ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020

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About the Young Walter Scott Prize

Honouring the achievements of the founding father of the historical novel, the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction is one of the most prestigious literary awards in the world. It made sense, therefore, to set up a parallel award for young writers too and the Young Walter Scott Prize, now in its sixth year, goes from strength to strength.

Launched into a world stilled by a global pandemic in the summer of 2020, we held our breath, wondering if the appeal of writing about the past might fade at a time when the present, let alone the future, was so uncertain. So we were relieved – and then overwhelmed – by the number of entries that we received over the course of the next few months. By the time we reached our October deadline, the total number of entries had exceeded all our expectations, sent by writers of historical fiction aged between 11 and 19 from all over the UK.

Whittling down the entries to a shortlist, and then to the ten stories included in this anthology, was a huge task. The judges – the Duchess of Buccleuch, novelist Elizabeth Laird, the Director of the Young Walter Scott Prize Alan Caig Wilson, former literary editor of The Scotsman David Robinson and literary agent Kathryn Ross – had a difficult job, but they loved it, and we are sure that in this anthology you will consider that they've chosen well.

And if your story didn't make it to this year's anthology, there's always the next one. It's never too soon to start planning your entry for the Young Walter Scott Prize 2021.

Running parallel with this initiative is the Imagining History Programme UK run by YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson. Because of the constraints under which we've all been living during the past year, that programme has gone largely digital, culminating in *Times Shifting: New Voices from a Changed World,* an anthology featuring the work of several YWSP winners and participants from previous years. More information about that Programme and how you can become involved can be found on its website – www.imagininghistory.org

Both the Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize are generously supported by the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.

Past Young Walter Scott Prize winners

2015 Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones

2016 Demelza Mason and Alice Sargent

2017 Leonard Belderson and Miranda Barrett

2018 Jenny O'Gorman and Joseph Burton

2019 Ide Crawford and Charlotte Lee

Past Walter Scott Prize winners

2010 *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel

2011 *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

2012 *On Canaan's Side* by Sebastian Barry

2013 *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng

2014 *An Officer and a Spy* by Robert Harris

2015 *The Ten Thousand Things* by John Spurling

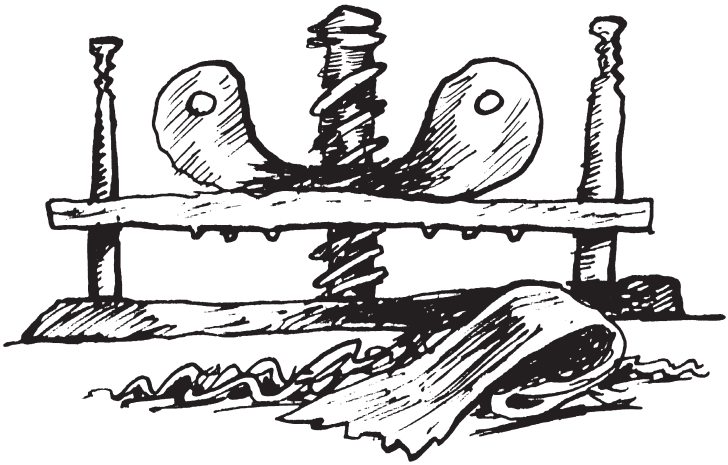
2016 *Tightrope* by Simon Mawer

2017 *Days Without End* by Sebastian Barry

2018 *The Gallows Pole* by Benjamin Myers

2019 *The Long Take* by Robin Robertson

2020 *The Narrow Land* by Christine Dwyer Hickey



SLAYING HOLOFERNES

Madeleine Friedlein
Datchworth, Hertfordshire

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize
16-19 category

Author's introduction

Slaying Holofernes *was inspired by the National Gallery's exhibition of work by Artemisia Gentileschi, which I saw on BBC 4 during lockdown. The title is taken from my favourite work of hers, 'Judith Slaying Holofernes', completed following her rape by Agostino Tassi. The rage she felt is evident in this painting, so I wanted to capture this in my fictionalised piece on her court-case. Her frustration is clear in the final section, in which she repeatedly exclaims 'It's true', words I took from the court-transcript of 1612. Artemisia is not the only woman to have been abused in such a way, nor will she be the last, and recent news supports this. Her perseverance and eventual success despite torture and injustice shows a strength we can learn from. This is perhaps why, deservedly, her paintings are now displayed alongside her father Orazio's, as some of the best that the Italian Baroque Era has to offer.*

SLAYING HOLOFERNES

1612, The Curia, Rome

I was sure he was watching, relishing, as they wound the cords over my fingertips.

The silence in the courtroom was punctured by a low whisper, one guard to another, 'Be gentle. She is just a child.' I felt the cord loosen, revealing a strip of flesh, puckered and purple like the skin of a damson.

I dared a glance up from the instrument, from the bruised fingers encased in metal and twine. I looked at my father, Orazio, wringing his hands, palms flecked with cadmium red.

My dear father. I know he didn't want this trial; pacing between dawn and twilight and whispering pleas against a locked door. 'Please marry her, Agostino. Marry her and salvage the Gentileschi name which you so wilfully sullied.'

Soon those pleas turned into demands, a battering of fists against a locked door, 'I shall take this to court, Agostino. Do you have no guilt? Artemisia lies, ever since and even now, in her room, broken and tarnished – a ruined woman, a child. Have you no guilt Agostino? Marry her, I demand it!'

He didn't marry me, so here I sat, in a silent courtroom. The cords were taut, my fingers now properly attached to the Thumbscrews – the procedure commenced. This method of torture was devised to procure the truth. I risked my fingers, my ability to paint, all to prove that Agostino Tassi raped me.

He had already battered the audience with lies, 'Never have I had carnal relations nor tried to have it with the said Artemisia... I've never even been alone in Artemisia's house with her.' I seethed quietly while he stalked round the room, delivering his testimony. His voice, stance and glare repulsed me.

The judge asked me directly, 'Artemisia Gentileschi, you claim that Agostino Tassi raped you, deflowering you, is this true?'

I said, 'It is true.' I felt a fierce tug on my fingertips, the cords pulled tighter. I was surprised to feel that the pain buoyed me, my determination spiked and drove me to speak further. 'He was working with my father to paint the vaults of the Casino delle Muse. He had been following me for some time, asking after me, observing me. I could see it, but felt no need to fear it, until we were left alone, and he forced himself upon me.'

'Was there a struggle?'

'Yes.' The cords tugged. 'I fought him fiercely, clawed and pushed and scratched. It was futile.'

I paused, 'I've never felt worse pain.' My lips trembled. I was speaking as confidently as I could, desperate to share my pain and ruin with the audience, desperate to see Tassi condemned and punished. I felt his strong grip against my neck still, pressing me down in a mockery of submission. I avoided his gaze and awaited the next question.

'Was anyone else complicit in the act?'

This question struck me; I remembered Tuzia, peering in the doorway to see me struggling, and slipping away, down the darkening corridor, as if scared. As if she was the one who should be scared.

Following a barrage of questions, my voice never faltered. I persisted; the pain grew increasingly intense. I spoke for Tassi's sister-in-law, his previous wife and all who had felt his crushing grip and lustful tongue. I spoke for the months I lay in bed, a cold husk. Unable to paint or draw the heavy curtain to glimpse at the dawn or dusk or day or night: a wraith.

Throughout the trial, I had not dared glimpse at Tassi, for fear of destabilizing my fragile confidence. Though I knew he watched me intently, his eyes groped my body even now, from the hem of my dress to the weeping red of my fingertips. I imagined him as I answered every question, his façade faltering at every utterance of truth, his mannish shock that his action should have this consequence.

'Did Agostino Tassi fail to marry you following your alleged sexual relations?'

'Clearly,' I said somewhat confidently.

Tighter still. The joints of my fingers white as the bed linen I was forced against. I tried to face him, but some force, perhaps my abhorrence of him, stopped me. My eyes bored into the cords, as if willing them to loosen and let me wilt into the courtroom floor.

Dare I look at my father? Dare I weep? Perhaps weeping might help my case. Poor 17-year-old Artemisia, a young and frightened girl. Evil Agostino Tassi, a rapist and a liar. My tears polarizing the crime for the ignorant audience.

Several questions later and there can't have been much more to ask. The pain had me involuntarily weeping, great tears swept the globes of my cheeks, I couldn't even brush them away.

How would this conclude? How could the audience fail to see my truthfulness? I came to a cold realisation, who would care about the honour of a 17-year-old painter, a girl, nonetheless? My trial was inconsequential, unimposing on all involved – even Tassi – except me. I was going to lose everything, my honour, my career, my fingers – my poor fingers! And even though my story would soon become irrelevant, a court transcript tucked away in a decrepit building, it was not a new story. My struggle thrummed with biblical precedence. I was Susannah, as she bathed in the view of the leering elders. A woman observed, a woman abused, a woman discarded. A perpetual cycle perpetuated by men and the patriarchal society. Sickening. I refuse to submit to the sexual whims of men - of Tassi, he cannot walk away from his wrongdoing, from his sin.

The cord spanned my whole body, wrapped and roiling in injustice and agony. A feral anger overflowed.

'It's true! It's true! It's true!'

My heart felt fire in those words, I lifted my face as my tears sprung victoriously.

'It's true!'

Exhilaration tore through me, I stared at the judge and willed him to understand.

'It's true!'

I turned my head at looked at Tassi, his eyes wide and lips agape. In those stony eyes I recognised terror, I delighted in his humanity. I shouted at him, 'It's true!' He flinched and I felt giddy; as if omnipotent, as if divine. I was the Goddess Artemis and he Actaeon. Judith Slaying Holofernes. I was punishing him, my observer, my abuser, in a bout of glorious fury.

Is this what it is like to be a man? To exert control over another living being, feel their fear as you cradle them in a glance or a gesture?

My rush of power ended abruptly as the cords sprung back, leaving my fingers a startling maroon. I cradled them and wept, steadily and methodically – filtering out my hysteria. I was still murmuring, 'It's true, it's true, it's true,' as my father knelt beside me on the courtroom floor, his hands resting on my trembling shoulders.

'They know it's true, my darling, they know.'

WE WOLVES

Atlas Weyland Eden
Devon

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

Thirty-five thousand years ago, in the forest and mammoth steppe of Central Europe – before humans domesticated animals, before written words and static settlements – an event occurred that advanced humans into the next phase of evolution: the greatest change since fire. There are countless theories about how, when and why this happened, but the centuries are muddied, and it is impossible to say. This is the way I imagine it, my journey to that moment.

As archaeologist and geneticist Greger Larson said, "The only way to know for sure is to go back in time."

WE WOLVES

We are silence. We are silence in grass, in light of grey. We are cold in wind — whispering leaves, rattling branches, ruffling lark in nest, licking fur on cheeks. Wind is against us. Go through wind, through grass, through moss on earth, on stone, on bone. Step past bracken, too loud under paw.

Stop. Night is new, smells of day, last birds call, trees wave. Nose to earth, to hoof-mark in mud: hoof on leg, joined to muscle, pumped by blood, through heart, through chest. Here an hour ago, a buck with herd, antlers unripe — hoof hurt, bone twisted.

We flow through trees, beneath boughs — mate is here, father of pups, son and daughter run close. Bat cries pierce ears. Bear lumbers far away.

Stop. Edge of woods, end of trees. Endless grass grows bright under moonlight. A musk of deer: crunch of grass, tear of willow, grind of teeth. We smell buck. We smell him raise chin and look to woods. Wind wafts from him to us; he smells nothing.

Flick tail to buck: he is hunt, he is life. Mate acknowledges, bows his head. We leave cover, sink in grass, edge towards herd. Mate encircles left, son and daughter right.

Watch.

Fear enters scent. We are here. Son bounds past doe, snaps to buck; buck turns, meets daughter, leaps past — we follow, between deer, between hoofs flailing, fear wailing. Buck keeps with doe, but we snap, ring, push. We steer him to woods, but he does not go, bounds deeper into field.

We smell rhino.

Rhino chews willow, wool trailing in grass, ears pricked in alarm. We keep to buck's sides, keep from hoof, antler, steer him closer. Wind turns; rhino smells, stamps warning. We speed, as buck tries to break. We come close; rhino charges, horn swiping, swishing. We scatter into night, but buck is slow; swipe catches shoulder. Rhino steers away. Buck stutters, crumples: bad-hoof twists, blood-scent gushes.

Before buck rises, we are here. Son's teeth in leg, daughter's bite in belly. Buck writhes, buck leaks: life leaks. We smell beating heart — ease

through flesh, through breaking bone, to warmth and wet; buck screams as teeth sink deep. Panic wild, grip tight. Buck struggles, thrashes, kicks — lame leg in jaws. Buck's heart is all we hear, echoing in bones, in hoofs, in antlers: slipping away. Limpness comes, struggle stops. Teeth tear belly, pain fades away: buck fills with night.

Taste heart. Taste liver: hot, sucking, twitching. Mate feasts, bone-crunch, flesh-rip, life in blood, in belly. When full, we draw back, buck in teeth. Son comes forwards, daughter waits; when son is done, she sinks teeth in stomach.

Buck is stripped. Scent is gone. We raise mouths — we sing. Sing to meat, to wind, to sky, to tree: sing to home. Our song echoes back, from sister's mouth. We are silence, padding through bat-filled trees; to where earth is our scent, river our blood, hill our bones. Sister waits. Her fur is soft as she shows belly. Son gives her buck-leg carried in mouth.

Little son bounds, yips, nuzzles paws. He smells of blood and milk, smells of little daughter, and last little son born forever silent. Little son nips lips, smiles tail. Mouth meets his, brings up buck, from tongue to tongue, mother to son.

Taste sweetness from mother's mouth. Nip mother for more, but meat is gone: belly is full.

Follow mother to family. Nuzzle father's paw, chew sister's nose. Big brother bites ear. Aunt carries us away in softness of mouth, to rest under earth, buck running in belly.

Nights turn, in bones, in days, in muscle stretching, fur thickening, meat eaten, milk pushed away; in bounding legs, beating earth, sleeping heart on heart, in curl of blood and fur.

We run. We flow through snow from branch on earth. Legs move in strength, tails swooshing, wood breathing, father, brother, sister. Breathe mother's absence away in earth, new brother and sister in belly.

We need meat for unborn, for fur yet to grow. Father leads to edge of woods, to bare steppe. We follow scent of deer, find herd lapping water

running through grass. The scent we need is fawns fresh with milk, the meat mother wants for un-singing ones.

We are silence. We are silence in grass, in circling wind. Shadows in shrub, cast by slit of moon. Deer do not sense us. We creep close. Musk is thick, consuming: teeth hurt, bellies growl. Wait.

Old buck lifts nose — sniffs.

Nothing. Lowers head.

Wind changes. Our scent rushes to herd — ears up, eyes white, hoofs stamping. We move in, but deer swirl, clatter; does shield fawns.

We weave through limbs, but bellows deafen, buck kicks — antler bites belly.

Fall.

Where are we? Father? Brother? Sister? Belly punctured, wound deep; life seeping out. Blood in fur, sky spinning, earth echoing. Deer clashing, deer screaming, trampling legs, chest. Hoof crushes tail.

Red. Heat splatters snow, but from another heart. Deer falls. Tree grows from its chest.

Tree?

Sounds. Father cries, hoofs crack, lone bird chitters.

Sniff — others are here.

Creatures move, steps loud, breath hard, darting between deer. Smell of brother lunging, pushed back by swirling limbs, legs, danger. Brother turns, runs. Brother and sister keep close to father as they vanish into trees.

We are gone.

I am alone.

Deer disappear. Air quiets. A shape moves past, bends, puts claw on fallen deer. Life leaks in earth. Shape stands, heavy on back legs, spine straight, stone-claw in paw. I do not know his scent. Try to stand, but things shift, convulse — fall.

Eyes watch. More creatures, standing, staring. Paws hold thin trees, sharp. One comes close, muscles bend, sees blood in fur. He studies, puts paws to wound, looks for life.

Growl.

He raises paws. I see fur, close to his skin, yet apart. Ears unseen, nose small.

Other creature barks. First one steps back. He pauses, gazes. Stone-claw hangs at hip. He bows, joins pack. They raise deer on shoulders — vanish into trees.

Night broadens. Stars light sky. Nose filled with blood, pain. I summon bones, stand, sway; stay steady. I raise mouth — I sing.

Listen. Wait.

Sing.

Listen. Wait.

I drag legs, drag tail, out from open, into trees. Lean on trunk. Sniff, smell. Raise paw, scratch snout. Sniff, smell. Wander on.

Stop. Father's scent on log. Sniff. Follow. Go slow, slower than wish — pain is creeping.

Hardness hits head. Stumble. Tree, not there before: brought low by wind. Move around, keep going. Scent? Where is scent?

Sing to sky, to light of night.

Listen. Wait.

There. Faint, on edge of ears, family sings of home. I follow, between trees, over stones, through thorns. Sing. Keep going. Sing.

Path wavers. Scents appear, disappear. Family-song rises — fades. Legs give way. I collapse on earth.

Eyes fall shut.

Wind is in me. Night fades into dawn. Earth is cold and hard and old. I try to move, but bones resist. Without raising mouth, I sing.

Silence.

Dark diminishes. Force myself to paws, to legs, to breath. Smell, taste, see — move, pad, breathe.

Smell. Nose twitches. Something. I edge closer, cautious, unsteady. Not our scent. Keep going, close, closer. Surety grows — unease. These trees, this earth, this stone — not ours. Another pack, another territory. Not home. I look back. Will I find mother? Will I smell unborn?

Hunger rakes sides, scolds deeper than aunt ever did. Wind wafts strong scent: meat, flesh, life. I follow scent, into land not ours. Paws fill with ice, head throbs, blood trickles grass, but I go on.

Stop. Stone-claws sit together. Brightness lies between them, brighter than moon or sun, rising, falling, warmth spilling out. Smell deer as they eat, chew, swallow, ingest.

Sniff. Lick lips. Belly whimpers. Their scent is danger: not prey, but rival, to avoid, not confront. Watch. Life leaks from my edges, goes with night, fades in amber sky.

I step closer. I am silence, but I do not hide. Another step. Another.

Stone-claw straightens — sniffs. Others see, turn from brightness. I am still. Eyes watch me, watch trees, for family, for pack. I am alone.

Against instinct, go closer. Neck bent, head low. Stone-claw stands on back legs.

I am still.

All is still.

I know his scent. He knows mine. He holds meat in paw, tosses through air; lands at my feet. Teeth are in it — it is in throat, in belly, in bones, in heart.

Stone-claws watch. Feeder sits, eyes on me: brightness crackles.

A moment.

I stand. Ease forwards. Stop. Wait. Move close. They are still, as I come to brightness, sink to paws, chin on earth, alert for motion.

Feeder bends. Hackles rise. He raises meat, offers from paw. It is gone in rush of tongue and teeth and lips.

Warmth overtakes me. Brightness flickers, runs in place, covering fur, skin, soul. Shivering quiets.

Feeder moves — touches my neck.

My teeth grip his paw. I do not pierce skin. My eyes meet his eyes. He is still.

Others stand. Brightness cracks.

Nothing moves.

I let go, lay on ground. Roll on side, show softness of belly. Others ease, bend legs, watch. I am still, as feeder brushes fingers through my fur. Touch is light — like mother's tongue.

Sun rises. Eyes close. I feel grass and warmth, hear trees sway, birds waking to another day. I lie, breathe, feel tender stroke of feeder's paw.

I sense the world shift, as scent of he and scent of me, blurs into we.

THE FALL OF SAIGON

Rayhana Bint-Mumin
London

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

Recently, I've been reading a lot of diverse literature and poetry so I decided to write about Vietnam because of some books and spoken word poetry videos I had seen from Vietnamese-American people. Though I am not Vietnamese myself, it was a good opportunity to learn about a new culture that shares some similarities with my own and widen my horizons on what historical events people experienced around the world. When I was researching Saigon specifically, I found out about Operational Babylift during the Vietnam war in 1975 and I created the story around that event to delve into how it impacted people, especially children of war because they are so innocent, which makes the story all the more devastating.

THE FALL OF SAIGON

1975. The Vietnam War was still raging on with the utmost intensity even after 20 years had passed. Saigon summers, once bustling and bright had been colonised by smouldering smoke and soldiers patrolling the streets.

Cicadas chirped as Linh and I collected the plastic amongst the waste. We had to be extra careful to avoid the American soldiers strolling around like they owned this place, so we scurried around like mice.

"Bảo, let's go home now, I'm hungry," my little sister whined.

My mother was making lunch for us at home so I also couldn't wait to return.

"Come on, let's go," I agreed, hand outstretched to lead her home. Linh was still too young to work but I had to take her with me to keep her safe.

My mother had worked as a cleaner to provide for us ever since our father died from a crossfire incident last year. I know it's hard for her, but she still envelopes us in warmth and smiles when we return for lunch, one of the only times we see her.

Her bones must have ached from labouring all day but she made sure to cook us a hot meal every day as her way of showing her love. It seemed as if one sip of her steaming hot phở bò was enough to comfort me every time I got upset. One day I hoped to give her a comfortable life, away from all the burdens and hardships of her life.

We were walking up the streets with trash bags and children's clothes lining the pavements, a result of the displacement of families by bullets or bombs, when suddenly a booming crash ripped through the residential area, destroying everything that used to stand there, sending rubble flying outward and black fumes upwards. Roofs were completely blown off, windows were smashed in and everything went up in a flurry of flames.

Legs frozen in place with utter shock, my mind immediately went to my mother and her safety. Mustering every ounce of courage in my small body, I ran towards the flames, hoping to see her fleeing away from the furious fire.

But I couldn't.

The neighbourhood men held me back in their firm grip as I tried to flail and wail my way out and I had to wonder if they could see the desperation pouring out of me like tar. Deep down, I knew she couldn't have survived as the bomb fell right next to our home. However, my delusional mind still wished it wasn't true. Though I can't remember everything now, I remember the emptiness in my heart as I realized I would never see my mother again. I had the responsibility of looking after Linh now that we were orphans.

I somehow managed to escape the grip of the men and grabbed Linh to run away. We ran until I couldn't see any more of the neighbourhood we once lived in, or our house that had been destroyed along with everything dear to us.

We rested on the curb of a street, pressed against the tin wall of a sweetshop. Linh eyed the sweets hungrily but I had no money to buy them to give her. I felt bad but could only hug her until we eventually fell asleep.

We were awoken by two soldiers shaking us awake. They held their guns in their hands and shouted what sounded like cuss words in a language unknown to me. Americans... I had never interacted with them before, but I couldn't run. My body froze with fear as they towered above me threateningly. One tall blonde soldier grabbed Linh, who was quivering in the corner, by the arm. Adrenaline rushed through my veins as I scrambled to get his filthy hands off her.

Smack.

Out of nowhere, a rock came splitting through the air and hit the soldier in his face, drawing blood from his temple and giving me an opportunity to get Linh and myself far away from the situation.

I turned to see the girl who threw the stone cursing the soldiers for harassing us before she grabbed our arms and ran away from the scene to safety.

I recognised her, a girl from my neighbourhood called Mai. We used to play together in the evenings while my mother went shopping and her father went to work. But as the years passed and she got older, my mother had warned me to stay away from her. I heard from the whispers throughout the neighbourhood that she had been taken as a boom bar

girl. My mother told me about the shameless boom bar girls, how they sold their bodies to the soldiers and brought evil to our neighbourhood. However I couldn't imagine Mai having an ounce of treachery in her body after she saved us.

She led us to a dilapidated building hidden away behind broken buildings, an oasis for all kinds of victims of war's cruelty. Pregnant women clutching their round stomachs, old women with canes and unmoving fingers, malnourished soot-faced children, men injured from bullets and teen girls shaking with fear all gathered in this place of refuge. War does not discriminate and haunts everyone in its path, through bloodshot eyes or broken limbs, suffering had been inflicted on us all.

Looking at them sitting there covered by blankets, I could not ignore the way they shook, bodies trembling, eyes wide and wet with tears staining their cheeks. When they cried, I could hear the defeat in every sob.

Blankets and bandages were passed around while Mai handed me a bowl of hot soup. I scooped it up and blew on it for Linh and once she'd taken her fill I gulped the remainder down furiously, letting it burn every one of my taste buds before it could imitate any kind of warmth.

That night, we were to sleep in the cramped town hall with twenty other people in the same room. As soon as I confirmed Linh was asleep, I silently slipped outside to the cold night. The moment the icy air hit my pores, I broke down. The tears fell warm and heavy while my voice cracked into muffled cries, a broken and restrained noise escaping my body. In the span of one day, I had lost everything: my home, my childhood and my mother. The mere thought of letting her die before providing her with as much comfort and love as I had hoped to give, strangled my heart. Linh was all I had left now and her safety was my sole priority.

A woman came rushing in the next day with a flyer in her hand, rambling rapidly about something she'd heard on the streets coming home. Apparently the government were preparing planes to evacuate children from South Vietnam to the safety of foreign countries. 'Operation Babylift' - an opportunity we couldn't afford to miss.

Hope flickered through our eyes as we began truly to believe we could escape Saigon's suffering... but sometimes you fall the hardest just when you think you are climbing the highest.

We received news of the crashed baby flights that night.

The 1975 C-5 aircraft leaving Tân Sơn Nhứt had crashed and broken up over the South China Sea, killing many children and volunteer staff along the way. Of course some survived but the devastation was widespread and heartbreaking for Vietnamese citizens.

Huddled up in scrappy blankets under a leaking roof, we prayed to God throughout the night for an end to this war. The night was filled with muffled sobs from the old and the young for the lost lives of those innocent children. The only comforting thought was that 'at least they escaped this hell on earth'.

Following the failure of the first flight, doubts ran across my mind about whether we would be able to flee at all. Boarding the next plane out of Saigon posed the risk of crashing but staying in this place allowed the possibility of being shot or bombed.

Eventually, Mai came to me, sensing the turmoil inside my head.

"Go," she encouraged, "nothing good will come out of staying here but you have hope on that plane, no matter how little. You and Linh deserve the chance at a better life and they're giving you a chance. Có chí làm quan có gan làm giàu (Fortune favours the brave). You must be brave and go."

"What about you?" I whispered, terrified of what might happen after I left.

"I can look after myself, and when it's safe to stop hiding, I'll come and visit you," she promised, though I knew it was false hope.

I glanced over at Linh who was fast asleep and realised that I had to do what was best for her even if it was dangerous. Bảo means protection so I had to fulfil my duty of guarding Linh.

Knowing it was the last time I would be here again, I hugged Mai tightly and thanked her for all she had done for us. Maybe I pretended she was my mother and my gratitude spilled out like a broken vending machine releasing coins.

We left at dawn.

Carrying half-asleep Linh on my back, I boarded the train to the airport where we were rushed onto the plane heading for the United

States of America. Deep down, I resented allowing myself to receive help from the same people who killed my mother, but it was my only option.

Although no one spoke of it, I know we all prayed for safety under our breaths. Not once did I let go of Linh's hand, thinking she might just slip through my fingers if I let my guard down.

A sigh of relief escaped my mouth as the pilot confirmed we had landed in the airport. Cheers filled the plane as the restless atmosphere turned into a euphoric moment, the laughter of children allowing me too to cheer in happiness with Linh by my side in a new country.

Flight attendants offered us all an apple, so I ate it contentedly as I walked off the plane trying to fill the void in my stomach from days of hardly eating.

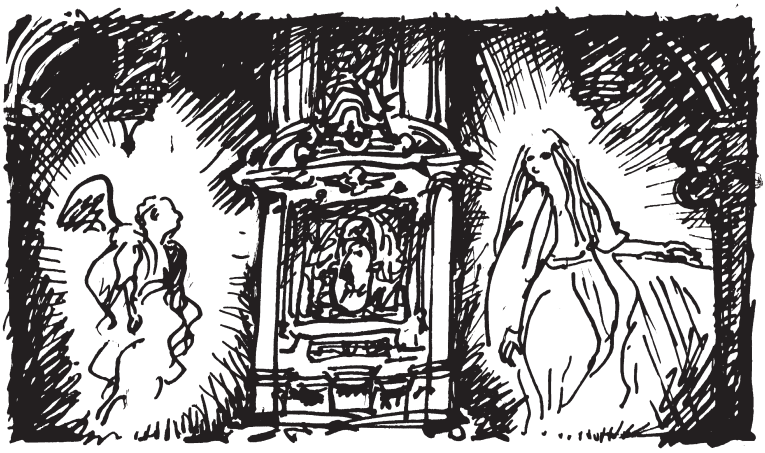
I threw the apple seeds on the American land and momentarily glanced over at the place across the ocean, filled with Bánh Bột Lọc dumplings and night market mackerel, and I had to wonder if anything could ever take root in foreign soil.

Three years later, I was 16 and going to school in America where Linh and I were staying with a host family. Though I was happy here, I couldn't help but yearn for home as I heard the war was over now. I missed everything, the language, the familiar streets and the food. I had to retrain my tongue to speak in English without an accent but I was so ashamed of losing my culture, thinking my mother wouldn't recognise me anymore if I became too American.

It was one spring night, when I was awoken by a knock at the front door.

I opened it to find my mother standing there, on my doorstep, soaking wet as if she had swum across the entire Pacific Ocean to find me. Her apron still tied around her neck, her sleeves rolled up, she looked exactly as she was the last I saw her, a lifetime ago. To this day, I don't know if it was a hallucination or a gift from god but either way her presence reminded me of how everything used to be.

"Sorry it took so long, Bảo," she said, still smiling as if nothing had happened these past years. "Lunch is ready."



WHAT FIORE SAW

Ide Crawford
Macclesfield

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

My story was inspired by Pontormo's Annunciation *in the church of Santa Felicita. Of all the paintings in Florence, none moved me more than this relatively little-known work – hidden in a locked side-chapel in a tiny church and lit only by my coin in the machine. I was haunted by a need to understand how the historical moment of its creation contributed to its emotional power.*

It was painted during a time of crisis when the Italian republics, until recently the cultural and financial heart of Europe, and spaces of new modern freedom, were being subdued one by one by foreign powers. In 1527 Rome was brutally sacked by the army of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Florence still clung to its freedom, and took advantage of the chaos after the sack to declare itself a republic for the last time, with Niccolo Capponi as leader.

The republic lasted only two years, during which time the Capponi family commissioned Pontormo's painting. In 1529, Florence fell to Charles V, becoming a client state of the Holy Roman Empire. This was effectively the end of the Italian Renaissance.

The melancholy Jacopo Pontormo was one of the first mannerist painters. Mannerist art looks back at the confidence and balance of the High Renaissance from a perspective of tension and instability.

Vasari recounts how Pontormo lived alone with a ladder to his room that he could pull up after himself. "…His bizarre and fantastic brain never rested content… he was so afraid of death that he would not hear it spoken of…solitary beyond all belief. At times, going out to work, he set himself to think so profoundly on what he was to do, that he went away without having done anything all day but stand thinking."

The patronage of the Medici in Florence had raised the status of artists and thinkers from humble artisans to prophets and guides, and given them space to neglect material concerns and stand around thinking. But for the ordinary people of the city and the surrounding countryside, life and work went on much as it had for centuries, with little regard to the fact that they were at the epicentre of a historical epoch. The Renaissance, which seems to us an era of mythical grandeur, had humanist ideas about the glorification of ordinary humanity at its heart. I wanted to write about a moment in an ordinary girl's everyday life when these two perspectives intersected.

Santa Felicita was the patron saint of women who had lost a child.

La Vacca, "the cow", was a large bell in the Palazzo della Signoria's Arnolfo tower. It summoned the citizens of Florence to take their part in the democracy of the city, and was a symbol of republican pride. When the king of France threatened Florence with military subjection in 1494, Piero Capponi replied, "if you sound your war trumpets, we will ring our bell." The Vacca was eventually melted down by Duke Alessandro to demonstrate his domination over the city.

WHAT FIORE SAW

Florence, 1569

All still. Only motes dancing, playing in a shaft of wan gold. Faintly falling, settling softly.

The children pattered in on either side of their mother.

Fiore followed behind.

The clear smooth floor of an aisle always seemed to make little Lilo want to run, in spite of hard words after.

Pippa put two small hands on his shoulders and hauled him back. 'It's God's house!' she whispered, shaking her curls fiercely. 'Into the chapel! Brunelleschi made it,' she added, proud of knowing. 'Nonna said. You know who he is, Lilo? He built the great dome!'

Lilo was peering into the dimmer chapel. His mouth opened into a perfect tiny circle as he looked up at the fresco, his eyes growing as round.

'Who is it?'

'You naughty thing!' said Pippa. 'It's the Blessed Virgin – and the Angel Gabriele there! Say a prayer now.'

The children knelt, eyes fixed on the semblance of sunlight on the wall and the tremulous turning face of the Madonna.

By candlelight, the fresco was different from Fiore's memory.

It was not her custom to remember often. But now she saw one October evening in her mind's eye, and did not blink it away.

The light dripping very quiet and slow like honey; the olive groves sweet-smelling, with the harvesters homeward bound. A few still remaining, singing at their work – one calling to her that it was a fine season.

She had brought a knife for the bristling ox-tongue growing strong about San Miniato. Here was navelwort clinging to the moss, quenching leaves as small and round as soldi. She put one into her mouth, letting it lie on her tongue for a moment like Christ's body at the Mass, before she bit.

Always about the feast of San Michele the green things grew young

again, even as the sun fled. It was like another spring, one that promised nothing but lengthening shadows, the earth drifting asleep instead of wakening.

Borage, dandelion, and ears-of-the-hare, fresh and bright and bitter. Fiore squashed them into the basket with both hands, but still she wanted more, and gathered the rest into her gown.

Her back ached with stooping, and she enjoyed the moment of straightening as she began to knot her skirt, sun gentle on her face.

She turned to the valley, dim and warm as a womb, with Florence lying safe, caressed by the muscle of the hills.

The Arno slipped silverly, doubling its bridges; palazzi along the water bathed in a glow, the crowned tower rising proud. The dome, like a ripe perfect apricot, above all.

Fiore paused in the breath of light, holding the tails of her unfinished knot. She looked forward to the first mouthful of salad, crisp beneath a silky slick of new oil, singing with all the most savoury memories of a summer well past. It would bring pleasure to Mama's tired face. Bello would call it bitter, screwing up his little nose, cheeks dimpled like a ripe hazelnut, but enjoy it still. She was not tired at all for the walk home, but happy to be still.

As she watched, the cupola of the Duomo gave a quick dancing spark, as you see sometimes in eyes.

'Madonna!'

A man's voice! Half the dandelions went spilling down the moss. It was too vexing…she bent to gather up the toothed leaves.

'Madonna!' A voice urgent as the pealing of the Vacca. A hand on her arm – she started round.

It was a young man with hungry eyes, whose face had the pale, hollow life of the statues that looked down from the campanile.

'You saw it!'

His eyes burnt deep into her face. She ought to drop her own, and she wanted to – but her gaze was fixed by his.

'I was only looking at…our city,' she said.

'I have seen this in dreams,' he cried, hands eagerly twisting the air in front of her into wild shapes, 'but always, in waking, the memory fades before I comprehend. I never thought to see it on a living face! You must come with me.'

'Are you mad, messer?'

'I beg you! You cannot go away from me as if it had never been! Come, I will take you only to a holy place.'

'I am sorry.'

There was quick terror in his face. He reached out a hand towards her. 'You must come – you must understand. Not to the workshop – to a holy place!'

Fiore felt bound to go, in mere Christian pity, for it was as though he meant to fall at her feet and die; and she knew she would not be missed at home a while yet. But it was madness.

'You will tell no one?' she said.

'How could I ever tell of such in words?'

Her heart was throbbing in her mouth as she followed at a seemly distance. Down to the city, between the shadows of the cypresses beckoning on the night.

Arnolfo's tower rose above the roofs like a clock's hand, the light blinking on the little golden lion.

Through the Porta San Miniato. The sun was almost gone from the streets, the yellow stone of the old wall soaking up the last of it, like four-days old bread finding oil from the latest press at the bottom of a bowl.

Down the Via de' Bardi. She thanked the Virgin it was so quiet. From faraway came the sad sound of drunken singing: "roses and violets, all in the Spring… let he who will be gay, for the day will never stay."

By Santa Felicita he stopped.

'Is not the chapel being adorned for Messer Capponi?' said Fiore, by way of saying something, so that he did not stare at her silently.

"When the sun shall set in the East, and rise again in the West, thou with thy love may rest…" sang the drunkard.

'I have been set the work,' he said. 'I thought I never could undertake the annunciation – I thought all vain – until I saw you.'

The chapel was cool and clean enough to keep cheeses in, with a small, sweet-curving dome.

Fiore stared at the great fresco on the wall; Christ just taken from the cross, pale and painfully dead, and a multitude of figures with the saddest faces and bodies twisted in glowing torment. They were so close, as though they wanted her to come and writhe among them, and yet there was no place for a basket of greens in their world without weight.

Her companion had turned to the wall still blank.

'There the annunciation will be.' He waved a hand to one side of the narrow window. 'Now I have seen the moment with these very eyes – I understand how the Virgin Mother must be – turning – with the light on your face!'

'Mine, messer?'

'I saw you receive it! I must take your likeness direct onto the wall. Turn a little to the side – as you did on the hill. You saw it – God's miracle – our miracle – Florence!'

The echo returned his words – flat, drained of eagerness.

The air shivered. It was as though the Vacca should peal with all the breath in full brazen lungs, and not one citizen rush out in answer – piazze empty, the ranked palazzi looking at nothing, their windows barred and shuttered.

'Where is the light?' he cried.

He was white, lip caught between his teeth, brows bent together. Fiore flinched from his gaze, and looked at the black and white tiles, wearily repeating their pattern at her feet.

'How can you be so changed? What you saw is not gone! Parting perhaps – not gone – not yet! Pray, look as you did.'

'Messer, I cannot tell how!'

A nightmare in his face, as if he watched the recognition fade from the eyes of someone beloved and dying. She must change that look.

She tried to remember the moment by San Miniato. She had been thinking of her skirt full of green things. She had stood up to relieve the ache in her back, and looked into the valley of the Arno.

The sun low enough to take in through the corner of her eye, and the roofs still warm in the last light. The palazzo tower calling bravely to the sky. The Duomo like another sun that could not set.

Two suns, as sometimes on the surface of water.

The gleam of the cupola.

She frowned. The image was dimming, and instead she saw the face of the painter. A single tear gleamed in his eye.

'Then – it was as if I saw it again.' His sadness seemed drawn from the deepest well. 'I saw it…fade. What shall I do?'

'You must paint me as best you can,' said Fiore. Now she felt sure she understood better than he. 'There is no help for it. Was not the blessed mother a woman born, with a woman's feelings, fleeting with the waning hours?'

'The light is gone!'

'There is never much of sunlight in a chapel; see how small the window. You can paint light, cannot you? We must light candles and ask a blessing, and you will paint light from a setting sun.' She was speaking to him the way she did to little Bello. 'The sun was going down! That is why it looked so clear and gentle.'

Day after day, she stole down to the chapel, and stood where he asked. She looked in fascination at the flickering lines he traced out. Some seemed to be her shadow, but others were strangely unlike – though she never told him so. Perhaps she was wrong; she had no Venetian glass, and had seen her own face only in pools after rain.

She told him at last she could not keep coming, or she would be found out. She felt sorry at the thought she would never see him again; but then there was life to go on with. He kissed her hand and said he would never cease from seeing her face, and they parted.

It all felt very like a dream after, and when she heard that Messer Capponi thought a great deal of the fresco, and that it was talked of in the piazza, she almost stopped believing it was she who had been painted.

Still she liked to think about it; as though instead of remembering, she were imagining a dream of the future that could never come true.

She had not been to Santa Felicita since the dome was lopped off, leaving this blank, flat roof painted to look like a curve. It had stood in the way of the private passage which the Grand Duke had ordered so that he might pass from one palazzo to another without meeting the gaze of the likes of her, or soiling his shoes with the mud washed down from the hills. They said too that he feared a cold knife slipped in through the gold threads of his farsetto as he passed through the crowd on the Ponte Vecchio.

Fiore saw that little Pippa and Lilo had their faces still up-turned to the fresco, and their mother had knelt down behind them with a hand on each small head.

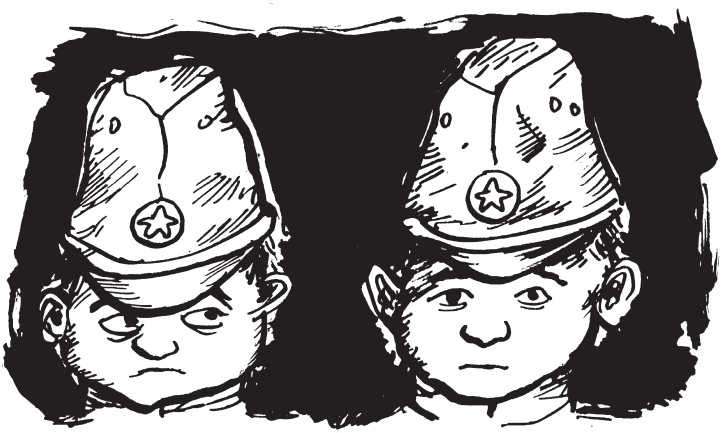
Pippa twisted suddenly round to look up into Fiore's face.

'Nonna Fiore, why is Mama crying?'

Fiore reached forward to wipe away her daughter's tear – but it glittered in the candlelight like the cupola of the Duomo – and she let it fall.

'The Madonna Addolorata knows our loss,' she said, 'I don't say you will forget. It was here I came after I lost your sister, not six months mine. Forty years, and it seems last night I last kissed her sweet face. But the grief will grow gentle, like evening light.'

And there was the face of the Virgin Mother – a girl with eyes a little widened, turning to a remembered annunciation, the divine light fading from her face.



DAEJEON STATION, 1945

Theodore Fulford
London

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

I set the story in Seoul, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. What is not terribly well known is that many Koreans moved north to Manchuria and established the Yanbian Autonomous prefecture, a Korean enclave in China. When the Japanese invaded Manchuria, many of the Koreans in Yanbian fled back to the relative stability of Korea, even though it was still under Japanese control. Koreans were forced to assume Japanese names, the Korean language was banned, and Korean history was eliminated from teaching. This was the world in which my grandmother grew up.

None of us knew about this part of my grandmother's past until I asked her about her childhood for a school project, and I was fascinated and appalled by the idea of suppressing your identity, and by the changes that must have occurred at the end of the war when the Japanese suddenly left.

I was particularly interested in the Korean boys who were taken off to fight in the war by the Japanese and by their return to Korea at its end, in the midst of huge uncertainty and instability as the regime and culture shifted. I imagined their return, and the emotional impact their absence had – not on the boys themselves – but rather on those who had watched them go. The story is written from the perspective of a woman of my great-grandmother's generation who had lived through all the changes and migrations, and who had seen her sons, boys my age, go off to war. We see glimpses of her past, focussed around the train station from which she fled to Manchuria, into which she returned, and finally where she waits for her sons to return.

DAEJEON STATION, 1945

Has God forsaken my son?

Will I never see my beloved Sang, my first-born, my sweet Persimmon, again?

The Japanese surrendered 53 days ago, and every day since I have been waiting here in Daejeon Station, this unchanging brick building, oblivious to all the traumas of my life that have begun or ended on its platforms. Today is the last day of September, and the persimmons on our tree were finally ripe this morning — a good sign? They were — no, are — Sang's favourite. I packed a few in a small basket to bring with me to the station in case today is the day he returns. My little Myung Sung, Bright Star, is running around the platform in her summer dress that I cut from an old hanbok – sun-yellow, the colour signifying safety and good luck. I have told her to be careful to avoid the American troops. They look like giants, and they are not friendly to us. I think they see us all as chinilpa, collaborators with the Japanese. Are they just new occupiers? I am glad the Japanese have finally left Korea, but what will become of us? Will the Americans make us change our names again, this time to American ones?

Thirty-five years ago, when I was just nine and Daejeon Station was still brand new, we crowded onto a train with hundreds of other families fleeing north to Manchuria to avoid the final Japanese annexation after five years of conflict. It was hot and my parents seemed angry and afraid. My brother's little hand was clutched in mine, and I tried not to show him how scared I was while he stared up into my eyes. I had been put in charge of him while we got ready to go to a place I had never seen or heard of, for reasons I didn't know or understand.

I knew my father didn't want to go. He hated the Japanese and how they had been taking over his country. He seemed to think it was a stain on the character of Koreans to give in to them and he did not want to run away. My mother's view was that family comes first and that staying meant danger and hardship. We left in the end, of course, but my parents' fights were terrifying.

Twenty years later, dark clouds were gathering again, and I understood what my parents had been through when they decided to uproot our lives

and move to Manchuria. We had helped build a little corner of Korea in Yanbian Prefecture and for a time, things were good. We were many miles from home and had left behind a lot of what we knew, but in China we could still be Korean. I met my husband, Ji-tae, at university – a brilliant historian, whose family had also fled Seoul. We had our two sons in those Manchurian years – in 1927 and 1929 – and we hoped that we would live and raise our family in Yanbian in peace. We were happy then, for a while, with our healthy boys and Ji-tae now a professor at the university.

That happiness didn't last.

By 1931 the Japanese war drums became too loud to ignore, and I was forced to persuade my husband that we couldn't be in Manchuria when Japan came, as my mother had convinced my father all those years before. Eventually Ji-tae relented, even though things would be hard for him in Seoul; my parents were a different story.

If my father was stubborn about fleeing Seoul, he was unyielding about going back, knowing that he would have to embrace the Japanese occupiers we had fled. I didn't see a choice; to be there during the invasion was too dangerous, and the Japanese were too powerful to resist. It was clear the Japanese were coming, and that when they came it would be terrible. It turned out to be even more savage than I imagined. Ji-tae and I took our sons to Seoul, where we had family and a place to stay, leaving my parents behind. We never saw them again.

We arrived back in Daejeon Station in 1931, on another hot August day, having avoided the shark's teeth only to find ourselves in its belly. In the 20 years that we had been gone, Japan had been digesting Korea and reforming it in its own image.

In Manchuria we were Koreans; upon our return to Korea we had to pretend to be Japanese. Under Soshi-Kaimei, the Name Change Order, we were no longer the Cho family and became Yamamotos instead. In public, Sang became Akio, Chun was Matsu and Myung Sung, my Bright Star, my autumn surprise, born in Seoul, was Miyoko. We have tried and tried to hold on to our Korean names and ways at home, but it has been a time of terrible humiliation, especially for my husband, an educated man, a scholar, forced to be a labourer under Japanese rule. Japanese has been a struggle for us, though the children have learned it well, maybe too well now that we can hope to be Korean again. Will it last? I pray it will last.

In those years since our return, Japan has never stopped seeking to oppress all of Asia. Many Koreans were sent to Japan to toil, especially after Japan entered the international war in 1940. Girls and women were being taken away too, and I felt lucky that I was too old and Bright Star was too young. Wartime was hungry and hard, but for all those difficult years, we had each other.

And then, in 1944, we didn't. For two years the Japanese had threatened conscription and finally in December, they came for my boys and took them away. We saw them for the last time in rough Japanese uniforms, being pushed onto a troop train in Daejeon Station on a dark winter night, cold and frightened, shipped off to be soldiers of the nation that had driven us from our home twice. They were terrified on the night they left, mere boys – only 15 and 17 – sent away to face death on the side of their enemy. For almost two years I have shed salty tears, fearing for my little boys taken from me. With no news at all since the spring, I have felt lost, wrung dry, bereft.

But Chun, my second-born, arrived back in Daejeon a month ago, just two weeks after the surrender. He is no longer the happy boy he was, no longer has the light in his eyes that he did. Chun hardly speaks, and never about what happened to him during the 18 months that he was gone. The boys were separated at the front in China and Chun does not know where his brother was sent. I should be happier to have one boy home but being half-happy feels the same as being completely sad, a half-broken heart is still broken.

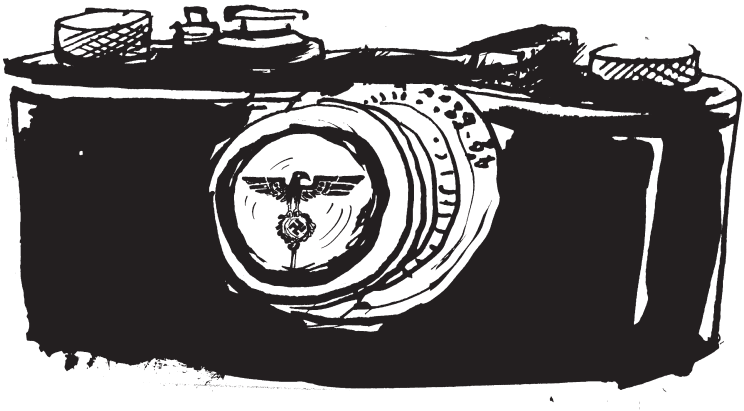
My husband Ji-tae has been gentle with me, but I know he fears the worst. I am not ready to give up – surely a mother would know if her son had died? In my heart I still believe he is alive. Would God be so unkind to me? It is hard to be sure, He has been so unkind to Korea already. Maybe I should stop coming to Daejeon, and care for the family I have left. But how can I stop, while my Sang is still lost?

The trains arrive in Daejeon Station at irregular intervals, some with cargo and relief supplies, some with desperate families fleeing devastation, some with more American soldiers to take over our streets. It is late now, the sunbeams horizontal through the high station windows. I will wait for one more train and then take Bright Star home and cook our family dinner. It will be meagre, as it has been for months, just rice and kimchi with a little tofu that I have made from our remaining soybeans. Maybe

tomorrow I will not come to the station, maybe Ji-tae is right.

The last train stops in front of us, steam hissing and brakes squealing as it slows into the station, with an acrid whiff of sulphurous coal smoke. The smoke clears and the doors clank open along the length of the train, emitting ragged refugees, burly American soldiers, and haggard Korean boys wearing the tattered remains of uniforms. As always, I scan their faces – hopeful at first, and then with a sinking heart. As I am about to turn away, one more boy, tall and thin, gets off the train. He looks around, his head turns towards me and our eyes meet.

It's Sang, home at last.



THE CRIMES OF A CAMERA

Isa Kleibergen
London

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

I wanted to set my story in Germany just after the "Golden Years" of Stresemann. I was interested in the way the cultural blossoming of 1924 to 1928 was in such radical contrast to Nazism and Nazi beliefs, and how the culture in Berlin around cabaret and the very liberal arts and forward-thinking, progressive ideas was completely eradicated by Nazism in the space of a few years. The contrast between the young, vibrant and modern generation living in cities compared with the traditional and rigid rural communities composed mainly of the older generation was something I was keen to explore. I decided to include different viewpoints, the liberal girls in the main plot and the rigid Gestapo man who captures their images at various stages. I chose the two young girls as my principal characters as I wanted to see how Nazism had influenced and changed their relationship, and to show the consequences of extreme persecution by the Nazis. By not quite defining the nature of the relationship between the two girls I could also demonstrate the contrast between the years of Weimar Berlin where same-sex relationships were starting to be accepted, compared to the persecution of homosexuality and the repressive nature of Nazism that occurred in the years after, reversing the modern ideas that had been starting to blossom in the years of Weimar Berlin.

THE CRIMES OF A CAMERA

Berlin 1933-34

Lotta watches the smoke unfurl into the air, a miniature billowing cloud of tobacco. She inhales again, dragging the cigarette smoke deeply through her lungs, relishing the searing heat in her throat. The stereotypical German worker beams at her from the poster plastered over the billboard, eyes glazed. She watches as Herr Koffman shuffles despondently to the door of his cabaret club, now shuttered tightly, fading gold lettering peeling off. She remembers Herr Koffman a few years back, eyeliner smudged under his eyes and lipstick smeared generously over his full lips. Dancing scandalously in his skimpy pink frock onstage, unreserved, wild-eyed with pure excitement, undiluted adrenaline. She remembers her own dress, even smaller than Herr Koffman's, bejewelled with sequins and studs of cheap metals that made her shine luminously onstage, reflecting the low-lit, warm light inside the club.

Lotta's chapped hands smart in the burn of the icy wind.

Without warning, she tosses the still smouldering cigarette to the ground and extinguishes the last glowing embers under the heel of her boot before striding across the street, calling to Herr Koffman. When he sees her, his round, soulful eyes crinkle mournfully and he unfolds his arms, enveloping her in the familiar scent of stale cologne and faded leather. The smell makes memories race before her eyes, nights fizzy with joy, blurry with alcohol. Pictures and scenes jostle in her mind, making her head spin, dizzying.

A young man, coat collar turned up against the biting cold, watches Lotta and Herr Koffman embrace, eyes narrowed in disapproval. They should not be here, holding on to remnants of a decadent, rotting age, where morals and young people were corrupted. The young man was never corrupted, he held on to his dignity with a stiff pride, unlike Lotta and Herr Koffman, who used to sway outrageously every night to the rhythm of scandalous music. A camera shutter clicks once, twice, three times.

The underground metro rattles and rocks, lulling Lotta, whose eyelids flutter in battle with exhaustion. It spits her out near the centre of Berlin, at the same station she used to stumble drunkenly through with Thea,

shrieking with laughter, holding each other tightly as they floated through their fantasy lives. It's deserted now, plastered with posters of smiling men and women, who are blond and blue-eyed and fair-skinned. Lotta is skinny verging on skeletal, has sooty grey eyes, and is deeply tanned, even in this winter. She hurries past them, pulling her threadbare coat more tightly around her lean shoulders.

As she steps out onto the pavement of Berlin, she feels it before she sees it. The flare of heat, unnaturally searing. Smoke billows into the sky, a much magnified version of her cigarette smoke. Hot ash sticks in her throat, not entirely a different feeling to the charring burn of tobacco. The Reichstag is being devoured by towering flames; they leap from pillar to pillar, like a monkey in a forest or a dancer on a stage. The tongues lick the sky, suffocating the air, oxygen-starved. The fire emits a dull roar, writhing with power. Ash and smoke is belched out into the sky, blotting out the stars in a single swipe. Sirens scream and Lotta sees the black uniform and shining cufflinks of the SS stand out amongst the firefighters. This releases her from her spot as she runs, prey-like, heart beating a bruise against her ribcage, terror flooding through her as the eyes of the SS burn into her back, far more dangerous than the fire.

Thea refuses to go outside. They are angry, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazis. They are growing too, claiming democracy is done, the Golden Years are over. Rural communities especially are disgusted by the years of Stresemann, the beautiful freedom of Berlin, cabaret, the art, the singular identity everyone had, her and Thea, Thea-and-her. Finally agreeing with the world, in all its promises of modernity, of progression, of the evolution of culture, a new age.

The Wall Street Crash brought with it a U-turn in thinking, and suddenly cabaret was scandalous, the art was ridiculed, identity became a target and Thea-and-her were degenerate.

People regard Herr Koffman with disgust and go far to prove it, until Herr Koffman is hospitalised, arms bent at odd angles, eyes stained crimson with burst blood vessels. Lotta wonders how people can beat Herr Koffman, a man whose only crime was joy, whose body is wasting away without the regular flow of cash and laughter into his cabaret club. They are hypocrites, all of them, they claim they are revolted, ashamed of the Golden Years, but Lotta recognises their over-large coats from the years of sifting through pockets in the club's cloakroom.

Thea's father's grocery shop was looted last week; the thugs smashed his windows and painted in ugly red writing *Jude,* Jew, on his front door. Thea's mother is in prison awaiting trial, accused of conspiring with the Spartakusbund, of being a communist. It is not a good time to be the daughter of a Jew and a suspected communist. He is chancellor now, the one they all say will save Germany, the small, shouty man with the excuse for a moustache. Thea nags her to take him seriously, what he's preaching is horrific, and horrific people, Thea warns her, often have a knack of getting their way. Lotta doesn't dare to imagine. Just yesterday Thea was approached by a tall man in a black overcoat, pestering her to join the newly underground communists. Thea swears he was Gestapo.

"I saw it in his eyes." She nods wisely. "Empty eyes, eyes of a monster."

Lotta snorts, unable to suppress her scepticism of the encounter.

Thea pounces on her, hollering "It's not funny!" while shrieking with laughter.

The young man frowns from his perch atop the building, looking into a window where two girls roll around laughing wildly. The faces of these two girls are slotted in a file in the building where the young man works, along with detailed descriptions of their backgrounds, residences, and suspected crimes. The camera clicks again, capturing the two girls, trapping them, in that sparsely furnished apartment, alone.

Rumours, filtered down from above, have reached the likes of Lotta and Thea. That Hindenburg, the stubborn old man who resolutely clings to his presidency, the one thing stopping the shouty chancellor, Hitler, getting to full power, is dying. Thea carries the radio around with her everywhere; Lotta hears it warbling through the thin walls of their apartment, static hissing like an angered snake. When the news plays, Thea's eyes go round and fearful; she becomes very still, apart from the tremble of her hands. Thea's brother, after protesting against the nationwide boycott of her father's shop, has disappeared.

Then early in August, the radios blare the message: Hindenburg is dead. On the evening that it is announced, and the funeral arrangements prepared, Thea's eyes are steely, brimming with fierce determination.

"I'm leaving," she says, and her words hang in the air for a second as the full, hefty weight of them sink in. She meets Lotta's eyes, and an unspoken understanding passes between them, fleeting, too dangerous,

too deadly, to be spoken aloud. Like birds flitting between the gnarled trunks of a forest, their thoughts arc and swoop to the rhythm of their relationship and when Thea whispers to Lotta, no lighter than a breath, "Will you help me?" those words shift the fundamental cores of the two girls, like tectonic plates unsettling deep in the earth, altering the inside beyond recognition while only causing a ripple above the surface.

Loitering in a dark alley, Lotta yearns for a cigarette. Those became a luxury long ago. A man strides into the alley, as if the broken, blackened cobblestone is a carpet into the finest hotel in Berlin. A flash of banknotes, a sheet of official looking documentation stowed hurriedly inside Lotta's overcoat.

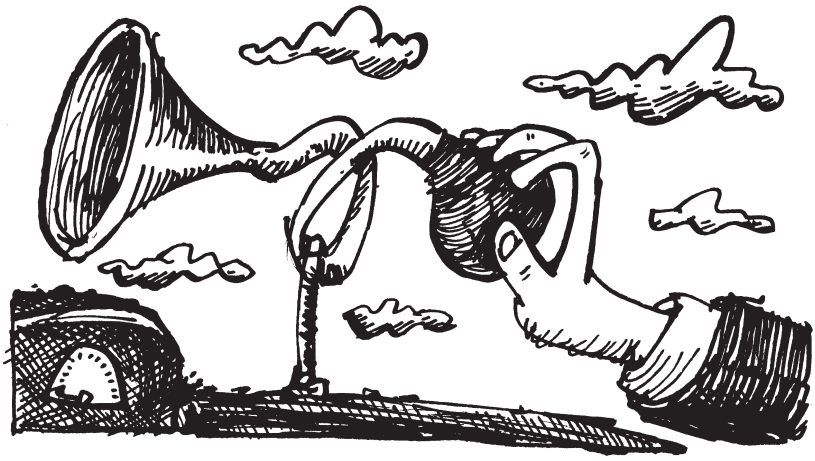
The rumble of the car that trundles past them fully masks the sound of a camera, clicking away.

Thea is on the train bound for Warsaw, which is so packed that people cannot sit on the floor, only stand, like sardines compressed tightly into their tin grave, other people's faces just inches away from yours. Lotta can see her, Thea, right next to the window, staring out at Lotta with wide, frightened eyes. Suddenly Lotta's fighting through the throng on the platform, shoving her way to the carriage where Thea is pressed against the window, until their noses touch the glass. Ashy grey eyes meet Thea's deep vivacious blue and Lotta, who has not cried since she was five and broke her arm, feels tears slip down her cheeks, like raindrops racing down a window, until her face is wet with tears and her lips taste of the sea. The train gives an enormous shudder before starting to roll out of the station, and Lotta starts to panic, because what will she do here in this culture-starved, Thea-free, monster-filled city? She claws at the handles of the train and throws her weight against it, hopelessly adrift without Thea, but the train doesn't slow or even notice her weight, it just drags her along with it, the platform edge hurtling towards her. Thea is screaming now, screaming at her to let go, she'll fall, she'll be slammed against the barrier, she'll die. A man seizes Lotta from behind, a big, burly man, who lets loose a stream of reassuring, comforting words into her ears, but she doesn't hear it because all her senses are focused on one thing: Thea's face slipping round the corner, in that rattling metal cage, grief-stricken, fleeing for her freedom.

The snow crunching underfoot reminds Lotta vaguely of the rattle of sequins in a box. She was stared out of the station, people goggling at her as if she was a rare breed of bird. The sky is an unyielding, unforgiving iron grey and the snow falls thick and fast, catching in her eyelashes and hair. She tells herself the tears running down her face are melted snow. Her feet find the old cabaret club, the letters now all gone, replaced with spiky, angry graffiti slashing at the building like knife wounds. The door gives way. Immediately a rancid smell reaches her, curling up her nose, suffocating her, thick and rotting. Lotta stumbles into the main performance room and sees Herr Koffman, swinging from a noose onstage, suspended by the same hook that used to make him fly.

Lotta doesn't stop running until she reaches the apartment, stripped bare now that she and Thea have sold all their valuables. She's violently sick on the doormat, before staggering into the main room, where three men wait. Pictures, hundreds of them, are spread out across the bare wooden floor. She's winking in one, arrogantly beautiful, almost haughty. Like a map of her life, they unreel before her, reaching into the corners and encroaching up the walls, hills upon mountains of evidence stacking up against her. She looks at each of the men, grinning at her like crocodiles, Gestapo stamped on their hearts like on the hundreds on the photos. Lotta doesn't hesitate. She flies down the stairs, through the streets, into the station she left an hour ago.

Arms snatch at her, but they're not comforting now, they're rigid and too tight; she feels her rib cage bruising. She is a bird trapped in a cage, a sparrow, lashing out desperately but it makes no difference, they shrug off her feeble blows easily. The arms force her roughly to the floor as the three men hurtle into the station. As the last rays of sunlight dip behind the horizon, painting the world a bloody crimson, someone somewhere in the mess of screaming and thicket of bodies raises their gun and fires. Lotta falls as though there had been a puppeteer holding her strings, a puppeteer who lost interest in his play.



ADLESTROP: ONLY THE NAME

Jamie Lunnon
Durham

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16-19 category

Author's introduction

My decision to base my story in Edwardian times was inspired by three things. Firstly, at the time I started writing the piece, we had just been launched into a national lockdown and I desperately needed some escapism and so began reading some Evelyn Waugh and then P.G. Wodehouse. I was inspired by the rollicking comedy to have a go myself and escape the cold, clinical atmosphere of global pestilence. Secondly, I thought the Edwardian period would be one of the lesser-picked historical moments to write on, given its stasis and quietness relative to the preceding Victorian period and the destructive war-dominated forty years to come. But, more than this, the Edwardian period is a part of history I've always taken interest in, precisely for its stasis and supposed naivety. Applying to read English at Durham University, I managed to find a literary niche, reading lots of EM Forster and Edward Thomas, and ended up writing my personal statement on Edwardian literature. The turn of the century and erosion of Victorianism and the empire came with an inevitable atmosphere of angst and uncertainty, and as such a literary and historical moment at odds with its own identity and self-definition. Waugh chose to laugh a bitter, sardonic laugh, Wodehouse to draw moustaches on the looking glass and chuckle to himself, Forster, James and Woolf to totally reimagine narrative technique itself and Edward Thomas to depict a time of untainted, perfect, cucumber-sandwich innocence. So, with its plethora of identities, the Edwardian time was a fruitful literary and historical moment and my piece tried to capture that sense of chaos and multitude, with its varied characters, and hapless narrator. In Edward Thomas' 'Adlestrop', a train stops at a station 'unwontedly'. 'No one left and no one came', there was merely 'Adlestrop, only the name'. I wanted to ask what was beyond that 'bare platform' amongst the quaint, silent stretches of English countryside. What is there is far from peaceful, and anything but silent.

ADLESTROP: ONLY THE NAME

Yes, I remember Adlestrop, the name. One afternoon of heat, the express train drew up there. Late June…. Or was it July? Or perhaps May? Temporal inconsistency is an apt introduction for the following account because I had just dashed-well missed my train out of Adlestrop and, having graced the thornbanks with a speech akin to the most unadulterated Chaucerian literature, was hurrying home.

I ought to explain what necessitated my race to catch the 4.38 from Adlestrop in the first place. You see, Adlestrop College (little known and soon to be defunct minor Public School for the sons of fallen huntsmen), was hosting the long-awaited, much-anticipated, annual school dance. It is rather a highlight of a young chap's life in Adlestrop, as, in a rare and heavily policed moment of razzle-dazzle, boys from Adlestrop College Sixth Remove, have a faint chance of actually seeing and (for the brickiest amongst us) sometimes even chatting to actual girls. Hitherto, the only known contact of that sort, was the apocryphal, oft-repeated story of two enterprising and fallen Sixth formers, who sought refuge in the hedgerow to engage in rather twiggy kisses. (On such slight, uncomfortable foundations have many a young man's dreams been fostered. I was no exception.)

So, I was in the soup. Indeed, I felt rather like a soggy crouton that has missed the sweet escape of the spoon and congealed at the bottom of the bowl… how different from my dreams...

On, on, as I always say. Back to the Bakewell-Richardson family seat, where my miscellaneous family seemed to be conspiring to stop my pleasures forever. Beginning with Ossie, before I even made it to the door.

"Carmen, is that you? Tell me you have for once performed your duty and retrieved some Ethylbenzene!" The voice was my brother's, echoing across the lawn as I approached home. Carmen was our valet; taciturn, practical, and silently enduring. A brick of a man.

"Sorry to let you down old boy, but it's me, Eddie." One had to exercise contrition when crossing one's older brother in the throes of EXPERIMENTATION. He was scientistical and had seized the whole 'motor car revolution' thing with the breathless joy of a spaniel. He obsessively tended his 1912 Franklin, donated by a friend's father, who

felt, not unreasonably, that a car really ought to move if it could and that this one didn't. If anyone could persuade an intransigent hunk of metal to come to life, Ossie could. And I had caught him now in the middle of trying. He was off to the right of our broad, gravel drive, legs protruding below the bonnet.

"Eddie! What the devil are you doing back so soon? Surely you have not been let down by the great British Steam industry?" His voiced bounced off the under-carriage of the car. It was as if the motor was talking to me. His legs gyrated bizarrely, before he added, with emphasis; "Xylene!"

"Ossie, I'm a juggins. I missed the train."

"Benzene!"

"Well, I suppose so, Ossie. But actually, I was wondering if you might drive me to the dance." (I eyed the rusty metallic lump in front of me uneasily.) "Or help me persuade the Old Man to let me borrow his horse pdq."

"Eddie, you rusted-1910-Wolseley!" he retorted. "Can't you see I'm engaged in a serious procedure, the success of which will see us major contributors to British industry? Besides, you know what the Governor thinks about my 'mumchance motoring'."

I saw his point. Our father viewed all cars as the work of barbaric, possibly even Satanic, forces, designed to bring down all that was noble and proper in the Empire. He was a formidable Victorian; espousing the benefits of horse-powered transport and eschewing any but the most necessary of conversational exchanges with his first-born son, as long as he continued to indulge his delight for cruick shank and gear shift. I shuffled over to Ossie and patted his protruding ankle:

"Be a 1911 Packwood, Ossie, and help out. I'm awfully keen not to miss my dance." I caressed his sock in my most winning way.

"The gasket's blown," he told the under-carriage of the car.

The car's or my father's? It was unclear and Ossie remained part man, part vehicle. I left him to it and headed inside.

I didn't get far. In the doorway a great, paternal colonnade waited. I followed its shape upwards, from the hem of the pristine jacket, past the scowl of the beard, to the glare of bespectacled, unamused eyes.

"S-sir," I stuttered. "It is with regret that I have to tell you that I have offended your dignity..." (He liked when we alluded to his dignity.) "… by idiotically missing my train this evening…" I shrank in apprehension.

My father's face contorted slightly, regained its fixed position, contorted again and then relaxed into figurine stillness.

"Boy, you are a fool." The bass of his voice emerged doom-laden from the thickety depths of his beard. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, folded it thrice, returned it to his pocket and rearranged his bi-focals. "You should always answer for your idiocy in all matters of wrongdoing." (Again, the beard boomed its disapproval.) "However," (A strange twitch and an unforeseen, unnerving jump of the moustache... Was that? Could that have been the beginnings of a smile?) "I was once young." (This seemed improbable. As did his next utterance.) "You may take Caesar."

Oh, the relief! I accidentally released a sort of exhalatory yippee.

"Don't be preposterous, Edward. Get ready. You should leave imminently. I will ride Caesar round." He straightened himself like a tropical Baobab tree and marched to the stables, to instruct the grooms. Caesar was the oxymoronic name of his horse. Although a powerful black stallion, it had been specially trained in Kent to perform dressage and was, on occasion, wont to abandon its duller, more orthodox course in favour of artistic, cadenced dressage.

Still, I would not look a gift horse (even a confused one) in the mouth. This was a second chance. I turned to find my riding boots, only to be distracted by strange, high-pitched whinnying (of the non-equine kind), echoing across the hall.

It was Mother: Deidre Didcot Bakewell-Richardson. My mother was not ordinary. In addition to being our mother, and the toast of Moreton-in-Marsh 1886, she was also the owner of a regionally famous canary collection.

I found her in the canary room, alternately whinnying and whispering to her birds. (She shared her live-fowl predilection with an obsession for the purchasing of ornamental stone birds for the gardens. Her most recent, controversial acquisition, was a 15-foot statue of a griffin, positioned with precarious magnificence on a central pedestal outside the entrance. Mother had wanted a canary statue, but she had been cowed

into submission by Father, who insisted on a griffin; rich, fantastical symbol of Victorian splendour.) Her current distress was occasioned by the fluttering precariousness of a yellow-feathered scrap in her hands. It didn't seem keen on living one jot longer in this maelstrom of a home. (Perhaps it dreamed of flying to Adlestrop.) She swept past me: "Come, Edward. We will revive Flavo, on the range, below stairs…"

I turned to join my Mother (aware, even as I did so, that she had forgotten to close the canary cages) but was re-routed by declamations in the library.

"Thy wicked, whining, whingeing hurts mine head,

So devilishly that I feel I need more tea…"

A shriek. And then:

"Oh, when we are born, we cry that lost is the Strand Quarterly..."

This was Grandmother. She spent so much time in the library perusing Shakespeare that iambic pentameter made up much of her daily discourse. I made haste to hand her the elusive periodical (sidling tentatively in through the door, for she had a propensity to lapse into suicidal Hamlet when startled).

"Hello, Grandm –"

"FIE! FIE ON'T!" she bellowed, swivelling her head like a wind-blown barley sheaf. "Is whispering nothing?"

"Terribly sorry to have disturbed you, Grandmother. I just came to let you know, I'm off again to the dance at Buckland. You see, I missed my train from Adlestrop, because…"

"Oh Mercy! Dost thy ornithological twittering ever cease?"

"Jolly good, Grandma. I'm off now."

She drifted towards the entrance to wave me farewell.

"Dances, revels, the ink of young man's dye,

But far be it from me, not to wave you goodbye."

And thus it was that I hastened out of the house, to meet my father and be re-issued ceremoniously to the dance. A car rumbled in the distance. The front doors rattled. The trees conferred in a deafening whisper. The

great, grey statue of the Griffin glared down, coldly.

"Eddie! if I haven't found just the solution to your dilemma!" Ossie called across the drive like a car-horn. He was leaning on his Franklin with erect hair and piscine goggles.

"Thanks Ossie. Father has offered me Caesar."

At that moment, Father emerged, rigidly perpendicular atop Caesar. His cane extended, inviting me to replace him, and his bespectacled eyes stared firmly forward. My family formed a sundry assemblage at the doorway, bizarrely determined to wave me off.

And then, quite suddenly, a spluttering, akin to that of a fur-balling cat, emerged from the car. Ossie's eyes glared from behind his goggles as he leaned over the side door and furiously yanked at a lever. An ominous motorised groaning. The car slipped out of Ossie's grasp, edged coyly, teasingly forward and started to pick up speed. Five pairs of eyes watched in horror as it slid remorselessly across the sloping gravel, trained ineluctably on the fabulous stone bird. Then, with what felt like an almighty, epoch-ending roar, it hit. The great, grey Griffin seemed to consider its position. It cracked, it wobbled, it prevaricated. And then, with theatrical slowness, gravity took over. Down went the bird. Toppling inelegantly sideways. It landed supine on the gravel; beak broken, claws gracelessly projecting skywards. Smoke billowed apologetically from the bonnet of the now stationary car. My family erupted.

Eyes bulging with fury, astride his steed, my father fairly roared: "Oswald. You industrialised ape! What have you done?" He kicked Caesar on, but alas, Caesar misconstrued the instructions, embarking instead on a dainty, staccato side-trot. Father's face turned claret. He resorted to Latin, "Terribilis Equus! Incompetens Equus!" The bewildered horse became yet more vertical and regal, pirouetting obligingly round on its hind legs and tipping my father to a most precarious position.

Ossie's frozen bewilderment turned into motorised madness. He began spasmodically reciting mechanical terms: "Ethylbenzene! Crank-case! MULTI-LINK SUSPENSION!" He ran to his errant darling.

Meanwhile, my mother, initially paralysed in disbelief, yelled like a starved hyena, "MY GLORY! MY GRIFFIN! MY PRIDE! MY JOY! I WEEP. I WEEP!" But she was drowned out by a more magnitudinous noise, as scores of canaries flew out of the house, squawking mightily.

They accosted her, mid-lament and began pecking her clothing, seeking her ubiquitous birdseed. She became one large, screaming entanglement of bird and human.

Meanwhile, in the doorway, a ball of wrinkled flesh was rocking back and forth and soliloquizing:

"O, that this too, too solid bird would melt..."

I stood, helpless. Despair around me. Disaster had well and truly struck. The Griffin had fallen, and with it, my chances of ever reaching Adlestrop College dance.

Just at that moment, a blackbird sang.

*****

In the end, Carmen got me to Adlestrop on the front of his bike.

The train arrived and I climbed aboard. The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. No one left and no one came. The train exhaled and slowly started to move. What I saw was Adlestrop. Only the name... I turned away from tangled youth. Outside the window, the sweet scent of fields rose in a steaming haze. A peaceful summer evening in 1913.

DEEDS, NOT WORDS

Rachel McWhinnie
Newcastle upon Tyne

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16-19 category

Author's introduction

This story was inspired by a visit to the ruined Delaval Mausoleum in Seaton Sluice in Northumberland, a short distance away from Seaton Delaval Hall. Although the Hall is a National Trust museum, the Mausoleum is completely abandoned, with the roof fallen in and the walls disfigured by graffiti and weeds. It's built on a 3-metre high wall with no staircase or method of reaching the Mausoleum (aside from getting your friend to give you a boost, which is hard in a short denim dress and a 5-year-old pair of Doc Martens, and even harder when you have a grumpy old Miniature Schnauzer with you. All in all, not something I could imagine an 18th Century lord doing). There's no plaque or headstone commemorating a lost loved one – indeed, there is nobody buried there at all. Once we'd made it inside the ruins, we were very curious as to why the Mausoleum existed, mouldering in a farmer's field. Intrigued, we researched the Mausoleum's history and discovered that it had been built for the son of the Hall's owner, Sir John Hussey Delaval. According to the Shell Guide, his son (also named John) had died in 1775 "as a result of being kicked in a vital organ by a laundry maid to whom he was paying addresses". It didn't take a genius to work out which organ it was. Of course, we found this very, very funny, and spent a long time leaning against the graffitied Mausoleum walls, wheezing with laughter. When I tried to research the laundry maid's story, I couldn't find any information about what happened to her after the event, so I decided to make up an answer for myself. As for young John, his father couldn't agree a consecration fee for the Mausoleum with the Bishop of Durham, and so his rather impressive burial chamber instead provides a canvas for budding graffiti artists. That's what you get for bothering laundry maids.

DEEDS, NOT WORDS

They said the scream had been heard by the fishing boats, miles out to sea, but they were, admittedly, prone to exaggeration. They also said that she was a witch, and that she had cursed young Sir Delaval, and that was, of course, completely false. Well, the second bit was. Cursing took a lot of time, a lot of power, and, most irritatingly, a lot of ingredients. To enact a curse nearly so effective, she would have had to have spent weeks gathering bitter white roots under moonlight, burying teeth under the loose flagstones in the wine cellar, and stealing young Delaval's hair from his bedsheets. All she needed for what she actually did were strong muscles in her legs and a good pair of solid boots, both of which she possessed.

But that tale could never be told in the village. Because every woman around these parts possessed legs muscled from making the daily trek to the Hall, and every woman around here had a decent pair of work boots. Better to say that she was a witch, that she had unattainable powers, that she was something beyond their understanding. Better not to let them think that they could do what she had done.

They said she disappeared immediately after it happened. They probably said she did it in a puff of smoke, or rode off on a broomstick, or turned into a plague of locusts. This was, of course, as ridiculous as the curse rubbish. She just used the servants' staircase. Maids in the Hall were like the second woman already hidden inside the wooden box, waving their legs while the beautiful assistant was sawn in half. If the audience saw them, it spoiled the magic. As far as the Delavals were concerned, their laundry spawned naturally, fresh and clean and pressed, growing inside their wardrobes while they slept. It used to bother her, that they were so ignorant of the people living beneath their noses, keeping their beds clean and their food hot, but she quickly learned that things got far worse if they found their way into the servants' quarters. Far worse both for her and for them.

Young Delaval had something of a reputation for less-than-appropriate behaviour, especially when it came to serving maids, and her own reputation wasn't exactly spotless when it came to keeping her temper. There were several young men in the village who could have given him a much-needed warning, but then he would have missed out on a much-needed lesson. Women have minds of their own and boots of their own,

and if you cross the wrong one she will leave you with less than you started with. Of course, young Delaval didn't have much time to reap the benefits of his new outlook on life. He died not long after from internal haemorrhaging. *The Newcastle Journal* would later report the cause of this as a severe kick to a "vital organ", and despite their phrasing, everyone knew which organ they meant.

There were no reports or records of what happened to the laundry maid who did the deed. I know, though. She stole a fishing boat and rowed all the way down the coastline to Bamburgh, where she lived out her days in a small cottage, watching shipwrecks from the sand dunes, and made it to the ripe old age of seventy-three before all her teeth fell out and she died on her kitchen floor. She didn't let that stop her, though.

The very day that old woman with solid work boots dropped dead, a baby girl was born fifty miles away in Seaton Sluice, and she was born angry. She already had three teeth, and she bit. She grew more teeth, but the biting habit never left her, and when she was a beautiful nineteen-year-old a young man made the mistake of a Delaval and she sank her teeth into his face. They caught her, this time. They threw her in a jail cell in Newcastle, and a judge said she was the most wild creature he had ever seen and that she should be kept out of polite society. Not two days later she was put on a ship bound for Australia, but she never lost that wild edge, and by the time her feet touched foreign soil there was a warning not to touch her painted in bruises on men's bodies. It was too hot in Australia for a Northumbrian lass, but out there nobody stopped her from taking a bite out of anyone who crossed her, and so she was happy enough until the scurvy set in and she lost all her teeth, and then she threw herself off a cliff onto the warm rocks below. The men of England did not know it, but they were praying that she stayed down there this time. But either God didn't listen, or she was ruled by something else, because a day later Seaton Sluice was once more graced by a baby girl.

She hoped things could be better this time, because she was born with a woman on the throne, but she quickly learned that optimism would only lead to disappointment. She broke her first nose at nine years of age, and by the time she turned seventeen her parents had had quite enough of her antics. They tried to marry her off to three different men, but each one left with a different embarrassing injury, and so they gave up and had her committed to the Northumberland County Pauper Lunatic Asylum. Nobody ever really believed that she was insane. There was nothing

insane about any of the things she did. But insanity was an excuse to keep her locked up, and as long as she was locked up, she couldn't bite or kick. They quickly found out that she could stab, however. Orderlies were soon banned from bringing needles into her cell; she had to take all her medication by mouth. There was one doctor in the asylum who took an immense liking to her, and so she took an immense disliking to him, and when she eventually jumped from the third floor window, she took him with her.

The next baby girl born in Seaton Sluice was quieter. She had learned from her past three rebellions, and she knew how not to be noticed. She worked hard, but more importantly she worked quietly, and by the time she was twenty-one she had enough money to catch a bus to London, where even fewer people noticed her than before. She kept her head down and she kept quiet – so quiet that she managed to burn down three buildings in the name of women's suffrage before anyone noticed that she might be guilty. She wasn't quiet, after that. In prison she was very, very loud indeed. She kept on screaming until her body could no longer take the effects of her hunger strike, and then she died. Her corpse's face would give the officer who found her nightmares for the rest of his life, and she found that immensely funny.

When she came back again, she thought she might actually be peaceful this time. It wouldn't just be a mask for her misdeeds. She would be calm, and she would be nice. The war was over, and all that hard work screaming and starving in prison had paid off, because even once-laundry maids from Seaton Sluice could vote now. A cloud drew briefly over her life in 1939, when the men in charge proved that they weren't like her and couldn't learn from their pasts, and another war broke out. But, as cruel as it felt to say so, it was easier when all the young men went off to war. She had tried ever so hard not to kick or bite or stab or scream this time around, and without the creeping eyes and wandering hands she had no reason to break her oath to herself. Nobody bombed Seaton Sluice. There simply wasn't anything there. She lived her wartime years in peace, and then the men came home. They were worse, now. Something had been done to their minds out there, something that had made them so much more comfortable with the idea of ending a life, and once you were comfortable with killing you were comfortable with almost anything. And so she had to give up on peace and become worse herself. So far, her record had been taking one other man down with her. This

time, it was three. Arson. Her least favourite way to go yet, but also her most satisfying.

In her next life, she passed the gutted ruins of the burned pub on her way to her wedding. She didn't want to get married, but the guy was rich and her mum was sick and she was struggling to care for her and to pay the bills. It seemed that being rich made this man arrogant, and he hit her on their wedding night, and so a week later she drove their car off a cliff with both of them in it. She knew she'd be back.

Her next life was her shortest one yet. She only made it to 9 years old before a man bundled her into his car while she was walking home from school and she was never seen again. They never caught the man. They never even knew where to start. She did, though.

This time, she only had one purpose. She remembered the car registration, and she remembered the man's face. Admittedly, this wasn't much to go on, and so it took her twenty-two years to find him, but find him she did. She could have called the police, but she didn't have any evidence besides memories of a past life. And by this point she had realised that she wasn't very nice at all. She wanted to do it herself. She brought a gun with her, but she used her bare hands. It was satisfying, but it also felt like an ending. She had completed her purpose in that life. When the police caught her, she didn't fancy the idea of fifty or so years in a jail cell, and so she ran at them with the gun until they shot her dead. That was in 2002.

I bet you think this is a proper dark story. You probably think I'm nuts. It's all true, though. You can check, easy. Google "John Delaval mausoleum". That's what we're standing in, after all. I bet you're wondering why I'm telling you all this. I'm surprised you haven't worked it out by now, but you never were the brightest, were you? Bright people don't go round treating women the way you do. Even young Delaval learned not to try anything like that. A bright person might also have realised that there's something suspicious about a woman who hates you agreeing to go into the woods with you at night. Did you think I was the stupid one? That's hilarious. I'm not stupid. I'm angry. I think it's what keeps me alive. I've been angry for nearly 250 years, and I don't think I'm going to stop tonight. Call the police if you want. Or fight back, or whatever. Even if you win, you don't really win. Every generation, there's going to be a baby girl born in Seaton Sluice, and she is not going to be

nice and you are not going to be able to stop her. So think carefully about how you treat women. You never know if it's me. You never know if she's going to kick, or bite, or stab, or scream, or burn, or crash, or bludgeon, or… Wait. I haven't even told you how I get my revenge in this life. I think you're going to like it. I know I do. Don't worry, I'll stop rambling on now.

I'll just show you.

TO DUST WE SHALL RETURN

Holly Thorpe
Wrexham

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16-19 category

Author's introduction

I decided to focus on WWII for my story, partly because I felt familiar with it, studying it in school so much, but also because its complexity interests me. I wanted to look at a quieter side of the war, not involving the fighting on the battlefields, but people just living and doing their best to help and get by. I chose to focus on two women because I always thought how horrible it must have been for women back then to be left alone after the death of their husbands, left without even a body to mourn, struggling with their own isolation as well as the effects of war at home. I liked the idea of two such women finding comfort in each other, finding a sense of warmth in the midst of a pattern of tragedies.

TO DUST WE SHALL RETURN

"Bonnie, please!" The young woman tried her best to turn and face her friend, but the blanket wrapped around her caught on one of the shelter's wires, cocooning her in place against one of its rabbit hutch sides.

The other woman freed the blanket and avoided her pitiful stare, looking out to what Marie wanted: the slices of cake that had settled down quite comfortably on the wooden side table on the other side of the room, which was admittedly on the small, verging on claustrophobic side; although at that point, it was not an unbearable problem for them. They lay next to each other in what was a hopeful silence for Marie and an anxious one for Bonnie.

Marie tried a different tactic, "I can't hear them yet – listen. You'll be fine I'm sure of it."

Bonnie turned her head to the left, "Then why don't you venture out there yourself?"

"Because you're on the side that opens and most importantly it's my birthday! As lovely as that dinner was there is no denying that the day has taken a turn for the worse – I think this would really boost our morale in this particularly trying time – "

She had not needed to say any more as Bonnie was already lifting up her side of the shelter and crawling out, quickly grabbing the desired plates and swiftly returning, closing herself and Marie back in. "The birthday reasoning is one I will accept, but please do not start quoting the posters."

"I shall accept these terms." Marie smiled as she lay on her side facing Bonnie, both trying their best to eat without giving themselves indigestion.

It was then that Marie looked at the letters that she could see resting on the mantelpiece, just about visible on the other side of the room if she lifted her head up ever so slightly as to see over Bonnie's.

She could still remember the first few lines of the one from her James:

"My darling Marie,

Last night I heard someone humming 'Cheek to Cheek' and it was like you were there, twirling around amongst the beds. I could almost see

myself next to you, despite me being the dead hoofer that I am. You have always been the only one who could ever get me to dance." It was a line near the end of his letter that stuck with her most, the unintentional lie of "I will see you soon, and we will one day dance together again."

She was unsure what Robert had written to Bonnie in his last letter. She could have easily stolen a glance at it when Bonnie was out of the room, but she felt like this would have been a betrayal, as if this letter was his final breath and she would be snatching it away by reading it, especially since Bonnie was usually so private. The only thing Marie knew about Robert was that he was called Robert and that he bought Bonnie the green and white dotted dress that had one of those white collars that Marie loved. Her train of thought was interrupted by another siren. They reached out to each other and held hands tightly, abandoning the cake slices beside them.

It was dark, with the windows covered and the flickering light growing more and more feeble as the seconds played out adagio, but Bonnie could still read Marie's face without trouble. She'd gotten rather good at it after this long. Besides, this was not the first time they had lain there together. She was hesitant to openly admit it, but she admired Marie's ability to charm, as much as it annoyed her on occasion.

Convincing Bonnie to move in with her was possibly Marie's greatest feat yet, for the young woman was overwhelmingly private. When they first started working together, Marie had always thought that she was a spy. Her eyes always seemed to be observing something that Marie could not comprehend. This did not bother Marie much, however, as an interesting character was just what she wanted, and so it was to her delight that on one particularly dull afternoon, she discovered that they both walked home the same way. At first, she tried to win her over with compliments, although she soon ran out and ended up trying so hard that she had said how wonderfully the boiler suit complemented her figure.

It was only when they both stopped to see a woman trying to claw her way through a huge mound of rubble on one of the streets they passed, screaming as she pounded her fists against the unmoving stone, that Bonnie first spoke. "Do you think this will ever stop?" she had said, her face easing from its usually rigid expression.

Marie had looked at her and then back at the woman, who had started crying, and spoke with honesty that surprised her, "I don't know."

Bonnie had seemed surprised by it too, turning to look at Marie properly for the first time, "We can only do what we can and hope that it is enough."

Marie stood in silence for a moment and then smiled weakly, still looking forward, "Would you like to come to mine for tea?"

"What have you got in?" Bonnie responded, which was met with a look from Marie that she would grow to know well, one that said in a serious yet loving way, 'Really?' She looked down and adjusted her answer, "I would like that...very much."

Marie nodded and they set off towards the floral-wallpapered flat she called home. It was after a minute of walking in calm silence that Bonnie said, "Thank you." She had not yet gained the ability to express her emotion while being so vulnerable as to look someone in the eye, but Marie still knew that she meant this sincerely.

Back under the shelter, Bonnie looked into Marie's eyes and saw that with every second she remained under there, her shiny exterior was being worn down more and more. She squeezed her hand.

"When all this is over, what do you want to do?" She knew Marie loved nothing more than the romanticised realities that she hoped the future would hold.

Marie smiled, "Well, I'd quite like to move to the countryside. I've heard things about the Women's Land Army and, well – I know that they are there to help with the war effort but what if they keep hiring women to do farm work after the war as well? Think of that – days spent working in the fresh air, animals, a nice little cottage or something to retreat to."

"You must be more soused than I thought you were! That work would involve intense physical labour and you getting severely sunburned – you would not last a day out there!"

Marie laughed a little, but Bonnie saw that she had just had her hopes dampened. Bonnie was furious at herself for not being able to show kindness without having to defend her use of it with some unhelpful and unnecessary remark.

"But –" she continued, trying to save things, "– it must be lovely to live in the country. You'd make a little cottage feel so cosy. I can just see it now. You'd lay out that flowery tablecloth that your mother made in the dining room and I'm sure it would be regularly covered over by large plates of pie."

The pair smiled.

"How would we earn our way then?" Marie sat up a little, leaning on her elbow, invested.

Bonnie struggled to idealise the grim reality of labour, "Well...well I could cook? Maybe some village would need a bakery, and I can make great bread."

"Really?"

"Yes, yes – I suppose that I could give you a free loaf before I open the bakery each morning so that you get the best of the bunch."

"Well thank you very much!" Marie's smile strengthened before she began momentarily contemplating her own answer. "I think I should like to be a poet."

"A poet! Fascinating." Bonnie did not mention that she had never seen Marie write a poem once in the time that she had known her, but she found joy in her expression and so she continued, "What would you write about?"

"Gosh, I don't know. I haven't written one in years, but I'm sure the countryside will inspire me somehow."

They lay there for a moment, content in brewing over this idea, before they were interrupted by sounds in the distance that they knew too well. The whistling was the worst part. It was part of the wait as those instruments of death dived to the ground in a roar that latched onto the very core of their humanity, reminding them of their helpless, breakable bodies.

Marie's grip on Bonnie's hand tightened and she could hear her breaths quicken. Bonnie held her tighter too, and looked at her again, at how her hair draped over the side of her face, how her eyes were sealed shut, how her skin looked so fragile.

"Why don't you write one now? Or rather say one now." Bonnie added an optimistic, 'Hmm?' to the end of that to arouse Marie's attention.

Marie opened her eyes, "Good idea. Yes, alright."

Bonnie nodded for her to go on after Marie took a second to think.

"Well... I look forward to my absence from these... gutted? No – these hallowed streets."

They heard them approach, each whistle like a nail into their skull.

"I pray it comes quick and that you might be with me, both on the road there and next to me, always."

The floor shook slightly, and Marie began speaking quicker.

"And – and I feel guilty that the path to our heaven must be trodden over knotted bodies, unmarked and uncared for by the land that devours them, and –"

Marie was cut off by a sharp breath and the roaring grew louder and closer, the building shaking. Bonnie placed her other hand over Marie's and looked into her as if making sure that Marie's face was carved into her memory. Marie squeezed Bonnie's hand tighter as she captured her face in the same way, her speech quickening yet again as she continued.

"And I hope we can reach our home and that – that we never have to worry that we... might die under the dinner table –" She choked on her words, "– and as we sit together in our home you will know that I… love you."

Bonnie reached out and held Marie close as the building shook more. They stayed there, intertwined, for what felt like several lives over. Neither wanted to move, because tearing themselves away from the moment would involve deciding what to do next, and that was something that neither of them was ready for.

AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?

Ted Whitaker
Gloucester

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-16 category

Author's introduction

The Young Walter Scott Prize combines my love of writing with one of my favourite subjects, History. My story was inspired by a painting titled, 'And When Did You Last See Your Father?' by William Fredrick Yeames. It depicts a Royalist family being interrogated by Roundheads during the English Civil War.

I stumbled upon the painting whilst doing research for a History Essay. I was instantly intrigued. The brave innocence of the boy, the silent sorrow of the mother, the stern soldiers and the question, 'And When Did You Last See Your Father?' I'd seldom come across a painting that had snared me into deep speculation. It was a mystery I wanted to put words to.

AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?

Inspired by the painting: "AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?" by William Yeames

Scott House had once known joy, though it was hard to believe it this morning. In the southern study the interlopers had the family ready to be questioned. The men wore yellow sashes around their waists, their dreary outfits, so out of place in the extravagant decor of the room, though definitely fitting the mood.

At the table sat four men. A weary scribe scratched out notes with his quill. A gangly soldier sat expressionless, his eyes as hollow as a pistol barrel. They would have brought him along for mere menace. In the middle sat a serious looking inquisitor who was whispering swiftly to the ginger man on his left, though the words couldn't be heard over the sobs of the little girl, common sense would tell you they were discussing nothing good. The inquisitor stopped and began to question the only man of the household, a little boy.

The mother cast a concerned look towards her son who was standing so innocently proud upon a stool, his brilliant blue outfit shone like a star in the dark atmosphere that day, in total contrast to the grim men in front of him. Her husband had told her about these men, he called them Roundheads, "a bunch of dull parliamentarians".

Did these "Roundheads" have no decency? First, they interrogate her and now her seven-year-old son.

While other sons and fathers would spend no worth of time in each other's presence, this boy and his father would move heaven and earth for each other.

They were a prosperous family. A happy family. With pleasant experiences there was always a price. The man of the house had been called away to war. A war to protect his king from parliamentary forces. This miserable fact of a war against men of same country still haunted the family's thoughts to this day. A King against Parliament, Cavaliers against Roundheads, family against family. Was the country in chaos?

The creeping fear of the inevitable danger lurked close in the family's train of thought. They all buried this despair deep within themselves and silently prayed for their loved one to return.

It had been a day since the Roundheads' arrival. They'd been woken from their bed chambers and directed to their father's study where the Inquisitor sat waiting.

He still stood there peering at the little boy like he was observing something peculiar or unexpected inside a cage. His face wasn't unkind or repulsive like the men behind him, he smiled gently and spoke…

"Good Morning, your Uncle here…" he nodded towards the ginger man to his left, "has been telling me all about what a fine young man you are. My name is Thomas Monck, what's your name?"

The boy nervously yet politely replied, "My name is Rupert, sir."

"Rupert's a strong name." He grinned. "How old are you?"

The gangly soldier glowered at the boy, without pity.

"I'm seven, sir."

A burly man who was sitting in the armchair in the corner, gave a low grumble.

The inquisitor smiled, "Are you a good boy, Rupert?"

"I hope, so." For some reason, Rupert couldn't stop looking at his Uncle. How could he be a part of this group that held him hostage?

The inquisitor gave a chuckle and leaned forward so he directly looked into the boy's eyes, "Do you love God?"

It was simple question for the boy to answer, "Yes, sir."

"Do you love the King?"

There was silence…

The mother burst out in tears. The soldier who had an arm around the boy's sobbing sister said in a gruff voice, "Come now, any opinion the boy has would have come from his parents."

The inquisitor gave a disregarding stare at the soldier, "Sergeant Crawford, is that how you speak to a senior officer? We are the New Model Army not some fools the King's strung together."

The Sergeant stood to attention, the inquisitor turned and smiled to the boy, "Yes, your parents, would you mind telling me their names?"

"Yes, sir. My mother is Georgina Debois."

"And your father?"

"I don't know, sir…"

The inquisitor smiled a smile that would have been worn by a fox when seeing a rabbit, then said, "Do you study the bible?"

"Yes." The boy stared at the guard holding theirs.

"Good, then you'll know God's Ten Laws. Could you tell me Law Nine, Rupert?"

"Thou shalt not bear false witness."

"Thank-you. Can you tell me what God will do to those who break those sacred rules?"

The boy's mother interrupted the interrogation and blurted, speaking to her son, "I believe the most important law is Honour thy Father and thy Mother." She glared at the inquisitor without his notice.

"Yes. Can you tell me, does your father play games with you?"

At that moment his mother burst into tears, the inquisitor shot her a sharp look then resumed his playful smile.

"He does, sir."

"And so, it should be, I remember playing with my father when I was your age, when did you and your father last share that experience?" The Inquisitor smiled.

The boy's lips were sealed.

The boy twitched uncomfortably. The memory, so fresh in his mind, by the unexpected visit of his father and his men, those last words that he'd said to him, before he fled. "Don't forget me…"

Only a mere two days ago…

"And when did you last see your father?" the inquisitor repeated.

A ghostly chill filled the study.

"I'll ask again, when did you last see your father?" His smile broke, his barely hidden anger revealed.

No noise escaped the boy. His mother took a deep breath. The once honest eyes of the inquisitor were swapped with the cruel eyes of a desperate man.

"For the final time…" He gritted his teeth. "When did you last see your father?"

The boy's uncle stared at the inquisitor; he disliked his nephew being threatened by a man six times his age.

A sharp knife of anxiety cut into the previous atmosphere; a cold sweat boiled on the little boy's forehead. He had a life or death decision.

In one metaphorical hand was Truth. A truth that endangered his father, a man who had raised him, the father he loved.

Then there was a Lie. A lie which would save his father yet would damn his immortal soul.

The decision was his.

The little boy cleared his throat and spoke…

TIPS FOR YOUNG WRITERS

The eminent published writers shortlisted for the 2021 Walter Scott Prize give their gems of advice to those starting out in writing historical fiction.

Steven Conte, author of The Tolstoy Estate:

"Remember that the details from the past that we find exotic and remarkable shouldn't necessarily seem so to characters who are familiar with that world. In a sense this is a technical problem in all fiction: why do characters notice certain details, and is their noticing natural and plausible? One solution is to choose a viewpoint character who is an outsider, or, better still, a partial outsider, at once knowledgeable about their world but also alive to its oddities."

Kate Grenville, author of A Room Made of Leaves:

"Start by reading plenty of history. Read the work of historians but also, if you can, some of the original sources the history is based on. (When I was 12 I read a book about Captain Cook that quoted big chunks of his journal - it was a formative experience). Wait till something jumps out at you - something you can relate to from your own life. History is full of schoolyard bullies, for instance, even though many of them are called Sir or General. Then - as Stephen King advises - close the door while you write the first draft, letting it go wherever it takes you (rather than where you think it should go). Don't show it to anyone too soon - only open the door when you've done a few drafts and you feel as if you know what you'd like it to be, even if it isn't there yet. Good luck!"

Dame Hilary Mantel, author of The Mirror and the Light:

"Remember facts are never the whole story. Research is not just about names and dates – it's about imaginative, sensory closeness to the past. So you begin as you would with any fiction – by forming yourself into a writer. That means paying attention to the world, and being open to experience. For your chosen period, you become a magpie. As you are reading, watching, listening, you pick up anything that glitters. Don't ask, how does this fit in my story? Just take it home to your nest. Sooner or later, you'll see why it attracted you."

Maggie O'Farrell, author of Hamnet:

"Begin with a map or a sketch of your location, real or otherwise. Maps are a wonderful way to unlock your imagination, to explore the surroundings of your characters, to root them in a time and place. And also, don't worry too much about your first draft – put words down on paper, irrespective of whether they are spelt correctly or not, get your characters talking or walking or fighting. Press on. There will be time later to go back and fix everything."

Pip Williams, author of The Dictionary of Lost Words:

"Write about something that you are incredibly curious about. Something that seems half drawn by the historical record. Something that raises questions that your imagination might have answers to."

Happy writing and don't forget to enter next year's YWSP!

For further information about any aspect of the work of the Young Walter Scott Prize, please contact
The Administrator, YWSP, Bowhill, Selkirk, TD7 5ET or
info@youngwalterscottprize.co.uk

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