

Summer of Flies

By Poppy Thomson, winner of the Burgmann College E M Cumming Essay Prize for 2020

It is the summer of the flies. Of course, they always come to Wahratta. But the transient heat of this summer lets them slip in quietly. *Anonymously*. No one knows when they arrive except for when they are suddenly here. Forced by fire and smoke. The hottest, driest summer on record. Dotting cheeks, lips, eyes, lashes. Seizing the air.

One Sunday morning the flies knock on Benjamin's eyes, opening them to dusty gold flecks of sunrise. He turned eight that summer. For him, it is the summer of church. Of prayers muttered every day to ward off heat. He hadn't owned a Bible before now, but when word of fire took loan on the air his parents made sure one took up residence on his bedside table.

He swats at a singular buzzing iridescent exoskeleton. It flits like a dumb, crazy dog off its leash until a point of interruption. Benjamin hadn't noticed it when he went to bed last night, but now there was no mistaking.

Spindly and crackled. A translucent wall like cellophane on the windowsill. A web. *And an owner*.

Sinewy and forceful and lingering *there* in the corner.

The fly like a fish with gaping holes in its cheeks—hooked.

Benjamin had of course seen this creature before. But not in his room, this close, this *hungry*.

The spider stilled, not really quite knowing. And then knowing. The pulsations send it down the white web toward the withering thing it had caught. A closing over. The cellophane web's unforgiving hands had it now.

The last alive flickering wing. The last alive lurch. The relentless feast upon a living, breathing thing like a ritual the spider had memorised, parting white web like oceans to plunge further into food its glasshouse eyes knowing nothing but the black fury of draining life and so Benjamin picks up the bedside Bible and slams it against the spider.

It's stunned, waving its slender legs at odd broken angles, looking around for the villain. The interrupter. It drags its separate bits back into the sill corner until it can go no further.

And the two creatures, predator and prey, flicker like a movie until the screen reluctantly goes black.

Benjamin stares at the spider staring blankly back until it becomes foreign and the space between them boundless. The cellophane wreckage of webs framing the two corpses like mist. Like smoke.

Benjamin drops the Bible and hurries to put on his clothes for Sunday mass. The buttons of his shirt feel too big for their holes, the laces of his dirt-caked shoes mangled. Gold specks of sunrise still grace his actions with a warm glow. Caress the windowsill. They had died so beautifully. Benjamin could eat and drink that glorious yellowness and the world would talk in calming whispers. Would anyone even know or sense his crime?

But the flies understand it before he does. Spinning and fleeting in seconds that seem larger than heaven or hell. Buzzing ferociously about the room. That summer, the smell of smoke could not be mistaken for anything other than doom. And it squeezes through the window gaps like lingering decay. Descends like mist upon Wahratta. Everything they had been praying against.

And it is then that Benjamin realises who did see and sense his crime. The Bible is heavy when he leans over to clutch it in his hands. A weapon. And his stomach turns to cement. For a moment Benjamin sees the bend of the earth before the drop-off outside his window. Smoke shows wordless psalms of ancient reigns, a reckoning. They echo in his head—*did I do this?*

Of all the transitory faces and smiles he has worn to greet the world, Benjamin cannot prepare a look for Sunday church. A look to fight fire.

He takes soft steps down each stair to the breakfast table. His mother asks him why he is crying. He didn't realise he was. But it bubbles and brews, pressing onto his chest until at the last he splashes the secret.

He expects a fury. A tide of atonement—boulders falling to sea like giants. Conditions for drowning. But from the other side of the kitchen table his father folds little Benjamin into his lap and strokes his fluffy hair. A deep chuckle rumbles from his chest and shakes the small boy's exhausted form.

Benjamin rests like a piece of ash falling from the sky. Shaken from a tree, not knowing if he would have to fight to gain a place on the ground but enjoying the suspension nonetheless.

The smoke had travelled from somewhere far off. Wahratta is not burning. A reckoning is not nigh. Relief arranged itself outside of Benjamin's hands. His father's heartbeat rhythmically against his cheek. A fly landed on his forehead and with a twitch he sent it to some other landing.

It is nearly time for service. Benjamin spreads strawberry jam over toast. It is red and sticky between his teeth. He wants to spit it out but instead swallows it whole. Feels it move deliberately down his throat. Watches the white tendrils of milk swirl like smoke in his tea. The haze remains a menacing linger outside on the journey to church. He watches his friends' grandparents cover their mouths with their collars on the way in.

Now the children of Judah had fought against Jerusalem and had taken it and smitten it with the edge of the sword, and had set the city on fire.

In the dark eyes of the pastor Benjamin sees spider legs and flitting flies. He sees the binding of the heavy bedside Bible now stained with blood. A black smoke.

His hands feel heavy as he clenches and unclenches, clenches and unclenches and thinks on these strange spoken words more than another child in the room. The meaning is too slippery.

But he wonders if maybe killing has a rhythm. Like the noise of a drum. Beats that require more beats. Sounds requiring more sounds. Words needing more words. And if no one would judge his crime then what would it matter if they could know or sense it? Crimes are plentiful as flies. Anonymous. No one knows when they arrive except for when they are suddenly here.