

Jade Wilson – Secondary Schools Division, 3rd Place

Archaeological

Tuesday

The river boils in my throat.

The teacher turns his head to me expectantly. I rub the gap between my collar bones, looking towards the school gate, and ask him about sums.

It is more or less what the boiling wants to know.

By the gate, the bones of a sparrow have been slowly grounded. Before it, the wing of a seagull pressed into the dirt by nine days' worth of student travellers. White feathers now solidly brown. Unwitting conservators have pressed vape-capsule skeletons and bottle caps into the mud beside them.

When we are gone, this place will be a treasure trove. How long does it take to make fossils?

There's a kid who likes to stand by the gate, back pressed against the rounded stone wall next to it. Sometimes I think he will lean on it so much that you will be able to see his shape against the stone. He's here early today, a half-eaten apple in his left hand. Drying fingerprints cover the stone face by his hip, nature's tea towel greedily absorbing the juice that he has smeared there.

In three years, there hasn't been a day where I've left without his send-off. Today, he turns from me. The wind pulls a curtain of dark hair across his eyes, shielding a portion of the bruise across his right cheek. It is yellow around the edges now, not as purple as last Friday. I don't linger on it, don't follow his hand up to his face as he pulls a too-close strand away from his greening eyelid. My eyes slide blankly over the wet that the action rubs onto the side of his nose. I pass, disregarding any similarity to the red-green liquid seeping from the apple in his fist. He looks better. I think he likes apples.

The river follows me home, rolling through the gutter.

In the grass by my gate, the wind has tangled the broken remains of a bottle. Already, parts of the glass have been drawn across the footpath, crushed by boots on their way home. It won't save. I nudge the particles towards the gutter. The glass melts into the river there, caught quickly in its hands and dragged away.

Inside, Mum has left her mail on the kitchen table again. I put it on the bench between the fruit bowl and an empty mug from someone's morning coffee. The kitchen is a mess.

Around nine, I am halfway through washing dishes. The crisp click of the front door punctuates the music in my headphones. Dad brushes through the hallway, joins Mum at the table behind me. She's been there since she got home, tanning before the screen of her work computer.

Dishwater swirls around my wrists. Mum and Dad are talking. Mum's voice is rising. A knife soaking in the basin brushes my thumb. Someone pushes Mum's laptop shut. I pull my hand away from the blade, splashing the front of my shirt. My hands are wet and I can't change the volume of my music. Their voices dig into my headphone wires. I pull a plate into the sink. Behind me, something smashes to the ground.

The river is in the dishwater. It pulls at my hands, seeps into the speakers wrapped around my ears.

The breaking sound vibrates through my spine, vibrates through the river. I am careful to be still as footsteps behind me retreat, and I am left with Mum's mail, the fruit bowl, and the broken thing.

I finish the dishes, gather the ceramic pieces of the empty mug. The shards clink together in a cardboard cereal box that's been waiting to be recycled. I will take it out tomorrow. Already, a piece of me glistens on one jagged, ceramic portion. The box's printed bowl of cornflakes smudges red as I pick it up.

Band-Aids in my bedside drawer. Biodegradable cotton ones that I will put on the compost heap after use. They are soft against me.

Wednesday

On Wednesday, I leave class a couple minutes early, bored with study. The boy isn't at the gate. I look down the road for him, towards the dairy, where he might have gone to get something to eat. A gum wrapper skids across the pavement, wind shrugging non-committedly at his absence. The river traces the wrapper's path.

Someone has dropped a can tab from an energy drink just off where he normally is. One end of it has been pushed into the dirt, so that it stands upright, catching the sun. A slight dent in it pushes the light into my eyes as I move closer, closing my hand around it. It sits uncomfortably against my bandaged cut, so I shift it into my pocket.

The corner of the seagull's wing lifts up slightly. Its feathers are slightly browner today. I am careful to step over it as I pass. On the other side of the gate, I wait several minutes for him, hand on one of the rounded stones. That gum wrapper continues to dance, flipping closer and closer to my feet.

At home, I take the box of ceramic parts into the backyard. The wind whips against the empty washing line. I pick a tree by the fence. One that has waxy green leaves with pale undersides. My shoes scuff the dirt under it until the ground curves, revealing travelling roots. I tip the box over the hole, and the broken mug falls. One piece splits in two on impact. They gleam against the dirt. I fish the can tab out of my pocket and throw it in as well. It clinks twice.

The grass folds under my knees as I bend. Favouring my un-cut hand, I place the can tab beside the broken pieces, press the mug's handle into the dirt and pack wet earth around the delicate line that circles the mug grip. When they find it, I want them to think that it was beautiful.

All of the mug pieces are buried together. They will know it was broken regardless.

Thursday

The boy is still not there. In the mornings, he likes to get chips from the dairy, eats them while he watches us arrive. The grey stone faces of the wall are dark without salty fingertips wiped across them. They eye me as I pass. They say nothing.

There is a maths test during period four. From my seat, I can see the stone walls. Between questions, I glance towards them. I am far enough to imagine that they dented inwards in his spot, reserving it for him. Question 4, grey stone. Question 5, grey stone. They give no answers.

I am out of class as soon as the last bell rings. He is not there. Leaf spines, petrified gum and sparrow bones curve around his space. The stones do not. My body parts the stream of shoes through the gate. They rush over the skeletons, pulling wispy strands away from the centre line of the seagull's feathers. A pair of black-soled feet walk across his place, blurring the outline of a shoe print in the mud, just below the wall.

The river trickles down my arms. With it, dark pieces of grit.

More of the glass bottle outside the house has been pulled away. I clean my arms in the bathroom sink, sort Mum's mail into piles. There's a few little chips left from the mug that I must have missed on Tuesday. I kneel to collect them and catch sight of green under the fridge.

An apple from the fruit bowl. The side of it caved in, split on the hardwood floor. It can only have been there for a couple of days. I wet a cloth, lift the apple, drag damp fabric over its resting place. Juice from its split pools in my hand, sticky and cool. The bandage over my finger swells with the scent of orchards.

Friday

Someone has kicked the seagull wing out of the dirt. It lies bent against the wall.

I try to dip my fingers into the river, it shifts and moves away from me. That sweet, sticky feeling of apple persists. The compost heap holds three biodegradable bandages.

Monday

A weekend and a school day done. The seagull wing has shaped to the curved stones at the base of the wall. I want the boy to come back, so that I can show it to him.

I still haven't seen him.

Friday

Gum wrapper, vape capsule, grey-stone grit. No boy. None of his footprints left. No space for him in the stone. None for me either, really, but I stand there, waiting for him.

I spit seed after apple seed into the gutter by the school gate.

The river moves determinedly around them.