

Year 11 & 12 Category Runner-up

Our Names in Chalk

Hazel Jennings - The Friends' School

I am a silent passenger, a ghost. My skin is translucent so that you can see right through me-right past me. You're all so solid, like you're outlined in permanent marker, whereas I am made of chalk, melting away when it rains.

It was never supposed to be a big deal. The day my sister was off sick. The day I caught the bus alone. I had sat in the same spot I always sat: second seat to the back, on the left side by the window. Sometimes I can't help but think-what would, or rather wouldn't, have happened if I'd hung back just 5 minutes? If I hadn't sat in that seat? If I hadn't frozen? If I had shouted for help and demanded to be heard. Those thoughts cling to me like tags on the underside of an overpass.

Pictures of the bus bleed through my memory like highlighter ink. Rows of identical seats flash before my eyes; vines sway, attached to a metallic canopy, their ends twisted into yellow grab handles. I see names emboldened in Sharpie, scrawled across the graffitied mirror back of a metro bus seat like an interrupted procession of ants. They are like cave paintings-calling cards in the shape of hands, screaming the words: 'Listen to me.'

But for me, those words have no answer. They're attached to clinical classroom concepts that stick to the roof of my mouth: The Bystander Effect-a term describing those silent, watching people who view public attacks like a spectator sport and do less than nothing to help.

To feel the weight of your silence-to be on the receiving end of that nothing-is a strange cruelty. I knew the importance of asking, pointing out someone in the crowd for help; it's supposed to make people feel 'morally obligated'. But no one ever tells you how to ask for help. When drowning in black water, you forget which way is up-not knowing how bad it needs to be before it's 'bad enough.'

But it was 'bad enough' that day, when those loose classroom concepts were tested and made real. When that silent gaze was directed towards me. When the bus I had once known transformed into a hunting ground, I was a gazelle deserted by its herd. The day I wished I could blend in, as if to mimic the effect of zebra stripes and be camouflaged in colours not my own. That day, crunched-up paper fell like false stars. When strangers became aggressors armed with insults and threats, while familiar passengers became onlookers. I was used up, gum with its colour drained, fearing that the silent gaze would stick to me like dust.

'Was', but what has changed? Nothing yet. But unlike 'was,' 'yet' is hope, an action that hasn't happened yet but which can, will, and must occur. All you need to do is hold it tight like a bus grab handle, like a twisted vine, so you can swing through the trees, holding on for dear life. What truly matters is what you do now. It can start small by offering an ear, because we all leave marks behind, hoping someone will listen, that someone will care. Because when we help, we make each other's chalk outlines a little bit thicker. A little bit stronger. A little bit less afraid. So, when the rain comes, we won't be washed away.