

# 2016 LITERARY COMPETITION



## Literary Competition Coordinator's Introduction to Winning Entries

Deb Peden

What an absolute delight and honour it is to present the winning entrants for the 2016 Literary Competition. Now in its 57<sup>th</sup> year, the talent across Queensland and the Northern Territory has not wavered and the interest in the competition continues to climb with an unprecedented 940 entries received. Our successful entrants came from across the State and Territory, wowing us with their talent for poetry, fiction and non-fiction. If you're a regular *Words'worth* reader or follower of the Literary Competition, you may even notice some familiar names among the winning recipients. I hope you enjoy the selection of writing that follows.

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## Section A — Short Story

Amy Coomer, Kimberley College

### THE DEVINE NINE

The sun was angry.

That was what I told my two year-old brother, Bren, when he questioned me about its sudden transformation. He wasn't alone in his curiosity. Every man, woman and child in the northern hemisphere had descended into mad hysteria since they awoke to a blood-red sun. By that point however, I knew that word had spread all around the globe. While one half of the planet was living in fear beneath a reddish glow, the other was holding their breath in collective anticipation for night to wane into day, to experience the foreign sight for themselves. Then there was the media, who I liked to believe was a separate faction altogether, amplifying the chaos through their trivial 'expert quotes'. Their chief theory: we were all going to die.

Did I agree with this hypothesis? Perhaps. I may have also believed that the sun, beyond any scientific rationale, might very well have just been angry. I could neither entertain nor dismiss any notions. This was unlike any event in our history – an anomaly in centuries of sound existence. For thousands of years the sun had risen and set, and, when tasked with the job of drawing a sky, perceptive children reached for the bright yellow marker within their colour packs. Its being was fact – one that we as a human race had come to depend on.

So, there was really only one thing I was absolutely sure of.

I was scared.

So scared that I couldn't bear the sight of my neurotic mother phoning every relative we had in tearful succession any longer, nor the sound of my father's worn rocking chair squeaking back-and-forth as his eyes stayed glued to the TV. After retreating to my room to grab a very important piece of paper, I made a move for the back door.

My brother was playing with his toy trucks on the patio as I stepped into an eerie red reality. I planted a kiss on his head as I walked past, opting for the fifth time to ignore his question of:

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*Who angered the sun, Jack?*

I swung my legs over the fence, slipping on my dark shades and feeling like I'd just propelled myself into a dreamland. This feeling only heightened when I saw *her*.

Molly. A small girl with dreamy eyes. A vision of light brown hair and bold femininity. Equal parts salt and sugar, madness and beauty. The face that she was my neighbour was the starkest thing about her, but it was always the best thing about me.

"So," I called out to her. "Have you heard the news?"

Part of me suspected she was involved somehow. Every extraordinary thing always led back to her.

She looked at me, startled, and I saw the fear in her eyes only for a moment. "And what news would you be referring to?" she sniffed, turning her face away and returning with a drawn smile. "That of my new Birkenstocks, or humanity's impending death?"

I gasped. "You got new Birkenstocks?"

She laughed as I lifted myself onto the back of her dad's truck, sitting next to her. "Yes, and I'm very upset. I was planning to wear them until my feet grew out of them, or I died; whichever came first. I feel cheated by the universe."

"That *is* upsetting," I agreed. "Although, you do know that beneath every red cloud..." I trailed off, reaching for my piece of paper I'd stuffed in my pocket, "is a silver lining."

"Oh my god, Jack..."

"Put on your dancing Birkenstocks, baby. The time has come."

"The Divine Nine," Molly sighed fondly. "I can't believe you still have it."

"Can't believe I...? Oh, Molly Polly, don't tell me you lost yours. Does the hallowed spit shake mean nothing to you?"

She grimaced, casting her eyes away. Then, just as I was about to surrender myself to the formidable red sun above, her face lit up as she whipped out a matching piece of paper from behind her back.

"As far as I'm concerned, I took an oath that day in the treehouse. With mutual spit I vowed to complete the Divine Nine before we both keeled over."

I released a breath, clutching my heart. "Thank God. Nine items in eight hours is a feat for two. I would've never gotten through this list on my own."

"How are we doing so far?" Molly asked, comparing the two of our lists together.

"Surprisingly... awful," I finished bleakly. "We've made exactly zero progress in ten years."

She huffed out a breath, leaning back to look at me. "Not even your one?"

"Nope," I swallowed. "How about you?"

"Still pending."

I nodded. *The Devine Nine* was a list of nine items that Molly and I created in grade school. We each contributed four things that we wanted to do before we died, however separate lists were created to account for a mystery one item that would remain secret, even in death. After all these years, I still had no idea what Molly's was, and she didn't know mine.

"Well, we'd better get a move on. What's first on the list?"

I looked down, then scoffed. "Go to Italy."

Molly nodded, jumping down from the truck. "Alright, let's go."

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Admittedly, when Molly said we were going to Italy, *Molto Delizioso* was not the first place I thought of. It was an admired quality but, stuffing my face full of pizza and pasta at the new restaurant across town, I'd found a new appreciation for Molly's imaginative mind. I on the other hand, was highly deficient in this area.

"What are you doing?" Molly laughed. She stared around the restaurant, mortified despite the face that it was nearly deserted. Most of the places in town were closed today.

"Molly Ann Krieger, will you marry me?"

"You did not just propose to me with a taralli." She shook her head, sobering herself. "It's perfect."

I grinned. "*Be proposed to*: check."

Our next stop as a newly engaged couple was the local Tiffany's jeweller, and I stared in dismay as Molly ate the taralli right off her finger. "Breakfast at Tiffany's," she said between chews.

On our way to the park, we came across a man playing the violin. Today there was no open case, no pleading for anything in exchange for his gift. "Front row at a concert," Molly whispered in my ear, leaning her head on my shoulder. We listened to him play three sets in silence.

"Lean to fly? Really, Mol?"

"I was seven!" she shouted over the wind. Her hair was captured by a sudden gust as she leapt off the swing and into my arms.

After swimming with dolphins – the shark's friendly cousin as Molly contested – and winning a small stuffed elephant at the local fair that was "pretty much a gold medal", the two of us bought two lobsters from a restaurant uptown. We brought them down to the local pier where we set them free, thereby saving a life, and then prepared to die ourselves.

"Wait," Molly cried as the wind was picking up – a sign of our impending fate. "What was your number one?"

I looked at the fiery red sun in the sky, then into Molly's eyes, and I kissed her. Hard and passionate. "You," I whispered. "You were always number one."

At some point in our embrace, the wind stopped. When we looked at the sky, it had faded into a swirl of pastel.

That was the first day of the end of my life.

I never believed love to be so black and white. That it was a mad, inexplicable thing beyond any psychological reasoning. But I'll never forget that day out on Bloomfield Pier, the water a reflection of the rosy sunset, when I looked at her. Just looked at her. And I knew, as surely as I know anything true, that I loved her. I felt it in an instant – the moment my body surrendered to the feeling, and I felt the warmth of my chest travel to my face, and I laughed.

The sun was yellow for the rest of our lives, which were long and full. People still talk about it – the day they witnessed blood in the sky. They continue to theorise, to attach religious connotations and try to make sense of something inexplicable. Me? I retired my curiosity long ago. In the end, all I had was gratitude for this divine intervention. For this subtle communication between us and the sky. The universe, after years of being questioned, was merely questioning us back. And for those of us wise enough to listen, we found that golden light shone far brighter than it ever had before.

## Section A — Poem

Nick Moncrief, Kelvin Grove State College

### YOUNG

some times  
they would sit and think of each other,  
float,  
hang,  
from needles of twin pines,  
so far apart on the ground, but almost kissing in the sky.  
almost kissing,  
they would think  
heads buoyant feet falling spines stretching fingers  
entangled  
as a spiderweb,  
almost  
kissing  
the bathroom mirror  
(so blessedly obscured by steam)  
to feel a feeling,  
(so gossamery)  
along the bevels,  
and around lip fog,  
of connection,  
reciprocation,  
(daydream  
(movie  
(floating  
(achey,)))  
like  
a million tiled reflections,  
across oceans,  
over synapses,  
perhaps between two old pines,  
so far apart on the ground,  
but up with city lights and shooting stars,  
there are sparks,  
pairs of eyes,  
almost  
kissing

## Section A — Non—Fiction Prose

Isabella Ostini, Somerville House

New Speak: Youth and the Evolution of Language

### THE MONTHLY

#### *Australian politics, society & culture*

Today's teen language is not everyone's cup of tea, but educators and elders must not imbue this 'new speak' with Orwellian presentiment. XX explores why the space makes all the difference.

The English language – that much-maligned bastard child of a regularly invaded island and significant human innovation. No one with the slightest grasp of etymology could contest that our language is pure, and yet we feel strangely protective of it, or at least its 'current' form. In fact, *The Economist* suggests that there has always been "... wailing throughout the history of the language, by people convinced that the end is nigh ..."<sup>1</sup>

Today, it seems, pedantic semanticists are certain that the language of Gen-Y, including the infamous 'txtspk', is out to destroy the world's writing, reasoning and possibly, morality. The way they use the term certainly suggests that these apparently well-educated critics foresee English becoming a replica of Orwellian 'Newspeak'<sup>2</sup>, an unsightly beast that controls the boundaries of its users' thoughts and realities. But much as some choose to bewail the degradation of the English language, ostensibly brought about by the youth embracing text messaging and social media, they would do well to remember that language becomes truly dangerous when it becomes *cold*.

In order to understand the 'youthspeak' phenomenon, it is vital to acknowledge the boundary between spoken and written English. While they certainly influence each other, the Linguistic Society of America explains that the words that come out of our mouths are more dynamic, more rapidly changing and much more loosely confined by the laws of our language than their written counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Slang, cant, call

it what you will, reflects the attitudes of its users in a raw, upfront way, but it often also passes rapidly into obscurity as values, technology and cultural contexts change. Take, for example, the thieves' cant co-opted by young members of the Regency upper-class as a way to signal their independence from the traditions of their elders: the only place nowadays where someone could "Swallow a spider" or have "Eaten Hull cheese"<sup>4</sup>, without actually imbibing milk products or arachnids, would be within the covers of a Georgette Heyer novel. On the other hand, the works of Austen and her contemporaries remain comprehensible and deeply relevant to this day.

Perhaps young adults actually understand this distinction better than their parents and teachers, as leading UK linguist, David Crystal, has found: "Kids have a very precise idea of context – none of those I have spoken to would dream of using text abbreviations in their exams ..."<sup>5</sup> Textspeak and 'chat-rooms' are a new form of spoken language, hence the names, brought about by the rise of keyboard-centric communication. Just because kids record their conversations in text, doesn't mean that they are forgetting how to write 'proper' pieces. In fact, the ebb and flow of colloquialism is what makes English exciting, what keeps it alive.

And English is very alive. The Global Language Monitor estimates that 800-1000 neologisms are added to English dictionaries each year.<sup>6</sup> This fluidity of language is important, not just as a kind of linguistic heart-monitor, but because it ensures that English remains relevant and

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meaningful to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century context. New words are vital to describe new phenomena (there's no Latin word for Wi-Fi) and new attitudes. Take 'mansplaining', which describes when a man explains something to a woman in a belittling way. This kind of term can only arise when the assumption that men *do* know better drops away, so here the changing shape of language reflects the changes in Western attitudes to women.

Not everyone will like or use words like this. Some people vehemently resist new terms, especially acronyms and compound words, but change will happen, and it must continue. If educators insist on the younger generation maintaining the strict language conventions of a 1950s English boarding school education, they actually risk enforcing the language they fear – a cold, archaic, dead language that doesn't represent today's values, and isn't relevant or liked by tomorrow's change-makers and problem solvers. That is truly Newspeak, when people can't engage with language, and reinvent it for themselves. Academic Lauren Collister argues that young people's "creative repurposing" of language is "swift, clever and context-specific, illustrating the flexibility of the language to communicate... in a nuanced, efficient manner."<sup>7</sup> It follows then, that an erudite teen should be able to use 'lol' and 'insouciance' in the same sentence; in fact, one often indicates the other, as in "I forgot to do my homework, lol!" This is language at its best, when speakers and writers can dip in and choose whatever words serve their purpose, and express meaning to their liking.

Not only is the language of youth not as dangerous as it seems to some, but it is in reality an important part of a young person's passage into adulthood. Dove's Self Esteem Project advises parents that teenage language "...creates bonds with other teens, and helps to build confidence in [their] own opinions."<sup>8</sup> By manipulating language to suit themselves, teens are able to draw a line between themselves and their elders, signal who's 'in' and who's not, and understand their newfound need for independence.

Critics should also take heart, because there is nuance in this 'teenspeak'. In 1984, Orwell was not warning against language that is abbreviated or abrupt. He was not afraid of new speak. He was, instead, terrified of English losing its meaning. Writing on language and society, George Elliot sums up this difference perfectly:

*"A language which has ... no whims of idiom, no cumbrous forms, no fitful shimmer of many-hued significance ... may be a perfect medium of expression to science, but it will never express life, which is great deal more than science."*<sup>9</sup>

This "many-hued significance" is in fact language's defence against Orwellian obliteration, and it is alive and well today. Let's revisit 'lol'. Rather than ersatz laughter; it is often ironic, as in, "I'm not laughing because it isn't funny, but I want to show I don't care," and can in some cases be plainly vicious, used to indicate complete indifference; but it no longer indicates actual 'laughing out loud'; as those who use it know and exploit. Newspeak has no such nuance, because it was conceived with the dream of eliminating nuance.

It is natural and human to fear change. But it is not right to let that fear stifle growth. We ought not to try 'pruning' English, when it is less an ornamental garden than a riotously beautiful woodland. The language of the youth is part of their identity-under-construction, and they must be trusted with this admittance to adulthood. After all, until English is stripped of all its subtle, sometimes convoluted meaning, we are safe.

(Endnotes)

- 1 R.L.G (2015)
- 2 Orwell (1954)
- 3 Bright (2012)
- 4 Kloester (2008, pp. 319-330)
- 5 Crace (2008)
- 6 Atkins (2015)
- 7 Collister (2015)
- 8 'Teenage Slang and Language' (2014)
- 9 Elliot (1880, p3 xviii)

## Section B — Poem

Hannah Ostini, Somerville House

### GHOST SONG / GHOST DANCE

There's a hot wind blowing  
ghost song; hard to breathe  
Mountainous towers, century by century become one with the landscape.  
A ghost of green, swept away; storm of grey  
Steel towers, concrete paths, bitumen roads, glass frontiers –  
grey, grey, black, grey  
and she sits on a worn veranda,  
pale ghost of a woman  
now lost  
waiting for her husband, waiting for the rain.  
Around her, buildings fall and new ones assemble  
children are born, children leave home, children grow old  
And she sits on that veranda  
as high-rises rise higher and boundaries wider,  
waiting for her husband, waiting for the rain.  
A weather-worn woman; one who has seen  
a century or more of man's great dreams  
dashed on the reef  
of reality.  
A weather-worn woman; one who has seen  
a business, a house  
while waiting – nothing more  
And when it comes, she's almost forgotten  
what she was waiting for at all; just that she was  
so when the first drops fall, she looks at them in wonder, and reaches out for  
each diamond;  
they slip through her fingers, but it doesn't matter,  
because there are more – so many more, falling, hitting the ground so hard that  
it looks like the ground is raining upwards, and this weather-worn woman who  
has seen so much  
and yet so little –  
dances.

## Section B – Short Story

Caitlin Williams, Kelvin Grove State College

### GLASS

Trapped.

Isolated.

Invisible.

Alone.

*A small boy, no more than seven years old, walks past with his mother. She looks stressed. He looks like he is embarking on the greatest adventure of his life. For an instant, his eyes lock on mine.*

I know you can't see me. Nobody can. In this prison of light, I am but a shadow, cursed to forever watch others.

*The woman pauses in front of my window. She looks at me, fixes her hair and adjusts the bag on her shoulder.*

I was like you once. Young, beautiful and free to take on the world as if nothing could stand in my way. In you I see me, confident and proud, arrogant and self-absorbed. God, I made so many mistakes, I wrote this fate, and now I would give anything to change it. Absolutely anything.

I was a conceited narcissist and everybody knew it; they watched me every morning as I walked past the boutiques on the parade and stopped in front of the small café on the corner on their way to work. It had one of the most gorgeous windows in existence looking out to the street, it beckoned to me with elegant winding vines and leaves of gold, so exquisite that I felt compelled to look at myself surrounded in such grandeur; I was royalty and felt everyone should bow down to my exquisite beauty. The surface reflected splinters of light onto my reflection and into my soul and surrounded me with an ethereal glow befitting a heavenly being. In time, I became obsessed with how I looked in that mirror; I found myself making more frequent trips to it and staying there longer, until eventually I began to arrive at work hours late and sometimes not at all. The window slowly absorbed my soul; the more I stood there the more of myself I left behind until one day the window had taken all it could. I had given it all I could, and I vanished.

*But this woman isn't me. She breaks her gaze and walks off down the street, seemingly unaware that her son hasn't moved. He is still looking at my window.*

I was absorbed into a churning vortex that clutched me in an embrace of transparent suffering. Here, in the sight of all, and yet no one, I have been trapped ever since, slowly infected with a craziness we so far have no name for. What dark part of my soul shivers

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as it is shattered into shards to be spread among the atoms of the glass, so thinly spread that there's little left to be seen. Sometimes I think I catch a glimpse of myself, but it isn't truly me, it is a gaunt and hollowed skeleton. A memory of me and nothing more. No longer are my eyes the vibrant green they once were but a dull lead grey, sunken in ashen skin covered in inky patches of neglect. Oh the irony of my imprisonment. Such a fine punishment for me to be tortured with, condemned to be an onlooker to others and not myself. Nobody can begin to fathom what I feel, what fractals of emotion push their way to the surface of my mind as I watch them float past. Some resemble what I was and I want to yell, to scream, at them to look away from themselves, to notice others, because if I can change one person maybe I will be forgiven and allowed a second chance to redesign my life. It is a fantasy, but a welcome distraction from the eternal suffering I bear, a distraction from the words inside my head that take up every conscious thought and consume me. I am chained by my thoughts, forced to endure them in a tundra of silence behind a transparent wall.

*His mother looks around. She's noticed her son is missing in the crowd, and for a moment she doesn't know where he is. I do. He's right here in front of me, admiring how the light bounces off the glass and surrounds his reflection like he is an angel sent from heaven itself. Please stay right there with me, forever, so that I need never be alone again.*

I look toward the heavens. Morning cloud has appeared like a slow white rose, opening across the horizon and I welcome their deluge. I cry only when the clouds do, when their tears drop against my tinted surface. Tears of pearl and cut diamond cascade down my cheeks, reminiscent of a life spent looking at my appearance through a gilded mirror, a remnant of what's left of my rotting soul. I need the chance to change like I need air to breathe, like an insomniac craves sleep.

*He cocks his head, smiles, smoothes the creases out of his shirt. And walks away. In a moment, he is gone.*

Please don't leave me at the mercy of my own mind. Please don't walk away from my suffering. Please. Please acknowledge that I exist. That I matter.

*He doesn't look back.*

please.

## Section C – Poem

Sonika Tamlin-Stockbridge, MacGregor State High School

### PUNISHMENTS

Sitting quietly,  
Her knees touching the roof of the table,  
The plate in front of her untouched.  
She decides that her body can do without food tonight.  
She breathes I, and tightens her belt.  
Stuffing the food into a napkin, she throws her weight away.

Standing in front of her mirror,  
She measures her waist, her arms, her thighs.  
She weighs herself,  
And does dozens of push ups and crunches.  
She spends her time adding up calories  
She spends her money on makeup, a new face.

Sleepless nights,  
Crying,  
Pulling at invisible fat.  
Nibbling at a chocolate bar,  
Not eating for a day.  
Her schedule is simple.  
If she eats, she will punish herself.

Her eyes droop in class,  
Glazed over and weak.  
From the front the teacher stares,  
At the glassy-eyed girl worn down to nothing.  
A spine sticking out of her back, and  
Each bone in her fragile fingers visible.

A soft warm hand comes out of the darkness,  
Negativity immediately grappling onto it, pushing it out with its long,  
unforgiving tendrils.  
But slowly, surely, it breaks through.  
Pulling her up, slowly out of that deep pit of punishment.

Now, she feels proud to eat,  
Now, she feels proud of her body.  
Now, she is happy with herself.  
The punishment is finally over.

## Section C – Short Story

Rosa Flynn-Smith, Kelvin Grove State College

### BUT HOPE PEEKS IN

Windows frame tiny snipes of the lives within box-like houses. If you walk down a street at night each one is like a television screen, lighting up the world inside. I am foggy, clear and broken. I am the screen to my boy's world. The eye. The interface between his inside and out. I am the window on his world.

Today he slammed the door, sending papers flying. Closed my curtains, blocking out the light that I let in. His world is changing. His walls used to be hidden by washes of vibrant finger-paintings; glittery jubilant abominations. But, have since morphed into a display of certificates and awards – people's expectations of him changed, changing what he found important, how he decorates his world. He used to chase rain droplets along my grass with chubby, little fingers. He'd smile, amused at his own reflection; all sticky-up hair and teeth. But now the rain isn't timetabled in; he doesn't even look up, rarely out. The paper he used to carefully craft into paper planes is now printed with drafts; generic and colourless. Now on his desk sits a laptop, where fat crayons used to be. All of the colour in his life has been swapped for HB-grey. From behind my curtains I watched my boy flick through pop-up picture books, escaping to worlds far beyond my frame; light softer than I could ever catch. But his pop-up books are now text books and essays that he still needs to write. These days his mind doesn't travel far beyond the dust gathering on my sill. Now, like reality, the light that spills through my curtains is harsh, causing him to wrinkle his eyes and turn his back on the world shining in.

Through my glassy eyes I've seen my boy evolve from a child who was bold and confident, to a teenager who second-guesses everything. All his wild Lego creations have been pulled apart, pack away, forgotten. The clock that he could never quite read, still hangs above the door, only to tell him that's he's already five minutes late. The struggle to make it through his teenage years wiser but not broken – a better version of himself – has changed him. The colour and playfulness in his life has been replaced with time-bound practical thing; in universally-convenient-grey.

As a child, he was carried through life by countless clusters of butterflies, real and imagined, shimmering softly in my light, illuminated by the rays that I let in. but when he slammed the door, papers flying, the butterflies inside stopped still. When he trudged towards my glass and tugged my curtains sharply shut, my light – so harsh now – was blocked, trapped just beyond my frame. His room tumbled into darkness, the butterflies hit the floor. Hidden by my curtains, for the first time, I could scarcely see him.

But hope peeks in past me, past my broken boy to a flint od light along the floor. His eyes follow it up to a basket under a mountain of un-submitted words; a basket of colourful bricks for making box-like houses. He mindlessly fiddles with the blocks while the clock ticks. At some point he pauses to pull back my curtains, he need my light again to see. When he looks back on his work my boy realises what he's made, "... ha, a house" he murmurs to himself. A house with a bedroom, with art, cubed colour and a big, big window. At the windows sits a boy looking out beyond his yard, beyond the world of expectation that he lives in, to a world full of wild possibly. All in dazzling, Lego-land colour.

Section D — Poem

Bianca Kroll, Redeemer Lutheran College, Biloela

LITTLE ROCKING BOAT

Little rocking boat goes against  
The waves  
That flap  
Against the side  
Of the little rocking boat  
That's filled to the brim  
Of emptiness  
The people  
Don't know, wouldn't believe  
Wouldn't know, don't believe  
That there could be a way out  
Of the war and land of death we came from  
Come from  
Little rocking boat goes against  
My heart  
That flaps  
Against  
My mind  
What if they were right?  
Was my mother wrong  
To ever even think  
We could escape Lebanon?  
Little rocking boat goes with  
My pleasure  
And excitement  
And leaps and jumps and shouts and soars!  
With the thought  
Of freedom  
At last

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Little rocking boat goes with

My fear

Should I be Christian?

Will I be different

Like the sea

Is different

From the sky?

Little rocking boat thinks

What will I do and

Say and

Think and

See?

What if there is even more pain and war and death?

Little rocking boat thinks

Where is the land,

And people

Who would jump and sing and eat?

Where is the food I crave?

And want to feast upon so badly?

And the excitement that I once had,

Where did you go?

Little rocking boat

Could you understand

The other war that pains

The Little Heartbeat that is

Flapping with the waves

Against Me

And Against

My Little Rocking Boat