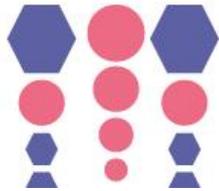




THE
SOLSTICE
PRIZE
FOR
YOUNG
WRITERS
ANTHOLOGY
2018



 Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

**WRITING
EAST
MIDLANDS**

Well done and thank you to all the young writers that submitted their stories and poems to the Solstice Prize for Young Writers!

The winners and highly commended pieces in each age category are as follows:

10-13 Age Category

OVERALL WINNER: Two Alone on the Moor – Martha Blue

Highly Commended Pieces:

Apple Pie – Mekha Benny

An Artist and a Writer – Mahrou Meem

Someone Give This Robot a Hug – Agata Ferst

Ashes– Selvi Nicholls

The Spell That Went Wrong – Alena Mueller

14-17 Age Category

OVERALL WINNER: Three Thousand Miles – Mary O’Shaughnessy

Highly Commended Pieces:

The Girl – Zak Caine

Don’t Come Here – Min Young Elizabeth Kim

Broken Girl – Sana Riaz

Loose Threads– Eloise Wexelstein

Bereavement – Kisholi Perera-Merry

EAST MIDLANDS YOUNG WRITERS - Highly Commended

Eradication – Henry Lambert

‘Twas The Night – Daniel Thomas

Martha Blue

Overall Winner 10-13 Age Category: Two Alone on the Moor

I wander beneath the thunder-black sky pressing down,
trying to iron flat this rolling land of low horizons; but it is not mine.
I can see forever, eye and sky sweeping miles of harsh mire.
A spider of dread runs up the thread of my spine
and gets lost in my wind-tangled, sunburned hair.

A dark silhouette of skylark tumbles across a fallen stone wall...
the silent and desolate and crumbling and abandoned ruin of
Top Withens, Haworth Moor, once farmstead now broken dream.
Gates and posts hang listless and useless, fences are up to no good.
Here, time is slowed to permanent ruin.

Two lone trees stand bleak; two alone
on the quarried ruin-scape of moor and bog;
two are havens for blackest roughest ravens,
whose raggedy wings tangle gnarled branches, but not for long.

I can see, though hidden underground like streams of minerals,
their roots trying to return to sodden grounds beneath the stone ruin.
I stand and listen as a little bit of water weeps from ground
with a light tinkling sound and disappears without noise, like people.

A bit of northern grit gets in my eye and I blink broken walls,
bleed into the moors, but the drama is in the skies above,
where northern gusts tear holes in clouds, and I, moor-crossed,
torn from the town, am more at one with the moor
than anywhere else in my wild heart.

An unimaginable place to name a place.

Mekha Benny

Highly Commended 10-13 Age Category: Apple Pie

The pleasant smell of apple pie consumes me,
reminding me of the
sweet treat I would
often eat
as
a child.

The sweet taste still
dances around
my taste buds.
I can still picture the
way my mother's
eyes would light up,
when I told her
how much I loved
it.

But now,
I no longer taste
the sweetness,
instead all I taste
is blandness.
What was once a happy memory,
is now tainted
by the bitter truth.

How I wish I could taste it once more,
to savour the taste.
I used to love apple pie
to savour the taste.
but now I can't stand it.

Mahrou Meem

Highly Commended 10-13 Age Category: An Artist and a Writer

She was an artist
I am a writer.
She drew our memories,
And I write our future.

She saw the differences,
I see the similarities.
She was a fortune;
I am just a penny.

She loved love stories,
Yet couldn't seem to imagine one;
I hate the thought of them,
Yet I am in some.

She fell in love with puddles,
The wavering images that never still;
I am falling for mirrors,
The clear path that kills.

She had large hands,
Wrinkled around the edges;
I have small hands,
The lines the only indent.

Her limbs were coloured in drawings
Like a child's picture book.
My arms are littered with writings,
Like a poet's handbook.

She was worth a half-penny,
Her smile a single tear,
I am worth a dime,
My laugh- a hundred years.

I was a writer,
I wrote our past.
She is an artist,
Who draws our memoirs.

I was a writer,
And she – my muse
She is an artist
Our story: beautiful and true.

Agata Ferst

Highly Commended 10-13 Age Category: Someone Give this Robot a Hug

Taken apart,
And put back together,
Misplaced some parts,
But she'll be alright.

'No wonder she went wrong'
They whisper again and again,
Will their words matter?
It's not like she cares,
No one will understand this complex machinery,
Made up of flaws.
That is her destiny.

Lack of emotion,
Is no need for commotion,
It's just another mistake
Lack of human heart:
Guarantees a heartbreak.

Wires for a brain,
Replace her memories,
CTRL,
ALT,
DELETE,
No such need for a machine.

To them she means nothing,
Just a mechanical being,
Made of stainless steel,
To her,
She is something,
Once human,
Half gone,
She's seen as a robot
And a robot she is not.

Alena Mueller

Highly Commended 10-13 Age Category: The Spell That Went Wrong

I sit quietly at my desk whilst the world around me is a blur of crazy. Everyone is: running around the classroom, climbing on the desks, writing on the chalk board, screaming, shouting... I can't think straight. I tap my pen to a soundless beat (a beat only I can hear) on my perfectly ordinary school book. The label reads:

Annie Sherbet
Year 8
Potions Class
Miss Featherblossom

As if someone flicked a switch, the noise abruptly stops. I look up and notice all eyes fixed on the beautiful girl gliding through the doorway; her hair flows behind her like a wavy waterfall, running down her back. Everybody moves out of her way as she floats to her chair and all the others race to sit next to her. I sigh, brushing away my dull, wiry hair. I'm sure I'd get noticed too with hair like that.

At that moment, Miss Featherblossom ushers the girls to their chairs,

"Come along girls, turn to page 471."

I reach for my text book and accidentally knock it to the floor with a loud thud. I reach to pick it up. A few of the pages are creased and a part of the cover is bent. I curse under my breath – my face turning an agitated red. I pause, as I suddenly notice the page it has fallen open at. It is very decorative with intricate miniature diagrams. But it is the title that grabs me - "Hair Potion". My eyes grow into golf balls as I eagerly read on. That's it! I almost leap out of my chair. I would be the most popular girl in school, and everybody would want to sit next to me!

For the rest of the lesson, I plot my next move and dream how my life will change. I cannot concentrate on the school work! Then, out of nowhere, the lunch bell rescues me, and I excitedly run out of the classroom to the store room along the corridor. Once I am out of sight from everyone, I get out my text book, conjure up a rusty old cauldron and immediately start to concoct the hair potion.

With everyone occupied with the delights of lunch, I can scavenge the ingredients from the well-stocked store room. It takes most of lunchtime preparing the mixture. I stir and stir until my arm nearly drops off. After, what seems like a lifetime, it begins to change from pond-scum to algae green - the potion is finally ready. I nervously pour some of the green bubbly mixture into a flask. The smell is unbearable, but it is a small price to pay for beauty. When I eventually gain enough courage, I close my eyes and quickly gulp down the potion. It tastes of rotten fish, troll snot and sewer water – although I confess, I haven't really tasted troll snot.

Suddenly, I feel a prickling sensation all over my body. "It's working!" I squeal and excitedly skip down the corridor to the girl's bathroom. I rush towards the mirror and freeze. I am horrified!

My face...my face is covered from top to bottom with HAIR!!!! I quickly check my notes. I had followed the instructions carefully – what did I do wrong? What now? I don't know what to do! I flick through my text book for an antidote but there is nothing! What if I am stuck like this forever?

I jump at the sound of the bell, signalling the end of lunch. Reluctantly, I swing my cloak over my face. With my spell book clutched tightly against my chest, I run back towards my room, dodging and weaving through the crowd of confused girls. My face was bright red with embarrassment (I don't think that anyone could tell with all the hair covering my face). I just want to vanish. Suddenly, someone comes rushing towards me and knocks me over as if I was a domino.

"Ooops! Sorry about that! Are you alright?" I hear a cheerful voice say. I don't want to speak so I don't reply. I look up slightly to see the beautiful girl with wavy golden hair. Her warm, friendly smile suddenly drops. "Ummm...who...ummm are you?" She stutters nervously.

"Annie," I murmur.

"Annie?"

"Annie Sherbet," I nod.

"Oh yes...you're in my potions class," she says. I quickly get up and try to move away but she grabs my hand and gives me a gentle smile. "Annie, whatever's happened to you, I'm sure that I will be able to help."

I look at her cautiously. "How will you be able to help? I'm ugly! I only wanted to have beautiful long hair like yours. Now, I'm going to look like a yeti forever...there isn't even an antidote!" I start to sob quietly.

"Don't worry. I've got a few ideas up my sleeve." She grins at me cheekily. I am not sure if I should be worried or happy. "Come with me," she says yanking my arm. "By the way, my name is Clare."

With nothing to lose, I follow Clare to her dormitory. The next thing I realise, she has me sitting in front of her dressing table and is grooming my face with a shaver! She finishes by putting a pink silk bow in my hair and winks. "You look beautiful!" she says.

At that moment, some giggling girls clamber in and stop mid-sentence, stunned at the sight. Suddenly, they rush over with "Ooh's and Aah's," patting and stroking my head excitedly.

"Did you get a puppy?" they cry. "She's lovely!"

14-17 Age Category

OVERALL WINNER: Three Thousand Miles – Mary O’Shaughnessy

It is a thick, airless night, and the lights are out. It is quiet at last. The motel room is small and stuffy, grubby cream wallpaper closing in around us like a too-tight sweater. It is hot, swelteringly so: even with the air conditioning blasting from the tiny vent in the dirty ceiling and the covers flung off the bed, it is unbearable. Maybe that’s what started it: the heat.

If it hadn’t been so hot, none of this might have happened in the first place.

The Nevada air is so still that each singing mosquito shudders the fragile window-panes like a tinny earthquake. Somewhere distant beyond the parking lot, a lone car shatters the landscape, kicking up dust with every tyre, until the engine fades into quiet again. I lie awake, dismal, eyes fixed on the ceiling: a dark stain of damp spreads across from where the floor-length window meets the grimy frame. It smells like hell even when I close my eyes: cheap hot-dogs from a fair, sickly, greasy leftovers in the pan, so pungent that my nose wrinkles.

Our bags are piled in the corner, still unpacked, sweaty, screwed-up clothes bundled together from our last escape. I can hear his breathing next to mine, amplified a thousand times. Repulsive. Without a thought, I sit up, letting the covers fall to the scrubby carpet. The bed creaks under my weight, springs groaning as I shift uncomfortably. I look across at him, just as the moonlight falls across his face: handsome, I suppose. I can’t bear it.

There’s my bag, just on top of his, a little lighter: no bottles in mine. In no time I’m next to it, my hand in his discarded trouser pocket for the car keys. I wouldn’t pretend it’s a nice car: it’s a Volvo, ten years old, but it drives and that’s all I need it to do. I glance across at him, still illuminated in the unmoving darkness. This is the seventh time. The seventh time he’s packed me up and we’ve left out of nowhere. The seventh time I’ve got too close to somebody, a friend back in the city, another mother picking her child up from school. This is the seventh time I’ve got home, and he’s tossed half my clothes into a suitcase, and he’s standing on the front porch with two months’ rent and the car keys in his hand.

The seventh time he’s said, “All right, we’re getting out of here.” At first, I used to find it exciting. All this movement, all this intrigue: it was so different from the static life I’d lived for twenty years before I met him. I used to think he was like a knight in shining armour, a leather-jacketed bad boy from the movies, one with demons in his past I wasn’t going to find. I was his beautiful, red-lipped damsel in distress, and I loved it. Now, seven times later, I see it for what it really is: running away.

And - at last - I’ve had enough.

“Goodbye, Charlie,” I say softly, just under my breath. He shifts in his dreamless sleep, as if he heard me, and for a moment my heart stops. This timeless second drags on forever. I watch as his chest lifts and falls in sleep, and at last I can breathe. I tuck my hair behind my ear and turn away from him.

I miss him already: I've been missing him for years, ever since the first time we said goodbye, really. He was perfect on that first date; a real gentleman. That's when he captured me in his web, pulled me in. A flawless execution.

The screen door slides open noiselessly. Suitcase in hand, I slip through it, turning back once last time to survey the damage. I shouldn't be worried: one sleeping pill in his after-dinner glass of wine was enough to knock him out cold, I know that. And yet with every tiny sound, I'm on edge, like a mouse on tiptoes to avoid the trap.

I look out, across the parking lot, eyes wandering over the lone Volvo - mine, now - and into the horizon. The first hints of sunlight bleed across it, orange streaked with pink and purple. An artist's palette, perfectly untouched. It's not yet five a.m. I don't know why I waited so long. Perhaps I am scared - who am I kidding? I am terrified. I lay there all night, making up reasons why I should stay. He loves me, really, he does, I know he does. All of this is to protect me.

I walk across the parking lot, lift my suitcase into the car. Think of all the times you've had to run. He loves me. You don't have to be afraid for the rest of your life. He's trying to protect me. Think of Anna. He - All I can see is my daughter, watching me from the window of the neighbour's house, as Charlie pulls out of the driveway.

"We're coming back to get her, aren't we?" I ask, as the little house on the corner sinks away in the rear-view mirror.

"Of course," he promises.

I should have learnt long ago that men's promises mean nothing. Sweet nothings into the wind. Into the driver's seat. Key in the ignition. I turn it, and the engine flares. Across the parking lot, in the motel window, the lights burn on, fluorescent and blinding. I see his silhouette in the window, and for a moment my foot hesitates on the accelerator. And then I remember Anna, three thousand miles away, and I grind the pedal into the floor. The car bursts forward, a horse rearing out of the stable. My heart erupts with joy, and I shoot across the desert, sending dust into a whirlwind behind me, into the blazing sunrise.

Three thousand miles to go.

Zak Caine

Highly Commended 14-17 Age Category: The Girl

I'm writing about a girl, she loved her life from young until now
She thinks it's her fault that her Mum and Dad don't speak now
She blames herself and cuts her arms and they bleed out
She just wants to sleep and not wake up from her dream, wow
She made some decisions that she ain't proud of, it wasn't her fault
She needed to escape and turn the sound off, block her ears and close her mouth
She hears the arguments in her head as they scream and shout
Says they don't love each other no more
Since the kid came
Mum shouts at her husband and says it will never be the same
Her mum claims that she saw her dad, with another woman, playing a sick game
The girl just sat back and watched the love drain
Since that day, it ain't ever been the same
She's been neglected and taking drugs, and her dad hasn't come to see her again
Isn't bothered
Doesn't care, won't even have a single hour to spare
He doesn't even remember the shade of her hair
Or her favourite colour or the day at the fair
When he told her he loved her, they were speaking
The little girl didn't even dream of her daddy leaving
But it happened
And a fake man's love can be deceiving
That's why she hurt herself and she keeps on bleeding
She believes that her life has no meaning
Her image is different to what other girls are seen in
She just needs to be loved and know the true meaning
This is just what the girl is reading
She wants to die and hang herself from her bedroom ceiling
Nobody really cares about her, they just want her gone
But this is where the story is changing
A boy comes up to her and says she is beautiful, and she begins dreaming
She's going to have a good life, a big family with real meaning
Convinced this boy is what she needed
Getting rid of the suicide thoughts
She is feeling everything is turning around and that's good
Tomorrow will be better than today, so it's great and it's good
She felt happy again, never thought she would
Don't need her dad, just her boy, her mum
And focus on the baby to come, son.

Min Young Elizabeth Kim

Highly Commended 14-17 Age Category: Don't Come Here...

I'm watching.

It's my duty. Every day, I watch your daily routine. You change into uniform and comb your hair in front of me while I do the same. Then you leave the house, and I leave mine; then we come back at the same millisecond. That's when I must be the most alert. You're not groggy like in the morning – you're awake, and maybe you'll touch the mirror on your wall.

Most times, I don't have to worry. You simply make funny faces, which I do back at you, and laugh as you send weird selfies to your friends. But other times you come very close and touch your fingers against mine. You wonder if your hand will disappear through the surface, like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* – but that's stupid, you conclude, when it doesn't happen. Unknown to you, it's entirely possible, and I was the one who stopped you.

You never notice. You can't. I look at you when you look at me, and when you turn your eyes away, I'm still looking. Of course, you have no way of knowing it. You have limited vision, and I'm careful around you. We share the same body – I know your every move. It's not prediction, but instinct. What you do is what I do.

One day, you came sobbing into your room. I was already aware of what happened, since I went through the same events. Your mother had died in a car accident and you were beginning to realise her gaping absence. You wept in the dark, huddled against your bed, opposite the mirror. Half an hour passed before you glanced up at me. You crawled closer slowly, still dripping tears, and stared into my eyes while I stared into yours. We pressed our heads and palms together, and although I couldn't feel your warmth, I felt your pain. I understood that you were desperate. You wanted to escape reality and forget that she was gone. I understood all too well.

"Hey," you whispered hoarsely. You must've felt stupid, talking to your mirror.

"Can't I... can't I go through?"

I knew that you weren't addressing me. You just wanted somebody, something to comfort you, and the only other person in the room was your reflection. I couldn't answer your earnest request. You don't know how much I wanted to swap places with you. But I couldn't. You'd regret making that wish. My world is a dystopian parallel of yours, full to the brim of man-made monsters and super intelligence. It tore my heart. It was excruciating, not allowing you to come to my side. I wanted to scream at you and your blissful ignorance.

You wanted to go through. I was willing to kill for an entry to your utopia. I wanted to grab your collar and roar what my life was like down your throat. I couldn't, of course. I had to

maintain the position that you held, but my bottled emotions came out as silent tears. I shouldn't have been crying more than you were.

They streamed down my face increasingly and I prayed that the dark would blind your eyes. It didn't. You stared, astonished. I couldn't muster the energy to replicate your movements. You saw me for the first time. Me; not your reflection, but me, your counterpart in a different universe. I was terrified about what you'd do next.

Your fingers came close to the mirror, and this time my hand wasn't there to block yours. You watched in silent awe as it went through the glass into my side. I didn't move. You pressed your palm against my moist cheek and wiped away my tears with your thumb. It was warm. I'm not sure why, and I know you weren't sure why either, but we both closed our eyes.

I could suddenly see from your perspective. These were... your memories. You had happy moments and sad moments. It was exactly like my life, just in a different setting. Your world had environmental damage and government corruption. Oh, and you were living through a war too. It must be hard. Why did I ever think you had it easier than me?

We opened our eyes in unison, both in a trance. I knew that my memories had travelled to you, and I was unbearably happy. You understood. You understood me, and who I was.

It's been a month since then. Our lives haven't changed much. You go about your daily routine, and I copy. Sometimes you stand in front of me and smile, and I smile back. We've agreed, without words, that entering each other's side is now forbidden. You were never much of an adventure enthusiast and neither was I. We became aware of each other's presence and kept it at that.

I'm still your reflection. I still block you from coming here, as you block me. I still observe you every day, as you do back, but now with a knowing glint in your eyes.

I'm watching

Sana Riaz

Highly Commended 14-17 Age Category: Broken Girl

She was strong, and she was brave,
Built from steel, with satin grace.
Eb'ny skin glittered and gleamed as
Words rang out, bright lyrics clean.
She stood tall, a daze of love
While the unknown fast approached.
One strong hit, and down she fell,
Concrete walls to hungry soil,
Sliced up sides, a gash in lungs,
Skin hung off decaying bones.
Lonely void, and silent screams,
Numb, cold, alone.
Burning a year of tears and hate,
Walking corpse, a lifeless brain,
No one cared, her fangs were sharp,
Clouded eyes, faltering heart,
Ripped, bruised skin, an empty throat,
Her veins so nearly severed.
Built back up, she pinned and stitched
A once whole girl in tattered bits.
Now she's glass, with cautious frown,
Just one tap she'll tumble down.
Not the same, an echoed past:
You can't fix a broken girl.

Eloise Wexelstein

Highly Commended 14-17 Age Category: Loose Threads

Your laugh frayed first.
It became an overdone cackle with lips
That never quite synced.
Then, your smile turned to a strain —
Too painful to flash at me often,
But when you did, it was a copy-paste version
That I couldn't believe.
I worried a little at the start;
Was everything all right at home?
I weighed up the chances...
Had I made a mistake and said something wrong?
But you always hid grudges; I knew that for sure,
So, nothing I'd done could've turned things this sour.
We hung onto each other by fast-thinning threads,
Which neither of us had the courage to cut —
All we could know was dread.
Our conversations grew clipped and scarce:
They were but time-fillers on rainy days,
And silence would always tackle them down.
Your words; stabbed like needles.
And your heart poured out lies.
And I slowly began to stop wondering why.
That day your eyes broke, I saw right into your soul:
It was sagging with the burdens
Of your own lies and hate.
So, I took the scissors and I cut at our threads,
Snip-by-snip re-sketching our fate.
And you tried to stop me.
Oh, the hypocrisy!
For that's when I realised, you'd unpicked them already.
Long, long before.
Now I am cleansing myself of your poison,
And I suggest that you do the same.
Soon you'll learn each time you glower into the shadows,
My light will come calling your name

Kisholi Perera-Merry

Highly Commended 14-17 Age Category: Bereavement

My life was never the same. Everywhere, everything; nothing else had changed and yet my world was on its head. New eyes, gazing at what used to be familiar and used to feel familiar.

To have you, and then suddenly not have you.

I walk down the street. Warm-coloured autumn leaves blanket the pavement on a crisp November evening. The sky is purple with sleep, gold splashes of colour thrown about the clouds. Burning chills clasp onto my skin, but a faint memory keeps my focus. This street used to be yours.

I imagine you, elevated above my head, judging me and praising me. It doesn't make sense, but neither does the way you were taken. It's been years and yet I still think about what happened. You, lying on the floor, and the sirens, and the lights. My brother uncontrollably sobbing in front of me in a way I'd never seen before.

Grief.

A life-changing event that I can only sometimes think to remember. I've grown numb to what used to bring tears to my eyes. Years have passed since the events that, at the time, I thought were the end of my world and would cast a shadow on everything. Now my sister is the age I was when you left us. She probably had no idea what was happening when they found you.

Sometimes I trace all my problems back to that moment. Perhaps that's what set off the chain in my head and gave me all these issues and insecurities. Then again, I don't remember not being this way. I suppose death wasn't ever going to help it.

Shuddering a little, the crunch beneath my feet stops as I slow down and gaze to my left. White paint, brick driveway, black gate. It's the same as you left it. At least, it's almost the same. Breathless, I slow to a halt. A flood of memories knocks the air out of my lungs and weights my feet to the ground.

What could I do differently? What would I do were I back there, then, with you? Thinking back to then, I don't even remember my last words to you. You were a constant, to the child I was back then, a necessary being that would be there the next day. It took mere hours for that childish view to fall apart.

Stumbling, I break free of the spell, and I'm pulled towards the door. I can't help myself against the force of attraction. My ears are numb with the cold, but I can barely register them over the racing thoughts in my head. The door is painted white with a gold handle and a gold painted knocker. I feel the rougher, drier brick through the soles of my shoes.

I don't remember what your voice sounds like anymore. Reminiscing over the feelings I experienced is no problem for me, but memories of your face and eyes and words and voice; those are long gone. Thinking back now, I wonder how much my sister or my brother remembers of you. You went too soon. Too soon to be rooted in my memories and my being and my essence, but there's still so much of you everywhere. Photographs on a wall.

Clouds rise as I inhale and exhale the chilling winter air, the taste of the cold biting at my throat. I stand there, breathing for a few seconds, not daring to move. A sudden surge of impulse lifts my hand towards the knocker edging closer, trembling either from the cold or the butterflies nesting in my stomach. My arm extends more and I'm only a few millimetres away from the golden knocker and so close to seeing the home I spent so much of my childhood in. A change of heart hits me and I pull away, turning around. Walking away, I smile and let the butterflies go.

There were so many feelings that tried to control me once you had left. So much negativity and self-doubt. This isn't closure; I won't ever let myself forget you, but I can't live in the past anymore. I look up at the sky, now a deeper indigo. A sunset is the end of the day, but the end doesn't make the sunset any less pretty. All I can do is let the night take over and wait for the next sunrise.

I am letting you go.

Henry Lambert

Highly Commended East Midlands Writer: Eradication

This isn't a story about how one succeeds, this is a story about how one fails, about how I failed. My memory is blurred but I'll try to tell you my story as best I can.

I was little when it started, a normal day, but something changed and with it, my life. The idea that humans were a mistake somehow crawled into my head and would not leave. My brain quickly thought of a solution: eradication.

It started off on a minor scale; cardboard boxes with bottle tops taped to the sides. When I was asked what I was building, I said it's a machine to help me accomplish my dream.

If I had said that my dream was to wipe out humanity, things would have played out differently but fortunately I kept my mouth shut about that. I want to make one thing clear; none of these Weetabix boxes could exterminate billions of people. They say anything is possible if you put your mind to it. I took that way too literally. Some things are beyond the mind and require all your soul. I remember being very disappointed when my galactic inferno maker didn't work. I really wanted to incinerate the galaxy.

At first, I thought my machine was not working because I didn't put any fire into it in the first place. A big mistake. Galactic Inferno Maker 2.0 had to be made in the garden to prevent the whole house catching fire. It was made from two shoe boxes taped together; in one of them, I'd put the lit match. The fire would travel into the other box and be spat out a funnel. Five minutes later I was staring at some blackened pulp and some burned grass.

Finally, after many fails, I realised what I was missing: electricity. Galactic Inferno Maker mk3 was very similar to the second version but this one had an extra box in which I put a wire connected to a plug socket. I pressed the on switch (a milk carton lid).

Nothing.

I reached to turn on the plug switch; the wire hit me in the face, I dropped the box and the fire melted everything. Again. By this point I had become very tired of fire, so I decided to put out that fire with water.

Introducing the Galactic Tsunami Maker!

This contraption was made from many cardboard boxes positioned like a tower to stabilize a garden hose. All I need to do is turn this switch and...

Voila!

Everything turned to mush. Oops.

Finally, after many years, I moved on from the childish boxes and decided to take things seriously. I was about 18 then. Going to university seemed like the best option to gain the knowledge I needed. My plan was to create a nuclear explosion and destroy the whole planet. I had been studying chemistry for about 2 years when I came across a problem: I had to erase every human on the planet.

Including myself.

The machine itself didn't take that long to create, how to build it was the big question. Like the original designs, my new machine (the Bang Box as I liked to call it) was a large box, but this one was metal not cardboard. This meant it wasn't turned to pulp by fire or water. The contraption was not very large (about half a meter high) and it didn't weigh much either, so it was portable. It was humanity I wanted to destroy not animals, but it seemed impossible to get rid of one and not the other, meaning animals had to go too.

So, there I was, just hours from spectating the end of history and yet, everyone around me was walking so calmly, oblivious to me. Did they deserve to die? I shook my head there was no turning back now, I had come too far. I would pull the planet out of the misery it was facing and shine a new light on the planet. For full satisfaction, I decided to get as high as possible before activating the Bang Box. A skyscraper loomed above me, turning my world into shadow. It wasn't that high, but it was high enough. I climbed to the top of it as quick as possible and put the Bang Box on the top floor, ready to be turned on. My hand hovered over the box for a second.

There's no turning back said a voice in my head. I pressed the button. I don't know what happened, but something went wrong. The world didn't perish, I perished and came here I don't know where here is, but I know it's neither heaven, nor hell, it's somewhere in between. It truly is beyond words, but I know one thing; never make the mistake I made, I said humanity was a mistake but really, the only mistake was me.

Daniel Thomas

Highly Commended East Midlands Writer: Twas The Night

It's that time of the year.

A silent night. All is calm. All is bright.

The depths of midwinter, and it is freezing. The air is still – unearthly still, almost sterile. Not a living thing moves. The stars burn in the sky, cold and alien, and the moon glares down dirty-white and luminous.

It hasn't snowed, but on the branches of the trees and the window-panes, frost gleams like a diamond saw. In the unearthly light, skyscrapers loom, tall and proud, whilst houses and shops huddle for warmth in their shadows. Statues abound on street corners and in plazas; they are transmogrified by the night into darkness-shrouded grotesqueries. In one square, there stands a fountain, its water frozen by December's bite, a jagged and vicious sculpture that glints in the moonlight.

Everything remains still, utterly, indescribably still.

The river winds its way through the heart of the city. Its waters are colder than even the air around them, cold as the snow atop the hills from which they rose, and cold as the storm-tossed sea which they will join in a matter of days. It reflects the god's-eye moon and the aberrant stars, casting their sidereal beauty back to the heavens.

A freezing wind blows, finally, from the north.

And on that wind, it rides.

It sweeps over the human village – there's a different word for it now, shorter, but what are words to such as it? – over the gleaming spires and steel-and-glass towers, and begins its search – no, its hunt – for the children.

It has watched them for the past twelve months, awake and asleep, marking off the tally in its ice-bound grotto, and now is the time for the reckoning.

It crawls down chimneys, up pipes, through cat-flaps, unlatches windows and unlocks doors, as it begins its task.

To those who have pleased it – those who have been nice - these days there are fewer, so many fewer than even just a handful of years ago – it brings their rewards, as is their due. Shiny baubles and trinkets, useless, but these gifts are what they are owed, and it is nothing if not fair.

Those who have been naughty are far more numerous. In most of those houses, the offering, the libation, the sacrifice has been left out dutifully at the fireplace, and it does not find these wanting. Those children will sleep safe another year.

As for those who have failed to make the offering... well, one way or another, it will still take what it is owed. A parent, a sibling, a favoured pet, a finger... it's not particular, really, if something is taken.

At last, it reaches one final house, the abode of the naughtiest child of the year. There is no offering here; the parents are asleep in a haze of wine, knowing what must be done and loathing themselves for it. It slithers, slowly down the chimney. It crosses the living room, and with an ominous creaking sound, clambers up the stairs.

The child's door opens, and –

An empty bed, an open window, and a wind blowing northwards.

And a sound.

A cold sound, a sound that creeps down your spine and coils around it tightly, imparting its frigidity into your very bones.

The sound of sleigh bells jingling.
You better watch out,
You better not cry,
Better not pout,
I'm telling you why,
For the love of God, please don't cry,
It is coming to town.

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