



Storytelling Competition 2021

SECONDARY CATEGORY

***I Walk* by McKenzie Ashford-Brown**

I'm late for the bus. I didn't finish my jobs in time. Mum has to drive, she's less than pleased. My mother once wore makeup, it's now replaced with wrinkles that stretch and sag like a well-worn jumper. Her once athletic stature is similarly stretched by a growing weight, and she knows it.

I leave the car and vaguely hear her say something in a voice too high, "*Have a good day.*" I continue to walk and her voice becomes raised, '*Tell them you walked into a door.*' I walk. I walk into school late. I walk into my classroom to have sea of eyes stare and judge. I walk to my desk and collapse, defeated. "*I walked into a door,*" I mumble, leaning forward to shield or hide the cut and spreading red purple bruise, sure that it swells and bulges with their knowledge.

My pen scratches obediently until the shrill bell signals our departure. Packing my bag and the teacher bends over at my desk speaking soothingly, "*What happened to your eye Honey?*" Her voice is like the liquid honey she refers to and I can feel my pulse race and I want to tell her... "*I walked into my door... by accident.*" I can see her lips curve from the corner of my eye and I shove rather than pack away my pencil case. "Remember you said that last week love." There is now steel wrapped in the honey and I quickly change my story, "Yeah, right. I got hit with a soccer ball playing with my older brothers, just an accident."



Lunch looms and my stomach grumbles smelling the hot canteen food. I shoulder my bag higher and walk. I walk past the handball games, I walk past the selfie-obsessed groups, I walk through the playground as if I had a destination.

The branches of the lopped and chopped gume tree spread definitely and I curl into its shadows. Shouts and people become distant and I share my hastily made peanut butter sandwich with the dappled light.

They walk, the police officer and the Deputy, into my silence. My brother is close behind and I worry they have called my mum about the bruises, the school has before, mum didn't like that. Their voices pull me from the protective shelter and the sun causes my eyes to squint and I am reminded of the cut and swollen bruises. Quick gestures and assured voices send me to collect my bag and follow. I turn once again into the cooling shadows and my heart settles, thrumming to a more even beat. My hand settles on the trunk and I use its solid surface and ancient wisdom to lever myself into action.

I walk.



***My Guardian Tree* by Karina Maya**

Eighty-Four kilometers north-west of the busy, crowded, and lively city of Kathmandu, on the long and windy road to the mysterious snow-capped Himalayas, hills drop in close to the river nearby and a scar cut through the road from earthquakes and tremors of the past, gently rocks the car. The river, teal and treacherous, carefully whispers its history, for the mountains have slipped and eroded over the year's rains; slowly creating the mysterious river with dangers that in the sunlight, form deep craters that glare at you with the fury of death. On one side of the mountain, you could be fooled by the rivers' initial beauty: the deep green foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky mountains. The horizon is lined with gorgeous, ancient bodhi trees, guarding the wildlife and locals from the severity of the world. As I fall asleep to the gentle hum of the car and I wonder what it is to be such a tree, a guardian enduring throughout time, a symbol of strength and forbearance. I think about the tales they have witnessed, of love, beauty, hate and death. I am curious about what it would be like to settle in one place and grow roots of my own, I slowly get pulled under into the land of dreams. It is not long before the hot sun gently wakes me from my sleep, and we come to a stop.

I look up at the line of bodhi trees guarding the base of the hillside, their branches intertwine and reach out to the horizon. I run my tiny hands against the massive bumpy trunks, I can feel the life of every tree.

This is their home.

Where is mine?

After weaving around and admiring the contrast in beauty between each tree, the energy emitted from one particular tree draws me close, the wind's pace picks up and the leaves rustle in the wind as if calling my name. Something pulls me in, entirely enchanted I place my small smooth forehead against the gigantic gleaming branch. For some peculiar reason, I am drawn to this tree, not any other. It is like I was made to find it. My heart flutters with excitement. I am consumed by a familiar feeling, warm and safe.



Is this my home? Is this where I lay down my roots? Is this the moment I've been waiting for all these years?

"Hush" the wind whispers in my ears... A chill quickly tingles down my spine but I'm not afraid.

I slip off my black sneakers and take off my sky warm socks. I place my bare feet on the cool earth, the grainy soil between my toes. I stand still and absorb the beauty my bodhi tree offers me. As I stand there I breathe in, totally immersed in the tree's fragrant essence, sweet and strong. Slowly a vibrant and calming feeling starts in my heart and spreads throughout my chest, to my fingertips and down through my toes into the ground. I am blooming like a lotus in the summer. My hair rustles in the wind just as the leaves of my bodhi tree does. A sense of fear arises, of death and loss. What if my bodhi tree dies? What if I lose it? What if we are parted? How could I live without its guarding light beside me?

Its strong, weeping branches gently wrap around me, sheltering me from the worries of life, and guarding me from the harsh, cold world, guiding me to happiness and safety. All my worries are swept away when my bodhi tree is with me. Together we sway through all of life's hurdles, we sway through the rough storms, we sway when the ground beneath us trembles and shakes, we sway together when the morning light first touches the land when the birds sing with glee.

We sway together as one.

I am eternally grateful to the whispering river; it has led me to my home. Our hearts and souls entwined. Protecting and guarding me from everything. Together we flourish and thrive, grow, and learn, for I am finally at peace, with my beautiful, bewitching bodhi tree. My guardian. My life. Here we are Eighty-Four kilometers north-west of the busy, crowded, and lively city of Kathmandu. Home. At last.



It Rained by Samuel Penny

The weight of the sky is equal to that carried by the mourners. Men, women and small children, hands held firmly, knuckles white in tribute to the trauma within, false smiles etched harshly, hide the feuding troubles within. He had tried to smile. To hide the bags beneath eyes red from the crying. A resilient man who had worn sorrow, tremendous pain and suffering like a richly patterned coat. Always vibrant on the outside while the stitching unravelled and his passing neared. Today it was the mourner's turn to wear the coloured coats, their own pain at his passing carefully belted and buttoned within. He had always made other people happy before worrying about himself, and the coloured bodies today remember.

The length of the tree's roots reaches all the way to the old man's coffin, uprooting tombstones across the cemetery, the Guardian Tree protecting the brave souls from unwanted visitors, keeping them safe in the afterlife, being the light that keeps the peace.

Maria walks, clothed in her grief and a yellow coat that sheds the rain and makes me smile. She makes me strong, and I make sure that I will not crumble, for her. Maria has always been like a mother to me; she would always make sure I had a bed and food, had a loving family, and always a listening ear. Driving her here today, her tears welled up, cascading over her sunken cheeks in a flow like the Niagara falls. Our heels digging into the soggy ground make a moist hiccupping sound and the grave gets closer.

Squelching heels, suck at the sodden ground and I'm reminded of his goofy antics. The way he would do things with little thought beyond making me happy. Beach walks when he would pick up jellyfish, throw them until their invisible bodies blurred and landing was known by the squelching splat of jelly hitting sand. We'd keep on walking for the length of the beach, stopping constantly for a: repeated throw, squelch, splat and his spontaneous laughter, with mine joining the salty breeze. Now there was only the choking throb of salty tears lodged somewhere in my throat.



Bodies move ever closer to the mound of dirt that sags beneath the relentless rain. The wooden coffin silently waits for the vigil, the memories and the final farewell. All eyes are weary from the hours of straining, but there is a happiness in the air, instead of mourning and locking people out, everyone is smiling. Stories are retold of a life well lived and shared, gratitude mixes with shed tears to make eyes watery, we are grateful for the memories. Words flutter on the stormy air, colours fly across the clouds in a display that reminds all of the wonder of life. Sunlight kisses the coffin.

Capturing the fluttering cloth that crosses the coffin in its light makes it spark like tinsel. I am reminded of Mark decorating the Christmas Tree with such great care and enthusiasm. His careful hands wound the red tinsel to cover any stray light cables, everything was in the right place, colours would be perfectly matched with ornaments. Lights were spun around the house giving it a beautiful ambient warmth; , soothing and exciting the soul. I had been proud in those moments, the harmony of watching Mark... my memory flutters as the breeze catches the cloth covering the coffin and my joy at having watched Mark year in and year out decorate the tree is interrupted.

As the congregation subsides into silence the rain is more noticeable, the sea of brightly decorated umbrellas gives an aura of happiness and hope. The sky makes a tempo for our solemn sobbs, a gentle pitter patter of soft droplets, water hitting the umbrella's protective covers, blanketing us in a colourful thrum, sadly safe and secure.

The branches of the ancient tree try to provide some sort of comfort as the rain turns to sun and the sodden soil and relentless rain subsides. The Guardian Tree stretches its leafy branches, intertwining with the splotchy sky, highlighting the bright silver clouds. It's roots search for the stories laid to rest and holds them.



***The Russian man's love for the girl in the window* by Tarnny Merz**

Once Upon a time there was a man named дьявол, 'devil' in Russian; whose name makes mortals quiver with fear and dread, whose presence sends knees to quicksand. He has silky, long darker than dark black hair which curls in a halo, over his perfectly chiseled face. His grass green eyes scan the bustling pavements 7 stories below. Searching, scanning for the brightness in an otherwise grey sea of winter wrapped bodies jostling for pavement space.

There it is, an amber coat. His god made jaw-line relaxes and his full lipped mouth curves into an aggressive and satisfied smile. Standing in the busy street looking up whilst all the people swarmed around, the amber coat pauses. It flows down past her hips and stops before her knees which are covered by warm black pants. The coat stretches to small cold hands, one swinging rhythmically and the other lost in her pocket.

His desperate smolder turns into a massive grin. His energy sends him turning quickly guided by the amber coat and the small woman within who flutters. He stops in his tracks and looks at the perfectly formed tree that grows within the room. Its roots stretch impossibly into the cement floor, its branches snake across the ceiling and leaves swirl and whisper stories past and those yet to come.

His hands stretch between the branches and are consumed by its autumn shadows. It glows with a life and energy outnumbered by the grey street below. The tree glows and the man shrinks, his eyes shift to the amber coated woman who seems taller, more assured. He grows smaller, no longer a man but a child. An invisible wind shakes long brown branches and leaves flutter through the floor and down the 7 stories to collect around the ankles of the amber woman. They spread and the 'devil' shrinks with the price of sacrifice. The amber woman glows and the 'devil' shrinks into the ranging roots. She moves forward, into the pressing bodies and leaves behind a wake that colours the people, heads raise and eye-contact is made in a sequence of silent conversations that herald a beginning.



I enter the apartment and shrug out of my amber coat, slipping shoes from my feet and shaking the autumn leaves onto the doormat. Their curved shapes hook into memory that is not my own. The story of a man who loved a girl in an amber coat. The leaves flutter from the mat and out into a world where colour begins to seep in oranges, reds and amber.



***It Takes Two* by Elijah Pryde**

A dark red tablecloth sprawled across the dark wood table. Paired with red roses. Nestled beneath the restaurant's outside awning. The rose's scent twins with that of the Italian food and the light chatter filling the air. Stars engulf the night sky. A man sits by himself, seemingly unimpressed by the evening's offerings, he stares blankly into the harbour's horizon, waiting.

His trance is interrupted, "Would you like to order Sir?". "Not yet." The voice is smooth, the tone curt and dismissive, sending the waiter silently on his way to one of the more lively tables. Sporadically, the man stands. Leaving the restaurant in a hasty walk. He enters the cold quiet street. Icy pavement, flickering street lights.

No one is to be seen, just him and a long walk home.

Hunched over and shoulder drooped like bees belated in the rain. Sadness fills the man's eyes as he dawdles home. Out of the blue the sky starts to pour down upon his shoulders. How could his night get any worse? Water streams down the gutters and puddles form in the holes of the pavement. He continues to walk with soggy and drenched socks, his clothes are filled with water and bear the weight of an ocean. He turns a corner and sees street shops as far as his eyes could see.

He sees couples eating at fancy restaurants, ear to ear smiles on their faces, he can hear muffled laughter through the shiny shop window with raindrops flowing down it. Two candles and two chairs to every table. He thinks to himself, why can't that be me? The man continues to stroll home. He kicks two rocks on the ground, and they manage to land together, like two magnets. The man looks to his right, bright neon lights that read "Valentines gifts", the same dark red roses from the restaurant sit in the store's front window, along with two happy teddy bears. A car quickly speeds past, running through a puddle.

Filthy water whips across his body, "Dammit." the cry is plucked from his mouth and lost in the evening traffic. He steps onto the road and a screaming horn to his right is teamed with two



piercing head lights that illuminate his startled body. The car swerves, knocking him back into the waiting embrace of the tree. Branches bend absorbing the force of the impact and collapse, lying him upon its roots, providing a resting place.

Phasing in and out of consciousness he sees leaves shining in pairs and a voice twins with his thoughts, marrying his story with that of something ancient. A bent figure moves against the leaves and a concerned face bends close to his, speaking to him, telling him he is safe.



The Ocean Seeks Violence by Anna Simon

Piercing moonbeams scour a sky robbed of the sun's warmth, and strike my tempered surface, sending irregular patterns rippling across my ebbing and flowing currents. I thrash against this invasion sending arcing waves in a platoon formation that stretch and roar a promise of drowning, but the moon is relentless. The smell of the oceans breeze is deceptively heavenly.

The sand is my ally. Her rough broken shells, uncomfortable and unwelcoming, a defence against those who seek to invade my watery body.

Broken white water heaves a neglected buoy, sending it swinging recklessly. I gift it repetitive hideings as it flashes its worn and dim lights, a desperate signalling for help. My carelessly created waves, built off the passion of my anger, whitewashes the shore in a turbulent embrace.

Chuckling a welcoming, the sand runs and scatters enthusiastically but the towering cliff remains resolute, unaffected by my onslaught. Small rocks and pieces of sediment calmly fall as a fog creeps in a thick layer shifting slowly and eerily into a salty blanket.

Flashes of movement atop the cliff are the bodies of drunken teenagers. Their slurred words aggressively follow the rocks and sediment down the cliff face. I roar the promise of a watery grave and the moonlight hesitates, shielding its beams and sending the teenagers to switch on ignitions. Headlights replace the moon's gaze. They bravely step into the light. Their fragile figures lurch towards the edge and I wait... expectant.

Upon the cliff's edge a misshapen figure is illuminated by the teenagers hedonistic headlights and my watery attention is captured. Twisting branches etch the stories told by my ancestors into the expansive skyline. With miraculous strength she leans over the edge of the cliff, watching me, reminding me. My once thrashing waves calm as she reminds me of the responsibility I bear as a steward to my country.



Teenage turmoil is a chapter in the cracks of the tree's rings, their story witnessed and the memory preserved. I wait... calmed.