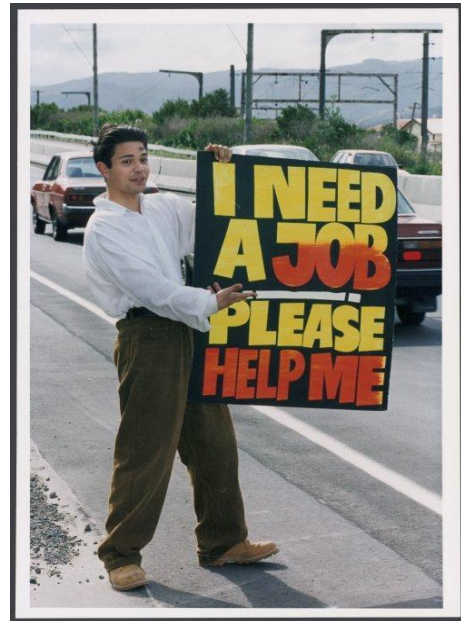


Ref: EP/1994/2919/13A-F



April 26th, 2021

Dad's at it again. He asked me to come with him this time and I didn't have it in me to say no. So now I'm sitting here on the damp concrete off the side of a busy highway watching him. He has a big sign, the same one he brings every time. It's a nice sign too, red and yellow. It took him ages to make. I remember how Mom shouted at him for getting paint on the floor. A big angry splotch of red. He had promised her it would be fine, that it would all be fine. I don't think he's so sure anymore. Painted on that sign is a cry for help. He's advertising for a job. Or rather his need for one. Nobody pulls off the road, or even slows down to read it. A Toyota goes by, and then a green Porsche. They don't care, and honestly I don't blame them. Other people's lives seem a lot smaller when your own seems so big.

It's going the end the same way as it always does. Him looking at his watch, folding up the sign down the familiar creases, and telling me it's time to go. He'll try to make a joke, act like it's all fine. We both know it is not.

Dad lost his job during the pandemic. His company went bankrupt. We were all sure he'd find a new job, a better job soon. He was a good worker, he really was. But now it's been almost a year. My mum says this whole thing is a lesson. But the only lesson I've learned is that takeout doesn't taste as good the fifth night in a row and that people are selfish. It's their fault, all of this. The virus wouldn't have been so bad if only they had worn their masks, stayed home instead of meeting their friends. Maybe then Dad would still have his job. Maybe then it could all be like it was before.

I know I shouldn't be complaining, we're lucky, my family and I. At least Mom still has her job. At least Dad doesn't sport the symptoms of joblessness that you always see in the movies, the ones I had imagined; a belly that's round from beer and a fist that's callused from hitting their kids. At least he still tries, despite the stubbly chin and faraway look in his eyes.

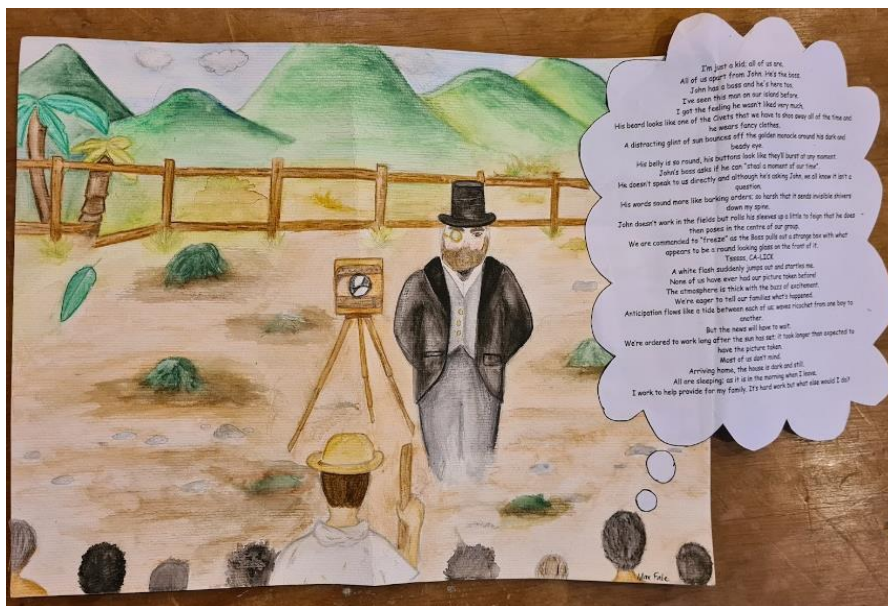
I brought a book, I knew I'd need a distraction. We have to read it for English. I don't want to. I pick up the book anyway. The back of my legs are cold and probably decorated with the pattern of pebbles beneath me. Just as I begin to drown out the desperate roar of the highway, I see my dad look at his watch and begin to fold up his sign.

ALEXANDRA (SASHA) ANISIMOVA

Wellington Girls' College, Y9-10

Winner, 2020

Ref: PAColl-5530-43



Perspective

I'm just a kid; all of us are.

All of us apart from John. He's the boss. John has a boss and he's here too. I've seen this man on our island before. I get the feeling he wasn't liked very much.

His beard looks like one of the civets that we have to shoo away all of the time and he wears fancy clothes.

A distracting glint of sun bounces off the golden monocle around his dark and beady eye. His belly is so round, his buttons look like they'll burst at any moment.

John's boss asks if he can "steal a moment of our time".

He doesn't speak to us directly and although he's asking John, we all know it isn't a question. His words sound more like barking orders; so harsh that it sends invisible shivers down my spine.

John doesn't work in the fields but rolls his sleeves up a little to feign that he does then poses in the centre of our group.

We are commanded to "freeze" as the Boss pulls out a strange box with what appears to be a round looking glass on the front of it.

Tsssss, CA-LICK

A white flash suddenly jumps out and startles me. None of us have ever had our picture taken before!

The atmosphere is thick with the buzz of excitement. We're eager to tell our families what's happened. Anticipation flows like a tide between each of us; waves ricochet from one boy to another.

But the news will have to wait. We're ordered to work long after the sun has set; it took longer than expected to have the picture taken. Most of us don't mind.

Arriving home, the house is dark and still. All are sleeping; as it is in the morning when I leave.

I work to help provide for my family. It's hard work but what else would I do?

MAX FALE

St Patrick's College, Silverstream, Y9-10

Runner-up, 2020

Ref: ½-225847-F



JOURNAL ENTRY 398

Today's Plastic Collection went well. Those humans left quite a mess when they died out, but we're here cleaning it up now. It would have been a lot easier for everyone if they just hadn't invented the moon-forsaken thing in the first place, but what's done is done. Shal discovered a new object today as well: a plastic mug.

Why make it out of plastic? Why not metal? Or wood? Okay, so wood would have been a bit strange. Besides, the trees were dying too. But HONESTLY! That's Homo Sapiens for you. Senior Tae tried to explain that it was something to do with 'money' and 'economy'...it all sounds dumb to me.

My sister arrived in my district from Mars this evening as a new member in the Plastic Collection Regiment. She's only young, but she'll do fine. I mean, all we do is pick up this stupid plastic. Nothing too exasperating. I can't believe the humans never thought to do it themselves. She asked me what happened to all the people who used to live on Earth, and I told her that they pretty much just filled the sky with toxins, suffocated 95% of the population, then the other 5% croaked when the ozone layer thinned to the limit.

A lot more stuff happened but that's the gist of it.

Here's hoping something interesting will happen tomorrow. Things can get a bit boring sometimes when you're tidying up after an extinct race of idiotic primates.

TRINITY ANDERSON

Whangarei Girls High School, Y9-10

Highly Commended, 2020.



The Stuff Up

Stuffing up is a completely normal and necessary part of life. While this argument sounded plausible in my head, I wasn't too sure Dad was going to be so agreeable, especially when the aforementioned "stuff up" involved his pride and joy, a 1960 Ford Prefect.

Dad's parting words as my parents left yesterday, were: "In the case of an emergency, the keys to the Ford are in the top right drawer in the kitchen." Surely, getting my mates and me to the surf carnival was considered an emergency. After all, I was reigning beach flags champ, and I had to retain my prestigious title.

I wasn't speeding. I wasn't distracted. I was unlucky. Hitting a slick of oil, the car spiralled violently out of control. Momentarily becoming airborne, we careened through the farm fence and came to rest on the side of a gorse-strewn hill.

Exiting the car, I felt a trickle of blood running down my right shin. "Are you alright, Tom?" I called out.

Tom appeared from behind the car with a faint grin across his face. "Jeez mate, I thought we were goners!" he whooped loudly.

"Well, young fella, I'd say you're pretty damn lucky," stated the burly tow truck driver, head out the window, as he manoeuvred his truck into position. The winch made a high-pitched whine, protesting. Dad's car emerged up over the shoulder of the road looking anything but prideful and far from joyful.

Shielding my eyes from the dazzling sun, I watched a lone figure stride purposefully towards me. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I took a tentative step in Dad's direction, pondering my momentous stuff up.

JACK CAMPBELL

Francis Douglas Memorial School, New Plymouth, Y9-10

Highly Commended, 2020



WAITING

The day was hot, seagulls hovering lazily on the warm currents, squawking mindlessly. The sun was brilliant, but not blinding and the azure sky was cloud-free – save for occasional wisps that moved sluggishly. While the seagulls may have been taking advantage of the wind all the way up there, down here on the ground, the branches on the trees were unmoved, the numerous bunches of green leaves stationary. Even the landscape was perfect, picturesque green fields, interspersed with copses of trees, stretched to the horizon, where they seemed to join with the sky. Old-fashioned picket fences separated the fields from one another and separated them also from the small road that ran through the countryside. If it was even a road. It was really more like a country lane – the kind you see in old postcards or expensive calendars.

Beside the idyllic road, hard-packed earth stretched for several metres before merging with the flowering fields on either side. On one side, a pole jutted from the ground, rising out of the earth – the only other man-made imperfection besides the road, on a stunning natural canvas. The sign that sat atop the pole marked it as a bus stop, and beside this pole, stood a man. He was medium build and medium height, with nothing remarkable about his face nor the features which composed it. Average and unremarkable.

A briefcase hung loosely from the fingers of one hand, and on the other, was an unimpressive watch. The unremarkable man sighed, placed the briefcase on the ground and glanced at his watch to check the time. He cursed irritably. "Bloody late," was all he muttered. He couldn't afford to be late, not today. Today was important. It was more than important. It was huge. If things worked out, the contents of the briefcase would change his life. Not just his in fact, thousands and thousands of others too. If he arrived on time. Which it seemed, was not going to happen. The man scuffed his boots on the ground, creating small clouds of dust and idly tapped his fingers on the side of his leg. Impatiently, he pushed back his sleeve and checked the time again. The hands on the watch face hadn't moved. He frowned, and tapped the glass. Nothing happened, and he felt the colour drain from his face. It was one thing to know you were late but another thing entirely to have no idea *how* late.

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned, but then there was a sound. The drone of an engine and the sounds of tyres on the road. The man glanced up, watching the form of a bus solidify as it passed through a heat haze and steadily approached him. Once it was fifty metres away, it began to slow and then it was beside him. A dilapidated old thing, with peeling white paint, no plates on the front or back, and heavily tinted windows. The door opened slowly. He stepped on and peered up at the driver. "You're late," the man said.

A shrug. "Couldn't be helped," was the reply from the driver.

"There's a lot riding on this, you know, I need to be there on time."

"And we won't get there any quicker with you standing there complaining, so take a damn seat."

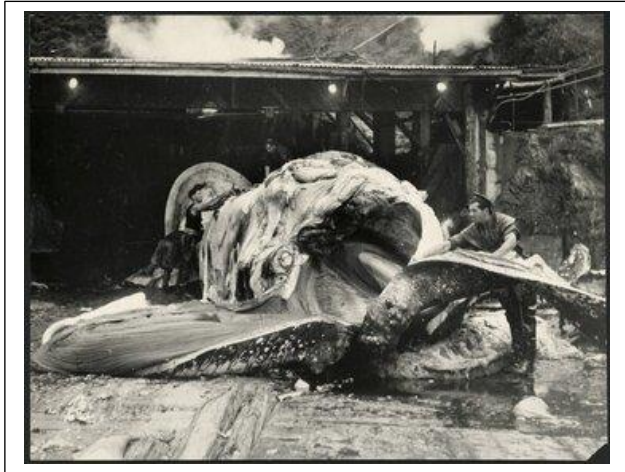
The unremarkable man glared at the driver, but turned and moved down the centre aisle, and found an empty seat with no one beside him. He felt the bus begin to move beneath him, and couldn't help the smile that spread across his face.

This was going to be good.

ANTON DOW

Rotorua Lakes High School, Y9-10

Highly Commended, 2020



Evaporating Stars

You used to take me all around the world, from places where bioluminescent plankton grew to where I could feel the propellers of ships tickle my skin. We skimmed through the waters until the sky started bathing in watercolours; red, orange, pink, yellow. All the time, you held me tight, so tight that sometimes I had to gasp, but I never knew how afraid you were that something might happen to me. Like Dad.

It was my birthday that day. You had given me the most special birthday treat anyone could possibly get. I felt so lucky to be your son, to see the stars smiling at me through the transparent water, as I slept beside you, your warmth gushing into my blood.

That was when I decided to tell you what I wanted so badly. I asked.

You refused. I pleaded.

You refused. I cried.

You refused. And so I went on my own.

Yes, it was freezing, but I saw enormous canoes, islands every shape you could ever imagine, glittering glaciers dancing with the mischievous sky. I didn't know you had seen me from the corners of your eyes, that you had followed me. The sound came like waves in a tsunami. They were everywhere. I hid behind the dark shadows, staring at the spears piercing the waters, my heart frozen with fear. When they hauled you onto their foul-smelling boat, I came out charging at them, but all I got was a spear-wound beneath my eye.

I never forgave myself, as I tried to hide behind my skin, beneath the blood-diffused water, under my memories. I lost you. The same way I lost Dad.

That night, as I stared into the damp air between me and the sky, the stars said that you'd be back.

They lied.

OSHADHA PERERA

Southland Boys High School, Y9-10.

Highly Commended, 2020

Ref: AW-0198



Summer

The wave swept up onto the beach, churning up the sparkling blue water turning it into a foaming cascade. Whoosh! The water returned to the ocean taking the soft sand from under my feet with it. I ran into the break, diving under a wave. A cold chill runs through my body and I shiver. I come up gasping for breath from the icy cold of the sea, golden rays of sunlight warming my face.

Further on, the reclaimed mussel buoy raft bobs on the water. Throwing my arms forward I pull myself towards it. A shoal of shimmering fish swim swiftly beneath me. With my brother not far behind me I pull harder kicking with all my might. I look up, I was almost there. Screeching seagulls swoop through the sky. We power on churning up the water. A couple more strokes. 1, 2, 3, slap! My hand hits the raft. Heaving, I pull myself up out of the water and flop onto my back. On its wooden deck.

The rough splinters scratch my back, and a glancing light gleams off a buoyant black buoy. The mussel buoys are ringed with limpets below the water line and seaweed clings to the anchoring rope as it descends into the deep. I leap off sending small waves heading toward the shore.

A pod of orcas swims just beyond the bay, leaping and diving through the sparkling water. Suddenly the cry of "stingray" echoes through the bay and we clamber out of the water to the safety of the raft. The day suddenly seems dark as the sun hides and the wind chills me. A fever of stingrays fly beneath us in their effortless way, eager to escape the orcas.

As the stingrays recede, the sun jumps back out from behind a cloud and the day returns to normal.

Summer.

SAMUEL LEITCH

St Patrick's College, Silverstream, Y9-10

Highly commended, 2020

Ref: EP/1938/VolCXXVI-28



CURSED RAVEN

Head, tilted upward
Glossy beak, a shard of carved obsidian
A tiny prick of starlight,
The sun reflecting on the black orb of an eye
Its feathers are grease, wind sliding
Over the sheen of black

Crouched, expectant, claws scraping the earth
Oily, dusty onyx scales
Softening into charcoal feathers
Slim, slender body, wielding a dagger-sharp tail
It skitters behind a tombstone
Rejected from a tea-party

The glassy neb burrows into mouse corpse
A pitiful castaway of flesh and blood
Flecks of crusty red
Adorn the raven's form

Bees pulsate through the clover
The raven sits beneath the sun-soaked trees
It huddles, a hag, behind a fallen branch
Accursed, unconsecrated, warm and satisfied.

SAPHRA PETERSON

Home-schooled, Y9-10

Highly Commended, 2020

Ref no: ½-024811-G

FLOWER BUDS

I dug a hole an autumn's day
Wishing to bury myself
Amongst the leaves,
Into a silencing burrow
But instead, I found some flower seeds –
That were aching to take a breath of air above;
Unlike me, who was trying to stifle my sorrows.
And so I let them be, covered my deed
And fled back into my mother's arms anyway.



As winter slunk in and the snow gingerly approached thereafter,
I found myself wondering if those buds would ever bloom
So I fossicked around in the very same place –
Hoping to take a glimpse
But its absence greeted me like
The utmost grey of gloom;
And so I left with my expecting anticipation unfulfilled
Feeling a gaping hole in myself, until

A day had passed, and my mind had wandered
When I begged for them to surface and breathe
I had also craved fresh air, so I cautiously crept outside to see
And two dainty flower buds had come greeting me!

From that day, I felt free
With nothing that could silence me
I danced around those flower buds
Day after day, week after week;
Until they disappeared and reappeared and disappeared some more
But I had always known that I had something to look forward to
When the snow came.

Now, I return to the spot
But my flower buds aren't there to reunite and meet me.
Winter has already slunk in, but the snow has not.
The ground is terribly dry; it has turned into a rotting grot.
I dig a hole, yearning to see my flower seeds
But they are now mere shrivelled prunes, cowering from the surface –
That they had once ached towards,
To breathe.

HANNAH ZHANG

Westlake Girls High School, Auckland, Y9-10

Highly Commended, 2020