

Bill Coppel Young Writers' Award 2011

Winner, 16-18 years category

Red and Blue by Becky Bunting

They were entrancing. The echoes of colour as they flitted through the trees, the flashing lights of red and blue. The people came prowling, drawn like flies to blood, like bowerbirds to the twitch of blue in a dark forest floor.

Mrs Greene stalked with them, distinguished as the gossip, instigator of the mass exodus of the street. She clutched a steaming mug in her hands and wearing a white dressing gown and a taut expectancy that bent her, the red and blue lights flashing demonically across her face. She clutched a fold out chair to her scrawny chest, the exertion of the burden drawing her forward in short, impatient jerks.

Disaster attracted, danger aroused. And the crowd, drunk on the intoxicating offer of both, stuttered through the trees, grunting and snorting through the leaves, fossicking for the juiciest titbit, craning their necks to see.

Police roamed the area, the accusing glare of their lights halting the observers in the shadows outside their reach. One by one they fell silent. They were being watched.

A pole protruded from the ground, the light it cast still clinging enticingly to the air in a dim mockery of sunlight. The car was curled around it, half of its face gnawed away by the pole, the windscreen shattered. And its remaining glass eye staring, scanning the crowd in search of its missing owner.

They had all heard it – the shrieking of the car, the metallic agony as seam was rent from seam – the pain had woken them, drawn them to the dying creature.

Mrs Greene pushed ahead from the pack, eyes narrowed, one hand slightly raised, a finger curled as though she was going to ask a question of the car. She saw.

Each in their way they too saw.

Some gasped, whimpered, mewled piteously. Others, their eyes seemed to fall upon the sight and rest there, as though they had fallen into a deep well and it was in stoic silence they stared in captivation at their whole world.

He was a dark smear in a dark night. He was a black line in the dirt, one a page; a figure to scare children staring to drive. He was a number, a black tally, curled against the ground, cradled by the leaves, a sliver of death in blackness. Where his jeans had ridden up, there was a flicker of red and blue. He was wearing odd socks.

Mrs Greene turned to the silent watchers. She was bewildered, her hands tightening on the chair, her mouth forming words, but dropping them, clumsily, slipping on the sounds.

‘Son...my son...it’s...’

There were no more words. She had none left. The chair dropped, the mug slipped and bounced, splashing the hem of her dress, and the flick of liquid dissolves her.

The sinew, the bones that pointed her face into eager curiosity, the feet that were wet and dappled with leaves, the feet that hurried her through the night to red and blue, everything is fading, losing its colour.

The crowd seethes and broils, inhuman cries echoing as with a sigh and a shiver the message slips through the pack. The crowd has swollen, feasting on the spectacle, and in their horror they cannot move, gorged as they are on the noise, the commotion and the pain.

Mrs Greene is running. She is leaping, a white crest in a wave of blue uniforms, teetering on the edge of the fall.

She is screaming, wildly, arms spurting, rising and falling in her majestic terror of reality. She scrabbles the dirt, breathing the leaves, heaving towards her son. Then she begins to wail, but there is no sound.

And she is on her back, chest heaving. Her hair is in disarray, her limbs splayed as her son's are. She's offering herself as a willing sacrifice for the carrion of eyes to feed on her flesh.

Her gown has ridden up. She is wearing odd socks. Hers are white and yellow. The human in the animal urge that drew her from bed in the darkness to red and blue.

The crowd too had felt the urge. They had hunted a whisper, and caught a scream. They stirred restlessly, some already turning back to their homes. For that night, they were satisfied.