crossing the line
Crossing the Line

The Tower Hamlets Creative Writing Competition 2011
**Introduction**

We are proud to present the winning entries of the 2011 Tower Hamlets Creative Writing competition, an annual celebration of the best young writers in the Borough now organised by Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service.

Ten secondary schools are represented here by the twenty-three prize winners, with entries in the categories of KS3 poetry, KS3 short stories, KS4 poetry and KS4 short stories. The order that they appear in the anthology is unrelated to category or prize.

We hope that this collection provides inspiration and enjoyment.

*Tower Hamlets Schools Library Services*
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Foreword

Two months before we decided on this year’s title and created the artwork for the competition, students and school pupils around the country marched on London in protest at the Coalition Government’s rise in tuition fees. Battle lines were formed. Union picket lines would soon appear. The reasons for these events were often presented in the carefully scripted lines of sound bites. It seemed appropriate to make use of the ideology and imagery of these ‘interesting times’ to inspire our writers. Months later and the people of Egypt rose up in protest against their own leaders, testing the lines that traditional separate the powerful and the powerless, an event explored in the first poem of this anthology.

All over the world lines are constantly being drawn up and broken down, and the young writers who entered the competition have explored what this means to them. Presenting the awards, the author Pete Johnson remarked how diverse the works were, reflecting the highly charged and personal nature of the theme. These poems and stories have not just drawn on imagination and inventiveness, but also on their writers’ deep perceptions of the world around them.

All too often we are told not to cross the line. The works collected here encourage us to make our own choices.

Jacob Turner
Tower Hamlets Schools Library Services
Civilians Vs. Politicians
Crossing The Line To Freedom

Germany 1939-1945
Racism, sexism, communism socialism,
Homophobia, Power, Ideology
War, Euthanasia, Holocaust
All I see is blackness surrounding me
And pride overpowering me
Yet I cannot help but question this sudden feeling of relief
Is my German nationality something to be proud of?
Or is it something to despise?
The tears of this nation’s pleas will scar the world for generations to come
I stand and wonder how one man acquiesced bureaucratic power to make him believe he was superior to any other race
I stand and look at my quietly ticking watch
Is it too late to cross the Line?

What is a civilian?
Is it the birth of a diverse world?
Or is it simply society’s Lost voice?
What is a politician?
Is it the end of the world?
Or is it simply society’s puppet?

South Africa 1948-1943
There seems to be a never-ending line
A line that looks to be segregating the human race because of the colour of their skin
This line is a symbol of how man takes power to the head
How man THINKS the world should be his
This here line of mine parts he people
Whites and blacks
Yet, the colour of the line seems to be a rainbow
Which makes me question
Why can’t this prejudiced nation abolish the line?
Why can’t the nation be multi-coloured?
Why must the colour of my skin determine the rest of my Life?
I stand and look at my quietly ticking watch
Is it too late to cross the line?

Why does man take power to the head?
Why does society allow man to prompt a nation to success?
Why does success give man pleasure?
Why does pleasure require more gratification?
Why did man create democracy, if man does not abide?

**Egypt 2011**
The streets of this beautiful country will never be the same
I see vandalised posters, vandalised property and vandalised people
How could one man turn a country against each other?
How CAN one man be in power for nearly half his life?
It is not fair on my people
It is not fair on the children
This man has not changed anything
This man has not given me freedom or a Livelihood
This man only takes
I saw the multi-coloured line
And I questioned it
I asked it if the current events show a democratic country
I asked it to help
I realise that the Day of Departure is dawning
And I KNOW this man WILL step down
But I cannot wait any longer
I now stand and look at my quietly ticking watch
Is it too late to cross the line?

What happened to the “I believe”?
The “I dream”?
The “I will succeed”?
Why do we feel isolated in a dolt house with ignorance and greed
pulling at our strings?
What happened to the “we”? 
To the “us”? 
To the “you”? 
What happened to the importance of a nation rather than the feeding of the wealth? 
What happened to democracy?

I STOOD and LOOKED at my quietly ticking watch

I CROSSED the line.

Nadia Rahman (Morpeth School)
Blinded

*Hazera Khatun*
*(Sir John Cass’s Foundation and Redcoat School)*

It was raining. Grey clouds filled the air, not a single ray of hope was to be seen. But that’s how most of my days are. No laughter or happiness exists in my world. Misery after misery, it’s like time never stops. nor does it wait for you. You’re all alone, in this never-ending world.

Have you ever looked into a bully’s eyes? You can say that a bully crosses all limits. But have you ever known how they really feel? You think that the victim suffers more, but no. The bully does. After they come to that point where they realize their mistake, they have to live with that guilt for as long as they live. Scared for life, that’s how I feel right now. I didn’t mean to be one, but it just happened. That’s what happens when you let greed and
envy rot inside you. You become a monster which you yourself have created. Sometimes you take a step too far, and you lose everything, even yourself. You cross all the limits and forget what really matters. You lose everything you ever wanted and end up with nothing, nothing but sadness and guilt.

The same thing happened to me, you know. There was a time where I crossed all the limits. I wanted something so badly, that I was willing to hurt someone really close to me to gain it. I had a friend and she was really nice. Nice is like an insult for her. She was beyond nice, the kindest person I’d ever met. But I was just too dumb to realise it. I felt better when was around her, but for some reason, I still felt empty. It was the jealousy which was eating up everything inside. I was too careless to see how lucky I was with what I had. But I always had a craving for more. Then, I was always a monster, but a monster that was never unleashed to the public. I kept hidden away, but sometimes you could see right through me, especially my friend who never suspected how much I hated her sometimes.

I thought the best day of my life would be the day she went away and everyone accepted me. But it wasn’t. The satisfaction only lasted a few weeks and then it goes away.

It was a normal school day, a day like any other. During break I would just sit there, whilst my friend tried to pacify me out of my anger. But it never worked, because she didn’t know that she was the root of all my frustration. Well...that’s what I thought at the time. I was watching everyone play nicely, laughing and having so much fun, the fun which never existed in my world and the fun which I deserved. That’s the only word which existed in my dictionary: me, me and me. I only cared for myself. How selfish I was.
It just disgusts me so much that now I make sure I stay away from everyone as far as possible. I was a beast, who longed for what she had desired. The thirst of popularity was growing every second. While I was lost in all this though, my friend was still trying to pacify me. If only she knew that it wasn’t working, all her efforts were being wasted. Instead she was making me angrier than I already was.

Her naïve little eyes were staring at my every move. If only she had learnt to keep away. Then she wouldn’t have had to suffer that day. The anger was building up inside me, raging to get free. Freedom roared inside, fuelled with all that hatred! Suddenly, my mouth was open. The anger had managed to escape. I was screaming and I was swearing..., at her, the one who had been my company for a long time. Nearly every person in the whole playground was staring at us. Enjoyment was dancing in their eyes and fire in mine. The monster was released. I was creating a crowd and every person was cheering for me. This enthusiasm made me stronger and I swore at her more. Not regretting each word; but I should have, or I will. I loved all the attention! It was like I had finally gained victory. Each word stabbed her like a knife. All the blood was oozing out and this was shown in her tears, because for each word I had said, a new teardrop fell.

I finally composed myself together and stopped. Everyone was shouting my name, but giving dirty looks to her as they walked past. They treated her as though she was some sort of disease. She was all alone. But that’s what she deserved for ruining my life, I thought to myself. To keep being popular, I would have had to hurt her more, but I didn’t care. At least I was popular and everyone liked me.
From that day onward, I used to bully her. I should have known when to stop, but I was long gone from that boundary which stops you from doing bad. I was a newborn demon who was out of control. I was lost in a new world, a world where bad things could happen any moment.

Of course, they did. After a couple of weeks, this new technique of mine for grabbing attention was starting to get old. Slowly, one by one, my crowd was starting to fade, getting smaller each day, and so was my victim. She couldn’t tolerate it any longer. She severed all her ties with me and went away. No one knows where she went. That’s when I realised that I was a monster; I went over the top by ruining someone’s life which wasn’t worthy enough to be ruined.

I guess that’s what I deserved. No! I deserved more! Think before you take that extra step forward! Is it really worth hurting someone to get what you always wanted?
Once I walk out that door, I’ll be gone forever
So tell me not to.

Once I cross that line, I’ll lose myself in the horror
So please tell me to stay.

Tell me not to leave
because once I’m gone
I can’t come back

So I’ll linger a little longer here
right here where time will stand still
until you come to me and say what you need to say
I’m standing by the door I know I should walk through.

But not yet
Not now
I’m waiting for you

But as time passes I’ll move into the dark room
the room that is everlasting
the room without pain
without love

ALL I HAVE TO DO IS CROSS THE LINE!

Please don’t let me go there
Please come after me
I can’t save myself

_Shakila Tasnim (Mulberry Girls School)_
The soldier grabbed Mother’s neck. Mother shrieked a horrible sound. I watched in horror. He squeezed tighter. I knew the soldier would kill Mother and it would be over for the rest of us. Our freedom was vanishing into the distance every time Mother let out another anguished gasp.

Stumbling forward I lunged at the soldier. My brother, Sok-Ju aimed a kick at him. It was useless. He tossed me away like a rag doll; my empty body crushed to the floor, my soul rattled and eyes shed no tears even though my heart was brawling. Lying on the stiff ground I stared at the night sky, Mother’s final cry echoing deeper, deeper in my ear before she slumped, lifeless. I begged the sky holding me prisoner to let me go. No answer. No surprise; everyone becomes forgotten in North Korea, dreams turn into
fears, freedom into restriction.

However, the day Freedom finally came knocking on my doorstep was the day Death came with an appointment for Father. He died insisting we ‘get out of here’, shaping his last breath into a whispered ‘quick’ when Sok-Ju thrashed into the house. He gasped, ‘I’ve found our-, before his eyes fell. Sok-Ju staggered forth and murmured, ‘but I’ve found our freedom...’ He said it half-heartedly like he knew you couldn’t negotiate with Death. To my astonishment, Father’s lips were smiling. The face of fulfilment. Father knew we would flee - all he ever dreamed. He was waiting for us in Heaven, guiding with his smiling dead face.

Sok-Ju retold a conversation with a friend who admitted to travelling back and forth to China. He assured us that once inside China, you could dial South Korea but we were suspicious at first. You couldn’t trust anybody. After a few days, we decided he was sincere. He knew a truck driver who’d drive us to the border. It was settled. We were finally leaving this grey country where colours were only depicted vividly on propaganda posters of North Korea’s founder, Kim Il-Sung. Rays of sunlight emanate from his face: he’s the sun but I’ve had enough of his exposure.

The plan fell into place within weeks. The night before leaving, I took out a bundle from my cupboard containing every letter I ever received from Jun-Sang, my lover. The letters must be destroyed. I ripped them into teardrops. After we fled, we’d be denounced as traitors but I didn’t want guilt to swallow Jun-Sang. His life can go on. He’d find a suitable wife. He’ll forgive me.
I was twelve when I met Jun-Sang who was fifteen from the town of Pyongyang. If we were seen together, Jun-Sang’s career prospects would diminish and my reputation as a virtuous woman. Therefore, our dates consisted of long walks in the dark; no restaurants or cinemas operating due to the lack of electricity. Jun-Sang was my best friend but I hid my biggest secret from him: my hatred for North Korea and my family’s plan to defect.

The next morning, we set off once Mother told neighbours we were off to a family wedding in Musan — our cover story. It would buy us time before anyone noticed our disappearance. We wore our best clothing underneath rags, carried minimal luggage and stuffed family photographs in to remember our friends. We met the truck driver taking us to Musan which situated near a narrow stretch of the Tumen River. It was a ghost town, its mines closed, terrified of its own existence. A guide escorted us out of Musan, down a dirt road running parallel to the river where he left us. ‘Just keep walking straight,’ he said.

My body trembled from fear and cold. Without light, we struggled. Where was the river? Then I collided with a wall. It loomed high above our heads and stretched far in either direction. As I edged myself along it with my hands, the wall got lower until it was easy to climb over. I understood now. It was a retaining wall for the river embankment. I scrambled down to the water. The river was low, reaching my knees but it was so cold. My legs felt like lead as my trainers filled with water. Lifting one leg, then the other, I inched forward. When the water receded to my ankle, I pulled myself up to the riverbank and looked around. I was in China. There were noises of Sok-Ju helping Mother across. Nothing else. The eerie silence gnawed at me. I looked back at North Korea. I
could walk back to Musan and go home. Jun-Sang would never
know. I could erase this event from time by turning back. As I
contemplated my options, I heard a rustling in the trees. My limbs
froze. Then a man’s voice. ‘Nuna? Nuna?’ My brother was calling
me, using the Korean word for ‘older sister’.

Now, looking up at the sky, recalling the memories, I knew I’d
failed. We were stumbling blindly when we walked into a soldier
on patrol — like he was waiting for us. I refused to be a failure.
Determinedly, I heaved to my feet... and fell back down. The
soldier eyed me furiously, waiting for back-up to arrive in the
dead night. I rose again and I fell and I rose till the soldier’s eyes
twisted red at my persistence and pinned my neck under his meaty
arm. Sok-Ju’s gasp resonated through the grass.
‘Nuna!’ He rushed to wrestle my fate...

‘No.’ Mother froze everyone’s movement with the word. She was
swaying weakly.
‘Please.’ Mother implored, looking earnestly at the soldier. ‘Please
let my daughter go. I beg of you.’
The soldier reluctantly released me and I received a fit of coughs;
my lungs regaining oxygen. ‘Nuna! Are you alright nuna?’ I
reassured him with a thin smile. Mother was talking quietly to the
soldier and I strained my ears to hear the conversation.
‘...you’re very young. You haven’t witnessed the country’s harsh
reality. Imagine the situation reversed. Would you live in a country
that was starving; that you weren’t born in? I think not, so please...’
Mother waited to hear the verdict to her plight. We all waited. It
was painful knowing someone was choosing our fate. He ‘s going
to say no... I just knew it.
‘Fine.’ He sighed. I couldn’t believe my ears. Looking at this
stranger’s face, I thanked him with my eyes. The soldier frantically
looked around.
‘You better hurry. I called back-up; they’ll be here soon.’ He directed us towards Musan’s minefield. ‘Hurry!’

We stuffed our delight of surviving deep into our hearts. We weren’t safe yet. When we reached the exit, a wave of emotion lifted me. This was it. One more obstacle and we’d be free. I was torn from my imagination when a roar made the smallest weed quiver. Spinning around, I spotted a soldier — a different one — pointing his gun at... Sok-Ju! He was bringing up the rear so the soldier was closest to him.

‘Don’t move!’ The soldier barked. His loud voice sounded awful against the quiet humming of night creatures. Sok-Ju turned to face him and a bullet pitched into the air; slicing the silence. ‘No!’ Mother screeched.

Time froze then. The twelve numbers with its sixty digits wriggled to beat again but it was a losing battle. Its commander, the extensive sleek hand and deputy in charge, the shorter, stumpy hand both informed time that it couldn’t move till Mi-ran remembers she has two legs which moved. Legs which needed to save Sok-Ju.

I thrashed to Sok-Ju but abruptly halted. Sok-Ju’s body appeared queer. That’s because he ‘5 just been shot stupid! My brain screamed. I told it no. Why wasn’t he falling to the ground then? That’s when realisation dawned upon me. At the same time the sun crawled across the horizon, digesting the night stars away and stretching out its arms till sharp pink illuminated the field. Then I saw that the bullet shot had seared the heart of the soldier and as I puzzled over his death, a figure stepped out of the mist still circulating the ground. It was the previous soldier. He fired the shot. He headed for us - stepped over the dead body - and faced me.
‘Mi-ran, nothing’s stopping you. Leave.’ It was when he said my name that I realised it was...JunSang! Our nightly-dates must have affected my image of him but he was really here. I grabbed his left hand, Mother’s in my left, Sok-Ju on her left and we became free together. I always dreamed of feeling delightful when I left my prison cell but I was sad. Pitying those that were still chained, I said a silent sorry and crossed the line to freedom.
NASA Communication Network:
[Error Code 07-645]
Unidentified object: Identified.
[Status update 0569]
Identified object is approaching Earth’s spine.
[RED ALERT RED ALERT: TrekArk TEN]
We have company- Aliens

BBC News
Gong!
Landing News,
A Meteor has broke,

Gong!
Into the Nevada Desert,
This is no hoax,

Gong!
Reports are materializing,
Of extrinsic life,
Gong!
But as we once knew,
Rumours are rife,

Gong!
We’ll be updating you shortly,
On the state of affairs

Gong!
But first let’s drool on about,
Obesity and/or mayors,
Gong!
Hold for a second,
Or maybe a few,

Gong!
There’s been a development,
Something... quite new,

Gong!
We haven’t merely discovered Aliens,
We’ve shot one of them too.

The Slaughtered
The longer one life,
The colder we get,
10 000 light years,
Qf time and space,
We clung to our pain,
or 50 hard too arid long,
And finally we CRASED,
into our sleep,
After approximately an eternity of rest,
   We scanned with my head,
       for some sort of being,
           To quench our thirst,
   One embarked on a search,
   And 500trillion waited above,
   To look for some sustenance,
       Some animals,
           Some love,
   One finally trekked too,
       A city of life,
   And entered the warm room,
       To be bit in the back,
           Like butter through knife,
   The claw kept on going, Going, Going, Gone,
       Through our heart,
   Clawing and snapping and clapping its brilliance,
       Delighting in slaughter,
           Wetting itself in death,
   We are the Kind One,
       And we live on love,
   but the shorter our life gets,
       The warmer we get,
   The more we drain blood,
       The less we forget.

The Slaughterer
Waa do I wal’ in this waiting room here?
This empty foyah’,
Wid empty people, An’ empty stares,
(Oh dear br’ it was a babe),
Time chewing away our short lives,
And spitting out the gao’ stuff,
They can’ puh me arway,
They made no law concerning this,
Like any law abiding AMEEERIAN CITY-ZEN,
Ah used self-defence,
(How did ah not know it wahs a Chyil’!)
It’ll be Okey doodles,
(Ah was Its first impression of human Kin’)
Ahil call Buckley,
He’ll vouch for me... in the supreme cour’,
(Oh Mah’ Righteous Gaawwwd!),
What have I destroyed?

Judgement
“MURDERER”
“REAPER”
“DECEIVER”
“JUST LEAVE US”
Mr Cain Abel Buckley,
As Judge I am Judging,
And Strive not begrudging,
The fate you have ditched earth in,
It is with great regret that I announce, Hanged to the ounce,
You wont be,
Instead our dury,
No not kind,
Just naive,
Have decided exile you,
Back home,
The extra—terrestrials will search there first,
And indeed satisfy their thirst,
This is a terrible fate,
But from this mournful date,
Our race will no longer exist,
I know court is in session,
But I really must mention,
Inter-Planetary relations, Alien negotiations,
You fucked it up,
Before it,
Was even,
An it.

Alfred Green (Raine’s Foundation School)
One summer, there was a lad named Bradley Hillings. He was really good at football but there was only one problem - his parents wouldn’t let him play because they were scared he would get injured. He was an only child and was really bored to sit at home all day. He was going downstairs and said excitedly “Mum, can I go play football please?” She replied angrily, “No way! It’s way too dangerous.” He walked upstairs muttering under his breath, “I hate my life I wish I could play football.” He put his face on his bed as if he was crying. His Mum walked in and said “I know you want to play kickball or whatever you call it but, your father wouldn’t like you to get
injured. You are an only child; we wouldn’t want to lose you.” “But-”
“No buts - I’m sorry dear.” She closed the door and went downstairs. He stomped downstairs sloppily and walked straight out the door.
His mum shouted, “You get your bottom back here or you’re in big trouble young man!”
He walked back with tears in his eyes and a lump in his throat.
“Please, Dad wouldn’t even notice.” He cried.
“Hmm” She hummed while thinking about it. “Oh okay, only for an hour though.” She said reluctantly. “YES, YES, YES! Thank you mum I love you so much.” She smiled in great happiness.
He ran off to the pitch but first he went to his friend’s house and said “Come lets go play some footie, I’m allowed to play.”
“Really?”
“Yes!”
He put on his trainers and started to play to play. His friend John Tyler started with the ball; Bradley tackled him, ran crossing the half way line and shot from half way across the field.
Bradley shouted in excitement “What a goal!”
“Nice shot man!” Said John surprised.
“Thanks, coach said I was a natural.”
“You are man!”
After playing for hours, he went home. When he got home, he was in big trouble.
“I thought I said only an hour!” Said his mum, angrily. “That was an hour.” Said Bradley wonderingly.
“That was four hours.”
Bradley thought to himself, “Four hours, How?”
His dad strolled in; he overheard their chat. Bradley looked up at his dad.
“Did you hear that?”
“Yes, now listen here boy, I was once a footballer. I had a mas-sive accident, it was very serious. I had the ball, the toughest defender was on to me, he jumped and kicked me in my head by accident. At least I think it was an accident. I was knocked down and out cold. Everyone was running over me to get the player, everyone was stepping on me. I was a legend. I came out of hospital the week you was born and never spoke of it again, I almost died that day.”
“Sorry dad, I didn’t know.”
“It’s ok son, it’s ok.”
“How would you have felt if your coach put you on the bench every match? Huh?”
“Really annoyed.” He whispered.
“That’s exactly how I feel.” He said.
His dad looked at him and said “I will let you play on one condi-tion.”
“Anything, dad!”
“Be very careful”
“Okay dad”
On his way up to his room he turned around and said “I love you, dad.”
His dad smiled and said “I love you too, son.”
Poison of Your Words

The tiniest things can have the biggest effect.  
One word  
Two words  
A mere touch or sound or truth  
What you said ruined everything  
It started with a buffalo wing.  
Sauce on the carpet.  

You wanted to clean our room. Her letter was under the bed.  
You found it.  
Your eyes glistened like crystals, wanting to know what had happened  
I told you.  
My biggest regret was knowing I’d lied  
You felt denied.
Our trust shattered in those few minutes
I begged you to think twice.
Your nod sufficed

But just as I started to see resolution on the horizon, your lips moved.
‘I hope you die.’
My eyes widened. Yours remained cold.
I couldn’t keep my desperate gaze controlled

You had the right to shout, swear, spit and question me
But not the right to curse.
We never stayed friends, it was the final goodbye
Your wish had punctured my heart
The injured organ like a work of art
Nothing would ever be the same again.
Pain
The poison of your words running through my veins
Still remains.

*Rhiannon Hutchings
(Sir John Cass’s Foundation and Redcoat Secondary School)*
Crossing the Line

Akashi Alam (Morpeth School)

The Hossaini family were exhausted! They had already been travelling in secret for four nights running, squashed, all five of them, in a small truck, driving nocturnally, pretending that their destination was a shrine. They had left Shiraz in the South on Friday evening and reached Tazeh Kand on the border of Iran 96 never-ending hours later.

“Tonight’s the night everyone!” whispered Ghazal to her three children and youngest brother in law. They sat, huddled in a circle around a campfire, sizzling away. It was dusk and apart from baby Parastoo who had no idea of the happenings which lay ahead, this night, the 19th March 2011, would be a night to be remembered by the future corners of the Hossaini family.

“OK, I’ll run through the plan once again” said Abdi, lowering his tone to a raspy croak; his voice was on the verge of breaking, you know how it is with 16 year old boys who seem to grow an inch every other day!
“An hour from now, we will have packed, given the truck back to Tanvir Jan and set off. The Araz River flows down stream about a kilometre away from here in Tazeh Kand, we must reach there before isha prayer which means we will be taking the short cut through the Azad forest” Abdi continued before Laleh, his 13 year old sister interrupted,

“Abdi Jan!”

“Yes Laleh”

“What creatures’ lie in such a forest? We are already on the edges and the sound of grass hoppers is far louder then back in Shiraz.”

“Azad means free! We are taking a path to freedom. Surely these harmless creatures deserve the same! This forest is alive with many beautiful animals, if we treat them as we would like to be treated, the least they will do is allow us to pass” replied Abdi. Laleh looked deep in to her brothers pale green eyes. He reminded her so vividly of their father and their evening walks in the mountains on the outskirts of Shiraz. She recalled her father telling such magical stories about trees which sang, far away lands with palaces over rainbows and a little black fish that was brave enough to explore what lay beyond what she knew.

“We must finish running through our blue print, the sun is almost down and we need to prepare before setting off.” Uncle Samad’s usual jovial tone switched to a serious and slightly nervous voice.

“Sorry Uncle” whispered Abdi lowering his head a little.

“Once we have reached the river we must wait until everyone, meaning soldiers and locals starts praying. Of course there will still be a few army men on guard at the border but less then there otherwise would be. When the coast is clear, we shall wade through the water and Inshallah reach Azerbaijan safely.” Abdi
finished off louder than he had started, just the thought of leaving a country which had ruined their lives brought a smile and fiery gleam to the Hossaini’s faces, even baby Parastoo’s eyes widened, the green of her iris turning gold, reflecting the camp fire.

Uncle Samad was Abdi, Laleh and Paratoo’s paternal Uncle, the youngest brother from their father’s siblings. He was just like a smaller version of Ali Hossaini, their father. Ali was a doctor working with a hospital-on-wheels which treated patients who’d been injured while fighting for human rights against the government. It was a rest home which travelled through many parts of urban and rural Shiraz treating many people a day, mainly students. The government soon found out about this well-known, mobile clinic and had all patients and staff members jailed. Very few prisoners were released to their families, the rest are nowhere to be found. They’ve disappeared. Unfortunately for the Hossaini family and friends, Ali, was one of them.

It was 8 o’clock. All dressed in dark browns and blacks, wearing rubber soled shoes (the common footwear for women was flip-flops) and bandanas around their faces, Uncle Samad, Abdi, Ghazal, Laleh and baby Parastoo, began their quest into the heart of the Azad forest.

As bats flapped their wings rapidly in the tree tops, Wild dogs howled, loud, like the siren of cops. While snakes rattled at their feet, Red ants scurried from log to leaf. Herds of deer, Ran from sounds of fear, From their fellow species, Being caught by things so beastly.
“What was that?” hissed Laleh.
“Don’t worry Laleh Jan, why this is nature’s music, an orchestra of sounds just for us!” replied her Mum Ghazal, cradling Aisha who they’d luckily put to sleep before leaving.

45 minutes of muffled foot steps, suppressed breathing and minimal conversation went by but eventually the sound of gushing waters was audible. Parastoo had woken up and begun to cry for milk, but fortunately, another sort of cry drowned her wail. It was the call for prayer, the Azan. Reaching the ears of all villagers, the un-amplified, pure voice of the Moazzin brought hope, bravery, encouragement and fear to the entire escaping troop. They had reached the Araz River!

On the river’s banks, the mud was dense; there were many high weeds, low tree branches and easy-to-hide-behind bushes, all of these natural elements helping the Hossaini family on their trek. The majority of the local population were inside the mosque, praying. All was silent apart from a deep murmur and the river’s gargle. This was the cue for all 5 members to move swiftly and escape via the river. Now this may sound simple, but with army men within distance, a baby who may start screaming at any moment and the current state of the Iranian government, for any person trying not to be seen while wading through a waist deep, fast flowing river in the dark, is some challenge!

“We must move, and fast!” hissed Samad. He stepped discreetly out from the shadows of the forest and into the gleam of the moon and the village, making motions with his hands indicating that the coast was clear. It was a beautiful night. The sky was clear, painted navy and dotted with pearls of all shapes and sizes. The biggest pearl being the moon, it was the closest it had ever got to earth
since 1992 and appeared noticeably larger then usual, lighting the sky with it’s iridescent, opal glow’ They scurried out from the lingering darkness of the forest and into the presence of Uncle Samad whose eyes were now scanning the surrounding area.

“OK, there is a man on guard just 50 yards to our right on this side of the river; he has a machine gun in his hut. There is another guard quite a bit further down that way” said Samad pointing left.

“He too is loaded but seems to be praying in his hut or possibly asleep!”

“Won’t we catch a cold mother? The water looks so very cold, I’m already shivering!” exclaimed Laleh clinging onto her Mum’s loose shawl.

“One has to take a challenge to receive a reward” replied Ghazal to her daughter.

From that moment on, unnecessary talk was lost and the family kept hushed. They tip toed to the edge of the narrowest part of the river, staying hidden behind tree trunks when voices were heard. Even at the narrowest point in a mile of river, the width was around 20 metres and it was more like a gorge so there were plenty of rocks of all shapes and sizes to trip or slip on.

The time had come. One by one, each member stepped into the ice cold river, all flinching at the contrast in temperature but biting their tongues so as not to make a sound! Once they were all in, Ghazal cradling Parastoo to her chest, everyone was trembling, the colour draining from their faces. The first few minuets were swift but bitterly cold, their legs were numb but gradually became less so. Abdi lead with Samad at the end. In the middle the three girls huddled in a small cluster, moving slower now as the river became harsher and the rocks beneath them, uneven.
They were now 12 or so metres across the river. It was then that they heard it. An ear piercing series of blasts, that lasted too long, reverberated for endless moments off valleys and onto others. Ghazal flinched, Abdi jumped, Parastoo sniffed, Samad blinked and Laleh screamed.

All heads turned to Laleh, pitying yet unbelieving looks upon their faces. Then they heard scurrying foot steps coming towards them from both sides of the river, the Iranian side and the Azerbaijani side. Ghazal bowed her head and recited a surah from the Qur’an under her breath, Uncle Samad sighed impatiently. Had they really been discovered? They stood, disorientated, halfway across the Araz River.
Which way should they go? Back towards the country that had given them such a hopeless life, or onto their fantasy world of hopes and dreams? It turned out to be neither. Samad hissed a few words, “Take a deep breath. I love you all.” So with that, the Hossaini’s inhaled and lowered their heads into the waters of the Araz.

Luckily Parastoo was not to be worried about, she was still at the age where she had the ability to comprehend when to and when not to breathe, in this case, holding her breath under water. The rest of the family clung onto each other in the darkness, the wetness and the viciousness of the river. Not knowing if they were alive or dead. Moments passed by. Moments that felt like weeks, months, years.

Finally, after around 15 seconds sub aqua, Samad rose from under water and drew a long but silent breath. He listened to the two guards, now opposite each other on either side of the river, saying something in Azeri. The rest of the family arose, all gulping for
air, shuddering, eyes popping out from their sockets, bloodshot and confused. They froze.

“What was that?” the Azerbaijani guard asked the Iranian, “I’m not sure, I was hunting deer and heard a scream after my gunshot coming from here, I didn’t suspect it was you?” “Nay, of course not!” replied the Azerbaijani, a hint of offence in his tone.

Samad turned to his family, motioning by tilting his head that they should go back under, they weren’t safe yet. Three of them obeyed this, but Abdi stayed, keeping his head above water. They listened, picking up the few words they understood.

“Well I’ll stay put, I doubt it’s anything, but we can never be sure eh?” the Iranian said, chuckling to himself.

Ghazal, Parastoo and Laleh came up again looking harassed and bewildered, their eyelids half shut as if being pulled down by two heavy weights.

“I know it’s not safe uncle, but we have to get Ma, and the little ones to shore or God knows what will happen to them!” Samad exhaled slowly,

“I suppose it is our only choice, myjan, now be a brave boy for me, carry Laleh, I’ll carry your Ma and baby Parastoo” he said.

They had only waded a few steps towards Azerbaijan when the Iranian guard shouted,

“Alas! I was right! So who do we have here?” He pointed his rifle to the moonlit night sky and fired making the Hossainis jolt a second time. However, he was soon distracted by the rumbling sound of a Land Rover which bolted down towards the river on the Azerbaijani side, knocking down all objects in its way. It beeped continuously making both guards run in its direction. Samad and his nephew had no idea of the happenings around them but took the opportunity of not being seen or heard by the guards to run
ashore into Azerbaijan! Ghazal, Parastoo and Laleh with them.

Despite being unbelievably numb, they ran for their lives into the shadows of Azerbaijan’s forest and took shelter under Azerbaijan’s trees and felt the warmth of Azerbaijan’s soil.

It turned out that the Land Rover which had saved the Hossaini’s lives was being driven by another Hossaini! He drove towards his family, leaving the guards he’d driven into the river, behind him. It was not until the door opened of the scraped and scratched Land Rover that Ali Hossaini revealed himself. Yes! Parastoo, Laleh and Abdi’s father, Ghazal’s husband, Uncle Samad’s brother was standing before them, on the border line of Azerbaijan, alive and well!

Before anyone could express their emotions, Ali herded his long lost family into the car he had borrowed. He whisked them away, to his cottage in a small town a couple of hours drive away. That journey revealed all answers to everyone’s questions. They had escaped Iran! “I told you you’d get your reward didn’t I Laleh Jan?” whispered Ghazal in a husky voice to her trembling but gleaming daughter. They were sitting in the back seats along with Abdi and Parastoo, who was asleep, “Yes Ma, this is quite a reward!”
He stood there petrified at the yellow line staring back at him, the line that had taken so many lives in such a small time. Loss that could have been prevented.

Andy woke up with a loud gasp, scared of the dream he had that night. He laid breathing deeply on his light blue pillow, with his burnt-chocolate brown eyes as wide as saucers. His short, straight, dark brown, whisked hair was drenched with perspiration.

It was very weird for a boy of his age to be scared of a dream, especially when he knew very well that dreams could never come true. Andy slowly sat up, dragged himself out of bed, got showered and dressed for school. He slowly made his way down the carpeted stairs to the cold, dark kitchen where he made his way over to the cereal shelf. As he reached up towards the high shelf he soon realised that his foster brother, Ryan, had eaten all
the cereal... again. There was no time to go out and buy more so he would have to go without breakfast, if he didn’t want to be late for school.

As Andy went to walk out the front door he felt something bang in to him. It was as if a car had come and run him over. He fell on to the hard, concrete ground. As he turned to see what had hit him he heard Ryan’s voice viciously tease him “Get up rat boy or you’ll miss the bus.” Andy got himself up and walked away. He could still hear Ryan shouting out at him, but he chose to ignore him and carried on walking.

As Andy came round the corner he saw the long red, sausage-like bus moving away from the bus stop. His other options were to either walk, which would mean he would only just get to school in time for his second lesson, or he would have to take the train, which meant he would just miss registration. You would think he would have taken the train but as he walked up to the train station his feet froze and he could not move, so he decided to walk to school.

It was not his fault that he could not take the train; that was the last place he saw his mum before he was put into care. No one ever really knew what happened to Andy’s mum, except Andy, but he never told anyone. He never knew his Dad. He was a lonely child. He felt stupid being fifteen and scared of a train. He was not going to walk all the way to school, was he?

He kept walking until he heard a sweet voice behind him say “you are not going to walk all the way to school, are you?” Andy turned to see a long legged girl with shoulder length straight, blonde hair. When the sun hit her you could see her deep, emerald green eyes.
She looked at Andy waiting for him to answer her question. Andy gazed back at her. Thoughts were going through his head, but no words were coming out. Finally he coughed to clear his throat and brought himself to say”Hi Carley.” It sounded stupid but it was all he could come up with. Carley looked at him and smiled “Well are you going to come on the train with me or are you going to walk and be late for school?” Andy looked at the train station; he could do this, he just had to believe in himself.

“Well, if you are offering I’ll take the train with you, if you don’t mind that is?” After Andy said this he realised that he had just committed himself to taking the train. Carley started walking. As Andy went to go in the opposite direction, Carley looked back and called to Andy “Come on! The train is this way.” Andy could not believe that for the first time in ten years he was going to use the train again. He changed his direction and headed towards the train station. As he walked with Carley down the steps he could see a crowd of people standing behind the yellow line. He and Carley both copied the crowd of people and stood behind the yellow line. Andy stared at it like it was his worst enemy. Everything seemed to fade into the background. All he could hear was the sound of the train rumbling down the tracks getting closer and closer...

Andy was sat at his desk he had just missed his name on the register he was breathing deeply, with his burnt-chocolate brown eyes as wide as saucers. His short, straight, dark brown, whisked hair was once again drenched with perspiration.

As the school day went on Andy over heard people asking for Carley he did not understand why she was not in school they got on the train together, didn’t they? Where is she?
It was now the end of the school day and Andy saw that Carley’s best friend, Sarah, was all alone. He made his way over to her “Carley not in today?” Sarah turned to look at Andy, her large blue eyes full of water. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Her mouth slowly opened “she’s not answering her phone, she always answers her phone.” She held out her small Blackberry to Andy. Andy looked at her he wasn’t going to let her walk home alone in this state he would have to go with her “I could walk you home if you like?” Sarah looked up at him and half smiled.

As they were walking Andy couldn’t stop thinking that he was about to take the train twice in one day. When they arrived at the train station, Andy and Sarah did the same as everyone else and stood behind the yellow line. Andy looked at it and opened his mouth once more “It will be alright Sarah; I am sure Carley’s just switched of her phone.” Sarah looked at him and smiled. And just like he had done before Andy stared at the yellow line like it was his worst enemy. Everything seemed to fade into the background. All he could hear was the sound of the train rumbling down the tracks getting closer and closer...

Andy arrived at home breathing deeply, with his burnt-chocolate brown eyes as wide as saucers. His short, straight, dark brown, whisked hair was once again drenched with perspiration. He slammed the door shut and slowly brought himself to walk upstairs to his room. What had happened at the train station? Everything was a blur.

Three weeks went by and Andy could see that people were getting more worried about girls that were setting off for school but never returning. Posters were up everywhere of girls Andy had gone to school with. Each poster had a picture of a girl on it and in big
bold letters said ‘Have you seen?’ Each girl’s name was under their picture, there were lots of different names, well eight names to be exact (Carley Fox, Sarah Mills, Claire Burton, Tina Denton, Leah Brady, Louise Scott, Jude Richardson and Katie Lomas.) Andy wondered that if what had happened to his mum before was happening again.

Just then a loud knock came at the front door Andy lay on his back and closed his eyes he heard Ryan make his way heavily down the stairs to answer the door. He could hear the sound of a man’s voice that he never heard before. It was deep and muffled. Just then, Ryan called upstairs for him “Rat boy it’s for you!” Andy knew it was bad he didn’t like the sound of it. He shouted back down to Ryan “Whoever it is, send them away!” He heard Ryan’s footsteps coming up the stairs. His bedroom door creaked open, Ryan’s head popped round as he said “It’s the cops. For you.” Andy brought himself to sit up slowly he walked out of his bedroom passing Ryan.

As he went to walk down the stairs, he saw the police officers; one was shorter than the other but not much smaller, the taller one had dark blonde hair with eyes as blue as the lid on an EVIAN bottle. His face was serious and he stood like he was made of cardboard. The other had brown hair that was dark but not as dark as Andy’s. He had light hazel-brown eyes that were like milk chocolate and he, just like the other police officer, had a serious face. He stood up but seemed more relaxed than the taller officer.

Andy stood in front of them; the tallest one spoke first “Are you Andy Hayton?” Andy looked at them and nodded. The two police officers looked at each other then the tallest one spoke again “I am Sergeant Stone and this is Inspector Smith.” Inspector Smith
spoke “We’d just like to take you down to the station to ask you a few questions about the disappearance of these eight girls.” He held out photographs of the girls.

When Andy arrived at the police station he noticed that everyone was depressed. The police officers took him into a cold navy blue coloured room and Andy sat down in a cold, hard chair. The police officers sat opposite Andy. All that separated Andy and the police was a wooden table that had a recording machine on it. The inspector pressed the button on the machine and the interview had started - the inspector asked all the questions.

“Andy you are here because we have CCTV footage of you walking with all these girls to the train station before their disappearance.” Andy looked at them with his mouth opened and not even he could decide what was going to come out “they all came off at the stop before mine.” Andy couldn’t believe that he had just lied to the police. After about twenty minutes of more questions, Andy was free to go.

He could still hear the police talking when he went out of the room. He knew what he heard; they wanted to follow him. He knew he had to get out of their and fast. He rushed out of the police station and made his way over to the train station where he saw another girl in his class, Kayley Owen. She had jet black straight hair, and the darkest brown eyes you could ever imagine. When Andy saw her he walked straight over to her and they started a conversation. Andy told her how dangerous it was for a girl like her to be travelling alone especially with all the disappearances.

Suddenly, everything seemed to fade into the background. All he could hear was the sound of the train rumbling down the tracks.
getting closer and closer..., and the police officer’s words rang inside his head. Andy grabbed hold of Kayley and threatened to throw her on to the tracks. The train was getting closer and closer, the police tried to negotiate with Andy but nothing worked. Tears started to fall from his eyes; they would never understand. Words came from his mouth; they just rolled of his tongue “You don’t know what it feels like to have no one love you. I was five when I last stood here behind this very yellow line. My mum never cared about me. I was five. I didn’t mean it. I just pushed her and the train just happened to come along straight after”.

Andy’s face by this time was drenched in tears”That was the first day I felt something inside me; the second was with Carley and the ninth is going to be with Kayley. Funny that” he laughed, “Carley, Kayley. It rhymes”. The police shouted back at him “it doesn’t have to be like this Andy. You could get counselling; we can help you. Just come here”. Andy looked at them not believing what he had just heard “you’re laying” he shouted at them. “As soon as I give up you’ll arrest me”. Both Kayley and Andy were crying. As the train passed the station Kayley was standing alone by the yellow line.

Andy lay on the tracks. He was not breathing deeply; his burnt-chocolate brown eyes were not as wide as saucers. His short, straight, dark brown, whisked hair was not drenched with perspiration but with blood.
I crossed the line with you,
I took the risk of having a broken heart,
Falling so deeply in love that I was blinded,
Giving you my heart may have been a mistake.

You had me,
You lost me,
so cold,
I’ve been loved, I’ve been left
You took everything and walked away

The doctor told me not to give you my heart,
Because it might be the cause of my death,
But I thought it was you that would keep it beating.

Jackie Anyuru
(Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate Girls School)
My name is Frank Stuart, I am 37 years old. I live in London, I’m rich and wealthy. I used to live in poverty in Mexico barely making a living. My wife and kids had died from disease and hunger. I shall tell you my story.

I had planned to stow away on a cruise ship heading for London, hoping to try and cross the border lines illegally. I had saved money for over five years to get to that point. Paying to get on the ship would be impossible for me with such a low wage at that time, but paying a security guard, John, to help me was a much cheaper and easier way to get to London. John was stocky looking man. He was waiting for me at the gangplank. As I walked over to him my heart thudded with excitement that I would be able to get away from that dump I called home. John led me to a room
filled with blankets, towels, pillows etc. I was to stay in that room for the whole cruise unless I had to go to the toilet. John bought me food and water so I wouldn’t starve to death. But then I started getting bored, so I left the room ignoring John’s orders of staying in the room.

It seemed that I was on the workers deck or “deck one.” I used the elevators to go on top longing for fresh air, to see the sun and to feel the wind on my face. The elevator pinged when it arrived and I moved out of the way for a maid to pass. I jumped every time someone walked my way but they just went on without giving me a second glance. They thought I was a passenger. I thought about getting a drink but realised that I didn’t bring any spending money. I only bought money to rent a place in London until I got a job. I walked back to the room to wait for John.

When John did arrive he had food but was angry, I could tell this because there was a bright blue vein pulsing in his neck and his face was red. “I told you to stay in this room!” he bawled at me. Of course I denied what he said straight away but that seemed to make him angrier. “They caught you on camera and are out there looking for you! Just remember that if they do catch you I had nothing to do with this,” he gave me the food and walked out.

I had another two weeks to wait until I was in London so time passed ever so slowly. I was jumpy that the next person passing me will put their hand on my shoulder and say “Aha! I finally caught you!” and drag me away to a cell. Nights were restless, filled with nightmares of having to go back to Mexico and drinking the filthy water that was provided.
It had been a week and the ship’s crew still hadn’t found me so I tried my luck to go above and get fresh air. There were hundreds of people and it would be impossible to spot anyone specific in a crowd like that but still there were guards posted around areas. A bald, fat guard was going to passengers asking them if they had seen anyone acting suspiciously. One of the passengers pointed my way and the guard started making his way towards me. I panicked and headed for the stairs but it was too late, his hand was on my shoulder. With my fingers crossed I prayed to God that I wouldn’t get caught.

“Excuse me sir. That lady over there says she hasn’t seen you until today and we suspect that you are the stow away that we have been looking for since last week. I’m afraid that I’m going to have to take you with us.” He let go of me and put his hand on his walkie-talkie to say something but he never did. I smacked his head to shock him and punched him as hard as I could in the mouth, which was quite hard as I worked in the mines all day lifting a heavy pick axe. I shouted an apology as I bolted towards the staircase because the guard did nothing to harm me. I came to the workers deck and looked for a hiding place growing more frantic as the approaching footsteps got louder and closer.

I ended up in the kitchen hiding in a cupboard. Hearing one of the guard’s footsteps I held my breath hoping he wouldn’t hear me. I tried peek through the crack in the cupboard but luck was not with me this time, I lost my balance and fell out the cupboard in a heap along with a few pots and pans. I saw the guard’s boot and waited for him to drag me away. To my surprise he helped me up and I found myself to be looking at John. I almost fainted with relief when I saw him. He told me to hide somewhere in the kitchen before the other guards came in. Just as I wedged myself between another cupboard and the wall, the guard’s came in asking John
what happened. He told them he opened the cupboard and a bunch of pans fell onto the floor. When the guard’s left John took me to his cabin and told me to stay there for the rest of the cruise else he would turn me in. This time I obeyed.

The rest of the week went by quickly and I soon found myself leaving the cruise ship and heading to London. I rented a flat in Stratford in and got a decent job and now live in central London working as a doctor. I had crossed the border lines! I had gone from poverty to prosperity!
Beads of sweat started forming at the corner of my forehead; the sudden humidity making my head spin. Clutching onto my Radley bag, I looked down trying to steady myself. The punishing heat was overwhelming as it gently blew past my violet coloured dress. It was as if the humid air was suffocating me, making every breath I took seem like agonizing torture. ‘Dad, when’s the bloody Cab going to come? I whined weakly as all the energy seemed to be drained from me.

The constant ringing of rickshaw bells on the roads were really starting to make my head hurt even more than it was already was. The shouts of beggars on the streets echoed throughout the
entire place; young sweaty men were scurrying everywhere, some holding fishing rods, others, several different types of crops and wood. A spluttering little yellow taxi slowly approached us; I sighed heavily, took in a deep breath and stepped in ready to face all the havoc that was waiting for me at ‘home’.

Even before setting foot into the house, I was bombarded by uncles, aunties, cousins, family friends and so the list goes on. The entire living room was jammed with people, several of whom were paying special attention to me, pinching my cheeks, stroking my dark hair, patting my back. Typical Asian people, I thought to myself. All the women were dressed in colourful sarees, their hair was pulled back into tight sleek buns and their lips were painted a deep cherry red.

Glancing ahead, I noticed three elderly women sitting by the burgundy wall. They were in deep conversation which presumably resolved around me as every few seconds they would stare at me and then turn away when I met their gaze. They were sitting around a small brown table which had little trays of food. They’re wispy grey hair was sticking out in every direction like the end of a mop normally is after leaving it out to dry in the sun, they’re faces were creased with wrinkles and their plain dark sarees all just reminded me of a particular scene from a particular story — Macbeth and the three witches.

Jumping off the large sofa, I strolled towards the samosa tray, which was placed on the table the three women were sitting around. ‘Oh just look at her, She’s perfect, they are going to love her! I told you didn’t I?’ gushed the tallest of the three women in Bengali.
‘Sister, keep your voice down, the girl is right in front of us,’ whispered the eldest lady of them all. I gazed down trying to understand what they had meant, who’s going to love me and why were they taking such an interest in me? During the evening, the burning curiosity behind the three ladies conversation had not left my mind; everything was just too strange. The way they had looked at me, the way they were talking about me it was all very peculiar to say the least. I could sense that something was going to happen, or maybe I was just being a little paranoid - who knows?

The next morning the entire house was in chaos, I woke up to the servants babbling on about ‘the guests’ who were supposedly coming for dinner. ‘Oh my, she’s up, took her long enough. These British people sure as hell can sleep, but we have to wake up at the crack of dawn to feed the bloody chickens and clean the house and cook breakfast and milk the cow and don’t forget about sending the little ones to school.’ moaned the shortest of the servants. I glared up at her, furious by her remarks about ‘us British people’. I was going to set her straight, did she think that just because I was from England that did not understand my own mother tongue.

‘Jameela, for God’s sake go and wash your face, no no, have a shower. Yes that’s it; take a nice long bath. ‘Dad instructed.

‘But it’s like 36 degrees outside who in their right mind would want to take a long hot bath now, do you want me to boil to death or in fact shrivel up like a prune and —‘I said before being cut off.

‘Have a shower then, whatever! Do not try and be smart with me girl, I am your father therefore you must do as I say! That nasty
tongue of yours ought to be cut straight off. Now get in the shower and then put on this purple Iengha.’ exclaimed my dad. ‘Purple lengha, for what?’ I asked.

‘JUST GET INTO THE BLOODY SHOWER AND STOP QUESTIONING ME!’ He yelled. His voice bellowed making me shiver in fright.

Jumping off the bed, I grabbed my towel and sprinted straight into the bathroom. I knew better than to answer back to my dad when he was as angry as he was now. He had always been a control freak, trying to control my thoughts - my every step. His voice alone would send shivers down your spine, the intensity and anger was so strong even the fearless would run for their lives. When he was angry he would give this glare. This cold empty glare that would instantly make a person feel small and hollow inside - trapped by this fear. He could not go through a sentence without gritting his teeth; his lips would curl up as if he was just about to growl. I never dared to disobey my father, the few times that I had really got him angry was when he brought out the stick. The stick was this long slim brown stick, about three feet long, a single blow from the stick would make a person writher in agony and pain. That was my dad’s weapon - the stick.

Tears started welling up in my eyes as I could not believe he had showed me up in the room like that in front of all the servants; the whole village had probably heard by now considering his thunderous voice. Some father he was.

Everything about that entire day had been utterly bizarre to say the least. Not only was I dressed in a heavy decorated Iengha, I was also wearing my best gold jewellery: two gold bracelets, a beaded
gold necklace and gold hoops. My hair was done up in a loose bun with a small purple hairclip. My face was caked in makeup, from foundation to lip-gloss, you name it, it was on my face. But I still could not understand why on earth they were making me dress up so much for some guests who were coming just for dinner.

‘They’re here!’ exclaimed Ayesha as she patted at her saiwar kameez and fixed her hair. ‘Maybe they’ll pick me instead!’

‘Haha yeah right, dark skinned girls aren’t considered to be beautiful, remember,’ said Ayesha.

‘Oh stop your yapping, now sit down at the back and look presentable, Jameela come here and sit on the bed,’ instructed auntie Leyla. I did exactly as she said.

Suddenly the bedroom door swung open, two elderly women stepped in. They were both very tall and very large, both of whom were very proud looking women - the type of women who would do anything to protect their family’s pride. They stepped into the darkened room, their large bosoms wobbled with every step, bangles clinking with every swing of their arms, their sarees shone like sparkling diamonds. Their faces were caked in makeup; their lips were painted a crimson red. It was as if the very presence of these two women were already changing the atmosphere in the room from excitement to tense and unease. These two women sure could make a statement.

‘Ah, Salaam Wa alykum Shareen.’ said one of the women.

‘Walaykum salaam auntie. Come, come auntie, sit down, please said my auntie excitedly in Bengali.
The two women reluctantly followed auntie Shareen to the chairs that were in front of the bed that I was sitting on. Auntie Shareen muttered something to the two women who then slowly turned their faces towards me; their eyes bored into my face, my jewellery, my lengha — observing everything about me. It seemed like ages as they fussed over my hair, my skin, I could not understand why they were so obsessed with me.

Before they finally left, they gazed at me one last time, ‘her skin is so fair, it is perfect. Ahh yes, a definite yes, oh my I must go and tell everyone!’ exclaimed one of the women to auntie Shareen. Jumping off the bed, I furiously stormed towards my auntie and my mother.

‘What the hell was that about? You made me sit there just so these women could inspect me!’ I screamed.

‘Jameela do not raise your voice at me, these women were simply admiring your beauty. They had not seen you quite some while so they were excited about telling the rest of the family about how much you had grown.’ answered auntie Shareen without meeting my eyes. Her voice was expressionless.

Never ever will I forgive myself for being so stupid, so blind to what was really going on. The next few days were utter chaos; there were family everywhere decorating the house with balloons and lights. I was told to stay with my cousins; I guess it was to keep me ‘out of the way’.

On the Friday of that week my dad asked me to get dressed in this red lengha that he had bought for me. The crimson red lengha was
decorated in a million gold sequins. There were gold shoes placed next to the lengha and the finest, heaviest gold jewellery.

‘Huh, why on earth would I wear a red lengha for no reason at all?’ I asked absolutely puzzled.

‘It is for your cousin Rameena’s wedding, did I forget to tell you she is getting married today. Oh well now you know. You have got half an hour to get dressed, make yourself look beautiful and then come downstairs. I will be waiting in the silver car.’ Said my dad and then ran down the stairs within seconds.

Soft and smooth, my hair fell just past my shoulders as I patted it down. I reapplied my lip-gloss for the umpteenth time and then slowly lifted my legs to put on the golden heels. The heels of the sandals caught on the hem of the skirt and I went tumbling down the stairs. What a great start to the day, I thought to myself.

Dad drove us to a very grand mosque. It’s pillars were tall and enormous; the outside of the mosque was painted white and blue. A crescent moon and star was placed on the very top of the dome. It shimmered beautifully in the golden sun.

‘She’s getting married in a mosque?’ I said with utter shock.

‘Yes your cousin wanted to get married here, it’s a very small affair, now shut up and get out of the car’ my dad instructed. I shut up straight away and got out of the car.

When we walked into the mosque, all the men congratulated my dad, for what reason - I had no idea. He held my arm and walked me into a small blue room decorated with banners and candles. Some of my cousins were already there sitting on the silver chairs talking amongst themselves. They all gasped as I walked in, staring
at me admiringly. I was told to sit in a small corner in the room with my cousins, who were sitting around me. Gazing around the room, I noticed that there were very few people here; there were just some of my relatives and a few faces I did not recognise. Where was cousin Rameena? It was her wedding after all.

A large bulky man entered the room. His stomach seemed as if it was going to pop out of the white Panjabi he was wearing. His greasy hair fell past his ears as he ran his fingers through them. He had a mixture of white and black stubble all around his neck and chin. As he approached my father he gleamed with pride, he shook his hands and smiled widely whilst revealing his stained yellow teeth. The ugly man then went and sat down at the front of the room on the grand white chair.

‘Dad don’t tell me that’s going to be Rameena’s husband’ I said disgustedly.

‘No darling he’s not here to wed Rameena, he’s here to wed you. This is your wedding ‘betti’ and you will marry him. He is the perfect suitor for you’ said my dad expressionlessly whilst stroking his beard.

‘What the -!’ I screamed. Was this some kind of sick joke that my father was trying to pull to scare me?

‘I knew that if I told you to get married here you would say no, so I did the best I could as your father and found you a suitor who you will happily spend the rest of your life with. Hussain will make you happy; he has offered a lot of money for you. You will have everything you want.’
My hands started to shake. My heart felt like it was pounding out of my chest. Swallowing the bile that was gathering in my throat I glared up at my father furiously.

‘No fucking way!’ I shrieked. Lifting up my lengha, I tried to push past my cousins; I had to get away, anywhere from here, anyway from him.

The sudden blow threw me right onto my cousin Leyla. I gasped in shock. ‘Now you listen to me you stupid disobedient girl, you will get married to Hussain and you will never show me up like that again. Do you understand, I’ll kill you Jameela. I mean it.’ He bellowed as he grabbed my arm and thrust me into the chair next to Hussain.

‘Ma!’ I cried staring helplessly at my mother. She stared back and then whispered ‘it’s for the best’ and then turned away, turned away to face the back, leaving me to fend for myself. Tears started streaming down my cheeks as the realization of the situation sunk in. My own mother had turned her back on me. Abandoned me. I felt like I was drowning, sinking deep into this dark murky water as it swallowed me. I stared down as the queasiness in my stomach had taken a turn for the worst and and threw up all over the lengha, giving up hope and letting my auntie grab my hand and sign the wedding certificate as I was somewhere far away where none of this was happening, where no one could hurt me...

No one.
Locked Away

Locked up, no way to escape
Dying of freedom in a dark derelict place
Thinking in my head, moving at my own pace
You can see I’m dying by the expression on my face
All I have is the hope of freedom
My family, my friends I need to see them
Life and freedom, I’ve been deprived
Mistakes in my past I have realised
If I could I would choose to hide
I’d rather hide than have no life
All I can do is pray and hope
That I will continue learning how to cope
I need to live my life have fun
Go outside play in the sun
Go outside with my mum
Instead I’m locked up with no one
The fate of this land
Is placed in my hand
Instead of living in a dreamland
Down on my luck, back against the wind
Trying to succeed trying to win
No one has ever known
The life I’m living, I’m living on my own
In this cell is a private hell
I want to go home
That’s it, that’s my poem

Josh Streete (Raine’s Foundation School)
I’m running. Running for my life. My heart is pounding like jungle drum, behind my ragged clothes. Shoulders aching because of carrying my sister. My poor orphaned sister. I’m baking under the dazzling sun. I must stop but I remember what Mama said “Remember Pedro! Escape, hope and freedom!” But then I do stop. I’m forced to or they’ll shoot. “Stop!” They yell in a foreign language. I stop dead in my tracks. Everything is silent and then... BANG! A gun shot is fired.

“Pedro! Maria! Mama yelled. “Come down here, I have to go to work!” I lift my head from my crumpled pillow. My head weighs a ton and instantly hits the pillow with a thump. Finally
I got changed, and went downstairs to find my sister sitting in the dark crying. I tower over her and ask “What’s the matter?” “I don’t want to move, I love Mexico!” she whined. Slightly lisping knowing it makes her cuter. It doesn’t work. I pick her up as she wraps her legs around my waist. I grab my bag and slam the door behind us.

“Over here!” Yells Papa. He’s surrounded by his friends. Papa introduces us. “This is my wonderful son and daughter.” “Hola. ¿Cómo estás?” one asks “Fine thank you,” I reply. Maria runs over to the stool and starts to help Mama with the tombola. I spot Alejandro and Ediberto. I zoom over leaving Papa with sand in his eyes. “Sorry Papa!” I yell back to him. When I reach them, Alejandro speaks “Alejandro the defender,” Alejandro says acting macho sticking his chest out. “Ediberto the clever,” Ediberto says tapping his temple. I tip-toe and say “Pedro the stone!” I say loudly and tap my chest. We all burst out laughing. We do this every time we meet; no one finds it funny apart from us. Our names’ meanings.

Maria and Estefani come strutting over carrying something. “Pedro,” Maria says. “Mama and Papa said YOU have to help us with the piñata.” “Estefani, where’s Mama?” Alejandro questioned his sister. “She’s over, over,” she scans the unready fair “There!” she yells. We all head in that direction. Not knowing going in that direction would put us in grave danger.

When we reach there, Mrs Sourez is laying out plates of food on the table. “Mama! I done the piñata and helped Auntie with the tombola and...” Estefani rambled on about her achievements of the last half an hour. But something else intrigued me. Men. A group. It wasn’t so much about the men; it was what they were carrying.
Guns. Bullet belts. Grenades. What could they possibly need them for? I know there has been a, well, disagreement between the villages but there hasn’t been physical violence. “Pedro, you seem distracted,” Mrs Sourez said sounding concerned. Her hair fluttered in the wind. She was frowning but still looked beautiful. She was definitely too young to have two kids.

Once I insisted I was fine she left and went to help Mama. The men came over and asked me what I was looking at and that it was rude to stare. The youngest about nineteen years of age, he said he would teach me a lesson. To my surprise, Papa’s friend stood in front of me like my hero and commanded them to leave or he would force them to. First they laughed, “Who do you think you are old man?!” the youngest one said. Rubbing his gun, indicating he wasn’t afraid to use it.

“Get out of here or I’ll will make you, before I snap your neck off one ... by...one,” Uncle said calmly. And they obeyed. Their cold eyes stabbed me like a dagger. “Are you ok, Pedro,” He asked gently, “Fine, Fine.” I said quietly. And ran off to join my friends and family.

Loud music. People dancing, eating, playing games, drinking. Mama, Papa, Mr and Mrs Sourez, Mr and Mrs Papal dancing. Snap back to reality, I’m at the fair. I’m having so much fun but.... no Mama is dragging me away.

“We need to go it’s time Pedro... Get Maria we’re going,” Mama’s crying. I try to grab Maria but someone gets there before me. It’s the man from the gang that threatened uncle. “Fancy meting you here! He says acting surprise. “Pedro! Help! I can’t...Urgh breathe!” Maria yelps. For that very moment in time, I felt useless that I couldn’t do anything. He was pulling her long dark hair, sniffing the top of her head. That’s it! My eyes went
blood-shot, I clench my fist, my body fills with rage like a bath filled with water and I charge like a bull and knock him flying. I grab Maria and kiss the top of her head and we run.

We see Mama. We see Papa. We run towards them then ...BANG. Mama, dead. BANG... Papa, dead. They fall to the ground. They fall at our feet. I drop, cry over my parent’s corpse. But around us chaos is still going on, everyone apart from Maria and I are oblivious to just what happened. Everyone apart from Papa’s friend, Uncle. He grabs us and we run. We get into the car, Maria is crying into my shoulder, traumatized. We drive off we knew this was coming but we never expected our parent’s to die. We drive off and do what Mama and Papa wanted us to do. Cross The Line.

The gunshot came from Uncle. The Border control guards fall we drive off. We fulfilled what Mama and Papa told us to do, we had done it. We had crossed the line. We settle in California, America. Uncle and his new wife, Aunty Sámi will never fill our parent’s shoes but they are defiantly second best. We escaped. Sometime I feel guilty for leaving everyone I ever loved or cared about but sometime your family come first. 15 years ago it all happened but I will never forget what happened.
This is How Nations Die

There is a war in Afghanistan
Parents lost their daughters and sons
Their staring eyes like the mouth of guns
A single shot from a firing tank
Left the parents sad and blank

Israeli, Palestinians
Muslims, Christians
Armies march towards their suffering
Armies charge near and far
A fallen soldier, a fallen star
Some families live to run
While other are stabbed are gone
Prayers are uttered in silence  
The air scissored in sirens  
A Childs eye vacant of hope and future tells me  
Something is lost  
Then I hear an exploding bomb  
Maimed boy opens an eye  
Watching his parents rock and cry  
The planes over head, his lullaby  

A mountain of coffins piles up high  
Each filled with a mist of unspoken goodbyes  
This is how nations die  

*Minhaj Rahman (Stepney Green Maths and Computing College)*
The world was engulfed in a pit of cataclysmic darkness. The hideous consequences of battle were evident on every wall, street and building. Humanity descended into chaos, torn between political ideals and practical reality. Brother against brother, father against son stood with raised guns ready to drive one another into oblivion. Even death seemed to buckle under the weight of its infinite workload.

War

The very skies were thickened black with the incessant discharge of missiles blotting out the sun. The air was ablaze with the cries of a thousand mourning souls. Bloodied streets stood with their grotesque faces roaring the echoes of the dying screeches of the dead, as the sound bounced along endless rows of rotting blood coated walls. I watched as a woman bent double in prayer lowered her head in deep gratitude, chanting appreciation at every
precious moment she was spared from the jaws of death. Standing there at that very same window for a life time, I watched from the sidelines as an emaciated, withered old man with wise eyes on a once world of green beauty that was transformed into the killing fields of Satan with deceit pulling from the left, right and centre. This very same window was a gateway to my past from where I would relive all the days of my youth, of my happiness, of the peace.

Reddened skies. Collapsing buildings. Swirling smoke arose from every distance far and near. And what did I survive on? Hope?! Hope was now but a cruel mockery which had no meaning in this hellish nightmare of a world. All I had was memory after beautiful memory of what this almost barren damnation of a world had once been. I fed on them, clung to them, desperately revisiting every scenery, every face, every hour...

I watched as my life flashed before my eyes.

A bright sunlight pierces through the window as rosy red curtains are thrust aside, welcoming in the gentle swish-swashing of the sea. As the searing pain of light infiltrates my eyes I take an immediate refuge under my blanket cover, barricading myself from the outer world. I wait motionless as the outside predator homes in for the attack, clutching the blanket tighter with every nearing footstep. “Come on honey, chop chop! You don’t want to be late for school again.” reasons my mother, wrestling the blanket off me, “Your father’s doing breakfast, you don’t want to miss the big event!” “Okay, I’ll be downstairs in ten minutes” I respond. Flinging my feet over the side of the bed, I shudder as the frost coldness of the hard stff floor penetrates my skin, sending tingles spiralling down my spine adding to my longing for my warm snug bed.
Struggling up, the sweet oaky aroma of the house fills my nostrils almoha seductively, beckoning me forwards, slapping on a uniform I brush my teeth with half open eyes.

Downstairs I’m consumed by the fumes of a charred breakfast, with smoke detectors shrieking like sirens overhead. I stand frantic with laughter watching as my panicky father prances about like a crazed clown, tripping over dishes and pans in his attempt to make a simple breakfast of eggs on toast. With a plate of what seemed like the cremated ruins of a body, I take a bite into a bitter coal. Munching through gritted teeth at rock-hard bread “Great, dad. Really lovely!”

The view becomes blurred as a tall intimidating figure enters the frame.

“You there, yes, you.” scowled the headmaster with that sickening calm voice, pointing a meaningless finger towards me. His sharp but commanding voice always made my body rigid in fear. The headmaster himself was a tall bony man with slick oily hair that he always pulled back, and had a nose that a witch would envy.

“Yes sir?” I replied.

“Tuck your shirt in. This is a school, not a wild animal display.” I resorted to following his orders before being drowned in more overtly exaggerated metaphors. “And if ev-“

RIIIING RIIIIING RIIIIING! Suddenly the usually horrendous explosion of bells detonating though the school, sounded like a sweet nightingale chirruping it’s sweet song.

Saved by the bell.

A sphere of light moves in closer and closer until I’m temporarily blinded. Upon opening my eyes I find myself overlooking the beach of my childhood, the very sands which contained every
echo of my laughter and speech.
I take a step out onto the blistering beach, my feet sizzling slowly over the soft silky sands, glittering golden under the sun hanging over my head like a raised medal. The wind whistled harmoniously with the sea spraying it’s body over the sands. A heavenly breeze whirled in the air, flowing through my bare body, filling my whole being. I close my eyes, inhaling deeply. A sharp tinkling laughter permeated through the air; opening my eyes I realise it’s Alex - the love of my life - laughing as I stood in the open air in a crucified position taking in the world’s beauty. I turned dumbfounded as Alex’s overwhelming beauty mesmerises me once more; skin fairer than the moon, lips redder than roses and eyes bluer than oceans. Then with that we share a passionate kiss; a gentle lingering of the lips as the sand becomes cotton and the sky lights up with a brilliant display of fireworks, chaotically splitting through the skies in blissful freedom. I move my cheeks lower to Alex’s chest, resting my head onto my lover as I gently grasp her warm tender body, wishing I could spend an eternity here.

The scenery dissolves into nothingness.

The tender warmth of Alex’s presence fades.

Then as If a claw had run through my heaven I find myself back in the reality of a shrivelled old man gazing at the view from my bedroom window at a war infested world.
The sky was the colour of autumn, and the sun a ball of butter-yellow that melted into the low horizon, its warm light spilling into our laps. Where the river snaked its twisting path through the grass, a mist rose, tricking the eye and confusing the mind with its antics — swirling and amorphous, giving rise to half-formed phantoms, products of our youthful imaginations. The chill air of the evening mingled with the oppressive heat of the day, and it cooled the sweat that lay upon our skin. A gentle breeze lifted the fallen leaves that lay scattered about us like so many errant children, and suffused our souls with the calm of simply being.
We sat there beneath a maple tree, the dying sun’s dappled light percolating through the foliage, tracing patterns of light and shade on our skin. The scent of grass hung in the air, and the smell of apples. She loved nature; she loved Japan, her home. Her lips tasted like strawberries, a reminder of our earlier, unforgotten repast. I held her hand in my hand and her heart in mine; as we sat as simple viewers to the pantomime of life, watching the day come to its end. I could feel her warmth melt into mine. She felt right in my arms. I will remember this day till it’s the end of us. I kissed her hair with gentle strokes; her hair tickled my skin. She responded with light shivers of desire. I loved her, I knew it. I loved her more than anything. She was finally mine; mine in my arms; mine to kiss and mine in my heart. And I’m not letting her go. I felt her heart beating against mine; fast and warm. I kissed her hand, feeling her supple skin against my lips and I could smell the very same scent of fresh jasmine. I kissed each small finger tips of hers. She then placed them to my face tracing light patterns. She gazed at me once again, with those golden eyes; so pure and amorous. I adored her more than anything. I felt her breath slow against mine. I tilted my head closer once more, pressing my lips gently against hers. Great tenderness filled me whole. We just laid there for a couple of minutes, enjoying the tranquility. A vivid reflection was projected over the sea, also gleaming radiantly. It was all too beautiful. The birds chirping were like natures music. Trees swished against each other like the wild waves. The wind caused ripples in the waves which gradually multiplied into littler waves. It was the sound of serenity — nature had it all.

We began to sense a light vibration buzz beneath us, it shook ever so lightly. Growing curious, we jointly leaned forward and abruptly, the ground bellow us began to shudder harder. Faster, faster the maelstrom quakes got. “Earthquake!” I heard someone
yell. Cracks percolated the solid ground as it trembled rapidly. Buildings began to crash; blazes shot alight; terror approached the innocents, destruction brought devastation. The weather varied along with the atmosphere. A backing wind brought a granite sky and a mizzling rain with it; pallor of damaged goods seemed to have closed upon the hills, cloaking them in mist. The day seemed to turn a whole new page. The high ground blew with such force, leaving us uselessly unsteady. The sky seemed to be falling on us; the grounds unsustainable force bought a tree ramming down whilst the wind came in gust. We ran. We ran hopelessly, witnessing infinite wreckage. We stayed close; we held tight. A sudden howl set abrupt! I looked around, wincing at an obscure hazy mist. It began to grow larger and larger... nearer and nearer... Until I knew. I glanced at her. Her large hazel eyes watched me as they responded a mutual sentiment. She was afraid.

“RUUUN!!” I shrieked as we leaped into a dash. Hand in hand, we ran in such pace, breathing harder than ever. It was getting closer, I can feel it. The perilous splashes set my heart adrenaline alight! Second by second, more innocents would vanish. My eyes laid onto a ladder which leads us to a higher surface; we’re so close! “Mai, Follow me!” I continued to drag her along. She was getting weak; gradually slowing down. “Run Mai, RUN! Mai, Come on! Faster! We’re almost there. Almost there! That’s our finish line, right there!” I cried. The tides came crashing through, eliminating everything that came in their way. We were like little ants scurrying around looking for our home, a shelter, anything that would protect us from the savage tide that wanted to wipe us off of the face of the earth. It was too late for the people on the beach; they had already been taken prisoner, drowned forever in their tears of sorrow and fear. It didn’t feel like it would be much longer before I was shackled and chained up as well. I felt
like I had been running for hours, I wouldn’t have been able to keep it up for much longer. The tide just kept coming and there was nothing powerful enough to stop it, “We’re going to make it, Mai, we’re going to make it. Just hold on. Hold on love, we’re” — BAMN!

***

“Ken! Ken! Wake up! Wake up!” screamed Mai. I opened my eyes sensing an instant vile pain throbbing on my head. I reached and touched the damp, bloody surface of my forehead. Boy was it sore. My head pulsed defusing greater pain; my head felt dizzy and my legs felt paralyse. I tried to force myself up, still groggy from the hit. At least Mai isn’t injured, what a relief. “Come on!” Mai yelled, pulling my arm over her neck for support. I limped as fast as I could. My legs felt heavy whilst an internal burning tormented me alive!

My heart raced faster than I could. My body ached yet, with one glance at Mai, I continued to persist. Finally we reached my destination, embracing the ladder, I heaved myself up. I gave out my hand; she held on but remained still... gazing into my eyes. “Mai, Hurry!” I shrieked fearfully. Audaciously, I glimpsed towards her behind; it was inches away! I looked back at her. Her eyes; she gazed around at the innocents; the devastation; the lost nostalgia; her eyes. It had clearly shown forfeit. Tears began to stream down my cheek, “Mai?” I whispered helplessly as she released her grasp... “Mai! MAI DONT! DONT!” I screamed but it was too late. One enormous tsunami ripple drowned her away... Drowned, drowned my love. “MAI! MAI, NO!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. A dream. Please be a dream! Tears poured
down, a lump grew in my throat as my heart slammed against my chest. The piercing sound of the emergency alarms was all I could hear. Everything turned into a blur; the beauty had died...along with my love, Mai. The rescue team arrived, saving the injured; I sensed a helicopter approaching my presence. All I could think about was — I gasped. Awake once again and gasping for air. My heart raced frantically; it felt as if it was about to flounce right out of its cage. Shaking my head, I tried to discard the dream I had awoke on. My dreams fled back memories of rue and woe, leaving me with nothing but bitter old scars grazed onto my heart that was always unable to be distained. The pain had just given me only salty tear’s to shed and the great sense of self-loathing invading my body like a parasite. I have nowhere to go with no one to ease my pain. Just left in a room where only four walls and a ceiling close me in and only a flicker of sunrays were able to shoot themselves through the blinds like bright vivid streams.

These walls reflected my misery. They told stories of broken hearts and dreams that were wished never to be seen again. And then there was the sunrays trying to make their way in his world to brighten up his day but it always seems to fade away eventually, abandoning me in the raw stealthy obscurity. My room remained dim, colourless and dismal. Just two beds were placed on each side. One was mine and the other just seemed to be a spare, a helper; always did I wonder... Was there anyone who could replace that bed...again? The broken dams bring back the horrifying reminiscence, welling tears in my eyes. Nostalgia.

I just remained sitting there with my back hunched over, face in hands...Weeping. I hadn’t bathed in days. My body seemed to reeks of sweat and unwashed flesh; of stale tobacco and dried-up
vomit. Gradually, I dressed myself into shoddy trousers teamed with intimidating combat boots that were caked with mud from his previous outing. There are only two things I resent most in life, and that is my life., and I. I could’ve saved Mai. I could’ve done something! She was my future; she was my love. I try to find a new someone. But my life is like this room - lost and lifeless.

And then there’s the closed window placed above the ceiling, silently crying for me to open.

And now it’s up to me, whether I fall... Or fly...
Sweet Dreams

Oliwia Lewandowska (Raine’s Foundation School)

Someone had once told him that sweet dreams were made of this.
Who was he to disagree?

Carter Felix lay unmoving on the alley floor as blood dripped from various wounds and bruises placed upon his body. His left eye had been cut through with a sharp weapon and juice oozed out of the cut and his right arm which had been broken in multiple times lay resting on his hip.

The people of Mortem walked by the alley in silence, conversations slowing to a stop as they passed by the blonde and then picking back up as they were far enough from the boy.

I hope he suffered... their thoughts all rang similarly
He sat down in the wet sewer with his arms hugging his knees.

He had learned at a young age that this was the one place that no one could bother or beat him. It was only in this place that he was truly alone with his thoughts and mind.

He wasn’t foolish, nor was he stupid.

Carter Felix, age 7, knew that outside this little packet of space in his mind

That he was dying and that no one passing by (and he knew they were there) would ever him and get him better.

But even though he knew he was dying, he wasn’t sure if that was so bad.

Cause in death he wouldn’t be beaten.
In death he couldn’t be abused.
While dead he couldn’t be used.
Instead of living, he’d be dead and free.

So no, even though he knew that death was coming, he couldn’t find anything all that bad about it.

-

An old man once lay on the ground near the place that he called home.
The people had passed over him, simply walking over him as if he were nothing but an obstacle in their way.

Oh, humanity - what happened to the human in you?
He had been coming home from the forest, toting the fish that he had spent all day trying to catch when he saw him.

Saw the old man that everyone else had passed over, dirty, cold, and dying.

Mr...are...” he stuttered, unsure of how to say it rare - uh, are you okay?

He didn’t really need the answer because somewhere deep in his mind, no, somewhere deep in his soul he knew that this man did not have long left in this world.

The dirty old man opened his eyes to see the figure of the young blonde haired child standing over him with bright blue eyes.

“Who am I to disagree?”

The man laughed with a wisp in his voice “True that.”

Silence consumed them once again. The old man looking up to the final night sky and the boy poking at the fire with a stick, but it was a comfortable silence.

“Kid.”

He looked over to the man

“Inside of you...lies the demon Dolor.”

His eyes widened “Wh-wha?”

“It was sealed in you at birth and it’s a village secret...but, you and only you have shown me kindness in these last hours of my life and I figured that you deserved to know it.”
Coughs erupted from the man and the boy rushed to his side to see if he was okay. The old man grabbed his hand and held it within his own, “Kid...remember something.”

“Remember...that Mortem does not care about its civilian population. If you are ever dying then remember that you will not be saved as long as you are not Bellator.”

Blood splattered the boy’s face as he coughed again

“If...if you are ever dying then remember this; you haven’t lived life...and you can’t die yet, so become a Betlator as soon as you can so you are not put through this.”

Felix nodded

“And if...if you are dying before you become a Bellator, and you will because this village hates you and everything that you touch...”

“Remember what is sealed within you and make sure that you live on long enough to find what life is.”

“-Cause sweet dreams are made of death — but only after you’ve experienced life.” Carter Felix, age 7, muttered the words of the dying man that he had met that night two years ago as he stared at the cage deep within his mind. Dirty water and grime piled at his feet but he did not bat an eye as he looked into the cage.

“If it isn’t ...the boy himself.” Its voice rang through the sewer prison loud and ruthless.
It looked down at its puny host whom stared back at it with cold blue eyes, the human reminded it of itself - lacking the human trait he had learned to call fear.

“You are sealed in me...and your power is limitless.”

Carter Felix spoke to the demon within his mind “I do not wish to die just yet.”
He smiled “I haven’t lived life yet.”

Flies feasted on the body as it sat cold and alone in the alley of the now sleep Mortem.
But the flies stopped and flew away as nature told them too this boy is not yours!

“What do you want kid?” he coughed, voice raspy from not using it for a few days.
Felix blinked and pulled at the man’s arm “Come on mister, you shouldn’t be out here like this. It’s cold and you’re going to get sick.”

No, he was going to “Kid, I’m dying”

“You don’t know that, come on! I’ve got fish here!” he held up the fish for the man to see “You should come with me and eat, ‘cause they always say that sleepin on the floor is bad for ya!” he tried to smile as he pulled at the man’s arm again.

“Listen demon brat!” the old man spat and Felix dropped his arm like a sack of bricks, this man was like all the others “Leave me alone and let me die in peace.”
The old man watched the boy leave before he closed his eyes again in a sigh. His eyes erupted open as the smell of fire and fresh food hit his nose.

He sat up slowly but surely to look at the fire that was in front of him. An orange jacket sat over his chest and he shrugged it off to look around.

“There’s a fish on the fire for you.” He heard the boy before he saw him.

“I thought I told you to let me die in peace you damn demon.” The old man muttered.

“Yea...but then I figured...what could an old man do to me anyways?”

The two of them sat there in silence for a long time after the moon rose to the sky and took the place of its rival the sun.

Cough

“You airight?”

“Kid...I’m dying, I’m old and no one cares that I’m dying...not even my own children.”

Carter Felix would sit and listen to the man’s story

“...Mortem forgets its civilian population too much and they’ll let those of us that don’t help them die out. But *cough* that’s just the way of the world.”
The old man sighed
“You know...the thing about death is...”
He closed his eyes
“If you look at it the right way, it’s nothing more than a sweet
dream.”

“Once you’re dead, you don’t have anything to worry about. You
don’t have to worry about work, taking care of people, children
whom have forgotten that you even exist...”
“You don’t have to worry about the pain, cause in death it
doesn’t hurt anymore...”
“Don’t you agree?”

The boy closed his eyes and it remember all the pain that he had
been through in his life...the emptiness he felt when he would
see other children with their parents, the pain he would feel
when they looked at him with those eyes and beat him.

Dry blood became flowing, cuts healed in a show of steam,
oozed recollected and sight came back to an eye. And bones
cracked back in place section by section.

His eyes snapped open in the darkness.
He balled his hands into a fist to see if he could still feel.
He licked his dry lips to see if he could still taste.
He took sent through his nose to see if he could still smell, and
he smelled like crap.

He laughed to see if he was still alive.
And he was.
“Boy... even if you have to make a deal with the devil, make sure that you stay alive until you’ve seen life. After you become a Bellator, Mortem will take care of you... but before that, all you have is you.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha HA HA ha ha ha HAHAHAHA!”
His laughter roared through the abandoned alley where he had been left to die.
He would make a deal with the devil to stay alive and alive he would remain until he lived.

Because he made a promise to that old man years ago to change the world, and he couldn’t see the sweet dreams that death held for him until then.
The Battle

Life is precious
From the day you are conceived
The day you are born
And the day you finally reunite with God,
it is precious.
No one should have the right to take that life.
Surely not me, myself.
As I walk out of this door
I step unwillingly to fight
Unwillingly to kill and to take life.
And one step closer to Hell.
As I walk out of this door I pray.
As I am closer to Hell.
And further away from Heaven.
I pray to God to forgive me even before I have begun.
As I walk out of this door.
I am not only walking away from my home.
I am walking away from my life.
I am walking away from myself.
And walking away from God.
Please don’t judge me.
Don’t judge me for what you see.
As I am not who you think I am.
I can feel death embracing me.
Beckoning to come and join him.
I feel the Devil walking behind me.
He is my shadow now.
I look to the sky where Heaven lays.
Knowing I will never join and that there is no space.
For someone like me.
The Devil I will be.

Zahra Nabil
(Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate Girls School)
A View from the Trench

Rebeka Zafar (Morpeth School)

One of the worst feelings in the world is waking up not knowing what sight or situation will be awaiting you.

Usually you can see an attack before you hear it or smell it, which sounds logical, however not every soldier’s five senses are in full working order. I’m one of the lucky few who’s limbs and mental health are still intact. This is largely due to the fact that I’m relatively new, therefore have not been exposed to the horrors of war to the extent that my fellow brothers in arms have. What I have witnessed thus far is enough to make the bravest of men turn their backs and run.
In reality, the army is littered with courageous men who would rather be shot, bombed or gassed by the enemy than turn their backs on their men. Not even the stranglehold of the gas can deter them. Not even the deformed bodies can frighten them. Not even the distorted smile can make them waver in their duty. I wish with all my might that I were one of them.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, choking and spluttering on the air around me. But in my dreams that precede this I see myself tumbling with my gas mask during a gas attack; everyone around me has managed to successfully put on their masks whereas I am the only one struggling. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a faint green mist working towards me, snarling at me, taunting me. Eventually I get my mask on in this slowed-down version of the world, however something is horribly wrong. When the mist arrives, it dances through a hole in my mask. Before I can contemplate how the hole came about I am forced to submit myself to the green mist and just when it is full to the brim, I wake up spluttering and choking.

I’ve once awoken to death at the foot of my bed. This one night I was not awoken by my ghastly dreams, but instead by what felt like the crushing of my legs. I smelt him before I even laid eyes on him. I also heard our frequent unwelcome guests, rats, savagely chewing this poor guy’s toes which were hanging from the side of the bed. Blood has a copper-like smell to it, or maybe that is not the most apt description. It is strange how difficult some things are to explain, even when you are regularly exposed to it.

That same night I witnessed another dead body, but this one I watched the demise of. During my realisation that what I initially had feared was a bomb that had landed on my legs was actually a
dead soldier’s body. I heard what sounded like the painful cry of an animal. At first I started to sweat with fear again as I suspected it was a bomb which was going to land in the trench I was in as it sounded so close. However when I stopped panicking I started to think more clearly.

It couldn’t be a bomb, I thought to myself, because the direction of the source of the bomb was to the right of me, whereas a bomb attack would most likely come in front of me. I felt a wet substance tickle my fingertips. As it was a dry summer’s night, my trench was not filled with water up to my knees, which had led me to wonder whether I had urinated in my underwear out of fear of an attack. I let my fingers splash around in the watery substance for a few seconds, then investigated the smell by bringing my fingers close to my curious nose. I was puzzled to be greeted by a strong scent of blood rather than the acidic smell of urine. I pushed away the dead body that was across the lower half of my legs. I crawled along my belly as my legs had gone numb under the pressure of the body.

It took me around ten minutes to reach the location of the inhuman sound. What I found has recently replaced my nightmare of the gas attack. A boy around the age of seventeen or eighteen looked like he had been shot in both legs and in the face as half his brain was bulging out of his skull. Rats the size of kittens had already started feasting on his vulnerable body. There was a gun in his right hand, which at the time I did not fully acknowledge the symbolism of. All that was running through my mind was putting this poor boy out of his misery. I had to do it, his cries were painful and they didn’t even sound as though they were coming from a human mouth. It had the same effect as nails on a blackboard. I shot him straight in the face.
The glint of life disappeared from his eyes as quickly as it was there a second ago.

Soldiers
Both young and old
Find themselves drawn together
Bound by red tape

The ghost of the past
Etched on their faces
The spirit of the future
Still resides in a small place in their hearts
The horror of the present
Defined by their ever startled eyes

Each accepts
That they are just another name
One the list
Each now know
That they signed away their dignity
Once they enlisted

Out here
There are no age groups
Just rank
Bound by sticky tape
Each man’s fate entwined

One love, one hope
Brotherhood
“Oh Jesus, make it stop!”
In twenty years you will beg for a school reunion. How sin will age me.
Stink of lechery. And you, stood there, disinfecting me with your eyes,
Eating away at my arms.
I think you are scared of me.

You think my eyes are made of acid.
And I believed you, your voice over-loud in the blue room,
The walls swelling with the weight of your enlightenment.
I came apart all at once.

I told you what I thought you were. A spider in each eye, my mouth fizzing red, Words biting like hoar frost.
Nausea.
Pinning you to the wall.
They all thought you deserved it. I didn’t think so.
I scraped the varnish off my legs, smashed enough mirrors
To see me through to the end.
I thought I had killed you.

Crossed a line you didn’t tell me about.
We were never friends. No faint tug of affection,
No umbilical noose to cut.
You never liked me.

You make me feel feral. Little beast,
Snarling with my yellow teeth. Contaminated. But I can smell
you from here,
The spectre of desire dancing on the edge of your bottom lip.
You think you are spotless.

How can you be so pure?
You have the same thoughts I do.

Cherry Whipp  (Central Foundation Girls Secondary School)
Rule No.1: Opportunities always look bigger going than coming.

Despair swept through the open space of the moors, showing the sun as it bowed to the sky and sunk down low, flourishing as it departed with nothing more than the silence of the wind, the memory of day as it faded into blackness. Memories freshe than the dreams he saw, the trance he was pulled into every time he came to this haunting place. The life he could have led, had he not chosen the evil that left him depraved of all that gave his life the meaning that burned within him, the one which he desired more than any belief he had ever known.
Rule No.2: If you must choose between two evils, pick the one you’ve never tried before.

Having learnt the lessons he had taught himself before this time, he felt that he was doing what was best for him. After all, life was too short to do nothing but wait. But maybe waiting would have left fate to decide for him. Would have made leaving easier to do. Would not have made him leave at all. A course of sorrow swept through him as he realized that all he lived for had been destroyed by none than him.

Rule No.3: Not one shred of evidence supports the notion that life is serious.

He wanted to realize that all of the faults and errors that he had made were simply due to the way he had lived. There was nothing that he could change. There w. nothing that he could have done to stop it. But, what did he have to do to restore his virtue? He just wanted to be held and told that there was nothing to be afraid of, that he wasn’t alone, that he would never be alone. He wanted to be kept safe inside, and have arms like towers, protecting him from every horrible thing that he would face, even heartache itself. But that was the one state he could not avoid.

Despite how fast he ran.

Rule No.4: Realize that happiness is not something you obtain.

A cradle of beliefs stirred within him, enveloping around him and suffocating him with this all-consuming knowing that he was never going to live, never going to love ft like he had already
loved, to laugh as he had laughed, cry tears of sorrow and joy as
he used to cry. The thoughts burned deep in his mind and created
this hollowness within his chest, growing and growing like a
tumour, devouring and tearing an aching as it grew wider and
stronger. No force on Earth could change how he felt foj them. How he loved them both. Loved how it felt so wrong that it was
right.

He let the lone tear fall down his cheek, as soft as a cotton ball that
seemed to soot the ache he felt all over, spiralling and coursing
through his blood. Bonding with his DNA. He began to push the
limits of his sanity as he sunk to the ground, the dark heavens acting
as suffocating crowds of people, shouting numerous thoughts that
he couldn’t forget, that he could never let go of.

In his eyes, many people believed that love was so exclusive
and unique that even entertaining the thought that you were in
love with two people meant that you’re not really in love with
either. But that is not what he thought. The idea that love had to be
confined to only one person was a myth and most likely what he
was brought up to believe in.

The truth was, most of those he knew did not want to entertain the
possibility that love could extend to two individuals at the same
time, because it is too scary to imagine being in such a confusing
state. But how could he contain the way he felt for either? How
could he restrain the emotions swelling inside of him, suffocating
and overpowering him? How could he choose?

Elizabeth will wonder where I am. I must leave. He told himself
subconsciously anc rose, but he shook his head and fell back
down, gravity stronger than any he felt before was pulling him
down, forcing him to the ground.

He closed his eyes willingly and pictured his face, his voice, his beauty in front of him. How could he not love him? How could he not want to remain with him, to be alive with him, to stay with him? The temptation was too strong, had too strong a grip on him.

He sniffed and opened his mouth to breathe, feeling all of the air inside of him rushing out just as fast as he took it in, he didn’t know what was wrong with him, why he was reacting this way. Once his eyes had adjusted from the tears he felt pushing strongly on, he could see once again. He propped myself up on one elbow and noticed that the man before him had gone quiet and was staring at him, his patience never wearing out. It made him self-conscious, but he was unable to look away once their eyes had met.

Evan was who he loved.
Elizabeth was who he was meant to love.
But what was there to think about? He loved him. It was simple.

Everybody’s journey was individual. If you fall in love with a girl, you fall in love with a girl. If you fall in love with a boy, you fall in love with a boy. The fact that many people considered it a disease said more about them than it did about homosexuality. The fact that he had loved both merely meant that he had experienced a variety of feelings in his lifetime.

Every time you don’t follow your inner guidance, you feel a loss of energy, loss of power, a sense of spiritual deadness. He’d often wondered what his sexuality might be, but he had never wondered whether it was acceptable or not. Anyway, who really cared
whether he was gay or straight? No government had the right to tell its citizens when or whom to love. They are only people who don’t love anybody. He bounded up and draped his arms around him, exhaling in relief to have finally given in to what he was, to who he would remain as forever.

“I do. I do love you.” They remained that way for several minutes, waiting for the other to let go, but neither did, neither had the strength not to hold on. They had already held on for so long.

“We have to move away, Jules. The Irish government will convict us. They’ll take us away from each other. I couldn’t bear that.” Jules eventually moved away, the reality of how dangerous what he had chosen to be was.

He lifted his head and smiled widely, laughing. “Well guess what? I couldn’t care less. What if I say I’m not like the others? I don’t want to be. I’ll never find a peace of mind until I follow my heart. I’m not afraid anymore. I’m crossing the line; it doesn’t mean a thing to me. It doesn’t bother me anymore.” He smirked and moved towards Jules, moving his mouth to his ear to whisper: “No, we’re crossing together.”

Rule No.5: There is only one life for each of us: Our Own.
Crossing the Line When Nothing is Impossible

Inside each of us is a tiny seed
Born with bless with a power to survive and succeed
From crawling and learning to stand up tall
To realise our potential and not to fall
Our dreams, our desires wait to be achieved
“cos nothing is impossible if you believe”

Faith is the key to powers unfold
Limbs imprisoned by stories untold
Music seeps - into your ears - eyes that don’t see, infuse your mind, move your lifeless body, relax play those notes caress that tune
Free yourself from your mental cocoon
“cos nothing is impossible if you believe”

Yes you can and will achieve.
Fight for something worth living for
Don’t worry about being rich or poor
Break down the barriers put in our way
Search for dreams not demons living today,
by faith you can move mountains
“cos nothing is impossible if you believe”

Syeda Khatun (Langdon Park School)
## List of Winners

### Key Stage 3 Short Story

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<td>Nasrin Ahmed</td>
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<td>Rubeka Zafar</td>
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<td>Akashi Alam</td>
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<td>Salman Rahman</td>
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### Key Stage 3 Poetry

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<td>Zahra Nabil</td>
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<td>3rd &amp; Best in School</td>
<td>Joshua Streete Campbell</td>
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<td>Highly Commended</td>
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<td>Shakila Tasnim</td>
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# Key Stage 4 Short Story

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<td>Tasnim Shormee Aziz</td>
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<td>Oliwia Lewandowska</td>
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<td>Rima Rashid</td>
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# Key Stage 4 Poetry

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<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jackie Anyuru</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
<td>Rhiannon Hutchings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Alfred Green</td>
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