

Sarah Davy -winner

The Jewel of the Wall

Outside the landscape is growing wild. My neighbour is squirming, too many hours on a claustrophobic bus, bare legs stuck to leather seats. Relief fills the air as we slow and turn off at a brown road sign. I retrieve my bag, checking the inside pocket. Still there. I turn the small linen pouch over in my hand once, the pendants weight reassuring. Only a short walk now until it is returned. The map is already folded and marked, the trail moderate. A hill or two, perhaps a stile. I leave the tourists behind, baseball caps & walking poles cluttering the car park.

The truth was nothing like I'd imagined. My father's image had always been clear. Waistcoat, shorts, dust covered boots and tanned calves. In his hand, a trowel and in his pocket, a linen bag. The treasure would have been checked in, numbered, catalogued. A piece of a woman's life, remembered. And I was custodian of this rare thing.

The truth was dark, secretive. Evenings spent sneaking, stealing, pretending. He was a vandal. No-one but us would ever have known about this tiny fragment. Smooth, dainty, a minute hole for a delicate chain. Hers. Not his. Not mine.

I have never worn it. Even now I only touch it, occasionally peering into the bag to check its continued existence. The path takes a steep turn upwards to a crest where the low-lying ruins sit, waiting. Once she may have sat here, watching her children play, touching the pendant around her neck, awaiting the return of her husband from the wall. My father's drawing points to the spot. I kneel and start to dig. A new grave for an old treasure.

Andrew Jones - winner

The Jewel of the Wall

Sulpicia Lepidina to her sister Claudia Severa,

Greetings.

My dear, what must you think of me?

Never the best of correspondents

But one thousand nine hundred and eighteen years must be some sort of record.

So sorry to have missed the party.

Cerialis had to sort out some trouble with the ghastly little Brits;

Said it wasn't safe to travel.

Hope Aelius wasn't too put out.

Hope you liked the earrings;

Green was always your colour.

Anyway, bit late to exchange them, I'm afraid.

Well, we've got some catching up to do!

What with this and that I haven't had a minute to myself

Except to scrawl this little note

But promise I'll set aside the time to write properly;

Though to be honest I'm not quite sure where the time all went.

Never mind. What matters is that you and I

Have always been able to pick up where we left off;

Cerialis says he doesn't know how we do it.

Men!

Well, aren't we famous?

First recorded writing in Latin by a woman, apparently,

Even though I'm only in it as your addressee.

Bet you'd have had more to say if you'd known!

But then Aelius would have put his oar in, too, and Cerialis;

We'd have been lucky to have ended up as footnotes.

It doesn't do justice to the people we were or the lives we led

But maybe it covers the things that matter, in the end;

A party;

A sister;

A friend.

Your Lepidina.

Alyson Faye - Runner up

The crow lands beside me, head cocked, watching me scrape and undress the layers on the stones. Three years out of uni and working for free this summer for the Prof. It's a dream come true. I'm soaking wet, freezing cold, blue-lipped, but my spirit soars daily.

'Each stone has its own story,' the Prof told us. 'Roman soldiers lived here with their families. Some never left.'

We'd all thought about that for a moment. Being buried within these ruined walls, in a bleak wind swept country miles from home's sunny, verdant shores.

Dusk drapes the stones in violet hues and I smell frying bacon from the camp site. Time to pack up.

In the distance I hear thunder, like horses' hooves pounding; the riders returning with supplies.

Up here time can slip- you can so easily lose track. I hear feet behind me, a medley of voices, women's, children's blending with the click of knuckle bones. The air smells coppery, a pig is roasting on the spit and the women mill around, hands full of amphora and kettles.

'Welcome.' 'Come join us.' Curious fingers pluck at my jeans, touch my short cropped hair. I close my eyes and feel the wind on my cheeks.

A warm hand presses a small round object into my palm and closes my fingers. 'A present,' the whisper tickles my ear.

The crow flaps away with a raucous 'Caw' startling me. The sun has fled. The night beckons.

Turning I head towards the camp's lanterns. In their light I inspect the small, round hardness nestling in my palm. A pottery bead, patterned like snake skin, in faded, dusty blues and greens.

Triumphant I hold it aloft- my fellow archaeologists gather around. Agog.

'Vanessa's jewel' pronounces the Prof. staring at me. My cheeks flush.

Robert Rayner - Runner up

The hills are washed grey by dark skies. Rain patters into rutted puddles on the tracks running through Vindolanda . From her bedroom window Antonia sees Vitalis directing work on the caldarium and dust escaping from the kiln. The reek of hides being tanned pervades the air. It is neither this bleak scene, nor the weather that has lowered her spirits.

Antonia is unhappy despite last night's successful feast held to welcome Marcus Lucius, the new Legate. Severus, her husband, had complimented her eye for detail. She'd replaced an imperfect tile in the mosaic – newly laid to impress their visitor. Later, Lucius praised the dish of venison and the wines she'd reserved for his visit.

Conversation flowed too. She likened the wall of the northern frontier to a necklace - the forts were chain links with Vindolanda the pendant jewel at the centre. When Lucius nodded his head, she knew he'd use it in his report to Rome. She felt cheated.

This morning, Antonia envies the legionaries practising drills – happy with a few dinarii for beer. A recurring nightmare also disturbs her - stranded on the moors she cries for help but her words are swallowed by wild winds. Antonia finds solace recording her feelings in a secret journal – those precious tied tablets.

Toni is overjoyed. The local school where she's head of history was just ranked outstanding in an Ofsted inspection. Today, as a volunteer at the dig at Vindolanda, carefully sifting the earth, she'd found a beautiful tile with a small chip. The archaeologists enthused at the discovery. The selfie Toni's posted is going viral.

Too excited for sleep, Toni wonders about the last person to hold the tile and the fragments of forgotten lives which survive. Eventually, she succumbs to fatigue. She dreams of a tunicked woman at a window.