy, nor its fascinating monuments.

And this is why me and my better half sat here now. Waiting. For, once the other families had packed up and left for home or hotel, Sophia and myself would race down to those calmly lapping waves, and we'd swim like our lives depended on it.

"Shall we, love?" I turned to her, but she'd already fallen asleep beneath her wide-brimmed hat. Her chest rose and fell, and I felt my heart beating along too, falling into step behind hers. Minutes, hours, days could have passed and I would have been perfectly content sitting there, gazing upon her, hoping every moment would last.

But we couldn't stay here forever. Not like this, not when the waves waited for us below. And so I lifted the hat from her face and flicked her nose. Gently, of course. She awoke, and I smiled down at her, and after a second of blank confusion she blinked, slowly, like a cat. She smiled back, and my heart beat faster for her, falling out of sync.

"What was that, mi amore?"

"The ocean. There's no one around." She gave me a look, then, the sort of look we always gave each other when we thought the same thing. Her eyes squinting with the delight of the same smile she always gave me she rose, and I rose too, and we wandered down the steps together, hand in hand. Upon reaching the beach I flinched: soft but cold sand underfoot, wedging itself between my toes like tiny pebbles of ice.

"I thought Italy was supposed to be warm."

Sophia laughed and shook her head with a simple "you know how temperature works," before pulling me along, gripping harder as she did so. I couldn't resist. That, and she was stronger than me.

The silvery sweet light of the moon washed down upon the shore, bathing us both in its cool light and lapping gently at the waves which, in turn, did the same to us, just barely reaching the tips of our toes

at the height of each swash. With every step further and further in, the water rose to meet us, warming us, the sun having heated it up in the day. Just for us.

Sophia stopped, water up to her thighs. She gazed upon me with those eyes of hers, a blackness so gently and so all-consuming that I just wanted to stare into them forever. As dark as the ocean, and just as deep, too.

“What are you looking at?” Her sweet voice broke me from my thoughts.

“You.”

Sophia laughed again and I blushed, knowing full well what she'd say before she said it: “That's cheesy.”

We said no more after that, instead allowing ourselves to become one with the moment. Sophia was one half of me, but that didn't mean anything if you couldn't glue the two pieces together. And nature, being out here, away from everything, everyone... that was our glue.

Until it tore my better half from me.

Zak Bird

"After a long night battling darkness, tinder-box conditions and high walls of flame, firefighters continue to lose ground in Calabasas - over 300 acres and several homes have burned, with the Santa Ana winds blowing strong..." Carrie idly flipped her lighter back and forth on the bar - forwards, backwards - eyes transfixed to the flickering images on the television. It's hard to look away from your town in flames. She'd watched it play out in slow motion - as fire engulfed the hillsides, working its way down through state parks and stilt-houses, tinting the sky a murky orange as it encroached on her suburb.

She rolled her lighter onto its side, letting it fall back to the table with a satisfying thud. It was behind the golf course now. She withdrew a cigarette from her purse, running the paper through her fingers as she scanned the room. Her neighbours congregated in small groups; the PTA moms, the socialites... each talking amongst themselves about the many ways their children were growing up too fast, or the riveting details of last Saturday at the mall.

Carrie didn't want to find a clique - it was much too similar to high school. Maybe her neighbours did. Why else would they try so hard to divide themselves? She flicked her lighter, a soft flame flickering in the pale light. She held it in her hand for what felt like forever - watching the flame falter in the artificial breeze circulating from the air conditioner. "You can't smoke in here." One of the PTA moms reminded her - appearing out of nowhere like a disgruntled teacher, staring her down in the school bathroom. She didn't bother to respond before making her exit. The recreational centre sat on the opposing hillside - overlooking the planned community.

They'd been holed up here for several hours now - since the fire got past the Olive Garden - and the city was evacuated. There was nobody out on the lawns. Her neighbours preferred to stay inside. You couldn't see the fire from in there. It had reached the west side of the charter school - flames dancing over the skeletal frames of houses as they swayed viciously in the winds, shedding speckles of white ash into columns of black. "It's an act of god." She turned slightly, averting her eyes from the copper horizon. "Fire's a part of nature" Silas stood behind her - hands in his pockets, blond hair blowing in the high winds. Her brother-in-law had moved to the area a year ago, after her husband died. It was good for the kids - to have a father figure around, and it was clear he felt sorry for her. She'd always thought he was an idiot. She still did. "Act of god..." she repeated under her breath, turning back to face the flames. "Those are people's homes." He shrugged off the comment, moving in closer. "You know, FEMA's going to set them up at the Hilton, in Anaheim..." - he mused, staring out at the blaze.

He didn't look at her when he spoke. She didn't look at him either. "They're gonna get room service - premium cable - those little towels with logos on them - then they'll come back, build it back up, bigger..." "Then God's going to burn it down again, because never wanted them here. "My house is about to burn to the ground" She retorted, more aggressively than she intended. "You got insurance?" "My life is about to burn to the ground, my memories are about to burn to the ground - the don't make a policy for that." She let the silence hang in the dry air. It felt like she had won an argument. She didn't intend on having one. "Then it's a sign." Silas sighed. She didn't turn away from the fire, yet she could feel his eyes on her. "A sign?" "That it's time to move on - that you don't belong here." "That this..." - Silas's breath hitched in his throat as he gestured emptily to the subdivision. "This is not your home." "What am I going to do?" - she turned expectantly to Silas. He shrugged off her comment again. "You're smart, you're pretty..." "Yeah, I'll think of something, huh?" Carrie interjected, pitch heightening. "I'll think of something" She spat - staring right through Silas with intent.

Her eyes watered as she gestured back towards the suburb. "That's my entire life - all that." "Entire life... come on." He echoed back. Her eyes burned when she looked at him - emotion brimming in her tongue. Silas never fought with her. Sometimes she wished he would. "This is one tiny valley" He pointed outward, into the haze. "Over the hill, there's another one just like it." They just stood there after that. She wanted to fight - but she'd settle for silence. "Which one is your house?" He asked. The valley was littered with houses, lined up like beige tombstones under a dusty sky. They stared back anonymously - each one slightly different, yet it wasn't enough to distinguish them from the monotonous lull the neighbourhood seemed to have. The houses on the other hillside had their roofs a slightly different hue of red. The houses closest to her had a different pattern on their particle board. "That one" - she pointed, before slowly pulling her arm back. "No - that one" - she pointed, more hesitantly this time, to another house a few streets over. She squinted along the empty asphalt of the

tiered streets - devoid of life, eerily black against the washed-out facades of empty houses. She tried to remember if hers was more creme, or eggshell? If from her pool she faced down, or up the hillside - if she had a view of windowless back walls or nondescript roof tiles on a hot summer day?

"It's... over there somewhere." - her finger hovered over the bulk of the development. "Maybe the fire won't get there" - Silas prophesied. "You could stay here forever." She flipped the lighter over in the palm of her hand. Forwards, backwards.

Maisie Cutler

The Place That Cradled Me is Burning

When you've been awake for so long, the terrible sustained ticking of the clock becomes similar to the beating of your own heart. Ever-present. Unlike the pulsation of the heart, I am unable to turn a deaf ear to it. Its incessantness is monstrous. Worst of all, it is a reminder that time is passing.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I have no idea how long I've been awake.

At some point, you stop feeling tired altogether. This is nightmarish. Oh, how I yearn for nightmares now. What I wouldn't give to wake up, perspiring and relieved to escape such sickening terror. There is no escaping this, I feel. It has been too long. All that is left to do is decay, and I think this room is decaying with me. The sickly green wallpaper is beginning to peel away. Such wickedness it must be concealing.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

There is nothing left for me here. The world, in all its cruelty, has moved on. Each day the rain washes away the sins of the outside world. Such a luxury is not available to me.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

With all the strength I have left in my forearms, I lift myself up on my bed. My gaze meets... someone. I know I am alone. It is my reflection, dull as ever. I look in the mirror, but I don't see myself. I am grey, harsh, uncomfortable to look upon. As I rub my eyes, I notice my hands for the first time in what feels like forever. My knuckles jut out sharply, my fingers are spindling... such immense physical transformation is ghastly to see with one's own two eyes.

Tick. Tick.

In the corners of my clouded vision, I can see the women. I see them all of the time now. They're not like the other shadows; they seem real to me. At first, their presence induces an uneasiness, but I have eventually found them to be peculiarly comforting.

They come closer. And closer. I had never been able to see them so closely before.

Tick.

A sound other than my heart, other than the clock. My body softens. The rain is drizzling...

"You can sleep now".

Joel Darcy

Skies, Meadows, and Stars

It was summer, on a warm day, there was a slight breeze that sifted through the air pleasantly, and the warmth was like a gentle stroke against the skin. I'd say it was perfect weather, and without a cloud in the sky. The sun shone through my window and bathed my room in golden light. That day already seemed magical, but it was to get more so. I got dressed, had breakfast, and started to go to her house. It was a long journey but I never cared, I just couldn't wait to see her again. And even still, to this day, every day, I just can't wait to see her.

On the way, I made a stop to pick up some food. A mix of her favourites and mine. When I did get there, she came out to meet me, and she was ethereal. She always was. I imagine she is sick to death of hearing me say how pretty it is, I just cannot say it enough, but in the sun, she was beautiful; she meant everything to me and that moment reminded me of that.

After I recollected my thoughts and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, we set back to where we'd have the food: the hill, right by my house. We got back when it was around three in the afternoon and we began to walk to the foot of the hill- where the meadows were. The soft breeze shook the flowers and grass gently, I picked some of them up and gave them to her awkwardly, to which she smiled her precious smile and laughed her precious laugh as she took them from my hands.

I kept staring into her eyes. I couldn't help it, they were a cozy colour of brown and they reflected like jewels in the brightness of the afternoon sun. We stood in the meadows for a while, gazing at the horses in the far-off fields living peacefully amongst the tranquility of the day.

I turned my eyes to her and she turned hers to me, and she smiled her precious smile again. Again, we set off walking up through the cool shade of the forest on the incline all the while thinking about her- even when I am with her, all I can think about is her. I took her hand in mine. Soft, it was, like a warm blanket that covers you all over in a cocoon of comfort and peace, that's how it felt when we held our hands together. Tight. Like we would never want to let go. I don't think we did. I shan't forget how it almost made me tear up that we so loved one another that we didn't want to let go of each other.

We wanted to face it all together. In about twenty minutes we reached the top of the hill after spending around fifteen in the graceful meadows. Overlooking the suburbs where I grew up, unbeknownst to young me that I would be there with the girl I truly adored one day, we sat down on the blanket I brought and ate the food. I was anxious to see if she liked it so I gracelessly stumbled over my words trying to ask, "Is it okay?", to which she responded by smiling her precious smile and nodding in affirmation.

I am not sure how she puts up with my awkwardness, but the fact she does makes me appreciate her so much more. The time was just melting away the more and more we talked and the more and more we gazed into each other's eyes without speaking. At one point we lay down looking up into the skies as the sun began to set and as the stars began to appear, her head lay on my chest, and I stroked her flowing dark hair. We lay there for a good while, then the stars came out fully. It was incredible. Like millions and millions of minuscule lanterns, they glittered playfully in the deep abyss of space.

This time, I did tear up a little, and she must've noticed, and she placed her palm on the side of my face and stroked it slowly. It just made me tear up more; the fact I was witnessing such an amazing sight was one thing, but to share it with her made it truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I hadn't felt anything like it for a long time before that. No fears, worries, doubts. Complete joy. Happiness, unlike any other happiness. I was with her. I always wanted to be. I stared into her eyes as she, too, gazed into the sky, then into my eyes. Everything melted away, other than her. I was floating. She sat up across from me, and I kissed her. I held her close to me and I felt our heartbeats match, and I felt my soul ease and grow calm. I know she makes me happy. Down to my soul and within every level of my being. Under the skies, by the meadows, and lighted by a million stars, we embraced each other in the gentle hold of love.

Hannah Partington

Skin and Stone

Dim light. Hollow walls. Melted candles. Down below, in the bowels of the Verrillian castle was a secret room- hidden by a wall. Behind the false limestone brick, there housed an array of bookshelves and artefacts. One of which being a head-sized, stone mask with fangs engraved into it. This was the mask originally worn by Rydian LaViere after The Old Kingdom had turned to madness in their experiments. The ancient relic granted vampires- and vampires alone- enhanced magical abilities, turning them into blood-lusting mutants: The Erivane. These were such powers as immense strength and speed, extended youth, and even time manipulation. However, its creators had become consumed with its glorified potency thus, only one was ever produced. Not much is known about The Old Kingdom's experiments. Nevertheless, rumours were passed around in whispers from town to town about its existence- as well as its suspected 'revolutionary' doings...

Within this ominous, damp room sat the man himself. Rydian was a tall, pale man with teeth as sharp as swords and eyes as piercing as a flaming green arrow. In the vampire's right hand, a book was clutched tightly; in the left, a crystalized glass was balanced delicately, almost filled to the brim with a mix of brandy and the rare tears of a lioness- only the finest blend for the King of the mighty Verrillian country. But outside, garbed in a cloak as dark as the abyss itself, a young-looking woman charged through the magnificently twisted iron gates. She grasped a cane of ebony wood, the handguard decorated with a phoenix of silver colours that encircled its wooden frame. It tapped lightly against the marble flooring as the woman made her way forth towards the halls, pausing once she stood next to a guard. This one looked at her with an unamused expression, at least until she spoke.

"Bring me your king."

The short blonde's voice was soft and hushed, merely above a whisper, but so cold that the guard was left with no other choice but to oblige to the woman's request. He hurriedly departed from her presence to request the King of Verrillia. The blonde woman waited where she had been left, her stance rigid, almost as if she had become a statue of sorts. It took the guard little over four minutes to reach the bottom of the massive spiral staircase which led down to Rydian's chambers. The man shielded in iron eluded the situation to his majesty, in which his only response was to stand up and take a step forward. The vampire's foot collided with the ground, sending out a loud distorted sound that rippled through the air. He disappeared from the guard's sight. This ripple occurred three more times, Rydian seeming to teleport with each one. Ephemeraly, the vampire stood behind the cloaked figure, a grin present on his face whilst his fangs poked out at his lower lip.

"Who has summoned me?"

Spoke Rydian with a thunderous voice that was still somehow alluring in a way. His natural ability to charm and seduce is what originally gained him this position of power. His guest turned on her heels, her milky-blue pupils settling on the tall brunette that now stood before her, yet she wasn't entirely looking at him. Her gaze was unfocused, a clear sign that the small woman that stood before him was blind. Her expression held no hint of emotion, with lips kept in a straight line and eyes blinking once every few minutes.

"You smell... inhuman..."

She mumbled, taking in a deep breath through her nose before facing the vampire completely. Then her body dipped, forming a slight curtsey, before straightening her posture and settling her cane firmly before her with a sharp 'thud'. Rydian leant forward, his hands placed comfortably in his pockets as per his normal stance. He gazed into the woman's eyes, taking note of her unfocused gaze. He chuckled lowly at her comment; it was certainly a new one.

"Has it occurred to you, dear lady, that I might I smell inhuman because I am inhuman? Perhaps at a time, I was not, but now no longer... but to whom do I owe the honour of calling me inhuman?"

A slight taunting tone ambled across his dark lips, his words rolling smoothly through his mouth.

"I am Lyssa Daephene, Queen of the Deadland capital."

The same hushed yet biting tone of voice she had used on the Guard earlier rose from her fragile throat. Her thin brows furrowed.

"You surely are a brave Noble- to come here without protection of your own."

"I need no protection, young one. It is you who should stand alert... I am not the only one who had plans visit this kingdom. I came here to deliver a mere warning from the Ashen Priest, for his word is to always be true: something great approaches. He has told me; the poles will scorn; the desert will flood; the forests will wither. Life as we know it will fade into nothingness."

When speaking of the higher nobility, a serene tone took over Lyssa's voice. Now, she could smell the vampire's blood, which set her gut to a hungry growl. A pink blush peppered her pale cheeks as she straightened her back and 'glanced' away, pretending to turn her attention elsewhere. The great King regained the grin on his lips, a sense of mockery lingering on the tip of his sharp tongue. Standing back up, he ran his hand through the clump of brunette locks on his head.

"Oh, apologies. Your warning is greatly appreciated. Although, I doubt it will affect us much."

"It is not exactly a warning, but a prophecy. All kingdoms will be affected. The Watcher of The Gate is dead. All prisoners have been freed- among them, the Cult of Dyskra. All there is left is for Her to be awoken."

Sinéad Leckey

Lovestruck

Slowly, Molly picked her way through the fields of poppies covering the hilltop. She was a petite woman with light brown eyes and fiery red hair. Many had once described her as full of life and always surrounded by people. She had loved to dance the night away and laugh with anyone who listened. However, now she wore a simple white dress and was quite alone in the world. Her once perpetually gleeful expression was downturned as she shuffled through the overgrown grass with an air of reluctance. Thousands of tiny explosions of red covered the fields and set the countryside alight with each one representing a life lost in battle. The sodden ground tugged at her every footstep as if urging her to stop walking and join the fallen who had already taken her heart.

As she neared the top of the hill, the small fingers of light created by the rising sun stretched lazily across the valley bellow and warmed her face gently. She drew her gaze away from the river of red to look upon the bright white gravestone set in front of her.

“In loving memory of William Grant,
beloved Husband and Son,
You Will Be Missed
12th June 1985- 22nd May 2020”

Molly lowered herself onto the grass and peered at the sharp engraving that had not yet been touched by the destruction of time. Suddenly tears began to blur the gravestone and made the white marble begin to mix with the blood red flowers surrounding it. She began to remember the first time they had met in the local coffee shop. William had been sat cradling a cup of coffee when she had tripped over her own feet on the way to the counter. He had swiftly jumped up and caught her. She had blushed profusely while apologising but he had calmly sat her down and offered to buy her a drink. Then she noticed the deep blue of his eyes which had relaxed her and almost comforted her. He had been 6 foot tall with defined muscles which made him quite intimidating, yet his graceful movements and soft smile gave her the impression he was a gentle giant. At that moment she had settled into the seat opposite him and struck up a conversation. That was 15 years ago yet the intense lust and overwhelming sense of happiness she felt when she was close to him was as fresh as their first kiss.

Their first kiss had been on a cold, stormy night when they had decided to stay in and watch a movie. As the film played, they had edged closer until Molly was buried in William’s strong arms. When the credits had began, they had locked eyes and Molly was once again startled by the deep blue of his eye which drew her in and made her want to never leave. In that moment, she had gently pressed her lips against his. The warmth and tenderness of his lips created small explosions of excitement within her and she knew that he was the one she would always want. Soon they were married in a small church only a mile away from the fields which she now perched on.

A slight breeze began to rustle the tall grass surrounding her and sent a chill down her spine. She wrapped her arms around her knees and carefully rested her head on the gravestone. Tears freely flowed down her cheeks now as silent sobs rocked her body. She felt her whole world crumbling around her as she peered up at the watery sky which was now beginning to become cloudy and grey. The warmth of the sun was momentarily blocked, and the world was thrown into a gloom.

Molly began to remember the day William had left to fight in the war. He had been dressed in a slightly oversized army uniform with a rucksack full of his belongings slung over his shoulder. A deep

sadness had overcome Molly as she pressed roughly into William’s side and begged him not to leave. He had gently pressed his wedding ring into her hand and whispered for her to keep it until he returned. Then he had turned and made his way to the bus stop. Molly had watched his muscular figure slowly disappear while clutching the wedding ring.

Months passed with letters coming regularly until one week they suddenly stopped. A sense of dread had filled her until one warm, sunny day when she had received the call. Birds had been singing in the treetops and children could be heard laughing and playing outside. But in that moment, time had appeared to stop as she had sat clutching the phone in silence for what felt like eternity. Her whole

world had fallen silent as she stared at a picture of William on the windowsill. She had remained like that for hours until finally she had curled into a ball and wept. She had cried and cried and cried until her voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper. The birds no longer sang soft lullabies but instead they preached a horrid tune, as if they too heard Molly's cries. Soon, the pitter-patter of rain could be heard on the windows and the house became a place of hatred for Molly as it was now and forever a place devoid of a soul.

Now she sat running her fingers along the smooth golden surface of the ring. Grey clouds covered the sky and threatened to cover the fields in a fresh layer of water. The poppies appeared to be bending over now as if awaiting the inevitable shower of bullet sized raindrops – ready to be struck down once more. Molly turned once more to the gravestone, filled with desperation and despair over her once perfect life lying broken in front of her.

Closing her eyes, she mumbled "What do you want me to do?"

Becca Southwick

The memory came rushing in, and it took every inch of my soul not to suppress the heat that burned through my veins. Not to ruin the process.
This is the least I could do. I had promised.
I took in a breath.

Then she was running.
I was running.

A smell that I didn't recognise flooded my being and tighten my throat, every breath feels like a battle im not sure I can face.

'Monster!' voices blare out behind me. I hear click of a gun loading and drag myself through the darkness, each step heavy and unbearable.

A high-pitched screech cuts through me.

'Monster stop! There is trouble ahead'.

She just laughs.

What makes you think I will listen to you?

She thinks.

And thats when it happens.

The ground opens up beneath her and swallows her down.

I can feel her heart catch in her chest as her limbs flail, tearing at the wind. The bright rays of the sun blind her eyes, blurring her senses.

Her lungs burn.

She starts to cry. From fear. from rage.

I hear the end before I feel it.

The smack of her body against the concrete.

Then I wake up.

Daz is slouched against a swivel chair, I watch him twirling his long white beard hairs into ringlets around his fingers.

"Well done, Myra" he says , after a short time.

"How did that feel?"

A loaded question,

Horrible' I want to say.

The phone rings, Daz picks it up.

I can hear the stifled muffles from the other side of the phone, it is silent for a while as we both listen.
"Okay" Daz says, "That should be no problem."

he continues "That was the people from the lab upstairs, they've said the results aren't clear enough, they need you to do it again".

"And what if I say no?"

"I'm sorry?"

I repeat it. "What if I say no , what will they do? they can't force me can they? isn't that against their values or whatever"

Daz looks at me for a while , his hazel eyes feel like they're drilling holes into my skin

"Suppose we don't want to find out do we , Myra?" he says, not unkindly.

"No" I say, "Suppose not".

Note from the competition organiser:

Thank you so much to everyone who submitted their entries! There were a lot of good submissions which made it difficult to narrow the top ten. I hope everyone who submitted their work enjoyed letting their creativity flow, thank you for sharing your stories with me. Keep writing, keep creating and please, be proud of your work!

Katerina

Thank you Katerina for all of your hard work and enthusiasm in putting on this competition, and congratulations to the writers of the 'Top Ten' stories, Caitlin, Jasmine, Rosie, Eleanor, Zak, Maisie, Joel, Hannah, Sinéad & Becca! I am impressed by all of your imaginative and creatively-crafted entries, and I hope that each of you enjoyed producing them as much as I enjoyed reading them!

Sue Dobson

Aspire Programme Coordinator & Teacher of English