



upon a golden bough

Foreword

When you start something and it goes well, you're happy. When you repeat that something and it goes even better, well, you've got to be even happier. The second year of The Heritage New Writing Contest saw more entries from more schools, leading to more winners in more categories. Nobody involved in running the contest could have hoped for so many different kinds of more. But we couldn't be happier to have achieved them.

This year's theme was **food**, and its concrete everydayness marked a shift from the abstract idea of **harmony** that formed the focus of last year's entries. In many ways, the theme seems to have pushed our island's young writers to think harder about how to make something so omnipresent and often taken for granted into something original and resonant. So, we have poetry and prose that cover the spectrum from the harrowing to the absurd, dealing with everything from love, to crime, to social media influencing, to body dysmorphia, to cannibalism. Above all, we have a body of work that shines with the immense talent and creativity that abounds in Cyprus's schools, and of which everyone concerned with young people and the arts in our nation can and should be so proud.

Once again, I need to express my gratitude to the teachers and students whose hard work and enthusiasm led to the explosion of entries received, and to the contest's judging/editorial panel whose expertise and time led us to the final pieces you are about to read.

So, for the second of what I hope will be many more occasions, here you go.

Simon Demetriou, Contest Organiser



The Under 11s: Poetry

WINNER

Leith Ryan Meshal, 11, The Heritage School, Limassol

Shakespeare's Tiramisu

O Tiramisu, Tiramisu, how art thou made Tiramisu?
I must deny my diet and embrace thy calories.
Or, if I do not, forsake my love
And thou wilt no longer be my dessert.
'Tis but thy mascarpone that will be my undoing.
Thou art so sumptuous and creamy inside.
What art thou if not a cuplet, with thy finger biscuits?
O thou fingers soaked in liqueur and espresso,
Thy grip on me is divine.
O thy sprinkling of chocolate,
Art like a sprinkling of rain after a long hard drought.
Thou art a melody of ingredients coming together
Like an orchestra on my stage of taste buds.
O Tiramisu, thy form is as fluffy as a summer's cloud.
Thou makest me rejoice with every majestic bite.
I cannot part with thee, for thou art the love of all my desserts.
Give all thine self to me!



COMMENDED

Alexis Serghides, 10, Foley's School, Limassol

Grandma's Pot

Restaurants serve it up all day
Juicy, succulent, steak straight to my plate
Taking my mouth on a serious date,
Squiggly spaghetti filling me up all the way,
Or fried fish frantically coming over –
But nothing tastes better than the food out of my grandma's pot!

Fast food chains serve it up all day
Run and queue without delay!
Finger-lickin' chicken and crunchy, salted fries,
Golden nuggets like rocks whose taste never lies
Paper-thin pizza, love it a lot!
But nothing tastes better than the food out of my grandma's pot!

Taverns serve it up all day
Some of it is gorgeous I must say.
When I enter through a tavern door, strong smells rush up my nose,
The famous smell of souvla that everyone knows!
For Sunday lunch it's the perfect thing to do,
But nothing tastes better than the food out of my grandma's pot!

Grandma serves it up all day, too
We don't go there just to play
With her food she makes magic in her own special way,
When we're at the table we don't want to go away.

It's the best food whether you believe it or not,
Because nothing tastes better than the food out of grandma's pot!



COMMENDED

Aditri Gupta, 9, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

Food From Around The World

I love crispy, spicy, and sweet panipuri.
Eaten fresh by my friends and me,
In the centre, a tiny hole I must make,
I love it more than eating cake.
With a fiery, spiced liquid the flavour is born,
In the busy streets of India, when it's gone you'll be forlorn.

A cheesy, gooey, and delicious treat,
This delightful dish you'll surely love to eat.
Pepperoni, tomatoes, olives- pile them up high.
Pineapple is not the best topping, but at least give it a try!
Invented in the city of Naples in stunning Italy,
Don't gobble down the last slice of pizza without me.

A roll of ingredients such as white rice and raw fish,
You will definitely finish this pleasing dish.
A place to find this treat is in Japan, Edo.
A variety of different colours of the rainbow,
Such as avocado green, pastel pink salmon,
Eaten with spicy wasabi, but don't eat a ton!

Trying new food makes me feel over the moon.
How many places can you fit on your spoon?



The Under 11s: Prose

WINNER

Sehja Chauhan, 10, The Falcon School, Nicosia

The Secret Land

Our story begins with ten-year-old girl Gemma Sparkles. Gemma loved drawing nature and animals, but her favourite thing to draw was food. She had brown skin, golden hair, and dark brown eyes. She was drawing when her mum called her:

“Gemma, time for bed!”

“Okay, just finishing my drawing”, replied Gemma. She could not decide what to draw, so she mixed a few of her favourite pictures together with her favourite pen. She used her pen in all her pictures, but she did not know that she was using no ordinary pen. It was an enchanted, unique wand. A magical pen that brought pictures to life, but this power could only happen at night. I know what you might be thinking: “How could Gemma not know about her pen?” It is because she always kept her pictures in her drawer.

Since she was rushing to finish and go to bed, she forgot to put the picture in her drawer. After she was in her pyjamas, she went to bed.

Suddenly she heard a noise. At first, she wasn't even sure it was a noise, but then it became louder and closer. She turned around and could not believe her eyes. Right in front of her was a land made of sweets. Without thinking, she stepped forward and entered the platform of dessert.

There was a river of hot chocolate and marshmallows. Clouds were made of multiple flavours of cotton candy. There were mountains of cupcakes and cakes. Trees were made of lollypops, and apples were made of bubblegum. Everything around her was made of food.

As she looked around, she noticed that there was something grey beyond the mountains. Out of curiosity she headed towards it.

While walking down the gingerbread path, everything around her was changing from sweet to healthy. Within a few minutes she was surrounded by fruits and vegetables. The lollypops had turned to broccoli trees. There were hills of salad. All she could see was healthy food.

Then, once again, she heard a noise. And, once again, at first she thought it was her mind playing tricks on her. She soon realized that it was a stampede of food animals – “foodimals”.

Panic and fear took over. As quickly as she could, Gemma climbed up the nearest broccoli tree. She waited.

When the coast was clear, she climbed down. As soon as she reached the ground, Gemma realised she had lost her route.

Out of nowhere a frog came towards her. This frog was made of kale and sensed the magic in her pen. It tried to direct Gemma to the place she needed to go by using its tongue. They walked through the vegetable jungle and over bridges. At last, they reached a cave. The frog jumped off Gemma’s shoulder and pointed towards the cave.

Gemma was unsure of what to do for a moment, but now she was inside. She stepped inside and noticed a light shining from a corner. Worry took over her body, but she continued to follow the light.

When Gemma reached the centre of the cave, there were multicoloured crystals everywhere. In the middle was a large crystal.

Suddenly, Gemma’s pen stuck to the crystal. Gemma discovered that she was the one who made the land. All the grey stuff she could see was the drawings that she

had not used her magic pen for.

Gemma was trying to think of how she would get home, when the crystal started talking. It showed her how to click a button on her pen and tip glitter out of it. A portal of sprinkles showed Gemma to a door.

She stepped in and found herself back in her bedroom. What an adventure it had been!



Stavros Athienitis, 10, The American Academy, Nicosia

Cereal Canard

Since the beginning of winter this year, 2022, shortages of cereal in stores have caused children to create a false rumour about a serial burglar who will attempt to gulp down each and every morsel of cereal in Cyprus. After the wide spread of the story, it has been noted that less cereal has been restocked in the country's Lidl's.

It is said the Serial Cereal Bandit will return on New Year's, 2023. The manager of a local Lidl was willing to volunteer by giving his experience of the story: "It's honestly outrageous," he commented. "The children are going to stop buying cereal in fear of this so-called 'Serial Cereal Bandit'. This could result in us taking cereal off the shelves."

People are afraid the rumour may spread into other countries if shortages become frequent, damaging the reputation of cereal further.

Keep your cupboards shut, but the Serial Cereal Bandit is most definitely not on the loose!



The Under 15s: Poetry

WINNER

Emily Nusinov, 14, The American Academy, Limassol

Nervosa

The nauseating feeling of desolation that fuels a hunger which isn't asking to be fed,
the paralyzing paranoia gnawing on the aperture in your stomach:

Thinner, thinner, thinner.

I judge the slices as I judge myself –
we must be thinner.

A brumal morning, a sorry scale, and myself.

I gaze.

I don't like what I see.

My eyes flood

not with tears,

but with envy.

I envy those that don't see green,

I envy those that can look down and digest what they see.

The feeling doesn't go away;

It clings onto you for dear life, like a parasite.

The feeling always stays

for you are as dependent on it

as it is on you.



COMMENDED

Milia Nardi, 14, TLC Private School, Paphos

The Diner

Who knew one small hair could ruin a diner.

The place would be shut.

They were aware.

A strand in glassware.

A mistake so minor.

They were sat.

The city's top headliner.

Just turned thirty niner.

Her garments were designer.

Styled in fancy dress.

A woman who cheated success.

The attention she could possess.

Everyone would obsess.

An opinion so murderous.

The only one that mattered more or less.

The food was still edible.

I thought she was incredible.

Until she stabbed and chewed.

My eyes were glued.

I viewed but I did not intrude.

She pursued.

Our restaurant was screwed.

After she sued.

We always clean cookware.

It is easy and square.

We are beware but sometimes it happens.

Out of nowhere.

There is a small hair.

I can admit it is gross.

It will be to most,

But did she really have to post?

Her fans were close.

She could have been discreet.

That she did not want to eat.

The millionaire's pitch.

Dug our business into a ditch.



COMMENDED

Viktoria Baranova, 14, TLC Private School, Paphos

Food for Thought

The human body is amazing
with so many functions worth praising
But even the best machines need fuel
And some may consider this to be cruel.

What is actually considered food?
The answer's hard to reach.
Food is what you eat
But what if some prefer to eat a different meat?

Perhaps this question might your appetite worsen.
But can I just ask: can you eat a person?
The response will be hasty: of course not.
Yet let's for a moment think, is that actually so?

I'm not saying let's all eat people now.
I'm just asking: how are we different from a cow?
If the person's already dead, why is it not right
To – if you are really hungry – take a bite?

I'm not looking for answers or taking suggestions.
That would be for naught;
But this is food for thought.



The Under 15s: Prose

WINNER

Ivan Kolesnikov, 12, Pascal School, Limassol

The Ring of Cheese

- Inspector Burnwell, sir!

Burnwell groaned. The last thing he wanted now was a new case. He was tired; serving 30 years in the police force does wear one out. Nevertheless, he replied:

- What is it now, Scranton?

Scranton was a young bloke of about 25, bursting with ideas and eager to serve his nation. He seemed to fail to understand that his superior was not to be bothered on every possible occasion, and thus he informed the inspector of everything that happened within the Department. In his noticeable Cockney accent he continued:

- Letter from HQ, sir. Reckon it's something important (he pointed to the "Top Secret" stamp on the envelope). Might want to look at this one.

With an even heavier groan Burnwell stood up and yanked the letter out of the young officer's hand, who turned sharply and left the room. He examined it for a bit, then tore the envelope at the top and took out the letter itself. It read:

- Dear Inspector Burnwell,

We have received information regarding a smuggling network in Portsmouth, extending far outside Britain. The criminals are believed to be concealing illegal articles inside wheels of cheese, hiding them on ships as supposedly "regular" deliveries, then swapping them out for real cheese once they have crossed the Channel. Headquarters expects your division to do all that is in your power to intercept and stop the smugglers. Further information has been sent to you via parcel and is due to arrive tomorrow. Begin immediately.

Best regards,

Sir Winston K. Wood OBE

Burnwell was shocked. Out of all the policemen in the department, HQ had chosen

him to track down the ring. He put the letter in his drawer and called Scranton, who was sitting in the waiting room having a cup of tea.

- Scranton, get your lazy backside off the chair and pack your stuff. We're headed to port.

Within minutes they had arrived at the dockyard. Scranton was asking the workers about any suspicious activity, while the inspector examined the shipping containers. Suddenly, he noticed a dark, cloaked figure scurrying about among some crates. It had something round tucked under its arm, and the inspector knew at once what was going on.

- Halt!

Upon hearing the inspector's cry, the figure darted away from the scene. Burnwell chased after it, turning corners and trying to cut off the fleeing suspect. After a few minutes of fruitless chasing, they came across a dead end. The figure looked around and then turned to face the inspector.

- Nowhere to run, innit?

The figure rummaged in its pockets and produced a revolver.

- Does it look like I'm going to run?

"Crikey" was the sole word that rushed through Burnwell's head as the figure came closer, aiming the revolver at his head. He closed his eyes.

In about ten seconds came a thud, followed by another, louder one. The inspector opened his eyes to see Scranton restraining the figure on the ground. He appeared to have tackled it after jumping off one of the containers. Burnwell approached the figure and tore its cloak off, to reveal a man of about 30. He was kicking and screaming and threatening the officers:

- You'll pay for this, you coppers! Just you wait!

The inspector then approached what the figure was carrying.
A wheel of cheese.

Within an hour, they were back at the station. The parcel had arrived earlier than expected, so there was some evidence to work through before heading home. The next day some men in civilian attire showed up and took the case file, shoving some papers in Burnwell's face and claiming it had been transferred.

Days passed, turned into weeks and those in turn became months and soon Burnwell had begun to forget about the case. One day though, he received a parcel, which contained a rather sizeable wedge of Edam and a note:

"Missed me?"



WINNER

Amalia Kyriakou, 13, The Grammar School, Limassol

The Food Fight in 1967

“Dandararardan...,” played the tune in the Jazz Parmesan on Protein Street.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a slender figure waltzing towards me.

“Bonjour! Mademoiselle...,” he exclaimed, as he grabbed my hand and swirled me around like a hurricane.

“Who allowed you to be so chocolatey, beguiling?” he grinned.

I blushed.

“I’m Blondie, Blondie Chocolate Chip,” I whispered to him trying to sound as mysterious as he did. “And you are?”

“Louis, Carbs Louis, the best baguette in the pyramid.”

It was love at first sight. Deep down, though, I knew we couldn’t be together.

Weirdly, I kept seeing him everywhere. Walking down the street one day I spotted him in an alley and, no, it wasn’t as creepy as it may sound.

“Are you following me?” I asked jokingly. He didn’t laugh.

Looking down, he said “I like you, mon amour... and I don’t know what to do about it!”

We both looked at the damp ground disappointed, as the sky started to cry.

“You know what? I don’t care. I’m not going to live a lie anymore.”

I stepped out of the dark alley, out into the Sweet’s Square and yelled, “I’M IN LOVE WITH A CARBOHYDRATE!”

Everyone – and I mean everyone – turned around, their eyes examining me, then Louis, up and down. Confused faces.

“Ou, Lala, why’d you do that?” chuckled Louis in a shaky voice.

Candies, cupcakes, milkshakes, and oils started whispering. It was the loudest whispering ever. Buttery sweat was trickling down my sweet face. Some were saying “Look at what we’ve come to... Foods from various parts of the pyramid mixing... Preposterous!” “Who does she think she is?”

That’s when great, grey clouds covered the blackening sky and the rain got stronger. Louder. That’s when we saw them: the Gangsta Pasta. Louis’s carbohydrate cousin’s gang. The Spaghetti, the Noodles, the Penne, and the almighty Rigatoni. Italians. They started stomping from the darkness of the alley, lurking in, towards us.

“You’re going to be in so much trouble. Uncle Potato is going to make you toast if I don’t. What do you think you’re doing?” asked Toni Rigatoni.

Terrified, Louis was shaking and stuttering.

“Standing up to categorising! Oh, don’t act as if you don’t like that fishy little lady, Betta!” I screamed spontaneously.

Gasps were coming from everywhere, Toni Rigatoni’s eyes were bulging, staring straight into my scrumptious soul. Suddenly, pasta, bread, cereals and rice from Louis’s family began to appear from the left. Oils, butters and sugar cubes from my family began to appear from the right. An ocean of open mouths, looks of disappointment and fury. Thunder! Lightning! The sky was afraid, just like me. I

snatched Louis's arm as they all came closer and closer.

Then, it was as if all went into slow motion. Crumbs, nuts, whipped cream, cocoa powder were flying through the air.

"FOOD FIGHT!"

The powerful wind was howling, the rain was falling like bullets, the sky was now furious, we were in the eye of a tornado. A war. Screaming, shouting, all blended into one loud echo.

"STOP!"

Silence.

"That's enough!" wailed Louis. "We're not that different. You know that? Everyone's fighting about their differences. What about our similarities? Huh? You two, pizza Margarita and cupcake Blake, you both have flour in you. A-and you, you're banana bread. There's fruit inside you! Are you bread or cake? See what I mean?" said Louis.

More silence. Stillness. Guilt.

"We're better than this."

Thereafter, everything began to change. Foods were able to love whomever they wanted, and Louis and I were able to create a better life for our little, baby croissant: Andriant.



COMMENDED

Luna Kafizas, 14, TLC Private School, Paphos

The Boy at the Window

Aside from the soft clangs of metal cutlery scraping the plates, it was silent. No pointless conversation or unnecessary compliments. Just the filling of mouths and stomachs as they munched greedily at the feast in front of them. I, for one, did not feel like Duck Confit very much, so I simply pretended to nibble on it. Honestly, it is a good thing I'm not old enough to be taken seriously so everybody thinks I'm an angel. Our neighbour, Mr. Harrison, was over for dinner. Oh, my poor, unsuspecting parents...

As his head dropped onto his plate, I couldn't bring myself to act shocked. The way it happened was so comical, I just had to let out a little giggle. I had never really liked him anyway. The police were called, and he was taken away. My parents glared at the detectives. I watched from the highest window, amused at how they had hysterically blamed the housekeeper. I mean, who would believe that a frail old lady had killed Mr. Harrison?

I do enjoy poisoning people. I'm smart, see? It is not necessary for me to use my intelligence like this, but it's fun.

As I watched, I saw an unfamiliar face among the large crowd of police officers. A lady, no older than 20. Perhaps she was lost. They knew her, though, so maybe not lost then. An elderly police officer made his way up to her. Ah, detective Oswald. Just about the only officer with a brain larger than a peanut. It had been a few months since I last saw him.

I walked down the stairs and out the front door. No reaction. Well, obviously, nobody pays attention to children! Except... Why was that lady looking directly at me? She smiled and whispered something into Detective Oswald's ear. He, too, squinted in my direction; I smiled back sarcastically.

"Miss Graham, if you could-"

“Oh please, Call me Angelina.” Angelina.

Wasn't that a type of hot chocolate? What was she doing here and why did she look so sceptical? I didn't like her. She seemed wary and distrustful. Then she looked at me again. As our eyes locked, hers widened.

She waltzed up the steps towards me, sidestepping to make sure she did not bump into me, and entered the house. The audacity. I followed her into the kitchen to see her rummaging through our cupboards and drawers. Well, she wasn't going to find anything in here; nobody leaves poison in the kitchen. Not even innocent little boys.

She turned to face me, notepad in hand and pen poised, and calmly asked how old I was.

I stared at her blankly, not knowing if I should answer or not. She raised her eyebrows at me imploringly. Oh, I definitely didn't like her.

“I'm eight, why? I shouldn't be asked questions without a witness present.”

She glared at me. How could a boy my age know that? Books. Crime books.

“Right,” she whispered as she left the room. Smug, I stared at the empty doorway and turned to leave but someone pulled my arm. I spun around until I was face to face with the lady, Detective Oswald and my parents.

“What on earth are you doing?” I shout at this annoying woman.

“Well,” she smiled, “you said you needed a witness. So, I found some. You aren't the only cunning one.”

Oh, the game was on.



The Under 18s: Poetry

WINNER

Natasa Ioannou, 17, The English School, Nicosia

Shadow Children

Then I inhale my sorrow.

The shiver makes my spine a little crooked;

I crack it and it fixes itself.

Then the drilling gets to my head.

I get up and go outside;

open my mouth for the first time in a long time,

breathe in the sun with its stingrays.

I look down at the street

towards the spider zigzagging across the pavement.

Pick it up gently,

put it in my mouth and chew it.

Then I see the pebbles on the sidewalk,

this time I don't swallow them:

I have too many

rotting in my stomach among the nests.

Then I blink and the mist catches up to me –

the sun has vanished by the time I'm done chewing.

The street is long and grey;

In the distance next to me

the cranes tower well over the buildings:

I look back and the cockroaches are filing towards the sewers.

Of course, I follow them.

The rain patters over my house right as the rats arrive.

Then it's morning again

as I emerge from the sewers.

The clouds have cleared,

some children are cycling a few feet away from me,

it is lovely and they are smiling.

I hop around and laugh,

collect flowers and put them in my hair.

Then the urge to vomit gets to me.

I run to the ditch and empty out my insides,

they spill into the gutter.

(Deep under the concrete grass,

the shadow children with their death eyes

eat them up with their razor teeth.)

Lingering behind me,

I can feel the little children peeking over my shoulder.

They open their mouths to ask me something,

then they come closer and take a good look at the stack.

Suddenly they look horrified and for a while I am confused,

then I look down and see my stockpile of skinned rats:

Of course, I cannot help but look back up at the children:

I grab their shoulders and bite them

as they turn to look at me.



WINNER

Louiza Constantinou, 16, Pascal School, Larnaca

Black coffee and pancakes

Your taste still lingers on my tongue every now and then.
Like when I think of the bucket list we made together
Or pass the place you kissed me for the first time.

It's the taste of freddo cappuccinos on warm summer evenings
The taste of black coffee and pancakes
The taste of my first real love.

I heard it's a taste that never truly leaves your mouth.
The kind that stains your teeth
And sickens your stomach –
Sweet as it may be.

You tasted of black coffee and pancakes.
And your sickly-sweet aftertaste still plagues my thoughts sometimes.

You embodied a strange form of innocence for me.
And though I left you with an acrid feeling in my heart,
Something tells me you always will.

He tasted of beer and bad decisions.
But funnily enough, the salty flavor of his lips seemed to sober up my mind.

It was different from you in every sense.
His hands choked a neck you once kissed
And his touch intoxicated me,
Fogging up my mind.

Still.

He kissed me with a sense of familiarity that night.
And though his hands greedily devoured my body
And left my knees sore –

I'd be lying if I said I regretted it.

That I didn't need the taste of beer and popcorn in my mouth
On windy autumn nights
After you were gone.

That after black coffee and pancakes,
I didn't crave the alcohol to drown it all down.

I'd be lying if I said I regretted it.



The Under 18s: Prose

WINNER

Maria Eleni Constantinidou, 15, The Grammar School, Limassol

Empty

When Mama was around, the hut always smelled of jollof rice. I hearken back to when the bazaar used to be alive with every Nigerian good imaginable. I remember marching through the crowded booths proudly, relishing the sugary smell of fried plantain. I dwell upon the sizzling sound of the smoked pork, its tangy smell filling the air. I reminisce about the rich aroma of the potato-and-spice mixture crackling in the oil enticingly, luring anyone into its complex world of flavours. Only powerful magic could, perhaps, fight through its influence. A soft growling in my stomach accompanies my memory of the first bite into a crisp, rose apple, its fruity flavour so concentrated that it twisted and twirled on my tongue, followed by floral notes of rose.

My nostrils widen and my ribcage expands as I inhale the goodness of the gifts those days had brought. Memories of the heavy perfume of Chai tea wafting into my nostrils, as the bowl's warmth heated my palms, each sip savouring the splash of honey on my tongue. The buzzing of the busy beehive engraved in my brain, signalling the incessant action of nature and the living. I remember gazing upon the elder trees that birthed several types of fruit. Perchance their saltiness would overwhelm their sweetness, and the nectars would overwhelm their aridness; their colours merging to form the most detailed artworks, their distinct shades and hues leaping out of the plain background, overpowering any other that tried to compete. I recall the grainy texture of gooseberry jam, its heavenly balance of sweet and sour seizing my entire being. All these reminded me of how life can offer everything and, in an instant, take it all away.

For a moment, the memories distract me from the reality I'm floating in. A wave of dull emptiness washes over me as the sweetness on my tongue begins to fade, allowing for the bitter taste of hunger to seep back in. The sweetness is now

dominated by the chalky taste of the contaminated water trickling down my dry throat. I cough at the obnoxious taste of the truth, as it rises and crushes every recollection of my imagination. I dredge up the old memory of silky textured bread, as grains of sand grind against my teeth. I recall the image of the glamorous flower, and the wide smile that it would paint upon Mama's lips, as she inhaled its cinnamon scent. Today, all I see in its wilted leaves is the wrinkled face of despair, and the suffocating ache of starvation.

The flame is high. The growl of my bloated belly resembles one of a bull-horned lion, ready to pounce. The pulsating throb in my skull is mimicking a heartbeat. My stomach crushes. A supermassive black hole is absorbing all the remaining life from within me and compressing it into a point of singularity. Holes are being drilled in the centre of me. Agony. I descend to the ground, as my weary knees can no longer support my malnourished body. Numerous bones prick through my flesh, stinging like a thousand needles being tossed at me.

As the breeze turns into wind and ferocious clouds gather, the sky becomes obscured by a leaden veil. The flame flickers. A salty tear races down my muddy cheeks, reassuring me of the assassination of all my hopes. I turn my tear-stained face to the moon, only to realize how blurry my vision has become. The emptiness inside of me releases a final desperate rumble, sounding like a dying macaw mimicking human speech. Death whispers above my shoulder. The flame is blown out.



COMMENDED

Michalis Xystras, 16, The American Academy, Limassol

The Lost Man

I've lost track of time; I've been wandering around this desert for three days now; I'm on the verge of death; and yet I go on. For what reason I don't know, I just keep walking. Clinging onto hope: maybe I'll find a small settlement; maybe a helicopter will come rescue me. Maybe...

These thoughts have been circling around in my head incessantly, but all they do is take up space. I just need some quiet, some peace.

It feels as though my stomach is trying to eat itself. I fall onto the ground, writhing in agony, rolling back and forth on the soft sand. I plunge my face in the sand and try to shovel some into my mouth with my hands and tongue. It seems to expand to scratch at my gums and the roof of my mouth, to suck moisture out of me. Still I try to swallow, but all I manage to do is cough it back out. With every cough my stomach stings.

I've thought of everything at this point. I've even thought of eating my own waste. I've tried to eat a cactus. I've killed crabs, killed worms, I've tried eating spiders. Same story every time, I try to swallow but then vomit it all out.

I try to stand up and walk some more. With every step I take I hear a small whimper. I can't locate where the whimpers are coming from. I keep walking. I hear someone calling out to me. It's distant but I can hear it. I slowly move towards the sound.

I see birds, big brown birds circling me. I grab a rock and throw it at them. A rock? Why is there a rock in the desert? Where am I? Am I even in a desert anymore?

I never should've listened to him. He brought me here.

I keep walking, headed towards a destination unknown to me. I stumble across the desert, my mind as clear as the sky.

I look up, the birds have disappeared without a trace. I spot something in the far distance. A tree! More than one! I can smell water coming from beyond the trees! I can hear birds chirping and dogs barking! An oasis! I've finally found it; he told me it would be here, and that riches could be found in this oasis! He really wasn't lying. I was right to have trusted him.

Wait a minute, why did I hear dogs? Dogs. That's right, Ruffus is back home. I hadn't fed Ruffus before I left. He must be hungry. But why do I hear him in the oasis? Last I recall I left him at home with my roommate Dave. I'll need to feed Ruffus when I get home. Dave most likely forgot.

Although that doesn't matter anymore. Ruffus is waiting for me at the oasis. I run towards him.

As I run, my foot gets caught on something.

I trip and lose my balance, falling face first into the sand.

When I look up towards the oasis it's not there anymore.

I look around me, trying to find a trace of the oasis. I can't find it but I spot something else behind me. It's a partially bitten cactus? There's something else beside the cactus as well. There's a hole in the floor, perfectly shaped for a face to fill it up.

That's when it dawned on me. I never really did move.



The Judges

Christos Kalli studied American Literature at the University of Cambridge and is now an incoming PhD student in English at the University of Pennsylvania. His critical writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Harvard Review*, *World Literature Today*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among others, and his poems have been published in *Muzzle*, *Ninth Letter*, the *Adroit Journal*, the *National Poetry Review*, the *American Journal of Poetry*, *Faultline*, the *minnesota review*, *PANK*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Harpur Palate*, and *Dunes Review*, among others. Visit him at www.christoskalli.com

Eleni Socratous is an award-winning writer; her short-story *Needle and Thread* won the Orwell Society Dystopian Fiction Prize and is published in the society's journal. She graduated with First-Class Honours in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Warwick and has an MA in Creative Writing from Durham University. She is featured in the Durham Peninsula Anthology with the story *Gypsy Bird*. Currently she is a Marketing and Community Associate at Founders Taboo.

Christos Hadjiyiannis is an incoming Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Regensburg in Germany. He was previously Research Fellow and Lecturer at the University of Cyprus; Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Texas at Austin; and Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford. He is the author of *Conservative Modernists* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and, with Rachel Potter, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature and Politics* (2023). His essays and reviews have appeared in journals and magazines including *Times Literary Supplement*, *Modernism/modernity*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*.

Polis Loizou is a writer, performer and oral storyteller. His debut novel, *Disbanded Kingdom*, was published in 2018 and long-listed for the Polari First Book Prize. *The*

Way It Breaks (2021) is set in his motherland of Cyprus, as is *A Good Year* (2022), a historical novella inspired by local horror folklore. Polis is also one third of the award-winning fringe theatre troupe The Off-Off-Off-Broadway Company. He's based in Nottingham.

Nicoletta Demetriou teaches creative writing at The Writing Room in Nicosia, and directs Topos Retreat, a writers' and artists' retreat in Vasa Koilaniou. She was Research Fellow at St Antony's College and Wolfson College, Oxford, a Fulbright Scholar at Stockton University, NJ, and a Visiting Fellow at the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University. From 2012 to 2019 she was Tutor in Narrative Non-Fiction on the MSt in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford. Her latest book is *The Cypriot Fiddler* (O Kyprios Violaris; 2022).



