

Three Points West

**The Collected Works of
Hillingdon Writers' Groups**



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Hillingdon Artsweek 2012

Published by the London Borough of Hillingdon



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Foreword

By the Mayor of Hillingdon

I am delighted to introduce the first ever anthology of work by Hillingdon Writers, launched as part of Artsweek 2012.

I am always surprised and delighted by the wealth of creative talent on show during Artsweek, and this diverse, and often very moving, collection of work by members of our three local writing groups – Ruislip, Uxbridge and Yeading – is a great example.

As our nation celebrates a very special year, with the Olympics and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, it's wonderful to have the opportunity to celebrate such proof of our local talent.

From stories about nuclear war to poems about the joys of blossom in Harefield, this very varied collection has something to offer for everyone.

I enjoyed reading them all tremendously and hope that you will enjoy them as much as I did.

Councillor Michael Markham
Mayor of Hillingdon
June 2012

Love writing? Join us!

There are three writing groups in the London Borough of Hillingdon, based in local libraries. All are open to anyone with an interest in writing. Joining one of our groups is a great way to develop your talent, meet others who share your passion for writing, and get constructive feedback on your work, whether you're a beginner or an accomplished writer. You can call the library to confirm the group is running in a particular week before coming but there's no need to book: just drop in and you'll receive a friendly welcome!

Ruislip Writers' Group

The Ruislip group meets 7pm every Monday at Manor Farm Library. The group is led by Darren Deeks, who has a Masters in Creative Writing from Brunel University and is the library manager. The group features varied workshop sessions followed by feedback for members on work-in-progress.

Email manorfarm-library@hillingdon.gov.uk or call to request the latest programme.

£2 per session, Manor Farm Library Tel: 01895 558234

Uxbridge Writers' Group

The Uxbridge Writers Group has been running for nine years. The group meets every Tuesday evening at 7pm in the magazine section of the central library. The group is led by Charlotte Baldwin, Arts Officer for the London Borough of Hillingdon. The group sessions include creative writing exercises on a huge variety of topics, from characterisation to dealing with writers' block, followed by a critique session where members can bring their work in and get feedback. Email the library at uxbridge-library@hillingdon.gov.uk for a copy of the latest programme.

£5/£3.50 per session, Uxbridge Library Tel: 01895 250600

Yeading Writers' Group

The Yeading writing group runs from 10.30 to 12.30 every Monday morning and is led by Jaspreet Bamra, a tutor with Hillingdon Adult and Community Learning. Anyone with a creative interest is welcome; the group's members write for pleasure on a variety of topics.

£2 per session, Yeading Library Tel: 020 8573 0261

By and By

By Kristen Platt

By and by I suppose I will come to terms with this new reality. The nightmare I find myself waking to every day. After a while even the truly terrifying becomes quotidian. My ribs are hurting like nothing else I've ever experienced; no matter how I sit, lie or stand there is no relief from the pain, keen and dazzling like sunlight off a newly washed window. Not that I will ever see that happen again. There are no windows; the blast took care of that. And the few shards of glass that remain in the window frames – like rotten teeth in festering gums – are coated in thick, deadly dust.

The dust gets everywhere, a toxic snow that creeps and creeps; stealthily infiltrating every last bastion of defence. I'm fairly certain that no matter how thick their concrete bunkers are, or however many parts per billion their air scrubbers say they can remove, they're just putting off the inevitable. I'm sure some people will survive, and their gross, misshapen, mutant lives will become the new norm. It's no more obscene then the lives we were leading before this, when you think about it. The mutations will stabilise and that will be the new norm.

I'm almost sorry that I won't be here to see it. I've always had a fascination for the grotesque; cats born with two faces, snakes with

two heads, all the things that would make a rational person shudder. I shuddered and then read more. I don't know why really, I like to kind of prove to myself and everyone else that I can look beyond the surface and understand the whys and the hows of these things.

I could tell you how they build an atomic weapon, of the precision required in the shaping of the fissile material; of the margins so infinitesimally small that it's almost a miracle such a weapon could be built at all. That the charges which compress the fissile material to start the chain reaction must be shaped and placed with such care and attention it makes me want to cry with wonder. Not that anyone cares much about the finesse, the sheer heart-breaking precision that goes in to building such a weapon; especially when they're staring in slack-jawed shock at the distinctive clouds billowing up from the targets.

Even then they didn't run. They just stood, hypnotised by the familiar, simple beauty of a mushroom cloud, something they've seen time and time again, and yet unable to comprehend the meaning of it; it is not an effect on a movie theatre screen.

I have a finely honed sense of self preservation, something I'm quite proud of. I too stood in slack-jawed awe until the little voice inside of me screaming hysterically finally pierced through my disbelief and sent me running. That's why I can see I think. I'm fairly certain the weapon exploded behind me. I didn't scream, I didn't get the chance. It was just white, and I was weightless, and then I was wrapped around a tree. I think it was probably a lime tree. Any other time I would probably have breathed in that deep, floral smell of lime blossoms; but as the pressure wave seemed to be trying to push all my major organs out through the pores of my skin, I didn't get a chance to smell the flowers.

I'm not sure if it's my imagination or not, but I can taste metal. Not like I've been sucking on a penny or the metallic tang of sucking on a cut finger, just a hint of metal. Aside from the massively radioactive isotopes I know I'm ingesting with every breath – with every movement – through my lungs, my nostrils, my gums and my eyes; aside from those, I'm sure there are all

kinds of highly toxic elements in the dust. Look what happened to the people who breathed in the dust from the World Trade Centre.

Actually, I think that as well as all the bad things, I must be breathing in people. People who were standing directly under the missile when it went off, people who were instantaneously rendered down to their base elements and carried ahead of the vacuum on the pressure wave. Maybe the metallic taste is the wedding rings, gold teeth and amalgam fillings; the earrings, necklaces and zippers; the copper and iron in their blood. I'm breathing people, their hopes and dreams now in me, a part of me; slowly, slowly killing me. Choking and poisoning me with all the things they left unsaid, the ambitions never fully realised.

Three days. Three days of trying to get comfortable with the dazzling pain in my ribs that can't be eased by sitting, standing or lying. Three days of waking up to a nightmare that I know will become mundane. By and by I'll come to terms with this new reality. I know I will. I just need time.

Kristen writes fiction to entertain herself on her daily commute. She has completed her novel *Shows, Blows and Breakfast Burritos*; and is a freelance writer for www.Close-Upfilm.com.

Winter Sunset

By Margaret Hibbert

The setting sun glows
with ever diminishing light
over the November world.
A stillness is here
as if all nature has come to rest. The river lies flat,
seemingly weary of its journey to the sea. Its banks,
dark with tired earth,
recede to tangled scrub.
And the trees, tall and age twisted, cling to dying leaves
— the ashes of summer.

Margaret has been writing for several years and is a member of Uxbridge Writers' Group. She has mostly written poetry and recently began to write short stories. She has lived in Hillingdon all her life.

As Time Goes By

By Angela Narayn

I watched her in the fading sunlight, salt and peppered hair, elegant slim fingers and her mint green twinset adorned with a single row of pearls. Despite her condition, she was still strangely captivating. Her hair blew softly in the wind and I noticed the hem of her cotton skirt playing on her knees. As the leaves flickered in the late sun I was reminded of something.

“Mother do you remember that time I rode Bessie for the first and last time as it happened? I had stood there trembling part with excitement but mostly with fear and you urged me to hold the reins tight and speak firmly to her. I’ll never forget your words: *you must let her know who’s boss. She needs to know that.*” I remember wondering what a boss was, as Bessie’s rich chestnut coat glowed in the stream of warm sunlight. I remember her long sleek neck and the strength of her body under me as I looked down at everything from what seemed a dizzy height. Suddenly a wave of nausea washed over me.

“Do you remember Mother; I asked you if I could get off because I thought I was going to be sick. You replied, *Lizzie, don’t be silly. Pull yourself together. Remember you’re the boss.* With that, you patted her side and she moved off to a slow trot.”

I could still feel the fist of fear in my stomach and the clench of my hands on the reins. I felt as if I was on a small boat set adrift in a strange ocean. Fighting back the tears, I struggled for composure.

Mother looked out into the gardens, I noticed an involuntary shudder. We had better go in, I thought, before she gets a chill. We walked slowly through the lavender and the hollyhocks. She clung to me like a delicate flower. Her voice seemed to resonate inside me, *I love the smell of lavender, it reminds me of Rye, my pony Daisy and the woodlands lost in bluebells.*

Inside the nursing home I breathed in its distinct smell; a combination of cleaning agents and decaying flesh. Getting her ready for dinner I washed her hands and face and reapplied some make up; just a trace of lippy on her thinning lips and a dusting of powder on her cheeks.

"There you are, Mother. Still as beautiful as ever."

She sat, motionless, like a captive bird in her chair. A slight drooping in the corners of her mouth but her skin was still flawless and her eyes still a brilliant blue. Brushing her hair I looked at her face in the steamy mirror; her features emerging through the vapours. Through the window a butterfly shimmered, corn yellow, with blue pale spots on each diaphanous wing. How fragile life seemed. Each day so small, inconsequential, like the endless dripping of a tap and all of a sudden it hits you. Life has stolen up behind like a shadow and you are nearly done for.

I smiled at her in the mirror. Gently placing my hands on her shoulders I felt her frail form beneath my fingers. Brushing her head with mine I hoped she didn't mind such an overt display of affection.

"Mother how would you like your hair today?" As she sat motionless I remembered on a rare occasion brushing her hair as a child. She was so beautiful; her rich chestnut hair had shone like ripples of silk. Her selection of jewellery had lain winking in the sunlight; a rainbow of colours in the velvet drawers. The splendour of it all had made me feel quite heady. Once she had let me dance round the room wearing a beautiful necklace. It had a blood red ruby set in tiny diamonds. I had never seen anything so beautiful. I imagined I was a princess and I danced round and

round until giddy with happiness I finally collapsed in a heap on the silk covers of her bed. It never happened again. I had broken an unwritten, unspoken rule. I had abandoned myself to sheer pleasure.

As I changed her into a turquoise blouse I suddenly noticed it. "Oh mother! What's this?" There was a horrible discolouration along one side; purple and grey it bloomed, a dark flower ugly and sprawling. What's happened? Why did no one none tell me?" I suddenly saw her predicament sitting there so passive and helpless; removed from everything like a child. Perhaps like the child I had been. How the tables had turned. Overwhelmed, the warm tears rolled down my cheeks. How did it ever come to this? She had been formidable in her day, even tyrannical, but I would not have wished this on her. Life could be so cruel. I gently stroked her arm and breathing in her fragrance I heard her humming quite distinctly. It was the song from Casablanca: *As Time Goes By*. I quickly dabbed my tears. "You always loved that song didn't you?"

We sat facing each other across her cluttered desk. She was a small woman, with hazel eyes, pleasant enough but I felt a touch of evasiveness as I challenged her concerning my mother's bruising.

She hesitated, "There is a record of it in the accident book, but I was going to write to you concerning the incident."

"Don't you think you should have informed me straight away? Would you not want to be informed straight away if it was your mother?"

She paused. I noticed the red nail varnish, perfectly applied. I was beginning to feel moisture on my temples, and an increased sense of annoyance.

"Well of course, but I have had some difficulty trying to contact you."

I was becoming more agitated, "Could you please tell me what has happened to my mother?"

I noticed her lips and how they pursed together between certain words.

"Sometimes at night your mother can become disorientated. She leaves her room and actually tries to make for the main exit."

"You don't really expect..."

"If you would let me continue, she can become quite aggressive. She picked up a china doll from the bookcase in the hall and hurled it at Graham, our care worker, just missing him, the other day. It was the next day that this happened. She was approached trying to leave the foyer in her night dress. She became... well... In the struggle she slipped and fell backwards on the floor."

I sat there astounded. Did she really expect me to believe this? Her voice became rather stern as if she could read my thoughts.

"Well it's all in the accident book and the doctor can verify it as well."

"It's unforgivable. I should have been informed immediately," I retorted.

"I am sorry. I do understand how distressing this must be. I have tried ringing several times but you're never available."

"This is amazing! You fail in your duty of care to my mother and you start criticising me."

I slumped back in my chair overwhelmed by emotions. Regaining composure I felt a strong compulsion to leave as quickly as possible. I didn't feel quite myself. I expressed my dissatisfaction reminding her of her responsibilities towards mother and stressed she must inform me of any incident however minor. I emphasised that I would be in touch shortly to discuss future changes in mother's care plan. As I approached the door I heard her voice as clear as day.

"Do you know Miss Baxter that after your visits she is visibly improved? She is calm. Upbeat even. I don't know if you realise what an effect you have on her?"

"What do you mean? My mother hasn't the faintest idea who I am. What possible difference could I make?"

"I beg to differ. We all see a marked improvement after your visits. I'm sure she knows her own daughter. There are some things, some connections, that are stored forever; they can't be severed."

I sat on the train dumbfounded. Was it all a cover up for sheer incompetence? I would get to the bottom of it, get advice and then consider what to do. But was it really true that my visits had made such a difference? She had never shown the slightest tremor of response. I always thought she was lost in her own world, set adrift in a distant ocean; a bit like me on that damn horse. Would I have really noticed? Always juggling work and family commitments and only fitting her in when I could. Oh mother! When had we become so much alike? She sat looking out into the darkness at the rolling landscape draped in shadows. The dark horse of night galloped at her side breathing in and out mist and swirling clouds, and running with the stars.

Angela is a member of the Ruislip Writers' Group. She describes the experience of writing as 'teasing strands of the inner self whilst reaching out for inspiration and ideas... full of twists and turns and countless surprises'.

Chess – The Great Pretender

By Leo McHugh

When I first looked into your stillness, all I saw was inertia.
Noble pieces indeed, but passive and impotent.
Your board was smooth and flat,
A neat, peaceful looking place.
Pieces clumping blindly about the board,
Awkward and clumsy.

Now I look into your stillness and it is alive with potential.
Now the pieces cast their shadows over their squares,
Their influence creeping over the board.
The board is now filled with precipices,
Many shrouded in the fog,
And a wrong turn can send you tumbling out of control.
Invisible forces pin and skewer me,
Forcing stasis or unwanted movement.

Do Grandmasters look into your stillness,
And see the beating pulse of their opponent?
Do their eyes pierce the deep fog,
Allowing them to traverse the near invisible trails of salvation,
Inches from danger?
Do they have to weather the opponent's focus,
Beating down upon them, like the sun?
Does their sight stretch deep beyond my sight,
Seeing the delicate artistry of the landscapes?
Do they infuse their pieces,
With their own creativity?
Casting their brush strokes,
Through the timely manoeuvrings of their pieces?

Leo is writer who believes that it is much easier to communicate through writing than through short biographies like this one! He attends the Uxbridge Writers' Group.

Penance

By Fran Tracey

‘Hail Mary, full of grace.’

I begin my penance. Today I expect to be here for some time. And that’s ok; I’m in no rush to get home. I’ve got a lot of putting right to do, Father Murphy tells me, if I want to get to heaven like Mother Teresa. And if Mother Teresa’s not in heaven, who is?

Heaven never bothered my brother Joe.

“I don’t believe in God, all that nonsense,” he’d always said. “I just go along with it to make Mum happy. And Heaven and Hell, they’re made up to keep us on the straight and narrow. I don’t need that threat to be good.”

I didn’t ever feel clever enough to argue with Joe. And I always thought it depended what he meant by good. I was hedging my bets. I remember the last time me and Joe had come to confession together. It was several years ago. Joe hadn’t been since that day. I came intermittently. When I felt I really had to.

“How many d’you get today, Maggie?” he’d asked as he stumbled out of the confessional. We’d often dared each other to trick Father Murphy, to shock and amaze him. It was always a bit risky, because Father Murphy was smart. He spotted anything too obvious, and he knew our faces and voices from school.

"Oh and Father," I said, once I'd got through the usual sins of stealing pencils from Louise Smith's pencil case and lying about the dog tearing my homework to shreds. "I saw the face of the Virgin Mary in my mash last night. It was truly amazing," I'd tried once, a long time ago. I'd been in church an age getting through my prayers after that one.

"There's lies and then there's big lies, Maggie," Father Murphy had said before he absolved me.

I was already kneeling when I replied to Joe's question about my penance all those years ago.

"Five 'Hail Mary's' and an 'Our Father,'" I had replied. "You?"

"More than that," he'd shrugged. Although he never said his prayers anyway. Not properly.

"Our Farter, who art in heaven," he droned. Then he tickled and nudged me; trying to dislodge me from my kneeler and land me in the aisle. When that failed he toppled sideways, crashing to the floor, pretending to faint. I ignored him.

"Oh my goodness, what's happened to the poor boy? Heartless girl, leaving him to lie there," cried Miss Higgins, rushing to Joe's help. She'd been in church when we got there, tweaking lilies a few inches here and there to perfect her display. She cradled him in her arms, glaring at me. He gave me a wink as he pulled himself up. And he thanked Miss Higgins graciously. He wasn't often unkind, Joe, not really.

I watched Miss Higgins return to her lilies. I felt certain that when she died she'd be one of the ones who'd be sure to join Mother Teresa in heaven. Probably be on her right hand side, helping with the flowers. She was a good woman. Did a lot of crocheting for the parish. Tea cosies and the like. Mum had a few she'd bought at church bring and buy sales. They sat in the sideboard drawer in the dining room, along with mine and Joe's communion cards. Dad and Joe wore the cosies as football hats once, with their ears sticking out. Joked about them being holey.

I was nervous when I entered the confessional today. I'd waited until the end, watching all the others go in, say their prayers and leave, hoping Father Murphy would be long gone by the time I came to confess. But he's still there, and I sense he's expecting me.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It is three weeks since my last confession. And I have told a lie."

There's a tutting sound from behind the confessional. Then a low whistle. I know Father Murphy recognises me. He sounds vaguely disappointed, as though he has high hopes of me and I've let him down.

"Three weeks. That's a good while. And what lie would that be, Maggie?"

"I told Mum I'd answered the Archbishop's question when he visited our confirmation classes last week. But I hadn't."

Mum had been desperate for me to be noticed by the Archbishop as soon as she'd heard about his flying visit to the school. And with the ways things had been at home it would have been bad to let her down. I knew it would be a highlight of her call home on Sunday night. The idea of her phoning home had always puzzled me. I thought home was with us in Birmingham, not in County Wicklow. She'd be able to convince Grandma that I'd secured my niche someone near Saint Joseph in heaven. I couldn't disappoint her.

"He asked about the Holy Ghost, Mum, and I told him all that I know. I waved my hand around and he picked me over all the others. He said I had an astounding depth of knowledge and that he was most impressed. I went up to kiss his ring afterwards. He touched me on the head, just gently, you know."

This all came out when Mum questioned me after school. I hadn't planned it. But I knew from experience it was no good just telling a plain lie. Once you'd decided to tell it you might as well go for it. Joe had always encouraged that. And I couldn't let Mum down either. She had high expectations of me.

I could have tried to blame Joe for my inability to speak. And in a way it was his fault. When the Archbishop had asked about the Holy Ghost and how we thought we could achieve living in heaven forever the reality was I'd put my hand up, frozen, then run to the girls' loos. Miss Maguire followed me. For once she was kind, put her arm round my shoulder whilst I cried.

"That's not good, Maggie, lying about what you said to the Archbishop," said Father Murphy, surprisingly softly.

"No, Father Murphy. I know."

"I'd have thought better of you, young lady, but I know there are extenuating circumstances."

I stay silent. I'm not quite sure what he means, but I think he's talking about Joe.

"I'll have to give you penance."

"That's grand, Father."

I accept my Hail Marys and leave the confessional. I say my prayers. Then I rest my head on the pew in front of me and think about Joe. Today I've got an extra prayer to say, on top of the others. It's not the one Father Murphy gave me, because he doesn't know about the lie I told Joe.

"Forgive me Joe, for I have sinned," I whisper. I knew Joe was a good boy. Although, by the end, it wasn't obvious; he kept it well hidden. He'd got in with a bad crowd, Mum said. Dad said he'd soon outgrow them, once he realised what a bunch of eejits they were. He's a bright boy, our Joe, he'd often said, trying to convince himself everything would ok. But Joe hadn't outgrown his mates by the time they took that spin in the car and Paul Mitchell had been drinking and took the corner too fast, and the car that wasn't theirs hit a tree. It all happened just before the Archbishop's visit. I stroked Joe's hand in hospital as he lay on the trolley, the curtains pulled tight round our family.

"You'll go to heaven, Joe," I'd consoled him as fear flickered across his face. Then he lost consciousness and we were offered no hope.

That was the biggest lie I ever told. I didn't know Joe would go there, because I no longer believe in a place called heaven.

Formerly a librarian, Fran lives in Ruislip with her husband, son and daughter. She loves people-watching and listening, and translating this 'hobby' into writing short stories for magazines and anthologies. She attends the Ruislip Writers' Group.

Easter Sunday

By Priyali Ghosh

Your light comes in the morning,
and I hold my head
so precious to you,
down, for I'm not strong.

No, not strong like you.

still clasp an outstretched hand,
with weight of my own.

Last night, waiting.
I thought of you still
under the soil
weeping an ocean, thinking I might touch
you in the quiet dark.

wanting you to understand
that you did not go alone to death,
although you said

We had all forgotten,
Promises made in the flush of love.

Dear heart, I hold my head down
Knowing you are come
with morning.

Not to be comforted
But to give away again,
Your solely fought victory.

and yet, who cannot smile
looking again at your love flushed face.

Standing so close to morning in your eyes,
I capture a height,
I did not know to be true.

Priyali Ghosh grew up in Calcutta (India) and kept on growing when she moved to England in the 1990s to read English at Cambridge University. In her life outside poetry and theatre she is a language and literature teacher and nineteenth-century scholar; she hopes to publish her recently completed doctoral thesis and to contribute to a happier world in which instead of being asked "where are you originally from?" people might instead say "where are you going?" and "Can I come?"

Rush of Air

By Caroline Russell

He had been smiling and whistling all day. It was a change for him, for months he had been quiet James; melancholy James. The permanent absence of another had consumed him, as it does when love is involved. But time passes and heals even the most broken of hearts. Now only the scar remained, hidden from view.

Elle watched, puzzled by the sudden change.

What's made him so happy? James turned away from her and looked out of the window. The sun shone and glistened off the morning dew. It was a beautiful day, perhaps this accounted for his mood? But James didn't give anything away.

"Right," he said, "time to get ready." He turned away from the window with obvious reluctance, throwing most of his warm coffee down the sink. Steam rose from the stainless steel and floated away to nothing.

"Okay, see you later," said Elle. They didn't talk much anymore. There was too much water under the bridge. She watched as James left the kitchen, and she continued sitting at the table. She stared at the scrapes and cracks on the wooden surface as if it held all the answers. But there were none to be found.

Elle's finger traced an intricate twirl embedded in the wood. Her hand found its way to an empty coffee cup. There were lots of them scattered over the table.

"Typical James," muttered Elle, "Always needing to leave some evidence of his existence."

She stared into the mug nearest her, at the remnants of his drink. It still had the strong aroma of good coffee. A comforting smell, Elle always found.

Some people say the future is written in the sludge at the bottom of your cup, she thought. Or is that tea? Either way she saw only the past.

Elle and James had met at school.

The child of an overworked father and an absent mother, Elle had been sent to a new school with the order, "Enjoy!" She would be the first to admit she was a sulky teenager, fed up of never getting her own way. So she was adamant that she would not; could not enjoy herself. Elle slumped to the back of class hoping to hide out the day. Then she tripped over James, over his long legs stretched out across the aisle. He caught Elle, yet she felt as if she had continued to fall. In those few seconds they became best friends. Sometimes it happens that way.

Their bond had remained through school and beyond. Elle and James were inseparable and their paths led them in the same direction, to university and a shared house.

It was a mundane moment in their history when Elle realised she loved James. Every day they met in the same café. Not the nicest of places, a bit run down even. But it was theirs to share and they didn't notice the chipped cups or the peeling paint. That morning was warm. Elle and James sat outside soaking up the sun. They sat side by side, watching people wander by. She remembered how they had sipped from the same cup, pretending it was only to save them money. She felt the intimacy of it – their lips touching the same warm pottery. Elle thought James felt it too. Then, when a soft breeze entwined Elle's hair with his, James had laughed and said they would always be together. Friends for life, he said.

A rush of time back to the present and Elle now stood in the kitchen doorway, watching as James hunted for his keys.

I wonder where he's off to, she thought, as she inhaled the smell his cologne. The one he wore when he really made an effort. It was her favourite. Elle had given him his first bottle and it was the only one James had used since.

"I'm not going anywhere without my keys," growled James. "Where have they gone?"

He ran between rooms, overturning cushions and coffee cups. His frustration showed in clenched fists and grimaces, but Elle couldn't help but giggle. Secretly, she loved to see his nose scrunch up in annoyance.

"It's always the most obvious place," said Elle pointing to yesterday's discarded jacket.

"Right," James said, "I'm off." The keys rattled in his hand and he was at the door. Then he was gone leaving only the scent of him behind.

The door closed and all energy left Elle. She slumped over to the stairs and sat, her legs tucked beneath her. There was always a good view of everywhere on the stairs. Often it was her favourite place to go; a place to think middle-of-the-stair thoughts. Elle wondered why she could never say the words she wanted to say; somehow the time was never right. She loved him and she suffered for it because he no longer loved her. Elle had never been enough for him. Not as anything lasting.

Even so, Elle found herself waiting for James to return later that evening. He wasn't alone. She heard the laughter first.

How can he do this? She thought. Bring someone home to the place we still share? But it was obvious. James didn't care anymore.

Elle listened to the soft murmurs; of smiles caught up in voices. It made her stomach clench and her breath catch in her throat. Then it went completely quiet and she knew it was over. The time had come to move on. He had someone else now and she had to let go.

Elle walked down the stairs. She was not quiet; they would not hear anyway. James never heard her these days. The front door

caught on the frame, with a grating sound as she pulled it open and her footsteps echoed lightly on the path in a slow rhythm. The alarm blared out a warning, its piercing noise awakening the night. James looked out through the open doorway. But he did not see the girl he had once loved. All he felt was a rush of air as it touched his skin. Then there was nothing but stillness.

Caroline Russell is a member of the Ruislip Writers' Group.

Giant Yellowwood Tree

By Michael Swinton

Larger than life, usurper of the light,
Giant in a forest of gigantic trees.
Surpassing strength in long, lithe, ligneous limbs
Standing fast with colossal, columned ease,
Observing where the flighted eagle climbs,
Not jealous in your broad and brooding might.

You stagger by your stupefying sight,
You stun by what the mind cannot pretend,
And pygmied by your silent eloquence
You symbolise what man can't comprehend.
Once seen, all else is little consequence
And fancy takes another, different flight.

Large armed by some strange, majestic law
You stretch to where our passions reach for more.

Dolphins

By Michael Swinton

Slate, sleek, snub-nosed citizens of the sea
With Mona Lisa smiles they cannot hide,
Curling like imitating waves to snatch
Another breath of air before they slide
Seething and weaving like a babbling batch
Of travelling school kids, chattering endlessly.

Muscular torpedoes scything through seas
Surging with the ocean's ebb and flow
And masters of a sound and sensing brain.
Tails flick and in an instant flash they go
Pacing, in concert, with no get nor gain
In uncontesting, harmonious ease.

Without pockets for cents or the dollar's bent,
Embracing the day they are content.

Michael is a member of the Uxbridge Writers' Group.

Teary Smile

By Yasmin Selena Butt

She was smiling, but her eyes shone with unshed tears, because a hammer had just dropped on her foot, and she couldn't say a word, for she was up on stage – and the audience were watching her.

What the hell had a hammer been doing there? The prop man must have left it when he was decorating the set. Meera's face heated with the enormity of the "OW" that she was longing to yell out. It had happened in the middle of an emotional scene, when her betrothed, a man who'd been languishing in prison for five years, was finally coming home, and she'd received a phone call telling her of the happy news.

She gripped the phone, a rictus of a grin fixed on her face. 'Oh my God, when? Where do I have to go? Please tell me this isn't a joke. Do you have any idea how long I've waited to hear these words?'

Her eyes were now stinging. She gasped. She could barely see the audience through the veil of tears threatening to spill. Meera nodded into the receiver, her smile softening, put the phone down and turned to speak to the packed house.

The tears spilled over her cheeks. Her nose went red and her mouth crumpled. The audience ‘oohed’ in sympathy and somehow, Meera got through to the end of the scene.

The applause at the end of the performance was heartfelt. It carried a different timbre, intensity to previous nights. Meera marched backstage with a singular purpose, but the prop man was nowhere to be found. The director came up to her and gave her a tight squeeze from behind.

‘Meera! The *tears* in the phone call scene, that was genius! I don’t know where you went to pull that off. I wanted to script it, and forgive me for this, but I didn’t know if you were capable ... but your range, I didn’t know you had it in you! I can’t *wait* to see the reviews. I’ve already had four critics come up to me and all they can talk about is *you* in that scene. The *emotion* you conveyed. The way your face changed colour! The sheer intensity on your face. They’d never seen anything like it! I’m going to change the script. I’m going to add in the tears...’

Meera looked at her director, dumbfounded and nodded. Dear, dear God!

This time, the unshed tears shining in her eyes were of a wholly different kind.

Yasmin is a member of the Yeading Writers’ Group.

Love and War

(May 19 2011)

By Priyali Ghosh

Love, revive my hungry heart.
In the deeps and hollows of
The turning world within.
Let your face be known to me.

Let your face be shown to me,
My bride and groom of softened sun.
Let there be white flowers
And red
In the hollows of my footsteps.

Love, in the howling storm without
Let me know your peace.
Be my staff, and not my snare.
Protect the trust with which you strew
The lush velvet floors within me.

Strengthen my wounded heart
To act in my defense.
That blood I drop now, one day will shine.
Rubied in its majesty,
Powerful as the seas I
Seek to command.

Lend me armies of white geese,
That honking will fly by my side
As I soar in the skies
From which so long I turned away my face.
Skies which last night
Beat at my window
Hammering and singing their songs of war.

Love in your sky and in your earth,
Let me be the
Butterfly and the boar.
I will wet my toes in honey drops.
I will charge with the fury and the fire
Of tusks unleashed.

Not I, anymore love
The shy and tender one
You reared as your own child.
I have seen your many faces
And I have a hundred voices, and a thousand tongues
To sing of conquest and ravages.
To match and meet, your armies and plains.

Priyali Ghosh is a member of the Uxbridge Writers' Group

Poem for Raminder (air stewardess)

By Simon Harrison

It was just another day
of sun-swept clouds
and lunchtime in the park,
Planes climbing up the Windsor sky
and outstretched girls
dreaming of last night and boys,
when I first set eyes on you...
But of course it wasn't you at all,
not a person I could see or touch,
just a plaque and lines of chiselled words
which seemed to move me.

And I wondered who you really were
and how you died.
Did you climb and touch the sky
and fall to earth?
Or were you simply taken from us,
as they say, before your natural time?

Perhaps I just would never know,
but somehow, as it seemed to me,
you stood for all the people
I would never meet this side of death.

And as I sat upon your bench,
I wondered if, somewhere,
beyond the veil of human time
and what we understand,
you might be looking down
to wonder who I was
to be so moved to write these words.
But moved I was.

And I will often come here, sit, and think of you,
one lovely person whom I never knew.

Simon lives in north Uxbridge, and used to work in archives and records management. His main writing interests are in historical and biographical literature, but he enjoys writing poetry too. He attends the Uxbridge Writers' Group.

If I should write...

By Simon Harrison

If I should write
a poem just for you,
would you sip it
slowly,
like a pernod
or dry martini?

Or would you gulp it down
like draughts of bitter ale
or Sicilian lemonade,
iced
on a summer afternoon?

Would you read it,
hide it away
in your fattest file
and deepest drawer,
or
keep it on
some rarely accessed
computer drive?

Or would you scan it,
zoom it off to friends,
hurl it into cyberspace,
await
tweets and twitters
and frothy facebook replies?

Perhaps you'd frame it,
hang it on your kitchen wall,
savour each line
over
muesli and stewed plums,
veggie stews and garlic bread.

Or maybe you'd place it
above your bed
like a consoling prayer,
words to watch over you
through dream journeys
and restless nights.

Or would you flip it
upside down,
pull it, stretch it, bend it,
jumble and pastiche it,
turning
my words into yours?

I can imagine
you might do one
or more or none
of all these things,
and
I wouldn't mind,
so long as my words,
dictionary-free,
live for you.

Siesta

By Simon Harrison

In a blue afternoon dream,
a girl sits on her terrace
sipping Frascati,
dreaming of her seaborne lover.
Below, the hum and heat of the street.
A donkey brays,
a car horn shrieks,
a cart upsets its load,
voices and tempers rise and fall.
A bell tolls from the dome
as the priest murmurs
in the empty church
while incense burns and drifts.
Heat glistens and the cat stretches
on the white wall.
The sea, like blue glass,
shimmers away to meet the sky.
The girl, bored and sleepy,
slips into wine-filled dreams.

The Haven

By Julia Underwood

The Haven: What a lovely name for a house, thought Lizzie.

A cross between a cottage and a bungalow, it lay in the embrace of the slopes of the Downs, on the outskirts of a once-pretty seaside town now polluted by new housing and commercial developments.

Lizzie and Tom bought the house as an investment. Now the older children were grown up and only Katy lived at home, they had enough cash to venture into the property market.

The Haven had been neglected for many years and needed a lot of work before selling. The slate roof leaked; the once-white plaster rendering was damaged. But they bought it cheaply and it showed potential.

'Spacious accommodation on two floors,' droned the estate agent. 'Three beds, two receps., usual offices. Needs updating, of course.'

'Updating' – a familiar euphemism. Inside, everything needed to be done.

'It hasn't been touched for fifty years.' Lizzie relished the challenge. 'We must get it!'

A plan to rewire, replumb and redecorate started. Lizzie formulated schemes to extend the kitchen, making it open-plan to

the dining room. The sitting room was gloomy and she visualised a new window to bring light and air. The smell of mould entailed major upheaval before other work could start. But damp-proofing helped considerably.

‘When we opened the windows and let in the air, the house was stretching; waking up after years of sleep. I’m sure it’s happier now.’ Lizzie told Tom.

‘That’s a bit fanciful, isn’t it?’

‘No, really, you could almost hear it sigh with contentment.’

Chaos ensued for weeks as floorboards were lifted; electricians and plumbers laid intricately twined wires and pipes. Holes were drilled and new radiators installed. The bathroom fittings were smashed and piled onto the over-full skip.

Inches of dust covered everything as the builder removed the wall between the kitchen and dining room creating a lovely room, light and airy.

Lizzie found herself patting the walls. ‘That’s better; much more spacious.’

They argued over where the new window in the lounge should go.

‘If we put it on the south side you’ll be able to see the sea.’

‘You’d have to stand on tiptoe,’ laughed Lizzie. ‘The other side there’s a lovely view of the Downs.’

But Tom was persistent, claiming that there would be more sunshine from the seaward side, so the builder was ordered to make the aperture in the south wall of the room.

‘I’ll just mark out the plaster,’ he said, holding a ruler and thick pencil. ‘We’ll knock it through tomorrow when I’ve got the beam ready.’ He left pencil marks on the wall, gouging the surface, where the new window would be.

Next morning, before the builders arrived, Lizzie wandered into the sitting room and switched on the single light bulb. The room was still dark, so she wasn’t surprised that she couldn’t see Jim’s pencil marks on the wall. She peered closer. No marks, even the gouges had disappeared. She could have sworn ... hadn’t he drawn it out yesterday? Tom was there; she’d check with him.

Lizzie called Tom at work. ‘Sorry to bother you, love. Something’s odd. Didn’t Jim mark out the new window’s position yesterday?’

‘You know he did; I was there. You’ve not changed your mind?’

‘Either I’m going mad or something very weird’s happening. There’s no marks there now.’

‘There must be. You’re not looking properly. Put on another light. You want me to come over? I haven’t got much on this morning.’

‘Don’t bother. I’ll look again. But, Tom, I think the house may be trying to tell us something.’

‘Don’t be daft. You’re being fanciful again.’

‘I’ll speak to you later. Jim’s arriving.’ Lizzie didn’t want to prolong the argument. She peered, squinted her eyes, put on her reading glasses, but there was no trace of any pencil marks.

The builders arrived, expecting tea and switching on loud radios as soon as they’d taken off their coats. Lizzie told Jim what had happened; he didn’t believe it either.

‘Would you credit it? Not a sign. How did that happen? I’ll mark it out again.’

‘No,’ Lizzie stopped him, ‘I’ve got another idea.’ She led him to the other wall. ‘Mark it here and we’ll leave it for a bit.’

‘OK. I’ve got plenty of things to do. We should get the heating on today. The plaster’ll dry in no time and we can start decorating.’

Later Lizzie inspected the north wall. She touched the pencil marks.

‘Jim,’ she said, ‘the window’s got to be here.’

‘Righto. I’ll get Bert onto it.’

Bert and Jim inserted a prop to support the ceiling. Bert set to work on the wall. In minutes the window-sized opening was excavated and the timber beam inserted.

‘It came away like butter,’ said Bert. ‘Never done an easier one. As if there’d been a window here before.’

Lizzie smiled and peered through the aperture. It seemed meant to be. The window would overlook the garden just where a

pretty jasmine grew; she could smell the flowers. The gentle sweep of the Downs rose behind.

'Yes,' she breathed. 'That's the right place.'

'I knew you'd change your mind,' said Tom, trying to keep annoyance out of his voice. 'You always get your way in the end.'

'No, it was supposed to be there, Tom, the house told us.'

'Hmpf,' Tom strode away.

That evening they turned on the heating; the ultra-efficient boiler throbbed into life. In mere seconds the house was warm and snug.

'It's going to be cosy when it's finished. I wouldn't mind living here myself.'

'It's lovely. I'd be happy here too,' agreed Lizzie.

'No. It's an investment. We've got to sell it to get our money back.'

'I know, but all the same...' Lizzie stroked the new kitchen surfaces and she fancied she could hear the little house purr with contentment.

Two weeks later they called the estate agent.

'You've done wonders! Shouldn't be any problem to sell.' He quoted an improbably high price for the property.

'Great!' Tom cried. 'Let's go for it.'

'I'll have it on the market tomorrow.' The estate agent roared off, probably fantasising about his commission.

From the first viewing things went wrong. Lizzie was showing them round, explaining the renovations.

'The new window,' she said, 'gives this room a lot more light.'

The branch of a tree scratched against the glass; a sharp draught sighed from nowhere.

'It's chilly in here,' shivered the husband, 'I thought the heating was on.'

'It's usually very cosy,' said Lizzie. 'The wind's probably in the wrong direction. Perhaps someone's fiddled with the thermostat.' But when she looked, it was set at the usual temperature.

Whenever she showed someone over the house peculiar new sounds emerged. The stairs creaked on every step, the doors refused to close properly, the lights flickered.

'It's all been rewired,' reassured Lizzie.

Fierce gales blew through the attics as if the roof was about to blow away. Once she couldn't open the main bedroom door. 'One of the children must have locked it.'

The viewers gave her an old-fashioned look.

'You're sure it isn't haunted?' asked a particularly nervous viewer. 'It seems very noisy.'

Every couple sent by the once enthusiastic agent complained about some peculiarity.

'No-one seems to like it,' he explained. 'Perhaps we should lower the price?'

But even a £10,000 reduction didn't help and Lizzie and Tom despaired.

'We can't afford to keep it up,' said Tom. 'The interest charges are crippling us.'

'Let's try a bit longer.'

'If it goes on more than a couple of months we'll have to sell our house and move in ourselves.'

Lizzie had a revelation. Of course, that was what the house wanted. She kept a careful eye open every time she visited. Whenever she was alone or with the family the house welcomed her; it felt warm and peaceful. When anyone else came, especially the estate agent and his clients, the house responded with winds, noises and eerie draughts.

'That's it, Tom,' she said. 'We've got to move in ourselves.'

'Oh, no,' complained Tom. 'It's miles from the golf course.'

'Oh, come on, Tom. We don't need such a big house now there's just Katy. There's still a spare bedroom for the others.'

Tom put up all the objections he could think of, but eventually he came round.

'The interest charges are a nightmare,' he conceded. 'And it is a lovely setting.'

The agent was stunned, but sold their bigger house in record time.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' he said. 'Properties like this are hard to come by nowadays.'

'We're doing the right thing.' Lizzie was as sure as she could be.

Within weeks they moved in. The day was sunny; without a breath of wind. Lizzie felt the house breathe a sigh as they brought in their furniture, an almost tangible contented shrug, as they settled into their house, their Haven.

A resident of Ruislip, Julia has been a medical scientist, a publican, a restaurateur and an interior designer. She has had several short stories and articles published and has hopes for a novel. She attends the Ruislip Writers' Group.

Haiku – A Collection for the Modern Woman (Part 1)

By Kristen Platt

Butter stains my pure
Silk blouse, like my lies which stay
Around forever.

Your iPad does not
Need to click as you type so
Please change the settings.

Kristen writes fiction to entertain herself on her daily commute. She has completed her novel *Shows, Blows and Breakfast Burritos*; and is a freelance writer for www.Close-Upfilm.com.

Spells

By Ron Balsdon

Fred Evans had always loved books. He'd read a chapter or two every night propped up in bed on his pillows, oblivious to the occasional mouth open snores of his next door neighbour Charlie Tompkin, so immersed was he in his latest whodunnit.

He'd often told his mates down at the pub that he wouldn't be able to sleep without a couple of chapters in bed at night.

His love of reading had been with him ever since his schooldays, when he'd won first prize in the class writing competition once. After leaving school he'd joined a creative writing group, determined to write a novel but unfortunately he'd soon realised that that moment of inspiration at school was a fluke, a one off. The Muse, as Fred put it, had popped in, said hello and quickly popped out again never to return.

So Fred had become an avid reader instead.

Bookshops drew Fred like a magnet, especially the second-hand ones, when one might stumble across a well thumbed piece of treasure from yesterday. So when one opened at the bottom of his road one Saturday morning he soon paid a visit.

Glancing along the shelves he nodded to himself.

'Good,' he thought 'They're all here, all my old friends: Gresham, Du Maurier, Tolkien, Austin, Rowlands – haven't read her

yet,' he thought. 'I must be the only one who hasn't,' he hesitated.
'Maybe next time.'

Bending down he quickly scanned the lower shelves his eyes drawn by a paperback with a vivid yellow spine. Picking it out he stood up and looked at the front cover. Superimposed over a picture of a witch riding on a broomstick were the words 'Spells: Ancient and Modern.'

Fred chuckled to himself and prepared to replace the slim volume when curiosity made him first flick through a few pages.

One page caught his attention, caused his brow to furrow as he glanced at the chapter heading: 'Spells for career advancement.' He read on for a few minutes, then looked thoughtfully out of the shop window with a faraway look in his eye. Then suddenly he snapped the book shut and took it to the cash desk, where a young woman with a bad case of acne sniffled into a tissue and sat reading a copy of a celebs magazine.

'Bloody sacrilege,' he mumbled under his breath. looking around at all the treasures piled on the shelves behind her.

Taking his money, the girl glanced at the title as she slipped his book into a paper bag. She gave him a funny look as she gave him his change, seeming to take great care not to touch his hand when doing so. Walking past the window when he got outside, Fred felt a pair of eyes boring into his back.

After finishing his evening meal in his lodgings that night, Fred carefully cleared the dishes from the kitchen table. Taking the book from his coat pocket he turned again to the chapter that said 'Spells for career advancement'. Sitting down in his rather threadbare armchair, he studied the book carefully.

'Advancement in one's chosen career,' he read, 'can often be like waiting in a queue – unless you are very fortunate indeed you certainly won't be anywhere near the front.'

When he'd finished the chapter Fred put the book in his lap, thinking. 'Twenty one years I've been on that production line at Simpkins Sanitation and Bathroom Fittings Co. Ltd. Stuck on the factory floor, churning out thousands of white plastic toilet seats. They turned down my request for a transfer to the brass ballcocks and grommet section last year. Surely I deserve more out of life!'

He felt his blood pressure rise as he thought of the injustice of it all.

Crossing to the table he studied the book carefully again, then going out into the garden he returned with four blades of grass. To these he added five baked beans, a dash of HP Sauce and a button off his best shirt. Still studying the page, Fred wrapped them carefully in one of his old socks and going into the toilet recited the rather obscure verse, before dropping them down the loo. And, as directed, he said aloud three times the name of his foreman Bert Coggins before pulling the chain five times exactly.

Laying in bed that night, Fred gazed up at the window and stared at the moon, thinking that the swirls and craters there gave it a slight resemblance to old Bert Coggins' face.

He laughed to himself, thought of the whole thing as a bit of fun and slept that night like a baby.

Parking his bike in the cycle shed the next morning, Fred clocked in one minute early and was immediately buttonholed by George Blisset who worked in Urinals and Faucets.

'Quick, Fred! Report to Mr Sheldrake in the main office. They've just had you on the Tannoy.'

'Why? What's up George? What's it all about then?'

'It's Bert Coggins' Mrs, she's just rang up to see if he's here yet. Apparently she's in a hell of a state. It seems that at about 8.30 last night he went into the loo... and... and she hasn't seen him since. You see,' explained an excited George, 'the window in their loo is so small nobody could get out that way and she said he'd locked the door behind him as he usually did. Police had to break it down this morning. There was no sign of Bert!'

'They want you to be acting foreman I think, Fred. Until Bert shows up, that is.'

'Well there's a rum do and no mistake!' said Fred as he walked to Mr Sheldrake's office.

A few minutes later the police arrived and interviewed all the staff—There were no leads and no sign of Bert.

It was about a week later that the first rumoured sighting of Bert Coggins occurred.

Betty Hardcastle from the canteen swore that she had seen him on Sunday leading the Salvation Army band down Blakeley High Street.

Then young spotty Palmer from despatch said that he'd seen Bert, starring in a porn movie down at the Heavy Breathing Club, which was situated just above the local Women's' Institute over in Beak Street.

Two mornings later, Rodney Morton from accounts rushed in waving his copy of the *Guardian*.

'Look! Look!' he shouted. 'Here's a picture of Bert Coggins!'

The office staff crowded round.

'Yes, look! It is him. It's Bert all right!' went up the cry.

They saw him standing on the lawns of the White House, smiling beside the President.

Fred really enjoyed his status as acting foreman and spent a lot of time supervising in the Assembly shop in order to be near Cathy Oakroyd who he fancied like mad. He made her team leader with a resultant increase in salary.

She said she must show him her gratitude and promised to invite him home, where she would give him some hotpot.

The only fly in the ointment was Percy Potter, the shop floor manager, who loved to embarrass Fred in front of Cathy, who he secretly lusted after. Daily he would come into the assembly shop and shout across to Fred: 'Make the most of it Evans – you're only here under sufferance you know. Soon as Bert returns, you're back on toilet seats again. Think on!' His voice would boom across the urinals and bidets to a red-faced, profoundly embarrassed Fred.

One night Fred washed up after his evening meal and went over to his bookshelf and took down his copy of 'Spells: Ancient and Modern.'

After carefully reading a few pages, he got up and collected together two raisins, 1 pencil sharpener and half a pickled onion. Over this, he sprinkled some Ready Brek. Then he wrapped them carefully in one of his old vests, as the book directed, and put the whole thing in the dustbin, at the same time chanting the obscure verse and repeating Percy Potter's name three times.

Very early the following frosty morning the Potters' next door neighbours were roused from their sleep by frantic screams emanating from the Potters'.

The front door was broken down in order to gain entry. Bloodcurdling screams came from the upstairs bedroom. Bursting frantically in they stopped short in their tracks at the sight of Mrs Potter, sitting up in bed, screaming hysterically with the clothes clutched tightly under her chin while a rampant orang-utan bounced excitedly up and down, dressed in Percy's blue pyjama top.

Now, two years later, Fred is driven to work every morning in a chauffeur driven Rolls. Invariably puffing a large cigar as befits the senior managing director of Simpkins' International Sanitary Ware Co Ltd.

Young Nathan Blackwell, the rather likeable office tea boy, was orphaned at an early age. He often calls his boss an old skinflint. 'Guess what he said to me today,' he told old Harry Gregg of the brass ballcocks and grommet repair shop. 'He said that if I behaved meself and went to night school, he'd give me a prezzi.'

'Really, and what might that be I wonder then?' asked old Harry.

'A flipping book! I've half a mind to tell him what to do with it. The old skinflint!' said young Nathan in disgust.

Ron's writing moved up a gear when he joined Uxbridge Writers' Group nine years ago. Since then he has written many short stories and sketches and had some plays performed at various venues. Ron also likes to do readings of his work! Any offers?

Pink Milk

By Fran Tracey

I can't think what makes me tell her. I can only think it's Lily asking for pink milk. She's started asking for it at bedtime. Maybe it's that and Charlie watching Doctor Who. The two things happening together have jogged my memory. Having my memory jolted was one thing; it was quite another admitting to my Mum what I'd done thirty years ago. And it isn't what I am supposed to have told her. I'm still holding onto that. There's no need for her to know I'm having another baby yet.

"I used to pour my milk behind the sofa, into the carpet," I say, leaving the words hanging in the air.

I don't think pink milk and Doctor Who converged when I was a kid. It's strange how strands from the past unravel like DNA, and it becomes hard to pin time down. To make it seem all neat and tidy and linear. But things are rarely as simple as that. They are more likely to be a tangled mess. I certainly hid from Doctor Who, but that meant just putting a cushion in front of my face. Charlie, all of eight years old, isn't the least bit afraid.

"Hmm?" Mum is buried deep in the crossword. Eight down is tricky. We're all stumped. We've just got 'rebel', five down, so we know there's an 'r' in it, but that's about it. Mum is unusually quiet today, even though it's her party, as though she's waiting for

something to happen. Maybe I've made some unacknowledged faux pas.

"I'd pour it into the carpet and watch it soak in. Sometimes I'd squish my foot into it, see it pool around my toes."

I go into the details against my better judgement.

"But you've got laminate flooring."

This was one of those random remarks which tells me Mum hasn't been listening properly.

"It's not Lily I'm talking about. It's me. I hated it."

"You never hated pink milk. You loved it. Didn't she, Martin?"

My Dad ignores her. He's watching the TV with Charlie. Twenty minutes ago he'd been woken by his own snoring; looked around, puzzled to see us all there, as though he thought he was taking part in his favourite activity, fishing, and we hadn't been invited. He starts to say he wasn't asleep, just resting his eyes, but he gives up, probably remembering how often we'd heard that excuse before. Mind you, it was Dad who'd got the answer to five down, just before he nodded off.

"I didn't. I hated it. I was behind the sofa because I was frightened of the Daleks."

I don't think this is true at all. But it sounds good. I'd tried to convey to Charlie the fear I felt of the hideous robots who promised to exterminate you. He just makes a face as though to say 'my Mum's mad'. It's come early to Charlie, the realisation that his parents are far from perfect.

"Tom Baker." Dad said.

"How often did you do that?" Mum's tone has altered. She's tense today, even without taking the pink milk revelation into account. I can feel her rolling back her anger thirty years or more, encompassing something she had obviously known nothing about.

"Dunno," I shrug, also rolling back thirty years.

"I don't know," she enunciates. "Remember your elocution lessons?" Charlie turns the volume up. She's all posh now, as though the Archbishop is in the room, snuggled on the sofa next to my Dad, who's sipping from a can of bitter.

"I don't know," I reply. "About when I had my first Holy Communion, with the sticky out dress and the German measles."

I see something slip into place with Mum.

"It always smelt in that room, like someone had died in there," she says. "And we couldn't afford to replace the carpet. Now I know why. You should have said you didn't like milk."

"I did. Every time."

"That's why you didn't grow then."

Silence. Deadlock. She's probably right. I am the runt of the litter. I hear the Doctor explain to his assistant why there's two of her. Something to do with different dimensions, but I'm not really following.

My sister-in-law, Jo, comes into the room. She's been washing up with Chris. They both like to get on with things, my husband and Jo. They find these parties claustrophobic. They've both fitted well into our family, considering.

Lily crawls onto Mum's lap for a cuddle. Mum shakes her newspaper. I can sense her irritation, but Lily is oblivious.

"Must be great to be grandparents," says Jo.

There's a long pause before Mum answers. I try not to read too much into the silence, waiting for her to speak. Our family is a bit too prone to reading too much into things. We worry away at them, question why someone didn't talk to us in town today when they've forgotten to wear their glasses. And even then we'd be disinclined to believe them.

"Yes, it is, it's lovely being a granny to these two." Mum squeezes Lily really tightly, nearly making her spill her milk. Lily grins. She's an easy kid to love. Jo catches my eye, raises one eyebrow. She knows it took Mum longer than was decent to acknowledge the love. I shrug. She got there in the end. And I still had to tell Mum the other thing. The thing about having another baby. That was all still to say. There hadn't been the right shape space in the day. Not yet.

"Why didn't you rebel when you were a teenager, Karen, love?"

Dad again. I wondered if he was talking in his sleep. Remembering the answer to the clue. But no, he was wide awake. "I'd have loved a daughter of mine to rebel. I could have boasted about you down at the club."

I don't bother replying. There was nothing my Dad would have liked less than a rebellious daughter. The truth is a strange thing, easily distorted, like Chinese whispers. It's not worth questioning him, though. You need to know when to let things go. We are all quiet for a while. Then Lily breaks the silence with the news I hadn't been brave enough to share yet.

"Granny, Mummy's going to have another baby."

"Lily, I told you I was going to tell Granny that."

"I guessed as much, Lily, love. And when exactly did you plan telling me, Karen? When it was too late to do anything about it?"

I look round the room. No-one else seems to have heard, especially Dad who appears intent on following Doctor Who. I walk out to the kitchen. I don't want to continue this conversation in front of Charlie, Lily and Dad. Mum follows me.

"Martin, get our stuff together, will you, we'll be leaving in a minute," she calls back to Dad.

"It's too late now, Mum. We've decided to keep the baby."

I busy myself unloading the dishwasher.

"Well you're even dafter than I'd give you credit for, Karen. Surely you can remember what the doctor said after Lily. I hope you're not going to come running to me whenever you get a twinge. This is selfish. God knows what I'm going to tell your father."

"I'll tell him, Mum. I'll tell him that I've finally rebelled. He's just said that's what he always wanted."

I wiped my eyes on a damp tea towel. Mum snatches it from me and passes me a piece of kitchen roll. This helps. But what I really want is a hug. We both know I'm taking a risk. That the doctor said another pregnancy would be ill-advised because of a genetic condition. Not impossible but ill-advised. Funny how genes can mess things up, isn't it? Then me and Chris had an accident. And we decided to go ahead with the pregnancy. We love being parents. And we're adults, perfectly capable of taking informed risks. Not that you'd know that from Mum's reaction.

"I've got the answer to eight down." My Dad emerges from the living room, shrugging into his coat. It's 'concern'. That 'r' in rebel gave it away.

Me and Mum stand there. Close but not touching.

“Is it indeed? Concern. Did you hear that, Karen?”

“I did, Mum.”

“That’s right. ‘Care for another’s wellbeing.’ Easy when you think about it,” Dad says. “One of us should have got that.”

Then they leave, Mum and Dad. Mum hugs me and whispers something I don’t quite catch. I kind of hope she says she loves me, and I tell myself that is exactly what I hear. She wouldn’t have hugged me otherwise, would she? Mum needs some time to adjust. I understand that. And if she said she loved me, then it’s ok for me to think things will turn out fine in the long run. After all, they usually do, don’t they?

Formerly a librarian, Fran lives in Ruislip with her husband, son and daughter. She loves people-watching and listening, and translating this ‘hobby’ into writing short stories for magazines and anthologies. She attends the Ruislip Writers’ Group.

What would I desire?

By Leo McHugh

That I am the wind sought after by your branches, that carries the birds with the songs that fill your garden with colour and harmony.

That I am the sun that is embraced by your waters as I glimmer and sparkle on their surface and permeate their private depths with a welcome warmth and light.

That your ideas bloom like flowers and I am the bee; harvesting them and causing them to flourish.

That I am the bare footed child, delighting in your soft grass caressing my feet and experiencing the endless expanse of your summer.

That I am the elderly man, blanket covered: relaxed and content, dozing blissfully in the warmth of your fire.

That I am the eagle whose distant flights across your skies plough fertile furrows in your fields.

That I am the silence that settles with your snow. Inhabiting the spaces between your feathery fallings.

That I am the gardener, trusted with the keys to your gates. Whose intricate and loving touch causes your flowers to sigh their perfume into the air, cloaking him in your scent.

That I am the painter, drawn ever back to your beauty, in the hope that one day he can absorb all of its nuances and glory and capture it on canvas.

That I see all this glistening ardently in the depths of your eyes when you look at me.

Leo is writer who believes that it is much easier to communicate through writing than through short biographies like this one! He attends the Uxbridge Writers' Group.

The Passing of Gaegue

By Angela Narayn

Her bony hand extended towards me like a withered root. She clutched my hand like a frail bird; her touch was cold like a fresh wind blown across the lake. Her skin was pale and opaque like egg shell and the blue, thread-like veins shone underneath. Her voice both near and far sprouted from between her thin lips like mountain water bubbling between rocks.

“She’s a real *Roarty*. There’s no denying.”

Then she fell into Gaelic and the rise and fall of her strange words swirled in my head as I felt the waves of acceptance and inclusion. The huddled pyramid of heads murmured in agreement around the bed and their lips were pursed in a mutual confirmation of family and belonging.

For a frail moment I stood at the core of this chain of belonging. The dying light fragmented across the sparse room as I stood alongside the tomb-like bed. My eyes dilated, my lips parted, in this ghostly vision of death. I had never seen the ancient so close before; it seemed like her flesh just clung to her bones and her thoughts hovered between two worlds. In her eyes I saw the

scattered lakes of her homeland, and in her voice the cry of gulls in flight and the rush of mountain water.

I inhaled her smell of decay as it crept along the cold stone walls. On the old dresser her crucifix loomed in the shadows and the picture of Jesus above her bed, breast open to display a perfect crimson heart, and her rosary; the worn beads entwined through her twisted fingers. I imagined her head bowed and eyes closed in fervent devotion; the chanting of prayer midst the old wooden furniture and worn square of carpet.

Amongst her symbols of faith, a green faded head scarf strayed from a slightly open drawer and I pictured her in the fields. The stain of earth on her hands, head covered, back arched, legs bent, fingers grasping for potatoes and carrots, and the sowing of seeds in spring. By her side, perhaps, a baby in a basket and only its cry stopping her work. Under her bed were old boots, leather discoloured, wrinkled, soles worn and the stale odour of a lifetime's toil. They had carried her all those years to her work that had both cleansed and exhausted her. Suddenly her hand fell limp and her head slumped back on her pillow; her breath was rapid and shallow.

I ran through the tumble of outbuildings and through the marshy fields. I looked beyond the dry stone walls and the smudge of heather in the distance. I heard the sea pounding on the fine sands as the land fell away to the east. I could smell traces of salt and seaweed carried in the wind and the shadow of seagulls overhead swept over me. Errigal glimmered through the trees, pale and mysterious, her peak lost in clouds. I breathed in life and bathed in movement. The earth beneath my feet was rugged and uneven as I weaved a path under the open sky. The wind nipped at my heels as it propelled me through this land of my fathers.

I approached the grey stone walls and slipped inside the gaping doorway; moving slowly in the darkness. I felt eyes as they glared in the darkness. I saw a humped shape and heard a strange menacing utterance between snarling teeth. I stood frozen, breathing in the smell of damp straw and sheep's wool. My eyes began to adjust and focus on the jumble of life under her; stumbling desperate to suckle. She spat her defiance and crouched

low. I inched slowly to the door, my breathing suspended; never taking my eyes off her for a second. Once out, I gulped the damp air and ran back to the house. My heart pounding, the wind in my hair and the sting of stubby grass on my skin.

My father emerged blinking into the skyline; a large strong man but somehow diminished. Two men shook his hand firmly in turn and I noticed his drooping mouth and the slight tremble of those powerful hands.

"She'll hardly make morning." Their sombre tones hung in the air like heavy clouds.

I sat by my father in the car and pressed my face up against the window as I saw the house gradually diminish and disappear from sight.

"Whose is the old ruined house out beyond the trees?"

"You didn't go that far? You be careful. That belongs to the Boyles. That's their place. It stretches right over to Meencorwick."

"What happened? Why did they leave it?"

"Oh that happened all over. Only Maggie and Biddy stayed. The others went to America and they never married." They died some twenty years ago now, I would say. My father's voice was always harsh and abrasive and I relaxed in its familiarity.

I saw the crumbling house windblown and rain lashed in my mind: the ruined roof, the sky leaking through, the windows long gone, the smell of animals that permeated its walls and the half door rotting on its hinges. I shivered as I felt the eyes that had glared in the darkness. We chugged along the dirt track until we met the road. The sky was granite grey and the land stretched before us; desolate bog lands and stone studded hills. I saw my Dad's face in the dying light; the strain of parting still on his features and his empty, sad eyes staring.

"You know she was a force to be reckoned with in her day. No one spoke out of turn in her presence. Not if they had any sense," he added with the ghost of a smile.

Swinging my head sideways I noticed the hushed tone and slight hesitation. "Do you mean the old lady, Dad?"

"Her name is Gaegue, child. She is your great aunt."

I thought about her, pale limbs outstretched, boots under the bed and the worn rosary beads twisted between her fingers. I turned the words over in my head, *she'll hardly make morning* and the words fluttered round and round in my head.

"I remember her as I boy. You'd watch yourself if she came to visit. She'd sit down by the range with a bowl of tea and slice of bread, her boots damp from the bog, and she'd ask my mother "which one has been acting up this time Mary?" My mother would pause and we'd all go silent hoping not to hear our name." His voice was low as if he was really talking to himself and I just happened to be there. Then he plunged into a sombre silence.

As we approached my uncle's house and turned in from the road the two dogs ran to meet us. I plunged my hands through their damp, thick, fur, and breathed in their smell. I was careful to push them away as they tried to lick me; I knew it would anger my father. The door opened and the light spilled onto the gravel path. I looked backwards for a moment as the lake shimmered quiet and still like a slumbering serpent. The distant mountains receded into shadows and from their hushed silence, a misty moon climbed overhead.

Angela is a member of the Ruislip Writers' Group. She describes the experience of writing as 'teasing strands of the inner self whilst reaching out for inspiration and ideas... full of twists and turns and countless surprises'.

Survivors' Feast Songs

By Priyali Ghosh

You don't know anything about me
Because of the way I look
Or speak
Or sound.

You don't know anything about me
Because of the language I speak
My accent
The school I went to
Or the part of town
I hang my hat in.

You learn something
About me
When you listen.
When you
Free yourself
From the things you don't know.
That clutter your mind

And come between us
Telling you where to look
And what to hear.

I learn something about you
When you look at me
Naked as
The day
And not ashamed.

How beautiful you are
When you have no bodyguards.

Here, I find you
The mystery I follow.
I learn your name.
You give me your secrets
Like flowers.

Many colours,
Many softnesses.

Here we hold
A country of our own.

This poem was performed in London in February 2005 as part of the Ramajaz Fundraising Event for victims of the Tsunami in 2004. Priyali Ghosh grew up in Calcutta (India) and kept on growing when she moved to England in the 1990s to read English at Cambridge University. In her life outside poetry and theatre she is a language and literature teacher and nineteenth-century scholar; she hopes to publish her recently completed doctoral thesis and to contribute to a happier world in which instead of being asked "where are you originally from?" people might instead say "where are you going?" and "Can I come?"

The New Girl

By Caroline Russell

Colours bright and scalding caused Yasmina to squint as she entered the classroom. There were posters everywhere, all in strange, incomprehensible writing. String was stretched across the large room, a place for children's works of art and a trap for tall people. It was quiet save for the voice of a lady, who gestured towards Yasmina. Another lady, older, stood next to the young girl and held her hand, as if worried she would bolt for the door without a moment's hesitation. Yasmina had been the new girl before, but this time it felt different.

Young faces looked up at Yasmina. Some even smiled at her. This she understood and for a moment she thought she might smile too. But then they spoke all at once, and a confusion of sound met her ears. It was too much and Yasmina wondered how she could listen to this every day. She wished her family were surrounding her still. She imagined it was so.

The class sat down at blue tables, in a noisy crush that Yasmina found loud and scary. She was handed over to a girl with bright red hair and pale skin, called Clare, who ushered her to a chair. The girl spoke very little, merely smiled, though Yasmina could not have replied anyway. It didn't seem to matter. The two girls drew pictures with fat crayons, as around them children chatted

and laughed. Yasmina felt a moment of happiness. At last, something she knew. She could draw; very well, in fact.

"Is that your family?" Clare asked smiling as Yasmina shrugged in reply. "Where are you from?"

Yasmina could not answer. Instead, thinking of her family reminded her of the journey. And the distance they had travelled.

She remembered closing her eyes against the blur of scenery passing the minivan. It hurt to stare at the things zooming past. The miles stretched beyond miles until she no longer felt them passing. Her family had been travellers for many generations, yet this was the first time *this* generation had strayed beyond their homeland. The journey was taking them to a new country. But Yasmina didn't want to leave for this new life. She found the prospect too strange, too scary. This was an adventure to everyone but Yasmina and she felt alone because of her family's excitement.

"Where have the yellows and green gone?" she wondered. All she saw were shades of grey. Before they left, she had run round the village saying goodbye to her friends. Yasmina was proud to have made those friends, as normally her stays were brief and she left friendless. She found her sadness growing as the village disappeared into the distance behind them.

They stopped to rest after hours of travelling and finally crossing the wild, grey sea.

"My legs are wobbly," said her younger sister as they exited the van. Yasmina cuddled up to her, noticing how green she looked.

"Come," said Yasmina, "sit here with me." The metal bench was cold underneath them, so they huddled together while their uncle bought food and water. Yasmina liked the chocolate in the purple wrapper best; it tasted of sweetness and warmth.

While they ate, the adults talked of the English people. Her uncle had been among them for some time. He told them they could be a strange people, but for the most part, more tolerant than some.

"Guard your ears against their talking," he said. "When they speak it sits stagnant, and wallows in your ears." He gave a harsh laugh. Her mother and father joined in too, as if sharing in the joke.

"Why are you all laughing?" Yasmina asked. As she looked around her at the people, she thought they looked no different from her family.

"Never mind, little one," replied her father with a shrug.

They were moving again. Next to Yasmina, on every side, her family jostled and poked, responding to the movement and sway. She didn't speak. She knew her voice would not be heard over the many layers of sound that filled the van. It was the way of their culture, with so many competing for so little; you had to fight to be heard. But Yasmina felt no need to vie for attention and she took comfort in their rhythms.

Darkness surrounded them as they stepped from the van and walked the path to their new house; the house her uncle had found for them. It was a starless night; the moon fought to show through the cloud and Yasmina shivered into her thin jacket. She didn't know it could be so cold. It ate into her bones until she was numb throughout and shivering wasn't enough.

Inside the house it wasn't much better, but there was light and hot water. Her uncle said the fire would warm them up soon, though it wasn't soon enough for Yasmina and her sisters. They huddled together and watched as the vapour from their breath ran down the curtain-less windows. Her uncle brought out a bottle of Tuica and the family stood in the small room and raised their glasses, a celebration of their successful journey. Yasmina had never before had the hot, plum-tasting drink and she choked on the tiny sip she had taken from her mother's glass.

"Bedtime now little ones," said her father, putting down his empty glass. The brothers and sisters spread throughout the house searching for space to sleep. The noise was loud and echoed around.

A few nights later, Yasmina lay awake amid the sounds of snoring. Soft moonlight shone through the window, into the darkness. The family lay two or three to a room. There were no beds yet, but once they had them, she would still share with her sisters. This was how it always was. In the meantime, she wriggled around trying to get comfortable on the hard floor. But the chill she felt had not shifted and she dreaded the morning light.

The shock of chattering voices and giggles brought Yasmina's attention back to the classroom. The children were tidying up for play time, their voices louder and more excited at the prospect of freedom. Clare was smiling at Yasmina again and waved her hand towards the door. It felt good to have a friend, so Yasmina followed her. She gave a sigh, glad to leave the stifling heat of the crowded room.

Outside Yasmina felt the caress of the wind on her face. She saw her brothers and sisters huddled together by the fence, always a united front. Overjoyed to see them, she dragged her new friend over, shouting and laughing a greeting to her family. There were hugs all round, and smiling faces. The eldest brother checked how everyone was. But it was easy to see how happy and relieved the siblings were.

"Hey!"

They all turned as one, sensing danger. Yasmina knew what was coming. She had been here before. Violence and aggression followed her family round like a hungry dog. Gulping back her fear, she watched as her older brothers moved forward to meet the group of children, pushing Yasmina behind.

"We know all about you thieves."

Yasmina did not understand the words, but she knew the group's intent. She read it in the crossed arms and their twisted up faces.

"Go back," someone said. "We don't want you here." They used words, which weren't their own; they seemed rehearsed, as if from older mouths. The oldest brother stepped forward. He was tall and knew how to use his size. But the other children moved towards them, hands fisted in readiness.

Yasmina felt a sudden surge of anger. She was tired of this hatred. She pushed past her family and stood in front of the cluster of small minds, ignoring her brother's call to return to her position. She didn't speak, merely stood and stared at the faces in front of her. She felt the strength of standing alone against many. Then looking to her right, she saw Clare appear at her side. Yasmina nodded a thank you, aware there was some language they could share.

The others laughed to see two small girls standing in the way of a fight. But Yasmina sensed discomfort in their eyes. This hadn't gone how they wished, so where did they go from here. The matter was taken away from them.

"Ok, break it up," said a loud voice. "Mr Jennings, I hope you were welcoming our new friends to the school?"

The group dispersed then. A battle had been won for today at least. Here's to more ahead, thought Yasmina.

Caroline is a former teacher. She now writes short stories for competitions and magazines, in between looking after her two young children. She is a member of the Ruislip Writers' Group.

The Treasure

By Julia Underwood

How lucky it's been a dry June, Doreen thought, positioning the flower arrangement in the centre of the hall table. The roses were especially ebullient this year; pink, plump buds, red and luxuriously scented blooms mixed with blousy peonies and delicate hanging fronds of leaves.

She regarded the hall with pride. The oak floor was beautifully polished as were the console tables and the antique octagonal table that the flowers stood on. She was satisfied; how she loved this house!

Doreen had come to live here at 18. Mrs Greene-Smythe expected twins and couldn't manage the house and grounds as well as their lively three-year old, Heather. So Doreen was employed as Mother's Help.

'I need help with absolutely everything, Doreen; I know you'll be marvellous,' Prudence said, tears sparkling in her pretty eyes. 'I simply can't cope. I've never had to do this sort of thing. Mummy and Daddy never lifted a finger; they had servants in Singapore.'

Doreen took over and managed the household from then on. Prudence's undoubted charm encouraged her.

'You're a treasure, Doreen, I couldn't do without you!'

But she took credit for the state of the house and the cooking whenever there were guests.

'My goodness, Prue, the house looks magnificent! And dinner was outstanding. I don't know how you manage it.'

Prudence would blush and accept the compliments without demur. Her husband, Colonel Greene-Smythe, patted her hand.

'You do a wonderful job, old thing,' he'd say before retiring to his study to write his memoirs, a tale of World War 2 exploits in the desert. Doreen read some of it and found it incredibly dull; full of hyperbolic references to the Colonel's heroism under fire.

Prudence was not entirely idle. She pottered in the garden in a fetching straw hat and gauzy frocks, wielding secateurs and chopping willy-nilly at errant foliage. She cut flowers for indoors and spent hours arranging them into elaborate displays. She changed her charming, expensive clothes often. She read detective novels on the morning room chaise longue, occasionally calling for coffee or tea.

'Be a darling, Doreen. A cup of tea would be marvellous. I've been so busy today.'

Fortunately Doreen was not expected to do literally everything. A woman came from the village to do the cleaning under Doreen's supervision. A young Nanny was employed for the children and a cook reigned over the kitchen. Prudence's interest in food was limited so Doreen planned the menus and the shopping.

Whenever she could, Doreen stayed in the nursery. The nanny, fresh from Norlands, was inexperienced and they cared for the children together. The twins, Geraldine and Adam, were a handful, always up to mischief. Heather was more serious, aware of her position as older sister. Doreen was always there to comfort or scold, to praise or admonish. She thought of them as her own children and relished their goodnight hugs; their sweet childish gifts.

'Look, Dorrie, I've drawed an elephant.'

'I love you, Dorrie,' they'd say as she tucked them in.

She was bereft when they went away to boarding school at eight. Heather first, a sweet, shy little thing in a navy blue uniform too big for her, driven away in the Rolls on the first day. Doreen

cried copiously. Later, Prudence seemed relieved when the twins left.

'So energetic all the time,' she said. 'There'll be some peace at last.'

The twins went to Bedales, a co-ed school, so they could be together. They went off hand in hand barely saying goodbye to their parents but clinging to Doreen before they left.

Doreen greeted them back in the holidays; packed their trunks and saw they had everything they needed, mended, cleaned and marked with their names, at the end of the break. Often they spent the holidays alone in the house when the Colonel and Prudence were away on their foreign jaunts. Doreen relished these times of fun and freedom. Just the children and her, for the nanny had left by then.

Doreen dealt with the little dramas that arose at school.

'I don't have time for this,' said Prudence. 'Do it for me – please.'

Doreen took the phone calls; calmed the tears and fears; advised on how to deal with bullying, with unkind teachers, with minor misdemeanours and with more serious troubles. She rushed to the school when Adam broke his leg, when Heather had scarlet fever, and brought them home wrapped in love. They might as well have been her own children.

They were teenagers when the Colonel fell ill with cancer. Mercifully he did not have to suffer for long. Doreen nursed him through his last months. She gave him his blanket baths, changed his sweat-sodden pyjamas, made sure he took his medicines and cleaned up his mess.

'I can't bear sick people, Doreen. Be a darling and do it for me, could you? I'll come up and see him later.'

Prudence put in an appearance when he was clean and pain-free; sitting up tidily in bed, bravely trying to smile.

Prudence looked lovely at the funeral; black suited her. She stood slim and elegant at the graveside, holding back sobs with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

'You've been so brave, Prue,' said her friends.

'I did everything for him you know,' she whispered.

Doreen stood in the background, the children at her side.

Prudence was away even more in widowhood and depended on Doreen more than ever to attend to the house and her wardrobe and packing for her trips. The children were back at school and had three or four more years; they still needed Doreen to look after them. Prudence barely gave them a thought. Doreen was relaxed; she was safe in her home.

The children completed their schooldays with good qualifications and plans to go to university. That same summer disaster struck Prudence. She was drowned in a boating accident in Monte Carlo. Another funeral and the children hung around looking mildly forlorn. Doreen was joyful. At last! The children and the house were hers; she could live out her days here with everything she had ever wanted.

'You'll look after the house whilst we're away, won't you, Dorrie?' they said.

'Of course, my darlings, it's my home,' replied Doreen, beaming at her children.

Now Heather was engaged to a young man in the Grenadier Guards. Tall and handsome, he seemed very suitable; the Colonel would have been pleased. Heather and the twins were coming home for the weekend. Just like a real family, all in their house together. This could go on forever and, when she was too old to look after the house, she would be looked after by their children. She smiled at them gently as they sat down to dinner.

'How lovely to have you all home,' she beamed.

After dinner they had coffee in the drawing room. The scent of polish and roses pervaded the room.

'Sit down, Doreen,' said Geraldine.

Doreen was surprised; she was planning to sit with them anyway. They were family, weren't they? Surely they didn't expect her to retire to the kitchen?

'We have some news for you,'

'Yes, my darlings...?' Doreen was all attention.

The children looked at each other. Adam cleared his throat; there was a hint of embarrassment in his attitude.

'As Heather is getting married to Richard she wants to buy a house in London. And when I leave Cambridge I want to start my own business and Gerry needs to get somewhere to live too.'

Doreen sat very still, something ominous was happening, she didn't like it at all.

'I thought you'd all come to live here, as you always have.'

'That would be lovely, of course, but we have our own lives now. We don't want to live in this dingy old place.'

Doreen was shocked. Dingy, these sparkling rooms, the cosy chairs, the huge fireplaces filling the place with warmth in the winter. Dingy? No!

'So,' Adam continued, 'we're planning to sell the house as soon as possible.'

'No!' gasped Doreen, feeling sick. 'You can't!'

'Yes we can. We don't want to live here and it'll fetch a couple of million.'

'What about me? Where will I live?' The trace of a wail filled Doreen's voice.

'You, Doreen? You're still in your forties, aren't you? You'll find another job easily. We'll give you a reference, of course.'

No doubt in his voice, no love, no warmth or concern. She had been a mother to these children. Her world was crumbling as she listened.

'I don't want another job,' she gabbled. 'You're my children, I practically raised you. I want to be with you forever.'

'Oh no, Doreen,' Adam smiled gently, mildly surprised at her outburst. 'You're just a servant.'

A resident of Ruislip, Julia has been a medical scientist, a publican, a restaurateur and an interior designer. She has had several short stories and articles published and has hopes for a novel. She attends the Ruislip Writers' Group.

Heart of the Wolf

By Lorna Read

At the heart of Man is the wolf.
At the heart of Wolf is the moon.
At the heart of the moon are our dreams –
I hope you find yours soon.
Dreams of the man,
dreams of the wolf
and the brightest, bravest moon.

At the heart of Wolf is the moon.
And Wolf's at the heart of Man.
At the heart of the moon are the dreams
We've dreamt since time began.
Dreams of the wolf,
dreams of the moon
and a howl in the heart of Man.

The howl of the wolf is the lust
of sinew, blood and bone.
The howl of the man is the dust
of the dreams he's never known.
Howl of the man,
howl of the wolf
and the keen of the wind through bone.

The dreams of the moon are dark.
The dreams of the wolf are bright.
Who knows of the dreams of Man
in the hollow shield of the night?
Dreams of the man,
dreams of the wolf
in the moonstone silver light.

At the heart of Man is the wolf.
At the heart of Wolf is the moon.
At the heart of the moon are our dreams –
I hope you find yours soon.
Dreams of the man,
dreams of the wolf
and the silent, secret moon.

Lorna is the ex-Editor of Loving Magazine, a romantic fiction monthly, and is the author of several children's books. She lives in Hillingdon, currently works as a freelance book editor and writes a monthly horoscope column.

Haiku – A Collection for the Modern Woman (Part 2)

By Kristen Platt

That sinking feeling
When you realise you have left
Your phone on the bed

Kings Cross, no longer
Grimy and run down, draws in
Hipsters and tourists

Kristen writes fiction to entertain herself on her daily commute. She has completed her novel *Shows, Blows and Breakfast Burritos*; and is a freelance writer for www.Close-Upfilm.com.

The Bridge at Mostar

By Keir Thorpe

The view through the grimy lorry window was of an old landscape, unchanged. It was just the buildings lying derelict which showed me how much trauma the land had experienced. I glanced at my watch: it was one-forty; we could not be that far from the town. I looked over at Milan, but his eyes were fixed on the road. It was a shame that the weather was not better, the plateau we were driving across could be glorious in sunshine but maybe the cloud was suitable; maybe it was a time to be sombre.

Viewing it all from the lorry meant everything still looked second-hand, just as when I had seen the events on ZDF. I worried what I would feel when I stepped down from the cab and faced it for real. Would I see the ghosts around me? Would I just be empty? Would I simply become swept up in the introductions, the welcomes, the business?

We passed another charred skeleton of a house. I stopped my thoughts running from wondering if its occupants were now in some mass grave and switched my focus to a repaired house, one with a girl by the door toying with a cat.

For the thousandth time my fingers reached into my jacket to touch the old photo. It was like a scab I could not leave alone. I

wondered if I had been right to bring it, my sole tangible connection to this place. This time I took it out. The rear side appeared first with its faded writing: 'September '39'. Already the continent had been at war, but it had impacted little down here. It took another couple of years and a coup before Hitler became interested in us. I flipped the photo over. I knew the image well, though I doubt I had looked at it ten times in the past five decades. It shows two teenage boys, myself and Abid, grasping hands as we stand on top of Mostar bridge. We were hesitating whilst Zdenk, my eldest brother, took three shots with his brown box camera. Seconds later we were proving our courage, plunging into the cool water of the River Neretva below. The dream of that summer did not die for almost another three years, not until we dragged Zdenk's body from farther down the same river, sodden and with three dark circles of German bullets staining his shirt.

I shook myself. I had begun to think how many other corpses had ended up in the same waters, both then and through more recent murders. Each one has to be pulled out by someone; each one has to be missed by someone. Burying Zdenk was the end of the adventure for us. The next years were serious and they have remained like that. Though we saw little action, the war set Abid and myself up for good positions in Tito's Yugoslavia. We were the proudest of the victors, the only country in Eastern Europe to kick out the Germans without needing the Red Army. Yet, we were radical too and Communism was the only creed to follow if you were a radical. United by conflict, Abid and me worked closely in our years at Mostar's technical school, but our objectives were different. He was the keen one in the marches through May the First Square; I just came to be seen. I wanted to build on my skills; he looked for a post in the administration. Ultimately, we both got what we wanted.

I know how my life went: to be a 'guest worker' in the West Germany of the economic miracle. Despite my qualifications I started as a building labourer with long hours spent in soulless German cities, rebuilding their industrial might. At least I was part of a community, other Yugoslavs, Italians and Turks, we kept to ourselves but we all knew we were in the same position: living in

scummy rooms and among a population that despised and exploited you. The only way out was hard work: during the day on the site and studying at night. It took me years, but I got far enough to become a West German engineer. Now my work means I direct the new cheap labour: Ostis and Poles; the occasional Lithuanian and Russian.

By the late sixties I had become part of the system, with a flat of my own, a lovely Italian wife, Carina, and our twins. As for Abid I could only guess. I pictured a trajectory through the local party and maybe on to national celebrity. I did not know. I did not know if he lived or died a peaceful death. I prayed he was not rounded into a barbed-wired camp and had a Kalashnikov bullet put through his head.

Mostar. Our journey was almost at an end. There was a cluster of people around the shattered bridge. I saw Hungarians from the NATO engineering team that had pulled many of the bridge's 427 stones from the river below. Milan parked the lorry and I quickly had the door open and was out on the street. The language; the accent I heard around me was familiar, welcoming. I shook a dozen hands without thinking: it was the bridge that drew me. Once the link between East and West, it was now the dividing line between Bosnians, Bosnians of the Muslim and Croat variety.

I shook off other well-wishers and strode past the Halebija Tower to the ragged edge. People clustered around me, but I was blind to them. My eyes strained to see the other side. We were mirrored by a group of people over there. I recognise Izetbegovic from the press photos, but my gaze continued to hunt, until I saw the slender old man among them. I tugged the small photo from my wallet and waved it above my head. He stepped forward, the press of people seeming to part before him. He smiled and fumbled in his pockets. He too waved a browned photograph. Yet, the bridge between us remained smashed and the Neretva continued relentlessly flowing in the divide.

Born in 1967, Keir Thorpe has been writing short stories and detective, science fiction and counter-factual novels since his teenage years. He lives with his wife, son and four chickens.

The Shop of Lost Souls

By Sue Coldwell

Distracted and miserable, Cassie did not notice she had wandered from the main street of the town. Walking in a dull fog of grief, she suddenly found herself at the entrance of a narrow cobbled street. Written in faded black lettering on the side of a wall was the name Falling Lane. Having nowhere else to go and no inclination to turn back, she continued down the winding street lined with small crumbling houses. Pigeons hopped and waddled over the cracked cobbles, and a flock of sparrows squabbled beneath the eaves of the nearest house, their shrill cries disturbing the silence. Shadows stretched and leaned against the little nooks and crannies of the stained walls. Cassie shivered in the chill wind and thrust her hands into her pockets.

No one stood outside the crooked, wooden doors to watch her as she passed. No one peered out of the small dusty windows. It was as if the houses were deserted and forgotten.

She walked on and found herself standing in front of a small shop with a bow window. The glass was thick and green and as

she gazed, her reflection drifted and wavered, as if she floated through water. As if she drowned.

Overhead a sign swung and creaked in the breeze. In slanting gold script was written 'The Shop of Lost Souls'. Intrigued, she pushed at the black painted door. It swung open and a bell jangled. The shop was dark and filled with shelves laden with things that were not instantly recognisable in the gloom. However, towards the back of the shop she could make out a wooden counter with a vase of white roses on it. Their scent filled the shop and she felt suddenly faint. She knew these roses, could see the golden heart of each one, and the delicate tracing of pale green on the curling petals.

A piping voice asked her to take a seat and as she sank into a worn cane chair a man bounced out from the shadows. His face was as brown and lined as an autumn pippin and he wore a black frock coat. He danced in front of her, his coat tails flicking out like bats' wings.

"You have come, dear lady," he enthused, his voice light and high. "I am so pleased, so very pleased. Those who find their way here are sad and in need of my help."

Cassie could only nod.

"I have the very thing for you," the man smiled. "This will remove all your problems." He gently put a small box in her hands. "You must place it where the person who has hurt you will find it. That is all."

"Thank you," Cassie whispered, and fumbled in her purse.

"Silver will do," beamed the little man. "The silver sixpence you keep for luck. You will not need it now."

Outside the shop Cassie retraced her steps and holding the box carefully, made her way to the ear park. On the drive home she pondered the dark shop and the odd little man. The whole experience seemed like some strange dream.

In the kitchen she opened the box and lifted out a small snow globe. In the globe was a house set in a neat garden and behind it, painted mountains with dark forested slopes. The blue front door of the little house stood open and the figure of a mob-capped maid peered out, as if watching the snow or welcoming guests. Cassie

shook the globe and white flakes swirled down to smother the house and the garden.

At dinner that night, Cassie made an effort to smile at her husband Ben and ask him about his day. To pretend that everything was normal, though she longed to scream at him, to say that she knew he was having an affair with Marcia, his secretary. But over the meal she talked calmly of her day, though she did not mention her visit to the Shop of Lost Souls.

Ben was an attractive man in his fifties. His dark hair was touched with silver and he was tall. Cassie had always been attracted to tall men. She knew her looks had faded over the years. Lines now dragged down her mouth and her hips had broadened.

She watched him and wondered how he could be so blind. Couldn't he see that Marcia was a gold-digger. She wanted not only Ben but his money and their house, the house she had furnished with such love and care. Marcia would fill it with ghastly modern furniture and glaring colours.

Marcia had a thin mouth outlined in bright red lipstick, like a wound, and bleached blonde hair. But it was her nails that Cassie loathed. Long nails, curved like talons, in harsh purple with little glittery stars. A woman who thought more of her manicure than her morals.

Ben was fretting that it was Marcia's birthday the next day and he had forgotten to buy her a present. Ben always gave presents to his staff on their birthdays. It was his way of thanking them for all their hard work.

Cassie told him she had just the thing. She had found it in an antique shop, and she was sure Marcia would love it. She fetched the snow globe and Ben agreed that it would be a charming present for Marcia. Cassie wrapped it and the next day Ben set off for work with it in his briefcase. Then Cassie waited.

A week later Ben told Cassie that Marcia had not been in the office for two days and there had been no phone call. He had sent one of his managers round to the house. The car was in the drive, but no one had replied to his knocking, and the neighbours could not help. He would have to find a temp to cover. Cassie suggested Mrs Smith, a kind, motherly woman who had worked for him

before. Ben frowned and said he couldn't understand it. Marcia was not the sort of person to let people down. She was very conscientious. Cassie agreed, but secretly thought that Marcia was only conscientious about stealing her husband.

Another week passed and still Marcia had not been in touch. Ben went to the police. Cassie found herself smiling as she cleaned the house. She sang as she ironed Ben's shirts.

Ben carried a cardboard box home with him the next day. He explained that he had to clear Marcia's desk and as storage was limited in the office, he thought it best to bring her things home with him and put them in the basement. He also brought with him a bouquet of white roses, the roses he had given Cassie whenever he felt especially romantic. White roses had been in short supply for some time.

Cassie took them with a kiss and arranged them lovingly in her crystal vase. She dared to hope that Ben had come to his senses. She phoned the private detective she had hired to inform him that her husband's affair appeared to be over and that a cheque was in the post.

When she was alone in the house she went down to the basement. She found the cardboard box and, kneeling on the floor, went through it. She was astonished that a woman like Marcia had such a liking for small, furry toys. There was also a stained mug, a half-eaten packet of mints, a grubby compact and a nail file, all the small detritus of Marcia's time in the office. At the bottom of the box, wrapped in tissues, was the snow globe.

Cassie picked it up and gave it a shake. White flakes floated and danced round the house, the mountains and the forest. But something had changed. The blue front door was firmly shut.

In one of the upstairs windows stood a figure, gazing out. A figure with bleached blonde hair. The face of the figure was blank and vapid, the red mouth hanging open as if in surprise, or perhaps screaming for help. The hands rested against the glass of the window. Long nails, purple with sparkling stars, clawed at the panes.

Cassie stared at Marcia in her frozen glass world, and gently, so gently, replaced the snow globe, went up the steps and locked the

door. She walked into the sun-lit lounge and saw something that sparkled and winked on the mantelpiece. It was her silver sixpence.

The scent of the white roses was drowned by a thicker, fouler smell, and behind her she heard the flap of large wings.

In her ear a voice piped: "I have returned your sixpence as the price has risen. I now demand your soul."

Sue has previously written plays and sketches for a local group and is currently working on a radio script. She has won prizes for her poetry and short stories.

Hawthorn in Harefield

By Jacqui Williamson

You are early again, May blossom.
Fringing the pastures, frothing billows of lace,
Before the other trees have dressed.

A twisting, bony, labyrinth, edging the way.
And as the daffodils retire like a played out jazz band,
From your fingertips the blooms with yellow threads dance.

As kids we poked our fingers in,
Wary of the bees and barbs,
To steal the nutty, sweet leaves; bread and cheese.

Wind driven your petals lay,
Like scales on the wrinkled waterway.
Confetti for the coming of swan.

Jacqui is a member of the Uxbridge Writers' Group.

How Time and Circumstances Change One

By Iris Perry

How we all change as our ages advance
From 1 year to 7 years we learn by chance
From 7 to 14 we think the world is a ball
But from 14 to 20 we think we know it all!

As our years advance we learn a lot from life
Some of us have trouble and some of us strife
A marriage and children and highs and lows
Where and when it will all end nobody knows

But all I can say from the benefit of age
You live, learn and change until the very last page.

Iris is 79 years of age and along with her writing activities, also enjoys book club and badminton. She has three married children and six grandchildren. She is a member of the Yeadings Writers' Group.

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Created for Artsweek 2012, this anthology brings together the best work from three local writing groups, based in Ruislip, Uxbridge and Yeading.

It's an inspiring and diverse collection of short stories and poems, all of which appear for the first time in this book. From family drama to fantasy, and from horror to comedy, there's something for everyone inside.



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