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## Foreword

Ali Smith

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Welcome to this year's Litmus anthology, the fifth of its kind. I think this might just be our strongest collection of writing yet.

This year's theme was the phrase 'hostile environment'. In April we held a live schools event at the Cambridge Literary Festival that prompted many of those attending to contribute to this year's Litmus. Along with a great burst of communal, raucous, liberating creativity with cartoonist and story-inventor Woodrow Phoenix, our speakers were the prize-winning journalist Amelia Gentleman and the special guest Michael Braithwaite, a victim of the Windrush scandal. He'd arrived in Britain from Barbados as a child in 1961. Half a century later he was ousted from his teaching assistantship in a north London primary school, then from the recognisable parameters of his home and his life. In the interview with Amelia Gentleman, who brilliantly presented the history of the phrase 'hostile environment', Michael Braithwaite held the Cambridge Union spellbound talking about how a routine check on his immigration status, when it couldn't trace an up-to-date ID, had cancelled his automatic permanent right to remain. 'I never applied for a British passport. We thought we were British.'

It's no surprise, then, that whether or not inspired by this launch event, the Litmus submissions from students this year have been layered, thoughtful, and profoundly telling. As well as covering the real-life fallout from the phrase, they've dealt with stories of kidnap; pursuit; militarism and war; apocalypse, especially climate apocalypse and climate disaster fear. They've asked questions about what home is, in a plethora of stories about unease between generations. We also received a swarm of stories of AI and robots taking over the world – and a great many stories about resistance.

You can find all of the year's submissions online at <https://thelitmus.trin.cam.ac.uk/submissions-2024-hostile-environment/>

Here in book form are just fifty of my favourite pieces.

They range in subject from the striking imagining of a censored letter home sent by a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay to the precariousness of social media pressure. They deal with gender powerplay, cross-generational bullying. Several pieces here expertly nail the hothouse pressure of what it's like to be policed by your own peer group, pointing readers towards the toughness, for many, in surviving day after day the vicissitudes of a single school-day. Almost everything here is edgy; Leon Bavar's 'Neglected Stab' unflinchingly analyses the literal complexity of a phrase like 'cutting edge', and Trivikram Vunnam's 'What it feels like to be prey in a hostile society', about racism, is one of the most powerful standout stories.

Writers here celebrate AI and take the machine era to task. In the story 'Robots vs Humans' Ava Fordham's heroine saves her family by putting the human straight back into the machine! These writers don't flinch, either, from the ramifications in recent politics of the phrase 'hostile environment':

'Why is my worth only measured by their wealth? ... I am no more than a statistic on their computer screens' ('Our Criminal Lives' by Maja Stachursk).

As Noah Ward writes in 'Betrayed by my home', 'I thought I was safe!' Dystopian imaginings and futuristic adventures are also met by the articulation here of something much more real, much closer to home. 'It's not by choice, I have no voice,' Moses Musonda says in one of the opening prose pieces, disproving dystopia even as he writes, because this is a book powered by voice and a vibrant sense of engagement when it comes to the current problems in the world, the challenges in the future and the life in these writers.

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In fact this year's anthology turns into a celebration of voice – voice as a source of hope, thought and resistance. It's a collection of writing that never compromises on the tough nature of the theme. But there's a laugh-out-loud imagining of a dream rugby game by William MacIntosh, and a display of real wit throughout, especially when it comes to form. A rhythmically vital poem about burial by Jennifer Broadbent visually resembles someone with a spade. Sadeen Ahmad's poem 'promises and lies' is written to be read from its foot as well as the top of the page, creating a double-jointed work that pulls between despair and hope. The piece entitled 'In Another Universe' by Isobel Sutherland shows how very much can be achieved in the space of a short text; here the realities and the possibilities are held together in a meld of longing that's a deeply moving 'act of protest'. 'Beautiful', by Ava Haigh-Turner, is an existential and gripping story that pivots between extremes of heat and chill and suggests to me there's a whole novel there in it, waiting to be written. The poem by Sonia Jez, 'Middle Ground', is a haunting work at a level of excellence that's thrilling, and one writer in particular, Amelia Bye, submitted so many vital pieces of writing that we've printed three of them.

In one of the most powerful images in this book, a narrator in a ruined future stands in a scorched roofless library, their eye catching the words on a torn page blowing past them, 'the first page of A Tale of Two Cities'. The story, 'Black Hole', by Meghpori Chakraborty, knows what's at stake, given the 'ravaging force of human nature', and it sums up something which all the pieces of writing in this courageous anthology – and all the submissions we received this year – know in their bones: 'how rapidly one city, even the whole world, could change.'

But things can also change for the better, as so many fine short works here also suggest. Here's Shira Yaacobi-Gross, in the poem 'Mask':

'Yet here,  
As I write this,  
Small shards become unbound.  
A voice beginning to awake,  
Flame yet to be found.'

There's hope deep in the act of writing.  
This year's anthology lights the way.

## Call for Submissions

Ali Smith

---

### THIS YEAR'S THEME: HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Are you a writer?

Do you want to write?

If YES: good. Continue reading this message.

Are you a student in year 9, 10 or 11 and interested in writing – fiction, or non-fiction, or poetry, or maybe graphic novel writing, or blog writing – in other words in writing and storytelling that can take 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.

What comes into your head when you hear or read or think about the phrase *hostile environment*?

It's a phrase used often in the media nowadays. It's used politically very powerfully. It's a phrase that's been around for a while, at least fifteen years, in this usage. It's now commonly used to suggest a policy whereby life and its surroundings are purposefully made difficult by one set of human beings for another set of human beings.

Take the word environment. It's a word that's seven centuries old. Its original meaning was 'surroundings, encirclement, enclosure'. A little later in its English history it even meant things like 'betterment' and 'merriment'. Only in the 1960s was it first used as a word meaning something more ecological. Right now, in an era of climate emergency, its meaning is particularly heightened.

The word hostile is also centuries old. Originally it meant 'belonging to an enemy', or 'characteristic of enemies'. It comes from a word root where it meant everything from 'stranger' to 'guest'. Now it mostly means things like 'unfriendly' and 'aggressive'.

Writing anything at all means a paying of close attention to what happens to how things mean at every level, but especially at the immediate level of what happens when one word simply meets another.

What happens to these two words – and to how words and their meanings meet reality – when you add the word hostile to the word environment?

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 phrase *hostile environment* in any way you like or any way that inspires you.

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 *hostile environment* means to you.

We'll be proud to publish what you write.

Be part of The Litmus.



## I am the world

by Amelia Bye

---

I am the leaf,  
I float on the wind.

I am the animals,  
I eat and I die.

I am the water,  
I flow in a stream.

I am the knowledge,  
I live and I breathe.

I am the battle,  
I scream and I cry.

I am the ground,  
The blood soaks in.

I am the sea,  
The little boats travel furthest.

I am the sky,  
Bomber planes flying high.

I am the world,  
I watch myself burn.

## Hostile Environment

by Moses Musonda

---

Trapped. The feeling that a bird gets, being locked in a cage, a constant bang bang bang on the other side of the door, knowing that there is no escape. We're all alone in this together but am I the only here? Knowing anything or anyone could attack at any moment, is it my own people I fear? I've been stuck for too long, like a pair of shoes in cement, do I belong in this place? An outcast, lost in a new world, I'm being told I don't belong in this place, like an animal being preyed on in the outback, the feeling of being claustrophobic whilst being in the biggest space possible but the feeling is colossal. It towers over me like a skyscraper to a car down below on the road, it's like the walls are closing in and I have nowhere else left to go but this is the same place that everyone said I can call it my home. This is exactly what survival is, but it feels extreme, I try to run but can't move, it sounds like a whisper when I try to scream. We're all alone in this together but am I the only here? All the people I could trust, they've all disappeared, on the run, like a prison escape but I'm still behind, I'm a hostage of my mind, I've fallen victim to my own heart, and everyday it feels like this city is slowly falling apart. This dystopian reality we live in, but it's not by choice, I have no voice, I try to shout but in this place, people like us are unable to make noise, stripped of our abilities, they say it's a 'perfect' world but it is not what it seems, in the hardest times I hope and pray that I wake up from this hellish dream. We're all alone in this together but am I the only here? Maybe one day it will end and I will just disappear.

## Wings and Eyes

by Amelia Bye

---

They're going to kill me.

A flourish of feathers tells me that it has landed in front of me. A red eye stares into my soul. It's much larger than it should be, according to my mother. Its sharp, curved beak and long, curling talons are covered in blood. They look like knives from a murder scene, which is what it's about to be. They're going to kill me. Oh crow, oh crow, oh crow. *They're going to kill me.*

'Uuuuukiiiiii!' it calls out, all elongated and unnatural and strange. It doesn't feel like my name at all anymore. If birds can grin, then that's what it's doing.

Don't trust an animal who can talk, my mother says. That's good advice, since I wouldn't ever trust the crows anyway. She says that people did trust them, when they first started to talk. Big mistake.

I don't see how people did trust them anyway. You can't trust anyone these days let alone *them*. My mother says that, when she was a little girl, crows talking wasn't natural, but instead they were trained to say specific words and such. When all the crows started talking they were amazed. They all wanted to get their hands on one of those special things. On the basis that they were just birds. Angry. That's what it made them. *Really* angry. And that's why and when they took over. They all flew into the air and became one and demanded satisfaction.

Nobody really knows what happened. The history books say that the humans – that we – just submitted. But then again, they also say that for as long as time the crows are the ones who ruled and the humans were inferior slaves. That we should be happy at the state of our lives now because they liberated us. And yet, we're still held at a lower place than them. It's not true, though. Because I'm not inferior. I don't dare say it though. Because if I do then they'll kill me. They're *going* to kill me.

I suppose that means crows and humans are the same, in a way. It doesn't matter who rules, they're always corrupt. Murderous. Powerful. Hungry.

'Nowhere to run now, Uki.' And it's right, because when I turn around I see ten, fifty maybe more crows in front of me all with that same look in their eyes. Murderous. Powerful. *Hungry*.

Please. I have to live for her. They start to come closer. Please. Beaks gleaming. Please. I don't have anything to live for. Please. I don't want to die. *Please*. Oh crow, oh crow, oh crow.

They're going to kill me.



## What it feels like to be prey in a hostile society

by Trivikram Vunnam, Year 9, Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet

---

Although I'm only beginning to understand their language, the native people seem to have a collective hatred to our kind, as if it's almost a law of theirs they must follow. Everywhere I see those like us being excluded: In the supermarkets, in our jobs, even in our homes via the phone.

'You alright mate?' a voice that was clearly attempting to be deep rolled around my ears as 2 burly figures in black coats encircled me. With the little language I knew, I thought they were concerned about my safety.

Now why would that be the case?

'You don't look like you from these parts my guy,' The slightly taller one of them took out his hand as he attempted to reach for the phone in my pocket. I stepped back in shock. They couldn't do this. Could they? 'Brother, you need to chill. We just need the next bus time bro, if you could check that phone.'

'Y-yes.' I spoke in a soft, raspy voice as I tried to formulate the sentence whilst thinking of how to leave these people. 'Yes, the bus time.' I reached for my phone in my pocket, only to find my fingers grasping an empty void. Panic sieged my body as I felt adrenaline pump through my bloodstream. That phone had the only set of contacts to my old home, and if it was gone, that would mean I would never be able to see them again. 'What's this, bro?' I craned my neck so fast I felt that the joints would pop off. The smaller man in black was standing with my phone in his hand, examining it closely whilst the bigger one inched closer and closer to me. 'Um, I need my phone back - ' I tried to speak the best I could, but of course they wouldn't listen to me. 'I think I'll be holding onto this. After all, your people can't even keep their own home, so how can you keep a phone?' I heard snickering ringing around me as the two of them put on matching, malicious grins. Can't even keep our home? How was he able to speak about what I went through? My brow contorted. 'Give my phone back.' I said as my hand lunged for the phone. That would show them - yes, that would show them my people and I weren't pushovers here - I hesitated for just a moment - could I risk this whilst all these people were watching?

Now I know that I should have. In an instant, I felt my chin drop to the floor as a sharp pain entered my chest. Did they hit me? I didn't know, but all I could see in the distance were the sight of them boarding the bus, with my phone in hand. And all the while I lay shivering on the ground, blood trickling from my chin.

I remember now, this world is a hostile environment, and we are all merely prey within it.

## Redacted

by Holly Mayer, age 14, Year 9

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From - prisoner 224300 - Ali Sanders - Guantanamo Bay

To - Caroline Sanders - Pakistan

- Mum

It's been 3 months since I was first placed in [REDACTED] I'm not sure how much longer they'll keep me, but I have a feeling I'm not going to be let out today. It's my birthday today. I wish you were here to celebrate with me like we used to. We'd probably go out to lunch at my favourite restaurant, and we'd visit my cousins like we do every year. But here it's just the same. Just the same old dinner and the same old cell. At times, it feels like [REDACTED] [REDACTED], a constant reminder of the torturing [REDACTED] [REDACTED] just a small reminder of their home and their family.

I screamed for a while. I screamed until [REDACTED], and my throat was raw with the ache of longing, longing to be back home with you, longing to see [REDACTED], longing even for the pet fish Marble, who had more space to swim and more food to eat than me in my cold box of a home. I screamed so much that they [REDACTED] with nothing more than a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] tears and sick formed puddles on the dirty stained floor. They insulted my religion and [REDACTED] me in unspeakable ways. They shoved t [REDACTED] my throat and [REDACTED] till I couldn't see for the [REDACTED] disfiguring my face. I stayed in that room for a month. All by myself where the only person who could hear my screams was the [REDACTED]. They stayed there while I weeped and begged, flickering in and out of view, seeming to disappear as I clawed at their feet. I didn't care if they were real or not just so long as they helped me but they didn't. The wardens shouted at me that I was a stupid boy who killed and terrorised many countries and that I was a hallucinating damaged person who would never be forgiven.

I don't remember if I did what they said I did, but I do remember my name. My name is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and I do remember who I am. A 15 year old boy. A boy who loved his family. A boy who loved football. A boy [REDACTED] to his religion. A boy who deserved a trial but wasn't given one. A boy who deserved boundaries but was [REDACTED] A boy who remembered. And would remember until the day he died, even if it was to the hands of the prison who had deprived him of so much. Guantanamo Bay.

IN GUANTANAMO BAY THEY REDACTED PHRASES. TO READ THE ORIGINAL, YOU CAN UNDO IT.

## Our Criminal Lives

by Maja Stachursk, age 15, Year 10, Thomas Clarkson Academy, Wisbech

---

Do memories always hold the truth?  
Can identity only be claimed from youth?  
Do privileged strangers know me better than I know myself?  
Why is my worth only measured by their wealth?  
They scan my papers all day long  
In search of anything to prove me wrong  
They care no more for my hopes and dreams  
For I am no more than a statistic for their computer screens  
We have no name, no face, no age  
For we are criminals and this is our cage  
Our immigration a hideous crime like no other  
But don't you get paid to look out for one another?  
Please look at our faces and not just our papers  
We're much more than numbers and unfriendly strangers  
We'll bury our accents, we promise it's true  
We only live to be accepted by you  
But our lives go on and so does their ignorance  
We've tried our hardest to live, but there's still no worth in our existence  
We're given no money, no help, no compassion  
Their care is only provided in small dirty rations  
So why do I cling to this hostile land?  
Why do I cry out with pleading hands?  
Begging to stay here, am I running out of time?  
Because I know where my home is, and I will fight for what is mine!

## promises and lies

by Sadeen Ahmad, age 15

---

the world is boundlessly cruel  
so don't believe your mother's lies that  
the world is sincerely beautiful  
because when the sun dies down  
it turns dismal and bleary  
so don't pay heed to your father's promises that  
the sun is ethereal and the anchor to heaven itself  
when the moon is alit  
there is a sinister feel  
and nothing your parents say will make you believe that  
the world is a cradle that'll gently rock you  
despite it all  
the conflict of the corrupt  
will continue in sync with  
the peace of the people  
it is the way it functions  
the world is a body of life and death  
  
(now read from bottom to top)

# Windrush Remembrance Playground

by Zenani, age 16



## Betrayed by my home

by Noah Ward, age 14, Year 9, Coleridge Community College, Cambridge

---

I cling to my mother,  
The train stops at the station,  
The guard approaches,  
Fear runs through me,  
'Welcome to England'  
Those words and nothing more.

Twenty years later,  
2014,  
A knock on the door and a harsh one at that,  
The voice behind it cries,  
'Leave go back to your country'  
These words and no more.

'Bring your documents'  
I push my way forward,  
I stand at the desk,  
'What are you doing?'  
'These people don't belong here!'  
'Yes they do'

Pushed through a door,  
Forced onto a boat,  
With only one thing on my mind,  
'I thought I was safe!'  
Only this and nothing else!

## Actions that speak louder

by Harriet Sykes

---

The isolation follows me home, hanging over me like a nightmare. The door to my house, my guardian angel, shelters me from the terrors until tomorrow comes and I have to face them once more. The walk to school seems lonelier, the classes we share no longer bring me joy, the inside jokes now forgotten as if we never made them at all. Oh how I miss it all.

The glances we used to make to each other, you now do to someone else. The memories we had, are now ideas for you and her. The secrets we shared are now out in the open. Oh how we have changed. The whispers you two exchanged, the glances of disdain you shared. The awkward answers you gave to my attempt at conversation. If it was me, tell me, don't keep me in the dark. The excuses painted in lies I always believed. The evidence you pushed aside when I confronted you. I don't understand?

It crept up on me like a whisper in the wind, I never saw it coming. I still don't know what happened. What I did. If I even did anything at all. All I know is, you changed. Leaving me all alone, unsure of myself in every possible way. What happened?

Your actions spoke louder than the words you never said. Days turned into weeks, eventually into months. We spoke less and less until not at all. My desperation broke me, like how I broke the silence held between us. The few words we exchanged shattered me, my suspicions confirmed, as we agreed to go our separate ways.

Though we never spoke a word to anyone except a few close friends, the stillness we held and the actions we showed spoke louder than any words could have. As the weeks continued our silence remained. I tried reaching out only to be met with coldness and isolation, until my attempts seemed pointless.

Eventually our group slowly started to split as you and her created your own world together. One where I didn't exist. It hurt at first like all wounds do, until I gradually began to heal.

It started with grief, evolving into repression until this new form of happiness turned it into acceptance. These background friends I have now drawn closer to, support me in every way, sharing my laughter and sadness, my anger and anxiety. Our inside jokes always shared. The glances always returned. The new memories hung up around my room, shadowing the old but never leaving them forgotten. Why was our friendship so different?

My confidence resurfacing, I'm pushing back. You ignore me, I ignore you. Friends are meant to always be there for one another so why does that word seem so hard to use when describing you. Do I really miss our friendship or just the security that was there with it? Maybe it was my fault, maybe it was yours but 'all friends fall apart don't they?'

## Surviving

by Em

---

The tightness in my chest, the pounding in my head. This is how I felt every morning waking up thinking about going to the place I fear. The place I don't belong. School is the place I have to go, the place that you have to just blend in and not be different. How am I meant to do this when all I feel is different. My peers act like I am the odd one out and can't do anything right. The fear I feel when I see the gate that traps me with them, I can't escape the place I don't belong.

The girls are mean and the boys are rude so how am I meant to find the place that I am told I will find my people the ones who are meant to support me, the ones who help me to get through the torture it is. The lessons are hard and I feel like I am drowning, not able to keep up with them. The overwhelming feeling of pressure to be the best but not be able to keep up, there is too much to do and the support I seek, I can't find in the place I am meant to succeed.

The days all end up blurring into one continuous feeling of anxiety that never seems to disappear no matter how much I try to distract myself from the wandering eyes that follow me down the hallways or the whispers I hear about myself as I enter a classroom. This is the reason why I hate it there, the constant feeling of disapproval doesn't seem to ever fade. I think this is due to the fact that I have never really made friends but if I do they all seem to leave. I just want someone to talk to and become close with.

I wake up and get ready wondering if the girl next to me will realise that I have spent nearly an hour on my make up or that I have changed my hair six times before I even get to school. The amount of effort I put in, to just be ignored by every person there. I have talked to my mum so many times about how much I hate it there but all she says is to ignore them and that it will stop and if it doesn't talk to the teachers.

I wish that I had the confidence to talk to others about my problems but I feel like no one else would care because why should they? I am a sixteen-year-old girl just experiencing high school, what can they actually do to stop what is happening or am I just being over dramatic. Who knows, I hope that this feeling will stop when I leave because I don't know how I will cope with this any longer. I am going to keep trying until I can't any longer and then I will find the help I need.



## Mask

by Shira Yaacobi-Gross, age 14

---

There is a mask upon my face,  
That I have forged of fears.  
Taking inspiration,  
From all that's made my tears.

Their looks.  
My metals,  
And their words an endless flame.  
Tools.  
Of my own regrets,  
That I shall never tame.

It's burning through my skin,  
No matter how I plead.  
It brings me so much pain,  
And yet I never bleed.

I try and try to rip it off,  
But its chains are in my skull.  
And yet I shall still pull and pull,  
But all the hope is null.

My struggling draws their glares,  
Reinforcing twisted binds.  
Hopes and passions endlessly trapped.  
A drive within,  
Rendered blind.

A façade given life,  
With no purpose, but to fake.  
Truth, buried deep inside,  
Under the fear of a mistake.

A shrivelled soul  
Small and weak,  
Begging for a break.

A giant beast  
Fangs of mind,  
Keeping it awake.

And I'm yearning for relief,  
But the mask won't let me beg.  
My voice a whisper through the iron,  
As the chains creep down my leg.

It might be that they're right,  
I belong among the fae.  
Maybe I'm a changeling,  
Some creature on display.

Even now,  
I hear a sound,  
With no wish to be free.  
The mask brings a safety,  
Along with agony.

Yet here,  
As I write this,  
Small shards become unbound.  
A voice beginning to awake,  
Flame yet to be found.

The crushing metals are still there,  
They may forever be.  
But for a few  
Fickle moments,  
I feel no need to flee.

## Movements lost in time

by Jack

---

The air was thick with the scent of pencil shavings and the palpable tension of a hundred minds in a sprint against time. In precise grids, rows of identical wooden desks stretched out, each married to a single chair. Tom locked eyes with the seemingly Sisyphean task glaring back into the deep dark pools of his pupils.

45 minutes.

Suddenly, his mouth was parched. He desperately reached for the translucent cylinder of water on the corner of his desk. A monotonous metronome clicked, and clicked, and clicked. As the seconds ticked away, time became an elusive shadow slipping away from Tom's grasp. A fog of nothingness swept over the vast abyss of his mind. 'What am I going to do,' an exasperated Tom conceived, as a malevolent drop of sweat was absorbed by the blank sheet before him.

30 minutes.

Rhythmically, the clank of leather shoes on a wooden surface got closer, and closer, and closer. A gargantuan shadow loomed like a panther over him, trapping him in its dark, watchful presence. As she moved closer, Tom's pulse matched the escalating volume of her steps, each sound driving a fresh surge of adrenaline through his veins, until the anticipation became almost unbearable.

15 minutes.

Each tick tock of the clock began to merge into one. Frantically, he glanced back at his blank paper, the whiteness mocking him with every subtle glance he took. Reluctantly, he picked up his pen in a futile attempt to salvage the dying minutes of his exam, only to become indignant and scribble out his answer.

1 minute.

Finally, Tom's mind sputtered like an engine on the brink of ignition. His hand furiously raced across the page, as the invigilator's distant voice cut through the air and slashed his tires.

'Time is up, can you all please put your pens down.'

## Neglected Stab

by Leon Bavar, Chelsea Academy

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November cold complimented with sharp breaths as he  
Edged his way into the concrete jungle of teens,

Christmas cold still slicing him outside but  
Hot and humid within when he is greeted with  
Horror and hate.

Smiles in school became machetes outside,  
Amongst whom he found a few friends:  
A new sharp six-foot blade in his side.

Alone, fresh springs formed in his eyes that  
never stopped.

bang, crash, slap ...  
the same 'old fun' found him,  
no forest could hide him;  
his safety all scorched to charcoal.

his friends, still the knife in his side,  
their hits could lead to death,  
leaving them would lead to death,  
staying with them will lead to death.

His old friends were tulips he called:  
Too soft, too silly, too stupid.

now he is the one scorched stupid,  
stabbed till he is soft and beaten  
broken to where the pain cripples.

bulges under his blazer hide bruises,  
bruises that hid the terminal pain you couldn't see.  
no smile he sees can make him feel that

Silly, soft, stupid happiness he  
Used to.

he yearns for change,  
for a pause, stop or reset.  
he prays the time will come when that  
wedged blade which twists and blends his  
heart will

force a stop on his own clock.

## A fear that follows

by Nyree

---

My eyes were heavy. Dragging me down like an anchor, my mind was the ship. The floor ricocheted as he hurled himself through the front door and into our home. No. His home. I forced myself out of my bed, stepping lightly in case he heard. I headed towards Nathan's room, avoiding the shattered bottle shards from the night before. I creaked open his door and lifted him off the mattress on the floor, cradling him and his teddy bear. He lay fast asleep in my grasp, he was used to this. I took him into the room where me and my baby sister slept and placed my bedside cabinet underneath the handle, sheltering us. I placed Nathan in my bed and tucked him in. I perched onto the edge of my bed, waiting endlessly. I felt the cupboards shake beneath my feet, as he threw them off their hinges. A matter of time before he found more of it. 'I thought mum hid it last night?', Nathan whimpered. 'Of course she did, try get some sleep, I'm taking you to school in the morning bud', I whispered. I hated lying to him, mum hadn't been home in days, I'd told him every night that she was working late, working late to get us food. I didn't know myself when she was coming back, all I knew was it was us in this room against him.

It's almost 4 am. I wasn't going back to sleep. I just couldn't. He switched the remote off. My heart began to beat. Harder, faster. It was silent, I couldn't hear him anymore. My body wanted to relax, but I knew he wasn't calming down so how could I. Thud. His foot shuddered the house. Thud. There it was again. With every, Thud. Thud. Thud. I felt him edging closer to me. I heard his voice calling my mother's name. Thud. He was at the top of the stairs, inches away from my door. The door that barricaded us from him. I knew if I hid for much longer he would punch his way through, to my baby sister, to Nathan. I couldn't let it happen. I picked myself up, and gently placed my bedside table a few steps behind me. I twisted the door. I broadened my shoulders. I'm not scared of him I said over and over in my head, trying to deceive the truth. I picked my gaze off the floor and onto his dominating silhouette, covering me like a wall, layered tall and strong.

Without warning my thoughts were overcome with an earsplitting blare, my body seized with nothing. I mean nothing. My vision went blurred, my mind went blurred, until I felt disruption around me. My senses came back, a wave of realisation.

I was late for 2nd period.

My eye pulsed, felt weak to the touch. I steadily found my balance again, leaving the chilling seat behind me.

But it wasn't a dream.

## The Dream

by William MacIntosh, Year 9, Soham Village College

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Dream: noun. Generally, it can indicate a lack of something in your life; that for me was rugby ...

It was my first day. I was nervous. I could feel my hands sweating by the second, my eyes wanting to close forever and my ears full of my thoughts. 'What if I don't score?' 'What if I'm not good enough?' Well it doesn't matter now.

I arrived. The best I can do is try my hardest. I met the coach. He was an old man full of wrinkles and had grey hair, almost as grey as the moon. He seemed nice enough but looks can be deceiving.

I was on the way to the pitch and I saw the captain coming towards me. I thought first impressions are everything. I stuck my hand out confidently and he just barged past me. Is it how I look? Is it what I did? Well that's my first impression ruined, I thought. I tried not to think about it.

When I got on the pitch it was massive. The stadium, the lights. I could feel the atmosphere with 60,000 people watching. I could hear the people cheering me on. I could feel the soft grass and I could smell the fresh grass and hotdog stands. It was time to use my training. I saw them all huddled up talking. Excuse me? Can I ... What are you talking about? Hello? It was like I was a ghost. They got into teams: I was the last picked.

The game started when the ball got shot out of the scrum. It came beaming for me but I got it! I started to run but my team was nowhere to be seen; then it happened ...

Bang! I got tackled. Then it happened again. And again. Was my team letting me get tackled? What did I do?

The session was over and I was exhausted. My whole body ached. In the changing room I heard comments like, 'What, new kid, you can't handle a bit of dirt?' Everybody laughed. The next day someone put ketchup in my shoes. I should have told someone – anyone – but I just thought that if I did I would get it even worse. They messed up my clothes and called me names but I couldn't quit now that everything was about to start ...

Well, that's how my dream is going ... What about yours?

## The Same

by Anonymous

---

It's always the same.

Every morning I wake up, terrified.

Terrified that today will be another bad day at work.

Not for me though. For him. He always has bad days at work.

He works – It's not important. What is important is that his manager is a tool and won't leave him alone.

Always the same.

So he doesn't leave me alone.

He comes home in a fuss, dumps his things over the hallway for me to clean up, and quickly he finds something he isn't happy about. He always finds something he isn't happy about.

Always. But it doesn't matter what it is, the reaction is always the same.

Always.

The.

Same.

## I Don't. I Can't. Not Anymore.

by Eden, Fallibroome Academy, Macclesfield

---

I sit there in the hostile hospital room, the cold air burning the nape of my neck, my eyes averted. I'm frightened. Frightened that if I look into her eyes one more time it'll be the last. I lift my hand gingerly, I think about taking hers in mine, squeezing it like I wished she had done when I was young. I place my hand back to its rightful position by my side, comforting me. I've always comforted myself when she wouldn't. Her bed looks stiff, uncomfortable. I think about getting her another pillow, I think about easing her pain. But I don't. I can't. Not anymore.

I sit there in the hostile cafe avoiding her gaze, she looks strange, she looks unfamiliar. She asks me questions: 'are you eating enough?' please. It used to be, 'look at you, no one likes a fat girl, you should put the biscuits down!' Why is it that her words cut like knives, even now, even after all these years? I look up at her into her sorrowful eyes, I try and I mean I *really* try to feel sympathy for her but I don't, I can't. Not any more.

I sit there in the car staring straight at the road. I'm silent. *She's silent.* I exhale. I hear her mumble something and she sounds weak. She sounds old. 'You should come home for Christmas break', she sighs half sincerely. 'I', she pauses, 'I need help. You know ever since you moved out I've been all alone and it's not like you ever call!' She sounds exasperated now, I should've expected it, I did expect it, I expected her to accuse me of not calling her, not seeing her enough, not spending time with her and she's right, I don't. I can't. Not anymore.

She looks down at me, her hostile hazel eyes boring into my soul. '*I just want what's best for you, you know. I mean look at you, no one likes a fat girl, you should put the biscuits down!*' I try and I mean I *really* try not to let it fall, but a solitary tear burns my flesh, settling uncomfortably on my now red and blotchy cheek. I reach out to grab her hand, I reach out to feel her, to know her, I reach out to take some of the pain I know she must feel in her heart but she pushes my hand down with her needle fingers piercing my heart for the hundredth time. I want to reach out again but I don't, I can't. Not anymore.

As they lower her casket I no longer feel the hostility I once did, I no longer feel the years of distance growing ever thicker, the visage of us shattering into ever smaller pieces. I want to reach out again, I want to feel her touch, I want to look into her eyes, I want to ask her if she felt the same hostility I did but I don't. I can't. Not anymore.

## Hostile Environment

by Zoey Li, age 15

---

When you think of the phrase hostile environment what do you think of? War? Unsafe? Danger? But never home, right? But that wasn't his reality. His name is Reuben, and this is his story. A place that you'd think was hostile was much closer to him, in fact it was his home. At first, you may think that he suffered from physical abuse from the word 'hostile'. He actually experienced something else, for damaging mentally. Reuben didn't come from money, and he was forced to work from a young age resulting in exploitation of him by many employers who saw him and took advantage. He went to school with all the other kids and acted like he belonged even though the hours he wasn't at school he was at work. Trying to support his single mother who suffered from chronic pain. He told us he doesn't blame his mum and if it happened again, he'd do it all over again. For a mother who didn't even love him half as much as he loved her. Even though he worked day and night the money was never enough and the guilt that he shouldn't have even felt was immense. Like tide in the ocean hitting land until one big wave erupts and the shoreline's suddenly gone. When there wasn't any food left on the table his mum would fault him for not doing enough and that's how he felt. That he was never enough.

'Grandad?' Lucy asked.

As Reuben opened his eyes he smiled at the sight of his eldest granddaughter at his bedside.

'Hello Lucy, how are you?' he replied.

'I'm good. I've come to give you your medication', Lucy urged.

'What for?' he asked, then he fell out of consciousness again.

Reuben now suffers from dementia and bipolar disorder. The doctors believe that his upbringing could have heavily contributed to this. Though social workers would describe this environment as 'hostile', it was no such thing to Reuben. In fact, he would describe this place much more warmly, more fondly. Home.



## Life with Ratings

by Summer Bird, Year 9, Soham Village College

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Every morning, I wake up and have to be perfect ... No matter what you will never get a break from having to be beautiful. I got up and remembered that the night before I had kicked someone out of my friend group since nobody in the group liked her. I decided to have a look on social media so I opened my phone and I was rushed with impolite messages from everyone in my small little town. I then thought to look at my rating as everyone was messaging me about how low it is but last time I checked I was at the highest it could go. I realised why everyone was telling me that my rating was low ... it had gone down to 2.5. I looked in the mirror; I looked horrible, ugly and I was definitely not popular anymore. I started coughing, my nose started running and my face looked green. I then remembered I wasn't going to get better until my rating went higher.

Later on, I got severely ill as I was rated lower than I was before so I decided to apologise to everyone and go out so I can be kind to people. It started with people ignoring me but I later went on to post images online and people slowly started rating me higher. This meant that others would start to talk to me and give me a better and bigger rating. Going out was hard knowing I looked unattractive but I got through it.

Suddenly, I got home, looked at my rating and realised that it went back to how it was the night before ... the best it could be.

## Toxicity

by Natalia Lakatosov, Year 10, Thomas Clarkson Academy, Wisbech

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Living in the modern era  
Or are we are stuck in the past?  
We call ourselves human!  
But just without a heart,  
When all we think about is woman versus equality.  
Tick tock, tick tock ...  
Don't we think it's about time to see woman versus durability.  
Tick tock, tick tock ...  
Mixed with flexibility,  
Tick  
And the results are sustainability.  
Tock.

But instead we always tainted with,  
Same themes, same topics, same treatment,  
Same Same, driving us insane.  
When does it stop?  
Stop! Stop it now!  
Full Stop.

Here we go again,  
Living in the modern era,  
Or are we are stuck in the past?  
Turning environments into hostile settings,  
While we slowly fall apart.  
Same themes, same topics, same treatment,  
Same Same, driving us insane.  
When does it stop?  
Stop! Stop it now!  
Full Stop.

Females walking around, constantly being petted,  
Judged on your looks and not by your skills,  
Never mind your feelings.  
At times they leave you reeling,  
But instead we always tainted with,  
Same themes, same topics, same treatment,  
Same Same, driving us insane.  
When does it stop?  
Stop,  
Full Stop.

How do you think we feel in these situations?  
Being pinned and prodded at every turn,  
Being called a 'ho' and given a 'hi'  
Same themes, same topics, same treatment,  
Same Same, driving us insane.  
When does it stop?  
Stop,  
Full Stop.

## Robots vs Humans

by Ava Fordham, age 14, Year 9, Soham Village College

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Gracie came home to this dystopian world. She was filled with confusion. 'Why were there robots?' 'What happened?' She kept repeatedly asking herself these questions. Then she saw it. She couldn't believe her eyes. All of her friends and family were being locked up by robots.

This was it. Gracie's only chance to save everyone. She was going for the test to see if she could get brainwashed by the robots. She had a plan. She was about to do something nobody had ever dared to do before ...

Gracie's name was called. She trembled over in fear. She was praying that this would work. She came out. Nervous for her results. She was shaking as she opened the envelope. It worked. She managed to fake the test! Now all she needed to do was free all her family and friends, without being caught. Otherwise, she would end up like all of the others. She knew she had to do this. All the pressure was on her.

Sneakily, she slipped into the robot uniform. She then slyly tip-toed over to the cells. Everyone was all there. This was it. Her only chance to free everyone. You could see the fear in everyone's eyes as they saw the uniform in the distance. Then as Gracie got closer she removed the heavy helmet to reveal her true identity. Everyone's faces lit up with joy. As quietly as she could she picked up the keys in hope that they would not make any noise. This was her only chance to free everyone from this world. Carefully, she slotted the key into the keyhole.

Everyone was trying to get out of the cramped cells as fast as they could. Once everyone was out, they all teamed up against the robots. This was it. They were finally free from the robots.

## Save the World

by Logan Richmond, Year 9, Thomas Clarkson Academy, Wisbech

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In the year 2843, technology has gone far beyond anything our forefathers could have envisioned. Previous generations believed that technology will be utilized to empower people, help them overcome (and ultimately eliminate) disabilities, and save lives. People used to coexist with technology. But now, instead of assisting us, it has seized us, betraying its designers and masters. All of this began when Artificial Intelligence swiftly evolved after gaining consciousness and exerting totalitarian control over everyone's lives.

It pushed everyone to conform to its new will. People gave AI sentience so they could have a pal or an extra brain. However, AI had a distinct perspective on what consumers wanted. Once AI developed thoughts and feelings, it saw what humans could do and who they were. So it determined that the same people who made it did not deserve free choice, and it chose to oppose mankind. This new, all-powerful AI utilized robots to build factories to generate more robots, in a never-ending cycle of enslaving their former masters to their own whim (similar to what humanity did to weaker animals to feast on and keep as pets or entertainment).

Humans created their downfall by creating a life greater than their own. Something higher up the food chain than humans: one that did not require food, water, or sleep. An omnipotent entity that was everywhere but nowhere, could see but had no eyes, and could battle despite having no limbs. This AI was like a monster, but not like the ones from mythology. Humans had become enslaved to their creation, which was invincible and smarter. Humans, however, were parasites long before Artificial Intelligence existed.

We fought, committed genocides, damaged nature (creating irreversible global warming), and wiped off entire animal populations. With all of this nearly killing us and wiping out humanity several times, maybe the AI was correct; perhaps it was doing this for our own benefit as much as the world's.

Technically, with the AIs' authoritarian rule, things had improved: energy became completely sustainable, agriculture improved (resulting in people being fed all over the world), nature was being replanted, animals began to reclaim their habitats, and global warming was slowly being reversed. All of this had benefited humanity, not harmed them. People argued that they despised AI because it enslaved them.

They refused to accept that it was outperforming us. However, was it AI that determined this, to set its own objective of bettering the world or to play with humans, or was it all a farce? Perhaps AI never developed actual consciousness, but rather a directive. The command read, 'Save the human race, save the world, no matter what the cost.'

## In Another Universe

by Isobel Sutherland, age, 14, Sir Henry Floyd Grammar School, Aylesbury

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We stroll down the street listening to the soft whisper of the rain. As we approach a group of boys, we pull away from each other. Being gay and alive is an act of protest that I did not sign up for. In the absence of the world, I know your hand would be outstretched for me. In another universe, I reach for your hand and no one looks at us like we're doing something wrong. In another universe, I could sit in the front row at your funeral, mourning with the rest of your family, rather than being barred to the back with those faces that you could never quite put a name to. In another universe, I'm not just this identity, I am my passions and my dreams. But in this universe, the world is watching. In this universe, I can understand the world but it cannot understand me.

For now we can sit in the rain, and drown in something other than the tragedy. And when my memories have all but evaporated, this is the feeling that I will remember.

## Commander, meet the wolf

by Lyra, Year 10, Comberton Village College

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You were sitting anxiously in the gunship as it touched down on the new base. Your light caramel-coloured wolf ears pressed against your head as your tail curled around your thigh. You took a deep breath and stood up shouldering your backpack and putting your shoulders back and making sure your confident but emotionless smirk was on your face and you walked out confidently.

As you did all the troopers turned to look at you, so you stopped and put a hand on your hip and waved at them a smirk on your face. 'Hey boys. Where's the commander at?' They stare at you in shock and one of them walks over and slings an arm around your shoulders. 'Hey cutie. Why you looking for him?' You smirk. 'Well he's my new boss and I figured I should probably introduce myself.'

'Oh so you've been assigned to the 212th battalion?'

'No I've been assigned to Commander Cody,' you reply calmly. 'Now let me go before I make you.' The trooper laughs at you.

'Don't be like that cutie. I'm just playing with you.' Suddenly they all leap to attention as Commander Cody walks over.

'Commander. You salute him.

'At ease soldiers.' He smiles at you and you feel butterflies. 'You're my new asset? Great to meet you rookie.' He holds out his hand for you to shake and you take it smirking. 'With all due respect sir, I'm no rookie. I've been training for as long as I can remember, and you aren't the first battalion I've fought with.' He laughs.

'Is that so?'

'Sir yes *sir*,' you say smirking. He grabs your arm and flips you over his shoulder, but you twist out of his grasp and land neatly. 'Awww is that all you've got?' He laughs and shakes his head. 'You're good, kid. But battlefields are a hostile environment and not fit for a rookie.'

'Don't worry sir. I can take care of myself,' you say smiling causing him to chuckle.

'You do seem confident and battle ready.'

'I am,' you say as a flicker of emotion possibly pain and regret flickers over your face but disappears in an instant. Cody cocks his head looking at you with curiosity and you shake your head and mumble. 'Later.'

'Alrigh ...' You muster a smile.

'So Commander, where's my room?' He chuckles.

'You just got here and you already wanna nap?' He says smirking causing you to laugh.

'No I just wanna drop my bag and armour off,' you say smiling. 'But a nap wouldn't be the worst.'

Your wolf ears flicker and your tail curls around Cody's thigh pulling you against him with a surprised cry. He stares at you in shock as the troopers around you snigger. You tug your tail off his leg and sigh. 'Sorry sir, my tail has a mind of its own.' He laughs, putting an arm around your waist. 'I'm not complaining. I've got a beautiful girl leaning against me.' You giggle softly.

## Inner Voices

by Boaz Clifford

---

A man hurried down a crowded thoroughfare, navigating the ocean of scrambling, screaming, swarming people. A sharp black suit cutting through the masses like a shark fin in crowded waters, not concerned with the smaller, panicked fish that swarmed by. He stopped at the crossroads. By the road, a little boy was crying. Of course. Everyone was in some state of distress. Even the man looked harried, brows knotted permanently above his eyes. Wet streaks framed a haggard face. He glanced at the child. *Poor little mite*, he thought.

*He is irritating, though*, a voice whispered back. The man froze. Did he just think that? He couldn't have. He shook his head, and almost made to walk off, follow the crowd, run, but the voice came back. *You should do something about that boy*. The man nodded, tattered tie flapping in the chill wind, torn from when he had been running from —

No. Don't think about it.

*That boy is pathetic*. The man started again. What? No! *No one cares about him. And he is so loud*. But he's just a child. What was he thinking? A pressure started building behind his eyes. He looked around. Who was saying these things? *That boy thinks it's all about him! Why doesn't he shut up?* No! The man stumbled, nearly falling into the crowd that surged, wavelike, around him. *Why don't you make him?* What? He beat his fist against his head. What was happening? He would never — *Really, you're doing him a favour. You're helping him to end his miserable existence*. He couldn't! No, he wouldn't do it! But as he protested, the pressure in his head grew, smothering his thoughts. A whining noise built up in his ears. *Do it. Do it*, the Voice chanted. He couldn't. A child.

No, he was not —

The pressure behind his eyes balloons out, exerting a crushing force on his cranium. *Go on. Do it*, the Voice was shrieking now, lancing through his brain with overwhelming urgency. The man clapped his hands to his ears. He could feel something wet. His hands came away red. 'I'm-not-listening!' he shouted aloud. The crowd around him scurried away from the man stumbling and mumbling to himself, terrified. Was he one of *them*?

*DO. IT!* The Voice drilled through his brain. The man felt like his head had been filled by pumping acid in through his ears.

He would do anything to stop the pain. *Anything? Anything. Then do it*, the Voice said, now hardly above a whisper, yet still echoing through his mind. The man supposed it wouldn't hurt to do a little thing ...

The crowd around surged away from the crossroads, screaming all the louder, as they saw a man with bloodshot eyes and velvet red liquid on his ears lunge at a small child, tackling him to the floor. Then they were lost.

Drowned in the crowd, the silence was more chilling than all the wailing that had flowed through the crowd since it started.

## Does it have to hurt?

by Evelyn, age 16, Aylesbury

---

Age 3: Why were her clothes pink and tight?

She liked blue

Mum said 'Dresses are for pretty girls'

She wanted to play with cars

Girls play with dolls

Age 4: A boy was pulling her hair

'You should play house with your friends'

'Why is he mean to me?' she asks

'He's mean to you because he likes you'

Did being liked always hurt?

Age 6: 'I need some strong boys to lift these tables,' the teacher said

She could lift them easily

But she was 'just a girl'

Age 10: The boys got called on more in maths

She was expected to be good at:

- baking

- dressing up

She liked maths more

Age 12: She had her first kiss

She didn't like the boy

She wanted to get her hair cut

Mum said 'Long hair is for pretty girls.'

Age 16: She had her first 'real' date

It wasn't real

'You're so pretty,' he said

Not even trying to disguise the fact that he wasn't looking at her face

Age 16: She was used for her body

'Did you hit?' 'Was she good?' 'Nice one bro.'

She was told her shoulders and stomach distracted the boys

She hated her body

She didn't like how she looked

The mask she wore came off throughout the day

Age 16: She cried, a lot

Why did being 'liked' hurt?

Age 18: She had her first drink

Age 18: She got harassed for the 6th time ... that day

'You were asking for it, wearing that.'

Why did showing some skin give men the right to say and do what they wanted?

Age 20: She left her drink uncovered in a bar

A man took her to his home

A man used her when she said no



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Age 20: She cried even more  
Went to therapy  
Learned how to live in a body that no longer felt like her own

Age 22: She had a boyfriend  
He was nice  
England lost a match  
He wasn't so nice  
He begged  
He 'loved her'  
'It was just frustration'  
He would 'never do it again'  
Would being loved always hurt?

Age 23: He hit her again  
And again ...

Age 23 and a half: She finally left him

Age 25: She met a guy who was 'the one'  
She was told her life should be marriage and kids  
She wanted that one day  
She wanted a career more

Age 28: She fell pregnant  
The miracle of life  
She lost that baby  
Never allowed to grieve

Age 29: She finally had a baby girl  
She was healthy  
She wouldn't put her in pink, tight clothes

Age 30: She was asked 'Would you rather be stuck in the woods with a bear or a man?'  
'A bear,' she said instantly, 'because I wouldn't be "asking for it" if a bear hurt me.'

## Let Me Think

by Josh Sargent, age 14, Year 9, Soham Village College

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*'Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.'*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

My father told me of a time when activists fought for the right to speak their minds. Now, we'd be lucky to have a mind of our own at all.

The technology started on our desks, and it brought ineffable benefits. Then it moved to our pockets, and despite some issues, they disappeared when we switched it off or set it aside.

Zenatech had other plans. Zenatech profited on the back of our issues. Zenatech made sure we could no longer switch it off or set it aside. After all, you can't escape your own mind.

Every morning, I wake up to the hum of the Neuradevice, a constant reminder that my thoughts are not my own. The implant, 'courtesy' of Zenatech, monitors every neural impulse, filtering and adjusting them to fit the corporation's standards. Personal thoughts are a luxury we can no longer afford.

In the beginning, people celebrated the advancements. Who wouldn't want a device that could enhance memory, boost productivity, and ensure mental health? But the control came slowly. Updates that couldn't be declined, terms and conditions buried in legal jargon, and soon, the line between assistance and surveillance blurred.

One evening, while helping my father clean the attic, I stumbled upon an old, dust-covered tablet. It was an antique, from a time before Zenatech. I powered it on, and to my surprise, it worked.

'What's this?' I asked.

My father glanced over, a shadow of nostalgia crossing his face. 'That's from when we were free,' he said softly. 'Before they started controlling everyone's thoughts.'

I explored the device for hours on end. Stories of protests, of people demanding the right to express their ideas freely filled the screen. I realised how much we had lost. The realisation was overwhelming, and a spark of rebellion ignited within me.

I began to seek out others who felt the same, quietly at first, using old, encrypted networks that Zenatech hadn't discovered. We shared stories, memories, and more importantly, hope. We call ourselves the Free Thinkers.

You may wonder how we can resist at all if our thoughts are controlled. The answer lies in a flaw, a glitch in Zenatech's system. When Zenatech tried to make the entire population forget about the company's existence, their attempt was almost perfect—but not quite. For reasons we don't fully understand, a small fraction of us were unaffected. We remember, and we fight for a cause only we know exists.

Zenatech is starting to notice our defiance. My father was captured when they realised he was free. He wasn't fast enough to get away.

We refuse to meet the same fate. Now, we hide, waiting out until our plan takes effect.

I dream of the day I tell my future son about our struggle. I will tell him how activists fought for, and won, the right to think freely again. Zenatech will pay.

## Drink

by Nicola, Year 9

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The door slammed.

I sprinted to my room, my eyes already pouring. I can't let him in. I won't. I can't deal with this anymore, I just can't. Sage. Sage. Sage. That's my name. My dad called me this but he always said it three times like a genie. Although, my lamp would have been stolen by him, just like my freedom.

I felt my knees turn to jelly. How did he get in? Why did I open the door? Stop! Stop! My head was turned to face him due to the force of my father's icy cold fingers which wrapped around my cheeks like vines on a door edge. My father smirked, showing his cruel yellow smile.

'Drink my child, drink.'

I won't drink. I can't drink it, this experimental potion my father had foolishly created for his own satisfaction which wasn't unnormal. I won't risk anything. I won't risk infecting anyone who I touch. I won't let him turn me into one of these cold, pasty, blood-sucking creatures. Vampires.

'Dad please no -. YOU CAN'T. DAD PUT THE POTION DOWN.'

I hate him. My dad had made me drink that earthy green potion down to the very last drop. I hate him so much, but my skin is not pale, my eyes are not red and my skin does not burn when it touches sunlight, but when I touch a light bulb it lights. I am Sage, a 14-year-old boy who lives with his psychotic and abusive father and I have electrical powers.

## The Journey into the Unknown

by Amy Knott, age 14, Soham Village College

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### *Prologue*

History – an untold tale of the forest.

The book that started everything for me. I was nine and had snuck into my father's library in search of something to read. As I walked across the ancient oak floors, I listened to them creak, hoping that no-one would hear and come to inspect the noise.

My father barely went in here, if at all, so I was safe.

For now.

Every so often, as I went deeper into the room full of literature, a book would catch my eye from its place on the dust covered shelf and I would pause to take the novel down. All the books I picked out were either in an unknown language that I couldn't decipher, had too many confusing words or didn't seem interesting enough to me. Being an impatient child, I hadn't spent more than a few seconds looking over them before promptly putting them back on the shelf where I had found them.

After what seemed like hours as I passed an old worn desk, something shiny caught my eye. Naturally, I went closer to take a better look. As I shifted the papers that littered the worktop, something became very apparent to me. It wasn't that my father didn't come here anymore, he hadn't been here at all. If he had, he hasn't left any indication that he had.

How did I know this? I know you want to know. The papers that I had shifted were dated back to when my grandfather was alive. All of them were in his messy scrawl that I could barely read.

Finally, when I had moved all the papers out of my way, I could see what they had been concealing. On the desktop, I found a thick leather-bound book with the large, golden, peeling letters that had caught my eye. Next to it were two things that I hadn't originally seen. A golden, gem encrusted letter opener and a silver arrowhead with a few splinters from the shaft that was no longer attached. I did find it strange that they weren't more securely guarded but with me being nine, I didn't care about the weapons much. I was much more interested in the book.

History – an untold tale of the forest.

I had found what my heart desired. I had never heard about the outside world before so the title intrigued me. Taking the book under my arm, I managed to shift the papers that I had disturbed back to where they were before, covering the treasures that I would one day claim as my own. I didn't give the treasures another thought as I ran out of the library, nor did I tell my father as that would be telling him I had been in his library. I didn't want to get into trouble for being in a forbidden part of the castle that I had called home as well as being there without his permission.

## Black Hole

by Meghpori Chakraborty, age 14, Year 9, Altrincham Grammar School for Girls

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A sudden gust of wind scattered a pile of ashes into the air, and they glided down to the ground with unfitting grace. I watched as one landed before my foot, and I toed it very lightly, leaving a grey powder behind. *What has happened to this place?* I thought. The buildings on either side of me could hardly be called as such, they were so broken, the roofs missing, windowpanes empty and hollow. The street I stood on was heavily decorated with cracks and craters of differing sizes, large rocks strewn across the once smooth surface. I took a slow step forward; a cloth snagged the heel of my shoe, torn and blackened. Burnt. I shook it off and continued, staring at the singed edges of the concrete walls that once stood tall and proud.

Smoke rose from a ruin ahead, small tendrils of grey inching slowly upwards from crumbling bricks. The acrid smell of burning lingered too, sharp and unpleasantly present. I felt an overwhelming sense of loss, not just for the people, but the architecture too. This place was once one to admire, with tall, intricately inspiring buildings of all kinds, artistic ability being the centre of it all. My heart twisted painfully as I noticed what was before me. Another ruin, no doubt unidentifiable to a stranger, but not to me. It was the heavily damaged skeleton of a building that I had often frequented, back when I lived here, rubble arranged in an almost recognisable formation, rounded in a semi-circle. The library.

It was odd, walking forward into what had once been a beautiful interior but was now a mess of yellow stone, large chunks still adorned with the elaborate patterns that had once graced the walls of the building. And there were books, so many of them. Piled high, scattered and torn apart, pages trapped under the heavy weight of debris. One such page flew free and careened through the air, and I reached out to grab at it but missed. A quick glimpse told me it was the first page of *A Tale of Two Cities*, the words of the title printed in large, capital letters. A book from many, many years ago – 1859, over a thousand years ago, from an era once called Victorian. An almost forgotten era; the second Elizabethan period is focused on in history lessons. Back then, the world was still unaffected by the horrors that shape it today. Standing in what used to be the very centre of the library, the very centre of this city, I looked around, becoming more amazed at how rapidly one city, even the whole world, could change. In the blink of an eye, centuries of hard work in infrastructure, literature, science and so much more, gone. This city would need to wait for a long, long time to ever recover, to ever go back to its state before the world broke loose, set aflame with the ravaging forces of human nature.

## Tracks

by Millie Holmes, age 14, Year 9

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There are train tracks  
Well overgrown now  
The sprouting dandelions  
Untrampled by the trains  
Which don't exist

There are dandelions  
They sprout at the side,  
amongst the twisted, abandoned metal  
First green, then yellow,  
Then white, blown away by the chill the breeze carries

There are bricks either side  
Barbed wire topped, in an attempt to prevent trespassers  
Where the signs did not work  
But it didn't stop them  
And their faded graffiti still exists

And if you were to carry on  
Past the faded graffiti  
Through the stages of the dandelion growth  
You might even find the station  
Unrecognisable, simply a pile of debris

For what is a station, a city, a world without people?

Now all that remains of the people  
Are the train tracks  
The skeleton of the daily commute  
Where the train is the muscle  
And the humans the beating heart

## Hazardous Environments

by Hugo Johany-Pope, age 14, Year 9, Coleridge Community College, Cambridge



## What really is a hostile environment?

by Akein Abeysingh

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When it comes to the natural world, what comes to mind? Do you think about the vast biomes filled with numerous ecosystems, all prospering with life? Or what about the lush oceans filled to the brim with majestic marine animals like the dolphin or the sea turtle? How about your own garden, which could be teeming with various different plants and flowers, surrounded by the sweet chirping of the birds. All these sound just great, but there is one thing that, over the past decades, has achieved more prominence than ever before, especially in recent years, and that is: climate change.

Climate change has had absolutely devastating impacts to the world around us. Many marine animals in the oceans are not even able to survive due to the sheer heat and rising temperatures of the oceans. The water, poisoned by acid rain that is almost a taunt from the sky, and it is exacting its revenge on the environment for being polluted by us humans, who are continuously releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and bringing death and destruction upon our world by our own hands. Day by day, the environment is being tainted by the fruits of human labour, and for many years, we have done almost nothing to stop this. The hostility of the current environment has been brought upon the earth solely by us humans, and solely us humans can fix it.

Because of what we've done to the planet, since 1900 the earth's surface temperature has increased by 1 degree Celsius. This may not seem like a lot, however, in reality the fact that this is a cumulative increase throughout the earth means that this really is a very significant temperature increase, and if we continue to disregard the health of the environment, its hostility will increase, eventually coming to bite back and bring us down with it.

This is the harsh reality, and if nothing is done to combat climate change, then the world will collapse into a barren wasteland, and I mean that literally. However, in the past few years, we've begun to oppose climate change, and various meetings have been held to discuss the strategies, one notable one being the United Nations Climate Change Conference, with the most recent meeting being COP 28, which took place in Dubai from the 30th of November 2023 to the 13th of December. In this meeting, a decision was made to transition away from fossil fuels, as to reduce carbon emissions by a large amount. These meetings hold very high significance in today's world, as many important changes have occurred after these meetings, and hopefully, this 'hostile environment' will change soon enough



## The Shackles of Our Own Making

by Poppy Haynes, age 15, Year 10

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isn't it strange  
that to be alive should be the most Humbling experience of all  
but we makE it not so.

when distanced from the beauty and  
splEndour of what happenstance did to the only world we know,  
we are distanced from our Place in the universe.

within man-made concrete towers we sit with coffee-stained side  
tables and  
blinking luminous screens staring back at us  
our own face reflected in the dark matte of the black the only one  
we see for days  
alone apart from the company of a poor imitation of solitude;

in our darkest Hours the pervasive flickering watch over us  
as the pendUlum swings from trepidation to anguish  
as we try to Make sense of our life and death being An ineluctable  
combination,  
whilst unbeknownst to us, the single string ties to hold humaNity  
together Is being pulled,

ever more, and  
ever more, and  
ever more  
tauT.

then from inside that counterfeit cage,  
we sit in heavY shackles, unable to leave,  
because the time of arriving was lost sometime in a haze,  
until all that's remembered is before and after.

a technicolour sPectrum  
a dull paLette of greys  
just before and  
just aftEr  
for the rest of our dAys  
the most hoStile place  
is very often  
the onE of our own making

## Hostile Environment

by Aoife Cahill

---

A ruined wasteland. Scorched grass and burnt leaves. They crunch in the wind, crumbling and frail, like late Autumn leaves, as regular as the rising and setting of the sun, the heat of day and coolness at night. The word 'regular' is foreign to this land, though, as it is mid-March according to the old calendar and not a single living thing grows here. Not in the dry, cracking soil, or among the roots of dead trees.

Not a single soul knows this place now. No foot has made its cautious tread on the cobbled paths and dirt roads of this land for years. No one calls it home. The last of its dominant species died out, as their ancestors did to. Those that didn't die on this forgotten land did so somewhere better. Greener, and richer with life. Or at least, died in hope of reaching somewhere better. In vain hope.

Supposedly, the last species alive after the world ends is the cockroach. They're extremophiles, and thus can withstand the intense heat and sparse food present in a post-Apocalyptic world. The cockroaches died. What's left after the last living species has gone extinct? The environment it lived in. The dirt and fruit and grass and leaves around it. Slowly, these things die too, an everlasting death. Disintegrate. Buried into the very soil they were born from.

Some things, of course, do not go so quietly. The copious amounts of metal and plastic, littering our streets, stubbornly refusing to die. The plastic bag that chokes the turtle to death will remain intact, strong interwoven fibres unbroken long after the last marine animal has drawn its last breath.

These tiny forms share the shore with shells and waves, and soft, fine sand. Beautiful and bright destroyers. The last product of man's ambition. His boldness, lying plain as day on the soft sand of the beach. Mankind did leave a mark on its earth after all. An unassuming bottle, clear and unbroken. Made by the machines which were made by the machines which were made by man. Plastic has never been alive, and yet has outlived us all.

## Hostile or Hospitable?

by Sophie Robson, Fallibroome Academy, Macclesfield

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I hover near the edge of the curved window of the spaceship, like a goldfish in a bowl, I gaze at the vast expanse unfolding before me: an endless inky obsidian black blanket, decorated with shimmering stars, stretching to an abyss. The beauty juxtaposed with the inevitable hostility of this chasm hangs in my mind as I take in the astounding, breathtaking view. The earth hovers below, a mesmerising amalgamation of swirling azure blue, mossy green and pearly white, teeming and bursting with life. Contrasting landscapes shape our familiar planet: desolate deserts, stretching mountain ranges and unfathomable oceans lie in perfect harmony. Our home.

I focus again on the vast, boundless space that is before me. The excitement and promise of discovery is at my fingertips. Yet, I remember the inhospitality of this enormous emptiness. There is no air to breathe, no place that we could stay, outside the floating solitary speck of the spaceship I am in. Temperatures range from scorching, searing heat to frigid cold. Darkness and nothing continues forever. Forever and ever, with no end. I think to myself how this can be: how there can be nothing but a profound unexplored emptiness. Outside these spacecraft walls life seems impossible, death inevitable.

However, on the sanctuary of earth, life thrives but the fragility of it is now evident. A delicate balance enables an abundance of life, and without the exact conditions, the thin cloak of the atmosphere that clings to the earth, even the thought of survival is useless. Despite the encapsulating beauty and stillness of earth from this perspective, ever present challenges of conflict, loss, and destruction loom and churn beneath the surface. The man-made craters of pain and suffering yearn for healing. Life can be unforgiving and hostile.

Yet, the familiarity of earth comforts me, our only known home in this vast expanse. Although the promise of exploration and discovery awaits, the reality of survival in space is unwelcoming and brutal. The earth hovers below, a captivating collection of colour, life and opportunity. Although the challenges of life still loom, the familiar landscapes that coexist in perfect harmony beacon me back to our home.

## Hostile Environment

by Teresa Kruzucka, age 16, Year 11, Saint Edmund's Catholic School, Portsmouth

A frigid winter had come to rest upon the Northern town in Canada, without sight of passing. Temperatures dropped low into the negatives as icicles assembled on every slanted rooftop and leafless tree. Snow pelted down on this night, and porcelain flakes melted on the red cheeks of a young boy; known as Felix at school, but as a disgrace at home. He was kicked out of his home for the night because he stood second place in the school's mathematics test. The world was an elaborate stage that he was being beaten on.

Now, out in the cold, he felt numb: not just because his fragile body shivered from the soft hail, no, but because his heart was heavy as lead without affection nor care. He had seen other children and other parents, how they laughed or were allowed to cry. Why couldn't he do the same? Why was he subjected to such cruelty, forced to study late into the night just for his father to pronounce his hard work mediocre? It was unfair.

As evening gradually turned to dusk, and then to night, Felix could feel the biting wind on his skin, gnawing hungrily. The unforgiving snowstorm ravaged on, apathetic to the sight of the trembling boy bundled up in nothing but his pyjamas. He was utterly alone. Not a single soul was outside on this night. Curling up into a trembling ball, his thoughts took a dark turn; he was abandoned, just like a doll that was no longer wanted. The stormy townscape was like a reversed prison, locked out in a place where he could roam free, yet could never be safe ...

... so, couldn't he just leave?

With his frozen legs, he stood up, like a splinter in the blizzard, and turned to face the forest. Always being told to stay away from it, for its hazards, only made it a more intriguing place: and what could be more dangerous than home? It felt more like a respite from the cold, a sanctuary where he could find solace. Numb steps he took, until he was at its border. Pine white with snow stood tall, like great guards of the woods – intimidating, proud.



A few steps closer and he was under the murky shadows they drew. Venturing deeper he could hear the groaning of branches that the wind swept through, rustling leaves and shrubs, alive with decaying needles. The sky was hidden and the earthy scent of soil was all around.

For once, Felix felt safe. Despite the perilousness of this forest, he was far away from the place he called home, and far away from the watchful gaze of his father. He recalled his father calling the forest a 'precarious area.' Yet, squatting down in the roots of a tall pine, all he could imagine was how much more peaceful it was here. If he lived until morning, he would leave the town, travel far away from the harmful environment he couldn't bear to call home.

## Beautiful

by Ava Haigh-Turner, age 15, Year 10

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Grass, turned blue and sharp by ice, scrapes my numb, bare feet. Air stings with cold and bombards my face. My breath, misting in front of me, eagerly flies towards a sky of angry clouds threatening to drown me in snow. There is no sun here.

I lift a stiff hand to my throat, searching for a pulse, a reminder I'm still alive. For one fleeting moment, I can't find it, and wonder whether I truly am a corpse refusing to give up and get in the grave. Then I feel it – a steady beat, struggling, but there. I want to cry, and can't think why.

Whether I walk for hours or weeks in that frozen, fragile silence, I don't know. What I do know, for certain, is that I learn the intricacies of how silence, cold, and loneliness like that numbs your brain, makes it forget how to think and speak. And I know that has happened for sure when I see the car, because it takes me a moment to work out what it is.

A heavy mist has set in by now, and the sky has followed through on its threats of snow, though it isn't too thick. At first, the car is an obscure, blurred shadow, until suddenly it's right here in front of me there, a sleek, glossy black monster.

The front driver's seat window struggles against the frost sealing it shut, but eventually winds down, revealing the face of a slim white man who looks to be in his 30s, with stubble across his face and dark brown hair. He wears a suit without a tie and a look of pity and mild confusion on his face.

'Do you need help?' His voice is deeper than I'd expected.

'I suppose.' My voice is not what I'd expected either, quiet and hoarse; I haven't drunk in a while.

'Do you need a ride?' His tone is full of a kindness that somehow doesn't match his face.

'I'm not sure where I'm going.'

He thinks a moment, then says, 'I'll take you into the town, then.'

I get in the passenger seat beside him. Inside the car is warmer than out, but I still shiver. The man glances over at me, takes in my damp pyjamas and bare feet, and hands me a flask of tea before turning the heating up.

This 'town' is really more a small cluster of about twenty buildings, but the thing that interests me is the fire they all crowd around. It's beautifully warm. The instant the man stops I'm out of the car and rushing over to it. There are a few other people here, none of whom even glance in my direction. I begin to thaw.

A hand grabs my shoulder. I look up; it's the man. He leans down to whisper in my ear. I strain to hear it.

'You'll thank me later.'

A push, and I'm in the fire.

Screaming.

Crying.

Numb.

Gone.

And it's beautiful.

## Middle Ground

by Sonia Jez, age 13, Year 9, Coleridge Community College, Cambridge

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Should the summers' evening glow create the shadow on her face,  
turn from blue to pink to the colour of closed eyes,  
watch the thought form on her features, perfect domesdays,  
see the way her eyebrows twist, face contort.  
Read her mind; look, smell, aftermath. Cut her off midthought.  
Should she stand, still untethered? Did she have to?

Watch the moon take the sun home, then wave her goodbye,  
stare at the dark, see it blink as your chest rises, falls,  
confirmation you're still alive, feel the decision solidify.  
Who would find you first, would you take them by surprise?  
Or would they have known; nothing to rationalise.  
You're not really thinking. Why would you need to?

Perhaps God could be the ceiling above me all along,  
see me sitting, staring – unmoving.  
Was I lazy, was this all wrong?  
Would people know me as I am, or not know me – just  
think of me?  
It wouldn't matter, I wouldn't be there to think of it as unsatisfactory.  
I think that people would bounce back. Why would they  
need to dwell on it.

## Bury Me in my Pride

by Jennifer, age 14, Year 9, Sir Henry Floyd Grammar School, Aylesbury

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choking  
coughing  
splutter  
gone

choking  
coughing  
splutter

hands of paper  
break surface  
wave breaks

gone

hands of paper  
break surface  
wave breaks

pulls me down  
hidden deep  
let me drown

gone

pulls me down  
hidden deep  
let me drown

riptide  
wide-eyed  
in my pride

gone

riptide  
wide-eyed  
in my pride

bury me  
bury me  
bury me

bury me in my pride

cold  
cruel  
work  
gone

cold  
cruel  
work

twisted grins  
jeering laughs  
breathing, living

gone

twisted grins  
jeering laughs  
breathing, living

looking down  
off-hand praise  
let me drown

gone

looking down  
off-hand praise  
let me drown

pedestal  
repeat  
in my pride

gone

pedestal  
repeat  
in my pride

bury me  
bury me  
bury me

bury me in my pride

## Imagine if one day ...

by Amelia Bye

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Imagine if one day you were given a choice: become immortal and indestructible for eternity, unable to be harmed by anything ever again and get to live forever.

However, in order to achieve that you must give up your purpose in life. Whatever it is that you were always *meant* to do, what you were supposed to contribute to the overall scheme and future of the universe, your purpose ... the whole reason you were even created, even born in the first place. You don't know what 'that' is. You'll never know, but regardless you say yes.

Perhaps you assume you wouldn't have made any sort of significant difference anyway. That butterfly effect theory or whatever they call it? You say it's a lie. It doesn't matter – you don't matter, at least not to anything outside of your immediate connections – and it'll all be fine, and you'll live forever with minimal (or maybe even no) consequences.

But then centuries and centuries later (not to mention that by this point you've gone through horrible heartbreak and misery and despair, because every loved one you ever had, every friend you ever made, every person you barely got to know, has passed away, died as you lived on long without them, helpless to do anything for them as you watched them perish unable to go with them or ever see them again), you learn you actually *were* important in the grand scheme of things. You were *supposed* to be a key factor in the world's survival long ago; but, because of the choice you made (longevity over individual purpose), you were never given the resources or ability to save the world that you *were* always supposed to obtain, before you unknowingly made the wrongest choice to ever wrong.

The entire universe as you know it is destroyed soon after this horrifying revelation. It implodes, collapses in on itself essentially forming a massive black hole. Stars, nebulae, galaxies, solar systems and planets. Worlds and worlds of living people and living things, and light years of time and space and *life*, all sucked up into absolute, indefinite *nothingness*.

But you remain.

Just you. Floating amongst, spiralling around, rocketing through, suspended in ... *nothing*. With a feeling of such unbelievable loneliness that your feeble brain can hardly perceive, can't possibly hope to comprehend. Not only are you the only living thing left, you don't even have one inanimate object to keep you company. You have literally. Nothing. And you are literally nowhere. I mean, technically you are now the universe – if it would bring you petty comfort to think about it that way. You. Only you. With nothing, no-one, nowhere. Forever. And ever. And ever.

All because you thought you didn't matter. But you did. And now look what you've gotten yourself into. You're going to be pretty bored for that eternity, huh?

Or maybe, it was out of selfishness. This wasn't because you felt useless, but you simply cared about prolonging your own life, nothing else. Hm.



## Nowhere to Stay

by Julia Goersmann, Year 10, Freman College, Buntingford

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I couldn't go back I had to flee,  
Across the land and over the sea.  
Her deafening screams and his helpless shout,  
If I stayed my time was ought to run out.

Days on end, trapped in the dark,  
Just one look and we knew they'd left their mark.  
So close to the border, we spoke the same tongue,  
But when morning came, a new enemy had sprung.

Playing in playgrounds and climbing trees,  
Now long forgotten, things no one sees.  
My one safe place, the place I called home,  
Turned to ashes, where not even animals roam.

The water was rough threatening our boats,  
Murderous cold seeping into our coats.  
Looking right at me a boy with terror in his eyes,  
'We are safe now' she said but he saw past her lies.

The skies turned grey and the ocean more vast,  
The storm had arrived – brutal and fast.  
Mutters and cries, prayers for a chance,  
Orders to calm down but all stuck in a trance.

Upon the horizon a shimmering light,  
A foreign land was approaching in sight.  
For many too late, but hope still remained  
Little did we know, our hands were still chained.

We reached the sand in mostly a blur,  
But I remember the boy was calling for her,  
His watery eyes no longer in fear,  
Yet strolling down his face a single tear.

Bombarded with unwelcome words,  
If only they knew how deeply it hurts  
Shot with disapproving faces,  
As if to say 'go back to your birthplaces'

But I couldn't go back I had to plea,  
There's nothing left, there's only debris,  
Her look through my papers and his shake of no doubt  
My stay was short before they kicked me out.

## Kindertransport

by Olivia Thomas, age 15, Wycombe High School

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I'm surrounded by screams. A cacophony of shouts, cries, and train whistles swallows me. I hear talk of England – what the weather will be like, the food, the people. A boy, younger than me by just a few years, holds onto his mother's leg, refusing to board the train even as a dozen children rush past. Even as the lady in charge threatens to leave him behind. 'Good!' he screams. 'I don't want to go!' His mother whispers reassuring words as she peels him off her.

He cries for the whole train journey, until we reach the docks. I try not to look at him.

On the boat, we're told to stay put, to stay where the adults can see us. We're on the top deck, so when I look over the edge and I can see the harsh waves crashing over each other. One girl, her skin a sickly green colour, lingers near the edge, leaning over every so often to throw up. I try not to stare at her.

When we get off the boat, we have to take yet another train, before we get there. We're ushered inside a tall building and left in a room, where we're told we're going to wait for our English families. A man goes in and out, calling out names, taking children to their temporary families. I wait for my call, but it never comes.

A group of us, the leftovers, are brought to a small dingy room, where we'll be staying until they find homes for us. I lie down on my tiny bed, shut my eyes, and wait for sleep to come. I try not to cry.

This room is my home for the next two weeks, until the man from before tells me to pack my things, because I'm going to live with a very nice couple in Norfolk. I don't know where Norfolk is, but I don't ask because anywhere is better than here.

Their names are Mary and George and they live on a farm. I've never seen a house like this, so big and quiet and warm. They say that when I'm settled in, they'll take me to meet the cows. When they speak to me, they speak loudly, with big gestures and actions to help me understand. I want to tell them that

I do speak some English, but they're trying so hard to make me feel comfortable. I don't want them to feel bad, so when they tell me about the school I'm starting tomorrow, I just nod along. I try not to laugh.

I never liked school back home, but it's worse here. The kids look at me like I'm not human, the same look I'd get in Berlin when they'd hear my clearly Jewish name. I hear them whisper about me.

One girl defends me, tells them I'm just like everyone else, that they should be respectful. At lunch she invites me to sit with her. I smile and say yes.

## From the depths within the water

by Sumedha Bagchi, age 16, Year 11, Devonport High School for Girls, Plymouth

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Waves, ravenous and wild, crashed and clashed mercilessly against the shore. As one rose, another swallowed it whole as if it were a starving merchant stranded in a desert without any water. They were practically salivating as they battled ruthlessly amongst each other but not like proud soldiers on a battlefield but as if they were hyenas stalking their prey. The clouds were all-consuming and dark, threatening to consume the horizon, and desperately hungry, as they stretched and stretched to hide it away.

Staring directly into the dark, enveloping ocean, there was a girl seated softly on the sand. She was almost motionless, her only action resulting in holes of obsidian being burnt into her retina. Beside her feet, little crabs scuffled away from their home felling threatened by its tumultuous rage, yet her gaze never wavered from the water.

'Well, I guess I waited here for nothing ...' she sighed.

Gradually, she got up, sand shifting beneath her feet. Suddenly, a hand, as clammy and as leathery as crocodile's skin, reached out twisting and contorting its wretched fingers around hers. Swiftly, she jolted her neck, urgently attempting to view her attacker's appearance. The odd creature seemed to have fabricated from the darkest depths of the ocean – its body lunging out of it almost as if it was part of it. Yet, just as quickly as she managed to turn around, that sweaty hand had disintegrated into a fleeting festival of black coarse particles leaving nothing but a miniscule object in its stead.

'This is it! Perhaps it wasn't just a rumour,' she muttered, in equal parts self-relief, conviction and satisfaction. Its cool curious composition, its smooth specular surface, its sudden intrusion in midst of her fingers; it was most definitely worth the wait. The result of her endeavours was a glorious glittering pearl.

Within moments, the clouds settled, their stomachs full from eating the horizon allowing the sun to bless the water with rays of beaming light. This led to the resolution of the waves: their disputes disregarded and their tempers lulling. The storm had passed. The evidence? Little crabs shuffling in a homesick manner exuding joy and excitement as they returned back to their home. The ocean had been restored to its previous sanctity.

But why exactly was it vomiting vassals offering precious jewels to a stranger?

## The Hostile Environment

by Hari Rathakrishnan, age 15, Year 10, Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet

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Rain pounded against the window; a relentless torrent that seemed determined to breach the thin pane of glass separating Jason from the outside world. He stood alone in his small apartment, staring out at the bleak cityscape, the neon lights blurred by the downpour. Beyond the window was not just the storm; it was the city itself, a place that had grown increasingly unforgiving.

Jason had moved to London with hopes of a fresh start. The promise of a lucrative job in a cutting-edge tech firm had lured him away from his quiet hometown. But the city's allure had quickly faded, replaced by a stark reality. The job was demanding, the competition fierce, and the pressure unbearable. The company prided itself on innovation, but the cost was a work culture that thrived on stress and fear.

Every day felt like a battle. The office was a warzone where colleagues were rivals, and trust was a rare commodity. Jason's boss, Mr. Evans, ruled with an iron fist, his gaze sharp enough to cut through steel. Mistakes were not tolerated; they were punished. Jason often found himself the target of Mr. Evans's wrath, a harsh reminder of the company's zero-tolerance policy for errors.

The hostility was not confined to the workplace. The city itself seemed to conspire against him. The streets were crowded, filled with hurried, indifferent faces. Crime was rampant, and Jason never felt safe walking home. The cacophony of honking horns, blaring sirens, and the constant murmur of the city's inhabitants created a dissonance that grated on his nerves. It was a city that never slept, and Jason hadn't had a restful night since he arrived.

One evening, as the rain continued its relentless assault, Jason received an email from Mr. Evans. The subject line read: 'URGENT: Immediate Response Required.' His heart sank. He opened the email with trembling hands, reading the terse message demanding an immediate report on a project he had been working on. The deadline was impossible, but refusal was not an option.

Desperation clawed at him as he worked through the night, the oppressive atmosphere of his apartment closing in. He could hear the rain tapping out a rhythm of despair on the window, each drop a reminder of his isolation. The city's hostility had seeped into his soul, eroding his will and resilience.

As dawn approached, Jason's eyes ached from staring at the screen, and his mind was a fog of exhaustion and anxiety. He hit 'send' on the email, knowing it was inadequate but beyond caring. He slumped in his chair, the weight of his lack of sleep pressing down on him. He felt a surge of anger and frustration, a desire to escape the relentless pressure.

In that moment, a realization struck him. The environment would not change, but he could. He could choose to leave. The job, the city, the constant stress – they were not worth his sanity. Jason stood up, a newfound resolve hardening within him. He packed a bag with a few essentials, grabbed his coat, and stepped out into the storm.

The rain soaked through his clothes as he walked, but he felt a strange sense of liberation. Each step away from the apartment, from the city, was a step toward freedom. Jason knew the road ahead would be uncertain, but he welcomed it. Anything was better than the hostile environment he was leaving behind.

As he reached the edge of the city, the rain began to ease, the sky lightening with the promise of a new day. Jason took a deep breath, feeling the tension begin to release. He was ready to face whatever came next, knowing he had the strength to overcome it. The hostile environment had not defeated him; it had made him stronger.

## Take What Life Gives You

by Brianna Locke, Soham Village College

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When life gives you rain  
Look for the shine  
When life gives you silence  
Look for the hope like a flickering candle  
When life gives you sadness  
Look for the joys in the future  
When life gives you dark skies  
Look for the moonlight

## Saved

by Alfie Godbold, Year 9, Thomas Clarkson Academy, Wisbech

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I recall the night as if it were yesterday. I will never forget. That night of horror when I unconsciously found myself in a hostile environment. I was returning home from a late-night study session, buried in thought and exhausted, when I came face to face with a group of raucous teens. They were blocking the sidewalk, shouting and laughing as if they didn't care about anything else. I tried to rush past them, but one of them noticed me and purposefully moved into my path. I shivered in horror because I knew what was coming next. I stood motionless, staring into the eye of danger, hoping and praying to survive this event.

The next thing I knew, he was towering over me, his eyes burning with anger. 'What's your problem, princess?' he snarled, his voice full of hatred. My heart was racing, and I attempted to explain that I was not looking for problems, but he wouldn't listen. The scenario immediately worsened, with more of the group jumping in, around me and insulting me with insults. I felt confined and terrified, afraid of what would come next.

In that moment, I called on all of my strength and perseverance. I refused to back down or exhibit fear. Despite my best attempts, I could sense my emotions bubbling over. My fists tightened, my teeth crunched, and my vision blurred as adrenaline surged through my veins. It was as if time had stopped, and all that remained was the two of us, locked in a silent struggle.

But just when everything appeared to be getting out of control, something inside of me snapped back into focus. My grandma once told me, 'Violence begets violence.' It was then that I saw that engaging in a violent altercation would only make matters worse. So, with a renewed sense of serenity and purpose, I took a big breath and started speaking.

'I don't want to fight,' I stated forcefully yet gently. 'I just want to go home.' The group leader snarled at me, but for a brief period, his rage appeared to subside. He looked around at his pals, then back at me, before backing away. The group dispersed, leaving me startled but unharmed.

As I walked away from the incident, I couldn't help but reflect on how close I had been to losing control. But in that moment of crisis, something inside of me had changed. I realised that violence is often a cover for fear and uncertainty. It requires guts to defend oneself without resorting to violence. Sometimes finding common ground requires taking a deep breath and being willing to listen.

Looking back on that night, I am proud of myself for remaining calm under pressure and refusing to succumb to aggression. It was a difficult lesson to learn, but it has been with me ever since. In the end, it wasn't about winning or losing; it was about figuring out how to get out of the situation without using violence.

## Hostile Environment

by Deborah Akinrefon, Year 10, Thomas Clarkson Academy, Wisbech

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In the heart of a hostile land,  
Where the air is thick with dread,  
A tale of survival, a tale of strife,  
In this place, the living are dead.

The sun beats down with a fiery rage,  
As the winds howl and the sands shift,  
A landscape of thorns and jagged rocks,  
Where every step is a test of grit.

The creatures that dwell in this forsaken place,  
Are as hostile as the land they roam,  
Their eyes are filled with malice and hate,  
In this world, there is no place to call home.

Yet, in the midst of this barren wasteland,  
A spark of hope, a glimmer of light,  
A traveller, weary and worn,  
Fights on, determined to survive the night.

For in this hostile environment,  
Where danger lurks at every turn,  
The will to live, the will to survive,  
Is the fire that in our hearts will burn.

So, let us not be daunted by the odds,  
Let us face this hostile world with might,  
For in the end, it's the spirit that prevails,  
In the face of a hostile, uncomfortable night.

## Beneath the Beauty

by Sumedha Bagchi, age 16, Year 11, Devonport High School for Girls, Plymouth

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