



Impact Statement

Seyoon Byun, Grade 11

Where Silence Breaks, 2026

Charcoal, colored pencil, watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 25.5 inches

Newton South High School, Newton, MA

Unsung Hero: Gareth Jones

When the world is full of fear, silence, and suppression, who will we, as common citizens, rely on to carry our voice past sealed borders? To the Ukrainian people in 1932, it was Gareth Jones who brought their suffering into words that the outside world could read. Jones was a Welsh journalist, the first to publicly expose the 1932–1933 famine in Ukraine known as the Holodomor, which was deliberately caused by Joseph Stalin and the Soviet state.

I chose Gareth Jones because his story sits at the intersection of what I believe are two of the most valuable virtues: courage and truth. He was a journalist who chose to walk into a dying countryside rather than look away. I find it admirable that Jones pushed through, despite the immense pressure from officials to silence him. When the Soviet propaganda machine and prominent Western journalists accused him of fabricating the famine, Jones did not recant. He fought with his reports until the day he died, at just twenty-nine years old in China near the borders of Japanese-occupied Manchuria, under circumstances that remain suspicious to this day.

In the winter of 1933, Jones travelled through the villages of Soviet Ukraine, ignoring the official minders who had been assigned to control what foreign journalists could see and report. What he witnessed were starving children, abandoned homes, and mass graves. He published his findings immediately after returning to the West, stating plainly but painfully that millions were dying of starvation. The Soviet government denied everything. Moreover, Walter Duranty, a correspondent of *The New York Times*, publicly denied Jones's reports, arguing it as propaganda and reassuring readers that there was no famine in Ukraine. For years, Duranty's version overshadowed Jones's in Western discourse.

History has now changed completely. Scholars now estimate that between 3.5 and 7 million Ukrainians perished in the Holodomor. Jones received his vindication through academic historians, declassified Soviet archives, and a 2019 film, *Mr. Jones*. Jones's story lies heavily on the fact that he was personally among the villagers with the victims. Many Western journalists were aware of famines, but never openly exposed the existence of huge famines. Reading Jones's firsthand notes that were handwritten, urgent, and precise made the story immediate in a way no secondary source could replicate.

I began learning about Jones's story on gray textured paper with watercolors, chosen for the weight it suggests—ash, winter, the color of absence—justice and life for the

Ukrainians. My piece was deliberately separated: the exterior of the piece is worked in charcoal and minimal color pencil, monotone and cold, representing the life of the victims under Soviet control and the famine: the silence, the denial, the erasure. But at the center, inside, is the story Jones told with his dispatches, where color erupts. Warmth of deep reds bleeds outward, the colors of bread and wheat, of life insisting on being seen.

Jones himself appears on the threshold between these two zones, one foot in the gray world of suppression and one in the vivid truth he uncovered. His figure is small in the background relative to the landscape around him. The famine, the Holodomor, his reporting, and his achievements were never about Jones. The colors belong to the Ukrainian people.

The world Jones walked through in 1933 is not as different from our own as we might want to believe. War and deliberate starvation continue. State-sponsored propaganda not only persists—it has become more sophisticated, more deadly, and more difficult to distinguish from facts especially with the development of AI. Journalism, which exists to carry truth, has itself become a contested battlefield where narratives are manufactured, and facts, or lies, are weaponized.

Jones's story is my justification for pursuing journalism with honesty at its core. Not because the world is good, but because exposing what is not good is the only way to preserve what is. He showed that one person with access, courage, and the willingness to put their name to the truth can change a historical record. That the record was changed too slowly, and too late for millions of Ukrainians, is a tragedy. And tragedy continues today. With eruptions of war, Jones pushes me to question my next choices. As I finished my last touches on the paper, I was taken out of his world to see my own and to face the matters that we humans have brought to the stage. I hope to share this work at school and in my community, and to use it as a starting point for conversations about the Holodomor, media literacy, the responsibilities that come with the ability to tell a story, and finally, about all the suffering victims of wars.