



upon a golden bough



FOREWORD

The weeks leading up to the end of November are always rather nerve-wracking for me. As The Heritage New Writing Contest's submission deadline approaches, my fear of finding an empty email inbox on December 1st rises. Because as its organiser, once the email launching the contest and inviting submissions goes out in September, all I can do is sit and wait and hope. Each year, as the 30th November passes and my inbox is filled with submission notifications, I am both immensely relieved and enormously grateful.

This year, I was jumpy. There had been less correspondence from schools asking for information or letting me know they would be participating. Of course, that made sense. We had two years under our belt. People knew what they were doing.

Or maybe interest had waned. Maybe the theme didn't connect. Maybe everyone had better things to do with their time.

It turns out that my fears were unfounded. The 2023-24 academic year saw us receive almost 200 entries from 18 different private schools, including some for whom English is not the primary language of instruction. Three years in, neither I nor the many others involved in running the contest could have hoped for engagement from virtually all the private schools in Cyprus, but I am overjoyed to have had my expectations surpassed in a way that suggests what we're doing is adding something to the educational and artistic landscape of our island.

Certainly, it is our privilege to provide a forum for the young writers featured in this edition of upon a golden bough and to be able to release this selection of stories and poems into the world. Our theme this year is escape and while it would be trite to suggest these pieces were trapped before we published them, it's nevertheless true that this is work that needed to be let out.

My gratitude goes out, once again, to the teachers and students whose hard work and enthusiasm landed so many great pieces of new writing in my inbox, and to the contest's judging/editorial panel whose expertise and time helped our writers shape the final texts about to leap off the page as you read them.

So, for the third of what I hope will be many more occasions, here you go.

Simon Demetriou, Contest Organiser





The Under 11s: Poetry



Christiana Vaggas, 10, The American Academy, Nicosia

The Perilous ESCAPE

Running through the woods,
I'm nearly out of breath.
The bear's still back there chasing me:
Could this be my death?

Through the alley, up a tree,
What is going to happen to me?
I hear its grunt; I feel its breath.
Its paws thud upon my chest.

I can barely breathe, my time is up,
But no!
She comes off with a jump.
She just thought I was her cub!

She backs away in serious doubt.
I calmly stand; my face in a pout.
It's her turn to think it's the end.
"Don't worry," I whisper, "I'm just a friend!"



Sehja Chauhan, 10, The Falcon School, Nicosia

An Extraordinary Escape

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Clarence.
She was walking through the woods when she lost
her balance.

She fell down a hole
oh so dark
bounced back up like a dashing, bright spark.

As she looked around her it was strange:
it was as if everything had changed.
Instead of trees there were hills of snow,
there was no green floor but a bright blue glow.

The clouds were made as if of cotton candy
and the sun seemed so soft and sandy:
hot, cold, blue, yellow, sand, snow.
Clarence was surrounded by a weird flow.

She heard a whisper: "Get out of here, hurry up!"
The walls were slowly closing; it was really abrupt.
The voice kept reaching her ear: "Hurry up,
Hurry up, or else you'll be squashed.



She ran to the nearest ladder,
her heart racing louder and louder:
it was as if the ice bit.
“Almost to the top,” Clarence said, with a flick.

Clarence could see above her the crystal-clear sky;
she wished that she could just fly.
She landed on the soft, muddy ground,
but her heart was drowning out
every other sound.



Akylina Longinou, 9, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

Escaping my shadow

Deep below I always say,
I'd like to escape my shadow one day.

It's a mysterious, mortifying creature
that follows me around like a seeker.
And so, I dash to and fro by the bay,
trying to make my shadow go away.

At the crossroads inside me,
I don't know where to flee,
Cars are honking right behind me,
I don't know where to be.

Causing pandemonium everywhere I go,
I feel like a helpless psycho.
And so, I take a break from my bizarre quest,
as I find myself in need of some rest.

With a clear mind and no longer blind,
A heap of hope is what I find,
And so, it is a key,
For a shed arises in front of me.

As I start sprinting to the shed,
I felt like I've done an entire session of phys ed.
At long last I felt like the best of them all.
As I find my self in black attire, I have accomplished
to become a scary vampire!!



The Under 11s: Prose



Zoe Klinghoffer, 10, Foley's School, Limassol

Escaping the Anxiety Monster

It's 3 p.m. on a Monday. Dance class time. I am excited. Dance makes me feel free, and my body rejoices in the rhythmic movement. Yet, I am also overcome with shyness. My palms sweat when I step into my dance class. I wipe them on my burgundy-coloured leotard and take a deep breath. The other students stare at me and start whispering in Greek. *Are they talking about me? Are they talking about the weather?* I wonder. I wish I knew what they were saying. Being the only non-Greek speaker in the class makes me feel left out and lonely. I tell myself to ignore their whispers, but I can't help letting the doubt affect me.

Tuesday afternoon. Homework time. I feel focused but a little stressed. There is roaring laughter around me as my younger sisters gallop around the room, chasing each other with balloons. *It must be nice being a toddler with no homework,* I ponder. I try to do my homework despite the noise. Being in a family of six is challenging when I seek quiet. My heart aches. When I see them having fun, I feel jealous and I often want to escape, hide in my room, and play on my iPad. I aim to finish my work before dinner, but this rarely goes as planned. The alluring smell of my mom's stifado traps me in its tentacles before my homework is complete. That's when I start getting anxious.

Bedtime. Outside it is dark, and I feel like there is no other sound but the wind. The silence makes me nervous; it feels like danger is coming. Suddenly, my younger sisters begin crying. *Are they also scared? Did someone come into their room?* Falling asleep is hard and I want my mom or dad to come and snuggle with me to make me feel safe and protected from harm and danger.

When I feel stressed, terrified, or exhausted, I visualise myself curling up into a ball, like a hedgehog with pointy, sharp quills, trying to get all the anxiety spikes out of



its head and body. The anxiety morphs into a colossal bubble choking me from the inside, and I am using all of my strength to push it away. I know it is all in my mind, but it feels real.

When these feelings overwhelm me, this is what I do: I take a few deep breaths and I think about my escape. I think to myself: *I am strong. I am brave.* I am kind. The mantra my mom has us recite every night. I sometimes go for a drive or a walk with my dad to get a treat and take my mind off any stressors, or talk out my fears with a trusted grown up. Often, I simply ask one of my parents to give me a hug or a snuggle, their warmth quieting my scary thoughts. But, most times I like to imagine each stressful thought as a bad guy I defeat in a superhero battle. I lock these negative thoughts in a cage where they can't reach me. I see myself as a powerful wizard who uses their wand to make fearful feelings disappear. The anxiety monster can be strong, but I can be stronger.

Most times, I win.



Alexis Simou, 10, The American Academy, Nicosia

Escape

As I sat at my desk, I looked down at the white empty sheet of paper. Mrs. Riley had given the class a writing task about the word 'Escape'. I fell into panic and words were like distant stars, far beyond my grasp. I didn't know how to catch them. My fingers fumbled as I struggled to hold the pencil. It was like catching a whisp of fog with my bare hands.

At that point, Mrs. Riley slowly walked towards me and whispered: "Don't worry Charlie, you can just colour for this period." It was as if she could read my mind.

Around me, children were filling their pages with tales of adventure and daring escape. Their pencils were twirling and dancing around, painting pictures with words. I watched in silence as I flapped my hands and swayed back and forth.

The world outside our school was alive with the soft melodious chirping of a bird. I imagined I was that bird leaving behind the cage of the classroom. I imagined sitting upon a golden bough.

In my mind, Mrs. Riley's voice became a distant hum, like a river flowing gently in the woods. I soared through the endless blue sky. The sun led me past mountains and took my mind away from the world of words that had always eluded me.

Suddenly a voice broke through my fog of thoughts. "Charlie's writing something!" a child sitting next to me exclaimed.

In a flash, everyone gathered around my desk, their eyes wide with surprise. I looked down at the bright white paper, and there it was, my greatest escape – a single sentence and the first of many:

"I am free."



Sotiris Paisis, 10, The Falcon School, Nicosia

Escape

Once upon a time, four kids were sleeping in a haunted bed unaware that it was haunted. When they woke up, it turned out they were in a forest next to a sleeping monster.

Eggy Clever said softly, "Let's get out of here!"

They all started running until they found snow. Eggy Clever cried, "What are we doing here? Are we in a dream?"

Dreamy said quietly, "I think we are in my dream because when I needed water, water came to me."

Strong Longy answered, "Then give us guns to kill the monster and get out of this dream."

Dreamy gave them guns and they turned back to the forest. At one point, Eggy Clever cried, "To get out of Dreamy's dream, the monster needs to die..."

They tried to kill the monster but the monster was two times stronger than them. They all started running away as fast as they could, except for Eggy Clever, who was left behind. When Strongy Longy saw that his friend was trailing, he became long and took Eggy with him.

In front of them they found another friend. Lucky Mucky. They told him to run but he stopped, preferring to use his luck to get away from the monster.



All the friends were safe now but they needed to find a way to get out of the dream. Eggy Clever shouted with a loud voice, "Everyone, we have a problem!"

"What happened?" asked Strongy.

Eggy answered, "Three monsters are here for us!"

Strongy shouted, "Dreamy, teleport us out of here!"

Two minutes later, they woke up in the mountains. Strongy said quietly, "We need to get out of this dream."

Eggy answered, "Maybe if we sleep in a dream, we can wake up in real life?"

Dreamy happily said, "Let's do it."

They slept but when they woke up, they were in another universe. Dreamy said quietly, "I saw a dream!"

"What dream did you see?" asked Eggy Clever.

Dreamy answered, "In my dream we were in a rocket, and we were going to Mars." Eggy Clever said quietly, "Then can we sleep again, and this time return to Earth? Maybe that will help us escape!"

"I will try," said Dreamy.

This time they woke up back on Earth. "You did it!" shouted Strongy. They all looked at each other with happy faces.

Suddenly, they saw three monsters. Dreamy had given them superpowers in his



dream. He gave Strongy extra muscles, Lucky extra luck, and he made Eggy Clever extra smart. He had given them powers so that they could survive until they found a way to get out of the dream.

Now it was time for the fight between them and the monsters. There was a fifty per cent chance of winning or losing. Dreamy dreamt of soldiers to help them and soldiers with superpowers were teleported there. They also had the power to teleport wherever they wanted.

They won!

After a while, Eggy Clever shouted happily, "I know how to get out of this dream!" Strongy asked, "How?"

Eggy Clever answered, "We will sleep in a magical bed and this time Dreamy will know how to get out."

"That's a great idea. Let's do it!"

A bed was teleported in front of them. They slept and when they woke up they woke up in the middle of nowhere. There were a set of keys that they thought must be the keys to open the dream. Dreamy took the keys and they left the dream. They woke up in real life and decided to never sleep in the haunted bed again.



The Under 15s: Poetry



Kacper Kowalski, 14, The American Academy, Larnaca

Hooves on Soil, Dirt on Fur

I do not see the light of freedom; I cower in iron intestines of captivity.

I never met my mother, she birthed me into a life of imprisonment, made from manufactured nativity.

I'm a being of produce, made to be packaged and sold.

My entrails shall be used to make those who are rich richer and make black and white gold.

I do not suckle on teat; I nurse a metal mother that provides me with all my needs.

My meat is worth more than my soul and my life has not been assigned an end goal.

My hooves belong on grassy planes and I yearn for the day my fur is muddied with soil.

My eyes crave the night sky and the crimson sunsets of a world I've never seen.

My nights are filled with restless dreams and I hunger to discover the world beyond the metal bars.

These sleepless nights spent upon this earth, I spend imagining how constellations and stars reside in between.

I feel unsafe when I'm dragged out of my pen—killer's hands hold, a strangle hold on my bovine body.

I struggle, I fight, and I crash out of the butcher's grasp, the clatter of young hooves as my leaving fanfare.

The wind itself celebrates around me, zephyrs pulling on my hair and snatching me.

Rampant gales giggle as they tug on my pure opal like fur.

Constellations wave at me from past the pastures; Cassiopeia, my astral mother, I never knew.

Orion's belt illuminates the blanket of night stretched over my starry eyes.

My heart pounds with anticipation for the wonders of this world and my mind races as my body sprints.

Soil dirties my pristine fur, freedom loam cakes my hooves.

Captive no more, I, calf of freedom, stand a free being among those that are not.

I can truly see.

I am free of worry, I am free of daylight murder I'd encountered in that steel stomach meant to digest me.

A crack smashes through the night sky and the smell of black powder emanates from a crimson plume on my chest.

I bow and thank the stars as I keel and moo.

I had experienced a world of wonder and alluring astral frescos.

A clueless being, given a clue.



Donia Maktabi, 14, Foley's School, Limassol

They Say

They say: *you may go where you want but you cannot escape yourself.*

If that's the case then why is it

when I listen to music I feel like 'm floating?

Melodies enter my veins and I'm no longer myself:

I'm a symphony of sounds,

an anthology of words,

a composition of colours

all jumbled together to make a piece of perfection that numbs my nerves and soothes my thoughts.

They say: *you may go where you want but you cannot escape yourself.*

If that's the case then why is it

when I read I feel like I'm flying?

Soaring through different worlds and universes,

escaping where I belong, focusing on what I want to belong to,

I travel to the deepest depths of the ocean and to the highest mountain peak.

I'm a queen, then a knight, then a young girl sitting on the windowsill

pinning for her lost lover.

They say: *you may go where you want but you cannot escape yourself.*

But my heart doesn't beat for the life I live,

my worries aren't those of a life I was born into.

I live in songs I've listened to, the ink of words I've read.

I can escape into a story written in the words of another or I can read

- alone -



under the covers.

I can sing songs meant for others,
feel a writer's hope or despair,
everything in between.

In a tide of empathy,
I live their dreams and die their fears.

They say: *you may go where you want but you cannot escape yourself.*

But I have!

I have been where I wanted,
I have escaped myself.



The Under 15s: Prose



Leith Ryan Meshal, 12, The Heritage School, Limassol

Let Freedom Range

- Och, Lassie you're stepping on ma tail!

Cluck shouted in his heavy Scottish accent. The farmer's son, Billy MacAllan, had jokingly named him Cluck Kent, and despite everything Cluck tried to do, it stuck!

- Sorry Cluck. I jus' hate this overstuffed cage. Don't you? There's jus' no room to breathe in 'ere.

Sal wondered aloud whilst taking her foot off his feathered tail. Her name was also a bad joke: Sal Monella.

- Well, I've been planning something... but I'm not sure it'll work.

As Cluck looked at his gal pal Sal with one beady eye, her eyes lit up expectantly.

- You mean...a plan to get oota 'ere?!

Sal and Cluck both went quiet, reminiscing about the time when they used to range free across the Scottish Highlands, seeking excellent grub. Of course, this was before they ventured too far and were captured. The poor hens in this flock had never tasted life outside the coop.

- Och aye, ma friend!

Cluck fluffed up his feathers and crowed, "Cock-a-doodle doo".

The other chickens stopped in their tracks, looked at Cluck and started to gather around him in one huge hen huddle, with their fluffy butts sticking in the air, waiting for his usual tales of Highland adventures.



- Tell us more about Nessie an' the Loch Ness... Tell us about the Highland steer. Each cried, eager and hungry for more stories of life outside the cage. Instead, Cluck laid out his plan!

- Och, buk buk ... BUK ... buk ... buk ba-gawk...
Mid-sentence, the door suddenly swung open. A towering shadow fell upon them. The figure, wearing a blue and green tartan, loomed over the chickens.

- Big Boots, Big Boots, BIG BOOOOTS!
Sal shrieked in warning! Breaking apart, the huddle quickly became a disorganised group of chickens, pecking at the ground. Big Boots was none other than Mr. MacAllan himself, and as he entered, one eyebrow shot up, looking at their strange behaviour. He spread around some feed, then left.

The new day rose.

- Cock-a-doodle-doo!
Cluck let out a war-like crow. His Chicken army were at the ready. Hearing a heavy plod come their way, they got ready to pounce, like freaky, feathered felines.

- NOW!
It was the exact moment the door opened. Corn popping, hot oil spitting, kernels bouncing against the walls of the pot... just like this flock of chickens, the synchronised chaos of their attack was a pre-movie night spectacle.

- FRRRREEEEDOOOMM!!!
Every chicken cried in unison, pounding their wings on their chests. Pecking Big Boots' legs, heads bobbing back and forth as they ran at full speed, they were determined to escape!



- CRIVVENS!

Big Boots shouted in bewilderment. Stumbling... tripping over the horde of hens... he almost lost his balance.

- GET BACK 'ERE, BLOODY CHICKENS!

As the last of them ran out of the cage, Big Boots chased them across the farm. He swerved around piles of rocks. He jumped over ditches. The chickens were fast, but not fast enough. Big Boots was gaining ground.

- Under the steer! He can't get us there!

Sal yelled at the top of her lungs. Running faster than she had ever before, she weaved through the hooves of the steer.

- Jus' a bit further and we'll pass through the steer! Follow Sal and me a wee bit mo ... ba-gawk!

The hoof of one of the steers came down on Cluck as he was shouting to his flock. Just in time, he dove out of the way! A split-second later and Cluck would have been a feathery pancake.

- I'm oota 'ere.

Big Boots returned to the house, giving up on chasing down his flock of chickens.

- Phew! We're in the clear Lassies.

As time passed, the chickens pecked food from the rich, damp Highland grass. They scratched at the soil, unearthing a bounty of grubs, crickets, and snails, but once the chickens stumbled upon wild Scottish berries, excitement flooded them, as if they had discovered ... *tiramisu*!

There was a contented murmuring amongst the flock, almost like kittens purring. All the chickens had gorged themselves. Cluck looked around, he cocked his head to



one side, gazed at the sinking sun, dragging its pink, peach, and persimmon colours across the sky, he then cocked his head to the other side, and looked at the coop.

- Okay Lassies, it's time to head back to the roost, it ain't safe out 'ere at night.

Tomorrow is another day.

The hens followed Cluck back to the coop. Cluck strutted with his chest puffed out, his tail feather swinging from side to side with each step, his head bobbing forwards and backwards. He was the man ... 'Och aye'!

They were met at the coop by Big Boots, who held the door open for their arrival. Big Boots and Cluck locked eyes in understanding, there was a truce made here. They were now *Free-Range* chickens!

Sal stood next to Cluck.

- Thanks Cluck, that was ... *Eggcellent!*



Ivan Kolesnikov, 13, IMS, Limassol

“Full Speed Ahead!”

“Nine-tenths of tactics are certain, and taught in books: but the irrational tenth is like the kingfisher flashing across the pool, and that is the test of generals.”

- Thomas Edward Lawrence

The year was 1952. The Second World War ended four years ago with a resounding victory for Germany. The shadow of the Reichsadler loomed over Europe. Africa and a better part of Asia were engulfed in a series of civil wars, and what had not regressed into fratricide in those lands was controlled by the Empire of Japan. Unable to face such a powerful alliance, the United States sued for peace and soon enough elected its own fascist government.

But the Empires did not rule unopposed.

It was a particularly cold day in the Northern Atlantic when the ship's onboard clock struck eleven. Archie finished his daily tin of soup and sighed as he stared into the dark blue void of the ocean. For miles, there was nothing to see but infinite blue. As though hypnotised by the allure of the watery desert, his mind began to wander, daydreaming about days from the past. He was brought back to the present by an agitated sergeant of the Royal Marines clutching a radio report in his hand.

“Lieutenant Finnegan, sir!” the sergeant saluted him and passed the note.

It read:

GERMAN NAVY SEARCHING LARGE FLOTILLA DO NOT ENGAGE



That was bad news. The German Navy was out to get them, and they were closing in. Thanking the sergeant, Archie rushed to the ship's bridge. Formerly an Italian merchant ship, Archie's *Donegal* had been hijacked and re-purposed into an inconspicuous but powerful commerce raider to disrupt enemy trade routes through what were essentially pirate tactics, capturing and looting any stray merchant ships.

The bridge was bustling with sailors and officers; everyone was on edge after the worrying radio transmission. A navigation officer named Browne briefed Archie on the situation, pointing to different points on a map.

"The reality, sir, is quite grim. Jerry has already surrounded us and we are in a very sticky situation. If we are to fight another day we've got to break through. Old *Donegal's* no sailing yacht; our 12-pounders pack a wallop, but we have neither the armour nor the firepower to face their warships."

Archie frowned. Their only advantage over the German ships was speed. He selected a weak link in the enemy patrol for the breakthrough: a relatively small destroyer. He hoped to catch the Germans off guard and sink the warship before they could retaliate.

As the sun began to set, the sky was taken over by an orange hue. Archie was pacing up and down the deck when one of the sailors shouted from the crow's nest:

"Jerry! Ten o'clock!"

The ship's alarm broke into a wail, and the sailors scattered to their battle stations. Archie looked down through his binoculars and, sure enough, there it was: the German destroyer, sitting at anchor for the night. He was preparing his men to fire a full broadside but stopped dead in his tracks.



“Get down!” he cried.

Everyone dashed for cover as a salvo of explosions rocked the *Donegal*. The Germans must have noticed the *Donegal* much earlier than expected, and their fire had disrupted Archie’s guns.

“Blast! What the hell do we do now?” Browne’s knuckles were white from holding on to the railing, the impact of each shockwave sweeping his legs from under him.

He received no answer, for Archie had decided to try something unprecedented. He lay the helm hard-a-port and set the *Donegal* at full speed on a collision course with the German destroyer.

“If we go down, they’re coming with us!”

The screech of twisting steel rattled both ships as the *Donegal* ploughed straight through the elongated hull of the destroyer, splitting it in two. Screams of terrified sailors pierced the air as explosions rattled in the enemy boiler room.

The *Donegal* cruised away at full speed as the destroyer’s wreckage slipped beneath the waves, leaving the *Jerry* behind them. Browne recovered his footing and glanced down at the *Donegal*’s crumpled bow.

“I wonder how we’re going to explain this to the shipyard master,” he scoffed.



The Under 18s: Poetry



Polina Dynyak, 15, The American Academy, Nicosia

To Me – Who Managed To Escape

To me – who left everything to fate:
matches somewhere deep inside I hold.
Your heartfelt words that bring me warmth,
the words, your words, help me escape the cold
that I was destined to bear since birth .

To me – who left everything behind:
awaken in cold sweat, somewhere in a foreign state,
I left behind only the feeling of overwhelming rage
for those who were not played with at an early age,
those who grew up playing risk-taking games with fate.

To me – whom you left stranded:
arrows on the clock always meet, setting off alarms.
Don't give up; break loose, escape without traces.
You must learn to find refuge in people instead of places;
there is no place that welcomes you with open arms.

To me – who left my things and ran:
with my hands behind my back, I'm thinking: why?
Someone else dies the moment a new life begins.
I take refuge, while you keep running away from your sins,
Back from when I was the apple of your eye.



To me – who managed to escape:
Looking at the moon from the same angle,
yet thinking of two vastly different things.
I am thinking of escape and what the future brings,
and you, thinking of the mess you have yet to untangle.



Adam Bello, 16, Pascal School, Larnaca

Tell me we've made it.

The guests welcomed themselves in
And repainted our walls in red
Demanding through thick and thin
We gave in, made sure they're fed

The sun was no longer greeting
What's there to greet anyway?
Not like our land was beaming
Day by day, it just turns grey

That's fine, we'll soon make it.

The flames, the bombs, the grief of all moms
Our new source for sound and light
Beneath the rubble of homes and trouble
Dads desperately search at night

A raging marathon out there
With no safety to be in sight
Peaking such chaos, I cannot dare
Our lives shatter, and they want a bite

I know, but we'll somehow make it



Throw me on a boat
Drift us far away
Unchain me from childhood
Pinch me till I'm awake

In the hands of God's creation
Let the waves decide
Will we really seek a nation?
Or are we also to die?

Remember, we'll make it.

Tell me it's a dream
Tell me we'll be safe
Share with me the fear
For we're who they chase

And during every night
Sing me a lullaby
Within your arms tight
Share the ocean a cry

Don't worry... We'll make it.

May God hear our urgent prayers
And grant mercy for such terror
We've somehow slipped downstairs
Such a fall has no repairer

Our souls will soon rise
We cannot change it
I know you said otherwise
But I don't think we'll make it



The Under 18s: Prose



Emily Kyriakides, 17, The Senior School, Nicosia

The colours of my mind

The intricacies of the mind, especially at 6am on a Monday, are not an easy thing to detangle. The dull fog crowding my dreams is instantly replaced by a burning typhoon of rage when my alarm blares next to me. I slam my hand onto it, wiping the smug look off its digital face. I stumble to my bathroom and inspect my stringy hair and puffy eyes. Wash my face, slather on layers of makeup and lipstick, meticulously smearing each product into place. My war paint. Because that's what I do every morning. Prepare for battle: school.

I drive myself through the inconspicuous roads of my neighbourhood, nearing my best friend's house before I fully register that I'm decaffeinated. I need coffee. Now. Her yellow blouse shines almost unnaturally against the dismal weather, and her blinding grin almost makes me want to pull over and leave her stranded on the side of the road. "Today's a good day"; her voice mixes with the radio. Her optimism astounds me. I speed 5 houses down. My other friend is dressed in her signature green. She's unmoved by my "good morning", hands superglued to her phone.

"You're drinking that?" she says when we reach the drive-through, her words dripping with disgust when she sees my triple shot iced espresso. "No wonder your face is that puffy, you're practically injecting it with caffeine". I say nothing; the bitter beverage slowly makes its way to my stomach, smoothing the rickety start to the morning.

As we enter school, the bell rings the order for first period. Maths. The girl on my left chews on a pen I don't remember giving her. She's wearing carefully applied red lipstick and burgundy doc martins. I'm wearing a similar pair. The teacher hands out our tests from last week. We get the same grade: C+. I exhale a breath of relief- I



passed. My state of peace is short lived however- the girl puts her head in her hands, stomps on the grey tile floor, muttering curses and complaints, before catching me staring. She looks at my test. "You think a C+ is good enough? You think you're good enough? A C+ is basically a fail. How can you be okay with yourself, weren't you like a Maths champion or something?" Her huffing and puffing dies down. It takes me a few seconds before I realise that- she's right. I would have been angry too, once. I was good at Maths. What happened to me?

I glance over to my right in an effort to compose myself. A girl with striking blue hair laments over her own C+. If I look closely, I think I can almost see her crying.

Break comes faster than I thought. At this point I'm so overwhelmed and overstimulated I need to sit down just for a second just to think clearly, just to breathe. I feel like I want to scream. To hide. To escape. From something. From the invisible monster of pressure. I burst into the bathroom and rest my hands on the sink just as all the girls from the morning materialise around me. They ask me what's wrong. Their voices overlap. Their words jumble. I squeeze my eyes shut and tell myself "You're fine. Breathe." I wish they would go away.

When I open my eyes, I'm alone in the empty school bathroom. And then I see them. All of them. Staring back at me through my own eyes. In the mirror.

I laugh at my futile attempt to escape from the voices in my own head.

I wipe the charcoal smudges from under my eyes and march onto third period.



Alexia Papadopoulou, 17, Foley's School, Limassol

The Escape

Shrieking. Screeching. Crying.

I was familiar with the routine by now, but those agonizing screams still startled me as they echoed through the sinister hallways. My attention shifted to the sacred portal, lying teasingly ahead. My feet began to burn unbearably as I raced along the crimson corridor. The cold, grey door emerged from the darkness, my legs trembled, and I threw myself towards the exit.

Though my eyes were closed, the familiar embrace of the fresh and frosty outside world welcomed me.

“That was epic!” Dan trumpeted, still catching his breath. “What next?”

I looked at the grand mansion looming behind us. A distinct scream could be heard from inside.

“Not another haunted house!” I sighed.

Dan laughed and put his arm around me. The aroma of cotton candy, blending with the vibrant sea of lights perfected the park's thrilling symphony.

“Let's do the mirror maze!” Dan exclaimed, dragging me along before I had chance to object...

Within moments, I was deep in a staring competition with myriads of me, trying my



best to shuffle through my persistent reflections.

“This way!” instructed one of many Dans. I tried to follow him, but among the kaleidoscope of ways, we rooted down different paths and soon got lost.

“Daaan!”

No response.

“Dan?” I pleaded.

“Not funny Dan!” I uttered, eyeing my surroundings. I gasped as I noticed the state of my hair in my reflections, and quickly tossed my head down to tie it back. I flicked my head back up.

I had company.

A hooded figure was standing before me. Tall, primal and holding a knife – it didn’t take much observation to realize it wasn’t Dan. We locked eyes. His cold, inhuman gaze triggered flight mode and I darted the opposite way. Racing through our reflections, a wave of familiarity suddenly washed over me - almost as though I’d been there before.

It couldn’t be, I reassured myself as the figure stalked fiercely towards me. Then why hasn’t he grunted yet?

The man grunted.

My brain started clicking pieces into place, succumbing to a mortifying realization. *This had happened before, and I was about to get stabbed.* I ducked down in a flash, going off script as the man threw his knife obediently.



“Huh?” he vocalized. “You were supposed to-”

I looked back and the man was gone – almost like the fabric of reality had consumed him. His knife, behind and not inside me, shattered a domino of mirrors. In them I caught my confusion - but as I looked back, my reflections didn't follow.

The mirrors flickered. A rippling glitch followed. The room began jittering like a faulty hologram, and my reflections fused into each other. Time itself seemed to contract, and the room fluxed into its primary form.

“Error! Timeline Breached!” announced a discordant chorus of robotic voices.

My mind was in a million places, scattered like the floating pixels around me. My world, a digital landscape. A distant, blinking sign caught my attention: EXIT. Lured by this promise of escape, I bolted.

Flashing red lights bled onto concrete walls as a siren began screeching. The sound penetrated my thoughts and for a second, I almost collapsed in agony. But I couldn't. Not now.

“Restarting Program.”

I charged towards the exit sign, fixated on nothing but the grey door ahead. The walls began to re-flicker, but I paid no notice. As the exit burned closer, the flashing lights intensified – staining the room a sinister red. Racing down the crimson corridor, a familiar sound rang in my ears like an unwelcome guest. I tried brushing it off, but the sound persisted until finally, I recognized it.

Shrieking. Screeching. Crying.





THE JUDGES

Christos Kalli studied American Literature at the University of Cambridge and is now an incoming PhD student in English at the University of Pennsylvania. His critical writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Harvard Review*, *World Literature Today*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among others, and his poems have been published in *Muzzle*, *Ninth Letter*, the *Adroit Journal*, the *National Poetry Review*, the *American Journal of Poetry*, *Faultline*, the *minnesota review*, *PANK*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Harpur Palate*, and *Dunes Review*, among others. Visit him at www.christoskalli.com

Eleni Socratous is an award-winning writer; her short-story *Needle and Thread* won the Orwell Society Dystopian Fiction Prize and is published in the society's journal. She graduated with First-Class Honours in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Warwick and has an MA in Creative Writing from Durham University. She is featured in the Durham Peninsula Anthology with the story *Gypsy Bird*. Currently she is a Marketing and Community Associate at Founders Taboo.

Christos Hadjiyiannis is an incoming Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Regensburg in Germany. He was previously Research Fellow and Lecturer at the University of Cyprus; Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Texas at Austin; and Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford. He is the author of *Conservative Modernists* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and, with Rachel Potter, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature and Politics* (2023). His essays and reviews have appeared in journals and magazines including *Times Literary Supplement*, *Modernism/modernity*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*.

Polis Loizou is a writer, performer and oral storyteller. His debut novel, *Disbanded Kingdom*, was published in 2018 and long-listed for the Polari First Book Prize. *The Way It Breaks* (2021) is set in his motherland of Cyprus, as is *A Good Year* (2022), a historical novella inspired by local horror folklore. Polis is also one third of the award-winning fringe theatre troupe The Off-Off-Off-Broadway Company. He's based in Nottingham.

Matt Lloyd-Rose is the author of *Into the Night: A Year with the Police* (Picador, 2023), which was Book of the Week on Radio 4, and *Curiosity: An Alternative A to Z of London* (Penguin, 2016), which was shortlisted for a British Book Award and an Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award. He lives in Cyprus with his wife and two young children and writes the weekly newsletter Social Imagining, exploring themes of care, community, ecology and the role of imagination in social change.







