



**2024
FRESH FICTION
WRITING COMPETITION
WINNERS**

Winning entry in the 7–12 category: [Zoe Wensor](#)

Winning entry in the 13+ category: [Sophie Nikolarakos](#)

I Believe

Zoe Wensor

You can believe a lot of things but that doesn't make them true. I am skipping joyfully down a cobblestone path with a broad smile spread across my face. When I enter our house, a delightful smell whiffs from the kitchen.

"Mum!" I call. She pulls me into a hug. I need it. It is a beautiful hug. That is until the walls fade away into a small hotel. "No!" I scream. I wake up, my heart thumping in my chest.

"Bad dream?" My dad's voice echoes.

"Yeah," I reply.

"You're sweating. Let me get some water." His footsteps trail off to the kitchen. Tink-tink. Soft music vibrates from underneath the room. I sit up. Curious, I creep out of bed and follow the sound, which leads me to the basement. Tink. The music is stronger now. I slowly make my way down the old staircase. I open the door slightly. The music stops dead. The room is deserted.

Pushing the door completely open, I look around. A piano is in the centre of the room. I trudge slowly to the piano and pull out the seat with great curiosity. I start to play softly. My fingers begin to dance across the keys as the melody builds up to an unpredictable rhythm. Suddenly the piano shifts. Pieces of wood fold in various shapes. First a chair, then a bookshelf. It's as if it's confused. Finally, it holds a position. A door. A blinding beam of light shoots out of the door.

Squinting my eyes, I try to see the cause of the light. I move with caution, floorboards creaking under my feet. My foot hits a rotten floorboard which snaps in two, causing me to slip and fall through the door. But it isn't a door. It's a hole.

I fall headfirst down the hole and wave my arms furiously trying to break my fall. I get closer and closer to the ground, my heart beating so fast it hurts, until suddenly I stop inches off the ground. Then I drop onto the cold hard ground with a thud. I quickly get to my feet and look around anxiously. I am surrounded by trees that reach the clouds, hiding the sun from view.

The grass is a beige colour. It's the middle of the day.

"Lost, dear?" The voice belongs to a grey goose. I open my mouth to speak but the words don't make it out. "What is your name, dear?"

"E-" I pause. Should I trust this strange talking goose? "Elodie."

"Well, Elodie, you must have questions." My thoughts are running in circles. A piano just shapeshifted into a door, which turned out to be a hole. I am in some sort of magical world and I'm talking to a goose.

"Where are we?"

"Mistievia," replies the goose.

"Mistievia? But that's not a place."

"You'll find that it is," she replies. "Now come inside. I want a few questions answered."

Her cottage is a small and cosy place with a fire flickering at the back of the room. "So, Elodie, how did you find yourself here?"

"Well, I played the piano and it kind of shapeshifted into a door."

"How did you know the piece of music?" Her voice has a hint of concern.

"What?"

"The one that you played on the piano."

"My mum taught me."

"And who might your mum be?"

"Emily B-Baker," I whisper.

"And where is Emily Baker?"

I look down at the floor. "She disappeared two months ago," I tremble at this. She too looks sorrowful. "Well, we mustn't focus on the past or we'll miss the future."

I look up at her. She said "we" as in 'she is sad too, because she knew her,' instead of "you" as in 'I'm sad for you.' She notices my change of expression and tries to change the subject. "It's getting late, why don't you get ready for bed? You can sleep on the couch."

I lie down, forming an escape plan in my head. I pull the sheets over my shoulder, adding the final additions to my plan.

"Good night," she says as she goes to her own bed. As soon as she blows out the candles, I spring out of bed and grab the coat that she kindly loaned. I head for the door, but a voice stops me. "If you want to save your Mum, you might need this." She hands me a map. "Go to the Misteivia Prison. Floor 2. Door 368, and watch out for Deathemas."

"Why are you helping me?" I ask.

"Because I am a friend of your mother. Now go!"

I look at the map. Left, right, then right again. I start sprinting, getting faster by the second, until I am as fast as the wind. This might be my last chance to see my mum again. I run until I finally reach a stone building. This must be it.

I see a black creature with a long-shredded cloak guarding the front door. That must be a Deathema. I tap the creature on the shoulder, it turns around and I quickly duck and slip inside. I turn into a long and dusty corridor. I pace up some steps to another corridor lined with doors. 366, 367, 368! "Mum...?"

"Elodie, darling! What are you doing here?"

"No time to explain." I take a pin out of my hair and try to unlock the door. It clicks open. "Come on!"

We race through the corridor and down the stairs, Deathemas close behind. We sprint through the exit and into the dense forest. After running for a few minutes, we finally come to a stop. "How do we get out of here?" I ask.

"With this." Mum holds out a locket. "It doesn't work in the prison, but it will here." She opens the locket. A flashy portal appears. "Shall we?"

"We shall."

You can believe a lot of things and sometimes they're true because I believe.

Children of Nowhere

Sophie Nikolarakos

There were no requirements for getting into Nowhere. Children simply appeared, fusing into society like musical notes in the breeze. Most didn't need to bend when inspecting the roots of trees, and when they tripped on them for lack of leverage, flowers simply caressed their faces in hopes of tears. Initiation consisted of friendship bracelets, a woven braid of secrets, promises and silk ribbon. Crowns of stalks ripped from dirt adorned the royal heads of nature's descendants, though no title could prevent the noble subjects from cloaking themselves in mud. They spent their days exploring, plucking daydreams from orchids that snuggled the west or hunting for bedtime stories in the woods where mushrooms grow plump and bluebells collected morning dew.

They were wild children, shoeless and trapped in blouses with buttons of curiosity.

Every night, the children fished for stars in pools of sadness, wielding nets of shipwreck rope. They feasted on sugary clouds melted and burned over sparks of eagerness while seated on ringed logs, home to moss that spread like dandelion seeds in the wind. The woods sang lullabies, treetops with branches like rungs now enveloped by a woolen, inky blanket. Laughter drifted into giggles and whispers were exchanged in the secrecy of the dark. They fought to remain awake, but soon after the moon kissed them goodnight heavy heads and heavy hearts succumbed to the needs of their eyelids. Jealous waves cried for their friends, envious of the sand that clung to the children like guilt. When dawn set fire to the sky in a rush of excitement, the children would be once again ready to soar through winds of unbeknownst lies and nestle in boughs of wisdom.

This was how days passed in Nowhere. Never different, yet always unique. What once was carried in wraps on backs now padded through the underbrush of carelessness and tripped over self-conscious roots. Real names were forgotten, lost in weaving thorns and ivy upon arrival. Once, a boy flourished into being who liked to soar through innocence, way up amongst buttery clouds and landing each night with tales of utmost absurdity. His words, though madness, demanded worshipping and his poetic soul was free. They christened him Peter Pan.

Robin was the one who plaited their hair, tucked knitted quilts of safety over them in the dark. She had always been there, her ringlets now cascading curls of wisdom. Robin stole kisses and returned them in luxury, pure as her heart. Though her legs were too long for the swings of imagination, she was yet to reach the wood's overhang of acorns that were home to fairies. She always held the soft palms of one lucky sibling, as the other was reserved for Peter.

Conflict resided solely on wooden sword fights for supportive crowds on grass carpets or the lack of space on a toadstool when the forest stage transformed into a molten beast. Cupid especially reveled in harmonious choirs

of playful trouble, the lieutenant of thrill leading unions of loyal, oblivious subjects into battle. He bowed to no one but Valentine, her identical freckled face adorned with the same pink splotches over her nose and cheeks. Constellations of scars were painted across their skin, secrets embroidered like the snail tracks that glistened and weaved through the moss. Orion could often be found among those trails, observing seedlings growing in soil of patience or collecting warm eggs dropped from nests of comfort. Worlds unfolded before his eyes, a fragile glass microscope unveiling an invisible heavens beauty. His pockets chimed with pennies ever since the first thing he'd wrapped his fingers round had been a coin from Robin.

It so happened to take place while the children were having a picnic of iced tea and nut butter sandwiches amongst the wildflowers and oaks. They were led by Tiger, who walked in circles while rain drenched and thoughtless on the days she could be found. Twice, Peter had to break away from the convened sun-soaked children to pursue her dream walking, tracing her steps and calming her roaring soul before she fell off the edge into evermore. On their way back, the wind whistled cautiously as orphaned leaves scattered to greet the onlookers. Knocking branches were unable to forbid the children from advancing, their warnings through hollow claps and groaning lost within their habits and repetition. The children broke into the clearing like ruptured silence, eyes snagging instantly.

A wooden doorway stood precariously in the clearing, stained dark with impending tragedy. It was simple yet beautiful, as things that poison are, existing of splinters of lies. No doorknob nor keyhole resided on the door and grass tickled the frame as it stood in solitude, with nothing behind it except the havoc it would soon weave.

The mystified audience was quick to gather, circling the doorway as if playing another youthful recreation. It was solid and thick, leaning carelessly on a slight angle as if dropped unintentionally by a god. Only Orion's eyes weren't clouded by awe, though they became blurry as he wept for the innocent tree whose limbs had been sacrificed. Tiger was the first to reach for the structure, though was quickly pierced by a thin shard and rescued into the high shelter of Peter's arms. However, it was found that after abundant orbits of the frame nothing much else was to be done with it. One by one, fatigued children pondered off, leaving but a few who were unable to shake feelings of amazement or dread.

When the sun was once again torn from the visible galaxy, shivers clung like creepers, caging dreams behind bars of insatiable affliction. Those who were able to fight weariness with blades of desperation persevered around dying flames. Robin's fingers dripped with blood as she continued to knit, guiding Peter as he loosely strung together blankets of his own. He hummed as the moon mourned for her stolen lover, his shoulder becoming the resting place for his sweetheart. Fireflies crescendoed in twinkling phantoms of nuclear emotion before diving into oblivion, a million tiny heartbeats becoming the first of many

to fail in one last synchronized phantasmagoria. Though engulfing skies returned in sloping planes like regret, everlasting shadows were free to reign longer than folklore.

When daylight's golden glow spilled into the permeated haven, heavy minds and heavy souls set forth upon the garden. Robin, in flowing skirts and braids from Peter, led curiosity-ridden children across vivacious earth towards their newcomer on a quest for proficiency. Those who couldn't yet reach burdening weights of worries remained amongst lapping waves, avoiding handfuls of sand thrown by the tireless Cupid. Orion studied a crab as it dragged its malnourished body through grains while others built houses of fallen branches. Plump bumblebees once harvested pollen, though between the night and morrow their winged humming, or lack thereof, no longer harmonized with the breathing forest. Sulking flowers outlined winding paths; delicate petals having fluttered into pillow-like rainbows amongst neutral skies of olive-green foliage. Butterflies of hope had yet to flee, kissing the tops of heads and warming papery wings under the sun's gaze.

The doorway stood like the cold arms of a long departed lover, leaning impatiently for those who had wronged it and abandoned the frail wood to the long hours. It wore a cape of darkness that stretched towards the outskirts of the vegetation. Dead grass laid in black tendrils that crept outwards like a virus, forming the border on which the explorers stood. Entranced by concern, or perhaps some greater power, Robin surged forwards until she was alone, draped in its shadow. What happened next transpired in neither a grandeur nor precipitous manner, though it sent chills spiraling down every spine.

The door opened.

It merely drifted outwards as if it were a feather navigating the surface of the shore, ever so smooth and ever so common. The slightest of creaks pierced through the air, which once smelt of perfume and freedom, though now only tanged of burning oil. The darkness within was enough to make nightmares recoil, and was as bitter as goodbyes. Above the damned spectators, the sky became laden with self-centered clouds. Or perhaps they were shrouding the heavens to hide the misfortune. Those left around dwindling flames or shivering in sodden blouses had already commenced running to the clearing, where the rest of the children stood increasingly further away from the frame that plagued their sight.

It was under the umbrella of darkness, surrounded by all who had ever known her, that Robin was dragged through the doorway. A chain appeared, already latched onto her fragile neck, before beginning to recede into the structure. Bound as she was, Robin could only turn her body towards the crowd as her struggling figure was taken. Bare feet dug into crumbling dirt as the cold metal grasped her breath. Only Peter was quick enough to reach her, the soft

brush of fingers encasing the vows words could not speak. The last seen of Robin was her lonely hand, comforted only by a bracelet woven of secrets, promises and silk as it reached for those she loved. Her haunted face was already consumed as the door swung shut.

The children screamed, till throats were raw and the cacophony was drowned by rain.

The children cried and shook, burdened by that of which they could not communicate.

And Peter, who knew nothing now but the wind and the pain. He flew, oblivious to Tiger whose mind was destroying her, upwards to the raging sky that swallowed him whole. His wings of innocence began to fail. Rage and raindrops blinded him, though it was grief that stopped his heart.

The boy who flew, fell.

And fell and fell and fell until his bones were as mangled as his soul, though he had become more than a boy; for a second, he had existed as a shooting star.

Although on the other side of that doorway Robin's skeleton remained chained to the land, she was but that, for her spirit could not be torn from her love. Though she could be seen walking in the Real, it was naught but her ghost. She belonged to the children of Nowhere, and to the broken poet who awaited her in the place where broken people go.

Despite what was lost that day, the sun continued to fulfil its eternal fate of chasing the moon, dragging his golden chariot of sorrow in hopes of caressing her starry cape's ends. Tearstained children had burrowed within blankets that were beginning to fray, their melancholy filling the space where their laughter once resided. No pranks had been played for a long time, for swords and sand no longer sparked interest. Orion's forest was desolate and only weeds grew like blood from beneath a bandage. Tiger remained expectantly for Peter to tuck her in, snarling at the approach of others. Entwined limbs provided the warmth desperately craved throughout the wintery nights that suffocated like velvet. Infants cried for their lost siblings, both souls now gone, differently, but alike in that they would never return. Across sands where the tide used to wash up prophecies and beneath trees that had once seemed to tickle the universe stood the doorway. There it would wait, till age bestowed another child to fade amongst the lifeless Real mortals.

Though Nowhere would begin to dwindle in numbers, it would also start to rebuild. The blackened grass ceased its tyranny of poison, leaving only paranoid roots and ashy ground in its wake. Beauty returned to the land with the thawing of snowflakes and the flutter of wings, sweet as belonging and

relieving as answered prayers. Wounds began to heal, even if children still bore the scars.

Every once in a while, a child was stolen through the door, and soon few remembered a boy who could fly, a girl full of love and a story untouched by fear. But all wondered how it ended.