

3rd Place
Hearts and What Could Have Been
R.S. (HS 2)

Grown-ups always told me that the spirits weren't real, that there was nothing in the pond, but I knew. I squatted beside the heart-shaped pool lying in the middle of the abandoned room, and stared at the silent surface.

Well I know I'm old enough to be here.

From a jagged hole in the ceiling poured in some rare sunlight. I held my breath. A grey shadow skittered across the water. Two more followed. I clutched my knees and gasped.

The spirits!

I leant closer, hugging my legs closer to my chest, and saw that they were shaped like triangles. A slow, droning roar started shaking the ground. They reached the end of the pool, and disappeared. I sat back, and put my fingertips together in front of my face. My thumbs met, and the space between my hands formed a triangle—just like the spirits. I bent my thumbs inwards, and my hands made an upside-down heart. Like the pond. I giggled to myself. What was there to be surprised about? The spirits *were* the pond.

Hearts. They're all hearts.

The girl in the pool was laughing too. I peeked in just as she did, and she was smiling a limpid grin, and I waved, and she waved back. She was the guard of the spirits—whenever my hand got too close, she would reach out in warning.

“Don't tell anyone I'm here,” I whispered.

More spirits materialised on the water again, scattered over the surface. I craned my neck. A spirit had lit itself up like a firefly. It swayed from side to side, orange light flickering on and off behind it, trailing a thin stream of black. Another caught alight. And another. Like fireworks the spirits streaked the surface.

Fireworks? Fire?

A mechanical wail rose from downstairs, and I clasped my head.

A siren.

I huddled in a corner. I could hear distant drum beats—explosions coming my way. In the corner of my vision, the roof crumbled.

I slowly opened my eyes.

It isn't there... the pool... the room!

Where the abandoned room was supposed to be was a few collapsed walls and a strange forest. I brushed the dust off my arms and stepped over the rubble. Trees stood eerily naked, stripped of their leaves, covered in white-grey flakes from bark to bough.

I looked up. The sky was a beautiful misty red with the white powder suspended in the air, the sun a pinprick in the fog. An immense heat draped itself around me; I took off my jacket and kneeled on the ground, brushing away fragments of concrete, looking around for the pool.

The spirits have to be somewhere. The girl has to be somewhere.

The ground around me darkened, and I looked up. A gigantic grey monster circled overhead. It canted over to its side and veered off; another monster joined it, and they flew in tandem. I caught a glimpse of their flat triangular bodies as they roared through the air above me, and twirled and twisted. The first abruptly burst into flames, fragments flying off, silhouette pitch-dark against the flames, spiralling down. A ground-shattering crash reverberated from the direction that it had gone. I staggered back from the sound and towards a tree.

Loud. Hurts.

The white powder coating the tree was coarse, and the flakes on my hands left small blotches of red on my skin. Tender blisters broke, and I watched as small holes appeared in the wounds. Blood trickled down my fingertips, stinging. I brushed the powder onto the ground and stomped on it.

It doesn't like me.

I stared at the tree trunk, caked in white. There was a crude heart drawn on the bark, as if it had been singed. A heart—like the heart-shaped pond. I glanced upwards to see more of the monsters flock together.

Could they be the spirits? From the pool?

But those spirits were always playful. They did not make each other explode. They swam with each other and made spectacular shows.

I leant back on the tree, my head fitting just underneath the heart, and stared at the intensifying red fog.

A grey cloud bloomed in the distance, a giant, plump mushroom. Inky splotches appeared in my vision, growing larger, merging with each other, blotting out my vision altogether.

I heard someone screaming frantically at me, that the outside was dangerous.

Grown-ups are so silly.

I was just going to find the spirits.

And maybe the monsters would be my friends too.