

## Neil Gunn Writing Competition

“It was very quiet, with a quietness that was tall and far, delicate as a leaf, and soft-footed as the grass.”

The Well at the World's End

### Birdsong

I awaken to the sound of a bird - I'm not quite sure what kind, but it makes a sharp “twee twee” sound. I know many people find birdsong beautiful and calming, and for many birds, I would agree - apart from this one. It's repetitive. It's annoying. It woke me up. I fumble around for the light switch - the lamp turns on with a satisfying “click”, before fizzing slightly and turning back off. The bulb's dead. Of course it is. I decide to risk it and attempt to make my way to the window in the dark, trying to memorise the room, the furniture and the other bits and bobs scattered around. I wince as I step on a fallen pencil, before successfully reaching the curtains. I gently pull them open, and after my eyes have adjusted to the morning sun, I'm met with the sight of a young bird. “Twee twee” - that's the one. I should have known. It's a robin - *the* robin. The one that always meets me at the bird table to steal a couple of suet pieces before the breakfast rush. I haul on my dressing gown as I think about what to have for my breakfast.

*“Twee twee.”*

Ah, the robin.

*“Twee twee.”*

It needs breakfast too.

I decide to be kind to the bird and feed it before I feed myself. I get dressed, pulling up a pair of faded black dungarees over a bold purple t-shirt and throwing a black and lime green band hoodie on the top (the robin didn't care about fashion or style) before making my way to the back door of the house.

Once my wellies are on over a pair of thick fluffy Christmas socks, I pick up the keys to unlock the door. The other keys jingle and jangle together as I take the correct one and turn it - hold on, wrong one - as I take the correct one-with-the-blue-dot-on-it, and turn it. As I open the door I'm instantly met with an ice-cold breeze that chills my face. The sun may be out but that doesn't change anything when you're living in the Highlands in late November - the fact the sun's even out is a miracle in itself. I go down a few steps and turn to my right where the birdseed is kept - in a small, slate-grey container that's covered by a single stone on top of the lid to stop the mice from getting in.

As I'm getting out the birdseed and anything else that needs re-filled, I realise how quiet it is. I can hear the other birds now, the calming ones, with the faint sound of a cow in a nearby field, and the swish of the trees as they sway together, the now-gentle breeze ruffling the last of their leaves. One comes my way, and I watch as it

falls, gracefully, until it touches the ground. Nothing is silent, just quiet. A good type of quiet. I can feel all of my worries fade away, and for the first time since last Christmas, I'm glad I woke up early.

I turn back to the bird table with a plastic tub of mixed seed, pink suet and dried mealworms to see the robin. It stares at me from a branch sticking out from an apple tree as I place a few suet pieces on the corner of the table - it has to be on the corner or it won't take it. As soon as I draw back my hand, there it is. The robin pecks at a small piece of suet before flying off, holding it with its tiny black beak. I feel lucky to be able to get this close to a bird, even if it doesn't stay for long. I love the way that they stand out, with their fiery orange-red feathers, surrounded by a circle of white that contrasts with their coffee-brown backs and glossy black eyes. Then again, I've always been interested in different species of birds, what they look like or sound like and where you can find them. One garden bird that I'd love to see one day is a goldcrest - a minuscule bird with a bold golden strip across its head - said to be the United Kingdom's smallest bird.

I finish putting the seed on the table, throwing a small handful on the ground for the younger birds, before turning back to go inside. As I reach for the handle, I take one last glance at the bird table. A speckled blackbird pecks at a sunflower seed as its tail feathers sweep a few onto the ground, swiftly followed by some pale brown seeds and a piece of corn. A small breeze comes, causing the lighter of the seeds to rattle as two of them roll away. The bird soon spots me and flies off to a faraway tree.

As I step inside, I think about the birds. It's funny how spending such little time with nature can have a positive impact on my whole day. I lock the door, put down the keys and take off my wellies.

*"Twee twee"*

I look up at the bird table - surely the seed can't be gone already? The robin looks at me before taking another piece of suet and flying off, almost as if to thank me for its food. I smile.