

Essays Beyond Borders: Self and Place

***Essays by Post-Secondary Students in
Malta (2024)***



Edited by Mario Aquilina



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. Corinne Vella, <i>On Art</i>	2
2. Julian Vella, <i>The Temple: An Ode to Silence, Simplicity and Solitude</i>	5
3. Mila Scicluna Bartoli, <i>Of Lost Appreciation</i>	13
4. Jinzhu Lu, <i>Examining the Layers of Place: Roots Among the Concrete</i>	17
5. Judith Gauci, <i>I Know this House</i>	19
6. Amy Falzon Farrugia, <i>Of Warmth</i>	22
7. Sadie Marie Mifsud, <i>Reflections of Childhood</i>	24

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Introduction

The essays gathered in this collection were written by students from post-secondary schools in Malta as part of an Erasmus+ funded project, *Essays Beyond Borders*, in 2024.

Students attended workshops exploring non-academic forms of essayistic writing and focused on ways of exploring the relationship between individual voice and public issues around the theme of place. They were encouraged to write self-reflexively and to allow the process of writing and revision to guide them in finding the appropriate form for their thoughts. They were also encouraged to not be limited by predetermined models of writing and to experiment with personal perspectives on human experience.

The texts reproduced here went through a process of editing and reviewing that gave these writers some early experience in the process of having their writing edited by an editor. The editorial interventions were very light, and an effort was made to preserve the writers' idiom and language as far as possible.

Approaches, styles and themes vary considerably in the collection, and they range from the philosophical contemplation of permanence and transience to the expression of individual feelings in public contexts. They tend to be personal and introspective but also attempt to gesture at meanings and insights that go beyond the individual self.

It is hoped that opportunities like these will encourage these young writers and others like them to experiment, in the true spirit of the essay (a 'trial' or 'attempt'), and to dare to be different while keeping their reader in the conversation.

Mario Aquilina

On Art

When visiting an art museum, there are several things people might do first. Some might head directly to the gift shop, flipping through the notepads, testing out the pens on bits of rough paper and leafing through the graphic tees with cheesy sayings. Others might be there with a tour guide or a headset, on holiday and clueless, clutching a map of the building's layout and listening to a stilted robotic voice describe every nook and cranny. There are also those who go to a museum knowing exactly what they are looking for and why they are there. Unlike all of them, I simply wander.

I haunt the rooms like an apparition, drifting from one gallery to another, drinking in every little detail. My steps echo on the polished floors as I slip by the other visitors, the syrupy lighting tinting everything a warm yellow, casting long ambiguous shadows along the walls. The indecipherable chatter of people is easy to escape from – all you have to do is to continue walking, and with each room you pass, the crowds continue to dwindle until it is just you and art. The museum is a labyrinth of artworks, one room always leading to more, each frame as elaborate as the painting it encloses. I resist reaching out and tracing its ridges, slightly discoloured in the corners where all the dust has collected over the years, permanent stains as if they were reminders of all the days gone by.

Museums, an amalgamation of history and the present, are suspended in time. Walking past centuries-old pigment and marble, crafted by someone's hands all that time ago, I can almost picture its creation. The careful washes of paint, yellow on cream, purple on peach, and the marble, chiselled to perfection with the slow precise movements of all the fine tools. Their muses, although lost to time, are conserved in oils and clay, outliving those they inspired, to be studied, appreciated and to inspire us who came after. In those quiet halls, I almost expect to see every artist reappear, look at their creation and criticise or praise it – the way most artists do.

It's disquieting that what we make outlives us, forever out in the world and impossible to take back. All these works no longer belong to the artist, not when you can buy coasters, bags and socks of them, not when you can purchase a cheap replica to put

on your shelf. The personal becomes the impersonal; or the personal becomes everyone's intimate interpretation.

*

The plaques under the frames and platforms shone sweetly, as if calling out to me, contrary to the indifferent, callous gazes of the muses, so desperately tired of being watched. Some of the plaques held familiar names, artists so well-known, venerated even – Bernini, Michelangelo and Da Vinci. So many of them underappreciated in their time, now their work copied and praised; maybe that was why the figures stared back with such blatant disregard, a sort of 'I told you so'. As I continued down the hall, I paused in front of a window, heavily curtained by rich velvet, and through a small gap I could see the outside. It was just a bit after noon. The sun's rays rendered everything dewy and light, the custard coloured buildings vibrant and solid. There was a crowd of people in the streets, their voices carried up by the wind, unfamiliar foreign words spoken with glee and a carefree lilt. Outside, the world continued, charging towards the present, closing a door on the dark past and mildew. You cannot forget about it though. It always lurks behind you, past mistakes and past advice. In art, you find a warning that should not be ignored, sometimes advice from a kind friend with a comforting hand on your shoulder, other times cruel and unforgiving.

I turned, giving my back to the window, the sun making me see spots as I retreated back into the artificially lit room. After readjusting, my eyes came to rest on 'Anonymous' engraved elegantly beneath a bust. It was the figure of a woman, in white marble and ancient, her brow furrowed and regal head slightly tilted to the right. Her hair was wrapped up in a turban, and she was dressed in flowing, draped fabrics, wrapped loosely around her shoulders. A funerary piece, provenance unknown. I wonder how many artists' names were forgotten, be it by natural or manmade disaster, or if they were simply eroded from memory, like all things must. Permanence may only come after remembrance, yet maybe it was destiny or a punishment of sorts.

Down the hall, a beam of sunlight came to rest on a painting on the far left of the room, bright and solid, once again disrupting the stagnant atmosphere, exciting even the dust particles in the air as they bobbed to-and-fro. I inclined my head, scanning the

details of the oil on canvas. The first thing that caught my attention was the table, covered in trinkets all in various stages of decay – fading pink flowers, their soft petals falling, human skulls all uniquely flawed, bent playing cards, sparkling bits of broken armour and other tainted valuables. Behind them there was an angel, face round and soft clothed in deep blue, his expression stoney. To his right, a painting of the Last Judgment, coloured in waxy hues of red, blues and orange, apocalyptic in its vibrancy. The angel was pointing to the items strewn on top of the table, as if inviting the viewer to take their pick. The plaque underneath read *Vanitas*, Antonio De Pereda.

Vanitas. Vanus. Fleeting. The ultimate sign that everything – life, objects, emotions – is ephemeral in nature. The angel watched me go down the stairs, walk room to room, dodge past tourists and students idling in the middle.

There are several things one might do when leaving an art museum. Some might take a final picture of the work they liked the most, others might visit the cafeteria for a meal or to use the bathroom. There are those who simply leave.

Corinne Vella, De La Salle College

The Temple: An Ode to Silence, Simplicity and Solitude

My study is a large white box fitted with a desk, chair and lamp, along with a mirror and air vent. Take any box of goods, empty it fully, and you will not manage to work; could you work in an oversized box? It is customary, nigh on mandatory, for students and workers to embellish their study with practical instruments: libraries, canvases, recliners, pencil holders, waste baskets—a more intricate and structured model than the desk, chair and lamp.

They say: A study must be fitted with objects to help us study; any library, canvas or recliner installed is not clutter, but a utensil. Utensils are all that is needed in a practical world—a utilitarian society aimed at maximising efficiency. In this life, we want nothing but utensils as anything but efficiency is a thing wasted.¹ One must judge by calculating utility, anything lacking utility is a thing unwarranted.² A study laden with utensils—with a library, canvases and all—is the only good study; an efficient person is one enveloped by utensils to get them to work and concentrate. The past has consolidated this custom, the present complies, the future will continue to confirm it.

I will not say anything in return. My life will.

*

I was four upon moving to the apartment pillaring inconspicuously in a mass of identical towers—a lone watchpost in an army without generals, commanders or anyone above the rank of sentry. Life was static, stationary, staid. All residents of our minuscule borough, enough to constitute a militia, were also singularly static. *Live to work and work to live*, they would say, although not to each other—there was no time for social interaction in an eight-hour workday plus the family... along with another part-time job to cope with the equally static minimum wage that was too fond of the

¹ Dickens 1907, p. 4.

² Bentham 1789.

past decade. They were united in their anguish, but also in their separation: *everyone for themselves and God for us all*.³

My parents were indistinguishable from the rest of the militia. After being evicted from a lavish manor, they were left bereft of funds, having invested them in the house hoping that its value would appreciate. Soon after, the market collapsed. Then I was born. Then their lives collapsed. *Weeping may endure for a night, but light comes in the morning*.⁴ The day after my birth, and several wailing weeks at the YMCA, my parents decided to migrate to the city and rent an apartment. I was four months old when they found one they could afford. Dad became employed as a full-time construction worker and Mum as a full-time veterinarian. I was an impeccable rodent, and the mice occasionally infesting the flat were also rather vexatious. She proved qualified at her job and stoically composed, consoling me through my whimpers and relieving my every grouse. She never lamented her situation and neither did Dad. They rejoiced in their sufferings, mindful that it fosters endurance,⁵ and refused to tire of doing good.⁶ I was taught to be satiated with little⁷—to limit my appetite to minimal material objects. Every time my stomach growled for delicacies, for a Nintendo or Heelys, they would feed me a mouthful of wisdom, remind me that material objects are vices guaranteeing a desire for more material objects; values and principles are virtues ensuring serenity of mind and personal maturation. The few daily minutes spent with family were considered “virtuous”, as were the prayers thanking God for the takeaway scraps of pizza we gratefully labelled as a “meal”. *My son, the quality of food doesn't matter;*⁸ *if it removes hunger, a loaf of bread is just as good as a turkey*. Hunger was a natural yearning, appetite was unnatural. If it wasn't natural, it stemmed from human greed and had to be refused. Even our rooms were furnished out of necessity and not desire, equipped with as few items as possible to limit spending. Retrospectively, I think one of these rooms was left scantily equipped deliberately, not out of despair.

³ Wight 2023, p. 103.

⁴ Biblica 2011 § Psalm 30:5.

⁵ Ibid. § Romans 5:3.

⁶ Ibid. § 2 Thessalonians 3:13.

⁷ Epicurus 1993, p. 99.

⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

*

The family study has remained unchanged since my childhood. An agglomeration of four white walls above a white floor and beneath a white ceiling, it is nigh to pitch black. The only natural light source is a single ray of sunlight narrowly intruding through a hole in the wall, akin to a *camera obscura*, except that the light is not reflected. There is a mirror, but deliberately positioned on an adjacent wall. The lamp is the only artificial light source, casting an overbearing shadow on the opposing wall as I sit on the square wooden chair, doing my work on the square wooden desk. Besides that, a square white air vent lies alone fixed at the top of the wall. Its rigid rectangular mouth reveals its personality – grim, jaded and completely forlorn, much like me as I worked in the study as a child. Every time I heard birds chirping through the vent, I would console myself into thinking they had come to accompany me; incidentally, whenever I attempted to communicate with them, their chirping would dissipate. The company of the desk, chair and lamp would have to suffice. All schoolwork, reading, anything involving concentration, had to be carried out here. There is an uninterrupted flat murmur uttered by the faulty electrical supply in every other room, sounding its dirge throughout the entire block lamenting the residents’ inability to afford proper wiring. The study is the only escape to silence in our flat, being the only room with a door. In its vacuity, the softest whisper will amplify into an indelible wailing, and the desk, chair and lamp will listen vigilantly. It is more of an anechoic chamber reminding the individual of their unaccompanied presence.⁹ The mirror does not face the chair, but if one bothers to turn around to break from the sight of the work on the desk, it too would stencil the word “isolation” in their mind. No canvases, decorations or colours disturb the walls. Whilst immaculately white, their shade of white changes with the angle of incident light littered by the lamp.¹⁰

The study is blank, but I do not perceive it the same every day. It expands when I’m optimistic and shrinks when I’m desolate. There is no sound, but no silence either; my thoughts organise themselves into a vacant melody, filling the room with aleatoric noises.¹¹ They diffuse around the space between the four walls and keep resounding

⁹ Cage 1961, p. 8.

¹⁰ Kostelanetz 2003, pp. 69–70.

¹¹ Cage 1961, pp. 3–10.

until the door is opened. Being in such austere isolation, with no disturbances from other humans or objects, I am ensnared in a realm comprising myself and my psyche.¹² I cannot escape my thoughts as my state of existence integrates into my psyche and my psyche transmutes into my very personality.¹³ Thereon, I am no longer a part of nature, no longer a human, but an inexplicable form of existence—not a living thing, but a condensed cloud of thoughts and emotions. Consciousness. My thoughts and emotions operate in silent sound.

*

Of all my parents' lessons on growing in virtue, the one I distinctly reminisce about is their description of the study. *Son, think of our study as a temple. In a temple, besides worshipping God, people would think about themselves and their lives. It was a silent, simple place where they could be solitary, meaning being lonely in a good way. In this way, people would think about what they are doing wrong and their flaws and see how to solve them in peace. They could reflect on their problems without anyone or anything disturbing them. That is how you, my son, should view our study: a temple of silence, simplicity and solitude.* Dad's precise words still reverberate in my conscience, sounding their wisdom in a euphonious song just as angelic choirs chant praises to the Lord. As I grew up, he would additionally mention the Freudian notions of "ego function", "voluntary isolation" and the "noncommunicating self" he had learnt from *The Ego and the Id*.¹⁴ Still, I feel that the original message was beautiful in its simplicity, which did not compromise its profoundness. Nonetheless, I never understood Dad at a young age, not knowing what "solitude" implied. If it meant anything remotely close to loneliness, I could not grasp why he was labelling it favourably. School taught me to spurn the idea of being lonely—to perpetually belong to others. Religion teachers reasserted Jesus' continuous presence among a mass of disciples... whilst neglecting his occasional absence from others to withdraw to lonely places and pray.¹⁵ Loneliness meant fragility, being exposed to the pack of upper-class kids prepared to tear at my personality along with the weight of carrying my pile of problems by myself, hauling

¹² Pluth Zeiher 2019, pp. 75–78.

¹³ Cage 1961, pp. 3–6.

¹⁴ Coplan & Bowker 2014, pp. 73–77.

¹⁵ Biblica 2011 § Luke 5:16.

them around without anyone to help. I could not distinguish loneliness from solitude. That is the approach I adopted for the family study.

The study was the concretisation of my fears. It was a harrowing venture, working there as a child, having to bear the weight of being alone with my psyche. I could not hear the pen etching words on my homework; the silent sound of my emotions—distress at my isolation—eclipsed any concentration on schoolwork. Mum would have to enter and guide me, not for my homework, but for my infirmity in the face of silence. When she was gone, I would talk to the desk, chair and lamp and soon enough, a mutual bond flourished between us. I found solace in their company as they did in mine, besides the few night hours they spent conversing with each other. I could not appreciate the value of study's splendid isolation—it was not loneliness, but solitude: deliberate seclusion from disturbances. That's what Dad intended. It was harrowing, but it didn't have to be.

After years of enduring the blank environment, I gave up... and started to appreciate it. At thirteen, Dad's words ceased to echo insipidly in my skull and managed to permeate my mind. I had fully confronted our piteous financial state and acknowledged my fate, being destined to work in a low-paying job that did not require qualifications, for higher education was as distant from us as the spirit of altruism is from the upper class. My life collapsed. My psyche, unlike its prior twelve years as a dominion of my parents' conscience, was pushed to proclaim independence, for they would not have the time to assuage my concerns considering their unmitigated profoundness. Psychotherapy was not even considered. Stranded in a secluded realm, my depression would only be known to myself, and I alone had to expel it. I turned to my adversary for counsel: myself, and just myself; no one else could help. Only one space allowed for isolation, where my psyche could effuse from my skull and swim in the confined air, open to personal exploration. After finishing my work late at night, I would sit and stare at the study's walls for a few minutes. I would silence the desk, chair and lamp and offer my sincerest gratitude to the libraries, canvases and recliners for not being there. Free from disturbances, amid unblemished blankness, I would bask in the air blended with my thoughts and emotions. Amid the silence, broken

exclusively by my conscience's humming, I could meditate.¹⁶ My only companion was my psyche; I communicated with it for several nights, with each one providing deeper introspection into my depression. Soon enough, I identified its roots. I staked out the air for traces of fatalistic assurances and pessimism, sequestering them through the hole in the wall. In their stead, hope was planted—hope for a future where my family would be liberated from the handcuffs of social inferiority and manumitted from poverty. Cleansed of parasitic pessimism and laden with newly discovered hope, my psyche was cleared of depression. My life recomposed itself. In the study's uncanny simplicity, I could extract a few essential hours of silence and solitude to study myself. No other study could have offered this opportunity.

*

I earnestly dedicate my story to the human race—to the mass herd of animals scavenging for utility and efficiency, racing for maximum practicality in work and study without ever arriving at a meaningful end. They have been conquered by complications, engulfed in the brume of practicality. Practicality deprives life of value, of purpose, of any meaning besides being as useful as possible. The human is not a toy solidier to be tinkered with; work and study are not solely obligations fixed by top hats, but opportunities for personal growth. Being practical is important; being valuable—psychologically and emotionally fulfilled—is indispensable.

Nature adorns us with freedom, society arms us with constraint; both idols are open to our fealty. Being free agents, yet constrained by the choices of other free agents, the decision is automatically made for us: we abandon our Mother and adulate our abductors. We are born free but bound to the stubborn chains of social convention, shackling ourselves to the actions of others.¹⁷ Prioritising utility is one of these conventions and should be treated as such: a convention, not canon. We must be willing to shun every prejudice against idiosyncrasy and reconsider our lifestyles. We must be willing to shun the supposition that time is best spent doing practical work and devote some to valuable work. We must empty our studies of needless objects, our lives of needless disturbances, and swell them with space to study ourselves.

¹⁶ Burgan 2009, pp. 51–53.

¹⁷ Rousseau 2017, p. 1.

For too long, social convention masked me from the value of silence, simplicity and solitude. I was blind, but now I see.¹⁸ Society is blind, but one day, it too will see. Until then, let me lay in my temple, in my uniquely barren, bland and boring large white box. Let me live in peace of mind, quiet by day, unseen and unknown to the world of irrepressible complexity.¹⁹ Let me bask in the darkness, in blissful ignorance of disturbances to my growth, living amid the company of silence, simplicity and solitude.

Julian Vella, De La Salle College

Works Cited

Bentham, Jeremy (1789). "On the Principle of Utility", *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. [Reproduced on BCcampus.com](#).

Biblica (2011). *New International Version*. [Reproduced on Bible Gateway](#).

Burgan, Michael (2009). *Buddhist Faith in America*. New York, United States: Facts on File, Inc. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

Cage, John (1961). *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. [Available online](#).

Coplan, Robert J.; Bowker, Julie C. (2014). "The Origins of Solitude: Psychoanalytic Perspectives", *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*. Hoboken, United States: Wiley-Blackwell. [Available online](#).

Dickens, Charles (1905) [1854]. *Hard Times*. London, United Kingdom: Chapman and Hall Limited. [Reproduced on Project Gutenberg](#).

Epicurus (1993). O'Connor, Eugene (ed.). *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*. New York, United States: Prometheus Books. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

Hutchings, William (2023). "An Essay on Criticism", *Wit's Wild Dancing Light: Reading the Poems of Alexander Pope*. Open Book Publishers. [Available online](#).

Kostelanetz, Richard (2003). *Conversing With John Cage*. New York, United States: Routledge. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

¹⁸ Newton 2008, p. 24.

¹⁹ Pope 1700.

Newton, John (2008) [1779]. *Olney Hymns*. Wiltshire, United Kingdom: Cromwell Press Limited. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

Pluth, Ed; Zeiher, Cindy (2019). *On Silence: Holding the Voice Hostage*. Palgrave Pivot. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

Pope, Alexander (1700). "Ode on Solitude". [Reproduced on Poetry Foundation](#).

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (2017) [1762]. Bennett, Jonathan (ed.). *The Social Contract*. [Reproduced on Early Modern Texts](#).

Wight, Martin (2023). *Foreign Policy and Security Strategy*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. [Available online](#) (limited preview).

Of Lost Appreciation

The apartment is tiny, but big for Russian standards. When you walk through the door, the bedraggled witch swaying from the wall snags your eye. She has glowing red eyes, straggly black hair, and two crooked teeth. My grandma, like many Russian people, is very superstitious, and according to folklore, the witch would scare any evil spirits away.

Passing the witchy wall on your left you will find the kitchen or more precisely my grandma's haven. The floor is slippery and is covered with these brick-red, glossy tiles which make an excellent skating rink especially if you wear fluffy socks. The kitchen is quite cramped as if the architect forgot to include the kitchen in the apartment plan and had to squeeze it in last minute. The walls are painted a light blue and are lined with white cabinets stuffed with cookbooks, unused crockery and random bits and bobs. There is also one large window that overlooks the communal yard, which has a tiny playground. I love opening that window, sticking my head out and filling my lungs with crisp, Russian air. There is something special about it. It is full of the smell of rain, and after you inhale it, you feel alive. That window would not be open for long, however, since my grandma would yell from wherever she is, for me to shut it due to drafts. If there is one word my grandma adores using, it would be "drafts".

Then there is the living room. Lace curtains hang over the windows, and the couch is covered in velvet flower patterns. I enjoy dragging my hand across the velvety smooth fabric, feeling it pucker and turn white. At the far end is the television, still widely used, mostly for news coverage by my grandpa and bone-chilling dramas by my grandma. A chandelier made from glass hangs from the ceiling. If I were to leave the window open (to my detriment may I add), the glass would begin to tinkle and sway gently. On the right, there is a wooden cabinet filled with glass crockery that my grandparents got on their wedding day.

Next, there is my grandparent's room. Its walls are painted a delicate lilac shade which may be the reason why it seems so cramped. There is one window nestled into the far end of the room, a large mirror which is used more for the hanging of clothes than for

anything else. The room is essentially split into two, my grandma's side which is littered with knitting needles, sewing material, drawing pads, pens and pencils and a multitude of books about health and psychology. Contrasting greatly is my grandpa's pristine side, with only his Kindle and a coffee-coloured miniature figurine containing his heart medicine.

On the other side of the corridor, there is an extra room, which I like calling 'the Skype room' since my grandparents always answer our calls from there. There is one ancient computer perched on the top of the desk, some pen and paper, a glass-paned book cabinet, and a guitar hanging from the wall. Then there is the infamous balcony, which is wooden and makes these very unsettling creaking sounds whenever you take a step. The windows are covered with a flimsy white lace, which billows like sails when the northern wind gusts. I take solace from the balcony and the sounds of the area. Since the temperatures are often lower than 14 degrees in Russia, most Moscovites like to use their balconies as fridges, so it is not uncommon to see pots of soup and plates of meat simply sitting on a balcony. The most interesting thing on the balcony is by far the skin of a bear that my grandpa killed on a hunting trip decades ago. I would always step over it when I was younger, scared that it would bite my toes.

The mornings are dominated by the barking of dogs, the rumble of planes taking off, and the loud "carrrr" coming from the colonies of crows who have begun to call Moscow their home. They are fascinating creatures, very clever and quite intimidating. They are huge black birds, with sharp claws, long pointed beaks, and glassy black eyes. Their feathers, which are slick with oil, glimmer in the rays of sunlight making one want to reach out and touch them, which I wouldn't recommend. At night the sounds are different. The barking of dogs is endless, but shouts from rowdy teenagers rise from the dimly lit streets below together with the faint hum of traffic coming from the highway, the clatter of the underground which is strangely comforting and the occasional howling wolf.

The playground is a simple affair. It has a big metal, reflective slide that when covered in snow makes the best slide I have ever ridden on. The minute you sit on it you already find your backside thumping down on the wet ground below. There is only one swing, but it still allows your toes to touch the branches of the 'berezki', most of

which are patterned with shaky hearts filled with lovers' initials on their striped trunks. They sway gently in the chilly breeze, their drooping branches caressing the slick sidewalk and dotting it with their signature leaves.

Just the playground itself carries a multitude of memories: of us waving to our grandma from the snowy swings, chasing crows and feeding them croutons, playing with our neighbour's dog, and having epic battles in the snow. Although now it stands hauntingly silent, before we would spend hours swinging on the chipped yellow swing, whooshing down the reflective metal slide, and hanging off the rusting blue rings until the burgeoning blisters on our hands begged us to stop.

I would do anything to go back and play on the slide, feed the crows, step over the bear skin, stick my head out of the kitchen window, feel my nose numb, and turn a rosy pink because of the cold.

I'm reminiscing.

Nostalgia seems to beckon us as we age and prompts us to dive deep into the archives of our memory to retrieve memories and details we thought were long lost to our psyche. I haven't been to that little town on the outskirts of Moscow and stepped into my grandparent's apartment in more than five years, and to say that I miss would be a sore understatement. The nostalgia I feel is tinged with a bitter anger at myself. We take too much for granted in our privileged society, from our morning commute to being able to smell our food. I remember how as we were pulling away in the taxi and the figure of my grandpa became a mere outline, I said to myself "Oh I'll be back next year", and well I wasn't. We assure ourselves that all aspects of our lives will be there tomorrow for us to enjoy, indulge in and extract joy from. We assume that we will wake up after a nap, that we will get home safe, that we will open the fridge and we will have food and that we will go abroad and see our relatives in the coming year, and yet all these false promises are not ours to give.

I find it quite sad that to appreciate something we need to be rid of it to truly begin to value its presence in our life. Yet at the same time as painful as it may be, I am grateful that at times life reminds me of how lucky I am because I think that without them I would grow up to be a surly, grumbly old woman devoid of all hope and simply

existing. There is a difference between living and existing and not only as words. To exist is to plough through each day with an ungrateful, preoccupied, and distracted mindset. To live is to wake up to meet each day with an overwhelming sense of gratitude at life's seemingly insignificant gifts. We get so lost in the hubbub of our routine, its monotony and incredible speed that we forget to live, to be exquisitely present in every single moment.

When tomorrow dawns try tasting the deep, caramel notes in your coffee, feeling the breeze ruffle your hair as you walk up the steps, the gentle warmth of the sun on your back and the delicate rise and fall of your chest as you breathe. Life is so wondrous, so rich in experiences and lessons that it would be a pity to waste even a moment of our glorious existence.

Mila Scicluna Bartoli, Ġ. F. Abela Junior College

Examining the Layers of Place: Roots Among the Concrete

Tucked amid soaring skyscrapers and busy streets is a peaceful spot in the middle of a busy metropolis. This humble location is significant even beyond its actual borders; it captures the spirit of the place. I consider the many layers of meaning woven into the fabric of this area and how it interacts with larger social, environmental, and human storylines while I sit on the weathered seat and listen to the soft rustle of leaves and the far-off hum of city life.

I was raised in this urban jungle and have direct experience with the cityscape's ongoing change. Like ocean waves, buildings rise and fall, each leaving its mark on the collective memory of the city. But even in this constantly shifting terrain, some locations hold steady, acting as communal hubs. One such location is the park where I am currently sitting; it is a haven from the bustle of city life where people come from all walks of life to find comfort and companionship.

I'm struck by the variety of experiences that are being presented to me as I look about. The joyous abandon of children playing on the swings contrasts sharply with the serious expressions of older couples strolling through the park on a daily basis. A group of friends are having a picnic nearby, and the sounds of their laughter blends in with the tunes of street entertainers. The lines separating age, colour, and socioeconomic class dissolve here, in this microcosm of society, fostering a sense of human connection.

However, there is a deeper reality – one characterised by inequality and displacement – below the peace on the surface. The city's streets and structures are adorned with the stories of those who came before us, and the very earth beneath our feet is a testament to their efforts. Like a relentless flood, gentrification carries communities away and erases historical markers as it moves across neighbourhoods. What was formerly a vibrant centre of cultural diversity turns into a sterile, commercialized area that serves only those with the means to pay for advancement.

The idea of place acquires significant significance in this setting as a battlefield where conflicting interests collide and the voices of the underprivileged are frequently

muffled. Nonetheless, resilience exists even in the face of difficulty. Together, community activists reclaim their neighbourhoods, revitalizing abandoned areas and protecting the legacy of bygone eras. The real meaning of location is exposed here, in the communal fight for justice and equality, not as a static thing but rather as a dynamic force for change.

My thoughts go to the natural environment that is located just outside of the city limits as I continue to consider the complexity of place. These wild areas provide an insight into the earth's ancient cycles, in sharp contrast to the concrete jungle. This place, with its tall trees and meandering rivers, reminds me that we are but minor characters in a much grander scheme of things.

However, the devastation caused by human activities still affects even these immaculate natural areas. Pollution, deforestation, and climate change pose a threat to permanently affect the landscapes we cherish, deleting the very locations that help to define who we are. It is our responsibility as stewards of the planet to save these delicate ecosystems for coming generations, lest we become lost in the process.

I am grateful for the locations that have influenced me, including the busy streets of the city, the serene seclusion of the park, and the wild beauty of the natural world, as the daylight fades and the sun sets. Every single one conveys a tale of tenacity, adversity, and hope. And it's through recounting these tales that we discover significance in the locations themselves as well as in the relationships we make along the journey.

I have a deeper understanding of the subtleties of location and how it influences our life as I get up from the bench and head home. Ultimately, it's not only about the places we live in; it's also about the memories, feelings, and sense of community they arouse. And we make sure these places survive by acting as a collective stewardship, acting as rays of hope in a world that is constantly changing.

Jinzhu Lu, G. F. Abela Junior College

I know this house

I know this house very well. Its rooftops are brown and it has two blue windows in its attic. Its front door can never quite close, releasing random noises about facts and opinions that would be swirling through the attic up above. The foundations of this house are at its centre. It has a big heart-shaped pillar that has a few plastered holes in it. This house has all its belongings packed up into boxes because it's constantly moving from one neighbourhood to the next, trying to find a place to call home.

I know it has pale walls on the outside and has a red squishy interior. The white fence of the front door had been fixed to perfection a couple of years ago, but the house tries to hide the fence's naturally aging yellow discoloration. I know the house has a brown spot on its right hand that's been there ever since the house was built. I know of the trail of eczema running across the arms that the house can never quite get rid of, no matter how hard it scrubs.

I know all this because, up in the attic, there's me. I'm connected to the entire house by means of an elaborate system of capillaries, veins, arteries, and nerves. I know all about how it works, from the synaptic clefts between one nerve and another to the way the glucose in the capillaries diffuses out of the red blood cells; all contributing to the house's constant hum (I told you the front door never shuts up).

I know my house loves chocolate and detests anything with a spicy undertone. I know it loves hugs and has always wished to find another house to someday call its permanent neighbour. My house wants to find its place in the city, but I know its heart is tied to the countryside. It loves the smell of wet grass and baking cookies and cupcakes. It loves music and the rain, as well as the warm sun shining on its rooftop and the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks while feeling that cool sea spray all over its exterior.

Everyone tells me my house is unique, but how unique really is it when the inside of your house looks and works exactly like mine? Even my friend from Australia's house seems to have copied the exact blueprints of my interior. So then, why does everyone

tell us we're unique? I mean, sure, we all look different because some fences are a little more crooked than others, and our attic windows may be green or brown instead of blue; so I guess we do look different, but... what about what's really inside us?

We all seem to have a heart-shaped pillar as our foundation, but some people's pillars are more fragile than others. Some might have their foundations resting more on their mind or their money boxes rather than on their hearts. We all seem to believe we know what our houses are really filled with, but deep down, we all know we're lying through our fences. We may be similar, but I think what makes us unique is more what's in our attics, in our minds - the true you in the big house we all claim to know so well. What we use our attics to store and look for is what makes us particular, the way we perceive the world and react to it.

I know all these things about my house, but do I really understand the intricacies of it? I've always wanted to fit into a neighbourhood but I always get stuck in the same cycle of never finding the right place. Like when I thought I'd found my permanent neighbour, only for them to move eight months later with the excuse of "our power supply wires never really connected." Or when I attempted to change the colour of my roof to match the others, only for them to repaint it another colour a week later. I don't know what's more important to my house: to fit in or to figure myself out. Will I just keep flitting from one neighbourhood to the next in hopes of finally finding somewhere I think I belong?

I've always wanted a place I could call home. Only a few people I've met have ever let me really feel like I was home - like I was myself. I'm constantly changing and adapting to whoever I meet, so, I'm never really myself, am I? I want to be surrounded with people and things I love, feel the same love I project to everything around me reciprocated back. I want to feel comfortable, to be allowed to live in my own skin without having to change anything about me or tear myself apart in an attempt to please others. But how can I do that when I don't even know who my true self really is?

What if I have to face the fact that the only home I'll ever need is my own? My house. Me. Maybe in finding out what I really contain - the answer to the question of why I am who I am - it'll let me accept the idea of being myself without the constant want to

find where I belong or what I'm meant for. Maybe my place is here, my house, myself, comfortable with the idea of the true me. I should remind myself more often that it's not just my house, but that house is me, and I should to learn to look inside its contents more often.

I don't know this house very well. I know what it looks like and how it works, but I don't know what's in it that differentiates it from the rest. I don't know where it's supposed to belong or what it's meant for. I guess some houses never do; I just hope I'm not one of them.

Judith Gauci, St Aloysius College

Of warmth

The cold breeze always felt substantially colder where I used to live. The proximity to the sea seemed to almost amplify the already freezing temperature, and so I would scarcely leave the house without first bundling myself up in layer upon layer of warm clothing. I did so not because my mother told me to, although she admittedly did, but more to protect myself from the harsh winds that used to plague the hill-village air that I would expose myself to three times a day. I would take the dog out every morning, afternoon and evening, and I especially dreaded doing so in the wintertime. The wind penetrated my clothes entirely with a chill that seemed to gather in my chest. It seeped into my flesh and bones as I gripped the leash, pushing through the disagreeable gales.

As one would assume, these walks were quick-paced, and I often had to force myself to allow my dog a chance to relieve himself on a rusty pole or patch of grass. Upon reaching the three steps of the patio that my mother's maisonette shared with a block of apartments, I would rather reluctantly reach into my right pocket and retrieve an old lanyard, house key attached.

The very moment the door opened I would be enclosed in warm air, my childhood home, a refuge from the winter. Except it was not. The house was welcoming, soft yellow lights illuminated every corner, casting a pleasant glow on the dark wood furniture. Stepping inside I would feel the warm air assault me. Within the house, warm as it may have been, there was a cold far harsher and more volatile than even the most brutal of storms outside. This cold was a part of my childhood, winter or summer, spring or autumn.

Her coldness seeped too; into my heart it rooted itself, and I knew then, as I know now, that I would never escape it. Her green iceberg gaze pierced my heart, dripping little droplets of freezing water onto the parquet floors which were already littered with my salty sadness.

And so I would often retreat to my closet room, lay my throbbing head on my pillow, and cry. I would make sure to be loud enough for her to hear me, and even before I

knew what pity meant I prayed that perhaps she might feel enough of it towards me to thaw her icy rage, consoling me and enveloping me into her chest. I longed for her to open the creaky door with her slender manicured fingers, wearing a comforting, motherly expression, a twinge of regret for her frequent outbursts and an apology, if I was lucky. I was not. Instead, I would fall asleep sticky-faced and sad, and I would wake in the same sullen, swollen state.

I grew up under that cold gaze, naturally developing one of my own in the process. I could not tell you the moment my mother's deep and empty stare became my own, the moment her coldness stopped being directed at me and became part of me, where I stopped being able to distinguish where she began, where I end.

And as I was about to leave my home for the last time, I saw those cold eyes searching for mine as she stood barefoot on the hazelnut brown parquet. Confusion flashed in her grey-greens. I wonder if she felt responsible or guilty, if she felt anything at all as she was met with the reflection of her own cold stare.

Often, our parents do not understand the power they hold in shaping us, and sometimes I fear that we are all doomed to become like them. Their expectations eventually become a part of us.

So, I stepped back out into the chilly air, but it no longer felt cold. I haven't felt cold since that day, since I stepped out of the patio that last time, since I left her to freeze as I moved towards the warmth I've always craved.

Since that day I find myself wondering if warm can exist without cold. I know what cold feels like because I have experienced being warm and vice versa. So what if by leaving, I disturbed this balance, what if by never experiencing the cold again, I'll never find the warmth I'm in search of?

Amy Falzon Farrugia, G. F. Abela Junior College

Reflections of childhood

I am sitting quietly in class, and it is winter. The cold drifts me off into a train of thought. A memory of when the weather was warmer undusts itself every so often demanding to be kept in good condition. Something significant would not want to be forgotten. It is a battle against time and all the experiences that stack on it. You get distracted. Life is forever moving, never stopping. We think it will not end so quickly, until it does.

What determines that you have lived an enjoyable life? You are given a suitcase to take with you just before the leap that takes you into an unknown place. Without any effort exerted, the suitcase packs itself with the essence of what made you happy. A memory that ignites my young soul is one spent in nature surrounded by people whose only desire is to have fun and make their experience unforgettable.

We are at our usual summer campsite as young scouts. Looking up at the bright sun, he greets me with a hot wave for a hug, welcoming me to the place where it feels like home. A different kind of home that is free of the stress of life. Only for five days each summer, we live there together, bond, making the best out of the summer holidays, and essentially our youth.

The campsite is fairly small, a humble space that is just enough to satisfy our needs. Past the entry gate is an open expanse of white pavement that shines bright like our hopes for the future. Just in front, nature flexes its colours of the earthly brown soil ready for pegging camps, and leafy green trees stand tall, having been waiting for our arrival all year. The birds in their nests expect us to listen to them singing in the early morning breeze. We never let go of these nightly conversations and the silly laughter that leaves us breathless. Those sounds are the core features of our childhood.

The rucksacks are placed in the dining shelter. We take the weight we brought from home off our shoulders completely. From the camping area, a fresh view of the blue sea and the sublime capital city floating above it puts us at peace with nature. An inner harmony excites us, and we feel the waters cool us down after a hot day of scavenger

hunts. The ridiculous number of jokes and the chatter makes our throats dry. We talk about everything, for hours, help each other and in unity we form a family.

Our unit prefers sleeping in the hammocks. We inspect where to hang them, which trees are strong enough to support us, provide us protection like babies in the arms of their mother's care. Most nights we don't really sleep. We only lay there after an eventful day. We gaze up in the silence of the night looking at the stars, thinking of that special person we've been crushing on ever since we got there. Innocently complimenting each other and holding hands when nobody is looking.

"Your skin is soft."

We catch ourselves smiling. We wonder if the others are doing the same thing, but no it's silly. We convince ourselves we are tired. Fatigue and curiosity start to eat at our brain, stopping us from thinking right. All the emotion floods our brain with delusions.

"Maybe they do like me back".

We think of love the same way lovers in fairy tales have a happy ending, but we are children growing up in a blemished world we have yet to discover.

A place like this holds memories we wish we could relive. Years accumulate.

I know I am young but maybe not as young as I thought. Pushing further away from what was once called the present, is now a past. A past time, a past life of childhood experiences has ended. The heart bleeds from wistful melancholy, from the fear of never experiencing again such childish joy. An infinite longing that wounds the soul in search for another exciting adventure, similar to those we had as kindled children. However, despite the weight of emotion I need to carry, it is worth gathering it all up for when the journey is over. I will forever clench moments like these in my fist until the strength I have in my hands gives out and fades into the unknown.

Sadie Marie Mifsud, De La Salle College