

0860/405

NATIONAL
QUALIFICATIONS
2010

THURSDAY, 29 APRIL
2.30 PM – 3.20 PM

ENGLISH
STANDARD GRADE
Credit Level
Reading
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.



IN THE SILENCE

- 1 The stooks¹ of corn glimmered in the moonlight and boys' voices could be heard as they played hide and seek among them. How calm the night was, how stubbly the field! Iain crouched behind one of the stooks listening, watching for deepening shadows, his face and hands sweaty, his knees trembling with excitement. Then quite suddenly he heard the voices fading away from him, as if the boys had tired of their game and gone home, leaving him undetected. Their voices were like bells in the distance, each answering the other and then falling silent. He was alone.
- 2 The moonlight shimmered among the stooks so that they looked like men, or women, who had fallen asleep upright. The silence gathered around him, except that now and again he could hear the bark of a dog and the noise of the sea. He touched the stubble with his finger and felt it sharp and thorny as if it might draw blood. From where he was he could see the lights of the houses but there was no human shape to be seen anywhere. The moon made a white road across the distant sea.
- 3 He moved quietly about the field, amazed at the silence. No whisper of wind, no rustle of creature—rat or mouse—moving about. He was a scout on advance patrol, he was a pirate among his strawy treasure chests. If he thrust his hand into one, he might however find not gold but some small nocturnal animal. Very faintly he heard the soft throaty call of an owl. He was on a battlefield among the dead.
- 4 He began to count the stooks and made them twelve in all. It was a struggle for him for he was continually distracted by shadows and also not at all good at arithmetic, being only seven years old and more imaginative than mathematical. Twelve stooks set at a certain glimmering distance from each other. Twelve treasure chests. Twelve men of straw. He counted them again, and again he got twelve so he had been right the first time.
- 5 A cat slanted along in front of him, a mouse in its jaws, its eyes cold and green. The mouse's tail was dangling from its mouth like a shoelace. He put out his hand, but the cat quickly ran away from him towards its busy house, carrying its prey. Its green eyes were solid and beautiful like jewels.
- 6 He took a handkerchief from his pocket and began to dry his face. In the darkness he couldn't see the handkerchief clearly, it appeared as a vague ghostly shape, and though it had red spots on it he couldn't make them out. This was the quietest he had ever heard the world before. Even the cat had made no noise when it passed him. During the daytime there was always sound, but now even the dog had stopped barking. He could hear no sound of water, not any noise at all. He put his hand out in front of him and could see it only as a faint shape, as if it were separate from the rest of his body.
- 7 He looked up at the moon which was quite cold in the sky. He could see the dark spots on it and it seemed to move backwards into the sky as he looked. What an extraordinary calm was everywhere. It was as if he had been left in charge of the night, as if he was the only person alive, as if he must take responsibility for the whole world. No sound of footsteps could be heard from the road that lay between the wall and the houses.
- 8 The silence lasted so long that he was afraid to move. He formed his lips as if to speak but he didn't have the courage. It was as if the night didn't want him to speak, were forbidding him to do so, as if it were saying to him, This is my kingdom, you are not to do anything I don't wish you to do. He could no longer hear the noise of the sea, as if it too had been commanded to be quiet. It was like a yellow shield in the distance, flat and made of hammered gold.

¹ Tall bundles of corn tied together.

- 9 For the first time in his life he heard the beating of his own heart. Pitter patter it went, then it picked up power and became stronger, heavier. It was like a big clock in the middle of his chest. Then as quickly as it had started, it settled down again and he held his breath. The laden enchanted night, the strangeness of it. He would not have been surprised to see the stooks beginning to dance, a strawy dance, one which they were too serious to do in the daytime, when everyone was watching. He felt daring as well as frightened, that he should be the only one to stay behind, that he should be the dweller among the stooks. How brave he was and yet how unreal and ghostly he felt. It was as if the boys had left him and gone to another country, pulling the roofs over their heads and putting off the switch beside the bed.
- 10 This was the latest he had ever been out. He imagined himself staying there all night and the boys appearing to him in the morning, their faces red with the sun, shouting and screaming, like warriors. The sun was on their faces like war paint. They came out of their boxes pushing the lids up, and suddenly there they were among the stubble with their red knees and their red hands.
- 11 The stooks weren't all at the same angle to the earth. As he listened in the quietness he seemed to hear them talking in strawy voices, speaking in a sort of sharp, strawy language. They were whispering to each other, deep and rough and sharp. Their language sounded very odd, not at all liquid and running, but like the voice of stones, thorns. The field was alive with their conversation. Perhaps they were discussing the scythe that had cut them down, the boys that played hide and seek among them. They were busy and hissing as if they had to speak as much as possible before the light strengthened around them.
- 12 Then they came closer together, and the boys seemed suddenly very far away. The stooks were pressed against each other, composing a thorny spiky wall. He screamed suddenly and stopped, for at the sound the stooks had resumed their original positions. They were like pieces on a board. He began to count them again, his heart beating irregularly. Thirteen, where there had been twelve before. Where had the thirteenth come from?
- 13 He couldn't make out which was the alien one, and then counted them again and again. Then he saw it, the thirteenth. It was moving towards him, it had sharp teeth, it had thorny fingers. It was sighing inarticulately like an old woman, or an old man, its sigh was despairing and deep. Far beyond on the road he could sense that the boys were all gathered together, having got out of their boxes. They were sighing, everyone was sighing like the wind. Straw was peeling away from them as if on an invisible gale. And finally they were no longer there, but had returned to their boxes again and pulled the roofs over their heads.
- 14 He didn't notice the lights of the house go out as he walked towards the thirteenth stook, laid his head on its breast and fell asleep among the thorns.

Adapted from a short story by Iain Crichton Smith

[*END OF PASSAGE*]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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