

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Secondary school section

Third prize: Adam Weir, Dornoch Academy

Theory

Portrait of *me*.

From somniferous molten oblivion, trawled; hauled from the sea bed, dripping, into the steel air. Green numerals glare and burble in the dark.

I search for a reason ever to mobilise again; and, in Virginia, grasp it. My chest a rusty accordion, I arise from the shore of snores, trailing pungent weeds of decaying dreams. My palpably puffy eye sockets dotting fizzing fireflies—green and purple—onto my retina, I fall through the doorway; directing my path of descent not back into bed, but at the next item on the brief rota that looms between me and my spill back into the lethargic bathwater ocean. Time begins to compensate as I move; its elastic rebounding, smudging the minutes into an indistinct blur. Before I know it, my next footstep is due upon the white linoleum of Virginia territory.

The room is roughly an isosceles triangle: I stand at the elbow of the two equally-dimensional walls, facing a third. But the far wall curves; wrapping around me for a quadrant of my vision, always the same distance away. A single, centred round window—the diameter of my height—shows a dim-lavender-lit golf course. Overlaid is the current time. Four thin, empty circles of thin, empty light stare out at me. I stare back because I can't quite work up the energy to blink.

I sit, pressing my thumbs to the ridge of the desk. The window opens with a flourish, blossoming across the wall into a nexus of pages and faces: thoughts never to be completed, stories never to be told. Glowing from the wall, that light I so hate—those icicles of blue mist—gore my retina.

To her, I must seem legitimately geriatric: a grandfather clock to her quartz crystal. I hear every sickening tick of my mortal coil tocked away, plucking my mind away from the present, and dropping it back into the numbing brine of dread—am I making the most of this, now? She doesn't hear it. There is no premeditation in her temporal spending; which might explain the number of faces I see with her on her social apparatus, scrolling by, scraping away at my heart. With a swipe of my fingers, I escape; filling the wall with golf. What *matters* is that the closer to her I reach, the further the ticking fades. She lets me live, rather than calculate; and for every tick that she has took, I'm grateful it was her.

But at the edge of the wall—and my sense of security—leaks that stabbing beam of *doubt*. This time, though, I'm curious to find myself not recoiling. I don't flick the sliver of ice back into view, load a string of five-second feature films, and recline to have them sprayed like expanding foam into the void in my cranium where I would otherwise entertain the company of thought; and, too often, the thought of company.

I slide the window off the edge, and open Microsoft Word. With a great hack—display issues aside due to its age—it coughs back to life; a wall of frost-light stares me dead in the eye. I experimentally

look around the room, unable to escape its line of sight, feeling its cold breath down the back of my neck. Its cursor blinks; taps its foot; drums its fingers. Ticks. Tocks.

All that keeps me from shutting it down is the chilling knowledge that many could see a page of Shakespeare and react just as I am now; seeing nothing but a blank page. Since it isn't being blasted into their ears to a thumping electric soundtrack, etched into their eyes in bleeding neon, it's simply below their threshold. Any of today's entertainment can stimulate the senses—*overstimulate*, and often all of them at once—but how much can stimulate the heart? How many people can quote the current number one pop hit word-for-word; but know of Che Guevara only for his digital reanimation in an advertising campaign for McDonald's?

It makes me nervous. I twitch into view my messenger to Virginia, well aware of what I'll see. Alongside the empty page, another stabbing blank sheet. Yesterday's exchange is retroactively voided, just as the days before. I recline; as I consider how I'll begin, she does. Out of the vacuum, a sentence pops into being. At first, I avert my eyes; before I realise that she'll likely be impatient already, and that I have very little ground on which to delay; besides feeling, in what I'm about to read, an air of *magnitude*. How wrong I am. How wrong I *always*— *often*— *generally* am.

I read the line of text. Upon my reaching the final word, it deletes itself. So does my last ember of hope for tonight.

She really is *gone*. The piercings; the drugs; it's all *her* now. The transitory nature of electronic conversation is useful, certainly, in eliminating the possibilities of regret; and, in kind, inhibitions: but since the sea of information broke into a river, nostalgia has given way but to my frustration. Every greeting, every romantic interaction, every *trace* of Virginia of before has simply run the course of all music, all film, all words. They come into existence; run their course along the current of the current until their age outweighs their value; whereupon they run off its brink into history. Were I to claim that Virginia had ever been any different—a beautiful, seemingly infinitely ancient and wise mind of maple and steel wire—what evidence would I have but that, occasionally, we ones now of water and oil still blow bubbles to each other?

I shut down the wall. The ocular assault ceases. In darkness and inanimation, I note that the wall is now infinitely far away. The light is like ultraviolet; shone upon even her, it reveals things unseen, deep within. In light, she exists merely in practice. In darkness, she's still a theory: and that's the only way we can love.