

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Secondary school section

First prize: Rachel Desmond, Millburn Academy

The Darkness

The land was preparing for winter. A harsh winter lay ahead as the boy's bones seemed to gnaw his insides and his fingers burned with the searing pain that only came with a cold north wind chill.

Only a pale, watery thread of sunlight escaped from a low winter sky. Just enough light to show the faint outline of a path to the forest the boy knew so well. He kicked his boots on the stony step and banged the door shut behind him. He walked away from the thick smoke of a village that had closed its doors to keep out the bitter winds. Those inside huddling together turning their backs to the winter and staring at fires that would soon need tending to keep out the relentless cold. He could not breathe inside any longer or feel the claustrophobic tightening of the thick stone walls. He had to inhale the bite of the air. *He had to.* The shadows reached out to him.

Shards of frost entwined with the dead leaves lying on the forest floor. The fox lay still in his dark pit in the ground. His breathing warming the small space. Hues of rust and gold majestic against the earthy brown walls. In Spring he will be wary, recalling the hooves and horns of unknown terrors, but for now he will leave his lair for the darkness. Survival forcing him into the shadows. It was nearly time. He watched still as stone for the right shade of inky blackness to fall and then slowly stretched. The fox crept out of its den into the night.

The boy quickened his pace and pulled his jacket tighter round him as his feet trod over a stubbled field and he hastened toward the edge of the copse. He loved to hunt here in Spring. Fat pigeons and buttery rabbits slung over his shoulders dripping down his back as he scoffed at the hawks circling overhead. But now it was only the blackened skeletons of tree and the dank pines with their icy harsh needles that had survived the onset of cold. He ran on hardly noticing the distant noise of the gypsy camp on the outskirts of the village. Its strange smells sired warning for the children of the village. They are not like us. Safe in our thick walls.

He ran into the beckoning darkness.

The fox slunk round the trees padding soft and measured as if he was moving to an ancient rhythm learned through generations of hiding and skulking through shadows to survive. His instinct smelled surrounding fear. The fox hunted alone. Its nostrils pulsated in the dark for smells of blood and bone. It would scavenge over feathers. Its claws sharpened on the sinewy flesh. And then its belly full it would return to the dark lair. The fox sensed the noises and smells of all forest life. He knew they belonged there. For that was the way it was and had always been.

The boy halted. The darkness was now complete as thick and tangled branches scraped his face. He stared into the black as his eyes slowly adjusted to reveal an image that only appeared to those who looked into total darkness long enough, uncovering a whole world in front of him. Emerald-jewelled eyes stared back at him. The boy watched the fox. It crouched low and held his gaze for just long enough. It looked so alive and part of the forest night. The boy felt his own breathing quicken but he stared mesmerised by the beauty of the nocturnal creature.

It was then that the fox disappeared back into the shadows unseen. The boy stared through the black but the fox had gone. He could not see, but it was not the darkness he now feared. He loved the darkness. It had revealed its secrets and he realised it is not darkness though we cannot see. He ran past the gypsy camp and saw the bright jewels of their clothes swirl against the sparks of fire. The music and voices carried high against the winter night. He wished he could join them but he returned back along the path he knew so well. Tonight he would sleep with his face toward the darkness.