

Furthsetter



Photo by [Patrick Fore](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Creative writing from the
pupils of
Boroughmuir High School

2024-25

Welcome to this year's edition of Furthsetter!

This year's writers bring us beautifully vivid imaginary landscapes, dystopian tales of struggle and determination, nature writing, instamatic poetry, and atmospheric short horror fiction.

Thanks, as always, to the English department for truffling out contributions from our wonderful writers, and huge thanks to our writers for producing such creative content.

And thank you to you for reading!

Lesley Bloomer (Chief Wrangler)

Contents

Instamatic Poem by Aran Nasibinejad	page 3
Skaldspire by Andy Chen	page 4
Rainforest by Korey Sturgeon	page 6
The Library by Cora Jensen	page 8
Curfew by Conrad Urch	page 9
HERON by Alice Ferreira Dos Reis	page 10
Death of a Dynasty by Charlotte Bewsher	page 11
The Stable by Katie Wood	page 13
Crystlind by Maia Gray	page 14
Martyrdom by Duncan Richards	page 16
Mephisto by Nathan Adams	page 18
Better Left Unsaid by Poppy Tipton	page 20



<https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo-contest/2021/tatiana-nikitina/1>

(an instamatic poem, in the style of Edwin Morgan)

Aran Nasibinejad

Clutching his bike as if
His life depended on it
Grabbing for control
As his chance is slipping by.
A young cyclist is sent clattering into the ground
Because of his deadly mistake
That will cost him more

Than mere injuries.
His face expresses shock
And panic at something that even he
Cannot control.
The cyclist behind
Has swerved to avoid
This tragic crash
That surprised them both.
Slamming on the brakes
His only chance is
If something divine
Saves him from
His awful fate.
It is a bright sunny day
In Katowice, Poland.
In the background
The others try and avoid
The mangled remains of the crash
A mixture of human and metal.

Skaldspire

Andy Chen

The flickering orange light of a hundred lanterns sharply illuminated the cold black stone bricks encrusted in ice that shimmered like a frozen river caught in eternal stasis and blanketed in snow. A frigid wind wrapped around me, stinging and howling like the mournful cries of ancient spirits as I climbed the cracked steps towards the great bridge.

Towering statues of forgotten kings stood sentinel at either side, their stone faces weathered yet defiant, cloaked in emerald moss and frost. Beyond them, the vast bridge stretched forth – a treacherous span of bone and sinew carved from the remains of a primordial beast bested in battle, its ribs arching skyward as though reaching toward the heavens. Beneath it, a roaring cascade plunged into an abyss of icy mist, the deafening crash of water against rock echoing into the freezing air.

Ahead, the fortress perched precariously on its rocky pedestal, like a crown atop the world. Its spires pierced the grey, snow-laden clouds, their jagged silhouettes stark against the pale light of a fading sun. The land itself seemed alive, each gust of wind and creak of timber a whisper of untold stories. The snow beneath my boots crunched like brittle glass, and the icy air bit deep into my lungs as the weight of the place settled upon me – a reminder that I stood at the threshold of both majesty and desolation.

I stood at the gates of Skaldspire Summit, the keystone of the northern realms. A place woven into sagas and songs, its name carried the weight of both reverence and

foreboding, like a shadow cast across the pages of history. The Summit was more than a fortress – it was the lifeblood of a civilisation clinging to the edges of existence, built atop the rugged spine of the world. From this vantage, the surrounding mountains unfurled like an endless ocean of ice and stone, their peaks serrated against a twilight sky awash in hues of violet and silver. Below, frozen forests stretched in ghostly stillness, their frost-coated branches shimmering faintly as though encased in glass.

To the east lay the Shardmere, a glacial expanse riddled with fissures like sawtooth scars etched into the earth's icy flesh. Glowing veins of trapped crystal pulsed faintly with a light as soft as dying embers. It was said that Shardmere held remnants of the old gods' breath, frozen when the world was young. To the west, fjords plunged into a steel-grey sea, where waves hurled themselves against sheer cliffs in a relentless, thundering symphony. Carved watchtowers clung to the cliff edges like stubborn barnacles, their silent sentries braving the forceful winds as they gazed into the icy horizon.

At the Summit itself, every structure bore the burden of survival. Blackstone keeps jutted into the sky like clenched fists raised against the great beyond, their spires sheathed in a glistening armour of frost. Great iron braziers burned with whale-oil-fed flames, roaring like a lion and casting flickering shadows against walls etched with ancient runes of protection. At the heart of it all stood the Skyforge, its molten core glowing like a captured star. Here, blades were born – sharp, unyielding, destined for both survival and conquest.

The Summit's history was as harsh as the land itself. Once a refuge for exiles, it had grown into a bastion of strength under the Ærlingr dynasty, said to descend from a

frostbound demigod. The Ærlingr thrived not by conquest alone but by mastering the land's unforgiving nature. Their society was disciplined and precise. Farmers cultivated hardy crops on terraced slopes, smiths forged tools of survival in the roaring forges, and warriors sparred atop the bone bridge. Even children played their part, learning early to navigate the snows and wield tools of survival. Life at the Summit was not easy – but it was purposeful.

The Ærlingr ruled from the Hall of Thanes, a chamber carved into the mountain's heart. Beneath its ceiling of red ice and diamond, the High Thane presided over decisions of war, trade, and justice, balanced by the Council of Elders, a body of warriors, sages, and merchants who represented the people's voice. At the base of the Summit stood a grand temple of luminous ice. Here, priests of Kaldir, god of winter and endurance, kept an eternal flame – a beacon for travellers seeking hope or sanctuary in the frozen wastes.

As I climbed higher, my breath clouding the air, I felt the aura of history surrounding me. Though raised in the southlands, my blood carried the Ærlingr line. This was the place of my ancestors, and though its icy winds bit deep, the rhythms of Skaldspire felt familiar. The land itself seemed to call me, its untamed power stirring something ancient in my veins.

The days here were dictated by survival. Before dawn, farmers descended to the valleys, lanterns bobbing like fireflies in the dark. Warriors drilled atop the bridge of bone, their movements silhouetted against the roaring cascades below. In the forges, smiths' hammers rang out in a rhythmic symphony. Evenings brought respite: roaring fires, hearty meals of spiced venison and rye stew, and songs of ancient battles sung to the low hum of bone flutes.

As night fell, the Summit transformed under the aurora's ethereal light, its colours dancing like unbound spirits across the sky. Standing on the bone bridge, gazing over the vast expanse, I felt awe and sorrow within me. Skaldspire Summit was magnificent but unrelenting. It demanded everything from its people, yet it held a beauty impossible to deny – a reminder that even in desolation, life could endure.

And as the wind howled and the fires flickered, I knew one thing with certainty. I was bound to this place, as much a part of it as the stones, the snow, and the stories etched into its frozen heart.

Rainforest

Korey Sturgeon

The dark grey clouds darted as the sun approached the earth, making the rainforest as lively as a bus full of schoolchildren. The light from the morning sun was a star shining through the darknesses of the blanket of evergreen trees, hiding the beauty from the earth. The air stuck to your skin wrapping around your body like a damp towel, making you break out in a sweat within five minutes of being there. A boat full of explorers glided through the once-resting rivers, journeying through the Amazon River- hoping to make it upstream to Bolivia. Pink River dolphins swam alongside the travellers, showing off their long beaks. The dolphins playfully splashed water making the sightseers feel refreshed as cool water trickled down their hats and onto their burnt skin giving some relief. Nearby, there was a delightful smell of fresh berries that could make your mouth water if you were hungry enough.

The ground squelched as jaguars ran like their fellow sports cars, looking for their prey to cure their dreaded morning hunger. Cooling rain ran, clear but also silvery, and dropped down each branch until it softly reached the soil that was itching for some water, after the drought of the night. The tree trunks reached out into space making a canopy to protect life below from the rain. Fresh vines snaked their way around tree trunks giving more ways for animals to travel. Luscious grass as green as ripe Granny Smith apples, sprouted from the soil as the rain helped the soil soak in its nutrients, now soft enough to be used as a carpet for a gracious king. The wet

soil left an earthy scent mixed with stunning berries and gave a smell like no other. The flowers bloomed a radiant red colour leaving wonderful pollen for bees to store before they soared through the sky back to their kingdoms, to create hexagonal honey that was as yellow as the yellow brick road.

A soft roar of a cargo plane rumbled through the midday sky making its routine deliveries to villages below. A thick trail of smoke bellowed out of the spluttering engines creating a rancid scent that caught the back of the animal's throats- making them cough loudly. Shipments of food and other supplies crashed into the sides of the plane as it went down to a sweet descent, landing feet away from the magnificent jungle. The plane screeched like a cat as it skidded to a halt on the edge of the runway. Parrots flocked around scared by what they didn't understand. They asked each other questions- 'what other species of that size could float through the sky?'- but soon everything was forgotten, and they flew back into the forest to greet their families.

A waterfall crashed down from rocky cliffs below, leaving a soft mist of like-warm water that rose into the sky and created a dense layer of warmth like a fresh batch of hot chocolate. A rainbow appeared in the mist, creating colour that was a firework of bright intensity. At the rarest of times, small rocks would fall from the cliffs giving a small plop at the bottom of the river- just missing the animals that inhabited the depths.

Soon, the night brewed as the sun tried to grab the sky, trying not to disappear into the darkness of space. Still, darkness had arrived- and so did something else.

The birds shrieked in terror as the ground shook and now bulldozers and vans carrying humans ready to start destruction tore through the grass, leaving dirt tracks and destroying what was once a beautiful landscape. To the animals' dismay, they ran from their homes trying to escape to survival, from what they thought were aliens. The trees roared in pain as chainsaws with sharp teeth ripped through the roots, bringing the deep brown trunks down without remorse. A thick mist like golden plates spread over the entire Amazon as sawdust suffocated its inhabitants like a million different needles piercing its throat.

Men in high vis suits packed up the logs and strapped them down into vans that were buses of now lifeless trees. Koalas, confused by the noise, were moving as slow as tortoises making their way out of their tree homes, trying not to get hurt. Their cries were so loud that they could be heard miles away.

Fish scattered from the river that was once as clear as glass and was now a brown mush of fallen trees and debris. Still, the machines did not stop to hear the cries of their victims. The dolphins had become encaged in tangles of nets, so they could no longer move freely: wriggling in the rough ropes, trying to escape, briefly hearing a snap but losing hope soon after.

A man with a gas mask that looked as old as World War 2 had a flame thrower in hand with a gas tank on his back that weighed more than a bus. Fires as bright as a burning ball of gas travelling through space emerged from the thin tip of the destruction machine. The fire danced in and out, between what was once gracious

green leaves and was now a heavy charred pile of rubble. Smoke fumes rose through the burning canopy leaving the air tasting of acrid tar.

Then- silence.

What was once a tropical paradise was now lifeless and would be considered a wasteland. The animals had either escaped or the ones that had been unlucky were now haunting the place. There was a soft crackle left over from the great logs as they finished charring into a ghostlike grey. The humans had taken away the tropical paradise from the animals who needed it. It would never return.

The Library

Cora Jensen

Talia hummed along to the music drifting through her earbuds as she carefully deciphered the words swimming on the page in front of her. The warm, bright lights of the library hummed in the background, harmonising with the chatter of the patrons as they bustled around, busy with their own interesting lives. She absentmindedly ran her fingers over the textured carpet underneath her and inhaled the familiar musty scent of old books. She watched the dust swirl and dance around her in the afternoon light filtering through the window. Talia loved the quiet solitude of this hidden spot, wedged between two towering shelves and behind a large plant pot, emerald-green leaves unfurling over her head. Her head tilted back to rest on the wall, and her eyelids flickered closed, lulled by the calming murmur of the library.

When Talia's eyes opened again, she was jolted awake by a loud clicking sound. It was the automatic lights turning off, casting the library into a dim glow. She sat up and looked around. The library was quiet and empty. The librarians must have missed Talia in her hidden spot when they were leaving. She headed over to the front doors to check if they were locked. They were. The windows were made of thick glass and wouldn't budge, and the back doors couldn't open either. There was no way out. The silence seemed to stretch on, and the sun was going down outside. Soon it would be dark, and she would be alone and trapped.

Suddenly, a loud, muffled rattling sound rang through the eerily silent library. Talia whirled around just in time to see the golden edges of the sun disappear over the

horizon, coating her in darkness. The thick, heavy layers of dust hanging in the air now suffocated her. She moved toward the sound, cautious of what might await her. The source was a book. It was shuddering and jerking in its shelf, tipping towards the ground. It landed open, with a thump, and stopped shaking. Now there was no sound except a quiet scratching and scraping, like little claws on stone. More rattling. Talia looked around, and other books were starting the same process, vibrating violently, and then falling open on the ground. Different sounds started to join the scratching. A chilling melody of buzzing, clicking, fluttering of small wings. Footsteps. And then, all at once, the books exploded in a flurry of movement. Words transformed into creatures, real ones and fantastical. An army of tiny black ants, beetles, and spiders emerged from an encyclopaedia of bugs. The book in front of her erupted into a flood of thousands of rats. They swarmed up her feet, legs and torso, small, razor-sharp claws piercing and gouged at her skin. She couldn't move. Just before the rodents covered Talia's face, she let out a blood-curdling scream of pure terror.

There was nothing left of Talia. The creatures returned to their books, which flew back onto their shelves, and the library was quiet and still once more.

Curfew

Conrad Urch

The cracked pavement underfoot meets my every stride with resistance, almost like it is trying to warn me as I step foot into the boundaries of the city. The harsh, stark lighting that stays on even after curfew lights up the empty streets, where no life is to be seen at all except for the occasional patrol clad in the black and red riot gear that is so often associated with fear.

I am not welcome here. Not by those in charge at least. Not since what happened all those years ago when I was still one of them. When I could still call this place my home. Returning here strikes terror into the depths of my soul, as move past where I used to stay, the lowest levels of accommodation.

The crumbling apartment complexes slowly seem to turn to sleeker and more modern architecture as I near the centre of the deathly silent metropolis, and the buildings somehow are even more densely packed together, barely letting what little moonlight is left splash onto the cobbles. Angular and imposing skyscrapers and government buildings surround me on both sides, almost as if trying to trap me here. I continue to tread along the cobbles, moving to the side of the street to keep out of the light as I near the central district of the city. I tuck up against a smooth metal pillar swiftly, as I hear a patrol round the corner and watch as they march by.

This place used to be a haven of sorts, nestled here within the rocky landscape of the Northern pass, a place that welcomed travellers and refugees alike. Not a city where

you spent your days scared for your life and locked up, a prisoner in your own dwelling, after sundown.

Looking up I can just about see the night sky but, alas, without a single star is on display it is just an empty void. It slowly slides out of view as the buildings somehow become even denser still. Claustrophobia begins to set in as the superstructure narrows even more, the street only five feet wide and nothing but emotionless concrete when I glance up. After a minute, I break out on to an open plaza with relief until I set eyes on the tall, ominous post that stands alone at its centre, outside the menacing chambers from where this dictatorship is run.

Signs full of bright, neon propaganda blind you no matter where you glance this deep into the city, forcing out the night and almost illuminating the whole square. They will never be removed. It serves as a reminder of their inevitable powers.

I spin slowly on the spot, fully taking in the surroundings as a small, yet noticeable wind breeze plays upon my bare arms, sending dead leaves dancing at my feet. I picture this place years ago, where the trees were full of life, market stalls lining the perimeter of the square, people bustling about going from each stand to the next, huge smiles on the faces of the stall-keepers. The constant rustling of the leaves below brings me back to the present.

I set off again and continue through the square, and back onto the restrictive streets. I wander down towards the other side of the centre, moving slowly into the richer areas, where the tightly packed, looming architecture turns slowly yet surely into rows of dark and water-stained rows of townhouses and then into more spaced out and luxurious detached properties. The security presence here feels just as

intricately woven as its counterpart in the heart of the city, posts for guards placed every twenty or so metres to protect those who the governors believe to be valuable.

I am nearly out the other side now, walking in a trance, at a leisurely pace through the last few neighbourhoods of the most “important” government figures. The air is clearer now, absolute clarity compared to the heavy smog that lay so close to the ground in the depths of the metropolis. The faint sound of birdsong, so rare these days, carries over the gentle breeze playing against the side of my face. The sun is just beginning to rise, staining the dark sky with streaks of yellow, red, and pink. I should not be here. I have overstayed. Panic begins to set in as the shouts of a patrol starting their morning shift. I break into a run, ducking under the tall wire fence, designed not to keep people out, but those who reside here within the boundaries. Not stopping to think at all, step after step I retreat into the barren, rocky landscape and leave this place behind.

HERON

Alice Ferreira Dos Reis

A statued beauty

Unmoved by the violent wind

Frozen by thought

Long legs start to creak

Grey rough wings start to unlatch

Knees start to buckle

Up the wild bird soars

Awkward at its departure

Low flight to the ground

Up the heron flies

Guided by the lunar light

Glides through the night sky

Death of a Dynasty

Charlotte Bewsher

Fireworks and plumes of dust, illuminated by the arms of the moon as piles of it are sprinkled in the neglected corners of my cavern. The particles dance and twirl, hand in hand, across the floor as my door is carefully nudged open by gloved hands. Rusty hinges and elderly wood, slick with a glossy white layer, shriek in protest as they are shifted. The same gloved hands, firm and calloused from experience of slaughter, urge me gently into consciousness as they take a hold of my shoulder and shake. The bearded figure murmurs hushed directions into my ear. *We are leaving*, I catch amongst the indistinguishable commands. Heaving my legs over the edge of the bed to sitting, my knees protrude awkwardly like a stump on a tree trunk, ivory skin stretched and contorted as a bad taxidermy would be. Crafted tiles shake and tremble in their places as blunt heels of expensive boots hit the floor; he marches around the room with the vigour of a former king. His urgent steps return, growing louder as he approaches; he holds a bundle of clothes for me, the buttons on his wrists clinking softly with various metallic embellishments. I am escorted out of my room after I have changed, met halfway by my kin, the hallway identical to every other in this makeshift prison. Surrounded by white lace and frills, compressed by a flurry of aristocratic swans, their feathers oscillating with each step, progressively ruffled with panic as they follow closely behind my father. We are told with a blunt and minimally informative tone of the evacuation as we are led towards the cellar.

One by one we file in through the jaws of the basement; father's remaining servants led the pack, followed by us and our overseers, wolves, nipping at our heels and

herding us forwards. My fingertips graze over my mothers, ghosting over them in a search for comfort. Her eyes are trained towards the back wall, pupils glossed over, running up and down the panels, the icy hues of her iris hazy with her illness. A warm palm on my upper back directs me to the right of the entrance, shooting an involuntary tremor through my spine. Tense silence replaces the whispers, the air growing tighter with panicked breaths, static snaking and zigzagging left and right, up and down, conducted by the eye contact my parents maintained. Conversing as their eyes dilated and contracted, diverting and glancing, unspoken words were said, finally whipping towards the entrance as the sentry takes his position by the door. The thick smog of quiet penetrating every breath and creak of the floorboards, shattered like a mirror by an abrupt slam. The door is open. A gaping black hole in this enclosed space. Lungs heaving and inflating, every inhale stiffening my limbs, petrified like much of the wood in my room, my mother's nails stamping crescents into my skin as she grabs a hold of my arm, white skirts and layers shifting, bouncing, swirling, twirling, gliding against one another as agitated legs twitch and squirm. Seven sets of widened eyes try to block the door, heaving delusions and hopes on top of the barricade. Fantasies of safety. Fantasies of a future. I have hardly lived. The dam grows as we push and strain. Through the floorboards a black stain creeps, making its way towards me. *Leaking* through the dam. Surging through, wave by wave, a sea of tyranny cloaked in grey, red accents like eyes of a hungry predator with its prey backed against a wall. Silver teeth bared as they lick their jaws, enamoured with the smell of helplessness.

Lunging forward, a dozen ashy coats split open, folding over each other as steel barrels rip through the stagnant air, coming to a halt as they face my father. His

eyelids, heavy and sleep-deprived, fall shut as triggers are pulled. The recoil forces the revolutionary onto his back foot when an iron freight train launches itself down the darkened tunnel, leaving the track and ripping through the air, tearing its way through the sound barrier as the air fills with a sultry smell of gunpowder. Wafting up from the neck of the weaponry, smothering the adversaries in a thick film of fumes, dividing into vortexes as they advance. I watch as clouds of dust are ripped from the ground as my father drops to his knees, ruby dianthus, like the ones that grow back home, bloom through his dress shirt, petals falling to the ground in hot red drips. I cannot tear my eyes away from his body, swaying back and forth, his palms flat on the ground. Silhouettes are painted an inky black on the wall, growing as the heavy thumping of their footsteps approach. I cannot tear my eyes away from his creased eyes, clamped shut, expecting. I hear them. Tendrils of a foul smell wrap around my neck, coiling tightly as he looms over me. I cannot tear my eyes away. The air by my ear whistles briefly as a long pole is hurled with power, striking my father in his shoulder, the long point skewering him to the wooden floor. His eyes still tight tally marks in his face, the blood of a dynasty pooling out beneath him. I don't tear my eyes away from him, the soldier dislodging the bayonet from his skin as I am shoved harshly onto my front. Large hands digging roughly into my skin as my back is pierced and impaled, drawing a feline scream from deep within my lungs, ricocheting around the room in a hurricane and dispersing the howl of torment. Twice. Thrice. The heir to the crown, his skeletal torso disfigured and shredded as his arms are held down, large knees on his joints like paperweights. The small room is filled with gunshots and desperate keening. Agonised wails stopped halfway by splutters of red. Ballistics lodge themselves into the flesh of my sisters, their pale skirts now wet and ripped, soaked with the crimson of their own life. My mother, her eyes lolling and

bulging backwards into her skull, laying on her side, her figure morphed and broken by my hazy vision, her limp body twisted unnaturally under her dress. The boy on the floor, his pale skin now bruised and bloody, morphing in purple waves as he rolls over to face the ceiling. The chambers of my heart, pumping, pounding, dim rays from above crawling through my tight eyelids. Deep ravines in my back, ribs jutting out from beneath, scraping against the wood like nails on a blackboard when I spasm and throb. Blond locks tossed back as he throws his head towards the ground, mouth agape as he gasps a deep breath of smoke. I am ripped into darkness once more.

The smog of silence returns to the Ipatiev House. The walls are stained with the remains of the monarchy of Russia.

The Stable

Katie Wood

It was a beautiful evening with the sunset casting a golden glow onto Roxy's face. The birds were singing lullabies to their little ones high up in the trees and the flowers only just beginning to bloom, created little pops of colour in the long green grass. Roxy wandered through the field mesmerised by the little signs of spring that were finally showing. There was the stable, looking quite rundown these days with cracks in the roof and weeds growing through the cobble floor, but it was still her favourite place to go. It belongs to her family and goes decades back all the way to when her great great grandmother, Sylvia, was born. Roxy creaked open the door to the stable and walked in. It was stuffy and damp and the stink of horse poo was not something pleasant. But the sunlight soon flooded into the stable through the open doorway, followed by the fresh air, extinguishing the horrible stench and stuffiness into the night.

Earlier in the day she had been tending to the horses, but once she had finished and began the long walk back to her house, she realised something. Her locket that has been passed down through the generations, which has always been sealed off, not revealing the secrets inside, was missing. That's why Roxy had made her way up here again in these late hours of the evening. As she walked in, the stable was just as she had left it, with her horse Rose there, tack jangling and hooves scraping the

cobblestone floor. But something wasn't right. The evening sky was quickly falling into a deep dark slumber, the stars glowing brightly like a spotlight glaring at her. The bird's soft song suddenly stopped and the biggest difference of all was what was lying right in front of her. The family locket sat open on the cold cobbles, with Sylvia and her horse Tommy staring into her soul.

Bang! The doors to the stable slammed shut. Roxy whipped around only to see a flash of lightning brighten up the mysterious night sky, as it struck a tree. Birds screeched and she could hear rain pounding down pouring into the stable through the cracks in the roof. The howl of a wolf stole Roxy out of her strange trance, bringing her back to reality and to what was standing beside Rose. Tommy. But when Roxy went to stroke him, she was astonished. Her hand penetrated the horse, swiftly appearing on the opposite side of the horse's head. Her heart dropped at the realisation. Was he real? Was she imagining it? She had to get out of there. The door was bolted shut, thunder shaking the ground beneath her feet. That's when Roxy spotted a ladder in the corner of the room. She followed it down into the basement to where horse skeletons and bones lay. They combined together to create a huge monstrous skeleton horse. Without time to think she ran, only to realise she was trapped. The ladder had disappeared, and the skeleton was charging at her...

Crystlind

Maia Gray

As you soar through the clouds over the vast and bare alpine mountain range, you will find yourself in a forgotten world of wonder and mysteries. No matter who you are, it will make you stop in your tracks and gape in awe as it is one of the world's most treasurable sights. The mountains rise as high as an eye can see and when they are covered in a thick white sheet, they merge with the clouds above so you are surrounded by a white wonderland. The wide valleys stretch for miles along and deep, dark caves line the mountain sides. The alpine river runs through the valley, breaking it in two like a huge knife slicing through flesh. Its crystal-clear, almost sapphire blue water makes a sound like tinkling carol bells as it flows along its route at the bottom of the valley and launches off the roaring waterfall at the end of its path. To even be ten metres from the waterfall you would be deafened by its sound, echoing through the mountains and rattling the cave edges along the way. Icicles hang down like suspended teardrops on almost every rock face, their shiny surfaces glistening like triangles of glitter when the winter sun shines through them. Every now and again a shadow will skulk out from a cave and send a shiver running down your spine. It is the ghost of the mountain patrolling her long reigning throne. Her magnificent marbled coat blends with the rock face and her impressive paws make no sound as she prowls back to her den, well away from sight.

The mountain range of Crystlind is like no other in the world. Surrounding the huge mountain range are acre upon acre of long forgotten alpine forests, packed full of coniferous trees, some at least 60 feet high. These woods are genuine ancient forests, established long before the first dinosaur hatched on planet earth. Undisturbed for centuries, the trees' roots have become tangled and knotted together, leaving twists and turns on the forest floor. Moss swallows the bark of the trees and long, long grass suffocates the gaps in the canopies. Many species thrive there, some that are found nowhere else in the world have made Crystlind forests their home. Beyond the ancient forests of Crystlind, miles and miles of grassland and eventually open water surround the mountain range and its true wonders that a natural world like Crystlind holds fondly in its arms.

All kinds of animals come to drink from the edge of the alpine river, knowing its cool, refreshing taste will revive the weak and poorly. Everyone but the gazelle savours their drink from the mountain water. He does not as he knows that he is always being watched by many pairs of eyes lining the cliff faces, waiting for the day that he will fall prey to them. These eyes belong to snow leopards: the ghosts of this alpine mountain range. They live in the caves that line the cavern, hunting frequently to feed their precious young. The mothers prowl their home, like police officers do ours, ensuring that their surroundings are as they should be. When you see one in the flesh, savour that moment forever as they really are so rare. You know when you are being watched by one of these magnificent beauties, for it is like a breath getting stuck in your throat, you choke in the moment. That breath is the ghost accepting

your presence. Never forget the sighting of her broad face, merle coat and steady paws. Be honoured as her majesty welcomes you into her long, forgotten kingdom.

In the summer months the alpine river flows steadily along its path, trickling through the winding valley until the thrashing waterfall is upon it, sending the water from this special river thundering down and crashing against the jagged rocks at the bottom of the cliff face. This happens over and over, and the creatures of the mountains have become used to the noise. It is comforting to them, and they like it. In the warm sunny months of spring, summer and most of autumn, the ground around the river is earthy and dry. The tips of the mountain peaks are always dusted with a thin layer of snow because they are so high, but that is all. For miles around, the valleys are brown and dusty. But when winter hits this special place, everything changes. Black-grey clouds fill the sky, sending a low rumbling echo through the valley, making the hawks soaring back to their trees in the forests and the mountain hares scampering for their forms at the base of the mountains. And then, the white monster comes. Snow, snow everywhere. It is like the heaviest dusting of icing sugar on a cake you could imagine and has cast a spell on the world. The valley is laden with snow, the snow leopards' caves are filled to the brim; they have no escape, and the alpine river is frozen. The river is as still as night, covered in the thickest duvet you could imagine, frozen solid. Everything is gone. The special world we once knew is nothing anymore except a world of white silence.

I have been here many times myself, but it still throws me how the snow kills all life in this valley. When the snow comes, there is nothing left. Even the shadows of the ghosts cannot be seen. You would think this is the end of everything, but it is merely the beginning. In the spring, the sun will rise like a king in the sky, peeking over the tops of the mountains, blasting the white duvet with its rays of heat until the duvet will melt and disappear, like it was never even there. The leopards will breed and little baby ghosts will roam the mountain sides, the sweet-tasting grass will burst through the earth, like miniature jack-in-the-boxes. The animals will come again to drink and the supreme river will start its steady flow of life once again, forever and ever to come.

Martyrdom

Duncan Richards

Sand grinds in the sores on your feet. Tiny embers scorching into the creases between scabs. Each shard slices its way further, deeper, as your legs twitch in agony. Yet the pain does not make it far enough for you to feel it. Your mind fills with what is to come next. The empty husks around you are the same, their quivering shells of bodies swaying in the dark; silhouettes against the splinters of light scraping through the doors, silhouettes of the people they once were. The rhythmic wail from the other side also seeps its way through, a tinny, raspy, guttural version of the mass of noise inaudible to you and the ones around you. Thick, dusty air brushes along your legs, catching on your hairs, and in the blood still weeping from wounds that will never heal. Your mouth is a sticky dry, the parching draught finds its way into the cracks in your lips, along with the gaping tears in the scraps of material wrapped around you. They gave you them to protect you. They told you it would increase your odds. They sent you here. They do not care for you. You would not be here if they did.

The quiet in the hall around only accentuates the harsh wall of sound squeezing through the gaps lining the aperture of the entryway, which begin to grow, now. The light begins spilling into the entryway, flouncing between the glistening sand and the cold stone, illuminating the empty facades of your peers; their faces drained of all soul, blood, or emotion. Just as fast as the light fills your eyes, a solid punch smacks between your shoulder blades, a cold hard edge firing a shot of red along your spine, and forcing you to move your frozen foot forward, then the next, then the next. Momentum builds. Before you realise, the walls surrounding are no longer protecting

you from what shall come. The sound around you solidifies, no longer just the diluted form only heard from behind. But now you are in front. The floor below you hardens with the noise of the pattering feet around you; you are not the first to walk this path. Your eyes now drift up, from the ochre, dusty earth below to the creator of the noise around you. The fat, gluttonous mass shrieking for entertainment. Guttural, harsh, unrelenting. Their endless eyes bore into you, calling you further, calling you inwards, calling you to your death.

The sun bores down, now, forcing every tear of water to pull its way out, matting your hair and glimmering on your back. The heat grows too, turning the seemingly distant horizon of the arch from which you came into a shimmer, blurred with the rising calefaction. Walking further the blur spreads, covering the uniform walls lining the pit in which you roam. The hollow bodies around you stare upwards to the herd of roaring revelling onlookers, and the pillars reaching up to the sky. The heat expands with the haze, which now covers all you can see, rising through the calloused soles of your feet, your now trembling legs, past the still piercing pain in your spine, up, up, filling your mind with deep, searing orange. It begins to take over all you can see. Mind full, each movement takes all the thought you can provide. Even staying upright requires maximal effort. But you are doing it. You stand tall, unwavering. You look around, feeling stable, as the world begins to spin, up, down, then above becomes in front, down turns to behind, and the scorching gritty earth slams the back of your head.

* * *

A faint image appears in the dark. A vision of how it used to be, your mind trying to find solace amongst torment. The church was a gentle place, set back from the road.

Its lonely spire barely peaked above the trees, hiding it away from the world. Hiding its visitors from the world. Sunshine would glint on the tips of each steeple in summer, and in winter water would dance down the roof, glancing off its many lesser pinnacles, onto the earth below, trodden by the many footsteps of those seeking shelter, from more than just what came from above. Once inside, liquid light spilled through the kaleidoscopic glass. Blues, reds, greens swirled together into pools of sweet hues, dying the greyest of lustres into beams of incandescent tones, which splashed upon the cold stone walls, creating a mosaic of endless diffraction. Green didn't only coat the insides of the building, but slender fingers of ivy climbed up every outer wall, leaving a network of earthy tendrils clinging on where the leaves had receded. A tender breeze fluttered through the ancient guardians of doors standing open, welcoming all, fluttering the pages of each Bible, and flickering the defiant flame of every taper. Each niche and crevice was gently illuminated by this candlelight, with sombre, ochre, burned tones. Burned tones. Burned, and destroyed. Gone.

* * *

Slits in the darkness appear. Slits turn to slivers of sunlight, then to slices, gently expanding until solid beams of burning brightness spill into your eyes, along with thick, saline sweat, and fine, floating grit, all burning their tender surfaces. Dragged out of your peaceful dream of what once was, sensation returns to your body as it drags itself upwards, though seemingly leaving your blood at your feet; the earth wobbles underneath you, and dark blotches slip over your vision. As your body settles, so do your senses; the searing pain through your back, and now your head; the endless calls and screams of the crowd, the heat bearing down from above, and

the dry tang of the dust in the air, all return. The memory of your home slips away. Everything becomes clear.

Yet something does not. A dot of orange barely visible you and those around you. This disturbance grew, a storm brewing, growing, becoming ever larger. The cloud of dust came with an uproar, the crowd noise swelled with its every approach, as though it was pushing it forth, a wave of inevitability rippling through you. But something else was the source of this. Something within. The something meant for you. Its extremities would be thrust outwards occasionally, with imperceptible force; and deep, hoarse, bellowing growls would be released from the heart of the cloud, as though alive itself. The dot is no longer a dot. It has approached, once so distant. But now you are in front. Inside the haze. The inevitable has come. Before you can comprehend what stands before you, it swipes you aside. Shredding the skin on your cheek. Mixing blood with sweat and saliva and grit all inside your mouth your nose up into your eyes stinging and scraping with that same thick metallic fluid now filling gargling spitting out of you. Your feeling drips out with the liquid. Fading. Drifting. Going. Gone. Snap. It floods back in. Wrenching, seething, contorting, the thick firm shots of pain twist around your spine every which way. Snapping, crunching, grinding crumbled joints against splintered bone. Every thought is burned red with the scorching flames of agony within until you can barely move. Paralysed, your eyes twitch their way open, the world flipped and turned around you. All you can see is more. Tens, hundreds more. Filing to exactly where you lie.

Mephisto

Nathan Adams

Most people can't see the true disease that plagues this city. Everyone thinks that criminals are the problem, but they couldn't be farther from the truth. This "utopian" city hides its nature in the spectacles and grand sights that surround its people. The way the buildings here tower over the people gives them an almost celestial feeling, like they are watching over everyone like protectors. These towers reflect the purple and orange neon lights from the streets below creating an ethereal feeling that imposes a sense of calm in the city. In the centre of this city is a market so large it could be considered its own city. The steel blue exterior and bright orange lights within give it a warm, welcoming look that seems to lure people toward it. In the far north of the city is an island adorned with a palace of such magnitude and intensity that its presence makes me feel uneasy, yet to the people of this city it is seen as a watchtower of sorts. It makes the people feel protected. The palace is silver with slight purple hues, radiating cold blue light and the orange glow of bright flaming lava. During the day, this palace seems as though it could be from a fairytale, but at night it changes. The darkness that is the midnight sky surrounding the palace gives it an overwhelmingly foreboding presence, as though you were having a nightmare. The city is named after the home of the gods, Olympus. It was named by its founder and current ruler, a man who goes by the name Mephisto. He is a zealot who worships the tyrannical and the cruel in his quest to achieve godhood. He is an unjust and unfair ruler, who will not tolerate crime in his city and will not stop until he has

eradicated all criminals by whatever means necessary. The voice of God came to me and told me that I had to stop him no matter the cost. So here I am, and I will do whatever it takes to stop him, and I will dispose of any who get in my way. I am The Black Knight: I am Azrael.

As much as I hate to admit it the streets of this place are astounding. The spirit of this place is calming, yet undeniably lively and the people here seem blissfully unaware of all of the problems that plague their society. As I make my way through the luxurious market that is the beating heart of the city, I, at first only see what I am meant to see; a bustling market with a diverse range of shops, stalls, and shows from toy stores to small travelling circus's full of strange animals that seem to come in all the colours of the rainbow. But while making my way through the sheep-like crowds and passing by more shops and stalls each so unique and different to the last, I notice only one consistency. Guards. Heavily armed, poised like predators, ready to strike at any moment. They seemed like they were looking for something, though in a place as liminal as this where every corner you turn feels familiar, yet unimaginably different from the last I doubt anyone, or anything could be easily found. The guards all wear similar "uniforms". They all have blue black and orange cybernetic enhancements. Most of the guards look quite simple for cyborgs. They have orange helmets with illuminated visors and have a strong blue streak on the top of their heads. Their bodies are made of dark grey mechanical parts, with orange and blue chrome plating on top. They appear unarmed, yet I can't shake the feeling that there is more to them than meets the eye. Scattered across the market are guards with varying appearances to "basic model" guards, and to each other. One guard I saw had three

arms: one with a hole in it that I can only assume a retractable blade is meant to protrude from, the second arm had a small hatch-like compartment, which I am unsure as to what might be in it, and his third arm had a small cannon attached to a small wheel allowing it to turn freely. The one thing all guards have in common is the blue and orange insignia that they proudly bear on their impenetrable armour.

After stumbling through the market for what seemed like days, I finally found the exit and continued making my way towards the palace of Mephisto. As I approached the palace I felt a sudden sense of unease. The intimidating structure was only partly to blame for this discomfort, mainly I felt that the eyes following me in the market had followed me here, and they continued to stalk me from the shadows. I searched the surrounding area observing the dead ash covered trees that drooped slightly under the weight of abandoned birds' nests and the burnt bushes singed by some unholy flame, even the ground and nearby rocks were covered in ash and soot, yet amidst this desolate landscape I was unable to find the eyes that I could feel piercing me like a knife. I ignored the uneasy feeling and continued my march towards Mephisto's tyrannical Palace. Up close this Palace is much more intimidating and flashy than I originally thought it to be. Looking up at this place from its gigantic golden gates it seems to stretch all the way into the heavens. The Palace has many ridges adorned with statues of various Greek Gods, demons, angels but most abundantly Mephisto. These statues of Mephisto depict him with large curling black horns, sharp pointed teeth, and a thin tail with a pointed tip. He also has scruffy jagged hair and large messy sideburns. Judging by the décor it is clear that Mephisto has a god complex

and an ego the size of the moon, and to my utter discomfort no one seems to see what he truly is.

Better Left Unsaid

Poppy Tipton

The stars fade and the moon solemnly says goodbye to the night. Wiry little wrens chirp, sing and dance in circles reminding the plants to come alive and call for the sun to shine. Peeking through the serene green leaves of the noble elm trees, the sun begins to bless the bitter sky with its warmth. Injecting life into the flowers whose soft petals unfold and flourish; they are little droplets of colour on a grand green canvas. Precisely orchestrated by the summer the colourful canvas will soon blend and become a dull grey as August is coming to an end the loud and vibrant flowers will quietly wilt and die.

The two women are not particularly noticeable. The blonde is older, definitive wrinkles crawl across her stern face. The brunette is youthfully naïve; she is pretty and has the same blue eyes as the blonde. When the blonde speaks her voice is clipped and brisk complimenting her stern face, whereas the brunette is northern and speaks softly with a slight lilt. They walk side by side; their footsteps cause twigs to snap and ripples to bounce through the puddles. The cold air deceives them with an embrace whilst stinging their face with tiny needles. The silence they share is comforting and like the serene green leaves they sway along with the breeze until they reach their bench. It has been here for years, for as long as both women's living

memory their decaying bench sat still. It wasn't a comfortable bench however it held a familiarity that could not be forgotten.

"How was the journey my dear?"

"It wasn't too long you know. I always think it's going to be longer than it actually is and then by the time we pass Manchester it's only another hour. Mum drove most of the way and I just sat in the back with dad and the dog."

The sun has finished hiding, it has listened to the wrens and is shining proudly over them, providing a bright hope to the day. It has been raining all week, so the lake is high and the flowers drowning. The bench has absorbed as much as it can handle and is starting to rot from the inside out like a swarm of beetles infesting, plaguing everything in its way. As the seasons change so too has the strong burgundy of the bench faded to a softer pallid brown.

Today is a good day. Today the sun shines for them.

The blonde woman is looking out onto the large lake with her small smile. Meanwhile her companion is studying her face memorising it like a map to keep in the back of her mind for whenever she may need direction. The rivers of wrinkles on her face flow with all of life's beautiful yet painful experience. Her pink cheeks, flushed like the blushing irises sprouting from the drenched ground, express the softness of her laughter and joy. Her piercing blue eyes, once a deeper blue than the lake, are

becoming clouded and tired. Her eyebrows are drawn on clumsily to match the purple eyeshadow painted chaotically on her eyelids.

“How... how have you been feeling?”

“I feel well thank you. I have three appointments next week. Then I take a break for two weeks and then they restart.”

Three yellow ducklings waddle past clumsily following their mother. The blonde's eyes follow them along to the field left of the lake.

“You know, when I was younger, my sister and I used to play in the orchard that used to be over there.”

A tidal wave of nostalgia consumes her as her imagination runs wild like the two girls used to. The elm trees rose above them and their neon green leaves danced as they resembled the energetic vibrancy of the wind. Grass crunched beneath their petite feet. Blonde hair crossed into tight plaits followed them as they ran as far and as fast as they could.

Her sister visits her on occasion, when brushing her hair or on days like this when the sun is high and the breeze is cold, she drifts by. She has lived in the village her entire life. Time has passed; some days it speeds by, but others never seemed to end. Ghosts hid with the monsters beneath her bed. She was never quite able to fight them off and now they have infected her.

The blonde lets out a soft sigh whispering as if she is afraid to speak. Perhaps if the thoughts in her mind escape her mouth they might come true.

“I could stay here forever.”

The brunette is staring straight ahead.

Perhaps she didn't hear, perhaps she isn't listening, perhaps her own mind is running wild. Or is she too afraid to respond? Maybe she thinks if she stares for long enough, breathes slowly enough. Maybe if she just does nothing it will all go away. Maybe she is just imagining it all. Maybe she will be seven years old again, in the back of the car. Grey seats powdered with crumbs. Her sister sat to the left of her asleep in her car seat. Her brother to the right also asleep. Her parents' voices drifting into the back slowly getting louder and louder. The green grass blending into the blue sky. The arguing getting louder and louder. The little white dots of the sheep speeding by. The arguing getting louder and louder. Her eyes blurring. Her chest tightening. Silence.

Her grandmother is there on her doorstep. Her warm embrace clouded her senses with the sweet smell of perfume. She follows her grandma into the familiar house.

Her heart feels heavy. In her stomach a pit begins to grow, sucking in her organs and swallowing them whole. She is paralysed to this bench as pins stab her neck, prickling down her spine. This dying bench.

It has sat here for decades burdened with all that it had seen and is now starting to crumble from the weight. It has let itself into people's lives for fleeting moments. Smiled as lovers met and mourned as they parted. Sympathised with tired mothers

whose mascara bled into the bags beneath their eyes. It sat peacefully with the lonely and with those alone. It watched in silence as the seasons changed and people passed by.

Today it sat with a tired grandmother and her sad granddaughter.

It isn't occurring to them this might be the last time they sit on this bench. Or maybe it is. A big black mass of pain floats through their minds. They try to shut it out but it's no good. They are thinking about it now and the silence they are sharing turns deathly.

"What time is it darling?"

"Oh, it's half eleven."

"Let's start walking back shall we?"

"Let's go!"

The brunette jumps up and helps the blonde wobble to her feet. They walk along the gravel path that circles the deep blue lake. The brunette is tired and so too is the blonde. Not a single word passes their lips. The glowing yellow sun rests against the bright blue sky. The air is no longer crisp but instead a mundane warmth cut like a knife by the frigid wind.

As they pass through the great iron gates at the entrance of the lake the brunette shudders as shivers catapult down her spine. She glances back and sees splatters of

brown and orange infest the greenery. She also sees the great elm trees shiver as their roots wither.

Autumn is approaching.

Snow had fallen one of the many winters' days following that crisp August morning. It coats the ground and sweeps across the freezing lake. Underneath the cold winter sun the land freezes and the ground glistens. The bench can't withstand the weight and is being buried beneath feet of the white fairy dust. It is starting to crack. The slats are snapping. The ground is rock hard. The armrests are pulled to the ground. Icicles form hanging from the barren elm trees. No longer proud they are sad, small, bare. The backboard is the last to crash down to the ground.

The bench had sat still for years and now it is gone.

Spring brightens the year and melts the snow away. A dark shadow is scattered with rusted nails. Three ducks swim across the lake as it glistens under the glittering sky. The white canvas is being coloured by the spring. The grass grows an intense green; radiant yellow daffodils sprout; little white snowdrops pop and violet bluebells wind their way up and curve under the pressure of the spring. Pretty pink petals from the blossom tree fall gracefully to the ground like her tears that are silently sending ripples through the puddles that surround her feet. Cranky little crows squawk as she

lays down a single carnation. Embraced by the shadow of a familiar bench, the purple carnation mourns. The ground soaks its tears of petals.

Every year the brunette walks the circle of the lake; with no bench to sit on or rest, she simply lays down a singular purple carnation. Then she walks away, not daring to look back – she must move on.