

Essay Winner**Name:** Owen Smith**Studying:** Graphic Communication at the Cleveland College of Art and Design

Today I'm packing my things into cardboard boxes as my time at this university draws to an end. My very first college ID card slips out of a favourite book, an old page-marker, long-forgotten.

"People like to think about butterflies and moths as though they were flying flowers, but they are fierce insects, struggling through each phase of life, spending time as caterpillars, bursting skins, dissolving selves in chrysalises and cocoons" Rebecca Solnit.

Having studied art for six years, I know something of the special dignity of images, and the truth contained within a face. So when I look at the tiny photograph of a petrified, doubt-filled teenager whose brow is slick with perspiration, I am unprepared for the way it moves me. For comparison, I remove my University ID card from my wallet and place the two thumbnail-sized faces side by side. One, a boy, who seems to wear his vulnerability as visibly as he wears his sweater, tight against his self-conscious frame, the other graced with the confident smile of an optimist. Two faces, one life, separated by so much more than six years . . . and a six-stone weight-loss.

Six years ago, my mother fled an abusive relationship, with my four siblings and me in tow. That was the first important ending in my life: and the first big, doubtful beginning (after being born). See, my mother home educated me for the first sixteen years of my life. I'd never set foot in a classroom before. I had no GCSES, no confidence, and no portfolio. Whenever your life ruptures it is an opportunity to start afresh. Remember that you are not inferior, and without your consent, nobody can stop you from making something of yourself. I can say that with confidence now.

And when my mother said to me you're going to do this, because I know you can, it required enormous trust between the two of us, when silently, in an act of defiance against a past which had treated us so badly, I picked up the pen and silently filled in my College enrolment form. I was terrified. Then a white-moustachioed Course Leader with the kindest of smiles said 'Ok son, we'll give you a shot'.

Someone said that education is nine-tenths encouragement. One tutor gave me a box of graphite sticks for Christmas. Another turned up at my house with a flat pack bunk bed, when she found out my little brother and me were sleeping on airbeds on

bare floorboards. I'm indebted to the lecturer who had me enter competitions, which I won. And to the mentor who helped me grow into my voice, who taught me to stand tall in front of the class, stand up for myself and my work. I'm grateful to the tutor who flung encouragement at me like jellybeans, and the one who only offered it once, like a rare and exotic fruit. Tutors will try to coax you out of your chrysalis, let them.

This week I graduated with a First Class Honours Degree, having received the Principal's Dissertation Prize and the Graphic Communication Award. My next step: an MA in illustration and authorial practice. These are just as much the achievements of the boy on the college ID card as the young man pictured on the University ID card, which only expired three days ago. Both cards speak of a quiet metamorphosis, but if I had to be an arbiter of worth, I'd clutch the college card with the fearful kid on it closest to my heart, because it's a reminder of what FE and HE have done for me; of who I was before the pupa melted away and revealed this other self that I now call me.