

Young Creative Awards 2023: Creative Writing Winning Entries

Age Category: 11-15 years

Winner: Dervla Mullan

The Time Keeper

We met when she was five years old, sticky fingers, dungarees, pigtails and bursting with energy. Out of everything in that dark, musty antique shop, she picked me. Maybe because of the wood glaze, or maybe because of my musical chime, or maybe just because I was big and noticeable. I am glad that for some reason, she picked me. I saw fragments of her life, just shards of what it was really like. I was there when she spilled spaghetti Bolognese all over the new rug, crimson sauce seeping into the soft, white fur. I was there every birthday ever since I was placed here, watching her glistening eyes as she tore open presents. I was there the day she came home from the dentists with braces lighting up that mischievous grin I knew so well.

As time went by, things changed so much, but I remained unchanged. For years, I have been standing in the lounge, dwelling on every occasional glance I got, moving my hands round and round, watching the world change around me. I've seen the family suffer through the war. I saw her sobbing after her first relationship shattered. I saw her getting ready for her wedding, her stunning white dress shining with pearls like the sparkling tears in her eyes. Through every hardship they've ever faced, I've been a persistent but subtle reminder of time. Every cold winter night I have been mesmerised by the crackling fireplace, as sparks danced around and roaring flames eagerly licked at the charred wood.

Things are different now. When she grew old enough, she inherited the family home but she never moved me from where I stood. Although she had a new family, she probably just liked the consistency of living in the same house, the same antiques, the same crooked shelves and dusty cupboards in all the same places. New or old, I enjoyed living with her and her family, observing how her role evolved from a dependent child to an independent mother, raising children of her own.

The night is dark and eerie, shadows of trees creeping. As it gets later, the dim, icy moonlight shines into the window. The fire is still burning, and her old, frail face and tired eyes are entranced by every glowing flame illuminating the lifeless room. She falls asleep next to the fire, just like she always does. But as the remaining embers of the fire slowly die, so does my purpose, and just like her heart, I stop.

Age Category: 16-18 years
Winner: Maia Redgate

Little Bella Whitaker

Witch.

That is what Judge McGregor had called little Bella Whitaker as he slammed his gavel against the wood of his desk. Kilcairn's small, dingy little courthouse was silent as the echoes of the Judge's sentence faded into nothing. This was not surprising news, Kilcairn had dealt with plenty of those malicious witches that had threatened them time and time again, but little Bella? Now there was a shock. She was always so nice and unsuspecting, playing with the other children and helping her caretakers with the chores around the children's home. That was how they tricked you. It was best that they got rid of the witch now, so she couldn't grow up and become something worse.

Metal scraped discordantly along the floor as Bella brought her chained hands up to her face and began to sob. She barely had enough slack to bring the cuffs past her shoulders and they dug painfully into her thin wrists. The crying eventually subsiding as she sinks to the floor and begins to whimper softly. It was probably another witchy trick to try and fool them into pitying her. Sure, she looked like an innocent child, but the villagers knew that underneath the black curls and blue eyes there was nothing but evil. Thank the heavens that the baker had caught her communing with a black cat, which was clearly one of the Devil's messengers. Kilcairn was safe once more thanks to the keen eye of its concerned villagers and the wise mind that was Judge McGregor.

Bella curled into herself tighter as the high sheriff began to rise, the pounding of his boots against cold cobbles like a death knell. The slow movements he took to

retrieve the keys from his pocket felt agonisingly long to the little girl on the floor and she quivered from where she was huddled into her ill-fitting cotton dress, pulling her hands into the sleeves. It would be mid-winter soon and the chill in the air seemed to worsen as the high sheriff loomed, dangling a set of rusted keys in front of a teary face and snickering.

“Thought you could fool us, did you, witch?” he asks, yanking at the chains draped near his boot in an attempt to drag the small frame of Bella up from the floor. The key went barrelling into the lock, mechanism clinking as the jaws of the cuffs break open, releasing thin, raw wrists from their imprisonment. This is when Bella takes her chance.

Screaming rips through the previously silent hall as tiny teeth sink deep into calloused hands. Bella’s mouth fills with blood, spilling in rivulets down her chin, looking every part the Devil worshipping monster that they’ve made her out to be. Unforgiving eyes burrow into the high sheriff’s own, as she stands tall and proud, not willing to go silently into the dark night as her fellow sisters have done before her. She understands the weight the witch trials hold, the power and fear anyone may have when all it takes is one accusation. She may be young, but she is smart, and she does not falter. She spits the high sheriff’s blood back into his appalled face and runs. Runs past the courthouse pews, through the doors and into the street as fast as she can, bare feet scrambling for purchase in the December mud and the ghostly hands of a thousand women pushing her to go even faster.

People shout from behind her, shouting and screaming ghastly curses after her as she dashes along the road. They begin to chase her, fear driving both Bella and the villagers to move swiftly. Almost everyone from the courthouse has run outside and

almost everyone outside has come to see what the commotion is. They were expecting to see a little girl being thrown into the witch cart, being led off towards the gallows. They would throw things at her and insult her and laugh as she hung. Instead said little girl has escaped and *oh god lord is that blood?* Did she *eat* someone? Even more people begin to fumble after Bella as villagers flood the streets and spot her blood covered face. She stumbles around the butcher's grasp and dodges underneath the pastor's arms, desperate for a way out and floundering past anyone trying to stop her.

Then like booming thunder the braying of a horse projects over the cacophony of townspeople and suddenly the high sheriff has recovered and is gaining ground quickly. His horse is brisk as it deftly gallops away from the courthouse and then it is much slower as it clumsily tramples through the hoard of scared and angry people all trying to reach Bella. She doesn't look back, not even when the loud bang of a musket can be heard to her rear.

Kilcairn's main road seems nearly endless until it finally dissolves into grassy fields. Only two of them stand between her and the treeline, wide and green, dotted with the occasional hay bale or lone tree and saturated with dew and a heavy mist. Her feet leave impressions in the grass as she sprints faster, tearing at the ground. Cool, wet blades sooth her stinging feet, a welcome comparison from the stoney mud of the village roads. Her heartbeat thumps against her ribs as loudly as the sound of hooves following her. Barking joins the yelling of the mob as well, bringing the symphony of her impending death to a crescendo as she trips into the second field, breath harsh and painful. Breathing feels like a thousand tiny flies are eating away at her lungs but all Bella can think of is running, lest she want to hang.

Blood still runs down her chin, dripping down onto the ruins of her dress and flying downward to meet her red and black footprints. It tastes rancid in her mouth, and she wishes she had just a second to spare so she could spit it out properly, instead of letting it dribble out of her slacked jaw as she wheezes for air. The hem of her once white skirt is drenched with thick, claggy mud and torn to pieces like carrion, the rest of it is in a similar state, dripping with brown, red, and black all the way up to the waistline, tossed frantically around as Bella runs.

Leaves scatter in a flurry as she hurls her body into the cover of trees, rolling with the impact and sliding down a light slope onto the forest floor, clearing a trail through the dead foliage as she tumbles. Not a second later she's on her feet and stumbling forward again, picking her pace back up as she moves through the peeling silver birches and further into the wood. The dogs are much louder now but the masses of angry people seem to have thinned as they reached the edge of town, most of them giving up and allowing the fastest men to go on ahead, the high sheriff leading the charge on horseback.

The density of the decaying plant life makes it hard to see the unforgiving ground beneath her throbbing feet, causing Bella to flounder forward awkwardly, slowing down her escape dramatically. There are maybe twelve or so men hunting her down now, the trees are thick and disorientating, spreading her pursuers out and away from her peripherals. She can only hear them call to each other, trailing the dogs track her scent. It makes her run faster.

A light tinkling of water alerts her of the upcoming stream and guides her towards the natural barrier. Wading through the water would help keep the dogs off her scent but would do her no good if her feet froze off in the icy current. The merciless forest

begins thin as she nears the banks and the ground becomes more even, allowing her to build speed as she prepares to leap over the stream, even though every muscle in her body threatens to collapse before she can get an inch off the ground. Digging the balls of her feet into the dirt, she kicks off into the air, flying across the fast-moving water and landing roughly on the opposite bank, hearing the men shout as they spot her. Her ankle takes the brunt of the fall, and it feels impossible to stand but stopping now means death.

Crawling away from the water's edge embeds dirt firmly under her fingernails and completely ruins the front of her dress, decimating the white cotton. The trees become denser again and she uses one to drag herself up again, gripping desperately to the peeling bark of the birch. Standing on the unbroken but painful ankle, she begins hobbling away until she builds up the will power to run again.

The farmer that shouted when he saw her jump begins to gather the men back together to continue the chase more efficiently. They shove aside the thin, twisted branches that block their way, accidentally twanging them into each other's faces in a desperate scramble. All four dogs slow in the dense undergrowth as well, aggressive barks becoming muffled behind pained whimpers as thorns like knife-points rip into their paws. One, a huge grey beast, becomes so caught in the brambles that it can no longer move, writhing in agony on the floor as the thorny stems wind tighter around its body the more it struggles. The men barely notice, instead trying harder to break through the thick wooded wall obstructing their view of Bella. She doesn't seem to be hindered by the tangled carcasses of long dead plants at all as she shrinks into the distance.

The high sheriff seethes and spits at this, bringing his horse back around and away from the growling dogs and the men who are hacking into the branches with hatchets. He stops fifty paces from the mass of wood, his horse rearing up as he readies for it to gallop forward. With a strong kick to its side, it belts forward, clearing the obstruction with ease and landing with a clobbering of hooves on the other side. Like the grey dog, the hunting party of men are left behind to fend for themselves as the cold, winter forest seems to close in around them.

Loud thunderous strokes of the horse's stride close in on Bella as she runs uninhibited across the hard packed dirt, tiny legs never faltering even as she starts to feel the vibrations of hooves in her feet and the tobacco saturated breath of the sheriff flare across her neck. He grabs for her, leaning as far off his horse as he can, reins clutched in one hand, feet pushing deep into the stirrups to provide support as he swipes at the back of her dress. Aggressively, he rips out a chunk of hair, trying to drag her back towards him. The horse stumbles under his unbalanced weight, sending him clattering behind by several paces.

More tears form in Bella's eyes from the throbbing of her scalp, the acknowledgment of pain reminding her of her other injuries. Her ankle has only gotten worse as she runs and the slapping of her sore feet against frigid ground surely hasn't done them much better. The muscles in her legs begin to lock up and seize in exhaustion, her breaths becoming shallow and barely there. She can hear the high sheriff pull the butt of his musket up into his shoulder, slowing the horse down for a better shot. Fatigue renders her unable to dodge and the bullet passes against the skin of her right arm; not embedding itself but taking a large chunk of flesh with it, making Bella scream. With one tiny, shaking hand she pushes against the tear in her skin, desperately trying to stop the steady pulsing of leaking blood.

She clenches her eyes shut and continues sprinting with the last of her energy. She can't stop, she won't, but eventually she will be forced too, so she puts all her willpower into pushing her body just a little further. Twelve and a half staggering steps later Bella runs into something solid and collapses against it, legs giving out. All she can do now is lie there and wait for the high sheriff to either kill her on the spot or drag her limply away to the gallows. She did all she could, but it wasn't enough. Little Bella Whitaker is going to hang for her crimes of witchcraft, but she is going to spend her final moments of freedom curled against a tree trunk, softly crying, breathing deeply and whispering prayers that sound too much like apologies. The horse stops. She can hear the high sheriff jump down, dead leaves crunching beneath his fine leather boots. Her heartbeat stops and every nerve she has tenses with anticipation and fear.

She isn't grabbed. No rough hands clutch at her hair or dress. No one throws her over their shoulder or ties her up. No one comes to take her away. She just stays curled against the tree; so, very slowly and with all the fear in the world, she opens one eye. There is a line of small mushrooms before the high sheriff's boots, and he does not cross them. She opens the other eye and looks up. Above her is not a tree but instead she rests against the legs of a curiously tall man.

The curiously tall man is dressed in long black trousers and a beautiful blue and silver jacket, decadently covered in lace and buttons. His smile is kind and gentle, and his eyes are a very pale shade of grey that matches the silver detailing on his jacket. Most interesting of all however is the curiously pointy ears that the curiously tall man had. He mesmerised Bella, who barely even flinches when he leans down to run slender fingers through her hair, flicking away leaves with claw-like nails.

The high sheriff stays behind the mushroom line but does call out, "Hey! You just give her back here now, I don't want no trouble, I just want that witch there." His voice sounds like wooden wheels scrapping along wet gravel.

"Witch?" the man asks, his voice like the twinkling of bells, "this is no witch sir, this is but a little girl. You humans can be so twisted in the head."

"Oh, but she is! You just hand her over and then we can all sleep a little safer knowing she's dead," the high sheriff argues, voice wavering in the face of the tall man with pointy ears. Bella wonders if he was an elf.

"Dead? That just won't do now, will it? You can't kill a child just because she's a little smarter than the other children or likes to pet cats or any other number of things you mad creatures have constituted as witchcraft."

"Now you listen here!" the high sheriff shouts at the man, foot slipping into the mushroom ring that Bella can see clearly now as she sits up against the kind stranger's legs. The high sheriff pauses when he releases his mistake. Time seems to slow down completely, almost as if the seconds were waiting for the man's permission to keep ticking.

"I wouldn't have done that if I were you," he warns, ashy eyes trained on the high sheriff where he stands unmoving, as though the man's sharp gaze had turned him to stone. The light, almost playful tone leaves his voice swiftly, but he still takes a hold of Bella gently with one hand, holding her protectively whilst he stretches the other out in front of him languidly.

"Redire to terram " he whispers.

For a second nothing happens and the three of them stand still, the numbing wind blowing through the clearing and rustling the leaves. Then the most terrible thing happens. The high sheriff's skin begins to stretch, slowly reddening and becoming misshapen. It looks as though it's becoming softer and squishier, like if Bella reached out, she could pull a chunk away with ease. Sickeningly his eyeballs begin to shrivel and melt, pouring goo onto the soil from empty eye sockets. His skin withers and writhes like it's filled with bugs and his muscles pull and contort his limbs into unnatural shapes. He is silent the entire time, unable to scream, but the faint cracking of bones and tearing of flesh can be heard over the chirping of birds.

Eventually Bella must shut her eyes. Not because she's scared, the horrid man deserved it, but because quite frankly the sight was gross. Only when she felt the man squeeze a hand against her shoulder did she open them again. In the place where the high sheriff had stood was a red and white speckled toadstool, sitting in line with the other mushrooms in the ring. It was then that Bella connected the magical happening to the fairy tales the caretakers at the children's home had told her. This was a faerie ring, and she was resting against the legs of a fae. Bella was simply too tired to care however and slumped back down.

The fae merely laughed and bent down to join her amongst the scattered leaves. He brushed his shimmery hands through her hair and across her face, magically dusting off the grime and blood that had been crusted into her skin moments before.

Pressure against her bleeding arm closed the wound, knitting skin back together seamlessly and a tingling at her ankle stopped the aching in her bones. She was carefully pulled into the fae's lap, and she felt the chill of the wind melt away, leaving only a buzzing warmth. When she looked up again and thanked him, he gave her a

grin that showed off all his sharp teeth, but Bella still didn't run, the fae was nice and his hands were soft and magical.

"Could you give me name child?" he asked, still smiling softly down at her.

"Bella Whitaker," she tells him, big blue eyes no longer sparkling with tears but with wonder.

"That's a very pretty name," he tells her, and she smiles widely at him. "How old are you, Bella?"

"I'm eight years old," she says counting out the years on her tiny fingers.

"Oh well you're so very capable for your age! But your much too young to be out here alone and I wouldn't dream of letting you back near that rotten village. Would you like to come with me?"

"Really! Will I get to learn magic and wear pretty clothes like you?" she babbles excitably.

"Anything you want darling, you're safe now and we have all the time in the world to do as many things as possible."

And so, the exceedingly kind fae, that Bella will later learn goes by Elm, takes Bella's hand, and walks her away from the faerie ring and into his world, never to be touched by ignorance and hatred again. The villagers tell their children that Little Bella Whitaker was a witch that killed the high sheriff in the forest south of the town and that they should never step foot there lest they want to be cursed. Years later Bella will have many siblings who did not listen to the stories they were told about her, and they will all be happy.

Age Category: 19-24 years
Winner: Amy Child

All Flesh is Wax

I scrub my bones over the bathroom sink. That's all teeth are, really: bones, piercing through flesh. Bollocks to collagen and any other technicalities. Those scientists don't know how it feels to be knocked in the face and see a piece of your skeleton go flying.

When nobody's watching, it's too much effort being tidy. Warm, frothed-up toothpaste pours over my lips and down my chin. I support myself on the flat ledge of the sink (false marble, as if that's fooling anyone) and hunch over it like a drunk. Overhead, the yellow bathroom light buzzes – there might be a wasp trapped inside – but I focus on the ceramic bowl, the way it bends the light, its silver press-down plug, ringed with mould, and the streaky black stains caused by the leaking tap.

I spit into it, and there's blood in the white foam. Could be a sign of gum disease. That's what mouthwash ads say, but then, they're just trying to sell you something; they'd rather you think that you're dying. I turn on the tap, cold water jets, and the blood swirls pink then drains away.

I scoop water into my mouth, the way people did when they drank from rivers, and hurl it from cheek to cheek, threading it between my teeth, before expelling it in a bile-like stream. It burns with the aftertaste of mint. You know you're in bad shape when your vomit's clear and burns like that, like your stomach's trying to strip your throat raw.

I swipe a wet hand down my face, over the beard which isn't long enough yet to be his, and rinse it clean. The mirror over the sink diagnoses me with another ten years, pitilessly inflicted by the overhead lighting. My skin looks like wax, half-melted. The shadows beneath my eyes tug downwards. God, I could do with some sleep.

Then, Francis claps and stands and says, "great work, Myles. Let's stop there," and the bathroom lights up and disappears.

At home in my study, Roger Soper stares me dead in the eyes. His prison mugshot's blown up to fill my computer screen, streaked with bars of light which cut through the gaps in my blinds. I don't bear him more than a passing resemblance, but that won't matter; I've seen them turn a young man into an old man, a living man into a corpse.

I lift my beer bottle over the box of tissues and stack of semi-organised papers cluttering my desk and take a swig. It's warm, of course, and sticky. Christ knows how long it's been sitting there.

Soper's expression is comically deer-in-the-headlights, as if the photo was captured moments before collision.

He doesn't have his weird hipster look in his mugshot: the too-small coat, the checked waistcoat, the fully buttoned shirt with no tie. His beard and outgrown curls make him look like a werewolf in a '70s horror flick. But in other photos, he's artsy, eccentric. His posture's awkward and he's never really smiling, only parting his lips, but all the great artists were fucked in the head – Van Gogh cut his own ear off and gave it to a prostitute – so it's no wonder no one looked twice at him.

I use the mouse to zoom in on his eyes until they blur. They're deep set, buried in pits of shadow.

In one YouTube interview, after his exhibition opened, before anyone knew what was inside his statues, he said, in that monotone way of his, “art’s about capturing life, is all. If art ain’t got soul, it’s dead.”

He was born in Atlanta, Georgia. He died in Thamesmead, London. Not five miles from where I grew up.

Oh boy, you gotta see this here goddamn fool, fellas, now, ain’t that something; mighty strange, real special, I’ll be damned, and dang, I sure as hell ain’t seen nothing like that ‘round these parts before, and that’s just about the size of it.

“Uhhh.”

“That’s good. Keep going.”

“Uhhh. Uhhh.”

Does Francis realise that it sounds like we’re fucking?

I move my facial muscles in circles, trying to work them like chewing gum until they’re soft and elastic. I’ve already ‘released the tension’ from my fingers, wrists, arms, shoulders, hips, legs and ankles. It reminds me of that time I saw a therapist, who told me I should start yoga: “that’s it, ladies, aaaaaand *release*.” They never have a goddamn clue what they’re on about.

Francis sits on a battered prop chair downstage, tapping a ballpoint pen, which might as well be a meat tenderizer, against his knee. He’s got that stupid silk scarf on again, along with a tan blazer and those thick-rimmed glasses which make his eyes too big. His bald head gleams beneath the floodlights: a wannabe Oscar.

“And the brows and forehead,” he reminds me. Forred. That’s how he says it. Brows and forred.

I shut my mouth, which has been working like a cow chewing grass for the past minute, and begin writhing my eyebrows: raising, frowning, questioning. I sculpt my flesh like clay, or wax. I look comically deer-in-the-headlights.

Soper's artwork's beautiful, on the surface. The piece that made him famous, *Daedalus Before Morning*, is the sort of wax statue you can imagine breathing: Daedalus holds up Icarus's wings and somehow knows he's going to lose his son.

After Daedalus' bones were found, Icarus, only nineteen years old, held a vigil over his grave for four nights.

I stare up my darkened ceiling and watch the headlights of passing cars stretch and shrink across it.

His artwork's more beautiful, if you look deeper. Mighty tragic, yes, and real grotesque, I'm not denying it – but it moves you; art ain't art without soul.

In a later interview, in which he wore a jumpsuit, Soper admitted it was the idea of reanimation which attracted him; he liked bringing bodies back to life, making them perfect. An artist, in their own way, was God. So, it was an act of Creation, building those statues, like when God made Woman from the rib of Man.

I don't remember much about church, except that service was on Sunday morning. My bruises were always fresh from the night before. All flesh is grass, is all.

Before he used bones, Soper never got the proportions right. Something was always off. Which makes sense, when you think about it.

God, I could do with some sleep.

Francis buys me KFC. It's too early for lunch and he's vegetarian, but he wants me to focus on the sensation of meat.

The chicken legs in the bucket are more brown than golden, and soggy with grease, which has left transparent stains on the cardboard. They never show the stains on the posters.

I lift one out and inspect it, like a food critic. The glaring stage lights are too exposing, showing up gaps in the batter, places where it's almost sliding off. I probe at the makeshift skin with my fingers and the light sticks to the grease.

"Good, now give it a sniff," Francis instructs. Goddamn fool. Treats me like a dog. Sit. Stay. Paw.

But hell, I need this. I sniff the chicken as commanded. It's rich. It still smells warm. I haven't had much for breakfast, only a bowl of dry cereal – the milk was off – so my stomach growls. Francis probably wants me to lick it, real slow, porno-style. I sure ain't doing that.

Instead, I take a bite. Really sink my teeth in. When you're hungry, it's hard to eat slowly. Your stomach reaches up through your throat and tries to snatch what's in your mouth before you've even chewed it.

The chicken gives way beneath my teeth, softening with the rush of saliva. Fatty juices spill out. I suck the flesh off the bone. It's a primal kick, you get from eating meat. No plant-based alternative could ever replicate it. I grind the chicken into pulp, listening to the increasingly wet *chomp, chomp, chomp*. Then, I swallow.

In my shed, late at night, I bring the chicken back to life. The wing bone glistens, pearlescent, under the amber-red spotlight of my desk lamp. There is a silence like that of Sunday Mass.

Steadily, I drip wax onto the bone, beginning to form a fifth layer. The wax is from a lavender-scented candle I bought years back, after that same dogshit therapist told me lavender helps you sleep, but as ever, they're just trying to sell you something. The heady, thick smell crawls down my throat.

There's a reason I moved this desk lamp to the shed, to sit amidst the congregation of metal tools; the bulb burns too hot, hot enough to melt wax, if you bring it close. I do, and wax encases my fingertips, smoothing and tightening the skin. When I was young, under the spotlight myself, all my skin felt like that. Now it's just the scars.

The wonderful thing about sculpting with wax is that you leave no fingerprints.

My chicken wing will be golden, greaseless. There'll be no gaps in the reconstructed batter, no places where the skin is sliding off. I could give back its feathers, if I wanted. Use the smallest screwdriver to draw in the lines. The wax yields, soft, beneath my fingers. I stroke the wing. I cradle it. I hold it up to examine in the light.

Daedalus' trepidation, fortitude and grief was so well-captured in the wax, it might have been real. I ain't seen nothing like that before, not 'round these parts.

The following morning, in the shower, I try to sculpt with soap but it's not the same without the bone.

"I'd like you to think back to your childhood," Francis instructs. "Pick a memory; one that stands out. Focus on the sensations. Hone in. What can you see, feel, smell?"

If I gave him a good shove, he'd topple off the edge of the stage, taking his chair and scarf with him.

"Can I take a cigarette break?" I ask, but he's frowning before I've finished talking.

"After this exercise," he agrees with a dismissive nod. He's got his pen between two fingers and is drumming it against his thigh. I wonder which – the pen or the fingers – would be easier to snap.

I massage my forehead – *forred* – grimacing. "I've got a bit of a headache. Could do with some fresh air."

"You can get some after this," he says, impatiently. "If I let you go every five minutes, we'll get behind on schedule." I went for a piss once, two hours ago. He's acting as if I've hardly been in the room. He points his pen at me. "It'll be quick. Just this exercise." There's no arguing.

I inhale a cloud of low-hanging smoke.

Mum's slumped on the sofa as if she's melted into it, smiling, just smiling, with those vacant, glassy eyes reflecting the stretching and shrinking light of the TV. She's watching some soap with a laugh track in the background. The stump of a cigarette hangs from between her fingers.

"That'll be you one day," she murmurs, and I don't know if she's talking to me or to herself or to no one at all. "You were so good in that school play."

I gaze towards the TV, at the made-up people strutting and posing in their bright, modern apartment. They look so perfect. So happy. Nothing could ever touch them.

Mum's eyes shutter and reopen slowly, like a wind-up toy. Tinny laughter rumbles through the room. The dented lamp beside the sofa illuminates the far side of her

face, exposing the swollen hint of a bruise on her cheek. Red. Soon it'll be blue, then purple, then green, then yellow. All the colours of the rainbow.

The same tinny laughter loops as a car pulls up outside. Its headlights pierce the curtains, flooding the room with twin beams of orange light. Mum's eyes flicker. Her smile wilts slowly. I should have said thank you, when she said I was good in the play. But I hadn't learnt my lines.

There are heavy feet outside, the click of a key in the lock, boots thudding into the hall, the stench of rain and petrol fumes and beer mats.

"Now, recall a time when you experienced a specific, sharp pain," Francis hisses, in the back of my head.

A damp fist collides with my mouth, dislodging a tooth. It's like someone's struck a match inside my skull.

I go in, and everything's just as it was. They've got it down to the detail: the burn hole in the arm of the faded sofa; the half-finished sketches on the side table, pinned down by the lamp; the peeling labels of the *Blue Moon* bottles and the crushed *Parker & Simpson* cigarette packets scattered on the coffee table. I stand and stare at the blank, glassy face of the TV.

In TV-land, everything's technicolour, larger than life. It's not meant to be real. But, God – I can just *smell* it.

Francis is leant against the doorway with his arms crossed, saying how he'd like me to stay here for a while, to really get into the headspace; he's already had the fridge stocked and a key cut and toilet paper put in the bathroom. He's going on like he's

about to call the place 'quaint' and 'snug' and joke that he'd live here himself if it weren't for the wife being so attached to the family pad.

My tongue is a swollen, rotten fruit. It's as if he could walk in at any second.

I can't stay here, no matter what Francis says. I'll call my agent. I'll pull out. I'll inject air into his veins with the syringe in the cabinet above the kitchen sink. I can tell from his shiny, bald head that he's got a mighty fine skull underneath: a skull which could look real pretty with eyes not so big. Would be a lot quieter, too.

"You got a son, Francis?" I ask abruptly, interrupting his spiel.

I turn, and he frowns at me as if I'm not listening, then answers, "yes."

"How old?"

"He'll be eighteen in July."

"Eighteen! I'll be damned."

I wander to the sofa and trace a finger around the burn hole. I should have him sit down and tell me more about his life; arts got more soul, when it's based on something real. Putting blood in the wax and powdered bone in the clay doesn't cut it like a story does. It's body, is all. A story goes deeper. Where would have been the tragedy, the beauty, if Daedalus didn't have a son?

"Want to stay and have a beer?" I ask over my shoulder, but Francis says he's got to get back, he's got stuff to go over, why don't I settle in and make myself at home?

Which is a goddamn stupid thing to say.

Next thing I know, he's gone.

As if he were holding me up, I double over and heave in deep, shaking breaths.

Then, with a hard lump in my throat, I straighten and coax a *Parker & Simpson*

cigarette from my pocket. I light it and take a long drag. Holding the fumes in my lungs, I pace over to the TV and switch it on, but it just reads: 'No signal'.

"Where does *art* come into it?"

Painstakingly, I tap ash into the small, glass tray they've set out on the desk. "Art don't *come into it*. Art *is* it. It's murder, comes into it; murder as a means of creating art. Bones as a," I sit back, put the cigarette to my lips, "an artistic medium."

"An artistic medium, you say." The interrogator's tone is flat, impassive. "Is that all? Is there anything else about bones which fascinates you?"

I settle back, considering. "It ain't – was never – about the bones themselves. It was the potential of the bones, what they could create. I thought of them how I guess a painter would think of a canvas, or colour palette: just as someplace to begin."

There's the rustle of pages being turned. "You talk a lot about creating. How do you reconcile that with destroying lives?"

I study my words carefully, then suck in another drag of smoke. "Do you mean, ending lives?"

"Yes."

"Now, see, I didn't end lives. Maybe as you understand it – as life of the flesh – but spiritual life, *eternal* life, I transferred, is all, from one vessel to another. It was about... uhh... preservation, not destruction. And Creation, in a broader sense; as Michelangelo said, 'I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free'. For me, the... human body was the marble. The angel was what I saw beneath."

"Considering your references to 'eternal life', 'Creation', and now 'angels', would you say that there was a religious dimension to your murders?"

“Sure, I’d say that was part of it.”

“In what sense?”

I stare into the beam of harsh, white light, and part my lips into something of a smile.

“God understood Man by becoming flesh. Surely, Man – more specifically the artist – could understand God by becoming Him.”

There are a few moments’ silence as my statement settles. Then, the lights go up and my interrogator stands, tugging out the creases in his blazer.

“Good,” he says. “Good. Let’s skip ahead. Let’s go to…” he flicks through the papers he’s holding, “here. Page twenty-two.” He takes a series of A4 photos from the bottom of the stack and spreads them out before me on the desk. I lean over them, peering closely.

At first, I can’t tell what the hell I’m looking at. Then, I recognise the scorched shapes, half-submerged in pools of hardened wax: femurs, ribs, the curves of skulls. It’s ugly, sad, even, seeing them dead like this: killed by a fire in storage on their way to London, where they should’ve gone on exhibition.

“They’re ruined,” I say, blowing out smoke.

My interrogator glances at his papers then up at me, disturbed. “That’s not… I beg your pardon?”

I glare at him, hard, right in his real huge and hideous eyes.

“I said, they’re Goddamn ruined, and boy, that’s a mighty shame.”

I must’ve proved something with that, because soon after, he lets me go.

Beneath the yellow eyes of streetlights, I lead him up to the front door. There's a camera aimed at us from the corner, but I don't look at it. I slide my key into the lock and turn, then our wet boots thud into the hall.

I shake the rain from my coat and hang it up, then undo the top button of my shirt, loosening the collar. I take his coat, too, and hang it beside mine. He thanks me, but hesitates on the mat, so I reach past him to close the door, forcing him to shuffle further inside. Then, I stand against it, turn to face him, smile, hold out an arm and say, "go on through. I'll get us some beers."

He sits on the couch and I switch on the TV, then settle beside him with a cold *Blue Moon*. He braces his bottle in both hands, picking at the label, and glances furtively around at my apartment.

Then, he licks his lips and asks, "do you *mind* living here?" He doesn't look at me. His eyes land on the screen, vaguely longing. I get what he means. It's not exactly the nicest part of town.

"Oh, no." I settle back and a laugh track rattles distantly. "Suits me fine."

He nods and takes a swig of beer. I watch him out the corner of my eye. Wax takes time to set, layer after layer; I've got practice being patient. There's a sheen of light on his skin, sticking where his bones tug against it. His temple pulses if something's trapped inside, battering to get out.

Bodies hover silently at the peripheral. He doesn't notice them, of course, nor the syringe poking from my sleeve, which I fill with air as he starts to slacken, melt, from the sedative. He turns large, disbelieving eyes onto me, questioning with his lips but saying nothing, and I gaze at him as if to say, "*this ain't personal. It's just part of the*

job". You can't make great art, art with soul, without breaking some eggs, and that's just about the size of it.

When nobody's watching, it's too much effort being tidy.

I press down the plug, turn on the tap, and empty the bones into the bathroom sink.