ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

The Young Walter Scott Prize
for Historical Fiction 2023

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by the Young Walter Scott Prize,
Bowhill, Selkirk, Scotland TD7 5ET

www.ywsp.co.uk

CONTENTS

About The Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize

Honouring the achievements of the founding father of historical fiction, The Walter Scott Prize is among the most prestigious literary awards in the world and boasts a stellar list of winners.

The Young Walter Scott Prize was established nine years ago for writers aged between 11 and 19 years who wanted to write stories set in the past. There was no other award like it, and the founders – the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch – wondered whether historical fiction would appeal to young writers. From the start, entrants proved that there is an extraordinary and wide-ranging interest in history, not least as a way to make sense of the present. The number of entries has increased every year.

The novelist Elizabeth Laird, Chair of the judges, said, "As usual this year, when the bundle of entries for the Young Walter Scott Prize arrived, I had no idea what to expect. The young writers had explored an astonishing variety of themes and styles. We were with a firefighter at Chernobyl, then with a soldier at Rorke's Drift and a moment later with a ruby miner in Myanmar. There were stories from Japan, Uganda, Napoleonic France and Franco's Spain.

The entries were heartfelt, original and ambitious, and, above all, a pleasure read. It was hard to select the ones which are included in this anthology, but readers are in for a treat!"

Our warm thanks go to Elizabeth and the rest of the judging panel, former YWSP-winner and journalist Rosi Byard-Jones, journalist and literary reviewer David Robinson, literary agent Kathryn Ross and YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson.

We look forward to receiving entries for YWSP 2024. Details will be posted on the website in due course.

The Imagining History Programme UK offers a complementary creative writing programme led by Alan Caig Wilson and we're delighted that so many young writers are taking up the opportunities it offers. More information about that Programme and how to become involved can be found on its website – www.imagininghistory.org

The Young Walter Scott Prize is generously supported by the Duke of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.

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

2020 Atlas Weyland Eden and Madeleine Friedlein

2021 Leo Wilson and Oliver Dhir

2022 Ellie Karlin and Rosie Brooker

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

2021 *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel

2022 *News of the Dead* by James Robertson

2023 *These Days* by Lucy Caldwell

About Sir Walter Scott and Abbotsford

Abbotsford is the home of Sir Walter Scott, originally a farm-house which he transformed into a large house and estate for his family on the banks of the River Tweed in the Scottish Borders. Scott, the world's first historical novelist, was by far the biggest-selling author of his day and wrote many of his phenomenally successful novels at the desk which you can see in the house today.

As a child, Scott loved listening to traditional stories and folklore. A victim of polio, he spent much of his childhood in the Scottish Borders with various family members, many of whom indulged this love of storytelling. The knowledge he amassed is evident in his novels, all of which are packed with fabulous characters, many based on real people, real historical events.

Sir Walter Scott was also a collector of artefacts. Visitors to Abbotsford will find themselves surrounded by an extraordinary array of items, reflecting the writer's passion for the past, his fascination with people and their stories, and his sense of humour.

One of the highlights of our Young Walter Scott Prize-winners' visit to the Borders is a morning spent at Abbotsford – there is something for everybody amongst the displays of Scott's eclectic collections, and in the gardens and grounds of the estate. We highly recommend a visit.

Juditha Triumphans

Elise Withey
Bathford, Somerset

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

I began more with a painting than a period. I love Klimt's Golden Phase, and his languidly murderous Judith und Holofernes *is one of my all-time favourite works of art. His Judith, more femme fatale than heroine, revels in the aftermath of Holofernes' killing, looking directly back at the viewer in challenge. The eroticism of the painting made it highly controversial when it was first displayed in Vienna in 1901. I have taken the liberty of allowing it to be temporarily exhibited in the National Gallery for the purposes of my story.*

I knew I wanted to set my story in 1901, when Judith *was painted, which led me to start exploring dynamics of violence and desire towards (and between) Edwardian women—and the restrictions they faced.*

In 1901 there were 22,698 doctors in England. 212 were female.

The title comes from the Vivaldi oratorio of the same name.

Juditha Triumphans

London, 1901

Miss Alden arrived the day before the doctor's funeral.

Poor taste—the accusation rustled through Little Bethulia's drawing rooms, clinging like cigar smoke to the ends of August. Some spoke of the brougham she had travelled in, a fine-lacquered carriage in a green most unsuited for the funerary occasion. Others recalled the strange circumstances of her departure six years ago. A few even wondered what an uncanny coincidence it was that the doctor's sizeable inheritance had all passed to one woman: an outsider, childless, with no husband and no family worth remembering.

Sybil Mursey listened to the rumours with a pleasant little frisson. She had always hated the doctor. On the morning of his funeral she feigned a fever and sat in the orangery all day instead, flushed among the heady blossom smells.

Once the talk had moved on – an exhibition had just opened in the National with some shocking Austrian paintings – Sybil waited until her husband was in a good mood and then asked him over the morning paper.

"I heard," she began, "that Miss Alden hasn't yet been invited to dinner by any family. Perhaps we should be the first to – extend a hand?"

Her husband paused midway through turning the page.

"Only as a courtesy," Sybil added. "She may have forgotten the way we do things here, after all."

"Alone?"

"Oh! – not at all. I know the Kellers would love to join us. Ester's been so curious to meet her."

"Then it's settled. Send out the invitations before noon." He stood in one quick movement and Sybil nearly flinched. "After all, it's always good to know one's doctor well. With your condition."

She signed the letter: *From Sybil Mursey. Your friend.*

The streetlamps outside were only just beginning to be lit when Miss Alden's green brougham drew up outside the Mursey door. She wore her hair pinned in a widow's coil, and she touched Sybil's arm where the bruising was hidden by her sleeve and said, "I hope I am not too late."

They slipped into the conservatory while they waited for the Kellers, and Sybil found herself shivering despite the balmy August night. She pulled her shawl closer.

"Sybil," said her husband, "is often sickly. When the doctor was here – "

"God rest his soul."

"Of course," he said. "When he was still with us, he would call upon Sybil every few weeks – a man of great skill, and greater discretion. You were close; perhaps you know who will fill his position?"

"Why," said Miss Alden, "his old apprentice. I myself will open my practice to patients in two days' time."

The wind turned, and the scent of jasmine drifted in from the shadowed gardens. Along the flowerbeds fresh tuberose blossoms had begun to open, star-white.

"How modern," her husband said at last.

Miss Alden smiled. She was not pretty, but in the rosy darkness of the conservatory Sybil thought there was a soldier's handsomeness about her features, the angles of her face. "Haven't you seen the new exhibition? We all seem to be very modern, these days."

The next morning Sybil woke early, and in the thin silk of her nightgown shivered her way through a second letter, the pen strokes unsteady with cold. She wrote: *Thank you for your delightful company yesterday. I did have such a lovely night.*

She meant: *You touched my sleeve and it was so gentle that I was scared.*

It was another two weeks before Sybil Mursey saw Miss Alden again. The carriage into the heart of London was not one she enjoyed, and she preferred for the most part to stay within Little Bethulia's quiet trellised neighbourhood, a safe mile-half from the city. Nevertheless, Piccadilly's tailoring could not be bested, and Sybil was having a new evening gown fitted in the healthy-waisted Parisian style when the dressmaker's door

swung open to a familiar face.

"Here's a happy coincidence," said Miss Alden. Her dark hair was tied low around her shirtwaist's high white collar, and her forearms were bare. Sybil was seized with the sudden awful fear that Miss Alden had forgotten her name before she added, "Mrs Mursey."

"Oh, let me be Sybil for now. I'm not at home."

"Neither am I," she said, "for now. I saw your carriage outside; I thought that I might drop in. Forgive me if that was too presumptuous."

"Not in the slightest. In fact I would love your eye for this blue, I'm not sure if it's quite my shade – would you lend me your opinion? As my physician, of course."

Miss Alden stepped around the folding screen and then her face shuttered through four quick expressions at once. Too late Sybil realised her mistake. She drew her hands up to hide herself; not from modesty, where the half-pinned gown fell loose around her breasts, but to cover her collarbone, and the dark handprints that mottled it.

"Sybil," Miss Alden began.

A bright tinkle of bells. The dressmaker, mouth full of pins, came shuffling in from the back of the shop with a new roll of fabric; paused, seeing Miss Alden, her widow's coil, her hand outstretched towards Sybil's arm.

Sybil Mursey rested a hand on her neck, took a deep breath and with her best homemaker's smile said, "Miss Alden was just on her way out."

Later, she wrote: *How good it was to see you today.* She meant: *Please.*

The weeks blurred. September came with a sweep of warm rain and a pea-soup London fog that settled over the house like a fever. That was what the neighbours were told: a fever. Sybil's ill again. You know how it is. The doctor was sent for.

Miss Alden found her sitting on the edge of the bed. She had not brushed her hair or rouged her cheeks.

"I've come to help you."

Diagnosis, departure. Sometimes they called it neurasthenia; sometimes it was branded hysteria, or neurosis. She knew the ritual. She had not mourned the doctor's death. His eyes that saw bruises and stayed silent.

"Write me a prescription for two months' rest cure," Sybil said, "then take my husband's money and go home."

Miss Alden sat down beside her and took one of her hands instead. Her fingers were warm and the skin was rougher than Sybil had expected. Working hands. Sybil closed her eyes and tried to think of summer, of indigo darkness in the conservatory and the smell of jasmine.

She did not need to say that she could not leave him. That any claim for divorce would be dismissed on grounds of mental infirmity; after all, those doctor's records had been so carefully collated. Neurasthenia, hysteria, neurosis. Whichever label they chose to give her. The case was closed.

"Tell me about the exhibition," she said instead. "The one with the Austrian artist."

So Miss Alden began.

In her low voice she spoke of the gallery hall, the way the paintings all narrowed back before the gold of the centrepiece, an Austrian man's work lent out from Vienna; Judith und Holofernes. How the oils were blue and soft and the brushstrokes hazy as evening, as though you were seeing the woman through misty glass—her skin behind the gauzy trail of curtains, the edges of her breasts; her eyes, heavy with pleasure; how gold leaf burnt so bright across the top half of the painting that you nearly missed, at the bottom, the severed head.

How Judith came to the tent of Holofernes by night and afterwards, at the end of everything, he fell into sleep, his neck bared, lost in dreams of animals running.

How when Judith beheaded him it was an act of God. It was a miracle.

"Do you think Judith knew that?"

Miss Alden's eyes were the same dark colour as the bottom of a wineglass and her hair was coming loose at her neck and she said, so unbearably close: "Klimt's Judith did. She looks happy now. She looks blissful."

Sybil could not sleep that evening. Her limbs ached, and the story glistened in her head, except when she tried to picture the Judith of Klimt's painting she saw instead the bare forearms, the widow's bun, the handsome languid stare. She rose and flung the window wide. The night air cooled her face but not her thoughts.

A beheading. A miracle.

How I wish you could have stayed longer, she wrote. She meant: *I wish I could be oil and turpentine. Paint me into you so I don't have to leave.*

The next days passed like silk slipping over skin.

"She holds herself so brazenly," said Ester Keller, over tea. "Like everyone doesn't know what happened with the late doctor, God ha'mercy."

Sybil's teacup felt suddenly unsteady in her hand. "I only moved here five years ago—a year after she left. I don't know what you mean."

"You never heard? She was one year widowed when he took her under his wing. Always a kind soul, our doctor was; he let her study as his apprentice, put in a good word for her with the Medical Register so she might get licensed. Taught her everything he knew – then she up and fled one night and no one could fathom why. Shameful, after everything he did for her. Shameful behaviour."

Sybil Mursey said nothing, but she clutched the handle of her teacup so hard she feared it might shatter.

She wrote: *Give me your miracles, then.*

They met at the exhibition. It was safe there, Sybil told herself; the people of good society wouldn't dare show themselves in the presence of such a scandalous work of art. But in truth she wanted secretly to see Judith's expression for herself, to swallow down the bliss in those hungry eyes and pretend, for a moment, that it could be hers.

Miss Alden, in her long black skirt and matching suit jacket, a fox-fur around her neck against the October chill, took Sybil's hand in both of hers and said, urgently, "You must be certain."

Above her, Judith. Soft in blue, the brushstrokes swimming into a heady vision. Yet when Sybil searched her body it was unblemished. She recalled Holofernes' strength. She thought perhaps that the artist had forgotten, in all that milky skin, that Judith ought to have some bruising too.

"Were you certain," she asked, "when you left the doctor?"

Miss Alden looked up at the painting. When she turned back her face was tired, worn by an ancient sadness. "He taught me so much. I was young, and still grieving. I did not know what he wanted in return until he took it from me."

"And now he's gone."

"You understand. You must understand. At the end of everything – these miracles. We make them ourselves."

Sybil stepped closer. The gallery hall was empty, their only audience the paintings, and she dared to lean in until the softness of the fox-fur brushed her cheek. Miss Alden smelt of August nights, and a cool wind rustling through the flowerbeds. She pressed the vial into Sybil's hands. It was small. Two drops would do.

"You won't leave."

"Find me afterwards," Miss Alden said softly, her eyes that wine-bottom dark. "I will not leave."

Afterwards. How Judith came to the tent of Holofernes by night and afterwards –

– afterwards, at the end of everything, after the funerals and the drawing-room gossip and the smell of jasmine in the conservatory, after the evening gowns and the hurried goodbyes, the paint dappling the unbruised skin, I wish I could be oil and turpentine —

– afterwards, perhaps, a warm bed. A gentleness. A miracle.

Portrait of a Great Leader

Iyla Latif
London

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

Author's introduction

Portrait of a Great Leader *follows an artist working on a painting of Stalin, who then becomes disillusioned with the regime by which he has been commissioned. I am fascinated by the history of the USSR, particularly under Stalin, and have been wanting to explore the era in writing for a while. I wished to delve into the role of artists, an unconventional perspective not often explored in fiction about the period, despite them being key producers of propaganda. I find it interesting to consider how much responsibility an artist, acting as a vehicle for the state, has in upholding a regime, and how that may conflict with their personal principles. The story aims to explore the personal struggle of an artist and how easily one can be consumed by an artwork with so many wider implications for society.*

Portrait of a Great Leader

His mother had always said that he was destined to be an artist, although he didn't believe in ideas like that. Isaak was undeniably passionate, though, and had drawn voraciously ever since he was a child. When he should have been taking notes in class, images clouded his mind, his doodles invading the margins of his schoolbooks. The construction lines on his canvas reminded him of those early sketches - the ones stacked at the back of his studio, memories tucked safely away in the back of his mind. They sat in the corner of his room as his brush scratched against the canvas' surface, like a pen against a page.

"Isaak, do you want a tea?" Andrey yelled, disturbing the silence. Although he said yes to the offer, tea had never been his favourite drink. He would have taken a glass of his mother's Sbiten over it any day.

Andrey sauntered in a few moments later, mug of steaming liquid in hand. He set it down on the table next to the painter.

"Thanks," Isaak mumbled, hand glued to his brush and eyes only diverting from the canvas to take brief glances at his palette. This was a big job - it could be his legacy. He could feel Andrey giving him a look – a mixture of pity and confusion. Not wanting to break the spell of creativity that was possessing the hunched figure, Andrey just sighed and made his way back to his room in their Petrograd apartment.

After a few minutes (or was it half an hour?) Isaak dropped his brush into its cup and, without looking away from the beginnings of his painting, he picked up the mug and held it to his lips. Still hot, but not steaming. He pretended that the watery drink he sipped was really a thick, purple-ish beverage filled with spices and a sweetness that coated his tongue.

He continued with the construction of the image until the scaffolding of the man he was going to paint had taken shape. Isaak barely spared it a second look once done and seamlessly, he moved to the background.

He squeezed a bright red out from a weathered tube of paint and dunked his brush in it. His strokes against the background were generous, as fierce and strong as the colour itself; it was the red of the Soviet flag, embodying the revolutionary spirit, a tenet of his upbringing that he

couldn't help thinking was fading away. His instincts urged him to express this in his art, but it was out of the question, especially for an artist of the state. Creation was yet another exercise in suppression, propaganda to be used by a government, contained and controlled. Still, at least Isaak could enjoy the process. He loved how it felt to paint, to coat the canvas with each movement of his forearm and add colour where there had been none. The blazing glow and dynamism broke through the cycle of boredom and mundanity imposed on him, morning till evening.

Andrey referred to this as the start of a 'consumptive phase': a point where the artist (or, at least, this artist) starts to become engrossed in their piece as if it is absorbing them. He had long since accepted that he couldn't drag Isaak out of this trance-like state no matter how hard he tried; the unstoppable power of creative energy had to be left to its own devices. He was, unfortunately, responsible for making sure that Isaak ate and drank, though, even if Isaak wouldn't move from his chair. Andrey walked back into the room and stood by the door, just as the painter was finishing with the scarlet: by now, the sun had set.

"Hey, I'm making some dinner, what would you like?" he asked gently.

He received no response. The artist sat deathly still, paintbrush in hand poised like a cigarette, and continued to stare at the easel.

"Isaak?"

Still no response. Time for a different approach.

"Isaak, I'm trying to help, ok?" Andrey swore under his breath, then snapped, "I'm not your mother."

That caught Isaak's attention. He turned his head so fast that he almost gave himself whiplash and stared at the man in the doorway for a few seconds.

"I'll have anything."

Andrey cocked an eyebrow.

"Seriously. Make anything. I just need to finish-"

Andrey cut him off before he could stop himself. "You always get like this. Obsessive."

Neither man spoke for a moment, an awkward tension filling the air.

"Right. Well I'm going to make some Bozbashi. Might take a while –"

"Yeah. Thanks." Isaak had already turned back to the piece, once again, oblivious to his surroundings. Andrey walked out of the room and into his kitchen, hand pressed to his forehead.

So, after a hearty Bozbashi soup and a short night's sleep, Isaak started forming the figure. The light beige broke out of the scarlet and quickly took over the image, transforming the canvas. It started to feel like another person had occupied the studio, with what had started off as a flat, bright silhouette darkening and deepening with every stroke, becoming more human. To the artist, though, he was as much a man as he was a collection of shapes being added to and added to until he looked right. The painting was now an ever-evolving entity in the apartment, much to Andrey's dismay. He hoped that it wouldn't stay for long; they already had one small portrait, they didn't need another. Besides, neither of them were on great terms with the actual man who was being painted.

Isaak remembered going on a gallery trip with his mother as a child, before Stalin came to power. He gazed up through long eyelashes to see countless artworks, but the piece, 'Dance', by Alexander Rodchenko had captured him. He could still recall the canvas, almost two decades later, as well as the electric feeling he experienced when seeing it: so many figures, separate yet overlapping, individuals part of one unified whole working towards a better future. That's what he painted for – the collective movement. He couldn't help but notice that his current painting was the complete antithesis of that. It was to be a single, towering man, a lone God. Unfortunately, the message of collective movement was irrelevant to the state now, and he needed to stay in their good books. (Or, more bluntly put, he needed their money.)

He still felt it eating away at him. His insatiable idealism at odds with the repressive world around him, and another, more unexpected feeling: guilt, a parasite that replaced his pride as he painted a figure who would become the face of Stalin for decades on end.

Layers upon layers of brown now completely clouded the base coat that had previously glowed whenever the sun was up. Isaak was a sculptor, chipping away at marble as he toyed with shadows and highlights; a

tool of the state, precisely crafting the image of a leader. Although it had begun as an exercise in two-dimensional sculpting, with every new stroke, it became more and more of an exercise in repetition. The further into the process he got, the more he tired of what he was creating. He was forced to stare at it for hours on end, engrossed but not willingly. Fatigue, the inevitable result of continuous boredom, was setting in, consuming him. He fought the urge to fall unconscious, blinking for seconds at a time as he obsessed over every small detail that could drastically alter the figure he portrayed.

By now, Andrey had grown increasingly concerned: Isaak seemed to be having a full-on crisis, or perhaps it was more similar to an infection. This painting was having more of an effect on him than any of his others. It was quite unsettling to have it sitting in the middle of this room in Petrograd, but that was life. Or he'd thought so, at least.

The man was sitting, finally resting, staring blankly at what looked like a finished piece. Andrey looked at him for a while, then breached the boundary between the studio and the rest of the apartment, stepping into the world of canvases, brushes, paint and rags, as he had done every day since the start of this saga. "I'm making you food," Andrey said, not waiting for a response. "By the way, it looks finished. Just let it dry and send it off." He lingered for a minute, then turned and left the room.

Oh, Lord. Was it finished? Isaak supposed it was. He could barely think now. He looked outside: once again, dark as coal. He slid off his chair and stumbled backwards to see his work. Finally, his masterpiece, his bitter masterpiece was complete. This could be his legacy. It probably would be. He sighed, staring up at the canvas, imagining what Stalin would say. His leader loomed over him, the poor man behind the stool, disapproving. Aren't you loyal? A good citizen? A good artist? So get a grip, man, and live with what you have created.

His head throbbed. Isaak stared at the brass lighter lying next to the cigarette packet on his table. He imagined himself picking it up and flicking the lid open, igniting the wick and holding it to the painting. The painting would catch fire and disintegrate, its blackened remains falling to the floor. He continued to stare, but did not move a finger.

How could he send it? He wasn't proud. He was just another person serving the state he didn't like, serving Stalin and the Gulag and the

purges and the disappearances and the famines. Wasn't he?

He took a deep breath. He couldn't destroy the painting, as much as he wanted to. The time, effort and obsessive dedication had been too great for him to throw it all away. Urgh. He should not have decided to be an artist, not here. An office job would have been better: safer, more secure. He'd been made responsible for what would become the face of Stalin, perhaps for decades. But he couldn't go back now. Besides, he would only get paid after he sent the painting, and he needed the money.

Remember Me?

Ide Crawford
Edinburgh

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

I have written, through the eyes of an ordinary soldier, about two iconic points in the career of Napoleon - the peak of his military prestige at the victorious Battle of Austerlitz in 1805, and the moment a decade later when he escaped from exile on Elba to astonish the crowned heads of Europe by immediately rallying the French troops back to his side. Napoleon employed various subtle methods of psychological warfare before Austerlitz to convince the enemy Allied army that he was retreating, among them suggesting that his soldiers burn their gear in celebratory fires to mark the anniversary of his Coronation – the Austrians, as he intended, assumed that they were burning their baggage to make a quicker escape. The story is also inspired by real accounts of the methods Napoleon used with his troops to enforce his charisma, and the Grande Armée slang used throughout is real. I include a glossary at the end.

Remember Me?

Austerlitz – December 1805

I'll ask someone, the devil knows who, to translate my tale, and make it understood. We had our way of talking. War is 'the Wedding', or 'the Fête'. 'To find', is to steal. To 'eat your supper with a fork' is to attack with bayonet. The Austrians, in their white uniforms, are soldiers served in cream. An ugly amputation is a 'leg of lamb', and… ach, we'll see how we go on.

Fires blazed over the hill, minding me of a shower of stars just fallen. To the two northern Emperors and their 94 thousand troops, they were the fires of a beaten army burning their gear as they scuttled to retreat.

But there was only one Emperor we cared for, and it was five years since he placed the crown on his own head. That was why we burnt our very beds to make a starry heaven down here on earth - that and because our pigtails were like to snap off clean with frostbite, and maybe our fingertips too. We all knew we must win the morrow, if only for sake of the coronation – for the Little Corporal had always a pretty way of looking to his timing.

I was rubbing my palm back to being with my clenched knuckles, our Cuckoo spreading its wings above me in the glow, the fiddler to my left playing the Marseillaise. The Celery-Eaters in the light cavalry were airing their crockery in the firelight across the frozen stream – swilling the gut-breaking liquor to melt their insides. François was lying like a bulletin.

'The lad she was to wed fought with Les autres chiens, but he got frostbitten eyes at Ulm. Took that fast to his heels soon as the big-mouth flute began to play. I'll never wed a coward, she says, and then she takes my hand and leads me cross the room, saying there's plenty of wine here for a soldier boy to drink it if he's able. Then up she trips, as light as summer, and makes my bed, very soft and comfy – and then, in she jumps, boys – just to see that it was easy.' He winked broadly. 'Says she, I hope to God you're able. I –' he stopped as sudden as if a ball had taken off his head, and I looked up.

It was the Emperor himself. He'd dismounted, and was speaking with

the boys two fires down. I saw that melting smile of his I'd caught but once or twice before, quick and true enough to thaw the snow and bring violets out in December. Any words that passed I could not catch for the fiddle – but I was soon past thinking of that. For Napoleon had passed on, and was nearing me. I felt the pull of him – the way we all circle him, as the planets spin around the force of the sun.

His eyes found me, precise as points of steel. Then he smiled at me - spoke my name. I kneaded my hands tight together, knuckles pressed white.

'I remember you under the Pyramids like it was yesterday,' he said.

I felt a stab of suspicion. How the hell could he remember me? He was buttering me up before the big day. But he went on.

'And how you shed your blood for me. But you got the fucker, and we kept the Cuckoo.'

These were specifics. I felt like a maid in love – felt my heart flicker, soft and twisting as a flame under my coat. François used to joke, indeed, that France surrendered to Napoleon like a pretty girl to lancer. I half-raised a finger to the fly's drinking trough the Mameluke sabre had scarred across my face, that long ago, in the stinging sands. I remembered the Emperor's grey eyes passing over me, cold and easy, as he calculated the strength of Desaix's square. I never guessed he would have held my face in that mind of his for a moment – forget six years. It was like him only now to tell me that he had seen it – on Coronation Day, the eve of a victory that would seal it all. Ever the timing.

'Fight for me that way in the morning,' he said, 'and I'll always remember you.'

Before I could make reply, he had passed on. I could only watch his familiar brisk step, his clasped hands, until he was lost in the night. The last words I heard were something about fried onions at the next campfire.

I spread my coat over grass crunchy with the frost, settled my haversack under my head and curled into myself to keep out the night. One comes to sleep the night before a battle – it's only the civilians who think the fear is worse than the weariness, and this campaign we'd marched the boots off our feet against roads hard as steel. My eyelids dropped lead-heavy

before the fire's glare as the Marseillaise faded into a tune rather slow and sorrowful. An English song, of all things, that Henri had carried about since Flanders.

"Molly, lovely Molly, I delight in your charms,

And many's the night I have laid in your arms.

If ever I return again, it will be in the spring

When the mavis and turtledove and nightingale sing.

You can go free to the market, go free to the fair,

Go free to church on Sunday, and meet your new love there…"

I carried the cold and the sorrow with me into sleep, for I dreamt I lay in a narrow grave under frosted turf, and that above the folk walked two and fro with hasty steps, forgetting me. I could not see how they could fail to remember, and I beat my hands bloody against the coffin lid in hope one of them – my own Marie, or the Emperor himself – would think of it, take a shovel and crack the hardened ground and lift me out. But I dreamt he had found another, whilst he was busy with the plans for a girl's school in Paris. He was like that.

The morning of Austerlitz, the sun rose above the fog into air cold and fine as a bayonet edge. It was as big as my fist, dripping scarlet light warm as fresh blood on clouds beneath.

'The Emperor talked with me last night,' Jean-Baptiste said as we primed.

I looked away. I knew, of course, that I wasn't the only lad in the army the emperor had spoken with. But I was jealous anyway.

'I told him of you,' said Jean-Baptiste. He grinned.

'Me?' I went on priming, ramrod scraping in the black barrel.

'I said I were at the Pyramids. He asked if I had comrades near as minded the day. I told him you were the man as saved the Eagle, and he asked how, so I told him about that Mameluke bastard, how you put your bayonet in his gut. He thought I meant François at first, but I pointed you out, pointed out your scar.' Again he smiled, broad and stupid, looking for me to thank him.

I nodded, and looked away, and said nothing, but thought what a fool I was to be so taken in. I felt the rage beat inside me like the black wings of death. All that day I was without pity. I have never before kicked my boot against the pig with so much good will in me. By that, we mean running a sword through a man's throat. I fought like a fiend fresh from hell for my lying little Emperor, who could make me believe with the falling of his arm that the sun rose in the west.

All know what happened that day. I remember only ordinary things now – the feel of my lips black and dry as leather with biting the cartridges – rusty bloodstains scuffed into the frosty grass – the crack of the balls tearing open the air – and the weariness after, as if my own blood had clotted in my veins. Jean-Baptiste was kissed by a young lady – that's to say, a cannonball dragged out his guts.

A decade on, most of the men who had fought for the Emperor that day were dead anyhow, their bodies lying stiff as boards by some Russian roadside.

Laffrey – March 1815

The Emperor had promised he would return with the violet. Did we believe him? Of course we did. The monarchs of Europe might dance their nights and talk their days away in Vienna, drawing lines through France's empire and gifting each other pieces of it like baskets of hautbois strawberries – or sets of duelling pistols might be nearer the mark – they might think Napoleon would live out the rest of his days seeing to the smartness of the rubbish collection on Elba. We knew him better. Not well, maybe, even now, but better than that.

And here he was, a man of his word, mounted on a white horse. And his face – it was too far away to read – but it would be his face, the same as ever. And here we stood, not at his back, but facing him, bayonets accusing in the pale light, musket barrels pointed at him shaking with holding them straight. To keep body and musket stiff was all I tried for in that moment.

We all waited to see what the Emperor would do. Fighting with Napoleon for fifteen years does not tell you that; it's never the same twice.

He raised a hand, and his Guard came to a halt. A gesture, and they slowly lowered their weapons. He rode on, until we could see that his grey coat was dusty from the road, and his grey eyes unsheathed. He swung down, with a little more difficulty than he used to, and steadied himself with feet wide apart on the ground.

Then he walked toward us. Not the old brisk pace, but slow and firm, maybe to give us time to feel we were not dreaming. He fixed his eyes on the narrow barrels of our guns, and carefully, he walked into range. He knew as well as we did where he must stand so that each ball could tear into his flesh if any one man of us pulled the trigger.

He raised his glance, and we felt it rake our faces, cool and sifting, fastening for a moment on each of us, eyes hooking ours as easy as a fisherman lures a catch. He was a little to the left of me when his eyes stopped still – looking straight ahead – the smallest frown on his brow, hands clasped behind him.

'Soldiers of the Fifth!' he cried, the old voice, tempered strong with carrying over the thunder of the cannon. Then he sunk it, spoke as if to each of us singly, yet to all at once. 'Remember me?'

A joke told right is a deal in such a moment. I had to bite my lip to keep from a sudden cry of laughter. I felt the musket shake as if it had a life of its own.

The Little Corporal tore open the buttons of his greatcoat with one hand. He raised his chin. 'Do you recognize me? If you want to shoot your Emperor,' – half a pause, and half a smile, '– well, here I am.'

His life was in my hands. All the power he had gathered to himself in fifteen glorious years: mine to give or take away. The dead weight of the musket dropped from my arms, clashed at my feet.

I never knew which of us shouted first. My heart rose into my throat: I felt I had to tear it open to get the words out past. 'Vive l'Empereur! Vive l'Empereur!!' We screamed like madmen, flung our hats into the quiet blue. Napoleon walked among us, smiling his spring smile, reaching out his hands to us. I used to think, before that day and the battle that ended all three months later, that nothing frightened the Little Corporal.

Now I know what he fears. Being forgotten.

Just before he remounted, his eyes were on mine again. Another moment and he had me by the arm, and was whispering.

'Austerlitz - I remember you!'

Glossary:

Les autres chiens - the 'other dogs', a pun on 'autrichiens,' French for Austrians (the Prussians are the primary 'dogs').

The big-mouthed flute – the artillery.

Lying like a bulletin – the bulletins were official reports notorious for containing exaggerated accounts of events.

The Cuckoo – the French eagle standard

Celery eaters – commissioned officers

Airing crockery – to flaunt medals

Fly's drinking trough – a deep gash in the face

Having frostbitten eyes – to be afraid during an attack

God is Over All

Sylvia Davidson
Cranbrook, Kent

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

Author's introduction

My story is the (true) tale of three lighthouse keepers who vanished one night in late 1900, their bodies never found. Their disappearance remains unsolved to this day, and since I have almost as much of a head for mystery and the supernatural as I do for history, it seemed an interesting choice for my historical short story. I also used some of the real logbook entries that were found, to really evoke the words and writing style of the time.

God Is Over All

The wind howled outside, and it didn't sound like regular wind. Marshall sat near the fire and shivered, not just from cold. The logbook sat in front of him and opposite, Ducat. It was December 12th, 1900, and Marshall, who had been a lighthouse keeper for well over twenty years, had never heard such a strong wind. It was the sort of wind that blew men off decks and seabirds into cliffs, and Marshall didn't like it one bit. Ducat, usually sociable, had hardly said a single word all day. The third lighthouse keeper, Macarthur, had been keeping away from the other two, but when Marshall had seen him, his eyes had been red, as if he had been crying.

That unsettled Marshall, even more than the lack of Ducat's cheery conversation. Macarthur was a former mariner with an argumentative nature. Marshall could not understand why he would be crying because of a simple storm. He must have seen far worse at sea.

Suddenly, he could not bear to sit listening to the wind whistling down the chimney and screaming and scratching the other side of the bricks. Having only that to break the silence between the men was intolerable.

'Ducat?' His voice sounded creaky, like an old wooden door.

'Aye?' Ducat didn't sound like himself either.

'You ever heard winds like this before?'

'Never.'

'Nor have I.' When the other man did not reply, he said, 'Do you think Macarthur's alright?'

'About as alright as we are.'

Not alright then, thought Marshall.

Ducat fixed his gaze on the dancing flames of the fire and said nothing more.

Marshall sighed and pulled the logbook onto his lap. He wrote:

12th December 1900.

A storm blew up early this morning. There are severe winds, the likes of which I have never seen in twenty years. My fellow keepers seem as out of sorts as I feel - Ducat has been very quiet and I suspect Macarthur has been crying, the reasons for which I cannot fathom.

Other than this all is well, and we have plenty of food and fuel to ride out the storm.

*****

13th December 1900.

The storm is still raging worse than ever, and by God the screeches of that wind get to a man! I don't think we any of us could sleep. We have all three prayed for an end to this Devil-sent storm.

We are, however, physically fit, and no equipment has sustained any damage.

Marshall slid the logbook away. There was not much point in writing more, he decided. At least the lighthouse was undamaged - he wasn't sure if his family could stand up to another five-shilling fine. A few years ago, a storm had broken equipment he was meant to be overseeing, and the five-shilling fine had nearly broken them. Marshall had a wife and four children back home, and they had never been wealthy.

Though Marshall wished the storm would let up, he would rather have been in the lighthouse than on a boat, now. He pitied any sailors out in this storm. Maybe that was why Macarthur was being so quiet - perhaps he was mourning friends drowned under the waves from storms such as these.

Marshall was certain that the storm would let up soon.

*****

It was the next evening when Marshall recalled the equipment on the beach. It was mostly supplies and spare, emergency things, but if it was broken, there would be hell to pay. The isle was covered in small, dangerous coves, where water would crash in very fast and rush out even faster. The equipment could easily be damaged or lost.

It was possible that the equipment was still there. It should definitely be secured; however, he could not do that alone.

'Ducat.'

'What?'

'We should go and secure that equipment down near the beach.'

'It's probably already secured.' Ducat glanced out of the window. The storm was still howling and leaving the lighthouse in conditions such as this was to risk death. Ducat knew it, so he said, 'Ask Macarthur.'

'He'll sock me.'

It was true. Macarthur angered more easily than most men, and he'd been in a bad mood since the storm began. For the first time in days, Ducat felt the edges of his lips quirk up in a smile.

'All right, I'll come.' Marshall's shoulders sagged slightly with relief. Suddenly Ducat remembered that Marshall had a large family to support, and that he had already been fined once for equipment negligence.

Ducat poked his head around the bunkroom door. 'Macarthur?'

The big man grunted in response.

'Marshall and I are going out to secure equipment. If we're not back in half an hour, assume…'

'Assume what?'

'We'll be back in half an hour.'

Macarthur grunted again.

Back in the hallway, Marshall was pulling his coat around himself. Ducat followed suit.

'Got your lantern?' Marshall asked. He nodded.

Ducat took a deep breath and unlocked the lighthouse door. Immediately the wind hit them, sharp and cold as a new razor blade. Both men tucked their chins deeper into their collars and walked forward, Marshall closing the lighthouse door. They gripped each other's forearms for fear of losing each other in the howling, freezing darkness. It was an

effort to take a step - the wind threatened to push them off their feet. Their combined lanterns hardly gave enough light to see potential gullies and rocks where they could fall.

After walking a few hundred yards, it felt like hours had passed, though Ducat knew it had been barely ten minutes. The hulking pile of equipment, covered with a tarp, loomed out of the lashing rain. Though the edges of the tarp flapped like an injured bird, it was obvious that it had been belted down. Ducat relaxed. He looked at Marshall and jerked his thumb back toward the lighthouse. But Marshall shook his head and pointed towards the far side of the pile. He was right, of course, any number of vital pieces could be spilling out the other side, just out of their view. Ducat, however, knew that the far side was the closest to the inlet. In storms like this, a wave could come up and knock them both off their feet, then drag them far out to sea faster than a man could swim. They'd never hear it coming above the wind.

Ducat shook his head violently at Marshall, but it was too late. Marshall hadn't seen and Ducat was not fool enough to call out to him, no one could hear a word over gales like these. They were still gripping each other; Ducat stumbled slightly as Marshall moved forward towards the heap of equipment. Ducat didn't know what to do. He knew that the chance of them drowning was far too high to warrant doing what they were. Marshall must have known it too, but he didn't stop. If anything, he seemed more determined than before. Ducat was running through his options. Let go of Marshall and make his way back to the lighthouse? Impossible. Though he could see the warm yellow light high above their heads, how would he find the door? And without Marshall's weight, he would be swept off his feet.

They'd already reached the pile and were starting to go around it. Ducat prayed harder than he ever had before in his life. He breathed out a slow sigh of relief when he saw it was secure all the way round. Now they just had to get back to the lighthouse and -

His feet, which had been growing steadily colder since they left the lighthouse, suddenly became colder still, as if a frozen hand was gripping them. Then, Marshall was ripped from his grasp. Marshall had been closer to the sea than him. A wave must have come in. 'MARSHALL!' he roared into the storm. He only just had time to think how pointless that

was before he, too, was dragged off his feet by the water.

The cold was sudden and intense. It swept into his jacket and thick overcoat and chilled him to the bone. His lantern was snuffed out and torn from his hand, too fast for him to even think about it. His feet could no longer reach the rocky bottom of the ocean floor. As he fought to keep his head above the water, he looked desperately around for Marshall, but he could not see anything in the endless dark - nothing but the familiar yellow glow of the lighthouse lamp.

Just before his flailing limbs were too numb to move and the waves dragged him under, he thought he saw another, smaller light on the shore, illuminating a huge figure. Macarthur, he thought. He wanted to see him again before he died, and Marshall too, even if it was his fault he was drowning. He wanted to sit by the fire and drink whisky and laugh at Macarthur's dirty jokes and Marshall's lighthouse tales, just for one more evening. He squeezed his eyes shut and hoped to awake there.

Instead, cold, merciless water dragged James Ducat beneath the waves. He did not resurface.

*****

Macarthur woke to someone slapping his face. He blinked open his eyes. 'Marshall?'

'No, it's Ducat. The storm's broken. We all survived.'

Memories of the previous night flooded in, rather like the way the water had flooded into Ducat's lungs during the storm.

'I'm going to kill Marshall.' Macarthur sat up, remembering the stupid risk Marshall had taken.

'He's over there.' Ducat pointed. Sure enough, Marshall's figure was making its way up to the lighthouse.

Macarthur got to his feet and he and Ducat walked up to the lighthouse as well. Their clothes were soaked, yet none of the men felt cold. Macarthur did not punch Marshall when he drew level with him, despite his threats. In fact, he did not say a word. The gate, when they reached it, was still open. So was the door. Macarthur's coat was still on its peg. When they reached the top of the stairs, Marshall wrote an entry into the logbook,

and Ducat went up to the top of the lighthouse.

No one looked back at the beach. If they had, they might have seen the three bodies lying on the sand, exposed by the low tide: the bodies of Macarthur, Ducat, and Marshall.

*****

Nine days later, the relief crew landed on the shore five hundred yards from the lighthouse, carried by the good ship Hesperus. When they entered the lighthouse, they did not find any of the lighthouse keepers. All they found was Marshall's logbook, the final entry of which had been written on 15th December. It read:

Storm ended, sea calm. God is over all.

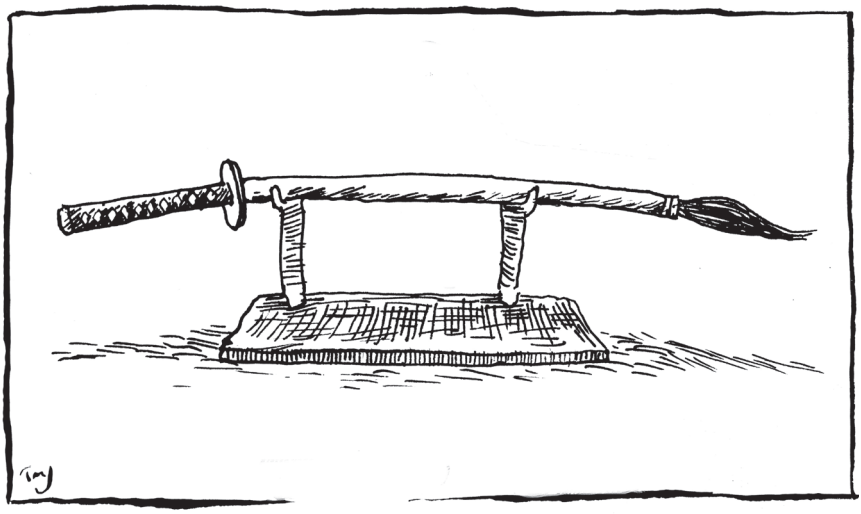
The crew searched the lighthouse and then, the entire island of Eilean Mor. They found no trace of the men save the logbook, and its odd entries about a storm.

There had been no storm.

*****

Future keepers of the lighthouse refused to work at the Flannan Isles lighthouse without double pay, for it was said to be haunted. Chairs would be knocked back when no one had sat there. If your back was turned to the fireplace, said the keepers, you might hear laughter or the crackling of a fire. Sometimes, there would be footsteps on the lighthouse stairs.

And on stormy nights, if you were down at the inlet, you could hear the faint cry of 'Marshall!'



Mora

Atlas Weyland Eden
Devon

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

Matsuo Munefusa — better known by his pen name Bashō — was born in 1644, in the castle town of Ueno, Japan. He remains one of the most celebrated poets in Japanese history, and was the first master of haiku. At the time, it was known as hokku. It originally served as the opening stanza of a long collaborative poem called a renga. Over his lifetime, he turned hokku into a revered art form in its own right, a way to capture a fleeting moment and hold it in your hand.

A haiku is made of seventeen mora, the Japanese equivalent of syllables. With these few sounds, Bashō's poems have a quiet profundity; an innocence, a humour, and at times, a deep and soulful melancholy.

Mora

Ueno, 1665

The cherry is old,

old as the castle, perhaps.

One hundred soft springs.

> In winter she is warted — her trunk black, gnarled and stunted,

but now she begins

to open her eyes, startled

by her own pink self.

> A petal drifts from her bough, and makes its home in my hair.

What must it be like

being so old and so young

in the same moment?

> Sengin sighs with the cherry. 'How goes the poem?' he asks.

I blink at my brush,

silver light upon paper.

'Ever so slowly.'

> The temple bell's morning chant. Sengin smiles. 'May I read it?'

He addresses me

as his friend, or his brother,

instead of his page.

Still, my verse is so clumsy. As he reads, I look away.

I wrote of the tree,

but how can one capture such

in so few mora?

'Another few lines?' he says, and we young poets tinker.

We struggle in vain,

stunned, at last, by the grandeur

of our shared failure.

Spring rain marks the occasion. At an utter loss, we laugh.

Huddling together,

sheltered by blossom, our words

paddle off the page.

Edo, 1686

Sora finds the Master sitting by his banana tree, having a staring contest with the Buddha.

Cicadas.

Sora sets down the soup. He is silent, for fear of disturbing. The Master sighs and rests the palm-sized Buddha among the bashō's roots. 'Sora.' He blinks. 'Where did you come from?'

'I brought your supper, Master.'

'I pray it's hot. There's a shiver of autumn in the air.' He lifts the lid and smiles into steam. The Master is old beyond his years. Some days he is

light as spring blossom. On others he is Fuji, with frost upon his brow. He eats, each spoonful a contemplation, pausing to admire the tree.

'Sora?'

'Yes, Master?'

'You are lingering. What is it?'

He hesitates. 'I would not wish to waste your time...'

A smile creases the old man's mouth. 'You have a hokku for me?' Sora nods, fumbles a piece of paper from his belt. He offers it, but the Master says, 'If you will not read your words, who will?'

Sora swallows, clears his throat.

'The subtle sword writes

a red poem in the snow,

dark as winter dusk.'

The Master watches the Buddha with half-lidded eyes. 'Have you ever seen a sword?'

'Only while sheathed, Master.'

'Have you seen a man's blood stain the virgin snow?'

Sora looks away. Shakes his head.

The Master chuckles. 'That makes two of us.' A mist falls over his face. 'I once trained to be a samurai.'

'I heard you came from a noble family.'

'Noble?' He hoots. 'My family were farmers and shinobi until a generation ago. Still, my father apprenticed me to a lord's son. I was sure I'd make a fine samurai.' A soft laugh. 'Even then, I was more poet than warrior.'

Sora tucks his poem away. 'I always wondered, when did you write your first hokku? A hokku, with nothing after?'

The Master opens his mouth, but frost glazes his eyes. A hush swallows the cicadas. Sora tenses — has he offended? Met with silence, he bows and turns to leave. The Master sighs. 'One thing. A new last line.' He draws a deep breath, lets it out again.

'The subtle sword writes

a red poem in the snow,

harder to erase.'

Ueno, 1665

Sengin chose his name

the same summer I chose mine,

pen names, young and proud.

We leave the trickling garden and step inside the castle.

Sengin's father waits,

kneeling — short sword at his side,

long sword on its stand.

We sit and incline our heads, Lord Tōdō's son and his page.

Lord Tōdō begins:

'We carry our swords all through

these years of peace. Why?'

Sengin, his heir, answers first. 'As symbols of our service.'

Our lord folds his arms.

'One sword for your enemy,

and one for yourself.'

My eyes wander to the screen — painted dragonfly, mid-flight.

'We are warriors

without a war — still we must

stay fierce and thoughtful.

For now, your brush is your blade. I trust you have kept it sharp.'

First comes the hokku,

seventeen mora, no more.

My ink gently dries.

Sengin writes the second line, fourteen mora in reply.

I describe the room,

royal burnished dragonfly,

the shuttered window.

He writes of quiet moonlight, stroking the dragonfly's wings.

This is our renga,

linked verses, words entwining,

our shared paper world.

Lord Tōdō's eyes walk the page. 'Matsuo,' he says to me.

'Your words are rigid.

You must stay within the rules

and yet, you must fly.'

I bow my head to hide my shame. The poetry escapes me.

To his son, he sighs.

'If only your skill with sword

matched that of your verse.'

Sengin nods and says nothing. His silence like falling rain.

'Before each battle

when you look upon life's edge,

you sit down and write:

a samurai's death poem. The last words you leave behind.'

The lesson is done,

we depart to the garden —

the sound of water.

The Road, 1686

The Master is drunk on wind. He sways in straw cloak and straw hat, a scarecrow buffeted by the breeze. Sora tries to take his arm, but the Master waves him away. 'I may be old, but I have roots.' He steadies himself on his stick. The road is a rough path rambling through the hills. If he falls, will he rise?

When he left his hut, the Master heaved a sigh. 'I have meditated,' he said, 'and I have meditated on the point of meditating until I realised I was no longer meditating. Then, I tried to write. Each mora a drop of blood.' He shook his head. 'Only the road can revive me now.'

For Sora, the way is wearisome, but the Master grows lighter with every step. When they make it up the hill, he raises a hand.

'You are tired?' says Sora.

'No, it is simply a good place to stop.'

The ginkgo trees are gold again. Mount Fuji bleeds in the morning light. 'Will you make it into a hokku?'

'When I was your age,' says the Master, 'I wanted to write down everything. Every falling leaf, every dead cicada, every frog upon her lily pad. Now, often I am content to breathe it in and let the moment be.'

Down the hill, the road forks. The Master turns left. Sora frowns. 'I thought we journeyed north?'

'West.' A breeze wraps about him like a robe. 'I am going home.'

Ueno, 1666

The dawn of the year;

the old house where I was born

creaks a sweet welcome.

Mother's tea still tastes the same, a perfect imperfection.

My elder brother,

our father's lingering shade,

takes a sip and smiles.

Winter dances on the roof. My sister blows on her tea.

In bed, on the floor,

my thoughts wander up the walls,

closer to the stars.

I see the garden's poem, still searching for the next line.

Ah, but sleep beckons.

Perhaps I will ask Sengin

tomorrow morning…

The Road, 1686

The Master goes nowhere in a hurry. They rest in village after village and wherever he wanders, there is food and fire for him and his apprentice, men and women praising his words, poets begging him to lead their renga and dogs licking his smiling face. Sometimes he writes. Sometimes he falls asleep under a tree and Sora finds him blanketed by leaves.

They winter in Kyōto. It is only a few days' walk to journey's end, but the Master refuses to struggle through the snow. On the solstice, they visit Kifune Shrine. Red lanterns dusted with white, maples stripped bare. Halfway up the steps, the Master stops. 'Are you well?' asks Sora.

A sigh. 'Just old.' They cross the torii gate to where the gods await. He shivers. 'I hoped to be there by now.'

'Still,' says Sora, 'we will see Ueno in the spring.'

'Spring.' The Master gazes into the sacred water from the mountain, confronted by his reflection. 'So long, I have wandered. Yet it is always so bittersweet, returning to where it began.'

A lone leaf clings to its branch. In a moment of courage, it dances down and settles on the water.

Ripples.

Ueno, 1666

When the morning comes,

I bid my birthplace farewell,

bowing as I go.

I stroll through the newborn snow, sifting poems in my mind.

The castle looms white

against a grey winter sky,

mourning the blossom.

A servant runs towards me. I know him from the castle.

His eyes are spilled ink.

The wind whips away his words —

I cannot reach them.

'We found him in the garden. No one knows how it happened.'

'Who?' I ask, voiceless,

yet I know, even before

he utters his name.

Ueno, 1687

He greets them at the castle steps. The samurai stands hunched. One hand rests on his hilt, securing the blade.

They bow. 'Lord Tōdō,' says the Master.

'Matsuo,' says the Master's old master. 'Although, I hear you prefer Bashō these days.' He smiles the way a mountain might.

The two talk over tea in the painted room. They dust off memories, while Sora studies the dragonfly on the screen, eavesdropping on ancient gods. The Master sets down his bowl. 'Many thanks, my lord.' He draws a breath. 'I am ready to pay my respects.'

In the cemetery, the light has faded. Stone lanterns flicker. The Master kneels. Moss grows over the grave, framing the name.

'Tōdō Yoshitada,' reads Sora, quiet.

The corner of the Master's mouth lifts. 'He wrote under the name Sengin.'

Ueno, 1666

It should be raining,
the sky should be an ocean —
oh, wash me away…

The paper awaits,
blank, disturbingly patient;
the brush finds my hand.

Despite everything,
words unfurl, a lone hokku
with nothing after.

I sit here, waiting
for him to write the next line…
a drop of ink falls.

Moonlight, glimmering
on the unsheathed blade — my brush
trembles in my hand.

'We samurai write
our poems, never knowing
which will be our last.'

Ueno, 1687

The cherry is old. How old, Sora cannot say. He lingers at the gate while his Master follows the stream. 'Come along, Sora. The garden is best with company.'

The Master meanders. First to the peonies, then the old pond, then he takes the stepping-stones over the stream. A frog hops by. At last, they reach the tree. Petals on the grass, petals on the pond. The Master gazes at the roots, neck rigid.

'He never told us he was sick. He did not wish to seem weak before his father.' Above, a white-eye warbles. 'We sparred here,' he whispers. 'With swords and with words. With words, he always won.' His smile fades. 'We trained together, to be samurai. So when my young lord died, I came to the cherry. With my brush, and my blade.'

The spring wind chills Sora's lips. 'You meant to follow him? To commit *junshi?*'

'Any page would do the same.'

Sora hesitates. 'And yet…?'

The Master rests his eyes. 'Sengin never wished to be a samurai. He loved to sit. To write. As my death poem dried, and the old sword shone, I saw two paths ahead.' He releases a long-held breath. 'What is better? The short, swift way of a samurai, or the long, narrow road of a poet?' The Master opens his eyes. Slowly, he raises his gaze to the branches.

A moment.

'Sora…'

'Yes, Master?'

A soft smile. 'I have a hokku.'

Sora slips out his notebook. Kneeling, he readies his brush, dips it in ink. Rooted in the world, the Master is as old as the cherry. And as young.

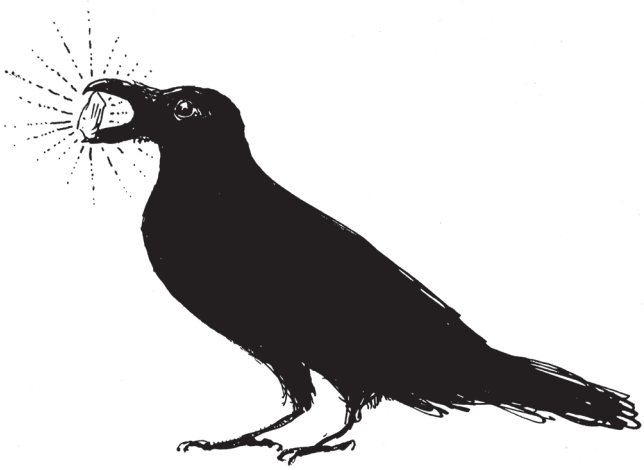
'Many, many things

they summon back to my mind,

ah, cherry blossoms.'

さまざまの
事おもひ出す

櫻かな



Rubies

Maymady Kyaw
Didcot, Oxfordshire

Runner-up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

Author's introduction

Rubies *is set in the 1890s, during the British Empire's colonial rule of Burma (Myanmar). It centres around two miners from Mogôk, a town in Burma famous for having an abundance of the highest quality rubies in the world. They work under 'The Burma Ruby Mines Company' - a British run enterprise that ran most of Mogôk's mines from 1886 to 1925.*

Burmese rubies have been the pride of royal jewellery collections throughout history, from King Henry VIII to Queen Elizabeth II, but there is little coverage in Western media as to where these rubies come from and how they are acquired. So I wanted this story to illustrate the hardships faced by Burmese miners in the 19th century, and even still to this day, as well as why Burmese rubies have often been nicknamed "Blood diamonds".

Rubies

My mother used to tell me old stories about how hunters would shoot down crows. When they would come to collect their prey, they'd find a treasure greater than any bird or animal. A ruby. A dark, shimmering stone lodged in its beak. The story amazed me, and made me understand why she would always come home after sunset, smelling like sand and dirt, with indents in her calloused fingers. Every day, she would handle a piece of magic. An unreal, unearthly stone with a colour like nothing else in the world. Not quite the colour of wine or coral, but red so vivid it was almost blue. A red that contradicted itself.

"Soon, you will be like the crow," she'd told me, as she stroked the hair away from my forehead. "You will find a big ruby for us, and we will be rich."

"Yes, Amay," I'd promised. She'd bid me goodnight, and I'd dreamt about rubies.

Now, after a near decade, my dreams have come true. I've found a small, precious number of rubies. I described my discovery vividly to my friends on those days; the way they protruded from their ore, glittering so brightly it was like they were moving. But it doesn't matter. My mother had lied to me. We did not become rich.

English soldiers surrounded the mine I worked in. Their coats were a much uglier shade of the gem we struggled and died for. Shwe Myat, a wise, bright-eyed friend of mine, understood their language better than any of us. He said that the best rubies would be bought by the English king, and studded into crowns, necklaces, shoes. He said the king would pay half of his kingdom for these gems. Where does the money go? I asked. Myat took a drag of his cheroot cigar and said he didn't know.

As I took a few more steps downward, I mulled over whether he truly didn't know, or whether he'd wanted to save us the hurt of knowing the money was going anywhere but to us. That, in a just world, it could've been the difference that saved miners' lives from malaria and consumption, the difference that saved miners' lives from the fate of a miner.

The sun was disappearing now. I took one last look up at the sky, reverent for its vivid, undulating blue, before sinking into a world of

darkness and limestone.

The mine stretched sixty feet into the earth, and was maybe two metres wide. Its entrance was a hole in the ground, accessible by a ladder made of thick tree branches. I did not pray when I climbed down it, as I trusted the wood to support me. I did not, however, trust the torch fires to stay alight. They were bound to the craters and crevices of the limestone walls. I felt the heat of them lick at my feet as I climbed past. The air was frigid, leaving no chance for a strange gust of wind to extinguish them and plunge us into darkness, but still, I muttered a prayer for the light not to leave me.

Beneath me, I could hear the roar of water against rock. We couldn't start work on this particular mine until all the water had been pumped out of the earth. It would take another week at least, then we could extract the ore. Strangely, I had become accustomed to the size of the mine. I enjoyed being able to reach out an arm and touch the end of the world, but during water-removal periods like this, a storm hit this world. The shrieks of man-made waves ran up and down the mine, as if the water was telling us not to rip it from its home so untimely. Sweat was beginning to collect on my forehead. I gritted my teeth and kept descending.

The ladder stopped as I made it to something like solid ground. My feet came into contact with raw wood board, glazed over with shadow. One wrong, blind step and I surely would've fallen to my death. I wouldn't have been the first. The wood boards were only loosely nailed together, supported by the same tree branches that made up the ladder. They floated above a partially eroded platform of limestone. This was level one out of six.

The sound of a match striking made my ears perk up. A fire came from the other side of the level, blooming from an oil-drenched torch and casting a yellow glow over the small cavern. I met Shwe Myat's smiling eyes.

"You're early." He took two steps and we were face to face. I turned away, sitting down and letting myself breathe.

"So you won't be lonely." My legs hung over the last wood board. I swung my feet above imminent doom; a dark chasm in the earth, controlled only by wooden scaffolding and torch fires. I squinted as I looked down at the spiral. I could just see the water at the very last level, far beneath the beams of wooden scaffolding cutting across the mine's

width. It was a pale brown colour, but it foamed white as it was pushed and pulled by our bamboo drainage pumps.

Myat put his torch down and sat beside me.

"Thank you." We were shoulder to shoulder. I could see the dirt staining his face and hair, the weariness in his expression.

"You're early too."

"I hope to earn an extra rupee or two."

I nodded, smiling back at him. "Yes, I know that feeling."

"And I like watching the water." He pointed toward the pool. "And the sound it makes."

I wasn't sure whether he was joking, but there was a glint in his eye that I've only ever seen in rubies. I stared in disbelief.

"You're a mad man," I said. He laughed, barely audible over the sound of rushing water.

"Just listen. It makes you forget all your problems."

Just for Myat, I leaned back and listened. I let the noise fill my head, washing away the sight of magic red stones, the red of white men's coats, the red of my friends' blood. I watched Myat next to me too. Seeing him so at peace, with his chest rising and falling in such quiet, even rhythms, was more beautiful than any ruby the Earth could make.

"Alright, I think I understand." I sat back up. "It's not so bad."

Myat's eyes lit up for a moment.

"I told you." The moment passed. He looked contemplative. No one could truly make out what was going on inside his head, though. He lay a hand over the pocket of his trousers. "There's something I want to show you."

I opened my mouth to reply, but the words died on my tongue.

A rumble shook the world. Instantly, rocks fell around us and Myat's torch went on its side. The hardwood that held us set on fire. The walls shook.

"We have to go!" Myat rushed to his feet. He grasped my arm and dragged me behind him, shielding me from the fire that slithered toward us like a python.

"What's happening?" I yelled desperately. More rocks, larger, deadlier, came down onto us. They tumbled through each of the mine's six levels. I could hear the splashes they made in the water and the horrible, dense sound of rock against rock.

"They must have set off another detonation." Myat's voice was drowned out by the chaos. He pushed me toward the ladder and I wasted no time climbing.

I was not meant to be here. The thought struck me right in the chest. No human should've been blasting into the ground with dynamite and extracting stones that were never meant to see the sun. No human should've been in this sweltering limestone casket. My hands were forced to find purchase as the Earth continued to shake. I felt Myat following close behind me, but I dared not look down. The last thing I ever saw would not be the collapsing bottom of a mine. Another hailstorm of rocks fell, the fire kept growing, and I feared that fate might be unavoidable.

I yelped as I felt a hand wrap around my ankle suddenly.

"The smoke is making me dizzy." Myat coughed loudly. I felt the smoke too, burning my throat slightly as I breathed it in, but Myat took the brunt of it. "Are we almost there?"

It broke my heart to hear him so frightened. "Yes." I assured him. It was true. I could see remnants of sunlight ahead of us, like flowers growing in a desert. "Hold onto my leg, and put your shirt over your nose and mouth." I wished I could do more for him, but all there was, was to keep climbing.

For the next few desperate moments, I felt his hand around my ankle. The warmth of it was shocking. It tightened very suddenly, fingers digging into my flesh. I called out to him once again.

"Myat? What's wrong?" The only reply was a pained groan and the crackle of fire. I didn't press the matter because sunlight poured out onto me. I scrambled toward it, throwing my body forward.

Only when my chest hit the ground on the surface, did Myat let go. I turned backwards and faced him for what felt like the first time in years.

The sun beat down on my back, the sky dripped with blue once again, the air was so lovely it felt like a blanket around me. Yet, I screamed aloud in terror.

Myat lay on his side, clutching his leg with his face scrunched up with pain and regret. The burn stretched his entire calf. I could almost see the way a torch must've fallen from its mount and swung against his leg.

"Myat!" I rushed to his side. He took deep, heaving breaths and curled in on himself, pressing his burned knee to his chest. "I'll call a medic." I went to stand, but he grabbed my arm with such a strength I was forced to the ground once again.

"No! Please!" he wheezed. "Wait."

Slowly, painfully, he reached into his pocket and presented me his fist. "Take it." I took his hand in both of mine, gently rubbing the white knuckles, and opened it. At the centre of his palm was the greatest treasure in the whole world.

I felt time slow down around us. The rest of the mine site fell away from my vision. There was only Myat and the ruby in his hand. "How did you- ?"

"Take it! And don't let anyone else find out you have it." He shoved it into my grasp. I stared into his eyes, open-mouthed. Even then they still shone. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"We will get out of this life together," I promised.

He just smiled. "Yes. We will."

The heavy patter of footsteps came and surrounded us. Myat was taken away on a stretcher and I was left on my knees, watching him go as I was bombarded with questions by the other miners. Their voices faded into useless noise. The jagged edges of Myat's ruby dug into my skin. It was the size of an almond, with a colour worth half of an English king's Empire. It would not go toward him, though. This stone's wealth was for us and us only.

"I'm sorry, Myat." It was one of the more senior miners, standing over Myat's stretcher as he was carried further and further away. I felt another red well up inside of me at his tone. A new red, a fury red. I strained my ears to hear. "We were ordered to blast a deeper mine nearby, ninety feet,

this time. We didn't know it would destroy the sixty feet mine so easily."

Myat died of sepsis four days later.

He was shot down like a crow, dead with a ruby in the mouth.

The Nakbah
Uthman Ahmed
Birmingham

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

The Nakbah

The stream rushed past in a hurry. It sparkled brilliantly in the blazing sun as it ran along tickling the branches of the gangly trees looming overhead. Mahmoud dipped his hand into the cooling gush and felt the heat flow from him. The stream wasn't very big. Mahmoud could cross it in just three ankle-deep steps, and in the summer, it wasn't even there. It was only just outside the village, but Mahmoud couldn't find it on the maps in Baba's study, or on the huge map of Palestine in the library at school. But that made it special to Mahmoud. It was like a friend who wasn't always with you, but who you could always rely on to come back. That was better than a friend who pretends, in Mahmoud's opinion.

"Get up Mahmoud! Come on!"

Mahmoud jumped to his feet. Daniel kicked the ball to him and Mahmoud shot at the gap between his and Daniel's crumpled jackets which signified the goal - and he scored.

"I'm better than you are now," Mahmoud teased.

"Shooting's easy with no defence," Daniel retorted, with a side smile.

Daniel had come the year before. He was lucky to be alive. But his family didn't want to live in Germany anymore. Not after the Holocaust. In the new land he had struggled at first, adjusting to the hot summers and the new language. He found that most people were generous and giving though, especially Mahmoud. But now, all both boys lived for, was football.

"Alright then. Get in goal and we'll see!"

*****

The table was laid for breakfast. The sky outside was lightening. Baba was collecting the post and Mama was heating the last flatbreads on the stove. Ibrahim and Sarah were already sitting ready to eat, kicking each other under the table so Mama couldn't see. Mahmoud shook his head as if he was completely innocent of any bad behaviour ever and sat down as Mama brought the bread over and Baba walked in.

"What's everyone doing today?" Baba asked as he began to open the mail.

Mahmoud immediately launched into a plan for his school day before anyone else could take the spotlight.

"Well, first we've got maths, but the teacher speaks SO slowly that I almost fall asleep. Then we have break and then we'll do art after. I drew the stream by the date farm last week. You know, the one outside the village where me and Daniel go and play? I'm going to paint it this week but… Baba?"

Baba had opened the first letter and was absorbed in the small black print. Mahmoud picked up the envelope. A little label in the bottom right corner signified it was bought at the post office in Haifa, where his Jiddah lived. The usual English Mints were absent. Mahmoud looked up at his father.

"Is everything ok?" Mama asked in her calm voice. "How is your mother?"

Baba continued to stare intensely at the yellow paper. His eyes were unfocused. Baba looked up at his wife and tried to smile in reply but Mahmoud could tell it was fake. When Baba smiled, the world smiled with him. Even the sun couldn't smile like Mahmoud's Baba. His eyes would twinkle and his whole face would lift. But Baba's eyes were empty. He couldn't keep it up for long. Hot, silent tears began to well up in the corners of Baba's eyes. They began to trickle down his face, desperate to expose the emotion he tried to hide, falling from his beard and crinkling the smooth yellow paper.

Sobs began to rack his body. Mama rushed forward and hugged strength back into Baba. The children awkwardly wrapped their arms around the two adults.

"Don't cry Baba. Please don't cry." Mahmoud began to cry himself as he remembered his grandmother. How could a whole life be ended by something as small as a letter?

A knock on the door interrupted Mahmoud's thoughts. Mama rose to answer it.

"No, don't worry. I've got it," Baba replied.

Everyone let go of Baba and he stood up. He wiped his face and closed his eyes, muttered a prayer and walked out of the kitchen. Mahmoud

heard him open the door. Unfamiliar voices spoke quick sharp words. But Baba's reply was cut short. A dull thud echoed through the hallway and into the kitchen. Mama ran out to see what had happened, Mahmoud trailing behind. Baba lay on the floor, half of his head caved in, like a deflated football. A little stream of red flowed from his lips into his beard. His eyes stared unseeing at the ceiling.

Mama opened her mouth, but nothing came out. No screams. No cries. Just silence. Looming over Baba stood a silhouette holding a baseball bat. It said nothing. Behind it stood four men wearing helmets, each with a gun as big as Mahmoud. A blue star on their arm spat some brightness on their dull khaki soldier kit.

"Run."

Mahmoud, his mother and his siblings ran. They fled through the backdoor. They jumped over low garden walls and pushed through prickly hedges. Bangs and pops sounded all around them. They ran till they reached the main road. Hundreds of people: relatives, friends and neighbours filled the street. Behind them chased more people with baseball bats, backed by more soldiers wearing blue stars. Mahmoud searched for Daniel amongst the crowds. He couldn't leave like this without thinking about his friend.

There he was!

standing behind his father,

who held a baseball bat,

wearing a look of confusion akin to Mahmoud's own. The boys locked eyes till a badge with a blue star wearing a huge man stepped in the way.

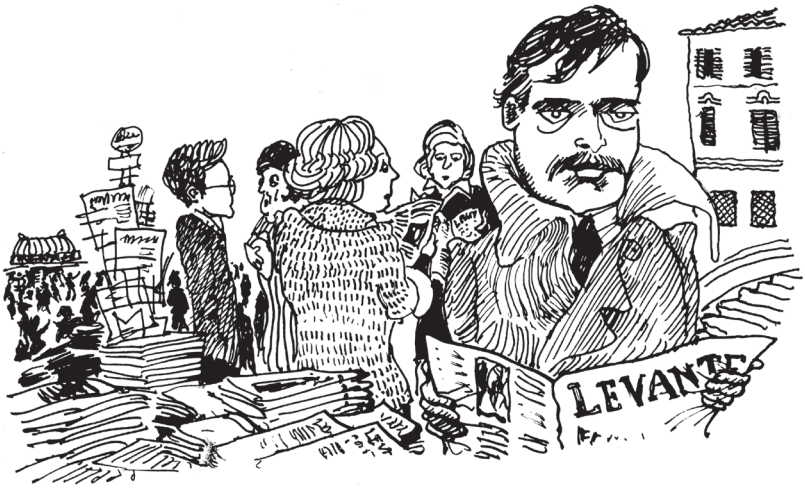
Mahmoud and his family ran till they reached the stream. The water was scarlet. The little river rushed past in a hurry all the same.

They were outside the village. They were safe. The sky was still filled with screams and gunshots, but they were far off. Mahmoud looked around. Reality set in. Baba had not run with them. He turned to Mama and buried himself in her, hugging her tight.

Then a bang shook the world. A single sound, louder and more real than anything around them. More real than Baba. More real than the red

river which flowed beside them.

Mahmoud felt warmth flow out of his body. He felt heavy. He felt light. He looked up and saw Mama crying. Then he closed his eyes…


LEVANTE

The Newspapers Told of his Death

Alexa Baumann
Southampton

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

As an A-level Spanish student, I studied Spain as Dictatorship and its slow transition to a democracy. During the Franco dictatorship, Spain's government and power were centralised in Madrid, and regional variations, including minority languages such as Euskara (Basque) were brutally repressed. The dictatorship's values were based on an extreme version of Catholicism. As such women held very little power in society and divorce was illegal, causing numerous women to have to stay in unsafe relationships. Using a mixture of Spanish and English language sources, I was able to explore life in Madrid through perspectives of two relatively ordinary women during this time on a much more personal, human level than we experienced in Spanish lessons. Throughout this story, I chose to refer to my protagonist using the unmarried title of señorita rather than señora in order to show her total dissociation from her husband and her married life in general.

The Newspapers Told of his Death

19 November 1975

Señorita Izzaguirra sits by her window, annoyed because her radio has broken. She lives in Jerónimos, the best part of Madrid now. She used to be a republican and a university student, but she has been a Señora for the last 27 years, married to a good, true Madrileño who hurts her in the privacy of their apartment, someone who knows the power of a united Spanish State and truly believes that Francisco Franco is the best thing that has ever happened for the country. He is the kind of person who hasn't imagined a life without Franco, not because he doesn't want to give himself false hope, but because he can't cope with the thought of Spain without him. He works for the government but doesn't trust his wife enough to tell her any details of his job. Her married name doesn't matter to her because it does not belong to her, not really. If she could, she'd have left this hell of a marriage decades ago, but she can't. She stays trapped. She is still from Euskadi, the Basque Country. No man, especially not someone like Francisco Franco will ever change that. Her Euskara may be rusty, but it still exists and it is still hers.

Señorita Izzaguirra regards the view. Her neighbourhood, Jerónimos, is as full of people as it always is, they're rushing around, and the cars are speeding down the street. Her younger neighbour Claudia exits the building, wrapped in a thick coat. She knows her because their husbands work together. It's a Thursday so she will be heading to the butcher for pig snout and chorizo to make callos for her husband. From their short talks, Señorita Izzaguirra knows that Thursday is callos day, and from the overheard screaming and the fact that even in midsummer Claudia wears long dresses, no matter how strong the heat is, she knows that missing the day has devastating consequences.

The weather is ordinary for mid-November, cool, and last night there was frost, and yet there is something strange about the people in the street. In front of the kiosk, people are starting to gather, looking at the newspapers. Some people start dancing, others stand like statues. Everyone who goes to the kiosk leaves differently somehow.

Señorita Izzaguirra decides to buy a newspaper. She takes 50 pesetas from the housekeeping money she's hoarded and leaves her flat. The flats in her road have an elevator but she decides to take the stairs. She sneaks

through the lobby, already considering excuses to give her husband if one of his associates sees her. As she opens the door, the first thing she notices is the noise. People shouting, screaming not only in hurried Spanish but also in Catalan, Gallego and Euskara. She overhears fragments of conversations.

"…dead…"

"…gone…"

"…future…"

But she does not know what they mean. She crosses the street, jostles past the bodies crowding towards the newspaper stands. Every newspaper shares a headline, shares a photo.

Francisco ha muerto – Francisco has died. The newspapers told of his death.

Señorita Izzaguirra almost breaks down. She talks to herself in Euskara because her neighbours are too agitated by the news to care. Her entire adult life has been shaped by Francisco Franco's power. He caused her once-shouted Euskara to become something shameful, something she had to whisper to herself. He was the reason she left Guardia, high in the Pyrenees to move to Madrid and try and become a Madrileña, why she married the monster, and why her days are full of housework and fear instead of a beautiful life she could never fully imagine.

And now he's gone. And no one yet knows what will happen to Spain. She heard rumours that the old royal family's prince, Juan Carlos was named by Franco as a successor. One of her neighbours proclaims joyfully that he will carry on like Franco, pushing the power of the Catholic church even further. Someone else says it may be different, that maybe Juan Carlos will change the constitution. Rumours are flying around the streets, echoing off the buildings and filling the air. Right now, all of Jerónremos, probably all of Spain is living in the present, in this strange new world.

Señorita Izzaguirra turns around because someone has tapped her on the shoulder. Claudia stands behind her, still clutching the newspaper. They've sold out now but it doesn't matter, everyone knows of Franco's death.

"You should leave here," she says in Euskera. She speaks it haltingly, stumbling over syllables, wrinkling her brow as she tries to remember a specific word.

Señorita Izzaguirra doesn't respond straight away, she's too shocked at her quiet neighbour's ability to speak a language that she only hears in her dreams.

"Where would I go?" she asks eventually, also stumbling over her words.

"I'm going home to Donostia, it's on the coast."

"I know where it is, I visited with my cousin once when I was eleven," Señorita Izzaguirra says, remembering running over the Zurrila bridge and swimming in the Bay of Biscay, laughing and completely carefree. She turns away from her memories, back to Claudia and the present day. "Franco's death does not mean the end of this life, do you think it's worth leaving here? At least here we have somewhere to live, and our lives, if dull and painful, are at least stable."

"What are you talking about?" Claudia is shouting now and the neighbours are turning to watch her, shocked to hear a language that they don't understand. "Why would you want to stay here in such a life, where our husbands help Franco and want to hurt us? I know what your husband has done to you, and yet you don't want to take the chance of a lifetime. Our futures in Euskadi are beautifully uncertain and if life here shows signs of worsening we could always escape to France. Maybe the new leader will be far far worse but at the very least we would be away from this gilded cage of a city. I want to see my home again, I want to die there." Crying with anger and disappointment, Claudia turns and runs back to the apartment.

Señorita Izzaguirra watches her leave, considers her words, and then follows her back to the apartments. She knocks on Claudia's door.

"Do you have a spare suitcase?" she asks.

Claudia grins and invites her into her home. The apartment has the same layout as Señorita Izzaguirra's, has the same photograph of Francisco Franco above the mantelpiece, and the same statue of the Virgin Mary on a shelf. Señorita Izzaguirra feels like she's walking through her own life, not the apartment of a neighbour she only knows by sight. Claudia disappears into her kitchen and then returns with hot coffee and crumbly

Almendrados biscuits. They can sit cross-legged on the lounge carpet because their husbands won't stop them. Claudia spills coffee, flinches, and then starts laughing. They discuss their childhoods, the mountains and the coasts. Señorita Izzaguierra had a wild grandmother who once cut down a sweet chestnut tree and turned its sticks into spears. Claudia, who was only 15 when the civil war finished and Franco came into power tells the story of how she saw Iberian wolves once, chasing and killing a deer. After they reminisce, they start to discuss their escape.

"Do you think the trains will be running on a day like today?" Claudia asks.

"We could look after we pack and try to buy tickets."

"Otherwise I can drive us, I learned when I was younger and I don't think that's something you'd forget."

"We'd have to wait until our husbands get home then, to take one of their cars."

"That's true," Claudia pauses, taking a deep breath. "We should try to get the train."

The two women say goodbye to each other as Señorita Izzaguierra leaves to pack, clutching Claudia's suitcase. She climbs the staircase taking everything in: the hanging light that does nothing other than cast creepy shadows; the narrow window that overlooks the backyard garages and a glimpse of the Jerónemos church that dominates the neighbourhood; the green patterned wallpaper that has started peeling. The stairwell is due to be renovated this February and she realises that she'll never see it finished. She walks slowly up the stairs, trailing her hands on the banister. She tries to take in every part of this Jerónemos apartment that she grudgingly called home for the last 30 years. As she reaches her floor, she notes the other four doors, behind which other women are living lives that she never noticed. She wonders what would have happened if she had befriended them earlier.

Señorita Izzaguierra packs hastily, her husband is due in forty minutes and he is always punctual. She doesn't need many clothes, she just packs necessities. She realises that her careful money hoarding has paid off,

she has just over 100,000 pesetas. She smiles to herself remembering travelling to Palomeras Sureste, a neighbourhood in the city a world away from the elegant luxury of Jerónemos, to buy cheaper bread, meat and fish so that she could keep the leftover money. Until now she never knew what she would do with this money, saving it just became habitual. She turns around the apartment one last time and then slams the door and leaves. Her husband has not returned.

Señorita Izzaguierra and Claudia run through Jeronimos on the way to the Puerta de Atocha, the train station leading to their new lives. Neither woman remembers the last time they were this happy. They plan to travel to Bilbao together and try to stay there, at least for a few days. After that, they have no plans. They don't need them. They pass the botanic gardens and stop, one last time, to admire the palms visible from the road. Neither of them knows if they'll ever return.

A crowd has formed on the road opposite the train station. People are murmuring, some shouting in obvious distress. Señorita Izzaguierra and Claudia exchange glances, wondering what happened. For the second time that day, they hear fragments of conversations.

'Jumped…'

'Unstoppable…'

'Dead…'

They push through the crowd. A man sits sobbing at the side of the road.

Their husbands' mangled remains lie on the road, intertwined with the twisted, broken bonnet of a green SEAT 133. The car was almost brand new. The distressed man on the pavement repeats the same words over and over again.

"They jumped out in front of me, I tried to stop, I really did but they took me by surprise, but I tried, I promise, I tried to stop." He stands up shakily, vomits, and sits back down.

Señorita Izzaguierra hugs Claudia, who has started sobbing, feeling sick to the stomach. She's shaking. No matter how hard she tries, she can't stop looking at the gruesome death in front of her. There is just too much blood. The two women leave the scene, nothing is keeping them there. They glance at the corpses one more time, remembering years of brutal,

painful marriage. A few hundred metres away Señorita Izzaguierra sees her former husband's car: A navy blue SEAT 800, relatively modern with low mileage, used by him for rare trips across the country rather than day-to-day life. She points it out to Claudia and they pack their suitcases on the back seats. Claudia sits down in the driver's seat, still shaking. Señorita Izzaguierra finds a battered map in the glove box and starts planning a route, far from this city of death. They leave Madrid behind, avoiding the bloodstained roads with broken cars and beautiful neighbourhoods full of ugly lives.

They arrive in Bilbao at one o'clock the next morning and sleep in the car because they can't find a hotel that will take them for the night. It is agonisingly cold but they don't care. A new day, and indeed a new life without Francisco Franco has started.

And it will be magical.


FREEDOM

The Girl with Hope

Elin Day-Thompson
Malvern, Worcestershire

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

Author's introduction

My story is set in 1910 and it is about the journey of an old lady, who is so fixated in her beliefs about the world that she finds the idea of change utterly appalling, and subsequently thinks very little of the Suffragette movement that is taking place at the time. She meets a young girl with hope passed down from her mother for a bright future for young women of the time - a hope that girls could be more than just a wife, a housemaid. This subject means a lot to me because it is so incredible how far we've come - and also how far we have left to go.

The Girl with Hope

Miss M. Milkwood did not have much patience for daydreams, dalliances and general mess, and therefore she did not have much patience for children (who she considered to be the very devilish embodiment of all these things). Therefore it was to her *deepest* dismay that one blustery autumn afternoon she found herself hovering indecisively at the wrought-iron gates of the Female Orphan Asylum, looking out across the bleak and grey courtyard in a very bleak and grey manner, with the most preposterous thoughts running through her head.

Help Needed Urgently, read a tattered grey flyer nailed to a post, flapping in the wind. *Children in desperate need of homes.*

Miss Milkwood did not deign to read the rest. "Perhaps I am going mad," she said brusquely to herself, straightening her hat. "It's a bizarre idea, *bizarre* I tell you! I am enjoying my childless retirement very much and besides, I am presently rather busy with the garden." She sighed under her breath. She *really* ought to be off, she'd dilly-dallied for far too long now and if she didn't hurry, she'd miss her train.

However, just as Miss Milkwood had gathered her resolve to leave the lonely orphanage gates behind, and had made her way halfway down the alleyway, a small voice rang out from behind.

"Hello."

Miss Milkwood jumped very high into the air and let out an undignified yelp. "Who's there?!" she cried, flustered and angry.

"Me."

Fussing over the state of her skirt, Miss Milkwood span and saw with dismay a small, round face pressed against the bars of the gate, a face belonging to a girl so small the tip of her red-haired head seemed to be level with Miss Milkwood's waist. Oh, *this* was going to make it a lot harder to walk away!

"Have you no manners?" she snapped, composing herself and marching up to the gate. The girl took a wary step back and stared slightly fearfully at Miss Milkwood, her puddle-like eyes wide and watery.

"Oh, here, don't cry," Miss Milkwood commanded, not feeling or

sounding very sympathetic, more simply disgusted at the prospect of *snot.*

"Not crying," the girl mumbled. "My mummy used to say girls shouldn't cry."

Miss Milkwood stared blankly.

"But my mummy's dead now. And my daddy and my sister. They all *burned* away when my house caught fire, you see."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Miss Milkwood said.

There was a pause, then the girl smiled sadly. "Well, don't be sorry, because I'm sure the doctor said 'dead', but the thing is I'm also sure the vicar said 'moved into God's garden' and the matron definitely told me they 'went to sleep' so I don't really know who to believe. But why would they move to God's house without me, and if they're asleep *why doesn't someone just wake them up?* So I suppose they *are* dead after all, and I suppose I'll have to stay here forever and ever and ever." The girl said all this in a very mild tone but gazed steadily into Miss Milkwood's eyes all the while.

Seven hours later and it was past midnight on the steam train to Miss Milkwood's little village on the moor, and she was staring into the deep, impenetrable blackness out of the scratched, rain-dashed old carriage window. She was thinking, very hard and very deep. About books. And also the girl. Mostly the girl. Whom she had taken. Not permanently, mind! Just to get her away from that orphanage, and give her a home while they waited for her to find a parent who wanted her.

The girl in question lay curled up on her seat opposite Miss Milkwood, a tangle of small, thin limbs and wild auburn hair. Her deep blue eyes were hidden behind pressed-shut eyelids, her lashes so long, pale and thin they looked like frost. Her breathing was steady, and her chest rose and fell like the swell of the ocean Miss Milkwood so loved. Yet her bare arms and legs shook with cold. She wore only her brown tunic she'd left the orphanage in, thick white stockings and scruffy black shoes. She'd refused to wear her coat. Contrary. Silly. Most unladylike. The girl had most likely been influenced by the *Suffragettes*. It would certainly explain her wildish ways - yet more proof that those madwomen must be stopped, Miss Milkwood thought!

"I'm not really asleep," the girl whispered suddenly, giving Miss

Milkwood quite a fright. "I can't sleep because I don't know your name."

"What? What a silly thing to say!" Miss Milkwood said, bemused and a little irate. "You know my name. Miss Milkwood."

The girl's eyes sprang open. *"No,"* she said animatedly, flinging herself forward in her seat and staring so intently into Miss Milkwood's eyes it was as if she thought by looking hard enough she'd find out every secret the old lady harboured. "Milkwood is your surname, and I don't know your *name* name!"

"You needn't," said Miss Milkwood crossly. "People give out names *far* too thoughtlessly nowadays! Names are special and important things, you know, and there's no need for a child like you to know my first name. Indeed, very few people do - and even then I prefer them to call me by 'Miss Milkwood'. It's *far* more sensible."

"You know *my* name," the girl continued, as if she hadn't heard a word Miss Milkwood had just said. "I'm Sally, Sally Primrose Carter, and I have other names too, and you can know them all!"

"That… quite unnecessary…"

"My Mummy called me 'love' and my Daddy called me 'dear' and my sister called me 'Sal' and my teachers called me 'young lady' and Matron called me 'little girl' and my friends called me 'Primrose' and I call myself 'Suffragette-Persephone-Frances-Mildred-Moonstar-the-First' because it sounds like the name of someone from a storybook. It used to be 'Princess' but now it's 'Suffragette' because my mum says they're the real princesses. So, now you simply *must* tell me your name!"

Miss Milkwood did not reply.

"Well, you're *not to call me Miss Carter,*" Sally said huffily, and closed her eyes again.

The next day, Miss Milkwood heaved herself out of bed at the crack of dawn and tended fervently to her garden. Then she marched up and down the kitchen, thinking, and finally rapped loudly on Sally's door.

"Up, child! Wake up!" She shouldered the door open and was surprised to see the girl not asleep, but sitting reading on her rickety wooden chair, dressed and with her hair brushed, the bed made and her spare clothes seemingly folded away in the wardrobe.

Miss Milkwood's mouth dropped open into a perfect 'O'. Then she realised she looked rather undignified and abruptly closed it, staring in shock around her.

"Good morning," Sally said confidently. "Look what I did!"

"I, well, yes, very good. Well done," Miss Milkwood said uncomfortably. Compliments did not slip off her tongue with the same ease criticisms did. She had to wrench them out her mouth and expel them with a strong huff of breath. "You'll be needing more clothes, I suppose?"

Sally smiled. "Do you have any princess dresses?"

"No! How silly! But I have some *normal,* quite pleasant dresses of about your size from when my daughter was young."

"You have a daughter?"

"Yes."

"Can I meet her?"

"… No."

"Why?"

"We don't speak any more. I haven't seen her in years." Miss Milkwood sighed, deciding honesty was the easiest tactic here, predicting that more questions would come otherwise. "I shall go and get the dresses, Sally. You are to wait right here, do you hear?"

"Yes, Miss Milkwood!"

The old lady left, wondering if perhaps there was a deeper reason for her resentment of children than snot and mess.

She returned with the dresses after a short while, feeling a little flustered. They all fitted Sally, luckily, and as the girl pulled a purple and green one with white ribbons over her head, she said quietly, but with bright eyes, "These are the suffragette colours."

Miss Milkwood knew of the suffragettes - oh, she knew of them, alright - and she disapproved greatly. Such disorder, such silliness, such *preposterousness* – even Queen Victoria herself had called their battle a "mad, wicked folly"!

"I like the suffragettes," the girl whispered, swishing the skirts of her

dress. "I like them very much. My mummy loved them. I'm going to be one when I'm older, I am."

"No you are not!" Miss Milkwood cried.

Sally did not reply, just smiled wryly in that way that children do.

"Goodnight, Sally," Miss Milkwood whispered as she tucked the girl into bed a few nights later, all thoughts of the Suffragettes quite forgotten.

"Miss Milkwood," Sally whispered back, "thank you for taking me out of that orphanage."

"You're welcome."

"Will you read me a story?"

"Ah, you like stories?"

"I love them!"

"Jolly good!" Miss Milkwood exclaimed, and the warmth between them made it more than possible to ignore the cold air in the bedroom. They burned through many books, page after page, and through the laughter and the tears Miss Milkwood grew rather *unfortunately* fond of the girl.

The next night they ate dinner, roast potatoes and a hearty cabbage soup, silently, until Sally said at last, "Miss Milkwood, why don't you like the suffragettes?"

Miss Milkwood dropped her spoon. "I thought we'd moved on from this! I think they're rather silly."

"Why? They want women to have futures and you're a woman. Don't you want a future?"

"I'm a little old for that, Sally."

"Well… Don't you want me to have a future?"

"I – "

"I want to be more than a wife and a mother when I'm older!"

"Sally, calm - "

"I will not calm down! I want a life! And unless people like you start supporting the Suffragettes I won't get one." She stood up and kicked the chair forcefully back under the table. "Right. I think I shall be going to bed now. Goodnight."

Miss Milkwood lapsed into furious silence. How dare the child be so rude?

And so… Right?

The next morning, Sally was gone. She wasn't in her bed. She wasn't in the garden. She wasn't in the house at all. And the purple, green and white dress was gone from her wardrobe.

On her bed lay a note.

I've decided to go and march with the suffragettes today and I won't be coming back. I thought a lot last night and yes, I still want a future. I'm terribly sorry, I think I shall miss you dearly.

PS. you never told me your name

Sally x

"No!" Miss Milkwood gasped. "NO! Sally!"

She ran blindly to the door, rode blindly in a taxi, charged blindly through the streets of London, saw the marching, the screaming, the signs, the chaos - and there she was! A beacon of tangled red hair among the sea of green and purple banners and signs, wild eyed and scared looking, and yet … happy.

It hurt to see her so happy. "Oh, why did I get myself into this awful mess! SALLY!"

Sally's head turned, and her eyes lit up. "Miss Milkwood!"

Filled with the same determined purpose of any protective parent, Miss Milkwood marched through the crowd and grabbed Sally by the arm.

"Sally - " A thousand reprimands waited on her tongue but all she could do was cry and wrap the child in her arms. "Oh, you're *never* to run away like that again, do you hear!?"

Sally pulled away, eyes damp. "Miss Milkwood... I'm joining the suffragettes, and if you won't let me, I'm going to run away with them. I want a future, and my mother wanted me to have one too."

"Sally…"

"Will you let me? Miss Milkwood, will you let me do this?"

There was a long pause, then Miss Milkwood took the young girl's hand. Sally was right. She, and all the other little girls, and their daughters and daughters' daughters… They all deserved a future.

The suffragettes were right and so was Sally.

"My name's Mary," she said finally. "Mary… Yes... the Suffragette."

"That is a very nice name!"

They laughed, and they marched onwards, hand in tiny hand.


Suffrage

Coronation Day
Alexander Drysdale
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

I wrote Coronation Day *to explore the tensions that can arise in a family as a result of differing political beliefs. It is a piece of historical fiction, but hopefully also reminiscent of more than a few contemporary issues and modern day inter-generational conflicts. The cast of characters includes Johnny, a political centrist with a slight inclination to the left. Rachel, his sister, a teacher, feminist and staunch socialist. Their mother, who votes when she can remember, and their father, a conservative voter with deeply conservative ideals.*

Coronation Day

2 June 1953

John noticed, upon entering his older sister's apartment so early in the day, just how clean and white her space was. A vase of pink daylilies sat on the table in the hallway, next to a stack of English textbooks and a cream-coloured lamp. As a teenager, Rachel had been very protective over her privacy, and John couldn't even draw a clear picture of what her room had looked like in his mind. He could only picture something adult and organised, something as fastidiously cared for as what lay before him.

Rachel's bedroom door here was half-open, and John could see a blue lace dress hanging neatly on her wardrobe. A coronation party with friends later, presumably. Something to get the tension out of her shoulders from lunch.

'What time is Dad getting here?'

Rachel glanced over her shoulder, leading her brother through to the kitchen. 'He didn't say. Sometime around eleven, I'm assuming.'

'Right.'

'You can take your coat off there if you like - yes, just hang it over the chair.'

'He didn't tell you what time he'd be here? Did Mum not say?'

Rachel shook her head, quickly, dismissively.

'No. They'll get here when Dad wants to.'

John nodded, annoyed with his sister's vague answer. He cast an eye over her kitchen while she tied an apron around her waist, feigning disinterest. The truth was, John had been realising, of late, that he had very little knowledge of his sister's life. She was a schoolteacher, he knew that, an intelligent, cultured person. Or at least a pretentious one. He didn't think of her as funny, though she was, he supposed. A good cook. A big reader. Political. Irritable. Kind.

A large poster of a new musical she'd seen a few years ago during her trip to New York, 'Guys and Dolls', hung in a slim wooden frame on the wall just next to the window. The room was sunwashed, and little pots

of green things sat on white shelves next to cookery books and candles. A few dried flowers were kept in glass frames, next to a pinned-up leaflet instructing John to 'Vote!' in big black letters.

Everything felt very carefully revealed, like he was being shown only what his sister wanted him to see.

'Do you have plans later?'

'Hmm?'

Rachel looked up from the salmon she was preparing. 'Do you have plans later? With friends? To go out after this?'

'Oh. No.'

She nodded, returning to the salmon. 'I do.'

'Oh. What're you making?'

'Salmon.'

'Yes, I can see that. What kind?'

She scoffed. 'It's mine. I'm calling it 'Coronation Salmon'.'

'Oh really, why?'

'Funny.'

'Can I do anything?'

'I don't need you to.'

'No, but can I?'

His sister glanced up to a shelf opposite. 'You can slice some of that bread, if you want. Then there's cherry tomatoes in the fridge that need chopping in half, and a potato salad you can get out when Mum and Dad arrive.'

'Right. Alright. How much food are you serving?'

Rachel hummed, as if to say, 'not much', then, 'Just this, the potato salad, some pork pies I got from a bakery earlier, a small quiche (I made that last night) and a Victoria sponge, for Mum. I wanted to get some cold meats, but rationing's still a nightmare.'

'You do know it's just the four of us?'

'Dad eats for four.'

'Mmm.'

The two worked in relative silence for a while, chopping and measuring and pouring and dicing, till the buzzer rang. John set down his knife, pausing on his way to the door as he caught sight of another poster above where his sister now stood. It was black-and-white and old-looking, with an illustration of a woman angel holding a key next to a small, winged child clutching a newspaper. The lettering above read 'The Suffragette'. John pointed to it. 'Are you going to take that down before Dad gets here?'

Rachel turned to look at it. She frowned. 'No.'

Rachel and John's mother was the first up the stairs, bustling into her daughter's flat with two full grocery bags. She was dressed for a wedding, decked out in a new sprigged dress, a brown coat, and polished white shoes. Her hair was pinned neatly beneath a felt cap, and powder was visible on her face. She glowed.

'John, give your mother a kiss - it's lovely to see you!! You've been working so hard lately, and no one should be working today. Especially you Rachel! Now I hope you don't mind, I know you're cooking, but I brought you a few things - oh! You're wearing trousers!'

Mrs Lawrence stared at her daughter's legs in wonder.

Rachel rolled her shoulders back slightly. Her lips were pursed. 'I told you you didn't need to bring anything.'

'Oh, I know, but it's such a special day, I couldn't help myself. It's only a few things.'

John took the bags from his mother and peeked in on the way to the kitchen. It was more than a few things. He set them on the counter and exhaled loudly through his mouth. Today would be long.

'Where's Jonathan?!' A fourth voice echoed through the flat, and John could feel his eyelids start to sag. He steeled himself.

'One minute, Dad!'

A grunt answered him.

It was early afternoon, the Queen's coronation well underway. A quarter

of the food was gone, the rest untouched. Rachel's creamy homemade salmon lay congealing on her mother's plate. Their father had had more than a little to say about the state of Rachel's clothes, and so John had shepherded him into the sitting room before he could see the vintage suffragette poster in the kitchen. Or the 'end racial discrimination' flyer that he had only then noticed pinned up in the hallway. Thankfully there were no anti-monarchy leaflets hanging up anywhere (though John was sure his sister had some). It wasn't that John disagreed with the sentiments expressed (or even that he had any political opinions of his own at all) he simply knew his sister well enough to know she wasn't one to shy away from an argument with their father, and certainly not a political one. Which would make his father angrier and angrier, face getting redder and redder, until he would begin to shout over the television, at which point their mother would start to flap her hands and cry out how upsetting it all was, and John would either have to comfort her or excuse himself to the kitchen to make some tea.

John's mother sighed happily.

'Oh, she looks very pretty. She's a very sweet woman, I think.'

Rachel snorted. Their mother looked hurt.

'What? She seems lovely!'

'You don't know her at all, Mother.'

'Rachel,' warned John.

'They televised George's coronation too, you know.'

Rachel turned back to the television set. 'You said, Dad.'

'Not like this, though.'

'We know, Dad.'

Mr Lawrence began to scowl.

One thing John had noticed about his father, particularly in his later years, was every expression took him quite some time to form. You could see the muscles in face working, trying to arrange his features to reflect the necessary emotion.

'I don't like it. I don't think they should be doing it.'

Rachel tilted her head back in her chair and closed her eyes, breathing

through her nose. John watched her.

'And do you know who else I bet doesn't like it? Churchill!' The cutlery rattled on Mr Lawrence's plate as he spat out the name emphatically.

'Yes, thank you Dad, I think we get it.'

'They're doing it for you, all you modern, theatrical women… and young men. Young men studying art.'

John rested his chin in his hands, and kept staring at his sister. Her nose was slightly too long.

'I'm against it. And I'm against him. The new one. Philip.'

'We know, Dad.'

'It's an institution. A symbol of British tradition. They shouldn't be catering to some broadcasting fad.'

'I don't think television is a fad, Father.'

'I do.'

'Alright.'

The kettle was boiling. For John, there was something meditative about watching the steam curl out and about the orange ceramic rim, at least for a moment. His father had gone blissfully silent in the other room. The Victoria sponge sat on a tray, next to four cups and the teapot. He hesitated, then lifted a mandarin from his sister's fruit bowl and began to peel it. He bit into it, hard, leaning against the counter, ignoring the whistling of the kettle, letting the juice dribble down his chin and through the gaps in his fingers. John was normally a careful eater, having mastered the ability to take the peel of an orange off in one go and separate the rest neatly into segments, but none of that now. He bit off two, three segments at a time, till it was all gone. Then he wiped his hands on a chequered tea towel and filled the teapot.

'I don't take sugar in my tea.'

'There's no sugar in your tea, Dad.'

'There is. It's too sweet, Jonathan, I know how my tea should taste.'

'You must've picked up Mum's by mistake then.'

Mrs Lawrence piped up. 'My tea tastes just right, thank you Johnny.'

'You see? You put sugar in my tea.'

'For Christ's sake Dad, if he says he didn't put any sugar in your tea, he didn't put any sugar in your tea!'

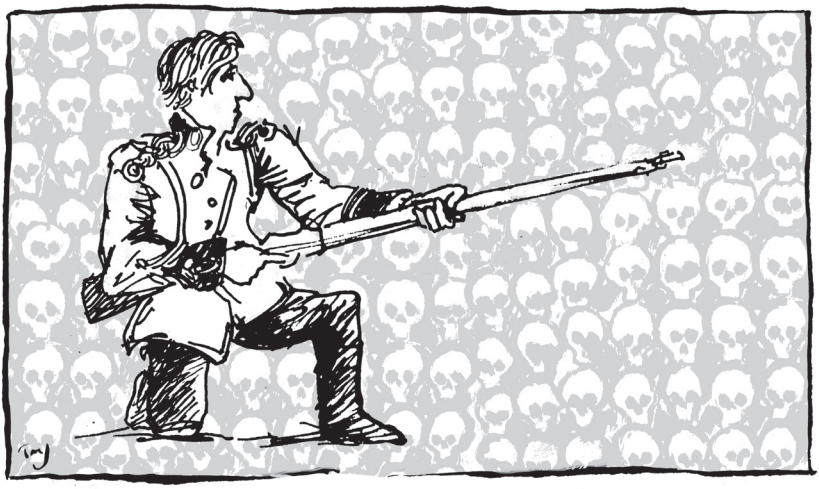
'Rachel! Language!'

Mrs Lawrence gasped. John jumped up, suddenly a little agitated. 'I'll go and make you another tea, Dad.'

'Well, I should think so.'

Watching the kettle boil was less meditative this time. John stood taller, and he drummed his fingers on the stove. He stared at the little marks on the red tiles in his sister's kitchen. Something on the hob, spitting, must've put them there. He still hadn't taken his shoes off, and his feet were starting to ache. He glanced at the clock. It would be over soon. He could get back to his digs, Rachel could go to her party, and Mum and Dad could do whatever the hell they wanted. Dad in particular.

He took a brief look at the suffragette poster again. It had to be about 25 years old, judging from the faded edges, the style of print. It was pretty, and the folds of the angel's clothing reminded him of the comic strip illustrations Rachel had read growing up. They were always about girls in boarding school, the ones John would read after Rachel was done with them, and he thought they were nice-looking. He kept them in a box under his bed until he left home, and last summer had checked to see if they were still there. They had gathered dust and were untouched. John thought about the sense he had, even at a young age, to keep them away from his father. Girl's stories. Wouldn't have gone down well. The kettle whistled, and John lifted it off the hob, and refilled the pot. He poured another cup of tea, added a splash of milk, and added three spoonfuls of sugar.



This Is It, Then
Isabelle Edwards
Sheffield

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

This Is It, Then

One hundred grimacing faces.

One hundred shining bayonets at the ready.

Five hundred brass buttons quivering like it's the end of the world.

They know in a matter of minutes they could all be dead. They wait in the stiff silence which threatens to choke them, sensing in their hearts they have no chance. But a tiny flicker of courage yet remains in each heart, like lanterns in the darkness refusing to go out.

Bushy-bearded Lieutenant John Chard feels the clammy air close in on him. Sweat gathers on his forehead. His hands shake as he loads his black Webley revolver. *One, two, three…four…. five…... six.* He finds himself in charge of this small garrison, which has been commanded to defend lonely Rorke's Drift. He knows the whole thing means almost certain death. He's an engineer; he builds bridges rather than destroys them, he uses a spanner instead of a gun. So why, why him? He longs for his brothers, Charles and William. They used to play battles in their garden in Boxhill; wooden swords drawn at the ready, paper shields reinforced with twigs, a wooden cannon firing mock balls of leaves tied up with string… that was years ago. Yet it seems centuries ago that he said his tearful goodbyes to them the day he was deployed. Today they are dearer to him than they ever were. Today he might get speared to death.

No time for such thoughts now; he must stay calm. Slipping the Webley into his pocket, he feels the nagging sensation he may actually have to use it more than he wants to. His face is a foreboding sight. It is set like flint, as the Old Book used to say. All he can do is wait. Wait, like the ninety-nine other British soldiers who he is commanding. Wait for the attack that makes their scalps prickle. Wait while the suspense suffocates them more every minute. They know, they are painfully aware, that some four thousand Zulu braves are coming. Yes, they are coming.

No one wants to talk. They stand with a few mealie bags and biscuit boxes hurriedly put together in a protective wall. They listen intently, hopelessly, full of dread, for the sound of the approaching enemy. What chance do they have? Only earlier that day, a force of Zulus had annihilated one thousand three hundred British soldiers on the fateful plains of Isandlwana in a single morning. Chard's mind is racing. A

vacant-eyed man stands beside him. He says nonchalantly, "You know, old boy, you really ought to show a bit more pluck for the rest of the men." His name is Lieutenant Bromhead. He thinks he wants command. He knows not what it means.

Just then, a harrowing cry booms across the compound. This is accompanied by bone-chilling slapping and chanting which makes Bromhead's throat pound like the pendulum on his grandfather's old clock. John Chard's palms are getting wetter. His heart is plummeting like a rock thrown into the deepest of seas. Echoing ominously over the towering hills above Rorke's Drift is the tremendous Zulu war-cry. They'd heard so much about it; now they were hearing it for themselves. He whips his head around to see a daunting row of Zulu warriors, lined up on the summit. "This is it, then," he whispers. "God help us," murmurs Bromhead. Shaking, the soldiers grip their bayonets tighter. This is the calm before the storm. An unhappy silence reigns for several torturous seconds. This is it.

And suddenly the Zulus descend. Down they come, sprinting down the hillsides, wave after wave of them, spears forward, oval shields adorned with leopard skins, hair flowing in the wind, chanting that unforgettable war-cry. The one that injects terror into all who hear it. Gulping, Lieutenant Chard shouts his commands as the Zulus come within firing range. "North wall, load your guns and look to the front!" Swallowing their fear, the soldiers load their guns with the new, shining lead bullets from the boxes by their feet. Another moment of what feels like silence, the familiar click of the bullets slotting into place. Then the booming starts.

"Fire! Reload…fire! Reload…fire! Reload…fire!" Chard shouts these profound words he's heard a thousand times before and tries to stop his voice cracking. A billow of thick grey smoke rises obediently from the pointed bayonets. The command echoes back through the hills as the racing army comes closer… and closer… and the cloud of smoke continues to rise from the redcoats. But it does nothing to affect the Zulus, who stream forward at furious speed, like a river bursting its banks. Chard gives the signal to Bromhead. "Fire at will!" calls Bromhead, throat dry as a desert as death stares him in the face.

Suddenly, the Zulus are upon them again. Shooting is no use now. They burst through the mealie bag wall, spearing and stabbing as they leap into the compound. The redcoats fend them off for as long as possible, using the pointed end of their bayonets, but many are found, slumped

and bleeding, against the barricade. Havoc breaks out; order is a thing of the past as the wall comes crashing down. Screaming and bleeding, shouting and shooting, spitting and spearing, many are fallen as one great mass. Bromhead springs into action. He is exhausted, but something has awoken within him; now he is bloody, and dirty with all of them. Chard keeps shouting commands while trying to fire his Webley. He fights his way through Zulu after Zulu. He was unprepared for this day.

He sees courageous redcoats stabbed in the back, and brave Zulus shot in the heart. He hears the screams of the wounded, the groans of the dying, the shouts of the valiant; he smells the smoke of guns, the sweat, and the grime, and he tastes the bloody, battle-wrought air. He feels the sharp stabs of agony, the intense suffering, the unquenchable pain. All this is coming from the chapel.

There are no hymn songs in there today. Rorke's Drift chapel is now Rorke's Drift hospital and, it is filling up fast. Men with blood dripping down their grubby uniforms which stains their black striped trousers, sit sweating with pain in the pews. The altar has become a gory operating table. The surgeon, James Reynolds, performs dangerous operations with not an anaesthetic in sight as wounded men continue to pour in like rain.

Now the Zulus are climbing up the plaster walls of the buildings, scrambling quickly onto the roof and rapidly pulling apart the golden thatch. Rushing to defend it, redcoats race after them, shoving them off into the raging battle below while the Zulus retaliate with their sharp spears. Bromhead scurries up after them, grubby, dusty, and unrecognisable to himself. These Zulus are braver than he'd been told. He was humbler than he knew.

More rapid gunshots, and a blazing hot fire ravages the thatch which quickly catches alight. The fire is greedy and unquenchable. A gluttonous beast, it rapidly devours all in its path - beds, doors, walls, men. Redcoats drag men out, though some are trapped as the fire-eaten roof falls in. Crawling, coughing through the cavities in the wall, only the lucky ones escape from the fiery dragon.

The compound is overrun. But Chard is an engineer. He lines up the men quickly in two lines, one firing while the other reloads. The battle rages well into the night, the peace of the darkness shattered by the constant and unrelenting sounds of combat. By the end, all the men are completely exhausted, Zulus and redcoats alike. That night the remaining soldiers

stand, trying to snatch small bursts of sleep as though it's a Christmas gift they're not allowed to open.

The orange sun dawns the next morning. A beautiful African sunrise. It is so perfect, so innocent, and so ordinary that it feels like there has been no war at all the night before. Breathing in the fresh morning scent, John Chard reluctantly wakes up his sleepy lionhearts. They are thirsty, tired, badly wounded, some barely patched up. And they know there might be more fighting to come. Here they are again, as before. Waiting. Except this time their uniforms are a different kind of red, their helmets dented, hands grubby, wounded, and weak. They are beyond mere fear; they just want it all to end.

And then that sight again; thousands more Zulus line up on the hills. The chants, the spears, the leopard skin shields. The horror of yesterday comes flooding back. As if it was possible, a new weariness of the soul grips them. They load their guns, slap on their helmets, and prepare for yet more battle. Yet more killing. Why?

Suddenly, a new cry comes down from the hilltops. But this sounds more like a song. A Zulu hymn? What does it mean? Anger? Mockery? Grief?

And suddenly, the Zulus are turning around. They walk slowly off, still singing. One soldier from the garrison dares to let out a joyful shout, and the rest of the men gradually allow themselves to join in - the hope is almost too great to bear.

Chard can barely breathe. Had they really done it? Had they really won? Not a Zulu in sight. Victory! Yet all around them are hundreds of bodies, heaped up in the dirt.

Chard pats Bromhead on the back.

Bromhead looks up and whispers, "Why are we here?"

The Canary Girls

Sara Musabbir
Leeds

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
11 to 15 year-old category

Author's introduction

I'd been studying WW1 and WW2 in Year 6 at primary school and I was really touched by how the soldiers suffered in the trenches and how families back home were affected. However, the trenches and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been written about by many fine writers and poets, so they are well known. Mum took me out cycling one day and we went past a memorial board in a park near our home in Leeds. It was about the Barnbow Lasses. I read all about it and it inspired me to write this based on a true story. Unlike other aspects of the world wars, the conditions and accidents at the Barnbow Munitions Factory were not publicised at the time deliberately because it was felt that morale on the home front would be damaged. The women and girls were just as heroic as the soldiers and I wanted to bring this to life. The characters in this story were real people; Herbert, Agnes and Edith were siblings. Edith died in a terrible accident at the young age of 15 whilst her brother (Herbert Sykes) was in the army and her sister (Agnes Sykes) was ill with flu. This true story is written from Agnes's perspective. She suffered terribly, yet bravely laid her sister to rest.

The Canary Girls

Chapter One: The Nightshift
4 December 1916

Gripping my shawl tightly around my neck, I set off onto the cold, Leeds streets. The frigid air nipped at my numb hands and the fog was starting to settle, making it hard to see more than a few yards ahead. I knew the way to Barnbow pretty much blindfold by now, though, so I kept my head down and quickened my step.

"Oh darn, I wish I'd remembered my woollen gloves! My fingers wouldn't be so cold right now," I muttered to myself. They would be lying on the sideboard where Ma always put them out for me on cold evenings before the night shift. Despite being only fifteen, Edith usually reminded me about practical things like that, but she was on days and had been staying at Aunty Belinda's house to help out with our younger cousins.

At times like this, it made me wonder if the night shift was really for me; getting up in the middle of the afternoon, helping Ma with dishes, peeling the vegetables for our evening meal and then going to the munitions factory. If I worked the morning shift, maybe my sleeping habits wouldn't be so messed up. Without the war, I'd still be working as Mrs Fox's housemaid, but the wages there would be nothing like as good. Now the bonus scheme had been introduced, I earned nearly £12 per week for handling the dangerous explosives. It really was risky work! They nicknamed us the Canary Girls because the TNT we were exposed to in the factory made our skin yellow - drinking milk helped and we got it free at the factory, along with all the barley water we could drink. The bosses had brought a herd of one hundred and twenty milk cows onto the factory premises to keep the supply flowing.

It was 9:53pm – I could see the hands of the big Crossgates clock edging closer to 10pm. I always checked it on my way. I had to arrive at the factory at ten, yet I was still about nine minutes away. The low heels of my Oxfords clattering on the pavement as I hurried on, I yearned for the warmth of my workplace. The conditions in the Barnbow Munitions Factory were generally fairly humid, so I knew I'd soon warm up.

I burst through the door of Room 42 and rushed to the changing rooms. Stripping down, I yanked out my hair pins and twisted my damp

hair into a tight knot. I grabbed a work smock and pulled it over my head, securing my cap hurriedly. I slipped on my rubber shoes, then dashed back through the door; a sea of startled faces looked up at me.

The sound of churning and rattling of the noisy machines filled Room 42. Muttering, I rubbed my sore, calloused hands which were dry and cracked. Every time before bed, I'd rub goose fat on my hands to soothe my skin – I would need a double helping when I woke up. Sucking my teeth with the discomfort, I went back to making shells for the poor soldiers back in the trenches who were hanging onto their lives hoping to come home. I thought of my brother Herbert fighting for the country, his life, his family. "Must serve Britain," I thought. "Must serve and pay respect to our brave soldiers."

"Agnes! Concentrate! Ye going to end up blowing up the whole factory!" snapped Ellen, our charge hand, looking over my shoulder to check exactly what I was doing.

I rearranged my fuses into a neater pile and took another filled shell from the loaded table facing us. "Push in the fuse, screw down the cap tight, nod to Annie to take it to the machine." I got the rhythm going in my head and increased my work speed. Annie scurried between our bench and the machine, carrying a heavy shell each time she went.

The rhythm helped to make time pass quickly, so quickly that I wasn't prepared for the bell for break. Only aware of how dry my throat was, I pushed and shoved through the bustling queue. I grasped the milk jug, poured a glass and guzzled it down.

The other girls at my table were eating their pack-ups quickly. Olive generally made us laugh with her jokes, but tonight her demeanour was more serious.

"Have you heard about the new cream they've brought out to deal with the yellow peril?" she asked the three of us sitting alongside her.

"I suppose you're going to tell us all about it," replied Sally.

"Ven-Yusa cream – they say it will bring back the bloom of youth!"

"Get back to blooming work," chuckled Ellen, "Never mind the bloom of youth!"

Night shift over, I walked back home feeling hot and rubbish, despite the blizzard outside. My cheeks were burning and I had a splitting headache.

With great effort, I dragged my feet all the way home to Ma who was very concerned at the state of me.

"What's this, dear? You look very pale! And you've got a temperature too!" she said, feeling my forehead. "You better go to bed. It costs to call the doctor, so let's see if a good sleep sorts you out."

"Ma! I won't be able to work tonight! Tell Aunty Belinda to make sure Edith takes my place, otherwise I'll be sacked!"

Ma nodded as I made my way up to bed. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell into a deep, exhausted slumber.

Chapter Two: The Dream
6 December 1916, sometime in the morning

I woke up. A dim, early light seeped through the cotton curtain. I sat up and let out a massive yawn. Everything was so still and quiet you could hear a pin drop. I crept into Edith's room to see if she was still sound asleep but her bed was empty; the sheets rumpled up in a heap. Gasping in shock, I hurried into Ma and Pa's room but their beds were empty too. I called for Herbert, yet he didn't answer. Then it hit me - it was the day that Herbert was going to war! I pulled on my boots and rushed out of the house down to the station where a huge crowd was gathering around the conscripts who were boarding the train to London, then the boat to France. I saw Herbert amongst them. I waved and shouted and screamed, but he took no notice of me – he seemed too buoyed up by the support and cheers of the crowd to acknowledge me. I scurried along the platform; eager to give Herbert one last hug, but I never got the chance. He was in the carriage now and a guard stopped me from rushing on board to say my goodbyes.

"But he's my brother! Mister I'd do ANYTHING if you just let me say goodbye." I could feel tears welling up in my eyes and a heavy aching lump form in the back of my throat. "Please!" My voice cracked as the whistle blared out. Steam filled the platform and I watched the train slip further and further away. The tears came, sudden and harsh like a waterfall. Before I knew it, I was sitting in a puddle. I wasn't the only one; even male relatives of the departing soldiers were wiping tears from their eyes.

Chapter Three: News of the Barnbow Disaster
6 December, 1916

I woke up from my dream of Herbert to hear a faint, muffled talking coming from downstairs.

"Looks like Ma is talking to some kind of neighbour," I thought, settling back under the covers and listening in on the conversation.

"I don't think you have heard, but there's been an incident at the Barnbow Munitions Factory in Room 42."

I leapt out of bed and leant over the banister on the landing. I saw Ma in her plain white nightgown and Will Parkin, one of the Barnbow mechanics, in a black, sodden coat. His hair was dripping and his face was dirty with red stains.

"About thirty five were killed, but your daughter was rushed to the Infirmary, missus." He continued, "I helped pull her out and several others."

I felt like someone had kicked me in the stomach. Edith. Breath trembling, I watched Ma sink to the floor, a cry escaping her lips so loud, so shrill, so piercing that the whole street could hear.

The man looked up and nodded at me sadly, then left. I raced down the stairs and sank to my knees alongside her. I cried and Ma stroked me, hugged me, kissed me. Nothing could stop my tears. After a while, I went to the bathroom to wash my face. My eyes were crimson as blood and my cheeks were red and stained with tears. I splashed cold water on my face and rinsed my eyes out.

Chapter Four: Our Loss

Ma and I visited Edith every day in the Infirmary for weeks. I was stunned when I saw the state of her that first time. Her skin wasn't rosy like it used to be, it was yellow and scarred. Her hair was matted, framing her pale cheeks, although the kind nurses tried so hard to take care not only of her wounds, but also of her outward appearance. They were honest with us, and the head doctor said he couldn't say whether she would recover or not. At least they controlled her pain with morphine.

Today, I cautiously sat on the end of her bed, stroking her hand. Her breaths were slow and heavy and her eyes were closed.

"Edith?" I whispered.

One of her eyes opened slightly.

"Edith! I'm ever so happy to see you. You really need to remember something. You promise you'll stay with me right? And never let go? You promise?"

Her eyes were closed again but she wasn't breathing slowly and heavily any more. She was gone. In a time so short and so limited, she had died.

The nurse came in and gasped. "Oh dear me, I'm so sorry. I didn't realise it would be so soon!" She stroked Edith's face and closed her eyes gently.

"Why did Edith die, though?" I sat on the bed with Ma beside me, my arms folded, thoughts streaming through my mind. I felt angry, angry at all the rules they'd set, no holidays, no breaks, constant work, work, work. I hit the mattress in frustration, so furious that I'd let Edith work there, going around lying about her age in order to become one of us canary girls. The men lost their lives in France, but our sacrifice seemed just as great to me in that desperate, sad moment.

Chapter Five: The Funeral

Herbert came back from York barracks – he had returned from France for the funeral. He had borrowed a gun carriage from the barracks to carry Edith's coffin to its resting place. Many of our neighbours lined the cobblestone road as she was carried past to her final resting place. It was a cold, grey day that morning, but Herbert and his comrades carried my sister with great dignity, marching in step and saluting respectfully when she was lowered into her grave.

"She gave as much as any soldier," Herbert whispered.

To this day, I still come back to Edith's grave every week, remembering her bravery. I knew then she would stay by my side in spirit wherever I was. She'll always be with me.

Fighting Girlfriend

Hersh Singh
Hornchurch, Essex

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 year-old category

Author's introduction

Fighting Girlfriend *is set in the midst of the Eastern Front of WW2. In the battlegrounds between Germany and the Soviet Union, a woman is compelled to make a difference at the frontlines, carving her own path through the bloodstained tapestry of The Great Patriotic War, and in doing so has her name immortalised, with parallels to her story even visible in contemporary times.*

I chose this topic for my story as I feel history books (specifically school-level ones) focus too much on simple cause-and-effect, adopting a callous top-down view of events. Little to no consideration is given to the individual aspect, especially in recounting conflicts and battles. Specifically, I wanted to explore the common soldier's motivations; are they fighting for their country, for honour, for love? I chose to bring this topic to light with the obscure tale of Mariya Oktyabrskaya, as well as highlight what some soldiers might have faced even behind the frontlines. Though her story is still far from the public eye, that does not make it any less impressive.

Without further ado, please enjoy the story.

Fighting Girlfriend

"Mariya Oktyabrskaya?"

I silently nod as the man at the door butchers my name. He tries to sound sympathetic, but the words come out in an odd monotone, devoid of warmth or empathy. I know what he's here for. But I quickly rout that harrowing thought creeping into my head, because thinking about it would make it true.

"Wife of Ilya Oktyabrskiy?"

I silently nod.

Two years since I last heard from Ilya.

Two agonising years of insomnia-riddled bouts of half-sleep every night, the ghosts of his promises still raw in my mind.

"He went missing near Kiev in 1941. I'm sorry."

Two years of endlessly replaying those last precious moments with him, before he travelled to the front. The Great Patriotic War, he told me. I wondered if I would see him again. The last breakfast, his favourite *kasha* with just the right amount of honey, and two eggs from the chickens, in our last home in Crimea.

Wrapping our wedding photograph gingerly in a swatch of hand-woven fabric and pressing it into his hands before he left, something he could keep close to his heart for the weeks ahead. Making him promise that he'd come back.

The last embrace on the doorstep, and the last look he gave me before he turned away, silently saying the unsaid words we were too choked-up to say. Walking along the beaten dirt track until the horizon snatched him away forever.

"I said, he died near Kiev. In 1941."

I can see it in his face. He probably likes having this job far away from the front, where all he has to carry is feigned sorrow and a clipboard, doesn't he? Likes tearing families apart?

"I heard you the first time."

With a look of contempt, I slam the door in his startled face, then flinch as one of the cups hanging on the wall tumbles to the floor and explodes.

And with it, my tears all come spilling out at once, sobbing away two years of broken promises. Our pictures – his pictures - still stand there on the mantelpiece like sentinels, his million grayscale faces now just a cruel irony. Did he die alone? In pain? Abandoned somewhere in bitumen-like mud, skeins of blood binding him to the soil as his life ebbed away?

"Dear Premier Stalin!"

Falling to my knees, I try to labour the feelings away by picking up fragments of pottery strewn across the floor like scattered entrails, cradling the vestiges in my arms.

"My husband was killed in action defending the motherland. I want revenge on the fascists for his death, and for the death of Soviet people tortured by the fascist barbarians."

But the fragments dissipate, wavering and becoming distant. Instead, the promise of hard gunmetal grows heavier in my arms, wedged between my chest and the bullet-churned slurry underneath as I crawl through loops of barbed wire, like the inside of a razor-edged caduceus. Another burst of gunfire breaks the air above me, flattening the hairs on the back of my neck.

Five months until I can be sent to the lines.

To be trained like this is a luxury. The steppes of the front, cursed with the blood and wisdom of centuries of war, are the only teachers most will ever get.

I defend that entrenched thought when I see them point to me and whisper, wearing contempt on their vulpine smiles. I try to ignore the bawdy remarks whispered within earshot about Mariya being an oeuvre of propaganda, just a morale boost for the braver boys on the line.

It's easier when I remind myself of what I've given for this chance.

"I've deposited my personal savings – 50,000 rubles – to the National Bank to build a tank."

A tank just like any of the other tanks lined up here, ranks of machines parked in bays overgrown with weeds and forgotten tools.

But the tank I see now holds different words painted on the hull. They

might be legible if there was any light to see them by, but in the half-hearted radiance of the dying day, they're just a mass of wavering glints.

It doesn't matter. I could never forget those words.

"I kindly ask to name the tank 'Fighting Girlfriend'."

Those words cost me everything I ever knew, everything except the clothes off my back. Each tarnished swash and serif is another pot or pan or piece of furniture sold.

I sold the house too.

Why should I own a home at all if he'll never return to it?

"And to send me to the frontline as a driver of said tank."

**

Smolensk. My first battle. 1943. Two years since The Great Patriotic War began. Two years since I lost Ilya. Two years' worth of unpaid debts.

Our tracks cutting through the mud and the sludge of shell-churned steppes pockmarked with chemical-scorched birch trees, overcast by gunmetal-grey clouds scurrying across a pale sky.

Inside the cramped hull of our Fighting Girlfriend, where any unannounced movement thumps someone's spine with the rigid sole of a muddy boot, our bow-gunner, Yasko, leans over in his seat and puts a hand on my shoulder. He hardly moves his eyes to meet mine – though I can see the slight smile he's failing to hide – and jibes while the tank commander, Chebotko, strains to listen to orders streaming from the radio.

"Are you sure you can handle this? Tell me if you need help, okay?"

I shrug him off, opening my mouth to say something colourful, before Chebotko's rough voice booms, richocheting inside the hull and hammering the words in again and again until there can be no doubt of why we're here.

"Forward, full speed!"

"Understood!" I nod and switch to first gear while pressing on the throttle, jittery with both excitement and adrenaline.

My first chance for vengeance.

My first chance to prove I'm just as capable a driver as they might

expect from anyone else.

Though they might not show it, I still know what they say about 'the Mariya girl'; hushed conversations turning silent when I enter a room, brief glances exchanged whenever I get close.

"Machine-gun ahead, hard left! Load OF!"

I put the Girlfriend in a sharp turn and come to a stop, and scan the way ahead through the viewport.

In a thicket of trees not yet stripped of their foliage, there's a stain of slumped sandbags, spattered with unmistakeable uniforms.

I hear the clang of a shell being stuffed into the gun as our loader, Mykhailo (Ukrainian, just like me – though they call him Misha) slams the breech shut, the sharp noise cutting through the din of machinery.

"Ready!"

"Firing!"

I feel the force of the shot hammer my ribs as the blur of light leaves the barrel.

I watch as their emplacement turns into a mandala of fire, turning the copse into a miasma of suspended earth.

I watch as the haze clears, leaving little more than charred earth.

I watch from the corner of my eye as the reflection of the moon on a shell-crater lake is obscured by a silhouette.

"Tank, right! Load BR!"

As the words leave my mouth, I can hear Chebotko's gasp of indignation over the whir of the turret as it swivels to meet its target.

Mykhailo sees the same thing I do: the looming maw of a barrel pointed at our Girlfriend.

"Ready!"

"Firing!"

As the shot finds its mark, the tank erupts in flame like a Roman candle, weeping tears of molten steel. With a rare moment of silence filling the tank, I breathe a sigh of immense relief.

The world jolts as I'm hurled forwards into hard steel and the cabin is rocked by the concussion – *concussion of what?* - and the machine shudders to a stop, and I taste the metallic tang of blood in my mouth as someone distant screams and I can't hear it, and I cough away the acrid smoke, and the only thing I can hear now is the whine in my skull, caterwauling as I try to make sense of it all, the shaking, the smoke, the shouts…

There's one obvious thing I can understand. The Girlfriend needs to get back to fighting.

"Mariya, no!"

I barely hear someone's voice before the clang of the hatch slamming shut drowns them out.

Lit by the gleam of the barrel in the moonlight, metal made iridescent by muzzle-smoke, I heave the spare track-links off the tank and fumble them into position, cutting away the mangled remnants of the track like a surgeon amputating a gangrenous limb.

A staccato of gunfire fragments the air, and as the ground near me erupts with explosive flowers of debris, I curse as I struggle to fit the last of the links into place on the obstinate metal.

Once I fix the last pin in, I prise the hatch back open and clamber into the driver's seat, revelling in the maelstrom of shock and awe on Yasko's face as I push the tank back into gear and urge the Girlfriend forwards to where the Germans still wait.

**

Vitebsk. 1944. One year until we bring an end to The Great Patriotic War.

"Mariya, anti-tank ahead!" Chebotko's voice is still as gruff as ever, though it has a grudging respect to it now, which shines through the cracks in his façade of uncompromising discipline.

As I peer through the viewport, I see it: hidden in a drift of snow lies the telltale outline of a field gun.

I slam on the brakes as Misha slams a round into the gun and Chebotko cranks the turret, though not fast enough to stop the orange blaze tearing from the mouth of the cannon.

The inside of the hull turns into a massive, dissonant bell as we're thrown sideways in our seats. I feel the force of our own cannon blazing as Chebotko responds in kind. As I try to reverse, the tank lazily veers off to the side, churning the mud into slurry.

The track must have been damaged again. As I start to climb from the hatch to the dangerous world outside, Yasko turns to me and gives me an affirming nod, his eyes betraying his pleading for me to stay safe.

Once again I jump down from the hull. I sever the broken track-links; once again, I manoeuvre the links into position, while a burst of muzzle-flashes lights up the air like a fiery aurora; Yasko doing his best to cover me with the machine-gun.

I hear the whistle of the shell far too late as it burrows into the earth.

I move far too late to escape the air shattering.

I scream far too late as everything turns into light and I'm lifted off my feet.

But as the hot hands of the explosion set me down, I feel summer sludge depress beneath me instead of the frozen snow-stunned earth I've become accustomed to in the winter months.

The sunlight casts dancing shadows inside my eyelids as I struggle to move my weighty head. Hazy shapes start to solidify through my blurry eyes; the faint outline of a uniform, the dull sheen of a helmet, the face that I've seen before.

The face that's been gone for two years.

He lies motionless in the dirt, blood welling from shrapnel-holes and deep cuts in his side. As I reach out a trembling hand to my Ilya, he grasps it tightly, though his hand passes right through mine.

He painstakingly moves his head and sees my face, and I see his last smile spread across his face. His tired eyes – as I blink away the last dregs of colour from my sight, I realise they're supposed to be piercing green – say all that he should have said, two years ago, on the doorstep of the home in Crimea.

As we cling to each other like children, I fall asleep in the warmth of his arms.

I Am Uganda
Aaran D Thakore
Middlesex

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2023
16 to 19 age-group category

Author's introduction

I Am Uganda *is set in the 1970s. It follows Abbo, a young woman of Asian heritage, and her journey after learning of her imminent expulsion under Idi Amin's government. As a British Asian with strong familial ties to Eastern Africa, and more specifically Uganda, I chose to focus my historical piece of literature on a time and place that has been somewhat forgotten. Living in England, the study of history is practically synonymous with the World Wars, and few people realise that European history is merely a small segment of what is a very broad subject indeed. As I have grown, these 'hidden histories' are something that I have been ever more drawn to. History as a subject, has its importance embedded in the idea of learning from and applying the past to the present. While it can be easy to talk of the success of the World Wars, not all of the Western past is as palatable. As a society we have often found ourselves on the wrong side of history. Yet this, in my view, is not something to shy away from, but instead a reason to focus on these stories even more. The story of the expulsion of Asian Ugandans should be used to highlight the importance of helping and fighting for those refugees currently facing hardship. Be it Syrians, or Uyghurs, we can't sit and let history repeat itself, with thousands more like Abbo forced out from the only place they ever called home.*

I Am Uganda

In 95 days, I die.

It's a fact. History. Set in stone. Words written in a book you may very well own. One I won't ever know. For me it's too late. But that's not the same. Not for the 82.4 million refugees whose futures are not up to fate.

Because in 95 days. In 95 days, I die. I know that because in 84 days I forget to brush my teeth, and in 87 days I undercook the rice, and in 91 days the lights were turned off. Since then, they haven't turned back on.

Day 0

Have you ever wondered how long it takes to destroy 80,000 lives?

23 minutes and 19 seconds. 23 minutes and 19 seconds of meaningless commitments and vague hand gestures.

23 minutes and 19 seconds of a single voice distorted by the overly loud air conditioning in the corner.

23 minutes and 19 seconds of the same message, just different words. That we are no longer welcome here. Eh, we never really were.

23 minutes and 19 seconds was how long it took for Idi Amin to crush me. Slaughter my hopes and watch them rot. Mine and those of 79,999 others. Because it all changed at ten past eleven, with the raising of the red, yellow and black. Just like the one in the kitchen. Our nation's flag.

'Tukusanyukidde, Uganda,' he had practically shouted. Ironic. Welcoming Uganda to deport the Ugandans.

'Eh, why you lazing like dat?' My mother, angry. Again. I feigned ignorance. 'Abbo, I'm talking to you. You under my roof, you help me. Here come. Help me.'

'Maama…' I didn't say any more.

'Change the channel. And turn the volume down. I'm going to go deaf.'

I gave her a look. She got the message.

'Don't worry yourself about that, Mukwano, Dear. He's not doing nothing. You know these things. Nothing but lies.' She rolled her eyes. Just like how she used when I was younger and asked her a question she didn't know the answer to, like 'Why is grass green?' or 'Are we ever truly free?'.

And I believed her. An offhand remark soaked up instinctively, like a dog obeying the stupid commands of his drunken owner. Just three words and my worries were washed away. Why hold concerns when you simply do not have the space? Because we, we have that trust. The trust buried as deep as the soil that feeds us. We are a loyal people. We love, we laugh, and we respect. So, when she said 'These matoke aren't going to cut themselves', I did what she said. My rough skin warm against the cold knife. Little did I know that I would pay for that with my life.

Day 6

Soldiers are here. For the first time. One woman, one man, one old, one young, one tall, one short, both clutching guns perfectly placed in their palms.

'Eh, good morning, soldier,' Maama says, proudly, opening the door. It's been days but she still doesn't know how to act around them. Recognising the face of the woman as our neighbour, and good friend, she adds, 'Ah, Namono, oli otya?'

Auntie Namono hesitates, glancing down at the floor, before replying. 'Ah cousin sister, I'm good,' the harsh English words stripping my mother's Luganda leaving it bare and exposed. She knows my Maama isn't good with her English.

'You heard President Amin. All of Asian descent have 90 days to leave. That was six days ago. Here, complete this,' she extends her arm, holding out a clipboard, in which a sheet, 'Identification of Asian Household Number 9973' is neatly tucked.

Number 9973. The last prime number before 10,000. I have never hated a number so much.

But before Maama has a chance to take it, Auntie Namono pulls it back. 'Actually,' she begins, a smile spread across half of her face, her headscarf, the same one Maama wears, shaking in the wind with no restraint. 'I'll do that. Save you wasting ink.'

Maama sighs overtly, and I realise that she still trusts Auntie Namono. I watch. An onlooker in my own home. Watch as a familiar stranger scribbles down my life. Reducing me and my family down to our looks, our physique, our blood boiling beneath our skin. Like an estate agent in the process of a house inspection. She knows us. Owns us. And I start to notice the cold.

My mother stands. Awkwardly. Fiddling with her hands. 'Would you like to come in? I can make tea.' I have never seen her like this. So uncomfortable. Scared, even. Afraid. A child begging to be saved. This time it's the man's turn to make a noise. He chuckles, a sound that both frustrates me and makes me feel at home. I feel an eruption of warmth spread inside of me. I mistake it for anger. Not something more. He doesn't stop laughing. Loudly. He's so loud. It's all so loud. Everything.

It's all too loud.

Namono doesn't say anything, pretending to not have heard. Maama's words linger, choking, suffocating, like a child drowning, gasping for air. Namono's inebriated eyes widen slightly, her pupils dilated. I hate it. I hate everything about it. Maama. She stands. Unsure how to react. Her friend so busy documenting her existence on a paper she won't ever see. Restricted to a statistic, just one of so many.

Namono moves forward, her tall figure imposing over my mother's crooked frame. She dwarfs her. I feel a tear in my heart when Maama doesn't look her in the face.

'Cousin sister, sign,' she says, practically thrusting the chipped clipboard into the soft cushioning of my mother's rounded bosom. Cousin sister. A term only used for those most dear. How can friends turned enemies do so overnight? I want to say something, but I choose not to. Speaking could make it worse.

By the time they leave, Maama is shaking. Really shaking.

'That was not okay,' I say, raising my voice to match the strength of the one in my head. 'Namono can't do that. They've made you so late for work.'

Maama closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. 'It's Auntie Namono to you. And I'm not working anymore. I quit.'

I don't ask why. Some things are best left unknown. Because today was the first time, but I doubt it was the last.

Day 89

We know what we're doing, Jajja, Maama and me. But we're doing it anyway. Having dinner, the three of us. A dinner before our lives change forever. We know it's risky. Just the other day, they were at our friends across the street. Barged through the door and forced them to leave. Eh, the children were still taking their bath. They just stood there, naked, wet, rocks piercing the soft soles of their bare feet. The older one didn't even have her underwear! They were just girls, ay! Even us three women are not safe.

'O, you know they say he chose 90 'cos it was the answer to one of them maths puzzles in the newspaper,' Jajja mutters, barely a whisper, her hands shaking as she looks for a place to put the stew.

'Kiki? I heard his house was built by Indians, and they painted the walls the wrong colour. That's why he don't like us, ay. Because of paint! Look. He had an Asian helper until recently. And he liked her. Only got rid of her because he didn't want it dirtenin' his image,' Maama chips in, tutting her head in that disapproving way of hers, as she takes the large pot from her mother's frail hands. 'The people who get angry at us when we're all the same, are the ones to get angry at us when we're too different.'

I close my eyes. Let my stomach subside. I know that feeling. Guilt. Jajja didn't want to leave because her daughter weren't and Maama weren't leaving because of me. But I can't. Can I? The chances of my business succeeding without me, well those figures don't need a genius to work them out. I didn't become the first businesswoman for nothin'. Numbers were my constant. The factual in the fiction, the reliable during constant indecision. But what if something happens. That's on me. It's not impossible. Look at the statistics, eh? Those numbers don't comfort me. They can't. That's never happened before.

'Eh!' Jajja leans over and blows out the candle, before clasping her hand over her mouth in delayed self-restraint. The smell of burnt ash lingers, tarnishing the sweet scent of spices sauntering sleepily from the Rolex. I still remember when a tourist thought a Rolex was a watch. The joy of Ugandan food! I look up, about to say something, when Jajja's nervous

eyes freeze my tongue in its track. Something's wrong. Outside. A lamp. No, a torch. By the window. Close. Too close. No one says anything. The sound of rocks squashed under heavy boots. It gets closer. Then stops. It's only when Jajja's gone and Maama touches my arm that I realise I hadn't even dared to move.

Day 94

There's a knock at the door. So quiet. It's almost midnight. We look at each other, daring the other to speak first. The voice outside, weak like my father, takes the choice from us.

'You have been reported. We know you are there.'

How can they? We took such care. My mind whirs. Was it our neighbours? No. We are a loyal people. Not one full of haters. They wouldn't. They couldn't.

They don't bother waiting. We have nowhere to go. The basement the last safe place.

Our home.

It happens so quickly. My mother screaming as they drag her by the hair. Her body, a limp doll on the stairs. The soft sound of a whip, hard rope hitting hard floor. Again, again, again. Almost peaceful, like a wave lapping on the shore.

But the whimpers. The whimpers from above. The men. Two of them. Laughing and smoking. The man, young, who takes me up to watch. There's blood on her. At the bottom of her dress. The one that's lying on the floor. Scrunched in a mess.

Bare. Naked. Battered and bruised. Thin rivers of red on a black charcoal moon. She doesn't look at me. Kneels silently. A small scarlet pool filling between her legs. Guilt. Guilt for not stopping it. Guilt for letting them. Guilt for being thankful that she was always much more beautiful than me. People used to always say I got my dad's brains not my mother's beauty. Those words now take on a different kind of meaning.

That blood. It's on my hands. I know. And she does too. I Caused This. She gave me life and I stole hers. Her body now doesn't belong to her.

I don't look. I can't. I hear it go off. The slow slumping sound. I cry. No scream. Just a primal howl with the sharpest teeth. Then silence. It slaughters me. No number can predict the work of the human psyche.

Pain.

Inexplicable pain. A thousand daggers slicing my veins. I sink. My entire insides. Drown, suppressed, under water without a sound.

I lunge. The soldier doesn't jump. My fists long for his soft skin. I don't listen. Not when they speak. So quietly. What is the point, when I'll never be free? Because that's when I know. To live or to die, I won't ever survive. My life will never, ever, truly be mine.

Day 95

I know what's happening. I've seen it before. I don't cry. Beg. Plead. Feel. I let be the stillness; its soft arms embrace me.

There's no need to be weak.

I know how this goes. Tears, dried, shed long ago. Life. Gone. For me. Lost.

All those years I have lived here. All those years that I won't. We are no longer a loyal people. And the whole world, oh, they do know.

It goes. Off. My body. I fall. Hard skin against hard wood. Ringing. Deafening ringing. Soldier withdrawn. Then silence. Silence. So soon.

Too soon.

Day 95

Have you ever wondered how long it takes for a life to change? 23 minutes 18 seconds it took for me to meet my final fate.

At a time when thousands of lives did change. The world, well, she remained the same. Looking on. Indifference unexplained. A silent, silent, single state.

The Duchess of Buccleuch
Founder of the Young Walter Scott Prize

It is just over a year since we heard the sad news that the Duchess of Buccleuch had died following a short illness. All of us involved in the Prizes miss her terribly. She was so passionate about encouraging young writers to look to the past for inspiration, and to express important ideas through their writing, and she was always delighted by the ambition, scope and skill of all the winning writers over the years.

Entering the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024

Details of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024 and the Walter Scott Prize will be posted on the website and publicised through our social media channels.

@waltscottprize

@waltscottprize

@walterscottprize

#walterscottprize

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

For further information about Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott: www.scottsabbotsford.com

THE YOUNG WALTER SCOTT PRIZE

Patron – Tan Twan Eng

Founder – The Duchess of Buccleuch

Director – Alan Caig Wilson

Chair of the Judging Panel – Elizabeth Laird

Judges 2023 – Rosi Byard-Jones, Elizabeth Laird, David Robinson, Kathryn Ross and Alan Caig Wilson

Publicity and website – Rebecca Salt, StonehillSalt PR

Social media – Sheila Averbuch

Administration – Lindsey Fraser and Kathryn Ross

The Young Walter Scott Prize programme is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.

www.ywsp.co.uk