

ELEMENTS – Short Story Competition – Winners and Runners Up

Winner - **Libby Harrison:**

I'm a woman after all

A fictional diary extract suggesting an alternative account of the discovery of Osmium.

22nd May 1803

Today was another long day of gruelling research. I can no longer look at myself for fear of fainting from the dizzying image that appears. My hair is matted, swept back in a bird's nest of a bun with pencils sticking out; dark grey rings frame my tired, sunken eyes; my clothes hang off me my cleaning rags caked in dirt. I know that I'm overworking myself, but I am so close to discovering this new element that I'm sure lurks behind this platinum and nickel work. Well, Tennant is close. I'm cleaning his bench. Anyway, I best be off to bed to be at my best for work tomorrow.

23rd May 1803

I've had a brilliant idea! The mixture of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid (aqua regia) dissolves gold, another noble metal, so what if it's able to dissolve platinum? What if there's a residue? Regardless, I better get back to work, I can't have Tennant catching me. Apparently, cleaners are only supposed to clean. I'm thinking about sneaking into the lab, and testing some of these theories but I'm not sure about it. It's not very ladylike, is it? Oh well, my mop is calling.

25th May 1803

Guess what? The lab received a new shipment of platinum, so I can finally test my theory. Or Tennant can test his. The soft silvery metal is calling me, the glimmering iridescent highlights shimmering, mirroring the sparkle in my eye. I am working every second; the lab is so interesting. I didn't go to school. Girls at school? Ridiculous, as Papa would say. Now I'm stuck cleaning labs instead of working in one.

26th May 1803

It's 2 am; I'm ridden with indecision. I am itching to go and test my theories; my blood is crawling to pursue this whispering voice. Should I creep into the lab? Should I not? Oh, I don't know. I can visualise every second of my plan: reaching into the cupboard, collecting the aqua regia....

I *will* follow my dreams; I *will* discover this element.

26th May 1803

I'm in a lot of trouble. I did creep into the lab, and I did dissolve platinum in aqua regia, but before I could see anything, the alarms went off, the sirens started ringing, and here I am in a prison cell. The walls are awfully drab, the ceiling an ugly colour of spiritless grey. Oh, hang on a sec, they've just dropped a paper into my cell; I might as well read it.

NEW ELEMENT 'OSMIUM' DISCOVERED BY SCIENTIST SMITHSON TENNANT.

Oh, how could he? He knows that I was the one with that idea, it was him who caught me in the lab. I shall tear this paper into a million shreds and dump it on whoever I next see. That's all I'll ever be able to do. I'm a woman, after all.

1st Runner-Up – **Ollie Symes:**

Element of inspiration: **Helium**

The Grecian Noble Gas

Born of the titans Hyperion and Theia, Helios waits to begin again his daily duty. His four-horse chariot ablaze, he bursts from Eos' gates of dawn to begin the recurring pattern in which all mortal life revolves. As he leaves Eos in his wake, closing her gates for the next morning, his chariot floods the sky with light and radiates the earth.

Those soaked in his light look up in fear and worship, sacrificing prized heifers to ensure he continues to embark on his daily commute, east to west. As his power fuels their crops, their animals, their lives, they become ever more indebted to him.

As the day draws to a close, Helios falls with his light from the edge of the earth, allowing the silver beacon of his sister, Selene, to fill the night sky. This harmonious sibling cycle continues to this day.

After thousands of years, worship waned as those below gradually turned their attention to other deities. The look returned by the mortals below as Helios raced across the horizon was no longer one of fear, but of fascination. Particularly busy-bodied mortals, who dedicated their short-lived existences to unravelling the secrets of the universe, studied his journey, his energy, his light. Why? In a vain attempt to comprehend the power of a God? Nevertheless, they studied and searched, tested, and tabulated, experimented and elucidated for centuries to understand him.

The range and power of his light was defined, captured, valued, and recorded. Gradually, the prying mortals unravelled his secrets and laid them bare in text and diagrams. They recognised wavelengths of his light and realised they could also be found on earth, eroding the divine reputation of his power. Feeling embarrassed and exposed, one day Helios took to hiding behind his sister, Selene, creating a seldom seen eclipse. It was in this eclipse that the tenacious mortals glimpsed the searing, fused heart of his light.

Revealed as a bright yellow spectral line, the mortals observed in wonder. The source of this radiation, which could not be found elsewhere on earth, must be ethereal in nature, not of this world. The reason, the origin, the *element* behind this light must therefore be in his name: Helium.

Through the circumstance of this discovery, Helios maintains an aspect of mystery and returns happily to his indefinite duty. Although it is later discovered that helium is indeed present on earth, it doesn't matter – Helios has diversified his channels of immortalisation and now resides peacefully, inertly at the top right of our Periodic Table, lording over the noblest of gases.

Joint 2nd Runner-Up – **Theedsana Thiruarulselvan:**

Element of inspiration: **Oxygen**

The Elements Over Ground

Our world is quite different from yours; in fact, we don't understand why or how your world used to work in the way it does. I mean, think about it, the most valuable things for you are those deep underground. Why do you need strong hard metals so much? The funniest thing for me is how you valued gold so much. I've read in history books that gold used to cost a whopping £50 per gram. Honestly, those who bought it: Why? I will cut you some slack; you didn't know what was coming.

Back in your time, Humans occupied themselves with digging deep down, searching for cores to obtain "precious" metals from. The digging cut down trees; the digging ruined habitats; the digging used all sorts of machinery which pumped horrible toxins into the precious air. The air that was needed for everything; the air that ran the whole ecosystem on Earth, was getting damaged, because humans believed that the hidden secrets underground were more useful and worthy than the beauty overground. I want you to picture this: you have been living underground your whole life; you are in a blanket of darkness, in a tornado of roughness as the rocks constantly scrape across your skin every time you move. You then find a way out. You see light just above you. As you push through, there is a beautiful revelation of colour texture and heavenliness.

What were you doing? The opposite. You were pushing yourself down into the hell that the person wanted to escape. As this happens, you are tarnishing the heaven above.

The heaven above started to get sick; no medication helped as it was too late, there was always some parasite in a corner of the world attacking her. It was too late when we realised, but the rich realised first. They began buying bulks of oxygen and even bulks of carbon dioxide for their pure perfect plants. The demand for air sky-rocketed. The average middle-class didn't notice until the price of 1 tank was way beyond their capabilities. It happened in the blink of an eye. The poor of society were culled by nature, a fantastic, heartless way to reduce the population. They simply could not afford the oxygen, and the oxygen mother nature was providing was too polluted to live off. By this time, no one cared about the gold, and platinum underground; they were worthless. I remember seeing "valuable" metals just scattered around in the mud, eventually sinking back to where they belong. Oxygen that was free in your time, became priceless in mine.

Joint 2nd Runner-Up – **Twisha Ravuri:**

Element of inspiration: **Helium**

I am Helium

The classroom - a place of chaos and utter destruction. Chalk hitting the walls, as it soars over the masses of tables from where it was launched at its target. Students laughing and talking at a volume that could be described as little less than earsplitting. The latest obnoxious pop music blaring through a phone at maximum volume. As I walk in, the noise hits me like something solid. I look around at the mass of people in front of me - all students, wearing scraps of school uniform along with their own clothes. I look down at my pristine blazer, ironed shirt, not a hair on my head out of place, and feel a throb of disappointment as I acknowledge the vast distance between me and the people in front of me - I live in a world a million miles away from these children, even though we are but a few feet apart. Just as I am thinking of a way to describe just how different I am from the other groups of students, my eyes fall on a huge poster of the periodic table in front of me. And it comes to me. I stare at the group of popular kids - one of them is mindlessly scrolling through nonsense on her phone, while the other one is busy buttering someone up with false compliments. I look at them in disgust, and then it hits me. There are 3 main ways to describe kids like them - afraid to be alone, blowing matters up, and highly, highly toxic. Popular kids are just like Fluorine. Fluorine is a diatomic molecule (explaining the way they walk together like packs of wild wolves), it is very, very reactive, and toxic. Just as I'm thinking this, I spot someone sitting by themselves, refusing to socialise - a loner. Without a second thought the answer pops into my head - she's hydrogen. Hydrogen has no group, so what better element to go with someone who has no group to belong to as well? Then, I look down at myself. I'm so different from the others, it's hard to define exactly who I am. People always call me the nerd, the smart one, but I'm not so sure that that's true. I'm more like helium - reacts with nothing, instead floating high in the air, away from everyone and everything, happy in my own company. I imagine myself, miles away from the ground as I soar through the air, liberated from the restraints of other people. Suddenly, I get shoved out of the way, as more students make their way into the classroom, heedless of rules and manners. Sighing, I sit down, and dream of the day I can fly away from them all, light as a feather. Just like helium.