



UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

LIVERPOOL LITERARY FESTIVAL

'ANNIVERSARIES'
THE SHORT STORY SCHOOLS
COMPETITION ANTHOLOGY 2025



Culture | Liverpool
Partner | ONE

**Congratulations to all our winning,
runner-up and commended authors.**

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Foreword

Telling stories is a way of understanding things. It's a kind of algebra for decoding people, or a physics for piecing bits of lives together. You can use them to think about where we're going or where we've been. They can make sense out of chaos, or a useful chaos out of sense. Every story is a prediction built out of the past – *if this happens first, then that might happen next*. The strange thing about telling stories, though, is that you often don't know where they're going when you set off. Even if you do, they have a habit of surprising you along the way. Were those things inside you all along, or have you changed in the course of telling the story? This is why stories are perfect for learning – learning about the world, learning about other people and learning about ourselves. Like a lot of things, you might get better at it as you get older, but it also gets harder. The world feels less open, too stuck into the patterns into which you've settled. But when you're young, life is wide open, undecided. This energy shines through in the stories collected into this anthology, where everything still feels as though it is up for grabs.

In particular, it dazzles in the winning stories. Julia's time travel story, 'Echoes of Us', melds both tragedy and tenderness where the narrator is a 'ghost in [their] own memory'. Her story is woven with evocative descriptions and underpinned by a hard-won kind of hope. 'June 6th', by Lyla, likewise places us in the past with a striking immediacy and intimacy, also exploring memories 'sharper than any gunshot.' Her story, ten years on from D-Day, is told with a highly impressive restraint and exactitude as it brings Nancy to life. These, like all of the stories in the anthology, remind us why it's so important to tell stories. Just as crows build nests and foxes burrow into the ground, we're storytelling creatures – that's where we live, and we should never stop building those worlds for ourselves and each other.



Dr Danny O'Connor,
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YEARS 7-9 CATEGORY



COMMENDED

'The Fake Sister' by Scarlett H, The Birkenhead Park School

'Fifty Years of Bebington FC' by Logan D,
St John Plessington Catholic College

'The Tale of the Great Pale Count' by David S,
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St Hilda's Church of England High School

'Echoes Through the Smoke' by Ellysa B, St John Bosco Arts College

WINNER

'Echoes of Us' by Julia H

I wait.

As I eagerly watch the machine hum to life, metallic organs churn, eyes flickering awake. Anticipation crackles in my veins. I step into the brass, hollow structure, heart pounding. Already, memories of her overwhelm me: the shine of her silky hair catching the morning sun while she brewed my coffee – never bitter, always perfect, just like her. The sparkle in her eyes when her fingers danced across the piano keys, weaving melodies from pure devotion.

Inside, I set the date: 30/4/1989. The day everything changed.

Once again, I have relapsed into the past. Every year, the pull is irresistible. The door opens, releasing me into my sanctuary, my Eden, the only memory worth exploring again: her. I step into a simpler time, ready to feel every moment all over again. To relive the past.

I run toward her. Her gaze is angelic, her eyes locking with mine as we rush into each other's arms. Warmth floods me; butterflies swarm my stomach. In that embrace, the world dissolves, pain numbed by her touch. She grabs my hand, leading me forth, into our past. Reunited at last, I savour the sight of her genuine smile, hesitant to look away I notice myself. There I am, my reflection, an aged leather jacket, ripped jeans with an extravagant hairdo. How did she ever fall for someone like me? I chuckle softly; I'm a ghost in my own memory. Unknowingly we relish our last day together unaware of fates cruel trick to part us. We stroll down the boulevard, sunlight gilding our path as we make our way to the beach.

The sand is soft beneath our feet; the sun's warm glow strokes our faces; our hands intertwine, each touch a promise of unity. No moment could be more flawless. We race to the shore, plunging into the cool embrace of the water, splashing recklessly, laughter erupting, sincere and unguarded. For a split second, we are untouchable; us against the world, forever bound together, never to be separated. We collapse on the warm sand, dripping and breathless, dreaming of a future together.

Two deafening gunshots blitz the air. Disaster strikes. The once serene landscape is instantly shattered. We run.

People scatter in every direction like fleeing gazelles. Dodging bullets, we race for cover. Another manslayer sprints in our direction. Confused and terrified, we dive into the sea, holding our breath. Salt burns my nostrils, but I must stay down. I must. Gripping her hand, I feel her inevitable rise. A bullet pierces her skin, and in an instant, she's gone.

Overwhelmed, immune to danger, I carry her out. The crimson stream stains my skin. Everything is silent. I can't bear it anymore. Tears blur my vision, eyes swollen. Like every year, cowardly, I step back into the machine, unable to relive it all. But instead of returning solely with grief, I feel bittersweet gratitude for the life I shared with her. Even if only in memories, she lives on. ■

RUNNER-UP

'August' by Jessica F B

She awoke to the gentle pitter patter of winter rain on her open window. It was today. August sat up with a groan, scanning the room which was messy as usual, and noticing nothing out of the ordinary but twelve cardboard boxes which were not going to fill themselves. She reluctantly slid out of her warm bed into the cold British morning and went to close her window before anyone saw it, if her dad knew it had been open all night he'd never let her out, which would be a shame seeing as a frosty white blanket had settled over the overgrown grass in the backyard. Before the thought of what was tapping on her window could even enter her mind, she was startled by a scream of joy coming from next door. "SNOWWWWWWW!" Her smile faded a little; Stevie was up.

August stretched for her hoodie and scrambled downstairs grabbing her seven year old stepsister by the arm and scolding her about screaming things this early in the morning. Ignoring this Stevie replied by asking, no, demanding "CAN WE GO OUT?"

"No Stevie," she replied "we're moving today." Stevie was not happy to say the least. And neither was August.

Before I continue I have to clarify that this wasn't a normal day, perhaps it was for Stevie however for August, today would mark the source of pain, the cause of all suffering. In fact, today would change her life forever.

After two excruciating hours of packing, August hauled her now very much full boxes into the bitterly bleak morning air. Her mum followed closely behind, cheeks rosy as she helped her eldest daughter cram her belongings into the back of a moving van. "Why do we have to move?" August blurted out; shattering the silence that hung like ice in the glacial air. Judith sighed. "You know this is the best decision for your sist--"

"MY SISTER?" August had cracked. "WHAT ABOUT ME?" Tears that shed hidden for weeks were now streaming down her face like rain on dry earth

"I AM TRYING TO DO WHAT'S BEST FOR THIS

FAMILY"

"WHAT ABOUT ME" August repeated, stepping back into the road

"UGH YOU ARE SO SELFISH AUGU--"

"BANG" and everything went dark

August could hear voices, echoing faintly with each louder than the last. The hairs on her arms stood up and she slowly felt that she was being moved. She was terrified. "Wake up darling" Judith pleaded over and over again. With a tremendous effort, August finally opened her eyes. She found herself in a small room on a small hospital bed surrounded by her small family. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph you scared me half to death," Judith exclaimed, smiling for the first time in what looked like hours "What on earth were you thinking?"

"I don't know" August replied "I actually don't know, sorry how did I get here?" Three concerned faces stared back at her. "And did we even move today or are we doing it next week?" The room fell quiet as a doctor stepped in and cleared his throat.

"August it's been three years" ■

COMMENDED

'The Fake Sister' by Scarlett H

Every year, on the anniversary of her sister's death, Lena lit a candle in the front window. A small flame for Mara, who had vanished on a cold November night, leaving only a cracked phone and a trail of muddy footprints that led to the edge of Black Hollow Woods – and stopped.

It had been exactly five years.

Lena struck a match. The flame trembled as if breathing. "For you," she whispered, setting the candle on the sill as the wind moaned outside. She was heading to the kitchen when three sharp knocks sounded at the door.

Knock.
Knock.
Knock.

Her blood iced. No one came here after dark. No one dared, not on this night.

"Probably the wind," Lena muttered, though the knocks sounded deliberate – impatient. She approached the door slowly, "Who's there?"

Silence. Then faintly....

"Lena..."

Her breath hitched. The voice was thin, distant, familiar.

"Mara?" Lena pressed her forehead against the wood, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, "Mara, is that you?"

"Let me in," the voice whispered, "it's cold."

Lena's hand shook. She remembered the night her sister disappeared – how Mara had called her, terrified, saying someone was following her through the trees, whispering her name. Mimicking her voice. Lena glanced at the candle. Its flame guttered violently, shrinking low.

"Mara," she cried, "if that's really you.... Tell me what you said before you left the house that night."

A pause. Too long.

Then the voice murmured, "I don't remember. Come on, let me in. Please, believe me..."

Lena stepped back. Her sister never forgot anything. The doorknob twitched. Slowly. Testing.

"Lena," the voice tried again, cracking like ice, "I came home. Don't leave me out here, are you going to leave your.... Sister alone?"

Footsteps scraped across the porch – dragging, uneven. Something brushed the door, a soft thud like a head resting against wood.

Lena backed down the hallway, heart racing. A sudden realisation dawning on her, "You're not Mara."

A low exhale seeped through the gap beneath the door, smelling of old leaves and earth spoiled from corpses. Then the voice changed – stretching into something hollow and hungry, "She was warm," it crooned. "So full of light and life. She walked too deep. She stayed too long. I kept what came to me. I return what lingers."

The candle flame surged tall and blue.

A fingernail scraped along the door.

Another.

Another.

Until it was the whole hand dragging downward.

Knock.
Knock.
Knock.

"Open," it snarled, "and see what become of her."

The candle suddenly went out, plunging the house into darkness. Lena froze. From the front door came her sister's voice one last time – broken, pleading, desperate.

"Please... let me in before it finds me."

But it wasn't asking.

It was practicing. ■

'Fifty Years of Bebington FC' by Logan D

I'm six years old at my first match, and my father lifts me over the turnstiles at Bebington Park for the first time. The roar of the crowd is thunder in my chest, the pitch a green altar. He told me the club was older than both of us, that it had survived wars, recessions, heartbreak. Tonight, fifty years since its founding, I stand among thousands, a scarf wrapped tight around my throat, voice raw from singing. The air tasted of smoke and rain, and the floodlights carve the night into brilliance.

At halftime, they wheel out Arthur Hughes, the club's first captain. His cane taps the turf, his eyes still fierce. The announcer calls him a legend, a builder of dreams. The crowd cheers, but Arthur doesn't smile. He looks at us as if we're strangers, as if he's carrying a truth too heavy to share.

Then the screen flickers. Grainy footage of the 'first match' plays – except it isn't a match at all. It's a funeral. Rows of men in black coats, women clutching children, a town hollowed by grief. My stomach twists, and the stadium's roar dies into silence.

The announcer's voice breaks: "Bebington FC was not born of sport. It was born of tragedy. Fifty years ago, after the factories collapsed, the town invented the club to survive. The players were actors, the matches staged. Football was the lie we told ourselves to keep breathing".

The silence deepens. My father's hand gripped mine, trembling. I remember his tears at every victory, his fury at every defeat. He wasn't mourning goals – he was mourning ghosts. Every chant had been a dirge, every scarf a shroud, every Saturday a ritual of remembrance disguised as joy.

Arthur raises his cane. "We gave you a myth", he says, his voice crackling. "Because myths are stronger than despair. And you – every chant, every scarf, every Saturday – made the lie real".

I feel the weight of it: fifty years of cheering, of believing, of carrying a story stitched from loss. The anniversary isn't about football. It's about survival, about a town refusing to vanish into silence.

The whistle blows for the second half. The players run out, but I see them differently now – not athletes, but torchbearers. Every pass is a prayer, every tackle a defiance of death. We score once. We score again. And in stoppage time, a final goal rips the net. 3-2. Victory.

The crowd erupts, but my tears blur the pitch. I realise the twist is not betrayal – it's revelation. Bebington FC was never about winning. It was about keeping us alive long enough to heal.

I lift my scarf and scream into the night. "Happy Anniversary, Bebington FC!". My voice joins thousands, and together we sing – not for football, but for the miracle of endurance, for the myth that became truth.

Ever since that night, every chant has carried more than hope – it has carried history. It has carried a promise. A promise that grief can be turned into glory. ■

'The Tale of the Great Pale Count' by David S

The cold vapour enveloped the solemn structure, which hid unruly confidences. The towers were sharp and cone-shaped; they were elevated above the woods, packed with wolves and ghosts and ghouls, and other creatures so horrific, even Hades rejected their rotten souls. Rain poured down, and thunder crashed. The date was 30th November 1850, in Transylvania. Inside the castle, on the very top floor, a fire crackled, and next to a wooden table, there was

a rocking chair, both made of solid mahogany. In this chair, sat a figure, dark eyes, slick, dark hair, and he wore a velvet cape, crimson on the inside, black on the outside. Arranged around the room, there were other trinkets and decors, quite normal things, but the figure, he was not normal. He also had sharp teeth, that could, and did, pierce flesh. You may know his legend; his name is Count Dracula...

On the 30th of November, 850 AD, Count Dracula of Transylvania, died, and was buried. When he entered the afterlife, he asked for immortality, and supernatural abilities, but this came with costs, he couldn't go out into the sun, and he had to live off human blood. Blinded by greediness, he hungrily accepted the deal. And he was cursed, till the end of times. Only the sun, and crucifixes could kill him. And now, our story continues.

Dracula breathed deeply from his glazed, briar root pipe. And he wrote some notes with a white feather quill, as his shadow moved nervously across the walls, "We're hungry..." It said weakly, "We need food!" It managed.

"And where do you presume, we acquire fresh human blood?" His accent was strong – and obviously Romanian – it was deep, and quite mesmerising. "Every soul has moved 10 miles out ever since our last rampage, remember?" The Count referred to 500 years ago, when Stephen of Anjou was king, he went on a rampage, and consumed 431 people, that was when people moved as far away as they could. It knew the Count made a point, so it settled down with an angry hiss. But Dracula knew it also made a point, this was his 3rd week with no food, he only fed recently because he found a few wandering kids in the woods, and after 4 weeks, he would weaken, and after 4 months, he would die and not comeback. He sighed and settled down his quill. He stood and walked to his cellar, his Oxford shoes clacked against the marble stairs as he went down 2 flights. He then made his way to his wine cellar, which had a woody and fruity aroma circulating. It was full of Bordeaux wines, Sakes and many more. He grabbed a bottle of Tokaji Aszú and poured himself a glass and drank it, it didn't have the same effects as it did on humans, but it was nostalgic. Suddenly, there was a knock at the heavy oak door of the castle. It was a man, whose name was Abraham Van Helsing. ■

'A Promise in the Dark'

by Hallie M

Hope traced her fingers over the dusty frame on the mantel, the photograph inside faded but unmistakable: two smiling faces, hers and Elias's, taken exactly one year ago tonight, their first, and last, anniversary.

The storm outside rattled the windows as if reminding her she shouldn't be there. The townsfolk had begged her not to return to the old cabin, not after what had happened. But grief has a gravity stronger than fear, and Hope felt its pull like an anchor too her ribs. A soft creak echoed through the room; she froze.

"Elias?" the name slipped out before she could stop it, foolish and fragile.

Thunder swallowed her voice. The air grew colder, brushing the nape of her neck with a familiar chill. Her breath stuttered she'd felt that touch before, warm fingers sliding over her skin, followed by an icy whisper. She turned slowly; the hallway was empty. Still, she knew she wasn't alone.

The candle on the table flickered violently, throwing shadows across the walls, long reaching things that bent the wrong way. Hope stepped back, clutching her coat tighter.

"I came to remember you," she whispered, "Not to disturb anything."

Another creak. A footstep, steady, approaching. Hope's heart pounded against her ribcage as a silhouette emerged from the dark corridor, tall, familiar, wrong. Elias's face materialised in the candlelight, half shadow, half memory. His smile was identical to the photo, but his eyes...they were hollow, swirling with something ancient and hungry.

"You remembered our anniversary." He murmured, his voice sounded like Elias and yet scraped like metal on stone. Hope's knees weakened.

"You're not him."

"But I was."

He stepped closer, and she smelt the forest grave he'd never escaped, earth, rot, and rain-soaked soil. She backed away until her spine met the cold brick wall.

"You promised you'd never leave me?"

The thing said gently, reaching for her, his hand passed slightly; the air around it crackled with death. Tears blurred her vision.

"I did not leave you. You left me."

For a moment, the creature stilled. The hollow eyes softened, just a breath. Elias's real voice surfaced like a trapped bird.

"Hope...go."

"What?"

"Run."

The shadows behind him arose violently, trying to swallow the small spark of humanity left inside of him. The creature snarled; its voice distorted.

"Stay, stay with me forever."

Hope lunged for the door, driven by heartbreak and terror. She flung it open, the wind screeching like her pulse. Behind her, the creature roared, a sound that rattled the bones of the earth. She never looked back. Not even when she heard his voice, tender, and soft.

"Happy anniversary, my love."

The darkness swallowed its words as Hope ran into the night, the photo clutched to her chest, the ink smeared by the rain and tears. The memory of love forever haunted. ■

'The Day We Fell Apart' by Anna H

It is January 8th, 1944. The war has been going on for 5 years now, and I feel like it will never end. It has been a long year. This day, 3 years ago, was the worst of my life. I left my home. Most people honoured this moment. Only if it were the same for me. I was at home that morning, oblivious to the cruel actions fate would play on me. Me and my wife, Amelia, were at home just going about our normal day when we saw an official officer standing in front of the door. They were after us, after our religion. We ran out of the room and into the forest just behind the house. We didn't dare look back. The pounding of footsteps rattled behind us. We couldn't stop. It was not an option. Our legs ached. We couldn't catch our breath. Soon, only our footsteps were heard. We thought we were in the clear but we couldn't be more wrong. After collapsing on the floor, a bang echoed through the air, hitting a bird. They knew we were still here. Fear overtook me. I ran as far as I could; Amelia was not far behind. The second shot was fired. I ducked down, barely missing the bullet, but it didn't fly far. She was hit. I tore off my sleeve, helplessly trying to save her, but it was too late. I couldn't help but shed a tear. I had to run for my life. But I couldn't. I sat there, head in hands. They soon came, dragging me away from her. I couldn't believe what was happening. I spent 5 years with her. She helped me through the toughest times in my life and has seen me at my worst. She was a living angel.

Today, I pick the scraps off my food and wait for this war to be over. Every day I wonder how I live without her. She was my heart, my lifeline. Every year, on this day, I say a prayer to her at exactly the time she passed, no matter what is going on around me. For those 5 minutes, I have no worries, and I know that she is looking down on me from Heaven. ■

'A Friend to Remember' by Havien T

Tears flooded the ceremony. Cries could be heard everywhere. Grief Pain and suffering of a death so horrible of a close friend, sibling and family. Million knives sliced me down to weak bits of meat and bones. My heart aching as if a dark deadly needle injecting some sort of corruption into my heart constantly never going away. Memories ripped into suffering images of the past. Death of family and friends. I couldn't even stand straight. Only I was able to fall to my knees in the depression I was in. A question my life would have a purpose without him. Why did he go so young? The pain still aches to this day. Keeping him close to my heart as possible. I cherished his memories and will never let it go. I wished. He should come back and I would've been taken. But nothing I can do now can change the past. Yearly I come to his grave. I still remember his song but now sounds like a wave of happy memories in the line with him. When he smiled, I smiled. When he laughed, I laughed. When he was sad I was there for him, but now he's gone. The air containing a voice to it as if I can still hear him talking to me. Life was sweeter when he was there, but now it's all bitter and sour. I put his favourite song notes and flowers for it to see it in his afterlife. I reluctantly turned around and went home not forgetting who I was there with. An anniversary is not just happy it could be pain and suffering but always be cherish memories of your loved ones old or young doesn't matter remember them carefully. Celebrate them the way you used to do with them just to connect with them more in the afterlife. ■

'Echoes Through the Smoke'

by Ellysa B

At the time of VE Day, fireworks played like bombs from the war. The sound of gunshots that were fireworks rang in my ear until I saw explosions that destroyed my most nostalgic childhood places. Grenades were scattered like tense animals. The sound of gunshots being fired filled my ears as I ran. Memories of my pregnant, kind and loving wife played in my head while I tried to fire my gun and flee the dangerous land.

I passed the friends I once chatted and hung out with, now just dead corpses who flew up above to heaven. I closed my eyes when I huddled in a cramped corner, tears welling up in my eyes as my hands covered my ears, flinching at every explosion. I miss my wife. I want to wake up after this war to see my unborn child and hold them in my hands. But first, let's worry about the Nazis.

I came out of my hiding spot to the battlefield, killing every enemy in sight while avoiding bombs and any guns. As I kept firing, I looked around. Figures on the left. Figures on the right. Men who I once recognised, now dead or barely breathing in the war. Soldiers from the other side lying dead on the ground I stand on. People I trained with now dragging each other away from danger or death as more explosions came. BANG. BANG. BANG. Each one leaving debris or body parts flying across me.

I need to do this. For my wife. My unborn baby. So my child can say that he aspires to be me. So my wife can say there is no other person she wants except me. For the justice of the Jewish people, so they get no more hate or neglect for being Jewish.

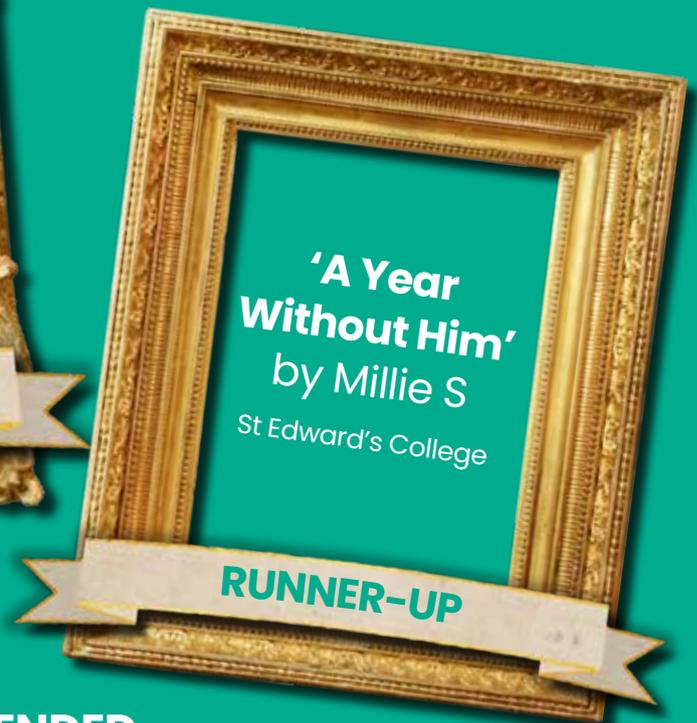
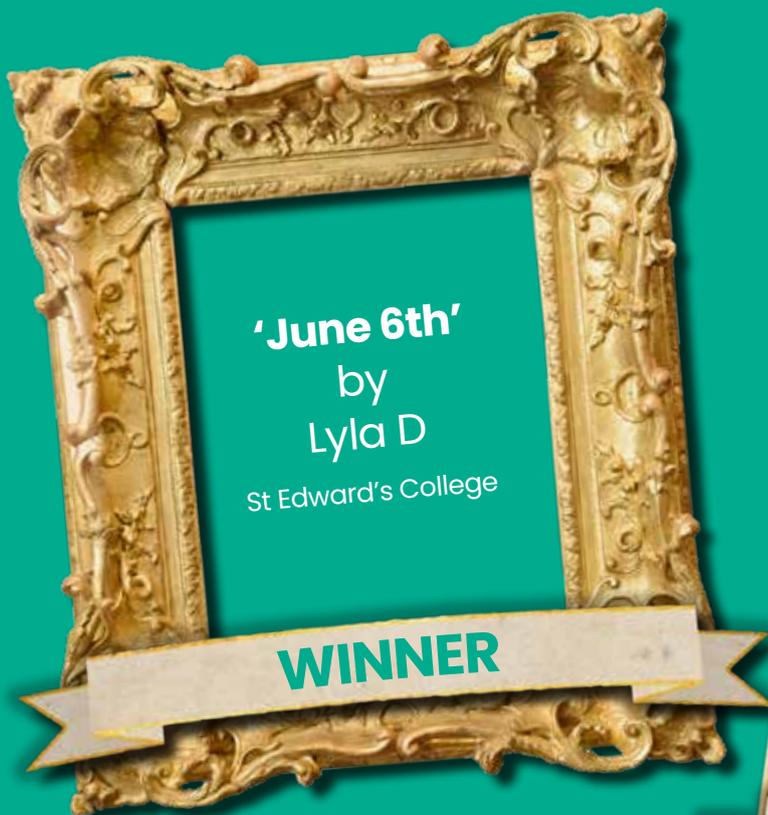
I hear people shouting and I see buildings burnt down, falling down. Tears run down my face in fear as I am shooting the rival side. Gunshots. Gunshots. Gunshots. Loud and clear through my ears as I fire a grenade. Explosions. Explosions. Explosions. Life will never be the same. I want to go home. Not this hell I fight in.

I watch fire burning bright, people shouting orders for their life. I wonder what there is to gain in this pain. Water builds up in the corners of my eyes as I look up at the skies and wonder if everything was a lie.

Reality hit me as my dear grandson ran up to me shouting, "Happy anniversary, Grandpa! Or is it VE Day?" He asked, as he jumped happily into my arms while the last tear rolled down.

Today was a day of victory. My past is victory in their eyes. And today is the anniversary of our country's victory to free people from the Nazis. No more bombs. No more gunshots. Just the anniversary of the war that left scars. The anniversary of the war that shall no longer be anymore. The anniversary of a country that fought to save the law. ■

YEARS 10-11 CATEGORY



COMMENDED

'Concept of Time'

by Niamh S, St Edward's College

'If Only'

by James S, St Hilda's Church of England High School

'Silent Reminders'

by Emily R, St John Bosco Arts College

WINNER

'June 6th' by Lyla D

June 6th 1954 - Concord, Massachusetts

I rise when I hear the distant church bells chime, but I've been lying awake, rigid, for quite some time. I'd been restless through the night, my thoughts ricocheting through my mind like a bullet against a wall, although today my memory feels sharper than any gunshot.

I hug my housecoat around me and tread downstairs, where I make myself a coffee and set out onto the porch. I gaze out at the front lawn, where the grass looks greener than it ought to on a day like today. The birds are chirping, the sun is baking the new asphalt, and Mr Whitaker tips his hat at me from across the street.

"Paper! Concord Chronicle!" calls the delivery boy, and, suddenly, the daily newspaper comes hurtling toward my head like a crazed bird. I flinch instinctively, scowling at the paperboy's receding figure. I stoop to pick up the Concord Chronicle, the bold letters blurring momentarily. I blink and the words sharpen: A Decade Since D-Day: Concord honours those lost in Normandy.

Ten years ago today, he fell. I still remember the telegram. Trembling hands, tears blurring those harrowing words: KILLED IN ACTION. The War Department offered their "deepest sympathy," as if that could bring him back. Back from Normandy, back from the war, back into my arms. I sit down on the porch, rays of morning light beaming pleasantly on my face. Suddenly I'm back in '42, the sunrise painting my face marigold, and he is standing on the path with his duffel at his feet.

I walked him to the station, that morning. They needed men fast. He got the letter on the Thursday, and this was the following Tuesday. He was one of those new paratroopers, ensnared by the promise of thrill, honour, and the \$50 bonus. The station was a sea of shiny shoes and pressed uniforms, but my eyes were fixed only on him; I was trying to memorise the exact angle of his smile and the way the early-morning light made his hair glow caramel. "I'll be home, Nancy," he promised me, tucking a golden curl behind my ear and fixing me with that steady gaze of his, but even then I didn't miss the tremor in his hand. As the train lurched away I turned my back, blinking furiously.

I blink, scramble to my feet, and head back inside. I while away the morning trying to distract myself with the garden, baking, cleaning, but by midday I inevitably end up unfolding the cherished letter I keep wedged under the photograph of him on the mantle. I unfold the flimsy page, flattening it against my knee, and allow myself to soak in the last words he ever wrote me.

I'll be home, Nancy. All my love,
Jack.

I hold the letter to my chest, wondering if the next ten years will crawl by as slowly as the last. ■

'A Year Without Him' by Millie S

Although she'd wished it would never come, Adalyn woke up on the morning of July 9th. Even though it was her birthday, the date was nothing more to her anymore but a constant reminder of the man that had so easily reshaped her life. The soft light shone through the curtains; the ones her and Austin had picked carefully together, a bittersweet reminder of how big of a part he played in her life. Today was the first year since Austin had the accident, and the thought settled heavily on Adalyn's heart.

All her limbs felt heavy, reluctant to leave the bed that almost provided her with the same warmth her husband once had. The streets outside bustled with life and the laughter of children, but inside Adalyn's home, it was as though time had stopped completely. The idea of getting ready to celebrate the day that had crushed her only a year before felt utterly alien.

Dragging herself to her wardrobe, Adalyn picked out the simple black dress that Austin had remarked "complimented her eyes". Dresses were never her thing, but it was her own way of keeping a piece of him close. The material hugged her figure, the same way Austin had when he held her close, as if he were afraid to let go. And now she wishes he never did.

Adalyn fixed her hair into a messy bun, the kind she hated but Austin loved. Looking at herself in the mirror, Adalyn's eyes began to gleam with tears. She blinked the tears away, not because she knew she was ashamed, but because that is what she had been doing for so long. She knew she couldn't drown herself in tears. She turned her back to the mirror, slipped her shoes on, and headed out the door with no real idea or reason.

Getting into the car, Adalyn gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles began to turn white. She pressed her foot to the gas, not with intention but rather from instinct. Every turn was fueled by determination. Each road had become more familiar to her than she would like to admit. Before she knew it, Adalyn was parking her car in the place that she dreaded seeing every day. She promised herself not today, not until she had celebrated, not until she had lived.

But she had to.

Almost running, Adalyn raced past the familiar steel cemetery gates. Coming into view was Austin's name, each letter far too new, each flower far too fresh. And realisation began to settle within her chest. The stabbing pain between her ribs made it all feel so much more real. Tears began to well in her eyes yet again, although this time she didn't have the strength to fight them back. Adalyn's knees buckled beneath her, the dry grass scratching at her knees. She laid on the ground, the 6 feet between her and the love of her life making it feel as though they were worlds apart. ■

COMMENDED

'Concept of Time' by Niamh S

Time – a funny concept. As strange as rain does rise then fall in its perpetual cycle in which it supports our avaricious world; yet exhausts itself out. A transcendent concept in which the soldiers of life live then fall, breathe in the air and then breathe it out for the last time. Time itself has the power to freeze the most formidable of folk and drag out the most despairing of days, to contort in accordance with torment against our own mind. Deity yet demonic, an entirety for heartbreak, love and loss. It is the capacity for all, the container for all knowledge and understanding for what was and what is yet to come. Sure, the ticking of the clock is the reflection of my own heartbeat. Is it able to accelerate it, slow it down, even stop it according to its will?

But today, I stand in honour for my fallen friend, lost to the past of this undulating field with nothing to show for its history but venerable, burning red dots flecked across the lands with small wooden crosses woven among the grass; fragile yet formidable. For how do the unconceived children of the lost generation relish the rewards of patriotism, is it a mere fable? His death is a chronic disease that plagues my dreams and haunts me in my sleep. For his time is forever frozen and mine forever long.

The day was as heavy as our drooping eyes were. Larks scattered from the sky as the face of the enemy rose in the distance. Its menacing face encompassed by radiating hatred, its eyes the end of a rifle, preparing to set bullets into our flesh. The earth was a concoction of brown sludge and a red sticky substance, littered with trenches that dropped into hell itself. My friend stood next to me shoulder to shoulder, brother of battle. His life full of dreams and a young fiancé waiting for him at home. Why did his destiny become lying glass-eyed in a motionless prison, of just being another name in stone? I lay there wailing in the mocking wind praying for his flame to relight, willing him to fight back against the incoming darkness that clouded the edge of his familiar eyes. For in that moment time did stop, it was a figment of my imagination as I knelt there with him on my lap and friends and foe fell into the same darkness around me, but I was left unscathed. For today I must be grateful on

his anniversary. As I got to marry, have children, witness the fulfilment and sorrow of life yet his story ended there. But in honour of that I lived for both of us, told stories of his shining light in the blackness that was war as he was my anchor in a raging sea, for our once synchronised hearts fell out of rhythm that day. ■

'If Only' by James S

It was a bitterly cold Monday morning when we received the order. I laid my hand on his shoulder as he turned to me with a furrowed brow and tearful eyes.

"It's going to be alright", I had told him when we all scrambled over the top, clawing at the dirt. "It's going to be alright", I had told him, when we were just kids getting into trouble. "It's going to be alright", I had told him, when we had joined the Liverpool Pals, at a time when I was stupid and excited at the prospect of the fight. "It's going to be alright", I had told him, shrapnel flying over our head and bombshells kicking dirt into the air. "It's going to be alright", I had told him, as I cradled him in my arms like a baby, him coughing up blood onto my tunic, as I knelt down in the mud. "Hang in there, Tommy", I pleaded. But no – his eyes were wide and staring into the sky – his head tilted back and his mouth agape. His body limp and the roar of gunfire fading, my head hung over my friend as I cried. "It's going to be alright", I had told him. "I want to go home, Harry", he told me.

Two years had passed, and this bitterly cold Monday morning brings Tommy to mind. The sky was cast in gun-metal grey, flooding my thoughts with the battlefield, I picture his mother, standing on the doorstep, reaching out with a trembling hand, for the message, delivered with an apologetic look from the postman. I can see her knowing eyes, beading with tears at the sight of the telegram. And that was all that was left of our Tommy – a neat little slip of paper. I felt cheated that the world had met his passing with cold efficiency, that it moved on by laying him in some unmarked grave in France, away from his family and his friends, and that was that. My guilt, my sole torturous companion, plays with 'what ifs' and 'what could have been', if my ambition and naivety had not gotten the better of me. That maybe Tommy might be here with me now – if only. ■

'Silent Reminders'

by Emily R

Swish, swish, swish. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget that day, the very damned, cruel day that took everything from me: you. Poignant regret fills me with dread; dread to go to sleep because I know it will be you I see; dread to open my drawer because it's filled with old, sweet memories of our past adventures; dread to wake up because when my heavy, saudade eyes open, it won't be you I'm next to.

Well, I guess that's why I end up back here each year. No matter how much my mind viciously taunts me, whispering heartbreaking thoughts in my ear, "It's all your fault... you're the reason I'm gone." The waves now grow stronger as they hiss, hiss, hiss, grounding me back to reality. I shake my head vigorously, telling myself repeatedly to ignore the voices, no matter how convincing they are.

Oh my days, it's just like you're still here, stood by my side on the cliff edge. So close, yet you've never been further. Crash, crash, crash. My thoughts raced, my mind ached, my feelings roared, and my soul shattered. If only you knew how much I missed you and longed to embrace you again. How could I not miss you? When you left, up became down, left became right; the tidal wave set in motion. Powerful, strong, uncontrollable.

Pain seethes through my chest as salty tears stain my face. I choke on desolate sobs until the oppressive burning in my throat could only formulate your name as I wailed my pain to the world. Oh, how I wish I were as brave as you. I pondered as I took a step closer to the cliff's jagged edge, with a stern, contemplating look in my eyes, one idea on my mind.

Abruptly, one last wave crashed and then the silence came, reminding me of the reason I come back to this place every year. It's become a sort of sorrow tradition, you may say. But how selfish am I? Trying to make your death anniversary about me. I know what it makes you feel, what it makes you think: why would I put anyone else in that situation? So worthless, so powerless.

Anyways, I hope you're okay up there. Happy anniversary, my love. ■



CONGRATULATIONS

**TO ALL OUR WINNERS,
RUNNERS-UP AND
COMMENDED**