

First Story
National Writing Competition Longlist
Teachers

Home

Sui Anukka, Matthew Moss High School

The forest that made way for the suburb in which I live
will not conceded. Not entirely.

The survivors burrow the earth thirsty to drink from the silver river
that runs beneath the insult of asphalt and firestone.

When I walk by, they pull me close.

We embrace. Bark and heart; leaf and skin.

But on the street they shout.

Go back. Go back home.

Your trees have stroked my cheek.

They have told me. Forget it.

Home is a mirage in a rear view mirror.

Go back to where you came from.

You dream of custard, tweed and Gallifrey.

And like us, you hanker for a home

you won't find— even if we all went away.

You know this to be true, in the rivers of blood and tears
you cannot shed.

Still you say, go back. Go back. Go back.

We have unpacked our suitcases, brick by brick,
and built a monument of our love for you.

A silver river of stories that feeds the survivors,
the salt and the strangers.

Those who have been and are yet to come home.

Your Rastafari and Mine

Jahlisha Israel, Pimlico Academy

Rasta

You have your Rastafari and I have mine

Yours is political with its problems

Mine is natural with all its beauty

You have your Rastafari with its programmes and

Conflicts

I have mine with dreams and hopes

Be satisfied with yours as I am content with mine

Your Rastafari is a political knot which time

endeavours to untie

My Rastafari is mountains reverently majestically

Rising towards the blue sky

Your Rastafari is an international problem yet to be

solved

My Rastafari is calm enchanted valleys with church

bells and whispering brooks

Your Rastafari is a contest between houses

My Rastafari is a winged prayer that hovers in the

morn when the shepherds lead their flocks to pasture

Your Rastafari is a chess game and power struggle

My Rastafari is a temple in which the soul finds haven

when wearied of your civilisation

Your Rastafari is a taxman collecting donations which

are never enough

My Rastafari is a holy monk bowed in prayer pouring
out his soul unto Jah
Your Rastafari is posts portfolios representatives
committees lectures and debates you are free and ardent
reformers but only in newspapers and on the platform
Even though you stand proudly before the sun and
hold war-like gatherings
your swords are sheathed with rust your spears
broken and your shields laden with holes
Those are the sons of your Rastafari
How great are you in your own eyes and how little in
mine
Now let me show you the sons of my Rastafari
They are the ones who turn the stony land into
orchards and gardens
They are the poets the singers and players of
instruments the masons the potters the weavers and
the tabernacle builders
They are the ones who left the Caribbean penniless for
another country with hearts fired with enthusiasm
adapting to the new environment they are esteemed
wherever they go
These are the sons of my Rastafari walking with sturdy
feet toward truth beauty and perfection
Truly I say to thee the trees planted by the Daughters
of Zion in Shashemane
will outlast your deeds and achievements

and the plough drawn over her fertile terraces out glories

your hopes and ambitions

You have your Rastafari and I have mine

Be content

As for me I am happy and comfortable with regard for
my Rastafari.

House Martins

James Lawton, Matthew Moss High School

Come spring, they would build their nest, their home
beneath eaves o'er my room at number eight.

A fragile, interwoven, grass-lined dome,
married jointly by the male and his mate.

They woke me on a clear bright morning,
a brood of young Martins on their first flight
from a hole the size of a wedding ring,
three inch long darts, steel-blue and white.

Later, autumn's air was delicate,
birdsong turned bitter from that convex cup.
Father fetched his ladders from the shed,
I begged him not to climb up.

The house was frosty when I heard the thump,
(a pane of glass between father and son),
In the cold bin outside I found the nest dumped
and Dad, like the Martins, was gone.

Home Is Where The Heart Is

Melissa Lord, Banovallum School

The phone rang. I balanced my book on the edge of the table and gingerly lifted it out of its cradle.

“Hello?” I questioned the person at the other end of the line.

“Hello love.” Grandma. She called everybody love. I sensed it immediately. The usual tone of calm and softness had melted from her voice. The overriding tone was now one of panic. I heard some labored breathing. My heart started to flutter uncomfortably in my chest.

“Is your Mum there?” Her voice hooked me back to reality. I quickly passed the phone on and through the fractured bones of the conversation, I knew that something was wrong.

“No, it’s fine, we’re on our way.” Mum’s voice was insistent. I was being whisked into the car. The crumbs of my now forgotten sandwich peppered my lips and dotted my jumper. I brushed them away, watched as crumbs of bread dusted the car and then stared at them. There was nothing else to do.

Standing in her kitchen, whilst my mother scrambled to get an overnight bag ready, I realized that my grandmother was the epitome of home. It pulsed in her veins, oozed through the comforting cuddles she gave and puddled in her kitchen. Where I was standing now. The jumbled kitchen with its old rusting tins, full of new memories. Its resident kettle that whistled on the stove up to seven times a day for the expectant visitors. The collection of photographs that clustered on the wall; representative of the family now torn apart.

As I waited patiently, watching mother stuffing slippers and bars of Imperial Leather soap into the overnight bag, something caught my eye. My Grandma, white and hunched with pain, taking short gasps of air, secreted one of her beloved pictures in to her coat pocket. It seemed like such a quick movement and went unnoticed to my mother’s preoccupied eyes. Which one was it? I was about to ask...

“Let’s go.” The words broke the moment.

Grandma wobbled to the car, mother stuffed the bag into the already over-packed boot. The relative calm that had come over me whilst standing in the kitchen evaporated, dissolving into the now fraught atmosphere. Nausea gnawed at my stomach and hot tears pricked the back of my eyes. My hand subconsciously drifted to my mouth so that I could nibble my nails and I remembered that Grandma was in the car and didn't like it when we bit our nails. She threw a butter knife at a cousin once for the crime.

Within minutes, the hospital loomed in front of us and we were bustling her into A&E. She was driven off in a wheelchair and a nurse took us to the 'family' room. With its plain walls, inconsequential prints hung in frames and couches with worn arms, it was in stark contrast to the shabby comfort of Grandma's house. The minutes crawled by. Images of her kitchen swam before me: the rings from the teacups stained on the side; butter with the knife struck through it left next to the toaster, a smatter of buttery crumbs near them; and the old wooden kitchen table, a family heirloom that was now stacked with the litter of daily life. What if I never saw it again? I knew that if the worst happened, I would see it again. It was the fact that it would be without her soul that broke me.

The nurse entered, a kind smile plastered on her lips. The agonizing wait was over; we were finally allowed to see her.

Tubes snaked across her chest, intertwined and intermingled with different coloured fluids pumping through them. The tiny breathing tube pervaded her nostrils and, wearily, she opened her eyes in greeting.

"Hello love." The familiar words.

"How're you feeling?" There was a tightness to my mother's voice. And insecurity.

"I'm alright." It was only a mumble but her eyes twinkled. It was then that I spotted it, the photograph of Grandad. I knew that the supposed dislike they held for each other, the barked remarks that pierced the atmosphere of the kitchen and Grandma's renowned grumblings were a mere façade that masked fifty years of marriage.

As we left her in the bed, snaked tubes and all, the nurse stopped us in the doorway. Her words swam through my ears, except from the two that I distinctly remember. I would hear them again.

Heart attack.

Homes

Andy Maclachlan, Pimlico Academy, Teacher

I knew I shouldn't have said it.

I'd sort of meant it as a joke, but I forgot: you couldn't do that with Dad. You could never joke with The Professor. He hardly ever laughed, and when he did I could never understand what he found so funny. We never did understand each other. Never will, either.

At first I thought maybe he hadn't heard me properly – sometimes it's hard to tell – but he had. He heard me, and he said 'no' and shook his head like he not only disagreed with me but was now lining up the reasons why. He never just disagreed. He had to show you why you were wrong, and how wrong you were, too. He would be clinical about it, objective, not to prove that he had to be right – just to show that he was right. Like it was natural.

Anyway, I thought he actually looked at me, but his wrinkled old eyes narrowed like he was looking through me, and I could feel his reply coming, building between us like pressure, and when he finally spoke it was like he was dictating lecture notes: 'Home,' he said, 'is just a word we use for an infantile desire to return to the womb.'

I mean...Christ. The womb.

Then he looks around the room like he doesn't even know me, like I'm not even there, and says some other crap about how every rejection we face in life is like something biological or something, and how basically nothing can fix it.

He must think I understand about rejection. Is that why he always looks away?

Mum was no help or course, but it's not her fault, obviously. She made this noise like she'd forgotten to breathe for a moment, but that's it. She never did say much when Dad was talking.

Anyway, he said a few more things about belonging and security or something, but I wasn't really listening – which is okay, since he wasn't really talking to me anymore. He just huddled behind his cigarette again with this look on his face that I'd never seen. Staring at the ground.

I closed the door on them like it was a room in my own head, and I left that place. I hope the night nurse didn't think I was being rude, but I didn't say goodnight or anything.

I was done with them all, and have nothing left to say.

The old man sucked a thoughtful cigarette over his ancient dressing gown. 'No,' he rasped slowly, shaking his head. The young stranger looked tired; the men in suits stared.

He hunched behind his cigarette, slowly moving smoke around the inside of his mouth like dry wine. 'Home,' he breathed, sighing smoke, 'is just a word we use for our infantile desire to return to the womb.' He scanned their eyes. 'Every rejection we face in life,' he continued, 'echoes that first biological diaspora, and every attempt at securing somewhere to live after that is simply an attempt at healing the pain of that expulsion. And sadly, no physical edifice, no mere domicile, can achieve that.'

The young man looked beaten. The gentlemen smiled their approval at one another, top hats swaying as they lightly tapped their blue-cold fingers together in mute mockery of applause.

The woman slouched in her chair, all wrinkles and white hair in slippered bathrobe. She stared at the silent ceiling forever. He didn't know her, or why she was there, but the gentlemen ignored her, so he did the same.

One of the gentlemen cleared his throat. 'That may be so, Professor,' he said, 'but does it really answer the young man's question?'

Polite, stares. The Professor's eyes narrowed and jumped around the room in thoughtful silence, and the young man, watching those eyes, sighed. The old woman hitched a deep breath as if she'd momentarily forgotten to inhale.

The Professor pursed his lips around his cigarette, two gnarled fingers scissored lightly above the filter. Tobacco flared with the infinitesimal no-sound of searing fibres. 'It's instinctive,' he strained, before releasing a long smoky sigh, 'the search for belonging. Our bodies can rest almost anywhere, but our minds – our egos – they crave security.'

The young man turned away.

The old man huffed a faint cough, and settled into a brooding silence. Ethereal top hats moved with appreciative nods over wide grey smiles and cold, soundless clapping. The old woman smacked her lips, oblivious.

The young man left, closing the door gently on the couple and their empty room.

The cleaning lady watched the young man pass into the icy darkness outside, his whole body clenched into his coat. 'Who's that?' she said over her shoulder.

'One of our regulars,' the night nurse said as the glass door seeped shut. 'Lost the house when his parents were admitted. Don't know where he's staying anymore. He keeps visiting them though. Every night.'

A moment like snowfall. Then: 'We don't know if they even know.'

Silence then, until the cleaning lady pushed her broom again.

Evening Greeting

Helen Mallinson, Pimlico Academy

Click.

A key slotting comfortably into the lock it was made to fit. The familiar rattle, the few seconds between outside and in.

Creak.

The voice of a door, its gentle groan honed through many a patient year. It traces a well-worn arc – its welcoming smile.

Thud.

The day's worries, bundled together and bound in leather, drop to the carpet. That soft corner will carry the burden, at least for the night.

Shuffle.

The barely audible patter. His indoor slippers. Those crooked, high arches encased in crumpled paisley.

Exhale.

And then, at last, he calls. That voice. I've known it since before I knew my own. It echoed through the walls of my world before I entered his.

And, in turn, my reply. The same as yesterday. The same as tomorrow. A private joke, a daily routine. No longer outward laughs. Still inward smiles.

From the top step: Those Slippers. Padding down a few more bristly stairs reveals a wiry lower half. Trousers: pinkish taupe. Socks? Green. The sartorial insight of the colour-blind.

There he stands. On the threshold. A corner of space, which he owns. Strong, broad. And, somehow, suddenly, my height. As the years fell away, I rose to meet his steadfast benchmark.

Face to shin. Face to waist. Now face to face.

Those watery, blue eyes. No clue as to what's behind. Just the pitter-patter of crows at either side. Those eyebrows. Unruly. A stray nose hair catches the light, defiant, untamed.

The years of my life dance in the creases of the smile that now greets me.

Glint.

A glare through the bifocals from the ebbing sunlight behind. A dusty smear, too, on second look.

Inhale.

Dulled by the day's acrid perfume of coffee and sweat, that morning's still-lingering splash of spice.

Dark.

That crook. The space between furrowed neck and woollen shoulder. Where my weary head has long been rested, my sobs muffled, my love absorbed, and my peace restored.

Home

Kira Roberts, Pimlico Academ

Home is the sound of my mother crying in a bathroom,
The noise of my father shouting downstairs.

Home is my grandmother turning off lights to 'conserve' energy,
Being mortally terrified of the dark.

Home is dropping water on my brother's face from the top bunk,
Long nights crying into a pillow.

Home is hiding empty cigarette packets in a sock drawer,
Then having them found.

Home is trying to find a door with a lock.
Hugging the toilet after a long night out.

Home is the endless movies on sky, eating takeout,
Still being mortally terrified of the dark.

Home is telling my stepfather I was gay,
Watching him stretched out on the sofa with a book.

Home is sitting behind different closed doors,
Sleeping without washing.

Home is making a mess and then cleaning it up a few days later.

Finding it hard to throw things away.

Home is dressing quietly as you sleep.

Your head on my shoulder.

Home is lying like two commas, huddled together.

Like lying underneath a train.

Home is feeling the chasm between us.

Home is the dust on the blinds.

READ THIS ...

Hannah Swain, City Academy Norwich

Don't go into the cellar.

I'm going to explain what happened. You need to know. It could happen to you and I wouldn't want to be responsible. You have to pay attention, make notes if you have to, remember everything. But don't tell a soul.

The day started like any other. I woke up early; it was my birthday. I ran downstairs to see if my presents had been piled on the kitchen table. They had! I ripped the first open - a GameBoy! You won't know about those - things have changed a lot since then. Believe me, at the time it was the ultimate. The iPad mini for my generation. There were a few other presents: socks; a Beautiful South tape; some stone washed Levis; a copy of Adrian Mole's Secret Diary. Nothing as exciting as the Game Boy.

Then I heard the noise. I know you've heard it too. I know you're desperate to know what it is.

Tap tap tap tap tap.

It was so quiet, barely there really. I couldn't ignore it. I had heard it many times recently, late at night when I was trying to get to sleep.

Tap tap tap tap tap.

Empowered by the GameBoy and my recent high score on Tetris, I decided to finally discover the source of the noise. Mum was clearly fast asleep and I knew she'd stay that way for at least a couple of hours (it never really was that great a home, not like now - not like yours).

I crept to the cellar door.

Mum had told me never to go in there. I knew it was where she kept her stash of cheap whiskey for emergencies, and I knew it was the source of the tapping. I found Mum's key in her coat pocket, attached to my old yo yo keyring. Unlocking the door, I stepped into the darkness.

A long staircase stretched before me. The walls were slick with damp and slime. I couldn't see the end of the steps. The tapping was louder now. Echoing like droplets of water in a cave. Hearing a creak, I looked back, over my shoulder. It didn't feel right. This place, cold and empty as a tomb, could not be the place where my Mum kept the Christmas decorations and my old toys.

The door slammed behind me. Fear lurched in my stomach, wrenching my insides. A rush of adrenaline coursed through me, making my body shudder. The cellar was unnaturally dark; pitch black like the bottom of the sea.

That's when I heard the tapping. More like a banging now, insistent, penetrating. It was coming closer up the stairs towards me. Aching and almost paralysed with fear, I scrambled back to the door. It was locked. Banging on it with my fists, I screamed for my Mum. No sound came from my mouth; it was as if my scream had died within me. My hands, clenched tight, began to fade. My arms began to fade. I felt myself disperse into the door before me, the walls around me. It was agony, yet I felt nothing at all. My body was being absorbed into the house itself.

I don't know who or what did this to me. I just know that it is still hungry. Never go into the cellar. It is waiting. It wants you, too.

That's why I left this for you here, in the bedside drawer. I know you read every night before you go to sleep. I knew that if I could somehow become part of your bedtime story, in the way I have become part of your home, I could warn you.

I didn't think I could do it, but I did. I reduced myself to particles of dust and drifted through the air. I transformed myself into the words on the page, the words you are reading now.

I exist and I do not exist. I live and I am dead. I am trapped in the fabric of your home. Your home is my life, and without you I am nothing. There is no hope for me. I am home. I am everywhere: this house, your walls, your ceiling, your creaking stair.

Home.

Everyone has one. Everyone except me. I have become one. I have become yours.

He Once Made Everything

Janie Tonkin, Pimlico Academy

Buried beneath the gravel
Near the ageing oak remains
Lie two halves of a sentence
In a hole that slowly drains

Felled for its idle stance
The old maypole once would
Connect the lines of light and voice
That were rarely understood

Buried beneath the apple tree
To be replaced by Finnish coals
Lay two small wooden boxes
Whose story is still told

One third of an acre
Blurred through instinctive labour
She will never understand
The fulfilment of her favour

The seasonal skins they shed
That sparked a lasting fire
Continue to gently burn
For years to inspire

The cracks always there
Have begun to slowly shift
Creeping through the plaster
Of walls that still exist

As damage appears to cease
The ship still sails on
Through vivid storms and candlelight
His hillside flame still shone

Janie Tonkin. October 2014.

Home

Austin Webster, St Helena School

Home is a place with freshwater bodies the size of Ireland,
and more than one of them, too.

Home is a place that could bury the whole of Europe in the tundra,
and freeze its problems there, too.

But I've percolated through your antiquity,
in the spaces between Victorian bricks,
that run along the horizon like evergreens,
in this country.

And I've come to see the superiority,
of the High Street over 'the mall',
and wondered maybe what my life would have been like,
if those coal mines of *Canadia* hadn't been so much...

fresher,

bigger,

richer,

cheaper,

blacker,

all those generations ago.