

## SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2<sup>nd</sup> PLACE 2017

### A Fate Like Gallus'

The firs are heavy with rain. Their old boughs creak. Sigh in resignation at the gathering storm. Branches swaying, stretching. They knock against the window. Like Old Man Time.

They had grown unruly. Too large. Too close to the house. More than once he was advised to cut them down or back. But he resisted. They had earned their place – a right of residence. They had been there since his childhood. Long before. They would still be there long after.

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He put down his book and stared through the window. Against a deep green backdrop his reflection stared back. Unseeing. He looked like some old tree-spirit. An ancient dryad. Old Silenus himself!

How had he accumulated such age? Without an awareness of it happening? Time had trickled towards him. Imperceptibly. Rippled over him. Like water over stone.

Enveloped him completely. Then rushed headlong by. Gathering. Deepening. *Circling*. Slowly at first. Then faster and faster (or so it seemed). *Whirling*. Like a vortex. Drawing everything into its empty eye.

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Whoa! That's a bit heavy. Too much for first thing in the morning – that's for sure. Such thoughts have their time. But not before elevenses, thank you very much!

They will return, no doubt, along with others. When light is banished beyond the edges of our world. When the clock on the mantel chimes past midnight. When we start from sleep. At the darkest hour. When God Himself seems absent. But for now? Sort it out, man! Such thoughts must not prevail.

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He glanced at the volume beside him. Back to the task at hand, his old Professor would say.

*Back to the task at hand, Mr Wiseman...*

*Our very own Homo Sapiens!*

The face of his old classmate flared before him at the memory of the running gag. But he had to stay focussed.

He had awoken that morning to the recollection of an old conundrum. Uninvited. Out of the blue. And what's more, he had felt alert, clear-headed. Ready for the challenge.

He had found the book first time (knew exactly where to look!) and flicked to the poem in question. *Number 21. Gallus and the soldier*. He was looking forward to renewing an old acquaintance.

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But it felt a little strange, truth to tell. This clear-headedness. Memories appeared. Fully-formed. But unbidden. Without order or control. It unnerved him.

Lately they were more about people or events from the past. From his boyhood really. He had no trouble recalling details from that morning. Goldfinches. A pair. Face to face at the feeder. Their red masks poised between them. Like dancers at a ball. But then it was London. His first day at school. The face of his teacher in lurid 60's technicolour. Long, auburn hair. Lashes heavy with mascara. Sky-blue shadow on the lids. Chalky, peach lipstick.

What was it that had linked the two? The vivid colours..? Masks..? Perhaps.

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Yes, he could recall these details. But what about the in-between? The vast expanse of adulthood and ageing - between the roll-call of his first day and the pageantry of the morning. What about the most important part of his life?

His children were both adults now. Embarked upon their own journeys. Many times he thought to call them. Text them on some detail from his day. But he almost always didn't. They had enough in their own lives - with their own families - to keep them fully occupied. And his wife. *Blue girl. Blue bird.* Blue-eyed and golden. Until. Well... just until.

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His family was what made it all worthwhile. But their faces didn't come easily to him now. Sometimes he had to struggle. To concentrate. Beneath the occasional thrill of full recall (moments like this morning) it was an ever-present, beneath-the-surface sadness. An undertow of guilt. And loss.

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He jolted himself awake. Back to the task at hand. *Propertius 1.21*. Only ten lines in total - but what a cracker! Multiple versions of the text and as many (mutually exclusive) interpretations. Partly because of the manuscript tradition. But also due to the enigmatic nature of the poem itself. Never underestimate the enigmatic!

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Essentially, there were three key questions within the poem: the condition of the speaker (*Gallus*); the identity of the sister (*soror*); the nature of the request. It came back with a clarity that surprised and delighted him.

Okay then, seize the moment! Take them in order. One. Two. Three.

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Is *Gallus* dying or already dead? If dead - is it his corpse, or just a scattering of bones, that "addresses" the passing soldier (*miles*)?

'Hey you... soldier... *Tu... miles...*

Why do you start, wide-eyed, at my groans?'

Okay. Three lines in. A good start. Dramatic. Arresting. Enough to make the *miles* (and the reader) stop in their tracks. So far so good.

The soldier is wounded. Running from the site of battle. Desperate to avoid a fate like *Gallus'*. But why is he so terrified? Because he is being hailed by a dead man? Or a disembodied voice? (Either reason enough cause for alarm, God knows!). Or does he imagine the voice belongs to one of his potential pursuers? Is it fear of capture that clutches at the soldier's heart?

And if *Gallus* is dead (or even dying) - as long as his body was intact the *miles* should surely recognise him? After all, they probably fought together - possibly even side by side. (It was common for neighbours or relatives to fight beside each other in the local militias that resisted Rome).

*'Pars ego sum vestrae proxima militiae'*

'I am your brother-in-arms - part of your militia.'

(Propertius 1.21, l.4)

Perhaps *Gallus* is bloodstained - his features masked and difficult to discern? Either way, the mystery begins. The secret heart of the poem. Encoded. Subversive. You see, for Caesar, there was no welcome in the hills of Umbria. Old families and allegiances were what mattered there. But this was not the time to celebrate such things. Or to acknowledge older kinships. So the poem becomes allusive. Elliptical. Bloodlines are implicit. Identities are blurred.

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The knocking makes him start. He remains in his chair. Unmoving. Waiting for his senses to return. It seems to have stopped now. Maybe it was his imagination (perchance a 'waking dream'?). More likely just the postman! Or perhaps his sister come over to check on him as she often did. Either way they had gone now. Left a card – or would try again later. Not a problem. Tho' he would like if they had seen him. Poring over his old books - alert and studious. They wouldn't have expected that. He would like to have seen their faces!

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He should get up. Move around a bit. Put something on the fire. But he stays still. Propped on the arm of his chair. Struck by a sudden, uninvited memory. A visit from the past. His friend had called with a colleague. Out of the blue. Caught him reading Vergil (Book IV!) in a desperate attempt to salvage the academic year...

*'At Regina..... But the Queen.....*

*Gravi iamdudum saucia cura*

Already riven by a deep desire...

(Vergil, *Aeneid IV, l.1*)

He recalled the Professor's booming delivery of that great opening salvo. His voice revelling in the broad-vowelled syllables. The long 'a' of the ablative (*cura*). The staccato of the mandatory dactyl (*saucia*). One long, two shorts -

*Like the joints of your finger -*

*Check it out, Mr Wiseman!*

*From the Greek "daktylos" ...*

The past came rushing back. Overwhelming him. He could not keep it out. It had a separate, irresistible momentum.

*Or the flight of a swallow –*

*One long, two shorts -*

*Look closely next time you see one, Ms Kelleher!*

*But what does she do class?*

*Anyone..? Mercedes..?*

(Much to a classmate's horror the Professor had learned her middle name was *Mercedes* –  
"A beautiful third declension name")

*What does the queen do..?*

*"Vulnus alit venis."*

*That's what she does, Mercedes...*

*"She feeds the wound with her life-blood."*

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It was Jerry who had called that day. Rained off a dig in an ancient city. Drove through the wretched weather – just to check in and say hello. Votive knocking. April's icy draughts.

Like an array of Cretan arrows. Rend the air. And Jerry. At the door. Beaming. A young Octavius. His damp face framed by curls.

Kindling crackled in the cast-iron grate. Braziers glowed beneath old city walls. Sacred fires shimmered on cold temple floors. We chatted. Laughed. Put whiskey in our tea.

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He really should make an effort. It seemed like the day had passed him by. Light was fading - evening gathering in. He should get up. Make some tea - or something light to eat? And he would - but not just yet. In a while perhaps. His sister might call again later. He would wait until then. They could have some supper together.

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Speaking of sisters. He had strayed far from the task at hand. (Forgive me, Professor, *mea culpa*). Left the soldier petrified, in mid-stare. And *Gallus* - nebulous forever. Not good enough! He must return. Lead them where they are destined to be.

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And so the *soror*. Who is she? *Gallus* exhorts the soldier to go. To leave him. Make it back: to his home; to his parents; to the *soror*.

*'Sic te servato, ut possint gaudere parentes'*

'Save yourself, so your parents might rejoice'

(Propertius 1.21, 1.5)

But whose sister is she? *Gallus'*..? The *miles'*..? Wife to one. Sister to the other. But whose wife? Whose lover? Things become complicated. Less and less clear. And - to make matters worse - from here... the manuscript is corrupt!

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Which brings us to final *crux*. The nature of *Gallus'* request: full disclosure; partial disclosure; no disclosure. Does he want the *soror* to know of his death? The texts are in conflict. The acceptance of '*ne*' for '*et*' can change the sense completely.

'May she (not) guess at these events through your tears.'

(Propertius 1.21, l.6)

Or is it the manner of his death that he wishes to conceal? How he, *Gallus*, having escaped from the midst of Caesar's swords ('*per medios Caesaris ensis*', l.7) could not evade the hand of a common assassin ('*ignotas manus*', l.8). Is there a hint of soldier's honour here? Or just an irony too cruel to reveal to a loved one?

Either way, the final couplet arrives:

*'Et quaecumque super dispersa invenerit ossa  
Montibus Etruscis, (haec)/(ne) sciat esse mea'*

'And whatever bones she finds scattered on these  
Etruscan hills, may she (not) know these to be mine.'

(Propertius 1.21, ll.9-10)

Did he mean for her to find his bones? Or not? (A simple '*ne*' changes everything). Either way, the elegy concludes.

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He was beginning to struggle now. The clarity he enjoyed earlier was starting to dissolve. To dissipate. He couldn't be certain which reading he once favoured. (Although he had argued it passionately back in the day!). But that was long ago. Few, if any, cared back then. Truth be told. No one would care now.

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Daylight was draining away. The hills beyond the trees were darkening in hue. In the half-light they could pass for the hills of Etruria. A soldier making a desperate descent to the valley. A sister waiting below. Anxious. Unaware of what was about to unfold. And *Gallus*, propped on an arm. Imagining the scene in his mind's eye. Dying. Perhaps already dead.

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Night had fallen. Starless. The wind had strengthened to a full-blown storm. The old firs groaned and swayed. Waved their weary limbs in futile defiance. They easily reached the window now. Raking the panes with their branches. Needles tapping the glass. Like fingers. *Warning. Beckoning.* Into the fury. Into the darkness beyond.

**END**