

John McGlashan College

INKSTER



Volume Two: June 2017

Foreword

Welcome to the second installment of Inkster, John McGlashan College's collection of creative offerings from a selection of our keen writers and artists. This edition offers a gance at some of the fantastic photography coming out of our new Level Two course. Many thanks to Bryn Jones for compiling these works.

The writing, like the photography, is an eclectic mix of offerings from students who are a part of The College's creative writing group. This work is all completed out of class time, with little guidance from teachers, and relfects their passions - both in terms of the genres in which they write, and the subject matter.

Read. Enjoy. Appreciate. And if you see one of the Inkster contributors about the place, and you liked their work, tell them. Their efforts deserve a bit of a pat on the back.

David Schaumann
Head of Inkster Department
John McGlashan College.

*Cover Image:
Charlie Doughety*



Andrew Hughes

Long Since Concluded Affairs

The fields of Europe waste away in a restless silence,
Glory of Youth lies torn and rotting
Heroic ichor suffocates the dirt,
Turning all flowers into garish mockeries of poppies.
Flashes of glowing violence linger in the dark
As green gas causes soldiers to sputter drown
So real.

And yet a monochrome of black and white fills the world,
The battle stutters and jerks as if you watching an ancient film.
Where is the lingering stench of death?
Where are the agonised cries of moribund soldiers
And the tears drying on widow's cheeks?

This hellish scene is laid out before us.
But never do the dark words fully convince
Those who lie in warm beds at night,
Sheltered by the vast gulf of time.
We do not know the bite
Of frostbitten digits,
Or the horror of battles fought long-since.

Though we stand in city squares,
Staring with hushed prayers,
At stone soldiers,
Remembering long since concluded affairs
Can we truly understand the butchery,
the carnage, all those years ago?

Alex Thomson



The Seed of a Story

As I sat down on my chair and opened my book, I noticed something. Just out of the window, I saw a tree. But the tree hadn't been there the day before. It was new. It was different. As I wondered about how it had gotten there, where it had come from, and why, I subconsciously reached for my journal and pen and began to write. I wrote a story, about how the tree arrived, about how it grew from an apple that fell to the ground, even though I knew that the explanation must have been much more ordinary, as the soil around it was fresh and no grass had grown over it, so it must have been planted there as it was, fully grown.

I wrote how it had grown overnight, how the apple had come from a special tree - a magical one. One that had a single flower which turned into a single fruit. One that had all of its energy focused on a single seed in that single fruit, and how that fruit had gotten there and then instantly decomposed, so its tiny seed lay there bare and exposed and made a plant - the new, fresh tree. I wrote how that plant, that tiny sapling of a tree, grew at a ridiculous rate, so fast you could see it growing, and that it didn't need to photosynthesise to get the energy. For it was all in that seed. All of that energy. All of that mass. Contained in a tiny object, smaller than the tip of my little finger.

That was the story I wrote from my observations, and as I proofread it proudly, as I gazed at it, I wondered if it was actually me that wrote it. It seemed too good to be mine. Too well written. I poured so much of my imagination into that story, that I almost believed the words. I almost believed that it could be true

Nathan Dockerty



Adjacent Page: Andrew Hughes

Above: Charlie Dougherty

Fiordland

Foreboding sentinels stand guard
over bounteous depths
That snake and writhe through the land.
Yet sharp anchors disembowel them daily.

Fog gushes through harsh valleys,
enshrouding treacherous mountains
in a protective mask
that imbues awe and fear.
It does not deter keen rifles and rods.

The glistening valleys chatter quietly
as the wind tickles them,
'til a whirring buzz fills the air
and a booming silence ensues.

Streams of crystal slither
through the bowels of the bush,
exciting life wherever they alight.
Yet putrid slime creeps gently
on the heels of well-meaning men,
quietly stalking its quarry.

Slow healing scars of grey
mar the faces of the land.
Yet it looks on,
silently accusing those
who gaze upon it.

Stuart Van Turnhout

The Ocean's Performer

The creature vaults the waves
As if they were watery hills,
It bypasses them trying to touch the sky
Throwing itself without remorse.
It dives through a school of clownfish,
Snapping one up as it flashes by.
The dolphin continues doing majestic maneuverers,
It is an acrobat and the ocean is its stage,
Yet no one is in his audience.

Jack Lundy



Winston Brinsley

The Divide

A fire rages.

I may be poor but I still have enough.

I've spent a lifetime trying to make up for what I don't have. Having wants is part of living. I just have more than some. I find peace from my troubles in giving people hope. Hope found in faith. Faith is almost all I have now but it is the most precious gift of all. Not even the flames can take that from me. They came at night and lit up the dark. How they started I may never know but they were swift and came for what little I had.

I gathered what I could and took my wife away. We ran away from the light, down thin streets surrounded by corrugated iron. A dirty dark alley became our shelter and we rested. Looking up, I couldn't see my wife's face but her heat comforted me. A blanket of shade rested upon us and we closed our eyes. I had what I had and that I was grateful for. What I had lost; a home, a place to keep the faith. All of that tugged at my heart but for now, I was just grateful that she was well. Other wives and husbands may not have been so lucky.

I have lost and yet I still feel lucky for some have lost more than I.

* * * * *

I may be rich but I'm not heartless.

I saw an orange glow coming from over the wall. The barbed wire ontop glistened like gold. I looked through the slats within the wall and saw a roaring fire outside. I called to the guards around the gate, ordering them to grab buckets of water. One made a move towards the blaze but I shouted him back. "Wait until it's closer!" He stepped back into line, clearly aware of who paid his salary. The blaze moved around the wall, growing in size rapidly. The men desperately loosed their water upon the flames but to little effect. We fell back as the wall became fire.

My house burned and so did my status. My castle, situated upon the shanty hovels of our neighbours, crumbled. A beam collapsed and struck one of the surrounding houses. The cry that followed fell upon preoccupied ears. We backed away from the fire and forced our way into one of the houses far from the orange light. That's all I could see. Orange. The bright glow of a house ablaze.

I have lost and I feel cursed for no one has lost as much as I.

Fire. I am not biased or cruel. Fire. I am not fair or kind. Fire. I am nearly there. I strip the brands of poverty and wealth revealing only what lies beneath.

I am the equilizer.
I hurt those you love and those you hate.
I am the middle ground.
A grey area in the orange glow.

Alfie Richardson



Jake Willsman

The Ashen Path

Third day of the Eighth Moon

My condition is getting worse dear Journal, faster and faster. If I stopped to count the blisters and boils, I'd probably die before I finished. Though, I suppose they're more like those lumps old trees get. I've been hearing stories about what happens to those that survive for too long. Stories about flesh stiffening up, not just on the outside, but the inside too. I don't want that, I'd rather burn with the heathens.

I should never have left the village. At least then there'd be someone to put me down before it got really bad. Twenty-three days dear Journal, twenty-three bloody days I've been walking through this bloody forest. I can't tell if the blisters on my feet are from the sickness or the walking anymore. The worst part is that it doesn't even hurt; it's like they've turned to stone. Bloody hell they're probably too far along to be fixed, even if I find a way.

I know what I should have done, dear Journal. I should have brought a knife, just in case I didn't find anything. The boils are hard, but not hard enough to stop cold iron.

Fifth day of the Eighth Moon

I found the way, dear Journal. To hell with knives and cowardice, I found the bloody way!

It was around mid-morning I think, when I stumbled onto the path. Took me a while to notice, I must admit. Everything was so pale on the way, I guess everything turning grey wasn't so shocking. Took me a while to cotton onto the plants dying as-well. I left in winter you see. everything that doesn't have a hundred pounds of fur on it dies around this time.

I was more surprised when I realised the snow had been replaced by ash.

Seemed quite ridiculous at first, snow doesn't burn, it melts. Even a baby knows that. Then I remembered what the vagrants had said about their dreams. They had spoken of grey plains and the twisted mountains. I can't see any mountains right now, what with all the husks around, but what's greyer than ash! By god there's a lot of it, dear Journal. It's just ash and dead trees for miles around! At least, I think they're trees. If they aren't, I very much hope they're dead. The vagrants didn't say a lot about where this place was, which isn't surprising. They probably didn't even know if it was real! Most likely it's just some hold-over from the Time of Creation. It'd explain all the ash. Who know's, maybe there's still some Demons around here somewhere. Maybe even some Angels!

Well, Journal, I won't be finding out anytime soon. I'm no grave-robbing adventurer. There's only two wonders in this place that interest me. First is the light. I can't see it very well, again, the husks are quite abundant, but it's definitely there. It's not a warm light, it's just kind of pale and blinding. At first I thought it was just this place's sun, but it hasn't moved in hours. Maybe that's just how it is here, but I can't escape the feeling that the source is nothing so distant.

It's probably all bollocks, but I can't shake the hope that it's just as the vagrants' dreams said. Maybe, once I get out of these damned woods, I'll find myself looking at a Marble Tower. Imagine that! The Marble Towers of Them in the Light!

The second thing I noticed was the path. The thing itself isn't anything special, it's only slightly less grey than everything else here, and even then that's mostly just the absence of ash. No, dear Journal, what's interesting about this path is the foot prints. They're all a bit cracked, like the earth was only recently disturbed. Maybe I'm wrong, dear Journal, maybe I'm an idiot. But what these prints tell me is that, not only were there others here, but they were here recently. I do hope I can find them; renewed purpose doesn't do much to alleviate sheer boredom.

Ninth Day of the Eighth Moon

For the record, dear Journal, I was never under any illusions about this place being any sort of wonderland. I mean, granted, I was seeking a marble tower, but I hadn't thought I'd wandered into paradise. More likely it was left over from the great war.

On the other-hand, I never thought there was anything wrong with this place either. I'd thought it was

strange, of course I did. All this ash in one place yet with no hint of any recent fires? Of course it's odd. But I'd always thought it to be a harmless sort of odd, like one of those mushroom circles in the woods.

Let me tell you, dear Journal, what it was that shattered that thought.

Yesterday afternoon, I was walking the path, as I have been for the past few days, despite the weakening protests from my legs. I must not have been paying attention, because I bumped into a tree. It didn't seem strange at first, until It occurred to me that, for a burnt out husk, the thing was oddly leafy. My spirits soared!

"What if it has fruit?" I thought, that'd certainly make a change from these damned trail rations! Lucky for me, it did indeed bear fruit. Unfortunately, I couldn't recognise the sort, so I tossed them aside (don't worry Father, I haven't forgotten). They looked sort of like apples, or maybe peaches, given their size. The difference is they were all dark, solid purple. Probably some sort of plum or oversized berry.

In any case, I tossed the fruit at my feet and got back to walking. Or at least I would have, had my foot not caught on what I believed to be an exposed root. Once I'd cleaned the ash off my face, and had started to stand up, I noticed an odd pressure around my Leg. I was hard to notice, given the spreading numbness, but It was definitely there. After a few moments of pointless struggling, I turned and looked at what exactly was holding me there.

It was a hand, dear Journal, there was a hand around my foot.

As you would expect, I cried out. With my free leg, I kicked at the things as hard as I could. I kicked so furiously that, if I could still feel my foot, I'd probably have caused myself a lot of pain. Nevertheless I did free myself. Despite my shock, I decided to take a look at the thing. Maybe this was the one who left those prints, and I'd just stepped on them in their sleep?

No such luck, dear Journal, no such bloody luck. It was a withered, bump covered thing. Wrapped in roots, and jutting out from just under the tree. So withered in fact, that I wondered if I really had been caught on some roots, and this was all just some sort of hallucination. It looked like a corpse, dear Journal, how could it grab me! Still, fear compelled me to touch the thing, just to make sure that it was real.

Not only was it real, Journal, but it was warm. Whoever this hand belonged to, they were still alive.

Now, I like to call myself good-hearted, so I of course tried to help the poor soul. I called out to them, tugged at the hand with all my might. I even tried to push the whole tree over so they could climb out, but it was all for nought. At first, I resolved to stay with them for a while. However they came to be buried, there's no way they could much longer. It certainly couldn't hurt to give the poor soul some support. They're bumps were similar to mine, after all, it'd be criminal to abandon a fellow sufferer like that.

I held onto this idea for a grand total of five minutes, before I took another look at the hand.

The roots weren't wrapped around it, dear Journal, they were growing out of it. You could see the skin warping where they connected.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I legged it as fast as I could. This place is wrong, dear Journal, whatever happened here has twisted it. I don't know how the tree could have grown on top of a man before time finished them off, and I don't care. All I know, is that if I don't reach that light, if I don't rid myself of this plague, if I don't get out of this place, I'll end up just like them. Being drained of every last drop by a plum tree.

Tenth day of the Eight Moon

I've been finding more and more live trees, dear Journal, all much older than the one I found yesterday. There's almost as many trees as there are husks now. I haven't bothered to look for anyone under them. If there is anyone there, they're too far underneath for me to do anything for them.

The Light doesn't seem to be getting any closer, dear Journal. I've been walking for five bloody days and it hasn't gotten any closer! I probably sound mad, trying to walk to the sun, how stupid is that? But I swear hasn't been moving, dear Journal. it's like it's fixed in the sky! It must be a tower, how else could it be stuck up there? But even if it is fixed, it should at least look like it's moving, because I'm getting closer to it. Why isn't it moving!

I need sleep. That's what I need, I need sleep. I've been trying to get as much walking done as I can, but I don't think it's worth it anymore. Why bother saving your body if you ruin your mind. Still, it's with no small amount of hesitation that I say that. I've been seeing dark figures amongst the trees, dear Journal. They're probably just delusions (again, I haven't been sleeping well), but real or not they're the last thing I need right now. They've all been man-shaped so far, but I don't think they're exactly human. They're too damn thin, like

they're made of sticks. What's really striking about them is the eyes. You ever see a cat's eyes at night, dear Journal? It's a lot like that.

The ones I've seen have mostly just been looking at the trees. Sometimes they've been picking the fruit. I'd say it's harmless, if I didn't know what lay under them.

I've not yet had the stomach to approach them yet, dear Journal. They show up all around me you see, and if they are real, what's stopping them from tearing me apart if I upset one.

In any case, I don't have time to exchange pleasantries with imaginary stick-people. My condition has gotten worse since I've last written, dear Journal. Some of my fingers have locked up, I can't move any of my toes anymore, and the sores are more abundant than ever.

I have to keep moving. I will not die here, not like that man.

Roughly the middle of the sixth moon

I've figured it out, dear Journal. It's not that the light isn't moving, it's that I'm not moving!

I found out just this morning. I was walking, trying to ignore the figures, the usual. But then I came across another buried arm. I figured "I'll try and help him, why not?" I've only found one other like him, maybe if you find them quick enough they can still be saved. So I knelt down to give him a tug, to see if he was still alive, and then I noticed something odd. You remember what I said about the other arm? Withered, Roots growing out of it? Of course you remember, you're a book, it's not like the words can just fall off the pages.

Well, this arm was eerily similar to that one. You might even say they were identical. The roots were even in the same places. That's when it hit me, dear Journal. I looked around, and wouldn't you know it, there it was. The same fruit I'd tossed aside days ago.

If I was still capable of it, I would have run off right then and there, just like before. Looking back, though, there's no point. This path, this ashen place, it's all a trap. I've been seeing more figures, bigger ones. Maybe they lead the little ones? It doesn't matter, what does matter is that they're getting a lot closer. What's more, they obviously know I'm here. The little

ones peer at me from behind the trees, like they're trying to hide, but the big ones? They just stand there staring, plain as day. I can see one right now, dear Journal, off in the distance.

They're waiting, dear Journal, waiting for me to freeze up. This isn't just a trap, dear Journal, it's an Orchid. Or, at least it was. Something burnt it, and now they're planting a new crop. The worst part is, they're nowhere near done. For every tree I see there's about three husks, and I'm seeing a lot of trees. I thought of burning some down, I've still got some flint from the trip here after all, but I decided against it. There's so many, and I doubt the figures would just let all their hard work burn to the ground.

I'm not going to stop walking, dear Journal. If I'm going to end up buried alive you better believe I'm going to enjoy my last few hours as much as I can. Those worms want to use me as fertiliser? They'll have to drag me down into the earth themselves. Though, given all the other trees, that Idea probably wouldn't bother them would it, dear Journal?

Jack Craig-Pearson



Paddy Wennekes

Responsibility

James turned over once again in a vain attempt to catch the ever elusive grasp of sleep and started trying to count sheep so that he could bore himself to sleep. It's probably midnight or something by now, tomorrow's test is going to be a nightmare. James opened a hesitant eye to see what time it was, but when he looked at his alarm clock he didn't see any numbers displayed at all. "You're joking" he said to his room, "why would it be out of batteries now of all times?" Now wide awake, James threw off his covers, grabbed the alarm clock and wrenched off the bottom. Empty. "So we have a battery thief in the house, how nice," he continued to his room, "because it's so much effort to go downstairs and get it yourself isn't it". Slamming down his alarm clock, James got out of bed and (still grumbling) he made his way out of his room and into the hall. Even though it was pitch black, James knew his way around and soon found the light switch. Words can't quite describe the pain of a bright light coming to life right in front of tired eyes and indeed rather than words James used more of a choked rasping sound to convey his discomfort. He stumbled backwards where his socks slipped on the polished surface, sending him careening down the stairs and right into his mother's brand new porcelain vase. A ceaseless stream of particularly imaginative curse words flowed from his mouth as he attempted to clutch as many parts of his aching body as he possibly could. "I'm ready to wake up from this nightmare now," he moaned as he struggled to his feet. Struggling to his feet, he surveyed the wreckage he had created. "Better clean it up I guess," he sighed and made his way over to the kitchen where he found a dustpan and brush. James dejectedly swept up most of the pieces, grabbed some new batteries and began to trudge back up the stairs. "Mum's gonna kill me," he groaned, "how am I going to explain..." James trailed off as he got an idea. When he got to the top of the stairs, James knocked frantically on his sister's door, when he received no answer, he pushed open the door and poked his head inside, "Rose?" he whispered, putting on a sense of urgency. "What is it" she replied sleepily

"Did you hear that crash just before?" he asked, now trying to sound a bit more frightened

"No, what was it?" she asked. James frowned, how heavily does this girl sleep?

"Seriously? I heard a crash coming from downstairs."

"I'm sure it was nothing...go back to sleep," she said turning to go back to sleep. James frowned again, at the sheer lack of credibility she gave him but closed the door again and moved back over to his room. As he was making his way towards his room, still aching and getting sleepy again, he tripped over his guitar, sending him sprawling across his floor and making enough noise to wake the dead. Just about ready to give up on everything, James staggered into his bed, slammed the batteries into his alarm clock and tried to get some more sleep. With any luck, everyone will think it was a robber or something and James could claim that he had nothing to do with it.

Rose lay in bed thinking about what her brother had just said when he'd entered her room. Something seemed off. If she knew anything about her brother, it was that he is perhaps the least talented actor to grace the earth and although she could guess the tone he was trying to convey to her, it remains as one of the least convincing displays she'd ever seen. What's he done now? she thought as she got out of bed to investigate. As she made to open the door, a loud thump followed by several muffled swear words emanated from James's room. Stifling her laughter, Rose opened the door and stepped into the hallway. She looked up and down the hall, looking for anything incriminating and, when she found nothing, began to make her way down the stairs to the living room. Shuddering at the cold, Rose picked up her dad's big coat that was draped over the stairway bannister and wrapped herself up in it. She was nearly at the bottom when something caught her eye. A few pieces of white porcelain glittered on the bottom stair and living room floor. Frowning, Rose got closer to inspect and as she did, she noticed that the table at the bottom of the stairs now stood empty where there had previously been their mother's brand new vase. "Oh James you poor fool," she muttered, "I guess I'd better get something to properly clean this up."

Now in bed and beginning to recover from his room's violent assault, James hesitantly closed his eyes and began to cautiously hope for some sleep at last. However, as soon as he did, he heard someone walk down the hallway outside his room and then down the stairs. James's eyes snapped open. "Don't investigate Rose," he groaned as he, once again, dragged himself from his bed's loving embrace and made his way down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he saw that his initial attempt at cleaning the wreckage had been less than adequate. It was then that he heard some rustling from the kitchen. Taking in a deep breath, James moved towards the noise, preparing for Rose to confront him about the vase. However, when he looked in the kitchen, some-

one else was there. They were about a head taller than Rose was and they were wearing a large coat that just touched the floor. James froze. Who was this person? How did they get in? Just as he was deciding what to do, a car raced past the house, its headlights partially illuminating the kitchen. Despite himself, James swore in surprise, causing the robed figure to freeze and begin to turn around. Without waiting to see the face beneath the figure, James bolted out of the room, back up the stairs and into his room.

Rose went to the kitchen to look for a dustpan and brush, however, it proved more difficult than she had initially intended and she ended up spending more time than she had intended. Eventually, she saw her goal up on top of one of the cupboards, just out of her reach. Rose grabbed a small stool from out of the living room and stepped up, her father's coat so big on her that it still dragged on the ground. However, as she was reaching for the brush, a car suddenly raced past which, nearly caused her to jump out of her skin in surprise. At the same time, she heard someone behind her. Her heart in her throat, she whipped her head around to see who it was but there was no one there. The heavy footfalls of someone running up the stairs followed by a slammed door meant that it was just James and she relaxed. She brushed up the remnants of the vase and made her way back up the stairs.

James lay in his bed panting. Who the hell was that? James drew in a deep, stabilizing breath and considered the situation. There was an unknown person rummaging through his house and his parents were both away. Should he wake Rose first? Call the police? All thoughts left his mind as he saw a shadow in the hallway outside his room. Time to call the police he thought.

Rose stopped outside her brother's room, knocked and then entered. She frowned at the sight before her. Her brother, stood at the center of his room, his guitar in one hand like a makeshift bat and his phone at the ready in the other. "Am I interrupting something?" she said slowly. "Rose thank god it's just you," he replied in relief, "listen, I just saw someone downstairs I think we need to call the police."

"Uh-huh, well yeah that was me genius - I presume you were the source of the frightened yelp and frantic scurrying that nearly made me fall off the stool?" Realisation dawned on James's face as he began to connect the dots. "Right. Yes uh well" he cleared his throat and awkwardly lowered his guitar, "what do you want Rose?" Rose shook her head and locked eyes with James, "tut tut James, mum's favourite vase. Not good." James sighed in resignation, "look, it was an accident, don't tell mum it was me... please" he pleaded.

"Well who the hell am I supposed to say it was? I'm not going to be taking responsibility."

"We can say that someone else entered the house and knocked it over as they were leaving" Rose tilted her head in consideration, "maybe, but... what's in it for me?" James closed his eyes for a second then at last replied, "I'll do your chores for a week."

"Two and we have ourselves a deal" she said with a sly smile

"Fine, fine just let me retrieve at least some sleep," he sighed with a wave of his hand

"Pleasure doing buisness with you," she replied silkily and with that, she turned and returned to her room.

Anonymous

Above

Clouds encompass the sky.
I reach up for them and soar.
The clouds are vitality.

Drip.

The wind brushes against me.
Pink fingers slice through the air,
making life as it was meant to be;
pure and full of hope.

Drip.

I want it to go my way.
I wake up startled
and shut the faucet.
It's pointless to run
from what you are...

Human.
Fulfilling life will have faults.
Now, what will the next day bring?

AJ Visage

Piano

A gentle melody sings from within
the black box set upon the stage.
Captivated in silence, they listen
to the euphony its voice creates.

Eyes enchanted, the strings resonate
a vivid, vibrant recital
and from the box, music emanates
dulcet, dynamic, delightful.

Crescendo, tone intensifies.
A cascade of notes resound.
The audience watch, mesmerised
as the melodic performance surrounds.

The voice of the strings diminishes.
The tempo begins to descend.
Lost within, the audience witness
as the masterpiece reaches its end.

Ben Wishart

Holiday

My deadlines approach far too quickly,
Yet lately work ethic is sickly,
As teachers don't fathom,
Although snow is phantom,
The break is for sleep; quiet and thickly.

Jaiden Tucker



Jack Pacey

MICHAEL McALLEN

GALLOWSHIRE, YEAR 10357 OF THE SAINT

If there's one thing I love more than a scrap, it's the sweet scent of blood. All vampires do, old and young. I don't think I need to tell you why. You may think they'd be no exceptions, and that we're all blood hungry fiends whose mouth waters at the moan of any dying creature. Most of the time, you'd be correct. But burnt flesh? I do nae care for any Rackham dog. Never have. Base cowards, all of them. Purposeful dishonour deserves a brutal death. But... Saint below, that Beckett girl must be worse than her cursed father! The stench was a nauseating mix of roasted man and stale blood. The sight was even less appealing. Either side of the road was flanked by hundreds charred bodies tied to withered oaks, their skin black and horrid. The faces of the former knights were contorted into shapes of pure terror and pain. Between the posts hung tattered blood and rain soaked Rackham banners, a final insult to the now dead house. This punishment was known as "purification," I had been told. I'd argue the f**king contrary. The three thousand or so lads behind me rode silently, their high spirits and joyful songs shattered into silence at the sight of this atrocity. All that could be heard was solemn thump of hooves and the distant pipes of the Rothswell army. I smiled bitterly. The looks on the mortals faces if they marched through this woodland would certainly be amusing.

"What are you grinning at, lad?" Asked Robert shakily, obviously trying to break the uneasy silence. His tone told me that he wasn't enjoying this grisly scene either, the usually charming old features now grim and noticeably upset. I thought about my reply for a moment

"How hard would I have to pull to rip a Beckett's arm off with one hand?" I asked. Robert chuckled

"Aye, lad. Vengeance -" he began to my dismay. Oh, who cares? I thought. I waved dismissively

"Yes, yes. Blood, murder and all that bollocks. Does it ever get old telling that for three hundred bloody years?" Robert shrugged.

"Trying to preserve morale, lad" I ignored him as we reached the top of the hill.

I gazed over the ridge, greeted by a fairly pleasant view of green and grey, disregarding the corpses. To the left, before Blightwater Lake, lay the Rothswell camp in all its mortal might. Row upon row upon row of tents, several battalions of men in formation in front of it, most likely performing a drill. Thirty-thousand of our allies had marched south to push the Beckett's from their seat of power. A truly glorious sight.

To the front were a few dozen farms with cattle grazing in the pastures, although there was no sign of life coming the homesteads. Fair Enough I thought with a chuckle. Just beyond the farms was the River Mulberry, with the Gateway of the East towering above it. The castle of Highbank stood defiantly above the surrounding countryside, its walls level with me, despite being over five miles away. Four huge bastions stood upon different hill tops, bridges connecting them. The keep was stationed furthest away from me, overlooking the west shore of the lake. All in all, it looked as though a mentally challenged child had been the architect, with a bunch of armless Wights from Barrowshire as the masons. No wonder it had been conquered so many times. I could feel thousands of eyes on me and the lads coming from Highbank, each one filled with despair. I didn't understand the feeling, like a warm buzz at the back of my skull, but I welcomed it, smiling gleefully. I'm coming for you, Angela.

The rest of the day was the usual. Set up camp. Eat. Drink. Beat each other senseless. Less on the beating though, as not many lads were up for talk and merriment after today's sights. Robert had gone to discuss battle and negotiation plans with Duke Rothswell. The pompous whoreson most likely wouldn't care for what my Grandfather had to say and keep to his fancy halberd formations, precise crossbow volleys, and timed flanking with cavalry. Rational, but not a knightly thing to do. If I were general I'd simply hack my way through the front ranks, smashing the tiny enemy force to pieces within minutes, wasting no time to claim the castle. The Beckett's aren't exactly McAllen's. We outnumber them ten to one for pity's sake! And anyway, Davey's B**tards were certainly marching from the south so, we'd need the hill, but Henry thought we had all the time in the world. Most of the time the man was a military genius, but his talent got in the way of legendary conquest.

The lads gave me half hearted greetings as I passed through the pavilions. "Lord Michael!" and "Vengeance!" and better still "Fancy a drink, milord?" rang out from the tents. I examined the knights as I passed. Most weren't wearing their armour, although kept their maces, longbows and poleaxes at their sides. I was dressed similarly, claymore in hand and cuirass on my chest. Why, you ask? Why not, us McAllen's say.

I made my way to the edge of the camp to look over to the valley once again. Clouds gathered over the Mulberry, most likely preparing for another famous Old Country shower. Behind me some of the lads were put to work removing the bodies along the roadside. Some had volunteered, but most simply refused to do so. I understood why. Not to keep their dinner down, but because of honour. The fools who were now dead had earned their places on the trees. They had led another house into their own home, which meant safety and mutual trust. To break said trust. To try and kill all the lords and ladies that you had allowed to sleep in your beds! They deserved death. But did they deserve one of this kind? I shook my head. Tis best not to care about dead men who you didn't care about in life. Especially if they were oathbreakers. I spat.

Shadows lengthened in the valley, and activity in the Rothswell camp died down. The clouds suddenly grew darker, drops of rain falling hesitantly to earth. A soft southern breeze passed through my beard. A storm brewed. The wind began to increase in volume and strength, oddly now blowing from my back. Lightning suddenly flashed above Highbank, the bolts smashing into her keep. I frowned. I felt eyes upon me again. Another brilliant blue arc blasted the top of the castle, making the sound of a god crashing its fist upon the earth. Balls of ice flew down furiously from the sky. They battered me harder than my sister does when she's drunk. Perhaps not that hard I chuckled, in spite of myself.

I realised it wasn't time to joke when a hailstone the size of an apple struck me in the nose. It might as well have been a rock. My nose crumpled under the ice's speed. "Gah, ya bastard!" I yelled as cold pain shot through my face. I clutched my nose and swore profusely. The eye's of the south looked at me with mockery as the gale pushed me up the hill, threatening to force me over. What Beckett trickery is this?

Darkness fell upon me as the stormclouds charged towards Highbank. What had previously been a pleasant evening had suddenly become a tempest of ice and sorcery. The hail continued to pelt me, sending me sprawling. I felt as though I was drowning. I realised that I needed to find some cover. I heaved myself onto my front, crawling toward the nearest oak. A small, leafless tree, but it would do. Left arm forward. Right arm. Left leg. Right leg. An agonising pace. Slowly, the tree began to increase in size, the scream of the wind bending it at a worrying angle. Nevermind. I was a mere ten paces away. I'd be fine! If I just got there... but a blue ray of light flickered above me. I swore at what followed.

All optimism vanished as a blinding bolt of lightning arced from the clouds above, aiming, of f**king course, for the tree I sought cover from. The bolt connected with the top of the tree, sparks flying in all directions. The scent of scorching wood filled my nostrils as the oak began to glow a brilliant blue. It began to crack and snap, until eventually the tree gave way to the immense heat shooting down its trunk. With an almighty bang, chips of white-hot wood showered my back and unprotected neck. I grimaced at the pain, turning onto my back, staring into the dancing sky. I tried to take a well-earned breath, but coughed up some blood. I groaned. A broken nose the day before a battle? I'd get over the pain; it's just that one must keep appearances whilst hacking honourless Southerners to pieces. I writhed around in the muddy field, the icy projectiles thrashing at my face some more. It felt like a thousand tiny bees stinging me at once, then a thousand more coming to aid their sisters and brothers. Nothing I couldn't handle, of course, but an annoyance nonetheless. As cold as the Wraith's stare, I twisted in frustration.

Through the bombardment, I somehow managed a brief glimpse at Highbank, immediately wishing I hadn't. The streaks of blue had coordinated into the Lilies of House Beckett. A terror tactic, no doubt. The Rothswell's would be pissing themselves right now, and my lads wouldn't be awfully happy about it either. That damn girl was clever as well as brutal.

The storm continued its savage assault, bolts of light obliterating more trees atop the heath. The lads that had been taking down the Rackhams' were nowhere to be seen. There had been a dozen of them! Flaming stumps and smoldering grass was all that could be seen behind me. As I thought that, something whooshed over my head, causing an almighty crash as it walloped the now completely white hillside. What the f**ck was that!? I internally yelled.

The gale died down unexpectedly, and the... minor cloudburst changed its course. I heaved myself onto my arse, vision planted at the castle. A whirlwind of ice swept around its keep. Why?! What was the point?! What in the name of the Saint Most Holy was this mad girl doing?! The magical coat-of-arms violently shifted in shape, breaking into two. It became the symbol of House Rothswell and the Wolf of my House. The valley lit up in fear, bolts exploding all across the shire. The Rothswell encampment looked like a disturbed ant hill from here, the peasant soldiers gathered to the edge of tents to stare at the arrogant display of power in terror. I snarled in anger as the the symbols shattered to pieces, another insult as well as an admittedly bold attempt to demoralise

the lads. The lightning dissipated with terrifying synchrony. The gale ceased, and silence fell upon the heath.

I just sat there for a while, jaw planted in the grass. Only three words drifted through my mind. None of them dignified or lordly. The hail had ceased, giving way to mocking drops of water. I sighed as a downpour of rain began to wash away the some of the blood that covered my face. F**king Southern B**tards.

Thoughts of vengeance flickered through my mind. I thought of William's head sent to us on a silver platter. I thought of my father, mutilated and bloodied. I thought of my humiliation on the Vengeance Moor, where the previous Alastair Paragon stuck me like a pig. The southern raid on Lothenborough, the Harraways... All crimes committed to Clan McAllen, completely unprovoked (for the most part!) The shock of the lightning quickly vanished, and I felt the rage rising in my stomach. Every vampire feels and relishes such fury, as it is the source of our military prowess. My fists clenched tighter than a vice, knuckles cracking like rocks beneath a Forest Horror's hooves. My teeth bared, the sound my fangs chittering only overpowered by my bestial grunts. I tasted a howl building up in my mouth, slowly making its way to my lips. I'd curse them all. The Beckett filth, the Alastair scumbags, the entire south, and even the Archfiend itself. Curse them all! With a deep breath I-

"Michael, my boy! What're ye doin' out here in that deluge? Did ye see that pretty wee light show that b**ch put on? F**king Saint below, that sure were something, eh?" I wheezed, my intended roar silenced by familiar sounding voice. Old Charles Bonnie.

"I suppose you could say that," I muttered, my words laced with irritated sarcasm. The ancient vampire took another look at me and grinned.

"Why're on yer arse like that, ya silly bugger? Come on..." He took my hand and heaved me to my feet. "Come on lad, we caught a plump wee southerner on the run who just looks too sweet to pass over. Quickly, before the boys get to it. Or I see you've already found some blood, if you'd prefer to keep that?" he said with a hearty chuckle. Charlie was a good man, always joking and laughing with the lads, but his sympathy often left a lot to be desired. I blinked, my rage hidden behind my ebony eyes.

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" I said under my breath and incredible strain. The Lord-Commander's own black eyes pierced into me like the end of his poleaxe, an eyebrow raised but smile gone.

"Not feeling well, lad?" he asked, concerned. I bristled.

"I'm... I'm... I've been better. Just... Well, ask me after tomorrow and I'll be fine," I said, forcing a smile. Charlie grinned, gnashing his fangs.

"I see you're angry, lad, so let me tell you something. Hatred. Hatred and vengeance. These are the backbones of this country. For ten-thousand years, we have butchered each other for those two principles, only putting them aside for The Archfiend when the Silk Banner's of the Blight arose once again." His face turned grim. "McAllens' hate the Beckett's, because we helped them long ago, and they betrayed us over a pixie girl. The Alastair's hate the Rothswells due to their strict code of honour, which Henry's house broke frequently. Is it petty? Perhaps. Is it justified? Definitely. Robert preaches vengeance like a town crier, and for reasons that only began to show themselves to me after sixty years of warfare. Two hundred years later, look at me now. This land bleeds hatred. If it didn't the nobility will grow soft, and The Country could be undone." he finished.

I suppose he was right. The only reason the Country still stood before thousands of years of fiend incursions and bloodshed was through resilience born of hatred. I took a glimpse at Charlie, and firmly nodded. Tomorrow would be a good day.

Stewart Ashton