

## Year Twelve Winners 2013

### Georgia Duthy

#### First Prize

I sit bolt upright, my breathe won't catch, and the pain in my chest that accompanies each shallow gasp is paralyzing. I lift my heavy arm to my brow; the same sweat that has drenched my sheets now bathes my sleeves. Each sharp breath brings a new wave of pain, and I moan into the darkness, but no one will come, I know this before the sound has a chance to escape my mouth. I have once again found myself alone and afraid in the dark.

It was the same dream that woke me, it always is. There's never an image, only sounds, the same sequence of sounds that cut through the darkness on that unforgivable night. Every night's the same, the darkness envelops my dreams, and I'm taken back to that night fifty long years ago. The sound of the train rolls in over the cutting as it gathers speed and it doesn't slow until the sound of crunching bones shatters the night air followed by an unmistakable wail that can only symbolize one thing, the end of life. Then comes the hiss of train breaks, the sound of car doors, murmured voices, the splatter of vomit hitting the tunnel wall and then, like always, I wake to the sound of approaching footsteps.

I slowly lower myself back down onto my dampened pillows. I am met again by an engulfing darkness, though a different kind to the one in my dreams, a silent darkness, broken only by the occasional beeps of the many machines surrounding my bed. I feel a wave of rage surge through me. Sleep is hard to come by in this god-forsaken place, and when it is kind enough to fall over me, it is only brief, always traveling with the memory of my past.

Again I am left alone too long with my thoughts, the only distraction coming in the form of pain from my old, aching body. Like most nights the unanswered questions I have forever battled circle my brain - how did I get here? What was it that led to me becoming this bitter lonely old man, dying alone in a hospice a few measly blocks from the street I lived as boy? I have nothing to show for who I am, or who I was. No one to mourn the man I have become, and no hope of making sense of the path that led me here.

The door creaks open, a pool of light dancing over the weathered linoleum. The large nurse I don't much fancy waddles into the room. She leans over me to adjust the tube leading into my wrist, pressing her large bosom into my face as she fiddles with the stubborn machine. Does the woman not know the risk of covering the airways of a lung cancer patient? I give into my bursting lungs and inhale her musty scent, an overwhelmingly familiar smell meets my nostrils - the smell of old tobacco. And just like that the room spins before me, darkness covers me again, and suddenly I'm back, back in the tunnel, though this time the fear is gone, replaced by lust and adventure. I lean against the slimy brick wall, shoulder to shoulder with Deidre Berril, exchanging drag for drag on a cigarette taken for her mother's purse. We met most nights during the blackout, exchanging cigarettes and booze, exploring the town and exploring each other. Her father was off fighting in the war, and as a result Deidre was doing as she pleased, and I followed like a lost puppy. The solution to my question comes to me as abruptly as the memory containing it. It was Deidre who lead me here; it was her who shaped the man I have become. After all, she introduced me to the life of smoking and sex, habits I was unable to shake throughout my adult life. Could it have all stemmed from her? From that summer in the dark? Were my failed marriages a direct result of the temptation she laid

out for me as a boy? And is this pain in my chest a consequence of me obediently imitating her every move?

It seems so simple to put the blame on a girl I haven't seen in forty years, a girl whose connection to me went little beyond the proximity of her house to my own. But can I really pin it all on poor old Deidre and her troubled youth? Was my life really defined by a single individual? Or was it more than that? I struggle to think back earlier. Most of my memories as a boy have been replaced by the singular memory of that haunting night. I only have flashes, images of a different land, of rushed hiding and secret meetings, snippets of words spoken by my parents, words of little sense, like 'schnick-schnack' and 'kuddle-muddle' always followed by the name Joachim. There is little more than these fragmented pieces left in my old brain, but they are enough to piece once more answer of my puzzle together. It was my parents who ultimately shaped who I was, more so my father and his attempts to hide his German background. They constructed the world that I thought was my own. They created who I was, the way I talked, dressed, and behaved. They took me from one world and put me in another, turning me into the British boy they thought I needed to be, a facade I never gave up on. My entire life has been an act, I have never stopped pretending to be Geoff Wheatley, and forever ignored Joachim Weitzler. An act only ever been seen through by one person, the one person who was seeing through my acts before he could walk.

The whirl of unstoppable thoughts becomes too much, and again I find myself bolt upright in the darkness covered in sweat. But this time I am not alone. I turn to see a scrawny figure perched beside my bed. At first I can't quite make out who it is from their silhouette, but then he talks, and I know instantly who it is speaking gently beside me. The pain becomes unbearable; it is not only the illness that corrupts my lungs, but also the longing pain for home that aches in my heart. I lower myself back down and hear myself murmur the words I have been hiding from him my entire life, 'Papi,' I say, 'Papi, ich hab Angst vor dem Dunkeln,' as the darkness steals me away once again.

## **Second Prize**

**Max Rycroft**

**Stephen**

I could feel the presence of this thundering force nearing me, its pulsing momentum sounding like a colossal iron heartbeat. I could hear the burden the tracks bore, as the immense steam powered mass charged over them, the distress of the groaning sleepers shrieked at me for a moment before fading into silence as the night swallowed up the iron behemoth and all of its urgencies. My heart, however, would not cease to beat as vigorously as the rushing locomotive because I knew it was more than a speeding train that was keeping me awake. My head was spinning, so many unanswered questions and hidden truths. The mere thought of a vicious, scheming German right under our noses was quite an unsettling one, so much so that it was all I could think about lately. Mrs Hayward would definitely be in on the plan; she had been relaying messages back and forth to this imposter. She always looked worried and on edge, even fearful as she returned from his hideout. Is this German, even alone, a dangerous threat? These thoughts continued to swim in my mind, clouding it from any reason or logic. I had to act; I had to do something... The Close needed to be warned about this menace, then I could become a hero like Uncle Peter. I burned with curiosity to find out what this evil German was doing right at this moment.

## **Peter**

Even down in this earthen prison, I could feel the powerful rumble and hear the intimidating roar of the rushing train above me. That was the last of the three trains departing this hour; strangely it was the only thing that kept me sane down here. Every time I heard one of those busy locomotives chug by, my muscles ached to leap up and board a train and forever be gone from this place of loneliness and exile. But I am anchored here in my isolation. I wish I could walk into town and be treated like the hero I once was. I wish I could hold Bobs in my arms again and never let her go. 'I'll come back for you.' Those five softly spoken words replayed in my mind, providing me with comfort from the visions of death and sorrow that fog my thoughts. Those five words are all I have. Outside, the wind picks up, the sound reminding me of the windy tarmac on the air force runway. Looking down at my hands I can see, even in darkness that they are worn out. They look like two old leather gloves, cracked and withered, they didn't look like that before my service, before they had taken the lives of men. Maybe this was my punishment – to lie here in this grave and rot. This damp, earthy prison had now become my refuge, shielding me from the outside world, only letting in streaks of silver moonlight to reassure me there was something beyond this tomb. The faint whistle of the steam train slowly fades as it thunders away into darkness. I just wish I could tell Bobs she was the one for me.

## **Mrs Hayward (Bobs)**

I could feel the house tremble ever-so-slightly as a powerful mass charged past, breaking the monotonous snoring of Ted, who spluttered once and then started snoring again. I couldn't help but wonder if Peter was clambering on board to start a new life. Ted rolled onto his side, coughing slightly, blissfully unaware of the changes in his 'beloved wife'. Sometimes it felt like the still of night was the only time when I was left with my thoughts, the only time when I could be myself without Ted watching me like a bird of prey. It broke my heart to know the condition that Peter was in, and to barely be able to help him. I wished he could just walk out of that wretched hole and come home to be treated like the hero he was. In the eyes of the military, deserters like Peter should be put down like rabid dogs, all because he couldn't bear the hell on earth that he was sent to. Peter was always the one, but it was the 'smart, sensible' Ted who I had ended up with. Now, he treats me like a prisoner of war, and I am unable to check the mail without his say-so. I don't know how much longer I can keep this facade of an obedient housewife going. I wish I could be like the steam trains that rumble past the Close. I wish it was Peter and I that were charging past this town, off to somewhere new and far away from here.