

The Tongue She Speaks



EMMA GRAE

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It's Elsie Stirling's first week at the big school. Bullied oot the wee wan, she's determined tae avoid gettin oan the wrang side o the neds and finally get intae the toap English group. But whit she couldnae huv expected wis tae meet a wolf in sheep's clothin, a first year wi madder notions than hur, who takes it upon himsel tae destroy any dreams she hus o writin in hur ain tongue...

I

THE BIG SCHOOL

2005

The big school is gonnae be different, ah tell masel, lookin up at the blue and grey concrete square. Ah willnae be bullied oot o this wan fur bein a mousey lassie who doesnae care aboot boys, fitbaw or make-up.

Everywan ah've seen so far hus a big smile oan their face, fur aw ah'm sure the cliques huv their problems, and the air oot here in the countryside is cleaner than the sooty shite in Thistlegate.

Boys kin dye their hair firey-reid; lassies kin wear corsets if they fancy it, and naewan looks twice if yer an emo wi

MCR tip-exed oantae yer bag. Somewan oan the other side's lookin oot fur me.

When ah came up fir a tour o Bonnieburgh Academy, ah breathed a sigh o relief. Ah knew ah'd be safe. Twa boys wur kissin. Naewan would o stood fur that at the other big school – the wan deemed too rough fur a mousey lassie like me.

That's no tae say that ah'm no nervous. But Mr McDonald said ye cannae get lost here. No when the school's a square. Jist keep goin roond in circles, and ye'll find yer classes eventually. That's wis his advice.

First Years huv it easier an aw. We've been lined up like wee soldiers in front o blue, metal poles that huv seen better days. There's no a section o paint that's no cracked. Ah resist the urge tae bite ma nails.

'Welcome to the Bonnieburgh Academy,' Mr McDonald says, walkin up and doon the lines like a sergeant.

Maist o the pupils huv split aff intae groups wi their pals fae primary school, and then there's me, Billy nae mates. But ah cannae be the aniline wan. Ah take a breath and remind masel that cream always rises tae the toap.

'Hello,' says a voice behind me.

Ah turn tae a friendly lookin ginger lad. He puts me in mind o Ron Weasley. Does that make me Harry Potter?

'Hey,' ah say. 'Ah'm Elsie.'

'Harry,' he says.

Whit are the chances? Ah fink. Ah keep ma lips sealed

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about the Ron thocht. The poor lad must get it aw the time.

‘You’re not from here, are you?’ he asks.

‘Naw. A wee bit further doon the road in Thistlegate.’

‘Oh! I love to go swimming there.’

‘Ah heard there’s a pool here,’ ah say, hopefully.

He shakes his heid. ‘Mair like a glorified puddle.’

Ah laugh. A pal, and we’ve already gat sommat in common. Ah always appreciate folk wi a sense o humour.

There’s a group o lads in Lacoste trainers and Burberry caps behind Harry. Ah get the fear. Their school ties are done up at hauf mast.

Harry turns tae look an aw. ‘Don’t mind them,’ he says. ‘The bams. They won’t bother you unless you bother them.’

‘The look like they could be in the HYT,’ ah say, addin, ‘The Hilltop Young Team.’

‘It’s called the YMD here,’ he laughs.

‘Whit’s a bam?’ ah ask.

‘Ned. Nae idea why they’re callt bams roond here. They jist are.’

Ah keep the fact that the YMD sounds the YMCA tae masel an aw – jist in case. Ah still look like a teacher’s pet, even here, at the posh school. Ma lang black hair’s scraped back intae a pony, and ah’m wearin everyfink listed in the haundbook doon tae ma thick, leather Clark’s shoes, which, admittedly, ah’m startin tae regret.

Ah sound different fae everywan else, and ah’m layin it

oan a bit thick. It's no that ah cannae speak proper, ah kin, but this is ma language, and ah'm prood o it. Ah couldnae care less if folk are scared o me, as long as ah'm no gettin grief jist fur bein masel, ah'll gie it laldy wi the best o them.

A plukey girl wi lang, black greasy hair walks up tae Harry. She looks at me.

'This is Ruth,' he says.

'Hey,' ah say. 'Elsie.'

The bell rings, and ah follow the others tae the assembly hall. We're haunded a map o the school by a specky wumman wi short grey hair who puts me in mind o a munchkin even though she's taller than me. They're takin nae chances wi us.

Ah've English fur ma first period. Ya dancer, ah fink. Harry and Ruth hud music fur their first periods. Nae luck there.

English is the aniline subject ah'm guid at. There posters oan the classroom wa's fur *Death of a Salesman*, *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*. Ah've no read any o them yet.

Ah sit at the back o the room, avoidin anywan who looks like they'll gie me a hard time. The teacher welcomes us wi a smile and starts explainin whit we'll be gettin up tae. Ah shiver o excitement runs doon ma spine.

It sounds amazin – personal writin and readin a book callt *Underground to Canada*.

A lad wi lang, broon moosy hair saunters intae the room, late. He'd huv gat his marchin orders in the wee school, but the teacher says nought. He's hidin behind his

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big emo fringe and sits in the aniline empty seat next tae me.

He takes a jotter that looks like a dug's dinner oot his bag and avoids eye contact wi me. The boys at ma auld school would've hud a field day wi him.

'You have your first double period of English next week,' Mrs Smith says, 'and we're going to use it as an opportunity to assess your writing.'

Ma ears prick up. It's ma time tae shine.

The wee school wis a richt mess. The teachers put me intae the bottom group fur everyfink jist because ma Mammy didnae come fae a proper family wi 'careers' and, in the teachers' eyes, hud wan too many weans. Naebody knows shite aboot me here. Ah'm gettin assessed oan ma ain merit.

A lassie raises a haun before the teacher's hud a chance tae finish speakin.

'Yes,' Mrs Smith says.

'What kind of writing will we be doing?' she asks.

'Creative, of course. Personal writing! So there's no need to worry about it. There won't be any set parameters, either. I want to see what you come up with off your own backs. I'll give you a wee head start though,' she pauses.

Wee, ah fink tae masel. She used the word wee!

Scots is a funny language. Maybe she'd huv understood why ah laughed at the wee school when Mrs Clark said the Young Team hud nicked the new alloys aff hur motor.

‘We’re going to be writing about Scotland, specifically, you’re special place in Scotland,’ Mrs Smith says.

Ma eyes fall oan the lad next tae me. Ah’ve awready dubbed him the Grim Reaper oan account o his black hoodie, greasy hair, and unwillingness tae look at anyfink but the flair. Ma eyes widen when ah realise he’s scrivin poetry at the back o his jotter, bold as brass. Fae the looks o it, it’s as depressin as puck.

Granny says puck instead o the F-word. Ah’m takin a leaf oot o hur book there. No that Mammy would see puck as much different fae the F-word.

‘Now, as some of us met when you were still at primary school,’ Mrs Smith says, lookin at the lad next tae me and smilin. ‘I’m going to come around and have a word with anyone whose name I don’t know. Feel free to tell your desk partner about the best book you read this summer while I make my way around the class.’

The lad covers a line that reads ‘My life is a coalescence of darkness’ when he clocks me huvin a swatch.

‘I’m Elsie,’ ah say.

‘Dante.’

‘Are ye Italian?’

‘No,’ he says, lowerin his voice. ‘But that’s what you can call me.’

‘So, whit wis the best book ye read this summer?’ ah ask.

‘*The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oscar Wilde.’

‘Oh wow. Ah’ve been meanin tae huv a swatch o that. It wis Burns fur me.’

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‘Burns?’

‘Aye. The poet?’

‘Ah, yes,’ Dante says.

There’s nae tone in his voice. Ah kin tell he’s lookin his nose doon oan me awready. There’s nought wrang wi Burns. Much better than Jacqueline Wilson. No that ah’m no partial tae the odd episode o *Tracey Beaker*.

‘What’s your name?’ Mrs Smith asks.

Thank God, ah fink. Talkin tae Dante’s like tryin tae draw blood fae a stone.

‘Elsie,’ ah say, smilin.

‘Welcome to Thistlegate Academy. So tell me, do you enjoy English?’

Ah smile.

‘It’s ma favourite subject,’ ah say. ‘Ah love Scots. Y’know? The greats like Burns. It aw started wi Jack and Victor. Ye know *Still Game*?’

‘I can’t say that I do, but I do like Burns.’

‘Nice to see you again, Mark,’ she says tae Dante.

Whit a liar! Ah fink. He’s gat a normal name, but he’s actin like he’s walked straicht oot o an Oscar Wilde play. Talk aboot bein easily influenced.

Mrs Smith leaves, and it’s jist me and Dante or Mark again. Ah look at the clock. Time’s passin as slow as a day in the jail. Ah dae ma best tae make small before the bell.

‘Well, see ye fur the double, Mark,’ ah say, throwin ma fings intae ma bag.

‘It’s Dante.’

Touchy bugger.

There's sommat funny aboot Dante ah fink in P.E. Why did he lie aboot his name? The ainlie explanation is that he's tryin tae reinvent himsel at the big school.

Ma P.E. teacher's name is Miss Bruce. It sounded like a joke when ah read it oan ma timetable. Not a word o a lie. That's hur name. Big manly wumman an aw. Ah felt better aboot the size o ma chest when ah saw hur. Grawn up and wi nought tae show tae the world but two flat pancakes under a Patrick Thistle strip.

Fitbaw strips wur banned at the wee school. They caused too much trouble, even though everywan knew tae say they supported Celtic and didnae know why.

That wis hoo ah learnt whit a hun is. Mammy took mair offence tae that word than shite or even puck wi an F. She nearly hud ten kittens when ma pal doon the street gat green and white braces and said tae me in the garden, "Ah'm gonnae tell everywan ah'm a hun then open ma month and be like 'Naw, ah'm no!'"

We're daein the trail run fur P.E. It's through a forest, and ah'm determined tae show aff ma endurance skills. Runnin is the ainlie hing ah wis guid at at the wee school, even though ah knew ah'd a talent fur English.

Miss Bruce blows hur whistle. There's a lassie in front o me fae, and nae matter hoo hard ah try, ah cannae seem tae beat hur. Mind ye, she's gat an advantage. This is hame turf fur everywan but me. Ma estate's miles away.

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Turns oot the boys are daein the trail run an aw, and it isnae lang before ah pass two o the stragglers. Dante and a goth.

Ah dinnae class Dante as a proper goth compared tae his pal. This lad's wearin eyeliner, whit ah kin aniline assume are fake tattoos and an Iron Maiden T-shirt under his uniform.

Ah feel Dante's eyes oan me as ah run past. He's walkin alang the trail, despite bein a big lanky bugger who could probably gie maist o the lads in his class a run fur their money in the speedy department.

'Come oan, Elsie,' ah pant. 'This is yer new start. A chance tae show everywan whit yer made o.'

There's a sharp cramp in ma side. Ah ignore it.

Ma shirt's wet wi sweat, but ah'm hot oan the heels o that other lassie noo. She beats me by the skin o hur teeth.

'Ah'm Catilin,' she says efterward. 'You did well.'

Ah'm so oot o breath that ah cannae reply. She's barely broken a sweat. Ah'm no sure whit tae fink either. Oan the wan haun, she seems nice, but it's hard tae take anywan at face value when ye've been bullied oot a school.

Ah spend lunchtime wi Harry and Ruth, and they tell me that a lad in their class hud introduced himsel as Scout when he's callt Daniel. Clearly, changin yer name's a fink.

'Meep meep,' says a voice as ah walk oot the school.

Ah turn. It's Dante.

'You were like Roadrunner on the trail today,' he says.

Ah laugh.

‘Ah cannae say the same aboot ye,’ ah reply.

Ma nose twitches. It’s a roastin hot August day, and the bugger husnae changed oot his gym clothes. Insteid, he’s jist put his school shirt back oantoap o him. The smell gies me the boak. Ah turn ma heid a wee bit tae get a moothful o fresh, country air.

‘I don’t want to be part of things like that,’ Dante says, no noticin. ‘All the boys trying to be the fastest and the strongest. It’s just not for me.’

‘Fair enough,’ ah say.

Mammy’s always said ah’m as deep as the ocean, and ah nicht huv said the same aboot Dante if it hudnae been fur that conversation. The bugger hud nae qualms aboot openin up tae me.

‘Ye seem fair intae yer English though,’ ah say before an awkward silence kin descend.

‘It’s my dream to be a writer,’ he says.

‘Same,’ ah reply wi’oot finkin.

He raises an eyebrow and smirks.

‘What kind of writing?’

‘Writin that makes folk laugh, especially when it’s written the way they talk.’

‘Sounds like you want to be a comedian.’

‘No,’ ah say, firmly. ‘It’s the writin that ah’m intae.’

‘Language is beautiful and complex, and I think that should be reflected in every revered piece of prose and poetry.’

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Ah'm at Mammy's car before ah've a chance tae reply.
Ah gie Dante a wave and open the door.

'Ah new pal?' she asks.

'Ah've nae idea,' ah say, lookin at Dante through the
wing mirror. 'He talks like he eats pages fae the dictionary
fur breakfast.'

Mammy laughs.

THE WEE SCHOOL

1999

Ah cannae even sit through mass wi'oot drawin aw eyes tae me.

Ah'm sittin oan the manky wooden flair, lookin up desperately at the clock while Father Martin says his piece. Ah've tickle in ma throat, and ah'm tryin no tae cough and splutter, never mind say the *Our Father* wi the rest o them.

Ah must o look like wan o those pufferfish as ah sit here, cheeks inflated and legs crossed until ah cannae hauld it in any langer. Father Martin gies me daggers fae the school stage-turnt-pulpit, and ah fink tae masel, well, that's ye

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goin straicht tae Hell as well as gettin bullied tae buggery, Elsie.

‘Elsie,’ whispers a voice. ‘Elsie, go to the nurse’s office.’

Ah stand and shuffle oot the gym hall.

‘*There’s no I in ‘Team’*’ reads the biggest poster oan the wall as ah walk tae the nurse’s office. A sugary smell is comin fae the dinner hall. Mrs Gary must be makin tablet again. Mammy furgot tae gie me iop fur a square the day, even though it helps soothe ma throat.

Ah sit doon oan the big reid bed in the nurse’s office. Wi’oot a word, she hauns me a wet paper towel. There’s nought in the wee school that cannae be fixed wi a wet paper towel. Ah cough intae it.

‘Oh my,’ the nurse says. ‘Open wide.’

She’s gat a lollipop stick in wan haun. She puts it oantae ma tongue.

‘Say ahh.’

‘Ahhhhhhh...’

‘Jist as ah thocht. Tonsilitis. Ye’ll need tae get yer mammy tae take ye tae the doactor.’

Ah nod, before realisin that the day’s a Friday and that means ah’ve gat tae read aloud.

‘Whit about readin?’ ah ask. ‘Kin ah still read?’

‘Of course, you can,’ the nurse says. ‘Your teacher will have seen you coughing away in mass. Nothing to worry about if your throat starts playing up. You won’t get into any trouble.’

Ah look at ma feet and sigh. Ah micht no get intae any

trouble, but that teacher knows ah come fae nought, and ah'm determined tae play the game tae get intae the toap English group. Ah kin speak proper when ah put ma mind tae it.

She's jist gat the wrang idea because she's met the lang line o McDuff's that came before me. We're no daft – no by a lang shot – but wur no the maist academic bunch, and teachers are snobby buggers.

'If ye cannae speak properly, ye willnae be able tae spell properly,' Mammy said.

Ma posh Granny spoke properly, but ma other Granny spoke jist like me and naewan gied hur grief fur it.

'It's wa-T-er,' Posh Granny said. 'Not wa'er.'

Ah felt bad. Usually, ye know when yer daein sommat wrang like nickin a Bubbalo fae the corner shop or puttin zop in yer piggy bank insteid o the plate at mass. But ah gat tellt aff fur jist sayin words – and they wurnae even bad words.

Ah asked posh Granny fur some butter oan ma toast, and ah couldnae even dae that richt.

'It's buTTer,' she replied, shakin hur heid.

But it wis a rare day when ah didnae get full makes oan ma spellin tests, and ah could wipe the table wi everywan else when it came tae personal readin.

Nane o it mattered though. Ah talk the way ah talk and that wisnae guid enough fur ma teacher. Ah talk like a lassie who should be in the bottom group, or so she

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thocht, and that's where she wis determined ah wis gonnae stay.

'Water,' ah said tae posh Granny.

'Much better.'

'Why dae ah no speak like ye?' ah mind askin at the time.

'It's...' she pauses. 'Your house. It's not an address.'

Ah tellt Mammy whit Granny said the next day, and she hud an Annie Rooney. Daddy tellt me tae pay no mind. He said his Mammy wis born wi a silver spoon in hur mooth, and she wis too auld tae change.

But Mammy came fae nought, and she wis almaist as bad as posh Granny when it came tae correctin the way ah talk, even though ah've tellt hur time and time again that ah cannae help it.

Ah know noo that posh Granny didnae mean any harm. If ah did mair than put oan proper talkin occasionally, it would probably dae me the world o guid, but ah love Harry Potter, and if that specky bugger is anyfink, it's true tae himsel.

'Elise hus the plague,' Barry jokes at playtime.

Ah shake ma heid. We wur as thick as thieves until primary two. Then it wisnae cool fur boys and lassies tae be pals anymair. Ye hud tae stick tae yer ain.

'Ah've jist got a bad throat. The nurse said it's ma tonsils.'

Ma pal Mary takes a supportive step closer tae me. He

doesnae argue wi that. He drops the fitbaw in his arms and walks ower tae the grey fitbaw pitch.

‘Who dae we love?’ the lads shout. ‘NOT THE KING. NOT THE QUEEN. AINLIE ST MARGRET’S FITBAW TEAM!’

Ah whisper tae Mary that St Margret doesnae huv a fitbaw team. No accordin tae book o saints that Mammy gied me fur ma confirmation.

Me and Mary sit doon at a bench, and ah take oot ma copy o *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. She tucks intae a Lunchable. Ma stomach rumbles. Ah ignore it.

Ah’ve been practicin ma guid English ower and ower again, ever since Mrs Clark said tae Mammy that she’d only fink aboot puttin me intae the toap group when ma readin aloud wis up tae scratch.

Ma life would be a hunner times easier if posh Granny didnae live oan the coast. She’d love nought mair than tae gie me aw the talkin lessons in the world.

The other lassies and lads whose parents hud bigger cars than ma Mammy and Daddy hud nae problem speakin the way Mrs Clark wanted them tae. But nae matter hoo hard ah tried, ah wis the world’s worst actress when ah tried tae put it oan.

Ah hud tae persevere.

WRITE IN ENGLISH

2005

Ah feel relaxed oan ma second day at the big school. It's gonnae be a piece o cake – in the ned department at least.

'Is that yer boyfriend?' a voice says efter regi when Dante walks up tae me.

Ah laugh. If it hud been anywan else, ma cheeks would huv been beamin. But Dante looks like he's been dragged through a hedge.

His broon fringe is stuck together in clumps, and he must be oan the sweeties because his plukey face doesnae just put me in mind o a pizza, it reminds me o a volcano an aw wi aw the scabs that huv appeared owernecht. He smells

like a curry too – a stale wan. He cannae huv changed his shirt fae yesterday.

Ah'm no feart o the bams at the big school. Efter aw, they arenae even callt neds. Fae whit ah've gathered, the maist they get up tae is playin truant and smokin doon the woods. The neds at ma auld school were bloody arsonists.

Jist before ah gat pullt oot because o the bullyin, they threw a firework intae a bog. Hoo a bunch o 12-year-auld's gat a hold o a firework is beyond me, but they did. Blew the cistern clean aff.

The school ended up gettin flooded by the sprinklers, and we spent aw efternoon oan the fitbaw pitches, near enough catchin oor deaths, as firemen swatched o every nook and cranny o the school until they found the blown-up bog.

Ah sit doon in double English, tryin and failin tae brush aff hoo anxious the boyfriend comment is makin me feel. Is history aboot tae repeat itsel? Ah hate bullies and hoo they pass everyfink aff as a joke even when ye know it isnae.

Ah avoid eye contact wi Dante when he sits next tae me. Fur aw beggars cannae be choosers, he isnae gonnae be ma best pal if ah kin help it. Especially if, God forbid, folk think ah fancy a specimen like him.

Ah look at Dante's converses. The soles are tryin tae make a break fur it. And tae hink this boy hud the cheek tae talk doon tae me fur speakin and writin in Scots. Ah'll show ye, ah fink, scribblin away oan ma lined paper.

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Ma eyes drift tae his jotter. Surprise, surprise, he's writin aw aboot himsel.

Ah swear there's a scab fae Dante's face oan the desk. Ah look up at the clock, wrackin ma brain fur ma best Glasgae patter as ah write.

Ah look roond. There are plenty o friendly lookin lassies and some huvnae found their clique yet. It's jist ma luck naw tae huv Harry and Ruth in maist o ma classes. But maybe the teacher will split us aff intae groups at some point, and ah'll get a chance tae know them an aw. God knows ah'm no gettin stuck wi Dante if ah kin help it.

Boys arenae oan a level wi lassies – although ah wonder if Harry could be an exception. Mammy tellt me that lassies grow up faster and that wis part o the reason why ah'd the piss ripped oot o me in the wee school.

Ah couldnae risk getting held back like that, especially when ah'm as green as ah'm cabbage lookin.

'OK, first-year, are you ready to write about your special place?' Mrs Smith says.

Naw isnae exactly an option.

Ah know whit tae write aboot. Posh Granny's hoose by the sea. Ah love Scotland, no that ah've hud a chance tae live elsewhere, but ah dae. Ah love that braw's a word, dreich twa, and that ye cannae throw yer granny aff a bus.

Ah fink o the waves slidin up oatae the cobblestoned shore. The white, grey, and black seashells crackin beneath ma feet. Mammy tellt me never tae take it fur granted. Ah hope ah never dae.

Jack and Victor would've had a field day in the amusements near Posh Granny's hoose. Fur aw they didnae huv a patch oan the wans in Blackpool, ah missed the hills whenever ah wis doon South.

'Dunoon's in Argyll and sits next tae the Firth o Clyde,' ah add, knowin the importance o facts. *'When walkin alang its beaches, ye kin hear, smell and touch the sea – well, as lang as ye dinnae mind gettin wet!'*

'Okay, first-year. Now that you've written your stories, we're going to do a little peer assessment before I take them in for marking,' Mrs Smith says a guid hoor later.

Ah put ma pen doon. A haun shoots up.

'Peer assessment?' a lassie asks.

'Yes, I want you to all be making reference to the five senses in your writing.'

Ah roll ma eyes. She could o tellt us this before we started writin, but mibbie it's a test. She quickly reminds us o the five senses oan the board.

'For the last twenty minutes, you're going to swap stories with the person next to you and give them three stars,' she explained. 'Two for what they've done well and one for what could do with improvement. But remember, they have to have used all five senses!'

Ma heart sinks. Dante's gonnae rip ma story tae shreds. Before ah've had a chance tae offer it tae him, he's awready swapped it wi his.

Ah start tae read. He's gat a talent, ah'll gie him that, and ah dread tae fink what his first impression o ma story is.

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His story begins by describin him walkin through the local park up tae the reservoir. Every metaphor and simile is perfect, and he's used mair than a few words that ah dinnae know. Ah resist the urge tae double-check their meanin's in the dictionary.

Dante loved Scotland an aw, in his ain way, but ah cannae get ma heid aroond the big words he's usin. Sure he'd mentioned the five senses, but it was aw a bit much, even fur a bookworm like me.

'Ah've nae feelins,' Dante wrote at wan point.

Ah furrow ma broos. He's flesh and blood like awbody else. Ah could see him gien me less-than-flatterin feedback a mile aff, but ah didnae want tae get oan his wrang side – and his work is impressive, awbeit a bit disturbin.

Whit happens tae a 12-year-auld tae huv them come away wi sommat like that?

'Great use of the five senses,' ah write, addin his first star. 'Good use of rhyme,' ah add, alongside the second.

Ah struggle tae fink o a criticism. He's the teacher's pet. Ah'm a naebody.

'Neater handwriting,' ah conclude.

'Pens down, first-year,' Mrs Smith says.

Ah dread tae fink whit Dante's wrote oan ma paper. Mrs Smith asks the class if they're willin tae share whit they've written aboot. A nervously raise a haun.

Dante's almaist certainly gonnae knock ma confidence. But at the end o the day, the teacher knows best.

'Yes, Elise,' she says, gesturin tae me.

‘Ah wrote aboot ma Granny’s hame oan the West Coast,’ ah say. ‘In Scots.’

‘Scots?’ a few voices whisper.

‘Like Burns,’ ah add.

‘Can you explain why you decided to write your story in such an unusual way?’ Mrs Smith asks, eyebrow raised.

‘Because naewan writes like they talk. Everywan’s tryin tae be sommat they’re no. Ah showed ma Granny a story ah wrote wi big words and she tellt me it wis a lot o rubbish. Yer 12-year-old,’ ah mind hur sayin, ‘lassies yer age are meant tae huv fun wi their imaginations, no get their knickers in a twist ower fings even adults dinnae know.’

Dante guffaws. The Young Team at ma auld school would o honestly hud this bugger fur breakfast. Nane o the other lads in the class huv started developin yet, but he’s gat a wee ratty moustache.

‘Well, I’m looking forward to reading your story about your special place, Elsie,’ she says.

Ah smile.

‘Okay, first-year, what is everyone else writing about?’

Dante’s haun darts up, and there wis me finkin he wouldnae say boo tae a goose.

‘I’m writing poems about my special place. The reservoir. About the colours of the dawn coalesce in brilliant splendour as I contemplate the meaning of life at the dawn.’

Ah raise an eyebrow. Wis this bugger fur real? And does

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naewan get bullied at this school? Ah'm tempted tae start oan him masel.

'Oh wow,' says the teacher. 'Do you want to share with the class what the word coalesce means?'

Dante looks at hur, smilin like he thocht she'd never ask and takes oot a dictionary that's as ratty as his moustache. Wee post-it notes are stuck between every other page.

'Coalesce,' he says, openin the *Cambridge Dictionary*, 'If two or more things coalesce, they come or grow together to form one thing or system.'

'Very good,' says Mrs Smith.

She wisnae so complimentary aboot ma work. Ah stare aff intae space as a few other folk share whit they've written aboot.

Mrs Smith tells us tae swap feedback moments before the bell rings. Almaist certainly tae spare any bruised egos. If somewan takes it the wrang way, they've gat time tae cool aff. Ah stuff ma story intae ma bag and walk oot the class.

Insteid o heidin tae music, ah go tae the toilet. Ah sit in the cubical and read Dante's four stars. Ma heart sinks.

'I couldn't get through this,' he wrote as his criticism. 'There were masses of dialogue, and the Scots just made it difficult to get my head around the few times you did use the five senses. WRITE IN ENGLISH.'

He'd underlined the word English. Ma eyes well. Did this happen tae Burns or am ah jist rubbish at writin in Scots?

BIG LADDIE AND WEE LADDIE

2004

It's ma dream tae be in the toap spellin group before ah go the big school. Mammy says ah'm clever, but ah've always been average – or worse. Fur aw ah'm convinced ah've gat some imagination oan me. Ah kin tell better stories than hauf the class put taegether and read bigger books an aw.

Ah tried tae write a book aboot ma favourite subject – the Titanic. When ah showed ma teacher, she jist haunded

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the pages back tae me covered in reid pen. Ah could o gret. But sommat amazin happened last weekend.

Granda knows hoo much ah love Jack and Victor and tellt me that some folk write like they talk an aw.

He'd taken me up the toon fur a gander at the Transport Museum, pointin oot the auld orange and green Thistlegate tram.

We went tae the Mitchell Library efterward. He knows hoo much a love ma books. While ah wis busy browsin, he came up behind me wi a pressie.

'Ah've gat ye a present,' he says, pullin oot a book. 'Well, it's yers fur the next two weeks anyway. Ah dinnae hink this wan's been oot the library in cuddies years. A cryin shame. Mibbie they'll let ye keep it if ye take a shinin.'

He hauns me *The Collected Works of Robert Burns*. The pages are yella'd, but when ah flick through them, ma eyes licht up. Scots!

'It's amazin, Granda,' ah say.

He smiles. Ma Granda hus the kindest smile ye ever did see. It's always so gentle. He's always roamin aw over Thistlegate and Glasgae, and ah could spot his white hair, smart shirts, and blue jeans a mile aff.

Ah read the Burns book in wan week. Nought but Harry Potter hus captured ma imagination like this, until noo, and there's aniline so much a lassie fae Thistlegate kin relate tae an orphaned boy at a magical boardin school.

Ma favorite poem is *Tae a Moose*. Ah relate tae Burn's

wee timorous beastie as ah've wan o ma ain – sort o. Ah've named him Gus efter the moose in *Cinderella*, even though he near enough gied me a heart attack when he turned up rustlin in ma Rice Crispies wan mornin.

Mammy's set trap efter trap fur Gus, but she's never been able tae catch him. Ah love it when the wee fing makes an appearance, but his days are numbered, especially wi Lottie, the neighbour's cat, never bein too far away.

'Mammy, ye dinnae talk any different fae Jack and Victor when ye get goin,' ah say the day ah finish the Burns book. 'Whits yer problem wi Scots?'

She pats the empty space next tae hur oan the couch. Ah sit.

'Miss Bert,' she says, narrowin hur eyes.

'Who?'

'Ma auld teacher. She's must be six feet under noo, but the wumman wis a tyrant. She hud two belts, Big Laddie and Wee Laddie, and ah gat tae aw too familiar wi Wee Laddie whenever ah'd the nerve tae say 'Aye' instead o 'Yes.'

Mammy shakes hur heid as she speaks. This is a big deal tae hur.

Ah hink tae masel that Wee Laddie sounds like Scots words if ah ever heard them, but ah feel fur Mammy. Maybe if she saw hoo great Scots kin be, the likes o Burns, then she wouldnae mind me gettin in ma practice at hame.

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Ah haun hur ma story aboot the Titanic. She smiles. She's always happy tae see me writin.

'Whit's this wan aboot?' she asks.

Mammy loved the story ah wrote aboot magic beans in primary four. It hud a man who wis hauf goat servin at the sweetie coonter in the pictures and centred roond an unfortunate incident that saw ma wee sister Skye transformed intae goldfish.

'The Titanic' ah say proodly.

'Well, ye've seen that wan aboot a hunner times,' she laughs. 'Did that book ah picked up at the library fur ye gie ye any extra inspiration?'

'Oh aye. Ah mean, yes. Maist o the folk in steerage wur immigrants, so ah imagined whit it would o been like fur a poor Glasgae family tae be there. Just me, ye, and Skye.'

'Sounds like quite the story. A proper book even!'

'They talk like us an aw,' ah say.

Mammy starts scannin the first page wi hur eyes. She hauf smiles.

'Ye've some talent,' she says, then pauses, 'but ye know whit the school is like. This is fine well at hame, but ye need tae write in full English there.'

Ma lip quivers. Ah didnae want tae admit tae masel that Mammy's richt. Ah tried tae write a story in French an aw and that gat me nae brownie points – even though it took furever and a day tae find the words ah wanted tae use in the dictionary.

'Maybe the big school will be different,' ah say.

‘Maybe,’ Mammy smiles.

Ah cast ma mind back tae poems ah’d seen pinned tae the walls o the big school. Ah mind finkin ah could dae that awready. There wis sommat callt shape poetry that ah’d ne’er seen before, but there’s nae books oan that in the library. Daddy willnae gie me the cable fur the internet unless he’s gat wan eye ower ma shoulder.

‘It’s fur yer ain guid,’ he said. ‘There’s aw sorts oan the World Wide Web.’

Aw ah’d seen oan the computer when Daddy wisnae hame wis Minesweeper and Solitaire. Ah jist wanted a chance tae use the Google tae find books that wurnae in the library.

Ah go upstairs tae let Mammy read ma story in peace, no holdin oot much hope fur hur likin it. She always said that when ye feel lost in life, she should say yer prayers, so that’s exactly whit ah dae.

Ah wander intae Mammy’s bedroom and take oot an auld, dusty Bible that Daddy inherited fae his Great Auntie. Then ah go back intae ma bedroom and grab ma wooden rosary beads, hauldin oantae them fur dear life.

‘Glory be tae the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,’ ah say, puttin the beads aroond ma neck and openin the Bible.

Then the maist amazin fing happens. An auld newspaper clippin falls oantae the flair. Ah start readin.

A Bard’s eye-view of Scotland in 1967

THE TONGUE SHE SPEAKS

Here's Rhymin' Rab! It's mony a year
Since I cast e'e on Scotland dear.
Gey aft I socht, e'er I cam' here,
To ken wha's boss!
Some chiel in London rules, I hear,
A Willie Ross.

The lass I see is braw like Jean,
But limbs nae langer blush unseen,
Wi 'dates' and 'discs' it's ill to glean
The tongue she speaks:
And I see mithers, far frae lean,
'Braid Scots' in breeks!

There's gey queer things about the toon,
Fell tramp-like cratur, locks fa'in doon,
An' wha's the lass an' wha's the loon,
I'm sweert to spear.
Can they be objects frae the moon?
I guess and fear.

I grieve John Barleycorn, auld freen,
'Mang ord'nar folk he's little seen,
Sair hauden doon his spirit's been
Wi' Budget's cross.
Near twa pound ten? I rubbed my e'en,
Whar's that man Ross?

EMMA GRAE

And noo the Empire's days are ower,
In ither airts lie wealth and power,
But still to Britain tyrants cower,
Th' oppressed look back.
I'll toast my dear land's 'finest hour'
Gin I win back.

W.T. Stirling, *The Glasgow Herald*, 25th January 1967

Ah always hud ma doubts aboot the power o prayers until then. Ah've no even said wan proper prayer and God's answered mine. Ah rush doonstairs. Mammy is deep in concentration as she reads ma story.

Ah'll surprise hur afterward, ah hink. But if the poem isnae a sign, ah dinnae know whit is. Somewan oan the other side wanted me tae find it. Writin's in ma blood.

There's a knock oan the door. Mammy opens it and smiles.

'Ah fair enjoyed yer story aboot the Titanic,' she says.

Ah'm waitin oan the but.

'Really?'

'Aye,' she says, grinnin. 'So here's ma advice. Play the game. Learn the guid Queen's English. Write and write until yer a master, and efter that, she kin gie Scots a fair guid go.'

Ma heart sinks.

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‘But why can’t ah gie it a go noo?’ ah say, readyin the dictionary.

‘Because that’s jist no hoo the world works, hen, especially schools. If ye’d been taught by a tyrant like Miss Bert, ye’d understand.’

Mammy’s eyes water. There’s a time and a place fur everyfink, as she says. Ah keep Great Granda’s poem tae masel.

PLAYIN THE GAME

2005

Ah pull oot a dictionary when ah get hame and start pickin oot the maist beautiful words ah kin find in the Queen's English. Writin in Scots is a daft notion. Ah kin see that efter Dante's feedback. Ma Great-Granda jist gat lucky. It wis a Burns-themed competition. Ooutside o that, naewan gies a fiddler's fart aboot writin in their ain tongue.

Well, that's no entirely true, but mibbie the ainlie reason Jack and Victor gat away wi gein it laldy in Scots wis because they wur oan the telly, no a piece o paper.

Ah cannae stoap finkin aboot writin. Maybe it's jist no

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fur me? Is it worth playin the game tae get somewhere? Ah hate maths, but awbody kens that ye need tae get yer Standard Grade in it tae huv hauf a chance at a decent joab.

'I am haunted,' ah write, channellin ma inner Dante. *'A vessel.'*

Jesus, ah fink, knowin fine well that ah probably shouldnae huv taken the Lord's name in vain, even if it wis jist in ma heid.

This feels awfae self-indulgent. Then again, Burns did write that his love wis like a reid, reid rose, and this isnae a stone's throw away fae that.

'Youth is everywhere,' ah add.

God. Ah'm a teenager. Well, near enough. Ah dinnae feel like ah've gat any richt tae be philosophical. Ah ask Daddy fur the dial-up, tellin him ah need the internet fur ma homework, and start googlin famous poets. Turns oot there wis a very well-respected fella in the 18th century who popped his clogs when he wis aniline seventeen, and he wrote poems like this. Ah guess there must be sommat tae it.

'I walk across a carpet of green and gold,' ah continue.

This isnae too bad. Paintin photies wi words. Sure it's no the tongue ah speak, but mibbie that's the reason ah didnae get intae the toap English group at the wee school.

'Elsie?' Mammy asks, walkin intae ma room. 'Ye wantin anyhin fae the chippie?'

'Eh... pizza crunch?'

She looks ower ma shoulder.

‘That’s a nice line ye’ve written aboot the leaves there, Elsie. Very poetic,’ she says.

Ah’m no so sure. Ah’m mair confident writin in ma ain tongue, but it’s a confidence boost aw the same.

‘Thanks,’ ah say, beamin.

She walks oot, and ah cannae help but wonder whit she’d fink o Great Granda’s poem, but it kin wait another day.

Ah fall asleep holdin oantae the auld Scots poem. Mibbie poetry’s the answer. It’s no like ah cannae gie it laldy in that department wi the best o them, finkin o the day’s creation.

That nicht, ah dream o bein back at the wee school, back in the bottom groups.

Ah cannae escape feelin like ah’m never gonna gonnae be guid enough, even in ma dreams. Ah’ve always tried ma best, but ah’ve never been mair than average.

Ah wake and look oot the windae at the darkness. Ah come fae nought, but ah cannae shake the feelin that mibbie, jist mibbie, ah’ve gat sommat worthwhile tae share wi the world – ah’m just no sure whit it is yet.

Ah want tae be a writer because ah love books. Dante doesnae strike me as much o reader. Ah’ve nae idea why he’s intae his writin. He probably wants tae be famous and cannae hauld a note so *Pop Idol*’s oot the question.

Books huv always taken me tae world’s ah could huv

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never imagined. They're an escape, and ah'd love tae dae that fur somewan else – take them oan a richt guid jaunt wi words, folk, and places they'd huv never otherwise known.

Ah look at ma schoolbag. We've no been put intae groups yet, and ah'm dreadin a repeat o whit happened at the wee school.

Before ah've a chance tae worry anymair, ah drift aff again.

'That's ye,' wan o the neds at the big school says, pointin at an ugly photie in a biology textbook.

Ah'm stunned intae silence. Is history repeatin itsel?

Then ah'm back in the wee school.

'That's ye,' Michael McGlincy says, huvin gone tae the effort o drawin an ugly wee character that's meant tae be me.

Ah tear up, grab it clean oot his haun, rip it in twa and run oot the class.

Ah didnae go back tae the wee school efter that, in the wakin world.

Granny and Granda kept me entertained. Ah cycled tae their hoose every day when ah should o been in class, pullin the weeds oot their floo'er pots, and eventually, ah planned, fixin the fence that wis fallin doon at the back o their gairden an aw.

Granda wis ma best pal. He said he'd seen it aw, especially daein his national service, and ah believed him. He knew mair aboot life than a bunchy o plukey wee neds.

EMMA GRAE

'If ah could get away wi it, ah'd wring the bugger's necks,' Granda said.

Ma eyes open, and ah scream. Granny's photie o the Sacred Heart is floatin at the end o ma bed. Mammy rushes intae ma room.

'Elsie!' she says. 'Elsie!'

Ah blink, and Jesus disappears.

'Elsie, it's jist a bad dream.'

'Ah know,' ah nod. 'Ah know.'

Luckily, Granda's auld poem isnae squashed when ah wake in the mornin. Ah'm still feelin doon, aboot everyfink really, but it gies me a wee bit o hope.

The teachers at the wee school made their minds up aboot me a lang time ago, but there's still everyfink tae play fur at the big school – and ah'm related tae a published poet. Somewhere, writing's in ma blood. It jist cannae be in ma ain tongue. No yet.

Mammy comes intae the room hauldin a wee gift bag.

'Whit's this?' ah say.

'Well, since yer tryin yer haun at poems, ah figured ye'd like somewhere tae write them doon.'

Ah open it and smile when ah see a beautiful turquoise notebook wi gold sitchin. Ah gie hur a big hug and tell hur it's perfect.

POET'S HANDS

2005

Dante's sittin in the corner o the library like the Grim Reaper. There's a photie o Britney Spears encouragin folk tae read behind him. He couldnae look mair oot o place.

It's hard tae imagine the kind o man Dante will grow intae. Aw he talks or cares aboot is poetry this and poetry that, but naewan makes a livin at poetry these days. Ah kin see him noo, a big beardy bugger wi a leather notepad sittin in a park, refusin tae get up aff his arse and get a normal joab – or at least sign oan.

'I've got poet's hands,' he'd said the other day.

Ah've changed ma look a wee bit noo ah'm gettin settled

intae the big school. Ah've acquired a Jane Norman bag, since that's the aniline acceptable fmg tae carry yer gym kit in, and ah make sure ma tie isnae quite done up at the toap. Ah've started wearin ma lang black hair doon an aw.

Ma skirt's far too lang, but ah'd need a miracle before Mammy would fink aboot lettin me wear wan as short as some o the lassies up here sport.

'Hey,' Dante says, an eye emergin fae under his broon emo fringe.

Ah take a seat across fae him.

'Hi. Hud a wee go at poetry masel,' ah say.

He smiles. Fur wance, he doesnae smell like, well, the S-word. Mibbie he's realised that he willnae huv a chance up here if he doesnae get his act together an aw.

'Mrs Smith's going to love that. She told me she's thinking of starting a creative writing lunch club. If you fancy it...'

'I'd love that,' ah say, takin oot ma copy o Burns.

Ye're no supposed tae chat in the library fur long. If ye dae, the poke-nosed librarian will be oan yer case quicker than ye kin say Boab's yer uncle. Ah take oot ma copy o Burns, forgettin that ah'm usin Great Granda's poem as a bookmark. It falls oantae the wooden table. Dante's eyes widen.

Before ah've a chance tae grab it, Dante's readin away.

'Poetry competitions,' he scoffs. 'Gosh. You can hardly make sense of this. At least Burns is sort of legible Scots.'

Ah tear up. Dante doesnae seem tae care. He hauns the

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poem back tae me. Ah put it back intae ma Burns book and rush tae the toilet.

Ah plonk ma arse doon oan the bog and start readin the graffiti etched intae the walls. Ah shouldnae huv let it bother me. Ah know that, but it's wan fink huvin folk fink yer an ugly lassie, it's another tae huv somewan ye respect fink yer a stupid wan.

It wouldnae be so bad if Mrs Smith didnae fink the sun rose and shone oot o Dante's arse, but she does. It will be richt up his street if ah dinnae get intae the toap English group. Ah dinnae want tae care whit he finks, but ah cannae help it. Ah jist dae.

When ah get oot the toilet, Dante's hangin aroond by the lockers ootside.

'Elsie?' he says.

Ah cannae avoid him. It'll ainlie make fings worse.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah, yeah,' ah say. 'Women's troubles.'

Oh my days, ah fink, as soon as the words escape ma lips. Women's troubles. But it wis that or let him know he'd gat tae me.

'There's still twenty minutes left until the bell. Fancy a walk?'

'Sure,' ah say.

We make oor way ower the concrete playground and heid doon taewards the trail run. Mibbie Dante's no a bad lad. He cared enough tae come chasin efter me. But that somehow made it worse. He likes me, but he genuinely

hates Scots, and maist likely every attempt ah've made at writin so far.

'So what kind of poetry have you written?' he asks. 'Didn't get a chance to find out in the library. Scots, is it?'

'No,' ah say. 'That's naw aw there is tae me.'

He smiles as we walk through the woods, and the first time, ah feel like ah've wan a wee bit o respect fae somewan genuinely intelligent.

'Any chance of getting to see it?'

Showin Dante ma poetry is the last fing ah want tae dae, but ah cannae huv him finkin that ah'm full o rubbish either.

Ah haun him ma new notebook fae Mammy. Ah'd sneakily redrafted ma poem intae it at the back o maths this mornin.

Dante sits oan a fallen tree and starts readin. A nervously hover nearby, diggin ma Clark's shoes intae the hardened summer mud.

'This is great, Elsie,' he says. 'Mrs Smith will love it – if you feel able to show her.'

By the time the bell rings, ah'm beamin fae ear tae ear.

THE COMPETITION

2005

‘Afternoon, first year,’ Mrs Smith says.

Fur wance, ah’m no fussed that me and Dante look like pals. He doesnae gie a fiddler’s fart about whit anywan finks, and he’s gettin nae grief. It makes me wonder if ah’d huv fared better at the wee school if ah’d jist no risen tae the neds’ bait. Anywan can make somewan else look dug ugly oan a scrap piece o paper.

‘I’ve marked up all your special place stories,’ Mrs Smith continues. ‘We’re going to do a close reading exercise and then I’ll be speaking to the other English teachers to work out what level you’re all working at.’

Ah take a nervous breath.

‘There’s also a creative writing competition for under 16s in East Bonnieburgh, if any of you feel like entering.’

She looks at Dante. Mrs Smith might as well declare him the winner here and noo.

‘So,’ he whispers, ‘will you be entering?’

Ah’d love tae enter, ah fink, but ah’ve gat nae chance. Ah’ve set ma sights oan gettin intae the toap English group, but winnin a competition and beatin every other bugger in the area seems like reachin a bit too far. As much as ah’d like tae prove tae Dante – and ah guess masel – that ah’m in his league when it comes tae the writin.

‘Mibbie,’ ah say.

We get tae work. Ah take ma time wi the close readin passage, makin sure ah read every question carefully. That wis part o ma problem at the wee school. Ah wis always so nervous that ah misread fings, and ah cannae afford tae make the same mistake twice.

The close readin passage isnae too hard, thankfully, and wance it’s ower, ah’m quietly hopeful that, alangside ma special place essay, ah’ve done enough tae nab a place in the toap English group.

Mrs Smith says we willnae be gettin moved fur at least another week. That’ll be a week a spent oan tenterhooks, ah fink.

At the end o the lesson, she hauns oor essays back oot. Dante’s gat a big wan written at the toap o his. A wan’s the best ye kin get at the big school.

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It feels like ah'm waitin an eternity as Mrs Smith hauns oot everywan else's essays. Ah'm wan o the last tae huv the white sheets placed doon in front o me.

Ma heart sinks when ah read ma score: a three.

Ah'm average. Ah've tired ma absolute best. Read far and wide, and here ah am, still as average as they come. It's no like Mrs Smith knows anyfink about me comin fae nought like the teachers at the wee school either.

Ah try and fail tae blink back ma tears. Dante puts a haun oan ma arm. Ah jolt.

'You can do better than that,' he says. 'It's just... y'know.'

He's read ma feedback before ah've hud a chance tae.

'This essay is well-formed, and you've used the five senses well. Unfortunately, your use of language was not appropriate to the task, which is why it has been marked a three. Please don't let this discourage you!'

Ah swallow the lump in ma throat. Well, that's that then, ah fink. She tellt us tae let oor imaginations run wild, that's exactly whit ah did, and noo ah'm bein punished fur writin in ma ain tongue.

Ah tried tae stay true tae masel against everywan's advice, and it's ainlie done and done me oot o a place in the toap English group. Hoo could ah huv been so stupid?

When the bell rings, ah heid straicht fur the toilet. Ah take a compass oot ma pencil case and start workin oan the wall. Mammy would be mortified if she could see me scratchin away at the flakey grey paint.

'*This school is a shithole,*' ah etch, knowin fine well that it could get me intae aw sorts o bother here, let alone at hame wi Mammy.

Ah pat some Dream Matte Mouse oantae ma face tae hide the fact ah've been cryin before goin back ootside.

Dante's waitin by the lockers. Again.

'It's okay,' he says. 'There's no need to fly off the handle. It's just one essay.'

Ah roll ma eyes. Who the puck does he fink he is?

'Easy enough fur ye tae say. Ye dinnae know the first hing about me,' ah say.

'Well, tell me.'

Ah want nought mair than tae run up the ramp intae the music department, but mibbie there's nae harm in it.

'Yer gonnae hav tae skive fur this wan,' ah say.

'Like it's the first time,' Dante laughs.

Ah've already broken wan rule the day, skivvin isnae gonnae make it any worse. Plus, fae whit ah've gathered, ye huv tae dae sommat really bad tae get intae bother at this school. Playin truant is like askin tae go tae the toilet when ye jist want a break.

We heid doon the woods yet again, and before ah've hud a chance tae let the puffiness fade fae ma eyes, Dante's lit a roll-up fag.

'Draw?' he says, offerin me the glowin orange butt.

Ah shake ma heid.

'Right,' he says. 'Spill. And for the record, Mrs Smith might like me, but you've no idea the crap marks I get

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elsewhere. Mr McDonald's sent my mother a letter about my performance in PE.'

Ah laugh and tell Dante whit does he expect when he's no even botherin tae run the trail. But he jist shrugs and takes another draw, waitin oan me openin up.

'Ah wis bullied,' ah say, embarrassed the moment the words escape ma lips.

He shrugs yet again as the thin paper sizzles in front o his lips.

'I'd love to know someone who hasn't been picked on. The bams here? A classic case of the hunter becoming the hunted.'

'Oh yeah? And what makes you so wise?'

Dante drops his fag oan the leafy groond then stomps oan it. The forest is so dusty that smoke doesnae rise intae the air.

'I spend a lot of time reading about stoic philosophy and that sort thing,' he says. 'It wouldn't interest you, but it helps me understand people.'

'And how old are you exactly?'

'Thirteen.'

Ah shake ma heid.

'Yer no supposed tae smoke until yer sixteen let alone gie other folk advice,' ah say, turnin tae walk away.

'Fine, but I can tell you this for nothing. I'm better than you. Never forget that.'

Ah wis callt every name under the sun at the wee school, but Dante's words cut me tae the bone.

EMMA GRAE

Oan ma way back tae ma cryin cubical, ah want the concrete o the playgroundd tae open and swallow me whole.

Why did Dante want me tae open up tae him if his aniline intention wis tae cut me doon? Wis ma trauma no guid enough fur him?

Ah've nae idea why, but Dante hus a hold oan me, ah fink, scrapin away at the toilet wall because ah kin. Ah'm self-aware enough tae know why an aw. We huv the same dream, and fae whit ah kin see, he's closer tae makin it a reality than ah'll ever be.

A SCOTS TONGUE

2005

Ah walk doon the narra country path tae the shoaps efter school, huvin jist taken ma frustration at Dante oot oan a netbaw. Ah'm gettin pullt in aw different directions. Ma heart's tellin me that there's sommat in writin in the tongue ah speak, and jist aboot everyhin – and everywan – else is tellin me no tae bother.

Ma life would be easier if ah jist gied up. This dream's makin me miserable. But that's part o the problem. If ah'm somehow able tae make it a reality, it'll make me so happy – and ah dinnae want tae lose oot oan that.

Ah dinnae feel like ah'm meant fur much else. Nane o

the other subjects at school hold a candle tae English – as much as ah wish it wis Scots – and fur aw ah’m barely a teenager, ah’m still at the age where ah’m expected tae make big decisions aboot ma future – even if ah’m no auld enough tae buy a lottery ticket.

‘Are you alright, Elsie?’ Harry asks, walkin up behind me. ‘You don’t seem like yourself. You were awful quiet in R.E. this afternoon.’

‘It’s jist...’ ah trail aff. Poor Harry probably hinks ah’ve replaced him wi Dante, no realisin that the Grim Reaper’s always runnin efter me. ‘Are ye writin stories aboot yer special place in English?’

‘Oh yeah. Do you want to have a quick look at mine? Apparently, I’m a perfect speller. Only used two of the five senses though. Oops.’

He hauns me a story that looks like a dug’s dinner. It takes me aw o five seconds tae realise that it reads like wan an aw. He’s nae Dante.

‘This is great,’ ah lie.

He smiles.

‘Not so great, actually,’ he confesses. ‘It got a five. But c’est la vie. How did your story do?’

‘A three.’

‘Well done, clever clogs.’

Ah force a smile and cannae help but feel like an ungrateful so and so.

‘The lad ah sit next tae gat a wan,’ ah say.

‘Really?’ Harry says. ‘I overheard the teachers saying

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that only a dozen folk in the whole year, bearing in mind that there's a hundred of us, got more than a three.'

Ma eyes licht up. Maybe there's still everyfink tae play fur when it comes tae the toap English group. Ah resist the urge tae hug Harry. Ah cannae look like a weirdo.

'So,' Harry says. 'I'm guessing you'll be entering that creative writing competition?'

Ah fix ma eyes oan the concrete pavement.

'Ah dunno,' ah say. 'Ah've probably got nae chance.'

Dante's richt. That's why his words hurt. He is better than me, at least richt noo. But there wis nae need tae say it aloud.

'You have to be in it to win it,' Harry says. 'That's what my mum always says to me. Give it a go. You never know.'

Ah smile as ah get intae Mammy's wee car. Harry hus nae idea hoo much he's turnt ma day aroond.

'Hoo wis school?' Mammy asks.

'Gat ma English essay back...'

'Oh? How did you get on?'

'Well, if what ma pal jist overheard is correct, actually pretty well.'

Mammy smiles and says she knew the big school would be guid fur me.

Efter treatin masel tae an episode o *Neighbours* as ah ate ma smiley face potatoes and beans, ah go tae ma room and get tae work.

Ah didnae know where tae start, then Great-Granda's

poem pops intae ma heid wance again. Ah kin write a follow-up tae it!

A Bard's-eye View o Scotland in 2005.

Ah shut ma eyes and fink aboot whit Burns would huv tae say aboot the state o the world richt noo. Fur wan, if Great-Granda thocht it wis shockin that lassies cut aboot wi limbs nae langer blushin unseen, he'd get a shock. These days, foundation lips are aw the rage. No that ah'm personally intae it, but that's the style.

Then there's the computers and websites. Awbody's gat a Piczo site these days. The mair flashin graphics, the better.

But there's some fings aboot 2005 that ah'm glad are the way they are. Fur wan, we've gat mobile phones, and ah've nae idea hoo ah wis able tae fall asleep before Snake wis a fink, then there's the telly. There's always sommat tae watch, especially if yer lucky enough tae get a Sky box, or huv a pal who cuts dodgy DVDs.

Mr McDonald said Bonnieburgh Academy wis built in 1967, which seems like mair than jist a coincidence noo as that's the year Great Granda's poem wis published.

Apparently, back then, it wis ruled wi an iron first, which is hard tae imagine wi the stuff folk get away wi these days. Ah felt bad aboot ma ain addition tae the graffiti.

'Burns would huv an Annie Rooney,' ah write, 'If he saw the state o Scotland in 2005.'

Ah smile.

THE TONGUE SHE SPEAKS

*'Lassies wi spider-leg eyelashes, skin-coloured lips,
Their lugs weighed doon by gold Playboy earrings.'*

Before ah've hud a chance tae catch masel, ah've written a poem in Scots. It's a guid wan an aw, ah kin feel it in ma bones.

'Busy wi yer homework?' Mammy says, walkin intae ma room.

'Eh.'

She always tellt me tae tell the truth and shame the Devil.

'There's a competition...' ah trail aff when ah realise she's clocked ma poem.

'But yer no gettin marked oan it?' Mammy asks.

'Naw.'

'Then ah fink ye've done a braw job.'

Ah beam fae ear tae ear then haun hur Great Granda's poem. Hur eyes narrow as she haulds the auld piece o newspaper. Before lang, she's tearin up.

'Mind whit ah tellt ye aboot God no always gien ye whit ye want but gien ye whit ye need?' she asks.

Ah nod.

'That wis whit ye needed.'

Ah'm content as a lie in ma scratcher the nicht, but ah feel awfae uneasy an aw. Sure ma poem micht be braw by Mammy's standards, but ah'm up against Dante. He writes like an auld philosophical man and in the guid Queen's English.

Fur aw ah kin try tae write like Dante, ah'm no gonnae

EMMA GRAE

dae it as guid as him, ah conclude. But sometimes ye huv tae chance yer arm. If ah end up back in the middle group, at least ah'll know ah've been true tae masel.

Ah've gat sommat Dante doesnae huv. A Scots tongue in ma heid. Sure it's no daein me any favours richt noo, but naewan, least o aw a philosophical thirteen-year-old wi a ratty moustache, kin see the future.