

SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2017

HIGHLY COMMENDED

DESCENDING by E.Rose

I

There is a tension in the brackets of my neck, and now I must put my books into the warm wood hole of my desk, long before the bell rings. The others are resentfully respectful as I efface myself in the sun, leaving the under-sounded bitterness of their voices spreading from the windows. In the dry season, the Union Jack at the front of the school rarely changes shape from its morning laxness to the lunchtime lowering; we have to take turns in learning how to fold it and how to stand below it to send it upwards. I raced it to the top this morning, and now someone else will have to take it down.

Going home means crossing the road from the school front gates, which aren't gates at all, just two stone columns on either side of the half-ring sweep. They are the right size for sitting on, high enough to see if my mother is on the warpath across the road and wide enough to disappear behind them when she is. There are cars all over the road, sweating paint and rubber; the driveway is stuffed with them, and all of ours are closest to the house. There is a reverse precedence on some occasions. The gravel makes a sibilance; going sideways through the cars takes a different sound from the granite chips. The front door is the ugliest thing in my visual life; it is topped with a large section of glass in green and yellow and red. From the inside, it bursts the light out of its pleasure into hot colours which gush over the red and green floor tiles; every day, I renew my resolution to hate stained glass windows forever.

The screaming of the relatives clears out my ears. They have risen in their own estimation again, having travelled heavily, and lightly, through their fifteen-hundred mile and eighteen-hour journey, whiskey and moths accompanying them easily through the black and green bush. The moths are still outside, the gardeners sliding them down the water streams

from the windscreens. My mother is having a shaking fit down the hall and I sidle towards her to avoid the brandy-smoked smell of the assaultive uncle.

In the churchyard, my grandmother's coffin is brown under the flowers; I look for the wood bits, not wanting the rage of my eyes to be waylaid by wreaths. I have waited for eight years for this, beginning with the trees of the sunset beyond the high window, when my grandmother first leant across to push me away from watching my bare-breasted mother who was feeding my sister. My mother's mother said my mother didn't want me any more, now that she had a new baby to care for. My little sister must wonder why I hate her so much.

There will never be enough breath left in me for the conviction that my grandmother is locked irretrievably in; her swinish mind still ratchets through mine.

My mother's hand is vicious from her focus on the grave, and my father is holding my sister. I twist my hand away for a handkerchief; I shall apologize to Simon tomorrow for crushing his ironing. He thinks it tender that I see what he does; my mother is beginning to be suspicious of him. I hide my face as the box twitches down, holding my breath to hiccups in case it comes back up again. When the forest of legs clears at the periphery of the handkerchief's linen and lace, I resist going, hearing their sighs of our closeness and how I should be left alone to say a last goodbye. I lean over to make sure she is still lying at the bottom, and wiggle my shoes in the surrounding earth.

She would close her room, my eight-year old sister a closet captive in it, and take out the chamber pot and have my sister sit in it until she'd done something and then make her flush it down the toilet. The afternoon before she went to hospital, I had to put her lunch tray down on the floor to turn the doorknob, and I heard her ask the potted sister who had given her the birthday scent. Raised into her deafened ears that I had, my grandmother shouted back that she would never wear the smell again. I had a hard time not slopping the soup onto the tray. At midnight, through the toilet door, I saw her going by, flat on her back and waving her hands from the stretcher. I wished I'd known before what mushroom soup could do.

Seventeen relatives stretched out down the tables for funereal food. They came back that December when we had cold turkey under the leaves riveted to the sun, and I overheard my mother saying to them that I had her mother's Irish legs, just like fat tree turnks going straight up and down. I knew then that I would rip any child of mine right out through my skin. I wondered if I should have told them that I had been dancing on my grandmother's grave.

II

To Dorothy Hughes, whose daughter is Elaine, whose daughter is Patricia

Their sitting-room is rounded out with wood, the walls are chaped with knots, and the floor is glossed to a flow to walk on between the knobbed rugs. The window faces over the lake sucking right below; the house legs itself out of the cliff, levelled for family living in stages of privacy. You live right next door, in a drunken house stitched to this one with flagstones, its whiteness greened by the pines and the divebomber birds. The light leans in through the windows and arranges the lake inwaves on the walls. For you, the family live in a fishbowl; they mouth phrases and gesticulate soundlessly, moving through the light like the fins of an angelfish.

It was considered pretty sissy to wear ear-guards in Africa, so it was only when I went pistol shooting here in Victoria that I found out how to snap them on over my hair. My perception narrowed instantly to the gun butt soothing my palm, the smell of the cordite, the focus straight ahead to the small white paper square some fifty feet away from me. The weight of the gun stretched my wrist. I had to let it fall moment by moment to rest on the chamois which covered the front of the trestle. I could hear only a soft pop from the man next to me, watch his target brace and tremble. This is a curious world without sound. The intensity of the surrounding colours deepens and alters; green goes navy, beige grass to blackwood brown, and the white square advances to the front of my thoughts.

The only other time I have been deaf was the first time ever that my father tucked his gleaming .303 into my shoulder. He had to pull the ammunition box over to the side of his allotted space, tearing up the grass as he grunted it under the rifle. I was glad to put the front sights down on something other than the roots of the grass tufts, and glad that there wasn't too much sand stuck inside the barrel. I knew how long it took to clean; wrapping the tip of the cleaning rod with pieces torn down the red stripe on the narrow white flannel roll, dipping each piece into the oil which stuck it around the end. He would upend the rifle and rest it against his shoe and force the rod down the barrel from the breech. When he had managed to stuff it down the whole length of the barrel at least once, and the rod didn't bend quite so shockingly towards my face, he would let me wrap a new piece around and dip it in the oil and start it off for me. Then he'd hold the rifle steady while I reached high over my head and swung my arms down. I would have to push it down in stages; the upended breech was my

eyelevel, and standing on a chair only wobbled the rod. I knew that sand in a gun barrel was no good at all.

When the box was anchored by its weight to the ground, and the rifle was anchored by its weight to the box, I stopped pretending that I had been able to hold it up. The front of his shooting jacket was bulging up over my eyes, and the elbow pads were over my wrists. His arm lifted me up horizontally to pull the jacket down; I felt like the iron lung I had seen in the hospital where the bodies lay stretched out, suspended in a metal tunnel. Back down again, from the distance he had shrunk to in my mind, I heard his voice tell me to take my time, and to pull the gun butt into my shoulder. I knew about taking the time; the men would silence themselves into the hard grass-covered mounds, stilling the blood in their arms and their eyes, breathing without motion. The barrels would freeze the air. Standing behind them, I would feel the jerk of their bodies as they squeezed the trigger, wait for them to start moving their lungs, and hear their murmurs as they swivelled to the telescope to mutter about magpies, v-bulls and outers. I focused on the target six hundred feet from my face, and fired.

I heard nothing. The barrel lifted soundlessly and smacked down on the box. I felt the butt being unstuck from my fingers, knew that my father had stood me upright on the groundsheet, and that he had pulled the jacket straight over my head without undoing it. He held me with his hand. I could see his mouth move across the narrow valley of the rifle range; I could see the heat haze swimming around his head against the sky. A bruise the exact shape and size of the gun butt was bludgeoned into my shoulder. Of the two, at least I had remembered to take the time.

So when I dropped in last night to the house which draws the lake into its rooms, and read to your family the last prose-poem that I had written, about dancing on my grandmother's grave, I saw that the lines on your face were smoothed out by being left out, again. It was hard for me to read, as it is hard for me to talk, knowing that you see me move through transparent syrup, my arms and legs and eyes without the meaning of my voice; and when you asked to read it for yourself, I could only write down for you that it was unfinished and that I would sign a special copy for you later on this week.

I knew that the grandmother of my best friend would need another poem to know that not all granddaughters dance on graves.