

Robin Jenkins (b. 1912) FLOWERS

At the door of the little school Miss Laing frowned at her seven scholars off to gather flowers.

'Can I trust you?' she asked.

'Yes, miss,' they chorused, except one.

Miss Laing pointed a chubby stern finger at the red-eyed dissenter.

'Now, Margaret, I want *no* more nonsense from you.' She gazed with professional intentness at the small sulky girl with the red ribbon in her hair. 'Do you understand?'

Huffishly, Margaret nodded.

'That's a good girl. Now off with you. Come back at once when I ring the bell.'

As the teacher stood at the door in the heat and brilliance of the sun, watching the children scamper to the gate, a great roar was heard growing louder and louder until in front, low over the sea loch, with the pilots clearly visible, three fighter aeroplanes in camouflage paint flashed into view, flying with exhilarating swiftness and power.

Miss Laing was exhilarated. She waved her hand wildly.

'There they are, children,' she cried. 'There are the true flowers of our country, the most precious, the most beautiful. Wave to them'

The children were startled and even a little alarmed by her excessive white-haired enthusiasm. Aeroplanes were now commonplace on the loch. Canna Rock was used for bombing practice. That was why almost every day they had all *to* promise solemnly, with their hands on their Bibles, never to go down to the shore.

Then the aeroplanes were gone again and their roar faded until a bee buzzing by was louder.

'Remember,' cried Miss Laing. 'Be very careful.'

Margaret halted in the shade of a tall pine and watched the others hurrying towards the fields at Laggan under the larch wood, away from the sea. She sneered as she saw how Roderick McKenzie's long thin lassie-like legs twinkled under his torn kilt; he had his little sister Morag by the hand. They all gabbled to one another in Gaelic, mysterious and hateful to her Lowland ears.

Tears came into her eyes. She looked about her and saw, with aversion, the bell heather streaming like fire along the top of the dyke, the red branches and velvety foliage of the pine overhead, and the tiny school with its queer high roof. She wished to see the shops, houses, tramcars of home. She wished this summer afternoon to be playing in Mathieson Street with her friends Belzie Carruthers and Janet Morrison. She didn't want to be here in the Highlands staying with Aunt Sheena. She didn't want to be safe from bombs.

It was silly anyhow picking wild flowers in the hot sun-shine. Miss Laing would just show off by telling their names, and then she'd either throw them out or else put them into a vase where in a day they'd wither.

Suddenly she jumped up over the dyke and ran across the heather. She didn't crouch nor try to hide. She didn't care if Miss Laing was spying on her. She didn't care either that she was breaking a sacred promise.

The sea was in sight with gold and silver spangles swimming in it like wonderful swans when she abruptly stopped, drawing in her breath in astonishment and awe. On a rock lay neatly coiled a small adder, green with gold and black zig-zag markings; its little head, eyes shut, formed the apex of the coil. It lay sunning itself, camouflaged against the background of greeny-grey lichen stone and gently waving fronds of bracken.

She didn't know what to do. Adders, Miss Laing had warned them, were dangerous and must always be avoided. There was plenty of room for her to creep safely past. But she hesitated, and the snake awoke, conscious of her presence. It raised its head high, glancing quickly round. She saw its tiny eyes and its black tongue spitting in and out.

Suddenly it seemed to represent not only that detestable alien country but her own wickedness in disobeying. Furiously she lifted a stone and threw it. The snake hissed and slithered away. She snatched up a stick of hazel and stepped in pursuit, striking again and again though she felt sick with fear and hatred. A lucky blow crushed its head against a stone and blood trickled from its mouth; but it still hissed and slithered on, escaping into the bracken. She stood gazing at the speck of blood and scraped it with her stick. She was amazed because she hadn't thought a snake would have red blood in it.

She became aware of a yellow flower at her feet. Like the serpent it seemed hateful for some reason she could not understand, and she was about to trample on it when, unaccountably, its beauty, harmlessness, and its loneliness there amidst the tall brackens, moved her instead to stoop, tenderly pluck it, and hold it against her cheek.

Such obscure intensity of feeling was a new experience for her, and she stood gazing in fascination and guilt along the seaweeded rock and white sand. A black and white bird with long red legs and beak rose up with shrill cries. She watched it in fear. Then she looked again at a sandy corner among the rocks. Perhaps she might be able to paddle there. Would there be any unexploded bombs or ferocious crabs or stinging jellyfish?

She came down the bank cautiously and, flower in hand, walked slowly across the beach. The cool salty breeze was pleasant on her face and legs. More birds rose and screamed. She waited till they were gone.

When she crept round the boulder that shut off the sandy nook she stopped, surprised and embarrassed. It had never occurred to her there might be someone there.

Two men were lying stretched out on the sand in the shallow glittering water.

It was a strange place to lie, especially as they seemed to have their clothes on. She watched them moving gently with the waves' push. The water surely must be very warm. Certainly the sun struck it with a great blaze, forcing her to shade her eyes with her hand.

Smiling shyly, uncertain of her welcome, she started to walk over to them.

She paused again suddenly when she was close enough to see they wore airmen's clothing: they had the huge fur-lined boots, though one of them seemed to have only one boot on. They gave no sign at all that they knew she was there. Further along the beach the red-beaked birds screamed again. She walked a step or two nearer, and then rigidly halted. Her scalp tingled and her whole body seemed frozen in the cold bright sea. In her hand the yellow flower was crushed into a green and black mess.

One of the airmen, with fair hair, had no face at all: while the other's face was half gone, and what remained was unrecognizable as human. The one with the single boot had only one leg; the fingers of his right hand, flung out in the shallow water, were gleaming bones. A sweet nasty smell mingled with the tang of the sea.

Screaming she turned and raced back. Frenzied eagerness to shock Miss Laing with the news of her discovery drove her on as much as the horror itself. But as she made to clamber up the bank she became aware of the crushed flower in her hand. Weeping and yelling, she rubbed it madly on the grass.

TALKING POINTS

In the first sequence of this story, the narrative gradually focuses on the figure of Margaret and at the same time sketches in the setting. How does the author use the setting to sharpen the impressions of the girl's reactions and rebellious mood?

What exactly happens in the final sequence? How does the author build up to and present the terrible moment of recognition? (A consideration of film technique may help here.)

What, separately, do the adder, the flower and the airmen contribute to the human experience?

Consider Jenkins's method of leading in to his story (his introduction) and his method of phasing out (his conclusion).

What clue does the title 'Flowers' give us as to the tone or attitude of the author? What is its full significance in human terms?