

2nd Place (High Schools, 2023): Emma Philips, Ruawai College, A Serendipitous Meeting Between Two Former Classmates in a Coffee Shop

The shadows smooth her face and the woman sitting across from me could be the girl I knew. When she looks away, into the golden morning sun, she is unrecognisable. It could be a whole other branch of archaeology, scraping back the time-worn changes on someone's face. Wondering who gave her those worry lines. The bags under her eyes.

"It was great, back then when we were young," she sighs.

*I remember words like knives. Lacerations in my psyche. A bag on the last chair. Salt in a wound. I sat on my own by the window.*

The lines and dark eyes aren't from haunted nights then. She is all wistfulness and fond memories. To her I'm not even a ghost from the yawning maw of the past. Just some girl she knew.

"It's better now, " I say, "no due dates for history essays I forgot to write."

She laughs and I join in. The sensation is disjointing. To be laughing with her.

*They leered around me. Mouths wide, flicking saliva. Like stretched out shadows in the midday sun. I couldn't outrun them. I'd tripped and now they had me. Specks of concrete were embedded in my hands. I smelt the blood of my skinned knee.*

I offer to buy her a coffee.

"Thank you," she says, "it's just so good to catch up with someone from school again."

"Yeah."

"Everything was so simple and light-hearted then."

Basking in nostalgia, she reclines in the pool of golden light. If I reached out could I hold the sunlight in my hand, drink it in, replace the darkness?

But I can't. She is blissful. I make up my mind.

*The library was noisy when the weather was poor. I hid out behind the swimming pool, coat pulled round myself and my book. It was a mistake. My resistance was swallowed by the wind. Her nails burrowed into the spine of my book. Paper tore. Frankenstein, scattered to the wind, turning translucent in the puddles. It takes a while for inky words to break down.*

I bring back her coffee. Distracted by her phone, she is oblivious to my clumsy emptying of a small silver packet into the cup. She recoils at the bitterness of the coffee, not realising the taste masks something far more unpleasant.

*I remember the echoes inside my head at night. Some words live forever.*

She will not.