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Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
2022

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

Emma Wylie

Solite

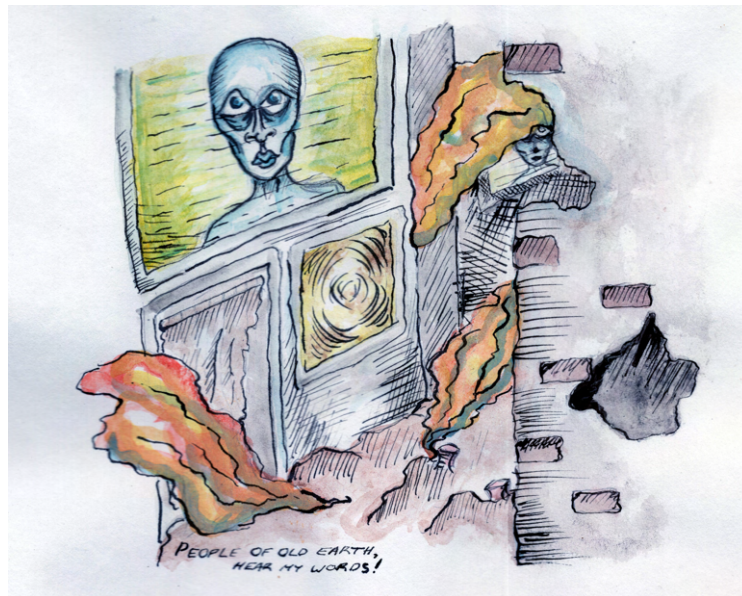
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Solite



People of Old Earth, hear my words! The redeemers are coming! It is time ... Time to uncurl your hunched backs and rejoice in the coming of our future. The Holy Solites are coming, coming to break through our sins of past and lead us towards the New Earth. May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

People of Old Earth, hear ...

Through the noxious smog, the tinny calls of the holoscreens echo into the busy street.

Our bodies pack together, a herd of worn faces set hard against the heavy stench of the waste piles and disposal vendors that line the storefronts. The glass is hazed with the years of contaminants, a thick yellow sludge engrained in its surface.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

Around me the Elders raise their faces to the mildewed sky. Their lashes are crusted and leaking with years of the smog pus that has made its home in our toxic streets, lips chapped and bleeding red against the yellow-green of their blistered faces. To their lips they lift their Suncharms, kissing them reverently as their eyes glaze with a sickly hope. Hope of something beyond the piles and piles of rotting, fuming waste that line the streets and fill our skies.

The citadel of Old Earth is a rancid place. Beaten and damned, they cover it with holoscreens professing the coming of our Solite saviours to distract the decaying population. The lights from the flashing screens fight for purchase against the smog – its haze casting a thick sickly yellow shade throughout the streets.

We shuffle silently through the deep sludge and muck, the line snaking through the leaning skyscrapers – towering over us like wizened skeletons of a distant past, and eventually towards Howards Square. Beside me an Elder hacks violently into the paper in his hands, pulling away as thick green and red dot the crumpled ration sheet.

They are all dying. *We* are all dying. And yet in the neon lights the Elders bask their blistered faces with the promise of a saviour that has not yet come.



In the centre of Howards Square, Ben Howard stands defiant against the smog – copper bubbling teal in the noxious air as his towering form points towards the skies. Around his neck sits the original Suncharm – glowing a dangerous white.

The man himself is insane, a fact buried beneath his success. His invention of the Trash-belt was a fever dream, something the world grasped for as we slowly drowned in our waste ... And for a time it was perfect. Centuries of trash floating delicately across the outer atmosphere were a promise of a greater future.

But, as is the nature of our being, humanity will never truly learn from our mistakes.

The belt has been slowly spiralling back towards Earth since its creation, periodically dropping flaming masses that destroyed cities and nations in fiery, gaseous paths. Howard needed an answer – a promise to the people who had so fervently grasped at the hope of his invention.

His solution – the Solites.

An ancient alien race that appeared to him and *only* him one fateful night as he watched the colourful streaks of his creation bathe the night sky in flashes of red and orange. The Elders claim the Solites came to him in a flash of glorious white, their melodic voices echoing through the ruins of Old Earth with the promise of a new start ... a New Earth.

It was the perfect future, a new hope for the pitiful remains of humanity, and they clung to it with the desperation of a pauper to a blanket.

And yet still we remain ...

Still we shuffle with bowed heads against the burning stench of waste and death.

Still we wait, clinging for refuge as our heads slowly slip beneath the mud and refuse.



The Ration Stop sits stinking in the corner of the square. The beggars cry for new stamps as we shuffle past their mangled masses towards the small window. In the slippery muck I stand on a man's hand, his bones snapping under my boot as he lets out a shuddering sob. His eyes are white, sight long lost as he cups his mangled limb, muttering and rocking at my feet.

Behind us the horizon lights up with a burning orange, a flame catapulting from the skies as the object ignites the sulfuric fumes that drench our citadel. The flames dance across the distant skyscrapers as guttural screams echo in the heavy air. I bow my head as the breaking cries of a child ring out in the street. The line halts, each watching with a tired weariness as the flames splutter before burning out – drenching the distance once more in the thick indigo of nightfall.

As I reach the Ration Stop a whisper builds in the line. Suncharms are lifted once again in a droning chant to hungry lips.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

In the window the ration man stands, gut pressing against the bench as he squeezes through the tight kitchen – if you could call a sink and reheater a kitchen. From a steaming pot he slops the gelatinous mess into my bowl, sweat tracing a stark line through the muck that cements his skin as it drips slowly into the pot.

Shades of brown and grey fill my bowl as my stomach growls desperately.

When I was young, I knew an Elder who spoke of foods with colour – reds, greens, yellows and oranges would fill a dish, grown from the soil and the heat of the sun. He told the stories of his mother, who told the stories of her mother, and we the children would sit enthralled as we perched on the tyres and crates that filled the old warehouse shelter we called home.

No holoscreens tainted those looming walls, only the bare light of a Suncharm to bathe our small faces. His eyes would glisten as he stared into the shimmering centre of the charm, clutching it tightly, voice shaking as he breathed hope from his frail lungs into our hungry hearts.

I found him some months ago, his body blistered and charred beneath a beam of the old warehouse. His glassy blue eyes staring desperately at the charm still clutched in his wizened hand. Through the smoke and haze the wind carried the distant chant.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

... People of Old Earth ...

I grunt as the Elders shuffle dutifully to the midday call, their drooping figures wavering against the smog in the centre of the square as they wait for the usual transmission to flash its way across the beaten holoscreens.

In the dense shadows surrounding the square we younglings stand, faces set hard at the withered forms before us. Right on time Howards Square is filled with the booming calls of Howard himself, face powdered and eyes brightened as he spins his glorious tales.

Stand with me Old Earth! For our time is near!

Hunched backs in the square uncurl towards the beaming lights of the screen, the white light washing out the oozing, inflamed blisters and filling those chapped lips with a feast of unbridled hope. The beggars stand with them, the white-eyed man grasping his Suncharm in his mangled hand as the blood braids itself across the glowing surface.

Choked wheezes echo through the square as shrivelled lungs cry out against the smog. The Elders hack and cough as the transmission continues, flecks of green and red falling from cracked lips in a delicate rain upon the sludge below, glistening in the light of the holoscreen.

A woman slumps forward in the throng, her knees cracking as her face slowly slips into the mud.

Keep strong your dutiful heads my friends, our time of salvation is near. The Solites are near! May we rejoice in exultation with their coming.

Like a cold shock the transmission cuts.

Silence.

Shoulders slump as backs hunch, faces falling to the reality of our surrounds.

A heavy sigh weaves through the streets as we slowly begin to shuffle into formation once again. Boots dragging through the mud, we traipse back through the haunting skyscrapers. Leaving the square, the body of the fallen woman is slowly stomped into the thick sludge, tufts of grey hair the last sign of her presence. My ankle twists, making out her frail chest beneath the mire, cracked ribs crunching under the weight of our plodding line as the grey slips beneath the surface.

She will not be missed ... for in this world she was already lost.

Lost to a blind faith in the hope of a salvation that would never eventuate.

Day after day we younglings stand alongside our wizened Elders, our faces not yet marred by the state of our citadel. We do not speak. To speak is to care. And if the years of watching our Elders slip away with glazed eyes has taught us anything, it is that to care is to die.

Even here in this battered line the Elders mutter their prayers into the thick air, desperation weaving through the bright light of their Suncharms as it shines through the heaviness of nightfall.

Orange lights the sky above us as eyes raise to follow the fiery path. The tail glows a brilliant red as it looms closer, bathing our disfigured forms in its burning light.



It is close ... too close.

The Elders grasp for the Suncharms at their necks, whispered prayers growing in strength as the light looms. The indigo of nightfall is lost to the vibrant firelight above as I struggle to make my way through the throng of bodies.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

A distant roar thrums through my feet as I look frantically for shelter. Another youngling crashes into me, her eyes wide with unbridled fear as we each search for safety.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

The Elders in the line do not stray from their path. Their prayers rising to a chant as they cry over the thundering meteor.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

Finally, I slip into the darkness of a skyscraper, flickering orange dancing through the missing windows and cracks. A heat builds, filling the air with its sulphuric stench.

The line continues, Elders stretching into the distance as they begin to fill the gaps left by our fleeing figures.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

As the meteor fills the sky above them, I do not cry out. They would not hear me. Their faces are lifted in rapture towards the beaming form. Orange turns to white as their blistered faces begin to peel beneath the inferno.

A man lifts his arms to the sky, chest heaving with the sobs of a sinner calling for penance.

They do not scream. Their chant is read from lips alone as a terrible roaring fills my ears.

May we rejoice with exultation in their coming.

As the fire overcomes their frail bodies and their souls are stolen in the noxious air, the Elders bask one final time in the glowing light.

With eyes open they leave us, peaceful beneath the writhing inferno that whips into the dilapidated streets.

Their Solite saviours that they so revered do not appear.

They do not lower from the heavens to free us from this rancid reality.

Instead in the heat of humanity's failures, the Elders lay charred and mutilated – minds so lost to a desperate hope, that as their backs bent and eyes misted, they stood complacent. Complacent as the Old Earth slipped deeper and deeper, choking and crying beneath the weight of humanity's misgivings.

Crouched within the skeletons of the past we younglings watch the final Suncharm slip from a charred hand. The glowing light dying as it slips beneath the surface.