

Years 9 & 10

2nd Place: Hai Nam Phan

Year 9, John Wollaston Anglican Community School

The Descent

A beginning always has an end. That was the hard truth Jerin faced as he laid on the cold stone floor, his clothes torn and his flesh bare against the rough cobblestone. His lifeless corpse was severed in ragged chunks, scattered like seeds on icy rock. Gothic bars hung like frozen icicles, trapping him in his tiny cell. Walls towered around him as if they were pillars of ancient rock. Moss flowed through dirt and gravel, seeping into his already damp prison like rotting mould.

“Experiment 408. Failure.”

The plague doctor sighed, his goggles fogging from his breath as he scribbled notes onto a crusty clipboard. He rubbed the front of his mask and paced back and forth outside the bars of the cell. He mumbled something inaudible to Jerin, muffled through his leather face before leaving abruptly. He did not glance back. Jerin waited until he could no longer hear the stomping of boots before rising. His body screamed at him and he rose through gritted teeth, rubbing his back gingerly. He heard the gate grind shut behind the doctor and grinned through his pain. His body was in horrid shape, bits and chunks of anatomy spread across the floor in bloody clumps.

Today’s procedure was especially painful. Jerin knew doubtless that if this happened in normal circumstances then he would’ve died painfully. Luckily however, his predicament was not normal. Jerin stumbled around in the dark of his cell. He found as much meat of himself as he could and placed them back in his wounds, feeling his skin as the flesh aligned with the emptiness in his torso before mending. He then rubbed his eyes, blurry from unreleased tears. His movements were fragile and slow as if a weight was dragging him down. He wasn’t sure of the last time he’d been able to sleep. Jerin covered his face in his hands. He knew the doctors weren’t going to check on him until later on, so he had ample leisure time for now. Knowing such, Jerin crouched, snatching his hidden notebook from under his mattress before collapsing on top of it. He started writing.

*Stars of endless time
May twilight bells forever chime
In abyssal darkness and radiant light
May twilight bells strike through the night
For as time flows in eternal pass
The bells still toll through patterned glass
Of cities and towns and Earth and stars
The bells of midnight still sound through bars
So make us prisons or sky high asylums
The bells always sing and shall not be silenced.*

Jerin finished off the piece with grim satisfaction. These poems were the closest he could get to rebellion without any punishment. He let the fire of defiance burn inside him with a dark pleasure.

The flickering of firelight caught Jerin's attention away from his text. He gazed out the bars and watched the embers from torches among the dungeon walls dance. It reminded him of sunlight. How long was it since he last saw the sun? Days? Weeks? Months? How long was it since he was captured?

Jerin could remember it all. Everything was going well for him. He was coming home after a raise at work when it happened. The men in leather masks. Following him home as he weaved through quiet alleyways. He had always gone through side roads to avoid traffic. He hadn't realised it until they were nearly on him that he was in serious danger. Jerin remembered every minute detail after that. The darkness. The struggling. The pain. Only to be damned to a filthy bleak dungeon in who knows where? No. This was not how Jerin was going to go out.

He had always liked exploring. Seeing the world and all its fantastical wonders. Jerin had always planned to travel the world someday. Now he just missed the mundane things. The radiant lights of the city. The crystal blue of cloudless skies. The serenity of it all. Seized by the malevolence of his god awful fortune. Though he doubted he was the only one captured. Jerin had glanced names off the clipboards the plague doctors bore before, and after considerable glaring and questionable gestures from his part, he managed to get enough information from his capturers to determine that there were others like him in this miserable place. He wondered if he was taken by some kind of cult. It explained the bird masks.

It had looked to Jerin as though these people were experimenting on kidnapped civilians with some sort of chemically produced healing factor. For whatever it was, it resulted in strange and supernatural regenerative abilities which granted Jerin near immortality from fatal injuries. Jerin didn't even know if death by old age was even possible. And as if the prospect of spending eternity in a stone cage was bad enough, the experiments the doctors ran on their patients, which were essentially torture sessions designed to test the limits of the compound, would've been enough to drive him to insanity. Although to be honest, Jerin would've gladly embraced his tomb by now were it not for his timelessness.

But enough was enough. Jerin believed he'd earned his freedom. His choice was final. He had to escape. The plague doctors had no humanity left. If they weren't going to let him free, he would do it himself. Jerin had looked them in the eyes before. Their gazes as he was tortured were blank. Their reactions to suffering was of boredom. No empathy. No resentment. The thought of the person underneath the mask left Jerin's mouth bitter. No. The next time they dared to enter his cell, Jerin would give them hell. A beginning always has an end. It was his philosophy. But Jerin was also a man of poetry. And like the phrase the great Dante had written, 'The descent is easy.'