

The 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition



34

39 *Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,*

44 *flight to the imagination and life to everything.*

The image shows a piano score with three systems of music. The first system (measures 34-38) features a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 39-43) contains the first line of lyrics in red, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a simple bass line. The third system (measures 44-48) contains the second line of lyrics in red, with similar accompaniment.

MUSIC

Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

14-18 Year Old Category

The 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2021

MUSIC

*We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams...*

“Music is the art which is most nigh to tears and memory.” Oscar Wilde on how a song can roll back the years and take you to a forgotten place with friends long gone.

Literature and music have always gone hand in hand. Poets and authors, from Shelley To Shakespeare and Keats to Austen have woven it as themes through their works. 2021 is the 150th Anniversary of the Royal Albert Hall, a venue which has seen every style of music performed beneath its iconic dome. To celebrate this, the 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition was looking for poems and short stories that take music as their inspiration.

Following the success of 2020's 'New World', The Elmbridge Literary Competition was once more open to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, it was open to all ages.

2005:	Cook Up A Story
2006:	On My Way
2007:	A Life In Colour
2008:	Once Upon A Time
2009:	A Symphony of Life
2010:	The Elmbridge 100
2011:	Breaking The Barrier
2012:	A Dickens of A Christmas
2013:	One Act Radio Play
2014:	Dear Diary
2015:	Flights of Fantasy
2016:	Love
2017:	Luck
2018:	A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
2019/20:	New World

Category: Short Stories

1st Place: The Ballad of Cotton Jackson – by Elliot Abrahams

Not far from the great mass of the Mississippi river, lay a town named Bernardsville, Louisiana. A single dusty road ran from the sands of Texas in the west all the way to Bernardsville, onto the river, and then to where ocean met rock in the west. Along that road was a collection of houses made of wood and brick and stone, with chickens round the back and a flat roof on top. They were painted all the colours you can think of, from yellow to blue to white, resemblin' a rather dusty rainbow.

Now these wooden houses weren't very comfortable in the scorching heat of the August sun nor could they withstand the chill of a February night. Cockroaches crawled along the rottin' floors and there was one place for the whole street to wash with brown water. But Bernardsville was home to twelve thousand souls, including one Cotton Jackson.

His real name weren't Cotton but pickin' is all he done since he was old enough to walk. Six days a week he woke up when the sun rises and walked several miles to the farm of Mr Little, who lived outside of town. Little grew cotton on his farm, like his father and his grandfather done before. Well, Cotton walked to work on those fields, whistlin' on the way. Even when he was hard at work, he whistled, and everyone else followed his lead.

Whistlin' wasn't the only kind of music Cotton made. Every Sunday ever since he was small he gone to Church, and at Bernardsville Unity Church, the Rev'rend was a man of music, as well as a man of God. He took out his banjo, or sometimes a slide guitar, and sang about the Lord. Then everyone else joined in with him, singing and hollerin', clapping their hands or banging a drum, whistling or playing harmonica. Cotton loved going to Church because of that, and not just because he don't have to spend all day breaking his back in some field.

Cotton don't leave the music behind when he gone home at half past noon either. His ol' man was formerly in a band playin' the blues round the County, and he played the guitar real good, better than anyone else in all Louisiana. Some ol' folks even say he was a better player than Jimmie Rodgers, though I doubt the truth of that.

Anyway, because of Ol' Man Jackson's skill with six strings, he had been given a few guitars, which he left behind when he went off. Therefore, Cotton grew up playin' and refined his technique after instruction from the Rev'rend and some other bluesmen about town.

It was in Church, where Rev'rend was conductin' his grand orchestra, that Cotton learnt to sing. By the time he was fourteen, he could sing all the gospel songbook as good as anyone could. So, Cotton soon started writin' in his own words.

He borrowed a donkey and went an' listened to Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson and Sonny Boy Williamson when they were playin' nearby. He also listened to them and some others on the gramophone that Dan Jones owned at his saloon. Cotton then combined them lyrics with the gospel, writing a dozen songs.

In some Churches they didn't allow no blues, but Rev'rend knew that blues and gospel ain't so different and allowed Cotton to play and sing in his Church. Soon, Rev'rend's congregation had grown tenfold, as hundreds of folks came from all round the County to listen to Mr Cotton Jackson play the blues.

He realised that he could make more money playin' the blues than he could pickin' cotton for Mr Little, so he left the farm for good. He found that it was easier to make music without a busted back or achin' legs.

On the first six days of the week, Cotton played in bars and juke joints all over the County and sometimes even beyond. He made a whole lotta money after doin' that for a while and even managed to buy a car in Baton Rouge, painted bright blue like the walls of the house he grew up in. Nobody else in all of Bernardsville, Louisiana owned a car except the Sheriff and Mr Little. However, every Sunday morning Cotton still played in the Church for free.

Cotton realised he wasn't goin' to be a big success by livin' in Bernardsville, Louisiana his whole life. So, he got in his car with a guitar and drove away. He drove west across the river, and for many miles through Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee, until he came to the city of Memphis. That was where he decided he was goin' to become the greatest bluesmen there ever was.

There were many bluesmen tryin' to make it big there, but Cotton Jackson was the best of the lot. He could sing better than any of 'em, play guitar better than any of 'em and play harmonica better than any of 'em, but still it wasn't enough. Though he made hundreds of dollars, he wanted thousands. Though he could sing great, he wanted to sing greater. Though he could play excellently, he wanted to play the best. Not even his best was good enough for Cotton, he still wanted more.

Although he was a great success, he did not feel like one. Reluctantly, Cotton decided to head home havin' failed in his task of becoming the best bluesmen south of the Mason-Dixon. However, fate would not have it end that way.

He was leavin' a small town in Mississippi, not too far from his hometown of Bernardsville, Louisiana, when he came to a crossroads. Standing right in the middle of the crossroads was a man. This man was dressed in black from the brimmed hat perched on his head to his perfectly shined shoes. Everything he had was black except for a shirt as white as a cotton field and a light brown guitar.

Cotton did not want to run over the man, so he brought his car to a screechin' halt.

"Who are you and can you get outta my way?" he called from his wound down window.

"I am a traveler and I will not get out of your way," the man said back.

"That's a mighty fine guitar you got there sir," Cotton noticed.

"It is indeed. I can teach you to play mighty fine too," he said.

"I can play fine, I assure you," Cotton said, although his confidence did waver.

"But can you?" the man asked.

Doubt hit Cotton like a wave might hit a beach. If he was so fine a player then why had he quit and left Memphis?

"I will teach you all I know," the man said, "but I need something in return."

"What is that?"

"Come closer and I'll tell you."

Cotton leant in and the man whispered something in his hear. After hesitatin' for just a moment, he shook the man's hand and left with him.

No one heard much of him, and some folks from Bernardsville, Louisiana who had followed his career in Memphis started to worry for his wellbein'. However, he soon reemerged.

Cotton Jackson announced that he'd be tourin' the entire land of Dixie, from New Orleans to Charleston and back again, in forty days and forty nights. He would end his whirlwind tour back in Memphis, Tennessee.

Some folks from Bernardsville, Louisiana, includin' the Rev'rend himself, made the trip down to New Orleans to hear him play. They all knew something had changed, because he sounded different. His voice was deeper and slower and sounded more manlike, while his pickin' was faster and sounded better than anythin' they'd ever heard before.

Cotton ended his show before leavin' abruptly, not even talking to the folks who raised him.

It seems he barely had time to sleep or even eat and drink as he performed like a man possessed. He made good on his promise and toured the entire South in forty days and forty nights.

He then came to Memphis, where he had failed once before. This time he went to no bar or juke joint, instead headin' straight for a recordin' studio. Cotton sat in the chair with his ol' guitar for seven hours without a break, playin' and singin' every tune he had ever learnt. The producer took what he could to make some records, which sold real good all over thr country.

Without saying a word, he drove down a dusty road that passed through a small town in Mississippi. By that town was a crossroads. Accordin' to my reports, there was a man standing there dressed all in black, except for a white shirt and a light brown guitar. The pair exchanged some words as the sun set before stridin' off together. Nothin' was heard from Mr Cotton Jackson again.

2nd Place: The Music Club – by Connie Harris

She wore a long floral skirt that hung limply down to the floor, and a pale yellowy jumper in an unpleasant shade of baby sick.

'Here we go again', I thought. 'Another skirt-sweeping, jumper-wearing, biscuit-eating new member.'

I'm Sophie Taylor by the way. Music-enthusiast, composer-in-her-own-right, winner-of-the-U14s-prize-for-best-short-song-when-I-was-12 and most importantly, head of the village music club. Well technically not *head* - a batty old hag called Julie is - but I do all the work and I just fit the role. I'm not averse to new members, but I do think they should have to earn their place before suggesting the next song Of The Week, or getting first pick of our biscuit assortment.

So when the wool-swaddled Miss Brooks took it upon herself to grace our intimate Saturday gathering with a dog, I wasn't best pleased. People say not to judge a book by its cover, but we did a whole meeting on judging album covers which are very similar, and the thing I did learn is that nine times out of ten your judgment is right. The dog was tiny - the kind so small that you have to look where you step - and she seemed to have the idea that she could bring 'Cupcake' in for the meeting. I soon rid her of that thought, and the great fuss she made of tying this rat-like creature to the railings outside was sickening. I don't like to make unfounded assumptions about people, but if she can't bear to leave her dog outside for a bit, she obviously isn't suitable for the responsibilities that having a pet entails.

Her next offence came at biscuit break. I watched from the corner of my eye as Chubby Charlie grabbed four biscuits (two jammy dodgers and two bourbons), trying to hide the excessive amount behind her cup. That didn't surprise me, as it was public knowledge that she only came for the biscuits. But my eyes almost popped out of my head when I spied a shifty-looking Miss Brooks with three double-filled, extra-creamy Oreos in her sticky hand. I marched over purposefully to the now-sweating woman and informed her that two biscuits were our limit on a Saturday. Her eyes guiltily lowered, she apologised profusely and said she'd put one back. I forbade her, saying:

'It's your first meeting, how were you to know? Keep the biscuit, just remember next time.' That was going to come out of her next week's allowance.

You might be wondering why I told Miss Brooks off, and not Chubby Charlie. Chubby Charlie has been a regular member of our little club for years. Yes, she splurges on the biscuit front, but in my opinion she has earned it, from sitting and listening to hundreds and hundreds of songs and sonatas. And I'm not even sure if she can read music. Miss Brooks, on the other hand, had not sacrificed even an hour of her time for us before she had already greedily exceeded our biscuit limits. The real difference is that Chubby Charlie belongs. Miss Brooks doesn't.

In my haze of annoyance I sensed an opportunity.

'You're Mrs Brooks aren't you?'

She faltered, stuttering slightly: 'Um, *Mi-* Miss Brooks actually.' I looked at her sympathetically. 'But you can call me Christine or Chrissy if you like.'

'Thanks Chrissy, I'm *Mrs* Taylor.'

'Oh, hello Mrs Taylor, I get the feeling we've got off to a bad start, what with all the-'

'Oh no, don't worry about it, it's just nice to have fresh blood.'

Her laugh was too high and strained. The kind of irritating laugh you can hear from a distance.

'So what kind of music do you talk about here?'

'Anything really. With our generally older members, we like to do a lot of the classics. Pieces on the '100 pieces of music to listen to before you die' list.'

Unfortunately, I suspected that only a small percentage of our group would actually fulfil this promising title.

'For example, what do you think of Liszt's Consolations?', I continued, 'We had a speaker in on them about a month ago.'

Chrissy glanced at the floor. 'I actually haven't heard them, but I look forward to...'

'Shame, shame...', I muttered, shaking my head.

'Would you like to go and get a drink sometime, you could tell me a bit more about what you like? We could pop into Costa or something?'

Costa. *Costa*. I hadn't been there for years, not since I found a fly in my tea. A great big fly. God I was furious, because I'd nearly finished the drink by the time I got down to the bottom and saw the big, bloated insect amongst the dregs. Oh I gave Costa a piece of my mind. I told Chrissy this and I think she got the message. She can't just walk in here and think she belongs. She has to earn it.

After a slightly longer than normal biscuit break, we readjusted. In our discussion of the similarities between Baroque and pop music, Chrissy kept contributing when others were speaking. A few *glances* from me did the trick.

I announced at the very end the guest speaker for next week.

'I'm sure you'll all be excited to hear that I've booked in Mark White to do a talk for us next week. He's a very up-and-coming composer and I am a personal fan. He's just moved somewhere local so we're very lucky to have him as our nearest composer. Same time next week, remember no late-comers are accepted.'

I strolled over to Chrissy.

'Have you heard of Mark Wood?'

She had dimples in her cheeks as she smiled.

'Yes, I *know* him... We just moved here together. I'm his fiancée.', she admitted with a little giggle.

I offered them a couple's membership, half-price. And I'd add in unlimited biscuits. Bargain. You know what, I think the soon-to-be Mr and Mrs White will fit in very well here.

It feels like they belong already.

Joint 3rd Place: To Sing With Stone Companions – by Lauren Welsby-Riley

Aunt Ivy swore that all of her stories are true, and I want to believe her, I do. But you can only hear about groaning stones and whispering winds so many times before the seeds of doubt begin to grow, first a sprout, full of promise, then a sapling, taking the shape of what is sure to come later, until finally, my doubt was as fixed and unchanging as an evergreen tree.

"If you want to know how to sing with the dead..." they always started like this. With no real context or explanation for the otherworldliness of her claims. "If you want to know how to sing with the dead, you needn't travel further than the cemetery at the top of that hill." She lifted a wrinkled hand and pointed, though we knew exactly which hill she meant. After all, Aunt Ivy wasn't the only one with tales of Swanford Downs.

Anybody who had grown up in our village knew that to go over Swanford Downs by yourself was to experience something peculiar, whether it was ending up with one shoe less than you

started with, or seeing a pair of wild rabbits huddle together and snuffle in one another's ear like a gossiping couple. No matter what it was, almost everybody had a story about Swanford Downs. This very fact caught me off-guard when Aunt Ivy began her latest anecdote. Somehow, it felt more conceivable now that the subject matter was something familiar, something known. I myself had long been perplexed by the mysteries of the hill, and leaned in closer so that I could properly drink in her words.

My aunt often coaxed us in with a small fact we knew to be true, and this occasion was no different. She would walk through the cemetery every day on her way to and from school, along a straight and narrow path which cut right through the heart of the village necropolis. For this we had no trouble taking her at her word - we'd done the very same thing on the rare occasion that the buses weren't running. I looked at my sister now, the same glint of humour in her green eyes that I'm sure shone in mine also. There it was again, that tree of doubt; it grew in both of us. Alice and I had never experienced anything out of the ordinary in the cemetery, and it was hard to imagine that Aunt Ivy had, either. Our path was a well-lit one, usually populated by retired dog walkers and always surrounded by a sea of flowers. It was, despite the macabre nature of the scenery, a truly lovely place to be.

A pointedly loud cough drew me out of my thoughts and I looked back up. "I was a remarkably rebellious little girl, you know," she said, looking off to the other side of the room as if searching for something, some trace of a childhood long lost. "Oh yes. I had an unquenchable thirst for excitement, and excitement rarely strikes the rule follower. That's why I strayed from the path."

It took all of my willpower not to laugh. My Great Aunt, with her flowers and frills and frayed lace curtains, the rebellious type? Still, I supposed I could imagine her doing something as tame as walking the long way every now and again.

As she described her journey to us, I was at once transported to a version of our cemetery that was foreign to me. Foreign, and yet recognisable all the same. This path took you along the river bank, through the churchyard, and over Swanford Downs. No wonder it was forbidden to someone so young; this route was enveloped by a thick canopy of trees, their branches intertwining to form a ceiling so dense that not even the sun's rays could penetrate it.

"Weren't you afraid?" Alice said in a hushed voice. *Great*, I thought. *My only ally has been well and truly hooked.* Aunt Ivy nodded, but she added that although the path was dark, and indeed quite deserted most of the time, it was also beautiful, enchanting even.

When she launched back into the story, I couldn't help but notice that her voice had changed, almost imperceptibly. There was a heaviness to it now that hadn't been there before, an earnest sadness that you often saw in people grieving a lost loved one, or recounting something awful - the kind of sadness you can't fake. And for the first time in fifteen years, I knew that I would believe whatever she told us next.

"After a while, even my new course began to bore me. Unquenchable, like I told you. So I started to play a sort of game. Nothing disrespectful," she amended hastily upon seeing the incredulity on our faces. "No, you see, I felt absolutely rotten about all of the abandoned gravestones. Some of them hadn't had visitors in years, you could tell. I wanted to breathe

some life back into them, for lack of a better phrase. I started to make up stories in my head, entire lives rich with experiences of love and pain, betrayal and fun - *real* people to accompany the names I looked at every day for five years.”

And so she started to list them off.

James Rigby, who had died in 1915 at just seventeen years old, a war casualty no doubt. His life as Aunt Ivy told it was similar to so many others’ in his time: grew up listening to talks of bloodshed, Crimean, Boer, and the looming threat of the Great War to come, always wanted to fight for his country, willing to die for it, even. And in the end, he did.

Rosamund Davies, a florist who lived to the grand old age of ninety-six. She was a plump lady in this story, her wiry curls never faltering even as they turned from flaxen to salt-and-pepper grey. Her husband died twenty years before she did, leaving behind debts to manage and a heart too heavy to carry - she was never the same.

Jean Battersea, a cold former headmistress, whose family claimed to have died from stress brought on by her job, (“lovely lot”) but really she just had a heart condition.

Aunt Ivy’s favourite of these stories, and mine, was *Grayson*. His surname was covered by a layer of moss, and we couldn’t even be sure that he was a he at all, but when she described him, she described a vibrant man, with hair as dark as the ground in which he was buried, and bright blue eyes to balance it out. “You could get lost in those eyes,” she said with a wink, and I felt my cheeks flushing despite myself.

Grayson was a singer. He dabbled in opera and the occasional love ballad, but what he really loved was jazz. This love was ignited in my aunt immediately, she said. She had heard the soft crooning of Frank Sinatra on her mother’s record player enough times to feel confident enough to open her mouth, in the middle of the cemetery, and start to sing. Aunt Ivy sang to us then, her voice overflowing with nostalgia and heartfelt sorrow. Not only did she move my sister and I to tears, but I could’ve sworn that, just for a moment, the birds outside interrupted their chirping to fall silent. A proper audience.

“They sang with me, you know,” I laughed then, and she did too. “You may never believe me, but it’s true. We were a chorus of jazz singers, even Jean sang along, the old bat - but Grayson was the loudest of them all.” I could hear them then. They were in her voice, all of them, blending together to create the voice I’d known all my life, though it was as if I was hearing it for the first time now.

When Aunt Ivy passed away just two months after she told us this story, Alice and I combed the cemetery looking for the path she had taken all those years ago. We must have visited every day for a week, spending hours there at a time. But no matter how hard we tried, we never could find Ivy’s stone companions.

“Do you think maybe she was making it up?” Alice asked me, as we left the graveyard for the final time on the day of her funeral.

I looked up at her through tearful eyes, knowing that my answer could quite possibly break her heart. “No,” I whispered finally. And I meant it.

Joint 3rd Place: Sing For Me – by Ingrid Wong

Myrtha wanted the bard the moment she saw him.

He called himself Jo. He was a travelling bard, the townsfolk said, who trekked from village to village to put on a show for their residents. Myrtha did not know this. She only knew that Jo was beautiful.

His eyes flickered with gold when the sun shone down on him. His hair fluttered, feathery and soft, whenever a breeze blew past. His rosy lips spilt the sweetest melodies. And his hands were the most stunning of all. His slender fingers would glide across the strings of his lap harp, drawing forth tunes that would intoxicate one swifter than even the strongest wine, so bright and catchy that all those around him would have no choice but to listen.

She watched Jo perform every night in the town square, singing while playing the harp. The moon and the stars seemed to lean down from their celestial perches to listen and became so engrossed in his song that they forgot to let the sun take over. Every night, the village fell silent for Jo.

Jo did not perform in the daytime. He would steal away to the woods at the edge of the village, sit on a moss-covered log and practice. The wind snatched away his songs before they reached the village, but Myrtha caught them anyways. Every day she ventured into the woods to pick cloudberry, sure to catch a glimpse of him. In the woods, it was only the two of them.

Once her basket was filled, Myrtha would go back to Jo's log, sit down at a nearby tree and begin to read. The words that once intrigued her now felt dull, and her mind soon wandered from her book to listen to the music that was playing nearby. Her back was turned from him, her eyes staring up into the treetops, but every sweet verse of his song thrust Myrtha deeper into adoration. She did not need to see Jo to love him.

They spent every afternoon doing their own work until the sun was soon to set and the village would reel them back. Those few hours, she came to realise, belonged only to her and Jo, and nobody else.

Sometimes, while they walked home, he would talk to her about himself. Myrtha learnt his favourite colour was yellow, he had two brothers and loved embroidery. She also learnt that his laugh was the loveliest sound she had ever heard.

Two weeks passed, and Myrtha had become used to heading straight for the town square at sundown. It was rowdier than ever that evening, with everyone surging forward to try and catch a glimpse of Jo. Grimacing at somebody stepping on her foot, Myrtha heard someone say, "pity he's leaving tomorrow. D'you think we'll ever see him again?"

"Course not. They don't call 'im a travelling bard for nothin'."

The summer night seemed to turn cold. Jo? Leaving? How could it be, when he so clearly loved her as she him? He could not leave her all alone in the village without even telling her! Hardly bearing to look as he began his performance, she pushed her way through the crowd and ran for a house far from the square.

Distressed youngsters and desperate men alike whispered of Cosette, the owner of the local apothecary. She rarely left her store except to gather herbs, and people said she had a concoction for anything. Myrtha pushed into the store, blinking away tears, and nearly knocked over a rack of dried lavender. From the counter, Cosette glanced at her in irritation. "May I help you?"

She strode towards the counter and demanded, "I need a potion."

"Why, of course you do," she said nonchalantly. "What do you need, lass? Something to help with rashes, perhaps? Or cough medicine?"

"No." She once again felt tears well in her eyes. "I need something that will make a man stay with me forever."

Cosette raised an eyebrow. "Ah, this is about the bard."

"How did you know?"

"Silly girl, just because I don't get out much doesn't mean I can't tell when somebody is in love." She peered at Myrtha. "He'll leave tomorrow, and you do not want that. I can see that in your eyes." She grinned. "Your green, envious eyes."

She wiped at them, pleading, "make him stay in the woods with me. Make him sing and play for me forever."

"Forever," Cosette mused, "is a strong word. Do you mean it?"

"Yes. Make him never leave. Please."

With an indignant huff, she stepped into the apothecary's back room for a moment, and returned holding a bottle. "This here will keep that bard of yours here forever. Feed it to him somehow and the deed will be done."

Myrtha grabbed the bottle right from Cosette's hand, careful not to drop it. "Thank you so much. How much do you want for it?"

"Just your silence." She turned away with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Now go, you silly girl. Go make your bard stay."

...

She went to the woods the next afternoon, carrying with shaking hands a slice of pie with the potion drizzled on top. She could only hope that Jo did not notice the taste of the potion.

He was at his usual log, tuning his harp, and smiled as he saw her approach. Jo accepted the pie without hesitation and polished it off in a matter of minutes. He looked as though he was about to say something about it before he froze, set the plate down and picked up his harp again. Once again, another melody came from their strings, and he began to sing.

Myrtha watched, giddy, and hummed along to the music. The first song ended and Jo began another, and one more after that ended. He hardly seemed to need to breathe.

What could have been minutes or hours passed, yet he continued to play. His voice soared sky-high; his fingers flew across the strings. Time itself stilled.

Then far away, marring Jo's performance, the clock-tower rang. Myrtha jumped, realising it had been an hour since she had gone into the woods.

The music continued once more, and soon she calmed down. Jo continued to sing; never once did he waver. Nothing else mattered when she gazed at him. His fingertips were flushed red.

The clock-tower rang again. Jo's voice grew slightly softer. His fingertips looked redder than before. "Are you not tired?" Myrtha asked.

She did not get an answer.

Another hour passed. His fingers left faint crimson smudges on the cream-coloured strings, and his hands proved steadfast when she tried to pull them away from the harp. "I love your music, but perhaps you should take a break," she suggested.

Once more, she heard no response.

Jo's voice fell fainter still, until Myrtha had to strain her ears to hear him. Those lovely eyes of his, normally as bright as the sky, were glazing over. The strings grew redder. Myrtha took hold of his wrists, but he wrenched them away. "Why not rest?"

He only sang.

The sun sank far below the horizon, and muse and maid remained in the woods even as its golden light was extinguished. Jo did not stop playing, nor did he stop singing. His fingertips were darkened with blood. "Please," she implored, "stop for tonight. You can continue playing tomorrow." She tried to pry the harp away from him, but he held on. She shook him, but he continued singing.

The moon rose and set, and dawn was soon to break, yet Jo didn't stop for even a second. Song after song bled from his lips until Myrtha couldn't even hear them. The strings were stained almost entirely in scarlet. His hands did not shake, his lips still mouthed the lyrics, but his eyes had lost their shine somewhere along the way. No matter what she begged of him, he would not stop.

When the first fingers of daylight traced the sky, Jo finally ceased. His harp crashed to the ground and he fell forward.

Myrtha cried out and rushed to catch him. His eyes were glassy, his lips still parted around the last syllable of a little ditty. She took his hand, the fingertips mangled and bloody, and pressed three fingers to his wrist. There was nothing.

She waved a hand in front of his mouth. He was not breathing.

Her vision blurred, and once again she felt freezing. How could he have performed for so long, knowing that it would hurt him? The first tear was rolling down her cheek when she remembered.

Make him stay in the woods with me. Make him sing and play for me forever.

Jo had performed for her and only her, for so long that he had dropped dead because of it. He had played forever — or tried to.

And how could a corpse ever leave the woods?

Highly Commended: Warfare Melody – by Ninjin Battsengel

It was not fighting nor war that was considered prideful, it was winning that was honored; intimidation was to give an option besides fighting. Mongolia had always been fully encompassed by towering mountains, preventing clouds from the ocean passing over the land locked country. These natural barriers that circumference the country was how the name of the Land of the Eternal Blue Skies came to be. The Tartar clan of the east stood before the Mongols. The tribes were closely related, -in history the Mongols were mistakenly named 'Blue Turks' or 'Black Tartars'- but the distinction was drawn by the Mongols' descendancy from the Huns. As the two clans of the steppe erected in front of one another, it was yet another clear cloudless day. Though it appeared the battle was yet to break out, to Temujin the war was waging.

Shamans could be appointed but more commonly they were to offer their services to clans they believed had the highest chance -from previous records- of winning in battle. The shaman's job was to bring upon support from the eternal blue sky and their spiritual world; yet their very presence alone, could determine the outcome of the rumble.

Even though an infinitely blue expanse suspended above the Mongols and Tartars and not a single cloud floated in the sky a dark rumbling, a rhythmic thundering was seemingly growing louder. Although Tartars' men and horses stood steadfast several thousand yards away, these bellowing hits could not be ignored. The low growling's' source was the shamans' drums, the beats were eerily played far apart and so the echoes were sent adrift when the next heavy blow rolled across the tumbling and dry terrain. This ceremonial drumming checkpointed the commencement of the psychological warfare. Next, diffused the hushed chanting, '*huree huree huree*' the shamans sent upwards while their heads were contorted back. Their words crawled towards the army in front of them, the ominous blessings sounded like unintelligible mumbling as it became mutilated by the drumming; messily

mashing to conjoin and create a low-pitched harmony. The Mongols had nearly a dozen shamans positioned according to their ranks all feverishly beating drums to call upon the gods; *the probability was in Temujin's favor.*

Temujin's promise for revenge started when he was only nine and his clan was hijacked by the much better off Tartars, as well as his father killed. Without his father the remainder of his family was deemed useless and left to survive and scavenge in that year's harsh winter, alienated. However, this battle was an inevitable one, expansion and growth from any clan was threatening to all others. Temujin had his goals set and began operating his campaign of bringing together all clans of the steppe, and this would become easier as time went on. One victorious battle meant several circulating rumors in neighboring clans, one victorious battle could mean a surrender from the next two.

People of the steppe were born mounting horses. It came as naturally as suckling tits for milk at birth, children mastered horseback riding and being able to stand up fully on the horse's back at four years old. Then at age ten when their legs grew and were long enough to push up against the stirrups of the saddle, they began tuning their craft in mounted archery. Developing the muscles and co-ordination needed to deal a devastating shot while atop their horse, the children crafted targets of leather pouches that they dangled off branches; leaving them to dangle admits the trees meant that the targets could sway in the wind. The leather targets were shot at varied heights, distances and speeds. In winter they hunted with their bows and further honed their craft on moving prey. Transforming their irises into scopes, masterful and venerated bowmen emerged at fifteen years old.

Waiting until the coldest months to advance and siege, men and horses required less water. Dew this season would stimulate grass growth, providing grazing for horses and small game that the nomad warriors hunted for sustenance. Mongols easily rode and fought over frozen lakes. The rivers that Europeans relied upon as protection became highways for the Mongol cavalry.

The impatient kicking and stirring from the hooves of the cavalry sounded coarse and rugged on the flattened and short-grass steppes. This scratchy grinding, however, was drowned out by a different sound. The transition was to a horsehead fiddle accompanied by throat singing, and it was strong and stuck out from the drumming and prayers. Throat singing coupled with the horsehead fiddle held more depth than that of heaving down the rival with grainy bellowing on the battle field, it was to relay strength and courage into their own army's' men. The singing was an imitation of nature, its animals and its noises. The sound must be conjured from the gut and pushed out with as much strength as possible from the back of the throat; a sash is tied around the belly to help in pushing out the breath. Throat singing was a personification of the lands' icy zephyrs that rode down the mountains' slopes and volleyed off frozen streams, the whistles of arrows piercing through the trees and the moans and grunts of native cattle.

The drums frenzied towards a climax, as each beat squeezed into one another and each hit shoved past the previous one, the shamans' drumming mimicked the hollow pulse of powerful hooves sprinting.

The drumming was distorted by the sky bound blessings, the husking croaks of fiddles entwined their vibrations with the cultic singing. The Mongols morphed to spawn a looming ensemble that strung the sounds of their previous victories to the Tartar clan. *Cower away from this confrontation* Temujin's troupe cooed. A battle symphony that was played to several enemies before them, that gave them the same option as they were given. The heavy vibrations could shake the soil under the foe's cavalry and make wooden planks of the rival fleets shiver, the tempting waft of submission licked at the hooves of Tartar's horses:

several broke off from their formation and fled. Then, several others, then more, then even more fled the fight. A domino effect of fear toppled into place, as one handful of soldiers left the rest felt their own probability waver and so fled and then the next handful felt their own odds of survival shrink, and again and again. However far Tartar's soldiers fled, the burdensome tune still ricocheted the dirt they galloped over their horses with. *An honorable outcome.*

Ulaanbaatar, the coldest capital in the world. The small city has always perched snugly inside its bowl of mountains. From October to January the pollution and cold weather would essentially become trapped by the natural walls, extending both the frigid winters and the highly concerning air quality. The country's largest mountain ranges retain its status as towering and gargantuan, and it still renders the city very dry from the lack of clouds through the year; the city remains as the Land of The Eternal Blue Skies. Yet inside these tall ranges that can completely block the clouds, are hills that dwarf to these seemingly untouchable peaks. Mounds with slow inclines and stubby slopes. These rolling and tumbling hills have been smoothed over by time, burnished over centuries of existence and have been buffed by the trampling and hurtling of cavalries.

Highly Commended: Melody of Memory – by Atlas Eden

The piano envied the keyboard. After three hundred years of singing the same eighty-eight notes, the piano wished it could speak Guitar, Saxophone, Drum, Panpipe, Violin and Koto, and the one hundred and twenty other voices the keyboard boasted. But you can't teach an old instrument new tricks.

And this piano was old.

The piano's first memory was a caveman tapping on stones to keep the dark of winter at bay. They were hardly a piano, but the various-sized pebbles made an enjoyable set of sounds when struck a certain way. The caveman made up a melody. He might have made the first song, except the cold crept in the cave and froze his fingers, which made the playing irksome. The piano remembered this in the way a human remembers the womb: distant, cosy and not quite real.

It remembered the later years better. There was music throughout history, rising, falling, like an opera of endless acts. Other instruments became dominant: the piano's cousin percussion and its sister strings. But one way or another, those nice-sounding stones in a cave morphed through the centuries into the harpsichord.

The piano loved being a harpsichord. These days it cringed at the twangy sound, but back then it knew no better. The keys thrummed and zoomed, singing in a voice somewhat like a guitar, somewhat like water slapping on a rock, or the sighing of seashells. Life as a teenaged harpsichord was wild, so puffed with self-esteem that it was utterly unselfconscious. The piano looked fondly on those memories, but if another instrument inquired about them, the piano would blush and pretend they never happened.

In the eighteenth century, the harpsichord became self-aware and developed a certain class, refining itself into the piano. This was when it got into its stride. Pianos were a staple of Europe, but this piano — this dusty, scarred, unbranded model sitting in a second-hand

music shop surrounded by self-satisfied keyboards — was a legend. It had performed ‘Für Elise’ while being played by Beethoven himself. Well, technically he played a different piano, but in an overly enthusiastic crescendo, a D key came clean off and flew through the air, unnoticed by the composer. Eventually, the D key was repurposed into a different piano and that was the one that sat in the music shop. So one of its keys was played by Beethoven.

The creation of this piano was an eclectic job. Of its eighty-eight keys there was the D from Beethoven, an F from Mozart, an E from Rachmaninoff, two A’s from Elton John and an A-sharp from Freddy Mercury. As a result, the piano was rather haphazard: several keys were different sizes, most had gone yellow, and there was no middle C.

No wonder it sat in the music shop for thirty-odd years, its colourful heritage forgotten. The owner would have thrown it out, except it added a classical tone to the shop. So the piano waited, staring jealously upon keyboards, with nothing but a melody of memory.

In September, the music shop flooded. The shop was closed, the owner on holiday, but the water ignored the sign as it burst through the door and came to peruse the merchandise. The keyboards short-circuited. The piano allowed itself a chuckle at their demise, which was replaced by an ivory scream as a wave picked up the piano and purchased it. The piano floated down the street. It meandered in confused circles, before the wave headed to the seafront and the piano was swept into the blue.

Eventually, it sank to the seafloor. Its wood swelled. A fish attempted to eat its keys and decided after much struggle that Elton’s A wasn’t food. A crab took up residence under its lid. There was a nibbling of strings.

When a band of fishermen hauled up their net, they were surprised to find a piano among the cod. It was ruined, producing wet slurps when played. The fishermen were superstitious folk — which comes from living atop a sapphire abyss — and decided that in case the piano belonged to a musically minded dead pirate, or was a hobby of Davy Jones, it was best to return it to the sea. Three men pushed the piano off starboard and it toppled backwards with a haunting lurch and a splash that scared mermaids.

The piano resigned itself to an eternity of wood-rot, but a storm tide beached it on an island. A race of natives inhabited the island who had escaped modern influence and dressed much as the cavemen of the piano’s formative years.

The natives poked the instrument. They peered at its crab-scarred strings and its waterlogged keys. They dragged it to their village to be examined by the shaman.

The shaman — who looked remarkably like Beethoven — stroked his chin. He declared that if the piano once housed a deity, the deity had drowned at sea. This offended the piano, but it lacked the will to voice its woe. The natives carried on with their day and the piano lay, again, forgotten.

Months passed. Any lingering menace the piano possessed, faded. The natives grew less timid and more curious, and pulled the piano apart. The hammers were used to tenderise meat, the wood was dried and burned on fires. The keys that had once been stroked by Rachmaninoff and Freddy Mercury, were sharpened and used as spearheads.

The piano had fragmented dreams of pounding upon flesh and dancing in flames; of being jabbed towards enemy tribesmen, piercing skin and turning from yellow to red.

The natives grew adventurous. They took the keys from the spears and filed them into different shapes: they balanced them in ivory towers, hit them against each other. They discovered that a stone struck against a key produced a sound. They found that one key sounded different from another. And they experimented and played.

Soon there were no more spears. There were no more battles. The natives were caught in the throes of music and no force of heaven or earth could shake them. They created sounds: sounds turned to melodies; melodies turned to songs; songs turned to symphonies.

Instead of settling territorial debates with fighting, the chosen method was trial by music.

The natives shared the secrets of the keys with each other, and the island thrummed day and night with tribal rhythms.

The piano was conscious of every sound. It hadn't been played so much in a hundred years and never by so many hands. Who would have thought it would end up reverting to the music of cavemen?

After years of melodic evolution, an interlude arrived. A boat moored on the island manned by English anthropologists, there to study the natives. They were astonished to find a culture revolving not around hunting, but solely around music. To top it all off, the natives had created ivory piano keys, despite a distinct lack of elephants.

One anthropologist took a key with him to England. A picture appeared in the paper, headlined 'ADVANCED MUSICAL PROGRESS ON REMOTE ATLANTIC ISLAND,' and, 'WERE THEY PLAYING PIANO BEFORE WE WERE?'

The piano key sat behind glass in an exhibition. No prehistoric keyboards were present.

A collector purchased the key for twenty-thousand pounds. Had they known it was the D once played by Beethoven, it would have been closer to a million.

The collector had the piano key made into a new brand of instrument, meant to replicate how the islanders would have created a piano from their natural resources. The Tribal Piano, as it was called, was an instant success among music-lovers. Its popularity was so great, the collector manufactured an entire line.

"All the grace of a Steinway with all the charm of a harpsichord," said critics. "Feels like I'm jamming with the cavemen," said others.

Despite its old-fashioned appeal, many missed the convenience of a keyboard. One person put together the first digital Tribal Piano, which had the rustic look of an acoustic, but also had a headphone jack, speaker inputs, Bluetooth compatibility, internet connection and two hundred and fifty instrument voices for good measure.

And so the piano who once envied keyboards sung in far-flung tongues, while an unused keyboard watched from the corner. The piano hummed in Euphonium, whistled in Flute, harmonised in Harmonica. And when its owner selected the standard 'Piano' voice, the result was a clanging and tinkling and whirring and chirping and pounding and slamming and fluttering and hissing and tapping, tapping, tapping on stones in a cave at the dawn of time to keep the dark of winter at bay.

Highly Commended: The Things We Left Unsaid – by Oona Wicks

The old theatre stretches out before me. I can still feel the ghosts of a once loved and cherished community. The ever fading happiness still clings to its ruminants; I can feel the memories in every faded curtain and every gold letter slowly losing its noble shine. The stain glass windows are boarded up and a few singular rays of light manage to weave their way through cracks in the wooden panels, slicing through the near darkness.

I see the grand piano and I can almost feel the audience as I haul myself onto the broken panels of the wooden stage. This was our happy place, and it always will be.

I slide off the white sheet from the top of the grand piano, watching millions of pieces of dust float upwards towards the roof like a thousand graceful angels that slowly come to rest at my feet.

I've been mute for 4 years, ever since my mother passed and the theatre was the only place in the world I could still feel close to her. I remember when she had finished her performance and how she would always smile at me as I stood proudly in the wings. She's still here, in every broken key and every inch of the theatre we used to call home. I can feel it.

Trust me, I've tried to speak. It's like the voice inside me has slowly faded along with the pieces of my heart mother took when she left.

Music was my escape, every day I would sit in our theatre and play the one song mother taught me, bowing to the audience of empty chairs and smiling at the thought of mother, maybe someday watching me from the wings, like I had always done.

I trace my fingers along the broken keys, feeling a slight lump in my throat when I remember the day father had declared the theatre was closing down. I remember the faraway look in his eyes and how he had simply just said 'Aria, every time I step foot in that theatre, all I can think of is the past. We can either spend days trying to mend something that will never be the same, or we can move on and cherish the life we have, because life is precious. With ends come new beginnings, and now is time to start our new chapter.'

I hear the creak of a door, slowly opening and closing and snap out of my daydream. I hurry towards the back of the piano and crouch low. You shouldn't be in here, Aria. I say to myself with an air of confused panic.

Suddenly, I hear muffled voices coming from the back of the theatre. There are two men, one of them is the unmistakable figure of my father and the other a strange man with a briefcase and a look of importance. I strain my ears to listen to the hushed conversation.

"I was never planning on selling, sir." I hear father declare. I can sense the frustration in his voice and it sends a chain reaction of panic through every inch of my body. I shouldn't be listening.

"Maybe I can offer something that may be to your persuasion, my friend." The stranger's voice is cold and calculated and I hear the sound of a briefcase opening and closing. For a second the intensity of the silence seemed to be wrapping its arms around me and consuming every inch of the theatre. "It's done."

Father paused slightly before the footsteps left the theatre and I was once again, alone.

I slowly rise from my hiding spot, but to my utter surprise father is sat on the front row of the theatre, he gazes up at the stage with a lost expression.

For a second I feel like the lost voice inside me is filled with a thousand questions but the feeling fades as quickly as it came.

“Hello dear.” Father smiles at me briefly. I was half expecting him to be furious of me being in here, let alone eavesdropping on his private matters. The ghost of a sympathetic smile crept across his face but faded abruptly.

“I sold the theatre.” He said quietly. “But it is not as bad as it seems, my dear.” He says with more purpose.

“The man I saw today promises to rebuild it, and repair any damage so one day, it is fit for the beautiful theatre it used to be, once again.”

I feel a wide smile sweep across my face. I throw my arms around father. All I want is for the place I once loved more than anywhere else to be teeming with joy and life, and that’s what it will become once again.

7 Years later....

It’s time. I clutch the sheet of music to my chest; the faded photograph of mother is hidden deep inside the pages, her warm smile fuelling the fire of hope deep inside me. I hear the cheers of the audience as I make my way out onto the vast stage and as I look out across the crowd of unfamiliar faces I see the proud smile of father lighting up the front row.

I sit down, the grand piano keys are no longer broken they are shining with a million memories, healed by time and love.

As I begin to play, the theatre fades away around me and it’s just me and mother once again. She’s sat beside me, her hands on mine, teaching me to play the first song I ever learnt and smiling down at me with that proud look she always did when she saw how the music gave me a fire of passion.

When I finish the song, the roar of the audience suddenly melts all the memories away and I stand to take a bow. Thank you, mother. I say quietly thank you for everything.

I glance sideways to the wings where my daughter stands watching me with awe and I smile at her, just like my mother once did. They say life is almost like a tree, in some ways. Each branch is a different direction and a different path you can take and each wilted leaf the ghost of a forgotten memory. Maybe mother’s time had finally come to an end, but I would treasure the leaves of her memory forever and pass on the roots of her love through the next generation.

Commended: The Abandoned Tune – by Alvina Chan

“Hurry! Run and get out of here!” said the old man urgently.

“I’m not leaving everyone else here! I’ll fight the guards off!” said the boy with a desperate look on his face.

“Get away from here, Thomas! I’m counting on you to help us bring music back to the world”. Ever since the new prime minister stepped up, a great deal of changes had been made, one of them being the banning of any form of music. Walks home became depressing and movies were no longer entertaining. But most of all, musicians suffered the greatest loss, not being able to touch their instruments ever again, causing great grief and despair.

Thomas had only been two years of age when music was outlawed. Although it seemed forever ago, Thomas still vividly remembers hearing a piece on the piano his mother played to him as a lullaby. His mother had died 14 years ago, 3 days after the law on music had been put into action. Many say she may have died of grief, for her entire life had been devoted to becoming an amazing pianist.

Thomas had always wanted to reconnect with music. One day, on a rainy Thursday afternoon, when the sound of the pattering of the rain was the only rhythm, Thomas had just come out of his afterschool club. All he could think about was how his long journeys home would not feel as burdensome if he had music with him. As his train arrived at the station, Thomas could suddenly hear the faint noise of a low instrument playing a captivating tune. He tried his best to ignore it but his urge to follow the melody grew stronger. Thomas followed this unfamiliar sound as it grew louder and louder until it led him to a wooden door. Not knowing what was behind that door, Thomas sluggishly turned the door knob. As he entered, lively jazz music was dancing across the room. The notes the saxophone produced were soulful and powerful, as if the instrument itself had emotions. It was nothing like Thomas had ever seen. It turned out to be a secret store for instruments, he looked around and the walls were hung with guitars, ukuleles, bass everything you could think of was in the store, from cellos to harmonicas. One item that really caught Thomas’s eye was the keyboard. At first he hesitated, afraid that he might get in trouble. Then he thought about his mother’s playing and decided to make the purchase. Thomas made sure that the keyboard was safely hidden in the suitcase provided so he would not get caught for being seen with something suspicious. Thomas was more nervous than he had ever felt.

When the train door finally closed, Thomas gave a huge sigh of relief. Oblivious, Thomas had not realised that an undercover cop was sitting in the cabin besides him and had noticed his strange behaviour. Before he knew it, Thomas had been put in handcuffs. As they were taking him away he saw that the police had discovered the keyboard. He knew that a lot of trouble was coming his way.

Thomas then passed out in the back of the police car. The next thing he saw were the walls of his cold, dark and meek prison cell. It was a hollow cube of concrete with no escape or light. Alone and anxious all he could do was hope for the best.

A few hours later, Thomas was woken by the guards bashing on his cell.

“Supper! Wake up!” they yelled viciously.

Nervously, Thomas made his way into the lunch hall.

“Next!” yelled the server as she slopped an unknown grey mush on the prisoners’ trays.

Thomas had no one to sit with because it was only his first day, as he was about to walk towards an empty table, a somewhat familiar voice shouted:

“Thomas!”

Immediately turning his head around, he tried to find who was calling for him.

"I knew it was you! Come sit" the old man said.

Not remembering who this man was, Thomas sat hoping for some answers.

"H-hello." Thomas stuttered

"Do you not remember me? I used to come over every weekend and play the piano with her. I still remember how you would always sit next to the piano, you look all grown up now!"

Hearing that Thomas slowly started to remember who this man was.

"Do you know how long we'd be stuck in here?" Thomas asked.

"Sorry boy, I'm not sure," the man said hopelessly, " I've only ever seen around 2 people leave this place. I was brought here 5 years ago for purchasing some CDs. There hasn't been a single day when I haven't thought about getting out and being with my family again. Anyway, I think it's time to finish up. Get yourself cleaned up and return to your cell."

The old man's words were all Thomas could think about for days and nights. A few months passed and he finally came up with the perfect plan to escape. Thomas planned to distract the guards with music, the best way to escape was to work together and cause a scene.

Thomas told the old man about the plan. Though at first he was hesitant, the old man had always wished to be reunited with his family again and agreed. Not long after, Thomas was able to get enough people on board with his plan.

It was the big day of the jail break. Abruptly, a wave of harmonies were sung through every prison cell, it sounded as if it was a morning in Sunday church with the choir. The guards had no choice but to go into the cells themselves and stop the people from singing. Just when the cells were opened, everyone had made a run for it, standing on tables and distracting the guards many of them including Thomas were able to find a way out.

"Hurry! Run and get out of here!" said the old man urgently.

"I'm not leaving everyone else here! I'll fight the guards off!" said the boy with a desperate look on his face.

"Get away from here, Thomas! I'm counting on you to help us bring music back to the world".

Thomas decided to listen and slyly escaped while the guards were putting the prisoners back into their cells one by one. Unfortunately, he was discovered and dragged into a government vehicle. Thomas finally gave up, he sighed hopelessly, not knowing where he was to be taken. Before he knew it, he had ended up on the steps of a government building, with high stairs and tall pillars.

"Hello, Thomas" said a mysterious voice.

Thomas looked up, and realized that it was the prime minister speaking to him.

"Someone informed me that you were the one responsible for the jail break this morning, you understand the consequences of your actions?" she said.

"I wouldn't have been sent to jail if it wasn't for your irrational ban of music!" Thomas exclaimed.

"Not everyone can have what they want. You see, twenty years ago, before I became prime minister, I wanted to become the greatest pianist to ever walk this planet. But unfortunately I had a tragic car accident, doctors said my ears would never recover. Having permanent damage to my ears meant my dream of being a pianist became extremely difficult, so I gave up entirely. Seeing so many musicians succeeding reminded me of the future I could've had. That's why I started my plan to get rid of music entirely." she explained.

"Look, I'm sorry. And I know I could never understand how you feel. But don't you think it's unfair you took music away from everyone. My mother used to be a pianist and would play for me all the time until she passed away. Music is the only thing that would connect me with

her as if she was here again. Now that you have taken music away my memories of her are more distant.”

Upon hearing this, the prime minister thought about the consequences of taking music away. All those years she had only thought about herself.

Though Thomas felt he was leaving empty handed, the prime minister had been touched by his words.

A few days later, a prison guard wakes the prisoners up with the greatest news of their lives: “Those who are in here because of illegal access to music are free to pack up and go home. When he gets back to the city, the streets are filled with roaring street performances, people are celebrating music being back into their lives. Hip hop dancers are break dancing along to pop music and bands are playing more energetically and powerfully than ever. It feels as if a heavy fog has been lifted and people are free to express themselves again.

Commended: To Play A Violin Until Death – by Hannah Gao

If I could have chosen the way I would die, it would be to play a violin at the shore until the tide came to drown oneself.

For what could be more beautiful or romantic than death? Her graceful, black shadow roams over the earth on her inky feathered wings, waiting to pounce with a clash of cymbals on the least expecting prey, and clasp them lovingly in her arms, carrying them tenderly into the next world. The great Shakespeare understood this. Romeo and Juliet, the lovers who would die for each-other, as there was no meaning without their partner. A tragedy of a lifetime but a beauty that has lasted for centuries.

(I stared down at the yellowed telegram in my hands, turning it over until my hands tore it apart and down the bin went those pieces of trash.)

It was then I made up my mind.

Bow and the violin’s neck in my clenched fist, I closed the dormitory door behind me for the last time and strolled off without a backward glance.

I felt free; my body and spirit unburdened from the duty of life, leaving me to appreciate Nature’s loveliness without worry of my own’s absence. My feet trod along the woodland path leading from the prison-like university to the flowing sea.

Night-time calls of birds echoed from inside the wood. Trees rustled and murmured in their canopies above me, a stream of earthly language too low for the human ear to intrude on. Their elegantly swaying forms gave the impression that they were dancing to unheard music and the wood was merely a gathering, a party for pleasure. In the eerie twilight, I was one with the woodland as Mother Nature welcomed me back into her family that mankind had long forsaken, yet I also was an outcast of the forest, passing through foreign lands.

Light was my tread upon the forest floor as I turned off the path. So light that I seemed to have grown Apollo’s dainty wings upon each ankle that sped me across the wood as the speed of his golden rays. Suddenly, ahead of me, through the crowd of weathered trunks, a light among the darkness. I caught glimpses of Puck and the Faerie Queen with her score of glittering attendants flitting about her, chattering in musical tones that blessed one’s ear. But

no matter how fast I flew, I could not catch up. Glittering garments shone just a few step ahead every-time. Here in the forest, lay a deep ancient magic that pulsed in the air, thrumming the violin's strings. Their soft Faerie music could be heard if I strained my ears, mingled with laughter, mocking me.

At last, in a desperate attempt to join their magical midst, I broke free of the trees and came to a halt in-front of the sandy beach that the tide had retreated from. It led into the churning black sea some miles away.

The moon, who had been covered by the leafy dancers' before, smiled down in her cold affectionate way from her perch in the starry sky, beckoning me to join her in the heavens as a star by her side. A star that shone and glowed blissfully in the sky and knew nothing of worry but only happiness that made it sing in chorus with the surrounding constellations.

It was time, she seemed to say. Stepping onto the sand, out from the shadow of the trees, I placed the violin gracefully onto my shoulder and, closing my eyes, began to play.

The strings did not need warming up; they understood this was their last performance in this world and knew to execute their best. The violin's sleek, red-tinted body melted into my familiar touch,

its well-known figure into mine so that we became one in that moment. Its accompanying bow, usually stubborn to my wishes, heeded my every desire at the slightest contact and sailed smoothly across the strings like a ship in fine weather. I was playing "Claire de Lune", an ode to the moon herself for my final night.

Softly, began the tune, the delicate beginning layer of a butterfly's cocoon that would fall apart at the gentlest wind, slowly forming the foundations of life. The bow's first movements along the puckered strings, were notes played hesitantly, cautiously, testing the waters. Then, the tune began its wavering ascent into the sky to reach the silently watching moon. Fingers danced a waltz across the keyboard, tuning, adjusting the piece to perfection. Soaring notes leapt to faltering heights out of sight and, in an instant, plunged fathoms into the depths of the sea. The melody's richness grew deeper. The cocoon's caged butterfly broke free in its vibrant colours and tasted its first moments of living. Slower chords moved steadily along, overtaken by fast, joyous crochets that sped ahead on the journey of "Claire de lune". The magic of the music bound the night to its enchanting tune. The moon was quiet and her subjects, the children of the night, followed suit. Once still night-air became alive with the strings and bow's harmony as they moved in-sync together, partners to a complicated dance only they could step in time to.

Finally, it came to an end. Exhausted, the instrument and his companion strung out the last faltering notes, and, simultaneously, the butterfly's animated wings fluttered into a still shadow of Nature's most delicate form of life.

The last remnants of the music loosened their hold on me. Now, the only thing I could hear was the crashing reality of the waves, a sound wilder than anything in the world of Debussy. It was nearer than I remembered. Someone was watching me.

I opened my eyes and two things registered at once; firstly, in my haze, half in the land of the composition and lured by the moon's stolen rays, I had walked miles further onto the beach until I was at the edge of the oncoming waves, looking into the bare sky. Secondly, a mermaid was staring at me from a cluster of moored rocks a few feet away.

“Hello”, I said, seeming to have been expecting her as I was neither surprised nor alarmed.

“Hello”, came her sweet voice across the distance that separated us. Still, the tide crept in.

In the silence that followed, we continued to look at each other. Aliens to one another, dangerous even, but held together in a trance.

She didn't look exactly as the fairy tales had said. Long, liquid-like waves of hair cascaded down behind her slender slight figure and into the sea. Partially obscured by her azure locks, peeked out her startlingly blue eyes, reflecting my small dark figure in a cloud of curiosity and innocence. Her tail had two delicate fins running down either side, like a butterfly was my thought, and two others protruded from the end of the iridescent tail of emerald scales, a shade of ivy. She sat proudly on the rocks, a queen in her elemental throne.

But what caught my attention was not her captivating eyes, loveliness, the aura of peace that hung about her, nor even her shimmering tail; it was the golden lyre that was fastened at her side by a belt encircling her waist.

She noticed where I looked and, blushing, broke the silence.

“It's my own. I made it.” The mermaid said shyly in her beautiful lilting voice that addled the brain. She unfastened the belt's clasp, and her piercing gaze grew even more intense. “May I?”

I nodded, though neither of us were quite sure what I had consented to, and once more, raised the violin high onto my shoulder. Our hands began to move in the same instance, our eyes still connected. The water lapped around my ankles. And higher still.

The music that started to pour out into the night sky belonged to the heavens rather than our mere earth. Nothing of the kind had ever been heard in human memory, I was certain. It was unique in every way: gentle as the calmest of waves yet a storm of emotion at the same time, free flowing music that was captivating, elegant as the swan's regal form but harsher than an eagle's cry as it sweeps the ground. Now, it was not only the night that stopped in motion to listen but, indeed, the whole world ceased revolving on its axis for this moment.

The mermaid's gentle touch on the lyre's chords evoked a music that was painfully exquisite, the heart would ache the simple sound, and the tears begin their fall. Different notes weaved into each-other, creating a pattern of harmony that could never be remade as it disappeared into the night air, lost forever. It was the purest form of beauty that we created. We, I thought our eyes locked, me and her.

The two figures played until the jet-black sea covered them, carrying them away from the prying eyes of the celestials.

Commended: The Music She Made by Chloe Martin

Like every Sunday past and every Sunday to come, she and I skipped into the Church hall together, well she always skipped, bounding in front of me while I lurked just behind as if I were her shadow.

She was always so merry even her appearance would smile and bounce along with her; her tight-coiled curls springing, tumbling and hopping and deep hazel eyes that grinned warmly, the dull sun melting them into honey. While mine may be blue, like all the poets and singers tend to tell of, hers were more than any song could ever describe.

The rich ochre of her irises were like fragments of ancient forests. They were the curse that bound us to this mortal plane, the blessing that someday my body will be embraced by moss and decay. Her brown eyes were a promise that a day will come when I breathe my last breath and that my lungs would swell with flowers, that my veins might flow with pond-water and that my heart will one day die. Her brown eyes were born of the lusting human love that comes with facing God and walking backwards into sin. They were the rings of trees and wrongs of men. They were an old song, a melody that only the forest knew the words to.

She was beautiful in a timeless way, the way a statue may wither and grow old and yet will still be regarded as a masterpiece for millennia. Perhaps I loved her too much. To think like this in a church of all places, a place that would define these feelings as friendship, a strong bond. The kind of pining historians would note to be nothing more than two women living in the same cottage until they returned to the earth hand in hand. And they may very well be right in assuming such things, however, I think the yearning will continue to hum and glow within a little amber lantern swinging in my heart, whether I let her know or not. For as long as she is here, the world feels warm.

Drifting in behind her, like the fog to her shine, her cornflower overalls caught in the wind and I was merely another admirer. Together, we perched on the battered, dusty pews, patting down on the crimson pillows in plumes of dirt. She helped me with mine, she always did, as she was always there. Tucking stray strands of her curls behind her ears and gingerly roll up her sleeves, she was always the same and always perfect. She never would need to change her tune.

As we sat, chatting idly, she told me of all the words she loved the most, she spoke of orange slices and stars, everything that would seem so mundane, but if she were to say she loved yellow, I feel suddenly my whole world would grow sunny and soft. Her words always seemed to resonate in every aspect of life, when she longed for rain soon we'd hear the pitter-patters on the pavement. Her words were always laced with love, honey-coated and caramelised she'd speak of even worms as having not a mean bone in their bodies because, being worms, they had not a bone at all. Everything that rolled off her tongue was from a dream, guiding me to a home I wasn't sure I had. Mystical, magic, mysterious: her thoughts always lingered, it felt intrinsic that I remembered what they were.

But the awe she amassed only expanded when she sang, after sermons she'd muse for as long as her soul believed it could. And today was no different.

In her lemon-grass wake, she chirruped to the stand. She sang like it was the end of the world

And it was -for a moment- we were the last two people on earth, bathing in the water of stained glass, an empty church, and an empty hand I wished so deeply to use to put an end to her song and watch the whole world dissolve in silence, and yet we would be safe in each other's embrace. The spell of old wallpaper, petrichor and lavender binding us tight and holding us close.

With every note, the world shattered, with every line someone else seemed to disappear. Just me and her, at the edge of time. But it was in these notes when she looked most herself. Melancholic. Her eyebrows shook, her hands trembled and the words she brought forth into the world were ones of woe. I wondered how she kept it all in, her despair. How she could hold it in her chest, behind her teeth, inside her mind for so long. Every week, waiting and waiting for that one moment to just let it out through song. I wondered when I would find my own tune to let it all out. To release the boulders that crushed down on me, cracking my collarbones, confining me to live as just another watcher. Let my soul cry out in its restlessness for a world full of deceit. A world in which we have rocket-ships that go to mars and toothpaste that tastes like strawberries and yet somehow to love is seen as insane. Illegal. Sin.

I am unaware to what burdens her but I pray that it is not what bothers me.

The harmonies nestled and slept in my chest as she continued to sing. Just one moment at the end of the world with her where I could share that stage and everything would just be a little bit more ok. To have the world crumble and burn around us in a chorus of chaos and mayhem, and to ignore it all for the sounds she made when she smiled drowned out everything else; it didn't mean a thing. Just one moment in a town without us, that would be enough. To join her duet, without judgement.

But I was cowering in the pews and she stood tall with a halo above her head and I am reminded of all the reasons it will never be.

It was wintertime, the time when not even the sun dared stay for long, abandoning us in an abyss. The church was empty, just she and I alone with the rattling door. She traipsed towards me, running her fingers lightly across the rough wood. My heart beat solemnly like a choir of drums and standing together we left out into the bitterness.

"It's a strange time for rain," I noted. She laughed, "it's not raining,"

Gently she took my cold hand in hers and lifted it to my cheek, it was wet when I pulled back. "Oh,"

"Are you ok?" she inquired. "Peachy," I beamed.

When you practise things often enough, they grow easier and easier, and for me lying had always

been one of those things, hiding and waiting.

It began to snow on our stroll home, my shoulders were quaking, terrified that somehow, someway she would know I was lying. That she might figure out the freezing wind that haunted my mind was much stronger than the one that ensnared us now. As snowflakes trickled onto her eyelashes she drew the vastest toothy grin upon her face and reached for her woollen ear muffs.

She whistled delighted chirps and swung her arms, but I'm sure she couldn't hear my voice, my fear when behind a cloud of frozen vapour I whispered a melodical, "I Love you," and joined in her joyous song for the first time. Whether she or the world ever I heard it mattered not. It was a declaration, that I was ever there and that I will ever love. And maybe one day, in some future time, someone will remember us and they'll sing the same song. One that no one really knows the words to, but they'll keep singing it anyway until the earth dissolves and humanity is mud.

For even in man's darkest moments there has always been music, on the front lines of wars, on ships of sailors heading into death and in the touch of a hand that will never touch yours back. In the close distance, the invisible veil that separates me and her.

Commended: The Healing Power of Music by Alisha Sri-Ram

I'll never forget that fateful day. That day when I lost my voice.

She sang her heart out as we drove, as if she were performing to an audience of a myriad of people. Her passion and fervour for these bizarre tunes fascinated me- how could someone love music so much? To me, the notes were mere beats in a bar; to her, they were a river of mellifluous melodies which flowed through her and lifted her spirits.

From country to classical, from pop to punk rock, she would listen to music for hours upon hours, mesmerised. She would always sing along; her voice, that of a melodious nightingale, would fill any room with light and life. It was indubitable that she ought to become a singer. She was humming, singing, laughing; little did she know that in the blink of an eye, a car would swerve in front of her.

I heard the crash before I saw it. That innocently wicked vehicle thrust into the driver seat of the car aggressively. My shock was followed by pain, as excruciating stabs of pain were pierced through me. My body became paralysed, as my blood, bones and brain were frozen in place. But that pain was nothing. Nothing compared to what I felt when I saw her.

All the blood blurred my vision, and my eyes couldn't see anything but that gruesome image of her. Fresh tears fell fast, as my shoulders shook vigorously. That moment stilled, as my tears turned to salt, my throat dried up completely, and my head began to throb as loudly as my heart. People were everywhere- they closed in, confined me, cut me away from her. I tried to plead, tried to scream, tried to cry, but someone had wrenched my voice away from me. They ripped me away from her. No matter how I endeavoured to deny it, all I could think about was that devastating truth.

My mother was dead.

I take in my surroundings; besieging me are boxes of her possessions, her belongings, her memories. It's been a year, and I've struggled to muster the courage to face them. Face her. Reluctantly, I force myself to do it, to take something out of the boxes. Pulling out her dresses, her accessories, her jewellery breaks my broken heart even more, as memories

come flooding back and threaten to wash me back to my misery. But then I see it- a piece of scintillating silver in the array of colours.

Her music player. Frantically, I scramble through the blues and pinks to grab it. It is exactly how I remember it, slightly scratched around the edges, with those same white earphones that she would always wear. Music. It was her weakness, but also her strength; it was with her through hardships, but also through prosperity; it was with her during her life, and during her death.

My heart takes over my body, and I can't control myself as I put the earphones on and start the first track. At first, all I can hear is my heart thumping like a drum. In an instant, the real drumbeats begin, as I immediately recognise the song. But strangely I don't hear the blank, empty notes I used to hear. The music has changed. The music changes me.

The sweet sounds caress my heart, the rhythm relaxes me, and I can almost taste those soothing tones on the tip of my tongue. The melody brings a serenity that washes my worries away. Without warning, the chorus comes, and somehow my voice is controlled by someone else. It is as if it's controlled by her, as I start singing along to the music, getting lost in its harmonies, feeling its slow pulse connect with my heartbeat. And in this moment, I feel more connected to my mother than ever before.

I can feel her. Feel her laughter, her life, her love. I can hear her voice, sweeter than a lark's, chirping along to the song as she flutters across the room, dancing with sparkle and zeal. And in that moment, I remember what she said to me only hours before she died.

That day, she was belting out the lyrics of her favourite rock song, when I angrily marched next door to plead that she be quiet. Music is irritating, disturbing and a waste of time, I complained to her, my face scrunched up in exasperation. She laughed, and cupped my face in her delicate hands, as her attenuated lips formed a smile.

"One day, you'll understand what music truly is. One day, you'll find your voice."

Today is that day. Today is the day I have found my voice.

Commended: Tuesdays Are Silent by Megan Tredgold

Morning jazz trickling through cracks in the doorway.

The light beginning to break through the window overlooking a carpark with concrete and no people and no cars. I'm rolling over to my side, face buried in the itchy, thin pillow. No sound is muffled. The jazz continues, tinny and persistent through the hidden speakers in the stuffing. I get up and wash.

The water hits the walls and the floor, applauding the musician hidden in the showerhead. A threadbare towel, a faded carpet. Milk past its sell-by date and cereal turned stale in its packet. Rich jazz, wealthy jazz. Rolling its tongue over the grey day, the peeling walls. Artificial sunshine.

Outside, there is no sunshine. Mozart on Mondays. He echoes down the street, pensive and powerful. Mondays are for reflection. We step out in unison, the walk to the station. Blank faces, pages where notes are written and symphonies made. Footsteps slap on that concrete, in time with the jarring tempo of violins and cellos and trumpets and oboes and piano and flutes. Mondays are for reflection, so they drown us.

At work I'm assembling speakers. Some are tiny, the size of the nail on my finger. Some as large as houses. We stand in silence we don't look we don't speak we don't think. Mondays are for reflection. Mondays are for Mozart. He's at the assembly line. Trickling between my fingers like the jazz through my doorway. It's for our own good is what they tell us. It's to make us happy.

I need it. A pocket of silence in the folds of my reality. It will come, they say, you won't hear it anymore. Your brain will tune out the incessant noise. You will find peace.

I am drowning.

Tuesday I am breaking the rules. The rain has been falling, softly, all night. I stay awake and watch it. Imagine the sound it makes hitting the pavement and the growing puddles. Swimming swimming in those soft puddles, softer than the tinny whine of music that scratches at my ears. I feel like I want to scream.

It isn't music, I realise. It's silence. Not a comforting silence, a warm embrace that pulls you gently against her and cradles your weary mind. This silence is the absence of thought, absence of love and passion and friendship. Everything we had. Everything music gave us. The notes pumped through me are emotionless and rigid. Solid blocks of grey mass pounding at my sense of self. At my soul.

I get out of bed. The clock on the bedside reads 3am. Witching hour, they used to call it. The devil's hour. I feel the floorboards creaking beneath my feet, their traitorous resistance mercifully covered by the lullaby hanging in the air. A black coat to match the night. My heart is pounding quickly now and I am beginning to sweat. I could turn back. I could take the steps away from the door and lie back down in my bed and listen to the sounds and do my job and listen to the sounds and listen and do my job.

I unlatch the door.

The humidity from the misty rain sets the ends of my hair on end. I am sure I look crazed, exiting my apartment and navigating the damp stairwell. Passing doors identical to mine, their numbers merging into one. The lullaby still plays lightly, haunting in the darkness. I feel like a bee in a hive.

"It's scientifically impossible for the bumblebee to fly; but the bumblebee, being unaware of these scientific facts, flies anyway."

Darting into alleyways and behind bushes, I am making progress through the silent streets. The lullaby is louder here. If we still had birds or squirrels or rats I wonder if they would

appreciate such a silence as this. I don't know where I am going. The thought of the puddles drives me. I head to the river.

They put speakers in the trees, in the rocks and the soil and the tunnels. The lullaby is a child. Not plump and round and rosy-faced. No, this child is persistent and rude and loud and grasps my sweaty hand with its own clammy fingers. If I shake it off it will cry and they will know I am breaking the rules.

We travel to the treeline, the lullaby and me. The river, normally raging and untameable is placid and slumbering. The lullaby is quieter. I feel its clammy hand loosen against mine. The night air is crisp now, the water washing away the heavy humidity. I sit on the leafy floor, ankles tucked under my crossed legs.

I feel like a jade Buddha.

The image of this flashes in my mind and makes the corners of my mouth rise slightly. It hurts to move muscles so long disused.

I sit for as long as I please. The night stretches on, time stretches on, infinite and impossible before me. I like hearing the gentle flow of the river. The lullaby keeps fading in and out of my focus, and I observe in fascination as it clasps my hand in insistence before becoming nothing more than a whisper against my palms. The world is sleeping.

As I am about to leave, movement on the opposite riverbank. My muscles lock in anticipation. They found me. They know. Panic. My heart racing.

Under the thick cloak of darkness, a shrouded figure is pushing a boat into the sleeping water. I remain half-turned, ready to sprint into the safety of the forest. I watch as they row themselves out to the centre of the river. There is no moonlight under this grey sky.

From the murky shadows of the tiny rowboat, they pull out the last thing I would suspect. Not a gun, a knife. A violin.

My legs burn in protest of the crouch I remain in, but I am transfixed. The stranger pulls back the hood of her cloak and reveals a young woman. She stands stoic and bold against a threat which hangs thick in the air. She is breaking the rules.

Then she begins to play. Soft, melancholy notes at first. They drift across the water and find my ears. The lullaby lets its tight grasp go.

The notes are lost hopes and dreams. Greif and sorrow and depression. They wind tight around me, not to constrain but to empathise. I feel my pain within each stroke of the bow on strings. I feel understood in a way so profound my insides feel as if they have been turned out for all to see. Raw, vulnerable, exposed.

The piece transitions into something filled with rage and anger. She begins to draw her bow across the instrument in sharp, demanding strokes. I feel my anger rise with it, bubbling up in my throat and my blood. It's unbearable. I feel alive. Notes continue to carry across the water, not as solid blocks of grey mass but as prisms of light and knowledge and emotion. It's as if my soul is being played back to me.

The violin stops.

There is a great shuddering in the air. The trees creak and the bushes spew their dying leaves out at my feet, wind whipping the branches of the forest into a frenzy. Breaking through the layer of cloud is a helicopter, its searchlight exposing the woman on the boat. She lifts her hand to shield her eyes from the blinding beam. Artificial sunshine. A crack through the chaos and noise, which, combined with the pounding of my heart creates an overwhelming cacophony of sound.

She collapses at the bottom of her boat.

A metal claw extends from the belly of the beast. It grabs the violin which is lying limp on the seat. That gift, that instrument of delicious chaos and life and passion is encompassed in the flying cage of metal. The helicopter disappears.

The forest is silent. A clammy hand slips itself back into mine. The lullaby plays softly, soothingly in my ears. Now, now, it seems to say. It's all going to be alright. I walk with feet that aren't mine, a mind that isn't mine. The lullaby is cradling me now, rocking me gently back and forth, back and forth. Back to the apartment, back to my bed. I let the sound carry me away. I don't want to think. I don't want to think about how my soul was taken from me, how it was moulded and shaped to form those wonderful notes. The face of the girl as her life was ripped from her body by that metal bullet. Metal claw. Metal beast. I don't think.

Morning sun trickling through cracks in the doorway. I'm rolling over to my side, face buried in the itchy, thin pillow. I get up and wash. The water hits the walls and the floor. A threadbare towel, a faded carpet. Milk past its sell-by date and cereal turned stale in its packet.

Tuesdays are silent.

Commended: Chords of The Night by Olivia Harley

His nerves buzzed inside him. Quivering fingers clutched a violin: smooth, dark and intricate. A thick, velvet curtain hung ahead. Poking his head around the crimson wave, he gaped at the crowded chamber: tiny hands tugged at sleeves, fidgeting impatiently; grey-haired men tapped their feet, sighing. He took a deep breath and strode onto the stage.

An elegant arm lifted and the bow flew across the strings. Heads flicked up, enraptured with a note. Chords of the night filled the hall. Gentle lullabies flowed from the soft tongue of a smiling mother and a choir of twinkling stars sung in dainty rounds, creating an exquisite harmony. A sister sun beamed down, her rays soft yet powerful. The tones were a symphony: wondrous and yellow, echoey and warm. All mortal sins were lost to the rising melody as divine planets forgave and forgot our flaws.

Only the dreamers were awake. Only the romantics felt so profoundly. Quaintly watching the full moon - a shimmering sphere of silver. The climax had arrived. Gloriously operatic notes were flung, rocking the very galaxy with their intensity. The moon released one last booming note and it was all over.

A hush fell. Because the music was too beautiful; it stole the words from their lips and the breath from their lungs. Rivers stilled, winds halted and storms collapsed. Until the

amazement flooded from them and the applause began. Rivers rushed, winds howled and storms danced. The bravo was a song in itself. It required no words, no lyrics, to be understood. For music is a natural magic. A celestial magic of the mind or a place where we are all connected to, by golden threads of passionate feeling. Those very threads knot desperately together, clinging to one another, saving themselves from drowning in emotion.

To play someone a piece of music is the most intimate act. Music rips, spins and tears you. It is a complete exposure of the soul, a gift from one to another. To know my music is to know the colour of my soul.

Explosive clapping erupted. Palm upon palm. Tiny palms and wrinkled palms. All were united in their adoration of the piece, the heavenly ode to nature. It had sounded like a hymn, praising the joys of life.

Hours later, they were still clapping. As the curtain fell with a swoosh, redder than their bleeding hearts. As the violinist's sobs echoed through the room, choking on regrets and lost hopes. As they thanked the world, for the music.

Category: Poems

1st Place: Have You Ever Heard A Sound So Beautiful – by Elizabeth Dunn

Have you ever lain on your back,
The carpet itching your shoulder-blades,
And studied the ceiling?

Have you ever done it with your friends –
Your soulmates, the loves of your life?

Have you ever sprawled across a food-stained floor,
Limbs intertwined and tangled;
And stared into the ceiling. Singing at nothing – at no one?

I have. I've screamed at nothing, the nothingness of a beige-white painted ceiling.
Not quite "singing" our song; some words I can remember, some I don't.

Have you ever shouted a song so loud,
That the cries of your voice drown out
The simple melody?

Overriding it, blending chords and tones that should never hear one another.
Suffocating and smothering every extraordinary note crafted by a god

Have you ever gazed into someone's eyes as they sing?
Watching every emotion they feel as they express it
Through another's words.

Have you ever heard a sound so agonisingly beautiful
That you simply – forget how to breathe? I have.

I've heard a melody that stopped me,
Right in my tracks. Capturing
and encapsulating me.

It wasn't Mozart. Or Beethoven or Chopin.
It wasn't Nick Cave. Or Damien Rice or Kate Bush.

It was them. My friends –
My soulmates,
The loves of my life.

It was Their laughter, Their Melody, Their Music,
That mesmerised me.

2nd Place: A Study in Ivory – by Nicholas Hall

Suspended in shadows,
A silk diamond painted on a shaking chest.
Silence glares in the cavern outside, where
Two hundred pairs of eyes divide the dark into neat
And equal
Slivers.

Apprehension screams –
patiently.

One breath awaits the next.
Two pointed shoes peek from the velvet curtains.
Five quick steps to the stool,
and a flutter of coattails.

Silence tightens.

Fingers sharpen, and
burst into dance,
harmony and melody jump
and intertwine
like olive branches in
a summer courtyard.

Eyes alight like pools of joy,
as color streams from sound –
What makes it so moving?
resplendent timbre,
elegant grace,
or perhaps
some mystic quality of light?

sweat flies from my face
as I present
this study in ivory.

3rd Place: He Should Fear the Power Held in His Fingertips – by Jess Payne

I watch them tremble with apprehension.
His hands ghost the notes he will play; tenderly caressing the precious ivory.
He knows he will create magic. Yet he is fearful.

His angst sets me on edge; I want to reach out, talk to him, tell him whatever he does is
Beautiful. That his talent is unmatched and he is ready.
He needs to feel proud of what he will create. I have faith in him.

Then I stop and think –
Is he scared about performing in this chapel full of people, or to unleash his enchanting skill?
Magic is precious. He has a right to be cautious when releasing it to our unremarkable ears.

A distant irrelevance announces his name. I watch the laboured rise and fall of his chest.
His hands stop shaking.

Not his fingers, but his whole body is swaying, he is caught in his own spell.
I misread his apprehension – his power is limitless and affects him too. Him the most.

Then I hear it. I am intoxicated by his melody; I cannot stop drinking this elixir of notes.
I am transported to heaven and I don't want to leave,
As if I did, my soul would be ripped in half
And I would bleed to death.
How could I ever have existed before hearing this?
This is why I am alive – my purpose, my meaning, my passion. Yet it is not mine, it's His.
Could my purpose be to listen? A careful, appreciative ear? I am not him.
He is ineffably, triumphantly himself. But eternity is whispering in my ear and
I cannot breathe. My introspective, selfish questions cease. This is not about me.

The euphony makes me drift off into the infinite cosmos, into a nebulous fantasy.
I've never felt more grounded and still more detached from reality.
Locked in a state of pleasant madness.
The emancipation of identity, my burden of humanity is lifted...

It would be wrong to say he finished playing.
He wasn't "playing", he was extending his soul and memories and love and hate and tears
and guilt and pain and pleasure. And we were blessed enough to witness it.

I have never heard this boy speak. But I had heard his spirit sing.

Highly Commended: Engloutie – by Puntil Pothikamjorn

I found an old record of yours the other day
and put it on.
Debussy's 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir...' in my head,
the rough bark of a fig tree spun
until it's blooming ripe bulbous fruits - straining to be
plucked
as fantastical dreams are in the night.
Clean sweetness is traced from the grooves,
a tattered fragrance as worn as a childhood home,
as real as the chords played faintly over your heart.
Spinning, spinning.
Far away, a girl drops clothes into the darkness,
blades of grass flutter in my fingers, a meadow smoking with
honeysuckle drawn by evening air.
The third eye in a dead toddler bars a blonde boy from sleep,
something thick and crimson rattling in his ribs. It's his fault,
isn't it?

You're here again, in the centre of my vision,
putting a new record on, spinning it over
the bark of the last one.
Debussy still, but not the same.

We danced to this one, once, feet rasping against the angry chords in a hidden
attic chilled with ghosts. But right now where I am,
the floor cracks into a cathedral coiled in flames –
the only ones that can dance, in the dark heart of a sea pounding so loudly
it's a real nightmare over both pieces.
Lost is the revered diamond that kept me safe as a child
and you're not truly here, because I'm

drowning,

drowning.

Highly Commended: Maybe Music – by Jacinta-Maria Wajero

Maybe it was because without it she couldn't wake up
That the song was embedded in each musical thump
The resonance of the waves crashing against the shore;
Doctor said, "She'd die if she couldn't hear it anymore."

Maybe it was because the melody danced through her veins
That she became immune to the evil needle's pain

And the prodding and shoving and retracting of tubes
Couldn't be felt, through the awesome tune

Maybe it was because the rhythms reverberated round her ribs
That she wouldn't remember how she ended up like this
Swaying photos, bitter-sweet nights; vanished. Left behind.
Her memory of us was exiled to the muted back of her mind.

Maybe it was because the doctors "couldn't find the source"
That over time her voice became coarse; like a sand bag's exterior
And the only noise she could make was her harmonious heart beat
While our memories of her pre- coma persona were fleeting away.

Maybe it was because we needed her back.
We blasted her music tremendously loud
And it enhanced her health in 'leaps and bounds'
We stammered her syncopated songs, sniffing, silencing our crying tears.

Rock, blues, heavy metal, punk, baroque;
Jazz, soul, funk, reggae, classical, pop,
Country, orchestral, calypso, hip—hop,
Please come back. Please, wake up!

It was because we loved her so much.
That we drummed with cutlery while eating lunch
Because that day, her eyes gasped— she recognized us, at last.
Like a hummingbird following its song back home,
She'd found the composition of our memory in her soul:
"All I had to do was follow your sweet sound".

Highly Commended: Soundtrack to Me, Soundtrack to You – by Fizza Zaidi

She hears those tentative opening chords
And all of a sudden she is six,
Sticky strawberry juice running down her chin and chocolate-stained gingham thrown across
the sticks.

Crushing daisies underfoot as she leaps for her life,
Chasing all her youthful hopes and dreams that fly
With the ribbons of her favourite red kite, her mother's laugh warm like the midsummer sky.

Now she takes a breath as her vision blurs,
Grabs her keys and swipes at her eyes,
Stops off at the florist, picks her way through the stone soldiers and lays the daisies where
she lies.

The crooning voice sings through the chorus
And the house is cold like it was before
And the silence loud in a city of sound but now he smiles, for he can never find quiet
anymore.

It's not just the one voice bouncing off the bare walls,
The soundtrack to his young fear of being alone,
But more than he can count, and laughter and chaos and children themselves that made the
house a home.

He pushes the sofa to cover the crayon masterpiece
Tired of painting and re-painting the wall
The melody warms both his head and his heart and he smiles again; the alone was worth it
all.

The last riff begins and a smile lights his face
And he thinks of black caps and billowing cloaks,
And dreams that come true and cameras flashing at the beaming bright faces in the shade of
the oak.

The one under which he spent so many years,
Crunching the leaves or picking the flowers
And this song that faced every moment with him, from the soft summer morning dew to the
cold winter showers.

He'll never forget the feeling of hope in his heart,
Rising like the heat of the midmorning sun,
The end of one song as it closes one chapter, knowing another has just begun.

Commended: The Orchestra – by Weiyan Tan

The orchestra is conducted by the wind
Laced with the calling of the breeze
It whistles through the air, glistening invisibly
And whispers tenderly with a gentle breath

Leaves are stirred up into the air
Twirling in circles as they crackle with laughter
Under the feet of a choir of birds
Singing with voices like golden sunlight

The clouds join in and drumroll the thunder
Vociferous peals resound and ricochet
Gusts of wind trumpet their howls
Fingers of frost pluck the strings of the harp

Showers of rain fall in a deluge
Pounding the pavements and beating the ground
Rivers surge whilst ocean waves swell
They crash to the shore with the clash of a cymbal

The rain is restrained and slows to a trickle
Tinkling bells tapping at windows
The sun emerges and chimes ever so softly
Until the echo fades and vanishes

So what is our music, unique and rare?
Is it our own, to claim for ourselves?
Or is it a mimicry, an imitation
A pastiche of nature's melodies?

Commended: The Girl in The Twilight – by Allison Xu

The sun dips lower, horizon aflame,
at the corner of the winding street
a girl sits in front of an old upright piano,
her gaunt fingers stretched across cold stony keys.

Music notes float from her fingertips,
melting into the bustling throngs,
like a story lost in a massive volume of books,
or a tiny rock swallowed by a roaring ocean.

Her figure blurs in shade
almost invisible, like she always was.
No one notices the tears glistening in her eyes
or the coagulated blood on her chipped knuckles.

Somewhere close, a young boy slips free of his mother's grasp,
running towards the melody; a tangled bundle of excitement.
He is the girl's first audience,
he doesn't understand music, but he hears emotion.

The boy's mother joins him.
Then people slow their pace, turn to the piano.
And for the first time,
people notice the girl in the twilight.

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 25 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

