

Read the passage and write a response to the Writing Prompt.

Excerpt from “The Trojan Prince”

by Tessa Hadley

1 It’s an April morning and a young man waits at a black-painted front door on a decent street in Tynemouth. It’s a much more decent street than the one where his home is. Both streets are terraced, but here the scale’s quite different. A curving flight of stone steps climbs to the door, flanked by railings that are also painted black. Dropped behind more railings, there’s a basement area, and rising from down there are the sounds of pans clashing and women’s voices and the steam of cooking—but he’s determinedly not looking down. He fixes his attention on the front door as if willing it to open—he has tugged at the bellpull and heard a distant jangling inside, but doesn’t know if he’ll have the nerve to pull it twice. The year is 1920. This young man has missed the World War; he has closed his mind now even to the thought of the war, which, it seems to him, has devoured everyone’s pity and imagination for too long.

2 The street is quiet. It’s past the hour when the kind of men who live in these houses leave for their offices and boardrooms. He has chosen the time intentionally, so as to avoid them. But he’s hoping that it’s still early enough for the women to be at home. He has only a vague idea how the women who live here pass their days. The wind is tearing scraps of cloud in a fitfully gleaming sky, and combing through the twigs of the hornbeam trees (the trees are another difference between this street and his), setting them springing and dancing like whips. Last night it rained heavily—he lay awake listening to it in the bed that he shares with his brother—and the stone walls are still dark with wet, though the wind has dried the pavements. Beside the door, an iron implement like the upside-down end of a hoe is set into the stone step; too late, just as the door swings back, he realizes that it must be for scraping the mud off your boots before you go inside the house. He has walked or run down this street a hundred times before and never noticed the boot scrapers or given any thought to their function, because then he was a boy with no interest in going inside. There’s no time now to check whether his boots are dirty.

3 A maid has opened the door—he knew that would happen and worried that she might be a girl he’d known at school. But she’s a stranger, tall and big-boned, with a smut on her cheek, so he’s able to push past her into the hall, doffing his cap. It’s only as the still atmosphere of the house envelops him that he’s aware of the particular weather of the morning he’s left behind—its touch on his face and its tug at his coat, the urgings of the onset of spring, the twigs glowing russet, swelling into bud.

4 “Can I speak to Miss Ellen, please?” he says, with the aplomb he has rehearsed at home.

5 The cessation of the wind is so abrupt that he feels for a moment as if he were deaf; it must be the quiet that makes this house seem so different from his own, because the smells are familiar enough—furniture polish, scalded dishrags, boiling cabbage. The maid is frowning at him sulkily, not knowing if she should have let him in. He guesses that she spends her life afraid of trouble from one side or another.

6 “Don’t know if she’s at home.”

7 “I should think she’d like to see me. She’ll be sorry if she misses me. I’m her cousin. I’m going away to sea.”

8 The maid dithers fatalistically.

9 “I’ll go and tell Missus. What’s your name?”

10 “McIlvanney,” he says. “Tell her it’s James McIlvanney.”

11 “Do you want to wait here, then?”

12 “Here’s all right.”

13 She puts out her hand to him and he waits a moment too long, not knowing what she wants. Then, blushing, he gives her his cap and sees a little light of contempt come into her eyes, which are round and hard and wet like pebbles—but it doesn’t matter, he’s got this far. Going up the stairs, she makes a show of stamping her feet heavily, as if she’s actually too weary to climb to the first floor.

- 14 He's only sixteen, despite the man's overcoat and the new tweed cap. His hair is jet-black and very straight, and his face is composed of strong fine lines, clean and clear and exquisite like his pink-and-white skin; his eyebrows are as well-shaped as a woman's, his curved lips pressed shut as if he were holding in important news. The jut of his cheekbones and jaw is masculine enough—strained and resilient. His expression is keenly alive with self-interest, which makes him appear blind and alert at the same time. The air in the hall is thick and dim and greenish, because the blinds are all drawn down—as they are in the parlor at home—to keep the light from fading the furniture. It makes him remember floating underwater once, when he dived into the canal and hit his head on an old bedstead someone had dumped there. A clock ticking in the hall is like his own pulse urging him on. He can hear the maid's voice upstairs, other voices responding, impatient, querulous—he has dropped an interruption into the smooth unfurling of the women's morning. Without warning, he experiences a slight nausea and dizziness.
- 15 He holds his head back warily, defiantly, on his shoulders, so that the furnishings in this house won't get the better of him: the dado with its raised pattern of diamonds under thick brown paint, the polished wood of the hall stand, the yellow gleams of brass among the shadows—the face of the clock, a rack for letters, a little gong hanging in a frame with a suede-covered mallet balanced across two hooks, a tall pot to hold umbrellas. He doesn't look down at the pattern of blue and cream tiles underfoot in case he has trodden mud on them. Through an open door he glimpses low chairs fat with stuffing, crouched on a sea of flower-patterned rug. The smell of brushed carpet tickles in his nose. Everything in this house is slick with prosperity, with the labor of servants. In his own home, there's only a girl who comes in two mornings a week to help his mother with the heavy work.

16 What James McIlvanney thinks is: I'll have all this one day.

17 He doesn't particularly like it, but he wants it.

18 He stores it up, so that he knows what to want.

Excerpt from "The Trojan Prince" by Tessa Hadley, from *The New Yorker*, November 15, 2010.

¹**hornbeam:** small hardwood trees

²**aplomb:** confidence

³**dithers:** hesitates

⁴**fatalistically:** warily

