

Into the light – Rose Korsen (Red House School)

I'm sorry.

I want you to know that I love you, this is not your fault; this was my decision to make.

I was so tired. Exhausted. I could not keep going. Physically or mentally. This is what was right for me, and I had to do this. I know that you will not understand so I will try to help you, because that is all I can do now. But sometimes help is not enough – I, of all people, know that – and for that, I am sorry.

Ballet was my passion, my love, my everything. I could express my emotions through the fluidity of my body, and show others how I felt through a single leap in my pointe shoes. That is what I loved – the expression, the art form, the beauty. But this is a feeling I could not express through choreography. This was my only solution, to a perpetual problem.

The beauty of ballet is ugly deep down. The gruesome truths about what we do to achieve the highest of standards and how we do it. A ballerina's goal is to embody perfection; but no one is perfect. So, what does a ballerina do? Perfect the impossibility of perfection. Point our toes, round our arms, straighten our legs.

This beauty takes effort, and with that effort comes extreme pain. I stretched and stretched until my body felt as supple as plasticine; but when it came to training and dancing, the plasticine had been left out in the sun, and as I was being pushed into the mould, I was cracking. I do not know whether I couldn't fit the mould, or if the mould didn't fit me – either way, the mould made me uncomfortable, it made me suffer. I had to get out and this was it.

I trained and I trained every day, to get stronger, to get better. As I got stronger, which was essential to perfect the beauty of the movements, my muscles grew bigger, but you can't have that. Smaller. Daintier. Lighter. This is the mantra drilled into every ballerina's brain. This was the mantra bulldozed into mine by everyone around me. My mum, sister, choreographer, team mates. It is like walking on a piece of string a hundred metres off the floor, get too strong and you will be too heavy for the string, not strong enough and you will be too weak to control your movements, and you will fall. I got sick of looking in the mirror and scrutinizing every millimetre of my body, every flaw, every imperfection. I got tired of trying to resist life's simplest pleasures. No matter what I did, it was never good enough.

I would never be as good as those around me because I was exhausted from trying to be. To be the best you have to want it, and I no longer craved to be the best, I simply craved my freedom.

No one understood.

The choreographer thinks that they understand because they choreograph the expression, but it is not until a ballerina breathes emotion into it that it becomes true expression. So, when they push us harder and harder, deep down it is because they cannot

compartmentalise their own failures; they cannot move past their downfalls, and they know that they could never dance their own work like we can.

Ballet is like a room, except the room is empty, on the fiftieth floor, small, cramped, with no door. Freedom, happiness, and joy are all just outside the room but there is no way out. The walls are high and the room is dark.

The single way out is very small window at the top of the wall. Trust ballet to only let you out if you are miniature enough to squeeze through a crevice.

The banging on the walls drowned me, the loneliness of my own company was overwhelming, the fear of failure crushed me.

The spotlight was every ballerina's deepest desired, but the light was too bright for me. The only light that I dreamed of now was just outside the window, with a drastic death drop below.

There was only one way for me to finish my dance – the only way.

I had to step into the light.

I'm sorry.

A shot in the dark

Zaria Adams (Farlington School)

There is a father and a daughter. Hurling towards oblivion on the sand-covered, sun burnt roads of El Paso. Tumbleweeds blow by as tarantulas crawl out of their cool homes and taste the red clay. My father turns to me, cigarette sticking out his mouth, hands twitching on the leather steering wheel. "When the rapture comes, this will be the site. Ain't nuthin on the earth more holy than the desert. It's a new world, with laws onto itself". I turn, rolling the windows down and sticking my hand out, sunburnt knuckles lie flush on warm brown skin. I imitate my father, slouching down in the seat and resting my hand on the car's wing mirror. The steel burns my finger tips, branding them until they turn raw and unmarked, as smooth as a baby. For a second I feel brand new, a child birthed out of the dust and the hot dark dirt. With the sand and wind in my eyes I feel like something beautiful and real. Then Johnny Cash crackles onto the radio, crooning blues about God and liquor and everything in between. The car hits a bump, and we lurch forwards. The ground suddenly becomes real and the road stretches out in front of us, miles and miles of lawless land with no real destination.

In the backseat of my heart lies a tragic backstory, because no story is complete without one. I decide to keep it secret. I lock it up in a box that I stuff deep in the attic of my mind, away from prying eyes that want to devour me whole. A ghost lives in the backseat next to me, she has my face. Only warmer, kinder, more human. I miss her in ways I can't explain or describe. I turn towards the road, the only thing that has remained a constant and gaze at the dilapidated houses as they pass me by. My father is a wild man, racing against the stream of time and truth. He wears all the right boots, endures the heavy belts and heavier hands because this is how his story was meant to be written. This is what it means to be a man. My story is not yet written, let alone done.

That evening as I lie on the desert floor, blankets scattered around, the sun sets and a dreamless night takes hold. I am moon bruised when I wake up. My father is in a good mood, in love with his car and the whole world, and by association he is in love with me. Despite the aches and pains of the moon a bruised child still needs to learn how to drive, so we turn to the obsessive truth you only know when you're tearing up rubber and fathers, counting miles and the weather, looking for a destination you've already passed. I halt the car too many times, travel too fast down the dirt roads. But I'm happy, the sun is shining, my father is loving and the ghosts in the car are quiet.

I remember one summer, cold for some reason. My father had dragged me up to the Colorado mountains. He wanted a boy, I have to make do. He looks me over, weighing me up in his eyes. Then he puts his cigarette out and smiles, a carefree kind grin. He claps my shoulder, dragging me into the evergreen woods that lay in front, beckoning me into their open arms. A white deer and a gun is waiting. I know how to shoot, I know where to aim. It's a little different when the deer is lying in front of you, oblivious to the girl standing to its left.

I can't slaughter it with my eyes open. If a death occurs when no one is there to see it, did it really happen? I close my eyes and take my mind back to the starry night sky of the hot

desert. When all there was was my own heartbeat and the depth of the sky. Right now only darkness lies before me, rolling out like the distant roads and lands we travel. I exhale, once, twice and squeeze the trigger. The deer hits the floor and my father and I hit the road.

The car feels haunted. A deer and a mother ride in the backseat, my father in the front. Some spaces aren't meant for the dead, some people are not meant for hauntings. Every time I close my eyes, the deer lays there waiting. Watching me with intelligent eyes. In retribution the sun burns my face and my hands peel. At night I am haunted by its image, shot through with light and bullets.

By Zaria Adams

SHOT IN THE DARK

Amaylia Dewis (The Dixie Grammar School)

We stand in separate rooms and the sand hits the windows and the glass never breaks.

They cleaned out the house pretty well. Your brother drove by last week in his brand new car, with mates on his way down to the grey riverside - said there's ivy on the windows and some kids must've smashed the door because the porch is in ruins. Said thank god no one lives in that wreckage anymore.

We stand still.

Men come for the cushions, for the cupboard, the bed - they come with their lorries and lift the light fixtures from the plaster, peel the wallpaper to tatters with their nails. Soup spoons wander from the bottom draw and neither of us come alive to it.

And the storm swirls and shifts and howls like the creaking of the roof as it crumbles, like the ache of the floorboards we paced on for hours, days, mindless weeks - the desert rises and hurls itself at the glass like the tide, the glass unmisted by a hundred last breaths, the glass between us a living thing - a line drawn red in the spiralling gold, yellow in our hair and our eyes and my bleeding mouth. The silence of the storm is endless. I remember the flood of that sacramental Tuesday, the way the water rose until even the bed sheets were soaked. The ocean was born from the drip of the tap and suddenly the tiles were swimming, colour blended black - without warning, I had to kick to keep afloat. The dish cloth left my hands. And I remember how you thrashed, blind, violent in your need to swim far, far away from me, to the door, the air, the staggering weight of space. I remember sitting in the bottom of the bathtub under a thousand tonnes of salt, hugging my knees and thinking in the blue 'I hope the spider in the skirting board survives.'

(he didn't.)

And when the ocean drained through the cat flap and became lost beneath our green front door, I dried my eyes and looked for you. In every cupboard. Every hiding space we ever found playing games when we were younger, chasing ourselves round a house we'd dreamed so hard to buy, laughing in collision with the kitchen table, motion in each other's arms. I thought you were washed down into the garden, taken by the current to the trees we'd planted, so I found your footprints in the soil and followed them all the way down to the river. Maybe that's where all the world was washed away. You left nothing but a line in the sand.

I walked home with your pulse between my fingers, soil in my hair. Let myself in through the back door, the painted wood soft and splintering, taken to ruin by the screaming tide. It was quiet. I breathed on instinct, but hated myself for it. Straightened a photo frame on the stairs.

That night, the wind sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

And when I woke, you lay beside me in darkness, a shape indiscernible but as familiar as my own hands - I gasped and leaned and crushed my skull on nothing, on a wall of glass, a message. It grew between our pillows like knowing, needy cold.

I noticed the sand a day after.

So now we stand in a room long separated and listen to the wind, to the monsters in the skirting board moan. And I think and I think of the weight of living silence, the bones we keep in our fists. I think of the fragility of glass.

And then one night, like before, like always, like the inevitability of waking, the sandstorm pounds a little too hard. That noiseless drone circles into a screeching gale and it's so sudden in its undoing, so relentless in its pushing and wanting and ceaseless caring, the desert and ocean roiling as one and bursting through the kitchen tiles, a thunder of current and sterile sky - you turn and I almost fall to my knees as the tidal wave crushes, yellow, through our faded floral wallpaper and lunges screaming at the carpet. On the stairs, a photo frame slips left.

And the glass cracks.

Like an egg it splinters. Frosted white scuttles to the ceiling. For a moment, it hangs.

We are the only beings in motion.

And it's a blind shot, a desperate shot, in the dark and the silence and the space between breaths, but I fall to my knees and do it anyway. Throw out my fist to the carpet. One blink, and my knuckles brush the glass.

It shatters.

You stand and you look at me. Fine silver in the sand. Someone stole our spoons.

Silent, you take a step.

The Necklace

Zoe Lazarou (The Gregg School)

The delicate, golden chain glittered in the setting sun, the intricate raven charm twinkling impressively in the antique-shop window. For years now, the necklace had been hidden in the depths of the store cupboard, completely forgotten about until now. Despite the many years of neglect, the necklace was still as glossy and gleaming as the day it was made.

It was late March, in 1692, as the sun sank over the horizon, illuminating the lush green fields and casting the small town in a glorious golden light. Salem, Massachusetts, was the very picture of the quaint, scenic towns the area was known for, and was the perfect example of deceptive appearances, for it was to be the birthplace of one of the most notorious cases of mass hysteria. The town was placid and tranquil, and quiet enough to hear the blossoming trees swaying gently in the breeze. A scream split the previously peaceful air, as piercing as the sharpest knife and deafeningly loud. The heart-wrenching sound seemed to go on for ever, ringing in the ears of the villagers, long after it stopped.

“Lizzie! Lizzie! Oh, god help my little Lizzie!” the frantic woman burst out of the otherwise-ordinary house, bawling as loudly as her voice would allow, “Please, get the doctor! And the priest, lord help me, Liza’s possessed!”

There was nothing that either the doctor, or the priest could do. Poor little Elizabeth Parris died in the early hours of the morning, screaming and spasming right up until all the life was drained out of her. The funeral was a minor affair, her small, frail body being lowered into the ground before it was even cold, while the other villagers looked on fearfully, crossing themselves and praying, each of them begging their God to spare their children from the horrific spell. Over time, the earth over the unfortunate child’s grave settled, as did the villagers terror, mutating instead, like a malformed monster rearing its ugly, vindictive head, looking for someone to blame.

Four-year-old Dorothy Good was sitting on the floor of the modest cottage, singing faintly to herself, the soft, gold light pouring in through the open window like melted butter, illuminating the dust motes dancing around in the summer air and turning everything it touched golden. On her lap, Dorothy held a miniature snake that coiled mesmerizingly around the delicate hands of the child, occasionally latching onto her thumb with its needle-like fangs, making a deep crimson trickle of blood run slowly down her pale hands. Around the young child’s neck hung a tiny, delicate chain, an elaborate raven charm dangling off it, catching the light in a way that made it twinkle like a miniature star, stolen from the sky. It swayed hypnotically as Dorothy sang, gently repeating the rhyme like a spell,

“One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told, eight for a wish, nine for a kiss, ten for a time of joyful bliss, eleven for a curse that won’t come undone, twelve for a full purse, thirteen for death, fourteen for a baby’s breath and fifteen to undo the rest.”

Someone was pounding furiously on the door of the little cottage, knocking so hard it seemed as though the whole house was shaking. The small snake slithered swiftly under the chair, its beady eyes glinting from the darkness, watching as Dorothy's mother opened the door to a large, angry mob. At the front stood a muscular, imposing man who towered above Dorothy's mother. Ranged behind him was what looked like the entire population of the village, their flaming torches flickering in the ever-darkening dusk light and their pitchforks and scythes silhouetted against the sky.

"Where's the witch?!" roared the man, the crowd behind him thundering in agreement. Dorothy's mother was helpless against the furious horde, pushed aside like paper as they forced their way inside. The first thirteen men circled Dorothy, who was still sat frozen in shock on the bare floor, none of them quite sure what to do next.

"Seize the witch!" bellowed Sewall, thrusting his pitchfork like he was stabbing an unseen enemy from above. All of a sudden, the men were grabbing at the poor child, yelling with triumph and hatred, as the terrified four-year-old screamed and fought with all her might against the wrathful mob. They dragged her, kicking, and screaming, past her hysterically mother and outside. The mob swarmed outside after her, like bees flocking to the queen. Overhead, eleven ravens flapped towards the little village, cawing scratchily. The golden necklace, glinted on the floor, the broken clasp resting against the lone raven charm, glimmering in the dimming light.