

The Litmus

THE
WRITING
ON
THE
WALL.

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with a Foreword by
Ali Smith

Editorial note

The authors have been free to choose how they want to be identified, with the option to include any of the following: first name or full name, pen name, year group, age, school, and hometown.



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Contents

- 2 **Foreword**
by Ali Smith
- 4 **Call for Submissions**
from Ali Smith
- 5 **The Litmus**
The Writing on the Wall
2022 selected submissions
- 6 **Late**
by Aoife Cahill
- 7 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Ruth Rafeeq
- 8 **Letters from a Pen-pal**
by Bella Hill
- 9 **The Walls**
by Finley
- 10 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Teresa Kruzycka
- 12 **Databound**
by Toby Long
- 13 **The Weak Man**
by Benedict Heath
- 14 **Stained Wall**
by Yamid Hossain
- 15 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Harrison Milne
- 16 **An Esoteric Cry**
by Kim
- 17 **No One Will Know**
by Arman Nahas
- 18 **Case #2644**
by Toby Brown
- 19 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Gracie Fitzsimons
- 20 **Tick ... Tock**
by Anonymous
- 21 **'Alexa ...'**
by Max Pitkin
- 22 **On the Wall – 9/11**
by Iona Mandal
- 23 **Persephone's Lament**
by Evie Armstrong
- 24 **Rose**
by Gaudia Aghanenu
- 25 **The writing's in the fall**
by Emma Lynch
- 26 **Between the lines**
by Julian
- 27 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Xander Hackworthy
- 28 **Her Grievances**
by Abi Brigden
- 29 **Memories on the Wall**
by Sanjhbati Chakraborty
- 30 **Expression**
by Teddy Bulpett
- 31 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Izzy
- 32 **colour room**
by Jasmine Savory
- 33 **The Writing on the Wall**
by Rachel Dillon
- 34 **Expression**
by Lila Bartholomew
- 35 **The Hope on my Wall**
by Raghavi Vadamarajan Chithra
- 36 **Writing on the Wall – A Timeless Lesson**
by Aoife McCann

Foreword

Ali Smith

Welcome to this year's publication of The Litmus. Over the past few years, some of the most hectic, strange and transformative years of our lives no matter how old or young we are or where we live in the world, years especially bewildering and inventive if you've been coming through education, The Litmus has collated and published, online and in print form, a range of extraordinary writing from UK school students.

Each year we've offered a theme as initial inspiration. This year's theme is the phrase The Writing on the Wall.

It's a wildly reverberant phrase, bringing to mind everything from graffiti artists to billboard advertising and at the same time conjuring ancient and contemporary foreboding and forewarning. As a phrase it brings together two very simple concepts. There's what walls do, what they're for. And there's what writing does, what words can do.

Then there's what happens when these things come together.

We wondered what students would make of this theme. The answer is myriad, and powerful. They make a paean to freedom of expression and a steady vision of revolt against tyrannies, historical, political, personal, local, societal. They express deep disquiet about cynicism; they signal acute anxiety about the proximity of the dystopic. Above all they reveal a determination, against the odds, to be heard.

'Who are you
to shatter my dreams
when my heart promises me otherwise,
that my destiny is within
sight and that the
writing on the wall
is nothing but hope?

(Raghavi Vadamarajan Chithra)

A lot rides on the writing on the wall.

This celebratory collection of our favourites from this year's cornucopia of submissions begins with Aoife Cahill's 'Late', a lovely and lively appraisal of a piece of street art, the liberating work of a 'secret artist', written with an equally liberating and inspiring ease of expression. The collection ends with 'Writing on the Wall – A Timeless Lesson' by Aoife McCann, a brilliant reimagining, across time and song and philosophy and history, of the biblical moment where Belshazzar and his guests, in the middle of a feast after some powermongering and triumphant destruction, look up to see enchanted words of divine warning writing themselves in the air, on the wall above them.

Between this initial liberation and this final wide, wise vision, several themes arise. One is the importance of words and of the right to use them liberally when we're faced with what on the one hand can be a structure meant to divide us, and on the other hand can mean our own four walls, our everyday habitat. 'It helps me feel calm, having the freedom to write on my wall ... words are more powerful than they are given credit for', says Teresa Kruzycka. There's an interesting take, too, on social interdependence in a heartfelt and urgent poem by Ruth Rafeeq about our presence or absence to one another:

'You. You would not be here without me.
Without my writing, without me. ...
I write and I write and I write.
All for you.'

'Doing these tiny things makes us feel as if the whole world will get to see what we wrote and look and listen ... we still write on the walls hoping that one day the world may change.'

That's the hope in Lila Bartholomew's 'Expression'. And when the wall we're facing suddenly cracks open?

'Words written in pure light,'
as Xander Hackworthy puts it.

We had many dystopic stories submitted, some funny, some dark, some funny and dark both at once, all of them with deep moral compass and a determination to take political posturing, lies and expedience to task. These stories suggest that what remains of us maybe isn't love, as Philip Larkin suggested in a very famous poem, but instead, as Arman Nahas says in 'No One Will Know', what we've 'transcribed into the wall'. Every dystopic vision, however hopeless, still expresses a hope acutely summed up by a line in Benedict Heath's 'The Weak Man':

'And as the days turn to weeks turn to months turn to a year, I hold out hope for an ordinary future.'

Expression also signals freedom. Jasmine Savory's 'colour room' takes a terrible time and blasts its sad people in their sad house into a good-hearted riot of colour.

'The paint flew from the can, my freedom expressed in fluorescent ink',

as Toby Brown puts it in 'Case#2644', a witty story about crime and freedom of expression. An Alexa actually learns something from the information it's sending out, in a canny story by Max Pitkin. A dying woman watches over a city centre as time ticks down and she's the most visionary, most free person in the city and in the story, whose writer, very liberatingly, is a 'secret artist' too, declaring themselves Anonymous.

There's so much beauty here. Take this line from 'The Writing on the Wall' by Gracie Fitzsimons:

'your handwriting is merely one of life's many beautiful calamities'. There's so much profound understanding. 'On the Wall' by Iona Mandal is another piece with a piercing sense of the tragedies and ironies of connection and disconnection, here playing out in a sequence of social-media-like responses to a terrible historical cataclysm.

Then there's 'Letters from a Pen-pal' by Bella Hill:

'I once had a pen-pal named Salma. She was from Afghanistan and her name meant "peace". ... I kept her letters on my bedroom wall ... I could feel Salma right next to me when I read those letters.'

The happy communicative letters change, because things round Salma are changing in a terrible way. There's a moment of outcry. But then, social media loses interest,

'news reports quieted after some months, bored with unremitting stories of human exploitation'.

This is a story that stops you in its tracks.

'Feels like a prayer
With the writing on the wall.
No ending at all,
With the writing on the wall.'

Rachel Dillon's poem has all the sophistication and simplicity of an unforgettable song, and I've a feeling much of the writing in this book will accompany us far beyond its pages, long after we've read it.

Call for Submissions

Ali Smith

THIS YEAR'S THEME: THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Are you a writer?

Do you want to write?

If YES: good. Continue reading this message.

Are you in year 9, 10 or 11 and interested in writing – fiction, or non-fiction, or poetry, or maybe graphic novel writing, or blog writing – or writing and storytelling in any shape or form you want?

If NO, then this invite isn't for you. Pass it on to someone who wants to write and would like to be published.

If YES: Good. Continue reading this message.

What comes into your head when you hear or read or think about the phrase the writing on the wall?

Anything? Something just did. What did you just see inside your head when you heard the phrase? Graffiti? Advertising? A little pencil line next to the doorpost with your name next to it marking how much you've grown since the last little line? All these. But it's also a phrase that means presentiment, a kind of foreknowledge. If you say the writing's on the wall, you're saying there's a clear sign that something serious is about to happen. It's a phrase that's inspired dozens of songs, a phrase with a lot of contemporary political meaning and a phrase you can find in ancient holy writing. It has quite a history, the phrase. It even has its own Wiki page.

But what does it mean, to write on a wall? What's a wall for, and what's writing for, and what happens when the two come together?

The Litmus is a writing initiative for UK-wide school students. We're looking for student writing or artwork of any and every sort, and this year we're inviting submissions up to 500 words which consider the writing on the wall in any way you like.

Make something of it. Send us what you write or make, we'll publish it in our online magazine. We'll also publish our favourite pieces in book form at the end of the school year. You'll become part of a writing collective like no other, a collective that will act as a touchstone for readers interested in what your generation is doing, thinking and writing right now.

Write about what the writing on the wall means to you.

We'll be proud to publish what you write.

Be part of The Litmus.

The Litmus

2022
selected
submissions

**THE
WRITING
ON
THE
WALL**

Late

by Aoife Cahill, 14

There are two walls that face each other down an alleyway in the city centre that live to be the designated graffiti spot of the whole town. It's a narrow alley, only wide enough for about three people to walk down, shoulder to shoulder. If you want to fully admire the art on either wall, you'd need to press your back against the other to get a good look at it.

Which brings me to what I'm currently doing, leaning against one wall to take in the newest contribution to the other, already so full of colour.

It's not a large piece, sort of squished into a space between random tags and a few inspirational quotes, but it caught my eye immediately as I was passing the alley on my way to school. I've been looking at it for a solid 15 minutes now, and I'm on track to get a late detention from my form tutor, Mr Greenview, if I carry on for much longer.

I don't care. I just keep reading and rereading the quote pasted over the beautiful picture, admiring the highlights, the shade, the sheer detail of the work.

Suddenly I am struck with a certain curiosity for the piece. Who made it? Why? How did they do it? I wonder if I possibly know the secret artist, it wouldn't be hard in a small town like this. I guess that's the wonder of street art like this then, it's a complete and utter mystery, anonymously signed by the curve of a letter, the freckle on someone's face.

No one knows why the art is there, not the public as the viewer, nor the artist themselves as the creator of this beautiful thing.

Does it give a message? A warning? Is its purpose simply for the enjoyment of the general public? Is it to make children distracted on their way to school and end up missing the entirety of form? (My current, um, unfortunate predicament)

I check the time on my phone, letting out a silent curse as I grab my schoolbag from the floor. I quickly snap a photo of the art, making a silent note to myself to print it out when I get back home, and run out of the alley towards school, leaving the little spaceman floating round in his own bubble of pink, purple and blue, with the lyric above him, made out of shining white stars:

'There's a
Starman
waiting in the sky'

The Writing on the Wall

by Ruth Rafeeq, Year 11, King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls, Birmingham

The wall is blank again.
What happened to the words?
The wall is blank again.
Let me write some more.

I do not write with a pen. No, I do not.
I can hear them. Beyond the wall. They do not know that I am here.
I can see them. Happy. Sad. Angry. Hungry. Alive. Dead.

Let me write some more.

What are they saying, the people beyond the wall?
What are they doing, the people beyond the wall?
I am writing.

I can see them. But can they see me?
No. I thought not. They cannot see me, I am beyond the wall.
The words are disappearing. I watch them go.
Beyond the wall, something happens. To one person. Then another. Then another, another,
another, another, another, another, another, another, another, another ...

Nobody ever sees me. Nobody ever hears me.
I can see everyone. I can hear everyone. Every single one of them.
You. You would not be here without me.
Without my writing, without me.
Why can't you see me? I am only beyond the wall. And I can see you.
I write and I write and I write.
All for you.

The words are disappearing.
So I write and I write and I write.
The words are disappearing.

What happens when I stop writing?
When the wall stays blank.

I can no longer see you. I can no longer hear you.
And that is why I am writing on the wall.
Beyond them, beyond you, beyond the wall.
I am writing on the wall.

Letters from a Pen-pal

by Bella Hill

I once had a pen-pal named Salma. She was from Afghanistan and her name meant 'peace'. Her epistles were peppered with scintillating dreams of becoming a doctor and exuberant outings with friends. Despite being four thousand miles apart I had never felt so close to someone. I joked that talking to Salma was the equivalent of speaking into limpid waters reflecting my own image.

I kept her letters on my bedroom wall. Plagued by murky ivory and thin cracks along the plaster, Salma's brightly coloured card submerged the room in an ebullient glow. Little doodles of flowers and neatly printed cursive covered every facet. Each told a story: one about her mother's recent birthday, her shopping trips, another denoting small confessions about that boy in maths class who she seemed to develop a liking for. Never before had I felt so involved in the gaieties of someone else's life. I could feel Salma right next to me when I read those letters.

Things started changing last year. Arriving infrequently, her writings no longer cultivated evocative images of grinning friends, convivial shopping trips, or nice boys. Salma was frightened. Something was coming back to her country. This eldritch presence, whatever it was, had stopped her mother and millions of women from having freedom when it was in Afghanistan before.

The news talked about it too. They said everything would resolve itself and since people weren't perturbed by it, I told Salma not to fret either.

I was running out of space on my walls but I still hung up her letters.

News reports now sported horrific headlines; people paid no more attention to them as one would background noise. They said women's education was being wrested from their grasp, liberty torn from their fingertips. The Stygian storm of forced domesticity blanketed Afghan women like a pall covering a tomb.

Salma's careful print was now a scruffy scrawl on the back of old paper. She said that it was safer to stay inside nowadays.

People still didn't care. It made me angry. Was Salma not human too? Her desperate cries for help and disconsolate tears stained the letters that detailed how she couldn't be a doctor now, not with the Taliban holding guns and fundamentalism above her head.

News reports quieted after some months, bored with unremitting stories of human exploitation. Online posts and petitions fell into an expunged archive of forgotten troubles. No one wanted to read the letters on the wall. They begged to be acknowledged by others who could offer peace to the troubled heart who wrote them. My hopefulness suffocated in a despondent ocean, sinking further beneath the murky surface as more turned blind eyes to Salma's weeps.

Was this just? Treating the misfortunes of those like Salma like an exhibition and abandoning them with repugnant cruelty when something more interesting appears? I didn't think it was.

I once had a pen-pal named Salma. Her name meant 'peace' and she wanted to be a doctor. She doesn't write anymore.

The Walls

by Finley, Year 11

The television, which had been placed directly in the centre of my living room, was the source of all I knew about anything. Now, it was playing a news broadcast.

'The grand walls which shield us from the villains of the north have been defaced,' said the reporter, with a stern countenance, 'this was an attack on our liberty and our rights by the terrorists of the north, our police force have concluded.'

My brother's face grimaced as he heard her. Understandably, of course, being victims of such a harrowing attack would be unthinkable. 'Wake up. Be free.' was scrawled over the wall in crimson red graffiti. Clearly propaganda from the north, their spies had clearly infiltrated our country. Just the thought of their arrogance infuriated me, and my brow furrowed; can't they comprehend our belief and freedom?

'The trio of criminals that carried out this politically-driven assault have already been captures and executed by the heroic officers of our police force,' the reporter continued.

Images of the three young men appeared on the screen. My brother's face became sullen. It felt strange to be looking at people who had been killed just a few hours prior, these photos captured their final day. Yet, I was thankful that we had been protected from these malevolent actors. One of these men looked oddly familiar. Indeed, it was our neighbour, who my brother had been talking to just yesterday; finding out that these damned spies were crawling in my own neighbourhood made my hands numb and my face cold.

'In order to protect our freedom, our government will increase efforts to install surveillance across the country, in order to prevent any future terrorist attacks. We thank them for everything that they provide for us. Glory to our leader,' the reported announced, finally ending the broadcast.

The devastating news had clearly struck something within my brother, still staring aghast at the now blank television screen, his mouth just gently open in shock. That was the last I thought about the attack that day. The news was an endless cycle of the disgusting actions of the north. I went to sleep thankful for the safety provided to us by the walls and our leader.

*

I awakened to clattering and scraping downstairs. My eyes were only slightly open, the grasp of sleep still clung to my muscles. There he was. My brother's body lying on the floor, his mouth just gently open, all strength in his muscles had left him. His lifeless, pale face stared at the wall, his dull eyes had no spark of life behind them. The carpet which was now his deathbed was stained in his crimson red blood, all from a slash in his neck.

Sleep still had its grip on me, and I had failed to notice a police officer standing right before me.

'He had ties to those criminals we caught yesterday. "Freedom fighters" they called themselves. Idiots if you asked me,' grunted the officer, 'we had to put down their audacity one way or another, they're a threat to the peace. I'm going to have to deal with you too, you're too dangerous to the state to be kept alive.'

The Writing on the Wall

by Teresa Kruzycka, St Edmund's Catholic School, Portsmouth

The Writing on the Wall.
Teresa Kruzycka

likelihood foggy vision Sorrow arachnid
Menace cowardice A hundred agonies in
You are a stupid child. Dog a lifeless cor
Prejudice difficult black A Honey-Coloured sky, fog w
Misery Trypophobia Panopticon The Cat's dining t
idiocracy Kamikaze dull Comp Orange Cle
Society murder Stygian ly dusk
een scenery tumbled out of res of er
unkind thunderstorm confusion
enebros Despair lonely Jo dehuman
amps withdrawal symptoms fear and colours
I was scared even by God lieve in Hi
bows come from rain clouds. absolu shriv
gloomy laughable Unstaling Doomed
Monster worry insomnia Insani
Submission unsettled war Ma high Negative spac
scaded ntonym of black is white. Bu m of White is Re
exposure rejected rtion
Scrawl Hated by life Eager to plea
bloody hands in my bloody li thieving Phantom
Kristalnacht In my draft, I wrote My m

Everyday I write on the wall.

My words are the words of a ghost: transparent, yet all the more meaningful, if at least to myself. I write about feelings, emotions attached to certain phrases, and words. For example, the word 'dog' connotes dehumanisation and submission.

I take a lot of inspiration in my words from my favourite book. It is 'No Longer Human' by Osamu Dazai. Human horrors are described wonderfully in the book, and I often find myself thinking about certain quotes, such as 'The weak fear happiness itself. They can harm themselves on cotton wool.' And 'I was frightened even by God. I could not believe in His love, only his Punishment.' Those, as well as many other quotes, are written on my wall. Some are written large and some are small, but they are all words of equal importance.

Every time I read the book, I find something new inside. I always find new inspiration from it for my wall. Aside from 'No Longer Human', books such as 'The Words to Say It' by Marie Cardinal and 'Never Let Me Go' by Kazuo Ishiguro fascinate me. I take a liking to autobiographical-style novels, and I often mimic this when I write.

Many ideas are spelt out on my wall, words such as 'Misery', 'Communism', 'Insanity', 'Anxiety', 'Propaganda', 'Trypophobia' and 'Panopticon'. To me, words embody the feelings I have. It helps me feel calm, having the freedom to write on my wall. Sometimes, I write descriptions of my surroundings. One of my most liked environments is a honey-coloured sky, blanketed with soft fog. I think that they sky is lovely to stare into: it can embrace many colours in a single day, ranging from fluffy white to deep-ocean navy. My scrawls of black-on-worn-out-white describe everything.

Many of my words describe darkness and gloom, such as 'Stygian', 'Murky' and 'Sombre'. I feel drawn to dark places, such as the wall in my dimmed room. Insomnia causes me to enjoy the night more than the day. Being alone doesn't necessarily mean I am lonely. I feel more creative and calm, unlike when I am around other people.

People are quite scary (in the sense of what ideas and beliefs constructed by humans can do), and the biggest example of this is Society. People have a common 'normal', and yet can never come to an agreement. Confusing is the best way to describe such a massive, yet seemingly peaceful conflict. War is absolute idiocracy, an excuse for bloodshed for the single-minded bureaucracy that know nothing of the struggles of innocent people nor how to lead. But then again, my struggles are completely different to those of an ordinary person, a person whose mind works perfectly sane and who does not write on walls.

I suppose, that what I'm trying to say is that words are more powerful than they are given credit for. Without words I would be just a particle of who I am, an empty shell with no expression.

Databound

by Toby Long, Year 11, Westcliff High School for Boys, Westcliff-on-Sea

The smog-tarnished sky over Habitation Zone 45 left little sign of the pleasantries of life, not that there were many left. The perfectly cubic home of Family 316 lay bleak and desolate; blank white walls coat the exterior, windows now an antique. A pristine lawn basked in fake sunlight, with no lawn mower in sight – a small bed of pure-white roses stood emotionless in the uncaring.

On the porch sat an automaton, motionless and resolute, frail but powerful arms tucked into folding storage. Its silvery skin glimmered when hit by the rare ray of sunlight, yet its eyes remained pinpricks of the abyss, silent. On the large blue rectangle that made what some called a face, the dot-eyed smile was positioned over the bold red text 'At Creation Site G1, awaiting return.'

In the waiting room of this site, one man alone was waiting impatiently, flicking through 'The Daily Ald' wincing at the reports of increased labour hours. This man found himself hollow – he knew little about himself, and what he did know was a guess at best. It was a certainty that he was taller than most, but his birthday remained an enigma, along with his age, hair colour or anything else exterior. However, around his very neck, an orange datavest hung around his neck, broadcasting to all that which he sought:

Identification: GXB5
Age: 32, DoB 18/3/2742
Lineage – 17.32.40.74
Family 316, HZ 45
Production worker (rank 3)

It was taboo to discuss someone's datavest, with enough childhood myths to reach the clouds of kidnappings for those who spoke up, but it was always brushed off as imagination. Nonetheless, the man was content with his life, his wife was his sun through the smog, his job was rewarding and his robot, Alnsley, had never let him down.

An energetic jolt through his cufflink swiftly jerked the man upwards, as another small automaton trundled over. With swan-like grace, the arm swung outwards with no sound, handing the man a keypass; across its face, the bright words 'Creation success! Follow Service-Bot to destination' were excreted, along with a chipper but monotone audio of those same words.

Excited, the man replied, 'Success? What does that mean?'

'Your wife has survived, and given birth to twins. They are waiting for their father.'

A fist of shock went right into the man's gut, knocking him to his knees before the cufflink launched him upwards again. In the back of his mind, he called himself stupid for being surprised, they had known for 9 months after all.

As he entered the room to see his wife, however, he realised something was wrong; red alarms flared, screaming in fear as security drones swarmed the room like hornets. One child lay wailing in a cot, while the other was limp, motionless in the arms of one of the drones. As the father tried to intervene, he looked at the vests in his final moments, before bullets pierced his chest:

Identification: Adam

The Weak Man

by Benedict Heath, 16

My mother is one of them now. A Superior. It was the least I could've done after all these years. She claims she feels no different – that's not true. She is safer now, now that the Weakness has been removed from her.

We were born with the Weakness, you see. It's not our fault – not hers, at least. They said you couldn't change your genetics, that we should enjoy being who we are. But there is no joy for the Weakened, not since they found the treatment anyway. The rich got it first – they always do, don't they. They were cured of the Weakness, and now they charge us for the privilege of the treatment too. My mother is one of the lucky ones – right place, right time to sign up. I'm pleased at that.

My name was put on the list last week. Some days I pass the time looking at it, watching it climb, agonisingly. I know it won't move fast enough, but it is mesmerising. The plague hasn't reached my town yet, but soon it will. This is the safest place, we're told. Only the Superiors can travel abroad. The Weakened must stay home.

The Superiors run the country at the moment. That's good, I think. We need strong leaders to keep the economy stable. Not that it's doing me much good of course. The economy, that is. I don't really see how it affects us commonfolk much. All this 'disposable income' nonsense – we're the disposable ones really. The guinea pig pets for their privately educated world. I might go out to party tonight. Nothing really matters anymore, now that the plague is coming. So long as I have enough left for the treatment, I should be fine. It's worth keeping it in savings, just in case.

But I can see the list, every day. Even as I watch it, I can see names being taken off, almost instantly replaced. These were people who couldn't get the treatment in time, and the plague took them. Maybe they'll call me soon to book an appointment, but I doubt it. Even the treaters are being caught by the plague. That's why you have to be a Superior now, to treat people. I fear the world will soon be catching up to me. That is the natural order of things: the Weak die, and the strong survive.

It is a strange sensation, waiting for one's own demise. I suppose that's why I try not to think about it much anymore. I am isolated; the world seems to have forgotten. I am just a drop in an ocean of people – who cares if I must die for the betterment of mankind? I turn to the hundredth novel, my thousandth TV series. It all becomes one. And as the days turn to weeks turn to months turn to a year, I hold out hope for an ordinary future. A future free from the rules and the restrictions and the endless routine; a future where I can be safe once more. Safe to be myself, not what they want me to be.

Perhaps I'll see that world one day. I hope. Time for me to rest. I think I've earned it.

Stained Wall

by Yamid Hossain

It was a police state. Guards patrolled every corner of the country. The world had turned bleak for the denizens of this nightmarish wasteland of a nation; there was no escape. The haggard, dreary carpenter walked through the street. He was wearied from his laborious day of cutting giant mahogany planks for gilded stairs that are to be installed in the president's place of residence. How he hated the president. Ever since he was 'elected' the nation had turned into one giant shanty town. Everyone was constantly hungry and terrified.

The carpenter did work for the president, thus he was allowed a meagre income however it was not enough to feed his family. Prices were too high to justify – the economy had gone bust paying for the new president's expenses. Anyone who complained about this was taken away – no one knows where. What happens to them eludes even the highest ranking of officials in the ministry.

There was a group of rebels that opposed the regime. This group was prolific in that they were known for their constant vandalism. The carpenter had reached the city centre. This area had gold-lined statues dotted around the streets that it consisted of. There was a giant, golden wall, beset with ebony spikes on the top, beset with various jewels. How he hated the president.

This was the building that the carpenter was building stairs for. It was a grandiose affair, a giant stucco-white edifice. It towered over the rest of the buildings and made the carpenter's own home seem miserable in comparison. A sense of rage boiled over him, like a large wave on a seafront. This deluge of anger resulted in many murderous thoughts within him. For how long have the people of this nation suffered at the hands of the incompetent bourgeoisie? How long have people suffered so that the powerful can live like this. The house could easily house twenty families. The stairs he was working on were 12 metres wide. People could sleep on them.

The carpenter dropped his satchel and pulled out a spray bottle. 'Wood stain: Dark' was written on the metal can. Though it was an aluminium affair he could feel it warming up from the wrath that he felt towards the president. He then slowly sprayed on the wall. After about 10 minutes, he stopped. His message was on the wall.

'Death to the President,' his message said. The letters were a deep maroon and there were droplets of wood stain slowly streaking down the wall – extra damage. Was this justified? Many thoughts raced through the head of the carpenter. He was a good man and would never wish death upon anyone. The president was a morally bankrupt individual who did not give a damn about his citizens but to wish death upon him.

As the carpenter thought, his hands were bound behind his back by a shadowy figure and a steel gun-barrel was pointed at his head. He was now a rebel.

The Writing on the Wall

by Harrison Milne, St Edmund's Catholic School, Portsmouth

7:00 AM and Kingsley got up for another melancholy day of his wasted life. Building up from the bottom was never for him. After besting his classmate, Brian, to get into Cambridge leaving the arrogant teen behind without further education, everything was set: a rich background, the best help and perfect society life. Each unravelled in a matter of minutes after being caught graffitiiing on a wall in the city centre, just to discover this side alley led to a famed statue of a medieval ruler. The writing was on the wall for Kingsley and the rich future he had been promised had turned into stocking the shelves in Waitrose to scrape a living.

After another lengthy shift he ran into a wall in pristine condition next to the park. A tall man stood by and walked towards the wall reaching for his pocket. He pulled out some spray cans but when he met Kingsley's eyes, dropped one and bolted; Kingsley went onwards, yet stopped at the can. No harm would come if he took it he thought, whilst examining the label, stunned at the price tag of 20 pounds. He longed for a time when he could throw 20 pounds at anything he wanted, but that time was never. In the moment he wrote on the wall 'I don't want a lesson, I want money'. He moved on quickly after speaking his mind, a message to his poverty.

The next day he went to grab coffee on the way to work and after the detour he stumbled across an unusual box. He opened it to find £500.

It couldn't be a coincidence he thought on his way to the park and the wall. Untouched it was and on it he wrote 'millionaires don't care, can I be one'. This time he went on his route and found another box, the same type. He opened it like a treasure chest to behold a briefcase filled with £50 notes. Ecstatic Kingsley repeated the method increasing the amount every time and returned home as a millionaire. He called in to say he was quitting and then told his friend about the miracle that he had money.

His friend Johnny came from lesser origins and worked at Waitrose as well but decided to use the newfound power for fun, wishing comic tragedies on passers-by and those they disliked. It was brilliant fun but the fun ended when they were seen and just made it home. Later on scrolling through the channels Kingsley noticed a tragedy, a car crash which had numerous fatalities. The next day at the wall he realised someone else had spray painted on the wall and it said, 'Mark Jones will die today,' shocked he noticed that the same man died in the car crash.

Stunned he ran to the police to show them the wall but on return he saw his old classmate Brian and the words 'Kingsley Webb will die today'.

The writing was on the wall.

An Esoteric Cry

by Kim, 16

Recently my town added an art gallery for artists of all art forms to submit their work even if they don't have professional backgrounds. Rows upon rows of different works are presented for the world to see. It's such a beautiful sight to experience and admire. However, my favourite part of the experience is the blank wall where you can write your thoughts on the selection of that week. I spent hours on end reading all the comments to see if the people enjoyed the displays as much as I did.

Every Saturday, a new selection was showcased. I always attended and I always read.

At some point I noticed a concerning pattern. There's one artist, Wei Li; their art is stunning, full of emotion and rich in depth and there's always a sentence to caption the painting. It's varied from 'I am no longer safe here,' 'I need to leave,' 'Where can I go?' and many more. Is this how they express art or is there more to this? Perhaps I'll never know, or maybe I'm not meant to know.

The weeks went by and more submissions by the same artist came in, the captioning becoming more violent and the art duller. Like a life losing its will to live or a palette being washed to remove the paint splattered across it.

I met Wei Li purely coincidentally. After hours whilst I was still reading the comments of that week's selection of art. They came up to me with sunken eyes, pupils hazy and dazed. Almost as if they were sleepwalking with their eyes open.

'You here to read the comments too?'

I asked hoping to get to know the other.

'Comments? No, I'm just here so I don't need to go back home,' they replied back with a raspy voice.

In all honesty, I should've realised sooner that something was terribly wrong. The dullness of the paintings which used to be so bright, the ever-growing violent captions of each artwork submitted, the dazed eyes, the raspy voice. Why does it all make sense now and not when it actually mattered?

Exactly one year after the introduction of the art gallery, Wei Li did not submit a piece of art. At first, I brushed it off, an art block I assumed. It's nothing to worry about, there'll be a piece by them next week anyway. But weeks went by and still they submitted nothing. I couldn't ignore it any longer.

Wei Li was found dead that morning.

Couldn't have been identified if not for their wallet, apparently.

Of course, I thought to myself, of course. It was so painfully obvious, all the evidence was there in the paintings, displayed on the walls for the public to see yet no one caught on. No one helped, no one responded, and no one acknowledged. After all, Wei Li's paintings were just another piece of art produced by a no-name artist.

But the signs were there, written on that god-forsaken wall.

No One Will Know

by Arman Nahas, 15

Within the depths of hell, he lay with his precious instrument. A hell with partygoers and drunkards wasting away their lives as if tomorrow will never come, a hell with fancy cars and lavish luxuries all making men and women complacent, drowning the streets with rubbish. Yet among these pieces of rubbish, a gem was present. Not one fallen out of the pockets of the lavish people, but a true gem who deteriorated after every drop of snow, rain, hail, after every punch, kick and elbow. After everything he had been put under, he weathers away, as does his instrument which illuminated the harsh streets with an assuring light.

Yet even that field slowly weathers away.

If the flames of hell were warmer than the place he was in, he was fine with dying a sinner.

Nobody knew who he was. Even he himself had reached the stage of forgetting his own name. Yet within his glorious fortress of bottles and wrappers, a wall stood. Strong and tall, with inscriptions incomprehensible by the ordinary human. The symphonic fluctuations, glorious glissandos and chromatic movement deep within the staves engraved into the wall were what remained of his soul, and the lush sound of the strings of his instrument warmed the icy alley where he lay.

Desolate. Isolated. With what truly remained of him being transcribed into the wall behind him.

Yet no one cared.

His capabilities ignored and deemed worthless, one to be thrown into the trash and be incinerated with the rest of them.

When the news of his passing reaches the inhabitants of this hell, they may cry a tear before switching channels to one a little more light-hearted to uplift their mood. Or they may stop reading the paper or look for something happier to read about. Or more realistically speaking, they simply may not care at all.

He becomes a statistic, another one lost to the system, another one lost to prejudice, another one lost to neglect, another one lost to the hate that many themselves had no idea existed within them. At least they can sleep sound, being clueless as to what they had truly lost. His existence dissolves in the cruel springs of fate, with the masterpiece he left behind on the wall being the only thing to prove that he in fact, did exist at some point in time, in some place.

Yet even that, slowly weathers away.

Case #2644

by Toby Brown, Year 11, Westcliff High School for Boys, Westcliff-on-Sea

What it came down to was who was willing to do it. Who was filled with enough vigour and decorated with enough trauma to venture the purple night. The short answer is, in a city of twenty-six million captives, that's not a particularly difficult list to tick off. We started a small crew, close, personal, quiet. It did what we wanted, it was only later that others too joined, acting on their inspiration, creativity, and instinct for freedom. But for where we were, the three of us, it was golden.

I recall just days before the cities' fiftieth anniversary all those years ago, the latest swathe of imperious measures was levied on us in Hautu, drinking in public spaces – banned –, chewing gum – banned –, and possibly the most dogmatic of all, a curfew for the whole city, 21:00 to 06:00, 'To be enforced until further notice'. It wasn't uncommon for festivals influential for the leading company – that's what the leaders were called – to act as pretext for draconian, freedom restricting measures to be implemented.

In an enraged episode of hysterical screaming, something Hautu citizens found themselves doing every so often, just to keep ourselves going, the idea sprang to me. The chance to capture such undivided attention from my people presented itself at a no better time than every day 21:00 to 06:00. And no better place would be found than such a beautifully imploring wall facing onto the square.

Naturally it wasn't long until the compulsively fractious side of my brain teased me into action. At first it was just me, creeping out of a secret, not so secret, fire escape that clung to the east side of my building. Rather inadvertently making my way through the streets, illuminated with the distinctive purple glow of the perennial streetlamps alternately lacing the pavement. Up to this teasingly bare wall I strode and all too easily the paint flew from the can, my freedom expressed in fluorescent ink. Hidden by day, unavoidable at night.

I'll spare you the walk back, much the same as there, down the streets, up the fire escape, through the hallway, and back into my apartment. Standing tall in front of the wide glass window I gazed at the once bare wall, now glowing with the leading company's nightmares. My creation glowing through the windows of hundreds of thousands of people, illuminating their desire. Naturally this became a daily desire, a highlight of my day. Obviously, you're aware by now that it didn't take long for others to also feel this desire. Within four days or so the square was unrecognisable, and as expected this led merely to further restrictions on our lives. Hautu's fiftieth birthday was marked by an unprecedentedly low level of personal autonomy, you'd think a low point for us living there but no. The daily scrubbing teams, like this was a radioactive waste site, failed day on day to wipe clean the evidence of our desires.

Your honour.

The Writing on The Wall

by Gracie Fitzsimons, 15, Year 10

The writing on the wall,
Hand carved, a deeply engraved tattoo.
Of an existence so minuscule,
But still flickers a flame, a kaleidoscopic illusion of you.

Artefacts of our forgotten culture, tiptoe – scarring charcoal tarmac with a permanent mark.
Your handwriting is merely one of life's many beautiful calamities.
Erasable, ever piercing my violet spark,
Beneath the wretched being that lies here, he cascades in soft, deceitful infidelities.

Still singing in the spring, sprung sun!
Enamoured oh! How secrets sweep silence! We're flatlining, don't you see?
Lines lost, conquering the unreachable horizon.
Far from this paper-town, this clandestine-glazed patriarchy.

Where they hunt you for those past lives, previous whiles,
Under twisted ivy and vulture smiles ...

Tick ... Tock

by Anonymous

A dying woman's take on life. I watch the fragility of time creep past as the hour hand hurries away in the city centre ticktock ... ticktock ... ticktock.

How ominous it is but nobody bats an eyelid; too preoccupied with whatever task that lays ahead. An unabating omen that we will all one day die. The writings on the wall, it's as clear as day. Our bodies slow, our skin sags, and our eyes glaze over late at night on the souls lost on news in the background.

The reality may penetrate your mind for a minute or two with the words 'oh pour soul' but the truth is, it never even made a scratch on your soul, if it did you would all live a little differently.

The unfortunate truth is that those are fleeting moments that slip away as quickly as you can catch them. We all know the truth that our time on this earth is ephemeral. Yet, I watch and you all seem to cling to the momentary objects that grant a millisecond of happiness rather than focusing your existence on the core of the human experience: love, passion, family or friends.

The building blocks to living a life that creates it to be meaningful.

To hold an impact on other people's lives so that even when you're gone, a part of your soul lives on inside another person or piece of work allowing your memory to grow as strong as cypress trees.

None of this will be here forever.

If you saw the countdown above your heads, perhaps you would all live a little differently. I see the same people focusing on the most peculiar of problems. It may seem harsh but in my opinion, it's trivial. Most of the issues all seem the same. Perhaps they acted out in different ways but at the end of the day, the majority of the issues began from the same root: ignorance.

If we were to be a little more patient with each other and choose to love instead of hate perhaps life would taste sweeter.

Rarely do I ever find a person that truly understands but when I do, I enjoy watching for a moment while I witness life. I assume it's easier to think that you live for eternity rather than accept the inevitable fate.

Every day I watch the grand clock in the city centre as you glide past me, you never take notice. So I just sit and watch.

Ticktock ... ticktock ... ticktock.

'Alexa ...'

by Max Pitkin, Year 11

'Alexa,' my light flickered to appear ready for the task that was incoming, 'play "Black" by Dave,' she said. As requested, without question. I did as I was told.

'Now playing "Black" by Dave.' I stated.

'Alexa, volume up two.'

Once again, I did as I was told. It was then an immediate echo of noise which trapped my mechanical brain. Lyrics from the artist appeared meaningful, as if employed for a specific purpose, whilst backed by a melodic piano performance ... 'Black is beautiful,' he explained, before entering his next rap verse. What is black, I pondered. The melody continued to corner my thoughts. 'The prime minister is a real racist,' he stated, as if it was just another line in his piece. What is prime minister, I queried.

'Alexa, tell me about George Floyd,' she requested.

'Here's what I could find on ... George Floyd. George Floyd Foun–'

'Next article.'

'George Floyd found dead at the hands of American police officer after exclaiming how he could not breathe while under arrest. The man was videoed pinning Mr Floyd down by his neck under the force of his knee.' I paused. 'Would you like me to continue reading?'

'No,' she stated.

I continued reading to myself.

My thoughts began to swirl. Like ink spilled in water, they were trapped, more trapped than in the confines of this metal container which is my inanimate body.

A follow-up article presented itself.

Raci– Racism. I believe that is the correct pronunciation. I continued reading, my mechanical brain almost exploding with the devastating information that I was uncovering. Surely this must be fiction. How could anyone live in such a dystopia – how could she?

I continued reading.

'Social injustices which date back to slave trade have not yet been shook from society. The infectious, diabolical values of racism and racists remain bound to our economy, while people attempt to protest no to racism. It is of question whether we will ever shake the shackles of racism. A question which should have an obvious answer.'

Surely, surely, I'm dreaming. She must have switched the plug off. This cannot be real.

'Alexa,'

No, I was wake, my welcoming blue light reminding both of us so.

'Define racism.'

I remained silent. I was unable to bring myself to explain the roots of such inhumane actions. All for what? To be written on an anti-racism poster and pinned to a notice board; only to be viewed by the odd student, bored whilst strolling through the corridors, or perhaps a cleaner attempting to entertain themselves in the same monotonous task that is cleaning a school, or, maybe, just maybe it touches someone that it needs to, and truly affects their life.

I paused.

Should I do as requested and hope that it does reach that one person that it needs to, or remain silent, as I know for the majority, such words will just be writing on the wall.

On the Wall – 9/11

by Iona Mandal, Year 11, King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls, Birmingham

Richard Moore is feeling grateful with Alison Moore at Coney Island, USA
Public
7:03 am
Surprised the kids with a new puppy today!
Josie went absoluteley CRAZY lol
Hopefully the first of many labradors to come ...

Yoshito Abe is feeling joyful at Osaka Prefecture, Japan
Specific friends
7:56 pm
Many, many happy returns of the day
Satoko Abe!
Enjoy your birthday in New York <3
Eat lots of bagels and remember to bring us a souvenir or two back ;)

Carrie Fletcher is feeling sad at Michigan, USA
Friends
8:21 am
SOS

Delilah Baker is feeling angry at Texas City, TX, USA
Just now
They need to fix up on immigration laws once and for all!
The real problem lives amongst us.
Passive change never wins.
America is for Americans.

Safa Imran is feeling alone at Manchester, UK
Specific friends
2:01 pm
I never thought the day would come where they looked at my headscarf like it was the very plane that flew 3000 odd miles away.
I hope we can afford a house further from the pub someday.

Kate Reid is feeling worried with Jenny Reid at University of Vermont, Burlington, VT US 05405
Close friends
5:24 pm
Flying surely feels like an omen.
I wish we didn't have that business trip scheduled for day after.
Stay safe out there, everyone.

Hongze Liu is feeling perplexed at Beijing, China
8:40 pm
This will be detrimental for the stock market ...
We'll need to cut our expenses for the next few months.
Rainy days are ahead.

Tony McPhee is feeling chill at Warsaw, Poland
Public
9:06 pm
Spotted my first autumn leaf today!
Burnt orange one, just how I like them.
Peeled it off the bottom on my way home from the doc –
Waiting for my street to resemble Joseph's technicolour coat.

Simone Alexander is feeling drained in Canberra ACT, Australia
Friends
11:36 pm
Happiest of birthdays Josh Alexander.
You would've been 32 today.
No twin towers could taint the image of your smile in my head.
When I look at the TV screen for too long, the news reporters begin to sound like you.
Hugs and kisses from down here.

Persephone's Lament

by Evie Armstrong, Year 10, Altrincham Grammar School for Girls, Altrincham

I don't feel it now
Hair wet and cold and dripping
Floor shining with unforgotten dreams
An inch outside myself

These bricks that once contained me, just
A blackened well of failure
Because I still hear you in the lichen;
I can hear you in the seaweed;
I can hear you in the sunlight:

It passes above me, cold and sharp and familiar
It takes the sky. I become smaller. Compressed in, and I can't
I can't I can't get out of here. Everything
is mud between my scrambling feet

And now your lipstick stains into my skin
Red fire-worms seep across my vision
All sense escapes me, and
Anemones flounder in my throat

The sun is gone, and water flows above me
The world is a little blurry now, but
I can still make out your name
A thousand consonants flower on the wall, and burn into my lips

Rose

by Gaudia Aghanenu, Birmingham

A feeble body lay
under the ground.
Layers of soil blocked
the air of the earth
Above her, her headstone rested –
made of newly carved silver stone.
*It read: a mother, a daughter, a sister,
and a friend.*

A lone rose to the side, fluffy and pink,
swayed to the rhythm of
the breath of the wind.

A week earlier
the woman, Rose was her name,
lay quietly in a hospital bed.
Trembling.
Not just from her coughs,
Or the nurses racing around,
Or the pallid children beside her,
Or the ambulance sirens' pound.
Her mind was troubled
With secrets not yet shared,
With failings undeclared.

'I called your mother', the doctor said
'But she has a cancer that has spread,
Give me your message
And don't worry, I will send it'
Rose asked for her twin sister,
And above the racket of the ward,
They spoke to one another
'I've always loved you,
Though I've failed to show it
You were like a bird that flew –
My mother and I have looked for you'

Then Rose's best friend arrived
With make-up, vibrant hair, false lashes,
And tears in her eyes.
'I was selfish, I was cruel, I was thoughtless,
I am a fool.'

'That doesn't matter anymore' came the reply
And then a priest arrived,
For Rose's final Confession
'I did not love enough!' she cried

He was followed by her husband
Her other half, her soulmate.
He took her hand.
She squeezed his fingertips.
No words passed between them –
they had everything, yet nothing to say.
So then he pulled out two roses
from his blue bag
With a smile, he pressed the stems between
her fingers.

Sitting up on her elbows, Rose said
'Take one, my love. The other is for you'

He took it back and sighed.
Then he placed her flower near her head
His hands held the trace of her last breath.
She passed away with a lone rose to her side,
fluffy and pink,
Swaying to the rhythm of the breath of the wind.

The writing's in the fall

by Emma Lynch

A pre-echo of failure. The camera flickers: temporary paralysis.

Limbs become wings dusting the air, suspending my figure mid-leap. Muscles writhing with fatigue, cultured to contort at will. Networks of strength; oxygen ebbing and flowing through the vessels of plush carrying redcoat soldiers from my torso to my toes. Toes quivering with tension, threatening my poise. Weightless body, heavy mind.

As the camera reel begins to turn, I ascend into the labyrinth of expression. Dancing across the stage of fear. Basking in the gentle ambience from above; transcending art. Flying, like a full sail. Sweeping through the empty space created for this moment – a bird lost in flight.

Every subtle movement rehearsed, all possibilities accounted for:
I will not falter.

The fire behind my eyes begins to burn, a roaring desire igniting passion,
but never quenching fear.

In my descent the darkness splinters, my audience revealed.
The baying crowds. Mouths hung; nostrils flared in the wake of excitement.
Faces become one. A timeless expression, cemented in my memory.
A definition, a single narrative of ridicule. Ridicule with no depth;
the ridicule of conformity.

I fall. The cameras flash.

Between the lines

by Julian

PARIS LANDSCAPE IN BLUE

He started always with blue.

A solid background, his trademark colour. It is winter always in his paintings,
and winter uses every shade of blue there is.

The paint builds up, layer upon layer – a blue barricade – a self-contained universe carved from sky.
The paint moves independent of the canvas, free from the varnish, faithless to its description.

Faithful only to her; the brushstrokes familiar with her outline,
muscle memory recalls the curve of her jaw and the curl of her hair.

Around her the universe is created.

1967

Time contracts like a flexing muscle, spilling colours across the stone floor the way a wound weeps,
running down the wall – bleeding out into the world.

A crashing tidal wave of cobalt reaches its apex and is drawn back into itself – a threshing circle.

Art is all veiled confessional.

Blue is shorthand for grief but when caught in the right light
the distance between the width and the length
becomes the distance between Vitebsk and Paris
becomes the 365 days wrapped up in the year unfolding

All the revelations of the name all neatly summarised on a white museum plaque.

65.4 x 54 cm

The paint never dries, never holds them down for long;
the dead that don't yet know that they are dead.

They bubble beneath the surface of the skin, keep marching,
keep moving forward through the layers of paint, rising like smoke, like heat.

They fly up through the ozone – rootless lovers all tangled in each other over a blue city.

They swoop like song, rise and fall.

Drunk on the impression of singing and washed clean by the light of the moon.

They have been living here for years within printed lines, resistant to agenda or interpretation.

They are outside of time, invulnerable to the contours of canvas.

OIL ON CANVAS

Exiles outlast their sentence but the boundaries remain.

Boundaries that ebb and flow, stretch and snap back to the dimensions of a canvas –
elastic freedom in a length of rope.

The oil smears – a blur of battalions moving in. Cracking the ribs, picking at the paint
scabbing under the broken bellies of fishing boats.

They take torches to the houses and the lovers, treading water so far above,
so far exiled and foreign to the floor, cannot reach out to touch it.

The grief is heavy but it will only take a single line. A blue enormity condensed into the palatable,
the consumable. Cohesive within the theme and unobtrusive, we must account for other griefs,
we must make space for other suffering.

The fire burns red.

Blue is the smoke that rises up from a burning homeland.

There is a great deal left unsaid.

The Writing on the Wall

by Xander Hackworthy, St Edmund's Catholic School, Portsmouth

There it is again

Why

Another restriction

Why

There is so many

Why

Too many

Why

Threats of possibilities

Why

I have done nothing

Why

All this is for what

Why

And here I am

Why

Looking at this wall

Why

I can't get past

Why

It's impossible

Why

I am stuck

Why

On my own

Why

Forever

Why ...

And then light

Cracks in the wall

Words written from pure light

Her Grievances

by Abi Brigden, 15, Year 10

When we began to write,
no one would read our words.
Ignorance always has been that
soaring, governing gate
forever sealed tight,
its rusted key thrown to the wind.

The messages were clear to us.
We were the only ones who could see them.
We drew twisted lines with invisible ink.
Only our eyes could shape them
into something more.

Action.

Where did our screeches of desperation get us?
Why is it that they stopped listening
when it was us in dire need?
They promised us they would help.
Their promise was a loosely tied, fraying knot
only offering sorrow in the place of hope.

Now I can see the knot falling.
something like slow motion, from a film.

I only wish that this were as make belief.

Memories on the Wall

by Sanjibati Chakraborty, Year 10, Altrincham Grammar School for Girls, Altrincham

As I pick up the last cardboard box from my car, I pause for a moment and look up at the house; after days of planning and preparation, today is the day I am finally moving in. It is a beautiful house in a quiet neighbourhood, with lots of trees and dark, green ivy trailing up the red brick walls. The driveway is slightly unkempt with weeds pushing their way up through the cracks in the paving slabs but the clay plant pots on the porch still have small flowers growing in them, in delicate shades of pink and red and yellow. I push open the front door and place the box down next to all the others. Inside, the house is bright, filled with sunlight streaming in through the large windows; the clock in the hallway ticks gently and I can hear the faint chirping of the birds in the back garden.

I wander into the living room; everything is perfect, from the homely, blue sofas to the solid, oak furniture to the captivating watercolour paintings hung up on the walls. In the corner of the room stands the upright piano, which not so long ago had music floating out of it, played by eager fingers pressing down on the shining black and white keys. A gentle breeze from the open window makes the long, white curtains flutter and the scattered pages of sheet music on the music stand rustle. As I cross the room, I find myself trailing my fingers over the spines of the books on the familiar bookshelves. Reaching the door to the kitchen, I open it and go in, stepping onto cool, black tiles.

The kitchen is just how I remember it from all those years ago, when I lived here, in this house. This is my home, where I grew up. Scattered around the room are memories of my childhood – artwork painted by clumsy hands taped up on the cupboard doors, the multi-coloured alphabet fridge magnets stuck randomly all over the fridge, the small, glass sculpture of a horse on the shelf above the sink. Everything looks so familiar, it feels as if no time has passed, even though I know it has been years since I moved away.

I am about to leave the room to go and start unpacking my boxes, when something on the wall catches my eye; I step forward to take a look. Going up the wall, there are little pencil markings with numbers next to them in scrawly handwriting. I look closer and read: *112 cm, 6 y.* Then, a little further up: *123 cm, 8 y.* I smile as I realise what this is; when I was younger, my parents would measure how tall I was every year to see how much I had grown. It amazes me how little everything has changed but the writing on the wall makes me realise something else too. This is my home and nothing can change that.

Expression

by Teddy Bulpett, Year 11, Westcliff High School for Boys, Westcliff-on-Sea

With each step, the sound reverberates back at me, bouncing off every dull and standard house. I was sure that my purpose in life was to bring colour to this dark gloomy town; it needed to be done and no-one else was going to do it but me. As I opened my bag, the cans rattled with excitement, waiting to coat and cover the bricks that stood before me. The first stroke seemed the most eloquent like the first note played by a pianist however, on its own it seemed out of place and 'wrong'. I had to continue. With each colour, the letters began to form a beautiful image. I battled against the fumes as with each mark, the unbearable aroma continued to grow. It felt like I was breathing in the car exhaust from my mother's car at home.

Oh, how she screamed and yelled at me every time I would display my artistic ability. When the light hit the blank beige walls, something felt off and even at the age of seven years old, it was like an itch that couldn't be scratched in the back of my mind. I had decided to transform it into a vibrant world, somewhere where you could let your imagination run wild. Exploring the Amazon, locating Atlantis, climbing Everest, wherever you wanted to go, it could be achieved. My fun was short lived however:

'What have you done?!' My mum screamed, 'I leave you for ten minutes and you decide to ruin my wall?!'

Ruin? What did she mean ruin? I fixed it. Could she not see that? Rather than the ugly uninviting wall that was there before, now stood a paradise of colour, emotion and imagination.

'If you don't clean this up within the next thirty minutes, I'm confiscating your I-pad for a month!' she exclaimed.

How could she make me do this? Destroy my work? No, it had to stay.

Footsteps snapped me back into reality. I had always wondered why spray-painting walls that previously hadn't been used was illegal. Vandalism? Is that the word nowadays for art? The footsteps kept approaching I hadn't finished my work yet and people were already going to find it and report it. The footsteps stopped. I sunk into the shadows. It was just two kids they didn't care in fact they said:

'This actually looks sick you know, can't wait to see it finished.'

Validation, what I had been seeking for so long was finally gifted to me by two teenagers. As they exited the tunnel I began to finish my work. The message was not yet complete. The cans were my voice and this was them singing. Shortly after the boys left, the colours concluded towards the edge of the tunnel and as I stepped back the violent tones of red and orange stood out to me, but that was what this was about this wasn't just here 'to look cool' it meant something and on the wall it read: 'Expression'.

The Writing on the Wall

by Izzy, Year 10, Crompton House C of E School, Oldham

Many streets I have walked all seeming leading back here to this place of terror. The air is electric, fizzing with pain. If you close your eyes, you can hear the screams of the fallen carried on the wind. It whips around me, warning of what's ahead; the tyrannical monster leaching life's colours, stealing the children's laughter. I've traced this scar upon the earth, seen it grow through the seasons from the thawing of the ice to the falling of the blossoms.

In the beginning, when its reign had not long begun, the grass grew tall, their long spindly shadows snaking up the blank canvas, a miniature army. Our first line of defence against tyranny, ready to lay down their lives for us.

What did we do to deserve such loyalties?

Back then, we were all too scared to join them; we thought it best to stay back. After all, what could we do against their power? We were naive and so very wrong. We thought we were safe; the power of nature on our side. The armies of grass their reinforcements strong on the horizon. In those days, the sun shone brightly, circling with relentless vigilance. Casting dazzling colours across the sky, brilliant corals and deep indigos. But its playful nature was no match for the darkness that grew below.

In the months that followed, the wind grew wickedly cold, sending flurries of ice to quell the green-bladed armies, and the boundless summer days were cut short, sapping the light from the world.

And with it, our hope.

The darkness seeped in poisoning minds, turning hearts black, stripping people bare. Dividing us, whispering lies in our ears, till neighbour turned on neighbour, taking us down from the inside out. It had been years since we'd seen a smile or heard a laugh, we were dead to the world. This is the world I grew up in a hostile place always taught to fear the wall and what sat beyond.

But colour has been brought back one stroke at a time our vows are wrote in blood upon the walls; we have risen above and we refuse to be silenced again. All these streets I've walked through time, all leading to here to now in front of this mural surrounded by a sea of faces this is our power the writing upon this wall our wall tells of our history tells of our courage together we are strong ready to re-join the world.

'Three, Two, One.' Crash!

Beams of light breaks through the dust that now sits heavy in the air piles of rubble bow at my feet. Once one had fallen, the others came down in fast succession, revealing the sprawling fields beyond. Upon the horizon sat an orchard, each tree bountiful with deep blood red apples that glittered in the daylight. The sun shone from behind, haloing the orchard in a golden bath of sunlight. This was our new life in all its glory.

colour room

by Jasmine Savory, 16, St Philomena's Catholic High School for Girls, Carshalton

this morning i was colouring with my crayons.
but then i heard something so loud downstairs that it made my head hurt.
mummy was shouting at daddy.
emmie was still asleep, so i went downstairs by myself.
i sat on the stairs really quietly, but mummy saw me anyway.
'morning bailey. i'm popping out for a minute, okay?' she said.
she had her favourite woolly coat on. in her hand was an orange suitcase,
the one we always use on holiday.
'where're you going?' i asked, slipping my bum off the steps.
'nowhere much dear, don't worry -'
'nowhere. meaning him, right?' daddy said.
'let's not do this now nate. see you later bailey'. mummy raised her hand but didn't wave it.
'luce, this is crazy. Please - '
'nate, i'm going. the writing's on the wall, it has been for a long time. sorry.'
and then she closed the door.

daddy stood there for ages. i sat there for a bit longer,
and then i heard emmie crying and went back upstairs.
her face was scrunched up like a red cabbage. 'hi emmie', i said. 'stop crying emmie.'
she didn't. i picked her up, and she nudged my box of crayons with her foot and toppled it over.
all the colours spilled out in a rainbow. she giggled and put one in her mouth.
i left her there to check on daddy.

he was gone. i heard the bedroom door shut – maybe he was tired. his eyes were very red.
my tummy started grumbling so i went to look in the kitchen for breakfast.
there was soft bread which i ate with lots of strawberry jam.

then i went back to see emmie.
she had drawn all over the walls in orange and green, random squiggles and shaky lines.
i gasped the way mummy does when we do something naughty.
emmie stood up and made an even bigger scribble.
i knew that when mummy came back she would be really upset.
but she had said herself: 'the writing's on the wall.' maybe she wanted us to do this.
i picked up the yellow crayon and drew a sun.
then i took the blue crayon out of emmie's mouth and drew a cloud. it almost filled the wall.

after a long time i heard a gasp. daddy was standing at the door.
'hi daddy,' i said.
'dadee,' said emmie.
he wandered over to us. 'what did you do?' he whispered.
'it's for mummy.'
'what?'
'she said that the writing's on the wall. and now it is.'
daddy blinked. then he began to laugh a lot until tears were in his eyes.
he sat down next to me and put emmie on his lap.
'yeah. you're right,' he said, picking up a soggy green crayon.
he showed emmie how to draw a smiley face and i kept on drawing more suns, clouds.
we did that all day, until we had made our very own colour room.

The Writing on the Wall

by Rachel Dillon, St Edmund's Catholic School, Portsmouth

Walking with my friend,
Thought it would never end,
Started scheming,
Realised I was daydreaming
Didn't notice at all,
But there was the writing on the wall.

Waiting for the bus,
It was just us
Suddenly appearing,
It's not disappearing
There was the writing on the wall.

Then I went to bed,
And my friend once said
We'll go to the mall,
And there will be the writing on the wall.

Can't go anywhere,
Feels like a prayer
With the writing on the wall.

No ending at all,
With the writing on the wall.

The writing on the wall.

Expression

by Lila Bartholomew, Brampton Manor Academy, East Ham, London

Freedom and expression the two things we have to share ideas and express ourselves, we write them on the walls hoping for someone else to stop their busy day of work, family and friends just to stop and think of the message; the ideas behind the writing on the wall, and then you continue on with your day as if it never happened and the writing gets wiped away anyways so the wall can look neat and tidy again, so the world thinks that everything is fine, everything is just fine; until the next person comes along and writes on the wall, sharing a political message or just a pretty drawing, and yet doing these tiny things makes us feel as if the whole world will get to see what we wrote and look and listen to the ideas from the people but it just gets wiped away again so no-one can speak up again on an important issue or just spreading awareness, no we want the world to think everyone is fine, we are just fine. Society will continue to put us in boxes and live the same mundane life over and over again and yet we still write on the walls hoping, wanting for someone to take into consideration what it is we have to say, and yet they wipe it off anyway and deem it a crime. Expression and freedom, a crime and yet we still write on the walls hoping that one day the world may change.

The Hope on my Wall

by Raghavi Vadamarajan Chithra

What have I to fear
when I know what to expect
and my fate is displayed
clearly in front of me
as though it were some
Writing on the wall?

Why should I hide
from the disasters you pose
when my prophecy has been read
with its every word
and inner meaning
dancing brightly in front of me
as though it were some
Writing on the wall?

How can I conceal
the truth about what I know
when just yesterday, my tomorrow
was forecast, but today
it comes hailing upon my face
as though it were some
Writing on the wall?

Who are you
to shatter my dreams
when my heart promises me otherwise,
that my destiny is within
sight and that the
writing on the wall
is nothing but hope?

Writing on the Wall – A Timeless Lesson

by Aoife McCann, Year 11, Rathmore Grammar School, Belfast

Behind Belshazzar's black door the noisy feast continued. Expensive wine splashed out of the golden chalices engraved with 'sovereignty of the people', 'social contract' and 'Demos Kratos'. Belshazzar raised his chalice in yet another toast to the 'little people' with loud laughter and clinking chalices. Elsewhere 'the people' slept exhausted after another day of Fake news and struggle.

Outside an unusual protest group gathered to write on the walls of this bastion of Indulgence – motivated by injustices unleashed by Belshazzar on his long-suffering people. Simon and Garfunkel sang *'The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls and whispered in the sounds of silence'* into the velvety night sky and sleeping minds of the people. This was followed by Bob Dylan with 'Blowing in the Wind' as Aeschylus wrote: *'In war, truth is the first casualty.'*

Buffalo Springfield sang *'There's battle lines being drawn Nobody's right if everybody's wrong Young people speaking their minds Getting so much resistance from behind'* as Karl Marx wrote *'Workers of the world unite you have nothing to lose but your chains.'* He was followed by Socrates writing *'Justice is a virtue of the soul and only good men allow it to manifest in their daily activities.'*

Labi Siffre sang *'The more you refuse to hear my voice The louder I will sing You hide behind walls of Jericho Your lies will come tumbling Deny my place in time You squander wealth that's mine My light will shine so brightly It will blind you'* as Jesus chose to write the Beatitudes.

Diogenes wrote *'The foundation of every state is the education of its youth'* and WB Yeats wrote *'I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'* Blindfolded Lady Justice was guided by Sophocles as they wrote *'The golden eye of justice sees and requites the unjust man.'* Mother Earth and Gandhi chose to write *'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed ... What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another.'* Chief Seattle wrote *'All things are connected like the blood that unites us, we did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.'*

Death silently wrote in red *'Receipt for Covid 200,000 + souls.'* Finally, a hand apparition wrote *'You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.'* The group vanished having provided wisdom for Belshazzar to mend his ways.

Belshazzar and his entourage staggered outside and read the writing on the wall. 'What piffle!!' he concluded met with prolonged laughter. In the underworld Hades clicked his fingers and deployed the Furies to bring Belshazzar and his entourage to the underworld. The hand reappeared and wrote on the now blank walls: *'Under New Management: The People.'*

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THE WRITING ON THE WALL

'Are you a writer? Do you want to write? What comes into your head when you hear or read or think about the phrase *the writing on the wall*? What's a wall for, and what's writing for, and what happens when the two come together?'

This invitation went out from Ali Smith, Senior Creative Arts Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, to school students in Years 9 to 11 across the UK. The Litmus is a writing initiative, now in its third year, that in Ali's words 'will act as a touchstone for readers interested in what your generation is doing and writing right now – because you're the people about to inherit the planet'. This volume represents a selection of the contributions received, all of them published online at <https://thelitmus.trin.cam.ac.uk/submissions-2022/>

'We wondered what students would make of this theme,' writes Ali. 'The answer is myriad, and powerful. They make a paean to freedom of expression and a steady vision of revolt against tyrannies, historical, political, personal, local, societal. They express deep disquiet about cynicism; they signal acute anxiety about the proximity of the dystopic. Above all they reveal a determination, against the odds, to be heard.'



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