

Judge's excerpts for all entries, Jesus College Short Story Competition 2024
Historical fiction

Stourbridge Common (1250) by Oliver Scott (postgraduate)

Ealdwald's world was an empty one. His village contained just 14 households and 31 villagers, a little over a dozen homes surrounding a village green with a single street running through this remote but tightly knit community.

However, on reaching his fourteenth birthday in the summer of 1250, his father demanded he accompany him on his first day trip from the village, travelling first on horseback and then via boat on the day's journey to Stourbridge Common, just outside Cambridge, for their annual fair.

Ealdwald heard the fair before he saw it, a cascading of sound from metal windpipes as well as the gentle tones of a rebec and the crisp tinkling of the timbrel. Beyond that, there was a cacophony of voices singing en masse alongside the instruments, with their tone occasionally pierced by the shouting and hollering of individual voices who seemed to be in intense discussion with one another.

When he eventually caught sight of the fair, Ealdwald found his bottom jaw permanently detached from his top one. He was witnessing human beings on a scale he simply had never seen before.

The Knight (1300s) by Arabella Teddar (undergraduate)

I hurry down to the river, the frosted grass crunching softly under my feet. No one is out this early in the morning. A bird flies out of the forest nearby, settles on a bare branch across the river and tweets softly.

A twig cracks, the bird flies away, and out of the forest comes a knight in very fine armour, sitting astride an equally fine horse, carrying a green and gold axe and a shield with a five-pointed star worked on it. He takes off his helmet, letting down wavy, dark hair, and he smiles at me kindly with deep brown eyes and rosy lips.

'Good morning,' he says, his tone light and friendly. 'My name is Gawain, servant and knight to King Arthur! Would you perchance know where I could find the place known as the Green Chapel?' his voice booms, seeming almost to echo in the stillness of the crisp, winter air. 'I am seeking a great adversary with whom I made a deal almost one year to this very day.' I am sure the look on my face displays my confusion, as his pose falters somewhat, and, in a smaller voice, he says, 'Do you know where I could find any of the local lords? I'm beginning to run out of time.'

Should we have stayed (1400s) by Lisa Rowe (staff)

I was a secret that my Father had never meant to keep.

He presented me at the Convent gate claiming that I was an orphan, pitiless and dependent. My dowry to our Lord was small but exceptional, a small casket containing Mama's bones. I also held cards of pricked patterns, that she had taught me to read, when the libraries and the written word were held apart, in an exclusive domain, behind locked doors.

We accepted, but ignored the inquisitive scholars who came to worship with us. Heard their whispers through their whiskers whenever novitiates appeared. They gossiped and giggled as we filed through Chapel in serried ranks to take our place in the nave. Our sore knees bent on stone cold floors, and heads bowed to accept the grace of our Lord with humility. They knelt on cushions and read along with the sermon, making notes in the margins to be debated later, over goblets of wine and sweet meats from the kitchen.

"How ridiculous – those scholars, thinking they know the word so well that they can challenge it".

Nan's Story (1600s) by Claire Gilbert (visiting fellow)

I stop speaking.

Mother Abbess rises from her chair. I dare to look at her but I cannot read her face.

'Go back to the novice house,' she says. 'Speak to no one of this. No one. And we will not speak of it again.'

Many, many years later I become Mother Abbess myself. And I discover a chest of papers, pushed to a far dusty corner in my apartments. The Prioress tells me that the last Abbess but one, the Abbess who was Mother when I entered the monastery, had bid her successors leave it alone.

I open the chest and I look through the papers. Hidden amongst them is my story, written in the Abbess's hand. She wrote down my story.

What will I do with it?

Now I am mature in my religious life and have learned the ways of the church and of the men who rule it, I know the answer only too well. I can do nothing with it. So, frustrated, I replace it and cover the trunk and repeat the order that it is to be left alone.

The Bear from Stourbridge Fair (1805) by Sarah Burton (staff)

The bear and the man had their souls awoken, a fight on their hands in a rulebook they sketched. Dogs were not allowed; no law was yet broken. He found a way round it; a loophole was stretched. The case was answered, words were so outspoken. There was nothing to do, it might seem far-fetched.

But a bear lived in a Cambridge college, exposed to all academic knowledge. He walked him on a chain by the river, staying in his room with him overnight. On his true promise he did deliver, never letting the bear out of his sight. The bear had no cause to fear or shiver, ever again, knowing only delight.

After a year at Cambridge, he moved to a big estate, in the countryside, no cages, no barriers, no hate. The bear had a home and a right to roam. He wandered the huge house and its rooms. He had space, he had friends, he had grooms! There were peacocks, eagles, cranes, badgers, foxes and no chains.

He was no longer the bear from Stourbridge Fair. He had lordly airs, forever more Byron's bear.

Of Dusty Books and Forgotten Tales (1815) by Emily Oldridge (postgraduate)

Cambridge, Spring 1815

While the rest of the house slept, I would sit at my father's desk, reading as the candlelight flickered and illuminated the wooden bookcases lining the edge of the room.

The books all waited patiently, hoping that they would be chosen next and freed from the thick dust that cloaked them. The dust always returned, there were too many books, and no one remembered to clean what the rest of the household saw as mere decoration. Pages bound together in an aesthetic fashion.

And like the dust that always found its way back to the books, so did that empty feeling that I did not quite belong. A book that was not quite the right shape, or size, or colour. A book sprinkled with dust on the top shelf, difficult to see and almost impossible to reach. Forgotten.

That April night, as the rain tapped lightly on the windows, I read about the heroes of ancient Greece in the greatest battle of history - the Trojan War. Eventually, the candlelight began to lose its fight. I knew that it was time to return to my bedchamber and pretend I had been sleeping there all night.

Intelligent creatures (1800s) by Chanel Wagenheim Plucinski (undergraduate)

That was the catch. We were allowed there as long as we could be kept on the side,

apart from men. We were given more rights but we were not to have the same rights as men. We were allowed to exist as long as we were not a threat to men.

There was still a long way to go for us, for women. There was still so much to learn for us to be able to better ourselves. Still, we had to please men in one way or another for them to start taking us seriously. We had to rub men up the right way to make sure they would let us be. We had to make them believe they still had control over us while we would be the ones working towards improvement, we would polish up and make our way to the top.

Still, being allowed there, having the right to study, this was new, this was a step in the right direction.

We were finally allowed.

A Slither in time (1800s) by Deborah Omolegan-Obe (undergraduate)

If Aunt Mary could be a word then she epitomised “apology”. A hurried ‘sorry’ when you barged into someone at the Derby races, craning your neck to get a good view of the horse you picked out to be a winner.

Yes, Aunt Mary was an apology, a half-hearted one. You saw it in her when she sat down at the dinner table, her bottom wedged on only half of the chair, eyes timidly scanning the room. Her toes pointed towards the door and her hands pressed onto her lap, she moved them only to scoop soup shakily into her mouth. And after that her hands went straight back to where they always stayed. She had the look of someone who was being rushed, never fully at rest. And when she did muster up the courage to speak, it was always in a heavy whisper, heavy with breath, like she’d had to force the syllables out from some hidden inner chest that rarely opened.

None of us particularly liked Aunt Mary back then, but we pitied her. She had never been the same since Uncle Joe deserted her, he ran off with the daughter of a bookkeeper, they left Cambridge and went North, he used “love” as his excuse.

Dear Dorothy (early 1900s) by Bex Goodchild (undergraduate)

Only last week, I travelled from Cambridge to Bethnal Green to dance in the club with the factory girls.

I tell you Dorothy, never have I seen as much joy as I saw there. How terrible are the conditions of their work, of the streets they live in yet there they are beaming. More alive than I could be, more vibrant. I was jealous.

We link arms and dance up and down the small room. They are loud - shouting to one another, laughing, stamping their feet and clapping their hands. And I thought, "I belong here". The joy was contagious, spreading like a disease, infecting me with a smile.

But such extremes of joy are accompanied by other extremes. Loss, grief, fear, all of which I began to feel alongside them. All of which made my joy that much stronger, that much more defiant. The dance became a battle cry and the song a declaration of survival.

Us all together, I felt at home. I felt at home but according to what is proper, according to the will of the rich, I must stay away. We are much the same people and yet these invisible lines pull us apart.

Human Grains (1940s) by Flaminia Zane (postgraduate partner)

"Where is he?"

"We buried him on the beach. In Dunkirk."

"He loved the sea, you know."

He nodded, unsure of what to say. He could not deal with his own pain, and did not even know where to start with hers. But she talked again.

"It must be hard for you."

"I am alive."

Silence. Charles bit his tongue.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"About the war?"

"About everything you and Richard lived through there."

She looked immensely tired, but her voice was walking straight, keeping all the suffering within out of respect for the boy in front of her. In that moment, Charles saw in her more dignity than in any war hero history ever invented.

Now Louise was making him confront the reality. Richard must have packed his pain into the narrow space that war, a long list of anonymous sorrows, had allotted him – and held it tight there, just as she was doing now. There was no God in all that. It was only the deepest humanity that the war did not defeat, even though Richard and Louise had already lost.

"It's a long story."

"I have time."

Having time was a feeling he had forgotten. He felt a sudden calm wash over him. He smiled.

And he began.

Trapped in Takehara (1945) by Serena Warwick-Yamamoto (undergraduate)

"How have you been coping?" Dr Ichimura asked, opening up a new page in his small, orange notebook.

Coping. Miya hated the word. It was like an itch she couldn't scratch; a nagging *prod* on her brain which she could never bat away.

"I am fine," she replied. There was something about Dr Ichimura's face which unsettled her. Small and beady eyes behind thick, perfectly oval glasses. An unevenly shaved beard with small flecks of grey all scattered across his jaw in a disorderly fashion.

"Fine," he nodded, looking back down at his notepad. He flicked to the page before, then back again. "Are you eating?"

Miya's smile wavered. "Yes."

"Eating well?"

Her teeth gritted. "Well enough."

He nodded again, then shut the notebook, placing it face down on the table. He drew in a long breath through his nose and sat forward in his seat, looking solemnly into Miya's eyes. It made her want to recoil and crawl away, fast.

"How is your heart?"

Her smile dropped away, barely leaving even a shadow of politeness. "My *heart*?"

"Your mother told me your heart is broken," Dr Ichimura explained. He tapped his pen against his chest. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Exquisite (1950s) by Chanel Wagenheim Plucinski (undergraduate)

'Aren't we supposed to know it all?'

‘And infinitely more?’

Amanda took a last sip with a smirk, responding to questions with more questions was a Cambridge custom one grew rapidly fond of, and if you could also put in some intellectual references, it was even better.

‘This is the reason we got here in the first place, isn’t it?’

She did not answer but she let out a laugh. It all felt like an act, she felt she did not know a thing. And since she had started college it had only gotten worse. Students were not supposed to know everything, after all she was supposed to be learning, that was what college was for, but every day she was confronted with students who seemed to already know everything. She thought it was a common experience, something every scholar went through, some even called it imposter syndrome. She thought that was something everyone experienced. She really believed that, but then she met Amanda - that A-student whose confidence was as high as her ponytail.

Coming to Cambridge, Alice knew she would be surrounded by overachieving students who could actually pull all-nighters while still volunteering and taking part in school plays. However, when she applied she just wanted to please her parents, when she applied she was sure she would not get an offer, when she applied she never planned on actually studying here. Yet here she was, two years later, eating pudding at a Christmas formal with Amanda.

The Darker The Skin, The Deeper The Bruises are Buried (1950s) by Sam Misan (undergraduate)

We dined in the dark wooded Christopher Smart Room at Pembroke College. Kamau sat among the other two island scholars to my left: Agwe Etienne and Lindo Belfield.

They spoke of mutual interests, histories, textures, childhoods by the sea, currents in their lives and how they coalesced. It struck me that my Nubian lineage traced similar exotic shores yet I knew none of their histories.

I didn't understand everything. They dipped in and out of French, Spanish and English. They were multilingual which meant they had an expansive vocabulary and combined words in ways native speakers often never considered. These foreign words still painted a picture, more vivid in my mind than if I had known their meaning.

I fell back on the sounds rather like a child and allowed my imagination to take effect. Di-a-spora, éph-ém-ère, déma-gogue, Tous-saint, cata-clysmé. Each syllable swung open pockets of imagination. Di-a-spora sounded to me like spores dispersing through the air. I enjoyed the rhythms of their conversation as I dined; The sway of conflicting cadences on far-flung tongues; Kamau’s sweet savouring of Oh’s and Ah’s; Agw’és cooing Ooos and gentle rolling Rs.

Too Soon Made Glad (1950s/60s) by Rachel Gardner (undergraduate)

Jim had originally only invited us to visit, but we stayed to paint. As long as Maria would stay, so would I.

We often found ourselves by the Cam, tucked into nooks along the river edge where our conversation would only bother the ducks. She had first used that spot to pray. She said she always felt closer to God by the water because the trickling music of the stream always brought with it the reassurance of a reply.

Most afternoons, she would gaze into the water, grey eyes clouded by strands of shimmering, golden hair, and her lips would murmur missives to a God far beyond my reach. As she prayed, eyes open and hands twirling the grass beside her ankles, I would sketch. My notebook back then was littered with fragments of her: the arch of her nose, her mud-rimmed fingernails. In those moments, time had truly suspended itself. She teased me (that smile again) that she had become my muse—and I had no reply.

Of course, nothing of *that* sort ever happened between us. I couldn't bring myself to sully her with romance—in fact, I truly believed that if anything unbecoming or vulgar came out of her mouth, I would have had to cast myself into the river or leave the city forever.

Ladies' Night (1950s) by Molly Becker (staff)

Three hours earlier, Florence had filed into the candlelit Hall alongside her host for the evening, a lecturer in history at Jesus College. She had only been speaking with him for a half hour as they sipped port before dinner, but they had already covered the unseasonably cold weather, guesses about the dinner menu, and a discussion about the man's aunt, who was recovering from a short but severe illness in Lincoln, before circling back to the weather. Florence could already tell that this was going to be a long evening.

Florence had been to four Ladies' Nights around Cambridge since her marriage three years ago, all arranged by her husband. Mark had met Florence in a bookshop, her nose buried in a biography of naturalist Mary Anning. By the time the time they had reached Florence's doorstep after a long walk discussing Anning's contributions to natural science, Mark had fallen in love with Florence's mind, and she had fallen in love with him for it.

Mark loved to arrange these Ladies' Night invitations for Florence, imagining that she was having the conversations he knew she craved about art, history, and science. In reality, she and her hosts rarely discussed anything more intellectual than which Cambridge building she found most beautiful.

Tonight, though, this was finally to her advantage.

Audrey Hepburn's Coat (1963) by Anika Goddard (undergraduate)

The bells are tolling the hour in Queen's College chapel when I reach the river. They ring through the quiet like pickaxes striking the air.

The students are still sleeping. Get thee to Girton, Father likes to say to me. Or better; by the time you turn eighteen, Ada, maybe the grand old colleges will be letting women in. He laughs at this, as though the idea amuses him. It's an unthreatening idea. I look at the Elizabethan wood panelling just visible across the Mathematical Bridge in Queen's Old Court. I imagine crossing it with books in hand on my way to a supervision.

Enough of thinking. Onto the ice, crunching, stumbling, not-at-all-smooth.

Zing and pop like the special American soda cans we get in summer now.

The tooth-shivering cold of an ice-cream float.

White silvered lines criss-crossing the blades of the skates, like those frozen spider webs hanging off the lamps.

Lamps that give off no heat, only yellow light.

Now, though, the light is grey, piercing grey as a pair of eyes as I follow the curve of the river round the Backs.

One day soon there will be cows on King's meadow again.

The Hyacinth Girl (1963) by Eliza Powers (undergraduate visiting student)

Just Outside Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963.

My friends and I went to Caulfield as twelve-year-old boys who didn't know how to take care of ourselves. I ran out of underwear the first week, changing them in the morning, before cross country, after cross country, after a shower in the night and before bed. Peter got an ear infection and passed out on the Quad; I ended up wearing no underwear underneath my pants. Luke had lost fifteen pounds the summer before eighth grade: double jaw surgery for an underbite, rubber bands gummy with blood and chocolate pudding, dumping banana protein shake down the drain. He was so weak he couldn't run a mile. I had stayed back with him during field hockey practice runs, pretending my ankle was bothering me. We shared a secret love of comic books.

By lunch, the leaves were starting to fall; Autumn was peeling into Winter. Caulfield was nestled in a Massachusetts town. Around us: poverty, a sole Dunkin' Donuts, old farmhouses rotten with termites and newspapers damp in the dew-glazed glass droning

on about another boy with a bullet through his eye socket, gummy brain chunks melting on Vietnamese dirt. Hills peppered with maples and cows, overweight women in orthopedic sneakers working the pharmacy, Red Sox hats. Inside us, more wealth per square foot than the surrounding thirty miles until you hit Andover.

Space Songs for Ikeya–Seki (1965) by April Egan (undergraduate)

Then, somehow, happiness came up through the ground. I know warm winters bring armours of wisteria. There are no sieges now, I know, just bright purple immortality, ecstatic, terrible. Easter softens us all over again. Jesus wood, undemolished but for a dream. Saved. Still, I want to remember if there were mountains here, once. Look, there are owls in the broken tree-hollows, and their strong arms in the roof of the dining hall. Can you hear the earthworms outliving the magnificent falcons? The Christmas grit glowing in the spring soil? When asphalt turns sparkly, do you remember? Can you hear the draughty singing, now that peace is waiting, like a friend who still waves once you've turned the corner?

They say, at last, they're planting gardens. There is luck in the world again, glinting, freckling the eaves. Peace at last, Grantchester in song. Touch the sunlight, look out the windows. Forget to look for real revolution here - there is little chance in these scowl-shaped stones, rejecting newness with every crooked step. *Keep Off The Grass*. The chapels, flat with angels, cowed by stars.

Mill Pond, if you just ask, slips her green coat down a shoulder, winks, shudders like a tail disappearing downstream. The river wanders about as light as ash, its breath turning the leaves lazily, like pages of a half-read book. Temperance's soprano soars over us and buries itself deep in the cool, sweet earth. You left your scarf on my bed, still warm. I remember paper stacks. I remember that I got enough sleep. I remember the sound of yesterday. I remember the shoes. I remember the clatter as the wind cut the ballroom's shabby sign down. I remember the leaves, and the glitter of the asphalt. The new decade is rising like incense over the heat.

Running, Running, Running Away (1976) by Reese Robinson (undergraduate)

Despite my feet standing on Cambridge's cobbled pavements, my mind was far away. It was hearing the tropical buzz of Jamaican paradise, the raucous call of the 'jancrows' and the hustle and bustle of market day with Muma. I missed her more than words could conjure. A pang of guilt rose to my throat, but I refused to let my feelings awash. Instead, I furrowed my brow sympathetically and continued trudging through the snow. Flurries of icicles dusted my leather boots and made it slippery underfoot.

My days were spent gliding around in this trance. I had no care for this country and nor did it for me. The girls in my house despised me, my teachers looked at me pitifully and it wouldn't stop damn snowing!

At night, I'd curl up and transport myself back home to the warm embrace of Muma and Dada. But when the winter sun rose and accosted me through the bay window, I was reminded of just how alone I was. My roommate had moved her bed away from me. As she'd scraped the bed across the floor, thinking she'd been subtle, her gaze met mine. With a smirk and defiant toss of her auburn ringlets that enraged me, I knew I'd met my enemy in the flesh.

Reality Checkpoint (1990s and more) by Sarah Burton (staff)

She can see the light of the lamp post like a beacon. Two men in uniform are larking around and seem drunk. Their lips are moving, but she can't hear them. Shaking her head, the sound tunes in like an old radio, static at first. They have American accents and looking closer, she can see eagles above their breast pockets. The men are laughing now and climb up the lamp post. It looks different as there is only one light. It starts bending and they leap off, falling as it breaks.

The world sways. Footsteps approach through the fog. A group of men arrive, wearing suits, bow ties and tall hats. A few are holding canes. The lamp post is shiny and new. Her heart skips as she sees it in one piece again. She tunes in to their voices, or is it their voices tune in? They're discussing a ceremony and seem to be checking the post is central to the new paths.

As they move on, the fog gets thicker making her cough. Sound only comes through in waves as time slips past.

That's when the soldiers arrive, wearing round helmets, what look like skirts and carrying sharp sticks. The lamp post is no longer there and mounds of earth lie in its place, stretching into the fog. She shuts her eyes to quell the dizziness, while her mind is spiralling. The pressure builds inside her and it bursts out, "enough!"