

Years 9 & 10

2nd Place: Lilly-Anne Burns

Year 9, John Wollaston Anglican Community School

### **Bird Song**

She hadn't left the room in what felt like forever. She'd grown accustomed to the set routine of it all. Waking up, feeling the warmth from her mug leech into her cold stiff fingers. Forcing whatever tasteless mush she was given down her throat, swallowing the allocated medicine, wincing as the blinds opened causing harsh sunlight to sting her eyes. The sounds of a typical suburban Australian street surrounding her, enveloping her, but not touching her. The impending silence when their silhouettes left her line of sight. The click of the lock, the hushed frantic tones of voice on the other side. Empty, hollow noise.

*I hadn't seen her leave the room in a week. When the blinds lifted and she came into view, she would wince slightly, so subtly her movement was almost invisible. The big humans were with her. One male, one female. They seemed to be more tired every time I saw them. After an hour they would leave the room, and the girl would be alone again. I came and perched on the same branch every morning, wondering if the blinds would ever open to reveal an empty room.*

She knew there were only three rules. No devices, nails neatly trimmed, and her room had to remain consistently clean. They were insistent it would make things easier. A tidy space was a tidy mind. Her flannel pyjamas swamped her thin frame as she gingerly let her feet meet the floor and stood up. Grabbing the broom, she set about following the rules.

*I noticed the girl would only stand up or move around when the big humans weren't in the room. Almost like she switched on when the door closed behind them. Like the room became her space again. I wasn't ever sure what state the room would be in in the mornings. It was telling of how things weren't right. An untidy space, an untidy mind. They told her that every morning. Watching her grab the broom I wonder how she has the strength to stand.*

She liked that the rhythmic motion of the broom against the tile grounded her. Shards of glass clattered into her bin as she emptied the dustpan. They would need to replace the mirror soon. Maybe even remove it. She picked up her brush from where it sat on the vanity. She remembered the joy of hearing the muted crash that echoed through the room as it hit the glass, the reflective surface cracking. The tantalising urge to throw it at something else ran through her. Just to hear something so clearly there and real. There was no time for that though. She replayed the mantra through her mind. A tidy space is a tidy mind.

*I scanned the girl's features as she swept up the shards of glass from her floor. Connecting the dots, I was able to identify why the lights had been on a few times throughout the night in the big human's room. I don't think anyone had gotten much sleep last night. Her jaw set, the girl continued sweeping, only breaking out of it when she returned the brush to its correct resting place. Vulnerability flashed across her face, breaking the illusion momentarily. One could only keep acting for so long.*

She set the broom against the wall and swallowed, the dryness in her mouth almost choking her. She sat back on the familiar surface of her bed. Wrapping her fingers around the glass on her nightstand she let the chill of the drink seep into them. Picking it up, rhythmically drinking the water one sip at a time, slowly draining the glass of its contents. The sound it made as she placed it down startled her, the noise loud and clear. It rang through the room, causing her to curl her toes instinctively. Retracting her arm and settling down under the covers the girl took in her surroundings. White walls, white sheets, white floor, white curtains. Red blur. Red blur? A small creature perched on the tree outside her window. Watching her intently. Real, alive. Out of reach.

*I watched her sit on the bed, gulp down the water, curl up under the blankets. Distress and curiosity radiating from the figure swabbed in blankets, she turned to me. Her eyes were glazed over, tired and hollow, but for a moment they had seen me. Her mouth parted slightly, seeming like she wished to say something. Then the girl turned and sunk further into the cocoon of blankets, her frame shaking. The big humans came in hours later, switched off the light and closed the blinds.*

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*I settled onto my usual perch, waiting for the blinds to open. Waiting to watch the girl ghost her way through the day again. But the creaking of hinges never came. The sound of a door opening was sharp through the foggy silence. A vision in flannel, she walked down the driveway towards the tree. She paused at the base and poured out some bird seed into the palm of her painfully thin hand before scattering it around the base of the tree.*

*"Good morning." Her voice was scratchy and raw. I chirped in response, cocking my head studying her as she walked back into the house. When the blinds finally opened, she stood there smiling at me, the big humans at her side.*