Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

Untitled

by Juliet Robinson

He took the foil from his pocket, spread it on the ship's rail, and smoothed it with the pad of his thumb. Carefully he worked out the creases and folds, the heat from his skin and the residual warmth of the sun-warmed metal making quick work of the flimsy foil.

He watched his hand as it swept over the gold. The skin hung loose over faded meat and sinew. The bones, thickened with arthritis, were squared at the knuckles like playing dice. On his ring finger lay the permanent mark left by his wedding band—a narrowed point, the remains of another life, cut away when the joint had refused to yield and the gold had broken into two clean crescents.

He lifted his thumb. A square of gold-polished perfection reflected the smudge of his face - no detail, as if life had been worn away from its surface, smoothed like the foil.

The wind picked at the edges. He didn't fight it; he simply lifted his thumb away. The foil fluttered erratically, like a moth battering itself against a light, before the wind took control. It snatched the polished wrapper and pulled it up over the side of the ship.

He watched the blur of bright gold, momentarily winging its way over the swell like the seabirds accompanying their passage. Then a wave rose up, thick with foam from the ship's wake, and swallowed the foil whole.

His cabin was comfortable - it bloody well should have been given the grotesque sum it had cost. He frowned as he levered off his shoes. No more laces for him, just ugly Velcro straps.

How many pairs of shoes had he worn? How many lives had he walked through?

As a boy, none. He'd padded the jungles and tea fields barefoot, the soles of his feet as hard as ox hide. His first shoes, brought by his father from Victoria, had been several sizes too big. He had stumbled up the gangplank of the R.M.S. *Orion* in them, acutely aware of the other children watching his clumsy ascent. Pink, scrubbed faces; neatly pressed clothes; hair brushed and controlled. They had looked at him as if he were a wild creature brought onboard to entertain them. Their scorn had hurt more than the press of the newspaper stuffed into the toes of his shoes.

Then came the stiff black oxfords of his school years. There, too, he had been an outsider. *Jungle Boy* - the name had haunted him then, but now it brought a smile to his face. Yes, that's what he had been: a boy raised in the highlands of Uva, where the air smelled of damp earth and crushed leaves, and green ranks of tea bushes stretched across the misty slopes.

It had been the army boots next. They'd handed them to him at the depot: heavy, square-toed, with hobnails ground into the soles. While the recruits from Inverness, Forres, and other Highland towns had cursed the quartermaster and nursed their shredded heels in the barracks, he had just smiled. The thick leather had been nothing compared to the sharp bite of acacia thorns.

He kicked the ugly Velcro shoes across the room and enjoyed the satisfying thud they made as they hit the mahogany wardrobe.

He leaned back on the bed, letting the fluffed pillows take his weight and closed his eyes. The ship's engines thrummed deep in the hull, a steady iron heartbeat carrying him forward into the dark.

At the back of the ship, the part his mother had told him was called the stern, he pulled his new shoes off. He stretched his toes, wriggling them, enjoying the freedom of movement. He briefly wondered about tossing them overboard but knew his father would thrash him until his skin was as red as the Uva soils.

A sound made him look up. A girl was peering at him, her face puffy from crying. Her red-rimmed eyes stared at his bare feet, then flitted to the abandoned shoes.

"My shoes pinch," she said, her voice soft with an unfamiliar accent. "They were my sister's."

He nodded, as if he understood what this might mean.

"England?" she asked.

He nodded again, echoing, "England."

She stood, came to the rail beside him, bent, and removed her shoes. Her bare feet were pale and thin, nothing like his tanned wedges.

"Cold," she whispered.

He didn't know if she meant England or her feet.

Then she had pulled two gold foil-wrapped chocolates from her pocket. They were melted and misshapen, but in her pale hand they shone like treasure. She handed one to him, and they ate in silence.

Afterward, he watched as she took her foil and smoothed the golden square flat against the damp wood of the rail with the pad of her thumb. With a sudden, light flick of her wrist, she sent it winging out into the grey sea air.

He had followed her lead, tossing his own into the wind – a blur of bright gold, momentarily winging over the swell like the seabirds, before the foam swallowed it whole.