



upon a golden bough

FOREWORD

Islands are, by definition, isolated. Ever since Robinson Crusoe's wanderlust saw him stranded on his island in the mouth of the Orinoco – and probably even earlier – English literature has been unable to satiate its fascination with the desolation/discovery drama of the island and its lone or lonely inhabitants.

It's rather lovely, therefore, to reflect that this year's theme, *island life*, has had the effect of bringing together young people from all four of our major cities, with entries from 18 schools and winners from nine, all dwelling in original and assured ways on their individual creative islands, which span the real, the figurative, and the fantastical.

The islands in the poems and stories you are about to read are populated by extinct marine arthropods, dragons, school-children, pirates, fishermen, and – of course – stray cats, amongst others. Their creators all live in Cyprus, and it is a joy to be able to view our island as a home to so much talent. Cultivating this community of young writers is a task that feels worth doing more with every year that passes because there is only ever an increasingly urgent need for human beings who are able to think and imagine and feel in ways that are tender and unexpected and true.

As such, it is our privilege to provide a forum for the young writers featured in this edition of *upon a golden bough* and to be able to welcome readers to their work.

My gratitude goes out, once again, to the teachers and students whose hard work and enthusiasm landed so many great pieces of new writing in my inbox, and to the contest's judging/editorial panel whose expertise and time helped our writers shape the final texts about to transport you to their islands as you read them.

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

Simon Demetriou, Contest Organiser



The Under 11s: Poetry



Alexandra Ignatiuk, 10, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

My island life

Far, far across the seas,
There is an island full of trees.
They sway within the breeze,
Which will most likely make you freeze!

The mountains are such a sight,
They look in wonder at night
And by the very first light,
A gaze up at them in delight.

It's such a wonderful thing you know,
To live on an island far, far away.
To have the sea at every corner,
It always makes you feel warmer.

I run to the golden sand,
My feet meet land,
As I jump into the sea
I feel as if I'm free!

I swim against the waves.
When I spot something peculiar,
I cannot look away,
As there is something near the bay!

I try to come close,
When I suddenly freeze.



It was a turtle clearly seen
And I lean and whisper
“Don’t be frightened,
“I’m not going to stay here.”

And so I leave.
Was this really the end?
But then I turn around
As I hear a sound.

I spot the same turtle
Touching my feet very softly,
Under the sea which is very salty,
And I think to myself
Have I made a friend?



Hanna Adutskevich, 9, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

One Island. One Love.

Island life is different
depending on who sees.
We all look at Cyprus
through our memories.

Someone sees a fantastic view;
The sky for some is always blue.
Others are in love with a salty sea breeze,
wrapped in flavours, in warmth and in ease.

Halloumi, souvlaki:
They taste so divine.
Bright, pinky sunsets
make the heart shine.

Turtles and kittens, old olive trees,
different flowers being planted for bees.
People in Cyprus are always so kind —
a warmer place you will never find.

The island itself is a soul split in two.
Sometimes I'm thinking it can't be true.
I hope we will fix it,
find a new start:
one island,
one love,
one beating heart.



Mark Vasyletskyy, 8, The American Academy, Limassol

Untitled

On a sunny island, hot and bright where palm trees dance from the left to the right, the waves whisper “Hey, come and play” and the crabs pinch your toes – just to say “hey!”

Kids run around with disgusting sandy feet, trying to build a sandcastle street. Dolphins jump and do their tricks, while seagulls steal your picnic chips.

The sun shines down big and bold like saying “I’m never getting old!” Kids find shells, shiny and round, and think “This must be the best around!”

Island folk love to sing and feast. They grill their fish, and then eat the beast. At festivals they dance all night, till Uncle Pete trips to everyone’s delight.

Even when the storms come through, they rush inside: what else to do? But when the storm has passed and gone, they’re back outside before not too long.

Some kids grow up and sail away, looking for places where skies are grey. But they always miss that island vibe, where no one cares if you take your time.

They remember the sun, the waves, and that turtle who always showed up at noon. Life on the island, wild and free, as fun and wacky as it can be.

The island breeze has a mind of its own, tugging at hats till they’re overthrown. Kids chase after them down the beach, and somehow they’re always out of reach.

Fisher men boast about “The one that got away” and their hands show “this big” larger every day. Grandma’s coconuts sold out so fast, cause her secret recipe is meant to last.



Even the stray cats know where to dive. They line up for fish right at nine. And there's always that rooster that crows way too soon, waking up every one before noon.

Life on the island is never too slow. It's full of sunshine, rain and a rainbow glow. From dawn till dusk there's something to do. Because the laughs and the love carry you through.



The Under 11s: Prose



Alisa Stiskina, 10, Foley's School, Limassol

Untitled

The sea was grey as slate. The sun was hidden behind the clouds as if hope had left this place. Abandoned here by an evil fate, this island had been unreachable for centuries to the eyes of mortal sailors. For it was enveloped not only by a dense, cotton-like fog, but also by a spell protecting the ancient creatures living on it.

It seemed that the sharp, skeletal rocks, reminiscent of the towers of a gothic cathedral, and the cliff, similar to the toothy beak of a giant bird of prey, were uninhabited. However, a tall, lonely figure of a man soon appeared.

Turquoise waves greedily licked the rocky shore, as if trying to devour it. The wind howled like a werewolf under a full moon and attacked the human figure, who seemed desperate. Yet the woody smell of cypress trees mixed with the humid sea air and filled the person's lungs with freshness and hope.

He climbed resolutely to the very top of the cliff, because he would no longer be able to run away from his fate. Standing on the summit, he was once again blown by the relentless wind. The landscape was harsh but fascinating. He inhaled the heady resinous smell. The rockface was the jaw of his giant ancestor, since centuries ago the island itself had grown around the site of the skeleton of an ancient dragon, so that his descendants would live under its protection.

For the first time, the man transformed into the dragon himself and answered the call of his blood. At that moment, the sun illuminated the entire island with hope.

His wings stroked the sky as he became a massive creature. His claws were as sharp as knives. He knew he looked evil but felt free as he flew. One could drown in his dark orange eyes.



At last the sun appeared to meet him from behind. The whole island was transformed with the light and came to life.

His scales shimmered with different shades of red in the sun shine. He saw the reflections dancing across the morning sky, trees and rocks. He could smell the sea from up there and felt a depth of connection with the island that was new as fire.



Zenovia Annenkova, 10, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

When Prey Flies Away

"Finally you came! Our favourite TV show is about to start!"

"I'm...huff, huff...here...huff, huff!"

"Oh good, hey, mind the whiskers: they're in my nose!"

"Sorry. By the myay, when are we going to be fed, eh?"

"Come 'mon' Sammy, use your mrain! Today is Myaturday, they're all sleeping safe and sound!"

"Oh, never mind... oh look, he landed! Shall we get him?"

"Nah."

"You're not hungry?!"

"Well, I can eat whenever I want so..."

"So, what?! That doesn't mean anything!"

"Pipe down! We don't want that jumpy, annoying feather ball to fly away, do we?"

A minute of silence... The ruffled sparrow kept pecking on some sunflower seeds.

The creature with ginger fur was the favourite of everyone on this street.

"Alright, I'll go out and catch it, but don't let me show my claws again!"

"No myay myou're going myout myer, myer's myaining mya myuio mou mou..."

"What?!"



"Myou mi mou mimi ma mou..."

"No time to sleep!! Wake up!"

"Huh? What? Stop biting me, Sammy!"

"Well, it's not my fault. You said something, and you just dozed off!"

"Ah, yes, remember Toby, the white cat, that lives (I mean lived) on the other street?"

"The one that is a full of himself?"

"Yes, he claimed that he was on a different island. Moreover, he had his own toilet inside, and his own robot petter, imagine that!"

"Oh mi! What if he had his own bed?! Oh, Snowball! I wish I had the same!"

"That's not all! He had food from metal boxes!"

"What? How did he open them? Did he go to the rubbish bin?"

"He doesn't open them, 'they' open them for him!"

Suddenly and fortunately, the screeching door opened, and they both cheered:

"Breakfast, finally breakfast, myamyio mio mou!"

A familiar voice called them as a joyous, debonair boy gave them each their plates with delectable food. The joyful sparrow murmured:

"Ha, I have a better life: I can eat whenever and whatever I want! Chirp, chirp!"

The End!



The Under 15s: Poetry



Tatiana Mershina, 14, The Falcon School, Nicosia

'Disappointed Pelicans'

Over an island where skies are blue,
A flock of rosy pelicans flew.
They wondered, flying in the sky,
"How does life down there go by?"

They thought, "The days were bright,
And it was never cold at night,
With families of fish in the nearby sea,
And every creature wild and free,"

"A quiet place, where we could land,
And take a rest in the golden sand,
With beautiful flowers, buzzing with bees,
And plenty of shady, green forest trees."

As they started to reach for the land,
They saw an entirely different island,
At first, there was just pouring rain,
Then the sound of a steam train,

A giant ship leaking black, sticky oil.
People shouting so loud, one's head could boil.
Trash on the roads, trash on the sand,
Trash spread all over the island.

The birds changed their minds. Off they flew.
Disappointed pelicans in the skies of blue.



Adriana Mendoza, 14, Pascal English School, Larnaca

The Pulse of Distant Shores

An island sits, stranded in a canvas of blue,
where whispers of waves trace its solitude.
Palm trees murmur secrets to the sky,
while the horizon stretches, unbroken as a silent sigh.

Here, loneliness is a rhythm and a tide,
pulling you inward, where shadows reside.
The sand cradles your footprints, fleeting and bare,
a testament to a life suspended in air.

Yet, even in exile, there's a thread
the ocean hums a song, a hymn to what's ahead.
Each wave carries whispers from distant shores,
with fragments of laughter and echoes of roars.

Isolation builds walls, coral sharp and high,
yet connection sneaks in like a gull in the sky.
The moon tugs the tides, a lover unseen,
binding the distant with a silvery sheen.

And so the island learns that it is not alone.
The ocean's vast heart beats as its own.
Every drop, every ripple, every cresting wave,
a reminder of bonds that cradle and save.



For in the depths of isolation lies a truth:
connection is not found, it finds you.
Even islands adrift in an endless expanse
hold hands
 with the tides
 in a timeless dance.



Luka Marnitsyn, 14, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

Island Life

We're on an island where we hunt
For something we will never find.
Some call it "truth"—but that is blunt,
Some call it "lies"—but that is blind.

The wind of change has brought us here,
The wind of change will take us out.
The wind of change is what we fear,
Yet what we cannot live without.

Forever shall we gaze at seas,
Which crash their waves upon our shores,
And ask them where to find the keys
To make peace, without wars.

For we shall see in black and white,
This island, which is colored grey.
There is no wrong, there is no right;
We are the hunter and the prey.

Here in the days which are our last,
We're forced to look for things we lost
In ocean deeps of our past,
In days that we recall as first.



This island is a map that we
Shall use to chase the paths unwalked.
The map we hope will make us free,
But who has drawn the paths we walk?

We walk the edge, where sea meets land,
And wonder what lies past the foam.
We do our best to understand
Why one can't choose what he calls home?

Oh, what a shame, we only see
The why's to live, and why's to die,
The beauty in what cannot be,
The truth in that there is no lie.

Remember, there's no jail on Earth
From which an earthling can't escape,
Unless its entrance is your birth,
Or freedom lies beyond the grave.

This island is no solid place;
Its borders are the mind's design.
Its shores are bounds we must embrace,
Which make living pre-defined.

We're bound to stay, but bound to try
To find the homeland of the waves.
This island is where we shall die,
In face of time, there are no braves.

The rest is rust, and stardust fine,
The answers we should never find.
The island is the cogent line



The Under 15s: Prose



Noa Asulin, 13, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

The 986th day

986 days.

I have been on this island for 986 days.

I haven't seen a living human in 985 days.

I chew on my aggas quietly. It was the first fruit I found when I got here. I named it. Its dark purple shell deceives the eater. Making him think it's the inside he should eat. I learned that the hard way.

I wasn't alone at first. At first I had a friend. Eveyatar. He was the first one to look for food, to get over the shock and the confusion. He went to the forest in the heart of the island. He came back. Two fruits in each hand. He tossed me two then started chewing one of his.

When he got to the aggas I was chewing on my tut. Bright pink with black inside. I guess you could say I'm like that now. Rotten from the inside, broken from the absence of human life.

He peeled the aggas and ate the inside.

He choked almost instantly.

Blood coming out of his nose.

"Survive, prove them wrong."

His last words taunt me until today.

I promised his soulless body I would.

Who they are is still a question waiting to be revealed.

Since then I mapped out the island. Found more fruits which I checked on animals first. It might seem cruel but the animals just keep coming back. I hunt them. Go to sleep. And more appear at night.

Maybe it's a curse. Maybe it's a miracle. Maybe it's just my hallucinations. But if it



wasn't for that curse I'd be dead by now.

I finish my aggas and head to the tree line. The sound of waves urging my ears. The tides are high at night.

I look at the sunset. That might be the only thing not trying to hurt me. The only thing that can be considered beautiful. The only thing that isn't consistent. With new colours every night.

This time it was bright red as if to warn me.

I turned my head away as the growl made its way to my ears.

Sextovex.

I run as fast as I can.

I need a shelter fast.

Fast.

Faster.

I'm not fast enough.

I hear six legs behind me.

I turn around.

I see eighteen legs.

Three of them.

I can barely outrun one.

I look around. Desperation clouds my vision.

Green. Green. Green.

Trees surround me.

I run.

Blue.

Water.

The waterfall.

I run.

Fast.

Faster.



I hold my breath.

I jump.

Cool water surrounds me.

Even in the hottest days the water was cold. Always suitable for drinking. Unlike the fruits.

I never jumped in before though.

I feel cold.

Then warm as I get used to the cold.

The water is refreshing.

I should do this more often I think as I try to move around.

More growls.

I need to go deeper.

I move my hands trying to swim.

I don't know how to swim. Or at least that's what I remember.

But it comes as an instinct.

I move down.

Then glass.

Faces.

Watching me.

Studying me.

Horror etched into their eyes. Their purple eyes.

Purple like Eveyatar's eyes.

My eyes aren't purple. They are brown.

Then one presses a button.

And then. Black.



Zoe Penteado Passos-Lemmer, 12, The American Academy, Nicosia

Island Scratchers

Once upon a time, in a faraway land called Cyprus. I live here. It's a relaxing place for a cat to live in. Many nice ladies are willing to feed me Whiskas during the mornings. I prefer Friskies, but I'm not picky. Not that much at least.

I'll tell you about how I got here. Well, at least about how my ancestors got here. How I got here is an entirely different story. Thank biology for that.

A couple thousand years ago, some lady called Rio- no, wait. Bio? No... OH! CLEO! Yes, that's it. Her name was Cleopatra, and she was the ruler of Egypt for quite some time. Rumour has it that she sent a bunch of cats on a huge ship to Cyprus, so that they could get rid of the pesky snakes.

My ancestors were on that supposed ship. When they arrived, biology did its thing. One very long family tree later, and I was born. Pretty awesome backstory, I know. There are still a few snakes around, but I take care of them when I can.

Now onto what a stray does in Cyprus. I wake up to a fresh bowl of water. It comes from this legendary place called the faucet. Sounds like I get spoiled if you ask me. After finishing my bowl, I stretch my muscles. Cats can do yoga too, ok? There might be some of my friends here and there. One of them is pregnant. She says she doesn't know who the father is, but I have a different hunch.

I then bathe a little. That's all. I won't go into details, because... um... never mind.



After freshening my coat, I walk all the way to Ledra Street. All the restaurants have ungrateful customers, so more grub for me. Sieftalies, souvlaki, a few fries here and there. I used to eat mice and pigeons, but slowly got bored of them. Pretty nice upgrade, huh?

After a wondrous lunch, I usually like to scamper all the way to the local park. Rolling in the grass, warming up to kids, 'accidentally' biting the kids, I experience it all. The grass patches are basically my relaxing spots until the afternoon.

Soon after, I raid the benches at our local university campus. The students get beds, so the least they can do is donate their sturdy seats to a cat.

Tired of benches, I decide which restaurant I'm going to attack in the evening. There aren't many options for an island, but I like McDonalds. Imagine an adorable fluffy animal against a 5-year-old with fries. The ultimate battle of the century. I should be drafted into the WWE (Whisker Wrestling Entertainment).

After a successful clash of claws and crayons, I swiftly glide through the melancholy Cypriot streets, looking for my bed for the night. Tough mission, but worth it once I'm able to huddle into a ball without a single care in the world. An open window? Leading to a fancy looking uninhabited living room? Purrfect. I stretch my limbs, and settle down for the night.

Pretty productive day for a feline, isn't it?



Sofia Kochneva, 14, The Falcon School, Nicosia

‘I would have rather stayed there’

My classroom has always felt distant, as if I am floating alone in an ocean, about to drown. Paper is my saviour, a raft with the power to take me anywhere; I only have to imagine it.

The checkered pattern of the exercise book is sliced with a steep pencil line, my mind controlling what will soon become my own paradise. Alone, where I can do anything... And be anyone.

Scribbles turn into palm trees with layers of sharp bark scraps and large crowns of feathery leaves. Burning-hot sun with bursting rays was hitting the sandy shore. Trinkets and sand-dollars, and seashells with nacreous insides made treasures with every step. Something was missing though - who will live out there? No treasure island can be left without a hero-pirate. A self-portrait emerged from the horizon of the drawing: me with an eyepatch and a hat with a feather stuck on it. This almost felt real...

* * *

“Ahoy, hearties!” I exclaimed, saluting my crew, as I galloped from the dock. I checked the yellowed, crumpled piece of paper, ensuring the directions were correct.

“This bounty’s about to be mine!” I said, and a grin filled my face.

The squawking of parrots in unison, crunching sand grains under my boots and the gold-filled dreams with the clink of doubloons made me taste the victory that awaited me.



“Avast, ye bilge rats!” I exclaimed to my crew, stepping one foot into the treasury. Rubbing my one eye, I could not believe what rose up from the sand, as the spirits of the dead, illuminating with cyan glow, woke up to protect their gold.

“I won’t let some childish scare-tactic keep me away,” I said with doubtful sarcasm, while everyone laughed along.

A whistling sound; I barely dodged a bone that flew at me.

“Ay there, son! We mean no harm! No need to get violent!” I said confidently, yet hearing my voice shake.

The elderly ghosts were not up for negotiation. An array of bones was shot in our direction, femurs and humeruses. My mates were hit.

A spark of an idea came through: all treasuries have traps. There had to be something. In a flash, I executed a somersault behind a wall, feeling my bruised palms up the sandy wall. Pushing every brick I grasped against the wall, I watched my crew fall; I was the last one standing, the last one able to save my people from complete defeat. ‘Tic-tic-tic’, a familiar sound rose, as one of the tiles fell through. The roof of the temple collapsed under a wave of heavy sand that filled the room to the brim, knocking the skeleton figures down, back to their graves.

“A-ha!” My eyes were filled with victorious excitement. “Their tricks became their worst enemies! I’ve won, I am my own king, and everyone will love me. My pockets are filled with gold!”

Then, a crushing sound came, as I raised my eyes to see my snatched drawing crumple, my island life falling apart in the hands of my classmate.

“What is this rubbish?” he asked, as he unfolded the paper, bursting with laughter.

“Give it back, it’s my island,” I said staying firm, demanding my drawing. Yet, I was not as brave as I had drawn myself to be. I did not have a patch from losing my eye in battle, nor did I deserve to be a crew’s captain. Still, I would have rather stayed there. My life felt like an island, abandoned and forgotten, without a treasure worth writing about. How I wish I could spend another moment there again.



The Under 18s: Poetry



Fatima Sanjakdar, 15, The Junior and Senior School, Nicosia

Elevator

In the sea of clothes,
I catch the tide:
Ground floor.
It's raining goldfish and whales outside.

And through their lenses-
no,
Silly,
not the ones in their eyes-
They dive into reality, submerged in the pixels like granules on the shore,
First floor.
Kids don't seem to play outside
anymore.

By the towers and the clock and the markets and the shops,
They'll splash around:
clicking.
This lifestyle was in the cards,
I'm sure it's somewhere if I could see the stars.
Second floor.
Never mind 'how much',
it's on the card.

The lighthouse has constricted us to just a glimpse,



We gasp for life

breathless.

Where's the pearl?

I can't hear the shell.

'Just eat the oyster and the caviar as well.'

Top floor.

Finally,

far from the fish and sheep and gulls.

We morph into a shell:

and our poisons swell and swell

and swell.



Dikaia Michaela Tzamalouka, 17, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

Trilobyte

The first life on this little island were the Tribe of Trilobite.
 Later the Egyptians came
 for a meal and were eaten
 by the Persians who lurked in the corners,
 until a passerby, Sasha, took over the whole
 little island. Proudly surveying
 the small chunk of land in the vast emptiness of
 sea: "This glorious place, touched by Aphrodite's grace,
 with calm clear waters and comfortable climate
 befits my majesty. I conquered this earth and now I
 stand in the middle of everything."

Click. Clack. Tap. He's dead.

The empire torn entire
 armies washed over the little island:
 Roman, Byzantium, Ottoman, British, rose and fell
 like waves reshaping the shore.
 With a scalpel each carved the land, claiming
 pieces as their own and in their flat worldview ignored
 the click-clack-tap of their claws against
 the glassy cage of self-delusion.

"Constant"



The boy startled, while the crustacean-like creatures
in the glass jar remained
indifferent to the alien language
lacking consonants:

“Constantine, stop narrating and
kill those violent creatures.”

“Can I boil them
in the glass jar?”

“As long as you don’t
make a mess in the kitchen.”

Heat waves and warm winds turned
the island’s fertile soil to desert sand.
Their home was obliterated, yet
the Trilobites didn’t notice; they were too busy
eating each other.



Marchella Bagni Soultani, 15, The Junior and Senior School, Nicosia

The Siren's silence.

Fingers scraped as the sunset glared.
 My salt laden breath, my hearing impaired.
 Why was I the one chosen?
 To be lusted over, unprepared.

My feet set upon the white silky sand.
 Away from my lover's threatening hand.
 Why was I the one chosen?
 This is something I will never understand.

A siren is alluring.
 But you never know,
 If they pull you down to drown you
 Or if they have something to show.

Underneath the jagged shore,
 Greedy sailors look for more,
 They thrust and heave me to the core,
 They drain me empty, washed up ashore.

A siren's cry is muffled deep,
 Below her lover's fiery keep.
 She screams and shrieks, you will hear her weep
 As the wind carries her words, while you are all asleep.



Demetris Kyprianou, 16, Pascal Private English School, Limassol

Out of the Blue

I wake to the same sea, the same soft sky,
 each morning brings the sun, its steady gaze.
 The wind hums low, the trees in rhythm sway.
 And still, I wonder what could be if I were free...
 beyond these shores, beyond this endless blue,
 where time moves on, where questions don't consume me.
 It's strange how quiet thoughts can come to me,
 despite how much I've learned from hearing the sea and sky.
 They tell me nothing changes in this blue.
 And yet throughout the days, I always shift my gaze.
 What once seemed freedom now feels less than free.
 The island stays the same, the palms still sway.
 I walk the beach and watch the branches sway.
 The waves repeat their whispered tales to me.
 I listen close, but is my hearing ever free?
 The tide returns beneath the endless sky.
 I used to dream of leaving, casting gaze
 on distant lands that never meet this blue.
 Yet here I stay, within the constant blue,
 and feel the tug of winds that make things sway.
 I tell myself it's all I need, this gaze
 of sun and sea; a life that comforts me,
 a simple path beneath a quiet sky,
 where I am safe. And who needs to be free?
 I hear no voices, only winds that free



their thoughts on waves, returning to the blue.
Sometimes I speak, like now, as if the empty sky
might answer back, or hear the words that sway
between my lips, like secrets no one can hear but me –
But all I meet is water's ever so patient gaze.
The nights are still. And in the dark, I gaze
at stars that flicker, scattered wide and free.
They feel like something distant, far from me,
A world beyond the endless stretch of blue.
But here, the island rocks me in its sway,
And all I know is sea and open sky.
I meet the sky with every hopeful gaze,
but even as I sway, I'll never be free.
This blue surrounds; and quietly holds me.



The Under 18s: Prose



Agniia Vergiles, 17, TLC, Paphos

Heading south-west

30 km from target

Focus. Outside temperature 16°C. Oxidizer supplied to my combustion chamber. Sensors detect the target. GPS, cross-checked coordinates – aligned. Warhead – ready.

25 km from target

Beneath, the tropical island's vegetation. Weather conditions: no precipitation. Stabilizers adjusting my fins, altitude decreasing.

20 km from target

A field of wheat. In the middle of it, a house. Pre-war construction made of red brick. Infrared sensors detect heat. Focus. A point. Accelerometers detect motion.

18 km from target

Two distinct motion vectors on the roof. They remain stationary. Then they converge. Their fists unfold and intertwine, creating a lattice-like structure of one surface. A trigger, a surge in heat output. I recalibrate. The radiating heat shifts my prior data. Not numerically, but in the vibrations, it proceeds. The heat detectors process this energy outburst. "Unclassified."

15 km from target

I leave the anomaly behind, calculating the explosion radius. Done.



10 km from target

"Today: Two exploded." A concise news article. But importantly, eye catching. Though, "two" isn't striking. But still, it might result in mourning. Though silently concluding "wrong place, wrong time," they'll move on to the next object of pity. The next day. What to do, mourning expires too quickly. Gotta come up with something new. Something different, something refreshing. Since the ones living are, for now, motion vectors, their obligation is to explore death's whims. In a few weeks, the "two" will lose their rank in the search web. After all, it won't be grandeur, just an accident.

Yet, the soil will welcome their physical forms. Gently engulf them, decomposing their flesh. Flesh will serve as a nutrient, perhaps for a palm tree that will regrow in the area. After years, it will poke its nose into the sky, reaching higher and higher. Its leaves will rustle when the wind exchanges the most recent events with them. Perhaps, about the mountains' echoes, or the ocean's playful mischiefs. After a chat, down the trunk, deep into the soil, the island's murmur will reach the two.

They are now a part of its bones.

Protected and free.

8000 meters from target

Strange vulnerability, in this final approach. The air resistance increases with acceleration, making my iron core shrink. Who constructed me? Whose hands didn't inform me of that unclassified, ineffable heat vibration? Perhaps, hands were neither informed.

7569 meters from target

What's that? A crane wedge, drifting out of the clouds. Lucky ones, the explosion won't reach them. White feathers, plain and clean just like their minds. They're turning



left, then right, then back. So easily, amusingly. They have no target. Just the vast sky, only it and the moment. I rush past. In my half-life, never have I ever seen creatures of such awareness.

I envy them.

I like them.

7109 meters from target

I don't know what will happen to me after this. But if ballistic missiles are engineered to have dreams... I wanna see cranes.



Maria Tsvetkova, 17, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

It

On a desolate island in the middle of the Pacific, man-made tools are bound to break.

Each morning, as you wake up, you check on your shelter. This misshapen hut of logs and planks, rotted by rain, holds itself together with rusty nails to protect you, yet you imagine what it could have been, if you had learned to fashion stone, before.

You pause. One of the planks squelches down over a soft log. Straining, you reach down for your tools and get to work. The black dots in your vision do not concern you, the head of the hammer hits the plank in place.

The next step would be eating but you're worried about the wounded boar. Your weak shoulder throbs in sympathy, and you imagine what would happen if you found another. For a second, you relish the mercy of four pairs of tusks and enraged red eyes, laser-focused on your frail form.

Reflexively, you consider that your inert body would contribute to their comfort.

The boar's hind hoof is healing nicely, and at some point you think about pork. You try remembering the difference between boars and pigs, but find you have forgotten the Latin names for either species. You reach, abortively, for anything that could fix your gap, the effort too great for its worth.

You know that pigs are indiscriminate omnivores, and can eat their farmers if they fall asleep inside the pens.

As an easy exercise, you sit down to remember the tone of voice of your widowed



great-grandmother (the one that spoiled you rotten), the look she had when telling you a story, or the photo of her husband that you passed daily, framed in the kitchen where you took your meals as a child. You can't.

The boar bumps you gently. You move to get your feet under you, readying for another futile fight. When it doesn't attack, you find the boar sitting down, resting its injury. It is leaning on you, just a little, but your face gets hot and your throat seizes up all the same. You sit for a while. You forget the crops.

When you go to the shore, you check the nets you have set up for crabs and mollusks, but as you pull out a paltry pitch-black writhing wretch, you admit that you don't even know what you've caught. When it bites your wrist, you hope its jaws are weak.

You pause; you weigh the pang of worry. In wet rags, with no meaningful future ahead, with the thing rearing back to bite you again, you feel ridiculous. Your stomach cramps; you cut your teeth on a scrap of metal embedded in your finger.

Darkened blood leaks from the second bite.

You look up at a sun that has been setting for some time and absorb the beautiful redness of the sunset. Knowledge of where the sun rises and sets vaguely links to a short story you had to read in high school. The point was Orientalism. You remember photos your mother sent you with the same sunset. You don't remember the warmth of her hugs.

There is a miniature Lovecraftian horror now attached to your right hand. The summer has passed. You decide to name the boar Summer (you forgot you cared about naming it). You shake your wrist before teeth touch nerve and decide to go to the boar instead of the shelter.

It lies next to you. No drinking water left. You lie still, famished, falling asleep with the comfort that Summer won't go hungry in the morning.



Ayden Fernandes, 15, The Heritage Private School, Limassol

A Letter from a Fisherman

To the One I Love Most,

"No man can live as an island." That's what my ma told me, yet here I am as the tide rises fast tonight, the cruel hand of age seeking to drown me. I feel the damp air in my lungs, heavy and thick. The sea has taken many things from me, and now it has come for my life. I see the storm gathering on the horizon. I see the end.

I have spent years here. All alone. Years here, all alone, with nothing but the cries of gulls and the thunder of the sea. At first, I found the peace a blessing. I told myself that a man needed nothing but himself, Mother Nature, and his pride. But pride is a lonely companion.

I see myself now, reflected in the tide. Withered. There is no other word. My hands, once strong enough to wrestle a shark, now struggle to tie a knot. My net hangs empty. The fire of my heart has died down, a meek flame that barely keeps me warm at night. There is nothing more for me to do but sit on the rocks and watch the world before me. The endless sea.

The truth is, my boy, that no man can live as an island. I tried; it hollowed me. The days stretched on unforgivingly and the nights dragged on too, darker than the deepest waters. I built walls around myself. I convinced myself it was better this way. Better than loving someone again. Better than losing someone again. The truth is, my boy, that the silence in those walls was louder than any storm.

There is no life in one lived alone.



If you hear nothing else from me, hear this: Do not follow my path. Do not make the same mistake. Do not abandon the world, even when it may abandon you. The world is cruel, my boy. It will tear you apart, but there will always be those who are there to heal you. To stitch you together like a torn cloth. You will not be the same; you will be stronger. Pain will come and go, as surely as the tide.

I kept my distance to protect myself. Now I see, in my reflection on the water, that I have only been hurt. Now I see that I built not a fortress, but a prison.

You were my boy, Sam. My one chance to love freely. I let the sea come between us. I remember your impish laughter. I remember it well. Every night, I see your face. I cannot remember your mother. She has become a shadow in mind. I hope I have not faded in yours.

You were my only son, and I want you to know, that yours will be the face I see in my final hours.

The tide is rising fast, and my fire is out. I hope you find a life away from salt and storms. Tear down your walls, my boy. Open your gates. Let the world in.

With all the love I could never give you,

Your Father.



THE JUDGES

Christos Kalli studied American Literature at the University of Cambridge and is now a 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

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