



'An Angel That Burns'

By Siddhi Deshmukh, Senior Winner from India

*Tell me a story, a small voice whispered,
Of a tragedy that shall put mine to shame.
The gaping maw of the afterlife waited,
But the cold, solemn spirit of the little girl,
Had no reason to love the light.
She and Death sat in a small wicker boat,
Yours a soul beyond passing, said Death,
If a story is what you wish, than I shall furnish.*

From the inception of time and the universe,
The primordial being had many stories to tell
Stories to darken the skies and raise restless spirits of the dead,
And to shroud the sunless world of his realm,
In gossamer sunlight and warm flowers of spring.
But never had he uttered a word for a child's solace,
So be it, he thought, for this mortal coil was drawn short,
And so he began.

“Joan of Arc. Jeanne de Arc.
A saint of seventeen, pawn to God's will.
Her name clung to everything good and sweet,
an incoherent, irreversible prayer.
But she was a violent creature made true with time.
Hers is the anger which rivals that of Cain,
almost biblical, too bloody to tame.
*If only God could speak to me now, she thinks, ready to burn.
And France, if there more were ordinary things to blame.”*

“No man shall be a master of me, lest God himself were to arrive on Earth.”
She had declared in a voice made of steel,
her armor shining, a bloodied banner clutched tightly in her fingers.
“Go boldly,” she had urged her soldiers, “and have no mercy.”
Joan, maiden of France, a saint,
though nothing felt divine about the fear that coursed through her veins.
“C'est pour cela que je fus nais.” She had whispered to herself.
“Je n'ai pas peur.”
I was born for this. I am not afraid.”



*Joan, the girl whispered in awe,
Who doesn't know her tale?
She was a hero, a saint!
Why are you telling me this?
Patience child, said Death in a voice of silk,
You will know in true time.*

“And so she swept the battlefield with her sword,
Her words which she had uttered hollowly echoed in her mind,
carefully made true with every cruel stroke of her sword,
And with every word she shouted to her soldiers.
Orléans was free!
The voice of God became a faint whisper,
*There is no rest for the Maid of Orléans, He said,
secure me what I had asked for.*
Urging her forward, onward and forever on.”

“Until, Compiègne; there she was captured.
Her sword splintered, her armor stripped,
She could no longer feel God,
she could no longer feel His maddening divinity,
Had God forsaken her?
In the dreary hours of hours of the fallen night,
When the cold winds blew atop the tower.
Hope was not lost in her mind,
Escape was nigh, but not as she had hoped.”

*She flung herself off the tower, the girl said quickly,
But they caught her, and put her to death.
How did she die? Death asked,
Burning, the girl answered, in a low voice,
Do you know her last words? Death said,
a wicked shape to his smile, I was there to hear them.*

“To hold the cross high, to her eyes,
She had said, as the flames licked the wood,
I wish to look to my salvation, as I die.
A saintly woman, so she was called,
All her answers were futile echoes,
Did she dream her halos, her holiness?
*Foe only to the great blood guilty ones, a great man had said,
The Masters and Murderers of Mankind.*”



And thus the story ended,
with a silence too void for speech,
But not for thought.
Ghouls howled softly in the forever night of Death's realm,
For in death, all things screamed in silence,
The waters of the river gently lapped against the wicker boat,
And the girl's eyes were veiled with confusion,
At last Death spoke, a heaviness in his voice.
The calm, traitorous grief that betrayed his eyes.

*Child, he said, hatred makes corpses of humanity,
I've carried infants into the light, no more than my arm,
In the face of Death, tragedy, nothing matters,
Certainly not age.
We take and take, over and over.
We are bound by such strange grief that carries us forward,
We inherit this sadness that is mistaken as rage,
Your kind were borne of Joan's enduring brethren.
Does that answer your question?*

*But Joan was a hero, she said, blinking,
A child yet, continued Death,
God does not seek a poor vessel, or a weak one.
Hence Joan was chosen amongst thousands,
To have a heart that loves, a heart of steel,
Untethered by its age,
Is what created the woman that you know.*
And so Death drew a breath and asked her the last question.
The winds whispered in fervent anticipation.

"Are you ready?"