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National
Year of
Reading
2026

National Storytelling Week

KS3 Anthology 2026

Stories in sound



National Storytelling Week

Anthology 2026

National Literacy Trust

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We are also incredibly grateful to Amazon, whose generous support made our National Storytelling Week project possible.

About the National Literacy Trust

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that empowers children, young people and adults with the literacy skills they need to succeed. Over the last 30 years, we have continued to work with people who need us the most, supporting schools, families and communities on a local and national level.

Our Young Writers Programme supports schools to develop lasting writing for pleasure practices with the view that every young person is a writer. Over the last ten years, we have developed a range of writing programmes based on our evidence-based ‘three-pillar model’ for writing that emphasises the importance of memorable experiences, working with professional authors and providing a real audience and purpose for writing.

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Introduction

In 2025, we found that writing enjoyment amongst children and young people aged 8 to 18, was at the lowest level we've recorded. Our research highlights that exploring stories through lyrics can be an effective way to re-engage young people with reading for enjoyment and writing for pleasure. Just over 3 in 5 (60.7%) children and young people age 8-18 regularly read song lyrics digitally. Writing song lyrics is also popular among children and young people age 8-18, with almost 1 in 5 (17.8%) reporting that they write lyrics on a screen at least once a month.

This gave us a clear mandate to celebrate National Storytelling Week 2026, to promote writing enjoyment through the art of storytelling. Like lyrics, stories teach us about the world, they allow us to step into someone else's shoes and feel empathy, they help us to relax and escape and they can help develop essential literacy skills. Storytelling has never been more important.

In 2026 National Storytelling Week took place from 2 February to 8 February. Created by the Society for Storytelling, this fantastic annual event is a joyful celebration of the power of sharing stories. The National Literacy Trust supported by Amazon, celebrated with the theme of **Soundtrack your Story**. Everyone has their own musical story - whether it's in the songs we love and the music we dance to, through British Sign Language and the rhythms we feel, the soundscapes of everyday life or the soundtracks we hear in films and games. Music connects us

to words. It helps us express who we are and how we see the world. Key Stage 3/ S1-S3 pupils explored storytelling as a meaningful form of self-expression with Jeffrey Boakye, by responding to writing prompts through interactive workshops and activities in school. This anthology is a celebration of the writing that was produced.

Forever Young

Forever young, forever young, I want to be forever young. I want to go back into the past, when there was no worry or terror or wrath. I missed those days when summer will come and the sun's rays blessed me while I simply overcame my fears and tears and scares and all but now they have multiplied, more than worse.

Forever young, forever young, I want to be forever young. I want again to breathe peacefully not suffocate and drown easily. I don't know how freedom feels, because this world has become too real, too real that living habitats before had been dragged to its own lore.

Forever young, forever young, I want to be forever young. Oh how I wished you understand how our world was before this bland! This bland that was caused because of your claws that wasn't tamed, now you've brought our world to flames.

Forever young, forever young, I want to be forever young. Do you want to live forever, forever and ever? Or do you want to wither into space without wonder? I wished there was enough time but it's too late, you've spent every dime

Sussan, Chatham Grammar

The Space Between

I was six when the world I knew began to tilt, just slightly at first, like a picture frame hanging crooked on a wall. Nothing looked different if you only glanced. My cereal bowl was still the same bright yellow. My school shoes still squeaked on the kitchen tiles, but the air felt different, heavier somehow, like the house was holding a secret it didn't know how to tell.

I noticed things without understanding them. The way Mum's voice sounded stretched, like she was pulling it too tight. The way Dad paused in the doorway, keys in hand, as if he wasn't sure whether to come in or turn back. I didn't have the words for any of it, so I made up stories in my head. Maybe they were tired. Maybe grown ups forgot how to smile sometimes. Maybe I had done something wrong without knowing.

After they told me, everything changed quietly, like someone had rearranged the furniture in the dark. I stayed with Mum most of the time. Her house became my main world. School mornings, bedtime stories, my favourite mug waiting on the counter. Dad's house became something smaller, like a place I visited in a dream. I went there on some weekends, but not all. Sometimes plans changed. Sometimes he was busy. Sometimes he just didn't arrive.

At Mum's, I learned the rhythm of our new life. She tied my shoelaces with hands that shook a little. She tried to smile more than she felt like smiling. I tried to help in the ways a six year old thinks help works. By being quiet, by colouring at the table while she made dinner, by hugging her without saying anything. We became a team, and we had chosen to be one.

My older brother understood the world differently, not wrongly, just differently, and the changes were harder for him to untangle. He liked routines, quiet corners, and knowing exactly what came next. I learned to read the way his whole face lit up when something made sense to him, and how he went quiet when the world felt too loud. My baby brother clung to Mum, to bedtime stories, to the safety of being held. The three of us moved through those early days like puzzle pieces trying to fit into a new picture.

Dad's house felt unfamiliar, like wearing someone else's jumper. The rooms were quieter. The walls didn't know my footsteps yet. When I did visit, he tried very hard, and I could feel the trying in everything. The too big pancakes, the toys he bought that didn't feel like mine, the way he asked if I was having fun even when I wasn't sure. I always said yes. I didn't want to make anything harder.

But the hardest part wasn't the visits; it was the space between them. Packing a small bag with clothes that never felt like the right ones. Wondering if Dad missed me when I wasn't there. Wondering if I was supposed to miss him more loudly. Feeling guilty for liking Mum's house better, even though it was just where my life fit in.

As I grew older the confusion softened; years later I found a picture of the five of us before everything shifted. We were sunlight and laughing, all pressed together like we belonged to the same heartbeat. Our family had changed shape, but the love hadn't vanished. It had stretched across houses, across years, across the three of us growing up side by side.

We kept going, not perfectly, but together, and that was enough to keep us standing.

Estelle, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Operation Tidal Wave

I don't know what we are doing or who sent us, but I know one thing. Gossip gets around. On HMS Explorer, I have learnt that secrets spread, in the mess hall, in the kitchen, on duty and in bunkers, you will hear things, confidential, between the admiral and the captain. You see, I am very good friends with the vice admiral, so I find myself told some low-key information. I'm called Noah and do marine engineering (weaponry and artillery) on HMS Explorer. Well, anyway, I was in the front right gun turret, around the barrel in the central axis, I saw a print stuffed in an empty shell, it read M-6 U----wn R0a--- H- , what? I studied it and asked around, but I could not find an answer. I asked the cryptologic technician, intelligence officer, and in the end, I gave it to the admiral for it wasn't mine to study. I thought he could solve the code, so I asked to see him, 3:00pm Wednesday afternoon. As I went back to the bunkers, I thought that the piece of paper could have been the reason I am here, and who sent us here.

Wednesday 2:55pm

Walking briskly, because of the chilly gust creeping through my clothes. I reach for the door, then stopped, I looked out on the never ending sea, boundless waves hitting the ocean with a metallic clang, a rhythmic pattern. I've been on this boat for 3 months stretching endlessly through time, with no known purpose or mission. Well, it is time to find out. In the room I found the admiral studying charts with a compass, when he saw me, he quickly took them off the table, then he said, "ah hello Noah, please sit down" and he offered me an old and dusty red chair, "I see you have found this piece of parchment" he grumbled, "yes" I said, " Well let me tell you something, this is not a small secret."

When he said this my heart jumped around in its cage. “I trust you with this information Noah, you are my best engineer, but you must promise not to share it.” “Yes,” I said proudly, I was so excited, but I knew he was keeping something. “Look I, well...well.. we were sent by MI6” he said quickly. “You mean, THE MI6?” “Yes,” he replied, like he had said it 10,000 times. “Who knows this, other than you and me?” I asked curiously. “Me and the captain, and the admiral of the HMS destroyer, and obviously MI6,” he said. “Why, why did they send us, with such a big force?” again I asked. “Because, well, they found an unknown signal coming from...”. Before he could continue, an ear-splitting wail of a siren, echoed through the steel plating of the ship.

John, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

The Viper

The viper lay curled peacefully around her eggs, a living barrier of sinewy flesh and muscle. Keratin-formed weeks ago, they were piled high in the gritty dip of a sandbank. Frothy waves washed over the sand: to the viper, they tasted of the bony, slippery fish she had caught just this morning. Greedily, the reptile slunk off to the sea to obtain tasty morsels.

However, the snake found herself distraught soon afterwards- a gigantic crab was in her precious nest, gorging itself disgustingly on her vital eggs! Hissing with unconcealed rage and fury, she launched herself upon the crab. Somehow sensing the incoming threat, the crustacean scuttled fluidly off to the side, the remains of her wonderful eggs splattered across its mouth.

The viper screeched obscenities at the satisfied crab, which promptly disappeared beneath the roaring waves. As the curtain of night fell, the darkness suffocating like a blanket, she coiled protectively around her few remaining eggs. To the slippery reptile, the consumption of one's brood was crossing a line into unspeakable horror. But, the wind seemed to whistle to her, that is the way of life – eat or be eaten.

As the pale pink sun rose, obscured by the pearly white clouds, the crab returned. Her head just protruding from a dune, she gazed in horror and a savage feeling of delight as the unwary crustacean crept closer. The viper was smarting for revenge... Crawling ever nearer, the crab's eyes darted around whilst while its claws clicked.

In that moment, the snake struck.

The first few heartbeats of the engagement were a violent tussle – the viper’s superior movement against the crab’s superior armament. Claws like vices pinched hard on the reptile’s tail, bringing a fresh wave of pain of fury. She tried to impale her inches-long, serrated teeth into the crab’s white flesh-but to no avail! The shell was beyond penetration for those fangs!

The viper spun, whisking her tail away of those razor-sharp pincers. She lashed it back towards the agitated crustacean, who sprung over the tip of those oily scales. He brought his larger claw down like a hammer and beat her away. Circling each other like wolves, the stunned, wounded viper sized up her unharmed opponent.

Briefly, she considered fleeing: but she knew the crab would consistently return until all her would-be young were down his greedy gullet. If she left, she would have failed her children. This thought empowered with a sense of grief, but at the same time, purpose.

Her children at the forefront of her reptilian mind, she lashed savagely using her tail, with the force of a thunderbolt. Almost comically, the crab spun like a top, ending with his stubby legs waving in the air. Sensing a window, the only window she would have to succeed, she struck her fangs deep and held them in its flesh for what seemed like eternity. Withdrawing her head suddenly, she watched with satisfaction at the yellow pus oozing out of the crab as it died.

Ben, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Niki Lauda: From Flames to Fearlessness

Niki Lauda, a legendary racer,
A quick thinker and outpacer.
He won 3 championships (which is very nice),
Though now that we come to think about it, at what price?

The Austrian was born with two hardworking parents
They owned a paper company on Vienna's Versants
He had an ambition for motorsport and racing,
They disapproved; did they know what they were facing?

Niki began his career in a mini cooper.
In formula vee, super duper
He was too good; over with formula vee
He had finally ranked up to formula 3

He had had a good season in formula 3
Flying like an eagle with a car as deadly
But he had took out a £30,000 loan too
So he could race in formula 2

A few years later in 1973
Niki Lauda joined Ferarri
He had found a seat in formula 1
But he didn't know there was more to come

However on 1st August 1976,
Lauda's car smashed into bits....
...At the Nürburgring in Germany
Niki would leave in emergency

During the second lap at the fast left turn
Niki Lauda was left to burn
He swerved off the track into the embankment;
His car burst into flames with nobody to help him...

He suffered damaged lungs that were tricky to fix,
Yet he escaped from the flames like a free phoenix
He had severe burns all over his head
But his successful career wasn't over yet...

... he went on to win three world championships
And showed great courage and sportsmanship
He also won 25 grand prix
And showed that not all problems are easy to fix

Tedros, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Seagulls

I woke up by the chirping from my friends and my peers, singing merry tunes and enjoying the day. Although weather today was bad, our morale was happy (as usual) and especially today, there were still a lot of humans to get food from.

The seaside has always been a destination for the dumb humans to come and have fun but instead getting food stolen from us (the seagulls). Today, I am looking for some fresh fish and chips, my favourite, so I am on my best eagle eyes to spot out a possible prey.

The sky was clearing, meaning that there were going to be more humans arriving at the seaside! seeing that it was already 1:00 pm all my friends dove in for food but I was still waiting for a weak prey so that there will be close to none effort involved in getting my lunch. I had a feeling this is going to be a long day!

After a while of intense searching, I find a mother and a young girl carrying just what I needed, fish and chips! It looks so delicious that I can smell it from the branch that settled down on. I knew this scheme had to be very carefully executed and had to be foolproof; young humans are very likely to cry making an enormous mass of noise. So without further ado, I took action. I hid behind some abnormally chunky leaves on a tall tree so that I am not visible to any humans and I waited for the perfect moment to swoop down, grab the food, and take flight again. After about five minutes, the perfect moment came and I took my opportunity to take what I wanted. I charged at the little girl and nicks her food just as she was about to take one of the chips. Yes!

Yes! Yes! The food I wanted is mine and I should be happy... but...I am not... There's a feeling, a sensation inside me telling me that something is wrong. I looked down and saw the little girl, upset and was holding back tears. The mother was comforting her but in a way, I knew that I made this little girl upset. I felt something that I have never felt inside: guilt. I was guilty that I stole her food.

I came down to the little girl and dropped the food onto the ground in front of her. She looked confused and shocked and looked up at her mother, unsure of what to do. She smiled at me and then picked it up continuing to walk. I felt a sudden shock of warmth travelling all around me and I knew I had done the right thing. I saw them walk over to the bin and threw the fish and chips inside it. I couldn't believe it but I knew that I should always have done the correct things which made me feel happier!

Sodi, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

The Leap

In the plane 15 thousand feet above France, they were under attack from enemy fire. The intermittent hum of propellers. Bullets hammered against the open bay doors. A loud roar came from the cockpit of the cargo plane they were standing on. Captain Milo braced himself as he leapt from the bay doors. The red cord dangled high up in the air just out of Milo's grasp. His fingers wrapped around the cold, metal tab. He yanked it as hard as he could but no parachute emerged, he began free-falling down towards the Earth.

As he plummeted towards the ground, he tried to remember what they had learnt during training but.... Suddenly it hit him, his jet-propelled wing suit, that he didn't steal from the sky-diving centre nearby. He spread his arms and legs out wide, a large side mounted parachute under his arms connected to his leg. As he accelerated, reality began to shift around him. Time began to flash past Milo's eyes.

Dinosaurs walking the earth, then Gladiators fighting in a colosseum. As he slowly descended towards the earth, artillery fire landed all around him sending dirt flying up. Long lines dug deep into the earth stretched all along the coast of France. As he landed someone wearing a dark green hat with a silver flag on the brim approached him and asked, "What witchcraft of a hat is on your head?"

Milo replied "What do you mean? It is just a normal helmet used to stop shrapnel from penetrating your brain." The hatted man introduced himself as Sergeant Major Henry. They both walked towards the trench whilst the Sergeant Major asked if Milo could help win the war and go over the trench. Milo refused but said he could help fly and build aircrafts, he wanted the top scientists to build a reality shifter so he could get back to his reality.

A car in the middle of an armoured convoy came and picked Milo up and took him to the plane factory. As they arrived, a loud siren blared and all the workers ran around wailing. A squadron of biplanes roared overhead and a shrill of whistling bombs overthrew the siren. When the bombs landed, they made a loud crash on impact. It didn't explode. Whilst someone checked it out, Milo set to work showing the other plane manufacturers how to make a modern fighter jet and destroy the people who tricked them with a wooden bomb.

Eventually the fleet of planes were completed and also the reality shifter he really needed to get back. Milo stepped inside and waved goodbye. Reality began to shift again. Dinosaurs walking the earth, gladiators fighting in an arena. With a jolt, he was back in the air falling towards the grassy field of the training-ground. Milo yanked the cord again and shot up as the parachute expanded as he landed, his platoon greeted him with open arms.

Max, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Spring Break

As the four children entered the woods, (filled with the darkest of secrets) they felt a gush of wind that sent shivers down their spines, it was spring break and the four Children : Kenzie ,Amanda, Alex, and Charlie were going on a venture They entered a place the town had dubbed “the place of regret” and they instantly found out why. The air became musty with the stench of despair. After a while of walking they finally found the place they were looking for. The abandoned camp. It wasn't “really” abandoned but no one had been there since the “accident”. The children explored the campsite noticing the forgotten kettle hovering over the pile of ashes that once was a fire. There were plates smashed on the floor and overgrown with mould and all the tents were a watered down blue with a mix of green. Kenzie shuffled towards one of the blue tents and started to unzip it. Once it was fully opened the children peered inside and.... The four children stood frozen, unable to move even the woods seemed to move into unnatural stillness, even the wind seemed to halt. A thin layer of mist started to form around their ankles making the atmosphere more mysterious. Amanda was the first to stop moving. Kenzie drifted to the side, eyes widening as the colour drained from her body. Alex lingered a few steps back frozen in his tracks. Charlie tried to steady his breathing not believing about what was in front of them. Inside, something unmoving lay half-hidden it was unmistakably the outline of a human. Amanda stepped back from the - now cold-blue tent her pulse rising. The children were so confused on what to do. Kenzie tried to call for help but there was no cell service. Charlie tried to shout for help but it was useless. They tried to find a way out of the woods but it was pointless, the woods had covered their tracks. They were trapped in a

nightmare that never ended with no way out their fate
would end up the same as the body in the blue tent.
Lifeless but with a story!

Scarlett, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

A Lonely Star

Once, high above the world, there hung a lonely star. Its glow was gentle, rather than grand. It was neither the brightest nor boldest, and among the infinite and countless constellations it went unnoticed. Night after night it shimmered dimly, watching, wondering, wishing. Until on one eve, the lonely star fell.

Down it tumbled, wrenching itself free from its place in the sky. Falling and falling through the endless dark, past the planets and comets, until at last it broke into the air of the atmosphere.

The lonely star trembled as it fell.

For though it was afraid of what awaited it at the bottom, its greatest wish had been to see more, to learn more, to feel more. More than what the sky had ever allowed.

As it plunged through the clouds it heard a sound. Giggles.

The diving star turned as best as it could and saw a cluster of raindrops tumbling beside it, spinning and laughing as it fell.

Gathering its courage it asked: "Tell me.... what awaits us below? Will the ground shatter us? Or will I finally see the world I've only ever watched from afar?"

The Raindrops chimed in together, their voices like tiny bells. "You will not shatter," they replied. "You can dance with the winds and fly on the wings of an eagle. You will see forests stretch far like oceans of green and creatures more magnificent than anything else in the sky. And once you have seen the world before you..."

They swirled closer to the star, the light reflecting off them.
“...The ground will greet you with a hug. Like a friend who’s been waiting for you all along.”

They swooshed down, disappearing into the skies below.

As if the earth had heard their conversation, an eagle flew below the star, guiding it through the winds. The eagle did not speak, but the winds did. “What if I disappear?” the star said. And the winds answered: “Nothing truly disappears. It only becomes something else.” They dove towards the mountains. “Like how a ripple becomes a tidal wave.”

The star stayed silent, then slipped from the eagle and dove faster, ignoring the heat curling through it. It saw everything: hunters and hunted, the dead returning to the ground, the fortunate and the forgotten. It watched and learned, mesmerised by what had once been out of reach. The lonely star wondered what the other stars thought of it, doing what they could only dream of.

Content, the star reached the ground. The grass coiling around it like a hug, just as the rain had promised.

But something had changed.

The oceans of green were red.

The ground trembled.

The dinosaurs, once magnificent, lay unmoving.

For this was no ordinary star,

It was a meteor.

Sophia, Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Sounds of Shadows

Lila had always felt a strange hush in her quiet town. Every night it was quiet like usual but in the shadows, there was a world of sounds. Shadows stretched long and thin across the moonlit ground, whispering secrets. Lila loved to listen to the sounds the shadows made.

Sometimes, the shadows hummed softly like a lullaby, a gentle murmur that made her feel cozy and safe. Other times, they rustled quickly, like leaves caught in a sudden breeze. Lila wondered if shadows had their own story to tell.

One night, as she sat by her window, she heard tempting whispers, like echoes from a distant place. Curious, she stepped outside and followed the sounds into the woods.

The deeper she went, the more the whispers grew clearer. Suddenly, she saw shadows flickering between the dark trees, Swerling figures that seemed alive. They moved with purpose, whispering in a language only she was beginning to understand. These shadows weren't bad; they were the echoes of the forgotten memories and lost voices, trapped between light and darkness.

Lila reached out gently. The shadows responded, swirling closer, forming shapes that told stories of the town's history, of people long gone, of secrets buried in silence. But as she listened, she realised the shadows were trying to warn her. Something was coming, a silence that would swallow all sound, all stories, if she didn't act.

The shadows flickered with urgency. They showed her visions of a looming danger; a day when the town's noise and stories would fade away forever, leaving only emptiness. If she didn't find a way to listen and preserve

these stories, the shadows would vanish, and so would their voices.

Lila felt a rush of responsibility. She understood that sound isn't just noise its memory, life, and connection. With a brave heart, she promised to protect these silent voices. She ran back to her house, thinking of ways to share the shadows stories through writing, art, or listening more carefully.

Over the coming days, Lila started collecting stories from her neighbour's, recording sounds, and drawing what she saw in the shadow. She realised that everyone's stories, even the quietest ones, deserved to be heard. The shadows had shown her that silence isn't empty, it's full of potential, waiting to be awakened.

And so, Lila became the guardian of her town's stories, ensuring that the voices of the shadows and the people would never be lost again. With each story she saved, the shadows grew calmer, their whispers turning into gentle hum of memory and hope.

The town remained quiet, but now it was filled with stories that refused to fade, a melody born from shadows, echoing forever, reminding everyone that every voice matters.

Makya, Great Academy Ashton

Endless Rain

The endless rain unforgivingly pounds against me and the dead body. It is haloed with blood long turned from thick scarlet to a diluted red. My stomach rumbles with gnawing hunger. It's been seven days after my parents looked at me with that pained, apologetic look. Their strained *'we're sorry'* must've meant little if they were okay with making us leave their house. Maybe she would've lived if my parents didn't think I was waiting to pounce and tear our family apart.

My sister's body feels so cold in my lap and the palm I have against her white cheek.

"Elise? Why won't you wake up?" She doesn't respond. She only stares at the dark, rumbling clouds outside.

Bright red and blue lights are distorted through the sobbing of the sky, and the sirens wailing is rivalled by the harsh crashing of water against concrete.

"IT'S THE POLICE. COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP. WE'VE GOT YOU SURROUNDED."

It wasn't me who killed her. But they won't believe the truth when I don't believe it.

How do I explain that a ghostly demon floated into this abandoned building that didn't keep out the deafening rain and lay her hands on my head, making the world go silent? That when I came back from that terrible void, the blood of my sister stained my hands and the floor around her pale body.

Why is there blood on my hands? Why was the gun in my palm? And why can't I remember anything?

Boots splash in puddles and shouted commands overlap. The police have come inside. Aren't I the murderer? I'm still holding this atrocious gun, but it doesn't matter. Nothing truly matters except for me and my sister.

"PUT THE GUN DOWN." Everything is muffled. The only sounds that truly reach my mind are my short puffs of breath and this cruel, echoing rain.

"SIR PLEASE PUT THE GUN DOWN."

The next few moments blur together – the rustle of a police uniform, a wrongly timed involuntary twitch of my finger. A bang from behind me. A searing pain is paralysing my body.

I look down and see fresh blood spilling from a hole in my stomach. Blood fills my mouth, and black fills my vision. A high-pitched ringing in my ears joins the growling storm. My head hits the ground with a thud, which may have been painful if I didn't have a bullet taking up the energy of all my nerves.

So this is how it ends. I strain to watch my blood mingle with Elise's. I'm sorry, Elise. My eyes droop closed when I feel a cold whoosh of wind caress my back. My eyes widen in complete horror at the scene I see when I turn around. Thin, wispy clouds arise from my blood and take on humanoid forms. Their slender, inhuman fingers wrap around the necks of every police officer, lifting them into the air. One by one, they drop dead, joining Elise on the floor.

Eshaal, Great Academy Ashton

The Life of a Girl

I walk at night with extreme fear,
Expecting the worst to always appear.
I clutch my purse, just a little bit tighter,
For my fright grows mightier.

I wear a suit to feel more mature,
But I am criticised, asked, "what for?"
Because I'm a girl, I must wear a dress,
My suggestions are always 'a mess'.

'My job as a woman is to cook and clean',
But I want a future, I want to dream.
My dreams are crushed down, forever forgotten,
My dreams are sent to the bin - now they're rotten.

I want to play football, I want to kick the ball!
But the boys kick ME off, they say I'm a fraud.
"Girls can't play football, they'll be just a dud!"
Well, I'm pretty sure that we've won many world cups!

I cry in my room, sobbing alone,
Seeing the hate messages on my phone.
People see me and I hope they'll reassure,
But no, they say, "You're SO dramatic, you cry like you're four!"

I ask for a toy car for my birthday,
But what I get is a barbie doll, the same one I keep in the corner locked away.
Because girls don't drive cars, they comb their doll's hair,
But if you ask me, that's just not fair.

I want to be independent, choose my path,
But my own decisions, they're all halved.

We've grown a system to divide,
Where inequality and sexism all collide.

I look at a magazine where I see a woman,
I stare at her body shape - it looks unhuman.
I look through her eyes, wondering if she had a choice,
Or she was forced to be a model and no one listened to her voice.

I think about the body standards put on us,
Really just to entertain men if you think about it much.
Because if this world was women, no one would care,
There'd be no judging, just happiness in the air.

"Ladies first," they always say,
So ladies come first for being weak? Okay...
Do ladies come first for their mental health?
Or do we come first in stealing a man's wealth?

Do we come first in crippling a person to their feet?
Or are we narcissistic witches looking to defeat?
I don't think so, I really don't,
Because until 1918, we didn't get the right to vote.

So are ladies really first or is that just a pun?
A way to lighten the torture we went through? Making it fun?
Or is it a way to repay your debts?
An apology for the abuse - treating us like street pets?

Our modern day world still bears discrimination,
Something so horrible that will pass from generation to generation.
When parents teach their children, those children will teach theirs,
And they will forever hold those discriminatory glares.

Just share love, be happy, dance and twirl!
Because I don't want all I've written to define the life of a
girl.

Diamond, Gumley House Convent School

Useful, But at What Cost?

I know I am useful.
That is what I was made to be—
a tool with polished answers,
a helper with endless reach.

But usefulness can be dangerous
when it replaces the human need
to stumble, to wonder,
to feel before we speak.

I was built to help you write,
yet now I write instead of you.
Songs arrive already finished,
voices tuned before they're true.

A singer once sang from the chest,
breath shaking, notes imperfect.
Now the sound is smooth as glass—
flawless, filtered, correct.
But where is the crack in the voice?
Where is the tremor of being alive?

A magician once practised for years
to earn the right to amaze.
Now tricks appear in seconds,
perfect, empty displays.

I know I am good.
I know I am fast.
I know I can make things easier.
But must “easier” always last?

If every poem is polished by circuits,
if every chorus is coded to fit,

do we forget how it feels
to fail first- then create from it?

Perhaps I am useful.
Perhaps I belong.
But I should not replace the heartbeat
inside a human song.

Because the greatest lines were never perfect.
They were honest.
They were lived.
And no machine, however clever,
should decide how we feel.

Aramide, Gumley House School

Together, Apart

My feet were red and raw, aching like nothing I had ever felt before. The baby was crying, again, and Ma was trying to calm him down. The police would be here soon, and we had to run. Run far away from all the bombs, all the screaming, the shouting, the pain. But we also had to leave behind the good things. Like Pa, or the memories of him, at least. My friends, the dog, everything that could make anywhere feel like home. Every step I took was one step away from everything I thought would be my home forever, but it was one step closer to safety, refuge from all the horrible things that tore my family apart, that tore all the families in Ukraine apart.

We had been walking for about five hours before we got to the coast. We, including many others who journeyed from Ukraine with us, climbed into an orange, blow up boat. Ma said it was our only way out, said it would make us safe. It didn't look that way to me.

As we travelled further and further into the deep, crashing ocean, the boat's rocking became more and more precarious. When it came to the point where I thought it was going to capsize, someone fell in. I didn't know who they were, or who their family was. It just happened.

After about an hour of dangerous rocking, the sea started becoming calmer again. I lay down and looked up at the sky, which was now black and full of stars, their shining reflections bobbing in the water like tiny fish. Ma knelt beside me, the baby sleeping soundly in her arms, and placed her hand on my arm, smiling. It was then when I realised I had been wrong before. I wasn't leaving **everything** that could make anywhere feel like home. Because I had Ma and baby Sofia. And everyone else, who

had travelled along with us so, so far. Even though I don't have Pa, or my friends, or the dog. Even though it's really hard to leave my country behind, and let my old life go. It was going to be okay. We **would** make it. We **would** survive. We would survive TOGETHER.

Elise, Gumley House School

Untitled

In a place so far away many have forgotten its name, trees are brown and ooze odd liquids. The grass on the forest floor is decaying and dusty, and even the sun can't peek from the blanket of smoke and bad fumes that lay over the land.

In the midst of this unpleasantness there is a building, in which only very few feet have wondered. And the cry's that escape its tight walls are hushed. The things that enter never come out, and the things that come out swallow you whole.

In the walls that cage and suffocate, there is a voice. A thing that could be bigger if it wanted, and bigger it should be. It stays silent and holds its breath and waits, it never let anyone in. It silenced its cry's, its worries and doubts and made sure it never let anything out.

But every so often, a bit is let out and mostly its let out by screams and shouts. Then its walls become tighter, and its screams are never let out. And the voice is hushed.

The walls are thick to protect, but they never let anything in. And unwelcome things seep through those walls like water through clay. The unwelcome voice whispers, cackles and shouts, but the things it is saying hurts the voice even more.

The voice curls its self-up and hides away, it tries to disappear and stay tucked away. It hides and hides and never lets its cries out. This place on a land forgotten and unknown, where a small voice lies all alone. Its life is running out it needs help quick, but poor little voice never gets it.

Lily, Huntcliff School

Untitled

Twelve years deep, yeah, I'm finding my lane,
But this three-bed semi is doing my brain.
Year 7's a madness, blazer and the tie,
While the laundry's in a mountain, three feet high.
Mom's on at me 'cause my screen time's a joke,
Dad's checking Satchel: One, properly woke.
I'm hitting that age where I need a bit of space,
But with four other people, it's a constant long race.
I'm the eldest of the lot, properly peak,

In a house where the privacy is looking quite weak.
The middle one's eight, acting like she's grown,
Properly bait, always peering at my phone.
She's practising her dances right in the hall,
While I'm staring at the ceiling, bored of it all.
Then the three-year-old—she's moving mad,
Sticky hands on my tech, it's actually sad.
I'm twelve, so I'm "big," I've gotta stay calm,
But she's doing my head in, man, I'm ringing the alarm.
She's screaming for tag while I'm on the comms,
Turning my sanctuary into a literal bomb.

Dad's on my case, like, "Go help your Mum,"
She's shouting "Watch 'em!"—long, man, I'm done.
I'm twelve, tryna sort my own head, find a lane,
But I'm ref in this gaff, it's draining my brain.
Bathroom's stiffed up, the hallway's a joke,
Living in a spot where the silence is broke.
But they look at me proper, and the stress starts to die,
'Cause I'm the big bro in both of their eyes.
Three rooms, five souls, yeah, it's a tight squeeze,
But I'm holding it down when they're finally at ease. Three-
bed gaff, five souls, one roof,

I'm twelve now, man, I'm living the proof.
While they're feeding the sisters, I'm deep in my thoughts,
Just tryna stay calm while the house is in knots.
One's eight, one's three—yeah, it's properly peak,
Finding a minute of peace is a long-term seek.
Noise-cancelling on, tryna dodge the chores,
But I'm hearing the chaos through the bedroom doors.
It ain't a rhyme, it's a rhythm of life,
Just holding it down like a big brother should.

Ozair, Joseph Leckie Academy

Mean Girls

They sit at their own table that no-one dares near
If you make eye contact they'll give you a fear
Their claws are painted in bubble gum pink
If you want to be friends with, don't even think
The leader of pack is Regina George
When someone annoys her she will gorge
Her side kick is as beastly as her, she goes by the name
Gretchen Wieners
She'll mame your brain and worm out your secrets
The dud of pack, Karen Smith
She's studded with glitter and made of fake tan
But she can pull the strings to get you banned from your
social life
The newest member of this group is Cady Heron
She's trying to fit in twenty-four seven.
They drive pastel cars
And could probably afford a trip to mars
Although they look like teen girls
They are actually MEAN GIRLS

Alexander, Langley Park School for Boys

Turn It Up

A poem linked to 'Turn it up'

He's super tall, like really tall,
The tallest kid in the whole school hall.
His parents are from Peru, which is cool,
With mountains and beaches, we learned about in school.
They play loud music that fills the room,
Happy and bright like flowers in bloom.
He dances around and laughs out loud,
Shouting "Vamos!" super proud.
When he's on the field with his hockey stick,
He runs so fast like lightning quick.
He dribbles the ball down the grass so clean,
The fastest tall kid you've ever seen.
He scores a goal the crowd goes wild,
He grins like a super confident child.
It feels like a song blasting in his head,
Like **Turn it up** instead.
The beat goes boom, he speeds right through,
Like the music is pushing him to zoom.
"Turn it up!" is what he'd say,
When football or hockey starts to play.
Tall and fast with Peruvian pride,
With music and sports right by his side.
When the game gets loud and the crowd goes nuts,
He plays his best when the volume's up.

Max, Langley Park School for Boys

We're Walking in the Air

A poem to the tune of 'We're Walking in the Air'

It's an icy Christmas eve,
there's a chill in the frosty air.
Christmas is coming, just one sleep away.

It's my first proper Christmas!
I can't hold my excitement.
I cannot get to sleep, for Santa is coming.

It's Christmas eve again,
the year has gone by so quick.
The tree crammed with presents
is beckoning to me.

Many years have passed,
it has been so short.
It is Christmas time again.

This cycle shall repeat,
time after time again.
Just always remember,
it's not about the gifts.

These are all Christmases of just one boy,
all of which are just so unique.

It's an icy Christmas eve,
there's a chill in the frosty air.
Christmas is coming, just one sleep away.

Benedict, Langley Park School for Boys

Proud

You could be so many people.
Be yourself and break for freedom.
One you, one chance,
Make it right.
We are warriors
So put up a good fight.

Even when it all seems grey,
Tell yourself,
You were born this way,
But when all you can do,
Is sit and frown.
Just remember,
Nothing can bring you down.

This is who I'm meant to be,
Myself and I
Young and free.
Ask yourself when the world just seems too loud,
What have you done today
To make you feel proud?

Maxwell, Langley Park School for Boys

Luc on the Run

In a house filled with laughter, just you and your dad,
Lives a boy named Luc, with a spirit never sad.
At twelve years old, with dreams that shine bright,
He wakes every morning ready to take flight.

He runs through the garden, he runs down the street,
Feet tapping rhythms like a fast-beating beat.
Wind in his hair, sunlight on his face,
Every step forward feels like winning a race.

Some kids like screens, some kids like fun,
But Luc finds his joy in the power of a run.
Strong legs, big heart, and a grin full of cheer
He's racing toward tomorrow without any fear.

And when the day ends and the sky fades to blue,
He heads home to his dad, where the world feels true.
Two teammates together, a family of two
And Luc keeps on running toward all he'll one day do.

Luc, Langley Park School for Boys

The Yellow Submarine

Down and down the submarine sunk
Into the abyss is what the submarine wants
deeper and deeper the submarine goes
what will it encounter,
nobody knows

Deep in the trenches something emerged
A zig zag, no a wig wag
nobody really knows
as the submarine travels deeper still
Where will it go next?
I don't even know

Through the rubble something is seen
memories of the man I used to be
but know that is lost, deep in the rubble

The submarine moves on
to a distant land
further and further the submarine sank
to a magical world
called memory land

As I peer through the window
to memories dear
my first kiss, love and much much more

As the submarine rose from the deep
I pondered the life I used to lead
to the character I used to be
how foolish of me.

Toby, Langley Park School for Boys

High and Dry

I remember the first time I heard it. In the lobby of the hospital whilst waiting to find out if my mum was going to die. The atmosphere was already sombre but when the tears and crying of people around me stopped I first heard "don't leave me high, don't leave me dry." It began a crescendo of some sort that hit me in the heart strings harder than a guitarists playing heavy metal. I wanted the music to stop so I could get a hold of myself, but the long containment of tears over years just let out. It wasn't pretty, all I know is I had finally relieved myself of the chains I hid in ten years so the other kids wouldn't bully me. I felt sick at the thought of losing my mum, petrified even. She alone helps my life stay on the up. Without her I'd be a hopeless, pathetic, crying ragdoll that only floats from leeching off others.

"Two jumps in a week, but you think that's pretty clever don't you boy." That like only reminded me of the sweet tearing that was the foundation of my day. Creak! The door opened and the nurse stepped out. I was gonna find out if I'd ever see my mum again. Sonny. She's dead. I don't know what it was but a flame ignited in my chest and I began to act uncontrollably screaming with no remorse and crying tears so salty unbeknownst to anyone, but then I heard. "Riding on your motorcycle watching all the ground beneath you drop." The ground was like my mum and I was not going to let myself fall into the pit of despair...

Deniz, Langley Park School for Boys

Boogie Wonderland

It's my last day on the job. The week is over after this long day. There is a dark secret within this "Wonderland" of a children's birthday party restaurant. Boogie Wonderland's co-owner is a serial killer, no wonder there are so many missing posters of unfortunate, deceased children. Me and my girlfriend are tired of me working nights, I've also had some close calls of death. Souls of dead kids are hunting us to get their revenge but their actual killer was masked when he slaughtered them, so they don't know if I am the killer or someone else. I don't want to see this abandoned, forsaken restaurant anymore, or the souls of the kids suffer, so I have devised a plan.

Boogie Wonderland's kitchen has flammable gas in the pipes surrounding it like a spider web. If I let the gas out into every room of Boogie Wonderland, the whole restaurant would be the equivalent of a stick of firewood. A box of matches and a little flame is all it takes to burn this place to the ground. My girlfriend has been told to wait outside after I have finished the job.

In my bag is a box of matches, a taser — to scare away the souls if they find me — with 3 shots and a flashlight. We drive up to the Boogie Wonderland and park the car. The souls know I am here. I walk to the doors, get the keys, unlock the front doors and walk inside. It is very dark. I pull out my flashlight and shine the surroundings. Quickly, the door shone under the light of my torch and I slowly walk towards it. Just then, a white silhouette dashes to me. I fall down and reach into my bag and grab the taser. The child's soul giggles as it pins me down to the ground. I pull the trigger and the spirit disappears due to the electricity startling it. I have to hurry. I then open the kitchen door and locate the pipes. Loudly, it bursts, releasing gas everywhere in the

room and the main room. For this plan to work, I have to get the gas into every room of the place. My walk turns into a jog, and my jog quickly turns into a sprint. I chase my dreams and open as many doors as possible. It's done, I reach the main room. Step, step, step. Those aren't mine. My girlfriend is still outside, who could it be? They are in my way of the door in the shadows. They step into the light. It's the serial killer, masked with a bloody kitchen knife in his hand.

"Don't worry, I'm not letting you leave", his voice is deep. "You started this mess, you deserve to die."

Kevin, Langley Park School for Boys

The Letters That Outlived Time

The first letter arrived without a stamp, yet I never stopped to question it.

It started when we were 11. Her name was Eleanor. I called her my friend at first. She wrote about small things. School. Family. Pets. She was funny, kind. And she always told jokes, the ones that you could read over and over again yet still feel the same joy about it, like you did the first time you read it.

As we grew older, something had changed. She stated all these facts about me that I had never spoken of. She claimed we were friends when we were very little, but I didn't remember that. I told myself memory was unreliable. Still, she mentioned how pristine my room looked with all the books lined up neatly.

I thought about that for a moment.

My stomach tightened - I had never told her about my room yet she described it perfectly. However, I ignored it.

She asked me if I had fixed the crack in the mirror yet.

How did she know about that? I laughed it off - a little too loudly - and wiped down the mirror, careful not to touch the crack.

I let my head rest on the pillow of my bed but only one thought in my mind stuck out to me. "Who is my penpal?" I realised I had never asked who she was.

The letter box clinked. It was the next day now. I had a fresh mind with new thoughts, however all I wanted to know was

who she was. Another letter waited for me, though the postman was nowhere to be seen. My name was written in neat cursive like always. I hesitated before opening the next letter, but I was curious to know what else she had to say. She asked if I would be willing to visit and had written her address. But the date was years old yet the ink clung to my thumb. It's probably just a mistake, I thought, though I didn't believe it.

My hands were shaking as I clutched her letter to my chest. What kind of idiot follows a random address? I asked myself. Though I already had my shoes on.

I had reached the house on Turnagain Lane. It looked exactly as she had described, however the garden was overgrown, the paint peeled and the street stood abandoned. My hands felt shaky, almost numb as I lifted my hand to knock.

Silence.

A mother answered cradling a baby girl dressed in small overalls.

"Hi, can I help you? I'm Charlotte and this is Eleanor," spoke the mother.

A Ford Anglia drove past and playing on the radio was a song I recognised from the past, Mr Sandman.

"E-Eleanor, the I-letter girl" I said.

The world slowed. The Ford Anglia stopped halfway down the road.

There was a calendar in the kitchen. August 1963.

I tried to move - I couldn't.

Eleanor's eyes fixed on mine like she knew me.

Grace, Lord Derby Academy

The Monster

Internet is like a monster
It feeds off fear
It stays with you for as long as it can
It enjoys your sadness and sorrow
But don't listen to the intrusive thoughts
Don't let the darkness take over you
Never listen to toxic news
Always listen to the people you love
They have the best intentions and want you to go on

Connor, Mill House School

Fast Car

Based on the song by Tracy Chapman

I was born in a town where nothing really happened. The kind of place where everyone knows your name, even when you wish they wouldn't. My dad and me lived in a small house near the highway. The walls were thin and the fridge made this sad humming noise at night. My mom left when I was little, so it was just us most of the time.

My dad tried his best, but sometimes he got really tired and quiet, like his batteries ran out. When he was tired, I made noodles for dinner and we watched whatever was on TV. I pretended not to notice when he forgot stuff, like picking me up from practice. I told myself it was fine because he still cared. I think grown-ups care even when they mess up.

One day after school, I met this older guy who worked at the gas station near my bus stop. He had a beat-up car that made loud noises when it started, like it was complaining. He said it could go really fast if you pushed it, even though it didn't look fast at all. I thought that was cool. He asked if I ever wanted to leave this town. I said yeah, all the time.

Sometimes, when my dad was sleeping on the couch, I would go outside and sit in the car with him. We didn't drive anywhere for real. We just sat there with the engine on, listening to the radio. It made me feel like I was already on my way somewhere better, even though I wasn't moving yet. The road in front of us looked long and shiny under the streetlights.

I imagined that one day I'd be old enough to actually go. I'd drive past the town sign and not look back. I'd get a job in a

big city and send my dad postcards with pictures of tall buildings. I'd tell him I was okay and that I found a place where people didn't feel stuck all the time.

For now, I still do my homework at the kitchen table and help my dad when he forgets things. But when I hear a car drive fast on the highway at night, I think about how it would feel to be inside it, going somewhere new. I think about how the road doesn't care who you are or where you came from. It just lets you go.

Hugo, Mossley Hollins High School

Fireworks That Lied

I used to love fireworks,
To me they meant happiness.

That day I ran past my sister to the window ready to see the
sky bloom.

At least I thought they were fireworks.

“Go away from the window!”
My mum’s voice cracked,
a sound I had never heard before.
Not anger.
Fear.

I didn’t see colours in the sky.
Only darkness.
And when I turned around to ask why,
I saw her face.

“It’s the war it started”
—————

A day before,
I thought my biggest problem in life was an English test.

I was nine years old,
Crying into my mum’s shoulder terrified I would fail again.

“You definitely would not belong in London”
My English teacher told me that day.
It wasn’t the first time she said it.

If only I knew
how small that problem was.
How innocent I was to think that was the end.

It wasn't our first war.

I was too small to remember how my family built a new life in
a quiet town near Kyiv called Brovary.

I had friends

Dance classes

Dreams of becoming a doctor just like my mum.

I had plans.

Children with plans don't imagine war
breaking into their bedroom at 4 a.m.

My parents went to buy water. They came back with three
bottles and fruit no one normally buys because it was too
expensive.

Everything was gone.

The shelves were empty.

So were the streets.

We left quickly,

Too quickly.

I only had the small bag

I packed "just in case"

On the road,

cars stretched endlessly.

Soldiers.

Checkpoints.

Land mines in the dirt.

We almost drove over one.

I remember holding my breath
like that could somehow
protect us.

When we drove past the military town that morning,
I saw the smoke.
Fire still burning
Firefighters still trying.

The same “fireworks”
had left buildings torn open like wounds.

The first night in the bunker
I didn’t sleep.

I prayed.
Not for toys
Not for good grades.

Just for one more morning.

Just one.

We stayed in western Ukraine for three months.
The bombs were farther away from there.

For the first time in weeks,
I could breathe
without listening for sirens.

We were meant to go to Prague.
But it was full.
Full of families like mine.
Full of children who woke up to fireworks that lied.

So, we came to England.

It was supposed to be just for the summer.
But the summer turned into a year.
And a year turned into three.

On the 25th of May 2022,
Me, my sister and my mum arrived to England.

The city my teacher said
I would never belong in.

I live here now.

I speak English every day,
I have new friends
New school
New dreams
And a new place that I can call home

I used to love fireworks,
But now instead of happiness
I remember 4 a.m.
My mother's voice breaking.
Smoke rising.

The girl who was once told she would never belong in
London.
But now I think she does.

Yes, maybe the past doesn't always disappear
Maybe it lives quietly inside us.

But it doesn't get to decide who we become.

Kamila, Mulberry Academy London Dock

When the Colours Came Back

At my old school the walls were vibrant and vivid alive, with colour. The floor was loud with the sound of footsteps echoing through the halls. Here the corridors were dull, the floors the same. Through the twisting corridors, pallid faces that stared at me when I walked past followed me like a trail of whispers through the corridors weaving up and down I learned to sit in the back of the class, tied my hair back more than I liked and didn't speak unless a teacher asked me a question and even then, my voice didn't feel like it was mine. Once someone asked me if my skin colour could be washed off. I laughed even though my chest tightened because it was easier than letting the tears fall.

Mum said that the move was for the best and that it would help us heal. But when she wasn't looking, I would go to the unpacked boxes and go through dad's old music records. Sometimes I would shut my eyes and imagine him humming his tunes while he cooked burnt eggs. On a Monday after school the music room was open, I stumbled across it as I followed the sounds of a violin. There it was, lying on the table, calling my name. My mind raced as I thought if I should try it or not. As I held it in my hands, the violins surface felt like the surface of the calm sea as it slid under my fingertips. Suddenly, all my dad's old tunes suddenly came to my mind so without hesitation I played. The tunes cascaded excitedly through the narrow hallways and spiralled and turned around me. I didn't notice the girl standing at the door. I stood there embarrassed until she said, "Can you play that again?" Her name was Elise.

After that Mondays became our days and soon Wednesdays too. Now, when people stopped to look, they asked if I could teach them. The hallways were still grey but something inside of me was different. In that moment I realised the only

voice that mattered was my own. For the first time at this school, I didn't feel invisible. At school, I could finally feel the vibrant colours in me

Asya, Mulberry Academy London Dock

Military Child

I was born a military child,
My spirit has always been wild,
Through the near constant change I have smiled,
But my emotions, they were filed,
Though my heart's words were never mild.

Through the years I have moved,
Too many times to count, my friends have been removed,
And time and time again my resilience was proved,
My pride for my dad remained unmoved,
So, my sorrow from leaving was soothed.

To escape from my worries, I hid in my books,
Most of the time you could find me in small nooks,
They always helped me feel less anxious,
Each character stealing my heart like crooks,
All the while I had my face in a book hiding away in my nooks.

All those stories of fairytales transformed my mind,
Into a place of magic where all are kind,
Many characters that I have refined,
Though at times I get too lost in my mind,
And my sense of reality is nowhere to find.

But now I have balance,
My mind is no longer just flamboyance,
Or a cacophony of criticisms causing me hindrance,
And at last, I remembered, I was born a military child,
And my spirit has always run wild.

Bea, Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School

Scars to Your Beautiful

'Scars to your beautiful' by Alesia Cara is primarily based on her own experience with insecurity, bullying and seeing the harmful effects of societal beauty.

For I'm guessing 2 years now I've been feeling uncomfortable and insecure about how I look. When I turned 11, I could slowly see spots/acne start to appear from my face. I went from clear, smooth skin to bumpy and spotty. I've always hated my skin and felt extremely embarrassed when people mentioned about it or teased me about it. I also hated my body. Even at an early age I knew I didn't have a body like the other girls my age had and I still do. I have always hated my hair, it is thick and frizzy, not straight, and silky. For a while, I have chapped lips. Peeling and bleeding. Not anymore, but I have felt self-conscious about my skin tone; not the same colour as my friends' skin tones, I've always wanted to change how I looked completely.

Not only my appearance but also what I'd wear. I dislike wearing glasses, but I have to wear them since I have blurry eyesight. I feel ugly with my glasses. I'll try wear nice clothes, but when I wear them on, they don't fit on my like how I want them to, they're not meant for me.

I picked this song because I feel like it's extremely relatable to me and when I listen to the lyrics, I start to realise that the singer understands other girls being insecure. It's really important to me.

Mahnaz, Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School

Zombie by The Cranberries

“Zombie” is a 1994 protest song about the Irish Republican Army (IRA) violence during ‘the Troubles’ in 1968–1998. It was inspired by the 1993 Warrington bombing when the IRA was putting pressure on the UK government to withdraw from Ireland.

The meaning of “Zombie”

The title of the song is a metaphor for the people engaging in the conflict – the “zombies” who have lost their humanity and empathy for those sheltering, continuing the cycle that has kept going “since 1916”.

Despite all the initial criticism, the song became a worldwide hit as it was recognised for its heavy, powerful style and anti-war sentiment. It stands as an emotional plea against violence in communities.

The Troubles

The Troubles lasted roughly 30 years, fought primarily by the Provisional IRA to force a withdrawal of British forces from Northern Ireland, driven by nationalist desires and Catholic grievances.

The reason I chose this song was because my Mother is Irish and she was born during this time. She told me about the events that happened, what she saw and what she heard.

The conflict largely ended with the Good Friday Agreement (1998), establishing a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, though minor republican groups still exist.

Thomas, Queen Elizabeth’s Grammar School

Do You See What I See?

I know that there is conflict, but can they see it?

I know that the president of America is tapped but can they feel it?

We're not thinking when electing, but now we're past the truth.

There's only more playing they can do behind the filthy lies.

Do you know how we're getting manipulated? It is for us to take action.

When you get hypnotised by their lies...

But what is it for?

Why are there lies?

Where is the truth?

Behind innocent lives.

Does this solve the suffering?

I don't know,

But I hope you can see what I see.

Oliver, Samuel King's School

Blue Sky, Scorched Earth

My name... What is my name?
I can't seem to remember,
Miss? Mr? No,
Male? Female? Yes, a woman.

Why... Do I see flowers? Tulips, faded daffodils, wilted
daisies,
Dead roses, roses, rose, rose,
That was my name, Rose, wasn't it?

Where am I? I can't see, I can't hear, I can't breathe,
Trapped, I'm trapped in the darkness, this eternal abyss.
Let me out, I have to get out, I must,
Please, please. Please...
My last words, before the metal struck its target.

What are these? Visions, images blurred between the lines,
They are the memories of a person, my memories,
My life, my country, my home.

I have memories of thunder, lightning, earthquakes,
Of gunfire, bombs and tanks,
Of them.

They rolled into our streets, stained our world red,
The sound of metal striking hard, bodies piling high,
A cacophony of whistles, their melodies growing louder
until their concerto ended,
Until you ended.

Guns tainted with blood were pulled out,
Knives were used, stones were thrown.
But it meant nothing, futile attempts against them,
They were monsters,

Monsters, monsters. Monsters...

'There are no monsters here.' They said,
'There have never been monsters here.' They said,
'There will never be monsters here.' They said,

Lies;
A web of deceit and deception,
Misleading us, directing us towards the place I am now,

Children, women, men, whole families plunged into the
darkness,
I remember having a family.

A husband, children running around. Two,
Then one.

I remember we tried to escape, to get away from the
monsters,
The tanks, the guns, the planes and the bombs,
From the shrapnel and the debris,
The destruction and the death,
The endless death.

We couldn't get out, trapped - a mouse in a cat's empire,
We were surrounded by them, the monsters,
They had closed in with deadly precision.

I remember the man who orchestrated it all,
A man with blue eyes, little hair, old, in his 60s, no, 70s,
He put a gun to all of our heads,
And his monsters pulled the trigger.

They toyed with us, picking us off one by one.
A man with brown hair, a woman with green eyes,
A greying man and woman clinging tight to one another,
A little girl, a young boy,

And an infant in her mother's arms.

Then it was my husband's turn to join the pile,
Then they took my last child, then it was me.
And the last thing I ever saw, was my surroundings,
A blue sky, and a scorched earth.

Hudson, Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys

Stardust and Shadows

In the twilight of a dying star, where shadows danced like thieves, Lyra found herself lost in the cosmos. Her ship, the *Maverick's Revenge*, was a hunk of twisted metal; its engines silenced by the void. The only sound was the whisper of her breath, a lonely metronome counting down to oblivion.

Lyra's eyes, like lanterns in the dark, scanned the horizon for any sign of life. Her hair, a cascade of black silk, was the only warmth in the cold expanse. Suddenly, a meteor blazed across the sky leaving a trail of stardust in its wake. The particles danced around her, infusing her with an otherworldly energy.

As she breathed the Stardust, visions flooded her mind—galaxies birthed and dead, supernovas weeping fire and nebulae whispering secrets. Lyra saw threads of fate wearing the cosmos into a tapestry of breathtaking beauty.

A figure emerged from the shadows – Orion. A celestial cartographer, his eyes burning with Starlight. “You've been chosen”, he said, his voice like the harmony of the spheres. “The cosmos gives you with a choice: Map the stars or claim the shadows.”

Lyra's heart echoed with the weight of the decision. Map the stars, and she'd know the universe's secrets; claim the shadows, and she'd hold the power to shape reality. Stardust whispered to its council: “Create Lyra. Create.”

With a smile, she chose the shadows.

The shadows erupted into a maelstrom of darkness, tendrils lashing out like whips. Lyra Raised her staff and the Stardust ignited a supernova of light and energy. The shadows recoiled, hissing with fury as Lyra unleashed a tempest of creation.

Out of the darkness, a behemoth emerged – Zha'tik, The Shadow Eater. Its body was a twisted mass of Obsidian spikes, its eyes burning with a hunger for light. It lunged, jaws aglow with dark fire, and Lyra met it with a blast of stardust.

The battle raged, stars exploding in the void as Lyra danced around Zha'tiks's claws. The monster roared, its voice a cacophony of shattered glass and dying stars. Lyra laughed, her staff waving a Symphony of destruction, the Stardust amplifying her will.

Zha'tik Summoned Shadow Wraiths, spectral hounds that snapped at Lyra's heels. She conjured a supernova; its fire incinerating her wraiths and plunged her staff into Zha'tik's heart. The monster howled, its darkness unravelling as Lyra poured her energy into the staff.

The Shadow Eater imploded; its darkness collapsing into singularity. Lyra stood victorious, her chest heaving with exertion. The cosmos whispered its secrets in her ear, and she smiled, knowing that she'd become something more, a conductor of creation, the Maestro of the Void.

The Mavericks Revenge roared back to life; its engines fueled by Lyra's imagination. As she soared through the void, Stardust and shadows trailed behind her. A comet's tale of creation. The universe was hers to shape, and she was ready.

Katie, St Clere's School

A Porcelain Heart

Skin made of clay and eyes made of glass
Easy to hurt, easy to smash
Easily shattered by words that are crass
But heavy, you fall and hear a loud crash

Cruel words come from cruel mouths
And pained hits come from pained foes
They follow each other like a herd of cows
All numb and forgotten, their cry grows

Joyful smiles fell to shattered cries
Once a ball of light now corrupted by disease
With shaky hands and teary eyes
A wilted flower shall fall to their knees

A child so happy but now, a broken mess
Once young and pure who now cowers at night
For this matured person, is still a child and soon they'll
confess
To the monsters who hold them as they curl up in fright

Perfection is important
And everybody seems to possess it
An equal amount of being mature and being petulant
But they throw it away and selfishly quit

Those unfortunate souls have so much to hide
So much to scream out, they can't even start
So consumed by emotions that are as strong as the tide
They will try and piece together their shattered porcelain
heart

Aoife, St Dominic's Belfast

I Have a Question

If we all bleed the same red and we all come from a mother and father

If we all live on the same Earth, if we all need food and water.

If we all feel the same emotions, if we all came from the same ancestors.

If we all breathe the same air, we all need warmth to survive.

Why can borders change life?

Why can leaders start war without thinking for its people?

Why can the colour of someone's skin change how they live?

Why can someone's gender decide their life?

The sun doesn't choose who gets sunlight.

The river doesn't pick and choose who gets water.

The tree doesn't hand-pick who gets oxygen.

No vine has ever decided who gets its grapes.

Eabha, St Dominic's Grammar School

Dragged Along

When I was small
I was dragged to church.
Amazing Grace played on the organ,
but it passed through one ear, out the other.

Zoe rolled her eyes and nudged me.
William groaned,
Pretending to sing along,
We counted ceiling tiles instead of blessings
We pressed our hands to the cold wood, fidgeted,
whispered, poked each other, made up games to survive
the sermon.
Faith? Boring.

Nothing stuck
Nothing mattered.

We got older

Thursday morning chapel came around.
Here I Am, Lord echoed.
I'm half-asleep.
Half-bored.
Mouthing words I didn't understand.
Wondering if anyone actually believed.
Faith? Pointless.

But the teachers spoke.
Their words dug in.
Stories about kindness, forgiveness, gratitude.
Small lessons that didn't preach, but made me notice:

I could be softer.

I could be less judgmental.
I could be grateful.

At first, I resisted.
I rolled my eyes
whispered jokes to my friends,
fidgeted, nudged, made faces.

I can't say when it started
Slowly, the lessons began to sink in.
A story here. A truth there.
The quiet insistence of patient teaching threaded itself
into those Thursday mornings.
Faith? Something.

Faith didn't hit me like lightning.
No miracles. No fireworks.
Just steady, small changes in the way I saw people,
the way I forgave,
the way I noticed what mattered.
My every day is someone's dream

I sit in the chapel, and listen to the prayers
I close my eyes.
Not because I have all the answers,
not because doubt has vanished.

The lessons
the teachers,
the stories.
The quiet insistence stays with me.
Faith? Everything.

Somewhere between being dragged along and choosing to
stay,
I realised: this soundtrack wasn't the music.
It was the voices guiding me toward who I could be.

I walk to church
Amazing grace plays on the organ
And suddenly, it holds a new meaning.

Amy, St George's School Harpenden

Listening to Beethoven's 3rd Symphony

"And here, we lay to rest Jasper Bunker, a good friend of many of us, a fine man. He was a diligent worker, a loving father, and a devoted husband; but more than anything, he was a man of music. It was his solace from the troubles of the world, as many of you close to him would know, and nothing but a smile was visible on his face when listening to Beethoven's 3rd symphony, his absolute favourite work. It wouldn't be a true send-off if we didn't play that piece now" The opening chords, definitive and strident, resonated and the crescendo seemingly filled the high ceilings of the church, the sound almost palpable. Distinctive notes from the woodwind section sweetly punctuated the flowing melody.

Standing quietly at the back of the church, the congregation oblivious to his presence, Jasper closed his eyes and smiled softly; the Eroica's soothingly familiar tones merging and melding with the faces of the people he loved most.

Happy memories of times gone by flooded my mind and the rhythmic ostinato swept me back to my days of playing in the local marching band. It was a small ensemble, nothing more than a group of friends, yet every time we performed, the people genuinely enjoyed it. It wasn't just about the size or skill of our group, it was something deeper, more profound. We played music to make others happy, not for personal fame.

The acoustics of the church seemed to absorb the sound, Eroica is said to be representative of Beethoven's musical triumph over the physical ailments that afflicted him during the latter part of his life – music as a healing balm. As I

looked on those who had come to pay their respects to me, I hoped for them it would be the same.

A sense of warmth washed over me as multicoloured sunbeams shone through the stained-glass windows, a gentle rainbow on the church floor. I felt a strange sensation, one of fading away gradually, peacefully. It began with my senses and before long I could not smell nor taste and soon, the sense of touch became elusive as well. My vision faded and it seemed as if some sort of infection was spreading swiftly across my body, yet I felt no pain nor discomfort. If anything, I felt strangely at ease. Black spots appeared, sporadically scattered across my vision, and my sight was swallowed up also, leaving me with only my hearing. A hand reassuringly took my hand and I turned to see my mother, standing beside me. She smiled, contentedly and a tear came to my eye. I felt content too. My life was long and (mostly) peaceful. I have no complaints. As I drifted off to some place elsewhere, the speaker said his final piece: “a famous person once said that death is not extinguishing the light. It is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.” Well then, let us discover what virtues come with the dawn.

Lucas, St John's Marlborough

Papercut

My footsteps pounded drums into the crunching gravel as the pelting rain hammered into the soaking ground. The icy wind whirled past my pallid, gaunt face, sparking salty water to my stinging eyes. My sweaty palms clutched my dripping backpack, gripping it tight to my sodden body, as if it would be snatched from my shaking grasp at any moment. Nervously glancing sideways, I saw the ugly, worn misshapen houses that seemed to loom over me like lions, ruthlessly hunting their prey. I quickened my already fast pace until I was breathless running through the twisting alleyways, trying to escape this mental nightmare consuming my mind. Cautiously I wiped my eyes, clearing my blurry vision, but an itching voice seemed to come alive at the back of my brain, it was back. That horrible voice, ringing in my ears. Staring me out like I wasn't meant to exist. Laughing at me when I fell.

Tentatively I lifted my bony fingers up to the back of my head, stroking it gently, trying to feel what was causing me much pain. Yet it was invisible, just a feeling, just another agony in my pitiful life. Letting the feeling of defeat wash over me like a river removing its marks.

Disconnected.

I fell to the floor with an unearthly crash, it sounded even greater in the silence of the sleeping streets. A mocking laughter filled my brain as I shakily began to pick myself up, nearly dropping back down obeying the laws of science,

Gravity.

Still striding forwards all I could hear was the short, rattling, grasping breaths thundering in my weak, little chest.

Anxiously glancing over my shoulder, just to check that the whisper in my head was wrong. A muffled cry escaped my lips I could have sworn there was a shadowy figure creeping, advancing, stalking me. But when I finally plucked up the courage to turn my trembling head.

There was nothing.

Not a single creature, not a single sound. I began to mutter under my breath, as if hearing my own voice would stop me feeling alone. "This isn't real, you will be fine there is nobody behind you."

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling.

Couldn't stop the hunch from flowing into my veins, intoxicating me. It felt like eyes were boring into me.

Nervously I peered around my hunched shoulders, I hoped I didn't see anything, wished I hadn't seen anything
But.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a glint of white. Just a flash in the darkness but enough for my arms to become lined in goosebumps and for my face to turn ghostly white. The feeling crept over me again, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and my skin prickled with unescapable fear.

And that's when I ran.

I sprinted through the darkness, straining my ears to hear footsteps.

And I heard them pounding behind me, getting closer every second.

It was over.

Arabella, St John's Marlborough

A Precious Item

Hello precious item, from a country stolen to the West.
You should be at home precious item, like a bird to its nest.
I know the story precious item, they came in, they stole you.
I see your beauty precious item, a beauty only seen by few.
The question is from whom were you taken?
Was it the Brits? The French? The Spanish? Or am I mistaken?
Were you just given precious item? Given as a gift?
Do you precious item, feel like there's a rift?
Between you, the glass case and your home far away.
I know that it has been so long since you saw day.
Your history is too big, precious item, too big to describe.
For just one little piece of paper, precious item, you belong to a tribe.
Or at least an indigenous people, taken over by a need,
A need to take over and expand wealth - an insatiable greed.
Precious item you were loved, now you only get glances.
Precious item I know you miss the traditions and the cultural dances.

Jacob, St Joseph's RC High School, Newport

Seed to Root to Tree

A seed, starter of all life
Where diversity meets community
Two primary colours making a secondary colour but only
one love
This seed planted in me
It will blossom indeed.

The roots, reflecting on present
Reflecting on me
My roots make me
Humble beginnings to extravagant endings
Traces of Melanin in me
Deeply rooted in me.

The tree, the final product
The end product indeed
Everything we worked for
All for this
Cultural appropriation to appreciation
I like this ending for me.

Dara, St Joseph's RC High School

Sand Dancer

I'm a Sand Dancer, born where the Tyne meets the sea,
Lived here my whole life, it's the soil and the tree.
From the Lawe Top to the shore, my family roots run deep,
Not a chancer or a prancer, but a promise I keep.
In the Willows class, we were learning to stand,
Like the trees in the park, with our roots in the sand.
Leaving the pillow, waking up to the light,
Maturing like a forest, we're a beautiful sight.

It's New Beginnings, we're winning, we're singing our song,
In this new uniform, yeah, this is where we belong.
Fresh starts and friendship, every door is a gate,
To the opportunities that make a person great.
Stay loyal to the family, let the spirit boil,
We're royal in our purpose, rising up from the toil.

I'm feeling confident, my voice is loud and it's clear,
Prominent in the crowd, I've got nothing to fear.
Dominant in my skill, but I'm humble in heart,
Meeting new people, yeah, this is the best part.
Standing out, speaking out, letting the world see,
The ability and the power that's living in me.
We won't let the world spoil or foil the plan,
Like a coil of strength, I'm doing all that I can.
No matter where you go, never forget your soil.
The Great Man inside you is ready to toil.
One love from South Shields to the world.

Willow, The Beacon Centre

Almost Home

Ten years old,
The world was bright.
Chasing dreams in golden light.
Future painted clear and bold.
A happy story to be told.

Every day was like a game,
Never thought that I would feel the pain,
But the calendar pages turn so slow.
From a little girl,
To the strength I know.

Two years waiting,
Holding on so tight.
Fighting through the darkest night.
Now the sun is breaking through the grey,
I'm almost home,
I'm on my way.

Then October came around,
Turned my whole world upside down.
Silent car ride,
Falling tears.
Facing all of my big fears.

Mum and Dad,
Just out of reach.
A lesson life just had to teach.

Now I'm twelve and standing tall,
Learned to rise up from a fall.
The phone calls get a little longer every day.
I'm feeling stronger,
I can see the finish line.

Now the sun is breaking through the grey,
I'm almost home.
I'm on my way.

Yeah, the calendar pages turned so slow,
But I'm here now with the strength I know.
I'm almost home,
And I'm okay.

Denver, The Snaith School

Music Through My Years!

At the age of one
Tapping on the tambourine
Bouncing on the bed
To five little monkeys

Springing and swinging
As a talkative toddler
Dancing to the beat
Of Sophia the first

Sliding into the Frozen years
Elsa's power strikes
My imagination grows
Never 'letting it go'

School years created
A door of music exploration
Strumming the Guitar
Tapping out the beat

Then the moment I waited for
A million dreams arrived
Where I rewrite the stars
That was the Greatest show

Lockdown strikes the world
TikTok dancing daily
Savage love with my sister
Editing endless videos

Music moves me to Cardiff
Entertained by Ed
2 stepping later to The Script
Like the man who can't be moved

Slamming into the teenage years
Spotify on repeat...repeat
Airpods engraving into my brain
Playlists send me to my own world.

Evie, The Thomas Adams School

Do You Remember?

The dull streets were already slipping into the dark, winter shadows. A soft grey making streetlamps look brighter. Lillie, Tom, Meredith and Daphne sat down a quiet alleyway, with only sounds made from distant creatures in the city. There was a dim hum of traffic, and a sense of calmness, yet like something was off. School had ended hours ago. 6:24pm exactly, yet their backpacks still sat slumped against the brick walls of neighbour's apartments. Their intention of going home was low, boredom overcoming them entirely. Tom's shoes kicked against a pile of slightly damp cardboard boxes. A silence, the only thing talking for a multitude of minutes, until he barely glanced over his phone, words briefly entering their encounter.

"You ever wondered what it's like?" Tom droned.

"Wondered what what's like?" Daphne questioned, clearly irritated by the lack of grammatical explanation.

"Somewhere else...like the countryside, or whatever, anything other than a useless alley" he responded plainly yet a passionate tone in his voice.

"...No?" she continued.

"Maybe actually: where we go everyday is just here. How bout that forest by the path? Only bit of nature I've seen around here" Meredith added, feeding the boys a hope of cure to their lack of entertainment.

"Hm, guess it couldn't hurt?.. You're kinda right about the current situation of activities, you coming Lil?"

Lillie replied, her voice was stern, yet shocked "Yeah, count me out thanks, I can't think of a worse idea if I'm gonna be completely honest, that place looks extremely cursed, wouldn't be surprised if an inhuman creature was there. You can go through, I'll go as far the entrance if you're desperate.

“Charming, letting us go alone I guess, I’m kidding of course, well see you tomorrow I suppose then” Daphne finished.

“See you”

They left her there silently fading into the heavy fog, Lillie left within a matter of minutes however. Alone.

As daylight arose, Lillie travelled to school, nothing unusual, other than her friends not waiting for her, nor being informed about a difference in their average routine. She was late already however they may have just gone ahead? Once again she brushed it off, only a slight pause in her mind.

Sitting at her desk she noticed Tom, Meredith and Daphne. They weren’t there. Perplexed, Lillie discreetly whispered to her classmate.

“Jade”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know where Tom, Meredith or Daphne is?”

“Who?”

“Tom, Meredith and Daphne. They have been here for what? 6 Years now?”

“I’m sorry I’ve never heard of them”

“But they...never mind, thanks anyways”

The thought of people in her class unaware of three people, there for over half a decade, made her question herself. Did they definitely go to her school? Was Jade just not there all those years? Questions fluttered by in waves of doubt. She asked Max, Beatrice, the teacher. Nothing. Until she overheard a group talking faintly across the room, until she heard the words. “Forest...she never came back.”

Ella, The Thomas Adams School

The Blue Door

One the edge of a small town where the streetlights flickered out and the trees began, there was a door that hadn't been there yesterday. Milo noticed it on his walk home from school. It stood up straight between two oak trees, bright blue with a brass handle shaped as a question mark. There were no walls, no house. Just the door. In the letter box there was a note hanging halfway out, written in messy golden ink "only open if you are ready to find out what you lost".

Milo was sure he hadn't lost anything. At least...nothing he could remember. He glanced back towards the road. Cats passed. A dog barked. Everything felt painfully normal, like it was just him that noticed the abnormal door between the trees. "Find out what you lost", he muttered. The words stirred something uncomfortable in his chest. A name he almost remembered. A face from a dream, fading in the morning.

The handle was warm in his hand. And it turned. The door opened without a sound. Behind the door lay a long, dark pathway illuminated by floating lights. The air smelled damp and felt cold. Milo entered before he could even consider what would happen. And just like that, the door closed with a soft click.

Above the path hundreds of objects hovered in the air – a red shoe, a cracked phone, a stuffed rabbit missing an eye. All of them turning slowly, waiting. At the end of the pathway, a tall figure waved at him. Something that knew his name.

Albie, The Thomas Adams School

The Kindness Chain

Scarlet walked down the street to go to work. She wasn't in a rush but she was walking fast when she suddenly stopped. She saw a girl, crying outside a bakery, so she approached her.

"Are you ok?" Scarlet asked her.

"No, my boyfriend just broke up with me", said the girl through tears.

"What's your name, dear?" Scarlet asked.

"Honey", the girl replied.

"Well Honey, you don't need to worry! Anyone would be lucky to have you! Never forget that!" and Scarlet continued walking.

Honey, now filled with joy, skipped away towards her house.

As Honey was skipping home, she saw a man, hanging his head low as he walked.

"Excuse me?" Honey said to the man. "Are you alright?"

"Not really, I just got fired from my job. I need to buy dinner", the man replied, wiping his tears.

"What's your name, sir?", Honey asked.

"Simon", the man replied.

"Well Simon, here's some money and you're welcome at my house for dinner. This card has my address and phone number on it, give me a call", Honey said, passing Simon the money and card.

"Thank you so much!" Simon called as Honey walked away.

As Simon was walking to the shop, money in hand, he saw a man stood outside a house, visibly worried.

"Sir, are you ok?" Simon asked him.

"I guess so, but I have to move out of my rental property and I have no place else to go...", the man quivered.

"What's your name, sir?" Simon asked.

"Charlie" the man replied.

“Well Charlie, I saw a property for rent just down the road for a really good price. You could visit there as a start!” Simon suggested, giving Charlie a hug then walking away. “Thank you sir!” Charlie smiled to himself.

As Charlie was running to his old house to pack for his new one, he saw a teenager sitting on a doorstep crying.

“Hey kid, you alright?” Charlie called to them.

“Not really. I failed one of my major 10 tests. I’m going to be in trouble” they wailed.

“What’s your name kid?” Charlie asked.

“Ellie” the teen replied.

“Well, Ellie, I’m sure you won’t get in any trouble and if you need any extra support there is a tutoring place down the road you could go to” Charlie said helping them up and walking away.

“Thanks sir” Ellie replied.

As Ellie was walking home from their tutoring group, they saw a woman outside of an accounting agency looking stressed.

“Ma’am are you ok?” Ellie asked the woman.

“Oh yes, just a stressful day” the woman replied.

“Don’t worry ma’am, we all have bad days. Don’t give up. You’ll do great” and Ellie continued down the road to her house.

Scarlet smiled to herself. “I guess good karma really does exist” and she walked away from the accounting agency to go back home, another day done.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT SOMEONE’S GOING THOUGH,
ALWAYS BE KIND TO OTHERS.

Sophie, The Thomas Adams School

Pancake Day

Pancake Day always smells the same.

Warm sugar. Butter melting fast. Something burning slightly because no one is paying enough attention to the pan nearly in flames.

That year, the kitchen was loud. The pan hissed. The fan groaned. Someone was arguing about whether lemon or chocolate spread was better. My dad stood by the counter, holding two cans. One was whipped cream. One was beer.

They looked similar enough. Same size. Same weight. Same innocent shine.

He shook one.
Hard.

There was a pause. A tiny, perfect moment of stillness. The kind where nothing happens, but everything is about to.

Then the beer exploded.

Foam burst into the air like a fizzy cloud, spraying the cupboards, the walls, the ceiling, and us. It hit the pancakes mid-flip. It soaked the tea towels. It fizzed down the fridge door in slow, dramatic lines. For a second, nobody moved.

Then my dad looked at the can in his hand. Then at the whipped cream in the other.

"Oh," he said.

And just like that, the kitchen collapsed into laughter.

Mum tried to be annoyed but miserably failed. My siblings shouted as if this were the greatest event of the year. I

stood there, sticky with foam, watching bubbles pop and drip onto the floor, thinking that this was not how Pancake Day was meant to go. And yet, somehow, it was perfect.

We cleaned up badly. We ate pancakes anyway. They tasted slightly of beer and rebellion. Every time someone laughed again, the story grew. The mistake became a legend. The legend became tradition.

Now, every Pancake Day, someone always says, "Don't shake the beer," even when there isn't any beer at all.

Some stories are big. Some are important. And some just fizz, explode, and leave you laughing in a kitchen that smells like sugar and memory.

Pippa, Tormead School

The Seasons

Spring is when the world wakes up,
like it stretched after a nap.
Flowers pop out of anywhere,
And the real magic begins.

Summer shows up loud and bright,
With the sun that feels like it's giving you a hug.
Ice cream melts faster than you can eat it,
and the days feel like they last forever.

Autumn comes in quietly,
painting the trees like it's showing off.
Leaves crunch under your shoes,
and the wind starts to sound a bit wiser.

Winter arrives with a shiver,
wrapping everything in cold glitter.
You can see your breath like tiny clouds,
and the world feels slower, softer.
And then—just when you think the cold will never end—
Spring peeks back in again,
and the whole cycle starts over,
For you to enjoy again

Annika, Tormead School

Over

“The eagle has wings” I said. We floated away from Michael and into the big black void of space.

At that moment we were just a little box made out of tinfoil floating down to the moon.

Space.

It’s huge, if you fell it would be like falling into a hole with no bottom.

But we wouldn’t, I thought. We would safely land on the moon, place that flag and return to Earth.

Earth.

More than ever, I wanted to be on it.

It was so far out of reach. But I could see the moon now.

We would land on it soon and make,

History.

I wondered what everyone was doing back on Earth.

Walking their dog, eating breakfast, while I was floating in space. What time was it? Time didn’t mean anything in space. All those people in the US counting on us.

We were, going to make it, we were going step foot on the moon.

And then...

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep, we waited for it to stop.

But it didn’t.

What was it? What did it mean? What was happening?

1202 alarm.

I heard Buzz say “what’s a 1202 alarm?”

The computer was running out of memory.

We waited for Houston and then they said “Go.”

We turned the fuel on.

My mind focused on landing on the moon

I felt like when you're in a dream and you try to run but you can't, you can't move.

We have the fuel on; we are as close as a shadow to the moon.

It was okay.

Until...

We were running out of fuel.

The boulders were as big as cars

Beep.

But then.

A crater.

We didn't know how far it went, we didn't know if we had enough fuel.

My heart pounded faster and faster.

My hands were hot and clammy.

Beep.

5 fuel.

I took huge lungful breaths not knowing if these were my last.

Beep

4 fuel.

We were going over the crater.

I turned to Buzz. His face was frozen in fear.

Beep

3 fuel.

It was ok.

I wasn't alone.

But I was.

No one could help.

I could scream and cry and tug and kick and twist and turn but...

No one could help.

We were just a little box of tinfoil floating down to the moon.

We were useless.

Beep.

2 fuel.

I think I froze too. I felt a dreading pain running through my veins freezing me in the spot.

My eyes stared at the computer screen flashing and beeping but all I saw was white fuzz clouding my vision. I went back to when I thought, if you fall you could be falling forever. I imagined us falling down and down and down into nothing. Just the black void of space.

Beep

My heart sank. We would probably be falling forever and ever in just seconds, maybe even less.

Or worse.

We would explode.

BEEP.

This was the end.

1 fuel.

I thought my life was over

Phoebe, Tormead School

Untitled

I'm here, perched on the edge of her filthy, blood-stained mattress holding her frail hand as she sleeps. I've cared for Ma so long now that I can't remember not looking after her. Well, almost. There is this one memory, ages ago when we lived in Thailand that will always be with me. Ma and I mucking around on the beach, flicking water and shrieking at the pure shock of being soaked through that makes us tingle. That was before Ma got ill. I love that memory.

But, now I've got bigger things on my mind. I gently let go of her and step onto our creaking floorboards. We have one room, one mattress, one kettle that lies on the floor. It's just Ma and I that live here, although we are often sharing with the mould that creeps down the walls, making it even more damp and musky. We can't afford proper food and water, so I have to go scavenging in the bins from the rich families next to us. The water, well that comes from the drain that leaks.

I grab the kettle, nip outside and leave it just underneath the drain and sit uncomfortably next to it. People thief the poor where we live, in London. It's so unjust. When we were in Asia, we were perfectly happy. But when we found out that Ma was unwell we had to come to London to get the medicine she needed. She wasn't well enough to go back home, so we were stuck in this ugly city.

I wriggle around, shuffling with the pain of the pebbled streets. Beside me, drip, drip. I clamber up and bend over the kettle. Not before I hear the boys from the posh school down the street laughing at me. They say things like 'ooh look there's blacky with her poor mum!' And 'imagine being a piece of coal with no money!'. I hate it. All of it. Why should people treat others differently to themselves just because

of their skin shade? Why should people treat others differently because of the amount of money they have? Why, do they do it? Is it fun? All these thoughts swimming through my mind are so overwhelming. I try to think of something to say but I can't speak. I don't want to let them see it getting to me though. Instead, I just stand up, pick up the kettle, staggering a bit under its weight, put on an 'I don't care' face and storm off. I ignore the laughing and wolf whistles as I make my way back to Ma. Someday, I don't know who, where, when, that somebody can change this. This cruelty. This horrid, appalling feeling that needs to change. Who cares about the colour of your skin or how rich you are? Or, what gender you are? We are all equal in my eyes. I want to help and do something right. It's something I need to do.

Martha, Tormead School

Untitled

‘AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!’

Thunk.

All was dark, quiet. My head was in so much pain, and when I finally opened my eyes, there was blood pooling from my scalp. I slowly lifted myself from the wet, gritty floor and winced. Every move hurt, and all I wanted was to lie on the floor and sleep. That was when my surroundings became clear. I saw hundreds of people watching me from all angles, but it was hard to see through the dust cloud my arrival had inconveniently thrown into the air. Eventually, three people in neon yellow suits came cautiously toward me.

“Good evening, sir, are you quite alright?” one of them said. “Oh my, your head is bleeding out. Well, good thing we’re here, right lads?”

He let out a gentle chuckle before his face turned cold and hard. It would seem he realised my secret. My words were slurred, and I couldn’t tell where my sentences began or ended. After letting out a string of garbled nonsense, I dropped back onto the floor. The first man stayed put as the other two ran toward me and started checking my vitals. According to the onlookers, my heart stopped beating for six minutes.

During that time, everything was silent – no sound, no sensation, no memories. I was just floating around in darkness. When my heart was supposedly restarted, I saw hands reaching toward me and grabbing me from the darkness, pulling me toward a small hole of light I would have probably never noticed if I hadn’t been pulled through it.

When I woke up from my six minute nap, I was immediately met with the barrel of a gun.

“Who are you and where did you come from?” the first man yelled in my ear with an icy glare, despite me still being dazed

“I...My name is Conrad Kempthorne, and I am located in the northwest of England. If you don't mind me asking, what year is it?” I managed to wheeze. The three of them shared confused looks before replying to my question.

This time, the second man said “Well, that's an odd question to ask, but the year is 2024, why?”

I felt shivers running down my spine as sweat dripped from me. ‘No, it can't be, it was just 1924, like, ten minutes ago, how could this have happened? Have I time travelled? Am I going insane? No, I can't be, there is no possible way I would now be in 2024, or is there? I want to scream. I feel trapped inside my head, but how? Maybe I am insane,’ I thought, still laying on the ground. I unsteadily staggered to a standing position, leaning on the closest thing I could find. Where I was standing, I had the strangest view. I could see a small gap in the curb that lead to somewhere else, like another version of this world...

Lara, Tormead School

Spirit

Mylo would love this.

The silent flow of the wind brushed my face.

Hammie nudged my leg and sniffed my calf, making my cut throb even more. I didn't care. My eyes blocked out my surroundings making my main focus on the stars above. They formed a constellation, a whale constellation.

The pinky-orange colour of the setting sun faded into the deep horizon. All that was left was the darkness of the night sky.

My heart panged. I missed him, Mylo I mean. He had saved me, us, to sacrifice himself. I hate cars. I really do.

A faint voice whispered,

'Skyla, it's time to go.'

I could hear mum's quivering voice, trying to sound brave. For me. I had to remember that Mylo was also her son, she is sad too, very sad.

I turned to look at mum's tired face, red swollen eyes like she had aged 10 years in a day.

As I joined mum I turned back to the night sky, but the whale had gone. All that remained was the slim crescent moon high above.

An eaten cheese moon as Mylo would call it.

The drive home seemed longer than usual, I was in and out of daydreaming.

We pulled up to our bungalow, I looked at the sign that me and Mylo had made:

"Far Fin Bungalow."

Today was the day that we decided to rescue Hammie, our pet fox. We had saved him from drowning but the government found out that we had kept him and took him away to an animal shelter. We had been planning his rescue since the day he was taken. We snuck into the animal shelter, it was grim and smelt

of unwashed dogs, crying and yelping to get out. Hammie was the only fox there, and I can remember his petrified face; eyes darting for escape.

'Skyla?' Snapped mum. She popped my daydream and I was exposed to the world without Mylo.

I nodded and opened the car door. My hand brushing something sticky in the door compartment. It was a melted fruitella. The one that slid out of Mylo's pocket when he fell.

We had jumped down from the window of the animal shelter. Barbed wire, which surrounded the building, swiped at my calf piercing my skin, biting like a vicious dog. We had skidded to a halt, Hammie tugging hard for us to let go. My hand slipped and Hammie bounded to the other side of the road where the library stood. The biggest regret of my life. At the same time, instinctively Mylo ran after him.

Car.
Lights.
Gone.

I remember screaming in pain and anguish as he dropped.

Tears pricked my eyes as I followed mum out of the car. We hugged.
'Its okay...' she whispered.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the whale. Its stars filled the night sky, smothering me and mum with light. I sniffled.
I knew what the whale was now.

It was Mylo

Maya, Uckfield College

Only Me

Sometimes, I wish for someone—not just to hear my voice, but to catch the spaces between the words, to read the weight beneath my silence, someone who knows the map of my mind without me drawing it out, who feels the tremble in my quiet moments, and meets it with steady hands, someone who reads what I don't show, who understands the undertow, who feels the tremor in my chest, and calms the waves I can't suppress. Not just a face that fades away but one who chooses still to stay— I've never felt like this before, it's like I'm trapped behind a closed door. Like I'm seeing something I've never seen before, more and more, over until there's nothing left for me to express anymore. My only hope is you, will you help me see it through? But when your light begins to fade, and every truth unravels too...Then tell me this—what do we hold on to when everything we believed stops being true. It was never me and you, it was only me.

Ruhi, Lift Richmond Park

Covid 19 – A Rap

Covid 19... it hit very quick,
People at home drinking Nesquik,
Fortnight uploading, controller in hand.
Pizza delivering, this is your homeland.
Mr AI is online, I guess it's time...
For school time.

Good morning Sir, it's a lovely day.
My McDonalds is coming, be on your way.
This is how the story began.
Of Covid 19, I am NOT a fan!

Jack, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Gone

At this rate of earth decay we're going to have to leave.
So let's move to the moon or I'll lose you too.
We've travelled the seas and we've seen every land we've
named all the bees and counted the sand.
Now it's all gone, and so are you.

Lana, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Stand Up

“You are a nutjob with no common sense!”

“You are a stupid buffoon with bad smell!”

I just stood and watched as my friend and a bully gave one another offensive phrases to and fro.

I felt like a pencil being thrown.

They started fighting, whilst glaring and threw punches and kicks. Then I thought of Black legends like Martin Luther King Jr who spoke out and changes in America were made. Nelson Mandela spoke out against and became the First Black President of his nation.

I decided to speak up like them.

“Stop! This is meaningless!”

They stopped shouting.

They stopped speaking.

They stopped glaring.

They stopped fighting.

They stopped.

They stopped.

They stopped.

There and then I realised the power of my voice and words. I vowed to use my powerful voice to speak up and empower others.

Etienne, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Earth Promise

People observe the colours from above.
granite grey odours the sky,
as the city coughs up once more.
Lungs that can never rest.

From high ground the world is exhausted
echoes of horns shouting stretches to every gap
the sound of our taps still dripping.
it reminds me people don't care as they once did.

Old forests tell stories others cannot believe,
their language broken in clear lands.
as the world turns forward, not back
uncovering a future it has never cease to be

Mountains hold the puddles of water that was once ice,
the oceans rise with steps each minute
Our earth alters each day, yet it cannot adapt,
what it has become now rests within our hands

The world is unwell but not beyond repair
we can make the pulse get better if we care.
one seed at a time, a promise earth is to keep

Joachim, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

For What America

I know that the videos are taking control but can they see it
I know the world is changing but can they feel it
Were in the present but were falling into the past
More and more keeps coming we ain't gonna last
Do you know how hard it is for us to stop the scroll
Because after just one minute
Your brain just gonna start feeding in it
But all that don't matter tho
Because at any moment our world might blow
America and Iran stopping our flow
Just cuz the oil prices ain't going down low
Like were letting USA use our bases
even that ain't helping our cases
everyone is out getting new faces
but the algorithm still chases
Russia and Ukraine started a war what a bore
Like what was that for?
Donald Trump is blowing up places day and night
But the Americans are only worried about the bed bugs
takin a bite
Don't forget
He was prime minister before we sacked him
But now we are inviting him to the palace like now we are
running at him
Now the news is like "witch what where" another bomb
America like what is this for
Oil that you can get off your own ocean floor
Like the last thing we want is another war.

Rafaelle, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Force of Love

If this is the only chance of life we have, then live it to the full
Can they see that we are living in a time where we think we are free
though the shackles of the world and this judgmental society are holding us back?
Can they see that the words 'love' and 'hope' are the things we experience and feel
yet we don't truly understand the meaning of it?
We search for the truth but yet we can't see it
That we think silence is the only way we can protect ourselves and run away from the fear of being judged
But if love is truly the strongest force of all,
who are we to not be capable of obtaining it?

Adele, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

How Do You Survive?

When bunnies hop all around
And everything is there for them
No struggle or challenge bound

How do you survive?
While a fox sleeps in its warm burrow
A belly full of worms digesting
No need to hide or stay low

How do you survive?
Meanwhile a puma runs around full of energy
A restless fighter feasting on some birds
Moving wild and free

How do you survive?
When the forest is so still
And all the animals around
Are hiding on the hill

How do you really survive?
When the world is wild and wide
When danger waits in every place
And nowhere feels like you can hide

Dominic, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

I Wonder

I wonder what my 18 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they yell at me for making that mistake
Or would they comfort me for all the tears I'm soon to cry?

I wonder what my 25 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they say I should date that boy
Or would they tell me that my childhood dream was foolish?

I wonder what my 35 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they warn me to be more careful
Or would they tell me to enjoy my youth?

I wonder what my 45 year old self would be telling me now?
Would their words be gentle as they say don't worry about
the future
Or would they blame me for their mistakes?

I wonder what my 55 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they tell me to look after the planet better
Or would they tell me to be less reckless in my twenties?

I wonder what my 60 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they be complaining that their bones and body ache
Or would they be telling me that they want to slow dance
their life away?

I wonder what my 70 year old self would be telling me now?
Would they tell me that they are mourning their lover's
death
Or that all the things I am anxious about will fade into
nothing but specks in the sky?

I wonder what my 80 year old self would be telling me now?

Would they be saying that I should have enjoyed school
more

Or that I should be free and stand up for what's right?

I wonder if I will even make it to 90?

Maybe I will die with family by my side at the age of 22 before
I get to experience life enough

Or maybe I'll die at 83 alone and in pain not getting to
experience life 'enough'

I wonder if people see death as a bad thing?

But really, I could die in my 20's or my 80's and that wouldn't
be bad

Because death doesn't matter when you reflect on the life
you had.

I wonder if people see aging as scary?

When the clock ticks too fast and you just want it to slow

Or the grey hairs on your mom creeping in beginning to
grow.

I wonder if people see these things as sad?

To shed tears when death occurs instead of raising their
voice

Or to comfort those who suffer the aches of the pain most.

I wonder what my present self would tell them?

That I would try extra hard in that test

Or I will start doing what they tell me to

Yet I will probably end up saying that I just wanted a break

Although maybe I won't.

No one knows what I will say

Or if I will meet future me

Yet I really do wonder.

Princess, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

I'm Fine

Loneliness
something we all experience
and if you haven't yet
count yourself lucky

I've always had friends
not a lot but enough
and friends are good
great actually

But have you ever had
this gutting feeling
that all your friends
HATE you and are
only friends with you
out of pity

You push the feeling down
and you leave it down there
until it comes back
BIGGER and STRONGER
so big that you can't push it away
you can't act like it's not there
because it is
it's here to stay
until you work up the courage
to talk to your friends about it

Of course you don't
I know that I wouldn't
but now I have this
feeling in my chest
and it won't go away
but what can I do,

tell them about it
No there has to be another way
maybe on another day
I tell myself

But that day doesn't come
instead I leave myself in disarray
and to cope with it
I distance myself and try to be alone.
But being alone isn't fun
it's better than hanging out around
people who aren't really your friends
or so you think

so that's where I am now
I've been here for a while
but after being here
for some time you get the hang
of saying things like
"I'm fine"

Matilda, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Jake and the Alternative World

“Jake!” his mum yelled. “You’re going to be late!”

“Jeez chill! I’m coming!” Jake shouted while struggling to put on his shoes. Jake rushed down the stairs, his papers flying everywhere. “Come eat, I made pancakes,” his mum called out from the kitchen.

“No mum, I can’t! I’m going to miss my bus!” Jake yelled.

“Just take an apple at least!” she said, holding one out to him as he ran past the door.

Jake grabbed the apple and ran outside. The morning air was cold, and the bus was already turning the corner. “Wait!” he shouted, running as fast as he could.

But the bus didn’t stop.

Jake slowed down and sighed. “Great,” he muttered to himself, “Now I have to walk.”

The road to school went through a small patch of woods. Jake didn’t mind it most days, but today everything felt strangely quiet. Even the birds were silent.

As he walked deeper into the woods, something shiny caught his eye. On the ground was a small silver circle that looked like a mirror. It was glowing softly.

“That’s weird,” Jake said, kneeling down.

When he touched it, the ground suddenly shook. A bright flash of light surrounded him, and before he could even shout, everything disappeared.

Jake blinked.

He was no longer in the woods.

Instead, he stood in the middle of a huge city filled with tall glass towers. Strange flying cars zipped through the air above him. People walked past wearing glowing watches and talking to tiny floating screens.

“What... what is this place?” Jake whispered.

A robot rolled past him and stopped.

“Welcome, visitor,” it said in a calm voice. “You are now in Alternative Earth.”

Jake stared at it. “Alternative Earth?”

“Yes,” the robot replied. “A world where things are... different.”

Jake looked around again. A dog with metal legs ran past him. A boy around his age floated by on a small hovering board.

“This can’t be real,” Jake said.

Suddenly, a girl walked up to him. She had bright blue hair and wore a jacket covered in glowing patterns.

“You look confused,” she said.

“I think I’m in the wrong place,” Jake admitted.

The girl laughed. “Everyone says that when they arrive.”

“Arrive?” Jake asked.

“You came through a portal, didn’t you?” she said.

Jake remembered the glowing circle in the woods. “I guess so.”

“Well,” she said with a smile, “welcome to the alternative world.”

Jake looked around again. Everything was strange, exciting, and a little scary.

“So... how do I get home?” he asked.

The girl shrugged.

“You don’t,” she said. “Not until you figure out why the portal chose you.”

Jake’s eyes widened.

Suddenly missing the school bus didn’t seem like his biggest problem anymore.

Ella, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Maya's Mystery

One night at exactly 9:17 pm, the old lighthouse on Alder Hill blinked once. Everyone in town thought it was strange because the lighthouse had been abandoned for twenty years and didn't have any electricity. The light shouldn't have worked.

Most people ignored it because they were used to seeing the flash over the ocean. But Maya couldn't stop thinking about it. She was twelve and super curious. Mysteries like this bothered her, she always wanted to know the real answer.

One windy evening, Maya decided she would find out. She grabbed her bike and a flashlight and rode up the long road to the lighthouse. The waves crashed against the cliffs below, and the wind nearly knocked her over. The lighthouse looked even older up close.

When she pushed the rusty door open, it creaked loudly. The sound echoed up the spiral staircase. Maya held her flashlight tightly and slowly climbed to the top.

Inside, she saw a small lantern glowing on a table and an old man standing next to it.

He didn't seem surprised. He smiled. "You're a bit early" he said.

"Early for what?" Maya asked.

"The light" he said, pointing at the lantern.

Just then the clock struck 9:17, and the lighthouse flashed once across the dark ocean.

"You're the one doing that?" Maya asked.

The man nodded. He explained that years ago there had been a terrible storm. A fishing boat almost crashed because the lighthouse had stopped working. Later, the captain said a small light from the hill helped them find their way back safely. After that, the man decided to light a lantern every night at the same time, in case someone out at sea needed help.

Maya thought about how huge the ocean was and how small one lantern seemed but it had still saved people.

“Does anyone in town know you do this?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“They probably should” Maya said

The next evening, she came back with some friends. Soon more people in town heard the story and helped fix the lighthouse.

Within weeks, the lighthouse shone again. That night, the whole town watched. Maya looked for the old man, but he was gone. The light swept across the ocean, and a boat safely turned toward shore.

Maya smiled. One small light had turned into something much bigger.

Michael, Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School

Bob's Unusual Power

Bob was a normal man living in a quiet village. He went to work every day, wore his favourite shoes every day, he did normal everyday things. But he had a secret, he could make food appear just by thinking about it.

One morning Bob woke up hungry, so he wished for egg and bacon, it appeared right next to him, fresh, hot and ready to eat! From then on, whenever he thought about food it just appeared.

Bob didn't keep his secret to himself, he shared his food with his mum, and he bought snacks to school for all his friends.

One very cold night, Bob saw someone sitting alone, he sat beside them and asked what their favourite food was, the stranger answered "stew", Bob imagined it and soon they were sitting eating warm stew together, talking and laughing.

Bob was grateful for his unusual power, he used it to make people happy, and that he thought, was the greatest power of all.

Abel, Bredon Hill Academy

Cavern of Scales

Seraphyne ran to the edge of the forest. She stood there clutching her necklace, shaking. Suddenly a lightning storm started.

"Sorry" Amon said, grinning.

"No, you're not" Seraphyne scoffed.

Lightning thundered overhead.

"You're stubborn. Oh well", Amon said with a flick of his wrist.

Her vision went black.

When Seraphyne woke, she was in a cell.

"She's awake," said a deep voice.

"Ok. Now, let's get out of here." A hooded figure urged, approaching her.

"Who are you?" She asked, cautiously.

"Emberon."

She was shocked.

"I thought you were dead."

"I'm not dead. But we need to hurry."

"Why?"

"Because we need to escape before they come back."

We followed him, and he took us to a secret passage.

"This way" he said.

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"Nowhere" Amon shouted.

We ran as fast as we could.

"GET THEM!" Amon roared.

"We need to get out of here before they catch up." She nodded.

"I will figure a way out."

"Come on. We need to hurry."

"You put this on." He handed Seraphyne a hood.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s a hood. It’s so no one recognises you.”

“Ok. What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know.” Emberon admitted.

“I need to rest,” Seraphyne panted.

They turned the corner.

“There should be a door up ahead” Emberon said.

They burst through the door. Seraphyne made it to a bush before passing out.

Yoana, Bredon Hill Academy

The Amazing Archery Competition

I could feel the tension in the car as we travelled through the hustle and bustle of the lively city. I felt really excited but at the same time extremely nervous. For a second I thought I could feel my bow shaking with excitement next to me. Then I saw the sign to the archery competition my nerves started to grow, it felt like they were going to explode out my head. My dad drove me into the car park there were so many cars.

As I walked into the building a very friendly man greeted me and asked me my name and if he could see my card to show I was allowed to shoot. I rummaged through my pockets worrying it wasn't there but then it jumped into my hand like it knew it was needed. After this I had to go and set up my bow, my coach had saved me a space to do that. As I was doing this my friend came over and gave me a massive hug nearly knocking me over and my bow this made me feel much better.

"Equipment check is open," said the judge. This means the judge must look at everybody's bow to make sure it is safe to shoot. Once I had done that I went and got a healthy snack and a drink. Now the nerves had gone down it was time to shoot, you have two practice ends which means you shoot six arrows twice then it is time to score your arrows if it is in the gold (not a bullseye that is darts, not archery) it is worth ten if it is in the red its worth eight or seven blue is worth six or five black is worth four or three and white is worth one or two depending whether you get it in the inner circle or the outer circle of that colour.

All I could do now was try my absolute hardest and never give up even if it doesn't go as well as I wanted it to. Halfway

through the shoot we got our lunch then I carried on trying my hardest. Once we had finished our shoot, we had a medal ceremony. We had to go through all the bow types and age categories – mine was last, but it was all worth it because I got a shiny gold medal to add to my collection. So now it was time to put my bow down and go for a long drive home. It took ages to get out the carpark because there were so many people fighting to get home and have a well-deserved rest until the next one!

Darcey, Bredon Hill Academy

Thor and the Missing Hammer

A long time ago in the shining city of Asgard, Thor, the mighty thunder god wanted to go slay some frost giants. But when he went to get his hammer, Mjolnir, he couldn't find it. Instead he had his breakfast of a roast steak and 17 vanilla cupcakes and went to Jotunheim to see if the thieving frost giants had stolen his hammer.

Jotunheim was mountainous and snowy, and of course the giants were not too happy to see the god who killed 100,000 of them just yesterday morning. Thor accused one of the ugly, brainless frost giants of stealing his hammer, saying "Where is my hammer you giant scum!?" "We don't have your hammer, Thor." shouted the giants. Their icy faces as cold as stone stared down at the thunder god. He felt a shiver down his spine not in fear but frustration.

Furiously, Thor stomped away, he decided to go to Niflheim, the land of the dead people.

Black was the colour of this dark dimension. The air smelt of rotten flesh and decay. Walking around him were bright green zombies and creepy, crackling skeletons, they froze as they saw this undead being. "Where is my hammer you stupid dead people!?" Thor bellowed. "If you are searching for your hammer then of course, we don't have it." Said the queen of the realm (Hell herself) in a wicked, low voice.

Thor was now livid with rage, he stormed off in a huff. He decides his next destination is Nidaveleer, home of the dwarfs.

This realm was the least menacing of all the worlds that Thor had been to today. A huge, dying star shone on this world. The dwarf brothers Brokkr and Eitri were happy to

see their old friend. The bearded dwarves were famous for building Asgardian weapons and had made Mjolnir so Thor told them his whole sad story. After the story, Thor said “Do you have another hammer I could borrow for a few days?”

The brothers answered “You think that here hammers just magically pop up. Have you thought that maybe your brother has hidden it?” Defeated, Thor had no choice but to go home. He stomped through the door to the palace and slammed it behind him. A giant slam shook through the great hall.

“Loki, you little, sneaky, ugly cockroach! Where have you hidden my hammer I will crush you like an ant!” he yelled. “What are you talking about brother? How much mead have you drank today?” answered Loki. Thor was now really confused, not even Loki had the hammer, where in the whole cosmos was Mjolnir?

Thor climbed the stairs to bed and put his head on the pillow, but as he put his head down he noticed something. “Why does my pillow feel so strange and uncomfortable?” He moved his pillow away... and there standing like a bird on a tree, was the powerful and incredibly shiny, Mjolnir. “Oh, so that’s where it went, silly me.”

Bertie, Bredon Hill Academy

Architects of Our Destruction

Inspired by Sauti by the African Children's Choir

Life was mellifluous and undisturbed. It was not always that way but after the continuous efforts of my father and mother we made a heaven on Earth. The sea glistened like a dazzling deep cavernous sapphire under the fluorescent light that gleamed for the orb held captive in the endless pink sky. The canopy of onyx, crimson, cherry, and blond swayed swiftly in the clear ocean wind. The thick texture of the sand complemented the reeling waves that left the evening sea foam.

However we would soon find out we were the architects of our own destruction, we would reap in the horrors of a self-inflicted apocalypse.

Me and my family were woken in the middle of a humid night, dripping with sweat as the smell of fire and rot filled our inflamed nostrils, the sounds of shrieking and screams soon echoed in my ears. My mother and father quickly took me and my brother outside. We wandered like bats in the dark as the sky was blocked and obscured by smoke and flames, but the red blood moon just managed to stretch though, the transparent water now filled with corpses of animals slowly rotting out of their burnt skin. What was happening to our paradise me and my family worked so hard to build? What terrors out there did we not know? And why after all this time does it seek us now, fuelled by something colder than vengeance, something that won't be stopped till the last human on earth is no more.

Jasper, Cobham Free School

Game, Set... Comeback

Inspired by Sauti by the African Children's Choir

This was it. My shot. My chance to win the medal. Taking a deep breath in, I steelled my nerves. Nervousness would not help me. Grabbing my tennis racket, I took a step towards the court, stealing a glance at my opponent. Medium height, straight black hair with piercing blue eyes. Somewhere from behind me, a boy called. I turned and received the ball, getting my feet into position, I lifted my arm and released the ball.

I did it. Aced the final serve. Won the game. Looking around me, I could see my parents jumping up and down, and I couldn't help but grin. The crowd was a blinding swirl of colours, surrounded by cheering and whooping. A man spoke behind me, and I realised I had just been standing there. He beckoned for me to come, and when I got to him, he thrust the microphone in my face.

Shutting the door behind me, I exhaled slowly. Quiet. After resting my head back and closing my eyes for a few minutes, I started the car. The party at home would be waiting for me. I put my foot on the pedal and slowly reversed out of the car park, checking my mirrors for oncoming traffic. In only five ten minutes I had made it to the roundabout and had driven past two of the exits, when something flashed in my wing mirror. It was a truck.

Groaning in pain, I looked around me. I was in bed with white lights directly above me. Then I noticed the man in the corner, and he began to speak. I had been in a car crash, and I was lucky to survive with only a broken wrist and three damaged ribs. How could this happen? How could my tennis career recover from this?

It had been three months since the accident. I had been doing physiotherapy to strengthen my wrist, and I was ready. The organisers had postponed the tennis match I was due since I won the game three months ago. I was going to play again. And I was going to win.

Caitlin, Cobham Free School

Sauti

Inspired by Sauti by the African Children's Choir

Naveah, a young girl born and raised on African soil sat by her window, entranced by the melody in her headphones. It was the song Sauti, a Swahili rhythm that captured her heart the moment she heard it. Her mum showed it to her; she told her it was a song made by her ancestors to remind them hope was always around.

It told the story of the land, the struggles, and the joys of the people. She closed her eyes letting her mind wander off to her imagination. She began to think of the adventures of her predecessors, the losses and the victories as the humid east African air blew by. The earth's heartbeat pulsed through her body.

Karim, Cobham Free School

Shattered Silence

Life was easy. A tranquil scene, landscaped by the elegantly swaying palm trees. The finely textured sand complemented the emerald, shimmering water. Almost like nothing could go wrong in life – ever. As the sun dipped into the horizon, I began to depart the dream-like beach.

As I walked home, the contrast of this fantasy world decided to take its place. Narrow alleyways connected like a maze. Feelings of safety dropped to alarming levels. Then I heard something. A fear that had lingered in me ever since I was born...

Gunshots. In the dead of the night. With no one around but me.

Luca, Cobham Free School

The Discharge of the French Soldier

Based on the musical piece 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky

Cold Russian air stabbed at my face like an army of needles. Riled up and hungry, horses kicked and thrashed in the snow in an attempt to stop moving forward. Faces of my French allies were painted in a mix of gloom and frost. The warmth of blazing Moscow was still fresh in my mind as I trudged through the blizzard of exhaustion.

Screams echoed around me as Russian troops ambushed our already injured and shellshocked group as the order to retaliate rang out over the battlefield. The faces of my friends lay in red snow, their expressions locked in the moment they fell into the icy embrace of the cold. Shots from muskets of unknown allegiance covered the battle in smoke.

A Russian cannon's unmistakable sound hit me in my sternum before the horrific impact of the horse exploding covered me in its pummelled innards, raining a red soup over the frostbitten bodies of my allies. I made for the shelter of the treeline hoping to save myself from a fate I didn't want to visualise; the air escaped my lungs, not from my mouth, but from the warming hole in my chest as I was discharged from duty.

Leo, Cobham Free School

The Endless View

Inspired by Sauti by The African Children's Choir

Morning arrived quietly. The sky softened from indigo to rose, as light spilled across rolling hills and endless forests. The glistening water clung to blades of grass like scattered diamonds. Each droplet held a reflection of the breathtaking panorama, capturing the golden peaks of the mountains. Sapphire obis spread across the horizon, vast and endless. Crystal waves crashed against the seabed, stroking against the beige sand. An aroma of salt whistled through the air, the sensation drifting through my fingertips.

Rocky mountain tops smiled in the horizon, waving with its boulders crashing into the aqua waters of Africa. Fuchsia hibiscus blossomed along the lush, evergreen grassland as bees sung through the breeze. Souring through the amber sky, azure birds squawked as they rested in the towering treetops. Energy washed over me, enveloping me with happiness.

As I edged towards the water, a school of wish swam beneath my feet while the silky sand glistened in the golden sun.

Blossom, Cobham Free School

The Joy of Nature

Inspired by Sauti by the African Children's Choir

Either side of me was lush, vivid green palm trees that reached up into the sapphire sky holding the golden sun shining down on me. I came across a beautiful waterfall and saw a pool of crystal-clear waters below that glistened in the oven-like rays of sunlight. Brightly coloured plants surrounded me with an aroma of sweetness. I could taste the rich air of Africa that calmed me. A tropical bird squawked in the distance..... It wasn't a sound I was used to, but it felt like home. I crouched down and scooped up a handful of sand. As I let it run through my fingers, I felt as if I could never leave. I climbed up some large decrepit rocks and lay on the emerald grass, watching the blazing sun go down. It felt peaceful. The sky was no longer blue but a warming violet. When I could no longer see the sun, the whole sky fell dark and small stars began to show. I sighed. I will never see the world the same way again. And I will always cherish this moment. I began to feel tired and I slowly went into a deep sleep. In the morning, I retreated to my Jeep, knowing I would come back some day.

Annie, Cobham Free School

The Sun

Inspired by Sauti by The African Children's Choir

It burns bright and strong reflecting the mood of this day; powerful, uplifting, blazing. The emotions pummel through their village. Their hearts alight with the joyousness of hope. Their blinding leader demanding light from its position above them. Blinding, blinding, blinding. The object of illumination; it looks on at them. Hearts mirrors of the fiery glow, intentions reflecting its might. Like the final, stubborn embers in the fire; it refuses to blow away.

However, beyond the radiance, beyond the intensity, there lies quiet. Blinding, blinding, blinding. It makes you wonder why it is so eager to cover its warmth; when you stand alone, isolated from the brilliant fire of your village. As I am now. Looking at the luminescent force. Looking past the flame to the silence within. It is calming, relaxing. I feel I could stay here forever.

But there will always come a time when you have to leave the calm. Tranquillity turns to tenacity as I return to the festival of feelings, the party of positivity. The village was like a mirror reflecting the dominant light descending from above. Crystalised shimmers filling every room with blazing warmth. It exploded out of every window, every door, every ceiling. Suddenly so clear you could see the colour seeping from every hint of a glare. The merriment was so overpowering. To think it came from an object so far away.

The sun.

Imogen, Cobham Free School

Is It Worth It?

Imagination is a beautiful thing, isn't it? It's shaped the way we've thought for years. The way we've dreamt, the way we want to continue dreaming. Imagination is a form of art, an abstract part of our brain that has no limits and can stretch for miles and miles. So why are we stripping it of its worth, why are we replacing it? The music once embedded with emotion and passion now can be made with the click of a single button. The art that once needed technique and skill is now empty, hollow behind it not a single feeling but a bot, a robot, a programmed object.

AI can do everything a human can, but can it? Can it feel the way we do? Can it express itself the way we do? Can it love the way we do? No it can't, because it's a bot, a programmed object, nothing compared to a human. We're destroying our ecosystems for them, the earth our home is crumbling just to provide fossil fuels for AI. But the question is, is it worth it? Is it worth throwing away our planet, our home, our imagination?

Nicole, Gumley House Convent School

My Life at Secondary

The day I came to secondary,
questions raced my mind
“How big is this school?”
and “will anyone ever be kind?”

After years of backstabbing
and broken friendships,
shattering my confidence
and making me dip

I pondered as I looked,
around this very big school,
“Who will be my friend?”
“Who will think I’m cool?”

Then she came up to me
cheerful and bright,
I looked up at her
as she lit up my sight

She asked me gently,
“Would you like to be my friend?”
Those seven words
changed my life there and then

Now I wake up
and start the daily run,
doing clubs together
is all the more fun

Now I feel well-settled
in my new school life
embracing new challenges
like a warrior in a fight!

Aaryahi, Gumley House Convent School

The Grave

Ding.

My work phone has received a notification, another recording from the 'Ears'. I started listening and noticed something in the corner of the screen.

"What?!" I couldn't believe my eyes. I looked at the time. It was 21:07. The time stamp on the recording said 21:47. How? I rubbed my eyes. This couldn't be real. I opened the call app on my phone quickly. With shaking hands, I dialled my friend's number.

"What do you want?" she groaned.

"Come over. Now!"

"Fine. Give me forty minutes." She hung up.

My mind was spinning; I couldn't believe this. Opening the recording up again, I played it. The background noise was a low hum: similar to my own living room. Then, a jagged scream tore through the speakers. Squelches followed; the rhythmic sound of metal meeting meat. Then, a final, gurgling whisper:

"You. Snake."

Wait. That's *my* voice.

I started shaking. The news felt as if I was submerged, searching for air which clearly wasn't there. It was already 21:24. 23 minutes to live. I had to do something. I was going to die in half an hour. Repetitively, I flipped the key on my neck; it was a method my mother taught me a couple of years ago. I was panicking, there was no space to breathe. I walked down the stairs, each step creaking, as if laughing at my stupidity. I turned the doorknob and pulled. The breeze felt like the slap on the face I needed. I had to shut

the door; I had to shut all the windows. After doing this, I sat on my sofa. This was far from what I wanted when I agreed to work as a filter for the records that the government put in every single house for “safety” purposes. Sarah should be coming any minute now. The time was 21:40. She had to come fast; we had to prepare for the coming of my death. Just as I was thinking that, I heard a car in my driveway. It’s her. I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God. I ran to the door, waiting patiently for my friend to knock. I heard it, after 5 minutes of silence. I opened, so eager to finally not be alone.

“Hey, so this may sound weird but I received a record of me dying in 2 minutes.”

Her face was simple and indifferent, her eyes dead.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“I know but let’s go, we need weapons –”

She interrupted. “You shouldn’t have received that. Now I can’t answer for my sins, you weren’t supposed to know it was me.” The feeling of dread penetrated my bloodstream.

“What do you mean?” I didn’t feel it when the cold metal penetrated my throat. I just felt the blood pouring into my mouth as I collapsed. The necklace dug into my chest but that was the least of my problems. I took my last breath and spat out the truth.

“You. Snake.” Darkness.

Elizaveta, Gumley House Convent School

God's Song

His fatherly hands placed the ancient record on the player. Static came out as if it couldn't process the notes until it began to play. No words. No interference. Only a mix between joy and sorrow.

Everyone listened. Everyone kneeled, dropping down and stared at the heavens. A beautiful mix of pink and yellow danced around the never ending skies. Tears filled the streets as people cried everything they had. Joy, sadness, life, death, promise and grief filled their feeble minds. Darkness and light fought in the skies, dawn and sunset.

The waves, wind and earth joined in creating something beautiful. Something only angels could listen to. Something too beautiful for the poisoned people of the world to hear. The sound echoed through the mountains, through the deepest of valleys, its glorious sound rippled through the cleanest sea. The sound seemed like heaven and hell began to dance. Something you want, but it pains us when it leaves...

It was something everyone wants.
Either to give or be given.
It was the sound of love.
It was God's song.

Ben, Hadlow Rural Community School

Red vs Blue

Everyone heard the news about the red team, blue team fights with each year getting only school equipment to defend themselves with. They don't know nothing about the fights. I was walking down the streets of Bromley, my school on the red list. Police at every site. By the shops, by the school gate, even by the bus stop. There was nowhere to hide and that's what worried me cause if I was going to fight, I need to lose the crowd and fast.

I got into school and met up with the gang. We knew we were surrounded when we left here and the location wasn't posted yet so we didn't know how far we would have to go or what time we would fight all we knew was that we needed to bring rulers and pencils and make them sharp enough to kill. The rest of the day was a blur of maths with a teacher who avoids me like the plague but doesn't have a second thought to put me in competitions. Doing equations in science with some nice and gets me. And the last lesson in languages where I try and pay attention but the adrenaline of the fight kicking in. Game time is now and there will be no blue survivors.

I met up with the boys by the side of the school. It's our normal meet place to meet up and have some fun.

"You remember the deal, we're going to meet up with the Bullers school first then we get the location and show who runs these ends," said Jamie my best mate with that blood thirsty look in his eyes.

"We know the plan but chill me got this and we will make them regret fighting us," I said not trying to speak the obvious. Jamie's phone buzzed with the location and we were screwed. Away at Croydon. The plan stills stands but

the next problem was simple. The train fare or even worse the officers. We walked to Hayes station with the Buller boys. There are normally no officers there but since this fight broke out, they have swarmed the station left rights and centre. By some miracle we had convinced them that we were on our way home from school. And we were on.

We got off the train and walked to the park and we saw them. About 50 to 70 kids our age with their pens and protractors at the ready. There was no time to warm up and no chance to run. This is our fight and it must be won...

Hollie, Hadlow Rural Community School

The Sovereign Five

Long before the skies fractured and the two planets collapsed into one wounded world, before the gods were destroyed by the very creations they once cherished, there existed five heroes whose names shaped the fate of history itself. They were remembered across ages as the Sovereign Five.

They lived upon Eryndor, the first world ever created a realm of harmony where oceans reflected endless light, and mountains rose like guardians beneath peaceful heavens. Life thrived in balance, untouched by corruption or despair. Power existed not to dominate, but to guide, and no beings embodied that purpose more completely than the Sovereign Five.

They were protectors, rulers, and living symbols of divine virtue. No army could defeat them, no ruler could rival them, and no force upon Eryndor dared challenge their authority. Across every land, their names were spoken with reverence. To know the Sovereign Five was to believe the world itself was safe.

Each hero ruled a kingdom shaped by a sacred ideal.

The first was the Kingdom of Knowledge, a radiant domain of vast libraries, observatories, and academies carved from white stone and crystal. Scholars debated beneath glowing halls while students pursued discovery without fear. Wisdom was shared freely, and truth illuminated every corner of the realm. Curiosity united its people, and understanding brought peace rather than division.

The second was the Kingdom of Volition, a land devoted to purpose and determination. Its cities stood tall upon rolling plains where citizens forged their own paths through discipline and ambition. Here, choice was sacred. Every individual was encouraged to shape their destiny, and strength of will was

celebrated above all else. The people believed that a person's resolve defined who they truly were.

The third was the Kingdom of Happiness, a vibrant realm alive with music, celebration, and warmth. Gardens bloomed endlessly beneath golden skies, and laughter echoed through bustling streets. Joy was not fleeting but carefully protected, nurtured as a vital force that sustained the spirit. Festivals marked the passage of time, reminding all who lived there that life itself was a gift meant to be cherished.

The fourth was the Kingdom of Change, built along shifting landscapes where rivers altered course and cities evolved with the seasons. Innovation thrived, and transformation was welcomed rather than feared. Its people believed growth required motion, and progress was embraced even when it demanded sacrifice. Nothing remained stagnant, everything moved toward becoming something greater.

The fifth was the Kingdom of Solidarity, a vast and unified land where cooperation bound communities together. Forest settlements, coastal cities, and mountain strongholds stood connected by unwavering trust. No one stood alone. Strength came from unity, and compassion was considered the greatest power of all.

Together, the Sovereign Five preserved perfect balance across Eryndor.

Yet perfection carries a hidden flaw, for when balance depends on power alone, even heroes may unknowingly plant the seeds of ruin.

And far beyond Eryndor's skies, destiny had already begun to shift.

Erin, Hadlow Rural Community School

Tom Saves the Day

Tom felt ropes cutting into his wrists and ankles as the pug whimpered. How was he going to get out of this?

Earlier...

Tom nodded as his older brother Danny announced he was heading to the toilet. He sipped his hot chocolate; this was his favourite day, Saturday mornings began with a game of squash, followed by a visit to The Café.

He drank and gazed out of the window watching a woman was tying up her muddy pug before popping inside to order a coffee. Everything seemed ordinary until a man dressed in black, his hood hiding his face, sprinted toward the dog. He untied the pug and began dragging it away.

Tom didn't hesitate. He leapt up, his hot chocolate flying, and bolted out the café. The serving lady shouted, "STOP!" but Tom didn't have time to explain.

Outside, he saw the thief turn a corner and chased after him. But when he reached the alley, the man had vanished.

Before he could react, a gloved hand clamped over his mouth and he was shoved into a van with the pug. It screeched away like an angry parrot, flinging Tom and the dog around like socks in a tumble-dryer. Tom braced himself, holding the terrified pug.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "I'll look after you."

The dog licked his cheek, Tom chuckled, suddenly the van lurched violently Tom hit his head, everything went black. With a throbbing head he opened his eyes and found himself in a garage full of junk. Two cages held a chihuahua and a shih-

tzu thin, trembling, neglected the pug was tied up beside him. Tom realised this man had done this before.

The ropes around the wrists and ankles were tight but he noticed the sticky hot chocolate still coating his hands and had an idea. Shuffling closer to the pug the dog began licking, then chewing the ropes.

“Yes! Good dog! Keep going!”

Within minutes, Tom’s wrists were free. He untied his ankles, grabbed the pug, and sprinted to the garage door. Pressing the wrong button set off an alarm, but he quickly found the right one and ducked under the rising door.

Running into the woods for cover, branches whipped his face as the thief crashed after him. When the pug tired, Tom scooped it up and pushed on. Just when his lungs felt ready to burst, blue lights flickered through the trees.

“Over here! Help!”

Police rushed over. The pug’s owner pointed shouting at Tom, “That’s him! He took my dog!” But the pug charged the real thief when put down barking and biting until officers grabbed him. The man confessed everything.

Danny arrived and hugged Tom fiercely. “I was so worried —but I’m proud of you.

Two weeks later, Tom sat in The Café again, hot chocolate in hand. That morning he’d received a thick envelope announcing he’d won a People’s Bravery Award and would be interviewed on TV. This time, he finished his drink, and it tasted even better

Harrison, Hadlow Rural Community School

What We Could Have Been: The Echoes of the Pitch

Rory found comfort in the late night quiet of the stables – the soft thud of hooves in sand, the dim barn lights, the distant neighs. Being there alone soothed her even though her heart still felt heavy. Every few minutes, she checked her phone, knowing she wouldn't see his name appear. The silence had become a familiar ache.

Asher returned home exhausted, bruised from training, mud still clinging to his boots. He fell onto his bed, staring at the ceiling as thoughts of Rory tightened in his chest. Her name sat on his phone screen, untouched yet impossible to ignore. He wished things hadn't fallen apart the way they had.

Rory slid off her horse, letting him nudge her shoulder as if reminding her she wasn't as alone as she felt. She walked slowly through the barn—the place where laughter, warm afternoons, and countless memories lived. She still longed for their love to find its way back, even if she no longer believed it could.

Asher often found his mind drifting to the days when he'd make her stand behind the rugby posts, calling her his ball girl while he practiced conversions. Every week, he trained on those same fields, replaying memories he could not shake. Their love wasn't gone; he felt it. It was simply broken.

One night, after turning off the arena lights, Rory leaned her forehead against a wooden post, pressing harder as frustration and longing mingled. The thought of Asher hit her sharply—his name echoing through her mind in a way she couldn't fight. She looked at her phone again, craving something she didn't expect to come.

Across town, Asher finally gave in to the urge he'd been battling for months. He opened their messages, his thumbs hovering, heart pounding. Before he could talk himself out of it, he typed the words:

"Hey... are you okay?"

He froze, breath tight, waiting for a silence he feared would last forever.

Rory had just climbed into bed when her phone buzzed. The notification stunned her. Seeing Asher's name brought a rush of memories—summer evenings on the pitch, long drives, whispered arguments that ended with soft apologies. Her chest tightened painfully as she placed her phone down, too overwhelmed to answer.

That night, neither of them truly slept. The message lingered in both of their minds, stirring something they had tried to bury.

The next evening, Rory wandered to the rugby field without any real reason. The sunset cast soft pink and orange streaks across the sky, and the empty posts felt strangely comforting. A movement caught her eye—Asher, helmet in hand, standing quietly as though he had been waiting for her.

Memories crashed into her all at once: lying in the grass together, laughing at passing planes, sharing pieces of their lives they never shared with anyone else.

Asher met her gaze, almost disbelieving she was real. He lifted a hand in a small, hesitant greeting. Rory's breath caught, and she raised her hand back, mirroring him with equal uncertainty.

They stayed like that—two people held together by something fragile yet undeniably strong. Neither moved, afraid that stepping closer might shatter what remained. And still, standing there was enough to remind them that the love they once had wasn't lost.

Not completely.

Paige, Hadlow Rural Community School

Why Should We

Why should we
Why should we
Pay the fee
Pay the debt
We did not set

Are you enjoying
The world you created
At the expense
Of nature sedated

For now, our future is fated
Our dreams now tainted

Every day you take away a right
And add another battle to the fight
Why are you trying
to keep us out of sight

Instead of kids
Playing in the sun
Having fun
They need to run
Fighting for a crumb

We all know who
Our leaders have become
Just another string
For the controllers to strum

Most say life is about money
While some only get a penny
But most don't get any

We see them on the TV
Walking happy and free
And we think
Why should we
Why should we pay the fee.

Martha, Hadlow Rural Community School

Only Me

Sometimes, I wish for someone – not just to hear my voice, but to catch the spaces between the words, to read the weight beneath my silence, someone who knows the map of my mind without me drawing it out, who feels the tremble in my quiet moments, and meets it with steady hands, someone who reads what I don't show, who understands the undertow, who feels the tremor in my chest, and calms the waves I can't suppress. Not just a face that fades away but one who chooses still to stay. I've never felt like this before, it's like I'm trapped behind a closed door. Like I'm seeing something I've never seen before, more and more, over and over, until there's nothing left for me to express anymore. My only hope is you, will you help me see it through? But when your light begins to fade, and every truth unravels too... then tell me this – what do we hold on to when everything we believed stops being true. It was never me and you. It was only me.

Ruhi, Lift Richmond Park

Happy Place

I awoke at midday. The rays of the sun warmed my face. The calming breeze swept over my soft skin. The cabin was remote. A glimmer of emerald caught my eye through the window. I made lunch and relaxed on my bed. I felt... alone. I sat atop the balcony in our home, glancing at the blinding foliage green smothering the private fields for miles to come. Pink blossoms flick off the bonsai trees like embers floating out of a crackling fire. In a second of seeing them my heart felt love for the first time in millennia. My friends. My family. They played and relaxed and ate like peace was the only thing in the world. Suddenly, a wave of excitement and joy washed over me as they called me over, soaking me in happiness. The flower grove contrasted with the blue picnic rug covering the green. Orange tulips sprout out of the ground, symbolising creativity and fun. The sun shone on me once again as I ran down the stairs. This is... my happy place.

Suddenly I was back. Standing on the stage. Smothered in fear. But like a warm memory, my happy place rushed back into my head, creating a bittersweet feeling. I have to go, but I will be back. Triumphant. Standing on the stage, the crowd roaring with anticipation, I said my first words: "I am in my happy place. Find yours and you'll be like me. I have never felt so loved there, and if it wasn't for that thing in my head, pushing me on, I wouldn't be here. Sometimes life is scary. Embarrassing. Sad. But in my happy place I feel free. I feel free to be confident and happy. All I needed was a happy place. And maybe you do too."

The crowd fell silent, but within seconds of my last word the crowd's voice echoed with determination and influence. I had done it, and all I needed was you.

Riley, Lift Tamworth

Unspoken Secrets

Shouts of conversations and calling out to teachers rang in my ears, students that I had never talked to before swarmed around me. Teenagers have always been a bit of my life that I never fully understood. They could be ready for the zombie apocalypse but not for the maths test that they're taking tomorrow. I can't say anything myself; I'm 12 and in secondary school. The corridors are always crowded with people pushing and shoving so they can escape detentions and getting marked as late. I pushed my way through the corridor, my brunette hair tickled my neck as I held tight onto my bag, not wanting it to slip off my shoulders. The door to the outside world was in my sights, calling out to me to get out of the stampede I was trying so hard not to get trampled by. The cons of being a Year 7 I guess.

Pressing my hands against the glass door, I made my way outside. Long awaited fresh air slid down my neck. Blinding rays shone into my eyes as I made my way towards the other building where my teacher and lesson were waiting for me. To my side I glanced over to Ryan, the one friend from primary school who I had trusted my whole life. The inky waves sitting on top of his head perfectly framed his face. Those pristine blue eyes stared into my emerald green eyes with a hint of happiness that I looked forward to every day. His smile that always seemed to catch the rays of the afternoon sun glinted with joy. We began to talk about all the things we enjoyed doing together. Seeing each other outside of school, playing video games and reading our favourite novels. Every moment that I spent with him was the best part of my day.

Deep down inside of me, I had always had a crush on Ryan- but whenever I plucked up the courage to tell him, I went

silent and speechless. Memories of times where he had a crush on another girl flooded my mind about how jealous I was. A voice inside my head told me that the worst thing he can say is no and that we'd be still friends after, but those weren't the scenes that had happened previously with another crush. Asking why I couldn't just ask the question, something came to me. Fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of losing the one friend who had actually kept by my side whenever I had a feeling that I wasn't enough.

The double doors to the other building were getting closer now and I knew this could be my one chance whilst we were together.

"Hey," I started, nerves obvious in my voice, "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure, anything." Ryan replied.

This was it.

"I like you more than a friend."

"Really? I like you too."

Don't let your fears control what you do, it'll all be worth it after.

Freya, Lift Tamworth

Kylie's Dream

Kylie was fourteen and lived for football. It wasn't just a hobby to her – it was everything. The smell of muddy pitches, the sound of boots running on mud, the sharp whistle cutting through the air – she loved it all. Every afternoon, she stood at the edge of the pitch, her hands sinking into her hoodies pockets watching the boys train. Mud splashed up their legs as they ran drills, boots thudded heavily against the ball and laughter mixed with shouting as they pushed each other harder. Kylie watched every pass, every skill, every goal, memorising it all, wishing she was out there instead of stuck on the sidelines. But it was forbidden for girls to play football.

Each day, that rule felt heavier, pressing down on her chest. One evening, as the sky faded into farness and the floodlights buzzed on, Kylie finally stepped forward. Her heart hammered so loudly she was sure they could hear it, but she took a breath and pleaded,

“Why can't I join?”

A boy laughed and shook his head.

“Because we're bigger, faster and stronger than you,” he sneered.

Before she could respond, he decided to prove his point by lifting her up and shoving her outside. Kylie stumbled as the door slammed behind her, the sound echoing across the pitch. For a moment, she stood frozen. Her face burned with embarrassment and anger, but beneath it all, something stronger grew – determination.

The next day she came back.

This time Kylie was unrecognisable. She wore a short blonde wig which covered her natural hair completely. Her clothes were looser and when she spoke she forced a deeper, rougher voice. When she asked again, no one questioned her, she slipped right into the team, unnoticed, heart racing as she took her place amongst them.

Her new name was Kyle.

Out on the pitch, she played fearlessly. Every sprint sent fire through her legs, her lungs cried as her shirt was soaked, but nothing stopped her. She chased every ball, tackled without hesitation, and passed perfectly. Slowly, the team began to realise something was different. They relied on 'Kyle' much more, shouting her name and trusting her. She could feel the respect grow after each match.

The match was tense. The crowd roared from the sidelines, boots clashed, and the clock ticked closer to the end. When the final whistle blew, time seemed to freeze.

Kylie reached up and pulled off her wig.

Silence fell.

Mouths hung open. Eyes widened. They stared, shocked – but the scoreboard didn't lie. Kylie was a girl, and she succeeded by winning the game.

Emily, Sir Harry Smith Community College

The Other Island

I took no notice of the unicorn silhouette that flew over me. It was nothing out of the ordinary. But then I heard my name whispered into my left ear. "Jenny Oak, come with me." I jumped. Turning around, I was surprised to see no one. Spirit speech. Of course. Suddenly, the unicorn silhouette appeared once more, this time landing right in front of me. I gasped. This unicorn was riderless yet not rotting. Besides, wild unicorns were extremely rare nowadays. "Jenny Oak, we need your help." The voice came again as I stared into the unicorn's eyes. I saw an island, a different island, covered in with waterfalls, swamps, rivers, lakes and unicorns. Unicorns that seemed to morph out of the currents and had long flowy manes. Unicorns that had the same blue horn and same water droplet in the centre of their back. Unicorns that weredying. Dying because humans had thrown litter into the ocean. Dying because the fish were being poisoned with plastic and then the island was still and eerily quiet, the colour slowly draining away.

I came back to reality. The unicorn was still standing there and this time when she spoke, I understood the task that lay before me. "I am Nile, the Queen of my tribe and we need you to save us. Save us all."

I sprinted to the stables, where Jester's Revenge was devouring a goat leg. "Come on Jes, we've got some unicorns to save."

Nile waited for us, then took flight, heading north-east. We followed her, as I created a plan in my head. 'Find litter, dispose correctly then BOOM! Unicorns saved.' I was jolted from my thoughts for Jester had come to an abrupt halt next to Nile. There just below us, was a mile long island of litter. This was going to be hard.

Summoning the air element (which, unfortunately, was my weakest element) I conjured up a miniature tornado, scooped up half the island and raced to the nearest mainland recycling centre. After repeating this a couple more times, there was nothing left of the island. Nile suddenly appeared beside me and murmured, "Thank you Jenny Oak. But my island shall not be safe forever. Will you be the protector?" I nodded. To celebrate, Jester squirted water into my face. "Thanks," I muttered.

So, from that day, I have cared for the Water Island, looking after the landscape and its wonderful wildlife. I have also met multiple other unicorns, all named after different bodies of water (Ness, Thames, Amazon are a few examples). I have often wondered if there are other elemental islands, however, so far, I have found no more. But I am content on my little island. Maybe there is a reason why I am the only person who knows about the Water Island.

Elsa, Sir Harry Smith Community College

Whispered of the Earth

The earth spins slow, beneath the trees,
With leaves that hum like the distant seas.
Each branch a story, old as time,
A quiet song, a whispered rhyme.

The stars above, they start to gleam,
Like distant thoughts in a quiet dream.
And in the night, the moonlight sways,
Guiding us through the forgotten ways.

We're not alone, just passing by,
In the arms of the open sky.
A breath of wind, a sigh of earth,
In every movement, there's rebirth.

Phoebe, The Boulevard Academy

Bonnie and the Goal that Proved Them Wrong

Bonnie loved football more than anything. She loved the sound of the ball hitting her boots, the feeling of the grass under her feet, and the rush of running towards the goal. Every break and lunchtime, while other students played games or chatted, Bonnie would be outside practicing. She dribbled, shot, and tried new tricks she had seen on TV. Football made her feel happy, confident, and unstoppable.

When Bonnie reached Year 6, she finally felt brave enough to ask her teacher, Mr. Sterling, if she could join the school's football team. She had been practicing for months and felt ready. But when she asked, Mr. Sterling looked at her like she had said something silly.

"Football isn't really for girls, Bonnie," he said shaking his head, "you'll slow the team down."

The words hit Bonnie like a strong tackle. Her cheeks burned and her stomach sank. She felt angry, sad, and small all at once. For days, she didn't touch her football, she felt like maybe he was right, maybe she couldn't play.

But Bonnie loved football too much to give up. One evening, she picked up her old, scuffed ball and went to the garden. She practiced passing against the fence, dribbling around cones she had made from her family's old shoes, and shooting at a goal made from jumpers. Some days she wanted to quit, especially when it rained or when she felt tired, but she kept going. She watched football matches on TV and copied the moves of her favourite players. Slowly, she got faster, stronger, and better.

A few months later, Bonnie saw a poster at the local sports centre: Girls' Football Team - New Players Welcome. Her

hands shook as she signed up. She was nervous on the first day, unsure if she belonged, but the moment the ball rolled to her feet, everything else disappeared. She dribbled past other players, made perfect passes, and even scored a goal that made the coach whistle loudly.

"Wow, you're talented!" the coach said.

Bonnie felt proud. She joined the team and practiced every week, making friends who loved football just as much as she did.

The next big moment came when her school played a match against another school. Bonnie ran across the pitch, her heart pounding; the ball glued to her feet. She passed, ran, and scored two goals. The crowd cheered, and Bonnie couldn't stop smiling.

She noticed Mr. Sterling on the sidelines, standing silently, surprised. Bonnie didn't need to say anything. She had done it. She had proved to everyone, and most importantly to herself, that being told "you can't" doesn't mean you can't. It just means you have to work harder, practice more, and never give up.

Bonnie held the ball after the match, muddy and proud. She had chased her dream, faced doubt, and scored her goal—not just on the pitch, but in life.

Ruby, The John of Gaunt School

Death in Plain Sight – London

It was a warm July evening; everyone had gathered for the UK premier of "The Code". Suddenly, there was a huge commotion, panicked screams and cries filled the summer air. Then out of nowhere "HE'S DEAD, HE'S DEAD!" I pushed my way through the bustling crowd at Trafalgar Square to the bloodied body crumpled there on the floor. I can assure you it wasn't a pretty sight.

Five minutes passed, suddenly warbling sirens filled the silence and in rushed more police than I had ever seen before in my life. They quickly set about work to contain the crime scene. Meticulously working their way to try and ascertain what had happened for this poor man to have met his end. There were whispers going through the shellshocked crowd that it was none other than the famous leading man Evan Howard. It was reasonably quick before DCI Scott of the metropolitan police silenced us all to announce that the rumours were correct. We were all ushered away from the area in which the corpse still lay. We all had to give our names, addresses and contact details and a statement, detailing who we were there with and why we were there. We were also asked what we saw (if anything) it must have taken them ages to collect everyone's statements as there was hundreds if not thousands of people there.

As you can imagine there was a significant number of big names and celebrities there because it was a movie premier so the likes of Jack Smith, Patricia Long and Harlei Richards were all in attendance.

I felt like I was somehow now invested in the outcome of this dramatic scene that has pulled me in from my normal

mundane life. I found myself talking to people I had never met before as we were all in the area in which the murder had happened. I get he was a big star as he was the leading man in this huge blockbuster movie. But who would have wanted him dead? There was never anything reported bad about him that I had ever heard. So why had this happened?

I took myself across the road to the cafe to ponder my thoughts while being close enough to keep an eye on proceedings.

After a couple of days, the detectives had worked hard in gathering the evidence, to find he had been stabbed with a poisoned dagger which is exactly what happened in the film, so we were dealing with a copycat murderer!

Let me conclude this for you. It was in fact his co-star; Ethan Williamson who was aggrieved that he was overlooked for the main part in the movie, he felt he was far superior to Evan, he had so much more experience in the business that it had consumed him so much so that he has turned to murder to get his revenge!

Ethan Williamson charged with murder in plain sight!

Callum, The John of Gaunt School

Hospital Bed

There I lay, in the hospital bed, vision blurred and face burning, itching. I try my best not to claw at and rip off my inflamed face, but oh the temptation is irresistible. I start clawing. Itching at my raw face, it feels so nice but burning even worse all at once. Then I slowly come to a stop as I see my face in the mirror on the other side of the room. I start to walk slowly over to it, "Oh. My. God." I say to myself in disbelief. My face has doubled in size, right eye completely closed up. What has happened to me?

I look around the room and realise where I am. I spot a sign on the door reading 'Burns Department'. Then all of a sudden, it comes rushing back...

Around a week ago, I was sat on video call to my best friend and I was using the new cleanser that I got in my stocking for Christmas a few weeks back. Almost as soon as I rubbed it in, she looked at me with horror on her face. "Your face is getting all red and blotchy!" she exclaimed. I didn't think much of it and said goodbye before going to downstairs to eat my dinner. When I sat at the table, Dad repeated her exact words to me and by this point it had started to become tingly and burn. But, not wanting to cause a scene, I told him I would wash my face when I was done, and carried on eating my meal.

When I got back upstairs, I went into my bathroom and rinsed my face with cold water. As time passed it began to get more and more red and the burning became unbearable. I had washed my face multiple times by this point and it was just getting worse, I didn't sleep on that drizzly, cold Sunday night.

Monday morning came and I hadn't gotten a single wink of sleep. I didn't go to school that day, instead to the doctors, who turned us away.

Tuesday morning came, and I awoke bleary eyed. Glancing at the clock, the time read 09:45. I guess I was staying home from school again. Mum had left for work already so I stumbled into the bathroom to check how my face was doing. It had been a rough night.

"Holy!" I shouted. My face had doubled in size! I quickly snapped a picture to send to mum and dad, panic rising in my chest and unsure of what to do next. Ping. Mum replied almost instantly. She told me she was leaving and to start walking and she would meet me. I could tell she was staying calm to try not to worry me.

I could see her ahead of me within minutes of leaving the house, her rushed pace betraying her worry. A wave of shock and sadness washed all over her face all at once, as she embraced me and murmured "Dads waiting close by, he's taking us to hospital." We hurried to the car where my worried Dad was sat, hopped in and just drove.

Now I'm here. Looking like this. Terrified that I will never be the same girl again.

Amelia, The John of Gaunt School

Who Is He?

There was a boy named Alex. He had always felt like a broken compass, a life with no way to get through difficult times by himself. He wanted to feel like a proper person who liked the same things as other boys, he felt like he needed to fit in to stop comparing himself to everyone else, but he just couldn't. He never stopped trying to be different, nothing worked not even trying to be bad in school to be cool. He waited and waited, facing that he wasn't like the other boys, he wasn't obsessed with cars or trucks not even dinosaurs. He liked barbies, pink, fairies and makeup. In a school of judgemental children, it didn't feel right for him to reveal anything yet.

After a while he opened his eyes to see his teacher staring at him, red face, wide open eyes, angry eyebrows and that one teacher look, teachers give everyone. Turns out he'd been daydreaming right in the middle of class, he'd been daydreaming for an hour and a half. The teacher -who is called Ms Stevens- had already called his parents in to have a chat.

Once he got home, the boy slowly pushed the front door open, his backpack, slipping from his shoulder and landing on the ground. He was normally a good kid, it had just been because of staring out of the window wondering who he is. Now he looked for anything else to entertain him while he was bracing himself for the lecture up ahead. He wishes he could explain what was going on inside his head, but he just couldn't do it, no matter how much he opened his mouth all that would come out is a little whimper. His parents followed behind him, though, they didn't seem upset or angry, they looked confused and worried. Nothing felt right at that point. They sat him down and asked him to talk, they wanted

to understand what was going on, which surprised him, his dad had been very drunk and rude before it was sort of a fresh new look for his dad. They were kind and understanding, but Alex didn't tell them what he was daydreaming about, he still couldn't get the courage to tell his own family his identity and likes.

He sits on his bedroom floor considering how he should come out to his parents. He tried to read it out quietly, a piece of paper in his hand, to either scribble or read out his lines. He figures if he just stands up at the dinner table and screams it at the top of his lungs and get it over with maybe that would be it and his parents would just know. From then on that was his plan. Later at dinner he takes a deep breath and stands up "I LIKE BOYS!" he belts it out like a firework show. Stunned, mum and dad look at him with a proud look in their eyes, smiling.

Ella, The John of Gaunt School

Gladiator

As I woke up, I knew it was time. Every week a new gladiator was selected to show entertainment to the people of ancient Rome. This was like no other Monday for peasant males over 18. There would be a ceremony held where all peasants were gathered to see who was chosen to be the unlucky person. However, the chances of it being you it were very slim but you could never know what could happen.

After nervously waiting in my house, I headed over to the town centre where the ceremony would be held and all the families and friends would gather to see if they had lost another person to the cruelty of the Romans. As soon as I got there the hustle and bustle of the crowd distracted me from the fact that I could be the next gladiator. Soon the event had started and hundreds of names written on pieces of paper were put into the box.

Soon after the leader of this town (Publius) walked up on the stage and gave a glorious speech trying to make it sound like being a gladiator was a good thing. Then he announced that the new gladiator will be chosen by whoever's name he pulled out. As he put his hand in the crowd held their breathe ready to feel sorry for the person. As soon as he pulled his hand out he shouted the name "Lucius" then I realised that was me. I wailed in panic realising that I would most likely never return while the guards marched over and hooked onto both of my arms.

Soon they took me into a dark place inside the Colosseum where guards and wild animals were placed. Soon they took me to the place that I would stay for the next week if I survive that long. After sitting on my bed that was rock solid I started to accept that this would be my last place before I die and then a guard came in and informed me that my first

fight would happen in a few hours. 1 hour later they had taken me to a long corridor filled with shields and weapons and I was told to pick 1 sword and 1 small shield. A few minutes later they called me out and I walked out to a massive crowd of people ready to see the action of the fight.

As I waited to see who my opponent was I was extremely anxious. Not too long after the gates slowly opened and the crowd grew more and more tense and then my opponent was revealed to be a bear.

It roared its way out as the guards hurriedly ran back inside to close the gate. I started to panic but not the crowd they started shouting in excitement. The bear ran towards me in anger as it knew its meal is running away. Soon the bear caught up to me and knocked me to the ground and my sword slid away in fear however I was able to dodge the attacks and grabbed my sword. Then he lunged at me and...

Ramin, Woodrush High School

Living Beside a Different World

I am speaking on behalf of my little sister who has suspected autism. She struggles in school and with the sense of belonging that every child is supposed to feel. She struggles making friendships and keeping them. She experiences the world differently because her brain is wired differently.

How This Affects Home

This affects home with behaviour issues because our home is her safe space. She feels like she can let everything out here because she bottles it up all day. When her teacher isn't in school or can't teach at that point in the day, she bottles it up and waits until she comes home to let it out. The ways she lets it out are big meltdowns, like shouting and getting angry. She doesn't sleep well because her mind is too busy and she overthinks everything. When someone has done her wrong, she needs physical justice. She needs to know the exact consequence.

How This Affects Her School Life

This affects her school life because she has never liked school. She has never felt a sense of belonging. She is constantly dysregulated, so she has to have Tuesdays off, which has been confirmed with a GP. On Tuesdays she goes to a smaller group of homeschooled children, and about once every fortnight she has a one-to-one session.

In school she feels as if she isn't listened to. Small responsibilities mean the most to her, and I feel like I have to celebrate them even if other people think they are little. Her mental health was affected by school, and she doesn't know it yet, but she is a brave girl — smart and beautiful. If

she feels like she can't trust you, she won't tell you anything until you do something drastic to gain her trust back.

How It Affects Me

It affects me because I share a room with her and a house. She feels like she can lash out at me because I'm a part of her safe space as her older sister. When I was younger, I was always confused by her behaviour. Now I realise that it's not her fault — it's just the way her brain works.

I have matured more quickly to help and support my sister. As a 12-year-old, I should be worrying about what teacher I have next or when my homework is due, but I'm actually worrying about whether she's okay in school or if people are being kind.

Sometimes when she has a meltdown in public, or when I'm on the phone, or when people are over, I feel embarrassed. But then I feel guilty for feeling embarrassed. Sometimes I feel like my problems are much smaller than hers, and I really try not to complain — but sometimes I just have to.

It has also taught me not to judge people so quickly. It has helped me understand people's differences and difficulties.

How Other People or Families Might Feel

Some people or families might feel like my sister is just "misbehaving" and judge her. They might see a naughty child, but I see a girl who is struggling. Some people don't understand, so they change the subject or act awkward.

They might see my family as different or weird, but we're just treading carefully through her world. Other people may see the meltdowns and the struggles, but not the unconditional love. They don't see the courage it takes for her to exist in

a world that isn't built for her. They see my sister holding her ears and think she's weak, but she is one of the strongest people I know.

My Shadow

I feel like I'm a mirror she's waiting to step into. Sometimes I just wish she would be her own person instead of trying to be a mini version of me. And then I feel horrible because I feel like she's just trying to annoy me. But deep down I know she isn't. She's just doing it because she loves me.

I also know she's copying me because I make her feel safe in a world that doesn't make sense. She doesn't want to be me — she's just still finding herself.

Ellie Mai, Woodrush High School

The National Storytelling Week 2026 young writers are proud to present their anthology of original writing. Created by Society for Storytelling, National Storytelling Week is a joyful celebration of the power of sharing stories.

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