



Young Creative Awards 2022

Creative Writing

The Winning Entries

Heartwood

Áine Mullan (age 13)

YCA 2022 Creative Writing winner (11-15 age group)

There is a girl beaming down at me. Her eyes are twinkling with barely concealed anticipation as she glances to her mother, and then turns her gaze back to me. She says a few excited words- none of which I understand of course, but I can tell she is happy. After a moment, her mother beckons her to leave and she skips away.

Years pass and the girl and her mother visit me almost every day- after sunrise and before sunset. Now, every time she wants to talk to me, she has to stand on her tiptoes, as I am taller than her. Her visits continue until the days start to feel hot and endless and I don't see her for a while, but I see lots of other people.

The large, grassy fields around me are now alive. Families come to lay in the sun for a day, to make memories with their loved ones. There are small children in little pools, splashing about with their friends. Older children play games in the park, or chase each other round and round. Sometimes I wish I could do that- run around, be free. But I am fine watching, I guess I like it. Besides, when I grow tall, I shall be able to see the whole world. As I let myself get lost in these thoughts, I smile, and the world smiles back.

The vivid green becomes a warm, comforting auburn colour, and the ground becomes a carpet of leaves. And I become lonely, but I look forward to seeing the girl again- my friend. I find it strange how, after all this time I don't know her name, but still, I probably know her better than anyone. Except maybe her mother. They are always smiling and laughing together.

Sometimes I wish I could walk with them, but alas, my roots confine me to the earth. As the sun is stolen away by the clouds, as the fields around me lose their life, and as the days seem to shorten, I wait to see my friend again.

As I wait, I see and feel lots of things. I see buildings rise and fall, I see flowers bloom and wither. I feel the air change, as it grows from pure and fresh to hot, humid and foul.

I see a familiar figure trudging up the gravel path. But she is alone. I try not to overthink; her mother probably just couldn't walk with her that morning. But as she draws closer, I realise it isn't my friend- it is her mother. And she looks different. Nobody for her to chat to, nobody to hold her old frail hands. Arms hanging loosely by her side, she walks over directly to me. Up close, her face is ashen and lifeless, her eyes are glassy and unfocused. What is happening? I have never seen her like this. She stays, standing in front of me and holds her hands to her face. Mumbling incoherent things, she holds up a single white rose and places it at my feet. I cannot comprehend this, no, no, no. Where is her daughter? The pain of not being able to comfort her is agony. I would give anything and everything to reach out and embrace her but I can't, and I won't. My branches would catch in her hair and my thorns would pierce her skin. And even though it may feel like nothing compared to the pain she feels right now, I could never hurt her. The next few moments are a blur- I know what has happened but I can't accept it, I won't.

I just hope that, when my friend is buried, she is with me- so that my roots can hold her like I've always longed to.

The Disappearing Act

Leah Chaplin (age 18)

YCA 2022 Creative Writing winner (16-18 age group)

From the coffin mirror looks back a living corpse. Backstage, the woman from the dead, standing, preparing a face that will bury itself in the crowds cries, before their own very eyes-behind the closed curtain where her fate and body lies.

She paints on eyeliner thicker than the air in her chest, blacker than the tar from every desperate cigarette, cuts out her cheekbones and jawline with the sharp edge of a knife. She uses the extra blood as blush, deep red under the spotlight, she doesn't have to try, she fools the world she's still alive. She hides the blue of her lips with this same shade, tinged with the sunken scars her own nails and teeth made.

She counts the countless ringlets of her tightly curled hair, as if they were the times she had been left lonely, laid bare. All of the times where she'd been sure that she couldn't go on, that her livelihood was temporary, that it's facade is gone. Out of reach, she lifts a pleading palm and blocks out the light, envisioning this were the night that that she would finally die.

The face is now perfection, miserable in its ways, the woman looks away from the mirror and ascends to the stage. She stands in the wings, for once with no fear, and as the show must go on,

She is ready to disappear.

Flying The Nest

Lottie Cox (age 21)

YCA 2022 Creative Writing winner (19-24 age group)

By the time Ruby was left on her grandparent's doorstep, she had stopped talking. It seemed to her that all people ever did was talk, non-stop, about stuff that didn't matter. And when she did feel like talking, no one could be bothered to listen anyway.

This is grown-up's talk now, you go and play. Even the police had said that.

Ruby had only met her grandparents once before, when she was much smaller. In fact, this was the first thing her grandmother had said to her when she opened the door, (My my, how much you've grown!). If she'd wanted to, Ruby could have told her that on average, children grow 2.5 inches a year and that this was all perfectly normal. Instead, she sat on their patchwork sofa and ate a crumpet.

The new house was a different world to her, full of dusty things locked in cupboards and smelling of boiled vegetables, with a log fire that she wasn't allowed to touch. She knew from the drive over that it was miles away from the city, and looked straight onto a canal – but a nice one with people who said hello and no shopping trollies. It was the quiet that scared her the most, creeping into her bones and threatening to swallow her, when pulsing bass through thin plaster walls and screaming voices was all she had come to know.

"Is that nice?", her grandmother asked, pointing to the crumpet.

Ruby nodded.

"I made the jam myself – raspberry. I tell you what, when the weather gets warmer you can come and help me in the garden. How does that sound?"

Ruby nodded. Didn't mention that she preferred Nutella.

"Yes, it'll be good for you to have a garden. Somewhere safe for you to play. There's children round here too, so you can make friends. Next door's got twin boys. Did you have friends at the old place?"

She shrugged. Ellie, Dylan, Jack and TJ. They used to throw stones into people's gardens to piss their dogs off. She was always the best at throwing. They'd be useless without her now.

"Maybe they can come and stay sometime. Come on, let's go and see the ducks on the canal."

When you become a different person, it sort of feels like the moment when you jump really really high on a trampoline, and it's like you're falling forever. All you can see is an endless spinning wheel of grass and sky. No one really helped her pack when she left. Her grandparents bought her new clothes, but they were all stripey and didn't smell like home, and the new blanket didn't have holes in. She felt like an alien.

So that got her thinking – if she really *was* a green slimy alien with two heads visiting Earth for the first time, what would she do to try and blend in?

She'd collect facts. Obviously.

Facts made sense to Ruby; there was no confusion, no messy feelings. She didn't have to *fee*/anything when looking at a fact. So grandma bought her a notebook, and she started by writing down what was in her bag. It made her feel calm and in control, and before long, the fact book went everywhere she did.

*

The first winter in the new house was freezing, but she'd never been much good at staying indoors. The walls felt too close in there, and she found the snooker boring. So every day Grandma made her wrap up like an arctic explorer, and out she went into the world with little black notebook in hand. At the bottom of the garden, right where it met the canal, was a small mound of frozen earth. The mound was Ruby's home. When she lay flat, and stared upwards, all the new stuff melted away in a sea of grey.

Up there was grey sky and grey branches and grey snow clouds, and sometimes huge flocks of geese. The Geese Days were Ruby's favourite. She would see the same people on the path every afternoon, and so she started to write down what time she could expect them.

2:04pm: Mrs Rogers and Stuart the dog. Always wave at me.

2:32pm: John, who Grandma says is a vicar. Vicars believe in Jesus.

4pm: Have to go inside. The sun sets at 4pm and it gets dark very quickly. Grandma says this is dangerous.

The first time Grandma saw Ruby lying in her kingdom, she'd been baking scones. Every weekend, she would sing to the radio in the kitchen while she baked, but they were songs by old dead people, and so Ruby didn't know them. Grandad said that

the baking was the reason he had something called Diabetes, which is where you have to poke yourself any time you want some cake. And Grandad always wanted cake.

But on this afternoon, Grandma saw Ruby lying on the grass out of the kitchen window, and rushed out with her oven gloves still on.

"God, Ruby, are you hurt?"

Ruby shook her head.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Are you missing Mum?"

Now, that was a tricky one. She missed parts of Mum, like a glass statue that's broken into lots of little pieces. Once, back at home, she had knocked over an empty wine bottle and it had shattered on the kitchen floor. Mum had screamed, but only because she was tired. It was always best to find something to look at while it happened, and so Ruby had watched the pieces, and the way that some of them were spiky and some of them small.

Mum was a bit like that. Ruby didn't miss the spiky bits, but some things weren't the same. Grandma's silly voices at story time weren't as funny, and she didn't smell like vanilla.

"It's normal to miss Mum, you know."

She just nodded, because the mound was her kingdom, and in this kingdom she didn't have to think about Mum or broken glass or being an alien. Stuff just made sense here.

*

School started that spring, but the walls were yellow, not white, and everyone kept looking at her weirdly. She started checking the mirror to see if she really did have two heads.

Miss, why doesn't the new girl talk?

Ruby's had a tough few months, so she's just a little quiet right now. So, we all need to be extra nice to her, okay? And then hopefully, she'll find her voice.

Stupid adults, thinking they know everything. She knew exactly where her voice was; it's not like it had gone anywhere. There was just no need to use it.

Sunday nights were always the worst, because that meant tomorrow was Monday and she had to be an alien again, and Grandma would fuss, which Ruby hated because it was too loud. When things were too loud in the old world, she would just crawl into the gap between the bed and the wall, and count back from 50, as many times as it took for things to stop. And usually Mum just left her alone. But Grandma wanted to ask lots of questions about Her Feelings, and Ruby's new bed had storage boxes underneath it, so you couldn't crawl anymore.

And in her head she just said *get lost get lost get lost get* but then she felt bad, because it was Grandma, and it's wrong to shout at old people. That's why sometimes it was good that she didn't say things out loud.

Eventually, Grandad came up with a plan.

"Here's an idea. You love watching the geese in the garden, right? I've seen you out there. I could tell you about them, if you like. For the bedtime story."

He had never done a story before, but he loved birds and knew lots about them. Grandma said she would get out of their way seeing as apparently she made everything worse, but Ruby could still hear her sitting outside the door. She didn't really mind.

Then Grandad told her four (!) facts about geese.

- 1. A group of geese is called a gaggle. This is a funny word.**
- 2. They have one partner for their whole lives, like Grandad and Grandma.**
- 3. Geese really love each other. If a goose gets sick and has to leave the group, others go with them to look after them. Grandad said this is kind of what him and Grandma are doing for me.**
- 4. Geese can sleep with one eye open!!!**

This last one was particularly impressive to Ruby, seeing as sometimes in the old life, even if she screwed both eyes up really tight, she still couldn't sleep. She would get terrible nightmares, and even though her blanket would protect her, she was never quite sure what was real.

That was the sort of stuff they wanted her to talk about, she supposed. The endless string of adults talking to her in hushed voices, in rooms decorated with posters in primary colours. All trying desperately to get her to utter a single syllable.

- 1. Mrs Jenkins - had 3 necklaces and smelt of satsumas. She told me that this is a Safe Space and looked at me like she was sad about something.**

- 2. Mrs Ball, who asked me lots of questions about Mum, which made me angry so I left the Safe Space and started walking home.**
- 3. Grandad came to get me because going home Isn't Allowed, and I could have fallen in the canal. But I can swim because me and Mum used to go to the pool with the big slides as a treat in the old world.**

They brought John in next, who she had seen every day on his walk.

- 4. John wears a white strip on his shirt, which is called a dog collar. This is what vicars wear.**

"I brought some pictures for you to colour in, if you like", he said, laying them on the table. "Your grandma told me that you like Alice in Wonderland."

After a while, he said: "Tell me, Ruby, do you believe in God?"

She paused for a moment, halfway through shading Alice's dress.

She shrugged.

John laughed. "Oh, it's okay not to be sure! There are plenty of grown-ups that aren't sure – even I'm not, sometimes. But I just wondered. Would it be okay to tell you a story from the Bible while you colour?"

She shrugged again. Not like she had a choice really.

"Well, okay." He took a sip of his tea. "So it all starts with this man, Daniel. Now, Daniel was a favourite of the King, and he liked him so much, he thought about making him the ruler of all

the kingdom. And the other leaders got terribly jealous. They tried to find ways to get him in trouble. Eventually, they did. They passed a law that said everyone must pray to the King only, and Daniel was too loyal to God. He kept praying, and so as punishment, they threw him into a den of lions!"

He let this rest for a moment of dramatic emphasis.

"So, guess what happened next?"

Ruby stared. Then mimed a finger across her throat, which she'd seen people do in films.

He laughed and slapped his knee, but Ruby wasn't quite sure why it was funny.

"You'd think so, right? Well, the next day, the King went back to the den and called out to Daniel, to see if he was okay. And guess what? He answered back! He was alive! All because God had helped him. He had made the lions friendly so they would not hurt Daniel."

She couldn't help but think the ending was a bit of a let-down. Jack had shown her four minutes of *Saw II* back in the old world before his mum caught them, and that had been way more exciting.

"Now, the key point to this story for you is not about the lions, really. It's about Daniel. Think about how brave he was to stand there with those lions. And he did it because he believed in something, with his whole heart. And sometimes, it can be really really hard to do something that you believe in. But that's what makes it such a brave thing to do."

He sat forwards in his chair. "Ruby, I know that sometimes the world seems like a very big, scary place. And you don't have to

be brave every day. But the most important thing is just taking that step, okay? Just looking those lions in the eyes and saying: I'm not scared of you!"

Ruby couldn't decide between purple or blue for the Mad Hatter's jacket.

"Here, I brought some biscuits. I even got the fancy chocolate ones instead of Rich Teas."

*

By the time summer came, Grandad and Grandma had their first argument. Ruby supposed it probably wasn't their first *ever* because they had been married for forty years which is a very very long time. Sometimes they hissed like geese when someone forgot to put the bin out, but she had never heard them shout while she had been living with them.

It wasn't like the old world, with blue lights and shouting and holes in the wall, but somehow that made it scarier.

"It's driving me insane, Geoffrey", her grandma was saying, "I don't think I can do it anymore."

"We knew. From the beginning, this is what we signed up for."

"Ten months. *Ten months*, and not a peep from her. I've tried everything; I've read every book. I've listened to every podcast. Nothing works."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's a kid. Kids bounce back from these things; we just have to give her time."

"Stop saying that. You've been saying "give her time" over and over, and I've given her so much bloody time. It's putting her

behind at school – God knows she’s got no friends there. It’s got to stop.”

“It will.”

“You know, I pray every night? Sixty-eight years on this planet and I have never prayed like this. Feels like screaming into the void.”

“I know.”

“And sometimes, I—”, Grandma started crying now, “I just want to scream at *her*. I just want to shout and say I love her with everything I’ve got but we should be done with this. We shouldn’t be raising a kid again. You’ve got metal hips, for God’s sake. This motherhood thing, I got it wrong the first time. Otherwise we wouldn’t be here. And she looks so much like her, don’t you think?

Grandad passed her a handkerchief.

“Then she looks at me with those eyes and I think, *just get a grip and speak*. Isn’t that awful?”

There was a long pause.

“Absolutely awful. You’re a terrible person,” he said.

Then Grandma started laughing even though she was crying, and Grandad laughed too.

“She’ll figure it out, love. She’s just a baby. A baby that’s seen far more of life than she ought to. That takes its toll.”

Ruby staggered in, hair wispy and eyes smeared in sleep. In the old world, people always left when there was a fight, and she

didn't want to be by herself again. Besides, her grandparents were old, and the outside at night was Dangerous.

"Hello, my love. Did we wake you up?" Grandma asked.

Ruby nodded.

"Sorry, sweetheart. We just miss your mum a bit extra tonight, that's all. You do too, hmm?"

She shuffled, bare feet on threadbare carpet, and climbed into the perfect Ruby-shaped hole between them. Feet pressed against Grandma's thigh, head resting on Grandad's knee. Watching the moon through the edge of the blind.

"Look at us," Grandad said, "We're like a little gaggle."

*

August brought lazy days, where dragonflies skirted over stagnant water and the air closed in on all sides. It also brought raspberries, plums and runner beans, stretching up from the earth towards the sunlight. And most of all, it brought the injured goose.

Ruby had spent most of the summer in the garden with Grandma, trowel in hand in case she needed some help.

"You see," Grandma was saying, as they tossed raspberries into a basket, "We can wash these and then make something tasty with them for the school fete thing. Do you know what goes really well with raspberries in things?"

Ruby shook her head.

"White chocolate. Because raspberries are sharp, and chocolate is sweet, you see. It's all about balancing the

flavours." Then, as an afterthought, "Life can be a bit like that sometimes. It's all in the balance."

Ruby closed her eyes, feeling the sun on her face and the stickiness of the red juice on her fingertips. She would write that fact about raspberries down in the book later.

"Besides, now I've decided to make something, it's got to be amazing. I want to show all those other young mums that I've still got it."

Ruby laid the trowel on the grass, and wandered away from the flowerbeds to look at the water.

"If you're lucky, you might see a kingfisher."

But she didn't find a kingfisher. Instead, she came face to face with a Real Life Monster. Lying, twisted on the ground and partially concealed by the hedge, was a goose. Ruby had never seen one up close like this before – usually, she wasn't allowed to get close because they could peck you. But this time was different.

Wing outstretched, broken feathers underfoot. White plumage streaked with scarlet, just like raspberry juice. For a moment, she just stood. Watching.

And then, ever so gently, she reached down and stroked his chest. Her pink-stained fingers left trails in the red, and the bird seemed to sigh.

She remembered once, back in the old world, when the cat had brought in a bird. The body was a hideous thing, and Mum said not to look but she couldn't help it. She couldn't sleep for a week, thinking about the glassy look in its eyes. Two weeks

later, the cat disappeared, and Ruby asked whether he had died of curiosity, because she heard someone say that on TV.

There was nothing in the fact book to tell her what to do, but she remembered that at school, they had to Tell A Teacher if they ever found anything scary in the playground. She was pretty sure they meant stuff like knives and drugs, but this goose was pretty frightening too, and so she went to find Grandma.

The next hour was a blur of people and phone calls, until all that was left was bloodied tea towels. She could feel herself brimming with questions, but her tongue was still tired and so she wrote them down.

- 1. What happened to the goose?**
- 2. Is it dead?**
- 3. Do geese go to heaven?**
- 4. Does heaven exist?**
- 5. What happened to his gaggle? Why didn't they come back for him?**

"The people that took him away will try to look after him the best that they can, okay? But he was in a very bad way, so nothing is guaranteed. They think an animal got to him. He was very lucky he had you there to look out for him, hmm?" Grandad said.

Ruby thought of the look in its eyes, and shuddered. Mum had looked like that once, just before the police came. That's how she knew things would be different now.

Not Bad Different, not Good Different – just Different.

That's how they sold it to her in the room with no windows, as they slid a carton of warm orange juice across the table. *Mum just needs a bit of a break for a while, okay?*

The phone rang at 3:08pm three days later, while Ruby was eating toast. She could tell that it was good news because Grandma hung up and started dancing. Sometimes she did that, when she was happy, or when Strictly was on. She dragged Grandpa in sometimes too, and he pretended to hate it.

"That was the wildlife people. Apparently he's much brighter this morning. They've asked if we want to come and watch him be released next week. Would you like that?"

Ruby nodded.

"Come on, superstar. I think this calls for ice cream."

When the day came, they piled into the car in the early evening, and drove to the big lake where Grandad sometimes went fishing. She had started to go along with him now, because fishing is very quiet and no one has to talk. Instead, she would read and rip up grass, and he didn't even tell her off like they did in PE.

The goose was in a big cage now, and Grandad went up with her to have a look, in case she was scared. But the goose wasn't wonky anymore, and his feathers were all white and beautiful like the ones she watched in the sky. He stared at her through the wires, and in her head, she told him that she hoped he'd find his gaggle again. Perhaps if she thought it hard enough, he'd understand.

"Come on, fella," the wildlife woman said, "It's time to get you back in the world."

She wished Mum could be here now, because everyone kept telling her she'd done such a Great Job, and Ruby wanted her to know. If Mum was here, she would tell her that she was like a superhero, because she had saved this animal and now it wasn't wonky any more. Ruby thought she would be pleased about that.

That was the thing about the new world – over time, you start to feel less like an alien and more like Ruby. And the thing about being happy is, you want to tell someone about it. You want to say *look at me with Grandad and Grandma, making cakes and fishing and going to school and doing a cartwheel*. You want to show her all the new cool things you can do.

But Mum belonged to the old world. At least for now.

Gradually, the goose began to flap his wings. Small movements at first, and then bigger and bigger until he was almost the size of Ruby herself. And with that, he launched from the ground and stretched into the air, beating against the currents until he was above the trees. Up, up, up.

She watched his silhouette against the purple light, and realised that for the first time in a long time, she wanted to shout.



Young Creative Awards Nottingham

youngcreativeawards.org
@ycreativesnottm

Cover Image: Ava Chapman (YCA 2022 Photography category winner, 16-18 age group) *"Clouded Thoughts"*

Thank you very much to the sponsors of the Young Creative Awards 2022 Creative Writing category, the award-winning e-learning solutions company **Walkgrove:** walkgrove.co.uk

Many thanks as well to the YCA 2022 Creative Writing judges: Cleo Asabre-Holt, Lucy Hodge, Lyle Lowery & Andrew Tucker.

This zine was risograph printed by The Carousel: thecarousel.co.uk

The YCA 2022 Creative Writing category winners are:

Áine Mullan

Leah Chaplin

Lottie Cox



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**