



# Global Short Story Competition February 2013

Winner : P J Vanston  
The Prague Violin

Highly Commended : Ciaran O'Riain  
The Birds

# The Prague Violin

P J Vanston

From his apartment window, Petr watches the little feather-light snowflakes floating on the air, dancing up and down, and round and round, fluttering this way and that like tiny butterflies of ice, before swirling with a final flutter and settling to stillness on the dark cobbles below. It is 1964 and Petr is fourteen years old.

How he loves the snow! Some people think that snow is just snow, but they are wrong. There are so many different types of snow, from the dry frosty dust which is usual in Prague during winter, to the heavy wet flakes which are perfect for building snowmen but which, to the annoyance of children, would only fall on those rare winter days when the Bohemian weather was not cold enough to freeze lakes.

Each snowfall is different, as is each individual snowflake. Always, when Petr sees the snow falling, he thinks of music – and then identifies each style of snowfall and assigns a composer to each type.

That evening, the snow is definitely Mozart – playful, clever and young, and a joy to behold. Sometimes, on other days, it is Tchaikovsky or Beethoven, exquisitely beautiful but brooding and melancholy; sometimes, it is Puccini or Verdi; occasionally, especially when the air is freezing cold, Debussy, Grieg or Mahler, perhaps, or Smetana or Dvořák; and, from time to time, on really dark, dismal and best-forgotten days, it is Wagner, doom-laden and frightening.



But the snow is always music to Petr Svoboda. It is the only way he can really see it, make sense of it, understand it – or anything else in the world, for that matter. He is just like his father. Without music, he would have been as trapped as a broken bird in its cage; without the movement of melody through his veins, his heart would have stopped pumping, blackened and shrivelled to nothing, and his life would have been a living death, cold and colourless as a stillborn child.

‘Petr! Petr! Come quick!’

It is father, home from rehearsal. He is holding a letter and smiling a smile wide as the Vltava itself.

‘Come on, now, boy,’ says the Orchestra Secretary, a beady-eyed man with a face like a rat whom Petr knows his father loathes, ‘Play!’

He is standing in front of the committee, a row of old stone-faced men, all of whom seemed to be smoking. In the centre sits the Minister of Culture, an enormous man with huge hairy caterpillar eyebrows, and next to him the Orchestra Secretary, twitching.

Petr lifts his bow to the violin at his neck, and begins to play.



Soon, even the greyest member of the panel has colour blushing in his ashen cheeks, as the warmth of the music fills the smoky air like sunbeams. For there in front of them, a skinny fourteen year old boy, small for his age, with a thick mop of chocolate-coloured hair, and a face as smooth as an egg, who doesn't look as though he will be able to lift a violin, let alone play it, is producing the most beautiful sound they have ever heard.

They know too, like Petr's father, that this is not solely because of the special instrument that is being played, even if it is the Prague Violin. This instrument, over two hundred years old, and talked of in hushed tones by all who know of its existence, has a tone so rich and pure it is said to have been the very last violin its master-maker ever made – according to legend, he believed he had reached perfection, so never made another. Very few are permitted to play it. Only special talents; only prodigies like Petr.

When his small hands ease the bow over the strings, the violin almost seems to be playing itself – or, perhaps, it is the instrument that is playing Petr, rather than the other way round. He has, he knows, been born to play this instrument. It is, quite simply, perfect.

The boy finishes playing. Silence. Petr is worried that they may not have liked his recital and looks to his father, concerned. But then the members of the committee applaud in the Russian manner, and at least one of them seems to be rubbing his eyes, no doubt because of all the tobacco smoke.



There are tears of joy and pride swimming in his father's eyes that day too.

\*

It is 1968. Petr Svoboda is eighteen years old and the most famous musician in Czechoslovakia, admired and feted all over the Eastern Bloc.

He now shares an apartment with his father in Prague Castle, but Petr is not there when the Russian tanks roll in. After rehearsal, he has gone to join his friends in the Old Town, against the Orchestra Secretary's express instructions. There is a girl there that Petr likes – loves, even. There are rumbles of thunder and they look to the sky: they think there is a storm coming. There is.

No-one realises that the tanks have come until it is too late. There is such confusion that they get separated. Petr never sees Katarina again. He does not attend her funeral.

Before it all happened, things seemed to be changing. It was a time when the springtime of Dubček was forging a better future and the air hummed with new possibility; when the old, cold cobbles of Prague had seemed to come alive and give a spring to the step of her warm, worn people; when Petr's youth was almost bursting though his skin and he was primed to be a part of building a new future in this, his city.

That was a time before the Russians came, with their tanks and their orders and their disgusting tea.

And Petr and his father knew then that the future was finished and they would never leave.



Now, it is 1981. Petr is thirty, but looks older. Everybody did, in those days.

But Petr is lucky – he knows that. The way he lives, the success he has enjoyed. They leave him alone to play his music, and so that is what he does. This is what his father advised him to do: he knew that as long as Petr had his music, he would be able to cope with anything. His father is buried with his mother now. Petr visits the grave every week.

And then the Orchestra Secretary tells Petr that he has to play for the man who crushed The Prague Spring – the man who killed Katarina.

In April 1981, Brezhnev is due to visit Prague for several days to attend a conference of Communist party leaders, and to open the newly built concrete-clad Palace of Culture where all Czechoslovak party conferences will now be held. A concert is, naturally, being organised especially in his honour. Petr is expected to perform.

‘You cannot say “no” – it has been decided!’

‘No,’ says Petr, again.

The rat-faced Orchestra Secretary is snarling with rage. He knows how badly it will reflect on him if his star performer does not perform.

Petr refuses, many times, but then agrees on the condition that he is allowed to take The Prague Violin home. He says he needs to practise more and that this is the only way he will be able to perform to the highest standards expected for a concert honouring such a great man.



'You know as I do that the Prague Violin must be kept here, securely, at all times,' the Orchestra Secretary says.

But Petr is adamant: if he cannot take the violin home, then he will refuse to play. Reluctantly, the Orchestra Secretary agrees.

The next day, after spending the day watching the snow fall on Prague from his apartment – thick, wet snow falling like flakes of diseased skin from the yellowing flesh of the sky – and after drinking glass after glass of vodka, Petr grabs the violin from its case, opens the dining room window, and flings the instrument out into the winter air. It turns and twists, an acrobat in the air, the snowflakes seeming to make way in awe at its trajectory, before smashing and splintering like broken bones on the cobbles below. Today, Petr has decided, the snow is definitely Wagner snow.

'What have you done?' screams the Orchestra Secretary, his hands clenched like claws as he picks at the wreckage on the table before him.

Petr does not answer. He is drunk, and just stares out at the city through the window, smiling. His father loved the view of Prague from here: over the red-roofed mosaic of its streets and houses with the river snaking through its middle, to the small grey tower blocks in the distance.



Of course, Brezhnev didn't notice anything wrong at the concert. But then, to his cloth ears all violins sounded the same, and he probably wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a beautiful piece of music and a cat farting through its ears, and much else besides. Factory production lines made his kind of music. And tanks, of course.

The Orchestra Secretary managed to have the Prague Violin swiftly repaired before the concert, but it was never the same again. And nor was Petr. After that concert – the worst he had ever played – he never played another. They couldn't make him, after all.

It is 1989, and Petr is almost forty. He has been working in the boiler room for eight years.

It is an easy job down there, stoking the fire, waiting for the end of the day and a drink, always alone. He has not played a violin since that concert for Brezhnev. Sometimes he sees Katarina's face in the flames; usually, he sees his father's.

Then he sees what is happening on the television, black and white images of Wenceslas Square, where he and Katarina used to meet 'under the horse'.

They will send in the tanks, he knows – the Russians will never allow this. But they do, and there are no tanks. And, almost before anyone realises, Czechoslovakia is free.





It is 2012 and Petr is over sixty, as old as bones.

He is there now every day, near Charles Bridge, playing his violin for the tourists, counting the crowns as he used to crochets and quavers, weighing the coins in his bony hands and thinking of beer.

After the revolution – the second, for Petr – he started playing music again. He even gave concerts, after being invited to by the Orchestra Secretary, who was still the Orchestra Secretary, as loyal to his new masters as he was to his old, especially as his salary had increased substantially.

Petr could see the hope and possibility in the young faces all around him – faces just like his used to be, before it became the colour of dust. He even saw one that looked so like hers, but of course it was not her. How could it be? She was as forgotten as an old dream.

But it was not the same as the last, this revolution, and soon it became all about money and profit as the big foreign companies rolled in. It was not all about love, or even freedom. Not really.

And then, the new system became, in some ways, as oppressive as the one it replaced. Everything had changed, even the country's name – but everything was really just the same. And Petr could not stop drinking, and didn't want to, so the concerts ended.



These days, his pension is not enough, not with the prices – not since 2008 when the world went mad. So he plays his violin for the tourists, who wonder who he used to be.

Sometimes, Petr catches the tram to Prague Castle, where he looks out over the red-roofed mosaic of the city's streets and houses, with the river snaking through its middle, to the small grey tower blocks in the distance. He loves to watch Prague in the snow.



# Highly commended

## The Birds

### Ciaran O’Riain

Mr Rose, my English teacher, died just before Christmas, the year I turned fourteen.

On the morning the news broke, we were herded into the school chapel. I sat, frozen and numb, as my classmates whispered excitedly. Father O’Brien appeared and silenced us, then spoke down in grave tones about what had happened, his old grey head bobbing like a broken toy. ‘A terrible thing,’ he growled, ‘a great loss.’ He sounded embarrassed, angry. Behind him, the huge brass crucifix glowed dully, Christ’s head slumped, defeated. Mass began and the familiar call and response soothed and deadened the boys, and there was no more excited whispering. Mr Rose’s son Francis – everyone called him Pansy – was in our year, so we said prayers for him.

Soon the rumours started, whispered around school as though the word was sacred or sacrilegious. Suicide. At home, my mother pursed her lips and said, ‘God forgive him.’ She stabbed a sign of the cross into the air in front of her and hushed me when I mentioned Mr Rose. We were shepherded into the school chapel again on the last day before the Christmas holiday and this time Father O’Brien was surer of



himself. 'A terrible sin,' he said, licking his wet old lips, 'the worst. The sin of despair.' He never mentioned Mr Rose, but we knew. We chanted a few prayers for Francis, still absent. And I went off home for Christmas, certain that Mr Rose, that clever, bright-eyed man, forever polishing his spectacles, always searching for just the right word, was the worst sinner I had ever known.

We returned to school two weeks later. Stepping from the bus and jamming my hands into my pockets, I wandered over to a group flocked like sheep in a circle. I joined the perimeter with a mumbled, 'Alright?' There was no answer. Everyone looked older, taller after the break. We were fourteen, that age when bodies are hardening with muscle, darkening with hair, and we had little to say, so we stood there, darker and harder than before.

At the centre of the group, taller than the others, was Shay McBride. We stood around him, hunched like questionmarks, our breath puffing up like clouds. 'Fucking freezing,' Shay said, just as little Mr Bell, the Maths teacher, walked past. A faint thrill went through us as we waited to see how the teacher would respond. Shay stared at the man, then smirked as he dropped his head a little and walked on. 'Freeze your balls off,' Shay said, louder, and he laughed and then the boys laughed too.

Shay spat on the ground and dragged the toe of his heavy shoe through the puddle. 'Pansy's back,' he said, nodding over to where another bus had pulled up.



Francis Rose— I can't think of him as 'Pansy' now — was walking towards the chapel. He went to the short mass every morning — more, perhaps, to escape the other boys than from religious devotion. He moved quickly, clumsily, from bus to chapel to classroom, avoiding the open spaces of the playground where he could be snared and trapped. He was even taller than Shay, but awkwardly thin and clumsy, as fragile and ridiculous as a flamingo, a twisted apology for himself. He had a high shining forehead, a large beak of a nose and his father's bright birds' eyes, forever flickering, searching for threats.

It was part of the boys' morning routine to intercept him. 'Pansy,' it would always start, then 'fruit', 'poof', 'gayboy.' After what had happened, though, things were different, and I watched them move nervously like spooked animals as their little group pulled closer together. And then I was shoved aside as Shay moved out of the circle. 'Alright Pansy?' he shouted, loud enough to get the attention of the clusters of boys standing around. All the heads in the courtyard turned at once to watch. The confusing inaction was over and the boys started giggling, wolf-whistling at Francis, moving towards him, Shay at their head. 'Pansy!' he bellowed again. 'You're back!' From the back, I watched Francis, expecting him to break into his silly stork's run, attempting to get up the steps and into the chapel as he usually did. But he kept walking, head down, arms swinging. Shay's footballer's eye for space took him into Francis' path and he stood in front of him, stopping him with a hand on his chest. 'Pansy,' he said again, 'we missed you.'



The rest of us caught up with them and formed a circle, muttering, whistling, waiting. Shay put his arm around Francis' shoulder. 'That was bad about your da killing himself,' he said, and there was a gasp, an electric thrill shared as the thought wired itself through our animal hive of a mind – to say it to him, just like that! That's mad! Francis looked up then, and I still remember what he looked like – he was Pansy, still, tall and ridiculous; but he too was harder and darker and while the rest of his foolish bird-like body wavered and swayed in front of Shay, those blue eyes, usually wild and active, his father's eyes, were steady and clear.

'You! Come here!' We turned to see Mr Bell striding towards us, his face twisted with fury. He pushed through us and headed straight for Shay. Shay backed away, smiling, hands up. 'We were just messing...' he started, but Mr Bell planted his hands on Shay's thick chest and shoved him, sending him sprawling on the wet ground. 'You... cretin, McBride,' he said, and we all stepped back. 'This stops now or so help me I'll break your neck myself, you little shit.' Shay was still on the ground, his mouth open. Mr Bell turned to the rest of us. 'Is this what you've learned here? I'm ashamed of you. Your parents should be ashamed of ever having you.' Other boys were staring over at us, watching Shay on the ground. Mr Bell shook his head. 'Get out of here,' he said, including all of us in a sweep of his hand, and he sounded more sad than angry. 'Get away from me.' I looked up to see where Francis was, but he had escaped into the chapel.



We dispersed a little way, muttering at the injustice, but soon congregated again around Shay. 'Pansy's fucking dead,' he said. 'I'm going to get him at breaktime.' We nodded, aware that Francis was somehow responsible for his own troubles; I nodded too, a little later than the others.

Such challenges, of course, were a normal part of the physical economy of a boy's school; but I felt sick during the morning lessons. Francis was in my History class and as the teacher droned about 1916 and English aggression in Ireland, I stole glances at him. His head was bowed. He nodded as the teacher spoke, but opened no books and answered no questions. I could see his eyes, his father's eyes; too bright and clear, focused on something far away, further away than breaktime, or Shay, or any of us.

I looked away from him, out of the window. Two birds, robins, were flapping around outside, their red breasts making targets of them. I watched them until the lesson ended, wondering how they managed to survive the cold, how they managed to live at all.

Breaktime came and we congregated again. The lads were nervous and jumpy until Shay appeared. 'Where's he at?' he asked. Nobody answered – Francis was where he always was, in the chapel. We started to move, others flocking to us as though we were leading a pilgrimage.



We stopped at the chapel doors but Shay went straight in. Again, that buzz through our group mind; A fight in the chapel? That's mad! As Shay strode up towards the altar, the rest of us straggled in, some stopping to bless themselves with holy water. At the end of the aisle, the huge crucifix shone in the gloom.

Francis was in the front pew, his head down. Shay strode straight up the aisle towards him. 'Pansy!' he shouted, and the sound echoed around the walls. The lads had stopped, excited and terrified by what was happening, huddling closer together. Francis did not turn, even when Shay walked behind him and hit him hard on the head. 'Get up,' he shouted, grabbing Francis' blazer and hauling him out of the pew. Francis looked up, and there were tears on his face. 'Crying already!' someone whispered and there was laughter, but soon we were silent again.

Shay had Francis on his feet. Francis was simply staring at him, tears streaking his face. 'What are you crying about?' Shay asked, and he pushed Francis hard on the shoulder. 'Scared?' Another push.. 'You should have thought of that before getting me in trouble.' Francis was against the pew now, and he couldn't be pushed any further. He was staring at Shay, his eyes clear, empty. I looked away and tried to keep my eyes on Christ, dead on his cross.





Shay slapped him, open handed, like a girl. The crack echoed around the chapel and some of the boys flinched. Francis' head flew to the side, and when he looked back there was blood trickling down his face. 'Crying still?' Shay slapped again, harder. 'Crying about your da?' Another slap. 'Your poor dead da?' The slap this time was harder again, louder, and more of the lads were flinching as the blows landed.

'Come on Shay,' someone said. 'Leave him be.' Shay looked up angrily at that, and then Francis jumped. He leapt into Shay's chest and landed on top of him, the two of them spread in front of the altar. Shay roared and started to raise his hand, too late as Francis clasped both his hands and brought his two fists down right in the middle of Shay's face. We heard the crack of Shay's nose breaking at the back of the chapel. Some of the lads started to run up to the altar, but Francis was on his feet and taking a step back. Before anyone could reach him, he swung his foot hard into the side of Shay's head. There was no crack this time – just a dull thud, then silence. Blood trickled from Shay's ear across his destroyed nose as he lay there, and one of his eyes looked strange, almost out of its socket. But Francis was worse, tears and blood smeared on his face like warpaint, his eyes wet but still and unblinking. I turned and ran, then, away from the chapel.



I have sometimes thought of searching for Francis Rose; I know people use the internet to track old acquaintances down. I have no desire to speak to him, or anyone, really, but I am curious like anyone else. I never do, though, for I suspect that like his father he is no longer to be found. There is some strange comfort in that.

I never saw either of them again. I heard later that Shay had to go to a special school afterwards, that he couldn't speak properly or look after himself afterwards. I don't know where Francis was sent or taken. I went to class, as normal, and I stared out of the window. Maybe it was the same day, maybe weeks later; it is all the same now. The two robins were playing still, and halfway through the lesson one of them flew into the window. The lesson stopped and we all looked to where the bird, dazed, was circling around and preparing to try to penetrate the glass again. It flew harder this time, thudding into the pane with a force hard enough to break its own neck. As boys around me laughed at the sight of this foolish creature destroyed by something it couldn't see or understand, I felt tears burn in me.





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