

Examples of candidate work

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The Green Room

I don't know how to begin. Or where. I know that I am supposed to write what I know and that all human activity lies within the artist's scope. But I know that what I know is coloured by numbers.

And what I don't know exists. Exists as a beautiful, deep blue ocean of land that sparkles with the brilliancy of childish imagination. Where the people are more real to me than any I could lay my hand on. Their forms are more exquisitely flawed. Their eyes are deeper and more passionate windows into their souls, which are so much more full of life. And soul. So tangible that I could almost shake their hands.

They are wandering minstrels diminuendoing through shady glens blessed with eternal summer – soft breezes and artistic light. They are lanced, daring acts of valour at the sword of puff-chested knights. They are damsels who wave handkerchiefs distressedly. What I don't know is my life-blood. Dark skinned women – who wear scarlet and gold and dance the flamenco under a tambourine moon – pulse in my veins. And yet this is not what I know so not what I write. Although they may appear briefly, as passing thoughts, through a window of parenthesis. They are childish. They are spectres. They are nothing more than the idle creation of a seventeen year old malcontent who is so desperate for adventure that she has resorted to the invention of her own. Head jangling with loose change of advanced calculus, the real currency of her thoughts is a rip-roaring high seas adventure. Whilst looking through endless overhead projections about chemical respiration, she is gasping for breath as she gallops, on a cursory journey through the night, on her thoroughbred stallion.

Her school clothes are getting too small and it's too late to purchase anything new. Shirt sleeves stop circulation. Jumpers barely reach the waist. Shoes are scuffed and trousers are getting dangerously short.

I have outgrown school clothes and I have outgrown school.

Unfortunately, as the time draws near for leaving, I begin to see that I will be inherently disappointed with reality's adventures if I do not forgo these fairytales. Be lost at sea and fall off my horse. When young, we are surrounded by heroic perfection. Slowly and gradually – subliminally – it is trampled into us, by the steed of the very society that will later dash all our hopes and dreams, that we have a duty to keep young and beautiful, to find our Prince Charming and live happily ever after in a pink castle with a purple drawbridge, nestled amongst candyfloss clouds which soften in a golden syrup sky. But these castles in the sky are built on vain hope and empty romanticism. In reality, Cinderella went to the local disco, got totally hammered and fell off her ridiculously tacky diamanted shoes. And when Prince Charming tried to help her stand, she threw up all over his feet. Snow White ran away from home and squatted in the dwarves house. She accepted a treat from a stranger and fell into a drug-induced coma. And Sleeping Beauty fell asleep because she was exhausted, having stayed up all night cramming for her Advanced Higher Chemistry NAB.

Wars were glorious, righteous things. Good always defeated evil. Men who died in battle died the death of a valiant warrior. They were not taken to a prisoner of war camp, stripped naked and led around on a leash like a flea-infested dog. Whilst journalists salivated.

Being brought up on a good, wholesome diet of fairytales and Louisa May Alcott has, I fear, spoiled my appetite for the world that lies ahead. Fairytales may be designed to protect and reassure us. But ultimately, the absence of 'happily ever afters' in a world where the divorce rate is thirty percent rips through our flesh like a spear to a dragon. The world is no longer a romantic place. And anybody who attempts to remain so might as well bite the poisoned apple.

Although. My parents no longer widen my eyes with fantastic tales of glorious deeds then tuck me in and kiss me on the forehead. But last week I encountered a fairy story of another kind.

Marcel Proust – author of the novel 'The Remembrance Of Things Past' – had a love of a small French cake called a Madeleine. When he dipped it into tea and brought it to his lips, the past came flooding back. I have a Madeleine. Orange juice. The moment that I taste the sweet, thin bitterness of fresh orange juice from a tumbler I am instantly and unceremoniously plucked from wherever it is that I am drinking fresh orange juice from a tumbler, hurled over the garden fence and landed with a hefty thump in our next-door neighbours kitchen. Cutlery rattles on the cluttered surfaces and the fat orange cat spooks – ripping into the hideously grey carpet with yellow nails.

Our next door neighbours are the Taylors. They live in a house called 'Balloo.' It smells. Not bad, but strongly. Strongly of damp grass compacted into the perishing soles of wellingtons that are older than time and lined up at the back door. Strongly of book must – intellectual and soupy. Strongly of a thousand boiled kettles. A strong but sweet roast from beans matured in the monsoons of South India. Even when I have a cold – and being a spotty, swotty little thing prone to allergies, that is not altogether infrequent – I can smell this smell all the way across the garden fence. The smell isn't in my nose. It's in my mind, in my frontal lobes, as all truly memorable odours are. Their house smells strongly of them.

Auntie Margaret – no relation by blood but by tumblerfuls of orange juice. Graham – never Uncle Graham for reasons which can no longer be recalled but which are wholly accepted. Michael – their eldest son who used to let me win at chess and Ronnie – who I fell in love with aged seven and who married a music teacher in the leonine yellow of last summer. Auntie Margaret is an English teacher and was the first woman I ever knew who had hair as short as her husbands. I thought it was strange. I thought it was marvellous. There seemed to be Real Strength in the abandonment of the common bob: of the shoulderlength. Real Strength and a whiff of the revolutionary.

This marvellously strange woman - who grows cacti in blue window boxes and whose husband wears moccasins - came across the garden fence last week. She came across the garden fence and slayed my happily ever afters.

It was late evening. I had been studying since after dinner and, tired of tilting with advanced calculus, the second derivatives of non-homogenous functions, I came downstairs in search of a distraction. Unfortunately- and I really wish it hadn't – a distraction found me.

We have two living rooms. One is a ramshackle confusion of shoes, books, papers, slippers, a pretty ugly three-piece suite and a wide screen TV with surround sound. The other is decorated in coordinating shades of green. The luscious, precious green carpet, the fireplace and the horribly expensive coffee table are reserved for Christmas and for after dinner coffee - at Christmas. However, the glass doors between these two are always left open; partly because we are hoping that some of the elegance of the green room will seep through into the confusion and improve the 'slumped-on-the-sofa' ambience; partly because they were never hung quite correctly and make an awful rattle when opened – no matter how careful you are. So when I saw that they were shut it was a glaring no-entry sign, despite the door's transparency. Three muffled voices bled through the glass – my mum, my dad and my next door neighbour. My mum is a gynaecologist. My dad is a GP. When Michael decided to play hockey with a wasp bike, he came yelping over to our house. When Ronnie broke two of his fingers playing football, my mum strapped them up for him.

HRT this time? I thought.

An in-grown toenail?

Insomnia, depression, palpitations? I thought.

Thyroidism, rheumatism, aneurysm, orf...?

Intrigued, I moved round into the kitchen and flicked on the kettle. It gasped a sputtering, bubbling rasp whilst I pretended to myself that I wasn't trying to hear. But positioned just behind the door, busying myself in the fridge, I waited and listened for a bubble of adult conversation to float out of the green room. I heard her say it then.

"So I have cancer..."

I fell away from the door. To be more precise, the door fell away from me. As did the walls, the roof, the fridge, the precious green carpet and the garden fence. A wave of orange juice engulfed me. Sherry on Christmas morning intoxicated me. Help with a particularly tricky essay jumped off the page at me. Spontaneous barbequing blew smoke in my face and a fat orange cat hissed. Somewhere a dragon roared.

I gently picked up the milk, closed the fridge door, made myself a cup of tea.

Lumpectomy, mastectomy, chemotherapy ...?

and I returned to my calculus.

Auntie Margaret went home not long after that. I heard the door close. Having waited an inconspicuous amount of 'I-haven't-heard-a-thing' time I descended once again and flicked on the kettle. Mum came into the kitchen and said in a 'I-don't-know-a-thing' tone

"Oooo great. Tea. You're an angel."

I smiled as she kissed me, on the forehead.

“Why was Auntie Margaret over mum?” I asked, standing barefoot on the cold kitchen floor. The kitchen is where we do all of our talking. Religion. Romance. Exams. Romance. Friends. Romance. It’s where wounds are healed over a silent cup of coffee after a skirmish of the wills over hem-length and heel-height on a shopping trip. Standing barefoot on the cold kitchen floor, I asked.

“Why was Auntie Margaret over mum?”

“Oh just wanted some advice. Nothing to worry about. How’s the calculus going?” She sipped her tea. She might as well have asked ‘who is the fairest one of all?’

“Fine.” I frowned as she floated off into the living room – trailing a fairy godmother magic wand and surrounded by a cloud of pure air, laced with swirls of silver sparkle and puffs of pink perfume.

Perhaps my parents will tell me the truth eventually. Perhaps when Auntie Margaret is out of the woods: woods that are haunted by the footsteps of monsters that will, quite literally, turn on someone and systematically eat them alive.

Fairytales are lily-padded, jewel-encrusted, satin-robed frogs, which don’t turn into handsome princes no matter how much they’re kissed. In short, they are huge disappointments. They make us believe in a world that is trailed in clematis and shot in sepia. They make us believe in candyfloss dreams. And whilst dreams are comfortable pillows for children whilst they sleep, when they wake and find themselves to be almost grown ups in a pillow-less world where no dreams can be found, the stench of human misdemeanour will overwhelm: one of those memorable smells. A slight but pervasive and enduring whiff that can be smelt even when I have a cold.

And they will live disappointedly ever after.