I lie on my back watching him through the ripples. Every so often the breeze picks up and caresses the gossamer shroud that covers his stiff limbs. He never moves save for the tired quaking of his limbs as he looms over the surface where water meets air. Dust has settled on him, covering him in cakey grime all over. He doesn't seem to notice the decay.

He is above and I am down here, stuck being the brown ribbed bottom of the pond, forever looking deep into his entranced eyes. Our eyes remain interlocked on each other, but he never notices me. He sits there, dazed, drinking in his reflection as if it's all he needs. Nothing else matters, the corners of his vision blur and fuzzy shapes dance at the sides. It’s obsession to the extreme.

As time slithers on, the image starts to change.

It starts with his weight.

He eats only the echo of himself, constantly craving more and more, but it’s not enough. The skin starts to tighten on his face, being stretched and pulled back to reveal the skull underneath. His cheekbones threaten to slice through his skin at any moment. Every so often I hear the low grumble of his stomach, distorted by the water; I see how the sound undulates through his spindly body.
He doesn't try to move. His skin dries up with the sun's rising and setting, with every new promise of frost. It cracks and crinkles, rising and decomposing as the worms crawl over their warm, moist food.

I watch as he becomes the ground he sits on. Ashes to ashes, dust back to more dust.

Yearning eyes collect a layer of milky film. Crust and dirt gathers in all the crevices of his body and eyes, turning black and brown and green. Chapped lips, overgrown nails, and the occasional chunk of matter greasy hair falling. He lifts up one skeletal hand to waft away the debris from his image.

Every so often I watch as he lowers himself down onto the water surface, his lips brushing his reflection. But from down here, I see the water break where his lips dip down and his image is shattered by rippling water. I feel a sense of pity rise up within me; I've watched his eyes full of love that has been consistently unwavering and seemingly eternal, but I've also endured the passage of time and the years that roll by do so cruelly. How can a person be so full of love and yet stay so alone?

Maybe he'll be here with me forever.

Those cloudy eyes stare through my own until the last of the sockets withers away and they roll back into the skull. The skeleton collapses with the last of its ligaments. It comes down and collides with the water. He buries me. We die down here together. His skeleton is entombed under the silky sand, still looking down, hoping to catch one more glimpse.
Narcissus by Alice Nunwick

The story is based on the Greek myth about a hunter who is punished for his vanity by becoming entranced by the reflection of himself, and being unable to obtain the object of his desire, he died at the banks of the lake from his sorrow.

I wrote about this as I’m really inspired by Greek mythology and because it’s traditional story telling with few limitations. Almost anything goes in mythology and I enjoy that crazy unpredictability. I also like that many have an allegorical feel to them and so I definitely tried to recreate that in my story.
This is an **ambitious piece of writing**. The story has been told in words and pictures many times before so this new version appeals implicitly to the reader’s own experience of the myth in the creation of a fresh interpretation. I certainly found the memory of Dali’s portrait haunted my reading.

Alice resists any temptation to stray from the description of the processes of decay, **maintaining a focus** on the stages of disintegration of Narcissus himself on the one hand and the reflections on those stages from the river bottom on the other. This gives her the **framework to describe and evoke a tragic connectivity** between Narcissus and the observer of Narcissus. The reader, of course, identifies with the ‘I’ of the narrator-observer and is thus entangled in the story, realising with dismay at the end that the destiny of one character engulfs the destiny of the other. ‘No man is an island’ etc. We are all vain observers of ourselves.

The last phrase of the story emphasises the **inevitability and relentlessness** of Narcissus’s story arc. I’m reminded of Eliot’s ‘the end is in my beginning’.

It is **startlingly mature** piece of writing.
Yellow light glinting off the glass and pooling at his feet, Jacob’s eyes snapped open. He was surrounded by chandeliers, one for each of the mirrors besieging her. The cold in his stomach had spread to his legs and chest; he couldn’t stand or even breathe - because he knew this place...this was where it’d happened.

It was an opulent room, with a grand oak table standing in the middle and high backed gilded chairs. The paintings on the wall were tasteful and expensive - but not extravagant - and the fireplace was huge. Jacob looked at the mirror in front of him and saw this scene reflected...But the floor he was slumped on was hard and cold, not richly carpeted like that of the image before his eyes. Strength suddenly surfacing in his legs, Jacob scrambled to his feet and whipped around to look behind him and saw the exact same scene reflected in the mirror before him. “But this can’t be right,” he said aloud. In the mirrors he could see Carlotta’s luxurious dining room, in every reflection he saw the room where they had lost it all but he wasn’t there. “How is this possible?” he demanded of himself, but no explanation arose. What was truly maddening was the inconceivable juxtaposition of the image surrounding him and the plain space his feet were planted on.

There was the sound of a chair being pulled back and the clink of silver on glass. It was as though Jacob was being transported to one year earlier as the sounds of the dinner party continued.

Suddenly the mirrors went black and showed only his reflection. Hundreds of Jacobs looked back at him. “Have you gone quite mad, my right honourable fellow?” the Jacobs
said to Jacob, and they began to morph into a sixty-something old man with a full head of grizzled white hair and a magnificently bulbous nose. Baron Myerscough pulled that silver pocket watch out from that maroon velvet smoking jacket and sighed.

“Time to reflect, don’t you think, gent?” the Baron’s reflection asked Jacob, pulling a bumblebee yellow handkerchief from his jacket pocket and blowing his considerable nose with it. The sight of Baron Myerscough was enough to split Jacob’s skull in half and at the ‘gent’ he once again found himself collapsed. Clenching his eyes shut he prayed to the God that he had renounced that he wouldn’t have to see what the Baron had done at Carlotta’s dinner party. He had been a mentor of sorts to Jacob, helping him around Lords after he took his father’s place as one of the last hereditary peers.

“Jacob,” a disembodied female voice said somewhere behind him. He turned to see, heart dropping to his belly, but each time he looked behind him all he could see was a glimpse of dark hair. Carlotta Carlotta Carlotta Carlotta Carlotta Carlotta it’s her oh no oh God oh please Carlotta.

Jacob could taste the whiskey in his throat and even before he opened his eyes he knew he was inside the mirrors and in the scene. Eyes watering, chest constricting, heart walloping, hands shaking, he stayed perfectly still as he heard the sharp intake of breath from the woman he loved and did nothing. What could he do? But even in the blackness of his head Jacob saw.

The flash of metal and a blood spotted tablecloth.

Suddenly he was in the room of mirrors and the scene had reset. Ant it repeated until he wanted to rip down the whole mansion with his fingernails. And it repeated.
The story is about the main character, Jacob, who is reliving a traumatic event in his life over and over again and he is forced to face the part he played in the death of Carlotta.

I wrote about this as the theme was ‘reflection’ so I immediately thought of mirrors and the idea of reflecting on past events. I had recently watched the film ‘Inception’ and the imagery in that inspired my entry to the competition.

I thought it was rubbish when I wrote it and begged Mr Down not to send it off with the other entries from our creative writing class!
Reflection by Izzy Higgins

Judge’s Comments

Some classic touches here – the slow reveal of the truth, the build of the feeling of guilt and its inescapability, the careful selection of physical detail, the gothic presentation of the story, the comic dimension, the skilful paragraphing, the occasional lexical surprise (‘heart walloping’, ‘a bumblebee yellow handkerchief’), the purposeful use of sentences without main verbs, a filmic set of images.

This rich, but well controlled, mixture makes for an enjoyable read. Well done, Izzy.
Third place: Senior Category

Rewound Clocks by Isabella Hankin

Nostalgia washes over me as I observe my hometown bustling with life and energy, seemingly a safe haven in the midst of war.

But I knew better.

It was meant to give me a sense of closure, seeing this place one last time, how my sepia-tinted childhood self remembered it. All it accomplished was dragging me deeper into the predatory mouth of despair, hand-holds rapidly crumbling under the reclaimed years.

Schools of children rush through the blossomed streets with youthful recklessness - phantasms of what I once was. One lags behind, honey-soaked fingers clamped around a smudged glass bottle. A summer painted cicada, playing its agitated tune, rattles inside. With an irregular gait and concern for the insect inside, there was no was he could keep up. Yet he doesn't mind, cooing over the freshly caught jewel with birdlike tones.

I observe as the adults move with the hurried serenity of those at war, but don’t think they’ll be targeted. A ghost town full of people. They are neighbours, friends, teachers, innocents and future casualties. In exactly one minute, an uncaring pilot will press a button and decimate not only this city, but the world.

The time, 8.14am.

The date, August 6th, 1945.

Resignedly closing my eyes, I request to return back to my present - a distant future to the peaceful, ignorant inhabitants of my once home. I can’t stay any longer. Seeing the plane, the bomb, would play a crescendo with my abused heartstrings. In my last few seconds of presence, I count.
On a lonely hilltop and miles away from Death’s eyeball, a girl stares, carefully sketching the parasitic cloud into her eyelids. A thousand ‘nevers’ will prevent her from returning until time itself warps and shadows no longer bleed into the earth.
Rewound Clocks by Isabella Hankin

The story is about someone who time-travelled to August 6th 1945 to give them a sense of closure relating to Hiroshima, but they reflect on the fates of the citizens there and return just before the bomb hits.

I originally had the idea of something about ghosts, then it changed into someone being isolated when they are surrounded by people. The poem evolved into Hiroshima and the atomic bombing that killed so many.
This is an excellent idea for a story. The re-playing of history allows the reader to remember the hideous events of the end of WW2 in the Far East and to sympathise with the narrator’s desire to find closure – which is impossible.

The paragraphing is thoughtful and successful. The imagery likewise – the storyteller plays with long-distance views versus close-up details. The image of the cicada inside the bottle, with its implications that it’s not just the insect which is trapped, is particularly memorable.

The storyline compresses the years into a few words with admirable discipline.

The piece might benefit from one further drafting, perhaps. E.g. Was the pilot ‘uncaring’? Is the phrase ‘my abused heartstrings’ OTT?

But overall, a genuinely interesting experiment.
The snow crunched under my feet,
The pale pinks of the sky quickly faded then died.
The black sky clawed its way around the sunset,
But still I stood here, waiting.
The clock chimed throughout the village,
The snowflakes floated down in time to the music of the wind and the trees,
Kissing my face and then vanishing.
A chill slithered up my spine,
My heart started beating faster in excitement.
Running, dodging, ducking, laughing,
The sky was awake and watching with thousands of bright, curious eyes
All merging to form one.
Laughter filled my ears and all stood still.
I noticed the conversations of the trees,
The grumble in the wind,
The hissing of the ice skates on the ice ring,
The crispness of the snow,
And the taste of delight in my mouth

I was so wrapped up that I didn’t notice what was about to hit me,
An icy blast struck my face and I fell back in surprise,
Imprinting my body into the snow.
I gave myself over to the cold and looked at the sky,
All those eyes seemed to be staring at me.
I murmured something under my breath and the eyes winked back at me as if they understood.

But how could they?
The poem is about when my family and I went to France for a holiday and we all had a snowball fight in the dark.

I chose to write about this because it was a powerful and happy memory and I remember the sky because the stars were so bright and the night was so clear.
This poem is full of surprising choices. The black sky claws its way around the sunset, the snow falls in time to the music of the wind, the trees have conversations and the wind grumbles. Everything is not just organically alive but awake and aware.

There is an appeal to a number of the senses in the sight of the watching eyes, the hissing of the skates, the crispness of the snow, the taste of delight. It’s a well-worn strategy but the detail is convincing here.

Three times in the three separate verses the writer insists that the sky itself is awake and capable of reflecting back the narrator’s mood accurately and appropriately. This bold assertion prepares us for the movement of the last line.

The mood changes satisfactorily and fluidly from verse to verse. In the first, the narrator is waiting in mounting excitement. In the second there is a sense of euphoria. In the third the narrator bumps back to earth (literally!) in an almost comic way but then this is superseded quickly by a sense of acceptance and the beginning of a philosophical questioning about the nature of the universe.

Not sure one can ask much more from a single piece of work . . .
My very first time at theatre group,
My stomach simmered and frothed like hot soup.
My thoughts wrestled like a ravenous hound,
Within me my heart struck a crippling pound.

I edged tentatively towards the vast crowd,
A concoction of voices rang seethingly loud.
The wooden floor groaned as it scolded my feet,
The mass looming near I dreaded to meet.

I brawled with the forest of legs to find air,
Receiving a shove and a faceful of hair.
I was mangled and mauled as though caught in a tide,
I couldn't resurface though I valiantly tried.
A stream of tears fought its way down my skin,
    I couldn't contain it, the state I was in!
An ominous shadow billowed my fears,
And my thoughts were flooded with gallons of tears.

I fought my way out of the treacherous sea,
With a bruise on my arm and a graze on my knee.
I parcelled myself in my dad’s soothing grip,
Drying tears from my eyes and restraining my lip.

Then from my cocoon I began to unfurl,
Gazing at me was a scrawny young girl.
How could she just stand there and stare while I cried?
But then, as she murmured, my tears were dried.

“Are you ok?” She stammered and smiled,
“We’re finding partners, join in for a while.”
An uplifting sensation swarmed in my chest,
It rippled right through me, unwilling to rest.

The first time at theatre group,
My stomach steamed with elation like soup.
My thoughts harmonised, a heart-warming sound,
My heart have an exhilarating pound!
A Kind Little Girl and an Ocean of Faces

by Olivia Buchanan

The poem is about the first time I went to my theatre group and met someone who created a strong memory.

I wrote about this as it happened a long time ago but it has stayed in my mind. If it hadn’t happened I wouldn’t be the same person I am now and I wouldn't be so confident.
I liked the **ambitious and sustained use of rhyme** in this poem. It’s not easy to sustain rhyming couplets without a sense of strain and Olivia does very well to make the rhyming both satisfactory in terms of ‘wrapping up’ the message of the couplets and in unifying the poem as a narrative whole. Well done, Olivia.

Narrative poetry is not as popular as it used to be so it’s pleasurable to track the **development of an incident** from its unpromising start to its heart-warming conclusion.

As in Bella’s poem, this piece of work **appeals to the senses** (‘a faceful of hair’) and to a **common human experience**. Who has not felt excluded and hurt by rejection, and then relieved and exhilarated by acceptance? The experience of the feeling is common but, of course, the **choice of highly specific context** is what makes this story plausible and believable.

Some really **nice touches** here – ‘I parcelled myself in my dad’s soothing grip’, ‘a concoction of voices’.
As the fresh air filled his lungs and whipped around his face, he wondered why he didn’t just move here ages ago. He’d had the money. But all the options were closing off. Soon decisions would become a thing of the past.

He rounded a corner and came to a clearing. The tree roots were all over, and he needed to pick his way carefully through the tangle. When he looked up he needed to squint; the sun shone directly into his face. However, as he slowly opened his eyes, he realised that it was a tree. Dew had collected on the curved leaves and were catching the sunlight, giving them a sense of being alive.

He had never been lonely, but he felt like he had no real friends. He studied the tree. He didn’t have a vast knowledge of trees, but recognised that it was odd. The leaves were shaped like ash leaves, but much bigger. The trunk was the thickest he had ever seen, and was twisted and gnarled like the olive trees that he remembered finding in France, although larger. In fact, everything about this tree was scaled up by about four.

He walked up to the lowest branch and looked at a dew drop about the size of a crystal ball. He staggered back with shock. It reflected him, contorted, and showed a young boy of about fourteen, with dark hair and a bony face. It was him as a boy, though he wore a smart blazer, and looked more tidy—*tamed*. This was not his school, this was not him, this had never happened.
He watched himself in this school, telling posh class mates of his recent triumph; an A+. He watched the opposite branch: a rough looking boy boasting to cronies about his adventure and its outcome - detention. He was a quick witted fellow, despite his poor life choices and he soon figured out how it worked: this tree showed snippets of the looker’s real life, and an alternative if they had split onto a different branch of life.

After 15 minutes he had watched his entire life so far, and the shadow of what it could have been. He watched his childhood, wasted by misbehaviours and rowdiness, his teenage years, lonely and reclusive. Then his adult life, sinful and stupid; gambling and spending away money, disposing of valuable artefacts just for money for cigarettes. He watched his house being repossessed, his job gone and his friends lost.

After watching what could have been, his heart ached with regret and he wished he could re-do everything.
The story is about a tree which shows your life so far and the life you could have had if you had made a different decision.

I wrote about this as I think it’s interesting how, when you make a decision, it leads to other things and these lead to other things and so it goes. The story is about how important decision are in life.
This piece of writing won itself a placing because of the confidence of its narrative style. The story opens purposefully in mid narrative flow, as it were, then develops quickly in an unusual direction.

Writing with economy and sureness, Abbie is able to represent the parallel lives of the protagonist and achieve a high degree of impact. The ending is poignantly simple. And (I’m not sure how far I can push this point but) the story does seem to me to represent or point towards some of the social and educational dilemmas of our age.

No attempt is made to explain the tree’s capacity to show people the possibilities of their lives – wisely, I feel. Therefore, the impact of its larger-than-life quality and the twin realities reflected in the giant dew-drops on its leaves assume importance and the reader doesn’t question the truth of what is revealed.

I particularly appreciated the use of the word ‘tamed’ in the context, the knowledge implied in ‘shaped like ash leaves’ and the way in which the phrase ‘could have been’ is slipped in without any sense of nostalgia or cliché.
Commendations for other entries

Judge’s Comments

I would also like to say well done to:

Katy Kerr for the touching story of the primary school visit;
Harrison Hayes-Shaw for the high impact of ‘That Dam Rock’;
Leo Higgins for the spareness of ‘That was the Time when I saw the Fox’;
Sebastian Botterill-Kang for the ingenuity and commitment of ‘The Resurrection’;
Ruby Hutchinson for the unexpected twist in ‘Reflection’;
Andrew Brown for the line, ‘The day was dying, fond of its own fall’;
And:
Poppy Slater, Libby Danby, Shay Rafferty, Tom Booth, Oscar McCumisky and Zhu Li McGurk for moments of happiness.

2017 Rotary Young Writer Competition
Theme: Reflection
Judged by: Gill Frances

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wings-ghost-digital-lomography.jpg