

The Root of

Tranquillity

“Night, the beloved. Night, when words fade and things come alive. When the destructive analysis of day is done, and all that is truly important becomes whole and sound again. When man reassembles his fragmentary self and grows with the calm of a tree.”

~Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943)

The Root of Tranquillity

“Emily, I want you to make yourself scarce tonight. Do you understand? You know, maybe go play outside for a few hours or something?”

“What am I, six years old? Mum, I’m thirteen... I don’t *play*. Besides, it’ll be dark and I don’t know which box the torch is in.”

“Oi, Fletcher,” my mother croaks hoarsely. My father thumps his way downstairs sounding like a slow hammer to a nail. “Did you pack the torch before we moved?” She asks.

“No, I threw it out. Why?” He replies not expecting an answer.

My mother sighs and Dad just shrugs, messes my already stringy hair and returns to his upstairs dwelling. My parents have communication problems and my mother and I don’t see eye to eye. Ever.

Dad and the She-Devil think that I don’t know what they do whilst I’m out of the house. It isn’t anything to do with pleasure... they just sit in separate rooms and work. Sometimes, when I was younger, I would catch them shed a single tear in their dimly lit room or suppress an exhausted sigh. I didn’t understand why they were like this until I was eight. I thought, “Working isn’t a sad thing is it?”. It was when I glanced into the main bedroom at my mother’s looking glass that I realised I was the problem. On the corner of the silver-wired frame was a note scratched in my mother’s handwriting. It said: *Fletcher, I don’t want her. I’m going away for a few days. – Patrisha.*

I stared at my childish reflection that day, with the round edges of my baby-fat just visible and my thin, hazelnut hair in tangles from my quivering hands and silent writhing at this new found knowledge. I took a deep, throaty breath and decided that it would be better for everyone if I just pretended that I had never seen that frightful note on that delicate mirror. Since then I have kept my personal promise and I no longer bother sneaking to the side-window to see what my parents are doing. Thanks to that distant memory, I don’t try to impress anyone I don’t care for.

I still don’t know why my mother had written that note but because she did, I do know why the house is so quiet when we are alone in a room, or when everyone is at the

dinner table, eating as silent as mice. I used to be locked in my room when my mother became tired of my presence but now that I am older I have been given the privilege of fewer restrictions. With this liberty, I go outside, I lie under the sky – whether it be night or day – and I dream.

This is the third house we have moved to in under two years; we travel a lot. My parents are Travellers and are paid quite a substantial amount to decide whether the consumer market of home-buyers would like a particular home in a specific location. I can't say that I like to change towns (sometimes even states) because I never have time to make good friends. To busy myself I usually study things that we don't learn in school like how to cook, what not to sow next to other species of plants, how to play the piano, when to change the oil filter in the car. I don't bother unpacking everything in case we have to move sooner than I expect, so keeping my mind active is always a good option that doesn't involve many items or cost anything. It is also time consuming.

This year I'm being home-schooled because my parents predict another move in the next few months to Queensland. I wonder if it would be easier to be part of a Defence Force family.



“Many things grow in the garden that were never sown there.”

~Thomas Fuller (1608-1661)

This is what you call a garden! Everything is intricate, detailed and lifelike; the moon shining, a light bulb in the darkness. Walking through this archaic archway covered with clinging vines, embracing the metal frame, I breathe in the fragrant air. There were, I noticed, little blooming *Houstonia Bluets* amongst the tangles. Is this really my backyard? It is vast, pleasant... beautiful even. I think I might come out here every night.

I follow through a small hedge maze, feeling younger than I am, with my arms open and my eyes closed; I rely on my senses, touch the bushy sides. I smell the green.

“Uumph...”

What was that? Oh, never mind. Wow!

There are limestone walls around the edges giving an 18th Century look to this Garden of Eden. Vines drape every surface, flourishingly full of life; there is a vivid floral arrangement of flowers spread throughout the garden as well as a small cement bird bath positioned in the centre of the plot.

“Excuse me...” says a small voice. I know I have heard something just now. But did I just hear words? I am alone, surely.

“I don’t mean to be rude but you stood on my stem,” the perturbed voice says, this time less timid. I turn around, still a little unsure. No, I am the only one here, I’m sure of it.

“Down here, you chickweed!” a harsher voice sounds.

“Ah!” I exclaim, my hands beginning to shake. I look down and see four flowers planted in a single row. The smallest of them waves at me. I wave back bemused.

“Ignore Envy, she’s a little moody tonight. My name is Merry,” the Daffodil explains.

“Ignore me? Ignore *me*! Who do you think you are, Merry? I think...” the Tiger Lily responds angrily and continues to rant. My thoughts are becoming increasingly loud and background noise is nothing but a dull hum – like my alarm clock in the morning.

“Stop it, I think you’ve scared her!” shouts the little Bluebell who had previously waved at me. I continue to stare, not daring to interrupt. Who planted this arrangement of flowers together? Wait, why am I worrying about that? Shouldn’t I be worrying about the fact that I am insane or that flowers are... arguing? What about that beautiful crimson-red Hibiscus over there, does it talk too? It’s so delicate and I’m so drawn to it. Why?

“E-e-excuse me little Bluebell... but you ha-haven’t said your name y-yet,” I stammer out in an attempt to reclaim reality.

Suddenly shy again, the Bluebell squeaks, “It’s Melody. My name is Melody.” She seems very young and very diffident. Still the Hibiscus doesn’t speak. At least I am starting to calm down a bit. I start to hum slowly as I do when I’m feeling uneasy.

“That sounds really pretty...” Melody notes. She attempts to join in.

“Please stop,” the Hibiscus finally speaks.

“I’m sorry. What would you... You don’t like my humming?” I ask, stumbling for questions, yet feeling a little more composed than moments ago. At the same time I am excited that this flower is finally being articulate. Are all the flowers animate in this garden?

“I don’t care what you do... I just... I don’t know. Forget it. Not that you care, but would you like to know my name?”

“I would, very much so. To be honest, I wasn’t sure whether you were... alive,” I say. I am perplexed by this one flower. The others are courteous, or at least are trying to be, but there is something about this one.

“Fred. My name is Fred,” he states. Envy snickers.



“In order to live off a garden, you practically have to live in it.”

~Frank McKinney Hubbard (1868-1930)

I don't know how I managed to notice the other flora in the garden when there was clearly something else keeping me occupied; something different, something unnatural. Among the vegetation, there were red maple trees (*Acer Rubrum* to be exact) and miniature grass trees – *Xanthorrhoea Glauca* – that can be found only in Australia. I plan to return to the garden tonight as I may have left in too much of a hurry last night. This was after I realised that maybe I was ill, I mean, who talks to plants? I hope I didn't hurt their feelings.

From my upstairs bedroom, I hear my parents arguing down in the kitchen. They are arguing over trivial things like who last used the Vegemite and why the cicadas are so loud at night, as if either of them have control over their songs. You'd think that different scenery every few months would make a couple less tense, but maybe they're like me and dislike change – as my Business Studies notes say, “We are creatures of habit, after all”.

Humming, again to no particular tune, I descend the stairwell to join my *family*. Dad is reading one of his war novels and my mother is gnawing on God-knows-what. Hopefully today goes fast so that I can visit my new friends; I want to talk to them some more.

It is profusely hot today, like most days. I swear that the paint is melting off the walls of the house just like honey from a knife. Hopefully the garden can handle the heat; maybe I should consider watering them if it gets worse. Do they even need water? Perhaps I shall conduct some research on this later. There is however a slight breeze causing the grass to sway and the shade to cool. They should be fine.



*“The raindrops kissed the flower beds,
The blossoms raised their thirsty heads...”*

~Carroll Gibbons (1903-1954)

“Emily!” Melody exclaims happily upon my arrival. This little Bluebell sure is sweet but I’ve noticed that she is often quiet – I figure that she must be thinking or is naturally introverted or both.

This is my fifth night out here and the flowers are becoming accustomed to my presence. I like having someone to talk to, even if they turn out to be a figment of my imagination. However, they are tangible so according to Science they must be real.

“Hello there, Emily. I’m glad that you have come to visit us again tonight because I feel it is going to rain,” Merry riddles.

“Is that so? Well, is tonight’s rain a good thing?” I ask, wondering what significance the rain has on this particular night. It hasn’t rained in a while so it will be nice to experience the change anyway. “Envy, Fred, you aren’t being very conversational tonight. Are you both okay? I bet you’re just grumpy, Envy,” I tease, expecting a rebuttal. But there is none.

“Fred, would you like to explain to Emily?” Merry whispers.

“Not really...” he sighs but continues nevertheless. “You have probably noticed that Envy is a little on the touchy side of things. Well, the rain inexplicably affects her mood —”

“She goes all quiet... like me,” Melody interjects.

A few crystal drops begin to fall from the sky. The clouds are still visible, a violet-grey hue, though the stars persistently shine through like the twinkle of an eye across a crowded room.

“As I was saying,” Fred continues, “the rain is something that we all look forward to indefinitely but for Envy, it is hard to deal with.”

“Tiger Lilies do need water... so it must be a personality thing where something external affects one’s disposition,” I note thinking out loud. This reaction to rain

reminds me of my old Russian Blue cat; she was adamant about sleeping the entire way through a storm. The sprinkles become a shower.

The night air feels warm; the rain stirs up the surrounding dust creating a smell of moist soil and light humidity, a constant reminder of the Australian bush. If one were to look closely at a nearby *Abutilon* hedge, they would see a display of vibrant pink flowers dancing amongst the thick leaves and a small, trickling stream down each of them. Drops fall into puddles repeatedly, and splash little balls of smooth liquid in all directions; looking closely, these remind me of clear fireworks. My friends spread their petals and look up to the sky; they embrace the downpour. All except Envy, who droops with the leaves of water-weighted trees.

Deducing that I am already soaked to the bone, like a child left home alone for the first time, I embrace the feeling of freedom, spread my arms and spin. I feel each cool droplet of condensation hit my face, my shoulders, my hands. The rain in the distance looks like a shower of glittering confetti thrown in the air only to fall again in an array of shimmering beads. I wish it would rain more often.

In my peripheral vision, the vines begin to untangle and alter their structure. Over and under. They become a familiar figure – a small canopy – and shield Envy from the rain. “Thank you,” I hear her say in a weary tone. This garden never ceases to amaze me. Sitting next to Envy, the vines unexpectedly form a larger version of the shelter and linger above my head. “Thank you,” I say, mimicking Envy, and begin squeezing out my damp hair and drenched clothing.

The wind, combined with the surrounding flora, creates a composition of natural music, the orchestra a rustling of long, grassy bushes, and whistling thickets of leaves, the rapping of the thinner branches of the Australian Oak (*Eucalyptus Obliqua*) upon the limestone walls, and the expected pitter-patter of the rain.

Looking down, I notice that everyone is now sheltered (for they would drown were they to be rained upon any further). Little snaking streams of crystalline water seep into the soil surrounding them, penetrating deep towards the roots, the roots of life.

“Will you be punished for staying out with us so late at night?” Merry asks shaking her petals as a dog would shake his fur after being washed.

"No," I reply, almost indignantly.

"You're dripping wet! Surely *that* warrants some trouble in the household?" Melody squeaks.



"The greatest gift of the garden is the restoration of the five senses."

~Hanna Rion (2008)

Unfortunately, staying out in the rain until 11pm, saturated and tired, has given me a cold. Though, on the positive side, it means I get to lounge around all day instead of typing up figures on real estate prices and sorting out mountains of receipt paper for my parents, or even doing my Spanish-by-Distance assignment. Another plus is that it is probably only a 24 hour bug which means I can still go out into the garden tonight. *Sniff.*

The crunch of the toast, lathered in raspberry jam, mellifluous and defining, seemingly echoes throughout the room. Despite coming in late last night and staying up further to wash my clothes in case my parents asked why they were soaked, I am the first one to 'rise from the coffin' as my Dad would say. He would, were he awake, be likely to shout "It. Is. *ALIVE!*" upon sighting me – referring to my ratty bed-hair and my zombie-like movements. I am not usually a morning person but a good piece of toast can often fix that. The flavour, regardless of my blocked sinus and faint loss of taste, is rich and indulgently sweet. I would eat so much more if it wasn't considered gluttonous.

Luckily today is Saturday, the day I nominate to be my 'day off' from my independent studies. I love to either watch television or listen to my parent's old vinyl records on a Saturday, but truthfully I am willing to do a bit of work here and there if I feel the need. Turning on the TV, I have my daily epiphany: early morning television = repetitive children shows. I have no idea why I don't realise this before I take the TV

remote and press the power button. *Sigh*. I can either watch *Scooby Doo* or the news and I don't watch the news in the morning purely because I don't like the monotonous hosts; so, *Scooby Doo* it is.

"Get in the kitchen, Emily. You know you're not supposed to eat in here!" My mother orders, her voice appearing out of nowhere. Frustrated, I turn the 16" television off and carry my steaming Milo (white and two) and crumb coated plate back to the kitchen. I sneer at her behind her back and sit at the bench making sure to not bang my plate too hard on the counter in case of an annoying clatter – she would yell at me as if I were attempting to smash the plate in defiance. My mother is the biggest hypocrite. I always catch her eating in the lounge room, crunching her food like a Tyrannosaurus Rex munches on the bones of its prey. Then, as I watch from the stairwell just out of sight, she stomps her way back to the kitchen to dispose of the evidence, creating a miniature earthquake as she walks. Those crumbs on the cushions are not mine.



Come on, you big ball of hydrogen and helium! Disappear behind the surface of the earth; I wish it to be night. I was right; the flu didn't last so I can still visit the gang tonight! Ha-ha, 'gang'... I think I've watched one too many episodes of *Scooby Doo* in my lifetime. I could just go and visit them now but it's too hot outside during the day and I am a strong believer in avoiding skin cancer, plus I prefer the dark atmosphere. I know that seems silly but I will even stay inside all day just to avoid the sun. To make up for the lack of exercise during the day I can at least keep fit by using our moving gym in the upstairs spare room. My dad: the fitness nut.

Earlier today I realised something – I haven't simply asked the flowers how it is that they are alive. I can't believe that that thought hadn't already occurred to me.

Opening my bedroom window, the faint smell of last night's rain lingers, reminding me of that moment when one walks into a perfume store. I think I'll take an umbrella tonight, just in case; I don't want to fall ill two evenings in a row. I find it uncanny that the first friends I have made here are flowers and not people. I feel almost as though

this is an alternate reality. Next, animals will begin to compose music and mythical creatures like unicorns and narwhals will roam the streets. Fairies will run our banks and money will turn to glitter. Imagine that. I am being quite unrealistic but that is what an active imagination is for, right?

Once again, I hear the muffled robotic voices of my parents downstairs. I don't think that they are arguing this time because the sounds are inconsistent and not like any other time. If they're not fighting, they're discussing business or sitting in silent solitude. It is when they are deep in personal dispute that I do not care to listen. When it comes to Traveller discussions however, I quite enjoy listening to them debate over whether or not a particular home would be appropriate for the modern day housewife who is out working an eight hour shift at Woolworths, or the single father of two small children, or the old lady with her twenty seven cats.



“In my garden there is a large place for sentiment. My garden of flowers is also my garden of thoughts and dreams. The thoughts grow as freely as the flowers, and the dreams are as beautiful.”

~Abram L. Urban (2009)

This day has progressed so slowly, my every action seemingly slower than usual; the incessant ticking of the antique clocks scattered about the house, a reminder of the stagnation of time. The path underneath my feet has become worn from the number of times I have journeyed to and fro, and the weeds that are usually along this trail, having been repeatedly trampled on, are too afraid to resurface. I absent-mindedly swing my lucky yellow umbrella – there is a story behind why it is lucky – around my index finger and secretly wish to have matching yellow gumboots (though the ground is no longer wet enough to think about wearing them).

As I near the haven that is my secret garden, I hear singing; it is like listening to a symphony played on the rims of wineglasses:

*“When the moon (the moon), it rises (it rises), we sing for her infinite role;
We sing in praise, in harmonious time, articulating her delicate soul.
Could we dance, we’d dance divine; purely to see, our darling shine.”*

I know they are the voices of Fred, Melody, Merry and Envy... but I have never heard them sing before. I feel like I have stumbled upon some covert musical gathering, not meant for mundane ears. The singing stops before I can begin to consider slowing to listen to the lyrics further – perhaps they can hear my crunching footsteps or feel the slight vibrations I create through the ground.

“Hey guys,” I greet nonchalantly.

“Emily!” Melody and Merry chorus. For one so quiet and sad, Melody certainly does take to the smaller things in life.

“An object today, you have brought, I see,” Merry states. At first I smirk but I cannot hold back my laughter at the syntax of her statement.

“You just sounded like Yoda!” I say, trying to contain my developing side-stitch.

Suddenly interested, Envy joins in; Fred however remains uninterested and stares into the distance.

“What is Yoda?” Envy asks. I forgot that these were flowers and not outside-dwellers...

“Oh... I’m sorry. Well, Yoda is a green character from a film known as *Star Wars* created by George Lucas—”

“Film?” Fred interjects, trying not to seem too interested.

Palming myself in the face I try to explain some things about life outside the garden. I talk about books and movies, and famous authors and directors like C.S Lewis and Steven Spielberg.

“And you read these movies?” Merry quizzes.

“Ha-ha, well not quite.”

I reflect upon the various modes of transport (including segways and wheels that one attaches to their shoes).

“Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Melody exclaims, floundering her petals about.

I introduce the different cultures and food, as well as music and art.

“Landscape painting sounds absolutely fantastic!” Fred bursts, unable to contain his hidden interest.

I even provide the awkward talk that a parent has with their coming-of-age child...

This left them with looks of incredulity, and beneath this facade, mirrored expressions of slight disgust. “*Oh. My. God,*” I hear the flowers whisper.

“So that *thing* is an um-ber-rell-a?” Envy queries.

“Yes, it is an *umbrella*. It is my lucky charm really,” I muse. Melody attempts to pronounce the word without drawing attention to herself.

“Would you care to tell us why it is lucky to you?” Merry insists.

Blushing, I realise that I never actually think about why it is lucky whenever I mention it, but nonetheless, I do have a story about it.

“Well, to be honest... I found it. The handle was protruding from the lower branches of a *Terminalia Melanocapra*. Oh, that’s a —”

“Black Almond tree,” Fred states, cutting in before Merry has the chance to show off.

“Yes! Anyway, it was fortunate that there was a park bench situated underneath the tree otherwise I would probably have had to jump and I cannot jump very high, ha-ha. The park bench was very old. I stood on the tips of my toes and grabbed at the nose of the umbrella but the chair started to wobble —”

“Oh, the horror...” Envy croons, feigning worried compassion.

“... and I felt like I was standing on the edge of the *Titanic* – that’s the historic ship I mentioned earlier. I managed to free the umbrella and as it slid free, like the sword from the stone, the bench collapsed,” I finish.

“Oh, no! Were you hurt, Emily?” Melody peeps from behind her petals.

“I grazed my elbow on a protruding root but the umbrella remained intact.”

“I still don’t understand why you would class that bright *stick* as lucky,” Envy sneers.

“Oh, yeah. It is lucky because it rained immediately after my fall and it allowed me to walk home completely unsaturated,” I state, smiling internally.

“That was the most terrible story I have ever heard,” Envy sputters in contempt.

“Now, now, Envy. There is no need to dismiss Emily’s story just because you do not like it. Remember, if you do not have anything nice to say then it is best to say nothing at all,” Merry responds, sage-like and calm.

Surprisingly, Fred is the next to speak. “Well I liked it,” he said.

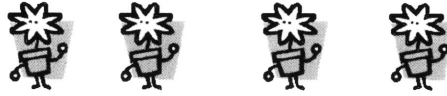
Melody begins to dance on the spot, swaying from side to side like one of those sound activated flowers you see in the windows of novelty stores. “Fred likes the story, Fred likes the story, Fred likes the story,” she sings. Her melodic tune reminds me of the singing I had heard earlier; the voices of the past resonate throughout my brain. Should I ask them about what I heard? Is it any of my business?



I decided to go with the blunt approach of just asking about their singing. Now I am wandering around the courtyard in search of something small to keep me busy while the flowers confer. Turning around, I notice that they are huddled and speaking in, despite my distance, a low whisper. They had been surprisingly cool when I asked them about it.

I walk down the winding, dilapidated cobblestone path towards the Oak tree, kicking loose bits of gravel as I go; my path is lit by the Hundreds and Thousands scattered about the sky. Looking towards the sky, I find myself thinking that each of those stars could have a story – one named for a lover, another a part of the zodiac circle, the other about to explode – and that, coincidentally, someone else could be thinking the exact same thing at this moment. There is something so beautiful about the

unknown, something unexplainable, yet unequivocally real. I realise now that perhaps I don't want to know how these flowers exist. I exist, therefore they exist.



"We have reached a decision," Merry dictates like a court jury representative.

"However, the vote was not immediately unanimous so you may have to bear with us. Fred, you may proceed."

"Why do I have to... fine. We have decided that we will show you what we mean when we sing instead of explaining it," he says half-heartedly.

"But are you prepared to stay out until sunrise?" asks Merry.

"Why do you make me explain things if you just cut me off, Merry?" Fred glares. Merry waves him off like an annoying fly. "Whatever, I don't care."

"I... yes, okay, I will stay out until sunrise." I don't understand why I must stay until dawn but it's not like my parents will notice. They will just think that I had a whim to do some early morning gardening or something. I realise that I have never come out to visit during the day. It is as if some subconscious force has kept me from doing so. I will stay out with them tomorrow seeing as I will already be out here. Wait, why sunrise?

As if reading my thoughts, Melody answers, "When the sun ascends and the sky starts to become a fresh-water blue, you will instantly understand. I promise. We promise."



"If there were nothing else to trouble us, the fate of the flowers would make us sad."

~John Lancaster Spalding (1840-1916)

I wake up with a jolt on the coarse ground to the screaming... like a thousand banshees... nightmarish, unnatural. Startled, I stand scraping off loose bits of soil that cling to my arms as if preening myself will make the sound stop.

It is sunrise. The sun ascends through the atmosphere in a twisted frenzy of light. No sound passes through my lips, nor do I even blink. The only sign that my body has reacted is the step I take, backward and unbalanced. My heel hooks a nearby root and I fall, landing on my palm and elbow in silent anguish. The screaming continues. My environmental companions flail in pain, the sound they emit is shrill, penetrating, agonising. Though the sun is rising, the atmosphere is becoming increasingly grey as if an invisible cloud is blanketing the Earth's surface. I continue to watch in stunned silence. Suddenly there is a burst in the sky and everything turns a vivid, cherry red as if someone has thrown a glass of wine against the world. Thin silver strands of matter fall around us that fizzle and hiss as they reach ground level, and dissolve into oblivion. Diverting my eyes from these strands, my attention returns to the flowers. Their petals burn with a fluoro haze of green and pink, and their stems are flaked and peeling.

What is happening? What do I do? Somebody, please help!

I still can't understand what is happening; my inertia with the current reality weighs me down. Slowly, one by one, each petal wilts from the heads of my friends who, still, writhe and cry in agony, helpless and dying. The Oak tree by the wall is a giant, raging purple flame and the surrounding vines thrash about like loose electrical cords. Is this apocalypse what they were waiting to show me?

CRACK.

Silence.

I am blinded by an intense silver curtain of light and smog. The coarse, shattered ground feels alien to me and as a result, I move around by my sense of smell. The garden no longer has the aroma of fresh leaves and soil; all that remains is an odour

that is acrid, brassy, cold, ejected, as if someone has fired a shot gun of fire-filled misery into reality. I allow my nose to guide me, just as I had once been led by touch, and stumble towards the strongest smell, where I assume the flowerbed is situated. The smog is smothering and bitter but the stench of burnt grass and ash is the most overwhelming of smells in the pungent air.

“Guys?” I manage to cough, my eyes watery and stinging. No reply. My voice reverberates off the smoky fog that is so thick it might as well be the limestone wall located elsewhere within the garden. I reach the bird bath with a painful thud. Though winded, I now know where I am. Five paces to the right of the bath and I should reach the patch where they usually lie. I clamber to my hands and knees and desperately search, patting the barren ground as a point of reference. Where are they? It’s like trying to see through a blizzard!

Curling into the foetal position, I surrender to this reality.



“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

~Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

The air begins to clear like a stage curtain revealing the final act after intermission. The sun perforates its way through the haze, a spotlight pursuing its actor. My eyes start to readjust and the scenery becomes clearer. But this is no stage, and there are no performers – contrary to what Shakespeare believes. This is life, surreal and unpredictable not rehearsed, nor performed.

They are gone.

The garden is a wasteland. Except... wait.

A fully mature Dandelion –*Taraxacum Officinale* – sits comfortably to one side of the aged bird bath. How? How is it that a weed as delicate as a Dandelion can survive

what has just occurred? Especially a mature one with its little parachuting seeds vulnerable to the elements. The air is returning to a fresher, morning-like state with only a slight stain of decay lingering. Visibility is maximised. I manage to summon a small amount of energy and drift back toward the centre of the garden to study this strange miracle.

“Hello little one,” I say, talking to the Dandelion out of habit. It does not reply, this ordinary plant. Absent-mindedly, I pluck it from its harsh domain and bring it closer to eye level. The white of the Dandelion contrasts dramatically with the brown of its former habitat, yet still looks as if it belongs. I remember reading somewhere that this flower is a symbol of persistence and strong will. Perhaps this is true. Perhaps I am merely searching for justification.

My delirium allows me to see, instead of fluffy umbrella-shaped seeds, minute dancing sprites that seem to giggle and wave flirtatiously. Their wings flutter rapidly, unable to detach from the head of the Dandelion; they spin like a jewellery box ballerina. A slight breeze brushes my shoulders and one of the petite dancers falls, her wings too small to compete with the gust. I snap out of my ecstatic hallucination and remember that these mischievous fairies are nothing but a construct, nothing but seeds.

Taking a firm hold of the soft but prickly stem, I line the head of the lone surviving flower with my mouth and I blow. My worries are carried away in the flurry of feathered, white eyelashes. I watch as they fly away over the desert and off to create a new life elsewhere. Now they too, are gone.

With no other distractions, I stand and pivot slowly to examine the rest of what was once the garden. A graveyard, empty, cold. I stand isolated with my foot resting on the base of the cement bird bath that I had never really taken notice of until today.

Staring at the shrivelled, burnt remains of my friends I begin to reminisce. Vignettes from the past filter through my mind, but one in particular catches my attention like a flyer hitting the windscreen of a passing car – I remember the lyrics to their song.

The moon is the key.

I think I can make sense of what has happened now.



“Human beings, like plants, grow in the soil of acceptance, not in the atmosphere of rejection.”

~John Powell (1963)

“Emily... It’s quarter past two in the afternoon...” my father croons. “You’ve been sleeping until this late for days. Are you... okay?”

“Mmmm,” I manage to reply through my lethargy as I roll to face the wall.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” he says, leaving the room.

Wait, did he say 2:15... PM? Sighing, I slink out of bed only to slump onto the floor. I have been sleeping a lot over the past few days... I think it’s time I revisit the garden. That’s if it is a garden again. Forcing myself to stand, I dress quickly and go downstairs to have what I call post-brunch. Only a few more hours and then I will go to the garden.

Before I reach the bottom of the stairwell I hear from the kitchen, “It. Is. ALIIIIIVE!”
Oh, Dad. Who doesn’t love lame Dad jokes? Though I am tired from over-sleeping, I can still muster up enough of a laugh to make him smile.

“Where’s Mum?” I ask, not particularly caring.

“Out,” he mutters.

“Sorry?”

“She’s gone on another one of her spontaneous trips,” he replies mechanically.

“Okay.”

Coating my Weet-Bix in a mountain of sugar – complete with miniature avalanches and all – I take solace in the fact that Mother will be away for a while. I can relax,

Dad can relax, and our fridge can relax. Weet-Bix isn't the best meal for post-brunch but there always seems to be a box-full in the pantry.

"You're a good girl, Em," Dad says, more to himself than to me as he walks into the lounge room.

Thanks, Dad.

I have a few more hours until it is dark so I'd better catch up on the homework that I have been sleeping through. I nonchalantly switch on the radio just to fill the empty void of the kitchen only to hear Julia Gillard's obnoxious voice. It looks like Dad has set the station to *ABC News Radio* again... Here, here politics, here, here.



***"At dawn I asked the lotus,
'What is the meaning of life?'
Slowly she opened her hand
with nothing in it."
~Debra Woolard Bender (1999)***

After telling Dad that I am going to do some late night gardening, I close the flyscreen door and force back images of the 'garden' I last saw. Cautiously, I progress down the familiar, worn out path, using the moon as my guide. The smell of that horrific morning is no longer recognisable but the memory persistently kicks at my temporal lobe. Its daunting presence will forever be a blemish on my perception of life; my rose coloured glasses are cracked by truth. Rounding the last bend, I decide to close my eyes in fear of what I shall see.

"*It's Emily!*" I hear a familiar, petite voice whisper in excitement.

"Hello, Emily," Merry says slowly and affectionately.

Behind my eyelids, colours dance like twirling ribbon and form vignettes of my little friends. I hold onto this imagery and reluctantly open the blinds that cover my eyes.

"Oh! You are here again!" I exclaim, almost skipping on the spot.

"You *are* a strange girl," Envy states, rolling her eyes, "but I am glad to see you are happy."

"I was so worried that I wouldn't see you guys again!" I say, a tear of joy sliding from my right eye.

"You will always see us again, Emmy, even if we aren't physically here," Melody smiles, clearly suppressing the urge to pull herself from the ground and hug my ankle.

I turn my attention to Fred who has yet to speak. His crimson-red petals have a frailty about them, as if an inner strength no longer holds them firm. However, as a Hibiscus, he still holds a majestic presence. There is a sudden solemn silence.

"Fred asked me to tell you: Thank you for showing an interest in him... he will never forget. He is proud to have known you, Emily Winestone," Merry recites.

"What...? How...? I never told you my surname... What do you mean *known*?"

"Goodbye, Emily," Merry says, her voice echoing. Then she too, is as lifeless as Fred.

"Melody, what is happening!? Why is this happening?" I bumble, my hands beginning to shake.

"We come at a time of need, Emmy. You see, you were unhappy and She had noticed this so—"

"She?" I interrupt.

"Yes, she whom we sing for. She, the moon, gives us life and decides when this gift is needed – that is why we were here when you came to the garden," Melody chirps.

I sit quietly as the little Bluebell's words flutter about from my ears to my heart. Goosebumps form on my skin; anxious excitement fills my soul.

"It is time for me to leave too," she sings, "Oh, how I shall miss you so!"

"I shall miss you too, my Melody. I hope we will meet again," I reply whole-heartedly.

Melody begins to hum a familiar tune. As the sound becomes distant I remember that it is the melody I had sung when I first visited the garden. I shed another silent tear. *Thank you.*

“... But wait!!! What happened the other morning? *So much screaming...*” I burst.

Melody gives one final wink before becoming an average plant in an ordinary flower patch. Left unanswered and alone, I lie next to the row of botanical non-beings. From this low angle I can smell each individual fragrance of the flowers. There’s timid, benevolent Melody – she has a sweet perfume; stoic and wise Merry, she smells like yellow candy; moody yet kind with a hint of musky orange is Envy, and then there’s Fred, just Fred, who is deceptively apathetic. He has a scent that is intoxicating to my senses, a scent I cannot describe. None of the flowers smell the way they should. Perhaps it is my imagination.

This is the end I suppose. I shan’t forget the countless evenings I have spent out here, nor the feeling of elation that I got each time I stepped into the garden’s threshold, greeted by open... petals. I bend down to inhale the aroma of this bouquet one final time, remembering that smell is the closest linked sense to memory. I pause at Fred, – the Hibiscus rather – the flower I had been most intrigued by when I first made my way into this modern Wonderland. I prolong my goodbye and savour the present.



“Scenery is fine – but human nature is finer.”

~John Keats (1818)

Poof. A pinkish cloud erupts from the Hibiscus’ core as I breathe in. It encircles my head and enters the cavities of my nose, a genie escaping its lamp only to inhabit a new one – much like a hermit crab in search of a new shell. An overwhelming sense of tiredness takes hold of me; I lie down peacefully and succumb to the unexpected fatigue. Yawning quietly, I cushion my head with my folded arms, blink twice through blurred vision and close my eyes.



I’m flying?

No, I’m falling. Upward? Forward?

Thump.

I hit the ground... or the sky... and find that I am surrounded by teal trees and strawberry stones, lilac leaves and there’s a lime lawn chair. It’s over there! – By the brook of running books. The lawn chair barks and wags its tail, inviting me to sit down. “Such a comfy seat,” I think though it sounds as if I have spoken aloud.

“Greetings and salutations, Emily,” a familiar deep voice sounds.

Beside me in another chair with twitching cat ears upon the back of it, sits Fred.

“Hello, Fred,” I greet casually.

“My feet are dreadfully cold,” he says, pointing to his curled up roots.

I take out my earrings, watch as they turn into miniature shoes, and hand them to Fred.

“Much obliged, my dear,” he returns.

“You aren’t talking the way you usually do, Fred... It’s much more formal,” I say perplexedly.

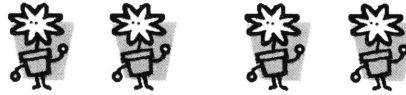
“It’s your mind. How do you think we came to be?” he states.

“Melody said it was because of the moon,” I reply.

“Yes, but was it really?”

Suddenly Fred vanishes and the sound of Dad's calm voice reverberates through space. The trees start to shake and a few stones climb the nearest trunks while others scuttle about in confusion.

I begin to fall again.



I open my eyes to find that I am leaning against the trunk of the Oak tree, my clothing stained with grass and mud. In my hand are four, slim flowers – A Daffodil, a Tiger Lily, a Bluebell, and a Hibiscus.

“I don’t recall picking these. Where on Earth did they come from?” I say to myself.

“Eeeeeeeeeemilyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy,” Dad calls from a distance.

“Around the corner, Dad!” I say as I brush the dirt from my knees and hands.

“Hey, kiddo. Come inside, it’s getting cold... Ha-ha, look at you!” he laughs, pointing to my dusty jeans. “Pick me some flowers did you?” he teases, gesturing towards my hand.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t,” I say playfully.

Dad puts his arm around my shoulder and steers me towards the exit from which we once entered.

“Let’s have ice cream for tea...” he says as we reach the edge of the maze that leads into the garden.

“You scream, I scream, we all scream for ice cream!” we sing in unison.

I turn around in a subconscious reflex and stare into the maze towards the metal archway. “Beyond that frame is my garden,” I think to myself, “I can’t explain it but I feel like I’ve spent a lifetime there”. Oh, that’s right! I have a bunch of flowers... They shall go in a vase as delicately detailed as each of their petals, and I’ll get Dad to put them on the highest sill so that they can overlook the garden!

If flowers could live like people, I’m sure they would like that very much – to be able to see the beauty of a garden from a different perspective. After all, a garden is always magical, even from afar.

Reflection Statement

The Root of Tranquillity

*"Scenery is fine – but human nature is finer."*¹ ~John Keats (1818)

My Major Work, entitled *The Root of Tranquillity*, is a short story that attempts to subtly explore the influences of relationships on an individual and what stems from them. Relationships are a complicated phenomenon as well as a universal theme, thus any reader, not just young teenagers, can relate to my protagonist, a thirteen year old girl named Emily. Not unlike many classic stories, allegories and fairytales, I endeavoured to break down the complex and make it simple so that both the young and the old may enjoy my story. If my story were to be seen as a fairytale it would be a fractured one, however it is neither as it does not take place in 'a realm far, far away' and does not end in 'happily ever after'.

The inspirations for my Major Work are predominantly personal in that I love being outside at night, particularly in a garden with my camera and my imagination – what could be better? In Advanced English (Year 12), we studied the concept of Belonging and we were asked to write a descriptive response on where we felt we belonged. I wrote about getting lost in my own world whilst reading outside, being surrounded by the fresh air and enjoying the sounds of the nearby lake. The seed that was my idea was planted then.

Literary influences for my work include Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*² (1865), whereby the idea of talking flowers bloomed in my mind; *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett; and Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* (1943). Each, in one way or another, explores personal identity through relationships created by natural entities or circumstances in a 'secret garden' – "A garden wall at home may enclose more secrets than the Great Wall of China."³ During my childhood I had watched the Disney film adaptation and various other representations of *Alice in Wonderland/ Through the Looking Glass*, however,

¹ *Letter to Benjamin Bailey*, 13th March 1818, John Keats.

² As well as *Alice in Wonderland*, 1865, Lewis Carroll.

³ *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, page xxiv (introduction).

reading the novel as an adult had given me a greater insight to the meaning of the story whereby “words mean more than we mean to express when we use them”⁴ and left everlasting mark in my mind – it is okay to dream and be as peculiar in doing so as you like. My story however, deviates from the absurd and logical atomism that Carroll initialises throughout his novels.⁵ This is because of the various ambiguities within my story that lead to a postmodern end whereby doubt remains.

Other literature that has aided in the creation of my Major Work are those studied in Year 11 and 12 Advanced English and English Extension One. From Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*⁶ (1993) came the idea for quotations (an epigraph) at the beginning of each section which I found most appropriate for my narrative. Just as Proulx uses the motif of knots as an opening for a chapter, I use garden quotes/references to adhere to the theme of my story, each hinting to the content within the related segment.

Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), writes by the senses, particularly smell.⁷ Wholistically, I attempt to rely on each of the five senses equally and use metaphors⁸ as an important part of ‘showing’ as opposed to ‘telling’. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516 [Year 11 English Extension One]), is another text that helped shape the composition of my Major Work. *The Root of Tranquillity* presents not just a utopian aspect but also a contrasting dystopia – you can’t have one without the other – the garden being the utopia for my protagonist, contrasted with the dystopia created within the ‘home’. Another significant novel for me was Bryce Courtenay’s *Jessica* (1998). The family dynamics of my narrative are similar to Jessica’s; the mother is harsh and biased and the father is kind and reserved.

The form of a short story was chosen to express my idea as it can be read in a single sitting but can still engage the reader. A short story usually contains a direct beginning, problem and conclusion (resolved conflict); however, my narrative deviates from the conventional structure, as not all the issues are completely resolved and the conclusion is left open-ended for the reader to interpret. My Major

⁴ *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, 1898, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood.

⁵ Excluding the dream sequence. Not everything has to be logically atomised.

⁶ Currently being studied (Year 12, Extension 1).

⁷ Much like his poetry: “The Cinnamon Peeler”, 1982, Michael Ondaatje.

⁸ Eg. “The sun perforates its way through the haze, a spotlight pursuing its actor.” – *The Root of Tranquillity*.

Work is also split into juxtaposing sections⁹ – one section revolving around the dysfunctional home life is contrasted with the carefree, magical garden. This allows for a transition between the subplot (Emily's family relationship/ indoors) and the main plot (Emily's relationship with the flowers/ the outdoors) as well as aiming to provoke different responses from the reader. The genre that I chose to write in is Magic Realism as it attempts to convey events in a realistic manner whilst also involving elements of the surreal. This is a prominent feature of my story in that there are talking flowers¹⁰, moving vines and other fantastical elements. Literature that contains elements of magic realism that I have read and have modelled my story include the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series by J.K Rowling; Cassandra Clare's trilogy *The Mortal Instruments*¹¹ (2007-current); *Life of Pi*¹² (2001) by Yann Matel; and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823).

The intended audience for my Major Work is early teens from around 13 to 16 years of age. However, while it was written for this demographic, it is possible for people of all ages to be able to respond it and make their own interpretations.¹³ I hoped that various allusions to literature and ideologies such as Seamus Heaney's poetry¹⁴ and Renee Descartes' theory "Cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am" would add depth. Another attempt to appeal to all readers was by using not just the common names for plants but also the scientific names. This allows for a more intellectual mood/tone.

A recurring motif that I have used within *The Root of Tranquillity* is that of music – "It is like listening to a symphony played on the rims of wineglasses." I hoped to create a magical and musical tone and juxtapose this with the insecurity of the family segments. Another motif is the Arts, particularly performing. I allude to Jaques' speech "All the World's a Stage" from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1600). As an

⁹ The idea stemmed from *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll; as well as previous HSC short stories such as *Das Ich* by Naomi Parkinson and *How to Build a Scientist* by Joshua Sidgwick.

¹⁰ Animals and the like that have human personalities in an otherwise realistic setting are a significant element in relation to allegories and magic realism texts.

¹¹ "He could smell her mortality, the sweet rot of corruption." Chapter one, book one (*The City of Bones*, 2007, Cassandra Clare).

¹² Cannibalistic trees and animals with human qualities (eg. a Bengal Tiger named Richard Parker).

¹³ A text that does this is the classic *The Wind in the Willows*, 1908, Kenneth Grahame.

¹⁴ "Acrid, brassy, genital [cold], ejected." *The Strand at Lough Beg*, 1979, Seamus Heaney.

almost didactic composition, my story contradicts the theory that the world is a stage.¹⁵

Additional research that I have undertaken in order to complete my Major Work includes the exploration of scientific names of vegetation (from a plethora of websites), the conventions of a short story, philosophical study on existence¹⁶ and idiosyncratic humanism, and the inertia one feels when being forced to welcome sudden change.¹⁷ Observations on life have given me enough information in order to reflect upon dysfunction within a family so minimal research was required for the theme of disconnection and alienation; however, some extra investigation was done as background research via the internet.

Due to extensive research and personal understanding, my Major Work *The Root of Tranquillity* has blossomed into a flower of creation whereby the theme of relationships and personal identity has been explored, and the surreal has blended with reality. My Major Work is written in anticipation that one will enjoy its quirkiness and relate to the emotions that the protagonist feels. If not:

*"I'll simply have to put up with two or three caterpillars if I want to meet some butterflies."*¹⁸

¹⁵ "...contrary to what Shakespeare believes... This is life, surreal and unpredictable, not rehearsed, nor performed." — *The Root of Tranquillity*.

¹⁶ Renee Descartes: "I think, therefore I am."

¹⁷ Change: Area of Study. Year 11 Advanced English: *The Reader*, 1995, Bernhard Schlink; *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951, J. D. Salinger.

¹⁸ *The Little Prince*, 1943, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, page 34 – the talking flower.