

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult Short Story section

First Prize: On the Hill by Richard Bennett

On the Hill

He was ower the warst o the brae an jist aboot up tae the hoose fan he was on his hauns an knees, an the messages was a ower the place. He was stiff a doon ae side an cuildna move his airm. He crawled in the hoose an he tried tae get up, an athing went oot ower ither.

Fan he opened his een, he was laid oot flat wi his face on the slab o slate lookin oot the door. He didna ken foo lang he'd been lyin there. He cuildna feel a thing or move a finger but he cuild see the cotton gress fyte in the sun an the heather broon on the hill abune.

About a mile awa on the ither side o the burn an a lot higher up the hill, was the Galls, the place faur he was born.

Twa hooses an byres an a big barn wi a threshin mill. Fan he was a wee loon, the ither hoose at the Galls was empty, but, ae day, his fadder's brither an's wife an bairns came up the brae in a cairt, a the wey back fae America! They'd emigrated aboot sax year afore but they hadna made a go o't. It was coorse wark, wannerin aboot like tinks, howkin tatties amon a lot o French fowk up near Canada. Niver a chance o a place o their ane, an near starvation wages. So they came hame an spoke tae the factor an got the hoose at the Galls. He minded fine the day they came up the lang brae in the drabble o rain; he sees them noo plowterin up the road, a few sticks o furniture in the cairt an three bairns, hair

burned like straw, drookit, eyes wide at the rain. Fan his fadder an his uncle had the place, there was corn an hey and tatties an neeps in the parks an sax beasts an a pair o horse an a hunner sheep on the hill. An a dizzen fowk bidin there. The brithers took in new parks, put mair sheep on the hill, sorted the dam, got the mill workin. Fan his fadder an mither left the Galls, his uncle bade on for a few years but he didna mak muckle o't.

The roofs was aff noo, an the parks was fu o rashes an bracken.

Ae generation an it's a awa.

He was deid tired. He lay an watched the shadas o the clouds movin ower the hill.

He was the aulest o the bairns at the Galls, an him an his sisters an cousins haiked ower a the hill, pickin blaeberries, the grouse stertin oot aneath their feet. An the hares. You cuild come roon a knowe an see forty or mair o them sittin up an boxin ane anither. An the cries o the whaups and the peeweeps, an the gows' eggs aside the wee black lochans, an the hen-harrier sweepin the side o the hill like a ghost.

The bairns gaed doon tae the school thegither – a mile tae the road an anither tae the schoolhouse. It was like bein in the jile. There was twa teachers – a cripple wifie an aul Willie Watt, the heidmester. He lickit the loons – the same wey he'd lickit their fadders an their granfadders, some o them. The only readin book was the Catechism: 'The work of creation is God's making all things of nothing and all very good'. History was Bruce an the spider, an Geography was a broon map on the wa.

Fan he was thirteen, he was sax fut an cuildna fit in the desk, an ae day, fan

Willie Watt was gyaun on an on, he jist got up an walked oot the door an went hame. His fadder niver made him go back, an aul Wattie niver sent for him, so that was the end o the school. Afore the year was oot, he was deen a man's wark.

He dozed for a fyle on the warm slate. There was a blackie tweetlin awa.

Then, there was Bess. Bess Sweeney. The kitchie quine at the Overton, roon the side o the hill. Sent up country, fae doon Buckie wey, she was wee an jimp, like a bairn. She lookit at ye wi a queer kinna cheeky look, oot the side o her een an she lauched a lot, though she had tae wark a the hoors in the hoose an the byre an oot in the parks as need be. He was near sax fut fower noo, an broadened oot, an she was only aboot five fut. He cuild put his hauns roon her waist an lift her up an throw her in the air an catch her. She skirled but she liked it fine. He was doon at the Overton ivery nicht. Syne she went awa for a fyle, twa-three months. Awa hame, so they said. Fan she came back she had a bairn wi her. She niver said fa the bairn's father was. An he niver asked.

Anither year went by. The banns was read in April, an then they went doon tae the manse, an the minister read a bit o the Bible, an they was merriet an went back up tae the Galls, an there was a hen in the pot an a few drams, but there wasna room for the three o them, an he got a fee an a cottar hoose at the Crofts, a ferm doon aside the kirk. Twa rooms, bare flooers, a reekin lum, water fae a hole in the grun – but they was as contented that lang summer – him an her an the bairn, as iver they was again. He'd come hame at the end o the day, an the fire would be on, an the bairn would come tae his knee. He was fair taen wi the loonie, Willie, an he'd learn him tae walk and tae spik, an they'd hae their tea, an Bess would pit the bairn tae its bed, an they'd sit an look at the fire an blether till they went awa tae their ain bed.

The bairns started tae come. First Dod, then twa quines, Annie an Ella, then five loons, then anither twa quines. Ten bairns in fifteen years. An aye they bade on at the Crofts, in the same hoose. Work was short, an he didna look for anither fee. Thirteen o them in twa rooms. ‘A swarrach o geats’, fowk said. Bess went tae the Poor Law man an they got a few shillins a week an a boll o meal.

Through the hard years, Bess got affa soor. She blamed him for a’thing an she got the bairns on her side. The only ane that spoke tae him richt was Willie, the loon that wasna his ain. He made sure Willie took his name, nae Sweeney, like it said on the birth certificate.

Thon months fan they was first merriet came back tae him. The loonie playin at the fireside, an then awa tae their bed. Bess was like a cat, fechtin an kickin. He’d get up in the morning wi his back a scratched.

Then there was change. Forestry contractors came in aboot the place lookin for workers. They offered twice as much as he got on his fee, so they were awa fae the Crofts. A big hoose rented on the Square in Dufftoon. Plenty o rooms, runnin water. Afore lang he was a foreman an bidin in ludgins farever the wark was. Doon aboot Elgin, Inverness, Kingussie. Awa fae Bess an the bairns. Fan he came hame, he had tae lick the loons if they’d been jukin the school. But ivery Monday, Bess kept ane o the quines hame tae dee the washin. Then she tellt the teacher they was seek. That was her wey o’t.

For Bess the biggest thing aboot Dufftoon was the chapel. She’d been brocht up an Irish Catholic an she went back till’t like a shot. Fan he was awa on the Black Isle for a month she had a the bairns baptised. Mass three times on a Sunday. Twa-three o the loons altar-boys. Confession. It wasna his wey, but fit could he dee? He brocht in the money, but he grew awa fae the faimly. An he was iver wrang.

The sun had shifted roon a good bit, an the shadas was gettin langer. His heid was stounin.

The last twa quines, Maggie Jane an Janet, was just twa-three year aul fan the War broke oot. Willie an Doddie was awa fae their fees an jined the Seaforths. He minded ae day: he'd been awa warkin an he was comin up the road fae the station. Fan he got tae the Square, he saw Willie, a lang loon in his khaki an his kilt, an he had wee Janet up on his shouthers an she was kickin an lauchin an skirlin 'pit me doon, Willie, pit me doon!' As clear as yisterday. But Willie was nae seener in France than word came back he was deid. Festubert. Festubert. That was hard. Doddie lested till 1917. They were gran loons. The best o the lot. Cheery loons, they warked hard an were guid tae their mither an their brithers an sisters. Baith times, fan word came tae the hoose aboot Willie an Doddie, he was awa fae hame. He kent Bess took it hard, an she blamed him for nae bein there.

Janet was the youngest ane, an the ane he liked the best since Willie was a bairn. Fan he came in the door, she'd run tae him, an he'd lift her an throw her up an she'd skirl, an she'd climb on his knee an they'd sing an he'd kittle her an play wi her ringlets. Then he came hame ae day in 1919, an she was lyin in a box on the kitchen table, an the funeral was the next day. The flu.

Things was niver the same efter that.

The years was fleein past. His mooth was affa dry, his tongue roch and swollen. There was a tin o pineapple in his messages. He cuild taste thon sweet bree fillin his mooth.

The bairns was a' growin up noo. The wuid was hard work but it was clean wark, an there was guid pey an guid company among the men, an ye didna hae to

tak off yer cep or bend yer knee tae onybody. Ae day there was a photographer there, an the boss came an asked him if he'd lift up a log an put it on his shouther. So he lifted up a guid big lang tree, an the boss stood aside him, an the mannie took a photograph. It was in the *Press and Journal*. Him stannin there wi a tree on his shouther. He cut the photo oot o the paper but he didna ken fit happened tae't.

Wark, ye see. That's a there was till't. Fan ye was a bairn, ye played aboot for twa-three years an then ye warked an then ye dee'd. That's fit a man did. That's juist the wey o't.

Syne, ae time fan he came back, Bess tellt him she was leavin Dufftoon. The bairns was a up – merriet or warkin awa – an the hoose was ower big an she'd gotten a wee hoose in Buckie. Back amon her ain fowk, so she said. Ane o the loons was there fan Bess tellt him. That was Alec. He was up for the day wi his wife an bairn. He was the butler at a big hoose doon the country an cleaned the sheen and polished the knives an forks an drove the car an god only kent fit else he did for the toffs. He thocht he was a bit o a toff himsel. He fair tore into his fadder that day. Aboot leavin a'thin to Bess, an niver bein there fan times was hard.

The fact is, for the first fifteen years they was merriet an the bairns was comin, he *was* there, but there was nae money. The next fifteen years there was money, but he wasna there. He was wrang a weys o't.

So Bess went off to Buckie. He gave up the hoose in Dufftoon an went to see the factor wi his cep in his hand an he bent his knee an he got Hillside. Back tae the hill. Jist a wee placie, fower-five acre. £7 a year rent. He got a job in the wuid at the back for a few years an he put in tatties an neeps an kale an shallots, got twa-three hens, an he snared rabbits an took a job at the beatin for a bit o

money. Thrawin the necks o the grouse the toffs had shot. He hardly iver saw ony o the bairns at Hillside an he niver went doon to Buckie to see Bess.

A fyle ago he'd taen a walk ower to the Galls. The aul road up the brae was runnin like a burn. Rickles o stanes a that was left o the hooses an byres. He minded the day they opened the sluice for the first time, an a the bairns runnin doon the side o the lade, followin the water, lauchin and cheerin, an the big wheel on the side o the barn startin tae turn, an they were threshin their ain corn. He thocht o the work o the aul place an he heard the win in the rowans an the cries o the whaups an he looked ower at the shadas o the clouds on the Ben an he followed the lines o the dykes that climbed the face o the hill. The licht was that clear he could coont the gows abune the ploo on a park a mile awa.

Noo, they was spikkin aboot anither war wi the Germans. The Butler was waitin tae be ca'ed up. So was Ella's twa loons.

The licht started tae dim abune the hill, an the win dropped. For a fyle there was a glimmer fae the West, an up the side o the brae, came the voice o a bairnie singin ower an ower:

One two three aleerie

I spy Bella Steerie

Sittin on her bumbaleerie

Eatin chocolate biscuits.

Then she was in front o the door – a wee quine wi a face as white's her pinny, dark ringlets, black stockins.

'Janet,' he cried. 'Janet ... '

But she didna hear him an she skipped on by, an the singin died awa, an he lay there, an the air cooled, an the blue got darker, an it came that he cuildna separate the sky fae the hill, an then the stars came oot, an he kent, at that meenit, that the hill was the hale warld, an that nae ither body but him cuild see that same pale licht.

2498 words