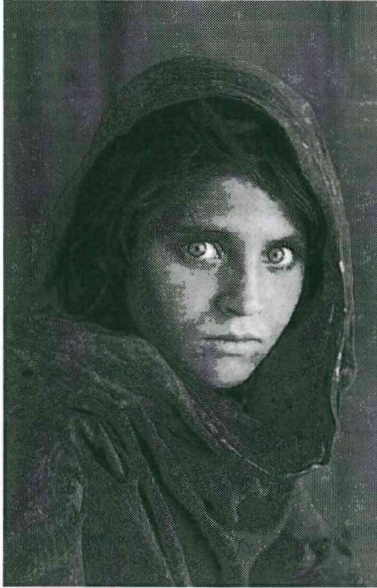


Senior category

Mia Kellner, winner

The eyes of war

This story was inspired by Steve McCurry's 1984 photographic portrait; "Afghan Girl", which later appeared on the June 1985 cover of National Geographic.



I walk through the barren landscape, through the country that had its heart ripped out by war and its soul destroyed by the Soviet shells. Here I am in Afghanistan; "the land of the Pashtuns", the very people who now wander aimlessly around their nations' hollowed carcass.

Now, with my camera around my neck and tripod in hand, I weave through the seemingly infinite sea of tents, the never-ending current of sorrow visible in the faded multi-coloured patchworks and quilts that barely shelter their impoverished occupants. This sorrow is etched into the lines of an aging mother's face and is unmistakably clear in the once bright eyes of a child. This is what I am here to document, to capture the poignant emotions of these refugee camps, to bring the world's attention and sympathy to these people. They are simply people, nothing more and nothing less, not just numbers on a page or pictures in a newspaper. They are individuals with distinctive identities, families and stories which I want to tell.

I arrive at my destination: a building albeit very different to its surrounding shelters, but as equally decrepit all the same. This can't be it, I think. This couldn't be the school. But it is. 7ft grey walls descend into the cloudless blue sky, dull bricks where there is dazzling sunlight, hope where there is no hope. Education where there is no future. Shattered glass like the souls destroyed by the savagery of the war. In the very place where there should be a door, there is only an empty frame, no pathway to another life, no escape from the perpetual agony, the camp between safety and war as purgatory is between heaven and hell. It is an agonizing form of torture, not death or flesh-ripping bombs, but simply nothing. In between. They are in a haven but they are not. They are suffering but still might

believe that light awaits ahead, just out of their reach but also within their grasp. This form of torture is indifference. This indifference I also see staring at me, emanating from a young girl standing outside the building that is an epitome of despair.

The girl could not have been more than 12 years old, but her face told the stories that only a war could write. Her face is the parchment of tragedy, the ink is the blood shed by countless victims of explosives, the blood that she saw erupting from friends, family, strangers. Her olive brown skin is the barren desert, the desolate landscape from which she escaped, the rough sands and grains now the prominent scar on her nose, the scar of loss. A carnelian red headscarf is wrapped around her head, a nest of chocolate brown hair peeking through the top. But her eyes tell me the main plot of her story; they are startling but captivating; emeralds glinting in a dark abyss. They are the paradise just beyond the arid desert, the ocean glinting in the distance. They are hope. In the girl's eyes, there is a depth which one would not usually see in a person; the experience and realism of an adult with the soulful innocence that only a child could possess.

Now I raise my camera to capture her photo, her essence, she raises her hands up to cover her face with her headscarf. Shyness and embarrassment. She doesn't want me to take her picture. I look down at the ground, disheartened but when I look up at her again, her entire demeanour has changed. The girl has undergone a godly metamorphosis; any embarrassment or shyness has evaporated from her eyes; only a raging fire is left. Her gazing at me with that fierce intensity almost seems to be an act of defiance, a small feat of rebellion. Once again, I raise my camera to take her picture. Afghan Girl.

By Mia Kellner

Senior category

o ie re lin, runner u

Senior

Rosie Breslin

Reflection

Her skin glowed, as the sun kissed her cheeks and caressed her jaw. On this perfect afternoon, before the sun played hide and seek with the clouds, she stood and watched; we pedalled. Our pedalo moved through the water like a toddler attempting to walk: we couldn't steer. As my mother, my sister and I strived to move in any way besides in circles, she shrieked and giggled, without fear of the world. She looked so beautiful; she always did.

She told me incredible stories of existence beyond princesses and dragons and knights. Her thoughts were too elegant for books, too fragile to write on paper. As for me, I was lucky enough to lay in her arms and listen until my eyelids lost the battle and she rocked me to rest. She thought they meant nothing, but her words were flowers growing from her mouth, planting seeds in my heart that would grow with my love.

The way he was enchanted by her. I fell in love with the way he fell in love with her. She was mountains and waterfalls and flowers and oceans and she was his muse. When she was there, nothing else mattered. She was his home.

They loved to play tricks on us and laugh until wrinkles formed beside her eyes when she giggled; she never aged. Her eyes light up with stars; stars that she had traced on our palms whilst we sat on her lap as infants; stars that are now inked onto the delicate wrist of my older sister.

She was the sun and the moon and everything that was beautiful.

Why did you leave us?

He never really smiled again.

My sister became depressed.

My dad and my uncles began to argue all the time.

She was gone.

As I reflect, I remember the crackly voice recordings of her my dad used to bring home from the hospital. My mind was too youthful to know that her leaves were wilting and she couldn't hold my hand as tight as she used to. The day came and her pain ended and my heart broke. But she had been a part of my life and, for that, I could never thank my lucky stars enough.

I love you Grandma-May.

Evie Sutcliffe

I stare at you.

There's a bad taste in my mouth. It lingers as though someone has broken into my body and sewn horror and anguish through my skull, like the pretty black ribbons you once wore in your hair. It lingers as though my nerves and sinews have been plucked raw, played like a violin to make kings and queens cry. It lingers as though my atoms have been replaced with those of a star on the brink of exploding. I feel like everything that's ever made my heart beat will stop working so suddenly I'll cease to function. I feel broken. Numb. Nothing.

But it's not nothing. It's this crushing grief that's slowly devouring me. It's this darkness, the same one I've always been afraid of, wallowing away, sobbing for you, and the ghost of your hand in mine-

Remember that time I couldn't breathe? My chest closed up and everything was overwhelming so I screwed my eyes shut, succumbing to a panic I'd never known before. Then there was your voice, floating to me through all the confusion and mess:

"Tell me something," you said. Your voice always sounded like how I imagined satin would sound, if it made any audible noise; soft and lulling. *"Tell me anything. Any fact... Darling, what's reflection? Tell me what reflection means."*

With a difficulty that ripped through me, I forced everything to stop. It was the first time you called me darling.

"The throwing back by a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it."

And I could breathe again. It was like magic.

When I opened my eyes, you were smiling wryly at me. *"I bet that was word-for-word from the dictionary,"* you said. You were joking, but the fondness in your voice drenched me in soberness.

Now, I fall to my knees beside you. My fingers, shaking, trace along your cheek, brushing away frozen tears, catching the ones that snag on your eyelashes. Your face is cold, the emptiest I have ever seen you. There's no joy eager to burst out, no sunbeams to shine from your smile or explode from your lips when you laugh and it's jarring.

How can someone so full of life be so devoid of it? How can you, so *young*, so *free*, so *invincible*... be dead?

I whisper, pleadingly, *"Wake up."*

You don't reply.

You are a bundle of intricate nerves and bounding heart, of courage brewed in the face of death, laced through bone and blue eyes and a beaming smile, and you are dead. Gone.

The only world I ever wanted to know was the skies that raged within your eyes; the blue sunsets that blinked farewell every time you fell asleep, and the sunrises that illuminated the darkness each time you woke. The only reflection I wanted to see of myself was the euphoria thriving within your tears, the sonar from the force of your laugh.

But there's nothing. I am nothing without you.

Intermediate category

Tara Forselles, winner

Reflections On The Sea

Shards of light penetrated the sea and reflected into my eyes. His box was on the granite rocks next to me, the Swedish flag flying high, rippling with the sudden bursts of wind. I touched the elegant box; felt the notches and warps in the almost perfect wood like the ones in my own almost perfect life. I could hear the voices of my family on the other the side of the small island, but in my head they all melted together and became a jumbled murmur. White scum from the waves pulsed and writhed with the same agony I felt. That is, if I could feel anything at all. I would have thought I was dead, but the thud of my heart in my ears reminded me otherwise.

I heard the snap of twigs behind me as my cousin approached. I knew he would tell me to come back with the box. But I didn't want to empty it; I wanted to keep the contents forever. I stared out at the landscape. Sea gulls reeled overhead, screeching at each other. I felt a soft hand on my shoulder: "It's time to leave him. Just let go."

Surrounded by my entire family, I couldn't have felt more alone. It was like the ground had been pulled from beneath me, leaving me plummeting into the darkness. Endlessly falling.

The rush of the sea brought me back to my senses. I could hear the squeak of the oars as my father, uncle and grandmother rowed out to sea. I slid my sunglasses on, protecting me from the unbearable light and blinding emotions. My cousin smiled at me, a futile attempt to lift my spirits. But it didn't quite reach his eyes. He felt it too.

I clutched the yellow rose, my hands slippery with cold sweat. Carefully, I placed it into the sea, allowing the gentle waves to carry it away, the graceful petals drifting apart like old friends. My grandmother began to sing. Her usually gruff voice became fair and young, her beautiful words echoing out to the infinite ocean. "Everything is a reflection, and that reflection is everything..."

I looked at my wobbly image on the surface of the water. A single tear dropped from my eye, the small ripples distorting my reflection.

With shaking hands, my grandmother lifted the box. She opened the lid. Into the sea she poured it, the dark grey ashes sinking immediately.

The silence was deafening.

Even the sea gulls had stopped screaming. The sea became a hushed whisper, welcoming the ashes of my grandfather with outstretched arms.

"Goodbye," I whispered, my voice cracking.

And he was gone.

"Ill"

"Confused"

"It's just a phase"

I'm not any of those things. That's just what they say. But they don't know. They don't know what its like inside my head.

"If you look in the mirror and don't like what you see, then you'll know first hand what it's like to be me."

My reflection isn't my friend. My reflection isn't who I am. My reflection is who I am on the outside; not who I am on the inside...

"Alexandria! Get over here." My head snapped up from the white button down shirt in my hands. I rushed over to my mother. She held a cocktail dress in aqua-blue with large ruffles on the skirt and diamanté bodice. I grimaced at the dress.

My mother didn't know what it was like in my head. If she did, she didn't like it. She tried to send me to therapy, but they told her I wasn't broken. I'm not. She wanted them to fix me, and they didn't. They just told her the news she didn't want to know. I doubted that she would ever accept me for who I was.

"So?" She questioned. I looked at her blankly. "Ugh, never mind. I'll get it for you."

"But... Mum..." I said quietly. Her head snapped up.

"What?"

"I was thinking more... I don't know. Over there" I said, gesturing to the far wall.

"What. Why? That's men's clothes. What do you want with that?" She said, clearly disgusted.

"I... I don't know. Forget I said anything." I replied hastily, not wanting to start world war three.

"Hm." My mother hummed suspiciously, brow furrowed. I look over longingly to the men's department, avoiding eye contact with my mother. I just wanted to be comfortable in my skin. In my reflection. I'm drowning in the brightly coloured fabrics in my mother's hands, willing her to change her mind on the tight, pink skirt she was looking at on the rack.

"Take these and try them on. I'm not sure if they will fit you or not." My mother said. I stared at her blankly, still lost in the voices in my head. She clapped her manicured hands in front of my face,

"Quickly, Alexandria. I haven't got all day. We still need to get your nails done."

I took all of the clothes from her and looked around to find the nearest fitting room. I smiled to myself as I spotted it, nestled deep in the men's clothes. Peering around quickly to check my mum wasn't looking. I walked briskly to the room, stopping every now and again to pick up some clothes I liked.

Reflection

Isabella Briscoe

I dumped all the clothes on the chair in the corner of the cubicle and stare long and hard at my reflection.

“This mirror lies” I whispered angrily to myself. I looked into the vibrant pile of dresses and flouncy tops and skirts and back at my reflection. Reaching past the dresses to the white shirt I’d picked up earlier, I pulled my black top over my head and buttoned up the white one. I kept on my jeans and pulled the black beanie out of my bag. Twisting my hair up, I crammed the hat on over the top, just like I’d done so many times at home. Looking deep into my blue eyes, I smiled bigger than I had in a long time.

I was finally happy with my reflection. This reflection was my friend. This is who I am. This is who I am on the inside.

“I am not Alexandria. I am Alex.”

Intermediate category

Aiva Bertram, third place

9

Reflection

Stars don't make you feel safe. *Not like the arms of your family.* So far there are 367 of them above the Arabian Sea, just sitting there, mocking me with their cold stares. I don't see why so many people put their faith in the stars - they won't help. *Trust me, I should know.* I've decided stars can't be trusted. Scattered across the sky, they lie there...until they die. They wait until their inevitable death and do nothing about it.

The sea however, is my friend. It gave me Ali. Ali listens to me when I miss Mummy and Daddy. *He doesn't go away like the stars do.* He sits on his own boat underneath mine. He looks just like me; dirt streaked face, worn and faded red t-shirt and ripped brown shorts. Ali never says anything back, but that's ok.

I feel sorry for Ali sometimes; he looks so sad when I talk to him...and sometimes he cries. But he listens. He listens when I tell him about Mummy's illness and the mean people that took away Our House. He listens when I tell him about Daddy going away to serve for the greater good of Our Country. He listens when I cry and he listens when I don't. He listens when the Sun is up and when it's down. He never leaves me like the stars do. *Like they did.*

Sun never stays either. At the first threat of darkness he slowly fades away whilst the night takes over. Daddy always used to say that we should never run away from our problems; that we need to face them. The third night of the sky screaming and the ground shaking was when Mummy told me we had to run.

Eyes blurring, I stretch desperately over the edge of the boat to see him. Looking up at me from the sheer depths, tears stream down his face. Slicing through him, the ripples carve their way across the cold water. Ali disappears. He leaves me. Just like they did. Just like we did. Just like - and he's back.

He never left - not really.

I lie in my boat. *The one that left them.* The soft brown wood keeps me safe. It encases me, envelopes me in warmth. *Why do I have to leave it to talk to Ali?* Sometimes I wish Ali was among the stars instead of in the water below, but no. He only appears when I subject my body to the cold, biting wind.

I dream of Our Home as the stars blur and the boat rocks, sending me to sleep.

I open my eyes to the Sun baking my face and the blue sky stretching across the world like a shield from our troubles. Feeling decidedly hopeful I look around, hoping to spot land somewhere. But no, I'm still in the middle of a never ending blue hole. I laugh half-heartedly at my own joke. How many days has it been now? My food is low and my water is dwindling.....but at least I have Ali.

Aiva Bertram - Illingworth

Y8 PHS4

Junior category

Marla Payne, winner

By Marla Payne, 10

St Barnabas First and Middle School

A Flash of Orange

Free-standing,
Dusty,
Its glassy face expressionless.
Peaked... pointed,
Sharp.
Its oak frame layered like her
once-upon-a-time wedding cake.

She stood in the room,
Face as glassy as her twin.
All lace,
Now ripped.
Now torn.
Tears flow,
Stain the watching face.

She stumbles,
Bony fingers grip.
Wild.
Untamed.
But now the image shimmers.
The church,
The man she was never bound to.
And a flash of orange.

She is kneeling,
Eyes streaming.
A day so perfect,
Now a day so wrong.
The face is identical,
Share the deep pain,
Once more.

She trips,
As she moves.
Mournful grieving still not over.
But time repeats,
And now she is swallowed,
To join him.
In a flash of orange.

Junior category

Archie Nye, runner up

Reflection

One beautiful summer morning a shy, brown fox sat by a river glistening in the scorching sun. This fox was a very sad fox as he thought nobody liked him.

The fox started walking slowly along the river bank and peered into it. The fox saw a version of him he didn't like. He had a much longer nose and a hump of a body. He had large, fluffy ears pointing out from the top of his eyes. The fox was scared this was the reason everyone hated him so much and the reason he got into so many fights. The fox felt extremely sad because nobody saw the true, kind animal he really was. The fox scrambled back into his cosy warm den and went to sleep hating himself. The next morning, he hoped the previous day had just been a dream. The fox droopily climbed out of his little den, stretched his legs and had a little fun chasing a butterfly. The fox wandered over to the river that was gently flowing along again. He looked in the river and yet again he saw the same image. The fox was so shocked by this image that he saw yet again that he ran and hid in his den feeling hopeless.

During that week animals started edging out from their hiding and going to play. The fox saw all this happening as he was constantly peering out from his den but he was too unhappy to join them. After three weeks, even wise owl and wise owl junior were out there but fox was still just watching.

However, on the fourth week something terrible happened. Wise owl junior was playing tag with the rabbits. Wise owl junior got too close to the river bank and lost her balance. She wibbled and wobbled for a bit of time and just she was about to fall in when the fox saw her and made a heroic diving rescue and caught wise owl junior just at the last second. The animals were speechless as they watched the fox carry wise owl junior back to wise owl. Then just as the fox was about to return into his den the animals started cheering. It shocked the fox out of its skin and the fox returned to a clearing the animals had kindly made for him. "Whoooooohhh," the animals yelled as the fox scampered into the clearing. He felt proud of himself and worthwhile.

Suddenly the cheering died down as wise-owl flew gracefully down from his perch. The fox did not know if wise owl was going to say something good or bad. "Well done," said wise owl in a grand voice. From then on, the animals all included and appreciated the fox for ever. As he strolled happily home he couldn't stop peering into the river. This time he liked what he saw.

By Archie Nye 4L

Junior category

Mabry Williams, joint third place

Reflection

By Mabry Williams (age 8)

As the iridescent kingfisher dives into the crystal clear lake, the shadow kingfisher spreads his wings to swoop upwards out of the water and be free, trapping the vibrant kingfisher in his place.

The kingfishers align as they envy each other on the thrilling opposite sides of the glimmering, glistening pool. The vibrant kingfisher prepared to dive as the silent shadowy other rises up to fledge, sneakily soaring into the beautiful light filled world above.

In these wonderful new worlds each explores his new home. The shadow kingfisher is swift to find beautiful cherry blossom trees, the sweetness he imagined beyond the ripples and most importantly light. He tests his wings, darting through the trees, warmed by the sun, feeling lighter in the air as his feathers dry. Meanwhile the glowing kingfisher is more disappointed by his dark and gloomy surroundings in sharp contrast with his shimmering plumage. The weight of the water holds him and the grassy reeds clutch at him making his journey treacherous.

The kingfisher in the darkness tries to escape only to find his lifelong friend, his reflection, has betrayed him. He no longer needs the perfumed air to fill his lungs in his watery prison but the need he feels to breathe and sense the open air is desperate.

Although finally free the shadow kingfisher could not enjoy his new world for fear of being trapped again so he forced upwards, the wind ruffling his dark blue tail feathers and midnight black wings. The lightning bright kingfisher pushed upwards too, swiftly aiming for brighter warmer waters and the chance of freedom but the lakes depths seemed to be calling him down.

Beyond the trees, the noise of the riverbank and soft breeze of the lake the free world of the shadow kingfisher became silent and as the blushing sun set it became as cold as his old home. Lost in the huge night the shadow kingfisher became part of the dark sky as invisible as he had been in the murky depths of the pool. Then he saw the moon. A blue moon lit the night. Weightless in the air the shadow kingfisher no longer felt excitement like he had in the new rays of the sun but he longed to be in the light once again. He saw his target and aimed towards the entrancing beacon.

Below the surface of the water the light cast by the moon only just caught the brilliant colours of the vibrant kingfisher locked so close to the world he feared he had lost. He raised himself up towards the surface of the lake, touching the line of the water that held him from his home. Suddenly the still surface of the moon pool was shattered like crystal as the two kingfishers aligned once more and were returned to the worlds they knew without the envy that once pulled them towards the darkness of their reflection.



Junior category

Zach Scerri, joint third place

REFLECTION

26th February 2017

My name is Hugo and I live with my brothers and sisters in the Arctic.

I know I am a big white bear I have long fur that goes all the way to

my feet to keep me warm on the ice. I spend most of my time on the

edge of the ice where we can find the most amounts of seals.

I am a happy bear I love my life hunting all day and all night.

However, there is something missing from my life. I feel lost in the

great big Arctic as I want to know what I look like.

Do I have the same eyes as my brothers? Is my nose small and black

like my sisters? Is my mouth long and wide like my mother's? Or is

my tongue red and slippery like my father's?

I search all the time for a way to see what I look like to feel complete.

I went to visit Tux, the greatest mind in the whole of the Arctic. My

best friend Tux the Penguin will know how to help me.

Zach Scerri

Tux tells me the most amazing story of light and reflection that will make my dreams come true.

Light is energy travelling at high speed and when it hits an object all the energy has to go somewhere. In the daytime light will reflect off of my body in all directions and when you look in the water as long as there is nothing bright underneath that overwhelms the brightness of your image, then at long last I will see what I look like.

Tux tells me that a great time to see myself is when the sun goes down but the sky is quite bright still and if the water is dark then I can see a contour. But if I really want to see myself then I have to wait for a very bright day then I will be able to see myself just perfectly.

I wait and wait for the weather to change for the sun to shine and find my reflection. I search and search for it day after day.

One day I am looking for seals on the water's edge in a new area I have not been before and I see a great big polar bear looking back at me.

Zach Scerni

I hadn't seen him before and believe me in the Arctic I know
I HADN'T SEEN HIM BEFORE AND BELIEVE ME IN THE ARCTIC I KNOW

everyone. Then suddenly like a flash I realised that it was my
EVERYONE. THEN SUDDENLY LIKE A FLASH I REALISED THAT IT WAS MY

refection and I could finally see who I was and I thought I looked
REFECTION AND I COULD FINALLY SEE WHO I WAS AND I THOUGHT I LOOKED

pretty good.
PRETTY GOOD.
