

**‘Halcyon’ by Eden Annesley**  
**Third runner up**  
**2021 Young Writers Award**

**Halcyon**

When I was eleven, my Aunt Winnie taught me about the halcyon bird. It was years after we moved to the ocean, where the sea-wind was ferocious against my skin, and licked my hair raw with salt. She claimed it was a romantic tale of lovers, inspired by Greek myth: I thought it was a curious excuse for disharmony. When you live by the ocean, you’ll realise exactly how piercing their cries are, like heaven’s racket. But I could be mistaken: Winnie is well-travelled, and I only learnt the basics of French at school.

Sometimes, as a dutiful aunt, she would sprout random advice about life, mostly through witty anecdotes or poetry. Often, it was at the beach, and I’d have forgotten my towel, and be famished, beyond good conversation. When the sun set, I’d push my feet in the sand and say I needed to go home. Winnie would smile distractedly and I would think about an evening of solitude and the rattle of the kitchen door at half-past two. But I was a creative kid: I told myself stories, mostly re-workings of reality in which I inhabited a glorious garden of orbed roses and curtains of ivy. Winnie would be setting tea for two, and I would gift her with a token of my affection. Then those condemned birds would begin to screech. The ocean swell collapsed and crimped, and I would see myself in the mirror of the kitchen window. Winnie was always the flower, and I was the mud and soil beneath – or maybe I’ve gotten it all wrong.

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Aunt Winnie tells the tale of my birth: there was weedy girl in a ward with a midwife, white-faced, clutching the hand of her sister. Winnie wanted her to call the child Prudence, if it was a girl, and Bartholomew, if it was a boy, superior religious choices, and thereby ironic. My mother was nineteen: she’d been working in the north, growing bananas, spending evenings beneath the slashing white moon, seeing the rockpools bubble with nocturnal animation. At least, I like to imagine this flippant tableau as my mother’s – and thereby my own – story. So the baby gurgled forth, gritty and tainted in

a gruesome second-flesh. Apparently, my cries were so loud that a room was designated in our apartment for utter silence. Below, Winnie describes, were the red, greasy lights of nightclubs and the coarse roar of slapping glasses. Maybe that's why we moved to the ocean – or perhaps it was another reason. Winnie never said.

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I remember when I was much older, venturing into my mother's room. It was a netherworld of scattered laundry and hair-ribbons, which were one of her curious accessories. There were two indents in the unmade bed, and a slip of light between the curtains. I felt the fresh air suffocate between the jowls of the tumbling wardrobe.

On her bedside, she had a single pot-plant, a dreamy succulent: in her top drawer, I found only a folded white handkerchief and an envelope, marked with the distinctive words, *Adrian Underford*.

I was by no means a naturally sinful child, but I was intrigued by this discarded object, which seemed a communiqué of a deeper secret. Inside, there was a photograph of young adults at a party, both men and women, smiles encased in a speckle of dusty grime.

I heard a lump of thunder crackle overhead, and I left rather suddenly, the photograph neatly returned. I caught a startling sight through the window: it was a halcyon bird, outlined like tar against the flashing sky.

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It must have been around this time that my heart was set upon a pet. I most wanted a cat, because they emanated a comfortable languor, but Winnie disagreed. She suggested a bird. I could see the benefit: it had some resemblance of a voice, and could become my inquisitor, hunting down my enemies and extracting deadly secrets.

“Do you think he could have babies?” I said. “And I could care for the birdlets and help them into new homes?”

Winnie nodded avidly. “And you could call it Halcyon – to bring the best of Mediterranean luck.”

I suppose this was the first time I heard the origin tale of the Greek lovers, which went something as follows: there was a mortal man and a goddess-woman. In a tale of tragic love, the husband was claimed by the sea, and the wife drowned herself in despair. The gods, struck by her devotion, transformed her into a halcyon bird to patrol the oceans.

“That’s a rather frightening story,” I said. Winnie agreed, but she said the luck Halcyon brought would remedy all fear and doubts. I believed her then, but I was growing, and ideas were floating here and there, obsolete before they were conceived. But now, I do like watching the seagulls tearing about the horizon, crying like mad things: sometimes, it even makes me smile.

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When I see my mother’s shadow, it makes me imagine her second self, an almost intangible imprint of her personality: like there is a part I can feel patter beneath my fingertips.

I was walking home from school, along the seaside façade, and thinking about the strange poetry we had read at school: something about fate. I noticed the paint was peeling in brown strips along our front porch, and the weatherboards tinged a phantom-white by the accumulation of dust and sand.

I walked inside and noticed an instant pungency of smoke. The screen door flapped shut behind me. I walked towards the kitchen, finding a hastily scribbled note:

*Frank’s coming for dinner. Don’t be late.*

Her writing was a jagged scrawl of black ink. When I closed my eyes, I could imagine her composing this note, the imprint of her hand upon the page.

Outside, I noticed the flowers Winnie and I had coaxed into life several years previously, now a shrivelled lump of salinity. The grass stretched wide, to the backs of houses, then out onto the high cliffs.

I don’t remember leaving the room, but I must have, because I found myself back in my mother’s room, near her bedside. The envelope had disappeared: now there was a set of grungy keys and several heavy metal rings. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine they were precious gems. But imagination could never compensate for reality. I left the room undisturbed behind me.

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I remember during winter, when icicles would crust over the grass and send the sea sparkling, that I was in charge of the washing. The amount of underwear had increased exponentially: I never realised how many shades of boxers there could be. But I distinctly recall one of these days, because I made a terrible mistake. A gale ripped its jaws into the town. The world became a fallen palette of slate grey, punctuated by brash colours of sock patterns and my own fleshy hands. I tried to hang the sheets, which collided in spectral matrimony, whipping between my face and the sky high above.

And then – I must have been holding my mother’s favourite shirt – a great needle of wind descended upon me. The garment was flung high into the air. I shouted out, because it was her favourite, an angelic white. It sailed high into the air, crackling and swaying like a bird. I ran along the yard, but by the time I had reached the fence, it had disappeared completely.

I never confessed to the sin, but fortunately, my mother never asked. Perhaps it was better this way, letting the silence speak its volumes.

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It must have been a few months later when I heard sounds from the bedroom. I had no habit of prying in places I was unwanted, but I needed a break from chores. I knew at once it was not Winnie and my mother: these were hushed voices of lover’s tongues, and I only paused out of vague curiosity for what such conversation could reveal.

“You never speak about him,” said a male voice, “and yet you keep his godawful photo underneath your pillow?”

There was a grunt, and swearing, and I stopped still.

“You honestly expect a fella to take you seriously?” The voices had begun to broil: I heard the birds outside swoop low and cry their dreadful songs.

“Of course I’ve moved on,” said a female voice. “I’ve just...”

“Kept a souvenir of the ride?” sneered the male voice. “But you’ve already got one, in that pathetic child... what’s her name supposed to be?”

“That has no effect on us,” said the woman. “You don’t have to love her.”

“Sure I don’t. She creeps me out, spying around like a rat.”

“For God’s sake, Frank, can’t you shut up the complaints for one moment? I’ll get rid of the photo, if it’s that important.”

The man snarled something under his breath, and my mother drifted on in conversation. I can’t exactly remember what she said, but there was a faint memory that arose, the mysterious utterance of Underford. But then again, perhaps I was mistaken. I returned to my room, watching the sunset glide across the horizon, and hearing the birds disturbing cries echo along the ocean.

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Winnie – who was still my aunt in blood and spirit – once took me on holidays. It must have been several years after that incident, because I was taller and had cut my hair boyishly short. We went to a nearby town for dinner, a seaside resort restless and half-

conceived: the restaurant was a junction of bottled flowers, beach towels and French wine. I grimaced when I tasted the stuff, but Winnie sighed in contentment. I sipped my water and Winnie didn't quite meet my eye.

"How was the honeymoon?" she asked.

"Expensive, from the looks of the postcard," I said. "Bali costs a bomb these days."

Winnie nodded. She chewed her steak, ruminating: I saw her lips twist into the unspeakable question.

"And the boys?"

"They're healthy," I said. "You know she always wanted twins. Herbert and Vincent, they're called."

Winnie smiled. "I guess you've got your wish, Al. You always wanted another child in the house."

"I wanted a bird, once," I said, laughing. "You wanted to call him Halcyon!"

"Yes, I remember," said Winnie. Her face drooped a little and I realised suddenly that grey flecks had arisen amidst her curls. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you more often. You deserved more."

"It's not like I'm alone," I said. "I can still hear the birds from my bedroom, after all. They make a real racket."

Most matters were best digested in silence, untainted, unmoved. I continued to eat, and we discussed bland topics, like the weather: a cyclone was predicted to hit the coast. I didn't talk about the photograph of Adrian Underford, now in my own possession, or Frank Kelly's alcoholism, or the twin's screeching cries piercing the night worse than the halcyon itself. It was kinder, I thought, to only let loose the scant details. And naturally, it comforted me to know that we could exist with our small barriers and discrepancies, with no hindrance to intimacy.

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It was around that time I went north, into the heart of the city. I found some money in the kitchen, enough to pay for a train ticket and food, and left the house standing quietly behind me. I chewed gum in the carriage to ignore my heart, which had begun to thud. I presume it was due to the fact Frank was about to discover my absence.

In any case, I debarked in a busy suburb, which smelled like grease and coffee beans. The sound of caffeination was foreign to my ears. I wondered at the fact that there was no ocean, only the chug of the brown snake-river, and that the only birds were

scavenging pigeons. On a billboard, I spied half-naked men and women on a Caribbean island, bathed in fuchsia light. I wondered if pink was supposed to mean love. Clearly, now it wasn't, because the edges were tinted grey with pollution. The humans were not statements, only irrelevant punctuation.

I thought about the envelope in my bag, and how splendid it would be to inhabit this bright, busy world. The buildings were blue and silver, postmodern and boxy affairs towering into the cloudless air. My feet were drawn onwards towards a group of business buildings. One was a prominent skyscraper, tiered towards the Olympian sun. I squinted upwards to read the sign on the fifth floor, my tongue dry in my mouth.

UNDERFORD SOLICITORS.

I must have been standing there in that abandoned manner for some time, when a man tapped my shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you waiting to see Mr Underford?"

His impatient expression confused me for a moment. I shook my head wildly.

"No," I said. I unstuck my throat. "Sorry for blocking the queue."

The man stepped smartly past, his suit jangling with the vibration of a phone call, which he answered instantly. I suppose I realised my solitude was pitifully evident. I ducked my head, thinking about home, the birds, the ocean. There was finality in these things. I turned my head, blending into the blue haze of the city, not looking back once.