

## Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Secondary school section

Commended: Caitlin-Jane Lockhart, Millburn Academy

### No Man's Sky

Private Bell had always loved the night sky. He found a special kind of solace in the darkness, the vast expanse of glimmering light and shadow never failed to give him a sense of warmth. Even in the trenches, he'd sit in the dank pit and smile as his eyes searched the stars. The others thought him to be strange but were thankful for the odd calm he radiated amidst the panic of wartime. "Yer an odd one Bell, but a nice lad tae boot." He heard phrases along these lines often while with his regiment. So when Private Bell found himself lying in a ditch in the middle of the bleakness of no man's land, he was positive he'd be missed. He wasn't sure what had happened. He remembered the deafening barrage of the artillery, he remembered climbing up over the muddy parapet of the trench, he remembered beginning the deadly run across no man's land and then...he remembered a force hitting him in the stomach and knocking him backwards as if he were a ragdoll. He bent his hand at the wrist so that his fingers could graze the dinged up star he had pinned to his sleeve for luck. *S'pose ah've been shot, then. Doesnae hurt as much as ah thought it wid. Maybe ah've gone into shock?*

The young man sighed, affronted. Mam wouldn't be in a good mood at all. But then, she rarely was.

*Calloused hands kneaded dough like they'd done a thousand times before and eager young eyes watched as if it were the most fascinating process in the world. Mam glanced up and an eyebrow rose.*

*"Take it yer done wi' yer chores then, boyo?" the thickset woman enquired. The boy started, as though he'd been in a trance.*

*"Aye, Mam. Ah done everythin' you said fer me tae do." He grinned. Mam let loose one of her rare half smiles.*

*"Good lad. Yer birthday's comin' up, anything special yer wantin'? And ah'm no wastin' my hard earned pennies on a bag o' soor plooms or the like, so you think carefully." She narrowed her eyes at her absent-minded son, who stuck his tongue out in thought.*

*"Anythin'?" he asked cautiously. Mam's forehead creased.*

*"Anythin', boyo. 'Cept sweeties" she affirmed. The boy broke into a smile that rivalled a crescent moon.*

*"How much does a star cost, Mam? Uncle Tav says they fall sometimes." His eyes sparkled. Mam was taken aback.*

*"Ye want...a star?" she asked incredulously. The boy's smile fell.*

*"That bad, Mam?" He tilted his head. Mam's eyes softened from cold packed earth to melted chocolate.*

*"Naw, just...we'll see boyo, we'll see."*

Nearby, a soldier screeched like a wounded beast as Private Bell connected the stars that formed the plough.

Of course, Mam hadn't gotten him a real star but to the boy, the star shaped brooch she'd somehow managed to find was just as good. His legs had gone numb but he couldn't muster up a good panic, not while there were so many stars out. Mam had given Uncle Tav a row after that, saying that

people already thought her son was odd enough without him going round babbling about wanting a star to keep. Private Bell had always cherished the time he spent with his eccentric uncle. He was an outcast, but he understood the young boy better than anyone.

*Uncle Tav seemed to be in a constant state of motion. His nephew could only watch in fascination as he flitted from one end of his workshop to the other, grabbing bits and pieces as he went. Once he had gathered everything, he took a seat at the worktable and began tinkering with the watch he was being paid to repair. His nephew wandered over to observe, a question burning on his tongue. "Why d'ye like the moon so much, Uncle Tav?" the boy blurted out. Tav had a strange fascination with the moon, not unlike his nephew's love of the stars. Tav's hands stilled.*

*"Someone needs tae. It's always 'sun this an' sun that. Ah think people don't appreciate it enough because ye have to pay attention to notice it. The sun is there all day, blinding and shouting fer attention, but the moon is quiet and humble. Ah think it's fair bonnie." Tav stopped for breath. His young nephew stared wide-eyed before breaking into a grin.*

*"Ah like the moon too, Uncle Tav." Tav froze for a moment before his lips curled into a smile matching his nephew's. He reached over to ruffle the boy's hair.*

*"Glad ah'm no the only one."*

A limb of some sort rolled into Bell's ditch as he traced the contours of the moon with his eyes. He would have pushed it away but his arms were leaden. Black had begun to claw its way into the corners of his vision.

Uncle Tav cried when his nephew was conscripted. He had wrapped his arms around the young man and stood there, shaking in the dimness of his workshop. Tav had always been more sensitive than most. The villagers ridiculed him and the children never ceased to make fun of the strange man. When something needed fixed, however, it was Tav they called. Mam and Uncle Tav had been his only family for many, many years. Mam was his rock, his warmth; she was the stars, quiet and supportive but burning bright simultaneously. Uncle Tav was his youth, his likeness; he was the moon, larger than life and full of light.

Private Bell had always loved the night sky. He found a special kind of solace in the darkness, one that felt like the love of a mother's embrace and the cheekiness of an uncle's grin. When he closed his eyes for the final time, he had a smile on his face because for a moment there had been no war, no advancing enemies, no killing or chaos.

There was only a dreamer and the sky.