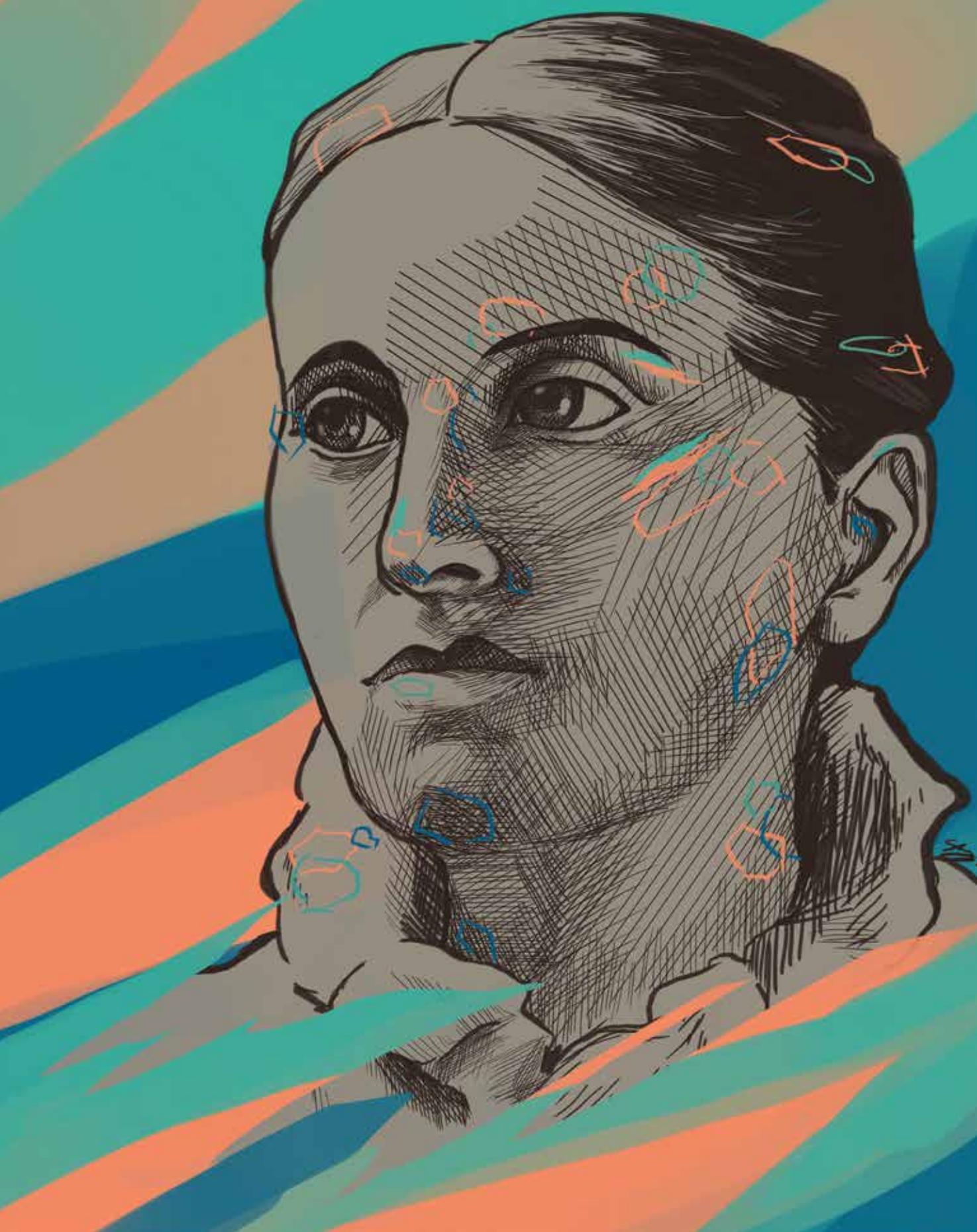




**THE
YOUNG
ADAS
SHORT
STORY
PRIZE
2023**



FIRST PRIZE

WINGS OF HOPE *by Jennifer Williams*

There was heavenly light, and pure clouds, and a brilliant expanse of blue.

I could feel it on my skin, the embrace of the great goddess of light. The wind, playfully caressing my bare limbs. Lifting my wings. Lifting them up to the sky. Into freedom, into peace.

Up.

Up.

Down.

Down, down, down.

No matter how much those cool hands tried to aid me, my wings wouldn't lift. No matter how hard I tried, how much I strained, they wouldn't fly. It was agonising. Torture of the cruellest kind, to be able to see the goal, but not reach it. Since I had been blown into that tree, and torn my delicate, whimsical wings, I had been in pain. Physical, but more. With every strain, every desperate attempt I couldn't resist making even when it caused that tear to split further, I felt part of my heart rip, too. My heart, and part of my soul. For my soul was born of light and wind and freedom, and without that, it was an empty husk.

It had been five days since I had last tasted the sky.

I was slowly losing hope, every inch of shredding membrane diminishing it further. Now it was almost out. That tiny flicker had turned to the most dim, dying, ember. I couldn't lose that too. I had to wait, hope that soon...

A shadow approached.

My heart started beating rapidly. I tried my hardest to shrink, to hide. Normally, I would retreat, escaping the danger that such large shadows usually represented. But I couldn't, not without being able to fly. So I crawled, as much into the safer shadows behind me as I could.

But it was too late.

The shadow stopped above me, and the human child peered down. Her monstrous eyes were so big and wide. Her mouth, so large, like a wolf's. Her strong hands, so clumsy. Hands that were now reaching...

No. No.

I could only think, silently screaming, as those too-strong, too-large hands scooped me up. Could only cringe as they nudged the back of my wings, grazing along the wound.

Could do nothing, absolutely nothing, as I was carried away, out of sight of the benevolent goddess who cared for me.

~

I had been with the human child for three days.

She was not like the other children I had encountered, or heard about from my brothers and sisters. Her hands had not crushed me. Not yet. But I had seen the nature of children. They were fickle and impulsive. I had little hope that she would not, in the end, hurt me.

But for the moment she was kind.

She fed me nectar, straight from flowers growing just outside her sanctuary. I knew she thought I was a butterfly, and cared for me as such. But the nectar was sweet, so I could not complain. She created a little bed of flowers and leaves and twigs, setting it by the glass so I could bathe my wings in the sunlight during the day, then the moonlight during the night. She was aware of the condition of my wings. I think she was even trying to help. But that ember was barely there. Still, it hadn't gone out, not as I had expected it to. Its warmth was still there—only just, cowering from the cold in me.

Perhaps the girl was keeping it alive. Or perhaps my own determination.

Yet she was kind. And whenever she was, that warmth pulsed lightly.

~

It had been one month.

Under the child's care, my wings had quickly recovered. I had realised by now that it had not been from the nectar, or time's passing. Somehow, the human girl had some sort of magic that had speeded up my recovery. It was not like my own, or that of my brothers and

sisters. She couldn't just use it as she pleased—I doubted she was even aware of it.

No, this magic came from deep within. From the heart. Slowly, surely, it had rekindled that dying speck of flame into one that burned joyously.

As I sat on the old timber bench, I fanned out my wings, feeling their glorious, renewed strength. I had tried a couple of times to get them to flap and lift me up, but so far I had not managed to go much higher than a couple of metres. But today, the sun was glowing, and the sky was beckoning. I could feel the child's stare, watching as she had every time I had tried to fly. I had, at first, expected her gaze to be unnerving. It was actually so ... hopeful. As if I could see a mirror of that yellow flame within their depths.

I looked to the clouds, setting my focus upon their fluffy surface. With every shred of my being, all the energy burning within me, I raised my wings, beating them fiercely.

Please, I begged my glowing goddess, please.

Eyes closed, I flapped and flapped, pushing myself as hard as I was able. There was no tear anymore, nothing pulling apart. They just flapped and flapped, faster and faster.

And I went up.

My wings carried me past the two metres I had previously reached. Higher and higher. I stumbled, falling back down, but my wings held steady. They continued to fly, lifting me higher.

Up and up.

~

The young girl watched as the creature flew up, up, and away. Into the glorious morning

sky, wings glittering like newborn stars. She supposed they were, in a way. Those wings, so delicate yet so strong, capable of flight again.

The creature flew towards the glowing horizon. The young girl was not naive. She had realised that the creature was not a butterfly, but

something far more special. She watched, and felt her heart lighten.

For if the broken parts of that wonderful creature could be fixed, then surely the broken parts of her could mend, too.