

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

### Second prize: Imogen James, Glenurquhart High School

#### Selfish

The clouds were selfish tonight: they absorbed the sky, leaving faint trails of pink and blue in their wake. The silence is cut, as glowing sticks fly past, a blurred mirage of pointed white outfits, swaying my grandad on his rocking chair.

The rock shattered through my window, covered in slurs and flames.

Our home wasn't much, but it was ours. The day they took it away from me sparked not only our charred walls, but a fire inside me. It took us days to salvage all we could – I remember sifting through the carcass of my bedroom – my life becoming a half charred Bible and a sweatshirt. It took us longer to cease my mother's tears. They painted dark lines on her face through the grey ash stuck to her.

That was the first time I started to notice I was different. I had never sat next to the other boys on the bus, or walked in the same parks, but it had never mattered to me. I felt like I fitted in, they always laughed with me, I found this a little strange as I never had to say anything to make them laugh. But then my reflection grew darker and I was no longer just a boy. I no longer loved my darkness.

As I grew, my bitter thoughts churned in my head, words burning on my tongue and fists uncoiled only at rest. I started off with little things, having the courage to throw a piercing look their way. But then that summer little Joey from down the road was hung mercilessly. Seeing him hanging from the tree like a bitter fruit struck a chord within me. Those gathered around jeering were stunned into silence as I ran into the crowd, fists flying with reckless abandon. I had the one that strung him up in my fist, inches away from my face. I started hitting. Hitting. Spitting. Crying. Breathing. Collapsing. Hurting. Screaming.

They locked me up for that. I stumbled into the jail, and saw a man like me. He was being dragged away in cuffs, but smiling as if this is what he wanted. He looked at me, eyes glinting and said simply, "I'll see you on the front page tomorrow then." Attention. That's what we needed. Not small acts of pitiful revenge. Large movements. A real fight.

I wasn't a big fan of busses, so when I saw Rosa Parks on the cover of the paper, face full of pride and anguish, I started walking. And so did my neighbour. And my cousins a few towns over. And the lady who I bought the paper from. And the man who I wave to daily. And then we were allowed on the bus, anywhere we wanted. I sat right at the front. And I smiled for the first time in a long time for myself; not for the smartly dressed white man skipping the queue in front of me. I smiled for me.

We gathered, mist thick in the air, the top of the bridge eerily fading away, like our identity. This was a chance to get it back. The sound of footsteps in unison split the tension in the air, and our steps became mingled with the beat of horses' hooves and shouts of the 'bull'. The thundered over the crest, and our support went with the wailing wind. Smoke burst, as did lips, staining the concrete crimson as people fell to the ground. Every step I took, on the road my ancestors had slaved to build, was another step forward. I was surging against them all, a fish going upstream. Until they started crashing into me, a bloody handprint running down my Sunday best. I was staring in the face of my jailer, and I walked right out of my cell, beginning to love my darkness again.

I kept walking, for many, many years. Although my ancestors did a good job on the roads, there were still bumps. Much like the one my wife was developing. I know the world around me is chaos,

but she is my peace. It is no longer just a fight for me; it is a fight for my family, for my child to grow up sitting next to the others on the bus and playing in the same parks.

By now were riding out the 50's and 60's in Chicago. Despite our colour being hated, our culture was celebrated. The narrow streets buzzed with a strand of jazz music here, vibrant dancing there. It helped me keep going. After spending almost a third of my life fighting to be the same as the white man, I often felt like giving up. But evenings spent listening to the sounds of the sax pouring through me, reminded me I have an identity. My colour may be dark but hell my culture is bright. Then came the fight.

The ever so familiar sound of 'authority' rang in my ears, megaphone making the voice resonate and bury even further under my skin. I guess the peaceful approach was finally fading. There was a time when I would've run forward to join the fight, but as I aged my ideas aged too. I see what we are lacking in peace, but violence certainly won't even it out. So for that week, we sheltered in our meagre flat, allowing the uproar to pass as we listened to shrilling screams and lamenting sirens.

The clouds were selfish tonight: they absorbed the sky, leaving faint trails of pink and blue in their wake. The silence is cut as my daughter runs onto the porch, hair stuck to her face from salty tears, "He's done it again, dad!" And I looked forward to my remaining years, as I saw a black man, just like me, sitting at the same desk as Johnson did when he granted us our freedom, and signed America into his hands. Now he, he loved the darkness.