

George Watt Prize, 2017

Pre-Collegiate Award Submission

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### **Shattered: The Bombing of Guernica**

Going into the museum had been my idea, and a bad one, at that. The grandkids had groaned and scuffed their shoes against the cement pavement when I initially suggested going for a visit, but with my husband Nick's promise of ice cream and a chance to beat the blazing Madrid heat for a few hours, they had grudgingly obliged, and I'd taken a moment to thank him with my eyes. The corners of his wrinkled in response-- he knew there was no resisting the pull I often felt when it came to coming across any opportunity to reach back into my past, and right then, with my grandchildren's mother relaxing in her hotel room and the afternoon open to explore the bustling streets of the city so close to where I grew up, my chance had practically seized my frail hand and dragged me up the stairs of the Reina Sofia Museum.

Now, a mural-sized portrait of chaos bombards my vision and mind. A seemingly haphazard jumble of black and white shapes and images at first glance, the painting confuses my grandchildren, but I study it with knowing eyes.

"What is it?" Noah whispers to his grandpa as my hazel eyes cling to an image of a startled white bull in the corner, then drag themselves to the distorted form of the woman weeping over her lifeless child beneath it. My granddaughter, Emily, slips her hand into mine.

"Guernica," Nick replies. "It was a beautiful city where your grandma grew up."

"It doesn't look very beautiful," Noah says, frowning at a depiction of an agonized figure with outstretched hands thrown up towards the other corner of the painting.

"It was destroyed a long time ago by some very bad people. Do you remember when I told you about the Spanish Civil War? Some of it happened right here, in Madrid."

I turn away from the painting, mind full, eyes empty. Emily squeezes my trembling hand. "Grandma?" she asks, but it's not her voice. It's mine. I shake my head, trying to return to the white room, but the walls are blinding.

"Amaia..." Nick touches my shoulder. No, not Nick. It's my mother's touch. The room blurs and I wet my lips, attempting to reassert my presence by saying his name, but my voice is weak. When I look back at the painting a cry rising in my throat, as I find the abstract masterpiece has begun to crumble. The gray turns to billowing smoke, the black to ashes that swirl around my feet, and the white to a harsh light growing ever brighter until it floods out the rest of my senses. I am drowning in my own muffled scream. *Guernica*. The town where I grew up.

The town I had watched disappear.

\* \* \* \*

Monday is a market day.

I can almost see it through my bedroom window as my mother helps me into a puffy white dress. Tables and carts and tents of every color fill the center of the town. Streets which only yesterday seemed so vacant and cold are now brimming with noise. Shouts. Lively conversation. Laughter. I bounce on my toes, longing to join the excitement. Though we've been informed the war continues to rage only thirty kilometers away, my heart leaps with the joyous fact that it has stopped no one from coming to Guernica. I live for market days, when our lives are normal. On days we can forget there is a war.

My mother does not share my excitement, and she shows it. She dresses in white as well-- in a skirt tipped with patterned lace-- but her face is shadowed; dark with worry. She wraps a thin black shawl around her shoulders and takes my hand, leading me out of my room while calling for my grandmother. I peer into her room as we pass, finding my parent's bed is perfectly made on only one side-- my father's side. His boots rest against the opposite wall, undirtied and patiently shining like those of so many other men's since the beginning of the war. Mother used to wake me up practically every night from inside that room, screaming his name after ripping herself from a nightmare. She hates market day, pretending everything is as it was. Because, without him, nothing is normal for her. Acting like it is would be like acting as though he were already gone.

Grandma joins us at the door and we step outside.

The bright afternoon is bursting with color and sound, and immediately my senses are overwhelmed on the short walk to the center of town. I let myself soak in the familiarity of it all when we arrive, clinging to my mother's hand while she leads me past a table covered in baskets of tomatoes, a knot of children my age playing a skipping game in the street, and a tent filled with brightly dyed blankets and cloth. I brush my hand across the fabric of one as we pass, watching it ripple under my touch. People have arrived from everywhere in Basque Country, like they have every Monday for years, and the crowd only grows around me as my mother and grandmother delve deeper into the market. The air is a mixture of shouts and patches of dust from the oxen-drawn carts thundering into the square. Vendors shout their goods: *Fish for sale. Pottery. Cheese.* My mother stays quiet and emotionless, a stiff, bitter contrast against the vibrant watercolor swirl of the market that surrounds us, pulling me along with her when I become distracted by rows of beads or a particularly wonderful smell. She doesn't stop until we reach a tent where a young man dressed in loose white clothing sits with a guitar in his lap, passionately singing a folk song I don't yet know the name of, though she seems to recognize it. She pauses, lifts my hand and twirls me around. I giggle as she pulls me into a dance in front of the man. My dress swirls around my ankles, fluttering like the wings of a bird. Perhaps a dove, like my father used to call me. I remember him lifting me above his head the day he left as he reassured my mother. *"No harm will ever come to you or I as long as my little dove stays here, safe and sound, watching over us."*

My mother smiles and drops my hands as the guitarist finishes his song. My grandmother claps and comes towards us, while above our heads and the bustle of the market, the church bell rings. My mother looks up at it, laughing. "It's far past noon..." she says, incredulous, as the bell was normally tolled then. Instead, the hands of the clock beneath the bell pinpoint the time to be half past four. Mild, amused confusion sweeps through the crowd and I press myself against my mother's leg as a few young men push past us. When she politely asks them if they know what is happening, they ignore her and run into a nearby building. She and my grandmother look at each other, fear creeping into their eyes as the formerly swelling sounds of the market drops to an eerie, confused murmur. Rumors swiftly make their way into the ears of the people around us before someone's voice pierces the air along with a rumbling growl growing from the south, too violent and droning to be an ox-cart or carriage.

*“Airplane! Airplane!”*

*“Fascistas,”* my grandmother cries, her voice hoarse. My mother lifts me into her arms and takes my grandmother’s hand as the market explodes into chaos. Vendors rip down their tents, vegetables and other goods overturned and rolling into the street beneath our feet. I cling to my mother, burying my head in her hair while a blurry, dark shape in the distance slowly takes form. A German airplane. Other people spot it, too, and point wildly. Screams rise from all around us, and yet the plane does not stop. It does not turn around to go back to the war that I thought was so far away from us. Instead it casts its deadly shadow over the town I love so dearly, dropping a dark object directly onto a store across the street, behind the man with the guitar.

*“Mama...”*

The store explodes, pieces of it flying in every direction. My mother is thrown to the ground with me in her arms. Brick disintegrates, windows shatter and walls cave in, all while becoming rapidly engulfed in a plume of thick, black smoke. Wails fill the air and the church bells continue to ring tirelessly as bombs are dropped onto stores, fields, and homes, sending up dust and dirt in enormous clouds that reach for us. Grandmother shouts and my mother struggles to her feet, but I can’t hear what either of them were saying. Voices fly up around me as people race to find shelter, some shouting for loved ones while others stagger in shock, asking questions of no one in particular. For a moment I imagine no one can hear them but me.

*“What’s happening?”*

*“Why are they here?”*

*“Are there more?”*

*“Go to the fields!”*

*“Go to the dugouts!”*

*“The cellar,”* Grandmother insists, pressing her face to my mother’s, searching her hazel eyes.

*“We can’t stay.”* Mother’s voice cracks, but she still shakes her head vigorously, desperately. Her fingers clutch my shoulder so tightly it hurts, but I don’t dare make a sound. She stumbles towards a man with a cart loaded with corn toppling out the back, reaching out her hand to make him notice her.

*“Please, sir, take us with you! My daughter, mother and I have nowhere to go!”*

Her plea attracts attention. Suddenly more people begin to flock the outsiders and vendors with carts, begging them to grant their families an escape from the further destruction certain to come.

*“Another plane is coming!”* someone shrieks behind us. I focus on the sound of my breathing, pretending not to hear the man crack his whip and charge off on his cart, leaving both us and the screaming crowd behind.

“They’ll bomb the bridges out of town next, anyway!” a man next to us cries hysterically. As he does, the second German airplane falls over us like a shadow. Mother covers the back of my head with her hand and runs for cover by the steps of the church. Three bombs hit the center of the square, sending debris from what remains of the market out in all directions. The cries of the man behind us abruptly cease. Three more bombs are dropped as the plane circles us. I scream.

“Amaia, Amaia, *Amaia*,” my mother repeats, rocking me in her shaking arms as tears streak down her dirty cheeks. “God help us...”

I peer over her shoulder and see nothing. Acrid smoke mixes with an endless cloud of dust. I don’t see any people, but I hear them screaming. Coughing. Sobbing.

“Grandma?” I ask the empty air, and Mother gasps. She stands up, screaming, but her voice is lost. She staggers through the rubble, holding her torn black shawl to her face. Over crumbled buildings. Bodies. Only minutes ago Guernica was alive. Now it is a tomb.

Shouts fill the air and the ground begins to shake again. I clutch my mother’s dress and watch as dozens of men, women, and children charge past us from where they had taken refuge in pre-prepared dugouts on the outskirts of the town.

“Go to the fields!” one woman shouts at us. “They’ll come back! You must leave!”

But Mother doesn’t go with them. Instead, she walks. She walks and does not stop. Not to rest, not to comfort me while I cry on her shoulder, not until she reaches the gates of our home, where she finally sets me down. When she rises again, she is pale, her cries for Grandmother driven to a silence more terrible than the desperate shrieking of her broken voice. Her shoulders sag beneath the the torn sleeves of her once-white dress, now smeared with dirt. When she looks at me, her eyes are glassy, having seen more than she can bear. The gate to our small yard is toppled, broken and smoking, but she pushes past it anyway with a bloody hand and stumbles through the doorway of what remains of our house, calling for my grandmother. I quietly admire the majority of it that still stands for a few moments before it collapses upon both of them. I call for them, struggle on shaking legs towards the gates, but when the dust settles, they do not come out.

I lay alone in the dirt while the city burns around me.

More planes come, but they do not bring bombs. They swoop low over the town, heading towards the fields, one after the other. I hear the rattle of their machine guns and know the people I had seen run past my mother and I before are gone.

When the planes can no longer be heard, I force myself to stand. To walk, as my mother had, and to not stop. I stumble through the center of the town, over bodies, over buildings. More planes come, more bombs fall, but now they are behind me. I walk towards the only building I can find still standing. An oak tree grows before it, its leaves coated in dust. I reach out and touch its trunk, the *Gernikako Arbola*, and fall to my knees.

The city is destroyed. It is not until the next morning that a small Basque family who had chosen not to leave the dugouts finds me and takes me out of Guernica, away from the unscathed oak tree, to Bilbao, where many other civilians fled. One of the daughters rubs my shoulder as I sit on the edge of

their farmcart, watching the city I loved burn, and for a moment I pretend it is my mother's touch. But when I turn to look, it isn't her face.

It's Nick's, full of concern. He grips my shoulders gently, saying my name in the middle of a white room unmarked by a single speck of dust. Only an oil painting projecting all that remains of the horrors I had seen in blocks of black, gray, and white. Images forever confined and suffering within the borders of their enormous, yet somehow infinitesimal canvas. I weep as he holds me, but his arms cannot stop my hands from reaching for the painting that contains so much of me, nor keep my ach to tear it down and release the stories it traps inside at bay. Only the repetition of my name, spoken in a voice as soft as my mother's, keeps me from collapsing in a heap at his feet.

*"Amaia."*

**END**