ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

The Winning Entries for
The Young Walter Scott Prize 2025

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About 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 eleven years ago for writers aged between 11 and 19 years and last year we were delighted to welcome the YWSP 2024 winners, Sophie Berry and Katherine White to the Borders Book Festival.

The novelist Elizabeth Laird, the Chair of this year's judges, said, *'What wonderful journeys the winners and runners-up of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025 have taken us on! In the two winning entries we watch the sadness of American Japanese citizens being interned in wartime USA, and meet the spooky muffin man of Drury Lane. The stories of the runners-up take us to Mao's China, the Khmer Rouge's Kampuchea, the scary border of North Korea, Pompeii in its death throes, the control room of a Russian space station, and, in another Russian story, letters to a prisoner in one of the infamous gulags. We meet a young Nigerian yearning to emigrate, plunge into the wynds of old Edinburgh, are swept away to the court of Henry VIII and laugh with a group of jolly Edwardian writers trying to arrange a cricket match.*

Once again young writers have shown us that they have rich imaginations and the writing skills to express their ideas. Congratulations to all of them!'

Our warm thanks go to Elizabeth and the other judges, writer and winner of the first Young Walter Scott Prize Rosi Byard-Jones, writer Angharad Hampshire, whose novel, *The Mare,* was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize in 2024, journalist and literary reviewer David Robinson, and YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson.

Information about how to enter the Young Walter Scott Prize 2026 is on our website – and we are open to entries until the closing date of 31st October 2026.

The Imagining History Programme UK is run by YWSP Director 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

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

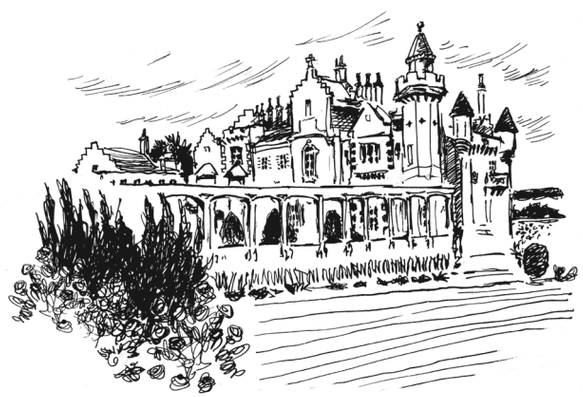
About Sir Walter Scott and Abbotsford

Abbotsford is the home Sir Walter Scott, originally a farmhouse 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 his love of storytelling, travelling widely through the stunning countryside, meeting people from all walks of life, introducing the boy to stories from Scotland's past. The vast knowledge he amassed in his youth is evident in Scott's novels, all of which are packed with fabulous characters, many based on real people, real historical events.

Sir Walter Scott was also a collector. Visitors to Abbotsford will find themselves surrounded with 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 visit to 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.



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

2023 Iyla Latif and Elise Withey

2024 Katherine White and Sophie Berry

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

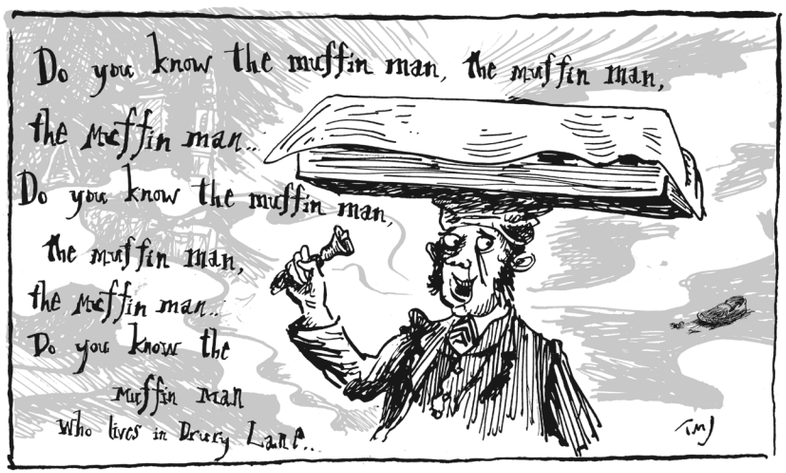
2021 *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel

2022 *News of the Dead* by James Robertson

2023 *These Days* by Lucy Caldwell

2024 *Hungry Ghosts* by Kevin Jared Hosein

2025 *The Land in Winter* by Andrew Miller



THE MAN FROM DRURY LANE

Tasbih Sharuar
Bancroft's School, Essex

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

THE MAN FROM DRURY LANE

London wakes before the sun does. The fog comes first heavy and yellow, curling through the streets like breath from a sleeping giant. Then the bells begin: carriage wheels rattling, market women shouting, the hiss of steam from the baker's ovens, and somewhere among it all, my bell. *"Ting-ting. Ting-ting."* A pleasant sound, light and merry. It should bring comfort. It tells the city the muffin man has come. That's me. Or so they say.

Each morning, I rise in my narrow room above Drury Lane, strike a spark to the small stove, and warm the day's first batch. Muffins, crumpets, and the odd bit of stale bread I soften with milk to make seem fresh again. I wrap them in a clean white cloth, though my hands are never quite clean; flour clings, no matter how often I wash.

By half-past five, I'm on the street, the basket balanced on my arm, my bell ready to sing. I know every stone between here and Covent Garden. I know which doors open early, which streets smell before noon, which shopkeepers smile and which ones sneer. London is a grand thing from afar. All spires, smoke, and promise - but down here, beneath the horse muck and soot, it's only hunger that moves the people.

The mothers greet me first. They stretch out a penny, sometimes two, for something warm to fill their children before the long walk to workhouses and workshops. "God bless you, sir," they say. "The little ones do so love your muffins." I tip my cap, smile, and move on. I've learnt not to linger.

By seven, the theatres empty of their ghosts. Drury Lane holds its breath as the players' laughter fades, and the lamplighters douse the last of the street flames. Only the fog remains. Thick as pudding and twice as bitter. That's when the footsteps start. Always the same rhythm. Step. Step. Ting-ting. Sometimes behind me. Sometimes beside. Never ahead.

I've turned more times than I can count, peering into the haze. Nothing – only the long, wet street and the gas light glowing faintly through it. The city plays tricks when you walk it alone. One tenebrous morning in December of 1803, the fog was so dense it seemed to swallow sound. The bell's note vanished almost before it left my hand. Near the corner of Bow

Street, I saw a boy - no more than nine, sitting on the steps of a boarding house, blue-lipped and trembling.

"Cold, are we?" I said softly. He nodded. I reached into my basket and gave him the smallest muffin. "Here, lad. Eat it while it's warm." He hesitated, then took it with shaking fingers. "Thank you, sir." I walked on. When I turned back, he was gone. Word travels fast in the markets. That evening, the women were whispering about a missing boy from Bow Street. "Disappeared in the fog," they said. "Nothing left but a bell sound, faint as a ghost's laugh." I said nothing.

There are hundreds of us muffin men in London. We sell warmth by the penny, moving through alleys before dawn. Few last long - the cold kills some; the drink kills others. You learn to keep your head down. Still, there are nights when I feel eyes on me, behind shutters, from darkened doorways, from children peeking round corners as their mothers hush them.

They know the rhyme, of course: *Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man…* It began as a jingle for the little ones, something bright to keep them from fear. Lately, though, it sounds different - lower, uneasy. As if the city itself were singing it to remind the children to stay indoors.

February brought a deep freeze. Ice sheathed the Thames; beggars froze in their rags. Still, I went out. Hunger doesn't stop for weather. At Long Acre I found a woman huddled in a doorway, her baby crying weakly against her chest. I offered her a muffin. She took it, eyes hollow, and asked if I might spare another for the child. I gave her two.

When I passed the same way next morning, the woman was gone. The baby too. But her shawl lay frozen to the step, stiff and rimed with frost. By spring, the rhyme was everywhere. Children sang it in skipping games; drunks muttered it as they staggered home. *Do you know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane?*

They laughed when they said it to me, thinking it a harmless jest. I laughed too, though something inside me twisted. For I did live there. I had since the plague took my mother, since the workhouse spat me out to fend for myself. London had shaped me, kneaded me, baked me hard as any loaf. And like a loaf left too long in the oven, something inside had blackened.

One night, after selling the last of my muffins, I turned down an alley near Covent Garden. The fog hung thick as ever, but through it came a sound. Soft, familiar, almost sweet. A girl's voice. "Do you know the muffin man…?" I froze. The singing grew louder. Then a figure appeared. A girl in a thin shawl, her bare feet grey with soot.

She smiled when she saw me. "Sir, could I have a muffin? Just one? I've no money, but I can pay tomorrow." Her voice trembled. "Tomorrow," I said, "the fog will be worse. You'd best get home." "I've no home," she whispered. Something in me ached. I reached into the basket and handed her the muffin I had saved for myself. I wouldn't have needed it anyway.

The next morning, the constable found the alley empty save for crumbs and a single child's shoe. After that, the rhyme changed again. The children no longer sang it in daylight. They whispered it after dark, huddled close to their fires. *Do you know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane? Yes, I know the muffin man - who comes when children stray.*

By summer, folk crossed the street when they heard my bell. Doors stayed shut. Mothers pulled their children inside. The muffins cooled faster each day. I told myself it was fear that made them cruel. The city breeds fear like mould. But sometimes, walking home through the fog, I catch my reflection in bakery windows; eyes hollow, face pale, mouth set in a line I barely recognise. Perhaps they see something I do not.

The police came once, asking questions about disappearances. I offered them tea and a muffin. They stayed only long enough to decline both. When they'd gone, I sat in silence, the bell heavy in my hand. I thought of the boy, the woman, the girl; of kindness, of hunger, of how easily one can become the other. London forgets the poor quickly. But the poor never forget London.

In the autumn of 1804, the frost returned. I still walked my route. Drury Lane to the Strand, past the market and back. The fog thickened until even the gas lamps were only dull smears of gold. That night, I heard footsteps again. Steady. Careful. Following. I stopped. So did they. I turned, and for the first time, someone was there. A child, perhaps twelve, standing in the mist. Thin. Pale. Watching me with eyes too old for his face.

"Are you the muffin man?" he asked. I nodded slowly. "I am." He stepped closer. "My sister… she bought a muffin from you. She never came home." The bell in my hand felt suddenly cold. "Perhaps she moved

away," I said softly. "The city swallows many." He shook his head. "I heard the bell." The mist swirled between us. For a moment, it seemed the whole city was holding its breath. Then the boy turned and ran. I did not follow. I could not. My legs would not move. I only stood there, the bell dangling at my side, until the fog closed over him and I was alone again.

They stopped singing the rhyme after that. Or perhaps they sang it more quietly, behind closed doors. The city forgets quickly when it must. But some nights, when the wind shifts down Drury Lane, you can still hear it, soft, half-lost in the fog. *Do you know the muffin man…?*

I am older now. The bell sits silent beside my bed. My hands tremble too much to bake. I listen to the city outside. New voices, new wagons, new cries; and I wonder if they know whose footsteps they walk in. Was I kind once? I think so. Did I mean harm? Never. Yet somehow, in trying to warm a cold city, I became colder than any of them.

Perhaps that is what London does: it bakes you until all that is left is crust. The fog thickens at the window. Somewhere, far away, a faint sound rings out. *Ting-ting. Ting-ting.* I smile. The city remembers after all.

THE PORCELAIN DRAGON

Erica Lockett-Yeung
Birmingham

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

THE PORCELAIN DRAGON

1942 - San Francisco, California

She knows what they want from her. She sees it in the posters that plaster the windows of grocery stores, screaming at passers-by amidst banners declaring the inflated prices of vegetables. She sees it in the cartoons that have bombarded her weekly newspapers and magazines every day since war broke out. Those garish yellow faces and narrow, vindictive eyes must haunt the dreams of every American child, malevolent buck-toothed grins with canines sharpened to rival the deadliest of blades.

This is what they mean for her to capture. Perhaps not as crudely or grotesquely, but she must still tell a story of their otherness. Or else, if they are so unfailingly human that this is impossible, she must make them forgettable; so that when the press inevitably pounces, readers will pass over their faces and it will be as if they never existed. Hide the crime in plain sight.

Stick to the narrative.

But standing on the sidewalk, observing the chaos and confusion unfolding around her, her camera - a lightweight Zeiss Juwel - is an unusually heavy burden. For the first time in her two decades as a photographer, she sees no photos to take.

A photographer's job - her job - is to take a thousand lives and condense them into a single moment. A whole life: all of its complexity, all of its vividness, all of its raw emotion - all captured within a single shot. She is an artist, a poet, a composer. But most importantly, she is a storyteller.

Across the street, a crowd is growing rapidly. Tightly packed heads the entire length of the sidewalk, many people left to linger on the dirt road at the mercy of the cars and motorcycles which fill the air with honks of irritation. Hundreds of people wait: babies, children, parents, grandparents. Families are easily identified as they huddle together, clinging tightly to one another as if they are afraid of being torn apart. The warm April breeze carries their fear through the street, rippling through the mass of people like a plague. She can see it etched all over their faces, clinging to their skin, in their bodies as they cleave to piles of luggage scattered along the road - entire lives reduced to a few suitcases and sacks.

Right now, there is no story to tell. Not the one they want told. But if she means to be a good storyteller, she must know her characters better than she knows herself.

In all her photographs she makes a point of never catching her subjects unaware. Photography, she understands, is never one-sided. The best photographs are collaborations between the photographer and the subject, between the observer and the observed - they write the story together. However, her instructions were clear: no talking to the evacuees.

Sweeping her gaze across the street for an opportunity to melt unnoticed into the crowd, conscious of the ever watchful gaze of the military police, her well-trained eye catches upon a little man, the many wrinkles on his face indicating an age far beyond her own, fighting a useless battle with a suitcase more than half his height, as he tries to lug it off the road where it has already held up several cars full of drivers who hammer their fists on their horns.

She sees it happening before it does. Just as he makes one final desperate pull, heaving it up with the last of his strength, he trips on that unforgiving chasm where road meets sidewalk, stumbling backwards. Time seems to slow before her eyes. She can only stare helplessly as the handle slips from his grasp and the bulging suitcase tumbles back, landing on the road with a resounding crash as it splits open and she watches as handcrafted plates, cups, bowls, and vases in every colour imaginable tumble out, the force of the collision throwing them outwards and away from the case to form a rainbow mosaic - an explosion of colour amidst the monotonous greys and browns that paint the street.

She barely has time to register the sight before a young woman darts forward and swiftly begins gathering up the items which lie nearest the sidewalk with graceful, steady movements as a young man patiently helps the old man to his feet, his expression crumpling in dismay as he takes in the sight of his careful labour lying in pieces before his eyes. She imagines him gently moulding the curved spout of a teapot with calloused hands. She sees him, brush in hand, painstakingly painting every little detail, taking care to find the perfect shade of pink for each cherry blossom.

Patience exhausted, one of the drivers presses forward, barging past the young woman and the crowd that has formed around them. Led by example, the rest of the cars, which have been hovering about tentatively, soon follow. The crunch of ceramic under tire echoes through the street.

The disturbance has caught the attention of the military police. Three of them come over to investigate, waving their rifles around in warning. With no aggression or attempts at resistance apparent, their stony expressions soon turn to ones of amusement when they catch sight of the old man scrabbling around on his knees, desperately trying to salvage what he can.

It is a pitiful sight.

For a moment, she imagines immortalising the scene: defy her unspoken orders, tell a story of an oppressive government and a victimised race. Her hand reaches for her camera.

But what would she achieve? A photo which criticises US troops so openly could never become public. It would be confiscated immediately, maybe even destroyed - ultimately lost forever.

Instead, she takes advantage of the distraction to slip discreetly into the crowd. With her hat and large beige coat, she blends in seamlessly.

In the midst of so many people, layer upon layer of voices blend together to form a discordant, lazy hum through which she catches snippets of conversation. Some speak rapidly in foreign tongues, others converse in accented English, but she finds most voices adopt a familiar Californian accent.

An unsettling feeling of being watched creeps over her. Looking down, she finds a pair of small, intelligent brown eyes staring back at her. Their owner is a young girl who cannot be older than eight, wrapped up in a green coat, dark hair divided into two neat braids secured with matching green bows, a doll cradled in one arm - blonde and clothed in layer upon layer of white lace. Round her own neck sits a tag which she knows will bear a number - they are easier to identify this way - as if she herself is on display at the toy store. She is suddenly overcome by the urge to wrap her up, to box her up like a china doll and carry her off far, far away.

The girl's face is glaring: unabashed and defiant. Accusatory, as if to say "I know you are not like us".

A strong sense of shame creeps up on her. She realises now how strange she must look to this child with her imposing camera. Most noticeably, the fear, uncertainty, and nervous anticipation does not cling to her as it does to so many around her; she walks with the knowledge that she will sleep soundly in her own bed tonight.

She finds herself marvelling at the way young children have the ability to confront you with your own failures as a human being, voicing the truths she herself is unwilling to see. And all of a sudden she knows she was wrong: this is not her story to tell. Nor is it shared, as if equally hers and equally theirs, but rather wholly, entirely their own. A life, a childhood, a family - she can never completely understand what has been stolen. And this little girl knows it.

Crouching down, she offers up her camera - her crown jewel - like a peace offering for the girl to inspect and attempts a weak smile.

"Hello," she says, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible; talking to young children has never been her forte. "What's your name?"

The girl's eyes narrow, assessing her.

Averting her gaze, the girl begins to twist her doll's dress round and round her finger until, still twisting non-existent fabric, she reluctantly mumbles, "Mika."

Relieved at being deemed acceptable, her face relaxes into a natural smile. She tells Mika her own name and that she is a photographer, come here to take pictures of people like her.

At this, Mika's expression morphs into one of curiosity, verging on excitement.

"Do you want to take my picture?" Mika asks, "Nobody's ever taken a photo of me before."

She hesitates. Could this be the photo she is after? Her missing piece?

But before she can reply, a murmur ripples through the crowd. Heads turn towards the road where, at last, five large buses have pulled up. In an instant, the street loses its nervous boredom, coming to life with frantic calls for family members and friends who have been swallowed up by the masses, diminished by the ringing shouts of the military police for order.

She can hear one name above all others. Pushing his way through the swarms a man materialises before them, his eyes fearful and searching: calling for his daughter.

"Papa!" Mika calls, "I'm here."

Locking his sight upon his daughter, his body relaxes in relief.

"There you are. Quick, Mama is waiting for us."

With an ease she almost feels jealous of, he scoops Mika up, shooting her a suspicious glare as he instinctively shields Mika with his body before charging back towards the jostling people. Over his shoulder, Mika's bright eyes meet hers, taunting. She thinks: *I can't lose her.*

Fumbling with her camera, she curses her slow hands as people rush by, obscuring her view. Whole minutes seem to pass before she finally hears the mechanical *click clack* and it is done. She has her photo.

Her world freezes. Now part of her will stand there, rooted to her spot as if she herself is a photo, trapped forever in the endless abyss of time. The barks of angry men, the buzzing of a thousand voices, the rumble of five engines departing one after another will fill her ears with a noiseless clamour. Until there is nothing.

Emptiness fills the road, seeping through the cracks in the sidewalks, squeezing out of windows, pushing up through drains, closing in on the one figure that remains. Eventually, even she will leave, crossing over to where her car has been waiting. Taking one last look around, she drives away.

* * *

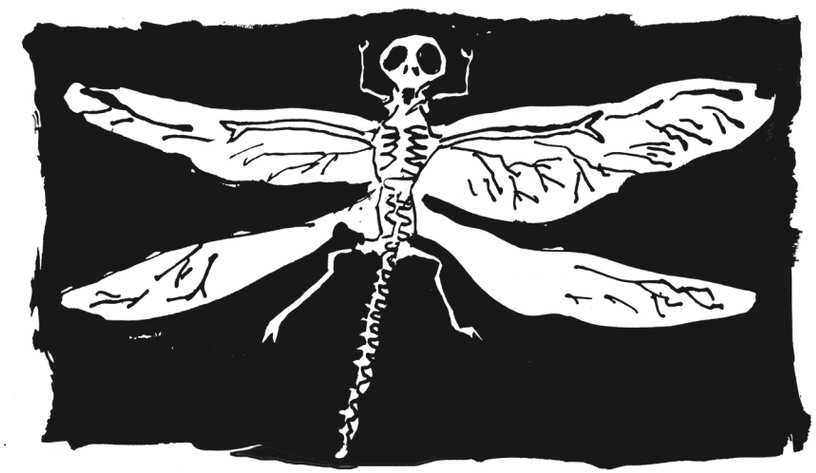
Across the street, a little girl walks by, clinging to her mother's hand. She laughs to herself at the game she has created all on her own, kicking a small stone along the sidewalk in a one-woman game of soccer until her mother tells her to stop it as she will scuff her new shoes.

But something about the stone catches the girl's attention.

She bends down to pick it up, only to find it is not a stone after all but a piece of porcelain. The design is incomplete, broken off from a larger shape, but she can make out the strange head of a beast with long twisting horns and cunning serpentine eyes, sharp claws bared out towards her. Entranced by its beauty, she picks it up and drops it into her pocket.

Author's note:

Dorothea Lange was a photographer commissioned by the US government to document the relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps across western America after the US declared war on Japan in 1941. She took many photos over a series of months and although inspired by her work, this scenario is entirely fictitious and not written with any particular photograph in mind.



FOR ANGKAR

Astrid Fauque
London

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

FOR ANGKAR

Cambodia, 1977

Angkar is your mother and father.

Angkar is your mother and father.

Angkar is your mother and father.

These are the words that have been whispered to the boy for years, indoctrinated into him until they are now as familiar as the murmur of the grasshoppers in the rice fields.

They are the words he now soundlessly recites at the bottom of the pit.

He does not remember everything that happened – how could he? So much had happened in just a day. All he can remember now is Met Kanak's face as he pushed him into the pit, saying something about 'eliminating the tree from the root'. What did he mean?

It all seemed like so long ago now.

Despite this, his mind drifts, drifts until he has finally dispersed the mist in his mind and found the memories he has ignored up till now. The boy turns over these fragments gently, examining them closely – freely – now that he knows that soon, he will remember them no longer. He knows that they are fragile – fragile like the blue dragonfly he had seen, a mere breath of a dusk ago.

* * *

The moon had been resting in the sky, low and oppressive as it watched from above. Its yellow, sickly face was the only source of light in an otherwise black void, where the clouds, spooked by their own serenity, were long since gone. The air was thick with smoke and heavy with dust, pressing against the cracked ground until even the Earth itself was suffocating under its weight and the only things that rose from it were the stubborn rice shoots.

All day, the boy observed the workers as they laboured, tending to Angkar's crops, their skin tanned and wrinkled, their clothes fitting where they should not, their bodies thin as bamboo shoots and frail as a dragonfly's. Their backs were hunched over as they worked, their movements rhythmic and symmetric, their bodies locked in an identical dance. One by one, they all rose above the golden rice-heads, wiping their brows and tilting their heads back before falling back down and moving forwards with the passing of the sun. This was no joyful dance – only a mechanical blur of motion executed by empty souls, repeated again and again until their bodies forgot how else to move. From dawn till dusk, they laboured, their black and red clothing their costumes and the grasshoppers' song their music, so that when the grasshoppers stopped singing, so too did they stop dancing.

True to Angkar, the boy had watched the workers carefully. He had punished those who were lazy. He had been loyal.

But there was one woman who had caught his attention. She should not have – by any means. Just like all the others, she was dressed in the black attire and the red chequered *krama* scarf. Her skin, stretching over her bones, was dark and tan. Just like any other worker, she moved in sync with the communal dance, her back arching before unfurling itself slowly as she stretched, lifting her eyes defiantly to the blue sky overhead.

The woman pulled her straw hat – her *do-un* – further over her eyes, shielding her face completely from his attentive gaze. He took a futile step forwards, his eyes squinting to get a better look at her as he told himself that he was observing her for any signs of disloyalty. The boy had been taught that even a single error could mean the slip of an enemy: a glance the wrong way, a step out of time. A woman pulling her hat down too low.

But the boy knew that that was not the reason he was scrutinising her, not the reason he was so impatient for her to rise again, for her to lift her hat. He noticed it in the small movements: a brisk flick of a wrist as she walked, a limp in her left leg. The movements that had, in another life, at another time, belonged to Kunthea. The woman whom he had once called his Ma.

* * *

Angkar is your mother and father.

The rifle's bulky shape jostled uncomfortably against the boy's still prepubescent frame as he patrolled the huts, their bare, skeletal bones of bamboo barely covered as they shivered in the wind. With a certain sense of satisfaction, he noted that as he walked past each cabin, the whispering inside quietened, the deafening silence reeking of fear. Furtively, his eyes skimmed past the shelters and through the branches as he paused in his tracks, examining one hut in particular. Through a crack in the wall, he could see two women – an older one, and a much younger one. They both had the customary short, black hair and attire, but something in their movements – similar to the woman he had seen earlier – made him pause.

That was when he saw her.

The boy let out a quiet gasp of surprise and recognition. Kunthea. His Ma. A name – a person – who should mean nothing to him.

But yet now, he could not turn away. He saw what he could not before: the hollow, gaunt eyes, the brittle, almost red hair. He saw, with quiet horror, the burning marks on Kunthea's wrists and shoulders and he saw her patched-over attire, each rough seam careless and ugly. Her head was slightly bowed, but even through the darkness, the moon shone onto her, a flashlight for his eyes. He saw her high cheekbones, her prominent nose, her softer brows. The boy saw his Ma – yet now, there was no doubt that it was her.

He moved closer, taking care not to be seen, his shoulders drawn in and his eyes darting around nervously as he placed himself just out of sight. He knew that with each hesitant, almost insignificant step, he was sealing his fate. He was betraying Angkar. But now, he could see another shape – a smaller one – cradled against his Ma, and he could not go back. Patches of shadows veiled the child's face, but the boy knew exactly who this girl was.

"Sokha."

His Ma's whisper cut through the air as she nudged the girl, running her hands through her hair as the infant rubbed at her eyes and lifted her head. Despite the moonlight, her features were blurred, her bones carving cruelly through skin where baby fat should have been and her complexion grey as she coughed into her *krama,* her countenance showing nothing but a childhood taken away too early.

The sick are victims of their own imagination.

Unwelcome memories came flooding back. The whisper of a mother's touch. The playful teasing of his siblings. His father's rumbling laugh.

His family.

Features that he had once known better than his own, now reduced to skin and bone.

With growing horror, the boy watched as his Ma reached into her own krama, and, with bony, trembling hands, took three beans out.

Three stolen beans.

Lowering her head, she passed them quickly over to Sokha, their hands, shrouded by shadow, touching for barely a second. The child clenched her small fist around them before opening her hand carefully to reveal three ripe seeds. The buzzing in his ears grew louder, the thundering sound reaching a crescendo as, with her other hand, Sokha took one of the beans between her index finger and thumb and placed it inside her mouth. For two more times, she repeated this action, her throat bobbing as she swallowed the precious, damning morsels.

He turned away, his breathing hard and ragged. He was young, but he knew what this meant for Sokha and his Ma – sure death, in a camp as harsh as this one.

Unless he decided not to denounce them.

The sick are victims of their own imagination.

The boy saw Sokha's colourless face – once so full of laughter and happiness – and he saw her bony wrists. He recalled Ma's long, black hair and her singing a lullaby to him. All before this. Before Angkar. Before his father had died on the fields, labouring, and his eldest siblings had been sent to fight. All for Angkar.

His breathing became shakier, the rifle he had been so proud of barely a minute ago now feeling like a foreign object.

Angkar is your mother and father.

* * *

The boy now remembers everything. He remembers how he had repeated the slogans dictated every day over the loudspeaker for years. He remembers how he had clung onto them like an anchor, seeking peace and comfort where none could be found.

He remembers it all: the caress of a lullaby and the questioning – how could he have ever forgotten the questioning? The look of betrayal on Ma's face. He remembers their sentencing, and the pickaxe and the pit. The shallow grave where their bodies were to lie. The ghost of a mother's hand, resting upon his shoulder.

A pair of burning black eyes, that would follow him to the end.

Angkar is your mother and father.

* * *

There are many things of which the boy is unsure. He is unsure whether the rice shoots will continue to grow. He is unsure whether the frail, glass-like dragonfly will fly for much longer. He is unsure of his name. He has forgotten it.

There is one thing he is sure of, however: that he will be rewarded greatly for this. Angkar told him so. He has done the right thing. He has been noble.

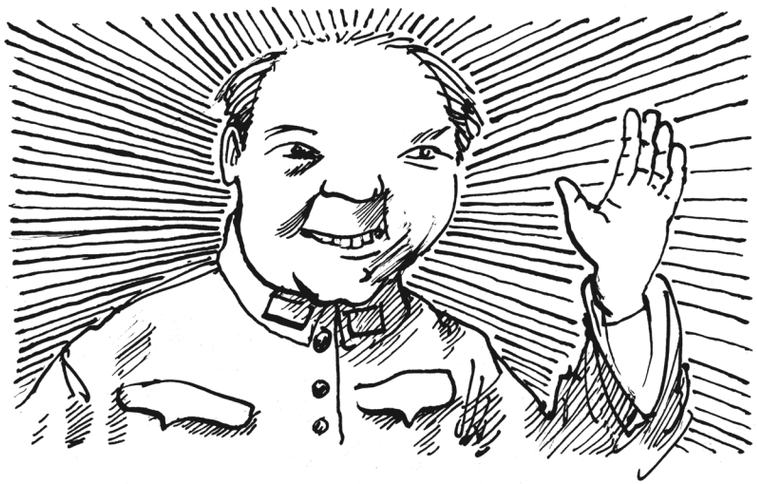
And thus, cradling this thought in his mind, the constant buzzing in his ears slowly fades and the dull pain throbs away. His pulse slows, and his thoughts become simpler and simpler until all he sees and hears is darkness. He cannot move – instead, he is content to lie there, a red pool forming around his head, his last thoughts of his courage and nobility until they morph into two words which have shaped his whole life, from his first breath to his shuddering last.

For Angkar!

Author's note:

When I began researching for this competition, I knew that I wanted to write a story set in a period of oppression – of people fighting for justice. Of course, there were many infamous, horrific periods that came up, but one that interested – and disturbed – me in particular was the Khmer Rouge, the brutal genocide which took place in Cambodia from 1975-1979. As I researched further on this topic, I grew increasingly horrified at what had happened, but most of all, I was struck by the fact that I had never heard of the Khmer Rouge before. Of course, I do not pretend that what I do not know is not common knowledge, but the fact that I had never heard anything even related to this relatively-recent, mass genocide which killed over 2 million Cambodians – not even in my history lessons at school – shocked me greatly. It shocked me to think that, if not for this competition, I may not have learned about the Khmer Rouge until years and years later.

This story is set in the year 1977, at the peak of the genocide. I wanted to explore how cruel and manipulative the regime was – not only to the people, but also to their own soldiers. My story follows a nameless boy, who, despite being a cadre member and supposedly being at a higher rank, suffers the same fate as all the rest.



THE POETRY LESSON

Logan Gordon
Tunbridge Wells

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

THE POETRY LESSON

Anqing, Anhui Province, 1966

The boy's foot shifts to avoid the trail of blood slowly tracing its way through the cracks in the paved road. The boy readjusts; he can exert more force from this angle, and besides, he can't afford to stain his Red Guard canvas shoes. His eyes seem to focus on some object beyond his victim, as if paying no notice to his dutiful task. Only weeks ago, it may have been different. A bead of sweat rolls from the boy's neck, across his shoulders, and falls to deposit itself neatly in the growing puddle of blood, tears and rain. Beneath him the man's face shines with the tears pooling in the wrinkles so familiar to the boy.

Each strike encourages a roar from the hundred-strong sea of red armbands, with chants of "Demolish the four olds!" and "Long live Chairman Mao!" rippling tsunami-like through the square. A girl the boy knew from class stands near the front. She silently mouths the slogans, her wide eyes glazed over, her pale hands clutching her red book like a lifeline. The wind whistles through the square, lifting the edges of torn documents as they scatter, blowing open half-burned books, remnants of forbidden media. A page of the boy's old textbook dances its way through the air, resting briefly against the man's broken body. A flicker of recognition passes over the boy's face, before he picks up the page and throws it on the burning pile of knowledge behind him.

His eyes begin to water. The others think it is the smoke.

★

The boy shifted his foot to stop the pencil meandering across the floor of the classroom. He picked it up and returned it to its owner; a small, pale girl with wide eyes. She smiled in silent thanks and reburied herself into her studies. The boy's world was quiet then, content. The thrum of the town outside the open windows, the steady scrape of chalk across the board, the faint scent of ink that lingered on his fingers. He felt more at home here than anywhere; even with the Chairman's portrait looming over everything in the room. He stayed behind most afternoons, sweeping dust into neat piles, while Mr. Zhao packed away papers he warned no one else could see. Today was no different; yet it changed everything.

"Do you know Li Bai?" his teacher asked, his voice low, as though afraid the gentle gusts of wind might carry his words. The boy shook his head – but the name rang an old bell, from deep in his childhood. His mother, no, father, must have mentioned it. "He wrote of the moon," Mr. Zhao continued, "and of home, and…" His words were stifled as if to speak more would break a spell. "You will see." He pulled a slim, worn volume from his desk and slid it toward the boy with careful delicacy. The title was faint, and the pages curled, it gave off a faint musk smell. The boy blew a thin layer of dust off its cover, and began to open the book. Mr. Zhao touched his hand. "Not here," he said, "not even at home. This may cost me my life and put you in danger; understand this, before you take it." The boy nodded, slipped the book into his bag and left the classroom wordlessly. He would read it tonight, he decided, in the sanctuary of the forest near his house. The anticipation grew in his chest like a small flame, warming him, enticing him.

At home he ate the grey food ravenously, eager to leave. In the forest towering dawn redwoods peered down on him. The soft birdcall and implacable scent of the woodland led him to a small green enclave, punctuated yellow with witch hazel. The fading sunlight struggled as lone rays sought tiny gaps in the leaf cover, casting small pools of light all across the forest floor. The boy sat on a fallen tree, removed the book from his jacket and lost himself within the verse.

"At the foot of my bed, moonlight

Yes, I suppose there is frost on the ground.

Lifting my head I gaze at the bright moon

Bowing my head, thinking of home."

★

The first posters appeared overnight. They bloomed like flowers across the school walls; thick strokes of black ink bleeding through the paper, names written and crossed out, accusations scrawled beneath. The boy traced over one with his finger before class began. *Counterrevolutionary.* The words were beginning to sound familiar, like a song he did not yet know the lyrics of but could hum. Morning assembly changed too. Where once the headmaster had spoken of diligence and obedience, now his voice carried the hard edge of warning and reproach. "The enemies of the people hide among us," he declared. "They wear the masks of family, neighbours, teachers." His eyes swept the courtyard. For a moment, the boy thought they lingered on him.

At home, the air became heavier. His mother stopped humming when she cooked, instead her breath was short and shallow. His father, who had always sat upright during dinner, now bent low over his bowl. The boy heard the word whispered outside their gate: *landlord.* His grandfather's old life had cursed them all, though the house they lived in was now bare and their fields long surrendered. One evening, he found his father burning photographs in the yard, the fire's light carving hollows into his face. "It's safer this way," his father murmured. The boy said nothing, watching the young face of his grandfather melt and blacken in the flames.

At school, his classmates spoke now in slogans, painted the walls with them, chanted them during breaks, quoting lines from the Red Book as if each word were a medal or a shield. The boy tried to join in, but the phrases caught in his throat, feeling alien against his tongue.

★

On that day the first struggle meeting was held, the boy stood at the edge of the crowd, clapping when they clapped, shouting when they shouted. His voice cracked. Later he sat again beneath the same trees where he had first read Li Bai; the forest was darker now. He took out the secret volume, its spine soft from use. For a moment, he thought of Mr. Zhao's cautious smile, the way his eyes had glimmered when he spoke of poetry. Then, from the direction of the town, he heard the distant lure of loudspeakers; the voice of the Chairman, calling for all black elements to turn themselves in. He knew then he would not read tonight.

Trudging back into town, the boy's senses were assaulted; by the rain that pummelled the pavements the boy had walked so many times before;

by the dark smoke that drifted low over the soaking rooftops, clinging to the tiles like a second skin. The streets pulsed with lifeless noise: the rhythmic stomp of boots and the electric crack of a loudspeaker echoing the endless slogans into the dusk. In the square, a hive-like crowd was dispersing around a makeshift stage where desks and chairs from the school had been piled; burning leaves of textbooks and colourful paintings danced among the flames, their patterns melting into each other in the rain. A young child, pink hands stained black, poured ink slowly across a row of books before throwing them into the fire. Ash fell like the first snow on a beautiful winter's day onto the faces turned upward. The smell of burning, mingled with the faint sweetness of rotting fruit from an overturned cart, invaded the boy's sinuses and pierced his reverie. He turned towards the school, past walls where posters hung, crooked, names and faces crossed out, replaced, crossed out once more. It was as if the town were trying to erase its own memory.

Entering his school, the corridors seemed narrower and his classroom seemed smaller than the boy remembered. Dust swirled through the room, fog-like, and the slant of light from the door illuminated the minute particles suspended in the thick air. The chalkboard was free of Mr. Zhao's distinctive writing, instead boasting large white brush strokes of the standard issue slogans. The boy saw his teacher, standing alone, like a stranger to the room. Mr. Zhao's eyes were directed at the rain collecting in little pools inside tiny cracks on the windowsill. The boy paused, frozen, in the doorway. The two remained absolutely still for an instant. All the desks were gone. Only their imprint remained fossilised, in the layer of dust blanketing the wooden floor. Mr. Zhao turned his head, his eyes tranquil, yet also distant, as though already half the world away. The boy's breath caught; the same silence that had once held questions now held something heavier. Guilt? Shame? The boy wanted to speak, needed to speak, but still, nothing came out of his mouth.

A whistle sounded, outside, perhaps near the cafeteria. Mr. Zhao seemed to wince at the sharp sound, as if it carried more than a noise, an accusation. Mr. Zhao straightened his tie, put on his jacket and walked right past the boy, into the hallway, and on to the open air.

The boy stood for a moment. He regarded the classroom for a final time, remembering where he had sat, where he had asked questions, where he had been happiest. He turned away and walked through the door. The once-bustling hallways, now empty, amplified the sound of his

shoes on the tiles like the beat of a drum. Each step seemed to sync to the rhythmic thudding of his heart as he made his way through the desolate school. Outside, the moon shone in the reflection of the rainwater that carpeted the grey streets. The moon powerless tonight.

A group of his old classmates were gathered on the northern corner of the square. The boy tried to turn away, pretending to forget something, but it was futile. The group thrust upon him clothes, a small book, and a worn baton. The boy did not need to examine it to ascertain what was caked onto its surface. He pulled on his newly issued clothes, slipping into shoes that were far too big. A girl much older than him forced his arm into the Red Guard armband. There was, now, no going back.

A crowd had already formed in the square, ever-growing, ever-baying. The boy was pushed forward towards the centre of the square where he could see clearly the silhouette of a man, tie straightened, buckled on the ground ahead of him. The boy was pushed forward again…

The boy's foot shifted to avoid the trail of blood slowly tracing its way through the cracks in the paved road.

★

Anqing, Anhui Province, 1986

The three-year-old tugs at his father's sleeve. He wants to have ice cream, he demands, it is hot enough. But his father is transfixed by the sight of an old man across the road. He is limping heavily as he carries his shopping. The father wants to shout out but no words leave his mouth. He crosses the road, sweeping his son under his arm, dodging the relentless traffic. They follow the old man slowly, until the father lifts the shopping bag from the old man's hand. The old man looks up, surprised, but he lets him take the bag, a quiet relief. The three-year old smiles up at him and the old man's eyes wrinkle with pleasure.

At the door of the drab apartment block the old man takes back his shopping and turns to enter the building.

The father speaks softly, "Mr. Zhao."

The old man looks back.

The father bows his head deep to his chest, his voice is choking him. "Mr. Zhao."

Mr. Zhao holds up his hand to speak no more.

"Hàoyú, you have a beautiful son."

Mr. Zhao turns away.

THE EXECUTION OF A QUEEN

Sarah Hyde
Bedford

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

THE EXECUTION OF A QUEEN

EDWARD

The nurses were all rushing today. They let me play knights. I like knights. My father looks like a knight when he wears his armour and it's all silver and shiny. Father wasn't here today. When I asked Cecily if Father would see me today, she said that he would be gone today, that he was at court. When I asked for Queen Catherine and that I liked the Queen Catherine, she said that the Queen would not be coming to see me any more and that I "shouldn't say such things, you do not like her any more".

"But I do like her!" I had told Cecily. "I do, I do, I do."

Cecily had told me off for that. I can't like Queen Catherine any more. Maybe when I'm grown up I can see her again, maybe Father would allow it.

But not today.

Today was for playing knights now and learning numbers and the Bible later.

I picked up my sword. It was light and wood but to me it was just like the ones in the stories. I swished it around the air. When I am grown, I shall be a great knight. I waved my sword again. I shall protect the princesses and win fame. I will fight a dragon. I will be moral. Only the bad men will die when I am grown and a knight and a king. I will be a knight king, and men and women will be safe from harm wherever I am. My sword dropped a little when I coughed, but Cecily said it was just some dust in my throat. I continued to play knights until lessons in the afternoon.

ELIZABETH

"What does this word here mean, Elizabeth?"

I fiddled with the end of my quill pen. "I don't know."

Nicholas sighed. "You do know, you're a bright young lady and we just went over this."

I looked down at the word again. *Sola fide,* written in Nicholas' elegant hand. He often said my penmanship was as good as his on some days. I like those days, it feels nice, though today I was not sure I could write at all. My thoughts were not on Latin, they were not even in Hatfield House. Nicholas sighed again. He would keep waiting for as long as it took.

"Sola Fide, faith alone," I answered finally.

"Very good." He reached for another piece of paper with another phrase written. "How about-"

Whichever phrase he wanted translated next, I did not hear it. I played with the soft feathers of the quill. Swan feathers were terribly expensive yet there was one in my hand. When it eventually breaks, who would give me a new one? Not my governess nor my tutor, they could not afford to do so. Would I have to beg the king for one, perhaps at New Year as a gift? Or would I have to resign myself to a worse quill pen from a less royal bird. That would fit well, once royal, then less so.

"Elizabeth?" Nicholas tapped the paper in front of him. *Sola Gratia.* I had no interest in grace that day. There was a question I needed answering.

"Is Queen Katherine being executed today?"

The tutor grew quiet. Eventually he gave a simple "Yes."

"Will it be in the Tower of London?"

"Yes, that is often where traitors to the crown are executed. She was disloyal to your father."

"Was my mother executed there also?"

Nicholas seemed to go a shade paler. Maybe he had forgotten about my mother, my father tried his best to. If he had his way then I'm sure I should never have even learnt her name as he waited for her to become

lost in memories. But talk is harder to let die, and so are the etches she left on the land and within me. I never knew her, and yet she scored my heart as only a mother can.

"Yes, she was my lady," Nicholas said quietly, before growing in voice once again. "Come now Elizabeth, we must continue your education, no more talk of Katherine or executions. Focus on the scripture."

So I did not talk of her again. Later that day, a messenger arrived, letter in hand, to tell my protectors that Katherine was dead. I wept that night; for Katherine, for my mother, or for myself, I did not know.

During prayers when I was alone in my bed, the tears now dried on my face, I pledged to God that I would never ever marry. I wonder if He heard me.

MARY

My father's court was with him only in name, I thought as I walked through the silent corridors. They were all in Whitehall Palace, but the king was accepting no visitors to his principal rooms so the court was hiding in the far side of the palace. "Wallowing in his lost love," someone had said at breakfast. "The poor king was deceived viciously by the little queen." He was not 'wallowing in lost love', I was certain of that.

He was just angry at looking a fool – that not even marrying a woman younger than his daughter could make him seem dynamic and vigorous.

I could've laughed when I heard someone suggesting that his majesty was grieving. He would grieve Katheryn as much as he had grieved my mother, which was not at all. The click of shoes echoed down the hallway as I made my way from the chapel to my chambers. They weren't as grand as the ones I had when I was still called Princess. When I was a child, even the bedding at Greenwich was embroidered with gold thread in a fleur-de-lis and lion design. Now though, when they simply called me a Lady, I had the same room as all the other courtiers – fancier than a pauper but not the chambers of a princess. I was sitting by the window, watching the Thames flow past when two lady's maids knocked and entered.

"Some courtiers are having a meal above the Great Hall, my lady," one began, "they are asking for the honour of your attendance."

"Who is hosting?"

"Lady Margaret Douglas, my lady. The Lord Chancellor and the Lord High Admiral are in attendance also."

"Alright, thank you Alice. Please tell my cousin I shall join her momentarily." Alice curtsied and left. I turned to the maid who remained. "Shall we have a bet, Mabel? Three shillings to say that the hall will be as busy and lively as another coronation."

"I'm afraid I cannot afford your bets, my lady."

It was a shame; I do love a good bet. And I do like to win.

"Would you like me to fix your hair before you go?" Mabel asked.

I agreed. I needed to look elegant, today more than most, for my father's honour as much as my own. By the time Mabel had braided my hair, replaced the linen cap and returned the French hood to its rightful position, the sun had reached its peak.

Katheryn's execution was to happen in the morning. It would likely be done already.

When I arrived at the hall, it seemed to be all aflutter – much different to the quiet near the king's chambers. The hall had near fifty people which created a pleasant warmth against the February air which had frozen me in the corridor. Everyone was talking in hushed tones, or attempting to do so. Some were sitting in large groups, people leaning over the dark wood to hear what a lord sat four people over was saying. Some were in smaller groups, discussing the affair privately with looks as though they knew more than others despite being in Whitehall all day. The servants worked alone, flitting between one courtier and another; refilling goblets, plating food, passing messages, hearing everything. The name Katheryn was on everyone's lips. I took my spot next to the Lady Margaret.

"Cousin, is it done?"

Margaret nodded. "Baron Russell heard it directly from the Tower messenger. Katheryn Howard is no more. A pity. So young."

Younger does not mean more innocent. A maid brought over some wine. I brought the goblet to my lips. I knew that she should not be Queen the moment I met her – too young, too flighty, hardly noble and

not at all royal. It was a horrid decision by my father. She took away two of my maidens just because she believed I had slighted her. Had I? Perhaps. But she should not have spoken to me as if she was the Queen.

And yet.

Watching all the courtiers talk about Katheryn's alleged adulteries and deficiencies, I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She was, for all intents and purposes, just a girl, younger than myself. She was not made to be royalty but was put there by my father in his unending quest to find a bride that suits him – a task he will never complete. People were already talking about another queen despite Katheryn's blood still pooling on the scaffold. Kathryn did not deserve to be Queen, but she did not deserve death either.

I took another sip of wine. It did not make me feel better. I stared at the goblet, pewter and polished. The wine was a deep crimson. Does it look like Katheryn's blood, the one staining Tower Green? Does it look like the blood on my mother's thigh when she birthed me or Henry or my other dead brothers and sisters? Does it look like the blood of the king's mistress called Queen when her head was removed from her body – is the blood of the executed cousins mingling in the grass? Does it look like the King's lost love when she couldn't move from the childbed and died there? Does it look like the "King's sister's" blood, tainted by him so she will never remarry.

Will it ever end? They were already talking about another queen.

In my chalice, the wine was definitely Katheryn's. Did she choose the vintage when she was queen for a planned celebration that never arrived? Will the next queen do the same? Today the wine was Katheryn's and the blood was Katheryn's.

I suddenly felt ill.

The court kept talking, the chalices kept getting refilled, and the blood won't stop spilling.

This country will never be free of queens but won't allow one with any power. Matilda was never recognised as queen, Isabella couped her husband, my aunt Margaret fought in Scotland to be on her child's regency council; but it was never enough.

If I am ever queen of anywhere, how long before I am displaced, or denied, or forgotten? If I am queen, I shall make a name for myself before this can happen.

I pray no more Tudor queens have their blood spilled on Tower Green.

"A message for you, my lady." My lady. That would always hurt.

I unfolded the letter. My cousin Frances would be coming to court with her daughters, she wanted to know if we could spend some time together. I would enjoy that immensely. I planned to send my reply when I returned to my room. Frances has two daughters, I recalled when musing her letter at the meal. What's her eldest named again? I tapped my foot, trying to remember. Finally, it came to me. Ah yes, Jane Grey.

THE WRITER'S CRICKET MATCH

Joshua Medland
London

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

THE WRITER'S CRICKET MATCH

The Angelsea Arms, South Kensington - 4:00 pm, Friday, September 16, 1887

Augustine Birrell was slumped in a chair, fast asleep. He had been at the Angelsea Arms for about three hours now, and still nobody had arrived. He had been passing the time by drinking vast quantities of apple cider and had just decided that it was time to make a start on the beer, when he had fallen asleep. Drool trickled slowly down his chin. His moustache twitched. Although he was still in his early thirties, he could easily have passed for late fifties, especially in his current state.

It was strange that Birrell was sleeping, as the pub was not a very restful place. Tankards were clinked together and slammed down onto the tables as drunken fools sang, gambled and chattered. It was unseasonably cool outside, but inside it would have been the same at any time of year; a dimly lit, cosy refuge. The landlord could be heard animatedly telling his more sober guests about his past glories. A loud crashing of utensils came from the kitchen, informing the patrons that dinner was approaching.

"Birrell!"

Birrell woke with a start. He looked around wildly for a few moments, before he spotted Barrie. "I wasn't asleep," he said quickly.

"How long have you been here then, Birrell?" asked Barrie cordially.

"Oh, only about ten minutes," Birrell replied. "Do you want any cider?"

"Oh no, I never touch the stuff. I prefer spirits," replied Barrie.

"Oh! Oh yes. So do I," said Birrell.

Barrie helped himself to the port. "So, Birrell, how are you?" he asked, only to find that Birrell was asleep again. Barrie smiled. He had a permanently austere facial expression, with a high hairline and a luscious moustache, of which he was very proud, but, despite his frightening countenance, he was kind and good-humoured at heart.

A few more men entered. "Jerome! Gilmour! Doyle!" exclaimed Barrie. "How glad I am to see you. Birrell's here too." They glanced at Birrell. Birrell rolled over in his chair and began muttering to himself.

There was a silence as the men all filled their glasses. "Birrell seems more energetic than usual today," commented Gilmour dryly.

Gilmour was a lean, wiry man with short brown hair and a carefully trimmed handlebar moustache. Doyle, in contrast to Gilmour, was a heavy, commanding figure, with a deep, booming voice and a thick, intimidating walrus moustache. It was truly a Golden Age for moustaches. "I thought this was a sports team," he snapped. "What's Birrell doing here?" At this, he glared at Birrell, who was snoring peacefully in his chair.

"I believe it's his routine to sleep at these hours," said Jerome. "All great men have their eccentricities."

"Then why does Birrell have them?" snarled Doyle.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," interrupted Barrie. "As you may have guessed, I have gathered you all here for three reasons. Firstly, this pub is close to my house. Secondly, they have the finest oysters north of the Thames. Lastly, as you should already know, we have a cricket match tomorrow. And as we are the core team, I have invited you all here to plan our tactics, and drink."

"Drinking is very good for the mind," said Jerome. "A drop of something warm makes a man feel happy. And when a man is happy, he achieves great things." Birrell seemed to nod his head slowly, clearly achieving great things in his sleep.

"As I was saying, gentlemen," interposed Barrie, "we have a game, and as advised in my telegram, we will be playing against the village of Shere. My friend Lady Arthur Russell had the idea. Dickie Askew, the landlord of the White Horse Inn is a keen player for Shere, you know. A horribly competent left-hander."

"He sounds like a fool," scoffed Jerome.

"He has also offered to give us match tea," added Barrie.

"What a splendid fellow!" said Jerome. "We'd better give him a few runs."

"His friend Sherwin Hannes also plays for Shere. I hear he has a great back foot shot. Claims to be a detective in his spare time, you know."

"I'll give him something to investigate," murmured Doyle.

"The train leaves Waterloo at eleven," said Barrie. "Strategy will be discussed on the train with everybody else, and glory awaits us."

"If we're discussing tactics on the train, what was the point of us coming here?" steamed Doyle.

"Why, to drink, of course," said Jerome, refilling his glass.

Doyle scowled, and for a few moments seemed to be about to respond, but evidently could not think of anything to say, so he refilled his glass and moved his eyebrows threateningly at Jerome.

"Cheers," said Barrie, and they all clinked their glasses, waking Birrell, who sprang up yelling, but was soothed when Gilmour handed him some more cider.

Waterloo Station, 10:45 am, Saturday, September 17, 1887

Waterloo Station was a perplexing place. A torrent of humans washed through the station, all struggling to make their way along the warren of corridors and ticket offices. Here all etiquette and manners were forgotten and humans were wild once again, like their primal ancestors. Men and women alike barged and chided each other. Below all the commotion was the constant, mechanical chugging of engines. A train's imminent arrival was signalled by a screeching whistle.

The company was beginning to gather when they were confronted by a strange vision. Thomson, the famous explorer, had arrived, wearing an elegant nightgown of French silk. He had been unsure what to wear, not being used to the current social norms, and so had opted for comfort.

"Is this what you wear in the jungle?" asked Jerome.

"No, my jungle nightgown is similar, but it has lace on it," replied Thomson, unflinchingly.

With this matter resolved, the men boarded the train with considerable difficulty, owing to the astounding bulk of their luggage, and the constant stream of short-tempered passengers jostling them as they passed. They had wanted to go first-class, but the first-class staff suggested that they would be more comfortable in the second-class, due to their extensive cricketing luggage.

Once they were all assembled in their carriage, Barrie cleared his throat. "I shall be the captain of the team," he announced. "You will go at silly point, Mason," he added. Mason looked confused but insisted that he was brilliant at going at silly point, that he had often played at silly point before, and that he was actually rather famous for his prowess at silly point.

"Now, tactics. I am sure you all know how to play cricket," Barrie continued.

"That's debatable," interjected Doyle indiscreetly, motioning his head towards Birrell, who was not listening as intently as he appeared to be and smiling vacantly back at Doyle.

"Du Chaillu, you shall be square-leg," said Barrie. "Square-leg, keep your eye on Partridge when he is bowling. And Partridge, when you bowl, remember to keep your eye on square-leg, and remember that he is keeping his eye on you. If you happen to be bowled out first ball, pretend that you let yourself be bowled out for your own amusement, and then go and sit behind the hedge. And remember, we may not have talent, but we have enthusiasm, and we'll jolly well use that instead."

There was an awed or perhaps apathetic silence which pervaded the carriage after Barrie's speech. The rhythmic clanking sound of the train moving along the track was now louder and more persistent. There was a strongly repugnant smell of oil and dust. Occasionally, one could faintly hear the soothing melodies of the grazing cows outside. A small boy, seated on his mother's knee, looked quizzically at Thomson's nightgown.

However, Doyle had played second-class cricket before and had learnt from the professionals, so he felt unsatisfied, and proceeded to address the team himself. He bloviated for a few minutes, after which the team were in a considerably less advanced stage of knowledge about the match than before, but everyone was certain his speech had some sort of metaphorical meaning, and gave each other knowing looks, to imply that they knew what the meaning was.

Barrie, noticing that they had nearly arrived, hastily addressed his team. "Now, quickly, is there anything else anybody would like to say? Are there any problems?"

Birrell raised his hand. "How *do* you play cricket?" he asked.

Albury Hill, Shere, 1:30 p.m., Saturday, September 17, 1887

The team stumbled out of the horse-drawn wagonettes and got their first look at the spot which would host the Writer's Cricket Club's first ever match. The pitch was freshly cut, surrounded by a lush vegetation of trees marking the boundaries.

Marriott Watson had not come to Shere on the train with the others. His mode of transport was a beautiful specimen with three wheels, which was studied with reverence by members of both sides. "It's a Butler's Velocycle, you know," Marriott Watson said. "It's not for sale. My friend Edward lent it to me." It was poked and prodded for a few minutes, until Barrie removed it from plain view, fearing it would distract the players from the game. This caused a great stir, as Marriott Watson was sure that somebody had stolen his velocycle, and flew into a paroxysm until Barrie put it back on display. Birrell had missed the excitement, as he had been diligently practising his batting skills, albeit he was holding the bat the wrong way round.

The umpire made an awful fuss about Thomson's outfit, which was deemed entirely unreasonable. Thomson's argument was that his nightgown was white like all the others, and that it didn't matter what he played in anyway, and that he wouldn't stand for old men in nankeen breeches ordering him about. The umpire's argument was that if other men saw Thomson wearing a nightgown playing cricket, they would be inspired to also come in nightgowns. Eventually, they agreed that Thomson would stand around on the pitch, doing nothing, which Thomson did not oppose, as that had been his intention anyway.

The announcer read out the names of the players.

"The Writer's Cricket Club

Captain: J.M. Barrie Esquire. Forfarshire

Wicket keeper: Thomas Gilmour. Lincolnshire

With:

J.B. Partridge. Middlesex

Jerome K. Jerome. Staffordshire

A.E.W. Mason Esquire. Kent

W. Meredith. Surrey

H.B. Marriott Watson. Victoria

A. Birrell Esquire. Lancashire

Joseph Thomson. Dumfries and Galloway

Paul Du Chaillu. Île-de-France

A. Conan Doyle Esquire. Midlothian."

They were to be fielding first, due to Barrie's logic that they would 'look less idiotic in the field than at the bat'. Doyle and Dickie Askew locked eyes for the first time. Mason stood in his unique stance at what he had assumed was silly point. Partridge marked out his run-up. Uncertain cheers came from the modest crowd at the sidelines.

Barrie took one last glance at his team. They were ready.

Epilogue

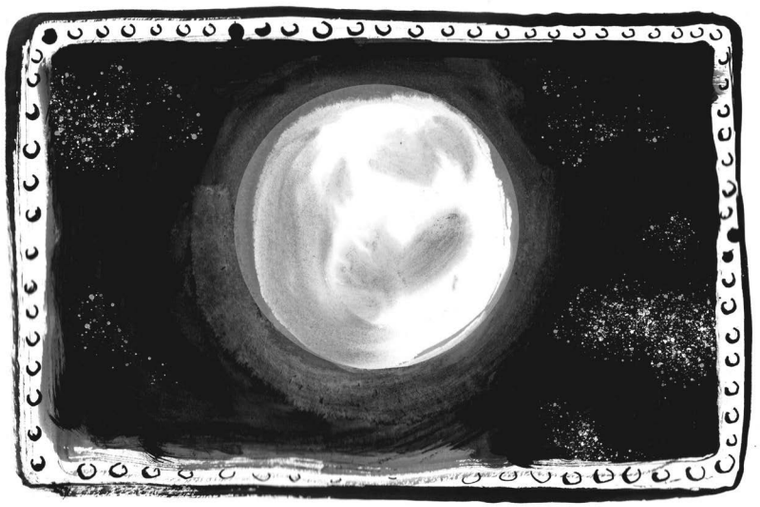
Unfortunately, Barrie's cricket team was very clearly not ready. Partridge, when bowling, in some miracle of physics, managed to injure Gilmour, who promptly retired from the match, leaving the team with no wicketkeeper. Despite the noble efforts of Captain Barrie, scoring two runs out of the eleven they scored overall, their opponents, the Shere Fire Brigade, were evidently not as hapless as the Writer's Cricket Club had originally imagined. Dickie Askew, who was almost definitely a bull disguised as a man, preyed upon the deplorability of the team. About halfway into the match, the less gifted of Barrie's teammates (ten of them in total) decided that their captain knew as little about cricket as they did and grew demoralised. However, fate knew the rightful victor and a few months later, the Writer's Cricket Club beat Shere by a landslide, aided considerably by a mysterious anonymous man who had replaced Birrell on the journey to the match. Barrie said it was one of the 'most significant events in the history of sports in Britain, or even the world'.

And indeed, *to them,* it was.

Author's note:

This story is about the cricket team assembled by J.M. Barrie in 1887 with notable authors including Jerome K. Jerome, Arthur Conan Doyle and the Liberal politician and humorous essayist Augustine Birrell. Whilst there are a few books and articles on the actual statistics of the cricket matches, there is little or no information about how the players interacted with each other outside of the games.

This story is an imagined account of the events leading up to the first match against the Surrey village of Shere in September 1887.



THE SURVEYOR

Naivedya Agarwal
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

THE SURVEYOR

Krasnoyarsk-26 was not a real place. Not on any map the Americans had. It was a cipher, a code name for a secret city where the finest minds of the Soviet Union worked under the cold, watchful eye of the state.

Anya Petrov, with her hands calloused from wiring circuit boards and an intellect sharp enough to cut through steel, was one of those minds. She had joined the program not for glory, but for the work. And to get away from a collective farm where the only future was dirt under her nails and the ache of harvest. Her mother, a woman who believed in omens and the stubborn magic of the soil, had called it a fool's errand.

"The heavens are for God, not for man," she had said, her voice laced with the heavy resignation of a life lived close to the earth.

Anya had quietly packed her bags, a small suitcase of practical clothes and a handful of books, leaving behind the smell of damp earth for the clean, sterile scent of the lab.

In the humming silence of the cleanroom, Anya adjusted her goggles, the fluorescent lights glinting off the lenses. Beside her, Alexei, a nervous, brilliant engineer who spoke more to the moon probes than to people, triple-checked the wiring. His spectacles, thick as bottle glass, magnified his wide, anxious eyes.

They were working on the new Luna lander, a project that was falling further and further behind schedule. The Americans had Apollo – the glamour, the public launches, the press conferences. The Soviets had secrecy. Pressure. Korolev's death had left a vacuum that Mishin, his successor, was failing to fill.

The whispers in the hallways were of missed deadlines, vanishing budgets, and increasingly impossible demands from Moscow.

"Did you hear the news from Baikonur?" Alexei asked, his voice barely a whisper, the sound swallowed by the low, constant hum of the air filters.

Anya didn't look up from her work, soldering a delicate connection with the precision of a watchmaker. "Another test failure?"

"Worse. The N1 rocket. Another one. They say it broke up completely this time. And they say the Americans are on track for a lunar flyby. A dress rehearsal."

Anya's stomach tightened. The pressure was a physical weight. The whole city of Krasnoyarsk-26, all 100,000 secret souls, depended on their success. The endless shifts, the bland cafeteria food, the gnawing anxiety – everything coalesced into a single, suffocating dread.

She thought of the Americans, of the televised launches, the smiling astronauts. Their names were known across the world. Gus Grissom, Ed White, Roger Chaffee. In the propaganda, they were rivals. Enemies. But their fiery end in the Apollo 1 capsule had sent a quiet shudder through Krasnoyarsk-26.

The engineers had observed a silent, unofficial moment of mourning. Theirs was a shared profession, a shared risk.

Her work was a quiet, anonymous rebellion against a regime that demanded control but offered only fear in return. When the Luna probes landed, she knew her hands had touched those circuits, her logic had governed their path. It was her small way of touching the stars herself.

One evening, after a sixteen-hour shift, Anya and Alexei sat by the Yenisei River, the frigid air biting at their cheeks. The sky was a vast, indifferent canvas of stars, a stark contrast to the small, constrained life they lived.

"We are so far away," Alexei said, staring into the dark river, the lights of the secret city a muted glow behind them. "From everything."

"Not from here," Anya said, her voice soft. She pulled her coat tighter around her. "From here, the stars look close enough to touch."

"The Americans think they own them now," Alexei muttered. "We were first. Gagarin. And yet…"

"And yet, our rockets explode," Anya finished for him, her breath a white plume in the cold. "The stars don't care about our politics, Alexei. The physics is the same for them as for us."

Anya had heard rumours of the American moon rocks, of the prestige and resources that followed Apollo. She had also heard whispers of the loss of the Apollo 1 crew. The propaganda machine had twisted the narrative, but the truth was too heavy to hide completely. In the heart

of the machine, Anya felt a kinship. Both sides were pushing against the same limits, paying with lives and fortunes.

One night, Anya was assigned to an inventory check of the lunar rock samples brought back by a Luna robotic probe. The sample box, no bigger than a shoebox, was lined with protective material. Inside, a handful of dark, unassuming pebbles rested, as inert and lifeless as any stones from the Yenisei. But they weren't. They were from the moon, a prize wrested from the cold vacuum of space.

As she worked, her fingers tracing the contours of the box, the silence of the lab was broken by a quiet, rhythmic beeping from a separate device. It was a seismometer, a piece of equipment they had borrowed from a more advanced American probe. The Soviet version worked, but Anya and Alexei both knew the American design was better. It was meant to measure moonquakes, but here, in the lab, it was picking up a different rhythm.

Suddenly, a new sound began to emit from the device – a faint, but unmistakable, code. Anya and Alexei froze. The beeping was Morse.

Not from space, but from another, even more restricted room. Anya had seen the equipment go into that room, but no one was allowed inside.

Alexei's eyes were wide with a mix of fear and wonder. "What… what is that?"

Anya put a finger to her lips. She began to write down the code, her hand trembling slightly. It was a string of digits, a technical sequence. But then, as the message ended, it was followed by a single word: Bravo.

The next day, they learned the N1 rocket had failed catastrophically. Mishin was livid. His rage echoed through the sterile hallways like a physical force. But a week later, an American broadcast came through. They had completed a successful lunar flyby.

Anya looked at Alexei, and for the first time, she saw something beyond fear in his eyes. Understanding. Recognition.

The code wasn't for them. It was a message passed between closed rooms, behind iron curtains. A shared sequence. A quiet signal. Not sabotage. Not espionage. A salute.

Bravo. A single word of respect, of camaraderie. Not between nations.

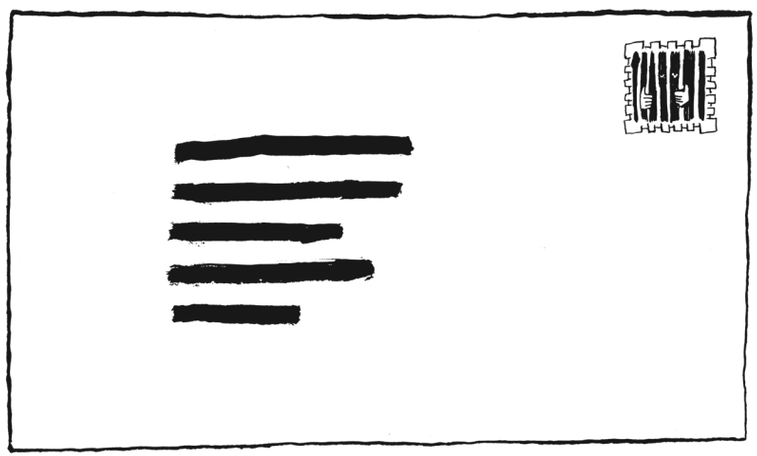
Between minds.

Anya placed her hand on the shoebox of lunar rocks, the cold of the moon seeping through the protective lining. She thought of the American astronauts. The Russian cosmonauts. All of them staring up at the same silent, indifferent sky. Their governments were at war, but the universe didn't care.

The space race wasn't about who won. It was about the fact that they were both trying at all.

And for Anya, that was enough. The city of Krasnoyarsk-26 would remain a secret. But the stars held a secret too—one whispered across continents, passed from lab to lab, heart to heart. A shared dream. A cosmic handshake.

A single word in the endless dark.



LETTERS TO NOWHERE

Jess Gilbert
Sheffield

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

LETTERS TO NOWHERE

February 7th, 1950

My dearest Akim,

I dreamed of you last night, walking by the lake, sitting under our tree.

The evenings are long without you. I fill them with your books.

I pray you are in good health, and the winter isn't too harsh.

[redacted]

I miss you.

Your wife, D

Daryna Kovalenko

Cold, unforgiving snow swirls around me. I pull my tattered coat tighter around myself, in an attempt to trap what little heat I have, my hood drooping over most of my face and obscuring my vision. Yet, the persistent snow and ice-cold air pushes its way in, effectively banishing any warmth I may have wished for. Despite this, I push on, with just one task left to complete before I can hide away in the confines of my miniature khrushchyovka apartment. And so, I hurry past the hordes of those waiting in ration lines, forever queuing for supplies that don't exist. I ignore the depression emanating from side streets; those unfortunate enough to have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from the endless sheets of snow drifting down to torment us.

Finally, I reach my destination and push inside, the doorbell's jingle welcoming me to the moderate warmth of the post office. I glance down at the folded paper I've been clutching, the ink probably smudged from the accumulated snowflakes, and step across the space towards the drop-off point, signing it over to censorship and tempering. Will it ever reach him? Does he know I still write? I sigh and go to leave, nodding to Kishka as she enters with her own bundle of letters, and begin the trudge home.

I think of Akim almost constantly, picturing him living this life by my side as we once planned, which mother claims is unhealthy, but I can't bring myself to care. I keep him up to date on life, gossip and whichever of his books I'm reading. I visit his family, and pass on their messages to him in my weekly correspondence. He's present in all senses but the physical, which isn't enough, but I pretend.

The letters I send are my lifeline. Awaiting his responses, though rare and almost unintelligible after their censorship, help me to push on. One day, I'll see him again.

February 16th, 1950

My dearest Akim,

I finished 'The Shipbuilder' by Yanovskyi. You were right, I should have tried it sooner.

Your sister and mother send their love.

[redacted]

I miss you.

Your wife, D

Akim Kovalenko

Maksym Bondarenko tried to escape. They shot him. I cleaned up the blood with his blanket. He doesn't need it any more.

March 2nd, 1950

My dearest Akim,

I apologise for not writing sooner, the ink ran out, and the shop's delivery took a week to arrive [redacted]

The snow is thawing, I hope yours is too. You always hated the cold.

[redacted]*Write me when you can.*

I miss you.

Your wife, D

Daryna Kovalenko

I work daily at the school. The hours bleeding into days bleeding into weeks. Time continues its slow march forward and yet nothing changes. There's still five of us living in an apartment with space for two. The ration queues never shorten. I write my weekly letter yet receive no response. I look for answers, yet never find where he may be. There were rumours of men working near Bila Tserkva, but I place little faith in this – I don't wish to further crush my heart.

Walking to work lets me watch the seasons change and flow. The flowers will begin to appear soon, after hiding under the snow and ice for so many months. I'll pick one for him, a lilac perhaps, and press it to include in a letter. They were always his favourite. I pray to a God I'm not sure I believe in that they signal his returning to me, where he belongs.

I visit the post office daily, to check for a reply. I'm sure the clerk hates me by now for my persistent pestering. I'd be annoyed by me too.

March 13th, 1950

My dearest Akim,

The apple trees have begun to bloom near the park. I picked some to practise my ponchiki. Your sister was married last week, to Oleksiy [redacted]

from [redacted]

She seemed happy and he's nice, but we missed your presence.

I hope you're not having to work too hard and are eating well.

I miss you.

Your wife, D

March 26th, 1950

My dearest Akim,

The children I teach are progressing well and I might bring them some of your books to read, I hope you won't mind. They seemed excited when I mentioned it.

Your birthday was a few days ago. I celebrated with your family, with my ponchiki, and we hope you were celebrating along with us, [redacted] *you* [redacted].

I pray you're receiving my letters, and that you can answer soon. I miss your voice.

I miss you.

Your wife, D

April 2nd, 1950

Contents: pressed flowers, photograph

Items confiscated, letter delivered

My dearest Akim,

The flowers have begun to bloom; they remind me of you. I've enclosed

[redacted]

Write soon. I miss you.

Your wife, D

Akim Kovalenko

I receive each of her letters, read them, save them. Each is kept under my pillow, so we can share a bed each night. Her letters are my lifeline.

We haven't been allowed to write until today, as 'punishment' for misconduct. Apparently working 13 hours a day isn't enough to atone for our alleged crimes. If I wasn't against the government before, I am now.

I stare at the blank page before me, in low light, and struggle to know how to begin. What to say?

The letter can't say anything, and I can't answer her questions about my life. Not truly. It's a waste of ink; it would be redacted or returned to me before she could ever read it.

April 11th, 1950

My darling Daryna,

I am alive and my health is fair. The work here is [redacted] *but I receive rations.*

I pray you don't worry over me.

The days are long, and I think of home often.

Write of how the lilacs are blooming – I remember their smell.

I miss you.

Your husband, always, Akim

Daryna Kovalenko

I must look mad, laughing in the street. But I don't care. His letter arrived at last. It's almost three weeks late, as we're now entering May, but at least it has arrived. I tore open the envelope the second I received it, stood in the post office's small room. I couldn't believe it. Now, I'm wandering the streets, meandering home. Perhaps I should visit his sister and Oleksiy, to show them the good news. Fantastic news.

When I arrive back at the apartment, I slip into my shared room and skirt around the bed, occupying most of the space, to tuck it under my pillow. It'll feel as though he's close by again, instead of separated by possibly hundreds of miles. I can pretend.

My days seem less gruelling, my work less taxing, my time less lonely.

I keep writing, taking this as a sign he's receiving my messages, and that he's replying. Maybe his responses are only slow as they each have to pass through the MVD UkrSSR system to be scanned for anti-government propaganda.

The days march on, but I'm renewed with hope. He's out there, thinking of me as I do of him.

May 19th, 1950

My darling Daryna,

There are many of us here, so I am not alone, but I ask that you greet [redacted]

my family for me. I can only send one letter and wanted it for you.

[redacted]

I dream of you often and that we will see each other soon.

I miss you.

Your husband, Akim

Akim Kovalenko

There are rumours spreading between the men that we may be moved. Perhaps the work will be better. Perhaps I'll be closer to her, the distance less extreme.

May 30th, 1950

My dearest Akim,

I received your latest letter and was glad to see your handwriting again.

The spring has truly come this year, and the lilacs are finally in full bloom.

They smell as decadent as always.

We planted the potatoes in the shared allotment. I'll try to send you some,

and apples too, when they're ready.

I miss you.

Your wife, D

Daryna Kovalenko

I sent my most recent letter only three days ago but visit the post office again, to see if there's news from him. Two in as many months has me almost hopeful. As I enter, the clerk recognises me and goes to check, without needing me to ask any more. We both know why I'm here. When he emerges from the backroom, paper in hand, my heart swells. He's written again.

This time, I step outside to read, wanting privacy. Yet, as I look down, it's my own handwriting looking back at me. There are three words at the top. Three heart-wrenching words.

Undeliverable: addressee unknown.

I begin to spiral. Has be moved? Has he died? Has he refused to receive the letter?

I send another letter, to be safe. A week later, the same response.

I speak with Kishka, whose husband is theoretically with mine, and she's had the same happen to her. Rumours are spreading that some of the men have been moved, their labour needed elsewhere. Perhaps this is what's occurred? Perhaps we need to wait a few weeks before sending again, to give them chance to be registered and able to receive what we write.

He never receives another letter. His location is 'unknown' on enquiry. Yet, I continue to write. My life is measured in messages written to him, but never sent. They live under my floorboard, letters to nowhere. Their intended recipient lost. I update him on my life, log what happens in our life, so he can one day read them when he returns. He never returns. His records are lost.

Our niece turned two today, she's beautiful.

I picked lilacs today and hung them from the ceiling to dry. I'll save them for you, your favourite flowers.

Your father died – influenza – the service was proper. He's buried to the back of the church, when you want to visit.

The school increased my hours. I teach six classes now.

I read 'The Standard Bearers' by Honchar.

We planted in the allotment again, potatoes and carrots this time.

I've adopted a stray cat. It visits once a day for food. I even met its kittens.

The queues for food stay long and seemingly endless.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has reduced the maximum term of imprisonment.

Perhaps this means you can return to me soon?

Author's note:

This story was inspired by my fascination with life behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. It seeks to capture the atmosphere of suppression and uncertainty that defined the era. I intentionally left the location largely ambiguous (though Ukrainian in essence) to reflect the pervasive censorship of the era. This choice not only underscores the futility of the situation but also broadens the story's relevance to the countless lives that were affected by it.

I chose Ukraine as the setting to draw a parallel with the current events happening there. The rise of social media has allowed access to information and communication that wasn't an option in the past. In contrast, my characters rely solely on letters as their means of communication, reflecting a time when voices were more easily silenced and connection was more fragile.

CHICKPEA
Alana Harrison
Lancashire

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

CHICKPEA

There were earthquakes over four days in Herculaneum. Small, creeping ones which arose no concern.

It wasn't until the fifth day that the panic began.

The day was a warm one, and the sea was cold and fresh. The great mountain Vesuvius sparkled like crystal behind the climbing figure of the summer resort town.

Cicero turned his golden face sunward, his round eyes shut loosely in the peaceful warmth. The water slid rhythmically under the boat as it drifted.

His pater hauled in fish one after another: slim, silver, red-mouthed things that flooded the floor of the boat and made it writhe. Cicero curled himself tighter on his wooden seat and nibbled a lump of bread. The salt in the wind got on his lips; he didn't mind. It, along with the fish-stench, gave his lunch-bread some flavour.

Pater reeled back the fishing-tool and stretched himself carefully straight.

He wobbled.

And so did Cicero's hand, which was halfway to his mouth.

Something burst in the distance – something dull.

Cicero jumped.

There were a few delayed seconds where the only sounds were birds' wings.

Then the sky began to fold.

Cicero felt his heart slowly begin to pound, stronger and stronger, against his bones. The boat rocked, and he heard the fish slap against the wood, but he couldn't take his eyes off the mountain.

Mountain? What mountain did that?

Thick grey was spilling clumsily out of Vesuvius, going up into the blue of the sky like fire-smoke. Some of it gathered at the bottom and was beginning to fall towards the town.

'What's happening, Pater?' Cicero asked anxiously, taking the edge of his father's toga and pulling it.

Pater whispered something that Cicero couldn't define.

He seized the oars, and the boat was rowed awkwardly to shore, then he leapt out onto dry land.

The ground was shivering and Cicero's vision blurred at the edges.

'Son,' spoke Pater. 'Stay there.' He kissed his son's forehead and pushed the boat gently away from the shore. Then he stumbled towards the family-villa, where Cicero's mater and sister ran the fishery.

Cicero couldn't have moved if he had wanted to. His limbs froze on this hot day — getting hotter with a red-stained sky. They paralysed him.

He watched as a young woman and her son sought safety. The mother's head was quivering on her neck, and her glamorous face was melting with tears, blue and black and red. She had brought a sack of coins with her. She eyed the boatsheds and threw her precious money into the shelter before herself or her small child.

Pater was gone.

More citizens: richly dressed tourists; fish-stained workers; slaves; children. They were like a stream of ants carrying food to their queen. They piled on top of each other as the sheds filled up.

The boat was picking up speed, gliding through the water. Pater had not tied it up, and he had dropped the oars some way away, as if to forbid Cicero from paddling to shore again.

Cicero sought his father's figure within the white chaos.

The clouds pummelled his head. His dark hair and golden skin began to fade into the same shade of ash-grey. The air smelt of warmth, but it was an ominous scent that choked, not the fresh, comforting smell of ten minutes ago. Or was it twenty? Time had begun to run in its own way.

Pater returned, and Cicero laughed despite himself; Mater and Caelia were with him. There was a little space in the last shed for the four of them.

'MATER!' screamed Cicero. 'PATER!'

They didn't hear him. They took the last places, scrabbling at the walls

like rats in a cage.

Cicero kept screaming at them; his voice was breaking.

Pater, arms tight around wife and daughter, looked at him. Straight at him. Even from this far Cicero could see the black eyes reach his.

And then everything was blotted out by the rumbling ground-cloud.

Cicero's muscles unlocked – only for a minute – and he hid under the wooden seat, with the squelching fish. He shut his eyes as securely as he could, and clapped his hands over his ears.

When he emerged, his homeland had vanished. The villas were gone. The boatsheds were gone.

The people were gone.

The busy town of Herculaneum was buried and stuck fast under a tenacious blanket of ash, pumice and debris.

But the little boat kept drifting.

*

Cicero had never tasted raw fish before. He was picky about food; he had never liked anything undercooked. At home, it was easy. His mater always had some delicious meal waiting for him and Pater when they got home from work.

But now he gnawed at this slimy, stinking meat like it was a long-lost favourite food while his mind attacked him.

His own father had abandoned him.

Or was it for his own good? Maybe he thought it would be better for him.

Cicero gnawed harder. His tooth scraped against bone. He flung the skeleton into the sea.

It had been hours, and he was still shaking, and his memories scrambled around him like animals.

Somewhere on the horizon, his home was a dirty smudge.

How long the boat would float for, Cicero didn't know. Something was bound to happen. And he didn't know his geography; he didn't learn

things like that. All he knew was fishing. And food. But fish was food, so at some point they had rolled into one.

Cicero scratched at his dry hair and furled himself on the seat. He was exhausted with shock, and only wanted to sleep, but his mind tormented him. It struggled in its skull, trying to grasp the situation.

The mountain he had trusted in, and loved, had betrayed him. That was all.

He tried his hardest to shut out other thoughts. He fixed himself on his other senses. He smelt salt and fish; heard the lapping of wind and water working as one, and his breath that carried on the air; felt the smooth, soft wood of the seat. He watched the colours swirling under his tight lids.

Sleep finally soothed him. He would not wake up until he had reached land.

*

The small brown fishing-boat swished with the green grass of Capri as the villager hauled it in. It had given her quite a shock, seeing it stumble along the water, full of fish and fish skeletons, and a small, sleeping boy. But she was determined to help.

The boy was now waking and he was crying and calling for his parents.

Stopping and taking him in her soft yet strong arms, Naila sang a sweet lullaby in her native tongue, smooth and swirling, to soothe the boy, whose face was encrusted with salt and ash and whose hands were pink and raw, but who otherwise looked healthy enough, although sad.

The boy stuffed his fingers in his mouth. He sobbed in the safe arms of this gentle, singing stranger; in deep shock but equally deep relief, he pushed his peppered head into her shoulder.

'Pater is dead, Mater is dead,' he mumbled, wiping his hands on his tunic. 'Buried under a blanket. So is Caelia.'

His voice was silky and young, yet a little hoarse around the edges. Perhaps from shouting. He spoke Latin, so clearly, he had come from somewhere in Italia.

'Where do you come from?' asked Naila in the same language.

'Herculaneum.'

Naila breathed in sharply; she knew what had happened to the people of Herculaneum – and Pompeii. News spread quickly in Italia, even from the mainland to the islands, and besides, she could see Vesuvius still throwing smoke in the distance. The boy knew the truth about his family: that they weren't coming back.

She began to lead him to her home. She, a widowed freedwoman, had no children of her own – it was a lifelong tragedy of hers – and now she was old, but very capable.

'How about,' said Naila, 'I give you a meal?'

'Yes,' said the boy. He hiccupped. 'Please. But no fish.'

Naila chuckled. 'Of course. It looks like you've eaten your fill of fish already.'

The boy's cracked lips stretched lopsidedly: a half-smile.

'My name is Cicero,' he said.

'Cicero! Doesn't that mean Chickpea?'

'Yes.'

The other villagers stared as the pair approached the village. They must have had questions, but they didn't ask them just yet.

Naila opened the door to her small home and prepared a feast as quickly as she could. Slabs of bread. Fruits and vegetables. Two jugs of watered-down wine.

Maybe he only was hungry for flavours, because he must have been full already from the fish, but he still ate like a wolf.

'The bread has legumes in it,' said Naila after a small while, watching him with her steady dark eyes.

'What are legumes?' asked Cicero, swallowing.

'Things like beans, and peas. In this case, the chickpea. Your namesake.'

The boy smiled, but couldn't laugh: his mouth was already full again.

*

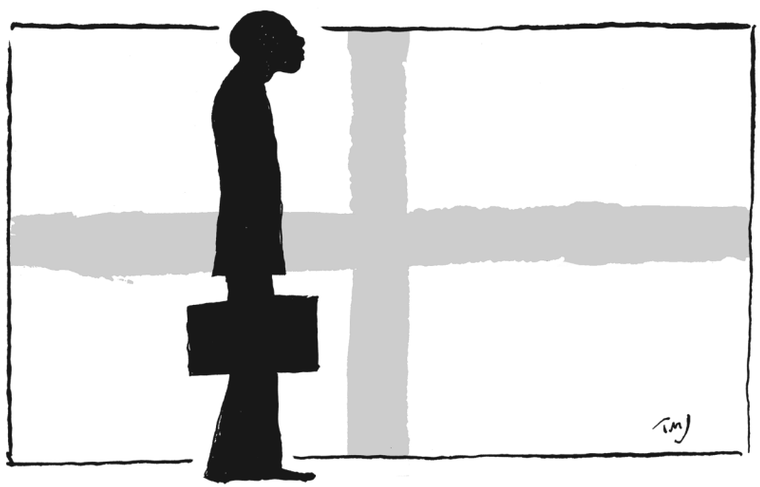
Cicero had finally stopped shaking. He was still grey – even underneath its crust, his skin was somewhat this shade – but he felt stronger already, eating food which reminded him of home. He thought of his family again, and the state of the town. But then he thought of this home, Naila's home, and relaxed. Perhaps Pater had left him on purpose, in a heroic act, and not an act of neglect; perhaps he had known the inevitability of the traitor Vesuvius and had given his only son a last chance to live.

This thought gave Cicero a twitch of love, and he took his last bite of bread.

He had been a cruel survival in a devastated society. His world had crumbled like cinders in a fire.

But this, he realised, was a chance for a new life, and a new safety.

Hope.



A GOD CALLED ENGLAND

Mercy Ikwueze-Okolo
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

A GOD CALLED ENGLAND

The day before Uche left for England, the sun was swollen with fatigue. It retired into the cool horizon for the night, dimming with a gentle hiss into the waters. The past week had blurred into itself and, were it not for the Sabbath – the day of his departure – he would not have been able to tell whether this was Tuesday's heat or Saturday's.

By now, Uche was getting tired of evenings. Each one carried the same idleness, the same dust that hovered over the compound despite the morning's sweeping, parting as Uche's slippers slapped through. Its plumes scalded throats and sinuses, each breath an uneven, itchy huff. Cicadas in naked bushes recited the same nightly requiem – one line, one chorus. Uche was sure he knew it off by heart, its melody hidden somewhere within his dialect.

His worn towel hung lifelessly over his shoulder, following the familiar path to the back of the bungalow where the half-empty water storage tank sat. A tall bucket of water stood beside it, its expectant dipper gaping up from its surface.

Uche was getting tired of bathing.

He was getting tired of cooling himself in surrender to an endless swelter. It was too hot in the house and too hot to leave, too hot to hawk groundnuts, too hot for rest. It was too hot for everything in Enugu.

Uche knew that in England this would not be an issue.

He knew it was too cold for England to experience the blaze of an African sun like the sole coral bead in the sky. Instead, people went home to defrost in their living rooms, and feasted on hearty meals of Irish potatoes and meat. He knew that every one in three houses remained empty, occasionally occupied by families who were abroad almost all year round. They were too rich to keep still. He knew that there was work that people did not want, and roads choked with cars – modern cars – and no thieves.

Uche knew there were white people too. The first time he had seen a white person was a few years back in Lagos, when he and a crowd of thousands swarmed the capital to the grand flagpost that stood firm in the centre. It was the day of their independence (so said the word of mouth).

Bits of rare midnight cool collected in small pockets between bodies, offering brief relief from the restless shuffling of the crowd. He remembered grappling for balance to support the basket on his head, overflowing with bags of packaged peanuts. There were more than usual, all ready to be sold.

Except it was not just the flagpost, he supposed, that people came to see. It was life like Uche had never witnessed before.

Lights like drunken fireflies surrounded the capital, bunting that dipped and collected at each pole. Men in brilliant white marched, beating into the hearts of talking drums, in sync – one. Parades of instruments howled at the stars, a collective chorus beyond the cicadas' sole line; and uniformed riders on uniformed horses strode with verve in some sort of divine formation, destroying and converging. Women danced like peacocks; giants soared on stilts. Feathers stretched from arms, flaunting high – too tall to see where their tufts ended and the sky began. Polyrhythmic.

Uche joined in too. The messianic excitement, the mutinous vigour, the haunting anticipation – it seized him like electricity. His breath melded into the chant, his chest pressed against the drum's breast, his heart its beat. And Uche yelled, to the Earth – to Heaven – that he was selling groundnuts.

But, above all the dance and cries and show, Uche's gaze landed on her.

Poised high upon the pristine balcony, surveying the landscape of ardour below: a white person – a princess. She sat with a faint expression, in a gown that flowed until forever and a crown buried within hair like silk. An effigy? A deity. Pale Princess Alexandra.

Suddenly, the hawker was rooted to the ground like a stale tree. His basket nudged against his skull as he stared. A visceral urge to steal the ghostly figure from the air in front of him sprouted from his stomach. She – Pale Princess Alexandra.

His voice ossified. Uche fell silent, watching the voices of thousands braid themselves into the semblance of a nation. Silent as men pulled on ropes the width of fists, straining at the Union Jack – pulling with their whole bodies as it wordlessly whipped against their force. They pulled and pulled until it tore free from the pole.

He was silent as they tugged again, a flag beginning to rise. Green, white, green – catching the confidence of the wind, rising higher until it reached the top. It licked at Heaven.

There was a roar:

Nigeria.

Fire buzzed behind his eyes.

He blinked again, and the flag had stolen its place in history; his basket was light as air.

Shutting his eyes, he poured the crisp water over himself, felt it sizzle against his skin, evaporate from his pores. He thought of England, where there were no thieves. Then, the sea that bordered on the edge of the world. Then, for when he would board the ship tomorrow and see her again. Pale Princess Alexandra, a blurred spirit he could not quite catch sight of, standing at the docks.

He would greet, kneel down, even if she was younger than him.

"Good morning, Ma!" and "Tank you, Ma!" would run off his tongue like a liquid prayer he could not keep in his fingers. When he would see white men on the deck, he would say "Good morning, Sah," and "Tank you, Sah," and they would accept his gratitude with silence. White people were serious people; they did not greet.

It was not until Uche found himself kneeling in the sand, whispering his imagined tomorrow, that he realised he did not know what the deck of a ship looked like.

He pictured the same parched ground with dust settled neatly in layers on top, waiting to be disturbed by the languid slaps of tired slippers. He envisioned vendors, yellowing leaves braided into baskets atop their heads, and smelled black oil and smoked fish. He heard Igbo traded between breaths, and the hymn of cicadas. Uche saw the ghost of a climate that he could not shed from his mind – the soul of Enugu ferried on his ship to England.

Even under the cover of water, he could not wash away the disgust that ruffled his face.

Uche barely slept that night. There was nothing left in the house to do – everything was packed neatly into a single suitcase. He lay outside on the veranda, staring into black until he felt as though he could see through it. For him, accomplishment was rare; as it settled in his gut, he could not help but feel a vacancy. Of what, he did not know. Whatever it was, it could be filled with work, money, and his new life on English soil, the gifts that God had provided for his devotion.

At Sunday's dawn, Uche prayed, bathed, and dressed in his best suit (the one he reserved for church), which was slumped on a chair in the parlour. Today was the day he left for England. He ate breakfast that morning: bread smoothed around the edges by a generous serving of butter, and a cup of tea with four spoons of sugar. It tasted better than anything he had ever eaten.

Uche did not sweep his compound today. He stepped out of the bungalow, his smart shoes flattening the dust underneath. The morning was unusually still, and for a moment, Uche could not help but smile. It was as if the compound held its breath, waiting for his inevitable surrender to routine: slipping back into slippers, ready for his preliminary bath against the heat to come. He almost believed it himself. Almost.

But he did not need to worry about the swelter any more. He was going to England.

With his suitcase in hand, Uche heaved his home to the high street, calling for a Mammy Wagon among the stirring streets.

Just before midday, church had ended. The crimson sun was already a third of the way through the sky, and by then Uche could smell Port Harcourt, swallowing its thickening scent of damp salt. The truck was already hot with the clamour of price fares and wailing babies. With the conductor at its flank, still rallying up more passengers, Uche was growing vexed. Seated on the wooden bench, Uche found the air stuffed with arguments and nonsense, and the urge to bathe soon festered on his hip like a blazing sore.

"Please, drop me here!" shouted Uche, loud enough to be heard over the buzzing commotion of shifting metal and the early afternoon.

It took three rings of the bell that the conductor jerked in his hand for the vehicle to stutter. As the wagon came to a stop, veering off the side of the road, Uche fetched three pounds from his pocket to pay the fare.

It was fine, he thought, retrieving the suitcase from underneath the bench. His seat was filled the moment he stood. Uche would make the money back twice – no, thrice as fast.

He was going to England.

The man stalked on towards the sound of screeching industry and bellowing horns. From afar, he could see the jittering sea and blobs of fishmongers, freckled across the sand. Uche's stomach tightened; he knew that he was close. This was where standoffish boats, nearly the size of Goliath, stood their ground as they stared the country down. This was where the last of Nigeria he would see resided, the land eaten away by an eternally hungry tide…

Work and money and a new life.

Uche needed to board the MV Apapa. Although he could not keep his eyes off the ticket in his hand, he knew it by heart. He had kept it neatly underneath the lamp in his room for over three months, looking over it every night to ensure each line of ink remained the same. MV Apapa. Port Harcourt. Port of Tilbury.

Port of Tilbury.

The second time Uche had seen a white person was at the border between land and sea, where the low grumble of a ship cut through the afternoon. There were many, but one in brilliant white had its mouth agape, digesting a succession of Nigerians. It reminded him of Lagos. Uche knew it was his, recognising the writing on its jaw, the letters lining up perfectly to the ones on his gently ruffled ticket. MV Apapa.

And then, as his steps quickened, he saw men in navy uniforms at either side of the ship. White men. They wore hats – not the same kind as Uche's – that covered their eyes in shadow and added gravitas to their persons as they admitted the chain.

White people. Serious people.

Uche stopped, then looked back at the endless line. He remembered his ticket – he walked back to take his place at the flank.

It did not matter if there were a million people ahead. Uche was content. This was it.

He was going to England.

He could not see far enough to know if she was standing there as well. Pale Princess Alexandra.

He wondered if Port Harcourt was going to be the place where she would be waiting for him, among the excessive smell of fish and community. He wondered if she would be corporeal now, finally grabbing hold of her for what had taken years to even imagine. He wondered if, now that he would meet her, she would be the figure he still uneasily saw when he thought of God, ever since that night in Lagos.

Though at the back of the line, Uche cleared his throat.

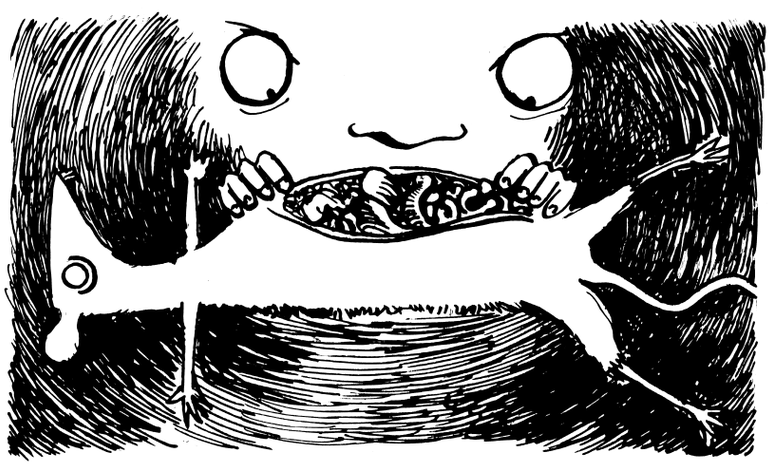
"Tank you, Ma," he whispered to himself, a practiced sound laced with the melody of cicadas.

"Tank you, Lord," he whispered, to England, stepping forward in line.

Author's Note:

A tribute to my parents, who cannot decide whether they hate the corrupt country of Nigeria, or miss its warmth in England.

Uche's story is one of relentless labour and devotion, both to God and the myth of England. He pours himself into ritual, routine, and work, believing in a future gilded by divine favour and foreign opportunity. Meanwhile, we leave him to tragically confront the gap between expectation and reality on his own – a life built as much on faith and illusion as on effort.



SAWBONES

Katherine White
Smethwick

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
16 to 19 category

SAWBONES

Here is enclosed the confession of Sir L——— S——— QHS, FRSE, FRCSE

Mother always said I had a touch of the morbid in me.

She was right, of course. As far back as memory permits, I possessed an ever-present obsession with the macabre. Nothing sparked more joy in my infant self than the sight of some unlucky creature lying dead upon the ground. For death meant dissection and dissection meant knowledge. As my childhood endeavours continued, I became intimately familiar with the innards of God's smallest creatures; I could name each organ of a rat as effortlessly as other children may regurgitate learned sums. Yes, I was a curious sort of boy.

Mother was herself a curious sort of woman, with various quirks and neuroses which had prompted her unwilling patronage of several madhouses throughout her short lifetime. She departed this cruel plane of existence a pauper, leaving me with nothing but debt and spent laudanum bottles. Before the old hag had drawn her final breath, however, I had managed to squeeze enough coin out of her to find lodgings in Edinburgh to chase my passion.

I was to be a surgeon.

Edinburgh is most successfully understood when viewed not as a rigid mass of stone, but as a living body. This body is composed not of the typical fleshy and gristly constituents with which we are familiar, but of crumbling sandstone and muck and grand churches and countless winding closes and streets and thieves and kirkyards cleaned out of their dead. It is a body which has faced much hardship; its current form is a patchwork of scars and blemishes, strung together by the toils and sins of its inhabitants. The city bares its wounds as openly as its people. In my youthful folly, I thought I could one day draw these gashes closed.

Aye. Edinburgh lives, but it leads a rotten life indeed.

It is perhaps no surprise that in such a city I soon found myself tainted with the blood of the dead on a frequent basis. Fear not; whilst I lay no claim to the soul of an innocent, the cadavers in question were always sent

to their grave by some steadier hand than mine. I was no Burke, nor was I a follower of his methods.

Edinburgh is a singular place. It makes sinners of us all.

* * * * *

My first experience of 'Auld Reikie' —as Fergusson so lovingly dubbed it— was on a crisp September night in 1825. I was young then, and hopelessly naïve; my purse had been stolen within hours of my arrival in the city. The very picture of a perfect fool, I believed that any man could raise himself from the squalor he was born into, if only his toils were sufficient.

Such a wayward sentiment was on my mind as I strolled through the labyrinthine wynds and closes of Old Town – thick as they were with filth and refuse, the abundance of which culminated in a most foul miasma. It was a stench different to any other, an unholy amalgamation of sweat and cheap perfume with notes of rot and smoke and liquor and decay, all underscored by the unmistakable odour of despair.

I marvelled that people could stand to live in such a place.

How Fate delights in her little tricks.

* * * * *

I had scrounged enough money from Mother to spend my first year of study lodged in a jolly little flat on the edge of New Town. Those I surrounded myself with there were respectable men, themselves chasing after various passions. Most were landed gentry types, the sort who knew their several-times great-grandfather's name and how many Englishmen he had killed in some long-forgotten battle.

Thanks to the prestige of their ancestors, these men had pockets so deep they could have reached Hell, and a grand pad in the country to retire to if their endeavours in the city went awry.

What is a young, aspiring man to do in the presence of such luxury but feign it for himself?

In my first year of studying the surgeon's arts, I made some unwise financial decisions. I regret that I grew a dash fixated on games of dice, and more dependent on alcohol than is strictly healthy.

It is exceedingly easy to waste money when one's attentions are focused more on the bottle than scholarly studies. By the start of my second year, I was living completely beyond my means. I was – to put it lightly – beggared.

* * * * *

It was this difficult truth which I was compelled to explain to my learned teacher after a demonstration one afternoon. The operating theatre in which the dissection took place was a deceptively large room, with layers of seating stacked upon each other so high that it seemed to brush the ornate ceiling above.

In the middle of the room was a large table, bare save for the corpse laid irreverently upon it. According to the word of law, this body must have been that of a murderer, but you could never be certain in those days.

When the teaching-surgeon had finished carving up the cadaver to demonstrate one of the finer points of the human respiratory system, the rest of my fellow students filed out of the chamber to pursue whatever it was that occupied their evenings.

I lingered, unsure whether to approach the man. He was a tall, spindly creature of middling age, with a brushy brow and a rather severe mouth. I watched sheepishly as he wiped his bloodied hands with a rag, waiting for him to notice my presence.

He muttered something to Campbell, his assistant, showing no indication of having noticed my intrusion. I stepped forward.

'Sir? May I speak with you a moment, pray?'

Mr K—— glanced up from the cadaver, his one good eye meeting my two.

'You are one of my students, yes?' He spoke slowly, and I nodded my assent. 'What is it you want?'

'I just came to inform you that I will be removing myself from this course.'

His bushy eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'Why would you do such a thing? Do you not like the content? You are showing some promise; it would be a shame to lose you.'

I bowed my head at this flattery. 'No. That is not the matter, sir. In truth, it is a problem of the financial aspect. I can no longer afford to study.'

The surgeon tilted his head, and an odd expression came over his face. A more fanciful man than I would have dubbed it hunger. 'I see,' His voice came low now, almost a whisper. 'There is – an option for students like yourself, with all of the drive and none of the coin.'

He continued, 'I am sure you have noticed that there have been more cadavers on my dissecting table this last year than murderers hanged at the gallows. There are – ways of obtaining these bodies that are perhaps less than savoury. I would be incredibly grateful if you aided in supplying these grisly articles. Why, I may even… forget about those fees of yours.'

I startled, taken aback by such brazen discussion of criminal acts. 'Sir, I assure you I do not understand what you allude to.'

He raised one bushy eyebrow in response. 'Come to your senses, man. You are no imbecile; you know you have no other option. I will have someone introduced to you. He will teach you the trade.'

I would like to say that I harshly reprimanded the man, and stormed from the lecture theatre, never to set foot in it again. I did not, of course. As ever, it was my morbid curiosity that pushed me forwards.

'I ought to buy a shovel,' I muttered to myself as I retired to my now much inferior lodgings in Old Town.

* * * * *

The first body was the worst. It was two weeks after that meeting with my most eminent teacher that I made my first foray into the world of the resurrectionist.

I did not creep through the streets towards the kirkyard. One does not creep when there is illicit behaviour afoot. Creeping merely alerts any careful watcher to the presence of the aforementioned illicit behaviour. Such attention is undesirable, of course, when one plans to be ferrying around stolen cadavers.

I did not creep, although as some level of discretion was required, I kept to the shadows.

Shadows were plentiful on this particular night – the moon's winking face was obscured by a thick veil of fog. Such a fog was common in

Edinburgh. It rose from the sea like a hazy Leviathan sent by some avenging god to wreathe the city in darkness.

Unfortunately for the law-abiding inhabitants of Edinburgh – the existence of whom I am assured by my nobler friends – it was on a night like this that all the city's sinners crept from their dens of iniquity to ply their wicked trades.

It was to meet one such sinner that I found myself abroad on that fateful night. The streets wound about me like veins, throbbing with a strange blend of merriment and melancholy. The narrow buildings on either side were barely visible through the haze, each one offering a brief glimpse into the lives of those within – a snatch of jovial conversation here and a snippet of a rowdy tavern brawl there.

I pressed on; although my heart yearned for the comforts of a public house, I had business to attend to. Lord knows I had little coin to spare for a pint in any case.

It was near midnight when I reached the meeting place; by this hour, all the reputable members of society had long since retired to bed.

Through the grey-brown blur, shadowy shapes flitted about with varying levels of urgency and sobriety. Those furthest from me were steeped in fog, their dark clothes rendering them one with the haze. Their features were blurred and indistinct, as if painted in hurried strokes by a singularly inept artist.

One figure seemed particularly determined; it strode through the darkness with a sense of purpose rarely seen among Edinburgh's nightly denizens.

As it came closer, those blurred features sharpened and arranged themselves into a regrettably recognisable visage.

The man clapped me on the back in a too-friendly fashion. 'Sawbones! How are ye?'

He knew I hated that nickname, with its rough, inelegant sound. Besides, I was no surgeon yet.

'Will you keep your voice down, Campbell?' I snapped.

Campbell grinned threateningly. His teeth were in an awful state of affairs; rotten and stinking. 'Whatever you say, lad. Just remember I'm

boss now. Ready for your first outing? I've heard there's a few nice fresh graves down Canongate way.'

I nodded, aware that I was sinking myself into sin. Some wicked part of me relished it.

I will not give you the details of what transpired after this point. Such should be confined to the pages of penny dreadfuls. Just know that it involved dirt and fog and saws and sin. And some little side of myself – perhaps the same part which found joy in a rat's innards – revelled in it.

By the tenth, twentieth corpse I had lost all qualms. These bodies were merely stepping stones to a new life, a better future. I seized this future with the fervent intensity of a madman. Nothing would stop me becoming a surgeon.

Sawbones or not, I became a dab hand with carpenter's tools.

* * * * *

Despite the sordid nature of my youthful endeavours, in time I became the eminent surgeon I am today. My teacher rewarded me for my efforts, and soon enough I was at the top of my profession. I am an old man now. The devil will claim me soon. They say the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Mine is paved with corpses.

Mother always said I had a touch of the morbid in me.

She was more right than she will ever know.

* * * * *

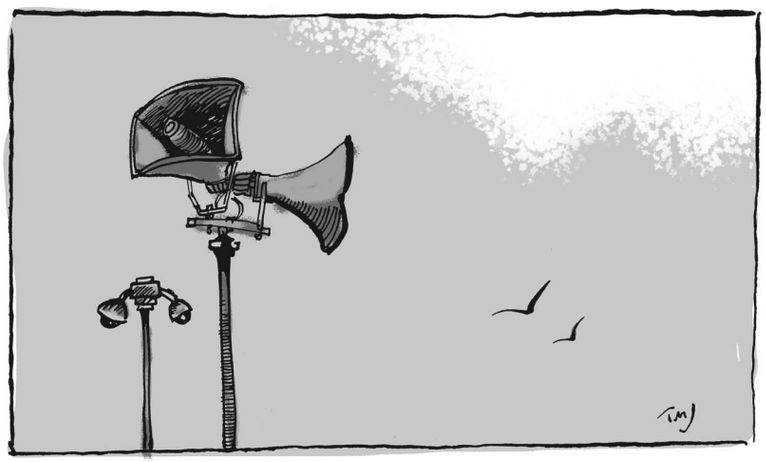
Author's note:

I have always been interested in the morbid (perhaps I am like my character in a way), but especially so in the stories of body snatchers or – as I prefer to remember them – resurrectionists. One part of this history I find particularly interesting is the fact that medical students could provide cadavers for their teacher-surgeons if they couldn't afford the fees. These students, likely from poorer backgrounds, may have felt they had no choice but to steal corpses to finance their vocation.

The trade in corpses, to me, highlights the difficult nature of studying history – there are many questions which we can never really be equipped to answer.

Were these people desperate and doing their best, or were they opportunistic monsters who had no consideration for the sacred nature of burial sites?

I think that the answer is somewhere down the middle, as it often is, but we can never say for certain.



WHEN THE ETERNAL ENDED

Annette Wong
Tunbridge Wells

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025
11 to 15 category

WHEN THE ETERNAL ENDED

The loudspeakers' crackled and muffled voices were edged with tears. Every home, every life came to a standstill, all radios and televisions were tuned to the same broadcast. Mi-Rae sat rigid on the floor, her eyes locked on the screen in the family's living room. The air smelt faintly of simmering boiled cabbage. Her mother's eyes glimmering with tears while staring at the portraits of the Great Leader, her tears outlining shiny paths down her cheeks. Her father gazed without emotion at the screen.

'Our Great Leader, Kim Il Sung, has passed away.' – 8th November 1994. The day where even the eternal had an end.

The words didn't sound real. From birth, children were taught that the Great Leader was eternal. Now he was gone, it was as if a spell had been broken over the people of North Korea.

But whilst others wept, Mi-Rae couldn't. The air felt heavy with something unnameable - fear, confusion, or perhaps freedom. If the Great Leader could die, then maybe everything the North Koreans had been told could be questioned. The spell wasn't just breaking over the country; it stirred up something inside Mi-Rae.

Her family had lived most of her childhood in Pyongyang. But her father's quiet trades across the border brought them to Hyesan, near the Yalu River. The area smelt of decaying bodies, the bodies of those who failed to defect across the river to China.

Her father's deals kept them alive: European medicine, American cigarettes, Chinese noodles.

But Mi-Rae, rummaging through the boxes in the concealed room at the end of the corridor, found something else that had entered the house.

It was a small, unmarked tape. Just lying there, at the bottom of a box. Mi-Rae was curious, she had never seen something so small yet so important before. She slid it into her pocket and waited for her parents to go to sleep. Later that night, she loaded the tape into an old video player.

Inserting the tape into the player, she saw a woman, and it felt like she was seeing a different world through the cracks of her screen. Though it was the Great Leader who had died, something inside her was dying too. It was the belief that there was only one way to live. Only one possible truth.

Then music started playing.

It was not the stately, patriotic orchestras she had grown up hearing. It was not a chorus of young schoolchildren praising the fatherland. It was upbeat, enlightening.

Then there was a woman's voice, speaking in an accent that felt familiar yet distant. There was something different about her voice. A voice similar to the South Korean music Mi-Rae's father sometimes played.

The woman was South Korean.

Mi-Rae continued to stare at the screen. The way she spoke, the way she laughed, it wasn't the rehearsed, robotic chuckles of state approved announcers. It felt real and free.

Mi-Rae sat spellbound in front of the TV until the episode ended. Instantly, due to power shortages in the country, everything turned pitch black.

The drama revealed an unknown side of reality, an antithesis of what was happening in her country. In North Korea, people were starving, as the government propagandised that two smaller meals a day were healthier than three. In South Korea, the cameras showed the people eating more than three meals a day, dating with no fear, being allowed to make mistakes. No one bowed to a portrait before speaking. Although it was so different to the life Mi-Rae had been used to living, there was something dangerously powerful about the way these characters lived, something that stirred Mi-Rae's curiosity.

They had choices.

Every night, Mi-Rae returned to the tape as soon as her parents went to bed. As every episode went on, Mi-Rae became more invested in the story. The power of love and hate. Family bonds. The drama had altered Mi-Rae's mind, as if there was a loose thread on some tightly woven fabric, eager to be free.

As the months went by, Mi-Rae watched the tape repeatedly. She memorised the lines. The mannerisms of the actors. The spark inside her grew.

Then, one night, her father discovered the secret.

He just stood there, in the darkness. He didn't seem angry, nor upset.

He simply ejected the tape, and after a long period of silence, said, 'you shouldn't have seen this'.

'But why?'

Her father didn't answer straight away. He placed the tape gently on the table, as though it might shatter from the weight of what it carried.

'I've risked everything to keep this family safe,' he said at last, softly, 'this tape, it doesn't just affect you, your mother and I would pay the price too if this was revealed. Wherever they take us, we may not ever return from.'

Mi-Rae was lost for words. The characters on the screen had always found the right words to say. But this was reality, and her voice had vanished.

'I didn't mean to—' she began.

'I know,' her father whispered.

The silence that followed was thicker than on the foggiest days.

'Do you remember the boy from the building next door?' Mi-Rae's father asked.

'Jun?'

He nodded. 'Gone. Disappeared without a trace. He was rumoured to have been caught with a South Korean magazine. An informer reported him.'

Mi-Rae felt her spine shudder. She remembered Jun, how he used to share his tinned peaches with her. He lit up every room he entered. His laughter echoed and radiated to fill everyone with joy. Now, there wasn't even a trace of his existence left.

Silence again filled the room and was only broken by the faint oscillations of the power attempting to come back to life - and failing. Her father didn't move, he simply stared ahead, the light from the street lamp outside casting shadows beneath his eyes. Shadows of fear, and exhaustion.

'My only goal is to protect you,' he said, barely louder than a whisper.

Mi-Rae wanted to say something - that she understood - but words seemed to tangle up inside her so Mi-Rae could do not much more than

give her father a subtle smile.

'I want to leave,' her father said suddenly.

Mi-Rae looked up abruptly. 'Leave?'

'Defect. Cross the river to China, and from there…South Korea. We won't have to hide everything we feel, our entire identity.'

His words didn't sound real. They sounded like lines from the drama - wild, dangerous and full of impossible hope.

'Does Mother know?'

He hesitated.

That night, Mi-Rae couldn't sleep. She lay on the hard mattress, shivering from the cold air whilst staring at the cracked ceiling, listening to her parents' steady breathing on the other side of the wall. She thought of Jun. The peaches. The magazine that tore his life away from him.

She thought of the bright colours of the actress's blouse that she saw on TV. The music. The freedom. And then of what her father said. Maybe if they managed to defect, her life could end up like the actress's, and she could have a life that wasn't just about survival and the fatherland.

But could she really leave the only home she had ever known? Leave her mother, who truly believed, in the greatness of their country, despite the hunger and the darkness?

That terrified her. But what really terrified her more was staying in North Korea and living in silence, in fear, the spark inside her slowly turning to dust.

The next morning, her mother sat her down. 'I know what you found,' she said simply. 'Your father told me. He also said he wants us to leave. But risking our lives for a dream that might get us all killed?'

'Mother,' Mi-Rae said slowly, 'it's not a fantasy. It's real. Somewhere out there.'

'They are not us. They are South Koreans. You may think we are all Korean but they will never welcome you. You'll always be an outsider to them,' her mother responded.

Mi-Rae looked down, her fingers tightening around the edge of her tattered sleeve. 'But what am I here Mother? A criminal? A girl who

defied the rules by watching South Korean drama?'

Her mother looked at her, her eyes glistening with both sorrow and fury.

'You are my daughter,' she said, her voice breaking while she choked back tears. 'I would give my life up for you. But I cannot give you a future I don't believe in.'

The words hung between them, heavy as iron. Mi-Rae wanted to run. She wanted to grab her mother's hand and pull her into the light she had always seen on the screen. But all she could do was stare, silently as her mother turned away.

For days, the house felt colder than ever. Not from the weather, but from the silence that wrapped itself around them like the winter frost. Her father never mentioned defecting again. Her mother went about her duties as if nothing had changed.

But everything had.

Then, one evening, while a thin layer of snow began to fall outside. Mi-Rae's father came to her room. He carried only a rolled-up map.

'We leave tonight,' he simply said.

Mi-Rae gasped. 'But…Mother–'

'She will not come. But she will not stop us either,' he replied.

Mi-Rae felt her chest tighten. The choice she'd dreamed of, the freedom she longed for - now it was real. But there was a cost.

That night, Mi-Rae sat next to her mother at the small dining table. The rice in the bowl was less than ever, the soup barely warm. Her mother placed the bowl in front of her and said gently, 'Eat well. You'll need your strength.'

Mi-Rae knew it was her mother's way of saying goodbye, and it didn't feel right.

Just past midnight, Mi-Rae and her father slipped through the snow-covered alleyways of Hyesan, past grey buildings and sleeping guards. With only stars guiding them, they moved in silence, their footprints disappearing behind them.

Ahead lay the Yalu River – black and frozen, stretching like a wound

between two worlds.

They crouched behind trees. On the other side of the Yalu, dim lights flickered, not bright, but alive. Beyond those lights, people were free to do whatever they chose to.

Her father whispered, 'We cross here.'

Behind them was everything they'd ever known: the warmth of her mother's hands, the cracked ceiling above her bed. But ahead was only ice, and the unknown.

She looked at her father who was gingerly taking small steps onto the river.

Behind them, a voice cut through the silence. 'Wait!' It was her mother, standing in the shadows. Barely visible.

'Mother! Go ba-' Mi-Rae whispered.

Then, the flashlights appeared. Armed soldiers, shouting in the distance.

'Go! Now!' Mi-Rae's mother screamed, her voice piercing through the bitter cold air.

Both Mi-Rae and her father stood on the edge of the frozen Yalu, motionless, hesitant on whether to turn back or to carry on.

'They'll take me. Go now!' Mi-Rae's mother continued to shout, whilst running towards the soldiers, arms outstretched, drawing their attention.

Mi-Rae's father grabbed her hand. They ran across the ice. Behind them, her mother's voice echoed once more, growing fainter, swallowed by the wind.

Mi-Rae didn't look back. Not until both she and her father were across the ice, the river separating the unknown and her home. Only then did she see flashlights converge on the figure standing motionless in the snow.

It was her mother. Surrendering herself so they could be free.

Mi-Rae felt tears slide down her numb face, freezing on her face as they fell. The wind howled, carrying the faint echo of her mother's screams and for the first time, she understood what it meant to lose something irreplaceable.

This night would live on in her memory forever - the ice breaking like

glass, the echo of voices, her mother's call. Her mother, who had watched them go, knowing she would not follow.

Author's note:

'When the Eternal Ended' is set in 1994 North Korea, at the moment of the passing of the 'Great Leader' Kim Il Sung. The announcement of the death of Kim marked a pivotal turning point in North Korean history, forcing the country to confront a truth they had never prepared for: the end of a leader they were told would last forever. This key moment, combined with the devastating famine of the mid 1990s - often referred to as the Arduous March - created a period of fear, uncertainty, and quiet questioning within a tightly controlled society, similar to the experience of my protagonist, Mi-Rae.

Through Mi-Rae's perspective, I wanted to explore how political change is experienced not only in public ceremonies or official announcements, but also in the private spaces of homes - in whispered conversations, hidden objects, and silent acts of curiosity.

By focusing on one family's decision to defect across the Yalu River - a decision contemplated by thousands of North Korean families - I hoped to capture both the danger and the hope embedded in that choice. This story asks whether freedom is worth the cost, and what it truly means to leave not just a country, but a home.

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The Duchess of Buccleuch 1954 - 2023

It was the Duchess of Buccleuch who established the Young Walter Scott Prize. She was fiercely committed to providing opportunities and encouragement to young writers, alongside the published writers fêted through the Walter Scott Prize. Passionate about the importance of young people looking to the past for inspiration, she founded the Young Walter Scott Prize to encourage them to express important ideas through writing, and she was delighted by the ambition, scope and skill of all those who entered the prize over the years. We miss her.

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