

Shima Jack – Secondary Schools Division, 1st Place

Muscle Memory

The black and white keys are mountains and valleys.

My hands are giant spiders, waltzing. They close the distance between each other, cross over, move apart. My right hand climbs up the untouched snow mountain of the highest keys – the clink of glass, the shapes of sunlight through water, fairy footsteps. My left plays a rhythm – full, repetitive, home.

Nothing could ever belong to me as much as this does. My cascade of butterflies pouring up towards the sky, climbing, climbing –

My left-hand spider trips. I stop playing.

The wrong note hangs, violent, in my piano room.

My mother is reading. I come into the kitchen, which is lit up by slanting slabs of morning light. I put out my right-hand spider and let it twirl in the sun. She looks up, smiles. There's peppermint tea in a travel mug on the counter for me. She's heard it helps with mental focus.

Why peppermint? I ask, just to hear it.

Her mouth opens. She glances at the mug. I thought you liked peppermint.

I take it with me on my way to school. Cold air grazes my cheeks, turns them raw. I tip the travel mug and let the steaming tea pour out onto the wet, black pavement as I walk. Half of it is gone before I stop.

I hold it hard to my chest, so hard it hurts.

It's not a good thermos – warmth seeps into my fingers.

School is a crawling anthill.

I'm not good at maths, English, or science. My friend Millie is a maths genius, but only just scraping through English. Sometimes it's fair.

In music class, I perform a modern piece: 'Papillon', by Johannes Motschmann. We have a relief teacher – she gushes over my natural talent, hands me a flyer for a piano competition in Auckland. There's prize money. It would look horribly good on a university application.

There's a special cabinet for my sheet music, a portrait of Satie, and an expensive piano stool. My mother moved the piano into this room when I was ten years old.

A singular room in our house dedicated to my practice.

My piano is placed between me and the door. Sometimes I feel like it is protecting me. Sometimes I feel like it is a monster, grinning a white-toothed grin, with my mother at the door behind it.

I feel like that more often.

My mother opens the door now, making me jump. She's holding something in her hand. The flyer.

Stupid. Stupid. Why did I leave it lying around?

She wants to know if I'm going to do the competition, reading it as she stands there.

"No," I say.

I could do the latest piece I've been working on – what's-it-called – it would fit perfectly with the requirements! Should we do it? She could go up to Auckland with me –

"I'm trying to practice. Can you please leave!"

She looks up at me for the first time. She's soft when she asks what's wrong. Why am I being so rude to her?

"I'm in the middle of learning something and you interrupted me. Please leave." I'm yelling now. I don't know why.

She doesn't. She comes closer, rests her hands on the glossy surface of the piano. She's calm. She's trying to help me with the competition. Why am I yelling? Why am I using that tone with her?

I don't know. I want to smash my fists down on the keys, scare her with the sudden discordant sound.

My mother's hands aren't spiders. They've never been. She uses them for painting now, or baking, or sewing. She's changed a lot.

Why can't I?

Listen – if I'm worried about time for practice, we could cancel going up to Grandma's on the weekend. She would understand, she knows –

“Get. Out.” My voice is so loud. Violent. It hangs in the room.

My mother stops. We stare at each other. “What's wrong?” she asks, quiet, like I'm fragile. She isn't yelling back. The air in the room hangs thick as sludge.

Why isn't she yelling?

My eyes move to her right hand. The smooth dry palm, slightly calloused, warm.

I didn't feel that her hand was dry or calloused or warm when it collided fast and hard, with intent to hurt, *slap*

to my own little spider-hands, perched upon the piano, or my leg, or my face, my child-body's blood rushing tender and hot to the skin. I remember my old bedroom, the coldness of a damp pillow in the dark, the mercifulness of solitude, and of that stinging mask of blurry tears as she screamed in my face, breath hot, so I didn't have to see her.

I'm back in my piano room.

“Mum,” I say. I am surprised to hear the shake in my own voice.

Silence. It rings in my ears.

“Do you remember what you did to me when I was little?”

The words feel like a cliff-jump, dark water gaping below.

I know everything by the way she doesn't need to ask – her face crumples like paper.

In that moment, she doesn't look like my mother. Or anyone's mother. I feel like I've never seen her before.

Every spilling-over tear is a drop of gasoline for whatever is roaring inside of me.

Imagine a statue of a deity turning human – seeing the slow blush of blood to skin beneath the cold marble, the stone melting away like white wax. Imagine a cicada shedding its armoured shell, and crawling out, pale and weak, to recover. Soft places for me to hurt. No words come, though they sit in metal chambers in my throat.

I wish she would stop crying.

I wish she had never started.

The next morning the sky wears a coat of grey, and the ground wears one of white.

I stand in my piano room. It is cold, silent. I imagine if I lifted the lid, I would find the keys stiff and glistening with ice.

I imagine the joints of my fingers stiff and glistening with ice.

She's not in the kitchen.

There's a travel mug full of tea on the counter. Beside it sits a pair of red woollen gloves.